

Recognition and the satirization of achievement in African conceptual poetry: The case of Nana Awere Damoah's *My Book of #GHCoats*

Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang¹

Introduction

Nana Awere Damoah is a Ghanaian writer and poet with a large following on Facebook, where he operates an active account. As by 2013 he had attained the 5,000 friends limit allowed on Facebook and had more than 1,400 followers. In November 2013, he posted on Facebook: "Never introduce your child to the delights of the tilapia head until he or she is old enough to buy for himself or herself. ~ Abraham Lincoln" (*#GHCoats* 2013, 10).² The disjunction between the modification of a Ghanaian proverb and its attribution to an American president triggered attention among Damoah's Facebook crowd; other users subsequently joined in to either make comments under his post or make similar standalone posts. These fictional quotes went viral among Ghanaian Facebook users, with posts such as "Fermented sobolo never got anyone drunk. ~ A young Angela Merkel at the 1972 Oktoberfest," (*#GHCoats* 2013, 12) and "He who eats jollof with stew has trust issues. ~ Confucius" (*#GHCoats* 2013, 15). Eventually, Damoah compiled the quotes into *My Book of #GHCoats*, which due to its nature, is an example of conceptual poetry.³

Conceptual poetry

Conceptual poetry is typically called an act of "uncreative writing," as practitioners aim for fidelity to their source material to the detriment of innovation.⁴ While this strategy elicits questions related to intent, plagiarism, originality, and ownership, there can also be focus on the nature of the constituent information.⁵ In a case like *#GHCoats*, the mere act of using well-known names as sources for the quotes means that recognition and familiarity

1 kdopoku-agyemang@ug.edu.gh

2 All material quoted from the text are unedited to preserve their original form.

3 In a larger piece forthcoming in *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, I explain into detail the context that informed the evolution of *My Book of #GHCoats* from Facebook phenomenon into e-book.

4 For introductory material to conceptual poetry, see the introductions to *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* edited by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith.

5 As Jacquelyn Ardam notes, scholarship on conceptual poetry is "more focused on the means of the production of conceptual writing – on writers' intentions and techniques – than on its formal properties or reception by readers" (2014, 134). While Ardam attempts to prove the possibility of a lexical analysis, this paper focuses on content analysis.

inform choice, which leads to an immortalization of the personalities involved. And yet, this form of achievement is not necessarily desirable because of the way in which these personalities are associated with the types of quotes in the text.

Satire and achievement in *#GHCoats*

Due to the heavy reliance on humor, sarcasm, mockery, and wit – all of which are traits of satire – I argue that *#GHCoats* involves a satirization of achievement that is done to overturn power structures that are established through the choice of attribution. In other words, by choosing these well-known names on the one hand, there seems to be acknowledgement of the importance of the personalities; however, by mocking them on the other hand, *#GHCoats* suggests that the creators of the quotes are displacing and dismantling the power structures by reducing these public personalities to ridicule, a major component of satire.⁶

In accepting Juvenal's classic interpretation of satire as open to "whatever men do," the critic Dustin Griffin processes satire as "unruly, various," and materializing in "many different forms" (1994, 4). He links the nebulous nature of satire to the fact that it is not a "genre"; instead it functions as a "mode" or "procedure" (4). The absence of a static definition in favor of a process, while precluding a comprehensive and unified theory, does not prohibit the ability to offer a set of critical perspectives. Griffin is therefore able to examine different types of satire in diverse contexts. For the purposes of this paper, satire is also understood as multifarious; however, when restricted to the realm of the social and political, satire works within parameters where elements of mockery, irony, ridicule, and humor intersect to lower the agency of powerful figures. These connections are highlighted in *#GHCoats* through a close reading of social and political commentary in the quotes, especially when enhanced through an explanation of context, allowing for a traversal of thematic, stylistic, and structural concerns.

Commentary on social matters such as marriage is immediately apparent in "A real trap is when a wife offers the last meat in the soup she is saving to the husband. ~ Pope John Paul II... [well, I guess that's why he became a priest instead]" (*#GHCoats* 2013, 8). On one level, there is the obvious attempt at humor in justifying the choice of the Pope to remain celibate and head the Catholic church, rather than fall victim to possible marriage shenanigans; on another level, the quote also considers the agency that a wife is traditionally expected to possess in the Ghanaian domestic space. While the convention of placing a woman in the kitchen implies that her position in the public sphere is tenuous,

⁶ It must be noted in any case that not all of the quotes are attributions to well-known personalities. The constituent quotes fall under the following categorizations: fictional quotes misattributed to famous people; real/modified quotes misattributed to a well-known person; proverbs misattributed to a famous person; and common Ghanaian parlance misattributed to famous names.

on the other hand she can utilize the power relations within the private sphere to her advantage.⁷ Attaching the quote to the Pope not only ironically subsumes the powerful religious figure under the institution of marriage; it also questions the motive behind the early decisions that eventually made him a powerful world figure.

Beyond the domestic space, marriage and romantic relationships are satirized in a political context through quotes like: “Bortos watching and admiring whilst your wife or girlfriend is around you is not for the faint at heart— Sarkozy 2009, to Obama at G8 summit”) (#GHCoats 2013, 23). “Bortos” is Ghanaian slang for “buttocks,” and phonetically gestures to the lack of consonant endings in certain varieties of Ghanaian English. More to the point, the quote on a thematic level mocks the tendency of men to leer at (and thence sexualize) women’s bodies while creating a binary between the woman whose body is looked at and the woman whose husband does the watching; on a contextual level the quote directly alludes to a viral picture of the American president Barak Obama appearing to ogle Mayara Tavaréz, a 17 year old Brazilian girl, in the presence of his French counterpart Nicholas Sarkozy. Again, then, two powerful world leaders are positioned as lacking agency due to the fear of being surveilled while surveilling. Subsuming the male gaze under the female gaze thus questions the gendered power relations. These two examples were just a couple among many of which achieved similar effects.

Even though in an interview Damoah pointed out that the contributions were essentially meant for fun purposes, these quotes also function as a post-colonial rewriting of the agency and wisdom of primarily Western authors and other such figures of authority.⁸ Especially because these authors include powerful individuals like leaders of world-wide religious bodies and world leaders, satire is effective as it displaces their agency through mockery and unfamiliarity. As mentioned previously, the major source of humor was intended to be the ironical juxtaposition of familiar names with quotes that they were not typically associated with. Similar to their local counterparts, such rewriting speaks to re-imaginings of authority on the one hand, and familiarity on the other hand. The use of these authors thus serves as a theoretical bridge of access in terms of power relations, which are dispersed and spectral especially since the contributors to the volume were 51 in total.

Transposing these quotes to the e-book from Facebook subverts norms and expectations by taking the quotes away from its original environment – which (like typical social media platforms) invites people to self-style by reflecting a norm of being in the

7 In Ghana, the woman of a household is typically expected to cook – multiple proverbs, songs, and folktales from different ethnic groups all over the country buttress this gendered expectation; this quote questions the supposed resultant weakness, as the woman’s control over the preparation of food in the house provides her leverage over her husband and deepens male anxiety.

8 There were many Ghanaian figures of authority such as heads of state, mayors, and local politicians who experienced similar treatment as the ones chosen for this paper.

world through the perception of exercising agency over their social media profiles. This ontological construction of achievement is displaced, as the users' names are uprooted from the quotes to a prefatory page, leaving the quotes in the main body of the work. These users are thus no longer at par with the personalities whose voices they appropriate. Recognition is, as a result, focused more on the personalities associated with the quotes than with the contributors.

Conclusion: Facebook and the power of creative expression

With social media gaining popularity across the continent, portals such as Facebook have become crucial to understanding the potential spread of new forms of creative expression. Facebook usage in Ghana for instance has grown exponentially since its creation in 2007, off the back of an increase in internet access across the African continent (Africa Internet Users, 2019 Population and Facebook Statistics 2019).⁹ As a result, various demographics can utilize the space to various ends, and there are examples of Africans such as Egyptians, South Africans, Ghanaians, Kenyans, and Nigerians using Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as spaces for poetic expression (Adenekan 2014; Santana 2018; Hosny 2018; Arenberg 2016). While these examples tend to follow conventional or traditionally African poetic forms, #GHCoots breaks new ground via its use of conceptual poetry, which is not common across the continent.¹⁰

Through the lifting of Facebook quotes into #GHCoots, Damoah pushes the personalities in unfamiliar settings and contexts to question what it means to be recognized in a satirical environment. Due to this action, achievement in #GHCoots is connected to vulnerability, as the visibility of these public personalities makes them liable to be treated in ways that appears to give these African social media users agency by appropriating voice. Social media thus becomes a vehicle that gives an impression of the democratization of power relations, even though social media is not a neutral ground – Facebook as a portal is a site of contested and commercialized mores with political undertones that reflect and sometimes magnify the inequality in the “real world.”

References

Adenekan, Shola. 2014. “Transnationalism and the Agenda of African Literature in a Digital Age.” *Matatu* 45, no. 1: 133–51.

9 According to Internet World Stats, internet usage grew in Kenya (from 0.7% in 2000 to 83.0% in 2019); in Nigeria (from 0.1% in 2000 to 55.5% in 2019); in Ghana (from 0.2% in 2000 to 33.6% in 2019); Botswana (from 0.3% in 2000 to 38.9% in 2019); and in South Africa (from 5.5% in 2000 to 53.7% in 2019). The same website pegs Ghana's Facebook users at 4.9 million by December 2017.

10 #GHCoots is arguably the first example of conceptual poetry in Africa.

- "Africa Internet Users, 2019 Population and Facebook Statistics." n.d. Internet World Stats. Accessed April 10, 2019. <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>.
- Ardam, Jacquelyn. 2014. "The ABCs of Conceptual Writing." *Comparative Literature Studies* 51, no. 1: 132–58.
- Arenberg, Meg. 2016. "The Digital Ukumbi: New Terrains in Swahili Identity and Poetic Dialogue." *PMLA* 131, no. 5: 1344–60.
- Damoah, Nana A., ed. 2013. *My Book of #GHcoats*. Accra: Smashwords.
- Dworkin, Craig Douglas, and Kenneth Goldsmith, eds. 2011. *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. Evanston Illinois, Northwestern University Press.
- Griffin, Dustin. 1994. *Satire: A Critical Reinroduction*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Hosny, Reham. Dec. 2, 2018. "Mapping Electronic Literature in the Arabic Context." *Electronic Book Review (EBR)*. Retrieved from: <http://electronicbookreview.com/essay/mapping-electronic-literature-in-the-arabic-context/>
- Opoku-Agyemang, K, and Nana Awere Damoah. 2014. Interview about *My Book of #GHCoats*. Personal.
- Santana, Stephanie Bosch. 2018. "From Nation to Network: Blog and Facebook Fiction from Southern Africa." *Research in African Literatures* 49, no. 1: 187–208.