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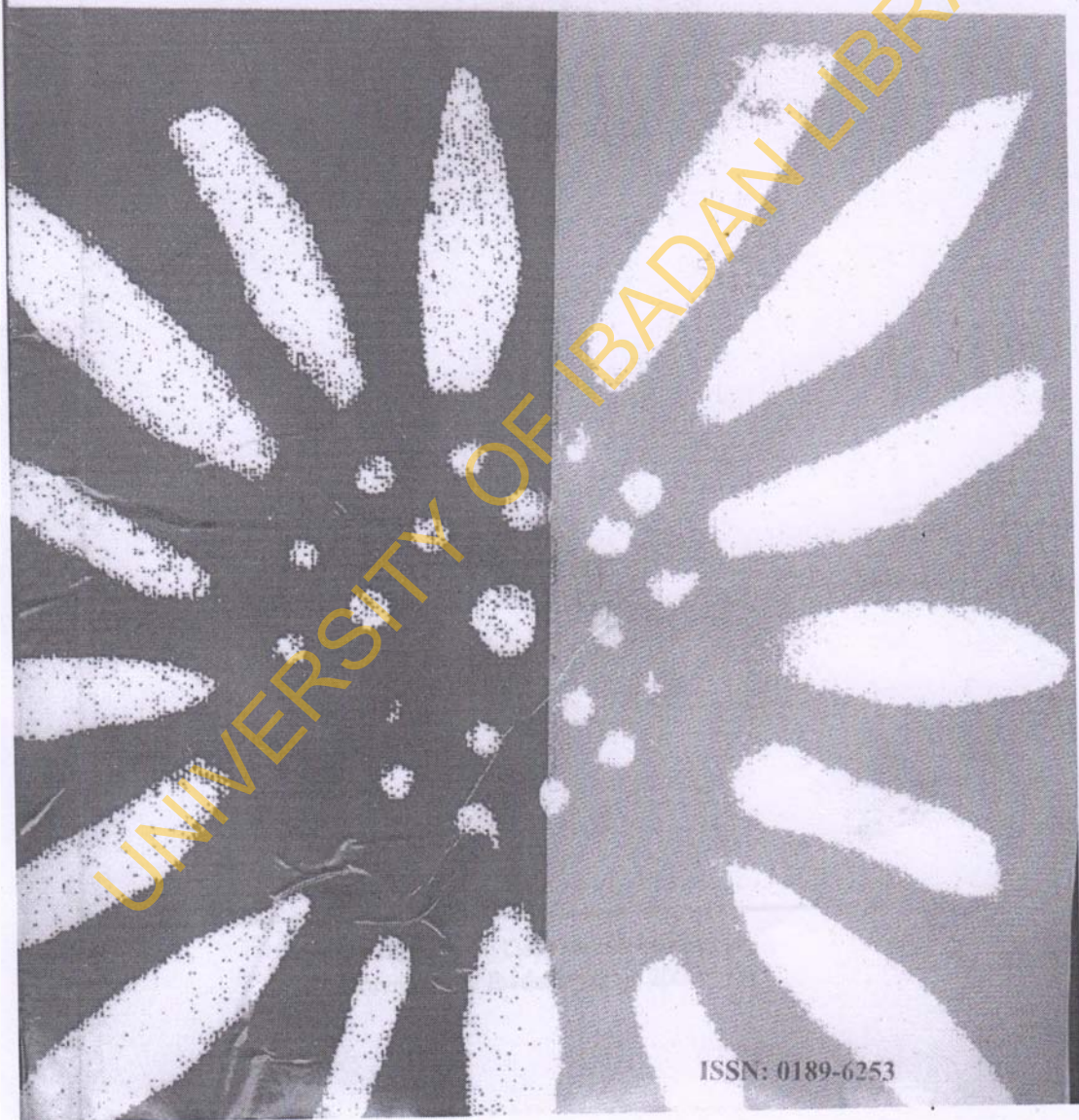
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For Contributors

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Contents

That Mutant Called "Text"

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Abstract

Exploring emergent dimensions of the "text" in the new media is the primary concern of this paper. The continually changing context of cultural, artistic, aesthetic, and literary production makes it imperative to re-examine traditional concept of (the) text (oral and written), and its mutations. More precisely, orality in contemporary Africanist scholarship is a discursive formation; it is a site of ideological struggle for self-representation and self-reinscribing in contesting foisted privileging norms and narratives. The paper draws attention to those normative assumptions of what constitute literature and the theoretical guide that has engendered the shaping of the discipline. In this case, the enquiry deepens further by examining some existing undercurrent layers of written literature in oral narrative and performance, and the consequent transpositions that mediate it through the new media made possible by the electronic technology.

Introduction

An exercise in the *conceptual revision* of the notion of the text would benefit from two critical voices in the debate: Houston A. Baker (1993) and Stanley Fish (1980). Houston Baker warns that in engaging the performance text we need a theoretical approach that is capable of an "improvisational flexibility and a historicizing of form that are not always characteristic of academic responses to popular cultural forms"(34). On his part, Stanley Fish suggests that the text can be far more unstable than we assume, noting further that it is not so much a case of indeterminacy or undecidability but of a "determinacy and decidability that do not always have the same shape and that can, and in this do, change" (306). Besides examining the discursive formations of the 'text' and modes of 'textuality', it should also be noted that the performance text can itself be a signifying mode of post-colonial counter-discourse and, as such, a cultural narrative nested in *Otherness*.

Ubiquity of (the) Text:

In grappling with the concept of the "text," Walter Ong (1999) makes a distinction between natural language and computer language, noting that while the 'grammar' of the former is first used and then abstracted, the latter is first stated and used thereafter (7). Besides, when human beings communicate, they gesture towards a multimedia 'accent' by

virtue of using the senses of touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing. This calls attention to the fact that a deep sense of language requires us to acknowledge how paramount articulated sound is, and that "thought itself relates in an altogether special way to sound" (7), even when writing does, indeed, enlarge language's potentiality and in the process converts some dialects into 'grapholects'. By grapholect Ong implies a "transdialectal language formed by deep commitment to writing" (8).

Another source of the text-literacy conflation is traceable in western discourse to the art of techě rhětorikě, 'speech art' which referred to "oral speaking, even though as a reflective, organised 'art' or science" such that in Aristotles's "Art of Rhetoric—rhetoric was and had to be a product of writing" (9). And even with Ong, we come to an appreciation of the word 'text' in a dual sense of the written, and that meant to be studied when he notes of classical practices: "...even orally composed speeches were studied not as speeches but as written texts," (10) and later, "such written compositions enforced attention to texts even more, for truly written compositions came into being as texts only, even though many of them were commonly listened to rather than silently read..." (10) Eric Havelock (1986), also re-echoed this problematic with the query: "Can a text speak?" (44).

With Ong one notices a definite worry on how best to capture oral imaginative expressions, for he even toys with the concept of the 'preliterate' but buckles at the danger that this may be used in an unreflecting manner such as to be thought of as an anachronistic of a secondary modelling system (13). He finally settles for the term "text" which he thinks may be more appropriate to describe the oral utterance, especially, that its root meaning connotes "to weave". This is close to the Greek *rhapsōiden*, which suggests "to stitch songs together" (13). The argument here is that this would be less misleading than the concept of literature which refers to letters.

Northrop Frye (1957) had in *The Anatomy of Criticism* proposed for all purely oral art 'epos', which has "the same Proto-Indo-European root, *wekw* -, as the Latin word *vox* and this is grounded firmly in the vocal, the oral" (Ong, 1999:13) The term "verbal text" is used by Ong when referring to Japanese, Chinese and Korean attempts at visual articulation of sound-meaning. (18)

The debate of naming is, undoubtedly, deeply ideological. It is instructive to note, however, that not all opposition to the use of the term literature for pre-literate verbal forms have necessarily been inspired by a desire to undermine the value of creative oral productions. The

profoundness of orally-based creativity can sometimes lead to this dilemma. Ong's sarcasm against 'literate' societies is very apposite here:

> It is demoralizing to remind oneself that there is no dictionary in the mind, that lexicographical apparatus is a very late accretion to language as language, that all languages have elaborate grammars with no help from writing at all, and that outside of relatively high-technology cultures most users of languages have always got along pretty well without any visual transformations whatsoever of vocal sound. (14)

While being mindful of the different strands of the debate, the choice of the use of the term text in this study derives, primarily, from a sense of its moorings from an oral state to its present constitution, even in its literate rendition. For one, the final constitutive element of what has come to be identified as literature is clustered around the body of that form—whether oral or written—identifiable in 'literariness', and this is hardly dependent, most often, on the mode of communicative experience. It draws, and even derives from social life while, at the same time, shaped by the communicative experience of its given age. As a concluding aside, a sense of irony, the simile, or metaphor derives, primarily, from articulation in language, irrespective of the mode or medium of delivery.

The Semiotic and the Contextual

But beyond this formal use of 'text', the paper proposes to extend the term to other discursive practices in its sense of a signifying practice that can accommodate other extra-verbal modes of aesthetic communication. Following up closely on this, Meki Nwezi *et. al.* (*RIAL*, 2001), propose the concept "lingual text in music as song lyrics or recitative" (91), in describing the lingual fundamentals of African drum music. The authors persuasively demonstrate how the text in African music can be encountered in the following ways:

i.) as a vocal processing of language—song;
ii.) as instrumental processing of language—metasong ;
iii.) as choreographic processing of language—the visual poetry of dance as metaphor;
iv.) as symbolic documentation of cultural statements—the extramusical meaning of special music instruments and musical art costume. (91)

In a similar treatment of the Yoruba *Oriki* as literary text, Karin Barber (1991) besides noting of the form as a variant of praise poetry also observes that *Oriki* is "radically unlike the kind of 'literary text' which critics educated in the mainstream Euro-American literary tradition are used to dealing with."(21) The most immediate repercussion of this is that there is a paucity of scholarly work on this form and its mode of textuality. Even when such texts are fluid and emergent, Barber argues that their narratives nonetheless have discernible internal logic.

Barber correctly locates the source of the confusion in treating oral narratives like *Oriki* as text in the western formal tradition of writing as due to the presumption of "fixity, visible form" and "a material existence detached from both author and reader." (24) The strong influence of critical traditions such as New Criticism of the first half of the last century also somewhat strengthened this orientation. Yet, there is the irony of critical traditions such as post-structuralism and deconstruction strengthening the features of orality, only that they were spawned from a critique of "writing". Applied to oral literature, they also seem to disempower agency, the critical element in enthroning the text.

Furthering the discourse, and responding to the charge of wilful interpretation of the 'text' as an attitude of the 'Newreader', Stanley Fish (1980), rebuts that although the 'text' may be determinate but only as a transient phenomenon because its normative feature is constantly in a flux that is at best realized by the performance of an interpretive community. What Fish is suggesting here is close (not necessarily in the nuances of its final resolution) to the contextual analysis of performance theory which is predicated on the formulation that an uttered sound or word of a linguistic system only come to mean "because the words are heard as already embedded in a context that they have a meaning..."(309) He provides features of this non-context-free communicative mode:

> (i) communication does occur, despite the absence of an independent and context-free system of meanings, that (ii) those who participate in this communication do so confidently rather than provisionally (they are not relativists), and that (iii) while their confidence has its source in a set of beliefs, those beliefs are not individual-specific or idiosyncratic but communal and conventional (they are not sophists). (321).

Even here we can already sense an incipient Barthesian formulation that challenges a presumed trans-historical 'naturalness' of language, while in

the same breath proposing a system of convention or code for articulating the meaning of a text. Roland Barthes (1967), in *Writing Degree Zero*, mutes the idea that "In actual fact, clarity is a purely rhetorical attribute, not a quality of language in general which is possible at all times and all places."(6)

With this it would seem that Barthes has further problematized the Saussurean conception of signifier-signified by introducing another mode of signification with implication on the 'code'. Frederick Jameson (1972), notes in this regard: "each literary work, above and beyond its own determinate content, also signifies literature in general...identifies itself for us as a literary product."(154) But Barthes' ultimate intention is at once a radical and an ideological revision of bourgeois trans-historicism and his attempt to empower subjectivity. To this extent in *S/Z* (1970), he opted for a role for the reader in literature and, by this far-sighted conclusion, foreshadowed the notion of the hypertext.

In reaction to the avant-garde style of the likes of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, Barthes proposed the concept of the 'writerly' text since the reader had been "left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text."(4) And in this new kind of text the reader can fill the ellipses and emboss her own reading/meaning, thereby escaping and challenging bourgeois containment based on the falsehood of fixity. It is in this same sense that he makes a distinction in, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), between *Plassir* (*Pleasure*) and *Jouissance* (*Bliss*), the latter having the quality of a responsorial engagement to which the writerly text invites us. Barthes pursues the argument:

> Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (14)

But we must turn to *S/Z* to learn the codes required to *read* and *write* in this five-feature Barthesian game of textual defamiliarization summarized as: i) The hermeneutic code; ii) The code of semes or signifiers; iii) The symbolic code; iv) The proairetic code; and, v) The 'cultural' code. This reading, based on Balzac's *Sarrasine*, has deep implication for the next exploration for the moment of 'ideal' textuality, given Barthes' classification of the reading units into some 251 lexias in

the mode of contemporary hypertext narrative—a mode that would appear native to many African traditional performance space.

Hypertext

The concept of 'hypertext' was itself coined by Theodor Nelson to describe the non-linear, non-sequential space made possible by the computer. Sven Birkets (1994) copiously cites a description of the term in a *New York Times Book Review* entitled, "The End of Books" (June 21, 1992), by Robert Coover thus:

> 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 pro-hypertextual but prescient Roland Barthes. With its web 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 travellers 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. (153)

Other authors have equally referenced this concept, and George Landow's (1997) entry into the debate, especially in relation to hypertext's interstices as the convergence of contemporary critical theory and technology, remains seminal.

Landow's sense of the hypertext dutifully acknowledges two critical voices: Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Landow observes certain commonalities in Barthes' (1974) 'ideal' textuality which Landow summarizes as; "text composed of blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails in an open-ended, perpetually unfinished textuality described by the terms *link, node, network, web,* and *path*" (Landow, 3) Barthes had earlier characterized this mode of text:

> In this text, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we

> gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be
> authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes ·
> extend *as far as the eye can reach*, they are indeterminable…the
> systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but
> their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of
> language. (5-6)

Michel Foucault (1976), would also in *The Archaeology of knowledge*
describe text in relation to network and links by suggesting that the
"frontiers of a book are never clear-cut" because "it is caught up in a
system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a
node within a network…network of references." (23)

Anticipating the potential misconception of this term, Landow makes
a distinction between hypertext as described here and other possible
forms of electronic textuality that can exist within hypertext without
necessarily being hypertext themselves. These include: graphic
representations of text, non-linear text, and, simulation. Landow does not
however make a distinction between hypertext and hypermedia to the
extent that he incorporates the latter in the notion of the text in hypertext
with additional data in sound image, animation and related forms.

So far, the notion of the hypertext has been based on the practice of
writing. It would seem like the critical elements of the hypertext mode
are present in the traditional festival performance setting; such a setting
shares such mutual features like non-linearity, non-sequentiality,
multivocality, and interactivity, in addition to the agency of the audience
which is not as active in the reader of the written and print text. Indeed,
applied to the average African performance context this formulation
would seem obvious enough, at least not as much a radical revision as
one finds in relation to the written text which seems to be the primary
concern of most hypertext scholars.

There is, also, ample evidence of the same features in a substantial
number of texts in modern African literature. Even when such a mode is
necessarily decontextualized unlike in a performance tradition, it
invariably echoes that central feature of orality that demonstrates
literature as text in situation. What has sometimes been considered the
limitation of oral narrative—its inhibited capacity for the sequential and
classificatory—is precisely what recommends its shared narrative texture
with the hypertext. Even the most 'readerly' fiction, in the strict
Barthesian sense, is incapable of escaping incipient hypertextuality for

two main reasons which this research proposes to describe as: one, the *texture of signification*; two, the *narrative ancestorial*.

In the first instance, the psychodynamics of signification is independent of the individual writer such that even his attempt to create a textual closure can elude her. The extended metaphor in which fiction thrives is basically referential, while the cadence of narration through features such as point of view, perspective, and character variation, to mention a few, can be quite challenging to linearity in textual sequence. While it cannot be denied that a medium of narration such as the print foists a sense of spatial closure seeming to lock the text within pages with a certain sense of cold finality, nonetheless through flashback, allusion, digression and other such narrative codes, the narrative process has always strived toward the flighty as a latent hyperlink to action, situation, character, time-space and event, no matter the contrasting situation. Even as plot's dutiful agent, this is *narrative in essence*—reaching back to its own sense of freedom—explicable only in our second hypothesis: the *narrative ancestorial*.

The sense of 'discovery' of the hypertext in print, with its consolidation in digital narrative is in itself informed by a disjuncture from narrative's moorings in orality or what shall be presently considered the archaeology of narrative, that is, narrative's beginnings. For one, primeval narrative is essentially multimedia and hypertextual, and fully ingested with the texture of non-linearity, non-sequentiality, multivocality, interactivity; yet, with a more profound sense of agency beyond what, sometimes, even contemporary digital hypertext can cope with. In the light of this, the research proposes to segment and characterize the different phases in relation to the hypertext as follows:

i.)   Pristine oral phase — Manifest Hypertext
ii.)   The age of writing — Phoenix or latent Hypertext
iii.)   The digital age — Emergent Hypertext

This, in a broad sense, represents a rough schema of the form that hypertext narrative has taken from the primeval, pristine oral phase through the age of writing to the present time (of writing in light). The research suggests that in the pristine oral phase the element of the hypertext was *in character* of text, while it seems to resurrect in the age of writing (with all the ambiguities implicit in fusing the different phases of that age; indeed, one which we still live in, in spite of the electronic age). Emergent hypertext merely attempts to reach back to the earliest phase, which Dasylva describes as moment of 'whole text', and this phase

continues to grapple with infusing the hypertext with all the senses (such as tactile, olfactory, 'feel', and 'mood') lost to the primeval age. The demonstration of incipient hypertext below draws, very briefly, from two slightly unfamiliar sources: the first is a sub-genre of oral narrative, while the second is from Niyi Osundare's (*Waiting Laughters*) poetry.

The Yoruba sub-genre of riddle, *àló àpámò*—as distinct from *àló àpagbè*—is the classic case in point of a narrative form that, apart from embodying all the earlier stated features of the hypertext, most empowers the subject, here constituted as the *Audience Co-Author* (A-C-A). This riddling game requires a member of the audience or a listener to decipher the code of the question always posed in symbolic-figurative association. What is significant here is the role of agency, represented in the subjectivity of the A-C-A but capable of redirecting the non-sequential narration. The A-C-A (*audience-reader*) here may, if nuanced in the encrypted posers, wrestle the narrative from the primary narrator (*performer-writer*), renders the latter castrate, and redirects the entire narrative transaction. But once the A-C-A assumes this status of primary narrator, it has automatically reconstituted subjectivity in an Other (the new audience), thereby triggering off opposition to his/her own discursive practice and this continual subversion continues...

On the second demonstration, evidence of phoenix hypertext is replete in Niyi Osundare's poetry, especially as captured in the second-order semiology of conceptual time in *Waiting Laughters*. Osundare here resorts to signifying through the use of typographic space calculated at inviting reader- (audience) response in the configured, sometimes blank, spaces created by the author in an attempt to approximate to the extra-linguistic mood inhered in oral performance poetry. This kinaesthetic narration attempts to capture the elusive and temporal sense of time as visually represented, in a tradition that goes back to the caesura, the figurate, and pattern poetry. Abiola Irele (2001) makes the point manifest in relation to African literature in his recent work, *The African Imagination*. In the bid to merge a universalist and a regionalist episteme, Irele suggests that literature does not only communicate a structure of feeling "but also reflects a climate of thought." (viii) But no sooner, he calls attention to layers of commonalities in the corpus of African literature, a need for which he hopes the critic can begin to acknowledge at the level of points of convergence of literary traditions in spite of the differences in language, conventions, and historical development. The critic is particularly mindful of an embedded counter-discursivity in post-colonial African literature, and the tendency among its writers and performers to testify to the central

issues of conflict and dilemmas involved in the tradition/modernity dialectic. (ix) This tendency, to say the least, has been most influenced by the discontinuity in the life of the colonial subject, and a certain subalternity of his status.

Conclusion

By and large, the paper has broadly outlined the diverse possibilities of textual enactment. Beyond this, it further suggests the 'futures' study potential of the text in the continually emerging modes and media, and the interstices of its overlaps in a tradition that takes its inspiration from pristine orality through the diverse contexts of scribal culture and the current electronic interface. In all this, the paper highlights the relationship between a communicative mode, no matter its subtlety, and the constitution of narrative subjectivity and its ironic empowerment.

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