

Writing a South African Pandemic Moment: Inequality and Violence in *The Lockdown Collection*

Thabisani Ndlovu

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5592-7522>

Walter Sisulu University, South Africa

tndlovu@wsu.ac.za

Abstract

This article examines how the overwhelmingly dominant genre in *The Lockdown Collection* (2020), the personal essay, is an appropriate medium to capture the immediacy of the initial hard lockdown in South Africa because of its brevity and resonance. While the essays react to policies of virus containment, the loss and alteration of social conventions, they inevitably reveal the identity of each author and how that identity sits in the imagination of South Africanness. This appellation itself incorporates and complicates fraternities that are race and class based in a context of acute inequality and ubiquitous violence. The essays display an awareness of the strong relationship between these two aspects and writing about them appears as an antidote to fear and a desire for a better South Africa, as learnt from and suggested by the challenges of Covid-19.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel bestudeer hoe die genre wat oorweldigend dominant is in *The Lockdown Collection* (2020), naamlik die persoonlike essay, 'n geskikte medium is om die onmiddellikheid van die aanvanklike streng inperking in Suid-Afrika vas te vang—vanweë die beknoptheid en weerklank daarvan. Terwyl die essays 'n reaksie op beleide van virusbekamping, die verlies en wysiging van sosiale konvensies is, word die identiteit van elke outeur uiteraard onthul. Dit wys ook hoe daardie identiteit in die verbeelding van Suid-Afrikaansheid daar uitsien. Hierdie benaming opsigself beliggaam en kompliseer gemeenskappe wat op ras en klas gebaseer is in 'n konteks van akute ongelykheid en alomteenwoordige geweld. Die essays toon 'n bewustheid van die sterk verbintenis tussen hierdie twee aspekte—en om daarvoor te skryf blyk 'n teenmiddel vir vrees en 'n

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hunkering na 'n beter Suid-Afrika te wees, soos die uitdagings wat Covid-19 meebring het suggereer en ons inderdaad geleer het.

Keywords: South Africa; Covid-19; lockdown; creative nonfiction; inequality; violence

Introduction

When Covid-19 hit South Africa, the country declared a National State of Disaster on 15 March 2020, soon followed by what was called a “hard lockdown” between 27 March and 16 April 2020. The state’s virus containment policies and strategies, as elsewhere in the world, aimed to separate the infected from the uninfected. Resultant edicts that aimed to enforce this objective required organised responses from law keepers and citizens given that such interventions severely disrupted “normal” life by curtailing movement, social and economic activities. There was panic, first over the fear of death and then the reality of mass unemployment, suspension of sociality and learning new work modes online. In this initial panic and confusion, two literary e-books that attempted to make sense of individual and mass precarity were published—*Lockdown: The Corona Chronicles* (2020) and *Lockdown Extended* (2020), both of which eventually became the hard copy, *The Lockdown Collection* (2020). Both edited by Melinda Ferguson, the two e-books sold “incredibly well,” probably because “they were published at a time when book shops were either closed or were very difficult to access due to lockdown regulations” (Ferguson, personal communication, July 2021). This could also be due to the essay form of the book, the essays’ personal take on issues of public concern and the genre’s brevity—all of which I will expand on later in the article. Be that as it may, the successful performance of the e-books in the market points to the potential and future of the e-literary space. What this article is concerned with, however, is how the resultant *Lockdown Collection* (2020), a compilation of the two e-books, captures the immediacy of lockdown during the hard, and later, “relaxed” levels of lockdown, focusing on two main themes—inequality and violence. First though, I offer a brief discussion of how the book came about as this process is just as important as its contents.

When Pumla Gqola, one of the writers in Melinda Ferguson’s WhatsApp group of authors under her publishing company, suggested that the writers in the group write a “corona virus book” (SA Booksellers Association 2020) based on their lockdown experiences, the challenge was taken up. The result was *Lockdown: The Corona Chronicles* (2020), published in 10 days, the writers having been given seven days to submit their pieces. According to Ferguson, this is “the fastest book in history” (SA Booksellers Association 2020). When the e-book went live, it “shot to number 1 in New Releases in Amazon’s Globalisation section” (SA Booksellers Association 2020). The success of this project led to *Lockdown Extended* (2020), another frenetically compiled e-book for which authors had 10 days to submit short writings. The publication happened a few days later. Essentially then, the 40 pieces in the hard copy, *The Lockdown Collection* (Ferguson 2020a), must be read as some of the fresh, initial

responses to Covid-19 in South Africa—one of the first, if not the first edited volume of short writings to do so. As Steven Boykey Sidley puts it, the book is an “outpouring of viscera” (Ferguson 2020b) whose value lies in attempting to understand a new, frightening and bewildering experience as it unfolded, a kind of fresh running commentary on what Covid-19 meant to each of the writers in the volume. Underlining the value of such a book, Ferguson (2020b) commented, “If one does not capture the immediacy of now ... we will never be able to recapture [it] five years after. There is something very panic-driven, anxious, so hilarious and very sad and very thought-provoking and deep in terms of the immediacy of the times that we are living in right now.”

Short writings were appropriate for the edited volume because of the short period given to writers as well as limited space in the book for each writer. The brief Ferguson gave was open: “I told all the writers, all 39 of them that they could write whatever they liked—memoir, nonfiction, fiction, even poetry, social commentary, the only brief was that the theme was Lockdown” (personal communication, July 2021). Ferguson did not impose a word limit. The result was a collection of short writings—personal essays and short stories—what Ferguson calls “flash publishing” (SA Booksellers Association 2020) with reference to the brevity of the pieces and the quick publication turnaround time, reminiscent of flash fiction. In editing the book, apart from an effort to “keep the fiction pieces together,” Ferguson did not pay much attention to genre but concentrated on finding “a pattern or [sub]theme” within the main theme of lockdown (personal communication, July 2021). Most of the pieces are personal essays under the umbrella term, creative nonfiction. This article is based on some of the personal essays, not only for their dominance in this collection but also because the personal essay is largely ignored in academic engagements on South African literary writing yet, as this article will show, it is fertile ground for the examination of South African identity politics in moments of crisis.

Pandemics, Pandemic Writing and the Personal Essay

Covid-19 is not the first pandemic to affect South Africa. Starting from the twentieth century, the country was affected by the influenza pandemic of 1918–1919 (Phillips 2020). The most recent is HIV/AIDS, first detected in the 1980s. Although brought under control through antiretroviral treatment, HIV/AIDS is still spreading, albeit at lower rates than 30 years ago when it was rampant. At different historical moments, there were also South African epidemics that included smallpox (1713–1893), bubonic and pneumonic plague (1901–1907), and polio in the first half of the twentieth century (Phillips 2020). These pandemics and epidemics have had telling impacts on South African culture and history given that mass human disease and death are not just biological, but also culture altering and forming. In terms of impact, however, perhaps none of these pandemics and epidemics will compare to Covid-19, which has triggered an outpouring of narratives on various media, including literary efforts of the sort that *The Lockdown Collection* (2020) is an example. This text, based on the literary topos of

contagion, is an example of “constructivist historiography” or “literary memory” of a pandemic (Davis 2011, 64). In other words, as opposed to positivist history, which relies on documentary evidence in the name of “objectivity,” essays and other literary art forms, through subjective accounts of phenomena, challenge official historiography.

But what is it that prompts literary responses to pandemics even as they unfold? Wuthnow (2010, 2) explains it as a human reaction to peril:

Peril is the mirror we hold up to ourselves. It forces us to ask what it means to be human. It focuses our attention on the shortness and uncertainty of our lives. We imagine the worst—death, the death of our children, the destruction of our way of life. Would we be able to withstand the suffering? Would our cherished institutions fail? Would chaos erupt?

Thus, although most reactions to mass peril tend to focus on finding scientific solutions to pandemics or epidemics, these technological interventions do not answer existential questions because our visceral responses to peril “are fundamentally driven by the need to make sense of our humanity” (2). Seen this way, literary reactions become both historical and affective documents that “mediate the divide between memory and history” (Davis 2011, 68) by rendering “at least a plausible feel” of a pandemic moment through empathy (65).

Whereas there is a dearth of literary output on the 1918 influenza because of its coincidence with World War I and political interventions that suppressed the discourse of mass death as a result of the influenza virus (Davis 2011), Covid-19 has been highly publicised and is likely, as Fred Khumalo (2020, 78) speculated, to result in a “surfeit of books—both fiction and non-fiction.” It is possible that writing directly or indirectly about Covid-19 will result not only in the popularity of a literary topos of contagion but distinctly Covid-19 metaphors and perhaps narrative conventions also. It will be interesting to see overall to what extent these features will result in a literary legacy bearing the stamp of a pandemic.

Mario Slugan (2021) makes the point that momentous historical events such as the Covid-19 pandemic can play a key role in how we classify cultural products such as movies and various forms of writing. For example, what may have been called a “thriller” pre-Covid may, during and post-pandemic, be prefixed with “pandemic” as in “pandemic movie” or “pandemic novel” based on the dominant theme of mass contagion or the threat of it. By extension, work produced during the pandemic and thematising the pandemic would be so classified as well. The classification goes beyond categorisation for convenience given that genres “organize our conceptual space” (Slugan 2021, 3). *The Lockdown Collection* (2020), then, is pandemic writing and must be read following the thematic concerns and conventions of this burgeoning genre if we are to appreciate the full value of writings so categorised. Overall, the impact of Covid-19 in the arts has caused the revaluation and expansion of cultural products to include the prefix “pandemic,” giving rise to a name of a category. As Slugan (2021, 6) points

out, “[g]enres typically come into existence once the adjectives which were previously used to describe genre cycles come to be used as nouns.”

As pointed out above, most of the pieces in *The Lockdown Collection* (2020) are personal essays, which are part of creative nonfiction. Creative nonfiction, or what Lee Gutkind (2018) calls the “fourth genre,” is largely in the form of a memoir or the personal essay. The definitive aspect of creative nonfiction is that it is based on real, verifiable events that are nonetheless rendered through literary means including scenes, plot, dialogue, and description—giving a “literature of reality” (Gutkind 2006, 9). The writer cannot make up the events or the people, in short, lie about what happened. The personal essay, which is the most common form of creative nonfiction, is a “personalised but factually-based style of writing that uses the essay form” (Hackley 2007, 101). The sixteenth-century French writer Montaigne is frequently cited as the inventor of this form (Malinowitz 2003). Since the days of Montaigne, far too many practitioners to mention have embraced the form globally. For the purposes of this essay, two South African humourists, Ndumiso Ngcobo and Fred Khumalo, self-identify as writers of the personal essay under the umbrella of creative nonfiction, each with more than a book in this genre. They use verifiable events that they embellish for literary effect without making up the material. Ngcobo explained this process thus: “Much as I use hyperbole, it is still non-fiction. I don’t lie about events but I do embellish them in my style of writing” (N. Ngcobo, personal communication, 13 July 2020). In a similar vein, Khumalo (personal communication, 13 July 2020) commented, “I might embellish an incident but the situations and people are real.” Among other subjects, the essays of these two writers tackle post-apartheid black middle classness, ethnicity, leisure and consumption, and racial profiling in the marketplace (Ndlovu 2020; Ndlovu and Dzulani 2020).

The writer of a personal essay is therefore immersed in the subject of his/her writing. Understandably, most personal essays are characterised by topicality and reflection as the writer attempts to make meaning of, or “to get a grip on,” a problematic situation (Delbecke 2018, 106). It is no surprise that trauma tends to be a “common source for personal essays” (Bascom 2013, 7). Difficult as it is to write from within a trauma moment, Fred Khumalo (2020, 78) is convinced that “it is a worthy challenge to both our medical brethren and our artists. Our imaginative powers are being challenged. We are being stirred from our stupor of complacency, to explore other ways of telling stories, other ways of reaching out to each other as human beings, other ways of being.” Much as some people may not want to read about the “ugliness” (77) of the coronavirus whilst in the midst of that pandemic, if writers do not “run the voodoo down” (75), they will have reneged on their duty to provide “a necessary record, a compendium of slices of life” (79) under a crisis. Thus, we see why the personal essay “flourishes in circumstances of change and insecurity” (Delbecke 2018, 106) of the sort characterised by “fundamental existential crisis” (108), the kind that Covid-19 has engendered. The personal essay has developed and spread, with three key characteristics being consistent—self-reflexivity, a genuine desire to make sense of a difficult situation, and

to challenge dogma. In that sense, then, “the essay is not only a symptom of a crisis, but also the product of a crisis” (106).

Although the personal essay has no prescribed structure, in its effective manifestation, it explores verifiable events deploying an “emotional and intellectual energy” (Freeman and Le Rossignol 2015, 385) that eschews egocentrism. In its avoidance of self-indulgence, it finds resonance with readers who might not necessarily agree with the author’s perspective but are drawn into that experience and realise it has wider relevance beyond the individual. Good creative nonfiction, according to Lott (2000), is free of “self-righteousness” and judiciously uses “self as inquisitor of self [and as a result] calls for a kind of ruthlessness about seeing oneself in relation to others” (196). It has, thus, a lofty aim—to exercise “*our responsibility as human beings to answer for and to our lives*” (Lott 2000, 199; emphasis in original). With regard to *The Lockdown Collection* (2020), the personal essays are imbricated in wider identities and fraternities such as nationhood, race and class in a moment of crisis. The cover of the book features pictures of all the authors in their diversity—most visibly race, age and to some point, sex. The framing of these pictures suggests individuality as captured through the picture of each author as well as nationality and common exposure under a pandemic.

There is a common undertaking by the writers—to make sense of the ravages of Covid-19. Regarding that purpose, Fred Khumalo, one of the contributors, uses an apposite hunting metaphor:

The book has this group of hunters, all gathering together to deal with this elephant. My concern was ... as an individual, I couldn’t see the elephant in its entirety. But [...] as a group of hunters/writers, we have a better view and energy and perspective to step back a bit as a group and look at this elephant and deal with it. Whether we bring it down for now is another debate altogether. (cited in Ferguson 2020b)

The hunters, to continue the metaphor, were feverish in their task, giving us an artistic product different from what can be produced in five or more years to come. Future artistic expression of the pandemic will be more considered to give us, as Sidley observes, “different art forms” (cited in Ferguson 2020b).

This article was drawn to the personal essays beyond the reason that has been stated—the dearth of criticism on this genre in South Africa. It also had to do with being drawn into conversation over issues directly related to the lockdown and beyond. Williams (2003, 296) captures the attraction of this genre over fiction this way:

I do believe that there is a difference in reading fiction and reading nonfiction. In the same way that the journalist in me wants to know the truth of what happened, there is a power in the retelling of real events in real lives that is different from the power of fiction. Different and important. We tell stories to one another, to understand one another, in part because they are true. That is, after all, why creative nonfiction appeals

to us. The nonfiction writer says to the reader, “Such things can happen, have happened, and as human beings we must struggle to make meaning from them.”

There is a way in which as witness to the trauma of Covid-19, the personal essay is a compelling antidote to fear in the manner it takes one into the minds of various authors grappling with what is new and confusing but at the same time suggesting the human impulse to overcome.

Locked Down in Inequality: Many Apartheids, Many Ordinaries

Before the lockdown, South Africa already had “the greatest inequality of income in the world [...] and extremely high inequality in wealth” (Francis and Webster 2019, 373). In spite of government legislation, policies and programmes to curb poverty and inequality in South Africa, these problems have deepened and manifest not only through violent robbery but high levels of interpersonal violence. Thus, pre-lockdown, the country already held two unenviable records—the most economically unequal and one of the most violent countries in the world. Its increasing unemployment, officially standing at 34.4% as of 27 August 2021 and rising (Stats SA 2021), was worsened by the effects of Covid-19 and recent rioting and looting in Kwa-Zulu Natal and Gauteng provinces between 9 and 16 July 2021. There is a relationship between inequality and violence generally. Countries with bigger income differences tend to have higher rates of violence and conversely, more equal societies tend to have less violence and improved social cohesion (Wilkinson 2004). Following the theory of relative deprivation, “[i]nequality breeds social tensions as the less well-off feel dispossessed when compared with wealthier people. [...] The feeling of disadvantage and unfairness leads the poor to seek compensation and satisfaction by all means, including committing crimes against both poor and rich” (Fajnzylber, Lederman, and Loayza 2002, 2).

Even within this explanatory model, violence has multiple factors and finds expression in different forms:

Violence research in South Africa shows that socioeconomic inequality, frustrated masculinity, and lack of social cohesion connect and overlap to drive violence, especially in combination with alcohol and firearms. The injustices implied by displays of wealth amid poverty and high unemployment, gender norms that are difficult to live up to in the absence of resources and life opportunities, and communities fragmented by apartheid legacies and competition for resources create the conditions that enable violence. Combined, they increase the risk of homicide, gender-based violence, youth violence and violence against children, and collective violence. (CSVR 2019, 5)

The essays in *The Lockdown Collection* (2020) must be understood in this context. The authors are aware that their very being—what they consider as personal and public identities as well as how they wish they and others would fare against the virus, bears the firm imprint of South Africa’s inequality and violence. It is not surprising to see essayists write that South Africa, even pre-Covid, was not “normal” (Mohamed 2020,

31); that it had a “rape culture” (Mohamed 2020, 32), and “penchant for xenophobia” (Mashile 2020, 19). The essayists seem to agree that segregation and inequality deepened post-1994 and as such, the Covid-19 virus is exposing “the apartheid everywhere” (Haffajee 2020, 67). As Pumla Gqola (2020, 55) muses, “[p]erhaps the virus is not showing anything about our society that we did not already know”; it might not even lead to social cohesion but trigger deeper reflection on South Africanness, particularly “the many inescapable ways in which [South Africans] are connected to each other” (55).

There is a sense of foreboding in some of the essays: that things can only get worse because in the first place, there is a paternalism by the government towards “its people,” as politicians are wont to address the populace in the proprietary “our people.” The fact, though, is that these are poor people in “the most unequal country in the world” (Mohamed 2020, 31). The disdain for the poor is also seen in euphemisms that refer to them. For example, Haffajee (2020, 65) cynically writes, “The mobile laboratories [for testing Covid-19] move across our ‘vulnerable’ areas—a synonym for dirt-poor and Covid magnetic areas. They will be used to mass test, to see if the virus has hop-scotched from rich and resourced South Africa, into poor and desperate South Africa.” The class divide is also physical, as in the case of wealthy Sandton separated from poor Alexandra by a highway. Separate but also together, given the constant human traffic between the two places mostly in the form of domestic workers and gardeners who have to clean houses and tend to gardens of the middle class and rich. It becomes clear that although all South Africans are in the Covid-19 morass, it is a question of “many deeper than others” (Mazza 2020, 157). Consequently, depending on one’s social class and race, lockdown language and practice mean different things to various individuals and groupings, depending largely on the intersection of gender, race, income, residential zoning and class. As Haffajee (2020, 67) reflects, “COVID-19 has, of course, exposed our fault-lines of race and class like the bastard it is. Social distancing when you have a garden, Netflix, food and a credit card are very different to life in a shack, on an unpaid furlough and crammed in with six other people.” In fact, Sisonke Msimang (2020, 29) argues that given South Africa’s entrenched inequality, the idea of finding inner peace during lockdown “is so middle class, so tone deaf in all the worst possible ways,” because the poor cannot “lean into this time and appreciate it.”

In her essay “Remaking the Ordinary,” Kharnita Mohamed (2020, 31), as a concerned university lecturer, dramatises the intersection of the factors mentioned above. She unpacks the assumption that university lecturers and students could work from home “as per normal” (32), itself a form of amnesia that has forgotten the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements of 2015, which demanded equal access to quality higher education and decolonised curricula. After two weeks of rapid training on online teaching and learning, the distance learning programme was unrolled:

We were meant to go ahead as per “normal” as if some of our students did not live in dense neighbourhoods and households where there was very little space to study, even

if the university provided a leased computer and data. As if some of our students were not returning to homes where there was no food. As if some of them would not be standing in long lines at hospitals when people got ill. As if some of them would not have added domestic chores. As if some of them were not being abused. They were expected to go back to neighbourhoods where gang violence and addiction and poverty were rife. (Mohamed 2020, 32–33)

The point Mohamed makes is that to start with, “university routines” (32) pre-Covid were “not so ordinary” for most poor black students who found themselves financially and intellectually excluded. Covid-19 and its protocols of social distancing did not work for most of these students given the pre-existing conditions Mohamed mentions above, hence the drive by the Black Academic Caucus to offer university accommodation to poor black students, thereby challenging the assumption that “we were all located in the same kind of ordinary, just a distance from each other” (32).

The other ordinary that is alluded to above is that of privilege, especially white privilege. Eva Mazza expresses awareness of her privilege by first telling the readers that she lives in Stellenbosch, a place associated with wealth, power and white privilege. Although she is aware of this privilege, she has decided not to beat herself “too much about it” (2020, 153). Looking at her well-stocked fridge, Mazza writes: “Right now I am revolted by the fact that I have so much in my fridge. I’m revolted by the evident disparity of wealth that times like these reveal between the haves and the have-nots. For those not in the loop, it’s called white privileged guilt” (153). She unearths the irony of sanctimonious charity in which the privileged, from their “20-roomed monstrosities” (156) are sparing a thought for the poor after stockpiling “every conceivable non-perishable item” (156) and does not separate herself from that group that she criticises:

So I went home, and watched from the comfort of my lounge, behind my palisade fencing, the sanctimonious rantings of the wealthy—including me—“sparing thoughts” for the most poor and vulnerable in our country. The very people who were “sparing thoughts for the poor” had bloody bought up items needed to survive this virus and 21 day Lockdown! (156)

In self-deprecating style, the very staple of essay writing, she reflects on how blind some privileged whites are to their privilege: “I wonder sometimes how much like assholes we whites must appear to be, in this time of Corona. First, toilet paper, then panic-buying and the audacity to complain about not being able to jog during Lockdown. TO JOG!” (157).

The insistence on jogging is echoed in a petition to the president of South Africa by a white middle-class coastal community to be allowed to surf:

Some of—its always some of—the people in this village have signed a petition to President Ramaphosa, asking that surfing be made an essential activity during Lockdown. If Privilege was one of the four Horsemen of Bourgeoisocalypse, this is where he’d stable his mount. His three compatriots, Indignation, Exceptionalism, and

Whiney, would have holiday homes here. I'm not naming the village, because it's not at all an anomaly in middle class South Africa. It's merely a salt-sprayed synecdoche, standing in for the lamentable entirety. (Roper 2020, 71)

This level of self-absorption in the middle of a health crisis has an apt Greek phrase which translates to "The World is burning and she's combing her pubic hairs" (Mazza 2020, 157). The point for Mazza (2020) and Roper (2020) is not so much one's privilege but how one handles it. Blindly flaunting it reflects ignorance regarding South Africa's "identity politics" (Koopman 2020, 115). In her essay, "My Covert Corona Diaries," Kelly-Eve Koopman (2020, 114) is mindful of the dangers of careless identity appellations in South Africa, the need for political correctness, and achieving a sense of South Africanness. She writes, "I've taken the Lockdown to finally learn Xhosa, untwisting my tongue from its colonial shackles—a word a day" (115). She volunteers her copywriting and graphic design skills by painting placards in isiXhosa that urge people to stay at home:

It is important that people, especially people in the townships, have access to correct information. Oof. Does that sound patronizing? DISCLAIMER: I am a responsible and active citizen. Non-racist, non-sexist or rather anti-racist, anti-sexist, aware of my own privilege as a light skin middle class, second generation-university going Coloured. (Koopman 2020, 115)

No matter how well meaning, something is bound to trip Koopman (2020) for wanting to be an "ideal" South African in a few weeks. She misspells the message that urges people to stay home, in spite of her concerted effort to pronounce the President's name correctly, "not to pronounce it like a whitey" (Koopman 2020, 115). Although she thanks a black supermarket cashier with a "deferential" tone (114) for being an essential worker, it is significant that Koopman belongs to a Neighbourhood WhatsApp group that has "sporadic mild racism" and fear of riots—"terrified about the prospect of bricks, breaking glass and angry poor people" (116). It is, overall, a middle-class positionality that desires to know the poor and by extension claim national belonging, but it fails because it is superficial.

Koopman's (2020) sentiments remind us of the country's socioeconomic divisions that require some form of resolving before they fester further, causing national instability. Just as Koopman (2020) meant well in the example above, Mohamed (2020, 34) reflects on how charity is heavily tainted in an unequal country like South Africa:

People who have benefited from racist capitalism and were able to build forms of security during this crisis, have given and are giving, in ways unimagined from a shack in an under-resourced township, where if you protest for food, you are more likely to get a rubber bullet to the face, than a loaf of bread. Some of them have kindly given the money they would have spent on a cup of coffee a day, the sum of which is greater than the social grant of R350 for a chronically unemployed person. Some of them have kindly given the money they would have spent on a single meal at a restaurant, which again is more than some people's household budgets. Some of them are putting together food

parcels with food they would never buy for themselves. Some are making sandwiches, that they would never give their own children. And yet, it is more than the people who need it, have. (Mohamed 2020, 34)

That the social grant equals someone's coffee and a meal equals a household budget are staggering comparisons, which all the more reveal the limitations of philanthropy, whose aim is to pacify the poor. The donors are doing this "lest a revolution come their way" and so they are "taking pictures of their goodness with the nameless poor, who are always black. Something to prove in the years ahead that although they might have benefitted from colonialism and apartheid, they are good people, nonetheless" (Mohamed 2020, 34). Although the author says she is not cynical that genuine care exists, she nonetheless makes the point that philanthropy only maintains the status quo, and implies that it is only a matter of time before the poor start demanding more than pacificatory and undignified gifting from the state or the rich.

Living in the Shadow of (Lockdown) Violence

In the previous section, I briefly demonstrated the link between inequality and violence, referencing interpersonal violence. In the book, essayists also cite the violence of the post-apartheid state and its similarity to the violence of the apartheid state (Pithouse 2020; Rasch 2020). Mohamed (2020, 35) writes of consistent and worsening "astronomical amounts of violence" South Africans endure. Living in a country with high economic inequality and consistent violence engenders chronic anxiety in which citizens are nervously poised since the "effect of some perceived threat or emergency is to make our bodies prepare for muscular activity—the fight or flight response" (Wilkinson 2004, 4). This is the kind of nervousness that one senses in the essays that focalise violence—its ubiquity, the state's failure to curb it and indeed, the state's role in perpetuating violence. It is a burdensome and collective state of siege characterised by widespread sexual violence and femicide, prompting the naming of the victims: "in 2019, Uyinene Mrwetyana, a University of Cape Town student, was raped and killed in a post office. Jesse Hess, a University of the Western Cape student was raped and killed in her home" (Mohamed 2020, 32), and these two are just examples of victims of "all the multiple violences women experience in a misogynistic country, like South Africa, which has some of the highest rates of rape, sexual assault and femicide in the world" (32). The deployment of the army and police to monitor adherence to Covid-19 protocols can only result in the deepening of violence as another layer of open militarised masculinity is added, leading to

the maiming of those who have the least and have always lost the most. An increase in impoverishment and violence. An increase in the torture of women at the hands of men who say they love them. [...] An increase in the predation of women and children's bodies, by men who will claim that history has broken them so much more than the rest of us, that their only recourse is to increase the breaking of the world, the breaking of lives. (Mohamed 2020, 33)

Mohamed (2020) is dissatisfied with the psychoanalytical explanation of male victimhood. Although she does not expand on the wider causes, such as inherited systemic violence, other essayists do.

When the police and army were deployed to monitor and enforce adherence to Covid-19 rules, Carsten Rasch, a former journalist who covered township violence in the 1980s and 1990s, sensed echoes of 1986, when the country was “on fire” (Rasch 2020, 39). Post-apartheid peace time during the Covid-19 crisis is reminiscent of violent apartheid repression:

That was State of Emergency; this is State of Disaster. Those cops were hunting activists, these guys are humiliating poor youngsters and desperate street traders; Le Grange was looking for bombs and weapons, Cele is looking for cigarettes, alcohol, cooked food. The situations are 35 years apart, but the same thing is happening; the state is de-legitimising itself, while grabbing power. (Rasch 2020, 42)

The victims are still the same—poor and black. The rule against hot meals in supermarkets affected mostly the poor who had relied on the low pricing of some of this food (Rasch 2020). Indeed, the violent dispersal of informal food vendors who relied on this form of trade as their livelihood makes Rasch (2020, 42) ask: “Does [Minister of Police] Cele not realise that the closest thing to compare his police force to, right now, is the apartheid police?” The author reaches this conclusion after also noticing the violence reserved for the media and the dehumanisation of people in general: “The army in the streets, the media treated like the enemy, the cops like wild, snapping dogs, and the people, like dumb animals” (Rasch 2020, 39). Rasch (2020, 38) rants against the government and lampoons the Minister of Police as “Cele, our Minister of Brutality” and Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs as “Minister of Unco-operation, Trivial Affairs & Banned Items.” The personal here is no different from others in the collection—it is a conduit for venting and exposing misplaced priorities and attitudes amongst public officials.

Richard Pithouse (2020, 46) in his essay, “The Urgency of Critique,” challenges those who think that it is “unpatriotic, irresponsible and even immoral to question the authority of the state” in its efforts to curb the spread of Covid-19, insisting that the state needs to be critiqued all the time, even under Covid-19 lockdown when some think that it is doing a great job. Pithouse (2020, 48) makes the claim that, “There have been a number of deaths at the hands of the police and army during Lockdown,” which he goes on to support with evidence. The murder of Collins Khosa on Good Friday of 2020 in Alexandra by the South African Defence Force proves two things (Pithouse 2020). The first is the increased visibility of the poor and marginalised because the pandemic “has generated some sense that all our futures are entwined [resulting in] more coverage than usual of the experiences of impoverished people, including evictions and hunger” (48). Second, it is confirmation of the state’s signature brutality in how it deals with poor blacks:

In South Africa there is, to our collective shame, a long list of unarmed people who have been killed by the police in the post-apartheid era. People have been killed during protests, as well as during various forms of armed state action such as evictions. ... There's an equally long and shameful list of people who have died in police custody. It is not unusual for deaths at the hands of the state to pass without any media reports or public discussion. When there are reports, the names of the dead are sometimes not given and frequently no attempt is made to establish the circumstances of the killing. Often the scandal is that there is no scandal. (Pithouse 2020, 47–48)

In challenging the anonymity of some of these murders, the author cites the murder of Andries Tatane in Ficksburg in 2011 and Mido Macie in Daveyton in 2013, at the hands of the police. These were publicly discussed because they had been recorded on camera. Some of the brutality caught on camera never gets publicised because “[p]eople filming abuses are often assaulted, have their phones destroyed or stolen, or are forced to delete footage at gunpoint” (49). Colonial forms of policing are tacitly endorsed for the policing of impoverished black people while other racial groups and classes are treated differently and with dignity, Pithouse (2020) concludes. This conclusion is supported by the civility soldiers display to one middle-class community, cited by Koopman: “There are soldiers right at the end of our street, 24 hours a day. They greet us all by name” (Koopman 2020, 126). Elsewhere, particularly in the townships, the treatment of civilians is both psychologically and physically violent. The meaning and practice of hard lockdown are different depending on racial and class inequalities. Tshabalala (2020, 96) dramatises it this way: “Yeah, the thing with the cops and soldiers is bullshit. *Vele* [certainly] they will never treat white people like this [rough-shod]. Ever! Even when arresting them, they probably call them ‘sir’ and ‘madam’ while we [poor black people] are ‘*hheyi, wena*’ [hey you!] and ‘*msunu*.’” The last pejorative, “*msunu*,” is one of the most vulgar swear words in isiZulu and expresses utmost contempt for someone.

Conclusion

The Lockdown Collection (2020) represents one of countless cultural artefacts that responded to initial moments of Covid-19 lockdown in the world in general and South Africa in particular. Together, the pieces create a rich tapestry of in-trauma essays from which to glean initial reactions to the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions in South Africa. The book's earlier and shorter e-versions and their circulatory and commercial success suggest future prosperity of e-publishing of the personal essay as a narrative of crisis and narration of crisis. The coming together of 40 diverse South African authors indicates a common cause—bearing individual and collective witness to the trauma of Covid-19, in order to lessen it and to some point, to inspire hope. While the essays written in the immediacy of the initial hard lockdown are written from the positionality of each author, there are overarching themes that speak to the peculiarities and anxieties of being South African, and this article identified inequality and violence as two such enmeshed themes which exercised the imaginations of the essayists at both individual and collective levels. There is a sense in which the essayists are pointing out what is broken or wrong in South African society, with a hope that Covid-19 has shone a light

on that which needs urgent fixing, such as the country's huge inequality gap, which perpetuates some of the highest levels of structural and interpersonal violence in the world. The essays read like testimonies that make sense of mass death and prolonged precarity and attempt to work out possibilities of being useful in a crisis—to oneself and country, both at once. They ask if South Africa takes seriously the need to address imbalances of the past, if the country is creating a just and equitable place, and if there is a balance between the severe disruption of ordinary life and the organised responses of the state.

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