

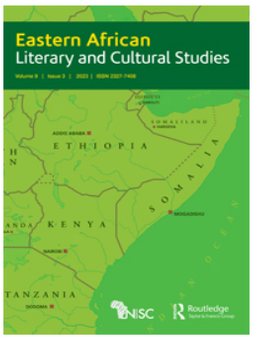
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Headnote Roundtable review of Shola Adenekans African Literature in the Digital Age 2021

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African Literatures and the Question of Digitality

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EDITORIAL

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Headnote: Roundtable review of Shola Adenekan's *African Literature in the Digital Age* (2021) African Literatures and the Question of Digitality

Shola Adenekan's *African Literature in the Digital Age: Class and Sexual Politics in New Writing from Nigeria and Kenya* is the ninth title in the series African Articulations, published by James Currey. This title is an eloquent embodiment of the series' preoccupation with cutting edge research on Africa's cultural texts, practices, networks, and social encounters. In recent decades, digital media have opened up innovative platforms and modes of self-fashioning which generate new publics as well as new scope for experimentation with genres in African writing. The intersection between the digital realm, the literary publishing world, and everyday life as perceived by contemporary Kenyan and Nigerian writers is the core preoccupation of *African Literature in the Digital Age*. Adenekan notes the ways in which the digital age has reconfigured the politics of celebrity, which in turn, have had major implications for the figure of the African writer: 'we live in an age of digital celebrity, where one's cultural currency depends on Instagram followership and Facebook likes' (Adenekan 2021, 3). Adenekan gives the example of how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's use of YouTube, Twitter and Instagram has helped craft and solidify her position as a feminist literary icon; while channelling her ideas across multiple platforms; a subject Steven Almquist (2022) has explored in detail elsewhere. Interestingly, some of Adichie's work on these platforms, such as TedTalks published on YouTube, make their way back into book format, both print and digital, in ways that exemplify James Yeku's (2020) reflections on the primacy of print or what he theorises as the print imaginary in African literature. Along similar lines, Adenekan considers digital platforms a debut platform for a subsequent transition to print, in a dynamic similar to performance artists who test their new work with a live audience before printing or recording. Here, cyberspace 'serves as a test-bed for work that may later go into print' (Adenekan 2021, 57). An example explored in the study is writer and digital entrepreneur Joy Isi Bewaji's online project, *Story of my Vagina*, which brought together writers working in different genres, reflecting on different dimensions of women's sexual embodiment. This project moved across various social media platforms before transitioning into a book, and later still, a play staged at a Lagos theatre (133).

African Literature in the Digital Age traces literary networks in print literature in colonial and newly independent Nigeria and Kenya as mediated by print media, literary magazines, and arts and culture clubs such as Mbari in Nigeria and Chemi Chemi in Kenya (31), as offering a blueprint of sorts for digital literary networks. The value of a digital literary network lies in its capacities to reveal power dynamics in global literary networks; articulate literary history and development; offer insights into the workings of class in African literary circles and reveal what Adenekan terms a 'digital network aesthetic' produced by African writers (25). For instance, he explores the Kenyan Koroga project's use of

poetry and photography to experiment with aesthetic approaches and 'chronicle the quotidian of twenty-first century life' (38). Here, Koroga project's digital postcards adopt intermedial frames by twinning photography and poetry: 'network aesthetics in the digital age can best be appreciated through a transmedia format — that is a combination of many different media forms across multiple platforms' (40).

African Literature in the Digital Age emphasises the role of digital platforms in building and sustaining networks of production, critique, and marketing of African popular cultural productions. At another level, Adenekan argues that the digital space provides a platform for decloseting quotidian queer lives and desires by turning queer private moments towards political activism (87). Far from being novel though, Adenekan argues, this turn to the erotic recalls older African oral genres in which oral poets and musicians enjoyed poetic licence to be sexually explicit in their work, within certain contexts (87). Erotic narratives online thus become 'a means of querying current attitudes and a way to reprise the erotic aspect of Nigerian history that has become subjugated by the project of colonial modernity' (134).

Turning to questions of quotidian everyday life, Adenekan notes that unlike first generation African writers who applied themselves to contesting racist portrayals of Africans by drawing on tropes of heroic and revolutionary figures, contemporary African digital writing prioritises the ordinary and uses the quotidian to contest 'past distortions and simplifications, by placing Africans doing ordinary things at the very core of creative writing' (144). Social media sites, structured around a consistent flow of updates, shares, likes, and retweets, forms an archive of everyday human experience — or, as he puts it, 'modernity in the twenty-first century revolves around digital everydayness' (146). Further, 'creative artists make the commonplace sublime when poetry and fictional narratives are foregrounded in everyday objects, sights and sounds, because objects invoke sentiments, judgement and attachments which we communicate to others' (146). This turn to the quotidian enjoys a certain elasticity that enables the repurposing of old genres to digital possibilities, as seen in the example of an Oriki-style praise poem celebrating Wole Soyinka's 84th birthday, by Nigerian poet Gbolahan, which, though in English, is easily legible as an Oriki to those conversant with Yoruba culture. To Adenekan, the digital parameters of audio-visual capabilities enable a reprisal of pre-print culture poetic traditions (156).

Class seems to be a thorny issue on the digital platforms and texts explored in *African Literature in the Digital Age.* Here, we see a strong attempt to distance Kenya and Nigeria from portraits of poverty and precarity which are seen as too one-dimensional. Still, Adenekan emphasises that consistent access to the digital is primarily a middle-class privilege, which in turn, inflects the kinds of stories and experiences depicted in much of this writing. As he puts it, the dangers of a single middle class story haunts digital African literature (167). In some ways, the turn to the quotidian, coupled with the anxieties of showcasing middle-class lifeworlds in Kenya and Nigeria would seem to point to a self-reflexive turn that, while remarkable in countering stereotypical, one-dimensional framings of Africa, simultaneously poses the new challenge of increasingly atomised narratives that shift attention from structural, systemic, and collective dynamics at play in the production of harm, precarity and narrowing down of possibilities for the majority.

In what follows, three scholars, each an authority in contemporary trends in African literatures — Amatoritsero Ede, Stephanie Bosch Santana and Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang — offer a reading of *African Literature in the Digital Age,* contextualising it in a range of debates on African digital literatures and mapping some of the questions provoked by reading this monograph. The roundtable closes with a response from Shola Adenekan, grappling with some of the questions tabled. Ultimately, what is clear is that *African*

Literature in the Digital Age is not only one of the first book-length monographs on digital African writing; it is also an important launchpad for what Ede terms a subfield in African literature, that holds great promise.

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Disclosure Statement

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