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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Re-membering the self online: Joyce Ash's quest for the pulse of community through social media-permeated writing

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Abstract This article examines the works of the Cameroonian author Joyce Ash as a quest for the pulse of the community that experiments with potential sites for building intersubjective relations in both traditional and modern societies. In a critical engagement with her poetry collections *A Basket of Flaming Ashes* and *Beautiful Fire*, as well as her co-written (with Eric Chinje) memoir *Lockdown Chronicles*, I argue that her writings constitute an archaeology of modern social media, giving insights into its current practices as well as its antecedents. Through long-distance nationalism, Joyce Ash mobilises social media in order to re-imagine an inclusive and equitable postcolonial nation as well as to bear witness to experiences of resilience, personal and collective, especially in contexts of political exclusion and lack of freedom of expression. I therefore make recourse to the concepts of the public sphere and popular culture via the Internet as crucial avenues in understanding her works as forms of self-re-memberment and collective quest for healing in times of crisis.

Keywords (Social) media · Self · Popular culture · Public sphere · Junction · Nation · Memory

1 Introduction: Joyce Ash: a literary "influencer"?

The influencer culture is one of the many Internet revolutions that have shaped the trajectory of the social mediascape from the inaugural years of the early 2000s. Social attitudes, trends and political views, are now defined by pacesetters who have built a popular following online and swept through popular opinion in a rather

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short time span. Some of these figures, with hundreds of thousands to millions of followers on Facebook, Instagram, Tik-Tok and other platforms have migrated from other spheres of life, whereas others have simply emerged from the blues and created commendable followership amongst their niches on these platforms. Many of them have community-based followership whereas others are transnational in nature, sometimes beyond their respective linguistic communities. But what about media figures concerned more with depth than with mere speed? In this article, I examine how Joyce Ash harnesses the habitus of the social media, combining its spontaneity and conviviality with the poetic genre, which is often known for its cryptic codes and closed structures.

The Cameroonian writer, Joyce Ash's[1] creative works can be summarised as an insistent quest for the reconstitution of resilient selves across spaces and times of crisis. In her writings she seeks to connect personal stories that portray the human predicament as well as the ecstasy of encounter through what I describe as an aesthetic of radical openness that is permeated, implicitly or explicitly, by social media consciousness. Her poetry and prose are highly infused by (social) media experiences, which in turn play a significant role in configuring their form and content and in defining their audience. Through an in-depth study of her poetry collections *A Basket of Flaming Ashes* (2010) and *Beautiful Fire* (2018), as well as her dialogic memoirs (with Eric Chinje), *Lockdown Chronicles—A Journey through Memory* (2024), I examine her quest for self and collective re-membering (Ngugi 2009) through works that seek to capture personal stories of survival and to re-assert her appurtenance to a global citizenry based on a transcultural embracing of identity and difference. Concurrently, her writings underline modes of personal/emotional connectivity through the reinvention of a public sphere that enhances the pulse of community and memory beyond fleeting conversations that are characteristic of contemporary social media practices.

I therefore articulate the tendency in Joyce Ash's poetry to combine the ability of new social media to build proximity amongst distance spaces and individuals with the quest with poetry for profound reflections on existence and human relations. Her writings can be considered a quest for the pulse of community, the desire to reignite social relations in the human community that harnesses the very best impulses of its individual components. This underlines the importance of re-membering and memory in her poetry. In a poem titled "Memories", the persona asserts that "Memories are clothes for naked days/I know what to wear this Valentine's Day" (BFA, 17). The brevity of this two-line poem is a litotical expression of the expansive nature of memories that require just a trigger in order to unfold. Even though the childhood innocence and youthful exuberance in her poetry are overshadowed by the persistent consciousness of the eventuality of death, the persona does not give in to absurdity or nihilism. On the contrary, the quest for purpose remains the livewire of her poetry and prose. Just as Joyce Ash's poetic personae are conscious of and pay respect to the ancestors and predecessors, so do they intend to pass the candle of light to the

[1] Joyce Ash has won several awards for her poetry and activism such as "The Spirit of Detroit Award" 1987, "Cameroon Cultural Festival Awards" 1989 and 1994, "Outstanding Women in Action Award", 2002, and the African Literature Association's "Book of the Year Award", 2020.

next generation with the same creative *fire*; hence, the recurrence of the imagery of fire in the titles of her two published collections—*A Basket of Flaming Ashes* (2010) and *Beautiful Fire* (2018). This experience relates to the tonality and sensibility of Joyce Ash's writing, the quest for an urgent inter-subjective experience that makes it quite amenable to the configuration of the social media space. Her poetry dextrously combines the traits of instant identification characteristic of shared social media content while safeguarding the profundity associated with memorable and timeless poetry and prose. Poetry and memoir writing for her constitute a quest for an intersubjective community that is enriched by individual experiences that make every life story unique yet relatable.

2 The poetic word as the first social medium

For a poet, the word is the prime medium of social communication, and every poet has a peculiar relationship with words. Words become the potent force that helps the author to navigate moments of vulnerability and a medium for exteriorised interiority in order to build a community of resilience. Moreso, for a poet with a theatre background like Ash, the word is equally a performative act and an interlocutory contract between poet and audience/reader. Her diction constitutes a source of solace and healing aimed at building a relational bridge between the poet and her audience. Her poetry bursts and spurts with life in all its complex dimensions and in all its states—ecstasy, agony, perplexity. It is poetry that is preoccupied with finding the meaning of life, not in abstract brooding or solipsistic introspection. Rather her poetry draws its vitality from seemingly commonplace rituals of survival and recognition, the tears, laughter and surprises of everyday life. Despite the speed brakes and moments of the unforeseen tragedies experienced by her poetic personae, her works are underlined by a kinetic force that thrusts forth the characters in a progressive movement. This comes out clearly in the prefatory lines of *A Basket of Flaming Ashes*—"... I experienced exhilarating moments of positive adrenaline rush while writing these poems; I hope while reading them you will experience the same!" (BFA, ix). The power of her poetry lies in her diction and her ability to build connections, especially in moments of vulnerability. Joyce Ash states this viewpoint lucidly in *Lockdown Chronicles*:

> "For most people, words are just words—a means of communication. For some of us, it is the currency of our existence. I hold words close to my chest—they are my aces! When I say something, I want to mean it. Sometimes it comes as a surprise that one, like me, who defies stereotypes, can be that 'rigid'. But this is the ying to my yang that blends into a malleable dough". (2024, p. 54)

She embraces spontaneity but at the same time endows words with a promethean charge, thereby reflecting the vigour of poetic expression, not only in depicting reality but also in forging new paradigms and relationalities. The following poem underlines the poetic persona's relationship with words in the writing process in "**Talk to me**":

I understand the language of your body
The verbs of your fingers
The nouns of your look
But talk to me tonight
Dress me up in capitals ....
Adorn my waist in words ...
Call my name tonight (BFA, 14)

The attribution of profound meaning to words in the writing process is again evident in the poem "Poetry Equals You", which is an erotic poem of intersubjective bonding. In this poem, the author resorts to a carnivalesque imagination of poetic diction that captures the ecstasy of a heart in love:

Being with you is poetry itself.
Lines sprint in laughter, song and silence
Punctuations run riot:
Commas stretch in stride
Exclamation marks abound (BFA, 16)

The dextrous use of language constitutes the relational aspect of writing, especially poetry, the creative genre inherently suitable in establishing connections between otherwise subjective experiences. Ash uses diction that mediates between hearts across race, gender, class and nationalities, hence my use of the expression "embrace" to capture the basic relational impulse of her writing. However, in this collection, the author's appraisal of the new media practices is equivocal. Inasmuch as the new social media contribute to instant communication and interaction that are in line with the poet's gregarious impulse, she is critical of the graphic liberty and ellipsis characteristic of online writing practices, as seen in her poem *Texting:*

ILU for "I love you"
Ruf2nt for "Are you free tonight?" ...
Where are the words in their glory?
Full and long?
Words that feel the mouth
Touching the roof of desires? ...
Full words touch the corners of broken dreams ... (BF, 42)

She is critical of the deterioration of writing conventions in the new social media and prefers careful use of words in their fullness and potency. From the nature of her social media-permeated poetry and prose, Joyce Ash seems to crave a space where meaningful dialogue and conversations can take place that addresses deeply social, political, ethical and existential issues in our interconnected communities.

3 The poetry of the public sphere

I have insisted on the importance of interlocutory relationality as an underlying aspect of Joyce Ash's poetry in terms of its quest for connection with multiple selves and the community at large. In other words, her poetry negotiates between the extreme subjectivity of poetry with the instincts of shareability inscribed in social mediascapes. It is within this framework that I consider her poetry to be oriented towards the public sphere. The public sphere has been defined as the space of "social intercourse and as sites of debate and exchange of information essential for overcoming isolation and vulnerability" (Sofounou and Olarinmoye 2009, p. 11). In a critique of Habermasian foregrounding of the public sphere, Nancy Fraser (1992) contends that voices of marginalised communities are not often represented in the public sphere and such communities prefer to create counter public spheres to make their voices heard. With the advent of digital media, online platforms and social media spaces have given a new lease of life to marginal voices that seek to circumvent political censorship and re-construct their agency. Joyce Ash's poetry constitutes a (re)construction of the very idea of the public sphere, that intermediary space of human interaction that is enriched by our individual vulnerabilities, strengths and idiosyncrasies. The public sphere designates spaces where social idioms are forged, where socio-cultural opinions are formed, where social events are sifted into fleeting and enduring components of communal memories, where global processes get translated by/for the local context, where desire is disciplined by communal ethos and where rules of acceptability are negotiated. The digital dimension of the public sphere has engendered reproducible means of self-representation, with the added components of instant accessibility, interactivity and virality. With the advent of the social media, the "shock" factor has increased as the "suspension of disbelief" has become banalized. In this regard, the public sphere is necessarily a hybrid, transdisciplinary and centrifugal space full of uncertainty, which can fuel optimism and pessimism in equal measure. In the same way, "platformized public sphere ... entails both threats and potentials for social cohesion" (Eisenegger and Schäfer 2023, p. 66). However, Ash's poetry weighs in on the positive side of the human imagination and sensation and the potential of social media to enhance relations of care and inclusivity.

A close reading of Joyce Ash's poetic sensibilities reveals an attempt to track the metamorphosis of the public sphere and the genealogical evolution of the digital media. This accounts for the poet's obsession with spatial thresholds and hubs such as junction, road, airport, bridge, off-licence, metaphorical sites where personal, communal and national memories coalesce. These sites are represented as microcosms of the (Roman) forum, the (Greek) agora and the arena or the village square in the Igbo community of Nigeria, as analysed by John Kelechi Ugwani and John Schofield (2018). These spaces are equally cognates of the chronotope, which Mikhail Bakhtin describes as "a place where the knots of the narrative are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narrative ... The chronotope serving as the primary means for materializing time and space, emerges as a centre of concretizing representation, as a force giving body" to the text (1981, p. 22). These chronotopic forms of spatiality can

be seen across a number of her poems: In "Between Airports", the persona posits that "My goodbyes are broken pieces of me flung back/My welcome, a quilt of my fragmented self/In between are bundles of memories" (BFA, 40). Nostalgic echoes can be heard in the poem "I Cry when it's Cold" where the persona insinuates that: "Maybe I cry/For lost totems, spaces, stories, hearths[2], laughs, and faces./Or maybe I cry for me and you/Displaced, misused, abused, misjudged, dislodged!" (BFA, 61). The same echoes of spaces of interaction and transaction cut across poems such as "For Junction here—a poem in Cameroon Pidgin English"—"Today, Junction off-licence[3] na ma place/Any evening I buy one man cold ma heart/Na only you know say no be mimbo I want/Na you I di still find, for Junction here"(BF, 36)[4] and "Delirium" (BF, 44) wherein the poetic persona affirms that "You will utter deep-seated words/Filling my basket of desired memories/ ...The airport is in my body, delirious" (BF, 44).

The persistent evocation of open space interactions is what gives her poetry the aura of radical openness to human encounters and negotiations of sociability in semi-rural and urban settings. Her writings become inscriptions on the social body that requests interactivity, conversation and reconciliation. I strongly argue that a reading of Joyce Ash's poetry portrays its congeniality with elements of antecedent traces of modern social media. By foregrounding the pertinence of spaces of memory and interpersonal contacts, Joyce Ash's poetry is redolent of Tom Standage's landmark work *Writing on the Wall* (2013) on the genealogies of the social media right down to the ancient periods of writing on tablets and papyrus:

> "To modern eyes this all seems strangely familiar. Cicero was, to use today's Internet jargon, participating in a 'social media' system ...The Romans did it with papyrus rolls and messengers; today hundreds of millions of people do the same things rather more quickly and easily using Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and other Internet tools. The technologies involved are very different, but these two forms of social media, separated by two millennia, share many of the same underlying structures and dynamics". (Standage 2013, p. 5–6)

4 Poetry, popular culture and digital media

Related to the idea of public sphere is the omnipresence of popular culture in Ash's poetry. She draws immensely from popular culture, especially from her home country Cameroon, in constructing her relational poetic vision. Popular culture is the medium through which the poet re-members her country Cameroon, the central African nation that remains the focus of the poet's political commitment from her

[2] The hearth designates the fireside in traditional African societies where moral fables and folktales are told, especially by the elders to the youth and children.

[3] Name for "bar". In urban and sub-urban neighbourhoods, especially in West Africa, bars are spaces of social intercourse, political commentary, romantic desires and social exchange that position them as local public spheres par excellence.

[4] In standard English: Today, Junction off-licence is my place/Every evening, I buy a bottle of beer to sooth my heart/You alone know it is not beer I want/It is you, I am still searching for, at this junction.

diasporic location, in line with what Benedict Anderson refers to as long-distance nationalism (1992). Popular culture serves as a force of intra- and inter-generational glue that provides common references in a continually fragmenting political dispensation. John Storey defines popular culture as "a terrain of exchange and negotiation … marked by resistance and incorporation" (Storey 1997, p. 10), whereas Stuart Hall considers it as "organised around this contradiction: the popular forces versus the power-bloc" (1981, p. 238). Hall derives his definition from Antonio Gramsci, who considers popular culture as the arena where hegemony is contested (Willems 2012, p. 8). Popular culture is at the very heart of her poetic experience and becomes a component of nation-building in times of crisis and division. The notion of the public sphere has been considerably transformed by digital media. New social media has become one of the vintage spaces for the spread of existing national idioms and the creation of new ones inspired by contemporary trends and practices, especially as sites of "cultural expressions of protest, satire and self-assertion by disadvantaged and oppressed strata" (Barber 2017, p. 9).

Joyce Ash comes from an English-speaking part of Cameroon, a region where separatist fighters have been engaged in war with the majority Francophone government since 2016. The Republic of Cameroon is a composite nation-state, constituted by the former French-speaking La Republique du Cameroun and the British Southern Cameroons in 1961. However, this reunification has been contested by most Anglophones, who decry the continuous marginalisation of English-speaking citizens. The crisis, which began as peaceful protest marches in 2016, gradually led to an outright separatist war in 2017 that persists today. Thus, her poetry as well as her co-written memoirs, *Lockdown Chronicles*, serve as artistic interventions in the debate of re-imagining the union that gave birth to modern-day Cameroon in order to chart a way out of the crisis. This attempt can be seen in the poem, **"Betrayed"** (*For Weka)* wherein the persona details the strategies devised by the majority Francophone government to subsume Cameroon Anglophone culture and annihilate its political identity and autonomy. The poetic persona imaginatively reconvenes a meeting between the two parties (represented as bride and groom) at the "M. Bridge", to meet and renegotiate the terms of their political marriage. "M" here stands for Mungo as the River Mungo is the natural feature that separates former British Cameroon from former French Cameroon and is often used as a symbolic reminder that Cameroon is a union of two erstwhile separate political entities.[5]

In the poem above, "Betrayed", the persona makes recourse to popular culture by invoking a song, *dimabola,* that was en vogue in the era of the one-party state in Cameroon, to eulogize the party and its successive leaders:

But I sang *dimabola**
Hoping for sunrise at dusk
Now decisions excite me
And my future bugs me

[5] In *Across the Mungolo* (2004), by J. N. Nkengasong, the Anglophone protagonist experiences discrimination and is on the point of an emotional breakdown for being treated as a second-class citizen in his own country.

Can you meet me at the M. bridge?**
(BFA 38)

In Cameroon, owing to the political context of political transition, "dimabola" has come to refer to political sycophancy that is devoid of any principles but rather depends on opportunism and expediency. The contract of political marriage that was signed in good faith by the British Southern Cameroons turns out to be a source of political effacement and marginalisation. "Hoping for sunrise at dusk" becomes a futile wish of political change in a regime that became personalised, reversing previous democratic political gains. Poetry serves as a medium par excellence of popular culture, deployed against the ills of political discrimination in a context where political protest is heavily repressed and criminalised. However, Ash's poetry equally re-articulates the undying spirit of political emancipation in the face of systematic assimilation and repression.

5 Poetics/Politics of home and long-distance nationalism

As a diasporic citizen, digital media becomes a primary source of news updates (Chirimambowa 2014, p. 3) and the space through which the poet engages with news about the raging protests that led to the separatist war. In the poem "Message from Buea-Bamenda-Mamfe"[6] (BF, 35) the persona asserts that "The blood on the street was your letter to me/The enraged masses became your email/The dreams on placards twitted your desires" (35). These lines, infused as they are with social media expressions, capture the medium through which the diasporic subject learns about and responds to news from home. As the editorial of the Codesria Bulletin posits with regard to the role of social media in shaping the public sphere,

> "Social media does not only serve as channel for the news, it shapes the way it is received in the electronic public spheres that Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube have become. State imposition of limits to public sphere and public space, particularly in politics, results in imaginative popular ways—using metaphor, songs, rumours, humour, irony, satire and derision to broaden and articulate political views". (Editorial, Codesria 2009, p. 1).

The poet's visceral reaction to news from home, brought to her knowledge through social media, can be seen in the poem "Ma heart ku burst"[7] (BF, 50–51) written in Cameroonian pidgin English, a lingua franca with nearly national coverage in Cameroon: "Sorry picture dem don gump for ma heart/People way dem die oh, people. Way body broke oh/small pikin oh, big person oh, all chakara for inside/Ma heart ku burst for this place way I shidon so" (50).[8] The engaging way in which the

[6] Buea, Bamenda and Mamfe are some of the key cities in Anglophone Cameroon, which constitutes two out of ten regions that make up the Republic of Cameroon.

[7] "My heart will explode".

[8] "Pitiful pictures have stuck to my heart/Of the dead, of the injured/of young children, of elderly people, bodies in pieces/My heart will explode where I am seated" (50).

persona reacts to news in Cameroon is made possible by social media virality and reproducibility. This applies to another poem such as "Koumate" (19) in *Beautiful Fire* that draws attention to a saga in Cameroon where a pregnant mother was compelled to give birth outside the hospital on 12th March 2016 under egregious circumstances because she allegedly could not pay the bills and was ordered out by the medical doctors. In the confusing urgency of the moment, a family member performed a rudimentary operation on her, leading to the death of her twin babies. This ignited a major scandal in Cameroon and led to a streak of denunciations especially by diasporic Cameroonians on social media concerning the disregard for human life and the sub-standard hospital facilities in the country. In a dispensation of censorship and life threats to whistleblowers, the Cameroonian diaspora, through its digital media activism, has become the main channel of democratic accountability.

National TV and radio channels, especially those run by the state and the ruling class, place undue focus on the lives and profiles of political figures, thus relegating the lives of the citizens to the background. This poses a challenge to the postcolonial diasporic citizens who wish to stay connected to news from home—understood here variably as the specific community, nation and as the continent as a whole. Karen Barber states that "numerically tiny elites not only consume a vastly disproportionate share of the national wealth, they also take up all the light. Newspapers, radio and television offer a magnified image of the class that controls them. Not only does the ruling elite make the news, it is the news" (quoted in Willems 2012, p. 8). Thus, the advent of social media, with its considerable democratisation of the media space, has provided avenues for expatriates to stay connected and participate in defining what is topical. Where popular political news was principally conveyed by radio stations and television channels as key purveyors of meaning making in the public sphere, this has been slowly replaced by social media as the space where socio-cultural symbols are crystalised.

To pace through Joyce Ash's texts, especially *Basket of Flaming Ashes*, is to operate an archaeology of the traces of new social media and heralds of things to come, given that most of the individual poems were written long before the collection was published in 2010, when social media was still in its infancy. On the other hand, her 2018 collection *Beautiful Fire* and her joint memoirs *Lockdown Chronicles* are immersed in new social media experiences and constitute a reflexive take on the medium. The poet is deeply inspired by the transitions in communication technology, and the choice of medium reflects her intention to capture these transitions and to rediscover the germs of old modes of communication in new social media. With the advent of the new social media, popular cultural practices and memories have found new modes and media of expression. Reflecting on email exchange as modern letter-writing, she intimates that "... just engaging in letter-writing exchange is revealing. We chose to write because we wanted to, and I have to keep reminding myself of a time when people wrote letters as the only means of long-distance communication" (*Lockdown Chronicles*, 50). The COVID-19 crisis brought social life to a standstill and accelerated the development of online platforms to replicate life online. Conferences that could not be held in person moved online, with complex web designs simulating real-life human interactive experiences through virtual meet-

ing rooms and virtual corridors enhancing small-talk, matchmaking and 'intimate' socialisation.

From the on-going, Joyce Ash's writing navigates the interstices between popular culture in the pre-social media phase and its extension through new forms of communication. With the advent of the social media, plays and performances, constituent elements of the traditional African public sphere, have recreated themselves online whereas inter-personal channels of communication have moved/morphed onto new cyber platforms, privileged spaces where diasporic yearning for home intertwines with political activism and long-distance nationalism.

6 Exploring media, commemorating personal/collective resilience

To read Joyce Ash is to engage with the haptic experience of the archives of communication media that are woven into the rich social experiences behind her poetry and prose. It is an engagement with photography, telephone, letter-writing, radio, television, etc., phases and components of the evolution of social communication and representation that have been transformed and wielded into social media platforms at the onset of the twenty-first century. Reflecting on the human tendency to look back to antecedent forms of contemporary practices, Karen Barber states that "Practitioners of relatively long-standing genres often have a keen consciousness of how these genres have changed over the decades. And when certain styles fall out of fashion, there may be pockets of the community who actively and nostalgically revive them" (Barber 2017, p. 3–4). This view relates to a persistent trait in Joyce Ash's fascination with media evolution and modes of representation. Her poem "Pictures after a high school re-union", for instance, addresses shared memories amongst peers. Inasmuch as the image captures the memories lived with former schoolmates, the medium falls short, in the persona's estimation, of mirroring the behind-the-scenes dynamics of interpersonal relationship of the subjects depicted:

> No, sisters, pictures can't tell the story
> I roll them over in my hand, lifeless
> Images of varied hues frozen in time
> The stories of each pose remain untold
> I grab this one with Anne, my childhood friend
> All that is left: our laughter of one moment …
> The wine from Cle, her husband, gone too (55).

The pictures capture moments of intense peer experiences in a close-knit social set-up that reflects boarding school experiences in Cameroon. The peer group represented a family away from home for most of the students who lived far away from their biological families, a fact that underlines the importance of alumni reunions. This poem is in tune with the social media evolution of its time whereby Facebook (in the mid-2000s) became a space of virtual reunion of peers who had lost touch in the previous decades of the 1980s and 1990s. The memories unleashed by the

pictures equally bring back sad moments in her life, such as the premature death of the author's sister, who passed away in her prime.

In them I saw my sis, Emilia
my tears flowed inwards
Ah! Stories, laughter and voices trapped
I look, look, look and look
And my gaze comes alive … (BFA, 55)

In hindsight, the author has learnt to work through her trauma and is able to express laughter at the follies of time and its games with human beings. The photograph in this context plays a vital function, which, according to Sontag is to "build our sense of the present". And photographs construct—and revise—our sense of a more distant past (Sontag 2003, p. 258). The photo triggers memories that enable her to recollect and to employ elements of her life and her social relations. The poet re-narrates her sense of loss in *Beautiful Fire* (2018) in the poem "When I was Ten: For Emilia Bechem Ashuntantang", where she states that:

When I was Ten, I could not have known
It was our last stand as a family
That six kids would become five
How was I to know
That her life would end at 13 …
Now each year
I measure my footsteps
In her sundried
Footprints. (BF, 71–72)

In the above poem, "Our last stand as a family" is a probable reference to a family picture that captures the unity and wholeness of the nuclear family, prior to Emilia's demise. However, even in the midst of existential uncertainty, the poetic persona regains energy from the exciting, promising but curtailed life of her elder sister, who becomes an inspiration for her. One also notices the persistent return of the memories of the deceased sister in her prose such as *Lockdown Chronicles*—"On October 31, 1977, Emilia who was in Form 1 in GHS Mamfe, drowned. A part of me died with her." (5) With the passage of time, the poet seems to have processed and converted her pain into a life-long lesson of resilience and transformation. Although her tragic demise remains inexplicable and the agony implacable, memories of Emilia serve as a motivation for the living to transgress gender/age stereotypes and prove their mettle in every aspect of life.

Joyce Ash's poetry and prose interweave personal and collective resilience, a reflection of the entanglement of the private and public in the social media spheres. In the conversation with Eric Chinje, a central figure of Cameroon Television history, in *Lockdown Chronicles*, the two figures revisit memories of their inaugural engagement with the media landscape in their Cameroonian homeland, reflecting on ways in which to leverage their public image and notoriety in order to contribute to

peacebuilding in times of a raging war whose dire consequences were compounded by the COVID-19 crisis. Behind the stories of the heydays of TV and Radio broadcast in Cameroon lurks the bitter reality of the marginalisation of the Anglophone Cameroonians, the background to the current separatist struggle. In reflecting on the inaugural broadcast on national TV, Chinje explains that the crew began with a recording of the news in French, with the assumption that, if anything were to go amiss, it should not be with the news in French. "I was conscious of the impact everything would have, including on the minds of French-speaking Cameroonians who had always felt that their English-speaking kindred were much less sophisticated and constituted a lower class of citizens" (2024, p. 37). The subtle details narrated by Chinje in this passage points to a history of blatant marginalisation. It should equally be recalled that during the separatist war, the government decided to interrupt Internet connection in Anglophone Cameroon for an entire year, in a bid to punish activists for portraying on social media the crimes committed by the Cameroonian military against the civilian population. These examples depict the way in which media can become a setting for power imbalances but also how media practices can become modes of resistance in a socio-political field undermined by historical injustices.

In this epistolary dialogue, both interlocutors show resilience at personal and collective levels. They refuse to be immobilised by the restrictions of the pandemic by maintaining a steady flow of communication through email, to replicate letter writing as it existed in the pre-digital media. They reflect on ways through which they can tap into the energies that have characterised their careers and media engagements to re-energise their individual visions and instigate collective change in their home country.

Joyce Ash's response to one of the Chinje's emails captures the general ambience of the lockdown: "My dear Eric, I trust you are well. I am tired, emotionally and physically. The burden of this pandemic season has a way of creeping in now and then ...." (2024, p. 49). The emotional stress experienced by many people during the COVID-19 pandemic was intensified by its combination with other underlying conditions that compounded the psychological toll it took on individuals and collective subjects. Both figures share experiences of loss of beloved family members in challenging circumstances and explore how that has influenced their attitudes and approaches to life. Apart from the demise of her elder sister discussed above, Joyce Ash also lost both of her parents in a tragic car accident in 1989:

> "On some days I simply existed. Your narrative about your mother coming to you decades after her death made me realize my experience of still missing my parents was not unusual ... As if in answer to my mood, Chimamanda wrote an insightful and naked piece about her grief over losing her father. (54)"

Apart from testimonies about the loss of loved ones, both co-authors open up on being diagnosed with health conditions that thrust them into self-introspection about the purpose of life and the nature of their legacies. Through writing and reading, Ash finds community and bedfellows facing similar challenges in life thanks to her radical openness. Coincidentally, in the finishing phase of this article, I checked Joyce Ash's Facebook page and I found the following on her wall:

> "My condolences to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and her husband, Dr. Ivara Esege, as they mourn the devastating loss of one of their pair of twin boys, 21-month-old son, Nnamdi Nkanu, after a brief illness. Adichie lost her father during COVID in June 2020 and her mother the following year in March 2021 .... I can relate ...May the peace that defies understanding locate her and her young family. #GriefJourney #chimamandangoziadichie # #griefsupport #amothers-grief[9]"

The fact that Joyce Ash reconnects with another public figure in the country's media history is of utmost importance to her commitment to the public sphere and communal ethos of care. Finding ways to reconnect with people going through similar situations and forming a human bond constitute a crucial element in their testimony of survival. In specific ways, Ash and Chinje respond to the necessity of sticking oneself out of the container bearing one's name and seeing, feeling and imagining the world in terms of intersubjective relationality. From their mutual vulnerabilities, they seek strength and mutual care, therein sharpening each other's perception of the past and engineering the future rather than passively waiting to endure it.

7 Conclusion

This article has sought to analyse Joyce Ash's poetry and prose at the crossroads of the increasing digitalisation of the public sphere and popular culture. Incarnated by the recurrence of "the junction", her writings constitute an archaeology of a society in transit and transformation with regard to modes of community building and expression of inclusive political visions. This is obtained by transforming the poetic space from a space of obscure and inaccessible interiority into a medium of interlocutory dialogue between self and other. In this regard, the article has argued that through their innovative and social media-conscious diction, Ash's works seek to reconstruct memories of resilience and enhance interpersonal relationality amid personal and collective crises. It is poetry that seeks to position the digital public sphere as a site of the reconstruction of memory, interpersonal bonds and practices of care. Ash's works constitute a dialectic interaction between media genealogy and individual/collective memories, foregrounding the need to re-tool the digital public sphere into a hybrid site of individual and collective agency as well as socio-political resistance, especially in times of political crisis and physical disconnection from home.

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Data availability All data supporting the findings of this work are included in the article.

[9] Posted on 10th January 2026 on the author's Facebook page—Dr Joyce Ashuntantang.

Declarations

Conflicts of interest G.S. Ndi declares that he has no competing interests.

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