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## **An Ethnographic Reading of Nigerian Migrant Autobiographical Poetry in English**

**AYODEJI ISAAC SHITTU<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

Literature, poetry in particular, has generally been marginalised in discourses on social history. While literature is seen by many critics, particularly social scientists and historians, as essentially fictitious and literary autobiographies as self-aggrandising, poetry, as a sub-genre of literature, is scarcely discussed as autobiography. Very few works have considered the possibilities of Nigerian poetry as auto/biography. Using ethnography of communication and postcolonial theoretical perspectives, this study, examines two purposively selected collections of Nigerian migrant poetry to establish their qualities as autobiographies. It also discusses the ethnographic qualities of Nigerian migrant autobiographical poetry and underscores its quality as not a mere self-aggrandising narration but a blend of self and the culture/society within which the self-narration is constructed.

**Keywords:** Nigerian migrant poetry, ethnoautobiography, social history, self-writing, cultural construction

### **Introduction**

Issues of genre, authorship, audience, ethics, as well as the kinds of cultural studies and the boundary between fiction and non-fiction take centre stage in on-going debates and discourses among theorists of autobiography. These debates address the status of autobiography and other life narratives as sources of social history. Breisach (1983), for instance, describes social history as a form of historiography that shifts emphasis from prominent persons or the elite to the collective past of people of all social levels. It is seen as the account of the daily life and struggle of common people, a kind of counter-hegemonic writing whose aim is to challenge grand narratives, portray the lives of the marginalised and create voice for the silent groups in society. Within the context of the discussion of these issues by autobiography and narrative theorists, such as Sidonie Smith, Julia Weston, Reed-Danahay and Kenneth Mostern, the concept of life narrative is re-envisioned in relation to different issues, sites, kinds and dimensions of representing experience and constructing identity. For example, narrative theorists address issues that concern first-person narrative, auto/fiction and auto/diegetic narration. In this regard, these theorists, particularly Smith and Weston

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(2005), Reed-Danahay (1997) and Mostern (2004), are of the view that autobiographies are both fictive and non-fictive. As nonfiction, it is seen to be experienced by readers as referential or as “real-world”. In this case autobiography is seen as a narrative practice that engages what Smith and Waston (2005) describe as “historically situated practices of self-representation” (p. 368) whose studies have been theorised variously and developed across multiple methodological approaches. According to Smith and Waston (2005), autobiography is both subjective and objective, simultaneously “fictive and self-referential”, and readers experience it as such. Because of this, they argue that there is need for narrative theorists to pay attention to the contexts of the reading of narratives, their locations and positions (p. 368). It is from this angle that postmodern anthropologists, such as Geertz (1983), Neuman (1996), Anderson (2006) and Reed-Danahay (1997), view all writings of life and culture as subjective because they are self-reflexive. They also view them as ethnographic because they are context-situated. In this way, they stress the unique quality of life histories as writings of self and culture.

There are, however, critics and theorists, such as Greene (1971), Griffith (1971) and Hetherington (2011), who disagree with this view by arguing that autobiography is essentially, self-aggrandising. These critics hold the view that autobiography is a self-reflexive literary genre which, unlike other life history genres such as ethnography and documentaries, is subjective and as such not a reliable source of social history. These traditional theorists and critics describe autobiography as dealing essentially with the display of self and revelation of personality (Oriaku, 1990, p. v), and, therefore, fails authenticity test and is not faithful to historical facts (p. 4). For instance, Graham Greene (1971) and John Griffith (1971) are of the view that rather than a full account of the autobiographer's life, autobiography is only “a sort of life” and a work of the imagination in which the autobiographer merely constructed a fictional and literary version of their life, which is a generalization of real life (Griffith, 1971, p. 79). It is for this reason that Hetherington (2011, pp. 3 & 6), Freud (1963, p. 367) and Shaw (1949) describe the idea of the authenticity of narrative voice in literature as problematic and question the reliability of autobiography as social history.

Therefore, one of the two foci of this paper is to explore the inherent ethnography of autobiography through an ethnographic reading of selected Nigerian migrant autobiographical poetry and, therefore, address the misconception that autobiography is essentially self-aggrandising with no value as source of social history. Nigerian migrant autobiographical poetry is established to be culturally constituted and composed of alterity, identity construction and epistemological orientation, and trans-spatiality which are features that demonstrate its form as an expression of self and culture within the context of social history. This kind of writing is described in this paper as

'ethnoautobiography'. The second objective of the paper is to, through the ethnographic reading of Femi Oyebode's *Forest of Transformation* (1991) and Tanure Ojaide's *When it No Longer Matters Where You Live* (1998) as autobiographical poetry, highlight the existence of autobiography in the poetic genre, a sub-genre of literature that has not been given sufficient critical attention.

### Theorising Poetic Autobiography

More problematic than the contention on the reliability of autobiography as a source of social history is the question of the existence of autobiography in the poetry genre. This doubt perhaps dated back to T. S. Eliot's assertion in 1919 that poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from it; and that it has nothing to do with the expression of personality (Eliot, cited in Hetherington, 2011, p. 2). This view has remained despite T. S. Eliot's later reversal of this view and his acknowledgement that poetry is to a great extent the expression of personality (Hetherington, 2011, p. 3).

In this vein, Oriaku (1990), Afolabi (2003), Falola, Afolabi and Adesanya (2008), and Dasylyva and Oriaku (2010) have observed the marginal status of poetic autobiography in critical discourses. They note that despite the fact that the genre of autobiography cuts across the three main genres of literature, the most critically explored is the prose autobiography (p. 303), a view shared by Falola, et al. (2008). According to Afolabi (2003), autobiography in the poetic genre is not common and not many African poets have written their autobiography in the poetic genre. He observes that prose literature has been the norm of autobiography even for renowned poets, while poetry remains a deviation from the norm (p. 548).

The common notion, according to Oriaku (1990) is that the autobiography must be written in "a sustained and often complex story line, the portrayal of clearly distinct and palpable characters and settings, and the alternation of sequences of description and dialogue in the course of the narration" (p. 216). This assumption is maintained by Philippe Lejeune (cited in Afolabi, 2003, p. 550) in his definition of autobiography as "the retrospective narrative in *prose*" in which an individual tells his or her own life story (Emphasis mine). This is possibly due to the structure of poetry as usually versified narrative, which in addition to its economy of words, relies on "concise and imagistic presentation of experience" to communicate ideas (Oriaku, 1990, p. 216).

Notwithstanding this perceived status of poetry, the existence of poetic autobiography has been acknowledged by scholars over time, such as Abrams (1953), Perloff (1970), Ssensalo (1977), Renhder (1981), Oriaku (1990), Falola, Afolabi and Adesanya (2008), and Dasylyva and Oriaku (2010). Apart from evidence of the existence of narrative poems which tell obvious story like in prose narrative, poetry is densely autobiographical.

Oriaku observes that more than any other genre of literature, poetry is used for expression of private and individual experience (p. 217). Rather than presenting the external details and reality of life, poetry is seen to dwell more on the inner self such as perceptions and feelings or attitudes towards life experience. In this way, autobiographical poetry makes up for what it lacks in the description of external details (Oriaku, 1990; Pheder, 1981).

Although the dichotomy between the “inner feelings” and “external details” is arguable, it is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it should be stated that all genres of literature deal with the inner feelings and external details, although the manner these are articulated and the degree of narrative details vary from one genre to another. Essentially, what distinguishes poetry from prose and drama is the manner in which it explores the resources of language and sounds. Poetry is figurative in the representation of life experiences and is particularly appropriate for the immediacy of expression. This fact is reminiscent of William Wordsworth's description of poetry as a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” that are recollected in tranquillity (1976, p. 22). Also, as M.H. Abrams explains, all works of art concern the externalisation of inner feelings, thoughts and perceptions. As he notes:

the primary source and subject matter of a poem, therefore, are the attributes and actions of the poet's own mind; or if aspects of the external world, then these only as they are converted from facts to poetry by the feelings and operations of the poet's mind (Oriaku, 1990, p. 219).

The fact that the existence of poetic autobiography dates back to many years was established by Perloff (1970) who observed that autobiographical poetry was first experimented by Goethe who also was the first poet to write a prose autobiography with “the structure and coherence of a work of art” (Oriaku, 1990 p. 220). The fact that critics like Oonagh (1993), Frye (1957), Shumaker (1955), Geertz (1980) and Brettell (1997) have drawn attention to the increasing blurring of the traditional boundary between autobiography and the conventional genres of literature, and between the poet's autobiography and their autobiographical poems, a practice which, according to Perloff (1970), is a recent development, underscores the previous existence of the sub-genre of poetic autobiography. In fact, it is argued that the brevity which characterizes many autobiographies or autobiographical writings and described by Stephen Shapiro as “the brief self-image”, distinct from the whole autobiography, is the essential quality of poetry (Oriaku, 1990, p. 222). Norman Hepple (cited in Hetherington, 2011, p. 2), describes this quality of poetry as its capacity to distil “key moments of

personal experience” which underscores its autobiographical nature. As Hepple observes:

... much of our poetry is suffused with the individuality of the writer. Directly or indirectly, he reveals his presence in a poem; his feelings vitalize it; his mood colours it; the ruggedness or delicacy of character is betrayed in it; his own thoughts, ideas, and experiences constitute its matter; it becomes, in a way, a mirror of himself... Now poetry of this kind is essentially a modern growth, corresponding to the immense development of individuality of modern times (pp. 8-9).

While Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010) caution about the tendency to indiscriminately describe all poetry and all lyrics as autobiographical, it is a fact that some contemporary lyrical poems are obviously autobiographical, although some are more autobiographical than the others. Thus, as the authors note, there is need to distinguish poetic autobiography from some kind of lyrics whose only claim to being autobiographical is because they belong to lyrics as an umbrella term. According to them, qualities that characterise poetry [lyrics] as autobiography include its “engagement with the uses of memory, “web of reverie”, internal states of consciousness and its ability to connect readers with the text and the poet experientially” (Smith and Watson (2010, p. 277). This quality of connectedness actually defines the ethnography of an autobiography.

Poetic autobiography is a biography of oneself written by one in the poetic genre. It is a poet's narrative account of their personal life in the poetic genre; an eye [“I”-] witness account in which case the poet/writer is the main subject of the narration. Like most prose autobiographies, a poetic autobiography is usually signified by the I-witness point of view although there are poetic autobiographies narrated in the second or third person narrative voice to deliberately conceal the identity of the person whose story is told. It can also take this form in order to subvert the norm as is found in some postcolonial writings.

### **Ethnography of Nigerian Migrant Autobiographical Poetry in English**

The ethnography of literature consists in its articulation of social and cultural experiences. In ethnographic narrations, social and cultural experiences are put in perspective in such a way that life trajectory reveals social restrictions. Since the peculiarity of literature is its appropriation of language uniquely to represent culture and social history, it is inherently

ethnographic. Ethnography of communication implies that language reflects the reality and peculiarities of its cultural milieu. It reflects the connection between language and culture and how it encodes the socio-cultural and physical environment of the speaker of the language (Shittu, 2006, p. 50). Soyinka (1976) describes this as the literature of a social vision, a “creative concern which conceptualises or extends actuality beyond the purely narrative, making it reveal realities beyond the immediately attainable” (p. 66). It is in this vein that Agbali (2008) describes the ethnography of poetry as the ability of poetry to portray the observed mindscape. Thus, poetry is seen, according to Agbali, as “a form of interiorized ethnography” which represents what the mind observed and expressed (in verse) in cryptical and creative manner with particular attention paid to the social and cultural contexts of the experience observed. Through this creative construction of the mind's interrogation of life, Agbali (2008) notes, “a human being experiences a profound confrontation with oneself and one's existential universe that enables the creation of the purview of hominised meaning” (p. 30). This kind of writing is described by Reed-Danahay (1977) as self-reflexive ethnography, otherwise called Autoethnography. It is a writing that represents the ability to transcend the “everyday conceptions of selfhood and social life”, and “involves a rewriting of the self and the social” (p. 4).

Faulkner (2009) describes the ethnography of poetry as that quality that shows its authenticity and social values which consists of its ability to achieve narrative connectedness such that readers are able to experience their own realities through the poem they read. According to Afolabi (2003), this connectedness is a particular quality of African autobiography. He describes African autobiography as defined by the African worldview and culture which are essentially collective and communal (p. 548). This, he notes, is more definitive of post-colonial African autobiography because the colonial experience which defines modern African existence did not merely rupture individuals' life and existence but the collective consciousness of colonised communities. This is evident in Yoruba verbal art which, when in the mode of a popular consciousness, brings about a combination of the individual artistic talents with collective memory (Afolabi, 2003, p. 551). Afolabi describes these multiple narrations in the African writing and particularly in the African autobiography as a “polyvalent autobiography” (p. 558), a “double-edged and ambivalent” autobiography that weaves the writer's culture and collective memory; and the experience of their people and society with their own life experience. This underscores what Afolabi (2003) describes as the “ambiguity” of the autobiography in the African context, a quality that is defined by the “notion of the ‘I’ as a mask” which allows assumption of “many voices and subjects in order to accomplish the people's mission through collectivized imagination” (p. 551). This quality is underscored in

Niyi Osundare's description of his poetic autobiography (cited in Afolabi, 2003) as a cultural practice:

A poet of my category is problematic in terms of autobiography. Because of the kind of culture I was brought in, I was reared in a collective culture and I was socialized into the collectiveness of the culture itself. In the kind of society we are in, the “I” of the person is also the “I” of the other person. So this configuration of “I”s is really what makes up the society. This is not saying there was no individuality in Africa at the time I grew up. It is just that everybody believed the public fate depended upon personal commitment and personal duty. Now my own birth itself cannot be personal [...]. This is why the “I” becomes just one angle of perceiving a major public issue; it doesn't personalize the issue all that much, although it doesn't remove the individual element... (Afolabi, 2003, p. 158)

Post-colonial autobiographies demonstrate the radical uses to which autobiography is put by marginalised subjects whose affirmation of a personal narrative voice, which also transcends itself, is a compelling way to inscribe culture. The essence of this kind of self-narratives is not merely to express grievances or to correct misconceptions but to critique larger cultural and political forces by situating accounts of personal trauma within wider social and institutional contexts in counter-hegemonic ways. Thus, a proper ethnographic reading of Nigerian migrant autobiographical poetry would definitely underscore the sociology of literature and its quality as an alternative history. This culturally constituted poetic autobiography is described as ethnoautobiography, a creative and self-exploratory writing which is situated within 'the ethnic, cultural, historical, ecological and gender background of the author' and explores a diversity of (hi)stories (Kremer, 2003, 9). As a post-colonial writing and discourse, migrant ethnoautobiography interrogates the colonial centres and creates multiple margins. It deconstructs hegemonic and colonising consciousness and master narratives so as to put an end to racialism and essentialist identity politics by stressing the multiple and shifting nature of identity (Shittu, 2014, p. 69).

In this study two collections of Nigerian migrant ethnoautobiographical poems, Femi Oyebo's *Forest of Transformations* (1991) and Tanure Ojaide's *When it No Longer Matters Where You Live* (1998), are purposively selected and critically analysed to

reveal their ethnography as texts that blend both self and culture. This quality characterizes migration and postcolonial texts

### **Myth, Yoruba Epistemology and the Journey of Self-retrieval in Oyebode's *Forest of Transformations***

Femi Oyebode is a Nigerian immigrant in the United States of America and a professor of psychiatry. He has published a number of books of autobiographical poems in which he explores his life as an immigrant in America. *Forest of Transformations* is his third collection of autobiographical poems in which he explores issues of space and marginality and how racial discrimination experienced in exile necessitates a return to the 'native land' through the 'wings of poesy'. These poems are the poet's encoded private experiences which are politically revealing as representing the collective experience of immigrants and a footnote to the post-colonial condition of his homeland that is left behind. The central theme in this collection is the retrieval of the subject's cultural past through memory as a way of mapping his identity and reclaiming his sense of self. He decides to appropriate myths and ancestral belief systems of his Yoruba homeland as identity schema and for the purpose of interrogating the epistemology of the Euro-American geo-space he inhabits. This is seen in the poet's mythical journey into the metaphysical world of his Yoruba ancestors which embodies an epistemology of the race. The concept of birth, living and dying which are the three interrelated levels of existence in the Yoruba consciousness is a very important aspect of this world view

Oyebode employs oral traditional resources in *Forest of Transformations* to represent the Yoruba cultural consciousness and a body of history and traditions of his people. His encounter with this space serves the purpose of self-re-apprehension, retrieval and identity re-construction. In this way he interrogates the historical past and experiential present both of the geo-space and cultural space. Using the journey motif, the poet explores the cultural memory and cultural landscape of his homeland. The self-rediscovery that is the aim of this journey occurs in what Wole Soyinka describes as the "fourth stage" (1976, p. 140), the liminal space that connects the living with the dead and the dead with the unborn. This experience is both mythical and historical. The image of the "Forest of Transformation" is a direct reference to the Yoruba mystical space of 'Igbo Oro' (forest of the deity). Igbo Oro is the grove of the Yoruba ancestors and divinities; it is a space for spiritual interaction between the gods, the ancestors and the initiated for the purpose of social and spiritual rejuvenation. This journey takes place in stages. The poet passes through seven stages towards self-retrieval, and this is demonstrated in the narrative order of the poem. Seven is symbolic in Yoruba consciousness; it is a ritual process which implies completeness and totality. The voyage is a ritual practice of a sort and,

therefore, the choice of the number seven (p. 7) is quite appropriate. This number is invested with mythical significance in the encounter between the “corpse” and the “I” antagonist, the vocal narrative split of the poet. The “corpse” is presumably the neglected *other* which represents the traditional half of the poet persona. The first stage of the encounter is described in the lines below:

The corpse stood up,  
 his eyes sighing, his evening rigid  
 his time not aching in any rhythm,  
 the distance beyond his coffin shifted;  
 he detached his implacable sorrow, undressed  
 dropping each groan, each dark stain of aro...  
 then he turned to me,  
 to my unequal ears, my eccentric chest,  
 (*Forest of Transformations*, p. 48)

This stage of the journey shows a partial quickening of the poet's sense of self-awareness demonstrated in the attempted connection between the poet and the corpse as it turns to communicate non-verbally, but somewhat telepathically to his “unequal ears” and his “eccentric chest”. This encounter mediates the chaos that characterised the poet's exilic consciousness resulting in some harmony of being. To the poet, deliberately coming to terms with this past and essence is a means of recovering himself and identity as shown in the following lines:

As he stood in the middle of his rooms,  
 I floated, in and out of his spirit...  
 He began to shed his skin, to surrender;  
 (*Forest of Transformations*, pp. 48-49)

As the persona negotiates the spiritual and cultural spaces of the homeland and gains some understanding of its essence, the corpse “began to shed his skin” and “to surrender”. This, however, requires a confrontation with his past, his travails and human pains; he must confront this history of himself in the “corpse” and accept it:

i listen to the child in his shiver,  
 and we spoke without words, without warmth  
 now ochre, now topaz, now ague,  
 the stain of famine, his many diseases, his history sobbed;  
 i looked again at him, at his joints,  
 his borrowed appendages, space crowded into his breath,  
 ....  
 i flouted his gravity, floating in his cough,  
 glistening, assailed by the corners of his sin,  
 the gout in his nights gathered;

A careful reading of these lines reveals that the poet's experiences are also those of his homeland in its birth, growth, the challenges and pains of colonialism and the processes of decolonisation which necessitated the migration in the first place. Most migrants are exiled from the homeland mentally and are ashamed to identify with home; this only complicates their trauma and identity crises. As post-colonial subjects, migrants need to negotiate their dual consciousness and histories. Thus, the poet attempts to interrogate these contact zones and the realities they throw up. This is reminiscent of a similar encounter in *Master of the Leopard Hunt*, another poem by the poet. Here he eventually achieves some understanding of himself and his essence, resulting in a union of the two selves. This is celebrated in a cultic dance which suggests a successful restoration of his tie with his homeland:

We danced, we settled into a storm,  
partly the storm ourselves, partly the dark night,  
we shivered in this territory of hidden dreams,  
we were not graceful in our fall when we fell  
as a cool rain and gathered into a puddle,  
into a comfortless huddle... (*Master*, p. 49)

The importance of the poet's appropriation of Yoruba mythology and supernatural dimension and their transmutation into the physical and geo-space of exile is in the fact that the divinities that make up the pantheon represent the collective history, memory and social consciousness of the people. As Oha (2009) observes, these divinities are “texts of collective consciousness, which are now used in framing the post-colonial presence of the past”; they serve as a 'semiotic system' that is useful for the purpose of re-apprehension and re-articulation of social experience (p. 187). In the blurb of his first collection of poems, *Naked to Your Softness and Other Dreams* (1989), Oyebode's poetry is described as having been influenced by the “landscape of Yoruba mythology and the place of the individual in a changing world.” Through the appropriation of this cultural landscape, he foregrounds “the irreconcilable postmodern chaos which creates the tensions within” and the geographical and cultural contradictions that this engendered (Okome 1996, p. 4). The articulation of the oppositional realities, which define postmodern and postcolonial existence in the poetry of Oyebode, is described by Oshita (1996) as the ability of the poet to explore the tensed relationship between the *self* and the *other*; between the world of his Yoruba birthplace and Europe where he lives (p. 26).

### **Space, displacement and alienation in Ojaide's *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live***

Similar issues, as are raised in the poems discussed above, are

engaged in Tanure Ojaude's *When it No Longer Matters Where You Live, No* although in a different way. In this poetic autobiography, exile is associated with racial discrimination, individualism and deceptive glamour, while the homeland is portrayed as oppressive and squalid, resulting in the persona's conclusion that neither geo-space is conducive for self-realisation. *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live* particularly addresses the social and political conditions of the homeland and how they produce the sense of dispossession and alienation that leads to the mass exodus of Nigerians to Europe and America. The collection is a reconstruction of the tragedies and hardship that result from the capitalist system of post-colonial Nigeria and the ruptures that it causes in the lives of the people. The situation at home is so bad that the migrant has no respite nor can lay claim to any place as a haven. Wherever the migrant resides, at home or abroad, he or she is confronted with hardship, displacement and marginalisation. Hence, it does not matter where we live. The poet addresses these issues in various poems. For instance, in the poem, 'Ships', the poet takes the reader back through memory lane by comparing the present migration to the North and the initial trans-Atlantic migration of African slaves popularly referred to as the Middle Passage, "the blacked-out holocaust" (*No Matter*, p. 16). To the poet, a ship is today a sign of exploitation and dispossession just as it was during the slave trade and territorial colonisation of Africa:

Ships have never been  
a good sign to me.  
Once launched, they  
dispossess pious lands  
of their gold and youth  
and taint waters with  
cadavers of stowaways. (p. 16)

In the experience of Africa and Africans, both at home and in the diaspora, ships are symbols of slavery and colonialism. During the slave trade era, they were used to carry away young Africans, male and female, into captivity, and when the ships came back during the proper colonisation of Africa, they were used to steal African resources. Today, with the connivance of African neo-colonial rulers, they are continually used as instruments of exploitation. The poet expresses this concern in "Libation" where he accuses the neo-colonial rulers of destroying the homeland, giving the enterprising ones no alternative other than to migrate to the North:

The republic shrinks from its shores into a mole on the map  
And populates the states with dunes of dry leaves  
Fishers and hunters return without consolation—  
When the brush flares with frenzy, exodus

Of the sharp-witted, skilled, and driving ones;  
The sack folds without the storage of corn or millet. (p. 39)

As a result of this inclement condition at home, many Nigerians migrated to Europe and America. The poet is one of them. As an eye-witness of these conditions, the poet tells his own story of home and exile which is similar to the experiences of many others like him who had gone the same route. He tries to warn those who may want to follow the same road he had followed not to do so because exile is not the paradise it is painted to be. He warns that however chaotic and alienating the homeland may be, exile is worse and that one does not know how homely the native land is until one experiences the marginalisation and trauma that are associated with living in a foreign land:

There is none so hurt at home  
who forgets the pain outside—  
that's the persistent ache one carries  
until home's safe to return to,  
when it no longer matters  
where you choose to live! (p. 77)

In part IV, the poet describes the futility of going abroad and discourages those who think that going abroad will solve the problem from such ambition. In the poem entitled “Immigrant voice”, which is written in Nigerian Pidgin, the poet tries to describe what it really is like to live in America as an immigrant and to tell his fellow Delta people that the real America he confronts daily is different from those in movies and pictures

Back home to here na long long way;  
The picture of here from home is so different  
From the wilderness I de see night and day.  
(p. 105, lines 1 – 3)

He then paints America as it is to an immigrant.

This na America with homeless for every corner  
That I think I de a numberless world?  
Where all the fine fine things in that picture  
Everybody dress kamkpe that I think  
Na angels, Hollywood Heaven they misspell?  
I work standing so te for minimum wage,  
Get dollars for one hand and give them out for the other.  
I come back from work so dead I can't eat or sleep  
And before dawn I don get up to begin another slave day.  
(p. 105, lines 4 – 12))

He lists some of the deprivations that are the lots of the immigrant to America, including loneliness, segregation and discrimination, and explains to his family at home that there is not much difference between America and Nigeria, because in America, too, “beggar, thief, poor, all dem de boku” (p. 106):

Sometimes I cry my eyes red for night in bed.  
 Wetin my eye don see for here pass pepper  
 Make me de prepare to go sweet home.  
 If God de, make e punish them  
 We drive me from Africa come hell.

(p. 106, lines 36–40)

It is very significant that this particular poem is written in Nigerian Pidgin because it is indicative of the audience. He writes to his family members in the Niger Delta area where Pidgin is very popular as a means of communication. It also suggests that he wants others outside the region to read his warning. Otherwise, he would have written the poem in the local dialect of his people.

The poet describes the discrimination that immigrants face in America even from fellow blacks who claim they belong to the first generation of migrants. This perhaps refers to African Americans who think that these new immigrants are illegal immigrants. By describing the status of these earlier immigrants, the poet shows that all blacks are treated as second-class citizens whether they were born in America or brought there. In the poem entitled “Deportations”, the poet laments:

From the way  
 these great-grandchildren of migrants  
 talk of deporting newly arrived immigrants,  
 calling them illegal and other stinking names,  
 you would think  
 they don't know their family tree,  
 don't know their fathers,  
 And where they came from.  
 They won't accept they are bastards! (p. 107)

Currently in the United States of America, there is serious animosity between African immigrants and African Americans, even among the younger generation. Many African Americans view their Black brothers and sisters who come to America voluntarily as competitors for Black quotas in the world of work and business. The poet may be describing them as “bastards” because, instead of uniting to fight for equality they fight each other as if they are not related. The word “bastard” may also have been used to describe the history of the African Americans themselves as former slaves.

By describing African Americans as slaves, the white community transfers the same quality to all Blacks. To most of American Whites all Blacks are the same; they are from the same source: Black Africa. As such, to them, all Blacks are “bastards.” Because of these insults and denigration, the poet becomes nostalgic of all the fellowship and relationships he had left behind when he went to America. Home offers a sense of belonging, acceptance, security and the possibility of positive relationship. In the poem entitled “Accents”, the poet laments:

When I wake, my face  
wet from drowning,  
I long for days  
that break on a plateau. (p. 17, lines 18–21)

He remembers the culture of his people and the festival in which he participated and counts his loss:

I left behind  
A column of faithful words  
Whose shadows mob my tongue—  
I have left behind  
*egodi's* yearly call  
from its sky trail,  
I have left behind  
the network of voices  
that give warmth,  
I have left behind  
A delta of fortune. (p. 18, lines 22–33)

In this collection of poems, Ojaide paints the life of an exile from his own personal experience. He describes how inclement conditions at home drive Nigerians into migrating to Europe and America in search of the Golden Fleece. He, however, shows that exile is neither a haven nor a paradise for the immigrant, but that, like home, it also has its headaches and trauma. In an effort to tell his life history as an exile, a migrant to America, he has to narrate the culture and geo-political landscapes of home and exile. In other words, he weaves his story into the stories of his homeland which he left behind and that of his adopted country.

### **Conclusion**

Nigerian migrant autobiographical poetry provides a very interesting and unique perspective from which to view the relationship between culture, space and the construction of identity within a trans-national and multicultural context. It reveals how migrants have to cross cultural and

physical borders and bridge gaps between these borders. The 'long geographical perspective' of migrants and their displacement from their homelands or reference points force them to live with what Eva Hoffman (1991, p, 135) has described as 'double vision'. Migrants' life histories are stories of life across borders of cultures and as such are actually ethnographies for their new country and the one they left behind.

While the poems that are discussed above narrate the individual (personal) trauma of their subjects as postcolonial subjects, their stories are told as forms of interrogation of social and cultural activities and milieus. These life stories are culturally constituted and autobiographically constructed in order to underscore “the tension and interplay between the individual and the social” (Jaffe, 1997, p. 145). This disposition is derived from what Jaffe has described as the “recognition that all writing is “writing for” (a purpose) and “writing in” (a particular social, cultural, and political framework)” (p. 145). In this context, these ethnoautobiographies serve as a vehicle of emancipation, which encourages the individual to interrogate the *self as other*, thereby generating critical agency in the stories of one's life “as the polyglot facets of self and other engage, interrogate, and embrace” (Spry, 2001, p. 708).

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