

Social Media as New Canvas, Space and Channel for Afrophone Literatures

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The increasing growth and use of social media across Africa have led to a massive transformation of literature production in African languages. Indeed, the recent and continent-wide explosion in social media use has created new forms of social engagement and creative expression, presenting writers—both established and emerging—with new literary canvases, spaces and channels to share their works, engage readers and circumvent or supplement traditional publication channels. This has radically changed previous modes of Afrophone literary production and reception, and rendered innovation and dissemination of new forms and genres easier and less state-controlled than ever before. One example of this change, especially pronounced in the realm of popular fiction, is the trend towards more explicitness in the emergence of erotic literature. Social media channels used for the production, circulation, marketing and consumption of prose fiction and poetry in African languages have thus facilitated new content, new genres, and new audiences.

In the emerging field of scholarship on digital forms of art and literature in Africa, the focus has primarily been on anglophone initiatives and networks that have acquired international visibility and recognition, such as *Jalada* (based in Kenya), *Saraba Magazine* (Nigeria) and *Bakwa* (Cameroon), to name but a few. These projects, often driven by African publishers or literary activists, have been celebrated for enabling pan-African literary networks as well as increasing the presence of African voices in global literary spaces, and even “reclaiming African literature” from international gatekeepers (Nesbitt-Ahmed, 2017). However, as Shola Adenekan rightly observes, these internationally acknowledged projects privilege literature with a “focus on telling the middle-class African story” in English, which often centre on the lifestyle of the highly educated elite (2021, 9).

In contrast, Afrophone digital literary production has so far been left relatively unexplored in academia. In this specific arena, many authors and author collectives have their own accounts on social media such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp etc. These provide a new outlet for writers producing Afrophone, popular literature at the level of what has been called “street literature” (Harris & Hallén, 2020). Some writers are also enlisting more recently established

commercial publishing platforms and apps such as Inkitt and Wattpad, which have received little or no attention in the academic world. Indeed, there seems to be a gap in the existing scholarship at the level of ‘street literature in digital spaces’ in Africa. What motivates Afrophone writers to make use of those platforms, and how and to what ends do they employ them? What is the impact of Afrophone literature produced and consumed on these platforms on other forms of writing and publishing? It is conceivable that online publication may set new trends for quality standards and editing in popular, African language literature.

The envisaged symposium aims at exploring how Afrophone literature has been impacted by the use of social media, with a particular focus on popular forms of literature. Much of African language literature has long been directed towards the “ordinary people” as a form of popular culture – a product of every-day life, unofficial and non-canonical (Barber 2018). We need to extend the examination of African literature to its evolving and highly productive digital literary forms and discourses in African languages. We believe that such a focus will significantly add to our understanding of literary expression and communication in the digital age in Africa. We ask how social media – understood as any digital media that allows for exchange, including blogs and websites having comment sections – have affected Afrophone creative writing with regard to form, genre, discussion of gender issues and sexuality, networks, publishing and dissemination, visibility, local and global reach. Afrophone literature has always been particularly affected by poor publishing and distribution infrastructures and gatekeepers on many levels. We want to understand how writers use social media as new canvas and channels to achieve visibility, recognition and presence in local, national, diasporic, and transnational literary spaces and how they try to facilitate monetization of their works. In this regard, we are interested in examining if and how African language literatures, which are usually directed at and consumed by limited audiences, are able to profit in similar ways as Anglophone African literatures from social media channels. There is also the question of gendered use of social media. How have women and alternative sexualities have been able to use social media channels to change their position in the system of Afrophone literature?

Afrophone literature on and disseminated through social media must also be examined in relation to the pre-existing forms of publishing and reading, since they do not just replace them. Kate Wallis notes that in Africa “relationships between print and digital in literary production are still in the process of evolving and establishing themselves” (2016:45). There are divergent views about these relationships, ranging from “the digital revolution helped to reinvent the physical book form” (Alabi 2021:2) to “print must die” (Wainaina 2011). In addition, as

Stephanie Bosch Santana (2018:187) points out, “African digital fiction must be considered in relation to both virtual and material networks of production and circulation in order to understand its ‘place’, literally and figuratively, in the broader literary landscape.”

Another strand of inquiry concerns how oral genres in African languages appear in intermediated form on websites and social media. Here, “a central question concerns the extent to which offline narrative or songs transcribed/translated online are ‘oral’” (Merolla 2021:169). Oral art forms interact with written forms, video and audio recordings, which raises questions regarding intermediality, transmediality and remediation. Furthermore, the interactivity of the social media allows readers to participate in the creative process in ways that can resemble oral storytelling practices (Reuster-Jahn 2021).

Finally, the impact of social media on popular, Afrophone literary production has differed among every region and country of the continent. Social media interacts with factors such as the political climate, censorship, cultural norms and values, educational policies, distribution and marketing challenges - an interaction which is strongly affected by their receptiveness towards globally circulating forms and genres. As a result, the use of social media has led to different outcomes regarding fiction written in African languages. In Northern Nigeria, for example, social media seems to have become the main outlet for Hausa popular fiction, whereas in Tanzania, writers strive to harness social media for their goal to improve the market for printed books. With our conference, we aim to bring together scholars specialising in African language fiction from all regions of the continent and engage them in discussions on the present state of literature in the age of social media and the major lines along which they are developing.

The symposium will take place online, from 22-24 February 2023.

Participants are asked to provide re-recorded presentations of 20 min length before the symposium.

Suggested topics of our symposium include but are not limited to the following issues on the relation between social media and creative writing in African languages south of the Sahara:

- 1. What is the impact of social media on creative expression in Afrophone literature?*
- 2. How does social media constitute a literary canvas and become an outlet for (popular) creative expression?*

3. *Questions of Genre*
4. *Moral norms and censorship*
5. *Publishing, networks and monetization*
6. *Gender and diversity*
7. *Readers and forms of reading*
8. *Oral literary performance in social media*
9. *Comparative perspectives*
10. *The impact of the Covid 19-pandemic*

Deadlines:

Submission of Abstract: **September 15, 2022**

Notification of acceptance: **October 15, 2022**

Deadline for submission of papers and presentations: **January 15, 2023**

Please send your abstract to afrodigit2022@gmail.com

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