

# Culpability and Nature-Nature Infractions in Select Poems in Tanure Ojaide's *Narrow Escapes: A Poetic Diary of the Coronavirus Pandemic*

**Gabriel Kosiso Okonkwo**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1798-876X>

Rhodes University, South Africa

Gabriel.Okonkwo@ru.ac.za

## Abstract

In literary imaginings, the infraction of the law by human and nonhuman agents manifests in different planes and character. With a pathology-inclined compass, this study argues that the representation of culpability for the infraction of natural law in Tanure Ojaide's poetry emanates mainly from the intentionality of human agents and intersects with the unintentionality of nonhuman nature. In the instance of nature-nature infractions, a first-cause anthropocentric infraction by humans intersects with a second-cause infraction from the nonhuman agents, thereby creating the binary of intentional and unintentional culpability. Tanure Ojaide, in *Narrow Escape: A Poetic Diary of the Coronavirus Pandemic* (2021), chronicles the themes of agonies arising from anthropocentric recklessness and abuse of the ecosystem, which result in nature-nature infractions and the subsequent culpability. With poignant imagery and electrifying fluidity, Ojaide presents a litany of the havoc wreaked by human agents and the nonhuman coronavirus on the physical and biological environments. This litany is expressed through tones of lamentation and caution. The cautionary notes evince hope in the midst of the pathological miasma that assumed a threshold in 2019. Lawrence Buell's eco-critical view is chosen because it locates anthropocentric negligence and ignorance as liable reasons for the breakdown of law and order in nature. Therefore, in causing the pandemic, sickness, and death, anthropocentrism as well as the coronavirus are shown to be culpable of homicide in the selected poems.

**Keywords:** nature-nature infractions; Tanure Ojaide; culpability; Lawrence Buell; anthropocentric recklessness; nonhuman nature

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## Introduction

Since John Henry Wigmore's *A List of Legal Novels* (1908), Benjamin Cardozo's *Law and Literature* (1925) and James Boyd White's *The Legal Imagination* (1985), the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary nexus between literature and law has advanced cordially with scholarly innovations in literary epistemology. This is what Nichole Thompson (2012, 1) substantiates in saying that "what is clear is that law and literature come together in various ways." These various ways of intersecting include the depiction of nature-nature culpability as ecological ethos in literature. H. Vaishnav (2014, 1) believes that this subduing but vindicating power of the law is one that is "uniting all humans as equal." Consequently, if this effect of the law is allowed to take root in humans, it will, no doubt, benefit nonhuman nature in ways that guarantee harmonious coexistence with humans.

In Bryan A. Garner's *Black's Law Dictionary* (2009, 435), culpability, an English adaptation of the Latin word *culpabilis*, is defined as "[b]lameworthiness; the quality of being culpable." Hence, blameworthiness or guiltiness captures the very essence of the word. Underscoring the relationship between guiltiness and punishment, David O. Brink (2021, 155) in "The Nature and Significance of Culpability" argues that "culpability plays an important role in the criminal law and in a broadly retributive justification of punishment." To talk about blameworthiness is to suggest that whenever an infraction happens, blame or guilt for the infraction goes to the right agent responsible for it. Etymologically, infraction is a late Middle English word that comes from the Latin nominative noun *infractio*, meaning "a breaking, weakening," and the Latin past participle verb *infringere*, which means "to damage, break off, break, bruise" (Andrews 1879, 948–49). At the heart of many vicious actions in the world today is what starts as an infraction. Legal luminaries tend to define infraction as an offence that is some steps away from a crime. Reflecting this sense, Bryan A. Garner's *Black's Law Dictionary* (2009, 850) also defines infraction as "a violation, usu. of a rule or local ordinance and usu. not punishable by incarceration." Infractions are often trivialised because they do not attract the kind of serious punishment that goes with some other crimes that are considered heinous. Ironically, most serious crimes start as infractions. An infraction is the foundation upon which other atrocious crimes are built. Literary artists, who often aim to represent experience in a way that engages readers' emotions and elicits catharsis and epiphany, sometimes depict echoes of the law such as infractions and culpability to foreground didacticism.

Eco-conscious writers do this because human beings and nonhuman nature are supposed to maintain that intricate but natural relationship within which they are fated as a composite of natural reality. Nonetheless, some misdirected anthropocentric activities tend to compromise the perpetuation of this rapport between humans and nonhuman nature. Eco-critics such as Lawrence Buell (2005), Ken Hiltner (2015), Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt (2010), Steven Rosendale (2002), and Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) have all underscored the vulnerability of nonhuman nature in an earth with self-serving

anthropocentric energy. While nonhuman nature is capable of initiating a first-cause infraction as in the cases of earthquakes and forest fires, which affect humans adversely, albeit this is sometimes attributed to first-cause anthropocentric actions, many eco-critical studies have shown that human beings are more inclined to initiate most of the first-cause infractions, which simply get reactions from nonhuman nature, thereby causing an effect-infraction. This preponderance of anthropocentric triggers is a concern for Stuart Pimm (2001, 163), who notes that human exploitation of nonhuman nature “may not seem like much, but may already be too much.” He further cautions that what humans have done to the earth is already sufficiently injurious, as “even at current levels of exploitation, let alone levels that will accompany a doubling of the human population, we are already harming our natural resources” (163). For instance, human defilement of earth’s water bodies is indeed worrisome. Apart from the domestic pollutions at water banks, multinational oil companies that continually spill oil into earth’s water bodies have also done sufficient harm.

The statistics of these atrocities are alarming. The former vice-president for research at the World Watch Institute’s Globalization and Governance Project, Hilary French (2000, 57), argues that “the world’s fisheries are under siege as a result of habitat destruction, pollution, and over-exploitation, with 11 of the 15 world’s major fishing grounds and 70 percent of the primary fish species either fully or overexploited.” Humans seem to be crossing the red line. This kind of behaviour that is often driven by a supremacy mindset usually constitutes a first-cause infraction, which then actively invites the reaction of nonhuman nature in the form of diseases, harsh weather conditions, flooding, tornadoes, climate change, and so on. While not dismissing nonhuman nature’s occasional natural processes of regeneration, which often cause infracting disruptions and consequent health consequences for humans, the strict rational binary of powerful humans and subservient nonhuman nature that often defines anthropocentric attitudes is what Cajetan Iheka (2018, 5) questions in saying that “narrow anthropocentric conceptualisations of the environment are now insufficient.” He pushes this argument further in showing how Amos Tutuola’s and Ben Okri’s novels evince an intricate inter-nature relationship, which blurs the line of the anthropocentric binary attitude of “we” versus “them.” This, no doubt, echoes Lawrence Buell’s clarion call for conscious interspecies mutuality. Focusing the same ideation of interspecies awareness, Philip Aghoghovwia (2022) engages Louise Green’s argument in *Fragments from the History of Loss: The Nature Industry and the Postcolony* as a directional contribution to the extant corpus of literature on the complex relationship between humans and the environment. He particularly notes that Green and other thinkers such as Lesley Green, Naomi Klein, and Jason Moore have tried to interrogate how the contemporary nuances implied in the term Anthropocene have been weaponised by capitalist orientations and interests against genuine efforts to save the environment. Ironically, this idea of a complex intricateness between humans and nonhuman nature in terms of character and essence runs contrary to Kate Soper’s (2015) positioning of nature as everything nonhuman and nonhuman experience. According to Soper, “I speak of this conception of nature as ‘otherness’ to humanity as fundamental because,

although many would question whether we can in fact draw any such rigid divide, the conceptual distinction remains indispensable” (2015, 267). While Soper focuses on the works of humans—history, culture, technology and the like—as the basis for her idea of conceptual binary, the more recent eco-critical interrogations highlight the focus and distinctiveness given to human works and experience as, in fact, the reason for the anthropocentric infractions, which hurt nonhuman nature, with reprisal feedback from the latter, unfortunately.

Interestingly, both humans and nonhuman nature respond naturally to natural law, which is the precursor of all other laws. Funso Adaramola (2008) asserts the primacy of natural law in jurisprudence:

Natural law jurists through the ages conceive natural law as a collection of objective moral principles based on the very nature of the universe and discoverable by human reason, and designed to serve as a model to which state law, i.e., positive law, must conform. They contend that if it does not so conform, it is not genuine law but a corruption of law—*lex injusta non est lex*. (2008, 13)

These objective moral principles, which inexplicably conflate human beings with nonhuman nature, exist for the sake of order. Lawrence Buell opines, “Ecocentrism is more compelling as a call to fellow humans to recognise the intractable, like-it-or-not interdependence that subsists between the human and the nonhuman and to tread more lightly on the earth than it is as a practical program” (2005, 102). It is compelling, as he says, for humans to truly identify with this inexorable intricateness for a better world order. This is important because inimical anthropocentric attitudes come from a place of not recognising, whether deliberately or accidentally, the interconnectedness that exists between humans and nonhuman nature. Not recognising and respecting the place and position of nonhuman nature in the scheme of existence constitute a first-cause infraction. Hence, Buell (2001) equally notes that imaginative works on environmental concerns do four things to the reader, of which one is foregrounded. In his words, they “connect readers vicariously with others’ experience, suffering, pain: that of nonhumans as well as humans” (2001, 2). If making this connection is made intentional, it will then blur Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann’s (2014, 6) idea of separate “bodies” of matter, “both human and nonhuman,” that can “be read as a text” separately. On the contrary, we can talk about a body of natural essence and equal significance. I call this ideation *fluid eco-imagining* because it has the potential of drastically reducing the errors of ecological infraction.

In order to illustrate the preponderance of infraction in Tanure Ojaide’s poetry, three poems are randomly and thematically chosen for analysis from his *Narrow Escapes: A Poetic Diary of the Coronavirus Pandemic* (2021) because they permeate legal footings with insights into the causes and nature of infraction. This collection currently suffers a dearth of criticism because of its relative newness.

## The 2019 Coronavirus Pandemic in Perspective

The coronavirus pandemic which started in 2019 caused the death of many victims across the world. This is partly because many governments were either caught unawares by the outbreak or were simply intransigent when the news of the outbreak was breaking. During the pandemic, the people who went about carelessly, not observing social distancing, not regularly washing hands, not using face masks, or not reporting symptoms to the appropriate authorities and so on, did more through their actions to perpetuate the spread of the virus. Many of these actions were done either out of ignorance or disenchantment with the ceaseless lockdown actions meant to ease the spread of the virus. Be that as it may, the outbreak was unexpected and unprecedented.

In addition, the cause of the pandemic is still a subject of controversy and propaganda. Existing speculations point fingers at mismanaged laboratory operations, and a possible outbreak in Wuhan, China. In the same train of argument, the World Health Organization (WHO) favours the belief that the outbreak emanated from Wuhan, China. According to a WHO bulletin on the coronavirus pandemic, “a new coronavirus *that previously has not been identified in humans* emerged in Wuhan, China in December, 2019” (WHO 2020; italics added). Other conspiracy theories suggest that the outbreak was a political subterfuge deployed by some scientifically advanced nations to reduce the population of developing countries. Yet some others frantically linked it to the widely advocated 5G network, which was passionately being championed by China at the time. In all the speculations and conspiracy theories, two major denominators stand out—infraction and culpability.

### Nature-Nature Infractions

Nigerian poets from the Niger Delta area in Nigeria such as Nnimmo Bassey, Ogaga Ifowodo, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Gabriel Okara, Ebi Yeibo and others seem to have the compelling drive to respond more to socio-political and ecological topicalities. This poetic posture may not be unconnected to their firm, cultural rooting in the political dynamics of the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Sule Emmanuel Egya (2016) corroborates this point in arguing that literary engagements by “pioneer poets such as Gabriel Okara” and “emergent voices such as Ebi Yeibo” have produced a two-dimension approach to environmental topicalities in the Niger Delta—a “romanticization of the natural endowments of the region,” and a “historicization of the struggles of the local inhabitants” (2016, 1). While they are at liberty to occasionally muse about personal concerns, they primarily see eco-critical and socio-political commitments as moral duties. This equally echoes protest, one of Ogaga Okuyade’s (2016) four major dimensions to the articulation of eco-human interactions in African culture-oriented works. According to him, “[t]he other displays a threnodic temper with a kind of combative engagement with the systems and institutions responsible for the eco-seismic devastation of the nonhuman worlds. This tradition is popular with most of the imaginative arts from and on Nigeria’s Niger Delta and Southern Africa” (2016, 461). Consequently, Tanure Ojaide, a poet from the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, is not

a greenhorn in the poetics of social and eco-critical commitment. The University of Ibadan and Syracuse University-bred poet has published collections of poetry. His ambidextrousness has also birthed novels, short stories, memoirs and other scholarly works, all to his credit. He is the winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for the African Region, the All-Africa Okigbo Prize for Poetry, and the BBC Arts and African Poetry Award. He has also won the African Literature Association's Fonlon-Nichols Award for Excellence in Writing and the Nigerian National Order of Merit Award for the Humanities. Ojaide is at the moment a Frank Porter Graham Professor of African Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Having an ancestral link to the Niger Delta area where people have a strong protest consciousness that is tied to environmental adversities and being resident in a progressive country which had a weighty impact on the coronavirus pandemic have, no doubt, significantly shaped the tenor of the poems in his *Narrow Escape: A Poetic Diary of the Coronavirus Pandemic*. To appreciate the devastating impact of the coronavirus on the United States of America where the poet currently lives, the World Health Organization reports that, “[i]n United States of America, from 3 January 2020 to 11:02am CEST, 6 April 2023, there have been 102,873,924 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 1,118,800 deaths, reported to WHO. As of 31 March 2023, a total of 666,193,352 vaccine doses have been administered” (WHO 2023). Such a monumental impact on the health system of any country has the capacity to achieve the kind of passionate poetic musing that Ojaide demonstrates in this collection.

Furthermore, Ojaide did not limit his worries and quandary to the health crisis in his diasporic residence, he equally mirrored the impacts of the pandemic from a generic prism knowing full well that it had effectively assumed a universal spread. The verses represent the poet's experience of the pandemic from its first wave to the threshold of its second wave. The poems, which assume a memoir-like structure, invite the readers to a personal introspection on the repercussions of disrespecting and exploiting nonhuman nature. For the sake of analytical and reading convenience, this article will interrogate the anthropocentric activities that the poet identified as the cause-infractions for the inevitable culpability that follows under the following themes: suspension of cultural rituals, management of social behaviour, and vulnerability of political correctness.

## Suspension of Cultural Rituals

Culturally, human beings all over the world get involved in certain social activities, which draw legitimacy from societal values and define the participants as informed members of the society. These social activities are usually defined as culture, the collective consciousness of the people. In “Every Year Cannot Be Normal,” the poet persona resonates the need to temporarily suspend cultural activities:

In a normal year, we celebrate  
birthdays and burials, take titles,

and gather to party and dance.  
We live a charmed life; demigods  
who know tomorrow and more.  
This year hasn't remained normal.

Every year cannot always be normal.  
There are times for tantrums between  
lovers. Now it has never been as bad.  
We who love change and variety  
now have more than we can handle  
something strange as never before!

In a normal year leaps out  
this abnormality. An invisible  
virus terrorises the world, routs  
the powerful from their comfort;  
the weak further humiliated  
by the plethora of failings.

So many postponements  
and cancellations to put  
on hold life as we knew it.  
Who knows tomorrow?  
Here we are in a new day  
failing tests of preparedness.  
Demigods fail their forecasts.  
(Ojaide 2021, 2)

The poem is a free verse that is premised on the inconsistencies and agonies of life and seasons. The first three stanzas have six lines each with only the last stanza having seven lines. The design of the poem is given cohesion by free-flowing enjambments in all the stanzas. In the first stanza, we see a chronicle of normal things human beings do in a normal year. Lines 1–4 move positively and very fast with a list of the normal activities humans do, while lines 5 and 6 slow the pace with a cautionary portraiture of human weakness. The oxymoronic pairing of “birthdays and burials” and “take and titles” reinforces the solemn effect of the alliteration in the bilabial and alveolar plosives *b* and *t*, thereby reinforcing the sense of quandary conjured. The gloominess created in the second line is quickly enlivened with the effect of joy produced by the assonance in “gather,” “party,” and “dance.” In fact, the first four lines and the last two lines are antithetical and ironical: described as demigods, humans have power and influence, yet they are said to be vulnerable with no knowledge of tomorrow or control over the year that has not been normal. The poet persona with the first-person plural voice “we” introspects on behalf of his group over what he perceives as a dilemma. This hints at a crisis that is yet to be defined. The poet’s use of the first-person plural pronoun, “we,” corroborates the impression that the activities that follow are socially and culturally defined. The activities are not isolated and self-defined. They are cultural activities that

the people described in the collective marker “we” do every year. However, those activities—birthdays, burials, title-taking, partying, and dancing—cannot be done within the pandemic year because of the contagiousness and rage of the coronavirus. Hence, the persona says, “This year hasn’t remained normal,” in the final line of stanza one. The foregrounded cultural activities cannot be practised within the coronavirus period because they are plausible means of cause-infraction and effect-infraction. The coronavirus could have contaminated the human-centric Wuhan area as a result of hygiene carelessness arising from birthday ceremonies, burials, partying and dancing in Wuhan. This possible absence of an intentional and committed sense of responsibility to the environment is what James Tarter (2002) hints in his eco-critical reading of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*. He argues that “Silko’s novel consistently constructs environmental justice as emerging from responsibility to places as sites of culture” (Tarter 2002, 98). With Wuhan being under the siege and rage of the virus, it was only normal that the cultural activities there and in other healthy areas of the world are discouraged until further notice. Note that the cultural activities highlighted above pose no problem in themselves. What underscores cause-infraction is the anti-social behaviour that the participants practise in such events.

The first line of the second stanza emphasises the conclusion of the last line of the first stanza. The persona’s firm assertion that “every year cannot be normal” shows his awareness of the situation and his world. In fact, he creates an analogy between the pandemic events of the year and the conflict times in a relationship between two lovers to show that conflict is natural. The alliteration of the alveolar plosive *t* in “times” and “tantrums” in line 2 creates a rhythmic effect of the binary of life. To further underscore the validity of the anthropocentric argument, the persona says in lines 4, 5, and 6, “We who love change and variety / now have more than we can handle / something strange as never before!” (Ojaide 2021, 2) To love change and variety suggests the particular predilection that human beings have for experimentation. We love to experiment and try new things, new ideas, and new ways of doing things, which may not always be in our interest. While experimentation in itself is the bedrock of innovations and inventions needed for a better world, it sometimes gets rocked in errors, which often result in the negative reaction of nature. When such experimental errors occur, they become infractions to the order of other natural realms which surely react negatively.

Corroborating this, the poet persona’s statement in line 1 of stanza 3 that “[a]n invisible virus terrorises the world” is hyperbolic and paradoxical because a virus is already invisible and should ordinarily not have so much power as to be able to cause terror in a world that is controlled by human beings who are significantly bigger than the virus in size and intelligence. However, it is ironic that these tiny organisms are able to bully “the powerful from their comfort” (line 16) and cause “the weak” (line 17) to be “further humiliated” (line 17). Interestingly, the virus is only able to achieve this size of victory “by the plethora of failings” (line 18) caused by human beings.

The first line of the last stanza expatiates on this plethora of failings that have made human beings pay dearly: “so many postponements / and cancellations to put / on hold life as we knew it” (lines 19–21). The sentence that starts in line 1 runs all through to line 3. The repetitive use of the sense of annulment in “postponements and cancellations” is hyperbolic and emphatic. The last lines, 4, 5, 6, and 7, evince the persona’s loss of hope in the ability of human beings to do the right things. His hopelessness is captured in the question, “Who knows tomorrow?” His tone is chastising human pride and presumptions. The consequences of anthropocentric experimentation are usually devastating. For instance, when the people who are partying become inebriated and begin to engage in unconsented and unplanned orgies, the result is not only psychologically devastating but also clinically consequential. The plausible victims could contract terrible diseases through their exuberance at such cultural events. The poet argues that the government of many countries had to put a hold on cultural activities because they know that they are good anthropocentric avenues through which the coronavirus spreads. They are predisposing factors of nature-nature infractions. The virus’s transmogrification and translocation within such cultural contexts predicate the government’s reaction. So, the poet’s representation of culpability for the nature-nature infractions here is a binary of intentionality and unintentionality. Humans are usually guilty of the infraction they commit from the place of deliberate, casual, or exuberant intention. Nonhuman nature, on the other hand, possesses unintentional culpability because theirs is usually a reaction to anthropocentric misdemeanour. As Buell opines, recognising the interconnectedness that exists between humans and nonhuman nature helps to ensure mutual respect.

## Management of Social Behaviour

The poet persona in “The Riddle of Tomorrow” laments the quandary that has become the order of the day as a result of bad social behaviour, a kind of behaviour that has brought about the virus’s attack:

Day dawns and the dirge intensifies.  
The riddle of tomorrow remains unresolved;  
hence death continues to poach a number.

The old swear by what they have never seen;  
the youths defy fate but can’t find adventures.  
Patient 17 succumbs to the ogre’s skirmish.

Only yesterday a doctor couldn’t pull himself  
from the echoes that stilled his breath;  
no one plays safe pranks with Corona!

Tears to bed, tears at dawn for numbers—  
the trail lengthens in a magical route  
the fetish minutest of beings litters.

The statistics stagger along calamitous routes;  
the virus slithers beyond the visible path.  
Who now understands the riddle of tomorrow?

Day dawns and the sun proffers dim light,  
the face in a grey hood all day;  
cold neither here nor there but filling everywhere.

When young and old, men and women stay indoors,  
abandon the roads and open spaces to the littlest,  
the world surely pays reparations for disrespect.  
(Ojaide 2021, 5)

This poem, like the first, is also a free verse with seven stanzas of three lines each cohering with enjambments. The poem in stanza 1 begins on a note of lamentation. The image of persisting agony is created in the alliteration of “day,” “dawns,” and “dirge” in the first line. Our bad social habits that cause viruses to become malignant force the “day” to “dawn” and the “dirge” to “intensify.” The effect of contravention of both natural law and positive law jurisprudence is punishment. As Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt (2010, 1) argue, “we as humans are directly or indirectly responsible for changing the nature of our planet to our detriment.” The original nature of planet earth is predicated on mutual and unselfish cooperation among all the life species in it. So, the absence of this cooperation breeds infractions and exploitation. When people infract laws, they are punished. This sense of consequence is what the poet creates so craftily. Unfortunately, the punishment from nonhuman nature for anthropocentric infractions is usually devastating. The use of “riddle” in the second line pictures the uncertainty of tomorrow, which the virus seems to be in charge of. And because the virus is effectively in charge, “death continues to poach a number” (line 3). Death is metaphorically compared to a poacher who trespasses and steals game without the owner’s permission. Similarly, death trespasses and steals life without the permission of the owner.

In addition, there is a subtle sense of satiric euphemism in the idea of the old swearing by “what they have never seen” (line 4), which looks like a divinity in the first line of stanza 2. Simplistically referring to the divine as “what” is ridiculing. The image of the youths defying fate but still not finding adventures in the second and third lines shows the immune resilience of the youths, which is still met with lockdowns and social restrictions that hinder adventure. Sadly, a few of them with compromised immunity still die of the virus, as pictured in “patient 17 succumbs to the ogre’s skirmish” (line 6).

Furthermore, it is interesting as captured in stanza 3 that not even the human doctor is safe from or immune to the wrath of the virus because, “Only yesterday, a doctor couldn’t pull himself / from the echoes that stilled his breath / no one plays safe pranks with Corona!” (lines 7–9). The oxymoronic act of playing “safe pranks,” which stilled the breath of many doctors fighting the pandemic at the time, creates the image of

vaccine and treatment experimentation. These seemed not to be so effective in the treatment and management of the virus at the time. This trial-and-error act is metaphorically compared to the act of playing safe pranks. This stanza portrays the monstrosity of the virus. From announcing his subject of grief in stanza 1 to portraying the helplessness of both the young and old in stanza 2 and depicting doctors' experimental and treatment efforts which yield little results in stanza 3, the poet persona sustains the tone and mood of lamentation in the poem.

He continues this tone of grief in stanza 4 where he mourns the pain people bring upon themselves by engaging in poor social habits. He laments that people go with "tears to bed, tears at dawn for numbers / the trail lengthens in a magical route / the fetish minutest of beings litters" (lines 10–12). The repetition of tears in line 1 reinforces the mood of the dirge. The image of the trail or evidence of the tears lengthening "in a magical route" says something about the peculiarity and spread of the virus. Sadly, "the fetish minutest of beings litters" means that not even the mystical and powerful juju men, imams, native doctors, priests, or magicians could stop, withstand, or escape the wrath of the coronavirus. They, too, were affected.

The poet persona continues the lamentation in stanza 5 where in line 1 he talks about the staggering statistics of death and infections in different climes symbolised by "routes." The alliteration of the sibilant *s* in "statistics, stagger, and slithers" in lines 1 and 2 conflates with the image of slithering, a snake-like movement, with the sibilant *s* mimicking the onomatopoeic hissing sound that a snake normally makes. Indeed, social behaviour and its instigating influences constitute a contravening factor that has the ability to provoke an unsavoury response from the coronavirus. Many a time, people do things that compromise the laws of both their physical environment and biological environment. Disregarding or disobeying any law is a call for anarchy. For instance, the human body, which has its own rules, is often disrespected and treated awfully by its human users. The inordinate and exuberant intake of substances such as alcohol, cocaine, cigarette, hard drugs, antibiotics, dirty water, contaminated food, junk, carbonated drinks, sweeteners and the like clearly breaks down the law and order of the human anatomy. When this happens, organisms such as viruses and bacteria, which were initially in their benign and natural states, begin to react negatively to the biological abuse and provocation caused by humans. And ultimately, their reactions lead to sickness and illness. On the contrary, a conscious and harmonious coexistence with the microscopic nonhuman nature within the human body could prevent biological infractions by achieving James D. Lilley's (2002) thoughts on Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* which suggest that "the natural world and the human body interact and interface with each other as fluid, coterminous, coextensive systems" (2002, 152). However, the burden of responsibility in this fated interaction or relationship falls on human beings.

In stanza 6, the mood becomes more despondent and the tone hopeless. The idea of the day dawning and the sun proffering "dim light" (line 16) shows nature's attitude towards

the chaos happening within its fold. With its “face in a grey hood” (line 17), nature is not happy about the deaths, confusion, and quandary that have enveloped humans. Hence, it is paradoxical that it is “cold neither here nor there but filling everywhere” (line 18). This evinces the fluctuating ways the pandemic affected different nations and persons. But what was sure was that everybody had a bite of it, some big, some small.

To end with a final lament and caution to those who might want to continue contravening the laws of the biological and physical environments, the poet warns in the last stanza, “When young and old, men and women stay indoors / abandon the roads and open spaces to the littlest / *the world surely pays reparations for disrespect*” (lines 19–21; italics added). It is ironic that the bodily massed human beings with intellectual and physical capacities have to “abandon the roads and open spaces to the *littlest*,” a euphemistic reference to the coronavirus. Disrespect in this context is another word for the anthropocentric infractions which have brought untold consequences on humans. This “disrespect” is synonymous with what William Wordsworth ([1798] 1999, 101–2) signifies as “murder” in his “The Tables Turned”—a vicious action he attributes to the collective wrong consciousness of human beings. He argues in these lines, “Sweet is the lore which Nature brings; / Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things: – / We murder to dissect” (lines 25–28). Also, the poet persona’s use of the term “disrespect” shows that culpability for the disrespect for the environment usually comes from the dual places of intention and accident for both humans and nonhuman nature, respectively.

In addition, historicising this disrespect and its insolent attitude shows that its perpetration is not without the anthropogenic myths of dominion bestowed on human beings by religious dogmas over the environment. In such mythic injunctions, while dominion and control are emphasised, preservation is latent. The act of controlling nonhuman nature in all areas is also seen as culture. For instance, an allusion to the creation story in Genesis corroborates this reality of human domination over other forms of nature on earth. Dominating and not preserving or, at best, preserving poorly creates a dialectic of social ambivalence in terms of human attitude to the natural law. This is what Lawrence Buell (2005, 2) queries in saying that “the opening chapters of Genesis, the first book in Hebrew and Christian scripture, have been blamed as the root cause of western technodominationism: God’s mandate to man to take ‘dominion’ over the creatures of the sea and earth and ‘subdue’ them.” Buell blames this biblical injunction for the West’s overreliance on technology, which has become a near act of worship that keeps disrespecting the environment. This is concomitant with Buell’s eco-critical idea of not recognising the need for amicable oneness with nonhuman nature. If humans recognise and live with the consciousness of their oneness with nonhuman nature, they will not harm her.

### Vulnerability of Political Correctness

Political correctness is one ideological phrase that is as slippery as its real meaning. According to *Black’s Law Dictionary* (Garner 2009, 1276), political correctness is

“[t]he inclination to avoid language and practices that might offend anyone’s political sensibilities, esp. in racial or sexual matters. 2. An instance in which a person conforms to this inclination.” Political correctness is a rhetorical attitude that is often used by politicians, influencers, and policy makers to blur superior knowledge from the view of vulnerable groups. The idea is to keep the vulnerable group in a box of group comfort and prevent them from seeing and experiencing a higher level of epistemology, no matter how objective or subjective, that could widen their horizon. Interestingly, the irony in politically correct words and actions lies in the fact that such words and actions appear as soothing rubs for the targeted group, yet are paradoxically feeble and simply convenient. This sense of vulnerability makes the question asked by Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) apt: “In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind’s relationship to the natural world?” (1996, xix). In the poem entitled “Infestations Galore” the poet persona exposes commercial opportunism and the various ways in which empirical information is obscured from the reach of targeted groups so as to keep them tied to their box of comfort. According to the poem:

The charlatans never had it so good,  
their doorsteps a traffic of lies  
retouched into model manikins for export.

Fake news is so inflammable it consumes  
so many that peddle it for fun or malice;  
so directionless the world wobbles.

The tabloids easily retool their presses,  
print and circulate hogwash as elixir  
which by advantage of covers circulates.

Facebook, master communicator, posts  
disquieting info—the blaze couldn’t  
have taken more wings to smother all.

They trend the revival of apothecaries  
as street vendors take over storefronts;  
everyone a hypochondriac seeking remedies—

chloroquine overdose in Nigeria; hospitals  
take over beds virus victims need to survive  
and the cure becomes a more lethal disease.

O age of migrants and instant news,  
you may have dealt a blow to ignorance  
but your gossip flares panic attacks

There are too many liars as prophets,  
a legion of counselling tell-tale archangels

and what fuels here pours from all corners.

Even truth has alternatives; double talk.  
 How did we come to this pandemic?  
 Infestations already corroded before corona!  
 (Ojaide 2021, 14–15)

This poem, like others before it, is a free verse with a livid persona who uses an acerbic tone to mock the opportunistic and politically correct behaviour of the people he calls “charlatans” (line 1). Charlatans are phony people who deceive unsuspecting persons for their selfish interest. They feast on the ignorance of the vulnerable public who practically lost a sense of direction during the 2019/2020 coronavirus pandemic. The use of enjambment in the stanzas save for the last helps to sustain the persona’s speed in expressing his feeling about the charlatans. With the coronavirus pandemic underway, there was a need for correct information from accredited health sources on how the situation could be managed. While the WHO was doing its best to disseminate the right information, there were several other information outlets misleading and misinforming the people with condensed narratives intended to obscure the scientific procedures that were being marshalled by the WHO. These are the people the persona calls charlatans. The first line of the first stanza exposes the premature ecstasy of the charlatans who are said to have “never had it so good” (line 1). The next line says that they move on lies as depicted in the image of “traffic of lies” (line 2). The subject complement “a traffic of lies” in the verbless clause “their doorsteps a traffic of lies” (line 2) is a hypallage or transferred epithet used to qualify strangely the nature of their doorsteps. The same hypallage is hyperbolic and metaphorical as it exaggerates the comparison between the subject, “their doorsteps,” and the complement, “a traffic of lies.” These doorsteps, which are described as “a traffic of lies,” are said to be “retouched into model manikins for export” (line 3). The idea of retouching gives the picture of alteration and manipulation. Their lies are altered and manipulated into further lies and phony “model manikins” and then exported for the consumption of unsuspecting victims of the coronavirus.

Lines 1 and 2 of stanza 2 tell us that these manipulated lies actually constitute “fake news,” which is “so inflammable” that “it consumes / so many that peddle it for fun or malice” (lines 4–5). Indeed, the fake news merchants had their preys. They targeted the uneducated, poor, and underprivileged groups whose world view is alienated from the progressivism of contemporary times. These groups, which had men and women, children and youth, old and young as variables, feel more at home with convenient information as a result of their naïvety. Their callowness meant that they could easily be walloped by politically correct moves, especially those coming from the news media. The poet asserts in line three that the lack of seriousness, ignorance, and insincerity of all the parties involved in the crisis mean that the world has become “so directionless” that it has no other choice than to wobble.

Politically correct efforts by the social and news media achieve one thing, which is the continued perpetuation of the virus. The more ignorance is legitimised by these charlatans, the more we have cases of new infections and on and on the virus travels. Hence, the poet christened the poem “Infestations Galore.” The inglorious actions of the news media that perpetuate the progressive spread of the coronavirus are in themselves acts of infraction. The fake newsmongers infract the laws of responsible news reportage, and in the process provoke the coronavirus into more vicious reactions, which come in the form of a multitude of infections of hitherto healthy people. The result then is nature-nature infractions as human beings do the cause-infraction and the virus activates the effect-infraction. The coronavirus is provoked into an unlawful invasion of a healthy human body.

Decrying the unfortunate roles that the news and social media play in perpetuating the pendulum, the poet persona further says in stanza 3, “The tabloids easily retool their presses / Print and circulate hogwash as elixir / Which by advantage of covers circulates” (lines 7–9). He criticises the newspaper media that often “retool,” “print,” and “circulate” nonsense news “hogwash” as the correct news “elixir,” and because much of it is already well-known, its content travels widely and receives naïve acceptance from the targeted group.

Apart from the newspaper media, the persona depicts Facebook, the more common medium of social interaction and news dissemination, which has become the “master communicator” in stanza 4, as a culprit that has a big share of the blame because it allows for the spread of “disquieting info” (line 11). Unfortunately, “[t]he blaze” emanating from this “disquieting info” “couldn’t / have taken more wings to smother all” (line 12). The image of “wings” conjures a metaphorical comparison between the strength and speed of “wings” and the spread of news, especially bad news.

In stanza 5, the persona talks about the various ways politically correct news spreads: “They trend the revival of apothecaries / As street vendors take over storefronts / Everyone a hypochondriac seeking remedies” (lines 13–15). While the news media peddle fake news for the consumption of the ignorant who are either scared of superior information or lack access to it, the merchants of fake news do all within their depraved power to produce content for the fake news media.

The poet persona paints an image of that perplexing situation in stanza 6: “chloroquine overdose in Nigeria; hospital / take over beds virus victims need to survive / and the cure becomes a more lethal disease” (lines 16–18). In Nigeria, the situation became so bad that chloroquine was said to be an effective and salutary remedy for the virus. Many poor and ignorant patients saw it as good news and began to abuse the use of chloroquine. The result was the lethality that followed; hence, “the cure becomes a more lethal disease” (line 18). Many of them were in search of a cure and in the process created more problems for themselves. The poet could not help but warn in stanza 7, “O

age of migrants and instant news / you may have dealt a blow to ignorance / but your gossip flares panic attacks” (lines 19–21).

Sadly, the altar was not spared of the game of fake news merchandising. The persona argues in stanza 8 that “there are too many liars as prophets” (line 22). It was so bad that pastors fed their ignorant congregations with their own ignorance, thereby building the multiplier effect of the virus at the time. As a way of tying up, the persona looks for a middle-ground argument for this trend of fake news and political correctness. He muses, “Even truth has alternatives; double talk” (line 25). He tries to find an excuse for the shenanigans of human beings as he can no longer understand what is happening. He follows this statement with a rhetorical question: “How did we come to this pandemic?” He performs this introspection because the “[i]nfestations already corroded before corona!” (line 27). As far as the poet persona is concerned, having infestations galore during the Covid-19 era is a reality that is a combination of a number of factors. There were the politically correct news channels and the politically correct merchants of fake news. Fake preachers were also part of the merchants of fake news, which tripled the effects of the pandemic. Being politically correct for selfish reasons at the peak of the pandemic makes for intentional culpability for anthropocentric infractions that are not only damaging to the solutions of the health crisis but also exploitative of the ignorance of many people. Similarly, the possible damage that comes from nonhuman nature makes its culpability accidental or unintentional.

## Conclusion

This study has tried to appraise and interrogate the chains of infractions that portray the binary culpability of intentionality and unintentionality and help fuel the longevity of the coronavirus pandemic and its lethality in select poems of Tanure Ojaide. At the heart of the poems’ argument is the point that human-centric attitudes that provoke the coronavirus into malignancy make humans guilty and incite a reactionary culpability from the hitherto benign coronavirus. Buell’s ecocriticism justifies the notion that anthropocentric negligence and ignorance are responsible for the breakdown of law and order in nature. The poems mirror reflections of humans’ collective helplessness in the hands of anthropocentrically disordered nature. In manifesting a vicious character and using the same to torment the physical and biological environments, humans and the coronavirus contravene the natural laws of the ecosystem and are thus guilty. In causing the pandemic, erosion, sickness and death, human-centric abuse and the coronavirus are culpable of homicide in the poems.

## Declaration of Interest Statement

I wish to unequivocally state that I am the sole author of this research. I also declare that the research discussions and findings are originally mine with no recourse to plagiarism of any kind.

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