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Romance Fiction and Publishing in Africa: Ankara Valentine's Day Anthology

Doseline Kiguru

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Abstract: Romance fiction is one of the most popular literary genres on the African continent, and this article argues that an analysis of the systems of its production and circulation provides an avenue for a better understanding of contemporary African literature and its markets. The article focuses on Ankara Press's *Valentine's Day Anthology 2015* which is a collection of romance stories from across the African continent presented in different languages and formats including photographs and audio recordings. The anthology is a free to download digital text made available through the publisher's website. This article provides a critical analysis of the romance stories in this anthology, read alongside the structures of literary production and circulation made possible through this publishing and marketing initiative by Ankara Press. It does this by exploring the linkages between the romance fiction, publishing platforms and literary markets, foregrounding the impossibility of confining this fiction to any form of genre boundaries. I argue that as a popular literary genre, contemporary African romance is continuously engaged in accessing the same literary spaces and publishing markets as other "high culture" genres and, therefore, is actively participating in the deconstruction literary hierarchies. This approach, I demonstrate, presents an entry point for analyzing and explaining the place of African literary publishing and its investment on local literary audiences that extend beyond genre boundaries.

About the Author: Doseline Kiguru is a researcher with an interest in literary texts and their production mechanisms. Her research engages with cultural and literary production in Africa with a focus on different literary platforms such as publishing and prize industries, book fairs and festivals, literary magazines and writers' organisations, exploring the networks they create and the effects that they have on contemporary African literary production. She is a Lecturer in World Literatures at the University of Bristol and a Research Fellow at Stellenbosch University.

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Introduction

African literary writing and publishing has historically leaned heavily on political history. Most of the foundational African novels had a heavy focus on the history and politics of the day. The first generation writers, emerging soon after World War II wrote with a function of countering the colonial discourse of prejudice, while the second generation was focused on the postcolonial disillusionment that faced many parts of the continent after political independence. Chinua Achebe writing in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975) argues that the primary task for the African writer is "re-education and regeneration" (45). The perspective is later furthered by Ignatius Chukwumah who notes in his essay "The African Literary Artist and the Question of Function" (2015) that the African literary field has historically played a role in emancipatory struggles and can, therefore, not delink itself from its role as activism. However, amidst this fiction loaded with activism and politics, romance fiction grew and has continued to flourish on the continent, albeit on the margins.

A lot of criticism of romance fiction as a literary genre is that it is didactic and apolitical. While the romance genre is one of the most popular in terms of readership and the economics of book publishing, many scholars have highlighted the continued relegation of the genre to a low status by literary critics. Pamela Regis in her analysis of the genre in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2013) refers to romance as the most popular and least respected literary genre, noting that popularity does not necessarily mean acceptance into the market (xi). On the same note, on the one hand, Belinda Edmondson further argues that "contemporary romances of literature and film are not usually read as serious works by critics and scholars of the African diaspora" (193). Lydie Moudileno, on the other hand, notes the vulnerability of the genre within the wider literary hierarchy, "its hard-earned legitimacy always threatened by the very preconceptions, stereotypes, and hierarchies its literature continuously denounces, from one decade to the next" (121).

This article argues that contemporary African romance fiction presents itself as a genre aware of this political and historical placing, even as it engages more with the emotional involvement of the reader. Through an analysis of the romance short story collection, *Valentine's Day Anthology 2015* by Ankara Press, the article explores the function of the genre as an activist tool. It does this by exploring the linkages between the genre, publishing platforms and literary markets, foregrounding the impossibility of confining this fiction to any form of genre boundaries. I argue that as a popular literary genre, contemporary African romance is continuously engaged in accessing the same literary spaces and publishing markets as other "high culture" genres and, therefore, is actively participating in the deconstruction of literary hierarchies in African literature.

In this regard, the continent has been host to a growing number of romance fiction publishers over different historical periods. On February 14th 2015, Nigeria was set to hold its fifth General Elections since the end of military rule in 1999.[1] On the same date, annually celebrated world-wide as Valentine's Day, Nigeria's Romance imprint, Ankara Press, published a digital anthology of romance short stories by African writers. In the foreword to the stories, the editors Emma Shercliff and Bibi Bakare-Yusuf note that one of the

motivations for the anthology and for the digital release on the Valentine's/Elections day was "to provide a Valentine's Day "treat" for readers, particularly those based in Nigeria who may need respite from the election fever sweeping the nation by 14th February" (v). The anthology is a collection of romance stories from across the African continent presented in different languages and formats including photographs and audio recordings. Key in these stories is the reliance on writers already canonized through other genres and other literary platforms such as international literary awards, as well as the heavy investment in different layers of translation. Each short story is presented in the digital anthology in four different layers: the original text in English, a translation into another language that the author speaks/writes, as well as a voice recording of each text and translation. Apart from English, the other languages included through translation are: Pidgin, Kpelle, Kiswahili, Yoruba, Igbo, French, and Hausa. There are voice recordings for each text and each translation, thereby increasing the audience reach across languages and above the written word to the spoken/recorded word.

The stories in the collection explore different aspects of love and romance on the continent from Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's "Painted Love" which tells of the heartache of long distance love to Binyavanga Wainaina's same sex relationships in "The Idea is to Be Sealed In" and Hawa Jande Golakai's "Candy Girl," a story about crime and romance. The stories in this collection heavily feature established African writers, such as Wainaina, Ibrahim, Billy Kahora, Elnathan John and Mukoma wa Ngugi. Through the genre of romance, the project was participating in a conscious effort to steer away from the exotic portrayal of the continent only in negative light. Indeed, in the foreword, the editors Shercliff and Bakare-Yusuf acknowledge the stereotypical overfocus on issues such as "Ebola, poverty and terrorism" in contemporary African literature (v). In their introduction to the collection, the editors note that:

> African literature is sometimes accused of presenting a rather depressing portrayal of life across the continent. Whilst we acknowledge that it would be disingenuous for African writers not to engage with the serious issues that frame daily life – issues such as corruption, insecurity, violence, poverty, unemployment and civil unrest, all of which have been highlighted by Nigeria's current election campaign – we feel it is important, as publishers, to do what we can to provide African writing with the space to reflect the stimulating, vibrant, quirky, joyous complexities of life here. (v)

The editors were consciously steering away from the exotic representation of Africa through the continued stereotype of a continent of pain and suffering. Graham Huggan (2001) and Sarah Brouillette (2007) write on the process of creating exoticism in literary works, foregrounding the commodification of difference through literary and cultural production mechanisms. In the Ankara *Valentine's Day Anthology*, the editors present a careful curation of stories, conscious of the dangers of commodification of difference and the foregrounding of a single narrative as the only defining narrative of Africa. They make the acknowledgment that exoticism is not a quality inherent in African or postcolonial literatures; it is a quality that is imposed on a work. However, despite the conscious move away from the stories on "corruption, insecurity, violence, poverty, unemployment and civil unrest" the anthology and the contents therein are not ahistorical or apolitical in any way (Shercliff and Bakare-Yusuf

v). As Bronwyn Cran notes about romance and women's writing, "the private is political," challenging our notions of the public, the private and the political (35). Edwige-Renée Dro's short story in the anthology, "Solitaire," is about the physical separation of two lovers due to political upheavals. The male lead in the story has had to run away and go into exile, afraid for his life because of the political persecution in his own country. The main story is about him sneaking back into the country because he is driven by love and is determined to get married to the love of his life despite the dangers and the threat on his life. Dro, therefore, is able to elegantly portray the reality of living under political violence or instability without necessarily fetishizing it and presenting it as the only story to define contemporary life in Cote d'Ivoire. This is one of the ways in which the stories in the anthology engage with the function of romance literature outside of its categorization as genre literature.

Further, I argue that romance fiction in Africa plays a key role in centering African literary production across genre boundaries. Dominic Strinati calls for a critical look at the social significance of popular culture and foregrounds its dissemination and audience through mass culture. In *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (2004), Strinati highlights the hierarchical placement of popular culture at the bottom tier noting that "the concept of mass culture provides a picture of a debased, trivialized, superficial, artificial and standardized culture which saps the strength of folk and high culture, and challenges the intellectual arbitration of cultural taste" mainly because of its mass production for a mass market (19). While placing this literature in popular cultures feeds into the hierarchy, it also simultaneously allows for a wider and continuous critical interpretation. Looking at romance fiction from the perspective of African popular culture makes it possible to appreciate and laude the genre-breaking and blending strategies employed in these short stories because they open up the space for wider engagement with their socio-political and cultural contexts without the confines of genre.

In their introduction to *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction* (2021) Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, and Hsu-Ming Teo affirm the centrality of this genre within the wider world literary markets: "The romance novel is the most popular and bestselling genre of fiction produced and consumed in the world today. In North America alone, the romance industry generates more than 1 billion dollars of sales each year … and this figure does not include the second-hand market, or romance novels borrowed from libraries or other readers" (1). Despite its high state in publishing markets, they further present how this particular genre of fiction has traditionally been "stereotyped and categorized as lesser usually stereotyped in misogynistic, heteronormative, and often ageist terms" (2). Indeed, Niamh Baker in *Happily Ever After?: Women's Fiction in Postwar Britain 1945–60* (1989) explores the historical positioning of this genre and claims that "[r]omantic fiction, whether in the form of novels or women's magazines, was escapist … marriage was the goal" (45). I explore this complexity in the context of contemporary African romance fiction.

As in the rest of the world, romance fiction in the African continent is still one of the most popular genres in terms of markets and consumption. However, most of the texts sold and read are produced in Euro-American literary markets with characters, settings, and ideals reflecting their local audiences. Belinda Edmondson in "The Black Romance" (2007) starts by arguing that the romance genre in the past "was an essentially white form, based on the European chivalric tradition: the leading man was a sort of knight, a powerful person who woos and wins his lady, a virginal or naïve younger woman … The categories of the

Leading Man and the Lady were defined by categories associated with European ideals of manliness and womanliness" (191). However, romance as a theme is not, and cannot be, confined to a single cultural or geographical context. Therefore the exploration of African romance especially with the focus of Ankara Press's work allows for the reading of a genre against a specific cultural and social background, analysing the ways in which the genre fits within the wider literary markets.

Postcolonial theorist Simon Gikandi writing in "Realism, Romance, and the Problem of African Literary History" (2012) explores the concepts of Western theories of representation in earlier postcolonial writing, noting that "colonized writers, always limited by their conditions of production as citizens and subjects, had no choice but to deploy inherited forms toward their own goals" (311). However, he also adds that these forms were not just wholly accepted and deployed, but that the writers were also engaged in moulding and shaping the forms to suit their work of postcolonial representations. He adds that "[t]hey needed an aesthetic that affirmed the lived experience of the colonized while also questioning the language of a literary canon closely associated with the culture of colonialism and with colonialist notions about progress, time, and subjectivity" (311). Looking at African Romance fiction through these lenses, therefore, opens an avenue for discussions not only of the genre but of the larger African literary marketplace in creating different layers of representation. The Ankara *Valentine's Day Anthology* is used here as a representation of contemporary African literary work especially on the digital platforms where the entry point is an inherited genre that has subsequently been inverted in order to be more representative of its social, political, and cultural background.

Creating a Market for Romance Fiction

The market for romance work on the African continent has always been present, with more Euro-American romance fiction circulating in the markets than the locally produced texts of the same genre. One of the most successful African romance imprint, Nouvelles Editions Africaines (NEI), based in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, was created in 1998 out of a need to respond to market demands that saw earlier consumers of this literature only accessing French produced and published texts. Lydie Moudileno writing on the popularity of this literature in West Africa during this period notes that:

> The decision came from the conviction, supported by marketing data, that there was a strong demand among some West African readers for a new genre, one that had been so far absent from francophone African fiction: sentimental literature. Not that African readers did not previously have access to love stories. On the contrary, the study conducted by NEI showed that at the end of the 1990s the francophone African public had a real "soif de littérature sentimentale,"[2] which could, however, only be fulfilled by reading love stories imported from the West. (120)

The consumption models for romance fiction foreground the audience more than the economic factors of publishing. Looking at romance fiction within the wider spectrum of book publishing in Africa today, it is important to note that the most recognized international romance imprints such as Harlequin Mills & Boon and HarperCollins continue to circulate

largely in second-hand book markets. These international imprints have a wider market access than locally produced and published romance fiction. In large African cities such as Nairobi, these texts circulate in markets locally referred to as Inama Bookshops (literally translating to "bend over" bookshops in Kiswahili). These are open air second-hand book markets on the city streets with a focus on popular genres such as romance and crime fiction.[3] A 2004 socio-economic survey on street vendors in Nairobi's Central Business District carried out by United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Nairobi Central Business Development Authority (NCBDA) put the percentage of second-hand books' street vendors at 2% out of a total of 50,000 to 100,000 street vendors in the Nairobi metropolitan area. Lydia Matata writing about these types of second-hand bookshops in Nairobi in 2016 notes that while "the stalls help to promote a reading culture … local publishers are concerned that their new books can't compete with the cheap second-hand books on sale by street vendors, and that it can have an adverse effect on sales of locally published books."[4] These types of book markets are replicated in other major cities such as Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Kampala, among others. Apart from selling the second-hand texts, the vendors are also engaged in book exchange programs, at a small fee. They operate partly as libraries where for a fraction of the novel/novella's price, one can exchange their books as long as the two texts fall under the same genre categorization. Since these are very fast-paced texts, the circulation is also quick.

This type of underground market ensures a continually growing reading audience that is not necessarily mediated by the publisher or their official designated distributors. The result is a wider reading public that does not necessarily translate to wider sales. However, as Lee Erickson contends in *The Economy of Literary Form* (1996), it is important to consider that the reading and writing processes are "materially and economically embedded in the reality of the publishing marketplace" (8). An impoverished and underfunded publishing industry has resulted not in a non-reading culture, but rather in a reading culture that is externally influenced by Western publishing industries. As Nathalie Carré writes in "From Local to Global: New Paths for Publishing in Africa" (2016), "the inadequacy of the book distribution system is one of the big issues for publishers operating on the African continent" (57). She further adds that "[i]n order to develop readerships, it is essential that books are well publicized so that potential readers are made aware of their existence and that a physical infrastructure exists to allow the purchase of books" (57). It is against this background of the underground market for popular texts that the Ankara Romance imprint was established, with the first six romance titles published in December 2014. They were originally available only in digital format and retailed at N500[5] per copy. Two months later, the Ankara *Valentine's Day Anthology* was published online and offered as a free to download text. Reading this within the context of the economics of literary publishing on the continent, Ankara Press, an imprint of Cassava Republic Press, was actively engaged in a literary publishing and marketing experiment that aimed to expand its audience and markets.

The romance genre is perceived as an enjoyment form and Ankara Press erased the economic aspect of it in order to introduce their work to their potential markets. This experiment aligned with the already established "markets" such as the Inama Bookshops mentioned above whose structure creates a larger audience without necessarily centralizing the financial benefit on the author and publisher. The subsidizing of the cost of the texts, as well as providing a free digital text can be analyzed within the larger economics of print versus digital publications and the cost differences between them. Writing in the context of

post-press literature Nick Levey focuses on digital literary publications with an emphasis on self-publishing and argues that the most predominant genres in this category are romance and erotica books. Post-press literature in this context is used to describe literary texts that exist outside of the mainstream literary avenues in terms of production, circulation and readership. In this context, most of the romance fiction published in Africa today falls under this category with many new texts published online and available on e-reader platforms such as Amazon. Further, many other contemporary romance fiction texts on the continent continue to be published and distributed on social media platforms and networking sites such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and personal blogs. Levey provides a detailed explanation of the wide gap in prices and accessibility between mainstream print publications and online digital copies under the same genres:

> It's hard to understate the influence that technology and digital culture have had on the rise of post-press literature; we might even say that it's the literature of a culture less concerned with analogue sources of cultural validation (such as print and the associated preferences for material objects) and less bound to traditional pricing structures and constraints. Post-press literature establishes itself via digital channels to avoid the forms of labor in which mainstream presses have a clear advantage (printing, transportation, warehousing, retailing, etc.). (n.p)

The experimentation with these different publishing and marketing strategies, including free and cheap print copies, as well as cheaper digital publications and distribution avenues is not a new phenomenon in romance fiction. In his historical analysis of the intricacies of publishing and marketing the romance novel in Euro-American markets after World War II, John Markert (2021) provides a detailed account of the various strategies employed by romance publishers to access a wider audience. While there was a heavy focus in developing the content of the romance fiction to fit their contemporary times and consumers' desires, a lot can be said of the role of marketing campaigns that saw the distribution of free and cheap books:

> To "hook" the consumer on its romance line, Harlequin employed numerous give-aways … One of these was to distribute 2 million copies of the book *Dark Star* to dealers at no cost in 1973. The book was sold to the consumer for 15 cents … In other introductory offers for readers who might be reluctant to spend even 15 cents, Harlequin gave away millions of other books outright, among them 5 million copies of Violet Winspear's *Honey Is Bitter*. These books were targeted to the audience Harlequin wished to attract, the housewife. … inside each box of P&G Bio-Ad laundry detergent was a free Harlequin novel. (355)

The main focus with such a marketing campaign was not to promote a single title but rather to create and expand the reading audience for romance fiction. The Ankara project can be said to engage in a similar related project in 2015 with the publication of the free-to-download anthology, just a few months after the release of their first titles. As with the Harlequin's aim, the Ankara project aimed to introduce a localized/Africanized version of

romance fiction to both new and older audiences. As a publishing firm, the interest is in developing a localized taste for the genre, and not necessarily to promote a single specific author or text. It was an attempt to create a market audience for their other publications. As demonstrated in the next section, this was successfully achieved in two ways: by an overreliance on writers, translators, and readers that are already well established in the wider contemporary literatures of Africa, and by expanding the focus of these love stories beyond the strict genre boundaries of the traditionally structured romance fiction.

Expanding the Boundaries of the Genre

With the Ankara Valentine's Day project, the focus was on conceptualizing a local audience as the main consumers of this fiction that was mainly created to counter the larger narrative of romance fiction as a Western genre. The intention was to draw some of these audience from the already existing consumers of international imprints such as Harlequin Mills & Boon and HarperCollins, as well as creating new audiences of genre fiction from consumers of literary fictions. Looking at the authors of the *Valentine's Day Anthology*, I argue that the latter was achieved by the specific curation of the anthology around already established African authors in contemporary literary fiction.

The anthology features seven short stories by contemporary African writers: Chuma Nwokolo who is best known for his work commenting on the Nigerian social political scene, such as *The Ghosts of Sani Abacha* (2012) and *How to Spell Naija in 100 Short Stories* (2015) from where the short story in the anthology was extracted; Abubakar Adam Ibrahim whose work by then included the short story collection *Whispering Trees* (2012) which was shortlisted for the Etisalat Prize for Literature in 2014 and with the title story shortlisted for the prestigious Caine Prize for African writing in 2013; Toni Kan, a writer and editor who had already published two full-length texts before contributing to the anthology; and Sarah Ladipo-Manyika, a British-Nigerian novelist and editor. It also features Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina, winner of the Caine Prize in 2002, and an already established writer and literary critic by 2015; Edwige-Renee Dro, a writer and literary translator from Cote d'Ivoire; and Liberian crime fiction writer Hawa Jande Golakai. The translators for these seven texts, as well as the readers were/are also well-established writers in the wider African literary scene and include Tanzanian novelist Elieshi Lema, Nigerian creative writer and visual artist Victor Ehikameno, and Kenyan writer and editor Billy Kahora, among others.[6]

This careful curation of the anthology and its representative voice that extended across genres, I argue, further served as a demonstration of the continued exchange of cultural and literary capital between genres that define African literature today. These writers, already established in other literary platforms and expressions, lent their capital to the new imprint and to the romance genre, drawing in more diverse audiences. The assumption is that these established writers already have their own audience that they are bringing into romance fiction. At the same time, the romance genre, which is one of the most read and popular, lends its capital to these writers by opening up the writers to new audiences previously centralized only around the romance genre. In an interview with *Africa in Words*, the Ankara Press publisher, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, acknowledges the commercial significance of romance fiction in different literary markets but also highlights the culture of exchanging literary capital: "romance sells. So I thought, if I marry the commercial

imperative with the ideological imperative we might have a winning formula. You know, a lot of people who would not ordinarily read a Cassava book might read this, and a lot of people who may not read romance might be drawn to our brand of romance" (n.p).[7] Hence, a project such as the Ankara *Valentine's Day Anthology* provides a lens into understanding how genre fiction can act as a measure of the publishing and reading landscapes of the continent.

Moving away from the popularity and markets for romance fiction, the genre is also very formulaic. While details may change from text to text, it usually involves two people who fall in love, then one or more barriers prevent them from being together, making the whole text a quest for them to get back together—which usually happens at the resolution stage. The work is very fast-paced and quite popular and, as Lydie Moudileno explains in "The Troubling Popularity of West African Romance Novels" (2008), "this popularity has been explained by the genre's formulaic nature, which combines a number of predictable schemes, ingredients and actors into scenarios of eternal happiness … Although critics disagree on the exact nature, number, and sequence of these elements, they nevertheless agree that the romance novel is a genre determined by what is called in structuralist terms a fixed narrative program" (122). In a balanced equation of romance fiction, the end result is the two unlikely persons overcoming adversities, falling in love, and living happily ever after. Reading the Ankara *Valentine's Day Anthology* through its deviation from this fixed structure of the traditional romance genre provides an avenue for a critical analysis of genre boundaries in African literature, further complicating the concept of postcolonial literary representations through inherited literary forms including genres and theories.

In the Ankara *Valentine's Day Anthology*, the formulaic nature of romance fiction is not completely adhered to. While this can be read as an attempt to localize this inherited Western genre, it is also a deliberate step at expanding the traditional genre boundaries. Disregarding the traditional structure, the stories in the anthology attempt to present a more realistic representation of life on the continent. More importantly, the stories do not necessarily end in a happily ever after situation like the traditional romance stories that aim to create an ideal world driven by love. Rather, they only aim to provide snippets of life and not life in totality for almost all the stories in the anthology. Indeed, love and romance do not necessarily loom large in most of the stories and only serve as a backdrop. While the editors state in the forward about the aim to avoid the stereotypical representations of Africa in literature as a place of pain and suffering, they are also careful in their curation in order not to present the continent as an idealized utopia.

Bakare-Yusuf argues that one of the driving factors for establishing the African romance imprint was the diversification of the idea of African literature, and also partly as a feminist project in which the idea of romance and gender relationships as espoused in the most prominent and foreign romance publications could be subverted. In the *Africa in Words* interview, Bakare-Yusuf spoke about the implications of continued unquestioning consumption of texts in this genre from a foreign point of view, arguing that the work of the African romance text was to change that narrative. She argues: "To my mind, the consumption of these Mills and Boons with their idealized masculinity, their idealized femininity, actually can create a sense of diminishment of women, or of who women are, as you have this expectation that the man must provide and take you away, and you need a man to be fully fulfilled" (n.p). In the *Valentine's Day Anthology*, however, it is worth noting that while the project was framed around "romance" fiction, most of the stories have deliberately

moved away from the strict formula of romance writing not only in structure but also in the stylistic devices used including characterization, language and style.

Golakai's short story, "Candy Girl" is set in Monrovia on a Valentine's Day and focuses on three characters involved in the final episodes of a love triangle. The narrator, through whom the story is focalized, has just found his wife, Leonora, dead. His lover, Ciatta, comes in and will not help move the body. The entire story is centered on the scene of the dead woman on the floor, with the husband trying to lift and move her body but failing. His lover looks on. The death is attributed to an accidental nut allergy after Leonora eats the chocolate her husband had bought for his lover. Leonora had assumed that it was her husband's Valentine's Day surprise for her. Because of the short time frame within which this short story is framed, the pace is very fast and immediate, focusing mainly on the description of the room and the dialogue between the two remaining lovers. At the end, the resolution comes as a form of advice from Ciatta warning against disposal of the body and instead for the husband to perform the role of the grieving widower.

The story disregards all the formulaic methods employed for romance fiction including the overt focus on the physical characteristics and the morality of the leading figures. In fact, the narrator describes his relationship with his lover as: "I did good. Clean and respectable but not high-end, romantic but seedy enough for debauchery" (6). While all the other formulars of the genres are broken or disregarded, the resolution at the end of the text is maintained at the two lovers eventually being together. However, this must also be interpreted through the viewpoint of crime fiction, the genre in which Golakai has continued to publish her creative works. She has previously published *The Lazarus Effect* (2016) and *The Score* (2019), two novels on sex, crime and detective fiction. Analyzing the creative output of Golakai, Rebecca Fasselt (2019) argues that the writer has mastered the art of genre blending, an innovation that involves a combination of "chick-lit elements with the crime plot" and therefore "rewriting the normative formulas of both genres" (186). In this context, on the one hand, Golakai's work provides a perfect example of the use of an inherited mode of literary representation and on the other hand, inverting and subverting it in order to suit specific local experiences. The genre blending in this particular story, for instance, acknowledges the complexities of women's experiences even if these experiences are only framed from one angle—romance. As Fasselt argues in the context of genre blending strategies employed by writers such as Golakai, the deliberate efforts of these popular texts to exist across genres has served to create disruptions of conventional genre norms. She affirms that this strategy "not only emphasise[s] the dynamic nature of post-feminist genres such as chick-lit novels, but also demonstrate[s] that popular genres in Africa exist as an entanglement of meanings" (189).

On the other hand, Binyavanga Wainaina's piece titled "The Idea Is to Be Sealed In" is a story of a teenager coming of age and exploring his sexuality. It is set in one single afternoon but extends to cover other timelines through the limited third person point of view's focus on the boy's past and memories. However, the story foregrounds safety, which for the boy is presented in terms of tangible objects that act as his safe space—books, novels, the old unused toilet he would lock himself in in order to read, and the tree in the open air café under whose shade he sits to read, eat, and meet his lover. It is in this café that he meets with the server with whom he ends up having sex at the end of the day. While not explicitly stated in the story, this is not the first meeting for the two lovers.

Wainaina's is a homoerotic love story that highlights romance and sex as normal, everyday life experiences. It moves the African romance story beyond the usual heterosexual relationship narratives. Further, in this particular story, the romance genre is used to present homosexual relationships outside of the common tropes of stigma, phobia, and the fight for recognition. The genre already associated with romantic and sexual relationships allows the analysis of the story to start from the point of assumption that homosexual love relationships are not out of ordinary occurrences. In this way, placing such as text like "The Idea Is to Be Sealed In" in this fixed genre allows for a wider textual analysis that is not necessarily centered on sexual orientation. The short story hence allows for questions such as the age differences between the restaurant worker that the 15-year-old main character encounters in the open-air café and has sex with; and the significance of portraying the sexual scene at the end of the text as transactional. The text ends with:

> The hand moves across his shoulders, turns his head to face him. The voice finds his ear, wet with droplets of man, raspy from late night shouts. "Pass me those cigarettes on the headboard. You can leave when you want." (13)

Similar to Golakai's story, Wainaina's piece also deliberates ignores the "formula" in various instances. As opposed to the traditional structure of the romance genre, the social background or social mobility of the two main characters is insignificant and they are not interested in a lifetime of romance but rather in an afternoon of sex. While there are two lovers and the sexual tension is prolonged through the afternoon setting, the story does not necessarily end with a resolution that brings the two lovers together in a forever-after happy life. It ends, as noted above, as a transactional process devoid of feelings and expectations which usually characterize the romance genre.

Other stories in the anthology also deviate from the generic structure in various ways such as Sarah Ladipo-Manyika's "Woman in the Orange Dress" that only presents a restricted view of two lovers on a date —one of them with a physical disability. The focus is on the happiness of the two and not necessarily on the story of their love overcoming obstacles in order to finally be together. "Cotyledons" by Toni Kan is the story of a young woman falling in love, marrying, and then being hit by the reality of life in a patriarchal society. Her way of escape from the cycle of unhappiness is to take a lover but the story ends with a description of the disappointing sex with her new lover.

While these stories all center love, romance, or sex as the driving force, they are also intimately linked together by the realistic ways through which they represent their settings and characters. The main diversion from the traditional structure of the romance genre is that their immediate or future realities are not presented through idealized utopic lenses. An Goris in "Loving by the Book: Voice and Romance Authorship" (2012) notes that "the ideal romance text facilitates readers' identification with the protagonists and offers its readers experiences of escape, relaxation, and positive emotions" (77). In the Ankara *Valentine's Day Anthology*, the stories are not invested in the fantasy of a full escape but a temporary relief by providing only the snippets of life where love briefly takes center stage.

Despite this, two stories in the anthology stick very closely to the formula of the traditional romance story: Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's "Painted Love" and Edwige-Renée Dro's "Solitaire." In "Painted Love" the two lovers are doctors and they meet at the beginning of the story, in a classroom setting. Later, the heroine, Inara, has to move away because of

work and ends up in different countries working for Médecins Sans Frontières over several years. The hero, Yaro, lives his life mourning the lost love until she eventually comes back and asks him, "Why didn't you come for me all these years?" (35). The narrator describes the woman not only in terms of her career but also in the context of her being able to create a space for herself in the world: "He envied her free spirit, her travels and convictions and her refusal to be caged by commitments and conventions, romantic or otherwise" (35). The story manages to create a strong female character whose lean towards love and romance is not presented as a means of economic or social escape but rather an independent and fulfilling step in her life.

In similar vein, "Solitaire" is a heterosexual love story between two successful people and leaders in their different careers. The story opens with the heroine, Aurélie, arriving at work at her TV company. In her office, her former lover, Sylla, a military man, is waiting. He has been in hiding in exile as a result of the country's political upheavals. Both the male and female leads are described heavily in terms of their physical appearance. And while the two lovers in Ibrahim's "Painted Love" had to face the obstacle of distance and lack of communication, the two lovers in "Solitaire" must resolve the complication of a love triangle. By the time her lover, Sylla, comes back from exile, Aurélie is engaged to someone else. However, this is resolved by her lover eventually saying, "[s]o change your mind and let's get married instead" (29), whereupon Aurélie removes her solitaire engagement ring, thus ending her first engagement and getting back with her former lover.

These two stories' addition to the African romance genre is the localization of the story and characters, as well as drawing the heroine as an already empowered, deliberate, and powerful woman with agency. Indeed, following the argument proposed by critics such as Edmondson regarding romance fiction as a European genre, these writers have successfully demonstrated the borrowing of a "foreign" genre and then inverting it to represent local realities and aspirations. Edmondson argues that "[a]lthough whiteness defined the original romance—its chivalric vision of the leading man as a sort of knight, a socially powerful man rescuing the maiden from poverty or the secretarial pool—nevertheless the romance genre usually highlights social status, and the crossing of boundaries" (207). The characters in these stories are less involved in social status and crossing social and economic boundaries like the coming together of two lovers from two different social and economic boundaries. In Ibrahim's "Painted Love," for instance, both leading characters are from similar social and economic backgrounds. In other stories such as "Candy Girl" by Golakai, or "Woman in the Orange Dress" by Ladipo-Manyika, the social classes of the characters are not even relevant to the story. The African romance fiction presented here goes a step further to push these boundaries beyond the plot of the story and to actually highlight the boundaries between genres.

In this romance anthology project, therefore, the writers and the editors were deliberately involved in pushing the boundaries of the genre and its market accessibility. While viewed under the lens of popular culture, the project foregrounds popular arts' investment in borrowings and reinvention of other arts. While still loosely housed under romance fiction, the short stories in the anthology extend to encompass crime and bildungsroman, among others, as dictated by the writers' backgrounds. Therefore, while challenging genre boundaries the project also contributed to challenging the hierarchies that exist between literary fiction and genre fiction, between high culture and low/popular culture. Bakare-Yusuf in the *Africa in Words* interview localized this perspective decrying the

fact that despite the rich history and tradition of genre literatures on the continent such as crime and romance expanding from the Onitsha Market literature to the *Pacesetter* series published by Macmillan, "in terms of their symbolic positioning within the cultural landscape, we don't think of those books as African literature. They are market literature, with its connotation of low culture" (n.p). She argues for a re-evaluation of the genre as a cultural and artistic tool, as well as for its economic significance.

In conclusion, this article is guided by the belief that the African romance genre provides a metric for reading the changing landscape of African literature—that an analysis of the popular literature trends in Africa is a reflection of the local economies of the book industry because it acts as a measure of the publishing and reading landscape. The local publishing scene, represented here by the experimental publishing and marketing project of the Ankara *Valentine's Day Anthology* is heavily invested in the curation of its own audiences with an aim to expand not only the economic markets for the texts but also the readership radius as a future investment. Further, the careful curation of the project with writers drawn from different writing backgrounds allows for the blurring of genre boundaries in a project that sheds light on the market translation of the effects of genre hierarchies in literary criticism. It is a snap shot of how the African literary canon might look like if it were not confined to genres and hierarchies. The anthology project demonstrates the breaking of these hierarchies by demystifying the notion of high versus low cultures through a series of interrelated texts focused on challenging genre norms at various levels. In the end, to quote Gikandi, these short stories demonstrate how writers deploy inherited forms and at the same time "molest the inherited literary order" in order to fit their specific contexts (311).

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[1] The electoral commission later postponed the General Elections by six weeks to March 28th, 2015.

[2] Translation: "thirst for sentimental literature."

[3] Personal investigation of second-hand street bookstores in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Kampala, and Nairobi.

[4] https://globalpressjournal.com/africa/kenya/kenyans-flock-roadside-vendors-selling-cheap-secondhand-books-spur-reading-boom/

[5] According to the exchange rate at the time, this amount translates to about USD3 per copy.

[6] "Fish" by Chuma Nwokolo was translated into Pidgin as "Fish" by Victor Ehikameno, and the English version was read by the author while the Pidgin version was read by Eghosa Imasuen; Hawa Jande Golakai's "Candy Girl" was translated into Kpelle as "Nɛ́nii Nɛ́ɛ́," where the English audio was provided by Helene Cooper while Yarkpai Keller read the translated version; "The Idea Is to Be Sealed In" by Binyavanga Wainaina was translated into Kiswahili as "Ni Wazo la Kufunika" by Elieshi Lema and Billy Kahora read the English version while Mukoma wa Ngugi read the Kiswahili translation; "Woman in the Orange Dress" by Sarah Ladipo-Manyika was translated into Yoruba by Kola Tubosun as "Arábìnrin Inú Asọ Ọlọsàn" with the author providing the audio for the English version and Yemisi Aribisala reading the Yoruba translation; Toni Kan's "Cotyledons" was translated into Igbo as "Cotyledons" by Chikodili Emelumadu who also read the Igbo version while Dike Chukwumerije read the English version; Abubakar Adam Ibrahim translated his story "Painted Love" into Hausa as "Launukan So," and the both versions were read by Elnathan

John; and Edwige-Renée Dro translated her short story into French under the same title, “Solitaire” and provided both audios.

[7] https://africainwords.com/2015/01/16/ankara-press-qa-with-publisher-bibi-bakare-yusuf/

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