



HOME IN TRANSIT: DIASPORIC SPACE IN ROMEO ORIOGUN'S *THE GATHERING OF BASTARDS*

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Abstract

Exile is sometimes conceived as a detachment from the social affiliations and interactions through which individuals negotiate their inclusion and exclusion and, ultimately, their sense of belonging. This paper interrogates how Romeo Oriogun's The Gathering of Bastards configures diasporic space through the interrelation of the labours of memory, racialisation, desire and contested home. It draws upon Avtar Brah's notion of diasporic space through textual analysis of six selected poems. The research scrutinises the selection of language, imagery, affective nuances, and symbolic representations as well as the interaction of line arrangement and formal patterns with situational and historical context. It also appraises the local historical narrative and how it informs the selected formal constructs and theories. The research contends that borders are reconstituted by the processes of assimilation, that the materiality of exile is inscribed by migrant labour, and that return is the materialisation of a pluralistic home that is incomprehensible without the legacy of displacement. The poems articulate home neither as a lost origin nor as another place. Home is constituted through the interactions of local dwellers, migrants, memories, and routes, and every claim to belonging bears the memory of those who have been excluded. The research advances a formal analysis of Nigerian poetry and demonstrates the possibility of localising and reinterpreting contemporary theories in Nigerian literary studies by focusing on a few selected texts.

Keywords: diasporic spaces, migration, home, belonging, exile, African poetry

Introduction

In *The Gathering of Bastards*, Oriogun extends his reach across African, European, Caribbean, and North American spaces and encompasses travellers, migrants, refugees, asylees, workers, and returnees. The poetics cannot be divorced from rhythm, address, imagery, breaks, and tensions in the speaking voice. He captures the pressure exerted on language to represent wounding, prayer, accusation, tenderness, irony, remembering, and fear. The social dimension and the experience of exile in African poetry are habitually separated in scholarship. This separation matters because it limits the critical tools we employ to interpret the poetry. When the text assumes the form of a list, or a truncated apostrophe, or a repeated prayer, or an unanswered question, or a depiction of a devastated landscape, the exile, the oppression, the love, the wounding and the loss are attenuated. The social dimension must be examined through form. This study employs a diaspora-space approach to scrutinise six poems from the 2023 electronic edition. Close reading attends to the relationship between body and landscape and to the affective consequences produced by form. The poems under examination do not recast the homeland as a restorative origin or an alien place. They posit that land is constituted through the interrelationship of migrants, hosts, structures, memories and pathways, and that each claim of belonging is inscribed with exclusion. These theoretical claims will therefore be assessed against local religion, kinship, colonialism, the environment and



migration, which may operate beyond the limits of the theory. Personas in varied positions may employ language that is religious, cruel or violent. The same applies to the language and imagery of mourning. Close reading must consider such volatility. Poetic language can both mask and reveal a particular discourse. It can recognise the anguish produced by the limits of the border and the harm of concealment while, at the same time, idealising love. The critical potential of these texts proceeds from the double nature of this discourse.

Theoretical Framework

This paper relies on Avtar Brah's notion of diasporic space; Brah's diasporic space offers a subversive lens through which we can scrutinise the ostensibly simple journey to and from home within a web of complex relations. As Brah explains, "Diasporic space is the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them' are contested" (Brah, 1996, pp. 208–209). Diaspora extends beyond simply traversing a border. It delineates the social field where the terms of belonging are perpetually revised.

Discussing multiple subject positions that are disavowed or contested, Brah describes diasporic space as "the terrain where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed" (Brah, 1996, p. 208). The collection's personas carry home with them to the airport and then to the streets, rooms, seas and landscapes of memory. The poems accord little attention to the binary opposition between the beginnings and endings of journeys. Home can be located in a new, and even in a perilous, place. Memory can also be home, and even home can be dangerous. The speaking subject of this collection occupies multiple subject positions.

Brah's further elaboration on diasporic space through "the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location" (Brah, 1996, p. 208) also draws the ideas of location and dislocation into the same sphere of analysis. The use of a slash in "dis/location" suggests that location can be either settled or unsettled. The poetry of Oriogun embodies this through the use of shifting pronouns and place names, recurrent acts of leaving and imagery that shifts the mind from one landscape to another. The body becomes an archive of routes, languages, fears, and attachments.

The literary operation of the concept relies on the arrangement of space. Deictic terms such as "here," "there," "home" and "away" denote moving and fluctuating points of reference. By speaking to an absent person, distances may be collapsed; by naming a lost place, it may be made to return in another place; a break in a stanza may indicate a leaving with no promise of a landing. The poems situate domestic things next to border technologies and demonstrate how public histories breach and inhabit private spaces. Thus, through the interaction of words and images, rather than through the act of migration as the dominant theme, diasporic space is disclosed.

However, the breadth of the concept makes it seem as though all intercultural encounters are, at least in part, diasporic. In this context, the concept denotes the combination of migration and contested belonging, a colonial past, and the unequal entitlement to inhabit a place. It foregrounds involuntary migration, and acknowledges that queer migration may oppose diaspora nationalism, because it reconfigures the concept of home. The method privileges relational mapping as opposed to linear mapping. Each poem catalogues places, remembered places, personas, addressees and boundary markers. The analysis examines how order draws places into contact and how the poem leaves unresolved the limits of the kind of belonging it offers. Brah's conceptualisation provides insight into why home and exile can coexist in a moment of a poem, while Oriogun's poetry conveys



the diaspora as an emotional, linguistic, and corporeal space that is constantly shifting and reconstituted by mobility.

Review of Related Scholarship

The existing scholarship has evolved through multiple conversations that share some concerns without simply repeating one another. The scholarship on migration poetry, postmemory, diaspora politics, and inherited feeling seeks to ascertain the means by which the conditions of the past can be inscribed in aesthetic representation that does not force literature into a documentary practice. Gbenga Adeoba theorizes migration and postmemorial witnessing in contemporary African poetry. The study posits that through inherited images, narrative fragments, and emotional proximity, poetry affords subsequent generations the capacity to witness the displacement that preceding generations endured. The author writes, “The marginality of intra-African crossings ... informs this essay’s focus” (Adeoba, 2025, p. 3). Such crossings have been situated within historical and disciplinary constraints that may circumscribe the reading of the poems. However, Adeoba expands the boundaries of postmemory. This paper probes the co-presence of the origin, route, stranger and host in Oriogun’s expression of migration.

Giorgia Proietti interrogates another archive and charts trauma from individual to social memory. Using an interdisciplinary approach to memory studies, the author contends that intergenerational memory is situated between familial narratives and broader social and political narratives of memory (Proietti, 2025, p. 720). Proietti writes, “I approach Cordonnier’s data from the vantage point of collective memory studies” (Proietti, 2025, p. 720). Representation, then, is mediated through specific frameworks, genres, or practices, rather than articulated in a more abstract way. Proietti explicates the scales of transmission.

Verónica Díaz Cerda's examination of emotional labour among descendants of political exiles reorients the focus of the debate. The study, based on qualitative interviews with descendants of exiles, argues that emotional labour, inherited narratives, and the management of multiple national attachments (Díaz Cerda, 2025, p. 1) play significant roles in the cultivation of belonging. Díaz Cerda argues that “Exiles still occupy a marginal status within the field of Transitional Justice” (Díaz Cerda, 2025, p. 1). The data point to a form of emotional labour that appears predominantly private and perhaps spontaneous. Though the focus of the study is Chilean exiles, this article examines the sensory and spatial frameworks of belonging in African migration poetry.

In the study of authoritarian regimes and the political participation of younger diasporic groups, Arne F. Wackenhut and Camilla Orjuela recalibrate the methodological discussion. Based on a comparative political study, the article posits that the diaspora is the result of substantial state activity, intergenerational change, and transnational politics (Wackenhut & Orjuela, 2023, p. 143). Wackenhut and Orjuela maintain that “authoritarian regimes seek to engage, govern and control their diasporas” (Wackenhut & Orjuela, 2023, p. 143). While Wackenhut and Orjuela are concerned with formally defined political participation, the researcher foregrounds “poetic fields” in the diaspora. In these fields, the state, family, memory, and desire intermingle. The researcher interrogates the diverse ways in which comparable tensions are reconfigured in the selected poems through sound, syntax, imagery and shifts in addressee.

The study by Sarah M. E. Chow-Quesada comes closest among recent studies. Chow-Quesada scrutinises trauma, memory, and literary activism in the work of Koleka Putuma. Her article employs a Black feminist close reading and asserts that poetic space can contain both corporeal memory and public activism without collapsing one into the other (Chow-Quesada, 2024, p. 211).



Chow-Quesada argues that Putuma “illuminates the lived experiences of Black women in post-apartheid South Africa” (Chow-Quesada, 2024, p. 211). The study intervenes in questions of representation and provides a historical framing of power, relationality and public engagement. Chow-Quesada is concerned with Black women’s literary space, whereas the researcher addresses migrant itineraries, male queer embodiment, and queer homing in Oriogun. The gap is therefore substantive and methodological. This study addresses the gap in scholarship by framing the Nigerian lyric as an act of thought that, to some extent, unsettles, reconfigures, and transcends the boundaries of contemporary scholarship.

Analysis

1.4.1 Assimilation and the Contested Boundary of Belonging

“Assimilation” and “Asylee in the Evening of the World” do not articulate the same theme in the same way. They address the same question, but from different perspectives. They also elicit different affects, mobilise different images, and impose different demands on the reader. The first registers the influence of the social or historical frame. The second indexes the influence of the frame at a different level, with a different tone and implied readership. The relation between the two can be read through Avtar Brah’s diasporic space, but it is determined by the lexical choices of each poem.

In “Assimilation,” belonging to a new world is imbricated with pressure, as adaptation is linked to memory loss and fear, while the burden lies in the expectation of being legible. The poem deploys descriptions of the weather combined with the imagery of plants and other physical elements to render the scene an argument that appeals to the reader’s senses. The tone interweaves lament with the pressure of memory, so that the grief, in the form of the past, interrogates the manner of its preservation. The past and the pressure of memory produce ruptures in the tone, and the emotion proceeds from the synthesis of the image and the setting.

It
me
of
through
It was a little dog, a terrier mix, running
(Oriogun, 2023, p. 95)

The opening statement, “It was not the green of trees that welcomed,” functions as a threshold into the persona’s predicament. The pressure of the text registers an attempt by the persona to articulate belonging amid the absence of community, the burden of memory, and the pressure to represent. The image of barren land signifies the absence of community and the burden of adaptation and memory. The interdependence of social and land imagery indicates that the persona is in a process of becoming. Avtar Brah’s diasporic space and homing desire frame the poem as something beyond individual expression. The persona draws together the corporeal, the political, the audience and the potential. The extracts exhibit pauses and a hesitant tone, yet the persona’s demand indicates an open boundary, amenable to the persona’s inhabitation, redirection, or exposure of the terms of recognition. This demand, coupled with the co-presence of multiple subjects, renders visible the limits of language and the theoretical and poetic contradiction of the spoken word.

The poem assembles jazz, books, village memory and the figure of a man with no country.
At
slowly
I
by
of children, like a storyteller pulling the strings



(Oriogun, 2023, p. 96)

The terms “night” and “before” traverse disparate semantic spheres. The juxtaposition of “like” and “gramophone” sustains those spheres in tension. The statement “At night when my gramophone wails” resists facile parastatement because of its singular combination. The entire line encapsulates a contradiction and, through the first person, sustains that contradiction. The endings of the words “wails,” “Coleman,” and “surrounded” momentarily separate them; as the syntax reconnects, meaning accrues through the apprehension of a provisional statement.

The critical strain of “Asylee in the Evening of the World” assembles village memory, jazz, books, prophecy and the figure of a man with no country, constituting a diasporic space in place of a singular exile. In this way, the principal image can house and harm, recall and wound, beckon and bar simultaneously. The image’s potency lies in this simultaneous positive and negative symbolism. The emotion of the persona does not exist behind the language as a sequestered element. Rather, it manifests in the relationships among the body, the social history, and an expansive image.

This poem revises Avtar Brah’s notion of diasporic space by situating diasporic space in the quotidian, in particular, in language and imagery. The social aspect of the space registers as longing. However, the poem’s pronouns, white space, and line breaks leave the subject indeterminate. What theory refers to as a boundary remains unresolved in the utterance. The interplay of metaphor and emotion engenders a void that theory is incapable of addressing. This absence articulates a felt relation and indicates what is required: a body, a place, or a memory.

In both analyses, concepts related to assimilation and the contested boundary of belonging are not reduced to content. These concepts appear through shifts in pronouns, line breaks, and modulations in tone. To the extent that formal divergences can be compared, the first poem establishes the conditions for the organisation of a body, place, attachment, or memory. The second poem examines whether the conditions can be reconfigured, accepted or transposed elsewhere.

1.4.2 Migrant Labour and the Social Life of Exile

Neither “The Migrant of Padua” nor “O Blue Waters, O Ships!” presents the theme in a predetermined way. Both address the problem from different speaking positions, configure feeling differently, and presuppose different responses from the reader. In the first example, the social or historical context is delineated, whereas the second amplifies or modulates the tone, scope and implied audience. The relation is read through Avtar Brah’s diasporic space, but the argument hinges on the linguistic techniques the two poems use to represent this relation.

In “The Migrant of Padua,” the image of butcher’s blood demonstrates how racialised visibility and migration configure the urban migrant’s existence, from family care to urban monuments.

For
love
who
in
are awake at night, counting the many ways

(Oriogun, 2023, p. 98)

The fulcrum of the poem is the opening statement “For those who have journeyed across the sea” and the closing statement “are awake at night, counting the many ways.” The terms “night,” “love,” and “home” do not delineate an easy progression. The experience of reading is one of delay. Each



term is configured as an alteration of the last, and the persona's insight is proffered as the answer to a question that the persona has grappled with.

The confluence of movement, place and time, memory and feeling conveys this sensation. The poem establishes a context and invests the environment it creates with consequence. The tone, at times, is one of hopeful expectation and an acute sense of loss. The discomfort that the persona feels is paradoxically hopeful. The poem declines to provide the expected signifier of belonging. The affective range of the poem is created through pronounced modulations in tone, sensory detail and the persona's inability to comprehend the situation fully.

This scene manifests the diasporic desire to be part of a community. The interplay of sounds, images and fractured syntax in the poem articulates Avtar Brah's notion of diasporic space.

"O Blue Waters, O Ships!" conjoins ports, sailors, gambling dens, anchors and cities of hope, figuring arrival as a social and economic expression of desire and despair. The subject cannot be dissociated from voice, body, setting and audience, so the reader endures the tension before it is resolved.

And
into
slowly
of
I chose to follow the movement of seagulls,
(Oriogun, 2023, p. 100)

"And though the day moved" inaugurates the difficult relation of the persona. The persona's positioning of "entanglement", "moon", "orchestration" and "movement" foregrounds perception, so judgement is called for before the statement is made. The persona's assertion situates the persona in a relation to the tension rather than loosely describing it. The relation of syntax to the line endings is conditioned by the appositional placement of "orchestra" and "moon." The form advances the explanation while enjambment of short lines discloses the work of naming the tension rather than explaining the relation.

"O Blue Waters, O Ships!" delineates a social economy of desire and despair that materialises when a port, sailor, gambling den, anchor, city that never comes, and a final arrival congeal. The poem deploys water imagery and then furnishes spatial descriptions. The poem is a sensory argument. The setting and images, rather than abstract comments of the persona, generate emotion.

In relation to Avtar Brah's idea of diasporic space, the poem stages the meeting of diasporic space and the desire to return 'home'. The desire to return home extends the movement of images and emotions beyond the persona's personal affect and articulates a relationship between the body, power, audience and the future. The persona can recalibrate the terms through which the scene is apprehended. Thus, the poem renders the presence of 'the other' visible through the action of the language, and points to the juncture at which theory cannot fully delineate the limits of poetry's transgressive reach.

The two texts investigate the relationship between migrant labour and the social condition of exile as something more than a simple matter of content. In both texts, the same images, pronouns, line breaks, and shifts in tone culminate in a change of meaning. These shifts disclose differences in the poems' formal relation to the theory. In the first poem, the author describes the characteristics that determine the organisation of a body, space, relation, or remembrance; in the second, the author



describes the characteristics that govern the potential of those ideas to be reconstituted, sustained, or transmitted to other situations. Their differences, however, preclude the experiences of the subjects from being homogenised.

1.4.3 Return, Memory, and the Plural Home

“On Belonging” and “Returnee” do not offer complementary illustrations of the same idea when analysed together. They address the problem from different standpoints and convey it with different images, different affective tones, and different levels of reader involvement. The first text configures the social or historical context, while the second shifts the balance, tone, and implied audience. The relationship between the two is anchored in Avtar Brah’s concept of diasporic space, but it is articulated through the lexical choices of each poem.

“On Belonging” takes a different angle on return, memory, and multiple belongings. In this instance, the conjunction of the water ritual and maternal chant redefines decolonisation as a relational return rather than the rediscovery of an uncontaminated origin. It situates the reader squarely in the poem at its first moment of recognition.

Again,
of
in
Once,
weaving stories into their genes, passing them down
(Oriogun, 2023, p. 110)

The words “water” and “mother” carry a range of meanings. So too do “home” and “decolonize.” This relation clarifies why “Again, to decolonize water is to walk into the sacredness” cannot be construed as a transparent statement. The statement turns upon itself, and an enjambed series of short lines exerts restraint on the poem. The endings of “sacredness,” “women” and “home” produce a temporary moment of stasis for the syntactic relations to coalesce, then yield a provisional meaning as recognition rather than a final interpretation.

Water rituals and maternal chants demonstrate a relational return that is characteristic of decolonisation rather than an untouched, perfected return. Here, the sacred lexicon imparts form to the overmastering feeling and propels the intimate scene towards “weaving stories into their genes, passing them down.” The poem oscillates between estrangement and full presence. The persona is drawn deeper by the promise of movement. The persona is uncertain of their sense of belonging. The affective state is not confined to words that can be publicly expressed and privately withheld. Instead, it is expressed through corporeal sensation and social history integrated into an amplified frame of the situation.

The poem extends Avtar Brah’s idea of diasporic space by shifting to the vernacular and the visual. It manifests its social force in the desire to return home, but the poem’s pronouns, pauses, and line breaks defy a stable subject position. Thus, while theory conceptualises the boundary in abstract terms, the poem keeps that boundary open through speech. The theory and poetic practice are united by emotion and metaphor. This lacuna produces a sense of co-presence and relationality and demonstrates that form can contain what theory seeks to define.

“Returnee” challenges orthodox ideas of return, memory and plural homes. For the returning persona, memory, the evolving landscape and altered modes of travel make it impossible to reconstruct the original home.



I
the
as
solemnly,
I might have seen the sea's grace,
(Oriogun, 2023, p. 128)

The statement “I might have seen in the mist” denotes the beginning and “I might have seen the sea's grace” designates the end of the central poem. Although “prayer,” “mouth,” and “might” evoke a sequence, they do not constitute a definite order. Thus, reading is an act of delay. The persona's impression remains situational and tentative, and the moment itself remains ephemeral. For the returning persona, it takes more than memory to reconstruct the original home. Changed landscapes and modes of travel will not suffice. The poem's use of a lexicon of the sacred and description of space gives emotions an environment and gives that environment physical effects. The tone fluctuates between anticipation and estrangement. The persona's uncertainty about their place in the world intensifies with the movement. The poem does not yield a clear symbol. The poem compares what the persona observes with what the persona knows, and emotional meaning accrues from that tension.

With reference to theory, the scene constitutes diasporic space, particularly due to the pressure of the “homing” desire. Avtar Brah explicates the relation, but the poetic devices demonstrate that the relation is carried through sound, image and interrupted syntax. The movement towards the boundary is not complete, so the persona is not a passive instantiation of the theory. Rather, co-presence is enacted in the extract, reconfiguring inherited lexicon to permit contradictions attached to body, relation, environment, memory and attachment to enter public discourse.

The two readings demonstrate that return, memory and the plural “home” cannot be reduced to subject matter. They deploy images, pronouns, line breaks and tonal shifts to articulate their differences. The difference between the two representations constitutes the relation. The first poem delineates the limits or “terms” of a body, a place, a memory, a relation or an attachment. The second examines whether those terms can be redefined, withstood or relocated elsewhere. At the same time, the two poems retain the distinct terms of each selected experience at the point where they meet.

Conclusion

The selected poems do not figure ‘home’ as a ‘lost’ origin or a ‘new’ destination. It is the product of multiple diasporas, of many encounters between migrants and those already settled, of the cohabitation of multiple institutions and memories, of multiple routes. Every claim to belonging is a claim to another's exclusion. Taking the six selected poems as a guide, and drawing on Avtar Brah's concept of ‘diasporic space’, the researcher has demonstrated how social history finds a place in the minutest details of a poem, such as a pronoun, a line, a line break, a part of a body, a call, an attitude or a disposition. The relations of participation and fellowship delineate the conditions of belonging. The selected poems redefine the relations of participation and fellowship that constitute a ‘home’ while remaining plural and allowing for movement. These relations expand definitions of movement in poetry beyond physical travel and establish the possibility of a relation founded on care. The selected poems do more than register trauma, love, movement and memory. They redefine the language of these phenomena, requiring the reader to participate in this redefinition. Consequently, their achievement forms part of the history of Nigerian literature, contemporary criticism, and the study of poetry as a public discourse.



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