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## The margins or the metropole? The location of home in Odia Ofeimun's *London Letter and Other Poems*

### The location of home in Odia Ofeimun's *London Letter and Other Poems*

This paper reads Odia Ofeimun's *London Letter and Other Poems* (2000) in light of contestations with regard to the conception and location of home in postcolonial travel writing. The collection is seen as preoccupied with the burden of self-location and the associated problem of self-definition in this tradition. The migrant postcolonial writer is understood as almost always caught in a dilemma once a choice has to be made between identifying with the original homeland (which in most cases also coincides with the margins) and the colonial "mother country", the metropolis. This necessitates either appreciating the burden of self-definition in a simplistic manner or realistically affirming the complexity that the heritage of colonial history introduces to problematise it. Ofeimun's collection is read as presenting a blunt appraisal of the postcolonial condition and an acceptance of the challenges it poses for people in the postcolonial world: the inevitability of affirming an alternative space which is in-between the metropole and the margins. **Key words:** travel writing; postcoloniality; marginality.

This essay locates *London Letter and Other Poems* (2000), a work by the Nigerian poet Odia Ofeimun, in the context of the growing tradition of postcolonial travel writing, underscoring its inevitable reconciliation of personal memory with colonial history.<sup>1</sup> In arguing that the poet problematises the burden of self-definition, the paper suggests that Ofeimun's elaborate exposition of his preference for the metropolitan identity that the urban space creates in his theoretical reflection, is a metaphor for appropriating the hybrid constitution of postcolonial identity. Lagos and London, which function superficially in the work as opposing spatial designations of the homeland and the colonial mother country respectively, consequently emerge as collaborators in shaping a unique identity that the poet-persona, as a postcolonial writer shares with others in the in-between space.

Odia Ofeimun is a prominent member of the generation of Nigerian poets that emerged in the seventies to challenge the tradition of "apolitical poetry" associated with an earlier generation of poets, the leading members of which are Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and J.P. Clark-Bekederemo. A Political Science graduate of the University of Ibadan, Ofeimun, who was born in 1950 in Irukepken Ekuma, in Mid-western Nigeria, must be credited with stirring the emergence of socially responsive

poetry in the Nigerian context. He has, over the years, been an active member of the Association of Nigerian Authors, the umbrella union of Nigerian writers, having served at various times as its General Secretary and President. He was, in addition, a member of the editorial boards of such Nigerian newspapers and newsmagazines as *The Guardian* and *The Tempo* for more than a decade.

Ofeimun's reputation as a poet on the Nigerian literary scene rested for a long time on the success of his first collection of poems, *The Poet Lied* (1989). (The collection was initially published in 1980 by Longman but had to be withdrawn due to the threat of legal action from a poet who felt it was a direct assault on him.) The strong statement that the collection makes with regard to the primacy and urgency of the social responsibility of art, inaugurated a generational shift in Nigerian poetry, making his work the signature tune for the kind of poetry that was to dominate the Nigerian literary scene from the 1980s to the late 1990s. The committed art that *The Poet Lied* promotes was instantly recognised as his major contribution to the Nigerian tradition of poetry. All assessments of his work acknowledged this, but his committed art has also turned out to be a major weakness of his poetry. As with all literary works with a clearly defined historical and political focus, the possibilities of reading the work were limited. This is evident in the appraisals of Harry Garuba (1988) and Funso Aiyejina. An aspect of his work that has not been adequately assessed is craftsmanship. It is in this sense that Olu Obafemi's "Odia, the Critical and Political Craftsman" (2002) is a necessary, wide-ranging consideration of Ofeimun's achievement, balancing the exploration of the "what" with the "how" of his poetry.

The publication in the same year of three new books of poetry – *A Feast of Return / Under African Skies*, *Dreams at Work* and *London Letter and Other Poems* (2000) – is a rare harvest of good poetry and these are capable of transforming the critical reception of Ofeimun's work. The most remarkable aspect of Ofeimun's recent poetry is the eloquent manner in which it confirms his capacity for articulating concerns other than the apparently political. Ofeimun has not only broadened the basis for the assessment of his work, but has also demonstrated his ability to engage a variety of poetic conventions and modes. And, as with his earlier work, he still exhibits the remarkable ability to organize the poems in each collection around a central idea or thematic orientation. In each case, the poet demonstrates competence at exploring different facets of human experience in a poetic idiom that does not lend itself to easy signification. The closest to his earlier work of the new collections is *Dream at Work*. *A Feast of Return / Under African Eyes* is a rare product of the experience of performed poetry,<sup>2</sup> while *London Letter and Other Poems*, on the other hand, operates within the tradition of travel writing, making it the most autobiographical of the three. The most obvious proof of the obsession of the poet with artistic perfection is the fact that the poems in the three collections benefited from many years of rigorous polishing.<sup>3</sup> This, no doubt, inspired the friendly comments of Niyi Osundare, a fellow Nigerian poet, on his perception of Ofeimun's work.

In a tribute to Ofeimun on his fiftieth birthday, Osundare draws attention to some reservations he has about Ofeimun's work, declaring: "I have often teased you about the heavy-footedness of some of your verse; the overarching seriousness which tends to rob some of your well-wrought lines of a touch of humour; the over-conscious intellectualism of some of the poems (...) There are also instances in which metaphoric competence tends to cheat the lyrical imperative (Osundare 2001: 81).

In the rest of this essay, I shall concentrate on Ofeimun's *London Letter and Other Poems* as a work that operates within the tradition of postcolonial travel writing. This necessitates examining issues and concepts that connect the poet-persona to particular places, conscious of the fact that "[t]ravel literature is almost by definition highly autobiographical and by no means ideologically innocent" (Rahbek 2002: 22). The essay also seeks to redress the marginalisation of poetry as a genre in the discourse of the postcolonial.

#### **Imaginary or adopted homelands?**

The critical reception of cultural production in the postcolonial world is increasingly cognizant of the impact of the interrogation of conventional markers of identity such as nationality and race. The erasure of the particularizing value of distinctive identity – evidence of the growing impact of globalization – is proof that emergent markers of identity have the prospect of illuminating our understanding of the context of contemporary cultural and literary production. The mass displacement of writers from the postcolonial world, and their westward migration have increasingly necessitated the revaluation of traditional assumptions about writers and their attachment to their original socio-cultural locations, especially as this indicates the possibility of the survival of the creative imagination of writers in the event of spatial dislocation from the homeland. While Caribbean writers are traditionally associated with exilic/migrant writing in the Anglophone world, the works of many Asian and African writers who were at different times compelled by political, economic and other considerations to migrate to Europe and America, are now increasingly manifesting this trend. If the title essay of Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* (1992) is taken as the classic statement of faith in the expiration of traditional notions of identity based on fixed spatial location and affinity to a birthplace, experiences of writers from Africa, Asia and the West Indies in Europe in recent years have led to the recognition of works inspired by travel, migration and diasporic experiences as significant traditions. The West inevitably absorbs the creative output of the immigrant writers in the spirit of cultural globalization. When the facilitator of emigration to the West is residual colonial affiliation, as is the case with many African and Caribbean immigrants in Britain and France (Zezeza 2002: 10-11), there is always a tacit affirmation of association grounded on colonial bonding in which potential immigrants from the

former colonies identify their prospective host country as the colonial mother country. Mojubaolu Okome stresses this pattern in global migration, underscoring the fact that, for this reason, "France, the United Kingdom, and other Western European countries have, for a long time, been "the most significant receiving countries" (Okome 2003: 10). But the eagerness of the émigré writer to identify with the colonial "mother country" is often negated by the reluctance of the latter to accept responsibility for citizens from the former colonies. Experiences of Caribbean people in Britain and citizens of Francophone African countries in France lend credence to this fact.

Postcolonial travel writing, very much like diasporic writing, raises questions bordering on the identity of the writers concerned as the motivation or basis for displacement from the original homeland normally reflects in the work of each writer. Two main attitudes to the writer's spatial location are possible. One is a real or feigned emotional detachment from the homeland. This explains why some writers may feel no serious sense of attachment to their homeland even when all that sustains their creative engagement is the commodification of the peculiar literary practices of the same homeland. This becomes the outlandish artefact that they prepare to satisfy the literary taste of their European readership, especially when their ultimate desire is to earn a reputation in Europe. What they have in common with a writer of African origin like Ben Okri is a willingness to identify with the relics of colonial association embodied in the myth of the British Commonwealth, which the common heritage of the English language practically sustains. Confirming the unique identity that this inclination generates, Eckhard Breitingner (1998: 38-39) says:

[T]here is (...) a group of younger writers who have turned their backs – obviously permanently – on Africa. They reside in one of the metropolises of the North, participate in the media racket that helps to promote their writing, but still adhere to Africa as the source of their inspiration and the location in which their writings are set. The prime example is the Booker Prize winner Ben Okri.

Pietro Deandrea (2002: 109) reports that a section of Nigerian writers and critics even attribute the award of the Booker Prize to Okri as a reward for the rather "scandalous picture of Africa" which his work is seen as projecting. But he is quick to add that Amos Tutuola had earlier been so accused.

The second and apparently more remarkable attitude to the homeland in postcolonial writing is that which celebrates the writer's original homeland and not the adopted country. Many of the writers maintaining this outlook are notable critics of their home governments who were forced to leave their countries and seek refuge in other lands to escape political persecution. Dennis Brutus, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Nurrudin Farah are prominent African writers who have suffered the agony of exile because of their principled pursuit of sanity and justice in their homelands. This should not be difficult to appreciate in relation to African writers for, as

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (1994: 487) argues, “since independence African writers, far more than the professional academics, have exhibited a commitment to the political cause of the masses and cultural regeneration”.

Locating Ofeimun in either of these two main categories demands a close reading of *London Letter and Other Poems* which reveals a certain ambivalence on the part of the poet-persona to self-location. The work provides an opportunity for him to reflect on the implications of the seemingly irreconcilable identities that the colonial and post-colonial legacies bestow on postcolonial writers. This becomes obvious most of the time when the creative activity is executed within the spatial location of the former colonial power. Ofeimun’s sojourn at the University of Oxford that inspired the poems in *London Letter and Other Poems* was intended to provide him with an opportunity to do research for a biography on Obafemi Awolowo, the foremost Nigerian nationalist and politician he had worked with as private secretary. The clarification of the conflicting identities of the poet in the collection is executed in a subtle manner, involving the assertion of his affinities to two urban spaces — Lagos and London — designating the homeland and the adopted “mother country”. His work, in the true spirit of postcolonial travel writing, registers an impression of the “mother country” without exhibiting the fascination with the exotic that defines the spirit of much of colonial/imperial travel writing. He privileges the resultant crisis of self-apprehension by appealing to his memory of the homeland in his exploration. The simultaneous expression of ties to Lagos and London emerges as a metaphorical narrativising of this crisis. This validates Rahbek’s (2002: 22) argument that “[t]ravel literature (...) typically tells us much about the place the traveler is leaving as the one he or she is journeying towards, just as it often discloses more of the traveler’s personality than was perhaps intended by the author”. The apparent projection of the self in the collection comes from the autobiographical dimension that the poetic expression of travel writing inevitably assumes. Travel writing in fictional expression normally provides an opportunity for the writer to substitute the self with invented personages, even though perceptive assessments of such works can explore the essential connection between the writer and the world of the work. Ayo Abiteou Coly (2002) demonstrates this in “Neither Here nor There: Calixte Beyala’s Collapsing Homes” in which the exiled Cameroonian writer’s dilemma in France is seen as dramatized in her fiction. The blurring of the boundary between the fictional and the autobiographical is implied in identifying the characters with her, leading to the conclusion of the critic that “[t]hrough Beyala’s representation of Africa, it appears that the continent is a collapsing home to her. This representation can only be read as a justification of her exile” (Coly 2002: 44).

The foregoing indicates the constant temptation to read exiles and travel writers into their works which may either lead to an informed or a misinformed reading. We can only adequately appreciate Ofeimun’s *London Letter and Other Poems* in relation to

his perception of the close interaction between the urban space and the creative imagination, a standpoint that foregrounds the significance of the city in the sustenance of his creative imagination.

### **Imagining the city**

Ofeimun's implication of the city in clarifying his creative project, especially in his travel writing, may suggest that literary and cultural critics within the African context may not have sufficiently drawn attention to the capacity of the urban space to shape or facilitate literary representations. An obvious exception will be James Roger Kurtz's *Urban Obsessions, Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel* (1998).<sup>4</sup> The city particularly becomes significant in considering works generated by travel and exile, being the traditional abode of expatriates. Erik Cohen's (1977: 25-26) comment that expatriate communities "tend to be disproportionately concentrated in the large cities and particularly in national capitals of their host country" also applies to expatriate writers. This is becoming increasingly relevant in the consideration of recent African writing, much of which is being produced in African cities and the seats of the former colonial powers. Paris and London have historically been choice sites for exiled and migrant writers. While Paris accommodated writers like Gertrude Stein, Leopold Sedar Senghor, James Baldwin, Ernest Hemingway and T.S. Eliot at various times, London has played host to such African and West Indian writers as Buchi Emecheta, Ben Okri, Samuel Selvon, Edgar Mittelholzer, V.S. Naipaul and George Lamming. Within the African setting, Accra also attracted writers such as Richard Wright, Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Manu Herbstein. The urban space provides the atmosphere and the facilities for sustaining the creative imagination and in the process nurtures a metropolitan spirit. It has consequently served in many cases as both the site for the production and the subject of literary reflection. The city occupies an important place in Odia Ofeimun's creative project. He asserts his affection for Lagos, Nigeria's former capital that also remains her commercial nerve centre. Elaborating on the significance of the city for him in "Imagination and the City" Ofeimun suggests that the city creates a unique space for people from diverse ethnic and national backgrounds to co-habit and consequently facilitates the forging of new identities across conventional categories of identification:

It is amazing how close ancient Rome is to modern New York and how much of a family resemblance exists between the city of London and Lagos in spite of superficial differences. The sprawl and anonymity that size engenders; the diminution of the city dweller to an ant size beside massive skyscrapers; the problem of filth and public conveniences. The perennial inadequacy of transportation and housing. The homelessness of individuals in the large crowds that pepper the landscapes and mindscapes of the city (Ofeimun 2001: 14).

It is possible to appreciate the concept of the dislocated social space that emerges from the poet's understanding of the character of the city in relation to Homi Bhabha's notion of the Third Space, a site in which he locates an alternative mode of identification which is essentially transgressive, blending apparently contradictory categories and inclinations. This spatio-cultural site constitutes an alternative space for the post-colonial writer and becomes both a psychological reality and an analytical necessity. It is this same space that provides psychological refuge for Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands*. Raisa Simola (2002: 396) is profoundly conscious of this, affirming that "[t]he convention of locating writers within the confines of the national geographies of their country of birth has occasionally been discarded". But the location of home actually acquires significance for metropolitan writers and intellectuals in an increasingly changing world, indicating the simultaneous inscription and erasure of identities. Sura Rath's (2000: 3) engagement with the problem assumes concrete autobiographical validation in "Homes Abroad: Diasporic Identities in Third Spaces", testifying to the reality of the problematic and ambivalent task of identifying the postcolonial self: "Physically and spiritually Indian, but politically and perhaps intellectually an American, I stand at the crossroads where two nationalities/localities intersect. Both merge in me, yet each remains sovereign. In me the two engage in conflicts and tensions that are sometimes subsumed under my 'internationalism' or globalism."

The poet-persona in *London Letter and Other Poems* constantly appreciates the fact that the colonial and the postcolonial investments in the constitution of his self manifest when a spatial interaction between the homeland and the colonial motherland provokes assertions of these apparently conflicting components. This necessitates framing another space, very much like Rath's, in which his real self inhabits. In the world of *London Letter and Other Poems*, this reality plays itself out at various levels. Its most striking manifestation is probably in the linguistic wedding / appropriation of the colonial self and the nativist Other evident in the ambivalence that Nigerian Pidgin English articulates. Nigerian Pidgin English as a necessity of history is the making of the Nigerian colonial experience in which the values of Standard English and the dynamic inputs of the indigenous Nigerian languages are forced to collaborate in inventing a medium which is neither indigenous nor European. The conflict also manifests in the love/hate relationship that defines the attitude of the persona to London and Lagos, indicating the acceptance and rejection of both at the same time. All these simply suggest that the postcolonial self is in every sense hybridized. Underscoring this reality in *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*, Jahan Ramazani (2001: 180) argues that "[t]he postcolonial poem often mediates between Western and non-Western forms of perception, experience, and language to reveal not only their integration but ultimately the chasm that divides them".

It should not be difficult to appreciate Ofeimun's special attachment to Lagos, especially as Lagos is not his birthplace. He is perhaps more consistent in his national

outlook than Christopher Okigbo, whom Egudu (1988: 60) describes as a national poet within the Nigerian context on the strength of the sentiments expressed his later work. Okigbo, for all his national orientation, later participated in the struggle of the Igbo (his ethnic group) to secede from Nigeria. Identifying with Lagos – the city in which he has lived and worked for most of his adult life, which also appeals to him as the typical Nigerian city – is for Ofeimun, a convenient way to define his Nigerian identity. But as with his critical vision in *The Poet Lied*, his expression of attachment to Lagos is not necessarily simplistic. In his perception and representation of Nigeria, love for the land does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of a sincere, critical assessment of the national condition. It should then be clear why he resolves to love his land in spite of all her imperfections. This realistic vision of Nigeria is a unique feature of Ofeimun's (2001: 138) creative project:

The truth is that this city by the lagoon fascinates, if for nothing else, because it offers the closest Nigerian parallel to a melting pot. This, as I see it, is our prime city of crossed boundaries. It is the most open ground for the meeting of nationalities and the criss-cross of individual talent in this country. Hence it is like going to meet a good deal of all the colours of Nigeria when you come to Lagos (...) Let me concede the point straight away: that Lagos is not a city where you may read a book in the comfort of a bus or train or recollect emotion in Wordsworthian tranquility. Perish the thought! Lagos conjures images of traffic lock-jaws, progressively decrepit roads and rickety public transportation systems, crude commercialism, indifference to the products of the human mind, lack of places of genuine public relaxation, an inhospitable culture of hospitality, tortured banking services and, in general, the tendency for brash materialism and uncouth and abrasive human relations to overcome good sense and aesthetics.

### **Remembering Lagos in London**

The dilemma about expressing devotion to, and affection for, either Lagos or London, for the poet, is significant. Lagos, to Ofeimun, represents the homeland and all her imperfections, while London is the colonial motherland, to which he cannot deny a tie. To uncritically celebrate London – which does not enjoy an esteemed status in Anglophone African writing – is to unduly celebrate the colonial bond. Paris is, on the contrary, equated with a terrestrial paradise in much of African writing of French expression. The fact that Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo (1901-1937), who was a promising poet from Madagascar, committed suicide when denied a French visa which would have enabled him to realize his dream of going to Paris (Roscoe 1982: 278; Makward 1993: 201) confirms this. David Diop's case is a remarkable exception.<sup>5</sup> A mixture of love and rejection runs through many works that capture the experiences of citizens of the former British colonies in Britain. Expectedly, London is the setting of most works set



in the country, as is the case with Ofeimun's collection. This aligns with Maria Rope-ro's (2003: 51) stance that "travel writing has become a powerful instrument for cultural critique in the hands of special interest groups such as postcolonial authors".

London enjoys prominence in *London Letter and Other Poems* either as setting or as subject of some of many poems. This is sufficient basis for focusing on the relationship that the poet establishes between Lagos and London. This, however, is not a way of denying other concerns of the poet that include a description of his visits to some other European cities as well as an exploration of the amorous. The poems in the collection are organized into four sections: "My City By the Lagoon", "London Letter," "Oxford Summer" and "Travelogue". There is a temptation to read the strategic placement of the poems that reflect on Lagos in the first section as a way of privileging concerns with the poet's homeland in the sense of an effort at foregrounding the ties to it. But the fact that "London Letter" immediately follows this, suggests that the relationship of the poet to the two may in fact project his special relationship to them on the basis of the values that they bear for him, betraying this preoccupation as a major concern of the collection. The last two sections are, therefore, only meaningful because they reinforce the significance of the first two because he defines the identity of every other city he visited in the context of her history.

"Lagoon", the first poem in the first section, defines the poet's relationship to Lagos. The memory of Lagos, for him, is both soothing and shocking. The city, true to Ofeimun's claims in "Imagination and the City", does not emerge as an idealized space. This sounds credible largely because it is devoid of the distortion and wild romanticizing that often colour the imagination of the homeland in much of travel or exilic writing, especially when venerating the homeland becomes a strategy for psychological survival in the face of the rejection that people often experience away from home. The classic case is the way Negritude poetry redefined the African image as a conscious negation of its demonisation in European literature. The lagoon is, for Ofeimun, a metaphor and he invests it with suggestions that blend a sense of optimism with the romantic:

I let the lagoon speak for my memory  
though offended by water hyacinth  
waste and nightsoil...  
I still let the lagoon reclaim  
The seduction of a land moving  
with the desire of a sailing ship  
pursuing a known star (3).

The desperate quest for sanity that energizes "Lagoon" also runs through such other poems as "Full Moon" "Demolition Day", "Self-portrait of a Lagosian" and "Eko-my city by the Lagoon". In "Full Moon", this takes the form of a plea to a mother to allow

her daughter experience the purity of nature that moonlight can represent when there is a power outage. This, at the same time affirms the presence of the past, a clear proof of stasis. The event provides an opportunity to denounce the pervasive decadence in the city, and by extension, the entire Nigerian state, on account of subverted plans and unregulated social behaviour:

Let your daughter know purity of wish  
before the pain of traffic lockjaws,  
and streets overrun by garbage-mountains  
and soldiers and policemen collecting toll  
on the service lanes of life  
teach her to hate and to swear (5).

In "Demolition Day", the memory of the violated poor inhabitants of Maroko in Lagos provides an occasion to reflect on the plight of the helpless masses that constantly suffer deprivations and injustice. The situation in this case is particularly pathetic because the mass demolition of shanty houses in the neighbourhood, which led to the displacement of hundreds of poor people, was executed with military brutality. More disturbing is the fact that it paved the way for the affluent inhabitants of the neighbouring Victoria Island to acquire the whole land. The masterly deployment of visual imagery and the adoption of an effective idiom make the poem generally appealing. It dramatizes the helplessness of the oppressed citizenry in the postcolonial state through the experience of an unnamed Maroko resident.<sup>6</sup> The poet, manifesting a capacity for the prophetic, could suspect that the land would eventually be taken over by the rich. The plight of the average victim of the destruction of Maroko then becomes a parable for the constant conflict between the powerful few and the powerless majority in contemporary Nigeria:

She knelt, cane-chaff on her tongue,  
mocked by her mist-eyed anguish  
wishing the lord would look her way

She knelt, dry leaf against iron hoofs  
among the forgotten of Lagos,  
the homeless of Maroko, wishing  
the Lord would look at her withered hands  
stretched pleadingly towards the law-mighty  
epaulettes glinting with a merry stamp  
towards her vale of sad wire...

She wept O Lord who would not look her way:  
as bulldozers rumbled, rhino-happy across

her three-score days of rain,  
where grass may grow forever

where cattle may be ranched  
and limousines brace the lustre  
of flashy skyscrapers  
pointing a rude finger in God's eye (6).

"Eko – my city by the lagoon",<sup>7</sup> the longest poem in the first section, is a strange love song in which images of chaos, disorder, insecurity, lawlessness, decadence, stagnation, all testifying to the fact that the city is a concrete symbol of underdevelopment, paint a graphic picture of the typical Nigerian city. The adoption of Eko, the traditional name of Lagos becomes an expression of intimacy, which is consistent with Ofeimun's personification of the city as a woman he loves. But the irony that sustains the poem indicates that citizens of underdeveloped societies – one of whom he is – have to make the best of their condition. The beloved city of the persona is one which has shaped and has equally been shaped by the inhabitants.

### **This is London!**

The poems that come under "London Letter", apparently intended to present Ofeimun's perception of London, tell a traveller's tale. "London", the first of the poems, registers the presence of Ben Okri in the London of Ofeimun's imagination. The poem also hints at other interests of the poet in the collection that include a critical assessment of relationships across colour lines, the status of London as a melting pot and the location of the Nigerian immigrant community within the social fabric of the city. In the true spirit of travel writing, some poems in the section are spiced with sentiments that border on the nostalgic.

The title poem, "London Letter", offers a wide-ranging representation of the poet's impression of London, its peculiar character and the condition of its Nigerian residents. The recurrence of such Nigerian pidgin expressions as "Na London we dey", "We dey for London," and "Na so, so enjoyment we dey", creates the atmosphere for the sarcasm that sustains the satirical intent in the poem. But as with most of Ofeimun's poems, "London Letter" presents a critique of London and the antics of her Nigerian residents. The London of "London Letter" is viewed with the familiarity and privileged insight of a former British colonial subject. His perception of the city cannot be divorced from the high regard in which colonial subjects originally held the coloniser and the so-called "mother-country". This, in a sense, makes the desire to compare Lagos and London inevitable. Ofeimun's attitude to London tends to debunk the myth that once surrounded her. The London of *London Letter and Other*

*Poems* is a post-imperial city with a significant immigrant population. If the years immediately following independence saw citizens of former colonies of Britain coming to Britain for a defined period to enhance their education and acquire other skills needed for self-fulfilment in the newly independent states, immigrants of these same countries are now mainly compelled by economic and political crises in their homelands to emigrate to Britain. The significant presence of the immigrant population has, expectedly, generated questions and problems of identity, integration and economic survival, inevitably inspiring the urge to establish a link between the two:

*Na London we dey.* Pooling vast memories  
across the Atlantic, we witness  
the red bus careering towards Marble Arch  
so free from the swarm and crush of Lagos  
the sweated journey turned to a fiasco  
fiercer than the wars of democracy.

*We dey for London,* spooling our best wishes  
in strands of rueful remembrance – *the god*  
*of bolekajas* packing bins upon human cattle  
to redress crowded busstops;  
ah! We pitch for undergrounds haunted to delirium  
by highlife numbers only a Lagosian can hear  
in the snakes and ladders of the mind  
seducing Big Ben to dance “*na soso enjoyment*” (14).

There is a close affinity between the image of London residents of Nigerian origin that emerges in this section of the collection and the collective image that *Ovation International*,<sup>8</sup> has unconsciously constructed for them. The poem is, in this sense, a subtle assault on the social life of Nigerians in London which the *owambe* tradition has come to represent. “Owambe parties”, as the social gatherings are known, create an atmosphere for the immigrants to exhibit hard-earned wealth as an index of success. But the tradition, due to its ability to draw people from the homeland to the colonial motherland on a regular basis indicates that the spatial and cultural gulf between the two is already being bridged. The survival of the *owambe* tradition in London is a pointer to the fact that the formerly colonized people are enacting a reversal of the cultural dimension of the colonial experience by which their own cultural practices are now exported to the heartland of the colonizer as a symbolic expression of their presence, just as European cultural practices heralded the coming of the colonizer in the colonies. The poem indicates that London offers greater comfort to the immigrants than Lagos because it is more orderly, but does not fail to recognize the fact that it has its own slum and homeless inhabitants. Proof of the

degradation of the persona's compatriots in London is that they are forced to take up jobs that they would have despised back home in their desperate quest for survival. The poet-persona recalls seeing "my countrymen sing *owambe* to the garbage can/ knowing that pound yields no stink at dusk" (19). The less successful Nigerians in London face the grim reality of marginalisation, degradation and the consequent frustration of their expectations, all of which render their sojourn and the high hopes that originally inspired their adventure unreasonable. Their condition is particularly pathetic, as history, nature and society seem to have conspired to authorise the verdict that is their lot. The transformation of the refrain from "Na so so enjoyment we dey for London" to "we dey London like we no dey at all" confirms this reality. The fact that many Nigerians experience the same hardship they wanted to escape at home all over again interests the poet who empathizes with them:

Like *them* who sang "*Lagos, na soso enjoyment*"  
we dey for London like we no dey at all  
dreading the winter like the old woman the nights  
without firewood to hold harmattans at bay  
*we dey for London like we no dey at all*  
chewing cud in the birth of freedom as tragedy  
a used up hope mocking the human condition  
on both sides of the Atlantic: *Na so so enjoyment* (20).

What most passionately affirms the poet's tie to the physical location he designates 'homeland' comes in the nostalgia-laden "Giagbone", which celebrates his father and his emotional attachment to him. This, no doubt, betrays his recognition of home as not just a psychological phenomenon but also a spatial reality. Harry Garuba's (2003/2004: 6) comment on the poem is perceptive:

In this moving elegiac tribute to the life and times of his father, the poet creates a tale of colonial and postcolonial modernity, using the life of one man as its focus. Giagbone, traditional ironsmith who works the forge becomes a motor mechanic in the period of British colonialism and the introduction of motorcars into Nigeria. Taking advantage of the new economy, he excels in his profession of fixing cars (...) Also inserting himself into the cash economy, he sets up a cocoa farm, buys lorries to haul the produce to Lagos (...) for onward shipping to the markets of Europe.

Even if an inclination towards obscure and incoherent imagery impedes easy understanding in most of *London Letter and Other Poems*, the work is, apart from documenting the backward – and forward-looking reflections of the wanderer-poet, also a frank critique of the Nigerian condition and the mentality of the Nigerian at home and abroad. A basic interpretive key to the collection is the metonymic elevation of Lagos as a symbol for Nigeria. The work is a significant postcolonial reflection which

is devoid of self-delusion and undue romanticizing of neither the margins nor the metropole.

The poet-persona problematises the acts of self-definition and self-location, invoking the complex and undeniable inputs of the metropole and the margins in the making of the postcolonial self. By interrogating the mode of identification that the conventional understanding of attachment to the homeland makes available, Ofeimun's work indicates a broader range of the sphere of identity-formation for people in the postcolonial world. This involves eliminating the possibility of being labelled a stranger in the metropole, having opted for the norm of self-apprehension that the city provides –with the implied suggestion of the inconsequentiality of national and racial categories of identification. Ofeimun recognizes the transnational space as site for the transcultural identity that he shares with others. Lagos and London, which the world of *London Letter and Other Poems* represents superficially as antithetical, actually collaborate in shaping him, and he does not see either as perfect or indispensable. The blurb of the collection acknowledges that the poet "presses personal biography and family history into a lyrical engagement with Africa's collective memories", adding that "his concerns are beyond the claims of race and nationality because he seeks "a common morality that cuts across different geographies and histories".

By identifying himself as "a nomad unready for home" the poet-persona hints at the possibility of extending the concept of home. He is particularly conscious of the shaping influence of Europe, based on historical affinity and continuing association. The consciousness that he articulates invites comparison with that of Derek Walcott in his much-anthologized "A Far Cry from Africa" in which he asserts the complexity of his identity. In all, *London Letter and Other Poems* acknowledges the ambivalent nature of postcolonial id/entities. This is a way of acknowledging the hyphenated character of identities in the modern world, validating Peter Childs' claim that "it would be easy to describe the present as (...) 'post-national' in its mixtures of peoples and cultures, its spreading into the global and fragmenting into what is now being called the 'glocal'" (14). The work, arguably, affirms the increasing deterritorialising of identity and the prevalence of double consciousness in much of postcolonial travel writing.

#### Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was substantially revised during my residency as Harry Oppenheimer Scholar at the Centre for African Studies of the University of Cape Town, South Africa between October and December, 2004. I am grateful to the Harry Oppenheimer Institute for the award.
2. The collection contains poems and sequences that were written originally for performances by African dance groups in the United Kingdom.
3. The collections, in manuscript form, had circulated among the friends and associates of the poet long before they appeared in print.
4. This is a book-length exploration of how the city creates and in turn is recreated in postcolonial Kenyan novelistic practices.
5. His extended stay in France only deepened his anger towards, and rejection of, French and, by extension, European dealings with Africa.

6. Maroko, a Lagos slum, was very close to Victoria Island, an exclusive neighbourhood. The shanty structures in the former were demolished and the land taken over by the rich inhabitants of Victoria Island during the military era under the guise of beautifying the city.
7. Eko is the traditional name for Lagos.
8. Established by Dele Momodu, a Nigerian journalist, this 100-page "celebrity magazine" is published monthly in London. It professes a commitment to celebrating "Africa and friends of Africa" and is apparently modelled on the African-American *Ebony*. Its main index of success is material wealth which it captures pictorially as exhibited in high profile parties held at home and abroad.

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