



## **Rebuilding and Reimagining Kenya's Libraries Interviews with Wanjiru Koinange & Angela Wachuka**

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KENNEALLY: Nairobi-based [Book Bunk](#) restores iconic library buildings in the Kenyan capital and elsewhere across the East African nation. That work, though, goes well beyond bricks and mortar.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally.

In 2019, the [Africa Publishing Innovation Fund](#) awarded Book Bunk \$50,000 to assist its efforts. The APIF supports literacy, book access, indigenous publishing, and library restoration across Africa. APIF is a joint undertaking of the UAE-based development non-profit [Dubai Cares](#) and the [International Publishers Association \(IPA\)](#). The Sharjah World Book Capital program [also has supported](#) the historic McMillan Memorial Library's restoration project in Nairobi.

As the global coronavirus pandemic holds the world in its grip, Book Bunk has suspended in-person activities, yet it continues to meet the challenge of engaging a new generation of readers.

KENNEALLY: Wanjiru Koinange is an author and publisher who is also a self-described lover of libraries. She joins me from Nairobi, Kenya. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Wanjiru.

KOINANGE: Thank you, Christopher. I'm so delighted to be talking to you this afternoon/morning. (laughter)

KENNEALLY: It's really a privilege for me to have a chance to speak with you and learn about the Book Bunk project. You planted the seed for it with an article you wrote on the McMillan Library for Commonwealth Writers back in 2015. That article described the dilapidated state of the library at that point. Describe the McMillan as you found it for our audience in 2015.



KOINANGE: Wow, that is such a throwback. It was heartbreaking to say the least. The library looked like it hadn't been loved and touched or given any kind of maintenance in what must have been two or three decades at that point. So a beautiful building, a beautiful structure. Lots of thought went into the building in the 1920s when it was put there. But just it was suffering neglect, and it was everything from the wiring, to the floors, to the collection that hadn't been updated since the '70s.

The building did nothing to speak to the city and its residents. You could have put that building in any city in the world in 1920, and it'd have fit right in, because it's like the city had shifted and left this library behind. It was heartbreaking that a building that was supposed to be the source of Nairobi's intellectual formation had been left to sit in that way.

KENNEALLY: When you were in that building at its worst moments, it was necessary to imagine it as something better. That was not just your own imagination, but others who joined and who could see that same thing. It's really remarkable to sort of imagine something better and then make it happen.

KOINANGE: Make it happen. Yeah, because on a personal level, I'm a writer first, and I've always said this. I don't write more than anything else, but I am a writer first. It was very difficult for me to be someone who has been born in the city, I've lived in Nairobi all my life – I have gone outside for school, but always come back – and I know what books cost in the city, and I can't afford to buy books as often as I want to. And this is me, who's done pretty well for herself, right? To expect myself to be writing for Kenyans and realize they can't afford the book from bookstores and that the spaces that are intended for these books to live have not been given the kind of care – if so, that it was incomplete for me to then spend a life writing for an audience that would never be able to access my work.

KENNEALLY: The other element that you have to engage with is history. That is a history that is really a complicated, complex one, fraught with so many things. When the McMillan opened in 1931, Kenya was under British rule. I wonder how as part of the Book Bunk work, you've engaged with that colonial legacy. What has that meant as you've gone about this restoration and reimagination?

KOINANGE: When the library was opened in 1931, it wasn't intended for us. Black people were not allowed in that space. It was intended for McMillan. Well, he was dead then, but his wife had intended it for her people. And the collection and the artwork and everything in that building speaks to a space for the European settler in Nairobi to access.



Every single day we walked into that building, we had a team, as you mentioned, of six people working full time to write down the name of every single book in that library, and some of them were really hurtful. Some of them were really problematic. We're not here to erase those truths, because that's someone's history. It's the way that we've been written about in the past, and we don't want to get rid of that, because that's not the solution. Erasing the way that we've been erased is not the answer. I think it's about balance. I'm like, let's see how we've been portrayed before, and let's add to it and try and be like, we have all these unique stories. I think at that point, we then arrive at a history that's a bit more complete than the ones we often have on this end of the world. It's something we're continuously having to address.

But you're right. There's so much tied to a library, and it's not just about the books.

**KENNEALLY:** And you've been speaking about it within the Kenyan context, but this is a project that now has taken on a kind of global importance. In May of 2019, the International Publishers Association, together with the UAE-Based Dubai Cares philanthropic organization, agreed to work together with you to support the Book Bunk. You received a \$50,000 grant from them, and Dubai Cares added on another \$10,000 for children's books for the library. What does that kind of support from around the world mean to you and mean to the Nairobi community?

**KOINANGE:** Oh my goodness. That strand of support – because it was, I think, the first time we'd gotten money from a body that wasn't based in Kenya, and we just kept being like, how did they even find out about us?

But it's also just – it was for us a nod to just kind of keep speaking about the work and keep talking about it, because people are listening, and they're watching – I think that around libraries specifically, because everybody agrees that they're important. I don't think that there's been a lot of conversation about how they can be kind of rejuvenated. Everything that we're trying to do is not necessarily revolutionary. It's fairly simple – get into a space and just ask people some questions, right? But I think it's always been so daunting. And when you get this kind of support from people, also then more comes, which is fantastic.

That's what the Book Bunk thing is. Maybe once we've done it once, we can then talk to government and be like, can we expand this and go to other countries? Because in a country like Kenya, hospitals and roads and schools are always their priority, and that's sad. But it's the truth, and I don't see that truth changing in my lifetime, to be honest, and it's unfortunate. But this is just a way for me to put some of the magic that I want in my city there while I'm alive, while I'm living in it.



KENNEALLY: That magic and those public spaces has unfortunately been entranced recently because of COVID-19. How have you managed with the restrictions that the pandemic has brought to you? It's unfortunate. Everything, not just at the McMillan, but around the world, has kind of come to a stop when it comes to public gatherings. Yet the work continues. So how are you managing? How are you responding to the COVID-19 crisis there?

KOINANGE: It's bittersweet, because here, schools are closed and will remain closed until January, so an entire school year has been lost, and I have no idea what the plan is to recover that. That's been a bit of a painful part, that children could be using these spaces to get some education – maybe not a full school year, but it could be helping serve the community more in this time. Not safely, obviously – we can't do that and keep people safe, because we all know what's happening.

But the plus side has been that because they're already closed, we've been able to renovate them faster. We did the first remodeling in half the time we thought it would take.

But of course, there have been losses. We haven't been able to gather in programs and have screenings and events and everything that we used to, and we're only now being able to shapeshift to move programs online. That presents new challenges, because the communities that use the library come to the library because they don't have Wi-Fi at home. They're coming there for the Wi-Fi. So you can't expect them to be logging in at home.

To counter that, we distributed activity packs to children who live around the libraries. We gave them some reading material, some toys, some activity packs, basically, to keep them busy, and we hope to do this a few more times before we reopen fully – which, to be honest, will be even post-reopen in January. So we don't see anything changing much between now and then. But we want to keep our fingers or our connection with the community. And I think between the digital programming and the activity packs, we'll have covered a bit of our bases.

KENNEALLY: Wanjiru Koinange, it has been a pleasure to speak with you about the work that you've been engaged in. Wanjiru Koinange is a co-founder of the Book Bunk project. She spoke with me today from Nairobi, Kenya. Thanks so much for joining me on Beyond the Book.

KOINANGE: You're welcome, Chris. Thanks for having me.



KENNEALLY: Angela Wachuka is the co-founder of Book Bunk. From 2008 to 2017, she was executive director of Kwani Trust, where she published many of Africa's leading literary voices and organized an internationally recognized literary festival in Nairobi, where she joins me now. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Angela.

WACHUKA: Thank you so much. Thrilled to be here.

KENNEALLY: We are looking forward to speaking with you and learning more about your perspective on the Book Bunk project, which you did co-found with Wanjiru Koinange. I want to ask you first to tell me about what led you to form this project and perhaps a bit about how restoring libraries fits in with your other literary activities.

WACHUKA: Sure. The connection between the two actually goes back to how Wanjiru and I ended up meeting, because like you say, I was working for a literary institution before we started this project, and Wanjiru happened to be the festival producer that we had hired under the Kwani Litfest banner. That's how we met.

During one of the editions, we were really keen – felt this kind of exhaustion from having explored as many venues as we thought were possible. Traditionally, we'd kind of taken literary production and writing into very many different Nairobi spaces – bars, restaurants, that sort of thing. And the one thing that was really missing was hosting these events in public spaces. So we came across the library during a hunt to try and lock down some public spaces to be part of the programming for one of those editions of the literary festival.

Really, that kind of plants the seed for our interest in this library. It becomes something that we continue to be interested in, curious about. We keep going back to speak to the librarians about the space itself, why it's in the condition that it's in, what kind of regeneration can be done, but also finding out things about structure – what's the body that's responsible for this library? What kind of fiscal responsibility do they have? What sort of patronage do they drive?

So we started to learn all these incredible things about the library, and of course, it becomes really clear what the gaps are. And having been people who'd worked in the creative economy sector, at least for a decade before that, it becomes an increasingly curious outfit that we feel super-compelled to try and kind of get to the bottom of. That's really how the project begins.

KENNEALLY: It begins with this act of imagination that you and Wanjiru had to engage in, right? Because the condition of the McMillan was such that you probably couldn't hold



the kinds of event you wanted to hold at that moment. You had to think of it in the future. That really is an act of imagination, an act of hope. I think it's really inspiring for others who may see the same kinds of conditions for libraries across Africa, or indeed around the world.

WACHUKA: I agree with you. Yes, it is an act of imagination, because we wanted to believe that there was a kind of different future that's possible not just for the libraries as structures, but also as places for imagination and places for expression. This happens at a time also that we think there are a lot of interesting things that are happening in terms of legislating the creative space here. So it's a confluence between, well, let's have a conversation as well about what the obligations of government are towards providing such spaces, but also fully resourcing them.

It's been a really interesting experience, to say the least, because as you can imagine, the project itself is born out of the neglect that these spaces have endured for decades. So it comes out of the imagination also at the same time as it does out of a need for better and more.

KENNEALLY: What was the response of the literary community in Nairobi around all of these efforts? Were they excited by it, or did they perhaps have doubts that you could really achieve what you were hoping to achieve?

WACHUKA: It's been really exciting collaborating with people in the sector. One of the first things that we did immediately was to speak to as many writers and artists and visual artists, and also to people really who were in the creative expression space and invite them into the building, but also gather their views about what they thought was important.

The year after that, we were able to elevate that relationship into a public callout specifically targeting artists and asking them what sort of programming, if they had some monetary support, they would like to carry out in these spaces. So throughout the course of 2019, in fact, all the programming that we did was done in partnership with artists, where we provided technical assistance for the kind of things that they wanted to put on, and then they kind of took care of the content side of things.

That ended up being really interesting, because we ended up with a balance between book launches, to storytelling sessions for children, to film screenings, to all sorts of things, but it also meant that these artists were coming in for discussions about the kind of future that they wanted to see in the library. But they were also bringing in their own audiences – sometimes back to these spaces, but sometimes it was a complete audience that first started interacting with the spaces. That's been interesting as well.



Traditionally, the creative sector here, when it comes to allocation of support, public spending, everything, you name it, it's kind of not been a priority. So we wanted to kind of flip that approach and make sure that the creative sector remains at the heart of how we're transforming these libraries.

**KENNEALLY:** And the McMillan Library itself – the building, the structure opened in 1931, when Kenya was still under British rule – British colonial rule. Tell me about the way that you and Wanjiru engaged with that colonial legacy as part of the restoration effort.

**WACHUKA:** It's been a very deeply layered process, and I think both of us have really growing respect and space for research and data and what that can generate. What I mean by that is that the first thing that we did was that Wanjiru got permission to write a piece some years ago about any aspect of Nairobi living that she wanted to focus on, and this was happening under the remit of the Commonwealth Writers Foundation. She then decided that what she wanted to kind of deep-dive into was the history of this library, which is where we end up with all this information about who built it, when, for whom, how, what are the legal aspects of this? So she did all sorts of research about the commissioning of this building, but also who it was intended for. It was our first real set of information that gave us the impetus to say, OK, we've really got something quite fleshy here that we can pursue.

The second level of the information that was coming across in relation to your question was obviously the content in the library. When it was opened in 1931, a lot of the material that we have found has actually been bequeathed by people who were connected to the empire somehow, people who set up shop here, but also people who were patrons of the library, which was never intended for Black African users, because that becomes something that's part of the deal just before Kenya becomes independent. But it means that for some decades, for three decades, it actually operates as a very exclusive club, where the only patronage that is allowed is reflective of the power structures of the time, which is colonial British. So it means that the material that you are encountering reflects that power structure. If you're talking about making it more inclusive, you've got to look at the entire remit of the material that you have inherited and decide what you're going to do with it.

**KENNEALLY:** I want to ask you about what you felt were the national values, the Kenyan aspirations that you were able to articulate through this work, because to move from that colonial legacy to the present day, to present-day Kenya, an exploration not only of the past, but of the present – can you speak about how you feel that this work for Book Bunk is a way of articulating those Kenyan values around literature, art, artists' endeavor, and so forth?



WACHUKA: I'm not sure about Kenyan values. I've always kind of shied away from this idea that you can have values that are national in scope, because we're so just deeply varied as a country. But I suppose when you look at what the ideal of the republic is when we become an independent state and the gaps that that has deepened or closed, I'd say one of the most important things, obviously, would be inclusivity. When you're dealing with a space that neither architecturally nor content-wise nor in any other way in its design was intended for you, then you've got to kind of go back to the very structure of it, because that is going to be reflected in how people imagine it can be used. If you've got to undo that, then inclusivity is something that you want to ingrain deeply, because we also know how much friction and fissures are caused by what are intended to be public buildings only serving the interests of a few. That's been a very interesting unearthing.

I would say another deeply interesting aspect for me has been public memory and access to archives and this idea of who gets to tell the story of who or what you are, either as a city or a community or as a nation. If that public memory is shaped by access to information that has been decided in terms of how it's going to be presented, then it shapes how you think of certain things. How do you think about Kenya becoming independent? How do you think about the exodus of the colonial government and its power structures and the beginning of Kenya as a republic or as a project? Public memory and archives around these experiences would be shaped by what I can access.

KENNEALLY: In addition to the work of creating this space within the McMillan, Book Bunk is now also a bit of a tiny publishing house. You'll be releasing Wanjiru's novel, *The Havoc of Choice*, and there will be some children's books in a variety of African languages. Tell us a little bit more about those kinds of books, because of course, libraries remain at their core about books and reading.

WACHUKA: Yes. We are really, really excited to be making our way back into publishing, because we're concerned, obviously, not just with where does access happen from, in the sense that libraries are a great access point to all sorts of narratives and all sorts of experiences, but we also want to help create the work that's going into those spaces.

So it was very important to us, our first book – this is happening under an imprint called Bunk Books. The reason why we were so interested in setting that up, Christopher, is because we wanted also for Book Bunk to have an avenue of earned income that's drawing from the same kind of ecology, if you like. We're very excited to explore books in our own languages. It's a long-lasting discussion within the sector what sort of languages we're publishing in. Is there enough publishing in indigenous languages happening? So we're excited to explore that, because we think that we're also publishing the kind of





stories that we would like to see read by children and we would like to see populate libraries. Although they're two different entities, they kind of do the same work.

KENNEALLY: Angela Wachuka, co-founder of Book Bunk, we've very much enjoyed speaking with you today about your work. Thank you for joining me on Beyond the Book.

WACHUKA: Thank you.

KENNEALLY: Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to this program wherever you go for podcasts and follow us on Twitter and Facebook. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening and join us again soon for another podcast from CCC.