Krishnan, M., & Bwa Mwesigire, B. (2020). Creative Writing as Literary Activism: Decolonial Perspectives on the Writing Workshop. *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies*, *7*(1-2). https://doi.org/10.1080/23277408.2020.1818494

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
10.1080/23277408.2020.1818494

Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Taylor & Francis at https://doi.org/10.1080/23277408.2020.1818494 . Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

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Creative Writing as Literary Activism: Decolonial Perspectives on the Writing Workshop

Abstract

This paper explores the concept of literary activism by reflecting on a coproductive creative writing project run by the University of Bristol (United Kingdom) and the Center for African Cultural Excellence (Uganda). It considers how the space of the creative writing workshop opens platforms for decolonial knowledge production.

Keywords: literary activism; creative writing; Uganda; workshops; decoloniality; Writivism

Introduction: 'thinking otherwise' through creative writing

This paper draws on our shared experiences organising two creative writing workshops which were held respectively in Kampala and Gulu, Uganda, in the summer of 2017. Organised as part of the #WritivismAt5 events and funded by the United Kingdom's Global Challenges Research Fund, these two five-day workshops aimed to develop new writing by young, emerging (and sometimes novice) Ugandan writers from across the country. Facilitated by Nick Makoha in Kampala and Jennifer Makumbi in Gulu, each of the two workshops focused on the craft of the short story, aiming, moreover, to enable participants to develop practices and techniques to create publishable short stories rooted in their own worldviews and positions as young Ugandans living under the effects of (post)coloniality. In our application framework and selection process, we prioritised the diversity of each group, with a view to gender balance and geographical spread, in the hopes that we might ultimately capture something of the diversity of Uganda, a country which, like the African continent more broadly, often suffers from a reductive portrait in the global imaginary. Central to our aims was the effort to use creative writing training and mentorship through the publication process

to empower workshop participants to develop their own sense of their creative voice in portraying a vision of contemporary Uganda from the standpoint of lived experience. After each workshop, participants were paired with a mentor to revise and complete the short story which they began in the workshop. These stories, after structural and copy editing, were eventually published as *Odokonyero: a Writivism Anthology of Short Fiction by Emerging Ugandan Writers*, co-billed as a special anthology celebrating the fifth anniversary of the Writivism Festival, one of Africa's largest festivals of literature and culture held annually in Kampala.[1] Throughout the project, we sought to offer, through the stories eventually published in the anthology, a redress to the often-reductive portrait of Uganda which continues to circulate in the global imaginary, and to offer a more pluralistic vision of everyday life as felt, experienced and conceived of by young Ugandans. Crucial to this task was an interest in how these stories might be enable us to develop material not just for an audience centred in Uganda, but expanding outwards, but also for teaching in schools. We were particularly concerned with how developing materials for use both within the curriculum and through extra-curricular literary clubs could help to build on the Writivism festival's regular programme of engagement with secondary schools, students and educators. In this paper, we reflect on the *Odokonyero* project through a holistic lens in order to consider the range of social, ethical and aesthetic claims which it enabled to emerge both as a process and, ultimately, as a form of literary creation. By so doing, we take a deliberately broad and 'un-disciplined' approach, tracing and documenting the project's various articulations across different ecologies of production and moving across methodological or subject-based approaches to considering it. Our overarching aim, then, is to think about the ways in which literary space and cultural production might open avenues for thinking the social, in all of its

[1] In 2020, Writivism is, for the first time in its existence, going on hiatus. An announcement can be found at https://www.facebook.com/writivism/posts/2560869300808550

fullness, outside of the dynamics of (post)coloniality and topographies of world literary space which so often dominate discussions of African literary production.

From the outset, we wish to be clear that in our remarks here we do not attempt to distance ourselves from our own positionality with respect to the project we describe. We are aware that, as producers and editors on the *Odokonyero* project, it would not be possible for us to claim 'objectivity' or 'disinterestedness' in our readings and analyses. However, by positioning ourselves within the narrative we describe and the process we analyse, we aim to un-do the obfuscating work which enables certain types of knowledge and analysis to masquerade as 'universal', 'unbiased', 'reasonable' or 'rational'. Where, in the context of African studies, 'local' forms of knowledge, including storytelling, performance and so-called traditional practices have been marginalised as supplementary to 'scientific' knowledge (or used as raw material for what are conceived of as 'objective' scientific analyses), our interest was in more directly and explicitly producing a platform for the modes of social analysis which arise through creative production to gain purchase and visibility. Within the specific context in which we write, this holds a particular force given the obvious and well-documented ways in which these very concepts of have been deployed to aid and abet the dispossession and expropriation of the African continent's resources, both human and non-human (see, for instance, Mbembe 2017, Carmody 2011, Amin 1973 [1971], Rodney 2012 [1971]). Without claiming that the *Odokonyero* project was conceived of or executed as a deliberately 'decolonial' act, we nonetheless take inspiration from the kinds of thinking which foreground the responsibility of the writer to consider the multiplicity of knowledges and idioms which persist, despite their denigration under the 'colonial matrix of power' or 'coloniality of power' (Quijano 2000). As Catherine Walsh (2018), writes, we, as academics and researchers engaging with communities with less access to intellectual capital, have 'a responsibility to think *with and from* the insurgent constructions, creations, practices,

and subject-actors' with whom we co-create and, therefore, a concomitant responsibility to 'disobey[] the dominant domain that locates academic theory above and over praxis, and it means taking seriously […] theorizing from and with praxis' (84).[2] While we may not necessarily describe our aims as being so ambitious, we nonetheless focus here on 'think[ing] with' the facilitators, mentors and participants who together co-laboured in the production of *Odokonyero*, towards what may seem like a more humble goal: documenting one example of a process of literary production whose creation of a worldview and positionality from which to perceive that world stands outside of – if not entirely separate from – the dominant practices of the world literary marketplace in order to, on the one hand, de-link our forms of thinking in order to think otherwise about what creative practice can enable and, on the other, foreground the ways in which creative practice can function as a mode of social thought and social production (Mignolo, 2007, 252).

Writivism: a brief history

In 2012, two young Ugandans and a Zimbabwean, Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire, Kyomuhendo A. Ateenyi and Naseema Mohamed, founded the Centre for African Cultural Excellence (CACE) with the aim of promoting African ideas through the arts and culture.[3] Drawn together by a shared interest in the power of literature and storytelling as a means of expression and a mode of engaging with contemporary realities, CACE's work started with the Writivism Literary Initiative, in its eighth year at the time of this writing. For reasons of

[2] Our use of the 'world' here is deliberate. Where 'global' might be seen as implying a form of restriction or enclosure, we, following Nancy, use 'world' to invoke 'an expanding process throughout the expanse of the world of human beings' (Nancy 2007 [2002], 28).

[3] It is important to note that Writivism joins a longer history of literary activist work in Uganda, including the decades-long work of FEMRITE, the Ugandan Women Writers Association, whose projects include residencies, workshops, weekly readers' and writers' club meetings, published anthologies and more, as well as more recent initiatives such as Mawazo Africa Writing Institute and African Writers Trust. Historically, Uganda has been a significant site for literary activism, with the 1962 Conference of African Writers of English Expression held at Kampala's Makerere University and *Transition Magazine* based in the city from its founding in 1961 through the arrest of its editor, Rajat Neogy, in 1968 on charges of sedition for what were perceived as criticism of the Obote regime published in its pages. Literary activism in Uganda of course extends beyond that work conducted in English, and Okot p'Bitek's important writing in Acholi, including *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, is of critical importance in understanding the development of its literary ecologies.

space, we are unable to provide a full account of Writivism's intellectual development over these years, its origins, as described in Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire's keynote address in this issue as emerging from a complex network of influence, experience and practice:

> And thus, we worked on a grant proposal, coined the tagline, "Connecting Literature to Reality" and hit the ground running. The GCM folk awarded us 2300 Swiss Francs to implement the pilot of the project. We decided we would hold a creative writing workshop, run a short story prize, and publish an anthology.
>
> Truth told, we were learning from the Caine Prize. By that time, thanks to the internet, I was in touch with several people of my age from other African countries, including Uganda who had been to the Caine Prize workshops and had been published in the Caine prize anthologies. My classmate at CEU from Kenya, Bemih Kanyonge had introduced me to Kwani and I knew at least something about the journal. Of Course I had met (online) Emmanuel Iduma, the publisher of Saraba magazine, and they had published some of my work. In fact, I had also been part of a gang of six writers, mainly from Nigeria, that had won the Short Story Day Africa chain story competition. This is the milieu that created Writivism. It was a digital writing community really that gave the programme its core.
>
> From the African Writers Trust mentoring programme that had produced the anthology, *Suubi*, we learned that mentoring could work online. Two of my friends, Harriet Anena and Gloria Kembabazi had been part of it. It was this knowledge of how online mentoring worked that informed adding it to the programme. We had wished for access to literary communities as high school students, so we added outreach to schools. Because access to literary material in book form was deemed

> limiting, we partnered with newspapers to co-publish the stories that would come out of the workshop. And finally, we organized a prize awarding ceremony, around which what has now become an annual festival was conceptualised. That was how Writivism started.

Writivism's mission, across its many mutations, has always focused on the everyday experience of young Africans living on the continent today, explored imaginatively through fiction as an alternative to the global dominance of narratives 'about' rather than 'from' or 'with' the African continent. While Writivism at the start focused on young writers living in Uganda, it expanded its scope in 2014 to reach emerging writers living anywhere on the African continent. In 2019, Writivism took another shift in its focus, re-orienting its work to centre more explicitly on links between continental and diasporan writers united through a commitment to blackness and evidenced in the most recent edition of the festival, 'Unbreakable Bonds'.[4] Since its inception, Writivism's activities have included two literary prizes (the Writivism Short Story Prize and Koffi Addo Prize for Creative Nonfiction), as well as the one-off Poetry in Translation Prize in 2016; an annual anthology of new writing; one-off projects, including *Odokonyero* and the 2019 *Unbreakable Bonds* anthology; workshops and mentoring schemes. While English has remained the dominant language of Writivism's activities, in 2016 Francophone entries were included in the Short Story Prize and, in 2019, Writivism announced the Inaugural Youth Prize for Rukiga Writing, marking an important turn towards African-language literary production, an area still grossly lacking in infrastructure across the continent.

While opportunities for published and professional writers based in Africa to develop their craft are increasing, particularly through the efforts of CACE and other literary networks based on the African continent, comparably few exist for novice or aspiring writers who live

[4] For an analysis of Writivism's shifts over time to its current formation, see Nangobi Mirembe (forthcoming).

in Uganda.[5] Our aim, in developing the *Odokonyero* anthology, was to fill this gap by giving emerging Ugandan writers and youth generally – some of whom had never even written a full short story before, let alone published one – a platform to develop their own creative voice, while simultaneously taking the opportunity to use this work as a means of celebrating Writivism's fifth anniversary. The aims of the workshops and anthology project we describe here are thus inextricably bound up in the larger project of literary activism. Literary activism is a term which is becoming ubiquitous in discussions of cultural ecologies as operating in parts of the global South, notably Latin America, the African continent and South Asia. While the terms and conditions through which the concept of literary activism is deployed display a broad variance, here, we use the term in a more specified way to capture the inherently political – we would argue activist – nature of any kind of work which attempts to open avenues for literary and cultural production where such avenues do not, a priori, exist. Put more bluntly, our working definition of literary activism is that it can be defined as the act of producing spaces within which artists can create, a task made particularly more urgent against the backdrop of neoliberalisation under structural adjustment and austerity measures as experienced in countries such as Uganda.[6] The essence of what we are trying to express can be summed up in the following comment by Bwesigye bwa Mwesigire from his keynote speech 'Who Keeps the Housekeeper's House?', a revised version of which appears in this special issue, that 'we use the word activism because as you realise the African literary and cultural scene is not supported by governments. It is not a problematic generalisation to say that most African countries took to neoliberal free market policies so there is no government

[5] Regular opportunities for writers which currently exist on the African continent include Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus writing workshop, regular workshops run by organisations such as Writivism and the Uganda Women Writers Association (FEMRITE), the Mawazo Africa Writing Institute Workshop, workshops run by the African Writers Trust and more. One-off workshops by organisations like Kwani?, Jalada, and Saseni! are also features of the wider literary space. As noted above, the majority of these offer opportunities for established writers to hone their craft, rather than focus on writers without prior experience. Further opportunities for writing training can be found in the university and secondary school spaces, where literature clubs remain an important aspect of extra-curricular activity.
[6] For further discussions of literary activism see Krishnan and Wallis (forthcoming) and Krishnan (2018).

funding for the arts/ In a way our governments have given us up to the logic of the market'. In other words, the constitution of a creative pipeline that enables new voices to emerge and new perspectives to have a platform for expression is an essential aspect of literary activist work (defined here not by its content but by its intervention into the production of a commons, through the democratisation of the literary landscape). Equally, we might perceive a second sense in which literary activism comes to mean when we consider, for instance, the historical import of figures like Wole Soyinka, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Alex Guma, Aimé Césaire, and others, both as activists, in the sense of social and political struggle, and as creators partaking in the production of engaged writing. In this second sense, then, literary activism might be said to foster a form of public intellectualism that views literary creation not as occurring in some idealised autonomous zone of the aesthetic, cleaved off from the equally mystified autonomous realm of politics, but as rooted in lived experience, struggle and the possibility of fabricating new modes of being and being in the world. At its heart, then, this is an explicit recognition of the power of literary writing as social thought (Adebanwi, 2014).

Odokonyero, creative writing and literary activism

The *Odokonyero* project which we describe here spans these two definitions of literary activism, on the one hand opening up avenues for young writers within which to produce and, by so doing, to produce altered conceptions both of themselves as writers and as social agents or agents engaged in the creation of the social. Crucial here is that we view the stories produced by these young writers not merely as representing experience, but as engaged in an active process of thought and theorisation of the contours of the everyday. At the same time, the insights which the stories give us about the everyday experience of contemporary life in Uganda as felt by its younger generations might enable one form of 'commoning' to occur through the identification of a shared sociality and shared social life (Hardt and Negri, 2018),

registered in an idiom that remains, despite its worldliness, ultimately introverted in its focus on contexts and situations which might be referred to in the shorthand as 'local'.[7] Contra the tendency, in contemporary African literary studies, to read literary material for its 'extroverted' features, particularly those rooted in the concept of Afropolitaniam, these stories develop textual landscapes which offer different scales of experience and different modes of situated thinking to emerge. Rather than suggest a dichotomy in which these are prey to a tension or oriented towards some kind of resolution of the either/or, they rather suggest a sumultaneous—if unevenly-loaded—multiplicity. That this should be so is of not little consequence, given the larger discourse which appears on the predominance of vertical forms of patrimony as the foundation of social production in the African context, a view which inherently and inevitably separates social production into a series of binaries: weak state versus strong bonds of kinship, primordial versus civic publics, the open space of the veranda versus the chilled air conditioned room and so on (Chabal and Daloz, 2010; Ekeh, 1974; Terray, 1986).[8] The *Odokonyero* project, as an example of literary activism, we argue, demonstrates another way in which to conceive of social production, neither refuting these binaries entirely nor capitulating to their alleged force, while engaged in both meanings of literary activism through its ability to open spaces for young writers to create, together, and, by so doing, to foreground not just 'the illuminating potentials of fictive imagination in reflecting, and reflecting on, social existence in Africa' (Adebanwi, 2014, 408), but to participate in the worlding of this very existence. Indeed, the kinds of social practices and production which we observed, both within the context of producing the anthology and in its

[7] The term 'introverted' is being used here, following Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire, as a deliberate play on the 'extroverted African novel' of dominant critical discourse. We would further argue following the work of spatial theorists such as Massey (2005) that the local and the global, as scales or sites of lived experience, remain intimately and intricately intertwined such that these distinctions are perhaps less useful than they might appear, as we discuss below.

[8] Coetzee (2018) has provided a powerful critique of the ethical imperative to break out of the 'air conditioned' room as part of our practice as academics and editors. See Carli Coetzee, 'Unsettled the Air-Conditioned Room: Journal Work as Ethical Labour', *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 12.2 (2018), 101-115. Notable responses to this piece have appeared in the African literature blog, *Africa in Words*. See Fasan (2020) and Bwa Mwesigire (2020).

contents, demonstrates a complex entanglement of scales of affiliation, registration and experience which complicate and bring nuance to the often-cliched global image of contemporary Uganda. The value of this pluralistic vision of social production, then, lies both in its aesthetic instantiations and its ability to give voice to social experiences and forms of sociality not often made visible in the hegemonic narrative of African experience. In this sense, our interest in putting together to *Odokonyero* project was oriented towards viewing engagement in literary practice as a means through which to create not just archives of experience and knowledge, but commons which might enable us to view social production – and the production of the social through literary practice – as a process of cooperation and collaboration operating across multiple vectors of lived experience.

We were supported through the creative writing workshop and mentoring process by funding which we received through the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). The GCRF is a £1.5 billion fund which was first instituted by the Government of the United Kingdom in 2015. Its stated aims are 'to support cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries' through 'challenge-led disciplinary and interdisciplinary research' (UK Research and Innovation). As such, the GCRF forms part of the UK Government's Official Development Assistance programme, with a particular focus on research with impacts and benefits for Lower and Middle Income Countries defined by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee. Our particular project was funded by a cross-council, multidisciplinary call funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Economic and Social Research Council and Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research. We mention this detail here for a number of reasons. First, we wish to foreground the potential challenges to work genuinely based on principles of co-production and co-labour by the research and funding environment within which it is implicated. Certainly, throughout the course of the *Odokonyero* project, we were

acutely aware of the difficult terrain which we needed to navigate in this regard and, particularly, the power differentials which it brought into plain relief. We further recognise the potential for such work such as ours to inadvertently become assimilated into the kinds of 'development discourse' critiqued by scholars such as James Ferguson (1994), on the one hand, and, on the other, the modes of extractive research work which have unfortunately become all too commonplace in studies of the African continent and which is exacerbated by funding programmes such as the GCRF (we note here in particular the important critiques of current models for 'partnership' research as articulated in the special roundtable, 'Ethical?! Collaboration?! Keywords for Our Contradictory Times', published by the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* in 2019). It was for this reason that we felt it imperative to interpret the broader theme of 'conflict' delineated by our research funding, opening discussions with workshop participants about their own interpretation of the term, as we discuss below. In particular, we felt it was not our place to provide an a priori definition of conflict, but rather to see how the writers we worked with chose to navigate the term, ranging from perspectives critical of the term as an index or marker and those which chose to view it through the lens of literary craft and technique.

We decided early on that we did not want to limit ourselves to the national literary centres of Kampala or Entebbe, which hold an outsized share of cultural capital, and that we wanted to open avenues for young writers across the country. For this reason, we decided to hold two workshops: one in Kampala (facilitated by Nick Makoha) and one in Gulu town (facilitated by Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi). Our selection of facilitators was based on two intersecting desires: first, to ensure that the project remained Uganda-centred and second, following Kate Haines Wallis's observations (2018) on the intersecting networks of capital which accrue and transfer across 'global' and 'local' literary spaces, to attempt, in some small way, to re-distribute the cultural capital which adheres to writers consecrated in the global North to our

participants. We selected participants through three different processes: first, we put out a call for submissions of entries in Northern Uganda in areas around Gulu town, with options for electronic and paper-based submissions and the requirement that applicants be normally resident in the north. Moses Odokonyero, who at the time directed the Northern Uganda Media Club, coordinated all of our activities in Gulu, including the application process, and for his tireless efforts we remain grateful. The anthology, which is named in part for him and in part to capture to spirit of its Acholi meaning 'has turned into laughter', is dedicated to him for this reason. For the Kampala workshop, we read through submissions from Uganda for the 2015, 2016 and 2017 Writivism Short Story Prize and chose the most promising entries which did not make the long- or short-list. Finally, we asked three members of the Writivism staff to submit applications, in order to ensure that the workshop activities directly benefitted team members in their own development as creative writers. This felt particularly important to us, given the extent to which the work of literary activism and production often occurs at the expense of the activist or producer's own work as a writer. Throughout these early steps, our decision making process remained rooted in principles of co-production, with the contextual expertise of the Writivism team, as an established literary network based in Uganda, taking precedence in structural design. We ended up selecting twelve participants for each workshop, aged between seventeen and thirty-five years old, ranging from secondary school students to established professionals to popular bloggers.

Much has been written about the potential of creative writing training in the empowerment of disenfranchised or marginalised groups. In an essay which examines the Timbila Poetry Project, for instance, Vonani Bila notes how, through a focus on creating writing particularly in indigenous Southern African langauges, the project 'nurture[s] and develop[s] poetry by emerging South African writers' (Bila, 2015, 95), with a particular attentiveness to how 'socioeconomic conditions are essential elements in determining what a writer can

legitimately produce in a specific cultural environment without compromising their craft' (Bila, 2015, 96). By recognising the explicit asymmetries and uneven landscape of access to creative writing, Bila's analysis foregrounds the ways in which creative writing provision might contribute in some small way to a redistribution of intellectual and creative capital to underrepresented and under-served communities. These insights are echoed, in a different context, by Mazza's exploration of the potential of creative and athletic programmes to 'to help young people unleash their imagination, learn about themselves, encourage creative thinking, build self-esteem, and strengthen interpersonal relationships' (Mazza, 2012, 226), particularly through models of practice and training which are 'nonthreatening and culturally sensitive, providing a sense of empowerment to the students' (Mazza, 2012, 330). More broadly, studies of this nature gesture both towards what Doris Sommer (2014) identifies as the pedagogical potential of creative practice and play, what she terms the 'special mission' of the humanities (3), as well as a larger sense, in extant literature, that training in the literary arts might serve a more instrumental purpose in engaging and empowering marginalised populations whose voices have historically had less purchase within the world literary landscape (Stickley, et. al., 2019). In the specific case of Uganda, moreover, recent studies have highlighted the import of storytelling, particularly through life histories, as a means of developing new strategies 'to capture experiences and perceptions of oppressed or subaltern voices that may have been unheard and/or need situating within a particular context' (Ssali and Theobald, 2016, 83). Even those studies which remain more sceptical towards the potential of creative writing as an avenue for meeting developmentalist targets retain a sense of its import as a means both of filling in silences and gaps within larger cultural archives (Xanthe Taylor and Jordan-Baker, 2018), emphasising how works interact with 'communities of interpretation, the canon, social expectations and interpretive ingenuity' (Xanthe Taylor and Jordan-Baker, 2018, 3), and as a practice of self-creation, 'self-bricolage' and subjectivity (Baker 2013).

We remain somewhat sceptical towards extent to which many of these claims appear to assimilate creative practice to larger developmentalist goals and narratives. Equally, as noted above, we would be remiss to suggest that the *Odokonyero* project lies entirely outside of these same discourses, particularly as a direct consequence of its funding mechanisms. As stated previously, the project was funded through a 'research innovation' grant jointly administered by the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council, Economic and Social Research Council and Partnership for Conflict, Crime & Security Research. As part of the larger Global Challenges Research Fund, this particular grant scheme sought projects which might enable new insights into conflict and post-conflict situations in countries listed as lower and middle income by the United Kingdom's Official Development Assistance register. From its very roots, then, the financial backing for the *Odokonyero* project was and remains deeply steeped in the rhetoric of development and its attendant implication with the colonial matrix of power. Our hope, in designing the project, was to use the material resources and capital available to us by participation in this funding stream to enable a critical position to emerge from within its own frameworks which could go beyond a simplistic ethical framework rooted in binaries of good or bad. As with any aim of this kind, our success can only be partial and the ethical implications remain complex and, at times, uneasy to sit with.

At the same time, our experience of convening the *Odokonyero* workshops nonetheless speaks to the possibilities for self-expression and social thought which the creative writing workshop creates. In particular, we would like to foreground parallels between our own experiences as participant-observers and co-producers with Billy Kahora's observation that the creative writing workshop operates along simultaneous but differential lines through its functions as a concept, editorial platform, aesthetic and pedagogical method, content and

institution (Kahora, 2019).[9] Returning to our opening definitions of literary activism, the workshop functions as a platform for opening access to literary production – and, indeed, a space within which production may occur. At the same time it is also a space within which social thought and the production of the social emerges through the daily interaction between and amongst writers, facilitators, conveners and the larger community of editors, publishers and readers extending outward from the core workshop, the aesthetic, ideological and socio-political implications of which we return to below.

After the workshops, participants were paired with established colleagues from the Ugandan literary scene for a period of three months during which they received regular online mentorship. The mentors were Jennifer Makumbi, Nick Makoha, Lillian Akampurira Aujo, Anne Ayeta Wangusa, Melissa Kiguwa, Beatrice Lamwaka, Philippa Namutebi Kabali-Kaggwa, and Angela Kintu Rwabose. Following the mentorship period, the final stories were edited by Kate Haines Wallis and Billy Kahora, and copyedited by ourselves and Duduzile Za Mabaso and her team at Black Letter Media, an independent publishing outfit located in South Africa who, at the time of the project, had just entered into a longer term publication agreement with the Writivism Literary Initiative, including publication of the annual Writivism short story prize anthologies. While the *Odokonyero* project began with twelve participants in each location, ten completed the workshop in Gulu and eleven in Kampala. Two writers dropped out during the mentoring process and one more during the editing, for a total of eighteen final stories (eight from the Gulu workshop and ten from Kampala), all of which were ultimately published in *Odokonyero: A Writivism Anthology of Short Fiction by Emerging Ugandan Writers*. Running in parallel to the workshops, we also held a series of

[9] Kahora's conception of the workshop as a pedagogical and practiced space echoes Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's own reflections on his entry into the community of creative writing during his university years at Makerere, particularly through his involvement with the student literary magazine, *Penpoints*, and the June 1962 Conference of African Writers of English Expression held at the university. See Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2016, 128-9).

focus group meetings with secondary school teachers from the local area, where we talked about the project, the emerging themes and the draft stories. These meetings informed the production of a study guide and special schools edition of the anthology, featuring twelve of the eighteen stories from the main anthology, which we distributed free of charge for those interested in trying to incorporate it into their teaching. A fuller discussion of the schools element to the project is beyond the scope of our reflections here, beyond signalling the extent to which we were struck by the teachers' emphasis that they felt they needed materials that would enable students to recognise their own lives in their reading, while also pointing out how difficult it can be to procure materials for study, especially books.

Prior to the workshops, most of the participants we invited had little to no experience of writing and publishing a short story. Nearly all of the participants described their previous writing experience as basic at best. Several explicitly described themselves as 'amateurs' and 'beginners' with little sense of creative writing as a craft. One participant, for example, described themselves as 'a lazy writer with a few good sentences', while another said they felt that their prior writing was 'amateurish', without a sense of 'what impact each work has on the page in the story'. A number of participants expressed the feeling that they previously had little engagement with writing as a creative practice and craft, viewing it more as a vehicle for explicit commentary on their own experiences, whether through blogging or journalism. Several others described their previous engagement with writing as something private, which they may have done for themselves but would never have shown to anyone else. Of the twenty-two workshop participants who attended, only one described themselves as having significant experience ('semi-professional'), having entered a number of writing competitions and with a few previous publications.[10]

[10] It is worth noting that this participant was one of the individuals who did not complete the mentorship phase of the project.

Post-workshop surveys reported that 100% of workshop participants felt motivated to write more following their experiences, with a majority noting that they now wanted to work on a novel, continue attending workshops and continue publishing short stories.[11] Comments emphasised how the workshop experience made participants 'realise that there is something more to learn everyday', that creative writing is a process requiring training, practice and personal development. Participants noted how they now felt more attuned to 'the world around [them] and the stories that are waiting to be told' and that the workshop 'created a hunger' in them and an understanding that 'being a writer is important serious'. Others expressed a newfound sense of their own identity as a writer, existing within a community of writers. Baker notes how, in the context of queer self-making, 'it is possible to refigure the writer as a mutable discursive position (or writing position) that can be occupied and vacated rather than as a stable personality or identity', thereby enabling the writer to 'occupy[] an array of social, cultural and ideological positions' (Baker, 2013, 362-3). Without wishing to draw a brute parallel between the practices of queer becoming and the kinds of subject-formation we witnessed during the *Odokonyero* project, it is nonetheless possible to view in participant comments such as those above a sense that the practice of writing – and particularly writing as instantiated within the workshop space – gave rise to new conceptions of the self which, while not necessarily immutable, static, stable or ultimately durable, nonetheless opened spaces for critical/creative interventions through the inhabitation of new positionalities. By seeing themselves as writers, engaged in a serious and essentially social practice, participants' comments gesture towards a means of understanding creative writing as an iterative process of co-creation and co-interpretation which exceeds any notion of aesthetic, ideological or socio-political autonomy and which is inherently collective in its

[11] One participant, Kakinda Maria Birungi, went on to be longlisted for the 2018 Writivism Short Story Prize for her subsequent work.

appearance. While it is tempting to view the individual becoming we reference here as fundamentally contradictory to the collective nature of the workshop, moreover, our observations emphasised the extent to which the individual and collective operate through a process of co-constitution. Quite simply, the creative writing workshop space, as we experienced it, enabled a vision of selfhood and community based on mutual interactivity, where one scaled to the other and vice versa to create a totality rooted in plurality.

Another recurring sentiment that participants expressed was the idea that fiction writing, in particular, can have an affective role that other forms of media does not. When asked, for instance, why they chose to write their particular stories, or what role fiction might play in contemporary society, typical responses included the idea that fiction enables the writer 'to look at society critically, to interrogate the role of tradition and religion as harmful forces, to create a world that doesn't exist' and to therefore help people. There was a strong sense amongst participant responses that creative writing can change societal attitudes, particularly with respect to traditional practices, ideas around gender, religious hypocrisy, the treatment of migrant populations in Uganda and the tensions which inhere between customary and legal justice. A number of responses emphasised the ways in which creative writing can offer the writer some form of protection within which to engage in social thought and the imaginative rendering of new modes of sociality under conditions of censorship and suppression (see, for instance, the discussion of Stella Nyanzi below). Comments expressed a sense that 'fiction helps [the writer] create a world that doesn't exist', and, by so doing, bring this non-existant world into the realm of the possible, if only fleetingly, and that 'fiction allows you to be more honest'. Other participants foregrounded how creative practice enabled them to 'speak [their] mind without actually telling people how [they] feel […] there is a way you can play with your thoughts and create characters out of it', emphasising the radical mutability of writing and reading not as individual or isolated acts but as a kind of co-labour that 'gives [the writer]

the liberty to express something in a language that will make people really see what [they] mean'. Implicit in these comments is a sense through which the practice of creative writing contributes to the constitution of a socio-affective commons which comes into being through its circulation across the triad of production, dissemination and reception, expressed, as one participant noted, in the feeling that 'this thing [they] wrote very privately for [themselves] can now be translated, can now be shared and it actually sounds a bit more profound when [they] wrote it and thought it was just pain or, you know, […] just anger'. What strikes us as important across these comment is how they all characterise creative writing as something fundamentally social by its very nature, something which exists not in isolation or disinterestedness but which participates in a kind of world-creation, even if only fleetingly and where rooted in introspection. Equally the contours of affect in these comments foregrounds the ways in which emotion operates not as a supplementary aspect of the social function of writing but as integral to its functioning. Critically, this is a view of affect which departs from the relative passivity of the kinds of empathy so often-invoked in discussions of African literary writing in world literary space: rather than operate as a transactional moment predicated on the division between a subject and an object (see Krishnan, 2017), emotion becomes part of the collective and the co-produced sociality which that same collective continually brings into being in an iterative process that remains nonetheless timebound to an extent through the structural limitations of the workshop format and production process. Equally, it is precisely in this vision of the affective-social possibilities of literary writing that we identify a move away from the blunter, more developmentalist or instrumental vision of creative practice's function, worth or value, towards one oriented towards a broader and more inclusive horizon.

Reading the *Odokonyero* stories

As we have noted above, in putting *Odokonyero* together, we decided to interrogate the theme of conflict. In so doing, we did not wish to contribute to the tendency, particularly in the British, European or American media and press, to view Africa generally, and Uganda specifically as a site of physical violence; rather, we wanted to show how emerging Ugandan writers engage with conflict, in the fullest sense of the word, as a theme, but also as a literary element that drives a story and advances a plot. Our hope was that stories would be able to think through what the idea of conflict looks like as experienced from a range of perspectives, some of which were radically distinct from one another. This was especially important to us, given popular discourse around Uganda, in particular, and Africa, more broadly, which continues to draw on colonialist tropes which foreground specific forms of violent conflict and so-called tribalism as both inevitable and inherently characteristic of the continent.[12] These narratives inevitably draw on brute divisions and decontextualized generalisations which efface the plurality of lived experiences which exist on the ground and which shape everyday encounters with the social in the world. In the case of the stories coming from the Gulu workshop, this was of particularly concern, given how deeply the decades-long conflict driven by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has shaped the contours of social and political life in the region, currently manifesting through the NGO-ization of Gulu and the north of Uganda.[13] One element which we observed, for instance, was the tendency at first of certain participants to expect to be asked to conform to a certain 'script' of victimhood or trauma in order to captivate interest. By taking a broader approach to the theme of conflict, then, our intention was to move away from this sort of performed identity in order to enable other subject-positions and concerns to emerge, but also to trouble some of the easy distinctions and positionalities which have characterised reporting around the region. Given Büscher's

[12] The 'catastrophic' rhetoric that often accompanies discussions of the African continent in the press and media has been well documented. See, for instance, Krishnan (2014, 7-10).
[13] A full discussion of the conflict in Northern Uganda is beyond the scope of this piece. Interested readers may wish to refer to Reid (2017, 53-99).

observation that ‘a clear distinction between ‘conflict’ and ‘post-conflict’ is not always easy to be drawn’ Büscher, 2018, 194), it is significant, then, that the final stories from both workshops show a range of conceptions of what conflict means and its implications for everyday life, including stories about generational conflict within middle class families, the conflict between customary and statutory law and its intersection with gendered conflicts, land disputes and women’s resistance movements, alcoholism and the legacies of colonial violence across different vectors and the psychological devastation of returned young combatants kidnapped into armed conflict.

More than one story in *Odokonyero* looks explicitly at violent conflict and its legacies, but these stories vary in their location, ranging from historical land conflict in the North to the more recent violence perpetuated by the LRA to contemporary violence against migrants and refugee populations within Uganda. Several other stories, however, turn their focus to other modalities of conflict, notably intergenerational and family conflict, class and particularly unemployment, religious hypocrisy as a driver of conflict and affective modes of conflict. Perhaps the most prevalent theme across the collection is the issue of gender and sexuality as a site of conflict and oppression. It is perhaps no surprise that gender figures so strongly across the collection, given the ways in which it has historically functioned as a central site upon which the various conflicts of (post)colonial Uganda have played out. Scholars have noted the ‘complex and sometimes paradoxical relationship’ between gender and violence under Amin’s regime, and its sometimes-contradictory relationship with militarism (Decker, 2014, 2), while much of the extant scholarship on the aftermath of the LRA in the north of the country has focused explicitly on its impact on women, particularly through the use of rape as a weapon of war (Nannyonjo, 2005, 477-9; see also Omona and Aduo, 2013; Anying and Gausset, 2017; Sengupta and Calo, 2016; Agade Mkutu, 2008). During the period in which the *Odokonyero* project took place, moreover, women’s and LGBTQIA rights were

particularly high-profile issues in Uganda, coalescing around the arrest of the scholar, poet and feminist Stella Nyanzi, who was then leading a national campaign to provide schoolgirls with feminine hygiene products after a failed government promise to do the same.[14] If the scholarly engagement with gender has shown a tendency to fall prey to certain narratives of women's positions in Ugandan society, however, the stories in *Odokonyero* show a much closer alignment with the dynamism of women's activism that emerged in Uganda during that period. Stories such as Twasiima Patricia Bigirwa's 'Muhanguzi's Daughters' and Aber Racheal Aboda's 'The Beautyful Tradition', for instance, explore the ways in which customary law is deployed as a means of justifying the oppression and subjugation of women. In both stories, emancipated and educated young women protagonists serve as agents against this, deploying a range of strategies from within the family unit to trouble easy distinctions between 'tradition' and 'modernity' and with which to make claims to their rights. Both Edna Ninsiima's 'Finding Freedom' and Gladys Oroma's 'Do Not Dare God', meanwhile, question what the meaning of liberty can be for women in a contemporary society still organised around compulsory matrimony and compulsory maternity. Godiva Akullo's 'Breathing Complications' foregrounds the struggle for LGBTQIA rights in Uganda, opting not to engage with the polemics which surround the issue, but to render a moving portrait of a grieving mother whose struggle to come to grips with her queer child's suicide affects a quiet sea change in her own understanding of faith and family.

Across all of these stories, what emerges is a picture of contemporary Uganda which is humanised and situated. Diverse, without a single approach to language, form or perspective, geographically and spatially moving across the country, ranging from city streets to domestic interiors to rural enclaves, the stories in the collection resist a simply assimilation into the

[14] A full discussion of the exhilarating activist work pursued by Nyanzi and others is beyond the scope of this paper. For a fuller account see Eltahawy (2019, 59-67).

easy tropes and categories which dominate so much of the discourse around contemporary Uganda. Instead, highlighted by the subtle and sometimes-surprising correspondences which appear across their breadth, they illuminate a picture of everyday life as practiced and practising, constituting a social world which cannot be reduced to a single story, but which also foregrounds its own interconnectivities. As those of us who work within African studies are all-too aware, depictions of the continent in both popular and sometimes even scholarly accounts often turn towards the general and the sensational. By contrast, the varied and sometimes conflictual imaginaries produced in these stories enable something of a stripping of these very layers of sensationalism and generalization through their specificity and their affectivity, on the one hand, and from the larger view which they enable from their own rooted positions, enlivening the observation that cultural practice 'needs to be understood as an aesthetic practice aiming at achieving certain goals which are, or at least may be characterized exactly by the wish to go beyond actual states of affairs' (Verne, 2015, 87).

Bwesigye bwa Mwesigire notes, with reference to the 1962 conference of African Writers of English Expression held at Makerere University in Kampala, how

> it is important to recall that the conference was attended by most of the writers whose work dominated twentieth-century African writing in English, among them, Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Most of their first works, for example Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) or Ngũgĩ's *Weep Not Child* (1964), focused on the colonial condition of Africa and the cultural clashes with Europe, themes that were real and urgent in their time, written, as they were, on the cusp of Nigerian and Kenyan political independence in 1960 and 1963, respectively. Some of these works have since become part of the postcolonial canon. The questioning of the representation of Africa in Western writing, a form of writing back to empire, became a dominant way to read African writing from this period. (Bwa Mwesigire, 2018, 103-4)

The work of literary activism, writ large, is to re-script these dynamics, which tacitly demand that African literary writing can only exist within the single framework of the 'world republic of letters', oriented towards a global North and its own preoccupations. By contrast, projects such as *Odokonyero* also foster space for a different way of thinking through the basis for creative practice, social production and the specific orientations of the text. Literary activism, here, implies a textual purview which seeks to actively shift the ways in which contemporary Uganda continues to act as a signifier in the global imaginary. By so doing, these stories attempt, in some small way, to unmoor the binary-based formulations which seek to position Africa in the world as always in relation to a European gaze, interlocutor or frame of reference. Our argument is not necessarily that these stories offer alternative readings of modernity in Uganda, nor alternative forms of world-creation, but rather than they speak from and to a positionality which views both itself and the world from its own place and time, seeking less to 'educate' or 'inform' and more to simply express the state of things as they are perceived and felt.

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