The World Poetics of Lockdown in Pandemic Poetry

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Abstract

This essay uses contemporary theories on World Literature to discuss two anthologies of pandemic poetry: Singing in the Dark: A Global Anthology of Poetry Under Lockdown, and And We Came Outside and Saw the Stars Again: Writers from Around the World on the Covid-19 Pandemic. These anthologies develop a new criticality on issues of migration, biopower, and inequality that have long “plagued” cultures of late capitalism. As they represent various states of lockdown imposed around the world due to the spread of the coronavirus, the anthologies grapple with the paradoxical experience of the “singular-universal” that comes with living in a pandemic. By emphasizing the untranslatability of diverse bodies, races, cultures, and languages, these anthologies deconstruct the perceived synchrony of experiencing lockdown. This essay reveals how they attempt to deconstruct the Eurocentrism of “World Literature” by reconfiguring the category of the “global” and representing collective trauma.

Keywords


1 Reconfiguring the “Global” in a Pandemic

1.1 Cities of the Dead

It is 1918 once more, and New Delhi has become “a city of the dead.” Ahmed Ali described the impact of the Spanish Flu in his 1940 novel Twilight in Delhi: “There was not a single hour of the day when a few dead bodies were not carried outside the city to be buried. Soon the graveyards became full, and it was difficult to find even three yards of ground to put a person in his final resting...
As I write this essay during the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic in India, there are mass burnings near the Yamuna. Corpses overflow in the river and hospitals and crematoriums reach capacity. There are over 350,000 cases of infection and 4,000 deaths per day. The bustling metropolis of New Delhi is bathed in an eerie silence, punctuated by the occasional sound of an ambulance on the streets. Twilight descends as I read passages from *Singing in the Dark: A Global Anthology of Poetry Under Lockdown*. The title of the book invokes a residual cultural practice from the time of the Spanish Flu, when the people of Delhi sang songs and circulated *ghazals* in Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi “They made songs and sang them, and the leaflets containing them sold for a piece each”:

> How deadly this fever is  
> Everyone is dying of it  
> Men become lame with it  
> And go out in *dolis*  
> The hospitals are gay and bright  
> But sorry is men's plight.  

*“Tera Mujhse” n.p.*

During the coronavirus pandemic, such vernacular forms endure in digital funerals and prayer services for the dead conducted on platforms like WhatsApp and Zoom. Through video calls organized by doctors and priests, the bereaved bear a surreal kind of virtual witness to the last rites of their loved ones in quarantine. For example, on 12 May 2021, a frontline medical professional, Dr. Dipshikha Ghosh, tweeted:

> Today, towards the end of my shift, I video called the relatives of a patient who is not going to make it. We usually do that in my hospital if it's something they want. This patient's son asked for a few minutes of my time. He then sang a song for his dying mother. 

> “Tera Mujhse” n.p.

As hospitals become sites of perpetual quarantine and the basic human right to access the deathbed of a loved one gets revoked, global technology and social media platforms appear to have come to the “rescue.” Those who wield this technology retain their right to life, while others have no option but to “sing in the dark.” Unlike Spanish Flu times, when the greatest act of dishonour to the victims was a stolen shroud – Ahmed Ali hovers delicately in his novel on the topic of *kafan chors*, thieves who would rob crematoriums to
resell shrouds to an endless stream of mourners – coronavirus victims in India have been stripped completely of aura in an age of technological reproducibility.

1.2 The “Singular Universal” Paradox

Published by Penguin during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in India, Singing in the Dark is a choral spectrum of trauma and resilience from across the world. From the celebrated Kenyan poet Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o to the Greek poet Yiorgos Chouliaras, its contributors hail from diachronous linguistic and cultural regions. Though most of the poets are of Indian origin, writing in either English or their respective vernacular, the anthology markets itself as “global” in scope. It focuses on issues of migration and biopower that have long “plagued” cultures of late capitalism. It also highlights the paradoxical experience of the “singular-universal” of living through a “global” health crisis. In their foreword, the editors Nishi Chawla and K. Satchidanandan claim that “We believe that all of these poets have been rendered so vulnerable, along with the rest of humanity, that they were moved to project their brutally changed reality” (xi, italics added). While their emphasis on “all” and “humanity” revives a kind of literary humanism that has long been disparaged by critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Judith Butler, and Emily Apter, the anthology makes a strong case to rescue contemporary Indian poetry from the canonical boundary of the “Global South” and market it as “World Literature.” During lockdown, I also came across Ilan Stavans’s anthology And We Came Outside and Saw the Stars Again: Writers from Around the World on the Covid-19 Pandemic. It was reviewed in World Literature Today’s “75 Notable Translations of 2020” alongside Dubravka Ugrešić’s The Age of Skin, Matéi Visniec’s Mr. K Released, and Monika Zgustova’s Dressed for a Dance in the Snow.

Originally published online by Restless Books, New York, And We Came and Saw the Stars was reprinted in New Delhi by Penguin, and it also became available on Kindle during the second wave of the coronavirus on Amazon India. Its fluid transnationalism and digital accessibility set it apart from comparative publications like Anthony Caleshu and Rory Waterman’s Poetry and Covid-19: An Anthology of Contemporary, International, and Collaborative Poetry. However, I discovered a similar criticality on issues of migration and biopower experienced across the world during the pandemic. Of course, Stavans’s own identity, as a Mexican-Jewish Marxist scholar who founded Restless Books and teaches courses on Latin American and World Literature at Amherst College, explains the emphasis on literary eclecticism and multilingualism. And We Came and Saw the Stars is a product of both the existing “local” diver-
sity within the immigrant intelligentsia of North America and of a “global”
digital market that translates and disseminates the works of prominent non-
English and non-American writers.

This brings me to Spivak’s call to “reconfigure the global” in her plenary lec-
ture given at the Modern Language Association’s 2021 annual meeting, which
was also conducted virtually due to the pandemic. Here, Spivak not only de-
fused the category of the literary “Global North” versus “South” but critiqued
the monolithic concept of the “global” itself. She raised certain important ques-
tions pertaining to “World Literature” and new digital readerships and markets
that have emerged in lockdown. First, she interrogated how a “global” health
crisis has redefined ways of editing, marketing, and circulating “World Litera-
ture.” As expected, nations like India are among the worst impacted. However,
with cities of the “Global North” such as New York, Bucharest, Amster
dam, Rome, and Sydney equally becoming centers of infection, it became futile to
reduce human suffering to a standard kind of Third World exceptionalism.
Second, Spivak asked whether the shared experience of biopower and digi-
tal colonialism in lockdown made it ironically possible for a “mediating World
Space” to exist between “literature,” “history,” and the “World” that is “rela-
tively autonomous” (Casanova 275). Third, she questioned how the Eurocentric
category of “World Literature” may be reconfigured in an always already mul-
tilingual and multicultural space like India. Is it even possible to subsume a
traumatic event like the coronavirus pandemic into a “global” poetic idiom?

Both *Singing in the Dark* and *And We Came out and Saw the Stars* reveal
a heightened communicability in enforced social isolation, perhaps even an
increased push for translatability and literary border-crossing. However, there
are significant differences in the editorial processes of anthologization. For
instance, as opposed to the evenly distributed internationalism of *And We
Came out and Saw the Stars*, *Singing in the Dark* dares the “global” reader to
enter “local” testimonies of the pandemic precisely through conditions of their
untranslatability. If there is already an unbridgeable gap between the lockdown
experience of the privileged and underprivileged classes in India, the anthology
explores whether the singular trauma of an Indian migrant worker who loses
his home may even be translatable as “World Literature.” It echoes Spivak’s con-
cern whether it is at all possible to “achieve an apparent synchrony” in World
Literature, or to develop a “global criticality when we are divided by different
diachronies” (Spivak “Plenary Session”). I elaborate these issues by comparing
how Stavans as well as Chawla and Satchidanandan “reconfigure the global”
in these anthologies. Are they simply cherry-picking pandemic literature from
different parts of the world, or developing significant new ways to preserve the
singularity of experience?
2 Unprecedented Untranslatables

2.1 “Refugees in Our Own Country”

The reality of mass death came early to India, as it went into a complete lockdown for the first time in March 2020. This was a knee-jerk response to the spread of the coronavirus in Italy, Spain, Iran, and Malaysia from Wuhan, China. Complete lockdown meant the closure of all commercial, corporate, and government institutions, transportation and delivery of goods and services. The rapid transition to a work-from-home economy assumed that an average Indian worker possesses adequate digital capital such as a stable internet connection, fluency in English, and technological literacy. In a recent interview, Spivak claimed that “digital idealism” is nothing but a form of “digital colonialism” due to which the imposition of a complete lockdown ironically creates “migration crises” (Spivak “Covid-19”). Consequently, the first disaster that New Delhi witnessed was not viral plague but the mass exodus of its unskilled and daily wage labourers. With the sudden and unprecedented lockdown, they had to walk kilometres without food or water to return to hometowns and villages of North and Central India. Women gave birth on the highways and the elderly died of dehydration. Many were forced into temporary shelters resembling labour camps. The word “migrant” was used by the mainstream media to characterize this transitional population. To undermine their citizenship would be the first step to justify state neglect. New Delhi, like New York, is a city of migrants but the label was used selectively for those unable to participate in a digitally run global economy.

“Are we citizens / Or are we refugees / In our own country?” asks Sanjukta Dasgupta in her poem “Walking Home.” The poem bears witness to this singular traumatic event of lockdown migration in Delhi. Neighbouring cities of the Global South like Karachi and Dhaka, with an equally robust section of daily-wage labour, avoided a similar crisis by announcing a staggered lockdown in advance. Dasgupta notes how:

Suddenly thousands and thousands
Of them became homeless
Who asked the migrant workers
To return to their native places?

As the workers began walking home, the government cordoned off state borders and sanctioned police brutality to avoid the spread of the coronavirus. In her inquisition on the ruling party, Dasgupta juxtaposes images of the “home”
and “native” with “homeless,” “refugee,” and “migrant.” She compares the condition of a migrant child born on a barren strip of land with the privilege of the Indian elite, safe in their permanent homes in New Delhi, “Bonding with family, playing with children, watching TV / Movies, web series, video games.” The poem attests to the biopolitical suppression of bodies that constitute the backbone of the digital economy. These bodies earn a living only by being outside their homes, working on-site, and facilitating the physical movement of goods and services for e-commerce.

Interestingly, this lockdown migration functions as the ethical centre of an otherwise “global” anthology; it becomes a crisis at the centre of the crisis. The paradoxical condition of a “lockdown migration” or “stranded walking” deconstructs hegemonic definitions of the home. In a simple term like “on-site homes,” Dasgupta introduces an element of untranslatability, or what Emily Apter calls “a quality of militant semiotic intransigence” (Apter 58). What is an “on-site home”? A non-Indian reader may wonder, isn’t a home, by definition, “on-site”? Dasgupta describes “makeshift homes” of the migrant workers “They were turned out of their makeshift homes / As they could not work from home.” For the global reader, an “on-site” or “makeshift home” could be anything from a tent at a national park campsite to a tarpaulin held up on sticks in Gaza. Somewhere on this untranslatable scale of global precarity is the migrant worker’s “home” in the Indian city.

2.2 Necropolitics in the Global South
Singing in the Dark seems to distinguish between the expected theme of loneliness in lockdown and poems that expose the biopolitical control of populations due to wars, genocide, migration crises, and ecological disasters that persisted during the pandemic. For example, the poems contributed by Les Wicks, Francis Combes, Jotamario Arbeláez, Taslima Nasreen and Ari Sitas describe social isolation in rather universal and existentialist terms. Sitas introduces the Zulu refrain “Umuzi ngumuzi ngokuphanjukelwa” (a home is “home” only when it has visitors) to reflect on a “global” failure to communicate exclusively through virtual platforms like Zoom: “There was a Zoom meeting. / The Zoom meeting is not a Zoom meeting, ngokuphanjukelwa” (Chawla and Satchidanandan 301). However, such poems constitute but a smattering in the anthology. The editor Satchidanandan also dedicates his poem “The Train” to “remembering the stranded migrant workers of India” and their unrepresentable trauma:

In which language can I tell them
It is my dead body that has arrived?
Of heaven, or of hell?
I am somewhere in between.

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Which begs the question, why do poems on India’s lockdown migration dominate this “global” anthology of poetry? Who specifically do these poems aim to discombobulate, if the event is located squarely within the political and phenomenological boundaries of a particular nation? Admittedly, there are bodies all over the world that succumbed to the coronavirus. Then why the editorial effort to centre this “local” disaster within a “global” experience of vulnerability?

The aim seems to be to highlight specific bodies that succumbed to the virus not due to a lack of immunity, but because they were already at the mercy of various forms of biopower. Ravi Shanker N.’s poem “Love in the Time of the Karuna Virus” reveals how, even within the relatively homogenous space called “India,” there were multiple migrations caused by lockdown, of which the worker migrations were only an example. As they had lived under military curfew for almost a year, the streets of Kashmir “were filled with singing dancing people” when the Indian army withdrew temporarily during lockdown:

The virus entered China and the Uyghur Muslims were sent back to families from the concentration camps. Pro-democracy protesters were let out of jail.
Same good news awaited the Rohingyas in Myanmar.
North Korea ended their sham communism. By the banks of the Amazon forests, the indigenous people were returned the forests. The wall between Mexico and the US was demolished. US brought back all its marines from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia banned capital Punishment.
In Iran, dissenters were released. Aboriginal rights were accepted in Australia.
The natives got their dues in the US. Israeli troops withdrew from Palestine.

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This list of “global” events unfolding during lockdown appears cursory, as if the poet were flipping through the international section of a newspaper. However, Shanker’s phantasmagoric compounding of biopolitical atrocities taking place
across the world invites an imbrication of the “local” self in the “global” Other. It is difficult to deal in abstractions like an invisible virus, its unknown causes of spread, and even the prospect of one’s death. But it is impossible to ignore global manifestations of precarity when they are made visible thus. The poem’s title punningly transforms the coronavirus into the “karuna virus” – in Sanskrit karuna means universal compassion but within the larger scope of Hinduism constitutes a kind of ethical witnessing. The poet thereby invents a comity of the oppressed. Singing in the Dark thus locates the Global South, particularly India, as perhaps a temporal “sub-centre” of pandemic literature.

Spivak’s comments on how biopower and “digital colonialism” are useful in interrogating the governmentality that operates behind such so-called ecological disasters in the Global South. In fact, the way in which the Indian government not only mishandled the migrant crisis but exercised intense censorship on literary and mass media representations of the lockdown makes one wonder how Singing in the Dark could be published at all. Like Spivak radicalizes Michel Foucault’s work on biopower, Achille Mbembe’s concept of “necropolitics” may allow one to comprehend the sheer scale of state-sanctioned deaths during the pandemic. Mbembe argues that lockdowns, curfews, and enforced migrations are consequences of colonial and neo-colonial forces functioning within governments across the world: “Colonization was a technology for regulating migratory movements” (Mbembe Necropolitics, 10). Clearly, the reticence of governments across the world to provide free Wi-Fi, masks, and hand sanitizers shores up a kind of “atavistic nationalism” (6) that promotes – in Darwinian terms – only the survival of the least precarious in a global digital economy.

3 How to Map World Anthologies

3.1 Witnessing “Global” Trauma
In his book Mapping World Literature: International Canonization and Transnational Literatures, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen states that the literature of trauma or “denial of life” brings forth the issue of the “unrepresentable masses.” Responding to the Kantian and Burkian category of the romantic and mathematical sublime, Thomsen offers his version of poetic witnessing as “the attempt to represent an overwhelming mass of people that cannot be represented as a whole, even though it can be thought of as such” (Thomsen 114). While discussing mass death and disease, Thomsen provides instances of the “social sublime” in Boccaccio’s Decameron, Defoe’s Journal of the Plague Year, and Voltaire’s account of the plague and Lisbon earthquake in Candide. Pandemic literature is as old as the spread of disease, and therefore “facing the incom-
prehensible is traditionally one of the *raisons d’être* of literature*” (Thomsen 116). Alongside Ahmed Ali’s *Twilight in Delhi*, the sheer volume of literary works produced in India during the Spanish Flu outbreak, such as Pandey Bechan Sharma’s *Vibhatsa* and Suryakant Tripathi Niral’s *Kulli Bhat*, demonstrates that:

Literature regards each individual with compassion and goes deeper than what statistics or historical records can tell us. Literature may not fight away or explain things such as pandemics, even as modern science sometimes can’t, but it does become a source of consolation, a way of sharing our common humanist concerns.

Thomsen accounts for how literature enables us to witness disaster at a massive, universal, and social scale. However, it is worth asking how the sublime – a subjective experience of awe or horror – may be extended to the collective experience of a community, nation, or the world. Even if the source of trauma is the same, as when living in lockdown due to the spread of the coronavirus, the experience is never identical for each witness.

Kai Erikson’s concept of the “social dimension” of collective trauma is useful in this regard. With respect to survivors of traumatic events, Erikson writes that “sometimes the tissues of community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of mind and body.” This would mean that “traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos – a group culture, almost – that is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds that make it up. Trauma, that is, has a social dimension” (Erikson 185). In such a case, the entire community of survivors experiences symptoms together. This produces a somewhat paradoxical community of survivors whose kinship is based on a shared, spiritual experience of pain, estrangement, and loneliness. Erikson argues that, unlike the immediacy of trauma’s repression in an individual’s psyche, collective trauma has a more gradual, everyday quality to it.

This quality is best captured by Judith Butler, who in a recent interview with George Yancy on the trauma of living in a pandemic echoes Thomsen’s concept of the “social sublime.” Butler addresses the difficult question “How to mourn mass death” in response to Yancy’s rueful admission of horror at seeing “the piling up of corpses and makeshift morgues.” Butler clarifies that while mourning and melancholia are private reactions to a crisis, in the current circumstance of a pandemic “a purely private form of mourning is possible but cannot assuage the cry that wants the world to bear witness to the loss.” She goes on to state:
Learning to mourn mass death means marking the loss of someone whose name you do not know, whose language you may not speak, who lives at an unbridgeable distance from where you live. One does not have to know the person lost to affirm that this was a life. What one grieves is the life cut short, the life that should have had a chance to live more, the value that person has carried now in the lives of others, the wound that permanently transforms those who live on. What someone else suffers is not one’s own suffering, but the loss that the stranger endures traverses the personal loss one feels, potentially connecting strangers in grief.

Butler

Even as mourning renders one a stranger to oneself, it allows one to connect to “strangers in grief” and encounter the Other in all its singularity, incomparability, and untranslatability.

The critically acclaimed Anglo-Hungarian poet George Szti1es produces “five baroque plague sonnets” in Singing in the Dark that testify to the ancient wound of mass mourning, beginning with “Small Pox”:

Crosses, coffins and cowls determine them according to the medieval scheme of superstition, death and troubling dream. It’s half cosmology, half stratagem.

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“Black Death” marks a shift from “cosmology” to “stratagem” as the plague doctor becomes the primary witness to mass death rather than God:

... Watch how he operates in his full gown. Observe how he inspects the body, turning it here and there at distance with his cane. Meeting no resistance. Note how he prods it. He’s the bird that pecks.

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According to Thomsen, this is the difference between the romantic sublime – which began and ended with the poet’s egotistical contemplation on universal nature – and the “social sublime,” which produces collective testimony. In “Cholera,” much like the pamphleteers in Twilight in Delhi sang songs, Szti1es personifies death as a “singer”: 
Death runs from open taps
and drops from the singer’s mouth. There are few
remaining, Highness. We watch the sun at noon
rise ever higher, burning off late dew.

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By the time we arrive at the “Spanish Flu,” Sztíres makes the solemn announcement that the “World is thinning” (Chawla and Satchidanandan 325). Sztíres invokes an archaic “normal” to help us understand the cyclicality of the “new normal.” Mario Varga Llosa also reminds us in his piece “A Return to the Middle Ages” that developed countries once experienced the same precarity as the Global South today. He draws attention to the repression of disease in the themes of chivalric romances: “the enemies of a knight errant are human beings, not devils, and devils are what medieval man feared most, the kind hidden in the heart of epidemics that kill the guilty and the innocent indiscriminately” (Stavans 16). By constructing the social sublime as a collective reduction to the “basic desire to that of escaping death” (Thomsen 111), pandemic poetry produces a thickening of the category World Literature.

Singing in the Dark and And We Came Out and Saw the Stars Again harness the potential to experience the self in the Other through collective testimony. I, for instance, related best to poems on the migrant crisis in India due to my own socio-cultural situation of lockdown. But I also found myself deeply impacted by Marius Chelaru’s account of the Pitești experiment in his poem “The Old Man and Silence.” Narrated from the perspective of a survivor who, at eighty-eight years of age, feels the same crippling fear, paranoia, and loneliness in lockdown in Romania, the poem focuses on a mundane detail that drew out my empathy: “the books on the shelves caress his sadness with their titles” (Chawla and Satchidanandan 55). Similarly, Eavan Boland’s poem “Quarantine” describes the untimely death of a married couple afflicted by “the toxins of a whole history” during the Irish Famine (Stavans 329). I detected a congruence in their act of walking and cradling each other from hunger and cold in 1847, to the walk of the Indian migrant workers in 2020. Precisely because lockdown segregated entire communities and sealed off national borders, we crave a connection beyond the self. Whether it be the reference to “singing about the dark times” from Brecht’s “Motto,” or the phrase “I’m not alone in misery” from Dante’s Inferno, it is clear that both Singing in the Dark and And We Came Out and Saw the Stars archive the trauma of living in prisons not of one’s own making.
3.2 Decolonizing “Darkness”

Via Spivak, another important question lingers around the curation and publication of anthologies like *Singing in the Dark* and *And We Came Out and Saw the Stars*. Are there any poems or languages that are completely absent from the collection because these cultures continue to remain “in the dark”? Exactly who is being included in the “global” if certain poets, translators, and by extension, linguistic-cultural regions were unable to come outside through pandemic poetry? The act of anthologizing poetry from across the world on a common theme is nothing novel. As early as 1807, Herder was collecting *The Voices of the Peoples in Songs* from diachronous parts of Europe. Herder believed that songs were meant to be shared and sung in large communities, in other words, songs were the best example of the “singular-universal” paradox. However, how can these parameters for anthologization evolve in this specific global health crisis? At a time when borders of the “home” and the “world” are hermetically sealed due to lockdowns and travel restrictions, can reading and writing pandemic poetry become profound gestures towards a kind of literary humanism or fluid transnationalism?

There are many contributions in *And We Came Out and Saw the Stars* that reconfigure the global by deprovincializing Western models of pandemic literature and centering metaphors of decolonization to understand biopower. One of Stavans’s best editorial strategies is to design his anthology like a map, rather than on conventional principles of autochthony or regionalism. Alongside the race and regional origin of a contributor, for instance, the anthology also provides a distinct spatio-temporal marker of where they were present during the pandemic. Khalid Albaih’s piece “Our Old Normal” comes not from Sudan where he was raised but from Copenhagen, where he was stuck in lockdown. Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Letter to Italy” is disorienting as the celebrated diasporic writer of Indian origin, born in London, residing in Italy, experiencing lockdown in New Jersey, yearns to return “home.” The Cuban playwright Ana Simo writes her piece “Confinement” from Paris, and the Palestinian-Israeli writer Sayed Kashua’s contribution comes from St. Louis, Missouri where he migrated. In only a few cases, the place of origin of the writer coincides with place of lockdown, such as Javier Sinay’s “The Life of a Virus” from Buenos Aires or Lilya Kalaus’s piece “Toiling Under the Canopy of Empire” from Almaty, Kazakhstan. As opposed to *Singing in the Dark*, which elects India as a temporal sub-centre of the pandemic, *And We Came Out and Saw the Stars* uses a more fluid technique of mapping identities and literatures. It conveys that biopolitical migration and contingency have always been a part of the global experience of trauma.

Thus, it is futile to imagine World Literature as coming from a cumulative set of fixed nations and their national literatures. *And We Came Out and
**Saw the Stars** disavows a Herderian model of World Poetry and resembles instead Joachim Sartorius’s 1996 text *Atlas of New Poetry*. Monika Schmitz-Emans observes in her article that Sartorius’s “atlas” deconstructed traditional anthologies by simulating the migration of readers and writers in a globalized world: “it corresponds to the social-historical world described in the paratexts: a world of migrants, of exiled people and individuals, or hybrid cultures and borderline crossings” (40). Since poetry travels with the poet, Sartorius refused to localize World Literature into convenient and representative national siloes. Compared to the poems in *Singing in the Dark*, which are arranged alphabetically by author, the table of contents of *And We Came Out and Saw the Stars Again* emphasizes each poet’s role as a witness firmly located, even trapped at a particular site during lockdown, from where it is possible that they never return “home.” Rather than set up an anthology that creates a false sense of cultural equivalence, Stavans truly engages with the universal fear of dying a refugee. Each contributor performs the role of a soul trapped in Dante’s *purgatorio* where there is no choice but to “sing in the dark.”

There have been generations of oppressed peoples who have “sung” in the “dark” for whom the isolation of lockdown and suppression of free speech is indistinguishable from an everyday “phantasmagoria of biopolitics, where the only cure is a transformation of human behaviour” (Spivak “Covid-19”). Khalid Albaih’s piece “Our Old Normal” evokes the idea of a comity of the oppressed that has become visible through lockdown. As he experiences lockdown in Copenhagen, the Romanian-born Qatari-raised Sudanese writer mocks the panic of his Danish acquaintances: “I’m sorry to break it to you, but your “new normal” has been the “old normal” for billions of Brown and Black people around the world. For many of us, restrictions, repression, and deprivation have been a constant feature of our whole lives” (Stavans 109). As a witness to violent occupation in Sudan and the Middle East, Albaih claims “I have seen all this before.” Ariel Dorfman, in his piece “Confronting the Pandemic in a Time of Revolt: Voices from Chile,” also attests to the multiple jeopardy that his nation faces over and above the “darkness” of living in lockdown:

> The question then becomes whether Chile’s citizenry, as they pull together to defeat this plague, can also block the authoritarian disposition of those in charge to use the threat of this dreadful disease as an excuse to put off much-needed reforms and endlessly defer the democratic and participatory discussion of a new constitution that would represent the great majority of people.

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While the specificity of lockdown varies for migrant workers, black transwomen, or Palestinian refugees, pandemic poetry grapples with what it means to be human in the multilingual and multicultural Global South. In many ways, the poems transform survivor’s guilt into a radically enforced global empathy. As Geraldine Heng writes in her provocative article “On Not Reading, Writing, or Listening to Poetry in a Pandemic,”

For those who would turn to poetry in this time of pandemic, which is also the time of an epidemic of racism, white supremacy, Islamophobia, antisemitism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and white-terrorist predation, there is a ground where undisciplining English can meet disciplinary interests: the ground of political poetry, graced by the courageous, luminous, and powerful work of such poets as Aimé Césaire, Carolyn Forché, Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, A. Van Jordan, Claudia Rankine, and Khaled Mattawa, among many, many others.

To Heng’s list, I would add Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, whose poem “Dawn of Darkness” depicts the untranslatability of experiencing lockdown in Kenya through a haunting Gikuyu chant “Gũtirĩ ũtukũ ũtakĩa” that means “Every night ends with dawn.” Ngũgĩ begins by critiquing Western models of individualism and neo-colonialism:

Crowing about rugged individualism,
Disdaining nature, pissing poison on it even, while
Claiming that property has all the legal rights of personhood
Murmuring gratitude for our shares in the gods of capital.

The binaries “dawn” and “darkness” do not exhibit reciprocity as hoped but reveal how the pandemic has become an occasion for “a planetary-scale renewal of the relationship of enmity” (Mbembe Necropolitics, 1). After all, the ironic title of Ngũgĩ’s poem signifies not a coming out of the darkness into a new dawn but the fear of a perpetual entrapment by neo-colonial ideologies. In his recent work Out of the Dark Night, Mbembe invokes Fanon to define decolonization as a collective emerging of the Global South from “la grande nuit” by “walking all the time, night and day, in the company of Man, in the company of all men” (Mbembe Out of Dark Night, 224). Mbembe compares this decolonized community to a “universal caravan” that should not cut itself off from the coloniser but create a common vocabulary to start anew.
Towards “Terrestrial Humanism”

Let me return, by way of conclusion, to Ali’s novel *Twilight in Delhi* and the unexpected conditions of its publication. Ali was a well-known Urdu prose writer, but *Twilight in Delhi* was his first novel in English. He had difficulty publishing it in the South Asian market, and its first edition was brought out in London in 1940 by the Bloomsbury group. In an astonishing testament to how far a text can travel beyond its national boundaries, Ali’s manuscript was optioned by none other than E.M. Forster. Forster worked tirelessly with Ali to launch this poignant literary testimony of the impact of the Spanish Flu in India to a global readership. The willingness of the literary “centre” in London to engage with trauma narrated at the “periphery” in India reflects an early example of what Leela Gandhi calls “affective cosmopolitanism” or “the ethico-political practice of a desiring self inexorably drawn towards difference” (Gandhi 5). Unlike Aziz and Fielding’s thwarted relationship in Forster’s novel *A Passage to India*, the alliance between the native writer Ali and the established Forster was not a deferred friendship banished to the realm of “not here” and “not yet.” Using Gandhi’s conceptual framework, one may locate Forster in a “dissident cross-cultural collaboration” with Ali, which proves that it has long been possible, even desirable, to reconfigure the global through World Literature.

The same affective cosmopolitanism operates in *And We Came Out and Saw the Stars Again*. Nadia Christidi’s photo essay “@Coronarratives,” for instance, showcases different cities in lockdown on social media. Christidi’s subaltern identity as a female, Syrian, Palestinian, and Greek writer experiencing lockdown in Lebanon enables her to foster a “dissident cross-cultural collaboration” through social media platforms in the pandemic. Having created the hashtag @coronarratives on Instagram, she invited photojournalists from Michigan, Istanbul, Hong Kong, Singapore, Moscow, and Amman to contribute images of lockdown. She then curates the photographs into a gallery of the social sublime – empty streets and benches, wiped-out grocery stores, street signs on vaccination or Construction Workers’ Union protests, and maps illustrating divisions of those who stayed home versus those living on the streets. Christidi’s archive shows that while technology has the “potential for building solidarities on the Web,” it doesn’t consider “who gets included and excluded” (Stavans 126). By allying themselves with those who cannot stay safe at home and even those who lack the digital capital to engage with their images, these photojournalists flouted lockdown by taking to the streets with their camera. Their photographs allow discrete experiences of lockdown in various parts of the world to translate to a global audience. Christidi captures a street sign in Singapore with the hashtag “@sgunited” to show the inability of technology to mitigate biopower,
since it “can carry multiple, contradictory valences, both/either a universalist call for brotherhood and/or a nativist insistence on ‘Singapore First!’” (Stavans 132).

Mbembe’s prescient pronouncement about biopower and the impending fragility of the world in his introduction to *Necropolitics* comes to mind: “a force of separation rather than one that is bond-intensifying – a force of scission and real isolation that is exclusively turned upon itself and that, while pretending to ensure the world’s government, seeks exemptions from it” (Mbembe *Necropolitics*, 1). He claimed that ultimately it is disease and illness that create a sense of globalism. We begin to fear a common end rather than fixate on our diachronous points of origin. As the coronavirus spreads across the world, “illness” becomes a metaphor for biopolitical mortalities and literary precarities. Mbembe thus calls for a “terrestrial humanism” over a kind of Eurocentric or Herderian spiritual humanism. If migration and marginalisation become the governing principles of World Literature, and writers of the Global South may be allowed to temporarily forgo their fetishized regional identities to participate in larger causes, then we may begin to discover new ways to converse and translate. World Literature may truly begin to understand the singularity of the Other and pass from the strictly “human condition” to what Mbembe calls the “terrestrial condition,” where literature redefines “the human in the framework of a general ecology and henceforth broadened geography, one that is spherical and irreversibly planetary” (13).

**Works Cited**


