Introduction

Literature, arguably Africa’s best known contribution to world scholarship, steadily gained greater exposure outside the continent in the last half of the twentieth century. To date, Africa has produced four Nobel prizewinners in literature: Wole Soyinka (1986), Naguib Mahfouz (1988), Nadine Gordimer (1991) and J. M. Coetzee (2003). While it is obvious that there are several hundred African writers producing works in European and African languages, as well as Arabic, only a small number actually reach a wide audience, either within Africa itself or without. The reason for this is that problems exist at all points along the writer-to-reader cycle: in publishing, distributing, gaining a readership, and being critically received. Some of these issues have endured longer than others, and there have been varied strategies to overcome them, some successful, others less so. In the face of these challenges, certain emerging trends offer exciting opportunities for change in the publication, dissemination and reading of African literary works, both on the continent and outside it.

This paper will briefly describe some of the constraints that African literary production continues to face in trying to reach a wide audience, and looks at the
possibilities electronic publishing may offer to help meet the challenges. In particular, the paper will describe how an electronic resource currently being developed by the author, one whose main objective is to help bridge the various divides that exist between creative writers and their audiences, could provide a possible solution. But before that, let us briefly examine the meaning behind the title of the paper.

**Anansi and Electronic Publishing: Making Connections**

Anyone familiar with West African oral literature would know about the character of one of its popular folktales, Kweku Anansi (or Ananse) the Spider. In addition to the many stories about him across the region, he is the subject of a modern play, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, by the Ghanaian playwright Efua Sutherland. His web also stretches across the Atlantic to feature in the folk tales of many countries in the Americas such as Jamaica, Belize, Trinidad and Tobago, and the South Sea islands of the United States where he actually changes sex to become “Aunty (An) Nancy.” In most Anansi tales, he is depicted as a trickster who finds himself in difficult situations but manages to extricate himself out of them by either outwitting the powerful, unsuspecting and gullible, or by morphing from human to spider form and climbing out of reach. These unsavory character traits notwithstanding, Anansi should also be recognized for his resourcefulness and ability to creatively adapt to new situations. Indeed, some Caribbean cultural scholars have compared these qualities, that is, the ability to “survive and thrive under debilitating circumstances,” be it through con artistry or strength of character, as typifying the essence of Caribbean peoples, especially Jamaican (Edmonds 28).
The story of how Anansi became the carrier of stories holds some significance for this paper. It is said that he wanted to break the Sky God’s monopoly over stories so that beings on earth could tell and enjoy listening to them. The Sky God agreed to give Anansi the stories in exchange for bringing the python, leopard, hornet and fairy to him, a dangerous and seemingly impossible task for a wispy spider. Through guile and wit, however, he delivered them all to the god who kept his side of the bargain and gave Anansi the stories.

The inspiration for the title of this paper comes from some of the admirable qualities of Anansi. It uses two of his positive attributes, folkloric and real – his ability to meet new challenges with creative options, and his web-building skills to connect interstices -- as a metaphor to highlight the way in which the World Wide Web is being used to overcome some of the challenges of disseminating African literary information across and outside of Africa. Put differently, this article capitalizes on the image of Anansi as a) the conduit through which stories were brought to a new audience, and b) as a strategic thinker who seeks out new solutions by either circumventing traditional views and perceptions or infusing them with new ideas. In this case, the new possibilities opened up by electronic publishing – easier access to information, potentially reaching more users, flexible delivery options, a professional group stepping out of its traditional roles and taking on new ones as publishers – can all be described as Anansi-like responses and solutions.

The Web project presented in this paper seeks to bridge the divide for those who have little or no access to, or knowledge about, current African literary writing, and tries to create a space where writers, be they in Africa or elsewhere, can learn about each
other’s literary output and pertinent new developments in the field, and give readers worldwide a more complete picture of the African literary landscape. Like Anansi, it is hoped the Literary Map of Africa (LMA) will democratize information about the works of African writers. The database also highlights an example of a new publishing paradigm that involves libraries: it was funded by a library association, the American Library Association’s Carnegie-Whitney grant, it is being developed by a librarian, and will be hosted by the Ohio State University Libraries.

**Literary Publishing in Africa: A Brief Outline**

To gain a better understanding of the challenges to publishing alluded to earlier in this paper, we shall briefly outline the path literary publishing in Africa has taken. The rapid growth of African literature and the early appetite for it has been largely credited to Heinemann’s African Writers Series (AWS), launched in 1962 with four titles -- Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, Cyprian Ekwensi’s *Burning Grass*, and Kenneth Kaunda’s *Zambia Shall be Free*. Critics have cited a number of reasons for Heinemann’s success. Becky Clarke (2003) attributes it to their being “more imaginative than other publishing houses by establishing centers on the continent in Ibadan, Nairobi, and South Africa, in addition to having a host of agents strategically placed demographically” (164 -165). She further asserts that this robust distribution network in Africa enabled the Europe-based publisher to also tap into the textbook market in Africa, by making the books “available at the major institutional sites [within and outside Africa] of critical reception and evaluation” (165). This strategy ensured a ready market for African writing in educational institutions there, while opening up new ones to an
international readership. Mpe, citing Sambrook and Currey, notes that 80 percent of all sales for AWS titles were in Africa (111). As Niyi Osundare (2002) more vividly declares, it is this effective network that made Achebe a “household name in Africa and the rest of the world,” Ngugi’s *Weep Not Child* “an anthem in Nigerian schools,” and Armah’s *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* “available in every village that had a bookshop” (129).

Their marketing and distribution savvy apart, Mpe believes that Heinemann also stimulated a surge in African literary writing because the AWS became a ready forum where writers could reinterpret their own history, culture and identity. Obviously, the appointment of one of its successful writers, Chinua Achebe, as the general editor did much to attract new literary talent to the series. Within the first five years after its launching, the series had already put out thirty-five titles (Maja-Pearce, 1992), and to 270 between 1972 and 1984. The list further grew when AWS acquired rights to some works originally written in French, and published English translations of, for example, Ferdinand Oyono’s *Houseboy*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *Ambiguous Adventure*, and Ousmane Sembène’s *God’s Bits of Wood* (Mpe). This led to the opening up of another area, francophone African writing, to the African and international English-speaking world.

Indeed, one can say that Heinemann’s success in publishing African writers was at its height by the time the series turned forty in 2002. Not only had it produced works that became classics of the literature and works by the first three African Nobel laureates, but it included other prizewinners on its list (for example, the 1980 Noma Award winner, Mariama Ba, and the 1991 Commonwealth Prize winner, Syl Cheney-Coker), and had the
most number of titles – 11 out of the 70 – on the creative writing list of Africa’s 100 Best Books of the 20th century. (For more information on the entire list, visit the following Web site: http://www.africanreviewofbooks.com/100best/100besttitle.html). It should be noted, however, that Heinemann was not the only non-African publisher with series devoted African literature. Other major European players include Longman, Macmillan, Evans, and Oxford University Press whose short-lived African series debuted with plays by Soyinka in 1963 before folding up in 1976 (Davis, 2005). There were also others in France (Hachette and Seuil, for example), but perhaps Heinemann was by far the leader.

The success of all these publishers in Africa is due largely to the dearth of viable autonomous African publishing houses. The few that still exist continue to be hampered by problems of professionalism, adequate cash flow, effective marketing and distribution strategies across countries and regions in the continent and outside it, and a dwindling number of readers who can afford to buy books for pleasure reading. Helon Habila picks up on this real-life problem and mirrors it in his novel Waiting for an Angel. In the story, Lomba, a journalist and aspiring writer is told in brutal terms by his editor:

Let us assume it is a good book, potentially great. Let us say you’ve found a publisher to publish it – we are talking theory now, because in reality you won’t find a publisher for it, not in this country…You won’t find a publisher in this country because it will be economically unwise for any publisher to waste his scarce paper to publish a novel which nobody would buy… (192).

The Nigerian playwright and novelist Femi Osofisan sums it up like this: “if publishing in Nigeria [or for that matter most African countries] does not ensure good quality production, nor promotion, nor distribution, such that the book is available at least in important bookstores for readers – why then would one want to continue with it?” (1999, 35). While he developed a split-continent plan – choosing to have some of his works
published in Nigeria and the U.K and U.S. – not many Africa-based writers can afford the same luxury of being published in multiple markets.

Additionally, African publishers have tended to focus on the government textbook market, deemed more lucrative and with a ready market than literary fiction which relies on a leisure reading public with disposable income. Not helping the situation either is the thriving market for pirated copies which, while it may be a boon for readers because they are always cheaper, hurts writers by infringing on their copyrights, and publishers by depriving them of legitimate sales. It is therefore does not come as a surprise that, according to veteran publisher Walter Bgoya (1999), there has been a general decline in literary publishing in Africa since the 1980s, one felt most acutely in West Africa. One notable exception he gives is Zimbabwe, which recorded a rise in output during this same period. This surge must obviously have been driven by the opening up of publishing possibilities to the majority population, fueled by the energy of the then newly-independent nation.

This decline notwithstanding, there have been some hopeful signs for the distribution of African literature outside the continent. New markets for works published in Africa are opening up because of ventures such as African Books Collective based in Oxford, U.K., which distributes works by a collective of African publishers in Britain and the United States, and local buying by agents for overseas libraries. But the reliance of Africa-located writers on European and American publishers continues, and the latter’s impact on who gets read, what gets read, and where books are read is still significant.
New Trends in African Literary Publishing

Despite the history of its phenomenal success cited earlier, Heinemann’s parent company Harcourt Brace dropped the bombshell in 2002 that it will discontinue the African Writers Series. They would commission no new works after November 2002, but continue to promote their backlist. Lamenting this turn of events and its implication for English-speaking readers, Nana Yaa Mensah (2003) writes,

For younger writers in Africa, with an infrastructure barely able to support bookselling across borders with neighbours, let alone to Europe and North America, the moratorium is a lifeline cut off. British and Anglophone African readers will go blissfully unaware of the good novels produced last year, this year, perhaps next, in 52 countries.

With regard to the backlist, it has now been converted to an electronic, full-text database by the commercial electronic publisher Proquest, but is not priced cheaply for even many libraries in North America and Europe to buy. To its credit, Proquest has been a good corporate citizen; it made the database available free of charge, or heavily discounted, to African libraries. However, while readers in Africa will have access to all the works, there is no reason to believe that reading off the screen or a handheld device will be popular. And even if this solves the issue of access to already published works, it does not address the burning one Mensah asks of how new works by writers living in Africa and the West will cross the geographic divide in both directions.

Heinemann’s decision, despite its far-reaching consequences for African writers and readers, does not really spell doom for writers and readers living outside Africa. Publishers in the United States and Britain are putting out new titles and reissues mainly aimed at their domestic markets, where African literature is making greater inroads into the college curriculum and the imagination of the general reading public. For example,
Pan Macmillan announced its new imprint, Picador Africa, (*Bookseller* 19 March, 2004). In addition to re-issues of some South African classics, its author list includes diaspora-based writers such as Chris Abani, Moses Isegawa, Alexandra Fuller and Lisa Fugard. In another new development, Africans in the diaspora are also publishing creative works in languages not previously associated with the literature, thereby adding new reading audiences. Examples of this development include new writing in German by Senouvo Zinsou and in Italian by Pap Khouma. Worthy of note also is the renewed appreciation for the literature in France. At the 2006 Paris Salon du Livres book fair, half of the forty featured Francophonie writers were African.

It is beginning to emerge that in this age of globalization, the production and consumption of African literature has simultaneously become both local and diaspora-centered to the extent that the latter may well have outpaced the former. In response to this trend, Ivorian writer Véronique Tadjo poignantly asked in 2002: “Is there going to be an African literature written in the West and fed by the western market on the one hand and an African literature written in Africa and fed by the African market?” (29). No-one would contest that there are indeed two categories of African writers, Africa- and diaspora-based.

She also predicts there will be irreconcilable differences between the Africa- and diaspora-based strands of literary production if nothing is done about the imbalance. Certainly there has been an imbalance in production numbers, as discussed earlier. And it is also true that other differences between both groups of writers are becoming apparent. One is the audience the two groups of writers may be addressing. The opinion is that while many diaspora-based writers may situate their works in an African locale, they
have either added a transnational flavor to their works or have set them works in non-African places, to cater to a more international readership. Examples of this trend are seen in Ben Okri’s *In Arcadia* (2002) whose plot is built around an English film crew, and Chris Abani’s *A Virgin of Flames* (2007) which is set in Los Angeles. These examples seem to be a response to the physical relocations of these writers. However, one could argue the point that there may not be such the sharp rupture Tadjo laments about simply because of differences in the sites of production. Indeed, new, diaspora-based writers such as Helen Oyeyemi and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have both set their works in Nigeria, a sign that they may not yet be ready to disconnect from their literary heritage, as her prediction implies.

The emergence of this new generation of African writers which straddles multiple cultures and locations certainly has implications for the future direction of the literature. Another issue arising from this is the definition of an *African* (or a Ghanaian, Nigerian, or South African etc) writer. It is widely known that some transnational writers such as Ben Okri, Jose Pliya and Kossi Efoui prefer to call their writing “universal” literature which is borderless, unbounded and free to go in whatever cultural direction the authors choose. Being classified as belonging to a world literary tradition, they claim, frees them from the regionalism of being a national writer, and from the constraints of narrow, critical reception and acceptance.

But place of location, not just creative influences, has itself added another layer of complication. For example, Nigerian writers living outside the country are barred from competing for the US $20,000 Nigerian Prize for Literature (Nwachukwu, 2005). This suggests that only Nigerian writers living in the country can truly be called *Nigerian*
writers. This reaction is perhaps a backlash against the case of two US-based writers, Tess Onwueme and Chimalum Nwanko winning the Association of Nigerian Authors’ Prize for drama and poetry respectively in 2002. Transnational writers therefore find themselves in a double bind. They are described in their non-African countries of domicile as African, (sometimes in broader strokes as Black or ethnic writers), or defined as belonging to a particular national literary tradition; and yet that national literary affiliation is being questioned by their birth countries.

**Another New Trend: Libraries as Publishers**

Electronic resources like the *Literary Map of Africa* could play a vital link in trying to draw the diverging literary strands into a more tightly woven fabric. The development and publishing of a Web resource such as this that spans many divides is being made possible by Internet Communication Technology (ICT). This technology has had a great impact on knowledge generation and dissemination, but nowhere is the impact of the digital revolution it spawned more palpable than in developing countries.

Although there are still many limitations on the infrastructure and consequently on access to digital resources in all but a few African countries, the drive to harness and utilize the potential of ICT for scholarship is remarkable. For example, African scholarship is gaining more visibility and recognition across and beyond the continent through e-journal projects by Africa-based institutions like CODESRIA, OSSREA, and Sabinet. Another exciting area of development involves digital theses and dissertations; some projects such as the Database of African Theses and Dissertations (DATAD) are continent-wide, or are undertaken by individual universities, mostly in South Africa.
Electronic publishing is one way that academic libraries in the developed and
developing world are leading the way in the production and dissemination of scholarship. They are expanding their roles beyond the traditional ones of data procurers and keepers, and repositioning themselves as knowledge creators and publishers. In the United States, many African Studies librarians are taking on digital projects, many of which are developed to support the teaching and research needs of their primary constituents. Popular examples include gateways and portals like Africa South of the Sahara
http://library.stanford.edu/africa/ based at Stanford, and the A-Z of African Studies on the Internet at Michigan State University http://www.lib.msu.edu/limb/a-z/az.html. As Limb, the editor of the latter points out, African studies librarians “have compiled a whole new generation of online subject guides to Africa-related Web sites and tutorials,” which alerted commercial publishers to take a closer look at developing research tools on African studies (2004, 154). Other projects are done in collaboration with African institutions. For example, Michigan State University’s Africa Online Digital Library http://www.aodl.org/, built in partnership with L’Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire (IFAN) and the West African Research Center (WARC), both in Senegal, is a repository of digitized collections.

In the U.S, librarians embraced Internet technologies more widely before many other non-IT staff in academia, and are in the frontline in recognizing emerging research trends and user preferences. One trend they spotted early on was their users’ preferences, often solicited through surveys and focus groups, for quick access to a bundle of resources in a digital environment, and preferably through one simple search interface. This user-centeredness, often lacking in commercial publishers’ calculations, has
introduced a new stakeholder’s viewpoint to publishing, and made the intervention of librarians in this arena more meaningful. While mediation between users and information sources remains a service librarians still provide, they have successfully guided their users toward more self-initiation in using these resources. In collaboration with IT professionals, they are applying their professional know-how and insights about user preferences to the creation of new electronic products.

This is indeed a new type of publishing model, different from the traditional one that are more market focused. Libraries are driven more by decisions of how their products will be used rather than who will use them. As the director of publishing at Cornell University Libraries succinctly sums it up, “publishers think of their readers as customers, libraries think of them as users” (in Wittenberg, 2004; emphasis added).

**Developing the Literary Map of Africa**

The *Literary Map of Africa* followed a similar user-centered imperative in the conceptual stages. Users’ viewpoints were taken into consideration from the outset, and these drove the decisions made about content aggregation, content enhancement, and technology. Each of these is discussed in some detail below. The appendix offers illustrative screen captures.

*User Viewpoints on Content*

The targeted users fall into two broad categories, academic and general public. As has been described earlier, one sub-set of each category resides in Africa, and the rationale for creating a product to serve their needs has been discussed already. Closer to home, the primary academic audience is students and instructors of African literature at
The Ohio State University. With regard to the latter, representative viewpoints came from selected instructors. Some of the views solicited include:

- types of general information about African literature they expected their students to have
- kinds of research projects they assign
- how the product would enhance their teaching and research
- what value added features they would like to see in such a product.

The student perspective was not directly solicited, but compiled from my personal experiences during reference interactions and course-related library instruction sessions, library literature on literary reference, and results from various studies on students’ preferences and research habits in a digital environment. The conventional wisdom is that most students doing literary research typically seek biographical information and critical analyses of specific works, in varied formats, and preferably retrieved through a single or federated search. These views, together with responses from African literature professors, informed the type of content and value add-ons to build into the database.

Additionally, because users these days come to expect some level of interaction with information systems they use, the LMA will provide features to meet that need. The map of Africa is clickable so that users will get, in one click on a country, a list of authors associated with it. They will also be encouraged, via a web form, to provide new content for the bibliography (verifiable, of course). They may suggest new author names, new book titles or other pertinent news items from local sources, and offer corrections where necessary. In the next phase of development, a collaborative space will be added where they will be encouraged to collaboratively build new content such as individual author
Content Aggregation

My position as the African Studies librarian and a one-time instructor in African literature converged in my role as content aggregator for this project. The *LMA* is a biobibliographical database whose core content, described earlier, will be a mix of resources and formats. Materials for the bibliography are selected and evaluated for their research value from print and electronic reference sources in libraries and free Web sites. Each writer’s page will comprise the following: biographical information, country of affiliation, and a list of primary works. When applicable, a list of selected reference and critical sources, interviews, dissertations and free Web sites will be added. The idea is to integrate disparate information sources in a seamless infrastructure, rather like a subject portal that aggregates and customizes resources via a single Web site. Here too, the viewpoint of all users is paramount and is reflected in the selection and diversity of resources, the scope of content coverage, and multiple levels of use of the resource.

Content Enhancement

While the objective of the database is to offer a range of resources, great consideration was given to easy accessibility. Given that the product will be a discovery tool, it was important to develop metadata to aid searching. Working in conjunction with a metadata librarian, the first determination was to come up with simple keywords for searching, which most Web searchers prefer. For this, we drew on elements of the
Dublin Core set, which offers a way “as small and simple as possible to allow a non-specialist to create simple descriptive records for information resources easily and inexpensively, while providing for effective retrieval of those resources in the networked environment.”

The basic search terms we decided upon are author name (including pseudonyms), title of works, country (of author’s affiliation), and work type (such as literary genre or critical work). Consideration is given to users who would be unfamiliar with author names, so the search function allows for full and partial names for which the system will provide levels of matching. Users would also be able to combine searches like genre and country to get a list of, for example, all writers in the database from Sierra Leone who write plays. They would also be able to limit searches by language of work and gender.

There will also be another page devoted to literary magazines, reviews, and creative writing spaces online to enhance the user experience. More value-added features may be added in the next phase of development. One is a searchable sub-database of broad thematic categories for only the most popular or widely studied works. It promises to be quite an attractive enhancement because it would allow users to identify works by themes. If added, the terms would be a mix of LC subject terms and specific project-developed ones. This option is inspired by FictionFinder, a prototype project of OCLC based on FRBR (Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records, an IFLA 1998 recommendation). FRBR is built around the entity-relationship model and divides entities into three groups: products of intellectual or artistic endeavor (publications), the entities responsible for their creation (as in author), and subjects of the product (characters, themes, place names etc). These subject features are only now beginning to emerge as a
possibility in traditional library catalogues. Although FRBR is not fully adopted in the *Literary Map of Africa*, a modified form consisting of the first two relationships and added ones --country of association and work type (genre) -- provide some depth to the content and search experience.

Another possible enhancement is to make use of global positioning technology such as Google Earth to help users locate countries. Already, the database offers links to background information on each country.

**Database Development**

The task of translating the project’s concept into a database and developing a delivery platform with an eye on simplicity on both the data input and public-side display was handed over to the web design and database development professionals. They came up ideas for a main page with a recognizable logo, provided off-site links to country information from the CIA WorldFact Book, and developed a clickable map of Africa that serves as a browseable country and national literature list. The main features include:

- A web form for inputting and updating data. This is dynamic, so new information added to the database immediately shows up in the public interface. This also makes editing and revising content less labor-intensive.
- Fast and simple search and display modes
- Easily recognizable navigational aids
- A web form for user suggestions and comments
In addition to developing the database, its search interface and the delivery platform, one important aspect this team had to decide upon was the hosting and archiving of the site. The database will reside in The Ohio State University Libraries server. Being a dynamic resource that will be constantly updated, questions about how it will be archived proved less simple. The decision made so far is that it will initially be deposited in The Ohio State University’s institutional repository, the Knowledge Bank, built using MIT’s open source platform, DSpace. At the time of writing, it does not accommodate dynamic pages, so older versions (static) will be archived, as updated versions become available. This will ensure some stability for the content.

**Conclusion**

Projects such as the *Literary Map of Africa* serve multiple purposes. In a single Web environment, the database brings together all categories of writers, the pioneers of African literature, the newcomers and others in between. Its aim is to pull together the geographically scattered voices of writers, and give equal space to canonical writers on the one hand, and those struggling to reach wider audiences on the other. In this respect, the *LMA* will offer users a more panoramic view of the African literary landscape. As a reference tool, it will serve both as a site for doing scholarly research and for current awareness. As a library-based initiative whose main objective is to offer free access to information in the pursuit of learning, it will further chip away at the stranglehold of commercial publishing gatekeepers, and secure another foothold for libraries in the publishing arena.
The *Literary Map of Africa* will join a band of projects on disparate subjects and multiple foci whose most important aim is to make scholarship on and from Africa more accessible. The only comprehensive database to date that is free, it joins more region-focused projects such as The KwaZulu-Natal Literary Map (http://literature.kzn.org.za/lit/) and LIMAG: *Littératures du Maghreb* (http://www.limag.refer.org/), and a host of simple, class-related ones developed by university instructors. Together with other subject initiatives and projects such as the African Journals Online (http://www.ajol.com.info), the Political Communication Web Archive (http://www.crl.edu/Content/PolitWebRelatedProjs.htm), users in Africa are being pointed toward scholarly resources and offered “an opportunity to ‘freely’ roam the centre [versus the periphery] of knowledge and tap into it” (Teferra 166). The *Literary Map of Africa* is yet another concrete attempt at bridging the many divides between Africa and the rest of the world, in this case, the literary.
Appendix A

Project Main Page
Appendix B

Sample Writer Page

Aidoo, (Christina) Ama Ata 1942 -

Country Information: Ghana

Primary Works:
- Dilemma of a Ghost. Longman, 1965 (Play)
- No Sweetness Here. Longman, 1970 (Short Stories)
- Arvaa. Longman, 1970 (Play)
- Someone Talking to Someone. College Press, 1985 (Poetry)
- The Eagle and the Chickens and Other Stories: Admire, 1989 (Children’s)

Selected Reference and Critical Works:
- Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo. Azodo, Ada and Gay Wiltz, eds. Africa World Press, 1999 (Book)

Web Sites:

- Ama Ata Aidoo
  - African Writers: Writers of Ghana
Notes


3. For more information about the Dublin Core initiative and its uses, visit the following Web site: http://dublincore.org/documents/usageguide/

References


