

Extalgia: Transcending the Legible Frames of Diaspora

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Introduction: Nostalgia vs "Extalgia"

The literature of exile and dispersal has generally tended to focus almost exclusively on the experience of the dispersed.

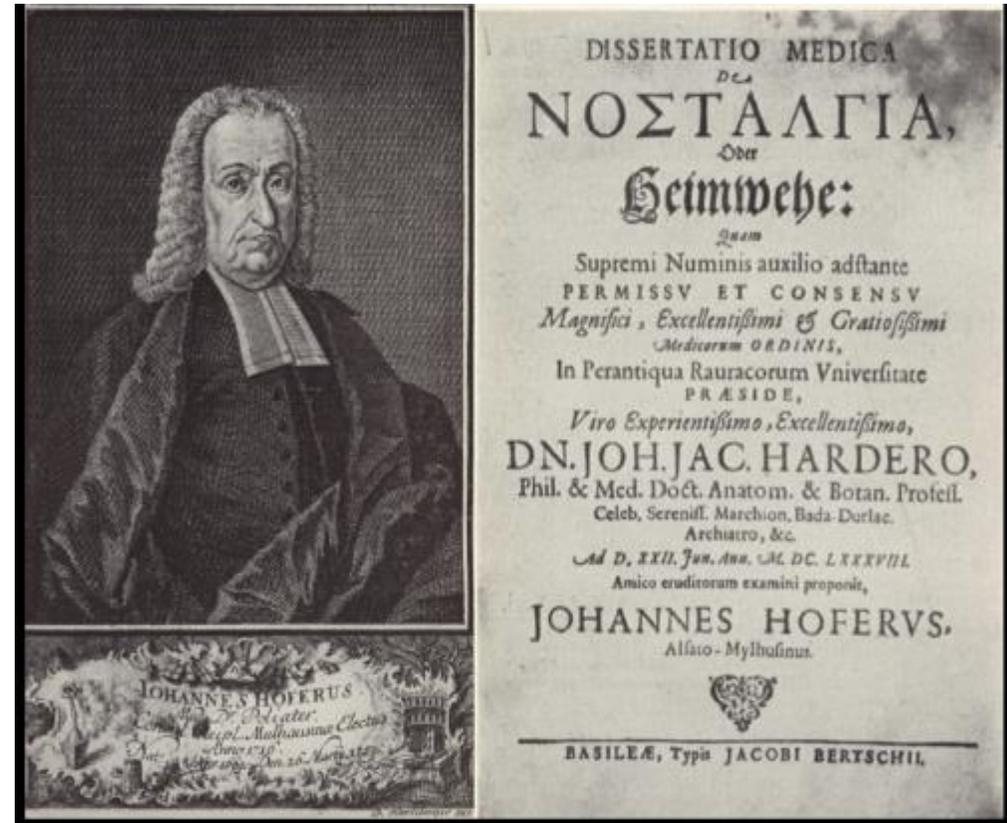
Introduction, contd.

This much has been done to the point of theoretical closure.

The pains and travails or sufferings and traumas of the dispersed/exiles are often captured in social sciences and humanities through the conceptual and empirical lens of nostalgia

Nostalgia at a Glance

- The study obtained from a medical dissertation that Johannes Hofer submitted in 1688.
- Since then, the concept of nostalgia has mutated from being a medical condition to assuming other notions, especially within the context of migration diaspora diaspora studies.



Nostalgia: A Trajectory

Among some of the popular understandings about nostalgia are:

- Imagined nature of the homeland left behind by the dispersed, making homeland become a place whose original form is lost beyond concrete recovery, which makes it amenable to the imagination of the exiled—Salman Rushdie (2012)
- Imperial Nostalgia-- the loss of political and economic domination of empire
- Colonial Nostalgia-- the loss of sociocultural hegemony and its expression in lifestyles
- Both definitions are by Patricia Lorcin 1997.
- “Imperialist nostalgia uses a pose of “innocent yearning” both to capture people's imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination” --Renato Rosaldo’s 1989

Other Iterations of Nostalgia

- **Mythical time-- To a lesser extent, nostalgia has also come to be associated with a sense of removal from a non-physical domain, which provokes a certain feeling of a mythical time (See Alina Romanovska 2020).**
- **Yet nostalgia has a much longer resonance in human history. The idea of "*aayun*" among the Yoruba is one.**
- **Psalm 137 is another illustration of the much longer history of nostalgia.**

The Blind Spots of Nostalgia

- Yet, the narratives and data that speak to the suffering and traumas of the stay-at-home are usually manifest in parallel to those of the dispersed
- However, the disciplinary orientation and cognition in the social sciences and humanities have ensured that such evidence of suffering predicated on the dispersal of loved ones from the homeland is glossed over
- It creates a sense of an epistemic cul de sac
- The suffering is at best subordinated to the narratives of the dispersed, leaving us to wonder can the left-behind in the homeland speak.
- Or if at all they (the-left-at-home) speak, can the import of their suffering be taken to mean much within the hegemonic discourse of exile and migration?

The Necessity of *Extalgia*

- In addressing the disequilibrium to the valuation of dispersal from homeland as a spectrum, I argue that a composite understanding of the experience of exile and migration generally stands to be enriched when we begin to acknowledge the constitutive of experience of the left-behind.
- The suffering and creativity of the left-behind in the homeland, and which are predicated on the dispersal of their loved ones into other lands, constitute what I have termed "extalgia".

Extalgia in Clearer Terms

If nostalgia is a combination of *nostos* (home) and *algos* (suffering or grief) to form nostalgia, I have coined *extalgia* by combining the idea of the exodus (dispersal) and *algos* (suffering or grief) to mean the suffering of stay-at-homes as predicated on the dispersal of their loved ones.

However, *extalgia* is conceived to mean more than suffering and trauma. It is about the suffering of the stay-at-homes for the dispersal of their loved ones; but the entailments of the suffering also acknowledge the possibility and actuality of their creativity.

Twining, Death and the Symbolism of Dispersal among the Ogu

- To come to grips with the enormity of the suffering and the creative agency of the loved ones left behind in the homeland, I turn to the symbolic ethnography of dispersal/exile among the Ogu of Southwestern Nigeria and Benin Republic.
- The effigy carving practice in response to the passage of a twin or twin child is symbolic both of suffering and creativity

Twining, Death and the Symbolism of Dispersal among the Ogu, contd.

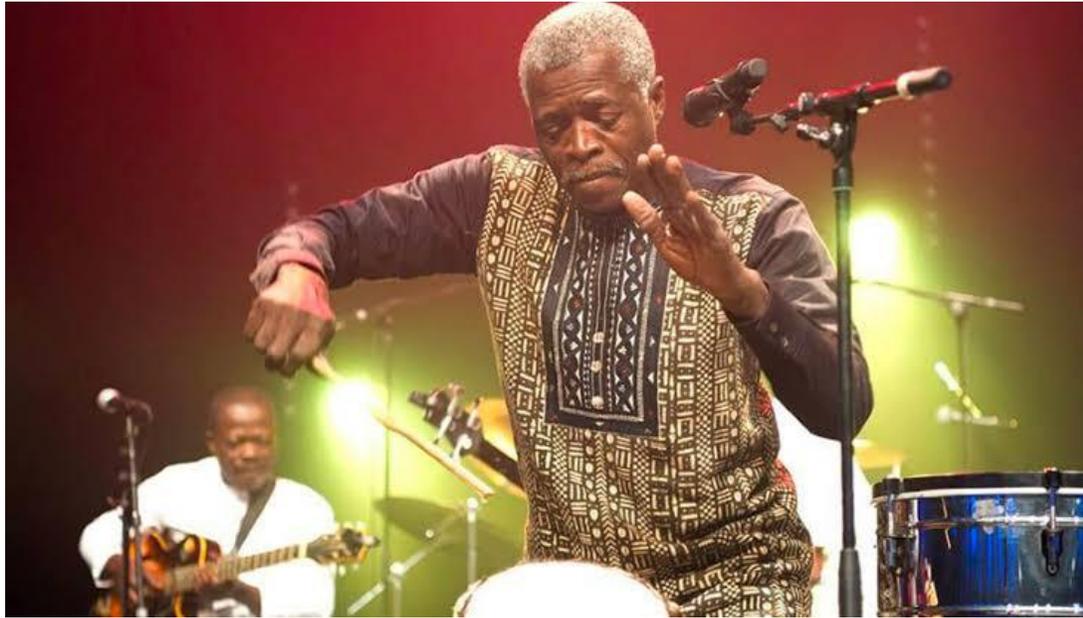
Bearing the trauma of a metaphoric journey



Everyday uncanny but logical correlation of journey of exile and death



Suffering and Creativity, continued



Extalgia and the Uncanny but Logical Correspondence with Death

- How does this postulation about suffering and creativity then apply to the dispersal of loved ones from homeland into other lands?
- Addressing this question may as well begin with the perspective of what I have termed the logical yet uncanny correlation between death and exile.
- The correspondence finds one of its finest illustrations in the ambiguous journey of Ikemefuna in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.
- Achebe's recollection of the misfortune of his elementary school head teacher Mr Okongwu in *There Was a Country*

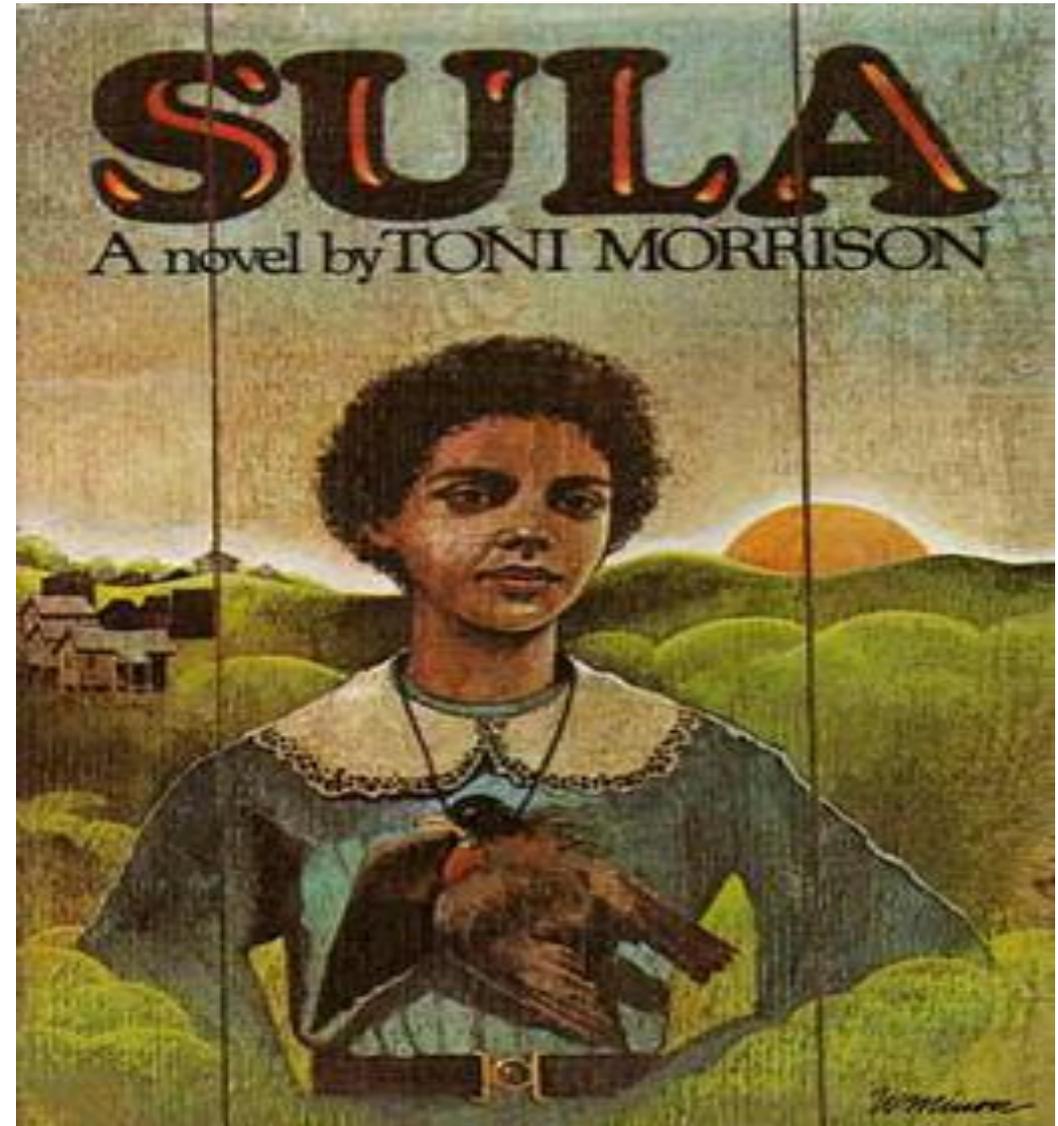


Extalgia and the Examples of
African and African Diaspora
Literary and Cultural Experience

“Extalgia” as broadly divided into:

**Pre-departure “extalgia”—Toni
Morrison in *Sula***

**“It is sheer good fortune to miss
somebody long before they leave you
This book is for Ford and Slade,
whom/I miss although they have not
left me”.**



George Lamming, Pre-departure *Extalgia* and the Trope of Repetition

George Lamming, the Caribbean writer, paints a picture of pre-departure *extalgia* using Boy G.'s mother and the trope of repetition as a symptom of trauma:

“You may say I am a big botheration to you, but for all I know I may never ever bless my eyes on you again, so I take this opportunity to remind you o’ one or two things” (272)

“That’s why I take this last chance the good God give me to try an’ call you to your sense, ‘cause ‘tis never too late to save a soul” (272).

“She gave me another piece of advice and another warning and started to re-read the list” (279).

“I didn’t know how many times she has read it” (279).

Post-departure *Extalgia* and its Ramifications

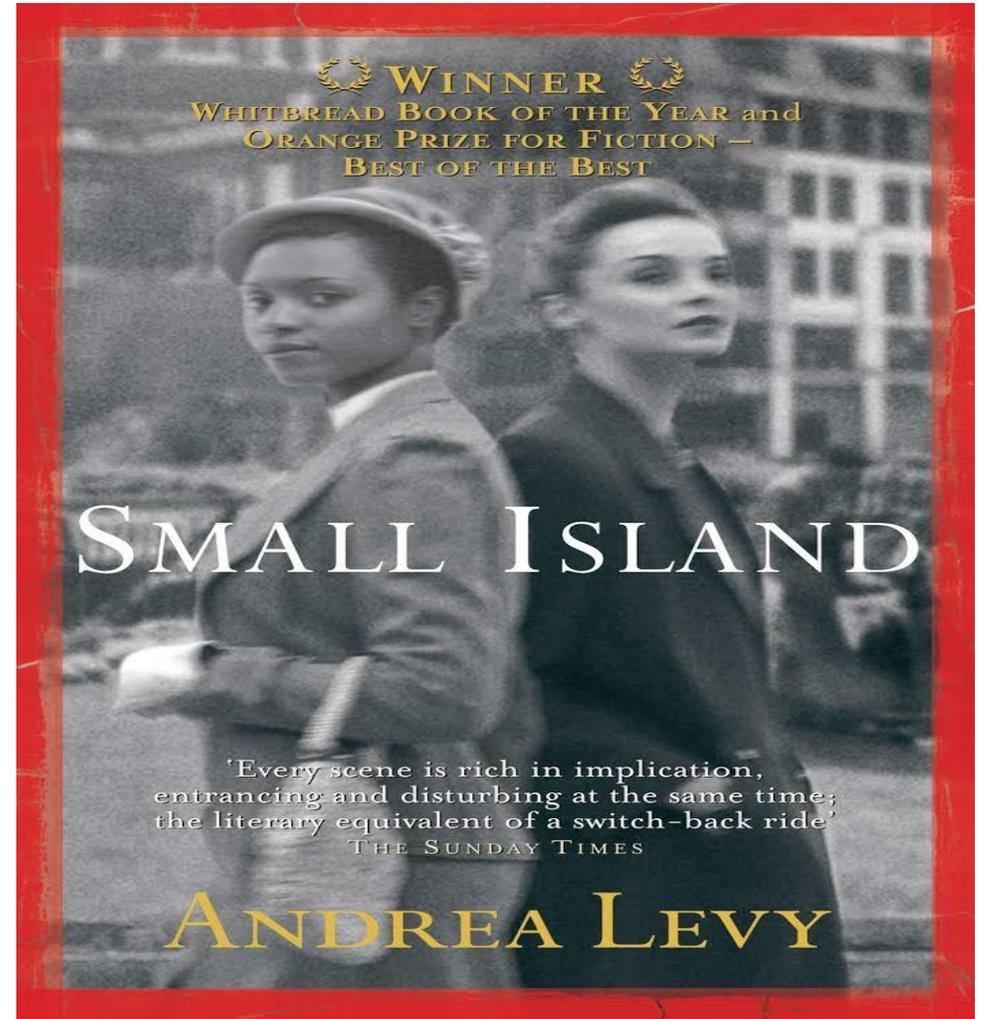
Post-departure “extalgia”—Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*

“He called his son, Nwoye, to sit with him in his *obi*. But the boy was afraid of him and slipped out of the hut as soon as he noticed him dozing [...]. He tried not to think about Ikemefuna, but the more he tried the more he thought about him” (46).

The seriousness of Okonkwo’s *extalgia* also consists of the pitiable psychological torture occasioned by the departure, knowing that even with the palm wine he manages to take, he ends up with “eyes [...] red and fierce like the eyes of a rat when it was caught by the tail and dashed against the floor” (p. 46).

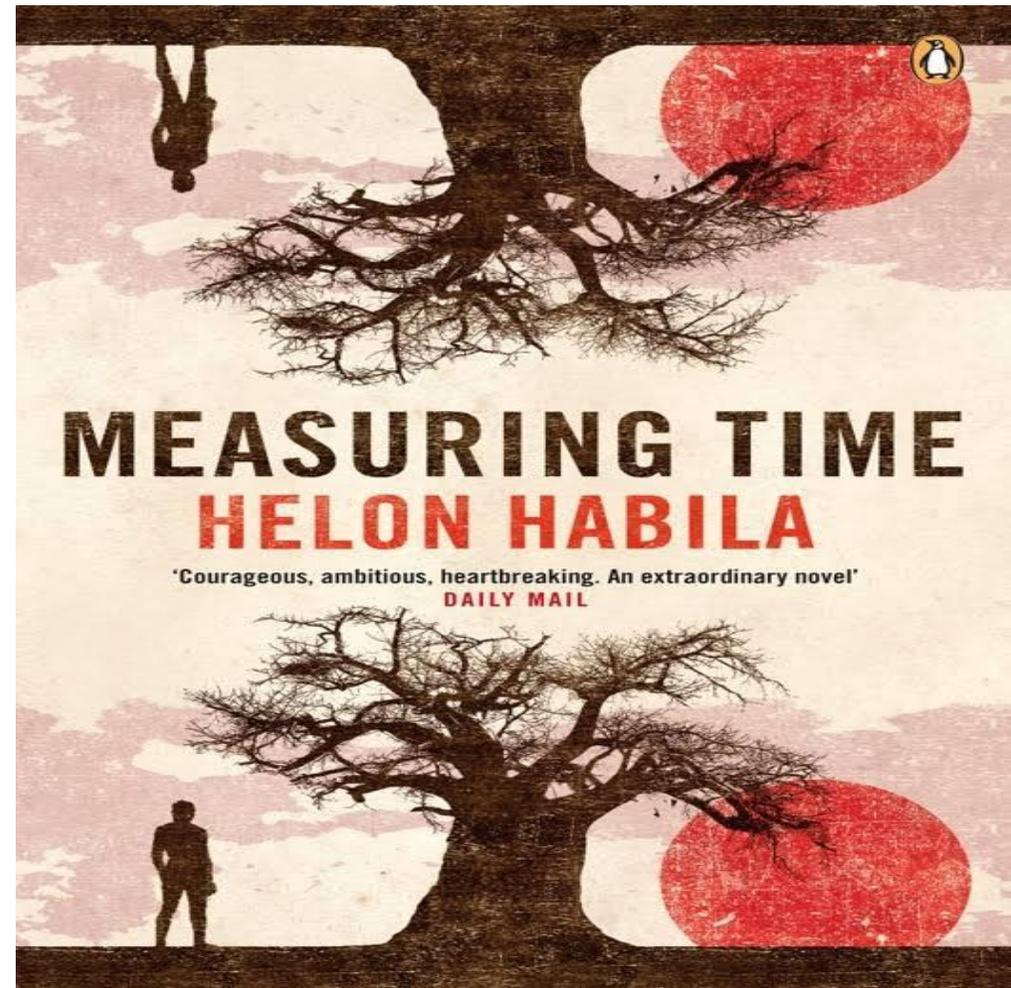
Post-departure *Extalgia* and Psychosis

- Apparently, seized by the necessity of being able to show her grown daughter her gone-away father someday, Celia's mother is overwhelmed to the point that during hallucination, she substitutes a random man for her husband:
- Unfortunately the procession of airmen momentarily stopped and Celia's mother ran to one airman and, 'Celia, this is your daddy. I told you he would come'. The airman had obviously never seen this woman before. This young boy— younger even than Celia – glanced around confused while compatriots jeered. (74)



Post-departure *Extalgia* and Fatality

- Post-departure *extalgia* can be traumatic to a fatal extent.
- In Habila's *Measuring Time*, Pandi's "heart broke when Haruna went off to war, and [...] she died soon afterward" (p. 40).
- Empirical correspondence



Extalgia and Creativity

Just as diasporas adopt coping and creative measures to transcend the travails of dispersal and homesickness, I argue that the left-behind also seek extremely creative ways of assuaging the pains and traumas predicated on the dispersal of their loved ones:

G's mother in *In the Castle of My Skin*—Doing everything possible to ensure she succeeds in training her son at college as a single mother:

Seized by the thought of being left alone, she would become filled with an overwhelming ambition for her child, and an even greater defiance of the odds against her [...]. She would talk about pulling through; whatever happened she would come through, and 'she' meant her child. (p. 18)

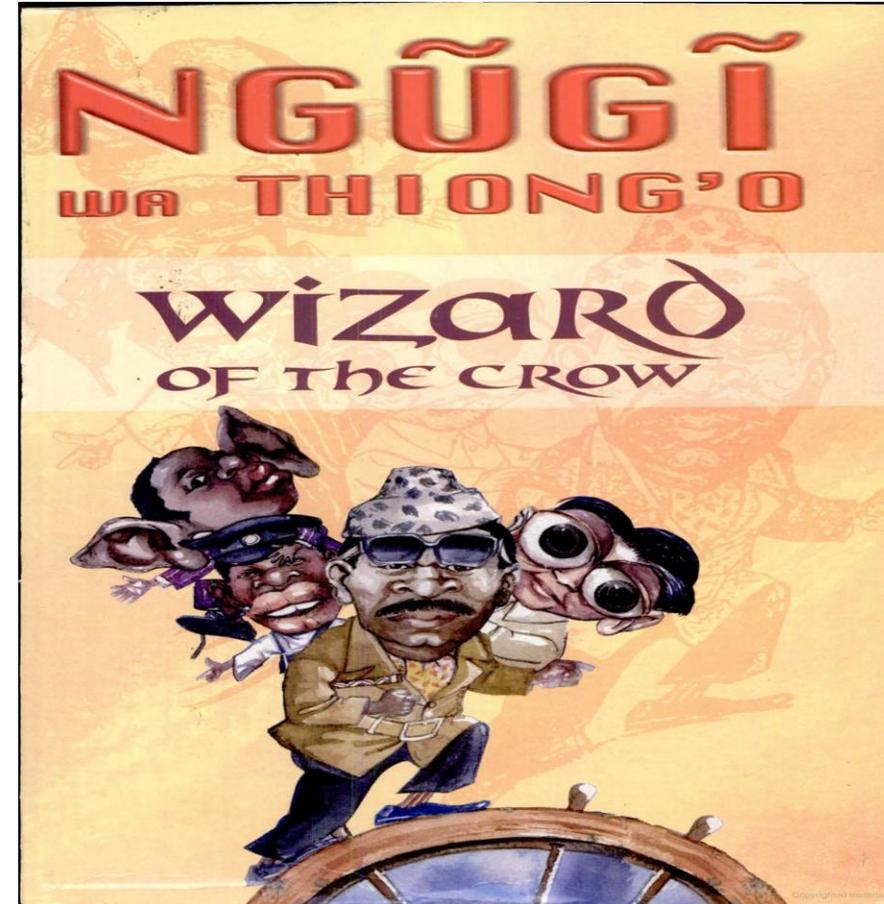
Extalgia and Creativity, contd.

In Levy's *Small Island*, part of the creativity emerges as the capacity of "extalgia" to engender other forms of dispersal:

Mummy and Auntie May no longer spent their days on cakes but had now turned their talents to the decorating of their hats. These hats were being readied for a journey that would see them visiting all their exiled offspring in America and Canada....Cheerful, they declared that this lovingly prepared-for trip around North America was a mission that could take them a long, long, time. While Daddy, frail and old, rocking on the veranda, sipping a sorrel drink laced so potent it could kill a bull, dozed drunkenly, unaware he was about to be abandoned. (197)

Extalgia and Creativity, contd.

- Nyawira in Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow*
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- As Nyawira stood at the gate irresolutely, watching her friend disappear in the distance, a song she once heard sung by the girls of the village popped into her mind, a silent lullaby to herself. She went inside the shrine and took out her guitar again. She sat on the veranda and, now, almost miraculously, the strings responded softly, her eyes now set on a distance far away.
- *You vowed never to go away*
- *Now you have gone*
- *Leaving me here alone*
- *Pleading with you to stay*
- *Stay one more night*
- She thought of him, the Wizard of the Crow, in America, in the care of the dictator, no longer sure that she would ever see him again. (p. 466)



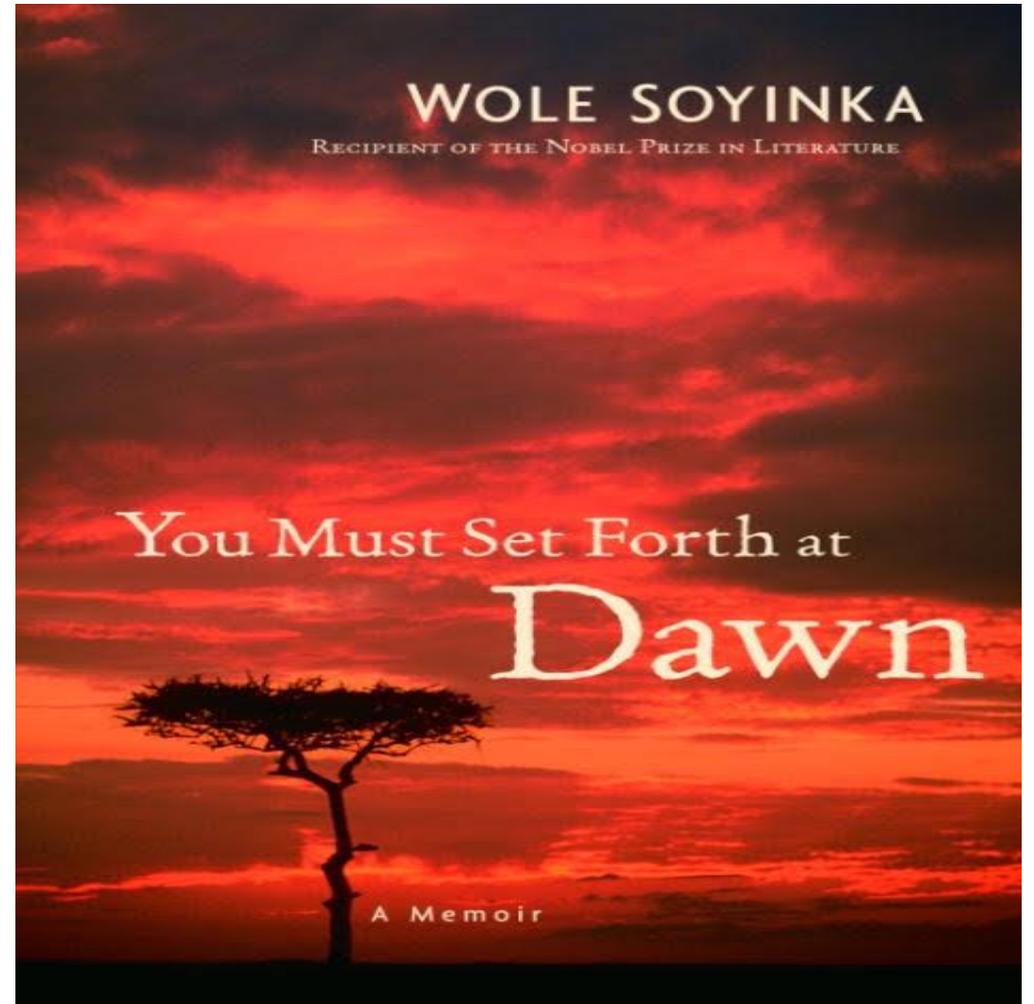
Extalgia beyond Textuality

- The motivation for the establishment of the Badagry Diaspora Festival is instructive:
- There is a vicarious communal trauma that the sight of the lagoon and the Atlantic Ocean engenders on a daily basis in Badagry.
- This is on account of the history of the Atlantic Slavery and the notoriety of Badagry as a major sea port in the West African Slave Coast.
- The memory of the haulage of Black people through the lagoon to the sea for several centuries has created a trauma that has become intergenerational.
- To assuage the trauma, the creative response of Badagry people through the platform of the African Renaissance Foundation (AREFO) was to establish a Diaspora festival through which the yearly return and participation of the slave descendants from the Americas and other places would offer a certain measure of therapy to Badagry people



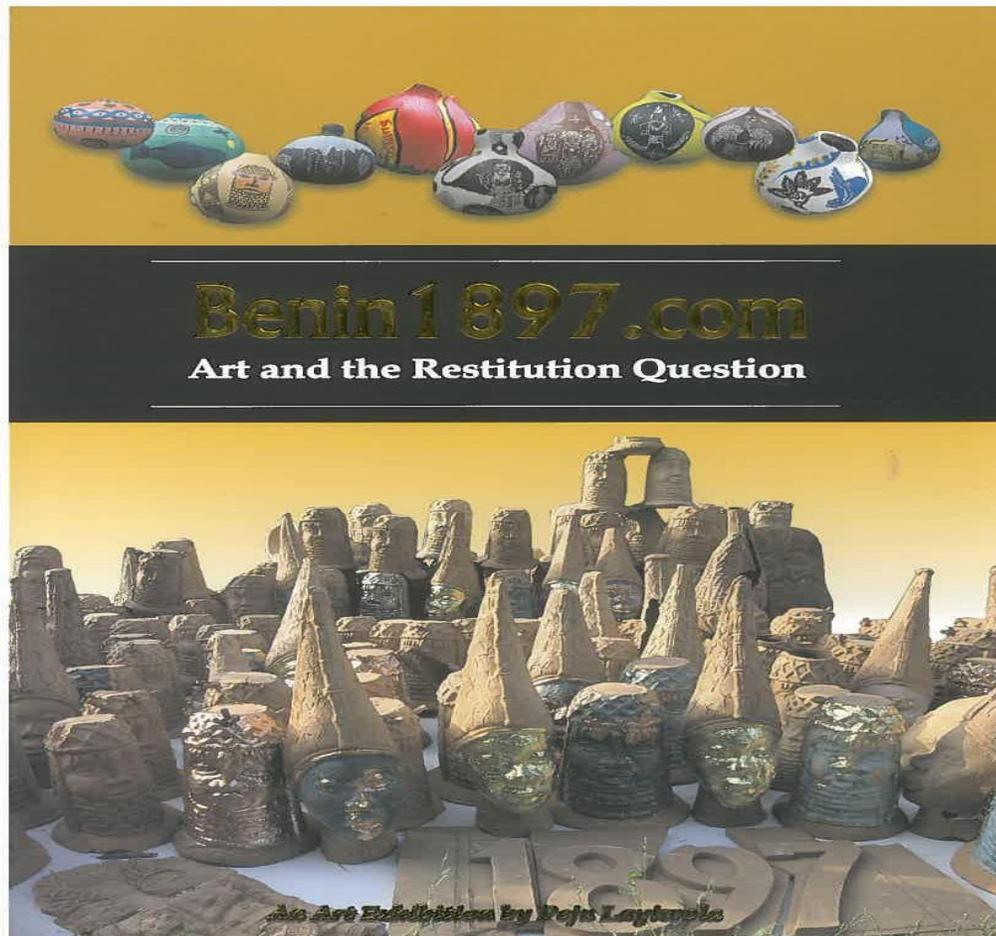
Extalgia as extending to the Debate around the Repatriation of Looted African Artefacts

- Soyinka and the desperate search for *Ori Olokun* in the 1970s up to Brazil:
- When a prize such as *Ori Olokun*, the long lost bronze head of a principal Yoruba deity, shimmers so alluringly within the sight of an *Olorikunkun*, one may be forgiven for forgetting the long spoon, even in full knowledge that a swishing tail may be hidden beneath the khaki uniform (203)



The enduring agitation for the Return of Looted Benin Artifacts

1897: Peju Layiwola and Sola Olorunyomi



1897: Lancelot Imasuen



Extalgia and Looted African Skulls and other Anatomic Property in Namibia, and Repatriation from Germany

- The German-Herero War—1904-1908-- provided an alibi for German colonialists to loot the skulls of Herero and Nama people.
- The looting was essentially informed by the need to prove the sub-humanity of Africans in order to justify their violent displacement.
- Although the display of superior arsenal prowess resulted in displacement and colonization of the indigenous African people, the long decades of nationalist agitation paid off, leading to political independence.
- Yet, the independence would not add up for the people who remain perpetually traumatized because of the memory of looted anatomical remains of their ancestors.
- The agitations underscore the imperative of the return of the skulls to perform the final rites that would ensure closure both for the living and the dead. The situation speaks to the logic of *extalgia* and its intergenerational resonance.



Extalgia and the Repatriation of the Remains of Sarah Baartman to South Africa

- In the early 19th century, Sarah Baartman, a South Africa Black lady, was deceived by a European to travel to Europe.
- Her uncommon but attractive prominent features were exploited and abused.
- Not only was she pimped; she was also exhibited like an artefact in different parts of Western Europe.
- Her humiliation and death became a vicarious trauma for the Black race.
- She died rather early in 1815 at the age of 25.
- Even in death her skeleton was on display at [Muséum d'histoire naturelle d'Angers](#).
- The end of apartheid paved the way for the confrontation of the evil that resulted in her death and burial in a foreign land.
- To cure the national trauma, President Mandela requested of France the repatriation of her remains for honourable burial, which occurred in 2022.
- Her case speaks to the national coloration of some forms of *extalgia*.



Extalgia without Creativity and Potential of Disaster

Sula in *Sula*:

In a way, [...] her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous.

(p. 121)

Extalgia without Creativity, contd.

- In the Nollywood movie, *Gone* (2021), Animashau goes away to the US for 25 years leaving a young wife and two little children.
- What does it mean to leave a young wife and two children behind to be raised alone by the wife?
- What are the challenges of single parenthood faced by his wife?
- How does the societal disapprobation of the adopted survival strategies complicate suffering for the wife and the children?
- How does the situation abnegate closure to their suffering, even after Animashaun's return?
- Critical to the creativity within the context of *extalgia* is question of affordability.
- Otherwise, disaster is inevitable.



Conclusion

- As mentioned at the beginning of this presentation, the imperative of investigating suffering and creativity within the context of exile should warrant an acknowledgment of a new and radically holistic approach, which should locate homeland at the other end of the spectrum.
- The insights offered by *extalgia* as a new theoretical and empirical lens through which we may view homeland perspectives to suffering and creativity grant narrative agency and visibility to the otherwise under-investigated categories of the left-behind in the homeland.
- Arguing that those left behind in the homeland can no longer be seen as subaltern narrative others subordinated to the whims and caprices of their dispersed loved ones, *extalgia* facilitates new ways of knowing by which the experiences of the left-behind can assume a cognate centre stage in the discourse of diaspora.
- If, as the presentation has shown, those left in the homeland express suffering and creativity predicated on the dispersal of their loved ones into diaspora and other similar destinations, such exhibition also arguably serves as a medium through which the absence of the dispersed is curated in the homeland.
- The assumption opens up a vista of possibilities across disciplines, necessitating the question: How do the left-behind in the homeland curate the absence of their dispersed loved ones in other disciplines?
- The approach in this presentation signposts the possibility of *extalgic* inquiries in the other disciplines of the social sciences and humanities. This then is the challenge that the discourse *extalgia* offers for further investigation

Thank you!!!