

# The Alterity of “The Road” in Selected African Cities in Niyi Osundare’s *If Only The Road Could Talk*

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## Abstract

This essay argues that the “The Road” concept in certain cities is a constant pattern in Niyi Osundare’s *If Only The Road Could Talk* (2017). In this collection of poems, the recurrence of “The Road” reveals a certain dynamic interplay between the “Self” and the “Other” as the poet journeys through Africa, Asia and Europe. Osundare’s odyssey opens an engaging space for him to re-think human experiences in city life such as self-re-assessment, boundary re-negotiation, neo-colonialism, migration and international politics as instances of alterity as the Self encounters the Other. Using the Alterity Theory of James Richard Mensch in *Hiddenness and Alterity: Philosophical and Literary Sightings of the Unseen*, this essay sees “The Road” in Osundare’s poems as a humanist pathway to discover the sameness in the “otherness” of cities in the world as the Self peregrinates other roads for alterities. Mensch’s Alterity Theory justifiably explains Osundare’s peregrinations because aspects of the theory support a literary comparison of the Self and the Other and how the Self encounters the Other in a journey. Germane issues like cultural diversity, ethical varieties, and re-examination of differences are a few decipherable alterities in this transnational poetic trip on “The Road” of human cities.

**Keywords:** *Alterity, “The Road”, City, Self, Other, Niyi Osundare.*

## Introduction

The idea of “The Road” has enjoyed substantial scholarship in African literature. This is because many scholars rethink the concept of “The Road” from myriad perspectives. For instance, Robert Eisner in *The Road to Daulis: Psychology, and Classical Mythology* deploys “The Road” as a methodological tool to assess classical myths’ diverging and converging patterns, including Oedipus and Electra. To Eisner, “The Road”

is a labyrinth of empowerment and disempowerment of the classical figures (9). Daniel Luttrull emphasizes this in ‘Prometheus Hits The Road: Revisiting the Myth’ where he uses Prometheus as an archetypal human character with the “twofold legacy of blessings and curses” (20) when the mythic figure faces varying contradictions on “The Road”. Extending Eisner’s and Luttrull’s arguments, the trio of Nikos Barbopoulous, Pavlos Baltas and Theodoros Chiotis (2012) in ‘The Archetypal Road-Myth: From the Highway to the Matrix’ agree that “The Road” is a long stretch of

permutations where the traveller is bound to experience ontological shifts and inevitable changes (17). Barbopoulous, Baltas and Chiotis draw from the perception of Frank Lloyd Wright in *The Disappearing City*, where he had earlier suggested that “The Road” decentralizes the structure of what we know as city by making spaces available for human mobility and growth. To Wright, as affirmed by Barbopoulous, Baltas and Chiotis, “The Road” should not have boundaries imposed by the limits of the Self (15). This view shares resemblance with the opinion of some critics of African literature like Stephen Larsen (1983) in *A Writer and His Gods: A Study of the Importance of Yoruba Myths and Religious Ideas to the Writing of Wole Soyinka* who explains that the mythic tool called “The Road” in Wole Soyinka’s creative essence, “...symbolizes both Ogun and the cosmic abyss that he was the first to bridge.... The road is closely linked to both life and death (65)”. “The Road”, as a continuum of life and as a space for the encounter of alternatives is further amplified by Soyinka who sees “The Road”, as an “abyss” characterized by “birth, death, and resorption in phenomena, for the abyss is the transition between the various stages of existence” (103). This perception is sustained by Osundare in the preface to *If Only The Road Could Talk* where he defines “The Road” as “a riddle with a thousand answers; the answer which twines back into a thousand riddles...”(xiii). To twine back is to renegotiate the journey as a result of a new encounter. “The Road” is thus a pathway with varying levels of growth and development. From the foregoing exegesis of the concept of “The Road”, it is decipherable that the passage of “The Road” contains surprises, discoveries, awareness, shocks and new realizations. The alternative discovery on “The Road” is what this study defines as alterity. In other words, whatever redefines or renegotiates the terms of the journey on “The Road” are alterities from which new perceptions are formed in some selected cities

in the poem. This argument is sufficiently underscored in the preface of *If Only The Road Could Talk* where Osundare explains that the qualities of African cities can be improved on the ground that their distinctions remain in “ageless dialogue” (xiii) with the narratives of other continents like Asia and Europe. Here, the African cities are the Self in constant dialogue with the Other, namely Asia and Europe. “The Road” is that archetypal place where the Self understands the paradoxes of diversity and sameness by encountering the Other:

And the farther I have travelled, the more I have encountered the astounding similarities between places and peoples as well as the confounding diversity which alleviates the burden of extreme sameness (xiv)

The “astounding similarities” and “confounding diversity” are alterities within the passage of “The Road” which enrich the travellers with new awareness such that, like Osundare, they will engage in existential interrogation such as: “What can human beings do with the bamboo that they haven’t done with it in Korea and China and Japan?” (xv). The answers to the various questions that arise from the encounters with other cities in Osundare’s *If Only The Road Could Talk* form the constituents of alterities which are philosophically and theoretically explained in Mensch’s *Hiddenness and Alterity: Philosophical and Literary Sightings of the Unseen*.

### **Alterity of the Road: A Theoretical Reinforcement**

Our understanding of Osundare’s poetics of “The Road” is reinforced theoretically by the philosophical standpoints of James Richard Mensch in *Hiddenness and Alterity: Philosophical and Literary Sightings of the Unseen* (2005). While critics like Louis Blond (2016), Rosalyn Bold (2017), Joey Kim (2017),

Timothy Neale with Eve Vincent (2017) and Arka Chattopadhyay (2018) have respectively delineated alterity from perspectives of deconstruction, history, politics, economics and ethics, only Mensch has extended the concept further by linking it with human mobility as well as situating the concept within a structured literary framework. Hence, Mensch's polemics justifiably buttresses our idea of the alterity of "The Road" in Osundare's *If Only the Road Could Talk*. For instance, in defining alterity, Mensch argues that "alterity is experienced as an ability to take up standpoints distinct from our own and question ourselves from alternate perspectives" (5). Mensch believes that through questioning we can see some sameness and saneness in the views of those we consider as the "other people" or what is philosophically known as the *Other*. This reaffirms Osundare's pontification where he avers that:

I have heard Osun, my River Spirit, raise a song while the Nile, the Thames, the Seine, and the Limpopo pick up the chorus (xiv)

In Osundare's perspective, the song of "Osun" in Nigeria is human enough to be understood by the Nile, the Thames, the Seine and the Limpopo because the poet has "taken up standpoints distinct" from his own Nigerian culture such that he is opened to see the alterities provided by Nile (Egypt), Thames (The United Kingdom), Seine (France) and Limpopo (South Africa). The ability to see differing standpoints and to infer some hidden ideologies from the *Other* is what makes Mensch's polemical position on alterity appropriately suitable for the reading of Osundare's *If Only The Road Could Talk*.

In Mensch's view, the alterity of the *Other* is hidden from us if we do not understand ourselves first (6). The first step to knowing other cities is to understand our own Self or,

in line with our discussion, our own cities. As he states:

Selfhood, in its concrete being in the world, is not a matter of inner representations of outer events. It involves the possibilities that make our freedom of action in world first possible. These are also involved in our giving ourselves as nongiven and, hence, point back to the action of the other. (86)

Osundare's poetic journey from one city to the other is transnationally valuable because the poet understands his own city. To Mensch, our acceptance or our rejection of the *Other* will determine how much we even understand ourselves and other aspects of existence. "I need the other to gain an objective sense of myself" (89), argues Mensch. He further contends that "The other is also crucial for my sense that this body is capable of objective motion" (90). In other words, the "objective motion" or "the Road" to other cities is a vast trip of self-epistemology which eventually reveal certain alterities that are vital to self-growth and corporate development. This idea is preponderant in Osundare's poetic odyssey in *If Only The Road Could Talk*. The way in which Mensch's idea reinforces Osundare's imaginative delineation of the cities affirms the belief that the movement from one city life to the other generates new belief systems which we have described as alterities. Mensch's view of "The Road" as a pathway to the discovery of hidden alterities is decipherable in his description of alterities as borne out in the human sense of "objective motion", which is the same as movement, mobility or journeying.

In addition, Mensch postulates that in the course of "Objective motion" humanity further enjoys alterities by face-to-face encounter. With copious reference to Levinas, Mensch contends that alterities are

decipherable from the dynamic physical encounters between the Self and the Other. In other words, while objectively moving on “The Road” from one city to the other, The Self will certainly encounter the Other physically. He opines that “to intuit the world that is there for all of us, we would have to see simultaneously out of our own and ours others’ eyes” (222). This one-on-one facial encounter with the Other helps the Self to question his own values. New alterities are hereby experienced as a result of self-interrogation. Mensch says “Such questioning gives us a concrete example of the “inquietude” that we...discussed as responsible for our self-separation” (168)

We can gather from Mensch’s Theory of Alterity that “Objective Motion” and “Face-to-Face Encounter” are aspects of human journey which enables alterity. These aspects of Mensch’s polemics can be deployed to explore the alterity of “The Road” in Osundare’s poetic peregrinations of some cities in *If Only the Road Could Talk*.

### “The Road” as Objective Motion for Alterities in the Cities

In Mensch’s view “The Road” is an objective motion because it provides varieties of encounters from where the traveller (the Self) can assess some personal contradictions in the light of new experiences. He argues that “A common sequence gives us a common, objective sense” (91) because mobility or motion on “The Road” objectifies the Other by providing some alterities which the Self can use as measures of self-introspections. The critic clarifies that

It is possible to see two distinct temporalities corresponding...each manifesting alternating hiddenness. The first temporality is given by the “I move myself”. Its moments arise in the registering of my impressions (both bodily and optical) as I move . Its temporal

relations are given by Kant’s “inner sense,” the source of which is the *first-person experiences*...We also have objective time, which corresponds to my body placed in space through others. This is the time that measures objective movement. (91)

It is against the background of the foregoing that Osundare poeticizes “The Road” as a place in the city where the Self is “placed in space through others” (91). In “objective time” (91) the Self travels to see certain alterities which emerge from that motion to meet the Other. Hence, in *If Only the Road Could Talk*, certain poems in selected subsection such as “If Only the Road Could Talk” (4), “Feathered Heels” (3), “Accra” (14) and “Eko” (9) attest to the view that constant mobility from once city to the other creates alterities. The poet avers in “If Only the Road Could Talk” that:

If only the Road could talk  
It would probe every grain  
In the destiny of the dust  
And pronounce prostrate particles  
Into proverbs and running banter (4)

The probing of “every grain” is an activity on “The Road” which shows that journeying and mobility from one city to the other create opportunities to change “destiny”; to make new pronouncements and to form new “proverbs”. New destiny, fresh pronouncements and “...proverbs and running banter” (4) are decipherable alterities. In addition, this poem suggests that social and political boundaries can be re-negotiated in the course of moving from one city to the other. The motion or movement is objective because it allows the Self to see the limits of boundary creation:

If only the Road could talk  
It would mock the River’s ageless envy  
And the iron idiom of the bridge  
Which sutures the sinews

Of its broken limbs (4)

Movement on “The Road” should be used as a time to deconstruct what exactly is causing “ageless envy” amongst cities; a season to “mock” (4) or interrogate the “iron idiom” (4) or the hard stance of the Self which perpetually creates limits which cause “broken limbs” (4). Mobility on “The Road” should give an ample time to re-assess and re-evaluate certain cultural positions that have become “iron idiom” (4)

Furthermore, Osundare urges the readers to develop the Self by examining the ways in which “the Road... would wail” (4) against every perpetual self-seeking and limiting enterprises. To avoid the recurrence of “murderous insanity” and “rivulets of blood” (4) the Self who journeys from one city to the other must objectively jettison every inhibiting cultural and social habits by “probing every grain” (4) and “iron idiom”. Indeed, the “goings and endless comings” (5) of the traveller in “curious places” (5) of the Other, should engender new perspectives and visions. There should be “parallel dreams” (5) created by the “couple” of the Self and the Other as the travellers move from one city to the other. This coupling of cultural and social divergencies is what Mensch means when he avers that “I must transfer to myself the sense of the other’s moving from one position to another in the world” (90), a position which theoretically supports Osundare’s vision of transnational ethos.

“Feathered Heels” (3) shares the same thematic vision with “If Only the Road Could Talk”. Here, Osundare poeticizes the sky metaphorically as “The Road”. To him, the sky is a kind of road. This enables him to liken a traveller’s movement from one city to the other to that of a “Bird of Passage” on a vast sky (3):

Feathered heels

Of the Bird of Passage  
Whose nest boasts a straw  
From every land (3)

This metaphor is apt in capturing the ways in which the bird (Self) collects new perspectives “From every land” (3). This is because its nest “boasts” of multitudes of ideas occasioned by new wind and song from “seamless oceans” (3) which can be described as the Other. There are newer alterities and ethos as the bird changes its locations:

Mapless migrations  
Itinerant intensities  
The sky is one liquid canvass  
Of nomadic colours (3)

The bird is unmindful of boundaries and limits because of its preoccupation to shed culturally limiting feathers. It sees one city as a continuation of the other and thus increases its “intensities” to add “colours” to its growing feathers. Indeed, it is

Unmoved  
By mimic maps  
And tattooed tonalities  
Of proxy mountains. (3)

Since the bird is unmoved by any inhibitions of maps and boundaries, the song it sings becomes tattooed with new tones and its wings assume new colours. This is similar to “If Only the Road Could Talk” where the poet refers to the feather of the moving bird as: “...the feathery amplitude/Of the bird with migrant colours” (5). The freedom with which the bird travels in the sky is reminiscent of Mensch’s objective mobility. Mensch argues that in the objective world, a person (Self) learns to grapple with the ideas of the Other by “transferring his sense to myself” (93). The transference of sense of the Other to the Self is made possible by an objective sense of mobility:



The grasp of the common world...is simultaneous with my grasp of myself as objectively present in the world. It marks the transition from “I move myself” to “I transit space” like other objects out there...I need to transfer to myself the sense of the other person as also “in” space, the other as part of the objective world (93).

In both “Feathered Heels” (3) and “If Only the Road Could Talk” (4), Osundare reveals that the Self is capable of identifying with the Other by seeing alterities which he has poetically described as “nomadic colours” (3), “tattooed tonalities” (3), “dialogue of the sole”(3) and “migrant colours” (3). To him, these are experiences which make transnational ethos possible because they are borne of a deliberate and careful understanding of “parallel dreams” (5).

“Eko” (9) shares similar preoccupation with “Feathered Heels” (3) and further confirms Mensch’s polemics of objective mobility. Here, Osundare sees the city of “Eko” (Lagos of Nigeria) as cosmopolitan enough to accommodate tribes and nationalities:

...your feet,  
nestles in the plural nationality  
between your fractious sands;  
your text a boatload of blue tropes: (9)

The beauty of “Eko” stems from its accommodation of “plural nationality” (9) which suggests that the city constantly surprises itself with alterities from different encounters with the objective mobilities of other tribes. The poet reinforces this idea by describing the city as “banters of waters speaking from both ends” (9). The constant interactions of the two “ends” of Self (the people of Eko) and the Other (the plural nationalities) are what produce “a boatload of blue tropes” (9). Talents, innovations, cultural aesthetics are the “tropes” generated. This is further amplified in the way which Osundare

describes “Eko” as a “text” or “A poem scribbled by the lore/ of a thousand deities” (9). There is an ethos derived from the intermingling of “plural nationality” (9). It generates what the poet describes as “lethal beauty” (9) which is suggestive of a kind of alterity. The rest of this particular poem demonstrates the transnational values of the concatenation of the Self and the Other. Indeed, the “water...from both ends...” (9) generates social integration as “lagoon sometimes lush...like hyacinths” (9); religious co-habitation like the “venal *Hallelujah* of Pentecostal noises” combining with “the soporific Allahu Akbar of sword-wielding Saracens” (11) and economic cooperation exemplified by “Rooms for all comers/promiscuous like a marketplace...” (13) and “face too wide for a partial mask”. For Osundare, the cosmopolitan nature of the city called “Eko” is defined by the way in which the expansive sea that surrounds it accommodates other sea in an infinitum dimension. The metaphor of people of “Eko” as accommodating vast sea with plenty alterities is captured in:

The Sea is Lagos; Lagos is the Sea  
blue eternity of billowing banters  
thronged expanse with a rainbow  
too wide for narrow skies (12).

Perhaps, it is from the “Eko” poem that Tejumola Olaniyan, in one of the comments in *If Only The Road Could Talk*, derive his view that that the collection is “A wordly, cosmopolitan voice, inspiringly capacious in its vision and empathy” (v).

While “Eko” (3) is borne out of the poet’s desire to foreground the idea of cosmopolitanism as a kind of alterity from the convergence of “plural nationality” (90), the focus of “Accra” (14), another poem from a sub-section, is to reveal the importance of change:

The ears of a resurgent era  
 Our legs commenced the clamour for a  
 new dance  
 Africa swayed from coast to coast  
 To a Freedom spelt out in sound and  
 coded silence (14)

*We are learning*  
*Let us know*  
*Let us know*  
*Let us know*  
*We are learning*  
*Let us know* (15)

The “clamour for a new dance” (14) begins by walking or journeying from “coast to coast” or from city to city. By referring to “Accra” as a place where Africa should sway “coast to coast” (14), the poet brings to memory the origin of Ghana whose capital is “Accra”. Originally belonging to the Gold Coast of the British Crown colony, Ghana was part of the convergence of other coasts or cities namely The Gold Coast, Ashanti, Northern Territories Protectorate and British Togoland Trust Territory. To sway “coast to coast” therefore means to travel or to journey taste in the “Otherness” of other coasts in order to encounter alterities of freedom, resurgence and newness:

A surge to free skies  
 One Black Star mastered the galaxy  
 Of tremulous nights (14)

The art of mastering “the galaxy” in “the free skies” is akin to the way in which the Self masters the Other in such a way that “Our *kente* which summons /A United Nation of colours” (14) can become more beautiful with interconnected, variegated colours. *Kente*, a colourful Ghanaian fabric, is envisioned to grow in beauty by the incorporation of colours of other nations. The poet maintains that “Accra” has entered an era of captivating resurgence because the city’s rebirth is necessitated by its pursuit from “coast to coast” and “From Cape to Cairo” (14). But the socio-cultural resurgence and freedom in Accra keep rising because the people in the city keep learning the dynamic interplay between the Self and the Other such new alterities are decipherable:

From the foregoing, the poem “Accra” is an imaginative re-enactment of Mensch’s polemical position of alterity. While elaborating on the nature of the otherness of the Other, Mensch opines that “Other human subjects appear to me and they appear as free. If they did not, I would not recognize them as *subjects like myself*” (93). That is, the people of “Accra” can learn to alter and renegotiate their freedom and “clamour for a new dance” (14) from other coasts because other coasts equally share the idea of embracing the Other. In other words, the “the resurgent era” (14) is enhanced by a shared feeling of freedom between the Self and the Other. An alterity of new colours is produced when there is a shared feeling of exchange between the Self and the Other.

Diversity as a form of alterity found on “The Road” is sustained in “Johannesburg” (16) where Osundare hints that the post-apartheid history of South Africa is constantly embracing changes, in spite of the varying quotidian contradictions:

Gold dances beneath your feet  
 To the gum-booted threnody  
 Of a sweat-soaked vitality  
 There is a glowing mettle to this dance  
 And a difficult rhythm to its songs (16)

The “difficult rhythm” (16), notwithstanding, Johannesburg (Self) is in perpetual quest to improve its harsh reality. This city seeks alterities that engender growth and development:

Beyond a cluttered skyline  
 Of glass and steel

The rainbow peeps like a baby  
 Begging for another birth  
 The seething energy  
 Of a city still re-shaping (16)

Johannesburg keeps “re-shaping” by encouraging and “Begging for” diversities by “The Road” for the Other. The city is renewing its “energy” for “another birth”, another set of colours which are in alterities to its own rainbow. Like the kente of “Accra”, “Johannesburg” presents its own diversity by requesting for more colours in the sky, “The Road” into its own city.

Comparatively, “Eko” (9), “Accra” (14) and “Johannesburg” (16) present to us three cities of people whose sources of cultural and economic development stem from the quest for cosmopolitanism as well as diversity. All are forms of alterities which are products of planning, self-assessment and deliberate understanding of the Other.

### “The Road” as Face-to-Face Encounters for Alterities in the Cities

Mensch argues that a traveller encounters different experiences face-to-face with human and non-human agents on “The Road”, an idea poetically sustained by Osundare in *If Only the Road Could Talk*. In Mensch’s view, the Self experiences “death” (167) when it has a face-to-face encounter with the Other. “Death” here means the renegotiation or rethinking of certain socio-cultural prejudices of the Self in a face-to-face encounter with the Other. With reference to Levinas, Mensch defines “death” as a mutual experience of the Self and the Other where their vulnerabilities and contradictions are exposed to themselves in a face-to-face encounter. “Facing the other”, Mensch opines “is an exposure to death” (167). He adds that “Death is, by definition, on the other side of everything I can think and know”. The traveller sees the “death” of some socio-cultural belief systems as they face human and non-human agents of

Other cities. In other words, the Self becomes more responsive and responsible to new-found alterities when they have face-to-face encounters with the Other in other cities:

The other is as much a part of myself as the being able to confront myself that arises from such alterity. The key to this argument is that it is through the other – through the other’s face, that is, through its nudity, its vulnerability, its exposure to death – that I face death. The mortality, which I experience through the face of the other, is mine through this other” (169).

The “death” of some aspects of the Self through an encounter with the Other and the resulting alterities are captured in Osundare’s “Korea Songs” (62), “The Berliner Ensemble” (86), “Stockholm” (101) and “Flying Over the Irish Sea” (108).

“Korea Song” (86) signifies the importance of welcoming the Other in order to learn from certain contradictions in the history of other cities:

You welcomed me  
 With a flower in your voice...  
 Rich with the Korean rain;  
 Then held my hands  
 And led me through  
 The tangled landscape  
 Of your country’s history:  
 The invaders who killed the King  
 And ravished the Queen;  
 Who laboured to put their own  
 Tongue in the Korean mouth (62)

The persona, presumably an African, is having a face-to-face encounter with a Korean and a language interpreter known as Shin Sun-mi. Sun-mi is the Other whose city, Korea, is a tourist site for the persona. The kind of welcome that the persona receives is the type that engenders some alterities because there are plenty resemblances



between African history and the “tangled landscape” of Korea because Africa equally experienced

The invaders who killed the King  
And ravished the Queen;  
Who laboured to put their own  
Tongue in the Korean mouth (62)

The persona thought that Africa was the only continent with invasions and troubled history from colonizers but when Sun-mi interprets Korean history by holding the persona’s “hands” in a face-to-face encounter and leading him “through” the roads of “The tangled landscape” (62), then it becomes clear, as written in the other part of the poem, that both the persona and Sun-mi

...glowed in the memory  
Of significant happenings:  
The resilient Korean spirit (62)

The “significant happenings” (62) between the persona (Self) and Sun-mi (Other) are alterities engendered by the “death” of the political prejudice that Africa is the only continent that is suffering from the hangovers of colonialism and Western invasions. The persona becomes aware that just like, Nigeria (for instance), has become polarized because of some historical manipulations during the agitation for independence and has further become regionally sectionalized because of the Nigeria Civil War (1967-1970), Korea is likewise perpetually apprehensive

...of yet another war  
Which divided a kindred land  
Into two unequal halves (62)

The alterity discovered by the Self here is that political agitation in the history of nations follows the same pattern of “tangled landscape” and, therefore, each nation should learn to develop from whatever remains and

stop perpetually blaming the Other. The Self (Africa) should “die” to the excuse of blaming the Other for its underdevelopment but like “The resilient Korean spirit” (62), it should create its own distinctive vision and create invaluable products:

The literate vision of  
The Great King Sejong  
Who made us the *Han guel*’ (63)

Beyond the alterity of sameness of political agitation, the persona (Self) also discovers that religious extremism is a common experience in Africa and Korea:

The scars from these wounds  
And the long, spirited battle  
Between Buddha and the Bible... (62)

Religious crises are common in the city of the persona (Self) which is in Africa. Korea faces similar religious upheavals. Hence, “the long, spirited battle/Between Buddha and the Bible” implies that religious turmoil is an experience that will keep recurring in human history irrespective of the cities. It does not stop “The Great King Sejong” from making, creating and inventing the ‘Han Guel’, the Korean alphabets which marked their own distinctive language and civilization. The idea that religious fundamentalism should be an excuse for the abandonment of corporate vision should “die” upon a face-to-face encounter with the Other.

Political and religious histories of the two continents are seen thus:

One sky  
Two suns  
One history  
Two stories (63)

The “Two suns” and the “Two stories” are the Self and the Other who, after leading themselves through the “tangled landscape”

(62) of a common road, discover that they are living under “One sky” and “One history”. The Self should therefore “die” to the ideas of selective historicity and the projection of undue peculiarities. Indeed, the Self is aware of the alterity from a face-to-face encounter with the city of Korea that, in spite of the political and religious imbalances, the Korean city is progressive. King Sejong creates sustainable growth in the midst of chaos:

Like the Golden Rule  
Of King Sejong  
Who bequeathed the letter &  
The light which fathered  
The modern miracle  
Of Samsung and Daewoo (71)

The persona (Self) needs the “modern miracle” of killing every excuse for lack of creativity and invention. This is the alterity of meeting Korea, the Other.

The foregoing thought is reinforced in “At the Berliner Ensemble” (86) where the poet uses series of personifications and metaphors to reveal how a face-to-face encounter between the Self and the Other is capable of producing series of alterities, especially if queries, questionings and interrogations are permitted. While “Korea Songs” shows how a welcoming Korean translator (Other) guides a tourist (Self) through the city of Korea and the latter, consequently, “kills” certain prejudices from its face-to-face encounter with the Korean city, in “At the Berliner Ensemble” we see an outburst between the Self and the Other:

At the Berliner Ensemble  
Masks burst through windows  
Multiplying into kites in the evening sky  
Props bloom into people  
Costumes into courtesans  
A quiet song takes wing in the orchestra  
Pit, amplifying into marching anthems;  
Ballads wield the spade,

The sickle twines into a question mark  
(86)

From Osundare’s poetic view, the ensemble or the gathering that takes place in Berlin of Germany is a meeting of the Self and the Other. But unlike the face-to-face welcoming encounter between the persona from Africa and Sun-mi from Korea in “Korea Song” (62), this poem shows how heated debates and fierce dialogues of nations can engender certain alterities. These assemblies of people of different tongues, songs, proclivities and “Masks” (86) keep “Multiplying into kites” because of the “burst” of encounters between the Self and the Other. Indeed, the “multiplying”, the “amplifying” and the “bloom” demonstrate Osundare’s vision of what happens when nations gather and talk face-to-face. “Ballads”, “anthems” and “courtesans” are the alterities which are generated from this ensemble. These are new songs and visions which can necessitate re-negotiation and re-thinking of national and international policies. Meanwhile, this multiplication and amplification of alterities are as a result of questioning: “The sickle twines into a question mark” (86) says the poet. That is, the mode of dialogue; the *modus operandi* of international relation is question. At the ensemble, numerous questionings can help to balance the Self and the Other even if the questions “burst through the windows” (86) sometimes; at the ensemble the heated discussion on immigration, for example, can be resolved when the Self understands that the perpetual inflow from the Other or the border crossing from the Other is an issue that can be resolved by asking certain fundamental questions, especially why immigration is on the rise. Hence, the poet advises that “The Caucasian Chalk Circle squares up/ With incessant crossings” (86). To square up is to cope with the inevitability of a process. The process here is the incessant flow of immigrants. Therefore, for peace to broker

between the Self and the Other, the ensemble should accommodate the multitude of queries from nations:

But around the threshold of the stage  
A multitude of masks in rainbow raiment  
Envisioning the outbreak of peace (87)

The city of Berlin is known for its masks, museums and other cultural exchanges and, therefore, it is an apt geographical metaphor to convey Osundare's poetic view that the conglomeration of "masks", which we have understood to mean the face-to-face encounter between the Self and the Other in certain gatherings, can mark the beginning of cultural interrogations and queries so as to envision certain alterities. The difference and diversity that are decipherable in the encounter of "masks" at the Berlin ensemble are the alterities (immigration issue, new songs, anthems) that other "masks" can learn from.

Similar to the motif of migration in "The Berliner Ensemble" (86) is the thematic thrust of "Ty Newdd Poems" (115) where the poet deploys folktale style to serve as a metaphor of the face-to-face encounter between the Self and the Other in an imagined city:

#### Squirrel Tale

We once had squirrels  
native to this land  
red-haired, ample tailed  
they played by day...

and the leaves gave them  
a place to live...

Then came these ones, grey,  
from a distant forest;  
fat like rabbits,  
they eat all seasons  
raiding bird nests

turning over the stones;  
they ride out the winter  
foraging snow fields  
for spoils and trodden things (115)

Different types of squirrels arrive on the same land with different habits. The "red-haired" squirrels that are "native to the land" must understand the alterities or difference of the immigrant "grey" squirrels who are fond of eating "raiding", "turning", "foraging" and looking for "spoils and trodden things" (115). Osundare differentiates the Self and the Other through their habits and skin colours. For the poet, the immigrant grey squirrels provide the alterities of adventurism, creativity, entrepreneurship, and risks that the native and calmer red-haired squirrels lack. In this imagined city, the squirrels cohabit based on their complementarities and diversity of habit and skin. The red-haired native squirrels represent the Self who, seeing the alternatives from the immigrant grey squirrels, decide to *alter* their *nativity* by accommodating and welcoming the rampaging and raking immigrants:

Grey sighs, a grey forbearance  
for no matter how grey they are  
they are our neighbours all the same(116)

In the course of their journey, the grey immigrant squirrels have encountered many difficulties on "The Road" such that their visages are full of "the scars and sighs of a veteran" (116) because they have "weathered the rough of many water" (116). Hence, they need to struggle to survive in the new city of the red-haired native squirrels. But for the two kinds of squirrel to live peaceably, they must "die" to the consciousness of their habits and skins by allowing the city to accommodate their alterities. Hence, "Welcome greetings ooze from the house" (116) to greet the alterities deciphered from the Self (red-haired native squirrels) and the Other (grey-haired immigrant squirrels).

This ‘accommodationist’ tone continues in the rest of the poem as the poet extends the metaphor with the following:

The sun, when it comes, is a treasured  
 guest  
 Pampered with blue laughters and  
 promenades  
 So many rivers in this land of your birth,  
 Breaking out of the mouths of lofty  
 mountains  
 Snaking through wool-washed valleys  
 Dying into the sea, resurrecting later (117)

Emphatically, Osundare argues that the Other (“The sun” or the grey-haired squirrel) is a guest that should be “Pampered” by the Self so that there will be a “Breaking out...” (117) of lofty ideas and alterities. That is, even if the Self dies “into the sea” of diversities and differences, it is bound to resurrect later with new observations. The motif of diversity, perhaps, informs Simon Gikandi’s view in one of the comments in the collection, that Osundare has a “deep love of places and the people who inhabit them; and in singing about both familiar and unfamiliar encounters” (xi). This subject matter of “familiar and unfamiliar encounters” is echoed in “Flying Over the Irish Sea” (108), another poem about diversity, where the poet maintains that the Irish “...waters are green” and diverse in beauty because:

The pebbles under them  
 Glow like fresh-rinsed potatoes  
 Strung end to end  
 Like rosary beads  
 Their resonance so lush  
 Their litany so Latin (108).

The diversity of beads of a rosary re-affirms the poet’s position that the beauty of a city is a function of how the Self allow other beads to be side by side with it. The city of Ireland achieves its aesthetics by the variation of “Their litany” which is not only Irish alone

but also “so Latin” (108) and variegated. Osundare’s accommodationist/intersubjectivity intent of the Self and the Other in “Ty Newdd Poems” and “Flying Over the Irish Sea” is theoretically captured in Mensch’s theory of alterity:

... my self-presence is a function of the intersubjective world, this inner alterity is actually my being outside of myself in myself. It is my being thrust into a world whose “truth” exceeds me (224).

Evidently, there are “truths” beyond the boundaries of the Self where alterities are experienced in a face-to-face encounter with the Other. This encounter lies in “The Road” of various cities in the world.

### Conclusion

This essay has argued that one of the ways by which humanity can make progress is to depolarize the Self and the Other by showing how these two can discover alternatives through continual journeying into the cities of each other. It is obvious from the poems that a perpetual peregrination into the “The Road” (air, sea, land) of selected cities engender new thinking on migration, fresh perspectives on diversity, re-examination of some cultural positions and the deconstruction of some worldviews like neo-colonialism and oppression.

In addition, apart from its various archetypal usage, the concept of “The Road” has been extended to mean a creative space for existential re-negotiation. This imaginative perspective is reinforced by using aspects of Mensch’s philosophical/theoretical inquiry which are objective motion and face-to-face encounter. The varying Self-Other encounters in the text are underlined by an avalanche of “metaphors for the essential commonality of the human experience and the pan-human spirit” (vi) as observed by

Christiane Fioupou in one of the comments in *If Only The Road Could Talk*.

Indeed, a reading of Osundare's poems from Mensch's polemical inquiry on alterity has added to the growing scholarship on alterity and migration because we have proven that mobility from one city to the other provides experiences of alterities such as the sameness of cultural aesthetics in cities and the confounding diversities of ethical values which are constituents of personal and corporate transformations. In Mensch's words, to see these alterities is "to intuit the world that is there for all of us, we would have to see simultaneously out of our own and ours others' eyes" (222).

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