



BOOK REVIEW

James Yékú, *Cultural Netizenship: Social Media, Popular Culture, and Performance in Nigeria*. Indiana University Press, 2022, 292 pp.

African scholarship's digital turn has been nothing less than exciting and refreshing. In the past four decades, digital media has introduced groundbreaking platforms and modes of self-expression. A wave of recent articles and a monograph within African literary and cultural studies have emerged in response to this proliferation of African digital cultures, addressing the relationship between African literature and new media,¹ how the seeming placelessness of the World Wide Web is rooted in local contexts,² the emergence and importance of born-digital literary platforms,³ as well as examinations of how the web enables African writers to challenge stereotypes.⁴

In this regard, James Yékú's book, *Cultural Netizenship: Social Media, Popular Culture, and Performance in Nigeria*, is a welcome addition to scholarship. *Cultural Netizenship* adds incredible depth and vitality to this digital move in African cultural studies. Yékú provides a nuanced exploration of Nigeria's "digital lifeworlds" (4), and he situates netizenship, which is "based on the performance of citizenship through popular forms" (6), as a "deconstructive practice that uncovers how people on the fringes of political power use digital media" (5). At the heart of the project is an examination of "online cultural productions and their disruption of postcolonial abjection in Nigeria" (236), which highlights Yékú's argument that social media has a political and performative function. Yékú emphasizes the interplay between social media, popular culture, and political discourse (236). In doing so, he delves into the dynamics of online rhetoric by "digital subjects" and its influence on the cultural and political landscapes in Nigeria.

¹ Shola Adenekan, *African Literature in the Digital Age: Class and Sexual Politics in New Writing from Nigeria and Kenya* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2021).

² Stephanie Bosch Santana, "From Nation to Network: Blog and Facebook Fiction from Southern Africa," *Research in African Literatures* 49, no. 1 (2018): 187–208.

³ Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed, "Reclaiming African Literature in the Digital Age: An Exploration of Online Literary Platforms," *Critical African Studies* 9, no. 3 (2017): 377–90 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2017.1371618>).

⁴ Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang, "Digital Cities and Villages: African Writers and a Sense of Place in Short Online Fiction," *Journal of African Media Studies* 15, no. Shifting African Narratives, Intellect (2023): 217–29 (https://doi.org/10.1386/jams_00101_1), and Shola Adenekan and Helen Cousins, "Class Online: Digital Representations of African Middle-Class Identity," *Postcolonial Text* 9, no. 3 (2014): 3, www.postcolonial.org (<https://www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/1779>).

The six chapters of the book focus on a wide corpus within African media studies, including social media, 419 scambaiting, internet memes and reaction GIFs, Instagram and Twitter comedians, activist selfies and self-portraits, online cartoons and political caricatures, and digital actors. For example, chapter one introduces readers to a relatively well-known, if understudied, figure—the scammer. The scambaiter, which Yékú describes as an Afropolitan anti-hero, “designate(s) the inverse of the supposedly culturally savvy, educated, global African subject who sometimes aspires to Western ideas in their performance of hybrid identities and localities” (53). Through his examination of this Afropolitan anti-hero, Yékú deconstructs stereotypes and instead underpins the figure of the scambaiter with a racialized and gendered power consisting of a “multiplicity of identities” (53). As another example, chapter five turns toward humor and examines how social media enables “a festival of laughter” in Nigerian digital culture (181). Here, Yékú turns to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram and shows how there is a “carnavalesque aesthetic at play in the performance of Nigerian humor on social media” (181). What is impressive is that Yékú gives considerable attention to African media forms, which are sorely unexamined in much of popular culture and media studies research. Humor, Yékú suggests, enables users to “poke fun at social and political hierarchies without the need for any permission, nuancing their subversions in an uncensored regime of populist power” (182). What is also quite significant is that although this monograph roots itself in a Nigerian national context, Yékú brings to the fore the ways in which Nigerian social media users engage with and satirize the political ongoing in other parts of the world. For example, Yékú provides a close reading of a Twitter image that has placed Donald J. Trump and Hilary Clinton’s faces in “Yoruba party clothes.” He analyzes this satirical image as an act of humor that suggests “the showbiz dimensions of Trump’s presidential politics” (192). Yékú further illustrates that the image stages “intersecting local and global identities, pointing to the many ways Nigerian netizens used cultural and media forms to symbolically participate in discourses on the US elections” (192). The internet thus becomes a space for the local voices of Nigerians to become part of a global discourse on the internet.

With the number of different conceptual threads and the wide-ranging citational practices *Cultural Netizenship* gathers together, it is in the moments in which Yékú hones in on how analog social hierarchies and inequities (e.g., capitalism, a failed post-colonial state) have been absorbed into the digital realm (e.g., #EndSARS and the #BringBackOurGirls movements) that the postcolonial and political concerns of the text come through with vivid clarity. This holds true throughout the monograph, starting with the introduction where Yékú introduces the phrase “digital subaltern” to denote those “without access to the internet” as well as those who, despite being marginalized netizens, were at the “margins of Nigerian sociocultural conversations and political history” (25). These individuals “now use digital media and cultures to express their voice in the public arena” (25). This switch in focus to the use of digital media by those at the margins enables Yékú to directly contend with the power dynamics within culture and politics and the unequal and sometimes inaccessible terrain of digital media itself. This argument is echoed in the latter chapters where Yékú writes

that “cultural netizenship is the space where everyday people confront oppressive power structures and wherein the procurement of attention and follower-ship often reinscribes capitalistic instincts” (229). Although Yékú’s monograph focuses on Nigeria, his expansion of the netizen figure, the internet citizen, offers a broader theoretical understanding of subversion and agency in the broader digital world. His rearticulation of the term “netizen” as “cultural netizen,” which is someone who “incorporates social media’s visual aesthetics” (6), is what enables Yékú’s close attention to the performance of popular rhetorics on the internet.

James Yékú’s *Cultural Netizenship* is a timely book that offers valuable insights into the dynamics of social media, popular culture, and political discourse in Nigeria. Scholars of popular culture and media studies will likely find that this book offers new and vital insights that not only highlight the transformative power of digital platforms but also encourage critical reflection on their societal impacts.

Ama B. Adwetewa-Badu 

Department of English, Washington University in St. Louis,
St. Louis, MO, USA

amabemma@wustl.edu

doi:10.1017/pli.2024.2

Author biography. Ama B. Adwetewa-Badu is an assistant professor of African and Black diasporic literature at Washington University in St. Louis. She has special interests in late 20th to 21st-century poetry and poetics, the digital humanities, public humanities, new media, and technology. She is the director of the Global Poetics Project (see <https://globalpoetics.org/>).