

Stories and Empathy in a Time of Crisis: An African Viewpoint

Ato Quayson

Abstract: This Presidential Lecture explores the ways in which African orality provides the means for a sentimental education in an era of crisis. Quayson notes how the essentially polysemic character of the genres of orality have influenced the ways he understands both literature and the African city, two areas of keen interest. After tracing the texture of Accra's trotro (passenger vehicle) slogans and the continuity of sentimental education from orality to social media, Quayson concludes by calling for a new interdisciplinary paradigm that would explore the polysemy of African orality alongside the hypertextual algorithms behind today's social media and the internet.

Résumé : Cette conférence présidentielle explore les façons dont l'oralité africaine fournit les moyens d'une éducation sentimentale en période de crise. Quayson note comment le caractère essentiellement polysémique des genres de l'oralité a influencé la façon dont il comprend la littérature et la ville africaine, deux domaines d'intérêt aigu. Après avoir retracé la texture du trotro d'Accra et la continuité de l'éducation sentimentale de l'oralité aux médias sociaux, Quayson conclut en appelant à un nouveau paradigme interdisciplinaire qui explorerait la polysémie de l'oralité africaine aux côtés des algorithmes hypertextuels qui sous-tendent les médias sociaux et l'internet d'aujourd'hui.

African Studies Review, Volume 65, Number 4 (December 2022), pp. 965–984

Ato Quayson is the Jean G. and Morris M. Doyle Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies and Professor of English at Stanford University, where he has been since 2019. Prior to that he was at NYU (2017–2019), University of Toronto (2005–2017), and University of Cambridge (1995–2005). He completed his BA at the University of Ghana in 1989 and earned his PhD from Cambridge University in 1995. He has published six monographs and eight edited volumes, including *Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism*. His latest monograph is titled *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Email: aquayson@stanford.edu.

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doi:[10.1017/asr.2022.144](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.144)

Resumo : Nesta palestra presidencial, são analisados os modos como a oralidade africana contribui com ferramentas para uma educação sentimental em tempos de crise. A natureza essencialmente polissémica dos vários géneros da oralidade, observa Quayson, influenciaram a sua maneira de encarar quer a literatura quer a cidade africana, duas áreas que suscitam o maior interesse. Depois de investigar a textura dos *tro-tros* (carrinhas privadas de transporte coletivo) de Acra e a evolução da educação sentimental da oralidade para as redes sociais, Quayson conclui propondo que seja criado um novo paradigma interdisciplinar que explore a polissemia da oralidade africana a par dos algoritmos hipertextuais que estão por detrás das atuais redes sociais e da internet.

Keywords: storytelling; orality; polysemy; social media

(Received 28 September 2022 – Accepted 28 September 2022)

Let me start off by invoking the names of my family's dearly departed: Maa Rosie, Agya Emmanuel, Maman Angeline, Tonton Paul, Tantine Emilie, and Esi. In Mexico and Italy, people enshrine the memory of their dearly departed in the Day of the Dead, when there are elaborate rituals for commemorating their departed ones and keeping their names alive. In the Akan tradition from which I hail, we invoke our ancestors through the pouring of libation on special occasions such as the naming of a newborn, at traditional wedding ceremonies, and also during the observation of funerary rites. But there is also a good reason for remembering our dearly departed ancestors and acknowledging them as often as possible. The ancient Egyptians held that there are two forms of death; the first is that of the physical body, when people pass away and are buried, and the second is when loved ones stop mentioning the name of the departed. The second death was considered by the ancient Egyptians to be the worse of the two, since it gradually extinguished the possibility of an afterlife. In a recent interview on *The Daily Show* with Trevor Noah, Lenny Kravitz shared his own insight into the value of remembering the dead that echoes the Ancients: "The beautiful thing is, even though a person may not be on the planet anymore it doesn't mean that your relationship with them can't evolve based upon what's going on in your spirit and in your mind."¹ To name one's ancestors is to animate them in the afterworld and also to acknowledge that we stand on their shoulders to see our way forward. As an African, I take these matters very seriously.

I also want to thank Onyankopon for taking us all through what has been one of the most difficult years in living memory.² 2020 has exposed us to much that is depressing and terrifying. And yet, after the months of Covid-induced lockdown from March and the killing of George Floyd in May 2020, the year has also shown us how much we depend for our mental well-being on sharing stories of our malaise, our lethargy, our vulnerabilities, and our hopes

and vague ideas for a world beyond the pandemic (see Quayson, 2021). It is no hyperbole to say that today's stories of our shared tribulations as they are circulated on all forms of social media have sustained our sense of belonging to a community of shared human values. That the unfolding scene of George Floyd's death could so incense so many of us even though images of police brutality against Black people have been in wide circulation both in the US and elsewhere for a long time also helped to show the degree to which the framing of the stories we hear, read, and see has an effect on eliciting our identification with the plight of others. At one level this seems to be a fairly banal fact and perhaps not worth much commentary, except that the events around George Floyd concentrated the efficacy of stories in a way that had only been expressed in a dispersed and diluted manner in earlier instantiations of police brutality but that now was brought together into an emotionally charged and concentrated form. When George Floyd called for his dead mother, we all shuddered at the realization that our own mothers were being hailed, irrespective of our race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religious backgrounds. And it is this feature of stories and storytelling and how they elicit our identification with the plight of others that I want to focus upon here.³

I grew up in Accra, the capital of Ghana, surrounded by various books along with lots of oral stories. My father was an avid reader of all things written. These included newspapers, Buddhist texts, novels, women's magazines, refrigerator manuals, and Shakespeare. There was no knowing what he would be found reading next. This meant that reading became a natural part of the environment in which my two sisters and I grew up, and also that our early reading was completely varied and eclectic. Stories and folktales also provided my father with opportunities for delivering memorable takes on what passed for the ordinary. One such instance I remember quite clearly occurred when I was about eleven or twelve years old, just before I left for secondary boarding school. My father often took us on walks. Sometimes we all went out together, but at other times he took one or the other of us three for an individual treat. This time it was my turn. We started kicking a stone. He kicked it, and I kicked it; he kicked it, and I kicked it. After about ten minutes of this seemingly pointless exercise, he turned to me and asked quite unexpectedly, "How old do you think that little stone is?" I was taken completely by surprise, having never thought of a stone in that way before. But then followed the most breathtaking story of the formation of the earth, of volcanoes and avalanches, of magma and igneous rocks. The lesson: every stone you kick has come a very long way, both geographically and in terms of time. I have never looked at a stone in the same way since.

My mother also had stories to tell, but hers were those of the marketplace. Her tales were reports of rumors, gossip, and urban legends, all generously leavened with great humor and laughter. These were all the story genres that I came to discover much later in life as the transactional currencies of Accra's social imaginary. The context of stories and storytelling in which I grew up came to have a major impact not only on my imagination, but also on my

appetite for books and how I read them. For me there was no distinction as I was growing up between fact and fiction; everything I read seemed to have a specific reality that was often quite intense. I didn't actually learn how to read properly until I was about eight years old, but once I could read by myself, I began to devour everything that I could find, including all my father's many books, as I have already mentioned. The children's library about a mile and a half from where we lived became my favorite hideout. I quickly exhausted their holdings and moved on to the Public Library in Accra's city center. Then followed the British Council Library, one of whose attractions was that it had permanently running air conditioning. My high school was some sixty miles outside of Accra, and once I had rapidly exhausted my two excursions per term to get away to the libraries back in the city, I just proceeded to sneak out of school to spend entire days in either one of them, shuffling my meagre borrowing rights so that I could always have a couple of library books with me to take back to school.

All this hearing of stories and reading of books formed part of my sentimental education. A sentimental education prepares the way for how we come to identify with the lives of others. But it is not simply about how our sentiments develop and attach themselves to persons, objects, and events. It is also about the distribution of our attention on what we decide to be right or wrong. In other words, a sentimental education also implies the development of a set of ethical dispositions regarding our own evolving selves as well as our relationship to others both like and unlike us. And, as has amply been made clear by politicians in both the UK and the US in the last few years, certain stories are designed to raise walls rather than build bridges between us. Even though I will not be talking about the effect of political cynicism and fake news on our overall sense of community, it is important to note that the manufacture of alternative facts completely disconnected from reality has become a potent threat to how we understand the world and our place in it.

A Folktale from Childhood

Before I continue, let me give you a small taste of what I mean by a sentimental education by sharing with you a folktale that my father told me when I was a young lad. It involves a singing tortoise strumming on a guitar, and goes something like this:

One day a hunter set out to hunt in the forest. It was not a good hunt for him. Try as he might, he could not kill any large animal in the forest, and all the smaller animals scuttled away before he could properly take aim at them. As the sun set, he became more and more despondent and decided in the end to just head home and make it back another day. He dragged his feet as he walked, staring at the ground and worrying about what he was going to say to his fellow hunters at their weekly gathering that was scheduled for the coming weekend. As he walked and kept mumbling distractedly to himself, he thought he heard the vague sound of singing accompanied by a guitar from somewhere in the forest. Singing in the forest at this time of day? he thought to himself. Whatever next?! He decided to follow the sounds and see

who this obvious lunatic might be. As he followed them, the sounds grew louder and louder, until upon a sudden turn and behind a dense clump of trees, he stumbled into a clearing. At the center of the clearing sat a tortoise strumming on an ukulele. And this is the song the tortoise sang:

“Asem mpe nipa, nipa na ɔpe asem
Asem mpe nipa, nipa na ɔpe asem
Asem mpe nipa, nipa na ɔpe asem”

The tortoise’s voice lilted gently as he sang, and he moved his body from side to side to accompany the repeated refrain. The hunter was transfixed! He had never seen anything like this before. Suddenly, an idea popped into his head. Bing! What if...? He didn’t wait to finish the thought but tiptoed very slowly behind the tortoise and with the sack he had brought with him to take back his kill, he swooped and gathered up the tortoise with ukulele and all, hurriedly tied up the mouth of the sack, swung it on his back, and headed out back to the village. Now the hunter had a spring in his step. Why, he even found himself whistling a long-forgotten tune!

When he got to the village, he did not go home but headed straight to the chief’s palace. “Oga Chief,” he said, on being ushered in, and doing his best to imitate one of his Nigerian hunter friends, “greetings and salutations! I have something with me that will make us a lot of money.” “What is this?” asked the chief, with a slight degree of skepticism in his voice. The hunter had been known to come up with all kinds of get-rich-quick schemes, including once a ponzi scheme that involved getting people to invest in different breeds of animals that could only be found by hunters in the forest. The hunter fancied himself some kind of futures trader of forest animals and made a good killing from the ponzi scheme to satisfy his speculations before the chief put a peremptory stop to it some months prior. The chief continued to fix him with a cold, calm stare, to which the hunter responded cheerily, “Oh, don’t look at me like that, Oga Chief. I have with me in this very sack a singing and guitar-playing tortoise that I want us to display to the whole village. Please ask the gong-gong beater to gather everyone together in the village square tomorrow at midday. Everyone should bring along a \$5 entry fee; it is not only the people in Accra that know how to chop dollars these days. We too we are globalized, and life is hard!”

The Chief agreed reluctantly, but insisted on one condition. If after three tries the hunter was not able to make the tortoise sing, he would be decapitated by the village executioner. The hunter gulped hard but stood steadfast. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “This is a miracle of miracles; you just wait and see.” The following day, the village square was fully packed nice and early. Word had spread fast, and everybody wanted to see this wonderful singing tortoise. The tortoise was placed on a small stool in the center of the square with his ukulele strung across his body. “Sing, Tortoise, sing!” commanded the hunter. Tortoise sat motionless. “Sing, Tortoise, sing,” bellowed the hunter, this time with beads of perspiration breaking out on his forehead.

Tortoise sat completely immobile like a statue. “Sing, Tortoise, sing!” said the hunter, this time in a voice that sounded very much like a hoarse squeak. Nothing. Again, no movement from the tortoise. The executioner promptly walked in, grabbed the hunter by the seat of his toga and dragged him off to his execution. The tortoise remained completely motionless until word was sent back that the hunter had lost his head. Only then did he start to sing:

“Asem mpe nipa, nipa na ɔpɛ asem
 Asem mpe nipa, nipa na ɔpɛ asem
 Asem mpe nipa, nipa na ɔpɛ asem”

He tilted gently from side to side as he sang in a most mellifluous but solemn voice. Translated into English, the tortoise’s refrain simply means: “Trouble does not come to look for man; it is man that goes out to look for trouble.” The moral of this story from my childhood is fairly straightforward, which, as the song says, is that it is often we humans who go out to look for trouble for ourselves, and not the other way round. This calls to mind a wise saw from one of the characters in Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* (2016): “The death that will kill a man starts off as an appetite.” In the tale of the singing tortoise, it was the hunter’s appetite for profit that ultimately proved fatal to him.

Now, as has been observed by many African folklorists, genres of orality on the continent such as folktales are often polysemic and tend to be not only composed of narrative elements but also will likely contain proverbs, songs, enigmas, and even direct commentaries on the contexts of narration (see Barber 1991; Yankah 1995; Okpewho 1992). Furthermore, each sub-genre nestled within the body of the larger oral story incorporates polysemy as an essential feature of its makeup. And the polysemous potential of both the folktale’s whole and its parts is carried forward into whatever new domains the subgenres are transferred into, thus also implying that the sentimental education inherent to oral storytelling is part of a lively zodiac of narrative possibilities at every level. In contexts of oral storytelling, the sub-genres of orality are incorporated in such a way as to captivate the audience’s attention and to keep them actively engaged in animating the story they are listening to. One good example of this polysemy is to be found in Amos Tutuola’s novellas *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (2016), in which every element of polysemy is incorporated into the stories from beginning to end. However, in the inherently propulsive and forward-driven character of Tutuola’s narratives, the polysemic elements serve to transpose an African orality-derived structure-of-feeling into what are essentially picaresque narratives that are structured around a quest motif. In other words, Tutuola’s picaresque narratives must be understood as the lively intertexts of African oral narratives and storytelling contexts, in spite of their written form. Given that in Achebe’s novels, orality makes itself felt primarily through his wide use of proverbs, his use of oral intertexts is quite different from Tutuola’s, and one might say, even narrower in terms of their overall polysemy. The intertext of oral storytelling is thus active rather than passive, even when

invoked within the written literary contexts of African novels that draw on this resource. However, African writers do not merely mimic the forms of orality available within their cultures; rather, they extend aspects of the process of sentimental education that derives from the oral folktale through a process of the strategic transformation of the oral resources for redeployment into the domain of writing (Quayson 1997). And yet, what I note as the polysemy of the oral folktale is not limited entirely to orality or even to African literature, but also gets re-articulated into urban rhetorical domains. Thus, when I was writing *Oxford Street, Accra* (2014), I came to realize that the many inscriptions to be found on trotro passenger lorries, on signwriting billboards, or simply scrawled rebelliously as graffiti on various public surfaces participated in the inherent polysemy of orality and oral genres.

Trotro Slogans and the Polysemy of Orality

As I note in the chapter on trotro inscriptions in *Oxford Street* (2014:129–58), the history of motorized transport in Accra reflects the production and circulation of a demotic expressive form. The introduction of motor vehicles into the country from the early part of the twentieth century was to radically alter the social landscape, with the development of new entrepreneurial and technical skills and the establishment of petrol stations, automotive workshops, and new companies of various sizes collectively creating a special social status for the motor vehicle. In addition, motorized transport also generated new forms of political mobilization and impacted upon the expansion and consolidation of the bureaucratic state apparatus.

After World War I, Ghana saw a large increase in the numbers of cheap and highly robust American Ford lorries. However, the introduction of Ford vehicles coincided with increasingly tense competition between British and American firms for dominance of the rapidly expanding global market, with Africa being a major factor in their calculations (Heap 1990; Hart 2016; Simms-Greene 2017; Gewald et al. 2009). It was with the end of World War II and the introduction of Bedford lorries by the British into Ghana and the rest of their West African colonies that a decisive shift began to take place in the cultural symbolism of the motorized vehicle. By the late 1950s, the motor vehicle had already become a key emblem of modernization and was featured in various ways in newspaper advertising campaigns to publicize items as varied as shoes, vodka, toothpaste, bicycles, and airline travel. Moving on in life was connected to all these products, but overdetermining every element of progressive modernity was access to or ownership of good, motorized transport (Reynolds 2008).

After World War II, the British imported the chassis of Bedford lorries, which were then customized locally for carrying either passengers or freight. This often entailed raising a wooden frame up on the lorry chassis. As a means of decorating the wooden bodies of the first imported Bedford trucks which came to be called “mammy lorries,” their enterprising owners began to paint them with motifs from folk narratives and to festoon them with language, in

effect making the lorries billboards expressing the complex cultural significations that had progressively accrued to motorized transport since its first introduction. The painting of folktale motifs such as mermaids and *sasabon-sam* (folktale devils) on Ghana's lorries was gradually replaced by the late 1970s exclusively with writing. It is not clear exactly why this happened, but it may have been due to the increasing cost of wood paint for painting the folktale motifs and also the fact that increasing education among the population also enforced a greater attachment to written language as opposed to the folktale images in festooning these mammy lorries.⁴ The sayings to be found on the bodies of the lorries in Accra were eclectic and of varied inspiration, but their legacy was to proliferate sometimes cryptic and often wry gnomic observations as a permanent visible feature of the urbanscape, whether this was through the mobile surfaces provided by the lorries, or, as became increasingly common, transferred to other surfaces such as makeshift sign-writing billboards and graffiti inscribed on barber shops, hairdressing salons, local chop bars, and even on people's houses. Christianity also magnified the process of urban inscription by providing an endless source of inspiration from sacred scripture and, along with Islam, ensured that the character of such urban inscription was never to remain entirely secular. All this produced a fascinating discourse ecology of sayings, some drawn from folktales, and others from popular culture, schoolbooks, and even international global advertising.

The polysemy of oral genres, once transferred to the written scripts of trotro slogans, also raises implications for the status of the English language within Accra's multilingual urban environment. The nature of the multilingual environment of a place like Accra means that the writing that we see across the urban landscape is the product of various translational transactions taking place between different languages as well as extending the inherently polysemous genres of orality. Even when the slogan on a lorry is in English, what we see does not efface local language sources or their cultural modalities. And even when a slogan is a translation from one of Accra's several local languages, the translation that takes place in an urban multilingual context fundamentally works to estrange the English-language text, thus deterritorializing its status in relation to the other languages with which it is obliged to interact.⁵

Take the following trotro slogans, for example, as seen in the examples in the Appendix:

“Barack” (Figure 1), “Lumumba” (Figure 2), “If You See Me, Tear Your Face” (Figure 3), and “In Trust We God” (Figure 4). The slogans about Barack and Lumumba are self-explanatory and provide good examples of political trotro slogans that have been commonplace in Accra’s urban landscape since independence in the late 1950s. The other two are more complicated.

“If You See Me, Tear Your Face” is especially fascinating, but for entirely different sociological reasons. To start with, it is grammatically correct yet idiomatically confusing. The slogan is, in fact, the direct translation from the Akan saying: “Wo ho mi a, te wo anim,” with the source of confusion here

residing in the word “te” which can mean both to open one’s face, as in to smile and be pleasant, but also to tear, as in tearing a paper into pieces. And so, the slogan simply means “Smile When You See Me,” except that it has used the false sense of “te” rather than what would be the idiomatically correct version. The trick in the slogan, however, is that if you are not aware of the Akan-language background to it, you will completely miss the fact that this slogan is a poke in the eye of educated monolinguals or those who see things primarily in English. This would of course include foreigners to the city. For what the slogan is really saying is that its English language surface is actually entailed in an Akan latent content that rises up to convert the textual surface of the slogan away from any principles of English correctness we might apply in trying to understand it. In other words, there is a subtle struggle between Akan and English playing out on the surface of this slogan that requires a rapid oscillation between the two languages for the slogan’s comprehension. This feature of slogans that seem to be idiomatically unsettled and yet are really challenging the unstated dominance of the English language is entirely commonplace in Accra’s urban landscape and sometimes migrates into other media of communication as well. The title of Kwasi Opoku Akyeampong’s satirical column “Shoes are Repairing Here” that ran in the *Daily Graphic* newspaper for a few years in the 1980s was taken from a shoemaker’s signboard and serves to capture the same tantalizing combination of seeming idiomatic confusion and the hint of deeper meanings that we find in trotro slogans.

The “In Trust We God” slogan is also quite fascinating, but this time the humor does not come from any latent subtext of any local language, but rather from the fact that the slogan is playing with the discourse of evangelical Christianity that is now commonplace in many urban settings. Again, we may conclude in our ignorance that the slogan’s writer is simply grammatically challenged. But given the fact that many of the slogan writers have at least a minimum of basic education, I prefer to read the “mistake” as entirely deliberate. It seems to me to be asserting that “God perfectly understands what I am saying, even though you skeptics and naysayers may be thinking otherwise, and that is why I trust Him, and not any of you losers.” But this slogan may also be playing with the discourse of materialism that has been richly encapsulated in the ubiquitous American dollar, commonplace as the preferred currency in large transactions in Accra (such as buying property, for example), since at least the late 1990s following the liberalization of the economy under pressure from the IMF in the previous decade. As anyone familiar with the American currency will know, the words “In God We Trust” appears above an image of the White House on one side of the dollar note in every denomination. Is the trotro slogan, then, suggesting that the Americans have got things the wrong way around, even in their much-vaunted democracy, and that Africans ought to beware of adopting their ways unthinkingly? Or is the slogan simply a clever poke at the discourse of local evangelical Christianity which seems to have converted God into the purveyor of material satisfactions, especially favored if bearing the imprint of America? There is no real way of knowing for certain the real import of “In Trust We God,” but the

fact that the slogan leaves all these and other possibilities open is a mark of its inherent polysemy.

What we find in Accra's trotro slogans is that within a multilingual context suffused by orality, the English language is itself required to struggle for its place. Unlike what we find in formal government contexts or in African classrooms, in the urban public commons the place of the English language or any other Europhone language is not guaranteed in its dominance but is always subject to challenges from other languages. "Look Well to See Well," as another slogan puts it, which is itself a contraction of a much longer saying translated from Akan: "If you do not look properly, you will not see properly," or, better still, "The World is a Dark Place." (And the story is told of an old man in one of Ghana's villages who went around with a lighted kerosene lantern with him everywhere at all times of day and night. When pressed by younger folk in the village, he would invoke this same proverb and insist that it ought to be taken literally if its meaning were to be properly understood). This struggle between languages is entirely appropriate to the interpretation of trotro slogans in general, since their surfaces often conceal quite complicated polysemous and multilingual processes.

Vital Immediacy and Social Media

I want to set the implications of the polysemy of the trotro slogans aside for now and return instead to the ways in which both oral and written stories provide us with forms of sentimental education. One of the things shared by the folktales and the books from childhood I was exposed to is that they elicited from me a form of identification with the characters in them, both near and far. When I heard tell of the wily Kwaku Ananse, the trickster spider of Akan folktales and of Ijapa the Tortoise from the Yoruba tradition, or I read Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, or Rosemary Sutcliffe's *The Sword and the Stone*, or Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, what equally came alive to my mind in each instance was the diversity of expressive universes that were open to my young imagination. The identification with the woes and tribulations of fictional characters has continued throughout my long professional engagement with literature from different parts of the world, from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *100 Years of Solitude* to Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*; from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to the poetry of Kamau Brathwaite, and from the theatre of Wole Soyinka to the tragedies of the Greeks and Shakespeare. Some of you may already have seen my discussions of different kinds of literary works in "Critic.Reading.Writing," the YouTube channel I started in June 2020 deploying literature for the discussion of various aspects of culture, politics, and society from a diverse range of interdisciplinary perspectives.⁶

I have also wondered for a while now whether it might be desirable to trace the long genealogy of identification with the lives of others from the folktale to the theatre and the novel right through to the ways in which such identification is enacted via the various social media platforms many of us

engage with today on an almost daily basis. This would have to be a comprehensive account that encompasses the variant ways in which these different oral, written, and social media discourses instigate forms of identification with their content through the structure, pacing, and rhythms of their stories and the participants' objectives in telling them. A brief sketch of such a research project would have to note in very simple terms that an orally related folk or fairy tale elicits a mode of identification with its protagonists primarily on the basis of what, following Abiola Irele and with the story of the singing tortoise still fresh in our minds, we might describe as the vital immediacy of orality (Irele 2001:23–38). Orality in Africa is not just a mode of speech different from writing, but undergirds an entire way of life at the core of which are modes of storytelling, not only in terms of whole stories but also in their subgenres of proverbs, songs, puzzles, and even sudden commentaries on the context of the storytelling itself, as noted earlier. More importantly, the traditional aesthetic forms that abound in Africa impact upon everyday environments as well as in more ritual contexts. Thus, for Irele the proverb, for example, opens up the “possibilities for mental processes and even cognitive orientation” and “represents a compaction of reflected experience [that] functions as a kind of minimalism of thought” (Irele 2001:32). Nevertheless, we should not understand vital immediacy to be inherently exclusive only to modes of oral storytelling, since all forms of music and even dance also transpose modes of vital immediacy into different formats and contexts. At any rate, after the oral folktale the novel was to generate a new process of identification for the reader, this time severed from the vital immediacy of oral contexts, yet no less profound in its implications for emotional identification.

Unlike oral storytelling, the novel installed modes of silent privacy into our engagement with stories, and in this manner replaced the vital immediacy of oral storytelling with different forms that allowed potential identification with the lives of others. While privacy and silent reading are the novel's main forms of engagement, a fertile attentiveness is also central to the means by which readers identify with the characters' tribulations and the conditions in which these are expressed. The novel's sentimental education implicates the matters of genre as much as those of language. Furthermore, as Margaret Cohen (2002) tells us, standard accounts of the novel of sentimental education that trace it to nineteenth-century French male writers such as Balzac and Stendhal ignore that this represents a “hostile takeover” of the prestigious sentimental practice of the novel, which was undertaken especially by women in the period. For Doris Sommer (2004), on the other hand, the sentimental value of the novel cannot be divorced from its bilingualism and indeed multiculturalism, since it is the encounter with otherness that jumps us out of the standard circuits of what we consider to be normal and into an appreciation of the worlds of others. Thus, both Cohen and Sommer remind us that gender and race also inflect the ways in which the novel does its work of sentimental education. We should also add that the novel must be credited with generating a new form of “interlocutory head space,” that is to say, the

process by which readers proceed to ruminate inside their own heads about the characters and situations they are reading about. The stronger the mental rumination generated by a given novel, the stronger the impulse to tell someone else about what you are reading. It is almost compulsive, and I think may be said to be a universal quality of reading any literature that fully engages our attention. It is almost, one might say, like falling in love or winning the lottery.

That the hero/heroine within the novel is composed of words and as such is in a sense aligned to other word-created dimensions of the text (such as metaphors, the sense of space and time, and of ethical dispositions) also means that the characters and the language with which they are described provide the syncing mechanism for us to be processually aligned with an entirely different universe of significance from our own in the lives of the fictional characters. The ways in which the novel generates rumination differs fundamentally from the ways in which the oral folktale or the theatre does this. In both oral storytelling and theater, the domain of the story is mediated through the embodied presence of the storyteller or actor, and it is the persuasiveness of this embodied presence in addition to the other components of the story that produces our sense of attachment or identification with the characters and situations being represented. The novel necessarily does away with this embodied mediation, relying exclusively on how it captures and retains the quality of our attention through its textual devices.

From the public screening of ten of the Lumiere brothers' short films in Paris in 1895, cinema came to interpose itself into the domain of how we identify with characters unlike ourselves, thus supplementing and also taking in new directions what was evident in the folktale and in the novel. The movie's combination of language and moving images served to re-transcribe the contexts of vital immediacy into ever-changing representational protocols. The early era of the movie was soon obliged to contend with public television broadcasting, which after the Second World War added a fundamentally new dimension to our modes of identification in the forms of serialized and continually evolving stories. If you think back to the early era of soap operas beginning in the 1960s, for example, it is easy to see how such programs encouraged viewers to identify with the lives of persons they thought to be much like themselves and to return repeatedly to the television to watch how their destinies might unfold. In fact, we may even say that the TV soap operas generated characters more similar to the ordinary viewer than those characters in the classic nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century novels. One strand of such novels that I have had a chance to discuss on "Critic.Reading.Writing" is the masculine adventure narrative that was commonplace in the nineteenth century until Joseph Conrad upturned it with his dark story of *The Heart of Darkness* set in the Congo. Starting with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), R.L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883), H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), as well as Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) and the novellas of A.G. Henty, among various others, young European boys and men were depicted in different parts of the Empire

doing all manner of things, including pacifying the natives and attempting to reveal the ways of God to them. Many of these novels were blockbusters when they were first published, with some running into several editions and selling 100,000 copies each. They were frequently given out as presents to young boys and were a major popular supplement to what was to be found in the works of Jane Austen, George Eliot, Arthur Conan Doyle, and various other novelists of the period.⁷

The early television soap opera from the 1960s instead placed before viewers the fragmentary life narratives of different characters in everyday contexts facing mundane yet by the same token also momentous life choices, just like those faced by the multitude of viewers themselves. That the plots of soap operas were relayed day-by-day, or week-by-week, or in whatever cycle of predictable regularity was enjoined for television ensured that viewers of soap operas were being encouraged to imaginatively identify with the vicissitudes of the characters in such soaps according to a rhythmic cycle that allowed the identification to punctuate the viewers' ordinary everyday lives and thus establish a comforting alternative to a real world that seemed somewhat askew. Television soaps have also been a great way of generating conversations around the workplace water cooler and thus an immediate source of bonding rituals through the sharing of televisual stories. A great cinematic validation of the changing nature of identification provided by the cinema and the television in both form and content can be found in *The Truman Show* (1998), which I think has not been adequately scrutinized for what it sought to express about audience identification with characters in soap operas by the end of the twentieth century. That soaps such as *Coronation Street*, *Dynasty*, *East Enders*, and *Home and Away* first reached markets well outside their original viewerships in America, Britain, and Australia and then spawned variants in the telenovelas of Latin America did not alter the efficacy of audience identifications that was central to the soap opera's success. And the era of Covid lockdown has also helped to proliferate different shows that have now become standard subjects of identification and discussion: *The Bridgertons*, *The Queen's Gambit*, *Tiger King*, and *Indian Matchmaking* are just a few of those that have made headlines in 2020.

Then came reality TV, which exploded in popularity beginning in the 1990s. Competition-based reality TV shows, in which one competitor is eliminated per episode or where there is a panel of judges, make for especially strong forms of viewer identification. Unlike the soap opera or telenovela, the peculiar power of reality TV is that irrespective of the content and the format (*Survivor*, *America's Got Talent*, *X Factor*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, *Blind Date*, *Greatest Losers*, *Big Brother*, *The Great British Bake Off*, etc.) they are first and last gladiatorial contests. The mode of audience identification with the characters in the gladiatorial contest is arguably different from what pertains to the soap opera, but it essentially requires that the viewers want someone to fail so another person of their own identification succeeds. But you can also switch identification from a winner-turned-loser to a loser who suddenly looks like a winner. That there

is no bloodshed or death, unlike what obtained in the era of the Romans or indeed of Spanish bullfighting, does not alter the essentially gladiatorial character of today's reality TV.

And now we come to social media. Facebook. And Twitter. And Instagram. And Tik Tok. But I want to stick with Facebook and Instagram, since it looks to me as if these are the two platforms that have had the greatest and continuing impact on youth identification in Africa or at least in Ghana. The first significant mark of Facebook is the integration of various multimodal platforms which allow people to combine text, still photos, and moving images, as well as links to other pages, pieces of information, and so on for the curation and constant reproduction of their self-fashioned identities. Instagram is also very important because it has made it possible for Africans and Black people all over the world to generate and circulate new images of what they consider to be beautiful. Instagram influencers such as Senegalese Amy Sall, Ghanaian Bozoma St. John, Nigerians Asiyami Gold and Onyi Moss, and French-Cameroonian Frédérique Harrell have given us some of the most amazing images of Black bodies and Black environments that now challenge the standard images of Western beauty that have dominated the fashion industry for decades. There is still some distance to go for the Black body to be taken as a universal standard of beauty, but what we now find on Instagram is a real possibility for identification with the idea of Black beauty. It is because of the fact that people no longer have to necessarily identify with fictional others in folktales, novels, films, or television, but that they have all the multimodal tools at their own disposal for inserting themselves into the circuits of spectatorship for others to look at them that social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are of such profound significance for thinking about modes of viewer identification. To be sure, what we see in Facebook and Instagram is a different kind of sentimental education. This is so because both platforms tend to highlight the spectacular in terms of the carefully self-curated image and storylines that are put into circulation by individuals. But the fact that people can rack up hundreds of thousands of followers means at the minimum that they have created a new tribe of individuals who identify with their life stories, no matter how in the end these are fragmentary and indeed utterly fabricated.

In many respects, the multimodality of social media platforms and the opportunities to shuttle between text, photograph, moving image, and even links to other sources of information mean that they mimic the polysemy inherent in oral genres that I spoke of earlier. In other words, what I want to suggest here is that the multimodality of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram must be studied alongside the polysemy of oral genres as essential sources of comparison in terms of structure, contexture, and scalability. In previous work, I have used the term "contexture" to denote the ways in which context is texturized such as to generate attention in and of itself rather than being simply the background against which the human drama is played out (see Quayson 2003:xi–xxxix). It is true, of course, that social media depends on particular algorithms to classify items on one's feed, and thus to

ensure that one is confirmed in an enclave of shared tastes and biases with family and friends, but I think that these algorithms are also a means of mediating identification with others. Here, I want to suggest the value of thinking about the polysemy of orality in close relation to the algorithmic theory that lies behind the multimodal social media platforms we are familiar with. We might then find that the algorithmic protocols that generate the instantaneous relay effect of social media and internet platforms invoke some deep structural dimensions similar to those of polysemous orality. That at the click of a button you can access multiple image and data sources that allow you to move rapidly between locations on the internet means that anything that you see is automatically entailed in a lively hinterland of connections and shifting relations. Robert Cover's description of the concept of hypertext in the early days of the world wide web in 1992 bears recalling in this context:

"Hypertext" is not a system but a generic term, coined a quarter of a century ago by a computer populist named Ted Nelson to describe the writing done in the nonlinear or nonsequential space made possible by the computer. Moreover, unlike print text, hypertext provides multiple paths between text segments, now often called "lexias" in a borrowing from the pre-hypertextual but prescient Roland Barthes. With its webs of linked lexias, its networks of alternate routes (as opposed to print's fixed unidirectional page-turning) hypertext presents a radically divergent technology, interactive and polyvocal, favoring a plurality of discourses over definitive utterance and freeing the reader from domination by the author. Hypertext reader and writer are said to become co-learners or co-writers, as it were, fellow-travelers in the mapping and remapping of textual (and visual, kinetic and aural) components, not all of which are provided by what used to be called the author.

Note what Cover says here about the opportunities for co-creativity between the hypertext reader and writers, something that is, of course, directly relevant to the co-constitutive forms of expressive immediacy commonplace in contexts of oral storytelling (see also Landow 2006). Something of the interrelated connections among lexias appears also to be relevant to understanding the different forms and genres of orality as these are interconnected within specific expressive environments, whether within storytelling contexts or on the surface of trotro slogans, as we noted earlier. Unlike the principle of instantaneity that governs our access to material on the internet, however, orality is governed by the rhythm of slow time for connecting the various polysemous features at different scales of signification. And yet, the structural principle of oscillation between a node of vital immediacy and a charged background of significatory relays is shared across both orality and the internet, expressed most insistently in social media platforms where we go to "meet and interact" with others. As Ainehi Edoro-Glines (2022) has adroitly noted, Facebook in particular cultivates the idea of friendship as part of the strategic construction of its platform, thus also instigating forms of identification with its communities.

My hunch is that if they are compared correctly, we may find that folktales and other resources of orality, whether from Africa or elsewhere, have something to teach us about how to understand the multi-referential power of social media. For social media do not banish orality but rather invoke its structural pathways to form the routes of social interaction. And by such a deep understanding of the polysemic logic of orality we as Africans might be able to devise our own and distinctive platforms of identification, even within the space of social media and the internet. It might be a forlorn hope, but we must at least pose it as a possibility to help focus our minds on a new and interdisciplinary research agenda.

If the journey I have shared about my own formation from immersion in the oral folktale, the novel, the movie, and television and on to today's social media has anything to teach us, it is that, at least to my mind, there are no territorial divisions when it comes to stories and their telling, but that Story is Its Own Kingdom. Stories are the social currency of our everyday lives, and what we need are more stories, not fewer. The more diverse stories we have and in as many forms and media as possible, the more we can guarantee that our sentimental education is not hijacked by the narrow-minded purveyors of false reality that try to pass it off as truth. This is especially crucial in a year such as 2020, where much has happened to shock us, but from which we have also gathered valuable insights for the future.

Thank you very much!

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Notes

1. "Lenny Kravitz Healing – Healing from His Past Through "Let Love Rule", The Daily Distancing Show with Trevor Noah, November 11, 2020; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXS2mfkzE4A&ab_channel=TheDailyShowwithTrevorNoah; last accessed February 12, 2021.
2. Onyankopon is one of the Akan names for God.
3. For further reflections on the scene of suffering and the contamination of witness-bearing communities, see my "On Postcolonial Suffering: George Floyd and the Scene of Contamination," (Quayson 2021). We should also note that police brutality during the pandemic has also been highlighted in many parts of Africa, culminating in the demonstrations against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) in Nigeria in October 2020 and the brutal violence against the unarmed demonstrators that drew condemnation from many parts of the world.
4. In terms of worsening economic realities, it can be argued that an important threshold was reached during the first global energy crisis following the Arab-Israeli War in 1973, when OPEC decided to weaponize oil prices as a way of prosecuting their side of the war. The effect on African economies was immediate and disastrous, and represented the first set of major economic crises that had to be navigated following Independence from the late 1950s and 1960s. Ghana was not exempt from any of these.

5. Because it is the capital city, several Ghanaian languages are readily found on the streets of Accra. Apart from the now ubiquitous Pidgin English, Ga, Akan (especially in its dialectal variants of Twi, Fanti, and Akwapim), as well as Hausa and Ewe are widely spoken, with people, especially traders, often being fluently multilingual in at least three languages, sometimes including English itself. On the question of deterritorialization with respect to literary writing, see Gilles Delueze and Félix Guattari ([1986](#)). My argument, however, is that there is a continual process of deterritorialization of the hitherto colonial Europhone languages being played out on the streets of Africa's cities.
6. Quayson [2020a](#).
7. Quayson [2020b](#).

APPENDIX

ASA Presidential Lecture: Images

Figure 1. Trotro inscription: “Barack,” photo credit the author.



Figure 2. Trotro inscription, "Real Lumumba," photo credit the author.



Figure 3. Trotro inscription, "If You See Me, Tear Your Face," photo credit the author.



Figure 4. Trotro inscription, "In Trust We God," photo credit the author.

