

## 28 Publishers' networks and the making of African literature

### Locating communities of readers and writers

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In May 1964, UK book trade weekly *The Bookseller* reported on Heinemann's successful launch of Chinua Achebe's third novel *Arrow of God* in Lagos. This 'publishers' reception' held on 4 April 1964 at the Bristol Hotel was heralded as 'the most successful occasion of its kind yet to be held in Nigeria', attended by 300 guests who included 'the heads of various government departments, the editors of the principal newspapers, the leaders of Nigerian broadcasting, and prominent figures in industry, education, the law, medicine and the Churches' (*The Bookseller* 1964). Later that same year in Nairobi, Heinemann launched Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's first novel *Weep Not, Child* at an event organised by South African writer Es'kia Mphahlele in collaboration with the ESA bookshop (Bejjit 2015, 229). It is possible to trace a number of significant intersections between these two launch events held in 1964 on opposite sides of the African continent, as well as the literary and publishing relationships out of which they emerge. The most immediately visible of these is both events being financed by London-based publisher William Heinemann with the intention of drawing attention and readers to their publishing of African writers, part of a strategy spearheaded by Alan Hill across the 1960s to capitalise on the expanding education and trade markets that had opened up in newly independent Africa while investing in local publishing and authors (Hill 1988, 122–123). Launched in 1962 the African Writers Series [AWS] formed a core part of this strategy, with *Arrow of God* and *Weep Not, Child* making the sixteenth and eighth titles in this series respectively.

However, Heinemann's African Writers Series was not responsible for creating the link between Achebe and Ngũgĩ, rather it was Achebe who had connected Ngũgĩ and the AWS. Achebe met Ngũgĩ in Kampala in 1961 and offered encouragement on his first short story published in *Penpoint* (Ngũgĩ 2013, 760). A year later in June 1962, in what has become an iconic moment in the history of anglophone African literature (Hill 1988, 126; Ezenwa-Ohaeto 1997, 91; Griffiths 2000, 84; Currey 2008, 3; Ngũgĩ 2013, 760; Bejjit 2015, 225), Achebe and Ngũgĩ met again in Kampala at the 'Conference of African Writers of English Expression' held at Makerere University College. Ngũgĩ has described how *Things Fall Apart* was the most discussed novel at the conference 'as a model of literary restraint and excellence' and that 'what most attracted' him to this event was the opportunity to share with Achebe the draft manuscript for his own novel *Weep Not, Child* (Ngũgĩ 2013, 760). As Ngũgĩ's and Alan Hill's accounts of this encounter both recall, Achebe was impressed by the manuscript and not only shared useful editorial suggestions but brought it to the attention of his publisher HEB who made an immediate offer to publish (Ngũgĩ 2013, 760–761; Hill 1988, 126). This sequence of events not only, according to Ngũgĩ, had a 'profound impact on my life and career' (Ngũgĩ 2013, 760), it also prompted HEB to realise the value of Achebe as a 'magnet for young writers' and later that year he was appointed as AWS Series Editor (Currey 2008, 3).

The continent-based literary and publishing relationships that are made visible by the 1964 launch events for *Arrow of God* and *Weep Not, Child* both enabled and emerge out of this encounter at Makerere between Achebe and Ngũgĩ. By mapping these relationships, my intention is to bring into view literary and publishing networks that weren't convened by AWS but through which the series was able to access new writers and accumulate cultural value. So for example, Es'kia Mphahlele, who was responsible for organising the Nairobi launch event for *Weep Not, Child*, played a critical role in conceptualising and bringing together the African Writers conference at Makerere. The conference was co-organised by Ibadan-based Mbari

Artists' and Writers' Club and Makerere's Department of Extra-Mural Studies with funding from the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF); Mphahlele, who lived in Nigeria between 1957 and 1961, was Mbari's first president and by 1962 was working in Paris as Director of African Programmes for CCF (Mphahlele 1995, 30). As a result of conversations and connections forged at the Makerere conference, Mphahlele subsequently asked CCF to release him so that he could set up a 'sister' organisation to Mbari in Kenya (Mphahlele 1995, 38). By 1964 then Mphahlele was in Nairobi establishing the creative centre Chemchemi (also funded by CCF) and so able to facilitate the launch of Ngũgĩ's first novel.

If one key node or point of intersection grounding the literary and publishing relationships out which these two launch events emerge is the 1962 conference at Makerere, then another is the institutional structures surrounding this, and in particular conference organisers Mbari Artists' and Writers' Club. Established in 1961 as a creative centre for exhibitions, performances and literary discussions by a group of writers and artists including Achebe, Ulli Beier, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark and Christopher Okigbo, Mbari also immediately set up its own publishing house with Okigbo as editor (Nwakanma 2010, 178). Again with funding from CCF, by 1966 Mbari had published 17 titles (Currey 2008, xxx), often being the first to publish writers who would go on to become an established part of the African literary canon. As Nathan Suhr-Sytsma has highlighted, 'publication by Mbari made previously unknown writers desirable to commercial publishers in London' (Suhr-Sytsma 2017, 68) with several titles being reprinted in the AWS (Currey 2008, xxx) including Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*.<sup>1</sup> Notably, when in 1964 HEB needed to recruit a new manager and publisher for Nigeria, they appointed active Mbari member Aig Higo – who was then taught the first things he needed to know about the publishing business by Okigbo (Nwakanma 2010, 186).

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<sup>1</sup> This was published by Mbari in 1962 and became AWS's thirty-fifth title in 1967.

Opening this chapter by exploring some of the interactions that surround the launch of Achebe's *Arrow of God* in Lagos and Ngũgĩ's *Weep Not, Child* in Nairobi, draws attention to the ways in which 'publishers' networks' can act as a useful frame for reading African literary production. These interactions make visible the role of key individuals and their relationships in the construction of literary institutions, and in particular relationships between writers (Achebe and Ngũgĩ) and between editors (Higo and Okigbo) which are focused on craft and generative of new writing and publishing. In addition, they highlight the overlaps between the roles of writer and editor, for example between Mbari as a club – invested in building a community of writers and artists – and Mbari as a publishing house. What this particular example enables me to foreground is that publishers don't necessarily *convene* the networks that their publishing depends on for finding new writers, investing those writers with cultural value and reaching audiences. Instead, they just need to understand how to access and build their publishing out of existing networks and markets. So here we see Heinemann's AWS able to access through Mbari a community of writers with its existing structures of prestige and publishing, and build out of this what Achebe would go onto herald as 'the largest and best library of African literature' (Achebe 2009, 97). These dynamics and their effect on the production and circulation of African literature will ground the arguments developed through the rest of this chapter. In the section that follows, I will provide an overview of previously published work that has shaped an understanding of and approaches to the role of publishers and networks in African cultural production. Building on this and focusing in on the launch events for Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* in Nigeria in 2004 and Binyavanga Wainaina's *One Day I Will Write About This Place* in Kenya in 2012, I go on to examine the complex and shifting relationships at stake in the publishing of anglophone African literature over the last two decades from both *outside* the continent by publishers in New York and London, and *inside* the continent by publishers in Lagos and Nairobi.

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## Publishers' networks and African literary production

Patrick Jagoda has explored the ways in which from the 1990s onwards the language and science of networks as 'the principal architecture and most resonant metaphor of the globalizing world' has come to frame and influence our perception and methodological approach to a diverse range of forms and disciplines (Jagoda 2016, 3). It is therefore perhaps surprising that relatively little work on African cultural production has emerged that *explicitly* uses 'networks' as a concept or frame. In my own work it was Nairobi-based publisher Kwani Trust's deliberate positioning of themselves as a 'literary network' that prompted me to develop a methodology through which this could be conceptualised and characterised, and realise the potential of this for examining the structures of contemporary anglophone African literary production more broadly (Wallis 2018). However, the concept of 'literary networks' is beginning to gain increasing currency in the field, as a recent 'Call for Papers' for a special issue of *Postcolonial Text* on 'Literary Networks and Digital Media in Contemporary African Literatures' edited by Aurélie Journo attests (Africa in Words 2018), as well as Madhu Krishnan and Chris Ouma's AHRC Research Network 'Small Magazines, Literary Networks and Self-Fashioning in Africa and its Diasporas' (Small Magazines 2018).

One area of study where the concept of 'networks' in relation to African literary production has been more visible is in work that maps a longer history of African print cultures and in particular the role of newspapers (Newell 2002; Peterson, Hunter and Newell 2016). However, even where relationships between writers, publishers, critics and readers haven't been framed as 'networks', there remains a significant body of work that has documented and theorised these relationships and that future studies of publishers' networks can draw on. As my account of the launch events for books by Achebe and Ngũgĩ shows, the exchanges out of which publishers' networks are constructed can often be traced through autobiographies and memoirs of writers and editors (see: Hill 1988; Soyinka 1994; Mphahlele 1995; Chakava 1996; Achebe

2009; Ngũgĩ 2017). James Currey's *Africa Writes Back* (2008) provides a particularly valuable insight into the relationships with writers, editors and critics out of which the AWS was constructed, drawing both on memories of his own interactions as publisher of the series between 1967 and 1984 and the archive of series correspondence held at University of Reading. Currey's account foregrounds the significant roles played by complexities of friendship, finance and the work of publishing houses and literary journals on the continent (from East African Publishing House to *The New African*) in these relationships.

Biographies also offer a potentially rich resource for studying publishers' networks. Obi Nwakanma's *Christopher Okigbo 1930–67: Thirsting for Sunlight* for example, places particular emphasis on Okigbo's work in publishing. Nwakanma records that Okigbo developed good relationships with a number of international publishers while working as librarian for the recently established University of Nigeria, Nsukka (Nwakanma 2010, 174). His move to Ibadan in 1962 – which also enabled him to take up an active role in Mbari – came out of this and was as a result of his appointment as West African Manager for Cambridge University Press (CUP). Nwakanma describes how Okigbo's work as CUP's representative was 'largely a public relations role', building connections and cultural value through 'the life and personality of the poet' (Nwakanma 2010, 214). He was aided in this by the house and retinue of personal staff the job provided for him in Ibadan, with his home and work place, Cambridge House, becoming 'the hub of Ibadan café culture' where business, socialising and informal creative writing workshops all took place (Nwakanma 2010, 187–196). Nwakanma's biography also documents the immediate connection Okigbo established with the founder of *Transition* Rajat Neogy at the Makerere Conference, with Okigbo taking on the role of West African Editor for the magazine by the end of the event (Nwakanma 2010, 183).

A significant body of scholarly work has developed around the AWS, which draws on these autobiographies and biographies, as well as shorter first-hand accounts by editors (Clarke 2003;

Maja-Pearce 1992) and archival material. Particular emphasis has been placed on AWS's relationship to colonial forms of patronage and to educational networks, as well as the ways in which editorial decisions were shaped by relationships with both Western and local audiences (Griffiths 2000, 79; Huggan 2001, 80; Barnett 2006, 76; Low 2011, 71, 86). However, the detailed archival work of Nourdin Bejjit perhaps offers the most compelling insight into the 'complex web of economic, political and literary conditions' out of which the AWS was constructed. Challenging arguments made by Huggan and Griffiths, Bejjit tracks the political, personal, commercial and literary factors that shaped both Ngũgĩ's and Achebe's relationships with HEB and foregrounds the ways in which over time both writers became increasingly committed to 'moving the centre' of African cultural production to the African continent (Bejjit 2015, 2009).

As I've highlighted, publishers often do not *convene* the networks that their publishing depends on but work in dialogue with or extend their reach through existing structures, relationships and literary spaces. Recent scholarly work has importantly drawn attention to the relationship between publishers' networks and structures of education, the space of the city, and literary magazines. Jinny Prais, while rejecting the conception of network in favour of the 'West African public sphere', shows the intersections between the paracolonial network of African newspapers described by Stephanie Newell (2002, 3), and an educated African elite associated with the West African Students Union in London, in building communities of readers and writers in London, Accra and beyond (Prais 2008, 148). Terry Ochiagha and Olabode Ibrinke have both challenged a narrative of Nigeria's literary renaissance that begins with the literary networks forged at University College, Ibadan (Ochiagha 2015, 3; Ibrinke 2015a, b). Instead Ochiagha has highlighted the friendships established between Achebe, Okigbo, Elechi Amadi, Chukwuemeka Ike and Chike Momah at Government College, Umuahia, documenting formative experiences and literary exchanges at secondary school that sparked their careers as

creative writers and directly fed into later interactions at university and through Mbari in Ibadan (Ochiagha 2015, 7, 9). Alternatively Ibrinke has brought into view the ways in which the city space of Ibadan itself and its ‘social character’ manifested in both ‘physical surroundings and humanity’ produced Wole Soyinka and Mbari (Ibrinke 2015a, 548, 2015b, 556).

Kachifo and Kwani Trust, the publishers responsible for organising the launch events that form the focus of the second half of this chapter, both began by publishing literary magazines – *Farafina* and *Kwani?* respectively. This choice of case studies reflects the role played by literary magazines in building literary communities and networks on the African continent from the 1950s onwards, visible both in the periodicals brought together by the Chimurenga Library<sup>2</sup> and Peter Benson’s editorial history of *Black Orpheus* and *Transition* (Benson 1986). Macharia Mwangi’s work has drawn particular attention to the complex intersections between the publishing industry and literary magazines through his study of *Busara*, *Mũtiiri* and *Kwani?* (Mwangi 2015). For Mwangi these literary magazines are ‘publishing outposts’, outside the established structures of the mainstream Kenyan publishing industry and therefore able to encourage experimentation and nurture creativity. He documents *Busara* starting life from University College Nairobi and shows how the writers publishing short stories and poetry in the magazine very often had significant roles in other publishers and publishing initiatives – from Jonathan Kariara as editor of Oxford University Press to David Rubadiri as editor of *Poems from East Africa* published by the AWS in 1971 (Mwangi 2015, 75).

A number of recent studies have worked with and against framings by Bourdieu of the ‘field of cultural production’ and, building on this, by Casanova of ‘world literary space’, as producing cultural value and ultimately African literature (van der Vlies 2007; Helgesson 2008; Strauhs 2013; Davis 2013; Bush 2016; Suhr-Sytsma 2017; Ibrinke 2018). This body of work opens up a range of significant new models for thinking about the medium and geographies

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<sup>2</sup> <http://chimurengalibrary.co.za/periodicals>.



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through which publishers' networks operate. Stefan Helgesson's study of southern African literature between 1945 and 1975 demonstrates the role of print in enabling literary cultures associated with the journals *Itinerario* and *Drum* to become significant beyond national boundaries (Helgesson 2008). While the work of Caroline Davis importantly traces the financial exchanges that are fundamental to the construction of publishers' networks (Davis 2013). Like Davis, Ruth Bush has challenged received models of 'world literary space' (Casanova 2004, xii) in her study of African literary production from Paris between 1945 and 1967 (Bush 2016). Through archival work Bush explores ways in which literary representations were mediated by publishers, translators, booksellers and reviewers, and convincingly shows individuals and communities resisting dominant structures of literary value and negating singular ideas of a Parisian literary geography (Bush 2016, 20). Most recently, Nathan Suhr-Sytsma has read both Ibadan and Belfast as nodes in a 'wider set of transnational networks' which in the era of decolonisation altered the contours of the 'anglophone literary world' (Suhr-Sytsma 2017, 11). By putting the poetry and publication histories of Okigbo and Mbari into dialogue with those of Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott, Suhr-Sytsma shows the ways in which these poets are connected through the 'structural dilemmas' and cultural institutions they negotiate (Suhr-Sytsma 2017, 19).

Placing particular emphasis on the role of the Internet (Adenekan 2012) and on relationships between continent-based writers' organisations and international prizes (Kiguru 2016), the work of Shola Adenekan and Doseline Kiguru has been significant in analysing the structures through which communities of writers have been formed, nurtured and canonised on the continent in the twenty-first century. Building on this work, here I explore the extent to which in a world of the present, marked by 'electronic media and mass migration' as forces that impel 'the work of the imagination' (Appadurai 1996, 4), there has been a shift in the institutions and relationships through which African writing is fostered, published and consecrated with

cultural value. Arguing that new models are needed that draw attention to the role played by pan-African exchanges and local publishers in the global movement and circulation of African literature, my 2018 article for *Research in African Literatures* advocated a theory of literary networks (Wallis 2018). Proposing a relational model that puts Appadurai's concept of 'scapes' into dialogue with Bourdieu's 'network of relations of exchange', I argued in particular for the potency of reading located literary events as 'multilayered expressive fragment(s)' (Quayson 2014, 21) through which to explore the relationships and flows out of which writers and texts are created. This chapter further develops and refines this critical model, shifting the emphasis from 'literary' networks to 'publishers' networks.

#### Launching Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* in Nigeria

In July of 2004 the literary magazine *Farafina*, published by Kachifo, organised a series of readings in Nigeria for Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's debut novel *Purple Hibiscus*. *Farafina* magazine had launched online the previous year and, as founder Muhtar Bakare observed, by 'being online we met a lot of people' (Bakare 2006). One of these people was Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who was living in the USA at the time, and whose short story 'Fide' was published in the third online edition of *Farafina* in 2003.<sup>3</sup> This reading tour for *Purple Hibiscus* was organised by *Farafina* in order to promote and celebrate Adichie as a contributor to the newly launched magazine, as well as more specifically to bring her novel, which had been published at the end of 2003 in the USA and early in 2004 in the UK, to the attention of a wider public in Nigeria (Feludu 2014). The tour included three public events – one in Abuja hosted by the British Council, one in Ibadan hosted by the Educare Trust Exhibition Centre and one in Lagos at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) aimed primarily at university students (ThisDay 2014). In addition, there was an invitation-only 'premier' event for sponsors

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<sup>3</sup> A later version of the story would be published in 2007 by the *New York Times* as 'Real Food'.

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and members of Nigeria's literati at the Yellow Chilli restaurant on Victoria Island in Lagos, featuring Adichie in conversation with Jeremy Weate, staged readings from the novel, and performances from Nigerian musical icon Fatai Rolling Dollar and the, then relatively unknown, young female singer Asa (Feludu 2014; Bakare-Yusuf 2013).

Moving across the five dimensions of global cultural flows that Appadurai argues act as 'building blocks' of 'imagined worlds' – *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescapes* and *ideoscapes* (Appadurai 1996, 33) – I argue that Farafina's launch events for *Purple Hibiscus* act as a significant moment of instantiation for the publishers' networks this chapter is concerned to map. So what were the ideas behind this reading tour? Significantly at the time these events were organised Bakare was very much focused on establishing *Farafina* as an online magazine and had no intention of moving into book publishing (Bakare 2014). This series of events to promote Adichie's first novel, which as yet had no Nigerian publisher, was therefore not driven by the financial imperative of selling copies of the book. Instead it had two ideological objectives (Bakare 2014; Feludu 2014). Firstly, the desire to 'burst the bubble' and reach a larger public in Nigeria with news of this novel rather than just the existing literary community (Feludu 2014). Reflecting this, care was given to make the events themselves as engaging and entertaining as possible with actors performing sections of the novel, and musicians also included as part of the programme (Feludu 2014; Weate 2016). Secondly, Farafina wanted to frame the events in a way that validated a larger and more sustainable literary community or network. As a press release and associated media interviews make evident, Farafina emphasised that the reading tour aimed to inspire and build a literary community and new writing by giving 'validity to other young Nigerian writers' (Ufine 2004) and showing 'other promising writers that the craft of writing can also be rewarding' (ThisDay 2014). Equally evident is the care that was taken to reach out to existing individuals and institutions with the power to consecrate the novel with cultural value in Nigeria, engaging

with universities, arts organisations from ANA (Association of Nigerian Authors) to CORA (Committee for Relevant Arts), leading writers such as Niyi Osundare and Femi Osofisan, and partnering with the British Council and the Educare Trust Exhibition Centre (ThisDay 2014; Ufine 2004).

Muhtar Bakare had hired Yemisi Aribisala and Egun Feludu (then Egun Olatoye) as *Farafina* magazine's first Editor and Editorial Assistant. Although putting together this series of events was part of a larger collaborative effort, it was Feludu, a recent graduate, serving her year as a member of Nigeria's National Youth Service Corps, who was the driving force behind it (Bakare 2014; Aribisala 2015). As a recently established publishing company, set up with Muhtar Bakare's personal capital, Kachifo did not have the resources available to fund this author tour. Feludu therefore put together a proposal and Kachifo began to seek sponsorship for these events. Feludu – who Bibi Bakare-Yusuf has described as a 'powerhouse' who was 'singular in focus' in relation to the launch of Adichie's first novel (Bakare-Yusuf 2014) – was driven by passion ('I was totally totally in love with her writing') and also able to draw on her own 'tidy network' to make the events possible (Feludu 2014). A personal friend of Feludu's, building contractor Kunle Ogunkoya, was so persuaded by her passion for the book that he committed the seed money that enabled the project to get off the ground (Feludu 2014). Alongside in-kind sponsorship from partners such as the British Council, Educare Trust and Moorhouse, Chris Okeke (introduced to Farafina via a mutual friend of Muhtar Bakare's, Bayo Adeniji), founding partner of a leading Lagos law practice, also gave a substantial amount of money without which the events would not have been possible (Feludu 2014).<sup>4</sup> Feludu was similarly able to draw on personal contacts of both herself and Bakare to secure high profile

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<sup>4</sup> At the time both Ogunkoya and Okeke asked to remain anonymous in their sponsorship (Feludu 2014).

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media coverage for the event, commissioning a review from Dr Olaokun Soyinka (Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka's son), persuading friend Jahman Anikulapo (Arts Editor of *The Guardian* of Nigeria) to help champion the book in his own newspaper and among the wider arts journalism community, and securing television interviews for Adichie with popular broadcasters Adesuwa Onyenokwe and Funmi Iyanda (Feludu 2014; Anikulapo 2018).

By mapping the exchanges out of which this first reading tour for *Purple Hibiscus* in Nigeria was constructed, I want to draw attention to *Farafina*'s role in shaping Adichie's significance within Nigerian cultural production. The ways in which these events were conceived and brought together, and the drawing in of Lagos's cultural elite to fund and support them, has shaped not only Adichie's own literary output but her role within a larger literary community. Several of the writers and publishers I interviewed for this study identified this event as marking the beginning of a period of more incentives and opportunities for writers in Nigeria, and a growing sense of community (Ogunlesi 2013; Imasuen 2014; Ndibe 2014; Aribisala 2015; Anikulapo 2018). In particular *Farafina* editor Yemisi Aribisala commented that 'it was amazing what that launch represented', explaining how it 'brought what wasn't yet a literary community together and gave them a sense of belonging and gave them hope' (Aribisala 2015). This sentiment is echoed in a blog post by Ayodele Olofintuade who describes how as a result of *Farafina* pushing *Purple Hibiscus* 'like cocaine', and the interlinked founding of the NLNG (Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas) Prize for Literature, a new vibrancy developed in Nigerian literature and 'we all became "writers"' (Olofintuade 2013; Bakare-Yusuf 2013). In her article 'The Rebirth of Nigerian Publishing', Bakare-Yusuf emphasises 'the energetic and fluid way Yemisi and Ebun worked together to put *Farafina* and Adichie on the map' and the impact of this on opening up a new era of Nigerian publishing and writing (Bakare-Yusuf 2013). She recalls the buzz of recognising that 'Nigeria had new talent', as she and Jeremy Weate were drawn in to support 'behind the scenes'. Bakare-Yusuf evocatively describes the evening event

at Yellow Chilli and in particular the pervasive sense in the audience that this heralded a ‘new cultural moment’ (Bakare-Yusuf 2013). Showing publishers’ networks as generative not only of new writers and writing but also new literary institutions, Bakare-Yusuf and Weate both credit Farafina’s launch events for *Purple Hibiscus* as one of the ‘sparks’ that led them to set up Cassava Republic Press (Bakare-Yusuf 2013, 2014; Weate 2016).

The exchanges that emerged from and enabled this reading tour also led to Kachifo deciding to publish an edition of *Purple Hibiscus* for the Nigerian market, and the launch of the Farafina Books imprint (Wallis 2016). This marked the beginning of a decade-long publishing relationship between Adichie and Farafina who released Nigerian editions of all her fiction between 2004 and 2013. Adichie and Bakare also collaborated to set up Farafina Trust, through which from 2009 Adichie ran the annual Farafina Trust Creative Writing Workshop. So, Kachifo’s literary publishing and Adichie’s relationship with Nigerian readers grew in dialogue with and out of each other, with Adichie publicly celebrating Bakare in both her acclaimed TED Talk ‘The Danger of a Single Story’ and in an article for the UK *Guardian* ‘My Hero: Muhtar Bakare’ (Adichie 2009a, 2009b). Adichie’s *Guardian* piece emphasises the personal connection so many publishing relationships are based on; she writes that on meeting Bakare she knew almost immediately that he was the right person to publish *Purple Hibiscus*, ‘[n]ot only because he was humanist, widely read, pan-African, thoughtful and had an instinctive understanding of the nuances of Nigerian society but also because there was a fundamental lack of falseness about him’ (Adichie 2009b).

In the UK, while Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* was very successful, it was the publication of *Half of a Yellow Sun* that ‘burst the bubble’ and brought Adichie to mainstream attention, with the novel winning the Orange Prize for Fiction and featured as part of the UK’s influential *Richard & Judy* Book Club. However, in Nigeria, I would argue Farafina did succeed in their aim of bursting the bubble with the launch events for *Purple Hibiscus*, reaching beyond an existing

literary community to a wider middle-class public. Organiser Feludu commented that as a result of the PR and media campaign it felt almost like audiences were ‘going from an Usher concert’ not a literary event (Feludu 2014). This sentiment is echoed by Jahman Anikulapo, arts journalist and now director of the Lagos Book & Art Festival, who similarly recalls the reading tour being ‘packaged with as much gusto and panache as a showbiz event’ and this being the first time a literary book had launched with so much ‘paparazzi sort of packaging’. Anikulapo positions this as the beginning of the CNA (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie) brand, ‘before the global literary circuit jumped on the wagon’, even though *Purple Hibiscus* had first been published outside Nigeria (Anikulapo 2018). In contrast, while the launch of *Purple Hibiscus* is referenced as a literary moment in Nigeria, very few people I interviewed remember any specific events or incidents marking the publication of Adichie’s second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* in Nigeria (Bakare 2014; Dosekun 2014). Bakare explained to me that the launch of *Purple Hibiscus* was so successful in establishing the profile of Adichie as a new literary name (with her second novel so highly anticipated there was even speculation that she might be a ‘one book wonder’), that Farafina felt confident they were publishing *Half of a Yellow Sun* into an established market and didn’t need to push it in the same way (Bakare 2014).

#### Launching Binyavanga Wainaina’s *One Day I Will Write About This Place* in Kenya

On 1 June 2012, Kwani Trust launched the East African edition of Binyavanga Wainaina’s *One Day I Will Write About This Place* in the grounds of the Nairobi Railway Museum. This event, held on Madaraka Day<sup>5</sup> in an old railway building complete with a disused Uganda Railways carriage and train track running through it, took the form of a party with a DJ set from Just a Band. Wainaina was in conversation with Ellah Wakatama Allfrey, and this was

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<sup>5</sup> A national holiday celebrated every 1 June to mark the day in 1963 Kenya attained internal self-rule and the end of British colonial rule.

followed by a performance from Eric Wainaina<sup>6</sup> and a book signing. Focusing on exchanges or movements of people, images, technology, money and ideas visible in this literary event, I again want to argue for this as a moment of instantiation for the publishers' networks this chapter seeks to map. Like *Farafina's* reading tour for *Purple Hibiscus*, it is an event that can be read as generative of new audiences, writers and publishing. However, it is also significant as an event that is reflective of the networks that had enabled Kwani Trust's publishing over the previous decade.

So what were the ideas out of which this event emerged? In *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, Wainaina writes about the railway as 'the origin and spine of what we now call Kenya' (Wainaina 2012, 59). Wainaina was keen for the launch to capture an idea and language of nostalgia (Wainaina 2014) and, as Kwani Trust's Managing Editor Billy Kahora explained, the railway symbolised a 'prop from history' with the potential to 'bring us back to what Kenya is, to what Kenya represents, that now has been discarded' (Kahora 2018). Kwani Trust originally explored the idea of a literary safari by train from Nairobi to Wainaina's home town of Nakuru to launch the book, before settling on the Nairobi Railway Museum when this turned out to be more feasible in terms of costs and practicalities (Wainaina 2014; Wachuka 2018; Kahora 2018). Kwani Trust had a total budget of just over \$5000 to bring together the event, the majority of which had come from their annual marketing budget covered by a grant from the Ford Foundation. The Ford Foundation money was then supplemented by \$600 from Wainaina's workplace Bard College, which was used to hire Sandra Chege to coordinate marketing and publicity, and \$800 from Kwani Trust's sales which paid for the DJ set by Just a Band's Blinky Bill (Kwani Trust 2012c).

Another objective grounding the curation of the event was that it should celebrate Wainaina as the founding editor of *Kwani*?. Talking about how the event was conceptualised, Kahora

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<sup>6</sup> Acclaimed Kenyan musician, not a relative of Binyavanga Wainaina.



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reflected on *One Day I Will Write About This Place* as a ‘symbol’ of what Kwani Trust had been able to achieve over its first decade, and the importance of this event as an act of ‘recognition of Binyavanga as a writer and editor, and all the things he had set out to do when he and others founded *Kwani?*’ (Kahora 2018). This was also reflected in Kahora’s brief introductory remarks on the night, where he told two anecdotes about the experience of working with Wainaina, the first describing staying up through the night to finish work on *Kwani? 03* and the second reflecting on the rigorous editing process for his own book *The True Story of David Munyakei*. The programming choices for the event were consistently informed by this sense of wanting the night to celebrate Wainaina’s achievements not only as a writer but as *Kwani?* editor. As well as speaking to ideas of nostalgia in Wainaina’s writing, the Nairobi Railway Museum had also been used as the backdrop to a video commissioned as part of *Kwani? 03* (2005) for Ukoo Flani Mau Mau’s ‘Mashairi’. This choice of venue was then also evocative of Wainaina’s collaboration with hip hop collective Ukoo Flani Mau Mau in the early years of *Kwani?*, with lyrics by several members presented as Sheng poetry in *Kwani? 03* and Kwani Trust supporting the group to set up their own studio to record second album ‘Dandora Burning’. Similarly, musician Eric Wainaina performed ‘Joka’ at the launch event – a track from his 2006 album *Twende Twende!*. ‘Joka’ had started life as a fictional song in the pages of *Kwani? 02* in Parselelo Kantai’s ‘Comrade Lemma & the Black Jerusalem Boy Band’ before being brought to life in music at the instigation of Binyavanga Wainaina (Rosenberg 2007, 121).

Finally, driving this event was the sense that it should draw a wider audience beyond the literary community, positioning itself as a ‘book party’ rather than a ‘book launch’. Based on a launch concept by Wainaina, Kwani Trust’s Executive Director Angela Wachuka worked with Wanjiru Koinange using lights and tents to transform the unusual space of the Nairobi Railway Museum into a public arts space. Posters for the event highlighted the DJ set from cutting-edge

Nairobi musicians Just a Band. As with Farafina's events for *Purple Hibiscus*, by playing with the possibilities of spectacle and tapping into links with musicians, the event was framed through popular as well as literary culture. However, Wainaina's book as a physical object, packaged with newly commissioned artwork from Catherine Anyango and Wainaina's own handwriting for the title, was very much foregrounded and was the ticket everyone had to buy for 500 Kenyan Shillings in order to get entry to the party.

Founded in 2003 in the aftermath of Wainaina winning the Caine Prize, from the outset Kwani Trust has been concerned with 'establishing and maintaining global literary networks' (Kwani Trust 2016) through continual dialogue with a pan-African and international space of writing, publishing and prizing. Reflecting this, publicity for this launch event emphasised that the book had been 'first released to great critical acclaim and commercial success in the USA and the UK in 2011', and celebrated its selection as an 'Oprah Book Club: Book of the Week' and one of *New York Times*' '100 Most Notable Books of 2011' (Kwani Trust 2012b). In 2008, Wainaina took up the position of Director of the Chinua Achebe Center for African Writers and Artists at Bard College in the USA, and part of the excitement in Nairobi around this event was that it represented a 'homecoming' both for Wainaina and for this memoir which had received international acclaim (Kahora 2018; Mburu 2018; Wachuka 2018). Kwani Trust's transnational networks were also in evidence in the choice of Ellah Wakatama Allfrey as host for the event. At the time Allfrey was Deputy Editor of the literary magazine *Granta* whose books division had published Wainaina's memoir in the UK and where seven years earlier (before Allfrey took up this role in 2009) he had published his seminal essay 'How to Write About Africa' (Wainaina 2005). As a member of the Council of the Caine Prize, Allfrey's presence was also a reminder of the links to this leading UK literary prize for African writing

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in Kwani Trust's institutional history.<sup>7</sup> Her prominent role in the event also reflected a longstanding friendship and working relationship with Kwani Trust – in 2008 while Senior Editor at Jonathan Cape she held 'manuscript doctor' sessions as part of 2008 Kwani? Litfest and in 2013 would take on the role of series editor for the Kwani? Manuscript Project. Recalling the image of Wainaina and Allfrey in conversation at the event on 'an orange couch at the main stage, with Binyavanga drinking a Tusker throughout the dialogue', writer Isaac Otidi Amuke<sup>8</sup> observed that 'Nairobi felt properly placed on the global literary map that night'. In interview he went on to describe that for him the event opened up 'possibilities', showing that 'writing and literature were something bigger, something tangible, something with tentacles that could connect to other parts of the world, something larger than the page and the text' (Amuke 2018). During her conversation with Wainaina, Allfrey drew attention to the fact that as he read from the memoir the audience had laughed 'at things I didn't necessarily get' and that 'even though it is the same book in all those markets, your audiences are different audiences' (Kwani Trust 2012a). While Kwani Trust might be concerned with maintaining 'global literary networks', the audience present at this event brought into view the local networks out of which Kwani Trust's publishing has been and continues to be constructed. Angela Wachuka highlighted that this was one of the first events which brought together the 'founding members of *Kwani?*' with 'newer writers that were emerging' (Wachuka 2018). So, present in the crowd of nearly 400 people were writers and creatives who were part of conversations and publications that defined Kwani Trust's early years such as Patricia Amira, Muthoni Garland, Judy Kibinge and Ann McCreath. However, there were also younger writers who over the next few years would come to both work with Kwani Trust and shape the contemporary Kenyan literary landscape more

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<sup>7</sup> Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor won the prize in 2003 for a story published in *Kwani? 01*. Parselelo Kantai was shortlisted for the prize in 2004 for a story published in *Kwani? 02*. Managing Editor of Kwani Trust Billy Kahora was shortlisted for the prize in 2012 and 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Creative non-fiction writer Isaac Otidi Amuke would be published in *Kwani? 07* in 2012, in *Kwani? 08* in 2016 and would later work as Wainaina's personal assistant.

broadly. Present was Kiprof Kimutai who in 2013 would be awarded third place in the Kwani? Manuscript Project, and Margaret Muthee who would become an editorial intern at Kwani Trust and part of the 2015 Writivism Mentoring Programme. In an interview with *Geosi Reads*, Muthee has talked publicly about Wainaina's book launch as a catalyst for her wanting to work at Kwani Trust and pursue her dreams of becoming a writer, and her application for the internship itself also makes reference to this ([Geosi Reads 2015](#); [Muthee 2018](#)). In addition Moses Kilolo, now Managing Editor of pan-African writers' collective Jalada, was there, as well as 2016 Caine Prize winner Okwiri Oduor, who wrote powerfully about the event for the Port Harcourt Book Festival blog ([Oduor 2012](#)).

Oduor describes how as Eric Wainaina played 'Joka', as if in self-fulfilling prophecy of the song's title,<sup>9</sup> 'long, winding queues snaked their way to the book-signing table' ([Oduor 2012](#)). I would argue that this event also succeeded in its aim of 'bursting the bubble' and reaching beyond Kwani Trust's established literary community to a wider middle-class and student public. In interviews both the organisers and audience-members repeatedly emphasised this event as not only attracting a broader arts and media community not usually seen at 'literary' events but the audience having the feel of that of a 'music festival' or 'concert' ([Amuke 2018](#); [Kahora 2018](#); [Kimutai 2018](#); [Mburu 2018](#); [Muthee 2018](#); [Wachuka 2018](#)). Wachuka in particular described how this event shifted Kwani Trust's relationship with public space, and that following this staging book launches in unusual venues – from a car garage to the KICC<sup>10</sup> Helipad – became a *Kwani?* hallmark ([Wachuka 2018](#)). The event also planted the idea of the Nairobi Railway Museum as a public arts space in the mind of others, and it went on to become a leading Nairobi venue with *UP Magazine* regularly staging live music events there ([Wachuka 2018](#)). For Wachuka and Koinange this event sparked an ongoing collaboration on curating

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<sup>9</sup> Joka means 'large snake' in Kiswahili.

<sup>10</sup> The Kenyatta International Convention Centre known as KICC is a 28-storey building located Nairobi's CBD.

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events that rethink the relationship between books and public spaces, out of which in 2017 they founded the social impact firm Book Bunk (Wachuka 2018).

### Disjunctures and intersections

This ‘book party’ undoubtedly enabled *One Day I Will Write About This Place* to reach beyond Kwani Trust’s established literary networks and, with the book taking on the role of ticket, placed copies in the hands of an audience of potentially new readers and book buyers. However, in interview Kahora marked a note of caution in relation to this (Kahora 2018). He explains that while Wainaina very much wanted the event to reach a larger space ‘outside the literary and the text’, his own question would be – how many of the audience bought the book to actually read it? He argues that there are ways in which the free literary events that Kwani Trust regularly stages in their garden, where the audience, whether they be students, older writers, publishers, librarians or work in the media, all have an existing relationship with books and texts, have more impact (Kahora 2018). This draws attention to the disjunctures as well as the intersections between the networks that publishers need to convene or access in order to publish new writing. As literary publishers, Farafina and Kwani Trust need to find new writers, and for both institutions convening writing communities by hosting creative writing workshops has formed a major part of this work. Over the last 15 years Kwani Trust has regularly run writing workshops, partnering with organisations from Granta to SLS to Somali Heritage Week, very often linking these to generating content for a particular edition of the journal. Equally Adichie ran the Farafina Trust Creative Writing Workshop annually with a group of 20 to 30 participants between 2009 and 2016, building a group of over 150 writers who started to identify as ‘alumni’ (Anya 2014) and were celebrated by Farafina as such (Farafina Books 2014). I have previously argued for Kwani Trust and Farafina as forming the foundations of an overlapping pan-African literary network with the power not only to nurture and bring literary

value to individual writers, but to inspire and validate new literary institutions (Wallis 2018). The links between these two organisations and the relational pan-African exchanges out of which their publishing is consecrated with cultural value are particularly visible in the space of the Farafina Trust Creative Writing Workshop. Having forged a close friendship after meeting on the Zoetrope website in 2001 (Adichie 2013), each year the workshop was taught by Adichie with Binyavanga Wainaina. Out of this relationship, Kenyan writers including Kiprop Kimutai and Isaac Oti Amuke attended the Farafina Trust workshop and Nigerian writers including Eghosa Imasuen and A. Igoni Barrett were published in *Kwani?*. Adichie and Wainaina's friendship has found form not only in these exchanges that 'support local literary production' (Kiguru 2016, 212) but also in physical editions of texts, with Kwani Trust launching a Kenyan edition of *Purple Hibiscus* in Nairobi in 2006 and Farafina launching a Nigerian edition of *One Day I Will Write About This Place* in Lagos in 2013.

However, in addition to convening a community of writers and consecrating their work with cultural value, literary publishers also need to be able to draw on a network of professionals who can edit, produce and market their books, as well as then be able to reach an audience of book buyers who might enable their publishing to become commercially sustainable. My critical model of literary networks makes visible the ways in which these networks are built across and through exchanges across multiple 'scapes', with new writing constituted out of movements of people, digital exchanges, and flows of ideas and media. However, publishing is also grounded in financial relationship and contractual obligations. While publishing relationships do often develop out of personal connections and friendships like that of Adichie and Bakare or Adichie and Wainaina, ultimately the practical elements of payment and the agreement that a publisher will make the writer's work available to readers also have a significant role to play. So, even publishing relationships formed out of closely intertwined personal relationships can break down when a shared understanding of what is possible or

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reasonable in terms of money or distribution also breaks down. For example in August of 2017 Binyavanga Wainaina announced publicly on Facebook that he was withdrawing Kwani Trust's rights to distribute any of his books, a decision he would come to regret and reverse the following month. Perhaps more significantly, in February 2018, a new Lagos-based publishing company Narrative Landscape Press announced they had acquired the Nigerian rights to publish Adichie's writing (Sabi News 2018). While this ended a decade-long publishing relationship between Farafina and Adichie, a relationship on which to a large extent the Farafina brand had been built, it is notable that Narrative Landscape Press was founded by two former Farafina editors who both consider Bakare a mentor (Imasuen 2018).

## Conclusion

In a contemporary moment of comparatively low-cost travel and digital communication, exchanges between writers and publishers based inside and outside the African continent have become logistically easier. However, significant parallels can still be drawn between Mbari and Kwani Trust as donor-funded publishers that convene local writing communities and open up opportunities for writers by cultivating 'global literary networks'. As this chapter has shown, key to the functioning of both these publishers' networks are individuals such as Es'kia Mphahlele and Binyavanga Wainaina who act as brokers of both cultural and economic capital, as well as friendships across East and West Africa, like those of Okigbo and Neogy or Wainaina and Adichie, that go on to shape literary output on both sides of the continent. Yet, what technology and increasing mobility *have* enabled is a stronger and more sustainable network of pan-African connections between institutions rather than individuals. As Cape-Town literary magazine *Chimurenga*'s founder Ntone Edjabe has observed, through this network Africa-based literary publishers have been able to 'mainstream our own aesthetics and reduce our dependency on the global publishing system' (Edjabe 2012b). While Kwani Trust might be

donor funded, since 2003 an increasing number of publishers have been established on the continent that acknowledge a debt to Kwani Trust or Farafina, and are set up as businesses funded through personal capital – from Storymoja to Narrative Landscape Press, from Cassava Republic Press to Sooo Many Stories. As a result it has become increasingly common for African writers (as pioneered in later years by Achebe and Ngũgĩ) to retain Africa publishing rights to their books, instead of signing these over to UK- or US-based publishers, and through this build long-term relationships with publishers based on the continent. As Bakare-Yusuf has repeatedly stressed in interview, one of her key drivers with Cassava Republic Press was that Africans should not just be creating their own narratives and stories, but ‘owning the means of production’ (Bakare-Yusuf 2017). She has also emphasised the significance of African publishers shaping the visual identity of African literature, creating branding and cover designs that genuinely reflect ‘the complex, gorgeous realities of the continent’ (Bakare-Yusuf 2017). This significance and the implications of owning and constructing the means of production is similarly emphasised by Narrative Landscape Press in the ‘About’ section of their website, which begins:

Narrative Landscape Press Limited (NLP) believes that owning the means of production is essential to a vibrant publishing industry. The firm believes that the ‘means of production’ here does not just mean physical books but also means editorial expertise, book design expertise and developing a cadre of excellent writers.

(Narrative Landscape Press 2018)

This chapter has been concerned with bringing into view the ways in which African literary production can be read through the frame of publishers’ networks and in particular with arguing for book launches as offering moments of instantiation in relation to these networks. I have shown how Adichie’s significance within Nigerian cultural production, both in terms of her



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own literary output and as a figure who is part of a larger literary community, has been directly shaped by the way in which Farafina conceived and brought together the launch of *Purple Hibiscus*. Equally, I have examined the ways in which the launch of Wainaina's *One Day I Will Write About This Place* was deliberately planned not only to mark and celebrate the publication of this memoir but also Wainaina's relationship to Kwani Trust as an institution. Both events make visible the Nairobi- and Lagos-based publics and communities of writers out of which Kwani Trust and Farafina have been constituted, and the ways in which these are generative of new writing and publishing. A critical model of publishers' networks, as opposed to literary networks, enables me to better allow for the practical and professional relationships at stake in owning the means of book production. For commercial publishing to be sustainable and to thrive on the continent, new audiences and markets do need to be opened up which reach beyond a community of writers and literary professionals. With this in mind, initiatives by individuals such as Feludu in drawing in Lagos's cultural elite to both fund and support a reading tour for *Purple Hibiscus*, and by institutions such as Kwani Trust to re-conceptualise relationships between books and public space, need to be both studied and celebrated.

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