

Introduction: #EndSARS and the Afterlives of Hashtags

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On the 20th of October 2020 when officers of the Nigerian Army shot at young protesters at the now infamous Lekki toll gate in Lagos, it again signaled the precariousness of youth in a country in which young people remain tragically vulnerable to the vagaries of bad governance, prebendal politics, and state violence. The #EndSARS protest became another morbid condition for the production of what Giorgio Agamben characterises as “bare life,” one that operates in the “sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide,” a realm in which, in the Nigerian framework, young people “may be killed but not sacrificed” (2016: 53). Rather than any logic of self-sacrifice as a messianic enunciation of political action, though, the forced sacrifice of young people during #EndSARS proceeded from concerted resistance to the brutal excesses of police power. The necropolitical carnage that defines youth existence means that the subjectivisation of life as bare and disposable remains incessant in the public arena as a common idiom of a violent contract between state and society in Nigeria. This antagonistic relationship between the Nigerian state and its young subjects, as dramatised during the tragic denouement of the #EndSARS protest in Lagos, is the central theme of this special issue. Yet, as the special issue casts a retrospective gaze on the disposability of youth and

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the abjection of life in the wake of #EndSARS, there is a critical refusal to idealise the category of youth, a topic addressed by Rhoda Nafziger and Krsytal Strong in their article in this collection. While they are most affected by Nigeria's gerontocratic and authoritarian politics and while they perform digital acts of citizenship as a mode of agency, young people are sometimes the instrument of political thuggery; they circulate misinformation and often serve as political trolls that legitimise the operations of the ruling class. As political influencers who also use digital technologies in potentially harmful ways, their ambivalent encounters with digital media forbid any romanticising logic.

While this special issue on #EndSARS is intended to capture various aspects of the youth movement and its online pushback against the Nigerian state apparatus, it is imperative to acknowledge that digital activism cannot, in fact, replace the exigencies of *realpolitik*. Without the necessary political action in non-digital spaces, online movements become merely slacktivist and becomes constrained by the logic of communicative capitalism. Jodi Dean describes “communicative capitalism” as a culture of participatory politics that is one-sided and noisy, since online speech on the social web does not always provoke any response from those in power and merely “functions as just another opinion offered into the media-stream” (2009: 21). As important as this viewpoint is, there is a chance it also misreads the potential power of the significant capacity to just perform subversive speech and to express political voice online. In many countries in the Global South, as in Nigeria in which the ruling class and its political strongmen do, in fact, respond to online speech, communicative capitalism hardly completely assimilates online critiques of oppressive power to noise. Online social movements and protests may be messy and chaotic but they are not always noisy in places where the power of digital citizens to resist domination troubles and unsettles the normative political culture. While we believe communicative capitalism and even data colonialism are real, we sometimes perpetuate a single story of the online worlds we inhabit when we focus only on the dark sides of the internet. No doubt there is a crucial need to become more critical of platform power and our vulnerability to

corporate social media; yet despite their encoded protocols of control, social media also give opportunities for all kinds of resistance, even if it is just the fundamental capacity for political speech and the kind of virtual resistance during #EndSARS which provoked offline protests.

Having said that, #EndSARS was a vital moment of resistance that continues to resonate in public memory and in Nigerian spaces of power in the current era, but it has to be understood as genealogically connected to earlier movements (both online and offline ones), including its less radical iteration in 2017 and the #BringBackOurGirls movement of 2014 which went viral after the abduction of about 276 secondary-school girls by Boko Haram that year. The movement reincarnates itself in several other ways in the last several years. To illustrate, the Nigerian state's ban of Twitter in 2021 invites us to consider the many afterlives of hashtags and digital activism, especially given how state power often fights back by reinscribing its hierarchies of control. The feminist scholar, Red Chidgey, elaborates on social movement memories and their cultural and social afterlives through a model she calls *assemblage memory*, “an exploration of how the images, ideas and feelings of past liberation struggles become freshly available and transmissible in times not of their making” (2018: 5). In the Nigerian context, from #OccupyNigeria in 2012 to the so called 2023 #Obidient electoral movement, hashtags exhibit a capacity for afterlives and become reconstituted anew, whether in terms of derivative movements, discourses or images that gesture back productively to them.

The affective translations of the feelings, images and narratives of #EndSARS into current realities mean we can think of events like the 2021 Twitter Ban in Nigeria or even the often raucous #Obidient movement as direct afterlives of #EndSARS. While the immediate cause of the Twitter ban was the suspension of President Buhari's Twitter account, the persistent memories of past social movements and unprecedented digital moments that unsettled governmental authority some years ago continue to haunt the state and, therefore, are remote causes of post-#EndSARS moments and hashtag movements such as the #Obidient. The #EndSARS movement may have started as a protest against police brutality, but it eventually marked the

symbolic denunciation of Nigeria's culture of everyday corruption. The multitudes and online groups that spoke out against economic corruption and the excesses of the political elite eventually became constitutive of the #Obidient movement—an essentially youth-based, post-#EndSARS, social media-driven campaign for the politician Peter Obi.

Similarly, the offline circulation of hashtags like #EndSARS and #Obidient in public spaces is something else that is worthy of attention. We often think of hashtags as principally domiciled online, but their unruly flows sometimes reach concrete spaces external to the digital, leaving behind the traces and texts of their digital ontologies on the built environment. When hashtags circulate offline, they make visible the enduring connections between digital and non-digital spaces, serving as concrete afterlives in the offline world. When printed and posted as communicative symbols that accompany other linguistic signs in printed texts such as promotional or political campaign posters, as we saw with the #Obidient posters during the 2023 elections for example, they also mark the boundless relations and overlaps between print and digital affordances and aesthetics. Print culture, then, may be understood as sometimes harbouring symbolic afterlives of hashtags that become central to the aesthetics of the urban experience.

The various essays in this special issue address these multimodal and intermedial dimensions of #EndSARS. Building on several ideas by Laurent Berlant, Diekara Oloruntoba-Oju, for example, focuses on the transgressive role of Nigerian popular music during the protest, exploring the ways in which popular music enacts claims to political publicness. Her essay urges us to understand, besides the many sites of the movement's visual media, how #EndSARS also produced an archive of musical forms that demonstrate the collective participation of DJs and musicians as political subjects whose labors inform the emergence of counter-hegemonic sonic publics. James Yékú uses the #EndSARS movement and its visual representations as an analytical entry into the subject of live streaming, a topic that has received scant scholarly attention in the African studies literature. Yékú's main argument is that Nigeria's diaspora communities

sometimes use political livestreaming to perform citizenship from exilic locations. While political livestreaming within Nigeria is generally less visible compared to other forms of livestreaming that do not explicitly unruffle and threaten the state those on comedy and pentecostal cultures, for example the #EndSARS protests produced several livestreaming events that now remain important as part of the archives of the online movement.

In his essay, Adeshina Afolayan uses the figure of the hoodlum—or what he calls the *hoodlum rhetoric* in Nigeria's media and intellectual landscapes—to rethink the contested nature of citizenship in the framework of political protest. In asking when a hoodlum becomes a citizen, Afolayan pushes back against normative assumptions in Nigeria that construct the hoodlum as a negation of democratic possibilities. By drawing on Hannah Arendt and Jacques Rancière, he focuses on questions of speech and political action as critical democratic acts that undermine the false difference between #EndSARS “protesters” and “hoodlums,” a distinction, he argues, that enabled the Nigerian postcolonial state to make its violent entry into the concrete and discursive arenas of the #EndSARS protests, besides the state's eventual arrest and subordination of the hoodlum's citizenship. Unlike the fragmented citizenship of the hoodlum in Afolayan's reading, what is at stake in the essay by Nafziger and Strong is a different kind of fragmentation, one that is based on the ambiguities of class in the youth ranks. The authors reconsider the coordinates of youth movement and query the notion of youth as a unified and undifferentiated social group within the #EndSARS movement. Hence, what informed the co-optation and fragmentation of the struggle was the inattention to the various class tensions and ideological divisions among youth during the protests.

The insidious ways in which the Nigerian government framed #EndSARS as a movement bankrolled by separationist groups and the political opposition also receive some scrutiny in these essays. Official discourses on #EndSARS, the focus of the essay by Oso and Ajayi, offer a pretext for the authors' analyses of newspaper narratives of the #EndSARS protests by state actors and agencies. Similarly, Bamgbose and Alugin's article explores the ideological representations of #EndSARS through some

of its most iconic posters and placards, which become recruited through linguistic theories such as critical discourse analysis and transitivity systems, to examine the textual strategies of civil protests in contemporary Nigeria. As the two articles pivot on linguistic analyses, they also intervene, like the rest of the essays, in how #EndSARS makes legible the discursive and linguistic strategies of youth resistance, as well as the nature of state narratives on the protest.

The gift a special issue on the movement gives us is the opportunity to come not only as scholars situated in different geographical and disciplinary locations, but to come as individuals directly and/or somewhat impacted by the #EndSARS protest. In all these articles, the contributors address wide-ranging topics that reanimate the traumas and gains of the movement, signposting us to the hashtag's connections to earlier social movements. This special issue, as another epistemic nudge to what is left in the wake of #EndSARS, therefore, constitutes a significant afterlife, one that is enabled by a Nigeria-based journal as a radical gesture of reclaiming and memorialising the #EndSARS narrative.

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