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Introduction: Kenyan and Nigerian Writers in the Digital Age

On her Instagram page, on 28 March 2019, the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is filmed dancing in front of a portrait of Andy Warhol. Adichie remarks on the video: 'And just because one was not blessed with the gift of rhythm does not mean that one should not, from time to time, make futile but enthusiastic attempts …'

While Adichie's dance steps may not constitute a literary work – just as Warhol's many self-photographs are not pure art, traditionally understood – the video becomes a prop that fashions the writer as both a literary icon and an icon of popular culture. It opens up the writer's personal space to the readers of her creative writings as well as to her social media followers, many of whom look up to her as an inspirational figure. At the time of writing this book, this short clip had garnered over one hundred thousand views and almost a thousand comments from Adichie's nearly four hundred thousand followers on Instagram. A week later, Adichie was involved in yet another poignant moment as a pop icon, when she graced the front cover of *Vogue* Brazil, becoming one of the few women of African descent to have ever been selected to feature there. As the Coronavirus pandemic sent much of the world into quarantine in April 2020, Adichie (5 April 2020) gave her readers and followers a view of how this torturous period in human history personally affected her:

> Last week, my family suffered a devastating tragedy, the very sudden death of my closest aunt, from a brain aneurysm. One day she was well and happy and the next day she was gone. Our time is filled with pain whose cause still does not feel fully true. We cry and yet we feel as though she is not really gone.
>
> And it is more surreal to grieve a sudden death in these strange times when the world has shut down, places once full are empty, heavy with the ghosts of silent gatherings, and across the world people are dying alone. Coronavirus is a menace in the air, a menace inside our heads. Every day I am reminded of how fragile, how breakable we are.
>
> My husband is a doctor and each morning when he leaves for work, I worry. My daughter coughs and I worry. My throat itches and I worry. On Facetime I watch my elderly parents. I admonish them gently: Don't let people come to the house. Don't read the rubbish news on whatsapp. This is a time to cope in the best way

we can. There are moments when our spirits will sag. Moments when we will feel tired after doing absolutely nothing. But how can we not? The world as it is today is foreign to us. It would be strange not to be shaken to our core.

Adichie uses the power of literature and that of her popularity to personalise the precarity of human life in the first half of 2020. Her statement underlines much about the way in which the personal and the literary collide in the digital age. We live in a world in which the African writer is not just our intellectual, but she is also our Agony Aunt. Her creative work and her personal life are used to reflect our lived experience.

From being referenced by celebrities such as Beyoncé, to interviewing Michelle Obama, and to her YouTube videos that have garnered millions of views, Adichie epitomises the visibility of African literature in a digital age. The Instagram moments are important to our comprehension of the way in which creative artists in the digital age have refashioned the concept of artistic self-presentation and self-fashioning that Warhol made popular through his now iconic self-portraits. Adichie's Instagram pages, like much of her digital presence, regularly showcase the writer as a cultural icon. On YouTube, she is the feminist and literary icon of our age, who gives a voice to women of African descent.

Anyone who has studied Adichie before she became a literary celebrity will know that her first preoccupation is telling the story of powerful Nigerian women, especially Igbo women, and the way in which these women have historically subverted patriarchy. Of course, fashion can also be a tool of subversion and of asserting one's identity, but it is only part of Adichie's sum total. The making of Adichie as an icon can be linked to the digital medium, one in which a story can be told in many different formats, to different audiences, in different settings. Some of her YouTube talks have become e-books, and these in turn have been converted to print books. But she also does a lot of live talks which are recorded and then uploaded online. Nonetheless, her major works of prose are first published in print.

While Adichie is arguably the most sought-after African writer, she is not the only African female writer leaving her marks on the digital landscape. The Kenyan-Somali British writer Warsan Shire is another important voice. Her YouTube videos are not only popular on social media, her poems are also used as status updates by many people on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Another important female figure is the queer activist Sokari Ekine. In blogosphere and in book publishing, Ekine has brought visibility to, and critical engagements with, queer African writing and intellectualism with the help of her blog *Blacklooks. org*. The book she co-edited with Hakima Abbas, *Queer African Reader*, is one of the most important books on queer Africa.

In 2014, in a television studio in South London, United Kingdom, the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina is in a conversation with the Kenyan-Somali-British

writer Diriye Osman about literature and life. In the video conversation, which was filmed for YouTube by the Iranian filmmaker and photographer Bahareh Hosseini, we see the two men read excerpts from their works; they talk about being middle-class Nairobians; they chat about multiple identities in a digital age; they discuss their lives as gay icons to many gay Africans; and the place of African literature in the age of popular culture.

Adichie, Osman, and Wainaina, who are writers with a middle-class background, signify the way in which middle-class consciousness permeates digital culture, including that of literature. This includes the everyday quotidian experience as well as monumental developments. We live in the age of digital celebrity, where one's cultural currency depends on Instagram followership and Facebook likes. On the one end of this spectrum are celebrities like Kim Kardashian who are notoriously famous not for their artistic talent but for the way they market themselves. On the other end are cultural icons like Adichie, Teju Cole, and Wainaina, whose digital currency relies on their brain power and how they use this to enlighten, challenge, and entertain us. Irina Dumitrescu surmises that: 'Celebrities feed the eternal hunger for newness without ever being truly new' (4). That sentiment is equally true in contemporary Africa, where the internet has become the main catalyst for a growing desire for new ideas, be it in politics, popular music, film or literature. In the field of African literature, the precursors to the age of Adichie and Wainaina can be found in a wide range of artistic endeavours by literary figures such as Wole Soyinka, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe, who featured regularly in the media and at literary events. The difference, in terms of popularity, between the previous generation and the new generation is that in the age of the internet, popular culture and literature are not seen by many Africans as opposites. This is because the internet has amplified the image of the literary author beyond the confines of literary circles into the digital public domain. The authorial image is a marketable product that is very much in demand by the digital public. The author and the text are marketable products, which combined increase the marketability of the product. Taking advantage of this marketability, the literary market now uses the art of digital marketing to sell literature to a global audience. Literary events are promoted online, and publishing houses sometimes manage blogs and social media pages for their writers. You can read Adichie's creative writing on the same platform on which a pop-up YouTube video of the Nigerian pop star Burna Boy is playing, and the Adichie that is referenced by Beyoncé as a feminist icon is the same Adichie that school pupils want to study in the classroom.

The unexpected death of Wainaina from a stroke, in a Nairobi hospital in May 2019, has cemented his status as a literary icon and as an inspiration to many Africans, most notably among the youth on social media platforms. Cyberspace allowed Wainaina's followers and his literary friends to grieve him through his writing and through his queer activism. Others hosted events to

celebrate his life on social media pages and in offline spaces across the continent. Today's literary celebrities are symbols of contemporary culture due to their offline and online lives. The physical demise of the author does not mean the end of his digital life and his relevance. Wainaina as a literary celebrity lives on in his works and the tributes that continue to appear on the internet. By using figures such Wainaina and Adichie as a point of departure, this introductory chapter lays the ground for the remaining chapters of the book, showing the way in which the elites of the digital age dominate issues such as sexuality and the experience of class in the twenty-first century.

Let there be no conflation between the everydayness and the 'spectacular' that *African Literature in the Digital Age* discusses, because the digital writings that speak to the big issues of our times also reflect everyday social-political engagements. One cannot talk about topical issues literature engages with without discussing the ordinary and the unspectacular it also portrays. The two themes can be examined side by side, or simultaneously, without creating confusion in the mind of the reader. This is not merely a juxtaposition; the literature that captures everyday ordinary existence is simultaneously addressing important social-political developments while also disabusing the outside world of an outdated anthropological perspective of the continent and its people. This is exemplified by Wainaina's well-received essay 'How to Write About Africa' (2005), in which he ridicules the trope of 'tribal' people who dance, sing and live in abject poverty, that has permeated mass media and academic projects on Africa for more than two centuries. The works of Wainaina and Adichie highlight how the immediacy of the internet, and its capability to integrate video, audio and images together, allows Africans, especially those who are educated and middle class, to depict their own Africa and their lived experience. While Wainaina's essay may be read as continuing a tradition of African writers writing back to the West, it is important to stress that for many writers from Kenya and Nigeria (Wainaina included) cyberspace is more of a site for African conversation and less of a preoccupation with responding to centuries-old stereotypes. The internet is seen as a tool that can bring about an era of progressive African ideas, especially in the context of sexuality. In her social media pages, for example, Adichie regularly asserts her African femininity as do Osman and Wainaina with their sexuality.

Every day in cyberspace, Nigerian and Kenyan writers use literature to respond to and influence events. When there was political upheaval in Kenya after the 2007 general elections, Kenyan writers came together to use literature to capture the experience of the victims, resulting in the 2016 social media literary project on Tumblr, the ICC Witness Project, that 'aims to give voice to some of the missing witnesses for the ICC trial'. Nigerian writers regularly use literature to respond to political events such as the activities of religious fundamentalists, for example attacks by Boko Haram.

Such interventions have become common in recent years with regard to Kenyan and Nigerian writers. It underlines the way in which the figure of the African writer has transformed from one that people only encounter through their creative writings to that of global intellectuals with a crossover appeal to the world of fashion and show business. *African Literature in the Digital Age* recognises this turn as a monumental paradigm shift because it signposts to us the possibility of the writer as a voice for a new era of openness; because it acts as a lens through which we can reflect on our understanding of African history, and articulate large as well as small-scale everyday political and cultural engagements. I ascribe this new visibility and transformation to one thing only – the digital age.

In the digital age, much of the creative writing being produced has a purpose, and I want to borrow Koleade Odutola's (16) terminology of 'cyber-framing' in discussing the way in which cyberspace offers digitally-wired Africans the chance to shape and reframe the way they and their societies are seen and perceived. Further, a concept of the potential to impact self-realisation in cyberspace can be parlayed to fictional narratives and poetry, especially in the implicit or stated position of fictional characters as embodiment of a social class and as belonging to a particular sexual orientation. Here, *African Literature in the Digital Age* sees African writers in cyberspace as agenda-setters within and outside of literature.

The ideas espoused in this book are foregrounded in the notion that for these writers and their contemporaries, and as well as their followers, the digital space intersects with the world of book publishing and with the lived experience outside the world of literature. Raine Koskimaa argues that the nature of literature in the digital age may be different from the cultural context of the past, especially with regard to the way in which literature is produced and distributed. He argues that we need 'to see literature as a media operating amongst others' (2). Koskimaa's argument is pertinent; the African writer in the twenty-first century needs to be seen both as an artist (in the traditional sense) and as an ambassador for popular culture. Within the conventions surrounding the online writing space, a writer is more intimately connected not only with other writers, but with her readers who might be from other parts of Africa or from the Diaspora. As Wainaina excitedly commented: 'There are 19-year-olds who've read all your work and they're based in Zimbabwe' (Spillman par. 42). Many readers of African fiction online are 'friends' of the writers on Facebook and follow them on Instagram and Twitter, and the writers are also 'friends' of those African readers. Readers and writers are able to see each other's personal life in pictures and in video with some writers regularly sharing family photos, activities, political thoughts and fashion tips with their readers on social media sites, alongside short stories and poetry.

Equally important is the fact that readers can leave comments on many of these platforms relating to the author's writing and extra-literary activities. These interactions instigate a dialogue about the writer's various interests. They highlight how these various interests intersect. The extra-textual material and engagements also alter and shape our conception of literature. Therefore, the nature of texts within the new media landscape is altered by the close interaction between the writer and her readers. It removes the tenets by which distinctions and value judgements are traditionally made about what is 'good' versus that which is 'popular', generally based on the reputation of the publishing house and on individual authorship. In this process, both writers and readers are starting to embrace different values regarding literature, as cyberspace abruptly frees up notions of literature for experimentation, collaboration and disconnection from specifics of place, politics and culture. The premise of this book is that this crossover appeal enables writers to perform the role of agenda setters, with the power to frame and determine their society's cultural values.

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

Class Consciousness in a Digital Age

Debates about the nature of the social classes in Africa often tend to be divided between the romantic and the pessimistic. The late Tanzanian President Julius Kambarage Nyerere, who was an intellectual and a leading Pan-Africanist, held a romantic view of a precolonial Africa where class did not exist, and the 'elders sit under the big tree and talk until they agree' (quoted in Mohiddin 133). For Afro-romantics like Nyerere, class consciousness is one of the negative consequences of capitalism and colonialism, while in the past wealth as well as the means of production were controlled by the community for the benefit of every member. For Afro-pessimists on the other hand, there is no such thing as a class system in Africa simply because the means of productions and the nature of wealth creation are not at the same level as those of Western Europe and North America. Such a Euro-centric view of history is expressed by Henning Melber in the introduction to a book on the African middle classes, which he edited in 2016. Melber dismisses the definition of an African middle class by the African Development Bank

(AfDB) as being 'a far cry from the petty bourgeoisie featuring prominently in a proper class analysis, and is devoid of any analytic substance' (2). Melber not only ignores the knowledge production of a team of well-trained African economists who work at the AfDB, he at the same time fails to recognise other historical and economic developments that do not resemble that of Europe. For the Afro-romantics, the notion of class is un-African because they assume that Africans practised a form of socialism in the precolonial era, while the Afro-pessimists see class as un-African because they deem much of the continent as not being economically sophisticated enough to be class conscious. Over-simplification of history has been the bane of such analyses of class history in Africa. Precolonial Hausa texts such as the Tarikh es-Sudan and Tarikh al-Fattash depict social stratification among the Hausa-Fulani people: the yan Sarki were (and still are) the ruling classes; the barori were the warrior class who served at the pleasure of the emirs and the sultan; and the Talakawa are the poor and ordinary people (see also Szymon Chodak). As I argue in Chapter One, an African class structure existed in many precolonial monarchical African societies. My argument is that the foundation of most monarchies across the continent – before the advent of colonial rule – is the social strata that supported them.

In the current millennium, the digital network offers a unique opportunity to theorise a history of privilege, visibility, omission and marginalisation. These four elements are important because the digital space, as far as Kenya and Nigeria are concerned, is also a space dominated by those who historically enjoy certain class privileges and who possess cultural capital. Class matters because offline or physical-space social structures are re-enacted in one form or another in the digital space and, therefore we have to theorise the way in which class is reified in terms of access to the digital network, as well as the ability to maintain constant presence and actively participate in this network. One's ability to exert some influence on digital platforms depends on the ability to be constantly visible and to be constantly vocal. But digital influence requires one to be able to purchase digital data, which is the currency that buys digital participation.

Despite there being more Africans who are digitally connected than the population of the United States and that of the entire population of Europe put together, the fact that the languages of the digital African network are still largely English, French and Portuguese speak to the affordability of – and access to – Western-style education. Although, there are works written in local Kenyan and Nigerian languages such as Yoruba, Swahili, Sheng and Hausa, the bulk of what is being published digitally is in English. What this means is that the people with the best education money can buy constitute the bulk of digital literary networks. Many writers come from families that can be described as professional middle class, and they themselves are

members of this class. Readers of literature posted online and publishers of online literary publications are also most likely to be members of the educated middle class.

Why Nigeria and Kenya?

The main focus of this book is on the works of writers of Nigerian and Kenyan descent, but the book also includes a discussion of South Africa as the third hub of African literary production in English, but without focusing on that country's internal debates around whiteness. These three national environments will be contextualised via references to the larger African literary canon as and when needed. I settled mainly on Nigeria and Kenya as case studies because these two countries arguably produce the majority of most-talked-about writers in Anglophone African literature. The body of written works and intellectual productions coming from, and relating to, both countries is the most extensive in Anglophone African literature, outside of South Africa. For example, these two countries have together produced most of the winners of the Caine Prize for African Writing. These include works that were originally published online such as Binyavanga Wainaina's *Discovering Home* (2002), Okwiri Oduor's *My Father's Head* (2013) and E.C. Osondu's *Waiting* (2008). Nigeria serves as the publishing hub for West Africa, while Kenya serves the same purpose for East Africa. In terms of literary networks, both countries have a history of literary collaborations between writers and scholars, which is discussed in the next chapter.

Furthermore, along with South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria possess the most digital hubs on the continent, thus putting them at the forefront of digital innovations in Africa. Many of the pioneering African bloggers come from Nigeria and Kenya, and digital culture is highly vibrant in these two countries, which is why both have caught the attention of digital conglomerates such as Google, Facebook and Twitter, all of which have business interests in Kenya and Nigeria.

It is important to stress that in the context of Nigeria and Kenya, written literature, be it in local languages or in the English language, must be analysed from the change in social structure brought about by the project of colonial modernity and the written culture that is the cornerstone of this modernity. For example, at the centre of the new social structure that emerged from the experience of colonialism is the discourse of sexuality. Stephanie Newell's important study of newspaper networks in West Africa points us to the people who exerted influence one way or another through the print publications they controlled, and through their engagements with the world of publishing. African female intellectuals like Oyeronke Oyewumi and Naminata Diabate alert us to the way in which colonial modernity and its written culture transformed our understanding of social status, as well as sexual and gender roles, and how this transformation created new moral codes that are mainly rooted in Euro-modernity. *African Literature in the*

Digital Age builds on such scholarship as it undertakes multiple explorations of middle-class domination of contemporary culture and how this domination is reflected in the thinking about class, sexuality and the quotidian. If Martin Burke signposts us to the 'conundrum of class' in America, this book argues for the need to study representational problems that one can only see from a robust analysis of the intersection of class and sexuality in the African context. While the digital age has allowed a lot of freedom in terms of communication, it is also an era that continues to reflect much of the dynamics of the print age. The material may be different, but it also carries many of the drawbacks of the past. The literary networks that emerged in Lagos and Nairobi in the first half of the last century were dominated by the new African middle class, whose members were largely educated by Europeans, and so participation in literary culture became a means of asserting one's status as a modern person. The 'new' modernity of the twenty-first century is closely linked to one's participation in digital culture. While this book will analyse the freedom that the digital space provides to writers, it also recognises that this space is a product of global capitalism, in which the unconnected are in danger of being overlooked and misrepresented because much of what is portrayed in fictional narratives is based on the African middle classes.

In theorising the representation that is emerging from the digital network, theorists need to take note of literature's focus on telling the middle-class African story, and that some of these depictions can be read as pathologising people who are not educated and who in the process are not part of Africa's literary network. The exclusivity of the English language, as previously discussed, may mean that the world view of those who are not connected to the digital network is not presented or represented in what is being published online in English. In the process, the lifestyle of the rich and the middle classes is glorified while that of poor Africans is portrayed discursively as materially and ideologically abject. Western proponents of the end of class such as David Bell and Joanne Hollows may argue that life-styling as seen in their popular media is an indication of the end of social group and the rise in social mobility, however, such representations may not capture the whole truth of digital development, not in the case of Nigeria and Kenya anyway. Therefore, we need to think about whether the idea of the middle-class African writer as the African cultural ambassador might not be rather problematic. Middle-class African writers may only be able to fully represent members of their own class as they are possibly somewhat ignorant of the way in which people outside their own social settings live. There are also nuances in contemporary Nigeria and Kenya that cannot be fully captured in English. Revathi Krishnaswamy aptly asks us to investigate 'what exactly are the "missing bits"' to which these cosmopolitan writers must reconcile themselves (141). The metropolitan perception of the contemporary African text is problematised by the presentation of the cosmopolitan writer as the mouthpiece of African culture. These writers, in turn, often play the role of the

ultimate insider–outsider to an outside world that is often only too willing to accept them in such a role. Since literature is often used as evidence of lived experience, however, it is important to accept that works published within the digital network may not represent the entire postcolonial experience. The reality within which new creative works are produced and consumed needs to be queried in order for us to not ascribe responsibilities to young African writers to which they may not be able to aspire. Thus, the public persona of the twenty-first century writer as an autonomous conveyor of African realities, and as the true teller of the African story, may be as wrong as it is problematic.

Publishing in the Digital Age

As previously argued, there is an African public in the digital space which African writers target with their online writings. And since texts tend to move to where the audience is, it is therefore no surprise that a greater amount of creative writing, mostly short stories, poetry, plays and essays, are finding a home in this new media space in order to satisfy and address the demand of these digital communities. To some extent the internet has levelled the cultural and institutional ground between the ultra-elite African literature of the likes of Teju Cole and Mūkoma wa Ngũgĩ and the self-published authors who use online platforms to gain access to national public spheres. The established new voices like Cole and Mūkoma are very active on social media and are well known across the print and online mediums, but for those who are self-published the internet is an essential tool of visibility, through which they can gain a foothold in the world of literature, and also reach audiences that may not be part of the established literary circle. As demonstrated in some of the chapters, some of the newly emerging voices like Nigeria's Romeo Oriogun first gained critical attention and popular following first on social media before catching the attention of book publishers. The poet Warsan Shire was equally well known on Twitter and Tumblr to her almost one hundred thousand followers before she was published in several literary journals and anthologies. However, *African Literature in the Digital Age* shows that for most writers – regardless of their status in the literary world – the digital space provides an alternative to mainstream ideologies, and an opportunity to create new forms of expression. What some writers publish online may be ideologically different from what is published in the mainstream of print publication. For the established voices and those not yet known, the internet is an ideal platform to present their versions of self and society.

The problem with literature in Africa has never been a lack of African readers, as Newell argues, because there are already millions of potential readers in countries like Kenya and Nigeria. In addition to the problematic nature of the politics of book publishing where the main publishers and editors are based in Europe and North America, the problem with the literary market in

Africa is the space in which printed works of literature circulate, which limits their reach to certain sections of the urban areas. The traditional means of publishing normally involves a writer sending off a completed manuscript to a literary agent or a publisher. The manuscript is then reviewed by an editor who decides on the suitability of the material for publication. If a manuscript is accepted for publishing, the publisher takes on the financial risk of production and marketing in exchange for the income from future book sales, paying the writer a royalty on sold copies of the book. The problem, however, is often with finding a publisher willing to take that risk. From email conversations with some young writers it becomes clear that one constant worry is publishing in Nigeria and Kenya. Some of the writers point to the fact that even established local publishing houses often ask writers to finance the publication of their own work, and will further ask writers to sign a contract that will give the publishing house a substantial percentage of book sales, in other words the writer takes on all the risk and pays a royalty to the publisher. They argue that rather than submitting to such exploitation they will publish their works online. Another example of writers being asked to contribute financially was an email on the Nigerian writer listserv *Ederi*, sent by a Nigerian publisher, requesting a fee the equivalent of £50 sterling from writers whose stories were to be included in an anthology of short stories by emerging Nigerian writers.

Because of the problem of finding publishers, some writers self-publish by taking their manuscripts to printing presses, and then selling the published books themselves or through booksellers. The Kenyan writer Rasna Warah, in an email discussion on 4 November 2009, explains the advantage of taking the self-publishing route: 'You retain control over the product, for one, and in my case, you have access to the global market, which local publishers do not provide … so I am not complaining' (n. pag).

The digital space has helped in bringing visibility to those who have self-published as stated by the Nigerian romance writer Nkem Akinsoto, who uses the nom de plume Myne Whitman. She insists that she owes her self-publishing success to the internet:

> I will always be grateful for the vehicle the internet provides to a writer and published author like me to get my book out there. Setting up an active blog and publishing my book has served a double purpose for me; finding out the target audience for my kind of writing and building a platform too. If not for the social networking channels, *A Heart to Mend* would never have gone viral the way it did … I put up chapter one of the book on a free reading website and it became a massive hit. (2010)

A Google search of Whitman's novel shows a network of material relating to her writing: copies of the novel are available in print; as a download from Amazon; as a pdf copy, hosted by *Free-online-novels.com*; and there is a related Facebook

site; a website and the blog. *Free-online-novels.com*, in particular, bills itself as 'helping to meet the desires of writers and readers', and Whitman's comments highlight the synergy between readers and writers in the digital space.

While creative writing published online still follows similar patterns to print, because many of these texts still try to mimic the material qualities of the printed page, new media technology provides a new avenue for many writers to move literature beyond the world of book publishing, by actually publishing short stories and poems directly on blogs, online magazines, social media pages and listservs. In Kenyan literature, for example, Binyavanga Wainaina's rise to critical acclaim arguably started when his online autobiographical fiction *Discovering Home* on the literary blog *Generator 21* (2002), won the Caine Prize for African Writing. From this, he launched the online literary magazine *Kwani?* In an interview with Rob Spillman, Wainaina recounts the role that the digital space is playing in African literature:

> You have all these young writers in Nigeria who know writers in Kenya because they met on Facebook and so-and-so's workshop. You start to get the sense of this piling up of power and production, which is now larger than the sum of any parts you can see. That certainly has meant more to writing out of the continent than any other thing. (Spillman par. 42)

Wainaina concedes that while there is still a place for the print medium, in his view, ultimately, 'We've all got to go digital. There's no question about it anymore. Print has to die' (Spillman par. 44). In part, this is because of the difficulty of accessing print copies within and outside of their countries of production, but equally Wainaina appears to be suggesting that the freedom associated with writing online accrues power to the writers and not to the publishers as in print production. Additionally, it is cheaper and faster to publish creative writing on the internet, and this work will potentially reach a wider audience, fuelled by a rapid uptake of internet and mobile phone technology within Africa.

Literature in Cyberspace

The 'internetting' of Kenyan and Nigerian literature arguably started between the mid- to late 1990s, when writers seeking to draw attention to their printed work started posting poems and short stories on personal blogs and on listservs such as *Krazitivity* and *Ederi* hosted by the likes of Yahoo and the now defunct Geocities. Some of these works also appeared on African-owned websites such as *Mashada.com*, *Nigeria.com*, *Africanwriters.com*, *African-writing.com*, *Chimurenga.com*, *odili.net* and *Nigeriavillagesquare.com*. By the turn of this century, some of the established literary magazines based within and outside Africa, not wanting to be left out of the internet race, started asking for short stories, essays and poems for their websites that would appeal to a growing

online reading public. At the same time, more and more writers, seeking to increase control of their work, started putting creative writing on their personal pages on Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr, in addition to joining online writer collectives. The advent of social media and the surge in the number of young Africans with access to mobile phones further reinforced the idea in the minds of several writers that the future of African literature lies online.

This assumption may not be far-fetched; a report by the African Development Bank says that 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 Internet World Stats suggests that, as of June 2017, there are over forty-three million Kenyans online out of a total population of almost fifty million people, and the Nigerian Communications Commission estimates that, as of August 2017, 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.

Given these figures, one can see that African writers are not putting their work in cyberspace just for the sake of it; it is because communities – both local and global – are being constituted in this space. There are now several listservs, blogging communities and social media communities started by Kenyans and Nigerians. These include forums that target queer Africans, women, writers and readers. In the context of Nigeria and Kenya, marginalised groups such as the queer communities have found digital space the ideal site for their voices to be heard. These sites include *Blacklooks.org*, *Queer Kenya* and *Kabaka* magazine. Moreover, over two billion people around the world are on social media and are digitally connected. This means that there are two billion potential readers of African literature. And since texts tend to move to where the audience is, it is no surprise that a greater amount of creative writing, mostly short stories, poetry, plays and essays, is finding a home in this new media space in order to satisfy and address the demands of the digital community.

The Concept of Space and the Internetting of Literature

In an analysis of South African digital writing, Stephanie Bosch Santana argues that literature in cyberspace does not exist in a vacuum, nor is it removed from the offline world. She argues that 'there is reason to think that digital space is not so neutral, empty, or detached' (187). Santana's argument is germane: in the context of African literature, digital writing is connected to lived experience because it asks questions as much of psychic landscapes as of the material world. Therefore, the concept of space as used in *African Literature in the Digital Age* focuses on the literal uses of spaces by emerging voices as well as on the metaphorical uses of the idea. Here, this book is referring to the specificity of space, in which writers are located in either the physical geographical space or in the virtual space of

the internet. This concept of space can therefore be seen as linked to the idea of attachment, and the argument is that African literature clearly makes its claim on the African condition – in the real texture of its lived life and history. This notion queries what is Africa and how is it presented. What kind of language is spoken on the streets of, say, Lagos, Nairobi, Douala or Lilongwe? And what is the value of experience, even as it is transformed by contact with a wider world that constitutes the condition of contemporary Africa?

Jenny Kennedy uses the term 'networked spaces' to describe the intricate link between the online and offline world. She argues that in the digital age, we need to make clear the distinction between 'place' and 'space'. The latter is infinite and can be inhabited by many different elements, but the former is rigid and only able to accommodate one thing at a time. Space for Kennedy, therefore, is where online and offline narratives converge and it is 'important in addressing the distinctions between online and offline for the contextualisation of social interactions' (3). Going by Kennedy's argument, the digital space can be seen as a site of multiple narratives that also reflects offline realities, at least to an extent. This is because the concept of space as expressed in this book is linked to the notion of having something in common with a community, such as a shared sense of Kenyanness, or a sense of being members of the professional middle classes, or of being gay. At times, these identities are also connected to Pan-African ideals.

Whilst online writers and readers congregate in mainly African-run online communities, non-Africans are allowed to become members of these communities as fellow digital citizens. One common factor within these online communities is that members are mostly people with the means and the skills to fully understand and engage with African literature written in English. And since English seems to be the language that many members of the educated middle and upper classes use in online forums, we see class manifesting and vocalising itself in the online space more than in the physical space. This happens because the writer can maintain some distance from the expectation of the geographical society and instead expresses herself as a middle-class African writing within a mainly middle-class digital space, without having to explain herself or her fictional characters. The digital space also enables the writer to address themes such as homosexuality and prostitution in fiction and poetry, which may have been considered taboo subjects in the physical space, especially by book publishers as well as by political and religious authorities. The physical space is thus being visualised by some of the emerging voices as restrictive as well as patriarchal, which is symbolised by the book form, while cyberspace represents freedom and democracy. In turn, one can argue that fictional narratives reflect both the restrictions of the printed word and the freedom of online publishing.

Structure of the Book

Although creative works published online and in print are the main focus of this study, I also used conversations on listservs and social media as supporting evidence in my analysis. In the course of carrying out this study, I joined online groups including *Ederi*, *USA-Africa Dialogue*, *Krazitivity*, *Concerned Kenyan Writers*, as well as various social media pages and blogs on African literature in addition to writers' blogs and social media pages. Having access to these privileged conversations gave me an invaluable insight into the world view of these writers in a way that would have been impossible twenty years ago.

African Literature in the Digital Age can be categorised into two, albeit interrelated parts; the first three chapters focus mainly on class consciousness, especially middle-class identity and what literature tells us about the relationship between those who can be classified as members of the African middle classes and those on the lower rung of the economic ladder. In these chapters, what this book is trying to do with regard to class is to not base its analysis completely on the Marxian understanding of the word. I recognise and accept that Marxists have provided robust arguments on class identity and consciousness, but as I have argued in this Introduction, ideas about status awareness are not exclusively European nor are they exclusively Marxist. Olaudah Equiano's narrative points to class awareness in precolonial Nigeria, before the subjects were enslaved. The life of enslaved figures in the Americas, such as Abdulrahman Ibrahim Ibn Sori and Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, are stories of class consciousness, in which the subjects are fully conscious of their social status in their respective West African societies. Likewise, the poetry and songs of the Yoruba, the Swahili and the Hausa, are replete with ideas about one's position on the social ladder. Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) – which is loosely based on a true story – depicts sexual, economic, gender and political privileges enjoyed by the ruling classes over ordinary members of the society, as well as how these privileges were disrupted by colonial rule. In addition, the story of Obi Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960) represents the dynamic of class aspiration in a Euro-modernist era. The life and aspiration of Nigeria's lower middle classes and working classes in the 1960s were captured by the writers of Onitsha pamphlet literature (which I get to in Chapter One), many of whom were themselves members of these social classes. I will also argue that, like these fictional narratives by two 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 in Kenya and Nigeria, such as sexuality and spirituality that are mediated through the lens of class.

Chapter One addresses an under-theorised aspect of African literature with its analysis of digital literary networks and their importance to our understanding of literary history in Nigeria and Kenya. I use Patrick Jagoda's idea of 'network ambivalence' to think through questions about what the digital network means for African literature, writers and the African digital public, as well as the millions who are not part of literary networks. I show why literary networks provide an important means to theorise the intersection of global politics, class and literature. In Chapters Two and Three, *African Literature in the Digital Age* builds on Adichie's interview with the UK *Guardian*'s journalist Stephen Moss, in 2007, in which she argues that, while the outside world may not realise it, class distinction exists in Africa. For some African writers, especially emerging voices, the digital space is the site where class consciousness can be articulated and projected. My position is that in the quest to show this side of Africa, there is a middle-class consciousness in the literature being published in the online space, which may be leading to the pathologising of the lower-class fictional characters. This point is further extended in Chapter Five, where I surmise that fictional representations of queer Africans largely revolve around middle-class gays and lesbians, and this means that poor people are missing from literary imagination. Perhaps this is because most of the writers and readers in the online space are middle-class Africans, with some of them identifying with the global middle class, rather than with those who exist in the periphery of the online space. Suffice to say that while online African literature may be imaginatively exploiting the freedom of cyberspace and the digital age, class and sexual identities depicted in some of the new writing show us that freedom from constraint can also mean imprisonment in alternate structures of economic power, denial and frustration.

In Chapter Two, we see writers reprising the oral tradition, the same way in which poets did some centuries ago. Here, I make the point that while publishers and editors are often the only authority in the way texts are constructed and consumed in the print space, some of the writers are embracing the freedom of the digital space by posting work straight online in their blogs, listservs and social networking spaces. In the process, they are bypassing the traditional gatekeeping roles synonymous with the world of print publishing. Like the ancient griot, the twenty-first century poet is allowing texts to be mediated upon by readers, and texts are in turn very flexible. This fits into the new ways of doing art that the Kenyan poet Shailja Patel alludes to in one of her poems (August 2010).

The next four chapters then build on the first three by examining the intersectional links between the discourse of class and the issues of sex, sexuality and body politics. I base my analysis on the impact of modernity on these discourses. I am interested in using contemporary history to show the way in which writers over the course of a century have used their role as cultural

ambassadors to comment on African sexuality, while forcefully foregrounding their opinion on what constitutes African tradition and what is alien. At the centre of a new social structure that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is the way in which attitudes to sex becomes a marker of progress versus barbarity, as well as what constitutes Africanness and Europeanness. This reflects a global trend at the turn of the last century, when certain attitudes towards sex and sexuality are ascribed to a particular social class. Michael Trask observes a similar trend in the context of American literary modernism, by surmising that: 'the elites of modern society chose to couch class difference in the language of sexual illicitness, viewing innovative and unsettling social arrangements as an extension of the irregular or perverse desires that sexology deliberated' (1). The social climate in America and Europe at the turn of the last century filtered through to the emerging middle classes in Kenya and Nigeria, if one examines magazines, newspapers and newsletters that were published during that time. African language publications in the 1920s, such as *Muigwithania* in Nairobi, founded and edited by Jomo Kenyatta, and *Eleti-Ofe*, in Lagos – which often featured poetry by the young Nnamdi Azikiwe – regularly argued that sexual enjoyment is frivolous and uncivilised. Many writers and journalists who came into their own in the early decades of the twentieth century, in publications such as *Akede Eko* (Nigeria) and *Muigwithania* (Kenya), used literature and journalism to argue for moral purity and a sense of purpose. As discussed in some of the chapters in this book, this preoccupation with sexual permissiveness mirrors what the middle classes of Europe saw in their own working classes. Local news publications in both Nairobi and Lagos often republish columns from Western magazines that warn against sexual frivolity. As a brand-new middle class emerged from the colonial project, the people who constituted this group sought to differentiate themselves from the European middle class that refused to see them as equals, and also from non-educated Africans, whom they considered as backward. Attitudes to sex – especially where women and homosexuality were concerned – became one of the ways in which class distinction was expressed. In the process, the educated middle class used the discourse of sexual desire as a means to straddle the divide between the tradition of the colonisers and that of the colonised. And as it tried to negotiate its place in the turbulent era of the early twentieth century, this new middle class borrows from European and African views of the world. However, the middle-class sensibility of the twenty-first century differs to a large extent from the orthodoxy of the past. Many of today's writers use their status as cultural ambassadors to argue for a more liberal attitude towards sexuality. In doing this, they foreground their message in aspects of African history they consider as sexually liberal, rather than borrow from the West's sexual revolution of the 1960s or the Stonewall campaign of the similar era. This reflects an aesthetic strategy on the part of a new generation of writers and thinkers.

In Chapters Four, Five and Six, I use the intersections of class and sexuality to unpack the queering of the online African space. In my study of digital queer Africa, I see this moment of queering of African literature starting to happen when emerging voices take a different approach from the older generation in their representation of homosexual characters. In these chapters, I show that the agenda of literature is not just concerned with exposing the endemic corruption of the postcolonial state but that it is now challenging the hypocrisy and lies surrounding African sexuality and history. We see the middle-class African writer in the online space using literature to attack homophobia; fictional narrators even show us that homophobia and capitalism are intractably linked. Thus, writers project themselves not as mimics or as agents of capitalist globalism, but as people who use literature and the internet to disrupt the agenda of global capitalism.

The chapters on female sexuality are foregrounded in the discourses of body politics, the history and the impact of the project of colonial modernity on contemporary ideas of what constitutes African sexuality. Roy Porter calls for a closer engagement with body politics. He points out that 'body history must be part of big history. It must display the body as the inexhaustible generator of representations for society at large, and as a crossroads of power, the new pineal gland mediating between personal and public, private and political' (11–13). More than two decades on, some of the young African writers and poets in the online space are using literature to depict the African body as a category of historical analysis. And as literary studies about African bodies have brought about continuous encounters, clashes and border-crossings between varieties of spaces, *African Literature in the Digital Age* looks at the African body as represented in online creative works and the sexual politics that have long surrounded this body. Some of these writers are using the freedom of the digital space to focus attention on marginalised bodies, especially the history of spectrality surrounding those Africans who do not conform to the prevailing sexual norm.

While literature in the print age helped articulate the idea of nationhood and Pan-Africanism, online literature along with the rise of the middle class is now arguably the catalyst for the 'coming out' of African marginalised identities. Similar tactics to those used in fictional representations of the figure of the African homosexual are employed by some writers who look at the figure of the sex worker and that of the modern girl. In discussing the figure of the modern girl, a term often interchanged with 'the Good Time Girl', this book reiterates one of its key arguments – that writings and ideas from the past have a great influence on current discussions on sexuality and class. According to Alys Eve Weinbaum et al., 'The Modern Girl appeared quite literarily around the world in the first half of the twentieth century' (1). Weinbaum and her fellow contributors demonstrate how this figure was also part of the discussions as far back as the 1920s in major Southern African cities (see also Jennifer Cole and Lynn M. Thomas).

African Literature in the Digital Age builds on such discussions in scholarship by showing that the trope of the modern girl still permeates literature published in the digital age. It shows that the modern girl was a fixation with writers and editors of small magazines in Nigeria, and that a new generation of writers from Kenya and Nigeria is now portraying their own rendition of the modern girl in the digital era. In this regard, we see the African writer returning to the role of the reporter of current events and the recorder of history. My usage of modern girl is the description of a woman, usually young, who does not conform to societal norms all of the time. These can be standards of dressing, speaking, posture and attitude to sex and gender roles. By discussing the trope of the modern girl in the digital age, I am trying to unpack the way in which Euro-American class anxiety over young women's behaviour, and the behaviour of the working classes of Europe and North America, became a colonial anxiety over the behaviour of the colonised from the early part of the last century, and how this anxiety was adopted by the new African middle classes during and after colonial rule. This book fills a critical gap by highlighting how some of the emerging works in the online writing space show that prostitution (or sex work) is a form of capitalist exploitation in the context of globalisation, and how it is also a form of female empowerment when we look at the way in which modernity's dictated gender performances are being disrupted by fictional female characters.

Chapter Six, takes a more cautionary approach by warning that not all emerging writers in the online space take similar liberal attitudes towards African sexuality. Tracing the impact of colonial modernity on African literature, this chapter shows that fictional works in the online space can also mimic some of the conservatism of the past. Chapter Seven addresses another under-theorised theme – the erotic in African literature. Foregrounding my arguments on the work of Audre Lorde, I place the erotic as an aesthetic strategy used by some emerging voices to challenge history, and as a means of empowering female readers. In Chapter Eight, *African Literature in the Digital Age* ends with an exploration of the importance of the quotidian, the commonplace and the ritual, to our understanding of African societies. It stresses that while literary scholars and journalists tend to mainly focus on the spectacular and the abnormal when it comes to African societies, African humanity can only be truly captured by an examination of the everyday. People love, take their children to school, laugh and cry, just like in other parts of the world.

Whether striking a liberal pose in their poetry and fictional representations or standing as vanguards of morality, the online writing space shows the new way in which African writers use literature to depict everyday political engagements. Kenyan and Nigerian creative works within cyberspace show the internet as a site of cultural performance and politics, and what is being published and consumed by readers in the digital space is relevant and important in this new media age.