EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

The Potentials and Pitfalls of the "Virtual Turn"

As the last two and a half years have made abundantly clear, we are ever more living in a world shaped by the virtual, so much so that we scholars can begin to consider ourselves deep in the midst of an epistemological and methodological "virtual turn." As part of this new focus on the virtual, African Studies scholars, together with our counterparts in other disciplines, have been talking through the new opportunities for knowledge production created by this expanding virtual world and have been developing innovative methodologies for creating and using new digital sources. A great deal of attention has been focused, and rightly so, on the broadening of research access that digitization can provide. It has indeed served to democratize the process of "doing" research, as scholars no longer necessarily need to go the sources, but rather the sources can more easily come to them.

Yet, even with all this attention to virtuality, social media—such an incredibly potent sociocultural/sociopolitical force—has received less consistent and less systematic scholarly focus, despite the tremendous potentials (and pitfalls) that it offers for the development of scholarship and of scholarly community. The "virtual turn" invites us to work with new ways of being and knowing, and at the most fundamental level, taking social media as a source base introduces new perspectives and fresh topics to African Studies. Across various social media platforms, scholars can follow the voices of ordinary people, which might not have otherwise been heard, *virtually* in real time. Social media platforms can function *virtually* as expansive archives, as significant repositories of discourse and imagery generated across all sectors of society. And social media can offer spaces for a new sort of ethnographic work where the researcher's "deep hanging out" (Geertz 1998) takes place *virtually* on Facebook, rather than in "the field."

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In all these cases, it is possible to analyze how social media operates both as a very contemporary "weapon of the weak" (Scott 1985), a tool of quotidian struggle and resistance deployed by marginalized individuals or groups, and as a central means through which those with power (and those aspiring to it) communicate. It can also be approached as a location of prolific cultural production, from the everyday to the extraordinary. Recent articles published in the *ASR*, for instance, clearly illustrate the potentials of utilizing social media as a source base to illuminate topics as diverse as African responses to Covid-19 (Patterson & Balogun 2021) and Sudanese women's activism (Ali 2019). Additionally, social media has figured as an important source in my own work, as Matthew Carotenuto and I drew extensively on Kenyan Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp as windows into how the *wananchi,* or ordinary Kenyan citizens, conceived of and debated Barack Obama's place in Kenya's political history, and as we traced the ways in which these debates influenced politics in both Kenya and the United States (Carotenuto & Luongo 2016).

In much the same way that "the archive" is both a space where information is located and an entity that can be "read," the utility of social media as a source base resides not only in the information that can be excavated from it, but also in what it can tell us about how people engage with information. Taking social media itself as an object of study shines light on the ways in which people compile, assess, and deploy information, and in turn, how the temporality and structure of various social media platforms shape people's ways of knowing and communicating, both on and off the internet. Here too, recent articles in the ASR have highlighted the work that social media as an entity does, and can be made to do, in contexts as diverse as the Sahel, where Matthew Kirwin, Lassane Ouedraogo, and Jason Warner show how the region has generated its own variety of "fake news" or "Afrancaux News" and what consequences this has for public opinion about French counterterrorism efforts in Mali (2022); or Zimbabwe, where Albert Chibuwe and Allen Munoriyarwa demonstrate how WhatsApp was crucial to disseminating humor during the Covid-19 lockdown, thus providing a society-wide coping mechanism (2021). The utility of social media can also be seen in Zimbabwe, where Susanna L. Sacks draws out the political and rhetorical work done by #ThisFlag in contesting the Mugabe regime and building national community (2019); and Guinea, where Clovis Bergère focuses on how Facebook and Twitter have become key sites of youth activism and addresses the implications this digital mobilization has for African youth politics more generally (2020).

At the same time that social media presents these sorts of ever-expanding opportunities for research, it also poses significant epistemological and methodological challenges. What makes social media so potentially rich as a source base is its ungoverned, freewheeling immediacy, its simultaneous anonymity and intimacy, and its near constant proliferation. Taken together, however, these elements also raise important, core questions about how to carry out research in virtual spaces: How much research is enough when the

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source base is unstable and evolving, or static, but without obvious boundaries? How can the researcher reliably pick and choose from among seemingly mushrooming sources? How should one effectively engage with voices that present as "authentic," but which cannot be authenticated? Simply put, in a virtual world, "sourcing" the sources can often be easier, but delimiting and evaluating them can often be harder.

The "virtual turn" also has important implications for the expansion of scholarly community. Professional interactions are increasingly taking place online, in spaces ranging from the highly structured environment of the online conference to the (often raucous) back-and-forth of social media. Such virtual interactions are proving especially critical to the growth of African Studies, because existing scholarly networks are typically far-flung, and geographic and institutional constraints have often impeded conversation and collaboration. Within this environment, social media has demonstrated its potential for broadening debate in a couple of key ways. First, in much the same way that social media as a source base incorporates the perspectives of people who might not otherwise be heard, social media as a communicative tool can dramatically expand the scope of debate by drawing together a much wider array of voices than is possible in more "traditional" fora. Second, it can break down the silos among different constituencies—scholars, citizens, practitioners, and policy-makers, among others—concerned with Africa. In sum, it offers a crucial, highly accessible arena to learn who is doing what in African Studies and to engage in conversations about it.

Nonetheless, as Sasha Newell and Katrien Pype have written in this journal, "The possibilities of the virtual should not be seen as exclusively positive" (2021:11). While it is true that social media platforms offer myriad spaces for inclusion and innovation, they are also something of a discursive Wild West, where a tendency to "shoot first and ask questions later" is common, and a certain lawlessness in discourse is not only widely accepted, but often encouraged. Countless recent examples show how the norms of social media can call the concept of "dialogue" itself into question. In the virtual world, interactions that begin as "dialogue" can easily descend into diatribe. Interlocutors can quickly become Others. Social media's simultaneous senses of urgency and remove can prompt people to eagerly express themselves in terms that they would not ordinarily employ elsewhere, either in "real life" or in professional settings, often with little or no consequences. Together, these twinned senses can create momentum that can escalate a debate into a controversy and that can contribute to a rhetorical culture in which a questioner purporting to ask for a reasoned response is often aiming to stoke an affective reaction.

Relatedly, social media can also invite the privileging of performativity over analysis. Its grounding in real time can reward style over substance, amplifying a pithy or provocative remark, (regardless of its accuracy or even its honesty), over an idea rooted in fact and analysis. It can also prompt the quick, uncritical acceptance of easy "expected" narratives; in the highly charged, emotive spaces of the virtual, people are generally not inclined to

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do the work of going back to the source. Engaging with social media requires a limited investment of time, but nonetheless it has such a capacity to generate instant, if fleeting, gratification, that when scholars try to move discussions begun on social media into other longer form and more mediated venues, few of the participants in the original social media stream follow along.

Because the scholarly processes that require the acknowledgement of dissenting voices do not apply in the spaces of social media, readers and writers can be at liberty to (cherry) pick and choose from among the perspectives that best conform to and support their own notions, while at the same time being able to reject, or to simply refuse to recognize, those that do not. Actual exchange can evaporate as people talk *at* each other or *across* each other rather than *with* each other. Overall, the ungovernability of social media is what makes it so potentially rich, but also so potentially perilous, for the development of both scholarship and scholarly community. As scholars, we have to take a hard look not only at what we want the "virtual turn" to do for us as individuals but also at what we can do *for*, rather than *to*, each other with the resources it provides.

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This September issue of the ASR is, if you'll pardon my Australianism, chock-o-block with stellar new research and analysis about historical and contemporary trends in Africa and African studies. We are fortunate to be able to share compelling new scholarship centered on Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, The Gambia, Zimbabwe, and Africa as a whole. This issue includes anthropology, architecture, feminist studies, law, history, political science, musicology, sociology, literary studies, and critical cultural studies, showcasing scholars active in Africa, Europe, and North America, including a number of emerging scholars in African studies.

Our issue begins with an essay by a graduate student. In "The Dilemma of Diasporic Africans: Adger Emerson Player and Anti-Americanism in Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana in 1964" [https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.54], Emmanuella Amoh narrates the remarkable history of an African American man who "rescued the U.S flag" from an anti-American mob in Accra. Amoh compares and contrasts the differing presentations of Player's action by Ghanaians and Americans to explore Pan-Africanism, racial solidarity, and ideas of neocolonialism. The incident reveals the complexity of relations between the Diaspora and Africa amid the context of ongoing debates about global Blackness.

The next pair of articles returns to a theme we have explored in previous issues, the relationship between heterosexism and homophobia in

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sub-Saharan Africa. In "Garçons Manqués and Femmes Fortes: Two Ambivalent Figures of Masculine Lesbianism in Women's Football in Cameroon" [https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.19], Basile Ndjio revisits anti-homosexuality laws from the 1960s, to explore how the Cameroon government endorsed heterosexualist ideologies that ultimately stigmatized and criminalized sexual and gender minorities. With a focus on the *garçons manqués*, Ndjio examines the pathologization of lesbian identity and its "political management" via football, insofar as "strong women" are celebrated as pivotal to global sporting ambitions and national pride.

Turning to Zimbabwe, Yolaine Frossard de Saugy's essay "'We Are Not Gays': Regime Preservation and the Politicization of Identity in Mugabe's Zimbabwe" [https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.55] revisits the notorious declaration of the late President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe to dissemble the carefully constructed narrative of hegemonic masculinity based on a mystique of national liberation. For Frossard de Saugy, Mugabe's tenacious hold on power was ultimately imperiled by mounting domestic challenges and the explicit questioning of prevailing homophobic narratives, notwithstanding his repeated attempts to belabor a national heteropatriarchy.

A second pair of articles addresses contemporary legal and economic developments in women's lives across the continent. Karmen Tornius's essay, "Staying with the Culture Struggle: The African Union and Eliminating Violence Against Women" [https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.68], turns our attention to efforts by the African Union to combat violence against women, with particular attention to the Maputo Protocol. While the Protocol refined the culture/violence nexus, post-implementation regional frameworks relapsed into culture-centered explanations. Tornius centers her analysis on the relationship between culture and gender discourses and their entanglement with colonialism, decolonization, African socialisms, and the advent of African feminisms.

In a Ghana case study, Ann Cassiman examines the daily lives of young female Muslim apprentices in the sewing shops of Accra's zongo communities. In "Stitching Womanhood in the Zongo: Seamstress Apprenticeship in Accra" [https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.59], Cassiman argues that the sewing workshop operates as a playground for self-experimentation that reshapes ideals of female respectability, self-making, and autonomy. What she describes as the "chrononormativity of apprenticeship and marriage" is disrupted when seamstress apprentices exert agency and suspend or hasten their marriages based on their self-perception of alternative futures.

A third pair of articles explores artistic representations of pressing national and regional debates. In "Forms of Interreligious Encounter in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction" [https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.78], Nathan Suhr-Sytsma examines examples of literary fiction for their portrayal of interreligious conflict and dialogue. Addressing the works and approaches of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Uwem Akpan, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, and E. E. Sule as social thinkers, he argues that Nigerian literary explorations of interreligious solidarity raise questions not only about the relationship

between text and lived reality but also about the making and crossing of religious boundaries.

Bonnie McConnell and Sheikh Omar Jallow's essay, "Climate Change Adaptation in The Gambia: The Role of Kanyeleng Communication and Performance" [https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.67], examines how traditional kanyeleng communicators have expanded their role as a result of climate change. The ethnographic research conducted by McConnell and Jallow shows that as kanyeleng performers, working as social mediators, disseminate information about climate change adaptation, they create the social conditions necessary for their audiences to hear and respond effectively to that information.

We continue our African Studies Keywords [https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2021.10] series with Nnamdi Elleh's "African Studies Keyword: Okà," [https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.87]. Elleh offers the Èkpèyè term *okà* as a tool with which to explore how the subject of "Architecture" and related professional practices colonizes building epistemes as exclusively European intellectual property. In African universities, Elleh asserts, architecture students, aware of this inadvertent colonial teaching, are calling for inclusive reformed curricula. Okà is an Èkpèyè multidimensional, organic, aesthetic, discursive approach to celebrations that offers a way toward an integrated architecture curriculum that abandons the ordering/othering distinctions between indigenous and modern built environment knowledge.

We conclude this print issue with three scholarly review essays: Damiano Matasci's "Decolonizing Education: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Challenges" [https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.71]; Emily Brownell's "An African Anthropocene" [https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.14]; and Rachel Herrmann's "On Cannibals" [https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.29]. The volume also features an excellent collection of book and film reviews, all of which are available online and accessible freely.

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