

## Digital Poetics, Machine Intelligence and the Everyday

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*As a culture, we are in the seemingly ineluctable process of handing over the digitization and indexing of our entire surviving published textual legacy to Google, in order for them to include that part of it which they have not already indexed.*

---John Cayley

### Abstract

*This paper was originally envisioned as a rather generic talk about generative text, poetics, and AI. But as I witness the difficulties faced by Twitter and Meta and ponder the very real cultural problems of North American culture, I feel like my time would be better spent discussing the problems with “development” as a paradigm for understanding digital futures and opening the door to discussing alternate futures as they may arise in an African context. Many global powers have financial and strategic interests in Africa, but their humanitarian interests should be regarded with scepticism. On the other hand, as the US, Europe, China, and Russia increasingly see themselves drawn into economic and political crises, African nations have many opportunities. In place of autonomous machines engineered in the so-called “developed” nations, African autonomy has the potential to play a significant role in the development of global culture in the 21st century.*

**Keywords:** Africa, Poetics, AI, Machine Intelligence, development Meta, Twitter

### Résumé

*Cet article a été initialement conçu comme un exposé plutôt générique sur le texte génératif, la poétique et l'Intelligente Artificielle. Mais alors que je suis témoin des difficultés rencontrées par Twitter et Meta et que je réfléchis aux problèmes culturels très réels de la culture nord-américaine, j'ai l'impression que mon temps serait mieux consacré à discuter des problèmes du « développement » comme paradigme pour comprendre l'avenir numérique et ouvrir la porte. Discuter des futurs alternatifs tels qu'ils peuvent surgir dans un contexte africain. De nombreuses puissances mondiales ont des intérêts financiers et stratégiques en Afrique, mais leurs intérêts humanitaires doivent être considérés avec scepticisme. D'un autre côté, alors que les États-Unis, l'Europe, la Chine et la Russie se sentent de plus en plus entraînés dans des crises économiques et politiques, les nations africaines disposent de nombreuses opportunités. Au lieu des machines autonomes conçues dans les pays dits « développés », l'autonomie africaine a le potentiel de jouer un rôle important dans le développement de la culture mondiale au XXIe siècle.*

**Mots-Clés :** Afrique, Poétique, IA, Machine intelligente, développement, Meta, Twitter.

## 1.0.Introduction

About 10 years ago, working as an editor, I started noticing resistance when I would suggest that people read articles that they might have overlooked in their research as a way to improve their own arguments. My takeaway from these interactions was the perception that by urging people to cite sources, I was engaging in a kind of exclusionary gatekeeping or, worse, a kind of elevation of the “old guard” by keeping the names of proverbial “dead white men” in circulation. And while there is a risk that citation practices can preserve a kind of hegemonic identity in institutional perspectives, I found that the resistance to the archaeology of knowledge was largely agnostic to identity—as people seemed just as likely to be unaware of W.E.B. DuBois and Octavia Butler as there were of Jean Baudrillard and Stanley Fish. Of course, these recollections are anecdotal and thus, likely, amplified by the bad taste that these experiences left in my mouth. The reality is that we are all beset by varying degrees of provincialism in what we deem to be critical to understanding our specific areas of knowledge. From here, there is a natural human tendency to extrapolate the relevance of knowledge we perceive as useful into a kind of cosmic explanation. We each have an internal library in our memories, some large and some small, some deep and specific, others superficial but wide-ranging (though there are some rare exceptions). This library is useful, but limited.

## 2.0.Mental Library

Being an intellectual is not about putting everything into one’s mental library, though it does require mastering something. More important than mastery, however, is self-awareness about one’s provincial little mental library married to a humble curiosity about what is in the libraries of others. And, when one shares these differences, the skill (really, the wisdom to seek counsel) is to appreciate what’s in another person’s mental library and how they use it. This is why we build universities, to create a repository of living libraries (augmented by actual libraries) and to make them available to a community of scholars, their students, and the civilizations they serve. But this repository of dynamic knowledge is not confined to the university. It exists in the city, in the village, in the family, in churches, in workplaces, etc. In other words, intellectual life rests on the possibility not just of individual intellect, but on the formation of a social knowledge base, or the aggregation of knowledge and analytic capacity of the community, as a network of intelligent individuals with unique experiences and the capacity for moral reasoning. And, when a living community envisions itself as a transgenerational entity, it gathers up information from the past generations and conserves for the future generations, using technologies and techniques of memory, to build an archive. And this integration of the individual, community, and culture is foundational to meaning in civilization.

As Bernard Stiegler notes, being is produced by “transductions” that occur between three processes of individuation: “psychic, collective, and techno-logical” (“Desire and Knowledge”). Stiegler elaborates on this, explaining, “The *I*, as a psychic individual, can only be thought in a relationship to a *we*, which is a collective individual: the *I* is constituted in adopting a collective tradition, which it inherits, and in which the plurality of *I*s acknowledge each other’s existence” (“Desire and Knowledge”). Stiegler continues, explaining that the *I* is engaged in a process of “in-dividuation,” working psychically to achieve a state of indivisible unity. This process of *I* formation takes place against the backdrop of one’s social milieu, within which the indivisible one is offset by the reality of the many. Furthermore, the individual self is valuable insofar as it is recognized as singularly so within the context of the many, hence the *I* and the *we* are animated by the existence of “metastable equilibrium” (“Desire and Knowledge”). Thus, the strength of the robust dynamic within which individuation occurs helps to form the individual as both unitary and important within the context of the collective, while reaffirming the general social value of the collective as both a gathering of individuals and a distinct community with an intrinsically valuable being in itself. Furthermore, the metastable equilibrium of the *I* and *we*, is prefigured by and productive of the technical system, broadly defined, of prosthetic supports that contribute to, sustain, and are passed on through the

cultural process (“Desire and Knowledge”). Hence, the various techniques and technologies of knowledge cannot realistically be separated from the threefold process of individuation without introducing deep distortions into social existence.

### 3.0.Literary Arts

The literary arts play a unique role in this configuration, as they sit precisely on the communication process and derive their pleasure, not from the linear transmission of instrumental knowledge via language, but from the friction that exists between senders and receivers as produced by the system of language. If the engineer’s interest in information is defined by the desire for precision, efficiency, and control, the literary writer’s interest in information is in imprecision, flourishing, and freedom. We know this because the literary tradition prizes the allegory, the implied, the metaphorical, the idiosyncratic, the subjective, and the symbolic. Where engineering tends to streamline the dynamic friction that exists where the *I* intersects with the *we* at these three levels, the literary emerges from this point of friction.

But this dynamic does not describe the state of culture today, and thus we do not exist in a state of metastable equilibrium. Instead, the long arc of modernity is married to a growing estrangement of the individual from the whole. In the European tradition, this begins with the birth of the author in the Renaissance and progresses through his “death” sometime in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century (see Barthes). Still, Anglo-European subjects desperately hold out hope for ego gratification against a system of culture that is inherently competitive and ever more banal in the prizes that it proffers. Andy Warhol predicted 15 minutes of fame for everyone. Social media made it probable. And now the “author” walks with the stench of zombie remains, trying to make their name visible among social media influencers and pop stars.

Globally, of course, the foundations of Western Liberal expansion have been facilitated by the obscured externalities of the colonies. The heavy-handed exploitation of Empire was followed by the liberal era, which adopted the benevolent rhetoric of the “developed” world offering assistance to the “developing” world through loans, aid, and nation-building. This trajectory has intensified via the extension of the consumption model at the precise moment that economics has become informational. If Henry Ford gave every American access to the Model T, perhaps META can offer everyone in the world a vision of access. Militarism, resource extraction, and industrial production continue to be material practices, but the interrelational cultural supports (culture, education, and finance) that were once framed as the goals in the discourse of neoliberalism have been virtualized. More importantly, these discourses are automated cybernetic loops of human input, surveillance and prediction, algorithmically governed output, followed by a renewed cycle of human input.

Obviously, companies like Alphabet and Meta offer their users free access in exchange for the right to analyze their language and relationships. These companies sell both the marketing data and “smart” access to those individuals and networks that make use of their intimate knowledge. This, of course, says nothing of the enormous intelligence potential of datamining and surveillance in managing populations. We may very well be entering a phase of saturation in which social media will become the only remaining place of publication, a heavily curated space, crowded by machine text. Certainly, Twitter is on an accelerationist trajectory towards total informational rot or tightly controlled subscription content (or both). This is a harbinger of the general trend towards a kind of meaninglessness in language held into place by a carefully administered visibility, as a carrot and stick.

As one can glean from Elon Musk’s acquisition of Twitter, the American intellectual class is in upheaval. We have a perfect case study of what happens when the intellectual life of purportedly “developed” country willingly replaces the utopian aspiration of the University with pragmatic engineered Platforms. Even as American scholars decry all the problems with algorithms and the

systemic nature of injustice, they seem to implicitly consent to and even celebrate the displacement of the social knowledge base as dialogical process in favor of a database curated by black box processes. The most common critique of Twitter is that without its largely anonymous cadre of paid curators serving the gatekeeping function, that intellectual anarchy will prevail. And, perhaps more dangerous, this belief in gatekeeping has trickled down into the logic of the actual brick and mortar knowledge communities. What has been abandoned is any pretense that ethical systems themselves can, on the basis of their own logical consistency and discursive practices, provide a moderating function within a community (something foretold by Jean-François Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* (originally published in French, in 1979). Instead, the belief is that even a highly educated group of individuals committed to a common purpose is destined to run itself into the ditch without regulation by a technocratic system of control. Against this failed community, we have a naked "will-to-power" with no internal tendency towards understanding. Instead, we have the belief that justice can only exist under a kind of injustice, an ideal which Gilles Deleuze gestures towards in "Postscript on the Societies of Control." Of course, social media was never meant to be a community in the first place. Nevertheless, many accept its failure to be what it can never be as proof that actual communities are impossible or that control societies are inevitable.

AI enters as a kind of trusted partner into the collapsed social knowledge base. Where communities of actual humans seem to have failed before our eyes, AI can furnish carefully tailored results that seek to resemble the acceptable and desired range of texts that we seek. Furthermore, as we have abandoned the grave difficulty of community formations, we grow accustomed to seeing slick but shallow pantomimes of competence as ever more intelligent (I think of it as the Anti-Turing test--we want to be judged based on whether or not we can plausibly imitate instrumental communication). Naturally, a society of atomized individuals would find these narcissistically modeled results to offered moments validation that are difficult to resist.

There was a time when it was necessary for people to manually enter the contents of their thoughts and affect into a database, but I think most of the training for AI is moving towards the capture of voices and gestures to train its models. So, these platforms may very well disappear, but in their place, the more logistically oriented platforms will persist and curated spaces will exist, but the large target will be the volume of social behavior that can be surveilled and manipulated through bottlenecks (for the time being, platforms like WhatsApp are able to pull together large pools of data on users along with real time speech analysis in very diverse linguistic contexts).

African nations, historically, are polyvocal. Often a colonial language will function as a lingua franca that connects people from differing linguistic communities (as is the case here). But as you are well aware, Africa is home to 1250-2100 spoken languages, with over 500 living languages in Nigeria alone ("Languages of Africa"). This means that Africa stands apart from the North Atlantic sphere for its linguistic dynamism. If AI is built by engineers in the US, China, and Europe and trained upon the semantic associations drawn from the linguistic samples provided by the largest and most connected user-bases with the largest bodies of published content, this means that what AI knows most closely reflects already dominant cultural perspectives. Rather than see the self-replicating assimilability of consciousness as evidence of bias or neglect, it could be seen as an opportunity to guard against imperialism and to create indigenous institutions that resist hegemony.

In this moment, the cultural discourses in US, especially, signal an openness to opportunity for the development of skills through educational exchanges and visa programs due to the legacies of slavery, colonialism, and racism. Additionally, global strategic and economic interests encourage knowledge exchange in nations with advanced tech economies. These opportunities are attractive though risky. Though the heterogenous nature of African culture could present opportunities to defer the process of assimilation, it is also possible that the exploitation of strategic inequalities in a variety of capacities (resources, technologies, markets, finance, and war) could result in a deepening of cultural imperialism. Complex ethnolinguistic terrains are targets for cognitive colonization. The key, of course, is to develop local and regional capacities, expand cooperation on the continent, and,

ultimately, to appreciate the historical significance of independence, not only for Africans, but for all of humanity.

### Conclusion

And so, I would like to conclude with a warning and a hope. To warning is that you will recognize the potential for AI to function as a colonizing force that can reproduce hegemony across very diverse cognitive terrains (and can do so with a seemingly human face). And the hope is that, in recognizing it as such, you might create literary practices that exist outside the ears and eyes of the surveillance apparatus. Literature is up for grabs and you have the upper hand.

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