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The Pandemic of Racism in Selected Contemporary Poems

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Abstract: Out of the lockdown restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic emerged contemporary American poetry through social media, online publishing, and print to portray a global health crisis, document the pain of social and physical distance, and reassert common humanness. It came to regenerate human empathy and compassion and stir in people the struggles of homelessness, exile, poverty, or at-home self-isolation. However, contemporary pandemic poetry, as it is called, transcended the therapeutic stand as a mere representation of emotional distress, tears behind the masks, or a source to remedy the physical harm and reestablish hope in humanity that the pandemic fractured. Through examining selected pandemic poems written by contemporary Black American poets, this paper argues that their poetry is neither a new version of stereotyped or clichéd themes about minorities in America, nor a poetic outlet during a health crisis. Instead, the paper is inclined to exhibit that poetry of minorities written during COVID-19 time is a manifesto of race-based violence that exposes an ongoing pandemic of structural racism. The paper also argues that pandemic poetry stands as a platform and praxis to reveal health antiracism discourse vs. established cultural and racialized assumptions of the different 'other 'that are deeply rooted in the non-minority mentality.

Keywords: pandemic poetry, Covid-19, structural and institutional racism, anti-racism, Black American poets.

I. INTRODUCTION

"This pandemic has magnified every existing inequality in our society – like systemic racism, gender inequality, and poverty."

Melinda Gates in an interview in September

Throughout COVID-19, poetry worldwide came to be not only the therapeutic act of love that gave an outlet to emotional experiences of pain or loss, or the poetics that helped absorb the strange events and suffering of the pandemic to see the hope beyond. It also turned out to be a platform to de-quarantine a serious social ill from its seeming lockdown, that is racism. While physicians and workers in medical fields were far above cultural or ethnic barriers, struggling to save patients, identity politics continued to emerge to set further cultural differences in medical health care or social fields. How would public health practice be of help if it does not reach all people or keep considering Black, Asian, and Latin communities as the 'other.' Ironically speaking, Covid-19 itself did not discriminate, while identity politics did. And there came the practice of poetry to animate people, taking them away from imposed strict isolation and raising questions about the real pandemic.

The premise behind critical race theory claims race is not a biological or natural characteristic by which certain human beings or social groups are recognized or come to be known. It is rather a "socially constructed (culturally invented) category that is used to oppress and exploit people of color," a label that is institutionally imposed on groups of physically distinct characters (Britannica). However, racism came to be considered a reality deeply rooted in the history of various countries such as America, Australia, Canada, etc., a cultural and social context against which legal institutions endeavored to enable economic, political, and civil equality

amongst diverse minorities. Ironically, various legal institutions in the aforementioned countries created institutional or systemic racism as much as they worked on eradicating segregation and ethnic hierarchies. For instance, banks, hospitals, schools, and governmental agencies in America played a crucial role in perpetuating racial and economic disparities amongst their diverse citizens. Such kind of racism, as it wascoined in 1967 by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*(1992), differs from direct individual and collective racism[1]since it is less identifiable or "less overt," but "far more subtle." Because institutionalracism originated through the functioning "of established and respected forces in the society, thus it receives far less public condemnation than [individual racism]" (p.4). That is to say, if obvious racism or prejudiced violent attitudes against people of color are now but distant memories whether in the United States or other countries of the Western world, then how would one explain the great rate of deaths of children, women, and old people amongst the ethnic communities in America or England during the pandemic? Such death rates of people of color versus that of white people are nothing but questionable. Ever since the last quarter of the 20th century, racism is still visible as a social, cultural, and political disease associated with institutional systems.

In her forward to *The Unequal Pandemic: COVID- 19 and Health Inequalities*, Kate Pickettmakes a statement that correlates with the notion of structural and institutional racism, saying:

> There are also significant inequalities by ethnicity and race, with the mortality of ethnic minorities in the UK considerably higher than expected, and the death rates of Black Americans in US cities such as Chicago are far higher than for their White counterparts. This is because of the interaction of the pandemic with existing social, economic, and health inequalities. (Bambra et.at, 2021, p.XIII)

No wonder the authors of the same book, Clare Bambara, Julia Lynch, and Katherine Smith (2021) assume that the pandemic's healthcare inequalities have their roots that were implemented by the spirit of past racism. The unequal influences of COVID-19 were based on earlier ethnic and economic preparations of identity politics:

> the pandemic was a predictable event and the unequal effects could have been mitigated or avoided through better preparation. The original inequalities leading to these unequal impacts were a result of prior political choices, and policymakers could choose whether to address the unequal impacts of the pandemic or not. Governments responded differently, and those with higher rates of social inequality and less generous social security systems had a more unequal pandemic. (p. XIV)

II. Racism in Pandemic Poetry

In "How the Pandemic Defeated America: A Virus Has Brought the World's Most Powerful Country to its Knees," Ed Yong, the 2021 Pulitzer Prize winner for Explanatory Reporting, provides crucial information on the American healthcare system during the pandemic, stating "Of the 3.1 million Americans who still cannot afford health insurance in states where Medicaid has not been expanded, more than half are people of color, and 30 percent are Black." No wonder that would be the case even after the time of the Civil War in which "the white leaders of former slave States deliberately withheld health care from Black Americans," building hospitals that Black communities could not reach, and segregating Black patients into detached sections (para.11). Even Black students did not have access to equal medical care, a matter from which they suffered in the 20th century.

Such realities render ironical the title of the published anthology, *Together in a Sudden Strangeness* (2020) by Alice Quinn who tends to underline through the anthologized poems that in the strangeness of the pandemic,people were together under the same calamity. No doubt that the book was published in a real moment of strangeness which all people went through, yet the title seems to contradict the serious inequities that

[1] Individual and collective racism refers to "whites acting against individual blacks and acts by the total white community against the black community. We call these individual racism and institutional racism. The first consists of overt acts by individuals, which cause death, injury, or the violent destruction of property (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1992, p.4).

took place during the pandemic. However, its published poems do reveal the demanding task of poetry as the cultural aperture and the very literary horizon by which racialized institutional actions are exposed. Also, the included poetry endeavors to build new networks of human connections vs. social distancing and fear of the other. The published poems of Quinn's anthology or those that are published via the internet in general, did take this literary genre into a context larger than being labeled 'pandemic' or 'lockdown' poems. As they frame and locate the Covid-19 crisis, they also prove that the effect of this virus was larger than the most foreboding economic and public health crisis.

In her introduction to *Togetherness in a Sudden Strangeness*, Quinn asserts that the anthologized poems do explore "the malign inequities endlessly perpetuated in America and reflected so glaringly in the pandemic moment-unequal access to health care, food, clean water, decent housing, jobs, and power" (XVII). There comes the role of poetry that Phillips highlights, saying "Poetry is séance and silence and science/…/A rendition of tradition unplanned" (123). Reclaiming history and past tradition into the present of the pandemic creates a cultural space to reidentify and interpret the current moment. It is the pandemic that made it possible to reread history and reopen new oeuvres of understanding the American national character, old and new stories of identity politics, as well as structural racism: "Such a teacher/ About ourselves we are/Learning so much from you" says Seshadri of Covid-19 (136).

Julie Sheldon, a new contemporary white writer who calls herself "I am an 'accidental poet," states that: "I found my poetic voice during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic," and claims in her poem "The same Boat":

'We're all in the same boat' they say
But I would disagree
So many different sailing crafts
Upon this stormy sea
Some sail on ocean liners
In comfort, style, and ease
Relaxing on their balconies ....Sipping G & Ts
…….
Some struggle on their battleships
Where nothing's going right
Endlessly preparing.....
For the next relentless fight. (*Line of Poetry*, 2020)

Even if Sheldon intends the poem to emphasize the unique Corona experience for each individual rather than referring to its racist spirit, the above lines do uncover that people were not really in the same boat. Interestingly, the poem is turned into a story video on YouTube that went quite viral, providing a new insight into a time when people were never equal neither in their lifeboats nor with their lifejackets. Vijay Seshadri (1954-), an Indian American poet, vocalizes a similar perspective about the pandemic, saying in his poem "April 5, 2020" that people are addressed by the plague "Run run says the plague/ Some run out some run in some can't run" (136).

The crisis of the pandemic that coincided with the very issue of the tragedy of the killing of George Floyd in May 2020 by a Minneapolis police officer flamed Black Lives Matter (BLM)[2] movement once again to call for a law-and-order platform for Black people. Contemporary American poets could not blink an eye to the inequalities or injustices that deepened the sorrowful consequences of the pandemic. African American poets such as Evie Shockley (1965-), Claudia Rankine (1963-), Rowan Ricardo Phillips (1974-), Yusef

[2] BLM is an "international social movement, formed in the United States in 2013, dedicated to fighting racism and anti-Black violence, especially in the form of police brutality. The name *Black Lives Matter* signals condemnation of the unjust killings of Black people by police (Black people are far more likely to be killed by police in the United States than white people)" (Britannica).

Komunyakaa (1947-), and other well-known academics like Dr. Ryan J. Petteway, Prof. Canute Lawrence, and Julia Alvarez (1950-) all wrote of a contaminated social American reality which people experienced it unequally. Through writing in the sonnet form, haiku, or prose poems, as well as experimental forms, those poets sought to reveal the connection between the pandemic period and racial inequities that caused the unequal distribution of health benefits. Such inequalities enhanced the negative medical, social, and emotional outcomes of the pandemic for low-income workers of color and ethnic minorities. The injustices they already suffered from in working places, mainly those who work in the service sector, were required to go to work during the lockdown, a matter that risked further their lives more than usual (Bambara et.al, 2021, p.8). Cultural and social ills can be positively considered another version of cultural re-colonization embodied through structural and institutional racism.

Thus, there comes the task of contemporary poets who came to be "witnesses" as Alice Quinn states: "Poets can crystallize a moment like this."(qtd. in *Italie*, 2020, para.9). It is a moment that Evie Shockley, for instance, calls "an inoculation against innocence," as her prose poem is entitled. It is a poem that diagnoses the inequities during such a crisis, written in a highly modernist and experimental way, combining divided lines into halves similar to an organized column on a blank page.. However, its lines with uneven gaps, and fragmented, and uncapitalized sentences to reveal the differences and inequities in treating some people vs. others during the pandemic:

wwiii floated the globe a common enemy. as usual, we were all in it
together, *it* being history, *in it* up to our necks. what good is hand-
washing when the contaminants coat the surface of everything we
touch: doorknobs, compassion, healthcare, all teeming with germs
of the past, no less concentrated for being invisible. we breathe them
as one, in and out, the only kind of sharing that comes naturally to us.[3] (141)

The poet speaks of the pandemic as World War III that spread naturally but extended to be an unnatural racism, which had its roots in American society since colonial times. The reference to the pandemic crisis as a new utterance of structural racism that began first as institutional slavery is emphasized by the medical word 'contaminants, 'indicating a contaminated social disease coating the country with germs that no hand washing can stop. It is an infection that is covered, becoming far beyond being remedied.

The image of World War III, on the other hand, embodies the danger in which "we were all in it/ together" as Shockley says, which "we/watched it rage overseas at first// not realizing we were/already infected, we let history / have its way: again" (141). No doubt that the COVID-19 lockdowns have resulted in a significant increase in social isolation and confinement that excluded no one, yet this very experience was not that neutral. Ethnic minority groups are more likely to experience discrimination personally as well as institutionally:

….. we were all ready to do the right thing.
but who were we, and who were we to do it to? how do you say god bless
you in asian american? how do you zoom remote instruction across a dark
digital abyss? if the poor folks who don't get paid sick leave are ringing
up our groceries and delivering our meals, are we eating our stress
or theirs? what is the value of a healthy black person on the closed
market? meanwhile, corporations take another step towards person-
hood, as they reveal that they, too, are vulnerable to this disease……(142)

If institutional racism reinforces the meaning of an entrenched disease in systems, corporations, laws, policies, beliefs, and practices, the above lines indicate an unjust treatment of some people vs. others. It is a matter that makes Covid-19 far away from being an equalizer infection, but one that distinguishes one group of people from the other whether of black or Asian origins or merely white, those of good incomes or not, those who could have

[3] All the quoted verse lines are taken from the same reference, otherwise they will be cited.

sick leave or not. No wonder Shockley's poem refers to how "we/clutched our pearls and / the finger of j'accusation east" (141). Such a reference brings forth questions such as: who amongst those people could have enough immunity to the virus? Why some were more immune in comparison to others? What is the meaning of personhood? Here, the word 'immunity' is meant to have not merely literal meaning, but also metaphorical, economic, and racial ones.

In an interview, Shockley reflects on the notion of immunity and HIV (human immunodeficiency virus,)[4] saying:

> can i deduce the nature of humanity from the relationship of american and multinational pharmaceutical corporations …? ~ is it natural to test pharmaceuticals on people who are citizens of less powerful nations, members of a devalued gender, representatives of a maligned race? ~ is it logical? ~ is it cost-effective? ~ ….. ~ are african women human? ~ are africans human? ~ are american and multinational pharmaceutical corporations human? ~ are american corporations human? ~ are americans human? ~ are american corporations citizens? ~ are africans american? ~ are african americans multinational? ~ …..(are humans incorporated? ~ are humans pharmaceutical? ~ is hiv pharmaceutical? ~ is nature pharmaceutical? ~ is nature humane? ~ is nature natural? ~ are nations natural? ~ are nations raced? ~ are nations corporations? ~ are nations cost-effective? ~ is nationality a test? ~ can i deduce the humanity of the reader from the relationship of the reader to american and multinational pharmaceutical corporations? ~ can i deduce the nature of the reader from the relationship of the reader to african women with hiv? (Marakalala 2020)
>
> Based on the aforementioned questions, one may wonder if would immunity be connected to the very meaning of community, or are they just two words that rhyme? Is the former a requirement to be part of a community? Can a poet differentiate between an immune reader and another who is not? Or does poetry distinguish readers of color from those who are not? Shockley seems to emphasize another kind of segregation between those who were exposed to the virus and those who were not. Immunity seems to categorize individuals, segregating citizens: "those who are already immune, those who will be, and those who might never be. Spatial immunity seems to imply segregation between those who have to live and work exposed to the virus and those who don't" (IAS).

In her poem about George Floyd, called "Weather," Claudia Rankine, a distinctly American poet of Jamaican origin, penetrates this institutional and cultural discrimination by saying:

> Face covering? No, yes. Social distancing? Six feet
> under for underlying conditions. Black.
> Just us and the blues kneeling on a neck
> with the full weight of a man in blue.
> Eight minutes and forty-six seconds.
> In extremis, I can't breathe gives way
> to asphyxiation, to giving up this world,
> and then mama, called to, a call
> to protest, fire, glass, say their names, say
> their names, white silence equals violence,
> the violence of again, a militarized police
> force teargassing, bullets ricochet, and civil
> unrest taking it, burning it down. (p.128)

It is a delineation of a form of system isolation that is imposed on certain sects of people who are supposed to be citizens, yet are considered representatives of an inferior race, malevolent ones forced to storm in again and

[4] HIV is a retrovirus that attacks and gradually destroys the immune system, leaving the host unprotected against infection. HIV is classified as a lentivirus (meaning "slow virus") (Britannica).

protest against a silence that is identified as white and violent. "Face covering" and "six feet distance" turn to be against blacks in particular, an imposed act that would make a "Black" kneel and have, not only his face but his neck fully covered by the system.The poem draws attention to the public health organizational structure and "militarized police" that meddles in the social welfare system. It emphasizes an immediate evoking need

> to disorder the disorder. Peace. We're out
> to repair the future. There's an umbrella
> by the door, not for yesterday but for the weather
> that's here. I say weather but I mean
> a form of governing that deals out death
> and names it living. I say weather but I mean
> a November that won't be held off. This time
> nothing, no one forgotten. We are here for the storm
> that's storming because what's taken matters. (p.128)

The reader may wonder which virus did really plague the existence of black Americans at the time. Is it COVID-19 or some kind of another old virus that keeps these people masked? Why do they keep their umbrellas next to their doors, preparing themselves for another storm? The significance of the umbrella denotes a symbolic reference to the past, a time of colonizing people of color embraced by the weather or a governmental system that tended to protect and preserve life, yet through death. That is why the umbrella is still there to face the present weather for whatever is it taking with it matters.

Ever since the 1960s various injustices were documented by black civic leaders in America, stating the suffering of black communities through listing several grievances. To name a few: "faults in the sewerage system, sidewalks needed, streets which should be paved, deficient bus service and traffic control, substandard housing areas, inadequate parks and recreation facilities, continuing school segregation and inadequate black schools," as well as inadequate clinics provided (Carmichael and Hamilton,1992, p.57). It can be argued that past racist inequalities cannot be the premise for contemporary wrongs, yet it is also arguable that the pandemic's outcomes of health tragedies for racial and ethnic minorities do not stand on their own. In this respect, Maya Sabatello, an assistant professor of Clinical Bioethics at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, claims that

> it is the apex of historical social, economic, and political forces that have perpetuated and continue to impact the present deprivation among especially Black Americans and Latin communities in the U.S. The pandemic adds a "spectacle" to the silenced but well-documented intergenerational trauma among these communities. It adds a visual display of the historical experiences of trauma from slavery, displacement, colonization, and genocide that are "passed on" from one generation to the next. (10)

Studies on structural and institutional racism underline that a series of past racial factors are extended into contemporary times in America that widened trauma for ethnic minorities, including insufficient access to healthcare services in the face of such a pandemic. The development of the health care system could have proven such studies wrong had been materialized as real a change.

In Rowan Ricardo Phillips's poem "Fantasia in a Time of Plague," "the River Man" is called upon out the "blindness to simple/ Basic kindness//But he was a myth of a mourning kid" (123). The African Americans experience of slavery has always been associated with water and rivers, a matter that reverberates Langston Hughes's 1920 poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Similarly, Phillips brings forth the black ancestral history of slavery and resistance integrating it with the pandemic, speaking of the "River Man" as being "locked up" again. In his poem, Hughes refers to the noteworthy rivers in the Middle East, Africa, and in America, including the Mississippi River to emphasize the role of the black people since the dawn of civilization despite their drudgery. Phillips, on the other hand, denotes the role of the river, though it

> …bends out of sight
> But still roars in your head
> As the River Man said it would
> On those sleepless nights

When you hear the dead
And the living at the river
Complicit as kites and rhyming about civil rights" (pp.123-24).

The water, which holds a double function in the history of the Black culture that of resistance and liberation, stands up in Phillips's poem like the Mississippi River still roaring and vocalizing its cry about civil rights in the pandemic reality. In an interview with Joshua Parajas in June 2020, Quinn comments on the beauty of Phillips's poem as he summons up "the River Man." Quinn correlates the poem's moment and how "the moment that we're in is tucked inside of the just previous moment because of the issues of inequality and vulnerability and lack of access to medical care and groceries and jobs and money to pay the rent, helplessness — that's what's being addressed right now (para.14). Black bodies that were delivered to labor on the plantation, a reality that inspired black American writers in general seems to maintain. It is equally an upright position in Phillips's poem, for water is the space for resistance and liberation at the same time where the living and the dead are still struggling to call for their civil rights, the ones that are not fully materialized. To voice this, Phillips writes this fantasia, this very poem, a piece of music to enunciate a significant moment that seems to echo the past.

Though it is unwise to locate the prominent Southern poet, Yusef Komunyakaa within the poetry of the black struggle, his poetry goes beyond this realm, his poem "Requiem" reflects an insightful poetic vision of how the history of discrimination revived with the time of the pandemic:

but then springs up of a novel virus
through our old racial memory
rolling back to the gray mounds
of smallpox blankets torched
by soldiers, ancestral loneliness
working its way down through victims. (p.77)

As the lines unfold themselves, reflecting neither the need for punctuations nor capital letters, they articulate structural discrimination that is engraved in the racialized memory of its victims, invoking British troops plaguing Native Americans in 1763 by passing infected blankets with smallpox virus.[5] This incident at Fort Pitt (now Pittsburgh) as a devastating epidemic that spread equally among Native Americans, white American, and European colonists stands up as an example of structural racism interconnected with institutional one "whose linkages are historically rooted and culturally reinforced"(Bailley et al., 2017, 2).

Drawing from public health literature, Dr. R. J. Petteway, a Black American public health scholar and poet, interrogates the dominant narratives of being all in this together, social distancing, and the irony of COVID-19 equal infection. In his poem, "MASKS//Exposed," cited in his "3 Selections from "Upon the Body: Poems of/to a 3 Selections from "Upon the Body: Poems of/to a Black Social Epi, PT.II--LOVE//Resistance in the Time of COVID" (2022), he penetrates the fact of structural racism by saying:

A drunken reality exposed by social distance,
rubbing sanitizer on distilled inequality-
let's put a mask on it
call it COVID
or call it "Chinese"
or call it whatever … we want
as long as we don't dare dream
to call it enough.
At what point, exactly, does "it" become what it is? (p.5)

These lines question the American COVID-19 reality that seems to be closely associated with decades of structural discrimination. It is a reality that categorizes and molds others into certain frames of inequality, distancing them using whatever masks are available. Major questions are raised by the speaker who dares to ask:

[5] Komunyakaa's lines "the gray mounds/of smallpox blankets torched" refer to "British forces gave

Can covering
coughs cover
the costs
of our American production?
……..
How do you quarantine racism?
How do you "flatten the curve" of capitalism?
Patience? Hope? (pp.2-3)

Such introspection exposes the reality beneath the mask as the title of the poem suggests,"MASKS//Exposed." If COVID-19 can be covered by masks or "wiping doorknobs" what can uncontaminated a racialized and contaminated society in which "we wouldn't turn for a neighbor/ who doesn't speak our language"? (p.2). The lines also suggest that socioeconomic aspects that determined racial or ethnic inequalities during COVID-19 affect mortality interaction amongst citizens of the same country. Interestingly, the poem outlines how, just almost a century ago, "the pandemic is experienced unequally across society,"dispelling "the emerging myth of COVID- 19 as an 'equality of opportunity' disease" (Bambra et.at, 2021, p.XIII).

The pandemic, in other words, did reveal more than ever the infected reality of structural racism. But what role does "Patience" or "Hope: play amid this reality? Would patience or hope be also a cover to quarantine racism? Would silence be an answer or this awareness can be inspiring to promote social justice by addressing institutions and fighting their systematic racialized attitudes towards the so-called other? In their *TheUnequal Pandemic* (2021) Bambra, Lynch, and Smith claim that they can "find evidence of hope that, in revealing such profound inequities, COVID-19 might serve as a stimulus for greater awareness which, in turn, might translate into sustained social action and, ultimately, meaningful social change" (p.117).

Such kind of poetry that documents the strangeness of times projected by COVID-19, as well as its inequality in health care, does read the people affected by its calamity rather than portraying the pandemic as a disease. It is a matter that makes poetry a human discipline of a crucial role, not merely a poetic platform of emotional depth to raise pathos of the pandemic or to portray a disease that is mercilessly in-compassionate. Pandemic poetry comes to be a creation that reveals a special stigma that came to be culturally institutionalized, leading to misinformation and discrimination.

In Lynn Unger's poem "Pandemic," published in 2020, this American San Francisco poet and minister, interestingly enough, looks at the pandemic as a time of sacredness, commitment, and compassion, saying of the pandemic as:

The most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
On trying to make the world
Different than it is.
Sing. Pray.
……..
Know that our lives are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)
Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words. (2020)

As Unger refers to the aforementioned pandemic as a period that requires a moment of meditation and stillness to realize that one's life is in someone else's hands, she emphasizes that it is also a time to "Reach out your words." No doubt that poetry is a way to voice out and reach out to one another's hearts, a mode of antiracist praxis to promote an extension of hands to all to make a difference in the world. In his "PreSeNCe//Gifted: On Poetry, Antiracism, and epistemic Violence in Health Promotion," Dr. Ryan J.

Petteway claims that poetry as a poetic knowledge "aspires to such a vision for poetry in health promotion—as a space in/through which to pursue antiracist praxis" (2023, p.41). Whether it implements a change or protest against the inequality in the health care system, it above all, endeavors to deconstruct a racialized and politicized mindset that discriminates the 'other.'

In Julia Alvarez's "How Will This Pandemic Affect Poetry?" she raises questions that determine the role of poetry in times of plague, saying:

> Will poetry go viral?
> Will its dis/ease infect us?
> Will it help build up antibodies against indifference?
> Will poems be the only safe spaces where we can gather together:
> enter their immense silences, see snakes slithering inside sestinas,
> listen to nightingales singing on the boughs of odes— hark! a lark in the terza rima,
> a hawk in a haiku?
> What if only poetry will see us through?
> What if this poem is the vaccine already working inside you? (Quinn,2020, p.4)

Such questions that waver between being rhetorical and non-rhetorical do reveal how this poetic genre can do much more than being a safe space to bring people together, be therapeutic, or stand as just a song that voices elegies. In times of lockdown and the pandemic of racism, poetry is the mode to produce antibiotics "against indifference." "(Will) (each) (word) (have) (to) (be) (masked) (?)" (p.4) is a question that Alvarez also asks in her poem through which each word is enclosed and separated from the other to underline that it is poetry's task to unmask the truth and break boundaries to "create the kind of knowledge needed to transform oppressive conditions" (Dill, 2015, as cited in Petteway, 2023, p.41).

III. Conclusion

The poems discussed can be categorized as pandemic poetry, yet this kind of poetry moves beyond the timeline of the pandemic, emerging from a time of crisis to speak to a global audience. The selected poems highlight a national spirit among ethnic communities in America, embodying resistance and protest, while also transcending national mourning and elegiac tones. Instead, they embody a testimonial voice that goes beyond the Black American national anthem, expressing an anthem that is transnational and transcends racism. The poets discussed in this paper reject narrow conceptions of human and identity politics, promoting instead a vision of true humanity—a humanity that exists as a social and united civilization, where the "I" cannot exist independently of the "Thou," as the German philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) asserts.That is to say, the 'I-Thou, 'as he assumes are an inseparable whole being, each existence depends on the other's without which no establishment of the 'we' can be achieved. One may wonder: if not for the COVID-19 pandemic, which claimed many lives worldwide, would this contemporary, globalized civilization ever be freed from institutionalized racism and a racialized health system?

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