

## TWO

---

### *Memoir*

#### GETTING PERSONAL

#### *An Elegy for Adam Levin*

Experience, contrary to common belief, is mostly imagination.

RUTH BENEDICT

Personal experience is a most vicious and limited circle.

OSCAR WILDE

THIS CHAPTER ENGAGES ADAM LEVIN'S 2005 *Aidsafari* in what Lauren Berlant has called the genre of the personal.<sup>1</sup> It explores the adaptation of what is by then a recognizable international genre—the gay AIDS memoir—to the subjective experiences of the South African context in the waning years of then president Thabo Mbeki's AIDS dissidence or denialism. Levin deploys a range of discursive frameworks, narrative strategies, and imaginings of the self and the social in making sense of these “personal” experiences. I try to follow his lead. Levin powerfully and ambivalently invokes family, community, drag, and fabulousness as key resources in his self-described “journey” with HIV/AIDS.<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously, his memoir dramatizes generalizable and historically specific difficulties around identification, empathy, and the public and political valences of “feeling” in a time of pandemic.

I met Adam Levin a few times in Johannesburg in the late 1980s. I first read his extraordinary memoir *Aidsafari* when it was published in 2005. I have it with me in Maui when I find out about his death on May 31, 2019, from a mutual friend's Facebook post. I am in Hawaii on vacation, either looking for my life or escaping it. I have brought Levin's memoir because I am writing a chapter about it, but this global circulation of readers and writers and their memories is constitutive of the meanings and impact of Levin's memoir.

As I read the post, I am overwhelmed with memories of loss and laughter, not just about Adam. I feel a small sadness that he will never read (and make

fun of) what I write about *Aidsafari*, a memoir which does important cultural work not just in bridging two of the most significant incarnations and geographic spaces of the pandemic—the pre-antiretroviral North Atlantic gay world and the more generalized pandemic of Southern Africa—even as the memoir resists that connection. The sadness moves in and across concentric circles of connection: sadness for the people I know who were close to him; an uncanny sense of cultural loss, like his very different close contemporary South African writers Phaswane Mpe and K. Sello Duiker, gone too soon; which segues into something like a mourning for an epistemological loss: a singular voice and talent who renders South Africa in a time of democratic transition and global gayness mutually intelligible and interesting. Simultaneously, *Aidsafari* is a book of the best kind of sentimental education, and while obviously centrally concerned with AIDS, it is also about so much more.<sup>3</sup>

First, that Levin's book is able to straddle the geographies of the gay North Atlantic world (and the ways in which that world was also *in* South Africa) and the emergent South African articulation of the pandemic is testament not only to his significant talent and imagination as a writer but also to his world-straddling biography and the deeply determining positions of a certain white South African gayness that was smart enough to plumb the contradictions tending to the impossibilities—moral, political, aesthetic—of those positions.<sup>4</sup>

I did not know Adam well. It is possible that he might not remember me. Our social circles overlapped some but not extensively. I think I first met him in an organic cosmetics shop in the Firs mall in Rosebank, Johannesburg, in the late 1980s—maybe 1988. I would have been twenty-two, Adam nineteen. I can shorthand the milieu. It was called the Bodycare Shoppe. It was the era of the anti-apartheid cultural boycott, and so a socially conscious global franchise like the Body Shop would not be caught dead in an upscale mall in the overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly affluent northern suburbs of Johannesburg, but the appearance-conscious part of that constituency, i.e., nearly all of us, still needed beeswax lip-balm—locally sourced (though locally sourced was not yet a term in 1988)—and rosemary/olive oil eye cream. White privilege was not yet a term then either, but we had it. The Bodycare Shoppe was owned and run by a beautiful, horse-jumping, former model Dutchwoman called Babiche. There was usually a crew of glamorous youth lounging around the store, not really buying anything because our parents, and not all our parents, were the ones who could afford to buy anything.

I want to be tender to those young people, but not in the mode of producing alibi. We were vaguely political, some of us would be more so in the years ahead. We all hated the government, abjured apartheid, joined the protest marches on campus, regularly got tear-gassed, very occasionally bitten by a police dog or whipped by a sjambok. But I don't think I am being unkind when I say we were thoroughly, if not irredeemably, complicit. Black women washed and ironed our clothes, cooked our food, looked after our ailing grandparents, and often loved us. We were too young, too callow, too sheltered to fully register how we were beneficiaries of deep and ongoing historical injustice. We were what my current students might describe as "fake woke." To our credit, we recognized the uselessness of white liberal guilt as a coping moral ruse, so instead we went "nightclubbing," to use the title of an immortal Grace Jones song that was pervasive in that time and space.

And the nightclubs we went to in those nights of what could later be seen as the dying days of apartheid were weird dreamscapes. On occasion, I would go with one of the models from the Bodycare Shoppe to a doctor in downtown Johannesburg who was either crooked, stupid, or entirely indifferent. We would put rocks in her pockets, and she would get on the scale and weep and wail that there was no way she could find work at this weight, until he gave her an Obex prescription, so we had good quality amphetamine-adjacents to go dancing all night. If you had told me in 1988 that Nelson Mandela would be released in two years, that the ANC would be unbanned, and the democratic elections were only six years away, I would have laughed at you, and said something like "I'll have some of what you are smoking." I could go on, but hope that the telling detail, rather than the exhaustive account, can give some sense of a prehistory of the memoir that I could not shake. I do not wish to romanticize drug use, but the notorious Grobler Commission of 1971 claimed that drug use by white youth was "a form of terrorism that is more dangerous than the armed terrorism we are familiar with on our country's borders."<sup>5</sup>

While *Aidsafari* is mostly oddly silent on music, the soundtrack, and the contexts of that soundtrack, of the memoir's prehistory feel significant for this reader, so indulge this auditory digression. It was an era of pirated cassette tapes. You could go to a music store like "Beat Street" and rent an LP for a few rand for a few days and illegally tape it. We listened and danced to British New Romantics and danced live to white Afropop bands like Evoid and Via Afrika—Rene Veldsman with the amazing biceps and snarling vocals—and the beginnings of South African sampling. One song stands out: Via Afrika's 1984 "Caprivi Strip." "If you find a man in uniform by the

side of the road, please pick him up” was a kind of public service announcement on a radio program where white conscripts in an apartheid army could request songs to be played, called “Forces Favourites.” This announcement by Esme Euvrad/Patt Carr urged motorists to give army conscripts a ride home—“please pick him up.” In Veldsman’s ironic and manic repetition of it, it meant something else entirely. I am listening to Via Afrika’s “Caprivi Strip,” the song where that sampling occurs, as I write this very far away in my study in Austin, Texas. The Caprivi Strip is the part of Namibia (I almost want to write Nambia, though that painful joke comes much later) that reaches across the top of Botswana to touch the western border of Zimbabwe; it was the site of the launching of many forays in South Africa’s illegal war in Angola in the late 1980s and also home to the notorious Koevoet covert operations, and rumors were rife that Koevoet was now/then fomenting the waves of violence in the “townships” around Johannesburg in what we can retrospectively see as the run-up to democracy.<sup>6</sup>

The strip in Caprivi Strip did not just invoke that notorious military territory, but also Glenda Kemp, the possibly even more infamous South African stripper of the 1970s, with her python, Oupa (Afrikaans for “grandfather”).<sup>7</sup> Veldsman owed something of her style to the iconic Kemp, who was a scourge of the South African censor board, and triggered every anxiety about sexualized white womanhood for long after she stopped performing. The club, the Bodycare Shoppe, the pop stars, and the strippers provide another archive of feelings—to borrow Ann Cvetkovich’s redolent phrase—for the making sense of the heady mix of race, politics, and sex in Levin’s South African AIDs memoir.

We, young white “alternative” boys, lived in terror of conscription: two years in the South African Defense Force, which could be deferred for tertiary education. I was briefly a member of the End Conscription Campaign.<sup>8</sup> Some particularly brave young men chose to go to jail for six years rather than serve in the army. I did not. I just kept studying. When I got to New York in 1991 to go to graduate school, I mailed the South African Defense Force (SADF) a gay pornographic postcard with the message: “They are coming, but I am not. Love and kisses 8252882.” The fact that some thirty years later, I think I can still remember that number suggests something of the depth of the imprint of conscription. The experience of the army or the experience of avoiding the army was in many ways a defining generational one. For white gay men, the army offered the sexual opportunities of gender segregation at close quarters for some, but there was also aversion therapy,

rampant and abusive homophobia, and attendant trauma. Carl Andre Van der Merwe's *Moffie* (the derogatory Afrikaans word of uncertain etymology—perhaps short for *hermafrodit*—the English *faggot* would be closest) chronicles these experiences in their full panoply of contradictions.<sup>9</sup> Adam was three years younger than me. Conscription was abolished in 1993, and its enforcement had become increasingly lax. Years later, I remember being told at a gay party in Pretoria that the military police (the MPs, as they were known) had a five-year backlog of men who had simply not shown up, but, even then, the specter of conscription must too have haunted Adam. It was not exactly avoidable. No wonder US Vietnam-era culture was so fascinating to us, even though its participants were closer in age to our parents than we were: how to be draft dodgers in a manifestly unjust war. I saw *Apocalypse Now* four times.

“Caprivi Strip” is a brilliant song that condenses that public and personal history, and while some thirty years later it sounds a little tinny and under-produced, I still want to get up and dance. I need to be clear this was not the great music of the struggle. Via Afrika were no Hugh Masekela, and Veldsman went on to have a successful career writing advertising jingles. Instead, it is the joyful, anarchic music of white alienation aching for solidarity in its borrowed African rhythms, and some call and response yelling. Via Afrika risked accusations of cultural appropriation in terms of their sound, their styling and choreography, the latter Africanesque without the fidelity and skill of a Johnny Clegg, but they were more than an element in the soundtrack of the times. They managed to embody and perform a discovery of the exotic at home, in a kind of post-punk “fuck it all” tonality. There was a clear ethics of refusal of racial segregation, even if the politics were murkier than the other great white music of that moment: the brilliantly morose dirges of Johannes Kerkorrel and the explicit satire of a band like The Cherry-Faced Lurchers. The latter’s lead singer James Phillips’s “Hou my vas corporaal” (Hold me tight, corporal) is arguably the song that best captures a critical take on white male trouble with conscription. The song was released under the pseudonym “Bernoldus Niemand,” because Phillips himself was hiding in plain sight from military conscription. Niemand is Afrikaans for no one or nobody. “Caprivi Strip” refuses the pathos of that parodic plea in a similar sense of the absurdity of the militarization of South African society in the 1980s.

Paul Gilroy’s extraordinary article in *Critical Times*, worked up from his remarks at a memorial conference for Hugh Masekela, elaborates

compellingly how we may think politically and experientially about music. I quote at length:

Music as organized sound confronts Critical Theory as a test of the limits and character of representation. It manifests the will of its creators, and as I have already said, it has supplied a means to summon our utopias, as Bloch and Said would have it, to bring the elusive “not yet” nearer so we can sample it and see whether it is, after all, what we desire. Organized sound has also supplied ways to create and share social, aesthetic, and somatic experience outside of the habits conventionally associated with merely political and material life. A younger generation of activists and writers has been more focused on how music sounds and makes them feel in political settings rather than on any discursive readings of musical texts and performances.<sup>10</sup>

There are clear parallels between Gilroy’s invocation of Bloch and Said in the attempt “to summon our utopias” and José Esteban Muñoz’s theorizing of queerness in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*: “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain.”<sup>11</sup> One could express similar sentiments about equality and democracy in South Africa. Levin’s memoir reaches to that horizon imbued with possibility, and in the memoir’s emphasis on the consoling power of memories of fabulousness shares the temporal complexity of Muñoz’s formulation. Levin is further willing to embrace pain, irritation, and occasionally disgust as he transfigures his travels with AIDS.

In thinking about Via Afrika as more than a supplemental soundtrack to the prehistory of *Aidsafari*, I hope to invoke the sounds and feelings of that music not just in explicitly political settings and to provide a discursive reading of their musical texts and performances, as well as to show how Via Afrika registered to me as a brush with queer futurity.” My high school fascination with Rene Veldsman’s biceps should have alerted me to something. While—primarily, I’m assuming, for largely cynical and commercial purposes—Via Afrika would have loved to be part of the musical Black Atlantic, they were not.

Adam Levin in *Aidsafari* never tells us exactly what music he danced to in the many nightlife scenes in his memoir, but I strongly suspect that they were the songs of global gayness, and African pop music, but not necessarily the music of the Black Atlantic. I cannot imagine Paul Gilroy loving disco,

let alone Via Afrika. They were too ephemeral, trivial even, but Levin's memoir finds a redemptive place for the trivial in his struggle with HIV/AIDS. In his *Aidsafari*, there may be a sparking connection with the campiness of the white Afropop of a band like Via Afrika that combines both critique and utopia, and their oscillations in the language of feeling.

In her immensely generative *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003), Ann Cvetkovich writes, "an archive of feelings, an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception. . . . In the absence of institutionalized documentation or in opposition to official histories, memory becomes a valuable historical resource, and ephemeral and personal collections of objects stand alongside the documents of the dominant culture in order to offer alternative modes of knowledge."<sup>12</sup>

In conversation with Andie Miller of the *Mail & Guardian* in 2006, Levin talks about music in relation to walking rather than dancing:

When it comes to walking, rhythm, he reckons, is key: "In New York everyone has an iPod, or a Discman, because you're alone, on the subway or whatever. So there we all sit with our separate rhythms beating, and walking to our separate rhythms. I defined three kinds of rhythms—the one of all our memories, all our songs that have carried us so far; what we currently listen to; and then what will take us forward. I've always got to have an anthem of the moment, that I play to death." Currently his anthem is Lord Raise Me Up by the "reggae rapping rabbi," Matisyahu. "At first I thought it sounded like a gimmick," he says, "but his songs are wonderful."<sup>13</sup>

Such songs, underscoring a return to health and mobility after the paralysis from neuropathy in Levin's life post-memoir, also constitute an "archive of feeling"—but back to nightclubbing. These clubs, gay, straight, who could tell, and the memories of them encapsulated both in Levin's memoir and in my somewhat addled memory of them, were still mostly but not exclusively white in terms of their clientele, but the patterns of segregation in Johannesburg were changing fast. After a series of declarations of states of emergencies starting in 1985, the country was becoming ungovernable, and for privileged white youth who were hungry for anything other than what we knew, it felt like there were not really any rules, though of course there were.<sup>14</sup> I remember quite vividly a young Steven Cohen, on the cusp of his global performance artist stardom, bopping away at Zipp's, before it became Mrs. Henderson's on Kruis Street, bedecked and bejeweled in swaddling cloths.



Adam and Steven were part of a kind of global club kid phenomenon, but we did not know that at the time. The description of the improvised memorial for Henry Heels in *Aidsafari* nearly twenty years later is of a piece.<sup>15</sup>

The 1980s in Johannesburg were millenarian. You don't have to believe my anecdotal accounts; there are brilliant and respectable sociological studies.<sup>16</sup> The press, where we knew some of the journalists, was extensively censored, and revealed that censorship by publishing the censored sections of articles with obliterating black ink where the text had been censored. One knew when Soweto was burning because you could see the pall of smoke to the southwest, and you would see tanks or buffels or casspirs rolling down the highway. We liked to say that Johannesburg in the 1980s was like Berlin in the 1930s. I don't think any of us knew much about Berlin in the 1930s, but we had all seen *Cabaret* a few times. We probably realized we were in historically momentous times, and we would have liked to be at the center of them, but we did not really know how, and/or suspected that the cost might be too high. Simultaneously, there was a pervasive and contradictory sense that life, real life, destiny even, was elsewhere, in places like London, Paris, New York, or God forbid, Sydney—places many of us ended up, permanently or on a sojourn. While Adam spent a year or so in New York, it was the African continent and particularly its visual cultural production that really grabbed and held his attention.<sup>17</sup>

I remember meeting Adam in that store and thinking he was tall, smart, and good-looking, and he was, but I did not really remember seeing him out and about. I would sometimes run into his best friend Roy at Champions—a sports bar that had become a gay bar (this was well before the era of the gay sports bar) across the road from the railway station in Braamfontein. Champions was there a decade or so before the attempt to create a gay nightlife strip in Braamfontein called “The Heartland,” modeled after such areas in North America and Europe as another sign of South Africa's joining the world after the isolation of sanctions and the cultural boycott, but more on that later. Roy had a fleeting crush on my ex-boyfriend's best friend. I thought Roy was hot. There is now a burgeoning academic literature on clubbing, sexual networks, and their concatenation.<sup>18</sup> While all readers, writers, and texts are historically situated, and much academic work begins with the premise that you need to get out of your way or, in a gay idiom, to “get over yourself” to read properly, that was not possible, and actually felt counterproductive for this reader of *Aidsafari*. I knew/know and loved in a kind of pre-critical way the milieu of much of *Aidsafari*.



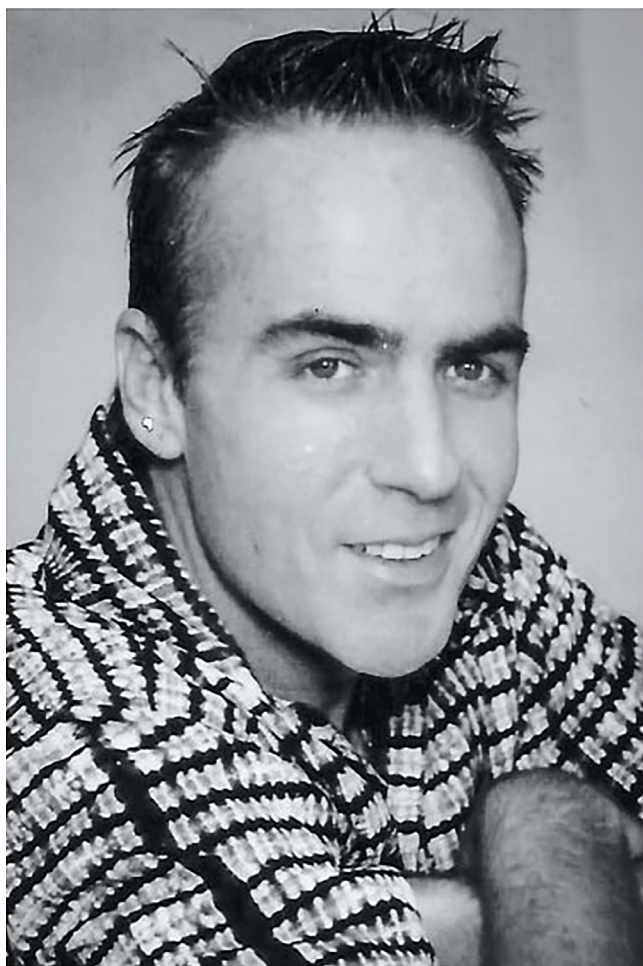


FIGURE 4. Adam Levin. Andrew Chandler, “Celebration: In Remembrance of Adam,” Mamba Online, June 19, 2019. <https://www.mambaonline.com/2019/06/19/celebration-in-remembrance-of-adam-levin/>

I could riff pretentiously on queer kinship. A distinctly unacademic kind of knowledge inevitably informs my reading of the book. At some point in his memoir when he is starting to feel better, Levin orders a cab and says: “4th and Main,” I know exactly where he is going—Oh’s—a gay bar in Melville, for a while *the* gay bar in the early 2000s in the longish moment when Melville succeeded Braamfontein as center of Johannesburg (white) gay life. The bar scenes in *Aidsafari* were particularly evocative for me. Other people have memories of Adam in the club. Here is Andrew Chandler

in his 2019 Mambaoline obituary: “But, despite his serious condition, that broad-mouthed smile did not leave his face. In fact, a few weeks later there he was—on the legendary dancefloor of Therapy—in his wheelchair. I remember the scenario—one of the killer deep house tracks being played at the time—some demented queen practically spitting out the words ‘the Drama Starts Here.’ A club full of sweating gay men—being whipped up into a frenzy by Adam gyrating his torso from the waist up.”<sup>19</sup> Even when he could not walk, Adam would dance.

This cauldron of a nightlife world and its afterlives is one of the worlds that *Aidsafari* brings into representation. In many ways there was not much in those intersecting demimondes to prepare Adam for AIDS, subsequent wheelchair dancing notwithstanding, though the mobilization of roughly equivalent milieus in some US cities was essential for the invention of life-saving safer-sex practices and the club could be both a site for community formation and community activism, as well as of danger, alienation, and trauma—what could be called the grimness of fun.<sup>20</sup>

I began with the claim that the memoir under discussion here bridges the North Atlantic gay AIDS memoir and the South African one. This is a claim that Levin in his memoir appears to dispute:

When I first got sick, I looked for books that might prepare me for the journey ahead for me. I looked in the bookstores, I surfed Amazon, yet I found nothing. In its own insidious way, the conspiracy to keep this disease walled in silence had triumphed. If this book helps chip away at a single block of that immense wall of silence, I will be greatly honoured. If my story can be of any solace or assistance to anyone battling the rigours of this disease, or to any of the people close to him or her, it will be privilege to offer that.<sup>21</sup>

I find this passage strange, almost implausible. As early as 1987, Paula Treichler’s essay “AIDS, Homophobia and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification” showed how AIDS was as much “an epidemic of signification” as anything else—granted, most representations were phobic in the extreme—but by 2004 the AIDS memoir was a recognizable genre in multiple languages.<sup>22</sup> Exclusive Books—the largest South African bookstore chain—responded to the 1996 constitutional clause prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and to global bookstore trends with a “Gay and Lesbian” section of its flagship store in Hyde Park, a venue in the social and geographic orbit of *Aidsafari*. I struggle to believe that in the early 2000s, Paul Monette’s AIDS trilogy, the AIDS writing of

British filmmaker Derek Jarman, the memoirs of Cuban/American Reinaldo Arenas, French Herve Guibert, and others were unknown and unavailable in Johannesburg.<sup>23</sup> David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives* is the memoir that shares the brutal anarchic honesty of *Aidsafari*, though Wojnarowicz's biography is very different from that of Levin's.<sup>24</sup> Closer to home, there was Phaswane Mpe's brilliant *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, published in 2001.<sup>25</sup>

The point here is not the absurdity of providing Adam Levin with a posthumous reading list, though there were literary resources and possible companions. None of my examples above would have been entirely germane. The year 2005 sees the publication of the first two gay South African AIDS memoirs, Levin's *Aidsafari* and Edwin Cameron's *Witness to AIDS*.<sup>26</sup> If Levin is unable to access the bibliotherapeutic resources of experiences from elsewhere—the cultural productions of the places from which a kind of global gayness may be seen to emanate—he does discuss the perils and possibilities of the memories of more embodied experiences of both the global and local queer community.

## QUEER COMMUNITY

This book is for all of you who were there. Without you, it would not have had an author.

ADAM LEVIN

The memoir is presented in the form of a diary, the form doing the work of both claiming to being subjective and anchoring its contexts in specific time and places, contributing to its truth effects, while insisting on its subjective nature. The diary form is deployed to different effect in Kgebetli Moele's *The Book of the Dead* in my final chapter. The important thing is being "there," and *Aidsafari* takes us there. The second entry is a flashback to April 6, 2003, on the gay section of Ipanema beach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Readers are in the milieu of a certain kind of easily recognizable classed and raced global gayness, to which our protagonist both belongs and feels uncomfortable being a part of:

There is a bunch of British tourists sitting nearby. Their conversation is upsetting me. One particular queen with a ponytail, Jackie O shades and a paunch is speaking far too loudly: "What a gaw-juss boy that was last night. He really

likes you, I think. Oooh yes. Has he called you? Never mind, luv, we'll see him at the club tonight."

Oh Margaret, I groan under my breath. Why do you have to be here? Why the leathery middle-aged fags on a package tour, hunting for young brown boys who'll fuck'em for a couple of hundred rials? Am I envious? Or—shudder—am I as pathetic as they are? Uggh. I don't want anyone. I'll just watch. Don't touch me. Don't come over and speak to me. And please shut up, Margaret.<sup>27</sup>

Who is Margaret? And why is his name Margaret? What subcultural compendium of identification and disavowal is "Adam" working through here with Margaret? With "a ponytail, Jackie O shades and a paunch," Margaret is clearly a figure of derision: stylistically, physically, follically, and morally. To play native informant here, it was not uncommon for gay men to use women's names and pronouns to refer to each other derisively, though this derision is multivocal. Since homophobia and misogyny are cognate social affects, and gay men are immune from neither, a quick diagnosis of self-loathing is possible here, but the act of calling a (fellow) gay man "Margaret" firmly places one in the community of Margarets. In a South African context, the linguistic codes of Gayle or Gaylene add another dimension. Gay/lene is a coded subcultural gay argot, related to cockney rhyming slang, though it works alliteratively rather than through rhyme. Many, mostly English words (and some Afrikaans ones) that are central to important imaginings of "Gay Life" are given an alliterative woman's name. Some of my favorite examples include "Beulah" for beautiful and "Hilda" for hideous ("Hilda deluxe" for very hideous), "Monica" for money, "Dora" for alcoholic drink, "Vera" for vomit, "Cilla" for cigarette, "Betty Blue" or "Betty Bangle" or "Priscilla" for the police, and so on. Gay/lene is also unsurprising and resolutely racialized—"Clora, Natalie/Natalia, Wendy/Lily and Zelda." You can work those ones out. I could not find an entry for Margaret in Ken Cage's *Gayle: The Language of Kinks and Queens*, which freezes this ever-adapting argot in 2003, so of a time with *Aidsafari*. The closest I could find was Marge—"a gay man who has a reputation for being easy to get into bed [from margarine which spreads easily]."<sup>28</sup> I think Levin deploys "Margaret" to get at "Margaret"'s age and nationality rather than specifically impugning his/her virtue.

What might a sex-positive critique, or even just a non-sex-phobic critique of gay sex tourism look like is a question that emerges in the context of a global HIV/AIDS pandemic.<sup>29</sup> Levin is briefly willing to consider that

he might be “as pathetic” as the Margarets, and in terms of race and class, measured by ease of travel, he is objectively more like the Margarets of this world than “young brown boys who’ll fuck ’em for a couple of hundred rials.” Nevertheless, it appears that he is more sympathetic with the latter, or, at least, less dismissive of them. His response to the quandary of where to identify in this scene is to (temporarily) renounce desire and the possibilities of community altogether: “Uggh. I don’t want anyone. I’ll just watch. Don’t touch me. Don’t come over and speak to me.”

So, leaving the Margarets on the beach in Rio, let’s imagine now going clubbing with the recently diagnosed Adam in Johannesburg. How does he imagine the problems of disclosure after his positive test for HIV? What sources of support can he envisage? Or will he stick with “Uggh. I don’t want anyone. I’ll just watch. Don’t touch me. Don’t come over and speak to me”?

Who am I going to tell about this? No one needs to know, do they? My grandparents certainly don’t. They’ll panic. They won’t get it. And my cousins? No not my cousins. And not my uncles and aunts. And what about the queens? Oh God! I can hear them bitching at the club already. Oh, she deserves it. We saw her picking up guys and fucking around. Now she’s Aida, doll! So thin! So *uggh*! *They* don’t need to know. I owe them nothing. I’ll tell the people who mean something to me. The people I love and I will tell them now.<sup>30</sup>

This frightened projection, which only partly comes to pass, when Adam ventures back—albeit briefly—into the world of the club, can be usefully contrasted with a sense of shared responsibility in a sexually networked world, particularly on the question of blame.

“Do you know who gave it to you?”

“Really, I haven’t got a clue. There are various times it could have happened. It doesn’t matter.”

“Aren’t you angry?”

“No, I’m not interested in seeking revenge on anyone. It was my responsibility to protect myself and I didn’t. It doesn’t matter” I repeated. “I guess what frightens more is the thought that I could have infected other people.”

Oh God! To be responsible for anyone else’s suffering or death! And yet, if I infected, I did so unknowingly—or unsuspectingly, at least. But then again, wasn’t denial as much of a crime as intent? Well, fuck it. Either way, protection was their responsibility as much as mine. (17)

“We are family,” as another song would have it, but the family is all in his head. First, Levin imagines not being able to tell his grandparents (“they’ll

panic”), his aunts or uncles, or his cousins. Kinship beyond the nuclear family holds no promise of support or solace. Then he shifts to imagining his (fellow?) queens: “Oh God! I can hear them bitching at the club already.” The account here skips the difficulty of telling them to the horror of them already knowing in a projection of their judgment and hostility. There is no anticipation of a supportive community here: “They don’t need to know. I owe them nothing.” Yet this internal monologue concludes with a recognition of some sense of shared responsibility even if just in the breach of it: “Either way, protection was their responsibility as much as mine.” There is notably a refusal of any question of blaming someone else for his infection. Each infection becomes a failure of shared responsibility rather than a poor individual decision.

Once he is sick, club life is remembered in much less frightening and more life-affirming ways:

On the weekend before I left for New York, we partied like Trojans. By Sunday morning, Bone and Andrew had closed up their club, and Bone and I sat on the kitchen floor in the dawn light, sniffing slivers of cocaine. It was a blurry but intimate moment. All my life, I had held the greatest respect for those brave individuals who did not give a tin of paint what people said, but celebrated life and their own freakishness with gusto. Bone was one such warrior. Brave, original and demented. And later, long after I had lost touch with this barbaric crew, as I lay curled up in the foetal position on my bed, praying for my recovery, it was precious memories like these that I turned to for solace. (98)

From the isolation of his sick bed, Levin recalls the camaraderie of part of the gay world, calling them “precious memories . . . that I turned to for solace.” Turned in on himself, “curled up in the foetal position,” memories of clubbing and community allow for something like “queer optimism.” Levin continues:

I missed this life. I missed being part of a gang and being mischievous. Socially inept as it was, it was actually one of my better behavioural patterns, for within this crew, everything was up front. Our lives were all so closely woven together, there was little space to be sneaking around. It was a naughty existence, but I felt whole. (98–99)

Thus, the club and the people there can be both a scene of anticipated terror and recollected consolation. The community—“the barbaric crew” that Adam has lost touch with—is one of what Elspeth Probyn has termed

“outside belonging.”<sup>31</sup> Later, Levin recalls his New York club schedule, noting, “I was insatiable. I was out there, looking for someone or something. Finding them. Losing them. Losing it. Collecting memories, perhaps in preparation for the immense transformation that lay ahead of me.”<sup>32</sup> The memory of these experiences gets explicitly reinterpreted as a resource for the transformation that lies ahead. In the memoir, the Margarets and the undifferentiated queens of earlier become individuated in recollection: Bone and Andrew. Bone is Sharon Bone, who was a feature of Johannesburg queer nightlife in the late 1990s into the 2000s. I concur with Levin’s description of “brave, original and demented,” but it is community as much as individual artistic genius that allows memory to console.

Some six years after the publication of *Aidsafari*, Adam Levin will write an obituary for Sharon Bone partly in the intimacy of the second person. The obituary appeared on Mambaonline on March 23, 2011, with the following editorial framing: “The last two months have seen the deaths of two legends of Joburg’s gay nightclub scene; house music pioneer DJ Patrick Talmadge and the underground drag performer Sharon Bone. Sadly, they died paupers. Few seemed to notice their passing, but many will remember being touched by their talents and personas.”<sup>33</sup>

Levin rewrites the above scene from *Aidsafari* for the obituary, entitled “Rest in Pearls Sharon Bone,” keeping the kitchen floor but leaving out the cocaine and attributing the cause of Bone’s death to a seizure, and we are moved past the convention of “Rest in Peace,” bypassing a “Rest in Power” to a “Rest in Pearls.”

I will always remember the one Tuesday morning, after the Easter Weekend of April 1999, when I’d found myself and Ms. Bone, alone on the kitchen floor at the New Moon Cafe with the club’s doors locked. I was moving to New York in a week or so, and it had been one hell of a final blast—dancing at Therapy across the street and hopping to the New Moon and back. We didn’t say very much as we sat there. We just chilled and exchanged the odd laugh. We didn’t need to say much because we’d been there. And So there. So out there too. It’s my strongest memory of Peter. Caring. Smart. And long before we’d imagined the cracks in the pavement might be quite so perilous.

We learn more about Sharon/Peter in the obituary—brief, identifying features of life beyond the performing persona of Sharon. “Brave, original and demented” has become “caring” and “smart.” The wild night ends with a companionable silence. Adam does not mention his earlier recollection of the



night and how “as I lay curled up in the foetal position on my bed, praying for my recovery, it was precious memories like these that I turned to for solace.” The obituary continues:

And this is the thing, Ms. Bone (Cos I have no doubt you’ve charmed someone into reading you this final obituary wherever y’are): all the theory or gossiping in the world can’t explain what it’s like to have been there, in the middle of the floor when a night takes off. To dance so hard you forget yourself, you lose track of time and you feel that the music, the weird, motley crowd and the gutted building somewhere in Braamfontein have all become one living organism of which you and a few hard-core Jozi jollers were a very special part. I am tearier than I’d expected bok. So I’d best not waste ’em. I’m going to look for some mascara to smudge in your honour. After all, perhaps in the end, all it really comes down to is that feeling. We did it because it was fun. And many of us had the time of our lives. I, and many others, will miss you.<sup>34</sup>

What Sharon Bone cocreated was the experience of being in the middle of the dance floor when the night takes off, and the transcendent ecstasy of becoming part of a living organism felt through the synthesis of “the music, the weird, motley crowd and the gutted building somewhere in Braamfontein.”<sup>35</sup> Of course, that phenomenological experience has often quite crass material determinants in the forms of business investors, zoning laws, liquor and other licenses, paid and unpaid labor, and as “the gutted building somewhere in Braamfontein” makes clear—historical and geographic palimpsests. “The Heartland,” where Therapy was located, was created as a gay nightlife zone—a collection of clubs in the streets of Braamfontein just south of the University of the Witwatersrand in the early 2000s.<sup>36</sup> Why there and not in the adjacent neighborhood of Hillbrow, which had been more of a historical center of gay nightlife in the preceding years? Easier to create secure parking for revelers from the white wealthy northern suburbs who had become afraid of the changing demographics of Hillbrow? Proximity to the largest English-language university in the city because students could be imagined as reliable customers and attractive patrons? While the relationship of gayborhoods to gentrification has been extensively written about elsewhere, “The Heartland” fails as an engine of urban development/renewal, and after a checkered history of closings and reopenings, a few because of zoning violations, the venues nearly all shut down in August of 2006.

There are many ways in which this story is a Johannesburg story, but gay nightlife around the world faced and faces similar challenges due to a generalizable privatization of sexual sociality due to the advent of sex/dating apps,

the imagined need for less explicitly and exclusively queer spaces due to greater societal tolerance, real and/or imagined, and the rampant gentrification of many previously queer neighborhoods, and now we can add the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. Too many locales and research projects cluster around the question of the political economy of queer spaces, desires, and practices, some more interesting than others. I can imagine a few irresponsible ones: I have a strong hunch that Johannesburg drag queens help keep the charity thrift stores like TOC-H in Johannesburg in business, along with other workers in the city's largely migrant informal sector. (We will get to Adam's disco mirrored shoe shortly.) Performers like Sharon Bone cobbled together livelihoods in the informal economy removed, like street traders, from the labor protections guaranteed by the South African Constitution and labor law, and part of an undifferentiated lumpen proletariat that left political economic thought positions as only reaction, distraction, and abasement. Michael Warner some thirty years ago noted: "Gay Culture in its most visible mode is anything but external to advanced capitalism and to precisely those features of advanced capitalism that many on the left are most eager to disavow. Post Stonewall urban gay men reek of the commodity. We give off the smell of capitalism in rut."<sup>37</sup> How might we think more cogently about the precarious life of performers like Sharon Bone in terms of labor? I suspect she was too anarchic to visit an organization like the Casual Workers Advice Office and make common ground with the thousands of informal workers in and around Johannesburg cobbling together a livelihood. I laugh at myself a little as I imagine organizing drag queens, but the injection of NGO cash often in the form of HIV/AIDS prevention funds has seen some successful mobilization of similarly precarious sex-workers, though more so in Cape Town than Johannesburg. The work of SWEAT (Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce) has been particularly important on this terrain.<sup>38</sup>

Nostalgia colors Levin's memories both in his memoir and in his obituary for Sharon Bone, but these memories appear as comfort, if not quite healing, in *Aidsafari*, and as a kind of collective mourning in the obituary: "I, and many others, will miss you." In the memoir, Levin calls his memory of that night with Sharon Bone "a blurry but intimate moment." This blurry intimacy is echoed in the obituary: "I am tearier than I'd expected bok. So I'd best not waste 'em. I'm going to look for some mascara to smudge in your honour." You seem to need mascara for a good cry, and I will foolishly try to translate "bok" here: literally "buck" in Afrikaans, but with resonances of *buddy* and *hottie*—the English "hot to trot" could be read as an R-rated

version of the Afrikaans “bok te fok.” “Bok” is at least partially ironic here—a way of defending against the unexpected tears—as well as a marker of the shared argot of a blurred and blurry intimacy.

I researched this part of the chapter by asking friends and friends of friends of their recollections of Sharon Bone, who was the kind of legend that made it only unevenly into the public record. I received the following succinct Facebook message from another denizen of the aptly or ironically named Therapy—the nightclub in Braamfontein where Sharon hung out just adjacent to her own club—Full Moon Café—after it moved from Orange Grove to The Heartland: “Sharon and her partner Andrew hit hard times and their heroin addiction took over. They had a fire where they lived and they landed up on the street although managed to find a room somewhere. Andrew was begging in the traffic in Braam and got arrested. When he got out, he got back to where they stayed and found Sharon had died, presumably from withdrawal. Andrew is still on the street.”

I read this missive as a cautionary tale against a facile celebration of transgressive queerness, but also as indicative of the costs and limits of the kinds of community Levin invokes as sources of fear and stigma as well as comfort and healing. Jeremy Atherton Lin’s brilliant and delicious *Gay Bar: Why We Went Out* (2021) covers this historical period for cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and London, but regrettably he never made it to Johannesburg. Levin’s memoir, while excellent on the sexually and affectively saturated experience of such spaces, is not focused on their material determinants and histories. It does, however, center HIV, which is a surprising lacuna in Atherton Lin’s wonderful book. Sharon Bone and her “barbaric crew” were one of the reasons one went out in Johannesburg during the last fin de siècle.

What’s in the name “Sharon Bone”? Sharon is a homonym of “sharing”—the same first name as Sharon Needles, winner of the fourth season of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* in 2012. Sharing bone is a name of sexual generosity, if it is Bone’s bone being shared, or a multiply ironic marker of a community defined by shared sexual practices, and having to explain the name puts one almost outside such a community. Also, men are dogs. It is not just memories that Levin turns to in his safari with AIDS, but to aesthetic objects and the making of them in the constitution of community:

Then possessed by some throbbing disco urge, I rushed home and chipped a handful of squares off a tatty mirror ball that I had stolen once from a drag

queen who owed me money. I glued the squares in place one by one, covering the entire surface of the shoe, and finishing off the edges with a strand of fake pearls. I placed my mosaic icon proudly on a side table. A glittering little homage to drag. I thought, but—more than that—a desperate hope that the sheer glamour of an object might help me find something I was looking for. That beauty alone might somehow erase some gloom or relieve some of the pain. And it did.<sup>39</sup>

We are in the recycling, informal economy of camp aesthetics here—the revaluation of devalued objects in the service of beauty, and beauty as a therapeutic route. We are given the most immediate provenance of the mirror squares—chipped off “a tatty mirror ball that I stole once from a drag queen who owed me money.” Where did that drag queen get the mirror ball? What was it like before it got tatty? Where was it? Who owned it? And when is theft just the settling of a debt, or informal distribution? These are the stories and questions begged in its latest transformation.

Here is the provenance of the shoe from the previous paragraph: “Then one day, I woke up burning with a somewhat unlikely desire. I asked Mary to drive me to the charity shop, where I dug through a mountain of long-forgotten stilettos, cork-wedges and court shoes. After much haggling over price and style, I settled on a lone, weathered navy blue pump, with a bad red and yellow toe detail, which I hustled down to an acceptable R5.”

The shoe is useless as a shoe. And ugly to boot—secondhand trash, and it is the ugliness and the trashiness that makes it desirable as well as the pleasure of the rummage and the bargaining. In the reconstitution of the stolen glitter ball as a glittering single shoe, what is being mourned and what is being celebrated? The shoe first and foremost has a poetics—the objective correlative of a self and a set of defining feelings lost but open to aesthetic recreation. What is in a *single*, abandoned ugly shoe? When struggling to find a title for his memoir, Adam tells us: “I had been stuck on ‘2’ for a while, my miserable rock bottom cell count when I first tested positive. . . . ‘2’ also evoked the idea of a second chance and a new beginning, but as my darling friend Alex so astutely observed, ‘2’ seemed glaringly inappropriate for a journey that had been so distinctly solo.”<sup>40</sup>

A solo shoe implies the lack of its partner, and given our protagonist’s painful struggle with neuropathy in his feet over the course of the memoir, wearing heels too is often not an option, but the shoe—like the self—can be aesthetically reconstituted as “a glittering little homage to drag.” And a solo shoe is sufficient for these purposes. On the opening page of his dazzling

*Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* (2018), Madison Moore disarticulates queer fabulousness from Thorstein Veblen's notion of conspicuous consumption: "This bedazzled version of Veblen is about how fashion, glitter and sequins, things I can't get enough of, are not only shiny, conspicuous and look great on Instagram, but they underscore the pleasure and power of creativity for queer and marginalized people and other social outcasts. The story I am telling is about fabulousness as a queer aesthetic, an essence that allows marginalized people and social outcasts to regain their humanity and creativity."<sup>41</sup>

Although writing in different times and places and from very different locales and social positions, Levin and Moore share an understanding of glitter and disco balls as both trivial and transforming, and while I wonder where that shoe is now, it does not matter as it did the work of fabulousness in the moment it needed to.<sup>42</sup>

It is not only with family and friends and found/made/stolen objects that Adam Levin must evaluate and appreciate and reappraise his sense of self in the world and his intimate relationships, but also with the pills that initially poison him and then save his life.

#### SIDE-AFFECTS

In the magnificently detailed and careful rendition of a case of an HIV test, which could not really be much more different than what happens to Adam Levin, Jonny Steinberg, in *Sizwe's Test*, writes about a young Xhosa man in a village near Lusikisiki in the Eastern Cape. Steinberg calls the young man Sizwe. Sizwe is a common South African first name, but in isiXhosa, it means nation. While Steinberg is scrupulously attentive to the specificities of a place like Lusikisiki, the choice to give his central protagonist the name Sizwe implies that the nation itself is at stake in this story. Sizwe is singular but emblematic. Mostly, Sizwe and Adam inhabit different worlds within the same national space.<sup>43</sup> One would have to be at a far end of the rainbow (nation) to claim Adam Levin as a representative South African living with AIDS, though he is undoubtedly South African, but there is in one instance an extraordinary resonance between the two accounts.<sup>44</sup> Steinberg writes: "If people are to administer their own lifelong treatment, they must have a lively relationship with their medicines, a relationship at once emotional and cognitive. They must know the name of each pill, its shape, its color, its

nickname, all its potential side-effects. They are stuck with these tablets for their lives. Their relationship to them will at times be hateful and fraught and unhappy. The tablets will perhaps make them sick, fail to stop them from getting sick, change the shape of their bodies. Best to develop a language with which to speak to them.”<sup>45</sup>

As if on cue, here is Levin’s description of his cognitive and emotional relationship to what Steinberg terms the “magic pills”:

Ten o’clock. I can sit upright now. Time for my morning’s anti-retrovirals. I am very good with these. In the past eight months, I have never missed a dose. The trick is, you gotta take them at the same time every day. Otherwise you die. Once I threw up and had to swallow the same bunch again. I should really eat before I take them, so I force down some fruit. Three big orange pills first—the plastic rugby ball ones. Then the white oval—hate the oval, it always sticks. Now the other lot—the yellow one with its weird vanilla flavour. Uggh, the blues. The green oval one. Then the five little blues and yellows—they’re the easiest, so I leave them till last. Done. I deserve another cigarette. Better lie down again. Feet aren’t ready yet.<sup>46</sup>

Levin has found a workable pill regimen and has developed “a language with which to speak to them.” He has been compliant for a full eight months. As befitting a fashionista, the pills are primarily identified by color and shape. It appears as if he starts with the worst ones—“Three big orange pills first—the plastic rugby ball ones.” They are hard to swallow and are aesthetically repulsive and I detect a bit of the indoor gay boy hatred of team sports in the description of them as rugby balls. (Levin ends a letter written to his father on the latter’s sixtieth birthday with “fuck soccer.”)<sup>47</sup> The pill-taking has become a daily ritual, rewarded with a cigarette as he waits for them to kick in—one of the pills must be for the pain of the neuropathy in his feet, but the pills are not identified by function. How you take your pills for both Levin and Steinberg’s imagined national constituency must become personally meaningful. For Levin, the relationship has become aesthetic, and later pedagogical. In the Fred de Vries interview mentioned earlier, he describes visiting HIV-positive people who are skeptical of the life-saving medication: “I show them pictures of how I was and say: look, I took those stupid pills and I’m okay.”<sup>48</sup>

While Levin primarily mobilizes the extraordinary love and support of his parents and friends alongside memories of queer community in all their ambivalences and the cognate queer aesthetic of the fabulous, there are difficult and painful moments when he attempts to imagine HIV/AIDS along

the vectors of South Africa's history of racial capitalism and the intimate forms it blocked and engendered.

#### SYMPATHY/EMPATHY/SOLIDARITY

*Aidsafari* opens with the dedication: "For Mom and Dad, How on earth did I find you?" In the opening paragraph of the memoir, Levin writes: "I have no idea how long I have been HIV-positive, maybe five years, maybe less, maybe more, but I have had Aids for the past two years. When I disclosed my status to my parents, they assured me that I would not have to worry about the cost of treatment and they would remain at my side on the journey that lay ahead. Few people are so blessed.

Even so, he concludes the paragraph: "If you had asked me, in the beginning, if I'd be able to handle the degree of suffering and uncertainty that lay ahead of me, I wouldn't have hesitated in my response. 'No, it's far too much,' I'd have said. 'Hand me the revolver.'"<sup>49</sup> Levin embraces his relatively good fortune with gratitude and without guilt, but how does he work out his relationships with those suffering from HIV/AIDS who are less fortunate than himself? There are key moments in the memoir when Adam imagines his shared and divergent trajectories with personalized and depersonalized figurations of other South Africans living and dying with HIV. Let us begin with the personal and proximate:

Over the past few months, my parents' domestic worker, Elsie, has been losing weight. Now, she has started coughing. They have beseeched her to see a doctor, but she says it's not necessary. Eventually the coughing gets so bad, Mom bundles her in the car and takes her to our GP, who tests her for tuberculosis. The tests are positive. Elsie must start a course of medication, but she doesn't want to. There is nothing wrong with her, she says. Privately, the doctor tells Mom he's sure Elsie has Aids, and should be tested immediately. But Elsie refuses. She also refuses to take the TB medicine.

We see that AIDS denialism is not only a political/policy position but also a deeply personal lived one—and it is the gaps and convergences between those positions where the work of the imagination becomes most vital. In *Sizwe's Test*, Steinberg writes: "There is a surfeit of shame and envy and destruction within us, quite enough to go around. But it seems to me what becomes of this darkness is not a matter of fate but of politics."<sup>50</sup>



In Levin's account of Elsie, who is very different from Sizwe, though her reasons for refusing to test may be comparable, there is a ghastly condensation of apartheid and post-apartheid racialized and gendered divisions of labor—the necropolitics of centuries of racial capitalism in South Africa in the figure of the domestic worker with AIDS—a trope that also figures prominently in Edwin Cameron's memoir. Cameron recounts the story of his Zimbabwean gardener, who disappears when he gets sick. Protective of this man's privacy, even in death, Cameron chooses to give him the name—Gladwell—"Gladwell (as I shall call him)." I think this is more a gesture of a powerful fantasy of healing than gallows irony here. Gladwell is obviously neither glad nor well, but retroactively Cameron deeply he wishes that he was, and that Cameron himself could have helped Gladwell to be so.

Did Gladwell die of AIDS? Probably. We cannot know. Gladwell did not want us to know, yet, as I look back, I see things with greater clarity. I see that I failed Gladwell. My notions of autonomy and respect so vital in principle, were misapplied in the lee of the jet-fuel fires of fear and stigma and internal disentanglement that were consuming Gladwell's life. Although I thought that I was offering him help, and thereby the choice of living, in Gladwell's mind he had no choice. The stigma associated with AIDS left him no choice. Like those at the top of the WTC towers who chose the horror of jumping 100 storeys to death, rather than the horror of being consumed by jet-fuel flame, Gladwell chose to refuse our offers of assistance. He "chose" to return to Zimbabwe to die, rather than let us help him deal with AIDS.<sup>51</sup>

Cameron's sustained invocation of the events of September 11, 2001, in New York, both directly and through the parallel metaphor of the jet fuel uses the single death of Gladwell to suggest something of the drama and scale of the pandemic—though if the then current figure of six hundred AIDS-related deaths a day in South Africa was correct, there was something like the World Trade Center death toll every four and a half days. However, Cameron does not use his analogy to play victimage sweepstakes, but rather to highlight the kinds of social death that fear and stigma produce. Death by AIDS and death by stigma are both likened to jet-fuel fires. What might it mean to say that notions of autonomy and respect are misapplied? Principle fails in the burning wake of "fear, stigma and internal disentanglement."<sup>52</sup>

There is/was way more than one misapplication, but like the child Thapelo in the Moele novel of the final chapter, I want, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, to keep political faith with Cameron here, even as

I watch, with Levin, Elsie go “home” to die. “Eventually, she moves to her sister’s house in the township, so she can be taken care of. She still says there is nothing wrong with her. Mom calls the township. Elsie is doing okay, they report. Slim and sexy, like me.” And then: “I know what a checkup means—an Aids test, and there’s no way I am having that. My parents are just being overly cautious because of Elsie. But I’m not Elsie.”<sup>53</sup>

There are almost too many emotionally saturated histories for me to track here. This report is recognizable to me as a kind of vernacular of my childhood. “Mom calls the township.” The persistence of apartheid-era spatial configurations is apparent, as is the persistence of the feelings attachable to them. How does one call a township, except in that a township is an undifferentiated place, full of racial others, a place one knows about but does not go to, a place to which Black workers return to after they have served their purpose in white areas.

“I’m not Elsie” but then in multiple layers of irony—“Elsie is doing okay” “Slim and sexy like me.” Later in the memoir, we are told of Elsie’s death: “We had tried to contact Elsie a few times, but without success. Sophie [Elsie’s daughter] had said that Elsie coughed more and more, but they had got her some herbs from the sangoma, which helped a little. But she just kept getting thinner and she couldn’t get out of bed. Her mother had been poisoned, Sophie said, so there was not any point in going to the clinic. . . . Sometime in November, they’d lost her. It was a blessing, Sophie said. She had been suffering. And what can you do if someone has poisoned you” (75).

The juxtaposition of the sangoma and the clinic here as treatment alternatives cannot pass without notice, as well as the poisoning allegations, as readers face the very different circumstances and worldviews of the subject of the memoir and other South Africans dying from HIV/AIDS. Almost in passing, the passage’s typical use of free indirect speech—the absence of quotation marks around Sophie’s utterances—might be suggestive, at the level of form and grammar of a kind of internalization or appropriation of Sophie’s speech into the writerly voice. Empathy or appropriation through internalization? You decide.

The following paragraph elaborates on the possibilities of commonality and difference between Adam and Elsie and the deeply enmeshed but sharply diverging worlds they inhabit:

I remembered our little trip to the bus stop, Elsie and I, twinned in our denial. Yes, I’d finally had the courage to challenge mine, but I’d also had a whole

lot of information and support that allowed me to do so. Elsie had none of that. And, even if she had felt a sufficient sense of urgency to finally resort to Western medicine, what were her chances of survival? Aids never strikes in isolation. It strikes in a context of economics and infrastructure and belief systems. And most often it is that context rather than the disease itself that determines one's chance of survival. It was Elsie's misfortune to have been born in a context of poverty and ignorance. And that had killed her. And that, as I was beginning to grasp, was the poison. (76)

The passage brings us to a series of pivotal questions: What twins Adam and Elsie? What separates them? What is medicine? What is poison? The poison, Levin suggests, is not witchcraft, but history and politics. For Levin, "denialism" can be scaled up and down from the sociopolitical to the personal. While Cameron at the end of his memoir imagines AIDS as a call to universal humanity, Levin oscillates between a profound sense of the loneliness of his life with HIV and a similar call for collective understandings if not responses: "It was 1 December, World Aids Day. A couple of people SMSed me to mark its importance, but I still did not feel part of the big wide world of Aids. From the beginning I had lived in my own tiny world of this disease" (137).

Adam and Elsie, linked through the Levin household, emblemize radically diverging South African biographies along the great cleavages of race, class, gender, and the myriad possibilities for living (and dying) they enable and block.

It was creepy living in South Africa, I had grown used to the images I'd seen on TV—emaciated black people, dying alone of Aids in dark, forgotten huts in the countryside. Shivering under threadbare blankets with huge hollow eyes. I knew the horrifying statistics. Four to five million South Africans were HIV-positive. Eight hundred people were dying of Aids each day. I knew this as well as anyone else who followed the news. . . . Only now I was part of that statistic. (44)

To ease the pain in my tummy, I'd raise and cross my legs, leaving me staring in the yellow hospital light, at my bony hope of a shin, coated in areas with a waxy dermatitis—another result of not being able to absorb any nutrients. With my twiggy arms, sunken ribcage and big bloated belly, if I'd had the courage to look in the mirror, my once ample figure probably would not have looked that different from those African kwashiorkor kids they show on the news sometimes, but I didn't. (125)

Adam tells us he did not look in the mirror to see himself that way, but there is one image—two pages at the end of part 1 of the book—a centerfold,

if you like—and the only image in the book, where we see him almost as such: shirtless, both emaciated and bloated, looking away from the camera with what look like Zanzibari doors behind him. He painfully, hilariously, impossibly calls this “Jesus Drag,” mocking an idea of his martyrdom, inviting and repudiating the readers’ voyeurism, and suggesting the complexity of the imagined political work of the spectacle of suffering that so many representations of Africans and “African AIDS” believe to be efficacious.