

Politics and Performative Agency in Nigerian Social Media

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By

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I examine the ways in which social media in Nigeria functions through online signifying practices as a strategy of demarginalization and subaltern resistance. I engage with this perspective by framing Web 2.0 platforms as enablers of citizens' right to public and performative speech. Interested in the ways in which netizens imagine the nation and perform political selves and identities through viral and popular images on social media, my dissertation underpins a reading of social media that is grounded in an expanded conception of speech, visual and/or verbal. This approach enables me to take cognizance of the voices and perspectives secured by the decentralized capacity of digital media for everyday citizens with access to the Internet. Engaging with how social media re-centers alternative perspectives to prevailing orthodoxies, I explore the ways in which marginal groups, mostly relegated to the periphery of governmental power, emerge in performative spaces of public discourses through digital cultural signifiers such as the selfie, viral Internet memes, and humorous political cartoons posted online. I show that despite the limitations of cyberspace and the uneven access to internet technologies in some parts of Nigeria, social media is a discursive, if not contested, space of cultural production from which postcolonial subjects 'author' media narratives that revise, resist, and challenge exclusion and marginality.

By analyzing the significations of user-generated cultural forms, mostly fictional images (Internet memes) and actual performative representations (the selfie) produced as vectors of digital activism and resistance, the dissertation highlights the varied ways in which social media functions as a rearticulating mechanism for a more inclusive appearance of young people and women in Nigeria's public sphere. I analyze the production and circulation of these images within a framework that positions them as supplemental performative strategies to digital

activism. Extrapolating the economy of meanings inherent in these images begins, for me, by unsettling the postmodern assumption that mediatized culture is futile for resistance. The refutation of such arguments is necessary to consolidate the claim that the capacity for agency and representation, which social media affords excluded or oppressed populations is more pertinent than the positivist and teleological expectations some scholars have of digital articulations of dissent.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate *Politics and Performative Agency in Nigerian Social Media* to Kemi, Iwalewa, and God—
whose grace gives me wings to fly.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: THE LIBERTY OF APPEARING

Social media in Nigeria functions through online popular images as a strategy of demarginalization and subaltern resistance, enabling a field of cultural production, as Pierre Bourdieu might frame it, that is defined by tensions and negotiations. My dissertation addresses this idea by framing Web 2.0 platforms as enablers of citizens' right to public and performative speech. I am interested in the question: what are the effects of imagining the nation and performing political selves and identities through signifying practices such as viral hashtags, Internet memes and the selfie on social media? My response to this query is grounded in an expanded conception of speech, visual and/or verbal, that takes cognizance of the voices and perspectives secured by the decentralized capacity of digital media for everyday citizens with access to the Internet. Its apparent democratic outlook notwithstanding, the Nigerian state practises a politics of exclusion that largely affects the masses, especially youths and women, who are largely unrepresented in both actual governance and the public sphere.

For most of its post-colonial history, Nigeria has witnessed more military governments than democratically elected administrations. The brutish and oppressive exercise of power during this period of military rule can be likened to what Giorgio Agamben locates in the sovereign sphere of totalitarian regimes, including the ban on human life through the circulation and mechanisms of absolute power (53). Typical of many autocratic countries, the militarization of society extended at the period to the regulation of thought, free speech, and culture, with a large section of working-class people massively underrepresented in governance or in official political discourses. The military era saw a complete ban on political activities, with the Abacha government of the 1990s continuing the dictatorial politics of previous military regimes and jailing social activists and journalists without trial (Babatope 2000). Despite the return to democracy in 1999, there is still an

enormous concentration of power in the hands of a few in the political class who attempt to maintain the old military culture of political corruption and exclusion of large section of citizens from the public sphere. I hope to show how digital technologies remedy this situation by framing social media users as legitimate “authors” of subaltern meanings and alternative sites of cultural and political knowledge in contemporary Nigeria.

The subaltern, initially from Antonio Gramsci’s conception of it in terms of class consciousness, non-hegemonic groups, and economic relations, is a keyword in postcolonial studies that I am using to designate this population of disempowered citizens who, before social media, found themselves in the margins of Nigerian sociocultural conversations and political history. While this work is also alert to the status of the subaltern in the framework of the ideas of Ranajit Guha and his cohorts in the Subaltern Studies Collective, the central focus of the term is its manifestation in digital contexts. In this dissertation, I describe the digital subaltern as an online subject that gains visibility and speech by coopting user-based media to write self and agency into the history of political and cultural processes. Gayatri Spivak’s essay on the female subaltern in the historiographical framework of South-East Asian colonialist politics adds to the concept of both Gramsci and Guha. Like Spivak’s idea that the female subaltern cannot speak and articulate any knowledge or agency because of a culturally designed lack of access to hegemonic spaces, the voice and perspectives of many Nigerian young people and women before social media was inadmissible in the public sphere.

Although much of the content I am studying are the cultural productions of people between age 18 and 35, I also draw relevant examples from the creative social media posts of other everyday Nigerians being followed in network communities by these young individuals. According to statistics from the CIA World Factbook, of the estimated 180 million population of Nigeria, 62.4 percent are in the age range of 0–24 years, 30 percent are in the range of 25–55 years, and 3 percent

are 65 years and older.¹ These figures are significant because only three percent of the population have been most dominant as the country's political elite, with a gerontocratic hold on power that, until recently, excludes many others from governance. I engage with how social media re-centers alternative perspectives to these prevailing orthodoxies, exploring the ways in which marginal groups, mostly relegated to the peripheries of governmental power, emerge in performative spaces of public discourses through digital cultural signifiers such as the selfie, viral Internet memes, and humorous political cartoons posted online. In a discussion of the margin as a space in which people inhabit "the fringes of the system of power" (48), Nelly Richard writes of it as "a concept-metaphor for rendering productive the social discarding of marginalization and marginality" (48). Richard stresses the importance of converting the sanctioning of the margin "into an *enunciative posture* and into the aesthetic citation of a critical neo-experimentality on the borders of identity and meaning" (48). In the framework of online media, this enunciative capacity of the margin can be rendered evident through the visual metaphors of symbolic forms on social media. Also, it enables me to argue that regular citizens on the peripheries of power can now rehabilitate their positionality and reclaim new political meanings through socially mediated forms of performative speech online. This dissertation, thus, generates important insights on the ways social media offers cultural capital to Nigerian citizens on the margins of power.

I hope to show that despite the limitations of cyberspace and the uneven access to internet technologies in some parts of Nigeria, social media is a discursive, if not contested, space of cultural production. It functions in countries in the global south to rehabilitate exclusion in political and cultural discourses. By examining the significations of user-generated cultural practices, mostly fictional images (Internet memes and humorous images) and actual performative

¹ "The World FactBook: Nigeria," Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html>. Accessed 19 Jan, 2018.

representations (the selfie) produced as vectors of digital activism and resistance, my dissertation pinpoints the varied ways in which social media functions as a rearticulating mechanism for a more inclusive appearance of young people and women in Nigeria's public sphere. These popular images, as the Nigerian social media terrain signals, serve as the visual metaphors of subaltern opposition to political domination and hegemonic culture.

With user-generated media, the people in this group of Nigerians, constituting the largest demographic in the country, have become more assertive and involved participants in the political terrain, with social media enabling the visibility of previously silenced and silent perspectives. These subaltern populations, though, are not an undifferentiated mass, impervious to the polarizing effects of ethnicity, political party loyalty, and religion. Indeed, there are inexplicable voices from the disenfranchised class that mimic, if not endorse, the operations of hegemonic structures. In a 2016 Facebook post, Ikhide Ikheloa identifies the ways the present government in Nigeria promotes counter-arguments to destabilize the interventions of young people on social media. I am invoking Ikheloa because he is one of the prominent voices commenting on culture and politics in the Nigerian social media arena. He writes of the existence of a Buhari Media Center (BMC) that has “been paying young writers/bloggers/social media ‘overlords’ and other assorted scumbags to appear to be objective public commentators (Ikhide Ikheloa 2016). This equally youthful group, working in a very slightly similar fashion to the Hitler youth organization in Nazi Germany, produces narratives to the “national discourse at least on social media, in the favor of their paymasters” and doing “many awful things to dissenting voices” in the process (Ikhide Ikheloa 2016). This propaganda machinery proves that the Nigerian state is alert to some of the ways in which social media, as a contested space, offers new tactics of political engagements for non-dominant groups. Despite the presence of these paid trolls, some of whom also double as the background actors of some politicians' engagement with citizens on social media, the ways a

relatively new medium emphasizes the functioning of expressive power among Nigerian young people remains unprecedented. The existence of these ‘trolls’ also serves as an important reminder of the dispersed agency of the subaltern, and the necessary caution against valorizing it.

The repoliticization of subaltern speech, as well as the new regime of agency and self-enfranchisement digital citizens now apply to themselves on social media, have altered the nature of political involvement in the country. I consider agency to be the capacity individuals exercise as a means of participating in society and of performing unhindered social actions in various ways determined by them. This perspective would be most accurate if informed by Margaret Archer’s social theory of critical realism and agency. Archer writes that “our emergence as ‘social selves’ is inextricably related to the emergent properties of the social structures and cultures in which we find ourselves, and which we both reproduce and transform” (258). In other words, the performative competence and self-worth of social actors play out from within particular social and cultural structures that constitute the foundation of individual self-action and personal identity.

Based on this theoretical viewpoint, I use ‘Performative agency’ to gesture toward the performance of identities organized around the capacity of individuals to produce and circulate cultural meanings as subjectively defined practices of transforming and reproducing social structures. In a 2015 report by Cordelia Hebblethwaite on @BBCTrending, Blossom Nnodim, founder of #AdoptaTweep, told the BBC that many Nigerian youths online feel a sense of political responsibility in the expression of agency. Those who do have “access [to the Internet] have taken it upon ourselves to be the voice for the ones who don’t. To be the voice of the voiceless” (“BBC”). The various inflections and employment of this subaltern voice—particularly its images, rhetoric, and contradictions—are the cornerstones of this study. There is a politics of class to be recognized here, though, considering that netizens who position themselves to speak for others without access to the Net unwittingly perpetuate other kinds of hierarchies. As Linda Alcoff famously argues, the

practice of speaking for others leads, even if not always, to an erasure and is often “born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another’s situation or as one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise” (22). In other words, the practice of privileged persons, whether on social media or in another discursive location, speaking for or on behalf of marginal or less privileged persons or groups, indeed, has the potential to increase or reinforce the oppression of the group spoken for. I highlight this idea to caution against the transformation of user-based performances online into hierarchical forms of speech and thinking.

Suffice to say that Nigerian young people and women now have a voice that resonates in the corridors of power. This digitally enabled repossession of a visible space in the political landscape unsettles the idea that young people are generally not interested in political conversations. David Buckingham explains that: “By and large, young people are not defined by society as political subjects, let alone as political agents. Even in the areas of social life that affect and concern them to a much greater extent than adults – most notably education – political debate is conducted almost entirely ‘over their heads’” (219). This dissertation addresses how young people challenge such perceptions, and political exclusions, investigating, although secondarily, the discourse of social media as an enabler of the organization and coordination of social protest in Nigeria. As the central objective of the dissertation is the exploration of online popular culture as discursive forms of resistance, I examine the ways young people express themselves politically online without implying that they are victims of any postcolonial entanglements. The enhanced visibility and voice offered by the medium envision a new regime of empowerment and new articulations of political consciousness for creative young people. I consider this newly amplified voice by analyzing the discursive spaces presented by digital media for the agency of young people, who, as Buckingham asserts, are often sidelined in conversations that affect them.

The assumption in much of the research on social media is the teleological imperative that the deployment of network environments for social actions must convoke some praxis. This view also assumes that the mobilization of social media as an apparatus for organizing protest must always initiate offline results for it to be considered an effective technology for social change. Implicit in this hypothesis is the fact that social media, like modernity's narratives of progress, must materialize measurable social change lest it is construed as another mediatized space in which resistance is futile. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's view that the culture industry restates bourgeois domination partly informs much of this pessimistic scholarship on technology and modern cultural productions. Adorno and Horkheimer famously write that "the deception is not that the culture industry serves up amusement but that it spoils the fun by its business-minded attachment to the ideological clichés of the culture which is liquidating itself" (114). Their sense of the culture industry as a legitimization of capitalist hegemony constructs culture as a sphere that offers a freedom to choose what is always the same. Despite Adorno and Horkheimer's cultural pessimism on the idea of the transformative power of political action by the working class and on social movements, there are others in the Marxist tradition that do not share their skeptical approach. A major figure in this later tradition, for instance, is Ernst Bloch, who asserts belief in the principle of hope, that utopian vision of a future not founded on naïve wishful thinking but one "pervaded by daydreams; dreams of a better life than that which has so far been given" (5) to individuals. As I intend to show in this dissertation, despite Nigeria's enduring crises of governance marked by a defective democracy and widespread human rights abuses and economic mismanagement, everyday life is yet infused with a principle of hope that is articulated in various ways that include the symbolic cultural practices of netizens. These individuals are animated neither by the sociopolitical gloom nor economic austerity that surrounds them, but by a sense of optimism, informed by a perpetual longing for a better future. This hope, together with other

factors, informs the production of satirical cartoons, playful and protests selfies, humorous Internet memes, as well as other media signifiers of sanguinity that are circulated in Nigerian social media as visual metaphors of politicized speech.

Aside from Adorno and Horkheimer, the other informing perspective is Jean Baudrillard's argument about the media as a site of simulations and unreality, one in which postmodern culture is constituted by copies and representations, an idea I hope to challenge in a subsequent section. Some scholars and public commentators extend these perspectives in various ways, including Malcolm Gladwell (2010), Evgeny Morozov (2011), as well as the occupy activist Astra Taylor (2014). Taylor, for instance, reasons that the "values of programmers and the corporate officers who employ them shape the online worlds we inhabit" (76). Morozov, for his part, asserts that the enlistment of social media for digital activism is a slacktivist process "that makes activists feel useful and important while having preciously little political impact" (190). While these are legitimate concerns, it is not always the case that resistance is meaningless or that real-world political consequences are absent when people deploy social media as a mechanism of dissent and resistance. I use Nigerian social media culture to assess the varied modes of expressing the amelioration of social inequities which the Internet also supports, including the performative expression of resistance through popular images. There is no doubt slacktivism may be a genuine possibility, yet it harbours a cynicism that forecloses the various ways the mere capacity for representation and speech as well as the public expression of politicized speech by subaltern populations in online network communities are significant expressions of self-enfranchisement. This empowerment needs to be appreciated for its own sake. The new regime of agency facilitated by Web 2.0 constructs new media users as productive subjects imbued with authorial power, making their capacity to represent themselves a critical milestone in countries with notoriety for the devaluation of free speech and the exclusion of certain individuals in politics.

Working within a digital feminist context, Carrie Smith-Prei and Maria Stehle (2016) invite critics to evaluate the politics inherent in the awkwardness and messiness of past digital activism such as those of Pussy Riot and the Occupy movements. They view the politics and expression of some of these digital moments as often fraught with a misdirected motion that is “in constant movement, circulating and slipping from view” (146). This state of flux and becoming is informed by an awkwardness that makes online articulations of resistance messy, unruly, yet acquiring a form that can upset social norms. Rather than focus on actual offline social changes that many critics of social media protests have come to expect, Smith-Prei and Stehle suggest that the “awkward politics” of digital activism embeds an agency that makes the online expression of dissent fascinating. While I agree with these feminist scholars on the efficacy of the medium, I insist that a politics of oppression in a context such as those obtainable in many autocratic or pseudo-democratic societies demands that one engage with social media for its sheer ability to render subaltern narratives and expressions of resistance visible. Focusing on whether these online protests are ineffective, messy or awkward sometimes elides the important fact that more regular citizens and subaltern populations in many countries can now indeed speak back to power, appearing through user-focused technologies to create, author, and circulate their own cultural formations and narratives of resistance.

I am framing resistance in terms of the wide-ranging and undisciplined ways young people seek to articulate dissent as a cultural and playful practice on social media. I examine resistance as the ways in which Nigerian netizens “encounter the state, and how they engage, deconstruct and wrestle with it” (Obadare and Willems xxxx) as a practice of an everyday life that is entangled with social media. Since I am interested in the articulation of this resistance through popular culture, my work highlights some of the various ways online images are produced and circulated in Nigerian social media as signifying practices that destabilize a normative sociocultural order perceived to

be unjust and unequal by many citizens. My work hopes to demonstrate the reterritorialization of the politics of counter-hegemony online and the reconstitution of the everyday resistance practices of citizens in social media posts and narratives. Although I will be returning to Stuart Hall's discussion of the workings of popular culture as the site in which "hegemony is secured" (239) in chapter two, I rely here on John Fiske's equally broad explanation of the culture of everyday life to chart my understanding of what Nigerian netizens are doing with popular images and visual texts on social media:

Everyday life is constituted by the practices of popular culture, and is characterized by the creativity of the weak in using the resources provided by a disempowering system while refusing to submit to that power. The culture of everyday life is best described through metaphors of struggle or antagonism: strategies opposed by tactics, the bourgeoisie by the proletariat; hegemony met by resistance, ideology countered or evaded top-down; power opposed by bottom-up power, social discipline faced with disorder. (47)

This focus on the tactics of disempowered groups, which Fiske underlines as the "creativity of the weak" is expressed in the context of Nigerian social media through political images and performative forms functioning to affirm the daydreams and hopeful longings of everyday people. The emphasis on the culture of ordinary people online enables me to explore how online everyday life in contemporary Nigeria overlaps with ideas of power and resistance. Fiske's reference to the "creativity of the weak" reiterates James Scott's idea of the "weapons of the weak" (1). Scott uses his expression to refer to the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups, notably the hidden transcript of the covert everyday resistance of peasants (29). However, with social media rendering subaltern strategies of dissent visible, these creative forms of resistance can be found in public and collective defiance of state authority. This is because social media, by nature, is a performative

space for the staging of public spectacle, with the practices of resistance conditioned by overt performances, rather than concealment. Social media inaugurates a practice that was almost inconceivable previously in a world of monopolistic and regulated media culture in Nigeria in which the consumer of cultural meanings was not actively invested in the process of resisting hegemony. The use of social media to subvert and undermine postcolonial excess in countries such as Nigeria may be imagined as a predictable response, typical of the dialectic of power and resistance, since, as Michel Foucault asserts, “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (95). Since power and resistance are mutually constituted, my interest is to examine the online articulation of this tension, this interplay of rule and resistance by locating contemporary modes of activist behaviour in Nigeria within social media. Therefore, as agency and resistance operate within the mechanism of power in various ways that engage, transform, undermine, and subvert state power (Obadare and Willems 7), I highlight how the incessancy of dissent to hegemonic culture is expressed through the images of popular culture. Also, I argue that much of the social media culture in Nigeria indicates the production and sharing of media for participating in politics. That user-generated media makes possible conditions in which netizens, as producers of culture, respond to hegemony restates the argument that these netizens are not invested in the struggle against the dominant culture from a position of victimhood. They are ‘authors’ of political change, not victims trapped in any static political formation.

While my work examines different modalities of political interactions and engagements in the Nigerian social media landscape, what it stresses most are the visual cultural forms that enhance the expression of resistance by a section of young Nigerians on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. What I am calling resistance also includes the expression of outrage articulated through the contestations of visible practices of political corruption, economic domination, and systemic abuses

of power. Although I problematize and complicate the meanings of resistance and concepts, such as agency and performance, my mobilization of the term is in the context of social media. Particularly, my focus is how Web 2.0 technologies rearticulate hitherto passive consumers of culture as legitimate producers of meaning and involved members of a new public sphere. While I invoke the Habermasian public sphere, I am deploying a framework for resistance organized around the production of visual culture by netizens. This deliberate production of images may be considered a manifestation of what Deborah Willis (2003) calls “subversive resistance” (55). Willis uses this expression to describe the calculated production of photographic images by African American communities as a repertoire of visual tactics that recover a positive identity and resist an “other” view of the black subject (55). Subversive resistance can be redeployed within a Nigerian social media context to refer to the ways in which online citizens intentionally or unintentionally produce and distribute subversive political images to resist, revise, and critique corrupt and abusive power. As well, these images also function as conduits of the subjectivity and agency of netizens who employ visual culture to repossess a space for themselves in online public conversations. Outrage, as Manuel Castells notes, is often a product of the realization that so-called democratic institutions do not “represent the interests of citizens” (42) because the ruling elite have, as in the case of the Nigerian government, become “a self-reproducing cast catering mostly to their interests, and to the preservation of their monopoly over the state” (42). Interested in the ways social media users challenge such systems of rule and domination, I show that forms and signifiers of online popular culture such as the selfie, political cartoons, online humour, and viral Internet memes are being used as performative strategies through which Nigerian netizens perform everyday resistance to disempowering postcolonial conditions. The idea that the spaces facilitated by social media inherently harbour the possibility of performance is a suggestion that users orient their public identities and activities in specific ways, carefully presenting well-fashioned versions of

themselves as they would want to be perceived or imagined by an audience. Social media, then, is the ultimate locale of self-fashioning.

The repertoire of visual tactics identified above is important for the scholarship on social media and social movements because of the deeply embedded cultural perspective it lends to much of the quantitative and positivistic research on digital activism that emerged after the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movements. While mindful of the overly sociopolitical orientation of social movements as a new media response to abusive or autocratic power, I am suggesting that the signifiers of online popular culture deployed as performative strategies of resistance by regular social media users point to the existence of alternative cultural practices that can animate research in online activism. While the debate on ways social media enables the collecting, organizing, and coordinating of dissident voices across the world is important, this dissertation explores the other means by which social media facilitates the expression of resistance, namely various symbolic and performative articulations of political dissent. During Occupy Nigeria, for instance, there were humour and musical performances presented as expressions of solidarity by artists who had joined the 2012 mass protest for the removal of oil subsidy by the Nigerian government. In a similar way to how the discursive representations in these sites of performances serve as symbolic accoutrements of street protests, online popular forms of representations and visual culture also legitimize spaces in which agency and politicized speech against hegemonic culture are possible.

My conception of the Nigerian public sphere as a realm constituted by visual culture circulated by young people on social media coheres with Thomas Paine's famous assertion about "the liberty of appearing" (154) as a precondition for the dissemination of truth in a nation. The liberty to appear and be seen/or heard, which social media facilitates is a mode of resisting a normative order that fosters silence, and, sometimes, discursive erasure. Thus, the rehabilitation of cultural and political invisibility is itself a form of resistance. This claim can be appreciated

more through Hannah Arendt's description of the public realm as an intersubjective and deprivatized space in which speech and visibility are major expressive modalities. As Arendt puts it:

everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance – something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves – constitutes reality. Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses – lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance...The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves. (50)

It needs to be emphasized that the liberty of appearance often leads to the appearance of liberty, something Arendt clearly opines in this passage. Her ideas sponsor the notion of silence as an ineffectual mode of engaging in the public arena, privileging speech as a productive and essential mode of appearing in the public sphere. This appearance, as Jürgen Habermas reckons, is predicated upon a certain “kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregard[s] status altogether” (36). This disregard of status is something user-based media affords all netizens, especially minority groups such as women and youths. Unlike the exclusion of particular sets of people that constitute the discourse of the Habermasian public, the digitally enabled public sphere in Nigerian social media includes anyone with access to the Internet, as citizens now seek to engage in critical-rational communication with willing members of the political class. To return to Arendt, the constitution of the politics in this public realm can be seen, for instance, in the ways social media enables networks and communities of individuals who, “in

the presence of others,” share reality at a differential, interactive, and multiperspectival level. Even if their contributions in this public space are deindividualized, the interventions of social media users are individuated because of the ways in which user-generated media serves to articulate the authority and agency of the individual on social media.

To critique this Arendtian framework of social media as a space of appearance, as do Nick Couldry and Jannis Kallinikos in a recent discussion of the sociology of social media’s ontology, is to restate a popular skepticism about social media that elides the agency of users. In their italicized claim, Couldry and Kallinikos are of the view that there is on social media platforms “*no appearance-in-itself but only ever appearance that is derivative of prior processes of [economic] calculation*” (234) that challenge the basis of understanding the social. Their views convoke narratives of what may be called ‘algorithmic interpellation’—the subjectivization of digital actors through computer protocols for economic gains. The recent privacy scandal involving Facebook and Cambridge Analytica is a pertinent illustration of how the agency and subjectivities of netizens can sometimes serve insidious ideological and capitalist ends. As I will show through a Marxist analysis in the next chapter, this perspective harbours a pessimistic approach to social media that occludes the meaningful social connections and political engagements that also take place on the platforms.

Because of social media, subjects whose representation in a nation’s public sphere is limited can now indeed appear in both the public arena and in the consciousness of the state or its actors. The Nigerian netizens who appear in such digital public spheres indeed exercise speech as a “performative power to lay claim to the public” (Butler s75) in a way that is not always sanctioned by the established cultural and political hierarchy in the country. Yet, as I will show shortly, this performativity sometimes transcends online speech to include “the demands of bodily action, gesture, movement, congregation, persistence, and exposure to possible violence” (Butler 75). This

ensemble of performative behaviour is evident in different ways in some of the examples in subsequent chapters, with the exposure to violence, in particular, examined within the framework of some selfie protests of #BringBackOurGirls campaign discussed in chapter three. In this third chapter, I stress how a certain disposability of protest bodies by the state and its repressive apparatuses faces some ridicule and resistance through visual culture.

A recent debate demonstrating this expanded voice of young people in the Nigerian public sphere involves Africa's first Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka. On the heels of the American 2016 presidential elections, Soyinka had expressed his determination to destroy his American residency card if Donald Trump emerged victorious in the election. Following Trump's victory, a horde of young people on social media called out to Soyinka to fulfill his promise. Soyinka read their online commentaries as a mob-like invasion of his privacy, calling his interlocutors "illiterates who feel they want to make themselves heard" (Ibekwe 2016). Although a number of Soyinka's critics were misguided, the plurality of haranguing commentaries on the subject indicates a new order in the nature and constitution of the Nigerian public sphere. Soyinka's language regarding social media users that wish to "make themselves heard" aptly frames the impact of the new regime of agency available to young people in Nigeria. One Facebook user, in a statement that reflects the collective disposition of this now visible group, presents the following thoughts as part of his response to the Soyinka debate:

[S]ocial media is turning out to be the 'older generation's nightmare. The older generation of politicians, intellectuals, columnists are used to having opinions and making them public without contradiction. They are used to writing in newspapers and declaring their opinions as final without contradiction because [for] some of these young ones, it will take them a year to ever get their opinions published in those newspapers. What social media has offered the youths is the opportunity to

challenge every word spoken, the opportunity to talk back, the opportunity to examine every word written and spoken and sieve out the bullshit from the real message. This is very uncomfortable for certain persons. (James Ogunjimi 2016)

My idea of agency in this dissertation is also this power to be heard and seen by others which Patrick Chabal (2009) frames as “directed, meaningful, intentional, and self-reflective social action (7). It is the individual capacity of everyday citizens to contribute to social processes with limited institutional restrictions. Ogunjimi’s post summarizes the anxieties of Nigeria’s young netizens about the evolving nature of the public arena in Nigeria. The post informs my view that everyday life in Nigeria is now entangled with social media and young people are the beneficiaries of the medium’s politics of re/membering and visibility. I use “remembering” in a dual sense that signifies how social media restages the consciousness of young people in cultural and political conversations, re/membering them as informed actors of a digitally enabled public sphere onto a body politic that has always excluded them. From a culture in which an “older generation of politicians, intellectuals, columnists are used to having opinions and making them public without contradiction” to one that promotes “opportunity to talk back” and “challenge every word,” there is the apparent understanding that previously silenced perspectives can gain traction and have evident representation in national debates. There is the possibility of reading the “talk back” of these young people as the jangling sounds of a mob as Wole Soyinka imagines it. However, such a view would be a foreclosure of the idea that social media unsettles an earlier cultural order that proscribes speech and silences certain populations in the constitution of a vibrant public sphere.

1.1 Web 2.0, and Postmodern Performativity

Tim O’Reilly and Dale Dougherty coined the expression “Web 2.0” in 2004 to explain the transition of the Internet from static web pages to more dynamic web platforms that rely on user-

generated content” (O’Reilly 17). Wikis and social media are examples of such platforms that enable a more active participation of previously passive and depoliticized media users in the production of knowledge and new cultural meanings, which are organized around connectivity and sharing of user-generated content. Thus, social media technologies, as Jean Burgess, Alice Marwick and Thomas Poell explain, include “those digital platforms, services, and apps built around the convergence of content sharing, public communication, and interpersonal connection” (1). My conception of social media as a digital arena of convergence and sociality enabling participatory politics also stems from the idea of the agora in Classical Greece, since social media similarly exhibits an assembly of disparate and performative voices appearing in a shared and networked space to discuss issues of public concern. The digital agora, though, envisions the possibility of a cultural and political space that stages privatized narratives and individual subjectivity as a mode of public self-presentations. With Web 2.0, social activism and the questioning of traditional structures of power and nation-states take on a global intensification, manifest in the online reconstitution of the politics of dissent and resistance around the world. Platforms such as social media became the organising mechanisms for coordinating and mobilizing protests activities of such notable social movements as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. In Nigeria, Occupy Nigeria became a local version of similar transnational movements around the world.

Although Nigerian netizens also coordinated and planned protest events on Facebook and Twitter, many others maximized the platforms’ creative affordances to reconstitute some of the symbolic signs that typically accompany street protests, within social media. I should note that while the activism in Nigerian social media in 2012 was simply a demand for basic living conditions, it has since transformed into a protest culture against bodily violence and state silence on domestic terrorism. Satirical cartoons, humorous videos, as well as other images that ridiculed

the Nigerian government's economic policies were deployed by ordinary Nigerians as cultural and performative practices during Occupy Nigeria. Artists and other cultural icons converged with civil rights activists on concrete spaces in Lagos and other major cities for protests. Cultural forms such as humour and music were strategic in rousing of the huge crowd of people that had been out to protest. With digital forms of resistance, however, these performances were retransmitted online through visual images produced to achieve similar ends. What is assured by these new developments is not only a reconstitution of the fields of social movements and politics but also of popular culture. Within the framework of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign and other forms of digital protests in Nigeria, these symbolic forms constitute a radical mode for the performative expressions of political thought. Besides arguing that users of social media are not just depoliticized and passive consumers of media that can read preferred, negotiated and/or oppositional meanings (Hall 117), I also suggest that social media offers an appreciation of their behaviour as audience-contributor in mediatized space in terms of performance. The performance of political selves on social media by users, especially young people who still occupy the margins of the political class, is now being articulated through the phatic and performative rituals of sharing, tweeting and liking content such as texts, music, and popular images. These young people can now, through economies of representation on social media, scrutinize the hegemonic spaces of the Nigerian state as well as its varied mechanisms of abusive power. A cultural theory of social media and its deployment as an instrument of resisting marginality not only, therefore, facilitates an awareness of digital media's enabling of agency but also divulges the ways popular and visual culture on social media can supplement resistance to dominant groups and postcolonial oppression.

In understanding the rhizomatic pathways of protest online, one can liken the forms of popular culture examined in this study to what Nduka Otiono conceives as "street stories" (2) in his dissertation. This perspective enables an understanding of the ways in which subaltern

narratives in new sociocultural contexts such as social media in postcolonial states disrupt structures of power through citizens' sharing of popular culture. Otiono explains street stories in "the postcolonial Nigerian urban context" as "asymptomatic of ordinary citizens' attempt to comprehend their socio-political circumstance through narratives, and to promote popular uprising against an oppressive state" (2). He focuses on how these narratives are framed through the communicative model of rumour in an array of media forms, including the traditional press in Nigeria, Internet sites, the video-film culture, Nollywood, as well as Nigerian music. However, he does not fully explicate the varied and specific ways social media particularly functions through digital visual culture and popular images to articulate subaltern dissent and archive the contemporary sociocultural and political history of Nigeria. In other words, my work builds on Otiono's, to elaborate on the reimagination of everyday life and political culture in Nigeria, by focusing on the digital activities of citizens who perform political selves and identities by posting subversive images on social media. Political images and the rhetoric they embed have always been central to cultural formations in Nigerian oral performances that employ aural and visual idioms as strategies of articulation. The iconic album covers of Nigerian revolutionary musician Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, for example, stage aesthetic performances of the politics of protest for which the legendary Nigerian music icon was globally acclaimed. According to Sola Olorunyomi, the visual narrative of the musician's album jackets offers "a social realism" (1) of Fela's Afrobeat song-texts that makes visible the agonies of life in early post-independent Nigeria. Designed by the artist Lemi Ghariokwu, the images on the albums highlight the intersection of art and politics—which more contemporary artists such as Mike Asukwo are using social media to circulate.

Beyond the global fascination with social media as an apparatus for new forms of social movements, therefore, is an appropriation of network platforms as cultural fields in which everyday citizens express political identities. My work undertakes a critical analysis of the visual metaphors

of virtual network communities, with a view to showing how the critiques of power by Nigerian social media users is an affirmation of some of the ways citizens can visually narrate the nation (Bhabha 1990). I examine viral memes and satirical images, and political self-presentations that function as markers of postmodern performativity in Nigerian social media to illustrate that the sharing of popular culture forms on social media extend the boundaries of online activism and can be conceptualized as counter-hegemonic visual signifiers in Nigerian spaces of power. By spaces of power, I am referring to traditional structures and apparatuses of nation-states and their geographies of political authority. For example, the Nigerian Parliament has recently proposed a bill, titled “Act to Prohibit Frivolous Petitions and other Matters Connected Therewith,” to regulate and control social media activities (“Premium Times”). In response to the prohibitions of the proposed legislation, social media was used by concerned Nigerians as a tactic of opposition. Many social media users published and distributed commentaries in their networks to disparage the bill, while civil and cultural organizations, such as the worldwide association of writers (PEN), networking with similar international groups, signed an online petition urging the Nigerian Parliament to reconsider the implications of the bill on freedom of expression.

Aside from the cliché that a picture conveys a thousand words, my sense of these varied interventions is that they receive a more critical purchase when accompanied by satirical and humorous images some netizens prefer to circulate instead. For instance, the works of the Nigerian political cartoonist Mike Asukwo who distributes his cartoons on both Facebook and Twitter are examples of such images. These visual texts are shared by the cartoonist and his many fans to disseminate political positions while resisting and subverting the juridical pretensions of the Nigerian parliament. Mike Asukwo is the most prolific political cartoonist in contemporary Nigeria and his many viral images inform critical discussions online. His cartoons are disseminated both in digital and print avenues across Nigeria. Digital media have become an important location for

the distribution of his works, as social media bring Asukwo and his audience into a shared space in which they converge to read, reproduce and circulate the political rhetoric of his cartoons. This work suggests that social media is central to the increasing role of Asukwo's political cartoons in expressing and conditioning a civic agency among Nigerians. His cartoons and the other images discussed in this work can lead to the conclusion that everyday media practices such as the reading of popular culture texts challenge hegemonic structures, leading to the production of a public sphere that is inclusive and assertive.



Fig. 1.1. Mike Asukwo. “Damning the Bridge.” *Facebook*

Metaphorically, the title “Damning the bridge,” in this cartoon illustrates the state’s disruption of the democratizing affordances of social media. It gestures towards the ways in which social media in Nigeria has been a connective technology for ordinary citizens to reach politicians, who

previously were inaccessible to their constituencies. That the lawmakers threaten a juridical procedure that abrogates a new cultural form of engagement between the ruling elite and the masses indicates how corrupt and abusive power in Nigeria resists scrutiny and citizen-driven demand for accountability. The fact that a Nigerian structure of power initiates this criminalization of social media is itself a critical pointer that social media is changing the face of governance in a way in which earlier forms of media and cultural representations have not done in Nigeria. Also, the image pertinently illustrates the destabilization of the traditional authority of the state which social media spaces of representation such as Mike Asukwo's Facebook timeline provokes. The deployment of this image on Facebook, and not in a traditional medium such as print, is one of the reasons for its effectiveness as a text that widely circulates resistance among netizens. The immediacy of social media and the participatory nature—evident in the dialogic exchanges of readers on the thread—empower users to quickly disseminate the critiques of the text, to the extent that the Nigerian national assembly, eventually reconsidered passing the proposed bill into law. The reach and distribution of the rhetoric of the image on social media make it more effective than any circulation of a similar message in pre-digital traditional media. Although the mainstream media and digital media continue to feed into each other in Nigeria, the fact that the latter enable ordinary consumers of media narratives to assert and represent themselves more directly makes social media an innovative space for resisting totalities in Nigeria. A new cultural template in which the user is the focus of textual formations, whether as writer and reader in the poststructuralist sense, invites the production of new forms of subjectivities, uncommon in the Nigerian sociocultural and political contexts. From the #BringBackOurGirls Twitter campaign of 2014 to the recent 2016 #SacktheSenate or #OccupyNASS movements therefore, what is evident in the Nigerian political sphere is a new sociopolitical order constituted by a virtual public that counters the hegemonic

designs of the state by mounting resistance through popular satirical texts and humorous images on social media.

My focus on the images of popular culture and the dialogic narratives they embed motivate my de-emphasis of verbal and oral modes of argumentation natural in the Nigerian public sphere. Instead, I rely on what Manuel Castells identifies as “the flows of information and images” (417) in digital media to understand the imagining and narrating of nationhood and citizenship through the construction of meaning organized around political images—visual self-representations used in political discourses, in addition to written self-representations such as status updates. My intention is to evaluate social media as a cultural and symbolic field in which citizens imagine and reimagine their nation through the playful and performative modes of self-presentations digital media occasions. My conception of citizenship in this work thus fits Heather Zwicker’s analytical framework, which promotes citizenship as one of the ways subjects negotiate with the nation-state. According to Zwicker, this understanding of citizenship never imagines the public sphere as being limited to the state alone. There is a sense in which identifying with a state involves the performance of citizenship in both private and public spaces (250). Social media is arguably the commonest example of a field in which this public-private performance can be realized through popular culture. In her definition of citizenship—as a mode of shaping the public sphere, Nadine Dolby (2006) asserts that citizenship is “an active process that involves the core of people’s daily existence, including the ways in which they interact with and use popular culture” (32). This centrality of popular culture to thinking about the expression of citizenship is an idea I emphasize as *performative citizenship*, as I imagine an intersection between popular culture as a domain for identity performance and social media as an avenue that fosters new expressions of political subjectivities. The expressions of citizenship and identity in contemporary Africa can best be fully

appreciated through the economies of symbolic meanings netizens produce and circulate on social media.

As I am critical of any conception of social media that essentializes it, I approach the increasingly pervasive influence of social media in contemporary Nigeria, and indeed around the world from a perspective that forbids essentializing or fetishizing the media. Social media might have been effective within the context of the Arab Spring and indeed Occupy Nigeria, yet the inflections and particularities of its workings in different regions of the world need to be highlighted. As Paolo Gerbaudo frames the argument, the problem of a techno-optimistic narrative on social media becomes “a ‘fetish’ of collective action” (Gerbaudo 8) to the extent that social media becomes endowed with mystical qualities that only obscure the actors using the media. Within the Nigerian context, social media exerts a palpable influence on society, as much as society also shapes the kind of contents and genres that are evident on the platforms. Commenting on this point, Daniel Miller explicates the essential nature of social media in relation to its working in society by noting that it is not “that the world has made social media completely different, or that social media has changed the world. It’s obviously always going to be dialectical. But in this case, it provides a new space for genres to occupy, which are not themselves particularly changed” (Borgerson and Miller 523). In other words, and this is particularly true of the social media culture in Nigeria, there exists a reciprocal influence between society and social media, to the extent that the latter exhibits a continuum of the cultural practices and media behaviours of users. For instance, before the era of social media, one of the manifestations of a public sphere in which everyday citizens participated in as an informal way of articulating their voice was the “newsstand street parliament” (Otiono 290), as in Figure 1.2 below:



Fig. 1.2. A group of men at a street newspaper stand in Nigeria. Source: *Gettyimages*

The mode of conversations and debates in public spaces such as the one in the image is one of the major elements of social life reconstituted in many public engagements with politics and culture in Nigeria. While narratives from street parliaments, serving as one of the traditional ways of assessing popular opinions in Nigeria, continue to be important for citizens without access to the Internet, social media provides a more complex and nuanced stage for the dissemination of the alternative perspectives of everyday people.

The gendered space of this example is telling, as the normative culture of patriarchy sometime abjures women from appearing and participating in public conversations on politics. Since women have not always been silent or muted figures in the Nigerian cultural imaginary, however, I will be showing later how women speak back to power through online popular culture strategies such as satirical fictional images and actual performative texts such as protest selfies. I consider the implications of women putting themselves “out there” as virtual images unsettling the gaze of oppressive masculinist politics. Re-articulations of the body as a symbolic site for resisting and altering patriarchal dominance have a long history in Nigeria and in other parts of the world. Historically, for example, the Aba Women's Riot of 1929 and the 1940 Abeokuta Women's Riot in colonial Nigeria offer pertinent illustrations of Nigerian women's disruption of patriarchal

spaces through the performative politics of the body. There have been more recent instances of such nude protests in states such as Benin and Ekiti. In these instances, women did not only employ the traditional politics of public nudity for resisting the British colonial apparatus, but they also forced the public sphere to reckon with them as political subjects materially affected by oppressive colonial policies. They were able to do this by mobilizing the traditional belief that deliberate nudity by women of certain ages goes against all forms of indecency and oppression, which was the way the British tax on women without representation was interpreted by all during this time. With social media, such public performances of protest through the body acquire new configurations that enable a better understanding of the intersection of corporeality and power. This study engages with this aspect of women's resistance and will include how women are unsettling patriarchal formations of governmental power through the production of subversive online content. Socially mediated texts such as the selfie provide cultural avenues to appreciate an African feminist discourse in Nigerian social media culture. With Boko Haram materializing a pernicious masculine ideology both online and offline in recent years, this aspect of my research enables an understanding of African women's response to violence in both digital and non-virtual environments. In my third and fourth chapters, therefore, I will use the selfies of some #BringBackOurGirls activists as well as the fictional works of the female Facebook user "Correct Bae" to show how a strong feminist presence on social media can undermine such patriarchal configurations of the political space.

Unlike older media such as film, literature, or older Nigerian Internet communities such as "Naijanet" or "Nairaland," that mostly allow the normative sender-receiver model of communication, social media offers more dialogic and interactive opportunities for participatory politics. Nairaland is an indigenous online community in which people post comments and have sociocultural and political conversations. On the other hand, Naijanet, "one of the Net's most

robust and enduring Afrocentric virtual communities” (Anna Everett 37), was created in the mid-late 1990s, as a space on which Nigerians in the diaspora converged to discuss topics about the homeland. The platform can be regarded as one of the various digital media employed by Nigerian diaspora activists to circumvent the limitations of the traditional media in the affirmation of a strong nationalist voice from exile. Social media thus animates the public speech of Nigerians in a digitally transformed public sphere, earlier assured by both Nairaland and Naijanet. Misty Bastian notes that Naijanet was a diaspora-based and activist online community for expressing “the true spirit of “Naija,” the virtual nationalist space [Naijanetters] were struggling to create” (qtd. in Everett 37) in their attempt to resist the then military junta in Nigeria. The diaspora performance of resistance online is a process of, to borrow Koleade Odutola’s useful term, “cyberframing” the nation (Odutola 17). The term locates in the digital moment possibilities for Nigerian émigrés to speak back to power from exile. By making the user, whether at home or in exilic locations, the locus of content creation, social media promotes a postmodernist character that inspires individual mini-narratives that decenter the hegemonic truths of the state and its media in Nigeria. Nigerian digital actors who utilize the democratic potentials of Web 2.0 platforms to subvert the Nigerian state’s mechanism of oppression underscore that user-generated media, rather than the restrictively authorizing spaces of television or cinema, are the new locations of subaltern agency.

One of the theoretical modes of engaging with the politics of visual culture and resistance in this dissertation is this postmodern perspective on cultural forms that elicit a re-articulation of the everyday subject from the margins of culture to its centre. Although theories on postmodernism appear to have peaked in the early 90s, I find it relevant to reflect on the way social media’s democratization of the media is a postmodern condition that unsettles absolute truths and grand political narratives. This postmodernist dimension rejects and deconstructs the metanarratives of

traditional media such as television, alerting netizens to the circulation of state-sponsored narratives online. The once passive consumers of the TV can now create and disseminate multiple media truths and identities, entering the realm of authorship as producers of meanings. Within the context of Nigerian political communication, social media enables a preponderance of individual narratives that challenge the hegemony of a highly-regulated media environment. Social media users in Nigeria who protested online against the government's explanation of the austere crude oil policy in 2012 were able, for instance, to produce their own counter narratives and alternative meaning about the 'true' state of the energy sector. They were invested in this process not only through text-based status updates and tweets, but also through visual self-representations such as cartoons and memes to offer alternative meanings to the dominant narratives of government. Writing in the context of post-coup Chile, Nelly Richard asserts that the production of contrary perspectives ought to generate a radical questioning and overturn of official systems of thoughts and power. Richard writes:

To have formulated meanings that were merely contrary to the dominant point of view, without taking aim at the larger order of its signifying structures, would have meant remaining inscribed within the same linear duality of a Manichaeian construction of meaning. It would have meant inverting the symmetry of what was represented, without questioning the topology of the representation. (4)

The personal tweets and Facebook posts of netizens, whether as visual or written forms, are not mere expressions of counter perspectives in the Nigerian context. They likewise function to question and resist asymmetrical power relations and their hegemonic narratives. Cultural forms such as online cartoons and humorous images together with the political commentaries that emerge from them challenge what Richard refers to as "the fraudulent language spoken by the official

power” (5). Produced and circulated online as dissident signifiers invested in the displacement of official knowledge systems, the visual texts deployed as examples in this study rupture and counter the semantic force of such fraudulent narratives. I intend these illustrations to prove that signifying practices are always already modes of interrogating authority and resisting both state strictures and attempted monopolies on meaning. The focus on visual images is thus in line with Nicholas Mirzoeff’s argument that “the disjunctured and fragmented culture that we call postmodernism is best imagined and understood visually” (3). A postmodernist performative dimension to this dissertation is thus grounded in the way Nigerian social media enact and present selves through the staging of visual cultural forms articulating an irreversible shattering of the normative power of the state. Although it may appear that the corrupt elite in Nigeria pays little attention to these sites of resistance, yet a closer appreciation of the overarching picture reveals, as in the case of the Buhari Media Centre, an unsettled governmental presence online bent on coopting and disrupting dissident voices.

As far as postmodern media go, the Nigerian netizens who use images to present political selves and identities on social media are invested in the mobilization of these images as cultural appendages of their oppositional politics. By showing how the social media space can be productive for subaltern agency, they challenge the negative vision of Baudrillard’s concept of the simulacrum, a representation of copies that have no correspondence to the real. Examples from Nigerian social media can demonstrate that, while it is possible for the image to reframe and articulate conflicting versions of reality, particularly within the (new) media space, a strategic reconfiguration of the simulacrum can yield further insights into some of the ways popular culture on the Internet serve as performative markers of identities subverting dominant power structures in corrupt and abusive regimes such as Nigeria’s. These images do not seek to represent an any

authentic political reality in Nigeria, but instead assert themselves, as autonomous versions of Nigerian politics, that intervene to question austere and disempowering conditions.

Performative behaviour in this dissertation is based on the view that discourse produces that which it represents. To this end, I reframe Judith Butler's description of gender as a performative identity to explicate the performance of identities in social media platforms. Butler reformulates the theses of J.L. Austin's remarks on performative utterances, and on Michel Foucault's exposition of discourse as systematic practices that bring into being what they name. She argues for an "understanding of performativity not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains (Butler 2). For Butler, the performative force of gender is not a natural category that defines what one is; rather, it is a contested term that describes what one does. Therefore, a person's "identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results" (25). Gender, in this sense, is a performance in which one's identity is not universal but constituted by one's social roles. In a similar way, I show that acts of vlogging, as well as practices such as posting, liking, trolling, sharing, tweeting, and retweeting, all of which I am calling "social media rituals," also produce specific performative identities, since they constitute the person who perform these rituals. Social media is, therefore, a performative space that enables users to frame identities through the digital performances enacted by its rituals.

Social media as digital networks of social relations illustrate new postmodernist performative dimensions of the self, expressed through visual culture. In other words, this present work demarcates the contours of social media intervention in politics differently from scholars such as Manuel Castells. Whereas Castells, together with many other alternative media scholars, frame the discourse in terms of the way social media are used by netizens to *do and organize politics*, this study locates its arguments in a postmodernist context in which social media users *do*

things with images as cultural texts that embody power relations. While studies such as those of Castells’ analyze the ways social media function to undergird and support social movements, I am much more, as mentioned earlier, concerned with how online popular images as signifiers of postmodernist performance are expressions of resistance to totalities and hegemonies. For instance, in the image below, the Facebook post of Nigerian political cartoonist Mike Asukwo is presented as a creative intervention in a Nigerian structure of power in a way that is different from the way online activists use social media to mobilize and coordinate mass protests.



Fig. 1.3. Mike Asukwo. “Tongue-Propelled Bullets.” *Facebook*

This image speaks to how the rhetoric of the ruling elite in Nigeria serves to stoke the embers of warfare. The two major political parties, the All People’s Congress (APC) and the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) are represented in a satirical cartoon that critiques the reckless exchange of political rhetoric that sometimes generate conflict in the polity. Publishing this image on

Facebook is not just a remediation of a print-sourced political cartoon on social media; it is an expression of the ways network environments are being deployed by both regular citizens and artists to perform an increasingly changing relationship to power and authority. Social media here gives the user Asukwo a space to ridicule the state and to express a counter-hegemonic perspective through the visual and textual rhetoric of an image whose medium potentially subjects to a vast possibility of digital dispersals. Asukwo suggests that the political elite is the real terror the Nigerian public must contend with. Posting this image is a social media ritual of performing political identities. As I am discussing the enactments of identities through acts of tweeting and posting information onto social media as performative practices, I will be returning to this in a later chapter. This example constitutes a specific online identity to the degree that the image reproduces Asukwo as a content producer whose self-presentation on social media gestures towards the performance of a political self. In contrast to other communities such as *Nairaland*, social media accommodates the distribution of content in a manner that decentralizes and disperses the original message, with the cartoonist's performance operating at a rhizomatic level that reaches a multiplicity of people in his networks and branches into the networks of his friends and followers.

The forms of popular culture examined in this dissertation allow me to determine how people's performances of self and identities overlap with resistance. It is this innovative use of images, expressed through the performance self and agency in Nigerian politics that inspires the Deleuzian inclination to relocate the simulacrum from a negative context to a signifying framework that is more optimistic and positive. I will show through a close reading of popular images that the cultural sites of representations that new media technologies enable legitimize a new regime of the image, which privileges the imagination as an act of resistance in network spaces. I also show how these new cultural spaces are being deployed by social media users in

Nigeria as individuated acts of political subversion and resistance, a new phenomenon that was first inspired by the inroads of global mobile telephony into the country in the early 2000s.

The explosion of internet-enabled mobile cell phones in many African countries is central to this discussion since mobile phones support new media behaviour that encourages creative Nigerian youths to appropriate global technology applications to forge an identity for themselves, and for an array of aesthetic purposes achieved through creative digital images. These netizens, relying on the instrumentality of web-based phones, challenge social conventions and confront the hegemonic strategies of the Nigerian state through popular aesthetics disseminated on spaces such as the BlackBerry Messenger, and recently, WhatsApp. In other words, a marginal category amongst Nigerian youth populations deploys new media to reinvent a new vision of self and society, and write their agency into the centre of national politics. Paul Ugor, speaking in regard to Nigerian video films, has written about the way this contemporary youth culture of digital media engagement leads to an emergence of ‘a new social space’ in which Nigerian youths narrate “their social struggles in everyday life for both local and international audiences” (1). The implication of the many digital media-propelled narratives is the renegotiation of the webs of powers in Nigeria and a redefinition of political apathy—as many more youths now use the many textual possibilities in Internet environments in a counter-hegemonic way that maps and remaps the contours of Nigerian politics. Partly because of the global acknowledgement of Nigerian cinema, Nollywood as a successful video-film and home-grown medium of (visual) storytelling, a number of new media scholars in Nigeria, including Ugor, locate their analyses of contemporary youth culture within the framework of a cinematic representation of the Nigerian marginal class. In the next chapter, I trace the emergence of Nollywood in Nigeria and contend that social media is a more fascinating media form that facilitates the demarginalization and repoliticization of many young people.

1.2 Nigeria's Facebook President

Although immigrant Nigerians' access to the Internet positioned them to "cyberframe" political discourse from metropolitan Euro-American centres as from the 1990s, it was less imagined at the height of the country's military junta in 1995 that the Internet's eventual appearance would be used actively from home to shape political life in the decade that followed. According to the site Internet Live stats, 3.5% of Nigeria's population were active online in 2006, a figure that rose to 25.5% in 2011, following the keen interest among Nigerian social media users in the events of the Occupy movements and the Arab Spring in 2011. As of 2018, that figure was 46.1% of the population, with a share of world internet users at 2.5 per cent². 2011 also marked the symbolic entry of a Nigerian president into cyberspace, facilitating a new political practice in the country's democracy. The president joined Facebook on June 28th, 2010, posting a message, which signalled government's desire to engage with social media as a potential policy platform:

Today, in fulfillment of the promise I made at the 26th convocation of the University of Port Harcourt on Saturday, 15 May 2010, I have created a [F]acebook fan page to interact with Nigerians. As I said on that day, there is an unchallengeable power of good in the Nigerian nation and her youth and through this medium I want Nigerians to give me the privilege of relating with them without the trappings of office. (GEJonathan 2010)

While the medium for the Nigerian leader subsequently became a platform for citizen engagement, it also pointed to a recognition by the Jonathan administration of the desire among many Nigerians for a dialogic environment in which government might be held accountable. Facebook gave a face

² "Nigerian Internet Users" *Internet Live Stats*, Live. <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/nigeria/>. Web 10 June 2017.

to a political elite often faceless and unresponsive to the electorate. The number of “comments” and “likes” generated by his initial post, Figure 1.4 below, illuminate an intensification of democratic sensibilities among Nigerian youths.

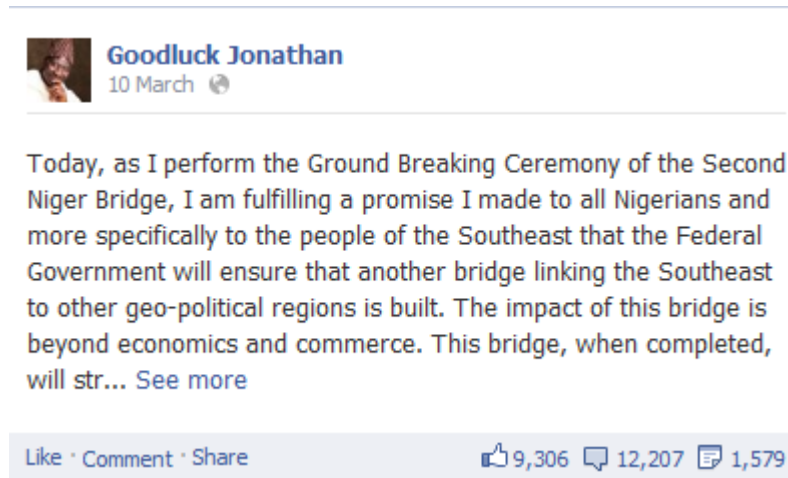


Fig. 1.4. Goodluck Jonathan. *Facebook*.

The large number of people *sharing*, liking and commenting on this post marked the first time in the country when many ordinary Nigerians, especially young people, could engage directly with the apparatus of government, and instantly assess and critique its policies and programmes, because of the growing level of online participatory culture in Nigeria. The difference between this medium and previously existing media is the opportunity for *instant*, even if sometimes hasty, expression of approval or disapproval. In a multi-ethnic and diverse country, such as Nigeria, the circulation of bigotry and hate speech among partisan followers of the president was also born alongside the presence of government in a digital medium of sociality and solidarity. Since Goodluck Jonathan’s emergence coincided with the advent of the social media culture in Nigeria, he became the first president who used the medium to interact with Nigerians online. The president later published some of his social interactions, and the reactions and suggestions of netizens on governance in the volume, *My Friends and I: Conversations on Policy and Governance via*

Facebook. The 2010 publication was the major highlight of a series of digital activities carried out by Goodluck Jonathan to reach the country's citizens. In the introduction to the book, Goodluck Jonathan asserts that "a major problem of democracy today is the absence of a sense of belonging by the citizenry. Many citizens believe they are only of importance to politicians at election times" ("Sahara Reporters"). Knowing the irresponsible character of governance in Nigeria, one can mock the book for its language and populist pretensions, as well as its questionable engagement with Nigerian citizens, most of whom deserted the president because of his response to Boko Haram and the economy. My interest in the book is to amplify President Jonathan's recognition of citizens' belief that, aside from their power during electoral seasons, they are mostly irrelevant to governance. In a 2017 article on the Jonathan administration's uses of Facebook, Omolade Adumbi writes that Jonathan's online presence demonstrated that interactions between the state and its citizens on social media "legitimized his attempts to promote cultural and national modes of understanding and to cultivate citizens to support state policies" (233). Adumbi refers to this performance of citizenship on Facebook as "a social mediation of politics (1), something that I have more appropriately identified as "digital social mediation." Supposedly coined from "social media," "social mediation" has a purchase on other fields, including conflict and peace studies, that makes it ambiguous in the context of digital media. Whereas social media itself was helpful in the initial days of Goodluck Jonathan's presidency, it also eventually became his nemesis, as I will show in chapter five through close readings of some Internet photo-based memes created during the 2015 elections in which he was ousted from office.

Also, two major events that took place during the latter part of the Jonathan Administration can be used to underscore the increasingly important role of social media in the Nigerian political terrain. In April 2013, a notable Nigerian online news portal reported that the former Nigerian president had awarded a \$40-million contract to Israeli arms manufacturer Elbit Systems to enable

the Nigerian government to spy on citizens' computers and Internet communications, under the guise of intelligence gathering and national security ("Premium Times"). The need for government surveillance of Nigerian netizens' activities was so much a concern for a government unmindful of public accountability that the presidency described the many young people who take to social media to critique the government as "idle and twittering, collective, children of anger" whose goal was to vote out the president from office. As will be discussed in chapter five, the 2015 national election in Nigeria provided an occasion for users of social media in Nigeria to reach to network platforms to articulate an alternative vision of politics and democracy. In the end, social media, which was central to citizens' participation in the electoral processes, resulted in a political change in Abuja. Also, consequent on this was the violence-free transition from one democratic administration to another in Nigeria, the first time that would happen in the country. It is because of this mobilization of social media to advance a democratic consciousness that I am engaging with network culture.

In subsequent chapters, I illuminate the ways in which the cultural forms produced by Nigeria's marginalized young people on social media unsettle the political status quo and promote a more egalitarian space for democratic participation in the country. In the meantime, to anticipate some of the kinds of visual texts the dissertation generally explores, I now offer two online political images used by netizens as an accoutrement of online protest. The first example is one of many viral images produced during Occupy Nigeria in 2012. Following the austerity of the government's increase of petroleum pump price in 2012, an army of Nigerian youths, inspired by similar events from Wall Street, began an online occupy movement to protest the government's decision and its potential for precarity. Figure 1.5, an example of one of the many ways dissent was performed on social media, casts the former Nigerian president in the mode of Hitler to emphasize the neo-fascist

appropriation of power by the Nigerian regime. The parallel to Hitler suggests oppression and nihilism in the policies and programmes of the Nigerian presidency.



Fig. 1.5. Occupy Nigeria. *Facebook*.

The image is overlaid with former American president, Lyndon Johnson's quotation—"The future holds little hope for any government where the present holds no hope for the people." American democracy is, thus, set against the backdrop of the totalitarian reign of Nazi Germany, is used to indict President Jonathan as an incompetent leader who leaves no hope for the electorate. The quotations allude to a prophetic termination of corrupt governments, implying that the former Nigerian president would eventually be voted out of office in future elections. Fortunately for the Nigerian online activist movement, Goodluck Jonathan was indeed voted out of office in March 2015, a reality that points to how social media and the various sites of online popular culture can resonate in some ways, even if limited, in the corridors of power. Social media posts might not have directly provoked any measurable change, but they certainly promote an alternative political consciousness imbued with electoral capital among Nigerians with access to digital media. The

screenshot of this image was taken quite early when it had only a single “like.” The number of “likes” garnered may be a result of the Nigerian culture of silence that is extended onto a digital environment. What the #OccupyNigeria, and later #BringBackOurGirls activists did accomplish is the attainment of a more censorious voice deployed through visually articulated narratives to critique all forms of hegemonic culture and the political landscape in particular, as in Figure 1.6:



Fig. 1.6. A Facebook Collage of Political Memes from Nigeria.

These are photographic images deployed to ridicule the operations of abusive power in Nigeria. Without much familiarity with the socio-cultural contexts represented, one can almost follow the decentred plotting of the narrative of this post, as actual images overlaid with words have been creatively combined to communicate a critique of the president. The image is a mix of four different photos, which together with the texts *pls judge for yourself*; *24 Hours after the [Nyanya]*,

Abuja Bomb Blast invites the reader to appreciate how the former president of Nigeria is insensitive to the pain of the underclass. He is represented as a party-loving leader impervious to the suffering of the masses, while the British High Commissioner responds to calls for donation of blood for victims of a Boko Haram terror attack. The juxtaposition of these images uncovers and mocks the postcolonial condition in which reckless African leaders are not as politically responsible as leaders in the West. While showing how social media empowers Internet users to critique a culture of political abuse in Nigeria, I will also be focusing on the dialogic conversations produced alongside the images. Of all the many uses to which Nigerian netizens put social media, it is through this interrogation of the political that the self is most expressed performatively. Unlike the past, Nigerian youths now find digital avenues such as Facebook and Twitter as appropriate media for their own radical expression of political agency and the questioning of normative hegemony. This practice is unprecedented in the history of subaltern participation in the political arena in Nigeria.

In the next chapter “Social Media and the Re/Turn to Agency in Nigeria,” I expand on the idea of agency, demonstrating how Nigerian popular culture has experienced a major shift from a widely celebrated video-film industry Nollywood to social media spaces that motivate individual subjectivities. By using the political cartoons of Mike Asukwo on Facebook and Twitter, as well as the puppetry videos published by Buni TV on YouTube, the chapter examines some of the ways in which satirical cartoons and animations facilitate the emergence of a shared community of network users critiquing the political culture. These netizens are committed to the production and reproduction of alternative narratives and publics that provoke counter-hegemonic models of civic engagement. In chapter three, “Performative Citizenship and Political Identities in Nigerian Social Media,” I propose the idea of “self-spectatoriality,” the performative presentation of spectacularized speech and citizenship in a context of power relations and the performance of

identity. My deployment of the term is aimed at foregrounding the ways the structure of social media urges users to produce and circulate their own perspectives. I will discuss this notion in relation to the ways cultural forms such as the selfie constitute performative expressions of resistance. The chapter will also examine selfies and other playful forms of self-presentation deployed by ordinary Nigerians during the #BringBackOurGirls social media campaign to dismantle the mythology that young people's involvement in social media forms of protest is entirely ineffective. In further developing the argument of play and performance, I stress humour as a tactic of subverting power in chapter four, titled: "Carnavalesque and the Cultural Politics of Humour in Nigerian Social Media." I will argue here that humour within the context of Nigerian social media culture is the most dominant cultural form of civic engagement and the articulation of outrage in Nigerian digital culture. In my closing chapter, "The Hashtag as Archive: Internet Memes in Nigeria's Social Media Election," I will focus on how Internet memes constitute a cultural genre that disseminated the voice and agency of ordinary people during the 2015 general elections. In my analysis of Internet memes as a cultural genre, I analyze the trajectories of citizens' engagement with Nigerian domestic politics, identifying the most viral social media hashtags since the inauguration of the present government in the country. I conclude the chapter by examining viral hashtags such as #BringBackOurGirls and their constitution of a digital archive of contemporary Nigerian culture and politics.

CHAPTER TWO

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE RE/TURN TO AGENCY IN NIGERIA

My starting point in this chapter is the contention that Web 2.0 facilitates the agency of the user and situates online subjects as “authors” in the centre of their own narratives. Social media’s foregrounding of the users and their activities—in the context of online social movements, for instance, has informed an enormous scholarship, including those of Paolo Gerbaudo (2012), and Manuel Castells (2012). These studies highlight new forms of social movements seeking to address and redress social injustice through the rhizomatic routes of social media and other user-based media. Despite the important roles of social media in recent social movements, critics point to the ways the activities and performances of users are mediated, recorded, and conditioned through algorithmic protocols. Rachel Dubrofsky, for instance, writes of how users are constructed as self-panoptic subjects on Facebook. Facebook, she argues, “effectively situates users as the master of their own surveillance and as the producers of their self under surveillance. On Facebook, surveillance is a practice of the self” (Dubrofsky 120). Dubrofsky’s view as well as the idea that both the Internet and the culture it distributes serve mainly as an apparatus of power, delivered through the paradox of free but controlled computer protocols (Galloway 2014) do not sufficiently address the situation in many parts of the world where repressive and/or dictatorial governments exist and limit citizen participation in the public sphere.

Even when the monuments and documents of history, as Walter Benjamin asserts, are, in their ontology and transmission, inherently tainted by barbarism (*Illuminations* 256), it is possible to argue moments of resistance can emerge from them. In a similar manner, one may still be able to deploy such cultural forms as social media to expound radical politics, without ascribing any messianism to it. This view is true even if the Internet, like earlier technologies such as print, is ideologically responsive to the subtly vicious operations of capitalist modernity. Those who

mainly conceive of social media as another way the culture industry repositions itself to pacify the masses neglect to see “the ways in which the cultural industry, while in the service of organized capital, also provides the opportunities for all kinds of individual and collective creativity and decoding” (During 32). Simon During’s claim is central to the ways I think of agency and the counter-hegemonic impulses of the images of popular culture examined in this dissertation. His view stresses a fundamental idea in cultural and media studies: the potential of the culture industry to facilitate creative forms of reinterpreting and challenging normative culture. It is precisely because virtual environments such as social media are not ideologically neutral that resistance to totalities and hegemonic culture is possible. Nigerian netizens, sometimes unperturbed by possible ideological undercurrents of the Net, are using online network platforms as social spaces from which they assert a political voice. The idea of agency in this work corresponds to the capacity for individual action which social media facilitates and can be appreciated from a socio-cultural perspective that facilitates communication. This communication is achieved, as Jillianne Code writes, “through Internet-based applications by enabling identity experimentation, social identification, and ultimately enhances self-development through the expression of human agency” (Code 39). Agency, within the context of Nigerian social media, is the newly found capability through which Nigerian young people, hitherto marginalized in the corridors of power, collectively exercise political influence (Bandura 2) in the country’s political conversations. This agential power is evident in how the social actions and politicized speech that now originate from them have resonances in the corridors of power. As Patrick Chabal notes, “the processes of social change *actually* taking place in Africa” (11) require an analytical framework. This analytical optic is what I have identified as a performative agency in Nigeria social media.

In December 2014, for instance, about eight months after the #BringBackOurGirls Twitter campaign in Nigeria and around the world had waned, Nigerian social media user Mike Asukwo

tweeted an image that urged some political responsibility among candidates seeking elective positions in the country's 2015 election. Asukwo is a Nigerian cartoonist who publishes his works on various social media handles and enjoys a huge following online, aside from producing cartoons for some traditional media organizations in Nigeria. Like many around the world who called on the Nigerian establishment to rescue the Chibok girls, he reached out to Twitter to remind a burgeoning social media community in the country of the apparent absence of any effective intervention of the Nigerian military in rescue efforts of the almost 300 high-school girls abducted in Chibok, Borno State by Boko Haram. Boko Haram is an al-Qaeda-linked Islamist terrorist group, fighting to impose an extreme interpretation of the Sharia Law in Northeast Nigeria. Figure 2.1 illustrates his creative use of a political image that maps and narrates the disposition of the political elite in the country to a major sociopolitical issue, such as Islamist fundamentalism.



Fig. 2.1 Mike Asukwo. "Don't Just Sit there...Condemn something!" *Facebook* [5 December 2014]

In the image, the former Nigerian president is represented as indifferent to Boko Haram's persistent assault on the Nigerian nation. Asukwo uses the president to depict a political class that is largely indifferent to the struggles of the underclass and therefore unresponsive to the parlous economic and social conditions Nigerians are persistently confronted with. Perhaps the most productive interpretation of the image is its disapprobation of an online culture of activism that has no impact on street protests. This political cartoon critiques the Nigerian state and its response to postcolonial tensions and precariousness. It mocks and resists the normativity of abusive power and the predictable pattern of empty political rhetoric in the face of, for instance, a Boko Haram terror attack. One may conceptualize "Don't just sit there...condemn something!" as a text prodding the state and online dissidents to political action, but a closer scrutiny reveals the image uses the political inaction of government to unsettle the very idea of an online activism that ends in cyberspace. Asukwo is using an image of the former president to perform a resistance grounded in anti-slacktivism. "Don't just sit there...condemn something!" may also be a euphemistic plea to the Nigerian state to carry out the functions of governance, aside from the implicit urging of an emergent shared community of online dissidents in Nigeria, to shun indifference and political apathy. The political cartoon, with 69 retweets and 7 likes on Twitter is one of the many cultural forms in Nigerian social media that illustrate how young and ordinary people are engaging directly with one another both for personal and political purposes. Over the last three decades in Nigeria, the influence and agency of these young people has been limited by a political culture in which they have a nearly non-existent voice. This culture of exclusion informed a petition launched in May 2016 on *Change.org*,³ seeking support for "the #NotTooYoungToRun bill to reduce the age

³ The petition can be found here: <https://www.change.org/p/national-and-state-assemblies-support-the-nottooyoungtorun-bill-reduce-the-age-limit-for-running-for-elective-office>. On July 26th 2017, the Not Too Young to Run Bill was eventually passed by the Nigerian parliament—another indication of the success of hashtag activism in the Nigerian social media context. <http://dailypost.ng/2017/07/26/nigerian-senate-passes-not-young-run-bill/>

limit for running for elective office.” Writing on this bill, Adebowale Adeniyi reminds Nigerian young people that:

2019 is around the corner; we all need to renew our interest in politics, have a common voice in unity, vision and take our future in our own hands. If the best political position the president of Nigeria could afford to give us is the Personal Assistant on New Media, Bashir Ahmad who is 24 years old, despite the full and mass support he enjoyed from us during the campaign both online and offline, then we need to have a rethink, mobilise ourselves *en masse* to have a mutual interest and fight for what belongs to us. Remember, the time is now! (*Sahara Reporters*)

The use of the hashtag symbol in the phrasing of the bill is a significant indication of how hashtag activism can translate into other symbolic contexts, illustrating the way in which digital culture exerts influence on both individual perception and larger political processes. Although I will be discussing hashtags and the publics that converge around them in chapter five, it suffices to note at this point that the interventions of Nigerian young netizens in political governance in the country has the emblem of social media written all over it. The fight for “what belongs to us” above is an expression of the desire for a more democratic public culture and is what Figure 2.1 succinctly articulates. While 69 retweets may not be significant on its own, networked social media means that such cartoons have the potential for extensive reach. With social media, many of these young actors now gain a more articulate and forceful entry into the arena of political conversations and contestations in Nigeria. It is possible to assume images like this have had an insignificant number of likes and retweets because of apolitical Internet users who have already succumbed to resignation, especially about the capacity of their activism on social media to effect any meaningful changes. However, what this assumption would overlook is that social media inherently facilitates a rare form of agency, namely a personal and citizen-driven engagement with the agents and

mechanisms of power in a corrupt country, such as Nigeria. The closest to this new cultural order was during military dictatorships in the 1990s in Nigeria, when the few young people that participated in any visible public sphere constituted an informal parliament organized around street newspaper stand exchanges (Otiono 113). Their narratives on unfolding events in Nigeria constitute part of what Nduka Otiono refers to as street stories, mentioned in the introductory chapter.

The situation began to change with the emergence of the Internet in the mid-90s and reached a critical peak with the arrival of social media, as many more Nigerians, especially young people, hitherto with very limited ways of engaging with the Nigerian postcolonial state, and unmodulated by any apparatus of the Nigerian governance, began deploying network platforms as alternative media for engaging with the state. Asukwo's cartoon tweets and Facebook posts together with many other popular images from other Web 2.0 applications provide a fascinating lens through which my work appraises how the performance of individual agency enlivens resistance politics in Nigeria. A sustained cultural analysis of popular images from social media stresses that social media applications provide a vital corrective to a political culture that limits the agency of certain individuals in the public sphere. This analytical perspective engages with social media as a domain facilitating new self-representational spaces for the articulations of resistance, expressed through the performance of new forms of popular culture in a shared community of network users. The idea of a limited agency speaks to how earlier forms of cultural and media representations such as television and film do not locate the user and consumer of these texts as an active subject the way Web 2.0 platforms do. In any case, government censorship creates situations in which the state determines forms and contents of these traditional sites of representation in Nigeria. With Web 2.0, ordinary Nigerians have a new cultural economy of self-representation through which they scrutinize and reorganize power relations. Both professional artists such as Asukwo and the

ordinary citizens who create viral memes do not merely provide visual metaphors for interrogating systems of rule and domination, they also legitimize spaces for online popular consciousness and for performing counter-narratives.

Although there is an obvious dearth of cultural perspectives and scholarship on Nigeria social media, there are a few pertinent contributions, including Innocent Chiluwa and Esther Ajiboye's work which tracks the ideologies embedded in and disseminated by tweets from Boko Haram members (Chiluwa and Ajiboye 2014). Chiluwa's lone study on social media networks and the discourse of resistance offers a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the sociolinguistics of Biafra separatist agitations in Nigeria. Other discussions on the use of new media in the Nigerian political sphere have focussed on the role of blogging for mobilizing grassroots participation and for monitoring and measuring electoral activities (Ifukor 2010). Using a qualitative approach of discourse analysis to present a variety of discursive acts that blogging, and microblogging afford social media users during the electoral cycle, Presley Ifukor analyzed data from 245 blog posts and 923 tweets and concluded that "citizens' access to social media electronically empowers the electorates to be actively involved in democratic governance" (1). There is also the article by Nancy Ogundimu, which undertakes a textual analysis of user comments on the Facebook page of former President Goodluck Jonathan. Ogundimu's work identifies how Nigerians through these Facebook posts, raise "fundamental issues about the terrorist activities of Boko Haram and the President's policies for addressing the problem" (219). She writes that the interaction of Nigerian netizens on Facebook "is important for understanding how the social networking site is changing the way Nigerians are discussing issues that affect them" (219). As these studies demonstrate, the Nigerian reality confirms much of the techno-optimism present in the criticism of social media as an enabler of radical politics. I expand this scholarship by assessing the symbolic practices of defiance produced within the context of these interactions with the Nigeria state and its agents, avowing that

the study of the role of popular images and other cultural productions can be useful as supplemental strategies of digital resistance for social media research.

2.1 From Nollywood to Facebook

At first, the term “Nollywood,” like similar labels such as India’s Bollywood, may invoke an imitative aspiration towards empire and the Western cinematic imagination represented by Hollywood. A closer study of Nollywood shows it has little affinity with the American model, even though it draws cultural influences from it (Haynes 133). The shift to social media and other Web 2.0 applications that foreground the poststructuralist devaluation of authorship and accentuates the direct participation and agency of regular citizens in the production of cultural meanings intensifies the field of popular culture in the country. By asserting itself as a cultural space in which Nigerians converge for local and global conversations, social media evinces that both Nollywood and new media, such as user-generated media are symptomatic of the impact of global media ecology in local contexts. Jonathan Haynes’s assertion in 2006 that “Nigerian video films are the leading form of Nigerian popular culture” (511) conveys the fact that Nollywood possesses expanded, cultural ramifications among everyday people in Nigeria. However, a medium such as Facebook had been founded only two years before and Twitter the same year as Haynes’ publication. These two digital platforms have transformed cultural expressions and political agency among everyday people worldwide. In Nigeria, the images and texts distributed on social media by ordinary Nigerians have now become the leading form and source of popular culture as well as the dominant mode of producing political subjectivities in the country. Although I do not intend this section to be an examination of Nollywood and the *digital social mediation* of political and cultural life in Nigeria within a comparative frame, the idea that the field of popular culture in Nigeria is currently being reconfigured through digital media cannot be contested. These digital networks of playful sociality

and participatory politics provide some kinds of digital hub or public sphere—in the Arendtian sense in which ordinary users of digital media are easily seen and heard in the public arena, exchanging political ideas and mobilizing one another through popular images and other cultural practices for political actions.

With social media, Nollywood, the Nigerian video-film culture appears to have been overtaken in the articulation of popular agency and of counter-hegemonic expressions by subaltern or marginal groups. This relegation of Nollywood can be explained by the fact that a larger number of young people can now directly engage with culture and power, deploying different technologies including digital cameras. The netizen now has some agency and cultural visibility which social media platforms avail young demographics in the new Nigerian public sphere. They express this agency through the various ways their own activities and conversations on social media, which significantly influence and determine to some meaningful degree the functioning of governmental power in the country. A selfie protest or a political commentary expressed through tweets may not be able to depose a president, yet everyday Nigerians now have a shared voice for resisting, revising, and altering articulations of dominance through these media forms.

Although the Nigerian video film, during the country's fiscal vicissitudes of the 1990s, furnished a space for young people on the margins of social life to represent themselves, new media technologies such as social media have now become more effective cultural spaces from which these individuals network with one another to articulate resistance to oppressive socioeconomic conditions in the country. The shift from modes of filmic expressions to the individual sites of self-narration that social media enables is consistent with the centrality of social media to recent arguments by Mahmoud Eid and Stephen Ward (2009) that new media are inherently social and network-based. It is almost inconceivable in the contemporary digital media ecology to imagine a new media object that is not inherently structured as a platform for social connection. Eid and

Ward (2009) stress this point when they note that the “rapid transformation of traditional media into new media” should be seen as encompassing “digital, computerized, and networked information and communication technologies” (1). In other words, a description of new media should account for network platforms such as social media, which personalize social ties and make online connections and communities possible. Perhaps important is the way in which Web 2.0 invites a focus on individual production and circulation of media forms. How the individual user functions as a free agent or author of content within the framework of social media invites one to appreciate Karl Marx’s reckoning that an assertion of the individual ties well in a dialectical sense with the social or collective. In understanding the “social” in social media, therefore, I am guided by this Marxist perspective in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* that “above all we must avoid postulating “society” again as an abstraction vis-à-vis the individual. The individual *is the social being*. His manifestations of life – even if they may not appear in the direct form of *communal* manifestations of life carried out in association with others – are therefore an expression and confirmation of *social life* (45). In other words, an individual enters a social and productive relationship to appear in the public sphere. Similarly, the individual author, or user on social media remains in association or friendship with others in a social network by interacting with them through a shared and conscious performance of social media rituals as expressions of their social being or sociality. This active participation of the user who authors content online is based on an individual agency that manifests among an interactive and relational network of other netizens. Social media is not thus merely a production of algorithmic combinations or prior economic calculations determining the activities and behaviour of users, but also of the activities and traces of active individuals that converge as social and producing beings online. A cultural analysis of social media ought to begin with the individual and his relationship among other users in a network.

The shared and shareable community of popular images, absent in the traditional media, has revitalized cultural and political relations in Nigeria and in other parts of the world, with a significant number of young social media users that engage with one another to produce content that challenges asymmetrical relations of power. While it is possible to see social networking sites as central to social media, the latter makes possible individual representation and presentations, the capacity for (personal) publishing, which some social networks do not necessarily entail. Social media is described, therefore, as “a group of Internet-based applications that enable communication amongst individuals and groups, the creation and exchange of participative user-generated content, and the expression of individual and collective agency” (Code 39). This definition transcends the idea of social networking and links social media to the promotion of the kind of agency that enables young people to narrativize their struggles, while challenging postcolonial excess and oppressive systems of abuse and domination.

Although Nollywood directors such as Kunle Afolayan now produce films in digital formats, the dominant material mode of production at the inception of Nollywood was video-film technology. Onookome Okome writes that the video film came directly out of the practice of the now-famous Yoruba theatre troupes whose directors felt the crunch of the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s in Nigeria. The video film was thus a response to economic problems that made celluloid production unsustainable for early practitioners of Nigerian cinema and difficult for the directors of the travelling theatres, who, according to Okome, “turned to canning their performances in VHS cassettes” (Okome 2). Nollywood redefined the concept of African cinema when its practitioners successfully evolved a film tradition and popular culture in which film-texts were shot straight to video formats, instead of celluloid, which was the distributional medium in early African Cinema. In 1992, large-scale production of such films as *Living in Bondage*, and later, *Glamour Girls*, inaugurated an industry with films by and about Nigeria

produced and marketed by young people to a Nigerian audience. Its popular acceptance and home-video appeal resulted in the huge commercialisation of the film industry in Nigeria. Noting that Nollywood is a major signifier of Nigerian youth culture, Paul Ugor locates the emergence of Nollywood in “an enormous influx of small media technologies such as digital video, VCR players, VCD/DVD machines, and other portable digital hardware—laptop computers, GSM phones, iPods, and the Internet” (393) and so forth. He argues that once marginalized cultural producers and new voices now find a creative outlet for their individual narratives. Ugor also asserts that Nollywood as “a new public sphere, animated primarily by the democratization of media technologies” (393) is a direct outcome of the globalization of the media. From Ugor’s analysis, it can be argued that Nollywood interposed the lingering Americanization of the Nigerian media space, reauthorizing narrative spaces for disadvantaged Nigerian youths to own and tell their stories to both local and global audiences.

However, while Nollywood has remained central to the recent local and global circulation of stories about Nigeria and indeed Africa, its representational spaces do not lend themselves to any shared and network community that underscores the kind of individual narratives social media economies of self-representations make possible for ordinary Nigerians. For instance, during the 2015 Ebola epidemic in some parts of West Africa, some creative and young people in the country produced comic narratives around an online trickster character, Akpos, distributing these stories through digital media applications and social media. Aside from the fact that Ebola jokes on social media further increased awareness of the disease in the country, they also showed how new media technologies are now the first disseminating points of popular narratives and political events in contemporary Nigeria. In the past, it would take Nollywood directors a longer time to produce a film that instantly revolves round the Ebola virus. With social media, on the other hand, there are *immediate*, and sometimes, real-time cultural representations of ongoing sociopolitical political

events in the country. Unlike Nollywood, social media offers a sense of immediacy, what David Bolter and Richard Grusin refer to in *Understanding New Media* as “an immediate relationship to the contents of the medium” (318), that dispels barriers and repositions users as producers of narratives. What social media brings to the field of popular culture in Nigeria is, therefore, a space for individuals, with little or no technical expertise in digital media, to broadcast themselves on YouTube and rewrite their own perspectives into the circuits of cultural and political conversations in Nigeria. Principles such as immediacy and connection, sharing of user-based content, as well as interactivity that are central to Web 2.0 make social media the most creative and effective interpreter of culture and social reality in Nigeria.

Hence, from the viewpoint of media scholarship, my work is a shift from the limited narrative economies of Nollywood to the more ubiquitous user-based sphere of social media, with its vibrant and participatory network of digital actors. These subjects are authors who share, comment on and distribute popular images as a community of reader-writers. While social media is already pervasive in Nigeria, there is still a dearth of critical perspectives on the subject from the perspective of cultural studies. The production, distribution, and consumption of popular culture in Nigeria have moved from the policed boundaries of a few individuals in Nollywood and the mainstream media, to a new domain in which ordinary citizens redefine the production of culture as an inclusive category. It is within this context that I attend to social media as a (re)turn of the agency of the regular citizen, of the marginal class in Nigeria, since they do not have to wait for their stories to be told by Nollywood auteurs or other professional artistes. With social media, the subaltern class, functioning variously as auteurs, writer, and even audience of their own narratives, infuse the public space with the perspectives, epistemologies, and politics of ordinary citizens. As Stuart Hall insinuates, the audience of a form such as Nollywood may be an engaged and active participant who decodes different forms of ideologically encoded messages. Yet, it is in new media

ecologies such as social media that one finds the idea of user activity reconstituted as a productive mode that locates the audience as meaning maker. The possibility of subverting dominant political narratives disseminated through government-controlled media forms takes place within a social media sphere in which oppositional readings (Hall 144) are always almost guaranteed, especially in societies that deny people's voice in the public space. More importantly, social media offers a more nuanced and complicated landscape than the sender-receiver model Stuart Hall analyzed in his television discourse. Rather than this linearity, what is evident is a network of codes sent and resent through a complex pathway involving a sender, and their network of friends or followers.

The fact that it is ordinary everyday users that facilitate the production, distribution and consumption of texts in digital culture further foregrounds the role of the popular in Nigerian cultural life. Since artists such as Mike Asukwo and other cultural producers can interact with audiences that decenter authorship and provide instant feedback, social media affects the creative process and makes the distribution of new cultural voices a popular and shared practice. As a way of further explaining the notion of the popular, there is then the need to understand how the social media landscape ensures that the modes of experiencing and representing contemporary Nigerian culture extend to the everyday online practices of its digital subjects. Social media facilitates new ways of engaging with expressive popular forms in Africa, something made possible because of the noteworthy remediation of earlier forms of narratives—from print and electronic media such as film, as well as cultural performances, such as theatre—in digital environments. These online popular forms of expression conform to Karin Barber's idea of "the popular" in African popular arts, in their dominant inclination to function as "expressive/communicative" texts which must also be pleasurable and perhaps also memorable" (74). Analogous to Barber's view that popular arts "play a crucial role in formulating new ways of looking at things" (4), social media texts occasion

new vistas for knowing and engaging with everyday life in Nigeria, particularly its structures of culture and agents of political power.

In their explanation of “the episteme of the everyday,” Stephanie Newell and Onookome Okome describe “everyday Africa” as shifting and unstable, much like how I approach popular culture in Africa as a provisional and unstable category. The authors suggest that online culture itself shares resonances with the unmediated, interactive and indeterminate nature of African popular arts Barber had identified before the era of the Internet (Newell and Okome 20). Since I am examining the cultural activities of both artistes and regular citizens in these online spaces, it is expedient to note that the postmodern erasure of the boundaries between popular culture and high culture is inapplicable in the African sense. The politicization of everyday life and culture in Africa, which I argue is now extended onto digital environments, has fascinated scholars in the field of popular culture in Africa for quite some time. Karin Barber’s pioneering voice in the field is echoed by her view of the high and low culture dialectic:

What this binary paradigm has obscured is the cultural activities, procedures, and products of the majority of people in present-day Africa. There is a vast domain of cultural production which cannot be classified as either traditional or elite, as oral or literate, as indigenous or Western in inspiration, because it straddles both and dissolves these distinctions. (1-2)

Similarly, there is “a vast domain of cultural production” in Nigerian social media. A great deal of people invested in this production are using social media applications to rearticulate cultural activities and practices, such as political cartoons, self-portraits, and Internet memes with structures of power. These texts not only straddle the boundaries of high and low cultures; they also show the creative ways through which people are deploying new media that promote interactivity and user-generated content to represent and engage with the Nigerian postcolonial condition. While much

of the scholarship on new media in Nigeria and other African countries has been devoted to cinematic representations such as Nollywood and in recent times on the political language of Internet memes, I argue that social media, because of the ways it informs and is informed by the individual agency of the user, is a more effective cultural space for charting the representations of subaltern struggle for visibility and political representation in contemporary Nigeria.

Aside from Fiske's perspective on popular culture discussed in chapter one, Stuart Hall (1981)'s sense of the term, as "one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged" (239) is pertinent. Hall notes that popular culture "is also the stake to be won or lost in the struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured" (239). In the Nigerian context, social media as a cultural field enables symbolic forms that reveal these struggle and negotiations. Users are thus engaged in what Lisa Gitelman refers to as "popular ontologies of representation" (14) pitched, in the case of Nigerian activist networks, for the performance of agency and resistance.

Partly because of the global acknowledgement Nollywood's success as a video-film and homegrown medium of (visual) storytelling, a number of (new) media scholars in Nigeria, including Ugor, have continued to locate their analyses of contemporary culture within the framework of a cinematic representation of the marginal classes. While the film medium is important, such new media spaces as social media show that Nigerians, young people particularly, now participate more actively in the negotiation of meanings from media narratives. With less censorship on these new media spaces, more marginal groups such as youth and women are positioned to assert a presence denied them in a previously government-controlled media environment. The examples from Nigerian social media highlighted in this chapter illuminate the ways in which postmodern media culture enables individuated "aestheticization of everyday life" (Featherstone, 2007) expressed as an everyday online articulation of agency.

As hinted earlier, the digital media restructuring of cultural and political realities in Nigeria began during the 2007 electoral process with the deployment of new media platforms, such as blogs for mobilizing grassroots participation (Ifukor, 2010). In that electoral year, civil societies and NGOs targeted a growing segment of the Nigerian electorate with access to digital mobile devices, circulating information about the election through bloggers and a nascent Nigerian Twitterverse. By the 2015 elections, these platforms played even more crucial roles in the political process, with voting updates and election results announced by the Independent National Electoral Commission INEC on platforms such as Twitter. More importantly, social media by this time had become a kind of digital contact zone for those at home and in the diaspora to perform a dialectical critique of the Nigerian state and its varied mechanisms of dispossessions and oppression through the sharing and discussing of popular memes. Mary Louise Pratt introduced the term “contact zone” to describe “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination-like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today” (4). I am redeploying the term here to refer to the various social media spaces in which disparate Nigerian subjects and cultures, whether at home or in the diaspora, meet and grapple with each other, with respect to domestic socio-political issues in the country. Like Pratt’s formulation of the term that emphasizes asymmetrical power relations, social media as spaces of shared communities and online networking harbour possibilities for the capitalist cooptation of user identity by the builders of the Net’s architecture. Nevertheless, the medium furnishes people with moments of productive authorship and sociality, taking on different configurations as users refashion hegemonic structures for practices of self-presentations and resistance. As for the Nigerian diaspora itself, the deterritorialization of Nigerians from their homeland in the 1990s was inspired, among other factors, by government’s failure to provide

economic opportunities and the country's highly oppressive military regimes between 1983 and 1999.

During that period, many Nigerians migrated to a pre-9/11 immigration-friendly America, as well as to other parts of the English-speaking world. Because Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, it leads other countries from the continent in terms of African immigrants all over the world. The significant role of the diaspora in Nigerian social media is what Farooq Kperogi describes as the Nigerian digital diaspora, composed of members invested “in the politics and discourses of their homeland, from their exilic locations in the West through the instrumentality of online citizen media” (8). With social media, therefore, Nigerians at home and in the diaspora effectively participate more directly and openly than they did in obscure traditional media outlets in an online public sphere in which they constantly pillory the state and its systems of abuses. Unrestrained by any effective social or political forces on social media, their performance of agency is expressed for both personal and political purposes. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2012) have argued that online media such as Facebook and Twitter are spaces through which “subjectivities capable of democratic action” are beginning to emerge. This position is apposite within the Nigerian paradigm, considering the way digital media users mobilized popular images such as Internet memes and satirical YouTube videos to perform resistance to nondemocratic practices. Examples from Nigerian social media illustrate that the Nigerian netizen engages with spaces of power through direct posts and status updates, deepening participatory democracy in the country. The intervention of this cultural netizen, that is, the social media user who deploys cultural forms to destabilize repressive power, however, can set loose the rethinking of dystopian arguments about the Internet, such as those of Jodi Dean (2003) and Alexander Galloway (2004). Both scholars conceive of the Net, not as a virtual agora that fosters a liberal democratic consciousness or a public sphere that catalyzes political consensus, but as an extension of pro-capitalist regimes

which depoliticizes individuals and re-cements bourgeois ideologies through inherent technical mechanisms of control.

Although some critics of new media such as Zizi Papacharissi (2002) assert that the Net is a digital public sphere that consists of several spheres of counterpublics, excluded from mainstream political discourse (21), Jodi Dean argues that the notion of the public sphere is tied to the nation. In her estimation, the Internet should be seen as “a space of conflicting networks and networks of conflict so deep and fundamental that even to speak of consensus or convergence seems an act of naïveté at best, violence at worst” (106). While Dean’s argument regarding the ideologies that are embedded by digital technologies is not totally invalid, Nigerian social media is a corrective to this view that the Net chiefly promotes conflict, without any capacity to legitimate an inclusive and rational realm for political participation and consensus. With a preponderant multi-ethnic and multi-faith population on social media in Nigeria, it may be sometimes difficult to find a coherent articulation of commonality on sociopolitical issues. However, on the whole, an educated and creative class of social media users appear to agree on the tenacity of abusive power and the prevalence of disempowering conditions, as well as the necessity to critique and challenge them in rational debates. The view that a degree of consensus is evident in Nigerian social media is contingent on the fact that the performance of political identities in Nigerian social media organizes the Net as a public sphere that contests prevailing order and rebut dominant state narratives disseminated through the propaganda of the traditional media. What is more important than the possibility of consensus, however, is that capacity to critique postcolonial oppressive conditions in a more direct and self-involving manner that, aside from few instances, does not always invite censure or punitive action, except in few instances. Even when some users deploy anonymity for whatever reasons, the mere fact that people have these conversations in the first place is supremely important. This newly secured power underscores some of the ways social media returns agency

to young media consumers, hitherto on the margins of political discourse and civic engagements in Nigeria.

The articulation of this engagement in terms of a performance of resistance through the politics of visual signifiers can be shown by the way Nigerians from all over the world engage with these cultural symbols as mechanisms of response to political excess and juridical abuses. For example, the meme below is a reproduction of images from the mainstream media on President Jonathan's visit in Kano State after a Boko Haram terror event in 2014. Social media makes possible a more dynamic response to these events for young people than the limited interventions they could have made either through the limited space of a newspaper comment or a passive group discussion among peers. Figure 2.2, therefore, is an instance of an online visual culture form that ridicules the response of the country's former president to Boko Haram's abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls in Northern Nigeria:



Fig. 2.2. A Screenshot of two Memes mocking the Nigerian Government.

This example demonstrates one of the ways popular memes were used in Nigerian social media to perform power relations during the height of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign on Twitter. The President's visit to the scene of another terror event is being used in these images to critique the persistent inability of the Nigerian military to rescue the 300 girls abducted. The screenshot combines two different memes as a single text to mount an imaginary dialogue between President Jonathan and President Barack Obama. The first text is an altered version of a real image from the president's visit to a scene of a terrorist situation, combined with a textual subversion of his defense of corrupt allegations in a media chat with the state broadcasting network. The Nigerian president had said that America would know if a politician had stolen any significant amount of money from the Nigerian national treasury and his words have been combined in this meme to indict his political incompetence in the light of the Chibok abduction in Borno State. The second meme completes the transnational narratives of the text, as President Obama is cast as mocking Goodluck Jonathan for his response, while also gesturing towards the tendency of the American government to police the boundaries of global security. It is also possible to see the meme as an expression of the creator's criticism of President Jonathan's negligence and expectation of an American military assistance in the fight against terrorism in Nigeria. President's Obama's "Of course, America will know. American runs Nigeria." might then be read as an acerbic reply that ridicules the former's handling of national security. There is also an implicit critique of a needless African deference to American hegemony and the West's mockery of a country's inability to protect its own sovereignty. Alongside the performative potential of these images is the way they are reproduced on social media as new forms of satirizing power, and expressing resistance to oppressive conditions. These texts as cultural expressions in social media environments are performative representations of the structures and actors of power in Nigeria.

To buttress this point, one can consider an example of a puppetry video on YouTube. Produced by Buni TV, the musical “Drunk in Power by G.E.J. and Dame Patience” presents a narrative in which former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan and his wife dance to a remixed version of Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s song “Drunk in love.” The video starts with an echo of Beyoncé’s “I have been drinking,” recast as “I have been praying” by the former first lady, Mrs. Jonathan. The religious twist is symbolic, considering that political corruption is often coloured with religion in the Nigerian public arena. The fictive first lady cannot keep her mind off the 2015 presidential elections, declaring that “I want you, now, now.” This obsession for political power that is at odds with the real desire of the electorate is metaphoric of how Nigerian leaders tend to cling to public offices even when the social contract between the political elite and the people is a mere illusion. President Jonathan joins in and sings that he does not care if the people abuse him, as long as he and Mrs. Jonathan “eat the cake.” The cake is a ubiquitous symbol of Nigeria’s national treasure and is the driving force for many a Nigerian politician who divests the people of their commonwealth. In parodying the Jonathans as drunk on power, the video sets the stage for debates among its followers on YouTube. In their revision and appropriation of a popular item of American rap culture, the makers of the video use social media to intensify the discourse on the production of locality in terms of global flows or “scapes” carrying capital, information, images, people, ideas, and technologies (Appadurai 33). In this case, the iconic representation of a corrupt Nigerian administration bears the cultural markings of American popular culture and invites one to appreciate the intersection of glamour and materialism in the critique of political excesses. Social media thus extends this idea of global flows beyond a Nigerian locality, presenting a transnational rhetoric that critiques the Nigerian condition. In his explanation of a way informational capitalism is mediated through the capillaries of digital publics, John Michael Roberts agrees with the idea that global capitalism has transformed itself from “an industrial form to a network form based on

fluidity, flows and informational social media” (12). By resisting and constantly critiquing a corrupt state hegemony through social media, Nigerian young netizens actively join in national conversations that seek to regulate the flow of capital from thieving politicians in Nigeria to foreign accounts.

Although the country has the most virile press in Africa, the combined circulation of all newspapers does not reach half a million in a country of about 180 million citizens (Olukotun, 33). A complaint letter to a newspaper editor, therefore, is at best read by a few Nigerians at home with its anti-corruption message not able to have the kind of reproduction and distribution social media creates. A satirical video on YouTube or a political cartoon on Facebook or Twitter has the potential to be reproduced in such a way that it reaches the millions of internet users in Nigeria and its diaspora. Sometimes, the explosion of information in the media does not have to lead to a loss of meaning, as Baudrillard imagined. With a media landscape defined by a network of people with similar ideological interests, it is possible to have material results that reshape power relations in the nation-state. For example, the head of the current Nigerian Senate, the third highest-ranking public official, was mentioned in the recent Panama Papers,⁴ leading to calls by some Nigerians on social media for his impeachment. Amidst that, the Nigerian parliament decided to purchase expensive vehicles for legislators, despite that the Nigeria people were being confronted with the economic agonies of global fall in oil prices. Some activists on social media launched the hashtag #OccupyNASS to mobilize people for a protest scheduled to hold on April 25, 2016. As in most other cases, this protest, whether online or offline, was simply a demand for a political

⁴ Luke Harding of The Guardian reports that “the Panama Papers are an unprecedented leak of 11.5m files from the database of the world’s fourth biggest offshore law firm, Mossack Fonseca.” The online leaks reveal how the world’s famous and rich hide their money in offshore accounts. (See “What are the Panama Papers? A Guide to History’s Biggest Data Leak.” *The Guardian*, Sunday, 3 April 2016; <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2016/apr/03/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-panama-papers> Web. April 29, 2016)

representation that assured decent living conditions for the Nigerian people. In addition to hashtag conversations, other users of digital networked media distributed political images that served to critique of government officials, while decrying the silence of elected representatives in the light of economic hardships.

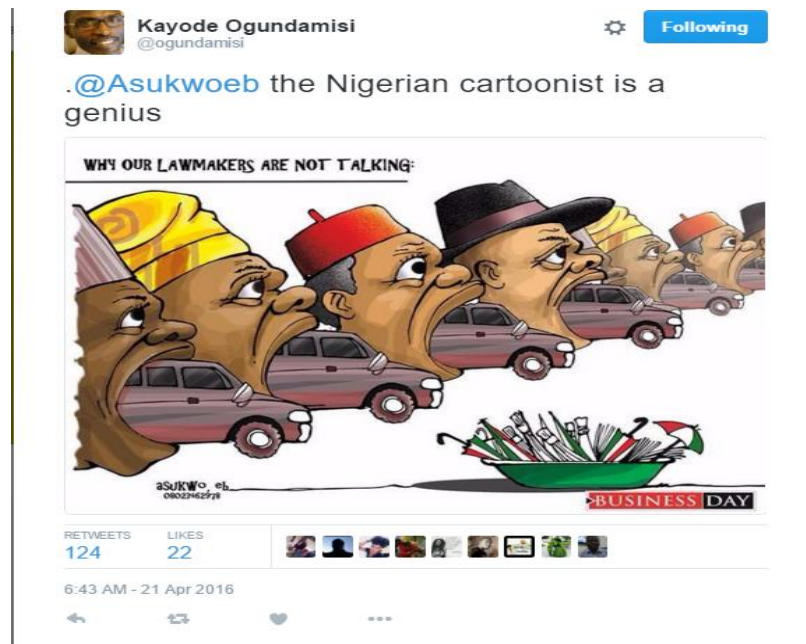


Fig. 2.3. Kayode Ogundamisi. “Why Our Lawmakers are not Talking.” *Twitter*.

Kayode Ogundamisi is renowned in Nigerian social media as an activist journalist who uses Twitter to critique and narrate the Nigerian state. The tweet indicates some level of consensus, shown by the 124 retweets and 22 likes, and emphasizes the point that “Nigerian lawmakers are not talking” because their capacity for speech is hindered by corruption and avarice. With a retweet by the user, @gaisebaba who has 7,587 followers, these retweets can get to thousands more readers, in Nigeria and other parts of the world. This decentred reproduction of the image in other contexts expands its interventions and publics. The profound visual rhetoric of the image itself is consistent with the ways the mouth and other parts of the body, such as the phallus, the backside, and the anus are

recurrent corporeal elements in political humour in many parts of postcolonial African state. As Achille Mbembe notes, “beyond this concern specifically with the mouth, belly and phallus, the body itself is the principal locale of the idioms and fantasies used in depicting power” (7) in the postcolony and it is the site for enacting and critiquing the festivities and celebrations that often define the expression of hegemonic authority. I will return in the next two chapters to the other ways regular citizens construct the body as a carnival of metaphors for the caricature and ridicule of juridical power. Meanwhile, the fact that the mouths of the Nigerian leaders are wide open and stuffed with vehicles in the present example is not just intended as a parody of the political culture in Nigeria. It affirms the perception of political leadership in the country among netizens, and suggests the centrality of obscenities and grotesqueries to the representation of postcolonial relations of power in the country.

Social media are thus new media of networking through which informational capitalism grants disenfranchised subjects some form of agency, which is deployed in the Nigerian context to grapple with the conditions of political exclusion in public discourses. That Nigerians at home and abroad can engage with social media texts such as the tweet in Figure 2.3 supports the notion that social media and its users in Nigeria signify as “mobile texts and migrant audiences” (Appadurai 9). This expression can be used to highlight both the ways popular texts in social media environments are fluid, alterable and remixable, as well as the fact that repoliticized subjects, diasporic or national, engage with the texts as local articulations of resistance inflected with global concerns. De Bruijn, et al. have marked the import of mobile devices in a study that locates mobile phones as the new talking drums of everyday life in Africa. The talking drum is a ubiquitous musical instrument in West Africa and can be made to reproduce the tonal and prosodic elements of natural speech. In the volume, the authors discuss mobile telephony as a marker of globalization in Africa. For them, the mobile phone enables dialectical conversations between technology and

society and serves as a new symbol of material culture that reinvents indigenous modes of communication (12). That the political critiques of the state by ordinary citizens take place mostly on digital mobile devices is thus important to the statuses of these migrant and immersive audiences who use smartphones and iPads as symbolic spaces for revising and resisting the prevailing orthodoxies. It bears repeating that not every Nigerian netizen deploys social media, whether accessed on desktop computers or on a mobile device, for the performance of citizenship or of political selves. There are those who are not sufficiently literate to comment rationally on political issues, while some others, though literate and few, are not social media enthusiasts. There is a third group that is constituted by literate youths who, though online, may not be interested in political activism or commentaries, but merely “like” what they perceive as a good commentary on politics.

My focus is the progressive and creative group that organizes political dissent around images from popular culture. The resistance practices of this group constitute a threat to the Nigerian state which modulates social media and its denizens in various strategic ways. The example of blogger and writer Tolu Ogunlesi, recently appointed to the role of Special Assistant on Digital/New Media by President Buhari, is important to understand how the dominant class assimilates and sublates the alternative narratives young people are producing on social media. Ogunlesi’s appointment can lead to two possible conclusions. One, it is a significant affirmation of some of the ways the Nigerian state is responding to young people’s expression of civic agency on social media. The fact that Ogunlesi, the main scriptwriter for the Buni TV YouTube satirical series, was appointed to a position which has now gained official traction in the Nigerian political system is unprecedented. Considering that before the era of social media, young people such as Ogunlesi, aged 34, would never have made an inroad into political administration, it is fascinating that having a huge Twitter following and writing stories for a YouTube channel can reorganize an apparent marginalization of young and minority voices in Nigeria’s political conversations. Being

attentive to the ways of abusing power in Nigeria, and this is the second possible conclusion, would mean one has to be mindful of how Ogunlesi's appointment also signifies some of the ways power seeks to neutralize resistance.

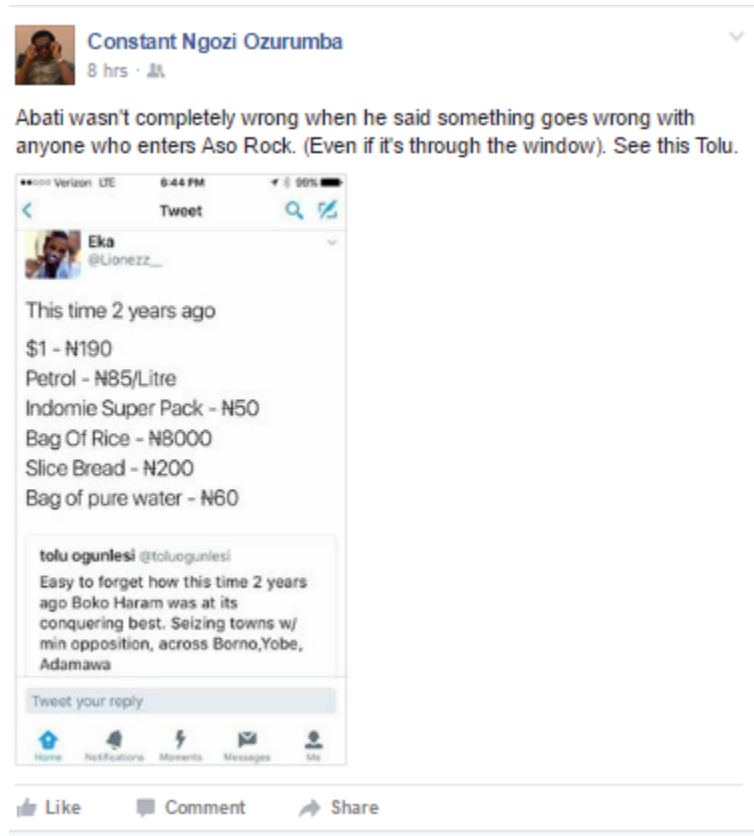


Fig. 2.4. Constant Ozurumba. *Facebook*. 9 December 2016. Facebook.
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10207254742999964&set=a.4377662412820.1073741825.1625924076&type=3&theater>

In this example, Ogunlesi's tweet is a defence of the Buhari government and a reply to another Twitter user who observes the economic situation of the country may have been better during the Goodluck Jonathan era. Ozurumba, the user who posts a screenshot of the conversation on Facebook is calling attention in the post to how hitherto progressive actors are easily bought over when invited to serve in government. The emergence of young people in newly created digital

media offices is an indication that wielders of power in Nigeria appreciate the need to ingratiate themselves with Nigerian social media actors whom they recruit for insidious purposes online. The appointment of Ogunlesi is therefore the subtle staging of state ideology in the country's digital body politic. Unfortunately, as is often the case with some Nigerian progressive voices who serve in governments, Ogunlesi has been more of an apologist for the policies and actions of the current administration, than a defender of social justice and equality. His Twitter feeds have been replete with tweets that affirm his principal's campaign against political corruption, a crusade that is the mantra of the present administration. Ogunlesi's new role is thus similar to that of social media commenters that constitute a vocal group of online warriors planted by the state on social media to defend the Nigerian government and its actions or inactions. Ogunlesi's appointment is indicative of a potential cooptation of social media for propaganda, which began with President Goodluck Jonathan's appointment of a certain Reno Omokiri as chief digital propaganda mouthpiece.

2.2 Social Media and Agency

One can understand Arjun Appadurai's statement that "the consumption of the mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and, in general, *agency*" (7). Appadurai's idea was a description of the electronic media that fascinated him as part of the dynamics of global cultural systems driven by the relationships among flows of people, images and ideologies. Even more, social media as an intensified form of this global media flow fits his examination of popular media and the production of agency. The reason for this is the personalization of the media which Web 2.0 facilitates. Despite digital media's growing influence in Nigeria as of 2009, Paul Ugor wrote in the same year, not of social media, but of Nollywood that "creative classes of marginal Nigerian youths have now taken initiative, appropriating and adapting new media technology in reinventing not just their social and economic lives, but also in

narrating their social struggles in everyday life for both local and international audiences” (1). Indeed, Ugor’s study might be said to have been on the cusp of an unforeseen revolution in creative production, one in which marginality and everyday life, enmeshed in digital media, are new locations of agency. I am thus building on the precedent set out by scholars such as Ugor to show that social media is a more effective media space through which “creative classes of marginal Nigerian youths” redefine power relations and create a “new social space” for themselves. For instance, in April 2014, Boko Haram, an al-Qaeda-linked Islamist terrorist group, fighting to impose an extreme interpretation of Sharia Law in Northeast Nigeria, abducted about 300 high school girls. The Nigerian government was initially silent on the kidnappings, until the tweet of a Nigerian lawyer was retweeted by Obi Ezekwesili, a former Nigerian cabinet minister and Vice President of the World Bank:



Fig.2.5. The Tweet that started the #BringBackOurGirls Twitter Campaign in Nigeria.

Ibrahim M. Abdullahi had heard the former Education Minister Obiageli Ezekwesili speak at an event in the Nigerian city of Port Harcourt, and tweeted about her words on 23 April 2014, using the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls (“#BBCTrending: The Creator of #BringBackOurGirls”). After #OccupyNigeria, the hashtag is a major signifier of the change in citizens’ mobilization of

new/social media to resist political excess and economic corruption in Nigeria. In addition to this important Twitter activism the tweet inspired, it also led some users of social media in Nigeria to post subversive and satirical works in these online media. These satirical texts, which sought to undermine the political negligence of the ruling class, had been inspired by the government's initial apathy. Figure 2.6, a screen shot of the YouTube series by Buni TV, "Ogas at the Top," is a good example of such texts.

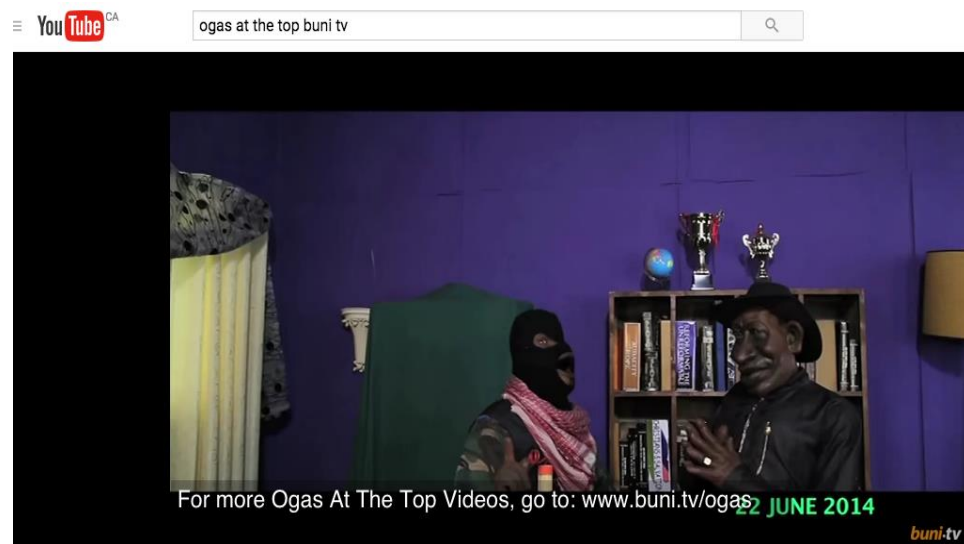


Fig. 2.6: Buni TV. "GEJ Meets Boko," *YouTube*, 6 July 2014..
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13u8C-hRKN0>. Feb 9, 2016.

The video highlights a scene in which Nigeria's former president, Goodluck Jonathan, invites the Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau for a conversation. The president walks around in fright while waiting for his guest, uncertain of what to expect from the Islamist terrorist. The video begins with the president's acknowledgement of his loss of credibility among Nigerians who are likely to believe Shekau more than him. Shekau arrives and startles Jonathan, who upbraids the president: "Why do you ogas at the top fear so much for your life? Is it that you have not eaten enough already?" "Oga" is the word for "master" in Nigerian Pidgin English. In this context, it refers to "leaders" and has been borrowed from a viral story of an interview in which a government official

constantly defers to certain senior bureaucrats (the “Ogas at the top”) before answering any question. The expression “Ogas at the top,” which also provides nomenclature for the Buni TV series, recalls Nigeria’s first viral moment on social media and refers to the corrupt Nigerian political elite that is impervious to citizens’ parlous conditions. Shekau’s question, then, has implications for class, since it ridicules the nonchalance of a political class satisfied with persistent thievery, and unwilling to respond to the oppressive living standards of other Nigerians, as long as the ruling elite is protected by its economic pillages.

The video, while also satirizing the inequality and social injustice of the Jonathan regime, takes a swipe at Islamist fundamentalism when the president himself observes: “All animals are not equal, Mr. Man. Some foolish ones are willing to die to meet virgins, according to what you people believe. Some are so sharp, they get their virgins here before death comes.” First, while “all animals are not equal” summarizes the leadership ethic and attitude of the Nigerian political class that is being lampooned in this text, “You people,” has a metaphoric reference to the project of Islamist jihadism, even if in the president’s estimation, it may gesture towards the Boko Haram leader and his band of terrorists. The fact that “some animals are so sharp, they get their virgins here before death comes” is an important attack on Boko Haram’s practice of abducting young girls and turning them into sex slaves. The text therefore sets up an ideological debate about the nature and motives of violent religious extremism in Nigeria, and around the world—since Shekau threatens to kidnap five thousand boys and send them into slavery in “the Sudan, Senegal, and even Mecca too,” the holy city of Muslims. The text is a representation of political Islam as a harbinger of transnational terrorist ideologies, and is effective because of the online medium through which it is disseminated. It is significant that digital network platforms facilitate a distributional and non-restrictive media that ensure that such a vehement criticism of religious extremism can be

undertaken by Buni TV and even individuals, without any fear of effective censorship from government or Islamic groups in Nigeria.

Also, this text is infused with other narratives about the character of political governance in Nigeria. For instance, the lie detector the president has bought on a recent trip abroad could be conceived as a symbol of the growing influence of technologies, such as digital media and networked platforms in the reconstruction of truth claims. In the text, the political assertions of both the Boko Haram leader and President Jonathan are subjected to a technology of verification. It is instructive to note that the video contests the truthfulness of the “I had no shoes” mantra that drove Goodluck Jonathan’s campaign for office. During his first term for office, the president, in a bid to appeal to ordinary Nigerians, had in a political commercial told the nation he “had no shoes” as little boy. The rhetoric of the commercial is being used in this video as way of refuting such a claim. The lie detector test is therefore important to the narrative as it symbolizes the insincerity and dishonesty of both groups. The grotesque representation of the Nigerian leader and the satire that is inherent in his conversation with Shekau are both used by the creators of the puppetry video to ridicule oppressive mechanisms of power, whether religious or political. A final point to note in regard to the transnational significance of the cultural critiques social media facilitates is the idea that the entire continent of Africa is open for political engagement by network actors who use global media as a way of affirming agency. In addition to Buni TV that produce content from Kenya for a Nigerian audience, there are other sites of transnational engagement in Africa. The image below is a newspaper cartoon that has been remediated online by a US-based social media user from Ghana. What is fascinating in this example is that ordinary citizens from different parts of Africa, resident in the continent or in its diaspora, are able to form a community around popular images that are shared online, with a view to contesting hegemonic narratives.



Fig. 2.7. Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang's Post of a Newspaper Cartoon. *Facebook*

The background to the image is the viral video⁵ in which a former Prime Minister of the UK is seen calling Afghanistan and Nigeria “fantastically corrupt countries.” While Nigerian officials and UK

⁵ Cameron was caught on camera at the verge of the opening of an anti-corruption conference in London. More from: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/david-cameron-video-corruption-quote-comment-nigeria-afghanistan-queen-a7022586.html>

opposition party members expressed disapprobation of David Cameron's sentiment, ordinary citizens of Nigeria and other African countries could be found on social media expressing alternative perspectives. The cartoon narrates the response of the Nigerian president, who after Cameron's statement insisted less on an apology from London than a concrete effort by UK officials to have Nigerian stolen assets in UK banks returned to the country. The Ghanaian user who published the image prefaces his post with thoughts that reference corrupt activities dating back to England's colonial presence in other parts of the world, as well as to the recent Panama Papers leaks that mention Cameron's father. The fact that subaltern narratives take on a transnational configuration is testament to social media's capacity to connect disparate voices across the globe. The commenters on the image contribute to the rhetoric of the text in a way that is not possible in the limited and unilineal space of the original newspaper context of the cartoon. This last point is in addition to the online reproduction and distribution of the image that enable anybody from anywhere in the world to participate in the circulation of the text. The fact that netizens digitize newspaper cartoons and post them unto social media indicates the limited impact of print culture that is being rehabilitated by using digital technologies to circulate the rhetoric of the image more widely and to preserve its meaning and message. This remediation also shows one of the ways new media informs how some readers relate to print culture. People probably read newspaper content in the past and moved on, or at best, shared its content with a friend or two. With social media lurking in the unconscious, people encounter content differently, knowing they can share information with many people who in turn distribute it further. In any case, the "moment" of consuming print culture expressed as remediation and distribution on social media is part of the production process. The next two examples further illuminate how the newspaper content reproduced on social media invite a different response.



Fig. 2.8: A Facebook User Publishes a Digitized Newspaper Cartoon Mocking Politicians.

In this status update, Olu Adegoke combines a cartoon by Asukwo and a quotation—The duty of youths is to challenge corruption—attributed to Kurt Cobain to provoke friends in his network to confront politicians seeking re-election. The image presents the archetypal narrative of the Nigerian corrupt politician who, having been elected into office, forgets his electoral constituency and his stewardship to them. After diverting public funds for personal use, the politician returns to the electorate, which does not recognize him. This social media text illustrates one of the new ways Nigerian netizens are reusing older cultural forms such as satirical cartoons to challenge the domination of abusive and oppressive power. In understanding how young people relocate themselves from the margins of social and political life to the centres of meaningful political conversations, my work attends to social media and the various cultural content these young people are creating and uploading onto them to underpin an alternative political culture grounded in youth creativity. As this appearance in the Nigerian public space becomes a naturalized practice for many netizens, online subjects such as Adegoke continue to generate political images and verbal status

updates that critique different aspects of Nigeria's sociopolitical ecosystem. In a recent 2016 status update published on Facebook, Adegoke posts a digitized image of a newspaper advertorial dedicated to a former Nigerian governor serving a jail term in London.



Fig. 2.9. Olu Adegoke. “Celebrating Crime. Only in Nigeria”. *Facebook*
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10153559326911261&set=pb.507071260.-2207520000.1470936965.&type=3&theater>

Adegoke is using an item from the traditional media to mock a popular practice among the Nigerian political class. James Ibori, a former Governor of Delta State who was arrested in the UK for money

laundering is being celebrated on his birthday by the present governor. Adegoke remediates the advertorial to lampoon and subvert its celebratory message for his community of friends who contribute to the discourse. Aside from his view that Nigeria celebrates and rewards crime, Adegoke is calling attention to this misdemeanor among his network of social media friends, who respond through shares, likes and damning comments on both James Ibori and Ifeayin Okowa, who signed the advert. The opportunity for civic engagement, and debates on corruption that the image provides makes it an effective means of asserting a presence in the public sphere. That elected official uses public fund to congratulate an indicted politician in prison is symbolic of the degree of corruption among the ruling elite in Nigeria. Adegoke's hashtag, #wewantpositivealternative which along with the title expresses a desire among young people for a corruption-free political order in the country. The comments on the image gesture towards a vibrant public sphere in which people can participate in rational conversations on corruption in Nigeria. The remediation of this newspaper publication overhauls the structure and dynamics of newspaper-stand public spheres highlighted in the first chapter. Part of this reconfiguration is locatable in the comment sections that signify a new form of community that expands the narrative of an original post in various ways.

Worthy of highlighting is the comment of Adam Eve, whose response in Nigerian pidgin, gathering a storm of counter perspectives, calls netizens to “stop them” and not merely stay online and exercise freedom of speech. His comment stresses the democratization of speech in online networks and imagines the possibility of slacktivism when individuals merely post content not supported by any concrete political action. The outrage against the abuse of political privilege is one of the factors marking the symbolic entry of an unprecedented number of young and savvy Internet users, many of whom are still on the margins of actual political power, into the country's public sphere. In the days that led to the 2015 election in Nigeria, this digital class reached to new

media technologies to mount an alternative vision of governance, such as Adegoke's "hashtagged" desire above, with the performance of social media rituals as productive practices of untying normative socio-political entanglements.

What is significant and innovative about these critiques is how social media facilitates a distributary common space in which users simultaneously participate as producers and audiences in a network articulation of resistance. The rituals of sharing, tweeting and uploading cultural data, in this context, serve to make the critiquing of autocratic power a *communal practice*, one that is not foreign to the shared cultural spaces of indigenous forms of representations in Nigeria. What social media occasions is a return to the participatory ethos of these pre-colonial modes of cultural representations and performances that electronic media such as print, television, and radio had relegated, following colonial modernity. A major feature of oral tradition, storytelling is achieved in an interactive space that fosters connection and immediacy of the spoken word. Most of the times, oral subjects co-create the meanings of the aural/oral text they participate in. For instance, the idea of call and response is central to indigenous modes of storytelling and musical performances in many African cultures, with performers and audiences jointly invested in the production of cultural meanings. This is the extent to which social media recollects indigenous modes of communication. Aside from the fact that many users mobilize these online networked spaces to narrate and perform personal narratives, the ways networked communities encourage participatory politics also gesture towards a mode of communication in precolonial societies that is affirmed by immediacy and connectivity. The idea of user-generated content can then be likened to how participants in indigenous forms of storytelling can contribute personal contents and anecdotes when 'resharing' an earlier tale. Similar to the practice in indigenous forms of communication, social media invites a community of performers, who join in the interpretation of a text's meanings, and hence, in a popular performance of dissent through the rhetoric of images

circulated in these network platforms. To illustrate, Figure 2.6 has about a hundred comments, with many of them in appreciation of the performance of humour in the text. However, there are a few other commenters who object to the portrayal of the president. Joe Badmus, for instance, claims that the text oversimplifies and mocks the gravity of Boko Haram's menace:

There goes Nigerians; your people are been [being]
killed unreasonably everyday and all you can do is
make jokes about it. (*YouTube*, Feb 25. 2015)

This commenter seems unaware of how Nigerian culture positions people to mobilize humour as a coping and mocking strategy in oppressive socio-political conditions. With social media, this culture of combating precariousness through humour might be framed as a practice of “LOLing” at the structures of power, that is, mobilizing satire and popular laughter on the Internet to critique power and authority with a view to undermining their hegemonic affront. Fundamental to this perspective is the way new media such as social network and internet apps reinvigorate humour, both as “a form of collective self-critique” and of “political resistance” (Obadare 102) for individual citizens who are simultaneously producers and consumers of social and political jokes. Through social media, humour in postcolonial states like Nigeria achieves a more caustic emphasis, as those who are subject to abusive power can directly travesty the state and its hegemonic apparatus of systemic oppression. The implication of organizing the rhetoric of political humour through the images and texts of social/new media is that humour as a site of resistance is individuated, with the ‘private spaces’ of citizens online becoming public sites of power contestations, hereby affirming the importance of treating social media texts as embedded in broader social and cultural discourses. In chapter four, I will be discussing humour in Nigerian social media culture more fully, using examples from the creative texts of ordinary citizens to illustrate my arguments.

Also, to return to Figure 2.6, germane is the participatory and dialogic process of undermining the state, facilitated by the shared community of commenters, who restate the logic of the video, and expands its semantic and thematic orbits through varied comments and explanations. For instance, Kelechi Agu's response to Joe Badmus's objection both rearticulates the implicit assumptions of the video and explains the way cultural producers mobilize the media landscape to empower people:

For your information, this video is not made simply for humor and entertainment. It sends across a message as well. Yeah even Media and entertainment can be used to empower people. If you cannot see the serious and concerned undertones beneath the wittiness of the video, then it's your loss. But expression is real no matter the form. I don't know where you are from, but I think if you are ready to point fingers, then you should be ready to stand up and show example no matter the minuteness of it. (Feb 25. 2015)

Kelechi Agu's response, which clarifies the video for readers and viewers who may not be familiar with the text, marks the way social media in Nigeria functions as a contact zone in which Nigerians at home and abroad engage in cultural and political dialogues. The commentary on the video suggests that Nigerians from around the world now participate in a virtual public space to discuss Nigerian political narratives with their countrymen at home, supporting the claim earlier that, unlike Jodi Dean's zero consensus possibility, the Net for many activist Nigerian youths is a digital community in which some level of consensus is achievable.

Another point to make about the video in (Figure 2.6) is its virality. The viral puppetry show, produced by Kenya-based Buni TV, is hosted on a website but is largely distributed through social media. A Google search for the "Ogas at the top videos" shows that the video has been shared and redistributed on numerous websites, and Buni TV's social media, not its traditional one-

to-many broadcast station, has been the source of this dissemination. Like Asukwo's page that hardly gets visits and comments from viewers and readers, the website of Buni media also gets more dialogues and commentaries from its social media outlets. This fact is another significant indicator of the way social media is ingrained in the imagination of young internet users in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. With thousands of shares through different users on Twitter and Facebook, the "GEJ meets Boko" video enjoys a viral status. Its virality suggests that many digital citizens endorse its satirizing of both Boko Haram and the Nigerian state. Although much of the commentaries around the video focus on its comic strategies, there are many commenters on various threads on the video that appear to provide the consensus that the Nigerian state was ineffective in its response to the Boko Haram crises and, especially, to the abduction of the Chibok girls. Social media in Nigeria, since the abduction, has remained a contested space of negotiation, as netizens seek to refigure power and speak back to it at the same time.

Furthermore, the mobilization of satire in the image (see Figure 2.6), evident in the way the video lampoons a Nigerian regime, is particularly instructive as it provides an optic to understand the location and function of online dissent in the community of readers/viewers in the country's network society. The cultural politics and ideological significations implicit in the many representational spaces of popular culture on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter evokes performance and performative identities. This perspective is similar to that in the work of Liesbet van Zoonen, Farida Vis and Sabina Mihelj, who examine how "the participatory opportunities of [YouTube]...invite performances of citizenship, especially with respect to the articulation of religious and/or political identity" (250). Digital network technologies enable the *social mediation* of cultural and political life in Nigeria. In particular, the representation of the political in social media environments informs a postmodernist performative identity, through which ordinary citizens, empowered by Web 2.0 platforms' re-centering of the user as the "message" of the

medium, affirm the constructedness of political identifications. The political is locatable in processes of postmodernist self-fashioning organized around visual culture and the performance of political selves, not merely in the posting of activist messages and coordinating oppositional politics on social media. The popular culture forms that accompany social movements online demonstrate how social media platforms are sites of organizing counter-hegemonic activities, meaning they function as spaces of personal creativity and performative self-presentations, which articulate resistance. These images serve as visual signifiers of a subversive discourse reaffirming a contemporary moment of network power (Castells 774) in Nigerian political communication. It is this network potential that producers of the *Buni TV* series, Marie Lora Mungai and Godfrey Mwampembwa, two former producers of television series, engage in to distribute their satirical interventions to a global audience. The fact that they produce content about Nigeria from Kenya emphasizes how social media makes possible connections and communities of resistance at a transnational level that is rare within Africa. With these social networks, different people across Africa are now able to engage at a global level with one another.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, like Castells, have also described how the governing apparatus of the network structures modern society. Within the Nigerian context, the mobilization of these cultural forms within network environments and the participation of readers/viewers who also join in the articulation of textual meanings show how the network has become a way of understanding and interpreting the world (Hardt and Negri 142) and acting in repressive and corrupt societies such as Nigeria. The network as a location of power relations is here seen with respect to cultural texts that signify the individual on social media as a performer who connects with other people to contest dominant narratives. For instance, in the *Asukwo* image below, the cartoonist contests a dominant practice in the Nigeria society: that of undermining judicial procedures so that politicians who defraud the state can avoid punishment. The text depicts the apparatuses of the

Nigerian state as corrupt institutions unable to midwife justice as it is done in Euro-American locations.



Fig. 2.10. “How my Pencil Reacted to the News of Ibori’s Imprisonment in London.” *Facebook*, 20 April 2012.

The cartoon delivers a powerful critique of the state in Nigeria and how government encourages corruption among state officials. That said, since it is published on social media, it leads to an (un)intended discourse on the intersections of politics and religion in Nigeria. Asukwo is asking “friends and fans to study it carefully” because he wishes to know what possible ideological

impulses the text may disseminate or motivate. Although the immediate setting of the narrative is not a mosque, the men, who represent some of the country's juridical institutions, have buried their heads in shame on the floor. This portrayal, reminiscent of the ritual of prayer in Islam, constitutes a problem for some readers who understand the cartoon as a religious narrative. Such readings demonstrate that religion, especially Islam and Christianity, impacts upon everyday citizens' interpretation of signifying practices. What should not be missed is the understanding of a cultural producer who discerns that the (new media) space of engagement and authorship is not the once univocal and authorizing frame of traditional media, but a de-hierarchized and polyvocal space in which cultural meanings are negotiable, performative and dialogic. This new space is one in which authorship is both shared and collective, and constantly in a state of flux, since the process of commentary, liking, or sharing is always ongoing. Within, Asukwo's original authorial space, now decentered, the author gains in authority and agency, becoming a legitimate producer of cultural meanings. That fans and friends can co-habit the space of cultural meaning is another reason social media is significant in the articulation of Nigeria's recent sociopolitical history. As a shared media space between cultural producers and their friends and/or fans, social media enables a kind of online carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1941) that restructures spaces of power through the chaotic carnival of popular humour and classless interactions focusing on sometimes grotesque political representations and subversions of power.

These texts motivate the argument that social media enables a culture of political participation that was previously almost inconceivable within the domains of traditional media such as radio, television and cinema, over which the Nigerian government exerts significant influence. A critique of the texts' meanings uncovers discursive space for an examination of how social media platforms articulate performative representations of individual agency. The images and the conversations they engender also illustrate some of the ways everyday citizens contest

dominant narratives, resist hegemonies, reframe political identities, and perform a subversion of the state's regulatory mechanism of dispossession. Users perform citizenship and construct political identities that subvert regimes of oppression and corruption in Nigeria. The idea of social media rituals is a suggestion that what people do in network environments can be depicted as "ritualized behaviour" (Schechner 52), conditioned by a sense of play, or digital flânerie. In other words, it suggests that the activities of people on social media are usually processual, as people, in the Nigerian reality for example, repeatedly share and reshare creative content as a way of imagining or gesturing towards a more productive political environment. This processuality informs why I conceive of practices such as liking, posting and other similar social media performances as "rituals" that potentially generate meaning and knowledge. In other words, epistemic consequences also arise for connecting with other characters, fictional or not, in social media environments. Users connect with one another, not only to identify with friends and relatives, but also because the rituals of liking and following occasion the creation and dissemination of knowledge. Expressions such as *Follow us on Twitter* and *Like us on Facebook* are, therefore, linguistic imperatives that seek both a performance of comradeship and of knowledge production. In other words, "Twitter follows" and "Facebook likes," are important sources of information that situate users and their followers in a shared media space. In this media space, social media users constantly construct their own versions of reality and producing knowledge about varied aspects of global, or in the case of Nigeria, local cultural politics. Both knowledge and the identity of users on these platforms are contingently framed through the social media rituals of sharing and posting content. In the example below, this collective and shared production of knowledge can be illustrated in this status update in which Mike Asukwo seeks the suggestions of his readers as to what to tell President Buhari in his next cartoon:



Fig.2.11. Mike Asukwo. “In the Next Cartoon What Should I tell the President?” *Facebook*. 5 Aug. 2016.

In this example, Asukwo as an artist is in some form of conversation with his friends—other netizens whose consumption of the text is expressed as “comments” and “likes.” The post elicits the agency and participation of the reader in the production of meaning, with Asukwo, aware of the discursive positioning of the reader, inviting their perspective for his next cartoon. The response of his readers on the thread indicate their acknowledgement of Asukwo as some form of spokesperson saddled with the task of representing their popular views through the symbolic context of the cartoon. “Tell him there is hunger in Nigeria,” one of the commenters write; while

David Christopher wants Asukwo to tell the president “to resign,” a view that is shared by others on the thread. There are other comments in this screenshot that raise other contentious issues, including Steve Aborisade’s comment that Asukwo should tell the president “to stop laughing at your cartoons.” Aborisade’s comment is an allusion to a statement released by the presidency that President Buhari is initially drawn to the cartoon pages anytime he opens a newspaper. These comments reaffirm the view earlier that, in conjunction with professional artists such as Asukwo or the crew at Buni TV, regular citizens in Nigeria are now much invested in the process of expressing voice and agency in Nigeria’s public sphere. These comments serve to prove that, for the cartoonist and his networks of friends, there is a self-awareness that the Nigerian government and its actors are paying attention to their social media feeds.

Social media, therefore, demonstrates the individualization of the information age through the agency of the personal narratives that Web 2.0 occasions. For instance, Mike Asukwo’s Facebook post, Figure 2.12 below, functions to disseminate the cartoonist’s discursive posture with regard to the Nigerian ruling party’s attempt to muzzle politicized speech on social media, after using the same platforms for campaign activities themselves. As discussed below, the text, while mocking government’s attempt to regulate social media, provides an incentive for dissent to ordinary Nigerians empowered by social media. It illustrates the way a user’s social media profile alters or resists some of the dominant narratives of the Nigeria state.



Fig.2.12. Mike Asukwo. “Notorious Fact.” *Facebook*

This text is particularly important since it engages with the social media bill, “Act to Prohibit Frivolous Petitions,” discussed in the previous chapter. While responding to the Nigerian state’s attempt to regulate social media, Asukwo uses the image to recuperate a civic space on social media, producing a text that encourages a pertinent political conversation between producers and audiences. In the text, a man vilifies members of the Nigerian Senate before his wife but later recants his statement when his wife reminds him that he might be jailed because of the proposed social media bill, which is not mentioned in the text. A gender analysis of the cartoon can yield

additional insights, including the implicit womanist undercurrents of the cartoon. By womanist, I am referring to the discourse of African feminist aesthetic that reconfigures Western Feminism in such a way that is apposite to the experiences and particularities of African women and women of colour in the African diaspora. It is valid to argue that while rejecting the label of “feminism” is an ideological act itself that asserts difference, “womanism” allows for an Africanist formulation of gender that is less Eurocentric and sufficiently adjusted to an African epistemology. Womanism, as Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi defines it, “is black centered, it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism; unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men” (Okonjo Ogunyemi 65). Although, to return to the couple in Asukwo’s text, a man can be seen in a seated position while his wife stands to communicate with him, as if she were subject to him, it is the woman that ultimately wields the greater power—evident in how she, through a rhetorical assertiveness gets her husband to recant his statement regarding the senators. Womanism constructs a social space in which both men and women can complement each other in shared and meaningful sociopolitical interactions.

Many of Asukwo’s Facebook and Twitter followers who share and circulate this image are not only invested in altering and resisting a dominant juridical commandment, they also join in the authorization of subaltern narratives that contest the power of government and its traditional media. They participate in the articulation of a common knowledge, or a “notorious fact” among many in Nigerian social media, the idea that “half of our senators are idiots” for proposing a bill to control online activities and police the various sites of creativity and imagination among Nigerians with Internet access. The Twitter version of this cartoon has an interesting reader response that suggests how some social media users in Nigeria respond to power through popular laughter. The commenter writes:

@Asukwoeb Draw all you want now cos [because] very soon when d bill is passed, u won't have d right to draw any senator. LOL (Posted on Dec. 5, 2015)

Asukwo's epistemological position as an author whose texts convey alternative meanings is being questioned by other social media users whose sharing of the posts affirms the decentralization and creative appropriation of his own authorship. For instance, the comment above is fascinating for the way the writer appears to share an ironic joke that sympathizes with Asukwo's situation, while also alluding to the state's desire to censor free speech and artistic expressions such as the cartoon. Social media shares and retweets, as this example shows, may therefore be a weakening of the authority of the writer or creator of online content, since the content produced by a user is subject to frequent reproduction and appropriation. The cartoon, as of February 18, has 249 likes and 71 shares on Facebook, while managing 96 likes and 20 likes on Twitter, and this is without even mentioning its potential for wider distribution, considering that a follower has 2,577 followers. This, and indeed other Asukwo cartoons, not only gesture towards the popularity of Facebook in Nigeria, but also towards how much of the cultural forms in Nigerian social media invite popular participation. While I have highlighted agency in this chapter, I will be turning more fully to the question of performance in the next chapter. I hope to discuss the performance of political selves and show how the structure of social media inspires measured and performative presentations of political identities.

CHAPTER THREE

PERFORMATIVE CITIZENSHIP AND POLITICAL IDENTITIES IN NIGERIAN SOCIAL MEDIA

In contemporary digital culture, users of social media who take photographs of themselves or of other people using a smartphone are arguably unable to take these photos without the frame of some social media lurking in their unconscious. The photographic pose for the digital phone camera therefore becomes an inadvertent and simultaneous pose for a digital public audience for which these users carefully present performative versions of themselves. This imagined social media audience, functioning simultaneously as a peripheral subject of the performance, silently inserts itself into the privacy of every offline moment of self-photography, conditioning the gaze and pose of the actual person who takes the selfie. The selfie, as the signifier of this performative behaviour, is a digital representation of the self's involvement in a politics of presentation and identity on digital or social media platforms. Scholars such as Laura Levin (2009) have documented the varied ways the self and the selfie are mutually constituted within the framework of identity formation. In this chapter, I contend that, aside from actual self-presentations, popular images such as political cartoons and videos published on digital networks are re/produced within social media as a performance of self that intersects with power relations. The chapter addresses the question: how effective are the various ways through which ordinary users of social media in Nigeria deploy fictional representations and actual self-presentations to perform resistance to power? I consider this performance (of the self) to be constituted by a broad variety of activities that includes the selfie, as well as the publication of comic images through which users construct and deconstruct identities that overlap with state power. In this regard, I examine specific examples of social media images organized around the performances of citizenship and political identities as forms of participation in the country's public sphere.

In a Nigerian social media context in which online subjects use images and photos as ideological signs for performing protest identities and political selves, this performance is further intensified as an online ethic of resistance to systemic corruption and political abuses. In a country perceived by its citizens to be unjust and unequal, there is the predilection by savvy digital subjects to push back at oppressive articulation of power and social injustices through the cultural spaces facilitated by the Internet. They do these as one of the ways of performing a citizenship not regarded as inclusive of their agency. This disposition to scrutinize and rehabilitate the structures and agents of state power overlaps with the social media rituals and activities of the subaltern in Nigeria. As a formerly marginalized and unrepresented class, young people invest creative energy in online networked communities to unsettle hegemonic activities. They utilize the representational economies of social media as cultural mechanisms for performing political selves and protest identities. In earlier chapters, I mentioned that, aside from posting political status updates, a digital activism-minded group of social media users in the country and elsewhere prefer the sharing of popular images such as political cartoons and videos as tactics of challenging systems of rule and domination in Nigeria. I also highlighted how other users deploy network platforms as mere expressions of social interactions, while acknowledging the possibility of a third group, sometimes planted online by the ruling elite to mimic and justify the workings of hegemony by rationalizing and endorsing the activities and policies of government. What is common to all these groups is the ways the idea of the “social” in social media enables the emergence of a vibrant virtual public sphere in which regular citizens, from the diverse ethnic and religious groups in the country, represent themselves in political discourses and perform political and cultural selves through the apparatus of speech—whether as words or images. This capacity for representation on Facebook, Twitter, and other networked platforms is articulated by participating in democratic conversations without the hitherto limiting structures of the state or of the traditional media. To

introduce the idea of social media as performative space, I am guided by Natasha Lushetich's chapter in Chow and Mangold's volume *Žižek and Performance*. Lushetich identifies the Facebook medium as an environment in which exists a liberal totalitarianism that masks itself in what she, in agreement with other scholars, identifies as the illusion of online freedom. My interest in her work primarily lies in her idea of a certain "performative constitution" that is inherent on Facebook. The Facebook wall, for instance, is the central stage on which, according to Lushetich:

The user interacts with a number of different audiences in the form of comments, images, hyperlinks, and, most recently, also via live feeds. Unlike face-to-face communication, which depends on gesture, facial expression, intonation, and movement the wall affords a co-mingling of social as well as graphic languages and is the site of linguistic performativity *par excellence*. Having established a personal profile, the performer lays out the tools for his/her performances. In generic terms, these tools consist of her favourite books, films TV shows and quotes. In specific terms, they consist of user-specific referential scaffoldings whose semantic value is derived from the combination of linguistic and pictorial performativity. (98)

Important here is Lushetich's shift from "user" to "performer" when describing how the settings of Facebook urge varying degrees of performative behaviours. Lushetich's notion of pictorial performativity is central to my argument about the operation of visual metaphors serving as cultural strategies through which the Nigerian subaltern perform political selves in network environments such as Facebook and YouTube—digital platforms that offer performative agency to users.

In addition to the structure of the medium that inspire users to articulate performative identities, the social media rituals of tweeting, posting, and sharing cultural content can also be understood as processual and symbolic expressions of performance that produce and bring

identities into the world. In this instance, though, there is a reworking of the popularly held pessimist view in cyberspace research that identity and subjectivity are plastic and incoherent in a play of images that knows no end (Taylor and Saarinen 6) for, as examples below affirm, digital media subjects can reinvest a creative and sometimes liberating force in popular images online. For instance, Facebook user Francis Nnamdi's post in Figure 3.1 draws attention to how ordinary Nigerians share popular images on social media as a strategy of performance and political participation. The focus of this chapter is to outline how social media provides a platform for creative and ordinary Nigerian citizens such as Nnamdi to *do* things with cultural signs such as cartoons, the selfie, and language, especially the performance of political selves and identities in a shared and interactive community online. In other words, how is the politics and "drama of everyday life in the postcolony" (Gikandi 225) retransmitted by everyday citizens on social media as a strategy for performing political selves, and resistance?



Fig. 3.1: Francis Nnamdi Chiedu “Meanwhile Somewhere in 9ja. . .” *Facebook*, 19 April, 2015
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1176745809002145&set=pb.100000002100036.-2207520000.1475694065.&type=3&theater>

From the thread in the image, there seems to be a consensus that the Nigerian parliament represented in the text is constituted by a mob of riotous “troublemakers,” defined by disorderly tendencies and not by lawmakers sympathetic to the electorate. The desperation these politicians bring to fore when power and pecuniary gains are involved is altogether absent when it comes to protecting the interests of the common man. An oil-based economy, the Nigerian state lacks an accountable social contract between citizens and the states, and many citizens are using online

visual culture to show that relationship. While the comments on the image provide evidence for the argument that more Nigerian citizens have a platform to engage in political ideas and conversations, it is the way the image itself represents Chiedu's performance of politics that animates some of the concerns of this chapter. To view the image on social media is to be put in a voyeuristic frame in which the subjects in the cartoon do not initially come across as parliamentarians but as actors. The result is that an imaginary representation momentarily displaces the reality of a political class, and the "reader" is interpellated as a spectator on a Facebook wall. The readers of this social media performance are themselves "active, engaged, and bring with them their own interpretative frameworks" with which they extend the frontiers of the knowledge produced in the performances, while also interpreting and deconstructing the performative behaviours of others (Pearson, 2011). "I'll let you be the judge" is the voice of an ordinary Nigerian netizen asking other digital citizens to be involved in a communal process of scrutinizing an apparatus of the Nigerian state. Rather than the unidirectional space of much of the mainstream media, social media allows for this dialogic environment in which the production of meaning and knowledge is fluid and community-based. The commenters on this post perform political selves to the extent that their comments similarly affirm them as individuals who respond to the discussion and similar others on social media as a way of participating productively in Nigeria's online public sphere.

In contrast to the more radical instance evident in the case of groups such as Anonymous and other revolutionary users that deploy technology for political interventions, my exploration of performative behaviour is informed both by popular images and actual performances of the self in social media environments. Although there are other forms of performance, such as an Anonymous post or message one might find on social media, forms such as the selfie or video broadcast options like Facebook Live or/and YouTube create scenarios in which users perform in front of a camera

to audiences, whether live or not. The activities of Anonymous and other groups usually include a political vision that locates hacking computer systems as a practice of resistance. For many countries of the global south, however, popular culture proliferated on social media is a more appealing strategy of political intervention than practices such as alternative computing. The tweet below (Figure 3.2), though, suggests there could be occasional practices of hacking even in places with a developing digital culture like Nigeria's.



Fig. 3.2. A tweet by Nigeria's Electoral Commission (INEC) during the 2015 election in Nigeria.

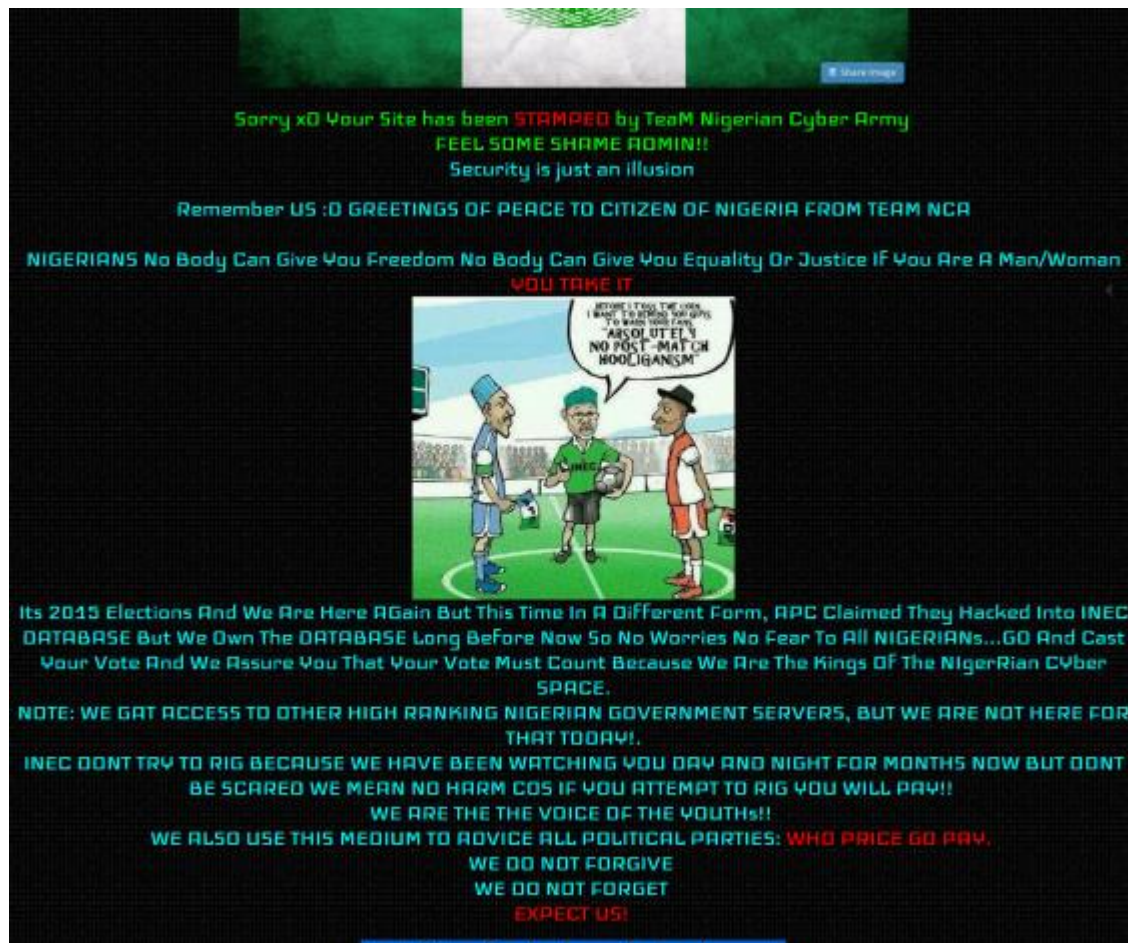


Fig. 3.3 A Screenshot of Hacked INEC website during the 2015 Election in Nigeria.

The tweet, published by the Nigerian electoral commission during the 2015 elections, confirms that partisan Internet users in developing economies can also utilize hacking as a digital practice of political resistance. Nevertheless, the fact that posting popular images of satire and humour are more widely distributed than other resistance activities such as hacking might gesture towards the productive use of expressive cultural forms, such as music and storytelling as dominant modes of experiencing and interpreting everyday life. The argument here is not the unproductive nature of hacking and other forms of alternative computing deployed for resistance and online activism. The idea, rather, is that posting satirical images and selfies is an articulation of a new media order in which people now participate directly in Nigerian political and cultural life. One may not always

be able to judge the effectiveness of these posts, nor gauge their real-world materializations, but the fact that they alert the ruling class in Nigeria to the transformed nature of the public sphere is telling. In 2015, for instance, the Nigerian government spokesperson described the many young people who publish alternative political narratives on social media as “idle and twittering, collective, children of anger, the distracted crowd of Facebook addicts” (Abati 2012) bent on ousting the president from office. Indeed, one can argue that social media was one of the major cultural fields that contributed to the defeat of the former President Goodluck Jonathan. In an interview with Jerry Eddings in *Mediashift* Nigerian journalist Samson Dare observed that the election in Nigeria was “decided, dominated and directed by social media. The power of social media came out for this country. Social media played a central role as a watchdog in keeping the integrity of the process. Within minutes of votes being counted at a polling unit, the results were all over social media” (n.pag). The thrust of Dare’s analysis lies in the varied ways in which Nigerian political conversations, now expressed through performative self-presentations and through online commentaries, have been reconditioned by a social media culture facilitating interactive and repoliticized communities. Dare describes how ordinary people were eager “to make comments, write their views, post pictures,” since they were invested in a process that has potential for actual change in the social body. Some of these images were not only photos and videos from electoral venues around the country, but also popular humorous images and cartoons through which a subaltern imagination was written by ordinary actors of the state into the fabric of power in the country. These images are the cultural signs symbolizing the new regime of participatory politics through which people push back at power and its excesses in Nigeria. In addition to the real-world outcome of online performativity within the context of electoral practices, there are also the ways social media enables the administration of social justice and discipline in society. For instance, in recent times, governmental apparatuses such as the Nigerian

police, notorious for its corruption and inefficiency, have had to respond to pressures from citizens who distribute messages concerning unlawful activities in network spaces. There are examples of social media campaigns, including the 2012 #Alu4 hashtag Twitter protest, that eventually prompted the Nigerian police to investigate criminal activities they may have been inattentive to were it not for social media. When the police deny, in their unwillingness to carry out their duties, that crimes take place, citizens who seek justice and investigation take to social media to publish video and photo evidence that eventually compel state authorities to investigate such acts. The fact that the social and cultural conversations people have on social media have material impact in places like Nigeria underscores the import of digital media in contemporary in the country. While my work is attentive to the ways a diverse array of communicative styles enables such decentered and networked conversations, what is emphasized the most is the performative presentations of selves and identity organized around popular images and cultural forms such as the selfie and online cartoons. The tendency to invoke cultural signs, as evident in the hacking example above, may explain why the group Nigerian Cyber Army accompanied their original post on the INEC website with one of Mike Asukwo's images (see Figure 3.19). The use of the cartoon stresses the importance of image politics to the expression of the visual rhetoric in users' political resistance online. The proliferation of Asukwo's political cartoon confirms the suspicion that the artist's works are some of the most dominant political images in Nigeria social media. I will therefore conclude this chapter by returning to how some of the cartoons illustrate the expression of performative identities in Asukwo's network.

3.1 Self-Spectatoriality and Rituals of Performance on Social Media

Performance on social media is predicated on what I have called *self-spectatoriality*, a notion that I deploy to explain the situation in which a social media user is active as performer and

spectator in the performative spaces of user-generated media. An essential attribute of social media is its ability to put the user in a spectatorial posture in which they are conscious of the gaze of both the self and others. Self-spectatoriality is thus useful in stressing the critical place of the user of social media as a spectacularized subject performing diverse identities for a public gaze that influences and perhaps reproduces the user's performance. It also helps to navigate the layered and nuanced ways social media signifiers, such as the selfie, as well as actual self-presentations, rather than fictional representations alone produce performing citizens rehabilitating their exclusions from power. Since user-based content is definitive of Web 2.0, one can see how social media narratives and viewership converge on the user, who, inspired by a performative space, is both producer and consumer of the spectacle on display in online performances. Self-spectatoriality is analogous to what Alice Marwick identifies as social surveillance (1), which explains watching others and the awareness of being watched in a fluid and unstable social media space. Marwick, working in a new media context, appears to reiterate John Berger's idea about the way women are depicted as being always aware of the male gaze in European Renaissance art (49). On social media, that awareness of being watched is both external and internal: the user watches themselves (in their social media posts) being watched by other people.

Self-spectatoriality is thus that performance assured by an awareness of a virtual gaze for which social media users perform using symbolic forms such as the spectacle of the image or the liking of content. Also, important here is the Sartrean perspective that the audience of a traditional medium such as film brings "itself into being as an object before its own eyes," and that "without playing itself as a role, it comes to understand itself" (Sartre 74). The social media spectator/audience, on the other hand, occupies a self-reflexive role in which meaning is constructed through the audiences' binary position as producer and consumer. The audience on social media therefore plays an active role in the production of meaning. Ideas of spectatoriality

and the self can inform an appreciation of performance and performativity with regard to Nigerian social media texts. The term draws attention to how Web 2.0 enable digital subjects to locate themselves as the point of reference in social media environments. Ato Quayson proposes looking at Facebook “as one of a long genealogy of modes of reader/viewer identification starting from the oral folk tale, through the novel, film and television,” claiming that since users have tools at their disposal, they are able “to insert themselves into the circuits of spectatoriality for others to look at,” making Facebook a profound “instantiation of a completely new socio-cultural template” (n.pag). This cultural order is a new regime of the spectacle that expresses itself in the way individuals are both spectator and participant in the process of online performance. A netizen who posts a protest selfie—which will be discussed in chapter four—can function simultaneously as a social media user who watches others watching them. The user is, thus, both performer and spectator in his own performance.

It is possible, in the light of this last point, to conceive of self-spectatoriality as a social media indication of the poststructuralist fusion of the identities of readers and authors. On YouTube, for instance, a user is the auteur of a unique vision of self, with an identity carefully fashioned to articulate a specific image. YouTube nicely illustrates the capacity of social media to shape and produce the users’ identity performatively. By responding to the plea to “broadcast yourself” on YouTube, users activate the process of enacting or producing particular forms of subjectivities and identities. For example, Figure 3.4 presents an anonymous White YouTube user who performs a parody of the wife of the former Nigerian president, Patience Jonathan. The former first lady had, during the #BringBackOurGirls Twitter campaign, responded on national TV to the Boko Haram abduction crises by crying openly and effusively criticizing public officials for abandoning their responsibility.



Fig. 3.4. “Darris God o.” *YouTube Post*, 11 May 2014.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ku7yKAmEhco>

The original video, “Chibok Girls: First Lady Breaks Down in Tears,” uploaded by a mainstream news portal Channel Television on YouTube on March 4, 2014, has been mixed and remixed by users who subvert its original content to mock the emotional outburst of the president’s wife. Figure 3.4 illustrates how the digital culture of remixing is a strategy of postmodern parody, mobilized to ridicule the Nigerian government’s handling of a terrorist activity. The character in the video is performing a comic self, which is foregrounded by the identity politics YouTube facilitates. In some remixed versions of the original video, YouTube users infuse the original text with humour to satirize the political establishment in Nigeria. The white lady inserts her subjectivities into the narrative, performing a Nigerian political identity in the process. As Papacharissi asserts, the “performances of the self are indicative of the shapes individuals take on as they claim agency and negotiate power within social structures and imaginaries” (2). The performance of self, thus, occurs on platforms such as social media when users mix and remix different shapes of media content to incorporate their own subjectivities into ongoing political

narratives. As the identity of the woman is not clear, it is difficult to locate the original source or producer of the video. The version with the most views is the upload by Olajumoke Olaniyan, which had 72, 706 views as at October 5, 2016. The image emphasizes self-spectatoriality as a productive mode for demonstrating the performance of self on social media. Most of the comments on a YouTube thread of this image are mostly dismissive of the participation of an outsider in the mockery of the first lady's melodramatic outburst. There are some commenters, though, who are quick to reject the suggestion by Obinna Chinedu that "this is our first lady and we are OK the way she speaks." Chukwudi tells Chinedu to "speak for [him]self! I am NOT ok with the way the so-called First Lady speaks or carries herself," a view that resonates with other commenters that join in the conversation to decry the first lady's theatrics.

Thinking of performance as self-representation resonates more with this YouTube video than conceiving of performance in terms of fictional characters such as Mike Asukwo's online political cartoons. The "Darris God o" video has remained fascinating as the subject of some other similar comedy skits on YouTube, with many parodies of the former first lady's outburst created by young humourists. Some of these videos provide more evidence for a reflection on how creative young people in Nigeria use social media to perform versions of selves moored in the political. The intersection of three crucial viral stories in the history of Nigerian social media so far can be seen in different adaptations of the original video from Channels TV. These revisions include the "Darris God o" video, the collected speeches and interviews of a Nigerian politician who loves bombasts. There is also the "Oga at the Top Video," which refers to the name of a TV interview in which Shem Obafaiye, a government official from the Lagos Command of the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) consistently defers to certain senior bureaucrats (ogas at the top) before answering almost every question from a panel of interviewers. Viewers across the country saw the officer's prevarication and unnecessary bureaucratic deference to a boss in

government, absent at the time of the interview, as the defining disposition of government workers who hide their incompetence behind the veil of official loyalty. At the height of a very disconcerting performance, the officer, asked about the official website of the Civil Defence, is unable to give a coherent answer: (“[www.nscdc...](http://www.nscdc.gov)that’s all”). The interview provided fodder for satirists on the Internet to lampoon the Nigerian government and its body of uncritical officers pandering to them. People shared the video on various platforms since they identified the interview as a metaphor of political incompetence in Nigeria. I will be exploring this video, together with similar other images within the framework of the question of humour in Nigerian social media in a subsequent chapter. Suffice it to say at this point that the ordinary people who make these videos are involved in a presentation of self that uses parody and satire to critique government and its institutions. The response of the Civil Defence Corps to a viral story that framed the organization as incompetent was the removal of the officer from his Lagos office; an outcome that shows another way conversations on social media, whether performative or mere posting of messages, have real-world effects in a Nigerian context.

On the idea of social media performance and the stylized presentation of self, I now examine social media activities as rituals of performance by exploring how the ideas of two traditional names in performance studies intersect with Nigerian social media performance. I examine Richard Schechner’s theory on the subject, before turning to an example from Nigerian social media to show how users perform political selves and ideologies through these rituals. Richard Schechner (2006) draws insights from the anthropological explanation of Victor Turner’s social drama, and from Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical theory of self-presentation and social interactions. He locates his theory of performance in a model in which performances occur in many different instances. “Performance must be construed as a “broad spectrum” or “continuum” of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts

(theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles, and on to healing (from shamanism to surgery), the media, and the internet” (3). This wide-ranging construal of performance suggests that any action that is “framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance,” and the Internet is a space in which actions and self are framed and presented in such a way that points to a paradigm of communication in which identity is unstable. For instance, the new Facebook Live video option, which allows users to become more visible in their performance of selves, complicates this presentation and display of the self.

The live broadcast prevents anonymity and enables any users of the medium to livestream their performance in real time. The opportunity to broadcast activities to audiences in real time makes Facebook Live another instance of a performance that can be stored and retrieved for a later use. The self-presentation inherent in the performance of such videos can be easily modified and oriented towards the feedback of a watching audience, unlike what obtains in the fixed context of a selfie whose performance and message entails an imagined audience prompted to decode the selfie. In other words, real-time videos that position audiences to give immediate feedback interpellate both performer and audience as co-producers of an unstable meaning constituted while the video is ongoing. Perhaps an eloquent example that succinctly illuminates some of the ways social media videos can have impact on the performance of political identities is the example below, in which a Nigerian senator can be seen dancing mockingly to his viewer. The video, among other possibilities, harbours the conscious framing of a virtual self oriented towards an audience of supporters and detractors online. The online news portal Sahara Reporters recently stated in a publication that Senator Dino Melaye did not have the requisite academic qualifications to be in the Nigerian legislature. Having made some face-saving efforts to debunk the story on his social media accounts, he eventually posts a video *Truth Will Always Win* onto YouTube, mocking the

publisher of Sahara Reporters. This image is not just important because a notorious Nigerian politician is using the video selfie to perform politics, but also because it proves the point that the social media culture in the country is a new terrain in which power relations and performative treatments of Nigerian political culture intersect.



Fig. 3.5. Senator Dino Melaye. “Truth will always win.” *Twitter*.

https://twitter.com/dino_melaye/status/846420813972754432

In the first video, Melaye asserts: “You speak the truth you die; you lie, you die. I Dino Melaye have chosen to speak the truth and die.” He gets up and sings: “àjekún ìyà niyo je, enití ò tó ní nà tó n dìnà deni. àjekú ìyà niyo je”—a rough English translation of this might be: “He will be severely beaten who, though incapable, tries to block one’s path. As a Nigerian senator is using the video selfie to convey threat to the media, one of his followers on Twitter responds to him, reminding him that “2019 is around the corner,” a suggestion that the senator could be voted out

of office in a future election. The politician's video, which went viral in a sense, attracted untold mimetic re-creations and comments that wonder why a legislator would invent a song to mock and undermine a section of the Nigerian press. Aside from the many parodies the video has triggered among creative and humorous netizens, the comments on the senator's Twitter handle reflect the views of many others who responded to the senator's "infantile behaviour," as @KolaSaidu asserts in his response to the senator. Besides some fictional representations produced to mock the senator, another video, Figure 3.6, produced to counter Senator Melaye's musical narrative similarly went viral on Facebook.



Fig. 3.6. A Nigerian citizen's video-selfie critique of Senator Dino Melaye. *Facebook*.

https://www.facebook.com/ReportYourself/videos/10154341121527703/?hc_ref=SEARCH

In a response to Dino Melaye's video, another social media user makes a video selfie in which she parodies the dance performance of the Nigerian politician, subverting his song-text as a form of alternative perspective to Melaye's rhetoric. The user revises Melaye's words: "If you ask Nigerian leaders for accountability, you will die. If you do not ask Nigerian leaders for accountability, you will die. I, Cynthia, will ask Nigerian leaders for accountability." She also sings the Yoruba song, but modifies it to read in English and Nigerian Pidgin English: "If you don't ask Nigerian leaders for accountability, àjekún ìyà niyo je, People wey govern Nigerian with fake results, àjekún ìyà ni o je." She not only criticizes Melaye for his video and the fact that he may not have the right university credentials, she subverts his originally intended meaning and turns it on Melaye's head in her own message to other netizens: hold corrupt politicians such as Melaye accountable since, either way, you will eventually die. It is crucial to note that a video selfie by a female voice is a bold performative act of resistance in a Nigerian social media space that largely mimics the patriarchal configurations of Nigerian culture.

That many supporters of Dino Melaye disparage Cynthia shows the oppressive and hegemonic nature of public discourses for most Nigerian women. Some may see the myriad of insults she receives as a reflection of a partisan interest, since her video has gone viral because it has been posted by Sahara Reporters, the online media organization Senator Melaye is up against. In any case, both video selfies are important documentations of the new face of political conversations in contemporary Nigeria: ordinary citizens, whether male or female, can speak back to power themselves, without any fear of censure. Also, I am highlighting this response of a regular Nigerian citizen to a legislator because it shows how the performance of the selfie on social media can be co-opted by anyone and reinfused with new meanings and ideas. Because of digital tools, social media allows spectators to recreate the performance they view and refashion it to include

the perspectives of the spectator; hence, performance in the social media space is always contingent and unstable.

This unsettling of the highly patriarchal space of Nigerian political discourses through performative expressions on social media is perhaps best demonstrated by a recent viral video⁶ by the Twitter user @AishaYesufu. A notable #BringBackOurGirls activist, Yesufu is one of many women using Twitter to repossess voice and agency for Nigerian women. She recently demanded that Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari resign from office because of his failing health. Disrupting the popular notion of northern Nigerian female as an oppressed, subservient Muslim woman demurely wearing Hijab, she ventured into an area that is typically reserved for male commentary. Her appearance in this hegemonic space invites the rethinking of the role of the Nigerian women in online spaces. Yesufu's selfie is pertinent because it is of a minority Muslim woman venturing a critical perspective in a public sphere dominated by men.

Another dimension to performance in this work is from Erving Goffman's classic *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* that conceives all social interactions, such as the ones in the video selfies, as self-presentations. Although Goffman's 1959 text appears to be dated, it is still useful to conceptualize how public performances can be imagined beyond the theatrical stage. Goffman explains that a person's identity and the sense of self other people get about them are deliberately framed to communicate intended messages. In other words, people's daily activities usually evoke a dramatic quality, since individuals self-present based on contexts and the expectations of audiences. He uses the term performance to refer to "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by continuous presence before a particular set of observers

⁶ Aisha Yesufu is one of the conveners of the #BringBackOurGirls protests in Nigeria's capital Abuja. The tweet in which the video was posted can be found here: <https://twitter.com/AishaYesufu/status/865274452376006656>

and which has some influence on the observers” (123). This definition is similar to the performance of the photography that produces an affect in relation to the spectator. In the rituals of everyday social life, each of us presents a vision of self that is sanctioned by an unwitting audience of friends, family, colleagues, or even by ourselves. Since social interactions can be understood from this theatrical model, one could argue that users mobilize social media rituals constituting performative behaviour as practices of online performance. If people can control the presentations of selves within these digital spaces, then they are involved in some form of performance since there is the possibility of editing ourselves and projecting identities we adjudge to be the best of who we are. And whenever “one has time to write, edit, and delete, there is room for performance, with the ‘real me’ turn[ing] out to be elusive” (Turkle 180). Unlike Sherry Turkle’s cynical idea of online performance, however, these self-presentation strategies in contexts such as Nigerian social media are productive tactics through which the self is refashioned as an active participant in a public sphere that precluded its voice before the era of digital media.

Goffman’s dramaturgical model explains the ritual of everyday living as evocations of dramatic qualities. He uses the terms “front stage” and “backstage” to refer to the various arenas of identity performance in human communication that social actors navigate. He also identifies a critical aspect of this conception of performance as front, “the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed” (123) by individuals in social performance settings. In online communities, images, avatars, colour, and font might constitute the front of performance, a reason Papacharissi identifies the personal homepage as “a carefully controlled performance through which self-presentation is achieved under optimal conditions” (644). Her idea rearticulates my contention that people not only perform themselves on social media but also produce carefully constructed and controlled identities through which, in the Nigerian context, they author and challenge political perspectives.

This performance of the self in Nigerian social media can also be understood within the contexts of the emerging history of digital activism and subaltern tactics of resistance in Nigeria. The #BringBackOurGirls campaign provides the clearest optic for judging how the selfie, for instance, is an embodiment of the performance of the self in Nigerian political contexts. The campaign presented (or presents—since it is still ongoing) spaces for virtual performances in which individuals upload selfies and self-portraits of themselves onto social media as a way of protesting the government’s initial apathy to the abducted Chibok girls. The #BringBackOurGirls selfies and self-portraits from different parts of Nigeria, and indeed the world, signify how people deployed the rhetoric of visual culture to perform political selves with respect to the precarious conditions of the Nigerian school girls. In this case, users’ self-portraits, not any fictional image, are the primary modes of this performance. The example of Charles Kehinde Alasholuyi whose story was featured on the CNN iReport is an important demonstration of how ordinary Nigerian youths, armed with digital media, perform protest through selfies and self-portraits on Facebook. For over one year, following the kidnapping of the Chibok girls, Alasholuyi published video and photos of a self-portrait, featuring a sign containing the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag on social media.



Fig. 3.7. Charles Kehinde Alasholuyi. “#BringBackOurGirls.” *Facebook*, 22 Aug., 2015
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10206483346095770&set=a.1898542936629.10729.1.1033316389&type=3&theater>

Alasholuyi’s performance rearticulates his body as a social and political construction, confirming the argument of Amelia Jones that the self-portrait is “a technology of embodiment” (950) that can be used to naturalize a counter-hegemonic response to totalities and oppressive conditions. The performance of the self in his image is grounded in a social construction of identity in which the virtual self is linked to power relations. Similarly, Bukky Shonibare’s example further shows how the self-portrait is being used as an important symbol in the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. Pictured below, Bukky Shonibare also posts a picture each day to represent the number of days the Chibok girls have spent in the terrorist stronghold.



Fig. 3.8. Screenshots of Bukky Shonibare's self-portraits, *Facebook*.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10157571567945416&set=a.10151203752655416.797294.670615415&type=3&theater>

The extent of Shonibare's digital agency is expressed in the semiotics of the images she posts on Facebook. The dark background to some of the self-portraits signifies an activist who inserts herself into a gloomy photographic space representing the anguishes and hardship of the school girls. Unlike Alasholuyi's performance, however, Shonibare shows that digital activism can be reproduced in actual street protests, as one of the images depict her holding up a sign in Chibok, the area from which the girls were abducted by Boko Haram. Although this gesture may be a performance of activism that brings Shonibare into a precarious environment, it explains how the symbolic language of the image is mobilized by the subject as a signifier of protest. Also, Shonibare's visit to Chibok some days before twenty of the abducted girls were released is

pertinent to understanding the strategic way social media has continued a conversation the mainstream media in Nigeria and other parts of the world have abandoned. While the mainstream media reported the release of the twenty girls by Boko Haram and swiftly moved on to other stories, Shonibare's continued performance of activism through the aesthetic of the selfie is one way the abduction narrative remains in public consciousness, a fact that affirms social media as an alternative location for the distribution of subaltern narratives. Although there are scholars who believe that digital activism would only succeed in situations that do not require people "to make a real sacrifice," (Gladwell 47). Shonibare's visit to Chibok is an affirmation of the praxis of her selfie advocacy, asserting the fact that her personal involvement materialized through the selfie is indeed political. What makes these two examples relevant is the way the individual subjectivities are organized for a communal denunciation of social injustice. Self-portraits and selfies with a political sign or message immediately personalize the protest situation, showing a much stronger commitment from individuals willing to be seen and heard, than merely tweeting a hashtag or anonymously signing an online petition.

The best example of this performance, however, is the image below (Figure 3.9), which demonstrates how the selfie can be utilized as a cultural supplement for challenging and questioning of forms of dominance and social inequality, while foregrounding the performance of citizenship.



Fig. 3.9. #BringBackOurGirls Protest. *Twitter*, 6 July 2014.

https://twitter.com/iyani_wura/status/485969992425689088

In the image, prominent Nigerian social media user Japheth Omojuwa, together with other protesters at a #BringBackOurGirls protest, takes a selfie that is carefully presented to include some Nigerian security personnel who block their march around the Nigerian seat of government in Abuja. This selfie not only signifies the user's awareness of social media's facilitation of agency but also his deployment of that agency as an instrument of resistance organized around the aesthetics of the selfie. Omojuwa intends this selfie as a practice that conveys a particular gesture, which, in this case, is a defiance of both the Nigerian Military and the Nigerian Government that have refused to "bring back our girls." Theresa Senft and Nancy Baym write that the selfie is a cultural practice with "a gesture that can send (and is often intended to send) different messages to different individuals, communities, and audiences" (Senft and Baym 1589). In other words, the selfie is a representational space that is used by a person to perform multiple, and sometimes, contested meanings. Since it is a representation that communicates meaning, the selfie can be read

as a major language of social media, with language in this context understood beyond the normative frames of written or spoken discourse. Stuart Hall, writing on the intersection of representation, signifying practices, and culture asserts that elements such as sounds, words, gestures, and expressions:

[A]re part of our natural and material world; but their importance for language is not what they are but what they *do*, their function. They construct meaning and transmit it. They signify. They don't have any clear meaning *in themselves*. Rather, they are the vehicles or media which carry meaning because they operate as symbols, which stand for or represent (i.e. symbolize) the meanings we wish to communicate. (5)

The selfie, as language of online activism symbolizes a particular meaning, which in the case of the #BringBackOurGirls protest, can be located in the non-explicit details of the photo. Because, like most representations, the selfie is a *constructed* space that allows performative presentations, people tend to think of it as a shallow and narcissistic self-absorption functioning to promote its subject. However, there are important elements in this selfie that indicate Omojuwa is not interested in any self-promotion. His positioning shows how a selfie subject can take the conventions of the selfie and use them to destabilize and critique those same conventions. At first, his placement at the margin of the image may reveal his desire that audience appreciate the presence of military officers seeking to disorganize their protest. Aside from the placement of the subject in the selfie, the place of protest is also suggestive. Mark Nunes elaborates on this place-marking effect of the selfie when he writes that “the placemaking selfie does more than broadcast (or narrowcast) one's location to the world; rather, it asserts an identity that borrows from the social and cultural encoding of a place as part of an evolving performance of citizenship” (110). In the context of this selfie, the place of Omojuwa’s performance of citizenship is symbolic, being the seat of power and official authority in Nigeria. His selfie thus bears witness to how the country’s

capital marks itself as space of austerity and the suppression of protest, rather than signifying as a place in which a photographic self-indulgence occurs. A closer scrutiny might also uncover how his position, together with his facial expression, in the image affirms him as someone taking a protest selfie that harbours little consideration for self. The defiance of his expression shows his investment in a resistance project being undermined by soldiers acting on behalf of the state.

These elements in the selfie suggest that Omojuwa deploys his body as a site of performing resistance to the hegemonic forces represented in the image. The clenched fist, a traditional symbol in the context of resistance and activism, can be seen in the background of the selfie. Omojuwa carefully represents these two other protesters in the selfie to show an awareness of the body's precarious involvement in the performance of protest. In addition, the words, "our courageous citizens, walking the walk" in the tweet highlights the ways the selfie is an archival testimony to the growing relationship between online activism and street protest in Nigeria. The employment of the language of association—our courageous citizens—not only reaffirms Omojuwa's unselfish interests, it also identifies the activities of these virtual citizens protesting social injustice as transcending mere digital activism. The citizens are thus "courageous" because, by getting on the street to protest, they affirm online activism as a practice that transcends the slacktivist conception some have of it. To "walk the walk" even in the face of a potential military brutality thus symbolizes an embodied performance and self-presentation facilitated by the symbolic space of the selfie. The selfie's staging of Omojuwa's irreverence, despite a culture of disposability marked by frequent police violence during protests in Nigeria, underpins the varied ways state actions and inactions often highlight citizens as expendable subjects.

This selfie post, together with the two earlier examples contribute to digital activism in Nigeria by the ways they have resulted in many other digital forms of activism through which citizens now engage with Nigerian hegemonic forms and power formations. The example also

illustrates Adam Levin's position that the selfie serves as a "real-time" performance of self oriented towards an audience situated elsewhere" (4). While the Omojuwa selfie might have been taken on a #BringBackOurGirls campaign ground in Abuja, its performance was meant to be restaged somewhere else, to a global audience more like, considering that the natural ecology of this cultural form is a space that can be reconstituted in many locations online. Adam Levin states that the performance of the selfie is "so integral to processes of individuation and identification within groups" (4) and is "always defined by a spatial and temporal displacement, as well as a separation between the self and the sign (the selfie) that is its surrogate" (4). It is therefore important to read selfie performances such as the examples above as cultural signs that refute the assumption that the use of selfies in digital activism are mostly oriented towards a narcissistic representation of the digital dissident. The resistance of the selfie is realized in the moment when the selfie protester materializes himself, like Omojuwa, in an oppressive offline environment, performing defiance in the face of danger. Both Omojuwa and Shonibare—who visit a major Boko Haram territory as sign of solidarity—are first performing resistance in actual environments of offline protest before documenting their activism through the digital culture of the selfie. The selfie, and its later derivative the selfie stick, are the material symbols of a self-presentation that overlaps with the performance of politics. In the Nigerian context, the selfie is, therefore, a critique of the politics of self-presentation and performance in social media. Whereas some Nigerian digital network users use the selfie to explore self and identity, the focus in this chapter is Nigerian social media users who deploy images as a way of performing a self that connects to broader social and political issues, and not one moored in the kind of playful and self-regarding logic of the selfie. The exception to this latter position is when the selfie has explicit connections to structures of power, as in the Japheth Omojuwa example. Omojuwa and the many other social media figures in Nigeria using selfies and self-portraits to embody resistance are entrenched in what may be called

performative citizenship. Performative citizenship stems from the spectacular matrix of social media and underscores the various ways citizen perform civic agency and political speech in a social media environment structured on performativity.

In terms of this performance of citizenship mentioned earlier, these political categories extend into virtual spaces, with processes of posting satirical images on Twitter and Facebook and uploading videos on YouTube posturing as artistic practices of social resistance, which relate to the construction and performance of online identities. Visually performed citizenship is at play in the texts examined so far, with the idea of the citizen enacted through posting and sharing of popular images. Besides the traditional conception of citizenship as a status within the geographical boundaries of a nation-state, therefore, the current new media environment “makes it necessary and possible to think of citizenship as a performance” (van Zoonen et al. 253). Performativity, thus, relates to how the representation of politics and political actors in “networked publics” (Boyd 1) gestures towards the production, maintenance and subversion of identity, with respect to the articulations of power. Some of these processes through which an online culture of political participation and performance of citizenship among ordinary people shape actual political events in Nigeria are manifest in the popular images examined in this study.

3.2 Performativity and Identity in Nigerian Social Media Culture

Aside from Goffman’s and Lushetich’s ideas that undergird my work, theories of postmodern performativity on identity as performance also support the proposition that social media rituals are performed through online popular images, with respect to the undermining of repressive and abusive power in Nigeria. Although the representations of self and identity as framed on social media recall Jean Baudrillard’s (1994) claims that we have lost the ability to distinguish nature from artifice in the postmodern age, since representation precedes and

determines the real, Nigerian social media culture contrast the pessimism inherent in Baudrillard's theorizing. His concept of the simulacrum as a location of unreality is relevant to social media discourse, as images from the Nigerian social media context can help to reinvest in it a positive potential as suggested by Gilles Deleuze's reinterpretation of the simulacrum. The limitation of Baudrillard's critique regarding the simulacrum is its absolute conception as a negative which locates reality as a mediatized world in which resistance is futile. Unlike Baudrillard's damning evaluation that sees no resemblance and/or productive relationship between a model and its representation, Deleuze's more optimistic analysis of the simulacrum has a positive resonance with the ways in which images operate in the Nigerian social media imagination. The simulacrum is not a degraded copy, Deleuze asserts, neither is it inferior to an original. He writes further:

It harbors a positive power which denies the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction. At least two divergent series are internalized in the simulacrum— neither can be assigned as the original, neither as the copy.... There is no longer any privileged point of view except that of the object common to all points of view. (53)

Deleuze's reversal of the Platonic paradigm of the simulacrum helps to legitimize the standpoint that the simulacrum is not necessarily a perversion of reality since it has "no possible hierarchy" (53) in which the meaning of a reproduction is subject to the significations of an original. Instead, the simulacrum functions to erase any possible distinction between a copy and its original, while also expressing itself as an inherently whole image that is not a facsimile of any representation. Deleuze thus locates some agential power in the image as his interpretation of simulacrum, though analogous to Baudrillard's, finds the sign productive for meaning and affect. Deleuze thinks of the loss between the original and the copy as a welcoming reality since the copy's distinction makes the original irrelevant. Many Nigerian social media images constitute a positive simulacrum in the way they also produce certain effect, a performative force that is affirmed by the simulacrum's

self-sufficient representation of the Nigerian condition. The images are not intended as degraded copies of any political or cultural reality in Nigeria; they are self-regulated representations of counter-hegemonic identities. The social media images are illustrated, not as simulacra of, for instance, social protests, or as substandard copies of street resistance, but as simulacra that exist as performative supplements of defiance in digital media. This productive force of the simulacrum inspires the application of theories of performance and performativity to political discourse in Nigerian social media. In this regard, the idea that performative expressions of resistance on social media are merely slacktivist is not applicable in some countries of the Global South, where social media users perform public speech and resistance through different popular images. The sharing of online political cartoons in the Nigerian social media ecology, for instance, demonstrates a decentered performance in which images are being used by netizens to critique power and to circulate an alternative and progressive perspective of the country.

As outlined in the previous chapter, Judith Butler, following from J. L. Austin's performative utterances and Michel Foucault's idea of discourse as practices that inaugurate what they name, conceives of gender identity as an unstable and constitutive category that is produced by the reiterative power of discourse. For Butler, a person's gender "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25). In other words, Butler locates subjectivity and identity in a poststructuralist and anti-foundational frame that draws from Nietzsche and Derrida, showing identity and selfhood to be fluid and contingent constructs, which operate in historical, cultural, and discursive structures. I am applying this perspective to my work on social media in two ways. First, I suggest that the social media rituals of vlogging, posting, liking, sharing, tweeting, and retweeting, like speech acts, produce performative identities, since they also constitute an identity for the person who performs these rituals. Also, as I describe these social network practices as rituals, it may be fitting to see them as signifying and reiterative acts

that portray the practices they symbolize. Facebook and YouTube can thus be seen as digital environments that inherently frame and produce identities distributed/published to imagined audiences. Through the protocols of self-presentation online, social media users deploy the space as a performative stage, which enables them to frame identities through the digital performances enacted by its rituals. In this theoretical framework, as Rob Clover cautions, “it would be unperceptive to think of social networking behavior, for example, as being only a representation or biographical statement or set of conscious and voluntary choices made by individuals or in accord with particular backgrounds or demographics” (180). Rather, social media activities, such as “liking” a post, adding a friend or choosing a gender category are best seen as performances which are “not merely voluntary, self-conscious decisions but acts which at a deeper level of analysis can be seen to construct the identity or self perceived to be making those decisions” (Clover 180). In other words, social media rituals actively construct and produce selfhood and identities, even if their subjects are unaware of this production.

For Nigerians in the diaspora especially, social media functions as a more performative space than earlier cyber communities through which an exilic imagination overlaps with the cultural politics of the homeland. Farooq Kperogi writes that members of what he calls “the Nigerian digital diaspora” (8) participate through online citizen media in political and cultural discourses of their homeland. This situation “illustrates that citizens, especially in the age of the Internet, are not mere powerless subjects and receivers of informational flows from the institutions of the state and corporate mass media but can be active consumers and producers of informational resources and even purveyors of political power” (Kperogi 8-9). I argue that the social media rituals of posting and sharing of cultural items as new cultural paradigms through which Nigerians at home and in the diaspora, engage with the nation-state produce and reproduce citizenship—as a conceptual category that is performed in Nigeria’s digital public sphere. The many ways people

engage in everyday political conversations on Facebook, seen in Pius Adesanmi's viral post in Figure 3.10, for instance, gives credence to a new level of performative citizenship in Nigeria social media. Social media users enact political identities through the content they publish, becoming what they tweet or post, since these rituals, as Clover notes, are performative acts of identity which constitute the user (178).



Fig. 3.10. “It Will Get Worse Before It Gets Better.” *Facebook*, 14 May, 2016.
<https://www.facebook.com/padesanmi/posts/10153793622241715>

This post has 283 comments and 706 shares, figures that indicate some of the ways social media has changed people's participation in political discourses in Nigeria. Adesanmi's Facebook wall has become a sort of digital hub for political conversations, as he and an army of commenters engage in rational-critical debates on the Nigerian state. The tweet of the post shows more interesting perspective of this political participation:



Fig. 3.11. “It Will Get Worse Before It Gets Better.” *Twitter*. 14 May, 2016

https://twitter.com/pius_adesanmi/status/731536791157637120

Although the Facebook post has more commenters who engaged with the post to express their political views, the tweet positions other commenters to mention Nigerian politicians on Twitter in their comments. The user @Moshoke, for instance asserts that the view of the post “is one of the best argument about the illusions of sacrifice” and that @DinoMelaye, one of many corrupt politicians who use social media, “needs to read, learn and act after reading this.” @Moshoke is

using the agency of Twitter mentions to initiate a direct but unsanctioned conversation with a member of a ruling elite naturally disinclined to interact with the electoral population. Adesanmi's posts and the comments produced on them are markers of a performance of citizenship previously organized aurally and orally around newspaper stands in offline spaces. With social media, that performance is articulated through likes and shares, as well as verbal and/or visual languages through which the Nigerian netizen performs an agency that disrupts the political order.

The second way I examine performativity on social media is by focusing on the affective force of the images produced and circulated online as spectacle. The images people publish onto social media elicit some form of response from spectators, just like the spectacle of Greek tragedy ought to elicit cathartic responses. The images produce an effect through the spectacle they embed, compelling the public gaze to experience some shock when looking at the narrative of the image (Sontag 42). This shock might lead a user to do something, which in the case of social media, is usually expressed through rituals of re/shares, re/tweets, likes, and comments—all of which are processual behaviour. Performativity in this sense is a way of scrutinizing the texts in a way that is consistent with how Susan Ash understands some photographs as having a “dual capacity to operate as a sign and as a kind of theatre, or site of performance” (511). For example, in Figure 3.12, the performative appeals of the image elicit a desire to share by one of Asukwo's friends:



Fig. 3.12. Mike Asukwo. “Buhari Has Replaced Jonathan on the Catwalk.” *Facebook*. 3 April 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10206606977513709&set=pb.1250241460.-2207520000.1475703673.&type=3&theater>

The perception of the visual power of this image by netizens who engage with it by commenting or liking it lead to the conclusion that social media is central to an appreciation of the shifting relations between the spectacle of the image and its performance. The performative force of the image is expressed by the commenter whose predisposition to the rhetoric of the text is a desire to share it. To share therefore becomes a symbolic process that not only endorses the ideas of the

artist but also serves to perform Kash Comfort's political identity. In the image, Asukwo recasts the identity of the current Nigerian president in the mode of his predecessor, Goodluck Jonathan, who, the Nigerian media believed, spent a significant part of his administration pandering to Western leaders. The performance of this photo relates to both the ways political actions and identities have been produced and how the image occasions a response from a community of social media users who share, like and comment on the photo, extending its rhetoric in the process. That "Buhari has replaced Jonathan on the catwalk" suggests not only the new president's continuation of Jonathan's frivolous and ephemeral style of governance but also the staging of political actors represented in the image. Many other images, mostly political cartoons by Mike Asukwo are distributed by the artist and his fan-friends as a way of engaging with the Nigerian state and are ideological signs that offer a site of performance. For instance, one of the commenters on the thread in Figure 3.13 notes that Asukwo already occupies a stage from which he speaks through his works:

Get Your Yansh Ready for More.



Fig. 3.13. Mike Asukwo. “Get Your Yansh Ready for More.” *Facebook*, 13 May 2016.
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10209805228427983&set=pb.1250241460.-2207520000.1475703564.&type=3&size=810%2C600>

The image narrates the 2016 increase in gas prices in Nigeria and shows how the masses are made to bear the brunt of government’s fiscal decisions. It depicts an image of the Nigerian president, represented as a medical doctor, and a patient on whose body has been administered different “medical procedures” that range from high salary delay to a failed currency. The injection of another dose of austerity into the body politic is represented by the doctor’s attempt to inject another shot into the *yansh* of the patient, who by now has a bloodied posterior to deal with. This

example is a way a non-embodied performance gives life to the agonies of embodied realities in postcolonial states such as Nigeria. The body of the patient as the metaphoric site of oppression, conflict and dispossession is depicted as being powerless and unable to resist the pain inflicted on it by quack politicians. This is how Foucault, in his genealogical work on Nietzsche and history, explains how the body bears the marks of dissolution and systematic destruction:

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body. (83)

In any case, the close reading of social media images as cultural productions encoded with meanings uncovers a dissociated body in the Nigerian political landscaped impoverished by a history of precariousness and political excess. The representation of the abject body is thus a recurrent motif in not only Asukwo's cartoons, but in many other sites of visual satires in Nigerian social media. This endless return of the repressed body is significant because of the way in which the body signifies as the ultimate location of colonial violence and postcolonial contradictions. The fact that this image has been shared by a large number of friends in Asukwo's network underscores its strong exemplification of the sentiments of Nigerian social media users regarding the removal of a petroleum subsidy by the government. The cartoon, affirming its performativity, stages a narrative that invites and affects the audience who share it as a reproduction of its message and a performance of its satirical impulses. The representation of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled is consistently cast in a predatory light in which the masses do not have any safety nets from the attacks of their political representatives.

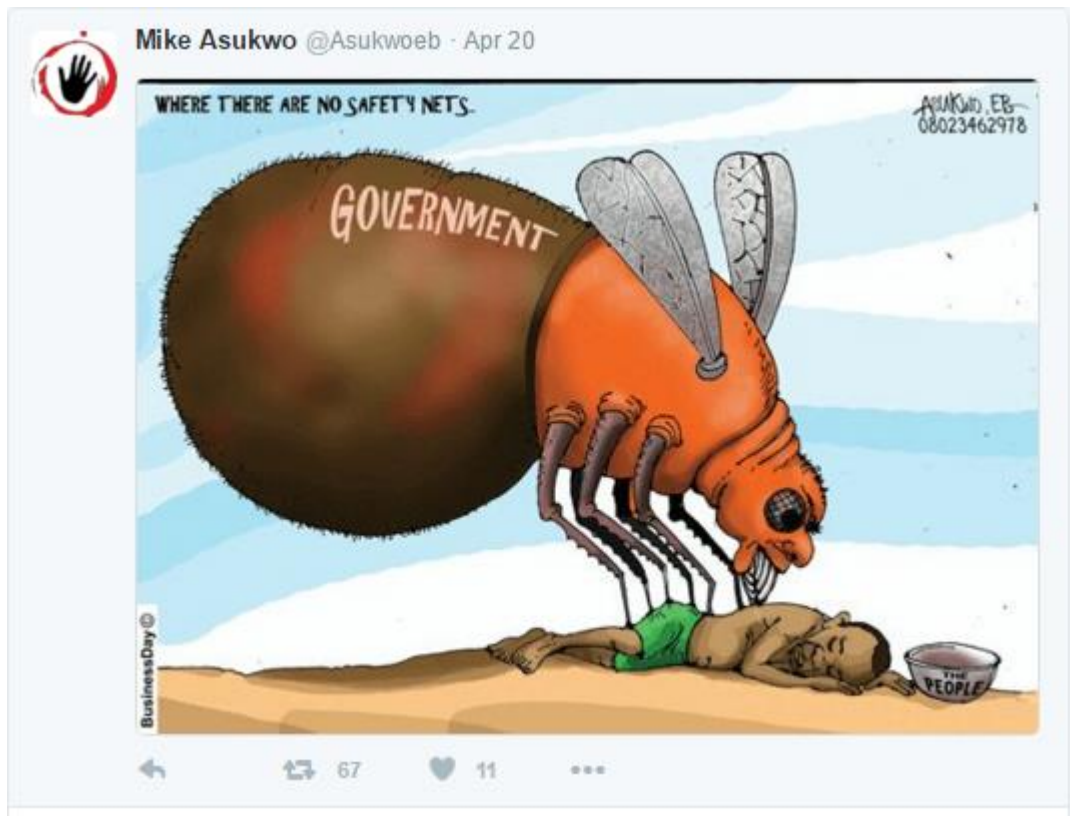


Fig. 3.14. “Where There Are No Safety Nets.” *Twitter*, 20 April, 2016.
<https://twitter.com/Asukwoeb/status/722857092760145920>

The body is also here presented as a site of economic and political plunder. In the image, the masses are unable to find a place of refuge from the “bites” of the government they have voted into power. Malnourished and resigned to fate, they are unable to protest partly because of the disempowering structures the state has put in place. Since, as Foucault asserts, “the body is the inscribed surface of events” (83), it is easy to appreciate how it functions in many of Asukwo’s works as a document of the struggles of the underclass against the impunity of the proto-autocratic regime in the country. The bloated size of the insect suggests that the oppressor is becoming increasingly powerful while the oppressed and their possibility for resistance continue to wane. The empty plate beside the body symbolizes hunger and the attendant lack of strength or capacity

to resist the oppression of elected officials who are indifferent to the suffering of the masses. Most of the time, when people are unable to protest injustice and uneven socio-economic conditions in Nigeria, the response is to recline into powerlessness or reach out to humour, as will be discussed in the next chapter, as a mechanism of coping. This last point is why one of the commenters on the thread in Figure 3.13 invites Asukwo to allow him “the luxury of a hearty laugh in these trying times.” In other words, sharing and liking a cartoon on Facebook as well as tweeting and posting content are performative acts through which some social media users in Nigeria cope with the agonies of life in a repressive and biting environment. They are performing, through social media sites of popular culture, a citizenship that lacks economic purchase, since they are, in most cases, excluded from power and are subjected to austere conditions by elected officials. In chapter four, I will return to this staging of “a hearty laugh” both as a mechanism of coping, and a subaltern tactic of subverting hegemonic culture. The irreverence of casting the government and the president in the negative frames above demonstrates the grotesquerie and bleakness of a dire situation citizens respond to in various creative ways online. Another example of this performative potential of the image as a producer of affect can be illustrated in Figure 3.15:



Fig. 3.15 “Nigeria is Broke,” *Facebook*, 21 May, 2016.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10209861661998787&set=a.2058448341395.126758.1250241460&type=3>

The performativity of the image can be located in the way the cartoon as a symbolic economy of alternative political meaning is being used to produce a public discourse that commenters on the thread can participate in as an elongation of the rhetoric and meaning of the image. The original post, that is the cartoon as well as the set of comments on it both constitute a shared performance in which both Asukwo and his readers are authors and readers at the same time. Beyond the visual persuasions of the image, the commenters produce verbal interpretive feedbacks that take the conversation in different other directions unintended by the artist. The meaning of the image is therefore locatable in the collective epistemic production of both the cartoonist and the commenters who infuse it with their own interpretations. For instance, Abusa Bennie comments that Nigerian “federal government officials are living large but the country is broke.” The statement reaffirms the message of the cartoon that the cracked body of the Nigerian masses signify a broke and broken country whose leaders hypocritically cling to affluence at the expense of the

people. Another commenter suggests Nigerian leaders “are living like kings,” having dispensed economic gains of public office for themselves. These image, with a display of performance that, like previous examples, arouses different emotions, also presents the theme of a Nigerian political elite that feeds on the privations and deprivations of helpless citizens, unable to resist the might of looting machines and the power of corrupt oligarchs.



Fig. 3.16. Mike Asukwo. “Change is But a Dream. *Twitter*, 18 May, 2016.
<https://twitter.com/Asukwoeb/status/733031913594716161>

Figure 3.16, with 117 shares on the feed of another Twitter user, presents an image that functions as a sign of Asukwo’s performance on Twitter. It uses both its textual component and allegorical company of animal characters to tacitly invite Asukwo’s community of friends to participate in the performative critique of the new government and their electoral promises. The last two lines, a departure from the wording of the original nursery rhyme: “Change is but a dream” is the artist’s way of appraising the failed promises of the new government in Nigeria, and it is a view that is being widely disseminated on social media, as evinced by the growing number of retweets the post has had as at May 18, 2016, one year after the president assumed office. The image makes a powerful statement regarding the way state apparatuses such as the department of security service limit the activities of civil society and the official opposition in Nigeria. The allegorical narrative that is presented in the image reinforces the view that the Nigerian state would rather control freedom of expression, instead of having activists protest social inequality and hold politicians accountable to their party platforms. The responses to the post on Facebook⁷, which has been shared 72 times with almost 255 likes, is even more illuminating, as they repudiate government’s policing of the opposition party and activists. For instance, a Facebook user comments that “an #artist is a necessity put in every generation by the designer of humanity.” He then thanks “Mike for putting our current realities on canvas.” Asukwo’s performance of a political self is thus affirmed by another user as representative of the views of many other regular citizens in Nigeria. Hence, another commenter believes nobody “captures the current Nigerian situation, condition and circumstance like Mike Asukwo.” The comments of the threads of these images are important

⁷ Asukwo, Mike. “Row, row, row your boat.” Facebook. 18 May, 2016.
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10209842638003199&set=rp.1250241460&type=3&theater>

components of Asukwo's performances on social media, as they supply vital verbal interpretations of the visual messages of the cartoons, even taking a new life of their own with refractive and analytical vigour.

Considering the ways professional artists such as Mike Asukwo and the auteurs of the "Ogas" YouTube videos use cartoons, puppetry, and the grotesque to represent political actors in Nigeria, therefore, what Achille Mbembe calls "aesthetics of vulgarity" come to mind as these texts exhibit elements that are "intrinsic to all systems of domination and to the means by which those systems are confirmed or deconstructed" (182). There is a need, though, to revisit Mbembe's reasoning that the humour expressed in these images as a practice of counter-hegemony does not have any material impact on the state. Because digital media ecologies such as social media make possible a more personalized and interactive mechanism for presenting political satire, this strategy of resistance sometimes leads to both consciousness-raising and offline material results. From a global context, Taylor Owen (2014) has noted similarly that the authority of the state, as traditionally understood, is currently undergoing a crisis, as digital actors engage with technology to disrupt the traditional function of the state as the sole organization of people for democratic activities (2). In Owen's account, however, the focus of digital actors appears to be subjects with the right technological skills, such as the members of the group Anonymous, who have the technical abilities to claim and reclaim counter-hegemonic spaces through their performance of dissent. The fact that individuals such as Asukwo have to be overly careful in places like Nigeria suggests that there could be real implications for any forms of social media critiques, including the publication and distribution of political images. Unlike Asukwo, his group of fans/friends are hardly scrutinized for censorship by the government. This is because regular citizens who use social media to protest institutional corruption are wrongly perceived by the state as passive agents of change. On the other hand, Asukwo's social commitment often attract professional editors in

the traditional media he produces content for that are pressured by state officials to proscribe some of the artist's work. Hence, he publishes his materials on social media and other personal digital media spaces such as www.Brohahamedia.com.

The point I have been developing is that the images Nigerian social media users share in these online network communities have a positive force that is contained and expressed in the performative effect the images have on users. Since digital media enables social contexts in which individuals perform everyday life with an awareness of the possibility of reproduction on social media, it can be suggested that people bring themselves within the realm of performativity, and of the performance of political selves in the Nigerian instance. As Sherry Turkle asserts:

Our online lives are all about performance. We perform on social networks and direct the performances of our avatars in virtual worlds. A premium on performance is the cornerstone of the robotic moment. We live the robotic moment not because we have companionate robots in our lives but because the way we contemplate them on the horizon says much about who we are and who we are willing to become. (26)

Although Turkle rightly identifies much of online life as performance, the idea that this performance is constituted by "a robotic moment" is a misreading of the productive engagements informed by performative self-presentations in contexts where people use social media essentially as contested sites for negotiating speech and agency for themselves and marginal groups in society. This meticulous production of the self can be discerned in the act of publishing, say, a political or religious post or image, which constructs a political or religious identity for individuals. Likewise, the 'writer' of the post and those who participate in its discourses are involved in a performance that constitute them as political or religious subjects. The social media performance can thus be grasped in its articulation of a dialogue between the content and its writer, the commenters on the post, as well as the social media environment that enables performative behaviour. The conception

of performance I have applied to social media discourse also fits the extensive formulation of performance as a broad spectrum of human actions (Schechner 3). Being a term that is a contingent category with shifting and contested meanings, I explore performance here within the trajectory of online political conversations in Nigeria. This examination helps to understand, as the image below demonstrates, the subversive significations of the social media texts through which such network actors as Asukwo, ordinary citizens, as well as the producers of the “Ogas” YouTube series perform political selves.



Fig. 3.17. Mike Asukwo. “The Back Scratchers.” *Twitter*, 4 Nov., 2015.
<https://twitter.com/Asukwoeb/status/661813973105451009>

By publishing this image on Twitter, the cartoonist transcends the then 140-character limits of the platform and instead unpacks through a single image the many ways politicians in Nigeria lobby

for cabinet positions. Asukwo also shows how Twitter is a representative space for critiquing the identities of two Nigerian political leaders, the current president and one of his cabinet ministers, who was prominent in the president's campaign for office. The title "Back Scratchers" is an allusion to a local practice in which people, politicians, in particular, expect others to reciprocate the good deeds they have enjoyed. As in his other texts, Asukwo is, therefore, using a local idiom his many followers can relate to. The fact that the image has had 58 retweets can be explained by not only the performative force of the image as social media text that inspires an affective response but also the desire to disseminate a critique of a political practice in Nigeria that is impervious to merit. To return to Lushetich's point on how the structure of a social network application such as Facebook can occasion performances, I examine the relatively new Facebook setting that allows users to share memories of past posts and updates.



Fig. 3.18. “Remember This...” *Facebook*, 3 March 2016.

Asukwo, like any other Facebook user, is reminded by the Facebook database of an image he had posted three years earlier. He reposts the image, telling his community of friends and fans to “remember this.” What is evident in this particular example is not just a sharing of memory, but also a recovery of performance, as the Facebook structure gives users the option to re-encounter what has been shared and encountered previously. By being asked to enact acts previously performed by other users, the Facebook option of sharing memories affirms the idea of performance as “twice-behaved behaviour” (Schechner 28). In “Performance as Metaphor,” Bert States avers in regard to the photograph that the “performance of the photograph can only occur by means of reproduction, that photography is the quintessential art of reproduction, and that it

survives only in the encounter and re-encounter of the spectator. Performance, then, is recoverable in time, though it is obviously never the same performance, even for the same individual” (11). In other words, one can be put as a spectator in a position in which an encounter with an image and its performance is produced essentially in terms of its reproduction. In the Facebook sharing memory option, we are being asked to restore and re-encounter an earlier ritual of online self-presentation. With respect to Nigerian social media discourse, this option can be a major strategy of (re)documenting Nigeria’s contemporary socio-political history, while functioning as a performance of political memory online. With persistent acts of police brutality in Nigeria, the image is a symbolic digital re-enactment of citizens’ performance of denouncing an apparatus of the Nigerian state. Aside from the broad idea that digital netizens network on social media to perform political selves by publishing and commenting on images, there is also the particularizing of this performance in the ways Asukwo and his cohorts organize resistance around state hegemony. Finally, the Facebook option to “share a memory” offers us an opportunity to rethink the view that “performance’s only life is in the present” (Phelan 146). If we take the virtual performance on social media as a performance event, unlike the art form whose ontology Peggy Phelan describes, that can be stored, documented and then reshared as in the case of the Facebook option; performance exists beyond the present. The social media performance by definition becomes itself by reappearance, a fact affirmed by the popular notion that the Internet never forgets.

A final example of some of the ways Asukwo performs a political self are presented in the rhetorical strategies of posts on Brohahamedia.com, Facebook, and Twitter. His posts in these media, among other things, seek to dislodge the hegemonic narratives of the postcolony, satirize and critique unconstitutional and corrupt policies of the state. The cartoons also invite other citizens to a network of resistance through which they critique the regulatory frameworks the state

uses to dispossess a vast majority of Nigerians. Much of the self-fashioning done on social media is a process that, on the one hand, affirms personal subjectivity and contests the dominant narratives of the political class in Nigeria and, on the other hand, is nuanced in the broadest formulation of the concept of performance. This latter direction lends itself to performativity since it imagines the possibility of social media rituals as practices that intricate with power structures. Asukwo's post on the 2015 election in Nigeria is an example of an image through which he performs a civic identity in the framework of the electoral process:



Fig. 3.19. Mike Asukwo. "Absolutely no Post-Match Hooliganism." *Facebook*.
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10205740461811358&set=pb.1250241460.-2207520000.1474404087.&type=3&theater>.

A close reading of this text reveals how its author borrows the metaphors of football [or soccer, as it is known in North America], a game many Nigerians fanatically adore, to presage the March 28, 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria. The country's sectarian debates about the ethnic or/and religious affiliations of political aspirants or officeholders are other latent ideas that a symptomatic

reading of the text can produce. The various commenters on the post are active participants in the overall performance of political selves evident in the image. The overarching sentiment expressed in the comments is agreement with Asukwo's call for an electoral season that is, as Mustapha Adbulkarim notes, "we understand." The text also contains some other cultural semiotics that gesture towards the users' understanding of contemporary politics in Nigeria. Some of these may include the significance of former president Jonathan's jersey—red as a signifier of danger; and the fact that the match referee, a professor of political science who heads the electoral commission INEC, appears to have his eyes towards the incumbent president who appointed him. Also important is the captain band on President Buhari's arm, a possible signifier of his past military atrocities as military head of state. Alert to the politics of electioneering and the fraudulent practices that often accompany them in Nigeria, Asukwo, on the scoreboard places PDP above APC. While this order in sports usually indicates which of the teams is playing at home as well as the visiting team, it harbours an awareness of the role of political incumbency in the determination of election results in the country. With 3546 Facebook friends and 2207 Twitter followers as of December 19, 2014, Mike Asukwo infuses the minds of his many readers with reformist ideas about the Nigerian state and uses the image to construct a progressive version and vision of the country. This image is important not only because of the identities of the politicians it represents but also because of the way it was shared and reshared by a community of people in Nigerian social media during the election to communicate the need for a violence-free electoral process. The comments on the image, together with the four shares and 38 likes, contribute to a shared sense of community that is lacking in traditional modes such as print media. These shares, in turn, reach audiences beyond the first shares, resulting in circuitry in which discourses around the text is continually subjected to critique. With social media, the author produces knowledge that is engaged with and reproduced in different ways by thousands of fans and friends in his community,

who, in turn, reproduce contents that are open to re-exploration in many creative redirections. Authorship in this space is therefore both a shared fragmentary process, always in a flux and never finally conclusive.

An interesting fact about Asukwo's works is that his personal websites at both <http://www.asukwo.com/> and <http://www.brohaha.com> do not enjoy this degree of participation from his community of friends and fans as his Facebook and Twitter pages. There is a suggestion here of social media's capacity to connect people in a shared and sharable space where cultural meanings are made possible. The idea of a shared media community also informs a possible revision of how bell hooks proposes marginality as a space of resistance and interventions on the politics of oppression (hooks 1990). Social media thus highlights how the project of resistance can be a shared practice between artists and their community of online friends, even as these friends reproduce the content of the initial post a new post from which more dialogic and performative relations can emerge. Figure 3.17 is a Facebook post of Asukwo's that other users have reshared, making the performance of political self embedded in the ritual of posting a shared and decentered practice.



Reggie Uzoechi

7 January · 🌐

Buhari, the Supreme Priest!

In my view, no treatise, no article, no opinion or analysis can best describe how Mr President has made a mess of our judicial process and desecrated the Temple of Justice than this master piece from Mike Asukwo.



👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share

👤 18

4 shares

View 19 more comments



Austin Ogbodo He will see the negative effect or this continued desecration soon. I wonder what the AGF has been doing in this circumstance

Like · Reply · 8 January at 02:59



Tope Alabi @idemudia, don't mind them. Sentiment has colored their reasoning. 5 billion euro for purchase of vehicles for Republic of Niger is a fresh allegation against Dasuki to which he must clear himself.

Like · Reply · 8 January at 06:42



Anthony Emuan @tope no one is asking him not to probe but at least he should respect the process that got him into power. The nonsense rule of law that got Buhari into power should be respected by Buhari... And pls let face it Buhari is a tyrant... As a leopard can never wash away his spot that is how Buhari will not stop being a tyrant.

Like · Reply · 8 January at 11:21

Fig. 3.20. Reggi Uzoechi. “Buhari, The Supreme Priest.” *Facebook*, 7 Jan. 2016
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1195885477105892&set=a.167353296625787.41130.100000533520465&type=3&theater>

Here is another example that is significant for a number of reasons. First, Reggi Uzoechi reproduces a political cartoon by Asukwo to express his own version of a contentious political debate, the independence of the judiciary in Nigeria. A quick glance at Uzoechi’s timeline reveals his consistent engagement with Nigerian political conversations. Whether he employs a visual text such as this cartoon or not, he constantly critiques agents and structures of government, performing a self that is moored in the political. Also, Uzoechi acknowledges Asukwo’s unique narrative of the new Nigerian president’s abuse of the judiciary. In a recent interview with the mainstream media, the President had made condescending remarks about the country’s judicial processes, and, in response Asukwo shared the image on Facebook, representing the president’s remarks: “MR HIGH PRIEST, CONSULT THE ORACLE AND CONVINCING HIM THESE GUILTY ONES ARE GUILTY.” If the men are already guilty, then Asukwo appears to be suggesting that the President is autocratic in his instructions to the judge. The president is positioned in the cartoon as a leader who scorns democratic principles. From the disparity between his high throne and the standing judge, it appears not suited for democratic governance. The larger issue critiqued here is the apparent disrespect of the Nigerian ruling elite for government’s institutions. The user’s resharing of the image and the comments that follow therefore point to how Asukwo and his Facebook friends perform political selves, using social media to present carefully edited versions of the self to respond to political debates in Nigeria. They do things with these images, showing that the performance of social media rituals as a presentation of political selves is consistent with Austin’s idea about the way people do things with words (Austin, 1965). The overlapping of social media as popular culture and structures of power in Nigeria “provides powerful resources for

people to present their own politics” (van Zoonen, et al. 536) and their alternative political imaginations concerning different cultural discourses. The capacity to use and reuse a comic image, or create a meme as an expression of political dissent on social media is an indication of a reclaimed agency for many in Nigeria.

Despite the idea that the agency social media enables may be limited because of the global forces of communicative capitalism (Dean 108) that structure and conditions network economies, I have attempted to show that in countries like Nigeria, this agency yet affords the marginal populations class participatory opportunities, including the performance of political selves through popular images. These images, the YouTube videos by Buni TV, Asukwo’s political cartoons, and actual self performances that position their rhetoric as interventions in the political, can be seen as new forms of popular culture. They locate their creators as participants in the global networks of resistance to state power and other sources of hegemony around the world. Creators of these cultural forms produce texts that are consciously ideological, and sometimes intend them to intervene in power relations. Many political memes, for instance, in social media environments point to how some global netizens appropriate the paradigms of digital culture and informational capitalism to destabilize dominant hegemonies. These texts show that the creators of online images are re/politicized subjects who use social media for resisting institutional injustices in Nigeria. The ways social media repoliticizes ordinary and young people in Nigeria are similar to Castells’ reflections on the role of communicative network power in the Arab Spring and Occupy movements. He comments on how social media concurrently served as networks of outrage and hope for many young people in the Middle East:

No one expected it. In a world darkened by economic distress, political cynicism, cultural emptiness and personal hopelessness, it just happened. Suddenly dictatorship could be overthrown with the bare hands of the people, even if their hands had been bloodied by the

sacrifice of those fallen. Financial magicians went from being the objects of public envy to the targets of universal contempt. Politicians became exposed as corrupt liars. Governments were denounced. Media were suspected. (1)

In the case of Nigerian social media and the Occupy movement, the government might not have been overthrown, yet young people suddenly realized they could participate directly in political conversations through social media. Through this participation, expressed broadly through commentaries and popular images, they perform their status as citizens. The cultural practices I have discussed so far became the most efficient and fastest means to perform resistance. The deployment of these popular images in protest activities in online environments is just beginning to receive critical attention. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg's study (2012) of memes as a tool of protest, and of framing personal or collective action speaks to this growing scholarship and suggest that popular culture on social media are connected to institutional power. In the next two chapters, I focus exclusively on how these ordinary citizens use humour and internet memes as cultural tools of performative citizenship and participatory politics. I am interested in how both humorous presentations of selves and Internet memes constitute symbolic forms that subvert and undermine oppressive power, and how they function as discursive fields occasioning a fascinating understanding of how some Nigerian netizens, hitherto excluded from the corridors of power, express political agency through social media images.

CHAPTER FOUR

CARNIVALESQUE AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF HUMOUR IN NIGERIAN SOCIAL MEDIA

The basic assumption underlying this chapter is that humour within the context of Nigerian social media culture, as in other places, is a major cultural practice through which netizens articulate their outrage and perform relations of power. Humour offers a creative space in digital media for the expression of previously silenced voices in social and political conversations in Nigeria. In discussions of humour as a cultural practice, the dominant tendency is to identify its function as a strategy of resistance, a means of subversion, or a coping mechanism in oppressive cultural and political contexts. For instance, Joseph Boskin observes that just as “humor has been used as a weapon of insult and intimidation by dominant groups, so it has been used as a weapon for resistance and retaliation by minorities” (38). Although humour can be a weapon that conserves the power of the upper class, its function as a form of resistance among the marginalized is an irrefutable fact this chapter seeks to identify. This function of humour was exemplified in a recent *New York Times* publication in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 American presidential elections. The *Times* on December 5, 2016, in sympathy with distraught New Yorkers who “cried on the subway the morning after the election,” published an OP-ED titled “How to Cope with Trump? Laugh.” The short article was an introduction to the main video narrative on the perspectives of nationals from seven different countries on the elections. With the awareness that “in many parts of the world, being depressed about politics is a tradition” and that millions of “people have spent their entire lives ruled by leaders they detest,” the contributors of the piece “asked a group of comedians, cultural commentators and political satirists from around the world to share their experiences and to offer a tool kit of coping mechanisms for American liberals — via video selfies.” Although one can locate in the video selfies a subtle stereotype renaturalizing the

assumption that the governments of the countries represented are mostly and always dictatorial, what is more relevant is the idea that political laughter has a cultural function evident in the performative agency of the video selfies and the messages articulated through them. In relation to Nigeria, one of the contributors to the *Times* video was Njakiri Damages, a Nigerian satirist who hosts a weekly online show that caricatures political leaders and cultural events in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. Njakiri Damages' suggestions concerning how Americans can learn from some of the ways Nigerians respond to cultural and socio-political oppression through humour gesture towards the cultural politics of laughter and humour in contemporary Nigeria.

What Njakiri Damages does with his online satirical show, part of which is reproduced in the *New York Times* publication, is a form of humour that is familiar to citizens in the Nigerian digital media environment. For instance, the use of humour as a coping mechanism can be illustrated with the media coverage of the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa. A prejudicial representation of Africa as a lingering site of pathologies played itself out yet again, as the dominant narrative of major news channels around the world was fixated on a disease that barely affected only a handful of countries on the continent. While the media, both online and mainstream, focused on the potential spread of the disease around the world, some Nigerian netizens with access to digital media posted and tweeted subversive stories, especially comic tales on Ebola, as counter-narratives to these dominant media representations. Jokes circulated in social media became productive mechanisms for engaging with a public health crisis that potentially threatened society. The jokes were productive in so far as they were cultural outlets through which new media consumers coped with the tragic impact of the Ebola outbreak. One of the jokes Nigerian users of these new media applications distributed extensively on the BlackBerry Messenger narrates the experience of a fictional character, Akpos, who is abducted by kidnappers and taken to an unknown location. The kidnappers beat him for a while and ask him, "Which of your family members should

we call to pay ransom?” A surprised Akpos replies: “I don’t have a family now. All my family members ran away after I was suddenly bogged down with fever, intense weakness, muscle pain, headache and sore throat. This was followed by vomiting, diarrhoea, rash...” Akpos has not finished speaking before the kidnappers jump out through the windows and flee. While facilitating a space of laughter for ordinary Nigerians in a debilitating environment, the Akpos joke illustrates how regular citizens, mostly netizens, respond through humour to the parlous conditions of life in Nigeria. In this chapter, I develop the argument that social media users in Nigeria mobilize humour as one of the dominant cultural modes of narrating and representing the Nigerian political terrain. My interest is to understand and articulate the specific ways social media has transformed the nature and form of humour production and consumption in Nigeria. I uncover some of the ways Nigerian netizens engage a global audience in conversations around social media by presenting Nigerian cultural life through the creative and humorous voices of some of the country’s Internet users.

The description of the Nigerian postcolonial society as a sociopolitical contraption defined by “the politics of “suffering and smiling” (Afolayan 1) is apposite in framing the question of the cultural function of humour. The expression, “suffering and smiling” derives from Fela Anikulapo-Kuti’s 1978 musical album, *Shuffering and Shmiling*. As this reference indicates, the ability to express outrage on social media, discussed in this chapter as a form articulated through performative presentations of humour, is evident in other forms of expressive culture in Nigeria. The songs on the album highlight how the Afrobeat musician perceives the tension between precarious living conditions and the religiosity of the Nigerian masses. Anikulapo-Kuti derides common people’s lack of agency (Olaniyan 66) in a musical idiom that locates religious hegemony as a weapon of subordinating the underclass. The song is as much a scathing critique of uncritical religious followership in Africa as it is a social commentary on the socioeconomic pillages forced

on non-dominant groups by exploitative leaders in Africa. Theorists such as Achille Mbembe (1992) and Ebenezer Obadare (2009, 2016) have located in humour a counter-hegemonic character through which individuals refashion the burdens and adversities of urban postcolonial contexts. For instance, Ebenezer Obadare has termed this capacity to suffer and smile in oppressive climes as an “aesthetics of misery” (Obadare 2016 74) supplying fodder for creators of humour, which may include the content creators on platforms such as YouTube studied in this chapter. By that phrase, Obadare refers to the creative re/appropriation and subversion of austerity as a strategy for survival. The dominant articulation of the character of humour in Africanist cultural studies has thus been expressed by scholars such as Obadare in terms of this predilection to enable postcolonial subjects to cope with the precariousness of existence in the postcolony. Wilson Harris, the postcolonial Guyanese writer, sums up this tendency of creativity to erupt from unlikely and oppressive situations when he poignantly states that:

Wherever one looks, whether in the West or in the societies of the Third World, it would seem that moral being cannot be divorced from a deepened cycle of creativity through which we may visualize a breakthrough from absolute violence. Such a breakthrough requires us to accept the adversarial contexts in which cultures wrestle with each other but to descend as well into camouflages and masks as flexible frames within the mystery of genuine change. (128)

Similarly, for Nigerians genuine change can begin when people first adorn the camouflages and masks of cultural forms such as humour and performance, visualizing a breakthrough from the violence of political abuses and systemic inequalities. Unlike the fascination with humour in precolonial Nigeria societies as a mode of conveying didactic knowledge, the contemporary operation of Nigerian humour lies in adversarial contexts because people find reasons to smile and laugh despite disempowering conditions. While this focus is a valid way to understand the

variegated sites for the articulation of humour, a more contemporary way of conceptualizing the cultural significations of humour is to examine the discursive and aesthetic merits of forms of laughter, such as the social media examples discussed shortly. Through the examples, it will become apparent that the productivity of subaltern humour consists in the ways popular forms of laughter facilitate an understanding of everyday life in Nigeria, enabling an appreciation of the social inequalities being experienced by the poor. Obadare links the preponderance of humour in contemporary Nigeria to the ubiquity of new media technologies, which assure the “simultaneous expansion and profanization of the public sphere” (75). In contrast to his work that is less focused on “the medium of humor” (75), I am concerned about the ways viral humour on digital platforms informs and is informed by a virtual public sphere. This public sphere is constituted by new, and in many cases, young voices engaging with political orthodoxies on social media. Through much of the comic interpretations of these netizens, it becomes possible to appreciate the ways through which ordinary Nigerians respond to everyday existential anxieties. Before fully examining the carnival politics of humorous posts from the social media landscape in Nigeria, I proceed in the next section to track the evolution of humour as an expression of popular culture in the country. This discussion is necessary to mark the continuum that exists in the performance of Nigerian humour, whether on a stand-up comedy stage or on social media.

4.1 Shifts and Continuities in Nigerian Humour

Aside from the Nigerian film industry Nollywood, discussed in chapter one, Nigerian stand-up comedy is another site of popular culture that aids an understanding of contemporary everyday culture in the country, although pre-Nollywood comedy series by veteran actors such as Baba Sala, and Gbenga Adeoye existed before the popular stand-up comedy stage. These comedians, responding to austere living conditions, produced humorous commentaries on Nigerian social and

political life and distributed them through technologies such as cassette tapes and, later, the CD. There was also Mazi Mperempe, a comedy programme on Radio Nigeria and the old Anambra State Television, Enugu, between the 1970s and the early 90s (Ayakoroma 5). With more advanced technologies such as the Internet enabling people to share past comic materials, some works by these performers have recently re-entered the public consciousness. There were also stand-up performances such as Opa Williams's "Night of a Thousand Laughs." The show, which now distributes recorded live performances on social media, is Nigeria's flagship stand-up comedy event. Williams, a pioneer video-film director, had produced comedic home videos in the early days of Nollywood before turning attention to the stage. The first "Night of a Thousand Laughs" was held on Sunday, October 1, 1995 at the premises of the University of Lagos. The show became iconic for the outlet it provided for artists such as Muhammed Danjuma, Sam Loko and Ali Baba, who had all migrated from television and radio to live performances.

With social media, however, the production and distribution of humour potentially gets more than a thousand laughs and likes, with both established comedians and even ordinary citizens with a humorous inclination publishing content that attract huge followers online. These followers also extend the message and performances of the comic posts they share or retweet, interacting with one another as co-producers of the rhetoric of these posts. Because of social media, the production of humour is undergoing a transformation from *a performance event*, such as the so-called night of a thousand laughs to *an iterative and performative process*, such as that of re/tweeting and reposting comic posts that receive more than a thousand likes and shares. It is possible to conceive of this processual nature of social media rituals—tweeting, posting, liking, etc.—as normalizing factors that depoliticize social media subjects. Yet, without essentializing the medium, I reason that hegemonic articulations of power and culture will always attract some forms of resistance, expressed by citizens whose everyday life is performed on social media. Just like

consumers of popular culture, such as Nollywood, have become legitimate producers of cultural forms on social media, there is a similar shift in the production and consumption of Nigerian humour by Internet users. Aside from giving visibility to social media users who are naturally predisposed to humour, there is also the emergence of new comic voices that would have perhaps never gained visibility had there not been a Facebook or YouTube stage for them to perform their comic talents. It is safe to conclude, then, that the proliferation of digital and social media in Nigeria has led to a relocation of the stage of stand-up comedy in Nigeria.

Social media has occasioned a cultural order in which ordinary people no longer only perform laughter as a way of responding to suffering as Anikulapo-Kuti observed, but they must now also “share” the source of laughter on different networked social media as a tactic of responding with many others to the precarious and disempowering conditions of life in the country. Audience reception to jokes on social media is evident in the participation of online subjects in the reproduction of laughter. As a social function of relating with others, humour fits well into a social media environment in which interactivity and social ties are sacrosanct. For instance, the humorous works I examine in this chapter including those of social media-inspired groups such as Naija Craziest and WoWo Boyz, suggest that any scholarly consideration of contemporary Nigerian humour should scrutinize the ways digital technologies empower ordinary Nigerians to perform comic selves in network communities and to respond individually to precarious economic conditions. Nigerian netizens who share, post, and/or tweet humorous content are thus invested in a performance articulated through the visual metaphors of digital media. These texts enable a focused and nuanced treatment of how alternative spaces of humour occasioned by Web 2.0 decenter, supplement, and reconstruct traditional platforms, such as the stand-up comedy stage in Nigeria. Organizing the rhetoric of humour around social media affirms the production of humour

in digital media as a site of individuated resistance, with the “private spaces” of citizens becoming public and performative sites for engaging with and critiquing culture and power.

Without social media, voices such as those of Correct Bro, Correct Babe, and those of the young Emmanuella and her uncle, both of *Mark Angel Comedy* would most likely struggle for prominence in a crowded stand-up comedy industry. The YouTube channels of these non-professional comedians literally have millions of viewers engaging with creative reinterpretations of everyday life and anxieties. This large number of views support the fact that social media, more than the traditional comedy stage, enables outlets for mass distribution and consumption of humorous forms by regular citizens. In the case of Mark Angel Comedy, starring Emmanuella, the six-year-old comedienne, there is an instance of how an ordinary netizen who generates content can become a key cultural reference because of comedy skits that uncover social and cultural issues. In the episode *I'll Beat You*, Emmanuella, returning home from school is accosted by a bigger girl who wishes to fight with her. Emmanuella outsmarts the girl by asking her not to run away but follow her home if she really wants a fight. They get home and Emmanuella further asks her to wait outside while she goes inside to put down her school bag. She gets inside the house, puts on the TV to watch cartoons and settles down to some popcorn. The other girl, meanwhile, waits outside until she is tired and departs with her cheering group. The episode ends with Emmanuella's words: “my fellow Africans, stop fighting. Use your head.” These words are probably the core of the video as they show an awareness of the conflict situations in some parts of Africa. By calling on “fellow Africans” to “stop fighting,” Emmanuella is using humour as an interventionist strategy in Africa's perennially social and political conflicts. The producers of the *Mark Angel Comedy* that features the young girl also understand the diverse nature of the audience of the videos, as “my fellow Africans” can also initiate, as the comments on the thread presents, conversation with audiences beyond Nigeria.



Fig. 4.1. “Hollywood Standard.” *YouTube*, Uploaded by Mark Angel Comedy, 8 July 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVyFVFyr8Ck>

The ideological underbelly of the humorous narratives from these social media comedians can be seen in episodes that engage with topics as diverse as the operation of capital, the contentions of religion in a plural society, and colonial attitudes. For instance, it engages with the ambivalent mechanism of “colonial imitation” that normalizes colonial culture which Homi Bhabha has rightly called mimicry (126). Mimicry, in Bhabha’s formulation, takes the form of a performative staging by the formerly colonized of the cultural codes and behaviour of colonial hegemony. The native learns and internalizes the codes of the colonizer and by performing them subverts the apparatus of dominance. Mimicry thus has an unintentional subversive component, which is a critique of the colonial codes that have been copied. Even if unawares of its operations in the text, the comic group expresses the notion of mimicry in the episode *Hollywood Standard*, an apt illustration of a subaltern engagement with power and culture. Evident in most of the examples in this dissertation

is a mimetic representation of power that appears to copy its codes with the view of showing its gaps. As Bhabha explains, mimicry is “the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (126). Subaltern mockery that takes the form of visual images are the metaphors of a mimicry of cultural hegemony and political dominance intended to subvert the hierarchies themselves.

In the video, the *Mark Angel Comedy* team can be seen on location, shooting a video which, as the director says, must impress “a Hollywood agent” waiting impatiently by a corner. The director and the production crew are part of the video text as they seek to produce a “Hollywood standard” comedy. He hurries the crew up, saying, “we don’t have time; this video is going on YouTube in a few minutes.” Emmanuella, however, raises an objection and calls the attention of the director to the palm wine, a local alcohol another actor is required to consume. The director tells her they “are making [a] Hollywood standard [film] and everything has to be real.” They get the actor to take alcohol, and not an alternative drink Emmanuella has suggested. Having agreed to continue, Emmanuella pretends to forget her line, to the chagrin of the production crew who scolds her and tells the other actor to repeat his role—drinking the wine again each time the girl deliberately misses her line until he gets drunk. Because the drunk actor falls asleep, therefore, the crew are not able to complete the skit for both YouTube and for the assessment of the Hollywood agent who watches in astonishment. The dramatic irony of the video is evident in the commentaries that follow the video on YouTube. Both Emmanuella, who has deliberately subverted the filming process, and the audience know what the rest of the film crew does not know. Emmanuella wishes to see the other actor drunk in order to prove that producing a Hollywood standard film is not sufficient reason to abandon reality. By depicting a film crew that aims to imitate a Western model, the video calls attention to mimicry as an unconscious performance of colonial desire that nonetheless simultaneously critiques the colonial culture being longed for. In this example,

therefore, the video engages with the question of reality in Hollywood, subverting the desire in local cultural contexts for a global and hegemonic cultural form. This episode gives an insight into the production work of the comedy group in the way they show a group of guys who take a video camera, produce a comic script and upload it to YouTube where local and global audiences meet and engage in important conversations.

The young Emmanuella and Mark, the producer of the series who is also her uncle in the episodes, were recently awarded a prize by Google and the Australian Government for their humorous works on YouTube. The Wikipedia Foundation has also recently partnered with the group to produce an episode that promotes the use of Wikipedia among Nigerians.⁸ The episode features a young Emmanuella who claims her knowledge of university-level topics is made possible by her reliance on Wikipedia. In defining the term “cognitive inertia” to the astonishment of her uncle’s professor and classmates, Emmanuella asserts Wikipedia’s emphasis on the shift of knowledge production and circulation from print technology to digital media, while subtly decrying a print culture that is still ubiquitous in the Nigerian educational system. This humorous episode for Wikipedia is an important reaffirmation of the ways in which the social media environment amplifies the voices of everyday people, while also signalling itself as a significant location of new cultural meanings. One final point about this YouTube comedy group, and this is equally true of the other comedians discussed in this chapter, is how they reappropriate the recognition they get on the platform for commercial purposes. In most cases, these users take their content to their own websites, hoping to attract their fans and followers to an independent space different from that afforded by social media. In the case of both *Brohahamedia.com* and *markangelcomedy.com*, what suffers most is the kind of vibrant and active communities inhabiting the multimodal and interactive

⁸ “Wikipedia-Emmanuella goes to school” *Mark Angel Comedy* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qDH4bPvfMw>.

space of social media. Aside from the ability to comment on images on these websites, there is a loss of the immediacy of liking, tweeting or instant sharing of posts which is available on social media. This capitalist cooptation of the community of subscribers, similar to the larger monetization of leisure time that underlies social media, is expressed through adverts directed towards readers unable to network openly and offer some form of resistance.

While the works of Mark Angel Comedy are well-received online, other groups on YouTube such as Naija Craziest and WoWo Boyz equally have thousands of YouTube subscribers. YouTube nicely illustrates the capacity of social media to shape and produce the identities of users in a performative manner. In broadcasting the self on YouTube, users are in the process of enacting or producing specific subjectivities and identities through videos uploaded to a broad demographic of audiences. The “Darris God o” video discussed in chapter three has remained fascinating as the subject of other similar comedy skits on YouTube, with many parodies of the former first lady’s outburst created by young humourists. In addition to parodies of Patience Jonathan’s video, other viral stories that inspire comic skits include the collected speeches of bombast-loving parliamentarian, Patrick Obahiagbon, as well as the last viral story of “Oga at the Top. In chapter two, I discussed “Ogas at the top,” a series of puppetry videos by Buni TV. These videos were inspired by the Channels TV interview in which Shem Obafaiye kept repeating the expression “Oga at the Top.” His gaffe on live TV inspired the production of “Ogas at the top”—which is the name of the puppetry YouTube videos discussed in Chapter two. Aside from this Kenya production by Buni TV, there are ordinary Nigerian netizens that have produced comic YouTube videos from the interview, while involved in the presentation of comic selves and the mobilization of parody and satire to critique government.

Naija Craziest's version of the "Oga at the Top" narrative is titled *Grammatical Explosion* and starts with the formulaic storytelling signifier, "once upon a time." The use of this element shows a narrative awareness expressed through parody and developed throughout the video. "Once upon a time...The Oga at the Top' saga rocked Nigeria," begins the video. The viewer is taken back to the Sunrise morning show at the Channels TV studio where the actual interview that produced "Oga at the Top" had taken place. Since the creators of the video also believe the popular idea that the anchors at Channels TV were unprofessional and disrespectful to Shem Obafaiye, they continue the narrative by noting that a man is on a revenge mission on behalf of the officer. This heroic subject, Patrick Obahiagbon, seeks revenge and his goal is to "finish the Sunrise presenters with grammatical eloquence and leave Channels TV in confusion." The video thus presents a narrative in the heroic mode, as one can see a public official who has come to defend the integrity of another public officer. This context provides a premise for the performers to query the grammatical accuracy of Patrick Obahiagbon's statements. Obahiagbon's famous lines, such as "political crinkum crankum" and "higi haga," became materials for the comedians' cultural jamming. The video is a creative blend of two parallel narratives: the original interview in which Patrick Obahiagbon responds in grand expressions to a crew of stupefied Channels TV presenters, and a second layer in which the young comedians hilariously challenge and critique Obahiagbon's language. There is also an instance of a neo-oral tendency in the reproduction of Nigerian humour on social media, since, like stand-up productions, the social media stage facilitates a return to an equally collective production of humour. An important Instagram post⁹ that mounts a dialogue between itself and other works of humour featuring Patrick Obahiagbon as the central point of

⁹ @Jiggzytos's video can be found on his Instagram page: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BLoJBfMha3d/?taken-by=jiggzytos&hl=en>

narrative is by the comedian @Jiggzytos. The fictive video interview illustrates how social media locates humour as a cultural form to be shared in response to sociocultural and political events in Nigeria. It presents an interview in which @Jiggzytos Photoshops himself into an existing interview granted by Patrick Obahiagbon and reappropriates his response to his own comic text. In this new interview, Obahiagbon responds to allegations in the media that he deliberately uses high-sounding words to impress and mystify his audience. Obahiagbon replies by garbing his words in more exaggerated rhetoric, “render[ing] an unreserved apologia” to those offended by his communication style. The interviewer proceeds to get Obahiagbon’s view on President Buhari’s comment in Germany in October 2016 that Nigeria’s first lady belonged in the kitchen. Obahiagbon answers that the president’s gendered rhetoric reaffirms the view that Nigeria still wallows in “cantankerous tribalism, ethnocentric chauvinism, syphilitic parochialism, epileptic nepotism, [and] catalytic parapoism.” This litany of grandiose expressions enervates the interviewer who storms out of the scene in annoyance. The use of sound accompaniment to punctuate the sequence of these words creates a funny rhythm that adds to the pleasure derived from the text. The pertinence of this comic video lies in how social media enables the creator of the video to create new narrative from an existing content from the traditional media. This skill allows him to insert his own agency as an up-and-coming comedian into a text that other users have remixed in similar other contexts for comedy. The Obahiagbon examples succeed as humorous texts satirizing Nigerian leaders, who are defined more by mere political talk than by an actual fulfillment of electoral promises. And since multiple copies of the videos migrate to other platforms where they are subjected to an endless process of sharing and retweeting, one can see that people are interacting with these texts as consumers of humour and transmitters of the resistance strategies inherent in the texts. Finally, the continuum being described in this section is that response to the structural adjustments imposed by economic hardship that inspired cultural forms such as Nollywood and

stand-up comedy in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Nigeria. Aside from the idea that a performative platform urges the will to share cultural practices, there is also an economic determination of the behaviour of netizens, expressed in the ways humour is being shared as a response to austerity.

4.2 The Will to Share

Because the discourses produced in comment threads of social media posts are fundamental to the overarching meaning of a post, there is the need to stress the “dialogic imagination” (Bakhtin 1981) at play in social media conversations. The comments on the thread of most examples in this dissertation are not only indications of a new order of participatory culture made possible by social media, but also of the dialogic framework of much of social media mode of communication. These comments are best located within a discursive frame in which their very production is both a response to a previous utterance and an anticipation of response from others in the thread. In other words, utterances are essentially dialogic and are positioned within a chain of communication as markers of discourses. This idea is particularly true of the historically contingent threads being produced in the many online communities and networks in Nigerian social media. In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Mikhail Bakhtin claims:

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation with any living dialogue. The orientation towards an answer is open, blatant and concrete. (279-80)

The dialogic presence sponsored by social media is why commenters on threads have an expectation that some other user/reader will have an answer-word in the form of a like, share or a direct reply to whatever they have posted in a thread of discussion. Social media provides the best illustration of the blatant and open orientation of communication towards an answer, such that this affective orientation itself shows a performative impulse that urges some form of response from anyone who sees what is posted. Within this context, identifiable is a certain *will to share* a content that most social media users experience when they find a post that elicits some form of response. Virality is the product of the will to share content on user-generated media. This “orientation towards an answer” (280) is even more evident in comic or satirical posts that provoke laughter. For instance, Figure 4.2 below is another example of a Facebook post in which the user is responding to a proposed Nigerian government tax policy that caused outrage online:



Fig. 4.2: Mitterand Okorie. *Facebook*, 21 November, 2016.
<https://www.facebook.com/MittOkorie/posts/10155815805004815>

In response to a proposed increase in mobile call tariffs by an agency of the Nigerian government, Mitterand Okorie calls on his friend to “download the latest version of WhatsApp” as an alternative call platform because this joke—the proposed hike— “is too expensive.” The use of the word “joke” foregrounds the hilarity contained in the post and the comments produced in its thread. In addition to the many likes and shares indicating the widespread understanding of a humorous engagement with an unwanted tax regime, there are comments that show people’s dissatisfaction with the government’s “stupid policies.” A commenter, Dei Anthony also asserts that the proposed

tax is a way to raise revenue to buy cars for the “legislalooters, executhieves, and the supposed judicial arm.” In other words, government is composed of looters and thieves who, according to Cee Jay Ibeneme, have “done nothing to help the businesses of the people.” While these Nigerians resort to laughter as way of expressing outrage, network actors from other parts of the world are much more political in their expression of resistance.

Manuel Castells describes the way outrage induces fearless risk-taking in the context of the Tunisian protest. Castells write that there “was extreme outrage against police abuse, against hunger rising in the country and against the desperation that led people to immolate themselves (82). He notes that outrage had, however, “been there for quite a long time. The key difference was that another potent, positive emotion was present: Hope. Tunisia epitomized the hope for change” (82). These words could have been written about the presence of outrage in the Nigerian context, except to the extent that the key difference in this case is the way the hope for change is expressed. In Nigerian social media culture, playful participation in network communities in which people express their outrage through the modality of forms such as humour is imperative. A major question being addressed, therefore is: why do people respond to oppressive sociocultural and political contexts through forms such as laughter when they could easily organize one another for more pragmatic forms of protest? A possible answer is that the underclass conceives of humour as an important cultural weapon for resisting the domination of the mighty. Even though, as Donna Goldstein explains, “the humor of the poor may not necessarily lead directly to rebellions and political revolutions, it does open up a discursive space” (10) within which they can express their views on subjects that have been previously naturalized as exclusive to the upper class. The exploration of this discursive space on social media yields insights into the form and function of humour in a digital age, which includes the involvement of otherwise non-dominant groups in the constructions of humorous online publics.

The reference to the last example is to emphasize the presence of other texts, aside from comic videos and images, although I acknowledge as Limor Shifman does, that there is a prominence of visual humorous forms over verbal forms (187) of humour in social media environments. The forms I examine also include posts that promote laughter in the critique of society, culture, and power. The next example is another Facebook post illustrating this capacity of a status update to create a laughing space in which a network of friends and followers can express and share perspectives on any subject.



Fig. 4.3. Ayobami Ojebode. *Facebook*, 19 November, 2016.
<https://www.facebook.com/ayobami.ogajode/posts/904232229676661>

The conversations produced in this post are significant sources of knowledge, aside from the comic treatment of a frequent Nigerian problem, the advance-fee scams distributed globally from Nigeria and other parts of the world. Ayobami Ojebode is a Nigerian communications professor who has supposedly been notified of an offer of admission to a polytechnic in Nigeria. The scammer asks him to click on a link or call a phone number for further details. Ojebode gets on Facebook and requests that his friends “rejoice with [him]” and a thread of funny comments emerges. The commenters playfully congratulate Ojebode and some remind him that there is “no end to learning.” A commenter, as if encouraging criminal behaviour, is disappointed that “the crooks are not even creative” while another believes the recession in the Nigerian economy is “bringing out the best in scammers.” The implicit critique of a culture of corruption articulated through humorous commentaries organized around a spurious offer of admission initially appears to be secondary. A closer inspection, however, reveals that the humorous commentaries foreground the playful treatment of a serious subject, as both the post and the thread call critical attention to a practice that perpetuates the notion that Nigeria is essentially a country of crime.

Content-sharing options on both YouTube and, recently, Facebook have resulted in the mass creation of humour as a means of what may be called *digital networks recreation*. As virtual communities that facilitate the creation, exchange, and commentary on content among different people, social media inherently harbours a playful environment that envisions sociality as an epistemological practice. As I demonstrated in previous chapters, social media enables the creation of new forms of knowledge. Against the backdrop of humour and play, one can imagine how this production of knowledge is grounded in a non-hierarchical and decentralized space that conditions ways of knowing as methods of altering and resisting existing meanings. The creation and recreation of content is explained more broadly by Lawrence Lessing as “remix culture,” the

practice of merging online content material found (songs, texts, images and videos) and merging it in a new, original, creation (De Notaris, 111). The focus on recreation, alongside remix, is to call attention to the elements of play and relaxation sometimes evident in some of the virtual communities on the Web. Play becomes a productive modality for expressing the social component of social media, while users poke fun through cultural forms at hegemonic formations. The mass production of humour in a Nigerian social media context consolidates the understanding of remix culture as a performative and participatory expression of this (re)creative play. In Figure 4.4, for instance, the user Correct Bro creates a fictional character that allows him to play with the idea of anonymity as he masks his identity in the process of humorously critiquing the Nigerian social and political processes on Facebook:



Fig. 4.4. Correct Bro. Facebook, 25 September, 2016.

<https://www.facebook.com/correctbro/photos/a.1050856868326588.1073741827.1050850821660526/1162443990501208/?type=3&theater>

Akara is a staple Nigerian snack that is made from beans and may be considered as a local meal through which the working class aspires to the elite status of upper-class food culture. The non-availability of “the *akara* woman,” a roadside vendor who sells *akara* in Nigeria, signifies the absence of some of the basic existential needs of the masses in Nigeria. The popularity of this post can also be explained by using Roland Barthes’s view that food is a form of speech, a site of mythology that the many people who like and share the post can identify with. Food, as Barthes

asserts, is "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour" (29) which has particular signification in any given society. It is the way *akara* signifies the food of the poor that makes many on social media identify with the humour in the post as an expression of their own anxieties about the economy. The 8,273 shares of this post and the over five thousand likes it has attracted give credence to how social media is changing the consumption and distribution of humour in Nigeria. The decoders of the texts on the platform relate to them as objects to be shared as a necessary ritual of the reading process. The "writer" of this post is an ordinary citizen who, according to his Facebook timeline desires "to be the reason [his followers and friends] look into [their] phone and smile." In other words, his activities on social media are geared towards the production of humour. The post itself is an artistic response to how people cope with everyday challenges in Nigeria. The implicit assumption of the post is a commentary on abjection and the tensions of chequered socioeconomic conditions. A commenter observes that in the kind of situation the text presents, people's dependence on an absent *akara* woman is usually the only plan, another suggestion of the economic deprivations meted out to ordinary people by an irresponsible political class. Correct Bro's fictional deployment of humour to critique everyday life in Nigeria, though anonymous, is one of the ways social media allows for individuated articulations of cultural resistance, as users' private accounts become virtual spaces for critiquing culture, power, as well as forms of institutional injustices. The Twitter user in Figure 4.4 presents a narrative that sustains the notion of food as system of communication, as Barthes notes. If *akara* signifies as a sign of the underclass, the Twitter user @am_delly asks us to see another food *jollof* as "a sign of hope and way of life" which must be well represented as a particular marker of a broader domain of discourse Bakhtinian sense of resistance and playful subversions.



Fig.4.5. @am_delly. “Spelling Jollof rice with small letter J is an insult...” *Twitter*. 3 April 2014, 7:25 p.m.

There is an implicit play on the word “*Jollof*” expressed in this text in the way a non-proper noun is being foregrounded to elicit a surprise effect on the reader who understands the word should in fact be spelt in lower case. The humour in the tweet is discernible in its unpretentious defence of the integrity of the spelling of *jollof*, a red, spiced West African rice dish that has recently captured the imagination of social media users in Nigeria and Ghana. Arguments about which of the two countries produces the best *jollof* rice reveal a much larger issue, namely the way food and its consumption can have covert cultural and political layers of meaning. The *jollof* example is useful here as a supplement to the creative merits of Correct Bro’s Facebook post, that is, the idea that humour can be organized around the daily rituals of food consumption in the critique of social and political structures.

The fact that these two examples affirm West African dishes to a global audience is significant, considering that older mediums of humour such as the stand-up comedy stage exist as events to be experienced singularly in a particular place and time. Consumers of social media humour, on the other hand, can experience jokes in multiple digital platforms, whether it is real-

time or not. Even if it is humour by an established comedian or by an ordinary user with a comic talent, there is, in addition, a memetic effect to social media humour. These jokes can go viral and become online memes, self-perpetuating cultural texts that function in social networks to transmit and replicate ideas and identities. In the last two years, the Buhari government, with an outdated sense of monetary nationalism and fiscal protectionism, had subjected the country's currency the Naira to economic policies that led to recession. In line with the mobilization of food as a cultural form in the communication of humour, here is a Facebook video response to the economic recession in Nigeria. Segun Adefila and two friends film themselves having a sumptuous meal and then post the video online with the caption "Let's Get Serious."

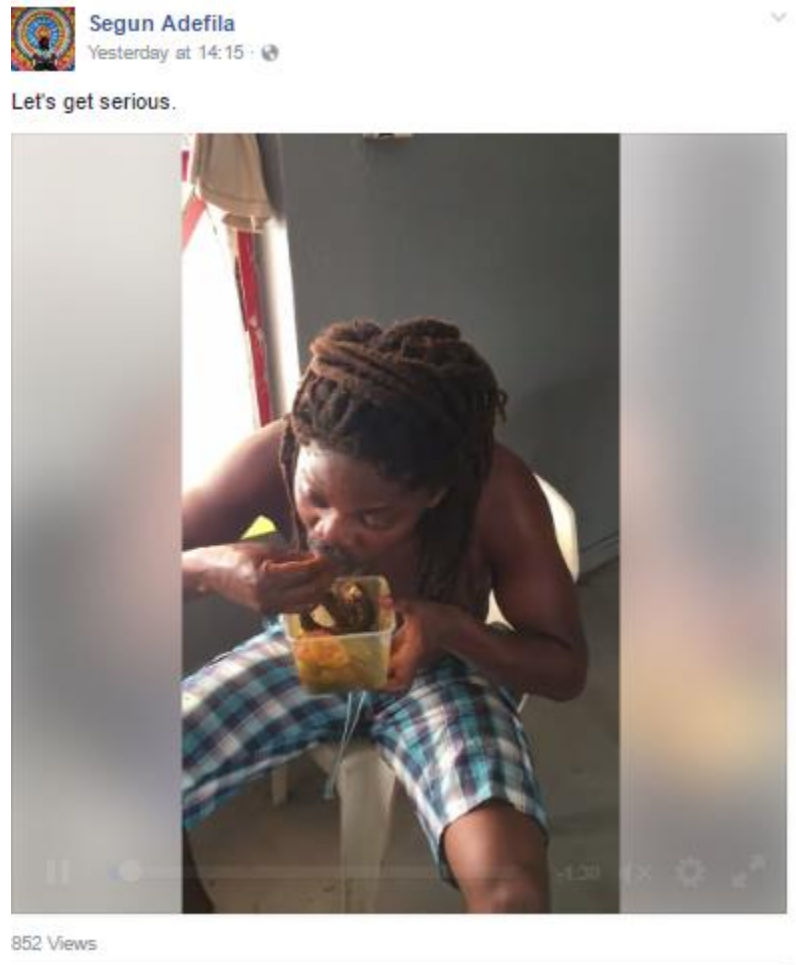


Fig. 4.6. Segun Adefila. “Let’s Get Serious.” *Facebook*.

<https://www.facebook.com/segun.adevila.5/videos/vb.722629458/10154720863059459/?type=2&theater>

Because of economic recession, Adefila and two other men call out in the video to “fellow Nigerians” advising young people particularly to go “on this hunger strike”—which refers to the food they are eating so the world “will know Nigeria is hungry.” With a huge morsel of meat in his mouth, Adefila insists the economic fortunes of the country calls for a radical change in lifestyle, expressed through their present investment in finishing their meal. The video is Adefila’s performance of humour that intersects with a damning assessment of the country’s political economy. The Nigerian government and its officials continue to feed off the national treasury while working-class people, mostly in the public sectors, confront a ruling class that asks them to change

their lifestyles because of economic recession. Within a context of play, Adefila's video rightly calls out the hypocrisy of a government that insists people must adjust to the ugly realities of economic hardships without any commensurate change in its own illicit opulence. "Let's Get Serious" is a regular citizen's articulation of the general perception that the Nigerian government is not sufficiently motivated to arrest the chronic economic mismanagement in the country. Social media provides an instant mechanism for a video text that embodies the deployment of humour in the political conversations people are participating in. This disposition by young people to scrutinize and critique everyday life and the agents of state power is a mode of response to subjection by hegemonic forces. As most of my examples seek to demonstrate, this amplification and visibility of subaltern voices are expressed in different forms of overlapping cultural practices. The performance of the agency enabled by social media through strategies of humour is central to the alternative and participatory context of political conversations in Nigeria.

The fluidity and exchange of roles between performers and audiences that one often sees on social media invites further comparison with indigenous performances in precolonial African cultures. Kole Omotoso writes of performance in these indigenous contexts as "a celebration to be enjoyed by both the audience and the performers in a unified encounter of participants, rather than by players and onlookers in isolation" (9). In network environments, the production of humour creates a virtual celebration in which both performers and their followers contribute to the workings of the performance space. Sometimes, the comments on a humorous post on YouTube or Facebook take on a new life of their own, as commenters extend the narratives of an initial post. Much like on the stand-up comedy stage where the meanings of jokes are co-produced, the social media stage also exhibits possibilities for a shared performance space between comedians and their audiences. This idea can be illustrated in another example: Correct Bro, who posts a humorous text to which

a reader responds by supplying a witty comment. Within hours, Correct Bro publishes another joke which includes the content provided by the reader. Figure 4.7 is a merged snapshot of these texts:

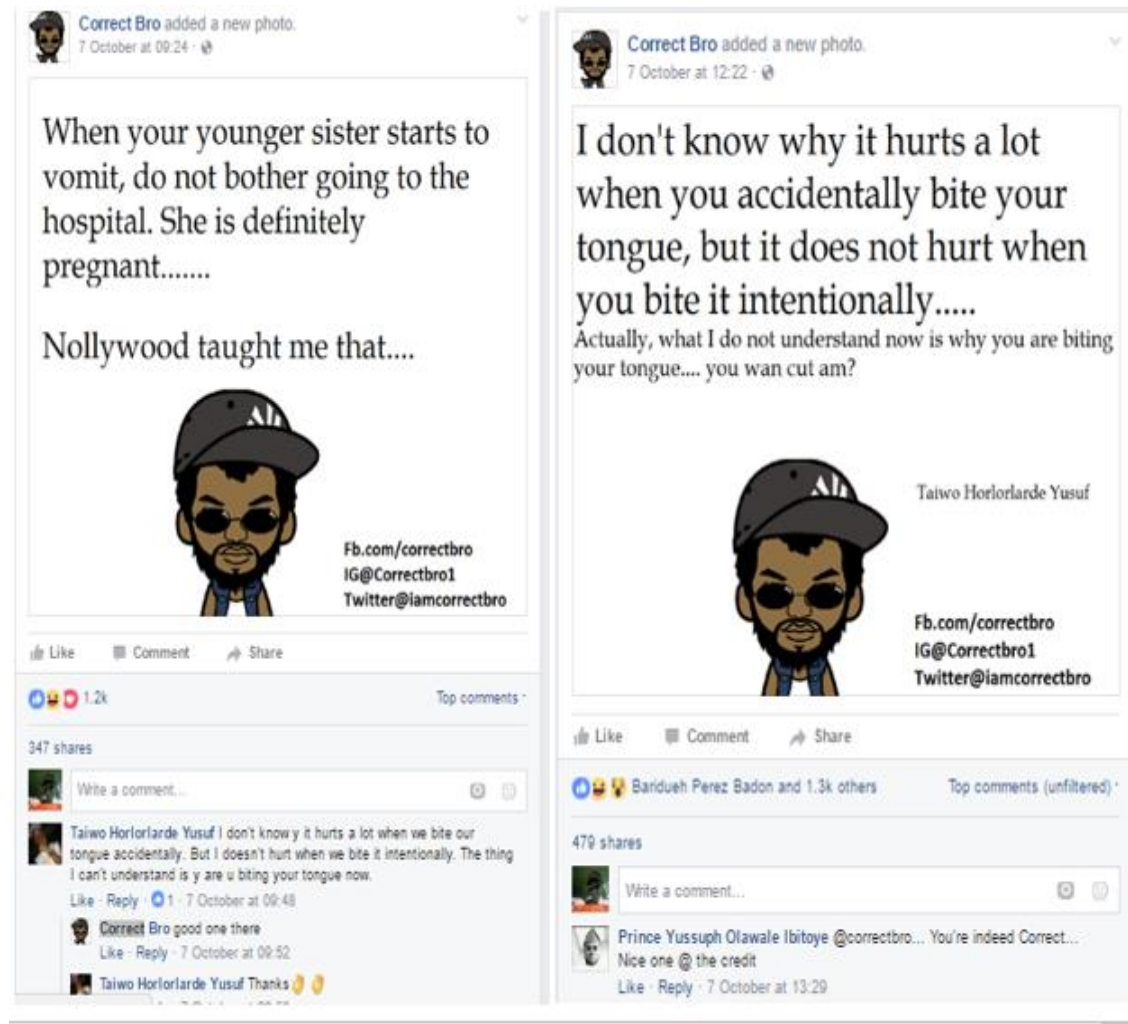


Fig.4.7. Two Correct Bro Posts. *Facebook*, 7 October 2016.
<https://www.facebook.com/correctbro/photos/a.1050856868326588.1073741827.1050850821660526/1172337352845205/?type=3&theater>

The first joke reproduces and contests the idea among locals that a young lady who “starts to vomit” is “definitely pregnant,” a stereotype that is perpetuated in many Nollywood films. The post is, thus, an apt illustration of how social media is being deployed as a mechanism of resisting and

altering dominant meanings, as Facebook user pushes back at the gendered biases and misinformation of an older popular medium, Nollywood. “Nollywood taught me that” takes a swipe at unimaginative film directors who favour single modes of interpreting scripts. The 1.2k likes the post has attracted so far point to many fans and readers who agree with the rhetoric of the post and therefore share or retweet it. A significant point is the way social media is positioned as a corrective to Nollywood, to the extent that the narratives in the latter are reconstructed and rehabilitated by a network community of audience empowered by digital media. Returning to how the feedback of the audience constitutes part of the performance of humour on social media, I should add that the commenter who responds to the Nollywood joke by posting a joke of his is possibly aware of the decentered nature of the new stage on social media. This user, like interlocutors in face-to-face interactions, enters the performative space of Correct Bro and starts another performance that Correct Bro acknowledges. By sharing his joke with Correct Bro, who publishes a modified version of his audience’s joke, Taiwo Horlorlarde Yusuf also performs a comic self that is reproduced beyond his own limited community of friends on Facebook.

One cannot gloss over new media’s propensity to create multiple users of a single content, reworked and remixed as a new text for different audiences. Peter Kunze, drawing from two of Lev Manovich’s characteristics of new media — “variability” and “numerical representation”— explains how digital content can exist in multiple versions, with the digital structuration of new media allowing creative users to modify existing content (102). This capacity of the user to mix and remix content is one area of affinity between digital content and texts composed in indigenous performance traditions, especially considering how an original text, say oral poetry, itself often a product of collaborative effort, can easily be manipulated in the process of improvisation. As in the view that no two performances of a single text are ever alike, users with the right technical skills can reproduce different versions of a single text with varying degrees of modification. Accordingly,

the performance of humour on social media is often both a remediation and re-contextualization of the content and form of older jokes, often reproduced through a communal process in which laughter is jointly produced, consumed and shared by networks of online communities. Within this context, the production of humour may be problematic since “authorship of digital comedy is a fundamentally fraught concept” (Kunze 102). In a Nigerian social media context, the question of authorship is equally problematic since people reproduce earlier jokes on different digital platforms and remix them for different audiences. There is also the inevitable change in the way audiences consume humour since readers/viewers of online texts approach them with an awareness of choice. An expanded body of comic texts available on and distributed through social media affects the attention span of consumers. This fleeting attention sometimes elides the possibility of critical engagement required by such texts.

The point being stressed is that capacity of social media to rearticulate a performative behaviour that is a common feature of everyday life among Nigerians. As Omotosho notes, the performance and theatre traditions in many African societies derive from the street (6) where people perform social roles. Nduka Otiono similarly identifies “street narratives” (7) as integral to articulating the ways postcolonial subjects in Nigeria engage with disempowering social and economic conditions. Social media facilitates a public space for the reconstruction of these street narratives. The oral and aural character of street narratives and performances takes on digital shapes, depicting some of the ways ordinary people engage in neo-oral and dialogic exchanges through shares and likes and/or tweets and retweets. Beyond the co-production of cultural meanings, also, is the possibility of real-time and immediate feedback between the artist and the audience, much like in live performances. The difference, though, may be how individuals can utilize, for instance, the anonymity of social media to criticize the excesses of established artists. This change in instant audience feedback in the performance of Nigerian comedy is illustrated in

the viral story of Nigerian comedian, Bright Okpocha, who, to the chagrin of many of his followers, in January 2014 published a joke about sexual violence against women on social media. Okpocha's rape joke, now removed from social media, was justifiably met with condemnations from many people who frowned at the inappropriateness of the joke. The critical responses of women and men, who might, otherwise, have remained silent had it been a stand-up comedy event demonstrate the ways social media provides a safer and anonymous environment for audiences to push back at and resist repressive cultural values. With social media humour, the audience is a more active participant who critique and provide immediate counter-hegemonic perspectives to the social and cultural values jokes embody.

The performative impulse of the street legitimizes the view that online interactions in Nigerian social media culture gesture towards a performance in which ordinary users exchange, play and replay roles, while also playing with roles that critique corrupt practices and dominant articulations of power. In the context of Nigerian social media culture in which online subjects use humour as a performative method of resisting hegemonic perspectives, these images contribute to an expanded understanding of the aesthetics and agency of popular images. This understanding is evident in the ways humorous images serve as a form of speech for repressed feelings and emotions. It is possible, though, as Andrew Keen does when he writes of user-generated content, to argue that "the new Internet was about self-made music, not Bob Dylan or the Brandenburg Concertos. Audience and author had become one, and we were transforming culture in cacophony" (104). However, that would be an elitist and classist reading of the ways democratized media allows creative individuals in oppressive postcolonial contexts such as exist in Nigeria, and elsewhere, to assert agency and recreate culture. Keen's view also forecloses the possibility that culture may be locatable in the everyday life of people. By implicitly restating the boundary between popular culture and high culture, Keen shows that his anxieties about Web 2.0 applications and networks

are prejudiced assumptions stemming from class biases. Rather than decrying the proliferation of digital media-enabled popular culture as a debasing of culture, “we can embrace it as an opportunity to seek out new, engaging and exciting creations from unknown and underappreciated artists” (Kunze 104). Peter Kunze concludes by noting that it is comedy that proves “particularly fertile grounds, as digital technology now gives us greater access not only to up-and-coming talent but to hard-to-find comedic materials from the past” (104). In the Nigerian social media context, the many versions of the “Darris God o” video reproduced by users of social media for comedic purposes speak to how digital technologies and the democratization of the media empower previously invisible talents to tell their own stories to both popular and elite audiences.

4.3 Social Media, Resistance, and the Carnavalesque

Writing on Renaissance popular laughter, Mikhail Bakhtin asserts that “[a] boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture” (4). He explains that carnival occasions built “a second world and a second life outside officialdom,” noting that both must be taken into consideration for a nuanced understanding of both medieval cultural consciousness and the culture of the Renaissance (6). This position can be applied to the two levels of interactions that exist in online communities, particularly in Nigerian social media. There is an official culture of political discourses and civic engagements on social media expressed through commentaries. Also, present in most conversations in network communities is a second world outside this formal and official culture. This second-order condition is defined by the laughing spaces people create to laugh out loud (LOL) at abusive power and their oppressors. By identifying forms of laughing out loud at oppressive power and official culture, I focus on a crucial form of the amplified speech social

media gives the subaltern class whose laughter functions as an ambivalent signifier of outrage and hope.

To ignore or underestimate people who use digital media to denaturalize the operations of hegemonies through the instrumentality of laughter is to distort the true picture of social media engagements in Nigeria. There are many jokes in Nigeria network communities, for instance, that desacralize religion, and make fun of both individuals and official power, while engaging the ruling elite in the kinds of unsanctioned and uncensored conversations absent before the social media age. Within a similar context of black humour in Brazil, Donna Goldstein writes that the carnivalesque is mobilized by ordinary Brazilians to make fun of the wealthy, and to poke “fun at the miserable circumstances in which they find themselves. It mocks the world and its madness and seems to be an unconscious masking of deep personal feelings that are too painful to deal with directly” (34). The eruption of this space of laughter, undergirded by a carnivalesque order assuring the free flow of creativity among social media users of different classes provides creative expression for coping with the agonies of everyday anxieties in oppressive postcolonial contexts. Within the framework of a repressive Iranian state, for instance, Babak Rahimi writes of the “anatomical indeterminacy of Facebook” as largely marked by “the co-presence of discursive activities that can be characterized in terms of asymmetrical exchanges, creating a distinct communicative realm of composite yet irreducible experiences for the participants” (11). Rahimi, commenting on the carnivalesque politics of online social networking, writes of online subjects “interactively sharing a “wild public” or contested spaces where hierarchies are questioned through various performances, including grotesque language and symbolic inversions” (11). In relation to Nigeria, the capacity of these citizens to speak for themselves may involve a direct and formal interaction on Facebook or even unsanctioned interactions on Twitter with the few Nigerian politicians who use these new media forms, undermining, in the carnivalesque spirit, the normativity of

officialdom. While it is pertinent to highlight the importance of this new site of communicative agency, the focus of this chapter is to understand the function of popular laughter and the “boundless world of humorous forms” (4) in social media conversations that use political satire to critique and subvert hegemonic culture. In her discussion of some of Bakhtin’s ideas in *Rabelais and His World*, Paula Findlen observes:

For Bakhtin, exploring the role of laughter in the Renaissance offered an opportunity to comment on the problems of totalitarianism through a historically specific investigation of the relationship of laughter to ‘official’ culture. Laughter represented an unofficial and subversive means of expression, a freedom in the midst of restrictions. (249)

Similarly, social media allows for the creation of a spaces in which a festival of laughter flourishes in Nigerian digital culture; more importantly though, the investigation of these forms of humour in social media communities offer the opportunity to uncover the ways citizens relate to the official culture of totalitarian power. The carnival of funny images, satirical discourses, and grotesque descriptions presents a subversive, humorous culture, marked by a crescendo of activities undermining the official culture of normative behaviour (Rahimi 12). By staging state power and performatively mimicking officials on social media, netizens offer one an opportunity to understand the ways official power is reconstituted and represented in the public (virtual) arena.

Also, because of the blurring and fusion of identities between performer and audience, as well as the inability to distinguish between both groups, there is something of a carnivalesque aesthetic at play in the performance of Nigerian humour on social media. Bakhtin’s view that “carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators (7) foregrounds this view. Also, the intersections and fluid interactions which social media facilitates among different classes of people, whether from the

upper class, or the middle or lower classes forbids the essentialization of hierarchies and dominant articulations of hegemonic cultures. It should be noted that most social media users in Nigeria are middle-class citizens who constitute fifty per cent of the population with access to the Internet. There is also a growing number of members of the ruling class, including those in the ruling elite who use the platforms as partisan locations of political engagements and solidarity with supporters. The idea of the carnival in this sense is not the momentary occurrence of the term as an event, but its trans-temporal nature in the everyday expressions of ordinary people, now extended onto digital spaces. There are aspects of the carnivalesque which are intrinsic to social media, including the familiar, dialogic and free interactive space legitimized for varied groups, marginal or dominant, and the uncensored and free nature of speech and its performance. The chaotic proliferation of humour in Nigeria social media culture is certainly one of the ways popular laughter intersects freely among different classes in a de-hierarchized manner. The fact that carnivals are participatory, alternative, and transient spaces within which performative actions questioning normalized social structures are possible also helps to draw parallels with the social media culture in Nigeria. As in other parts of the world, social media generally facilitates an alternative media ecology for participatory culture and different forms of unfinished narratives and discourses.

In the same manner as "[c]arnival festivities and the comic spectacles and ritual connected with them had an important place in the life of medieval man (6), the articulation of resistance in contemporary Nigeria has significant connections with the comic spectacles and visual or text-based forms of humour central to Nigerian social media culture. Achille Mbembe's comment that the "question of knowing whether humour in the postcolony is an expression of "resistance" or not, whether it is, *a priori*, opposition or simply a manifestation of hostility towards authority" (8) is thus not of secondary importance as he suggests. Mbembe probably conceives of popular humour and the carnivalesque in terms of an event—a stand-up comedy performance, a political cartoon

publication, or a comedic film or novel that satirizes power. It is in these restrictive contexts that it would be appropriate to affirm the ways the carnivalesque reinforces the dominant social structure, as the inversions and desecrations that occur in such fossilized spaces are temporary and permitted events that can be censored by the forces of power. The view that the carnival is “*a licensed affair*” dates to critics such as Terry Eagleton who see the carnivalesque as “a permissible rupture of hegemony” (148) relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art. While the folkloric and medieval contexts of Bakhtin’s work are understandably inapplicable in a digital context, social media re-articulations of the carnival do not affirm the view that carnival has to be a licensed affair that renormalizes an existing social order. On social media, people poke fun at social and political hierarchies without the need for any permission, nuancing their political subversions in an uncensored regime of populist power. Indeed, Obadare’s caution that “the privileging of humour must be undertaken with one eye on its limitations as a strategy of resistance” (76) is entirely justifiable. Within a social media context, however, one can think of the carnivalesque as an everyday performance of agency by all classes of people, who interact freely, unregulated by any dominant hegemony, with humour daily articulated as a form of resistance. And since careful users can avoid digital traces that can subject their privacy and online activities to both surveillance and monetization, it is possible to avoid, to a large extent, forms of algorithmic interpellations and subjectivization. Regarding Nigerian humour, a carnivalesque imagination on social media is thus an everyday expression of comic selves in an uncensored and decentralized space in which the country’s digital citizens *share* laughter as a response to the medium’s performative urgings. With a different array of social media available at their disposal, anyone can go public to criticize government and participate in political conversations, as can be seen in this post by another fictional account on Facebook:



Fig. 4.8. Correct Bae. “Just as they Promised.” *Facebook*, 30 November, 2016

<https://www.facebook.com/correctbae/photos/a.1685358838448864.1073741828.1684495175201897/1722030504781697/?type=3&theater>

There is the suggestion of certain gender dynamics in this example, as the user is a female version of the Correct Bro fictional character. It is hard to tell that both accounts are run by the same person because of the anonymous profiles, but they share an affinity in the ways their Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages provide a contact point for free-flowing and diverse forms of humorous commentaries on Nigerian political culture. As Stephanie Newell (1997) argues, contemporary West African cultures “overflow with local, culturally specific constructions of gender which circulate in literature and popular representations” (1). This post stresses how social media has become an important arena from which everyday women contribute to these constructions of gender. In this post, the user is using humour to subvert and satirize a major campaign promise of

the current ruling party in Nigeria. Having promised “One Meal a Day” for primary and high-school students, President Buhari had been widely seen in some quarters as a more promising alternative to his predecessor, Goodluck Jonathan. Instead of fulfilling their electoral promises, however, the Buhari government has pursued economic policies that resulted in a recession in 2016, just about a year after the elections. Although not mentioned in the post, the idea of economic recession is the subject of the post as the economic conditions of the masses have worsened, leading them to settle for only a single meal per day, “just as they promised.” Correct Bae is therefore invested in this post in some form of culture jamming, as she, as in the spirit of anti-consumerist social movements, disrupts the rhetoric of a political advertorial to show how the political class has yet again successfully deceived a segment of the electorate. She uses subversive satire to unfix the meaning in a dominant sign of power, and then affixes a new layer of meaning to the text. She renegotiates the meaning of the image because, as Rahimi points out, political activism on Facebook facilitates “the possibility for the emergence of alternative stylistic and narrative spaces marked as unofficial discourses that allow individuals of diverse backgrounds to negotiate positions of identity and power” (11). The post, thus, uses a version of a stereotypic assumption about the reading culture in some parts of Africa—to deceive an African man, write in black and white—to reimagine a nexus between the language of the advertorial and the actual reality of abjection and hunger imposed by the economic recession. The comments on the post mostly agree with Correct Bae, with one of the commenters claiming they are not able to get even a single meal in a day. The humorous post and the discursive thread of commentaries it produces are sites for expressing outrage through the agency of laughter. The rhetoric of the post is situated within the framework of politics as a way of critiquing the state and holding government to accountability, practices of participatory politics alien to most (young) people before the era of Web 2.0. Although the image does not have engagements between politicians and the producers or commenters on the

image, it does offer opportunity to reflect on the ways political comedy in an uncensored medium is used by citizens to relate with the Nigerian state in a way that mocks and satirizes its power. With several politicians recently joining Facebook, there is the possibility that they encounter the various attempts of a dispersive and wild presentation of humour to court their attention, even if they feign indifference. Also, the carnivalesque nature of these funny posts can be seen in the ways the humorous articulations of resistance enable different classes of Nigerians to interact. Figure 4.9 is probably a better example to show that the political class, and indeed the upper echelon of society engage with these social media expressions of humour.



Fig. 4.9. Garba Shehu. *Twitter*. <https://twitter.com/GarShehu/status/786972719095177216>

In this tweet, the president's media aide justifies President Buhari's comment in 2016 that women belonged "in the kitchen ... and the other room." Comic Internet memes, some of which I will be discussing more fully in the next chapter, emerged as tactics through which netizens lampooned the president on Twitter. @kolatubosun's response to the tweet is an outright mockery in which "hahahhaha" as a language of laughter becomes an irreverent strategy of transgressing and disrupting presidential power. With increasing instances of bloggers arrested by some powerful state actors in Nigeria, the direct interaction between Garba Shehu and the many Twitter users who subvert the normalizing rhetoric of state excess is embedded in Shehu's tweet. Kola Tubosun's response uncovers a carnival moment in the way his tweet refuses to be subordinated to "the verbal and semantic dictatorship of a monologic, unified style and a unified tone" (Bakhtin 1984 204) inherent in the government's tweet. In this carnivalesque space, what another commenter identifies as "a [classic] sense of humour" is the weapon that resists the authoritarian control suggested by the narrative of the presidency. Aside from this tweet, there are other examples of comedic forms that elicit the interest of the ruling class even as they deface power through their grotesque representations. In December 2016, an evangelical church in Nigeria had a YouTube comedy group arrested by the Nigerian police for satirizing its activities and rituals of worship. Like many similar powerful religious institutions in Nigeria, the church and its leadership successfully got the creators of the video to delete the episode from social media, marking the encounter as one of the recent ways power is coopting online resistance voices. While this incident can also be imagined as a way subversive humour has material implications on power, the now deleted YouTube video is a witness to how carnival is realized as a momentary performance that is an anti-hegemonic tactic of resisting hierarchy, the Nigerian Church, in this context. That the church, in tandem with the state, succeeds in getting the group to delete the video is a way a temporal and virtual transgression of sacred authority is followed by a return to the normative social order. With social media, however,

this normative return is again displaced, and carnival moment re-emerges in the next comic post that lampoons the state. This censoring of the group's comic performance bears witness to an evolving culture among the ruling elite seeking to suppress alternative voices and underscores the penetrative, even if silent, gaze of institutional power in Nigerian social media.

To return to Correct Bae, another of her post, Figure 4.10, suggests commenters' awareness of this capacity of official power to act as a panoptic gaze in the raucously festive treatment of state policies and actors. The profile avatar of Correct Bae in this post implies a gossipy image that mocks the "current affair update—London is the capital of Nigeria." Here is a carnivalesque deployment of language and comical image to break down an existing political and social narrative, namely the official account that the Nigerian president has to remain in London for medical treatment. After an extension of his visit to the UK for health reasons, the presidency announced the president had written to the senate to extend his stay.

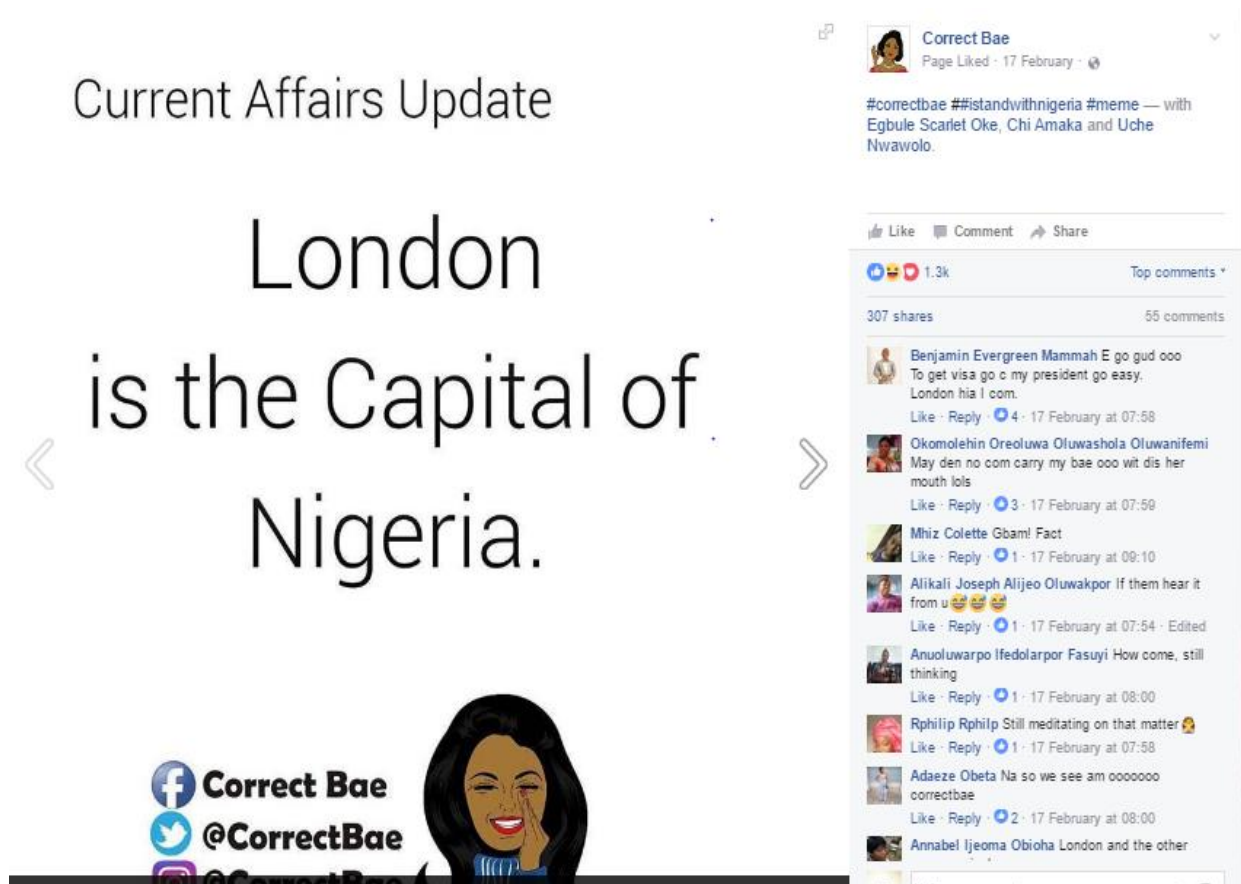


Fig. 4.10. Correct Bae. “London is the Capital of Nigeria.” *Facebook*.
<https://www.facebook.com/correctbae/photos/a.1685358838448864.1073741828.1684495175201897/1767429593575121/?type=3&theater>

That “London is the capital of Nigeria” recalls the country’s colonial relations with England and casts the president’s prolonged medical visit as symptomatic of the postcolonial and ambivalent fascination with empire that persists in the mind of many African leaders. There is also the suggestion that London still exerts much political influence in the administration of postcolonial Nigeria, a mockery of the supposed sovereign exercise of power by Nigerian leaders. This playful reference to the language of empire is used in a manner that parallels with carnival’s permission of informal discourse in the humorous engagement with official culture.

The comments on the thread constitute an important alternative archive of the public perception of the president’s visit. While the post and the comments may historicize this political

episode, the dialogic exchanges reveal the point I am making that alternative and humorous voices recognize the possibility of surveillance by the state. The commenter Mr. Oluwakpor cautions Correct Bae when he writes: “if them hear it from you,” a Nigerian pidgin expression asking her to be careful that her statement is not heard by the powerful forces being critiqued. Although this statement is complemented with smile emojis gesturing towards the humorous context of the message, one still gets the sense of the self-regulating behaviour and interaction grounded in the performance of subversion. In Figure 4.8, the avatar is symbolic of the average Nigerian young woman, probably from a rural community, with limited access to economic opportunities, while Figure 4.10 presents a sophisticated urban personality commenting on the political. Although the avatar in figure 4.10 presents a beautiful character committed to a prattling contestation of authority, Figure 4.8, with an avatar that slightly suggests a grotesque depiction of beauty, consolidates Correct Bae’s de-essentialization of beauty as a necessity of online performative self-presentations. As a carnival signifier of inversion, Figure 4.8 refashions the grotesque “affirmatively to destabilize the idealizations of female beauty or to realign the mechanisms of desire” (Russo 221). Both images can lead to the conclusion that Correct Bae deliberately presents images representing different layers of identities that seek to deface power and subvert the dominant narratives of authoritarian power.

Another post that shows this transgressive inversion of dominant and official discourse and that refers to the working of symbolic language in the tradition of the carnival is Figure 4.11, in which Correct Bae uses a news headline from the traditional press to alter an existing narrative on the president’s health status.

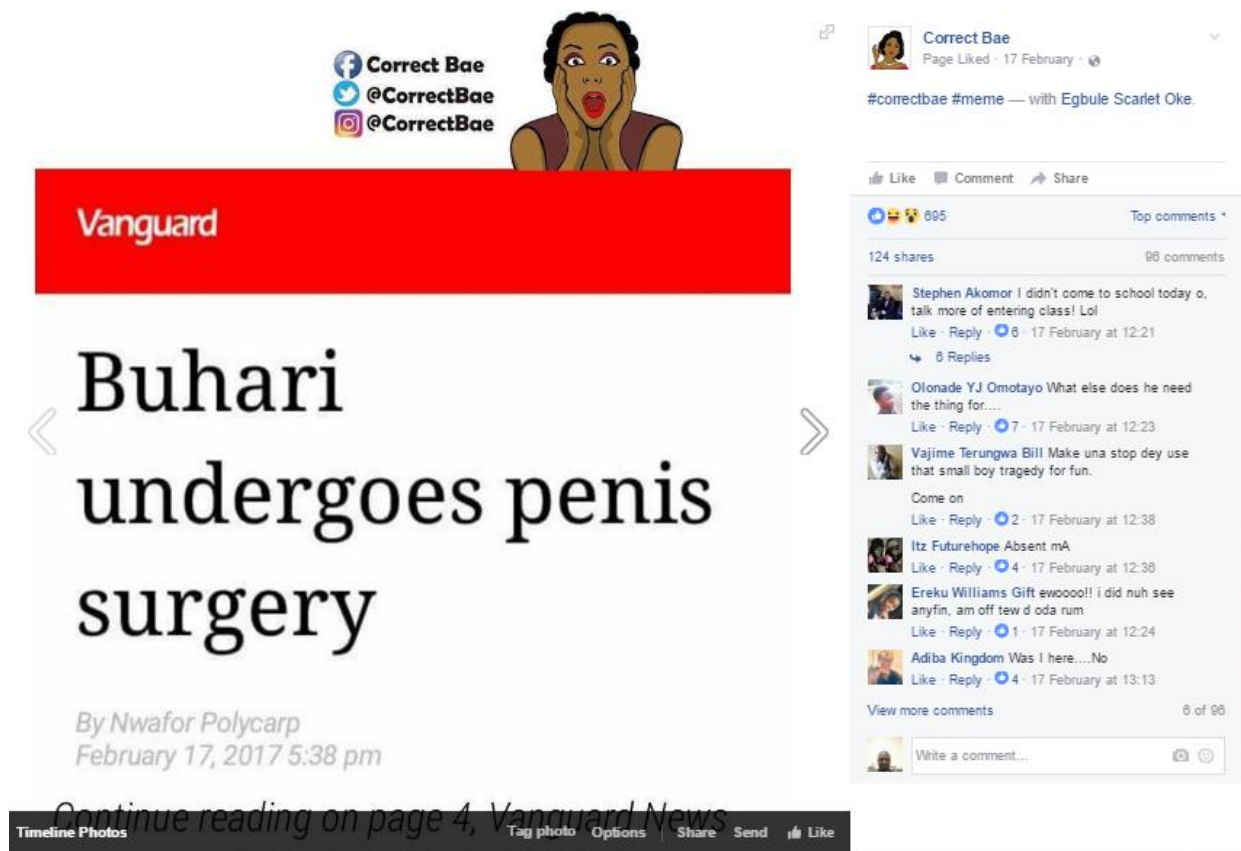


Fig. 4.11. Correct Bae. “Buhari Undergoes Penis Surgery.” *Facebook*.
<https://www.facebook.com/correctbae/photos/a.1685358838448864.1073741828.1684495175201897/1767591996892214/?type=3&theater>

The apparent sensationalism of this headline in the mainstream media is what creative users on social media have appropriated to achieve a viral status for this story of a child, having the same name as the president, who required corrective surgery after molestation by his step-mother. By posting an image in which the fictional character is surprised to hear that “Buhari undergoes Penis Surgery,” Correct Bae is performing a subversion of another narrative—the idea disseminated by state officials that President Buhari’s trip to London was for a routine medical check-up. There are people, especially in the opposition party, who would have the seventy-five-year-old president resign from office because of perceived health problems that undermine his ability to lead the nation. On the one hand, the intervention of Correct Bae and the commenters on the thread is a mode of engaging with this discussion that might provoke disgust for people who believe a child’s

health problems should not be the subject of both sensationalism and humorous representations. On the other hand, that the post enables space for people to discuss the metaphoric portrayal of the president's ability to perform his duties as president foregrounds the transgression of power relations embedded in the post. This mockery of President Buhari's sexuality intersects with a questioning of the operations of juridical power, although, as Achille Mbembe asserts, bodily forms such as the mouth, belly, and the phallus, "when used in popular speech and jokes, have above all to be located in the real world, located in real time, as play, as fun" (7). Correct Bae's post is, thus, a playful moment of carnival on social media that allows citizens to transgress the space of official power. In all three posts by Correct Bae, the utilization of facial expressions and the representation of the president's phallus by a female are indications that "the body itself is the principal locale of the idioms and fantasies used in depicting power" (Mbembe 7). The critique of a phallogentric political landscape is best echoed in the hashtag #TheOtherRoom which trended on Twitter in response to the president's misguided views in Germany. The hashtag, discussed in the next chapter, and posts such as Figure 4.11 are avenues through which netizens use the intertwining of sexuality and political power to mock the president's competence.

Similarly, there is value in the ways Twitter user Hakeem Alaiya uses his account as a platform for staging power relations. The images on his Twitter feeds offer examples of postmodern iterations of the carnivalesque, both in relation to Nigerian postcolonial condition and the representation of transnational engagement with politics. For instance, in Figure 4.12, Alaiya intensifies the discourse on the sexualization of the President's identity through an inversion of gender identities that gesture towards the unduly male-dominated nature of Nigerian politics.



Fig. 4.12. @qeemus1. *Twitter*. <https://twitter.com/qeemus1/status/724974142265671680>

At first, a feminist reading of the image would imply a troubling representation, since it is a male Twitter user deploying the symbol of the drag-queen as a performative tactic of subversion. In other words, a male online subject cross-dresses another male to project a masculinist space in which feminine identity is being ridiculed as source of amusement and laughter. However, in a country that has recently criminalized homosexual relations and gay culture, the representation of the president's gender identity within the context of drag is extremely important, even if as an unintended critique of heterosexual normativity in the Nigerian political landscape. This example harbours a parodic performance in which an exaggerated femininity is attributed to President

Buhari as a reimagination of the president's identity. From the tweet, Hakeem Alaiya intends for this image to be a performative strategy of humour in which presidential power is reconfigured to get his audience to "laff and easy (sic) the stress," affirming the user's deliberate adoption of humour as a coping mechanism in disempowering postcolonial conditions. The carnivalesque imagination in the image is the appropriation of embellished femininity to unsettle a political hierarchy and subvert a cultural space hostile to the articulation of female agency. Aside from the fact that the reversal of the president's gender identity stages the performance of female power in virtual public sphere, a common citizen is also poking fun at the patriarchal culture President Buhari embodies. These are carnivalesque strategies that mount political critiques through a parodic performance of gender identities. In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White highlight how in "Bakhtin the 'classical body' denotes the inherent form of the high official culture," (21) an analogous interpretation of the body, by Mbembe, as the principal locale for depicting and mocking the mechanisms of oppressive power. This view, when applied to both Correct Bae's and Alaiya's vulgar humour on President Buhari, can suggest the ways the president's body as a discursive site of high official culture and power is subjected to transgressive alterations to stage a critique of state hegemony and the power symbolized by the president.

The critique of cultural barriers and political hierarchies is not limited to the Nigerian sociopolitical environment, as it can also be seen when Nigerian social media humourists participate in global discourses around power. Alaiya's Twitter feeds offer some insights into the ways some users, in the carnivalesque spirit, deploy popular laughter as a way of participating in official sites of power such as the discourse of global politics. During the American elections, Alaiya used Photoshop to present alternative images of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton as an intimate couple.



Fig.4.13. @Qeemus1. *Twitter*, 29 October, 2016
<https://twitter.com/qeemus1/status/788652818571915264>

The cultural politics of this image is constituted in the local idiom it gives to a global subject, as the two American contestants are presented as Yoruba couple dressed for a wedding event. The image implies that both Trump and Clinton hold similar ideological persuasions, and present limited options to the American electorate. Although this view was a common one among pundits in the days leading to the election, it is graphically summarized in an image that represents the politicians as a rich Nigerian couple. The appropriation of Yoruba party dressing for humour gives the image its comic effect, suggesting the showbiz influence Trump, and perhaps Clinton, brings to the elections. The text also mounts a subtle critique of the Nigerian social space and its compulsive party culture. Alaiya is using this tweet to satirize the Nigerian ruling elite and the hypocritical alliances they forge whenever there is a party. The tweet is fascinating for its staging of intersecting local and global identities, and is a signifier of the many ways Nigerian netizens “participated” in discourses on the US elections. This overlapping of local voices and global

identities online is reflective of what Daniel Miller refers to as “the death of distance” (193), the transnational erasure of communicative distance enabled by online social networking sites and founded on the dissolution of social spaces and hierarchies between people. This decentering of the communication space is one of the ways a carnival moment occurs in the tweet, aside from the fact that the image has migrated to other platforms where it is subjected to other forms of performances, remixing, discussions, and disseminations, all of which assure the heteroglossic nature of social media forms of speech. Those participating in these conversations are performing a transnational identity enabled by global media. After Trump’s electoral victory, Hakeem Alaiya, @Qeemus1, presents another Photoshopped image of Trump, this time alone:



Figure 4.14. @Qeemus1. “The real Jagaban.” *Twitter*, 9 November, 2016.

<https://twitter.com/qeemus1/status/796323871431467009>

Although Alaiya attempts an unsanctioned conversation in this tweet with @realDonaldTrump, it is the larger conversation he is having through the humorous rhetoric of a political image that is more important. In this example, he Photoshops Donald Trump’s Twitter avatar, using it to show him as a powerful ruler in the Arab-Islamic tradition. The symbol of authority in the image is expressed through the traditional power-portrait pose as well as through the turban and royal staff

placed in front of the subject, whom the audience must approach with reverence. Very important is also the face of the eagle that suggests Trump's sense of vision, strength, and foresight, as well as the words "Jagaban Trump"—which is where the subversion and displacement of the hitherto flattering qualities in the image commence. Within a Nigerian political context, despite that the term "Jagaban" refers to "a leader of warriors," its popular connotation among street urchins in urban centres such as Lagos conjures the idea of fear, anti-sociality and criminality. That a notorious Nigerian politician, Bola Tinubu of the APC, is referred to as "Jagaban" emphasizes the corrupt context in which a Trump presidency is being placed and imagined. On the other hand, Donald Trump's notoriety as, in the estimation of Paul Waldman, "the most disliked, least trusted president in modern history" (The Washington Post) casts back a negative light on Bola Tinubu. The fact that Donald Trump is "the real Jagaban" is not only an obvious reworking of the Twitter profile of the then president-elect, but also a pointer to the doubled articulations of the post: Trump's corrupt and narcissistic personality resembles the corrupt outlook of a Nigeria politician, much like Trump's disapproval ratings among a large section of Americans might intensify the negative perception of Bola Tinubu among some Nigerians. An ironic quality in the image is its appropriation of Islamic royal paraphernalia to portray an American politician whose regressive rhetoric during electoral campaigns promoted Islamophobia and divisive politics. The fact that in both tweets, Alaiya mentions Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, and mainstream media such as the CNN describes how the carnivalesque disregard for conventions and hierarchies is at work in social media conversations in which a common Nigerian citizen is using political images to satirize powerful political figures. The critique of Donald Trump by some liberal voices around the world is localized in an example in which a Nigerian citizen perform an unlicensed and humorous parody of oppressive power. The last two images depict transnational negotiation of power, offering

alternative perspectives on ways social media makes the politics of representations a borderless process.

Also, the works of Wowo Boyz, a Nigerian comedy group in the US, offer a diasporic perspective to this idea that Nigerian humour is entrenched in a global and transnational discourse. That they work from a foreign country not only shows that Nigerian popular culture is also being determined by netizens from locations outside the country, but also that Nigerian youths who migrate to the West have found an inventive mechanism in a placeless medium for narrowing the gap between home and exile. While performing comic selves via YouTube channels and Instagram updates, these humour merchants produce narratives that project an image of Nigeria shaped from the diaspora. With their humorous interventions from exilic locations of the West, Wowo Boyz is invested in the performance of humour as a transnational practice through which it examines issues of alienation and identity that immigrants face abroad. Members of the group reconnect themselves to the homeland by posting comic videos that are oriented towards their over three million YouTube subscribers in Nigeria and around the world. Through their comic skits, the artists articulate the values, anxieties, social tensions of the Nigerian society to a global audience. In one of their skits on YouTube, they engage with the subject of Black Lives Matter, offering the narrative of a hysteric African pregnant mother who, responding to a journalist, expresses concern that her unborn child might be the next victim of police brutality. This hyperbolic perspective to racial politics in the American justice system is articulated in terms of an immigrant anxiety over public safety.

Commenting on the works of Naija Boyz another diaspora-based group of Nigerian youths that blend hip hop and comedy, Krystal Strong and Shaun Ossei-Owusu (2014) point to “the intersection of entertainment and technology as a strategic site of cosmopolitan practices, which exemplify the ways African youth reimagine themselves” (190) as cultural and global citizens. This

cosmopolitan impulse, recently reimagined as an “Afropolitan consciousness” (Gehrmann 63), in the discourse of African identity is central to the ways young Nigerians in the diaspora use social media to negotiate for themselves a productive identity from the liminal and alienating space in the home-exile binary. Most of their videos are social critiques of cultural issues as diverse as sexuality and gender, Nigerian parenting styles, and religion. Rather than conceive of the works and those of other humourists as a threat to “the business of stand-up comedians” (6), as Barclays Foubiri Ayakoroma claims, these new cultural economies can be understood as spaces that facilitate a better understanding of the transformation of the production, form, and reception of Nigerian humour. While humour continues to signify as a cultural form that helps people cope with everyday challenges, the ways social media reframe this function remains fascinating in the scholarship of Nigeria’s digital culture.

4.4 Conclusion

The carnivalesque culture of political subversion is an unsanctioned form of humour examined in this chapter within the context of social media. I have argued that a carnival impulse undergirds the anti-hegemonic repertoire organized by Nigerian netizens to alter and resist oppressive social and political hierarchies. That digital media enables the visibility of this expression of discourse is best articulated by the process of *sharing*, itself a subversive political practice that reconfigures humour as a form to be disseminated in response to disempowering political and economic conditions. Rotimi Taiwo (2016) has recently noted of Nigerian forms of humour on the Internet that “the online jokes posted by Nigerians are closely linked with socio-economic and political issues in the country” and besides making people laugh, function “to express people’s concerns about the state of the nation” (182). Therefore, I have argued that humour is one of the most productive modes of cultural engagement and critique in Nigerian digital

culture. Aside from the fact that social media inspires the sharing of content, an avalanche of information in digital network applications naturalizes conditions in which humorous narratives can become one of the paradigmatic ways of interpreting contemporary social issues. This point is close to the functioning of humour as a coping mechanism, only that in this case, humour operates as a virtual system through which everyday citizens make sense of and participate in contentious debates in the polity. The more controversial a social or political subject is, the more likely it will be represented in humour by creative citizens asserting their presence in the public arena. Digital platforms that allow real-time sharing as well as social media sharing options, such as Facebook Live give users the capacity to broadcast live comedy performances to audiences in more dispersed places in Africa and elsewhere. The space of humour production and consumption is therefore a decentered stage on which ordinary people present comic selves to represent a subaltern version of the African experience. If most Nigerians have an innate inclination for humour, social media simply intensifies that tendency. Sharing humour on social media is therefore fundamentally a performative act because its appropriation in digital media is primarily rooted in the online rituals of self-presentation: people perform and share comic selves as a cultural practice of narrating the nation, asserting agency in disempowering circumstances, and participating in global politics. In the next chapter, I will focus on the intersection of memes as a visual language of online humour, showing how social media users employed viral memes in the 2015 elections as a form of electoral participation and their involvement in the democratic process in Nigeria.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE HASHTAG AS ARCHIVE: INTERNET MEMES IN NIGERIA'S SOCIAL MEDIA ELECTION

In this final chapter, I track the trajectories of citizens' engagement with Nigerian domestic politics by discussing Internet memes and identifying the most viral social media hashtags since the #BringBackOurGirls movement. In my introductory chapter, I argued that the Nigerian state accurately represents David Buckingham's reasoning at the turn of the millennium that, in relation to politics, "young people are not defined by society as political subjects" (219). I will be examining viral hashtags to highlight some of the most visible Internet memes in the last five years, demonstrating that individuals excluded from political conversations now have ways of appearing in the arena of public dialogues. One of the impacts of the 2014 #BringBackOurGirls hashtag, for instance, is its implications for the surveillance of juridical power in Nigeria by creative and dissident citizens in digital environments. These netizens have continued to utilize funny hashtags and viral memes as tactics for participating in public debates and for subverting normative cultural and political perspectives. The discussion of these hashtags and the political conversations organized around them also enable me to archive some of the most dominant Internet memes in Nigerian social media since #OccupyNigeria in 2012.

As may be evident from the preceding chapters, central to this dissertation are the various ways social media facilitates a discursive interplay of the performance of politics and the politics of performance—the latter having a theoretically inflected character that I shall attempt to unpack shortly. A major objective of the work is the documentation and analysis of the entry of a previously excluded and marginal audience of Nigerian culture and politics into the realm of socio-political and cultural discourses. Because of user-generated technologies, this group has become more visible and involved in the expression of political voice and performative agency. Also, I have

demonstrated that the presentation of self on social media, to illustrate, can be expressed performatively through virtual images, as in the case of protest bodies deploying selfies and self-portraits as forms of performances in the #BringBackOurGirls social media campaigns. Cultural practices such as the selfie serve as an embodied presence of its subject's intervention in resistance, and demonstrate the ways in which the intersection of visual culture and digital activism is productive for thinking about social media articulations of subaltern politics.

By focusing on the popular images transmitted on social media, I have highlighted the radical critique of both governmental power and the larger hegemonic culture mounted by Nigerian netizens seeking to initiate a potential shift in the actions and directions of cultural and political institutions in the country. It is within this matrix that I have, on the one hand, framed the discussion on the *performance of politics* on social media as the means through which online presentations of selves through visual signifiers such as the selfie and fictive images overlap with the production of political identities and subjectivities. On the other hand, and following from this view of performance, there is also locatable a *politics of performance* in the ideological range and political spectrum, signified in the cultural posts of users on social media such as YouTube and Facebook. This latter approach to performance imagines culture to be “saturated with discourses of power,” and conveys a functional perspective of performance that serves to “change the audiences’ community and culture (Kershaw 6). In other words, as Baz Kershaw explains, a politics of performance is performance as an ideological transaction, articulating the various ways in which spectators are actively engaged in the construction of meaning as a performance proceeds (256). Although Kershaw’s theory, unmindful of a social media field in which the spectator can also function as performer, relates mostly to the deeply political character of rural theatre and community performances, his conception of performance as ideological transactions is conducive to the ways in which I frame performance through digital images as a political practice. This

conception of performance is articulated within the discursive sites of social media dialogues and networks that develop around politics and culture. While previous chapters have been focused on how social media users do politics with images (cartoons, selfies, etc.) as symbolic expressions of their performative agency, I now proceed to discuss how photo-based Internet memes are used as signifiers of the politics of performance, one that conveys social media performance as an efficacious media practice that can materialize social and political change. Within the context of electoral politics in Nigeria, the chapter identifies internet memes as viral monuments of a specific political moment in Nigeria, namely the 2015 presidential elections, showing how the production of photo-based memes was an online political practice that threatens real-world change. In a country in which 50 percent of the 180-million population have access to the Internet, it is understandable to see why, according to the *How Africa Tweets Report*, #Nigeriadeclides was the most popular hashtag in Africa in 2015 (Dobbs 2016). While this report underscores the increasingly dominant role of digital technologies and social media in the political landscape in Africa, it also points to the expanded prominence of hitherto excluded groups such as young people in the Nigerian public imagination.

These youths, like their counterparts in other parts of the world, resort to the creation and distribution of Internet memes for the expression of a new regime of citizenship orchestrated by digital media. In April 2015, for instance, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) published a story on how social media users in Nigeria relied on Internet memes to visualize the narrative contours of the 2015 elections. Titled “Nigerian election in memes,” the writer of the article concludes that “one thing [was] left to say from the social media world - goodbye to an old meme.” This “old meme” in the BBC story is a reference to a photo of the former Nigerian president, reproduced here as Figure 5.1. The meme, both as a reproducible idea and a viral Internet image, has been used and reused by many social media users in Nigeria to parody and mock the former

Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan, whose hand was “seemingly permanently stuck to his chin” (BBC online). The rhetoric of the pose bears the image of a political leader who appears resigned to fate and unable to perform the functions of governance. Metaphorically, the photo is the face of political privilege in Nigeria and indicates the ruling elite’s indifference to those in the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. Reproduced and remixed as Internet memes by netizens on different digital media platforms, including on Facebook and WhatsApp, the image is symbolic of the lingering perception among citizens that political passivity was the hallmark of the Goodluck Jonathan administration.

The intent of the focus on Internet memes is, thus, to explore the usage of these popular signifiers of visual culture by Nigerian netizens in the expression of civic and democratic agency with respect to the 2015 elections. I hope to show that the political memes from Nigerian new media spaces constitute an insightful visual language through which subaltern Nigerians with access to digital media participated in electoral processes. There is value in the ways in which memes facilitate a visual field for cultural and political analysis in Nigeria, considering the evolving digital culture in the country. In addition to examining this productive arena of online communication, I also explore memes that served to express the major concerns of social media users during the election, as well as some of the ways memes continue to function as an expressive and playful mode of checking the excesses of power. This chapter, thus, mounts its arguments as a way of furthering emergent scholarly conversations, such as Adeyemi Adegoju and Oluwabunmi Oyebo’s, whose article locates humour and memes as discursive practices in the 2015 elections. Their essay, which, despite an extensive Internet culture in Nigeria, is one of few studies on the topic, is an analysis of “the appropriation of Internet memes in representing the two main aspirants in Nigeria’s 2015 presidential election online campaign discourse” (659). To be clear, the idea of “presidential election online campaign” suggests that there were some members of the ruling elite

who believed the Internet could be used as campaign space to further their political interests. However, it also suggests that Internet users were actively invested in the electoral process and the discursive layers of their participation are what Adegoju and Oyebode analyze in their work. My intervention here extends their argument by tracking these political discourses by Internet users before, during, and after the election itself. This perspective enables me to stress the ways the production and distribution of Internet memes encourage practices, which serve to construct new types of online subjects, including networked netizens invested in a playful participation in public conversations. From this viewpoint, the production and distribution of Internet memes in Nigeria's contemporary communicative landscape is fundamental to understanding sociocultural and political processes. By critically analyzing Nigerian Internet memes of the political genre, I focus on how these digital media forms are mobilized by citizens to offer a critique of the state, and to express political dispositions informed by the social media modalities of interactivity and networking.



Fig. 5.1. Meme. The viral GEJ pose. Source: *The BBC online*.

This example offers an instance of some of the ways through which the traditional media furnishes creative new media users with visual resources through which they recreate memes for their own

alternative and playful performances of politics. The idea of play can be understood through the prism of what has been described as the performance of ludic selves on social media. Ann Deumert identifies digital communication as enablers of spaces in which people relate to themselves and others in a playful manner. In her estimation, “the primacy of play” (1) in social networking sites explains performative strategies of online-presentations that make participations in cultural and political conversations a fluid and pleasurable activity. These memes serve to complement the practice of voting and other concrete electoral activities with the production and sharing of memes as digital cultural practices of uncovering and resisting electoral fraud in Nigeria. Figure 5.2 presents an analogy to the meme mentioned in the BBC article and illustrates another way the aesthetics and content of political images from the mainstream media are reorganized for critiquing the state.



Fig. 5.2. Meme. “4 More Years.” *Tech cabal*. <http://techcabal.com/2015/04/01/top-memes-from-the-nigerian-2015-presidential-election/>

The creator of this meme has merely used “4 MORE YEARS” to describe what the country could expect from another Jonathan presidency. The creator uses four different camera angles of similar photos to express the view of political incompetency that marked the administration of the erstwhile president. The rhetoric of these images can be located in the different facial expressions of Goodluck Jonathan as it seeks to persuade the reader not to endorse the passivity of his government.

5.1 Internet Memes as Popular Culture Genre

Richard Dawkins proposed the concept of the meme as a “unit of cultural transmission” (192), functioning within the regulatory frameworks of imitation as a self-perpetuating cultural phenomenon similar to the gene as a replica and replicator of biological data. Positioned within this model, memes function to spread, replicate and modify ideas and culture. The word *meme*, according to Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (2007), is employed by netizens mainly to describe the rapid uptake and spread of a “particular idea presented as a written text, image, language 'move,' or some other unit of cultural ‘stuff’” (202). This description, like that of Dawkins, relates to the formal academic study of mimetics that is different from the popular conception of Internet memes motivated by a digital culture that is non-hierarchical, user-based, and interactive. The field of this cultural production is constituted by online subjects fascinated with the deployment of social media as space for expressing a humorous and satirical critique of power and political institutions. Internet memes are the playful texts of this transmission, as they enable netizens to convey and replicate ideas, contest dominant ideologies, while affirming online visual culture as a domain of individual mythologies that are easily reproducible. Limor Shifman’s definition of Internet memes as products of a shared and interactive network culture has some

value:

Internet memes are defined here as units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process. I suggest looking at Internet memes not as single ideas or formulas that propagated well, but as *groups* of content items that were created with awareness of each other and share common characteristics. (367)

There is the evident shift in this conception from Internet memes as unitary cultural forms to an expanded view in which they can be understood as a genre of popular culture. Shifman, who argues for a “cultural logic” (340) of photo-based memes, suggests in another study that Internet memes be regarded as “a group of digital items that: (a) share common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) are created with awareness of each other; and (c) are circulated, imitated, and transformed via the internet by multiple users” (341). Shifman’s perspective is unlike Dawkins’s singularized notions of memes (pre-digital memes, for instance a stand-up comedy, can mostly be experienced singularly at a given time and place). By cultural logic, Shifman rightly argues that a meme should be understood as cultural texts that combine linguistic and visual metaphors to articulate reproducible versions of mini-narratives. Shifman’s approach suggests that memes are best understood as iterative models of communication that constitute a genre deployed by ordinary users of media as creative interventions in cultural discourses. Seen as genre, therefore, Internet memes could be interpreted as a system of signs that function from person to person to represent and disseminate cultural and power relations. This cultural logic is certainly true of the *Third World Kid* meme which makes an excellent argument about the possible rhetoric and ideologies embedded in Internet memes. Of all the possible images a Google search for “African memes” might produce, the *Third World Kid* meme is almost guaranteed to be present.



Fig. 5.3. *Third World Kid* meme and some of its many variants.

Most of the narratives of the memes in this example demonstrate some of the ways the Internet meme genre can be used to disseminate and normalize racist epistemologies, affirming digital culture as a maelstrom of encoded textual moments that bring some netizens in arenas of ideological contestations. Since these memes reproduce dominant ideologies, and essentialize third-world conditions, it is important to engage critically with them and other similar memes because of their capacity to exist as viral media embodying negative and sweeping representations of the African child. In this case, memes become ideological texts of hidden power relations and reveal how the digital artifacts of global social media can also extend cultural polarities. Although it is easy to see how these memes and the ideas they stage demonstrate that there are persistent topographies of power and inequality in online communities, it is how they are organized as cultural

texts around economic and political agonies in postcolonial countries such as Nigeria that is critical for me. In either case, it is fascinating to see how pessimistic memetic representations occasion ripostes, generated as counter-hegemonic derivatives to the grand narratives of memes created within a dominant culture.

While Figure 5.3 does not relate directly to Nigerian social media landscape and electoral politics, it provides a premise for my idea that Internet memes are cultural texts that embed ideological assumptions, aside from their functioning as humorous popular ‘texts’ that can be used as signifiers of participatory politics. As examples from online political conversations from Nigeria indicate, social media as new spaces for performing agency have been effective in the dissemination of the subjectivities and agency of ordinary citizens extending the frontiers of the country’s democratic imagination. By sharing humorous and satirical memes and other forms of online popular culture, Nigerian digital actors supplement social media’s positioning as a space for coordinating social activism with a practice, expressed through comical images that perform and narrate the voice of marginal and excluded groups such as youths. This practice identifies online subjects who circulate the images on social media as repoliticized subjects seeking political change through digital networks and communities. Examples from Nigerian digital culture demonstrate that these regular citizens can engage more with the political culture than they do through earlier forms of media, which, in most cases, is partially regulated by the Nigerian state. Unlike the mainstream media, the more participatory and complex communication landscape enabled by Web 2.0 result in, as Clay Shirky has argued, “gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action’ (2011). The performance of this public speech through the apparatus of online visual culture, such as memes make digital media in Nigeria a new kind of cultural landscape within which democratic subjectivities indeed emerge and proliferate.

Aside from actual performative forms such as the selfie, and fictional images, Internet memes are other forms of political communication that indicate how the Nigerian public sphere is being transformed by the digital symbolic representations of Nigerian netizens. Memes in this view bring an evidence of “pop polyvocality” in the way they are a popular cultural common tongue that facilitates the diverse engagement and proliferation of many voices (Milner, 65). Used together with popular hashtags, these memes shape and reshape the public consciousness of network subjects, enabling cultural and alternative spaces for resisting official sites of hegemonies. These young Nigerian netizens rely on a digital culture that enables an unmediated representational space for individuals, and a self-broadcasting agency that oftentimes brings individual users of new media technologies in direct confrontation with oppressive power and disempowering conditions. Brian Loader, Ariadne Vromen, and Michael Xenos have described the youths who participate in this ‘digital social mediation’ of political power as the networking young citizen. As they put it:

Networking young citizens are far less likely to become members of political or civic organizations such as parties or trades unions; they are more likely to participate in horizontal or non-hierarchical networks; they are more project orientated; they reflexively engage in lifestyle politics; they are not dutiful but self-actualizing; their historical reference points are less likely to be those of modern welfare capitalism but rather global information networked capitalism and their social relations are increasingly enacted through a social media networked environment. (145)

Since there exists a vast army of networking young citizens around the world that invest political agency in online forms such as memes, the ideas in this excerpt can be extended to accommodate the operations of online popular culture in pushing back oppressive political hierarchies. Also, a social media culture that promotes different expressions of networking and interactivity, makes possible a political order ensuring the destabilization of the traditional function and capacity of the

state as the sole and legitimate organizer of people and resources (Owen 18). The creation and distribution of memes should be conceptualized as an important aspect of Nigerian digital culture that undergirds and intensifies resistance against totalities.

5.2 Internet Memes and Electoral Politics in Nigeria

In a country in which elections are still fraught with fraud, with most agencies of government out to serve and legitimize the ruling party's partisanship, netizens mobilize Internet memes as cultural tools of resistance. The participation of some of these Nigerian Internet users in a public sphere motivated by new media in Nigeria has resonance, therefore, both in cultural discourses and in the political landscape itself. Aside from the fact that Goodluck Jonathan became the first president to use social media to engage with these millions of young people, the president also planted apologists in these online network communities defending his government's policies and activities. As one of the practices of countering this online propaganda group, Internet memes became a political communicational strategy of engagement in the public arena. The proliferation of digitally enabled mobile cellphones in many Africa countries at the turn of the millennium encouraged creative Nigerian youths to appropriate digital media communities to articulate their political perspectives more intensely and visibly. Besides the publication of political commentaries on social media and the use of the various network environments for holding government accountable, they also, through popular entertainment forms, such as Internet memes, challenge social conventions and confront normative modes of corrupt and institutional power. The creation and dissemination of memes is one of the avenues through which young people articulate a resistance and cope with hostile living conditions.

With digital media, however, the possibility of a direct engagement by individual citizens with politics and political actors suggests how a multitude of internet users, using humorous memes

online, and the power of the thumb offline, can “authorize” possible change in governments. For instance, the examples below are some of the texts distributed online in the days before the 2015 national election in Nigeria. Particularly, they describe the electoral campaign process of the two major political parties and how their various supporters struggled for dominance in virtual space. Adegoju and Oyebode describe the dominant issues distributed on social media around before the 2015 elections, including (a) the perceived misrule of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) for 16 years (1999–2015) and the poise of the emergent coalition opposition party the All Progressive Congress (APC) to contest it; (b) the alleged ineptitude of the incumbent Goodluck Jonathan to fix some of Nigeria’s nagging problems such as corruption, insecurity, energy and unemployment during his first term in office (648). In addition to these, much of the campaign discourses refracted through online memes include the oppositional counter-discourses of supporters of the incumbent president. They labelled General Muhammadu Buhari the standard bearer of the opposition party as a religious bigot, dwelling on/emphasizing an alleged high-school certificate scandal to disparage his candidacy. Other electoral topics include the ‘change’ mantra that dominated the campaign of the opposition party and which received enormous memetic attention among netizens.

5.3 Pre-Election Memes

Most of the memes circulated before the election were satirical critiques targeted at the Jonathan administration by netizens who desired a change in the country’s political leadership. Together with the Boko Haram terror activities in Northern Nigeria, the abduction narratives of the Chibok girls, which had become politicized as an election subject, provided the most apparent contexts for most of the memes produced before the 2015 polls. Meme creators were responding to the Nigerian government’s handling of the abduction of an estimated 234 schoolgirls by Boko Haram. These memes served to spread the political narratives and social criticism of regular

citizens, critiquing Nigeria's exploitative and corrupt power regime. The subversive and satiric images posted in new media environments were focused on resisting the political negligence of the ruling class and narrating alternative citizen perspectives. As I have discussed some examples on the Chibok girls in previous chapters, I now consider some other images that were distributed by Internet users as memes before the election.



Fig. 5.4. Meme. A tearful mage of former President Jonathan crying. Online.

This meme uses irony and ridicule to represent the response of the Nigerian state to a recent misappropriation of taxpayers' money. The ironic depiction of a president crying to remain in power but not willing to be empathetic enough to alleviate the people's suffering is particularly telling. While the meme both disseminates, and records this actual event, it also caricatures the way Nigerian politicians, notable for their thievery and corruption, seek elective positions without any concrete developmental agenda for the country. The meme deploys satire as a strategy to interrogate political corruption in Nigeria, while lampooning a culture of graft that relates to shame

as a non-existent emotion. This example projects a netizen's attempt to subvert and resist a normative political condition within what Ryan Milner identifies as a "logic of lulz" (1) that serves as the dominant character of internet memes. Internet memes exhibit the functioning of humour as important discursive practice in Nigerian social media. The idea that Nigerian politicians would contest leadership positions despite their questionable ethics is further demonstrated in one of the memes below, with the caption: "I don't know what I am doing. Just vote for me."



Fig. 5.5. A screen caption of two different memes satirizing President Jonathan

The narrative of this first meme provides an engaging commentary on the perception that President Jonathan was clueless and unfit to lead Nigeria. The meme is an articulation of the views of many Nigerian Internet users who were supporters of Jonathan's opponent, General Buhari. Functioning as a visual reinforcement of the "clueless" rhetoric the official opposition party resorted to when describing the former Nigerian leader, it legitimizes and replicates a common political narrative in the country. The verbal meme—in this case the idea of meme is understood as any infectious and reproducible idea that propagates easily from person to person—in the Nigerian political environment rematerializes in this example as an Internet meme. There is also a reinforcement of the belief that many African leaders choose to cling to power even if without any measurable political achievement, or specific plans for sustainable development. Both the creator of the meme

and those who share and it on social media platforms suggest that the Nigerian president lacks political competence and is not fit to lead the nation.

The second meme in the example envisions the censorship of the Internet in Nigeria, a topic that the state enlisted for juridical approval after the elections. The meme is a representation of government's response to citizen engagement with institutional practices. This meme is used to imagine the Nigerian president's criticism of social media interventions by Nigerian netizens. The "nonsense" here refers to the various creative sites of critiques contrary to the government's oppressive policies and actions. It may also signify the government's mode of delegitimizing the interventions of young people in Nigeria's political discourses, or their procurement of public speech through social media. The meme functions as a visual text calling attention to free speech and its constraints in Nigeria. In addition, we can still locate a second-order signification in the text, with the meme showing how online visual culture embodies mythologies, ideological persuasions that are culturally understood by the interpretive community of the text. The mythic significance of the meme is its representation of the Nigerian government's disdain of social media, since Nigerian political discourse is now being shaped and influenced on Facebook and Twitter. Nigerian users of these social media affirm them as network communities for claiming and reclaiming social and political agency. The president's identity is reproduced in dictatorial terms that imagine him as a leader the country does not deserve. Free media and censorship are other vital concerns of the meme. In a country with much state presence in the traditional media, social media and new media technologies in general give young Nigerians an opportunity to speak truth to power. These satirical forms of 'speech' threaten the normative order and operation of the state and its repressive ideological apparatuses.

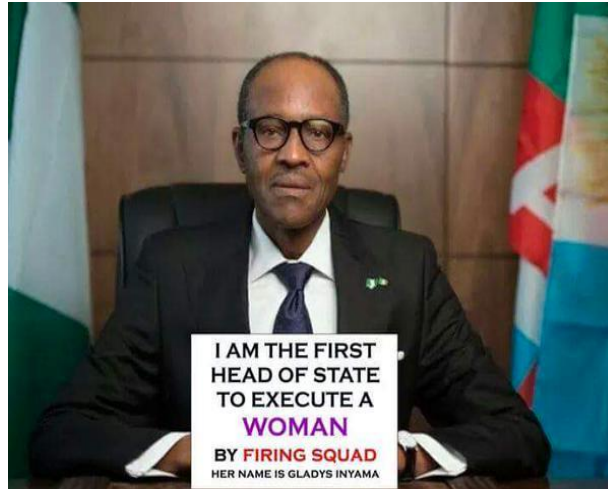


Fig. 5.6. A Photoshopped image of Muhammed Buhari (newly elected president in Nigeria), in one of his address to supporters, shows a self-indicting message about his past legacy as military dictator.

This meme aptly reconstructs the historical legacies of General Buhari, a former military ruler of Nigeria. Having led a junta in Nigeria, Buhari was perceived as a high-handed leader known for human rights abuses. This meme is one of several images distributed by online supporters of Jonathan to critique and lampoon the president's political opponent. It is important to note that the *creation* and *sharing* of this meme, and other political memes indeed, can be understood as a practice of political identity and identification. By sharing a meme that criticizes Jonathan, a user can be perceived to be a Buhari supporter. Conversely, if a user shares a meme, like the one above recirculating Buhari's past human rights abuses, they not only perform a political affiliation, but also affirm themselves as supporters of the Jonathan administration.

The production and distribution of Internet memes during the 2015 elections was, thus, an expression of partisan ideologies, in most cases. In other words, Internet users who support either parties found in memes cultural mechanisms for performing political selves and expressing their political perspective. One can conclude that social media facilitates a shift in the political participation of many netizens, who swap their passive followership of politicians for an active

engagement in the political process. This paradigm shift is made possible by new media, and by the way the agency user-based media enables is used is this creation of forms of popular culture and entertainment. Aside from these examples, there were memes that were circulated within the contexts of viral hashtags on Facebook and Twitter. One of such hashtags, #BabaWhileYouWereGone, trended on Twitter as a form of bantering, which panders to satire.

5.4 The #IstandwithJega Meme

The next three examples highlight this likelihood of a relationship between social media posts and the electoral process, underlining the ways young people in Nigeria used internet meme within the framework of hashtag activism to participate in democratic politics and push back against electoral fraud and corruption. The #IstandwithJega hashtag and meme was birthed within the social media context of support for the head of the electoral commission, Attahiru Jega. I am also using this section to highlight the close relationship between Internet memes and what Nathan Rambukanna identifies as “hashtag publics” (174). Unlike in spaces such as Facebook, hashtag publics on Nigerian Twitter enable citizens to assemble and cluster more effectively around a trending topic. While Facebook encourages more interactivity and dialogues, hashtags serve public points of convergence for netizens to deconstruct and engage with power and its agents. As Axel Bruns et al. assert:

hashtags now serve a wide range of purposes: amongst them, the well-understood function of assembling an *ad hoc* public around a key issue; gathering of a community of practice engaging in shared, possibly concurrent activities (such as attending a live entertainment or sporting event, or using *Twitter* as a backchannel to radio and TV broadcasts); attempting to create and promote a (playful or serious) meme that is virally distributed across local, national, and global *Twitter* networks; or introducing a point of emphasis that – similar to an

emoticon or emoji – carries a stronger semiotic charge than a word alone would be able to do. (2)

Of all these varied descriptions of the hashtag and its publics and uses, the most dominant in Nigerian online communication is the way hashtags can indeed be used to provoke and promote “a (playful or serious) meme that is virally distributed” across local and global Twitter networks. This transnational staging of political identities and the performance of citizenship through the hashtag makes the creation and distribution of memes a practice affirming online visual culture as an important form of activist speech that resonates beyond specific locations. Many Twitter users deployed the meme as a means of expressing confidence in Jega. Attahiru Jega was perceived by many in the country as a social justice crusader who would not be compromised in the electoral process like his predecessors. The meme was thus an online response to rumours that the Jonathan administration was contemplating replacing Jega with somebody who would aid the incumbent government and disenfranchise the people. In a country that is not generally known for free and fair elections, the meme was one of the significant ways netizens declared their desire for an electoral process not riddled with corruption. This citizen engagement with the political process was not merely a social media fantasy or engagement with mediatized representations and empty signs online. It was, as @dupekillla affirms in the tweet below, a process that can result in concrete political changes in the body politic.



Fig. 5.7. An #IstandwithJega meme. <https://twitter.com/dupekillla/status/583331446124843011>

The immediacy of the social media platform results in the personalization of a hitherto distant political process, as regular citizens now participate more visibly through social media memes in the political process. Their consumption of media is simultaneously bound up with a disembodied distribution of resistance organized around the sharing of visual memes serving as vectors of online agency. @dupekillla's tweet celebrates the recognition of the #IstandwithJega meme by the mainstream media, with the user adding boastfully that: "And they say it is just #Twitter." This statement justifies the use of social media in the electoral process. It also serves to show that arguments such as those of Russell Neuman et al. in *The Internet and Four Dimensions of*

Citizenship that, “with the notable exception of political scandals, it is hard to find traceable instances where issues nourished online have driven broader public debates” (28) are indeed outdated. The user judges the success of the meme by the fact that the BBC TV program on Africa dedicates airtime to discussing the issue. “And they say it is just #Twitter” could also have been a response to detractors, mostly from the ruling government, who insisted the Twitter space was an illusory place incapable of enhancing productive political participation or the expression of contention politics in Nigeria. This example emphasizes the need to examine the relationship between power, discourses, and institutional practices in the frame of representation forms (Internet memes) utilized by regular citizens as playful markers of everyday online life. Although @dupekillla’s excessive techno-optimism may not be justifiable, one fact is clear, as Paul Mason asserts: “people know more than they used to ... they have greater and more instant access to knowledge, and reliable ways of counteracting disinformation” (Mason 147). Most importantly, they have, besides other tactics of performing political selves, visual images as important economies of subaltern meanings, speech, and agency.

There are other variations of the #IstandwithJega meme that show the ways Internet memes as forms of popular culture intersect with power and sociopolitical discourses. Unlike what obtains through the exclusive reliance on modern technologies in advanced democracies, the Nigerian voting system largely depends on manual labour, with digital technologies having just been introduced in recent years. Because of this dependence on human labour, voter fraud is a recurrent issue in the country’s elections. During the announcement of electoral results in 2015, a representative of the governing PDP and cabinet minister in the Jonathan administration, Godsday Orubebe decided to halt the announcement of results, sensing that the country was voting against his principal. While Godsday Orubebe’s hysteric disruption of the announcement results was being shown live on national TV, a number of memes were being circulated by social media users

participating in the process from home. The #IstandwithJega meme resurfaced in other forms on Twitter and Facebook as Attahiru Jega watched Orubebe's actions with a calmness that further endeared him to millions of Nigerians. The example below is an example of the #IstandwithJega meme refashioned and distributed to show the bravery of the INEC chairman in fighting against corruption.

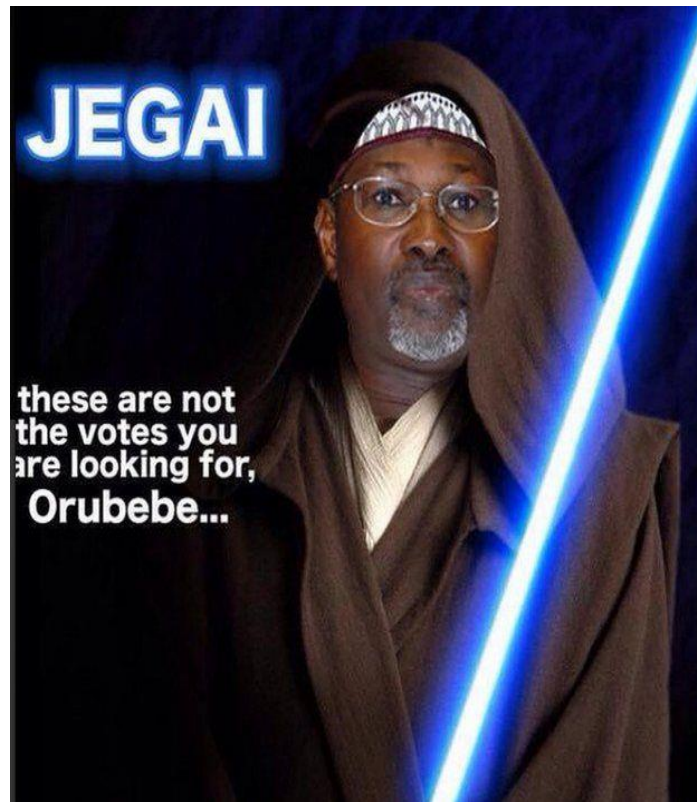


Fig 5.8. The Head of Nigeria's Electoral Commission INEC is Cast as a Jedi to Show his Fight Against Electoral Fraud. <https://twitter.com/famuyideolawale/status/583260624207155200>

This image appeared in most online spaces when Godsdar Orubebe interrupted the announcement of results, accusing the electoral body of bias. Social media users reacted to Orubebe's protest by using this image along with the #IstandwithJega hashtag to live-tweet support for Attahiru Jega's commitment to a fair electoral process. This deployment of social media to convey the real-time performance of civic speech through a meme documents an important political history of Nigeria,

demonstrating how participatory politics on Nigerian social media can be productive outside of the medium. The meme creator, Famuyide Olawale has reproduced Jega's identity in a way that fits and parallels the identity of the Jedi in the *Star Wars* movie narratives. By invoking an important figure in a major Hollywood text, the meme is made to signify how Jega's wisdom and skill helped to master the forces of corruption that threatened the Nigerian republic at a crucial point of history. The rhetoric of the photo is of particular relevance within the domain of popular culture and its constitution by cultural forms from different media fields. The message of the meme—these are not the votes you are looking for—is both an intertext and a revision of a now popular meme “These Are Not the Droids You Are Looking For,” a statement by Obi-Wan Kenobi referencing the Stormtroopers in *Star Wars* Episode IV. The statement is now popularly used in urban cultures as a reference to the pursuit of a wrong course of action. In relation to the Nigerian election, the meme gestures towards Orubebe's lack of awareness of Jega's determination to safeguard the people's electoral mandate. Like the Jedi figure, who values individual freedom and self-determination, Jega appears to be interested in the realization of the people's right to dictate the outcome of the Nigerian elections. The creative translation of Jega to a Jedi in the meme is, therefore, a linguistic means of emphasizing his defence of justice and resistance to corruptive electioneering practices. That characterized the tenure of his predecessors

The meme exhibits a doubling of roles evident in how its creators and disseminators participate in a transnational discourse of popular culture, while they also engage humorously with Nigerian politics. Images such as these, point to one of the ways social media is construed in this dissertation as cultural facilities for the expression of political identities, organized by everyday people around performative agency and resistance. Seeing that Goodluck Jonathan would lose the elections, some Twitter users began to distribute sarcastic memes that ridiculed the erstwhile president. Setting the narrative as a subversion of the #BringBackOurGirls social media hashtag,

many of these users sought to mock the president and his inability to rescue the Chibok girls abducted by Boko Haram.



Fig. 5.9. “Jega, Wait... What If I Bring Back Our Girls Before 8:00 PM?” *Twitter*. 31 March, 2015 https://twitter.com/iam_Rawlings/status/582918466732044289

The text in the meme is framed as a question from a losing candidate who appears to be desperate to save his presidency. This meme presents a satirical narrative authored by an ordinary social media user lampooning how matters as grave as security are tied to political considerations such

as re-election. The meme satirizes African leaders whose motivation to do what is right is conditional upon re-election. While this is a fictional portrayal of the president, it enables an understanding of how regular citizens through Internet memes reimagined and narrated the electoral process. Although there is the invocation of a traumatic event in the meme, it gained traction nonetheless because humour, as noted in the previous chapter, is one of the major cultural modes of engaging with adversity in oppressive circumstances. This example, together with the two before it, play into the narrative that memes and tweets constituted real-time options through which netizens participated in the electoral process.

5.5 Post-Election Memes and Hashtags

President's Buhari's electoral victory in the 2015 election was epochal not only because he was a Muslim from the North who won overwhelmingly in the majority Christian southwest, but also because it was the first time the country witnessed an incumbent president lose an election. This relinquishing of power is significant, considering that some African leaders are notorious for clinging to political offices. Most of the political images at the center of the conversations before and after the election focused on the inability of the Jonathan government to respond adequately to domestic challenges such as political corruption and poverty. Based on Buhari's victory at the 2015 polls and Goodluck Jonathan's peaceful transfer of political power, the throng of social media netizens who keep faith in the efficacy of the platforms to induce material change intensified their online advocacy, using hashtags as an important media archive of their resistance. #MinisterialList and #MissingBudget have been some of the most popular Twitter hashtags they employed to disseminate commentaries on the new policies and activities of the Buhari government. One of the lingering consequences of the 2014 social media hashtag #BringBackOurGirls, for instance, is its reconfiguration of contentious politics in Nigeria. Since then, netizens have produced many other

hashtags that have been used to organize and shape online discussions on electoral politics and political governance.

In the first two years of the Buhari government in Nigeria, several Twitter hashtags that narrate and reflect the Nigerian political condition trended on Twitter. Some of the most viral hashtags during this period include: #NigeriaDecides, #NigeriaHasDecided, #Dasukigate, #MissingBudget, #BudgetofYams, #OpenNass, #RedefineNigeria, #NotoSocialMediaBill, #MarchonNass, #NeverToBeForgotten, #TheOtherRoom, #PMBwasted365days, #TheList, #FreeAudu, #IstandwithNigeria, #OccupyCBN, and #Takebackyourcountry. Anyone familiar with the Nigerian society can see how these hashtags also historicize and document contemporary politics in Nigeria. While hashtags are important symbols of the online public sphere, therefore, the Nigerian context shows that hashtags can also be regarded as archives of political narratives and resistance. As these examples affirm, most of these hashtags produced network publics whose interactions in the new public spheres facilitated by digital media are mostly politically oriented. Although these hashtags originate from the Twitter community, they migrate to other spaces such as Facebook and to offline environments of actual protest. One other thing these hashtags reveal is the way online debates in Nigeria are grounded in a contested space in which the political perspectives of regular citizens can be censored by disruptive online voices working in the interest of government. Other ways this censoring of expression of alternative meanings manifest in contexts, such as #Ferguson, for instance, is through “algorithmic filtering” (Tufekci 2014) of the hashtags themselves. Zeynep Tufekci wonders if “Ferguson [would] be buried in algorithmic censorship” (*online*) had there not been Twitter. In the Nigerian framework, the politics of net neutrality and algorithmic filtering which is the focus of Tufekci’s article is not as pronounced as the careful ways government plants trolls in network communities to misinform progressive netizens who converge to have disinterested democratic conversations.

To return to one of the hashtags above, the #MissingBudget hashtag, was a response in 2016 to news in the mainstream media that the country's budget of the same year submitted to the Nigerian Senate by the President could not be found. The creative Twitter users who began to tweet on the topic by using different memes were motivated by the conviction that the missing document was symptomatic of political corruption; although there is the possibility that they were also responding to the hilarity of the situation. The incident provided another classic illustration of what it means in Nigeria to "Laugh out Loud" (LOL) at institutional power and its abuses in Nigeria's online mediasphere. Images such as Figure 5.10 is one of the many playful treatments of the subject on Twitter.



Fig. 5.10. “Searching for the #MissingBudget is a National Task.” *Twitter*. 14 Jan 2016

<https://twitter.com/Justinattor/status/687717589594849281>

The example reveals one of the many modes of political conversations, in the days after the inauguration of the Buhari government, namely the deployment of random images as cultural resources for resisting systemic abuses of power. As “searching for the #MissingBudget is a national task,” @Justinattor and the other commenters are invested in a patriotic duty to the nation-

state. The idea of invoking the nation suggests the ways netizens imagine the constitution of the “national.” From the standpoint of government, the national is an uncontested and neutral space for all citizens. However, the usage of the word in this tweet uncovers a reading of the national as politically charged space in which re-enfranchised citizens recover political voice and agency. Those who conceive of the search for the missing budget as “a national task” see themselves as citizens who now have some level of involvement in the nation’s political project, even if this participation is mediatized.

There is something of a playful and performative reconstitution of citizenship at play both in the tireless effort to retrieve the document in virtual space and in the commitment to using meme to facilitate the search. The image in the tweets was shared by many Twitter users who engaged its visual rhetoric to demonstrate the gravity of the search effort, hence they bend over sewage drains to find an important political document. That they resort to the sewage is a ridicule of governmental apparatuses in Nigeria. The larger critique of this meme is the way the #MissingBudget hashtag is being used by these Twitter users to offer alternative meanings and narratives to a systemic manifestation of corruption in the country. Aside from the humorous meme in this illustration, the words of the tweets are satirical commentaries on the appalling conditions in which governmental power thrives in Nigeria. While I examine the political discourses and critical exchanges embedded in and enabled by these social media environments, my more nuanced engagement in this dissertation has been the ways the deliberate production of popular and comical images by creative Internet users furnishes critics with a parallel discursive space for the analyses of power relations and subaltern agency.

One of the hashtags that best represent this commitment to the production of subversive images mocking and satirizing operations of hegemonic power in the Nigerian state is #TheOtherRoom, used with the image in Figure 5.11. Responding to his wife’s criticism of his

government on a state visit to Germany in 2016, Buhari told reporters, while taking questions alongside Chancellor Angela Merkel: “I don't know which party my wife belongs to, but she belongs to my kitchen, and my living room and the other room.” The idea that the country’s first lady belonged in the kitchen went viral on social media, as netizens used the hashtag #TheOtherRoom to engage in discussions on gender oppression and the female identity and presence in Nigerian politics and culture. I have already discussed a humorous recreation of this topic in chapter four, in which I examined how different users on Facebook and Twitter organized satirical commentaries around it. What I might add to it is that the president’s slippage received a more vehement attack on Twitter because of the way the hashtag functioned as an apparatus of collecting and organizing recalcitrant voices. The hashtag was used alongside multiple viral memes to reflect the criticality of visual and popular culture to the emergent hashtag publics in Nigerian social media.

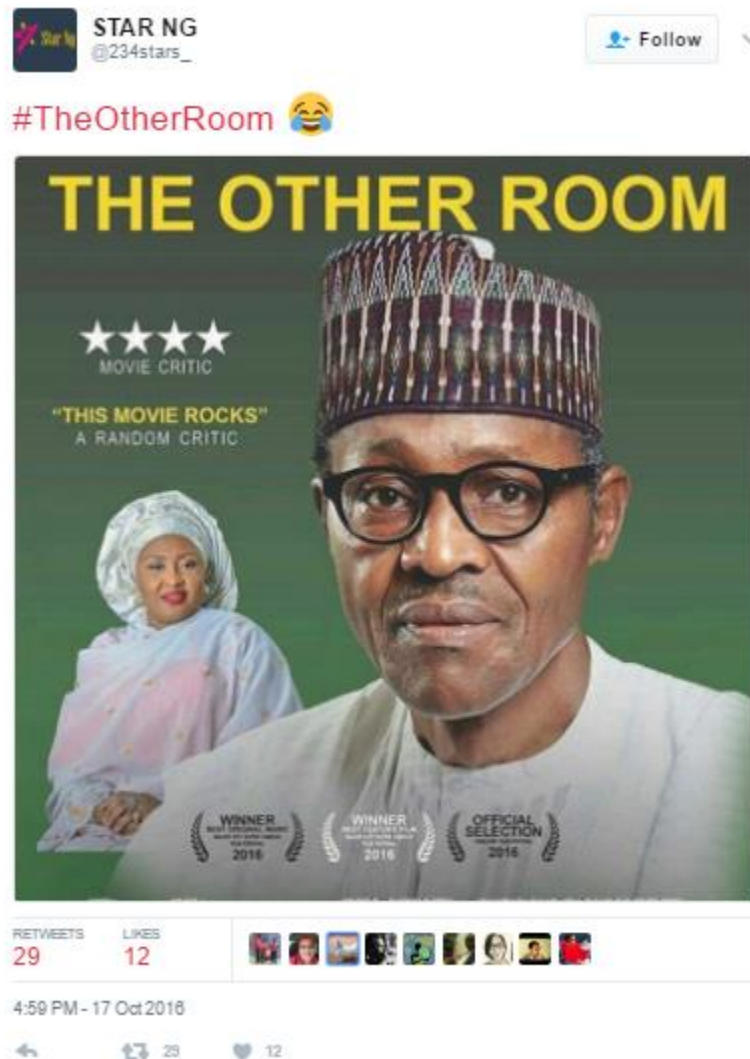


Fig. 5.11: “#TheOtherRoom” *Twitter*. https://twitter.com/234stars_/status/788122256316719104

This meme, published on Twitter by a blogger, has been redistributed 29 times by different users who have much larger number of followers on Twitter. The image is a useful illustration of the mobilization of popular culture in the expression of participatory politics in the Nigerian Twittersverse. The idea being invoked through a Photoshop design of a movie poster is the ubiquity of Nollywood as a foremost medium of African popular culture which is central to the playful presentation of political agency in much of Nigerian social media culture. Although I argued in chapter two that social media has overtaken Nollywood as the first communicative medium of

subaltern speech and agency, it is clear from this example that everyday users of social media still make sense of the political terrain by exploring images from Nollywood as creative memes of their counter-hegemony. By placing the first lady at the background of the poster, and foregrounding the image of the president, the creator of the meme uses a visual language to re-narrate the gendered nature of the president's statement, a point discussed in the preceding chapter.

Performative expressions of citizenship by Nigerian netizens have intensified in recent days because of some of the fiscal policies of the present government that have left the country in economic recession. The articulation of political perspectives and civic agency through a memetic scrutiny of the Buhari administration can be illustrated through a final example from Babasola Kuti's Twitter post on the hashtag #BuhariMustGo:



Figure 5.12: “Game over? #BuhariMustGo.” *Twitter*.
<https://twitter.com/SKSolaKuti/status/860143300975751168/photo/1>

The #BuhariMustGo hashtag which has trended in the last few months has been used to organize protests across the country, aside from the fact that it is the narrative locus of critiquing the current government. This cartoon by Mike Asukwo is also being shared by many netizens to query the President’s ability to continue in office because of his failing health. Unlike Aisha Yesufu’s actual embodied performance of politics, this is a fictional image that accompanies a hashtag as a signifying practice mounted to express political subjectivity. In the image, three former Nigerian

heads of state are depicted as medical personnel who carry out the injured president on a stretcher. The language of the narrative is vital to uncovering the message of the cartoon, as there are semiotic and aesthetic elements of a football match that are a strategic portrayal of the ways in which politics is merely a game that is played by Nigerian leaders. Despite an injury that requires medical attention, the president is opposed to being dismissed from the field, insisting that he “can finish this game.” The president’s refusal to hand over the soccer ball is itself indicative of the attitude of some African leaders who hold tenaciously to power, even if found to be incompetent by the people. The cartoon, thus, satirizes the breakdown of the apparatus of governance witnessed by Nigeria when the President spent three months receiving medical treatment in London. A concealed meaning in the cartoon is also the presence of former corrupt leaders who have saddled themselves with the task of getting the President out of the political arena. Their role is an assertion of the disenfranchisement of the people in the determination of the country’s political destiny. The three medical officials symbolize a political culture in which an oligarchy, rather than the electorate, exercises power over political governance. The #BuhariMustGo hashtag is one of the ways a section of the electorate can repossess some level of agency on Twitter, even as this repossession is supplemented with a text which represents the actual conditions of political dispossession the people are confronted with. While hashtag activism in the Nigerian increasingly generates more hashtags, it is important to conclude that hashtags have afterlives and indeed serve as storehouses of public memory—in the way they function to archive and circulate the recent history of alternative and subaltern political perspectives in Nigeria.

To conclude this chapter, I first restate some of ideas on Internet memes, hashtags and democratic participation in Nigeria, before some final reflections on the overarching thesis and arguments in the dissertation. Internet memes constitute a productive virtual genre of the participatory politics of Nigerian netizens. Many social media users resorted to photo-based memes

as forms of participating in an emergent hashtag public in the country. Specifically, as I have shown in this chapter, the 2015 elections in Nigeria provided a public platform for the mobilization of Internet memes by netizens for electoral participation. Aside from actual voting and other expressions of electoral agency, many of these users relied on social media as the organizing space for the monitoring and critiquing of the electoral process. These acts are new expressions of democratic behaviour grounded in and enabled by the increasingly ubiquitous digital culture in Nigeria. Tracking and exploring the nature of this involvement in the political landscape through a sustained examination of memes and their rhetorical strategies have been the focus of this final chapter. These Internet memes, like the selfie and the other subversive images discussed in earlier chapters, reaffirm the point that political images posted on social media are discursive locations through which satirical speech functions as resistance to abusive power.

CONCLUSION

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE FUTURE OF SUBALTERN AGENCY IN NIGERIA

My dissertation began with the question: what are the ways in which Nigerian netizens imagine the nation and perform political selves and identities through viral images on social media? A study of popular images circulated by netizens in Nigerian social media reveals economies of subversive representations that are used by everyday citizens to undermine political oppression and perform politicized speech. In concluding his own dissertation on the intersection of popular culture and the discursive values of subaltern narratives in Nigeria, Nduka Otiono reaffirms the import of the street and its ontological character as an “epistemic site for a broader and deeper range of interdisciplinary scholarship on everyday lived experiences in postcolonial Nigeria” (412). Otiono’s study was completed at a point when social media was only just emerging as a space capable of facilitating the coordination and dissemination of local narratives and identities to a more dispersed and global audience. With the role of social media in the Arab Spring, which Otiono and other scholars writing around that period elaborated upon, and indeed, Occupy Nigeria in 2012, it became obvious that social media would become a pertinent digital space for collecting and circulating alternative meanings and subaltern subjectivities from everyday Nigerians. Social media thus postures as virtual platform for the reconstitution of street stories that have more visual inflections than imagined by Otiono. Aside from staging citizen narratives in the rhizomatic pathways of the Internet, social media also assures an evolution of the form of these narratives. Because of social media, there is a transformation in the nature of stories shared in the Nigerian public sphere, as well as the ways in which audience appreciate and relate with the cultural practices in these network spaces.

The ways I have explored the reappearance of subaltern speech in the Nigeria public sphere can be summarized using the rhetoric of two final examples that illuminate how women and young

people now participate more visibly and vigorously in political and cultural conversations. The first example is Adeola Fayehun's *Keeping It Real with Adeola* on Sahara TV—an online news platform in Nigeria. Adeola Fayehun worked as a journalist before turning to Sahara Reporters' social media to start her satirical and comic presentations of political news and events from Nigeria and other parts of Africa. Since her performance of news commentary and analysis uses hilarity and the theatrical, one may argue that these factors inform her huge following online. However, there is the more pertinent fact that she has a space on YouTube and Facebook that further disseminates her voice to many Africans around the globe who follow her 30-minute show and can have political conversations with her and with one another. While there are many powerful female voices in the contemporary media landscape in Nigeria, Adeola's incisive, yet playful, voice is probably the most visible and boldest in the critique of political hegemony in the recent history of the country, and social media has played a huge role in the cultivation of that reality. While Adeola's example gestures towards the dissemination of current affairs, users such as Correct Bae and other similar accounts by women use fictional and anonymous accounts to criticize government. These are all bold interventions by women in a culture that is still conditioned by patriarchal politics.

If the example of a woman subverting and undermining the highly patriarchal space of Nigerian politics through satire on social media is not intriguing, then the second example of an everyday social media user from Northern Nigeria, a region mostly represented as a place of terror and economic precarity, may articulate the point a little more. One of the manifestations of political abuses in Nigeria is the recent gross neglect of the study and preservation of History, a subject whose academic transmission the juridical establishment in the country expunged from the public-school system. Although this disarticulation of the subject from the curriculum was eventually overturned after some resistance on social media and in other media contexts, the policy underscores the state's attitude to national memory and collective identity. As history continues to

be relegated to the margins of a decrepit educational system in a country that fails to fund and maintain sites of memory, social media, again, comes to the fore as an expressive mechanism through which ordinary Nigerians resist the government's tragic ahistorical approach to the Nigerian past. Taken from Williams Chechet's *We are The North* project on social media, my final example thus presents a work of popular image showing how digital media enables the reinterpretation and transmission of Nigerian history by regular citizens. Using Instagram and other similar platforms, the user @Williamschechet, recently featured on CNN's Africa's portal, highlights how performative and politicized speech on social media is articulated as a mode of resisting official dehistoricization. Chechet deploys signifiers of popular art culture to reconfigure historic images from Northern Nigeria, a region of the country negatively portrayed in the media because of Boko Haram and widespread poverty.



Fig. 5.13. From Williams Chechet. "We are The North." *Instagram*
<https://www.instagram.com/p/BPX4rWxDtbp/?taken-by=williamschechet>

This example presents a popular representation of a former Nigerian leader Tafawa Balewa (from the North) and uses digital art to portray Balewa's identity in a way that invites a "cool" generation of young Nigerians to prominent figures in their history. In re-presenting an image from Nigerian history on social media, Williams Chechet relies on a network of audience commentary and participation to document the past and present alternative perspectives on Northern Nigeria. His works are important because they use social media as personalized representations of Nigerian historical narratives, promoting an awareness of historical knowledge online. While the deployment of popular art in presenting a historical perspective is significant, what makes Williams Chechet's project *We Are the North* truly effective is how it exemplifies the artistic recreation of the Nigerian past through digital media, presenting it before a network audience that productively interacts with it. His work not only recalls the past but also gives his many audiences, home and abroad, an opportunity to appreciate the history and culture of Northern Nigeria.

As netizens engage with the Nigerian past online through digital images, they are invested in a shared and digital reconstruction of historical memory that potentially refashions nostalgia as a generative sentiment that harbors possibilities for recovering alternative representations of non-dominant groups and identities. This productive approach to nostalgia is necessary, because in Mike Pickering and Emily Keightley's estimation, as "the negative sense of nostalgia prevails, there is a tendency to neglect the reciprocal relationship between audience and media in generating the conditions for making sense and meaning" (930) both of past and present realities. While nostalgia might, therefore, be regarded as an ambivalent desire for the past, works such as Williams Chechet's invite the reconceptualization of nostalgia as a healthy emotion for constituting and producing historical imagination. An antidote for the so-called "dictatorship of nostalgia" (Boym 2007, 17) and the cooptation of history and politics by nostalgic emotions, might be a framework that develops an understanding of nostalgia as "a poetic creation, an individual mechanism of

survival, a countercultural practice” (17) which Kerwin Klein (2011) locates as a therapeutic response to the crises of historiography, a fact also applicable in the Nigerian context. Williams Chechet’s Instagram experimentations offer an individual articulation of some of the ways images of popular culture are being made by Nigerian netizens to function in various contexts to challenge cultural orthodoxies and present alternative representations of subaltern speech in public discourses.

With the recent post-factual age of Trump and its distribution of “alternative facts” and “fake news,” however, there is the need also to problematize and recover the idea of the alternative—which I have used extensively in this dissertation to signify the other locations of meanings and culture outside the normative matrix of dominant narratives and official power. The alternative meanings and perspectives I have used in my analyses are sourced from viral popular images of self-presentations and performances in Nigerian social media culture. These images, intrinsic as signifiers of visual culture to social media culture, incorporate in their rhetorical strategies, politically subversive insights that speak to a culture of resistance and expressive agency. This alternative, which also spreads online, is, thus, not grounded in the *untrue*, despite the mediatized space of its dissemination. Rather, I conceive of it as an anti-hegemonic fact or what Leah Lievrouw calls “an oppositional perspective” (3) occasioned by user-generated media and deployed as a mechanism of “participation and intervention in the creation of and sharing of meaning” (4). In addition to Lievrouw’s, other studies have engaged with this idea that social media platforms serve as an organizing space for agonizing and/or dissenting voices to mount various forms of resistance, and present marginal voices, and in the case of Nigeria, express outrage against a hegemonic culture that fosters the exclusion and marginalization of certain citizens. My emphasis is this possibility of de-marginalization and repoliticization facilitated by Web 2.0’s empowerment of the traditional consumers of media.

While social media continues to be used as discursive spaces of power relations by global citizens, my interest has consisted in identifying the various ways in which Nigerian netizens express performative agency through forms of popular culture, such as political cartoons, the selfie, Internet memes, and humorous images. Extrapolating the economy of meanings inherent in these images begin, for me, by unsettling the postmodern assumption that mediatized culture is futile for resistance. The refutation of such arguments is necessary to underscore the fact that the ability to represent the self, which social media affords excluded or oppressed populations is something that is worthy of note itself. It is possible to argue, like other scholars mentioned earlier have done, that a universe of algorithmic protocols undergirds and determines the behaviour of people on social media. However, the appropriation of the medium by users for presenting performative and dissident versions of selves and identities make such claims of technological determinism impervious to the actual social and political disruptions new media can potentially enable. While affirming the various ways in which processes of planting trolls online and coopting resistance voices by the Nigerian government suggest that the country's social media culture has altered the operations of abusive power, I have focused on how economies of cultural representations can be productive for appreciating the organization of dissent online. My ideas in this work are thus grounded in the assumption that Nigerian social media culture stages an appreciation of the ways formerly silenced young voices use new media to engage with society and the operations of power. Like I mentioned in chapter two, because of social media, the exclusion of young people in actual governmental administration in Nigeria is a topic that is gradually being revisited through concrete parliamentary efforts. While these social rematerializations of social media forms of political engagement are important, my dissertation has foregrounded UNESCO's 1980 prediction concerning young people:

In the more desperate structural crisis of the coming decade, the young may turn to the camera and the microphone in order to protest against the economic and social limitations impinging on their lives. They may be appealing to each other or their elders, worldwide, through demonstrations and cultural manifestations for an ethical judgment from what one expert calls an ‘all-seeing, all knowing eye of global communication’. (UNESCO 1981:41)

Although this statement might not have imagined what an incipient Internet at that time would morph into, its emphasis on “demonstrations and cultural manifestations” expressed through the “all-seeing, all knowing eye of global communication” is a prescient presentation of what cyberspace has become. Being more interested in the discursive implications of these cultural manifestations than in their teleology, I suggest that new cultural forms such as the selfie and Internet memes are important locations of identity and politics that make social media a cultural intervention. Aside from the frightening panoptic possibilities of the metaphoric ‘all-seeing, all knowing eye,” social media, in different ways, fully evinces this turn to the camera and the microphone, two significant apparatuses for performing the politics of visibility and speech, demonstrating the personalization of global communication by Web 2.0 technologies. These two technologies have not only converged on social media as tools of popular culture, they are also being used by netizens as performative facilities to denaturalize and disrupt the mechanisms of totalities around the world. Social media thus presents itself in the Nigerian context as the most important enabler of subaltern speech and, perhaps for some time to come, will remain a strategic space from which disenfranchised individuals such as Nigeria’s youths and women seek redress and personal representation in the political terrain.

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