

BOOK REVIEW

Review: *Everything Is Sampled*

Akin Adeşokan, *Everything Is Sampled: Digital and Print Mediations in African Arts and Letters*. Indiana University Press, 2023, 371 pp.

In 2017, the scholar Rhonda Cobham-Sander, together with Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang, Stephanie Bosch Santana, and Shola Adenekan, invited several of us scholars working at that time on African digital cultures and literary studies to participate in a symposium on “Digital Africas: Texts, Publics, Genre” which held at Amherst College. Also attending that symposium were Ato Quayson who keynoted on the topic of aesthetic judgement in the digital era, and Akin Adesokan whose topic “Shifting Margins: New African Textual Practices” Biodun Jeyifo responded to. I believe that the Amherst symposium has been a catalyst to the few scholarly monographs on African digital cultures, including Akin Adesokan’s *Everything Is Sampled*, which should be taken seriously for the reasons I shall outline below.

Everything Is Sampled lingers on an array of cultural forms drawn from several media, spatial and temporal frameworks to meditate on the enduring questions of textuality, artistic valuations, and authorship in African literary and cultural studies. As processes of *mediation* are central to the tome’s argumentation, they become the critical portals into what the author expertly articulates as a diachronic and translocal focus on, among other topics such as print culture and technologies, the ontology of digitality and its several affordances for artistic and creative practices.

What is effected through this approach is a solid offering that simultaneously queries and clarifies what constitutes esthetic formations under the conditions of digital freedoms and constraints. But the literary, though distinct and autonomous as one mode of several artistic endeavors, remains foregrounded as part of a system of relations in which it shares intimacy with other art forms and institutional processes. Whether literature, music, or curated texts of visual culture, these art forms, as Adesokan argues, do not exhaust the range and depth of African textual production, with each attaining “preeminence in unresolved tensions with its ‘others,’ those so excluded that a given art form may rise to that level” (16). A major strength of the book may, therefore, be locatable in its comparative and frequently nuanced analysis of these artistic forms and artifacts, including Nollywood films, opera, festivals, and blogging. The two parts of the book which are unpacked in six chapters explore modalities of artistic praxes such as curation, composition, adaptation, remix, and platform—overlapping

modes that are all apropos to the author's critiques of several technological transformations that enable the reconstitution of authorship and textuality.

At the same time, an enormous archive of scholarship on digital modes of creative expression exists that *Everything Is Sampled* leaves out, but that omission does not disqualify it from the kind of attention it deserves. It could engage more with other scholars and projects working in the vanguard of digital cultures and media due to the book's focus on intermediality and new textual practices, in order to emphasize the implicit conversation the author appears to be having with these other works. For instance, Jacob Edmund's *Make It the Same* explores forms of cultural and artistic iterations through poetry,¹ which Edmund suggests is—rather than its assumed singular context of production—increasingly being sampled and made from other texts through repetitive strategies like appropriation, translation, remediation, and performance. These are some of the key ideas Adesokan similarly wrestles with in his book's treatment of the “historicity of form” and the loaded assumptions that support the constitution of textualities (303). Closer to the African cultural landscape, texts such as Shola Adenekan's *African Literature in The Digital Age*,² and James Yeku's *Cultural Netizenship* make analogous claims,³ drawing on different but interrelated histories and spaces of artistic assemblages. In fairness to the book, Adesokan examines Adenekan's book but even that singular focus elides much more than what has already been offered on the “possibilities for digital artistic effervescence beyond and within print” (33). The remediation of Nollywood films as internet memes on social media platforms which Yeku discusses to demonstrate the centrality of remix culture to African artistic forms in the digital era may have been generative for the book's argument.

All of this is to say that the scholarship on digital technology—as it currently intertwines with the reproductive esthetics of different forms of African textual practices and expressive cultures could be as robustly scrutinized as the more traditional dimensions of African literature and print media which Adesokan, in his characteristically penetrative style, impressively undertakes. To close by returning to the Amherst symposium, I do think *Everything Is Sampled* could center some of the other works that both informed, and was inspired by, that gathering more frontally, particularly Adenekan's which is foundational to what many of us now write about. There is a significant focus on digital mediation and how it produces new texts, genres, and publics in *Everything Is Sampled*, so ignoring or cursorily engaging with the extensive body of work already done on these topics, which the Amherst event emphasized, offers an incomplete picture of an important subfield of African literature.


But we also cannot forget, as the author suggests, that *Everything Is Sampled* is itself a scholarly curation, and every act of curation bears marks of absences.

¹ Jacob Edmund, *Make It the Same: Poetry in the Age of Global Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

² Shola Adenekan, *African Literature in the Digital Age: Class and Sexual Politics in New Writing from Nigeria and Kenya* (Suffolk, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2021).

³ James Yékú, *Cultural Netizenship: Social Media, Popular Culture, and Performance in Nigeria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022).

Hence, “the ideas, aims, objectives, calculations, and negotiations informing the choice, clustering, and exclusion of texts, authors, and genres operate in the relationships between the ethical principles of African art and the various institutional forces at work in the production and circulation of artistic forms” (27). A book cannot, of course, sample every existing perspective, since in the case of Adesokan’s remarkable volume, there is a solid body of other critical ideas—from the works of Benjamin, Irele, and Greenblatt to Barber, and Gitelman—that constitutes the animating impulse of *Everything Is Sampled*. The result of both the exclusions of the book and the presence of these canonical scholars is a unique text that exemplifies how African literatures can be made critically legible as it circulates in a digital ecology that shapes its textual ontologies.

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