A vibrant but challenged continent:
African cities and villages in digital short stories

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About this series

The Academic Fellows program has brought together 11 African academics based around the continent and the diaspora to investigate Africa’s narrative across a range of mediums and topics that include social media, arts reinstitution, the impact of Covid-19, and spoken word poetry. The program brings academic rigour and an evidence-based approach to African No Filter’s work to understand and shift harmful and stereotypical narratives about Africa. It forms part of a larger research agenda to understand narrative and its impact. It is co-funded by Facebook and supported by The African Union, AUDA-NEPAD and the New York-based Africa Centre.

About Africa No Filter

Africa No Filter is a donor collaborative that is working to shift stereotypical and harmful narratives within and about Africa. Through research, grant-making, community building and advocacy, our objective is to build the field of narrative change-makers by supporting storytellers, investing in media platforms and driving disruption campaigns. The donor collaborative is funded by Ford Foundation, Bloomberg, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Luminate, Open Society Foundations, Comic Relief, the Hilton Foundation, the British Council and the Hewlett Foundation.

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ii
KEY INSIGHTS iii
1 INTRODUCTION 1
2 LITERATURE REVIEW 2
  2.1 Digital literature 2
  2.2 Meaning of place in literature 4
3 METHODOLOGY 5
4 FINDINGS 7
5 DISCUSSION 12
6 CONCLUSION 14
ENDNOTES 15
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report analyses how places – including cities and villages – challenge stereotypes in African short stories that are published online. The roles that urban and rural spaces play in online fiction are multifaceted. For instance, while the urban space tends to be constructed as harbouring crime, economic opportunity and stark inequalities, the rural space depicts idyllic lifestyles, challenges with poverty and outmoded practices. The young writers selected for this project are not afraid to tackle themes that perpetuate negative stereotypes about Africa. Through their literature, they are, rather, interested in addressing problems and challenges that they deem inimical to development. They are excited about the potential of the continent to do great things and underline this interest in their stories. In a similar vein, these stories highlight the resilience of ordinary characters who utilise their environment to overcome difficulties. Still, Africa is not a country. Africa is a complex continent, where local contexts inform how these writers think about place.

African digital writing platforms have proliferated over the last two decades, with young writers harnessing the potential of the internet to share their creative writing with wide audiences. While the online space allows for use of multimedia in crafting stories, the narratives selected for this project are made up of text and are typically not accompanied by audio-visuals such as images, sound and video. These stories appear on the literary websites Brittle Paper, Jalada, Saraba, Flash Fiction Ghana, Adda and African Writer Magazine.

Samples of literature from five women and five men writers were sampled across five different countries in four subregions of Africa: Ghana and Nigeria (West Africa), Kenya (East Africa), Malawi (Southern Africa) and Egypt (North Africa). Close reading and contextual analysis revealed that regardless of nationality and gender, thematic concerns overlap for the writers, with points of divergence. The different platforms that host these stories are also unique in terms of identity, focus, audience, and reach. Nevertheless, together they present a selection of writing that imagines Africa in its variety and beauty.

The selection of writing is not intended to arrive at an overarching argument about how all young African writers imagine place on the continent. Nevertheless, sourcing information from regional pockets of the continent allows for a medley of voices that combine to highlight patterns in relation to cities and villages in Africa. The project thus complements broader research on digitised media produced on the continent, and demonstrates how, through the study of the fictionalisation of place, we can enhance our understanding of online creative writing in Africa.
KEY INSIGHTS

1. African digital writers are not afraid to address themes that risk perpetuating negative stereotypes about Africa:
   They, rather, tackle these stereotypes head-on, critiquing challenges to progress and development, exploring the root causes of these problems, and linking these stereotypes to global challenges.

2. African writers view cities and villages as different from each other, in their digital writing:
   These differences reflect trends in how urban and rural spaces are seen as having distinct identities.

3. Even though overlaps exist, women and men writers concern themselves with different issues:
   The five women writers featured in this project explore domestic-related themes such as parenting and marriage, while the men writers are interested in crime and politics. Themes related to romantic relationships and economic hardship overlap in both sets of writing.

4. African digital writers focus on the potential of the continent:
   These writers highlight the resilience of ordinary characters who utilise their environment to overcome difficulties.

5. Africa is not a country; Africa is a complex continent:
   Context plays a critical role in the concerns of African digital writers; their concerns both overlap and remain distinct across nationalities.

6. African digital writers have global perspectives that are framed through local lenses:
   These writers examine the root causes of problems that traverse the continent, such as migration and global inequality.

7. The different identities of online platforms have minimal influence on thematic concerns:
   The platforms selected for the project are sometimes focused on a single country, have a regional focus, promote diasporic content, or are even non-African.
INTRODUCTION

It is a common sight to see people bent over their mobile phones all over Africa. The World Bank and African Development Bank reported in 2013 that the number of mobile users in Africa surpassed the number in the United States or Europe. Even though internet penetration remains low, it has picked up in the last ten years with the mobile phone driving the surge. Phones have altered social and economic lifestyles in Africa, as mainly young people use their devices to chat, post on social media, engage in economic transactions, and read as well as write fiction.

The use of electronic devices in crafting fiction is part of the reason why digital literature has become an important aspect of African creative expression. Even though research is mainly interested in the use of digital technology for health, advocacy, policy and other such socio-economic or political purposes, creative writing is also an important area that merits attention. Research into creative writing in this digital age is key to exploring how young African writers harness the internet in crafting their stories.

Through an analysis of ten stories on six online platforms by young writers from five countries across four subregions, this project considers how African writers use digital platforms to challenge stereotypes about Africa, mainly in relation to place. Setting is typically an important aspect of any literary work; accordingly, the respective descriptions of place shed light on the social relations and thematic complexities behind African cities and villages: place thus functions in theoretical, conceptual, political, economic and social ways, providing a particular understanding of Africa. In fiction, the word “place” has a variety of connotations, ranging from literal through conceptual to ideological and political. By looking at cities and villages and other places in a variety of short stories, we see how writers locate perspectives, and criticisms in their writing.

Analysing stories from a handful of websites connects a sense of place to themes related to belonging, rejection, isolation or even optimism. Thus, we can understand ways in which writers imagine the world around them while acknowledging their own place in this world, and how this sense of place perpetuates or challenges the stereotypical narratives about Africa.
2.1 Digital literature

African digital literature is characterised by a short but vibrant history. Right before the turn of the millennium, the American academic Harpold² made a bold but ultimately fake prophecy that Africa would be the heart of digital darkness. His unfair criticism joined a long list of ignorant but pervasive commentaries that misconstrued the potential of the continent. In the same decade that Harpold made this prediction, Africans were participating in internationally hosted online creative writing workshops; while locally initiated listservs (such as one curated by the Nigerian poet/scholar Ede) were conduits for creative work, which were the subject of vibrant email exchanges³. Young writers such as Chimamanda Adichie and Mohammed Naseehu Ali had their works featured online in the New Yorker and on other foreign outlets, while African websites such as Kwani⁴? made their mark, featuring personalities like Binyavanga Wainaina, who wrote both fiction and non-fiction.

Across the continent, internet access expanded, and subsequently, internet cafes proliferated between 2002 and 2012. These were replaced by mobile phones, which have been the symbol and vehicle of the current explosion of writings. These writings find their homes on African-owned literary websites such as Flash Fiction Ghana, which focuses on micro-stories by young Ghanaian writers; the Kenyan website Jalada, created by a group of young East Africans, interested in African-language fiction and writing coming mainly from East, West and Southern Africa; Saraba, created by young Nigerians based in Nigeria; Adda, hosting writing from the Commonwealth and with a significant number of creative submissions from North Africa; and African Writer Magazine and Brittle Paper, both based in the diaspora, publishing work by African-descended writers from all over the world. Selected stories from these platforms form the basis of this project, which explores the literary themes that are related to place.

Unlike the fields of African oral literature and African print literature which are characterised by decades of research scholarship, research into African digital literature is relatively new. The first book-length work in the field was recently completed by Shola Adenekan⁴; entitled African Literature in the Digital Age: Class and Sexual Politics in New Writing from Nigeria and Kenya, the monograph is an inter-regional exploration of the power of the internet to transform African writing communities across class, gender, social and cultural lines. Further, in a recently published book entitled Cultural Netizenship: Social Media, Popular Culture, and Performance in Nigeria, James Yékú⁵ examines the ways in which Nigerian users of the internet use viral memes and other aspects of social media to engage with the world around them. These two monographs bolster a field that is still dominated by shorter works such as book chapters and journal articles.

Such research explores creativity and authenticity, especially because of the problematic notion that digital technology is alien to Africa. Meg Arenberg⁶ for instance finds a complex relationship between traditional forms of expression and new media equivalents.
Using WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages as her data, her research interrogates the credibility of new media forms and highlights the challenges that allow traditional poetry in Tanzania and Kenya to flourish in digital spaces in complex ways.

Yékù⁷ similarly problematises the implications of adapting conventional forms of African literature into the digital space. He looks at how the writer Kiru Taye adapts potential romantic relationships in Chinua Achebe’s seminal Things Fall Apart through a fan fiction piece named Thighs Fell Apart. Yékù posits that the adaptation is able to undercut canonised work, thereby making it more approachable to generations after Achebe.

Working online also allows the writing to be critiqued by audiences through comments and thus forms a bridge between different generations of African writers and readers as well as genres. Taye has subsequently written different fan fiction pieces about other romantic relationships in Achebe’s novel, including a possibly queer relationship. Future scholarship into such creative work has the potential to extend the arguments made by Yékù.

Beyond questions of identity, there is interest in the potential of new media technology to overcome existing barriers that hamper the production, circulation and distribution of digital creative expression in Africa. Stephanie Bosch Santana⁸, for example, is interested in the relative ease with which African writers and poets use new media to reach wide audiences, whose engagement and reaction influence the nature of the work they read. Santana uses Diary of a Zulu Girl, a novel created out of a series of viral Facebook posts in South Africa, to reveal networks that are created across real-life and virtual communities in a localised manner. The male author started the Facebook posts under the guise of a female Facebook user. Again, the tendency of the author to incorporate the perspectives of Facebook users (through their comments and reactions to his work) meant that the work was – in a way – the joint effort of the Facebook users and the writer, leading to interesting questions regarding ownership in an age of digital media.

Santana’s claims are preceded by a contention from Adenekan regarding the implications of internet access. Adenekan⁹ made the argument that the internet space allows writers to overcome publishing barriers that hitherto stifled creative output. For decades, the well-known African Writer Series published by Heinemann, for instance, was one of very few outlets for African writers to share their work; the attendant gatekeepers determined the content that was allowed to enter into accepted pages for sale to audiences. Adenekan identifies the internet as the space that has created a multitude of avenues for newer forms of work. These forms of writing expand the horizon of African literature not only because of the new technology – more crucially, the writers who publish online are unencumbered by obstacles placed in their way by publishers.

The implications of Adenekan’s contention are adopted by Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang¹⁰, who carried out thematic studies of flash fiction in Ghana. Flash fiction enables creative artists to tackle transgressive themes that critique conventional societal relationships, which ultimately speak to nation-building. Likewise, Dina Ligaga¹¹ is interested in transgressive behaviour, but on social media. Using three Kenyan female public figures popularly called “slay queens” (young women who are usually active on social media and who gain attention by valorising flashy lifestyles), she demonstrates the potential of their transgressive behaviour to extend conversations on sexuality, women’s bodies and female agency. Ligaga underscores the importance of Instagram’s visual rhetoric to influence societal expectations regarding gender constructions. While the internet provides an avenue for women to self-express, patriarchal structures both online and offline present dangers that must be acknowledged, to attempt progress.
While Santana broaches the subject of place in *From Nation to Network: Blog and Facebook Fiction from Southern Africa*, she restricts her analysis to the various levels of networks that are created outside of the texts themselves. None of the existing research pays adequate or direct attention to the sense of place that is imagined in this emerging form of creative expression. This project, therefore, fills a gap by focusing on the literary aspects of the work that relate to a sense of place.

2.2 Meaning of place in literature

“Place” is tied closely with urban and rural spaces, for example, writers construct cities and villages by connecting these spaces with character and theme. Place is a contested issue here, because even though digital stories are “found” online, the internet is often considered to be “placeless”¹². In other words, the digital platforms that host these stories question what it means to be located, because the online space is not material (like a book). The absence of a physical anchoring, which is a feature of the internet, thus provides a paradoxical window through which a sense of place is analysed – conceptually, ideologically, politically and even literally – in the stories chosen for the project.

This focus leads to an analysis of place in relation to belonging, rejection, isolation or even optimism, complicated by the fact that the writing is found online. This complication is not intended to diametrically oppose the “lack of place” of the internet to the focus on place in the writing found on the internet. As Santana notes, while the internet is sometimes thought of as “placeless,” African digital forms create networks that “operate simultaneously at local, national, regional, pan-African, and global scales”¹³. There is a clear sense of place in the actual writing, and place is closely connected to cities and villages – the two major settings in African creative writing. This dichotomy again reflects urbanisation trends on the continent. Authored by writers who come from the east, west, north and southern parts of the continent, the selected writing reveals complementary and sometimes contrasting ways of conceptualising place, thereby enriching research into African digital literature and revealing how this sense of place mirrors or challenges existing stereotypical narratives about Africa.

This project is, therefore, important because an analysis of literary themes and characters that are related to cities and villages allows for an exploration of place, enriching research into how Africa can be viewed in terms of setting. The project thus fills a gap with regards to the complexities that make up place in African digital writing.
The methodology that undergirds this project is informed by analysing purposively sampled stories from the websites. The selection of texts was temporal (all stories were published between 2018 and 2020). In order to achieve a gender balance, five of the ten writers identify as women while five identify as men (see Table 1). Regional representation was also necessary. The nationalities represented in the data set were two each from Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Egypt and Malawi. Accordingly, West, East, North, and Southern Africa were represented; Central Africa was the only major region not covered in this selection. The potential limitations of picking only two stories from each country was the difficulty in fully analysing each story and examining the various issues related to space. Nevertheless, it was important to attempt a balance through representation, also by choosing diverse digital platforms.

Table 1: Purposive texts sampled

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hour of Judgment¹⁴</td>
<td>Edith Night Magak</td>
<td>Kenyan</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Brittle Paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Woman’s Body Parts¹⁵</td>
<td>Sitawa Namwalie</td>
<td>Kenyan</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Jalada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where We Live¹⁶</td>
<td>Wesley Macheso</td>
<td>Malawian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African Writer Magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting Oprah Winfrey¹⁷</td>
<td>Pemphero Mphande</td>
<td>Malawian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African Writer Magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call Me an Infidel¹⁸</td>
<td>Hajara Hussaini Ashara</td>
<td>Nigerian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Saraba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Wait for You¹⁹</td>
<td>Femi Ayubosun</td>
<td>Nigerian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Brittle Paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Story that Ends in Light²⁰</td>
<td>Fui Can-Tamakloe</td>
<td>Ghanaian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Flash Fiction Ghana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing Fear²¹</td>
<td>AJ Asomani</td>
<td>Ghanaian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Flash Fiction Ghana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the Cities of Central Cairo²²</td>
<td>Mohamed Matbouly</td>
<td>Egyptian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Adda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running in Circles²³</td>
<td>Hend Ja’Far</td>
<td>Egyptian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Adda</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹¹Purposive sampling allows the researcher to apply their objectives and judgement when selecting data.

The websites were chosen to reflect different identities of digital platforms in African literature. While Flash Fiction Ghana is circumscribed by nationality, as the submission guidelines specify that writing should have connections to Ghana, Saraba is Nigerian in ownership and African in submissions. Jalada on the other hand was founded by a group of young East Africans – like Saraba, its submissions span the continent. Brittle Paper and African Writer Magazine were both founded by Nigerians based in the USA. While Brittle Paper welcomes submissions from the African diaspora, African Writer Magazine is more interested in publishing African writers. Adda is the outlier in this data set, as it is owned by the UK-based Commonwealth Foundation. It still publishes stories from Africa and is the website from which the Egyptian stories are culled. Each website is thus unique in character and highlights the versatile nature of African writing in this digital age.

Cities and villages were usually the window through which analysis was done. The stories chosen for this project range from exhibiting a strong sense of place to not focusing directly on
place. The data from these websites was collected by reading the stories and noting down portions that would subsequently be analysed through close reading with the support of contextual analysis.

The outcomes of this project are realised through critical discourse analysis (CDA), a method with a longstanding history in literary studies. CDA has a “[focus] on social problems, and especially on the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse or domination” (van Dijk 2001)²⁴. Even though hegemonic structures as identified by van Dijk can be the focus, the methodology allows for a broader use that traverses domination and power relations. Nevertheless, for the critical discourse analyst, language is not devoid of political and ideological influence; textual examination is therefore intended to reveal such structures underlying a work. While there are different components of this methodology, this project is reliant on close reading, with indirect gestures to contextual analysis – two major parts of CDA.

Close reading is a literary practice that resulted from a literary theory known as formalism. Formalists argued that the meaning of a text was intrinsically linked to the text itself, devoid of surrounding information. While formalist theory eventually became obsolete, the practice of close reading has remained important to literary studies due to the emphasis that it places on analysing aspects of a text. In other words, close reading guides the reading of a text, helping a reader to examine the words that make up meaning in the text. For purposes of this project, close reading of the various authors’ choice of words is crucial. It is still important to note that close reading in and of itself is inadequate to arriving at the purpose of this project; accordingly, there is an additional reliance on contextual analysis.

Contextual analysis involves appreciating the context that informs the creation of a work. This context can include the profile and role of author, time when and place where the work was produced, the related cultural meaning and significance, the socio-economic and geo-political context within which the work was created, the ideology that characterises the work, and the purpose for which the work was made, among other similarly pertinent questions. While the situation in Ghana is familiar to the author of this paper, to move beyond a simple literary analysis other countries are also examined within these contexts.

Close reading and contextual analysis are therefore complementary in nature: while close reading demands a sustained and thorough analysis of the text, contextual analysis veers outside the text. A reliance on close reading – with contextual analysis providing support – will result in the methodology that drives this project. Obviously, this approach does not mean that every single word – or every possible context – will be considered while analysing each story. The convention is to typically isolate specific portions of a text – here, these are chosen based on their imagination of place – to arrive at meaning in the text.

In the few cases where stories are translated – as is the case of the Egyptian writers who write in Arabic, the translations are analysed.

In this study, I explored the following key questions:

i. How do African writers imagine place in online fiction?
ii. How do differences in terms of urban and rural spaces impact the stories?
iii. What are the implications of stereotypes in the stories?
iv. How do different literary platforms influence the constituent stories?
The stories examined in this study differ widely in terms of perspective, theme, setting, characterisation and plot. For example, in A Woman’s Body Parts, the narrator speaks in the third person voice while recounting advice from her grandmother in a domestic setting. Call Me an Infidel is narrated in the second person, as the narrator speaks to a man whose ego is bruised by the success of his wife. The occupations of the woman and her husband, as well as the ways in which they engage with their environment (the woman visits a nearby university, for instance), imply that the setting is urban. A Story That Ends in Light recounts the reaction of villagers in Ghana to a politician who promises development because of an impending election. In the Cities of Central Cairo has a magic realism tone, as the narrator and other characters move from Cairo to Paris and other cities through a café in downtown Cairo. The differences in literary aspects reveal patterns in relation to a sense of place. In literal terms, one dominant issue is a rural/urban divide, which reflects larger trends on the continent.

The urban population in Africa has ballooned from 285 million out of a total population of 810 million in 2000 to 587 million out of a total population of 1.3 billion in 2020. This means that the urban population more than doubled in 20 years, growing by 6% per annum. More people are moving from rural areas to cities. In the countries represented in the selection the rate of urbanisation per year is as follows: Ghana 57.35%; Nigeria 51.96%; Egypt 42.78%; Kenya 28%; and Malawi 17%. The national average rate of urbanisation is 41% per year over the last 20 years; thus, while three of the countries selected for the study have higher-than-average urban populations, two fall way below the average.

These statistics do not generally have a strong impact on the construction of place in the stories analysed, as thematic concerns run through the stories to create patterns. Regardless, the implications of rapid urbanisation on socio-economic life are captured in some of the stories, which imagine city life very differently from village life. Addressing urbanisation in the stories we tell is key in shifting stereotypical narratives in which Africa is seen as almost entirely rural, agrarian and underdeveloped. Across the board, the authors simultaneously challenge external stereotypes while addressing internal issues.

For example, Pemphero Mphande’s Meeting Oprah Winfrey, is set in a village in Zambia (with an annual urbanisation rate of 44.63%). In the story, the African American media personality Oprah Winfrey is fictionalised as having travelled from America to Zambia to live in a village for three months, to better understand the nature of poverty. She succeeds in being anonymous until she is accosted by the protagonist. The whole story is a dream, and the protagonist wakes up right after he is offered a million dollars. The protagonist is disgusted with the realisation that he has not left Malawi. He ends the story by telling his audience, “Some dreams can make you want to commit suicide”. While this point can come across as a joke, the protagonist seems to grapple with a deeper frustration about Malawi being a difficult place for young people to thrive.
navigate away from the implications of the stereotype, not least through how he imagines America. The perception of America as a place of opportunity is critiqued by the million-dollar offer, which can literally happen only in a dream. The story thus satirises the intention to go abroad. It needs to be emphasised that the author, while mocking the desire to travel, is also unhappy with the factors that make staying at home undesirable. Making an apparently near-perfect America attainable only through a dream is a means through which the West is depicted as an unreal place, contrasting sharply with an African rural reality that is harsh for many young people.

Running in Circles by Hend Ja’Far also revolves around dreams, but with a darker theme. A young woman has a recurring dream full of confusion, and after she informs her mother about it, the dream is transferred to her mother. Her father is also informed about the dream, at which point the dream is promptly transferred to him as well, creating anxiety in the family. The three characters circulate the dream among themselves until they decide to break the chain by choosing one of them to be killed while the dream is attached to them. The story ends with no such decision made; the narrator states, “All we knew was that the circle would break open for the unluckiest of us”.

In this story, place is not foregrounded explicitly, making it difficult to ascertain the location of the action. The dream is set in a forest, which is a popular choice for magical realism, ranging from traditional folktales (such as Ananse stories) to stories by modern writers, including Amos Tutuola. By connecting suffering with possessing (or being possessed by) a dream that is set in a forest, the author plays on the difficulty with dealing with burdens, and at the same time highlights the potency of forests in fuelling concerns of the plot. The adoption of magical realism does not specifically point to an African narrative; however, the ordinariness of the characters helps to highlight a quotidian feel, where the everyday nature of their actions makes their lives appear “normal” and not “spectacular”, as tends to be the case in stories about Africa that appear in western outlets.

The theme of magic realism is again strong in Sitawa Namwali’s A Woman’s Body Parts and Mohamed Matouby’s In the Cities of Central Cairo. While, as mentioned previously, A Woman’s Body Parts has a domestic setting, the protagonist is advised by her grandmother on how women should have detachable body parts to deal with difficulties, the protagonist in In the Cities of Central Cairo uses a door at a café in Cairo as a portal to enter major cities around the world. A women’s community is built in A Woman’s Body Parts as the grandmother-granddaughter relationship is complemented with aunties and a mother who add their counsel and experiences. The elder lady explains to her younger relative why and how women require the ability to reattach body parts anytime they fall off. The protagonist watches as her mother reattaches body parts, and her grandmother reveals that women do not have the luxury of permanent body parts. The need to attach body parts arises when a woman is threatened, disregarded, or attacked by a man. The magic realism that stems from having detachable body parts appears to be a figurative way of highlighting gender-based attacks. As is with the case of satire, the grandmother mocks some of these scenarios as she reminds the protagonist not to attach lips upside down; this will avoid looking like a strange bird with a beak. The absurdity of the scenario is intended to eventually point to the ridiculous obstacles that women face just because they are women. Ultimately, however, the author is careful to remind the reader that regardless of the magic realism and satire, the tears that follow from these challenges have to flow. This is the only way a woman can avoid “damning her soul” (par 23). In other words, the reality of many women being unable to escape from violence and difficulty has to be accepted and dealt with by venting the
frustration through tears. Through the address to the protagonist, the narrative helps the audience understand the ways in which women cope with these problems.

The narrator in *In the Cities of Central Cairo* is not concerned about dealing with his audience’s obvious confusion at arriving in Paris from Cairo through a doorway. He rather understands doorways as enabling unconventional access – either physically or in a more conceptual sense. Accordingly, he calls his love interest a doorway to her magical world where his imagination runs free in relation to “stories of her African forefathers passed down to her by her grandmother” (par 9), and notes later that “cities roam around downtown Cairo like pedestrians” (par 12). This observation could refer to the theoretical shrinking of the world due to the internet or underline the hassle that urban life presents to middle-class workers. The characters in Cairo use the café as a place to unwind from the stress presented by living in the city. It must be noted that unlike the comparison between Malawi and America in *Meeting Oprah Winfrey*, Matouby does not valorise Paris over Cairo. The addition of magic realism makes Cairo appear less conventional, thereby providing room to avoid stereotypes of African cities as simply fitting categories anchored in negative issues such as crime and underdevelopment. Nevertheless, other stories embrace such themes in order to challenge such stereotypes.

The city is imagined as rougher in other stories, where a sense of alienation becomes more prevalent among lower-class characters. Writers Femi Ayo-Tubosun (*We Wait for You*) and Wesley Macheso (*Where We Live*) incorporate crime scenes into their narration and portray young people as falling into crime due to a breakdown in socio-economic development. In *We Wait for You*, narrated in the second person, the narrator is an armed robber who talks about the way in which he and his colleagues attack and rob citizens. The robbers engage in conversation and banter with their victims, lying about their past and joking when they are exposed. The narrator states:

> We want to exchange stories, but you are not fun at parties. You are still afraid. You think we mean you harm. Why are you afraid of us? Do you think we are evil? We see you nod. We get angry, but not at you. Well, maybe partly at you. You caused this, after all. We try to recycle common tales. (par. 5)

The mundaneness of their conversations belies the dramatic life-or-death situation that is occasioned by armed robbery. Ayo-Tubosun explores the spectre of violence and crime, which dominate headlines about Nigeria; yet his focus on dialogue between the armed robbers and their victims adds a human touch to the situation and suggests a hesitance at outrightly condemning the criminals.

This tendency to situate crime within a larger context is explored more fully in *Where We Live*. The protagonist was brought to the city of Blantyre from his village by his mother at age seven. Abandoned in a slum, he joins other children to live off the streets until they are old enough to engage in stealing, drug dealing and prostitution. While he abstains from these activities, two other children become an international drug dealer and prostitute. The story ends with news of the drug dealer dying in transit in Brazil, as cocaine pellets burst in his stomach. Although Macheso appears to focus on the implications of the actions rather than the situations that engender these actions, locating the death outside of Africa is a reminder that these situations and actions are not native or unique to the continent. Death also occurs in *We Wait for You*, as the robbers eventually kill their victims. The problem of youth unemployment is addressed in both stories, as the characters view social vices as a means of survival. Both stories are set mainly outdoors; the next pair of stories have a more domestic setting.

Where the home is central to the plot, the domestic space is a place where women respond to challenges presented by the patriarchy. In Hajara Hussaini Ashara’s *Call Me an Infidel* and AJ Asomani’s *Balancing Fear*, the protagonists deal with a husband and a father respectively. The two stories are a critique of the tendency to construct women in relation to men, as the protagonists deconstruct being a wife and daughter respectively by displacing agency to their benefit. These two pieces of fiction challenge stereotypes about African women being submissive and docile. Ascribing agency to both characters rather
highlights the power of African women in roles that are historically intended to circumscribe their potential to control their voice and power. By setting the stories in a domestic space, the writers embrace the challenge of reimagining the house as a place where these women can reframe power relations to their advantage.

By appropriating voice in different ways, the two stories amplify their protagonists. *Call Me an Infidel* is narrated in the second person voice, and the protagonist mocks the husband for being unable to celebrate his wife's success as a writer. Different aspects of patriarchy, including religion, are questioned. The questioning in *Balancing Fear* is more personal as the narrator recalls her father's weaknesses, which he attempted to hide from his children. The theme of religion is also treated, as the father is more interested in supporting a pastor than in catering for his family. The use of voice is an effective way of highlighting the inherent dangers of allowing patriarchal systems to disproportionally affect women. This challenge to patriarchy is couched in a reflexive context, as the narrator waxes philosophical at the end of the story. She asks a rhetorical question: “How do we balance the rightful fears developed from our lived experience with the life we envision for ourselves and those we hold dear?” (par. 6).

Research by Afrobarometer has found that, despite gains made in terms of democracy across the continent, citizens are not enthused by elections²⁷. This apathy of the public is a reaction to corruption, which functions as a strain on proper infrastructural development. In *A Story that Ends in Light*, a politician leaves the city to campaign in a village. He knows that he needs the villagers’ votes but does not care to bring the development necessary to improve their lives. The villagers know that their presence is only valued for votes and will not result in development; their lack of interest in the politician reinforces Afrobarometer's findings that Africans are not overly interested in elections. On the surface, both villages in the stories are imagined as vulnerable to exploitation.

While patriarchal systems are prevalent in Magak’s *Hour of Judgment*, a more political form of hegemonic structures is present in Can-Tamakloe’s *A Story that Ends in Light*. Both stories are set in villages, with power relations as a central theme. The first story has two characters who are consumed by anxiety related to sexual performance, as an older man and a presumed virgin are supposed to consummate their marriage. While the young woman plans to trick the man into believing that she loses her virginity to the man, the man is reliant on a concoction to cure his sexual weakness. The reader does not find out whether either character succeeds, thus questioning the social structures that force anxiety on people due to societal expectations. The societal expectations here risk perpetuating stereotypes about African villages and backward practices, where women are supposed to remain chaste until marriage, while men are supposed to display sexual prowess. The anxiety that informs the psyches of the two main characters adds a human element to the situation while also providing a critique of the socially constructed connection between marriage and sex.

Both stories include characters who are perceptive of those structures that others use to keep them subjugated. As the narrator notes in *A Story that Ends in Light*, the villagers found the politician’s visit to be “an interesting interlude in an otherwise calm existence. They were here merely to observe” (par. 3). Finding the visit to be amusing removes the perspective from the politician and reveals that the villagers are not only aware of the shenanigans but are also in control of how they react to the situation. Such characterisation challenges the stereotypical narrative that ordinary (and especially rural based) Africans are helpless in the face of corruption from powerful politicians, thus providing a more rounded picture of the situation on the ground.

It must be noted that the various literary platforms that host these stories have different identities. Flash Fiction Ghana focuses exclusively on Ghana, as the submissions are required to have some connection to Ghana. Saraba was formed by young Nigerian medical students who initially started publishing Nigerian work, and currently welcome submissions from African writers. Jalada has a regional background, as its founders come mainly from Kenya and Tanzania. The website
welcomes writing from both Africa and its diaspora. Both Brittle Paper and African Writer were founded by Nigerians who live and work in the United States. Their diasporic identity connects with their submissions, which are from both on and off the continent. Adda on the other hand is not African. It is founded and run by the Commonwealth Foundation and publishes work from across the Commonwealth.

Their unique identities however do not affect the nature of the submissions. In other words, while one could have easily assumed that stories circumscribed by nation or region might have led to thematic or character concerns that differed from another platform, a literary analysis reveals that the nature of the platforms have largely minimal influence on theme.
While the stories chosen for this report are but a smattering of the larger body of work in digital African literature, they provide an insight into how the continent looks through the eyes of these writers. They imagine a continent that has a vibrant outlook but that is not without its set of challenges. The authors address these challenges indirectly, through humour or satire, but also directly, by highlighting the effects of leadership failures, rural-urban migration, and unbalanced social structures that negatively impact vulnerable population groups.

The authors are unapologetic about exploring themes and characters that risk perpetuating stereotypes. Instead, they choose to address the causes of these stereotypes, examine the implications of the stereotypes, or broaden the conversation in a more global sense. Ultimately, all these strategies provide some challenge to the stereotypes and enhance our understanding of how cities and villages contribute to making meaning in short fiction online.

An analysis of the creation of rural and urban spaces in the sampled texts indicate emerging trends and patterns in relation to gender. While the men writers appear to be interested in external issues such as crime and politics, the women writers explore domestic-related themes such as parenting (Balancing Fear and Running in Circles) and marriage (Call Me an Infidel and Hour of Judgement) into detail. Domestic themes that appear in the men-authored work tend to be treated in tangential ways (for example, parenting is explored in the beginning of Where We Live, after which the narrator becomes more interested in the relationship between crime and the urban space). Themes related to romantic relationships do overlap in both sets of writing, as In the Cities of Central Cairo and A Woman's Body Parts explore such relationships, or the possibilities of these relationships. It would be helpful to analyse a larger set of stories to ascertain whether these writers gravitate toward public or private-sphere themes based on gender.

Regardless of gender, however, the writers highlight the awareness of ordinary characters of difficulties that they attempt to deal with, whether successfully or not. The main characters across the various stories face challenges such as societal pressure (A Woman's Body Parts and Hour of Judgement), economic hardship (Where We Live, Meeting Oprah Winfrey, and We Wait for You), leadership problems (A Story that Ends in Light), and supernatural mysteries (In the Cities of Central Cairo and Running in Circles). Yet, there is a near-universal resilience in the face of these problems. While the authors do not appear interested in whether their characters succeed in adequately overcoming their challenges, they focus on the ways in which these characters respond to the problems they face.

Accordingly, places influence the characters, while characters also influence place. Meeting Oprah Winfrey, for instance, suggests life on the continent is shorn of opportunities that lead to upward economic mobility. This suggestion is contrasted with a further indication that life in America can lead to opportunities.

It is important to note again that the writers locate perspectives and criticisms in their writing. The perspectives that these writers explore are, in a stylistic sense different: while Hour of Judgement, Where We Live, Meeting Oprah Winfrey, Balancing Fear, and In the Cities of Central Cairo are in the first person, Call Me an Infidel, and We Wait for You are narrated in the second person. A Story that Ends in Light, A Woman’s Body Parts, and Running in Circles, are told in the third person. Each stylistic choice has its own set of implications: first person stories tend to be subjective and immerse the reader into the viewpoint of the narrator – this choice blocks out what other characters think or feel. As such, in Hour of Judgement there is the presence of dramatic irony – the case where the audience knows something that characters do not know – which heightens suspense, as the reader does not know how the two characters will deal with their potential sources of shame. Second person stories are usually direct, as they rope in the reader as the immediate audience. As a result, a story like We Wait for You makes the character address the reader, who assumes the role of the “you” being spoken while experiencing the robbery attack. The omniscient third person perspective in
A Story that Ends in Light helps the reader to notice that the villagers are not taken in by the politician who visits them solely for votes. This perspective thus amplifies the agency of the villagers and increases mockery for the politician, as he is characterised as not being genuinely interested in leadership.

By locating criticism of the patriarchy in domestic settings, some of the women writers directly critique places that contain social relations that are detrimental to gender roles and expectations. It is in this light that A Woman's Body Parts, Call Me an Infidel, and Balancing Fear have interests in how women respond to toxic relationships with husbands, fathers, and men in general. Locating criticism in rural areas allow characters in Hour of Judgement and A Story that Ends in Light to explore the psyche of villagers in order to portray them as complex. Connecting criticism with city life in Where We Live and We Wait for You is a convenient way of highlighting the dangers that the urban underbelly poses to vulnerable characters.

As mentioned earlier, while the digital platforms are online and are thus not necessarily in any physical place, the stories themselves refer to place in different ways. What role, then, does the digital age play in shaping how writers imagine place in African literature? What does it mean for African writers in the digital age to conceptualise place as welcoming, isolating, nostalgic or alienating? In the stories analysed here, the digital space allowed writers to put pressure on conventional notions of identity that relate to place by expanding what it means to be African. If African writers are patronising non-African outlets to share their work, and readers from all over the world are engaging with these stories that project Africa in all of its complexities, then it is important to understand and appreciate the role that African writers are playing.
CONCLUSION

This project has sought to tease out themes that can be connected to cities and villages across the continent in African digital writing. The pieces of fiction selected for an exploration of these themes are diverse in terms of nationality, region, tone, style and authorship. Yet, what can a handful of different stories tell us about how place is constructed in Africa? How can these stories contribute to or change a prevailing narrative about Africa?

The African narrative is enriched by this analysis because place is understood as a complex enabler of social relations. Place influences how characters behave and themes develop. In turn, place is influenced by the actions of characters, as well as by the ways in which themes revolve around place.

Across various regions of the continent, the selected stories generally challenge and critique stereotypes using these literary platforms that are found online. Digital technology has quickly become intertwined with African creativity. By using the internet to reach wide audiences, African writers not only contribute to global trends in fiction; through their stories they help to shape how Africa and Africans are seen by the world.
ENDNOTES


9 Santana 2018, 199.

10 Santana 2018, 188.


