Afrolit Sans Frontieres: Behind the Scenes, In Front of the Camera

Festival/Books/Writers in the time of Corona

by Zukiswa Wanner

| Angola | Brazil | Cameroon | Cote d'Ivoire | DR Congo | Egypt | Ethiopia | Eritrea | Ghana | Jamaica | Kenya | Liberia | Malawi | Martinique | Mozambique | Namibia | Nigeria | Sierra Leone | South Africa | Sudan | Uganda | US | UK | Zambia | Zimbabwe |

The Birth

It's the early days of coronavirus on the continent. In South Africa, the first known covid case is announced on March 5. Patient zero is a South African who had just returned from a vacation in Italy. A day later, I leave Johannesburg, where I had gone to attend an arts event, to return to my current base of Nairobi, Kenya.

March 15, 2020. Nairobi, Kenya.

My family and I have gone for dinner at my friend Lindy's home. Like me, Lindy is a South African living in Nairobi.

There is an expected announcement from the Kenyan President, Uhuru Kenyatta.

There is a pending announcement from the South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa.

The announcements come just as we have finished dessert and are having drinks.

Both countries are shutting down.

Kenya will stop all flights in the next week, as will South Africa.

In Kenya, schools are immediately closed. Parents with children in boarding schools should have them out by end of day the next day. My son's school sends a message that online school will start two days later. My son is happy to have a day off. This shall be our last social outing in a long time.

On Thursday evening after dinner, a post on Facebook leads me to a John Legend concert on Instagram titled *At Home*. When I finish watching the concert, my mind is reeling. What if? Could we? Is it possible?

In Abuja, my friend Abubakar Adam Ibrahim is self-isolating. He managed to get into Nigeria from France just before the shutdown. Abubakar and I have just recently been published together in the same anthology. He sends me a message to tell me he has just finished reading my story. We chat some more and I throw my 'what if' to him. Why not? I am certainly in, he says. And there and then at an ungodly hour, I start sending messages to my writer friends on WhatsApp.

By 17hrs on Friday, March 20, in Nairobi, 15 of my writer friends with ties to Anglophone, Lusophone, and Francophone Africa have agreed to be part of what I decide to name Afrolit Sans Frontieres and one is a *maybe*. I am the 16th. The name comes up simply enough. We all cannot attend literary festivals, I think. And yet, we are all very much tied to this continent and self-identify as Africans, so there we are. Writers from Africa without borders. I make an announcement on Facebook. Not long after, one of the 15 drops out because of some family commitment and the *maybe* becomes *absolutely*. That same evening, I set up a WhatsApp group so everyone can meet each other.



We are: Mohale Mashigo, Richard Ali Mutu, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, Maaza Mengiste, Yara Monteiro, Chike Frankie Edozien, Mukoma wa Ngugi, Bisi Adjapon, Kalaf Epalanga, Nozizwe Cynthia Jele, Shadreck Chikoti, Natasha Omokhodien-Banda, Remy Ngamije, Hawa Golakai, Leye Adenle, and Zukiswa Wanner. I shall get a late reply from another writer. He will not be able to be part of the first Afrolit Sans Frontieres, yet we all agree to add him to the group that very weekend. Although he becomes the first writer we have for Afrolit 2, he is, in essence, the final writer, editor, and official meme maker of the first Afrolit festival.

His name? Ondjaki.

I set up an Instagram account with the help of literary blogger James Murua. He also generously agrees to create the poster for the festival and be our official media partner. The theme for this first festival is *Sex*. Because, why not? Because, people say Africans do it but they don't write about it. In making this theme, I am trying to show otherwise. And familiar with the work of most of these writers, I pair them and use the theme accordingly.

African media houses make space for us. *Mail & Guardian* in South Africa, *The Standard* in Kenya, the *Daily Trust* in Nigeria all generously let people know about this online literary space. Through them, the continent knows, and when we go live that first Monday, March 23, a generous audience awaits. Our kick-off is in French with Richard and later in English with Leye. The theme for the day is *Sex and the City*, as both writers' books have a strong focus on their two cities of setting, Lagos and Kinshasa. That panel kicks off eight days of laughter, enlightenment and bonding, not just among the writers themselves but with the audience. It soon becomes clear that at 12GMT and at 18GMT when we kick off our panels, there is a loyal audience waiting. Immediately, the platform creates a cult-like following. We soon bond with some of the regulars like Ndegwa Nguru in Kenya, Dr. Ndlovu in South Africa, TJ Benson in Lagos, Edwige Dro in Cote d'Ivoire, @shonatiger, @mswyna and many others. When Abubakar has problems with Wi-Fi in Abuja, the audience is forgiving and avails itself on an alternative date. When Mukoma gives away the password in a Live, the audience laughs with us at this *faux pas* (we quickly change the password after his session). It becomes a space where writers can be themselves and where readers can realize that

writers are approachable and fun but importantly, discover works of writers that they did not know. A win-win for all.

The day after the festival, some British people planning a festival a month later tweet how they are the first antiviral online literary festival. It doesn't end well for them. Sable Literary Magazine and pretty much most of the participants of Afrolit 1 do a virtual whistle and a wink. *Sorry colonizers. Africa did it first. Don't erase us.* From them an *oops*. A *we meant*. A non-apology apology comes.

We move.

The festival is supposed to be a once-off.

It is not.

Growing Pains

A week after the festival, Maaza sends me a message. She thinks it will be great to have another festival and talk about the art of writing. We have a platform. We know writers. Let's do it, I say. We become co-curators of this second festival. Before kick-off, Lindy, who works at *CCTV* decides to come and do some coverage. So does *The New York Times*. Some of the writers' names are identifiable, others less known. What they all have in common is that, whether the world knows them or not, they are all brilliant writers. Ondjaki is, of course, part of Afrolit 2. The other writers are Tanella Boni, Abdourahman Waberi, Fred Khumalo, Lola Shoneyin, Mona Eltahawy, Chris Abani, Nii Ayikwei Parkes, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, Marie Louise Mumbu, Sulaiman Addonia, Hemley Boum, Ishmael Beah, Napo Masheane and Elma Shaw. We add something to the second festival that was not there at first — moderators. The moderators will ask interesting questions; if not enough from the audience, they will engage with the writers.

Afrolit Sans Frontieres 2

It’s beginning to feel like a traditional literary festival.

On Day One, Chris Abani gets the time wrong. Co-curator Maaza takes it in her stride and Natasha, Remy, and Bisi of the Afrolit16 join her. Abani is rescheduled to take part during the weekend. Two of the writers, like any normal festival, end up not taking part. And it’s on the same day. Day Three. The first one is having network problems. We know timeously so I chat with Edwige Dro, our moderator for the day, and she shall converse with Kelvin Adantchede. It goes smoothly and those of us in the audience have a lot of fun, if the comment section is any indication. We are less prepared for the second one. About ten minutes before he is due live, the guest writer states that he doesn’t understand how to work the logging on and off. He thereafter stops responding to messages. I send a panicked message to the Afrolit 16 on WhatsApp. *Not to worry, they say. We got this*. And they do. I put on some lip colour (such a seemingly small but pleasurable action to be seen with in these days of face masks) and go Live. I am joined by Frankie, Leye, and Kalaf at different times. It takes my looking at the coverage now to remember that we had a session where the writer quit on us.

Afrolit Sans Frontieres 3

At the end of Afrolit 2, I announce the date for Afrolit 3 and the theme *Future Present Past*.

The theme is a chance to bring in historical fiction writers, BUT it also gives us a chance to look at sci-fi writers from Africa. I co-curate this with Mohale Mashigo. On our line-up: Jose Agualusa, Leila Aboulela, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Molara Wood, Max Lobe, Mubanga Kalimamukwento, Chimeka Garricks, Dilman Dila, Angela Makholwa, Vamba Sherif, Tanella Boni, Ayesha Harruna Attah, Masande Ntshanga, Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse, Tochi Onyebuchi, and Virgilia Ferrao. I do the login training for the Instagram Live a few days in advance. I do not want to have the same mistakes as the previous Live. I have been talking with possible partners because, if nothing else, I think it will be great to be able to pay the moderators a small allowance for their time. Alas, no wins. There is an organisation that wants to partner up but wants to 'mentor' Afrolit. Another wants us as their partner where we share artists but when I go to their site, there is only one person who can be said to be of colour. I discuss it with the first 16 and in both instances, we are unanimous in our decision despite our different backgrounds and age groups. It's a no. What the Afrolit 16 do instead is send money for the moderation. Others offer to moderate for free.

Afrolit 3 begins symbolically on Africa Day, May 25, and ends on June 1.

In the middle of Afrolit 3, the #BlackLivesMatter protests begin. It becomes a discussion in the WhatsApp group. Within 12 hours, we have drafted a letter in solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter. As we go through the editorial process, our Lusophone siblings alert us to the appalling racism in Brazil. If the United States of America is purgatory for black people, Brazil sounds like hell. And so we must acknowledge this even in this letter that is a solidarity letter to black America. We do. Edwige translates the letter into French and Kalaf, Ondjaki and Yara into Portuguese. We record a solidarity message in the three languages read by Maaza, Bisi, and Kalaf and edited by Ondjaki. We circulate the letter to our writer friends and they circulate to their friends and so forth. By the time *Al Jazeera* carries it, we have 107 signatures. Through James' blog, more signatures shall be added.

By the end after a week, we shall have 140 signatures.

As for Afrolit 3 itself, while we have a few delays because of network, this time around, everything runs smoothly. The only downside is that two of the writers fail to save their Lives.

I chat with James and we have to rethink the moderation so we have all the archival material. At the end of Afrolit 3, we announce the dates for Afrolit 4 for June 29 until July 6.

Afrolit Sans Frontieres 4

I curate Afrolit 4 by myself and yet I do not. It's the first in many ways.

It's the first where we work with partners. From France, CIFORDOM comes on board; Ethale Publishing from Mozambique is also a partner; as is this *Peripheries Journal*. Another first is that Portuguese and French shall not require bilingual moderators but will be conducted in those languages. Further, it's the first time that there have been less than 10 writers who speak English as a primary language of the festival.

Finally another first we are proud of in the wake of the #BlackLivesMatter phenomenon worldwide is that for the first time in the history of the festival, we have Afro-Brazilian, Afro-American and Afro-French writers. The writers for Afrolit 4 are: Natalia Molebatsi, Lamelle Shaw, Koleka Putuma, Irenosen Okojie, Raoul Djimeli, Hannibal Tabu, Niq Mhlongo, Melio Tinga, Kola Tubosun, Suzanne Dracius, Ngwatilo Mawiyoo, Iquo DianaAbasi, Mel Matsinhe, Marc Alaxandre Oho Bambe, Lu Ain-Zaila, Raoul Djimeli, and d'bi.young anitafrika.

This time, the moderators are tasked with being the Tops (there is an Afrolit joke here that only people who have been on a Live and seen the comments will get) so that we can be sure that everything is saved. As usual, network and power are our enemies but we reschedule and people turn up at the rescheduled times. In the end, all footage is saved and our archives are the richer for it.

Afrolit Sans Frontieres 5

Afrolit 5 is the final festival. EDUNIperiferias publisher in Brazil come on board as

partners as does Prestige Bookshop in Kenya and what a final it is. The guests are Conceicao Evaristo, Margaret Busby, Armand Gauz, Sisonke Msimang, L.L. Mckinney, Helon Habila, Djamila Ribeiro, Ayobami Adebayo, Fiston Mwanza Mujila, Makanaka Mavengere, Rodrigo Franca, Lerato Mogoathle, Ashley Hickson-Lovence, Frances Mensah Williams, Joe Khamisi and Kayo Chingoyi.

The theme for the festival is *Journeys*, a fitting way to come to the end of this virtual festival trip. And it has perhaps the most risqué festival joke since the festival begun. Two days before the festival kicks off, an interview is published in *The Guardian* where Booker winner Bernadine Evaristo is asked how many times she has sex per day. Her tongue-in-cheek answer (we hope so because if that's true, wow) is eight times when she is not feeling horny. It's the perfect playful question for what has been a fun festival. And so for this final festival which is sometimes fun, sometimes serious but never boring, kicks off with travel writer Lerato fittingly telling us about some of her sexcapades traveling through the continent. And on a more serious tip, the joys and complications of traveling on a non-existent budget but also the generosity of many on the continent who end up hosting her. That evening it gets more serious as Kenyan writer Joe speaks of the little talked about but just as devastating East African slave trade.

The grand queen I would love to have a dark beer with, Conceicao breaks Live attendance on the second day of the festival. In general, there have been under 50 people on Live but lovers of the festival tend to watch either the YouTube channel or the IGTV later with an average of 200 views per session. It becomes the smoothest run of our festivals with only one hitch… when we cannot find a writer a few minutes before a panel. Fortunately, the moderator manages to carry it through so well it's as though he was supposed to be a solo

guest. The festival ends with Editor of Daughters of Africa and New Daughters of Africa. It's a three hour fiesta. After the first hour with Margaret, a virtual end of party festival runs for two hours with some regular members of the audience and previous guests joining in. The next morning I wake up despondent. For eight days a month for five months, this festival has been a part of my life, and now it has ended. I shake myself into smiling though as I think to myself, unlike a burial, this is not quite the end. Despite the seeming death, there will be a resurrection every year for five months.



Zukiswa Wanner | Photo: Troy Onyango

Future

And as I look towards the final Afrolit in English French and Portuguese for the year, I realize that this festival could never have happened, been fine-tuned and run as smoothly were it not for the indulgence of James Murua who gave the festival his platform. But equally important, the Afrolit 16 who have supported in their various capacities. I started this pandemic lockdown with 16 friends in a WhatsApp group. Five months later, I have an imperfectly perfect family that I foresee doing many interesting projects with in the next five years. Importantly, that family has expanded to Europe, to the Caribbean and yes, to Latin America. But for the pandemic, it would almost be a perfect lockdown.
