

FOUR

Poetry

THREE POEMS AND A PANDEMIC

PUBLIC SPHERE THEORY, with its reliance on Habermasian notions of communicative rationality, has historically struggled both to engage and theorize the role of affect in public life.¹ In recent years, feminist and queer scholars Lauren Berlant, Ann Cvetkovich, Audre Lorde, and Douglas Crimp (mostly based in the United States) have elaborated ideas of a “corresponding publicness to the intimate,” “public feelings,” “poetry as the revelation or distillation of experience,” and connections between ideas and practices of mourning and militancy, respectively, to confound the public/private split seen as central to hegemonic liberal ideologies.² This chapter aspires to set these ideas in dialogue with recent representations—singular but perhaps representative—of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa to work out the relation between illness as a profoundly subjective, embodied experience and a public one, deeply mediated by social discourses of shame and stigma, the historical forces of racialization and the market, new forms of governmentality in relation to the ir/rationalities of public health policy, and beyond.

The South African state, as policy shifted from denialism to investing in the world’s largest antiretroviral rollout, reimagines at least partially its relationship to its citizens in this moment. That these representations are poems, and thus bound up with performances of formal protocols and ideas of aesthetic sublimation, adds a corresponding wrinkle to the question of what kinds of public knowledge and subjective experience they may contain. At least two significant methodological questions inhere in the move to South African poems. Firstly, there is the hope that public feelings knowledge projects can travel without necessarily invoking imperial edifices of othering and that the work of scholars like Berlant, Cvetkovich, and Crimp, even Lorde, on affect, sexuality, and intimacy could be set in dialectical relation to national contexts outside the US, and, relatedly, that historical lessons

from the earlier pandemic in the North Atlantic world can be transposed without forgetting the salient differences between these times and spaces.³

Secondly, many of the major questions that the rubric of public feelings wishes to address are evident in an event like the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), where narrative testimony was imagined as having emotionally reparative force in a wider project of nation-building.⁴ Phaswane Mpe, the author of two of the poems under discussion in this chapter, expresses surprise that while the TRC did give impetus to new kinds of literary and cultural production, “HIV/AIDS did not feature so much in the TRC novels.”⁵ I turn to poetry as a way of interrupting what could be called neoliberal uses of testimony, documentary realism, and memoirs as the privileged archive for thinking about the role of affect in public life.⁶ My hope is that the poems can stand in supplementary rather than substitutive relation to these other forms and genres.

A consideration of genres of expressive culture can complicate representational terrains by suggesting the myriad ways shame and stigma, care and neglect, life and death, were lived and imagined: mobilized from below, ignored, refused, embraced? In understanding the pandemic, attention to representations of experience that consider questions of the aesthetic should not—to paraphrase Lorde—be considered a luxury. Much illuminating ethnographic work—Mark Hunter, Catherine Campbell, and Didier Fassin among others—powerfully suggests that careful listening to testimonial narratives of individuals and communities living and dying in the pandemic should affect policy.⁷ At their simplest, these texts demonstrate the utility of an oral history archive. All three authors are careful to frame the AIDS crisis in the long history of the global political economy of South Africa. Through careful attention to the life experiences of rural women in terms of their restless mobility in the search for work in an increasingly impoverished countryside, and the importance of transactional sexual intimacies in the struggle to survive, Mark Hunter reveals the idea that the vector of infection moves from migrant men into an imagined pristine countryside as the legacy of concerns about syphilis in the 1940s, and that this thinking about HIV infection is not helpful in directing prevention efforts in the present. Through her work on and with sex workers in a mining town, Catherine Campbell provides multiple scales of analysis for understanding sexual behavior, from the international division of labor to deep personal psychological need, and related temporalities of possible ameliorative interventions—from economic reform and transformed gender relations to STD testing, Didier Fassin frames his ethnography with a moral

argument about why the world should care. The three poems under discussion in this chapter participate in these representational rhetorics and strategies but refuse another significant genre for the emergence of public feelings—that of testimony, already a powerful player in a national public sphere after the Truth and Reconciliation Hearings of the late 1990s—themselves somewhat contentiously another site of an affective public sphere.⁸

As I begin, I remember W. H. Auden's powerful reminder that "poetry makes nothing happen."⁹ At the same time, I also remember South African poet Ingrid de Kok's remarks on writing: "On the one hand, verbs can, and on the other, they cannot move mountains."¹⁰ Indeed, the readership for these poems may be demographically insignificant, within the national confines of a reading public in South Africa, never mind within a national public sphere and within the wider English-speaking world. Poetry is not a mass media form at the turn of the twenty-first century, though there is recent exciting work on poetry, and particularly poetry in performance, that has begun to think marginalized non-mass genres as new modes of creating publics, particularly counterpublics.¹¹ With the acknowledgment that while poetry may make nothing happen, these poems all register with considerable emotional power that something happened, is still happening: the poems can nevertheless do at least two kinds of public work.¹² By giving us subjectively and aesthetically mediated representations of the pandemic, the two Phaswane Mpe poems, which follow soon, can suggest how other forms of public discourse around the pandemic on issues of prevention campaigns and testing are consumed, misread, and contested.¹³ While my imagination breaks on the question of the ethical and political uses of despair, and despair is evident in all three poems, the poems invite their readers to a landscape of shared suffering—geopolitically stratified as it must be by the worlding of each reader—and this invitation, to mourn, to memorialize, to be horrified, to speculate, could mark the humble beginnings of individual and collective action; the slow gathering of a sympathy, attuned to the risk of paternalism and the appropriations of too quick an identification.

PREVENTION

First, a love lyric by the late South African poet and novelist Phaswane Mpe. The lyric as a form and genre promises a deep subjective interiority—a private intimacy—which is ultimately where the poem arrives, but it

begins much more publicly. The idea that romantic love and sexual practices are ideologically overdetermined is hardly a new one. Recent decades of feminist and queer reading practices and theory have made this point with poignancy and power. Within the context of the first wave of the pandemic in the gay North Atlantic world, two resonant titles engage the problematic of sex in a time of sexually transmitted death: Michael Callen and Richard Berkowitz's 1983 pamphlet "How to Have Sex in an Epidemic," now understood as an originary text in the invention of community-based safer-sex practices and ideologies, and Douglas Crimp's subsequent liberationist riff—"How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic."¹⁴ The following Mpe poem dramatizes the difficulties of safer-sex campaigns in South Africa. In an era of internally led structural adjustment with its turn to public/private partnership in making public health announcements, the central icon of the poem is appropriately a social marketing billboard. The lyric confounds the billboard in a resistance to a new potentially life-saving normativity through a series of scintillating pronoun shifts.

loveLife

the only roll-on every woman wants
 the billboards say
 & we say we are not that woman

now that they say you are positive
 bone of my heart
 i will write you this *loveLetter*

i am waiting for words to run
 to the tips of my fingers
 but they enjoy the warmth
 in the heart of my heart
 feeding on the placenta
 of my dreams for tomorrow

silence too is love
 bone of my heart
 let us lie on the green
 & bask¹⁵

The poem is titled *loveLife*, an explicit reference to the multimedia HIV/AIDS prevention campaign in South Africa ("loveLife"). The title of the poem echoes the dual meaning of the name of the campaign itself. *LoveLife* recognizes that HIV is a sexually transmitted disease, and that it must

therefore concern itself with your love life, and then there is the injunction to love life—with the moral imperatives of care for self and others—to avoid the opposite of this alliteration—the specter of death that haunts all discussions of HIV/AIDS. The subject of the address of the poem, “Now that they say you are positive,” renders the title and the campaign initially ironic: the campaign fails with each new infection, but the redemptive ending of the poem, “let us lie on the green & bask,” marks a kind of triumph of love. The persona will continue to love life and love the lover in the face of death, not just in the desire to avoid it.

Billboards announcing the loveLife campaign are a feature of the contemporary urban South African landscape, borrowing the form and strategies of advertisements that sell commercial products. This appropriation seems to be what the poem satirizes in its opening lines: “the only roll-on every woman wants / the billboards say” mocks an idea that an intervention into the intimate and erotic lives of women can be as simple as selling them deodorant. Though I wonder if *roll-on* also makes a gesture to the sex act itself, or more likely, a reference to a condom. *Roll-on* is further an isiZulu term for a hidden or secret lover. Xoliswa Nduneni-Ngema explains the term better than I can in her memoir: “He could have one ‘steady’, and then numerous ‘roll-ons’, as secret lovers were called. Like a roll-on deodorant you use in your armpit, a secret lover was kept underneath, in your armpit. Roll-on. Or umakhwapheni. Even married men had umakhwapheni.”¹⁶

The poem’s next move is surprising: “& we say . . . / we are not that woman.” There is a perhaps a cross-gendered collective resistance to the billboards’ claim of the knowledge of what “every women wants.” I say cross-gendered because Mpe is a male poet, and this appears to be a personal poem, though the caveat remains that a poem cannot be read the same way as, for example, a memoir. Poetry may disrupt the presumption of personal and emotional transparency that rules the reception of the memoir and may encourage a more collective reading of the singularity of the poem. What is important is that a “we” answers the billboards and then disavows this collective subject as the object of the billboards’ address. One can feel the aching pathos of the failure of public health messages to find their targeted audiences, with its echoes of the so-called denialism that has plagued so much of the South African response to the pandemic across the public sphere: “& we say . . . / we are not that woman.” There is, moreover, a moving and ethical claim to the singularity of every love and every woman here. We are not that woman, we might want something else.

The next stanza juxtaposes the poem, “i will write you this *loveLetter*,” with what the billboards say. Pronouns have shifted from the shared “we” to an othered “they”—and an implicating “you”—“now that they say you are positive.” Who can this “they” be? The doctors, or more likely nurses, who have announced the test results, neighborhood gossips? Either way, the poem, as “this *loveLetter*,” offers itself as a different response. Mpe, who died in 2005, at the age of thirty-four, as a writer, is attached to the second-person mode of address. His extraordinary single novel, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), is sustainedly addressed to series of you—all strongly implicating the reader.¹⁷ “Bone of my heart” is a term of endearment frequently found in Mpe’s oeuvre and the metaphors of the poem move increasingly into the interior of the body.¹⁸ This *loveLetter*, unlike the promptings of the billboards, comes from inside—“the heart of my heart / feeding on the placenta of my dreams for tomorrow.” We are in the maternal metaphor of futurity here, but the final stanza of the poem jumps into a sufficient present with strong pastoral overtones—“let us lie on the green / & bask.” Paradoxically the poem ends up obeying the injunction to LoveLife, even as it exposes the failure of the campaign to produce the identifications and outcomes it desires.

I read the poem as a remarkably astute and subtle investigation into relations between historically public and private feelings around love and sex as they are reconfigured by the multiple social pressures that coalesce in the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa. The poem offers both the revelation and distillation of experience in Lorde’s terms, with experience understood at the interface of ideology—“the billboards”—and interiority—“bone of my heart.” The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, a major funder of the loveLife program, offers on its website the following definition of the program: “loveLife, South Africa’s national HIV prevention programme for youth, was launched in September 1999, by a consortium of leading South African public health organisations in partnership with a coalition of more than 100 community-based organisations, the South African government, major South African media groups and private foundations.”¹⁹ Here is the loveLife website: “loveLife is a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to youth behaviour change that implements, on an unprecedented scale, the international experience of the past 20 years—combining well-established public health techniques with innovative marketing approaches to promote healthy AIDS-free living among South African teenagers.”²⁰

The program itself thus speaks to significant changes in the possibilities for national and even global public spheres, evident most simply in the

personnel, a partnership among a variety of stakeholders: the South African government, community organizations, media groups, and international philanthropy. In many ways, one could argue that loveLife represents something like a best practice of social intervention under conditions of neoliberalism, where states—and particularly postcolonial states—are hamstrung in providing social services, including, but not limited to, healthcare by debt service and/or the need to keep (or get) favorable credit ratings from the international monetary financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.²¹ The neoliberal solution here is social marketing, not, for example, public education. The public sphere around HIV/AIDS in Africa is thus structured not only (if at all) by a Habermasian communicative rationality but by the immensely complicated networks of the global economy. Lest this claim reads like an accusation, a counterpublic, produced and represented by an organization like the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), necessarily participates in the same networks and in certain of its strategies has clearly learned from the insurgent AIDS activism movements in the global North, for example ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power).²² The TAC has, on occasion, used the guerilla theatrics of earlier AIDS activist groups in the North Atlantic world to apply moral pressure to the South African government, particularly in the AIDS denialism years of the Mbeki administration. In April 2003, six hundred pairs of old shoes were delivered to the South Africa embassy in Washington, DC: one pair for each person who dies in South Africa each day because of lack of access to HIV/AIDS treatment. This action spectacularizes the pandemic—another strategy would be the prevalence of T-shirts with the logo “HIV Positive” emblazoned on them that celebrities from Nelson Mandela to Annie Lennox have donned in solidarity with those who are living with the disease.²³ I wonder, in the poem discussed above, if the line “silence too is love” contains an oblique refutation of the central ACT UP slogan, “silence equals death.” Given the ongoing controversies about South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it may be responsible to speculate on the value of the form and practice of testimony to heal the wounds of history, particularly in the context of neoliberal economic determinants gestured to in this brief discussion of loveLife. Meg McLagan writes on the long history of transnational practices of testimony:

The use of testimony by abolitionists can be seen as an early precursor of the use of testimony by human rights activists in the post–World War II era. Like

slave narratives, human rights testimonies are important vehicles through which ethical arguments are made. They use symbols, images, and accounts of individual experiences of suffering in such a way as to affectively engage and persuade their audiences of a cause's moral worth. Testimony is premised on the belief that pain is universal, that it crosses all boundaries. . . . Essentially testimony functions as a medium through which identification with a suffering "other" can take place. Through our identification, we become connected to a political project and can be moved to action.²⁴

Increasingly, the South African TRC is seen as having exemplary status in relation to the growing global phenomenon of truth commissions as keys institutions in the theory and practice of transitional justice, though the question of the exchange of testimony for amnesty, and the problems of reparation, or lack thereof, have caused some subsequent transitional justice institutions in Peru and Sierra Leone, for example, to supplement truth commissions with special prosecutorial courts and/or reparations.²⁵ The restorative and redemptive power of testimony is not always seen as sufficient in these contexts. Adam Levin's sentence discussed in my introduction returns as an accusation that reframes the problem of identification as one of care, and caring about a collective, rather than only an individual: "Aids is a riddle. It is invisible and yet is everywhere, all around us, in people we love, in me. It does not matter if you are HIV-positive or negative. The world has Aids. And if you give a shit about the world, you have it too."²⁶ The sentiment here does not quite make a claim on the universality of pain, but rather emphasizes the shamefulness of not giving a shit. The naming and shaming strategy is within a human rights framework but is a different framing of the problem of care because of imaginative identification with the suffering other.

The Mpe poem refuses testimony and shaming and complicates an easy sense of the political itself. In the face of social marketing, speaking out—speaking truth to power—does not appear to be an option, and there appears to be a retreat into deeply private feeling and an almost defiant sensuous enjoyment in "let us lie on the green / & bask." That the poem itself breaks a silence while insisting "silence too is love" marks a paradox that must invoke an idea of publicness, not just as collective empowerment but also as the site of shame, stigma, and exposure, that there might be something unspeakable about both suffering and love. And I have a strong sense that this silence is not a liberal notion of privacy—the green, in the lyric tradition in which the poem situates itself, is very much a public place. Mpe was an English major at the University of the Witwatersrand. In an interview with Lizzy

Attree, shortly before he died, Mpe notes the range of authors who have influenced him, from Sepedi author Oliver Matsepe through the English literary canon: “I studied English literature, so Charles Dickens and Shakespeare and William Blake form part of my consciousness.” The final lines of his poem echo William Blake’s “The Echoing Green,” from *Songs of Innocence* (1789–90).²⁷

I want to risk overreading “the green” here, as a public place with a pastoral overtone, and representative of a utopian political longing for a space and time before the titling and private ownership of land in Blake’s time and the neoliberal privatization of previously public goods in Mpe’s time. For Blake, the green was the commons. Why would Mpe have his lovers bask there? There is no longing for the privacy of the middle-class marital bed. The green connotes a very different configuration of publicness to that found in the eponymous social marketing billboards of the poem.²⁸ In the minimalist and almost monosyllabic “let us lie on the green / & bask,” I can locate a powerful maximalist political desire for a world beyond productive and reproductive labor, beyond citizenship as the political horizon for affective belonging, and where indices of development and HIV prevalence rates are not all-determining. Perhaps this is what loving life looks like for the poem, rather than a sexual behavior modification. The imagining of intimacy becomes social and defiantly so, rather than sanctified by the new normativities of safer-sex campaigns, which unlike in the case of John Greyson and Michael Callen’s *Miss HIV* in chapter 1, come from outside the worlding of the lovers of *this* poem.²⁹

TESTING

As discussed in chapter 1, in his *Three Letter Plague*, published in the US as *Sizwe’s Test*, Jonny Steinberg takes up the task of trying to ascertain why people do not come forward to be tested and treated even when testing and treatment is made easily available.

Steinberg’s book attempts an answer through the singular story of a young man called Sizwe in Lusikisiki in the Eastern Cape. In Steinberg’s account, Sizwe’s reactions to testing and treatment become incredibly complex, requiring imaginative entry into the powerfully subjective experiences of post-apartheid modes of economic production and social reproduction, shot through as they are with the ongoing legacies of the apartheid era,

African masculine self-fashioning, intermittently held local religious and cosmological beliefs, community norms, and affective forces around blame, shame, stigma, and resentment. This list of mutually implicated factors is not complete, and it is to Steinberg's credit that his scrupulous rendering of Sizwe's world never forgets the differences between author and subject in the give and take of their sustained exchange. The following Mpe poem broaches the problem of testing again, this time explicitly in the first-person voice, that may or may not be autobiographical, but its terms seem both more personal and political.

Elegy for the Trio

i saw heard things
as i lay in the blanket
of night
my eyes piercing through the roof
watching twinkling stars
i heard the wind howling
jackals too
& the hooting of owls
awakened the night of my heart
echoes of thabo manto mokaba
haunted the hall of my skull
drugs drugged
the west tore nkosi apart
& devoured parks
hiv does not cause aids
but let thy condom come
anyway
the fear the flame contained
my body blackened
like a charred coal
as I lulled myself back into sleep
i heard the echoes scream
i turned cold and grey like ash
no test tomorrow
i said again³⁰

An elegy is usually, but not necessarily, a poem of mourning, and as Melissa Zeiger has shown, recent poets in the North Atlantic world, mourning those lost to AIDS and breast cancer, have shifted the gendered dimensions of the genre from what she posits as the Orphean tradition to expanded gendered and sexualized expressions of grief and loss in a living elegiac tradition.³¹ Who

is the trio being mourned here? I suspect that there are two trios. The first would be “thabo manto mokaba” referring to former South African president Thabo Mbeki, his one-time health minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, and the late Peter Mokaba, former leader of the ANC youth league.³² This trio comprised the key players in the public debates around causal connections between the HI virus and AIDS at the turn of the twenty-first century. Much ink has been spilled on the so-called denialist controversies and will not be rehearsed here.³³ I think the second trio is made up of Nkosi Johnson, a child who spoke at the International AIDS Conference in Durban in 2000 and died of AIDS at the age of twelve, emerging as a powerfully iconic figure of innocent victimhood; Parks Mankahlana, the official spokesperson of President Mbeki, who died in October 2000, amidst a swirl of rumors that the cause of death was AIDS-related complications; and perhaps the persona of the poem himself.³⁴ Five proper names are referenced in the text, so in key ways the identities of the members of the titular trio remain uncertain.

The poem opens with what appears as an admission of synesthetic confusion—“i saw heard things / as i lay in the blanket / of night.” There is an indeterminacy between things heard and seen as well as the uncertainty as to the reality of what is heard and seen—do they just exist in the persona’s head? The blanket of the night appears to offer insulation, but the persona’s eyes can pierce through the roof to see the twinkling stars in an almost clichéd image of imagined self-transcendence, but the howling wind, hooting owls, and braying jackals move us into a perception of threat. These sounds of the night awaken the night of his heart and transform the natural world into the human world inside his head—“echoes of thabo manto mokaba / haunted the hall of my skull.” The spatial expansion of a skull into a hall suggests the danger of a kind of self-explosion or the vastness of the persona’s interiority, and the wind, owls, and jackals become the pronouncements of three leading public figures on HIV/AIDS.

“Drugs drugged” perhaps suggests the internalization of the claim of the toxicity of antiretrovirals, that what is promised as medicine is poison. Then “the west tore nkosi apart.” The extra-textual references shorthanded in this phrase get more complicated. How did the west tear Nkosi apart? Is this a reference to Nkosi Johnson being fostered by a white mother—the uses to which he was put as the public face of the pandemic?³⁵ The juxtaposition of a massive historical and geographic abstraction—the west—with a singular African child may suggest the ongoing imperial determinants of the suffering of the pandemic—the “savage cosmopolitanism” of both conditions and

ameliorative attempts.³⁶ The absence of punctuation in the poem creates ambiguities in the attribution of agency here. Are drugs or the west the subject of this part of the run-on sentence that constitutes the poem? This ambiguity brilliantly contains the competing claims in the persona's haunted skull. On the one hand, we can insert punctuation to produce a reading congruent with the echoes of thabo manto mokaba: Drugs drugged the west, tore Nkosi apart, and devoured Parks. On the other hand: Drugs drugged. The west tore Nkosi apart and devoured Parks. What is significantly at stake here is whether western medicine is responsible for these deaths, or the larger political, ethical, and epistemological projects implied in "the west." The verbs "tore" and "devoured" take readers back to the earlier owls and jackals, but what or who do the owls and jackals anticipate: the west, the drugs, the night of his heart, thabo manto mokaba? In the poetic half-logic of condensation, the impossibility of adjudicating dramatizes the self-destabilization and transcendence of an interior hermeneutics of a night terror around the prospect of taking an HIV test. This version of the west can be forcibly contrasted with the helpers envisaged by a legal document like PEPFAR (the Presidential Plan for Emergency AIDS Relief, 2003, 2008)—a tearing apart opposed to a historical opportunity to do so much for so many, or even the MSF clinic in *Sizwe's Test*.³⁷

"hiv does not cause aids / but let thy condom come / anyway." Let me assume that these are some of the conflicting echoes in our protagonist's dangerously expanding skull. These two parts of the echoes are in very complicated relation to each other. The claim that HIV does not cause AIDS mitigates the need for a condom. The resonance of "thy condom come" with the Lord's Prayer—"thy kingdom come"—moves us into an ironically rendered religious inevitability—how is a condom like God's kingdom? Will they both save you from death? (We will encounter god-condom in chapter 6.)

The poem ends with the protagonist imagining fear burning up his body "like a charred coal," until he is "cold and grey like ash," and then he decides again not to take the test. Reading the rest of Mpe's short and frequently autobiographical oeuvre allows the claim that "test" is an overdetermined word. While Mpe was a brilliant student at the University of the Witwatersrand in the late 1980s and early 1990s, his experience of education and his teachers often approached the level of trauma. Several instances in Mpe's posthumously published quasi-autobiographical short stories juxtapose the trauma of being mugged and robbed with the experience of being Black in university settings: classroom, faculty office, examination hall.³⁸ I think the image of the hall of his skull works similarly. The experience of imagining an HIV

test in the terms of educational trauma further emphasizes the crisis, if not impossibility, of social reproduction in both material and imaginary registers, if the promise of upward mobility through education disappears in the face of HIV/AIDs in a time of newly democratic precarious futures. The characters of HIV and Khotso in Kgebetli Moele's *The Book of the Dead*, extensively discussed in chapter 6, will inhabit this private and public failure of normative intimacy, not with dread like the protagonist of this Mpe poem but with a kind of sadistic glee.

The idiosyncrasy of the link between a school test and an HIV test is just that, but also suggestive of the problems of thinking about these things in the aggregate. Moreover, what I think the Mpe poem can teach is the risky necessity of imagining ameliorative efforts as prompting something like terror, that the experience of the pandemic is not just economically and geographically but also affectively stratified—continent-wide too—and this is not to say that these affective responses are not related to those economic and geographic stratifications.

CONTEXT AND CONSEQUENCES

The Head of the Household

is a girl of thirteen
and her children are many

left-overs, moulting gulls
wet unweaned sacks

she carries them under her arms
and on her back

though some must walk beside her
bearing their own bones and mash

when not on the floor
in sickness and distress

rolled up in rows
facing the open stall.

Moon and bone-cold stars
Navigational spoor

For ambulance, hearse
the delivery vans

that will fetch and dispatch
the homeless, the motherless

unclean and dead
and a girl of thirteen,

children in her arms,
house balanced on her head.³⁹

In 1990, as far as it can be known, the HIV/AIDS infection rate in South Africa was around 1 percent, about the same as it was in Thailand and a little more than that of the United States. A mere twelve years later, in 2002, the South African infection rate hovered at around 20 percent of the population.⁴⁰ I have a problem with numbers, in that they feel endlessly manipulable, provide bedrock for policy, and never really tell what they mean. Eduardo Galeano in “Those Little Numbers and People” makes a more trenchant critique: “Where do people earn the Per Capita Income? More than one poor starving soul would like to know. In our countries numbers live better than people. How many people prosper in times of prosperity? How many people find their lives developed by development?”⁴¹ Numbers as indices of aggregates and averages cannot account for differential experiences within their mode of representation. An HIV diagnosis means very different things in terms of the geographical location, class, race, and gender designation of the person receiving that diagnosis in terms of treatment options, social support, employment, and immigration options, and so on. In this way, the international and national rates of infection are not always indicative of the structural violence that Paul Farmer argues produces global health inequities.⁴² On the other hand, by leaving so much to the imagination, numbers might be deeply ethical and potentially democratic, though any imagining of a public imagination must brace itself for categories like prejudice, xenophobia, and stigma. When I hear a number, my first thought is “pick one,” but I know there are professions in which being responsible to, with, and for numbers is important. I also know that hidden in those figures are deep and ongoing histories of governmentality and sovereignty, stories of emergent and now hegemonic sciences of demography, epidemiology, the hegemony of the modern state and the glimpses of its shifting role under neoliberalism—I cannot yet say demise. I raise that referential and probably inaccurate statistic to see how we can sit with, and I say sit with, not narrate or analyze, because I wish to fumble my way toward a category, more pointedly a phenomenology, of what could be called political feeling.

The testimonial practices of an institution like the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission partially addresses this problem of numbers as social indices by supplementation with personal narratives of the past, in the context of the historical trauma of apartheid. I cannot imagine a forum of transitional justice addressing the pandemic in its ongoing and painful present. The poems in this chapter can perhaps tell us how the pandemic feels in powerfully political ways. South African doctor Chris Ellis models how the poem enables and resists political feeling for a clinician working in KwaZulu Natal.⁴³

Ingrid de Kok is an established figure in the landscape of South African poetry and her poem, reproduced in full at the opening of this section, suggests another representational mode for the tragic history of the South African pandemic, reworking, in its central image of a young girl with a house balanced on her head, the iconicity of African femininity. No stately or stoic peasant woman gracefully carrying a calabash of water on her head from the river, but a surreal image of a young girl overburdened with swarms of dead and dying children, while bearing the house and all its resonances of shelter, home, nation, domestic reproduction, and generational continuity. How could she not stagger?⁴⁴

The temporality of this image of African womanhood extends deeper into the past, a time before AIDS, a fantasy of a time before apartheid, or even colonialism. But the promise of generational continuity will not hold: The titular head of the household is a girl of thirteen.⁴⁵ The poem has a spectatorial central conceit. The persona is outside looking in or on, appalled. The title, which is also the first line, contains echoes of a sociological description, if not the bureaucratic language of the census.

There are too many children for the ambulances and hearses, which are rendered as delivery vans for the unclean and dead. The delivery vans have no guides but “moon and bone-cold stars.” The failure of the state to respond adequately—to carry some of the weight of the household—is poignantly suggested, as readers too watch powerlessly the emergence of the surreal tableau that is the “head of the household.” Child-headed households are nothing new in the South African countryside—a feature of the impoverishment of more than a century of migrant labor, which HIV/AIDS now compounds. The figure of the girl in the poem becomes representative, perhaps emblematic, of the pandemic in ways that narrative accounts or statistical figures cannot be, even as the persona stands outside taking on the painful task of bearing witness. All a reader can do is to refuse to avert their eyes.

In a virtuosic reading of this poem, literary critic Chielozone Eze asserts: “Readers are not allowed the pleasure of a disinterested observer; they are drawn into the conditions of human frailty that are thrust on them in subtle forms, in forms that prod without being overbearing and are deeply moral without being moralistic.”⁴⁶

In this way, another response to the pandemic from another position is imagined. We are not in the deep interiority of the Mpe poems, but in the problem of a spectator’s response to the spectacle of atrocity. The final line, “house balanced on her head,” deeply ironizes, by rendering literal “the head of the household” title. The poem dramatizes a numbed, almost overwhelmed outrage on the part of the spectator. The image of the overwhelmed girl becomes unbearable to watch, but not quite in the same way that the house balanced on her head must be unbearable—yet bear it she does—for the object of the poem’s description. Sarah Brophy and Susan Spearey locate a tentative possibility for empathetic modeling in the poem: “As the poem frames it, then, the girl’s act of trying to balance her responsibilities is incredibly fragile, and its fragility is exasperated by observers’ tendency to conceive their role as only being able to watch, until extreme illness and, finally, death, necessitate official intervention. At the same time, ‘the head of the household’ anticipates that movement beyond observing might be possible, if observers heeded the call to response-ability that the girl’s own actions model.”⁴⁷

All three poems present their prevailing feelings—love, terror, horror—as feelings saturated with ethical and political concerns but without the promise of ameliorative action, and in the face of the suffering they express, a demand for the political utility of feeling risks a kind of obscenity, even as each poem gestures toward the political determinations of its representation of feeling. The first Mpe poem imagines agency as an exhortation to “lie on the green & bask.” “Elegy for the Trio” imagines agency as not taking a test tomorrow. “The Head of the Household” leaves us staring in horror at the unjust and impossible spectacle of a thirteen-year-old girl, mobbed by dying children, balancing a house on her head.

My desire was for this chapter to have an elegiac poetics, though I wonder about the appropriateness, or even the possibility, of ostensibly academic work performing the work of mourning. I think here of Eve Sedgwick’s work on the distinction between what she calls reparative and paranoid modes of reading, but, like Douglas Crimp and others before me, feel that some notion

of mourning and/or melancholia needs to be added to that Sedgwickian binary.⁴⁸ There is much to critique in all three poems. The defiance of “*loveLife*” in the face of the safer-sex message of the billboards, the refusal of “Elegy for the Trio” to take an HIV test, the risk of voyeurism in “The Head of the Household.” Yet all three critiques miss the feeling in the poems by turning the poems into either sociological case studies and/or ethical failures. The problem of reading here becomes one of holding onto critical reading without being reduced to it. Like Mpe, I remain stuck in the position of the refusal or the incapacity to mourn—in the disorientation of melancholia—claiming this as a political feeling. In the context of the South African HIV/AIDS pandemic, reading these poems, critically, reparatively, mournfully, works to reanimate the words of the dead and to keep the spectacle of the dying painfully, shamefully, and politically in us and with us.