

## Digital African Literatures and the Coloniality of Data

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### Abstract:

Digital iterations of African literary texts present us with scholarly opportunities to interrogate how literature produced and circulated on digital media becomes entangled with the capitalist politics of datafication. In the data paradigm described in the article, literary representations are subject to the workings of neoliberal capital and the constraints of algorithmic systems. Through a postcolonial approach that puts the digital humanities in conversation with African literary studies, the article transcends how digital technologies have evidently changed African literature and tackles the *costs* of digital literary cultures and networks from Africa. I examine data relations through an African literary culture which, in the current moment, indisputably exhibits the attainment of new and complex elements including the integration of digital affordances in the production of literature. How African literary expressions in a digital age circulates in market-driven digital platforms like Facebook and YouTube make the subject of coloniality of data as important for African literature as the expanded literary networks enabled by the digital.

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## Introduction

As it began transitioning Yahoo! Groups to more private and restricted communities some years ago, the American internet services provider Yahoo sent an email in 2019 to the Nigerian poet and scholar Amatoritsero Ede, inviting him to download a large amount of data on the historical literary listserv, Krazitivity, which Ede was moderating in its closing years.<sup>1</sup> Yahoo would have permanently deleted the poems, short stories, and other literary content posted over a ten-year period on the listserv had Ede not paid prompt attention to the digital archive produced by a large community of writers on the email list. Some of these writers included famous names such as Chika Unigwe, Pius Adesanmi, Lola Shoneyin, Akin Adesokan, and Chris Abani. But what is really at stake in Yahoo's assertion of corporate power is an enunciation of hegemonic control that threatens to forever erase the digital labors and footprints of a significant generation of Nigerian writers. As the Krazitivity episode presses important questions about data regimes and data ownership, it also significantly foregrounds the ways in which the content posted by writers online is vulnerable to the logics of data capitalism and correlates to the recognition of the ways forms of print culture continue to overlap intimately with the digital, what I have previously described as "a lingering print imaginary" in African digital literatures that possibly preempts, in the Yahoo! Groups framework, the risks of erasure itself.<sup>2</sup> I will come back to this idea that print cultures remain closely connected

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<sup>1</sup>Amatoritsero Ede, "Personal Communication."

<sup>2</sup> James Yékú, "Deference to Paper: Textuality, Materiality, and Literary Digital Humanities in Africa," *Digital Studies/le Champ Numérique* 10.1 (2020): 1–28.

to digital expressions of literatures, although one immediately visible implication of it is that the printed book retains its hegemonic status despite the efflorescence of electronic literatures. Data capitalism places “primacy on the power of networks by creating value out of the digital traces produced within them” and appeals to “community and consumer power to mask the digital labor it relies on.”<sup>3</sup> By primarily focusing on data capitalism, West appears to dismiss the ambivalence of the internet as both enabling user agency and corporate hegemony. She suggests here that the promise of connectivity by data capitalists is actually the means of concealing the exploitation of the digital labor of those who post content online.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the collection of data based on these logics of sociality and a participatory community is promoted as a form of consumer power; an illusion of control over what we post is made to mask the profit interests of the corporate owners of the digital ecologies people inhabit. As the commodification of our online data, data capitalism mainly enables a consolidation of power in the hands of a few in an age in which information is historically a major component of network power.<sup>5</sup> I examine these issues and interrogate how writers’ relationships with online literary and cultural

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Myers West, “Data Capitalism: Redefining the Logics of Surveillance and Privacy,” *Business & Society* 58.1 (2019): 20–41.

<sup>4</sup> I am primarily focused here on the digital labor of online cultural producers, although there are other dimensions of digital labor that are not immediately explicit. One example that comes to mind is the backend work of programmers and coders, or even the digital labor that goes into creating digital tools for DH projects serving as new knowledge ecologies.

<sup>5</sup> Manuel Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society,” *International Journal of Communication* 1 (2007): 238–66.

productions exemplify an iteration of data capitalism that Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias have recently termed as the coloniality of data to mark the capitalist foundations of big data and digital connectivity.<sup>6</sup>

This article signals attention to the *costs* of digital literary cultures and networks from Africa, transcending what Bhakti Shringarpure describes as “the dynamic digital impulses of African creativity”<sup>7</sup> that have evidently changed contemporary African literature. One way the print and digital worlds remain imbricated is how animated debates about literary prizes and awards based on printed texts takes place on social media (particularly on Twitter) and literary blogs and become globally visible, along with new forms of digital creativity, to more readers outside the continent.<sup>8</sup> My remit is to explore data relations through an African literary ecology, which, in the current moment, indisputably has exhibited the attainment of new and complex elements. African literature now presents us with new frontiers as the literary imagination intertwines with

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<sup>6</sup> Couldry, Nick, and Ulises A. Mejias. *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Bhakti Shringarpure, “African Literature and Digital Culture,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 4, 2021 (<https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/african-literature-and-digital-culture/>).

<sup>8</sup> In recent years, online literary magazines and platforms such as *Brittle Paper*, *Enkare Review*, and *Agbowo* have been locations for some of these controversies and debates, with some of them becoming the subjects of contentions. For instance, aside from the 2020 online hashtag to cancel *Brittle Paper* because of perceived censorship, *Enkare Review* in 2019 was the site of controversies based on the ethics and politics of a graphic story based on pedophilia.

digital media cultures and facilitates innovative epistemic possibilities sometimes based on the aesthetic regeneration of previously existing cultural forms.<sup>9</sup>

Digital iterations of African literary texts present us with scholarly opportunities to interrogate how literature as data on the social web becomes entangled with the ideological politics of digital technologies, although my analyses is anchored on a postcolonial approach to the digital humanities (DH), which, as Roopika Risam argues, “explores how we might remake the worlds instantiated in the digital cultural record through politically, ethically and social-justice minded approaches to digital knowledge production.”<sup>10</sup> A postcolonial DH means that African and postcolonial cultural and linguistic forms figure prominently in the digital record rather than a situation in which the histories, cultures, and records of Africa and other parts of the global south are mostly diminished and sometimes erased in Eurocentric understandings of DH. DH itself, as the scholarly area that designates the systematic application of computational tools and methodologies to traditional humanities research, is still inchoate in the intellectual frameworks of postcolonial African studies but presents substantial methodological concerns that urge us to rethink the ontologies of epistemic productions and circulations in Africa. In her introduction to a special issue on DH initiatives among African

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<sup>9</sup> One example of this is how internet memes—as quotidian expressions of everyday digital communication—draw from and regenerate an earlier cultural form such as Nollywood films. As Nollywood-derived memes on social media circulate as aesthetics of politicized speech in cultural and political commentaries, they rearticulate the remix culture of digital media.

<sup>10</sup> Roopika Risam, *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis and Pedagogy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 5.

historians, Jennifer Hart stresses the expanding use of digital methodologies in the study of Africa through projects that “use existing digital technologies—from “mining” social media to blogging to historical mapping—to bring new voices and perspectives<sup>11</sup> into the popular and scholarly conversation about the African past.”<sup>12</sup> Hence, although not as widespread and prevalent as it could be, there is a sense in which we might speak of a digital turn in the scholarship of both the African past and indeed the continent that computes new attention to media ephemera and digital media practices. Because such scholarly directions cohere with what Achille Mbembe describes as our current inhabitation of the third phase in the organization and evolution of Blackness, it demands critical attention to the place of the digital in African ways of being and knowing. Mbembe elaborates Blackness and race as an assemblage that has been inflected globally by three critical moments: the first moment is the organized despoliation of the Atlantic slave trade; the second moment corresponded with the birth of writing, which predicated the battle for the abolition of the slave trade, and African decolonization; and the third phase or moment is marked by the globalization of markets, as well as electronic and digital technologies.<sup>13</sup> DH is a useful organizing rubric to appreciate the current digital moment, and data cultures, whether prior to computation or enabled by it, are central to

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<sup>11</sup> Some examples of these new names include Nigeria’s Rasak Malik Gbolahan and Ghana’s Henneh Kyereh Kwaku, both of whom post works on social media.

<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Hart, “Introduction: Digital History in African Studies,” *History in Africa* 47 (2020): 269–74.

<sup>13</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2017).

the historical evolution of Blackness. Here, the emphasis is on data cultures or the collection and analyses of data before the use of computers became prevalent. The processes of data collection and organization in these analog contexts supported, for instance, the classification of enslaved people, first in slave ships and later at slave auctions. Some DH projects that are based on such data systems demonstrate how the trans-Atlantic slave trade produced processes of datafication that are closely aligned with African bodies and Black subjectivities.<sup>14</sup> Understanding data regimes and processes in this non-algorithmic, digital sense means an alertness to the historical dimensions of data that underpinned the political economy of exploitative systems such as the slave trade and colonialism. In other words, from an informational perspective, datafication indexes all three phases Mbembe prioritizes and is intimately connected to the constitution of Black subjectivity—whether in the contexts of the precariousness and dehumanization of enslavement or in terms of the technologized agency of Black programmers and developers.

Although the meanings of the DH have been subjected to vigorous debates in its short life span,<sup>15</sup> the interdisciplinary field remains committed in various ways to an

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<sup>14</sup> One notable example of this kind of DH work is *Slave Voyages*, a trans-Atlantic and intra-American slave trade database that culminates several decades of independent and collaborative research by scholars drawing upon data in libraries and archives around the Atlantic world. See <https://www.slavevoyages.org/about/about#> for more information.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Liu, “The Meaning of the Digital Humanities,” *PMLA* 128.2 (2013): 409–23; Matthew Kirschenbaum, “What Is Digital Humanities and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things about It?” *Differences* 25. 1 (2014): 46–63; David Berry, “Introduction: Understanding Digital

openness of knowledge and underscores the ways in which epistemologies of local communities sometimes become much more visible through digital tools and approaches that seek to abjure a reinscription of mostly cultural records from Euro-American contexts. Hence, as Roopika Risam evocatively captures it, the “opportunity to intervene in the digital cultural record—to tell new stories, shed light on counter-histories, and create spaces for communities to produce and share their own knowledges should they wish—is the great promise of digital humanities.”<sup>16</sup> In the context of African cultural productions, the value of the digital record may be understood, for instance, in a project like my own experimental DH project, *Digital Nollywood*, which deploys an open-source web-publishing platform, *Omeka*, to curate and exhibit movie posters and other visual records that document the historical evolution of cinematic culture in Nigeria.<sup>17</sup> Digital projects such as this are important for postcolonial knowledge productions and build on earlier digital projects such as those by African computational linguists preserving indigenous languages,<sup>18</sup> and queer digital spaces such as Sokari Ekine’s *BlackLooks.org*,

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Humanities,” *Understanding Digital Humanities*, ed. David M. Berry (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1–20.

<sup>16</sup> Risam, *New Digital Worlds*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Besides preserving movie posters, *Digital Nollywood* also supports the digital publication of new stories and counter-histories through other initiatives such as an oral history projects as well as exhibitions drawn from its collection of visual materials. See <https://digitalnollywood.ku.edu/collections/browse> for more information.

<sup>18</sup> For instance, Nigerian computer scientist Tunde Adebola started his *African Languages Technology Initiative* (Alt-i) in 2002 and did some pioneering work on natural language



which contains an African LGBTIQ+ archive and produces alternative epistemologies of gender and sexuality. *Digital Nollywood* is one example of how one can resist the extraction and control possibilities of big tech and its unabating corporate power to annex cultural forms' productions to the coloniality of data, and that's because it leans on the logics of the open web. A postcolonial DH, as one mode of critical digital humanities DH that foregrounds African digital cultural records, requires "praxis at the intersection of digital technologies and humanistic inquiry" and celebrates the building of "new archives, tools, databases, and other digital objects that actively resist reinscriptions of colonialism and neocolonialism."<sup>19</sup> Besides, African literary and cultural forms expand the scope of postcolonial DH and, through the continent's rich cultural records, makes possible the role of cultural criticism in the DH as outlined by Alan Liu in 2011.<sup>20</sup> Beyond the critical development of tools, data, and metadata, a DH that is not impervious to cultural criticism takes seriously a cultural studies methodology attuned to critiques of culture, ideology, and social processes.

Although I will return to the application of DH methods in the interpretations of African literary texts in a subsequent section, the focus here on DH is to underscore the interdisciplinary directions of my task in this article, which is to signpost how DH offers a different but equally productive methodological paradigm for African literary

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processing and machine learning. This kind of digital labor is often absent in the genealogies of the DH.

<sup>19</sup> Risam, *New Digital Worlds*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Alan Liu, "Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?" *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 490–509.

interpretations. Specifically, though, my interest emerges from reflections on the coloniality of data that I am using to refer to how media corporations claim ownership of and privatize the data that is produced by digital subjects. It is the appropriation of data produced by internet users in developing countries by media companies based in the global north. As outlined in the work of Couldry and Mejias, it emerges as the capitalistic capture of spaces and subjectivities online. Coloniality of data is intimately connected to African literature on the internet and enacts the epistemological affiliations of (digital) modernity to the project of coloniality. In other words, and to recast Walter Mignolo, modernity hides behind the splendors of digital connectivity the constant logic of coloniality, which also serves to configure the relationship of digital subjects with data on the internet. For Couldry and Mejias, therefore, data relations enact a new form of data colonialism, normalizing the exploitation of human beings through data. As they write, data relations are “ways of interacting with each other and with the world facilitated by digital tools. Through data relations, human life is not only annexed to capitalism but also becomes subject to continuous monitoring and surveillance.”<sup>21</sup> Although data colonialism makes significant contributions to the understanding of the effects of datafication, its conflation of capitalism and colonialism undermines its conceptual contributions to the debates on decoloniality because it appears to use the focus on online data to restage the logics of neocolonialism. But the point on datafication as ongoing resource extraction in digital ecologies is important and connects to my own thesis in this article, as data violence makes legible the ways in which the organization and classification of information and knowledge have historically supported the operations and enactments of

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<sup>21</sup> Couldry and Ulises, xiii

oppressive power. Data violence comes into existence as supposedly neutral computer algorithms encode the biases of developers and programmers and produce real-world consequences that are often downplayed to maximize profit. Google Search, to elucidate, is a notable example of how data and algorithmic systems can reinforce and amplify racist and sexist biases. Newer works in critical internet studies suggest digital technologies reproduce systemic inequalities through racist and sexist algorithms that are sometimes naturalized as neutral even though they encode the ideological biases of programmers. One example is the Google Search that has been shown to exhibit algorithmic violence in relation to certain racial or ethnic groups.<sup>22</sup> Noble gives the example of Black women whose bodies were primarily represented through images of pornography, even as algorithmic systems continue today to struggle to recognize Black faces.<sup>23</sup> In the context of literary and cultural discourses online, the mistranslations of indigenous languages by Google Translate is one way digital media also operate to alter linguistic data and the identities of those who produce them. For example, Google Translate renders the Yoruba proverb *À n pe gbénàgbénà ẹyẹ àkókó n yojú* as “we call it the bird carpenter time is running out,” whereas a more accurate translations would be “a sculptor is summoned and the woodpecker shows up,” which cautions against overconfidence. Also, the Igbo proverb *O bu mmuo ndi na-eke na-egbu ha*, which can be

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<sup>22</sup> Safiya U. Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: Data Discrimination in the Age of Google* (New York: New York University Press, 2018). See also Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Mutale Nkonde, “Automated Anti-Blackness: Facial Recognition in Brooklyn, New York,” *Harvard Kennedy School Journal of African American Policy* 20 (2019): 30–36.

roughly translated as “it is the deity that people worship that kills them” is ambiguously translated by Google’s machine as “they are killed by the spirits of the worshipers,” an interpretation that alters how this oral form is encountered in digital spaces. The point here is that, as currently constituted, AI and algorithmic systems, whether of Google or Facebook, not only mistranslate the language of African cultural productions but also, as a result, constrain the meanings of these artistic forms on the internet.

Hence, “African literature in the digital age,” as forms of African literatures that are produced, circulated, and consumed on digital platforms, urges a non-romanticizing gesture toward digital technologies, and appreciation of the profit-based AI systems that shape literary agency and reading practices. What is precisely at stake is how these information architectures constrain the literary and cultural spaces of African online subjects as well as the epistemic value of their data. Literary data, like much of other things we post on the internet, is articulated around the axis of capital, as a form of social relation, making internet companies and the owners of the digital ecologies we inhabit always already dominant over us. The digital networks that support new literary voices and genres are also deeply entrenched in a capitalistic usurpation of our relations with data, hailing us as vulnerable subjects of the colonality of data through a process of algorithmic interpellation that manifests in global digital media, including African digital cultures. From Althusserian formulations of subjectivity, algorithmic interpellations emerge in digital contexts that construct or hail online actors as users through computer protocols and codes that serve the ideological purposes of the developers and owners of digital infrastructures. Although the social web in particular is rightly praised for its democratization of knowledge as well as its participatory ethos that most internet users

are always already interpellated is a foregone conclusion that resounds in the violation of privacy and frequent breaches of data; hence, besides questioning the dominant rhetoric of a digital divide that sometimes conceals the digital labors of those with online access already, we need also to become more wary of the digital vulnerabilities of new African writers and other cultural actors who deploy social and digital media as aesthetic zones for the circulation of artistic content.

### **African Literature in the Digital Age**

If digital culture has become a catchword in the field of African literature in the last five to seven years, the attention accorded to it by scholars working in the area is a major reason.<sup>24</sup> For instance, Shola Adenekan's *African Literature in the Digital Age*, the only full-length academic monograph on literary DH and African DH more broadly, addresses how the "internetting" of Kenyan and Nigerian literature produced an entanglement of class and sexual politics in digital cultural productions from those two countries.<sup>25</sup> In explicating the idea of the network—which emerges in the mode of what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as a "field of cultural production"<sup>26</sup> that centers cultural value on a field rather than any particular author and makes texts possible in a complex system of literary

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<sup>24</sup> Although Adenekan published his book in 2021, he had written a dissertation on the topic as far back as 2011, while the first major peer-reviewed article on the topic appeared in 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Shola Adenekan, *African Literature in the Digital Age: Class and Sexual Politics in New Writing from Nigeria and Kenya* (Suffolk, England, and Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer), 12.

<sup>26</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1993), xii.

sociability, Adenekan constructs literary networks as spaces marked by aesthetics and power dynamics. In his assessment, “The online writing space shows the new way in which new Kenyan and Nigerian writers use literature to depict everyday political engagements” given the internet functions as “a site of cultural performance and politics.”<sup>27</sup> Besides functioning as offline networks and spaces of multidirectional literary flows and interactions, the internet also serves as a material anchor of what Kate Willis calls the different “transcontinental exchanges in the production of African literature” by writers from Lagos and Nairobi.<sup>28</sup>

Besides this interest in the quotidian politics that undergirds the literary expressions of African writers online, the idea that cyberspace sometimes serves as a debut platform for print culture also brings in view other scholarly conversations in the nascent field. For instance, a special issue at *Postcolonial Text* unpacks the possibilities and digital transformations of African literary works, makes explicit the modular intimacies between print and digital cultures, and provides an overview of other pressing subjects like digital publics and feminist digital practices. The analytical reliance in this section on the special issue is informed by the belief that the various articles in the edited collection sufficiently encapsulate the major perspectives in African literary DH so far and work well with several other previous articles including those by Nesbitt-Ahmed,

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<sup>27</sup> Adenekan, *African Literature in the Digital Age*, 19.

<sup>28</sup> Kate Wallis, “Exchanges in Nairobi and Lagos: Mapping Literary Networks and World Literary Space,” *Research in African Literatures* 49.1 (2018): 163–86.

Bosch, and Yékú.<sup>29</sup> For instance, Opoku-Agyemang’s essay in the special issue marks the value of the digital archive in short story productions on *Flash Fiction Ghana*, a digital publishing platform that enables thematic explorations of familial relationships among writers in the Ghanaian literary scene.<sup>30</sup> Also Rhonda Cobham-Sander uses Teju Cole’s *Open City*<sup>31</sup> to track what she calls the “the blurred boundaries between digital and analog forms” that compel readers “to grapple with the epistemological limits of narrative in an age when texts often are perceived as infinitely networked and their meanings instantly recuperable.”<sup>32</sup> Cobham-Sander’s digital mapping of the novel through the help of DH tools, from hyperlinks and GIS maps to computer apps that aggregate and chart specific literary effects, is made possible because of Cole’s articulation of the peripatetic Julius with the figure of Parisian flânerie as theorized in the works of Charles Baudelaire and later Walter Benjamin. The point here is how the flows of mobility, and fluctuations make Julius’s spatial navigation of the city amenable to a DH methodology that may include a digital mapping of Cole’s novel. As Julius aimlessly wanders New York, *Open*

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<sup>29</sup> Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed, “Reclaiming African literature in the Digital Age: An Exploration of Online Literary Platforms,” *Critical African Studies* 9.3 (2017): 377–90; Stephanie Bosch Santana, “From Nation to Network: Blog and Facebook Fiction from Southern Africa.” *Research in African Literatures* 49.1 (2018): 187–208; James Yékú, “Deference to Paper.”

<sup>30</sup> Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang, “Flash Fiction Ghana, African Electronic Literature, and Imagining Social Communities,” *Postcolonial Text* 15.3–4 (2020): 1–18.

<sup>31</sup> Teju Cole, *Open City: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> Rhonda Cobham-Sander, “Open City, Open Text: Teju Cole, Digital Humanities, and the Limits of Epistemology,” *Postcolonial Text* 15. 3–4 (2020): 1–17.

*City* confronts us with the production of a spatial dataset, which, though generated within a fictive, print environment, can then become reinterpreted by digital mapping scholars through GIS tools. But as I will demonstrate shortly, these kinds of methodological approaches Cobham-Sander employs are not without their inadequacies.

The creative fusion of digital and print aesthetics in the novel form also invites the integration of digital tools and methods into literary interpretations in the works of Chimamanda Adichie, reputed for her literary and performative experimentations with the form and affordances of digital media, employ similar strategies in their novels. In Adichie's fictional ecology, digital media—deployed as narrative elements in her novels and emerging as a means of connecting with fans and followers (in the sense that performs and displays the writer as a blogger and digital celebrity)—is a central organizing element. To give an example, blogging exists as a means of negotiating the mundane realities of her characters; Ifemelu, for instance, starts a blog that serves to exteriorize the frustrations she feels about systemic racism in the United States, while it offers Adichie the chance to blur genres and incorporate nonfictional elements into the fictive ecology she has created. The digital quotidian is also central to Kathleen Fitzpatrick's argument on the value of blogs for literature. Fitzpatrick argues that the literary quality of blogs arises from "a complex negotiation among discrete, and often random, daily entries and the often invisible arc that they together sketch. Character may emerge from plot, in most literary writing, but in the blog, plot must itself emerge from the quotidian, produced not by a singular, overarching narrative, or even by a multiplicity of such narratives, but instead by the accretion of numerous fractal narratives structured



by the form of the database.”<sup>33</sup>One of Fitzpatrick’s arguments in her essay examines how different literary forms are significantly defined less by their specific content than by the ways that readers engage with them, although how these fractal narratives coalesce into plot is not sometimes clear. Although the meta-fictional use of blogging and social media in *Americanah*,<sup>34</sup> for instance, is a way Adichie’s novel straddles print and digital ecosystems, digital media enables Ifemelu to express the quotidian politics of race and gender in ways that are structurally connected to the overarching plot of the novel. Ifemelu’s fragmented narratives on her blog are central to Adichie’s overall narrative design and must be accounted for in the critical interpretation of the novel, and this appears to be how the author envisions readings of the work. To understand Ifemelu herself, one has to focus on the alienating conditions of her immigrant experiences in the United States, but at a structural level, even blogging with its capacity to accommodate iterative writings, and the aesthetic distance between her personal and private selves also sets the condition for her multiple identities. As a leading race blogger, she creates different content for her multiple audiences, depending on whether she is writing on her blog on whether she is leading a diversity workshop, but it is apparent in the meta-fictional paradigms of the novel that to write an honest novel about race in the United States means the creation of Ifemelu’s blog. When Kelsey asks her what the novel she is reading is about, Ifemelu wonders why people fixate on such questions “as if a novel had

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<sup>33</sup> Kathleen Fitzpatrick, “The Pleasure of the Blog: The Early Novel, the Serial, and the Narrative Archive,” *Blogtalks Reloaded: Social Software-Research & Cases*, eds. Thomas N. Burg and Jan Schmidt (Vienna: Social Software Lab, 2007), 167–86.

<sup>34</sup> Chimamanda Adichie, *Americanah* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2013).

to be about only one thing.”<sup>35</sup> It is possible there is a tacit reference here to Adichie’s Ted Talk about the danger of a single story, but also visible in Ifemelu’s response is a self-reflexive explication of a novel that is constituted by multiple ideas and narratives based on both print and digital affordances. Hence, like Cobham-Sander, Lauren Tuiskula in her “Digital Adichie: Identity, Diaspora, and Transmedia Practice,” a DH project named *DHAmericanah* deploys DH tools in her interpretation of Adichie’s novel. Using both the novel itself and the digital sphere within it as well as other intertextual references evoked in the narrative as datasets, Tuiskula shows that reader interactivity is at the heart *Americanah*. This interactive element makes the novel “resemble the exact structure of a blog.”<sup>36</sup> Tuiskula’s recourse to DH methodologies underscores the new interpretive paradigms that are being made relevant to the study of the African novel and serves as a framework for how computational methods like data visualization, GIS mapping, and hypermedia analyses might invigorate African literary and cultural analyses. I underscore the methodological engagements with the two aforementioned novels to demonstrate how the digital configures not only the production and circulation of African literature but also our own hermeneutical interventions.

In the meantime, my analyses herein suggest the works of Adichie and Cole animate the intersecting dynamics between print cultures and digital media. Because print forms are still overwhelmingly dominant in African literatures, therefore, Stephanie Bosch Santana invites us to consider the nondigital spaces and networks that sometimes

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<sup>35</sup> *Americanah*, 223

<sup>36</sup> Lauren Tuiskula, “Digital Adichie: Identity, Diaspora, and Transmedia Practice” (master’s thesis, Amherst College, 2017 <http://dhamericanah.com/>).

function independently of the digital spaces. In her 2019 essay about the Story Club of Lilongwe in Malawi, Bosch Santana, drawing from Stephanie Newell's notion of "paracolonial networks,"<sup>37</sup> uses the phrase "paravirtual networks" to explain how the disappearance of digital platforms may prompt more offline literary networks such as the Story Club. Like the "Story Club—networks that are made possible by a shrinking digital world," paravirtual networks "operate in ways that exceed the digital's affordances" and are "likely to become more and more common."<sup>38</sup> Santana's essay builds on earlier discussions of Facebook fiction from southern Africa, particularly South African writer Mike Maphoto's once popular blog "Diary of a Zulu Girl," which started as posts on Facebook and later appeared in print form. Santana uses this online diary genre to bring into view the belief that African digital fiction is not merely spatially displaced and unmarked in the framework of cyberspace, but is better seen as "*emplaced*, positioned between digital and print, the material and the immaterial, the continent and the wider world."<sup>39</sup> Again, evident here is an affirmation of the persistence of print forms, a lingering print imaginary that is informed by the often-common valorization of digital technologies, yet a fetishization of nondigital networks and offline literary possibilities is sometimes contingent on a rhetoric that unduly fixates on the low penetration rates of

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<sup>37</sup> Stephanie Newell, "Paracolonial Networks: Some Speculations on Local Readerships in Colonial West Africa," *Interventions* 3.3 (2001): 336–54.

<sup>38</sup> Stephanie Bosch Santana, "The Story Club: African Literary Networks Offline," *Routledge Handbook of African Literature*, eds. M. Adejunmobi and C. Coetzee (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2019), 385–98.

<sup>39</sup> Santana, "The Story Club."

digital technologies in Africa, as if the fortunes of the digitally disconnected must constrain a necessary attention to digital cultural productions. The point is not to fetishize new media technologies, but it is also not to use discourses of the digital divide to essentialize Africa and obfuscate the agency of the digitally connected.

Having said that, I am not suggesting that the political dimensions of internet spaces and the questions of access are of no interest whatsoever. As a matter of fact, the data politics of African literary expressions online urges us to take seriously how for instance, the Facebook version of the “Diary of a Zulu Girl” can mean Maphoto as author, and his thousands of readers and followers, are vulnerable to algorithmic systems that extract profit from such literary productions and circulations. There is much that can be understood in focusing on how the aesthetic designs and affordances of social and digital media support new genres and publics for African literature, but equally important is the uses of our online data and the political-economic relations they evoke. By staying off the grid online and having privacy settings in place, some digital actors sometimes are able to resist technical protocols of hailing and subjectivizing systems such as the algorithms and databases that interpellate us as users whose data are extractable; yet the mostly positive gesture to the digital should not foreclose the thoughtful consideration of the politics of datafication online. This consciousness is necessary, given that many of the articles cited previously and indeed several others on African digital cultures tend to be more concerned with how the internet enables networks for literary and cultural practices than the economic and ethical implications of AI and algorithmic systems.

### **Data Coloniality and Literary Data**

To be clear, the ethics and politics of digital technologies are taking place in other African scholarly contexts, with prominent questions raised, for instance, about the decolonization of artificial intelligence and the digital coloniality that exposes the market logics of companies like Google and Facebook in Africa.<sup>40</sup> In any case, forbidding any technological determinism are the epistemic crises of fake news and its circulation online, the tragic denouement of revolutionary moments such as the Arab Spring, and the technological incongruities of a hacking culture that also undermines electoral processes in Africa and around the world.<sup>41</sup> Although “the fate of the unconnected”<sup>42</sup> is still largely with us in Africa, many who possess the data bandwidth and infrastructures for digital connections have to respond to local iterations of some of these pessimistic narratives about digital technologies. For example, whether it is on a WhatsApp group or a

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<sup>40</sup> Adam Rachel, “Can Artificial Intelligence Be Decolonized?” *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 46 (2021): 176–97; Toks Dele Oyedemi, “Digital Coloniality and ‘Next Billion Users’: The Political Economy of Google Station in Nigeria,” *Information, Communication & Society* 24.3 (2021): 329–43.

<sup>41</sup> In 2015, Nigeria’s Electoral Commission (INEC) confirmed in a tweet that its website had been hacked by some cyberwarriors. “Independent National Election Commission.” Twitter. March 28, 2015 (<https://twitter.com/inecnigeria/status/581771140403765248>). Similarly in Ghana, the official Twitter handle of the electoral commission of Ghana deplored “the attempt to hack,” the electoral commission urging hackers to “respect the integrity and independence of the EC.” “Electoral Commission of Ghana,” Twitter. December 8, 2016 (<https://twitter.com/ECGhanaOfficial/status/806754788964634624>).

<sup>42</sup> Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 169.

Facebook thread, these digital applications on our mobile phones often manifest as an assemblage of images and narratives that are often ideologically deficit in their gendered, violent, and political intensities and mobilities. But to be clear, these anomalies may gesture at the obvious ambivalence that is definitive of digital technologies. As the technological subjects of our age contrive the digital as “a new unified language for the multiverse of culture”<sup>43</sup> in the global media ecology, the manifestation of excess and restraint online, speech and silence, or even agency and depoliticization are well congealed in the workings of the digital. Their downsides aside, digital platforms like WhatsApp can function as a crucial literary environment, as Meg Arenberg explains, that supports the formation of cultural spaces and digital geographies for the publishing and exchange of Swahili poetry.<sup>44</sup> In other words, WhatsApp emerges as a handy platform for the curating of certain types of literary content, in this case, Swahili poetry. But with the common knowledge that WhatsApp has employers who are dedicated to moderating content on the app, and the potential for loopholes such as those from an external cloud storage system in its encrypted messaging platform, not even the poetic forms posted by the members of this mobile literary community can be reliant on any encrypted model. This is not to suggest that WhatsApp’s parent company, Meta, has access to what people post, but it surely can.

This ambivalent nature of the digital is contingent on the ideological base of the internet companies that offer promises of connections but are implicated in an insidious

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<sup>43</sup> Marshall McLuhan, “Culture Without Literacy,” *Explorations* 1 (1953): 117–27.

<sup>44</sup> Meg Arenberg, “Swahili Poetry’s Digital Geographies: WhatsApp and the Forming of Cultural Space,” *Postcolonial Text* 15.3–4 (2020): 1–24.

regime of capital that renders digital labors vulnerable to a manipulative reign of algorithms and a machinic control that holds us captive to the protocols and designs of platform capitalism. Platform capitalism, like what Jodi Dean calls “communicative capitalism” to describe an internet age that produces a noisy and one-sided democratic culture,<sup>45</sup> is Nick Srnicek’s term for explaining how companies like Google and Facebook operate as platforms invested in the massive collection of our data as their central business model. As “capitalism turns “to data as one way to maintain economic growth and vitality,” the platform emerged “as a new business model, capable of extracting and controlling immense amounts of data.”<sup>46</sup> Before outlining the links between literary media and online data, and how this topic is approached in digital literary studies, it is worth pointing out that for all its importance as the foundational text of African literature in the digital age, Adenekan’s book misses an opportunity to linger on a necessary critique of the major ideological fulcrum on which African digital cultures are constructed. Despite Adenekan’s focus on class and sexual politics, which makes the volume a solid intervention in digital queer studies in Africa, the work romanticizes the technological structures of the internet spaces examined. In several places, for example, the popular idea that “cyberspace represents freedom and democracy” and that “fictional narratives reflect both the restrictions of the printed word and the freedom of online publishing”<sup>47</sup> is uninterrogated and taken for granted. This results in a reticent scrutiny of

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<sup>45</sup> Dean Jodi, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>46</sup> Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 6.

<sup>47</sup> Adenekan, *African Literature in the Digital Age*, 14.

the extractive relations that exist between the corporate owners of the net's infrastructures and African digital subjects using these so-called "free" platforms. Without elaborating the point, the book, though, acknowledges early that platform capitalism defines digital creativity:

While cyberspace is important for this transformation of the figure of the African writer, *African Literature in the Digital Age* also recognises the notion of digital space is embedded in capitalist commercial mechanisms. Facebook, Instagram and YouTube are money-making ventures. Across the world, billions of people use social media every day, and these platforms are where our interior lives—including those of writers and other creative artists—are on constant display, alongside paid advertisements. For some writers, digital capital equals political and financial capital. The digital space is thus a site in which art and commercialisation exist in a symbiotic relationship.<sup>48</sup>

This is one of the few places in the book that highlights the sinister logic of "paid advertisements" and the "money-making ventures" of social media companies that constrain much of the celebrated literary experimentations online. But the commodification of digital lives and the capitalist susceptibility of the emerging writers who use social media as a test space for their literary works needs to be tackled headlong, much more than has been offered by the scholarship on African digital literature. Besides the hegemonic and political control of data relations, the mostly hidden costs of digital connections calls us to respond to the challenge of Africa as an extractive site of data

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<sup>48</sup> Adenekan, *African Literature in the Digital Age*, 6.



colonization. As creative artists post content on social media, we are not only confronted with how literature on social media sites foregrounds the quotidian intersections of social class, art, and politics but also with digital platforms that extract profit from digital African literature because of its entanglements with the capitalist production and consumption of data online. Sometimes framed as “affective capitalism,”<sup>49</sup> the emotive dimensions of online participation prompt us to consider how digital media both activates us as literary subjects and diminishes our digital labors through relations with data that reiterate hierarchies of economic control. But data capitalism is one way capitalism operates online also iterates what Shoshanna Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism, which aims “to predict and modify human behavior as a means to produce revenue and market control.”<sup>50</sup> Surveillance capitalism works through the digital capture of personal data and undermines the possibilities of digital democracies through the forces of commodification that use mined data to predict and determine people’s behavior. The social media era may be transforming African literatures and through technical features that foster new authorial power, genres, and experimentations, but the vulnerability of African digital labors to economic systems of control is patently real. As computation makes possible new literary networks and connections, the ontology of the digital becomes marked by a propensity for data accumulation that potentially limits the agency of people who use social and digital media for cultural productions. Platform capitalism sometimes means

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<sup>49</sup> Tero Karppi et al., “Affective Capitalism: Investments and Investigations.” *Ephemera* 16.4 (2016): 1–13.

<sup>50</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, “Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization,” *Journal of Information Technology* 30.1 (2015): 75–89.

that corporate social media misuse personal data beyond their stated intention and violate user privacy as digitized subjectivities are made vulnerable to capitalist logics. As suggested earlier, beyond the misappropriation of personal data, a writer's literary content can become the condition for a platform's ability to target ads at the writer. As new writers and their readers post, like, and share literary materials, the platforms they use learn something about them, and this knowledge becomes the basis for profitable advertising. In an age of big data, the ownership and control of the data produced by African cultural producers online should matter significantly to scholars, particularly as we witness the commodification of the literary self and cultural records by technical systems that reinforce economic power structures through mechanisms of surveillance and data control.

Having said this, to wonder whether literature is actually data is not completely out of the question. The argument could even be made that literature cannot be reasonably considered in the same way as DH scholars talk about data especially in terms of the quantitative approach to the description of textual and archival materials. In digital literary studies, however, well established is a method of computational textual analysis that examines the meanings of literary quantity and the turn to big data that results from the large-scale cultural and historical corpora. Computational approaches often prompt, for instance, interests in the meanings of the vast amount of born-digital or electronic literary forms being produced in spaces like social media by new African writers bypassing institutional mechanisms of print to self-publish on the internet. Understanding the social and aesthetic significance of literature in the frameworks of computing means we methodologically encounter literary forms as data, although what distinguishes

literary forms as data from say online social movements, hashtags, or newspaper content as data is the aesthetic quality of literary texts themselves. The method developed by Franco Moretti, “distant reading,” is probably the most radical in recent years as it advocates interpreting written literature not in terms of specific texts but by aggregating and analyzing massive amounts of data.<sup>51</sup> This way, literary criticism combines, rather than displaces, traditional methods of “close readings” with graphs, timelines, charts, calculations, and maps of literary works and networks. Hence, Andrew Piper’s *Enumerations*, which later explores these “quantitative dimensions within texts” also invites us to consider the ways in which textual meaning is produced through a computational method of reading that privileges the discursive role of quantity in literature and the value of statistical models to cultural forms more broadly.<sup>52</sup> Such an approach encourages a combination of traditional close reading of individual texts with computational analyses that possibly yield additional insights, especially when the focus is on comparative relationships that emerge within parts of a large literary corpus or historical dataset. The importance of this approach is how a single text is inserted into a system of textual and cultural materials to speculate on relationships among various parts over a period.

For example, a computational text analyses could produce definable patterns in Chinua Achebe’s entire corpus, and we could take this further by actually tracking the

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<sup>51</sup> Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso Books, 2007).

<sup>52</sup> Andrew Piper, *Enumerations: Data and Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 2

patterns of repetition in his texts, extracting literary meanings from the various quantities of lexical items and other formal features. This may then be correlated with the works of other writers in the first generation of African literature to show discursive relationships and networks. To illustrate this point, I used Voyant, an open-source, online-based application for performing digital text analysis, to “read” *Things Fall Apart*, and the first obvious result reinforces common close readings that consigns the novel to patriarchal spheres of male initiatives and control.<sup>53</sup> With “Okonkwo” and “man” as the most frequently used words (occurring 300 and 261 times, respectively), it becomes logical to grasp why Achebe's realist fiction enforces a systematic “under-textualization” of women such as Okonkwo’s mother, who recedes into the background in a manner that enables Okonkwo and other men to achieve their narrative prominence.<sup>54</sup> Although a complementary gender space in which a mother is equally supreme might be more definitive of Achebe’s novel, the text’s representational politics as an exploration of Okonkwo’s or man’s struggles on behalf of himself and society overshadows women—as the digital text analyses also corroborate.<sup>55</sup> In this case, Voyant’s algorithmic system enables me to obtain linguistic and statistical information from the novel, as it does of texts of varied sizes and languages and makes possible the results in visualizations that

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<sup>53</sup> See Biodun Jeyifo, “Okonkwo and His Mother: *Things Fall Apart* and Issues of Gender in the Constitution of African Postcolonial Discourse,” *Callaloo*, 16.4 (1993): 847–58.

<sup>54</sup> Jeyifo, “Okonkwo and His Mother,” 848.

<sup>55</sup> Of course, this point is already in the know, but the example, which less significantly relates to main thesis on data colonialism, is intended to show the supplementary dimensions of distant reading as an additional method for African literary studies.

include graphs, grids, and word clouds. This kind of statistical analysis may not be completely new in traditional frameworks of African literary studies, but the specific role of digital tools and methods in extracting meanings needs to be embraced more as supplementary critical strategies in postcolonial African literary discourses.

Having said that, digital text analyses based on quantitative models may depart from the normative interpretive model that privileges traditional close reading of texts, but it potentially generates literary meanings through the presentation of literature as numerical data. While applying the principles of literary computing to this singular text may generate other epistemological and methodological implications, it offers an example of how computational text analyses can facilitate literary meanings based on the digital emergence of large literary and cultural datasets from ongoing digitization processes on the continent or through the use of the social web as literary networks for the production of African literature. The point of large-scale literary history and interpretations based on quantitative models is neither to present distant reading as an inherently objective anchor for literary meanings nor, as Ted Underwood writes, to “recover a complete archive of all published works but to understand the contrast between samples drawn from different periods or social contexts.”<sup>56</sup> Rather than a displacement of traditional modes of reading and critiquing individual or large quantities of literary texts, the goal of distant reading is a complementary approach that self-reflexively understands the limits of a computational approach to literature.

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<sup>56</sup> Ted Underwood, *Distant Horizons: Digital Evidence and Literary Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 2019, xx.

## Conclusion

In the data paradigm described in this article, literary representations are subject to the workings of neoliberal capital and are at the core of Yahoo's email on the Krazitivity archive. But as Krazitivity indicates, the digital empires and infrastructures that underpin data relations are also crucial, signaling how algorithmic systems and platforms not only affect how people write, read, and discuss African literary texts but also the control and ownership of the data produced. If literature can indeed be considered data, how it circulates in market-driven digital platforms like Instagram and YouTube returns us to the capitalistic forces that coopt fiction and poems posted on these corporate platforms.

I would like to close with the practice of posting poems on Instagram, *Instapoetry*, a genre of popular literatures that has not received any critical attention in the context of African literary studies. Instapoetry is a direct outgrowth of the digital age and is a new subgenre of poetry rendered in a linguistic style that is proximate to Instagram's photographic format and accompanied by visual texts to supplement its aesthetics. The genre's leading voice, Canada's Rupi Kaur, has more than 4.5 million followers on the platform—a number that matters socially and economically for the judgment of prestige and the production of the writer as a social media influencer—online and has eventually gone on to publish bestselling poetry collections that confirm the remediation of literature from the digital to print. The literary quality and cultural value of the poems published on Instagram (and, indeed, other social media platforms), however, continue to shape discussions and critical receptions of Instapoetry, as the genre restages the dichotomy between popular culture and what is considered high art. But, as Scott Kushner writes, digital media “present literary studies with the opportunity to

interrogate the category of the literary; to examine anew what the category does to texts, the people who read them, and the people who study them; and to think about how it can reimagine the boundaries of its disciplinary operations.”<sup>57</sup> In terms of the evaluative paradigms of African digital literary forms, and indeed of works whose aesthetics derive mainly from computation, the point is that when literary texts are produced for the web or when a work is reconceived to take advantage of the capabilities of the web, the result is not just a web iteration. Rather, it needs to be constructed as an entirely different artistic production that is unlike printed text and should, therefore, be “evaluated in its own terms with a critical approach fully attentive to the specificity of the medium” and the malleability of forms and meanings it facilitates.<sup>58</sup> Such evaluative terms derive from the affordances of the medium and include, for instance, principles of interactivity, the hypertext, and even how AI constrains how readers encounter and make meanings of texts. With the digital screen and the literary forms it enables different from the formal aesthetics of the page, the different materiality of both media also conditions compositional, reading, and reception practices differently.

Also, based on my premise, rather than what is consecrated as having cultural value, most relevant are the commodifiable affects generated on the social web through

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<sup>57</sup> Scott Khusner, “Comparative Non-Literature and Everyday Digital Textuality,” *The 2014–2015 Report on the State of the Discipline of Comparative Literature*, April 18, 2015 (<https://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/entry/comparative-non-literature-and-everyday-digital-textuality-0>).

<sup>58</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, “Electronic Literature: What Is It??” *The Electronic Literature Organization*, January 2, 2007 (<http://www.eliterature.org/pad/elp.html>).

the self-publishing enactments of authorship and its affective circulations on digital media. As James Morgan Rue argues, questions that focalize Instapoems as “good” or “bad” are not as generative as “the particular processes which are visible in the writing and publication of Instapoetry and that differentiate it from poetry published in the past and through other media, notable in print.”<sup>59</sup> Besides Rupi Kaur, there are many other Instapoets around the world, including Kenyan-born Somali-British poet Warsan Shire, whose poetry focuses on immigration politics, Muslim woman identity, and sexuality—a topic that is common to the many writers who use Instapoetry to provoke activist conversations. There are also a few Nigerian writers who identify as “Instagram poets,” although many others simply post literary works on Instagram and other social media. Besides the outlet it gives for young poets to publish their works, a productive approach to Instapoetry and digital literatures in general is to keep in view the extractive nature of the platform that hosts it. Both for established writers using social media to perform authorship or connect with online reading publics and new voices using several online platforms to publish their works, the annexation of data to forces of profit is a reality to grapple with. We may surmise, then, that the social, economic, and political ramifications of the digital publishing of African literature is closely linked to the question of the literary data writers post online and the commodification of African digital subjectivities by American global media companies whose algorithms constrain the expression of literary talents. If Instagram poetry has value, it displays an ambivalence that is typical of technology itself and is evident in the value generated from what is posted on Instagram

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<sup>59</sup> James Rue, “The Future of Poetry in the Digital Era-Instapoetry and Remediation,” (thesis, Utrecht University, 2019).



by poets and a poet's capacity to monetize their Instagram fanbase and influence. But this potential to monetize their works springs from a capitalist machine that promises connections. One possible mode of resistance to this system is to develop African digital infrastructures that exhibit some ethical commitment to a healthy internet.