

Documentary Fictions

AUTHORS AND DOCUMENTS OF SEX AND DEATH

Fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners.

VIRGINIA WOOLF

The disciplinary interest in literary criticism is in the singular and the unverifiable.

GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK

THIS CHAPTER PONDERES HIV as an author who creates and curates a dystopian record of sexuality and identity in a time of pandemic. It argues that Kgebetli Moele's *The Book of the Dead* (2009) supplements *documentary citizenship* in South Africa through an aggressive recording of reductive details about Black South African lives in contradistinction to the failed efforts of the South African state in identity documents like the passbook and the "book of life." HIV, with its/his "book of the dead," emerges as a murderous substitute for the sovereign state in a vicious fantasy about the necessity and dangers of counting and discounting Black life in a long crisis of social reproduction, rendered particularly acute during the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

PERSONIFICATION AND AUTHORSHIP

The Book of the Dead (2009) provides the single-most elaborated fictional attempt to personify the HI virus, and as an *author* at that.¹ Moele's novel thus confounds the defining trope of "silencing" in many South African representations of HIV/AIDS, literary and otherwise. HIV in the novel is nothing if not voluble.² The novel is divided into two sections: "The Book of the Living" and then the eponymous "The Book of the Dead." The narrator of "The Book of the Living" is an omniscient third-person narrator with a

tendency to free indirect speech. HIV is presented as the author of the second half of the book, but what kind of author is it, and what kind of book do we have in “The Book of the Dead?”³ This chapter reads Moele’s novel as an attempt to understand the historical agency of HIV/AIDS in post-apartheid Black South African biographies by making HIV an author, and further considers the oblique references to other possible books, authors, and genres for the recording of these biographies. HIV, in its half of the novel, is somewhere between a diarist, an omniscient narrator, and state information functionary, with tonal echoes of the bureaucratic language of Ingrid de Kok’s poem “The Head of the Household,” discussed in chapter 4. HIV thus paradoxically appears in the novel as both outside historical time and very much inside it.

In a 2013 interview, Moele describes his desire to have HIV speak for itself, “to speak with its own mouth” in the face of the failure of what he calls “the public service announcement.” Moele here implies that perhaps if people could hear directly from HIV, the warnings could be more effective, but the voice of HIV also powerfully and schematically undermines all the public health initiatives in the novel: “The public service announcement [PSA] preaches caution against HIV, yet we have never seen HIV—we only have people warning us about the disease. But since 1991, the infected rate has kept going up. What was the problem with their warnings? That is what I wanted to do, to let HIV speak with its own mouth, in response to what we perceive.”⁴

While the interview quote suggests that directly hearing the voice of HIV may help in preventing infection, HIV is presented as invincible in the novel, and as an authoritative recorder of Black life and death in South Africa. This personification of HIV refuses the pedagogical impulses of public health announcements, by granting HIV both narrative omniscience and omnipotence. HIV kills everyone in the novel, no matter what preventive or treatment strategies they try to stay alive, with the singular exception of the child, Thapelo. We have encountered attempts to embody and personify HIV in chapter 1, where I argued that Michael Callen as Miss HIV in John Greyson’s *Zero Patience* served as a campy subcultural teacher about safer sex, and through the invocation of Scheherazade insisted on the value of storytelling in the face of death. In Moele’s novel, HIV emerges instead as a powerful historical and historiographic force, with Khutso, the main character across both parts of the novel, as HIV’s chief assassin. However, in Moele’s novel, it is the prompting and recording of death, rather than its prevention or the mourning thereof in *Zero Patience*, that characterizes this fictional personification of HIV.

An interlude—chapter 12 of “The Book of the Living”—offers the most elaborate personification of the HI virus in the first person:

I live amongst you, waiting like a predator. I am faceless. I am mindless and thoughtless. But I am feared and despised. You hate me. But then I put on a face—wear a human face—and I am respected, appreciated and valued. I am I. . . . I am alive, but I have no dreams or visions. I have only a purpose. Sometimes I am very poor and sometimes I am very wealthy, but most of the time I am just I. That face, that man, that woman is me. . . . I like the game you are all playing, talking about me as if you can identify me—thinking that I am a virus when I am out walking in the street. You think that the bony remains that are breathing their last look like me, but they are bones that I have long deserted. . . . I am coming for you.⁵

HIV struggles to characterize itself (though I feel a strong urge to gender HIV as male) in the above passage, falling back into the tautology of “I am I” twice, with the qualifier—“I am just I” the second time. The virus further resists self-identification even as a virus, or as being seen as a virus by others. Sometimes a virus has a human face, but that face is something that looks like it can be put on or discarded at will. Mindless and thoughtless, HIV can nevertheless write. Alive without dreams or visions, and then defined only by purpose, HIV here stands both outside and inside the novel’s version of the human as it also crosses all classes—sometimes very poor, sometimes very wealthy. Notably, even as the virus claims the pronoun “I,” it cannot be identified. In this way, HIV satirizes the colorful fantasy of the rainbow nation, insofar as he/it appears both color-blind and transcendent of race.

The virus significantly refuses the image of its emaciated and dying victims and refuses to be reduced to the appearance of “the bony remains that are breathing their last.” Here we see a rejection of dominant national and international media spectacles of the African dying of AIDS: the hollow-eyed, emaciated figure plastered across newspapers to prompt both horror and sympathy.⁶ These images partake in the long history of missionary and then humanitarian depictions of African suffering. HIV in *The Book of the Dead* is clear that it has long deserted those bony remains, and cannot be reduced to them, and suggests the futility of those spectacular images of embodied suffering for the making sense of HIV/AIDS and the uselessness of the self-consolidating sympathy from observers that such images may hope to prompt. HIV understands itself as both lethal and banal: “I have been talked about so much that people say my name like it belongs in a nursery rhyme. They have seen so many pictures of dying people that they eat their

evening meal in front of the TV, undisturbed by the reports on the news. They have seen me take down gladiators—eat them up, put them in bed and leave them wearing nappies—and yet they are still not afraid. I have become . . . usual.”⁷ The casual repetition of the three letters H, I, and V as a nursery rhyme has meant that HIV thinks that HIV has become child’s play. The South African published title of Jonny Steinberg’s *Sizwe’s Test* is *Three Letter Plague*.⁸ The enormous complexity of the pandemic is reduced to three letters—H, I, and V. The resonances with the child-learning-to-read shorthand of “ABC” (Abstain, Be Faithful, Use a Condom) discussed in the previous chapters are obvious.

HIV, even as the cause of those emaciated bodies, repudiates any identification with them. In this way, he is like the horrified and then indifferent television viewers who may or may not look up from their dinners, oscillating between thoughts of “Thankfully I am not that” and “How could I help?” The narrative structure of the book further voices difficult identification between HIV and the readers of the novel. Is “The Book of the Dead” something like HIV’s diary or, more chillingly, to-do list. Who is a diary for if not minimally its author? As readers of the novel, what does that make us? The novel requires us to see through the eyes of HIV and imagine his recording voice, thus encouraging reader’s identification with and repudiation of what it has us see in a vacillating manner not dissimilar to the horror/indifference flip-switch of Levin’s imagined television news report audience, discussed in chapter 2. This affective response may be related to “compassion fatigue,” first theorized in relation to healthcare workers, but compassion fatigue is very far from the personification of HIV’s responses to its victims, which approach joyous glee and pride.⁹ Though one notices an odd moment of mourning of Khutso by HIV at the very end of the novel: “[I] get up and walk away before the tears come.” So fleetingly and finally, HIV imagines Khutso’s life as perhaps grievable.¹⁰

HIV emerges over the course of the narrative as a figure of powerful, vital, protean threat, inhumanly human and something to fear rather than pity: “Many think that I am only for the poor, but I am walking with two legs amongst you. Smiling back at you. Laughing at your jokes.”¹¹ The virus is out walking the streets, quotidian and unrecognizable, rather than simply a specter or spectacle: he is alive and able to assume many different faces. HIV appears most strongly as ghost or spirit in the sense of being a disembodied animating force, but of death rather than life. While the novel mocks indigenous cosmologies and cures, its figuration of HIV is strongly an animist

one. This may appear a strange claim, yet HIV's weird transcendent nature, its/his ability to be both embodied and disembodied, renders HIV as kin to a malignant disgruntled ancestral spirit, but one who unlike "normal" ancestors cannot be placated.¹²

It is worth anticipating Khutso's lie to the bookseller about his intentions for "The Book of the Dead"—the hinge moment between the two parts of the novel—"I am going to record my paternal family history: the male lineage from 1840 to the present day."¹³ HIV emerges as the vicious antagonist to a writing project that ironically promises social reproduction and continuity, i.e., recording "my paternal family history, the male lineage from 1840 to the present day," a writing project that could never be because the South African state lacked the recording capacity of HIV in the novel we have during much of that time period.

What is at stake in this granting of a human voice to an agent that is barely animate in biomedical discourse? Are viruses alive is a question that has preoccupied biologists and historians and philosophers of science.¹⁴ The novel provides a resounding yes to that question, but reposes it for ghosts, ancestors, and perhaps even writing itself. What, if anything, can be learned from this projection or phantasmatic explicit threat made by a writing virus "I am coming for you"? That second-person pronoun marks one of the few moments of explicit address to the readers of the novel, and both singularizes and universalizes the threat.¹⁵ That double move refuses both the biopolitical (Foucault) and the immunitarian (Esposito) conceptions of self, body, and the social as HIV appears as something transcendent like God or the Fates, or vengeful ancestral spirits, but more on these theoretical elaborations soon.

It is Thapelo, Khutso's son, who most powerfully resists the sustained but inevitably incoherent attempts to personify HIV in the novel: "I am terrified of Aids. I hate Aids, Dad, I hate it," the little gangster continued. "If Aids were a person, I would kill him or her with my bare hands, but there is no Aids, there are only people, and that is the worst thing about Aids."¹⁶ As the moniker "little gangster" makes clear, HIV has an almost affectionate contempt for Khutso's son, whom it regards as a possible effective recruit in the war on people that HIV is waging. I am stumped by HIV's recording of the sentences "If Aids were a person" and "there is no Aids." Does HIV note this only to show how wrong and foolish Thapelo is? The echoes of contemporaneous state-sanctioned AIDS denialism are pronounced, but Thapelo's follow-up phrase, "there are only people," may suggest some nascent political optimism in the sense that he implies that people are responsible

for HIV and, if that is the case, people can also change it, fight it, kill it, end it. While Khutso's name is the first and last name in the book of the dead, Thapelo's name is recorded, but his death is deferred to some future date and future book. The fantasized and impossible recording of past male lineage that is falsely asserted as the rationale for the buying of the material object of the book of the dead may continue after that book's final chapter: "For the last time I touch the great book, thinking of all the triumphs we have shared, then I put it down and get up and walk away before the tears come. Somewhere out there I have conquered another author of no mean talent and we are starting another book together for the cause" (165).

Will Thapelo live on and escape having his name recorded in the book of the dead? And how might he live on as something other than HIV's soldier in the cause of death, as his father was?

Thapelo is imagined as possibly continuing HIV's work of death, when he is older: "When the time came for the little gangster to go back to school it was a sad goodbye, and Khutso cried. I was also sad. I liked the little boy. I liked him because I knew that one day he would make a formidable soldier in my legion" (164). For this moment in the novel, no one has immunity from AIDS, besides HIV itself. Paul Preciado's summary of the movement between Foucault and Esposito written in a time of COVID allows for a broaching of the political thinking of HIV here, which I hope to contrast with both prevailing biomedical conceptions and the novel's personifying figuration. Here is Preciado:

During and after the AIDS crisis, many writers expanded on and radicalized Foucault's hypotheses by exploring the relationship of immunity and biopolitics. The Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito analyzed the links between the political notion of *community* and the biomedical and epidemiological notion of *immunity*. The two terms share a common root, the Latin *munus*, the duty (tax, tribute, gift) someone must pay to be part of the community. The community is *cum* (with) *munus*: a human group connected by common law and reciprocal obligation. The noun *immunitas* is a privative word that stems from the negation of *munus*. In Roman law, immunity was a privilege that released someone from the obligations shared by all. He who had been exempted was immunized. He who had been *de-munized*, conversely, had been stripped of all community privileges after having been deemed a threat to the community.¹⁷

No one has immunity in the world of the novel and the *munus* appears to be paid only to HIV, who stands like the sovereign outside of community, or

tranhistorical spirit, or a haunting of what could never have been written. If the novel is clear that no one has immunity, what happens to ideas of community? Relatedly, HIV stages itself as the custodian of the historical record and the book of the dead imagines itself as something like the official history that Black South Africans were written out of by the documentary practices of, first, colonialism and then the apartheid state. If the state through indifference, cheapness, or internal bureaucratic conflict between its policing and public health components has failed in its biopolitical function of assembling the necessary information for communal life, HIV stands in as an entirely necropolitical substitute.¹⁸ While as the Preciado quote illustrates, taxation is clearly constitutive of community, *The Book of the Dead* further powerfully suggests that so are the documentary, civic registration, and other identificatory practices of the state. If HIV only desires to offer a record of how sex leads to Black death, it becomes imperative to ask who else has wanted to record Black (sex) lives and death and why in the forty or so years that constitute the time span of the novel, beyond the public health initiatives of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

“HOME AFFAIRS” AND OTHER BOOKS

Turning to the public recording functions of HIV in the novel, the extraordinary work of South African historian Keith Breckenridge is crucial. Breckenridge tracks the conflicts within the long history of the South African state to identify and periodically document Black South African lives through documents like the notorious *dompas* or passbook, architect of apartheid Hendrik Verwoerd’s *bewysboeke*, the failed “book of life,” and attempts at the national consolidation of a variety of fingerprinting registries from scattered efforts by state and private initiatives such as those by local authorities, mining companies, law enforcement, and the like. The most ambitious such attempt occurred in the 1950s after the passing of the Population Registration Bill and the census of 1951. Here is how Eben Dönges, then minister of the interior, introduced the Second Reading of the Population Registration Bill, on March 8, 1950:

A population register is actually a book containing the life-story of every individual whose name is recorded on that register. It contains the most important acts relating to such a person. In some cases, the life-story of the

individual is very short. In the case of a stillborn baby, it contains only one entry and one page. In other cases, a long life-history has to be recorded in that book. All those important facts regarding the life of every individual will be combined in this book and recorded under the name of a specific person, who can never change his identity. It is only when the last page in that book of life is written by an entry recording the death of such a person, that the book is closed and taken out of the gallery of the living and placed in the gallery of the dead.¹⁹

I can find no extratextual evidence that Moele publicly discussed the Population Registration Bill or the Dönges introduction to it, but the echoes between the aspirations of the bill and HIV's recording practices in the novel are loud.

For much of the twentieth century many Black South Africans had only one bureaucratic form of identification—the notorious *dompas* or passbook that allowed them to work in white urban areas. The extension of the *dompas* to women saw massive resistance, culminating in the women's march in Pretoria in 1956.²⁰ As Mamdani, Phillips, and others have shown, state indifference to colonized populations has a long history, most readily apparent in the ideas and institutions of customary law.²¹ One historiographic line of argument about customary law runs as follows: “The emerging colonial apparatus in British sub-Saharan Africa had neither the will nor the capacity under policies of what came to be called Indirect Rule to implement its norms all the way through the social body of the societies it was colonizing. Interested largely in the extraction of surplus value from these societies first in terms of agricultural and then mine labor, many matters of civil law were to be left to the customary law of these societies, if the customary law was too difficult to ascertain—it could be invented and often arbitrarily imposed.”²² Breckenridge offers an important counter to that now standard historiography of customary law—the hegemony on a shoestring hypothesis—and its corollary—“the theory of decentralized despotism”—by noting the conflicts within the state in South Africa across colonial, apartheid, and post-apartheid eras between proponents of biometric and documentary recording, i.e., between those who thought that universal fingerprinting was sufficient for the state's purposes and those who favored more comprehensive documentation in the forms of civil registration of, minimally—birth, death, marriage, children, domicile, employment, or some combination thereof, the events imagined as constitutive of “a life.” “The Book of Life” that Dönges describes never really got off the ground; even though whites were already

amply registered by 1950, Black South Africans were excluded from the “The Book of Life” initiative.²³

The emergence of super-exploitative systems of migrant labor, of which the *dompas* becomes the documentary marker, signals the apartheid-era continuation of colonial-era imaginaries of customary law and practices of sovereignty. Because documentary citizenship required too much state investment and Black life was often, but not always, seen as not sufficiently valuable to record and count beyond influx control, or fingerprinting for the sake of policing, Breckenridge notes:

From the first plans for the introduction of fingerprinting that were drawn up by Galton, biometric administration was motivated by a desire to identify the illiterate subjects of Britain’s imperial possessions. Remarkably this project—of fixing the names of illiterate African subjects in particular—remained the driving justification through the whole of the twentieth century and it is still the *raison d’être* of the current round of large-scale biometric systems, both in the former colonies and at the gates of imperial capitals.²⁴

Why and how must a state record? In the above excerpt, we see that biometric administration provides a cheaper form of state identificatory surveillance for racialized others. Earlier Breckenridge argues for a tension between biometric administration and more fulsome documentary citizenship within the recording apparatus of the state, with technological advances paradoxically producing a weaker and more hollowed-out state:

Agar, following the administrative and information-handling capacity of the British state in detail over the twentieth century, has shown that the contradictory imperatives to manage almost universal welfare benefits and reduce costs through the deployment of large-scale computer systems after the 1970s has produced a much weakened and hollowed-out state, one in which officials have only the vaguest idea how the work of information processing is actually done.²⁵

To understand this book of the dead and its author as murderous substitutes for the recording state, it may be useful to compare it with the other books and authors presented in the novel, as well as the haunting shadows of the *dompas*, “the book of life,” and the fingerprinting registries. There are glancing but significant references to other books and writing practices within the novel which suggest that, as much as some of them confirm HIV’s historical narrative and documentary modes, alternative historical narrative and writing genres lurk at the edges of *The Book of The Dead*.

Khutso's name, written out of official, state-authored texts because he is Black, is mentioned in relation to another quasi-official book, a book of all the troublemakers in high school: "He remembered that in his high school days all the troublemakers had been blacklisted in a book like the one he had before him. Ngwan'Zo's name had been written in the book in the first months of their third year of high school and Mato's a few months after that. Khutso wondered how his life would have turned out if his name too had been written in the book."²⁶

Both friends subsequently leave school, partially as a result of this blacklist. Here, to be recorded, like in the subsequent book of the dead, is to face bad consequences, and Khutso explicitly compares the troublemaker list book and the recently purchased "book of the dead"—"in a book like the one he had before him" (83). To have one's name in a book is not a mark of affirmative recognition, but rather to be singled out for discipline or punishment, or in the case of "The Book of the Dead," death. Khutso's education and attendant upward mobility appears dependent on avoiding being noted. The teacher or principal who wrote Ngwan'Zo's name eerily prefigures HIV as the author/recorder of names in the novel's literal "Book of the Dead." Education as a route to dignity and prosperity in the post-apartheid world of the novel is treated with skepticism throughout, and certainly offers no protection against AIDS. In addition, the prosperity of Khutso is presented as a factor that enables rather than constrains HIV. We are in the ambivalence of the public record in this blacklist book. To be noted and counted is to be subject to surveillance and punishment. It is good that Khutso's name does not appear in this kind of schoolbook. The evasion of the record looks something like freedom.

At the same time, to be invisible and not counted is to be discounted, de-individualized, and rendered a member of a disposable or surplus population who cannot access any of the rights, protections, and benefits of citizenship. Such rights, benefits, and protections depend on recognition from the state and such recognition usually requires official documentation. This kind of enabling documentation appears in the novel in the form of Khutso's matriculation certificate: "Then his mother danced a ritual dance, thanking all her ancestors because she had never believed that she would ever hold a matric certificate in her hands" (27). She dances because she believes that state recognition in the form of the matric certificate is Khutso's ticket to a better life. At first glance, this may appear to be the old shibboleth of the tradition/modernity dyad, but let us note that there is no conflict for Khutso's mother. For her, it is entirely obvious that ancestors and matric certificates are of the

same spatiotemporal order. The novel here confounds African historiography, which Mbembe argues “invented a narrative of liberation built around the dual temporality of a glorious—albeit fallen—past (tradition) and a redeemed future (nationalism).”²⁷ The matric certificate—ironic marker of a redeemed (national) future—and the ritual dance for the ancestors do not require a dual temporality here. How the novel engages the customary in the realm of “traditional medicine” in response to HIV will be considered later.

In the same interview mentioned earlier, Moele offers remarks on the place of sex in the writing of life that state documentary practices wish to record and ignore: “Sex is the central force, the gravity. Every face that you see in the world is the result of sex, the other things are just secondary issues.’ Indeed, every contour that makes up the individual physiognomy that distinguishes one ID card from another betrays a family history and an underlying sequence of events, reaching right back to a birth that may have been triggered by love, lust or plain strategic decision-making.”²⁸ The yoking of sex to procreation here works against the links between sex and death central to HIV’s “book of the dead,” but speak to the book of the dead that Khutso promises the bookseller he will write. The “plain strategic decision making” anticipates the transactional sex model for the transmission of HIV. Moele claims that it is sex that produces the singularity of each person’s physiognomy recorded by an ID card. That the apartheid state panicked about sex, particularly, but not only on racial lines is hardly news. Along with the aforementioned Population Registration Bill and the Group Areas Act, keystones of the apartheid legal regime were centrally concerned with prohibiting sex across the color line, most notoriously the Immorality Amendment Act and the Mixed Marriages Act also both passed into law in 1950. While much has been made over the surveillance aspects of the apartheid state and the intrusiveness of such legislation and their largely selective enforcement, the state was concerned about Black intimate practices mostly in an instrumental way, particularly to ensure the absorption of reproductive costs by the Native reserves/homelands/Bantustans.²⁹ Here Moele suggests the supplementary documentary role his narrator, HIV, may play in the “hollowed” out information gathering and processing roles and responsibilities of the state. HIV, like the apartheid state before it, desires to keep records of people’s sex lives, not just to criminalize them, but to kill them.

However, HIV is not the only keeper of a journal in the novel. Pretty, Khutso’s wife, keeps a diary. Unlike what becomes the book of the dead, readers of the novel are not given any details about Pretty’s diary’s provenance

or its final trajectory, but it is possible to read the diary as a shadow book or another possible record, with a feminine author in a distinctly personal genre, to the relentless masculinism of HIV as the author of the book of the dead, and the book of the dead that would be impossible to write except as fiction that Khutso tells the bookseller he wishes to write. Here is all that is told about Pretty's diary:

Three weeks after her death, Khutso packed Pretty's belongings into a box. In her handbag, he found her diary. Pretty had glued a picture of Thapelo and Khutso onto the cover with the caption Everything for my Family written below it. Inside on the New Year's Resolution page, she had written, I have to celebrate the birthdays of the people that I love and buy each of them a present.

Khutso read it page by page. The last entry was on Wednesday, 13 March 2002: I AM HIV POSITIVE.

The test certificate, confirming that she was HIV POSITIVE, had been glued to the same page.³⁰

There are no further entries. An HIV-positive diagnosis terminates Pretty's recording impulses, even as Khutso's diagnosis inaugurates HIV's record. Pretty's diary emerges only posthumously. And unlike HIV's book of the dead, which records dates of infection, CD4 counts, and deaths, in her diary Pretty records birthdays and resolutions, and the cover of the book is graced by what we must assume is the photograph of Pretty and her husband and son: Khutso and Thapelo. There is no gold embossing, just simple glue. In addition to the photograph glued to the cover, the certificate showing that she is HIV-positive is glued to the page of the date of her diagnosis, after which she writes nothing. The diary has the markings of a scrapbook or collage and is made by homely craft—the snapshots, the gluing, which can be contrasted with the gold embossed, professionally printed book of the dead to come. Unlike the possibility of Khutso's matric certificate, Pretty's HIV-positive certificate is seen as a death certificate of sorts, an official recognition of the end of her life as a person and as an author. "Everything for my Family" is the caption underneath the photograph of Khutso and Thapelo, and thus the photograph suggests family here is the bourgeois nuclear family, a respectable model of kinship that does not appear in the other representations of kinship in the novel. Given Pretty's fate, it is clear that her professed commitment to this intimate form fails to protect her or her immediate family. The sentimentality and respectability of the photograph and caption are powerless in the face of HIV and his legions.

Readers are never told what happens to Pretty's diary. Does Khutso throw it away? Does he keep it as a memento or evidence of what he perceives as her treachery? Might he pass it on to their young son, Thapelo, as a record of his mother's life? Or can we read it, as little of it that appears in the narrative, as a different kind of documentary archiving of life in South Africa in a time of HIV/AIDS?

Pretty's diary may resemble a newish genre in the context of representations of HIV/AIDS: memory books or boxes. Swedish crime writer Henning Mankel was instrumental in bringing this genre to a wider readership in his *I Die, but the Memory Lives On: The World AIDS Crisis and the Memory Book Project* (2005). Mankel writes: "HIV has changed the way we look at public and private memories," arguing that the memory book project builds on the memorializing work of the AIDS quilt.³¹ Beatrice Were, a leading Ugandan HIV/AIDS activist of the times, points to the range of support for and prevalence of this new genre and the optimistic investment in its possible impact: "Today the Memory project has been emulated by several key international and national development agencies including Plan International, Actionaid Uganda, Healthlink Worldwide, The AIDS Support Organisation (TASO), Groot's Kenya and many others. The project has carried its wings to many other countries in Africa including Tanzania, Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa. It has in fact reached to most countries in the world where HIV/Aids is a threat to family life."³² The memory book phenomenon can be contextualized within a South African affective public sphere that attempted to engage historical trauma that preceded, and in many ways, compounded the suffering caused by HIV/AIDS. In his *Never Too Small to Remember: Memory Work and Resilience in Times of AIDS*, Philippe Denis writes: "Ten years after the end of apartheid, the importance of memory work has never appeared more clearly in a country which still struggles with the effects of decades of discrimination and abuse. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, however significant it may have been, was only one step in a long journey of healing and reconciliation. The HIV/AIDS epidemic and the corollary evils of gender abuse, poverty and unemployment compound the problem. In South Africa, everybody is affected by the situation directly or indirectly. Everybody has to find ways of dealing with painful memories."³³

Notably, Pretty's diary, minimally described as it is, looks like the model memory book in the appendix of *I Die, but the Memory Lives On*, which has pages for the name of the mother, "Family Traditions and Special Events," "Thoughts on Life and Things I Believe In," and so on. Pretty's diary and

the memory book work within what Lauren Berlant has called the genre of the personal, and record everyday tasks and celebration, appointments and aspirations, honoring responsibilities, pleasures, and commitments obliterated by the premature deaths caused by HIV/AIDS.³⁴ It appears by the brevity of the mention of the diary and the affective flatness of his description of it that Khutso thinks very little of Pretty's diary and the wider genre of memory books that it invokes, and HIV, in his "book of the dead," does not think Pretty's dairy is worth mentioning at all. Thus, *The Book of the Dead* militantly refuses the humanitarian impulses and ensembles that enable pedagogical and public health and memorial projects that characterize the memory book phenomenon and the two young adult novels discussed in chapter 5.³⁵

So, we might need to read Pretty's diary as something more and other than a halfway memory book, even as the few details given about Pretty's diary eerily prefigure the obsession with dates and their recording in "The Book of the Dead." It is birthdays rather than dates of infection and death that Pretty wishes to record in her diary. "'Yes, I know, Khutso,' Pretty said. 'I am making an excuse to celebrate my son's life. You grew up without celebrating birthdays, I totally understand. You and your people like to celebrate people when they are dead. You like to talk well of them when they cannot hear a word, and spare no expense for their funeral, treating them like they are gods. Why not celebrate a living soul instead?'"³⁶

Even though Pretty is the first AIDS-related death in the novel, her commitments throughout are to the living, including to her own survival and thriving, which is how I will read her role in the novel's depiction of transactional sex as a behavioral model for transmission. The narrator of the book of the living tells readers: "Inside on the New Year's Resolution page, she had written, I have to celebrate the birthdays of the people that I love and buy each of them a present." Pretty's planned and recorded celebrations of life here are communal, as are the funerals of Khutso's people, as opposed to the solitary glee in HIV's book of the dead. But who reads these books? Moele in an interview asserts: "I am not surprised. South Africa has eleven official languages, all of them overpowered by a foreign language and a reading market that is . . . if it was an animal, it would be on the list of endangered species and, therefore, protected."³⁷

In addition to the high school book of shame and Pretty's diary, other books appear more obliquely in the novel in the form of sly allusions.³⁸ At some point Khutso must have read F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic American

novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Here is the entry for the only white woman who is written up in “The Book of the Dead”:

I was cruising in Khutso’s British supercar—prowling, top down, along Oxford Road on my way to Rosebank. A Gwyneth Paltrow lookalike was cruising next to me in her convertible and I was loving it. Suddenly a G-string hit me in the face and fell into my lap. I looked at Gwyneth and caught her naughty smile . . . She told Khutso that her name was Daisy Fay, but when he was signing her into the book of books, he remembered that Daisy Fay was a character in a novel he had read. Still, he signed her in anyway:

*15 August 2008: Daisy Fay
Done. Liberal white woman!*³⁹

This passage dramatizes the shifting possession of Khutso by HIV and the fleeting moments of autonomy or difference that the former may have from the latter. “I was cruising,” “a G-string hit me in the face” versus “She told Khutso” and “he remembered.” What is clear is that it is Khutso who is the reader of books, that he has memories beyond or before HIV, and that HIV’s possession of Khutso is not complete. Daisy Fay Buchanan is a lead character in Fitzgerald’s novel. What is Daisy Fay doing in “The Book of the Dead”? Arguably the most famous description of her in her home novel is as follows: “‘Her voice is full of money,’ he said suddenly. That was it. I’d never understood before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals’ song of it . . . high in a white palace the king’s daughter, the golden girl.”⁴⁰

Daisy Fay is how the woman identifies herself to Khutso. Daisy Fay may be who the woman wants to be in the encounter. There are strong crosscurrents of recognition in this entry in the “Book of the Dead.” First, it is strongly implied that the woman’s real name is not Daisy Fay, that the literary reference may initially be produced as part of her fantasy in the sexual encounter. She gets to play the part of a rich Jazz Age married American woman, though none of the privilege associated with such identity variables offer any protection from becoming HIV-positive, though assumedly she would have much better treatment options than some of the women Khutso and HIV infect. Gwyneth/Daisy Fay/liberal white woman is an object of erotic allure because of her heady combination of money, whiteness, and freedom. She clearly initiates the encounter.

While Khutso appears not to get the reference in the encounter itself and only remembers it when it comes time to write her “name” in the book of the dead, the thrill of infecting Daisy Fay reveals a retrospective participation

in a cognate fantasy: “Done: liberal white woman!” Book-reading and book-learning might be good for an extra erotic charge to the encounter but are seen to fail miserably in the prevention of HIV transmission. Khutso begins the encounter with a cinematically mediated fantasy, only partially and belatedly joining the literary fantasy of Daisy Fay. Why Gwyneth Paltrow? Paltrow represents a highly commodified celebrity culture that dabbles in self-help masquerading as soft humanitarianism: organic hummus and the notorious goop can save the planet and alleviate suffering, all while helping you to look beautiful.⁴¹ The Goop podcast’s self-description is nicely indicative: “On The Goop Podcast, GP and Erica Chidi Cohen chat with leading thinkers, culture changers, and industry disruptors—from doctors to creatives, CEOs to spiritual healers—about shifting old paradigms and starting new conversations. Tune in to hear from Oprah, Brene Brown, Bryan Stevenson, Joe Dispenza, . . . Erin Brockovich, and more.” All this talk of wellness, new conversations, and spiritual healing fail to protect Daisy Fay against the machinations of Khutso and HIV. HIV is a universal threat in the world of the novel. Even rich, white women have no guaranteed immunity.

The stretch of Oxford Road through the suburb/neighborhood of Rosebank in Johannesburg is a notorious area for heterosexual prostitution. Most commonly the johns are white, and the sex workers are Black.⁴² I am not sure what is at stake in the racial reversal here. Khutso and HIV appear uninterested in sex workers as possible candidates for the book of the dead. It is a representative of the wealthy white women—who drive rather than walk Oxford Road—who makes it into *The Book of the Dead*, albeit as a fictional character from an American classic. South African literary critic Lesibana Rafapa asserts that “*The Book of the Dead* (2009) paints on a larger canvas the regrettable co-option of Blacks into a self-defeating episteme of colour-blindness.”⁴³ How might this class color-blindness affect the figuration of HIV in the wider novel? Wealth appears as the price of entry into this ostensible color-blindness. The character/narrator, HIV, shows very little interest in poor people of any race in the novel. HIV through Khutso targets almost exclusively the emergent Black urban middle-class—the group of people known in popular parlance as the “Black diamonds” or what disgraced former president Jacob Zuma derisively called “the smart Blacks.”⁴⁴ Death by AIDS could be read in the novel as punishment for their racial betrayal in forgetting the historical injustices of settler-colonialism and apartheid, even as the sociological descriptions in the novel refuse to name apartheid explicitly. Rafapa continues initially in relation to the depiction of Pretty, Khutso’s wife:

The economic lowliness of a family affording only goat meat during a celebration, and the high-class Pretty's cultural solidarity with Khutso's people, satirically points to the democratic South Africa's creation of a new Black middle-class co-opted by the economically advantaged whites. Pretty's character speaks to Moele's discourse on a phenomenon whereby few upwardly mobile Blacks joining the whites whose affluence has been structurally and institutionally favoured through racial power from the days of apartheid, refuse to aid a post-apartheid colourblindness that, according to Milazzo ("Rhetorics" 12), seeks to de-politicise institutional racism by denying collective advantage in its appeal to a "shared humanity that precludes any critique of white privilege."⁴⁵

On the one hand, the sexual encounter between Khutso and Daisy Fay reveals the complicity of people like Khutso with the depredations of racial global capitalism by having him literally fuck an archetype of the American gilded age. On the other, the encounter with Khutso is arguably enabled by white privilege but the narrative implies that even white privilege is less powerful than HIV.

Prior to his possession by HIV, Khutso, as the literary reference to *The Great Gatsby* suggests, was a reader, and one with a redemptive and compensatory sense of reading. In the recounting of Khutso's educational biography, due to the difficulty of making new friends after the departures of his friends Maoto and Ngwan'Zo, we are informed: "It was then that he discovered that books were much friendlier than people."⁴⁶ Khutso has an overwhelming emotional reaction to the library at the University of the North. The University of the North, founded in 1959 and often held up as a successful example of separate but equal facilities for Black South Africans during apartheid, becomes the University of Limpopo in 2005. The introduction to the world of books that the library represents brings him to tears.

Inside the library he wanted to scream—his mouth wide open—totally amazed by even the few books that he could see. He covered his mouth with his hand. That wasn't what he thought the library would be. He thought he would read all the books in the shortest time. He had thought it would be the size of a classroom.

Still smiling, Khutso sat down onto the floor, shaking his head, defeated by his thoughts. "I am in a library," he said quietly to himself, his eyes filling with tears.⁴⁷

There are way more books than he can see, let alone read. It is one of the crowning ironies of the novel that Khutso's love of books is reduced to a

single book, the book of the dead, and that reading too will fail to save him from an AIDS-related death. Amazed by the abundance of printed materials in the university library, first Khutso wants to scream, then feels defeated by his thoughts and quietly cries, but these are reverential tears, produced by a sense of the enormity of the community of writers and readers the library invites him to join. The library represents a community that can contain the living and the dead, those who are present and those who are absent, but does not and cannot contain that “book of the dead” that Khutso tells the bookseller he wishes to write.⁴⁸

All these other books fade in the face of the book of the dead, which eventually manages to subsume them all. Roughly halfway through the novel, Khutso, our central protagonist, custom orders what literally becomes the book of the dead from a printer. This passage is worth quoting almost in its entirety.

Finally, he had what he wanted: a leather covered journal with five hundred unnumbered pages—each page divided into two columns—and two golden pages in the beginning and two at the end. The only words embossed on the front cover in twenty-three carat gold: *Book of the Dead*.

“This is the most unusual request I have ever had,” the sales manager told Khutso when he went to collect the book. “And to tell you the honest truth, it’s the first job this company has ever done for a Black man. Believe me because I have worked here for thirty years.”

The man went on to tell Khutso about all the special books the company had made, and all the special people they had made them for, but Khutso knew that he was avoiding the question he really wanted to ask. “In case you are wondering what I am going to do with this book,” Khutso finally said, making his way towards the door, “I am going to record my paternal family history; the male lineage from 1840 to the present day.”

“Book of the Dead,” the sales manager said, unable to pretend that he was anything but relieved. “And here I was thinking that you are a serial killer, and you wanted to record the names of your victims.”

“The Black man is always a suspect . . .” Khutso replied, watching as shame stole over the sales manager’s face.

Outside the printer’s offices, Khutso sat in his car with the book on his lap. It was as if he was introducing himself to the book, and the book was introducing itself to him.⁴⁹

The book, like HIV, is strangely personified, almost in animist fashion, as it appears “as if he was introducing himself to the book, and the book was introducing itself to him.” And then the remainder of the eponymous novel

is this “book of the dead,” which is not even written by Khutso himself but by an assumedly masculine personification of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus and catalogues the names and brief details of the relationships with all the women the two of them—the virus and Khutso—infect. It appears on closer examination that the names and dates of infection and death appear italicized in the book of the dead and the ontological status of what we readers have on the page is uncertain. The imagining of the virus’s relation to Khutso is complicated. The record of the book of the dead looks most like HIV’s diary about writing the book of the dead, though the entries evoke other significant genres—the census, the death certificate, the book of judgment, a list of sexual conquests.

The scene of purchase and the cross-cutting fantasies about what the blank pages of the book might become pull in multiple directions. First, the book is presented as a kind of racial originary document: “This is the most unusual request I have ever had,” the sales manager told Khutso when he went to collect the book. “And to tell you the honest truth, it’s the first job this company has ever done for a Black man. Believe me because I have worked here for thirty years.” There are many possible readings of this statement by the bookseller: This book will be the first of its kind written by a Black man; a Black man finally has the purchasing power to buy such a book; luxury businesses are a route to color-blindness?

It is a custom-made book: “A leather covered journal with five hundred unnumbered pages—each page divided into two columns—and two golden pages in the beginning and two at the end. The only words embossed on the front cover in twenty-three carat gold: *Book of the Dead*.” No Black man has ever requested such a book before, though one wonders how many white men have ordered a book with the title *Book of the Dead*. Of course, the real-life opposite or corollary to a book of the dead is “The Book of Life.” The Book of Life was the South African State’s long and contorted attempt to provide an identity document to all its white, colored, and Indian citizens. Keith Breckenridge writes: “Like the Swedish system and the Nazi *Volkskartei*, the population register was supposed to be a continuously updated register of domicile for all whites, Coloureds and Indians. This unrealisable surveillance ambition, and the proliferation of linked registration functions, was the Book of Life’s undoing. Over time the Book of Life project would transform into its opposite, becoming a radically simplified biometric register of identification only.”⁵⁰ Moele’s novel’s depiction of the book of the dead presents

HIV as a surrogate for the recording state, noting who counts and what the salient information about them might be. “The book of life,” with all the ambivalences about its surveillance, caring/counting, and policing functions, is transformed by HIV into “the book of the dead.”

It is only in 1981, ironically and coincidentally twenty years after Khutso’s birth (if he is forty-one in 2002—the date and age recorded in “The Book of the Dead”), that the South African government decides to require fingerprint authentication from all South Africans white and Black, which created the world’s first universal biometric population register. Following from that decision, all South Africans were issued with a common identity document, stripped of many of the surveillance functions that had originally been included by the document’s designers (although the last three digits of each individual’s identity number continued, briefly, to do the work of racial classification).⁵¹ The three digits identifying white men were 007, just when you think the bureaucratic architects of white supremacy cannot make a joke. The South African state’s “book of life” balks and founders when broaching the possibility of including Black subjects into its documentary life.

The novel takes this failure one step further by making the book of the dead the record of Black life. Khutso feels obliged to account for the uniqueness of his purchase: “‘In case you are wondering what I am going to do with this book,’ Khutso finally said, making his way towards the door, ‘I am going to record my paternal family history; the male lineage from 1840 to the present day.’”⁵² In the face of this racialized interrogation what are readers to make of Khutso’s lie here? How does a Black man imagine a legitimate answer to a white man’s query about the purposes of a book of the dead? And what might this never-written book in Moele’s eponymous *Book of the Dead* contain? Given the colonial and apartheid state’s indifference to the documenting of Black lives, would there even be records of the births and deaths of Khutso’s male lineage from 1840 to the present day? The novel appears caught between the regimes of documentary and biometric citizenship. As Keith Breckenridge’s work has shown, documentary citizenship was never really in the cards for Black South Africans, whose identities were alternately reducible to the *dompas* and a fingerprint.⁵³

The novel is increasingly obsessed with problems of tabulation, numbers, and dates and the recording of them. Let us look more closely at the details recorded about Khutso, the character that the narrative is most concerned with.

The honour of being the first entry in this great book went to Khutso. In the middle of the second golden page, I wrote:

03 October 2002: Khutso

Age: 41 years

Height: 1.74 meters

Weight: 107.6 kilograms

Status: HIV positive

CD4 count: 650

We were sitting in Khutso's study, both of us pondering the mission that we were going to undertake together. We are going to fuck 'em dead, I told him, and he smiled.⁵⁴

We have the date of recording—October 3, 2002; age—41 years; and then his height and weight. These would be standard if shifting items in most identity documents—stuff of the book of life. Then the entry continues to record HIV-related medical data: Khutso's positive status and his CD4 count. These latter are the key details for HIV's record in the book of the dead. The next time there is an entry for Khutso in the book of the dead, we learn that on January 6, 2005, at age 44, his weight is down to 95 kilograms and his CD4 count is down to 400 (133). Khutso appears again as the very last entry in the book of the dead. His weight is down to 64 kilograms and his CD4 count is 60 (165). Medical records reduced to numbers, but the second half of the novel attempts partial narrative biographies of those numbers. "The great book became our whole world, and at times I even felt like Khutso's job was a big hindrance to the cause—if he hadn't been working, I would already have been much bigger than I was. The average entry was seven women a week, one for each day of the week, but the record was sixteen in a week: 23–29 June 2003. That was when Khutso was at his peak" (153).

Here are the names besides Khutso and Thapelo that appear with their own entries in the book of the dead: Thabiso, Demie, Jarush, Matimba, Jessica, Michelle and Candy (one entry), Reneilwe, Nomsa, Elizma, Sandra, Nonkululeko (the one who almost get away), Daisy Fay, Kgahliso. The book of the dead spans some six years from the first entry on October 3, 2002, until November 6, 2008. HIV tells us there should be at least three hundred entries, but apparently it has only bothered to enter fourteen. In this imprecision, produced by its indifference to maintaining a proper record, HIV counts Black life about as carefully as the apartheid state did.

A couple of racial and potentially national allegories begin to emerge in the encounter with the “Book of the Dead.”⁵⁵ The novel and the eponymous book it enfold hyperbolically reinscript at least two powerful ideologies about African sexuality: One recent—the archive of Black sexuality can be reduced to the archive of HIV/AIDS. In the case of the Moele novel, the archive of sexuality is written by personification of the HI virus and called the book of the dead. Relatedly, the ways the HI virus represents Khutso’s sexuality reproduces a range of powerful if phobic reductions of Black sexuality to a predatory, super-potent, dangerous Black male heterosexuality. While much of this is satirical, the risk that a reproduction of a damaging stereotype is still a repetition, even in a critique, remains.

However, the novel suggests that HIV is a serious historiographic agent and the author of a new national biography. On the one hand, Khutso is a protagonist in one of the oldest and most enduring South African literary, filmic, and ethnographic stories: a young Black man leaves his rural homestead, goes to the city, and loses his moral way. Alan Paton’s 1948 *Cry, the Beloved Country* is the most well-known exemplar of this defining genre in South African letters.⁵⁶ South Africa’s first African feature film, *African Jim*, also known as *Jim Comes to Joburg* (1949), offers a more upbeat, less tragic reworking of the same story.⁵⁷ On the other hand, the utterly unsentimental rendition of Masekeng, Khutso’s village in Limpopo province, shows the countryside to be as corrupt as the city and thus confounds the central opposition needed to get the old story rolling. The long history of how the emergence of racial capitalism in South Africa impoverished the countryside is encapsulated in the following description of Masekeng: “Masekeng—the place where Khutso grew up—was a village where only one house had electricity and a borehole. Most of the community relied on water from the springs that they shared with their animals unless they had five cents to buy a twenty-five litre bottle of water from the local businessman—who owned the house with the borehole—or if they had the energy to walk more than ten kilometres to a government supplied tap.”⁵⁸

The state has utterly failed at basic provisioning. It is a ten-kilometer walk to the nearest potable water. The natural springs are polluted by domestic animal waste, but people are obliged to get water from them. The impoverishment of the countryside is hardly a post-apartheid phenomenon, as the destruction of often thriving peasant economies was central to the colonial state and the setting up of key extractive industries in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁵⁹ Masekeng is definitely not described in pastoral terms or tones.

It is perhaps wrong to try to write *The Book of the Dead* into a Patonesque South African literary tradition, since it explicitly eschews the racial drama of apartheid, especially in the tonalities of white liberal guilt as the structure of feeling for rendering the suffering of South African history. At the same time, it also eschews the national allegorical story of nonracialism arguably inaugurated by a novel like Sol T. Plaatje's *Mhudi* (finished in 1920, published in 1930), often heralded as the first novel written in English by a Black South African, and may be the first South African novel to prefigure the racial reconciliation embedded in the metaphor of the rainbow nation.⁶⁰ In many ways, Moele's novel is about the impossibility of national community in the face of HIV/AIDS, where the only task of the writer/historian is to record the names of the dead in tones that range from the callous to the gleeful, and incompletely at that.

How and why does HIV, as author, rewrite or write out apartheid? The novel spans the years from roughly 1970 to 2008. There is not a single explicit mention of apartheid. The only recognizable apartheid-era place name in the novel is the aforementioned "University of the North." We are told that in 2002, Khutso moves from Polokwane to Tshwane. The historicity of these dates and place names gets tricky. While Pretoria gets incorporated into the Tshwane metropolitan area in 2000, and there are ongoing debates about the renaming of the city itself as Tshwane, Pietersburg only officially becomes Polokwane in 2005, three years after Khutso leaves Polokwane. Of course, these re/namings come from long-extant indigenous names for these places, so what might be the cause of the occasionally anachronistic deployment of specific place names? Was Pietersburg always and already (to borrow a phrase) Polokwane and it is that name which is being restored after the apartheid imposition? South Africa's transition to democracy occurred in 1994—if we take the first democratic elections as the event of the transition, though obviously the time of transition is much longer than that and how democratic transition can be held under rubrics of neocolonialism or racial capitalism is still up for grabs. While apartheid was centrally concerned with the problem of racial identification and classification, the racialization of space was equally a cornerstone. Khutso and HIV, HIV in Khutso, Khutso as the soldier/agent of HIV, traverse these racialized spaces—past and present—freely and with impunity. The historical looseness of the place names in the novel strongly suggests that HIV does not care who and where you are, which belies the more specific demographic vulnerability to infection and death that the material history and geography of the pandemic would indicate.

That distant tap is clearly an apartheid-era tap.⁶¹ That businessman selling water from that borehole is the privatized post-apartheid future. While Khutso does not return to Masekeng in the second half of the novel, given rising levels of poverty in the region and the continued lack of basic infrastructure in rural South Africa in the era of democracy, the situation is not likely to have improved. The failure of political enfranchisement to improve the everyday lives of most rural Black South Africans is a feature of post-apartheid South Africa.⁶² Those people are the people Khutso is determined to leave behind.

The South African literary critic Lesibana Rafapa (mentioned earlier in this chapter) writes: “Mhlongo’s and Moele’s post-apartheid novels have been produced in a social context where, according to Milazzo (‘Racial power’ 36), ‘literary imaginaries, academic scholarship, and public racial discourse in post-apartheid South Africa’ have been shaped into a denialism purporting that ‘economic power is primarily a consequence of individual merit and personal responsibility; and that racial categories should therefore preferably *not* be invoked.’”⁶³

The novel’s general evasion of the designation “Black” and the very occasional presence of “white” as a personal descriptor confirms Rafapa’s and Milazzo’s claims. However, it might also be possible to read the novel’s evasion of Black as a racial designator as not only a liberal false color-blindness but a quietly confident assertion of Blackness as normative, of a performance of a Black universal, and a claiming of the privilege of the unmarked subject. Furthermore, the educational biography of Khutso in part I makes no mention of Bantu education, though that experience is presented as his only other experience of potentially having his own name in a book.⁶⁴ Khutso’s overwhelming emotional response to the library at the University of the North may also mitigate the Bantu part of Bantu education. Here is how Khutso understands his education: “School is like a railway line, he thought to himself. The train that runs on the rails has but one destination, and if it runs smoothly, sure enough it will reach its destination at the expected time. He knew he could work hard—he’d worked hard for Leruo, shovelling sand, but he also knew that people who work hard are the worst paid of all and to get paid very well one has to have a degree.”⁶⁵

The passage above notes a core contradiction in the linkage of a work ethic to financial success. Hard work is supposed to produce financial success, but as Khutso recognizes, “people who work hard are the worst paid of all,” and there appears to be a connection between class privilege indexed by access to

education (and that access under apartheid was definitively racialized) and the possibility of acquiring wealth. Khutso becomes enormously rich over the course of the novel, exactly how is never clear, but the life insurance policies Pretty takes out undoubtedly help. Those documents represent a capitalist calibration and record of the value of a human life only recently available to Black South Africans in the time span of the novel. This very recent inheritance can be usefully contrasted with what was taken from Khutso's lineage from 1840 to the present day, which cannot be written into that shadow book of the dead that lurks beneath the one we have. The origin of Pretty's life insurance policies is described as follows:

The whole family was buried the following Saturday, but Pretty couldn't bring herself to go to the funeral. The words Tshepo had said to her at the party came back to her again and again. "Pretty, do you have life insurance?" he had asked her. "If you don't have any, you should get some. And if you don't get that, then you should get yourself a good sangoma." He had paused to take a sip of beer. "Black people don't like educated people like you and me," he had continued. "And if you die, your children will be left naked. Get yourself some life insurance."

When she finally recovered from the shock of Tshepo's death, Pretty took out four life insurance policies—two for herself and two for Khutso. The monthly payments were costly, but at least every time Tshepo's question floated into her head she could answer it. "I have four," she would say. "Tshepo, I have four." (61)

Before he is killed in a car accident, Tshepo, Khutso's university roommate, offers two strategies for ensuring generational social continuity in the post-apartheid era: life insurance and/or a good sangoma, because education is seen as removing people like Pretty and Tshepo from the protections of kinship and community. Tshepo's question haunts Pretty and the invocation of "I have four . . . I have four" becomes an almost talismanic repetition. It is a terrible irony that the wealth generated by those life insurance policies becomes part of what enables the success of HIV and Khutso as agents of death in the novel.

While there is not a single mention of apartheid history and place names like Polokwane are partially anachronistically presented, HIV presents its relationship to Khutso in military metaphors throughout. "Nkululeko thought that he was knowledgeable, that he could outwit my forces but what he didn't know that he was already on the front line—and he stayed there for a full four years, a grade-A soldier working for me tirelessly day and night" (138).

While HIV claims that it is without human attributes besides will, it frequently stages itself as the military commander of legions, and its operations are those of war. Here is the moment when HIV bids Khutso farewell: “It was an honour knowing you, I tell him. I have had great soldiers, I have seen their great deeds, but you, you come second to none. But now Khutso, your time is done, I tell him. You are dying but I have to move on, I have to find another soldier of the highest grade” (165). While the novel never explicitly claims that AIDS is a national defeat, like Catherine Njeri asserts in *Confessions of an AIDS Victim* in chapter 4, these military metaphors can invoke both the era of apartheid wars and the armed struggle in the fight for national liberation—especially evident in the repetition of “the cause”—and occasionally gesture toward the possibilities of civil war: “The second execution took place in Khutso’s car. But this execution turned out to be a reinfection in both directions. It was a war between two great soldiers of the cause, and needless to say it was full of mind-blowing thrills” (100). If HIV continually writes himself into the book of the dead as an always successful military commander, what enables his continued success?⁶⁶

THE FAILURES OF HIV PREVENTION, TREATMENTS, AND CURES

In the stories of the characters whose names get written by the composite of Khutso and the personified HI virus into the “book of the dead,” readers find parodies and indictments of nearly every epidemiological account of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa from theories of concurrency and transactional sex to imagined solutions like god-condom, “traditional” medicine, and antiretroviral drug treatments. The novel is set on the cusp of the South African state’s massive antiretroviral rollout and its depiction of antiretrovirals felt, at least to this reader, as deeply cynical, given the remarkable success of the South African government’s rollout initiatives. The state is counting now. HIV/AIDS-related deaths dropped from 681,434 in 2006 to an estimated 150,375 in 2017. In 2007, the second to last year in the time span of the novel, South Africa had an HIV-positive population of 5.7 million people and an estimated 350,000 people died from AIDS.⁶⁷ While these numbers were and still are staggeringly high, there can be no question that they would be significantly worse without the massive state intervention beginning in 2003.⁶⁸ HIV in *The Book of the Dead* seems unaware of its diminishing powers.

The novel may be too early to register the success of the antiretroviral roll-outs but holds out no anticipatory hope. Here is what HIV has to say about antiretrovirals: “ARVs. I like them. In fact, I love them. I want my soldiers to live as long as they can. I want them to have the freshest faces for the longest time, so that no one ever suspects that they are sick. That is the reason I love ARVs so much. And that is the reason I forced Khutso to take them.”⁶⁹ ARVs are rendered not as the enemy combatant of HIV but as his enabler in a brutal setting up of prevention and treatment as a kind of zero-sum game. ARVs emblemize modern medicine’s best attempt at fighting AIDS, and Moele’s narrator HIV sees them as co-optable to his cause.⁷⁰ Quite simply, this is bad medical information. The possibility of the transmission of HIV essentially disappears when the taking of ARVs results in an undetectable viral load. Here, idiosyncratically, the novel refuses the pedagogical function of providing correct and up-to-date information about HIV/AIDS to its readers. To inspire terror by hearing the voice of HIV seems closer to the point.

So-designated “traditional” cures are subjected to even greater satirical treatment: “The cure: during a full moon Nkululeko had to go find a spotless white female goat that had never given birth, then he must drink the potion that Tshiane had given him, have sex with the goat and then leave it to its fate. Following this, he mustn’t talk to anybody else until he had looked directly at the midday sun. ‘Then you must go and have another HIV test,’ Tshiane told him. ‘And only after you have seen the results can you come back and thank me for the service. You must pay what you think I deserve.’”⁷¹

The long and contested history of the institutions of customary law cannot be fully explored here, but so-called “traditional medicine” was at the heart of much public discourse around HIV/AIDS during the years that the novel brings into representation. Before we broach the specific problem of the novel’s representation of “traditional medicine,” we need to situate the question of “tradition” in the broader crises of democratic sovereignty for the post-apartheid state: a set of crises that invoke the category of the “custom.” Achille Mbembe provides a useful genealogy: “Later, the colonial state went on to use this concept of custom—that is, the thesis of nonsimilarity, in a revised edition—as a mode of government in itself. Specific forms of knowledge were produced for this purpose; such was the case of statistics and other methods of quantification, as deployed in censuses and various other instruments like maps, agrarian surveys, and racial and tribal studies. Their objective was to canonize difference and to eliminate the plurality and ambivalence of custom.”⁷²

It is important to note that in the transition to democracy, the South African Law Commission saw the “harmonization of the common law and the indigenous law” as a particularly important and challenging task in the bringing about of a post-apartheid future, and the role of what could be called legal liberalism was significant in forcing the government’s hand in reversing the AIDS denialism of the opening years of the 2000s and instituting a free and comprehensive HIV/AIDS drug treatment plan. This legal liberalism, most evident in the document of the South African constitution and its subsequent deployment in key cases, was often in tension with the attempts to revivify customary forms of authority, which the novel sees as quite useless in the face of HIV. The new national constitution of 1996 asserted the legitimacy of customary law.⁷³

However, exactly how this recognition can be incorporated into national and/or provincial legislation has been an often controversial and contested process, particularly in relation to the status and treatment of women and sexual minorities. Gender activists in and outside of South Africa tended to see the Traditional Courts Bill of 2012, for example, as an attempt to move many South Africans living in rural areas outside the protections of the national constitution. Here is Graeme Reid, founder of GALA and now head of the sexuality desk at Human Rights Watch in *The Guardian*:

It is no accident that some of the most vociferous public debates in South Africa and sites of the most violent conflict have concerned the role of women and the legal equality of sexual and gender minorities. These have sometimes been adjudicated by traditional authorities but, contrary to the way the chiefs are presenting it, the traditional courts bill elevates the role of chiefs and threatens to ossify traditional law. Tradition, too, must evolve, and, indeed, it has done. The constitution holds that customary law should be recognised, respected, and—most importantly—subject to the constitution. Yet Contralesa and the National House of Traditional leaders have consistently rejected LGBT people as “un-African”, recently recommending that “sexual orientation” be removed from the bill of rights. The very essence of our democracy is the protection of vulnerable people. This bill, if enacted, would effectively remove that protection for millions of South Africans. For women, gays, lesbians and transgender people, in particular, the protection of the bill of rights is necessary armour against traditional authority. If South Africans keep traditional leaders in a modern democracy, these figureheads should play a role consistent with the constitution, not one that tampers with our rights.⁷⁴

This difficulty that an emerging democracy has had with the embracing of the “customary” has not been limited to questions of law. Customary law

under apartheid was the domain of often state-appointed “chiefs,” with a history of collaboration with the apartheid regime.

In the early 2000s, under the pressure of a burgeoning HIV/AIDS pandemic, the field of medicine became another ongoing site of contestation around questions of the customary, as did policing with the release of a leaked memorandum from South African Police Services that showed that provincial commissioners were now instructed to appoint two detectives in every province to investigate “harmful occult-related crimes,” a reanimation of the apartheid-era “Occult Crimes Unit.” Indigenous healers and their practices are particularly vulnerable to both additional police and public scapegoating. Would criminalizing the fictional Tshiane in the incident of the attempted cure cited above accomplish anything in the fight against AIDS? What would be gained in the rebranding of Nkululeko as a suspect of “harmful occult-related crimes”?⁷⁵

A plethora of “traditional” cures for a distinctly nontraditional illness emerged in the early 2000s across South Africa. Some of these “cures” had support from the highest levels. President Thabo Mbeki’s health minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, whom he supported to the hilt throughout her tenure, made the following incendiary remarks at an HIV/AIDS conference on June 30, 2005: “Nutrition is the basis of good health and it can stop the progression from HIV to full-blown Aids, and eating garlic, olive oil, beetroot and the African potato boosts the immune system to ensure the body is able to defend itself against the virus and live with it. I am sure that loveLife will continue to raise that.”⁷⁶ (I discuss loveLife more extensively in chapter 4, and Minister Tshabalala will make another appearance in the coda to this book.) While, to her credit, Minister Tshabalala never publicly recommended goat-fucking as cure, the desire to find a cure that could pass as indigenous undoubtedly deformed the state’s public health initiatives during the AIDS denialist years, ideologically connected to then president Mbeki’s African Renaissance project.⁷⁷ Like in the discussion of the film *Yesterday* in chapter 3, the novel sees so-called traditional medicine cures as entirely useless, if not risible.

And then there is god-condom as a satirical shorthand for safer sex practices. The opening section of “The Book of the Dead”—the second part of the novel that HIV relates—tells the story of a wealthy group of respectable married men who worship god-condom—and whom HIV desperately wishes to seroconvert. Eventually Khutso successfully seduces one of their wives. HIV appears in this section as the comeuppance of a predatory,

ultra-consumerist, westernized/"nontraditional" Black bourgeoisie, but the novel as a whole will not easily be contained as a newish national allegory of sorts. It initially appears that the safer-sex practices invented in the earlier North Atlantic incarnation of the pandemic have some traction. Khutso/HIV have to work hard to overcome a commitment to safer-sex practices by a group of wealthy associates. The phrase "god-condom" strongly implies safer-sex practices are kin to a religious belief, which also ultimately fail to protect like the "traditional" religious beliefs that drive the failed promises of a cure described in the entry on Nkululeko mentioned above. The phrase "god-condom" has broken homonymic echoes of "thy kingdom come," adding to the overwhelming and brutal fatalism produced by the malevolence of HIV as a powerful, transcendent, and all-powerful adversary to Khutso and all the characters in the novel who suffer under its rule.

What the novel does give credence to are two of the contemporaneous sociological/epidemiological explanations for the rapid spread of HIV in the subcontinent: transactional intimacy and concurrency.⁷⁸ Transactional sex as the root cause of the spread of HIV is broached in the book of the living through the sexual biography of Khutso's wife, Pretty. Pretty is initially seduced by her schoolteacher: "'Please don't tell anybody,' he said afterwards as he put money in her hand. . . . There were always men who wanted to be part of her life, and when they found that they fell short of her expectations they came with currency, and for a poor girl the currency was what mattered."⁷⁹

In a country where unemployment rates hovered between 20 and 30 percent in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, with youth unemployment rates often much higher, making ends meet or what we could call a crisis in livelihood or basic provisioning was and continues to be intense.⁸⁰ Attractive young women like Pretty could and did supplement their minimal or nonexistent incomes through intimate relationships that never quite rise to the formality of sex-work. The conventional wisdom can be parsed as follows: One man for the rent, one man for clothes, one for the cellphone bill, and so on. I find something redundant or even oxymoronic about the coinage "transactional intimacy" because I struggle to imagine intimacy without forms of exchange, and unequal exchange at that. There are compelling arguments for how these kinds of transactional intimacy, produced by the ongoing crisis in securing livelihood in the face of the paucity of waged labor and the relative weakness of South Africa's informal economy, facilitated the spread of HIV/AIDS.⁸¹ There is also no doubt that these transactional

intimacies participate in sentimental and libidinal economies as well as material ones.⁸² Obviously, the imagination of solutions cannot just posit moral or moralizing ones but needs to address the crisis in livelihood. The novel, at least, makes gestures in that direction.

Pretty is rendered somewhat sympathetically in the novel.

Her father's money had finally come through, but it wasn't even enough to keep her going for a month, and the student fund was only available for the next study year. The truth of it was that without Sport's financial support she would have to abort her studies. . . . She made a list of all the men she had got naked with, then separated them into three categories: Grade A, Grade B and Grade C.

Grade A men were those who were family men with financial power. Herbert was the first on the list. . . . After Herbert, Pretty tried the next man on the list and then the next. Almost all the men put something towards her education, and that was how she put herself through the University of the North. They had used her and she was using them in turn.⁸³

Like HIV, the imputed narrator of "The Book of the Dead" in the second part of *The Book of the Dead*, Pretty makes lists, and her education has taught her to grade. However, her list is made in the service of her survival and educational advancement, not a list of people to be killed.

The novel gives very little credence to the theories of the migrant-labor vector of infection, unlike the feature film *Yesterday* discussed in chapter 3. As Mark Hunter writes, "The male migrancy model did not adequately address what I call the changing political economy and geography of intimacy."⁸⁴ While Khutso moves from the countryside to the city, he cannot be categorized as a migrant worker, and the novel maintains that Pretty transmits HIV to Khutso rather than vice versa.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the novel is its refusal to bring any of the activist or civil society initiatives around HIV/AIDS into representation. In this way, it echoes *Yesterday*. There is no mention of the vital political activism that drove the massive antiretroviral rollout through the educational, anti-stigma campaigns and the multiple lawsuits brought by the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC).⁸⁵ Under the influence of HIV or arguably entirely subsumed by it/him in the second part of the narrative, Khutso appears as entirely alone with only HIV as company, guide, or occasionally an interlocutor. For the novel, HIV appears to transcend the political, except for the brief acknowledgment of Thapelo's political humanizing of the agency of the virus discussed earlier.

One of the very few extant prevention strategies/fantasies that the novel does not explicitly engage is the optimistic fervor around male circumcision as a possible preventive practice in the early 2000s. The pressure the pandemic placed on medical infrastructure was deeply felt in the attempt to mobilize so-called traditional medicine and other practices in the fight against it.⁸⁶ The mid-2000s saw an optimistic kind of mass hysteria about the possibilities of male circumcision as a prophylactic against the further spread of the disease, even though the most cursory glance at the macro data would have rendered such hope suspect.⁸⁷ Xhosa men undergo circumcision. Mostly, Zulu men do not. King Shaka is reputed to have abolished the practice some two hundred years ago. While prevalence rates in the Eastern Cape lagged behind those in KwaZulu Natal, at its height a prevalence rate of over 25 percent clearly suggests that circumcision was hardly a magic bullet against HIV.⁸⁸ Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini announced on December 4, 2009, that he hoped to revive the practice of circumcision among young Zulu men because a few small-scale recent studies had suggested that circumcised men were 60 percent less likely to become infected with HIV through sex than uncircumcised men. Close to 20 percent of the then estimated 5.5 million HIV-positive South Africans lived in KwaZulu-Natal, the South African province with the highest HIV prevalence.⁸⁹ This attempt to reinvigorate a lapsed traditional practice is coherent with other such attempts by the Zulu king, including his support of retraditionalizing “virginity testing” for Zulu women as an additional prophylactic against the spread of HIV/AIDS.⁹⁰

While the novel does not explicitly mock “male circumcision,” like it does ARVs, condoms, and “traditional” medicine, early in the novel we are told of Khutso and his friends, Ngwan’Zo and Maoto: “They had gone to komeng together and komeng—as men—together.”⁹¹ *Komeng* is circumcision school. Being circumcised clearly did nothing to prevent Khutso and his friends from becoming HIV-positive, and in the case of the former, dying from AIDS.

The “book of the dead” opens and closes with two pages, each with a single line of cited text. The opening reads “And every bitch I ever loved, I wish an Aids-related death”—Goodenough Mashego; and closes with “Aids is no longer just a disease, it is a human rights issue”—Nelson Mandela. Mashego is an artist, blogger, editor, journalist, poet, publisher, and short story (script) writer based in Bushbuckridge, Mpumalanga. I suspect I don’t need to tell you who Nelson Mandela was. I struggle with the tonalities of both these bracketing quotes that seem to wish to frame the text of the “book of the dead.” The quotes appear to be parts of the text of the “book of the

dead” that were not written by HIV, but as parts of the “book of the dead,” were they assembled by him? What might it mean to have to read Mandela’s exhortatory piety as the satirical equivalent of Goodenough’s murderous sexism? That is the order of question that Kgebetli Moele’s novel as a whole asks us to ask as we think about the documentation of life, sex, and death in a time of pandemic.

In a series of paradoxes tending to contradictions, Moele’s *The Book of the Dead* argues that books—reading or writing them—are powerless in the face of HIV/AIDS, even if they might be written by HIV himself. On the one hand, HIV as personified author of “The Book of the Dead” can be allegorized as the vicious or enabling ghost of someone like Eben Dönges, the literary embodiment of the desire to control life and death through sex in a recording practice that looks more like the fantasy of a biblical book of judgment than anything else. This ghost has none of the pedagogical or redemptive aspirations of the ghost of Gaetan Dugas in the John Greyson film discussed in chapter 1.

On the other hand, HIV appears as the ghostly apotheosis of neoliberal subjectivity: entirely self-actualizing and self-responsibilizing. HIV improvises a to-do list, and checks items off, even as by its own account, the record keeping, like that of the apartheid state before it, is shoddy and incomplete. While HIV can put on the faces of people, there is no conception of community or grasp of the common good. Collective action or shared projects are entirely subsumed by personal goals. HIV is the dystopian culmination of enlightened self-interest, a huckster, hustler, entrepreneur, master of his destiny, military commander, the sole writer of its book—Ayn Rand gone to South Africa in a time of pandemic—the symbol of life under internally led structural adjustment, the betrayal by Black elites in a time of democracy, and the haunting of the apartheid state’s refusal to adequately count, document, and value Black life.