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RESEARCH

Deference to Paper: Textuality, Materiality, and Literary Digital Humanities in Africa

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This article explores the relationship between the forms of representation and the modes of production of African online writing, rendering visible an appreciation of the digital contexts that have occasioned new experimentations with regard to genre, style and the formation of digital publics. But it's the bibliographic form and materiality of African digital texts that interest me the most. The medium of African literature, profoundly transformed since the arrival of the Internet, conditions the transmission, reception of meaning and the constitution of reading publics and the identity of audiences. More so, the new textual environment of African writing and creatives expressions such as digital networks and literary blogs are terrains of discursive contestations that activate these digital fields of cultural production in Africa as materially connected to prior literary forms. Deploying several examples, including the recent 'transition' of Saraba Magazine to print and Mike Maphoto's *Diary of a Zulu Girl*, I argue that, despite the widespread uses of digital media forms in new African narratives, there is a lingering print imaginary in the digital articulations of African literary texts. While this tension between print and digital forms shapes textual meanings, it signals new directions in African literary studies more broadly.

Keywords: Materiality; African literature; digital media; textuality; print

Cet article explore la relation entre les formes de représentation et les modes de production de l'écriture africaine en ligne, en rendant visible une appréciation des contextes numériques qui facilitent de nouvelles expérimentations en ce qui concerne le genre, le style et la formation des publics numériques. C'est pourtant la forme bibliographique et la matérialité des textes africains numériques qui m'intéressent le plus. Le média de littérature africaine, profondément transformé depuis l'arrivée de l'Internet, conditionne similairement la transmission, la réception de la signification ainsi que la composition de publics de lecteurs et l'identité d'audiences. En outre, le nouvel environnement textuel de l'écriture africaine et les expressions créatives, tels que les réseaux numériques et

les blogs littéraires, sont des terrains de contestations discursives qui stimulent ces domaines numériques de production culturelle en Afrique, liés matériellement à d'anciennes formes littéraires. En me servant des exemples de la « transition » récente vers la presse écrite de la *Saraba Magazine* et le *Journal d'une fille Zulu* par Nkululeko Maphoto, j'argumente que, malgré les usages répandus des formes numériques de média dans de nouvelles narrations africaines, il existe une anxiété persistante imaginaire ou archivée dans les articulations numériques de textes littéraires africains. Pendant que cette tension entre les formes imprimées et numériques façonnent les sens textuels, cela indique plus généralement de nouvelles directions dans les études littéraires africaines.

Mots-clés: Matérialité; littérature africaine; médias numériques; Textualité; écriture imprimée

Introduction

Few studies on postcolonial African literary productions online have focused on the digital environments and materialities of many born-digital literary texts by African writers. For scholarly works that present critical analyses of these important domains, the emphasis is more on content than on the form and physical features of the medium of expression. Ideas from bibliographic and textual criticism can be beneficial to studies of the African digital literary spaces that produce multiple textual forms, and which remain strongly linked to print culture. I use “textual criticism” not as a synonym for “literary criticism,” but in the sense of Thomas Tanselle (1990) who in “Textual Criticism and Deconstruction” writes of the ambiguity that emerges when both are used interchangeably. For him, “textual criticism” has traditionally meant the scholarly activity of studying the textual histories of verbal works in an effort to propose reliable texts of those works according to one or another definition of correctness. As I will show throughout this paper, my interest is not to focus on a single digital text or the remediated form of a print text for my analysis; the point is to use several examples which signal the material implications of an enduring print consciousness permeating African digital spaces. It is thus imperative to begin a conversation on new works that exist purely through the medium of the web, texts whose ontology is shaped by digitality and that later appear as printed texts. As the Internet is increasingly central for the circulation of African creative

expressions in Web 2.0 spaces like literary blogs and social media, we need to explore connections between the material form of these spaces and the variations of the texts produced.

In her work on the emergence of digital literary studies, Amy Earhart writes that a unique approach of the digital humanities is the decentering of print scholarship which is “beginning to wield less power in shaping the area as blog posts, tweets, listserv discussions, and digital projects gain attention” (2015, 6). While a similar situation may be found in digital literary studies in Africa, print culture lingers as a solidified aspiration of digital literary writers who mostly encounter the digital as an experimental space for their creativity. If as Karin Barber suggests, “literature is a social product and bears the imprint of the conditions of its production” (2007, 432), we can seek to understand the ways in which digital technologies shape the form, genres and texts of African literary texts circulating online. The platformization of African literature, evident in several literary blogs devoted to publishing new writers, has meant that spaces such as *Saraba* and *Jalada* have become central in the recent invigoration of literary sensibilities on the continent. The importance of the digital moment in African literature is asserted by established writers like Chimamanda Adichie (2013) who not only experiments with literary blogging in her novel, *Americanah* but also makes digital affordances central narrative techniques. Structured around social media as a meta-fictional space from which her protagonist, Ifemelu expresses grim perspectives about race, the novel demonstrates a range of textualities that highlight how print and digital poetics actually converge, rather than displace each other in contemporary works from the continent. New platforms of African writing not only assure the visibility of new names, but also accommodate novel forms of authorial agency that enriches African cultural productions more generally.

Theoretically, the field of African digital literary studies itself is responding to this digital explosion of literary agency, with an increased engagement with the Internet as the medium of new literary voices. Shola Adenekan’s 2012 inaugurating dissertation in the area frames this process as “the Internetting of African literature” (11) and is the basis for his forthcoming monograph on African literature in a digital

age. The new volume addresses class and sexual politics in online writing from Kenya and Nigeria and provides an analysis of digital literary networks and their importance to the understanding of literary history in both countries (Adenekan 2021). In the 2012 study, Adenekan argues that the platformization of literary craft in the Kenyan and Nigerian literary contexts arguably started from the mid to late 1990s when writers seeking to draw attention to their printed work started posting poems and short stories on e-mailing lists, such as Krazitivity and Ederi, and other similar listservs hosted by the likes of Yahoo and the now defunct Geocities. In more recent years, newer online spaces, such as *Brittlepaper* and *Africaisacountry* have appeared as platforms from which new writers produce literary and cultural discourses on Africa. In the last ten years, *Brittlepaper*, in particular, as an Afrocentric space of literary circulations has consolidated its status as the most formidable literary portal into creative writing on the continent.

In line with Adenekan's work, I analyzed an online fan fiction of Chinua Achebe's 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart* that was published by *Brittlepaper* in 2017, demonstrating that these digital platforms of African literature have created new roles for readers of African fiction who "recast the monologic frame and individual *authority* of print," resulting in "a decentered medium, structured on the logics of interactivity and participatory culture" (2017, 262). The reading experience is now such that allows people to easily respond to literary texts and even engage directly with other writers themselves, even as new reading habits are formed. My goal in that article was to show that the structure and design of Web 2.0 platforms and applications, such as blogs and social media, democratize and decenter authorial space, opening up more user-focused engagements and reformulations of traditional modes of cultural representations. Around the same time, Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed (2017) likewise argued that an explosion of new technologies has meant a completely new way of reaching and interacting with an African audience that not only changes the traditional gatekeepers of literature on the continent but enables creators and consumers of African literature to reclaim—and then reframe—their own narratives (387). A more recent paper stresses the role of social media in amplifying

articulations of reader agency in African literary texts. Exploring the intersection of digital culture and African writing on the Internet, another study uses social media commentary discussions and reader responses to Chinua Achebe's war memoir, *There Was a Country* to track the nature and functions of the digital publics of African literature (Yékú 2019, 2).

I have outlined these studies to acknowledge the existing theoretical engagements with a rapidly expanding field of African literature in a digital age and to counter critical any tendencies that obfuscate the presence of African digital subjects both as producers and critics of new digital genres. Indeed, Stephanie Santana's brilliant exploration of serialized fiction from southern Africa published on Facebook and blogs show that the digital is 'helping to foster multiple cyberplaces in which new literary forms and indigenous languages are thriving' (2018, 187). In a work that is closest to the topic I examine in this article, digital literary forms are asserted as influencing from local, national, and regional zones, with diverse audiences of these online fictional forms drawing from broader African, diasporic, and global audiences. Also, this theoretical excursion gestures towards the relevance of my present interest—that the close connection of print culture to the digital informs different forms of textualities which mandate an appreciation of bibliographic and textual criticism—areas that are undertheorized in African literature more generally. The making of literary texts, in terms of, for example, the archival materials and manuscripts drafts of several pioneering African writers, offers a glimpse of the changes that occur in the process of textual production and circulations. One recent iteration of this materialist approach in African literature is Nathan Suhr-Sytsma's essay "Christopher Okigbo's Materials," a work that investigates the poetics and compositional practice of the Nigerian modernist writer Christopher Okigbo through unpublished drafts (2020). For my own reflection, I am interested in the conceptual implications of the bibliographic variations that emerge when African literary texts first exist online and later in print.

After examining the 2017 "transition" of *Saraba Magazine* (2020) to print, I will proceed to use Mike Maphoto's *Diary of a Zulu Girl* (2013), to reflect on how different

platforms of African online writing both shape reading of literature and provoke new textual forms. I am hoping to use this article to explore the relationship between the forms of representation and modes of production of online African writing, showing how print and digital platforms can complement each other in a context in which print remains an unconscious or perhaps tactical objective. As several African creative writers connect and nurture relationships with readers by effectively leveraging social media and real-time collaboration tools, we are invited to appreciate why the Internet “serves as a test-bed for work that may later go into print” (Adenekan and Cousins 2014, 139). This possibility that works produced online may end up in print is what I set out to explore in this article, particularly in the framework of how ideas in textual and bibliographical criticism intersect with the African writing online.

Some of the ideas expressed here are of course not new, but I do wish to restate what I believe is a lingering print imaginary in the digital articulations of African literary expressions. This is necessary in the framework of African digital studies in which conversations around the text, in either its print or digital iteration, are limited in terms of their materiality and bibliographic form. A print imaginary refers to the ways in which print practices continue to undergird and inform digital expressions of literary agency. This persistence of print is informed by the popular notion that the digital realm is a domain of impermanence and instability. As Katherine Hayles writes, a print-centric perspective in the ways electronic writing and textuality are discussed (Hayles 2005, 37). This is evident among African writers online. I am interested in how these oft-repeated arguments in the digital humanities manifest in the particular contexts of online writing from several African countries. A print consciousness continues to shape the digital expression of works produced via electronic platforms, despite the tendency to romanticize the digital that we see in ideas of Nigerian online literary critic Ikhide Ikheloa. I am suggesting that the mobility from the digital to print is itself something we need to investigate since print in African writing remains pervasive despite our celebratory posture toward the digital. Because of the vast amount of literary data from blogs and platforms on African content, it is reasonable to assume that currently, the digital is the chief medium

of literature. However, considering present realities that show the simultaneous investments in both print and online writing, this may be a tad essentialization of digital media, one that is impervious to the class politics of the digital divide on the continent. According to 2019 data from the ITU, a United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies, 3.6 billion people around the world still lacked online access, with Africa as the region with the lowest (28.2 per cent). The ITU data revealed a growing Internet uptake, with 4.1 billion people now online, but also a widening digital gender divide.

While we need to acknowledge the important contributions of literary blogs and platforms that give prominence to previously unrecognized creative voices, we need to avoid fetishizing views on the medium as the new mainly uncontested space of creative writing. That writers use digital media as creative and experimental terrains for rendering visible their creative genius has received attention from others. New African voices online “use this space to overtly attack the ‘single story’ of African representations outside Africa through the modality of “their Facebook status updates and in much of the online fiction they post on social media networks” (Adenekan and Cousins 2014, 14). While the focus on *Saraba Magazine* enables me to reflect on this persistence of print, Maphoto's experimentation with his literary blog allows me to examine more fully the ways in which the interactions of both print and digital platforms can structure meanings differently.

***Saraba* magazine's “deference to paper”**

Saraba as a literary magazine published its first online issue in 2009 and has since then aimed to “create unending voices” by publishing the finest emerging writers, with focus on writers from Nigeria, and other parts of Africa. What I undertake in this section is to use an important digital literary space in Africa to make a point about print, rather than use the magazine's foray into print to undermine the platform. A major platform's turn to print proves the point that the digital only serves as a testbed for their literary works that ultimately aspire to print. From the editorial page of its first printed issue, the magazine expresses their commitment to “publish at least one print issue each year,” writing that “the idea, as we have done here, is to anthologize

new writing, squarely on the premise of promise; as though this is a document with which readers might return to understand how the featured contributors have prospered in their calling as writers" (2017). I am using this *Saraba* example to make legible the many other literary works that circulate on blogs and social media which, though are born-digital, desire the conditions of print since the digital, as testbed for the imagination, produces writing as an aesthetic of contingency. Contingency manifests as writing emerges through parameters of transience that subject online texts to constant emendations. This is particularly the case as texts evolve because of the multiplicity of those participating in its emergence.

Although this particular *Saraba* example may seem to be only one instance, there are other similar gestures in Africa's literary communities on the Internet. For instance, we may think about another platform, *African Writing Online* which published some of today's most important writers in contemporary African literature long before Web 2.0 became a converging point for cultural productions on the continent. The Nigerian writer Chuma Nwokolo one of the pioneering founders of the platform told me via social media on April 15, 2015 that their platform "was always meant to be hybrid" in the sense that digital works could later be published in print as a strategy of making *African Writing Online* "more sustainable without depending on grants and the like" from patrons (Nwokolo 2015). Therefore, although it is a foundation platform of African online writing, the magazine has had about five print issues and literary texts from many of its writers have appeared in print. The material differences between online poems by Niyi Osundare or Jack Mapanje and their print iterations deserve more scholarly attention than what we currently have. *Saraba* indicates that print is still very much entangled with digital environments, thus enabling a richer understanding of the production of texts in a material and bibliographical sense. As **Figure 1** indicates, what they call a "deference to paper," which I explore more below, provides a sufficient metaphor for the kind of conversations and analyses on African bibliographical criticism which we need to be having as texts move back-and-forth between print and digital platforms.

We can begin unpacking the implications of this post by *Saraba* magazine by examining how the editors imagine a reader who dives "into something of beauty"

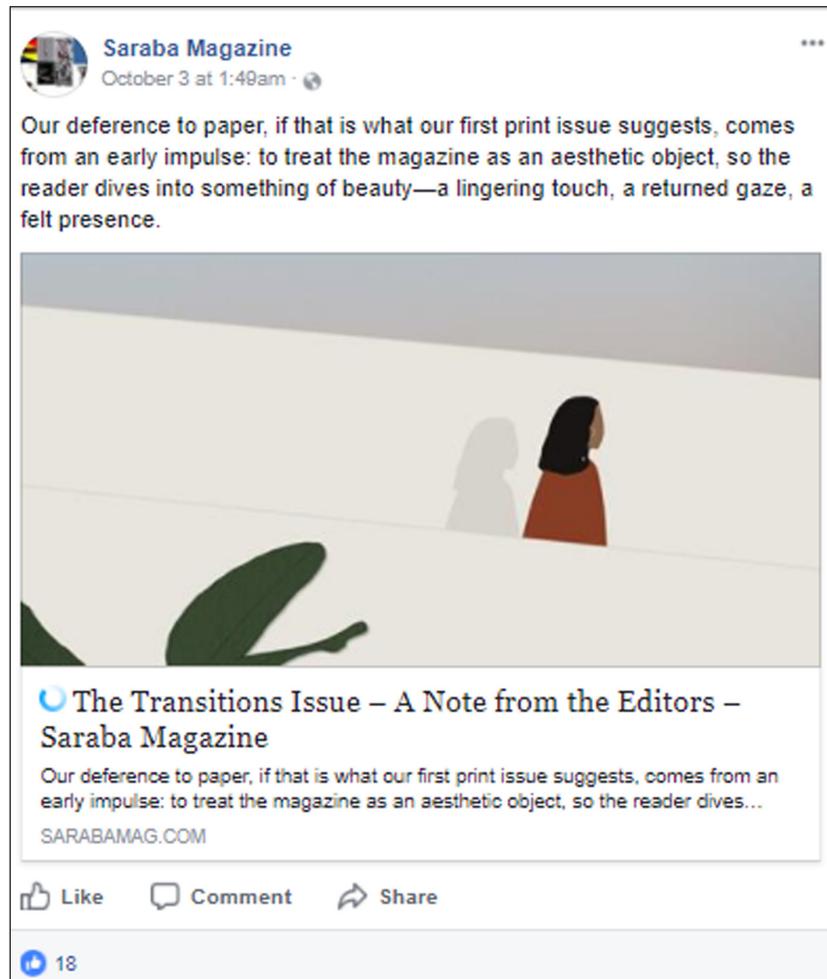


Figure 1: *Saraba Magazine*. "The Transition Issue – A Note from the Editors." (see *Saraba Magazine* 2017).

as a gross misunderstanding of the act of reading in a digital environment. The language the editors employ invokes the physical affordances of print as a domain the reader dives into. On the other hand, digital reading is an interaction with a screen environment that transforms perception and the acts of comprehension and interpretation. Readers express the cognitive demands of print reading differently in a digital space in which non-linearity, speed reading, and browsing are reading strategies typically employed by digital natives. In the light of their desire to treat "the magazine as an aesthetic object" the editors at *Saraba* reinforce the idea that

digital reading does not offer the kind of stability and permanence associated with reading print. The assumption here is that electronic texts are not as stable as printed works, even if the supposed fixity of print is an idea many scholars including Matthew Kirschenbaum (2002) have challenged. In what they acknowledge as their “deference to paper,” the editors at *Saraba* suggest that literary meaning in digital texts may be diminished and, in fact, not organized around any aesthetic impulse. What could become evident is an untended and ironic devaluation of the literary merits of the works on platforms like *Saraba* itself. Again, this language offers the sense that in a digital environment, a reader or user cannot possess “a lingering touch” or “a felt presence” that is enabled by the reading experience of print technology. It is mere subjective speculation to propose, for instance, that a kindle edition of Ayobami Adebayo’s debut novel, *Stay with Me* (2017) presents a less “lingering touch” than its various print editions. Whether it is print or digital, the materiality of both media offers different textual opportunities that constitute the reading experience, although materiality in a digital space is apparently of a haptic yet intangible kind.

Also, the idea of “a lingering touch” invokes narratives of materiality regarding the digital text. Matthew Kirschenbaum (2002) calls this supposition that a digital text or artefact cannot be material because you cannot reach out and touch them an instance of tactile fallacy (43). Kirschenbaum, alongside other members of the textual community, such as Johanna Drucker (2013) invite critics to understand the differences between print and electronic texts, arguing for a thorough understanding of their materiality. Scholars that imagine the role-playing game narrative *Bioshock* or *World of Warcraft* as important expressions of digital literature can hardly be convinced that there is not a felt presence in these interactive narratives. Beyond an uncritical suggestion that consolidates a bias for print, *Saraba*’s turn to a printed edition is in fact “a deference to paper” that emanates from the assumption that electronic literature cannot constitute a sufficient textual aesthetic for readers. Their view restates problematic ideas that digital environment is problematic for literature. Rather than the assumption that the Internet reduces literary texts to the surface spectacles of digital interfaces and typefaces, or to any other material structure of the electronic medium, the digital does not depend solely on language

for the conveyance of its aesthetics and narratives. It also looks to its own materiality and navigational apparatus as part of semantic transmission, to the visual strategies of presenting data and metadata, and to the media itself. In other words, we need to pay more sufficient attention to how the materiality of the text is central to the aesthetics and the reading experience of the reader. In a 2020 email interview in which I asked Rasak Malik Gbolahan what he thought about *Saraba's* print edition and his own reading practices and preferred medium, the Nigerian poet Rasak Malik Gbolahan who uses social media to circulate his works and has published his poetry on *Saraba* elaborates on this idea of print culture as a more enduring space:

There is something magical about holding a book. The magic emanates from the smell of each page, the letters gracing each page, and the book in its entirety. Also, I prefer to carry books around with me. They are like passports to a new city, to a world inhabited by people intoxicated by the opium of stunning sentences. When I hold a book, I feel a certain connection to it. This extends to every genre. For instance, in reading a poetry book, I find it easier to mark a page, or underline a line. I am quite focused in reading a print book than reading online. This is not to undermine the power of digital literature, but hard copies are always tugging my heart, offering me the liberty to embrace them (Gbolahan 2020).

Although it appears a mystifying logic of fetishization is being extended to print technology, Gbolahan's argument may suggest that the transitioning of literary texts from their original digital domain to print is symptomatic of a larger practice in African digital literary culture: the persistence of print in the imaginaries of cultural producers, one that is probably undergirded by an unstated capitalist impulse to circulate print copies and recoup investments. Though also evident in other cultural and writing traditions elsewhere, it undercuts the sometimes unacknowledged, over-celebration of digital platforms in African literary discourses. What is at stake here is perhaps an unwillingness to appreciate the ways in which linguistic texts, images and other formal transmitters of meanings can have narrative power based on a graceful form that does not hinder the fullest expression of aesthetic content. It is

ironic, though, that the presentation of content on the *Saraba* website is carefully designed to render graphic as an aesthetic appeal that contributes to the semiotics of the creative works posted on the online magazine. Put simply, despite the numerous sites, blogs, platforms and data on African online literature, a deference to paper by one of Africa's leading online literary platforms aptly symbolizes the persistence of print in an otherwise saturated digital environment. This is not to suggest that *Saraba Magazine* is denouncing the digital or that it does not trust the aesthetic abilities of digital technologies. While the editors may not necessarily romanticize the printed version, their transition does suggest the fixation with print that I argue is still largely to be found among some digital actors. Being able to access the printed version in digital format on online publishing platforms like *OkadaBooks* can also mean that the material complexities of both the printed and the digital versions warrant an exploration of the texts produced from a perspective that recognizes the physical peculiarities of both platforms.

Diary of a Zulu Girl

My second example is Nkululeko Maphoto's literary blog *Dairy of a Zulu Girl* which started in 2013 as a fictionalized presentation of sexual politics and crime in urban South Africa. This online diary presents the opportunity to explore the re/imagination of African literary practices on Web 2.0 platforms, enabling a focused attention on the many ways social media and literary blogs signify as new media spaces in which new African writers express literary talents. Maphoto's *Diary of a Zulu Girl* is an important work of popular culture that stages the materiality of the text of online African writing in fascinating ways, aside from its alertness to the poetics of the medium and the dialogic possibilities of social networks. The *Diary of a Zulu Girl* is a fictional blog about 19-year-old Thandeka Mkhize who leaves her small town in Mooi River to study law at Wits University in South Africa. The diary details her experiences in the big city, where she is introduced to older men, from Nigeria mostly, who buy her drinks and expensive clothes in order to exploit her sexually. The *Diary* chronicles the story of the average cosmopolitan girl who must navigate the social pressures of living in urban South Africa. Maphoto's narrative is in the form of an online diary, serialized as a blog, and therefore gets his readers to interact both with the story, and with one

another. Like many other recent expressions of African online writing that use the authorial affordances of social media to produce and sustain “networked publics” (Ito 2008), the *Diary of a Zulu Girl* brings readers and the writer in a shared media space in which the boundaries between author and reader are almost nonexistent.

Whether it is on Maphoto's blog or on his social media accounts, the medium structures literary meaning and conditions reader behavior and responses. In the seventh chapter of the e-book, which almost appears to reproduce the entry in the original Facebook post, Thandeka the protagonist is made aware of the dialogic space in which she has been constructed when she appears to step outside of her original fictive environment and negotiates some dignity for herself:

By the time I went to university I had slept with two guys and yes that sounds slutty to some but count how many people you have slept with before you judge. If you have more than 5 in five years then I guess we in the same boat (Maphoto 2013).

In this passage, Thandeka Mkhize asks her readers and the potential moral judges of her sexual choices to look at themselves in the mirror before judging her erotic proclivities. Maphoto presents a character that is aware of the readerly gaze of the online reader glued to the screen of a mobile phone or a desktop. Thandeka is rendered conscious of a need for a dialogue with the readers of the story in which she exists and signifies an awareness of the medium in which her subjectivities have been constructed. While both the initial Facebook entries and e-book version have an easy-flowing style, the obvious spelling and grammar errors reveal Maphoto's story has not been well edited, indicating the fluidity and mutability of a work whose language is in a perpetual state of flux. Also, as evident in this narration by the protagonist in the seventh chapter of part 1, the original blog entries were riddled with grammatical glitches and stylistic incongruities that are more effectively presented in the print edition: “I was not born poor but I cant say I was born rich either. My parents are both teachers in Mooi River halfway between Johannesburg and Durban...Yes I do not stay in the rural parts of it but its still deeply cultured with rules and traditions that go deep.”

Aside from the fact that the print edition polishes the linguistic glitches of the digital versions, another major difference is the difference in material and physical properties. As Stephanie Bosch Santana reveals, in general, the success of Maphoto's blog is due to its "exploitation of strategies associated with both the digital and print realms " Employing the anonymity of the online space to gain initial traction for the diary began, Maphoto later revealed his identity, and cast himself in the more traditional role of "author" rather than "blogger" (Santana 2018, 192). What is significant from the perspective of bibliographic and textual criticism is how his fictional work usefully illustrates how the book object, or the text, is usually open to emendations. Seeing the edited print version of the diary as merely polishing the unofficial language of the web version sequesters the changes in both. Accounting for these textual alterations is important.

Traditionally, emendation is designed to arrest the influx of error and corruption in textual transmission. It is the editorial intervention a text is made to have when it is disturbed by a fault. Emendation eliminates errors and repairs the text where its record of authority is deemed to be interrupted and broken (Hans Gabler 1993, 201). The print edition of the *Diary of a Zulu Girl* (2015) introduces variations and corrections since there are significant changes and substantives to both blog versions and digital editions of the original text. The textual critic of this text would, therefore, be interested in how the transmission of writing from digital formats to print texts affect the different versions and editions of these texts. A digital critical edition of Maphoto's *Diary of a Zulu Girl*, for instance will attempt to examine how the book differs considerably in its material form from the blog. Such materialist reading of the book as an object that has physical properties which contribute meaning is not common in African literary circles and it is one that I hope the imbrications of print and digital media can facilitate. As Maphoto's online fiction morphs into a printed book, as well as a planned television drama that is still being expected, it forces us to appreciate how a text can change its form and, hence, its meaning, and audience when its medium of expression changes. In **Figure 2**, we get a sense of the text on both Facebook and Wordpress.



Figure 2: Screen grabs of Facebook and Blog versions of Maphoto's *Dairy of a Zulu Girl* (see Maphoto 2013).

Maphoto's blog has been described as “something of a digital literature phenomenon” (Santana 2018). Literary forms such as the *Diary* proliferate on social media and blogging as a genre of popular culture that asks us to rethink the ways African writing is being reconfigured by Web 2.0 platforms. Areas impacted include author-reader interactivity as well as the digitally enabled fluidity of these identities. It invites us to appreciate anew how traditional authors use platforms, such as Facebook pages and profiles as alternative spaces for the articulation of creative expressions. In a conversation with Jeanette Chabalala of City Press, Maphoto explains that “readers have not stopped lapping it up and keep begging for more of the sex, drugs, lies and betrayal that fuel the story lines... What is fascinating is that parents contacted me and requested the blog to be turned into a book because they could not read it on their phones.” (Chabalala 2013). That parents “requested the blog to be turned into a book” may be read along with the many responses to the fictional diary as demonstrating the spontaneous nature of interactions on social media, but it also raises a question of age and class since the reading space of the net could be tenuous for older people with limited access to the internet.

In another context, the request for book also recalls Ikhide Ikheloa's question about books in African writing: “how is Africa viewed everywhere, if not primarily through hard-copy books?” (2013). While it is productive to imagine Ikheloa's

question as an exploration of the persistent focus on print culture as the major medium of the canons of African literature, it is also essential to discern the logic of materiality and the changing modes of the production of texts inherent in his question. In his response, Ikheloa locates his concerns not only within a trajectory of a book history in Africa that is unsettled by the intractable problems of indigenous publishing houses in Africa, but also in a hasty dismissal of print culture to coherently represent the African condition. Ikheloa argues on the USA-Africa Dialogue listserv that “the book [understood as print] is an inappropriate gauge of Africa’s stories, history and circumstances. You would have to look to the great book in the sky, the Internet, to have a well-rounded view of our world, not just Africa” (Ikheloa 2013). While Ikheloa, in the tradition of several other techno-optimists, does indeed fetishize the Net and essentialize “the great book in the sky” in his reflection on the medium of Africa’s stories and narratives, his observations are largely reasonable in signaling a need to recognize the close associations between print and digital texts.

The materiality of text

As the work of Karin Barber (2007) shows, African theories of textuality often invoke oral poetics, something that is relevant in the framework of the regeneration of meanings in literary texts both in print and digital realms. The major moments of textual representations in African knowledge productions includes the oral text best demonstrated by its context of performance, the printed text that emerged in the early twentieth-century Africa through the works of early publications, and finally, an electronic textuality of African literature that is gaining traction among scholars of what Walter Ong (1991) refers to as secondary orality. An expanded perspective of the text as any site of discourse, therefore, finds precedent in African oral frameworks that identify the text as a mutable entity produced by social and technological developments that affect its aesthetic and literary production and appreciation (Olorunyomi 2006, 137). In terms of digital texts, Shola Adenekan (2012) reckons that the movement of texts and writers across different mediums signals “an important way through which some of the emerging African voices negotiate the relationship between their works, themselves, Africa and the outside world” (17). Adenekan’s

argument is a useful commentary on the nature of textuality in contemporary African literature.

That said, there are more significant bibliographical issues the textual critic might be interested in, including what this “movement of texts and writers across different mediums” means for literary interpretation. That seems to me to be pertinent for an appreciation of the material history of the African literary text today. His work highlights the emergence of online literary magazines which focused principally on the publication of short stories, essays and poems that appeal to a reading public that is equally online. Blogging and social media sites also give young African writers more platforms to publish works that did not exist previously outside of the computational space. Critical evaluations of such work must be mindful of the structure and materiality of their new medium. This seems to me a crucial point to emphasize as it points to what Mathew Kirschenbaum identifies elsewhere as first-generation objects. A “first generation electronic object,” writes Kirschenbaum “is one that enjoys no material existence outside of the electronic environment of a computational file system-though this is not...to say that such objects enjoy no material existence at all” (2002, 20). In relation to African literature, it is important to engage more conceptually with not just works that exist purely through the medium of the web but also the forms of textualities propelled by digital technologies, particularly in terms of their ontology and materiality. Texts, whether written, oral, or digitally transmitted, can help us understand the political contexts of their producers as well as the publics that emerge from and cohere around them. However, beyond questions of class and the political touchstones of texts online, the various formal changes that accrue from a digital-to-print move need to be foregrounded too. Significant emendations involving a wide range of accidentals and substantives are therefore usually present in the transformation from electronic formats to print texts. Adenekan explains that this process of textuality “involves reshaping the text for different formats, and in the process the creative piece is unfixed” (2012, 13). This idea of an unfixed, sliding, and impermanent textuality that is obvious in the *Saraba* example is reiterated in the view that these digital texts may later appear in print.

The traditional obsession with “canonical texts has blocked our view of the real historical processes at work in the emergence and spread of literary forms” (Karin Barber 2007, 40). There is a sense here in which Barber’s assertion calls for a study of genre and textuality that is wide and varied in its orientation. This view can inform an appreciation of the ways a book’s production history, and its various editions also help to understand the sociocultural contexts of writers and their works, the form and physical shape of the text itself is the focus of my analysis. Karin Barber’s argument connects well to D.F McKenzie’s description of text. In the framework of textual bibliographical criticism, D.F McKenzie (1999) broadly conceptualizes the term in the famous 1985 Pannizi lectures. McKenzie (1999) defines ‘texts’ to include verbal, visual, oral, and numeric data, in the form of maps, prints, and music, of archives of recorded sound, of films, videos, and any computer-stored information (13) McKenzie’s perspective on textuality may be read alongside other theories of textualities in the core digital humanities tradition, including perennial names, such as Katherine Hayles (2005) and Jerome McGann (2004). For some of these early DH, scholars, a textual object, whether in a print or an electronic context, needs to be alert to not only materiality, design, and physical features but also the social contexts that inform the texts. In other words, our engagement with the physical hardware of the text is essential to understanding its semiotic transmissions and diverse economies of meanings. Items, such as page size, fonts, binding and other “bibliographic codes” are as important as the linguistic codes and social context of the work. These ideas were originally put forward by Jerome McGann (2004), who in his discussion of the production of the scholarly edition of *The Rossetti Archive*, asserts:

the apparitions of text—its paratexts, bibliographical codes, and all visual features—are as important in the text’s signifying programs as the linguistic elements; second, that the social intercourse of texts—the *context* of their relations—must be conceived an essential part of the ‘text itself’ if one means to gain an adequate critical grasp of the textual situation.” (McGann 2004, 11)

This view of textuality suggests that the text has a constructed character, and together with “documents are fields open to decisive and rule-governed manipulations” (McGann 2). A description of the textual situation of Chinua Achebe’s canonical text *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, would include numerous editions that present a wide array of bibliographical codes and visual features that form part of the algorithms and rules which control the text as a literary work that transmits meaning. The first edition of Achebe’s novel was published in 1958 by Heinemann Publications in London. Because of its significance as a strategic postcolonial response to the history of colonial discourse in Africa, many other editions of *Things Fall Apart* have been published and circulated since then.

In 2009, Anchor Canada published a 209-page paperback edition of the novel, adding to several other paperback editions by Penguin, Oxford, and Norton. Although these various editions obviously differ significantly from the first edition by Heinemann in terms of material and physical features, there is not much critical work by Achebe scholars that foreground how these bibliographical variations—in terms of design, page number and paper textures—can be one of the determinants of the text’s semiotic impulses. The production of meanings in the text can no longer remain only at the level of close reading of linguistic content; it needs to be extended to the various physical elements that constitute the text. A scholarly critical edition of, say a kindle edition of *Things Fall Apart*, would be interested in how it differs from earlier printed texts from the perspective of its electronic features, interface, and other aspects of its physical design. To be interested in a physical description of this kindle edition is to take seriously how the presence of substantive elements, such as coding structure and paratextual features make this digital edition different from earlier editions. The code of this kindle edition has a material existence whose structure is central to the ways online writing articulate meaning. These questions of form and physical elements are significant considerations in terms of the materiality and form of the text of African writing in the age of the internet. In my 2017 article on Kiru Taye’s *Thighs Fell Apart*, an online fan fiction of *Things Fall Apart*, I demonstrate that an established African text is reconfigured by a work of digital

literature that “articulates a paradigm of erotic fantasy not too familiar in canonical African literature’ (2). The gendered politics of Achebe’s original text is revisited by an online subject whose reading *reproduces* and extends the text’s narrative boundaries. For instance, “the spectacle of Okonkwo’s wrestling with Amalinze the cat in *Things Fall Apart* “is recast in ‘Thighs Fell Apart’ as sexual contest in which bodies clash in an ideological force field, with phallogentric might triumphing over female desire,” forcing a rereading of one of Africa’s famous fictional heroes. What is of more interest to me here is that by using blogging to produce a new text that remediates Okonkwo’s identity, Kiru Taye also use digital technology to materially reshape the original text. A critical edition of Achebe’s novel may be linked with Taye’ short story to complicate and trouble textual meanings in the original work.

Another helpful example of the material transformations of textuality in the making of African literature is probably evident in the digital copies of literary pamphlets in the tradition of the famous Onitsha Market Literature. These pamphlets, produced by local publishers in a popular Nigerian trading center of the 1960s, are composed of moral narratives, social discourses, plays, advice, and other popular stories, and have been recently digitized in different library holdings in the US. Emmanuel Obiechina traces the development of the Onitsha literature to the concentration of large numbers of locally-owned and operated printing presses in the town, writing that “the influx in the 1940s of Indian and Victorian drugstore pulp magazine fiction that also shaped the format of pamphlet literature (2008, 119). Several digitized versions of the Onitsha Market pamphlets that appear in the digital collection of University of Kansas libraries are held at the Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas. The Onitsha Market pamphlets are a legacy of colonialism in Nigeria, representing, as Charlotte Nunes’s article imagines, “the culturally textured crossroads of British colonial influence and the print record of a traditionally oral regional narrative tradition” (2015, 126). The digital archives at the Spencer library hold digital copies of the pamphlets (see **Figure 3**) which are important in the context of this essay because they demonstrate how the production of a new text, or even a remediated one propel new material conditions that can enable a better appreciation of cultural meanings.

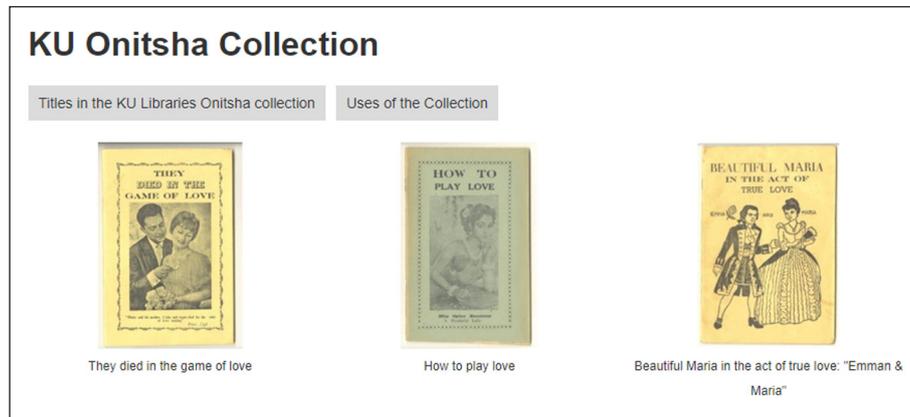


Figure 3: Digitized copies of the Onitsha Market Literary Pamphlets from The University of Kansas Library's Special Collections (see Onitsha Market Literary Pamphlets 2015).

Katherine Hayles's notes that "the navigational apparatus of a work changes the work," and constitutes a "part of the work's signifying structure" (2005, 90). This suggests that an appreciation of these digital manuscripts and their meanings is also now dependent on the functional designs and algorithmic structures that shape them. Digital environments, as Hayles intimates, do not merely provide us with ways of encountering the texts, they are central to our critical reading of the texts themselves. This idea that meaning is altered when the medium is translated may not be new in the study of textuality in an African context; yet, considered from the framework of digitality, there is an enrichment of the discourse of African literary studies itself. The materiality of the new digitized pamphlet offers the most obvious example of difference since the reading experience is now dependent on other textual codes and physical properties not evident in the original printed versions. Also, since the original print copies of the pamphlets are different in terms of meaning and interpretations from the digital copies, our reading experience of the text becomes varied. In *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*, Katherine Hayles describes reading types in terms of a close reading that "correlates with deep attention" and a hyper reading that "includes skimming, scanning, fragmenting, and juxtaposing texts, and is "a strategic response to an information-intensive environment" we find ourselves in (2012, 12). Hyper reading produces a cognitive

mode that eschews boredom in its preference for different information streams a high level of stimulation.

The Onitsha market pamphlets as print texts have animated research on African popular culture and print culture, but not much work exist on their iterations as digital text. From **Figure 4**, I am currently creating an archive based on digital critical editions of several of the pamphlets, using Jekyll and Ed to repurpose digitized copies of the pamphlets from the University of Kansas special collections, Jekyll is a preservation-friendly website generator that requires no database since it is static, with all stored information displayed on a webpage contained in an HTML file for the webpage. Ed as a Jekyll theme is based on minimal computing principles and was designed for textual editions. My goal with this project is a scholarly digital edition that makes available a large corpus of text which yields more insights on Nigerian market literature, while offering ideas on what the digital transmission of texts may look like in the context of African literatures. The textual situations of the new literary pamphlets produced will have to incorporate the entire digital contexts and materiality of the new works.

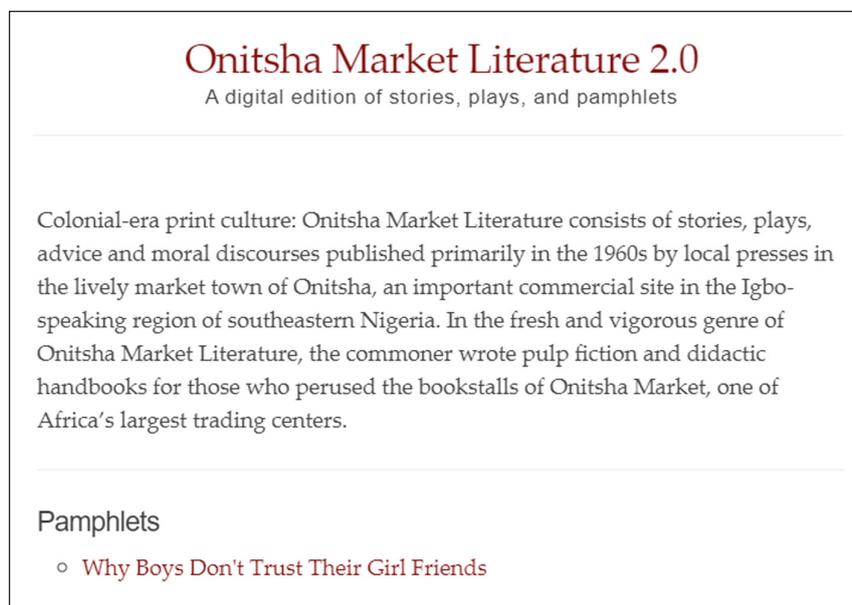


Figure 4: A Jekyll-based Project on Market Literature from Nigeria (see Onitsha Market Literature 2.0 2020).

Conclusion

The need to examine how the impact of the physical properties of the text on the transmission of meaning has been the central idea of this work. To recast the title of Amy Earhart's book, the old is not just a mere trace in the new digital contexts of African online writing, it appears to be a desired condition. Despite a massive growth of digital publications in Africa, print culture not only remains solid as a major goal for writers who deploy digital technologies to circulate their works but also impels us to see how the reverse movement from digital to print create multiple texts with different physical features. The medium of the text of African literature in the present moment has to be understood beyond the print technology that continues to permeate digital discourses. When Shola Adenekan and Helen Cousins argue in their discussion of class and online African writing that "cybertexts are not permanent," and that "like orature, the meaning of cybertexts is unfixed and subject to multiple interpretations (2014, 11), they restate an assumption about the materiality of both print and electronic texts that needs to be highlighted: indeed, they praise impermanence, but this is only to the extent that it is the condition that makes the transition to print possible. Whether the medium is oral, print, or electronic, texts transform and are transformed by alterations in their technological conditions. How the materiality of African texts harbor part of their meaning signals an alertness to the importance of the medium. The new digital spaces of African literature alter several aspects of literary conversations and interactions in Africa, even as they recall several poetics from oral tradition.

There are several ideas one can uncover when reflecting on the critical implications of the digital reconfiguration of literary expressions in contemporary Africa. It is apparent that writers based on and outside of the continent are using digital media to alter the form of their writing and that the platforms of creative expressions can inform the relationship between form and content, while transforming the relationship between writers and their publics. On different Web 2.0 environments, writers connect with other writers, and with new audiences who in turn share and transmit their works in their own digital networks. Indeed, the platforms themselves as well as the workings of algorithmic protocols and databases play an active part in

the networked ecologies of social media. There is a democratization, a decentering, of authorial space, as African literature and its audiences are reconstituted in a dialogic space that assures a polyphonic assemblage of new authorial perspectives and reading publics in rhizomatic networks of literary relations and socialities. The interactive and connective logics of social media implicate these social arenas of literary networks and affinities as cultural terrains that consolidate interactive performances of writerly agency.

Editorial contributions

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