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New Voices, New Media: Class, Sex and Politics in Online Nigerian and Kenyan Poetry

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"The rise of a genre," argues David Craig (1975: 160), "is likely to occur with the rise of a class." Craig's statement is germane not only because each social class often tries to define itself by devising and utilizing arts that truly capture the very essence of its existence, but also because various elements of day-to-day experiences are often portrayed through the prism of one's own class. Class-consciousness is not alien to many African societies. Class also intersects economic and cultural strata and no one epitomizes this phenomenon more than the artist, who derives his artistic licence from the fact that he occupies the middle layers of his society. This trend continues today. The way social critique in a digital age is expressed in poetry through a middle-class worldview, by people who are often seen as spokespersons for contemporary Nigeria and Kenya, is the focus of this essay.

Cyberspace is a convergence of political and literary power, and writers and politicians are very active in this space populated mainly by the educated middle classes. Not long ago, Terry Harpold (1999) predicted that Africa will epitomize the heart of digital darkness. Harpold uses Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899/1902) in pointing out the futility of imagining an African digital age. He surmises that no studies or data available at the time can "account for the extreme local obstacles which must be overcome before anything like a viable African internet is possible" (22). Two decades or so later, not only does Africa have more mobile phone users than Europe but internet usage on the continent is also growing rapidly. The past decade has also seen a boom in online-based communities, websites, and social media pages that target Africans at home and overseas. Leading politicians in both Kenya and Nigeria target online readers as potential voters on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The Nigerian and Kenyan presidents for example, maintain active social media presence, with millions of followers. Governors and legislators in these two countries are also active on Facebook. Poets often try to speak truth to power, while politicians use this space daily to communicate with the same audience that poetry is targeting. Readers are equally likely to be educated and actively follow politics and popular culture, in addition to partaking in historical and cultural events. Such poets and their readers can therefore be regarded as people who possess cultural capital. Thus class intersects with the poetic and the political in a digital age.

Furthermore, for many emerging poets from Kenya and Nigeria, cyberspace is not exclusive to the book, or a physical space's oral performance, as they use these media in a way that suggests orature. The print platform and cyberspace complement one another, and they are both germane to African literature in a new age. For example, poetry posted on Facebook may be performed for members of the public in the real space of Lagos and Nairobi, and the recording of those performances may be posted on YouTube and Facebook for consumption by the online public. Young poets such as David Ishaya Osu (Nigeria), Dami Ajayi (Nigeria), and Redscar McOdindo K'Oyuga (Kenya) publish poems almost every week on Facebook, many of which later form part of print collections. These works may also appear as part of a collection of a creative book project. These processes arguably involve reshaping the text for different formats, and through this process the creative piece is unfixed and susceptible to changes. These textual movements across spoken words, the print medium, and cyberspace speak to the malleability of texts, and also to the transnational middle-class lifestyle—and upbringing—of several members of a new generation of African voices.

Using history as a starting-point, this paper will argue that our understanding of class has for a long time been influenced by a Euro-modern concept of social status, which sees class as an idea that emerged totally from Europe and its modernity and that class can only be comprehended by framing arguments through this perspective. It will argue that ideas of social status are also part of history in non-western societies such as Nigeria and Kenya. In carrying out these analyses, I will argue that these online poems are organised around not just the present but also the robust interpretation of the past. This is because new media technologies give writers new avenues to shape, recreate, possess, re-live, experience, and remember forgotten old cultural practices and create new contemporary cultural values.

Cyberspace as the New Medium for Nigerian and Kenyan Poetry

Many of the new voices from Kenya and Nigeria are not posting their works on cyberspace just for the sake of it; it is because communities—both local and global—are emerging from this space. In addition, these communities are populated mostly by people who can be described as middle-class. A report by the African Development Bank (2011) says internet usage is a signifier of a middle-class lifestyle in Africa and the study uses internet penetration as one of its main markers for analysing the social classes on the continent. Another survey by internetworldstats.com suggests that as of May 2015, there are about thirty million Kenyans online out of a total population of fifty million people, and the Nigerian Communications Commission estimates that as of August 2015, there are over a hundred million Nigerians who have internet-enabled devices. The majority of the people living in both countries, therefore, have access to cyberspace.

Across the African continent, a study by Grail Research (2013) suggests that the rise in internet consumption is driven mainly by Africa's growing middle class.

I have previously (2012) traced the history of the internetting of Nigerian and Kenyan literature to the mid-to-late 1990s, when many young African writers, wanting to escape the politics of book publishing, began to publish poetry, short stories, and essays on African listservs, personal blogs, and creative writing websites. The demand for African short stories and poems began to grow a decade or so later as international publications such as the *New Yorker* and *Guernica* started to publish the works of some notable emerging African voices. In addition, some of the new voices came together to start their own publications, which include *Kwani?*, Africanwriters.com, *Chimurenga*, *Brittle Paper*, *Saraba* and the Thenewblackmagazine.com. Poets and short story writers also have their own blogs where they post works in progress; these include *Gukira*, *Koroga* and *TolulopeWrites*.

At this moment, there are dozens of poetry and creative writing communities online; many of these poets and writers maintain an active social media presence and there are hundreds of online groups in which poets, writers, and other creative artists mingle everyday with their followers. And since texts tend to move to where the audience is, it is, therefore, no surprise that an increasing amount of creative writing—mostly poetry, short stories, plays, and essays—is finding a home in this new media. Literature is one of the main elements that unite members of these online communities and writers are often seen as the guiding lights of these communities. For example, Pius Adesanmi and Tolu Ogunlesi (Nigeria) have thousands of followers on Facebook and Twitter, as do Binyavanga Wainaina and Shailja Patel (Kenya).

Publishers are also addressing this new digital trend and Donna Bryson (9 May 2013) argues that "[p]ublishers across the [African] continent are increasingly targeting readers with mobile phone apps and other technologies that are far cheaper than either e-readers or traditional books." These digital entities to which Bryson refers are made up of Africans who are using mobile phones and computers for their creating writing, while their readers often use these digital tools to access, share, and comment on creative texts. Some poems speak to cultural heritage as well as contributing to the online processes of collective memory productions (subversive and conventional), place-making activities, and identity construction. It is these historical evocations and the production of new materialities that inform this essay.

These middle-class poets are mainly people with a good knowledge of the English language, who also possess the resources to have internet access as well as the technical know-how to post creative writing online. Olu Oguibe is a leading poet, artist, and writer; born, raised, and educated in Nigeria, he recognises the privileged nature of African arts in the digital age, especially its connection to the

professional middle classes. In an essay, "Connectivity, and the Fate of the Unconnected" (7 December 1999), he argues:

> In time, however, we have come to acknowledge that the requisites of entry into this network involve a little more than simply connecting. Many now recognize that connectivity carries with it a string of conditionalities, and in order to connect, the average individual must meet these conditionalities most of which many are ill disposed to fulfil. (http://www.heise.de/tp/artikel/6/6551/1.html)

Oguibe's argument reflects the condition of African literature written in European languages. The poets, novelists, critics, and consumers of these works are people with the language capability to enjoy them. They can afford fast and reliable internet, are often based in metropolitan centres of Africa, Europe, and America, and some even spend much of their time in these places. Oguibe points to the way in which arts in online space exclude people from "certain communities, social strata, geographic locations." Even in 2016, there is still a digital divide between those who are active on social media networks, where much poetry is being posted daily, and those who are not connected to these networks. For example, figures from Internetworldstats.com suggest there are less than five million Kenyans on Facebook and Twitter. Moreover, there are less than a hundred active users on influential listservs such as ConcernedKenyanwriters. The people on these social media networks constitute the minority when we take into consideration that there are almost thirty million Kenyans with internet-enabled devices. The story is the same in Nigeria; according to the Nigerian Communications Commission (2015) there are over a hundred million Nigerians with internet-enabled devices, whereas according to Internetworldstats.com (2015), as of 2013, there are less than ten million Nigerians on both Facebook and Twitter. On listservs such as Krazitivity, USA-Africa Dialogue and Ederi, the number of active users is not more than three thousand. These figures, therefore, buttress Oguibe's argument that in Africa, as well as around the globe, online literature is still the domain of mainly the educated middle classes, especially those who have the education and the money to be digitally active on literary forums. This argument is poignant; many African poets base their work on the environment and their poetry cannot be separated from their background and the background of those who consume their work. The immediate reaction and emotion that poetry stirs also constitutes a reliable space for us to study socialization in contemporary Africa. This is because the poems that are being posted online by Nigerian and Kenyan poets, can be said to be the property of the contemporary African middle classes. The condition from which these creative works emanate can also be said to be infused with class consciousness. Therefore, Oguibe's essay can be read as a call for the recognition of the way in which poetry and fiction written in non-African languages intersects with class. The internet is an essential part of globalisation in the twenty-first century, and discourses within globalisation arguably operate to privilege some classes—those at the centre of these discourses—at the expense of others.

Historicizing Class in African Literature

It is important to stress that what is happening in the digital age is not new; the link between class and arts is steeped in history. While discourses on class are often filtered through a western understanding of class, especially through Marxism (Manthia Diawara, 2001; Emmanuel Ngara, 1985; Lewis Nkosi, 1981), I argue that there are resemblances of class structures in what Maria Lugones (2008: 3) describes as places outside of Europe that had "all historically known forms of control of labour or exploitation, slavery, servitude, small independent mercantile production." My understanding of class, therefore, is closer to that of Richard Wolff (2000) and Kwame Nkrumah (1970), both of whom aptly argue that social status and semblances of class existed in many feudal states of pre-colonial Africa. In their theses, they all debunk the myth of a classless pre-colonial Africa. Nkrumah, who was the first leader of independent Ghana and one of the founding fathers of modern Africa, surmises:

> In pre-colonial Africa, under conditions of communalism, slavery and feudalism there were embryonic class cleavages. But it was not until the era of colonial conquest that an Europeanised class structure began to develop with clearly identifiable classes of proletariat and bourgeoisie. This development has always been played down by reactionary observers, most of whom maintained that African societies are homogenous and without class divisions. (1970: 22)

Wolff likewise points out:

> In most African territories, the arriving colonialists found multiple, different class structures. Because they had no conception of class in terms of labour, they did not recognize those structures. Instead they utilized concepts like 'race' or 'primitive civilization' or 'tribe' or 'agriculture' to formulate their analyses of African societies and their colonial policies. (2000: 182)

The point Nkrumah and Wolff are making here is that class or social differentiation and economic production are not totally by-products of the colonial modernity project.

In many pre-colonial societies, there are social distinctions with traditional rulers at the top, rich farmers and merchants as well as artists in the middle, while the poor, former slaves and slaves occupied the lower rung of the economic ladder. What changed, however, is that colonialism brought about the decline of the once ruling classes, who were displaced by a new group of Africans educated by missionaries. Assigned to work with, and often responsible for controlling African kings and chiefs, these Africans reported directly to European officials. Nkrumah also sees Africa's struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism as the main factor for this oversight of the long history of class struggle in Africa. Nkrumah and Wolff are probably right; other scholars have suggested that works of arts can give us an insight into the traditional mode of class ideology in many pre-colonial African societies. Barbara E. Frank (2007: 13), for example, argues that in order for us to fully comprehend African arts, we must first understand "the social, economic, and spiritual contexts within which they were

conceived, created, and used." She also asserts that art objects yield "evidence of the structured coherence of different social systems, as well as revealing instances of the variability of identity and status." What Frank is alluding to here is that art plays a significant role in defining social status in many African societies. Therefore, an analysis of arts and the role they play in many African societies may force us to rethink our understanding of class and the perception that it was brought about solely by the project of colonial modernity.

In Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, Bini, and Swahili poetic traditions, for example, history is often defined through the ruling classes. Yoruba people speak of 'Aye Olugbon' (the era of Olugbon) and 'Aye Aresha' (the era of Aresha). These are powerful rulers whose influences on Yoruba poetic tradition persist till today. Certain oral Yoruba texts, for example, are geared towards the ruling classes and powerful merchants, while other texts speak to the aspirations of those on the lower rung of the economic ladder. Yoruba people also recognise the instability of class as epitomised by the saying: "Ati ri ọmọ Ọba to di ẹru ri, ati ri Iwọfa to di Ọlọla" (Trans: "We have seen a Prince who became a slave, and we have seen a slave who rose to become very rich"). Yoruba people see the condition of social status like the condition of texts, as not being permanent.

Jan Knappert (1979) observes a similar trend in his analysis of four centuries of Swahili poetic tradition, in which history is often defined through the prism of class, especially the traditional ruling classes. Thus, we can see that in many African societies, exclusion and privilege are expressed and asserted through the arts. Garvin Kitching (1980) makes a similar observation about the role of artists in pre-colonial Kenya among the Abaluhya and Samia people. A close reading of pre-colonial Swahili poetry also provides an insight into the way in which certain artistic productions were the exclusive preserve of people from privileged backgrounds. In addition, the history of artistic endeavours in many societies in these two countries shows that the arts and class are intricately linked and that the social status of the artist often allows her the poetic licence to take on taboo subjects that may be difficult to express in ordinary conversation.

A close reading of contemporary literary works indicates that art continues its close relationship with class. For example, the life and aspirations of Nigeria´s and Kenya's lower middle-classes and working classes in the 1960s were captured by the writers of pamphlet literature, many of whom were themselves members of these social classes. Fictional narratives by members of the first generation of modern African writers, several novels published by some members of the second generation, especially books published in the popular Pacesetter series of the 1980s, reflect contemporary concerns, such as sexuality and spirituality mediated through the lens of class. We also see class concerns in the writing of many members of the third generation of writers who are publishing their works online and in print. Examples include Teju Cole's *Every Day is for the Thief* (2007), Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street* (2009) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013). These works may have utilized

European aesthetic standards in their representations but they disrupt the notion of a classless Africa and force us to think about different versions of class.

The Old and the New: Class Representations in Online Poetry

As argued previously, a form of class system existed in many pre-colonial African societies. Like in Europe, there was a connection between class and cultural as well as economic strata. In addition, we can argue that since time immemorial, capital (finance) has always played a great role in the composition and delivery of texts. An Igbo proverb points out that: "It is the man who has eaten well that plays music. If he has not eaten he will be compelled to pick up a hoe, not a harp." The poet is the artist who is well fed and so is entrusted to speak on behalf of society. Thus, the artist often straddles the divide between poor and rich, and from this middle position she derives the artistic licence to criticise as well as praise these different sections of her society. It is this artistic licence that many of today's poets are reprising online.

The Nigerian poet and academic Omosun Sylvester (16 February 2009) acknowledges this heritage in a praise poem *The Juju in the Name (Ritual Space),* which he posted on his poetry blog Tribal Poetry (http://tribalpoetry.blogspot.com/):

> In search of my ancestral heritage
> I was drawn to my mind
> There I see within the stillness
> At the greatest of all beauty
> On the art born within,
> The limitless boundaries to all I can do
> To celebrate the festivity of my clan…
> Because my lineage were of the kings
> It was my art that I acted upon till elders bruised my feet on the tribal stone
> and I was crowned the Onojie
> By king makers in an Esan village
> I write and edit in respect of them

In this poem, Sylvester not only carries the art of the praise poem into the digital age, but also speaks of the privileged position of the traditional poet; the poem illustrates a division of labour that goes back several centuries among Esan people of mid-Western Nigeria, and the place of the poet upon that social ladder. The royal court and the praise-singers/poets exerted influence upon one another, and the impact of these interactions was often felt across every layer of society. The educated African middle-class, of which Sylvester is a member, arguably displaced traditional artists and priests, as the epicentres of African culture to much of the outside world. And at the centre of that displacement stands the poet as the intellectual, representing both unorthodox and orthodox thinking. The role of the poet in a digital age is therefore quite similar to that of the Babalawos and the griots dating back to several centuries. The notable scholar,

senior academic, and eminent Ifa priest Wande Abimbola (1997: 85) argues that "Ifa priests in West Africa are the intellectuals of their society. This was especially true before colonial rule. They had a lot of power and were part of the nobility."

While Karin Barber (2007) enjoins us to rethink our obsession with traditional ways of thinking of texts and asserts that all texts deserve our attention, Susan Arndt (2013) argues that new texts such as cybertexts "are informed by previous texts just as much as they happen to inform future ones […] Discourses meander through the centuries leaving their traces in texts, which in turn leave their marks and remember hi/stories into the future" (2-3). Just as the legacies of written and oral cultures from the past inform what is published online, the privileged social status that pre-colonial artists enjoyed and brought to bear on their works was carried over in the poetry and fictional narratives that were published in the colonial and pre-colonial eras, and these in turn, inform the middle-class poets who are publishing online. The young Nigerian writer, Yemi Soneye, born in 1991, acknowledges the debt that the digital generation owes to the past. In the first part of his poem "It is Development" (30 November 2010), published in the Nigeria-based digital magazine, *Saraba* (owned and run by a collective of young writers), the speaker points out:

> Nothing is recently born.
> All things are not new,
> from primeval times they have been.
> Only oscillations in form, we see and feel.
> Or what are communal tales
> told under gleaming trees
> in the village square to
> Facebook, Twitter and others?
> Would ancient folders of roads
> have had reason to race, fly or sail if
> with a tap, they were at terminal?
> Calls, SMS, MMS and Emails,
> just as a talking drum, stroked
> by the chosen, vibrated with Arokos,
> these are the classic couriers.

The speaker is arguably telling us that the new cannot exist without the past; the digital cannot be divorced from the oral and the written. Poetry in online space, although middle-class in concept, is not without precedent and emerging creative works should not be seen as totally separate from what came before, because African texts in cyberspace bear imprints of the past, including a history of poetic licence as well as various forms of privilege and marginalisation. These young poets are also indicating that their works speak to explicit as well as implicit connections between the real (offline) space of Africa and cyberspace. The two worlds should not be seen as separate entities. At the same time, the digital symbolises the new and we must acknowledge that it is different from the past. What young writers are doing online is therefore a continuation of the historical function of the artist in many African societies, but with a new (digital) twist. The terrain of the African text is shifting, as it always does, but the role of the artist as

the "classic courier" who sits in the middle, still remains the same. Additionally, in an attempt to bridge the gap between educated African middle-classes and their unconnected fellow citizens, the poet in cyberspace tries to represent the unconnected by harking back to African oral history and by marrying African tradition with the twenty-first century's contemporary culture and values. The work of Soneye, who is currently a postgraduate student at Ife, Nigeria, reflects the way in which several middle-class African poets have appropriated some of the skills of the old oral poets, many of whom occupied the middle rung of the economic ladder in the pre-colonial era. Soneye's speaker alludes to the fact that the digital space may be the perfect platform for African texts in the same way that the old poets used traditional musical instruments along with dance and chants, to convey poetry to the public.

Not only is the internet changing the way Nigerian and Kenyan poetry is written and consumed, but poetry on social media also regularly reflects contemporary middle-class culture and concerns. It showcases the educated middle-class people's day-to-day engagement with politics, and these interactions through poetry often speak to the multiplicity of the text. Hyperlinks (or hyper-textualities) allow readers to link texts from different poets on their Facebook and Twitter page. Poets also often 'tag' other poets when a new poem is posted on social media. Within a few seconds they can share these writings with thousands of people from across the globe. Unlike poetry published in print, in cyberspace, not only can poets amend their texts, commentators on social media can also edit or even completely delete their own contributions to online conversations. In addition, while changing poems that have been published as a book is often impossible and when it is possible the process is long and expensive, text editing online can be done within a few minutes and the amendment can be witnessed in real-time by writers and readers alike.

When the critically-acclaimed Ghanaian poet, Kofi Awoonor, was killed in the September 2013 attack on Nairobi's Westgate Mall, poems paying tribute to Awoonor posted on Facebook gave birth to a series of poems dedicated to Awoonor. There was Olu Oguibe's "Wake for Awoonor" (22 September 2013); Obiwu Iwuanyanwu's "Madding Crowd: For Esiaba Irobi and Kofi Awoonor" (22 September 2013); Chuma Nwokolo's "true infidels" (23 September 2013); and Rasaq Malik Gbolahan's "Kofi" (23 September 2013). On August 18, 2015, the poet Afam Akeh published two poems on his Facebook page, "Ancient Water" and "They Talk Into The Silence," which sparked poetical and political debates from other poets (such as Pius Adesanmi and Chuma Nwokolo) and readers alike. Comments include:

> Chijioke Amu-nnadi: Brilliant, as always.
> Pius Adesanmi: Afam efuna! The return of da master! Where u disappear go since?
> Akeem Lasisi: Oga Afam, these are very beautiful lines. May I use this opportunity to confess that when I was growing up on the lap of the muse, I found your STOLEN MOMENTS one of the most interesting and inspiring collections I came across...
> Chuma Nwokolo: Dalusmile emoticon

Saddiq M Dzukogi: This thread is for Elders. Thrilling!
Asomwan Sonnie Adagbonyin: Quintessential Afam! Vivid lines, sharp like a butcher's knife cuts on the skin of a deep haunting somnolence. Why do these images steal my heart so?
Sola Olorunyomi: And in the season of the Idoto celebrations too...poetry returns.
Nehru Odeh: These poems remind us of those unforgettable, stolen moments your poetry gave us. Good we now have those moments back with this offering. Welcome back, Afam ... and well done.
Niran Okewole: Deft, luminous, pure class
Chiedu Ezeanah: "The Chants Of The Quintessential AfamAkeh"
Olasunkanmi Ibikunle: Our Afam is back. What a way to announce your return!
Ifeanyi Edeh: "... It feeds its folk and feeds on them...the Atlantic opens wide and swallows like a great fish... swallowing more water, mixing rivers in its gut, mashing up their stories." Beautiful!

This sudden real-time burst shows the way in which online poetry enables both poetic and political engagements among many young Nigerians and Kenyans. These texts illustrate how online African literature can provide us with an immediate and intimate sense of real-life events. Barber (2007: 139) highlights the role that audiences play in the composition and delivery of texts. She argues that through audiences "one can observe and interact with" and see "clues to the nature of the society they are part of." The poet and his readers, as discussed above, are speaking in a digital language; using words that combine technology-speak with the Nigerian Pidgin English and native languages. Many of these online readers rarely complain they could not understand what other people are saying. Poetry and literature in the digital age is now crafting a new language and a new dialect that is comprehensible to digital natives, but which may sound like jargon to those outside the digital landscape. And because of this development, the nature of text, its presentation and interpretations in the online space, therefore, are open-ended, flexible, and malleable. Every interpretation, every comment and every response to comments has the potential of becoming a text or new conversations. And every additional text reflects the possibility that more information can lead to a better world. This is arguably what we mean when those of us researching the nature of the text in online space suggest that the digital space lends itself to democratic ideals more easily than the book. The way in which readers and writers collaborate together on Facebook and other online forums suggests openness and frankness of thoughts, especially for those who are digitally connected.

Richard Cutler (1996) surmises that real-time interaction is a distinguishing feature of cyberspace as it provides "a level of conversational interaction" that no other medium provides (352-27). Cutler is right: what we witness in the aforementioned posts happens every day on Facebook, Twitter and listservs, and in the process such poems inspire more poems and further conversations in a way that would have been impossible in the book age. These poems speak to the current state of Nigerian politics and the comments from readers reflect their own take on poems and politics. Furthermore, in literary studies, both the intellectual and the aesthetic matter in our articulation of the poetic. Therefore, if we argue that poetry has a history of class bias, especially in the age of the internet, it is because middle-class

online readers see themselves and their societies in these works. They not only have the poet as a 'friend' on Facebook, they understand her worldview, and the poems she posts online are like a mirror that reflects the way they see the world. Art is political because it is used to project the worldview of a certain class of people over those who may not have access to this art or to the medium through which it is projected. Poetry in cyberspace raises emotions among those who are proactive within this space.

As many of the poems posted online by many of these new voices are political, poetry, in the process, becomes a medium for political debate, since the agenda of some of these emerging voices is to use online poetry as a medium for expressing political outrage directed at the African ruling classes, for example. These online works and performances are often used as tools to remind fellow Africans of the need for the politics of resistance, for which the internet allows greater capacity, much more so than the printed book. Poetry in cyberspace, therefore, has become one of the new tools through which young people are seeking societal renewal. What some of these poets are doing in cyberspace suggests that although the internet is arguably an extension of the public space, emerging voices do not necessarily follow the rules of a typical literal public space, as they are using internet technologies instead, to devise new forms of practising their craft. Computer writer Howard Rheingold notes that "the vision of a citizen-designed, citizen-controlled worldwide communications network is a version of technological utopianism that could be called the vision of 'the electronic agora'" (1991: 14). For many digitally wired, middle-class Kenyans and Nigerians, digital space thus becomes a democratic space that allows the poet to perform without censorship and where poetry can be produced and consumed without fear, and without those taking part in this internet forum having to leave their home or travel any distance in order to participate. Jürgen Habermas (1992 [1962]) argues that public space is where citizens get together as equals to partake in debates and to contest the power of the interventionist and centralised state. African poetry on social networking sites gives poets and their audiences the opportunity to express ideas and contribute to debates, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, even though some of the participants hold what may be construed as extremist views on social issues. Thus, we can argue that African text in online space speaks to the possibility of a freedom of expression for the digitally wired middle classes and the freedom to be different.

Class and Sexual Politics

I have previously (2014) pointed out that cyberspace is the place we can (daily) see Africa's professional and educated middle classes at work—where we get an insight into their worldview, and see how they seek to influence national discourses—since most writers, poets, and politicians from Kenya and Nigeria now have a social media presence.

I have argued that in order for us to understand contemporary politics, we need to analyse all texts that are being produced online by people whom Stuart Hall once described as "the deeply cultural characters of the revolution of our times" (1996: 232). One of the most important themes emerging from these discourses is the issue of sex. In tackling taboo subjects such as homosexuality, poets are showing the way in which arts, class, politics, and sexuality intersect. The freedom of the online space, the centuries-old notion of poetic licence, as well as the privilege of being a transnational, middle-class figure, give emerging voices from Kenya and Nigeria the opportunity to challenge the prevailing views on African sexuality.

Kenya's BinyavangaWainaina tackles this theme in a poem "When the Internet Arrived, the Homosexuality Deamon Went Digital" (14 April 2014), posted on the queer African blog, Blacklooks.org:

> When the internet arrived, the homosexuality deamon went digital, and was able to climb into optic fibers. Homosexuality deamon learns fast. Full of trickery. Read a lot and decided to convert from simple analogue deamonhood, to an actual ideology. Homosexuality demon is by this time quite African, a middle class one, likes old colonial houses, comfy hotels, really likes imported things.

This poem, written in slam style, speaks to the Victorian attitude of many African middle-class people regarding homosexuality. Wainaina wrote the poem shortly after coming out as gay on YouTube. The poem tries to historicize the way in which the colonial administration and church officials penetrated the African mind by first controlling the body. The speaker ties colonial officials to the root of the criminalization of homosexuality in several African countries by arguing that many African leaders and middle classes, who are today condemning homosexuality as un-African, inherited such attitudes from colonial-era schools and churches. This poem speaks to the idea that same-sex desire is not un-African; what is un-African is homophobia, and the people who helped perpetuate homophobia are the middle classes. For Wainaina, the online is as real as the physical space. He unabashedly asserts his middle-class self in that space; mixing poetry, fiction, and his own personal stories together. His thoughts are conveyed to thousands of followers through these genres, and his readers share their stories with him in return. When Wainaina came out in 2014, he did it on social media; when he suffered a stroke a year later, he announced it on Facebook. He symbolizes the way in which the personal and the poetical feed on each other. Wainaina writes passionately about the experience of being middle-class and the joy and disillusionment of this identity. Often, he bares his soul, putting the personal right in the open before his followers. His writing is often fragmented, like a jazz musician trying to cobble together a groundbreaking album. Or perhaps the fragmentation reflects his transnational and nomadic existence: Johannesburg today, Lagos tomorrow, and New York two days after that. Perhaps it symbolizes the disjointed nature of social media conversations.

Poems such as this one often read like reportage. Wainaina, like many of his contemporaries, combine creative writing with a career in journalism—they write regularly for new media publications across the continent such as www.mg.co.za—and they often utilize the racy tone of journalism in their poetic and fictional narratives. Wainaina brings to bear the skill of verisimilitude to ground his poetry in middle-class situations that his middle-class readers can understand. From what I have observed, the people who are openly campaigning against the current spate of homophobia on the continent are mostly middle-class Africans like Wainaina. Their work is unashamedly middle class without any hint of guilt but with an awareness of the responsibility they carry as cultural ambassadors. It is a responsibility they carry with seriousness, and poetry is seen as a vital tool of societal transformation. In this regard, the agenda of some of these new voices is not just about exposing the endemic corruption of the postcolonial state but also challenging the hypocrisy and lies surrounding African sexuality and history.

The leading Nigerian poet Femi Osofisan (2008) argues that most members of the previous generations of modern Nigerian writers are rather puritanical when it comes to the issue of sexuality:

> Up at least till the turn of the new millennium, you will observe, the exploration of romantic love or of sex as theme was remarkably rare in the output of our writers. Virtually no literary work dared venture, except in the deflected language of metaphor and refringent echo, into the contentious area of carnal experience. From Tutuola to Okpewho; Achebe to Iyayi; Soyinka to Sowande; Clark to Onwueme—we are talking of over four decades of writing—there is no instance of a memorable kiss […] Thanks to this, the old notions of privacy, the consensual secretiveness and "holiness" that used to be attached to such matters as love and sex have long been axed and discarded as antiquated relic. Bashfulness, decency and self-respect have become casualties in the new ethos of the so-called "free society", where the reigning creed is to 'tell it all'. (www.irnweb.org/en/journals/issues/outliers/download/.../31)

Older writers treat the subject of sex with reverence because they want to preserve Africa's respectability and counter the image of sexually depraved black bodies. In addition, sex is considered secondary to the task of explaining Africa to the rest of the world. So, while some members of the older generation often describe sex in metaphors, several young writers are no longer using coded language in their attempt to challenge the authority as well as modern attitudes regarding the sexual. The explicit is the truth and the truth is ethical. Cyberspace allows for this provocativeness because it is free from censorship, in addition to the fact that there are now many means of publishing and disseminating creative writing in this new media age.

One of the poets who epitomize this new attitude is the Kenyan writer Shailja Patel. She uses the freedom of cyberspace to publish poems that may be considered sexually explicit, as if determined to provoke and challenge not just her readers but also those who are in position of power in Kenya as well as the rest of the African continent. Her poetry, in the process, is often infused with radical political messages. As the speaker in "This is How It Feels" (2008) informs us:

it's true we really do
change the world
by f**king yes
the revolution
is our naked bodies
woman's mouth
on woman's cunt woman's lips
in woman's labia woman's tongue

For Patel, poetry must be subversive and radical. Not only is lovemaking out in the open, but the love that did not dare speak its name two decades ago is now erotically provocative and political. For some of these emerging voices in the digital space, queer writing speaks the language of rebellion against political authority and simultaneously gives voice to the marginalized. Queer intimacy is not mere sexual lust; it is militant in its desire. While it is a demanding task to analyse a work of art for its moral or amoral implications, however, doing so can give an insight into the artist's point of view. In analysing Patel's online poems, we see a poet who is committed to civil rights for all. The sexual explicitness we see in some of her poems reflects her determination to use shock to jolt her mostly middle-class readers into action, since they are the people who are arguably most likely to influence national politics.

Arts, for some emerging literary voices like hers, must serve a purpose, which is to support the weak and the vulnerable. From this particular angle, some of the emerging African poets in a digital age, such as Patel, show the way in which the new media technologies that tether us to capital and control can also work to resist and challenge the agenda of capitalism. Through their mobile and active connections, some of these young Africans are creating a public sphere where individuals and groups can provoke and enlighten the reading public. Moreover, queer sexual desire is much more than sexual gratification; it is fulfilling and meaningful. In this poem, lesbian sex also serves as a commentary on a history of subjugation of queer identity and cyberspace's freedom from offline restrictions. Frank (2007: 14) argues that African artists have a long history of using their privileged position as the mediators between the ruled and rulers to marry the artistic with the profane. Osofisan (2008) makes a similar argument by referencing an Ijala poem from the yearly Oke-Ibadan festival, Ibadan, Nigeria, in which women publicly recite sexually-provocative poems. Both Frank and Osofisan debunk the myth that Africans do not naturally have an affinity towards what the contemporary society now deems as the obscene. The poetry of the likes of Patel shows that even in a digital age, the profane is still part of the artistic tradition. One can therefore argue that African literature in cyberspace can constitute a reliable basis for analysing sexual history. This fits with Doering's hypothesis that the digital space is becoming a site for shared awareness of one's history and of one's place in the community.

Patel's poetry reveals the way in which transitional identity is grounded in class and capital. Her parents' experience in Kenya is mediated through trade—Kenyan Shillings and the British Pound Sterling—a relationship that was brought about by colonialism. The

colonial experience introduced a new system of social classification, which although it did not totally displace the old social order, nevertheless changed the way in which citizens now define themselves. Stuart Hall (1992: 275-77) argues that identity is not a fixed thing but something that "becomes a moveable feast: formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems around us." He describes identity as "an endless, ever unfinished conversation." Hall's argument is exemplified by the way the digital space allows for the outing of Africa's fluid identity, especially for transnational middle-class poets like Patel. Cyberspace allows middle-class subjects to define who they are and poetry gives them further licence to speak their mind and in the process express their "true self" in a way that could have been impossible in the physical space. Religiously minded people like Pat Robertson helped define what is sexually normal, whereas what is considered "normal" can be undermined by middle-class subjects in the digital space. Additionally, being a queer Kenyan Asian who divides her time between California and Nairobi, Patel represents the way in which, in this new cultural space, identities are becoming fluid. Her poems do not evoke a feeling of displacement, despite her multiple identities. They do not reflect feelings of alienation but instead, they stress the fact that she belongs to different spaces and places. She is comfortable with being middle-class, transnational, Kenyan and Asian, while strongly believing in social justice and sexual freedom. Patel asserts her African identity while also embracing the fact that her forebears emigrated from India to Kenya: "I coined the word Migritude as a play on Negritude and Migrant Attitude" (Poefrika.blogspot.com, May 2009). Patel, in cyberspace and in offline space, is a border-crosser not only because she represents postcolonial migrancy, that is available mainly to the African middle classes, but also because she intersects the boundary between heterosexuality and queerness. She is the postcolonial middle-class figure who has learnt to move seamlessly within various cultural spaces and who speaks several languages: Kiswahili, Gujarati, Sheng, English, and Kikuyu. Cyberspace can therefore be seen as representing a new African "cosmopolitanity."

While Patel may not necessarily be accepted as authentically African by some people within and outside of the continent because of her Asian background, her texts and proclamations, however, speak to the silence of these invisible African identities; she represents the avocation and the emergence of these marginalised traditions. This politics of identity—which the digital space enhances—allows people like Patel a chance of naming themselves. Patel's offline and online relationship with Kenya and the West (where she often travels), speaks to the migratory tendency of many of today's middle-class Africans, and the mobility and the hybridity, across multiple online and offline platforms, for which African texts have been known. Patel and her poetry, therefore, reflect complex geographies of belonging and alienation, in addition to the problematic politics of recognition and invisibility.

Contemporary Class Concerns and Online Poetry

In Kenya, several new voices—poets, intellectuals, and photographers—have come together to start *Koroga*, an online project that marries poetry with photography. They see the project as "image-text" (1). *Koroga* uses photography to interrogate poetry and the poems to give meanings or problematize our reading of these professionally shot images, with the aim of engaging "with the politics of representation" (2). In a statement on the *Koroga* website (http://koroga.tumblr.com/page/2), Keguro Macharia, who is one of the project founders points out that *Koroga* "is another African story, a story of what we see and how we see, of meetings and transformations, of looking and seeing, of seeing and writing, of speaking into being the worlds we know, and those we are always imagining." He argues that *Koroga* wants to change the colonial narratives about Kenya and Africa, which still persist today. Instead, *Koroga* wants to tell the African story from an African perspective.

Koroga epitomizes the transnational space that is cyberspace, as well as the innovative way tech-savvy African voices are using new media technologies to show the complexities of Africa beyond the familiar images of the continent. The artists on *Koroga* acknowledge the fact that they are part of the professional middle classes; one of the many themes running through the dozens of works that this project has produced is class consciousness, as the poetry and the images that are being posted on *Koroga* often capture and re-imagine the life of Africans across social classes. For example, Phyllis Muthoni's poem "The Sandwich Bar" (5 September 2011) is supported by a photo taken by Jim Chuchu (5 September 2011), of an expensive restaurant. Its speaker tells us:

> the glass is stained by roses
> and bleeding hearts
> the air is laden with significance and
> sloughed off skin—palms clasped in
> fresh embrace or reluctant exit.
> (http://koroga.tumblr.com/page/2)

While Chuchu's photography presents us with images of a luxurious building and of immense wealth, Muthoni's poem reveals the insecurity of those within that building. Both the patrons and the workers who serve them feel insecure. The privileged professional middle classes worry about the durability of their wealth, and the workers are reminded about their financial insecurity, dependent on the amount of money spent by the privileged. African modernity and class privilege both come with insecurity and instability. Just as the condition of class is unstable, so is the condition of the image-text.

Marziya Mohammedali's poem "Sparks" (30 August 2011) is supported by another photograph taken by Jim Chuchu. However, this time, the image is of a working-class man, who is busy working on an electricity project. The speaker informs us:

Cautious and careful,
He climbs into place.
He feels the energy thrum
Under his fingertips,
The crackle and hum,
Of some lifeforce, enticing…

One second. Just one second.
And the life force turns deadly.
He twists from the pulsing embrace,
Slips to the safety of the ground.
(http://koroga.tumblr.com/page/2)

In these two posts, we see the contrast in the life of working-class Kenyans and that of the professional middle classes. One speaker is concerned about the aesthetic make-up of a restaurant and the effect these designs have on the life of those who patronise the place. While the other speaker illustrates the daily grind of life—that of a man who must risk his life in order to feed his family. In *Koroga*, the role of the artist as the reporter is not conferred on the poet alone, but the photographer is also our artistic reporter. Literature in the online space thus becomes the new tool for Africa's self-documentation. In these poems and photographs, we see the reverberations between meaning-making and visual performance at the same time. The online as a space for creative writing delineates the fragility of African modernity and of the two social classes. The photographs and the written texts—image-texts—work together to reveal the complexities of African modernity. Cyberspace gives many young middle-class Africans the chance to escape the old colonial-framed narratives about the continent and the people who live in it. As aptly argued by its publishers, what *Koroga* has done is to present an image of Africa that may not be published by foreign publishers, who may be uncomfortable with a complex story of class on the continent.

The texts and images in *Koroga* also contain a substantial amount of verisimilitude as writers and photographers become reporters fixated with mapping out social realism in the digital space. Articulating the nature of African poetry, Adam Schwartzman (1999) argues that poems "do not appeal to readers in empty spaces." For Schwartzman, they are an essential tool of "social interactions," though lived experiences are crafted and they reflect the lives of the poet and his readers (3). Cyberspace allows poetry to represent themes such as class consciousness and some of the real-life characters that populate this space. Online literature, therefore, can serve as reliable evidence of some of the changes and challenges facing contemporary Africa, since these are themes reflected in the statements and behaviour of characters in new narratives (poetic as well as fictional), and in the implicit or stated positions of emerging literary voices as middle-class and as cultural ambassadors. Poetical works in cyberspace show we need to rethink the way citizens engage with one another, by literary theory taking into consideration the way in which literature depicts

those small-scale, everyday political engagements, sometimes based on social status rather than on citizenship conferred by the modern state.

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