Editorial

Introduction: Commemorating the 50th anniversary of East African literature as an academic discipline

Alex Nelungo Wanjala

In looking back over the historical period from the 1950s to the early 1980s, Chris Wanjala ("The Growth of a Literary Tradition in East Africa") identifies the various approaches that had by then emerged in the East African region in regard to creative writing and the study of literature. In so doing, Wanjala examines how a literary tradition that is particular to the region was established. From Wanjala's study, the first thing that becomes evident is that the approaches that were used in the early stages of developing a tradition in regard to the production and the study of East African literature were formulated within the English Departments of the University of East Africa, which was by then a brand-new formation to the region. The University of East Africa had been established in 1963 as a federation of colleges from the three countries that comprised East Africa after independence, namely, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya (Hyslop). The three constituent colleges that made up the federal unit of the University of East Africa had distinct histories, with Makerere College having the longest. Indeed, it was developed from Uganda Technical College, which was founded in 1922, and then transformed into Makerere University College in 1949, which would exist as an affiliate of the University of London. University College Nairobi, on the other hand, was developed from The Royal Technical College of East Africa, which was founded in 1951. This college was converted from a technical college into a university college in 1961, becoming the Royal College, Nairobi. Dar es Salaam was the youngest of the three, having been established in 1961 as a university college. With the establishment of the University of East Africa, by 1965 University College Nairobi had joined its sister unit in setting up an English Department, with a curriculum that was similar to that in use at Makerere. This, together with an increased student and staff mobility across the region, led to the birth of what we refer to today as East African literature.

Wanjala goes on to describe how the first of the three English Departments of East Africa that was established at Makerere University College created a platform that generated the foundation of writing and criticism in East African literature. He refers to it as the Makerere School of English. The approach to literature within this school was that of liberal humanism, and the "literary education of [students from this school] was based on the writings of the English tradition" ("Growth" 125). This was evidently due to the fact that the students were taught by expatriate lecturers from the metropole, and also because the curriculum at the time was based on an education that was somewhat similar to that being offered at the University of London at the time. It was thus steeped in the tradition of the Cambridge school of criticism whose leading lights were I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis. The duo is known for engaging in the methodology of practical criticism of literary texts as a mode of teaching literary criticism. Although Leavis did not himself write essays on his cogent philosophical thought, he is known to be the most influential British critic of the 20th century through his work as a professor at Cambridge, his editing of the literary journal *Scrutiny* for twenty years, and especially for his numerous essays on English literature. Leavis displayed the influences of T. S. Eliot and Matthew Arnold in his thought and writing.

The text that Leavis is most famous for is *The Great Tradition* (1948) through which he establishes a literary canon of Western writers that he finds worthy of study. These writers are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad who Leavis perceives as having written texts that could be seen as representative of a founding tradition in the past, and D. H. Lawrence who Leavis perceives as the only contemporary writer that is worthy to stand for a continuity with that past. It is evident, therefore, that Leavis' critical ideology strives to suspend contemporary or modern culture and thought in an effort to preserve a tradition that he finds may have

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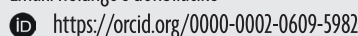
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been lost due to the mechanisation of society (read Britain and America). He finds that the best way to battle against such a loss in regard to continuity is through literature and criticism, whereby the critic discovers and maintains standards.

This was the critical ideology that must have been carried over from Downing College of Cambridge to Makerere University College by the expatriate lecturers and was taught to budding scholars from East Africa such as James Ngugi (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o), Jonathan Kariara, David Rubadiri, Peter Nazareth, Pio and Elvania Zirimu, and Grant Kamenju, just to name a few, in their undergraduate studies as students in the Department of English. As the emerging East African elite, they were to be trained in a manner that would provide them with a sensibility towards art and culture that adhered to the Great Tradition. In this manner, their education would make them a preserve of the few in society who would have the ability to read and examine literary texts in a discriminatory manner. They would have been trained in the good use of English language and idiom and, through their reading of English literature, they would appreciate "the best that has been thought and said", in the well-known words of Arnold. In perpetuating the English literary tradition through their reading and writing, they would battle against a potential loss in continuity that may arise in East African society due to the historical changes related to decolonisation within their immediate environment.

Wanjala, in agreement with an earlier assertion by Adrian Roscoe, goes on to pinpoint a second school that developed outside of the English Departments, but still influenced the development of a literary tradition in East Africa in the 1960s. He refers to it as the Song School in East Africa. It is the Song School that ushered in the idea of expressing nationalism through creative works. The students of this school came up with poems that were written in a manner that attempted to cultivate a certain sensibility and tolerance of local and regional cultures through language use. Their poems were a novelty at the time because they broadened the scope of written literature as it existed in the region at the time. They did so by incorporating traditional forms of oral literature within written texts. Early practitioners of the song school include its originator Okot p'Bitek who published *Song of Lawino* (1966); Okello Oculi, with *Orphan* (1968); and Joseph Buruga with *The Abandoned Hut* (1969). These poets "chose to capture East African pastoral life, in an image that was uniquely East African. They portray the peasant parlance and words of wisdom which writers in the Great Tradition could not grasp" (Wanjala 128). Through their poetry, they brought about a cultural renaissance that was a means to bridge an emergent East African urban culture with the traditional cultures that were still alive in the rural areas of East Africa. A similar, although not often mentioned trajectory, is evident in the first novel published by an African woman, which came from East Africa. This is Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land* (1966).

It is noteworthy that, prior to publishing his poetry, p'Bitek had already been involved in promoting local literature through organising and participating in performance arts, as is illustrated by Tim Allen: "[p'Bitek] was trained as a teacher in Mbarara in 1951–52. During these years, he was involved in a wide range of cultural activities, including singing and writing his first poems" (31). After his studies in Britain, p'Bitek continued in the same vein in Gulu and Kampala.

> [I]n the mid-1960s, he initially worked in Gulu for the extramural department of Makerere University, where he helped create a festival where he performed as a singer and dancer [...] In 1966, he moved to Kampala, published the English version of *Song of Lawino*, and put on festivals incorporating traditional performances at the Uganda National Cultural Centre of which he became director" (Allen 37).

As Wanjala and Wanjala illustrate, David Cook had by then also established the Makerere Free Travelling Theatre, making the university college the home of theatre in the region. These actions had an impact further afield. In Nairobi, Es'kia Mphahlele (then Ezekiel Mphahlele) borrowed from the engagement in cultural activities at Makerere and the Uganda National Cultural centre to argue for the same in Nairobi (Mphahlele, "Drama in East Africa"). He had by that time established the Chemchemi Creative Centre, which he described as being geared towards the promotion of art, music, theatre, and creative writing among the African masses within the urban populace (Mphahlele, "Chemchemi Creative Centre, Nairobi"). Hilary Ng'weno documents how Mphahlele's approaches to dealing with locals in regard to production and performance led to his having frequent disagreements with them. As such, the centre went into a rapid decline shortly after being established and collapsed soon after, with Mphahlele moving on to the United States. Mphahlele's model of the establishment of a local theatre and arts centre still remains crucial, as it inspired the establishment of other institutions such as the Paa ya Paa gallery

that was run by Elimo Njau. The Free Travelling Theatre model that he advocated was eventually adopted by the University College Nairobi and led to the establishment of several other similar theatre groups around Kenya.

Meanwhile, back in the English Departments of the University, and especially at the University College Nairobi, events took place starting in 1968 that would revolutionise the study of literature in the region. These events involved the agitation for a deeper overhaul of the curriculum, rather than the cosmetic changes that were then being suggested by the acting chairman of the English Department. The events were led by a special lecturer who had undertaken his undergraduate studies at Makerere University College before proceeding to Leeds University for his postgraduate studies, known as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. They have already been very well documented (Ngũgĩ; Roscoe; Wanjala, "Growth"; Sicherman, "The Leeds-Makerere Connection and Ngugi's Intellectual Development", "Revolutionizing the Literature Curriculum at the University of East Africa"), and I therefore will not delve further into them. Suffice it to say that, by 1968, all East African countries had achieved their independence, but the African lecturers in the English Department by that time still constituted a minority, with Ngũgĩ being the only full-time staffer, and two others (Henry Anyumba and Taban lo Liyong) servicing the Department from the cultural wing of the Institute of Development Studies, where they were based. Having received their postgraduate education away from Makerere University (Cambridge for Anyumba and Ohio for Lo Liyong), they were wise to the fact that there was a great need for Africanisation, not only of the personnel teaching at the University, but also the manner in which literature was taught. They thus challenged the critical establishment that existed at the University of East Africa at the time through attacking the colonial curriculum promoted by the expatriates at the English Department of the University College Nairobi, going as far as calling for the abolition of the entire teaching unit and its replacement with a Department of Literature. They were eventually successful in this endeavour. Lo Liyong would have the last word on the issue:

> This new syllabus, based on the relevance of subject matter to the human conditions obtaining in East Africa, and at the same time bearing in mind the boundary-lessness of the modern world, took three years to overthrow the ogres of Cambridge and Oxford. The coup was not swiftly accomplished, but we have now here the most revolutionary syllabus stressing the centrality of East Africa, and fanning outwards through Africa into other human experiences" (168).

It is evident therefore that the ideological battle to decolonise the literature curriculum at the University of East Africa was a battle against the Makerere school of English. When Lo Liyong talks of the ogres of Cambridge and Oxford, he is not referring to personalities, but a critical ideology that had been perpetuated during colonial times, continued during the period of decolonisation, and threatened to be furthered even during the post-colonial period. The revolution nipped such plans in the bud and led to a true liberation of the university curriculum in East Africa from its colonial origins. However, it should be noted that the shift was not conclusive, as not everybody was converted into a follower of the newly proposed ideological framework. Some of the African intellectuals that continued to teach at the University were already steeped in the tradition and continued to perpetuate it in their teaching and research, which has ensured that it persists to this date. Indeed, some African writers also preferred to continue operating within it. Carol Sicherman ("Revolutionizing") reports on how the poet Jonathan Kariara, an alumnus of Makerere who worked at the Oxford University Press, "declared he felt 'positively randy writing in the language of the colonizer'" (136). However, as it has been correctly observed, the actions by Ngũgĩ and his colleagues were directly responsible for the emergence of African literature as an academic discipline and therefore the University of Nairobi marked a first in the world with the establishment of the Department of Literature in 1970.

The implementation of a new curriculum at the Department of Literature could thus be equated to the inauguration of a new episteme in that the critical discourse that became dominant in East Africa ensured the survival and growth of African literature in thought and practice within the institutional framework of a university. This is evident through the fact that African orature became an important component of the course curriculum; texts were introduced into the course syllabus on the basis of representation rather than arbitrary criteria of "excellence", giving more freedom for exploration by East African writers; the study of texts from other regions of Africa was promoted; and finally, due to the ideological leanings of the time, there was an insistence on the evaluation of "commitment" in African writing, all the while maintaining a few of the elements in the study of literature from the previous curriculum.

This 'golden era' in which a new episteme had been established by what we could now refer to as the 'founding fathers' of the institution of East African literature involved the formulation of critical approaches to orature,

including a colloquium that was held in 1971 on Black Aesthetics (see Gurr and Zirimu); the publication of the pioneer text on East African literary criticism (see Wanjala, *Standpoints on African Literature*); a conference held at Nairobi School in 1974 that led to the establishment of collaborative activities between the Ministry of Education, The Department of Literature, University of Nairobi, and Secondary Schools in regard to curriculum changes in English at secondary school levels that would reflect the teaching of literature at the university level (see Gachukia and Akivaga); the participation of East Africans in FESTAC 77 (the second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture held in Lagos from 15 January 1977 to 12 February 1977); and other significant events that occurred both in Uganda and Tanzania, as is described by Sicherman ("Revolutionizing"). Notable publications at the time in the region that cultivated the production and criticism of African literature included "[i]ntellectual magazines like *East African Journal* and its sister special publication *Ghala*, *Transition*, *The Sunday Nation*, *The Sunday Post* of Uganda, *The Sunday News* of Tanzania, *The People* of Kenya, Zambia's *Jewel of Africa* [which] consolidated the base for the study of African literature in East and Central African Universities" (Wanjala and Wanjala 256).

This era was, however, not to last as a result of push back from various political and economic forces facing African countries from the late 1970s such as increased pressure from imperial powers due to neo-colonialism, a rise in political dictatorship, and the attendant repressive tendencies of such political regimes. Such events led to the silencing of East African writers and literary critics, either through forcing them into exile, detaining them, denying them access to their livelihoods by preventing their works from reaching their target markets, or simply forcing them into conformity with the political establishment of the day by ensuring that they engaged in 'safe' practices in their writing and cultural activities. This led to a situation whereby there was a decline in home-grown production and appreciation of literary texts by the 1980s. As a result, what was being revealed as the dominant scholarly narrative in relation to East African literature was not what was purveyed through the respective universities located in East Africa, but rather what was produced by foreign (read Western)-based practitioners of East African literature.

The situation was not unique to East Africa, as is demonstrated by Biodun Jeyifo, who describes how gains made in the recently established academic field of African literature in terms of their desire to point out the "truth" to the masses through literary texts and a critical evaluation of the same, were arrested by a counterweight in regard to the study of African literature. This counterweight was the fact that foreign-based scholars as well as a few local scholars were more concerned with the technical evaluation of African literary texts in a "scientific" manner that over-specified the formal aspect of the text, at the expense of pointing out the "truth", as desired in the original formulation of African literary studies. Jeyifo describes those with a desire for an over-specification of extra-literary aspect in the study of literature in the pursuit of truth as belonging to the "Nationalist" school of the study of African literature, and those seeking an over-specification of literary aspects as belonging to the "Africanist" school.

The adversarial relationship between the two schools led to a situation whereby the quest for decolonisation, which was the epistemic framework under which the Nationalists were steering the study of African literature, was "arrested" due to "structural, power relationships on an international, global scale" (40). This led to a situation that Jeyifo describes as "arrested decolonization" in which there emerged the "great paradox, surrounding the study of African literature [...]: historic de-colonization having initially enabled the curricular legitimation of African literary studies in African universities and schools, the equally historic arrest of de-colonization [...] swung the centre of gravity of African literary study away from Africa to Europe and America" (40). Writing in the early 1990s, Jeyifo points out a situation that has not changed even as we move into the second decade of the 21st century. This is illustrated in a discussion by Grace Musila in which she describes the unequal power relationships in knowledge production in regard to African literature between what she refers to as Africa-based academics and their 'Northern' collaborators: "A [...] process of homogenisation is implicit in the chronopolitics of the academy and its lexicon of 'dated' ideas, knowledge and scholarship. This aspiration to a uniformity of ideas, trends, theories, and even modes of framing our thinking is dangerous to the future of not only Africa-based scholarship, but to the global academy at large" (288). Jeyifo goes on to argue that the bifurcation within the critical establishment in the study of African literature could be cured if the two schools allowed for an integration of their approaches in a manner that retains the best elements from both schools and that also takes into account the historical and economic factors that have impacted upon the African continent. This should be undertaken in order to expand the agenda of the study of African literature away from merely gaining respectability for the discipline in Western countries, but instead addressing the marginalisation in the production and criticism of African literature within

the world system in contemporary times. Musila echoes the same sentiments with her appeal to avoid "intellectual inbreeding" (290) within the global academy in the discipline of African literature, indicating that there is still work to be done in the contemporary period in regard to addressing the concerns raised earlier by Jeyifo.

When I learned in 2014 that the editors of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* had decided to broaden their scope to include literature produced in the East African region, it was with these challenges in mind that I was very happy to honour the invitation by the then editor-in-chief Hein Willemse to serve on the editorial board of the journal as one of the editors responsible for the East African region. This was mainly because I saw *Tydskrif* as a good platform through which to give a voice to local practitioners of East African literature given its wide network and respectability as an established journal, and the fact that its editorial board comprises a good mix of scholars who are located both on the African continent and abroad. When invited in 2019 by the current editor Jacomien van Niekerk to propose a topic for a theme issue of the journal, I thought it would be worthwhile to mark the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Department of Literature, University of Nairobi, as well as to commemorate 50 years since the date of the launch of three national universities in East Africa, namely Makerere University, University of Nairobi, and Dar es Salaam University, which were all started on 1 July 1970. The commemoration of these historic events which relate to the discipline of literature would be addressed through the topic "Critical perspectives on contemporary East African literature".

Granted, the landscape of East African literature has changed over the past 50 years, with the region covered in the discipline not only limited to the three countries that formed the federation of University of East Africa, but now extending to cover other areas according to regional, economic, cultural, and social integration. In terms of regional integration, the area covers six countries, namely Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. To these could be added countries with economic, geographic, social, and cultural ties with their neighbouring countries in the region such as Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The East African Coast and Islands in close proximity to it are also considered as part of East Africa, especially in regard to the study of Swahili culture and language.

The theme for the issue was framed with a view to answering some of the following questions:

- Is there an attendant formulation of the identity of the new "East African" that comes with the new political and economic arrangements? If so, how is it being expressed in literary texts?
- What are the new forms of texts in literature, and how are they being exploited by practitioners from the region?
- Is there a new aesthetic that could/should be used in terms of evaluating these new texts? How would such an aesthetic be developed?
- What are the theoretical perspectives that are suited to the analysis of the new literary texts emanating from the region?
- Do we have a literary equivalent in East Africa of what has been referred to as Nigeria's third-generation writing?

The theme issue consists of two literary essays, one interview, and eleven research articles that address the above questions in one way or the other. Gĩchingiri Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ's essay sets the tone for the theme issue: he focuses on the famous Gĩkũyũ musician Joseph Kamarũ as an oral artist and demonstrates how his double-voiced political critique of the first two post-independence governments allowed him to escape detention or being "disappeared". The introduction foregrounds the similarities in the message in Kamaru's lyrics and Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's creative works from the 1970s and 1980s, thus suggesting the benefits of a dialogic study of both the creative and expressive art that challenged the increasing dictatorship experienced in a specific period of Kenya's history. In the bulk of Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ's essay he examines how, during a time of political oppression and censorship, Kamarũ used figurative language in his songs to "say the unsayable".

Whereas Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ gives us fresh critical perspectives on texts emanating from an earlier period of Kenya's history, Sam Dennis Otieno follows through with an essay that explores new genres of literature in contemporary East African society which are purveyed through literary magazines and which experienced a renaissance in the earlier part of the new millennium with the appearance of *Kwani?* on the literary scene. Otieno demonstrates how, with the decline of the activities of *Kwani?* in the recent past, new outfits such as *Down River Road* have emerged and are using the form of the literary magazine to engage in the publication of new genres such as flash fiction and visual narratives that are becoming increasingly popular with younger readers in East Africa. The two essays

are followed by an interview by Tom Odhiambo with the Kenyan writer Rebeka Njau, a prolific Kenyan writer who is part of the earlier generation of East Africans that were educated at Makerere University. She was also a co-founder of the Paa ya Paa Art gallery and has been an important part of the Kenyan literary scene over the years. The interview highlights various aspects of her life and reveals her current literary projects.

The research articles in this theme issue cover various genres of literature ranging from the novel to drama, the short story, poetry, and the emergent literary genres that are to be found on digital media. In her article "Alienation and estrangement in Dinaw Mengestu's *All our Names*" Ruth Openda signals the complicated task of defining the geographical extent of East African literature, as it focuses on the latest novel from a writer who identifies as Ethiopian-American, having been born in Ethiopia and moved to the United States at the age of two. The novel, whose narrative space covers Ethiopia, Uganda, and the American Midwest, may be seen to be a true reflection—albeit refracted in terms of time—of the author's identity as an African immigrant to the United States. Openda provides an interesting examination of the narrative of immigration as is portrayed in the novel. In the article Openda explores how the answer to the question "who are you?" is indeterminate in a world where the immigrant is in a continuous quest to belong, and thus explores the complex notion of identity in the contemporary world. Openda exploits the interplay between the concepts of hybridity and cosmopolitanism as espoused by postcolonial critics to examine the notions of alienation and estrangement in the novel by Mengestu, whose three novels indicate that although the writer is foreign-based, he is a powerful presence in the landscape of East African literature.

The examination of new and forceful presences in contemporary East African literature is also evident in Annie Gagiano's article "East African women writers' 'national epics': A new force in creative fiction?", in which she focuses on five African women writers whose individual works are critically acclaimed. They are *The Orchard of Lost Souls* by Nadifa Mohamed from Somalia, *Dust* by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor from Kenya, *Kintu* by Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi from Uganda, *The Old Drift* by Namwali Serpell from Zambia, and *The Shadow King* by Maaza Mengiste from Ethiopia. The novelists under study cover a large swathe of East Africa, making the paper an excellent comparative study of contemporary novels by women writers from the region. The inclusion of the Zambian writer Namwali Serpell may raise a few eyebrows, but the writer has provided a convincing argument for doing so.

In her article, Gagiano focuses on the novels as contemporary national epics. In doing so, she distinguishes her idea of the epic form, as depicted in the novels that she studies, from those of Georg Lukàcs, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Jan Knappert. She argues that, by choosing crucial moments and periods of 'national crisis', the authors of the novels give their works of creative fiction something of the scope of the traditional epic genre, thus the appellation "ethno-national". She demonstrates how, through their novels, the women writers address localised histories of various East-African "Ethno-nations" while at the same time giving a more prominent role to the contribution of women in the development of national consciousness through deepened historical awareness.

The study of the interplay between form and content in regard to contemporary authors as is depicted in Gagiano's study in relation to the genre of the novel is carried over into the genre of drama in the article by Renata Jakubczuk and Witold Wołowski entitled "La République Démocratique du Congo: Dramaturgies de conflits (idées et formes)" (Democratic Republic of Congo: dramaturgies of conflict (ideas and forms). In this article, Jakubczuk and Wołowski study seven plays written by six different Congolese playwrights, namely Pierre Mumbere Mujomba, Nlandu Mayamba Mbuya Tierry, Mumbul'Ikie Namupot Mas, David-Minor Ilunga, Célestin Kasongo, and Jonathan Kombe. This state-of-the art survey of Congolese theatre reveals how contemporary dramaturgy in the Democratic Republic of Congo is based on all types of antagonisms and conflicts, such as culture conflict as depicted in *Misère*, political conflict in *Prisonniers d'Ekafela*, social conflict in *La dernière enveloppe*, religious conflict in *L'illusion*, and family conflict in *Einstennette* and *Tour de contrôle*. The authors go on to examine the aesthetic forms represented in these types of agonistic dramaturgy in a manner that reveals the intrinsic value of modern Congolese drama as part of African and World literature.

Ruth Wenske brings literary aesthetics into dialogue with educational theory in her article "Teacherly aesthetics: Literature and literacy in Binyavanga Wainaina's works". She traces the history of literature-related pedagogy in East Africa from the 1960s to the present moment, connecting it to Wainaina's views on the subject through a close reading of his memoir *One Day I will Write About this Place.* With insights from Wainaina's essays on teaching and education, Wenske examines how teacherliness, as an intrinsic connectedness of literature and education, is constructed as an aesthetic and poetic layer of *One Day*, arguing that Wainaina views teacher-centred

approaches as incomplete models for both pedagogy and literature in East Africa. The author further demonstrates how Wainaina's thinking on education was ahead of his time, as his teacherly ethos is mirrored in learner-centred reforms introduced in recent years across East Africa, for example, in Kenya's Ministry of Education's launch of a Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) as their new framework from 2017.

Makumbi's debut novel *Kintu* (2014) stands out as a contemporary East African novel, firstly because of how it came to be published. Makumbi was awarded the Kwani? Manuscript Project prize in 2013 by a panel of judges comprising writers and critics from Africa. Kwani Trust went on to publish the novel, which thereafter was published in the United States by Oneworld in 2018. Today, it is one of the most critically acclaimed contemporary East African novels, which goes to show that the judges were not wrong in their selection. The novel's popularity is also reflected in the number of authors that focus on it in this theme issue. Russell West-Pavlov, in his article "Proximate historiographies in Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu*", makes an important contribution to the theorisation of questions arising from readings of East African literature. Focusing on *Kintu* as historical fiction, West-Pavlov uses the critical notion of 'proximity' to demonstrate how Makumbi's novel performs history in a peculiar manner by revealing the existence of an overlap of various types of historiography within the framework of the narrative that incrementally builds into the shaping of a material reality. Whereas West-Pavlov focuses on historiography in *Kintu*, in his article "African literature, metonymic gaps, and *Gandasation* of metropolitan language in Jennifer Makumbi's *Kintu*", Emmanuel Adeniyi focuses on aspects of language in the novel. Adeniyi draws attention to the prominence of Ganda terms within the novel and how the novel employs metonymic gaps to expound the deployment of indigenous knowledge in the English language text, thus allowing room for the jostling of various cultures in a struggle for supremacy, a process he refers to as the "*Gandasation* of metropolitan language".

Another encouraging project with participants from East Africa that has resulted in a publication in the past decade is that of a workshop on short story writing hosted by Shadrack Chikoti in Malawi in 2015. The workshop was facilitated by three East Africans, namely, Billy Kahora from Kenya, Jackee Budesta Batunda, and Beatrice Lamwaka, both from Uganda. The Pan-African nature of the project is evident through the fact that participants were drawn from all over the continent. The final product of the workshop was an anthology of short stories set in a future Africa: *Imagine Africa 500* (2015) edited by Billy Kahora. Doseline Kiguru focuses on this anthology of short stories in her article "Speculative fiction and African urban futures: Writing food in Billy Kahora's edited collection *Imagine Africa 500*". In her article, Kiguru gives a critical overview of some selected short stories from the anthology, while at the same time using ecocritical approaches in the study of those texts in order to examine how the food imagery contained in the short stories reflects anxieties about the effects of development on the environment today, and how these anxieties are projected through that imaginary into the portrayal of future African cities in the genre of speculative fiction.

In a seminar on "Media and Construction of Identity in Africa" held in Nairobi in 2004, Karin Barber presented a convincing argument on how different forms of media have over the past 100 years or so played a role in revitalising popular traditions in African culture (Barber). Barber further indicates that new media forms have also created new forms of popular culture in Africa because African cultural practitioners have innovatively harnessed these new forms of technology in a manner that serves, not only in retaining the old genres of African literature and diffusing them more effectively, but also in a manner that brings out new conventions and new genres that are specific to African popular culture. The same is evident in East Africa, given that since the 1990s there has been a rapid democratisation in media thanks to changes in geo-politics which have seen a relative liberalisation of media in the region. Technological advances in the dissemination of information have also enabled the transformation of traditional popular media such as songs, folktales, and short oral forms through new platforms such as FM radio stations, television, short message services, mobile telephone applications, and social media. An important element that carries over from the traditional forms of popular media in Africa to the modern forms is that of the interactive nature of popular media. These new forms of media have also enabled the transformation of traditional forms of popular culture to forms that adapt to the use of technology in their transmission and can be disseminated to reach more people much faster. In a way, we are now talking about popular media being a means of mass communication.

Two authors tap into these important developments in regard to the production and dissemination of new forms of popular culture in East Africa using digital media in this theme issue. The first is Patrick Chesi Lumasia's article "Churchill Show: Transgressing language codes; upsetting stereotypes". In his article, Lumasia focuses on a popular Kenyan comedy show that is filmed before a live studio audience and broadcast on television sta-

tions and YouTube. Some of the more popular skits are shared through social media platforms like WhatsApp, thus boosting the popularity of the performer. Lumasia focuses on selected comedy sketches from the show in order to examine their literary features, and in so doing highlights how, through aesthetics of escapism, the texts re-narrate quotidian events and give a certain re-interpretation of the country's history trajectory that veers away from what is contained in the official narratives purveyed through the mainstream media. Lumasia seeks to point out how these texts display a political aesthetics clothed in a post-modern aesthetics that transgresses language codes and upsets socio-psychological stereotypes.

The second article is Kimingichi Wabende's article "Imagining the Kenyan Canaan dream journey in cyber space" which continues along the same trajectory as that of Lumasia's in its focus on new literary genres that have emerged in the digital space. Wabende focuses on the interrogation of a 'Canaan' narrative that emerged during the electoral campaigns for Kenya's presidency in 2017. This narrative was initiated by the opposition candidate Raila Odinga who used biblical allusion in his speeches to fashion himself as a political 'Joshua' tasked with leading Kenya out of bondage and into the promised land. The 'Canaan' narrative thereafter grew a life of its own, with an online presence that involved exchanges either in support or in opposition to the opposition candidates' message by means of the various supports that exist on social media. Wabende uses the concept of online liveness in his analysis to examine how the digital exchanges arising from the 'Canaan' narrative represent a psychological desire by a Kenyan public for a journey towards freedom, and how the performance of this desire was enacted in cyber space.

Kiswahili literature, or Fasihi, is an important and integral part of East African literature, with texts published in Swahili forming a significant, if not substantial part, of the literary output from the region. Tanzania and Kenya are two countries in the region in which the language is predominantly used, and it is in these two countries that the output in regard to such texts is the highest. Mikhail Gromov indicates how changes to Kenya's language policy and publishing interests in the new millennium has led to its surpassing Tanzania which previously had the highest number of literary texts published in Kiswahili. In regard to the Swahili novel, Gromov indicates how the contemporary Swahili novel published in the 21st century could be placed within two broad categories. The first category consists of 'high breed' novels. These are experimental and neo-realist novels that are targeted towards a discerning readership that mostly comprises professionals in Swahili. The second category consists of novels that could be referred to as 'popular', for example the Swahili detective novel which targets the general public (40).

In his article "Metatextualities in the Kenyan Swahili novel: A case study reading of Kyalo Wamitila's *Dharau ya Ini*", Lutz Diegner showcases the experimental aspect of the contemporary 'high brow' Swahili novel by focusing on a novel by the prolific Kenyan writer which, as Diegner demonstrates, is written using innovative aspects in regard to its narration. Diegner subjects the novel to a close reading in order to reveal how Wamitila incorporates metanarration within his narrative structure in a manner that embeds several other genres of literature within the writing of this novel, thus inviting the novel not only to comment upon itself but also provide a re-evaluation of those other genres of Fasihi.

Alex Wanjala's "(East) African postcolonial ecocriticism: Revisiting Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Prisoner*" is the last research article featured in this theme issue. In the article, Wanjala revisits the renowned East African poet's text *Song of Lawino* on the 50th anniversary of its publication in order to re-examine the poem's contribution to the Song School of East Africa. Wanjala subjects the poem to a fresh reading using critical approaches arising from the intersection between postcolonial studies and ecocriticism. His evaluation involves an analysis of language use in the poem in regard to the depiction of imagery and metaphors related to the natural environment of East Africa. An interpretation of this imagery reveals a realistic depiction of the social and political situation of East African countries in the late 1960s and allows the reader to grasp the subtle message in the text.

In conclusion, the interview and essays contained within this theme issue on "Critical Perspectives on Contemporary East African Literature" provide readings and critical approaches that go a long way towards unfolding the peculiarities within the discipline of East African literature and how, as an institution, it has opened up and expanded according to changes within the postcolonial order in an increasingly globalised society. Produced in the midst of a raging global pandemic, the fact that this theme issue has seen the light of day is a testament to the patience and dedication of the authors. I would like to thank you all for submitting your articles and persevering through the long and arduous editorial process, even at a time when there were more pressing demands arising from the disruptions of a pandemic. I would also like to thank Hein Willemse for clearing the space that made this

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