

Anxious Competition: Exploring the Poetic Imaginarium of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Malawi

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Abstract

As I write this article in mid-September 2021, the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic has claimed the lives of nearly 4.7 million people and over 228 million others have been infected worldwide. This article explores the poetic imaginarium of the coronavirus, focusing on how selected Malawian poets imagine the devastation wrought on human beings by the pandemic in their poetry. Specifically, it considers how selected poems in *Walking the Battlefield: An Anthology of Malawian Poetry on the COVID-19 Pandemic*—a book edited by Martin Juwa, William Mpina and Beaton Galafa—explore the chaos, shock and bewilderment brought on by COVID-19. I also argue that a reading of the poems allows for an opening up of a discursive debate on the hope and indomitable resilience of the human spirit when confronted by life-threatening contagions.

Opsomming

Terwyl ek hierdie referaat in mid-September 2021 skryf, het die ernstige akute respiratoriese sindroom koronavirus (SARS-CoV-2)-pandemie reeds die lewens van bykans 4.7 miljoen mense geëis en meer as 228 miljoen is wêreldwyd geïnfekteer. Hierdie referaat verken die poëtiese verbeeldingswêreld van die koronavirus, en fokus op gekose Malawiese digters wat in hul poësie die vernietiging wat die pandemie in mense se lewens veroorsaak, in hul verbeelding ervaar. Dit besin spesifiek oor hoe gekose gedigte in *Walking the Battlefield: An Anthology of Malawian Poetry on the COVID-19 Pandemic*—’n boek wat deur Martin Juwa, William Mpina en Beaton Galafa geredigeer is—die chaos, skok en verbystering verken wat deur COVID-19 teweeggebring is. Ek voer ook aan dat ’n voorlesing van die gedigte ’n beredeneerde debat

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moontlik maak oor die hoop en onblusbare veerkragtigheid van die menslike gees wanneer dit deur lewensbedreigende aansteeklike siektes gekonfronteer word.

Keywords: COVID-19; resilience; contagion; poetic imaginarium; hope

Introduction

There's a natural mystic
Blowing through the air
If you listen carefully now,
You will hear
This could be the first trumpet,
Might as well be the last
Many more will have to suffer
Many more will have to die
Don't ask me why
Things are not the way they used to be
I won't tell no lie
Bob Marley, "Natural Mystic" (1977)

On 2 April 2020, a friend wrote me an email from Hawaii that, in part, read: "I just checked the Covid-19 infection data for Africa, and it looks like Malawi doesn't have confirmed cases so far, though South Africa has over a thousand. I hope you and your loved ones stay safe and well." I anxiously warmed up to the message even when I knew it was just a matter of time before Malawi got her fair dose of the pandemic. A day later, on 3 April 2020, the country recorded its first three cases. When the news broke, it left every Malawian anxious and confused. Since then, the number of people who have tested positive for the novel coronavirus has exponentially spiked, reaching over 61 000 cases by mid-September 2021. One is thus tempted to say—as Bob Marley also intimates in the epigraph above—that there is "a natural mystic blowing through the air." Marley's lyrics suggest the presence of an apocalypse probably at the hands of some nefarious power. With reference to this article, the strange force is the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic, which has "halted the ever-throbbing heart of humanity" (Sharma 2021, 95) socially and economically. What is more devastating is that ever since this deadly contagion started in or around the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan, Hubei Province in China in December 2019, it has spread with uncommon speed. It appears, as Marley (1977) sang, "many more will have to suffer / many more will have to die" in the coming months because "things are not the way they used to be." Erni and Striphos (2021, 212) ominously capture this zeitgeist in the following terms:

it might never get back to normal as the virus continues to mutate, as we struggle with the awful truth that we can still spread COVID despite inoculation, and as new, compensatory habits estrange us, maybe permanently, from once familiar people, places, objects, and practices.

A defining feature of the times we live in, then, is that ours is “the pandemic century.” In Mark Honigsbaum’s (2019, 2020) summation of the period, since the beginning of the twentieth century people have been under attack from various deadly contagions, including but not limited to the 1918 cholera outbreak (nicknamed the Blue Death), the 1924 Los Angeles pneumonic plague, the 1929–30 psittacosis outbreak and the great parrot fever pandemic, the 1976 Philadelphia legionnaires’ disease outbreak, the 1980s AIDS scourge in America and Africa, the 2003 SARS epidemic in Hong Kong, the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, the 2015 Zika outbreak in Brazil, and now the COVID-19 outbreak. These contagions have killed millions, with the current SARS-CoV-2 feared to be “the most significant health emergency of our time” (Giordano 2020, 1). In Paolo Giordano’s view (2020, 1), COVID-19 should be seen as “not the first, not the last, maybe not even the most horrific” of the pestilences that have befallen the world in the last century, but one whose death toll is bound to progressively increase because “Sars-Cov-2 is the first virus to spread this quickly on a global scale” (Giordano 2020, 1).

An array of studies has been produced on the novel coronavirus and its far-reaching impacts on global life (see Aarts et al. 2021; Acim 2021; Adelman 2021; Cowan and Morell 2020; Erni and Striphas 2021; Giordano 2020; Honigsbaum 2019, 2020; Sharma 2021; Žižek 2020). Most of these have either focused on its impact on social, economic and political life or how it has put “entire nations on lockdown, destroying the global economy and throwing hundreds of thousands out of work” (Morell 2020, iii). In a similar vein, Paolo Giordano (2020, 3) writes that “we’re living through a suspension of daily activities and routines, a pause in the usual rhythm of our lives—like one of those songs where the drums stop abruptly and the music seems to expand in the emptiness left behind.” Emile Aarts et al. (2021, 8) stress that the COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in “the dawn of a new common” where as humans we will have to “draw lessons from this enormous shock, come to our senses, and change our ways of thinking and doing, having learned our lessons well.” Part of creating these new ideas for a new common can be found in writing. Writing “can sometimes be an anchor that helps us stay grounded and hold back fear” (Giordano 2020, 3) even as we work towards finding new ways of containing the crises that define our times.

This article joins the above-cited research works, focusing on how selected poems in *Walking the Battlefield: An Anthology of Malawian Poetry on the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Juwa, Mpina, and Galafa 2020) hold back the fear that engulfs humankind in the face of devastating mass contagion and death. Specifically, it resolves how Benedicto Malunga (“Untitled II”), William Mpina (“Down, But Not Defeated”), Beaton Galafa (“Alone in a Cabin,” “Lunar Eclipse”), Aaron Mboma (“Diary of an Introvert”), Chisomo Majawa (“Uncertainty”) and Hope Banda (“Dear Unborn Child”) explore the hopelessness, bewilderment and mythologies COVID-19 has brought to social, professional and financial lives. The poems found in the anthology emphasise the unified global experiences of people in the time of the COVID-19 contagion. They also emphasise the common ground shared by Malawian local writers in the face of the

global pandemic. The sameness of humanity's anxiety and the sharedness of the people's resilience and hope are encoded in all 38 poems found in the anthology, which, according to Benedicto Malunga, "carries a multiplicity of sonorous voices from Malawi on COVID-19 [and] wakes the attentive mind to the horrors of our time" (blurb in Juwa, Mpina, and Galafa 2020). The notion of common ground formulates an important constituent of being with and beside victims of the contagion both locally and globally. More importantly, these poems are extensions of other poetic imaginaries on contagions in Malawi, mainly focusing on mental health and narratives of HIV and AIDS.

To my knowledge, there are no known poetry and fictive compilations on pandemics pre- and during COVID-19 in Malawi, apart from Martin Juwa, Mpina, and Galafa's *Walking the Battlefield* (2020) and Steve Chimombo's two books: *The Hyena Wears Darkness* (2006) and *Aids, Artists and Authors—Popular Responses to the Epidemic* (2007). There are thousands of poems and short stories that have variously tried to address contagions in Malawi. These appear in the country's local newspapers and magazines as stand-alone pieces. There are a lot of songs that address contagions, often sung by local artists. In recent times, poems are also being recited at literary festivals sporadically organised by the artists themselves. Finally, a few visual artists and painters have taken on the theme of contagion in their work, either because this is what they want to do or because they are commissioned to do so. What is probably unique about *Walking the Battlefield* (2020) is that the book is a complete departure from the theme of post-independence disillusionment associated with early Malawian writers, or other poetic interventions on domestic politics, corruption, betrayal, love, religion, the environment, human rights, life, death and disease. The anthology is also ambitious in its attempt to gather voices from largely little-known poets to memorialise the global pandemic.

The specificity of the Malawian poetic imaginarium of the pandemic should not, however, obscure the fact that we are wrestling with a deadly global pandemic and therefore the fears, dreams, conspiracy theories and indomitable spirit reflected in the selected poems are the various representations of a global village that is anxiously waiting for news about the final containment of the pandemic. My point here is to recognise how Malawian poets imagine the devastation wrought on humans by the global pandemic. This is of paramount importance because, as Erni and Striphas also emphasise, there is a need for us to be cognisant of the "importance of a collective endeavour, involving people with varying experiences of COVID-19, to tell us what important social, cultural, political and discursive markers were emerging to form a sense of the global crisis" (2021, 212–13).

There are many ways to characterise these varying experiences of COVID-19, from externally induced lockdowns, prescribed physical distancing and travel restrictions, to putting on mandatory masks as a way of slowing down the spread of the novel coronavirus. This article, then, also considers what happens when people are subjected

to a world of restrictions, highlighting how writing in general and poetry in particular give a sense of solidarity in moments of crisis. Certainly, there is a pattern that binds the majority of poems in *Walking the Battlefield*: the idea that poetry offers comfort in the face of adversity and therefore the presence of the novel coronavirus should not be seen as the annihilation of humans. In this sense, poetry functions like “a panacea for [our] broken souls against the fatality of the [coronavirus] disease” (Acim 2021, 67). By allowing poetry to act as a panacea, we can strip ourselves of the anxiety that comes with the presence of the pandemic in our midst. Poetry thus functions as a transference object for the person enveloped in worry and bewilderment. It helps unravel in unexpected ways, to use Benedicto Malunga’s formulation, “the almost indomitable resilience of the human spirit when confronted by adversity” (Malunga 2020a, iii). The present article is more of an articulation of this indomitable resilience in the selected poetry than an exploration of the hopelessness and despair that engulf humans in the face of deadly contagions.

Poeticising Popular Archives about COVID-19

The singular and most sinister exceptionality of the current COVID-19 pandemic is that it has created a dizzying popular archive and generated a lot of conspiracy theories, misinformation and terrifying rumours, spreading especially from social media circles into public consciousness. In Slavoj Žižek’s summation of the times we live in, the ongoing spread of the coronavirus epidemic has “triggered a vast epidemic of ideological viruses which were lying dormant in our societies: fake news, paranoid conspiracy theories, explosions of racism” (2020, 39). Most of these heightened, twisted, misleading and often harmful narratives have left more questions than answers, and have provoked a lot of anxiety, especially among people who are not scientists, epidemiologists and public health specialists. One such conspiracy theory is that the current COVID-19 crisis “was deliberately created by telecommunication companies in order to keep people at home while their engineers install 5G technology everywhere” (Erni and Striphas 2021, 213). Peter Achterberg calls this the “covid-spiracy” theory and notes how its proponents appear to say that “behind the societal curtains, elites are trying to deal with the problem of overpopulation by means of introducing 5G and blaming COVID-19 for the negative side effects” (Achterberg 2021, 17). Indeed, Thomas Cowan and Sally Morell (2020) advance a cluster of arguments, all with some merit and none wholly satisfactory, to explain how the coronavirus pandemic was born out of people’s insatiable lust for advanced technological innovations. In their view, illness from coronavirus is highly correlated with the rollout of the fifth generation wireless (5G) in some of the major cities of the world. They highlight a few cities in Asia and America to qualify their claim that there was a spike in SARS-CoV-2 cases in some parts of Asia and the United States (US) due to installation of the 5G network. They even trace the “birth” of SAR-CoV-2 to Wuhan, China, from where, they claim, the pandemic spread to other parts of the world:

On September 26, 2019, 5G wireless was turned on in Wuhan, China (and officially launched on November 1) with a grid of about ten thousand 5G base stations [...] all

concentrated in one city. A spike in cases occurred on February 13—the same week that Wuhan turned on its 5G network for monitoring traffic.

Illness has followed 5G installation in all the major cities in America, starting with New York in Fall 2019 in Manhattan, along with parts of Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens—all subsequent Coronavirus hot spots. (Cowan and Morell 2020, 16)

China is here portrayed as the source of a telecommunication mishap that supposedly occasioned the spread of the coronavirus—the “illness that followed 5G installation” (Cowan and Morell 2020, 16)—to other parts of the world. Bartomeu Payeras I Cifre makes a similar point, charting the roll-out of 5G technology in some of the popular cities in Europe. He concludes that there is “a clear and close relationship between the rate of coronavirus infections and 5G antenna location” (Cifre 2020) in these cities. The point of these controversial narratives is to trace the birth of the coronavirus to people’s attempt to roll out better and more advanced technology. The allegations have gained traction over the months and have made others wonder if humans are not overreaching themselves. One can discern these sentiments in the last six lines of Benedicto Malunga’s one-stanza poem, “Untitled II” (2020b), where the speaker appears to say that due to people’s insatiable lust for technological innovation, they have been repaid with an affliction that promises to stay with them for a long time to come:

That’s what the world we thought
we were remaking has become
in the grip of Corona virus
The king of death
The height of panic
The summit of plight.
(Malunga 2020b, 67)

Malunga here seems to believe that the pandemic is a human creation. Therefore, the words “[t]hat’s what the world we thought / we were remaking” ought to be read as the poet-persona echoing scientific literature about 5G wireless network’s potential to remake the world into a better place. This literature argues that 5G technology “has the potential to drive numerous advancements, including digital transformation across industries, providing a platform for end-to-end IoT [Internet of Things] connectivity, enabling faster connections for consumers, and even providing a more cost-effective platform for carriers” (Deloitte 2018). In the next four lines, however, Malunga derides those who thought they were remaking the world into a better place through the installation of the 5G technological network. He argues instead that this technological breakthrough has all but succeeded in plunging the world right “in the grip of Corona virus / The king of death / The height of panic / The summit of plight” (Malunga 2020b, 67). Earlier in the same poem, Malunga avers that even “manufacturers of expensive lethal / weapons of war / never saw the coming of a ruthless pandemic” (Malunga 2020b, 67) like the coronavirus. He also highlights the corrosive and elusive nature of the pandemic, adding:

No walls can bar
No supermarkets can avoid
No schools can shun
No great cities can ban
No prayer houses can arrest
No nuclear weapons can decimate
No powerful leaders can evade
No celebrities can keep at bay
No monarchs can run away from
No evangelists can pray against
That's the Corona virus of our time.
(Malunga 2020b, 67)

What is most striking in this passage is the growing sense of the pandemic's power to outlast every human effort, to the extent that no ethnicity or nation is free of its excruciating grip. Understood thus, one also appreciates the mutation and hence elusiveness of the virus. Its uncontainability becomes even more profound when one learns that not even scientists or religious leaders have managed to arrest its power. Such assertions signal how humans' belief in science and religion is highly tested in the face of a raging contagion. Malunga (2020b, 67) further states that while we are busy trying to find ways of containing the virus, the virus in question is equally busy

Stalking us diligently
Claiming us one by one ruthlessly
Making us rot as we walk
Breaking our hearts as we
Get separated from our beloved sick
reeling under its ferocity.

Helplessness, hopelessness and sadness dominate this passage since they are the by-products of the cruelty and viciousness of the contagion. Malunga's poem becomes even more poignant when one considers the millions of people who have succumbed to the pandemic worldwide, including scientists, celebrities, politicians, religious leaders, statesmen and academics. This is what leads him to write that we are daily "reeling under [the] ferocity" (Malunga 2020b, 67) of the coronavirus.

A number of researchers today think that it is actually humanity's destruction of biodiversity that creates the conditions for new viruses and diseases such as COVID-19 to arise (Vidal 2020). One such researcher is David Quammen (2020). Unlike Morell and Cowan who attribute the pandemic's cause to so-called 5G experiments in the province of Wuhan, China, Quammen (2020, 7) claims, in "How We Made the Coronavirus Pandemic," that there is a link between the emergence of the novel coronavirus and people's wanton invasion and depletion of ecosystems. For him, the bad choices human beings have been making regarding the environment over the years have come full circle. Consequently, we are reaping the fruits of our carelessness. His observation is that humans not only "invade tropical forests and other wild landscapes,

[they also] kill the animals or cage them and send them to markets” (2020, 7). Additionally, they “disrupt ecosystems, and [...] shake viruses loose from their natural hosts” (Quammen 2020, 7). He thus calls on humans to do everything in their power “to contain and extinguish this nCoV-2019 outbreak” (7). He concludes by saying that “when the dust settles [it will be apparent that] nCoV-2019 was not a novel event that befell us. It was—it is—part of a pattern of choices that we humans are making” (7). Similar views are echoed by Daneshwar Sharma who avers that “COVID-19 is a reminder of the dysfunctional relationship human beings have with Mother Nature” (2021, 102). In Sharma’s view, for centuries, human beings have mercilessly been invading “the natural inhabitants of flora and fauna” all the while living under the illusion that “Mother Nature cannot respond to the atrocities we inflict upon it. But it retaliated, and jolted the pseudo-victor, mankind, out of its greedy roller-coaster” (2021, 102). Here, humans’ greed and insensitivity towards the environment are being cited as the reasons for the outbreak. What stands out in both assertions is that nature is either “healing itself or taking revenge from mankind for destroying it mercilessly” (7).

The recurrent image of “destroying nature repeatedly” accompanies the opening lines of William Mpina’s (2000, 1) “Down, But Not Defeated,” where the speaker laments:

One would think
 Time is firing tears
 Nature is fighting back
 Catapults of darkness
 Are toppling light
 Disgruntled fishermen
 Are catching the sun.

References to “tears,” “darkness” and “toppling light” are in fact the poet’s way of saying that the peace and serenity that existed pre-COVID-19 have been replaced by anxiety, suffering and hopelessness. Overall, the point that Mpina appears to make in these lines is that COVID-19 is a result of people’s avaricious behaviour towards the ecosystem, which is now “fighting back.” In that case, Mpina is warning human beings about the perils that lie in wait for them if they do not work towards restoring unto Mother Nature what they have been taking away from her. One gets the impression, as Sharma (2021, 103) also does, that “maybe COVID-19 is the beginning of a new chapter of a healthy relationship between mankind and nature,” since the expectation is that the former will reflect on how to interact with the latter from now onwards. Such sentiments—that the novel coronavirus is induced by careless and selfish human actions—have morphed beyond science into politics and have given rise to considerable anxiety among people.

Another popular perception about SARS-CoV-2 is that it was passed on to human beings from bats. While scientists agree that it is likely for SARS-CoV-2 to have its ancestral origins in a bat species, they also point out that the animal source of SARS-CoV-2 has not yet been confirmed. These assertions notwithstanding, writers have not

stopped from speculating that people's consumption of animals such as bats is a possible cause of the pandemic. We get this sense in the first half of Hope Banda's (2020, 42) "Dear Unborn Child," a poem whose title suggests concern for the future. Banda begins his poem by highlighting that the spread of SARS-CoV-2 reached its peak in 2020:

I took a minute trying to put twenty twenty in a poem
As a magician would do with a wooden cross
Into an empty bottle of Coca-Cola
But the year itself was untamed
A new decade had dawned upon us,
And caught up in the slumber of jeering
We woke up to a nightmare no eye
Had seen, no ear had heard
Elsewhere somebody had feasted on
Bats and rats; told we were
For us to fall into a big trap
To be screwed and schooled
Caged in protective cells
And artificially introverted
That we used to tour nature sanctuaries
(Banda 2020, 42)

In light of the theorisations presented above about people's invasion of the ecosystem, it is probably expected for the poet-persona to think, though sceptically, that because "[e]lsewhere somebody feasted on / Bats and rats" (Banda 2020, 42), human beings have now fallen into "a big trap / To be screwed and schooled / Caged in protective cells" (42). Human beings are, in the poet-persona's view, architects of their own misfortunes for "tour[ing] nature sanctuaries" (42), probably looking for bats and rats to consume. Banda thus regards the contagion that arrived from eating the animals as "the monster [that] had come / Laying his enamels on our melanin / Gluttonously licking his fingers / Craving for more" victims (42). Humankind's eating proclivities are encoded in the poet's reference to his ability to "gluttonously lick his fingers" unmindful of the danger that might emanate from devouring bats and rats. In the next section, I examine the impact of SARS-CoV-2 on human beings as reflected by the poems in the collection.

Staying Home, Staying Distant, and Remaining Uncertain

Walking the Battlefield: An Anthology of Malawian Poetry on the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020) ironically suggests that loving others in the context of COVID-19 entails maintaining physical distance. This is also what Adam Kirsch means in his declaration that we live "in a moment when the greatest act of love is to stay distant from the object of your affection" (in Žižek 2020, blurb). COVID-19 has resulted in externally induced lockdowns, staying at home, self-isolation and maintaining physical distance following the pandemic's imperatives that nations, leaders and public health specialists frequently use to curtail the spread of the virus. One wonders if the ongoing pandemic will limit

affection or promulgate love in the form of distant care for a loved one who is so close yet out of reach. But what shall probably remain incontestable for years to come is that COVID-19 “has affected and altered our traditions, practices and gestures of love and care” (Sharma 2021, 101). This is because the same affections we showed each other in moments of love and togetherness are now discouraged and frowned upon. These are the sentiments we seem to get in William Mpina’s “Down, But Not Defeated” (2020, 1), a poem that laments the devastating social and economic impact of the coronavirus on individual and communal lives:

One would think
 The world is coming to an end:
 The closure of roads
 The shrinking of markets
 The rippling of waves
 The death of unity
 The cry of togetherness.

The speaker carefully documents how “things are not the way they used to be” (Marley and the Wailers 1977) in his immediate and distant community. There is, for the speaker, the “closure of roads” and “shrinking of markets” (Mpina 2020, 1), because people have been told to stay indoors and/or work from home to contain the virus. To indicate the widespread effect of the virus, the poet uses hyperbole, that even nature, in the form of rippling waves, has been constricted and contained, creating a picture that COVID-19 has stopped the ebb and flow of waves. Thus, everything has come to a standstill. Consequently, it is unlikely that there will be many people plying their trade in the markets or, indeed, taking to the roads. The speaker also talks about “the death of unity” and “the cry of togetherness,” probable references to the consequences of “prescribed social distancing, lockdown, mandatory masks, and negation of our right to assemble and practice our religion whenever an illness appears” (Morell 2020, v) due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Chisomo Majawa’s (2020, 14) “Uncertainty” appears to build on Mpina’s and Banda’s articulations of the fears and restrictions the pandemic has imposed on humans. But unlike Mpina and Banda who focus on external restrictions, Majawa chooses to focus on what the restricted person does to him/herself to contain the virus. Through the various restrictions people have been told to follow and observe due to the coronavirus, we are let into the challenges that face those who only survive by their wits. The middle stanza of Majawa’s poem particularly highlights the stasis and state of uncertainty that engulf people who must put up with masking all the time. The poet-persona laments:

Our nostrils no longer swim in fresh air
 We are forced to plaster our noses and mouths
 And closeness has become a nemesis
 Like a raging hurricane skating on debris,
 Lives of our loved ones are lost daily.

We no longer open our doors to anyone
And linger the markets free
Churches are horrendous grounds too,
Weddings and funerals strike terror
(Majawa 2020, 14)

Here Majawa aptly captures how precarious the future is for the majority of people who are poor, especially since they are yet to appreciate the government's measures to stem the pandemic. The poet also introduces a new impact of the COVID-19 measures: the curtailment of the freedom to freely breathe and people's inability to interact or attend church services and wedding ceremonies as they please. Majawa (2020, 14) then wonders if people will regain their freedom and comfort each other in times of crisis, given the restrictions that are the new normal: "How do we laugh and mourn with our beloved / While locked up in cages?" she asks. Here, Majawa thinks that people have become prisoners to the pandemic as they have lost their freedom to go about their daily business. Similar views are echoed by Hope Banda (2020, 42) in "Dear Unborn Child," where the poet-persona states that avoiding physical contact is not limited to public spaces but extends to homes as well:

We could not visit the mall
But stay in separate rooms
Your mother and I
Praying for favour
Pillows, sanitizers and phones
And wearing masks
And no handshakes
Such were our daily meal.
(Banda 2020, 42–43)

The poem emphasises the distrust and suspicion among family members who resort to "stay[ing] in separate rooms," frequently sanitise pillows and phones, and wear masks all the time. The "no handshakes" and "praying for favour" referred to by the poet-persona seems to frame the pandemic as incurable, and that humans' only hope is in trusting in divine intervention, a point I discuss at length in the penultimate section. Overall, Majawa's (2020) and Banda's (2020) poems focus on the various tactics people employ to survive the pandemic. They also highlight how precarious the future is for those living with the contagion.

Aaron Mboma's (2020,19) "Diary of an Introvert" begins and ends with the idea of lockdown in the face of COVID-19's devastating effects. Mboma likens the novel coronavirus to the popular American fantasy drama television series *Game of Thrones*, based on George Martin's fantasy novel *A Song of Ice and Fire* that is "known for its violent and graphic portrayal of the deaths of its characters" (Lystad and Brown 2018, 1). In the TV drama series, nine noble families are featured fighting for the control of

the fictional Seven Kingdoms found in the mythical continents of Westeros and Essos. There is what Lystad and Brown (2018, 1) call “political upheaval, civil wars and widespread violence” throughout the series, at the end of which there is the death of “more than half of the important characters” (2018, 7). As in *Game of Thrones*, Mboma is fearing the worst for humankind—that so many people will be wiped off planet earth by the time the coronavirus pandemic ends, if it does end. He projects himself as a prophet of doom in his declaration that the contagion is deadlier than the fictional *Game of Thrones*. He acknowledges that the coronavirus is “a fatal disease” and a “microbial bully / That locked people in their homes” (Mboma 2020, 19); that it has led “governments around the globe” to order “the closure of schools, / Churches, and bars,” including forbidding large gatherings at weddings and birthday parties (19). The poet warns that the worst is yet to come. This ominous foreboding reveals that governments and public health workers are at their wits’ end even as they do their best to contain the virus.

Hope and Resilience in the Face of Adversity

Researchers have noted that encounters with trauma also engender displays of human resilience (see Bonanno 2004, 20). That would explain why most people resort to singing, reading or writing their pain away when they are faced with nerve-wracking or life-threatening situations. As already intimated, a common thread in *Walking the Battlefield* (2020) is that of hope and resilience. Mpina’s “Down, But Not Defeated” (2020, 1) adopts a hopeful tone towards the end, and hints at how SARS-CoV-2 shall soon be contained. Unlike Sharma’s (2021, 103–4) pessimistic view that “our generation will no longer be able to go back to pre-COVID-19 life [and that] simple acts of love and happiness like blowing candles on birthday, kissing, hugs will always be looked at with suspicion as they can spread the corona virus,” Mpina (2020, 1–2) regards the coronavirus pandemic as a “season” that will complete its cycle and life will get back to normal one day:

Seasons may
 Like itching at the back
 Fly and sting
 Move and burn
 Dance and prick
 Seasons may
 Like morning dew
 Find you
 And leave you
 All one will say is
 Have fought a good fight
 And won.

In this case, the pestilence becomes something that will one day go away, and life will return to normalcy. Beaton Galafa’s (2020, 13) “Alone in a Cabin” is a one-stanza poem

that accentuates the resilience of someone at his wits' end, almost inviting us to read his poem side-by-side with William Ernest Henley's 1888 poem, "Invictus." Just like the persona in Henley's poem, Galafa's (2020) speaking voice is aware of the inevitability of mass death. He is also aware of death's destructive power—"I've seen mankind live through fire and ice / Charred flesh in flames and blood frozen cold / Screams falling silent and teeth biting frost"—yet he resolutely states that he is not in the least perturbed by the novel coronavirus and what it is capable of doing to humankind. In fact, the persona chooses to celebrate human courage in the face of adversity instead of living in deep despair: "You don't scare me / [...] / when the ice melts and the leaves fall / I've seen the sun and the moon tussle over / Our bliss when the thorny crown resigns to fate" (Galafa 2020, 13). Here, Galafa poeticises the figure of a resilient person challenging ubiquitous death and despair.

Galafa's (2020, 69–70) lessons in fortitude continue in "Lunar Eclipse," whose optimistic outlook insists that the tragedies people encounter on earth should be regarded as temporary. The poet stresses indomitability in the face of life's challenges. In Christian mythology, this is akin to the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, the three Hebrew men in the biblical book of Daniel who were thrown into a burning furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar for refusing to submit to his will that everyone should worship his golden image. The three figures are preserved from any harm and later allowed to walk free. Galafa's (2020, 69) poem also echoes the biblical elements of resistance found in the book of Daniel, in that the speaking persona insists that he will never be shaken by the pandemic's devastating impacts:

in the moon's worst days
 I belong to its brightest side
 coiled in the night
 it never shows to earth.
 this disease-ridden earth.

in the darkest of hours,
 I sit at the laterals
 staring at humanity as its soul
 trapped in dust and coughs hang on
 to threads of hope on the moon's rays
 bouncing off the lakes and rivers.

The poet sees the earth as a "disease-ridden" haven and that the poet-persona himself "sits at the laterals" while watching humanity caught up "in the dust and coughs" of the pandemic. His determination to remain strong and hopeful in the face of the pandemic is captured by the words "hang on / to threads of hope." This fortitude is further reflected in the poet's use of the image of the moon, often used in religion, poetry, art, literature, music and film as a powerful symbol of victory over hostile forces (Tearle 2020). Here, then, Galafa (2020) taps into popular beliefs about seasons and climate change in literature, art and science that often mobilise positive and negative associations with

times of the year, as well as the planets in the solar system. To be resilient, for Galafa's persona, is to belong to the moon's bright side. In this case, resilience becomes something that keeps the persona going in the face of the mishaps that appear "in the moon's worst days." This is also what Adelman (2021, 469) means in her explication of resilience as a trait that "keeps us awake to the possibility of better things." For her, the idea of resilience "is rooted in an underhanded kind of optimism; it acknowledges adversity, but insists that anyone can overcome adversity if only they try hard enough, and that this overcoming will position them for future success" (Adelman 2021, 469). The last stanza of Galafa's (2020, 70) poem further accentuates this element of resilience in the following terms:

in the moon's worst days
 my soul languishes in loneliness
 but I do not despair
 because listening to the night as it canvasses hope
 for civilization when dawn takes over
 I hear summer rains whispering
 from a distance—rushing
 to rinse the streets
 of gloom
 and
 doom.

What is underlined in these lines is that even in the face of deep despair, people find strength to be hopeful, as suggested by recurrent seasonal symbolism. The persona speaks of "dawn" taking over the pains of the night and of summer rains "whispering from a distance." In their biblical allusion, these words are reminiscent of joy that comes in the morning, a reference to overcoming adversity. The posture of the persona one gets, therefore, is that of consistent defiance, hope and resilience.

In communicating this message of resilience, the poem further implies that one should not dwell too much on things that vex the spirit and make one lose hope in the process. Crucially, Galafa's (2020) persona appears to say people should regard COVID-19 as a phase in their lives, one that like the phases of the moon will bring forth a brighter side one day. Therefore, we should not waste our energy trying to think so hard about the devastation wrought on humankind by the pandemic. Instead, we should muster the strength of our spirit and prepare ourselves for the "summer rains" that will surely come. In other words, we must take courage and realise that the pandemic is "just hallucinating again" (Galafa 2020, 69), a probable reference to the many contagions that have befallen humankind since the beginning of the twentieth century. This challenge that the sting of the pandemic shall exert no further anguish over the persona's unconquerable soul is the subject of many other poems on hope and resilience in the collection.

Conclusion

In “Lockdown Poetry, Healing and the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Rachid Acim (2021, 68) describes lockdown poetry as poetry “read or written during self-isolation or quarantine,” clearly limiting it to those moments where poets strive “to build connections with one another and establish a network society” (2021, 68) amidst the pandemic. This “network society” is important not only for people “to give free vent to their thoughts and emotions” or to release “stressful moments under lockdowns” (68), but also to “propel people to tap again on emotions of love and hate, laughter and tears, security and fear” (68). Most importantly, Acim sees reading and writing poetry in times of the pandemic as something that is inspiring, therapeutic and tranquilising. This is what I have demonstrated in this study. Each poem discussed here touches on people’s reactions towards COVID-19. Malunga’s and Banda’s poems “laugh to scorn” the power of science in the face of the pandemic. They also probe humankind’s behaviour towards the ecosystem, insinuating that were it not for their irresponsibility towards Mother Nature the world would probably have been at peace with itself, not fighting to contain the pandemic as is the case now. Majawa’s and Mboma’s poems highlight the stasis and state of uncertainty that engulf people when confronted with adversity and the tactics they employ to survive the pandemic. Galafa and Mpina divert attention from the devastating impact of the pandemic to give lessons in fortitude in their poetry. Overall, by the very nature of their subject matter, the discussed poems act as a balm to a battered and troubled soul. They are also lessons in hope. This is very important, considering that pandemics have the capacity to create stress and agitation in all of us.

The processes at work in these poems have been described in this article as acts of anxious competition. “Competition,” here, does not necessarily refer to striving to win or gain something by defeating or establishing superiority over another person. There is nothing gainful in looking at figures of the dead and suffering rising with uncommon speed each passing day. Instead, the poems act as empathetic witnesses to the anxiety and pain the pandemic is causing people globally. The word “anxious” here, then, refers to the narrative act itself, in the sense that the selected poets pivot from an engagement with past concerns with adversity (e.g., HIV/AIDS), to an engagement with a contagion that threatens to wipe away humans from the face of earth because its infection rate is higher and more menacing than previous global contagions.

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