

# **Where Do We Go From Here? Niger Delta, Crumbling Urbanscape and Migration in Tanure Ojaide's *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live*<sup>1</sup>**

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## ABSTRACT

Compartmentalizing time in order to engage with specific historical epochs and how they shaped African urban development, this paper turns to Tanure Ojaide's, *When It no Longer Matters Where You Live* (1998), in order to explore the ripple effects and exilic implications of state neglect of postcolonial urbanscapes in the Niger Delta. More specifically, the paper engages with the author's concern for the proverbial paradox of neglect of the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria by successive governments. Beyond the fact that the situation serves as a vector for the increasing consciousness of subnationalism in the region, the paper is concerned with the dynamics and the processes of migration that the situation produces either as overt transnational exile, or covert but thoroughly flawed postcolonial neologism of cosmopolitanism. I argue that the onus falls on the government to make conditions of urbanscapes in the homeland attractive and worth living for the retrieval of its human resources from the vortex of dispersal that has been exacerbated by globalization.

**Keywords:** *Niger Delta, subnationalism, cosmopolitanism, exile, return.*

*For decades now, large numbers of African residents have had to contend with urban living marked by decaying infrastructures and long-term dearth of formal employment, as well as increased levels of violence, disease, political oppression and incursion of external economic and political interests—Primorac 2008: 1*

The concept of cityscapes generally conjures up sensibilities of development and serves to illuminate reflections on social materiality by which good living is measured within the domain of urbanization. The evolution of Niger Delta cities, like many other African cities, must be construed against the backdrop of Western imperialism. When European activities began in this part of the country in form of trade, it was on equal terms. The Niger Delta people then had enjoyed the envious status of middlemen between Europeans and other African neighbours, especially those from the other side of what came later to be known as River Niger. But the equal relations soon gave way to an interaction of inequality, whereby trade in African slaves, rather than exchange of African

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commodities for European products, became the core definition of commerce. Truly, the Niger Delta retained for a long time its position as a link in the trade; however, the knowledge that it was made to compromise the humanity of its fellow black people, either from within the region or outside, already indicated the devaluation of the people's relationship with European merchants. Nevertheless, the trade relations laid the foundation for the formation of Niger Delta cities. The period between the abolition of the Slave Trade and the formal colonization of the region as part of Nigeria in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, made obvious the foundation of the Niger Delta polis. If the Western polis, after which most African cities were ostensibly patterned in their evolution, exuded vibrant productivity and were ultimate beneficiaries of such productivity, Niger Delta cities were created in a qualified simulation. Qualified simulation because rather than being the ultimate beneficiaries of the proceeds from oil palm trade, the benefits accrued almost exclusively to Britain and other European cities. Whatever benefits of urbanity they could garner in the era of occupational colonialism were also soon to be eroded, laying the foundation for the paradoxical dystopia created thereafter, from the colonial to the post-independence era. Alagoa (2004: 10) gives a vivid account of the historical and contemporary dynamics at work in minimizing the spatial privilege and relevance of the Niger Delta urban space.

The above then explains why the imperative of subnationalism in the Niger Delta politics can no longer be ignored. Going by Forrest's (2004: 2) account of postcolonial African subnationalism, there is no doubt that the political mobilization of ethnic and regional nationalities as counterweight to the aspirations of national governments is in most cases a response to the attempt by the political class to endorse and perpetuate national narratives and practices of marginalization instituted in the colonial days. As well as the collectivism of subnationalism, individuals have also taken it upon themselves to articulate the fears and aspirations of their ethnic and regional formations. This is what Forrest refers to as "individuals' conscious or ascriptive adherence to ethnic or regional identity patterns" (ibid.).

In a similar vein, Okunoye offers an explanation on the increase in the predisposition towards subnational literary imagination in postcolonial Africa, as against the continuity of an affirmation of homogeneous experiences:

To insist on perpetuating paradigms that affirm the continued relevance of shared experiences across national boundaries as basis for appraising African writing in the twenty-first century is to overlook the fact that much of the African literary imagination is no longer responding to shared experiences the way it did in the years immediately following independence. (2008: 413)

Specifically for Ojaide, the recurrence of the Niger Delta condition in his poetry stems from the huge paradox that dogs the history of the region, that is, the "paradox of sitting on oil and yet remaining impoverished" (Ojaide: 1999: 244).

Any wonder then that the collection *When It no Longer Matters Where You Live* begins with a reflection on ships, the mnemonic and symbolic reminder of the genesis of marginalization and despoliation of the Niger Delta space. The poem “Ships” provides insight into questions of memory and identity particularly as formulated through the commonality of experiences, both internal and exponential, that come together in shaping the political economy of a people or nation. As Erll and Rigney (2006: 111) assert, attention is beginning to shift from “‘sites of memory’ that act as placeholders for the memories of particular groups... to the cultural processes by which memories become shared”. Nonetheless, the veracity of such an assertion may need to be articulated with some measure of qualification. This is in view of the fact that considered from the purview of the duo, the abstraction of memory can be sometimes interpreted to underwrite hegemonic discourses. To appropriately come to terms with the argument of “Ships”, therefore, one must begin to conceive the idea of memory as one that straddles both the “sites” and “processes” by which it is legitimized. Therefore, one may have to turn to the notion of counter-memory to situate the social condition, which is both historical and contemporary, and with which the poem engages. Drawing this kind of distinction is also needful because:

Current interest in memory has largely been driven by a desire to explore the various ways in which people remember the past and the many versions of the past that have fallen outside the purview of professional historians. As a result, ‘memory’, has tended in practice to become synonymous with ‘counter-memory’, defined in opposition to hegemonic views of the past and associated with groups who have been ‘left out’, as it were, of mainstream history. The study of such memories has been based on a belief in the importance and possibility of ‘recovering’ memories which were once there and which have since been ‘lost or ‘hidden’. This recovery project is itself linked in complex ways to contemporary identity politics and to the desire of particular groups to profile their common identity by claiming distinct roots in a particular historical experience. (Rigney 2005: 13)

Therefore, in “Ships”, the sight of ships also induces the unpalatable binary unit of the spectrum of memory: “moments of bleak despair” as against the other much desirable side of memory: “its happy times” (American Archivist 2002: 2). Rather than be reprieved from the question of what accounts for the usual cleavage in the spectrum, one is instead drawn into probing further what happens when one side of the parties of memory shares the “moments of bleak despair”. Within the discourse of counter-narrative, the assumption reveals a guilty propensity and liability for lack of fair play on the part of the other side whose shielded but calculated corner-cuttings must have yielded “happy times” to the detriment of the brunt-bearing party. To face it, the foundation of Western capitalism and its practice in Africa were heralded by mercantile voyages. These voyages, rather than producing equal partners between Africa and the West, resulted in a relationship tilted to the binary permutation of the superior and the

inferior, the master and the slave, the colonizer and the colonized, and within the analysis of materialist schema, the rich and the poor. The link that the sight of “ships” provides for the defeated between the past and the future brings into perspective the question about the process of memory sharing for a people or nation. This is why the persona in no unambiguous terms expresses his reservations about the sight of ships. It will be worthwhile to quote the poem in full:

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

The banditry of the Armada  
could only be pride to the godless!  
The fleet that devoured captives  
could only be libated by torturers!  
The piracy of conquistadors  
could only be blessed by evil priests!

In Rhine-flushed Rotterdam,  
the vast port and museums  
told tales of wave-borne ships.  
I recalled the Middle Passage,  
the blacked-out holocaust.

Ships are still setting sail  
for distance seas  
to wreck inland peace.  
And there are ports as far apart  
as Mars and America  
reserved for the next fleet!

But no new ships bring back  
what has been hauled away  
with fire-spitting wizardry.  
They can only savage more,  
infesting coastlines with mines.

May *Olokun* break their spell<sup>2</sup>  
and dump them on the sea-bed! (16)

Broadly, the poem bears out the remark about the history of imperialism and how this history precipitates the present world order within the domain of globalization. For there is indeed a sense in which the poem provides an incisive

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<sup>2</sup> *Olokun* is one of the several Niger Delta gods that Ojaide invokes in his poetry, usually for justice intervention and revolution.

and concise account of imperialism as experienced in various parts of the world and as an act of coercion perpetrated and driven by the same form of consciousness and epistemology emanating from the West. Laying the groundwork for the present world order, it becomes clear how ships in the histories of imperialism are crucial to the various experiential epochs. This is why in the conception of globalization as closely linked to the historical experience of “trade, colonialism and nation state” (Murphy 2006: 139), the centrality of ships cannot be ignored. It definitely accounts for why Ojaide weaves a web that connects the depredation and exploitation of Spanish “Armada” to the imperial experience perpetrated by the conquistadors of South America, and to the maritime commerce of continental Europe. It was this that metamorphosed in its abhorrence into the climax of the “Middle Passage”, an experience through which Africa lost a huge productive population in millions over a period of about four centuries. But in specific terms, there is also a sense in which the poem, especially in the last three stanzas, speaks to the contemporary state of imperialism and in which ships still remain crucial in the execution of its agenda. Therefore when the persona remarks that “Ships are still setting sail/ for distance seas/ to wreck inland peace”... infesting coastlines with mines”, the truth of such remark also applies in particular ways not only to the Nigerian nation but more specifically to the Niger Delta from where the poet hails. Indeed, the exploration activities of crude oil by Euro-American transnational oil firms in the region have led more to the impoverishment and exposure of the people to various industrial hazards. As an externalization of a subconscious trauma, it then explains why in the concluding couplet the persona invokes one of the many Niger Delta goddesses, “Olokun” to “dump” perpetrators “on the sea-bed!” For African cosmopolitanism or migrancy, therefore, the neutrality of attachment to place is an impossibility for as long as cosmopolitans and migrants are alive to the knowledge that the comfort of other lands may have been reaped off their homes of origin.

Moreover, the holdovers of the despoliation of ships in Africa have created nation states in the wake of colonialism. By virtue of their colonial design, these nation states have given rise to cities and other urbanscapes, but most of the cities have not all endured in terms of the sophistication and material prosperity of Western cities. What then could be responsible for the decadence of African urbanscapes? In the case of the Niger Delta, like in other places, the factors are as internal as they are external. For instance, the dynamics of the imperial relations of the West to Africa are perceivable in “Accents”. The poem relates again an experience of homecoming in which the longing for a “rediscovery of the ordinary” (Ndebele 1992: 434) in terms of the reunion of old lovers, becomes a onerous task, since the process of reaching out by the foot-loose exile to his old-time lover means a “walk through the slums” and a “jump over gutters” (17). But it is not enough to assert that the evolution of Niger Delta urbanscapes in the wake of colonialism was bound to hit a social and economic dead end evidenced in the undermining scenery of “slums” and filthy “gutters”. Truly the exploitation of the natural resources of this region has to a large extent

constituted a source of fortune for the West through its prospecting firms; nonetheless, the level of urban degradation and economic emasculation that results in the experience of exile as being discussed in this paper is also significantly attributable to the level of irresponsibility of governance in the country. Therefore, upon the persona's realization that he has been forced to make home of a distant land, he laments the fact that "I have left behind/ a delta of fortune". The anger and the rage that the paradox of living far away from the "fortune" of home breeds is unleashed in the concluding stanzas, in which the persona also holds a critical view on the narrative of the sophistication of western urbanscapes:

And here, the parade  
that illuminates the street  
into a constellation of stars.  
I am asked to compliment  
the vulture for its face-lift  
that translates beauty  
into marketable beef.  
I am asked to practice love  
that is doomed to flowers,  
cats and dogs...  
I lock away sad airs  
from creasing my face

The sunbird left behind  
can never be matched  
by this made-up face. (18)

The use of "vulture" in this part of the poem reminds us of one of Ojaide's collection, *The Fate of Vultures* (1990). If in the said collection the metaphor of "vulture" is said to have referred to the Nigerian political class of the Second Republic that fleeced the nation of its wealth and created undue privileges of insulation from accountability, in this particular case in *When It no Longer Matters Where You Live*, one can argue that there is an attempt to balance the narrative in such a way that exposes the collaborators of the ruling class from the external end of the spectrum of oppression. Thus the continued culpability of the West in the economic oppression that most African nations suffer is once again brought to the foreground. But more crucially, the poem is an incisive commentary on the widely held view regarding the present condition of western postmodern cities. That is, in a bid to celebrate the "surface", not only is the "depth" undermined, but the source of the ostentation of such cities—the developing nations—goes completely unacknowledged, as people bask in the infrastructural wonders that the cities provide. It accounts for why the persona refuses to tow the popular path of praise singing about the wonders of western cities. Instead, he questions the artificiality of the manipulation by which "the vulture" "translates beauty/ into marketable beef". Thus the artificiality of conditions in western cities forces a comparative response on his consciousness

as he remembers home and declares “The sunbird left behind/can never be matched/ by this made-up face”.

What, moreover, is interesting about the collection is the way it engages with the incapacitation of the Niger Delta urbanscape on the one hand, and on the other, some other major cityscapes of the Nigerian nation, showing that the author’s subnational consciousness blends with the national. Putting Abuja into perspective, “Libation” engages with the monstrosity of misrule that the military represented in the 1990s. The economic emasculation that the system engendered is metaphorically captured thus:

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 fire flares with frenzy, exodus  
of the sharp-witted, skilled, and divining ones;  
the sack folds without storage of corn or millet. (39)

On the one hand, the various sanctions imposed on Nigeria by the international community in the wake of the annulment of the June 12, 1993 election already had a way of taking toll on the entire nation— from Abuja, the country’s capital city to other spaces, both rural and urban, creating all manner of crises in the nation. At the centre of it all is a one-man dictatorial imposition of General Sani Abacha who turned himself into an unquestionable figure and held the entire nation to ransom until he died later in 1998. But before he died the poet responded to the condition his regime created and the precipitous edge to which he had pushed the nation, to the extent that even those who had escaped as exiles or cosmopolitans to other lands could not be at rest. “Libation” engages with this Abacha phenomenon further:

This crisis cripples with pain  
Fatalities rub eyebrows with wet rags  
My people herded into a hole  
Suffer the suffocating smoke of want  
Nowhere’s secure from approaching flames

The land will continue to suffer for a long time,  
Even if it survives this spate of bloodshot eyes. (40)<sup>3</sup>

But if the above speaks to a national situation of paradox, it is in fact a preliminary commentary on the paradox of “resource curse” in the Niger Delta: the fact that the region whose wealth redounds to the prosperity of the nation is the one ironically typified by poverty and crisis.<sup>4</sup> For it is “In search of a Fresh

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<sup>3</sup> The reference is General Abacha, the Nigerian military dictator whose eyes were always bloodshot from an incurably inebriated lifestyle.

<sup>4</sup> Explaining the concept of resource endowment, Pegg (2006: 1–2) intimates that the “resource curse” phenomenon is closely associated with the proverbial “negative effects the North Sea oil revenues had on Dutch industrial production.” Taken out of context, the term is

Song” that there is a complete unfurling of this paradox. The search for environmental sanity in the foremost oil city of Warri can at best be compared to the search for rivers in a desert. The environmental eyesore must also be viewed as an indication that poverty rules the space and whatever myth of the “House of Wonders” that may have been woven around the city has completely disappeared.<sup>5</sup> The evidence reinforces the argument that although “the dream of the successful city which...accompanied independence for African nationalists can be characterised as a modernist dream” (Freund 2007: 142), the realization of this dream has however been vitiated by the connivance of both the political elite and the overbearing influence of the multinational companies, in the case of the Niger Delta cities.

In the specific case of Warri, the paradox becomes most evident when the poem unfolds, with an objectification of scenes and conditions compatible only with socio-economic exclusion. As usual in this collection, there is a sustained deployment of metaphors and images of motion and movement to drive home the point about the dystopian state of an oil-rich cityscape:

I wandered into Igbudu Market road,  
a labyrinth of dishevelled uniform—  
ochre-painted, grey, and unlit.  
I have seen an armada of fecal trash  
assault with toxic blast that lays waste  
the afflicted neighbourhood— damp, sour air  
that disperses death in the isolated ward.  
I have witnessed bloated feet wade naked  
through this slush of unlettered street  
everywhere urinary, toilet, or vast spittoon;  
I faced sweat-logged wraiths as easily knocked  
down by motor-bikes as by fever and want.

I walked through malarial rot—  
fetid pools of floors, evacuated hearths;  
pots rust from dearth of naira.  
Can I, burning from thirst, drink from here  
without contracting one of the many plagues;  
Or ready for lunch split the leftovers  
without a running stomach to contend with?

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now being used as a descriptive term for the negative consequences of over-dependence on the fabulous revenue from export of mineral resources by producing countries. Some of these are the drawing of “capital and labour away from agriculture and manufacturing”. Besides, he cites Michael Ross, who explains in a related manner that the situation also encourages the development of a rentier psychology which makes government less interested in levying domestic taxes, and ultimately makes it feel less accountable to the citizenry. All these are telling epiphanies in the history of Nigeria since the commencement of crude oil prospecting.

<sup>5</sup> In “Verandahs of Power: Colonialism and Space in Urban Africa” Myers (2003: 1–2) reflects on the late 19th century colonial edifice in Zanzibar named House of Wonders. It was regarded as an achievement in its replication of a Western city structure in Africa. But the sorry and frail state of the structure today can as well be described as a metaphor for the abandonment that many African cities have suffered in recent times.



O heart sore from this graphic vision,  
what love of residents of drifting detritus  
will lead me to share that loaf  
ever stale in the mouth, ever damp  
but fills a million mouths?  
I have encountered the raw end of another life,  
the smothering mire I want destroyed.

And my song rises out of this haunting vision,  
a vast net that's caught so many  
that they don't even know how deep  
and gone they are in the trap,  
Igbudu Market road. (44)

The case of “Igbudu Market road”, a symbol of economic and social capital in the city of Warri, brings to the foreground the contradictory condition of the Niger Delta cityscape. This is the more so when one reckons that, assessed against the backdrop of the global capitalist consolidation of division of labour, the relevance of the city is in its identification with the production of crude oil which is thereafter exported mainly to the West with greater values to its buyers than for the seller. According to Garth Myers and Murray (2006: 3–4), African cities, right from the earliest period of contact with the West, had been central to the prosecution of global capital and commodity flow; however, “the current phase of global economic restructuring has brought about a wholesale transformation in transnational division of labour that, in turn, has put into motion new urban dynamics on a world scale”.

The basic idea of the current division of labour presupposes that cities that have resources of whatever kind to contribute to the global commodity and capital flow, even if they are rated in the “second tier” category, will find relevance which will tell on their economic buoyancy, and rub off positively on their dwellers. That the city of Warri with the entire region it represents is buoyant is not in contest. Not least because, if there is a growing American and indeed Western interest in Africa, following from “threats of terrorism and interruption in oil production” in the Middle East (Barnes 2005: 1), Warri and other such Niger Delta cities are considered major hosts and attraction of such economic structure and practice. This then forms the basis for arguing that the Niger Delta cities’ condition turns the paradigm of the dialectic of cities on its head. Besides, the whole idea of basing connectivity of one city to the global scheme with respect to economic productivity and viability, conflicts in this context with practices of globalization which ultimately exclude African cities from their resources and productivity. Or how else does one take the assertion that “cities with little or nothing to offer in the global marketplace have faced the dire prospect of disappearing into ruin and decay, and thereby ‘falling off the world map,’ at least in terms of connections to the world economy”? (Robinson and Smith cited in Myers and Murray 2006: 4) For Warri, as can be seen in the

poem, it is not a case of being faced by the “prospect” of decay of ruin and decay; the reality is already evident.

But we must also transcend the fixation on global politics in the casting of the dragnet of blames. This is because on another plane, the deplorable condition of the city of Warri is also an indictment of the political elite that refuses to channel the proceeds from oil to the development and maintenance of the region. On yet another plane, the mood and diction in this particular poem—from the imagery of “armada of fecal trash” to “vast spittoon” to “damp, sour air” to “fetid pools of floor”—point to the fact that the division between cities as global and non-global, among other such permutations, cannot hold water in absolute terms. Not the least because for all its perceived dystopian condition, the mood and the imagery invoked in this poem are reminiscent of T.S. Eliot’s depiction of western cities in his poetry, pointing ultimately to the commonality of dystopia in every city structure irrespective of its location.

If cosmopolitanism presupposes a kind of feeling “at home in the world” (Brennan 1997), there is a sense in which this is redefined by Ojaide in *When It no Longer Matters Where You Live*. For him, the idea of feeling homely in the world must also mean a cosmopolitan existence predicated upon a compelling home mooring. Hence, the cities by which one’s national and subnational spaces are defined deserve reflective attention; not least because these cities are best at appropriating both the subnational and national pulses by which the state of the nation is measured. The passion behind the search for home in the world does not preclude Ojaide’s search for decency of living in the world created within the subnational and national domain of his country. Not for him the complicit silence on particularity of identity that arises from the “continuing emphasis on hybrid, interstitial” posture and which “all too readily occludes the particularities of identities of the lives of specific hybrid groups” (Thieme 2003: 1). This is why much as his articulation lends voice to the hybrid identity that the cosmopolitan existence precipitates, an idea extensively explored in poems like “Safe Journey”, the question about “the death of the nation-state” (Brennan 1997: 2) does not arise within the domain of Ojaide’s cosmopolitan practice. In other words, the nation as well as the subnation is alive and kicking in his poetry. Therefore, the idea of the “rootless cosmopolitan”, to borrow cautiously from Appiah (2006: 4), that is, the one without a community but who is of every place in the universe, requires re-inscription in *When It no Longer Matters Where You Live*. On this score, the justification for a claim of this nature is informed by the traversing within his immediate cityscape of the Niger Delta and the extension of the travel across the nation through a dialogue with cities of other parts outside the Niger Delta. To that extent, where the subnational mandate may become vulnerable to an indictment of essentialism, the involvement of other cities provides the broadly needed reflections that do more than centralize and unite the cities. But this involvement of other cities also shows the exponential threat of globalization in dynamics of the cities and how the dystopian condition that results becomes an inducement for exile. The nine-part poem “Home Song” says much about this.

For instance, “City in my Heart” provides the contrast that the northern city of Jos conjures when the oil city of Warri is mentioned. Thus, the celebration of the ecological sanity of Jos becomes for the Niger Delta poet, a lamentation of a subnational texture over the dirt and pollution that have turned Warri as well as other Niger Delta cities into an eyesore. The environmental neglect which is one of the many ways of “killing the goose” (Okonta and Douglas (2003: 56) has also aggravated the whimsical state campaign of exclusion and unemployment that runs hand in hand with the multinational corporations’ collusion to “diminish the humanity of every person and every institution involved”, be it in Port Harcourt, or Ughelli, Yenagoa, Bonny or Warri or “all the other urban centres in the Niger Delta.” (192).<sup>6</sup> It then becomes understandable when “City in my Heart” opens with mixed feelings: “I come to familiar paradise for a season— /I come to the plateau of hills and rocks, driven out/ by dirt and doubts from Warri’s delta lows” (61). If the narrative of “Home Song” is unique in the way it articulates the exilic implications of the deplorable condition of the cityscapes, it is not however in the last part, as would be expected, that one encounters the exilic consequences: the third part lays it bare.

While the fourth part expresses the initial wave of this exilic experience as one that is first internal by announcing proleptically, “we shall be homeless within our frontiers/ as long as the looting riots continue” (55), the third part comes to terms with the full blown implications of external exile as the direct and logical consequence of the neglect and economic exclusion of the masses in the country by the tripartite alliance of the state, the elite and the multinationals. Therefore:

The eyes blurred from exhaustion  
see no farther than the next half-meal  
& next week fresh exiles will take to flight  
to distances without roots (51).

The inconvenience of homeland is further reinforced in “In Dirt and Pride” where it is revealed:

Hardship has smothered the firebrands  
that once blazed a liberation trail.  
The land smothers every flower  
That flourishes a salutary fragrance...

Every blessing that falls into the land  
vanishes from hands, eyes ablaze—  
the jinx of failure litters dead dreams around. (75–76)

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<sup>6</sup> Okonta and Douglas (2003) cite the case of Shell which “maintains its own private police force, imports its own arms and ammunition, and at least in two instances has admitted payments to the Nigerian military” (58–9). The multinational is also notorious for keeping, among other units, “a special ‘strike force’, which ... was deployed to suppress community protests, armed with automatic weapons and tear gas canisters” (60).

The above may then be summoned as the basis for making a beeline for one form of exile or the other. And because this is usually to the West, the hopes that motivate such decisions may not be unconnected with the utopian view that is created about Western cities and the promise they presumably offer especially in the age of globalization. The “mobility of capital” (Brennan 1997: 6) has also come to be associated with mobility of human capital from the South to the North. It is a logical consequence of Africa’s capital flight to the North. The frenetic search is however concealed in the smokescreen of a better life that is presumably offered in the North. It is more so in view of the efficiency of information technology through which there is the compression of time and space.

Buoyed by this attractive assurance, the dispersal of Africans, now more than ever before, is presented in the parlance of cosmopolitanism. Yet, for the most successful of such cosmopolitans, the attraction of exile in the euphemism of cosmopolitanism can in reality be worse than a nightmare. This brings the discussion in this paper to the title poem. Perhaps the artistic value of “When It no Longer Matter Where You Live” and indeed the entire collection, lies in the concealed irony of the title. Rather than subscribing uncritically to the contemporary cosmopolitan teleology, which tries to conceal continuities of Western capitalism, the content of the poem departs from the title and reveals the irony that is inherent, particularly for the African cosmopolitan in the capitalist cities of the North:

For all its refuge, the foreign home  
remains a night whose dawn  
I wish arrives before its time,

There’s 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 live! (77)

The irony that defines this title poem consists in the way it, out of context and ordinarily, gives an impression that in the age of globalization it no longer counts where people choose to live. To that extent, this first impression is a false signal about an uncritical reception of cosmopolitan ideals by the poet. From another angle, Shija in his essay “Exile and globalization in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide: A Case Study of *When It no Longer Matters Where You Live* (2008: 33), weighing both options of living at home and exile, concludes that in the case of this particular poem “Ojaide views both his home and his country of exile as equally strewn with hazards”. Nevertheless, one cannot but see beyond the balance and the dilemma that such a critical view as Shija’s creates; for the option in the end tilts towards home once we recognize that even at its best the “refuge” of “foreign home”, remains a night whose dawn/ I wish arrives before its time”. The irony and multiplicity of interpretations it allows is also

significant in the sense that it serves to reinforce the values of ambiguity in the poetry of Ojaide.

The last poem to be considered in this paper is “Immigrant Voice”. This is primarily because there is a sense in which it advances the explosion of the myth of Utopia that is associated with the narrative of cities of the North, especially where issues of development and enhancement of human living are concerned. The crisis of development which arises in African cities emanates no doubt from obvious reasons of non-performance on the part of governments. But such crisis has always also festered for long precisely because it is in the manipulation and despoliation of African capital that the West has more often than not created the favourable horizon for the economic and social advancement it has prided itself upon in the last four to five centuries. The evidence is obvious once the trajectory of Western capitalism is juxtaposed with the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Ever since then, each transformation of the West’s means of economic development from one form to the other has also been described as a form of victory for Africa and the rest of the world’s subaltern groups. But to what extent can such victory be taken seriously when it could as well be conceived as a concession on the part of architects of Western imperialism to formulate a more subtle, usually far more sophisticated, means of enslavement of the subaltern groups?<sup>7</sup>

Besides the question of capital flight and the exilic and cosmopolitan response it engenders, the question of the city also arises. Therefore, where African cities have been mismanaged and milked of the capital they should retain, the dystopian condition created in these cities ingests a search for the “mobile capital” in the global cities of the North. The utopia created by the thought of fulfilling dreams of good living, and further fortified by the desirability of such cities as projected by media practice, propels desires of intimate experience for which there is an initial implication of denigration of the sense of locale that comes with cities of homeland. But to what extent are such dreams fulfilled in the global cities of the North, especially when “what is most revealing [about Utopia] is not what is said, but what cannot be said, what does not register on the narrative apparatus?” (Jameson 2005: xiii) This is why the realization of such dreams is certainly fettered, if not permanently undermined by the constitutive “closure... exclusion and inversion”, by which, as Jameson reveals further, all forms of Utopia are defined. Explaining further on the issue of “closure” as the antithesis of Utopia, Jameson contends that within the context of city abstraction, it manifests in form of projections of “spatial totalities... in the aesthetic of the city itself” (3). Viewed against this

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<sup>7</sup> Claude Meillassoux (*The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold*. Trans. Alide Dasnios. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, 323) critically reflects on the deceptiveness of freedom of the oppressed from a perceived epoch of imperialism and capitalism when he says, “Freedom is won little by little through the exploitation of the interstices created by contradictions in every social system which force the exploiters to give in so that they themselves can survive. Each conquest is not sheer victory: it can also be an adjustment necessary to the perpetuation of the mode of exploitation.

background, the paradox of the conception of global cities of the North begins to emerge against the actual practice on whose receiving end are the exiles and cosmopolitans who seek fulfilment through the transgression of their national boundaries from the South. Making America and its cities the main focus, “Immigrant Voice” opens thus:

*Back home from here na long way  
The picture of here from home is so different...  
From the wilderness I de see night and day  
Where all the fine things in that picture:  
Everybody dress kampe that I think  
Na angels, Hollywood Heaven they misspell? (105)*

Home is a long way from here  
The impression of this place at home is different  
from the daily wilderness that confronts me  
Where are the beautiful things said about this place:  
Where everybody is supposed to be smartly dressed  
Like angels or is Hollywood a mere make-believe?

To say the least, here is a testimony that turns the myth of the glamour of America and its many cities on its head. Through the globalization of American films, Hollywood that is, the simulation of the prosperity of American cities has taken an obsessively pretentious dimension which makes imitation of art in this case light years removed from the reality on ground. Moreover, by alerting us to the inconsistency between what is relayed in global media and the actual happenings in American cities we are confronted by the blurred vision of those subordinated groups of the Third World who seek salvation in migration to the West. As Appadurai (1996: 4) puts it, there remains a link between media, globalization and migration; however the mirage that is created on the minds of those affected towards migration as a result of what they garner from the media can really be misleading when compared with the actual situation of things as in the poem above:

The lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes they see are blurred, so that the farther away these audiences are from the direct imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects, particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other perspective, some other imagined world. (35)

This explains why in place of the sight of “all the fine things”, all that the persona sees on a daily basis is “wilderness”. At another level, the adoption of pidgin is both aesthetically and culturally significant in this collection. Aesthetically because the grandeur that is expressed in the lines above mocks the superciliousness of “elitist” critics (Garuba, 1988: xxv) who assign only facetious values to the use of Pidgin in literary practice. In fact, it is for this that

Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1994: 45), echoing Achebe in a positional criticism, warns that such critics of Western critical bias against Pidgin must “cultivate the habit of humility appropriate to their limited knowledge of pidgin”. The appropriateness of the choice of pidgin in this context comes to the fore on account of the fact that “merging vernacular languages, folk arts, European avant-garde forms, and secular concerns” has become a defining feature of postcolonial literature (Joseph 1999: 142). Besides, it must be understood as the necessity of taking serious the Lyotardian injunction to “wage ... war on totality” (1989: 82). At the cultural level, it is important to note that the postcolonial culture of the Niger Delta is unique in the way it privileges the use of pidgin. This is a result of the multiplicity of indigenous languages which are far from being mutually intelligible.

The adoption of pidgin is, therefore, one way by which these people are linguistically and culturally united, irrespective of social and educational backgrounds. The recognition of the unifying role of pidgin thus provides a strong basis for the poet to engage with their common problem in the only language they all can appreciate. Put into context, this further strengthens the argument of subnationalism that this paper has pursued so far. Ojaide himself gives rein to this view when he writes: “Pidgin in Nigeria was for a long time a Delta monopoly. Sapele, and Warri in the present-day Delta State and Port-Harcourt in Rivers State are the bastions of pidgin English. Of course, these cities are ports in which there was a lot of exchange between Europeans and Africans... With the examples of my writing in... pidgin English, the writer could be seen as the socio-cultural product of his birthplace” (1999: 239, 241). Besides, by highlighting the place of Niger Delta cities in the evolution of the language, it will not be out of place to contend that in the poem under discussion, there is an indicting confrontation of the cities of the South with the hyperreality of the cities of the North in America. That is, colonialism and other subsequent forms of imperialism may have given centrality to English, but the domestication of English and subsequent invention of pidgin and its deployment in creativity of this kind go to stress the primacy of postcolonial hybridity in all spheres and the circumvention of received colonial knowledge.

The demystification of the claims of the global cities is advanced in the succeeding lines of the poem which, beyond the centralization of the sight of the wilderness to the American cityscape,<sup>8</sup> also speaks to the disjunction between

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<sup>8</sup> The dialectic of wilderness and city or metropolis provoked so much debate in the making of the American nation especially between the Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian schools of thought (Lehan (1998: 167–8). The antebellum dispensation however gave the impression that the reification of the metropolis carried the day, thus turning America to a generally, if not totally metropolitan nation. If on the one hand, the wilderness option could be said to have lost out, it was because the city was considered a departure from backwardness in all areas of life. This is why in Ojaide’s choice of the word “wilderness” in the description of the daily experience of America in the last year of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the poem puts the lie to American cityscapes’ absolute claim to progress; there are therefore as many indices of progress as there are of backwardness.

distantiated appearance and the mirage that confronts exiles and cosmopolitans from the South when they arrive in American cities. The dialectic of dystopia and Utopia, divisively constructed and respectively deployed to denigrate the South and celebrate the North, may not, after all, hold water in the naked truth that stares one in the face in this poem:

*When I reply their letters from home saying  
here no be what they think they see for their minds  
they no gree with me and call me lie-lie man:  
“you de already there and you no want us to come.”*

When I reply their letters from home saying  
the truth about here is far from what they imagine  
they refuse to agree and label me liar:  
“now that you are there your intent is to bar us from coming”

*I know my people hate me for telling the truth.  
Wetin they see geographers de call am mirage—  
America na big photo-trick to me. (105)*

I know my people hate me for telling the truth.  
what attracts them is what geographers call a mirage  
America is nothing but a huge photo-trick to me

The above lines are crucial in the sense that they are interlinked by the poem's critique of capitalism. This brings up again the question about the fetishization of “mobility of capital”. The persona in “Immigrant Voice”, like the millions others he represents, is doubly a victim of capital flight from the South to the North which is tendered as the logical reason for labour flight from the South to the North. If the justification of such labour flight is hinged on the possibility of bringing back the capital in flight, the process of reclamation has proven to be far from efficacious. It instead reveals the double swindling of a subordinated group within the capitalist scheme of things. That is, capital is mobilized from the South to the North, labour from the South follows suit, only for those involved in the migration of labour to discover that in America, the mobility of capital is qualified and restrictive to the extent that it hardly transcends the boundaries of the country of the North back to the South. This then typifies the “mirage”, the fact that the morality of capitalism precludes communality but promotes a mean gesture of individualism, making its universalism suspect as:



*Neighbour no de, friend no de except them dog;  
you de for your own like craze-man de pursue dollar  
which no de stay for hand— they say na capitalism  
when dollar de circulate, circulate without rest. (105)*

Neighbourliness and friendship are inconceivable except with dogs  
your individualism is enmeshed in a crazed chase for the dollar  
which refuses to stay in your hands— they call it capitalism,  
when dollar orbits without end.

Where capitalism places greater value on animals than it does on man, then of what attraction are these cities of the North? This is besides the fact of crime which in its multiplicity leaves the persona bemused: “*the street de explode kpa-a kpa-a like Biafra, / you no know whether the person saying “Hi!” / want to shoot, rob or rape you*” (the streets explode with ricochets like a Biafran battle field,/ you are continually wary of greetings because, the one greeting you may be out to shoot, rob or rape you) (105). These streaks of contradiction serve to underscore the definition of America and its cities by Foucault’s idea of heterotopias, that is, “spaces of the real world, chaotic, contradiction-laden, spaces within spaces” (King 2007: 117). Put another way, the contradictions inherent within the space of the American cityscapes accentuate Baudrillard’s remark that whereas Disneyland is portrayed as unreal in order that it can serve as a foil to the reality of America and its cities, the truth is that America “is no longer real, but belong(s) to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation” (cited in Graham 1999: 121).

The fact of unmasking the simulation must then be seen as analogous to the demystification that follows:

*When somebody don naked for you for daylight,  
Nothing de the big boast of beauty  
For the cloth e take cover crawcraw and eczema.  
No be as e be for the picture they don retouch—  
Beggars, thief, poor poor, all of them boku (105–6).*

Once the nakedness of a person is revealed to you  
He has nothing again to boast about feigned elegance  
When his clothing has covered up his sores and eczema  
what is before us is adulteration and far from reality  
Here there is only an abundant collage of beggars, thieves and the poor.

From this point on, the desire is to make a return to the homeland in the wake of the explosion of the myth of American and American cities’ Utopia: “*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.*” (Sometimes I weep sore in bed/ I have been witness to peppery persecution/I had better prepare for a return to sweet

home) (106). The idea of “sweet home” returns the discussion to the home-within-a-home that the Niger Delta cityscapes presuppose for people from this region; but the idea also presupposes return to the nation and could apply to any other part of Nigeria. The implication of the subnationalist consciousness as “a distinctively African cultural emphasis on respect for locally specific autonomy within a set of territory-wide identities” can thus not be ignored. The very deployment of pidgin for the articulation of the desire to return, as explained earlier, reinforces this claim.

## CONCLUSION

At this point it is important to anticipate likely responses to the position taken in this paper. For, not a few African scholars deplore the continual portrayal of African cities as locations of utter dystopia and decadence. They often point, for instance, to the various amazing undertakings and interventions of individuals and groups in enacting and sustaining an African brand of modernity that chimes with current ethos of globalization (Ogude and Nyairo 2008; Dunton 2008: 68); the truth however is that the current level of development requires a lot more.

We must however transcend the insularity of such claims in order to do an unbiased and holistic assessment of the conditions of African urbanscapes. This will enable the continent to garner dignity and enter into the centre of the global frame on her own terms. This is why in spite of comparable ubiquity of dystopian sites in western cities, for which some even conclude that the dividing lines between cities can as well be collapsed as we re-designate all cities as “ordinary” (Robinson 2006: 109), the onus is nevertheless on African governance and political leadership to turn African cities and indeed other spaces of habitation into truly habitable and productive sites. It is only through this way that the present seemingly incurable vulnerability of Africans to deracination from African cities to cities in the West can be addressed.

As has been discussed in the *When It no Longer Matters Where You Live*, migration to a foreign land in the present dispensation of globalization may hold an initial attraction, it however continues to prove to be a mirage even where practices of hospitality are found to be altogether exceptional. This explains why, as seen earlier in the collection, “For all its refuge, the foreign home/remains a night whose dawn/I wish arrives before its time, [and]There’s none so hurt at home/who forgets the pain outside”. Therefore in the specific case of the Niger Delta, where return from exile has become imperative, as illustrated earlier in a line like “*make me de prepare to go sweet home*” (“Immigrant Voice”), the challenge posed is that the government rise to the occasion. As a region that still produces more than 80 per cent of Nigeria’s revenue, a commensurate gesture of support for the transformation of its urban centres into excellent sites of productive economy and standard of living will be in order. This is much a case of economic justice as it is that of environmental

justice, precisely because as already discussed in this paper, a better treatment should be meted out to a region that contributes so much economically to the making of the Nigerian nation. By so doing, the Niger Delta urbanscapes and environment would wear a look different from the dystopian condition described in, say, “In search of a Fresh Song”. The case is no less imperative for other urban centres of Africa; that is, if African urban centres must retain Africa’s best, the government must be sensitive to the conditions of her urbanscapes. This is why while we must recognize the capacity of globalization’s structures in compromising the dignity of the nation-state, the extent to which this compromise is allowed or countered still rests heavily with the home governments. This is all the more so since to propose otherwise is not only disingenuous but inimical to the ethos of African development.

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