

Interview with Achal Prabhala Regarding the Formation of Planetbinya.org Archive

Myrtle Jones (6/20/2019 and 6/28/2019)

Achal Prabhala is a researcher and writer based in Bangalore, India. Although Prabhala is known for his advocacy and research on intellectual property rights and medicine, his work—resurrecting, championing, and writing about issues related to Black and Brown people throughout the diaspora—has appeared in [Africa is a Country](#), [Bidoun](#), and [The Caravan](#).

Achal and I were among a group of Binya's close friends who banded to support him throughout his various health challenges. Upon his transitioning, Achal shared with the group the link to planetbinya.org, a digital archive of the work of Binyavanga Wainaina for whom this first issue is dedicated. Binya knew of and saw the archive before his transition on May 21, 2019. This two-part interview reviews the genesis of the archive. Part one details the genesis and formation of the archive.

1. **How did the archive come to be?** The archive was setup in 2017. We (Transition, Chimurenga, Kwani founders) worked together on an aborted project in 2005 or 2006. We were all attending Kwani Litfest in Nairobi. Friends came from Cambridge, South Africa, all these places around the world in the pre-social media era. Even with fairly good internet access, few had access to things on the internet because of pay walls, and because many magazines existed only in print. It was tough for Kwani to be distributed. It was tough for all of us. We decided as a collective to digitize and run all our magazines together on a free, open, internet platform. We setup the project, made some headway, and then it just fell apart. We really wanted to get writers to reach new audiences and gain awareness of each others' work. I felt as though many writers at the time weren't getting the attention they deserved because the logic of the internet was relegating them to being merely local. Planetbinya.org grew out of this effort. Binya saw the archive, since it went up at in 2017, and so he had several lucid years where could appreciate it.

[Binyavanga Wainaina](#)

August 24, 2017

Over the past few weeks, a group of people have been gathering to honor me by putting together an archive of all my work available on the internet together in one place. I'd like to thank Achal Prabhala a lot for this. This was his idea, and Angela Wachuka helped him, and Ntone Edjabe, and Isaac Amuke. I am deeply grateful to all of you. www.planetbinya.org.

2. **Why an archive?** I live in India, and I work there, as well as in South Africa and Brazil. When I went to South Africa for a meeting in 2016, Binya was there, and he was loving it. In South Africa, Binya could be himself. I like Johannesburg for the same reason; it's a place where you can be free, and be the fullest possible version of yourself, around all kinds of creative and innovative people, and you can do all this in a context that is black; which is to say, you don't have to be in the US or Europe to experience this freedom. Binya, of course, had changed as a result of the stroke. He was impatient to live the life he had always wanted. He wanted to stay and get a job, and to do that, he needed a visa to live in South Africa. Getting any kind of visa to enter South Africa is hard, so I thought perhaps we should try and get him a university job. For all kinds of sordid reasons, including that the

South African literary community is staid and insular, we thought the country needed to be reminded of who Binya was so we ran this super well-attended [event](#) in 2017. I set up the archive at this time as a companion to the event. It was purely practical: it was a means of getting him a job in South Africa.

3. **What is the archive?** It isn't the sum of his life because his life was so much more than his work, and Binya was of course was this really smart, intelligent, chaotic guy. But, still, I think of the archive as reflecting his best self. Our relationship had gone awry in a number of different ways, and my respect for him came surging back during the creation of the archive because his work is magnificent. I was strangely comforted by his work. Here was the character I met in 2004—the friend I could talk to about anything on the planet. I enjoy reading the archive even now; when I miss him, which is often, I read him, and it's a form of therapy.[1]
4. **What was the process of creating the archive?** It took quite a long time. Binya's output was prodigious, but he did not archive himself I was helped by the fact that I had a fairly good memory of where he had written. I had a good memory of reading his columns in the Mail and Guardian, for instance, even though they are more or less drowned in the sea of the internet. You know how it is where things can exist on decently trafficked websites but because of the way the website indexes articles, they are actually very hard to come upon, unless you know exactly what you are looking for.

There were instances where Binya had written for places which are behind a paywall. Harper's was one of them. Other essays were behind thick academic gates. I begged, borrowed and stole; I asked friends to get me copies of articles that I had no access to.

I was doing this on the side with the rest of my life. I worked on it in bits and pieces over 3 or 4 months. After the initial spurt, it became an ongoing project ,where I would add one or two new pieces every month. After his death many people wrote to me, pointing me to something I had left out. I'm grateful. The Binya archive is always rebuilding itself, much in the same way as Binya was rebuilding himself in the final years of his life.

If you have a suggestion for the archive, you can email Achal at aprabhala@gmail.com.