

When Shall We Restore Our Humanity? A Dialogue of Poetics with Carl Terver³⁶⁸

Tolulope Oke³⁶⁹

In this extensive dialogue, Tolulope Oke engages Carl Terver, his personal and intellectual sensibilities, and the socio-political undercurrents that inform his poetics. As a poet, critic, and editor, Carl embodies a literary restlessness that reflects the turbulence of contemporary Nigeria. His poetics, characterized by sharp wit, biting irony, and an unflinching engagement with existential, historical and present-day struggles, position him as a vibrant voice in contemporary Nigerian/African poetry. Carl's poetry thrives on juxtaposition, humour and despair, the sacred and the profane, nostalgia and disillusionment etc. These contrasts are not incidental but reflective of the fragmented nature of the postmodern human condition. His poetry resists closure, favouring ambiguity and an open-ended pursuit of meaning that never fully resolves, allowing readers multiple interpretive entries. Beyond his versatility, his poems reinforce that which is poetry's crux: to provoke and challenge us to restore our humanity. This conversation delves into his creative process, influences, and the tensions that animate his writing, particularly in his two collections: [For Girl at Rubicon](#) (2020) and [Everyone I know is ripe in plumage](#) (2023). This dialogue was conducted as an online exchange over a period of several weeks starting in December 2024.

Carl Terver was longlisted in 2024 for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize. In 2023, he contributed to the [Olongo Africa Multilingual Anthology](#) as a translator. He was a writer-in-residence, in February 2022, at the Ebedi International Writers Residency, Iseyin, Oyo, Nigeria. And in 2020, he co-edited *The Weight of Years*, the second volume of the AfroAnthology Series. He is a Nigerian writer of Tiv ancestry with a BA English from Benue

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TOLUPE OKE: I can't quite pinpoint my first encounter with your work, but I know it has been a while, and my earliest awareness of you was as an essayist, editor, and short story

writer. I took notice, even more, when two winners of the [Toyin Falola Prize](#), the same prize for which your short story “The Son of Blue Jack” was selected for the inaugural anthology, credited you as their editor or acknowledged working with you, all of which is hardly coincidental. Since then, I have also come to learn about the many other remarkable things you are involved in, such as [Afapinen](#). What does this constellation of roles and contributions mean to you? How do you navigate the intersections of these creative and intellectual pursuits?

CARL TERVER: Thanks for bringing up “The Son of Blue Jack.” When I wrote that story, its ambition was greater than my capacities as a writer at the time. It’s a story I wish to go back to very soon, especially after having read some Ted Chiang and seen what one can achieve with a short story if you give yourself limitless vision. I do not really know how to answer your question without coming off as self-advertisement, but I’m sort of a writing virtuoso, maybe even to my disadvantage, because which do I focus on and really master? I have tried to leave editing but editing keeps coming back to me, in the way of returning clients or writers I have worked with. When I am not getting paid for writing, editing pays, so I’m in that one foot in and out relationship with it. Nevertheless, I love editing, especially after it’s done the job it’s supposed to do; and I feel very fulfilled when I have satisfied a writer or shared ideas with them that made their work better. And working as a founding editor too makes me feel like a kind of pilot—I pore over details so much, over the sound of sentences, what works and what doesn’t, et cetera. And right now, I am invested into the industry of words, at least at home; it is how I get identified in some spaces, and I am just plugged into it. I let it be until there’s a change in trajectory.

TOLUPE: Isn’t that one of the graceful burdens of being a creative: to live at the crossroads of several influences and to be aware of it? Your poems often explore the socio-political realities of Nigeria, with recurring symbols like the rose representing both beauty and loss. In “Tonight I Am Complete With All the Deaths My Country Has Gifted Me,” you juxtapose the fear of becoming and unbecoming: of becoming a rose to be gifted to others and of unbecoming, one, the severance from the umbilical cord and “two, dying, to live where snowflakes/ are cold metaphors.” Could you elaborate on how this duality, or other contrasting multiplicities, shapes your creative process and poetic voice?

CARL: I don't think we can function very well without the capacity for contrasting our ways of thinking or seeing or looking at the world—or to put it this way, without contradiction. Thus, duality. The only way I can fully accept or grasp you is by letting some part of me partake with some part of you: to ask who are you from my vantage already initiates the idea or the possibility that not only myself exists, but you, and maybe others too. It is in the fabric of nature: create, destroy, create, destroy, love and hate, good and evil, and so on. If this found its way into my poetry, it is because at an earlier time, I came to define poetry for myself as trying to grasp meaning from the seeming meaninglessness life presents sometimes—you see the contrast? And, that poetry may try to redeem me from hypocrisy. I have constantly failed at these, especially the latter. If duality found its way to my poetry too, it is because I'm always thinking of the ego and the superego, how they exist within an individual's consciousness, always at war but never destroying their host; how this reveals our truest natures, which I feel I just replicate in my art. It is also in knowing that our conscience's assessment of right and wrong is very contingent and limited to what it "knows."

Essentially, one position switches with the other; a way of seeing or long-held beliefs change within a minute of new knowledge or even disaster. Duality saves us from the sin, I think, of absolutism, keeping the door for negotiation open, making us see beyond the limits of our selfishness and to acknowledge that nothing is certain. For me, sometimes, this should be the work of art, to not provide easy answers but to make us partake in a quest of finding again, or questioning again, what we think we already know—the certainties; *what is beauty, what is not beauty?*—or of who we think we are.

TOLUPE: Hmm, I do agree with the provocative depth of art. But beyond that, it speaks of some things that are intrinsic to human nature: our restless pursuit of meaning, our compulsion to question, and the unsettling drive that keeps us seeking, creating, and reimagining. In "This Blood," you reflect on both internal and external politics of war, poverty and hunger in Nigeria/Africa, teasing out the dynamics of propaganda and global aid. How do you perceive the connection between the international perceptions of Africa and the internal realities shaping narratives about the continent?

CARL: This one is very tricky and almost too diplomatic for me to find my way around it. There is a recent [poem](#) by Njoku Nonso, which partly answers this. It has quite a long title: “Surveillance from a High-Functioning Homo Proteus At Eagle Square, Circa Redacted.” Its last lines, which demonstrates the state of Africa for me, read

What other ruin resides in the occupation of time?
Whose patient dog lies dead and rotten among the wreckage?
Tell me, when Lord Lugard opened his eyes to the rainbow lights of this
country,
did he, too, like me, hiss and walk away
knowing yes, oh my god yes, we are beyond screwed

Africa is such a failed place. I know we don’t like to say it, maybe that is why we console ourselves with words like *black is beautiful* and so on, why we always insist on our beauty or whatever romantic ideas and perceptions we have for ourselves. The war which seems already lost is for the restoration of our humanity, which was taken by our colonizers. Each year, or every day, someone comes up and says we can’t keep blaming our past (meaning slavery and colonialism) as causes for our underdevelopment, someone comes up (this time) a foreigner with a book or apologia about how the West’s contact with Africa was more beneficial to us, etc. I don’t really care about these. But the reality, and we see it every day, is that there’s a lack of basic humanity here, and it affects everything, like a neurotic condition, which reflects in the degeneration we see around, from how we value life, the values we exhort, our worldview, and we know that it is from such a system that we all born into and grow up in, even our politicians.

So, there is a reason why the brand of corruption we have here is different. And it is the lack of humanity. This has caused so many problems for us and even answers your question about the “internal realities shaping narratives about the continent.” But in my revision, I’d say, the internal crisis bedeviling the continent. It is why a country like Nigeria, which in the last decade we have seen its total disregard for human value, thus why it has an alternative stock exchange where “bodies,” rather than economic growth, is the focus. You must be unthinking to think that the precolonial African or precolonial Africa and the reality today is the same thing. It is not; no revisionism can undo this fact. We live in very

deplorable societies where humanity is not considered; the mentally ill are abandoned to starve and die on the streets; there are no shelters or homes by the state for the very lowly and poor. No housing projects. No basic healthcare for them. This is not who we were. We have been damaged. When shall we restore our humanity? That is the most important task at hand.

TOLUPE: Indeed, and as it appears that the vortex will continue spinning, there is an increasing desperation to depart, by any means necessary. The *japa* movement. And this departure appears as a central preoccupation in your poetry, capturing the tension, indecisiveness, and ethical dilemma it often entails. In “Tonite I Am Complete With All the Deaths My Country Has Gifted Me,” you write about leaving as a “final suicide in a distant place, my second/ slave-coming. I take no grace in the arith-/metic of leaving, to un-be.” What are your views on migration, and why do your poems frequently appear to express a resistance to it, particularly in relation to the loss of dignity?

CARL: Man must up and go, especially when situations no longer favour him at a particular place or point in time. This is how humans spread all over the world; it is the march of our civilization, if you wish. But a decision must be made. By an individual or a group, and so on. This is a very personal subject for me, so I guess I will answer it on a personal note too. I have been coaxed to leave Nigeria, so much it feels like an atrocity to not have left by now. Why leaving is imminent, or maybe not, since we just talked about dualities, I don’t think we really pause to think about certain realities. I mean, the promise of a better life is good. A saner environment, perhaps?

When I read Chukwuemeka Famous’s [essay](#) “Reflections on the Burden of Parting,” it felt like an answer to a part of this dilemma. This act of leaving, of severance from place and people. That it is real, and painful, and that we all have different thresholds of processing these decisions. Don’t get me wrong. For some persons it is urgent that they flee from their homes, as seen in very unstable climates ravaged by wars or disasters. I wouldn’t want to talk about the loss of dignity here because it can be impractical. I have an unpublished poem where I’ve written about letting go of what cannot be as “the dislocated north of my country tires me.” I do not necessarily root against migration, as you imply; I simply use my poetry to reflect on it.

TOLUPE: I look forward to reading the poem. Your poetry defies linearity, in rhythm, tone, and preoccupation. For instance, “Tonite I Am Complete With All the Deaths My Country Has Gifted Me” combines elegiac concerns with satire and foretelling: “toast to our achievement, toast to hideousness, toast to our bravery./ Toast, one last time, to the end.” How do you approach this stylistic flexibility, and how intentional is this layering in your works?

CARL: I am very intentional about writing poetry, maybe because I am also a critic and editor. Working with other poets by way of editing their works, or with language generally, has taught me the importance of closely listening to what I am writing. What helps me in writing with such precision most times is, I believe, because I tend to write poetry only from response. And what I mean is I do not set out to write a poem. It must come to me; I believe in that ritual, that when it does, it comes with its own logic, magic or witchcraft, something in the air I breathe during that visitation of the muse, because it is then that the true poem comes to you. One you haven’t written by your intelligence alone, but which was revealed. Defying linearity or stylistic flexibility, as you put it, is an internalized thing for me at this point. It just comes. And I think this is because, as stated already, I have learnt the importance of closely listening to what I write.

TOLUPE: Your love poems, such as “Phenyl ethylamine,” “Musleema,” and “Aubade for Vanessa for Leaving Makurdi Without Goodbye,” are striking for their unusual and nonconventional sensual gestures. “Confessions to Two Lovers & Things Felt In-Between” for example is addressed to two lovers. How do you approach love poetry differently from your more political or existential works?

CARL: I am, primarily, a love poet. Writing poetry began with love poems as a natural response to what was more real to me, as in my own experience, compared to the polemical poems I wrote then. The latter was simply a poor mimicry from the political poems I read at the time, nevertheless that I was trying to mirror what was around me too, the perennial burden, of course, of growing up and witnessing the chaos of Nigeria. But later in this journey I saw that my language was refined in romance than in political poems. Although this has greatly changed since I found that thing called “voice.” The language is even now.

To answer your question, I do not approach either love or the existential any differently than the response with which they're borne from. Rather, it is the experience that matters. And a poem is an act of reflecting on an experience or a post-mortem of it. Sorry to say again that "it just comes," and I say so in the very Wordsworthian manner, of that spontaneous overflow. So that in "Confessions," for example, it is just what it is, that "they told me I will enjoy / the lights of the city / but now I am having urban frostbite / from catastrophe / & neon blizzards." This is my post-mortem of that sour love, that experience, and the words that arrived to convey perform it.

TOLUPE: You've emphatically mentioned your poetry comes to you, a kind of embodiment. But I'm curious, have there been moments when you've had to actively seek out the poem instead? Are there specific triggers, conditions, or constellations that invite these moments of poetic arrival? After all, to be embodied is also to be willing, how does that willingness shape the intentionality of your creative process?

CARL: I can still insist on poetry coming to me because there are some poems that begin from my mental space that sooner get evaporated, and I don't write them. And this happens because I waited for it to give me more but then it didn't. Maybe in the past I sought after a poem. The redemption, or freedom rather, is that I do not force any kind of writing at all in my life right now. If it doesn't come, it doesn't come. I'd rather let response do that job.

TOLUPE: Your poems are satiric, although subtle and layered in ways that might escape casual notice. For example, "Down Payment on a Roasted Corn" closes with: "He who brings corn brings life!" Similarly, in "Tonight I Am Complete With All the Deaths My Country Has Gifted Me," the toast to bravery and hideousness has an ironic undertone. What role do you intend sarcasm to play in your poetry? How do you reconcile the grim realities of your subjects with these moments of biting humour, and how do you balance chastisement with restraint?

CARL: Something happens when you understand language in certain ways. For example, its limitations or sometimes, maybe, its uselessness or redundancy when writing the polemical. We have enough troubles already; tragedy is familiar and the stuff of tabloids. It is rammed into our consciousness daily. How do you as a poet, then, tell it differently, or in a way that is genuine and not just some masturbation of your faculty with language? Or not just as a

manifestation of the desire to create art? Because this is what happens sometimes: poets writing to mourn when no one asked them to; writing to write, without actual heart. To show heart then becomes the goal for me. This is where humour and subtlety work for me. I want my reader to see themselves in the poem; this is one way to make them believe what I am saying and connect to it. And I feel humour does this because it makes us good judges of ourselves, rather than chastisement. Who am I to chastise even? How does doing so help with my hypocrisy? If it helps too, the Tiv language, my native language, is a language of humour generally, such that even insults come with humour or creativity. Say, your teeth are so scattered like broomsticks made to stand on a pile of shit. This is just one example. So maybe being Tiv also affects the way I infuse humour in my poetry.

TOLUPE: Right, it's fascinating how language allows for such profound expression, yet it's heartbreaking to be conscious of the disservice that translation does to indigenous languages, the dissipation of their aesthetics and depth. Tiv is primarily spoken in Benue (a place I had the chance to visit in 2015), and Benue itself seems to hold a special place in your work. We encounter Makurdi and Gboko in several shades: the rustic Makurdi, the endearing Makurdi, but also the bereaved Gboko, as in "Coming for your head":

In Gboko, humans become Goods Only
perched on Toyota Tacomas
& Peugeot pickups – the fleeing.

However, we do not encounter these places as just another geographical location, but also as animated entities with their own agency. In the "Looping Machine," it says "Makurdi eating up my dreams/ Lonely, lovelorn, anxious. 30. Shall I marry?" How has living in or being connected to these places shape(d) your writing?

CARL: I spent a good number of years outside the school system after graduating from secondary school, and went to university very late, which happened to be in Makurdi, at the Benue State University. Before this time, I had read enough and was mostly bored by the school environment and the lectures. Being a student with lesser obligations, I had a lot of free time which I believed I put into pursuing the literary life, so-called. This happened in Makurdi. I read most of my great reads in the city, wrote my best poems here, fell deeply in and out of love with several women here, discovered Hitomaro, Sebald, language, founded

a magazine, edited hundreds of thousands of words, and so on. I built my library here and the city also gifted me an idea for a great novel set in it. I'd say I found my writing self here. It is not just about how or if Makurdi shaped my writing; but that Makurdi is the place where I became a writer.

TOLUPE: Invariably, places are important social networks to creatives, and so are ideologies. "Down Payment on a Roasted Corn" reflects political ideology and economic disparity through the symbolism of the Anunnaki. What do political leadership and economic inequality mean to you, and why/how do you articulate this tension in your poetry?

CARL: I borrowed the symbol of the Anunnaki from the Sumerian myth about extra-terrestrials or supernatural beings who'd colonized earth, and by editing their genes created man as a subspecies to work as labourers for them. This is how I see the current political situation in Nigeria; our politicians are these powerful gods, and by saying "the last Anunnaki," I'm referring to the politician the poem addresses, whose slogan "emi lo kan" represents this all-mightiness, the ultimate power, where all else is inconsequential. In this contract, the people can do nothing about his power because what can—to quote a favourite line from a poem I read a long time ago—"What can a rat's swollen greed do to a bag of rice?" I try to stay away from political poetry, and I stated why I do so in my [essay](#) "Homage To Memory." I believe other poets, especially of the older generation, have done just enough in that department. But when I do write it, however, I articulate tension—which I believe should be the prevailing character of a political poem—by situating myself in such a poem, showing how I am affected by the political climate. But I must say I do not always succeed in doing so, because I have found, as in this particular poem, that I could be just an observer.

TOLUPE: Still on orientations. The breath of your poetry is extensive. In "May We Not Create a Vocabulary of Borders," you critique (post)colonial demarcations and their lingering effects on African unity. If there are any, how does the Pan-Africanist impulse influence your poetry, and what motivates your exploration of border tensions?

CARL: I don't like Pan-Africanism, in the sense that it is distracting because it resulted from a bourgeois consciousness than from the proletariat. It is distracting, first, because it tends to

sell the idea of black homogeneity which just robs us of individual ingenuities, and I am talking about this on an ethnic unit scale here. It's a bigger debate for another time, not one to go into here. On a general note, you can therefore say it doesn't influence my poetry. Consciously, that is. I cannot account for any unconscious influence because I know it is there. On border tensions, it is simply this idea that we are all victims of history or several indoctrinations that tend to pit us against one another. I do not write about this because I am presenting a way for us to locate our shared humanity, but simply as caution for us to reflect on the ways we have allowed ourselves become vessels of hate. As Teju Coles says, "History assures us that many people get swept up in the flood of its seduction."

TOLUPE: The line "Tell MLK Jr to shove his dream up his arse" seems to critique idealism in the face of harsh realities. Is this an indictment of impractical aspirations, or is it a call for rethinking approaches to true liberation in Africa and its diaspora?

CARL: I think it is smart how you quickly insert Africa's struggle of liberation after your initial concern on discarding idealism in the face of harsh reality, because thinking about your question and the poem that line is culled from, there isn't so much as a relationship with the sentiments you raise. That line was the result of a spontaneous thought but maybe it does reveal something of what you ask too.

"Tonite I Am Complete With All the Deaths My Country Has Gifted Me" was written from a place of deep frustration and could be read also as a work of glorifying a nihilist creed, which seems to be the way to cope with Nigeria. When I wrote the line I wanted to take it back, you know; it sounded obscene to me. But what could be truer than the unfiltered language of the unconscious which tends to know more about how we feel than our superego? So, I left the line there. For Africa's liberation, we must enforce decoloniality first, with the same violence of colonialism, as Fanon stated. Surely, this has nothing to do with combat or brute force, but in overhauling systems, so many things (cancellation of the celebration of Independence Days, for example, which is a bloody colonial reinforcement tool, because we were never ever dependent but conditioned to be so through colonialism), and so on.

TOLUPE: And that is one of the intriguing dynamics of poetry, it reveals different facets to us, and as the unconscious seeps into the creative process, it also shapes interpretation. I've

noticed that while you are critical of Pan-Africanism, you strongly embrace the idea of decolonization. Ideologically and in practice, how do you differentiate between the two? In what ways do you find Pan-Africanism limiting or insufficient, and why does decolonization resonate more deeply with you as a framework for liberation?

CARL: I wish this kind of discussion should be had at a table over bottle; that's when the dialectic animal charges and spews grand debates... I mean, this is Pan-Africanism we are talking about! Ja Rastafari! I-man! I-and-I... So, the thing is Pan-Africanism, like Independence, was a bourgeois struggle or fight, not the people's in general, and focused on aspects of imperial mimicry, in the ideas for Africans to have nation states after the models of the colonizers (in the case of Independence) and for Africans to have a certain homogeneity that reinforces a miseducation that we weren't a unified people in the first place. And this is also confusing in the sense that to the local Tiv man or Yoruba at the time what did Africa even mean? These were people who hadn't even survived the consciousness of the rural/ethnic public they belonged to, let alone ideals of a confederacy.

All you have to do is look at the history and source of Pan-Africanism: it did not even begin on African soil but in the diaspora, in pockets of England, and in North America, between the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th, resulting mainly from the intellectual heft accomplished by the diasporic Black community coming to terms with its human capital. They wanted to build an anti-imperial conglomerate of nations. But where were the strong institutions to build on—the extraordinary league of weak African countries at the time, whose case have even worsened? Decoloniality would have been every country's individual project of recovery; as I have already stated, the restoration of our humanity that was lost. You cannot fix the body if the spirit is broken. Decoloniality is more practical and truer, this latter truth is the main reason why the bourgeois and political class who benefit from it not happening will never canvass for it the way they proclaim ideas as democracy and nationalism. And one of the pits of Pan-Africanism today is the Rastafarian struggle which so far remained on an ideological plane of ghettoized fantasies of liberation. Decoloniality is a very practical thing, and we are not ready for it yet. The world and the powers don't even want it. It is dangerous.

TOLUPE: Your poem “Like Frankenstein Supine on the Rail” evokes the imagery of a laboring train questioning whether to revolt or remain in servitude, which gains even more essence when read against the Sumerian myth of the Anunnaki evoked in “Down Payment on a Roasted Corn.” Do you see yourself or your poetry as revolutionary, and how do you perceive humanity’s relentless pursuit of technological advancement, as explored in “Looping Machine”?

CARL: Great, great connection of these poems and the ideas you bring to them; but they are wrong as they are right too, maybe it’s just the angles of poet and reader from which the poems are seen, and that’s fine too. I don’t know. My poems are not revolutionary, maybe at a microcosmic level, at least, to shift the reader’s way of how they see the world, maybe that. To answer your question, it is not new for humans to imagine technological advancement as an invasion of our ways of life or threat even to our humanity. I mean, it was the very thing that made the First and Second World Wars devastating and different from the medieval wars that trailed Europe and the old world. The scale of destruction and humanity’s realisation of what violence can be wreaked on itself with the technology we have, the fear and the horror of our capacity for mayhem. I just found a way to bring in this sentiment with the train—this is the Kaduna train—and I was thinking of its bestial character, as a gargantuan automobile and the noise it makes, its movement, and the cases of bandit attacks that were launched on it in 2023 which led to the death of Dr. Chinelo. So, the arrival of the train for me wasn’t just the train itself but its history. And this was some kind of representation of violence for me. “The Looping Machine” is just a poem about the crisis of becoming 30 years old and feeling unfulfilled; I know it has postmodernist angst but there’s barely much connection to machines.

TOLUPE: Your shorter poems, like “Remember Garissa” and “After Rain in Rwanda,” powerfully condense tragedy into acute, minimalistic forms imitating the suddenness of horror. Likewise, the fragmented structure of “May We Not Create a Vocabulary of Borders” mirrors its preoccupation of dislocation and identity. How intentional are you with the forms your poetry takes?

CARL: I wished you stopped your question at the first observation because I have a Sebald quote that answers that, which is the fact that it is almost impossible to address with art

that which is already horrific. The Rwanda poem was up to 30 lines but with every edit, I realized I couldn't satisfyingly speak about that tragedy with poetic heart and fidelity. And it is a good thing as I think about this in retrospect, for I hadn't encountered Sebald then or was conscious of this way of thinking about art. So, it is just as you have said; for me I therefore go to minimalism if I ultimately have to write about the horrific, which I have now learnt to let be.

Or to use indirection, the way Achebe accomplishes so much in the poem "Air Raid," whose first line I borrowed for my Garissa poem. I also deploy structure sometimes to create effect or to reinforce message. I actually had this phase and hardly do this today, simply because I have cut back on writing poems with a lot of tension in them. But when the spirit leads, or when it happens by itself, as in a poem like "Sometimes I Need a Catapult to Aim," I allow the disorganization to remain on the page to show, to the attentive passer-by, that there is turmoil here, or chaos.

TOLUPE: Poems like "Sudanese" and "Bombs Keep Going Off in the Middle East" confront global oversimplifications and misrepresentations of Africa and the Middle East, like the naivety of the child poetic persona in "Sudanese":

[...] I ate Cornflakes
 every morning & knew
 you were a distant continent that will not happen to me
 even when I hear you die in a Salif Keita song
 Screaming to heaven, Eloi eloi eloi eloi lama sabachthani.

How do you navigate the complexities of alienation and privilege in representing these narratives so that they do not become another perception of distant spectres? By distant spectres, I mean essentialized dystopias or unsettling horrors that are reduced to the vanity appeal of aesthetics.

CARL: This has a similar ring to the last question, no? I think what happens is the poet's empathy or understanding of life that comes from everyday learning. Some of us are just fortunate, I guess. I learnt from an earlier time to always try to put the heart into the art. To avoid being the ventriloquist. If you are not writing about your own pain or tragedy, you need a way to engage it so that your reader can see that—and let me just paraphrase

Sebald—you have been thinking about the topic and considered it for a long time. Because as most times, we write about these events from places of comfort. Recently, a poet revealed in a Zoom conversation how far removed she is from the trauma in her works and must imagine herself as a victim. Yet her collection is one long ride of trauma poetry. Why then can't she write about her beautiful life instead?

So, it can be the failure of empathic knowledge, which I think is when the artist falls into the pit of what you have described as “essentialized dystopias or unsettling horrors that are reduced to the vanity appeal of aesthetics.” (Lovely context, by the way. I’m going to be using this expression a lot henceforth. Haha.) If the story or pain is not yours, there must be respect in how you write about it. And one other way I do this, as you may have noticed, especially from the poems you have cited here, is that I include my privilege of distance from the things I write about in the poem, using Realism in such cases, rather than abstract imageries: “watching Netflix with a second hand Hewlett Packard laptop [...] eating Cornflakes,” etc. It’s interesting as I only make this observation now. These things just become internalized, I guess. I’m lucky.

TOLUPE: Mortality is a recurring motif in your poems, serving as a solemn reminder of death, the brevity of time, and the essence of life. How does this preoccupation with mortality influence the emotional undercurrent of your poetry?

CARL: Ahmed Maiwada wrote in *We’re Fish* that “death is no vacation / to follow your stars.” Yet the Nigerian star is death. It doesn’t matter if you want to follow it or not. Nigeria has made me very conscious of death but sadly not even in a productive way as to inspire the philosophical but to constantly be tortured by its banality. Death has no meaning in Nigeria, and it is sadly that it is this context that mortality appears in my poetry. I’d have loved for it to bear a more profound sense, as in Japanese death poetry where you come across the simple but deeply reflective lines. Mortality does not appear in my poems as an intricate, internalized, or accepted motif, but a hazard of the environment I find myself in. If I am writing from response therefore, what surrounds me will find a way to reflect itself in the poetry.

TOLUPE: There have been criticisms of contemporary Nigerian poets for what some call “empty evocations.” Your works, however, are remarkably grounded and devoid of these

tendencies. What is your observation or sentiment about the current generation of Nigerian poets?

CARL: I am currently working on an essay (two, in fact) on this question. (As you may know, I have already written ["O, Griefa,"](#) where I decried the overused grief trope in the New School poets.) My current essay, however, deals with poetics, how the New School groomed its poetics, wherefore I am looking at exploring Lacan's *The Symbolic Order* in situating our poet's development and understanding of language, and so on. So, you shall find an extensive answer to your question in this essay. Also, generally speaking, if you have followed my sometimes unofficial criticism of Nigerian poetry today you will know of course that I have been decrying what I call "the imagination of the singular trope," where poets have suddenly and sadly chosen, unwittingly sometimes, which is rather unfortunate, but at the same time exposing ignorance and the absence of growth, the usage of similar imageries and metaphorization in craft.

To quote Shlovsky, "Images are given to poets; the ability to remember them is far more important than the ability to create them." But what this causes is the entry or habituation into what he calls "automation." So, there's that automatic redial to an already pervasive aesthetic the community runs on, that most poets, sadly devoid of fresh language, relapse into. I am not the first to say it, but there's been concern voiced about how our poems now all sound the same. But then, of course, it is interesting and revealing to study all of this. Because there are still very good voices among the gathering dust. But I mention no names for now.

TOLULOPE: Yes, there are. A handful, actually. I suppose a part of the problem is with visibility and new media sensationalism which flatten the voices seen. Not just African political leadership or interfering international agencies, your chastisement does not spare the creatives or intellectuals who are often seen as the conscience of the society. For instance, in "Coming for Your Head," you contrast research papers with political negligence, all against grim and turbulent social realities that do not discriminate: "Moloch's worshippers make merry while we/ submit research papers to Princeton:/ The Beautification of the Countryside with Red Flowers" while "Getting Out the Port of Spain" critiques the migration of African writers to the Global North, which is "the real estate of the new African writer/

where all his gains are, lest he amounts to/ nothing, as a friend tells me.” What would you say are the roles and responsibilities of creatives in contemporary African society?

CARL: That line about the Princeton thing was a way for me to self-indict because I am also a creative and an intellectual, so-to-speak. The same way I wanted to show how fucked we are. African writers and intellectuals have fought all the good fight, and today the harsh economic realities of the post-colony haven’t given intellectuals much time to do very much about the political reality. Our best shot is to witness and document, I guess. We are gradually experiencing the brain rot age, and in the near future, there’d be certainly no need for intellectuals. It’s all a mess. I fear even that questions like you’ve just asked will soon be very irrelevant, if not useless. And I guess this answers your question, too. We don’t have much of a role. It used to be said that we tell compelling stories, of representation, to enrich the African man, stories capable of empowering the oppressed. But with late capitalism and the over-commercialization of society today, where is the place for such stories? That kind of art is to be found in very small spaces now. That kind of art has left the cathedral, as Walter Benjamin would have it. Thus, the intellectual’s abilities are now also put up for joining the train of capitalism. Thus, migrations, for example. Even for me, I already see myself teaching at one of these American universities; it’s like a habitus, you know. How much more can one do?

TOLULOPE: Hehe, like you said: man must up and go. “Telex from The Past” stands out as an Africanfuturist poem, contemplating the tension between past, present, and futures, from an African locus of enunciation, through the lens of technology and myth. How do you see Africanfuturism intersecting with poetry, and what role does it play in reclaiming African narratives/past and re-imagining the futures?

CARL: Good question. And the thing is I have already started a conversation about this in my first [“Coming in from the Cold” dispatches](#) (an essay series I initiated to randomly talk about art). I’d rather say that African futurism is an incursion rather than an intersection in our poetry. I also spoke in that essay about its elitist-elitist status for readers. But what I shall say about it here, pardon me to quote myself, is that it’s a “discourse of the postmodernist reality of Africa juxtaposed with black identity, technology, dystopia and utopia, late capitalism, AI, The Singularity question, the invocation of African myths and gods, borne-ing

back sometimes into the past to understand the present, and more—in defining the individual and collective existence of Africa in personhood, place, and time.”

I also see it as trying to fill a gap in what I call the waiting end of the postcolonial continuum, you know, where there’s nothing more. After disillusion, what next? Without answer, the creative processes of our contemporary writers, and now poets, leap into the future, into ‘futurescapes.’ It is the great unconscious at work again, the neurosis here being the restiveness of the artistic mind to find answers or to imagine what will become of his world in such state as the silent dystopia we find ourselves in.

TOLUPE: It has been truly enriching to engage deeply with your poems and to have this thoughtful dialogue with you. To bring it to a close, for now, could you share what (creative) projects you're currently working on and future pursuits?

CARL: I have been interested in the idea of man leaving the cathedral, the way Walter Benjamin speaks of art leaving the cathedral when it loses its aura, a thought he pursued in his popular essay on the reproducibility of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. With the age of surveillance and data capitalism, what is the deep end of man’s several reinventions of self in such an age, and how does this affect his ability to be a more original person? I’m calling this “exitus cathedralis,” and I’m working on an essay to foreground this. Other creative pursuits include a novel-in-progress titled *Astralite*. There are critical essays in the works too. A second poetry collection, *We are Carbon*. And maybe, I shall go into creating short visual content on writing, philosophy, photography, and criticism soon. Also: I am learning German. So, *danke*, you too, for an engaging conversation.

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Notes on contributor

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