"Coat and Uncoat!": Satire and socio-political commentary in *My Book of #GHCoats*

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Abstract
Research related to creative expression has examined the form and nature of satire in both oral and print poetry in West Africa but is yet to adequately consider digital poetry. This essay examines Nana Awere Damoah's *My Book of #GHCoats*, arguably the first example of African conceptual poetry. A collation of humorous fictional quotes by Ghanaian *Facebook* users, *#GHCoats* allows for analysis the context of socio-political satire. In exploring the presence and utility of satire in *#GHCoats*, this essay analyzes the features of conceptual poetry as used via social media to present digital poetry as a developing force of creative expression.

Keywords: Satire, Digital Poetry, Conceptual Poetry, Ghana, Facebook

Introduction: Satire and Changing Forms of Poetic Expression

When Lindfors (1979, p. 244) calls the West African novel a "vehicle of strong social and political satire", implicit in this contention is the assumption that prose contains certain features that allow for engagement with socio-political issues through the agents of satire. However, poetry is also a particularly effective medium for delivering social and political commentary in the satirical mode in West Africa. As a genre,

poetry has a rich history of protesting political abuse, correcting social ills, sarcastically observing actions through irony and mockery, and critiquing figures of power in West Africa (Egudu, 1977). Ghanaian poetry contributes significantly in diverse ways through a strong connection with satire. In Ghana, the relationship between poetry and satire stretches back to poetry performances during festivals such as the Apoo, where people from areas in the present-day Brong Ahafo Region take advantage of license during this celebration to lampoon their traditional authorities; Mapanje and White's anthology *Oral poetry in Africa* (1983) contains the work song "As I came from the bush I met a demon", an Akan oral poem from the colonial period that satirizes and protests conditions of service for Ghanaian workers (p. 131); in addition, there are Halo poems – self-explanatorily known as songs of abuse – created and performed by Ewe poets.

Poems from the Apoo festival, Akan satirical tradition, and Halo tradition have existed for centuries; and with the proliferation of print literature, poetry has continued to serve a satirical function both in similar and complementary ways. The tone, style, and content of Halo poetry for instance inform the works of poets like Kofi Anyidoho and Kofi Awoonor, who both satirize Christianity in "Oath of Destiny" (1985) and "The Cathedral" (1971), respectively (Okunoye, 2005). Another major contemporary poet is Ama Ata Aidoo, and her poetry collection *Someone Talking to Sometime* (1985) is noted by Hoeller (2014) as including satirical representations of political speech (p. 35).

Following work done by African literature scholars like Abiola Irele, this range of examples in African (specifically, Ghanaian) poetry is conventionally categorized under the large umbrellas of either traditional or modern poetry. These two categories, well known to anyone who is familiar with Ghanaian poetry, relate in intimate ways, as Anyidoho and Awoonor's contemporary interpretations of Halo poetry reveal. Aidoo is also known to adopt aspects of Akan oral tradition in her work. Despite an overlap, these two divisions, otherwise known

as oral and print poetry respectively, have features that make them distinctive due to their use of oral and print technology respectively. Scholarship has accordingly theorized on the relationship between these two categories (Fraser, 1986).

The presence of digital technology as a creative tool in Ghanaian literature means that a third classification via technology is not only possible, but is already present in the form of digital or electronic poetry. This genre has its own terms of production, reception, and interaction, among other parameters, thus making it an emerging third division of Ghanaian poetry. After all, if traditional poetry involves oral technologies steeped in performative power, and modern poetry is primarily produced through print technology, then even though digital poetry is relatively new and does not yet have major creative artists or much scholarship, the uniqueness of the digital technology medium allows for new ways of engaging with poetry in Ghana. Even though transitions from one technology to another harness themes related to satire, the format and nature of the media indicate new strategies of dealing with these themes.

Accordingly, this article considers the treatment of socio-political satire in conceptual poetry, which is an emerging example of digital poetry in Ghana, and differs from oral and modern poetry due to its relatively radical engagement of creativity, audience, authorship, and context. Such features influence the nature and format of conceptual poetry and help to position this genre of digital poetry in a complex conversation with genres from more established forms of poetic expression. The choice for this article is thus deliberate, and allows for eventual scholarly consideration of the stark contrasts between a relatively unknown genre and the much more established oral and print categories of poetry. Prior to this consideration however, it is important to review the evolution of conceptual poetry in the context of Ghanaian creative expression.

Conceptual Poetry: A Review

Besides being unfamiliar in relation to these other categories of poetry in Ghana, conceptual poetry is also not especially known for its imaginative strengths. This genre of electronic poetry involves extensive appropriation of existing information: the conceptual poet gathers and combines this "data" into a "new" literary work, usually without adding significantly new material. Sometimes this piece has an explicit constraint, as seen in Goldsmith's _No. 111 2.7.93-10.20.96_ (1997) where all the words in one chapter have just one syllable and another chapter only contains words with two syllables; or _Eunoia_ (2001), in which Christine Bök uses a single vowel for each chapter. Apart from such strategies for production, conceptual poetry could look like Stephanie Barber's _Night Moves_ (2013), a collection of _YouTube_ comments of an American song by the same name. In these examples, the source material already exists elsewhere, and is organized into a single work of art by the poet.

Even though the genre is relatively new, strategies that relate to the creation of conceptual poetry are not necessarily novel or unique: T.S. Eliot and James Joyce were famously criticized by contemporary critics for lifting material from existing work in crafting _The Wasteland_ and _Ulysses_ respectively. Remixing, sampling, and remaking are also popular creative approaches to music genres such as the mainstream hip-hop and hip-life, its Ghanaian cousin, while in African creative expression there is extensive scholarship on literary genres copying heavily from various periods, places, and people. From William Butler Yeats' influence on Chinua Achebe (Quayson, 2004) to Pablo Picasso's debt to Congolese art forms (Gikandi, 2006), examples of this "anxiety of influence" abound. However, conceptual poetry stretches such borrowing to extreme ends, bringing into question the place of ownership and creativity in this genre. The lack of original material actually leads to conceptual poetry being labeled as an act of "uncreative writing", a term popularized by

Goldsmith, who is perhaps the genre's foremost theoretician and poet.[1]

Apart from Goldsmith and the afore-mentioned conceptual poets, other prominent names associated with the genre tend to be of Western, Asian, and South American origin. There is no reference to conceptual poetry in Africa, as evidenced by the scope of such mainstream conceptual poetry anthologies as *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (2011), edited by Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin. Even when marginalized conceptual poets are given the spotlight, as is the case made by Bergvall in the introduction to *I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women* (2012), African conceptual poets are still absent. In terms of scholarship, nothing seems to have been written on African conceptual poetry either. This lack of attention is not necessarily a blind spot as it is a reflection of reality; after all, by the time these anthologies and other research were published, there were no major (or even minor) attempts at creating conceptual poetry in Africa. Thus, on the other hand, despite the presence of digital technology, coupled with the familiarity with and mastery of poetic forms all over Africa, it must be noted that conceptual poetry has not been actively adopted by literary artists on the continent. In actual fact, Opoku-Agyemang (2020) is the only published work on the genre.

My Book of #GHCoats and the Origins of African Conceptual Poetry

Considering the absence of a tradition in conceptual poetry in Africa, Nana Awere Damoah's *My Book of #GHCoats* (2013) is arguably the first known example of the genre from the continent. As an example of African conceptual poetry, *#GHCoats* thus charts a new path for endeavors in this field. This work resulted from posts that were made on *Facebook* among Ghanaian social media users and then went viral shortly

[1] Even though Goldsmith foregrounds the uncreative component of conceptual poetry, it must still be noted that the mere fact of creating the collage of data is a creative act in and of itself.

after. The movement started in late 2013 when Damoah 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". Damoah, who at the time had reached the maximum friend limit allowed on *Facebook* (5,000 friends) and had more than 1,400 followers, received attention from his *Facebook* community – *Facebook* users copied the idea of connecting a hilarious quote to a familiar name. Other examples such as "*Having an okro mouth does not mean you will be given banku to go with it* – Albert Einstein" and "*He who eats jollof with stew has trust issues* – Confucius" followed suit and heralded a plethora of similar examples. Added to Damoah's large community, the presence of humor helped the trend to catch on quickly; in a few days, Ghanaian social media users flooded *Facebook* with examples.

More people became interested in posting, and the submissions diversified as some posters added context and other surrounding information to the quotes. In doing this, they critiqued contemporary issues and ridiculed well-known figures while employing humor and ironic juxtapositions, all of which characterize satire. In addition, the submissions started to include real or slightly modified quotes misattributed to a well-known person such as "*He who is down needs fear no fall* – Iron Mike Tyson to Douglas when he hit the canvas"; proverbs misattributed to a famous person including "*He who has diarrhea has no business in a flatulence competition* – Chairman Mao's opening statement at the 1950 Olympic Games" and "*Never laugh at the sloppiness of your mother-in-law's breast, since your wife's may turn out to be just like that when she grows older* – Marilyn Munroe"; common Ghanaian parlance misattributed to famous names like "*Ah, Girls Abrɛ* – Oshin (circa 1800s, Japan)"; and modified quotes from their actual quote creators such as "*Ask not what GYEEDA can do for you, but what you can do for GYEEDA*– John F Kennedy, 1962."[2]

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[2] All posts are quoted verbatim without correction in order to leave their uniqueness untouched. The misspelling of the name "Monroe", for instance, was one of many wrongly spelt words in the quotes.

In the early stages of the postings, Damoah and other users adopted "#GHQuote", a hashtag made up of "GH" – representing "Ghana" – and "Quote" in order to streamline the posts. After a few days, this hashtag was replaced by "#GHCoat": "Coat" added Ghanaian color to the hashtag, and was a humorous aside to the peculiarity of Ghanaian phonetics (because some Ghanaians pronounce "quote" as "coat", eliding the /w/ sound). Damoah eventually collated a large number of the posts into *My Book of #GHCoats*, and the work was popular enough on *Facebook* to spawn two subsequent volumes. Issued by the self-serve publishing outfit Smashwords, the volumes are available online as free books and together appear to be the first, albeit only, examples of conceptual poetry from Africa. Unlike Barber's *Night Moves* which consists of a multitude of *YouTube* comments made by users with loose connections to each other due to their typically nostalgic engagement with Bob Seger's song, *#GHCoats* contains posts generally driven by satirical humor and authored by 51 Facebook users, many of whom are personal friends with Damoah. The relationship between the users therefore builds a multi-voice community similar to what pertains in oral tradition, where performers can be multiple and yet relate closely by being members of the same narrative space. Damoah lists the names of the contributors at the beginning of the e-book, but does not attach their names to the individual quotes in the e-book itself. Even though the quotes do not create a coherent chain of thought but are randomly put together, removing the authors of the individual quotes ensures that attention shifts to the quotes themselves, resulting in the proverbial "death" of the author as well as increasing the potential for close reading.

It is important however to note the difficulty in performing close reading exercises with conceptual poetry. In *Notes on Conceptualism*, Fritterman and Place (2009, p. 27) famously opine that "pure conceptualism" negates traditional notions of reading in favor of thinking about the idea of the work. A significant number of conceptual poets tend to be theoreticians

as well, and the general acknowledgement, if not acceptance, of the inability to engage with the work in conventional terms amplifies a distinct lack of coherence. And yet, while the call to "think" about conceptual poetry in this manner seems by extension to imply the absence of close reading, Ardam's (2014) admirable attempt to close read Goldsmith's *No. 111 2.7.93–10.20.96* demonstrates what she calls an ability to complicate "the alphabetized and alphabetical, the encyclopedic and the literary, the uncreative and creative, the procedural and non-procedural text" binaries that are inherent in such an incoherent piece (p. 155). Critiquing these binaries allows her to question the work's supposed incoherence.

#GHCoats is similarly incoherent in terms of not having transitions – the quotes read as they present themselves: as a random collection of quotes. The incoherence engendered is nevertheless not as severe as Goldsmith's 606-page behemoth which includes such content as "… pesky critter, Pete the Puma, Peter Fonda, Peter Sellers, peter meter, peter parka, ..." (p. 39); and "…Isabel Archer, it becomes sincere, It Can't Happen Here, it can't happen here, it just India, it might be a chair, it tastes like flowers, …" (p. 52). This style of writing allows Ardam to create a largely textual analysis, as she focuses on the stylistic concerns raised by Goldsmith's work in relation to the English alphabet. Still, underlying socio-political questions can reside in conceptual poetry due to the meta-commentary that can be revealed in the information that constitutes the work in question, an example being another of Goldsmith's works: *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* (2013). As a collection of media accounts of different tragedies that color contemporary American history, *Seven American Deaths* indirectly comments on these various events through its use of the accompanying media reports, giving the reader room to compare the different narrations of the events in a direct manner and to contextualize the events, examining them from a nostalgic or reflective perspective. *#GHCoats* similarly shares connections with political and social

commentary because of the content in the constituent posts, leading to a relatively straightforward analysis of resultant themes in the context of satire, which is prominent in the quotes. It must be further noted that having just over 50 contributors to _#GHCoats_ invariably implies wildly varying styles of writing. Added to the diverse writing styles is Damoah's conscious refusal to edit the quotes: in an interview, he stated that copying and pasting the posts allowed an explicit acknowledgement of their diversity. The medley (or even cacophony) of writing styles therefore allows for a comparative analysis in some cases, as will be seen in the subsequent analysis.

In considering the stylistic and structural treatment of concerns with socio-political satire in _#GHCoats_, this essay not only gestures to ways in which African conceptual poetry can be a method of channeling modes of satire through strategies such as humor, mockery, and general commentary, but also ultimately (even if indirectly) connects the larger body of digital poetry in African literature with its older oral and print poetry cousins, employing satire as the meeting point. There is again the potential to explore the contribution of such a body of work to mainstream conceptual poetry, in order to better understand the role of African creative expression in larger conversations. An investigation of the relationships restricted to this article, however, is aided by situating satire within its proper context.

Socio-Political Satire and _#GHCoats_

In accepting Juvenal's classic interpretation of satire as open to "whatever men do", the critic Griffin (1995, p. 4) processes satire as "unruly, various", and materializing in "many different forms." He links the nebulous nature of satire to the fact that it is not a "genre"; instead, it functions as a "mode" or "procedure" (p. 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 article, satire is also understood as multifarious; however, when restricted to the realm of the social and political, and as hinted in the introduction, satire in this essay works within parameters where elements of mockery, correction, irony, ridicule, and humor intersect in intricate ways. These connections are effective in *#GHCoats* through a close reading of social and political commentary in a selection of the quotes. When enhanced through an explanation of context, these connections lead to 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* 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 domestic space. While the convention of placing a woman in the kitchen could suggest that her position in the public sphere is tenuous, on the other hand she can utilize the power relations within the private sphere to her advantage. In Ghana, the woman of a household is typically expected to cook – multiple proverbs, traditional and contemporary 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.[3]

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

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[3] The fear of having a woman utilize this power to her advantage is also captured in *The Anatomy of Female Power* by Chinweizu (1990), revealing masculine anxiety at perceived female agency.

2009, to Obama at G8 summit)" (*#GHCoats* 23). "Bortos" is Ghanaian slang for "buttocks", and similar to the use of "coats" in the hashtag. This word phonetically signals 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 at an unidentified woman in the presence of his French counterpart Nicholas Sarkozy. It must again be noted that using these two quotes as basis, the female partner is positioned as to be feared by her male counterpart, irrespective of whether the relationship is situated in private or public. This positioning follows from numerous examples in Ghanaian popular culture including music, movies, and movie posters, and whether this situation adds positive agency to the woman or simply gestures to the nagging female is dependent on the ways in which the audience approaches the quotes.

The open-ended interpretation of text is a feature of close reading, and the open-endedness of *#GHCoats* is again suggested by some contributors using the same source for creating some of the quotes; in such cases, the "authors" were different. An example is seen in the figure of the mother-in-law (thus extending the theme of relationships), who came in for particular treatment in the socially deviant quote "*If you want to see your in-law's behind, give her a farm on a hill. –* King Henry VIII" (*#GHCoats* 17); and "*If you relish the sight of your mother in-law's behind, give her a land atop a hill to till. –* Galileo Galilei" (*#GHCoats* 20). Both posts are rooted in a popular Ghanaian proverb which suggests the ways in which a man can manipulate the body of his mother-in-law in response to interest in her. While the repetition of the same proverb with different authors underlines the randomness of the misattributions,

the choice of the two authors also seems deliberately ironic, especially since King Henry VIII is known to have married six women (and executed some of them), whereas Galileo on the other hand did not marry the mother of his children due to contemporary concerns over the disparity in social status. Within both examples, then, the figure of the mother-in-law is paradoxically positioned as tenuous or even absent. Gesturing to these absent figures thus adds an extra layer of context to the quotes while in terms of theme, the consistent mockery of female domestic figures reveals the ways in which women tend to be ready-made targets for ridicule in familial relations.

If in *#GHCoats* women directly bear the brunt of satire in domestic settings, then in the public sphere the burden is shared more democratically, with the less uneven amount of the attention to both male and female characters indicating a different approach to both genders in public conversation. Such a reading can be seen as surface level, as within these examples the power relations between males and females were still unequal. Politically for instance, some quotes referenced international scandals like the Clinton-Lewinsky affair and Silvio Berlusconi's relationships. "*Soft lips give the most sensuous kisses*. – Clinton to Monica 2002" (*#GHCoats* 20) immortalized the American scandal and played on the information available to the public on the incident. Apart from the uneven power relations with regard to a president vis-à-vis a White House intern, the mere reference to the incident hinted at the gender imbalance: Lewinsky's career virtually ended after the news broke while Clinton recovered from the scandal to finish his second presidential term. Furthermore, choosing the surname of the former American president while using the first name of his former intern (as opposed to "Bill" and "Lewinsky", for instance) hints at gendered ways of knowing and forming identity in a Ghanaian space.

The former Italian prime minister on the other hand retains both names. Similar to the Clinton-Lewinsky quote where

the power relations are skewed to the advantage of the male as well as the afore-mentioned Obama/Sarkozy quote, in this instance the female counterparts in the scandal are not named. Berlusconi's quote is rendered with an idiomatic expression in "*If you have okro mouth, your end comes faster than a sexually-starved housewife in a quickie*. – Silvio Berlusconi, 1912, last paragraph in a private letter to Koku Headsroll" (*#GHCoats* 22).[4] An "okro mouth", which idiomatically refers to the slippery nature of okro stew and signifies the tendency to gossip or leak information, added to farce of a government official who called for "heads to roll" after there was a blackout at an international World Cup qualifier in Ghana. Moreover, using a private letter as the means of communication ironically acknowledged the spread of the news of Berlusconi's parties, which caused the scandal. Leakage of information leading to controversy was satirically captured elsewhere.

On the local political front for instance, Victoria Hammah, a deputy minister in charge of communications was sacked by the president in 2013 after her driver recorded and circulated a conversation of her planning with a friend to take advantage of her governmental position to make money through corrupt means. This scandal broke out around the time the quotes were going viral on Facebook, and Hammah was featured in "*No matter how big a woman's buttocks is, it cannot intimidate the piece of cloth that covers it*. – Victoria Hammah's driver to Delilah (251 BC)" (*#GHCoats* 21). The fictional conversation between the driver and the Biblical character highlights the sense of betrayal that the driver had wrought on Hammah, not least because he was reportedly her relative – Delilah's treachery to Samson in the book of Judges in the Bible is also a popular story among Ghanaians, and is referenced in highlife songs for instance.[5] The reference to Hammah's backside was not coincidental either, as she was well-known in public circles because of her body shape.

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[4] Berlusconi was again the subject of "*Everything that rises will fall. if you don't believe, ask Viagra*. – Silvio Berlusconi to Yaa Naa" (*#GHCoats* 28)

[5] An example is the song "Samson and Delilah" (2009) by the singer Ofori Amponsah.

A media house which talked about the story for instance found space to describe Hammah as "voluptuous, broad-bottomed, pear-shaped" ("We Made Vicky Hammah a "Sex Symbol" 2013). Related to the media report, the quote's exaggerated emphasis on her body part, being an example of the satirical tendency to overstate features for mockery purposes – in the tradition of the French philosopher Henri Bergson's essay collection *Le Rire* (1901) or contemporary Ghanaian movie posters in urban centers – thus deflected from Hammah's alleged misdeed. This example did not mean that such mockery was necessarily gendered, as men also received such attention.

Another political issue for instance occurred in mid-2013, when the mayor of Accra Alfred Oko Vanderpuye, officially known as the chief executive of the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA), decided to rename Ghana's national hockey stadium after John Atta Mills, the former Ghanaian president who had died the year before. There was public backlash because the stadium was already named after Madam Theodosiah Okoh, the woman who designed Ghana's national flag; also, a major road had already been named after Mills. Similar to Hammah, Vanderpuye was typically referred to in relation to a physical feature, his thick beard. His beard was the focus in quotes like "*It's only a fool who doesn't change his mind.* – AB Crenstil [in his song, Landlord Abodwese: The Renaming of Sports Stadia, Vol. 1 (2010) & Remix (2013)" ((*#GHCoats* 10); "*There is no place like home, and anywhere else feels just like an AMA office without a bearded boss.* – Charles Darwin, just before he shaved his beard a day before he died, 18th April 1882" (*#GHCoats* 10). Even though the first quote at the very least references the stadium renaming issue, the active mockery of the individual's physical feature is what takes center stage in both quotes – "Abodwese" is Akan for a "goatee", while the "bearded boss" in the second quote is the gesture to Vanderpuye's beard. Similar to examples of satire where people who commit wrongdoings are mocked into correcting their faults, the first Vanderpuye quote

leaves room for redemption, while the second, like the Hammah quote, does not appear interested in correction. Regardless of whether the quotes allow for correction of wrongs, there is a demonstration of an acute consciousness of current affairs.[6] It is obvious, then, that some of the quotes were not necessarily intended to directly correct socio-political ills, as can be the purpose of satire. Yet, the mockery in some of the quotes still contained the potential to address social and political wrongs.

The active political awareness evidenced in these quotes was not only limited to individuals, but also spread to institutions perceived as corrupt or incompetent. The Ghanaian police service for instance tends to feature as one of the most corrupt institutions in research and surveys such as the highly esteemed Afrobarometer research facility.[7] Ghanaian literature also tends to lambaste police vice. Perhaps the best known example is found in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) which captures the particular phenomenon of bribery by Ghanaian policemen in its last scene, as a policeman clandestinely receives money from a commercial car driver at a road block. The quote "*The nicer your vehicle, the more one Ghana notes you require while driving around town.* – Adam Smith, Economist, 1810 (A Study of Ghana Police; foundational theories and thoughts on Demand and Supply)" (*#GHCoats* 22) succinctly complements scenes like Armah's. Using the famous Smith as author of the quote highlights and then ridicules the economic logic behind the extortion of money from drivers.

As the use of Obama, Sarkozy, Clinton, and Berlusconi indicates, heads of government were a favorite source for the quotes. Angela Merkel, Chairman Mao, Winston Churchill and many others also received attention in *#GHCoats*, but the most prominent head was Abraham Lincoln, who had four quotes

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[6] Another quote that featured Vanderpuye was "*Fear not the enemy outside but the angel inside.* – Rev. Oko Rickross, 2012, upon the arrest of his colleague in front of the cameras" (*#GHCoats* 27), which played on an incident where he arbitrarily arrested a journalist and referenced the nickname, given to him because his beard was similar to that of the American rapper Rick Ross.

[7] In "Police Corruption in Africa Undermines Trust, but Support for Law Enforcement Remains Strong", the *Afrobarometer* revealed for example that in Ghana, trust in the police declined from 66% in 2005/06 to 47% in 2008/09 and 42% in 2011/13.

dedicated to him. "*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* 10), "*Facebooking in Ghana is the preserve of idle hands*. – Abraham Lincoln [funny, he wrote this on his Facebook wall]" (*#GHCoats* 17), "*Any man who uses his teeth to cut wele from a bowl of pepper soup with his eyes open is not afraid of anything*. – Abraham Lincoln" (*#GHCoats* 25), and "*If school isn't the place to sleep, then home isn't the place to study*. – Abraham Lincoln, 1945, after failing his exam and leaving home" (*#GHCoats* 26) demonstrate the variety of the misattributions and reinforce the tendency to use well-known figures of authority to make the various points, as the ironic juxtapositions continued to push the emphasis on satire.

Even though Damoah pointed out that the contributions were essentially meant for fun purposes (interview, Accra, June 8, 2014), these quotes also function as a post-colonial rewriting of the agency and wisdom of primarily Western authors and other such figures of authority. Especially because these authors include powerful individuals like heads of state, satire 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-imaginations 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, especially since the contributors to the volume come from different walks of life.

The overt social and political mockery was not the only result borne out of combining well-known local and international names with these quotes – some of the quotes leaned toward the absurd. "*Whoever hasn't tasted brukina knows not what he is missing*. – John Milton [Paradox Lost]" (*#GHCoats* 18); "*20 years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you*

did than the things you did not do. Explore! – Okomfo Anokye" (*#GHCoats* 8); "*It will take scientists a century to discover the wonders of roasted plantain and groundnuts*. – Winston Churchill [on a visit to a plantain plantation in Alavanyo]" (*#GHCoats* 19); and "*A hungry man who patiently waits for his Saturday fufu to get ready has the makings of greatness*. – Thomas Edison" (*#GHCoats* 11) were all examples that featured ironical juxtaposition in the context of humor. By placing emphasis on the ridiculous, such quotes hearkened to older forms of mockery in Ghanaian poetry.

The Digital as an Extension of the Traditional and the Modern

#GHCoats joins a rich stream of Ghanaian poetry that not only utilizes satirical structures to diverse ends, but also uses rhetorical and aesthetic structures for creative purposes. With features like multiple authorship through its various contributors, as well as the employment of proverbs, the collection acknowledges affinities with oral poetry: where authorship tends to be collective, and language is usually textured with proverbs, colloquialisms, and idiomatic expressions. In public readings of the work, Damoah reads random quotes in a non-chronological order. This conscious restructuring of plot again gestures to oral poetry, where the lack of fixity in a template story allows creative artists to organize the creative work according to their desires. Even though the work can be rearranged, textually the *#GHCoats* e-book has a fixed outlook and is thus similar to print poetry. The license to refer to various personalities, institutions, and incidents cuts across both oral and print varieties of poetry.

In terms of actual satire, *#GHCoats* contains some brash examples of mockery, but are still not as acerbic as the afore-mentioned examples of oral poetry, where performers use invectives, insults, and other colorful language. On the Friday of the week-long Apoo festival for example, people can walk through the principal streets of urban centers in the

Brong Ahafo Region like Techiman, Nkroranza, and Wenchi, blatantly insulting the traditional ruler for perceived injustices. The exaggerated portrayal of personalities like Hammah and Vanderpuye can still be seen as insulting; satirical modes however allow for such excesses, even though the harshness still pales in comparison to modern poetry examples such as Anyidoho's afore-mentioned "Oath of Destiny":

> By all the thunders of *Xebieso*
> By all the incurable infirmities of *Sakpana*
> We swear to post copies of the Judgement
> to your God, who is in Heaven
> Whose address we shall look up
> in the opening chapters of the
> Holy Bible, Unrevised Version (p. 61)

In this excerpt, Anyidoho rains curses on advocates of Christianity for destroying established tradition. The disappointment in a new order is less severe but also forthright in Awoonor's earlier mentioned "The Cathedral", where a tree whose boughs "stretched across a heaven/ brightened by the last fires of a tribe" is cut and replaced by "A huge senseless cathedral of doom." (p. 25). While these two poems cannot encompass the large body of Ghanaian print poetry, the connections to the emerging corpus of digital poetry in the context of satire indicate complex and complementary uses of satire.

On a surface level *#GHCoats* can be read as a reflection of societal and political issues: from past incidents to contemporary issues, the quotes capture the essence of news items that caught the public eye while also dealing with everyday issues. On the other hand, the collection of quotes goes further than simply observing events: by demonstrating the shared creativity of contributors, a reader gains a glimpse into ways in which ordinary citizens process local and global news. Such perspective is especially important in a digital space which according to

Adenekan (2014) affords a different type of engagement with literature in terms of issues related to ownership, audience, and tone. However, even though Adenekan posits that the internet affords more controversy in African literature than its print counterpart for instance, in Ghana, content, tone, and style, while varying wildly from genre to genre, all exhibit similar levels of controversy through their approach to themes of interest. Finally, even though there is relative freedom in publishing online, *#GHCoats* does not deal with its content in ways that are markedly different from oral and print poetry. Using *#GHCoats* as basis then, one can argue that digital poetry adds to the body of oral and print poetry by introducing new creative strategies while maintaining existing methods.

Conclusion: The Didactic, Social Media, and Digital Creativity

African poetry has tended to follow the prescription of Achebe (1975, p. 45), who memorably advocated that African literary artists adopt a political bent in their literature. And if satire is one of the major methods through which both political and social concerns can be addressed, then *#GHCoats* maintains a political agenda while acknowledging social issues in the posts that constitute the work. While not as acerbic or creative as some examples in traditional and modern Ghanaian poetry, this example of conceptual poetry demonstrates the political awareness of Ghanaians, coupled with social interest. Processed through digital technology, the work engenders a new way of looking at satirical poetry, especially because conceptual poetry has no tradition in Africa. The parameters outlined in this essay lend credence to further research that can examine this work in relation to mainstream (mainly Western) examples of conceptual poetry. On the creative side, as the work becomes more widespread, it could influence other creative artists to attempt their own versions of conceptual poetry. Such moves would cause the genre to gain strong roots not only in Ghana,

but across the African continent, where local iterations should surely enrich and enhance ways in which it is embraced.

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.[8] As a result, various demographics can utilize the space to various ends, and there are examples of Africans such as Ghanaians, Kenyans and Nigerians using *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Instagram* as spaces for poetic expression as shown by Adenekan (2021), Yékú (2022), and Arenberg (2016). While these examples tend to follow conventional poetic forms, #GHCoats breaks new ground via its use of conceptual poetry.

The use of the hashtag echoes non-literary examples in African social media networks that tend to engage with current events in overtly political ways. Movements related to hashtags such as #MuseveniChallenge, #MugabeFalls, #WhatWouldMagufuliDo, #KenyaVsNigeria, and #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowYou resulted in viral engagement mainly on *Twitter*, but so far have not resulted in literary outcomes. Unique among these movements then, *#GHCoats* serves as a mode of mobilizing social media users, not only for humorous purposes, but again to interrogate what it means to be literary and creative in social media contexts.

The extension of what it means to be creative, as offered by this work, blurs theoretical lines between "literature" and non-literary works. After all, on the one hand, the *Facebook* posts are made by Ghanaian users who are not necessarily interested in creating literature; thus in isolation, the posts are regular non-literary work. On the other hand, however, when processed

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[8] In 2004, the International Telecommunication Union named Africa as the fastest growing market for mobile technology; and according to *Internet World Stats*, Internet usage grew in Kenya (from 0.7% in 2000 to 85.2% in 2022); in Nigeria (from 0.1% in 2000 to 73% in 2022); in Ghana (from 0.2% in 2000 to 45.9% in 2022); Botswana (from 0.3% in 2000 to 51.3% in 2022); and in South Africa (from 5.5% in 2000 to 57.5% in 2022). As of April 2022, Ghana had more than 9 million Facebook users, up from just under 3 million in 2015.

as conceptual poetry, we can view the work as a creative engagement with social and political implications. *#GHCoats* therefore allows for a multiplicity of voices to demonstrate the utility of satire in a novel digital space.

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