



Africa Writes – Exeter 2023 Day 1: Minutes before the official opening. Photo: Israel Peters

## AFRICA WRITES – EXETER: AN EMERGING LIVE LITERATURE CLASSIC IN THE SOUTH WEST

When you think of a literary festival, what comes to mind? Presumably, you imagine a range of events that bring your favourite authors in somewhat relational proximity to you. The authors are eager to talk to you about their books related to the essence of the festival. You are likely eager to be in the same room or space with them, happy as a fan to share your thoughts about their work. You probably also beam at the prospects of networking with other attendees who clearly share similar interests, ranging from love for books to themes that underpin the festival. It is easy to create versions of your favourite authors in the active imagination with which you read their work, but translating that abstract creation into reality – a tangible human form – is an experience many of us want to explore. More than these immediate personal benefits, literary festivals bring other significant benefits in the broader literary space. This means we can assess a literary festival by considering the sum total of the additional value it creates in various forms, provided they advance the core and evolving priorities of the literary industry.

We consider Africa Writes – Exeter as one such festival that provides literary enthusiasts with rich immersive experiences while creating added value with broad implications. The festival is a ‘satellite edition’ of the larger Africa Writes Festival, which is organised by the Royal African Society in partnership with the British Library. It aims to celebrate both established and emerging contemporary literature and thoughts from Africa and the African diaspora<sup>1</sup>. Aside from the partnership with the British Library, other regional partnerships have recently emerged to co-curate satellite events in places like Leeds, Swindon, and Birmingham<sup>1</sup>. The first Exeter-based edition was held in 2022 and

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the second edition in the mid-summer days of 2023, from July 7 to 9. Bringing the event to Exeter is part of the UNESCO City of Literature programme of the city<sup>2</sup>. The festival was hosted by a collaboration between the Royal African Society, Saseni!, the University of Exeter, local independent bookshop Bookbag, and creative hub Roots Resistance. The involvement of these cultural institutions is the first indication that the festival is unique and purposefully ambitious.

#### The Place

Place plays a significant role in the success of a literary festival. Long before a festival opens its doors, we can form broad expectations of the events and create a sensual pre-emption of experiences they promise us. Thus, place also lends support to the organisers as a tool for publicity. We can think of place as the venue's reputation, location, and atmosphere, including the time of day of the events. These elements create sentiments and impressions, timestamping and geotagging memorable experiences on our minds.

A festival scheduled to be held at an iconic place sells itself on the reputation of the place. Africa Writes has traditionally been held at the British Library, the United Kingdom's national library. The library houses a diverse collection that has taken about three centuries to develop and spans 'every age of written civilisation'<sup>3</sup>. Every year, more than 1.5 million visitors step into the library while the website records 6 million catalogue searches<sup>3</sup>. Aligning Africa Writes with such a reputable and culturally iconic institution signals a deliberate intent to emphasise the magnitude and reach of the event.

Arguably, this symbolic capital is the basis on which satellite versions of the festival are initially successful. The literary community in the United Kingdom already recognises the significance of the festival and associates it with the reputation of the iconic host venues. The perception of high value lingers on the minds of the broader set of prospective audiences. This may explain why we may be highly receptive of the festival when versions of it move closer to us. In fact, satellite versions have an organic tendency for success because of the growing consensus on the need to democratise access to the diverse offerings of the literary away from the capital.

The 2023 Exeter edition was held at Bookbag and Exeter Phoenix. As of the time of the festival, Bookbag was the only indie bookshop in Exeter<sup>4</sup>. The bookstore regularly holds a range of creative literary events and stocks a diverse list. Its central location in the heart of the city makes it accessible like a magnet drawing in audiences and readers from all over the city. Similarly, Exeter Phoenix hosts all kinds of art events, priding itself as 'the home of the city's thriving cultural scene' that is 'supporting creativity in the South West'<sup>5</sup>. These two locations were significant to the mission of the festival because they promote the indie side of publishing while introducing the festival into the cultural climate and literary range of the creative city of literature.

In addition to the carefully chosen location, participants of the festival were welcomed into a soothing atmosphere, especially during the evening events. On the first day, participants were treated to a semi-open setting which fostered mixed experiences of networking, entertainment, and refreshment. Bookbag offered this place in collaboration with Sacred Grounds. Chairs and tables were arranged in the open space leading to both hosts within McCloys Arcade, under a transparent roof that created the impression of an open concrete field as rays of light from the pale sky filtered directly into the space. Low, floating yellow lights added colour to the high space, aside from their primary function of displacing the darkness that slowly crept in with the fading evening. Steps away from the seats were the open doors to Bookbag, making it easy for participants to pick other books in addition to those of the guest authors (a fine business win for the indie bookseller).

Evenings generally connote friendliness, unwinding, and destressing. Events holding on the first day of the festival ran from 6 PM to about 10 PM, winding down with music and dance for the younger participants who relished the moments a little while longer. During the mid-summer days of July 7

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and 8, sunset crept in at about 10 PM. The longer summer days were apt for the occasion, providing a perception of extended activity rather than the sense of rapid conclusion that typically accompanies dusk. Moreso, having festival events into the evening was ideal as working participants would have closed from work for the day and most likely would be looking to have a rather relaxing evening. The place of the festival was excellently created.

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Africa Writes – Exeter 2023 Day 2: Exeter Phoenix entrance. Photo: Israel Peters

#### An Emerging Literary Festival in the South West

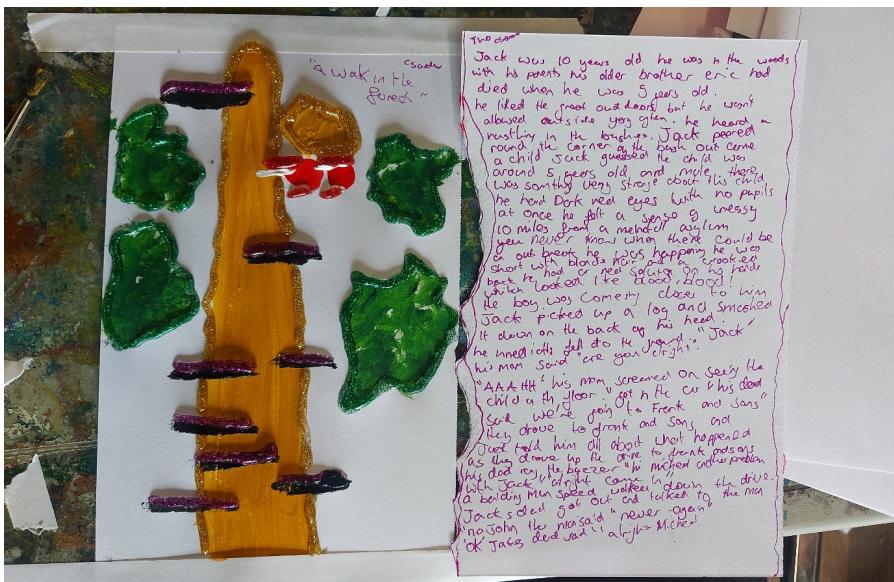
Literary festivals are common in the United Kingdom. They are part of the rich literary culture in South West England. The largest festival in the South West is The Times and Sunday Times Cheltenham Literature Festival. This festival is regarded as 'the world's first literature Festival' and is by many standards 'leading the way in celebrating the written and spoken word, presenting the best new voices in fiction and poetry alongside literary greats and high-profile speakers'<sup>6</sup>. Other relatively small festivals are also thriving in the region. One of such is the North Cornwall Book Festival which is supported by Arts Council England and the Cornwall Council<sup>7</sup>. The 2023 edition is scheduled for autumn and promises author talks, performances, and workshops. The Marlborough LitFest which is

also scheduled for autumn promises a touch of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry; aims to celebrate both new and established authors; and has entertainment and workshops planned for children<sup>8</sup>. One particularly niche literary festival in the South West is The Sherborne Travel Writing Festival, which in April 2023 brought together some of 'the UK's finest travel writers ... to Sherborne to transport readers, listeners, armchair and intrepid travellers alike towards the four corners of the globe'<sup>9</sup>. As we see, the South West is home to several thriving festivals.

Africa Writes – Exeter is most similar to the Sherborne Travel Writing Festival in terms of going niche (in a sense). Considering the growing call for inclusion in the ethnoracially diverse literary space of the United Kingdom, Africa Writes – Exeter stands out as a champion of bold inclusivity by adding a dedicated Black node to the broad literary network in the South West. This extension is not about celebrating Black talents from the region. It is about converging Black interests in a major way in the region, as evidenced by the geographically diverse Black talents celebrated at the festival. Clearly, the festival is enriching the literary networks in the South West through ethnoracial diversity and inclusion.

The place strategy of the festival creates a new kind of focus experience for readers while further highlighting the host city on the global publishing map. From my conversations with some participants (and an invited author) at the festival, it was clear that Exeter was not widely established in the hearts of many immigrant literary enthusiasts even within the United Kingdom. Could we say that successful literary exports are often isolated from their geographical origins by contemporary literary consumers? While we ponder that, there is no denying that the festival is one more opportunity to foreground the city as a cultural interest. Mainstream publicity provides widespread exposure. There is also a kind of exposure that is gained organically through micro networks. In today's convergent literary space, micro-exposure is mainly achieved by immersive experiences. When a platform creates memorable experiences for us, it is easier for us to associate the experiences with the place rather than the performers alone. So, as Africa Writes – Exeter creates memorable experiences for participants, they also spread word of the city organically by word of mouth, through informal conversations, and on social media. The festival, therefore, is poised to establish itself as a new cultural trademark of the South West.

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Africa Writes – Exeter 2023 Day 3: Product of the creative writing workshop with Chika Unigwe and Dina Salah Al Din for ages 7–12. Creation of 10-year-old Jack. Photo: Israel Peters

### Festival Impact: Value beyond the Cultural Good

Live literature takes various forms. A few examples are panel-type conversations with authors who talk about their work, read excerpts, and answer questions from the audience; oral performance such as spoken word poetry; digitally communicated texts; and live or performance art<sup>10</sup>. The relatively small scale of Africa Writes – Exeter 2023 did not hinder the festival's demonstration of live literature in its evolving breadth and depth. In terms of breadth, the festival events were author talks, poetry, music, and creative workshops. In terms of depth, some of these events incorporated other emerging values of the contemporary publishing industry through cross-thematic explorations. Al-Saddiq Al-Raddi performed poems from *A Friend's Kitchen* in Arabic. His translators read the English translation. This dual reading was both poetry in performance and translation in performance, which further strengthens the place of live literature in contemporary publishing and modern literary engagements.

As its name implies, the Africa Writes Festival generally seeks diversity and Black representation. Moreso, Africa Writes – Exeter 2023 was indicative of progressive representation, by which I mean representation that contributes to the sustainability of the literary culture in the region and is sensitive to social justice. For the former, today's younger generation will become tomorrow's literary creators and consumers. The writing workshop for children aged 7–12 years and creative workshop for teenagers and young adults aged 16–24 years was strategic. It is an indirect, proactive contribution towards preserving interest in the literary and maintaining its perceived value by those who will become tomorrow's literary actors. In terms of the festival's sensitivity to social justice, the featuring of Travis Alabanza and Okechukwu Nzelu who are successful authors from the LGBTQ+ community shows us how we should acknowledge and embrace society's diversity along the lines of gender identity. Okechukwu Nzelu's *Here Again Now* was described by a review in *The Guardian* as a 'story of two gay British-Nigerian friends exploring race and masculinity'<sup>11</sup>. Gay. British. Nigerian. The author remarked at the festival: 'being a Black British in the LGBTQ community has its peculiar challenges'. Here, we see a highlighting of the struggles faced by many: being Black has been hard enough. Some are coupling that hard experience with the struggles of being in the non-binary ends of the gender spectrum. Factoring in mainstream and political rejection of the LGBTQ+ community in Africa, we can safely conclude that the struggle is intricately tripartite. The curators of Africa Writes – Exeter skilfully illustrated their understanding that being African is not only about skin colour but also about every other sociocultural element of identity.

The aim for rich representation at the festival was by no means a compromise on quality. On entering the venue on the first day, I met visibly excited participants who made the environment lively with warm chats, happy faces, and palpable anticipation of satisfaction. The authors invited mostly did not fail in their author-performer role, which seems to have become an expectation in live literature<sup>10</sup>. Beginning with Al-Saddiq's poetry 'performance' on the first day, the translators effortlessly amused the audience as they recounted the uncertainty and difficulty they often encountered while translating the author's work. By the time Ros Martin was up at 8:00 PM, the author performances had become deeply immersive. These live readings are a bit different from the solo-immersion you encounter when you read a book. The context of the story, which the authors begin with before reading, creates a different experience entirely. You are subtly invited to think about the loved ones lost, the fallen being honoured, and some more receiving heartfelt recognition. These weave you into the readings in different and emotionally charged ways, stirring laughter, empathy, or sympathy. In-between readings, commentary is inserted, providing further emotional engagement with you. This is classic performance, and Africa Writes – Exeter 2023 was replete with it.

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8 July 2023 4:32 pm

Africa Writes – Exeter 2023 Day 2: Okechukwu Nzelu in conversation with Fiona Williams at Exeter Phoenix. Photo: Israel Peters

The events of the second day were less of entertaining performance and seemed more like honest, sober conversations and reflections. Peace Adzo Medie talked about *Nightbloom* as a deliberate attempt to explore the mundane that we may naturally treat as superficial. The author expressed her interest in how migration and social evolution shape family tension, especially family as we mostly know it in West Africa: large extended clans and family houses. Okechukwu Nzelu spoke about spending roughly 8 years to write the debut novel, a project that was undertaken as a fulltime teacher. US-based Chika Unigwe, author of *The Middle Daughter*, recounted the difficulty of ‘living her characters’ to be able to write about them. Leila Aboulela talked about the pitfall of getting carried away with over-researching before writing. The usual question about the writing process was thrown to almost all the authors. Overall, the first and second days were unique and engaging in their own ways. The creative writing workshop for children was the final event of the festival, and it was held on the third and final day.

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In addition to progressive representation, advocacy was central to the theme of the festival, especially in relation to the conflicts in Sudan. Many had thought that the ousting of Omar al-Bashir through a coup in 2019 was the dawn of democracy in Sudan, but the same military heroes took a U-turn only two years later. By April 2023, the U-turn had reawakened the curse of armed conflicts in the nation. In fact, the conflicts in Sudan have been ongoing for three decades, as emphasised by Sudanese poet Nour Khairi who also performed poetry at the festival. As with most conflicts, the instability in Sudan has ripple effects that reach beyond the seven bordering nations and the Red Sea. It potentially invites external sovereign actors who seek influence for selfish gains<sup>12</sup>. Sudan reminds us of the ravaging unrests that have swept across the continent for decades. It is a case of the struggles we have faced as a continent as we navigate through dictatorship, oligarchy disguising as democracy, military rule, and

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factional resistance. Political leadership is not all there is. Cultural struggles are equally rampant, as echoed by the women and feminist matters raised by Peace Adzo Medie and Chika Unigwe.

This festival is clearly a new node in the literary network in the South West. Think of it as a powerful migration of African literary networks deep into the region. By touching on key issues of sentimental significance to Africans, the festival creates a safe space for Africans in diaspora to converge and share support, solidarity, comfort, and hope. As an African in diaspora, you cannot stop caring about the peace and prosperity of home for the sake of your loved ones there. For the sake of the day you intend to joyfully announce 'I'm coming home'. For the sake of your strong connection to the roots of your identity. This is why Africans in diaspora value advocacy and discourse about salient issues concerning home. Advocacy drives a strong sense of bonding and provides an opportunity for the kind of global mainstream attention that stirs hope for progressive engagements. Africa Writes – Exeter brought home to Exeter for many. The festival audience had roots in Sudan, Somalia, Kenya, Rwanda, Ghana, South Africa, Nigeria, and British locals, all walking in from Bristol to Plymouth. One African participant I spoke with had travelled down from Canterbury in the South East. Such audience diversity creates room for audience–audience and audience–performers networking. Thus, the festival enabled inter- and intra-racial network associations.

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In all, let us begin from where we started. When you think of a literary festival, what *now* comes to mind? We certainly have our individual festival expectations and experiences. But we must look beyond these to see how the festivals we love are shaping the literary and cultural spaces we belong in. Africa Writes – Exeter entertains and engages. It entertains the reader-audience. Then, it invites us even deeper to engage with issues of significance to Africans in diaspora. We have seen the significance of place in the success and impact of a literary festival. We have also seen how unique and valuable Africa Writes – Exeter is: unique in its ethnoracial positioning in the South West and valuable as live literature creating immersive cultural experiences and deeply engaging with current affairs. A literary festival should not only make us feel good in fun ways. It should also make us think about the world we live in and the people we interact with daily in that world. Africa Writes – Exeter has set a new standard in the South West by these metrics. Organisers of the festival may consider creating participation incentives for emerging Black literary creators in the South West. This could further strengthen the networks the festival is creating in the region. Additionally, they may explore how live digital storytelling and performance may be integrated into the festival to create extended immersive experiences. We can only eagerly anticipate how the festival evolves to maximise its potential.

#### Notes

1. <https://africawrites.org/about/>
2. <https://africawrites.org/exeter/africa-writes-exeter-2023/>
3. <https://www.bl.uk/about-us/our-story/facts-and-figures-of-the-british-library#:~:text=Each%20year%3A,almost%204%20million%20items%20online.>
4. <https://bookbag.shop/>
5. <https://exeterphoenix.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/>
6. <https://www.cheltenhamfestivals.com/literature/news/the-times-and-sunday-times-cheltenham-literature-festival-2023-full-programme>
7. <https://endelienta.org.uk/support-us/patron/>

8. <https://www.marlboroughlitfest.org/full-festival-programme-announced/>
9. <https://www.sherborneliterarysociety.com/copy-of-sherborne-travel-writing-fest>
10. Wiles, Ellen. Live literature: the experience and cultural value of literary performance events from salons to festivals. Springer Nature, 2021.
11. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/mar/02/here-again-now-by-okechukwu-nzelu-review-gay-british-nigerian-race-masculinity>
12. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/terror-and-security/sudan-conflict-explained-what-happening-history-war/>