

THREE

Film

MOVING INTIMACY

DARRELL ROODT'S 2004 FILM *Yesterday* bills itself as the first isiZulu-language feature film.¹ It is also something like an AIDS pastoral, a film set mostly in rural KwaZulu, strangely out of time in a number of ways from the post-apartheid, or what Loren Kruger calls the post anti-apartheid moment of its ostensible setting.² While the major aspiration of this chapter is to track the temporal structure of the film as fantasy, I subject its representations to anecdotal and anthropological forms of reality testing.³ The driving question is how to read the dynamics of affect for (1) the protagonists (and those they are intended to represent) and (2) the viewers that the film imagines as its audience. *Yesterday* is an emotionally powerful film, inviting viewers to invest themselves in and distance themselves from scenes of suffering and alienation.⁴ I wish to understand how *Yesterday* moves us, to work a sense of the failure of feeling against feelings of failure in the face of the pandemic.⁵ That formulation is both too neat and overly ambitious, but is produced by a sense that the social organization, or construction, if you like, of affect is profoundly historical and that the phenomenological experience of affect cannot hold this constraint if it is to remain in the domain of feeling.

This chapter proceeds from the claim of significant historical and geographical diversity of intimate norms and forms that the intimate forms of modernity struggle to organize.⁶ It understands monogamous, companionate heterosexual marriage as the privileged normative form of sexual intimacy under modernity, with modernity understood as an extremely uneven historical periodization.⁷ While there is neither the space nor the erudition in this chapter to argue that general claim into being, in the part of South Africa that *Yesterday* ostensibly brings into representation, the marriage between Yesterday and John cannot be held up as either the empirically prevalent form or the normative one over the course of the last two hundred years. It is the institution of marriage with its legal, economic, sexual, intimate, and

familial ramifications that I somewhat riskily claim as evidence of a globalizing neoliberal structure of feeling.⁸ Viewers of the film feel themselves as feeling at least partially through the affective recognition of this structure, and the critical acclaim of the film as “a universal story” depends on this recognition. In the Zululand that *Yesterday* brings into filmic representation, this structure of feeling is phantasmatic. Given the fact that HIV/AIDS is mostly a sexually transmitted disease, the question of normative forms of sexual intimacy acquires considerable political urgency.

In the case of *Yesterday*, John and Yesterday have an ahistorical marriage—and a viewer’s cathexis of this spatially and temporally displaced companionate marriage may be what facilitates the most emotionally devastating scenes in the film. John and Yesterday must have a recognizably monogamous companionate marriage in order for an imagined global audience to sympathize with Yesterday’s predicament, despite the fact that such a marriage is both out of time and place in the rural KwaZulu-Natal the film claims to represent. Yesterday performs the gendered care work of social reproduction alone—removed from the forms of kinship that would have made it possible. The end of the film, which shows Yesterday, by herself, building a shack for John to die in gestures to these histories of gendered social reproduction but privatizes their marriage to the couple form. *Yesterday* is paradoxically a family values film that astutely and painfully recognizes the material impossibility of being a family values family for its protagonists.

NARRATIVE

Yesterday tells the oldest South African story from a number of angles. It is a story of family destroyed by migrant labor, though the temporality of this family form is clearly a palimpsest whose history is oddly out of place. The narrative unfolds in hauntingly familiar ways with AIDS as a new wrinkle in the drama of the affective and subjective forms of colonial modernity in what could be termed the South African liberal imaginary.

A young mother called Yesterday living in a rural village called Rooihoek falls ill, discovers she is HIV positive, goes to the mines in Johannesburg to confront her husband, who beats her up.⁹ The husband soon is too sick to work and returns to the village where Yesterday nurses him until he dies. The villagers do not want such pestilence in their village, so Yesterday must build her dying husband a shack. Yesterday tells her white doctor in a

neighboring village that she wants to live until her daughter Beauty can go to school. The film ends on Beauty's first day of school and with Yesterday taking a sledgehammer to the shack she had built as a private hospital for her husband. The film does not broach what will happen to Beauty when both her parents have died.¹⁰

The husband's name is John Khumalo, making the echoes of Alan Paton's 1948 classic *Cry, the Beloved Country* at least self-conscious (even though Khumalo is a common Zulu last name and the lead actress in the film is Leleti Khumalo, this appears stronger than coincidence). In that novel, a Reverend Stephen Khumalo went to Johannesburg to rescue his sister and discovers that his son has become a murderer. Es'kia Mphahlele called the novel "Paton's sermon" for its biblical language, moralizing tone, and sentimental outcome.¹¹ The novel concludes with the son of the murdered man visiting the village and the promise of a new cross-racial patriarchal stewardship of the land. *Yesterday* locates its sentimentality elsewhere and is a fascinatingly secular film. Social distinctions between Christians and animists, a feature of rural life in Zululand for at least a century, are not shown in *Yesterday*.¹²

The reworking of the land as a central protagonist is apparent from the opening credits—the bifurcation of the land this time is not in terms of the rich green hills belonging to white farmers and the barren valleys as home to the Zulus. Here is Paton's famous description: "Where you stand the grass is rich and matted, you cannot see the soil. But the rich green hills break down. They fall to the valley below, and falling change their nature. For they grow red and bare; they cannot hold the rain and mist, and the streams are dry in the kloofs. Too many cattle feed upon the grass, and too many fires have burned it."¹³

Instead, *Yesterday* opens with a long tracking shot across a broken, dry terrain with a barbed wire fence separating *dongas* (steep ravines, often produced by soil erosion) and the green hills explicitly in the background. A massive storm breaks out when Yesterday first collapses from her illness, and the film cuts to a plastic bag clinging to the barbed wire fence. The natural world risks the trope of pathetic fallacy here, but the tragedy of *Yesterday* is more personal, less open to allegorizing than its literary progenitor, and inscribes the scene of national fantasy in a more privatized way as nostalgia for a purity that never was. Paton can hold the fertility of the land as a ground for a better yesterday. *Yesterday's* yesterday was apartheid, which the film refuses to see as any kind of nostalgic grounding. I am interested in the iconic force of this plastic bag as at once a symbol of the pollution of commodified culture

and its circuits of social reproduction, but also as a resource in a resource-scarce community. In 2003, the South African parliament passed legislation to require that supermarkets charge for plastic bags as part of a wider anti-littering national campaign—which satirically rendered the plastic bag as the national flower of South Africa. The opening shot, however, clearly resists a sentimentalizing of an African landscape—so often the defining feature of filmic representations of Africa—think *Out of Africa* (1985) as the classic case.¹⁴ The landscape is desolate without grandeur, and the green rolling hills of Paton’s pastoral seem outside of *Yesterday*’s purview.¹⁵

The journey to Johannesburg no longer takes place on a train but instead in a minibus-taxi, in which, entirely implausibly, Yesterday is the only passenger, indicating perhaps unwittingly her status as a singular, if fantastic, representative subject caught in a set of private relationships, only explicitly brought into the network of exchanges through city and countryside, and the state and intimate life through the vector of disease coming from the city. Thomas Blom Hansen has recently written on the minibus-taxi as the agent and symbol of new social velocities in South Africa, the township no longer “a site of quasi-domestic stability, but a properly urban space, marked by unpredictability, difference, and the incessant movement of anonymous bodies and signs.”¹⁶ That this might hold not only for the urban ancillary space of the township but also for the ostensibly rural village depicted in *Yesterday* is apparent when watching the film and listening to the director’s commentary, as Roodt repeatedly describes the difficulty of blocking out the background noise of people and music in representing the village as a place of rural quiet and isolation.

Robert Sember points to the many omissions in *Yesterday*’s attempt to represent the pandemic in South Africa, interestingly in the mode of a counternarrative as an imagined sequel:

Perhaps Singh/Roodt will consider making a sequel, one of the more positive possible outcomes of the success the film is now enjoying. “Tomorrow” will show Yesterday working with other women in Okhahlamba and members of the local hospital there to set up an antiretroviral treatment program ahead of the scheduled government roll-out. Which is indeed happening. It will show how not all men in the community are absent, hostile, and sexually violent but actually work to educate the community about the epidemic. Which is indeed happening. And Beauty will participate in theatre productions with other children in which she will be able to voice her experience as a child affected by HIV/AIDS. Which is indeed happening. “Tomorrow” will not

pay homage to the strength of South African women to deal with suffering but to the history of collective struggle and resistance that have placed South African women at the forefront of social transformation.¹⁷

Sember notes many of the features of the struggle against the pandemic in Okhahlamba, the real-world equivalent of a place like Rooihoek, that the film leaves out.¹⁸ The accusation of *Yesterday* as “a narrative without a history” is a plausible one, and the political risks of presenting *Yesterday* as a kind of timeless tale of feminine endurance of suffering must mitigate against the interventionist aspirations of the film. The accusation runs roughly as follows: If the film cannot represent reality, how can it change it? However, Sember’s imagining of a sequel called “Tomorrow” belies a temporal intractability in bringing the pandemic into representation. The refrain of the previous quote used to highlight the aspects of the epidemic that *Yesterday* does not show is “which is indeed happening.” This phrase is repeated three times, but the imagined sequel is not called “Today” but rather “Tomorrow,” implying that the mode of politics that Sember sees in the present is at some level still in the future. There may be more at stake in the “untimely” or ahistorical elements of *Yesterday* than representational inaccuracy: that *Yesterday* as a post-apartheid film is still in the aspirational future of the anti-apartheid moment, even as it avoids a discussion of the legacy of apartheid in accounting for that moment in the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

THE FAMILY

The family form in *Yesterday* is both anachronistic and out of place, but not anachronistic in the nostalgic form that the name of the eponymous character would imply. John, Yesterday, and Beauty constitute a version of the white bourgeois nuclear family with an absent father thanks to migrant labor, which is itself anachronistically conceived. A Zulu man working on the mines is a much less typical proposition than it would have been in the 1940s–1960s. Migrant miners in the twenty-first century are much more likely to be from outside the borders of South Africa.¹⁹ The nuclear family has a complicated history on the terrain the film wishes to bring into representation. While Yesterday consults a sangoma, we never see her going to church, not that these activities are at all mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, given nearly two hundred years of missionary activity in KwaZulu-Natal,

the nuclear family is often seen as the Christian family and consequent associations with whiteness and modernity. So there also may be good historical reasons for this representation of a Zulu companionate marriage. The difference between Christian and animist Zuluness is more important in rural areas, and the film's depiction of this form of intimacy may also mark an urban imposition on the rural.

There is no evidence of an extended kinship structure in *Yesterday*—no grannies, no aunts, which makes it difficult to account for why *Yesterday* would stay in Rooihoek, as well as questioning any realist aspirations the film may have. As Mandisa Mbali and Mark Hunter ask: “Where are the Gogos [grandmothers]—the lifeblood of rural South Africa?”²⁰ *Yesterday* appears also to have no paying job, though there are scenes of her hoeing the ground and sowing seed. This is a representation of an earlier economic structure of migrant labor. Historically, migrant labor allowed the mining companies to pay a less than subsistence wage because reproductive labor costs were to be carried by the rural homestead. Rural women are now much more likely to meet these reproductive labor costs through participation in informal economies, but more on that later. Mother, absent father, and child are imagined as constituting the nuclear family, the structure geared toward social reproduction and affective distribution in ways that suggest to this viewer that the time of the family in *Yesterday* is the time when Zulus will have become a kind of idealized white people.²¹

Yesterday is undoubtedly a good housewife. We see her attending to her child, fetching water from the communal pump, washing clothes with Beauty in the river.²² We have a pastoralized zone of domestic privacy overlaid with a thin patina of romanticized African communalism. The film works hard to preserve this zone of privacy around the married couple. In the scene where *Yesterday* assumedly tells John that she is HIV positive—we never hear the disclosure—the camera moves behind a barred window and all we see through the bars of the window is John's flailing arms as he beats *Yesterday*. A flashback montage follows as *Yesterday* recalls earlier happier moments with John—a series of painfully moving and banal images of married domestic bliss—the embrace after a long absence, eagerly anticipating his return with a sleepy Beauty, John's gift of a food processor called “Le Chef.” In James Ferguson's analysis of the wives of Zambian mineworkers, discussed below, the mining companies are the agents of an impossible bourgeois domesticity. In *Yesterday* that bourgeois domesticity is cathected with the power of a man's love. In broad ideological terms, in a range of public debates

about libidinal economies from, for example, polygyny to homosexuality in African cultures, it is possible to argue that in the African context and perhaps also in a more generalized postcolonial one, the bourgeois nuclear family may have been seen as the proper intimate form of modernity, even as its historical existence for people in the countryside was clearly economically unfeasible. In a pointed analysis of domesticity on the Zambian copperbelt, James Ferguson writes of company-run courses for the wives of mineworkers: “A continuation of the paternalistic social welfare policies of the colonial mining industry, these courses were intended to teach mineworkers’ wives to be ‘good housewives’ by giving them instruction in cooking, cleaning, sewing, knitting and so on—all in the name of fostering modern family life in the mine townships.”²³

Ferguson concludes by noting the anachronism of the figure of the 1950s US housewife as a model for African modernity—“Like the Westinghouse kitchen in Tomorrowland, ‘the modern housewife,’ in mid-1980s Zambia appeared preposterously archaic and somehow poignantly out of place.”²⁴ The bourgeois nuclear family emerges as a phantasm of nostalgia and developmental aspiration at the same time. Yesterday’s housewifery is relentlessly naturalized. She needed no instruction in these arts, beyond a then loving husband to give her a food processor. The family form seems to float as an imagined point of normative identification for viewers unencumbered by any acquaintance with ideas and practices of Zulu kinship or colonial and neocolonial economics beyond *Cry, the Beloved Country*, which at least recognizes, through celebration, the imprint of Christianity.

LANGUAGE

My DVD copy of *Yesterday* allows subtitles in French, English, Spanish, and two levels of isiZulu.²⁵ In having two levels of isiZulu subtitles it appears to have pedagogical aspirations. Granted, I bought it in the US, a place where I struggle to imagine much desire for the learning of isiZulu, but maybe these subtitles imagine other South Africans—largely white, I suspect, as its learning audience, though there are no Afrikaans subtitles. Despite *Yesterday*’s self-conscious staging of itself as the first isiZulu-language feature film, it seems it is made to speak for and about, never to and from, the human subjects it brings into representation. Given the film’s reluctance or inability to even gesture toward bringing any imagining of African alterity or details of

contemporary South African history that might break pastoral tonalities into filmic representation, I suspect the language politics of the film are not those of the self-determination rhetoric of nationalism, or even a national or cosmopolitan desire to learn something of a language and culture not quite one's own. Instead, we have the benevolent imperialist versions of the romance of authenticity, the domestication of difference so that *one feels oneself* in the ostensibly Zulu world of *Yesterday*, even though *Yesterday* understands its narrative form as mediated by earlier figurations of Zuluness, and much less self-consciously, its representation of family forms as quite literally fantastic. Roodt drafted the script for the film in English, had the script translated into isiZulu, and started off shooting each scene twice, once in English and once in isiZulu. Ultimately, the English version of the film is junked in favor of the "authenticity" of the isiZulu one. More cynically, the decision to release the film in isiZulu may have also been motivated by a desire to manipulate its international reception. In an interview, Roodt asserts: "When I managed to convince Anant [Singh, who produced the film] to go the Zulu route, I said: 'At the very least, if we make a good film, we've got a shot at best foreign film.'"²⁶ As Anant Singh notes, Roodt is proved correct: "It's South Africa's first-ever nomination and the first film ever in Zulu."²⁷

Nevertheless, the film is made with the financial backing of the Nelson Mandela Foundation and aspires to be used in AIDS education programs—showing it in rural areas and using it to prompt discussion on HIV/AIDS. (The film has indeed been written about extensively in educational contexts.)²⁸ The film received massive critical acclaim in the South African press, with a few important dissenting opinions, raves from the English language media abroad, and, as mentioned above, was the first South African film ever nominated for a best foreign film Academy Award.²⁹ Nevertheless, its returns for the South African market were disappointing.³⁰

Yesterday is in certain ways the victim of her own name. It, along with the name of her daughter, Beauty, are the only English words we hear repeatedly in the film. From her account of her name, it would appear that the English word "Yesterday" is her isiZulu name. It is the name given to her by her father, sometime in the early 1970s, in the heyday of apartheid, if *Yesterday* is thirty at the time of the film. The name marks a nostalgia for a time when things were better, but when was that time, or what could it have been?

Yesterday is the most widely distributed filmic representation of South Africa's AIDS pandemic. Its language is isiZulu to keep its specificity and thus distance from its imagined polyglot and international audience. Its familial

and affective structure is bourgeois, white, and putatively universal—even though nothing else in the film fits any of those designations. Sympathy, as an affect, appears to need a dialectic between proximity and distance. I think this is how sympathy gets off the ground in *Yesterday*.³¹ *Yesterday* is a kind of everywoman, involved in the “timeless” difficulties of raising a child and loving a man. The moral outrage and deep pathos of the film arise from the fact that these things are not possible in her situation, despite her heroic effort. The reviewer for the *New York Times* writes: “The film . . . focuses not on the statistics of millions but on the tragedy of one death.”³² In one viewer’s response, albeit sanctioned by a powerful newspaper, the linguistic and/or cultural singularity of Zuluness becomes transparent and the singularity of John’s death becomes the locus of the film’s value. This singularity may mark the ethical work of a fictional representation despite the documentary failures of *Yesterday*, but it is the work of this chapter to argue that feeling this singularity is dependent on an affective recognition of a floating family form, which may undermine the ostensible pedagogical rationale of the film.

TRADITION

Tradition is a risky analytic term in the context of a fictional feature film being generically programmed as modernity in its sites of production and consumption, but *Yesterday*’s relation to the *telos* of modernity needs an Other. The two narrative outcomes of the film mark the film’s deep ambivalence about the entry into what, for want of a better shorthand, could be called “modern” subjectivity. The father, corrupted by his encounter with colonial forms of exploited labor and the sexual practices they have encouraged, must die. The daughter must, however, go to school.

It has been Mark Hunter’s extraordinary contribution to track the inadequacy of “male migrant labor as vector of infection explanation” for the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS in rural Kwa-Zulu over the last decades. He argues persuasively that this explanation is a transposition of discussions of syphilis epidemics in the 1940s that takes into account neither changes in Zulu courtship practices over the last fifty years nor the continuing impoverishment of rural spaces, which has meant that rural women are themselves extraordinarily mobile in the search for work.³³ The pastoral scenes of *Yesterday* hoeing and sowing are just that: a depiction of the countryside as if it were still a space where subsistence agricultural labor could, no matter how minimally,

meet the costs of familial reproduction. Hunter notes: “Multiple partner relationships, underscored by gifts, are a key informal survival strategy for many women.” The folk wisdom is “one man for rent, one man for food, and one man for clothes.”³⁴ The presence of “transactional sex” models of intimacy on the terrain *Yesterday* wishes to bring into representation renders *Yesterday* and her life trajectory in the film as the site of reinvesting in the fantasy of the privatizing of intimacy, when, as Hunter has shown, poor rural women’s intimate feelings also serve a range of subsistence and reproductive purposes, occluded by the film. Obviously, this social and economic character of intimacy is not limited to poor rural women.³⁵

In the landscape of feminine support in Rooihoek, *Yesterday* seeks help from two very different women—a *sangoma* (“traditional healer”) and a teacher in the primary school who becomes her friend and will presumably look after Beauty when *Yesterday* dies. The *sangoma* is consulted after *Yesterday* is denied admission to the Tuesdays-only clinic in Kromdraai—a two-hour-plus walk from Rooihoek—for the second time. The *sangoma* is clearly irritated that *Yesterday* has not consulted her earlier about the mysterious illness.

The *sangoma* appears in the film as a kind of mildly malevolent New Age guru—a Zulu Caroline Myss or Deepak Chopra with an attitude problem. According to her diagnosis, *Yesterday* is sick because, despite her protestations to the contrary, she is too angry. While on the one hand, this is an absurd psychologizing reduction, on the other hand it may contain an unwitting recognition of the growth of certain kinds of spiritual tourism to South Africa. Surgery and Safari was already a big business.³⁶ *Sangoma* and Safari is beginning. The *sangoma*’s office is spectacularly sanitized for western consumption: there are no lopped-off vulture wings, no dried baboon heads, no brightly colored powders or piles of roots and herbs—some of the tools of the trade. There is no diagnosis of angry ancestors, no calls for ritual animal sacrifice, no accusations that *Yesterday* is the victim of someone’s witchcraft. I suspect that this literally sanitized version is produced in the attempt to avoid criticism of exoticism and racism within the film’s prevailing ideological task of producing white sympathy for these people whose humanity must depend on them being as close to some normative “us” as possible. The medicinal smoke offered to *Yesterday* as medicine makes her cough, alerting viewers, as if we did not know already, that the *sangoma* is a quack more likely to hurt than help. The bunch of burning herbs *Yesterday* is instructed to inhale looks like nothing so much as a sage smudge-stick, familiar to me from New



FIGURE 5. Yesterday visits the sangoma. Darrell Roodt, dir., *Yesterday* (2008; Umhlanga Ridge: VideoVision Entertainment, 2008), DVD.

Age appropriations of some generalized rituals of Native American societies. These have undoubtedly gone global. (A friend of a friend in Cape Town makes dreamcatchers out of Guinea Fowl feathers and indigenous semi-precious stones.) Viewers are encouraged to disapprove of the sangoma, but not be horrified by her. Given the secular frame of the film, the ancestors cannot enter the time of modernity through her. The sangoma appears again as the spokesperson for the angry women who want John removed from the village—as part of the reactionary force of prejudice and fear in the face of the pandemic. That this task is undertaken by the sangoma and the women rather than by, let’s say, Yesterday’s landlord locates the film once again in the “no-time, no-space” of the pastoral.³⁷ Bheki Kha Mncube offers a particularly scathing review of the depiction of the sangoma: “A *sangoma*, who Yesterday consulted after two attempts to see a doctor at the local clinic had failed, was also suspect. During the consultation she instructed Yesterday: ‘Get rid of your anger, then I will heal you.’ I’ve consulted many *sangomas*, and even fake ones don’t dish out such hogwash”³⁸

The teacher appears early in the film as she walks the country road with a fellow teacher, hoping to find employment in Rooihoek. Both women carry umbrellas, one wears glamorous sunglasses, and together they offer a vision of educated, respectable, and relatively empowered single African womanhood. The teacher seems free of the perils of menfolk. She becomes Yesterday’s friend and gives Yesterday the five-rand taxi-fare she needs to avoid the long

walk to the clinic so she can get there before the lines grow too long for the doctor to see her. She thus enables Yesterday's diagnosis, but since Yesterday receives no antiretrovirals from the clinic, the moral victory of westernized medicine over the sangoma is rendered pyrrhic. The film fails to mention antiretrovirals at all.³⁹

This brings us to the doctor—a young white woman who speaks fluent isiZulu. Yesterday persists in calling her “madam,” even after the doctor requests to be called “doctor,” marking the persistence of racial honorifics in a national time frame when race no longer has the legal force it had under apartheid. “Madam” is one of the few English words that are heard in the film. The isiZulu translation of madam would be “inkosikazi,” from the isiZulu word for chief, “inkosi.” This rings true as most Black South Africans, even those not fluent in English, would use “madam” without bothering to translate it into their mother tongue. The doctor asks Yesterday frank questions about her sex life, establishing the cause of her illness: “Do you use a condom? Do you have sex only with your husband? Does he have other wives?” Yesterday is illiterate. How do protocols of consenting to her treatment work?

Yesterday's brushes with specific histories of the present reveal a continued attachment to the emergence of a gendered individualism as the only viable form of human subjectivity and interiority. John Samuel, CEO of the Nelson Mandela Foundation—one of the sponsors of the film—recognizes this emergence of a universalizing individualism as a ground for sympathy but in the mode of celebration rather than critique: “But when you see the human suffering and tragedy of one person, it speaks to you as another person, and that is its power.”⁴⁰ In a conversation with the teacher, Yesterday produces what I call “the parable of the woman of Bergville.” Yesterday tells the teacher of a young woman who was very clever and that her village saved money to send her to university in Johannesburg, where she acquired HIV, and when the villagers find out, they stone her to death. This references the very public scandal of the murder of Gugu Dlamini, an activist for the Treatment Action Campaign, phrased in the timeless language of village gossip and ignorance. It is a story that shows Yesterday experiencing her helplessness, that the only point of her identification with Dlamini can happen in her death by the forces of some paradoxical “traditionalism” itself invested in the trajectories of individualized upward mobility—they pool their meager resources to send the woman to university. She comes back something else. They kill her. I agree that Beauty must go to school, but then what?



FIGURE 6. Yesterday builds a hut for her dying husband. Darrell Roodt, dir., *Yesterday* (2008; Umhlanga Ridge: VideoVision Entertainment, 2008), DVD.

THE HUT THAT YESTERDAY BUILT, OR A HOSPITAL OF HER OWN

Yesterday building a shack from scrap metal for her dying husband marks the film's strongest critique of the post-apartheid state's failures to meet the needs of its citizens. There is no room at the hospital—the only time viewers see the pandemic as anything other than one family's crisis, but this moment is short-lived. The resilience of the African woman, herself HIV-positive, allows her to build her own.

Yesterday and Beauty forage through the landscape, collecting bits of scrap metal to build the shack where John will die. It is clear that Yesterday needs help in this task. In another revealing moment while watching the film with the audio of the director's commentary on: as Leleti Khumalo, the actress playing Yesterday, lifts an improvised window into a hole in the wall of the shack, Darrell Roodt, the director states, "Of course, she (Yesterday/ Leleti Khumalo) couldn't lift that by herself, the crew is outside helping her." The camera is inside the shack. Here the ruse of filmic representation encapsulates the impossibility of Yesterday's predicament and the fictiveness of the solutions it finds for the painful problems it presents. I hope the director's description of the difference between what is shown and how the illusion was enabled can be pushed into an allegory here of the necessary trickery of the film's individualist and *faux* familist understanding of the pandemic.

There is another moment of help—this time on camera rather than behind it. While attempting to extract the rusted hood from an abandoned car by the side of the road, Yesterday and Beauty finally receive some help from a group of women wearing the familiar orange of “a road gang,” seen earlier in the film working on the repair of a bridge. None of the village “housewives” helps. Why the informal volunteer labor of women who are strangers? The impersonal goodwill of strangers who do not know of Yesterday’s purpose seems the closest thing the film can imagine to a collective response. No politics. No Treatment Action Campaign fighting for adequate treatment.⁴¹ No other civil society organizations. No claim on fellow citizens. Just the kindness of passing strangers.

There are many tragedies in *Yesterday* beyond the palpable suffering of the protagonist. Let me parse, somewhat sentimentally, one that could be called a globalizing neoliberal structure of feeling, or the privatization of affect in the gendered sphere of social reproduction. John and Yesterday love each other, though this love broaches domestic violence in the undomestic setting of the corridor of the mine office.⁴² They both love Beauty. When John gets sick, his loving wife will take care of him, but she is now without his wage, formerly her only visible means of support. When he dies, she will smash the work of her fictive labor (the shack), sufficiently grief-stricken not to think that she might need it herself. What will she do when she is dying: rebuild the hut she could not even build herself when healthier without the random kindness of strangers, or the behind-the-scenes work of a film crew?

A reading that supplements the film’s representations with accounts of the pandemic attached to historical accuracy can imagine the kinds of massive economic and political resources needed to avoid the tragic outcome—jobs, hospitals, public infrastructures of survival and care. But that reading still begs the question of what kind of affective resources or narratives could mobilize something more than sympathy—active like that of the “road crew,” passive like the weeping viewer. Or will those affective resources continually need a recathexis of a family form that never was, that demands love and loyalty as it fails again in order for the dispersed subjects of these affective resources to feel themselves as feeling?

I conclude with this question because the mobilization of global feeling is crucial in the fight against the pandemic. *Yesterday* allows us to feel for a resilient young mother betrayed by a husband, but cannot imagine feeling for and with the many others affected by the pandemic, who stand outside the normative affective institution of companionate marriage, with those

whose forms of sexual intimacy require imaginative extension rather than recognition. As Hunter and Mbali write: “From government indifference to pharmaceutical profiteering, to deepening gendered inequalities, the AIDS pandemic operates on a highly contestable social terrain. *Yesterday* fails to challenge dominant preconceptions about the pandemic or, god forbid, actually stimulate political awareness rather than pity among audiences.”⁴³ While much of the pathos of *Yesterday* resides in the ways in which that unempirical but normative imagining of family provided our protagonist with no protections and equally nonexistent assistance, the film only allows us to feel despair at that failure. I hope that other cultural representations, which will risk representing the various local specificities of life with the pandemic and the collective struggles they have prompted, may prompt us to feel more and differently.