

Forging Memories of Moments and Places

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May 29, 2025



If his debut collection, *Where the Baedeker Leads: A Poetic Journey*, enacts place-centric imagination and diasporic consciousness, James Yeku's latest work, *A Phial of Passing Memories*, articulates further "memoir-poetic" narratives in 60 poems coordinated in five sections that detail diverse encounters in moments and places. His poetry picks on well-ranged, everyday experiences: birth, parenting, death, travels, leisure, and living in multiple spaces constituting memories he summons in his new book. *A Phial of Passing Memories* navigates memories of moments and places experienced within the diasporic topographies. Spaces lived or visited are eloquently rekindled and reimagined. Yeku is a US-based Nigerian poet, essayist, and Associate Professor at the University of Kansas. This second full-length constellates around the recurring trope of poetry as musings on memories, cartographies of cities, and affective meanings that the poetry offers.

With "in shifting scapes," which is the first poem in the collection, Yeku attempts a metapoetic constitution of poetry as a system of memory-making. The persona suggests that "poetry wanders, meandering into/ a sail with itself/like a flaneur," which indicates the kinetic possibilities of poetry as a collector of quotidian scenes, "mixing a child curiosity with a stranger's smiles." When poetry picks on the materiality of place and moment as a kinetic force, it links the signfield and spatiality. This is so that one imagines how the "flaneur" melds "a child's curiosity with the sights of strangers" but also how the persona ascribes an encounter with meaning for the studied "indifference" possible in a European city like "a busy Paris street," where he figures "strangers smiling indifferent hellos." When collecting moments in Paris, Yeku recalls the November rain in the Parisian street. He thinks of the rain as "a rogue" and "mischief-maker," which intends to ruin the city. The questions that point to the metapoetic undercurrent of Yeku's poetry are: what are these shifting spaces? Is it the encounter in Paris, which the persona narrates, or the form used to recapitulate such an experience of Paris?

Apart from Paris, France's iconic city being the narrative moment in the poem, the compelling

formalism of the poem, in its shifting lineation accords with the iteration of its title, “in shifting scapes.” Here, lines shift as in the fluvial movement of the tides collected from the November rain the poet accounts for. This phial of passing memories forges the shifting scapes like water, “as a peripatetic flinching/for all things strange and sane.” It follows then the tide dovetails with memories, which are inherently fluid when we recount “the scars of conflicts,/ the masks of love,/ and the weft of forbidden pleasures/ between/the wandering legs of troubadours.” To ground how these memories are currents of the metapoetic that will set the tone for all the poems in the collection as itinerant, Yeku posits that “poetry reclaims its wonder in shifting scapes, and the Baedeker resumes its travels.”

“Scapes,” a key term in Yeku’s phrasing, points to the relationality between poetry and the environment, and it has implications to the signifying chameleon, which forges a link between this poetic text and the environment that influences its form and technique. The rendering of textual signs in intricate connection to place calls attention to my concept of the signifying chameleon. The signifying chameleon ramifies a method of reading primordial, coordinate, and pluriversal text signs, which reflect the complexion of poetry about its reflexive environment. This reflexivity situates Yeku’s poetry, with its rendition of places and times as in the grammar of the signifying chameleon in poems like: “an opening glee,” “A toddler’s goodbye,” “A digital memorial,” and “grief.”

“An opening glee,” the poem which follows “in shifting scapes,” evokes the memory of a birth “in Berlin, where it was winter.” Perhaps, the persona captures the delicate moment of birth as retrieved from Germany. This scene of a child coming to life apprehends its full emotion, picking details of the moment, “and a warm hospital/ward was spilling out life; and newborns cried to a midwife’s chants and welcome.” Also, the mother beholds the likely male child, suggestive in “then she swaddled him, skin touching skin.” The tactile figuration and affect of this birth experience procure for it the epiphanic aura: “an opening glee in/the drama of first/affections,/the pride of her eyes,/fastened on him.” Awe and wonder as emotions run through the poetic memory of the moment, as well as the maternal joy, climaxing in “and the prayers/ of a new mother’s love.”

“A toddler’s goodbye” enacts two related memories observed by the poet. In the poem, there are memories, which revolve around school farewells – one that time and circumstance missed, but which recalls a second, similarly reflective of the previous school farewell, imbuing it with a profound poetic moment. This is the persona’s witness of the last school day of his toddler, with some frenetic retelling of the danger in not memorializing these ordinary moments that have profound implications on how and what we remember as children in later adult years. Reporting the last school day goodbyes, Yeku distills the drama of that spring season of school, particularly noting that “the unfurling of farewells among/ladybugs and pluvious eyes could be a theater/ of dreams...” The focalization here is perhaps the poet’s daughter, but the persona bears the agency of memory “with toddlers on Lawrence’s hilltop,” and the reader notes “the audiences of their own play—arms that wrap tightly.” The reader spots the concrete ways in which Yeku picks these moments “around a preschooler, like a final rite in a room of treasures, toys, and giggles.”

Picking this preschooler moment can be sudden and epiphanic, “Like the pitter-patters of restive feet...” Ultimately, the encounter in his daughter’s preschool points to memoir poetics, where Yeku traps his lived moment of distilling “the pathos of the moment” which “came like a poem that needed/ to be written.” However, the poetic encounter in that moment suggests “a heavy sigh bearing/ joys that made a response unthinkable.” As some sort of imagination of last school days for his daughter, like the events less graspable in previous places recur in his percipient mind, Yeku writes, “And then it happened again at Kita:/ it was the last day of school for her that spring,/ and an avalanche of warmth triggered some/ merry *tschüss*: “I will miss you, Eva,”/ *a lehrerin...*”(Original emphasis).

For Yeku, the elegiac is both preponderant and profound in its evocative measures. Yeku's imagination pursues a more poetic landscape of memorials, intensely elegiac as it is celebratory of journeys, whether of arrival, living, or departing. In an instance of the digital elegiac chameleon, he picks on a deceased user on Facebook. This memorial emerges from a Facebook post in the poem, "a digital memorial," which, as Yeku remarks, is "a tribute to a fondness past." To grasp the import of this "post on a friend's Facebook wall," he discloses that "a soul disappeared into the memories of photos." Worse still, the poet suggests the digital space as a site of encounters, an elusive presence where the user is eternally silent. On this digital silence, the persona is unsure that the deceased users of Facebook generally witness the corporeal joys of these tributes that continue to pour in on their digital relic, which serves as a reminder of their previous lives.

These Yekuan memories, enfolded in the chameleon poetics, appear as neural connections with moments and people, across places threaded by the synaptic (re)flexes of journeys, mental, temporal, and (meta)physical. Yeku, in "grief," sustains yet another digital grieving moment, suggesting that "on TikTok," there is a deluge of deaths that often assaults humans. This grief takes over every human feeling when "we witness the carnage of war." To the poet, this feeling is only less significant, for it "compares little to the pathos of those for whom horror sculpts a haunting hashtag." Moreover, Yeku's chameleon poetics is rife with the visceral effect of the digital clip of carnage and the images of human deaths he recalls from TikTok or any other social media applications where images of such haunt people. Human visceral reaction piques by the simile, with deft sensory images, which runs through the lines "For us upon whom the bullets rain,/and the flames of unceasing fire burn like a cannon in the hands of a beloved foe,/ the images of war are ever a terror that stalks those who are the dying." As poetry is a kernel of memoir-poetics, it distills corresponding emotions and moments connected to the memories it maps. *A Phial of Passing Memories* reimagines Anglophone poetry in its chameleon reflexivity. This chameleon reflexivity, as can be argued, relates to the complex aesthetic form of memory-making that brings together the poetic text, experience, and scapes of reading Yeku's volume in its geography of signs and signification.

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