The Political Function of Flight in Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu's *The Theory of Flight*: An Aeronautical Reading

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Abstract

Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu's novel, *The Theory of Flight*, foregrounds the ethics and politics of reinvention for characters caught in sites of disablement. Towards symbolic enablement, the novel creatively harnesses motifs of flight, both in its literal and metaphorical senses, allowing the characters to realise beauty and transcendence. It also dictates how it ought to be read by drawing attention to the intersections of literary imagination and aviation science. Accordingly, the article proposes that a basic understanding of aerodynamics and aircraft engineering can enliven the reading experience and aid in conceptualising how a cross-section of characters in *The Theory of Flight* negotiates the tension between aspiration and its fruition. It contends that the author invokes aeronautical engineering to nuance her depiction of complex practices of self-formation and the consolidation of (inter)subjectivities inherent in the margins of society. Beyond illuminating the novel's thematic depth, the unique conceptual framework seeks to unravel valuable insights into flight as a liberation praxis and, in the process, underscore how scientific perspectives can enrich literary analysis.

Keywords: *The Theory of Flight*; Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu; aerodynamics; aeronautical engineering; politics of refusal; Zimbabwean literature

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Introduction: The Trope of Flight in Literature

In his book *Flying Out of This World*, Peter Greenway remarks, "We want wings on our feet or on our shoulders, or an unrestricted permission to directly thwart gravity by some other means" (1994, 1). Greenway implies that humans possess an intrinsic desire for flight, which translates into a yearning for escape and renewal. Similarly, Rudnitsky (2008) suggests that individuals and social groups can vicariously transport themselves to better worlds through flights of imagination, a phenomenon that fictional narratives such as Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World* (1957), Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (2004), and Sue Monk Kidd's *The Invention of Wings* (2014) enable us to experience. These texts creatively mediate flight to represent the characters' aspirations.

In African fictional writing, the motif of flight is utilised for symbolic enablement. In Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* (2015), the eponymous heroine attends university in space to illuminate her assertiveness in pursuing self-knowledge. Similarly, Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-wine Drinkard* (1952), Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2007) employ fantasy in ways that defy the laws of physics, allowing characters to soar into alternative worlds. For example, in *The Famished Road*, the spirit child (Azaro) can ascend into spiritual realms, while in *Wizard of the Crow*, Kamiti's preternatural flights enable him to traverse time and space, rendering him invincible.

In Zimbabwean literature, where this study is situated, creative writers have invariably invoked flight by foregrounding characters who seek to escape what Ranka Primorac describes as the nation's "many historical traumas" (2006, 2). Fictional works set in the 1970s, such as Charles Mungoshi's *Coming of the Dry Season* (1972) and Dambudzo Marechera's *The House of Hunger* (1978), communicate the collective dream of Black people for political independence. However, several texts set in the first decade of independent Zimbabwe, including Chenjerai Hove's anthology *Red Hills of Home* (1985) and Shimmer Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns* (1987), highlight how the dream is deferred by the persistence of colonial hegemonies and spatial disparities. Some narratives set in the same period, such as Christopher Mlalazi's *Running with Mother* (2012) and Novuyo Tshuma's *House of Stone* (2018), recount flights from sites of *Gukurahundi* ethnonationalist violence that spanned from 1982 to 1987.[1] From the early 2000s, following Zimbabwe's Land Reform and the ensuing political instability and economic hardship, millions of citizens have fled to diasporic spaces all over the world. These involuntary migrations are captured in literary works such as Brian Chikwava's

1 *Gukurahundi* was a military operation that resulted in the deaths of an estimated 20,000 Ndebele-speaking Zimbabweans between 1983 and 1987. The operation was purportedly aimed at eliminating political "dissidents" believed to be aligned with Joshua Nkomo, the leader of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) party. See Nkomo, J. 2001. *The Story of My Life*, p. 1.

Harare North (2009), Petina Gappah's *An Elegy for Easterly* (2009), and Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), which foreground the flight of many Zimbabweans to diasporic destinations due to enduring political instability and economic hardship in the aftermath of the Land Reform Programme of the early 2000s. Meanwhile, Zimbabwean feminist writers, including Yvonne Vera, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Valerie Tagwira, invoke the flight motif by foregrounding heroines who often resort to unorthodox means to transcend the restrictions imposed on them by patriarchal normativity. In the process, these texts affirmatively answer Han's question: "Can the poor have politics?" (2018, 332).

The Present Study: Literature Review and Research Objectives

Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu's novel, *The Theory of Flight* (2018), which serves as the focus of this article, mediates the power of belief in flight. This belief is primarily embodied by Golide Gumede's determination to teach those around him that "all things were possible" (321), which speaks through his lifelong project to build an aeroplane for his wife (Elizabeth Nyoni) to fly to Nashville, Tennessee, where she aspires to be a country singer. Golide's self-belief encapsulates the novel's reinvention ethics, rooted in the Kantian existential belief that individuals can control their lives through practical reason. Golide and his followers reclaim agency and reshape their goals and identities amidst existential crises that include state-sponsored violence, reinforcing Foucault's (2019) conception of subjectivity as the ability to resist sovereign power and biopolitical control of populations. Thus, the novel becomes a site of reinvention politics, manifesting as practices of self-formation. Its theoretically inflected title, flight motifs, and kinesthetic imagery invoke the scientific disciplines of aerodynamics and aeronautical engineering, dictating how it should be read. Accordingly, this article draws conceptual inspiration from several principles of the two disciplines (explored in the conceptual framework) to analyse the dynamics and complexities of flight as a liberation praxis.

The current study is in conversation with a growing literature on the theme of flight as a metaphor for human aspiration, endurance, and transcendence in African literature. With the emergence of mobility studies as an academic discipline, there has been a growing interest in flight and other forms of movement, a discursive trend that Muchemwa (2023) aptly describes as "the mobility turn." Toivanen (2021) explores the experiences of diasporic returnees in a cross-section of Francophone African fictional texts, focusing on the complex ways in which the experience of transnational "aeromobility" shapes the identities of the returnees. Pfalzgraf (2022) also focuses on physical mobilities engendered by socio-economic and political realities within a Zimbabwean literary context. Although limited to the physical sense of mobility, these studies provide a useful background for the present study, which is interested in the political uses of the metaphorical dimension of flight.

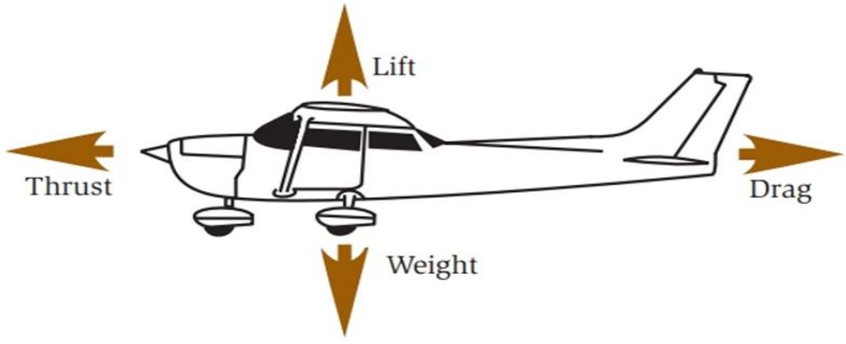
In her reading of Mia Couto's *Sleepwalking Land* (1992), Joseph (2024) employs the lens of the fluid and nimble figure of the water spirit, allowing her to conceptualise

bodily and ethereal mobilities that enable characters to navigate the chaotic landscape of war-torn Mozambique. While *The Theory of Flight* has not received much critical attention, analyses by Stobie (2020), Gagiano (2020), and Oumar (2022) offer valuable insights into the novel's theme of flight. For instance, Stobie uses the lens of precarity and conviviality to explore how central characters in the novel metaphorically fly from economic and political instability. Oumar (2022) analyses the power of self-belief and flight in inspiring individual and collective resilience within the theoretical framework of postcolonialism and spiritual realism. However, no study has yet investigated the limits and possibilities of flight as a political tool from an aviation science perspective in Zimbabwean literature.

This article employs a qualitative content analysis methodology, which, according to Krippendorff (2018), is suitable for investigations that deal with contextual meanings of texts. The study's objectives are to explore the political uses of flight as a metaphor for self-belief and examine how selected principles of aerodynamics and aircraft engineering can animate the reading experience and enrich explorations of refusal politics in Zimbabwean and African literature. The following questions guide my reading: (1) How does the novel harness motifs, images and other creative expressions of flight to depict the characters' quest for renewal and self-actualisation? and (2) In what ways does the novel's invocation of aviation science nuance and reorient understandings of flight as a political resource?

Conceptual Framework

Aerodynamics and aeronautical engineering can provide a novel paradigm for exploring the dynamic and delicate relationship between aspiration and self-actualisation in *The Theory of Flight*. Aerodynamics is the study of the behaviour of a body in the air and is an integral aspect of aeronautical engineering (Traub 2002, 17). Understanding how aeroplanes behave when exposed to moving air and oppositional forces not only allows aeronautical engineers to design safe and efficient aircraft but also enables pilots and other aircraft personnel to predict unsafe conditions and take necessary precautions (Traub 2002, 17–18). The diagram below illustrates the forces that operate on an



aeroplane in straight-and-level flight:

Image courtesy of Anderson and Eberhardt. 2001. *Understanding Flight*, p. 8.

Lift is the force of upward motion generated by an aircraft's wings as they displace air downward (Anderson and Eberhardt 2001, 18; Traub 2002, 18). It is oppositional to the pull of gravity, represented as weight in the diagram above. The weight of the aircraft determines the gravitational force acting on it and, therefore, the plane's efficiency and fuel consumption (Anderson and Eberhardt 2001, 40). As the plane is in motion through the air, it is propelled forward by the power generated when its engine blows air backwards. This force is called thrust. Its magnitude depends on several factors, including engine type or mode of propulsion, with jet engines capable of producing more thrust than chemical and electric engines (Irons-Georges and Marchman III 2002, 84). The force that directly opposes this forward motion is called drag. Drag results from air resistance and gravity (Bertin and Cummings 2021).

The tension between thrust and drag, like the one between lift and weight, can be explained in terms of one of Isaac Newton's laws, namely that "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction" (Anderson and Eberhardt 2001, 19). Lift and thrust can serve as metaphors for the self-belief and determination that propel characters such as Golide and Genie towards the fruition of their own and others' aspirations in *The Theory of Flight*. Weight and drag, as forces that oppose mobility, can represent constraints, such as political violence and economic hardship, that undercut the dreams of several characters in the novel.

Understanding aerodynamic principles enables aircraft engineers to devise mechanisms for enhancing the stability of aeroplanes as they move through the air. Modern aircraft have computer-aided stability systems in addition to traditional stabilising structures attached to the plane's tail or empennage (Irons-Georges and Marchman III 2002, 84). According to Anderson and Eberhardt, "stability is the tendency of an airplane to return to a previous condition if upset by a disturbance, such as a gust or turbulence" (2001, 97). As a conceptual metaphor, stability illuminates the determination, resilience, and solidarity networks that allow characters such as Golide, Genie, and Vida de Villiers (Vida) to realise their dreams in the face of constraints. Stability is interrelated with the aeronautical principle of control, which refers to "the ability to command the airplane to perform a specific maneuver or to maintain or change its conditions" (Anderson and Eberhardt 2001, 97). In my reading of *The Theory of Flight*, control relates to the characters' ability to navigate oppositional forces such as poverty, illness, familial burdens, and state-sponsored violence. In this extended metaphor, I draw an analogy between how characters build interpersonal alliances and the way pilots collaborate with other aircraft personnel to ensure effective control of the aeroplane.

In many ways, *The Theory of Flight* suggests that exposure to insecurity and violence is necessary for characters to build resilience, which evokes Nassim Taleb's declaration, in *Antifragile: Things that gain from disorder*, that "Some things benefit from shocks;

they thrive and grow when exposed to volatility, randomness, disorder, and stressors and love adventure, risk, and uncertainty" (2012, xv). Similarly, the Wright brothers, who invented modern aircraft, believed that an aeroplane needed to display a certain measure of instability so that the pilot would remain attentive and alert (Anderson and Eberhardt 2001, 112). This metaphorically illuminates how existential challenges such as political violence, gender prejudice, illness, and poverty, paradoxically enhance lift and thrust for the novel's central characters, including Genie, Vida, Golide, and Thandi, who mobilise insecurity as a political resource.

Considering the above, aerodynamics and aeronautical engineering have broader implications for literary imagination, especially as the principles of lift, drag, weight, thrust, stability, and control can serve as conceptual metaphors in various contexts across genres. While literature mediates flight as a metaphor for aspiration and escape, aviation science situates itself in the realm of physical flight. By bringing imaginative writing into a critical dialogue with fact-based scientific disciplines, the article leverages the benefits of interdisciplinarity that are hoped to outweigh potential conceptual glitches.

Plot Synopsis

The Theory of Flight is set in an unnamed country that is implied to be Zimbabwe. The story begins in the colonial past, narrating how Baines Tikiti, grandfather of the female protagonist Imogen Zula Nyoni (Genie), meets and marries Prudence Ngoma. The two bear an albino son, Livingstone Tikiti, who later becomes Genie's father. Baines is fascinated with aeroplanes, a passion he passes on to his son. When Livingstone joins the anticolonial war as a freedom fighter, he renames himself Golide Gumede, which translates to fields of gold, to align with what he "envisioned for his people after the war" (22). When Golide's commanders discover his interest in aeroplanes, they send him to study aeronautics in Russia. After his return, he meets his would-be wife, Elizabeth Nyoni, who aspires to fly to Nashville to pursue her dream career as a country singer, modelled after Dolly Parton. In support of her dream, Golide embarks on constructing an aeroplane using spare parts salvaged from a private passenger plane he shoots down. When Golide dies together with Elizabeth in a politically motivated massacre, his belief in flight lives on in Genie and his other followers at Beauford Farm and Estate. The soldiers who perform the genocide rape and infect Genie with HIV. However, she boldly faces her tragedy and finally dies with a sense of having accomplished her mission in life. The novel also chronicles the micronarratives of other characters who constitute Genie's social milieu.

Weight and Drag: Environmental Constraints, Personal Tragedies and Collective Traumas

The Theory of Flight foregrounds the aspirations and existential strategies of characters who attempt to pursue their ambitions amidst numerous environmental odds, including political violence, gender prejudice, economic hardship, and strained social relations.

This section examines these constraints and their impact on the characters' lives through the metaphors of weight and drag, interconnected aerodynamic forces that counter a plane's motion.

The Theory of Flight straddles colonial and postcolonial eras, reflecting how past hegemonies, thought systems and spatial relations persist in post-independence Zimbabwe. Colonialism promoted differential access to power and privilege in favour of white people. This racial asymmetry manifests in the stark contrast between the economic privilege of the white farmer, Bennington Beauford, and the precarious lives of indigenous people who supply cheap labour to his farm. The Beauford family owns a private aeroplane, reflecting a convenient life that contrasts sharply with how Elizabeth's dream to fly to Nashville, which represents the shared quest for self-actualisation among the colonised blacks, is undercut by economic hardship.

The novel depicts post-independence Zimbabwe as a replica of its colonial version, evoking Stoler's (2008) metaphor of "imperial debris." Colonial repressive and surveillance mechanisms resurface in the post-independence state through its secret agents, such as Valentine and Mordechai, who spy on and torture civilians on behalf of the president, who is tellingly named The Man Himself. When The Man Himself learns that Golide is building an aeroplane at Beauford Farm and Estate, he paranoically thinks Golide's genius would earn him political power and possibly undermine his own power or lead to political insurgency. Therefore, he instructs *sojas* (soldiers) to massacre the inhabitants of Beauford Farm and Estate. Later, he tells Valentine: "I did it because a man like me does not let a man like Golide Gumede build an airplane" (321), suggesting that the massacre was a way of flexing his political muscle. This draconian tactic not only stalls Golide's plane-building project but also acts as a drag on Elizabeth's ambition.

The state's vicious intrusiveness on civilian lives is also seen in Minenhle's torture by Mordechai for withholding information about Golide's whereabouts. Minenhle describes the state's behaviour towards civilians as "too intimate" (270), with the sexual connotations illumined by the rape of nine-year-old Genie by soldiers during the massacre. The rape leaves Genie infected with HIV, which severely affects her later life as she becomes a victim of stigma and terminal illness. These state intrusions into civilian lives reveal how legacies of colonial biopower render civilian lives precarious, aligning with Mbembe's assertion that postcolonial nations have reduced the meaning of sovereignty to "the right to kill" (2003, 16). In the novel, Jestina Nxumalo captures how this paradoxical scenario ravages the civilian psyche when she observes that "[t]here was a time, not so long ago, that we thought only white people capable of such hatred and anger, such evil" (82). For Jestina, it is unimaginable how the Black government has inherited the biopolitics of the colonial Rhodesian regime to prey on and hinder civilian aspirations.

The Theory of Flight also portrays historically situated prejudices as obstacles to personal and collective aspirations. Cultural fundamentalism undercuts the dreams and self-making efforts of women and numerical minorities. When Golide is born with albinism, his father (Baines) rejects him, which hardly comes as a surprise considering that ableist society ideologically constructs albinism and other forms of irregular pigmentation as indices of sub-humanity (Chando 2021). Baines's ableism not only stifles Prudence's dream of a bright future but also threatens the development of Golide's capabilities by withholding fatherly support. This dovetails with how society anathematises difference, which also speaks through sexual prejudice. The novel reveals how a homophobic society punishes sexual difference through the same-sex sexual relationship between Vida (a coloured young man) and a white boy, Everleigh Coetzee. Everleigh's father, Emil Coetzee, is a macho man who epitomises hypermasculinity and white supremacism. He abhors Everleigh's non-normative sexuality and affinity for fine art and music, which he contemptuously regards as feminine passions. Therefore, Emil compels Everleigh to go to war, intending to correct what he perceives as the boy's effeminacy and miscegenation. At the battlefront, the boy dies in a landmine explosion. The death of Everleigh leaves Vida heartbroken, forcing him to abandon home and live as a destitute in the streets. These tragic events underscore how cultural fundamentalism may prevent individuals from making free choices.

Gender prejudice also lurks as a vicious undercurrent in *The Theory of Flight*, often manifesting in insidious ways. Society's undervaluation of women's capabilities subtly rears its head in Marcus's assumption that only men can drive cars, reflecting the veiled toxicity of masculine socialisation. Similarly, in a dream, Genie meets a boy who insists that she must fall to the ground because he has killed her in some war game. Genie's dream reveals how the patriarchal script can etch and replicate itself in the subconscious mind of its victim. In its overt form, gender prejudice speaks through the oppressive behaviours of men such as Mbongeni Masuku, "a sadist who emotionally and mentally abused his wife" (287). Like his literary precursor Fumbatha in Vera's *Butterfly Burning*, Mbongeni obstructs his wife's ambition to train as a nurse. This underscores how essentialist thinking on gender conflates women with domesticity and stifles their aspirations.

The aerodynamic concept of weight evokes the burden of responsibilities that patriarchal society expects women to carry as mothers. Before becoming a mother, Thandi Hadebe dreams of moving to the city and pursuing a modelling career. However, after marrying Dingani Masuku, she discards the dream as she takes on a mothering role. This illustrates how women's ambitions can be thwarted by the patriarchal ideology of "intensive mothering" (Hays 1996) that requires mothers to subordinate their interests to those of their children. When Dingani receives a scholarship to study medicine in America, Thandi accompanies him, defying the notion of intensive mothering as she leaves her baby (Marcus) behind, concerned that he "would be in the way of two young people trying to realise impossible dreams" (298). Years later, Thandi breaks up with Dingani and the children to pursue her freedom in Belgium. Thandi's

anti-natal behaviour can be understood in aeronautical terms as weight and drag reduction, considering that "a low-drag airplane will fly faster than a high-drag airplane" (Anderson and Eberhardt 2001, 41). To reduce drag and weight, aircraft engineers design streamlined bodies using light-weight carbon fibre-reinforced plastic to improve the aircraft's efficiency (Rossow 2010, 602), which can be likened to how Thandi breaks away to escape the burden of family responsibilities.

The various environmental constraints explored in this section symbolically reflect the existential challenges faced by millions of Zimbabweans who cannot afford a decent living due to endemic socio-economic and political issues that have come to be dubbed the "Zimbabwe crisis." The deferred national dream is captured by the imagery of a bird with a broken wing that appears in Mordechai and Minenhle's apartment. My focus on environmental factors that undermine personal achievement has established the groundwork for the next section, in which I deploy the aerodynamic principles of lift and thrust to conceptualise how a cross-section of characters in *The Theory of Flight* can reclaim agency in the face of constraints.

Lift and Thrust: Inspiration, Aspiration, and Creative Expressions of Flight

In this section, I examine how *The Theory of Flight* harnesses creative expressions of flight, including flight motifs and magical realism, as tools of symbolic enablement for its central characters. I draw on the principles of lift and thrust to conceptualise the inspirations and aspirations that enable characters to pursue their dreams amidst constraints. As noted earlier, lift refers to the force that enables an aircraft to take off and remain airborne, while thrust is the force that propels the aircraft forward (Anderson and Eberhardt 2001, 18; Traub 2002, 18). Interestingly, both forces are reaction forces as they exist in direct opposition to forces that counter motion, following Newton's third law that says: "When a mass is expelled or accelerated in one direction, the accelerated mass will cause a force of equal magnitude but opposite direction" (Harikumar and Vibhute 2020, 1549). This scientific fact sheds light on how Ndlovu's novel portrays individual aspiration as precipitated and shaped by prevailing environmental constraints.

The novel foregrounds the wanderlust of Bafana Ndlelaphi, Golide's father, who serves as an assistant to a travelling Greek salesman. Inspired by a desire for newness and escape from humdrum life, he renames himself Baines Tikiti, after the British explorer John Thomas Baines. Tikiti is a transliteration of 'ticket,' which denotes access to travel. Baines's wanderlust is attested by the many pictures of aeroplanes stuck on the walls of his South African apartment. He also names his son Livingstone after the Scottish explorer David Livingstone. Baines's love for travel, arguably inspired by the unhomeliness of colonial Rhodesia, serves as a harbinger of the post-independence dispersal of Zimbabweans across the globe as they seek deliverance from the country's endemic crises.

Baines's love for aeroplanes inspires Golide, who inherits and retains his father's "knowledge and understanding of flight" (20). By renaming himself Golide Gumede (fields of gold), he positions his dream of a better Zimbabwe within a broader national narrative that seeks prosperity for indigenous peoples. His aspiration for collective transcendence is reflected in his intrinsic motivation to serve others, exemplified by his vows to build an aircraft to help Elizabeth realise her dream. The tenacity of Golide's belief in flight is evident in his decision to shoot down an aeroplane to salvage the wreckage for spare parts. He explains to journalist Bhekithemba Nyathi how this belief was inspired by an incident when he saw a troop of elephants swimming across the Zambezi River, which taught him that "human beings would also conceivably be able to transcend the limits of what is impossible and take flight" (Oumar 2022, 9). The inspirational power of Golide's self-belief is reflected in Genie's determination to preserve and transmit it to others. Among other ways, she recounts Golide's story of swimming elephants to Marcus and, when subjected to torture by state security agents, she defiantly declares: "You cannot break me. You see, I know for certain that my parents were capable of flight" (257). This metaphorically relates to how self-belief can be a political resource, one that enables individuals to weaponise vulnerability.

Magical realism is an integral aspect of the novel's creative expressions of lift and thrust, enabling characters to consolidate otherwise impossible (inter)subjectivities. Although the author rejects the term "magical realism" as a descriptor of *The Theory of Flight* (Ndlovu and Malec 2019, cited in Oumar 2022, 3), in many ways, the novel evokes the definition of magical realism as a genre or narrative strategy that ruptures the boundaries of reality by blending realism and fantasy, incorporating supernatural events into a realistic narrative without questioning the improbability of those events (Warnes 2009, vi; Geetha 2010, 345). This definition aligns with how *The Theory of Flight* mediates flight through surrealistic figurations of human capabilities, as foregrounded in the novel's prologue:

> On the third of September, not so long ago, something truly wondrous happened on the Beauford Farm and Estate. At the moment of her death, Imogen Zula Nyoni – Genie – was seen to fly away on a giant pair of silver wings, and, at the very same moment, her heart calcified into the most precious and beautiful something the onlookers had ever seen. (9)

Interestingly, the novel treats Genie's flight as real, authenticated by The Survivors who witness her ascendance as she is "borne aloft on silver wings" (Stobie 2020, 33). The novel also alludes to how Genie's parents fly away on silver wings during the Beauford Farm and Estate massacre. In this mystical rendition of death, "the prevailing images are of the transcendence of flight" (Stobie, *ibid*.), underscoring the liberatory power of flight as a metaphor for death.

Early in the novel, Elizabeth arrives at Beauford Farm and Estate with a "shiny golden egg" (15) from which Genie is later hatched. The egg symbolises a new beginning, while its association with a bird evokes the capacity of the human spirit to soar to other

universes (Stobie 2020; Oumar 2022). Thus, magical realism performs the political function of "transcending reality, escaping the human condition and constructing superior alternative secondary worlds" (Jackson 2003, 6), which is symbolically represented by the flight of Golide, Elizabeth, and Genie. In the novel, Genie is variously depicted as a flying being, for instance through the kinesthetic imagery of her "flying through the air" (117) when struck by a car, and through her mysterious disappearance from the hospital where she has been lying comatose for several days, only to reappear as a corpse in the sunflower fields at Beauford Farm and Estate. The name "Genie" also "suggests the supernatural creature rooted in Mesopotamian legends and developed in Middle Eastern and African cultures to characterize a being with free will, capable of good or evil, who has the powers of shapeshifting and flight" (Stobie 2020, 30).[2] The notions of shapeshifting and flight are aspects of fantasy and salient features of magical realism. In Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World*, the ability of Macandal and Ti Noel to fly and transmute themselves into various bodies serves as a metaphor for the collective dream of escape for enslaved Black people. Thus, in *The Theory of Flight*, Ndlovu uses magical realism to reimagine the world by symbolically allowing characters to achieve lift and thrust regardless of environmental constraints.

Although the flights of Golide, Elizabeth, and Genie serve as euphemisms for their deaths, the novel blends the natural with the surreal in ways that transform death into an exercise of agency. Dr. Mambo, who informs Genie of her HIV positivity, realises that the latter deliberately chooses to die as an expression of "defiance" (240) that reasserts control over her life. The figuration of death "as an exercise of agency" calls for "a radical conception of agency" (Musila 2007, 59, 50), which disrupts conventional understandings of agency and challenges Nnaemeka's assertion that "to see knowledge, power, and agency in the margins is to wrestle with contradictions" (1997, 2). Thus, *The Theory of Flight* recasts agency as the ability to make choices and remain afloat in scenarios where the default option would be to sink in despair. Therefore, as Genie soars into the sky on "a giant pair of silver wings" (318), the reader realises that she generates lift and thrust from her resilience, free spirit, and strong self-belief. Genie's flight reflects the broader politics of gendered resistance and identity reconstruction within African feminist literary imagination and theoretical practice.

Genie's death is romanticised as something that exudes beauty, as she "leave[s] her heart behind to calcify into the most precious and beautiful something that the world has ever seen" (318). This symbolically implies that, like Golide and Elizabeth, whose hearts are also reported to have turned into precious and beautiful things, Genie has left a legacy that will continue to inspire others to radicalise their vulnerability. Therefore, it can be argued that in *The Theory of Flight*, magical realism assumes both an "additive form" by deliberately conferring beauty on otherwise ugly experiences of suffering and

2 See also, Oumar (2022, 4) who explains the symbolic meaning of the Genie's surname "Nyoni," underlining how different African cultures associate it with flight and freedom.

death, and a "subtractive form of omission and erasure" (Hume 2014, 14) that diverts attention from unpleasant realities.

That said, *The Theory of Flight* creatively employs narrative devices to symbolically provide lift and thrust to characters in otherwise immobilising situations. It demonstrates the power of inspiration, aspiration, and self-belief to propel characters forward in the face of oppression and suffering. The narrative subversively merges natural and supernatural realms, enabling beauty and mobility to surpass ugliness and stagnation. Beyond expanding the imagination, the enchanted world reorients the reader's understanding of agency such that even death becomes the ultimate expression of beauty and transcendence.

Stability and Control: Resilience, Determination, and Support Networks

In aeronautical engineering, while the generation of lift and thrust forms the foundation of flight, the stability of the plane is equally important to ensure the safety of passengers, cargo, and the aeroplane itself (Bertin and Cummings 2021). Anderson and Eberhardt (2001, 97) define stability as "the tendency of an airplane to return to a previous condition if upset by a disturbance, such as a gust or turbulence." They add that for stability to be achieved, several factors, encapsulated by the term "control," come into play, including ensuring the pilot's alertness, the use of computer-aided enhancements, and the collaborative effort of all aircraft crew (*ibid*.). In this section, I recontextualise the notion of stability to frame my discussion of the determination and resilience that enable a cross-section of characters to maintain buoyancy in difficult situations. Considering that the stability of an aircraft requires a collaborative effort, I recontextualise the concept of control to imply the various support networks that allow characters in *The Theory of Flight* to forge ethics of togetherness as a strategy for navigating environmental constraints.

In the novel, Golide generates lift and thrust by inspiring others to realise that "all things were possible" (321). Although aware that building an aeroplane costs a fortune, he is determined to maintain the momentum by teaching people to "understand that they were still capable of flight, and at no cost to themselves" (24). Although Golide has not completed the plane-building project by the time of his death, the reader understands that Golide's aeroplane is a metaphor for an existential philosophy that mobilises flight as a political tool. This philosophy lives on in the minds of Golide's subaltern followers at Beauford Farm and Estate, immortalised by its relatability to them, especially as it enables them to appreciate their smallness, dream big, and envision transcendence in a hostile world:

> The possibility of the seemingly impossible. There was this feeling that Golide got … a knowing … He became aware of his place in the world. He understood that in the grander scheme of things he was but a speck … a tiny speck … and that that was enough. There was freedom, beauty even, in that kind of knowledge. It was the kind of

> knowledge that finally quieted you. It was the kind of knowledge that allowed you to fly. (25)

Here, Golide teaches his followers that they can fly, meaning they can achieve happiness even in the most undesirable circumstances, provided they master the art of contentment with their smallness. In a conversation with The Man Himself, Valentine suggests that the hearts of all of Golide's followers turn into "precious and beautiful something[s]" (322), which underlines the profound influence and transformative power of Golide's self-belief.

Genie embodies resilience, a key aspect of stability, by maintaining her calm, convictions, and moral integrity in the face of numerous personal tragedies. She is fully aware that her "ability to remain optimistic does not negate the negative experiences she has" (Oumar 2022, 6). The Beauford Farm and Estate genocide that claims the lives of her parents and leaves her sexually violated could have devastated her. However, when Jestina urges her not to be overwhelmed and changed by the incident, Genie declares that, henceforth, she will "choose [her] own endings" (83), implying that she will take charge of her life. Her refusal to allow external constraints to defeat her signals her capacity to convert instability into a generative force. The stability of her new resolution is evident in how she boldly receives the news of her HIV positivity, which strikes Dr. Mambo as unusual considering how other patients have previously received similar news with panic and grief. When she learns that she has about five years more to live, Genie boldly tells the doctor: "Don't worry, doctor. Five years is long enough for me to do something good with my life" (239–40). Her courage in the face of affliction evokes the concept of control that enables an aircraft to retain its stability and arrive at the intended destination despite turbulent conditions that might arise during the flight.

The Theory of Flight demonstrates the power of support networks in sustaining the buoyancy of characters in sites of displacement. The extended metaphor of control in aircraft handling illuminates the indispensability of social infrastructures of care. According to Anderson and Eberhardt (2001, 112), "[t]he pilot can manage the overall flight path while the computer manages the quick response tasks," highlighting the unity of purpose of different control mechanisms. Although "the computer has many capabilities, and engineers are learning more ways to use them," it still needs to work alongside humans to ensure maximum stability of the plane (Anderson and Eberhardt 2001, 115). Ndlovu's novel shows how characters build intersubjectivities that sustain their aspirations, such as Golide's realisation that Elizabeth's dream to fly to Nashville requires his support. Similarly, Genie and Vida's symbiotic relationship enables them to find love and meaning in life. Vida serves Genie's life when she is knocked down by a car, and later, Genie decides to leave her adoptive home to help Vida fully realise his capabilities as a sculptural artist. This occurs at a time when Vida has reached a "stalling" point, an aeronautical term that denotes "the reduction in coefficient of lift and lift begins to decrease" (Harikumar and Vibhute 2020, 1550). Genie's transformation from being a dependent of the Masukus to being a free spirit who lives

with a man on the streets defies patriarchal surveillance of women and their sexuality, reflecting a reinvention ethic rooted in subversion of identity and a quest for freedom.

After Genie decides to stop taking medication, she sends gifts to Marcus, Krystle, Minenhle, and Mordechai to convey her unwavering support for their dreams. The gifts bear symbolic meanings related to flight. For instance, the atlas she sends to Marcus evokes flights to various parts of the world, while the "colourful bird" (97) she sends to Minenhle and Mordechai signifies transcendence. Genie's symbolic gesture further evokes the notion of conviviality, which refers to the social act of coming together to forge ethics of togetherness or camaraderie, as conceptualised by Ivan Illich in his book, *Tools for Conviviality* (1973). As an expression and sustenance of collective aspiration, conviviality manifests in how Beauford Farm and Estate becomes a focal point of coalescence for individuals seeking to fly together. After inheriting the farm from her father, Beatrice allows it to serve as a home for various marginalised people, including Black ex-combatants, before ultimately selling it for a dollar to The Survivors, thereby transforming the farm into what Homi Bhabha would describe as "subaltern cosmopolitanism" (1996, 195). Beatrice's camaraderie with Black people, also evidenced by her biracial twins, hints at a transracial humanism that symbolically invites Zimbabweans from diverse racial, ethnic, gender, ideological, and cultural backgrounds to dissolve their differences in pursuit of a plural national identity. This idea is symbolised by the convergence of characters from disparate social locations in the sunflower field to mourn Genie's death.

Considering the above, the aeronautical principles of stability and control align with the way characters in *The Theory of Flight* remain focused on pursuing their aspirations. Although some dreams do not materialise, the characters analysed in this section maintain their determination, adhering to Golide's existential philosophy that life can still be lived happily in the immanence of hardship. In aeronautical terms, this can be explained by how, globally, the aircraft industry thrives despite persistent challenges that affect the efficiency and stability of aircraft, such as "the problem of degradation or contamination of the aerodynamic surfaces by insects and dust during climb and descent [which] still lacks a practical solution" (Rossow 2010, 602). Most aeroplanes reach their planned destinations, nevertheless. The reinvention strategies highlighted in *The Theory of Flight* evoke various theoretical concepts, including Michel Foucault's (2019) understanding of ethics as practices of freedom and self-formation through resisting domination, and Judith Butler's (1990) theorisation of identities as ideological constructs that are unstable and subject to reinvention.

Conclusion

Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu's *The Theory of Flight* offers valuable insights into the ethics and politics of reinvention within a Zimbabwean context. By foregrounding the existential struggles of characters who strive for renewal and self-actualisation in the immanence of personal and collective tragedies, the novel beckons the reader to

appreciate the ingenuity and resilience inherent in the margins of society. Its telling title immerses the reader in the intersections of literary imagination and aviation science, which has inspired this study to recontextualise the scientific principles of drag, weight, lift, thrust, stability, and control from aerodynamics and aeronautical engineering as conceptual metaphors for exploring the limits and possibilities of human aspiration in sites of displacement. In the novel, flight assumes both corporeal and ethereal senses as Golide embarks on a lifelong mission to build wings for his wife to fly to Nashville, where she wishes to pursue her ambition as a country singer. Through surrealistic depictions of flight, accentuated by flight motifs and kinesthetic imagery, the novel blurs the boundary between the probable and the improbable, and still convincingly leaves the reader with the feeling that, indeed, flight has been realised. In this enchanted fictional world, conventional understandings of agency are shattered, so even death affirms life and becomes the sublimation of beauty and fruition of aspiration. In the process, *The Theory of Flight* reaffirms the political function of flight as a metaphor for escape from a hostile reality, placing the narrative within the broader national search for transcendence in the face of enduring political and economic crises. It also calls for a holistic understanding of the human experience by inviting literary and scientific perspectives into critical dialogue. Considering that the novel addresses cross-cutting themes such as political violence, gendered oppression, sexual prejudice, ableism, disease, poverty, and resilience, the scientific discipline of aeronautics can unlock an alternative grammar for reading African literature and potentially unravel insights that may elude established reading traditions.

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