

Digital Obsolescence? Abandoned Blogs in the Francophone African Literary Field

Kristen Stern

University of Massachusetts, Lowell, USA

Digital spaces remain relatively marginalized in the literary field when compared to institutions such as historically established publishing houses, literary prizes, and even geographical centers of the literary arts. Different levels of cultural capital are associated with, and gained, by producing art in these different spaces: analog and digital. At the same time, we live in a moment of flux between these two forms of production. While online-only and digital-born texts, journals, and venues for publication are gaining more acceptance, the traditional nineteenth- and twentieth-century style publishing houses endure as signifiers of distinction and prestige. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the traditional Parisian-dominated French-language literary field. To quote the Distinguished Professor of English at Rutgers Rebecca Walkowitz;

Books persist. The rise of the internet and digital media has not decimated book culture. People continue to collect, restore, and cherish old books, and they also continue to purchase new books in print, even while branching out into audio and electronic formats (26).

Beyond Walkowitz's observations of individual practices in anglophone-focused "book culture," print-dependent cultural signifiers continue to hold importance, particularly for African writers working in French.

By examining author blogs, websites, social media accounts—and the eventual abandonment of those spaces in some cases—I will demonstrate in this essay that assumed progression towards ever-newer media platforms is in fact non-linear; including over the course of an individual author's career. Here I emphasize the transitional aspect of this moment, as evidenced by the back-and-forth movements of authors between the traditional and digital spaces. Print's fate is not one of total obsolescence, and in fact it is, at times, digital artefacts that disappear or cease to function. The digital sphere is also a site where paratext-like enunciations take place, situating authors in relation to each other, to the centralized field, and in the trajectory of their individual careers. Engagement with digital platforms similarly evolve, in this shifting moment, as writers often decline to choose

between the old and the new. They embrace new ways without turning their backs on the old—in their forms of producing content but also, for the writers in my corpus, by using French, by appropriating a French-language literary heritage, and by participating in the Parisian-centered literary industry. At times, they even turn their backs on the new in favor of the historically established codes and forms. While literary and media landscapes have grown more accepting of digital texts and platforms, print culture and traditional publishing houses have not completely ceded their authority to online platforms with fewer, or rather different, gatekeepers.

In the close readings that follow, I examine blog entries and other social media use as paratexts that operate in a similar way as prefaces, while following the framework of literary critic Gérard Genette. In *Seuils* (1987; *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, 1997), Genette categorizes by function all of the marginal elements of the book, but are not the book proper. These include prefaces and afterwords, book covers, author interviews and so on. Though Genette's 1987 book far predates the advent of blogs and social media, I see evidence for blogs presenting what he had called a “paratextual effect” (Genette 346; *italics original*),¹ akin to what he had observed in interviews, lectures, colloquia, and all manner of public discourse, by the author outside of the book itself—or what he calls the public epitext. Though the reader must be particularly attentive in order to find this effect, as Genette observed, —“... paratextual scraps [...] must often be sought with a magnifying glass or caught with a rod and line” (346)²—I shall endeavor to do so here. That is to say, these posts, and the sites hosting them, serve to frame the authors involved—both the author of the post and the author of a reviewed or commented work in the content of the post itself—in relation to established norms and names in the literary field. Just as prefaces can work in both directions, blogging can as well: a well-known author may preface a newcomer on the stage to give more visibility to a younger author, and vice versa, and an up-and-coming author may preface a canonical work, thus attaching his name to an established figure.

Before undertaking the work of analyzing the positioning of authors through their online and print works, I want to take a moment to explain both what I mean by this field in French and its structures, and to propose the metrics I use in this study when I make claims about the relative places of authors within that field. While this work of course leans on Bourdieu's foundational study in *Les Règles de l'art* (1992; *The Rules of Art*, 1995), it is also crucial to recognize that the model used in that text is embedded in the nineteenth-century Parisian literary world dominated by White European men of wealth. While Bourdieu reflects at length on the importance of the social and geographic origins of the author and the effects on their capital, this reflection is narrowed to a dichotomy of Paris and its close suburbs vs.

the French provinces (430-31). Claire Ducournau cautions against applying Bourdieu's models to African literatures without nuance. Thus the postcolonial landscape is not taken into account at all. Bourdieu's theory of the *champs littéraire* relies on the condition of autonomy. Is it possible to talk about African literatures (at least in French or other European languages) as autonomous? asks Ducournau. She prefers Mezioz's term "espace" (space) to account for this nuance (Location 400-401). The French field does still contribute to structuring this space "... through instances of legitimation and through editorial structures that now is mindful of promoting these authors ..." (Location 420).³ Yet, "... this space is not limited by the French literary field, which it [francophone African literature] contributes to expanding" (Location 420).⁴ While still influenced by these publishing structures in the French field, francophone African literatures are expanded beyond rather than limited by the Paris-based field.

It is precisely these editorial and legitimizing structures—more specifically, the two signifiers of publishing houses and prizes—that I use here to understand writers' positions within the field of literature in French and relative to each other. Odile Cazenave and Patricia Célérier discuss at length the different prestige dynamics at play in the Parisian publishing industry. They observe an expansion of new publishers and new collections within legacy houses beginning in the 1990s and early 2000s that focus specifically on African and diasporic writers. Newer publishing houses like *Serpent à Plumes* (founded in 1993, today a part of the larger publishing group La Martinière) publish significant numbers of francophone authors from Africa and the Caribbean, but no distinctive collection is reserved for them. Contrast this with Gallimard, for example, which was founded in 1911 and boasts dozens of Nobel and Goncourt prize-winning writers in its backlist. Today, there are many African writers published with Gallimard's specialized collection *Continents Noirs*, which first went into publishing in 2000, versus their flagship/prestige *Collection Blanche* nicknamed "la blanche" for its plain white covers with minimalist black and red type. These editors and collections offer new opportunities, but there is also a tradeoff to balance between visibility and marginalization. As such:

One wonders if the disappearance or altering of some classic series is indicative of a normalization in the status and production of francophone African texts in France. Yet, if that is indeed the case, why do specific "black" series such as L'Harmattan's *Encres Noires*, Gallimard's *Continents Noirs*, and Homnisphères' recently created *Latitudes Noires* exist? In fact, there are two concurrent and opposing marketing logics for African literature in France. Once such logic is the "collection noire" (the black series), the rationale for which is that the series format gives these works greater visibility and establishes links between African texts. Yet, the corpus thus created establishes faulty parallels. Indeed, what are the principles that ensure the coherence of such a series? Are they based on aesthetic principles? Are they fortuitous or momentous? ... The other logic is that these series have a ghettoizing impact and that to gain visibility and

be acknowledged, writers must leave the series. (Cazenave and Célérier, 154)

Along with the established status of publishing houses, prizes are another signifier indicating both prestige and access to capital in the literary field. Ruth Bush and Claire Ducournau observe two almost parallel developments in prizewinning regarding francophone African writers. One, a wave of centered, prestige prizes of the annual Fall literary season were awarded to francophone authors from outside France and specifically the African continent at the turn of the new century. “It is only at the beginning of the 2000s that the big French prizes of the autumn awards season began to shower authors from francophone sub-Saharan Africa with recognition” (Bush and Ducournau, 536).⁵ Two, a significant number of literary prizes in the 1990s that were specific to francophone and/or African writers was on the rise—corresponding to the similar rise in specialized publishing house collections as discussed earlier by Cazenave and Célérier—that brought about a “new legitimization” (Bush and Ducournau, 559).⁶ Similar questions regarding the tradeoffs of visibility vs. marginalization in publishing in smaller collections vs. the generalist collection arise in this proliferation of specialized literary prizes. These are the signifiers to which I will be primarily referring when I speak of centers and margins in this essay.

Within this landscape that in many ways is resistant to institutional disruption, how do individual authors situate themselves? I discuss here three francophone African writers—Alain Mabanckou, Léonora Miano, and Bessora who have all had (or at one time had) active blogs or websites related to their creative work. All three are of a similar generation, or what Pius Adesanmi would label as the third generation (275), are currently based (at least part-time) in Paris, and all have achieved critical acclaim and popular readership while working with some of the most prestigious French publishing houses. Alain Mabanckou, originally from Congo-Brazzaville and now based between Los Angeles and Paris, maintained a blog from 2005 to 2012, in which he commented on literature in French and broader cultural topics such as comparative Franco-American relations. Léonora Miano is a Cameroonian author based in Paris who formerly used her professional website as a kind of personal archive of her artistic influences under the guise of suggested readings. Finally, Bessora, a writer of Swiss and Gabonese origin who is also based in France continues to keep a more artistic and experimental blog which she uses as a creative outlet where she can incorporate visual and hypertextual elements not available to her in printed fiction. Of the three, Bessora is the only one who still maintains her blog. Mabanckou’s online presence has shifted to other platforms like Instagram and Twitter, with more promotional, as opposed to aesthetic, themes. Miano, meanwhile, has largely gone silent from the spaces she once occupied, with only a

public presence on Facebook that is largely promotional and intellectual in nature. From these case studies, what conclusions can be drawn specifically for contemporary African writers working in French, with regards to their evolving uses of digital spaces and social networks as they and their career progress in the literary field in French?

Rather than tracing developments in these authors' careers continually over a period of time, this essay compares their presences on the web at two different moments, in 2013-2014 and in 2020. I contextualize the data collected about their blogs and websites at those two moments by connecting these observations to other indicators of their relative places in the literary field in French at these different points in time. In each of the following sections, I will introduce the authors, at the points in their careers in 2013-2014, and where they are now in terms of their relative cultural capital within the literary field.

This essay also does not aim to trace development of authors or trends through the years 2013-2020, but rather is a comparative project between two distinct points in time of each figure: Mabanckou, Miano, and Bessora. In that short span of their careers, what has changed for each of these writers? Each has different relationships to the signifiers of prestige in the publishing field in French and these different points in time. The specific sites where I gather evidence to make this claim in this essay are first, in the publishers who legitimize their work; and second, any prizes they have garnered and the relative recognition power of those prizes within the French literary field (and at times, on a more international platform).

Surprisingly in 2013-2014, I found these author presences on the internet as evidence for the digital as *less* marginalized, but I now observe trends moving in a different direction. That is to say, six to seven years ago, these three writers were all rising stars, gaining critical and popular recognition, and building publishing records with increasingly prestigious publishing houses. While they accumulated these traditional signs of recognition and legitimation, Mabanckou, Miano, and Bessora were still all maintaining their "homes" on the web in the forms of blogs or standalone websites. The two spaces overlapped: traditional print and its attendant symbolic capital along with newer digital platforms with different metrics of legitimation and prestige like numbers of hits or commentators. There appeared to be no need to choose between one or the other; both functioned at the same time. The digital was not replacing print, but neither was legitimation found in the print sphere pushing them to lose interest in their digital projects. At least not yet.

Observing the same corpus several years on, things have shifted, and different forces are at play. The Internet and social media generally are very different places/spaces in 2020 and beyond than they were six years previously. It is not my aim nor is it possible within the scope of

this project to catalogue all of these changes; but they certainly contribute to changes in the field. As political figures and social movements have increasingly used social media to achieve their ends, the Internet feels like a much less innocent platform today when compared to the previous decade.

Alain Mabanckou: Blogger and Critic

Alain Mabanckou's blog was first hosted on the site *congopage.com* from 2005 to 2007, a French news and culture site with a focus on Congo-Brazzaville. The blogger first struck out on his own in 2007 at a page titled *lecreditavoyage.com* (a reference to the bar featured in his novel *Broken Glass*, translated as "Credit Gone West" in the English version of the novel; the link is now defunct). The blog changed homes again in 2010, when it gained its own site titled *Black Bazar*, referencing the author's 2009 book of the same name. In its independent form, *Black Bazar* was most active in the years 2010-2012; Mabanckou all but stopped producing new content here in November 2012. The entries in these active years paint a picture of the author's first regular public presence on the web, which corresponds to an early period of time when he became increasingly visible as a public figure, as a writer, and as a general commentator on cultural matters. With these frequent moves for the blog's home we see a shift from a regular contribution, to a larger news and culture site, to an independent page, to a separate site altogether consolidated under what became somewhat of a brand for Mabanckou—aside from the title of the novel and the blog, a musical group inspired by his writings and produced by the author also formed and released a self-titled album in 2012. While the capacity of the blog to stand on its own is an indicator of its increasing readership from 2005 to 2012, along with increased visibility of its author, today (somewhat ironically) the only pages that remain are those early 2005-2007 entries hosted and accessible on *Congopage*. While the moment Mabanckou's separation from his first blogging home signaled his rising literary star, today those independently hosted entries are the only ones that have disappeared for the average Internet user.

While comments from the original *Congopage* have not been preserved with the original entries, the interactive and back-and-forth relationship with active readers is of course one of the distinguishing features of the format. Mabanckou is aware of these dynamics in his own space, and he observes a relational phenomenon that is analogous to what he does as a blog author. In a 2007 interview with Dominic Thomas, Mabanckou observes that in some situations, readers choose to comment on entries using their real names, but in others they use Internet pseudonyms or leave anonymous comments. He hypothesized

[W]hen people use their real name, they want others to know it is them, what they have to say, and even that they speak with some kind of *authority*. For example, when I post an article on a recognized figure such as Achille Mbembe ... well, then people rush to use their real names so that they can appear alongside Mbembe's! But if I am writing about a lesser-known person or about a controversial subject such as sexuality in Africa, well, then they immediately seek the cover of anonymity. (Mabanckou and Thomas 63, emphasis added)

Authority potentially comes from many different places, but I want to discuss in this instance authority by proximity, a claim made by association with someone who is already an established (written) authority. Mabanckou describes here how users who have left comments on his blog deploy this strategy citing the specific case of the well-known public intellectual Mbembe. But Internet commentators are not the only ones seeking a right to speak based on their associations; “real” authors do as well. The cliché that anyone can be an author on the Internet holds true here—but it is not limited to just the producers of content. It also replicates, all be it with mutations, some of the structures and strategic moves that occur in the traditional literary field. In other words, the Internet is not entirely an idealized democratization of access.

As André-Patient Bokia has observed, sometimes the process of legitimation works for the preface-writer as well as the author being prefaced (137). This is an example of the game of mutual consecration that takes place in preface writing that Bourdieu identifies in *Les Règles de l'art*. He observed one of the functions of “... prefaces by which consecrated authors consecrate the younger ones, who consecrate them in return as masters or heads of schools” (230).⁷ Platforms like blogs, which I judge to have the effect of a paratext, can function in a similar way as prefaces. The blog author here uses the same effect of authority through proximity, at different moments, to elevate less-well-known authors in the texts he reviews, or elevate himself in referencing established thinkers—and he is aware that commentators on the blog are conscious of the same forces at play for themselves. This comparable game of authority by proximity is at work in the individual topics of his entries, and those who actively participate in the conversation.

Mabanckou's introduction to these other authors on his blog in the reviews and commentaries, position him professionally as a writer at a time when he was more firmly establishing himself as a novelist.⁸ Simultaneously he was launching his career as an essayist and literary critic in France and the United States. The heyday of *Black Bazar* blog also roughly follows a few years after the publication of his personal/critical response to the work of James Baldwin (*Lettre à Jimmy*, 2007; *Letter to Jimmy*, 2014) and corresponds to his move into American academia with professorships at the University of Michigan

(2002-2006) and then UCLA (since 2006).

I group his posts into several categories based on content: literature reviews, general cultural commentary, and the occasional guest post. Often in his series “Lu et approuvé” (“Read and approved,” a direct reference to the French phrase that accompanies signatures on legal documents), he recommends new releases and first novels of new authors. In these examples, the novelist uses his place as established writer to give a “leg up” to a few in the new generation. These writers he discusses, however, are not only relative unknowns. He chronicled in February 2012, for example, a new novel by Henri Lopes, the well-known Congolese writer who had been publishing since the 1970s. In this review of Lopes, Mabanckou is actually authenticating himself by showing that he is well-read in the French language classics of African literature, and has a perceptive critique to share. He thus, at different moments, calls forth different roles for himself. At times the established writer showcases the newcomers, and at others, the younger author proves his worthiness of an establishment role by demonstrating his understanding of, and respect, for the canon.

The “Lu et approuvé” series also occupies two positions simultaneously: a note can be found at the bottom of many of them telling readers that the content has been reprinted from the current week's issue of *Jeune Afrique*: a printed French news magazine covering the African continent (the editorial board is based in Paris). Thus, the blog is not completely digital-born; it is in some cases just another access point to print content. Mabanckou's blog from this time period frames him as an already established critic in traditional print media, while at the same time he reaches a different audience with the reprints through the newer form of the blog. Doubled formats like these are commonplace in the current moment; anecdotally, academics have become very used to scholarly publications appearing simultaneously in the classic print journal format, and through online databases accessed through institutional subscriptions. Yet the multiplicity of media for a single text in the present day is hardly an historical anomaly. Meredith McGill and Andrew Parker have “challeng[ed], among many of our received ideas, the assumption that every medium has its own epoch and every epoch its own medium” (960). In their 2010 article, they examine a sixteenth-century English text in its handwritten and printed editions that were in circulation at the same time. They concluded that “media do not succeed one another, one medium per epoch” and they find evidence for “overlapping systems of publication” (961). The *Jeune Afrique* reviews are a smaller scale example of the fallacy of assuming that each era has its own medium, and the previous ones are erased or irrelevant. Forms that we consider “older” do not simply vanish nor are they completely replaced by the next innovation in formatting. Both exist in the same time and space, and also both are intentionally

published at the same time; and it can be speculated that this is for the benefit of different audiences or for different purposes. Not only is print not yet obsolescent, but it circulates at the same time as the digital format of these reviews.

Today, *Black Bazar* is just another domain for sale, and the content of Mabanckou's blog is gone.⁹ The author has not disappeared from the web though; to the contrary, he is quite active on other platforms including his public Facebook page, Instagram, and Twitter to name a few. These linked posts are usually shared across all three platforms and are promotional in nature. Examples from recent years demonstrate this. On 10 October 2017, he shared a "top 10" post from the *New York Times* in which his most recent novel to be translated into English (*Petit Piment/Black Moses*) is included. A few days earlier, he had posted a cheerful photo at the Frankfurt Book Fair where he participated as France's Guest of Honor. The death of *Black Bazar*, the blog, and its author's developing use of other social media platforms, coincided with developments in his career. Since 2014, Mabanckou's star has continued to rise, and his career has taken an ever more international, or world literature turn with increasingly prestigious institutional recognition. After his *Mémoires de porc-épic* (*Memoirs of a Porcupine*, 2011) won the Renaudot prize in 2006, one of the prestigious Fall-season prizes, he was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize in 2015, and longlisted in the re-vamped version of the prize in 2017 for *Black Moses* (*Petit Piment*). Further cementing his acceptance among the old guard of French literature, in 2015 he was the first novelist to hold the temporary Chair of Artistic Creation at the Collège de France; one of the oldest of the establishment intellectual institutions in France, in the heart of the Latin Quarter. It seems that Mabanckou had abandoned narrative, longer-form, critical/creative space on the web as he had simultaneously gained more celebrity and became less marginalized in French and international literary fields.

Léonora Miano: Curator of Virtual and Print Libraries

Léonora Miano's website, active from 2010 until about 2015, departed from the blog model, and is a more typical example of the personal/professional author website featuring different, apparently stable pages, listed and linked across the top of the home page. Above the welcome page showcasing her newest publications, the site's menu options were typical of an author's professional site: a short biography, recent publications, and where she will be appearing on her book tour(s). Along with these typical spaces, the site also features three sections of recommended reading, listening and viewing, labeled *Bibliothèque*, *Discothèque*, and *Vidéothèque* respectively. Through

these three pages in particular, some of the same paratextual effects that I demonstrated on Mabankou's blog were also functions of Miano's site. Her recommendations of other classic books, albums, and films from the African continent and its diaspora "consecrate" her (borrowing the language of both Bourdieu and Bokia) as an author within a specific literary community and positions her works within a specific heritage.

In the last iteration of the page in 2014, the library presents one (relatively) stable view of ten works with images of the text with title and author of a selection of contemporary African and Caribbean writers. She frames this selection with a few words about her choices. Accordingly, "Léonora Miano has chosen to privilege Sub-Saharan and Caribbean writers of her generation, born between 1970 and 1976 ... And yes, there are only men. You'll find out why. Stay tuned!"¹⁰ The text explicitly states her goals that could be described as Pan-Africanist, "privileging" of other Black writers from Africa and the diaspora. To name a few, the page features thumbnails of book covers from writers such as Felwine Sarr, Alfred Alexandre, Edem Awumey, and others. She also enigmatically refers to a project in the works with these writers that is forthcoming: "She has invited these gentlemen to participate in a project that you'll soon hear about. At the moment, they are writing."¹¹ Here she positions herself not as the creator, but the impetus behind a larger creative project—a curator of a new collection of other writers, while also legitimizing herself as curator through the names on her virtual library shelves. Still a relatively new writer on the scene at the time (her first novel appeared in 2005, *L'Intérieur de la nuit*), using other known names in African and Caribbean letters establishes some of Miano's credentials.

In context, while Miano was a newcomer in 2005, she was a fast-rising literary power who had been steadily collecting several prizes for her novels. Among them the Goncourt de lycéens for her second novel, *Contours du jour qui vient*, in 2006, and the Grand prix littéraire d'Afrique noire in 2011 for *Ces âmes chagrines* before winning the Prix Fémina¹² for her novel *La saison de l'ombre* (*Season of the Shadow*, 2018) in 2013. Recommendation lists like the ones hosted on her author webpage share some of the media attention and clout she had gained since Fall 2013 to lesser-known writers of her generation. Curating a personal virtual library positions her as a "creative"¹³ and as a trendsetter, while the hints at a non-virtual project still affirm the primacy of traditional physical and/or print spaces of publication and literary legitimation. Through their preface-like effects, her virtual library and the print projects that came later mutually "consecrate," to once again borrow Bourdieu's terminology, both Miano and the authors she assembles in her library and in her edited volume.

The apparent stability of Miano's site was also not as definitive at it first appeared. Looking back at cached versions of the site—still

available through Internet Archive in 2015— showed there were at least two other editions of Miano’s curated library before the latest. A version cached on 8 March 2012 heavily emphasized African-American writers such as Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison. The earliest version, cached on 20 October 2010, added both English and French authors from the Caribbean; Lyonel Trouillot, Yanick Lahens, and the African continent; Véronique Tadjo, Sefi Atta. These various editions of the collection portray Miano as a cosmopolitan curator who is able to collect and arrange cultural artifacts from varied time periods and regions of the world. Thus, she is not only an author in her own right, but an authority able to guide readers through more complex constellations of other narratives, drawn together to make a new statement. The prominence given to other black—and often women—writers from the United States and the Caribbean specifically aligns with what Sylvie Laurent has called “a Black republic of letters and of female afro-descendant ideology” (799)¹⁴ in Miano’s oeuvre, constructed by the intertexts of her fiction writing, creating a “literary third-space unseen before that reconciles créolité, négritude, and Afro-American voices” (803).¹⁵ The *Bibliothèque* affirms what Miano stages in the ensemble of her fictional and essay work: that her influences and interests draw from a broad, inclusive library of Black cultural production going back to her childhood and the impression left by influences as broad as American jazz, Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, and the film adaptation of Haley’s *Roots* (*Habiter la frontière*, 13-14).

Today, LéonoraMiano.com is a domain no longer controlled by the author, but her public Facebook page remains active with mostly promotional posts for her events and recent publications. She engages in some socio-political commentary there, such as a profile photo in the fall of 2017 aligning her with the movement to abandon the CFA France in West and Central Africa. She occasionally shares open-access academic articles focused on Black authors and literatures on her Facebook page as well. This is a rare example of a fiction writer publicly displaying her engagement with academic discourse in her field and sometimes even on her own work. This aligns with her collaborations with Cameroonian writer and academic in the United States Nathalie Etoke, as well as aligns Miano’s work with more academic or theoretical leanings more broadly.

Her career has also continued to develop since the suggested library was still active. Since 2013, Miano has become a regular figure in literary coverage on mainstream media outlets like Radio France International and print weekly *Le nouvel Observateur*. At the same time, some of her curatorial work has moved off the web and into print: the result of the mysterious project she alluded to in the *Bibliothèque* in 2013 became *Première nuit: une anthologie du désir* (2014), followed by *Volcanique; Anthologie du désir* (2015), two

volumes that explore sensuality and sexuality from all male and all female authors respectively. More recently another edited volume project was published in 2017, *Marianne et le garçon noir* (*Marianne and the Black Boy*), focused on black masculine identity in France. She has also continued to publish fiction, with afrofuturist novel *Rouge impératrice* published in 2019 with Grasset.

These shifts can result in losses and gains for potential readers and for scholars attempting to understand the field. A printed volume arguably affords Miano more mainstream media attention, consecrating her as an established, legitimized author in traditional outlets and reaching a less-specialized potential audience for her writing (*Marianne et le garçon noir* had a review in the French edition of *Elle*, as one example). In the case of the 2014 version of her digital library, the digital space functioned also, in part, as a first draft or a set of notes for what would later become a print edited volume. In contrast to the *Jeune Afrique* (re)prints on Mabanckou's blog, the website libraries were a space for making experimental first steps in a public way, and what matters, or the trace that will remain, is in the printed volume. Miano's interest in curating endures, but she had enough cultural capital to pursue it in more traditional, print forms, superseding her work on the web.

Bessora: The Continual Creator

Bessora's first novel, *53 cm*, was published in 1999 with Serpent à Plumes, and since then she has published over a dozen works—mostly novels, but also short stories and more recently the text for a graphic novel. Her fiction is largely informed by her own background as a student of anthropology, often addressing the prejudice experienced on a personal scale by her protagonists, who are largely non-white minority residents of Paris, with irony and humor. This style carries over to her blog, as well, which I offer as a counterpoint to my two other case studies above—a counterpoint because it is the only example of those digital spaces cited here still in its same format as in 2013-2014, where Bessora continues to explore and experiment in a similar way as she did in that earlier moment in her career. I propose that this correlates to her relative position in the literary field compared to Miano and Mabanckou, who have continued on a trajectory towards the center in traditional print publishing and critical recognition. While Bessora did publish two novels with Gallimard—*Cueillez-moi jolis messieurs...* in 2007 and *Et si Dieu me demande, dites-Lui que je dors* in 2008—they both appeared in the Continents Noirs collection, as opposed to the house's generalist “la blanche.” (*Cueillez-moi jolis messieurs...* earned her the Grand prix littéraire de l'Afrique noire as well.) She has also returned to her original publisher, Serpent à

Plumes, for her *La Dynastie des boiteux* series since 2018.

Bessora has been active on her blog (bessora.fr; subtitled “Lunatic Author of Varying Geography”¹⁶) since late 2010, and she continues to update on a regular basis of roughly several times a month. Her early entries generally follow similar patterns composed of three parts: there is a short narrative text (often an excerpt from one of her novels), an image (usually representing in a humorous way one element from the text), and sometimes a hyperlink. A particularly comic example from 30 September 2013 uses an excerpted text from her 2002 novel *Deux bébés et l'addition* (*Two Babies and the Check*) in which the narrator, a male midwife, contemplates the problematic gendering of his job title (also gendered female in French: *sage-femme*) and satirizing discourses around motherhood that gloss over women’s pain with idealized imagery of motherhood. The featured image “above the fold” depicts a raw, whole chicken in a pot of water and an egg placed between the two drumsticks. If a reader’s interest has been piqued, s/he can follow an included link to purchase the full novel (in print) from the publisher.

Bessora has said that she follows this format as an avenue for another kind of creative exercise not available to her in printed fiction; “literary gymnastics” (“Literature in the Digital Age”). She cites the blog as a space where she can explore the virtual dimensions of identity, putting these ideas into practice differently than she could in a long-form novel as the medium of the blog allows her to add layers of meaning that even a novel’s complexity cannot offer. Though one is produced in an established industry and circulates in a commercial sphere, whereas the blog is free to anyone with access to the needed infrastructure, these two genres, novel and blog entry, do not contradict each other. Bessora’s blog operates as a supplement for readers already familiar with her printed work, but it can also stand on its own. The paratextual effect is one that frames her still as an author adjacent to but with a certain distance from the most authoritative, traditional institutions of legitimation in the literary field in French, which is a position that allows for experimentation, irony, and critique, in a way that is not possible when one speaks from the center. Her posts embrace the innovations in genre that the innovations in form can afford her: the intertextuality of hyperlinks, and hybrid forms combining images and text.

Today, not much has changed on Bessora’s site. In contrast to Mabankou’s blog and Miano’s virtual libraries, Bessora’s still exists in the same format it had back in 2014, and the archives appear intact. She still uses the open form of blog entries to experiment with humor and wordplay along with comic, sometimes jarring images. The entries’ content is somewhat different; a series in Fall 2017 in what she calls “season 8” of the blog satirizes her current escapades with her publisher for a new book to be published early 2018: attending fellow

authors' appearances and the obligatory mingling that follows, contract negotiations, the question of unionization and intermittent work for a writer. In "Elegant flower in search of a pollinating writer"¹⁷ (9 October 2017), Bessora compares the pitch she has to give on her new book to a passive public—distributors or perhaps journalists?—to being a pollinating animal asked to spread some fertilizing ideas around. As she describes it, "I penetrate the flower room... 17 flowers to pollinate in 10 minutes ... So I pollinate, by a method I'd more or less approximate as the pitch ... [After,] I look up to read my seductions' effects on their faces. Impassive petals. ... dusted in residual pollen, I go back to the coffee machine..."¹⁸ ("Fine fleur..."). Her narration of the scene, almost in the style of a clichéd nature documentary, makes her reader re-think the highbrow field of literary fiction as instinctual, ritualistic, and brutal. Followers familiar with her fiction will also recognize a technique Bessora often uses of ironizing anthropological discourses that have been historically directed at Black people; her stepping into the body of an animal as the pollinator here has a similar effect of making readers question the assumed neutrality of academic discourses about othered populations.

Bessora's visibility in the national and international literary fields has not reached the same degree as Miano or Mabanckou. Her short time publishing with Gallimard was already mentioned above, and more recent publications have been with smaller publishers. She has in fact expanded her reach a bit with a collaboration with Barroux on the graphic novel *Alpha: Abidjan-Gare du nord* which had successful translations into English and Spanish. The experimental content seen on her blog finds somewhat of a parallel in the freedom to explore different forms and genres in her printed published works.

Conclusions

It is clear that literature and cultural production are undergoing a transitional moment between analog and digital. Nevertheless, I submit that we think about this moment as a convergence, as Henry Jenkins proposes, as opposed to a digital revolution; "progress" is not inevitable (11) and "old media are not being displaced," they are simply acquiring new or different functions (14). In the converging media of print and digital, Bourdieu's theory of the literary field offers a ready-made schematic for plugging in the newer, historically less prestigious form of cultural production. That is to say a blog will automatically designate less cultural capital than an established old-guard publishing house on the rue Jacob. Based on the case studies presented here, perhaps the digital will remain a space for emerging writers, but once a writer accesses a certain level of cultural capital, a blog or a website falls into obsolescence as it is no longer needed for

anything other than a marketing tool. The stakes of this abandonment are potentially very high. In her study of Internet fan culture in the 1990s and early 2000s, *Rogue Archives*, Abigail De Kosnik admits that the disappearance of digital artifacts from this era may not matter in the end, but she also warns that we cannot know the implications of losing these archives years or decades from now. She then argues that we have no way of predicting whether

user-generated Internet content from the same time period will be widely regarded as critically important forms of early digital networked culture, just as silent films hold a venerable place in cinema history and amateur ham radio operators are understood to be the direct ancestors of the broadcasting industries (17).

In many ways, this essay has been about what we have lost, but I would also like to raise the question of what we can gain when more voices from the African continent gain access to more established venues with historically more cultural capital. Another way of asking this is whether the negative connotations of the obsolescence in my title are justified. We have lost something, yes, but—is it really all that bad?

In Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr's edited volume *Écrire l'Afrique-Monde* (2017), they emphasize that creative work is critical work and they offer an introductory list of outlets in this domain including dance, performance, and dare I say implied digital production as well. They also argue for re-centering and re-integrating the African continent into the critical discourse and theorization of the world. Rather than a world apart, or out of time, Africa has always been a part of this same world and the authors insist that thinkers and "creatives"¹⁹ treat it as such. Rather than thinking of Africa as a separate, special(ized) question, they argue, "there no longer exists any African or diasporic question that does not also send us back to a planetary question" (12).²⁰ In this "planetarization" of African questions, as African voices gain stronger positions in mainstream print, will the digital continue to be only a proving ground, and a space to be abandoned if and when the creators behind the project(s) migrate from cultural periphery to center? I suppose I remain naïve enough to hold on to some optimism regarding the democratizing potential of digital technologies for access to means of production and potential audiences, specifically regarding African literatures. But from these examples at least, it is hard for me to draw the conclusion that cultural production on the web, at least in literature in the French language and specifically from sub-Saharan authors, will not remain marginalized indefinitely.

Notes

1. “*effet* [...] de paratexte” (Genette 318).
2. “des bribes [...] de paratexte, qu’il faut souvent chercher à la loupe, ou pêcher à la ligne...” (318).
3. “...à travers des instances de légitimation et des structures éditoriales désormais soucieuses de promouvoir ces auteurs...” (Location 420).
4. “...cet espace n'est pas borné par le champs littéraire français, qu'il contribue à étendre” (Location 420).
5. “Ce n'est qu'au tournant des années 2000 que les grands prix français d'automne commencent à récompenser en rafales des auteurs issus d'Afrique subsaharienne francophone” (536).
6. “nouvelle legitimisation” (Bush and Ducournau 559).
7. “les préfaces par lesquelles les auteurs consacrés consacrent les plus jeunes qui les consacrent en retour comme maîtres ou chefs d'école, entre les artistes et les critiques” (376-77).
8. Mabanckou’s first literary publications were works of poetry, beginning in 1993 with *Au jour le jour* (Maison rhodanienne de poésie). He regularly published poetry through the 1990s and an edition of his complete works was published in 2007 by Seuil. *Bleu-blanc-rouge*, his first novel, was published in 1998 with Présence Africaine and to date he has followed up with 11 additional novels.
9. Or at least the site’s content has slipped beyond this author’s hacking abilities. It is even inaccessible through the Internet Archive Wayback Machine, which stops archiving pages once the domain changes ownership and, (usually) a robot text is used by the new owner to block sites like Internet Archive from “scraping” the data to make a skeleton archive. See Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (2016).
10. “... Léonora Miano a choisi de privilégier des écrivains Subsahariens et Caribéens de sa génération, nés entre 1970 et 1976. [...] Et oui, il n'y a que des hommes. Vous saurez pourquoi. Restez connectés !”
11. “Elle a convié certains de ces messieurs à participer à une aventure dont on vous parlera bientôt. En ce moment, ils écrivent.”

12. The Prix Fémina is one of the major prizes awarded during the Fall literary season in France, is sponsored by the magazine of the same title, and is decided by an exclusively female jury.

13. The author wishes to use “creative” as a noun. The Editor.

14. “une république noire des lettres et de la conscience féminine afro-descendante” (799).

15. “tiers-espace littéraire inédit qui parvient à réconcilier créolité, négritude et voix afro-américaines” (803).

16. “Auteur lunatique à géographie variable”

17. “Fine fleur cherche écrivain pollinisatrice”

18. “Je pénètre la salle aux fleurs...17 fleurs à polliniser en 10 minutes. ...Alors je pollinise, par une méthode approximative que je voudrais être celle du pitch...[Après,] je lève les yeux pour lire sur les visages les effets de mes séductions. Impassibles pétales ... À mon tour de rejoindre la machine à café, toute poudrée de pollen résiduel...”

19. The author wishes to use “creative” as a noun. The Editor.

20. “il n’y a plus de question africaine ou diasporique qui ne renvoie en même temps à une question planétaire” (12).

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