

1 Introduction

This study offers an approach to contemporary English-language African reading culture, surveying and synthesizing the substantial body of fascinating research that exists on the topic. I provide an overview of the history of underdevelopment of postcolonial publishing, with a focus on the period of economic turbulence and immiseration since the 1970s, before then moving to the contemporary situation, from about the turn of the twenty-first century to the present. Homing in on Nigeria and Kenya, with some comments extending to Zimbabwe, Uganda, and South Africa as relevant comparisons, I discuss both the elite literary sphere and more demotic popular forms of reading activity, and consider the relationships between these fields: between, that is, an established coterie of African writers that finds a sizable readership abroad, and a less literary local reading culture whose materials are ephemeral and habits hard to trace, and whose fate is tied – in ways I attempt to understand – to urbanization and to the realities of underemployment and labor informality.

I argue here that it is useful to think somewhat schematically, much as Pierre Bourdieu once did when thinking about the literary field in France, which he separated into two “fields,” one restricted and autonomous, with players possessing high prestige, and the other large-scale and heteronomous, where players are more interested in wealth and capitalization of increasing production. I suggest that these terms are not quite sufficient now, however – not just for the study of English-language publishing in Africa, but for the study of contemporary literary culture in general. We should highlight a different split instead, between a vibrant, dynamic, entrepreneurial culture of reading that has arisen as an offshoot of practical, material pressure to learn English, and a more established literary culture that imagines itself as activism and uplift. An African literary milieu would like to cultivate a local readership, but it also has access to foreign markets and private donors in order to facilitate its ongoing stability. I argue that the more dynamic popular culture is usefully thought of as picaresque, lacking a sustained engagement in aspirational culture or the goal of expansion of legal trades; the more high-literary elite culture is, on the other hand, still very much invested in the *bildung* of improvement and expansion. Like

Bourdieu again, the point is not to suggest that these spheres exist in isolation from one another, but rather precisely to consider how they are inseparable, gaining meaning only in that relation. Bourdieu emphasized that accruing cultural capital often meant disavowing the actual making of money, and that those with existing wealth were more readily able to position themselves as autonomous cultural producers. Here, differently, I stress that the funded high-literary sphere exists in part to discipline and manage more popular forms of reading in English, especially those forms that do little to expand legal publishing infrastructure.

Following this brief introduction, Section 2 contains an overview and explanation of my basic premises. I provide cautions about the value attached to literacy in English, arguing that it might reflect immiseration rather than “development” as generally defined by the agencies that monitor literacy statistics. I suggest English literacy be considered a tool taken on out of material necessity, which is expanding not alongside prospects for human development but rather in lockstep with urbanization and immiseration. Section 3 surveys the study of English-language publishing in the former colonies, and is focused on the relationship between learning English and social mobility and the oft-lamented fact of the relatively small leisure-reading audience, with people tending to stop reading much at all after formal schooling. I highlight some of the more significant schemes that Western firms developed to exploit markets for school textbooks within Africa – namely the Heinemann African Writers Series and Oxford University Press’s Three Crowns Series. I also suggest how study of African literature has dealt with ongoing relations of neocolonial dependence within the industry, in which many aspiring literary writers perceive a need to write in English, to have contracts with foreign firms, or to write with foreign audiences in mind, if they want to achieve success.

My fourth section then moves the discussion closer to the present, connecting contemporary conditions to the history of underdevelopment of the publishing industries in Africa. I discuss some of the ways in which African writers have bypassed the absent local reader, and emphasize the crucial role played by US-private foundation funding in the ongoing viability of the African literary scene. Section 5 considers a short story, “Jumping Money Hill” by Chimamanda Adichie. I read this story, which is

a fascinating skewering of a writing workshop, in relation to the power of foundation-funded literary writing workshops within the African literary milieu. I argue that the story is an effort to ground Adichie's own authority within that scene, and I offer my reading of it as an example of the way that understanding institutional conditions can help illuminate literature's meanings.

Section 6 then turns to what I describe as more demotic picaresque forms, or those entrepreneurial sites of reading production that are more motivated by immediate necessity and less intent on expansion of legal production of reading materials, especially high literary ones. I trace a number of these forms, including texts for smartphones and pirated books. Section 7 then highlights some relationships between the high-literary sphere and the demotic sphere, via another kind of close reading, this time of volunteer reports by people involved with the Canadian Organization for Development through Education (CODE) Burt Literary Awards, which aim at expanding young adult readership. I look at the developmentalist mindset within these reports, as they search submitted manuscripts for particular literary values, such as completeness, cohesion, and evidence of substantive editing. I consider the qualities of one recent winning title, *Finding Colombia* (2018), whose protagonist is entrapped by the police into catching a notorious drug lord, and I look then at the efforts of his publisher, Oxford University Press East Africa, to clamp down on book piracy by hailing readers as people similarly eager to stop criminals. Drawing on the work of Esther de Bruijn, I then compare *Finding Colombia* to a book she has studied wonderfully, called *The Wicked Mother* – a more ephemeral piece of informal market literature that does not meet the standards of the legal book trade, but that no doubt offered its readers some important skills and pleasures. In the final section I conclude by expanding on this comparison, suggesting that the legal developmentalist trade is motivated to try to capture and in fact discipline some of the dynamism and vibrancy of the more street-level picaresque reading culture that is, for understandable reasons, less respectful of private property rights.

This is a brief Element; my treatment is synthetic and suggestive rather than comprehensive and complete. I hope nevertheless that it might encourage some interesting new ways to think about literary culture in English as it is emerging today.

2 English as Immiseration

It is impossible to estimate with much accuracy how many people are literate in English in Africa; and it is important to challenge the idea that only one form of activity counts as literacy, or that only something like “full” literacy should stand as an official measure. Official literacy statistics measure ability both to read and to write a simple sentence. Yet often people who are semiliterate can read but not write, and those whose abilities are unknown, because they have not been surveyed, are not counted in the statistics. We could surmise then that one recent English Proficiency Index estimate that the rate for Africa as a whole is approximately 50.28 percent is probably low (EF 2020a). It is likely that more people can read in English than can write in it, and there are more people now learning to read in English outside of formal schools, and therefore outside of the catchment group for any proficiency surveying, as they seek informal work in cities.

Nor should we accept, of course, the notion that literate culture is measurably distinct from and superior to oral culture. On the contrary, as many writers have argued, there is little reason to try to separate categorically orality from literacy – efforts to do so have usually been hugely ideologically suspect – while clearly the activity of writing things down is only one mode of creative expression among many, with its own affordances and limitations. In Stephanie Newell’s words, “presence of one or two book-reading individuals in a small community is sufficient for textual interpretations and printed opinions to circulate widely among non-literate people”; and oral performers often know and play with established literary genres and tropes (2006, 71). The fetish for literacy and for printed objects is itself a symptom of a developmentalist ethos that promotes nation building, economic development, and integration into productive employment. This ethos infects much of the research on reading in English in Africa, and it is one that we need to treat critically if we want to see the situation clearly.

For while literacy is, as part of this ethos, included in all the official measures of a nation’s development, there are several respects in which this is deceiving. In the African locations I focus on here, which are for the most part sub-Saharan urban enclaves where people read texts in English, there is under- and overdevelopment, poverty and wealth, slums and wealthy gated

communities side by side. To quote a recent piece by economic historian Aaron Ben-Ner: “Our present reality is better described by near-future science-fiction dystopias than by standard economic analysis; ours is a hot planet, with micro-drones flying over the heads of the street hawkers and rickshaw pullers, where the rich live in guarded, climate-controlled communities while the rest of us waste away our time in dead-end jobs, playing video games on smartphones” (2019, 15).

Although there are agents of development still very much trying to usher in social progress linked to endless economic growth, and they make their appearances below, their conventional terminology is something to be studied rather than used without question. Because the truth is not a matter of an intractable syndrome of underdevelopment that helpful development industry experts are trying to ease. Instead the syndrome is the unfolding capitalist present itself, in which that selfsame lionized process, development, in fact ends up serving the real material interests of very few people, while producing and feeding off growing disparities between those possessing relative power and wealth and those who are – in increasing numbers – living in cities and trying to find some sort of fitful employment. These are, moreover, disparities evident not just in Africa but in the places with the economies that we are supposed to think of as “advanced” or “developed” too – places where we also find substantial pockets of underdevelopment and de-development of anything like sufficient supports for human flourishing.

In this light, English literacy may be as much a measure of immiseration as it is a sign of anything like development toward better conditions of life. How does our perspective change if we consider English literacy a kind of tragic consequence of massive social upheaval? A tool taken on through what Pádraig Carmody has suggested we call, in regard to mobile phones, “negative adoption” (2012, 6) – that is, as a result of the sheer force of material necessity? Consider that, even if the literacy percentages remain relatively low compared to other places, the numbers of people are relatively high: the population of Lagos has been estimated at 21 million, up from 1.4 million as recently as 1970. There is in Lagos, as elsewhere in Africa, a so-called youth bulge – an estimated half to two-thirds of the population are under forty years of age, putting pressure on

already cash-strapped education systems and inadequate labor markets now and into the future. Statistics from UNESCO for 2018 suggest that 62 percent of Nigerian adults are literate, but 75 percent of young people; one measure of proficiency in English in particular puts the rate for Nigeria at 58.36 (EF 2020b). It is interesting to think then that in Lagos alone there could be more than 10 million present or near future readers, many of them quite young, and this is probably a conservative estimate. Meanwhile rates of use of smartphones, mobile subscriptions, internet access, and social media network use are all on the rise, urged along by the increasing market penetration of cheap Asian phones specifically targeting consumers in Africa. For many young people, the easing of access to phone and mobile networks is reason enough to acquire basic literacy; these technologies are all but essential for survival in precarious conditions, as they connect people to job opportunities and to sometimes life-saving supports offered by family and friends (Dyer-Witheyford 2015, 102–123). These technologies also, for book producers, ease some of the burdens associated with establishing a traditional print publishing concern.

Wendy Griswold's pioneering work on reading in Nigeria helpfully drew attention to the very basic conditions that need to be in place for people to develop a serious "reading habit" involving long and relatively difficult books. Habitual readers usually need to find themselves in places where there is "social support for reading, in the form of active encouragement of reading as a highly esteemed activity . . . or at least tolerance of the temporary social withdrawal that reading entails," and "there must be the physical conditions – sufficient light, relative quiet, and some degree of comfortable, personal space – to make sustained reading possible" (2000, 101). Writing in 2000, she wagers that in the absence of these conditions, it is unlikely that regular leisure reading will become much of a pastime for Nigerians, while of course without a substantial readership to sell to there is little incentive for people to try to develop businesses in the book sector. This all makes sense as analysis of the relatively elite reading sector.

We can counter this, however, with a slightly different sociological purview. S. I. A. Kotei's UNESCO-based survey of the state of the book in Africa claims that traditional African social organization is simply against the

activity of reading privately. Referring to a “communal syndrome,” he laments that only “some people are able to escape the clamour of communality in order to read” (1981, 148). Writing in 1981, he notes that over 70 percent of the African population lives in rural areas, “operating a peasant economy” (1981, 150), where traditions are so cohesive that alien objects like books to be read in private are highly suspect, or at least so peculiar that they command everyone’s nosy curiosity. In the rural environment, he argues, one’s “individuality . . . is submerged in communality” (1981, 150). As a result, for the older generations, the few who read at all extensively did so “probably because they have been conditioned by their education to find time for quiet contemplation of literature that is spiritually and morally edifying.” He guesses that it is among the younger generation, however – and this is in contrast to Griswold’s predictions – where the habit might really take hold. Having “sought jobs in urban areas,” they have finally “taken leave of . . . communal ties,” and in “a relatively lonely environment, young people have substituted communion with books for relatives” (1981, 148). Urbanization is releasing “individuated experiences,” he states – very much echoing the early sociology of Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel. Reading is one of these experiences, Kotei argues, serving the needs of those in search of moral instruction and a feeling of togetherness with others.¹

Though I would not endorse Kotei’s derisive take on the “syndrome” of communalism, there is likely some truth to his argument about the affront to traditional sociality that reading presents. As people move into cities looking for work, whether or not they lose touch with their primary languages, they will often simply become immersed in English as the lingua franca of the urban hustle. This process has been rapid in recent years – we need only think again of the emergence of Lagos as a global megacity. Benanav notes that “between 1980 and the present, the world’s waged workforce grew by about 75 per cent, adding more than 1.5 billion

¹ See for instance Durkheim’s study (1893) of anomie as an urban condition of being too individualized, cut off from the norms of a supporting social whole; or see “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903), in which Simmel argues that city life allows the individual a complex and ambivalent freedom that manifests, especially in crowds, as loneliness.

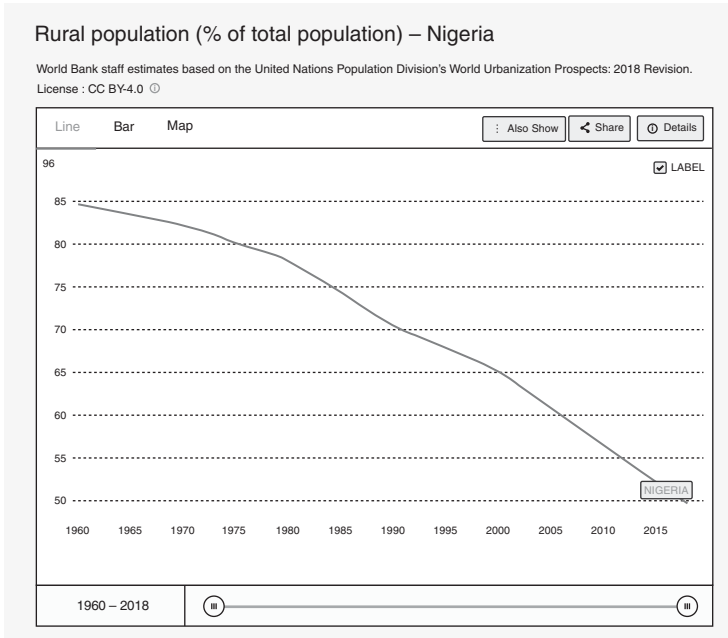


Figure 1 Rural population figures for Nigeria from 1960 to 2018. Chart created by the author using World Bank statistics.

people to the world's labour markets." Today "a much larger share of the world's population depends on finding work in labour markets in order to live" (2019, 37). This change has been dramatic in Africa. Just staying with the example of Nigeria, statistics gathered by the World Bank suggest that the current rural population is about 49.7 percent, steadily down from 84.59 percent in 1960, with no reason to expect any change in direction of population flows.

In light of this rapid transformation, we can observe that if the reading habit is currently spreading and changing, this is less because of the tireless work of charitable donors and developmentalist agencies actively trying to

intervene, and more due to rapid urbanization and the immersion into English of people scrambling for work and daily livelihoods. It seems no longer quite right to say “the English-reading audience in countries such as Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya is restricted to those who can afford to pursue higher levels of education” such that “when discussing readership in anglophone African countries, one is actually referring to a small elite” (Lizzaribar Buxó 1998, 24). This may apply well to the more literary readership, where longer and more dense materials are common for reading, and where texts are often more detached from functional uses and allocated their own special time as a tribute to their inherent value. But in the more demotic mass reading sector, where the sheer size of the potential reading population is quite considerable, we might guess that reading short texts on one’s phone, including fiction, or ephemeral print picked up en route, even just to pass one’s time during a boring day or commute, or to recuperate between work tasks, may become a growing daily habitual practice.

We observe then, alongside the slums and the rich gated suburbs, a persistent unevenness within the African English-language reading milieu itself, where we find small networks of reading as an elite pastime and cultural cultivation in a bifurcated system; we find schoolchildren exchanging sensationalistic supplementary readers produced in the informal sector; we find pressure to learn to read coupled with a lack of books at school; and we find demotic everyday reading of whatever comes your way, often speedy and ephemeral and haphazard and not easily statistically accounted for by me or any other interested observer. The fact of this other non-literary reading culture has long been observed, for instance in foundational scholarship on market literatures by Emmanuel Obiechina (1973), Stephanie Newell (2006), and Esther de Bruijn (2018). Scholars might now amplify and reanimate the claims of this work, by stressing the expansion of the audience for English texts that can be bought cheaply, shared readily, and read relatively quickly.

Hence my argument that what is not of much use here are the binary terms that usually feature in scholarship on literary publishing: mainstream versus alternative; large and corporate versus small and independent; commercial versus noncommercial or artistic. This vocabulary pits the mainstream against the independent, the corporate against the authentically literary. It emerged from study of what Pierre Bourdieu (1983) influentially

called relatively “autonomous” literary fields, which were situated in advanced economies. In these fields, a considerable number of writers became able to making a living selling their books to an interested public, which then made it possible for some to toy with the idea that it bothered them when good art is tainted by commerce. Perhaps their work did not sell well but they had another source of income (“emancipation . . . can be performed and pursued only if the post [of artist or poet] encounters the appropriate dispositions, such as disinterestedness and daring, and the (external) condition of these virtues, such as a private income” [Bourdieu 1983, 343]); perhaps they were willing to live in relative penury; or perhaps they were simply using anti-commercial posturing to sell more books. Whatever the case, we see many differences from the conditions Bourdieu considered when we look at the nature of English reading in the underdeveloped economies. For example, much of the activity in the high-literary field is funded not by market sales but by private foundation and nonprofit NGO investments. Furthermore, the relevant conundrum is not whether to “sell out” and go commercial, but rather how to acknowledge and manage one’s dependence on foreign readers and outlets.

It is more useful to develop an alternative schema, mapping two separate but interlinked domains: on the one hand, developmentalist publishing; and on the other hand, the publishing picaresque. Developmentalist publishing has as its goal a more extensive legal industry with a wider predictable readership. It is supported by local writers who simultaneously depend on foreign audiences and want to develop local literary fields even though their work sells well abroad. It is also supported by funding from NGOs, foreign governments, private foundations, and the like. It works symbiotically with private-sector firms that want to cultivate audiences and sell more books. It imagines literacy and especially reading for improvement as a universal good. It laments underdevelopment of the sector. Picaresque publishing, on the other hand, is more about survival and entrepreneurialism in the moment. It is not really engaged in practices designed to expand official licensed publishing and book industries, but instead responds in a more immediate way to new kinds of needs for emergent forms of readily digestible reading materials.