

Institution: University of Bristol		
Unit of Assessment: 27) English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Growing literary activism to build a sustainable future for African literary production		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013-present		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Professor Madhu Krishnan	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of African, World and Comparative Literatures	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 09/2013-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

Professor Krishnan's research on literary networks, institutions, and infrastructures in continental Africa has resulted in impacts spanning five African countries and the UK.

- **Economic impacts:** the creation of literary institutions, capacity building and job creation in Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire and Uganda.
- **Educational impacts:** new models of training and mentorship programmes; creative writing and literary translation workshops have trained emerging writers and translators in Uganda and Cameroon; mentorship has enabled new literary institutions to develop in Rwanda, Côte d'Ivoire and Uganda.
- **Cultural impacts:** innovative forms of literary production; established pathways for creative practice; new literary outputs and translation initiatives benefiting writers, translators and producers in Cameroon, Uganda and Somaliland.
- **Social impacts:** new cross-cultural partnerships between UK- and Africa-based literary institutions, as well as the forging of new pathways for cultural expression, highlighting the role of literature as a tool of social growth.

2. Underpinning research

Professor Madhu Krishnan's underpinning research focuses on African literature and literary production, operating across two distinct strands: the analysis of African literature as a category operating within the global literary marketplace; and the function of literary activism as a mode of social production.

The research includes analytic scholarship on individual texts, publishing histories and the analysis of literary institution-formation. It also includes practice-based research into the contemporary landscape of literary production as carried out by grassroots, collective and emerging literary institutions on the African continent. The research was also carried out through co-production with Africa-based partners, including Bakwa Media, the Center for African Cultural Excellence, Mawazo Africa Writing Institute and the Hargeysa International Book Fair/Red Sea Foundation.

Analysis of African literature as a category operating within the global literary marketplace

Since 2014 Krishnan has engaged in readings of specific texts, genres and institutional histories to produce innovative analyses of the ways in which a specific notion of African literature, aligned with hegemonic and liberal worldviews and global hierarchies, arose over the latter half of the long twentieth century. Centring on the triad of production, dissemination and reception, her key findings foreground how the normative conception of African literature has functioned in tandem with larger structures of late colonialism in the context of the neoliberal contemporary, developing from the critical study of the uneven geographies of global literary publishing [3.1] to

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the in-depth study of less-visible, grassroots work by literary activist collectives based on the African continent [3.2]. This, in turn, has served to efface longer and more diverse histories of cultural production, with material implications for the continued marginalisation of the continent as an agent of knowledge production.

The function of literary activism as a mode of social production

Over the period 2014-2020, Krishnan carried out collaborative research with Dr Ruth Bush (Bristol), Dr Kate Wallis (Exeter), and two Africa-based literary activist collectives: Kampala's Center for African Cultural Excellence and Yaoundé's Bakwa Media. Krishnan's research during this period analysed the ways in which literary activism (the creation of independent literary institutions and pathways based on the African continent) produces networks, publics and commons for social and cultural engagement [3.4]. These social formations, her research illuminates, operate as avenues for civic engagement which cut across a vertical/horizontal division of power. By so doing, they form new topographies for cultural production outside of centre-periphery models and hierarchies [3.5]. This research was carried out through the instantiation of the Arts Managers and Literary Activists workshop, mentorship scheme and fellowship, which operates as a hub for independent literary production on the African continent. It was furthered through the Bakwa Young Writers' Project, which focused specifically on developing new spaces for transcultural exchange in Cameroon through creative writing and literary translation. Through this work, special issues of *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* [3.4] and *Wasafiri* [3.3] were published, as well as two creative writing anthologies: *Odokonyero* (Black Letter Media, 2018) and *Your Feet Will Lead You Where Your Heart Is/Le crépuscule des âmes sœurs* (Bakwa Books, 2020).

3. References to the research

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- 3.1 **Krishnan M** (2014), *Contemporary African Literature in English: Global Locations, Postcolonial Identifications*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, [90,000 words; available on request]
- 3.2 **Krishnan M** (2018), *Contingent Canons: African Literature and the Politics of Location*, Cambridge University Press, [30,000 words; available on request]

Special Issues:

- 3.3 **Krishnan M** and Bush R (2016) Print Activism in 21st Century Africa, special issue of *Wasafiri* [co-authored introduction], <https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2016.1216267>

Journal articles:

- 3.4 **Krishnan M** and Bwa Mwesigire B (2020). Creative Writing as Literary Activism: Decolonial Perspectives on the Writing Workshop, *Eastern African Literary and Culture Studies*, pp. 1-19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23277408.2020.1818494>

Book chapters:

- 3.5 **Krishnan M** (2017). Periodizing the Anglophone African Novel: Location(s) in a Transnational Literary Marketplace, in Brouillette S, Sauri E & Nilges M (eds), *Literature and the Global Contemporary*, Palgrave Macmillan, (New Comparisons in World Literature) [Available on request]

Grants

Krishnan M (PI), *Literary Activism in sub-Saharan Africa: Commons, Publics and Networks of Practice*, ERC Starting Grant, January 2020 – December 2024, EUR1.5 million

Krishnan M (PI), *Academic Writing Workshop at the Hargeysa International Book Fair: African Literature and Cultural Production in the 21st Century*, British Academy Writing Workshops, April 2019 – September 2019, GBP19,128

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Krishnan M (PI) and Bush R, [*Creative Writing for Translation and Peace*](#), AHRC Follow on Funding for Impact and Engagement, AH/S005889/1, February 2019 – September 2020, GBP83,898

Krishnan M (PI) and Bush R, *Literary Entrepreneurship, Arts Management and Cultural Industries on the African Continent*, ESRC IAA Impact Project Award, April 2017 – November 2018, GBP15,000

Krishnan M (PI) and Ouma C E, [*Small Magazines, Literature Networks and Self Fashioning in Sub-Saharan Africa*](#), AHRC Research Networking Scheme, AH/P006930/1, February 2017 – September 2018, GBP35,209

Krishnan M (PI), Tikly L and Smith L, [*Ugandan Youth and Creative Writing: New Perspectives on Conflict and Development*](#), AHRC/ESRC/PaCCS Research Innovation Grant, AH/P008143/1, November 2016 – June 2018, GBP74,664

4. Details of the impact

Professor Krishnan's research has led to economic, cultural, educational, and social impacts across the African continent and in the UK. Her research [3.2, 3.5] shows how the lack of infrastructure for literature development in Africa has resulted in inequities in the literary market. Co-produced with literary activists [3.4], her research has produced new strategies for remedying this imbalance through practice and reflection, specifically focusing on the importance of training for infrastructure creators as well as creatives. Through collaborations with non-profit, grassroots and charitable organisations in five African countries and the UK, her research has:

- Established new, and strengthened existing, infrastructure for independent literary production on the African continent;
- Increased capacity for literary production on the African continent through the development of new institutions and collaborations;
- Deepened student engagement with contemporary African literature in Uganda and Cameroon;
- Created new audiences and publics for African literature on the continent;
- Developed new partnerships between UK- and Africa-based cultural institutions to shift programming priorities, establish new audiences, and transforming cultural communication.

Established new and stronger infrastructure for independent literary production in Africa

Drawing on her work on literary institutions in Africa [3.1-3.5], and at the request of the Center for African Cultural Excellence (Uganda), Krishnan designed and facilitated the first annual Arts Managers and Literary Activists (AMLA) workshop in August 2016. Working in partnership with the Writivism Festival and Center for African Cultural Excellence, the workshops have engaged 60 aspiring literary producers and entrepreneurs based in more than twenty countries across the continent, leading to a significant shift in the landscape of literary production by the creation of a new network, fellowship and annual workshop [5.8].

The AMLA workshops have resulted in the creation of new literary institutions. As of 2020, Mawazo Africa Writing Institute has run two novel writing workshops for twelve first-time authors, with two novels currently in press (2020) for the Mawazo-Huza Press series (see below) [5.1, 5.2]. AbidjanLit has an audience of over one hundred participants, having run seven 'chapters' or live literature discussions, and in March 2020 instituted the 1949 Library, Côte d'Ivoire's first reading room for African women's writing [5.6]. A follow-on mentorship scheme has increased capacity for the Nairobi-based podcast '2 Girls and a Pod' and a new magazine of literary interviews in Botswana, *Africa in Dialogue*, which currently reaches over 1,000 readers and has, since 2019, provided work experience for eight individuals through the Africa in Dialogue Mentorship programme. To date AMLA has supported 60 individuals and organisations from across the African continent. 100% of participants in the 2016 and 2017 workshops said it enabled them to develop 'practical tools to enable [them] to set up or sustain a literary initiative' [5.10]. Founder Bwa Mwesigire further notes that the collaboration with Professor Krishnan has

shaped the network 'At the operational level, at the intellectual level, at the financial level, at the skills level' [5.8].

Increased capacity for literary production through new institutions and collaborations

Over 2016 to 2020, Krishnan developed new collaborations and networks in sub-Saharan Africa through the delivery of workshops, mentorship, and partner-based work in the target locations. Direct impacts of these activities include the founding of AbidjanLit, a new book series co-produced by the Mazawo Africa Writing Institute and Huza Press (the first novels are in press for early summer 2020 release dates [now delayed to 2021 due to Covid-19]; 750 copies of each will be printed). Huza Press notes 'a very significant impact to the growth of our list of publications' from their collaboration with Krishnan [5.4]. In 2020, the Cameroonian Literary Translation network commissioned, through Bakwa Books, the first English translation of the Cameroonian Francophone novelist Hemley Boum's *Les jours viennent et passent* by Nchanji M. Njamnsi (a participant in the French-English translation workshop in 2019). The Founder of Bakwa commented 'based on our work with Professor Krishnan, over the next five years we intend to leverage the networks and partnerships we have made to increase independent literary production, empower female Cameroonian writers by publishing more of their work as well as translating their work, and ensuring a wider readership and distribution of Cameroonian and African writing on the continent and beyond' [5.2].

Developing out of her work on Africa-centred literary production and locally produced literatures, in 2017, Krishnan convened a series of creative writing workshops held in Kampala and Gulu (Uganda) as part of the Ugandan Youth and Creative Writing project. These workshops were targeted at emerging young writers between the ages of 16 and 30, none of whom had been previously published, and many of whom had never written prose fiction. Following the workshops, all 24 participants were mentored by established Ugandan writers and 18 were published in *Odokonyero*, an anthology produced by the Center for African Cultural Excellence to celebrate Writivism's fifth anniversary. To date, 500 copies have been sold (October 2020). Participating writers have gone on to produce new writing, including one story shortlisted for the 6th annual Writivism short story prize [5.5]. One participant has now established lakwena.org, a platform for young feminist writers from Uganda [5.5].

The Ugandan Youth and Creative Writing project, in turn, led to the design of the Bakwa Young Writers Workshop in Cameroon, in which two workshops (one in French, one in English) were held in Yaoundé in June 2019 (led, respectively, by Edwige Dro and Billy Kahora). Each workshop was attended by six participants, followed by a period of mentorship. 91% of participants rated the workshop as excellent or very good and 82% noted it provided them with useful skills for future writing [5.11]. The resulting stories were due to be published in March 2020 (delayed to 2021 due to Covid-19; 350 copies have been printed).

In October 2020, 24 aspiring literary translators participated in a one-week training workshop. Each has subsequently been commissioned to produce a translation for the Bakwa Books Anthology, *Your Feet Will Lead You Where Your Heart Is/Le crépuscule des âmes sœurs*. Subsequent to the workshop, which 100% of participants said met their expectations and satisfaction [5.11], participants led on the creation of a new network for literary translators in Cameroon and one participant has been commissioned to produce a novel-length translation.

Deepened student engagement with contemporary African literature

Workshops, focus groups and reports led to the creation of new literary material including anthologies (*Odokonyero* and the *Bakwa Young Writers Anthology*), as well as specific schools' editions and targeted study guide materials currently in use at six secondary schools in Uganda where it is taught to approximately 300 students. Teachers involved in the project note that the relevance of the stories to their students' lives has enhanced their engagement with literature as a social form. One teacher noted that the anthology would enable her 'to see how learners react to stories that reflect their lives' while another noted that he has 'been longing for a closer to home piece of work and *Odokonyero* is timely - it is what we have been waiting for' [5.9]. Further educational impact has been achieved through the training of new and emerging writers and

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literary translators. 500 copies of *Odokonyero* have been sold to date (October 2020), including 250 copies of the schools' edition.

Created new audiences and publics for African literature on the continent

Further new publics have been developed through the institution of the new Mawazo-Huza Press book series [5.4]. Working with facilitator Jennifer Makumbi and Institute founders Doreen Baingana and Farida Bag, Krishnan applied the findings of her work [3.2] to co-design the inaugural Mawazo Africa Writing Institute novel writing workshop (held in autumn/winter 2017/18 in Uganda). Baingana stresses that 'the collaboration had a huge educational and capacity-building impact on Mawazo as it laid the groundwork for our work ahead' [5.1]. Six participants were selected, and the research created new bodies of literary material through the inauguration of a new novel series, to be published by Rwandan publisher Huza Press (publication of the first novel was due for spring 2020 and delayed one year by Covid-19).

New cultural partnerships establish new audiences and collaborations for African and Black British writers

Since 2017, Krishnan has been actively involved in developing new programming based on this research for the annual Africa Writes festival (Royal African Society and British Library). This has allowed the festival to expand into new areas and audiences, including the recently instituted Africa Writes Bristol pop-up festival, which has doubled its audience to 700 people since her involvement [5.3]. Krishnan also brokered a new partnership between the Bristol Cultural Development Partnership (BCDP) and the Hargeysa International Book Fair (one of Africa's leading literary festivals with over 11,000 attendees in 2019), resulting in invitations to around 50 African and Black British writers in Bristol by BCDP in early summer 2021 [5.7].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

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- 5.1 Mawazo Africa Writing Institute – Corroborating Letter (November 2019), Director
 - 5.2 Bakwa Media – Corroborating Letter (October 2020), Founder
 - 5.3 Africa Writes Bristol – Corroborating Letter (October 2020), Co-Producers
 - 5.4 Huza Press – Corroborating Letter (October 2020), Founder & Director and Editor & Director
 - 5.5 Testimonials from participants, Ugandan Youth and Creative Writing (September 2019; November 2019)
 - 5.6 AbidjanLit – Corroborating Letter (September 2019), Co-Founder
 - 5.7 Bristol Cultural Development Partnership – Corroborating Letter (October 2020)
 - 5.8 Interview transcript with Co-Founder, Center for African Cultural Excellence (August 2018)
 - 5.9 Teacher feedback from the *Odokonyero* Publication and Study Guide
 - 5.10 AMLA Evaluation Report (2016) and AMLA surveys (2017)
 - 5.11 Bakwa Creative Writing surveys (2019) and Bakwa Literary Translation surveys (2019)