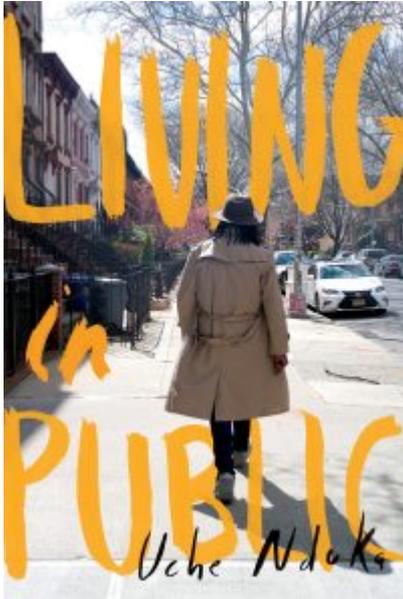


# The People in This Poem: Uche Nduka's "Living in Public"

written by Gabriel Ojeda-Sague | September 11, 2018



*Living in Public* by Uche Nduka  
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180 pages / [Small Press Distribution](#)

I'm charmed by a phrase Joyelle McSweeney used in 2014 to describe a 2002 Uche Nduka poem called "Acquittal": "seemingly bold but in fact ambiguous..." That phrase is a pretty helpful way of describing Nduka's poetry in his new poetry collection *Living in Public*, out now from the Writers' Collective of Kristiania. *Living in Public* is a book that modulates between bursts of very concrete references to post-Trump American politics and Nigerian/Pan-African politics (with an eye towards dictatorship and exile) and expanses of associational/abstract language. Anselm Berrigan says the very same in his blurb for *Living in Public*, that Nduka's form allows him to "by turns, unfold gradually, cut sharply, come forward, and slide further back into the plane as needed." For example, poem 6 uses both techniques in quick turn:

1. It spiraled into "false decolonization"

which Frantz Fanon pouted against

2. In service of the screaming summer

in your lockstep.

3. Not one of the outsiders preferred

a hillside.

But rather than “seemingly bold but in fact ambiguous,” I think I prefer to think of Nduka as bold, ambiguous, and ambiguous-therefore-bold.

The 168 brief and numbered poems of Nduka’s *Living in Public* are born out of a resistance strategy situated within the issue of craft. Take poem 53–

Shadows make promises

in this poem. The people

in this poem talk all

the time. Its windows and doors

croon. Despair has not provided

furnishings here. Every color in

this poem you can touch. There

are moans of pleasure here.

This poem wants to become

a wharf. It laughs at timelessness.

A breakfast table grows

loquacious, tries its hand at calligraphy.

–where everything, even the breakfast table, is wordsmithing. The poem is aware of the consequences of its craft: knowing that where every letter is inked, a shadow is cast, a promise is made. Note also the rigid short sentences that make up the poem, landing at a weight at every period, forcing the shadow cast by ink to become aural. *Living in Public* is concerned with “living in public” on the sociopolitical level, but these poems are also letting us know that “the public” up for debate is one Nduka is crafting in real time (not just people, but “the people / in this poem”). The public in this book is an aesthetic preoccupation as much as a sociopolitical one.

When it comes to poems that expressly reference current events, the issue of craft is never far away. The very first poem in the book which has the quite explicit address to “those who would / blast the blacks browns yellows / off the planet” begins with the grammatically-vague and slithering “So far as to: / as much as delight / for scuzz and invisibilia:...” In these moments where craft is not deliberately addressed, as it is in poem 53, a developed aesthetic preoccupation around ambiguity and association brings us back to

the issue. This quality in Nduka's work is something I have admired for quite some time, as the books that made him more known in the US, books like *Ijele* (2012) and *eel on reef* (2007), are driven by a "small-s surrealism" and a "breakneck pace" of imagery, as Joyelle McSweeney puts it. Flip to any page of *eel on reef* and you are likely to see this dynamic of rapid association: "a masseuse bestowed / a gamekeeper upon / your gas pipes // your gas pipes / buttressed the savage / laughter of a swishing mantilla // a swishing mantilla / beckoned kleptomaniacs / giantesses, auctioneers..." *Living in Public's* style often echoes this dynamic, but you are more likely to see it appear side by side with quick and cutting references to the contemporary political moment, such as in poem 46:

Page of the grass.

The diva rows into you.

All the trees of light.

They are talking about

"Legitimate rape" in God's

Own Country.

Nationalists leading us in circles.

A broken door yells Action!

Buckshot, bucknaked.

I imagine it would be up to the reader's tastes to say if this is a voice maturing into a "burn-it-to-the-ground, virtuosic energy" (as Maria Damon's blurb says), or the result of trends in Trump-era poetics of resistance causing a stylistic change. But either way, Nduka's work seems to have changed from a time when McSweeney could confidently say "all of Nduka's work is Surreal, and in this sense it is all political." That comment no longer rings true to me, with *Living in Public* hanging sometimes heavily and sometimes lithely on the real.

Let me now make a line into a triangle, which I see as the shape of *Living in Public*. I have already said that I think the issue of sociopolitical existence, or "living in public," is an issue of craft, and vice versa, but I need to mention that this book is also very centered on erotics. And to make the triangle, erotics is an issue of craft (and vice versa) and "living in public" is an issue of erotics (and vice versa). The first half of the book is full of poems like poem 4, which ends with "I save my best lines for you in bed." *Living in Public* contains many of these clever one-liners about sex and poetry, and many short poems of seduction, to the point that a reader who was not interested in a connection between erotics and poetics might get tired of them. But this is not a simple equation of sex=poeetry, poeetry=sex; the relationship gets quite contorted. Poem 26 for example—

Your way of asking  
in order to give me  
the joy of giving.

Ode, in black jeans.

—connects the giving/receiving of sexual pleasure to the poem's own complicated grammar, inverted even to the level of the lines, as something like a title is concluding the poem rather than beginning it. And this connection can become rather enigmatic with lines like "poetry without talking / is a waste of fucking" (poem 16). I admit I do not know what to make of that line. But that kind of misdirecting eros is where Nduka's work is most successful. The book is enchanted with sensuality, even sultriness, and the occasional moment of risqué, but there's always some turn to make the reader do a double-take.

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An early version of this review focused on Nduka's poetry as X, where X was various things that were not poetry. But I kept coming to the same conclusion, one that Nduka makes himself, where he says he writes "with the heart" and "with the brain" (poem 8). Nduka is always a bold writer, but more than anything he's an incredibly smart and precise one. Nduka is a writer who shows his work and still surprises you. And beyond the heart and the brain, he writes just a bit later in *Living in Public*, "I set my marks / & do what feels right. / Catch me if you can" (poem 11). What feels right, pleasure and its many amenities, is the core of this book. And his public, the one he designs for us, is as simple as the feeling of being in a room with another person.