

From Roots to Routes: A Deleuzo-Guattarian Reading of Naomi Shihab Nye's The Travelling Onion

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Abstract:

This study examines Naomi Shihab Nye's *The Traveling Onion* within the context of Arab American diasporic poetry, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome. It questions traditional views of identity that associate belonging with fixed roots and a single homeland, and instead it argues that belonging is constructed through movement, connection, and shared experiences. The study adopts a qualitative approach and a descriptive-analytical method based on close textual reading of the poem. The results of the analysis suggest that the onion functions as a central metaphor for diasporic identity that is layered rather than essential, mobile rather than rooted, and productive through its capacity to nourish others across cultural and geographic boundaries. By foregrounding everyday objects and ordinary labor, *The Traveling Onion* articulates a non-nostalgic and ethical vision of displacement in which identity is sustained through use, exchange, and interconnectedness rather than attachment to a single place of origin.

Keywords: The Travelling Onion; Naomi Shihab Nye; Identity; The Rhizome; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

1- Introduction

Since the early 1900s, Arab-American poetry has been part of the ethnic and minority literary scene in the United States. In contrast, its recognition in the larger field of American literature has only recently grown. Contemporary Arab American writers continue to confront forms of exclusion including marginalization and stereotyping while at the same time expressing ethnic pride and diasporic consciousness. Writers emerging after 1967 articulated a strong search for self-definition, one that was especially striking because it was shaped through an American literary voice. Composing in English and publishing within U.S. literary venues, these authors engaged with American poetic traditions, particularly free verse, and lyric forms. Within the development of Arab American literature, poetry has played an important role in articulating questions of identity, memory, and assimilation. As Arab American poets gained greater visibility in the United States, many turned to poetry as a space to explore cultural belonging and loss. As Majaj observes, "Authors such as Sam Hazo, Sam Hamod, Jack Marshall, Naomi

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Shihab Nye and others began to publish poetry that touched, sometimes glancingly, sometimes directly, on Arab identity and probed what had been lost during the generations of assimilation.” (Majaj: 2008: p.1).

Within this framework, Naomi Shihab Nye is a Palestinian American poet, essayist, and educator whose writing occupies an important place in both American and Arab American literary traditions. Raised in the United States by a Palestinian father and an American mother, Nye’s work is deeply informed by her bicultural upbringing, which shapes her sustained engagement with questions of identity, belonging, displacement, and intercultural exchange. Her poetry collections, such as *Diffèrent Ways to Pray*, *Blood*, and *The Art of Disappearing*, are characterized by clear, accessible language and attention to everyday moments, through which she reflects on individual and shared experiences of migration, memory, and cultural difference. Eschewing overt political rhetoric, Nye’s writing foregrounds empathy, ethical awareness, and common humanity, frequently highlighting ordinary lives and marginalized perspectives as meaningful sites of connection.

The Traveling Onion is situated within Naomi Shihab Nye’s broader body of work and within the tradition of Arab American literature that addresses questions of migration, cultural continuity, and belonging. Written in a clear and accessible style, the poem reflects Nye’s characteristic focus on everyday experiences and ordinary objects as meaningful sites of cultural reflection. Rather than foregrounding political conflict or historical events, the poem draws attention to common human practices, such as food preparation and nourishment, situating diasporic experience within familiar, shared contexts.

This study examines Naomi Shihab Nye’s *The Traveling Onion* within the context of Arab American diasporic poetry, drawing on poststructuralist theory, specifically Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome. By adopting this framework, the research challenges conventional, root-based models of identity that emphasize fixed origins, stable homelands, and singular narratives of belonging. Instead, it explores how the poem presents identity and belonging as dynamic, mobile, and relational processes shaped by movement, connection, and everyday social and cultural practices. In doing so, the study contributes to broader discussions in diaspora studies that foreground multiplicity, interconnectedness, and lived experience as central to contemporary understandings of belonging.

Therefore, the central question that directs this research is:

Within the Arab American diasporic context, how does Naomi Shihab Nye's *The Traveling Onion* challenge rooted notions of identity?

Furthermore, this study will address the following subordinate research questions:

1-How does the onion function as a metaphor for identity and belonging in the poem?

2-How is identity and the sense of belonging represented in *The Travelling Onion*?

In response to these questions, the study advances the following hypotheses:

This study hypothesizes that *The Traveling Onion* engages with Arab American identity and belonging through a rhizomatic framework that challenges fixed and origin-centered conceptions of identity. It further hypothesizes that the onion operates as a key metaphor through which identity and belonging are articulated in layered and non-linear ways. Additionally, the study hypothesizes that the poem represents identity and belonging as relational constructs shaped by shared experience rather than stable national or ethnic boundaries.

Previous scholarship on Arab American and Palestinian diasporic poetry has largely focused on themes of identity, resistance, and cultural hybridity. It is noticeable that few studies of Nye's poem have referred to a Deleuze-Guattarian rhizomatic approach.

This study is based on both primary and secondary sources to support its literary and theoretical discussion. The primary material is Naomi Shihab Nye's poem *The Traveling Onion*, included in her collection *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems* (1995). Nye's poem serves as the central text through which questions of identity, movement, and connection are explored.

To interpret the poem, the study draws mainly on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987). Their concept of the rhizome provides an important framework for understanding identity in non-linear and relational ways. By combining Nye's poetic representation with rhizomatic framework, the study examines identity as fluid, interconnected, and continually shaped through multiple cultural and experiential pathways.

James Clifford's *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997) examines how culture and identity are shaped through travel, movement, and processes of translation rather than through fixed origins or territorially bounded frameworks. The book proposes "routes" as an analytical lens for understanding diasporic and migratory experiences, focusing on how identities are produced through contact, displacement, and

historical circulation. This approach is relevant to the present study because it provides a conceptual framework for reading Naomi Shihab Nye's *The Traveling Onion* in terms of movement and everyday travel. Clifford's emphasis on routes rather than roots helps contextualize the poem's representation of belonging as formed through passage, connection, and ordinary practices rather than attachment to a single place of origin.

2-Theoretical Foundations of the Rhizome and Diasporic Literary Contexts

The rhizome provides a broad conceptual ground for thinking about how diasporic literature approaches questions of identity, space, and belonging. Writing shaped by migration often resists linear narratives and singular points of origin, instead reflecting lives formed across multiple locations and cultural frameworks. The concept of the rhizome, articulated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, provides a theoretical framework for understanding non-hierarchical and non-linear forms of organization and knowledge production. Rejecting arborescent models that privilege origin, unity, and vertical structure, the rhizome is defined by the principle that "unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 21). Knowledge within this framework is therefore understood as dynamic, relational, and continuously in the process of becoming rather than as a stable or totalizable system. By foregrounding multiplicity, heterogeneity, and connectivity, the rhizomatic model destabilizes fixed categories and binary oppositions, offering an alternative epistemological approach suited to conditions of complexity and decentralization.

Diasporic texts commonly attend to everyday practices, memory, and language as sites where belonging is negotiated rather than inherited. In doing so, they foreground forms of connection that emerge through movement and continuity rather than permanence. Read within this context, diasporic literature can be understood as engaging with complex patterns of affiliation that extend beyond national or cultural boundaries. Deleuze and Guattari describe the rhizome as a model in which "a rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo" (1987, 25), offering representations of identity that remain open, relational, and historically situated.

2.1-Space, Belonging through Rhizomatic Reading

A rhizomatic reading of space and belonging allows literature to be approached beyond fixed ideas of homeland, territory, or stable location. Deleuze and Guattari emphasise that "the rhizome connects any point to any other point" (1987, 21), suggesting a spatial logic structured through movement, multiplicity, and relational links rather than rooted origins.

In many texts shaped by migration and cultural movement, space is not simply a background setting but an active dimension through which identity and attachment are negotiated. Belonging, in this context, emerges through connections across places, memories, and everyday practices rather than through singular origins or bounded national frameworks. Such a perspective highlights how diasporic experience often involves inhabiting multiple spaces at once, both materially and imaginatively. Reading through this lens makes it possible to understand belonging as a dynamic process, shaped by routes of movement and relational ties, rather than as a condition grounded solely in rootedness or permanence.

2.2– Rhizomatic Identity in Diasporic Literature

Diasporic literature frequently represents identity as shaped through movement, cultural negotiation, and the experience of living across more than one social or geographic space. Rather than presenting the self as unified or rooted in a single origin, many diasporic texts depict identity as relational and continuously formed through connections to multiple histories, languages, and communities. As Jhumpa Lahiri suggests in *The Namesake*, the condition of displacement becomes enduring, since “being a foreigner... is a sort of lifelong pregnancy” (Lahiri 2003, 49). This approach highlights how belonging is often produced through everyday encounters and shifting affiliations rather than through fixed national or cultural frameworks. Rhizomatic identity, in this sense, offers a way of understanding diasporic subjectivity as non-linear and multi-directional, reflecting the layered realities of displacement, memory, and adaptation. Diasporic writing therefore emphasizes identity as a process, shaped by routes of travel and contact, as much as by inherited roots.

3–Exploring Roots and Routes in Nye’s *The Travelling Onion*

In *The Travelling Onion*, Naomi Shihab Nye explores the interplay between roots and routes by tracing the cultural, historical, and geographic journeys embedded in an everyday object. The onion functions as a symbol of rootedness through its ties to ancestry, tradition, and place, while its movement across borders reflects the routes of migration, trade, and cultural exchange that shape diasporic experience. By mapping personal memory onto global histories, the poem challenges fixed notions of origin and belonging, suggesting instead that identity is formed through circulation, connection, and shared practices. Nye thus reimagines belonging as relational rather than territorially bound, emphasizing continuity through movement rather than permanence.

3.1– A Brief Overview of Naomi Shihab Nye’s *The Travelling Onion*

Naomi Shihab Nye’s *The Traveling Onion* reflects on the global and cultural journey of an ordinary vegetable to uncover the quiet histories embedded in everyday life. Beginning with an epigraph that traces the onion’s movement from India through Egypt and Europe, the poem situates the onion as a migrant object whose presence in the speaker’s kitchen carries centuries of travel and exchange. Through close attention to the physical act of chopping—its layers, translucence, and capacity to cause tears—Nye transforms a routine domestic moment into a meditation on memory, labor, and ethical attention.

The poem foregrounds what is often overlooked: the “small and forgotten” elements of daily life that sustain others without recognition. By emphasizing the onion’s disappearance into the meal “for the sake of others,” Nye frames self-effacement and service as forms of quiet dignity. Ultimately, *The Traveling Onion* invites readers to reconsider how global histories, affect, and care are embedded in the most ordinary acts of nourishment, suggesting that belonging and meaning are produced through movement, intimacy, and attention rather than through fixed origins.

3.2–From Roots to Routes: The Onion as Rhizome

In *The Traveling Onion*, Naomi Shihab Nye reconfigures the onion as a rhizomatic figure, shaped not by fixed origin but by movement, circulation, and layered connectivity. The speaker begins by reflecting on “how far the onion has traveled / just to enter my stew today,” framing the onion through routes of passage rather than through a singular homeland or rooted source. This emphasis aligns with Deleuze and Guattari’s claim that the rhizome operates through “lines of flight by which it is perpetually modified” (1987, 21), foregrounding movement and transformation over stability. The onion’s “pearly layers in smooth agreement” evoke multiplicity, resonating with the idea that identity and meaning are produced through assemblage rather than linear origin. As the onion is cut open and “a history [is] revealed,” an ordinary domestic act becomes a site where dispersed trajectories and hidden connections surface. This moment reflects what James Clifford describes as a shift from “roots” to “routes,” where cultural identity is understood as “a matter of becoming rather than being” (Clifford 1997, 2). Even the tears the onion produces are granted significance—“It is right that tears fall / for something small and forgotten”—suggesting an affective response to overlooked movements and labor. Ultimately, the onion’s “traditionally honorable career: / For the sake of others, / disappear” embodies a rhizomatic logic of dispersal, where meaning emerges through

relation, circulation, and use rather than permanence or territorial rootedness. Through the onion, Nye articulates a model of belonging grounded in routes, multiplicity, and interconnected histories.

3.3– Deterritorialization and the Onion’s Cultural Journey

Naomi Shihab Nye’s *The Traveling Onion* begins with movement: the onion is not simply an ingredient but a migrant object whose journey carries traces of global passage. The epigraph charts the onion’s route—“from India... Egypt... Greece... Italy... into all of Europe”—immediately framing it as shaped by displacement and circulation rather than rooted permanence. From the outset, the onion’s history is presented as mobile rather than static, defined by travel across borders and cultures instead of attachment to a single place of origin. This emphasis on movement positions the onion within a network of historical routes that unsettle ideas of fixed belonging.

This mobility resonates with Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of deterritorialization, the process by which bodies, objects, or identities are lifted out of stable origins and reconfigured through motion. As they explain, “a line of deterritorialization” carries something away from fixed ground into new relational arrangements (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 9). The onion’s passage into the speaker’s “stew today” becomes a condensed example of cultural migration, in which global histories enter the present through ordinary practice. James Clifford similarly argues that cultural identity is shaped through travel rather than rooted origin, insisting that “routes” matter as much as, if not more than, “roots” in understanding cultural formation (Clifford 1997, 3).

In this sense, the onion reflects what Majaj describes as the intertwining of migration and everyday life, where belonging is produced not through abstract national narratives but through routine acts of memory, use, and consumption (Majaj 2008, 1). Nye’s poem thus suggests that even the most domestic space—the kitchen—contains global movement embedded within it. The onion’s journey collapses distance and history into the present moment, revealing how displacement and circulation are lived not only across borders but within the most intimate spaces of daily life.

3.4– Layered Multiplicity and Rootlessness

The onion’s most striking physical feature is its layered structure, which Naomi Shihab Nye transforms into a metaphor for multiplicity and non-singular identity. She describes the onion’s “pearly layers in smooth agreement,” emphasizing that it cannot be reduced to a single core or origin. Meaning, instead, accumulates through layers, each one distinct

yet inseparable from the whole. This image resists essentialist understandings of identity by presenting the self as composed of overlapping histories, memories, and cultural traces rather than a unified essence.

This layered form aligns with Deleuze and Guattari's rejection of rooted, genealogical thinking. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they challenge models that privilege origin and hierarchy, proposing instead the rhizome as a structure in which "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7). The onion, like the rhizome, is not defined by a central root but by its unfolding layers and intersecting connections. Its structure embodies a logic of rootlessness that does not imply absence or loss but multiplicity and relational depth. As Avtar Brah argues, diasporic identities are formed not through a single place of origin but through "the intersection of multiple subject positions" shaped by history, culture, and movement (Brah 1996, 127).

The speaker's act of cutting the onion becomes an act of revelation: "the way the knife enters onion / and onion falls apart... / a history revealed." History here is not linear or continuous but dispersed and fragmentary, exposed through disassembly rather than traced back to an original source. This moment resonates with Homi Bhabha's assertion that cultural meaning emerges in moments of disjunction and negotiation rather than from stable origins, as identity is produced in the "in-between" spaces of articulation (Bhabha 1994, 2). The onion thus refuses the idea of a stable beginning; it is a multiplicity that contains journeys, cultures, and time within itself, offering a model of identity grounded in layered coexistence rather than rooted permanence.

3.5– Minor Histories and the Poetics of the Forgotten

Nye's poem is attentive to what is overlooked and marginalized in everyday life. The onion is described as "small and forgotten," yet the speaker insists on its significance, even imagining kneeling to "praise / all small forgotten miracles." Through this gesture, the poem elevates the minor and the ordinary into poetic focus, challenging dominant hierarchies of value that privilege the monumental over the everyday. This attention to the overlooked reflects Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the "minor," in which marginalized or unnoticed elements disrupt dominant narratives and reveal alternative modes of meaning-making. Minor histories are those that remain outside official memory yet persist in daily practices and intimate spaces. As Edward Said observes, experiences of displacement and marginality often remain "strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience" (Said 2000, 173), underscoring how such histories resist formal documentation while continuing to shape lived reality. The onion's story is not heroic or

monumental; instead, it carries an “honorable career” precisely because it serves quietly and without recognition. Majaj similarly argues that migration and belonging are often experienced through minor registers—the domestic, the habitual, and the intimate—rather than through grand political narratives (Majaj 2008, 1). Nye’s poetics thus insists that what is forgotten still matters and that history resides within the smallest objects of routine.

3.6– Affect, Tears, and Embodied Ethics

One of the poem’s most emotionally charged moments occurs when the speaker reflects on the onion’s capacity to cause tears: “And I would never scold the onion / for causing tears.” Rather than treating tears as an inconvenience, the poem frames them as an ethical response. The speaker insists, “It is right that tears fall / for something small and forgotten,” suggesting that emotion functions as a form of recognition rather than excess. Affect here becomes a way of acknowledging neglected lives, histories, and forms of labor that remain unseen. Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize affect as a bodily intensity that exceeds rational explanation, moving between bodies and assemblages (1987, 256). Expanding on this idea, Brian Massumi defines affect as “unqualified intensity,” a force that registers in the body prior to conscious interpretation (Massumi 1992, 28). The onion thus produces tears not only through chemical reaction but symbolically, compelling the body to register what the mind may otherwise overlook. In this way, the kitchen becomes an ethical space where attention, feeling, and care are intertwined, and where the smallest object can provoke embodied responsibility.

3.7– Disappearance and Nomadic Care

The poem concludes by emphasizing the onion’s “traditionally honorable career”: “For the sake of others, / disappear.” This disappearance is both literal, as the onion dissolves into the stew, and metaphorical, suggesting the erased labor of those who sustain others without recognition. The onion’s vanishing reflects a nomadic ethic in which existence is defined not by permanence, possession, or visibility but by service, movement, and relationality. Deleuze and Guattari describe nomadism as a mode of being that resists fixed territory, inhabiting instead flows, passages, and transformations (1987, 380). In this sense, the onion is nomadic: it travels, enters domestic space, transforms, and disappears into nourishment. Stuart Hall similarly argues that diasporic identity is not fixed but is “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (Hall 1990, 225), reinforcing the poem’s vision of belonging as something produced through movement and relational giving rather than rooted stability. Majaj’s framework of “roots and routes” further

illuminates this ending, as the poem presents belonging as an ethical practice shaped by everyday presence and care rather than by territorial attachment (Majaj 2008, 1). Nye's poem thus articulates a quiet politics of care in which disappearance itself becomes meaningful, and the overlooked object stands as a symbol of migrant histories, embodied affect, and ethical relation.

4– Method and Tools

This study uses a qualitative approach to examine Naomi Shihab Nye's *The Travelling Onion*, focusing on the themes of identity, migration, and everyday objects as symbols of connection. The main method used in this analysis is close reading. This method allows for a detailed examination of the poem's language, imagery, tone, and structure, which helps identify patterns and interpret the deeper meaning behind the onion's journey. The poem was selected through purposive sampling because it directly reflects Nye's interest in cross-cultural experience and the movement of people, traditions, and memory across borders. Data was gathered through multiple readings, during which significant lines and sections were coded and grouped according to the main thematic categories.

The findings were then analyzed thematically, with attention to patterns surrounding identity, migration, and cultural connection. This study relied on close reading, thematic coding, and comparisons with existing scholarship on diaspora literature and Nye's poetic treatment of everyday life. No computational tools were employed in the process. However, basic word-processing and spreadsheet software were used to organize notes, codes, and thematic groupings for clarity.

5– Results and Discussion

The analysis of Naomi Shihab Nye's *The Traveling Onion* demonstrates that the poem transforms an ordinary domestic object into a complex symbol of cultural movement, migration, and belonging. Rather than presenting the onion as a simple ingredient, Nye frames it as an object shaped by global circulation and historical passage. The findings suggest that the poem connects everyday life to broader processes of displacement and cultural exchange, showing how migration is embedded even within the most familiar spaces, such as the kitchen.

One major result of the analysis is that the onion represents deterritorialization, as its identity is defined through travel rather than fixed origin. The poem emphasizes the onion's movement across regions, suggesting that cultural objects, like people, carry traces of migration and displacement. Through this lens, Nye presents the domestic meal as a

site where global histories intersect with daily routines. This supports the idea that belonging is not produced only through national or political narratives but through ordinary practices that hold cultural memory.

A second important finding concerns the onion's layered structure, which functions as a metaphor for multiplicity and the refusal of singular origins. The onion cannot be reduced to one stable core, but instead unfolds through layers that accumulate meaning. This aligns with theoretical frameworks that reject rooted, linear understandings of identity and history, proposing instead that cultural experience is dispersed, interconnected, and non-hierarchical. The act of cutting the onion becomes symbolic of revealing fragmented histories that cannot be traced back to a single beginning.

The poem also foregrounds minor histories by focusing on what is overlooked and forgotten. The onion, as a small and ordinary object, becomes a carrier of significance precisely because it is not monumental or heroic. Nye's attention to the everyday reflects a poetics of the minor, where marginalized or unnoticed elements challenge dominant narratives. The findings suggest that the poem insists on the importance of intimate, domestic spaces as sites where migration and belonging are lived and remembered in subtle ways.

Another key result is the poem's emphasis on affect and embodied ethics. The onion's capacity to produce tears is not treated merely as a physical reaction but as a form of recognition. Emotion becomes an ethical response to neglected histories and invisible forms of labor. The poem suggests that the body registers what the mind may ignore, and that feeling becomes a way of acknowledging the forgotten lives and journeys contained within ordinary objects.

Finally, the poem's conclusion highlights disappearance and nomadic care as central themes. The onion's purpose is fulfilled through its dissolution into the meal, symbolizing forms of service and sacrifice that often go unrecognized. This disappearance reflects an ethical model of belonging defined not by permanence or visibility but by relational giving and movement. The onion becomes nomadic in the sense that it travels, transforms, and sustains others without insisting on fixed territory or stable presence.

Overall, the results show that *The Traveling Onion* offers a quiet but powerful meditation on migration, cultural multiplicity, and ethical attention. Nye uses the smallest domestic object to reveal how global histories persist within everyday life, suggesting that care, belonging, and memory are often carried through overlooked acts and ordinary materials.

6– Conclusion

This study has examined Naomi Shihab Nye's *The Traveling Onion* through a qualitative close reading approach, focusing on how the poem represents migration, cultural multiplicity, minor histories, affect, and belonging. The analysis demonstrates that Nye transforms the onion from an ordinary domestic object into a powerful metaphor for cultural journeys and deterritorialized identities. By emphasizing movement, layered structure, and everyday significance, the poem reveals how global histories of displacement and circulation are embedded within the smallest acts of daily life.

The findings show that Nye challenges fixed notions of origin and rootedness by presenting identity and history as mobile, fragmented, and interconnected. The onion's layered form reflects multiplicity rather than singular beginnings, while its overlooked presence highlights the importance of minor and forgotten narratives. In this way, the poem insists that cultural memory is not only preserved through monumental events but also through intimate domestic spaces where migration is quietly lived and remembered.

Ultimately, *The Traveling Onion* offers a subtle ethics of care and attention, where affect and disappearance become meaningful responses to invisible labor and marginalized histories. Nye's poem suggests that belonging is not defined by permanence or visibility but by movement, relationality, and everyday acts of sustenance. Through the traveling onion, Nye presents a quiet yet profound meditation on diaspora, cultural connection, and the enduring presence of history within ordinary life.

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