

Young Adult Novels

THE FICTION OF BEST PRACTICES

The Novel and the NGO

PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES, DEBATES, and directives appear unevenly throughout the fiction produced about the “African” HIV/AIDS pandemic in the years from 1993 to 2009. I place “African” in scare quotes because the geographic determinants of both the production and reception of these novels exceed a continental and geographic frame. Achille Mbembe writes: “I wish I could have made it clearer that what is called Africa is first and foremost a geographical accident. It is this accident that we subsequently invest with a multitude of significations, diverse imaginary contents, or even fantasies, which, by force of repetition, end up becoming authoritative narratives. As a consequence of the above, what we call ‘Africa’ could well be analyzed as a formation of desires, passions and undifferentiated fantasies.”¹

There is a long moment when HIV/AIDS is a key player in this intensive work of the imagination of “Africa” as “a geographical accident.” In the face of a growing pandemic, educational publishers—themselves often part of, or in partnership with, NGO consortiums and sometimes state actors—saw the genre of young adult fiction as a potentially useful pedagogical site in prevention and then also treatment campaigns in this “formation of desires, passions and undifferentiated fantasies.” This chapter will analyze two such novels, Carolyn Adalla’s *Confessions of an AIDS Victim* (Kenya, 1993) and Lutz Van Dijk’s *Stronger Than the Storm* (South Africa, 2000). The novels deploy divergent strategies in their representation of the trajectories and life possibilities of HIV-positive characters in ways that are consonant with their place and time of setting and publication. A version of what we call “best practices” is an important driver, though not the only one.²

As the discussion of EthnoGraphic Media’s *Miss HIV* in my first chapter argues, “best practices” are both space and time bound. A set of practices shorthand as ABC (Abstain, Be Faithful, Use a Condom), which may

have been effective in Uganda in the early 1990s, would have been disastrous for Botswana ten years later, due to the different nature of the two states—a dictatorship versus a democracy, the availability of antiretroviral drugs, and the much higher rate of prevalence in Botswana, which meant that treatment and prevention could not be disarticulated. In this chapter, the state of play in Kenya in 1993 and South Africa in 2000 each has its own place-bound specificities as well as time-bound moments in international humanitarianism and global HIV/AIDS advocacy and policy. The putative universalism of “best practices,” as they traverse the terrain of “African” HIV/AIDS, struggles with both local particularities and the great inequality power cleavages within and between countries.

Political theorist Wendy Brown argues that “best practices” are a feature of neoliberal political rationality: “Emerging from the private sector in the early 1980s, but taken up soon after in the public, nonprofit and NGO worlds, best practices . . . embody a distinctive fusion of business, political and knowledge concerns and an easy translatability across various spheres and ‘industries’ in generating and applying governance techniques.”³

The ostensible political neutrality of best practices, their apparent ability to detach from the circumstances that produced them and apply to radically different situations on the ground, has been tricky for efforts to imagine the HIV/AIDS pandemic in diverging national contexts and more so for efforts to combat the pandemic.

I aim in this chapter to use the vaunted singularity of the literary against the flattening-out tendencies of best practices rhetoric, to refuse the dangerous shorthand of “best practices” as both an ameliorative imaginary and implementable strategy, even as the publications of the young adult novels in this chapter emerge from a neoliberal nexus infused with the rhetoric of “best practices,” by showing how “best practices” cannot really move from Kenya in 1993 to South Africa in 2000. Even though “best practices” often stage themselves as revisable under the phrase “lessons learned,” we are in the intractability of the incommensurate as we move between these times and spaces.⁴

“Best practices” emerge as something like the anti-literary, as a risky and facile shorthand that avoids the difficulty of imagining the specificity of any given condition, and allows for easy portability and the simulation of accountability in the mode of alibi. In many realms “best practices” become the way for experts who seem unconcerned with the life worlds rather than the practices of those they wish to help to create a simulacra of change.⁵ The novels

I discuss here are not only complicit with an idea of “best practices” in the enabling material conditions of their publication, but also suggest the necessity for more nuanced attention to both national and historical geopolitical contexts and to the singularities of subjective experience. The first-person narratives of both novels work to foreground such singular subjective experience even as they must render such experiences as typical if the novels’ pedagogical aspirations are to be viable.

“Best practices” are of course one feature, practice, or method of neoliberal governance and form an important part of the vocabulary and strategies of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment as well as on many other social and humanitarian concerns. The following selection from a 2000 UNAIDS “Summary Booklet of Best Practices in Africa” can be taken as typical.

The formal objectives of Best Practices are:

- to strengthen the capacity to identify, document, exchange, promote, use, and adapt Best Practice as lessons learned within a country and between countries as a means to expand the national response to HIV/AIDS
- to promote the application of the Best Practice process for policy and strategy definition and formulation
- to collect, produce, disseminate, and promote Best Practice.

UNAIDS attempts to capture details of a range of Best Practices in order to provide useful lessons and offer references for those working in HIV/AIDS-related activities.⁶

A more recent grant to the International AIDS Society by the Gates Foundation in 2020 states its purpose: “To enhance the evidence base and to generate best practices aimed at reducing stigma as a barrier for people living with, and most vulnerable to HIV.”⁷ The language of best practices is endemic to the global ameliorative aspirations of the NGO world. While bibliotherapy comes with its own set of problems, I propose reading novels as a supplement to “best practices.” In response, satires of NGOs have become more prevalent in recent years perhaps both as a cynical response to their prior utopian lionization, and because of their failure to substantively address and/or ameliorate the conditions that prompted their founding and funding.

The delightful Kenyan television series *The Samaritans* is arguably the most thorough-going takedown of the NGO world in contemporary Africa.⁸ The two novels discussed in this chapter offer no explicit critique of the

NGO'ization of African civil society, nor of political life more broadly, but can be used to demonstrate the limits of international humanitarianism, itself a key component of global neoliberal governance, and to show the ways that the complexity and particularity of the figuration of lived experience confounds the imagined portability of "best practices."⁹

My two young adult novels are written in different moments in the evolution of best practices in relation to HIV/AIDS and they have different political allegiances to the ostensibly diverging forces of international intervention in the pandemic—global family values and liberal humanitarianism that come together in PEPFAR. The figure of the African living and dying with HIV becomes an export site for North Atlantic culture wars between liberal humanitarianism and global family values underpinned by evangelical Christianity over the period covered by these books.¹⁰ Carolyne Adalla's *Confessions of an AIDS Victim*, while written in the first-person voice of an HIV-positive character, brings a significantly different time, space, and set of issues into representation (loosely more allied with a global family values coalition) in the long history of the pandemic to those found in Van Dijk's *Stronger Than the Storm* (closer, but not reducible to liberal humanitarianism). Adalla's novel stages itself as a series of letters written by Catherine Njeri to a Kenyan friend in Germany: one half of an epistolary novel. Both novels work hard to ventriloquize African voices in the first-person, and while *Confessions of an AIDS Victim* falls more squarely in the global family values camp, there is the striking irony that Marilyn, the African in the west (where Catherine, our narrator, wishes to go), appears never to write back.

CONFESSIONS OF AN AIDS VICTIM

Conditions of Production

The novel was published by Spear Books, a subsidiary of East African Educational Publishers. The history of East African Educational Publishers speaks to an earlier, pre-neoliberal moment in African literary publishing. In 1965—barely two years after Kenyan independence—two British publishers, Heinemann and Cassell, opened offices in Nairobi. In 1968, Heinemann Educational Books (EA) Limited changed its name to Heinemann (Kenya) Ltd when part of it became locally owned. Dr. Henry Chakava was appointed as the first African editor at Heinemann in 1972. In 1992, the year before

Adalla's novel was published, the company became the first entirely locally owned multinational publishing firm in Kenya, changing its name to East African Educational Publishers.¹¹

This brief publisher history shows the attempt to create national institutions out of previous colonial cultural institutions in the long history of decolonization. Heinemann has a long and illustrious history of bringing African writers to a global English-speaking audience through its African Writers Series, ably chronicled by Charles Larson in his definitive but controversial *The Ordeal of the African Writer* (2001).¹²

Biographical information on Carolyne Adalla is difficult to come by. *Confessions of an AIDS Victim* is thus far her only published novel. She "is a graduate in Bachelor Science (Agriculture), from Egerton University. She is currently working on a Youth Programme between Kenya and the Netherlands. This explains her interest in the subject of HIV/AIDS. So far, her major work is *Confessions of an AIDS Victim*."¹³ So given her professional commitment to international youth NGO work, she would share some of the commitments of the author of *Stronger Than the Storm*, which will be elaborated shortly.

If Thina in *Stronger Than the Storm* is a poor girl from Guguletu, Catherine in *Confessions of an AIDS victim* and her friend Marilyn, to whom the letters are addressed, are potential Afropolitan subjects, well before Taiye Selasi arguably coins and definitively copyrights the term in 2005.¹⁴ Catherine discovers that she is HIV-positive after a series of blood tests required for a US student visa to continue her studies in Texas: "I have tested positive for HIV and subsequently cannot be allowed entry into the USA."¹⁵ Catherine addresses Marilyn as follows: "You have proved to be such a valuable and selfless friend in high school, campus and thereafter. We have literally shared the memorable moments of our adult life together until nine months ago when you left for the Netherlands in pursuit of further education. . . . And you are such a talented writer. You describe everything so finely and in such detail, from the horrible winters to the slow pace of social life in Holland" (4–5). Marilyn has been able to follow the "typical" upwardly mobile trajectory of a certain kind of postcolonial subject. HIV will prevent Catherine from following her. HIV appears here as that which thwarts our protagonist's educational development. Of course, HIV is not the only stumbling block to postcolonial educational advancement, though the novel's moralizing tone and individualizing of notions of responsibility and respectability mark its allegiance to the individualizing of responsibility—a key feature of neoliberal social imaginaries.

In her account of herself, Catherine falls hard for Henry, a popular boy at the boys' boarding school St. Patrick's, whom she meets at a debate competition. She describes Henry as the honey-tongued son of an illiterate tycoon: "In his first letter, Henry had indicated his hobbies as basketball, dancing, surfing and skating. Looking back, I can see that he would have been more convincing were he writing from some temperate continent, probably Europe or America. Skating in Equatorial Africa? As for basketball, I soon found out that he had never been seen on the basketball pitch. I guess he did not even know the difference between a basketball and a football," (24) but neither might Catherine. Part of Henry's allure comes from the faking of cosmopolitanism and the performance of the prestige of the "West." Moreover, this description tells us as much about Catherine's own aspirations as Henry's, and her debunking of Henry's pretensions reveal her own ones, lesser though they may be. Basketball is played on a court not a pitch. These performances of the minutiae of "class" are important for the imagined readership of the novel and instructive about the kinds of sexual behavior readers must abjure if infection with HIV is to be avoided.

HIV has many meanings for Catherine in the novel: the terror of mortality, stigma, and the fear of ostracism, but the blockage of a kind of cosmopolitan upward mobility is arguably most important. The novel, despite the word "confession" in its title, functions as a warning: Sex is perilous for young women. Don't be like me or you will get AIDS. The first chapter ends with a homily from the doctor: "The only salvation for mankind is for its people to avoid high risk behavior and live as morally upright as monks and nuns." Catherine responds: "How strange this world is! Catherine discussing AIDS instead of fixing an appointment for a date out! Thank God there is writing to do. It helps me fill in the long hours I would otherwise spend crying and worrying. Right now I am a strange mixture of hurt pride and frustrated ambitions that are still sufficiently alive" (9).

Within this moralizing, important medical information is presented. Readers learn about the ELISA test, the prevailing test of the early 1990s, which tests for antibodies to the virus (not the virus itself), symptoms of seroconversion, and the time lag between infection and seroconversion. This information reads as the paraphrase of a pamphlet, barely fictionalized in a conversation with a doctor. While a university graduate, Catherine appears without the informational and emotional resources to cope with her diagnosis. She tells readers: "From the pamphlet I have, ELISA is an abbreviation for Enzyme-linked Immunosorbent Assay, whatever that means" (7). Fiction

here is imagined as an information supplement for readers who are implicitly seen as also lacking crucial information.

The novel then provides arguments for why safer-sex practices, particularly condom use, have failed to take hold. Catherine's "feminist" boyfriend, Brian, remarks: "Take the use of condoms, for instance. I must say few men, among my friends that is, would voluntarily choose to use condoms to protect themselves against possible infections. . . . One guy in our office amused us by likening the use of condoms to deduction of income tax from his pay. Another said using the condom during sex is like eating the sweet with its wrapper on. What this suggests is that many people find it cumbersome to use the condom during sex, and with this bias many of them are likely to be infected or pass the infection on" (48).

In these staggeringly obvious ways, readers can see the difficulties with ABC prevention campaigns. Catherine's sexual biography reveals the difficulties with A. A is for Abstinence, difficult for her in a world that does not prepare her for the power of her own desires; B is for Be Faithful, difficult in a world of the redundancy of transactional intimacy (what intimacy is not transactional?); and C for Condom is equally difficult in a world of heteropatriarchal male sexual entitlement. ABC—the first three letters of the English alphabet, so simple every child can learn them, but the analogy to basic literacy belies the difficulty and complexity of Catherine's erotic options and choices. Catherine is often quite clear in the novel that she needs the economic support of boyfriends—sometimes with basic provisioning like rent, but more often for the small luxuries that are essential to her classed sense of self, like dinners out, perfume, etc. As she notes, "The only way these ladies can get a share of that is through love, fake or otherwise" (49).

The epistolary form of the novel feels almost quaint. The novel is written around the advent of email as a dominant form for international communication.¹⁶ We are told that Catherine and Marilyn write to each other once a month. From 1977 to 1999, postal service in Kenya is delivered by Kenya Posts and Telecommunications Corporation, a national postal service, though debates about privatization are on the horizon. In 1999, the Postal Corporation of Kenya, with its six hundred post offices, is granted a legal monopoly until 2023, in a move that may mark a pushback against the free-market logics of neoliberalism. Reliable postal service is not imagined as a problem for the novel in its early 1990s moment, unlike the case in many other postcolonial countries.¹⁷ The novel needs a reliable postal service for its very form, which marks a set of expectations about state

services that are in imminent collapse in the moment of its writing, and not unconnected with the difficulties of imagining and implementing a national AIDS policy.

Narrative and National Allegory

Catherine Njeri tells Marilyn and readers that she is twenty-eight at the time of her HIV-positive diagnosis, which would mean that she was born two years or so after Kenyan independence. Her life is thus far coterminous with the life of the Kenyan nation-state, though there are few other national markers in her narrative. However, her personal geography may be significant. She is born in the village of Kamacharia in Murang'a district and her father owns a bookshop in Murang'a town. Murang'a county is at the heart of Kikuyu country and Murang'a town, called Fort Hall under the British, saw considerable Kikuyu displacement and resistance to land confiscations by the British in the colonial period and was considered the ancestral home of the Kikuyu people by some Mau Mau fighters.¹⁸ Catherine may willy-nilly figure the Kenyan national project in a crisis of economic development and social reproduction.

Catherine describes HIV/AIDS in Kenya: "It is like a cry of a nation which has been defeated at war."¹⁹ Even though the Mau Mau rebellion was successful in driving the British out and achieving Kenyan independence, HIV/AIDS represents something like national defeat for the novel in the early 1990s.²⁰

Sex Education, Sexual Biography, and the Politics of Respectability

The problem of HIV/AIDS in the novel is a resolutely heterosexual one, perhaps unwittingly prefiguring Ugandan president Museveni's 2002 remark that HIV/AIDS in Uganda is a heterosexual problem because there are no gays in Uganda, even though the national space represented in the novel is Kenya and not Uganda. The pandemic is heterosexualized as Africa becomes its epicenter.

Catherine's description of her sexual feelings and experiences are mostly held within the grip of sexual respectability, and the kind of sexual respectability that has particular difficulty in broaching women's desire. Occasionally Catherine notes and explains away the sexual double standard for men and

women. When she writes, “It was only much later, after I had read about the anatomical differences between men and women with regard to sexual arousal and response, that I began to understand why boys won’t just stop at kissing,” she appears to be securely within patriarchal sexual ideology.²¹ When she discloses her HIV status to her boyfriend, Alex, a terrible fight ensues. “Don’t call me names, Alex. Can you explain to me how you are attracted to prostitutes? I guess your girlfriend in Nairobi is one helluva prostitute too. A Casanova, that’s what you are.”²² We are unwittingly in the deep history of colonialism and its geographic and intimate legacies here. In her path-breaking history *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (1990), Luise White establishes the centrality of prostitution in the founding of Nairobi as a city, the links between migrant labor and sex-work.²³ The first buildings built to code in Nairobi are brothels. The novel thus participates in a long argument about the sexual politics of colonial modernity—the mobility of first African men and then African women in the search for work after the colonial destruction of often thriving peasant economies accounts for sexually transmitted diseases. Here HIV becomes a new wrinkle in an old story. This commonsense account of the spread of HIV, which Catherine seems to believe here in the exchange with Alex, is disputed in the South African context by Mark Hunter, who shows how the mobility of African women in search of livelihoods means that the male migrant labor vector of transmission of sexually transmitted diseases no longer applies in the sexual economies of postcolonial African states more generally.²⁴

Where else might we look for representations of HIV/AIDS in Kenya in the time of *Confessions of an AIDS Victim*? Writing of his experiences working in a clinic in Nairobi in the 1990s, Keguro Macharia, Kenyan author and queer theorist, describes silences around both HIV/AIDS and sexual norms and practices that differ from Catherine’s:

Perhaps because it was Moi’s Kenya, in the grip of massive political repression and economic hell, we did not discuss how these young men got HIV. We did not speculate about their sexual practices or sexual identities. . . . Young men were young men. Careless. Free with their favors. Unlucky. Perhaps with each young man who walked in and left in a bodybag, we were slightly relieved it wasn’t a brother, a cousin, a friend, a lover. Sometimes he was.

Funeral notices spoke about long illnesses and sudden illnesses, pneumonia and tuberculosis. Per the press, African villages were “emptying.” It was an abrupt shift from the “overpopulation” worries a few years earlier. I remember little. I borrow other memories. I invent some.

I learned that there was a language to describe Black gay experiences with AIDS when I went to the U.S. It was in Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied*, the Other Countries collective's *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS*, Essex Hemphill's *Ceremonies*, Melvin Dixon's *Love's Ceremonies*. It was in *Brother to Brother* and *In the Life*. We spoke about condoms and cybersex, masturbation and non-penetrative sex. Phone sex and mutual masturbation. To borrow from Douglas Crimp, we were discussing how to be promiscuous in an epidemic.

A few years into my stay in the U.S., I wondered whether the stories and poems I'd learned existed in the same way for Kenya. It was easy to find statistics—all those empty villages and destroyed populations—and easy to find venues of transmission—"harmful" traditional practices, including circumcision and widow inheritance, along with the modern irresponsibility of long-distance lorry drivers and hypermobile sex workers. African promiscuity. African illiteracy. African backwardness. African promiscuity.²⁵

Macharia is worth quoting at length here for some of the context that does not and perhaps cannot make it into Adalla's novel. *Confessions of an AIDS Victim*, with its resolutely heterosexual concerns, may not be part of the Kenyan version of the stories and poems that Keguro finds in African diasporic cultural production, but the novel does sometimes offer a counter-narrative to "African promiscuity. African illiteracy. African backwardness." Catherine is educated, hardly illiterate, and while there are mentions of "harmful" traditional practices and modern, mostly alcoholically fueled "modern irresponsibility," Catherine presents herself as a respectable, aspiringly middle-class subject. While sexually active, she is serially monogamous, no concurrent partners, and the nascent feminism of Catherine's account suggests that it is a kind of entitled toxic masculinity that drives the pandemic. While she sometimes attaches the adjective African to her description of such men and the social formations they constitute, her story *tout court* mostly refutes an "African promiscuity" frame. Catherine is invested in ideas of sexual respectability, and one of the overriding messages of the novel is that HIV can happen to anyone, even a well-educated, eminently respectable, and "normal" young woman. On the one hand, she is invested in being exceptional: "During the years that followed, I made lots of friends and improved my grades in class tremendously. By the time I reached standard six, I was a darling to the teachers and many pupils."²⁶ On the other hand, it is her ordinariness that she wishes to emphasize, particularly after her diagnosis: "I am aware that the story of my life is not so extraordinary to warrant attention; rather it is its similarity with the day to day lives of other girls

growing up that makes it worth narrating" (4). Similarly, HIV/AIDS must be an overwhelming personal tragedy and a quotidian and shared experience. Respectability has not and cannot save Catherine from AIDS, but that does not mean that she can relinquish it.

The African American texts that Macharia sees as providing a retroactive language for the omissions and silences he describes in the clinics all foreground race, and particularly notions of Blackness—celebratory ones—to counter the compounded stigmas induced by white supremacy in the US and cross-racial homophobia. Catherine barely mentions race, but sexual respectability appears as incapacitating in both Black majority and Black minority national contexts.

The desire to appear respectable is one of the reasons for the dangerous silences around sex, and by extension "sexuality," although heterosexuality is so resolutely naturalized in the novel, questions of sexuality are barely considered. While in a South African context it is possible to argue that there might be a resistant quality to assertions of sexual respectability as a counter to the racism in the charge of "African Promiscuity," this is less apparent in Catherine's case. Like many African colonial (and postcolonial elites), Catherine is mission-educated. She describes her first school: "The school was run by missionary sisters and the code of conduct was strict" (10). Her experiences at boarding school reveal an absence of sex education both at home and at school. "Mothers were rated poor sex educators. A number of girls admitted shyly that they never received any prior information on menstruation from their mothers—they just happened upon it, thanks to the boarding schools. One girl narrated to us how her mother had bought for her a packet of tampons along with her other shopping for the term. She had counter checked against the list she had written for the shopping and satisfied that it was an additional item, she decided to ask her mother about it. 'You are a girl. You will soon discover what it is,' was all her mother could tell her" (17). I do not think that this anecdote would constitute what "best practices" might term "peer education." The silences around sex, and particularly around feminine sexual desire, appear to Catherine as important factors in her inability to make intimate decisions that could have prevented her infection with HIV.

These silences appear partially produced by social stigma, which is presented as the great enforcer of respectability, and the enormous problem stigma poses for both HIV prevention and treatment programs has been amply documented, not just in fictional worlds. In a time when there are

no real treatment options, and arguably well beyond that time, the fear of being marked as subject of death and sexual shame prevents people from getting tested.²⁷ It is better not to know than to bear the stigma of being HIV-positive. Catherine only gets tested because she is required to do so in order to acquire a US student visa by an immigration rule banning HIV-positive people from entering the US, enacted by statute in 1987 and then strengthened in 1993 (the year of the novel's publication) and then partly lifted by George W. Bush in 2008 and fully repealed by Barack Obama in 2009.²⁸ With an HIV-positive diagnosis seen as something like a death sentence, and no treatment options available beyond the palliative, incentives for getting tested and knowing one's status were miniscule. Catherine gets tested as a kind of *pro forma* bureaucratic step necessary for her educational and career upward mobility and is surprised by the result. Unlike in the Black gay experiences, which Macharia wishes to bring to bear on HIV/AIDS in Kenya in the 1990s, here there is no sense of communal or social responsibility or care—no invention of new protective community sexual practices, like safer sex. Macharia mentions Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied*, the Other Countries collective's *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS*, Essex Hemphill's *Ceremonies*, Melvin Dixon's *Love's Ceremonies*, alongside Douglas Crimp's influential essay "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," to suggest an alternative genealogy for the sexuality of the Afropolitan subject than the biography of the international student like Marilyn or Catherine.²⁹

Instead, religious judgment underpins Catherine's understanding of HIV/AIDS. "And the first lesson is that AIDS is a reality, a terrible disease whose wages are death."³⁰ As in many places where the virus is mentioned, one sees in the biblical language the legacy of Catherine's mission education. Reworking the assertion in Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death," she substitutes sin for AIDS to damn herself. This self-hatred produced by a religious recoding of disease as sin is compounded by the imagining of social isolation and effacement caused by stigma: "I cannot fathom the idea, but an AIDS victim!—that is what I am now. Pretty soon I will be faceless and nameless. Catherine, the beautiful name my mother gave me, will only be mentioned in hushed voices and by wagging tongues" (2–3). Ervin Goffman's classic definition of stigma would seem to pertain to the fictional Catherine too: "By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account

for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class. . . . He possesses a stigma, an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated. We and those who do not depart negatively from the particular expectations at issue I shall call the normals.”³¹

In stark contrast to the multiple contextual explanations for the pandemic in Kenya presented and disputed by Macharia above, Catherine Njeri’s account of HIV/AIDS initially appears much more personal and individualistic. Her infection is the result of poor decisions she made about her intimate life, decisions that have removed her from the community of the normals. The novel is entitled *Confessions of an AIDS Victim*, yet what exactly is Catherine a victim of? In her letter to Marilyn, Catherine feels obliged to recount her entire romantic and sexual history as some kind of explanation for her infection. A Jamesonian hunch: real history cannot be depicted directly but only appears as shifting and elusive background that leaves a trace on depicted events.³² In this sense then, Catherine is a victim of colonial and postcolonial history, a victim of sexist ideology, and while the narrative broaches such notions, she mainly presents herself as a victim of her own unruly desires. It is only in the eighth chapter, when she steps outside herself to fleetingly imagine community with other people living with HIV (and this imagining is largely phobic), that we transcend the frame of HIV/AIDS caused by bad individual decisions.

Her central and repeated metaphor for AIDS is a (runaway?) underground train:

Some people in the world are boarding the AIDS underground trains by sticking to high-risk behavior and refusing to alter their lifestyles accordingly. Maybe I fit in this category. We knowingly ignore all truths and facts about AIDS, passing by all the warning signals, cheating ourselves that we are enjoying life. In this inferno, we obtain tickets in the form of the AIDS virus and secure ourselves a place on the underground train. Thousands of people are busy obtaining their tickets yearly without giving it much thought, only to realise a shade too late that they must die, to the glory of AIDS.³³

This partial personification of HIV/AIDS is often a central feature of the literary imagination of HIV, most thoroughly developed in Kgebetli Moele’s *Book of the Dead*, the focus of chapter 6. The language and central metaphor of the above passage may articulate colonial legacies in a way that the narrative itself does not or cannot. The language of a kind of hell, fire, and brimstone Christianity is present. Christianity in many ways remains one

of the paradigmatic markers of colonialism in the region, and the relation between sexual morality deemed Christian and indigenous African intimate norms is central to both colonial and decolonizing ideologies and practices over the course of Kenyan national history.³⁴ The early 1990s, the time of the writing of the novel, sees the beginning of the massive boom of evangelical Christianity in East African countries like Kenya and Uganda, arguably because the prosperity gospel provides solace in the face of the failures of decolonization and the extensive material depravations and inequality produced by accelerating globalization.³⁵

And then there is the train, that other great symbol of colonial modernity. The role of the East African railroad in the colonization of the territory that is to become the colony and then the independent nation state of Kenya is key in both the histories and historiographies of East Africa. Beginning in 1895, the railroad effectively opened up the lacustrine interior of East Africa for trade and white settlement in the Kenyan highlands, as well as bringing thousands of indentured Indian laborers to the territory. But Catherine Njeri's AIDS train is further an underground train, underground perhaps because hidden from sight, but underground trains are also a feature of public transportation in the large urban metropolises of the global north. Following Macharia's call for an intertextual/archival expansion in terms of the texts that can illuminate a Kenyan experience of HIV/AIDS, an entirely different register of "underground railroad" may riskily come into play in asking that we imagine new transnational possibilities of racial and sexual solidarity in the face of HIV/AIDS—but Catherine is no Harriet Tubman. In metaphorizing AIDS as an underground train, Adalla participates in the associative images of AIDS as a kind of western import, as an index of African sexual degeneracy caused by colonial modernity. Catherine writes to Marilyn: "The AIDS virus seems to be taking advantage of the moral weakness in our society and other imbalances. Hardly three decades from the time we attained independence, our Kenyan society is morally degenerating, caught at the crossroads between Western behavior and African morals."³⁶

Catherine's recounting of her biography reveals an uneven engagement with what *pace* James Ferguson could be called the domestic and sexual norms of African modernity as discussed in chapter 3. Catherine claims that her parents' marriage begins to deteriorate when her father takes a second wife. Polygyny is clearly an intimate norm for her parents' generation, but less so for her own. In contrast to *Stronger Than the Storm*, which in its closing tries to imagine the harnessing of African customs, not quite ossified

into tradition in ameliorative initiatives around the pandemic, African intimate norms, paradoxically enabled by both “modernity” and “tradition,” are imagined as only serving to facilitate the spread of the disease. Catherine tells Marilyn:

“[They] stick to risky cultural practices that have been known to spread the HIV infection. By this I mean the practices of group circumcision, where the circumcision blade is never sterilised between each individual circumcision. I am also talking of the practices such as the inheriting of wives by an otherwise healthy man, after the death of a husband possibly from AIDS. This practice is common among Western Kenya tribes. . . . AIDS also presents a catastrophe to the polygamous nature of African society. I know of a man who had three wives and sixteen children. He contracted the AIDS virus somehow and infected all his three wives. . . . Soon sixteen children from one home will need an orphanage.” (78)³⁷

Even though the novel recognizes that ideologies of sexual respectability produce both the catastrophic silences around particularly women’s sexuality and the forms of social stigma that facilitate transmission by adding to the difficulties of getting tested, “modern” monogamous heterosexual marriage remains the redemptive intimate form in the face of HIV/AIDS, and sexual activity outside that form must produce stigma. We also see here that sexual respectability has a geography, and a national and civilizational one at that. Catherine presents herself as largely without tribal affiliation, even though her patronym and hometown imply she is Kikuyu. She presents herself as detribalized into a kind of urban middle-classness, unlike her compatriots in the “Western Kenya tribes” who practice group circumcision, widow-inheritance, and—like her own father—polygyny.

These social and implicitly political framings of HIV/AIDS in Kenya come relatively late in the narrative and Catherine seems confident that it is her high-risk behavior that is to blame for her contracting of the disease. What else do readers learn as she recounts her sexual and intimate biography?

As a thirteen-year-old girl, she experiences a major crush on her stepbrother, Maina. Throughout her twenty-eight-year-old self’s recounting of her psychosexual history, Catherine demonstrates her “innocence/ignorance” on matters sexual. When Maina kisses her for the first time, she writes: “I had no idea what a kiss was like. Indeed for several months following this first kiss, I was under the delusion that it was Maina’s own marvelous invention” (14). This innocence/ignorance is impossible to imagine in an era of television let alone an era of internet porn and dating apps, but points to the necessity

of a variety of forms (and content) of sexualized representation, which ABC provoked, even if phobically.

It is, however, in Catherine's nascent feminism that the novel tilts against the gendered underpinnings of the ideology of sexual respectability that it elsewhere upholds. "Already the world over women were beginning to brace themselves for the International Conference on Women to be held in Nairobi a year from then. I remember feeling proud of all those women, who were lobbying for equality, among other women's rights" (39). The reference here is to the third World Conference on Women held under the auspices of the United Nations in Nairobi in 1985. "It appears that in Africa, the economy favours the male species more than the female. You get the best jobs, hold the top positions in any given firm, drive the best cars, own land and everything else. The only way these ladies can get a share of that is through love, fake or otherwise, but rarely through climbing the same career ladder" (49). The claim that "love, fake or otherwise" is the only way for women to get "a share of that" provides a nascent feminist critique of the positing of transactional intimacy as the cause of the rapid spread of the pandemic in African national contexts.

HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa affected women disproportionately, and while Catherine cannot shake her sense of injustice at her HIV-positive status for impeding her own upward mobility, in these moments she is clear that her position as a woman is as much to blame for her situation as the "bad" personal sexual choices she has made. More interestingly, in the novel's self-staging as a letter written by a woman to her best woman friend, readers—voyeurs as we may be—are structurally in the position of the best woman friend. The confession is addressed to Marilyn but written for us. This invitation may thus tentatively model a different mode of solidarity than the one to be found in the "white savior industrial complex"—to borrow Teju Cole's scathing term (extensively discussed later in this chapter) for the range of complex feelings, actions, and positions that underpin so many aid initiatives. While Catherine seems to look favorably on global feminist solidarity in her reference to the third United Nations World Conference on Women held in Nairobi in 1985, her letters are addressed to a fellow Kenyan abroad, and she has no white intimates in the novel, and a certain kind of imperial benevolence feminism is the target of Cole's critique: "This world exists simply to satisfy the needs—including, importantly, the sentimental needs—of white people and Oprah."³⁸

Confessions of an AIDS Victim marshals the "best practices" of ABC, even without explicitly mentioning them, at the cusp of the NGO'ization

of African public health policy. Seven years later and several thousand miles to the south, the literary imagining of HIV/AIDS and the imagining of the role of literature in an HIV/AIDS pandemic will have other representational strategies to deploy and a different ensemble of “best practices” to conjure and contest.

STRONGER THAN THE STORM

Conditions of Production

The front pages of *Stronger Than the Storm* reveal much about the desired social and educational impact of the book.³⁹ The book is published by Maskew Miller Longman, based in Cape Town, with representatives in companies across southern and central Africa. It was originally written by Lutz van Dijk in German and published in Germany under the English title *Township Blues*. It was translated by Karin Chubb, who also wrote a teacher’s guide to the book. Chubb and Van Dijk are the authors of an academic study, *Between Anger and Hope*, published by the University of the Witwatersrand Press (2000) on the youth hearings of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation hearings.⁴⁰

The author and translator of *Stronger Than the Storm* are, moreover, the cofounders of HOKISA (Homes for Kids in South Africa), a nonprofit organization that “aims to support young people affected by HIV and AIDS,” who have lost parents to the disease or are “themselves infected,” by assisting “in creating homes for these children and youth, in close co-operation and consultation with the communities in which they were born.” Readers are told that all earnings and royalties from this publication will go to funding HOKISA and are also invited to make donations to the organization whose address and bank details appear on the same page.⁴¹

On the following page, there is a brief author’s biography: “Lutz van Dijk, born 1955, PhD is an award-winning writer of youth literature who spent several years working for the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam. He has so far published eleven novels for young adults, most of them in German. They have also been translated into English, Dutch, Danish, Italian, Norwegian, Bulgarian and Hungarian. His latest award is the Youth Literature Award of Namibia 1997.”⁴² Then there is the obligatory Nelson Mandela quote about HIV/AIDS and a dedication to Gugu Dlamini, “a young woman from Kwa Mashu near Durban who was murdered by her neighbors after she divulged

her HIV-positive status on radio and TV on International AIDS Day, 1 December 1998.²⁴³

I reproduce so much of the first few pages of the book before the table of contents because they suggest how a cosmopolitan and responsible interest in the South African pandemic imagines itself. The book needs a pedagogical frame—the accompanying teacher’s guide. It needs a charitable rationale—the NGO, HOKISA, that will benefit from its sale. And there is the authorizing quote about the seriousness of the moral challenge posed by the threat of AIDS from the most famous leader of South Africa’s national liberation struggle and the first president of a democratic South Africa, who stepped down from the presidency the year before, and the dedication to Gugu Dlamini, a figure for the scandalous victimization of HIV-positive people by the forces of stigmatization and fear (also mentioned in *Yesterday* in chapter 2).

The book thus seems part of international humanitarian discourse. Its author is credentialed by his long work with the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, and I somewhat grumpily note that its humanitarian impulses are directed at children. This direction is nothing new and has a long material and discursive history going as far back as abolition, and relatedly the first-person narrator of the novel, the formidable Thinasonke, is presented as “an innocent victim.” Her infection is the consequence of child rape. The charity is called Home for Kids in South Africa. Who can argue with that? But the charity in its moment in South African history is stepping in to attempt to remedy not only the failure of adult parents to provide homes for their children but also the failure of the newly democratic state and the failure of the free market under the contemporaneous internally led structural adjustment economic policies inspired by the International Monetary Fund and financial institutions like the World Bank. While these processes inform the most immediate contexts of the charitable intervention, the long history of dispossession and exploitation produced by settler-colonialism and racial capitalism in South Africa further underwrites this need for charitable action, yet these ongoing historical processes contain wider economic, social, and political drivers that neither a young adult novel nor a single child-oriented charity could hope to address.

While it would be churlish and unfair to reduce the novel to an example of the “white savior industrial complex,” its participation in the discursive and material “best practices” of international humanitarianism risk partial

complicity. Here is Teju Cole's famous and defining series of tweets on the phrase.

1. From Sachs to Kristof to Invisible Children to TED, the fastest growth industry in the US is the White Savior Industrial Complex.
2. The white savior supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening.
3. The banality of evil transmutes into the banality of sentimentality. The world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm.
4. This world exists simply to satisfy the needs—including, importantly, the sentimental needs—of white people and Oprah.
5. The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.
6. Feverish worry over that awful African warlord. But close to 1.5 million Iraqis died from an American war of choice. Worry about that.
7. I deeply respect American sentimentality, the way one respects a wounded hippo. You must keep an eye on it, for you know it is deadly.

While expanded into the above aphorisms, the “white savior industrial complex” remains a soundbite—a risky shorthand that erases an enormous range of historical institutions, experiences, and actors in the poetics of condensation. It is like the other side of the coin of “best practices.”

The year 2000 is now far away enough to historicize a literary text, and these prefatory materials allow for that to happen in contexts beyond the “white savior industrial complex.” Author Van Dijk and translator and teacher Chubb's academic book concerned the youth testimony of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC was created by an act of parliament in 1995 and presented its report in October of 1998. Thus 2000 is two years after the report, one year after the end of the Mandela presidency, and in the midst of subsequent South African president Thabo Mbeki's AIDS denialism, and perhaps most relevantly after the constitutional court's decision in Grootboom that the South African constitution granted the right to housing insofar as it was possible within the means of the state: a very different strategy for the imagining of redress for the housing crisis than HOKISA.⁴⁴

It is possible to locate some of these informing historical events in the NGO/novel ensemble of *Stronger Than the Storm*, which while determined by the bigger frame of child-centered international humanitarianism is also deeply invested in the specificity of its South African setting, if not

the singularity of its central protagonist. Each chapter title appears first in isiXhosa and then in English, implying either an allegiance to the life worlds the novel wishes to bring into representation and/or a recognition that some of an international interest in the story will depend on the evocation of local color sliding into exoticism. How different would the novel be if it had been translated into isiXhosa instead of English?

Narrative and National Allegory

Let me begin with a synopsis of the novel's plot. Importantly, the novel opens with a kind of happy ending: Thinasonke and Thabang, her childhood best friend-turned-boyfriend, embrace in the sea: "For at least two minutes we manage to kiss and hold each other without drawing breath at all. If we train harder, we could probably last even longer! Then we burst out laughing and gasp for air like two fish on the beach, flopping onto our backs. 'Usebenzile—well done, Thina!' Thabang cries. 'If the next Olympic Games are held in Cape Town, we'll make the team for underwater kissing!'"⁴⁵

The playful wish for the next Olympic Games to be held in Cape Town is worth noting. The return of South Africa to the global sporting arena after decades of cultural and sports boycotts of the apartheid regime was another site for ebullience around racial reconciliatory rainbowism to the TRC. South Africa's triumph in the 1996 Rugby World Cup culminating in Nelson Mandela donning a Springbok journey and powerfully sentimentalized in the Hollywood film *Invictus* was an emblematic moment here.⁴⁶ Thabang is invoking the idioms of national sentimentality in imagining the healing of both HIV/AIDS as/and national trauma.

In 2012, Van Dijk publishes another young adult novel, *Themba: A Boy Called Hope*, that tells the story of an HIV-positive football-obsessed youth and his mother.⁴⁷ This novel imagines the arena of sports as a site for the working through of questions of HIV/AIDS and national belonging in the aftermath of South Africa's hosting of the World Cup finals in 2010.

The happy opening of *Stronger Than the Storm* sets the tone for the recounting of trauma that follows and echoes an optimistic take on the Truth and Reconciliation hearings, namely that the past can be healed by the future. The novel stages itself as Thina telling her story to Thabang: "Now that I have told Thabang the story, I want to try write it all down. To begin with, only for myself. It is a bit like that boulder by the sea. Being able to throw off that weight not only makes you feel light and free. If you do it the right way, it

can perhaps even make you stronger.”⁴⁸ Thabang, the boyfriend, is the first audience for the story. In *Confessions of an AIDS Victim*, it was Marilyn—the best woman friend—who is the primary addressee. That it is the narrator’s boyfriend who is the primary addressee here suggests that this novel has a little more faith in the possibilities of a future redemptive heterosexuality as the route to healing and social reproduction. In contrast, Catherine Njeri’s similar faith in the redemptive possibilities of heterosexuality as social continuity is mournful and retrospective—“If only I had not” rather than “If . . . , we’ll make”

While *Stronger Than the Storm* is essentially a novel of trauma, survival, and recovery, elements of it can be read as a partial national allegory. Mangaliso, our narrator’s brother, refuses to speak after being released from an apartheid-era prison. One night on her way home from buying her grandmother beer at a local *shebeen*, Thina is brutally attacked by three boys who rape her and steal her satchel with all her school supplies. She manages to make it home after the attack and a policeman and Granny’s sangoma are summoned. Thina then sleeps for two days: “Mangaliso stayed with me day and night. When I regained consciousness the first thing I reached for was his hand” (30). The brother is a victim of apartheid-era state violence. Thina is a victim of post-apartheid sexual violence, though the grandmother’s recounting of the history of a place like Guguletu suggests the continuities rather than the ruptures in the designation “post.” Thina’s friend Lindi’s mother proclaims: “Oh Thixo, it has really got terrible! . . . More terrible than in the old days when we at least knew who was the enemy and where we were safe” (36). The novel will work to restore voice to the brother and the possibility of a normative future to the sister in ways that map onto the imagining of healing and restoration for the victims of the racial/political violence of the apartheid era and the victims of the sexual violence of the post-apartheid era, respectively.

Next readers learn definitively from the results of a blood test that Thabang’s mother’s illness is the result of HIV infection. A group of students in collaboration with students at an affluent “white” school in Newlands announce that the attack on Thina has made them want to write a play about violence and perform it in the community as a piece of street theatre. (Thina is initially unhappy about this turn of events, suggesting the dangers of bringing her trauma into representation—an accusation that the novel itself could potentially face but circumvents by explicitly making Thina the author of her own story in the novel’s self-staging.) The authorship and production of the

play inevitably dramatize the difficulties across multiple representations of HIV/AIDS of the ventriloquizing of Black experience by white authors.⁴⁹

Thina confesses to Miss Delphine, her schoolteacher, about the rape and consents to getting an HIV test. During a school outing, Thina spots a bedraggled-looking Thabang on the street in Cape Town. Thabang tells the story of how he ended up there: “They said I should have made sure that it would stay secret, that nobody should know what Mother died of. Now I had brought shame not only to the family but to our neighbors in the whole street. They threatened to burn down our house one night if I did not leave at once. Ugawulayo—AIDS, that is the evil disease and it is a punishment for your sins.”⁵⁰ Once again, the biblical phrase “the wages of sin is death” structures the imagining of HIV/AIDS. Thina persuades Thabang and Thobile to return to Guguletu with her, and her family agrees that the two brothers can come and live with them. Thina takes an HIV test.

When the test comes back positive, Thina goes into a state of shock and becomes completely uncommunicative for eight days. Once again, the primary response to trauma is imagined as silence. Then, she tells her status to Thabang, who threatens to kill her attackers. Thina follows Thabang into the bush one night and discovers Thabang covered in blood. He says, “I’ve got them, Thina!!,” recounting to Thina how he captured two of the three youths, named Vuyo and Zweli, and was on the verge of castrating them when he was attacked by the third one, whom he easily overpowered because that third youth, Nkulu, had earlier been injured by the police. The blood on Thabang is also Nkulu’s blood. It turns out Thina has been followed by her brother, Mangaliso, who says, “We learned to move quietly years ago in the underground, when we could only move at night” (88). They head off to the hiding place where Thabang had left Vuyo and Zweli with the corpse of Nkulu. Mangaliso asks “Thabang and me to sit down on the ground, in a circle of five together with the perpetrators. ‘Before the sun rises, we have to have looked into each other’s souls to find out how we can leave this place’” (91). The scene appears as a microcosmic TRC run by affected children.

Mangaliso, a few pages earlier the agent of murderous revenge, now invokes the concept of Ubuntu in the attempt to forgive Zweli and Vuyo, the same boys he had intended to castrate. The novel’s representative of apartheid-era violence acts as a flip-switch between ideas of justice as revenge and retribution and the idea of justice as somehow attached to notions of forgiveness. The second Mangaliso prevails as Zweli asks Thina for her forgiveness: “I did something terrible to you, Thina. . . . I don’t know

whether Nkulu was also infected with HIV, but I am. In the village where my grandparents live there is a sangoma who says you can be cured through sex with a virgin. I have never really believed that. But that evening we had all been drinking and then we became hooked on the idea. I cannot excuse this all with anything, and I cannot atone for it. But I . . . I . . . want to ask for your forgiveness” (92).

Despite his wound, Thabang refuses to go to a doctor or a hospital: “There they will only ask me stupid questions and, if the police get involved, it could become nasty for me” (96). The grandmother agrees to tell Thina’s mother about the HIV test. The mother refuses to accept the news and throws Thabang and Thobile out of the house. After a confrontation with her mother Thina runs away and joins Thabang and Thobile for Christmas in a shed at the school, where they had taken shelter.

At a performance of the play, now called *Township Blues* (also the original “German” title of the novel), Thina announces that she is HIV-positive. Thina returns home and there is a family *indaba* “when members of my family met delegations from Zweli’s family to come to an arrangement without bloodshed. Everybody had resolved not to involve the police but to handle the conflict themselves” (105).

The novel ends with an implicit blessing on Thina and Thabang’s relationship from the grandmother in the form of an isiXhosa proverb: “‘They are like *umtya nethunga*, like the rope and the bucket. Both are necessary to get fresh milk from our cows” (106). Thina’s fingers are cold as she scribbles the last page, presumably from what we have just read, but she is looking forward to surviving whatever storms may come, and to spring.

This narrative summary should indicate the novel’s faith in a kind of documentary realism in the form of testimony or truth-telling. The narrative is in Thina’s voice and there are many moments in the text when she tells readers that first she, and then Thabang, will be reading what she is writing. But while readers need to believe Thina, she is of course an entirely fictional character. Three sentences on the title page of the novel mark an interesting attempt to finesse this tension: “A novel for young adults about HIV/AIDS in South Africa. All characters in this novel are fictitious. However, places like the township Guguletu do not only exist in South Africa.” The characters are fictitious, but perhaps representative. Guguletu is empirically real, but not singular—there are other places like it not (just) in South Africa. Guguletu emerges as not only the place of the novel’s setting but somehow related to the spread of HIV/AIDS, an indicator of the novel’s reach beyond it.

That implicit faith in the determining power of material context sits uneasily with the specificity and generality of Thina's experience. The novel's allegiance to realism mediated through an idea of testimony is apparent in its staging of the writerly voice of its first-person narrator, who explicitly tells the reader what has happened to her. On the other hand, there are elements of Thina's narrative that call out for a kind of allegorical reading, and it is possible to read the novel of as a partial national allegory for South Africa in and around the year 2000. Here is such a reading:

Mangaliso, Thina's older brother, is a young comrade when he is arrested, presumably tortured and robbed of the power of speech by the police of the apartheid state. Thina is born while her mother is in an apartheid prison. Guguletu, as a location (as a word might have it), is the product of apartheid-era forced relocation and racial segregation policies and practices. Its persistence in its apartheid-era spatial forms renders the designation "post" in post-apartheid questionable.

Since there are no dates in the novel and Guguletu is suggestively both inside and outside the time-space of South Africa in certain ways, the novel is anchored in its times of writing by the HIV/AIDS elements of its plot and by its reworking of testimonial faith in the immediate post-TRC, or more accurately failure of the TRC moment. The novel provides no mention of the emerging political activism around HIV/AIDS in the vicinity of Cape Town. No one in the novel's Guguletu appears to have heard of the Treatment Action Campaign, founded in Cape Town in 1998, partly in response to the murder of Gugu Dlamini—even as the novel is dedicated to her. The TAC itself is a very different kind of NGO, working much of the time along more explicitly political lines and thus not portable or recuperable for the rhetorics of best practices.⁵¹

In its narrative, the novel dramatizes the difficulty of social continuity and reproduction as the characters move across the imagined great divide in twentieth-century South African history (and historiography) apartheid to post-apartheid, and the so-called post-apartheid era from the constitutional triumphalism of the early Mandela presidency through the TRC years into the AIDS denialism years of the Mbeki presidency.⁵²

Realistically, a multigenerational women-centered household is the domicile for the novel's central characters, a common unit/space of domestic reproduction across the long twentieth century in South Africa. Thabang and his younger brother are chased by the forces of stigma around HIV/AIDS onto the streets of Cape Town. When Thina is thrown out of her

house by her mother for similar reasons, the three children take up temporary refuge in the school shed. After Thina is raped, her assailants steal her satchel with her school supplies. Housing, education, crime/security, and health mark four of the biggest governmental and humanitarian crises facing a post-apartheid government. The novel engages all of them, making clear that HOKISA would not be an adequate solution and the happy beginning/ending of two teenagers in love in the sea struggles to contain, let alone redeem, the historical and ongoing violence of the national polity. In the face of this structural and interpersonal violence, what work can testimonials and other forms of cultural representation do?

The Play within the Novel, or The Anxiety of Representation

The students at Forest Hills, the high school in Guguletu that our young protagonists attend, collaborate with students from a nameless school in Newlands, a wealthy, white suburb of Cape Town, to make a play.

“Thina, Lindi has told us that you were lucky to get away with a bad fright after that brutal attack . . .” I said nothing, waiting to hear what she wanted. “Still, we had a meeting of our SRC [Students Representative Council] together with a few pupils from Newlands, the day after the attack on you. Henk had the idea that we should write a play about violence and perform it in the community, as street theatre. Every one of us has had some experience of violence, but yours is the most immediate example. Also, it was youths of your own age that robbed you . . .” She looked at Henk and nodded encouragingly. “You see, Thina,” he started hesitantly, “we wanted to ask you to tell us exactly what happened. That story will form the plot of our new play. Then everyone knows that it is not just a story, not just something someone dreamt up, but that it really happened. It will be a documentary! What do you think?”

My hand flew to my mouth in absolute horror . . .⁵³

Readers are in a set of difficult paradoxes here. The play is at least initially perceived by Thina as a kind of revictimization—“My hand flew to my mouth in absolute horror.” How can the novel’s restaging of her trauma not fall into the same trap? What double bluff may lie in the claim that the factual is superior to the fictional in the making of a play within a novel? One could argue that the play might be preferable to the novel in terms of the rhetorics of truth and reconciliation in the fantasy of the rainbow nation.⁵⁴ The play would be collectively produced by the students across the great racial

and class divides of contemporaneous South African life. Instead, the novel is imagined as individual testimony in the form of a story told by Thina to Thabang, but the play, initially called *Shakespeare's Condom* before acquiring the eponymous "German" title of *Stronger Than the Storm—Township Blues*—appears not to be taken seriously by the novel and comes across in the description below as an almost parodic trivializing of Thina's trauma. "Lindi volunteered: 'Provocation all the way! We want to call the play *Shakespeare's Condom* and make it a kind of mixture of the Hollywood Blockbuster *Shakespeare in Love* and *Romeo and Juliet*. The two darlings not only abseil from the balcony after their romantic scene with a rope of condoms knotted together, they also turn literally inside out by conquering all the plagues of this world, from lunatic parents to AIDS, through the scrupulous use of condoms."⁵⁵

How is the authorship of the novel—Van Dijk, Chubb, the global humanitarian NGO ensemble—imagined as preferable to the exuberance of the play? Who can own Thina's story? And who benefits from its telling and retelling? While the TRC imagined truth-telling as politically and personally transformative, the novel stages the audience for its telling as Thabang, the immediate family, and an undefinable and potentially remote collection of readers literate in English and German. The play, at least, would be partially by and for the community most affected, but its youthful exuberance appears almost as the object of satire.

Transitional Justice and Customary Law

There is no national TRC for the crime committed against Thinasonke. The novel is consistent in its portrayal of the state in both its apartheid and post-apartheid forms as entirely untrustworthy. The young denizens of Guguletu do not feel themselves as citizens of a democratic polis—the police, the hospitals offer no redress but only more danger. There is no mention of a town council or any other governing body, or even a political party. Justice is imagined as a community matter with recourse to an imaginary that is called traditional, despite the confession from Zweli that it was the advice from a sangoma that sex with a virgin would cure his HIV.

Interestingly it is Mangaliso, the tortured and longtime silenced "comrade" in the anti-apartheid struggle, who articulates and implements this form of justice outside the purview of state power.

Mangaliso noticed my confused expression: “Vuyo and Zweli are not possessed by evil spirits, Thina. Our tradition of *ubuntu* has helped me to look deep into their hearts. Do you want to know what I saw?”

I nodded though I did not really understand what he was saying.

“We can only become human if we look for humanity in others for as long as it takes to find it. *Umutu ngumntu ngabantu*. I am what I am through you. Nkulu, Vuyo and Zweli have done terrible things. Their evil power became so great that it also turned Thabang blind with hatred.”

The scene of justice is not a police station, nor a courtroom, nor a house of parliament, but a gang member’s cave in the “bush” outside of Guguletu. “No, you should not forget anything. But you can become stronger, wiser, more humane—Thina, I know you can do that!” Mangaliso answered. “Our ancestors learned a great deal by observing the animals around them—more than we can today. They had a wise saying. *“Indlovu ayisindwa ngumboko wayo”*—No elephant finds its own trunk too heavy to carry. We should learn to be strong enough to cope with our own problems. To do it with dignity and honesty, not to perpetuate our problems by burdening others with them and so creating more and more unhappiness.”⁵⁶

However, the darker side of customs and practices deemed traditional lurks on the edges of the action and sometimes must be explicitly disavowed, and the customary emerges as a resource that can be adapted to specific circumstances by a range of actors who have authority distributed among them rather than centralized.⁵⁷ That much of this customary “law” may be patriarchal makes a novel invested in the empowerment of an HIV-positive young woman somewhat anxious.

Thina has many fears after she is raped, first that she may be pregnant. Then—“The pride of my whole clan would be affected, much less lobola for a ruined girl like me.”⁵⁸ The fear of being HIV positive comes later.

Lobola is a complicated custom, with a contested history and present. Usually the term is glossed as “bride-price,” historically paid in cattle, but also in cash, and part of a complicated property regime in wider social networks of lineage alliance and consolidation, and reciprocal relations of social support. Thina’s fear that she is now a ruined girl suggests that the practice places a premium on virginity, which is not always the case. Sometimes fertility must be proven before lobola payments are included. The novel’s representation of Guguletu as a peri-urban space—a “township”—renders relationships with rural areas somewhat vestigial and “cultural,” if not invisible. Thabang’s

father is in Johannesburg. We are not told where the various uncles who come for the indaba that decides on the fate of Zweli and Thina live, and the history of Guguletu through the grandmother's oral history is presented in terms of apartheid-era forced relocations. The rapid post-apartheid growth of places like Guguletu with huge influxes of people from both rural parts of South Africa and elsewhere in the continent is not mentioned.

In 2000, the year of the novel's publication, seven xenophobic killings were reported in the Cape Flats district of Cape Town. Kenyan Kingori Siguri Joseph died in Tambo Close, Khanya Park in Guguletu after being attacked and shot.⁵⁹ In separate incidents, two Nigerians were also shot dead in NY 99 in Guguletu, and Thina tells readers in the novel—"And NY 99 is the next road down from ours."⁶⁰ The "real" Guguletu is as cosmopolitan as "tribal."

The detribalization hypothesis is a feature of both white liberal and racist anxieties about African urbanization over the twentieth century in South Africa, namely that urbanization itself undermines indigenous African cultures and values and destroys both social cohesion and the possibilities for social reproduction. The novel, in contrast, attempts to imagine the redeploing of African "traditional values" as resources in the ongoing crisis of everyday life in a place like Guguletu, which is represented as monolithically ethnically Xhosa, and the novel is careful to eschew the parts of this imagined tradition that are not so easily accommodated to its liberal, moral vision.

As Thina notes:

It was my good fortune—and Zweli's—that the traditional solution after a rape, namely a forced marriage, was not an option. However, Zweli was sentenced to circumcision school immediately, with all the accompanying instructions into the duties of an adult man. That was his only chance to be re-admitted to his clan. The younger Vuyo was already heavily punished through the loss of his brother. All were agreed on that, especially as he promised absolutely never to take part in any attacks or any other gang-related crimes ever again. Not that the demands for material compensation were dropped, not at all. In the beginning of the talks the demands were much higher than the traditional lobola. The reason for this was that health problems were anticipated for me in the future, and would need expensive treatment. The word AIDS was not mentioned, not even once.⁶¹

This question of material compensation is one of the things that distinguishes the indaba, a customary institution that traverses the precolonial, apartheid, and post-apartheid eras, from an institution of transitional justice

like the TRC, which notoriously did not broach the issue of reparations but instead focused on amnesty. The successful antiretroviral rollout begun by the South African government in 2003–4 could not have been anticipated in 2000. Treatment need not be expensive, and the insistence that “the word AIDS was not mentioned, not even once,” suggests that this customary forum is no different than the surrounding civil society in finding AIDS unspeakable.

Neither Thina nor the readers are told why the “traditional forced marriage” was not a solution, though the ending of the novel strongly implies that the grandmother’s protection of Thina and Thabang’s love for each other may have something to do with warding off that disastrous fate. From the vantage point of 2024, the novel’s faith in the ability of customary practices to provide justice looks optimistic. The failed Traditional Courts Bill of 2012 attempted to consolidate the power of often despotically appointed chiefs and remove constitutional protections from 17 million rural South Africans, and CONTRALESA (Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa) has often made statements against gender equality and opposed LGBTQ rights.⁶²

Readers learn in the play within the novel of two gay characters. “Sizwe said that his oldest brother and his best friend were also infected. And, as though making sure that we would really understand, he added: ‘They love each other, two men, okay?’” It is the play that invokes the racial reconciliation spirit of the TRC, that gay issues can be broached there rather than in the sphere of the customary. The recent fracas about the 2017 feature film *Inxeba/The Wound* reveals how contested questions of gay sexuality are in the realm of the customary.⁶³ In the above quote, Thina says that Zweli is “sentenced” to circumcision school; the word choice of “sentenced” is an odd one here, as some of the attempts to locate an indigenous African “homosexuality” have focused on these homosocial institutions and practices. Recent years have seen efforts made to inhabit customs like lobola queerly.

Stronger Than the Storm manages to integrate HIV/AIDs within the wider tapestry of South African history as it unfolds in the moment of writing and finds resources for the enacting of reconciliation in the imaginary of the customary. It can be periodized as a post-TRC novel, with its faith in the healing power of the confessional and a novel that anticipates recent public debates on the role of the customary in imagining forms of justice and sovereignty, and in its depiction of Guguletu as both a place determined by its specific histories and as potentially a kind of more generalizable space it

suggests both the limits and the possibilities of a cosmopolitan, humanitarian, and pedagogical interest in the South African HIV/AIDS pandemic.

While I think the novel's self-staging in the prefatory and paratextual material discussed earlier makes it part and parcel of the neoliberal ensemble of "best practices," a central tension emerges between the conditions of its production and imagined reception and key parts of its narrative content. The resolution of Thina's predicament does not involve any NGO or recourse to external benevolence. The novel does not end with her happy and thriving in a house built by HOKISA. Instead, the novel suggests revived community and customary solutions, with undertones of what we might recognize today as abolitionist philosophies and practices. Mangaliso deploys his version of Ubuntu to perform a "non-punitive relation to harm." The novel consistently displays a deep distrust of the institutions of criminal justice across both apartheid and post-apartheid eras. No victim of crime in the novel ever wants the police involved, and this distrust extends to potentially more helpful institutions like hospitals. While these attitudes of the central characters toward key institutions of both biopolitics and necropolitics—let's shorthand them as governance—could be folded back into romantic notions of community and the paradoxical impossibilities of self-determination in a globalized world, they would struggle to be transformed into "best practices" frames and rhetorics. Whether or not these community practices could be scaled up remains an open question, and the state (democratic or otherwise) seems too important an institution to abandon altogether, especially given the subsequent success of the South African government's massive ARV rollout.

The two novels discussed in this chapter offer very different configurations of the person living with HIV, albeit both figurations rely on versions of victimage and our two protagonists both suffer with feelings of self-incrimination. The two characters are, however, differentially socially embedded. In *Stronger Than the Storm*, Thina is very explicitly presented as a subject of South African history, whereas in the case of Catherine Njeri, the question can arise: How Kenyan is she? The determining social cleavages that drive the narrative in *Confessions of an AIDS Victim* are those of gender and class. These two cleavages are present in the imagining of what produces the impetus of the plot in *Stronger Than the Storm*, but they are complicated by matters of race, language, and ethnicity.

Although *Confessions of an AIDS Victim* stages Catherine as at least partially a guilty victim and more of a self-responsibilizing neoliberal rather than historical subject, it is also plausible to claim that in the Kenya of the

early 1990s, an ABC prevention strategy even with its failures represents something like a “best practice.” ABC partially produces Catherine Njeri’s precarious condition and creates the dearth of possible representations that might have allowed an astute observer like Macharia to give meaning and value to the deaths he witnesses. Life-saving antiretroviral drug therapies were still in their infancy in Europe and North America and their patents so heavily protected that they would have been beyond the reach of any African healthcare system. Treatment options were palliative at best. ABC was something like a collective effort to marshal the moral resources at hand to fight HIV/AIDS, which both helped and hurt. *Stronger Than the Storm* explores other options, not without problems. That novel needs an innocent victim rather than a guilty one to reconfigure an idea of African culture as a consolation for rather than a cause of the pandemic, rendering more explicit social determinants of illness and health and moving its HIV-positive protagonist back into the circuits of a socially reproductive intimacy.