

# **En/countering the New Language of Exile in Uche Nduka's *The Bremen Poems***

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## **Introduction**

The city of Bremen in Germany inscribed itself as a city of art, a city in close dialogue with art, and of course, a city to be celebrated by artists, when it became a member of a network referred to as 'Cities of Refuge' in the country.<sup>1</sup> Being recognized as a 'City of Refuge' means reinventing and signifying the self as desirable, and, in fact, promoting what in politeness theory has been identified as 'fellowship face,' which refers to the want to be seen as a desirable member of community, or the desire to be included (Lim and Bowers, 1991). As a 'City of Refuge,' Bremen speaks the language of hospitality, of civilized welcome. Obviously, this project of re-identification is particularly strategic especially at a time when it has become urgent to re-imagine 'home' and 'exile.' In a conversation with Cecile Sandten, a Nigerian poet, Ogaga Ifowodo, whose political activism put him at odds with the military government in his country, comments that:

In a world that is increasingly intolerant and where a noose is fashioned for the word, where the writer is either hanged, or imprisoned or driven into exile I think the concept of 'Cities of Refuge' is a brilliant one, and that we should in fact be ashamed that it took so long for it to come into some form of practical demonstration. Bremen should congratulate herself for being one of the first cities to accept this concept. (Sandten 1999, 19)

A city that provides refuge to writers – especially those from contexts of wrath – would inevitably be an interesting subject of their writings. In their portraits of the city, one is likely going to encounter interesting semiotic and stylistic practices, especially those that reveal their psychological, social and cultural adjustments to the exilic city space. A 'City of Refuge' presupposes a contrast with another space where a person was previously located; it also presupposes the existence of respite. In an interesting way

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<sup>1</sup> The establishment of 'cities of refuge' for writers who are being persecuted in their home countries, which was first suggested by Salman Rushdie, took effect from the campaign of the International Parliament of Writers in 1997 (Olaniyan 2003).

too, the writing of encounter with the space of the city of refuge becomes an important autobiographical act, especially if one joins Kenneth Mostern (1999, 11) in conceptualizing autobiography as ‘that process which articulates the determined subject so as to actively produce a newly positive identity.’ This process of articulation and production of identity is essentially rhetorical because it must create the pattern of the subjectivity of the new self to the new space.

A Nigerian poet, Uche Nduka, who went into self-exile in Germany, also took refuge in Bremen. One of his collections of poems entitled *The Bremen Poems* (1995) is an attempt at articulating and representing his Bremen experience. Indeed, it is an attempt at taking poetic snapshots of experiences – even ‘mental’ experiences – of this City of Refuge. His writing of Bremen represents another interesting attempt by an African writer to ‘write’ Europe and his presence in Europe, indeed a literary *third-worlding* of Europe<sup>2</sup>, which amounts to what Rudiger Kunow (2002, 177) would refer to as ‘globalization from below.’ Such writing of a European context of one’s mind is worthy of attention because it could show us images of Europe constructed by the writer, and how such images relate to existing stereotypes, for instance the stereotype of Germany as a racialized and racist context. One would want to know what language the context of exile speaks in these ‘Bremen’ poems (and by *language* we mean generally the stylistic articulation and expression of experience).<sup>3</sup> It is even more interesting, because this ‘racist’ context now ironically offers *refuge* to an African writer who does not feel safe in his African homeland, or that tries to promote African art and writing, while the African ‘home’ rather fashions a ‘noose’ for such a writer. An *African* writing of Europe in this case (in which a European *righting* of Africa is implicit) therefore raises salient issues about the concepts of ‘home’ and ‘exile.’ What or where is ‘home,’ especially for a writer seeking refuge? When does ‘exile’ become a ‘home’? How stable is the concept

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<sup>2</sup> This perspective is based on the view by Gyan Prakash that ‘the First World’ is in ‘the process of being Third Worlded’ (quoted in Kunow 2002, 176).

<sup>3</sup> A German/English edition of *The Bremen Poems* was published by Yeti Press, Bremen, in 1999, a bilingualization that tends to suggest the *in-betweenness* of the text and, indeed, of the poet in exile. Although the German translation, *Bremer Gedichte*, done by Maren Hancke (a first-time translator) is, as the poet has disclosed to me in an e-mail, unsatisfactory, it suggests an attempt by the poet to ‘speak’ with the voice of the exile-home, to cross a linguistic border, in other words, an attempt at identifying with the ‘new’ home. Given what one may call the *anxiety of re/identification of the self*, a writer would be particularly concerned about the translation of his or her text, or even quarrel with the translator for mistranslating, not minding the argument that it is impossible to have a perfect translation. Alice Kaplan has observed that: ‘Writers want to control language – it’s their job! – and they’re only too ready to believe that their talent for words extends across all linguistic boundaries’ (2003).

of 'home'? And, turning specifically to Uche Nduka's poetry, how is the 'exile home' imagined? How are the visual, verbal, and other languages of the exile space en/countered in the rhetoric of *The Bremen Poems*?

The term *language* used in the paper refers generally to the stylistic articulation and expression of experience. En/countering playfully conveys the experiencing and interrogation of the language that the poet-persona perceives the context of exile to be speaking to him.

### **'In this city of Falling Leaves': Sketching a Portrait of Desire**

In a recent essay entitled, 'Exile: Threshold of Loss and Identity,' Wole Soyinka confronts the questions 'When is exile?' and 'Where is exile?' by explaining that exile is both a state of mind and a physical space (2000, 62). Living in exile, for a writer, requires encountering 'the new language of the frontiers of exile, its joys and anguish, its challenges' (2000, 63-64). Indeed, as Soyinka argues in the same essay, 'the condition of exile is the daily knowledge, indeed the palpable experiencing of such frontiers' (64). In Nduka's *The Bremen Poems*, the physical European context of exile is experienced and articulated in many interesting, sometimes conflicting, ways. But we obviously find a process, a journey that goes on in these poems towards grasping a consolatory and affectionate image of the city of Bremen, to probably compensate for the loss that exile, as a removal from 'home,' entails. It is indeed a search for what can make 'exile' a 'home.'

Experiencing the city is, first of all, a visual act. Nduka's visualization of the city of exile – which may require a mental reconciliation of images of his past or context of origin (home) and images of the present world -- is thus an important aspect of his 'writing' of the exile context, which also influences his search, his journey. I have, therefore, foregrounded this visual dimension of his writings and his quest through the sub-title I have given to this section of the essay, a sub-title that is derived from the following poem ('In this City of Falling Leaves') in the collection:

In this city of falling leaves  
and misty skylines

tramhoppers,  
smoking roofs,

high on hope  
and promises,

I serenade your face. (6)

The city is first of all an image, or rather an aggregate of images, which would become part of the ‘language’ learnt and spoken by the poet that it has given refuge. In the poem cited above, the poet does not just observe the cityscape, but uses it as a background to express his quest. As in actual painting, the background is also part of the meaning being conveyed, mainly because it located the major subject being represented and helps to shape the viewer’s/reader’s comprehension and response to it. The lover, whom he exophorically refers to,<sup>4</sup> acquires significance in the context of a European environment that wears its typical look – ‘falling leaves’ and ‘misty skylines’ (climatic change), tram-hopping, and ‘smoking roofs’ (obviously not a reference to danger). In this romantic contentment, the tribute is paid to the imaginary lover, but as we will see later in our discussion, this city reappears as the lover that is found irresistible.

In ‘Arrival,’ Bremen is configured as an ‘open name screamed/ at the world...’:

The plane has  
bruised the tarmac.  
The peppered weather  
has tripped the tourist.

And the witness  
is the open name screamed  
at the world: Bremen! (11)

Why an ‘open name’? Hospitality? Refuge? And what is a ‘closed name’? It looks as if the manner of articulation of the name ‘Bremen’ (the open-ness of the mouth/lips) is playfully appropriated to represent what the city *means* to the visitor? Obviously, the open-ness of the lips/mouth in the screaming or articulation of the name has no logical relationship with what the city *is*, or the character of the city. It is even very difficult to read a modern city, even figuratively (Oha 2002). What the poet writes is his feelings

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<sup>4</sup> Exophora are linguistic items that refer outside the text, i.e. to the extra-textual situation. As opposed to *endophora*, which refer to or signal relations within the text, *exophora* are textually non-cohesive as noted by Halliday and Hassan, and do create obscurity within a text. Poets therefore use them sometimes in making meaning more elusive in their poems. Pronouns in English that are typically *exophoric*, as Katie Wales has pointed out, are the first and second person types.

about the city (of refuge), and what the sound of the name seems to convey. Such a fallacy of association (and about the open-ness of the name) is already suggestive of the poet's quest to *understand* the city, to give the city *a meaning*.

Giving meanings to a European context in which they have relocated appears to be a common practice and engagement on the part of non-European migrants in Europe. It is part of the process of experiencing and articulating Europe, of *knowing* Europe, even though, given the diversity of the continent, such knowledge would still be inadequate and subject to interrogation. Bill Bryson, in his profoundly humorous book entitled *Neither Here Nor There: Travels in Europe*, writes:

One of the small marvels of my first trip to Europe was the discovery that the world could be so full of variety, that there were so many different ways of doing essentially identical things, like eating and drinking and buying cinema tickets. It fascinated me that Europeans could at once be so alike – that they could so universally bookish and cerebral, and drive small cars, and live in little houses in ancient towns, and love soccer, and be relatively unmaterialistic and law-abiding, and have chilly hotels rooms and cosy and inviting places to eat and drink – and yet be so endlessly, unpredictably different from each other as well. I loved the idea that you could never be sure of anything in Europe. (1998, 40)

The attempt at articulating the European context is indeed a process of re/invention, of fiction-making, in seeking to create a complement or supplement for the version of the host. The physically-visualized European world seems to merely provide the signifiers, the tropes, for the constructed meaning of itself. The meaning that is sought is never complete, never stable; it is often displaced and replaced.

'Open name' also appears to reveal *attitude*: it is *open* and cannot be immediately decided. An 'open name' would be tolerant of alternative meanings, not only inhabited by *native* meanings, but capable of being altered, of being vocalized and coloured by the new-comer's strange accent – what amounts to a pollution and does stimulate resistance or prejudice from the host who claims to have and know the sound and sense of the city. The city as an 'open name' would tolerate heterogeneity or multiculturalism, which is probably more of a hope than a reality.

A 'closed name' is already pre-determined, and tolerates no alternatives, no heterogeneity in membership and identity. Indeed, many migrants and exiled people would want a Europe that *includes* them, not only a Europe that provides accommodation or refuge. Refuge or accommodation may be temporary and does

suggest difference that, to an exile poet, would postpone the quest for 'home,' but it also questions the host's idea of otherness, and the presence of Self in the Order of the Other.

The impossibility of being included, of being in the Order of the Other, would make such a poet to retreat further into a *mental* exile where those desires (for a 'home') are fictionally satisfied. Some writers would seek this desire in making a mental journey nostalgically to the 'roots,' as we have in the case of Femi Oyebode in *Master of the Leopard Hunt* (1995). Just as Soyinka says,

Exile may hanker for a sympathetic environment, one that traits an umbilical cord to abandon roots, as if a handful of earth has been sneaked into the baggage and delivered ahead of the wanderer at destination. Mentally, the newcomer does the papal rites – kneels down and kisses the ground. There indeed, a close duplicate of habitation is recognized and adopted – while the self is schooled in a few minor adaptations. Or else – schooled to exist in a kind of paradox, a state of tension where the mind simultaneously embraces an anchor in alien territory yet ensures that it stays at one remove from the alien milieu. (2000, 63)

But in *The Bremen Poems* we do not have this nostalgia for African roots, surprisingly. Rather we have a romantic desire to be with the City of Refuge (as a lover), a desire that would eventually meet with disillusionment. In 'Bremen Trailed,' the city is configured as a lady-lover, and the relationship is intensely imagined as being inextricable (which is understandable, since such love affair is part of the seeking of refuge from hate or threat to one's life in the African homeland):

Like a snail  
Bremen trailed, slowly,  
through my skin,  
my friend, my flourishing friend  
my raw camera.

How could I abandon her?  
*How could I refuse*  
Her hand in my hand? (29)

Love protects; hate destroys. It is quite ironical that the outside (exile space) has taken over images normally associated with, or evoked by, home space. 'Her hand in (the poet's) hand' tells of love that is co-operative, love that is being poetically celebrated.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the poetry is partly the writing of Bremen as the artist's lover, and it is interesting to think of Europe that loves not just the African artist but also African art.

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<sup>5</sup> 'Her hand in my hand' could also refer to influence, i.e. the unavoidable influence of the city on the poet's writing. In this case, an ambiguity results in the (figurative) uses of 'hand' in the poem. The city's 'hand' is the hand of influence, while the poet's 'hand' is the poetic (artistic) response, which seems to support our view about the city writing itself through the poet for whom it provides refuge.

It must indeed be acknowledged that European countries (especially Germany) and European institutions have been in the vanguard of the promotion of African Studies generally, giving scholarships and fellowships to African scholars, and promoting their careers. The interest sometimes is surprising, especially when we find that Africans do not seem to be similarly committed to African (cultural) Studies the way that Europeans or other outsiders are. Some African critics may say that such a favour from Europe is a 'Greek gift,' but then it reveals reasons why Africa may not be a 'home' for an African artist who is never encouraged or promoted in Africa. Those of us who worry about 'brain drain' may, therefore, have to think about what *survival* means for the one who owns the brain. Tejumola Olaniyan (2003), in an online article, puts it more appropriately: 'Exile may be anguish and alienation, but home is neither warm nor welcoming.' One such case of the unfriendliness of the homeland to an African writer is seen in the experience of Jack Mapanje, a Malawian poet, in the hands of the government of Hastings Banda in his country. As recorded by Jules Smith in his short biography of Mapanje (2005), published electronically by the Film and Literature Department of British Council, Mapanje's collection of poems, *Of Chameleons and Gods* (1981), was banned by the Censorship Board in Malawi and his work was withdrawn from bookshops, libraries, and educational institutions in the country. Mapanje was imprisoned without trial by the Banda government in 1987, and upon release from prison in 1991, he sought refuge in Europe. His *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* (1993), writes Jules Smith (2005), 'reflects deeply upon his own exile and the condition of Malawi, with its scurvy children, a 'queue of skeletal hands,' and 'our fat-necked custodians'.... It is a country of roadblocks, gun-point burials, and the relevance of a new verb, to 'accidentalize' (political killings represented as accidents).'<sup>6</sup>

The poet, Nduka (an African), cannot abandon Bremen (Europe) that, unlike the African homeland, appears welcoming, and which has become his 'raw camera,' offering him a means of capturing, expressing, and articulating his experiences as an artist. As Tim Unwin (2001) has appropriately pointed out in an introduction to a recent special issue of the online journal, *Mots Pluriels*, which focuses on exile, the experience and context

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<sup>6</sup> Similar unwelcoming picture of the Malawi homeland is painted by Mapanje's compatriot, Frank Chipasula, who has been living in self-imposed exile in the USA since 1978, in his own collection of poems, *Whispers in the Wings* (1991).

of exile do often sharpen the creative sensibility and ability of the literary artist. And in Nduka's case, we have a place of exile that already gives him a special regard as an artist, and appears to be determined to promote him professionally. This situation would certainly not be the same for other Africans who have migrated illegally to Europe, in search of ways of becoming rich. Their own *writing* of Europe would probably present pictures of the struggle for survival in which the host is imagined as the villain.

Many poets often celebrate their attachment to, and affection for, geographical spaces, in amorous terms, imagining the spaces as female. This feminisation of space, which may have other interesting psychoanalytical readings that I am incapable of providing, and which could be seen as a strategy for valuation, enables the poet to express primitive emotions in a powerful way. And for a poet in exile, imagining the space as female becomes particularly a revelation of the desire to possess and be possessed by the exile space. Such condition of possession, such *at-one-ment*, could be seen as the beginning of the process of hybridisation – because it should be a relationship of give-and-take, not necessarily one that implies loss of memory for roots. Edouard Maunick, a poet from Mauritius, may after all be right in believing that 'Hybrid is the colour of exile, hybrid the culture of exile' (Soyinka 2000, 69). Going into exile is already a creation of an opportunity to deconstruct the idea of roots, not in the sense of discarding origin entirely, but in transforming the *rooted* Self into a dynamic Self that could converse with the Other, with another culture, another space. Interestingly in Nduka's case, the host cultural space also provides the symbolic means of engaging in this conversation as a 'raw camera': the European city provides itself as a means of visualizing and vocalizing its world:

I reap your flute  
Where fountains dance  
And voices make love. ('I Reap Your Flute' 32)

The city, in a sense, writes itself through the poet-persona as an experiencer. The exile poetry mediates the meaning of the city as a living world of human experience.

In 'Bremen's Ears,' too, still visualizing the city as a loving, richly dressed lady, the poet presents what seems to suggest a sense of entrapment, of helplessness, which reminds one of Keats' lady in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci':

Bremen's ear  
 Are not starved  
 Of earrings

Her mouth  
 Does not lack  
 The kiss within kisses

The tongue  
 Opening all the flowers  
 Of the flesh. (31)

Even though the city is feminised and configured as a lady-lover, yet it (she!) has its (her) many puzzles, its many paradoxes, through the capacity of 'opening all the flowers/of the flesh.' If the city stimulates emotions, it is also possible that some of such emotions would make the 'body' a site for the enactment of power and control. Already,

How could I abandon her?  
 How could I refuse?  
 Her hand in my hand?

(in 'Bremen Trailed') reveals a difference of power in the love relationship, paradoxically, for it seems that it is Bremen (the lady) who surrenders itself/herself, and it is the poet (the male) who has no choice but to accept the relationship. It can, therefore, not be understood as a relationship based on equality and mutual attraction. This would deconstruct the idea of love based on understanding, as speculated earlier. Love, as a correlate of refuge (in the 'City of Refuge'), is the subjectivity of one body to another. 'How can I refuse?' and 'How can I abandon her?' already suggest this helplessness.

Furthermore, the boundary between pain and pleasure, between the pain of punishment and the pleasure of the flesh, is so thin, just as the pleasures of the city (as a body) do not obscure the fact that such a space has laws, is being policed: it is therefore not entirely a site of freedom; the 'City of Refuge' as a lover has 'kiss(es) within kisses, which may include the kiss(es) of the police baton, of the oath book before the Jury, et cetera. The body of the 'lady-over' is watched by the Law, claimed by the Law, such that a kiss may be read as a transgression.

Bremen, although not quite like some modern cities in industrialized Europe for instance Paris, which Bryson (1998, 52) says has 'the world's most pathologically aggressive drivers – drivers who in other circumstances would be given injections of

thorazine from syringes the size of bicycle pumps and confined to their beds with leather straps – and you give them an open space where they can all try to go in any of thirteen directions at once,’ presents a sharp contrast from say, an African village. It has its own moments of hustle-and-bustle, noises of techno-culture, and sights of utopia that could surprise a visitor. And so in ‘Where Have I Run to?,’ a poem that enlists the strategy of rhetorical questioning, the poet expresses a surprise at what makes the city seem not to be the much-desired fulfillment or the much-desired (utopian) ‘home’:

Streetcars overthrow  
 The silence of tomatoes.  
 Where have I run to?  
 Tearing itself street by street  
 Bremen closes and opens.  
 This much is the raining city  
 Dangling with lights and marbles.  
 Who will take the feast there?  
 Bremen swings inside a string,  
 Hops out of God’s boots.  
 Where it goes no one knows. (22)

Quite interestingly, the poet has shifted in his perception of the city, as clearly marked in the stylistic use of ‘it’ or ‘itself,’ instead of ‘she,’ ‘her’ or ‘herself’ as we have in the poems cited earlier. As the city becomes more and more difficult to read, to understand, it ceases to be fixed in the referential person deictic form of the (human) feminine. It become neuter and inanimate, and ceases to be intimate.

Realistically, the industrialized European city space would prefer to be impersonal. It would rather prefer to be distant from everybody that is embodied in it. It would prefer to shun familiarity, and may only tolerate familiarity with its members that mind their businesses. It would also make its inevitable demands, even through hosting of other forms of Otherness that negotiate space in the pavements:

The scene cranks out iron, billboard, tar  
 And the riotous zeal of junkies.  
  
 Their begging hands circle my heart,  
 The limping beggars beside a tramstop.  
 Not claim in the pavement of noon,  
 The city is their merciless host too. (‘In the Pavement’ 27)

*Merciless* host? Gradually, affection for the city becomes paradoxical, and we begin to understand other meanings in the poet’s reference to the city as ‘an open name/screamed / at the world....’ Its open-ness also means the presence of what contradicts the idea of

refuge. Bremen cannot be a 'City of Refuge' if it plays a *merciless* host. Whatever affection the poet (or any other person) has imagined and associated with the city has some costs:

With a bill of love  
the city came calling;

through railtracks  
ran redemption's hand;

a new scroll opened where,  
like butterflies, raindrops wandered

through dispersed  
and dispersing clouds,

wandered, wandered where  
we travelled black,  
drank *White Ladies*. ('With a Bill of Love' 26)

If the city commiserates with the exile, the 'refugee,' it seems to be only temporary. Analogised as a tree (which seems to regress to the speed of a moving train), the city's affection/concern wanes. Redemption therefore remains remote for the exiled poet. In fact, one could say that with such disillusionment, the poet moves into another kind of exile that is no longer a physical place but a mental space, what Soyinka, in the essay we cited earlier, rightly refers to as 'a condition of internal exile' or 'a ghetto of internal exile' (2000, 64-65). In fact, Soyinka's representation of the identity of Esu, the Yoruba 'trickster,' 'prankster,' and iconoclastic god, as a wandering, liminal being in perpetual state of exile, seems to apply to the experience of the poet in *The Bremen Poems*.

Soyinka observes that

....Esu is a creature of liminal existence, just like the exiled writer whose residence is the frontier of reality, of the ambiguity of threshold, and one who is mostly content to be there.... An exiled writer is surely a creature of double alienation – one as a consequence of his transformative temperament and secondly of course by his physical displacement. (2000, 68)

Like Esu, the exiled writer would fail to find real admittance even in the 'City of Refuge,' especially when he is occupied in his own mind with a sense of his difference.

The terms 'travelled black' and 'drank White Ladies' seem to have strategic meanings. Travelling 'black' might mean travelling as a Black person, or still possessing Black African ways of life, in which case racial identity may attract attitudes of discrimination in a predominantly White society. Racial prejudice has often been the main problem

encountered by Black Africans in Europe, especially in Germany, and those who practise racial discrimination or fling racial insults at public places do not care whether their targets imagine the European context as a lover/home or not. In fact, being aware of such imaginations could even exacerbate the prejudice, given that racists try to resist attempts by racial outsiders to want an inclusion or sameness, to violate what appears to be a *natural* legislation on difference. The African exile in Europe cannot escape *traveling black*, the articulated hospitality of the 'City of Refuge' notwithstanding. The African writers in the 'City of Refuge' would always have to step out of the invented space where welcome is concelebrated to *travel black* through the streets where racial prejudice would peer at them. Even within the context of the celebration of such *protected* writers, the fact of being Black and African remains pronounced. Writing, in line with this argument in his article entitled, 'African intellectuals in the belly of the beast: migration, identity and the politics of exile,' Francis N. Njubi draws attention to the unfortunate debt one has to pay for being an *African* in the space of the Western other:

What exactly does it mean to be an 'African' in Europe or America? One quickly learns that the answer is not pretty. It is written in the faces of obnoxious waitresses, the teacher who slams the door of opportunity, the policeman who treats you like a criminal. It is reflected in the floods of negative media images that poison people's minds with racist stereotypes. (2002)

Traveling *black* in a White world then means being unable to escape the perceptions of this Black identity. It indicates the persistence of the memory of cultural identity, which must be reconciled with the demands of the immediate exile context, or rather the reconciliation of Then and Now, of There and Here, of 'where you're from' and 'where you're at,' which, Ien Ang (1998) argues, is what 'the idea of diaspora attempts to be a solution.'

Also, travelling 'black' and drinking *White Ladies* playfully presents an ambiguity. 'White Ladies' could be read, on the one hand, as the name of a type of drink, a wine maybe, but it could also playfully refer to real White ladies, who have love affairs with Black men. Indeed, the crossing of the racial divide through love affair is common among Black African immigrants and exiles in Europe. Some previous writings by Africans such as Ayi Kwei Armah's *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972) and *The Healers* (1979), and Dilibe Onyeama's *Sex Is a Nigger's Game* (1976), have focused on Black-White sexual crossings of racial boundary, but with different attitudes. While in Armah

it always ends in fatality for the Black African, for Onyeama it is an appropriation of stereotypes of the Black African's sexuality in trying to expose European hypocrisy about its own sexuality. Drinking 'White Ladies,' metaphorically, may, therefore, be a means of undermining racism that has no sympathy for either the African immigrant or the African artist seeking refuge in Europe. One African colleague, with whom I once discussed the issue of racism, and who studied in Austria, observed that racism in Europe is 'White-male.' According to him, the White European male stands at the border with a whip saying. 'No entry to Blacks!,' while the White European female is beckoning on the Black male to please cross the border by any means and embrace her! This might be a rude joke, a verbal cartoon, but it seems to convey an important idea about gender as a variable in the discourse on racism, which may be a sub-text couched in 'we travelled black,/drank *White Ladies*.' Interestingly, too, imaginations of love affair with either the White European lady or the European city are not without some intersections with some strategies used by some Africans fleeing to Europe to make good their stay. For instance, an African immigrant for acquiring a residence visa and/or citizenship. Very much an interesting way of drinking *White ladies*!

Traveling black and drinking White Ladies interestingly suggests the ambivalence of the exilic and diasporic imagination, which operates in the in-betweenness of cultural origin and immediate present of the exilic context. Ang (1998) has observed that: 'the diasporic imagination is steeped in continuous ambivalence. This ambivalence, I would suggest, highlights the fundamental precariousness of diasporic identity-construction, its positive indeterminacy.' The exilic African writer who travels *black* and drinks *White Ladies* is an adventurer that demonstrates that transgressive act of the *third-worlding* of Europe.

Uche Nduka has described himself and his poetry as follows: 'I am an adventurer and poetry is my adventure' (2000). The adventure of his poetry in terms of style – and his being a cultural traveller entering and working within the racial space of the Other – is much an adventure of African writing outside of its cultural setting. The author of four collections of poems, which include *Flower Child* (1988), *Second Act* (1994), and *Chiaroscuro* (1997), *If Only the Night* (2002), and the editor and translator of an anthology of recent Nigerian poetry into German (*Und auf den Straßen eine Pest: Junge Nigerianische Lyrik*, 1996), Nduka has demonstrated remarkable energy in his use of

shifting images and compelling language in his poetry.<sup>7</sup> Whereas in *Flower child* (1988), which was written and published in Nigeria, one could find traces of influences from African (Igbo) traditions of poetry and from Igbo poets like the late Christopher Okigbo and Pol Ndu, in *The Bremen Poems* we find a colouration by the experience and context of exile. Of course, this is inevitable, for every serious work of art also communicates its context, what more when the collection is clearly devoted to Bremen.

Entering the space of the (Cultural) Other necessitates a dialogue between texts and between the cultural contexts of those texts. We expect a situation described by the semiotician, Yury Lotman, as ‘culture within culture’ and ‘text within the text,’ which implies a transformation of style. The writing of Bremen as a cultural space necessitates another form of exile from Nduka’s context of Igbo culture, for he must speak some *language* of this new context. In a sense, this is part of the process of re/identification, for, as Odile Ferly reminds us, ‘Exile necessarily brings about some cultural adjustment, an adaptation process that leads to a redefinition of identity’ (2001). This adjustment process is part of the ‘adventure,’ in which an attempt is made to create a ‘new’ Self, a new voice.

The voice that we hear in *The Bremen Poems* does not contain those rhetorical features we commonly associate with African poetry – those aspects of orality like proverbs and rhythmic patterns sometimes modelled from or designed to suit performances with the drum, the flute, or even folk speech, as one may find in the poetry of well-known practitioners like Niyi Osundare, Oswald Mtshali, and Kofi Anyidoho. This *linguistic* or *stylistic exile* demonstrates another sense of adventure in the exilic writing. It is an adventure into a cultural devoicing and re-voicing of a new Self.

The memory that is reflected for African literary tradition only occurs in a testimonial reference to the late Igbo poet, Pol Ndu :

In a corncrib Pol Ndu says  
 Ironbenders love eating salt.  
 The beaching man needs his aspirins  
 His myths, his voyages, his mirthmaking.  
 Have a toke, he says, from a speeding verse.  
 Fleece my fears.  
 Walk the centre of my sobriety. (‘In a Corncrib,’ 32)

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed profile of the poet, visit his homepage at <http://www.pluriverse.de/uche>.

In this case, link with the voice of indigenous African literary tradition is indirect: it is through a quotation of a more faithful poet. T.S. Eliot, in his famous essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' writes that 'No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone,' but that his poetry is made on the achievements of dead poets and within a tradition that is ordered and already complete, but which the poet now transforms in negotiating a place(ment) (1986, 2207). 'In a Corncrib' partly exposes the poet's leaning on the Nsukka tradition of poetry in which poets like Pol Ndu, Christopher Okigbo, Kalu Uka, Kevin Echeruo, and many others, were already notable for attempting to tie up indigenous Igbo meanings and rhythms with European modernist stylistic practices, especially because of the nature of their formal university education. Many of them had studied European writers like Gerard Manley Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, under professors who had tremendous admiration for these modernists and for the so-called 'Great Tradition.' In the case of Uche Nduka, therefore, we are dealing with a poet nurtured by those who had been accused by African critics like Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike, in their controversial book, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1980), of being (already) stylistically and culturally exiled in their writings.

But indeed, what obtains in the case of the Nsukka tradition of poetry is an attempt at creating something new through a dialogism of the foreign and the indigenous, a post-colonial tendency that appears inevitable, and which has continued in other forms of cultural production like music, painting and fashion. Remembering tradition (or art) in 'In a Corncrib' could as well mean remembering the fact that there is no more a 'home' that presents a univocal African culture. Indeed, it is this sense of the changing nature and meaning of 'home' that may make an exiled African writer not languish in nostalgia about roots, about 'Sympathetic environment... that trails an umbilical cord to abandoned roots,' as Soyinka (2000) calls it.

The awareness of the inability to find a 'home,' either in Africa or in Europe, creates a sense of permanent strandedness, permanent exile, as expressed in 'Note to a Season':

Shall I luxuriously  
cradle my betrayal  
and write the ballad

of my maimed country?

I have become a tree  
thrust between the arms  
of a lonely sky. (10)

A ‘maimed country,’ it seems, is not worth celebrating, not worth romanticising. The same pessimism has been expressed by many Nigerian writers, but perhaps with different tones. Wole Soyinka, for instance, concludes his highly depressing narrative in *The Open Sore of a Continent* (1996) with a conditional sentence: ‘If the nation is to live, its resuscitation must commence where its heart first stopped beating’ (143), which sounds like a rephrasing of Chinua Achebe’s wise saying about the need for Africans to begin to look for where the rain started beating them.

*The Bremen Poems* is about Europe as much as it is about Africa, specifically Nigeria, or rather about Africa using Europe to express its agony of endless search. It is about *home* and *exile*, about home in exile and exile at home. This perpetual strandedness is perhaps interestingly reflected in the fact that the poems in the collection are conceived as ‘notes.’ They are short, but precise. A stranded person could still be productive – what more when the poet has some support as a guest at the heinrich Boll Haus in Langenbroich, and has had a stipendium from Goethe Institut, which brought him to Bremen, and also teaches African literature part-time at the University of Bremen. But the shortness of the poems seems to speak strategically about *time*, and about the state of the mind. I have already referred to them as ‘snapshots’ of experience, which are capable of being developed (just as film negatives are) for the images to become clearer. But images being undeveloped, unclear, is a communicative strategy; it tells about the condition of exile, of being physically and mentally unsettled.

A short poem, however, speaks more powerfully, semiotically, than a long one, because it surprises us. It abandons us suddenly, so that we are forced to pay more attention to it. It does not bore us, unlike the long poem, but rather *disturbs* us. Moreso, Nduka is in love with images; when these images are conveyed in short poems, they are much more striking and effective.

Most of the recurrent images are those of night, wind, ocean, tide and ‘lonely sky,’ which are archetypal images that evoke fear. In the poem, ‘Tragic is the Magic,’ for

instance, the images of fear (blinding season, night and tide) are used in conveying the sense of despair:

Tragic is this magic  
this season blinding  
the eyes of this tune.

Torment, flamenco  
hornpiping roots of night  
calling beyond Bremen

Beyond the pearl  
of farewell. *The staggering line.*  
*The lonely tune in the tide.* (18, italics added)

There is, of course, sufficient rationale for the use of the images of fear, particularly the image of night. Exile, filled with uncertainty, may be considered a ‘night.’ The poet searches in its darkness for security and comfort. But, in spite of what the intended meaning of the ‘City of Refuge’ may be, the real exile would continue to mean *loneliness* to the poet. Just like ‘The Staggering line’ – an impressive syntactic construction of meaning (since the last lines/phrases in italics are indeed staggered, the *lonely* phrases becoming sentences) – the questing persona staggers in an exilic night, his poetry sounding as a ‘lonely tune in the tide.’

### Concluding Remarks

In this essay, I have tried to show that the poet in *The Bremen Poems* does not eventually find refuge in the ‘City of Refuge’ in Europe, even though he tries to construct such as illusion in feminising Bremen and in expressing his deep affection for ‘her.’ Although one cannot speak of a homogeneous Europe, the physical world of the European city, with all its complexities, as presented in *The Bremen Poems*, forces the poet into an inner exile. Exile also means a stylistic exile in his poetry, not only because we are provided with dense and rapidly shifting images, but also some diminished link with African rhetorical traditions. Physical exile in Europe has greatly shaped the poetic style in *The Bremen Poems*, especially as the poet tries to articulate his experiences and to arrive at some meaning of exile. As this writing of exile is semiotically tied to Europe (and *with* Europe), it not only narrates the European space (from the perspective of the *refugee*) in an interesting way, but also reveals a ‘travel’ beyond the physical exile space itself.

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