

**THE SPATIAL CONUNDRUM IN NIYI OSUNDARE'S *CITY WITHOUT  
PEOPLE: KATRINA POEMS***

**BY**

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**FEBRUARY 2025**

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**AN ESSAY SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF  
BACHELOR OF ART (HONS) IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
AND LITERATURE, FACULTY OF ARTS  
UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BENIN CITY  
EDO STATE, NIGERIA**

**FEBRUARY 2025**

**CERTIFICATION**

I certify that this study was carried out by **Sharon Ifeoma ISRAEL (Miss)** in the Department of English and Literature, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City under my supervision.

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**Dr. Clement Eloghosa Odia**  
**Project Supervisor**

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**Date**

## DEDICATION

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all those who have supported me throughout the course of my educational journey.

First and foremost, I am immensely thankful to my project supervisor Mr Clement Eloghosa Odia for his invaluable guidance, expertise, and encouragement, which helped shape the direction and success of this project.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Jolly Chibugo for their financial and moral support throughout my education. and to my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Albert Ebalu, for their unwavering guidance and support, Your sacrifices and belief in me have made this journey possible. I am forever grateful.

To my siblings, thank you for your love and encouragement. Your presence has been a constant source of strength.

I am also grateful to my tutor, Mr. Ladi, for his support and dedication, as well as to my friends at the university for their camaraderie and motivation, which made this experience memorable.

Lastly, I give all thanks and praise to God for His grace, guidance, and blessings, which have seen me through every challenge and triumph.



## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Purpose of Study**

This essay examines the spatial conundrum in Niyi Osundare's poetry collection on hurricane Katrina disaster in order to investigate how the poet has represented the effects of the storm on the city of New Orleans. The research aims to analyse the spatial imagery and metaphors used in Osundare's poetry to convey the experiences of Katrina victims. It also investigates how the poems challenge and reinforce dominant narratives of disaster response and recovery.

#### **1.2 Scope of Study**

The study focuses specifically on the poetry of Osundare entitled, *City Without People: Katrina Poems* (henceforth abbreviated as city). The study randomly selects thirteen poems from the collection to explore the spatial predicament of the hurricane disaster.

#### **1.3 Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research approach, combining close reading, critical analysis, and interpretive research methods to examine the spatial conundrum in Niyi Osundare's *City Without People: Katrina Poems*. A detailed examination of the poetic texts is conducted to identify and analyse spatial imagery, metaphors and themes. The study applies geo poetic theoretical framework to interpret the spatial representations and cultural significance of New

Orleans. The primary data is Osundare's *City Without People: Katrina Poems*. The secondary sources includes scholarly articles, books, and reviews on geo-critical theory and topopoetic theory.

#### **1.4 Theoretical Background**

This essay applies the geopoetic theory to read the poems of Osundare which dwell on the hurricane disaster. Before exploring the geopoetic theory, let us begin with the concept of space.

Aishwarya , maran and Michael Raj have concerned of place as "an integral part of space became space is nothing but the abstract idea , imagination or perception of a place "(2). Thus, both place and space are contiguous. For example, space constructs the ideas of a zone , a wend , an area or even a territory (Elden , 2004) . It may be read imagined lived spaces . Hence , both "spatial and contexts" shape the relationship between "emotions and please" thus connect people's experiences to their memory(2).

Timothy John Creswell dwells so much on the concept of place. He begins with the equation of place to "location" (18). He adds that a place "names particular collections of things" (18). This presupposes that a place evokes the sense of many objects or "assembles of things". One important notion about place is its potentiality for enactment(19). Hence, Creswell concludes that places are not just locations but rich gatherings of things, practices and meanings" (21) or as Ti-Fu Tuan has said, they are "centres of meaning". (21)

The term, “geopoetics”, therefore involves the fusion of “geo” and “poetics”. The “geo” refers specifically to the earth. “poetics” on its own, has nothing to do with poetry. It is used in the same sense with Aristotle in *The Poetics*. Poetics conveys the sense of theories or thoughts and principles which aid interpretation of literary ideas.

Geopoetics, therefore, suggests the application of ideas, ideological presumptions, principles and theories that shed light on how place is represented in a literary text. Geopoetics involves therefore the textuality of place. Through a geo-poetic analysis, it is possible to foreground certain experiences that may not be obvious. As Cresswell has pointed out, the place is an assemblage of things and geopoetics examines the various shades of meanings associated with it.

Geopoetics is an important approach to spatial representation in literary studies. It sets out to investigate the relationship between human existence and the earth as the home.

Tim Cresswell traces the meaning to the Ancient Greek which regards the “geo” as “earth”, “ground” or “soil”. Cresswell explains that “geopoetics refers to an act of making earth or making earth as home place” (374). Within a literary text, geopoetics entails the construction of earth as home place with definable spatial relationships. The earth represents not just a place but a space which enables human existence and relationships. Muriel Rosemberg explains that geopoetics “designates a poetic practice that highlights the connection between

man's existential ties with the world and poetic creation" (289). Through the world created in poetry, the link between human existence and that world finds adequate expression.

Dana Bonisch avers that Geopoetics "investigates the author's critical approach towards place and the profound relationship between man and the earth"(17). The primary concern of Geopoetics is to find out how literary authors represent "places" and the connection between human beings and the earth they live in. also, Geopoetics "foregrounds the interconnectedness of place and Geopoetical elements" which include "culture, place, poeticity, philosophy, spirituality and emotional entanglement (20). Every human activity has some relationship with the earth which functions as geopoetic home.

Mahmood Heidari and Elham Choobine explain that Kenneth White introduces the theory such as "emotional-spatial entanglement, poeticity, critical thinking and descriptive in the selected work" (157). Emotion and space are interrelated because "places and the emotions they aroused in people" (167) form the major preoccupation of Geopoetics. White Calls this "the energy of place" and that it has effects on people's emotions.

Agnieszka Izdebska and Elzbuta Kononczuk holds the view that "space shapes human imagination" and explain that Geopoetics involves "a poetic inhabitation of the world" (20) and that it flows from the "poetics of space". According to Izdebska and Kononczuk, Geopoetics avails the reader an

opportunity to enter the place, that is, the poetic place being represented so that they can appreciate what is being said. The textual world holds the key to the writer's frame of thought, that is, the poetics. The "geo" represents space, the world and the ongoing experience.

### **1.5 Review of Related Scholarship**

The poetry of Osundare has attracted several scholarly attention. Few of them will be explored with the view to justifying this study. Abiodun Akinpelu explores trauma and resilience in the collection *City Without People*, remarking that: "In the context of Osundare's poetry, there is an active engagement with the postmemory of the trauma of transatlantic slavery and the Katrina experience" (49). Akinpelu reads the collection with the mindset of trauma as an extension of slavery to the disaster of Katrina. In both cases, the trauma of loss is followed by the resilience of the survivors. However, the essay does not explore the spatial conundrum which is the preoccupation of the current study.

Kazeem Adebisi-Adelabu examines the aesthetic sublimation of pain in Osundare's *City Without People* explaining that "the poet's pain, largely psychic, is a product of losses of various kinds" (16). The focus on pain is to reveal the devastating impact of the Katrina storm on the residents of New Orleans. The critic goes further by stating that: "the analysis of poems drawn from across the collection demonstrates the paradox of using pain to birth writing and using writing to kill pain" (16). The essential interest of the critic is to explore the

therapeutic nature of disaster poetry in healing the trauma of disaster. However, the essay does not show the spatial dynamics of the poems and how they help readers understand the spatial conundrum. Such reading does not improve interpretation of Osundare's poems. Hence, there is need to explore the spatial literary metaphors and imagery which undergird the poems.

Esther Iria Jamgbadi explores Osundare's poetry of political impunity and concludes that "impunity in government occurs when rulers abuse power and operate like gangsters breaking laws without any iota of remorse" (139). Jamgbadi's focus on political impunity is with the intention of exploring the great pain that bad leadership wreaks on the people. the difference is that disaster, like the Hurricane Katrina is a natural disaster. However, Jamgbadi's essay is a clear deviation from what we intend to address in this essay. Hence, it does not focus on geography of pain.

Both Yomi Okunowo and Oloko M. Jamiu examine aesthetic of oral art and bilingual creativity in Niyi Osundare's poetry they explain that Osundare's "literary creativity of imbuing his poems with a unique bilingual expressiveness and resources from African oral tradition situates his works in the political, economic and socio-cultural life of the Nigerian society"(162). The beauty of Osundare's poetry as attested to by Okunowo and Jamiu is that they constitute a source of aesthetic appeal to his poetic works. They also help to affirm the poet's ingenuity, Africanness and originality. Even when these help to expand the

readership, the focus of the present essay is the spatial conundrum using the cartographic and spatial literary techniques to read how the poet presents the predicament of the people during the Hurricane Katrina.

### **1.6 Thesis Statement**

This essay argues that Niyi Osundare's *City without People: Katrina Poems* constitutes a spatial critique of disaster, exploring the intersections of displacement, cultural erasure and spatial injustice in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and ultimately, offering a poetic vision of resistance, resilience, and reclamation that challenges dominant narratives of disaster response and recovery.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SPATIAL DISLOCATION AND DISPLACEMENT

Hurricane Katrina's devastating impact on New Orleans was more than just a natural disaster; it was a spatial catastrophe that shattered the city's social, cultural, and economic fabric. The forced migration of over 1 million people, predominantly African American, from their homes and communities constituted a profound spatial dislocation. Niyi Osundare's *City Without People: Katrina Poems* captures the anguish, trauma, and resilience of those displaced, offering a powerful exploration of spatial dislocation and its consequences.

This chapter examines the spatial dislocation and displacement represented in Osundare's poetry, analyzing how the disaster disrupted the relationship between people, place, and identity. Through a geocritical and topo poetic lens, this chapter investigates the ways in which Katrina's spatial disruptions reshaped the cultural landscape of New Orleans. By exploring the intersections of space, place, and displacement, this chapter argues that Osundare's poetry reveals the spatial conundrum at the heart of Katrina's aftermath, challenging dominant narratives of disaster response and recovery.

In the poem, "omiyale". Osundare explores spatial dislocation and displacement through the apt poetics of space:

The Lake came to my house

(Absolutely uninvited),

Its wild waters pounding the porch.

Like a band of wailing monsters

It barged through the door without knocking

Tore through the windows like a desperate burglar (*city*, 16)

The image of an uninvited visitor stares the reader in the opening line of the poem. This time, it is the lake that has been personified to amplify the sense of the threat. Its “wild waters” are said to come into the house of the speaker. The on rushing waters are compared through simile to “a bond of wailing monsters”. The point being suggested is that the Lake leaves in its wake a stream of wailing owing to the destruction that accompanies it. The flood waters “barged through the doer” and “tore through the windows”. The poet’s spatial acumen is being displayed. We see movement and the speaker helps the reader to imagine the through the aid of simile and personification. Two separate similes create a clever picture in the mind. In the first we see “a band of waiting monsters” mourning the destruction. In the second, the lake waters **tear** through the windows like “a desperate bugler” to describe the strength and speed with which the water moves out of the house. Also important is the velocity and power exhibited by the lake when it metaphorically “barged through the doer”. Thus, the flood displaces the door, pounds the “porch” and even destroys the window:

Swell up the carpet, billowed up the walls  
 Daubed my paintings in  
 its own satanic colours sat briefly on my sofa, its dirty legs.

On the coffee table, capsized my happy mugs,  
 Tossed up the tv  
 like a Disney toy then lunged towards my crowded kitchen.

The stanzas above explore the metaphorical technique to spatialise the hurricane disaster. Relying on images of violence chaos and destruction, the poet technically evokes spatial displacement and dislocation. The carpet that was flat on the ground suddenly swelled up”, while the paintings on the walls were “billowed up”. The hurricane is said to sit briefly on the speaker’s “sofa” and placing “its dirty legs” on the “coffee table”. The mugs on the table are not spared, as they are “capsized”. The “tv” is tossed up and “lumped towards” the kitchen to wreak more havoc. The movement of water from one object in different locations of the house, dislocating the displacing them emphasizes the spatial literary power of the poem, exploring the poetics of space as a trope in the poem. Thus, we see the displacement of the carpet, the painting on the walls, the dirtying of the sofa, the tv and the mug as all the these are hurled into the kitchen.

In another poem, Osundare examines the spatial dislocation and displacement, exposing how the disaster disrupted place, people and identity. In “Tell Me, Rain)” the speaker describes objects dislocated and displaced namely:

You strike the road

It runs red with mud

You hit my bread

It swells like a sickly mound

You touch the pool

It becomes a lake (*city*, 22)

The hurricane's ferocious power, as revealed in the actions being described, amplifies the destructiveness of the storm. The poet personifies the storm using the second person. Pronoun "you" as subject of the poem. In the opening line in the stanza above, the speaker addresses the storm as, "you", and this is followed by what it has done, "strike the road". The aftermath of this is that the road "runs red with mud". What this means is that the storm has destroyed the road. Put differently, it disrupted the road and eventually displaces the community.

Similarly, the storm is said to "hit" the speaker's bread causing it to swell "like a sickly mound". The beauty of the poem rests with the simile comparing the bread to a sickly mound. Thus, the speaker effectively expresses the destruction caused by the storm on the bread. By implication, this causes hunger because the people will have no bread to eat. Also related to this is how the storm displaces the community. Firstly, the storm unleashed its fury on the "poet" and

soon it has become a lake because it has ruined it leaving the people with no pool to swim.

You intoxicate the lake

It bursts its banks

You rattle my roof

And hurt my house

My books dissolved

In your thieving floods (*city*, 22)

The spiraling effect of the storm in the lake is effectively conveyed through impressive deployment of metaphor. The lake is said to be intoxicated leading its banks to burst. Thus, the storm destroyed the banks of lake leading to flood in the neighborhood. The effect of the hurricane is also fact in the speaker's roof when it rattled it and hurt the house. Also, the speaker suffers untold destruction owing to the roof being pulled down. For this reason, the speaker's books "dissolved" in the flood which stole his valuable property. The metaphor of intoxication, ratting and thieving to describes the floods convincingly and captures the power of the storm to displate and displace the people. Through artistic imagination, the poet invites the reader to share the experience as well as feel the pain of loss being suffered.

The poetics of disastrous space as decremented in Osunderer's poem comes out strong in "City without people". The speaker catagues the ruin as a way as of showing the impact of dislocation and displacement on the people:

The trees are dead

The birds are gone

The grass is scorched

The worms have vanished

Skeletal houses stare at the sky

Through their broken windows (City, 35)

The poet begins the poem on the note of displacement. The dead trees leads to displacement of birds from the trees. Also, the grass suffers heavily from scorching which eventually makes the worms to vanish. The skeletal houses are said to stare at the sky through their broken windows. The prevalence of death imagery indicates the sense of dislocation and displacement.

Viewed on a whole, the spatial dislocation emerges as one gives attention to the spatial imagery. The reference to trees, grass and houses shows the movement in terms of description from one object to the other which have been affected by the storm. The spatial imagery is reinforced through euphemistic tone

suggesting death, loss and ruin. The trees are dead but the birds are said to be “gone”. Also, the grass is scorched but the worms have “vanished”.

Tell me

What do you call a house

Without walls?

What do you call a city

Without people? (City, 35)

This poem centres on the theme of dislocation and displacement. The poet employs two rhetorical questions to emphasise the ruin. Firstly, the speaker wants to know if a house still exists where the walls have been destroyed. Secondly, the speaker appears to state that no city can exist without people. Owing to the storm and its devastating impact on the city, the people have been dislocated and displaced leading them to flee the city of New Orleans.

It is impossible, to read the poem, “Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward”, without noticing the dislocation and displacement which hurricane Katrina has wreaked on the people:

They called 911

Till the line went dead

And the city's tongue

Drowned in its mouth

Many simply dropped

Like fruits unripe (City 44)

The spatial imagery of downing, unripe fruits falling and death conspire to register a vivid picture of chaos. The storm has unleashed pain on the city leaving people frustrated and in agony. The emergency call lines “went dead” and many who depended on them are cut off and displaced. The city appears to be drowned in the flood while many dropped dead even when they are unprepared for it. The euphemism of unripe fruit dropping expresses untimely death brought on the people by the storm.

The spatial dislocation and displacement experienced by individuals and communities in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina is reflected in Niyi Osundare's *City without people: Katrina poems*, underscores the profound impact of catastrophic events on the human experience of space and place. Through the lens of spatial theory, this chapter has examined how the disaster disrupted the spatial narratives of New Orleans and reconfigured their relationships to city and its landscapes.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### CULTURAL ERASURE AND MEMORY

The devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina extended far beyond physical destruction; it also triggered a profound cultural erasure, threatening the very essence of New Orleans' identity. The displacement of communities, destruction of cultural landmarks, and loss of historical artifacts constituted a catastrophic assault on the city's collective memory. Niyi Osundare's *City without people: Katrina poems* bears witness to this cultural heritage while also celebrating the resilience of memory.

This chapter explores the themes of cultural erasure and memory in Osundare's poetry, examining how the disaster affected the cultural landscape of New Orleans, the representation of historical trauma and the role of memory in preserving cultural identity. Through a critical analysis of Osundare's poetry, this chapter argues that cultural erasure is not only a physical destruction but also a symbolic annihilation of community history and identity.

Cultural erasure and memory predominate in the poem "Liquid city" which expresses the sense of loss and deprivation. These lines have a deep evocative power:

Dissolve into nameless pools

Houses roam the street

In search of missing roofs

The city we knew

Went away with the storm

Without leaving a forwarding address (City, 15)

The precursor to the above stanzas is the speaker's reference to "Famous boulevards" which "Dissolve into nameless pools". These boulevards are the cultural icons of the city but now erased by the flood. Thus, "Houses" are said to "roam the streets". There is a subtle hint at a metaphorical evocation of loss and ruin. The sense of "roams" is meant to convey the percolation of rubble in the fleeing flood. The storm occasioned the "search" for "missing roofs" that have been erased by the flood. The speaker bemoans the sense of culture being wiped away. Also, the storm triggers the loss of houses "leaving no forwarding address". The poem provides the main test of Osundare's ultimate poetic techniques, the metaphorical language. Here, the poet compares the way substances dissolve into water to how "houses" have dissolved into nameless pools. Similarly, the search metaphor underscores the sense of loss. Also, there is the metaphor of leaving without a forwarding address to the way the city has been destroyed completely. The imaginative core of this poem is to be found in its degrading landscape. This is because the "houses" are said to be dissolved in a sea of calamity and mountain of ruin. Besides, to comment on the use of personification is to contribute

freshness into the artistic contours of the poem. By this device the poet expresses most completely his sense of erasure and memory and enriches the poem aesthetically.

In another poem entitled “soddenly”, the poet presents the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina leading to cultural erasure and memory thus:

In the deadening air

Of the living room

Where laughter once rumbled

Like thunder from a friendly sky

All water

All waste (city, 18)

Here are emotions perfectly expressed, relying heavily on auditory imagery, simile style and visual imagery. The speaker recalls the memory of the pre-storm era where people used to laugh hearty in “the living room”. The poet enlivens the stanza with a rich dose of auditory imagery through the loud laughter of people, which has been compared to a rumbling thunder. This image provides the poem with rich artistic quality in which the loud artistic quality in which the loud laugh articulates a friendly ambience. The last stanza embodies some contradictory ideas. In all the details of its imagery, the extract is suggestive of

alliterative virtuosity and loss. The sense of water pervading the city demonstrates the sense of waste. Thus, the city has become a heap of water and waste.

The darkening clouds. Wind-driven,  
Tornado-tormented, the lake overran  
Its fence, pouring its piled-up anger

In the careless streets  
Levees (built with levity)  
Collapsed like hapless mounds

Roads lost their names  
Streets their memories (city 13).

One unique quality of the poem is the exquisite power of personification with which the poet conveys how cultural erasure and memory are actualized. There is the sense of urgency which is linked with the raw speed with which the storm unleashed flood waters to the environment. The lake is said to be “driven” by the wind and the Tornado is said to be “tormented”. These empower the lake to overrun its fence and pour its piled-up anger” in the streets. Consequently, the “levees” get “collapsed” to the extent that “roads lost their names” while “streets” lose their “memories”. There is a deeper sense of loss connected to the roads and streets which symbolize the city itself and in fact, the people in the city. The

destruction of these symbols of human existence history and cultural significance represents the loss of memory.

A torrential torment enthralled the city  
 The day the lake came down my street  
 And took my house away (13)

The poet humanises lake and the rain the sense of the city being enthralled because the rain came down heavily on it presents the possibility of ruin. When the lake flowed to the street, it destroyed the speaker's house.

This destroyed "house", expressed through euphemism, amplifies the sense of erasure and memory of the house and whatever it represents. The aesthetic quality is evident in the alliterative technique. The words, "torrential" and "torment", express the heavy dose of suffering that the people had to endure during the storm.

The theme of cultural erasure and memory resonates in Osundare's poem entitled "postmortem". In the second part of the poem, entitled "postmortem II" the speaker bemoans cultural erasure and memory thus:

Narita's baby  
 Died in this house  
  
 The lake stole him  
 From his cot

And gave him

To the hungry sea (City 37)

The house, in the above poem, functions as an image of memory, which the speaker recalls with nostalgia., the death of Narita's baby in this fictional house represents the erasure of all experiences and memory of the dead baby. Also, the lake which stands for the ecological disaster is said to have stolen the baby from his "cot". The alarming point here is that the dead child is given to the hungry sea. The poet's language must be given its proper emphasis. This is constructed round personification, in which the Hurricane Katina is presented as a human being. The words, "Like" and "sea", are personified to enhance the destructiveness of the storm. For example, the Lake "stole" the child and "gave" him to "the hungry sea". The sea, cannot be hungry because it it not a human being. But in the poem, it is presented as such.

In another poem, this time, "postmortem vi the poet catalogues the sense of loss, cultural erasure and memory:

The Sheraton

Towers above the muddy mess

Its own wound

Bandaged with brown paper

Once thought impregnable

Until Katrina turned its rooms (city 39)

The focus of this poem is the Sheraton, a hotel of cultural significance and international relevance. The hotel is said to tower above “the muddy mess”. Its own “wound” is said to be “bandaged with brown paper. “The sense of memory is reactivated when the speaker recalls that the hotel was once though “impregnable” until Katrina destroyed the “rooms”. Again, there is heavy reliance on personification to express the sense of memory. The fact that Sheraton “towers” or stand above the muddy mess all around illustrates the humanness of the building. It is also said have suffered a “wound” which has been “bandaged”. Also, the Sheraton was once thought “impregnable” until Katrina lodged in the rooms.

In the final section of the poem, entitled: Postmortem VII”, the poet explains:

So much there was here

So little now

But

Hope, thin-bodied,

Is bent

Never broke (city, 40)

The poet reactivates the memory of the place employing place adverbials to spatialise the environment in terms of place and time. The adverbials “here” and “now” are key to understanding the context. First, the speaker recalls that so much existed in that place “here”, that is, before Hurricane Katrina struck. In rather twist, the reverse is the case. Although they had “much” to eat and even to spare, “now” it has become “so little” to eat and nothing to spare. Through a laconic style, the poet says much through brief and austere linguistic presentation. The word, “much” as used in the poem evokes the sense of plenty, abundance and prosperity. This is contrasted with lack, poverty and penury as evoked through the word, “little”. The point being made is that the Hurricane Katrina brought pain, misery and penury on the people. Also, through it, the poet reveals how the storm actualizes cultural erasure and memory. Despite the situation, the speaker’s memory does not factor. He recalls the days before the storm and compares it days after and concludes that the storm has brought the people so much pain.

A critical reading of Osundare’s poem, “The missing Altar” reveals the theme of cultural erasure and memory. The speaker marvels at how the disaster erodes years of cultural memory:

God lived here

Before the flood

With his angels and archangels

But the wind unroofed the altar

Raging waters pushed the walls

Three blocks from their sacred site.

The poet dwells on religious cultural experience which subsisted for many years. According to the speaker bemoaning the loss, “God lived here”, is a metaphor for church and Christianity, “before the flood” is a tempora-spatial indication that the flood occasioned the change. The speaker recalls with fond memories that “God” and His “angels and archangels” once dwelled there. The change occasioned by the flood sees the wind “unroofed the altar” as “Raging waters” were able to push down the walls, destroying three of gruesome details one notices how the flood wreaked untold damage on the church building and several others in the community. Viewed as a whole, the flood emerges as one which unleashed great havoc.

To, achieve a detailed and passionate representation, the poet resorts to personification. The flood, the wind and waters are personified giving them human strength, power and force with which to unfurl damage on building. The flood is presented as a visitor, bringing the wind along to unroof the altar. The waters are said to enraged to the extent that they “pusted the walls”.

Now, bloated bibles peruse the blight

The flock is off to greener pastures

Alien hymns harass the wind (47).

Even material elements are not spared. The alliterative power of the above stanza enriched its musical and poetic artistry. First, “bloated bibles” are said to read the “blight”. Beyond the alliteration, there is metaphor. The bibles are said to be bloated, that is a reference to its swollen nature in water, to convey the sense of ruin. Even the “hymns” are said to “harass” the wind. All these depict the impact of the flood on the people who are displaced. Thus, the place is desolate, empty and alienated. This presupposes that the memory of once buoyant society has become vacant, destroyed and fled.

In conclusion, Niyi Osundare’s *city without People: Katrina poems* offers a poignant and powerful exploration of the impact of hurricane Katrina on the spatial memory of New Orleans. Through his masterful use of poetic devices and techniques, Osundare maps the spatial memory of the city, revealing the intricate relationships between place, identity, and community. This analysis has demonstrated how Osundare’s poetry not only reflects the disruption of spatial memory caused by the hurricane but also serves as a form of resistance against forgetting and erasure. Ultimately, Osundare’s poetry reminds us that spatial memory is a vital component of our humanity, and that its preservation is essential for rebuilding and reclaiming communities in the aftermath of catastrophic loss.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DISORIENTATION AND REORIENTATION

Niyi Osundare's poetry collection under focus presents a powerful exploration of the disorienting effects of Hurricane Katrina on the city of New Orleans and its people. The poems convey the sense of dislocation and disorientation that resulted from the disaster, as individuals struggled to come to terms with the destruction of their homes, communities, and way of life. This chapter examines the themes of disorientation and reorientation in Osundare's poetry, analyzing how the poet represents the disruption of spatial and temporal coordinates, and the subsequent efforts to rebuild and reorient in the aftermath of the disaster.

The sense of disorientation pervades Osundare's poem, with the title, "Katrina Anthem". It begins with the speakers' anger at the destruction visited on the city of New Orleans:

Ka Ka Katrina, shameless witch  
 who quenched our lights and swamped the switch  
 Atop your stick and stormy broom  
 You spread your root from room to room (city 14).

The entire stanza reeks of disorientation. Confused by the depth of dislocation, the speaker lashes out at Hurricane Katrina calling her a "shameless witch" who had disrupted power supply to the people. According to the poet, the

storm has “quenched” their “lights” and swamped the switch”. Not done, it has spread the rot from one place to the other. This means, there is virtually no place, that the Katrina did not affect. The psychological toll that this devastation caused leads to severe disorientation on the part of the people. What informs Osundare’s poem’s good quality is his capacity to handle personification to express very precise aspects of the Hurricane Katrina. For example, Katrina takes the form of a human being. It is called a “witch” because it “quenched” the lights of the speaker’s home. It used its “broom” to spread “rot” into the rooms.

In the concluding stanza, the speaker reiterates the sense of disorientation among the people thus:

A whole city sprawls in your fatal grip  
From its severed loins to its broken rib  
A place once astir with a joyous crowd  
Is now supine beneath your shroud (14).

The overriding idea that pervades the above stanza is the devastating impact of hurricane Katrina on the city of New Orleans. The language and imagery help to convey the theme of disorientation. The opening line:” A whole city sprawls in your fatal grip” a shows the evidence of personification. The hurricane is personified as a powerful entity with a “fatal grip” and this creates a sense of overwhelming force and chaos. This image disorients the reader by

conveying the idea that the city is helpless against the storm's power. Also the use of violent, bodily imagery to describe the city's destruction emphasizes the severity of the disaster. The phrase "severed coins" suggests a disruption of the city's vital organs, while "broken rib" implies a deep, structural wound. This language contributes to the sense of disorientation by highlighting the city's loss of cohesion and integrity. In the two closing lines the poet offers a contrast between the city's past vitality and its current state of devastation. The word, "supine" specifically, conveys a sense of helplessness and disorientation, as the city lies passive and inert beneath the hurricane's "shroud". The use of "shroud" as a metaphor for the hurricane's impact adds to the sense of mourning and loss.

In yet another poem, Osundare in "Soddenly" wells on the theme of disorientation especially on the last four stanzas:

All water

All waste

All drenched dreams

And constipated truths

When the lake came

To my house

It left behind no dry eye

Or muddles foot (City 18)

The poem vividly describes the devastating impact of the hurricane-induced flood on the speaker's home and community. The repetition of "All" creates a sense of overwhelming totality, emphasizing the complete disruption of normal life. The contrast between "water" (a symbol of life and renewal) and "water" (a symbol of decay and destruction) and "waste" (a symbol of decay and destruction) highlights the disorienting effects of the flood. The phrase "drenched dreams" suggests that even the speaker's aspirations and hopes have been estivated and compromised by the disaster. The image of "constipated truths" implies that even the most basic and essential aspects of reality have become blocked and distorted.

The personification of the lake as a force that "came" to the speaker's house creates a sense of invasion and disruption. The use of "came" instead of "flooded" or "overflowed" emphasizes the unexpected and disorienting nature of the event. The image of the flood leaving behind no dry eye suggests that everyone has been affected, and that even the most basic aspects of physical presence and mobility have been compromised by the flood. The use of "muddles" instead of "clean" or "dry" emphasizes the idea that the flood has left behind a residue of dirt, grime, and disorientation.

Overall, these stanzas masterfully evoke the theme of disorientation by depicting the flood as a disorienting and overwhelming force that disrupts the normal rhythms of life, compromises physical presence and mobility, and distorts even the most basic aspects of reality.

Apart from the preoccupation with disorientation, a cursory glance at some poems, reveals that the poet also treats the issue of reorientation. This is effectively exposed in “This city will not Die”. In this poem, Osundare re-affirms his belief in overcoming the temporary set back:

And yet

This city will not die

Though prostrate now from

The poison of pestilential floods

And levees which toy with

The murderous fury of ranging waters, (city 115)

The poem presents a vision of resilience and determination in the face of catastrophic destruction. The use of this phrase, “And yet”, creates a sense of contrast and surprise, implying that despite the devastation, there is still hope for the city’s survival. Also, the poet asserts that: “This city will not die” and this affirmation of the city’s resilience and determination to survive establishes the

sense of reorientation. The use of “will not die” instead of “will survive” or “will recover” emphasizes the city’s refusal to give up. The image of the city being “prostrate” suggests a sense of temporary defeat or submission.

However, the use of “now” implies that this state is temporary and that the city will eventually rise again. The description of the floods as “pestilential” and the levees as “toy(ing) with the fury of the waters emphasizes the idea that the city has been subjected to a traumatic and devastating event. However, the fact that the city is still present and refusing to die suggests a sense of reorientation and resilience.

Overall, these stanzas evoke the theme of reorientation by presenting a vision of hope and resilience in the face of catastrophic destruction. The poem suggests that even in the midst of devastation, there is a determination to survive and rebuild, and that this determination is a key part of the reorientation process.

Footless floodwalls, the dirt and dust

Of dykes which humour the hubris

Of the lake ... lost lanes. Beaten boulevards

And the crescent city sprang a breach

In its arc sick now, my favourite pharmacy,

Starved, that grocery store which once stunned

My gaze (115).

The above stanzas present a vivid and disturbing image of a city in ruins, with infrastructure destroyed, and daily life severely disrupted. The image of floodwalls without feet suggests a loss of foundation and stability, emphasizing the idea that the city's defenses have been breached. The use of "humour" to describe the dykes' relationship with the lake's 'hubris' implies a sense of irony and tragedy. The dykes, meant to protect the city, have instead been overwhelmed by the lake's power. The use of "lost" and "Beaten" to describe the city's streets emphasizes the idea that the city's infrastructure and sense of direction have been severely disrupted. The image of the city "spring(ing) a breach" in its arc suggests a sudden and catastrophic failure of the city's defenses. The use of "sick" and "starved" to describe the pharmacy and grocery store emphasizes the idea that even the most basic and essential aspects of daily life have been severely disrupted.

Overall, this poem masterfully evokes the theme of disorientation by presenting a vivid and disturbing image of a city in ruins. The language and imagery emphasize the idea that the city's infrastructure, daily life, and sense of direction have been severely disrupted leaving the speaker and the city's inhabitants feeling lost and disoriented.

The museum has lost its muse

The liberty its love of letters

But sick, not dead,

This betrayed city

Deserted,

Not forgotten (115)

The stanzas present a powerful and poignant image of a city that has been devastated, but not destroyed. The use of “lost” to describe the museum’s muse and the library’s love of letters emphasizes the idea that the city’s cultural and intellectual heritage has been disrupted. However, the fact that the museum and library still exists suggests that this disruption is not permanent. The contrast between “sick” and “dead” emphasizes the idea that the city is still alive, despite being severely weakened. This phrase suggests that the city is in a state of recovery, rather than demise. The use of “betrayed” to describe the city emphasizes the idea that the city has been failed by its protectors, whether that be the government, the areas, or other infrastructure. However, the fact that the city is “not forgotten” suggests that despite being deserted, the city still holds a place in the hearts and minds of its inhabitants.

Overall this poem masterfully evokes the theme of reorientation by presenting a powerful and poignant image of a city that has been devastated, but not destroyed. The language and imagery emphasize the idea that the city is still alive, still remembered and still worthy of recovery and rebuilding.

Through Soundare's poetry, he conveys the complex and often contradictory emotions that arise from the experience of disaster, including the sense of dislocation, disorientation, and eventual reorientation.. ultimately, the poems suggest that reorientation is not simply a matter of rebuilding physical structures, but also of reconstituting the emotional social, and cultural fabric of a community. By examining the intersection of disorientation and reorientation in Osundare's poetry, we gain a deeper understanding of the human experience of disaster and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of catastrophic loss.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

This essay has interrogated the spatial conundrum in Niyi Osundare's *city without people: Katrina Poems*. The various spatial dynamics which unveil hurricane Katrina receive attention. Three main aspects have been treated in this study.

We begin with the poet's treatment of spatial dislocation and displacement. Poems after poems, the pain of being dislocated and displaced emerge as people dislodged by flood dominate the discourse. Through apt handling of simile, personification and visual imagery the poet portray how those affected by the hurricane were rendered helpless. We see their losses: both human and material. The image of destruction, suffering and vandalism occupy the heart of the poems. Agony of being dislocated and displaced through the spatial imagery becomes uppermost in the heart of the poet.

The next aspect handled by the poet is cultural erasure and memory. The essay traces how the raging storm swept through New Orleans and wipes away the culture and memory of the entire city. The roads, facilities, institutions and buildings are damaged. The focus of this aspect is beyond the physical damage to culture and memory. The imagination of the poet runs wide as he tries to remember certain experience tied to certain places which the flood has destroyed. Their destruction leads to the erasure of culture and memory. In one example,

Osundare recalls a certain living room once noted for loud laughter. With what the storm has done – destroying the room, the memory of those and that room which used to hold important memories is thus now erased. Like the destruction of public and private institutions, the destruction represents human, existence, history and cultural significance and these construct the loss of memory. Osundare's poetry reminds one that spatial memory is a vital component of our human existence and that its preservation is essential for rebuilding and reclaiming communities.

The last aspect is disorientation and reorientation. This chapter looks at two contrasting phenomena. The first reveals how the storm and its devastating effects have contributed to disorientation of the people. The second part shows that the people must do to overcome their predicament. The sense of helplessness pervades the poem. This fuels the disorientation that permeates the text. Speaker after speaker in the poems feel overwhelmed by the vast nature of the ruin.

Apart from the preoccupation with disorientation, the speakers through positive assertions, reveal a strong sense of reorientation. We see visions of resilience, determination and hope for survival in the face of catastrophe. The essay suggests that despite the ruin there is hope to rebuild and overcome their loss.

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