

On the making of African literatures

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Special Issue of *Cambridge Quarterly*: ‘Materials of African Literatures’

On the Making of African Literatures

Jarad Zimble and Rachel Bower

Manuscripts and songs. Letters and archival scraps. Inscriptions and book collections. Maps, machines and crude oil. Each of the essays in this special issue looks to get a handle on an author, text or set of texts by taking hold of something solid, tangible, sensuous. In his essay on Christopher Okigbo, Nathan Suhr-Sytsma attends to the poet’s compositional practice with an ear to his passion for music. Rachel Bower combs through editorial archives and correspondence to examine the ways in which Nigerian poetry has been made by anthologies. Asha Rogers re-reads Richard Rive’s short-story ‘The Bench’ after looking into the author’s personal library and opening its books to closer inspection. And in her account of Kojo Laing’s bewildering fiction, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*, Christine Okoth assesses the impact of industry on mapping – real and metaphorical – and on how we imagine Africa’s futures.

Does this interest in sensuous objects and tangible things explain our use of the phrase ‘materials of literature’? Not entirely, though it is certainly striking that the essays elicited by our call for papers are all concerned with the ‘stuff’ of verbal arts – with voice, paper, ink, body, machine – when, in the initial call, we glossed the term simply as ‘matter to hand’: as that which is put to work in acts of literary making. Similarly, though we gave no special weight to archival research, this is central to three of the four essays, while the fourth, Okoth’s, reflects on the means by which books are transported and stored. Perhaps this unanticipated congruence has to do with the fact that, for many literary critics, knowledge about the making of stories, poems, plays and novels emerges most readily from archives, whether these consist of small book collections at prestigious institutions (the case with Richard Rive), curated editorial records (such as the Howard Sergeant archive explored by Bower), or personal papers held by relatives (the case with Christopher Okigbo – at least at the time of Suhr-Sytsma’s research). This is not because such archives are deemed repositories of foundational truth, but because contact with physical stuff, which can be handled, photographed, watched and heard (and which often parches the throat, dries the

hands, leaves eyes and neck aching) produces a particular sense of the materiality of the verbal arts.

Research in the archive also fosters an awareness of the many and various kinds of labour involved in the making of literary works. This is important because, from the outset, *materials of literature* has meant, for us, a good deal more than that which writers, readers and critics are able to apprehend visually, aurally or haptically (to say nothing of the ways in which paper and ink can be smelled and even tasted); a good deal more than those processes of production, circulation and reception that leave their traces in business correspondence, marketing brochures, newspaper clippings, invoices and accounts. It has also meant the stuff of language and literary culture: words and their rules and patterns of arrangement (prosodic and grammatical), as well as stories, genres, forms, subject matters, themes and narrative strategies – in short, all those linguistic and literary resources that might reasonably be understood to go into the making of works.

Let us try to be more concrete. When we speak of literary making, we envisage an author, perhaps with a dedicated study and ‘a small slightly cluttered desk where he writes,’¹ though it is possible that she may not be at all ‘precious about needing the same location [...] or a particular time of day’.² This author may use ‘paper and pen’,³ or write on whatever she can: her ‘phone, on toilet paper, old receipts, work notebooks and walls.’⁴ But whatever the precise settings or tools of writing, our author cannot set to work without some elementary stuff, not to mention those habits of body and mind associated with her practice. This stuff will be ideational and affective as well as tangible, whether she begins with a clear plan – ‘a structure’,⁵ a plot, a set of characters and their relations – or ‘with some absurd situation’, around which she then figures ‘out how to tell a story’.⁶ Her writing may take off from an image, a feeling, the music of a line, ‘the sound of a word’,⁷ a rhythm or a mood. It will draw from the outset on her stock of words and phrases and their principles of combination; her sense of patterns, shapes, forms, and what they mean; her sense of what seems fresh and what seems clichéd, of what others have done before.

Equipped with all this stuff, and with an embodied practical knowledge, the author begins, a little at a time, or in a rush, and continues until there is a draft, however ‘messy, curious, intuitive and filled with footnotes’.⁸ And then, there is the inevitable labour of editing, whether or not our writer is her own (and only) editor. Indeed, before the text makes its way

into the world it is likely to pass before the eyes, and beneath the hands, of a dozen or so others, as it is edited, copy-edited, proof-read, type-set, printed. And even then, we cannot truly say that the making of the work is complete, and the question of the materials of literatures resolved. For there are many other rooms and desks and chairs and bodies in them, and the labour of publishers, distributors and marketers;⁹ of reviewers and censors and prize committees and the makers of curricula; of anthologists, translators, adaptors; of readers and teachers. And, on the other side of the process, there is the long chain of persons and events which convey the author to his moment of writing; which give her an opportunity to hone her craft, through ‘training workshops and fellowships’;¹⁰ which provide the desk or the pen or the time to write; which equip the author with her stock of words and phrases; her sense of what has and has not been done; which imbue him with the desire ‘to read all the books in the world’,¹¹ the ‘desire to feed’ his ‘mind’, to ‘protest’, ‘to comment about justice and injustice’,¹² as well as with the urge to write and the belief that writing itself is worthwhile.

The scenes of composition we have just envisaged are historically as well as culturally specific, even in their minor variations. A quite different story would emerge if the initial scenario focused on devised dramatic works or slam poems,¹³ or, more pertinently still, on the praise songs and oral epics found in literary cultures across the African continent.¹⁴ But the central point would remain the same: that the objects of verbal arts are *worked*, *crafted*. They are things that come into being through the labour of several persons, individuals as well as institutions; labour which is never purely intellectual, but, at each stage, from initial conception through to ultimate reading or performance, practical, sensuous.

This understanding of literary making – which need not entail a commitment to any particular branch of literary scholarship, but an openness to practical criticism as much as to book history, to narratology as much as to literary sociology – is attested in each of the essays in this issue. It is there in Okoth’s remarks on the confected idiom of *Major Genti* and her interest in the interactions of metaphor and material as much as in the agency of publishers; in Suhr-Sytsma’s attention to the painstaking revisions of Okigbo’s poetry as well as to the paper and ink they used up; in the way Rogers tracks a short-story’s transformation into a one-act play without losing sight of the labour of college cleaners and librarians; and in Bower’s discussion of how the poets Michael Echeruo and Okogbule Wonodi drew on the technical resources of different poetic traditions, and of how anthologists then responded to and framed these efforts.

Our understanding of literature's materials has another important dimension: the belief that whatever is worked (sounds, words, rhythms, syntax, forms, genres, media, subjects, stories), and which therefore somehow precedes the labour, will already have particular heft and hold, pressure and pull, arising from the manner in which it has been put to work at other times and in other places. 'The writer,' says Pierre Macherey, 'does not manufacture the materials with which he works. Neither does he stumble across them as spontaneously available wandering fragments'.¹⁵ Indeed, as Henry Staten argues, even the 'techne' or 'know-how' which governs artistic production 'is the accretion or sedimentation of myriad acts of trial and error and micro-discovery that come together over generations'.¹⁶ This means that literary making, in all its varieties, can never be simply a matter of unrestrained choice. In this regard especially, our framing of this special issue emerges from a longstanding research project, *Crafts of World Literature*, which has itself been informed by the work of Theodor Adorno, and his notion of the literary material.¹⁷

For Adorno, the material is 'what artists work with', which is 'the sum of all that is available to them, including words, colors, sounds, associations of every sort and every technique ever developed'.¹⁸ However, as one of our principal collaborators Ben Etherington has explained, what the artist has available, what she has to hand in making, is not *anything at all*.¹⁹ Since the literary material is historical through and through – since, that is, a technique, genre or medium can be worn out as much as a subject-matter – what an artist has to hand in making is not the sum total of all media, forms, genres, techniques, subject matters, production processes, means of circulation; but only those which have not been already used up and emptied of meaning.²⁰ This means that the 'scope for making decisions is actually extremely narrow'. Moreover, 'it is not for the artist coming to the material to decide what can and cannot be employed effectively, but the "tendency" of the material as it has been established by the long history of past practitioners and the way this has shaped and been shaped by taste'.²¹

In Adorno's sense, then, 'the material' may be conceived as the horizon of possibilities and expectations that, in each moment, determines aesthetic judgement, decision-making, and experience, as well as the capacity of literary works to convey their truths.²² And it is in this respect that our understanding of literatures' materials entails a commitment to a certain form of interpretation: in asking about how and from what stuff literary works are made, our

purpose is not only to determine the means by which literary labour is parlayed into prestige, but also, and above all, to understand what these works mean or say.²³

Why then have we preferred to speak of *materials* rather than *the material*? In the first place, because we have no desire to enforce a party line amongst our contributors: what they take the term is to mean is not identical with our own sense of it, as editors. But it is also because our broader project has been, from the outset, attentive to difficulties that arise from Adorno's notion, which become especially apparent when addressing postcolonial literary fields. To begin with, the task of criticism implicit in Adorno's notion – not merely interpretation, but the revelation of the work's truth content, of what it knows and says about the world – depends on the mutual embeddedness of authors and readers in the material. Given the dispersed and diverse nature of the readership to which so many African literary texts are directed, this kind of mutual embeddedness cannot be taken for granted.

But there is also a more fundamental problem, which has to do with the fact that colonization in all its stages precipitates cataclysmic cultural ruptures, destroying a community's 'indigenous social fabric' and 'systems of reference',²⁴ and producing 'a discontinuity in forms of life throughout the continent'.²⁵ In the literary domain, the importation or imposition of new languages and their attendant forms and genres are only the most easily discernible causes of this discontinuity, and one of its consequences is that, even where it may be possible to speak of distinct self-regulating communities of literary practice endowed with their own institutions – in other words, the kinds of relatively autonomous national or regional literary fields described by Pierre Bourdieu²⁶ – it may not be possible to speak of the literary material as such, if there is no sense of aesthetic necessity arising out of a shared problematic or relationship to the various materials at hand, whether these are indigenous or imported, pre- or postcolonial.²⁷

Our term 'materials', then, is also used to signal the vexed status of Adorno's notion of 'the material' for all scholars of African and, indeed, postcolonial literatures, along with a series of questions that this opens up, to do with the means by which 'the material' might be constituted, and the extent to which materials – elements drawn from the material of other fields – are portable. The first concern is perhaps more vital to conceiving the role of verbal arts in decolonization, though it is one touched upon only fleetingly in this special issue. The second, however, has proven central, again without editorial coordination. For, in different

ways, each of these four essays reflects on the movement of materials (techniques, themes, genres, and even entire texts) from one field to another, and the strategies of adaptation such movements necessitate. Okoth and Rogers address adaptation head on — looking at Nikhil Singh’s graphic narrative, in which Laing’s novel is reworked, and at the theatrical adaption of Rive’s short story. But the need to adapt materials is also pertinent to Bower’s examination of the processes of editing, curating and marketing poems through anthologization, and to Suhr-Sytsma’s reflections on Okigbo’s influences and the ways in which music enters into verse.

Of course, in outlining the origins and priorities of this special issue (and the larger project from which it has emerged), little of what we have said so far pertains to the other set of questions we sought to address in our call for papers: how might a reflection on materials enhance existing readings of African literatures, and how might this contribute to current discussion and debates about African cultural expression? What, if anything, is unique about materials and materiality in African literary fields, and what might an engagement with the literatures of Africa add to our understanding of materials?

In the first place, what do we mean when we speak of ‘African literatures’? Do these consist only of works made in Africa or also of works which are made outside of Africa but are nevertheless about Africa, use African literary and linguistic materials, or are made by Africans? What, in a global book market, given the notion of literary making outlined above, does it mean for a work to be made in a particular location? Which languages, genres and forms are African and which are not? Who qualifies as an African maker, and how? Is it a function of biography or bibliography or some property of the work, or a combination of all three? And who is able to say? Is it really appropriate, at this late stage, to adjudicate these matters in a periodical that is named for one of Britain’s elite institutions of Higher Education and that is published by the press of another? But without addressing them here, how might such institutions of scholarship and learning be diversified, decolonized?

The urgency with which such questions must be posed suggests the value of thinking literature’s material from an African vantage point, especially given its occlusion in recent efforts to model the literary world.²⁸ For if any attempt to address literary cultures from a

continental, regional or even national perspective might prompt questions about boundaries and about those who establish and police them, these are especially acute for scholars of African and Black diasporic literatures, for whom notions of place and identity are troubled by painful histories of migration, dislocation and disruption;²⁹ and for whom language and nation have proven problematic grounds for delimiting literary communities.³⁰ Indeed, though ‘who gets to belong?’ and ‘who gets to decide?’ may be questions constitutive of the discipline of African literary studies, they have become ever more obdurately resistant to neat solutions.³¹ Some of the reasons for this become apparent when we consider *Imprendehora*, a poetry collection published in 2009 by Yvette Christiansë.

‘Felony’, the first poem in the book, begins with an epigraph: an extract from a newspaper article published in the *St. Helena Gazette* of 7th March 1846, describing an inquest into the suicide ‘of a Liberated African woman’. The final poem, ‘Ship’s Register’, presents itself as a partial catalogue of children and young men and women,³² all of whom, we may presume, are likewise ‘Liberated Africans’, rescued from slavers who continued to operate for many decades after abolition.³³ Several are recently deceased, and one child’s date of death, ‘27.5.94’, suggests that we are dealing here with one of the last consignments of slaves freed from their captivity. Likewise, the part and section headings – ‘INDIAN’, ‘Katembe’ – indicate that the ship in question has docked on the east African coast, in the region of present-day Mozambique. ‘Felony’ itself is a kind of epigraph to the volume, but the poems of its first part, which appear under the heading ‘ATLANTIC’, are attached one way or another to St. Helena. Thus, the volume travels west to east, tracing a history of emancipation which, for almost all of those liberated, was merely a passage from one form of indenture to another.³⁴

Imprendehora is a volume which directly confronts the exploitation of Africa for its raw materials and the labour of its bodies, during the period of the slave trade as well as in the centuries of colonialism and uneven development following abolition. It is also a volume preoccupied with the textual history of this exploitation, which ‘sifts through traces and fragments of the colonial archive’: documents of trade, transportation and judicial proceedings; newspaper clippings; stories and songs.³⁵ All of this makes *Imprendehora* obviously pertinent to a special issue devoted to materials of African literatures, where *materials* comprehends subject matters as much as conditions of production, the stuff that is

written about as much as the stuff out of which writing and books, and ultimately archives, are made.

Christiansë's book 'rewrites official records' as a means of offering 'glimpses of lives that are otherwise almost impossible to retrieve'.³⁶ Yet, while it turns 'back to eastern Africa in its final part ... it does not beach on the mainland'.³⁷ Indeed, the continent traversed by the poems, the continent separating its two parts and oceans, remains largely an absence, untouched, unmentioned. *Imprendehora*, the book's title and a refrain of its first section, is also the recorded name of one of the slaving vessels seized by the British fleet; a misspelling, apparently, of the Spanish *emprendedora*, meaning enterprise. This is a collection, then, addressed to the extremities of dislocation, in place as well as in language and culture, and also to the disfigurements of imperial commerce. The corrosive effects of this misshapen undertaking, this enterprise which was both distorted and distorting, are marked repeatedly, for example in the ephemera and residua of the first part's section titles ('Scraps', 'Winds', 'Rust'), or in the European names of 'Ship's Register' ('Sarah', 'Samuel', 'Salome'), beneath which are recorded, often with alternatives or question marks, the names of African mothers ('Koollewah', 'Neammhoo? Neammorhoo?', 'Touamouyoo'). Thus, *Imprendehora* takes stock of the dispersals it seeks to salvage from the colonial archive.

In so doing, it illuminates certain of the difficulties in seeking and identifying 'African literatures'. One of these has to do with the nature of these dispersals, for there are questions not only about the continent's extent – about its islands and territorial waters – but also about whether and how the literatures of the African diaspora ought to be included.³⁸ In this respect, the status of Christiansë herself is by no means straightforward, for though she was born in South Africa, she has lived abroad since 1972, completing her tertiary education in Australia, and working in the United States as an academic, producing a monograph on Toni Morrison (2013), as well as a first volume of verse, *Castaway* (1999), and a novel, *Unconfessed* (2006), all published in the USA, by Fordham University Press, Duke University Press and Other Press respectively. Like *Imprendehora*, both of the latter works address slavery at the Cape and on St. Helena, drawing on the experiences and stories of Christiansë's own family, freighted by multiple migrations and dislocations, but also by the large-scale histories of forced migration and exploitation that have shaped our world.³⁹

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the language of Christiansë's poetry seems to originate somewhere in the mid-Atlantic. Here are the opening six lines of 'Felony':

*Last night, that moon spilled a little
on my mother's hands as she laid
new logs for the fire. My father
whisked the late fly from his face.*

*Or was it the owl's wings bearing down,
was it the spider in the corner of the stone house? ('Felony', ll. 1-6).*

In contrast with the epigraph, there are no semantic markers of location here: flies, owls and spiders are phenomena as universal as log-fires and moonlight. Nor does the language pin itself down, either in its syntax or its lexis. And one finds much the same throughout the collection, even in poems such as 'In This Place' ('Howl, wind. This skin does not flay easily/ I will dance as a silhouette in their dreams') and 'But We Have Ways, Here' ('The laughter of birds can break a knuckle,/ but such things are to be expected'), for the substantial referent promised by titular deixis never arrives: 'this place' and 'here' are never properly occupied. Thus, the vernacular of the verse itself performs a kind of displacement.⁴⁰

And yet, *Imprendehora* was first published not in America but in Cape Town, by Kwela Books/ Snailpress, an imprint associated with several prize-winning post-apartheid volumes, though owned by NB publishers, the largest South African general publishers. What is more, while this kind of writing back to and through the colonial archive is by no means unique to South African literature, and while there are clearly ways in which Christiansë's poetry speaks with and to works by African American and Caribbean peers and antecedents, it is difficult to read the volume other than in light of texts such as André Brink's *A Chain of Voices*, J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*, Wilma Stockenström's *Die kremetartsekspedisie*, Rayda Jacobs's *The Slave Book*, Zakes Mda's *Heart of Redness*, and, above all, Antjie Krog's *Lady Anne*.⁴¹ Even the volume's dedication – 'For Ingrid and Tony' – speaks of a connection with the South African literary field, invoking (to those who know) two of its significant elder presences, Ingrid de Kok and Tony Morphet. It is no surprise then that, where portions of the volume have appeared subsequently in European and American publications, their African origin has been marked. On the Poetry International website, which includes an important 'Introduction to

Imprendehora by the Cape Town poet Karen Press, Christiansë is tagged as South African; and where her verse appears in *The Common*, it is in issue 4, 'A Selection of Contemporary South African Poetry'.

All of which is to say that, at one and the same time, *Imprendehora* emerges from and speaks to a number of overlapping literary constituencies: Cape, South African, African, Black Atlantic, African diasporic, postcolonial, even Indian Rim. Of course, not all of these terms designate actually existing communities of relational practice, at least not of the same order, and we are not suggesting that the question of where Christiansë's poetry belongs is in the end undecidable. On the contrary, an account focused on relationality – an account, that is, of the ways in which it responds to works of other writers who see themselves and one another as confronted by the same problematic – would help to determine the field(s) of *Imprendehora*'s position-taking. Nevertheless, this book of poems, which skirts Africa's littoral zones and adjacent islands to ask questions about the continent's limits, as well as about the beginning and end of enslavement and of slavery, also brings into focus some of the complexities involved in determining the bounds of Africa's literatures, even when one has recourse to details of bibliography, circulation and literary relationality, as well as to features of language, theme, and biography.

As a poet of the African diaspora, who lives, works and publishes (for the most part) in the United States, Christiansë's status may seem more complicated than that of some of the writers discussed in this special issue, but, if so, this is a question of degree rather than kind. The South African Rive, the Ghanaian Laing and the Nigerians Echeruo and Wonodi all spent periods abroad, and their works circulated far beyond the places in which they originated, both intra- and internationally. Indeed, transnational circulation was the very purpose of the anthologies and adaptations examined by Bower and Rogers. It was also the purpose of the Heinemann African Writers Series (AWS), to which all of Okigbo, Laing and Rive contributed, as it is of Chimurenga, the Cape Town-based collective whose several ventures Okoth outlines. Of course, there are important differences between textbooks and anthologies which re-package African works for consumption in the global North, and pan-African networks which facilitate continental transmission (even though the latter frequently depend on metropolitan financial and literary capital), but the point here is that even the most apparently autochthonous practices – indigenous forms of orature, for example – are seldom

confined to the kind of highly localized circulatory ecology which Alexander Beecroft has identified as the ‘epichoric’.⁴²

More important still, like Christiansē, all of the writers addressed in this issue drew on resources that were multiple and diverse. We cannot say, in other words, that their materials were exclusively African – at least not in any simple sense. To begin with, each emerged from and into multi-lingual literary environments, in which different, often rival, vernacular and cosmopolitan literary traditions co-existed. Suhr-Sytsma and Bower tackle this head on, analysing the ways in which different Nigerian poets sought forms which might harness the energies both of Igbo and Yoruba verbal and performance arts, and of mid-twentieth-century anglophone and francophone poetry. Rogers too remarks the national and internationalist dimensions of the repertoires of literary existentialism and social realism upon which Rive draws. And Okoth is interested in how Laing’s narrative imagines a Ghanaian future which puts pressure on the idioms and conventional conceptual metaphors of a global commercial English, as well as on the generic conventions of the anglophone African novel.

Across the essays of this special issue, then, we come to see that being an African writer means contending from the outset with the entanglement of local and global, indigenous and imported. It means being at the sharp edge of many of the most pressing concerns of our moment, about identity, language, race and belonging, about art, politics and economics, about environmental degradation, ecological damage, and the exploitation of resources, and about a world which may be one, but which remains highly uneven. This unevenness has to do with the distribution of wealth and commodities, of course, but for authors and other literary agents, it also has to do with the distribution of literary resources, publishing venues and prestige-granting institutions, including institutions of higher education. Indeed, the edges have only been made sharper by the extent to which scholarship of African literature has been pushed off-shore over the past several decades, making ‘the production and dissemination of African literature and literary discourse [...] more dispersed than ever’, as a consequence of precisely those migratory pressures, social, economic and political, concretized in Laing’s novel.⁴³ But it is precisely because of this – and because of the precarity of so many of its authors and institutions – that African literature ought to be regarded as a privileged site for thinking through important literary critical questions concerning the nature of literary materials, and of the literary material.

No single special issue could get to grips with the diversity of African literary production, though the nature of its limitations will vary, in accordance with the linguistic and literary-historical expertise of its contributors, and with the practical and conceptual strictures of its editors and venue of publication. Some of the more significant limitations of this particular volume are discussed by our two respondents, Peter D. McDonald and Madhu Krishnan.

Writing about S. E. K. Mqhayi's isiXhosa work *Ityala Lamawele*, originally published in 1914, McDonald remains alert both to its textual nuances and to the intricacies of its publishing history. He thereby offers an exemplary instance of the kind of literary criticism invoked across the four essays: one that manages to balance the demands of internal as well as external analysis. But McDonald also helpfully extends the reach of the special issue to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whilst bringing into view several related omissions, to do with language, translation and orality.

Though our essays refer occasionally to non-anglophone practices, the focus of interpretation is, in each case, an English-language text. This excludes African literatures in other Indo-European languages,⁴⁴ and, more importantly, obscures the depth and richness of literatures in African languages, from Amharic and Arabic to Xam and Zulu.⁴⁵ And while neglecting francophone and lusophone works means leaving out of account profoundly important African authors and thinkers – Mário Pinto de Andrade, Mariama Bâ, Calixthe Beyala, Ken Bugul, José Craveirinha, Malick Fall, Bernardo Honwana, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Ondjaki, Abdoulaye Sadj, Ousmane Sembène, Léopold Senghor, Noémia de Sousa, Véronique Tadjo, to name only a few of the most obvious – the methodological and conceptual implications are perhaps less profound than those which follow from the exclusion of, say, Swahili authors (such as Abdilatif Abdalla, Ebrahim Hussein, Euphrase Kezilahabi, Penina Muhando, and Shaaban Roberts), or Yoruba authors (such as Isaac Delano, D. O. Fagunwa, Adebayo Faleti, Oladejo Okediji, and I. B. Thomas).⁴⁶ This is because, as McDonald's response intimates, this exclusion obscures important features of African literary production, such as the centrality of translation to the practices of many African authors and readers, and the vital role it plays both within and across African literary communities, as a means of sharing and enriching resources.⁴⁷

No less important, authors working with the materials of African languages are confronted by a different set of challenges to those working in European languages, since the former have more immediately to hand centuries-old vernacular genres and forms. Like the isiXhosa praise poetry incorporated in *Ityala Lamawele* and discussed by McDonald, many of these are oral. Indeed, oral traditions are often the bedrock of African literary cultures, and continue not only to co-exist with print cultures, but to adapt themselves to new contexts, new media and technologies.⁴⁸ In so doing, they play an important part in shaping forms of popular communication, from public speeches, sermons, and classroom teaching, to storytelling, songs, and poetry slams. Something of the importance of orality is captured by Bower and Suhr-Sytsma, both of whom remark the efforts of Nigerian poets to carry across Yoruba and Igbo oral practices into anglophone poetry, but, for all that, our essays remain focused on print-based works, and it is doubtless the case that a more concerted engagement with oral practices, and also with contemporary performance cultures and dramatic arts, would add a great deal to any attempt to get to grips with the materials of Africa's literatures.

If McDonald exposes some of the narrowness of our range of focal texts whilst rounding out the issue at the level of literary-critical methodology and practice, Krishnan's response pushes against certain of the issue's scholarly and conceptual limits, assessing its interventions in the field of African literary studies, and interrogating the keywords and core concepts at the heart of the broader *Crafts of World Literature* project. She, too, notes the issue's anglophone focus whilst raising the question of what might be lost when literary critics take the single author and single work as their object of interpretation, and she invites us to think further about the materials of reading and readerships.

The question of reading publics and communities of interpretation is especially challenging, and also pertinent, because the mode of literary criticism implicit in Adorno's writings demands that authors and readers are mutually embedded in the material. How does one approach a text whose project is in fact to constitute the material? What does one do with texts that may be legible, because they appear in a language that is (or seems) familiar, but which may be culturally as well as historically distant? And if the 'aesthetic values and interpretations' peculiar to different readerships in Africa 'are largely irretrievable from the archives', what other resources are at hand?⁴⁹ It is to illuminate the nature of these challenges that Krishnan invokes Raymond Williams, suggesting that it is the critic's task to recuperate

traces of a ‘structure of feeling’, as a means of reconstituting ‘an archive of lived experience and immediacy’.

As much as our respondents help to bring certain of this issue’s limitations into view, they also clarify the achievements of its four essays, all of which find compelling ways to move away from the ‘thematic approach’.⁵⁰ This means engaging concertedly with questions of technique and form, which have been frequently neglected even by scholars who deliver on their commitments to ‘close reading’.⁵¹ It also means keeping in view book historical, bibliographic and sociological questions, and in particular attending to the routes and means of circulation and transmission, of texts and practices as much as of prestige. In this regard especially, the essays in this special issue build upon recent work by scholars of African literature, including our two respondents, who have produced important research into histories of publishing;⁵² periodicals, especially newspapers and magazines;⁵³ printing presses and other technologies of print production;⁵⁴ institutions of formation and consecration, including primary and secondary schools and universities, as well as literary prizes and censorship regimes;⁵⁵ and transnational networks and ecologies of circulation, especially those with a regional or hemispheric dimension.⁵⁶

As both respondents observe, the essays collected here are notable above all for balancing their book-historical and sociological inquiries with careful attention to questions of technique, style, and linguistic substance, and also for addressing a broader range of genres and forms than is usual in studies of African, and, indeed, postcolonial literatures, where the novel has been dominant.⁵⁷ Here, in contrast, the focus is on poetry, anthologies, a short story, a play, a graphic narrative; and even where a novel does occupy centre stage, it is amongst the strangest and most generically idiosyncratic works of anglophone African fiction. In these ways, our essays demonstrate a commitment to a practice of literary criticism that, taking the materials of literatures in their widest but also deepest sense, keeps itself open to the specificity with which literary works begin to speak.

Much recent research into production, circulation and reception has been inspired by Pierre Bourdieu, whose notions of literary capital, consecration and relational position-taking have been important to all of the contributors to this special issue. Yet, while often helpful, Bourdieu’s model is profoundly agonistic. In contrast, one of the great joys of this project has been the spirit of collaboration in which it has been undertaken, from beginning to end.

Authors have shared thoughts about and criticisms of one another's work, in person and via email, and our respondents – both of whom participated in preliminary events – have engaged generously and generatively. And so we come almost full circle. Manuscripts and conversations. Emails and annotations. Inscriptions and book collections. Friendships and disagreements. And, finally, a set of essays and responses which think with, through and against the materials and materiality of African literatures. In so doing, they try to get to grips with the making of particular practices, as well as with the making of their weight and value, their meanings and effects.

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¹ Jerome Brooks, 'Interview with Chinua Achebe: The Art of Fiction No. 139', *The Paris Review*, 133 (1994).

² 'An Interview with Lesley Nneka Arimah – Caine Prize Shortlist', *Wasafiri*, 27 June 2017. <https://www.wasafiri.org/article/interview-lesley-nneka-arimah-caine-prize-shortlist/>

³ Irenosen Okojie, 'Interview with Irenosen Okojie', *Wasafiri*, 25 February 2017. <https://www.wasafiri.org/article/interview-irenoson-okojie/>

⁴ 'An Interview with Magogodi oaMphela Makhene – Caine Prize Shortlist', *Wasafiri*, 9 June 2017. <https://www.wasafiri.org/article/interview-magogodi-makhene-caine-prize-shortlist/>

⁵ John Zuarino, 'An Interview with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie', *Bookslut*, August 2009. http://www.bookslut.com/features/2009_08_014928.php

⁶ Walter Collins, 'Interview with Sefi Atta', *English in Africa*, 34.2 (2007), 123-131, 133 (p. 126).

⁷ Hedley Twidle, 'An Interview with Rustom Kozain', *Wasafiri*, 31.2 (2016), pp. 76-80 (p. 77).

⁸ 'Wasafiri Wonders: Novuyo Rosa Tshuma', *Wasafiri*, 15 May 2019.

<https://www.wasafiri.org/article/wasafiri-wonders-novuyo-rosa-tshuma/>

⁹ For accounts of challenges faced by publishers in Senegal, Tunisia and Guinea, especially to do with distribution and regional rights and sales, see: Raphaël Thierry, 'Amalion Publishing: An Interview with Sulaiman Adebowale', *Wasafiri*, 31.4 (2016), 23-25; Raphaël Thierry, 'Elyzad: An Interview with Elisabeth Daldoul', *Wasafiri*, 31.4 (2016), 28-31; Raphaël Thierry, 'Gandal Publishing: An Interview with Mamadou Aliou Sow and Marie-Paule Huet', *Wasafiri*, 31.4 (2016), 32-33.

¹⁰ Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Ntone Edjabe, Elieshi Lema, Hilda Twongyeirwe, Ann N Athiyo, Eghosa Imasuen, Billy Kahora, Walter Bgoya, Colleen Higgs, Azafi Omoluabi-Ogosi, Osman Sankoh, Muthoni Garland, Akoss Ofori-Mensah & Irene Staunton, 'A Survey of Fourteen African Publishers', *Wasafiri*, 31.4 (2016), 13-22.

¹¹ Nanda Dyssou and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 'An Interview with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 23 April 2017. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/an-interview-with-ngugi-wa-thiongo/>

¹² Akinyi Ochieng, 'Fiction and the City: An Interview with Helon Habila', *Ayiba Magazine*, Sept 2014. <http://ayibamagazine.com/fiction-and-the-city-an-interview-with-helon-habila/>

¹³ For an account of the history of slam poetry, and of its practice in southern Africa, see Susanna L. Sacks, 'Moving Forms: Individuals, Institutions, and the Production of Slam Poetry Networks in Southern Africa', *ASAP/Journal*, 5.1 (2020), 153-179.

¹⁴ Liz Gunner describes instances of both forms in 'Ecologies of Orality', *The Cambridge Companion to World Literature*, eds. Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimbler (Cambridge 2018), pp. 116-129.

¹⁵ Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London 2006), p. 47.

¹⁶ Henry Staten, *Techne Theory: A New Language for Art* (London 2019), pp. 10-11.

¹⁷ See Jarad Zimbler, Ben Etherington and Rachel Bower, eds., 'Crafts of World Literature', a Special Issue of *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (2014).

¹⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, ed. Gretel Adorno. and Rolf Tiedermann (London 2004), p. 194.

¹⁹ Ben Etherington, 'What is Materialism's Material? Thoughts toward (actually against) a Materialism for "World Literature"', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48.5 (2012), 539-551.

²⁰ By ‘artist’, we refer as much to writers of the ‘sub-field of large-scale production’ as to those of the ‘sub-field of restricted production’, for both are confronted by limits on the materials available for making. For more on this division of the field, see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge 1993).

²¹ Etherington, ‘What is Materialism’s Material?’, p. 543.

²² Here, we follow Raymond Williams in taking ‘determines’ to mean ‘setting limits, exerting pressures’. See his ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’, *New Left Review*, 82 (1973). On the truth-telling capacity of works, see Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimble, ‘Field, Material, Technique: On Renewing Postcolonial Literary Criticism’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 49.3 (2014), 279-297.

²³ As Nathan Suhr-Sytsma has explained, situating works in a field involves interpretation just as much as analysing their techniques and confronting their meanings. Indeed, these tasks may be interdependent and ultimately inseparable. ‘The Geography of Prestige: Prizes, Nigerian Writers, and World Literature’, *ELH*, 85. 4 (2018), 1093-1122.

²⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), pp. 5-6.

²⁵ F. Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* (Oxford 2001), p. ix.

²⁶ See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Cambridge 1996).

²⁷ This is particularly the case with African literary fields emerging along national lines during decolonization, where several pre-existing African-language literary communities are yoked together just as European-language literary production becomes increasingly localized, through the establishment of publishers and little magazines and a shift in educational curricula. Inevitably, there will be a lag between the creation of national institutions and the constitution of a shared problematic. Certain of these issues are treated in greater detail in Jarad Zimble, ‘Guy Butler’s Poetry and Poetics: Beyond Postcolonialism and Prac. Crit.’, *Wasafiri*, 31.2 (2016), 58-64.

²⁸ There is very little about African literatures in the work of David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, and Alexander Beecroft, but there are significant exceptions. For example, African literatures have been a focus of both the Warwick Research Collective, and the World Literatures research programme at the University of Stockholm.

²⁹ The problem of locating and delimiting African cultural production is confronted head on in Paul Gilroy’s landmark study *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*

(London 1993). For all that, Olakunle George follows Achille Mbembe in contending that ‘the event of the Atlantic slave trade has been badly undertheorized in African letters’.

African Literature and Social Change: Tribe, Nation, Race (Bloomington, 2017), p. 8.

³⁰ See Irele, *The African Imagination*, pp. 6-7. Irele’s solution – to posit an imaginative unity transcending time and place – begs more questions than it resolves, but he does make an important observation, which is that the problem of locating African literature cannot be divorced from the fact that, as African literary studies entered American and European universities, they too were dispersed across several disciplines (xiii). This observation is borne out by the editorial in *Research in African Literatures*, 1.1 (1970), which notes that, as a scholarly field, ‘African literatures’ emerged from ‘the Africanization of the arts curriculum in many African countries, an increased European interest in many African humanities, and the burgeoning of Black Studies in the United States’ (7).

³¹ This is a point made forcefully by Tejumola Olaniyan, who writes that ‘those unanimous or contested, spoken or implied assumptions of what constitutes the Africanness of African literature and literary studies’ have been progressively torn ‘to shreds’ over the past several decades, and that today ‘We [...] need expansive definitions of what constitutes “Africa” and “literature”’. ‘African Literature in the Post-Global Age: Provocations on Field Commonsense’, *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 3.3. (2016), 387-396.

³² We have only numbers 343-372, with names beginning R, S, T, and, somewhat surprisingly, O. Even this fragmentary document is a fragment.

³³ According to the *Liberated Africans* website, more than ‘one quarter’ of the victims of the Atlantic slave trade ‘boarded slave ships after 1807’ and were transported elsewhere in Africa, as well as to ‘the Americas [...], Atlantic and Indian Ocean islands, Arabia, and India’. Operations to liberate slaves were carried out ‘Between 1808 and 1896’. Of those captured, ‘roughly 6 percent’ were emancipated by ‘British, Brazilian, French, and US authorities’. <http://liberatedafricans.org/about.php>.

³⁴ In many instances, once freed from their captors, ‘Liberated Africans’ were compelled to undertake ‘periods of indentured servitude lasting several years’. Ibid.

³⁵ Meg Samuelson, ‘Yvette Christiansë’s Oceanic Genealogies and the Colonial Archive’, *Castaways and Generations from Eastern Africa to the South Atlantic*, *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies*, 1.1 & 2 (2014), 27-38 (p. 36).

³⁶ Gabeba Baderoon, ‘The African Oceans—Tracing the Sea as Memory of Slavery in South African Literature and Culture’, *Research in African Literatures*, 40.4 (2009), pp. 89-107 (p. 97).

³⁷ Samuelson, p. 36.

³⁸ A question critics have tended to answer in the affirmative, whether on the grounds of racial or aesthetic identity, or of socio-cultural continuities and economic conditions. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that the ‘African diaspora’ is far from a stable, given entity, as Tejumola Olaniyan and James H. Sweet explain in their introduction to *African Diaspora and the Disciplines* (Bloomington 2010).

³⁹ Christiansë refers to these family stories in a conversation with Shaun de Waal, ‘Yvette and the Sea of Stories’, *Mail & Guardian*, 11 August 2009.

⁴⁰ There are notable and important exceptions, including ‘Sister Thomas at Jacob’s Ladder’, the final poem in the ‘Winds’ sequence, which is in a kind of dialect; and ‘Ship’s Register’, in which the list is punctuated by lyric interpolations of those named, whose poetic voices are somehow strange. Other poems reflect on the language used, preferred or rejected by their personae: ‘The Shattering of the Vessels’ (‘Do not turn plainspeak/ into simple gruel’); ‘Sister Thomas on the Practice of Distance’ (‘I am a simple woman given to simple speech’); ‘Fernão the Gardener Has Premonitions’ (‘I speak two tongues’); ‘What the Signs Are Telling’ (‘Once, when in the back-there of another time/ my mouth spoke a language of brocade’).

⁴¹ Several of these links have been identified by previous critics. See, for example, Margaret Lenta, ‘A Chain of Voices and Unconfessed: Novels of Slavery in the 1980s and in the Present Day’, *Journal of Literary Studies*, 26.1 (2010), 95-110; James McCorkle, ‘Narrating Memory: Rayda Jacobs, Yvette Christiansë and André Brink and the New Slave Narrative’, *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 10.1 (2016), 18-31; Markus Nehl, *Transnational Black Dialogues: Re-Imagining Slavery in the Twenty-First Century* (Bielefeld 2016).

⁴² Alexander Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (London 2015).

⁴³ Olaniyan, ‘African Literature in the Post-Global Age’, p. 388.

⁴⁴ For some prominent authors and critics, it is a contradiction in terms to describe works in English, French, or Portuguese as works of African literature. This is a position identified above all with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, but it has been around at least since Obiajunwa Wali’s polemic, ‘The Dead End of African Literature’, *Transition*, 10 (1963), 13-15. However, not only did this polemic immediately prompt responses from several notable African writers, it also appeared alongside articles by two (Gabriel Okara and Es’kia Mphahlele) which took an

entirely different position. The issues continue to be complicated and contested. Sara Marzagora has suggested that we need to do more to dismantle the putative binary distinction between Europhone literatures as global, written and modern, and Afrophone literatures as local, oral and past (or tradition). See ‘Literatures in African languages’, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 27.1 (2015), 1-6; Biodun Jeyifo has more recently called for English to be accepted as an African language, arguing that the principle of ‘absolute autochthony’ should not be the sole determinant of which languages are considered African. See ‘English is an African Language – Ka Dupe! [for and against Ngũgĩ]’, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 30.2 (2018), 133-147; and reviewing four decades of heated debate, Moradewan Adejunmobi has proposed that ‘the recurrent discussions over language constituted one of the founding discourses of the genus of African literature, a body of texts largely composed in European languages and which required differentiation from texts composed in the same languages by writers from other parts of the world’. See *Vernacular Palaver: Imaginations of the Local and Non-Native Languages in West Africa* (Clevedon, 2004), p. 80.

⁴⁵ The notion of ‘African languages’ is itself far from clear-cut, for if none would dispute the inclusion of a Bantu language such as Zulu, or, a Tuu language such as |Xam, or even a Semitic language such as Amharic, some theorists and critics have resisted describing Arabic, another Semitic language, as African; and there are also languages with Indo-European roots, such as Afrikaans, which originate and exist almost exclusively in Africa. Over and beyond these categorical questions, there is the further problem of where one in fact draws the boundaries of any given ‘named’ language. For detailed discussions of this problem, see Adejunmobi, *Vernacular Palaver* (2004); and Derek Attridge, ‘Untranslatability and the Challenge of World Literature: A South African Example’, *The Work of World Literature*, eds. Francesco Giusti and Benjamin Lewis Robinson (Berlin 2020).

⁴⁶ These lists, like those above, are indicative, not exhaustive. Without first-hand knowledge of these literary cultures, we have relied entirely on other scholars. For helpful accounts of Swahili and Yoruba literatures, see Alamin Mazrui, *Swahili Beyond the Boundaries: Literature, Language and Identity* (Athens, OH, 2007), and Karin Barber, ‘Literature in Yorùbá: Poetry and Prose; Travelling Theatre and Modern Drama’, *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, eds. Abiole F. Irele and Simon Gikandi (Cambridge, 2000) pp. 357-378.

⁴⁷ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o remains one of the great advocates of translation across African languages, and from metropolitan languages into African languages – especially ‘works by

intellectuals of the African diaspora'. Uzoma Esonwanne, 'From the Garden of Languages, the Nectar of Art: An Interview with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o', *Postcolonial Text*, 2.2 (2006). For a compelling critique of notions of translation inherited from a Eurocentric comparative literature, see Harry Garuba and Benge Okot, 'Lateral Texts and Circuits of Value: Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and *Wer pa Lawino*', *Social Dynamics*, 43.2 (2017), 312-327.

⁴⁸ For examples of these adaptations, see Gunner, 'Ecologies of Orality'.

⁴⁹ Stephanie Newell, 'The Last Laugh: African Audience Responses to Colonial Health Propaganda Films', *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 4.3 (2017), 347-361 (p. 361).

⁵⁰ Irele, *African Imagination*, p. x.

⁵¹ It may seem iniquitous to cite examples, but it is striking that critics as astute as Ato Quayson and Olakunle George – both of whom offer compelling readings of a wide range of texts informed by sophisticated theoretical reflections – refer to 'close reading' without much qualification or elaboration. See Ato Quayson, *Calibrations: Reading for the Social* (Minneapolis 2003); and George, *African Literature and Social Change* (2017).

⁵² Peter D. McDonald, *The Literature Police: Literary Censorship in Apartheid South Africa* (Oxford 2009); Caroline Davis, *Creating Postcolonial Literature: African Writers and British Publishers* (London 2013); Ruth Bush, *Publishing Africa in French* (Liverpool 2017); Madhu Krishan, *Contingent Canons: African Literature and the Politics of Location* (Cambridge 2018).

⁵³ Stephanie Newell, *The Power to Name: A History of Anonymity in Colonial West Africa* (Athens 2013); Ruth Bush and Madhu Krishnan, eds, 'Print Activism in Twenty-First-Century Africa', a Special Issue of *Wasafiri*, 88 (2016); Derek Peterson, Stephanie Newell & Emma Hunter, eds, *African Print Cultures: Newspapers and Their Publics in the Twentieth Century* (Michigan 2016); Rebecca Jones, *At the Crossroads: Nigerian Travel Writing and Literary Culture in Yoruba and English* (Oxford 2019).

⁵⁴ Isabel Hofmeyr, *Ghandi's Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading* (Cambridge 2013).

⁵⁵ McDonald, *Literature Police*; Terri Ochiagha, *Achebe and Friends at Umuahia: The Making of a Literary Elite* (Oxford 2015); Doseline Kiguru 'Prizing African Literature: Creating a Literary Taste', *Social Dynamics*, 42.1 (2016), 161-174; Suhr-Sytsma, 'The Geography of Prestige'.

⁵⁶ Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress* (Princeton 1994); Stefan Helgesson, *Transnationalism in Southern African Literature: Modernists, Realists, and the Inequality of Print Culture* (London 2009).

⁵⁷ This dominance is apparent even in recent efforts to address the question of genre. For example, the articles collected in 'African Genre', a special issue of *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 4.2 (2017), focus either on novels or on popular graphic or audio-visual forms (Yoruba photoplays and Ghanaian ghost movies).