Following Digital Footprints: Researching South African Digital Poetry

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Abstract

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises the need to document the growing corpus of African literature being produced and distributed via social media and other online platforms. In *African literature and the future*, Ogundipe (2015) declared that:

In the search for a viable path for the future of African literature, a well-crafted vision of the future and effective strategies to engender transformation are imperative. This raises the practical application of the digital space, the internet and related innovative technology as new paradigms of knowledge to African literary engagement. But the absence of a critical standard remains a bane of this development.

To address this critical imperative and further explore the prevalence of such works, I collected a dataset to find examples of literary trends and key recent examples of significant works, informed by Moretti's scholarship on distant reading. The dataset focuses on poetry written by younger South African authors from the Born Free Generation, in line with my broader research. The main purpose of this paper is to present my findings and the theoretical and methodological framework that informed them. The paper concludes by briefly proposing some possible means of expanding this research and proposing a large-scale online archival project.

1 Introduction

In recent decades, countless scholars have highlighted the need to document and preserve works of electronic literature. The extensive research into methods of achieving this includes notable large-scale projects like the ELMCIP Knowledge Base and more recent initiatives such as the NEXT project, pioneered by the Electronic Literature Organization. However, there has historically been a dearth of research into African electronic literature.

Although scholars subscribe to a variety of definitions of electronic literature, the works I describe here can be categorized according to Leonardo Flores's description of "third-generation electronic literature." In his influential essay, Flores (2019) defines third-generation electronic literature as:

Based on social media networks and widely adopted platforms and apps, [they] have massive production and audiences… The huge numbers [of authors] come from users of multimedia authoring software—such as Instagram, Snapchat, Imgflip, and apps that allow you take or upload a picture, put language in it, create an animation, and share it. Even when they are not self-consciously producing literature—societal concepts of literature are still dominated by the genres and modes developed in the print world—huge numbers of people have used these tools to produce writing that has stepped away from the page to cross over into electronic literature territory, and it's a crucial move. Whether they know it or not, they are producing third-generation electronic literature.

Although the term "digital poet" has been in use for some time, with many citing Christopher Strachey's 1952 *love letter generator* as one of the earliest examples of the genre, it has not been adopted globally by all poets who use digital technology to release and distribute their works. Indeed, many of the poets that fall within the purview of this research fit this description of e-lit authors who do not categorize their work as electronic literature. Instead, they frequently promote their works as "spoken word" or "slam poetry," "multimedia doc-poetry," or "immersive project installations."

Likewise, the writers explored in this research did not, on the whole, explicitly identify as digital poets. They often describe themselves pluralistically, encompassing multiple professional roles on social media and in personal bios, such as "poet," "blogger," "artistic researcher," "spoken word artist," "producer," "digital strategist," "ac-

tivist," "arts entrepreneur," "translator," or "social media manager."

Joseph Tabbi has made a strong argument that electronic literature is a type of world literature that is produced under constraint (Tabbi, 2010). He explains that in the context of:

A world literature today, the electronic networks that support it, and the social networks that sustain it, can be regarded as an alternative formation to globalization (with its ideal of unconstrained flows of capital and information, and its ideology of progressive freedom).

While there is truth in this characterisation, this depiction of an unimpeded flow cannot be universally applied. The particular constraints that South African poets labour under are neither stylistic nor self-imposed. Many of the writers documented in this dataset occupy multiple professions and rely on diverse income streams, motivated more by the love of their craft than by expectations of high earnings. While their works often attract a local, national, and even Pan-African following, very few of these authors have broken through to a sizeable international readership.

Nevertheless, the influence of the networked computer has had an undeniable impact on the work of African writers. Simon Gikandi has asserted that:

Changes in technology, especially the digital, mean you no longer need centralized gatekeepers... electronic media has opened all sorts of new platforms, and this is enabling a new kind of literature. Poetry, which was almost dead a few decades ago, has become one of the major genres of our time. And I have no doubt it was because of the new technologies. (Mushakavanhu, 2020)

While extolling the democratizing potential of digital technologies, Gikandi, like most Africanist scholars in the field, is clear that despite the digital means available to them, this new generation of African writers remains deeply connected to their forebears, shaped by oral storytelling traditions and the norms of the global publishing industry alike. It must be noted that while the cultural inheritance is a rich one, there are inherent obstacles in the publishing industry that disadvantage authors from the Global South, with such inequalities further impacting their global and digital reach.

2 Critical and Contextual Background

Franco Moretti's work provided an essential theoretical starting point. In his scholarship, Moretti has been transparent about the challenges and complexities inherent in analyzing large corpora of literature through data, but asserts that doing so can provide valuable insights challenging established beliefs about canonization. Particularly impactful in this research endeavour was his influential work on distant reading and its relation to world literature and "the great unread" (Moretti, 2013).

For Moretti, "the great unread" constitutes the vast corpus of literary works that are not only underresearched but also often out of print and infrequently read. Whereas close reading stipulates that the reader turns to the text for illumination, distant reading practices require readers to conceptualise works by analysing data, aided by computational tools. Moretti's theories of distant reading outline the contours of the literary canon and have prompted vital dialogues on which works receive the most scholarly attention and how such choices are directed and informed. However, his analysis does not substantially account for the inherent restrictions in conducting distant readings of world literature.

If books themselves are data, and the printed text is automatically taken as the natural starting point of what constitutes literature, then a great deal of literature inevitably becomes absent from analysis. While Moretti's work is frequently concerned with covering a vast terrain of historically pertinent texts, he seldom accounts for contemporary texts that have, for various reasons, failed to attract widespread scholarly attention despite their significant impact on readers.

The ever-increasing number of such texts in the internet age constitutes a need to reconceptualize "the great unread." Although the global literary market might appear accessible and democratic for contemporary authors, closer analysis reveals a very different landscape for African authors, many of whom self-promote and self-publish their work or release poetry via small independent presses.

In her article "Conglomeration by design: A brief history of the Standard Book Number, 1965–1969," Schwartz (2022) highlights how the book numbering system was first devised and implemented in the UK to suit the practical and financial needs of UK publishers. Demand for a means of processing books using computational data was

partially driven by WH Smith:

The PA commissioned FG Foster, a professor of economics, to devise a system that fulfilled WHS demands while prioritizing the financial success of its members. The SBN's design presupposed a consolidated publishing trade. Every SBN was nine digits in length, and the schema allotted for up to 1,122,220 British publishers. The first part of the SBN was the publisher's prefix... The 9th digit was a check digit to ensure computing accuracy. (Schwartz, 2022)

Although Schwartz stresses that the creation of this system was integral to a scalable global book trade that led to a massive expansion in book availability, inequalities were baked into the model from its inception, which still fails to provide equal access to many authors from the Global South:

The PA gave the largest 2% of publishers 81% of all the title codes. They granted exponentially more title codes to the 20 largest publishers than to the 1,000,000 smallest... A press's ability to roll out an SBN and print it in their book pre-publication directly corresponded with their capital. (Schwartz, 2022)

The financial burden imposed on small publishers—particularly in less economically robust nations—has meant that many independent African publishers save on costs by not implementing ISBN numbers for their titles. Without an ISBN, these works lack computational viability in the global book trade and are less findable online, leading to obscurity regardless of their quality or popularity. The ephemeral nature of the web and the costs of maintaining personal domains further mean that key works often fade from the online world, leaving little hope of revival once print runs end and web references expire.

3 Theory, Methodology, and Research Questions

As well as the aforementioned influence of Moretti's theories of distant reading, the theoretical underpinnings of this research were also informed by Jahan Ramazani's book *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*. He claims that poetry has been given insufficient attention within the field of postcolonial literature. According to him:

If we embrace the hybridity of postcolonial poetry, we hybridize our understanding not only of Third World poetry in English but also of anglophone poetry more generally. This can help to internationalize a field of study that has remained relatively insular in the West. What happens if we hybridize our canons of modern and contemporary poetry in English, giving due space in our courses, personal libraries, and anthologies to Third World poets? (Ramazani, 2001)

It is a thought-provoking question, one that holds particular resonance for South African poetry. The poetic movements in the country have been shaped not only by a long history of colonialism but also by the diverse cultural demographics in the highly multicultural and multilingual nation. Its poetic legacy stems from a rich variety of traditions—ranging from traditional oral praise poetry and anti-apartheid verse to the Drum writers who paved the way for the vibrant poetry scene of present-day South Africa. Contemporary performance poetry, especially, is characterised by lively readings that embrace a variety of technologies and means of distribution, leading to an organic evolution of form combining stylistic elements from hip-hop to digital projection. Such developments necessitate a reconfiguration of the ways in which such poetry is analysed as a modern reading practice.

In *The Digital Reading Condition*, Engberg et al. (2023) argue for the need to extend our conceptions of reading to reflect our diverse digital media landscape in a way that embraces its variety without making value judgements about the supposed superiority of traditional print cultures. They emphasise an inclusive view that encompasses:

Print, audiobooks, printed books in all forms as well as a multitude of digital forms that reflect a complex and interlocking media economy that includes all these forms. The digital reading condition importantly includes community-forming activities supported by social media platforms... the material condition of reading cannot be settled by fixed definitions of reading or of digital materials. (Engberg et al., 2023)

In the case of contemporary South African postcolonial poetry, we should therefore not only consider its impact in terms of thematic and linguistic hybridity but also how it operates within a multimodal system of digital and print forms that interact with each other and inform an array of different reading experiences. As a form, spoken word poetry inherently transcends the confinement of the printed word and demands active, multilayered engagement from audiences. Gestures, tone of voice, facial expression, stage, and lighting design

all contribute to the audience's understanding and reception of a poem—it is inherently hybrid and multimodal.

This is especially evident when transmitted in stylised digital formats like TikTok videos and Instagram reels, and as such, demands different modes of analysis. As Engberg et al. (2023) put it, "we need to update the original 'oral-literate-electronic' scheme by adding the digital as a fifth element," particularly for "multisensory reading experiences" in audio-visual mediums.

Susanna L. Sacks has emphasised the impact of social media and digital reading practices on writing and reading communities in Southern Africa in *Networked Poetics: The Digital Turn in Southern African Poetry*. According to Sacks:

Digital self-publishing, together with the user-driven curations of social media platforms, accelerates poetry's move into the popular sphere and thus further threatens to disrupt poetry's conservative role. As mobile networks and digital platforms broaden opportunities for publication, this liberating function grows. Poetry is, or has become again, a youth-driven form... These effects are especially acute in southern Africa, where poetry's historical power, the rise of a new political generation, and the focus on mobile communication have together fostered an intense focus on digital media as a space of artistic production. (Sacks, 2024)

In conducting this project, the driving research questions were as follows:

1. Are social media platforms shaping the format of writers' individual creative works?

2. Are these platforms providing an additional online space for writers to release and distribute their works?

3. Is there a proliferation of certain poetic forms in these digital spaces, and if so, which forms are most represented and why?

Based on the results from the dataset, it appears highly likely that the social media platforms themselves are indeed shaping creative works. One observable aspect is the length and format of certain works. Most poems were longer works, and oral poems proliferated above other forms, although many experimental and multimedia forms also utilised different technologies.

It is possible that writers who prefer to compose shorter poems gravitate toward social media platforms that favour brevity, such as Twitter or Instagram. However, among more prolific writers who have released multiple versions of their work across different platforms—such as Xabiso Vili, who has produced YouTube videos, TikToks, printed anthologies, Instagram posts, and exhibition works—it is possible to observe clear variances in length, format, rhythm, and the addition of music or visual elements. Among such writers, longer spoken word formats remain dominant.

It is also possible to tentatively confirm that for certain writers, particularly younger writers at an earlier stage in their careers, social media platforms serve as viable spaces to hone their abilities and cultivate an audience. However, these writers are generally not influencers and have smaller followings; they are not in a position to monetize their platforms in ways that result in significant financial gains. Thus, social media publication is not overtaking the traditional publishing industry—it provides additional avenues for established writers to promote themselves and their work or offers a launching pad for emerging creatives.

My research methodology was directly informed by the "Follow the Thing" approach. Stephanie Sodero describes this as:

Taking a "more than human" approach. It goes beyond a human-centred perspective and instead, directly and indirectly, traces the complex journey of an object. The object, and the diverse networks of people, goods, regulations, and more, entailed in the journey of that object, are the focus. (Sodero et al., 2021)

Instead of following a single object, this research followed individuals and works online, exploring intertextual references made by poets and algorithmic recommendations to trace an online map of collaborators. For instance, lines from Thuthukani Ndlovu's poem *Why We Write* (performed as part of the Word and Sound Digital Slam) are partially comprised of titles of several books and poems by South African authors and organisations, many of whom he shares professional ties with. Searching for poems intertextually embedded in this work—such as the phrase "the sin in my blackness"—leads to a poem of the same name by Nkateko Masinga, which connects to her Instagram performances of *16 days? what happens on day 17?* and her contributions to the anthology *Hashtag Poetry*, "dedicated to the poets and wordsmiths crafting verses before they become hashtags."

Another reference in Ndlovu's poem to "things

the fire left behind" points to Bokang Maragelo's collection of poems that originated on Twitter. The more time spent exploring these authors and their work on social media, personal platforms, and professional pages, the easier it became to identify creative networks of collaboration and shared digital practice.

From the outset, it was clear that, due to the limitations of scale, the research output would result in a modest dataset. However, as Christine L. Borgman (2007) observes, what she calls "little data" of this type is not only common in humanities-driven research but also has distinct advantages:

Scaling affects the management of both research data and the information products that result from analyzing and contextualizing those data. When small amounts of data are collected, such as field research recorded by hand in notebooks, documentation can be flexible and adaptable to the immediate problem. (Borgman, 2007)

While a larger dataset would certainly bring advantages, producing a smaller-scale dataset allowed for more rigorous compilation, analysis, and documentation of the data.

Part 4: Section 4 – Limitations and Ethical Considerations latex Copy code

4 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

While the initial impulse was to collect data on works of electronic literature more generally, it soon became apparent that it would be more practical and efficient to focus specifically on poets and poetry, aligning more closely with my broader research interests. I also made the decision to focus exclusively on Black and Coloured South African authors (I use the term "Coloured" as it is commonly employed in the South African context to refer to mixed-race individuals). While there exists a large body of important works by white South African poets and writers of other ethnicities, I chose to exclude such works from this particular study to align with my broader aim of examining contemporary poetry produced by Black and Coloured South Africans of the Born-Free generation who came of age after the fall of apartheid.

As a European researcher working within Scandinavia, I am an outsider to the communities I am studying and therefore liable to make incorrect assumptions. This geographical distance also limits my understanding in other ways, as I am unable to attend live performances or festivals that would provide further context for my hypotheses, though I hope to conduct such fieldwork in future if funding allows. Importantly, I must also acknowledge that I am not fluent in any of South Africa's twelve official languages apart from English. This inevitably limited the scope of the project and likely resulted in the exclusion of worthy works I did not encounter due to language barriers. In any future expansion of this research, I hope to collaborate with South African scholars possessing the multilingual expertise I currently lack, and I hope others will embark on similar research with a wider linguistic range.

Consideration was also given to how "South African writer" should be defined. In awareness of the complex and charged nature of categorising individuals based on nationality, I adopted a broad approach compared to my approach to racial categorisation. The dataset therefore includes South African authors currently living and working abroad—such as Manthepe Moila in Seoul, South Korea, and Nomakhwezi Becker in London, England—as well as authors of other nationalities who live and work in South Africa, such as Thuthukani Ndlovu (born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe) and individuals with dual citizenship, like Adetola Adedipe, a Nigerian–South African writer residing in Alberta, Canada.

There were also several ethical considerations to be accounted for in undertaking this research. While some higher-profile poets, such as Koleka Putuma, are public figures who promote their work openly, many others represented in the dataset are at an earlier stage of their careers and cannot be classed as public figures to the same extent. Frequently, their poems are shared on personal social media accounts that also include private photos, videos, and reflections on their daily lives, blurring the boundary between the personal and the public spheres.

The fact that almost none of the writers in my dataset self-identified online as "digital poets," "hypermedia authors," or "electronic literature creators" meant that terminology of this kind was avoided in my online searches. Instead, I used more general search terms. While this approach produced a higher volume of irrelevant results, it ultimately yielded a greater number of relevant works and authors meeting my selection criteria.

5 Findings

The data was collected in an Excel document with one sheet dedicated to creative works and another to individual poets. The data set catalogs a total of 47 creative works and thirty individual poets in total. The text was written to be machine-readable to the greatest possible extent and recorded only non-sensitive information such as name, place and year of birth, and links to personal websites or social media accounts where works were found, along with upload dates and the specific platforms used.

Among the authors included in the dataset, there was a fairly equal split between the sexes, with female poets well represented. The combined works of these authors naturally spanned a wide variety of topics, but certain thematic elements appeared across multiple poets. For instance, many works reflected a progressive political sensibility. Feminist themes exploring systemic violence against women and girls, along with the struggle for bodily autonomy, recurred frequently in female-authored works. A focus on mental well-being and self-compassion was also common, alongside explorations of identity, belonging, and cultural and historical legacies. Several poems were explicitly religious in nature, with multiple writers highlighting the importance of their Christian faith in their self-descriptions.

While many works existed in more than one form (for example, anthologised pieces and spoken-word performances), other poems appeared to have been developed specifically for certain platforms such as TikTok. This was especially the case for younger poets, who often displayed greater spontaneity in composition and performance. Some videos were prefaced by the poet addressing the camera directly, noting that the poem had just been written for the purpose of sharing on social media. However, it remains difficult to verify with certainty whether such poems exist solely online or whether some were later published in print or anthologies.

It is evident that the digital environment enables poets to merge traditional forms with new modes of presentation. Social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have become significant spaces for poetry dissemination, each shaping the style and delivery of works. Longer, performance-based poems tend to dominate these spaces, but there is also a notable presence of experimental multimedia projects that integrate visual and audio elements.

The dataset further reveals that while social media acts as a powerful amplifier for visibility, it does not guarantee financial sustainability. Most of the poets documented maintain multiple professional identities and supplement their income through a range of creative and non-creative activities. The passion for artistic expression rather than monetary reward appears to be the main motivation behind their continued engagement with digital poetry.

Overall, the findings highlight that while the digital space has democratised access to audiences, it has not yet achieved full equity in reach or recognition for African poets. Nonetheless, these poets' ability to utilise technology for creative and social expression marks an important cultural development, one that calls for greater critical attention and archival support.

6 Possible Future Findings

If I were able to expand upon certain areas of this research in the future, I would aim to acquire printed copies of some of the poetry collections identified in this study. Unfortunately, many of these books appear to be available only for purchase within South Africa, which limited my ability to compare digital iterations with their print counterparts.

For instance, Nthabiseng JahRose Jafta has published a fascinating multilingual work entitled *Alora: She Dreamt Poems in Many Tongues*, which includes a "digital offering" in the form of an interactive app-based feature that enables readers to enjoy animated readings of poems via their smartphones. A comparison between the printed works (where applicable) and their digital iterations would provide illuminating insight into the contrasts between these formats and the unique multimodal experiences they enable.

Such comparative studies could help shed light on how readers engage differently with poetry depending on medium, interactivity, and multimodality. This would also facilitate a deeper understanding of how contemporary South African poets employ digital affordances to expand the aesthetic and sensory range of their work. In addition, examining how digital-poetic forms are received across social contexts—particularly within performance, academic, and online communities—could reveal new dimensions of meaning-making and cultural participation.

Further research could atherelso explore how

these digital works evolve over time as platforms change, algorithms shift, and technological affordances expand. For example, the migration of poets from Facebook and Twitter to TikTok and Instagram has already resulted in new aesthetic conventions and new kinds of author–audience interaction. The comparative lifespan of poems shared in different online spaces—especially when examined through metadata and archival capture—could yield important findings about digital preservation and visibility.

Ultimately, expanding this project into a longitudinal or cross-platform analysis would not only deepen our understanding of African digital poetry but also contribute to broader debates surrounding the preservation of born-digital cultural heritage.

7 Data Publication and Next Steps

The next stage of this process will be to publish the dataset online via Zenodo as an open-access publication in association with the Center for Digital Narrative at the University of Bergen and the ALMEDA research project at the University of Uppsala. I am also in the process of developing a website to share my research notes and findings and plan to build an online archive using the web-publishing platform *Omeka S* due to its versatility and user-friendly design.

If possible, it would be ideal to showcase such works via *Ibali*, the digital collections showcase of the University of Cape Town, which also utilises Omeka S software. Not only would it be appropriate for these works to be preserved through a South African institution, but the expert support from experienced archivists and scholars would also improve the longevity and accessibility of the material.

Developing such an archive is crucial, as throughout my research I found that web links frequently expire and sites become non-operational after a few years. An online archive would not only increase the visibility of this research and promote further study in the field, but it would also help preserve a record of these works for posterity. If realised, these efforts would be informed by the critical and theoretical scholarship of Siseko H. Kumalo (2020), who argues that:

The resurrection of the Black Archive may assist us in thinking critically about institutional decolonisation in the contemporary South African university, while further allowing us the capacity to read old questions through new perspectives.

Kumalo maintains that advocating for such intersectional and decolonial practices has the potential to realise social progress through what he calls "liberatory memory work." Naturally, such an archive would need to be developed in close consultation with authors, some of whom might have concerns regarding ownership and copyright. However, by working collaboratively and ensuring that authors retain their intellectual property rights, it would be possible to preserve a valuable record of these digital works for both the public and the academic community.

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