

Echoes of Environmental Degradation and Social Dislocation in Niyi Osundare's *City*

Without People

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Abstract

Sustained research on the poetry of Nigerian writer Niyi Osundare has largely concentrated on his socio-political preoccupations and unrelenting celebrations of nature, particularly in the tradition of the Romantics, including the unique stylo-linguistic character of his writings. Moreover, as a nationally and internationally decorated poet, scores of well-placed studies continue to privilege Osundare's more popular volumes, creating a critical gap in his overall "global humanistic vision" (Diala). One such issue, addressed in the less-acclaimed *City Without People* (2012), is environmental abuse and its direct link to human suffering. The sombre, quite melancholic *City Without People* dwells on nothing else but Osundare's own traumatic experience of Hurricane Katrina. However, starting with the volume's ominous title, a closer reading reveals a work that points to environmental degradation as a vital part of the larger issue of climate change. Eco-criticism, a broad investigative tool for dissecting global ecological issues through the intersections of literature, culture, and the physical environment has been adopted as the theoretical framework for this paper.

The devastating consequences of environmental ill-treatment on all aspects of human life are signified in this work. While the volume's super-ordinate focus stays on Osundare's losses from Katrina, the causative theme of climate change, particularly as engendered by human mishandling of the natural environment, is firmly embedded. Therefore, this paper argues that *City Without People* echoes environmental degradation as a contributing factor to climate change.

Purposively selected for analysis of this focus are four poems: "Water Never Forgets" (19), "Path of Thunder" (20), "City Without People" (35), and "Katrina's Diaspora" (43). The paper concluded that Osundare's *City Without People* compellingly addresses environmental degradation and its severe threats to man's physical and social well-being.

Keywords: Nature, Hurricane, Environment, Climate change, Physical and social well-being.

Introduction

Starting with his first volume, *Songs of the Marketplace* (1983), followed by *Village Voices* (1984), and the ultimately career-defining *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), Niyi Osundare firmly established his poetic agenda of putting “Humanity first” (2002: 141) quite early in his poetic career. In subsequent works and over an almost forty-year period, Osundare has essentially kept to his commitment to humanity’s welfare. The humanist ethos of his poetry, well-articulated in a distinctive poetic style, has been described diversely as: “the voice of the underprivileged” (Irele, 2003: xvii), “people-oriented poetry” (Ojaide, 2003:25), “class-conscious poetic” (Anyokwu, 2015: 4), “social poetry...for the masses” (Arnold, 2003: 437&440).

Dissecting the informed views of many scholars, it appears Osundare has primarily focused his socialist-oriented, humanist-defined poetic radar on the African continent and sometimes even exclusively on his beloved but beleaguered Nigeria. Notable Osundare scholar E. E. Sule captures this trajectory as one in which “...the social tenor ... had always been tied to events in Africa” (2017: 285), while Diala (2017: 380) describes this Afro-centric immersion as a prevailing “fixation” upon which scholars have been dwelling over decades of Osundare poetry criticism and scholarship. As Diala further observed, this has come at the cost of “the virtual exclusion from critical attention of an equally vibrant and sustained global humanistic vision” of Osundare as a poet (380).

Nevertheless, a few others have noted and highlighted Osundare’s concern for global human issues. For instance, Cynthia Hogue and Nancy Easterlin (2003) note, astutely, that in addition to his culture-rich, oral-infused poetry, Osundare’s poetic ambience also manifests a quite strong “faith in the unity of man and nature” (2003, 462). Hogue and Easterlin are not the only scholars who have said this. Right from his very insightful introduction to Osundare’s first volume (*SoM*1983), Jeyifo had observed, albeit fleetingly, that, among other things, Osundare’s poetry also reveals a “closeness to the earth, closeness to nature” (xv). This is a kind of closeness, which, apart from just celebrating its beauties and bounties of the earth, also at the same time, raises urgent concern about how it is treated.

Osundare and his many Songs for Nature

Scholars have explored the connections between Osundare's poetry and Nature from several interesting angles. Their attentions have ranged from his dedication to Nature as the bread basket of Man to the rhythms of planting and harvesting, including the seasons of drought and rain. Studies have been done on the ubiquitous Osundare songs for the rocks and mountains of his home town, Ikere-Ekiti, as well as the animals, birds, reptiles and even earthworms that populate its evergreen rainforests. Through his penchant for profuse metaphors, Osundare constantly deploys the different aspects of Nature as images and symbols for his different thematic focuses.

These studies have deepened the understanding of Osundare poetry by constantly employing nature as a useful tool for theorising the socio-political and socio-cultural concerns of the poet (see Oloko 2018)

Introducing his paper titled "Osundare as a Nature Poet: The Earth as a Metaphor for Destruction and Cohesion in *What the Earth Said*," Oloko Jamiu states:

The earth which represents the environment and the oppressed is predominantly expressed in this poem and indeed the entire volume of *The Eye of the Earth* (190).

Explaining Osundare's goal for taking on the earth at these two differing levels of symbolism, Oloko stated that the poet aimed at using Nature as a "platform for commenting and projecting the socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural ideologies of his country, Nigeria" (190). Jimi Ogunnaike and Adeniyi David (2018), in a paper titled "Studies in African Ecocriticism- a Thematic Analysis of Selected Poems in Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth*", observed that the volume "contains many poems with ecological stances and messages" (58), in which the poet "weaves history, culture and nature into literature" (68). Ogunnaike and David asserted in their paper that Osundare depicted the earth as a human being who has a voice with which he cries when maltreated and subjected to inhumane treatment (66).

In his observations of Osundare's romanticising of Nature in *The Eye of the Earth*, Kofi A.N. Mensah (2003) broaches the poet's focus on environmental and ecological issues from a different angle. Unlike other scholars before him, Mensah emphasises that Nature is the issue for deliberation in Osundare's work, and not just a mere by-line for other interests. He submits, therefore, that the entire volume of *The Eye of the Earth* is a deliberately sustained meditation on

Nature “in order to lead to a cautionary message for the reader’s benefit” (287). However, this kind of “cautionary message” is not exclusive to Osundare but is common to most poets and writers involved in one way or another with Nature.

Ecological bodies, such as the Green Peace Organisation, Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), UN Forum on Forests, and others. Their works constitute a form of ecological-cum-environmental activism which takes into cognisance the reality of the earth’s “more complex social conditions” (288) in contemporary times and raises awareness, through creative means, about the earth’s importance for man’s sustenance and survival. They make us realise that this earth of ours is “something we can no longer take for granted” (288). This sense of mission accounts generally, as Mensah has noted, for the profound display of love- (he calls it “sentiments”) - for the earth in the works of this class of writers. Their great depth of feeling thus accounts for the often-painstaking detailing of the earth’s beauty, bounties, resources and potential. Osundare has abundantly exhibited this characteristic over time and in different poetry volumes.

For instance, Osundare’s Nature-immersed childhood, coupled with his tremendous poetic gifts, has equipped him with the experience leading to such a poem as “Forest Echoes” (*EoE*, 3). This is a nine-page long poem, which in Mensah’s evaluation, is not only an “encyclopaedic portrait of the variety of the rain forest” (293) but also one featuring “the finest tributes to the majesty and variety of the rain forest ever achieved in writing” (290). In “Forest Echoes”, Osundare displays his fine mastery of the *oriki* (praise poetry) while meticulously noting and annotating the amazing particularities of the dense flora and fauna of the rainforest of his childhood homeland. Also, not forgetting the breathtaking topography of rocks, hills, and anthills creating their scenery. He also captures the incredible spectacle of flowing rivers and overhanging boughs in masterful superlatives.

Because of their immense affection for it, Nature-centred poets also protest and often grieve when their beloved earth is at risk or abused. In this wise, the same sense of celebration of nature in their works typically carries with it also an ironic “sense of the elegiac” (289). In effect, they write about Nature with nostalgia, using very evocative language to praise its beauty, even as they long for its lost glories. Based upon the preceding, Mensah concludes that Osundare’s *The Eye of the Earth* is “a very clear statement of his concerns” (287) about the Earth.

Another fundamental trait of eco-inclined poets is perceiving in Nature a kind of in-dwelling presence that is palpable and commands deep reverence. This distinctly Words worthian characteristic also permeates Osundare’s poetry. Just as William Wordsworth would meditatively contemplate the remarkable presence of the Divine in Nature, so also does Osundare in his poetry. This is the principal reason; for instance, in *The Eye of the Earth*, where Osundare presents Nature as a living being whose eye we must not step upon. Even though now a Westernised modern poet, Osundare, in this volume, stages a decisive homecoming to the Yoruba philosophy regarding the earth.

The title, “The Eye of the Earth”, intimately encapsulates the Yoruba reverence for the earth, which informs the folk saying: ‘*k’á má tẹ ojú ilẹ̀ mọ̀lẹ̀*’ (may we not trample the eye of the earth!). The saying, functioning both as a prayer and an admonition, also has a binary other which says: *k’á má tẹ aṣọ àgbà mọ̀’lẹ̀* (May we not trample the garments of the elders). As an admonition, the folk wisdom behind the two sayings reflects the Yoruba recognition of the earth and all they believe it stands for: nourishment, health, wealth, sustenance, peace, and man’s final resting place. As a result, certain sections of the Yoruba even worship the earth as a goddess, whose essence in this capacity is conceived as an *abiyamọ* (devoted Mother). As a prayer, however, the saying is a cautionary admonition, especially to a young person who appears to be quite uninformed in the norms of a culture or to an adult who seems somewhat presumptuous or oblivious.

The reader will observe that the common denominator to the two-fold saying is “ile” (the earth), whose sacredness, just as respect for the elderly, is aggregated to “ojuilẹ” (eye of the earth). Stepping on this “eye” potentially provokes unpleasant consequences. This is the entire message of Osundare’s *The Eye of the Earth*.

Erratic Nature and Unceasing Human Mishandling

We take our cue from the foregoing to argue that Niyi Osundare’s *City Without People: The Katrina Poems* (2011) is an eco-focused volume, not minding that it seems to dwell on the poet’s personal tragic experience of Hurricane Katrina. In *City Without People*, the poet expresses grave concerns for the environment and how its wrong handling puts modern man at grave risk. Apart from those addressed to personal friends and colleagues, a sizeable number of poems in the volume feature the poet’s warnings about calamitous consequences should the dimensions of abuse, misuse, exploitation of, and even cruelty to the earth’s natural resources continue unchecked.

Missing the mark would be that reader or critic, who on encountering Nature in Osundare's poetry, consigns its implication to his being a "farmer-born," "peasant-bred" countryside child who had had a "happy intimacy with nature" (287). While this may be true of his childhood, the present reality is that Osundare is now the vastly travelled, internationally-exposed poet whose earlier simple, innocent experience of Nature has become quite complicated. His exposures to the more scientific, machine-powered cultures of the West and other parts of the planet have combined to re-image his delightful childhood romping with Nature, into a far more diverse understanding of its many complexities.

Reflecting on eco-strains in Osundare's poetry, Bhupendra Limbu (2019) asserts that the poet has textualised nature in his poetry to "create an eco-literary discourse" (2) and thereby achieve "environmental consciousness" in his readers (2). While observing that "Our Earth Will Not Die" is an eco-critical poem connecting "the issue of environmental crisis with literature," Limbu emphasises that in it, the poet "has shown the destruction and exploitation of the environment done by humans" (1). He also highlights the poem's exposure of nature abuse as a form of cruelty in which not only the earth but also humans suffer unpleasant repercussions. Limbu's conclusion, therefore, is that Osundare used the poem to raise humanity's awareness of their anti-environment behaviour and the dangers to which it exposes them.

The question of climate change, its causes and consequences for man's continued peaceful existence on the earth has been a persistent thematic focus of Osundare's poetry; albeit more forcefully projected in some than in other volumes. However, in *City Without People*, Osundare confronts this issue head-on, presenting Nature not as the charming, beautiful, and benevolent Friend he had known and related with in his youth, but rather now as an ugly, unpredictable, and wild creature with frightening killer instincts, whose honour it is better not to "trespass"(19). Given the unfortunate benefit of his suffering, losses and near-death experience from Hurricane Katrina, Osundare has composed the poems in *City Without People* with a mixture of passion for the environment and pain for its abuse. His urgent, sometimes biting tone, reveals that the poet seeks to raise the bar of apprehension about rapidly eroding ecosystems largely caused by man's continual mishandling, as well as how this problem precipitates untold human misery when the environment fights back.

In “Water Never Forgets” (19), water is personified as a woman who has been subjected to serial abuse, but who ends up retaliating, with devastating consequences against her abuser. To establish this charge, the poet endows water with its own “mindscape,” (v.1, l.3) to signify its capability for rational thought. He also refers to its “heart” (v.3, l. 1) to indicate that water, just like any normal human being, has its own emotions which, as the poet established, have been dealt hard punches. Moreover, the poet talks of water’s violated “honour” (v.4, l.3), which, in trying to avenge, water bared her “vengeful teeth” (v.5, l.3) just as the floods of Hurricane Katrina. This highlights the crux of the poem’s title: “Water Never Forgets,” which is a subtle warning of water’s unpredictable reaction to acts committed against it.

The poem “Water Never Forgets” (19) comes under the section: WATER, WATER,” while “Katrina’s Diaspora” (43) features under the section: “AFTER THE FLOOD.” In “Water Never Forgets”, Osundare, perhaps as a son of water himself, exploits the benefit of his obvious familiarity with water to inform his readers that just like any other living being, water cannot only feel pain but give it back to when it has had enough. In “Katrina’s Diaspora,” however, the poet particularly highlights the socio-economic problems of modern living that get further complicated by natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina.

With the title “Water Never Forgets” the poet casts a deliberately delicate portrait of water’s faculties, with the cautionary hint that its retentive powers be not taken for granted. The fact is, just as he had said, “Water Never Forgets,” he could easily have said: “Water Always Remembers,” which would have communicated a quite positive message, especially if water had had good treatment in its relationships with humankind. But the way the title is cast suggests a kind of ominous foreboding, especially about occurrences of hurt in a relationship. Moreover, depending upon individual temperaments, the duration of pain in situations such as this differs. Typically for women, the gender attributed to water in this poem, the ache persists for as long as it takes and can develop ultimately into bitterness, except or until, it is assuaged. This is why the poet cautions that when the water has had enough, it will “roar back” (v.4, l. 2). The word “roar” captures graphically an unlocking of water’s sweltering wrath that had been held in its belly through the ages. When released, as seen in the instance of Hurricane Katrina, the outcomes were counted in human costs, and utterly devastating economic disasters, including complete social chaos.

Given what he suffered in Hurricane Katrina, Osundare ironically holds brief for Nature in “Water Never Forgets”. Passionately arguing its cause and going to meticulous lengths to detail the hard actions against it, and for how long; Osundare thereby justifies Nature’s destructive response. As a Nature lover and advocate, the poet here actively gives his support, not to Nature’s destructive reactions, but rather to its case. His conclusion here is that persistent human abuse has forced water to take the path of violence which unfortunately hurts humans. The sum of the poet’s appeal in this poem, therefore, is: ‘please stop abusing Nature!’

“Water Never Forgets” is also a sharp rebuke of the authorities of the city of New Orleans. Given his impassioned description of the scale of human and material losses, Megan Burns in her review of *City Without People* designates Osundare as the citizens’ “unacknowledged legislator” (3).

Osundare believes that the regulatory authorities failed woefully in their responsibility to keep the city safe from avoidable ecological disasters.

National Geographic, *Britannica*, and *Wikipedia* all record the devastation of Hurricane Katrina from different perspectives. While *National Geographic* estimated property damage alone at \$108b, *Wikipedia* estimated \$60b worth of physical damages and www.dosomething.org put Katrina’s total economic impact at \$150b. *National Geographic* states that by the time Katrina’s flooding was in full mode, 80% of New Orleans was “effectively underwater,” and CNN’s reports showed that 70% of occupied housing consisting of 134,000 units were eventually lost to the floods. *National Geographic* records that 400,000 persons were permanently displaced, while CNN puts the figure at more than one million people. CNN’s statistics of fatalities recorded 40% of deaths as caused by drowning, 25% by injury and trauma, and 11% by heart conditions. In the same vein, *Wikipedia* recorded that while number of deaths was set officially at 1,245, the estimated figures are as high as 1,836, while www.dosomething.org features on its website a total number of 705 reported as still missing. In its QuickFacts section, *National Geographic* reports that if all the debris from Hurricane Katrina were stacked on a football field, the pile would reach over ten miles in height.

All the above grim statistics came about because the city’s infrastructural deficits, which the Hurricane flooding ultimately took advantage of, had been in a state of neglect for decades. Available information from *National Geographic* reveals that at least fifty, which represents 85% of the built-in flood control mechanisms, known as levees, failed as they were overwhelmed by

the flood waters of Katrina. These levees, www.dosomething.org reports, had been constructed since 1965 and were originally built for a category 3 storm, whereas Hurricane Katrina made landfall at category 5 in 2005.

Specific words lodged in the body of “Water Never Forgets” contribute powerfully to a reader’s understanding of the poet’s definition of environmental abuse, which definitively point to a subsequent unleashing of water’s terrible fury in this particular instance:

So, when we **steal** its swamps

un-fin its fishes

and **trample** its shells

- stanza 2, ll. 1-3 (bold emphasis are mine).

Here the poet takes on the verb “steal”, to assert pointedly that humans have stolen so steadily from Nature until it could endure it no more. The first line indicts the New Orleans city authorities directly. Like Lagos in Osundare’s native Nigeria, New Orleans is a city sitting on water. Available public records state that almost 70% of the city is built on land originally reclaimed from the swamps. The poet therefore takes his time to detail what exactly the New Orleans city “stole” from water. First, they: “un-fin its fishes.” The verb “un-fin”, coined from the noun “fin”, is carefully positioned to emphasise a violent action taken on a vital body part of the fish. Obviously, without its fins, the fish cannot swim. And of course, when not moving fish is as good as dead. However, with the way the poet graphically presents the process of detaching this indispensable limb from the fish’s body, it sounds more like an amputation, which it is.

To further his original thesis that this action, like all others, ultimately represents forms of human cruelty against water, the poet uses here the possessive pronoun “its” to indicate who owns the fish that were being “un-finned” by fishers. Yet in this verse, the poet reports that people also “trample” water’s shells,” to indicate that her delicate treasures were mindlessly destroyed. This is more like saying water’s children were being ravaged for human profit alone, but for water, these are painful experiences that go straight into its memory banks.

Water Fights Back

The poet maintains the sense of an impending recall of mankind's reckless acts against water throughout this poem in a very creative way. He introduces the possessive pronoun 'its,' right from the first line of the first stanza, and carries it through the entire five stanzas. This pronoun serves as the power key which keeps turning the wheel smoothly sustains his delicate argument in support of water.

In the next verse which continues the narrative of human unkindness against the person of water, the poet uses the possessive 'its' in all three lines:

When we **scoop** *its* heart

Steel *its* span

And **cement** *its* stomach

- Stanza 3(bold emphasis and italics are mine)

The verbs employed here are also quite strong. While "scoop" ordinarily refers to the practice of sand-dredging large bodies of water to reclaim land for erecting physical structures, Osundare chooses that intensive verb to help communicate his strong opinion of deliberate hard actions against water's softness. And in the first line, we see an instance of water's "heart" (l. 1), the 'eye' of its softness being "scooped", or gouged. This was not a transplant, but an excavation of vital organs of the body. It metaphorically talks of killing water's positive emotions. The large hollow left behind stored up hard feelings against those responsible for that violence. The poet had pointed this out from the outset, by stating that even before the eventual flooding, the water had begun to shed bitter tears through: "its drip-drop, drop-dead/hints." He confirms that these are deadly "echoes" from water's "mindscape" (v.1, l. 2-3), which we can also equate to its memory. Recall that before the Katrina flooding, mild rains had first started, advancing into the non-stop downpours that precipitated the massive floods, which eventually overwhelmed the levees, and then the city. So mightily must water have wept on this occasion.

Further, the next line says we: "steel its **span**" (v.3, l. 2), alluding to the practice of fencing off large bodies of water for potential conversion to hard ground; we also "**cement** its stomach" (v.3,l.3), with concrete reinforcements built to hold it back from over-running the set bounds.

While these two lines both describe the reining in water as a form of flood control taken as a whole, the poet infers that the process is a show of force which can succeed only in further hardening water, because it puts her under hard, unnatural control. Hurricane Katrina's massive flooding is a powerful testimony to how the environment puts a lie to mankind's assumptions, that it can be perpetually controlled without consequences.

In line 3, the noun "stomach", which could also be used as a verb to mean 'liking', 'tolerance' or 'fondness' as in the expression: 'to have a stomach for something or someone,' is employed by the poet here to imply soft feelings turning to hatred. So, stating that mankind "cemented" the "stomach" of water, he implies that water was dealt "hard" deeds intended to inhibit her, but that rather than man cowing water, mankind only succeeded in turning her "stomach" (soft spot) into a hardened cauldron of pain. Water's ultimate reactions to the hardening processes were terrifying.

This entire verse brings to mind a Yoruba proverb which says: "èniyàn'ók'ẹ̀şinl'óró; ẹ̀şin ò ní'kàníńúrará. Wọ̀n sọ idẹ wẹ̀rẹ-wẹ̀rẹp apọ, wón fi kọ ẹ̀şinl'orùn" (Mankind taught the horse to be wicked as it never had any innate streak of wickedness. They strung small pieces of steel together, and with it they goad the horse). The idea is an admonition that cautions the horse rider to have empathy for the animal, as a sudden turn-around could be deadly. As implied in the proverb, an over-prodded horse can turn around in frustration and thus throw its rider. Their resultant accident may cost the rider their life or end them up in a debilitating condition. Corroborating human complicity in such otherwise avoidable disasters, Osundare makes the following clarification in the interview which was published along with the poems in *City Without People*:

"Afterall, Katrina was not a totally natural disaster. No. The water that took away everything we had, that nearly took our lives, came from a broken levee" (132).

In light of all that "Water Never Forgets" has complained about regarding the difficult relationship between water and man, Osundare's reference to the "broken levee" here can allude to the "broken heart" of water, which released the vast floods that practically obliterated an entire city and subsequently jeopardised millions of lives. This also seems to be Osundare's conclusion about the irrationality, as well as the 'rationality' of Nature's "logic" when it fights back against humankind.

Our second poem is in the AFTER THE FLOOD section of *City Without People*, which focuses on matters that arose in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. In addition to the tragic loss of lives and

property, another major aftermath was the massive dislocation of people. As shown in the poem, family life became completely disrupted, not by death this time, but by exigencies of survival. Poignantly titled “Katrina’s Diaspora” this very short but crisp poem sports a high economy of words, with which the poet fuses several significant aspects of history with contemporary events to present a single thread of narrative. “Katrina’s Diaspora” is also annotated in brackets as “Katrina’s Refugees,” the appellation given to the displaced victims of Hurricane Katrina by the American press and the politicians. Osundare adopts it however to stress his point in the poem that indeed it was a “refugee” situation. He depicts a scenario typical of a Third World situation being visited upon American citizens right inside the United States.

“Katrina’s Refugees” narrates the harrowing experience of a Black family which was broken up while being relocated. Osundare, at his satirical best, evokes in this poem, the entire Black history of four-hundred years of slavery, and the yet-to-be-mitigated social injury of the average Black citizen of the United States today.

The keyword with which the poem operates, and through which all other words in it acquire their significance, is “diaspora”. Already quite charged with varied political, historical and sociological connotations of its own, the term “diaspora” is surrounded in this poem by a dense field of allusive collocations which help cast into sharp focus the government-enabled social dilemma into which this Black family was thrown after the Katrina floods. The way the poet presents their situation, it appears that the family—predictably of meagre resources, and sheltering together—had been providing not just financial sustenance, but also emotional support to one another. Regrettably, however, this filial shield was completely shattered by the government’s evacuation methods, which caused them to be sent in different directions. As they were separated and haphazardly scattered all over the vast country, what the poet sees is: “A new diaspora/Of desperate dislocations” (v.2, ll. 2-3) to “placeless destinations” (l.3). This is the poet’s reason for tagging the family’s new location a modern “Babylon” (v.3, l.2), about the slavery and suffering of the Biblical Jews in a strange land.

Secondly, by calling their current experience a “new diaspora,” the poet infers that these African-Americans had gone the route of this kind of forced and haphazard family-fragmenting treatment before. This was in the days of slavery when their ancestors were transported forcibly and more violently from their African homelands to the “placeless destinations” of the New World. Using

this old experience as background, the poet reveals that the situation has hardly changed today. The poem shows that just as sons and daughters, fathers and mothers were scattered into the captivity of different slave traders who took them away to unknown places of the slave-holding nations of the Americas, so also are their descendants in the contemporary United States. Today, formerly well-bonded families are broken up and scattered into different parts of the massive United States, with scant regard to the social complications this creates. This is the logic behind the poet's assignment of peculiar names to their strange destinations, such as: "Albuquerque" (v.1., l.1), "Utah" (v.1, l.2), "Ashtabula" (v.1, l.3), "Wala-Wala", (v.1, l.4). Osundare adopted these mostly multi-syllabic and high-sounding names not only for their sensational pronunciations but also to accentuate the relocations - he calls it "dislocations" (v.2, l.2) as more of a throw in the dark.

As far as the poet is concerned this is an infliction of a form of social violence against these people who are citizens of the United States in their rights. For instance, while the father was "bussed-off" to Albuquerque (v.1, l.1) in New Mexico, a distance of some 17 hours away, the mother "found herself" in Utah (v.1, l.2), some 44 hours away from Louisiana, while her daughter was "Black-Hawked" to Ashtabula" (v.1, l.3) in Ohio state, some 17 hours away. In the father's case, the poet deliberately added of "off" to his being "bussed", thus making it sound like "buzz off"-an expression of rude dismissal. Secondly, he also purposely chose the daughter as the one to be "Black-Hawked" right in front of her mother. The poet utilised here the "Black-Hawk" helicopter brand name of the American National Guard to evoke the black hawk (Àşá) in the African folkloric tradition. This Àşá (black hawk) is a large predatory bird well-known for hovering ominously over chicks exposed from under their mothers and swiftly swooping them off for its dinner. Osundare uses this ill-omened imagery to suggest a child-swooping, family-breaking black bird airlifting this family away to unknown destinations.

Finally, the family's son "hitch-hiked to WalaWala" (v.1, l.4). This is in the Washington area, some 35 hours away from New Orleans. Another crucial point Osundare drives at by carefully detailing these destinations is the sheer size of the United States. The country is so vast and diverse that it has different time zones from coast to coast as if they were different countries. This perhaps makes it customary for scores of American citizens to hardly venture beyond their home states their entire lives, and thus know little or almost nothing about other parts of their country. This

puts in perspective the kind of apprehension that the “Katrina’s Refugees” must have been subjected to while being “Black-Hawked” all over the diverse country. Osundare also uses this Black family’s current dilemma to evoke the unfortunate epoch of slavery when Africans (now African-Americans) were uprooted from their homelands and taken to strange places they had never known before. The poet successfully achieves this historical connection with the expression “auction lock” (v.1, l. 5), by which he means “the auction block,” where the captured men, women and children were sold off against their will to the white slave owners.

Secondly, the expression “bussed-off” (v.1, l.1) signifies another instance of Black social dislocation in the United States, which the poet feels strongly about. “Bussing” or properly stated “desegregated bussing”, is the controversial “bussing” policy of the American school system which eventually acquired its socio-political notoriety because of the perceived unfairness in its implementation. For instance, regardless of how within reach a school is, a Black child would not be welcome there if it is a predominantly white school. As a result, Black children are compelled to walk several blocks down the road to catch the school bus to get to an all-Black school. As is often the case, it takes an almost city-round trip for Black children to get to school and back. This practice, which is easily identified with the ubiquitous American long yellow school bus, is what the poet refers to in his use of the word “bussing” in the poem.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to deliberate on Osundare’s concern for Nature, and reveal how environmental degradation negatively impacts man’s life on Earth. In examining this, the paper discovered that man’s multi-dimensional disregard for the earth, exhibited in serial violations of the unwritten laws under-guarding the earth’s resources and its biodiversity, greatly contributes to this extant threat.

Summing up this disregard as a form of disrespect and contempt for Nature and the environment; the poet lists issues such as: “stealing” the swamps by sand-filling wetlands that ought to be left for bio-diversity, “scooping its heart,” “steeling its span” and “cementing its stomach” (Water Never Forgets”- stanzas 3-4). Also, government neglect of reports of imminent or potential danger of flooding foretold by city officials (“City Without People” ll.23) are some of the concrete examples of Man’s contempt for the environment.

This paper reaches the conclusion, through a careful analysis of the selected poems, that Nature's fight-back causes dimensions of havoc, which, in the long term, has the most harmful impact on mankind.

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