

Life Writing During a Pandemic: Making Sense of the “New Normal” in *Lockdown Extended: Corona Chronicles* (2020)

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Abstract

This article focuses on the burgeoning Covid-19 life narratives written by South African authors, who narrate their ordeals and the “new normal” in a bid to make sense of the impact of the pandemic through the lens of their everyday experiences that are different to those mediated in mainstream media. Through a close reading and textual analysis of three personal narratives, we discuss how they reconstruct the first lockdown in South Africa, and take stock of the situation by confronting an immediate and distant past, daily acts of survival, private lives and imagined futures. The article also considers how the narrators envision themselves as vulnerable subjects, hence uniquely capturing the intense mood of the lockdown and how it led to a renewed interest in life writing.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel fokus op die florerende Covid-19-lewensvertellings deur Suid-Afrikaanse outeurs waarin hulle hul beproewinge en die “nuwe normaal” weergee in ’n poging om sin te maak van die uitwerking van die pandemie, deur die lens van hulle alledaagse ervarings wat verskil van die ervarings wat in die hoofstroommedia uitgebeeld word. Na die noukeurige lees en tekstuele ontleding van drie persoonlike narratiewe, bespreek ons hoe hierdie outeurs die eerste inperkingstyd in Suid-Afrika gerekonstrueer het, die situasie krities in oënskou geneem het deur die onmiddellike en verre verlede, daaglikse oorlewingsaksies, privaat lewens en verbeelde toekoms gekonfronteer het. Die artikel neem ook die feit in ag dat die vertellers hulleself as weerlose persone



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sien, en vang gevolglik op 'n unieke wyse die intense gemoedstemming van die grendeltyd, en hoe dit tot hernieude belangstelling in die skryf oor die lewe gelei het, vas.

Keywords: Covid-19; life writing; lockdown; vulnerability; South Africa

Introduction

The unprecedented disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic changed many aspects of everyday life, particularly how people live, behave, participate in social activities, communicate, travel, and work. These changes have become the “new normal,” which has many challenges. This article focuses on two aspects: first, how life writing becomes a deliberate process of making sense of the socio-economic and psychological impact of the coronavirus lockdown, and second, how narrativising the pandemic becomes a strategy to critique power structures, rethink how we envision a return to normalcy, and deconstruct perceptions of time and a homely place. Driver and Kossew (2014, 155), commenting on the provenance of South African life narratives, highlight how “lives are lived, recorded and viewed through multiple frames including those of language, politics, place, gender, history and culture.” The point of departure for this article is an understanding of the social and historical contexts that inform the writing and narrative format of the life stories we chose to analyse. Personal essays were selected, mainly those that lean towards the biographical, written in the first-person narrative mode, that do not blur fact and fiction and focus on grappling with the “new normal” from the perspective of an artist, a publisher and an academic, respectively. Through a close reading and textual analysis of Lebo Mashile’s “Lockdown: No Laughing Matter,” Melinda Ferguson’s “A Cursory Look at Hoarding, Huxley, Freedom, Starvation and Sheep,” and Helen Moffett’s “Sickness in a Time of Corona,” we argue that these three personal narratives generate a sense of individual perspective, agency, resilience and a constructivist narration of the “new normal.” We are, however, mindful of the gap that the anthology creates as the voices of vulnerable groups such as the poor, the homeless and people with disabilities who were disproportionately affected by the lockdown are not reflected in the anthology. The middle-class writers of the stories present these vulnerable groups as victims of the pandemic and lockdown mainly by pitying them. The article closely refers to McAdams’s (2008) theoretical insights on personal narratives and Smith and Watson’s (2001) delineation of acts of remembering and is also augmented by Davis’s (2014, 13–14) conception of a “pandemic narrative.” A “pandemic narrative” is defined by Davis (2014, 13–14) as a “cultural form constituting a story world” that is “seemingly fragmentary,” yet premised on the threat and perceptions of deadly viruses, hence it has a “temporal logic of emergence, peak and subsidence.” We read the selected personal essays as pandemic narratives that are centred on the nationwide lockdown in South Africa.

Background to the Narrative Form and Content

The writing of personal narratives during and after a lockdown in South Africa is in vogue. *Lockdown Extended: Corona Chronicles* (2020), hereinafter referred to as *Lockdown Extended*, is a collection of personal essays by writers from diverse backgrounds that include academia, journalism, business, social commentary, publishing, editing and poetry. Melinda Ferguson compiled the anthology after the first nationwide Covid-19 lockdown, which came into effect on the 27th of March 2020, but was extended beyond the initial 21 days. In this article, the terms “life writing,” “personal narratives,” and “personal essays” are preferred to “autobiography,” which in the strict sense of the term focuses more on the entire life of the narrator. McAdams (2008, 242) argues that personal narratives are written to make sense of our lives and explore the struggle to reconcile the reconstructed past and the imagined future. In other words, personal narratives are a subgenre of life writing and a product of an individual’s desires to understand the self, others and society as a whole. Similarly, Couser (2021) contends that all life writing in its various forms arises from our daily lives and is distinct from other imaginative genres such as fiction because it communicates messages of hope, and records and witnesses real-life events. Evidently, these personal narratives are written in an experimental style that fuses narrative journalism and chronological history. However, life writings also project the elusive nature of memory because they are not arranged in chronological order, and hence do not follow a linear progression of events. Given this dynamic, life writing, according to Gullestad (1996, 22), “is always faced with the dual task of analysing events both as they happen and as they appear in retrospect.” Life writing employs multiple forms of evidence, such as personal memories and archival sources, because of their usefulness in validating the narrator’s idiosyncratic acts of remembering (Smith and Watson 2001, 6). In light of this argument, the act of remembering forms part of a self-exploration that often produces lessons and insights and enriches a person’s life in the long run (McAdams and McLean 2013, 235). What animates the personal essays in *Lockdown Extended* is a subjective rendition of the narrators’ experiences across different dimensions of diversity such as occupation, ethnicity, class, gender, race, age, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, parental and marital status. Looked at in this way, personal narratives carry an intimate and personable voice that is therapeutic and relatable. In essence, we singled out personal essays for their salient narrative immediacy, brevity, multivocality and how they capture interrelated themes from different narrative perspectives. Thus, analysing these personal narratives is timely and yields multiple insights.

As a contributor, compiler and publisher, Ferguson notes in the preface to *Lockdown Extended* (2020a, 4) that the book came into being as “a response against creative suicide” and the subsequent extension of the lockdown. It is the sequel to *Lockdown: The Corona Chronicles* (Ferguson 2020b), which was arguably the first coronavirus e-book to be written in seven days. Of interest is how these personal narratives voice the writers’ experiences, depicting their vulnerability and at the same time capturing the effects of a global pandemic. This reconfirms that writing is a way of responding to

lived realities. Against this background of lockdown, the South African government, in its efforts to control the rapid spread of the coronavirus, mandated all “non-essential” businesses to close. This posed significant losses to the creative economy due to lockdown restrictions. To this end, Ferguson laments how the creative industry was overlooked and regarded as frills that could be trimmed off:

Sentenced to Lockdown, on the 27 of March, overnight regarded as “non-essential”—I found myself trying to figure out how suddenly all us creatives—writers, poets, actors, singers, publishers, musicians, painters, sculptors—had literally become “irrelevant”, according to COVID-19 Lockdown regulations. (Ferguson 2020a, 4)

For publishers and writers, the lockdown regulations negatively impacted the traditional supply and distribution channels due to the closure of bookstores. Many publishers had to be innovative to meet the growing demand for information and books during the lockdown.

The lockdown restrictions also created opportunities for authors to write digital personal narratives to satisfy an increased demand for pandemic stories. In light of this, Mashile’s personal essay presents the impact of the lockdown on the creative industry by narrating her own personal struggles as an artist. Most importantly, she links her experiences to the struggles of the majority of South Africans and further evokes the deep-seated historical struggles that have been haunting South Africa. Melinda Ferguson’s “A Cursory Look at Hoarding, Huxley, Freedom, Starvation and Sheep” depicts how the news of lockdown and the attendant extension made the narrator feel disempowered and exposes the false sense of security that she experienced after hoarding food. Ferguson’s personal essay also underscores the stigmatisation of homeless people and how the struggles of the poor and rich range dramatically. Helen Moffett’s “Sickness in a Time of Corona” (2020) is assembled from bits and pieces of emails she sent herself during lockdown that act as a kind of diary. The personal narrative is instructive for the way it sheds light on working from home, living alone and having a comorbid disease during the lockdown. What follows is an exploration of life during the lockdown and the stressful time of isolation.

Survival During the Pandemic: Exposing Deep-Seated South African Struggles

This section focuses on the personal essay, “Lockdown: No Laughing Matter” (2020), by Lebo Mashile. It explores the different and complicated life situations that the writer and the South African people faced because of the coronavirus pandemic, how they sought to come to terms with the situation, and the different survival strategies that they employed to cope during the pandemic. Apart from narrating her own challenges, Mashile also exposes the long-standing failures of the government to transform the arts industry to benefit and sustain artists. Mashile, who is a poet, author, performer and producer, explores these concerns by recounting some of her own personal struggles as an artist during the Covid-19 pandemic, which are linked to struggles of creatives in the

creative industry and those of other vulnerable groups in the South African community at large. It is against this background of South African struggles that Mashile considers laughter, including gallows humour, as the one thing that has sustained South Africans through crises, the main one being apartheid. She explores how South Africans deployed humour during the initial “hard lockdown” in order to get through that period.

In drawing attention to the struggles discussed above that beleaguered South Africa because of the Covid-19 pandemic and the critical issues that it exposed, Mashile critiques an aspect of laughter. The salience of humour is indicated in the title of Mashile’s (2020, 10) piece, “Lockdown: No Laughing Matter,” which explores how people used humour as a buffer against fear of Covid-19, especially during the early days of the pandemic. The fact that the narrative opens with references to some of the humorous ways South Africans treated Covid-19 and ends with the writer stressing “we can tell a million jokes to lubricate the passage that brought us here, but the reality of life, during and beyond lockdown, is no laughing matter” is telling (10). Mashile reveals how social media was awash with memes and jokes related to the pandemic, and she makes reference to a litany of pseudonyms such as “cororo” (5), “M’coristo” (5), “corrido” (5), “cocovela” (5), and “Coco V” (5) that South Africans jokingly used to refer to the coronavirus. She draws a link between these pseudonyms and earlier jokes South Africans created to make light of pre-Covid catastrophes, “tragedies such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, Jacob Zuma and the Guptas, Apartheid’s atrocities, government corruption, white supremacy, and deadbeat fathers” (5). Gallows humour, Mashile argues in her piece, has been South Africans’ default mode in dealing with crises and trauma. She writes that “[t]his is the kind of humour that comes from hearing aunties and uncles relive tales of torture,” such as “how sellout black cops placed our heroes’ testicles between wooden drawers and repeatedly slammed them shut” (18). Mashile reads this dark humour as an expression of post-traumatic stress disorder and disapproves of it as “sorrows continue to persist” (18) because it deflects from relevant or appropriate action, resulting in escapism. At the same time though, she understands the use of gallows humour when problems are enormous and overwhelming. As she asks, “how else do we cope with the rabbit hole, that is our historical and present-day landscape?” (5).

Having discussed Mashile’s attitude towards Covid-19-related humour, it is worth noting here that joking about the pandemic has not been unique to South Africans as there have been widespread humorous responses to the pandemic, globally. This demonstrates its “social significance” as argued by Dynel (2021, 176). Humour in general is “a powerful tool for bringing people closer together, managing conflict and reducing tension” (Robinson, Segal, and Smith 2020, 1). Although many like Mashile “do not approve of humour out of crisis” (Torres et al. 2020, 138), gallows humour has been defined as a “coping mechanism that may also boost camaraderie and morale” (Chiodo, Broughton, and Michalski 2020, 764). A typical and interesting example that confirms this claim is the research by Demjén (2016) on humour associated with cancer.

Demjén (2016, 18) found that humorous utterances and exchanges on cancer enabled patients

to talk about frightening, sensitive, embarrassing and/ or taboo experiences, potentially reducing the psychological impact of their experiences, facilitating a sense of individual and collective empowerment in a context where people can feel powerless; and building a sense of a cohesive, supportive community, thereby reducing potential feelings of isolation.

Covid-19-related humour helped to diffuse tension (Torres et al. 2020, 139) and build community; it “may be a way for people to say, ‘it is all very absurd’, but we’re in this together” (Wasserman 2020). Moreover, if we consider humorous scripts as important for easing tension, Covid-19-related humorous scripts position creators of the scripts as creatives in their own right, ironically corresponding to Mashile’s acknowledgement, as noted earlier, of the artist’s role in offering society the mental and emotional support needed during the troubled times of trauma and peril.

Related to the South Africans’ humorous reactions to Covid-19 was the misconception that the pandemic was a disease for “white[s] and elite,” in other words, a “disease that had gone to an Anglican private school and had a posh accent. This was a disease that had never set foot inside a taxi rank” (Mashile 2020, 6). This assumption was based on the fact that “in many developing countries the coronavirus was a high-class import—carried in by travelers returning from business trips in China, studies in Europe, ski vacations in the Rockies” (Plümper and Neumayer 2020). In South Africa, the first Covid-19 case was declared on 5 March 2020 and the “person, considered ‘patient’ zero, came back to South Africa on 1 March from Milan, Italy” (Stiegler and Bouchard 2020, 696). However, it did not take long for the coronavirus “to become entrenched among the poor” (Plümper and Neumayer 2020). Mashile reveals in her personal essay that, in no time, South Africans realised that Covid-19 was non-discriminatory, meaning everyone was vulnerable. In fact, the poor became more exposed and vulnerable, and lockdown restrictions “inflected a disproportionately higher burden” on them (Madonsela 2020, 1). We, however, discern from the personal essay “Lockdown: No Laughing Matter” that perceptions about Covid-19 as a disease for the rich and whites underscore the resentment of marginalised South Africans towards the historical injustices and social inequalities in the country. Of note is reference to racial injustices in the following supposition: “here comes a plague that seems to be targeting those who have plagued our ability to ever feel a sense of security, in the land that is ours, but that we do not own. Maybe there is a God, and maybe she truly loves black people” (Mashile 2020, 6). In the final analysis, the issue here is not whether Covid-19-related laughter is appropriate or inappropriate, as our discussion has shown, but that humour serves different significant functions in the struggle for survival during a pandemic.

Mashile’s concern over the struggles of South Africans to earn a living during the coronavirus pandemic is centred on the effects of the lockdown restrictions that South Africa, just like the rest of the world, imposed to flatten the curve of the virus. She

shows how physical distancing, which became known as “social distancing,” restricted social gatherings and consequently affected the creative industry negatively, especially performers who mostly depend on gigs for their survival:

An entire creative value chain of performers, sound and lighting technicians, stage managers, costume designers, set designers and builders, ushers, ticket sellers, grips, stagehands, producers, writers, publicists, agents, arts managers, theatre staff, festival programmers, eventing companies, administrators, caterers, décor supplies, drivers, and every independent vendor selling programmes, merchandise, chicken wings, chips and boerewors rolls, outside of the gigs, was out of work. And out of luck. (Mashile 2020, 6)

Mashile proceeds to give an account of how creatives scrambled to make ends meet, and at this point questions the manner in which the South African government dealt with the challenges faced by the arts industry, and how it has been profiting from the industry at the expense of the artists. Mashile offers an account of her own personal attempt to access relief funds set aside by the government to assist creatives through the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, to no avail. She relates the cumbersome processes that artists were to follow to apply for the funds, for example that they had to “quantify how much income they had lost due to Covid-19. These figures needed to be accompanied by support documents in the form of invoices and contracts that would prove that the work that had been lost, was in fact real” (7). This, coupled with the Covid-19 restrictions, made it difficult for Mashile to successfully apply for the funds:

I had less than a week to put together the necessary supporting material. Trying to chase clients and colleagues to retrieve contracts during those few days of lockdown was a logistical nightmare. ... I spent six days chasing supporting documents for my biggest contract, and when they finally came, I submitted my application 30 minutes after the deadline, only to be promptly informed that my application would not be considered. (Mashile 2020, 7)

This gestures to the government’s reluctance to support struggling artists and this reluctance is emphasised in the following important questions that Mashile (2020, 7) asks: “Why was the sector only given a week to apply for these funds? Why is there even a closing deadline during an ongoing international pandemic?” BBC News (2021) attested to the government’s reluctance and delay in releasing relief funds to artists by carrying a story on demonstrations by angry artists across South Africa.

An important fact to note in Mashile’s recollection and account of her personal experience as an artist is that this personal experience is “anything but merely personal” (Smith and Watson 2001, 24) and it is akin to what Smith and Watson (2001, 21), in their analysis of life narratives, define as “acts of personal remembering [that] are fundamentally social and collective.” Also significant at this point is that Smith and Watson (2001, 25) consider “experience” as an important component of life writing and argue that it “is the very process through which a person becomes a certain kind of

subject owning certain identities in the social realm, identities constituted through material, cultural, economic, and interpsychic relations.” These observations bear out in the way in which Mashile’s (2020) own personal experiences are tied to the broader experiences of artists in a similar position and other vulnerable groups, and most importantly, invoke the larger and enduring historical injustices that Covid-19 has surfaced. She asserts that “Covid-19 exposes what has and hasn’t been working for a very long time. It points a magnifying glass on public and private national systems” (8). Mashile juxtaposes her struggles to access the Covid-19 relief funds for artists with the exploitative attitudes of broadcasters regarding intellectual property as they tend to prey on vulnerable groups such as “black people, poor people and women” (7) because, she asserts, “we have the least access to capital that would allow us to develop content independently” (7). Mashile traces this injustice back to the apartheid era, calling it “one of the painful hangovers from the apartheid era” (7), further indicting the government on its failure to transform the arts industry post-apartheid. In fact, she points out that the government itself has preyed on artists who have been made vulnerable by the Covid-19 pandemic:

When the government put out briefs requesting new online profitable projects, it was acting as broadcasters in this country have always acted. Why should a national government be the owner of anyone’s intellectual creative property? How can this be seen as an attempt to relieve a beleaguered sector? How can the government purport to be serving a transformational agenda, when its behaviour is consistent with a status quo that benefits capital-wielding broadcasters, at the expense of working creatives, who become little more than creative raw materials, in a machine designed to exploit? Why is the government acting as a broadcaster or producer in the first place? (Mashile 2020, 8)

Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed how the South African government has failed to distinguish itself from the apartheid regime, neglecting the poor and vulnerable, and using unjust means to contain the virus, hence failing to bring the much-needed change to contemporary South Africa. Mashile presents the government in contradictory terms as both a victim and villain of history that has failed to protect the poor and vulnerable—the homeless, women and children who have become victims of domestic violence during the pandemic, a government that uses “apartheid-esque army and police presences in poor black communities” (8) to contain the virus. This evokes what Driver and Kossew (2014, 156) call “apartheid’s policing of public space.”

Mashile also uses her experience to draw the reader’s attention to the important roles played by artists especially in times of adversity. She reveals this through a series of questions that she asks towards the end of the narrative. The first question she asks is, “who will do the work of unearthing how we got to this place?” (8). The question ushers in a series of other questions that point to the usefulness of creatives in narrating human pain and commenting on society. In a similar vein, Sibongile Mngoma, a jazz singer, aptly articulates this important role of creatives in her critique of the government’s neglect of artists during the Covid-19 pandemic when she remarks, “the arts are the soul

of any nation and in this country particularly, the arts have driven our democracy and won us a lot of freedoms” (BBC News 2021). The value of an artist is also embodied in Mashile’s claim that artists play a significant role in ensuring the well-being of humanity in dire circumstances, and this points mainly to the role of an artist as an entertainer during moments of peril. Mashile (2020, 10) writes: “our continued creative growth and survival is essential for the mental and emotional support that community in this country need during this time and will need post lockdown.” Globally, various artists provided much-needed entertainment during the Covid-19 pandemic through virtual concerts and performances. Regarding South African creatives, it is crucial to acknowledge the musician and music producer Master KG (real name, Kgaogelo Moagi) and Nomcebo Zikode, whose song, “Jerusalema” (2019), rose to international acclaim and had the whole world dancing during lockdown periods and also inspired an international dance challenge, the #JerusalemaDanceChallenge, lifting the “spirits of the people amid the battle against Covid-19” (Mlaba 2020).

Through this instance, it is apparent that although artists in general have been victims of Covid-19 lockdowns, they continued to create and some even thrived. Accordingly, Mashile (2020, 10) celebrates their versatility, relevance, resilience and survival:

I have never been more proud to be an artist. The skills required to adapt to new ways of living and working, are tools that we have long had to cultivate in our arsenals in order to exist. The new world demands agility, sensitivity, adaptability, creativity, constant reimagining and reinvention. This is what creatives do. We make something out of nothing. We read environments and respond. We integrate new platforms and vehicles into our existing practices. We are the very definition of generosity of spirit and resilience.

Most significantly, it is due to such versatility, resilience and ability to survive the harsh conditions posed by the coronavirus pandemic that Mashile managed to contribute her personal narrative to the anthology *Lockdown Extended: Corona Chronicles* and exposed the persistent struggles that have been bedevilling South Africans.

Exploring Perceptions of Time and a Homely Place During Lockdown

This section analyses Melinda Ferguson’s (2020c) and Helen Moffett’s (2020) personal narratives, particularly how both imagine their lives differently and portray diverse perceptions of time and a homely place during lockdown. Interestingly, the two narrators turn to personal inquiry to construct and track their experiences. Davis (2014, 14) asserts that through narrativising the pandemic and through “experiential temporalities” individuals assert their agency. Personal narratives are mostly about a self narrating itself, detailing feelings, observations, thoughts and events. Landau et al. (2018, 294) argue that “the way people experience the passage of time is bound up with their sense of life’s meaning.” They further argue that certain aspects such as fear of death, illness, unemployment, relocation, and inactivity disrupt one’s understanding of temporality. Ferguson (2020c) begins her personal narrative by highlighting how the

lockdown disrupted her life. For instance, the travelling case that she had packed for a trip to Johannesburg before the state of disaster was announced remained unpacked for over four weeks in the lounge. For Ferguson, the packed bag is a constant and symbolic reminder of “a former life” where she could leave the house and travel at will (18). She views lockdown as home imprisonment and remarks that she “has not left the walls in the past 20 days” (18). Giordano (2020, 3) states that a suspension of daily activities and routines during lockdown made people feel lethargic, depressed and empty. Comparably, Helen Moffett in “Sickness in a Time of Corona” (2020, 87) enjoys her solitude in the initial days of lockdown and states that lockdown was not a problem for her since she is “self-reliant,” “accustomed to living alone” and working from home. She describes the first week of lockdown as “days of frenzy” because of pressing deadlines that had made her go into lockdown 36 hours before lockdown and ignore the terrible bout of the flu she had (87). This came from limited time occasioned by the need to adhere to a strict regimen of tasks involving media activism and community-building projects. The present and self-imposed deadlines signify how Moffett’s first week of lockdown disappeared in a blur of work and activity. In line with such reflections, Giordano (2020, 16) argues that:

We always want to know the exact date something will start and then come to an end, so that we can meticulously schedule our lives. We are used to imposing our conception of time onto nature, not the other way around. [...] But during contagion, we need to know what we’re actually allowed to hope for.

We may infer from Ferguson’s (2020c) and Moffett’s (2020) pieces that time is dialogical and also acts as a metaphor for their everyday experiences during the lockdown. Moffett (2020, 87) even claims that the extension of the lockdown did not annoy her. Significant in this regard is how the two personal narratives underscore the theme of nostalgia as indicated by their yearning to return to normalcy and to regain control of their lives. Ferguson labels the time before and after Covid-19 and lockdown as “BC. Before Corona. BL. Before Lockdown” (Ferguson 2020c, 18), while Moffett (2020, 88) refers to “post-Lockdown” to underline temporal modalities of a coveted past and desired future. Both write to validate their existence and to reimagine the future after the lockdown. The present however, that is, lockdown time, is seen as hectic, blurry, slow, tedious, muddled, and at times suspended. For instance, Moffett, who symbolically fell sick, probably from Covid-19, bemoans that “Time drips like a Dali clock” and there are “Days of Frenzy” (87), then “Day Somewhere in the Middle of the First Lockdown” (87), “The Dreary Days (also the Fear Days)” (87), “The Next Day (aka as Eleventy-voertsek)” (88), “Third Century (Week) of Lockdown” (89), “Day Number Where the Fuck Are We Now?” (89) and “Day of Incredibly Cautious Optimism” (89). The passage of time during illness and lockdown shows how it was fraught with elements of difference and sameness, largely punctuated by fear and confusion in the absence of recourse to “normal” solutions such as physically consulting the doctor. Brockmeier (2000, 51) advances that time is an object of construction that is subjected to temporal modalities and individual processes. This is noted in Moffett’s personal

narrative, which deplores how “there is a weird sort of squidginess about time” (88). In this respect, lockdown threw into disarray the continuity and coherence of everyday routines. Similarly, Ferguson (2020c, 22) complains of having “Corona Cabin Fever” and wearing “pyjamas at noon” (18), while Moffett (2020, 88) completely forgot she had laundry hanging on the line for a week. Such (mis)reading of time highlights a reality that is no longer synchronous to that of the world outside the narrators’ walls.

Perceptions of time and a homely place are inextricably linked and are mutually experienced and imagined. Skey (2011, 234) elucidates that a homely place is not a mere “site of constancy, familiarity, safety, comfort and freedom in an increasingly complex and, sometimes, threatening world.” The homely place is akin to what Lefebvre (1991, 85) calls the “lived space,” which is underpinned by a social reality and a “set of relations and forms.” In other words, the homely place is a protean space that connotes a multidimensional character and hence can be experienced differently because of varying degrees of interaction, privacy, social relationships, class structures and security. These aspects come to the fore in the following excerpt:

For a micro-moment I feel better. Of course I have bought far more food than we need. I tell myself it’s because I don’t want to leave the house in a hurry. Back home I grind organic coffee beans to drown out the “other” noise. I attempt to sip my white guilt and privilege away. There are days I hate myself for all the things I have [...]. The things I have are there as an attempt to distract me. To make me believe that I am somehow armed against the poverty that Corona is wreaking on our world. They are sad attempts to insulate me against the memories of the time I was desperate, addicted and homeless. (Ferguson 2020c, 18)

Stockpiling and panic buying become tropes for anxiety and privilege because the homeless and the poor are experiencing food insecurity as a result of their vulnerability and inability to afford basic needs. We consider hoarding as a form of structural violence, which is defined by Scheper-Hughes (2004, 13) as an “invisible social machinery of inequality that reproduces social relations of exclusion and marginalization,” and hence “naturalises” poverty and hunger.

Ferguson’s (2020c) past experiences as an addict and homeless person make her very sensitive and empathetic towards the plight of marginalised communities. She is riddled with guilt and shame that can be attributed to the discourse of fear, self-awareness, privilege and societal inequalities. She describes herself as living in a “hoarded house” (18) yet regrets that it failed to distract and insulate her from a painful past of desperation and homelessness. In their discussion of spatial dimensions of life writing, Kilian and Wolf (2016) argue that lives are mapped spatially, hence, identity formation depends on (re)locating the self in different places. In her bid to relocate the self in different homely places, Moffett (2020) recreates old experiences by hosting virtual online family gatherings, Zoom dinner parties, virtual drinks with her sister and niece, and daily family WhatsApp appointments to check up on her “eighty-something-year-old” parents (87). She resorts to technology to reproduce a home-like and familiar environment.

This article also extends the idea of homely places beyond the built environment and virtual or online interaction. It explores how people of no fixed abode, who reside in squatter camps, refugee camps and shanty towns, imagine homely places where social distancing is nearly impossible due to overcrowding, and where there is inadequate access to hygiene services, clean water and poor or non-existent sanitation. Therefore, a homely place is a site of struggle that highlights spatial, economic and social inequalities. It may be more helpful to contextualise the homely place in informal and improvised settings. During lockdown, many homeless people qualified for the Social Relief Distress grant that was provided by the South African government to assist the poor through food parcels or vouchers to buy basic needs. However, the government ignored that some homeless people did not have access to information, identity documents and would also be afraid to collect an affidavit from the nearest local police station. We argue that a homely place is an analytic category that is characterised by ambivalences. Ferguson (2020c) and Moffett (2020) acknowledge and critique their different forms of privilege as noted in the following comments:

I was homeless, begging for money for drugs at traffic lights. I know what May, June, July feel like in South Africa when you have no roof. When you are starving. But my belly has been full for over two decades, so *The Hunger Games* are now only imaginary as I survey my fridge packed full: [...]. The cupboards heave full. (Ferguson 2020c, 18)

My chest freezer is full of homemade soup. I have a veg garden, I'm off the water grid: a friend says of all the people she knows, I'm the most prepared for the Zombie Apocalypse. (Moffett 2020, 87)

Ferguson and Moffett register their own limitations by safely imagining the hunger experienced by people who are poor and homeless. The quandary of being homeless and poor during a global pandemic resonates with what Madzime (2021, 14) describes as being "coronared." We get a glimpse of the insider-outsider binary when Ferguson retorts that the "virus has othered us" (2020c, 18), thus evoking a sense of (in)security, (dis)placement and (dis)comfort. It is noteworthy that the current pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have left many people without visible means of support and income.

Conclusion

"Lockdown: No Laughing Matter" (Mashile 2020) is a significant South African narrative about Covid-19 that uses the experience of the author to explore the struggles experienced by those in the creative industry, which was amongst the sectors most affected by the pandemic. Mashile reveals how the struggles of South African artists were augmented by a lack of proper policies and the government's reluctance to support the creative industry. Her narrative is not only about herself and those in the creative sector, but one about the larger South African experience. Linking the present and the past, the personal essay shows how Covid-19-related struggles intersect with South Africa's historical past, suggesting that contemporary struggles cannot be overcome

without correcting inherited injustices of the past. Through the struggles of one artist, Mashile’s personal essay points to the indispensable role of artists as they offer society much-needed mental and emotional support, especially during moments of turmoil and upheaval, and exposes societal ills. It is also in light of coronavirus-related struggles and the deep-seated ills of the historical past that the author critiques the habitual use of humour by ordinary South Africans to laugh off tragedies related to the pandemic and other problems that have been haunting South Africa, suggesting that South African problems require pragmatic solutions. We have, however, argued in our analysis of Mashile’s personal essay that humorous scripts about the pandemic played a significant role as a coping mechanism for South Africans. The scripts also offered the creators some agency and marked them as creatives in their own right, thus ironically evoking Mashile’s own observation that artists offer the mental and emotional support that society needs during times of mass peril.

Using Ferguson’s (2020c) and Moffett’s (2020) personal narratives, we argued that there exists a correlation between perceptions of time and a homely place. Despite having skewed perceptions of time, both narrators refuse to view lockdown as a period of stasis or inactivity. They both question the linearity of time during the hard lockdown. They experience a slower passage of time as a result of boredom, the monotony of routines and living a restricted life. Their evolving perceptions of time are influenced by the environment, solitude, mental processes, previous experiences and daily routines. Staying indoors for weeks on end gave the narrators a subjective reading of time and the homely place. Thus, although the dynamic advanced in this article briefly mentions the marginalised communities to show the invidious distinctions between the rich and the poor, what is lacking in *Lockdown Extended* (2020) is a multi-perspectival narration. A multi-perspectival approach enables the chronicling of struggles experienced by persons with disabilities, in rural areas, prison, the hospitalised, victims of domestic abuse and police brutality. Situating and recovering voices that are glossed over will problematise and deconstruct the binary classification of people as “essential” and “non-essential.” By dint of this approach, a different picture of the lockdown will emerge.

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