


Preliminary notes on topicality and recent pandemic poetry

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In this article I appraise the aesthetic and ideological implications of the use of the topical as source material for literary creation, with special focus on poetry. I underscore how the shared knowledge between the writer and the audience influences the craft of poetry and is equally crucial for the reception of a work of art. I link postcolonial writers' fixation on the topical to Edward Said's influential reevaluation of Western historiography and privileging of the political in literary scholarship. I demonstrate my thesis primarily by examining selected poems from the anthology *World on the Brinks: An Anthology of Covid-19 Pandemic* (2020) as an instance of literary responsiveness to a topical global experience. I highlight and appraise the poets' obvious allusions to, replications, appropriations, and interrogations of well documented discourses on the Covid-19 pandemic as a contestation of imperialistic theories and assumptions, and show how the topical and its discourses fundamentally influence the reception of the work of art. Focusing on the poets' examination of the international politics of healthcare, and dispensing of palliatives, I interrogate the politics of the notion of common humanity vaunted in the wake of the pandemic's exposure of the intangibility of territorial borders. In this article I equally reflect on the mechanisms of the survival and transformation of the topical in poetry. **Keywords:** coronavirus, Covid-19, poetry, topicality, postcolonialism, discourse, pandemic, *World on the Brinks: An Anthology of Covid-19 Pandemic*.

Introduction

The topical, much like mythology, history, imagination, and literature itself, is generally acknowledged as an abiding source of literary inspiration. As the main attention catching subject of the day, it is the fare of the editorial column, the media commentary, and the headline news. Nonetheless, the topical equally serves as a dominant source material for an art form defined by its exaltation of originality and its fixation with the constant breaking down of the boredom of worn or overused materials and clichés to make them “new” (see Diala, “A Writers' Body and the Nigerian Literary Tradition” 127). However, the use of the topical in literature does not only locate a work in time and place, its gestures towards the timeless notwithstanding; it equally raises basic questions

about the production of literature and its reception as it does about the literary forms, their powers, and their limits. Given the characteristic density of his/her art, for example, the poet seems uniquely placed to respond to topical issues with a comparative promptness that normally eludes the novelist and the dramatist whose appropriations of the same experience are typically hindered by the labyrinth of greater details. The enduring tradition of publishing poetry in the newspaper certainly sets in relief the art's characteristic compactness and underscores the affinity it shares with the print media for a thirst for the topical.

World on the Brinks: An Anthology of Covid-19 Pandemic, a volume of 138 poems by 68 different poets from across the world, is certainly one of the earliest published collections on the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic currently ravaging the globe. Edited by two Nigerian writers, Ikechukwu Otuu Egbuta and Nnenna Vivien Chukwu, the volume was published in Nigeria at the peak of the pandemic in August 2020. I seek to investigate selected poems from this volume as forms of responses to the aberrations of routine patterns of daily lives which characterise the topical. I begin by establishing the nexus between the topical and postcolonial theory, and show its relevance for the poetry on the Covid-19 pandemic by setting in relief the counter hegemonic imperative of the poems' constant replications, allusions, interrogations, and appropriations of current discourses on the pandemic. Next I underscore the poets' exploration of the virus's mobility as a comment on the porosity of sovereign state territoriality, and a reaffirmation of the common bonds of the human race. However, as I indicate next, the worrisome facts of the international politics of healthcare and of palliatives are shown to highlight the sober ideological realities of the politics of humanism. I finally raise a question that is more far-reaching in its implications: does time tend to transmute the topical in literature to the transcendent for readers to whom the topical resonances are lost, except perhaps through archival studies, or does it instead turn the topical to a mere relic? (Diala, *Dionysos, Christ, Agwu, and the African Writer* 71). In this discussion of the potentials of the topical to rise to the visionary I also briefly appraise the villains and heroes of the pandemic and establish the pre-eminence of human language and poetry as the ultimate heroes.

The topical, postcolonial theory, and the pandemic

Especially in postcolonial countries, many writers' focus on the topical and their attempts to rewrite history can easily be traced to the influential work of Edward Said and other postcolonial theorists. The control of the approved interpretation of events is the prerogative of authority. Thus, the grim struggle for the control of the discursive representation of the present is inextricably linked with the ideological contestation of the power to (re)write history (Diala, "Burden of the Visionary Artist: Niyi Osundare's Poetry" 389). Said's discernment of the conflation of official chronicles of events and hegemonic mythmaking is the signal insight of his postcolonial reevaluation of Western historiography and his privileging of the political in literary scholarship. His

position variously restated many times in his career establishes the inextricable link between the writer's word and the world in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983): "My position is that texts are worldly, to some degree they are events and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted" (4). Writing eleven years after in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), Said reaffirmed this position and its indispensable implication for literary scholarship: "Texts are protean things; they are tied to circumstances and to politics large and small, and these require attention and criticism. [...] [R]eading and writing texts are never neutral activities: there are interests, powers, passions, pleasures entailed no matter how aesthetic or entertaining the work" (385). The influence of this insight on many postcolonial writers' and critics' strong assumption of political roles is irrefutable; it also clearly illuminates the poetry published in *World on the Brinks*.

In an obvious gesture to foreground the inclusiveness of the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, the poets in *World on the Brinks* are drawn from various countries of the globe such as Nigeria, New Zealand, India, Zimbabwe, South Africa, the Philippines, and Yemen. It is a signal that in the few cases where the nationality of a poet is unclear, the indistinctness easily transforms the voice of such a poet into a representative human voice, transcending a specific place or locality to articulate the commonality of the anguished human experience of the pandemic. The 14 photographs contained in the anthology are equally carefully chosen to reinforce the sense of the limitless frontiers of the focal human experience in the volume. Comprising scans of two Covid-19 test results of Nigerian patients, one positive and the other negative, the photographs primarily memorialise deeply touching Covid-19 funeral scenes from Spain, the United States, Iran, Italy, and the United Kingdom, the highlight perhaps being the poignant photographs from Vila Formosa Cemetery in Sao Paulo, Brazil where the remains of dead bodies buried three years earlier were exhumed to make room for Covid-19 victims. Kelly McGuire contends that in the unusual times created by the Covid-19 pandemic, the humanities as a discipline enables us to consider the people affected rather than simply focus on the disease (59). By its proclivity for emotional depth, poetry is preeminent in this role.

A brotherhood of the condemned

The commonality of the Covid-19 pandemic experience is, as can be expected, a presiding subject of the poems in the anthology. One of the most dramatic disclosures of the Covid-19 pandemic is that social hierarchy is a critical factor in determining vulnerability to the disease, and, especially in developing countries, a critical factor in procuring a cure, given the prohibitive costs usually involved. However, the pandemic's principal revelation remains the susceptibility of all humans to mortality. Many of the poets in the volume reaffirm this sober fact. In the poem "Corona is Here", Ade' Adejumo meditates on the mobility of spaces and the intangibility of borders in the wake of the pandemic:

From Milan to Monrovia
Distance shrinks in the magical speed
Of the awful gnat ... corona! (*World on the Brinks* 3)

The poem also underscores how the universal lamentation of the scourge of the virus sets in relief the shortness of the passage from “Wuhan to Wales” and:

From the fashion-draped streets of Paris
To the boisterous alleys of boastful Pretoria. (*World on the Brinks* 3)

The pandemic’s disruption of the economic life of a healthy city is evident enough in the lines:

Empty stalls of mourning markets
Tell their tales in strange dialects
Of absent noises ... (*World on the Brinks* 3)

It is through a careful deployment of alliterations, puns, and onomatopoeias in both the English and Yoruba languages that the poet delineates the pandemic’s disruption of the healthy sounds of normal life. It not only imposes “sinews of stunning silence” and creates “dozing streets”; its real terror consists of the production of bizarre and aberrant noises that spell death. The “virus-aided sneezing” and “an orchestra of sneezing larynx” reaffirm the deadliness of the metaphor of:

bullets of cough drier than
The echoing clang of clashing metals. (*World on the Brinks* 4)

The poet’s fixation on sounds and what they connote is explicit in his acknowledgement of the naming of Covid-19 as revealing:

Every phoneme of its name
Corrosive like the acid rain
From the wonder skies of Wuhan. (*World on the Brinks* 4)

Recurrently invoked in the poem through exclamations and once through an interrogation, “Corona” constitutes a refrain to the noxious music of the pandemic in a ritual schema in which sounds are magical and names are capable of casting spells. The kinship between “Corona” and “corrosive” is meant to be seen as lying beyond sounds: it plumbs the depths of terror and mortality.

In a similar vein, Azih Paul Tochukwu locates the virus at the core of the human fold, irrespective of social classifications or ideological persuasions:

Rich or poor, we’re all casualties,
Irrespective of our ideologies. (*World on the Brinks* 52)

Chinyere Otuu Egbuta is equally explicit in highlighting the proneness of all humankind to the virus:

Without respect to colour
From China to Europe
And to America
And Africa
To the end of the globe
You ravaged
Informing All and Sundry
That beyond the skin colour
Is our collective Humanity! (*World on the Brinks* 93)

In the poem “The Crowned Death” Sopuruchi Blessed Frank avers that:
The world is more united
By the rhetoric of a common monster (*World on the Brinks* 216)

And in “The Sudden Discovery” he sees the pandemic as a revelation of the inescapable commonality of human life:

In the end, the leveller is a reminder
Of our common humanity. (*World on the Brinks* 218)

In a poem in pidgin English, “Coro-Hunger”, Linda Edem-Davies dwells on the virus’s defiance of social borders but equally extends the anthology’s considerable political scope. She does this by subtly creating some room for political commentary by likening the ruthlessness of Covid-19 to the inhumanity of African leaders:

Social strata, Coro don bridge
African Presidents sef no wicked reach
Money e no collect, pity e no send
Coro don kolo, Nigerians don bend. (*World on the Brinks* 161)

The poem’s portrait of the Covid-19 virus as a fiend lacking in compassion, completely impervious to pleas for mercy, and rigidly bent on the decimation of its victims is a popular portrait of death among Nigerians. Its extension to Nigerian/African despots is easy to understand: the pitiless ruler lacking in human compassion is invariably a monster. The combination of pidgin expression with traditional techniques of English poetry such as puns and rhymes makes this hybrid poem fascinating.

By their constant reaffirmation of the mobility of the virus, the poets invariably foreground the porosity of sovereign state territoriality and affirm the common bonds of the human species. This emphasis resonates with public health policies that equally underscored the interconnectedness of humankind in the struggle against Covid-19 and the necessity for the assumption by all humans of the responsibility for the survival of the species. McGuire remarks on how the two primary measures aimed at checking infection—the face mask and vaccination—set in relief the commonality of the human race. Covering much of the face, the face mask virtually erased individuality, enhancing instead visible collective responsibility, while the administration of vaccination across

a general population asserts a rather unsettling shared biological experience. Citing Eula Biss to contend that humans constitute each other's environment and that immunity is a shared space, McGuire concludes that the mask and the vaccine "confront the individual with the reality that our immune systems are interlinked" (52). Her recognition of the need of a new politics to entrench this fact acknowledges an old order that needs change.

The politics of humanism

A crucial subject of many poems in *World on the Brinks* is the interrogation of the politicisation of the notion of "common humanity", as many poets show that the politics of discovering a cure or vaccine for Covid-19 interrogates the notion of an inclusive human family with a common destiny. This harks back to Frantz Fanon's bitter criticism of so-called Western humanism as complicit with anti-humanism: "Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe. For centuries they have stifled almost the whole of humanity in the name of a so-called spiritual experience" (251).

The West's exclusion of Others from the category of the "human" served the political purpose of justifying colonial appropriation and violence. Writing on this highly politicised concept of the "human", Robert Young acknowledges such universal facts as birth and death but remarks that if their historical and cultural contexts are taken away, anything said about them can only be tautological (162). *World on the Brinks* demonstrates that, at its deepest level, the West's hegemonic mythmaking consisted in the annexation of medicine and the sciences for imperialistic purposes.¹

At the peak of the discussions on the development of drugs and vaccines for Covid-19, two French doctors—Camille Lochet, head of research at the Inserm Health Research Group, and Jean-Paul Mira, head of intensive care at Cochin Hospital in Paris—brazenly suggested as exemplary scientific practice that Africa be made a laboratory for testing the efficacy of potential vaccines (BBC News). The apparent scientific reason for turning Africans into guinea pigs is predicated on the colonial premise that Africans are incapable of self-protection and are thus completely exposed to the virus and so will provide unmediated results to scientific tests. Possessing "no masks, no treatments, no resuscitation", the African condition in Mira's analysis elicits an insightful comparison with prostitutes in AIDS studies: "A bit like as it is done elsewhere for some studies on Aids. In prostitutes, *we try things* because we know that they are highly exposed and that they do not protect themselves" (italics added). In other words, the African and the prostitute are placed in the same dispensable category on which Western scientists can "try things"—an expression that is invariably a euphemism even for potential genocide—in the interest of Western humanity and science.

Many poets in this volume, like many African elites, passionately denounce this conception of the African. In "May Day! May Day!" Martin Ezimano extends the interrogation of the morality of Western science in his insinuation

that the menace of malaria has existed beyond the pale of its concern clearly because malaria is a tropical disease that does not threaten the West (and conglomerates of major Western pharmaceutical companies benefit from through sales of expensive malaria drugs). Ezimano's crucial grouse though is the imperialism of Western science:

COVID 19,
Scarcely six moons on the scene
And already a vaccine
Forcibly,
To be pumped into the veins
Of the guinea pigs of Africa. (*World on the Brinks* 174)

Ezimano's bitter imprecations bring to the fore for censure the imperialist factors of evil who clothe themselves in the sacrosanct linens of philanthropy or the alleged objectivity of scientific methodology:

I say: a pox on the vaccine
And for the vaccinator: a shattered jaw!
And my God's vengeful
Thunder
On the Gates
Through which would travel
This gift from Hades! (*World on the Brinks* 174)

The alleged collusion between Western philanthropy and Western medicine against the African accounts for this African poet's inspiration; it also potentially marks the structures implicit in an informed African reader's aesthetic reception of the poem in an effort to interrogate the political order that makes that collusion possible. Alan Bleakley writes with passion on the need for the democratisation of the medical culture and underscores the potential of the humanities and arts to function as a critical rejoinder to that culture. He contends: "Medicine could shift from its historical focus on autonomy to collaboration, from authority-led models to democratic models, from objectivity to empathy and from patriarchal values to feminist approaches" (74–5). However, for those approaches to make their fullest impact, the medical humanities itself must be inspired by an inclusive human vision in which the West's mythical Others expelled to the periphery of the human fold and used with no fuss for scientific experiments beneficial to "man" are reclaimed as legitimate members of the human family.

Remarking on the involvement of all humans in the vulnerability inscribed in humans' physical embodiment, Wai Chee Dimock emphasises an approach to medicine that recognises the patient as *human* and so as much more than just a list of symptoms and test results. Consequently, stressing the need to rethink what it means to be human, Dimock establishes as the point of congruence linking disability studies, medical humanities, and environmental humanities the recognition of the need to foreground the collective future of an endangered human species by "holding it accountable for the ills it has inflicted

on its habitat and on itself and making a new politics, a new democracy of care, the condition of its survival” (239). The envisaged reformative approaches of the new medical culture must include the postcolonial. By its emphasis on the imperialism of immunopolitics, *World on the Brinks* advances the project of re-humanising a highly politicised concept of the human category.

Caleb Okereke and Kelsey Nielsen have remarked that the American philanthropist Melinda Gates’s prediction of an apocalyptic devastation of Africa brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic in a 10 April 2020 CNN interview and the claims by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) in the same month that between 300000 and 3.3 million Africans were likely to become potential victims of Covid-19 exemplify the ominous characteristic distortions of the Western gaze on Africa. They remark on the West’s putative failure to acknowledge the grimmer impact of the pandemic on the West but instead envisage Africa as a potential arena of decomposing bodies. They account for this failure in perception not in terms of inaccuracy but of the sinister impact of colonialism: the enduring colonial assumption that all Africans think alike, and the consequent dismissal of the entire continent as inherently backward and dysfunctional:

The legacy of colonialism has perpetuated the lie that Black bodies are to be pitied and to exclusively be the recipients of aid [...] The problem with the UNECA and Gates’s projections of the impact COVID-19 will have on the African continent is that they strip African countries of their agency and redirect focus on providing charity rather than supporting already existing and well-functioning epidemiological responses.

Okereke and Nielsen make a distinction between an informed fear and an uninformed assumption and contend that the cynical refusal to acknowledge Africa’s considerable know-how in the management of epidemiological diseases as well as her obvious strivings to combat Covid-19 infection (just like the presupposition that Africans would be passive victims of the viral outbreak) is utterly rooted in colonial ideology.

Maria Abiola Alege’s “Who’ Must Die” sets out the devastation the Covid-19 pandemic has wrought in the West:

WHO exactly should die?
Perhaps only WHO should know.
From Wuhan to the Azzuris Italy,
To the multiple mourning parlours in London
To the Catalan Spain ‘n and happy lands Allemaigne,
To the Police Barrack of this world:
Deaths, loss, funerals all despondence. (*World on the Brinks* 167)

Here and in many other poems in the anthology the World Health Organisation is subjected to recurring censure for its role in the politics of healthcare perceived to be detrimental to Africa. The reality of the devastation caused by the pandemic in the West is certainly the obverse of what was envisaged in the imagination of the West, authorised by the likes of Gates. The Medical Humanities scholar Kari Nixon discerns a certain element of hubris in the

presumptuousness of the West deriving from its considerable achievement in medicine and vaccine production:

Our assumption that we're magically impervious to disease has already allowed us to be caught unaware by the pandemic, as Westerners watched the disease's spread in Wuhan but generally didn't seem to believe it would be a threat in their communities. It also delayed many shutdowns and social-distancing efforts, as generational bravado about infection prevented us from really believing that we, too, could die from contagious illness. Yes, even in "the Land of the Free" beds are finite resources, and doctors can be too sick to work. (8)

This presumption of the West is part of what Alege interrogates in "Who Must Die". The poet's cajoling of the World Health Organisation through endless puns to account for the disparity between the sober reality of infection rates and death tolls and the West's dark imaginings for Africa castigates the organisation as an organ of the West rather than a neutral group dedicated to world health. The poet posits two modes of knowing: the spiritual and the intellectual. His contention is that the much-vaunted intellectual tradition of the West obstructs spiritual perception:

WHO fiddled with their spirit eyes
Reliant on voices of education,
Fortuitous in judgment. (*World on the Brinks* 167)

He obviously thinks that the intellectual rigours of the Western tradition are not always distinctively placed to account for the unsettling paradoxes of life. Thus, he highlights the fallibility of the West's perceptual apparatuses to explain:

Why the unfortunate are not dying,
And the privileged bite dust. (*World on the Brinks* 167)

The invocation of proverbial African wisdom to account for life's abiding mysteries ultimately challenges Western intellectual suzerainty:

The suspect Araba tree fails to fall,
And the Iroko is shamed. Almighty never nuance as human. (*World on the Brinks* 167)

The final line of the poem is perhaps too daunting to follow. But it apparently attempts to account for the abiding incongruities of life by invoking the parallels between God's disincarnate purity and the limitations of the mortal condition in spite of the manifold accomplishments of human science and technology.

Conspiracy theories permeate virtually all aspects of the pandemic, from the circumstances of its alleged origins in Wuhan, China right to the politics of the discovery of an authorised cure. *World on the Brinks* is demonstrably a work of its times and the poets in the volume partake in these discourses. The topicality of the poems in the anthology is evident in their constant engagement with the discourses on the pandemic: the disparagement of Wuhan, the Chinese city to which the virus has been traced; the probing of sources of the virus in the light of numerous conspiracy theories; the lamentations on its impact on the

world's economy; the impact and cost of the cancellation of sports and other social and leisure events. Careful attention is also paid to the symptoms of the ailment, the agony of enforced separation, the incisive interrogation of the ritual ablutions as well as social distancing aimed at restricting infections, the highlighting of the politics of vaccination, and of the distribution of palliatives. In this regard, the passage from popular sentiment to poetry is remarkably short.

In "WHO Says Madagascar?" Alfred Fatuase alleges that the World Health Organisation "gang[s] up" to discredit the remedy for Covid-19 ascribed to scientists in the African country of Madagascar. If the world body insisted on a rigorous process of verification, it was perceived by some that the endorsement of any particular vaccine or cure anyway would necessarily be steeped in politics as such endorsement would have enormous financial implications for the inventor of a cure. The acronym "WHO" makes it such a convenient subject for puns:

Yet no vaccine, yet no syrup,
As they gang up,
We sit up
Or break up,
WHO will never accept Madagascar?
"Who" will ever dare! (*World on the Brinks* 14)

Likewise, in "Ancestral Herbs" Marinus Samoh Yong claims the efficacy of African herbs to cure Covid-19 and underscores alleged Western denials of that virtue:

The cure is in our dense forests
Hanging on leaves and potent backs [sic]
Deep in the depths with mangrove roots
And the green grasses of our lush savannah.
The western cacophony of windy brouhaha
Marching on our airwaves with imperialist boots
And tearing our tympanum with hollow barks
Defy the potency of ancestral herbs. (*World on the Brinks* 173)

The allusions are inescapable for readers familiar with the discourse of potential remedies or vaccines for the Covid-19 pandemic, the implication of which is the politics of international healthcare. It is, moreover, in the context of the topical allusions that some of the lines attain full meaning. Stanley Burnshaw notes that allusions are untranslatable even when they hold the key to the meaning of some poems (xi). Topical poetry invariably thrives on allusions, and allusions make possible a highly economical form of writing deriving from the shared knowledge of associations between the poet and his or her audience. However, time obscures their meanings further, making the reader dependent on the apparatuses of interpretation to obtain some clue of their referents. Fatuase's "WHO will never accept Madagascar?" will certainly require some annotation or at least a footnote to make full sense for a reader unaware of the

relevant discourse on the pandemic. On the other hand, Yong's accumulation of pejorative sounds and images confers on his poem some autonomy of meaning and impact. "Cacophony", "windy", "brouhaha" like "imperialist boots" "marching" on airwaves to tear Africans' "tympanum with hollow barks" constitute a considerable repertoire of negative terms and images aimed at indicting Western racist denials of the efficacy of the alleged African solution to a critical human problem.

Topical poetry and the timeless

Ezechi Onyerionwu reminds us in the foreword to the anthology that poems in the volume were conceived and executed in the middle of the pandemic. He appraises the aesthetic implications of the topicality of the poems rather positively by suggesting that the imposition of worldwide lockdowns provided ample space for deep introspection (*World on the Brinks* viii). *World on the Brinks* has its fair share of renowned voices and of deeply felt poetry. For example, the imaginative quality of the poems of the award-winning Nigerian writer Akachi Adimora-Ezigbo typically stands out in the volume. There are equally astonishing newer voices such as Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika. In Asika's "The Earth Is at Peace Again" we discern an accomplished poetic voice in a sober appraisal of the envisaged portentous new normal:

The marauding moon tickles the firmaments again
Like Enemma was not lost in the dark nights!

The sinister stars are out to play again
Like Nwanyike never bled to her death before their gaze!

The randy rain showers kisses again
Like the flood never came! (*World on the Brinks* 137)

In this poem, the compassion of the poet is for:

The nameless
The faceless
The childless
The homeless
The motherless
The fatherless
The voiceless (*World on the Brinks* 140)

His aching concern is to save them from their vulnerability to oblivion and only Enemma and Nwanyike have names. Yet, they are fabled figures of folklore rather than personalities of contemporary history. The evocation of their enchanted lives is a powerful signal that even the rebirth of the awesome grandeur of the universe does not completely obliterate past human catastrophes nor the world's inherent capacity for new treachery. Asika demonstrates, moreover, a presiding mode through which topical poetry survives: mythical transformation. Apparently victims of Covid-19, Enemma

and Nwanyike resonate with timeless tragic (female) figures in religion, literature, and myth that embody “the frailty of all we pride as life” (*World on the Brinks* 136) in an ambivalent universe beyond human domestication and even comprehension.

The obvious correspondences between how many of the poets in this anthology imagine Covid-19 and how preceding literature has characterised the agents of human destruction deepen the reader’s awareness of how topical poetry can serve the future hour by extending the frontiers of its relevance even when anchored in a particular time and place.² Ayodele Kuburat Olaosebikan identifies Covid-19 as “the grim reaper” (*World on the Brinks* 47), “the levelling general” (*World on the Brinks* 49), and describes it as:

Grim-faced, heartless with fangs
Venom of pains
Wreaking havoc in bones and marrows (*World on the Brinks* 49)

If the scientific veracity of Covid-19’s alleged pitiless crushing of bones and marrows is questionable, the poetic truth of its laying waste to the human body is incontestable. All through the anthology, the virus elicits a considerable repertoire of infernal praise names and epithets always tending towards a symbolic representation of death. Adebajo Adebago calls it a “bestial spirit” (*World on the Brinks* 6), Chimeziri Charity Ogbedeto likens it to “a million demons” (85), Ikechukwu Otuu Egbuta refers to it as an “impudent harvester” (141), Francis Ejiofor Onah “the merciless devourer” (125), Michael Onaiwu “the dragon” (178), and Gabriel Sunday Afolayan “the demonic dragon” (126). All this, no doubt, is in the spirit of the public discourse but even more fundamentally it derives from a long tradition of imagining dreadful agents that presage the apocalypse.

William Butler Yeats’s “The Second Coming” is justly famous for providing the ultimate ideogram for this monstrous destructiveness:

a shape with lion body and the head of a man
A gaze blank and pitiless like the sun (100)

This is the archetypal apocalyptic beast slouching towards Bethlehem to be born. Balachandra Rajan (48) suggests that the enduring power of Yeats’s poem derives from its location in a resonant world of mythical embodiment which lifts it beyond a particular thought. Yeats’s sense of an impending anarchy pervades many poems in this anthology. Frank writes in horror of the vision of:

a crowned death
Robes in scarlet
Riding surreptitiously on the wings of touch. (*World on the Brinks* 216)

The title of the anthology itself evokes an apocalyptic image: a world on the brink of a bitter precipice. Mar Charmain Tshabalala reinforces that notion when she describes the impact of the pandemic as “a dark cloud hanging over planet earth” (*World on the Brinks* 177). In an even more forceful metaphor in “Song of a Caged Bird”—an apt title for the entire anthology—Adimora-Ezeigbo

laments the transformation of the world into a cemetery, with her personae's room turned into "an enlarged coffin" where she is condemned like a caged bird to invent new ways of survival (*World on the Brinks* 22).

Nixon writes on the cyclical pattern of pandemics: "For the entirety of recorded history, disease has loomed, a haunting shadow waiting to strike and decimate. Disease has *always* been a given, and the question of the next pandemic has never been 'if.' It has always been 'when'" (7). Absorbing the Covid-19 pandemic into a recognisable order in the human experience is a certain way to tame it by making it familiar. Perhaps how seamlessly Covid-19 poetry can be integrated into the schema of human's perennial mythmaking of a looming apocalypse can only be apprehended with clarity by a generation of readers for whom the face mask is a fascinating museum piece rather than an obligatory shield against death.

On the other hand, Onyerionwu's general ascription of "quality and variegated profundity" to the poems in the volume is by far too positive an appraisal (*World on the Brinks* viii). For the anthology is also truly a work of its turbulent times for another unique reason: it is marred by many avoidable blunders. The title itself is mystifying. Overwhelmed by the potency of Covid-19 to change the face of the earth forever, do the editors perhaps aim to evoke the prospects of simultaneous multiple apocalypses by offering "brink" in the plural? The subtitle also is weird. One surely cannot *anthologise* a pandemic; one, however, can anthologise poems, photographs, or other works of art on the experience of a pandemic. Perhaps then the title could read: *World on the Brink: An Anthology of Poems on the Covid-19 Pandemic*. Moreover, the quality of the editing is not always painstaking. Spelling is occasionally awry, grammar askew. But these oddities in part constitute the appeal of this volume for this study. Hastily published, the anthology illustrates the routine hankering to be the first to report breaking news that often accounts for preventable errors in the dailies—errors which a work of art cannot afford to replicate! Moreover, for many of the writers, who are obviously not professional poets, and the editors of the volume, the distinctive badge of virtue is obviously an awareness of the politics of the Covid-19 pandemic rather than excellence in craft. *World on the Brinks* illustrates a politicised conception of poetry as folk art capable of commenting on topical issues. The aesthetics of this postcolonial counter hegemonic conception of poetry alone makes the anthology deserving of scholarly attention.

Moreover, grappling with an ongoing life-and-death experience whose cure was uncertain at the moment of writing, some of the poets clearly envisage the imminence of the apocalypse and raise crucial questions about the reception of the work of art. Cringing in mortal terror in the face of a deadly pandemic at the peak of its power with no cure yet, many poets of this volume avowedly discern in poetry of any species a veritable act of defiance. Even reading this poetry at the heart of the pandemic is extolled as virtual heroism. This glowing assessment of poetry is indeed a crucial subtext of the entire volume, and whether the circumstances that dictated it can possibly act as a compelling force for generations of readers after the pandemic experience is of interest

to this work. In her insightful introduction to a compendium of writings on Covid-19, Meghan O'Rourke remarks on how the future will apprehend the experience of the pandemic with greater clarity, given all the great benefits of hindsight. But she also acknowledges that the future will fail to appreciate precisely what it felt like to be part of the bizarre unfolding experience:

The future won't remember what it felt like when our children, our parents, our partners began coughing, running a fever, feeling unwell, and how desperately powerless we felt, how hard it was to get masks, tests, gloves, in those first weeks (it is hard to remember even now). The future can't experience how life seemed to go from normal to frozen almost overnight [...] (xiii)

Reception is invariably a factor of its historical context.

As is typical in every war chronicle, there is a fixation in *World on the Brinks* on strategies of combat appraisals of human conduct in the conflict, and the consequent vilification of villains and veneration of heroes. This preoccupation discernible in many of the poems in the anthology is perhaps most explicit in such poems as Adimora-Ezeigbo's "Brave Frontliner", Chidiebere Enyia's "Who Are the Heroes?", and Clement Eloghosa Odia's "Heroes". The gratification of the acquisitive human instinct as well as the exploitation of the afflicted on the one hand and the sacrifice of the self for the public purpose are the polar extremes highlighted in the anthology. The inventory of heroes ranges from nurses, doctors, scientists, survivors of the virus, the living, those compliant to safety rules, as well as the ever-suffering maltreated poor masses who invariably embody the human will to survive. In one of the most moving poems in the anthology "Brave Frontliner", Adimora-Ezeigbo adulates the nurses who defy their own mortality and allegiances to their families to carter to the infected. Their sacrifice is amplified by the poet's foregrounding of their palpable humanity evident in their fleeting hesitation as they leave home, bidding their families goodbye with heavy hearts that weigh down their hands:

Every day, in all weathers, there you go, sister,
Kitted in your survival robes. Brave heart!
Wearing a mask that perhaps hides the terror
In your eyes when you remember your family.

Loved ones exposed daily, as you are,
To the merciless onslaught of the ugly virus,
You pause, look back only for a second
Your hand half-raised in anguished salute. (*World on the Brinks* 19–20)

Thus, the face mask serves both to shield the nurses from the deadly virus and to conceal their terror of death. But like the survival robes, the mask, which became the primary paraphernalia of the pandemic experience, also foregrounds the inevitable metamorphosis which the Covid-19 pandemic compelled even human language to undergo. The *face mask* is a distinctive clinical specie even when most masks are meant for the face.

In the poem “A Short while hence” Iquo Diana Abasi highlights an inventory of terms whose meanings have accumulated new accentuations by their association with the pandemic:

Sanitizer, positive, breathing,
Isolate, distancing, intubate,
Ventilator, DNR, DNI:
Our badges of a time best forgotten. (*World on the Brinks* 145)

The badges are unwholesome insignias because their association with the pandemic taints them. Like “social distancing”, “stay safe”, “palliatives”, “droplets”, and “quarantine”, as well as such new coinages in the anthology as “coronaphobia”, “coronoia”, and “coronade”, each bears the frightful mark of the pandemic and exudes terror. Reflecting on this development in the context of the anthology, Afam Ebeogu identifies “the birth and popularization of new forms of vocabularies, slogan, names, monikers and catchy expressions” as an integral aspect of the pandemic experience and notes the prevalence of such terms in the volume. He points out that even when most of the terms are rather familiar expressions, in the smithy of the pandemic they “reflect a new way of perceiving things and coming to terms with the verbal transformations occasioned by contemporary experience”. In other words, language itself, in its virtual infinite flexibility and expansiveness to accommodate new experience, in its survival and even transcendence of the distortions of horrid aberrations and brutalities, epitomises the human will to survival. To read *World on the Brinks* is to seek to understand the agony of a besieged world, the discourses generated by the effort to make sense of the crisis, and its gestures towards a rebirth.

However, poetry is idolised as the ultimate hero in this anthology. In “The Crowned Death”, Frank memorably describes the human mind as “an invisible cenotaph” on which the “living merely lug sweet memories of the dead” (*World on the Brinks* 217). It is the defining role of the poet not only to *re-member* the beloved dead but to give them a new lease of life in art. In “No Lime for Lemonade”, Asika exalts the power of poetry to *re-member* as redemptive and identifies that virtue as the distinctive quality of the poet:

The blood that flowed without ceasing
The lungs that grew weary
The breathe [sic] that lost the struggle
Just a day and a week ago!

These tears that will never dry
And the poet will never forget ...
Even as the earth still grows too accustomed to all of us! (*World on the Brinks* 140)

Condemned to symbolic imprisonment and to virtual death, humans exploit the therapeutic powers of both writing and reading poetry in their struggles against the pandemic. The sublimation of pain into song is a time-tested means of achieving self-transcendence and, as the embodiment of humans’ greatest

achievement in language as well as a storehouse of some of the immortal accomplishments of the human species, poetry is at the core of the best and most enduring of the human patrimony. In what is arguably one of the finest poems in the anthology, Asika affirms a poem's apparent lack of utilitarian value as it is no lime from which lemonade could be derived; nor is it a drum to strengthen the reader's wobbly feet; neither is it:

even a dirge

To accompany your tears for a dying earth. (*World on the Brinks* 132)

Poetry nonetheless remains of critical human substance by seeking to *incarnate* the experience of being human itself:

The song is:

Those lungs that ran out of air and smiled into the abyss

The hearts that failed to pump just one more time

The eyes that ran out of tears in the clash of counter-claims

The voice that grew weary

Amidst the raucous noises of the killer bird

The soul that lost its way that night of great thunderstorm

Thousands buried in an unknown grave

Faraway in the evil forest. (*World on the Brinks* 133)

As a repository of human memory and the incarnation of the indomitable human spirit, poetry described by Asika as “memories buried in our souls” (*World on the Brinks* 133) resolves the existential terrors of life and human frailty by offering a reassurance of hope beyond death.

Conclusion

World on the Brinks is an impassioned cry by humans at an apocalyptic moment to make sense of what threatened them, to mourn their dead, lionise their heroes, exorcise the forces that endangered the human species, and, especially, to affirm life as an invaluable experience in spite of even such frightful vicissitudes as Covid-19. For the contemporary audience the anthology pulsates with a legion of allusions to verifiable persons and incidents and all the tensions and cross tensions that characterise reality. These incidentals are demonstrably capable of influencing aesthetic reception and participation. For the reception of a work of art is in part a function of the totality of a reader's awareness of both the aesthetic elements implicit in the work and the relevance of contextual or historical allusions. Thus, for the informed contemporary (African) audience, for example, the portals or *gates* through which the alleged demonised vaccines are conveyed to Africa are precisely the portals of philanthropy guarded currently by the likes of Gates and her former husband, Bill Gates. Such a reader invariably shares the poets' moral revulsion evident in many of the poems in this anthology. Depending on posterity's appraisal of the true legacy of the Gates's philanthropy, which is itself not insulated against politics, the poetic and moral elements in these poems may direct the sympathies of future readers in the same or different directions.

Topicality typically feeds on the popular sentiment and imagination, often without the benefit of the distillation of moral partisanship which hindsight confers on personalities and events. It is perhaps ultimately unascertainable whether the most skilful historian or archivist can preserve the quick of the fire of actuality available to contemporary readers to guide later generations of readers hereafter. It is, however, in the nature of poetry typically to idealise its subject. The powerful, enduring, and inescapable message of *World on the Brinks* for all readers is the heroic struggle of humans through the fire of death, both literal and symbolic, to survival. It is only proper then that that existential cry of anguish and ultimate triumph, even if only provisional, in order to be imperishable, is in the form of poetry, which, as William Blake tells us, is the only means of communication between time and eternity which neither the flood of time nor place has eroded.

Recent pandemic poetry evidently demonstrates the use the poet makes of the topical as well as poetry's particular suitability for appropriating the topical. Ranging from bare literal transcriptions of ascertainable facts to an imaginative grasp of the substance of the pandemic experience, the poetry accentuates a postcolonial counter hegemonic political valence. Available to contemporary readers in an unmediated form, topicality invariably constitutes part of the implicit ideological structures which influence a knowledgeable reader's aesthetic reception of a work of art, given that a work of art is not only typically a product of its time and place, but that its reception too is a factor of time and place. In this lies the particular power of topical poetry (on the recent pandemic) to survive and to metamorphose into a timeless exploration of the human situation.

Notes

1. In apartheid South Africa, André Brink remarked on the desperation of the regime to conceal its political contingency by expropriating the Bible as a white mythology that sanctioned the perpetuation of black servitude.
2. S. A. Larson has written an absorbing account of how Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, first published in Spanish in 1985, became topical in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, given its focus on such health themes as death, disease, and disability as well as population-level public health concerns.

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