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The Story Club

African literary networks offline

Stephanie Bosch Santana

Increasingly, the future of African literature on African-initiated literary networks seems to be located in digital space. *Jalada* magazine has reinvigorated African language publishing through hyperlinks, translating a single short story by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o into more than sixty languages. A blog, Mike Maphoto's *Diary of a Zulu Girl*, is one of the most-read works of fiction in post-apartheid South Africa. The internet has also provided an important outlet for African literary criticism, from *Africa is a Country*'s viral essays to the hundreds of comments that appear on one of *Diary of a Zulu Girl*'s installments.[1]

Despite this, there is an equally significant resurgence of offline literary groups in southern Africa. Book clubs sprung up across South Africa to discuss Maphoto's diary, and in Malawi, award-winning writer Shadreck Chikoti has succeeded in creating and self-funding another such face-to-face forum for literature. The Story Club was launched in Lilongwe in December 2013 and has since added branches and held events in other major Malawian cities. The club's eclectic format varies somewhat per session and has included talks by writers, filmmakers and academics, poetry readings, film screenings and live musical performances. Many sessions have also featured the reading and discussion of a guest writer's story, and it is in this respect that the Story Club recalls the famed Malawi Writers Group, formed at Chancellor College in 1969 by Jack Mapanje, Lupenga Mphande and James Ng'ombe amongst others. Significantly, the club is a 'space' aimed not just at writers but also readers, journalists, critics, teachers and editors: anyone who is 'passionate' about literature (personal interview, July 5, 2016).

This chapter considers the role of such literary clubs in the digital age, focusing in particular on how the Story Club-as-network connects to traditional publishing infrastructures, literary workshops and prizes, and online networks such as blogs and Facebook in both English and African languages. Chikoti, who is one of Malawi's best-known contemporary writers, is also the Executive Director of Pan African Publishers, which publishes 'African literature for the African market' in English and Chichewa (personal interview, April 19, 2014). In 2014, the Story Club hosted a writing workshop called 'Imagine Africa 500,' which led to the publication of a collection of Afrofuturist short stories by Pan African. The Story Club then held a book launch, which in Malawi functions as a kind of live auction, where the entire cost of publishing a book can be raised in a single evening, often with the help of government ministers who are

in attendance. Through all of these interconnected activities, the Story Club is deeply involved in the making and selling of literary value in Malawi.

Recently, Achille Mbembe suggested that 'Africa was digital before the digital,' pointing in particular to the continent's 'flexibility and this capacity for constant innovation' (2015, 2–3). While the Story Club is certainly innovative, Mbembe's formulation privileges the digital over the material, as does much scholarship on contemporary networks.[2] Drawing on Stephanie Newell's concept of 'paracolonial networks,' I argue that rather than prefigure or anticipate digitality, the Story Club and literary networks like it are better thought of as 'paravirtual': digital-age networks that are mediated in significant ways but that operate '*alongside* and *beyond*' the virtual sphere (2011a, 350).[3] In what follows, I show how the Story Club makes strategic use of digital connections, often in order to foster face-to-face interactions offline. Like the paracolonial, paravirtual literary networks can help us to move beyond a center/periphery framework to see forms of literary value that are enabled by global digital connectivity but ultimately exceed virtual space.

African literary clubs and networks

World systems approaches to the literary field have emphasized a singular, if uneven, global marketplace in which texts circulate and gain visibility and value.[4] Pascale Casanova, for example, argues for the existence of 'a literary universe relatively independent of the everyday world and its political divisions' that is characterized by 'incessant struggle and competition over the very nature of literature itself' (2004, xii, 12). The centers of Casanova's 'world republic of letters' are located in European and American metropolises like Paris, London and New York, where writers from the peripheries seek recognition and literary capital via a host of intermediaries, including publishers, prizes, well-known authors, critics, translators and editors. In *The Economy of Prestige*, James English considers the significance of these intermediaries, and of prizes, in particular, in conferring cultural value. Like Casanova, English observes the diminishing importance of the nation in the global cultural market, where 'the artist celebrated at the subnational level of indigenous community, can now be fed directly into a global market for indigenous cultural production' (2005, 272). Graham Huggan (2001) argues that this global market for the exotic and marginal has fundamentally shaped postcolonial writing.

While the above studies give little agency to writers, Sarah Brouillette and Akin Adesokan recast postcolonial authors as active negotiators of the global literary space and its institutions. Brouillette suggests that by reading postcolonial authors' identities and careers as 'key paratexts for reception and reproduction,' we can see beyond what Huggan has identified as a 'strategic exoticism,' to writers' more nuanced textual engagements with their own positionality (2007, 3). Adesokan, for his part, considers the role of the artist-intellectual as a 'mediator in certain kinds of commercial deals,' who can 'assert artistic control' to critique the very value and meaning-creating institutions that underwrite his or her work (2011, 4, 27). He understands global literary space to operate simultaneously as system and network, which he compares to the West African marketplace: it is a meeting place where the regulations of global and local institutions intersect with the 'human network' of 'potential collaborators' (10).

Only very recently have studies focused on Africa-based literary institutions and networks. Doreen Strauhs considers the role of African literary NGOs, which she calls 'LINGOs,' as 'noteworthy sites of literary innovation and public opinion making in the field of African literary production' (2013, 5). These 'homegrown' organizations, from the Nigerian Mbari club and Kenyan Chemchemi Creative Center that were established in the 1960s, to contemporary organizations like the Ugandan women's writers group, FEMRITE, and Kwani Trust in Kenya,

are rooted in national spaces but operate as key nodes in pan-African and global literary networks (29). Much of the current debate on Africa-based literary institutions like these has centered on how dependent and determined their networks and cultural capital are on Western funding and institutions, from the Ford Foundation and the Caine Prize to literary agencies like Andrew Wylie's, which represents many of today's internationally recognized African writers. Drawing on Strauhs as well as conversations and forthcoming material from specialists in the field, Sarah Brouillette's 2017 essay, 'On the African Literary Hustle,' deduces that Western donor funding has helped to create a select 'coterie' of African writers in 'key cities' like Nairobi and Lagos. In an argument that recalls Casanova's, Brouillette finds that:

> while there is a small readership in these urban centers, it isn't that important that there be local readers. These writers have bypassed the problem of the absent African reader. There is donor funding to support the activity of writing, to award prizes to authors, and to facilitate access to US and other foreign markets.

In contrast, Kate Wallis (on whose data Brouillette's essay largely depends) gives examples from Kwani Trust and Nigeria's Farafina to demonstrate convincingly that:

> writing from Africa that is published by UK and US 'powerhouses' is often brought to attention and consecrated with cultural value by structures of literary production based on the continent. Equally writers who achieve critical acclaim internationally are often part of and deeply entrenched within a larger continent-based community of writers.
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> *(Wallis 2018, 180)*

The Story Club, like the organizations Wallis describes, demonstrates the centrality of Africa-based institutions to the production of literary value on the continent, even as it participates in broader circuits. Like Kwani Trust and FEMRITE, the Story Club hosts writing workshops and public readings for aspiring and established authors, aims to bolster national writing and reading cultures outside of academic institutions, and operates as (or in close connection with) local publishers. Indeed, in a 2016 interview, Chikoti told me he had something like Kwani Trust in mind when he started the Story Club, and like Kwani's founder Binyavanga Wainaina, Chikoti used prize money that he had won to start the club. Chikoti said that after he won the Peer Gynt Award, Malawi's most lucrative prize, people began to ask him what he would do to help other aspiring artists. His solution was to create a space akin to Kwani Trust where people of 'different backgrounds' could 'meet and celebrate art.' However, the Story Club differs somewhat from Kwani and organizations like it in its complete lack of funding from international or domestic institutions.[5] Since Chikoti has continued to self-fund the Story Club entirely, he is free to operate it without any external influence. Nevertheless, Chikoti has expressed a desire to find funding partners in order to help sustain the club's incredible growth, from 10–15 participants at early meetings to hundreds at later events.

In its informal structure and reliance on individuals for effort and funds, the Story Club resembles the literary and social clubs popular throughout West Africa in the 1920s and 30s. Stephanie Newell argues that these groups served as significant literary, social and political networks for a newly literate class and help us to see 'paracolonial' cultural flows, which occurred '*alongside* and *beyond* the British presence in the region, as a consequence of the British presence but not as its direct product' (2011a, 350). In the Gold Coast, the founders of these clubs were 'youngmen,' who were 'neither chiefs nor members of the established coastal elites,' and who considered themselves to be part of the 'intelligentsia' (Newell 2000, 53, 55). Chikoti, who is

only 39 and who is not involved in the government, might certainly be considered to occupy a similar position in Malawian society today. Like the Story Club, the early clubs in the Gold Coast had both literary and social aims and engaged in a variety of activities, from the discussion of particular texts to lectures and debates. The membership of these clubs included local authors, readers and 'readers turned writers,' who 'responded to the books they read by producing their own texts and inviting readers to debate the issues raised' (Newell 2006, 232). In taking English 'raw material' (literature, language, styles) and appropriating it for local ends, Newell finds that these clubs 'created meanings which were not anchored to meanings generated in the metropolis' (Newell 2011a, 350). One such club, the New Tafo Literary and Social Club described its mission in the *Gold Coast Observer* in 1942 as follows: 'to foster an intelligent interest in the community in all literary and social pursuits, and to educate public minds on all the current affairs by means of public debates, lectures, talks and so forth' (quoted in Newell 2000, 55). This particular club even boasted a circulating library and had ambitions of building 'a Club House, tennis courts, a lending library and to acquire a wireless radio receiving set and a Cinema Pathe [sic] Projector, to keep its members and the general public in touch with current world affairs' (quoted in Newell 2000, 55). The Story Club, similarly, is aimed not just at writers (although it draws many) but at a broader community of enthusiasts for literature and the arts, and it, too, endeavors to keep members 'in touch' with international literary trends by making use of new technologies. And yet, also like the New Tafo Literary and Social Club, its establishment of an actual physical location, the Story Club Café in Lilongwe in August 2017, anchors it firmly in the Malawian milieu.

In the Malawian context, there are several precursors to the Story Club: the Malawi Writers Group, started by students at the University of Malawi's Chancellor College in Blantyre in 1969, and the Lingadzi Writers Club, which operated in Lilongwe in the 1980s and 90s. At the Story Club's launch, Chikoti said, 'these are not in operation right now. So this [the Story Club] is basically revamping that kind of the spirit. And I think the difference is that those ones only involved writers' (Malawi Broadcasting Corporation 2014). These clubs also operated in a much different political environment than today's Story Club. After independence in 1964, Malawi's first prime minister and then president, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, immediately began consolidating his power through repressive legislation, including the 1968 Censorship and Control Entertainments Act which made it 'a criminal offense, punishable by imprisonment, to possess, import, print, publish, distribute, display, exhibit or reproduce any publication which the Board had declared "undesirable"' (Mphande 1996, 81). Banda's approach to literary and cultural production is best exemplified by the college he built in Kasungu. Known as the 'Eton of Africa,' it taught students English, Latin, Greek and French and excluded all African literature and history from the curriculum (86). In this environment of severe political and cultural repression, Lupenga Mphande, one of the founders of the Malawi Writers Group, describes the group's objectives as both cultural and political in scope: 'to embark on the multi-dimensional task of redefining the national culture, creating a more liberatory environment, and constructing democratic structures within an oppressive system' (1996, 88). While Chikoti suggests that the group was primarily for writers, it seems that this designation was taken loosely. Mphande writes, 'Membership was completely voluntary, and many of the students who joined were not even "writers" in the traditional meaning of that word' (89). The organization was democratic in structure, with the chairman rotating at each meeting, one of the many ways through which it sought to 'create culture through practice' (89). Overall, the group was purposefully 'informal, defiant, and rebellious,' which is partly why the University of Malawi's English Department eventually incorporated it and sought to control its agenda and leadership (90, 99). While the Story Club operates in a comparatively much less repressive political and social

environment, post-Banda Malawi has also suffered its share of censorship, as is evident from the arrests of journalists in 2011 and very recent efforts to punish 'offensive communication' on social media (Freedom House 2017).

Despite increasing censorship of social media in many African contexts, literary organizations have made use of various digital networks to expand their reach. A digital presence has been important to Kwani Trust, for example, and new writers' collectives like *Jalada* are mostly digitally based (although it has also staged live events). In contrast, the Story Club lacks a website, and activity on its Facebook page is minimal. This certainly has something to do with Malawi's very low internet penetration rate and small percentage of Facebook users. However, this alone does not explain the Story Club's primary operation as an offline rather than virtual network, particularly since Malawians, many of whom are part of the club, are very active and engaged with Chikoti's personal Facebook page. Rather, it seems that there is something to be gained from face-to-face literary networks that cannot be attained online. In the case of the Story Club, participants benefit from local exposure for their work and sometimes in-depth discussion of it, which is often lacking in the digital space. They have also gained face-time with well-known authors including Tsitsi Dangarembga and Zukiswa Wanner. Importantly, these in-person engagements are facilitated by digital technologies like Facebook and WhatsApp, which Chikoti says are the primary means through which he keeps in touch with other African writers (Facebook message, January 29, 2018). As I explore below, the club operates through a complex network of friendships and professional associations, with a broad Malawian base that interacts with individuals and organizations in Africa, Europe and the United States based on Chikoti's own affiliations.

Shadreck Chikoti: the face of the Story Club's networks

Shadreck Chikoti's reputation as one of the most successful contemporary Malawian writers gave him the platform to launch the Story Club in December 2013. Chikoti has been on the Malawian literary map since he published his first book while still in secondary school at the age of 19, at the time the youngest Malawian to have done so. A few years later, in 2001, Chikoti's story 'The Trap' won first prize in the Malawi Writers Union's Peer Gynt Literary Award. Named after the Norwegian playwright, the Peer Gynt is sponsored by the Norwegian embassy and administered by the Malawi Writers Union (MAWU), the nation's body of professional writers. That same year, Chikoti spoke at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair, which featured his book *Free Africa Flee!* Over the next several years, Chikoti's short stories continued to win MAWU prizes and were included in several MAWU anthologies. In September 2013, Chikoti won the Peer Gynt award for his first full-length novel, *Azotus the Kingdom*, which is set in an unnamed African country 500 years in the future. Chikoti (2014) says that he considers the award, which came with a prize of 500,000 Malawian Kwatcha (more than 600 USD), as one of the highest literary honors he has received.

As a result of his literary successes in Malawi and southern Africa, Chikoti was able to enter into broader international literary circuits. In 2008, Chikoti attended the first Writers' and Literary Translators' International Congress (WALTIC) in Stockholm, where he met Danish writer Trine Andersen. This proved to be a particularly fruitful connection: in 2008, Chikoti and Andersen founded Pan African Publishers, and in 2009 Chikoti was a writer in residence in Denmark, where he began writing *Azotus the Kingdom*. In 2011, the Caine Prize selected Chikoti and fellow Malawian writer Lawrence Kadzitche to attend the Caine Prize workshop in Cameroon. Chikoti's first international publication, 'Child of a Hyena,' was in the Caine Prize 2011 collection, *To See the Mountain and Other Stories*. Overall, Chikoti's literary trajectory supports

Wallis's argument that many African writers gain literary capital in local and pan-African networks prior to being recognized elsewhere.

Chikoti has further immersed himself in local literary networks through his work with Pan African Publishers, which he founded, in part, as a result of his frustration with international publishers and competitions like Caine. When I interviewed Chikoti in Lilongwe in 2012,[6] he emphasized that African writers are too often forced to cater to 'what international publishers and competitions want,' usually culturally specific stories and/or 'protest literature.' Within Malawi, book sales are low, printing is expensive, and publishers are often unwilling to take risks on fiction. Therefore, 'the aim of Pan African Publishers is to encourage writers from across Africa to write with the freedom of theme' and without limitations as to genre. At the time of our interview, Pan African had published eight books for the Malawian secondary school market in order to 'generate income' as well as Chikoti's speculative historical novel *Mwana wa Kamuzu*, or *The Son of Kamuzu* (2010). Chikoti writes in both English and Chichewa and takes a pragmatic approach to choosing the language in which to write and publish. For example, Chikoti wrote *Mwana wa Kamuzu* in Chichewa because he 'wanted to reach a wider audience and [he] was aiming at the rural areas.' Since most Malawians do not have access to bookshops, Chikoti traveled to rural regions and sold the book directly to street vendors and in tea rooms. For Chikoti, a 'wider audience' is a variable concept: within Malawi, a much larger rural audience can be reached in Chichewa, whereas English is necessary to communicate beyond Malawi's borders.

The Story Club emerged from Chikoti's diverse experiences as both a writer and publisher. 'There are so many factors affecting the writing industry in Malawi,' Chikoti said in our 2014 interview, emphasizing in particular the lack of professional editors, outlets for writers to publish their work, fora for creative exchange, and a book-buying public. The Story Club is Chikoti's attempt to address this hydra-headed problem. 'If we want to improve the writing standards and the reading standards in Malawi, we need many players,' Chikoti argues. To this end, the Story Club is enmeshed in a number of literary networks, from local writers' groups to continental and international organizations. Locally, the Story Club intersects with several writing groups, such as the Poetry Association of Malawi and the Mzuni Writers Forum at Mzuzu University. Poets from these organizations, and others, are often invited to perform at club gatherings. There is also some connection between the Story Club and the Malawi Writers Union (MAWU), the largest and most influential writing organization in the country. Chikoti was the vice president of MAWU for a number of years, and the current president, Sambalikagwa Mvona, spoke at the Story Club's official launch in December 2013. Although MAWU remains powerful as the country's largest body of writers, there is evidence that some members may be growing tired of Mvona's leadership and of the organization's publishing practices. The Story Club is of a decidedly different nature than MAWU, which collects dues from members and has a clear leadership structure. In contrast, in a Malawi Broadcasting Corporation news feature on the Story Club's launch, Chikoti emphasized, 'We are not an organization … just a space for enthusiasts.' This statement may have been designed to show that the Story Club is not in active competition with pre-existing groups such as MAWU as well as to draw a distinction between them. Unlike MAWU, Chikoti acts as the 'coordinator' and 'founder' of the Story Club, rather than its president. However, Chikoti's centrality to the club also differs from the more obviously democratic – although male-dominated – Malawi Writers Group of the 1970s, with its rotating chairmen.

The founding of the Story Club coincided with a sharp rise in Chikoti's international profile, and it is through Chikoti's connections that the Story Club has been inserted into a number of significant pan-African networks like the African Writers Trust (AWT) and Africa39. In March

2013 (building on his connections to both FEMRITE and the Prince Claus foundation, a sponsor of AWT), Chikoti was invited to attend the first Uganda International Writers Conference, a project of the AWT. Founded in 2009, the AWT is an NGO registered in Uganda, with offices in both Kampala and London. In December 2013, the Story Club posted the link to an article Chikoti wrote about his experience at the conference, where he first met influential Malawian writer Jack Mapanje, who had been living in the UK in exile. In his essay, Chikoti focuses on the network of connections he forged while there, writing:

> But as it turned out, the conference was not only about me meeting Uncle Jack; the picture became even bigger than I had imagined. The conference became a confluence where African writers of notable levels living in Africa and in diaspora converged to form one lasting network that will yield results for a life time [sic].

While in Uganda, Chikoti met Billy Kahora of Kwani, Ugandan writer Doreen Baingana, Nii Parkes and Goretti Kyomuhendo, the director of AWT and then judge of the Commonwealth prize. He also reconnected with fellow Caine workshop attendee Beatrice Lamwaka, and the coordinator of FEMRITE, Hilda Twongyeirwe, whom he first met at the Ethiopian African writer's conference. These encounters did indeed prove useful and lasting: in November 2014, the Story Club held an 'Imagine Africa 500' short story workshop facilitated by Kahora and Lamwaka along with Ugandan Jackee Batanda and Trine Anderson. Pan African published the resulting collection, the first volume of speculative fiction to be published in Malawi, which included several of the workshop participants in addition to writers from Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Botswana.

Also in 2014, Chikoti was named by Africa39 as one of the 39 most promising African writers under 40. Africa39, in particular, underscores the entwinement – and power dynamics – of pan-African and global literary networks. Binyavanga Wainaina of Kwani Trust, who has publicly identified himself as a pan-Africanist and emphasized the importance of grounding African literary networks on the continent, curated the prize long-list. According to the Hay Festival's Africa39 website, both the prize and the resultant Africa39 anthology 'will bring to worldwide attention the best work from Africa and its diaspora.' The simultaneous announcement of the prize at the Hay Festival in Port Harcourt, Nigeria and at the London Book Fair is symbolic of Africa39's efforts to bridge the divide between sites of literary power. In our 2014 interview, Chikoti told me, 'the biggest thing about Africa39 is the publicity,' emphasizing that the prize brings attention to both himself as a writer and to Malawi as a nation. Indeed, shortly after the award was announced, Chikoti was featured on CNN's African Voices. While individual African writers have clearly benefited from awards like Africa39, we should also be mindful of the way that such prizes can reinforce existing literary hierarchies. For example, the winning writers were brought to Europe to help publicize the Bloomsbury-published anthology.

In contrast to Africa39, the Story Club espouses a kind of local pan-Africanism.[7] In 2014, Chikoti explained his version of pan-Africanism as being rooted in forms of local social activism, like the Story Club.

> For me, to be a pan-Africanist is to be someone who wants to contribute to the discourse of the future of Africa, you know, current affairs, social activities. Which is also why I involve myself so much in social activities. It is different, I think, my idea of pan-Africanism, from the idea that was there in the 60s, which was kind of a protest movement against the West. It has lost that tone in many who would call themselves pan-Africanists. The problems that Africa is facing are not necessarily from external forces. Many of them are also

> from within. It's to look at all of those things, internal, external, and see how can you contribute to that.
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> *(personal interview, April 19, 2014).*

Much like 'local cosmopolitanism,' this local pan-Africanism is both inward and outward looking and makes use of pan-African networks with the ultimate aim of benefiting Malawian writers (Newell 2011b; Primorac 2012). Chikoti has called upon his Africa-wide connections to bring a host of well-known writers to Malawi, including fellow Africa39 recipient Zukiswa Wanner. Despite Chikoti's assertion about the changing nature of pan-Africanism, the Malawi Writers Group espoused a similar kind of local pan-Africanism in the 1970s. Mphande recounts the pan-Africanist stance of the group and its deliberate incorporation of other African members, which it used to counter the Chewa-nationalist and British-inflected Malawian culture that Banda's regime was actively constructing. Similarly, in our 2016 interview, Chikoti emphasized that following Malawi's many years of isolation under Banda's rule, 'having artists come from different places, puts us in a network … they will help us to open up.'

As is evident from the above, Chikoti stands firmly at the center of the Story Club's many networks. In this way, the club resembles Kwani Trust and FEMRITE, which Strauhs describes as 'highly dynamic social networks' whose international connections are often forged and maintained through personal relationships (Strauhs 2013, 30). As Strauhs finds, it is the personal nature of these transnational relationships that has allowed organizations such as Kwani Trust to benefit from networks like the Caine Prize and to simultaneously critique and claim independence from them, as Wainaina has done very publically (75). Like Adesokan's artist-as-mediator, these organizations have found a way to both utilize and critique powerful structures. Chikoti, too, has openly critiqued organizations like Caine while personally benefiting from its international platform. And while the Story Club lacks official 'Literary Partners' (which is how Kwani Trust describes organizations like the Caine Prize and Commonwealth Writers on its website), it too sees a benefit in being part of their informal, virtual networks, as is evident from the Story Club's Facebook page. On Facebook, Chikoti's own social network interplays with the club's: the man and the club are two sides of the same coin, and which one we see is often a strategic calculation.

The club's Facebook page boasts 1,266 followers, more than the Malawi Writers Union (917 members). As a point of comparison, SocialBakers records the highest-ranking media page in Malawi as Malawi24, with 418,262 fans. Overall, internet access remains low in Malawi. Internet World Stats recorded only 9.6% of the population online as of June 2017; the Facebook penetration rate is even lower at 3.9% or 720,000 people. The club's Facebook page primarily promotes the club's upcoming events and posts pictures of past ones, although when the page first began it was administered by both Chikoti and Pius Nyondo (the coordinator of the Mzuzu branch of the Story Club) and more regularly posted news about African writers (particularly Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie), literary awards and writing competitions. There are also several posts that celebrate Chikoti's achievements. On June 11, 2014, the Story Club shared a Facebook post by the South African NGO, Short Story Day Africa, which listed Chikoti as their Writer of the Week. The Story Club's post explained the significance of this news in terms of Short Story Day Africa's connection to the Caine Prize, which had selected two of its 2014 shortlisted stories from Short Story Day Africa's collection, *Feast, Famine and Potluck*: 'Two of this year's Caine Prize shortlisted authors are from Short Story Day Africa. Proud of you Shadreck, founder of the Story Club.' In moments like this, we can see the ways that Chikoti, the club's face, recedes (even as he is featured) so that the club can claim a connection to Caine that Chikoti himself might personally be more critical of.

The Story Club's Facebook page also makes visible many of the networks described above. On August 23, 2014, the club posted a call for participants in its 'Imagine Africa 500' workshop and 'tagged,' or linked, to many of the people and organizations in its network so that they might further disseminate it. Those tagged included, in order: 'Commonwealth Writers, Uganda Women Writers' Association (FEMRITE), African Writers Trust – AWT, Youthful Malawian Writers, Babishai Niwe Poetry Foundation, Caine Prize for African Writing, Malawi Short Stories and Poems, Mzuni Writers' and several individuals including Trine Andersen and myself. Through practices like tagging, we can see who the Story Club envisions as its network of collaborators, and it is not insignificant that the first several groups listed are European, then African, then Malawian.

Nevertheless, the Story Club's Facebook profile picture, a computer-generated image of a bookshelf, reverses this hierarchy. The image, which advertises the club – 'Passionate about literature? Join us at the Story Club' followed by Chikoti's email address and cell phone number – depicts a two-tiered bookshelf with an eclectic group of titles. Notably, the top shelf is comprised of works by Malawian authors such as Stanley Kenani's short story collection and the Caine Prize volume in which Chikoti and Kadzitche appear, in addition to books written by international writers (many of them volunteers in the development sector) that are set in Malawi. One such title, which garnered a lot of attention locally, is *The Boy who Harnessed the Wind*: the non-fictional account of a Malawian teenager who built a windmill in his village, co-authored by William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer. The fact that these texts occupy the Story Club's first shelf shows its emphasis on Malawi and seeming openness to including non-Malawian writers in its national canon. The Story Club's second shelf features Dan Brown and John Grisham next to Dickens, Austen and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. This mix of popular fiction and English classics with Africa's most internationally recognized contemporary writer, Adichie, resembles the eclectic reading habits of many African readers past and present.[8]

In sum, the Story Club's networks cannot be adequately described as national (this would be a more fitting description of MAWU), nor are they only local, in that so many of the connections from which it draws literary capital are located elsewhere on the African continent and in Europe and America. It is strategically, if not ideologically, pan-African and is facilitated by virtual networks, but is not reducible to them. In fact, the club's Facebook page has less activity today than when it first began. As the minimal engagement with its Facebook page demonstrates, the club's most significant work takes place in person at its live events. Nevertheless, it still sees value in maintaining a digital presence. Finally, while the Story Club revolves in many ways around Chikoti and has benefited from his international profile, it is not entirely dependent on it. The most lasting contribution to come out of the club, the *Imagine Africa 500* anthology, makes no mention of Chikoti's international profile either in its prefatory material or on the Kindle site where it is now being sold. In other words, while Chikoti, as the face of the club, is the center of its many networks, its work also exceeds him.

Face-to-face meetings and live crowdfunding

The Story Club's fourth 'congregation' was held at Fantasia Korean Restaurant and Bar in Lilongwe's Old Town on April 20, 2014. It was Easter Sunday, but still there was a crowd of about 30, including journalists, teachers, students and several vendors from the craft market down the street, whom I had met earlier in the week and invited. The windowless room at the back of the restaurant was filled with rows of heavy wooden tables and chairs; the dimmed lights created a nightlife ambiance, despite it being the middle of a Sunday afternoon.

The event started at least an hour behind schedule, as Chikoti dedicated himself to the slow assembly of an impressive amount of technical equipment, including a microphone and sound system that he himself had rented. The space was not particularly large – not large enough to really require the use of a microphone – and it seemed that the sound equipment was, in part, a means of increasing the entertainment value of the event, which included live songs and poetry in addition to literary and critical discussion. However, it also presaged the way in which the entire event was *mediated* – literally and figuratively – by various technologies. The MC, Pius Nyondo, guided the proceedings from notes on his laptop, and Lily Banda sang several songs, including her hit 'Shampoo Your Locks,' over pre-recorded music. Most significantly, the audience listened to a pre-recorded track of Chikoti reading the story of guest author, Muthi Nhlema, who sat in the audience. A story of nearly 6,400 words, 'The Journey of Restoration,' took some time to play. During the discussion of Nhlema's story that followed, I noticed some of the participants using their smartphones to scroll through the text online (others perhaps using their phones, as many of us do, for other purposes). Overall, these technologies – while technically unnecessary – had the effect of making the club's activities seem both more professional and more 'connected,' much in the same way that the New Tafo Literary and Social Club sought to buy a wireless radio set and a Pathé projector in order to keep its members up to date with global affairs.

The discussion of the story began with the reflections of three pre-designated readers, including Nyondo, Lawrence Kadzitche and Immulanie Makande, chairperson of the Poetry Association of Malawi, Central Region chapter. The critiques of Nhlema's story were perceptive and surprisingly detailed. Kadzitche, who writes primarily in Chichewa but sometimes in English as well, suggested the story read as though it was written by someone for whom English is a second language. Makande, in his critique, drew attention to small details of language and setting. 'You don't need to say "sweltering hot,"' he suggested, 'just one of these adjectives will do.' He also noted minor inconsistencies in the narrative: although the story is set during the 2001 drought, when '[i]t hadn't rained in ages,' one of the characters looks out the minibus window and admires the green trees along the roadside. Makande repeated much of the story in his critique, a technique that reviewers of stories in Malawi's newspapers have used since the 1970s. As Karin Barber has observed in other instances of what she calls 'entextualization,' '[c]reative capacities are engaged not only when people compose, improvise or write new texts, but also when they read, listen, repeat or remember them' (2008, 210). I suggest that these retellings can constitute not only creative, but critical engagement. Recounting the scene where the story's protagonist, a teacher, masturbates in the latrine while imagining his female students, Makande said the scene concerned him because 'life imitates art' and 'what we write influences people.' In some contrast to the other reviewers, Chikoti praised the story as 'one of the best short stories by a Malawian' and pointed to its skillful use of symbolism. The rain at the end, he argued, serves as a symbol of restoration and hope, a new chapter for both the characters and the country.

The above shows the Story Club to be a space for the sustained discussion of literary language and craft as well as larger issues such as the social and ethical role of literature. The role of the artist in society was also a topic of discussion at the 'Imagine Africa 500' workshop. Further, Chikoti (2014) says he sees the club as a way of advancing feminism through art. The club has featured a significant number of female writers, directors and academics at club meetings. The need for men to be allies and feminists is also something Chikoti frequently speaks out about. However, sustained discussion of social issues has not thus far translated into the club's digital realm. In January 2018, the Story Club made a formal statement on Facebook condemning Mwiza Chavura's controversial song 'Rape.' Chikoti wrote on both the club's page and his personal Facebook page:

> We at the Story Club know that artists have the right to speak and produce art without limitations. But we also understand that, as artists we have the responsibility to protect the rights of others and to ensure that our art does not lead to the violation of the law … We at the Story Club promote women's rights, and celebrate womanhood in all its varied aspects.

While the statement garnered 78 likes and numerous supportive comments on Chikoti's personal page, the post on the club's page got little engagement (only three likes). Fittingly, the kinds of posts that get the most attention on the club's Facebook page are pictures of its live events.

While there are more and more blogs for Malawian writing online, including the *Nthanda Review* and *Makewana's Daughters*, few readers take advantage of this space to post comments, substantive or otherwise. Popular Facebook pages like *Chichewa Stories* and Juniah Ngwira's *Diary of a Single Mum* have, in contrast, drawn many more comments on each post. Often these comments signify engagement and that one is reading, rather than providing feedback. Most of the hundreds of commenters on *Chichewa Stories*, which is written entirely in Chichewa, simply reply 'Next' or perhaps 'Ili bho' (it's fine/good). The comments on Ngwira's diary (which has not been updated since 2016), were generally more substantive, with readers comparing the story to their own personal experiences of heartbreak, loss and single motherhood and sometimes even engaging with issues of form and language. These Malawian digital reading communities both confirm and challenge some of what we know about how literary networks operate online and off in other contexts.

DeNel Rehberg Sedo's 2003 comparative study of virtual and face-to-face book clubs based on online surveys with 252 readers, most of whom were from Canada and the USA, finds that readers join virtual book clubs to discuss particular books and to connect with people like themselves, whereas face-to-face clubs tend to attract members who join equally for 'intellectual stimulation' as for 'fun' (80). Although Sedo discusses more formal online discussion groups, there are similarities to today's social media landscape in southern Africa, where readers 'follow' specific stories and writers on Facebook and other platforms. However, unlike the clubs that Sedo studied, where a much larger percentage of face-to-face book clubs (74%) 'use personal experiences to interpret the books' than virtual clubs (51%), Malawian readers of Facebook diaries like Ngwira's relate to it in an intensely personal way. Further, while Sedo suggests that 'virtual meetings allow the reader to transcend physical, geographical, and time boundaries, enriching her interpretation of the book,' Facebook pages like Ngwira's and blogs like Mike Maphoto's *Diary of a Zulu Girl* are often more likely to appeal to local readers, who sometimes live in the very city where the story is set (Bosch Santana 2018). In South Africa, which has a much better digital infrastructure than Malawi, this has led to the creation of offline networks that derive directly from virtual ones. In addition to the book clubs that formed around Maphoto's *Diary of a Zulu Girl* blog, fans of Thulani Lupondwana's Facebook story *Diary of a Cheating Husband* organized events with the author across South Africa in November and December of 2017. Nevertheless, these offline occasions differ from the Story Club in that the virtual space remains the central realm of engagement. Further, these blog and Facebook groups draw mostly readers rather than writers, although many of the diary writers themselves were once avid readers of other blogs (as Lupondwana was of Maphoto's). As more of a writerly network, the Story Club depends on the face-to-face interactions and more substantive discussions that the offline space affords.

As a paravirtual network, the Story Club has been extremely successful in localizing and materializing its global/pan-African resources and connections in the Malawian literary space. As

Wallis argues in regard to Kwani Trust and Farafina, making 'material' denotes 'both the processes through which writing is created, takes form and is published, and the processes through which writing is validated and consecrated with literary value' (2018, 182). The Story Club has done this by providing Malawian writers with hands-on training from other professional writers, such as Billy Kahora and Jackee Batanda, and face-to-face discussions with world-renowned African writers like Tsitsi Dangarembga. Through its publishing arm, Pan African, it has also mobilized monetary and literary capital – funding from the Prince Claus fund and editorial expertise from Billy Kahora – to materialize books like *Imagine Africa 500* for the Malawian and international market. However, the Story Club has been equally successful in utilizing local resources, from the talents of writers to funding mechanisms, such as the book launch. In Malawi, the book launch is not merely an event to unveil the book to the public and sell a few copies – as we often see in USA and UK contexts. Rather, book launches are an essential part of both advertising and funding publishing projects. They are a form of live crowdfunding that somewhat resemble local lending practices like *chiperegani* or *chilimba*, savings associations where friends and neighbors pool their resources (Chipeta and Mkandawire 1992).

On July 1, 2016 Chikoti and I attended the book launch for *Loving Your Career* by first-time author Kasuzi Mbaluko. The event, held at the Riverside Hotel in Lilongwe, was a formal affair, with mauve tablecloths covering the horseshoe-shaped arrangement of tables and bottled water, glasses and mints carefully placed at each participant's seat. The two-and-a-half-hour meeting included an opening prayer, several songs, comments on the book by Janet Liabunya, a speech by the author, and a speech by the guest of honor Madalitso Kazombo, the Member of Parliament in Mbaluko's home district of Kasungu East. The most important feature of the event, however, was the live auctioning of the book, during which the MC took pledges from audience members, many of whom bought copies of the book for much more than an individual copy would normally sell for. Mbaluko said he raised a total MK70,000, which was just enough to pay for the launch itself. Afterwards, Chikoti told me that at the launch of *Imagine Africa 500*, they were able easily to raise more than the cost of producing the book in a single evening.

Overall, Chikoti understands the book to be a networked object. Discussing the impetus for the club with me in 2014, Chikoti argued, 'The book can't just come out by the writer himself.' Leveraging material and virtual networks to turn ideas into books is one of its core activities according to the club's Facebook page. The 'many players' that contribute to this might occasionally include international donors like the Prince Claus Fund, which contributed to the publication of the anthology, but equally important were the crowd of people in Blantyre, who together raised enough money to publish the book by each contributing a few thousand kwacha for their copies and, most importantly, lent legitimacy to the publication through their physical (and later virtualized) presence. As Moradewun Adejunmobi reminds us, 'No matter the structural inequalities at play, we should be careful about inferring the powerlessness of the subjugated and the muteness at the margins' (2017, 140).

Paravirtual networks like the Story Club – networks that are made possible by a shrinking digital world, but that operate in ways that exceed the digital's affordances – are likely to become more and more common. In addition to Malawi's many poetry clubs and initiatives like the African Women Writers Trust (Kalinga 2015), new face-to-face forums for fiction continue to take shape. In November 2017, writers Ekari Mbvundula and Wonawaka Gondwe started Storytelling Sessions in Blantyre to introduce local readers to local writers. Mbvundula says that while Malawians use the internet for many things, reading literature isn't yet one of them. These face-to-face clubs challenge the notion that literary value is primarily created in literary centers in the global North and that the relationship between local readers and writers has been obviated. While the Story Club's physical network engages with virtual networks

across the globe and is deliberately mediated – from its sound equipment to its Facebook page – its most important work happens offline, in a physical space, rather than a digital one. Mbvundula provides the following maxim for writers operating in such an environment: 'presence is everything.'

Notes

1 Parts of this chapter originally appeared on *Africa in Words*.
2 See for example Castells (1996) and Varnelis (2008).
3 Other recent scholarship also explores the entanglement of online and offline territories (Christensen et al. 2011) and the simultaneous virtuality and materiality of digital infrastructures (Hu 2015).
4 See Moretti (2003).
5 Kalinga (2015) makes this point about Malawian literary clubs more broadly.
6 I first met Chikoti in 2007 on a visit to the orphan care center that he runs with his wife, Yamikani. We later reconnected in 2012, when I interviewed him and Kadziche about their writing and their participation in the 2011 Caine Prize workshop in Cameroon. I also interviewed Chikoti in 2014 and 2016, attending Story Club sessions in both of these years. On each visit, Chikoti asked me to be one of their speakers, and I presented some of my own academic work to the club. In 2016, I invited Chikoti to the University of Michigan, where he gave a public reading and visited two of my courses.
7 This term resonates with Tsitsi Jaji's (2014) study of cultural, 'small "p"' pan-Africanism in relation to African diasporic music.
8 Nuttall (1994) observes the eclectic reading histories of black South African women, from British classics to popular genre writers like James Hadley Chase. Similarly, Stephanie Newell argues that 'while scholars might divide novels into "literary" and "popular" genres, West African readers seem unwilling to discriminate between high and low forms' (2000, 157).

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