



Literary Activism in Contemporary Africa

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Introduction

In late 2020, the Ubuntu Reading Group, an initiative of the Kampala-based Centre for African Cultural Excellence, published *No Roses from My Mouth*, a collection of poetry by Ugandan feminist activist and scholar Stella Nyanzi. The poems in *No Roses from My Mouth* were composed in 2018 over a period of nearly 18 months while Nyanzi was incarcerated in Kampala's Luzira Prison on charges of cyber harassment and offensive communication. Though Nyanzi was, by this time, well known for her work as a feminist activist (Nyanzi is the founder of the 2017 Pads4Girls, Ugandan Women's Protest Working Group and the March 2018 Women's March) these charges, raised under the auspices of Uganda's Computer Misuse Act, ostensibly came not for her work as an organiser but for a poem addressed to the Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni posted on her Facebook account. Written and published the day after Museveni's 74th birthday, in the poem Nyanzi writes:

*Yoweri, they say it was your birthday yesterday.
How nauseatingly disgusting a day!
I wish the acidic pus flooding Esiteri's cursed vaginal canal had burnt up your unborn fetus.
Burnt you up as badly as you have corroded all morality and professionalism out of our public institutions in Uganda.* (Nyanzi 2018)

Nyanzi's case is one clear example of the ways in which political activism, literary creation, and knowledge production intersect, often with powerful and unanticipated results. As a self-styled organic intellectual, in Gramsci's terms, Nyanzi's use of poetry as a medium for activist resistance is a natural expression of a larger agenda rooted in practices of engaged, direct action.

Economic in its form and broad in its reach, poetry is both a platform for expression and a medium for effective transformation, a mode of writing whose very *literariness*, its singularity, opens pathways for radical thought which can travel unfettered, even when its author cannot. The editors of Nyanzi's collection, echoing this sentiment, cite Audre Lorde's declaration that "of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labour, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper" (Mirembe and Bwa Mwesigire 2020: xi). At the same time, this economy of form belies poetry's transformative potential as literary writing able to "abolish the past, and refuse all history" (Emerson, quoted in Attridge 2015: 50), opening utopian horizons and the possibility of affective change. Critically, Nyanzi, although a Doctor of Philosophy in medical anthropology by training and a political activist by profession, deliberately identifies herself as a writer.

Why Africa?

Since the early 20th century, the African continent has been a key site in which literary engagement has intertwined with the political and social activist movements which have marked its emergence as a zone of ostensibly independent nation-states in the postcolonial era. From the era of anti-colonial mobilization, led by figures such as poet, essayist, publisher and future president of Senegal Léopold Sédar Senghor, to the centrality of writers in liberationist struggles in Nigeria, South Africa and elsewhere, an apparent link has emerged between literature and literary production, political mobilisation and activism, and the various

struggles to determine, through an iterative process of claim-making, the imaginative horizons of social and political experience in Africa, functioning across spatial scales and registers of meaning. A few brief examples suffice to illustrate the historical importance of literary activism to the region:

- The seminal work of Léopold Sédar Senghor, first as a poet and literary activist central to the development of the Négritude movement and pan-African student mobilisation in mid-century Paris and later Senegal's first president.
- The participation, on various sides, of prominent writers, thinkers and members of the Ibadan-based Mbari literary club, including Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi and Christopher Okigbo, in the protracted Nigerian-Biafran War of 1967-1970
- The harassment of Rajat Neogy, founder of *Transition* magazine, by the Ugandan government for perceived acts of sedition through the activities of that publication
- The imprisonment (and sometimes murder) of writers from across the continent including Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Kenule Saro-Wiwa and Chris Abani. As these examples demonstrate, the literary has long served as a key – and sometimes feared – site of sociopolitical mobilisation, debate, and engagement in SSA, with important material effects and implications both for governance and for activist movements operating in the region.

Literary activist collectives, springing around publications and institutions such as the Mbari Club (Nigeria), *Transition* (Uganda) and publishing house and journal *Présence Africaine*, played a crucial role in generating claims towards a situated mode of Afromodernity, inflected by the struggle against coloniality, which would underwrite the struggle for political independence, and produce pan-African networks of literary and cultural activism forged through textual and physical modes of space-making. These literary institutions, undergirded by their manipulation and re-configuration of concepts of citizenship, civic engagement, and solidarity, formed crucial outlets for forging a more expansive terrain of the political and enabling the opening of spaces in which socio-political sentiment could be imaginatively transmitted, often through highly specified codes of aesthetic practice, and sedimented into action on the individual and collective levels. What is vital here is to understand literary activism as a kind of production that occurs through social interaction and the bringing together of varied, diverse peoples. Literary activism functions through the commons of people and the public and the networks of practice that it produces. As such, it offers a crucial redress to models of the state, the market and civil society, as they are normally thought. It thus functions as the medium through which horizontal solidarities might emerge. At the same time, these new horizontal modes of social production remain entangled with vertical structures of power in many ways including at the financial, operational, and institutional levels. I will return to these complexities at the end of this talk.

Equally, literary activism allows us to consider what we mean by the literary, in a broad sense. If, in a Euro-American context, debates around literature and aesthetics have repeatedly returned to post-Enlightenment notions of art as disinterested, what is commonly thought of as 'art for art's sake', in the African context (and global South context more broadly) is something rather different has obtained. Here, that is, the work of writers and cultural producers and their concerted interest in engagement with society through aesthetic and creative forms demonstrates the ways in which art and culture more generally have always served as significant elements of social production and reproduction, a reflection of Raymond Williams's mid-century observation that *all* parts of the social unit interact, engage, and impact upon each other.¹

Literary Activism and African Literature: A Short History

Scholarship in African literature has always shown a deep preoccupation with the notion of the writer as an engaged intellectual, with a significant role to play in the raising of national consciousness and a constitution of the ostensibly postcolonial nation through the anti-colonial struggle. Indeed, since the early 20th century the African continent, particularly, has been a key site in which literary engagement has intertwined with the political and social activist movements which have marked its emergence as a zone of ostensibly independent nation-states in the postcolonial era. Extant work in African studies, for instance, has noted the ways in which the creation of literary collectives such as the Mbari Club, *Transition* magazine, and *Black Orpheus*, as well as university publications like *DarLite*, *Penpoints* and *Busara* in the 1950s and 60s, enabled the constitution of spaces within which writers and producers were able to engage in complex negotiations

¹ See, for instance, Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) and Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2013 [1961]), especially pp. 67-8.

around the meaning of modernity, development and citizenship in an African continent emerging into independence.²

While African literary writing – at least in the form of the global novel – is less explicitly or overtly ‘activist’, in the commonplace sense, literary activism, particularly on the continent, continues to rise in significance.³ Yet, there is little consensus on what, precisely, the term means or how to define ‘activism’ or literary activism. Both the notions of ‘the literary,’ that is, and ‘activism’ remain contested terms. For some, literary activism is a question of aesthetics and form, a championing of the platonic notion of the literary as such. Amit Chaudhuri, for instance, develops an oppositional relation between ‘market activism’ and literary activism. Where the former is described as ‘A species of activity that added a fresh – and what soon became an indispensable – dimension to the publishing of novels and, indeed, how the novel would be thought of’, intimately connected to ‘the discovery of new literatures’,⁴ the latter is ‘more desultory’.⁵ Under this view, market activism might be seen as concerned with questions of diversity, literature development, representation and the cultivation of new publics for these ‘new literatures’. Literary activism, by contrast, concerns itself more with the inchoate – and highly contested – question of literary ‘value’.

For other critics, working definitions which conceptualise literary activism as a mode of social production through the opening of spaces and platforms and the constitution of networks and publics, particularly those based and centred on the African continent. As I, with Ruth Bush and Kate Wallis write in a 2021 special issue of *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies*, under this view literary activism might be seen as a mode of knowledge production, ‘an expression of agency that unfurls through a desire for a “something else” which is not essentialist in its aims and which leverages its own forms of momentum’.⁶ Still more recent work explicitly delineates literary activism as a concerted and deliberate mode of political intervention both through the production of literary writing under conditions of duress or through its contents, address and publicness. Here, we might return to the example of Nyanzi or, in a more historical form, think of the work of writers such as Ngũgĩ or Kenule Saro-Wiwa.

These various, if not always contradictory, definitions imply literary activism functions not as a single concept or roadmap for literary engagement, but as a constellation of (sometimes contradictory and incompatible) approaches to understanding cultural production today. Here, I focus explicitly on literary activism stemming from the African continent, exploring one specific case study from Cameroon, with wider ramifications across the continent. Literary activism is of course a term which has been applied far beyond the African continent. In this talk, then, I draw on my own experiences as a researcher, collaborator, coproducer and friend who has been working with literary activists, writers, editors, translators, and other creatives on the continent for nearly a decade. It should go without saying that my reflections in this lecture are not and could not be comprehensive; Africa is not a country. At the same time, the case studies that I outline at the end of this talk strike me as representative of the larger patterns and tendencies which have marked literary activist work more broadly.

Well before the term appeared in commonplace usage, the centrality of literary activism to the work of cultural production was made evident on the African continent. Whether through the work of cultural centres and collections, such as the Nigeria-based Mbari club or Nairobi-based Chemchemi (both of which, notably, were funded by Northern institutions, a point I will return to at the end of this chapter); conferences such as the 1962 Conference of African Writers of English Expression held at Kampala’s Makerere University, the 1963

² See Nathan Suhr-Sytsma, *Poetry, Print and the Making of African Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Peter Benson, *Black Orpheus, Transition and Modern Cultural Awakening in Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Mwangi Macharia, ‘Nexus/Busara and the Rise of Modern Kenyan Literature’, *Social Dynamics*, 47.2, (2021): 228-242.

³ There are of course clear exceptions here, such as the work of Patrice Nganang, a Cameroonian writer who has suffered state persecution for his interventions in the so-called ‘Anglophone crisis’.

⁴ Amit Chaudhuri, ‘On Literary Activism’, in *Literary Activism*, ed. by Amit Chaudhuri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶ Ruth Bush, Madhu Krishnan and Kate Wallis, ‘Introduction: Literary Activism in 21st Century Africa’, *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies*, 7.1, (2021): 1-9 (p. 3).

Fourah Bay Conference of teachers of Anglophone literature held in Sierra Leone or the 1973 conference on African publishing held in Ife; the great pan-African festivals held in the 60s and 70s in Dakar, Lagos and Kaduna, Algiers and Kinshasha; school literary societies and their periodicals; or newspapers and other modes of print culture, literary and cultural activity was always tied to larger questions around society, politics and self-determination.

Both historically and in its present shape, literary activism thus enables a vision of social production which moves away from a polarity between the vertical (leadership) and horizontal (movements) through its broader entanglements and institutional practices, necessitating a critical vision which fetishises neither and foregrounds the relationality therein. In the 1950s, for instance, the Mbari Club, for which the influential Nigerian literary magazine *Black Orpheus* was published, functioned both as a physical site for the meeting and collaboration of anti-colonial and radical writers from Nigeria and beyond and as a symbolic location through which a series of aesthetic principles were developed and transmitted to wider publics. Though funded in part by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an institution of the United States Central Intelligence Agency, the Mbari Club nonetheless operated through a transformation of these modes of financial support into new institutions with specific and singular aims not always of a piece with the goals and objectives of the former. Both implicated within the vertical topographies of power during the Cold War era and radical in its fabrication of a space of communing in which writers and producers could contest and negotiate the terms of literary and social engagement undergirding their work, Mbari Club cannot be easily categorised as merely one or the other, relegated in a neat binary to either the realm of the air-conditioner or the realm of the veranda.⁷ This is but one example of the complex historical interaction of institutions, their creation, transformation and mutation, through the work of literary activists on the African continent. With the end of the Cold War, the institutional landscape against which literary activism operates has again shifted, this time sedimenting around the work of NGOs and donor agencies including the Ford Foundation (who, until 2016, supported Kenya's Kwani Trust) and the Miles Moreland Foundation. As these examples demonstrate, however, literary activism has also always been riven by questions of soft power, funding streams and the larger role of northern patrons. At the same time, the work of these foundations, institutions and meetings was critical to the constitution of modern African literature in English, in particular, but also other languages and ecologies.⁸

Critically, what this early history shows us is the role played by the *literary* as a site through which to constitute, negotiate and contest the social. Anti-colonial thinkers and activists such as Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral notably observed the importance of culture to the constitution of the post-independence nation. Far from acting as supplementary to 'real' social production, in its broadest sense, literature functioned as a key avenue through which ideas about politics, society, morality and liberation could be elaborated upon and debated. At the same time, this was a specifically *aesthetic* task. That is, rather than operate purely as functional or educative, early debates around African literature and its implication with the (re)production of society centred around questions of form, address and language.⁹ Crucial to these debates was the understanding that the literary is both a register through which to create publics,¹⁰ while also enabling these public spaces and networks through which to debate the contours of their own societies and modes of self-fashioning. Moreover, as the history of literary activism has shown, these discussions foreground the ways in which the literary functions as a constellation of activities, aesthetic modalities and forms, forming bridges across different facets of the book chain and with strong links to university cultures and critical

⁷Emmanuel, Terray "Le climatiseur et la veranda," in *Afrique plurielle, Afrique actuelle: hommage à Georges Balandier*, ed. G. Balandier. Paris, 1986.

⁸ See for instance Rebecca Jones, *At the Crossroads: Nigerian Travel Writing and Literary Culture in Yoruba and English* (Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer, 2019); Khwezi Mkhize, "Shoot with your pen": Isaac William(s) Wauchope's Ingcamango Ebunzimeni and the power of speaking obscurely in public', *Social Dynamics*, 36, (2010): 222-234.

⁹ We might consider here debates around the language(s) of African literature animated by individuals such as Obi Wali, Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o; questions of form, such as Ngũgĩ's decision to move from prose to theatre writing as a means of wider engagement with his intended publics; debates around the validity of African modernisms; the role of the newspaper as a critical platform for constituting what Stephanie Newell calls 'paracolonial' publics; and more.

¹⁰ See Moradewun Adejunmobi, 'Abiola Irele and the publicness of African letters', *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 14:1, (2020): 72-89.

discursive communities. At the same time, literary activist work cannot be seen as strictly provincial or self-referential; rather, what emerges is the existence of broader global networks which enabled – and continue to enable – literary activism, including networks of funding, distribution, critical-academic discursive exchange, the wider book chain. Thus, it is important to avoid the temptation to fetishise the grassroots or the concept of the independent cultural actor; something rather more complex instead must be recognised, not least in the present day when questions remain around donor involvement, state support (or the lack thereof), infrastructure, and physical resources, the tension between markets and audience and more. There remain, moreover, broader questions around extractivism, seen for instance in the ways in which work originally enabled by Africa-based literary activism becomes consumed and appropriated by the global North.¹¹

The Contemporary Scene

In April 2017, I organised a workshop in Cape Town, South Africa, titled “Personal Histories, Personal Archives, Alternative Print Cultures,” comprising part of the AHRC Research Network “Small Magazines, Literary Networks and Self-Fashioning in Africa and its Diasporas,” which I led for two years with my colleague Christopher Ouma. The workshop was held at the now-defunct Long Street premises of Chimurenga, a self-described “project-based mutable object, publication, pan-African platform for editorial and curatorial work” based in Cape Town and best known for their eponymous magazine, which published sixteen issues between 2002 and 2011. As part of a conversation with collaborators Billy Kahora and Bongani Kona, editor Stacy Hardy was asked how Chimurenga sought out and forged readerships and the public. In her response, Hardy argued that the idea of a “target market” was “dangerous” and “arrogant,” offering a powerful repudiation of dominant models within the global publishing industry and book trade. Chimurenga, Hardy explained, worked from the premise articulated by founder Ntone Edjabe that “you don’t have to find readers, they find you.” Chimurenga’s ethos, Hardy explained, was one based on recognition, what she terms the “recognition of being part of something,” of “encountering Chimurenga and clocking into belonging.” Readers, for Hardy, were “Chimurenga people” who would find the publication and, on finding it, find something of themselves within it, be it through engagement with the magazine, attendance at Chimurenga’s live events and parties, or participation in the collective’s online presence. For Hardy, this is something of a personal story, intricately linked with her own entry into the Chimurenga collective, sparked by a chance encounter with the Chimurenga journal at Clarke’s bookshop in Cape Town, early in her tenure as a new and unhappy Cape Town transplant.

This anecdote gestures to something much more complex than may first make itself evident. As Hardy’s response evokes, to be “Chimurenga people” is to enter into a kind of mutual recognition based on a certain shared ethos, one spread both through the actual transmission of the print magazine but extending far beyond, encompassing music, live events and digital archives as active sites where publics are forged and found and the literary, as a conceptual entity, enacted through an iterative process of recognition and engagement. And yet while Chimurenga’s editorial agenda is driven by what editors want to read, and a firm belief that people are “interested in brilliant, wild thinking,” as part of the same conversation Hardy talked about Chimurenga’s shift from its flagship journal to the *Chronic*, a quarterly broadsheet, in 2013 as both built out of a “network of friendship” and driven by the “need to reach more people”. Perhaps then what best encapsulates this multifaceted positioning in relation to cultural production, networks and the public is Chimurenga’s tagline, taken from a lyric by Nigerian Afrobeat legend Fela Kuti: “Who No Know Go Know.”

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¹¹ Examples here include Ayobámi Adébáyọ’s *Stay With Me*, which, though originally a shortlisted winner of the Kwani? Manuscript Prize only garnered critical attention with its acquisition and publication by Canongate; Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi’s *Kintu*, originally published by Nairobi-based Kwani? in 2014 but only in receipt of international attention with its American edition published in 2017 by Transit Books; or Teju Cole’s *Everyday is For the Thief*, first published in 2007 by the Nigerian press Cassava Republic and later, to global acclaim, by Faber & Faber in 2014. Of course the production of multiple editions across geographies is a common practice in contemporary publishing. My point here is rather that these serve as instances where *visibility* was denied – or minimised – to certain texts until their publication in the global North, with profits of course going to these multinational publishing houses rather than the original Africa-based smaller outfits that provided the original editorial labour.

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