

## Class Online: Representations of African Middle-Class Identity

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In an interview with the British journalist Stephen Moss, published on [Guardian.co.uk](http://Guardian.co.uk), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie recounts a conversation with an American professor at the university where she was a graduate student, who refused to believe in the veracity of her first novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003):

I was told by a professor at John Hopkins University that he didn't believe my first book . . . because it was too familiar to him. In other words, I was writing about middle-class Africans who had cars and who weren't starving to death, and therefore to him it wasn't authentically African . . . People forget that Africa is a place in which class exists . . . it's as if Africans are not allowed to have class, that somehow authenticity is synonymous with poverty and demands your pity and your sympathy. (Moss online)

In this interview, Adichie articulates the absence of theoretical considerations of class and social formations in studies of African literatures. While there is no shortage of sociological studies on class analysis in the western world, literary analyses on class formation in the postcolonial world of Africa are few and far between (see Borislav Knezevic, 2003; Ehrenreich, 1990; and Dimock & Gilmore, 1994). In part, this gap seems symptomatic of an homogenizing tendency, as expressed by the professor at Johns Hopkins University, which refuses to recognize class differences in African countries or that some Africans occupy an environment increasingly recognizable as middle-class. But if we are to investigate modern Nigerian and African identities shaped and transformed by globalizing and localizing tendencies, the question of social class cannot be ignored.

In this essay, we explore how African authors represent themselves within cyberspace both as African people and as individuals with a burgeoning self-identification as middle-class. We use this term to designate those who possess the accoutrements of a middle-class person in terms of education, possession of goods, and values. Illustrating with Nigerian examples, we discuss how online texts operate to consolidate the notion of a middle-class identity—how this depiction both performs as something indigenously Nigerian and also reaches towards an international middle-class audience.

In his examination of short stories and novels, Emmanuel Ngara argues that “African literature is the product of a bourgeois intellectual elite brought up on a diet of western education,” and that from this viewpoint, “African literature should be analyzed through this particular historical context” (40). At the same time, Ngara differentiates this bourgeois tendency of the genres of the novel and the short story from the creative works of the ordinary storyteller of yesteryears, whom he sees as an artist who “held his audience spellbound by the charm of his narrative, giving pleasure to the listener and at the same time teaching morals and beliefs of the community to the young” (31). Taking our cue from Ngara, we explore two distinct ways in which the Internet is used to produce and disseminate literature: first, short stories; second, poetry posted online which reprises the oral texts of the religious and thinking classes of pre-colonial Nigeria. Our examples draw from wider online genres than those traditionally recognized as African literature to include blogs, videos, as well as short stories, and poetry. Access to more literary forms can be via e-magazines or newspapers, or subscriber-access-only listserv groups—a distinction that becomes significant when considering the audiences for these texts. The late Chinese leader and intellectual Mao Tse-Tung aptly argued that “all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact, no such thing as art for art’s sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics” (cited in Ngara 31). Drawing on this argument, we contend that distinct forms of literary expression (specifically the short story and poem) perform distinct functions in developing a Nigerian middle-class identity. Whilst one identity values an individual presence that can connect with a global middle-class, the other is steeped in community.

### The Nigerian Middle-class Online

Contemporary Nigerian literature in cyberspace cannot be relegated to a minority or niche status. In Nigeria, there is a growing uptake of the Internet and allied technologies such as mobile phones. According to a leading information technology magazine *Computer World*, Nigeria now has both the largest number of internet and mobile phone users in Africa. There are more than 43 million internet users in Nigeria and the country accounts for almost forty percent of all internet traffic from the continent (Malakata online). A study by Pyramid Research for the Nigerian Communications Commission suggests that as of December 2009, there are over 75 million GSM mobile phone users in Nigeria—that is, more than half of the Nigerian population has access to internet-enabled devices (online). However, both Ben E. Aigbokhan

and the United Nations Capital Development Fund point out that almost half of Nigerians live in poverty and that poverty is eighty-five percent higher in rural areas than in towns and cities. Since affordability means online accessibility, one can assume that these online Nigerian communities are not only populated by the educated class based in urban areas, but that their social formations are based on capitalist ideals, and the literature emerging is the product and the property of the Nigerian middle-class (online).

In Nigeria, as in much of the continent, social classification along the lines of western stratification began prior to colonialism; it started when Nigerian merchants began to trade with their European counterparts along the West African coastline. Shola Adenekan suggests that this transformation also affected the local economy: there was increased urbanization, gender roles shifted, and a new middle-class elite schooled in European languages emerged, displacing the old elite of traditional chiefs. As colonial officers found the task of governing a country four times the size of Britain a far from easy task, they began to rely on the new African middle-classes for low-level administrative duties (*Nigerian* 12-13). Since the first contact with European traders, the Nigerian middle-class has borrowed politically, materially, and ideologically from Europe. In today's Nigeria, to be middle-class is to have similar attributes to those of the global middle-classes, what Barbara Ehrenreich sees as an economic and a social status (6). To be educated means to be conversant in the dominant language of global trade and capital—the language and mannerism of the World Wide Web, and the African middle-class is preoccupied with not being left out of the Internet conversation.

In an online article for [debateandreview.com](http://debateandreview.com), Meekam K. Mgbenwelu describes the current Nigerian middle-class as

privileged to live in an information age and much more savvy at embracing the offerings of new media and new technology. They are avid enthusiasts of mobile technologies, online social networks and yearning for the social freedoms and opportunities that open, democratic and functional societies offer albeit within a Nigerian context. (online)

In addition, Danah Boyd (2007) suggests that social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, as well as various listservs, are increasingly becoming territories where class identities are made (online), and Dyson claims that the internet is like medical insurance; we all need it but only a few people in the world can afford it (58). Class is not just about how people position themselves in terms of a particular social level, which is often determined by occupational identity, but about how identities can be seen in terms of one's shifting relationship and self-distancing from others through conscious and unconscious choices.

Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor show us that spatial immobility is just as significant as mobility in the making of personal identities

(2009: 180). With regard to Nigeria where public, free access to the Internet is limited, people with regular and reliable access to the Internet are those with money to pay for it: that is, the middle-class, privileged, enjoying social and economic advantages. Another group of Nigerians who also have regular access to the Internet are those similarly privileged Nigerians described by Harish Trivedi as “upper-class elite migrant[s]” (online) traveling through, living, and working in the diaspora and illustrated by Nigerian author, Tolu Ogunlesi, who writes on his blog:

Since June 10 I have been traveling through Europe:

June 10 – Lagos

June 11 – Berlin

June 14 – Freiburg

June 18 – London

June 20 – Birmingham

June 22 – London, Edinburgh

June 24 – London

June 25 – Madrid

June 29 – Brussels, Turnhout (Belgium)

June 30 – Eindhoven

July 2 – Berlin

July 4 – Lagos

I have slept in airports, endured strange languages, taken tonnes of photos, and mused about culture and identity and language and history and exile. (online)

Martha Karge sees cyberspace as a site for social exploration (online). It is here that middle-class writers and readers alike can actually partake in middle-class activities without the obvious constraints of race and ethnicity. Revathi Krishnaswamy (1995: 125) aptly asks us to investigate “what exactly are the ‘missing bits’” to which these cosmopolitan writers must reconcile themselves. The metropolitan perception of contemporary African texts is problematized by the presentation of the cosmopolitan writer as the mouthpiece of African culture. These writers in turn play the role of the ultimate insider-outsider to an outside world that is often too willing to accept them in such a role. As Sherif Hetata argues in “Dollarization, Fragmentation, and God,” there has been a tendency by this group of non-Western writers “to think and declare that they represent the people in the South better than the people themselves can do it, because of the sophistication, the means, and the knowledge at their disposal” (290).

In order to further highlight the ways in which cyberspace allows for the making and the asserting of a middle-class identity, one can look at the online musing of the 2005 Caine Prize winner, Segun Afolabi who, in a blog post, “The Tufiakwa Syndrome,” alludes to the fact that the physical space that is Nigeria and even the diasporic Nigerian space are too conservative. He complains about the expectation to conform to societal values and norms:

And when people do fail to meet up, they become topic of our side talk, something for us to look at with condemning awe. It is remarkable how Nigerian

communities even in different parts of the world continue to live by or even create rules, values and moral obligations that sometimes streamlines them. And this communal action of creating sets of values also take form in young people setting up these expectations around themselves that they must meet in order to gain some kind of respect. (online)

Afolabi was born in Kaduna, Nigeria, grew up in various countries, including the Congo, Canada, East Germany and Indonesia, and was working for the BBC prior to winning the Caine Prize. For cosmopolitan authors like Afolabi, cyberspace presents an opportunity for the making of an authentic identity, one that is Nigerian and enshrined in “global” middle-class values, of which individuality is an important aspect. Cyberspace also allows twenty-first century middle-class Africa to interact with and be closer than ever before to people of similar social status from across the world.

Afolabi craves individuality and rejects the communality that is enshrined in traditional Nigerian space. He suggests “that individuality and nationalism are so opposing, and can be likened to oil and water,” and believes that communality and nationality compromise the self (online). In the online writing space, the young Nigerian can escape all the negativities that come with the physical African space and at the same time free himself or herself from the burden of societal expectations. Afolabi articulates this further:

Sometimes, I feel that if life in Nigeria was to be likened to a novel, people, that I love and claim to love me, would become antagonistic to me, not for some intrinsic vileness in them, but for the reason that my core contradicts their beliefs and convictions. Yes, this might be the reason why I find the need to use the colloquial “Tufiakwa” to allude to our reaction to anything different, the reason why I feel torn between being the “true Nigerian” or being my true self. (online)

The online writing space represents Afolabi in a way that the physical space cannot, as his cosmopolitan lifestyle disconnects him from a geographically constructed Nigerian identity. However, as will be discussed in relation to online Nigerian poetry, other writers embrace the communality that the Internet can provide for a geographically dispersed community.

Cyberspace can be described as one of those borderlines where the “global link between colony and metropolis” (Bhabha 304) is enacted, but it is a significantly different space than in Homi Bhabha’s discussion because its participants are not necessarily translated in the physical sense that underlies his explanation. In a somewhat critical review of the term “cultural translation,” Harish Trivedi suggests that

what Bhabha means by the term is “the process and condition of human migrancy” and, it is implied, that migrancy is from the Third to the First World (to use Trivedi’s terms) (Basnett and Trivedi 5). We suggest that migrancy as described by Trivedi is culturally marked by the migrant being in need (of better economic opportunities, of a better education, of political refuge from corruption or violence and so on) creating a particular inequality that might require a migrant to make specific choices about how his or her identity is represented in the host country. However, as the Internet neatly obliterates the connection to geographical or temporal locations, Nigerian participants here are not marked by need in this way. In fact, merely being in this space implies already a similar middle-class identity to any other participant because of the underlying assumption of ownership of such material goods, education, and technological skills necessary to participate. The digital space begins to confound definitions of a middle-class rooted in the cultures and history of England (in which physical migrants might need to participate to present themselves as middle-class) as the essential indicators of middle-class-ness are marked materially by the technological hardware and skills, money, and education which allow access into the online space. Thus, a semblance (if not the actuality as discussed below) of equality in regards to class is created in this space; not simply translation as a “relationship of inequality between texts, authors or systems,” as defined by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, but a space in which the African author can appeal to his or her audience using a discourse of similarity in relation to their western middle-class counterparts (2).

### Nigerian Short Stories Online

To illustrate how the notion of the middle-class as a common ground is exploited, we consider a talk given by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the Nigerian author well known in the West for her two prize-winning novels *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). In 2009, she participated in the programme of talks organized by Technology, Entertainment, Design, commonly known as the TED talks, contributing a lecture entitled “The Danger of a Single Story.” As TED seeks to bring together people from the three fields indicated in its title in order to promulgate “Ideas Worth Spreading,” the speakers featured here—although presenting a conventional lecture, live, to a physically present audience—must also be mindful of the wider virtual and non-synchronous audience who will hear and see them speak when the video of their lecture is published on the TED website. Early in her talk, Adichie tells a story about herself and a houseboy who started working for her family:

I come from a conventional middle-class family . . . and so we had, as was the norm, live-in domestic help who would often come from nearby rural villages; so

the year I turned eight we got a new houseboy—his name was Fide. The only thing that my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor. (TED online)

Adichie thus makes a clear class distinction between her family and other, rural, poor families. The story is apparently told against her as she criticizes her eight-year-old self for only seeing their new houseboy as poor (although this is predicated on the only information supplied by her mother), a “single story of poverty” that is apparently exploded during a visit to the boy’s family home. Here, his mother “showed [them] a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made; [she] was startled. It had not occurred to [her] that anyone in his family could actually make something” (TED online). Adichie’s comments do not clarify precisely what the new plural story might be, beyond recognizing that it moves her from mere pity. However, the revelation that Fide’s brother is a craftsman keeps him firmly relegated to a class below the middle.

Adichie recounts another personal story to follow this: when she first moves to America, assumptions are made by her roommate at the university she attended that Adichie will have poor English and no understanding of Western culture or manners, like using a knife and fork. Adichie has to correct this association of herself with a Nigerian of Fide’s class but this is achieved on quite different terms. The roommate “asked if she could listen to what she called [Adichie’s] tribal music and was consequently very disappointed when [she] produced a tape of Mariah Carey” (TED online). This story serves a different function in relation to class. First, it exposes her roommate as ignorant in a comic way, something missing from Adichie’s story where she represents herself partly as misled by her mother’s prejudices and noble enough to recognize her own error. In turn, by sharing the humor with her audience (visibly white on the video, and arguably middle-class through their attendance at such an event) who laugh with her, she positions herself with them as enlightened people who know about the reality of an African middle-class that is not “tribal,” or without access to material goods and education, or unaware of global culture. However, as noted earlier, this is perhaps only a semblance of equality, as on closer inspection it appears that Adichie has had to invest in another particular western discourse about Africa. In moving from pity to respect, in relation to Fide’s family, Adichie does not reject her idea of them being in “need,” thus sharing the common Western perception of people living in African continents as needy. Instead, she appreciates what any tourist travelling in Africa would: the type of craft sought out and appreciated as authentic and ethnic by tourists. Being a tourist, in any case is a role associated with the affluent western middle-class.

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, in conferring its 2008 Genius Award on Adichie, notes that “she is widely appreciated for her stark yet balanced depiction of events in the post-colonial era” (online). So we can argue that to the outside world, she is a cultural ambassador not only for Nigeria but also for Africa. So, how do her online works back up this representational role? One common trend in Adichie’s fictions and writings from other voices from her generation is the relationship between the middle-class and the lower-class. Emerging voices may rebuke the stereotypical portrayal of Africa by Westerners but their own representation of the poor in Africa is equally problematic. Just as some writers from the West often portray Africans as poor and naïve, lower-class characters in online short stories are often represented as dirty, ignorant, unwashed, archaic, and bucolic. The poor in online fictions are often depicted in childlike posture, forever reliant on the benevolence of the African middle-class, and they are at worst a menace to modernity and civilized sensitivity.

In the short story, “Life During Wartime: Sierra Leone, 1997” (2006) published in *The New Yorker* online, Adichie brings the figure of Fide into fiction, and through this figure we are given an insight into the world of middle-class Nigerians and their domestic servants—a middle-class world no different from that of Adichie’s. In this short story, Fide the houseboy from the village is described as someone

who has never seen a refrigerator. He was light-skinned, and his lips were so thick and wide they took up most of his face. He spoke a rural dialect of Igbo that was not Anglicized, like ours, and he chewed rice with his mouth open—you could see the rice, soggy like old cereal, until he swallowed. When he answered the phone, he said, “Hold on,” as we had taught him to, but then dropped the receiver back on the cradle. He washed our clothes in metal basins, and pegged them on the line tied from the mango to the guava tree in the back yard. (Adichie, *Life* online)

The division of labor between the lower-class Nigerian and his middle-class boss is clearly represented here, enabling Adichie to reinforce her assertions of class differentiations within Nigerian society. Fide does all the domestic work in the household, while the university lecturer performs the creative role. In “Life During Wartime: Sierra Leone, 1997,” Adichie tries to lay bare the effect of political corruption on those on the lower rung of the economic ladder. She tries to challenge the attitude of the middle-classes toward their servants but at the end of the story it is Fide who pays the ultimate price by dying in the Sierra Leonean civil war, as a soldier of the peacekeeping Nigerian Army, while the middle-class family’s lifestyle goes on uninterrupted by all the instability around it. The mother accepts the houseboy as “our own Fide” only after his death. Thus it is through death that the poor manage to lay claim to their humanity.



In attacking both western portrayals of Africa and Africa's political corruption and widespread poverty, the middle-class writer may have good intentions, but some of the narratives border on an imitation of the way the Western media often portray their own under-class, as well as the Western media's representation of people from developing countries. Just as some members of the older generation (Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Bessie Head) used the print media to attack the European imagination, some of the emerging African voices online use this space to overtly attack the "single story" of African representations outside Africa. For example, new voices such as Chika Unigwe, Lola Shoneyin, and Richard Ali, often attack portrayals of Africans in the West through their Facebook status updates and in much of the online fiction they post on social media networks. Moreover, in that interview with *The Guardian's* Stephen Moss, Adichie laments that the single story "simplifies Africa. If you follow the media you'd think that everybody in Africa was starving to death, and that's not the case; so it's important to engage with the other Africa" (Moss online). She finds the coverage by a global media powerhouse such as CNN "exhausting because of its refusal to let Africans do the talking" (Moss online). Adichie is right in attacking the European imagination of Africa, for it is the single story that assaults the African consciousness, but she fails to recognize her own investment in a "single-story" of a middle-class which, in looking to a western model, distances itself from poorer people within the same country.

If Adichie's online work captures the current chasm between the urban middle-class and the rural poor, Teju Cole's short story, "Modern Girls" (2008), gives us an insight into the circumstances into which the current generation of middle-class Nigerians was born. The narrator is a pupil at an upmarket boarding school in a rural part of western Nigeria, the type of school started by the colonial government to educate the locals to take over the administration of Nigeria after independence. The small town of Omu, where the Royal College for Girls is situated, serves as a metaphor for class divides. We are told that before the school came into being it "consisted of a few small farms, a cluster of mud houses with thin roofs, a creek, a chieftain. The people of Omu were mostly Muslims, which meant they were not part of the cultural elite" (online). For the most part, colonial education intended to raise Africans who would think and behave like European missionaries.

In "Modern Girls," we see how this can also teach the students to despise rural people. For example, Nuratu is one of a small number of rural dwellers attending The Royal College for Girls and the narrator informs us that these students from the village "had to be good—at least by the standard of their villages and hamlets—but it was often

clear that they weren't the usual Royal College material" (Cole online). Their clothes were not only scruffier, but they could not speak English like the Europeans and instead pronounced "ch" with a Yoruba-accented "sh." Nuratu, the epitome of African tradition and provinciality, also "laughs like a goat," has not mastered Dryden, and eats boiled yams like a market woman. The Nuratu that the narrator gives us seems incapable of cultural development due to her traditional Yoruba upbringing. In short, to use the word of the narrator, she is "local." In this process, cybertexts reveal the means and ways through which the Nigerian middle-class, in its quest for a western bourgeois lifestyle, has internalized the colonial hatred of those elements that are associated with an authentically African lower-class.

As ICT and literature are purely middle-class affairs in Africa, it could be considered from our arguments above that they have become political tools to champion the worldview of a minor, but powerful, section of the contemporary African society. Moreover, the use of the short story as a preferred literary form to publish online seems to reinforce that individual identity so prized by Afolabi. In this narrative form, an individual authorship, and originality is required. However, a more communal approach to literature is illustrated by African poets writing online. Here, the interactive potential of the Internet is used to replicate more traditionally Nigerian collaborative writing practices.

## Nigerian Poetry Online

On Ederi listserv, the poet Uche Peter Umez openly invites other poets to intervene on a poem in progress:

Dear bros and sis,  
this is open to scalpel and scythe  
happy weekend. (online)

A reader responds to this invitation thus:

I grant that the worth of this poem could be revealed some time later. For now, though, I'm hard-pressed to impute value to it... What nature of human experience does the speaker intend to convey? What human emotion? What idea? What minute, otherwise, ignored aspect of life does the poet want to disclose to the world? What aspect of history, life or heritage is the piece trying to preserve?  
(online)

On a more open and popular listserv, Nigerian World Forum, the poet Chidi Anthony Opara posted a new, somewhat sexually explicit, work titled "Demands of the Goddess" on August 18, 2010. The submission also generated response. One commenter complained that his previous admiration for the poet has been seriously compromised by this latest offering:

I must openly confess that I have often browsed your lucid poetry and prose that

anchor their plots on everyday human chores and experience; the imageries you capture span the individual, the family, the local govts, the state and nation, especially the daily experiences of the mis-ruled and mis-led in our contemporary African societies. In all, I have silently commended your literary genius on its merit and level sophistication . . . Now, I realize that genius sometimes exhibits undisciplined or amoral excesses; and as you know, unrestrained and unregulated habits can be uncomfortably unruly and distastefully repugnant. And that is how I evaluate your present poem, entitled “Demands of the goddess,” in which you painted a picture of the act of sex by humans in the most shameful interaction between a man (Iyiafor the god), the woman (Iyieke the goddess) . . . What a mess!

Frankly, without attempting any sanctimonious posture, I am moved to say that this poem is an epitome of genius misplaced and misapplied for shameless vulgarity, breach of public decency, and senseless trash-talk. It is juvenile and distasteful; and my advice is that your children should not inherit a literary legacy that includes these dirts. (online)

Like pre-colonial oral texts, Nigerian cyberpoems are able to incorporate their source of inspiration, music, imagery, the audience and the performer into the production process. Poems and blog musings can thus be shaped and modified over time, in response to audiences’ reactions and socio-political context. Moreover, poetry posted on Facebook may be performed for members of the public (the majority of whom are members of the educated classes) in the real space of Lagos and Nairobi, and the recording of those performances may be posted back on YouTube and Facebook for consumption by the online public. These processes arguably involve reshaping the text for different formats, and in the process the creative piece is unfixed and susceptible to changes. Since most of these writers move seamlessly between the continent of Africa and the outside world, poetry and cyberspace are two of the main tools through which these transnational writers navigate the relationship between their works, their identities, and their audience.

In cyberspace, Nigerian poetry is rediscovering orature’s art of collaboration between the performer and his audience, which has been missing from books. With other Nigerian poets putting their poems on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, we are seeing online African literature reprising real-time collaboration between poets and their audiences. These new poems show the way in which African literary work and creative writers can connect and nurture relationships with readers by effectively leveraging social media and real-time collaboration tools. The audience provides approval for online poetry and cyberspace serves as a test-bed for work that may

later go into print, just as traditional poets and musicians try out their new work before a live audience prior to going to print or the recording studio. The storyteller is using the online writing space to gauge the mood of his potential audience, altering textual expression, tone, and temper to meet the situation created in relationship with the online audience. In the process, the final text is dynamic and very malleable. And because cybertexts are not permanent, they are therefore naturally predisposed to allow continuous smaller scale changes by the poet with input from his audience. Like the oral tradition, online texts may have no firm terrain due to the process of collaboration and intervention between the composer and the reader. Thus, like orature, the meaning of cybertexts is unfixed and subject to multiple interpretations.

Such texts are a collaboration between middle-class Nigerians who, as discussed previously, have access to the education and technology to be able to participate. However, African history shows that oral text and class have always been linked. Karin Barber (1991) has highlighted how Yoruba poetries of *Itan* and *Oriki* are the properties of the ruling classes and their chiefs. In addition, the *Ifa* corpus is the text of the intellectual and religious classes. These texts are rich in history and tradition. On the other hand, one can argue that Yoruba folktales such as “*aalo*” are narratives of the lower-classes, and often, they narrate how one can rise above one’s station in life through good luck, honesty, and hard work.

Many of the bards and poets of pre-colonial Nigeria articulate the concerns of the poor and popular views in their renditions, even as they were serving as underlings to the ruling classes. Landeg White highlights the notion of “poetic license” across ancient Africa. He argues that

oral poetry is permitted a freedom of expression which violates normal conventions . . . Chiefs and headmen may be criticized by their subjects, husbands by their wives, fathers by their children, employers or overseers by their workers, and the political rulers by their subjects in ways that the prevailing social codes would not normally permit so long as it is done through poetry. (cited in Barber, 1991: 11)

Adenekan (2012: 57) argues that White’s assertion of a poetic license, that many pre-colonial societies allowed poets and other creative artists, speaks to the position of the poet (the creative artist) as someone who occupies the middle layer of the social hierarchy. And it is this artistic license, which informs the work of poets like Chuma Nwokolo. Jay Bolter believes that the computer enhances the experience of writing through cyberimages (35). The poetic license that many pre-colonial poets and artists enjoyed is now being reprised in the age of the Internet by many middle-class writers. Nwokolo is middle-class, highly-educated and the editor of an online literary magazine—*Africanwriting.com*—and these privileges that many

middle-class Africans enjoy, allow cyberpoets such as Nwokolo to reintroduce some of the visual literacy found in most oral literature.

In his YouTube poem, “Sudan. Sudan,” Nwokolo combines sound, music, photographic imagery, and video to convey his message to online audiences. In the process, he brings African oral tradition into the twenty-first century. With soft melody, the video begins on the bank of the River Nile in Khartoum, with a man lying on its concrete embankment under the shade of a tree, followed by photographic images of the poet’s trip around Sudan. The poet’s voice is heard reading the scrolling letters:

Sudan. Sudan.  
Do you hear me call?  
Your lure has fallen on the souls that answer to your ancient name.  
With breezing net,  
Sudan, you seduce me also.  
Look East!  
Your Sun rises on a horizon of river palms.  
Centuries count for slow minutes beside the longest river in the world. (online)

Sudan becomes a metaphor for Africa’s glorious past and its recent troubles. The very essence of this poem can only be captured by the poet’s use of photographic imagery, music, cybertext, and his own voice. The moving images depict the complexities and diversities of Sudan and Africa. At the same time, they challenge the single story narrative that has become Sudan by invoking the multi-layered elements that have been buried in the familiar media portrayal. The visual, the spoken words, and the cybertext, all play equal roles in conveying the poet’s message to the reader:

You torch your souls again.  
Meroe burns again . . .  
Those buried souls have gone  
and flowered hope. (online)

The words scroll and tease as they unravel, the unfolding images brim of promises to come, and the poet’s voice captures the hope that has been dashed. The subversion of vocal, visual, and cybertext combine together to challenge the Sudanese authority, Darfur, and for the audience to see beyond the facade of serenity presented by the allure of the capital of Sudan, Khartoum, and its glistening River Nile. Nwokolo, like the court poet of old, has been licensed by the freedom of cyberspace to question the Sudanese authority about Darfur and the harsh reality of a theocracy/ despotic regime. Like the ancient poet, the cyberpoet uses the tools of new media to criticize through the ploy of

jokes and humor and reprises the ability of the poet to question the antics of African rulers which other citizens may not be able to do for fear of reproach.

African poetry in cyberspace combines all the elements of those ancient poets with that of the twenty-first century. It continues the fluidity and the flexibility of the African text in a new age continuing to produce texts that are ephemeral. Just as many African writers and readers are using cyberspace to further their interest in literature based mainly on the fact that they are members of the educated classes with knowledge of the English language, as well as the technological know-how and ability to afford the cost of downloading internet contents, through the Internet, an essential component of globalization, African texts are being radically transformed by their performances in this new media space. And with this is a transformation of its writers and audiences into a newly conceived Nigerian middle-class.

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