Poetics of Tenderness, Nomadic Subjectivity, and Transcultural Affinity in Romeo Oriogun's *The Gathering of Bastards*

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Introduction

The Mediterranean Sea remains the most popular route for irregular contemporary migration from Africa to Europe. For nearly two decades, Africans fleeing ethnic and religious conflicts, as well as adverse political and socioeconomic conditions, have taken this perilous route in pursuit of their European dream. Since then, this route has attracted significant attention, particularly from international media and organizations. Heartbreaking reports of Africans dying along this migratory corridor have flooded both Western and continental African media.

In 2001, CNN produced a documentary titled *Exodus from Africa*, narrated by Sierra Leonean journalist Sorious Samura, that detailed the struggles of Africans attempting to immigrate illegally to Europe. Similarly, in 2024, the BBC released a documentary, *Dark Waters: Africa's Deadliest Migration Route,* to shed light on the dangers African migrants face when crossing into Europe. According to a report by the International Organization for Migration, 2023 was the deadliest year for migrants from the Middle East and North Africa, with 4,984 migrants reported lost or missing, an increase from 3,820 in 2022.[1]

Since its establishment in 2014, the Missing Migrants Project (MMP) has tracked and documented migrant mortality in the Mediterranean Sea, reporting that at least 31,724 people (including 16,895 Africans) have been declared missing or dead. Africans accounted for 5,306 of the 29,551 individuals who have drowned. In today's world, saturated with data and statistics, numbers can become just that: numbers. When we think numerically or abstractly, such data can diminish the magnitude of human loss, even rendering it banal and tedious for some to grasp. Brad Evans and Chantal Meza contend that "there are abstractions that destroy any trace of the human" (351). Numbers can become abstractions that individuals might overlook when reflecting on mortality.[2]

However, news coverage of African migrants drowning in the Mediterranean Sea or perishing in the Sahara Desert has drastically diminished in recent times. This reality does not imply that African

migrants are no longer dying at sea or in the desert while attempting to cross from North Africa into Europe (Walia 2021; Jones 2016). Rather, there are now fewer reports of the rampant deaths among African migrants, potentially reflecting a decline in irregular border crossings via the Mediterranean Sea. Writing for the African Center for Strategic Studies, Wendy Williams notes that the number of African migrants involved in irregular crossings to Europe and Gulf countries declined sharply in 2025, compared with data from 2023 and 2024. Williams attributes this decline to European Union-funded border management efforts, highlighting how "[i]nterdictions in North Africa and West Africa have contributed to a 70-percent downturn in European interceptions of African migrants (to 33,500 people) along the Central Mediterranean route, primarily via Libya and Tunisia" (2). For instance, in 2023, the European Union allocated millions of Euros to Morocco to reinforce its militarization strategy against illegal migration and smuggling from Africa to Europe. The intensification of border surveillance and securitization along maritime and terrestrial pathways has deterred many African migrants, resulting in fewer crossings and fatalities. In 2024, the Moroccan government announced that it had prevented 45,000 individuals from entering Europe irregularly.

Zygmunt Bauman points out that '"[s]ecuritization is a conjurer's trick, calculated to be just that; it consists of shifting anxiety from problems that governments are incapable of handling (or are keen to try to handle) to problems that governments can be seen – daily and on thousands of screens – to be eagerly and sometimes successfully tackling" (30). Harsha Walia argues that border securitization and externalization are part of the imperial, spatial, and racial biopolitics of the European Union, designed to protect its citizens from the racialized Other (108). Referencing the border in her home country of Morocco, American-based author Laila Lalami writes: "The wall in Melilla no longer delineates a national border. Instead, it has come to signify something deeper: it segregates Spaniards from Moroccans, Europeans from Africans, Christians from Muslims, and white people from brown or Black people. The wall's message is clear and blunt: keep out" (59). Lalami posits the wall as a symbol of the ideological binary between the West and the Other, reinforcing ethnic, religious, and racial polarities between the two continents. In this regard, securitization functions to insulate Europeans against racial minorities from the "heart of darkness."

This article pivots around two key questions: What insights can poetry offer regarding the intimations of tenderness within the context of migrant precarity? What does tenderness tell us about the lives of Africans migrating through irregular routes from Africa to Europe? My aim here is not to rehash the "single story"[3] of African pain or the biopolitics of European border regimes, but to trace the representation of tenderness in Romeo Oriogun's *The Gathering of Bastards* (2023). In illustrating what I describe as Oriogun's poetics of tenderness, this article draws upon theoretical insights from Kevin Quashie, Rosi Braidotti, Judith Butler, and

Chielozona Eze. I analyze the following poems: "It Begins with Love," "Wind Whisperer," "On Leaving," and "Train Stop in the Sahara." In analyzing these poems, I do not focus on the discursive "spectacle" of migrant suffering.[4] I am not suggesting that we should disregard the precarious lives of African migrants. The point is not to characterize misery as the measure or totality of African life, either. Instead, I read African subjectivity – beyond the ideological and reductive mainstream media representations – through frames of tender affect and relationality to project migrants' humanity and the complexity of their lives. Tenderness is affectivity, which, Rosi Braidotti reminds us, is affirmative and positive: "it is the force that aims at fulfilling the subject's capacity for interaction and freedom" (148). This article gestures towards thinking affectively and tenderly about African migrants in the wake of postcolonial failures, aiming to reshape understandings of migrant precarity.

Western media discourses tend to dehumanize non-white migrants, portraying them through negative registers of criminality and pathology (Blanco-Herrero *et al*, 2023; Nwalutu and Nwalutu, 2019; Ahmed, 2015; Franko and Bosworth, 2013; Angel-Ajani, 2003). Hence, rather than dehumanizing, my proposed reading "*rehumanizes*" African migrants, presenting them in various subjectivities of aliveness, an aspect of their becoming that is rarely captured in the media. This article thus reflects an orientation towards liveliness, mapping how vulnerable African migrants remain capable of tenderness even as they confront perils that lead to a "brave new world." More specifically, I examine the manifestations of tenderness-as-aliveness in Oriogun's poetry (*The Gathering* henceforth), exemplifying what Kevin Quashie describes as the *aliveness of being*. I identify the migrant speaker in Oriogun's poetry as embodying the nomadic subjectivity of a griot who travels across West and North Africa, performing as a storyteller and oral historian. The griot-speaker inhabits multiple subject positions, belongings, and localities, refusing to be defined by what Chielozona Eze calls "nativist or autochthonous notions of identity" (7). Oriogun's poetics draw on the griot tradition, skillfully blending lyricism, storytelling, and history. His poems, often rooted in myths, folklore, and realism, read like vignettes of lived experience. In interviews, Oriogun attributes the influence of African orality on his poetic style to his grandmother and mother, as well as to the stories they told him while he was growing up in Benin City, in southern Nigeria.

Throughout his travels, the griot-speaker primarily documents grief and death while also narrating moments of tenderness and transcultural affinities among migrants and between migrants and locals. Using lyrical tones – sometimes elegiac, at other times buoyant – the griot shows that while many migrants recognize the risks of the Mediterranean Sea, they still express tenderness toward one another and enjoy conviviality. Tenderness structures and animates Oriogun's poetics, as he explains to Emily Everett in an interview: "I'm always looking for that tender moment in a poem, that moment that always surprises you, that sudden

turn" (*LitHub*). In another interview with a fellow Nigerian poet, Peter Akinlabi, Oriogun reveals: "I believe that in every state of war, in every trauma, there are tender moments. Everyone finds those tender moments; we are all creatures of small wonders" (*Africa in Dialogue*). This captivating turn towards tenderness highlights Oriogun's ability to deftly balance the tender and the violent, not merely for aesthetic but for ethical reasons. In other words, tenderness continues to manifest in social life despite the violence and horrors of the past or present.

Tenderness: aliveness and transcultural affinity

Tenderness rings with positive affect. It evokes softness, fragility, and warmth, suggesting intimacy. The word "tenderness" originally comes from *tendre* (Old French) and *tenerem* (Latin) and was probably first used in Middle English between the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "[t]he quality of being tender in regard or treatment of others; gentleness, kindness, compassion, love; considerateness, mercy, leniency" (N.p.). Another definition of tenderness includes: "A capacity for emotion, sensitivity; emotional depth; also, a feeling of compassion, sorrow, love, etc." It also encompasses "[c]onsideration, concern; a benevolent interest, goodwill, favor; also, attentiveness, care" (N.p.). Jennifer C. Nash's description of tenderness aligns with the dictionary contexts, meaning "to move with gentleness and affection, care and attention," but also "the feeling of being sensitized, open to the world –including the pain of the world – and vulnerable" (94). Here, tenderness signifies sensitivity, openness, and vulnerability.

In her 2019 Nobel Lecture, Olga Tokarczuk discusses how tenderness informs her aesthetics: "tenderness is the art of personifying, of sharing feelings, and thus endlessly discovering similarities" (23). Tokarczuk offers a lengthy description below:

> Tenderness is spontaneous and disinterested; it goes far beyond empathetic fellow feeling. Instead it is the conscious, though perhaps slightly melancholy, common sharing of fate. Tenderness is deep emotional concern about another being, its fragility, its unique nature, and its lack of immunity to suffering and the effects of time. Tenderness perceives the bonds that connect us, the similarities and sameness between us. It is a way of looking that shows the world as being alive, living, interconnected, cooperating with, and codependent on itself. (24)

The keywords in Tokarczuk's capacious definition of tenderness include sharing, concern, similarities, bonds, aliveness, and interdependency. Towards the end of her lecture, Tokarczuk affirms that "[l]iterature is built on tenderness toward any being other than ourselves" (25). Tokarczuk's

comment recalls her fellow Nobel laureate Toni Morrison's perspective on literature: "Literature allows us – no, demands of us – the experience of ourselves as multidimensional persons" (100). One of the themes Oriogun examines in his poetry is the concept of multidimensionality, represented by the poet persona as both a griot and a nomad.

Regarding tenderness, I invoke Quashie's discussion of the valence of aliveness as "a quality of being, a term of habitat, a manner and aesthetic, a feeling – or many of them" (14). In *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being,* Quashie challenges the idea of reducing Blackness to abjection, negation and terror, thereby providing a means to appreciate the fullness and vitality of Black life. Particularly interesting to me in my reading of tenderness as aliveness in Oriogun's poetry is how Quashie conceives of aliveness as relational: "a term of relation where the focus is on one's preparedness for encounter rather than on the encounter itself. In this way, to be in relation is to be in the embodied sociality of one's readiness" (21). This "embodied sociality" echoes Judith Butler's conception of vulnerability as a persistent feature of embodiment in social life (192). In addition, Quashie considers readiness as an openness to what may come – "in the happening of being open" (21) or what arrives in relation (55). The emphasis here is on openness and relationality as Quashie clarifies: "In a black world imaginary, one can embrace relation as an invitation to stay open through the wonder, smallness, hostility that happens" (124). Embodying a nomadic subjectivity, the griot in Oriogun's poetry dramatizes instances of openness amid a world of precarity.

Eze's formulation of transcultural affinity as "a feeling of transcultural empathy" (29) equally informs my analysis of tenderness in Oriogun's poetry. Eze theorizes transcultural affinity "as essential to the conception of global citizenship in that it acknowledges that a person's culture cannot fully express that person's relation to the world" (29). Eze criticizes identifications that enshrine race, tradition, culture, and other social categories as the basis of human sociality and offers transcultural affinity as a relational lens for envisioning a different world open to differences and interdependence. Eze's argument that we recognize our mutual entanglement recalls what Butler describes as "a shared condition of social life, of interdependency, exposure and porosity" (87). Simply put, we are all bound up with others in the social world. The following section examines nomadism.

Nomadism: in praise of nonbelonging and movement

In *Nomadic Subjects*, Braidotti uses the concept of nomadism not to define the physical act of travelling or to describe the itinerant or ambulatory individual but rather to reimagine alternative feminist subjectivities characteristic of "the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behavior" (5). Braidotti notes that "the nomadic state has the potential for positive renaming, for opening up

new possibilities for life and thought, especially for women and, even more specifically, for female feminists" (8). Thus, the nomad is not set in their way or is limited by fixed phallocentric conventions and norms of behavior. Moreover, the nomad need not be a world traveler, but a subject invested in a "quality of interconnectedness" and "creative sort of becoming" (6), working to "resist settling into one, sovereign vision of identity" (14). Nomadism rejects stasis and fixity, claiming no location as its precise destination.

Nomadism has little to do with homelessness and more to do with being able to recreate a sense of home anywhere: "The nomad carries her/his essential belongings with her/him wherever s/he goes and can recreate a home base anywhere" (17). Braidotti clarifies: "The nomad does not stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity" (21). Accordingly, nomadic subjectivity entails "a multiple, open-ended and interconnected identity that occupies a variety of possible subject positions, at different places (spatially) and at different times (temporally), across a multiplicity of constructions of self (relationality)" (Braidotti 158). Becoming is a crucial element of nomadic subjectivity since it "has to do with emptying out the self, opening it out to possible encounters with the 'outside'" (146).

Sara Ahmed points out that Braidotti theorizes nomadism as metaphorical rather than material, conflating thought (consciousness) with being (people). Ahmed contests how this theorization privileges liberal subjects with the choice, agency, and resources to travel the world and imagine it as home, unlike those forced into nomadism due to a single socioeconomic or political crisis. Ahmed problematizes Braidotti's construction of nomadism as transgressive, noting that "[t]he subject who has chosen to be homeless, rather than is homeless due to the contingency of 'external' circumstances, is certainly a subject who is privileged, and for whom having or not having a home does not affect its ability to occupy a given space" (84). Ahmed insists that we must consider the different realities surrounding forced and free movements and the material and social relations that afford some people a privileged nomadic lifestyle while turning others into precarious nomads. Malou Kürpick explains that "Braidotti's anti-essentialist nomadic theory seeks to overcome the essentialism and corporeal determinism underlying Western hegemonic – fixed, unitary, and exclusionary – concepts of identity by re-imagining the body as a site of a performative becoming" (332). However, Kürpick contends that Braidotti's nomadic thinking presupposes that anyone can access nomadic transcendence if they have critical consciousness, while overlooking how power structures and relations undermine embodied identity categories and individual agency (332). In what follows, I provide some context to help us appreciate Oriogun's poetics of tenderness.

African writers and migration narratives

African poets have depicted migrant journeys and struggle across the Mediterranean and the Sahara Desert in their work. In their introduction, "The Migration Turn in African Cultural Productions," Cajetan Iheka and Jack Taylor observe that "[t]he issue of migration is a political and social force that has begun to exert pressure on the form and content of contemporary African aesthetics" (2). Poetical representations of "the precarious condition of the African migrant" (Iheka and Taylor 6), include such works as Josué Guébo's *Think of Lampedusa*, Olajide Salawu's *Preface for Leaving Homeland*, Uchechukwu Peter Umezurike's *there's more*, and Gbenga Adeoba's *Exodus*. However, this article examines Origoun's *The Gathering* for its relevance to understanding nomadic subjectivity and figurations of tenderness against the backdrop of migrant precarity and historical traumas arising from slavery and colonial violence.

Oriogun is one of Africa's most prolific poets, having earned recognition in his home country of Nigeria and in the United States, where he lives and works as an Assistant Professor. Although Oriogun began publishing his poetry online, he gained prominence among the African literati after becoming the second Nigerian to win the Brunei International African Poetry Prize in 2017.[5] He subsequently clinched other awards, including the 2022 Nigerian Prize for Literature, the 2023 Julie Suk Award, and the 2024 Nebraska Book Award. His works include *Burnt Men*, *The Origin of Butterflies*, *Museum of Silence* and *Sacrament of Bodies*.[6]

Oriogun belongs to the emerging generation of Nigerian poets referred to as the "Facebook Generation," a term coined by Chibueze Darlington Anuonye. This designation stems from their ability to leverage digital and social media to publish and promote their poetry. According to Anuonye, Facebook provided a more robust platform for Oriogun and his contemporaries to publish their poetry, enhancing their visibility both within and beyond Africa. As a result, these poets have broadened their readership and gained recognition for their works. Uchechukwu Peter Umezurike has characterized the poetry of this millennial generation as confessional and private (461). Previous works by Oriogun examine the struggles of sexual minorities in heteronormative cultures, demonstrating his critique of the Nigerian nation and its degradation of queer lives. In his discussion of queer poetics, Eze considers how Oriogun interrogates the fear of difference toward sexual minorities in Nigerian society. Eze states that Oriogun envisions a world in which sexual difference is accepted rather than pathologized (121).

In contrast, *The Gathering* focuses mostly on exilic, diasporic, and migrant experiences and subjectivities, engaging with themes such as

migration, exile, diaspora, colonial legacy, ancestry, desolation, death, grief, and agony. Oriogun, who left Nigeria in 2018 to reside as an exile in the US, has revealed that his poetic vision is shaped by "the fear that lives inside of me and the joy also" (Philpott 2018), "the desire to exist in the fullness" (Akinlabi 2019) and the "idea of imparting grace to a body" (Amodu *et al.* 2021). He is also fascinated by the sea and borders, as many of the poems in the collection show. In "Romeo Oriogun Wrested Poetry from Pain," Emmanuel Esomnofu writes that most of the poems in Oriogun's latest poetry collections were written during his travels through West African cities.

The griot of tenderness and conviviality

In this section, I analyze the following poems: "It Begins with Love," "Wind Whisperer," "On Leaving," and "Train Stop in the Sahara" to demonstrate Oriogun's poetics of tenderness. The first poem in the collection, "It Begins with Love," depicts scenes of tenderness and love amid the grim environment of loss and mourning, buttressing my claim that tenderness is integral to Oriogun's poetics. The poem portrays a pastoral fishing village haunted by death. It does not matter that the village is unnamed. What matters is that we are invited into a world of contradictions and can relate to the locals' heterogeneous quotidian reality. Contradiction serves as the poem's structuring device, which Oriogun uses to uncover not a binary opposition but the complex and intricate ways of life: birth and death, love and loneliness, land and river, innocence and wild(ness).

The poem is a long narrative with no stanzas; the italicized speech in the opening line, "*Let no body,/bloated and gone, find its way to my boat*," typifies the fisherman's prayer to a deity, whose name is not mentioned. There is only a reference to "Omi" by the griot-speaker, which means "water" in the Yoruba language. Perhaps Omi represents Oshun, the river goddess in Yoruba mythology. The poem's tone is somewhat supplicatory. The fisherman's use of "let" may sound like an imperative, a forewarning, but it functions as a plea, an appeal to whatever deity is out there, which is why, shortly after, "[h]e gives thanks to the wild" (3). One could read the poem as a prayer, because the penultimate line – "Omi, spare us in death, spare us in life" (3)–, demonstrates this point. Quashie writes that "the praying subject speaks to a listener who is manifest in his or her imagination" (113). This listener, of course, is the divine. Following Quashie, prayer articulates a need, a desire, a longing. Thus, Oriogun's use of refrain in the poem emphasizes the fisherman's and the griot's longings and desires. Meanwhile, his speech shows that he is no stranger to seeing bodies washed ashore by the sea, and that a bloated body is not a rarity for him or any other fisherman. Nonetheless, the fisherman wishes not to witness another fatality.

It is instructive that the refrain, "*the day begins/with love, I tell you*," appears three times, underscoring and affirming the salience of love in a village haunted by loss and grief, and by bodies: "bloated," "drowned," or "washed out the river" (Oriogun 3), funereal reminders of human mortality. Though the griot speaks of an overwhelmingly bleak world, featuring "the vulture standing/over the roadkill," he presents radiant moments of aliveness in the wake of death ("the laborer kissing his wife's belly/the newborn seeing color"), juxtaposing grimness with tenderness. Similarly, he records touching scenes of beauty, even when fragile, as is the nature of beauty:

> After a long night,
> after the rain, after the sleep of hibiscus,
> the world opens its hands to sunlight. (3)

Nights, no matter how long they seem, will end. Rain rejuvenates. Vegetal life stirs. The tenderness of hibiscus, of sunlight on palms, the opening of hands, is characteristic of such tenderness. Sleep gives way to activity while sunlight permeates everywhere. There is an awakening of the senses, a re-energizing that comes after. This re-energizing is the day's benediction. The repetitiveness of "after" is significant because vitality comes once the long, rainy night has passed. The world is alive again, as is evident in the "after," which appears three times, like the refrain about love mentioned above. It is not only the day which begins with love, but also "prayers," and "even burial—the hand covered with sand,/a crown of seaweed" (3). Tenderness abides in the face of death and mourning. The act of burying a member of a community requires tenderness-as-love because, given our shared vulnerability, "to hold a drowned body/is to hold a part of myself" (3). As Butler mentions, touching is crucial to human sociality.

The prospect of migration can be exhilarating to some, but unsettling for many, especially those living precarious lives. Relocating can intensify that precariousness, particularly if an individual must sacrifice familiar comforts for the unfamiliarity of their new home. Comfort includes not only material aspects but also affective ones, such as the social and psychological attachments a person has developed over time. Migration can sever these attachments, even though migrants strive to hold on to them. In this context, migration functions as a means of severance. According to Ahmed, "[t]he word 'estrangement' has the same roots as the word 'strange.' And yet, it suggests something quite different. It indicates a process of transition, a movement from one register to another" (92). Migration reshapes a person's identity and attachments, prompting them to struggle with what to retain or let go of. This struggle challenges the individual's connection to home as a source of familiarity, creating tension with what may now feel unfamiliar and strange in the new environment. Consequently, discomfort emerges from the conflict

between familiarity (the home country) and estrangement (the new country).

Ahmed underlines that "[a]cts of remembering are felt by migrant bodies in the form of a discomfort, the failure to inhabit fully the present or present space. Migration can be understood as a process of estrangement, a process of becoming estranged from that which was inhabited as home" (92). What is implied here is that the natal home is a place of comfort that the migrant might have taken for granted. It is also a place of memory; thus, once a person leaves it, they may begin to feel estranged from that memory. One not only feels out of place in certain environments but may also feel that the air tastes different. In this context, discomfort, fueled by estrangement, arises from no longer feeling at home.

Oriogun's "Wind Whisperer" captures the connections between place, memory, and estrangement. The griot-speaker reflects on home and migration (symbolized by the pigeons "searching for home/ cooing in the language of voyages"), memory (recalled as "the sprawling slum of my childhood"), pain (illustrated by the imagery of "the earth is a wound"), and rebirth (depicted as the snake "shedding its skin"), and, of course, tenderness ("musicians" and "sweet music"). The poem consists of seven stanzas of unequal length and variations, narrating another instance of affectivity and conviviality. The griot has arrived in another location, precisely in Bamako, the bustling capital of Mali, where he feels, momentarily, out of place, presenting himself "[l]ike any stranger" (28).

Sequestered in his hotel room, the griot notices that the city is "spread in front of me—a banquet of buildings." Bamako appears open, generous, and inviting, a site of enjoyment, like a banquet. This appearance hints at sensuousness; the hotel, after all, is a place of sensuality. If the city promises a feast, and everyone is welcome to its sumptuous spread, it is no surprise that "the hotel lobby/ is crowded with musicians; sweet music,/ tender and draining" (28). Alone and pensive though, the griot contemplates desire, renewal, and regret. Nevertheless, what is most significant about his contemplation is his realization that, although "the earth is a wound," being a nomad is akin to living "within the house of regrets," yet within this house, "there are rooms of tenderness" (29). This contemplation is possible only when he expresses his interest in joining his fellow griots in singing about regrets, tenderness, and leisure.

The last couplet, which dramatizes tenderness and leisure and reassures the griot-speaker, is italicized for emphasis. There is some relevance to reading the tone of this couplet as didactic, an admonition. However, I interpret it as an invitation to slow down and savor life amid the vagaries and perils of the road (migration?). Equally important, the couplet functions as declarative and performative: "*sit for a while, rest, the road will still be here*" (29). The griot suggests that we must reach a point in our journey where we appreciate the regenerative power of rest, so we do not become overwhelmed by our "desire" and "hunger" for the never-ending road. There is an ethic of leisure conjured by this final line, addressed to fellow wayfarers to marvel at their own humanness in the

world, to experience it differently from the manic energy underlying productivity and activity demanded by our capitalist-driven system. Yet, *sit for a while, rest* epitomizes the practice of tenderness, too. In this sense, tenderness is both an ethic and an aesthetic, urging us to be tender with ourselves and tending to (read: caring for) ourselves, given that certain journeys can wound and leave bruises on parts of our bodies, if not our minds. Tending is a way of paying attention, a verb which shares the same root word as tenderness. Resting instantiates a manner of attending to one's interiority, "of being that is deep within us" (Quashie 133).

In *Slow is Beautiful*, Cecile Andrews describes the value of slowing down to recalibrate our daily routines and busyness, allowing us to sense the world anew and be rejuvenated in the process. Andrews criticizes the instrumentalist rationality that surrounds activity and exacts a toll on the human body and mind, preventing us from enjoying stillness and life. Caught in an ever-busy loop that is injurious to our well-being, we lose our appreciation for calmness and leisure. This entreaty, *sit for a while, rest* is enjoyment, which Andrews describes as having "to do with a near-mystical experience where time stops and you feel connected to life, expanded by life, transformed by life" (140). As the griot in Oriogun's poem narrates, "in the tiredness of the world" (28), we must learn to embrace a different ethos of life: *sit for a while, rest* is indicative of this radical, if not expansive, orientation to leisure-as-tenderness, and to life's myriad journeys. Indeed, *the road will still be here*.

"On Leaving" employs an elegiac tone to explore themes of departure, loss, conviviality, and love. It is set in Bobo, the shortened name for Bobo-Dioulasso, the second-largest city in Burkina Faso, often referred to as the country's commercial capital. The griot-speaker finds himself in Bobo, where he hopes to enter "another country," possibly Mali or the Ivory Coast. Bobo holds deep religious and cultural significance and showcases historic architecture. It was once a colonial industrial hub in the 1920s, during French rule in Burkina Faso, then known as Upper Volta. Here, the griot briefly pauses in Bobo en route to Bamako (Mali), where he meets fellow African travelers, a transcultural group that includes a Tuareg and a Chadian. They gather in "the quorum of tea drinkers" (42).

Oriogun's use of "quorum" is noteworthy as it signifies the required number of representatives needed before deliberations or a meeting can begin. However, this quorum, neither formal nor goal-oriented, takes place "beside a fire" (42), evoking intimacy and conviviality, inflected by the sharing of tea among fellow migrants during their brief encounter. The transcultural affinity embodied by this diverse group of tea drinkers blurs cultural, ethnic, and national differences.[7] The setback they encounter on their journey, "our bus, Noor, / broke down," hardly deters them from enjoying a moment of tenderness, even if fleetingly. In their misfortune, they find community through sharing tea. Sitting around a fireside under the starlight, their "eyes twinkled" (43). Tenderness underscores this scene, even as loss and grief persist in social life.

Tea plays a crucial role in fostering social connections across many cultures. Offering tea to a stranger or a visitor demonstrates hospitality. In this poem, tea unites this group, underwriting transcultural affinity. If coming together signifies commonality, then sharing tea with strangers, even if they are from the same continent, encapsulates what Iheka, building on the concepts of conviviality introduced by Paul Gilroy and Achille Mbembe, describes as "mutual imbrication, a consequence of living together and sharing physical space" (153). Conviviality-as-tenderness blurs the lines of cultural, ethnic, and national hierarchies, echoing Bauman's description of how a community represents a "short-cut to togetherness" (99), one "that knows no difference" (100). Taking on the role of host, the Tuareg in Oriogun's poem extends hospitality to strangers he will not see again. The migrants are all departing for various destinations: Toulouse (France) and Dakar (Senegal). Significantly, their bus is named Noor, the Arabic word for light or radiance. Firelight, starlight, and twinkling illustrate radiance, symbolizing love, which is evident in the story of "The Tuareg who fell in love with an aid worker was leaving for Toulouse" (42). Juxtaposition remains a key feature of Oriogun's poetics. Hence, love is captured in "the elegy of places." Grief and loss are softened by tenderness. Paradoxically, the desert serves as both a site of conviviality and trauma.

Aware that the Sahara Desert has witnessed historical violence, Oriogun uses the Tuareg to recall stories of the trans-Saharan slave trade and of betrayal and treachery – both his own and that of those who enslaved and trafficked their fellow men – alluding to CNN's shocking accounts of West Africans being sold in Libya (Mafu 2019, Harrison 2017; Youssef 2017). In this poem, the griot becomes an active listener to the Tuareg's retellings of tales of human brutality. Though the poem concludes with the griot reflecting on childhood, sorrow, and the "blue depth of Ethiope," the Tuareg's invitation for them to "*Sing, for this is what we are leaving/ for without the desert I am dead/ but alive in love*" (43) signifies an appreciation of how love can rekindle life within a space of aridity and mourning.

Deploying cartographic language, Braidotti discusses how nomadic groups have mastered the art of reading their landscapes as a form of map, which she terms "totemic geography." As Braidotti states, "[t]he desert is a gigantic map of signs for those who know how to read them, for those who can sing their way through the wilderness" (17). Oriogun's poem, "A Train Stop in the Sahara," also dramatizes tenderness and hospitality. The poem begins with the nomad-griot musing about "man's hunger/ for movement" and "man's endless desire for conquest" (51). Desire is represented as hunger; within Lacanian discourse, desire signifies a lack. Humanity desires not only movement, reflecting human migratory practices, but also the conquest of time and space. The Sahara Desert has historically been a vital trade route, reflecting humans' consummate desire to control and dominate nature and to inscribe their will upon the earth. While this poem depicts instances of conviviality-as-tenderness, it

critiques outsiders' preconceptions, particularly the media's reductive representation of the desert as hostile and barren. The dialogue between the journalist and the turbaned man exemplifies this representation. While the former serves as a metonym for the (Western) press, the latter personifies the Tuareg, the indigenous animal-herding nomads of the Sahara Desert. We could read the journalist as a representative of Western media who has arrived in North Africa to report on the nomads of the desert, since the Tuaregs in Morocco are facing an increasing threat of drought.

The poem challenges the image of the desert as sterile, uninhabitable, and unappealing, as the journalist describes it with terms like "boredom," "vast emptiness," and "gray skies" (51), insinuating that this is no place for modernity or for any modern man desirous of adventure. Instead, the journalist constructs the sea as modernity, a realm where dreams and opportunities are possible, while depicting the desert as heterotopic, existing outside of modernity and opportunities. This perspective overlooks the historical significance of the Sahara, which once served as a crucial trade route and was fundamental to both Arab and European modernities. The journalist further represents the desert as an empty space, devoid of meaning. As Bauman explains, "[e]mpty spaces are first and foremost empty of meaning. Not that they are meaningless because of being empty: it is because they carry no meaning, nor are believed to be able to carry one, that they are seen as empty (more precisely, unseen)" (103).

The journalist's question posits the desert as an empty space: "Do you feel/ left out of the world, do you long to see the sea?" (Oriogun 51). This presupposes that the turbaned man leads a life of boredom and bleakness, like the desert itself. Nevertheless, the turbaned man offers the journalist a response he likely did not expect, subverting his assumptions about the desert. The turbaned man's reply conveys a language of intimacy and abundance, evoking images of nurturing–-"the desert is my mother;" generosity– "she offers to those who know/her language;" and comfort– "When I am asleep, she holds me." However, the turbaned man also holds the desert mother, stating that he has "no need for the sea," since he has "underneath my feet" a reservoir of "endless flow of water" (51). The desert is sufficient for him; it provides enough sustenance for him and his household.

Bauman writes that "strangers are likely to meet in their capacity of strangers, and likely to emerge as strangers from the chance encounter which ends as abruptly as it started. Strangers meet in a fashion that befits strangers; a meeting of strangers is unlike the meetings of kin, friends, or acquaintances – it is, by comparison, a *mis*-meeting" (91). The encounter between the journalist and the turbaned man constitutes a *mis*-meeting. The journalist seems to have no more questions or responses for the turbaned man, who eventually leaves him at the train stop, inviting the griot, a silent observer of the dialogue, to the "vast nature of his home" (51).[8]

Upon arriving at the turbaned man's home, the griot succumbs to envy but feels awe and realizes what he has missed since departing from his homeland. Here, he experiences warmth: "the pot of a fire lit by desert shrubs" anticipates being served food from "a slain lamb," and observes "children napping under a tent" (safety), as well as "women braiding hair, planning the night's feast" (female sociality and communal merriment). Images of serenity, abundance, tenderness, and conviviality fill his vision, further repudiating the journalist's preconceptions. These images remind the griot of his itineraries in other "cities," where he felt rejected, like a "bone thrown into a pit" (51). As he muses, he realizes that he has "no language for belonging." Thus, he is left speechless by the warm reception he receives from the nomadic community. Finally, he manages to express that he has

> wished for nothing but this: let me live
> outside the violence of time, let me watch
> a passing train, listening as a turbaned man describes
> his camel waiting by a wall, waiting for water. (52)

This is a prayer for life, tenderness, sociality, and leisure because the "violence of time" is colonial time. It is marked by colonial modernity, of which the griot is apprehensive. He desires a different timescape, suffused with the sociality of tenderness. He desires nothing more than to escape colonial-cum-capitalist time and its violence. Modernity is turbulent and violent, he suggests. In *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman posits that we now live in a time of fluid or liquid modernity, defined by speed, acceleration, and instantaneity. In this era of light modernity, time has acquired a new value and urgency. While space is important, time appears more important now for its capacity to enhance and reproduce value in capitalist terms. Bauman's point about *mis*-meeting falls short when applied to the encounter between the griot and the turbaned man in Oriogun's poem, which illustrates and stages the concept of hospitality. What is also staged in this encounter is "transcultural affinity" and its disruption of "existing cultural hierarchies and mythologies of authenticity and belonging, and conversely to prevent the emergence of nativist notions of identity and belonging" (Eze 29).

Meanwhile, the griot, desiring to remain in the turbaned man's company, expresses his tenderness as "a form of longing" and "pure hunger" for his host (Oriogun 52). This longing is described as "pure hunger" and "the body asking." What is the body asking for? A hint of homoeroticism? We cannot say for sure, but there is tenderness in that longing, with desire and intimacy evoked as well. The poem concludes with a question, a characteristic rhetorical device of Oriogun's poetics, that highlights the tactile and its erotic potential: "now that I have touched your home,/ can I walk through the lonely path/ heading for home?" (52). Butler writes, "What the body is, then, is to some extent its relation to other bodies" (75). If Butler construes the body as unbounded and porous,

the griot's longing then demonstrates this bodily porosity. This encounter between strangers, "outside the violence of time," acknowledges the Butlerian concept of the social permeability of bodies. Further, Butler conceives of a lifeworld enriched by touch, which "establishes the general conditions of tactility" (57). In the words of Butler, "[w]e cannot really live without each other, without finding ourselves inside another's pores, or without letting another in" (109). Perhaps this is the lifeworld the griot inhabits as he ponders loneliness and companionship. Notwithstanding, while the poem hints at homoeroticism, I would argue that it explores the relationality of tenderness that emerges from the unconditional hospitality between strangers. Oriogun demonstrates that even in a seemingly arid place, such as the desert, a nomad can still find tenderness and community with another nomad.

Conclusion

Much of the discourse on African migrant subjectivity pays little attention to interiority and affectivity, thereby presenting a dominant picture that flattens the complexity of migrant lives. This article has articulated an alternative way of thinking about the heterogeneous experiences that characterize migrant subjectivity, drawing on the work of Romeo Oriogun, one of Africa's most exciting poets. In doing so, it mapped a poetics of tenderness to illustrate how Oriogun's poetry complexly "*rehumanizes*" African migrants, who in certain Western-mediated discourses are pathologized and criminalized. By "complexly," I mean Oriogun is invested in presenting a multifaceted and nuanced portrait of African migrant subjectivity that is not solely defined by suffering and agony but that reveals how tenderness is expressed in migrant lives and encounters.

While narrating migrant precarity and death, Oriogun employs the griot-nomad to capture and recount migrants' affective experiences. Indeed, reading Oriogun's work through an affective framework of tenderness does not obscure the precarious realities faced by African migrants embarking on irregular and dangerous journeys to Europe. Instead, it calls for a deeper appreciation of their humanity, greater awareness of the dangers they face along these routes, and an advocacy for migration justice that avoids stereotyping, demonizing, or dehumanizing migrants of any nationality or culture. This is the poetics of tenderness in Oriogun's work that I have highlighted. Moreover, this is the contribution that *The Gathering of Bastards* makes to ongoing discussions about African migration narratives. Perhaps future critical scholarship will examine the significance of affectivity, interiority, and aliveness in literary works depicting African migrant subjectivities in this contemporary moment, marked by colonial modernity.

Notes

1. The International Organization for Migration's report for 2025 shows that 2024 was the deadliest year for migrants (21 March 2025). See the data on their website. www.iom.int

2. See "The Black Mediterranean and the Politics of Imagination," where Smythe argues that the enumeration of migrant deaths "reveals the quantified abstraction of Black and/or migrant lives. This calculated value of Black life is expressed through the state's own language of deficit, dearth and debt" (5). Like Smythe's discussion of the numerical and abstraction, mine is also informed by the question asked by Katherine McKittrick: "How do we ethically engage with mathematical and numerical certainties that compile, affirm, and honor bits and pieces of black death?" (18).

3. I invoke Adichie's critique of colonialist and Eurocentric reductive representations and narratives of African subjectivities. In his essay, "How to Write About Africa," Wainaina also challenges such discourses.

4. Debord defines the spectacle in several ways, but I find this one compelling: "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (28). See also, Smythe's critique of the spectacle in relation to African migrants, where Pateh Sabally's drowning in Venice, Italy, was constructed as a spectacle for Italian onlookers (4). In "Thinking Lampedusa," Dines *et al*. write about how Lampedusa in Italy functions as a spectacle of bare lives personified by African migrants (432).

5. Gbenga Adesina and Chekwube O. Danladi were the first Nigerians to win the Brunei International Poetry Prize in 2016, though they were joint winners.

6. I did not include *Nomad*, published in 2021 by Griots Lounge Publishing Canada, because the book was republished as *The Gathering of Bastards*.

7. This scene evokes a moment of tenderness, conviviality, and transcultural affinity in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, where the narrator and his fellow travelers pause midway across the desert, share drinks and cigarettes, gather in sociality, and transform the barren landscape into an "intimate stage" (112–15).

8. We could read the turbaned man's gesture as an example of Derrida's notion of unconditional hospitality, which does not seek the guest's name or identity before the host extends hospitality. See Derrida, *Of Hospitality.*

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