‘Loving in a time of hopelessness’ On township women’s subjectivities in a time of HIV/AIDS

NTHABISENG MOTSEMME

In many explanations for the failure to effectively fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic, culture has been cited as one of the most challenging barriers to confront (Brummelhuis & Herdt 1995). In conversational interviews conducted with young women, I have found the socio-cultural milieu in which they are remaking themselves and their futures – redefining what constitutes risky and normative intimacy, and what remains joyous about relationships, sex and love in the age of HIV/AIDS – to be highly contradictory and complex. It is for these reasons that I argue that we need to redirect some of our studies at this point. First, the meanings of HIV/AIDS messages germinate their relevance and thus acceptable forms of authority within specific socio-cultural contexts. If preventative messages are to acquire grounded meaning, it becomes crucial to understand this complex fabric of everyday life – which we may be blind to – within which youth operate and formulate and at times even ‘rework’ cultural artefacts and practices. It is only when we are able to find both epistemological as well as empirical frameworks and tools that capture youth at their specific social locales where conversations and decisions about their sexual lives are being formulated, that most of ‘what actually happens’ can then be incorporated into HIV/AIDS strategies that target young women. There are other broader reasons though. As Bakare-Yusuf (2003) notes, it is when we begin to also view African women’s sexuality as not wholly linked to reproductive health or disease that we simultaneously open up room to focus at a deeper level on the pleasures and joys that are the precursor and precondition of sexual danger. This allows us to then investigate some fundamental aspects of human interactions, and the ways cultural artefacts and other methods are used by young women in urban ghettos to fashion viable identities in the midst of social chaos. In other words, we begin to get a better sense of how meanings are generated in times of social and ethical breakdown.

During conversations with young women, it soon became clear that I would receive stock responses and thus little information if I focused my attention squarely on the subject

of HIV/AIDS. Perhaps it is worth outlining at the onset that KwaZulu-Natal province, where this research was based, is considered to be the worst-hit province by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa. It has quickly acquired the status of illustrating the 'worst-case scenario'. Further, the township in which my research is based, Chesterville, though statistically not verified, has acquired the symbolic status of being one of the urban sites that harbours HIV/AIDS. Part of the reason is that it is one of the smaller and poorer townships in KwaZulu-Natal. The popular but silent sentiment emerging has even infiltrated individuals' bodies: to come from there is to be a dangerous, polluted person who is a potential carrier. Such sentiments act to reinforce popular notions which tend to fuse poverty with women, and then link them to symbolic and physical pollution. All these circulating discourses, often operating beneath official general health rhetoric, have also had the effect of making those coming from such places hyper-vigilant and self-conscious about anything that may link them to this 'death-promising disease'. All of this does not mean that individuals do not readily speak about HIV/AIDS in their everyday lives, but they do so in veiled and masked forms.

To show how these young women of Chesterville township navigate and talk about their social lives in a time of social fragmentation (and reconfiguration), I have structured the chapter in the following manner: I begin by outlining some *limitations of prevailing HIV/AIDS approaches,* advocating the urgent need for more socio-culturally grounded approaches which also consider important historical shifts and continuities that affect young women's lives.

I then explore *narrations of violence* as shared by them and show how the historical violences in which these young women's subjectivities are imbedded, have been repeatedly defined by the targeted destruction of their socio-cultural resources, which ensure cultural and self-continuity, as well as notions of felt safety. When safe space is experienced as a wound, it becomes necessary to question the effects on young women's subjectivities.

The *intergenerational struggles* that continue to shape relationships between young people and adults, and especially between these young women and their mothers, are also briefly examined. The breakdown of parental authority, which several parents express, also shows how social relationships within township homes continue to be highly stressed and yet also become the site for possible recovery.

I then move to looking at the ways young women are experiencing and *conceptualising their structural constraints, when they talk about the difficulties and frustrations of 'sitting around'.* They show us how the challenge of unemployment, specifically in urban townships, remains a problem that marks this young democracy.

The section on *repeated experiences of death, funerals and HIV/AIDS* suggests how death continues to structure everyday life in most townships. In the 1980s it was political deaths; now it is 'bad' HIV/AIDS deaths.

Finally, the chapter explores young women's *strategies of 'survival' as rooted in the philosophy and practice of 'ukuphanta',* which has close links with their ways of maintaining a viable identity amidst social chaos. The interconnections between violence,

survival, sex, loss and intimacy all point to how material/socio-economic lack and deepening social inequalities continue to shape the increasing commodification of love and desire.

And of course it would be impossible to escape the fact of the location of these young women, whose sexual practices take place within a context which is often perceived as 'hopeless'; 'the place which has no life', as they repeatedly refer to their township home. They belong to a class of women in South Africa who continue to live in the four-roomed and two-roomed Reconstruction and Development Programme houses and shanty towns bursting at the seams of KwaZulu-Natal's townships, and who express feelings of being left behind by the wagon of democracy and the glitzy developments taking place in the new South Africa.

Some limitations of prevailing HIV/AIDS approaches

Much of HIV/AIDS research relies on hegemonic notions of rational human behaviour

Many social studies conducted on HIV/AIDS have tended to reinforce the idea that sex and therefore AIDS reflect some forms of irrationality. This is evident in studies that focus exclusively on specific high-risk behaviours, high-risk groups (interestingly, it is often those who occupy the margins of society – homosexuals, prostitutes, Blacks), and personality variables such as low self-esteem, low internal locus of control and so on. While knowledge of these issues is important, most of these studies have failed to explain why transmissions continue despite the absence of some of these factors. Ralph Bolton, delivering the opening speech at a conference on 'Culture, Sexual behaviour and AIDS', argued that probably the biggest reason for unsafe sex is love, which involves risk taking, giving and trusting, and yet we have done little research on this area. He goes on to say that we may even find that prostitutes are more likely to become infected from lovers than from their clients. Certainly, even despite strong HIV/AIDS messages and high levels of publicised infection rates in South Africa, unprotected sex remains the norm.

Let us centre the continent and look at, for example, the ways we have for generations and generations been engulfed by colonialism, wars, ethnic conflicts and racial hatred. The question then arises: can we really even begin to understand the question of the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS when, for example, figures on war in northern Uganda show that in some of the districts more than half of the women have been raped and suffer serious gynaecological problems; others have been brutally attacked and tortured, and many are depressed, experience regular nightmares and have constant anxiety attacks (ISIS-WICCE 2001)? And what of the constant population displacements caused by civil wars and/or corrupt governments, which have left many without a safe refuge

and open to all kinds of socio-economic vulnerabilities, including sexual violence and coercion? And what about right here at home, where extreme forms of political repression and violence, repeated experiences of targeted deaths in communities and living daily with risk came to be experienced as the norm in everyday life? Surely within these violent forms of everyday life we must revisit what it is we mean by 'safety', 'risky' and 'choosing life'. In these often unaccounted for histories of oppression, where local meanings and order have been violently devastated and, in some cases, completely erased, surely so-called risky behaviour cannot be conceptualised as anti-rational when everything meaningful in one's life disappears? Surely this requires other modes of interpretation of sexual practices, risk, intimacy and desire?

The point is that uncertainty, collapse and transformations of family systems, as well as loss of the meanings of one's life generated by events such as wars, racism, poverty and other forms of chronic violence, cannot be seen as outside our understanding of why HIV/AIDS is such a problem in Africa and, in addition, how it is that individuals and communities tame, domesticate and learn to live with it.

Approaches tend to be individualistic

The search for individual deficiencies in those engaged in unsafe sex, particularly those deficiencies described in personality theories, has been argued as a way of reducing the problems of HIV/AIDS to individual actors. Richard Parker (1995) argues that this factor in research tends to emphasise individual determinants of sexual behaviour and change, and ignores the diverse social, cultural, economic and political factors potentially influencing or shaping sexual experience.

Studies are based on methods such as surveys and focus groups

The dominant use of survey research methods, while it fits well with research agendas defined in terms of epidemiological concerns or psychological models of behaviour change, are inadequate for providing a multidimensional insight into sexual accounts and the experience of suffering (Parker 1995).

There also appears to be a growing consensus that the academic aloofness which has characterised some HIV/AIDS research projects must be replaced by not only more sensitive methodologies, but also identification with the people we are studying. It is an ethical call for the need to go beyond witnessing, recording and dispassionate analysis, and to actively incorporate outrage and compassion in our work with communities. *Emotions* then become central to our work, and perhaps this must also affect the languages we consciously use in our research. By taking this position and approach we may even invent new languages of pain, suffering and recovery (see Das 1996). And as I came to learn, this becomes particularly important when the researcher is a part of this ailing community, and is directly affected by the constant deaths occurring in her or his own family as well as those of neighbours.

Theories tend to be anti-pleasure

We cannot ignore that part of sexuality is also about the search for pleasure, to abandon and surrender yourself to another. This basic human emotion cannot be ignored simply because we are faced with a 'dangerous' epidemic. The search for pleasure continues despite this, and the more challenging question becomes: What is it like to try to love in a time of hopelessness? Putting such reflections on the table may be particularly difficult, especially when entire communities are being wiped out by HIV/AIDS as we have witnessed in our own communities. Michelle Fine (1988) makes the observation that neglecting the pleasures of intimacy keeps us entrapped in current discourses of female sexuality which include *sexuality as violence* and *sexuality as victimisation.* These, she argues, have simply failed to provide rich discussions on danger and desire in sexual practice, rendering young women's subjectivities as without sexual agency.

Feminisation and racialisation of AIDS

'It is clear that this pandemic increasingly has a woman's face,' says Stephen Lewis, special envoy for the secretary general of the United Nations in Africa (Solheim 2002). What he forgot to add was that it has a young African woman's face. As an African woman I enter this intellectual terrain very hesitantly because this HIV/AIDS discourse has become politically precarious, especially where race and class are concerned. We are all aware how the dominant discourses of disease and sexuality have traditionally portrayed the Black female body as the 'essentialised vector of "evil" and "promiscuity" ' (McFadden 2004). To avoid academic repetition as a researcher it is imperative that you are conscious at all times of how you might be contributing to reinscribing women's (especially young women's) voices, bodies and sexualities in particular ways, and why.

Narrations of violence: displacement, the home as target of political terror and the fragmentation of family structures

An aspect I had not anticipated to find as central to young women's life histories was the extent to which most of their recollections began with an episode of displacement. This foundational episode of 'uprootedness' was often followed by repeated, sometimes forced, resettlements.

Uprootedness as a form of *physical and spiritual violence* is an aspect which surprisingly continues to receive scant attention in South African social studies. However, given that this issue was surfacing in narratives I decided to take a few steps back and rethink this concept of past violence committed against the Black body – its family structure as well as its socio-cultural networks. Probing the breakdown of the social fabric through experiences of displacement might also add to our knowledge regarding histories of violation that women continue to be embedded in. Perhaps this might also

make us more appreciative of why young women are imagining relationships with each other, their families as well as their sexual partners in particular ways.

Elaine Scarry, in her ground-breaking book *The Body in Pain* (1985), reminds us that violence is world-making and world-destroying. She also makes the important observation that the unmaking of civilisation inevitably requires a return to and mutilation of the domestic, what she calls the ground of all making (Scarry 1985). Several South African scholars have noted how apartheid violence targeted the family, or more specifically, African-centred cultural resources that shaped the maintenance, sustenance and continuity of communities. Central to apartheid violence, particularly the state terror of high apartheid in the 1980s, was the fragmentation of the local moral worlds of communities (Kleinman 1992). However, as mentioned, in many accounts of the violence of colonisation and apartheid in South Africa, these aspects of violence have been edited out.

An area which vividly illustrates this violent tearing of the social fabric is when domestic space and socio-cultural resources become objects of state terror. The effect of this is to infuse the domestic as well as the cultural with political codes and insignia (Feldman 1991). This attack on the home by apartheid forces and later vigilante groups in urban Black communities constituted for Pamela Reynolds (2000) a violation of the community's ability to nurture, form relations and therefore regenerate itself. This attack on homes, which surfaces in narrations, highlights the need to gain a fuller perspective on the lived effects of fundamental violations such as the right to a sanctuary. Questions on what kinds of subjectivities these young women are fashioning for themselves when sanctuary or safe space is experienced as a wound, remain largely unexplored. In the midst of repeated fracture, what is it that these young women hold onto? What do they let go of, in order to create viable identities to survive?

The history of political violence which made KwaZulu-Natal one of the most violent places to live in during the 1980s has been documented (see Bonnin 2000; Byarugaba nd; Gutteridge & Spence 1997; Nzimande Thusi 1991). This violence, often incorrectly portrayed as 'Black-on-Black' violence between the then banned ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), lasted almost two decades with its remnants still reverberating till today. It is important to point out that what surfaced in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) testimonies regarding political violence in KwaZulu-Natal was the careful orchestration of several violent events by the apartheid state in collusion with the IFP (Jeffery 1999). However, the extent to which aspects of this violence became normative and incorporated into individuals and family structures remains insufficiently probed. Further, the ways this specific generational violence continue to stressfully shape the continuity of family patterns and/or forms of interactions between communities remains a gap in South African social studies. What often tends to happen is that these effects are subsumed and normalised under the concept of 'township'. In the extract below, Thandi (a 24-year-old single mother) relates her life story, filled with violent episodes, where violence became a normalised backdrop incorporating what I suppose it meant/means to be a young woman growing up in KwaZulu-Natal.

THANDI: I am originally from Adams [originally a missionary settlement in the northern rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal]

INTERVIEWER: Oh…

THANDI: …yes, it's a rural area…when we lived there it was an open area, there was no developments like now…we came to live there because my mother's brother…the thing is he was a policeman who was working in KwaMakhutha during the ANC–IFP wars…it was his house...we lived there…one day, I remember it was the funeral of Chris Hani.

INTERVIEWER: I remember that day…

THANDI: They came and burned all the houses around…you see we all lived together…there was my uncle's house then aunts and cousins houses together…all of them were burned…all houses of people they knew were IFP were burned...

INTERVIEWER: …everything...Did you manage to save anything?

THANDI: Everything, everything was burned down…and some of the things they just took…they stole whatever it is they felt they wanted to steal…they burned everything and we left…we were then all relocated to the community hall in KwaMakhutha…and then I left to go and live in Umlazi at R section…There…well you see at that time I stopped going to school…we lived there for some time…There was a small yard you see and we built a small shack…But living in the shack was not good…After some time my mother talked to her sister because she thought it would be better if we lived in the house…In the house it was my mother's sister, her two daughters, and my mother and my sisters…We lived well at that time and then the following year I went back to school…and then there was a time when it was not good to stay there it became bad and then my sister started looking for a flat for us to live in town…Then we find a flat and stayed at the flat…then things didn't work out and we started looking for another place to live...now my mother lives at a back room at the white people where she works [as a domestic worker] and I live with my boyfriend's family…my sister is looking for shelter as she is having problems with the house she found after the flat…

Clearly, the violation and penetration of the police, vigilante groups and unidentified mobs into homes not only reminds us of how others lived daily with violence, but also how the state literally inscribed itself onto the most privatised senses of people. Or as Feldman (1991) notes of state power and violence in Northern Ireland's political violence, how the state takes control over the interiority of the body and imprints its power over material objects, bodies and built environments. Within this process, three

fundamental violations occurred. The first is a violation of the senses, which is set into motion as norms and codes that define the home as a place of protection are undermined and no longer carry the same meanings they used to embody. Safety, warmth, the smell of pap and oxtail soup are transformed by the chilling presence of the shadow of the betrayal of the forced intrusion. That is, a *violation of the senses* is what ultimately takes place. This forced entry of the state into homes is thus always felt and becomes a continuous embodied presence.

Secondly, not only is there a violation and transformation of the senses, but the walls of the home take on new *spatialised meanings.* A transformation in spatial meanings takes place when the walls of the iconic four-roomed township houses themselves are no longer just cement, bricks, etc., but also come to register a crumbling of boundaries between the outside and inside, public and private, interiority and exteriority (Feldman 1991). In this sense the wall can be said to store a history of violence (sometimes it is literally inscribed, for example through bullet holes). Common to these narratives of violence is then also the forced opening of the house to the outside, or allowing what Metha and Chatterji (2001) argue as 'the outside' becoming a permanent feature of the violated home.

Thirdly, as I have highlighted in other works where I explore women's testimonies at the TRC, these narrations also highlight the extent to which women felt powerless and unable to maintain their families (see Motsemme 2004; Ross 1997). They show the failure of what many women felt was the imperative duty of homes: to protect and contain their families. They surface the process in which a loss of control, a loss of lived meanings constituted around the home, and the pain this brought into families' lives, unfolded and was thus experienced as a deep violation for mothers. The fact that this violation was located in the domestic space, which usually marks a relatively ordered, continuous and predictable world (Ross 1997), provided a singular blow to women.

We must also add to these broader political upheavals and lived uprootedness, as Thandi reminds us, the accompaniment of personal dramas and feuds between family members. Unless resolved, these incidents also contribute to displacement experiences for young women and their families. Unmarried mothers with their children who reside in family homes are particularly vulnerable, as their right to shelter is usually precariously linked to the benevolence of parents (especially the father), or the older brother in the case where the parents have died.

Contained within many of these young women's life histories was the regular witnessing of killings, burnings of their homes and other violent crimes. Surely such experiences cannot be divorced from what continues to shape their meanings of what constitutes a 'good life' and a 'bad life'. It must also continue to impact on their choices of how they chose to confront their everyday experiences. In other words, *the past continued to have an ominous presence in their lives.* To some extent they live the present in historical terms (Mallki 1995). Within this context it becomes crucial to understand the *role of memory and violence in the constitution of these young women's*

self-identity. This is because the role of memory is, as we know, a strong factor in shaping and reconfiguring our identities. And in South Africa a major aspect of our memory is the history of actual and symbolic violence, which continues to have resonance to this day. For those who embody this experience, this is not just about official history symbolised in public political gestures or embodied in famous struggle icons. It is, rather, a history of violence which has been incorporated not only into the most private realm – their bodies and the intimate spaces of their interior lives – but also into their homes, interpersonal relationships and communities. These young women's recollections then allow us to witness the extent to which past personal and collective violence and trauma shape their attitudes to risk, death, survival, disease, desire and relationships.

Intergenerational struggles and the crisis of parental authority

How do we begin to explain the crisis of parental authority that most parents feel particularly disempowered to transform? As part of understanding generational ruptures and continuities, I also interviewed some mothers and grandmothers in Chesterville township. One sentiment that they all shared was that children's authority was fast superseding parental authority. It is reasonable to suggest that part of the explanation for this breakdown in parental authority can be traced to our recent history of intergenerational betrayal, another topic which requires more historically grounded explorations (see Benedict Carton [2000] for a recent attempt to trace the historical breakdown of parental authority in African homes). During the 1970s a radical transformation, which was to be solidified during the 1980s' period of political unrest, occurred in township homes. Youth defied their parents' authority, particularly their fathers, who were seen as colluding with the apartheid state via passive acceptance. Tin argues that the position of the patriarch in townships has always been a tentative one, as 'he was split between demands made on him by his radical children and by the repressive state, and many children lost respect for what they saw as the pitiful survival strategies of their fathers; avoiding the hassle of the overcrowded house, drinking beer in some shebeen after work and leaving the family to its own devises' (2001: 14). Within these entrapments, possibilities for intergenerational conflicts were opened up. Therefore, in June 1976, youth not only rebelled in the township's streets, but also against patriarchy in its current form in their homes, causing a violent reconfiguration of power and authority structures within the family. However, the erosion of patriarchal power, particularly in urban families, was more a carefully managed myth, since both urban and rural women were increasingly running households. Mamphele Ramphele puts this succinctly when she observes the ways African women 'tread a fine line between affirming the manhood of their men-folk and supporting themselves and their

children. The myth of the man as supporter, protector, provider and decision-maker were carefully nurtured in an attempt to protect the family and community from ethical breakdown' (2000: 115). Of course, this reorganisation of the family structure meant that women's role as nurturer was further extended to being principal provider and disciplinarian, which continues to heavily burden women.

It is interesting that mothers are quick to point out that the parental authority crisis can be directly attributed to the emerging *rights-based culture* introduced after apartheid. As a 92-year-old interviewee sceptically acknowledged, 'There is no more respect in our children. Those who have respectful children should go on their knees and be thankful as this is rare.' The idea of disciplining other children within the community, as encouraged in the concept of ubuntu, was seen as a thing of the fading past. Grandmothers and mothers complained that disciplining a child that was not from your immediate family was not worth it any longer, as you were likely to be met with responses such as, *'Ungubani?'* (Who are you?), *'Unani?'* (What do you have?), or *'Isikhathi sethu manje, asazilutho ngesenu!'* (It's our time now, we know nothing about yours!). Such responses signal the extent to which modes of existing in urban communities, such as ubuntu, are being continuously challenged within townships.

However, one of the mothers I spoke to did point out that the laws introduced under the new democracy were not altogether negative, as she had witnessed many cases of abusive parents in the township. She still maintained, though, that the majority of young women (as it tended to be them who used or rather manipulated these laws, she said) used them to disempower parents so they could live life as they wished. She then continued to cite examples of young girls she also knew who had dropped out of school and were shacking up with boyfriends at a very young age. Parents, they all seemed to agree, had lost power and the only thing to do was to 'watch'. And so we witness the social formation of 'watching parents' as opposed to 'intervening and disciplining parents'.

'*Sihlezi* for years': poverty, unemployment and 'sitting around'

The majority of young women I interviewed came from households where most family members were unemployed, and hence the household relied in one way or another on government grants such as pensions and/or child support grants for economic survival. Further, these young women who themselves were unemployed (except for two, one a waitress and the other a seamstress) described themselves as 'sitting' (*sihlezi*). This notion of 'we are sitting' is a widespread one and I encountered it on several occasions. In other words, in everyday talk young people did not describe themselves as unemployed when I enquired about what they are currently doing, but rather as 'we are sitting'. They will also tell you that the phenomenon of 'sitting' is very widespread and a serious challenge for many urban youth in Black townships and that in fact many of

them have been 'sitting around' for years. While conducting this research, seeing me at home and carrying out the rituals of being at home, several people approached me to ask whether I was also 'sitting' this year. This 'idling' and 'passing the day' through everyday rituals doesn't seem to be even remotely linked to the act of seeking employment. However, some are quick to point out that even though they are 'sitting', they do periodically go out and look for work. However, they just as quickly add how hopeless it is to try to find work in KwaZulu-Natal. The concept of '*ukuhlala*' or 'sitting' or 'idling' therefore seems to contain within its meaning a sense of resignation about finding good employment.

However, although the idea of '*ukuhlala*' is strongly linked to the incapacity to move (a symbolic sense of amputation) and a lack of creativity and stimulation in one's social environment ('the place with no life'), individuals are mobile, but it is within routinised socio-cultural parameters. For example, when I asked groups of young women to describe what a day of 'sitting around' involved, generally they would describe the following daily rhythms: the day began with doing household chores which included cleaning, hand washing clothes, and taking care of babies or smaller children who had not started attending school; bathing and getting dressed would follow around midday; after cleaning their houses and bodies, it was time to sit outside in their small yards waiting for friends to visit, or going visiting themselves where 'catching up' on the latest news and strategising around the weekend usually occurred; as the afternoon approached and others were coming home from work, this signalled the time to start preparing the evening meal; and finally, the evenings were reserved for watching favourite television dramas and visits from lovers.

The politics of labour in KwaZulu-Natal at this point in time are important to highlight. Young women who were 'sitting around' also pointed out that seeking work in KwaZulu-Natal was unlike other provinces, as the Indian and 'coloured' communities tended to continue to be privileged in employment practices. This, of course, forms part of the remnants of apartheid ideology which privileged opportunities for Indians and 'coloureds' over Africans to enter the informal and formal job markets. There was an overall feeling of injustice as youth expressed that the job market only offered jobs to Indians and 'coloureds', and very rarely to Africans, sentiments echoed in the controversial and now banned song 'Amandiya' by well-known playwright Mbongeni Ngema. One woman expressed her anger and betrayal, saying that she had not voted in the last general elections as she felt the ANC supported this status quo in order to secure Indian financial support and its votes in KwaZulu-Natal. If you were lucky to find 'something', some youth added, you had to put up with terrible treatment and bad pay. That is if they had not already hired a '*kwere-kwere*' (a foreigner from other parts of the African continent) in your place, as they explained. The politics of 'race', unfair labour practices, complex expressions of xenophobia and what was felt to be a deeply racist employment context, also appeared in the margins of young women's narrations.

There is also the factor that in Chesterville – one of the poorer urban ghettos in KwaZulu-Natal – the presence and visibility of the unemployed is historically part of what has defined this community. I often comment to my family when I am home how I lose sense of 'working time', as I am always surrounded by people without formal work. Unemployment, in other words, has become part of the social fabric and atmosphere of this community. It would perhaps be strange and shocking to many if most people left for work and this ghetto were suddenly visibly quiet during the day. To be unemployed, to 'sit around' and be 'idle', does not necessarily place you within the category of 'abnormal', since there are many others who are in the same situation. In the township context we must always take into consideration that the self-employed, especially women running shebeens, selling food and selling dagga, are also included in the term 'unemployed'.

Repeated experiences of death, funerals and HIV/AIDS

Linked closely to the aspects of generational violence that I have discussed are ways in which death has become such an embedded part of daily life in Black communities. While I cannot go into aspects of the multitude of unaccounted for deaths during early colonial encounters of violence, recent experiences of so-called political deaths have also received very little attention in South African social studies. This is puzzling, as it is a well-known fact that there have been constant and regular dealings with death in these communities.

The linking of 'the dead' with apartheid violence is not only traceable to the fact that the state was responsible for many deaths in townships, but also that it actively participated in the separation of the dead from the living. This further illustrates my point of the participation of the state in attacking people's cultural resources. Feldman (2002) has referred to the apartheid state's participation in the hiding and burning of Black people's bodies as part of the hidden history of the South African state. After all, a large part of this oppressive state was predicated on the erasure of Black people's history, memories and meaning structures. It is worth highlighting that many African-centred healing systems do not only involve the individual and the community, but also the healing of topographies. The recent digging up of 'hidden graves', where masses of Black bodies were mutilated by apartheid's assassins, thus constituted a moment of re-memory for several families who had lost loved ones during apartheid. For death without mourning constitutes death without reflexivity (Linke conversation). This has the effect of paralysing individuals' sense of cosmological continuity, which continues to be an important sphere in African life.

In the 1980s, regular mass political funerals, mostly of young men murdered by the state and/or vigilante groups, meant that women's 'caring' and 'compassionate' roles in

death practices were severely stretched. Since the 1970s until today, women have become weary of burying their young children. Nowadays you will hear parents affected by the death of young people lament that 'death has never been so bad' in their communities (Evelina pers. comm.). An interesting aspect to point out is that the Black body of the 1980s was politicised, and celebrated in the name of liberation, as evidenced in songs – such as *'Amagugu alelizwe'* and *'Senzeni na?'* – which were collectively harmonised during funeral processions. And as Cornel West (in Cowan 2003) points out when talking about the spiritual suffering of African-Americans, this musical response to psychic wounds and emotional scars by oppressed people enacts their creativity, dignity, grace and elegance, so important in preserving their humanity. However, this availability of *music as a cultural buffer* in times of pain is absent when confronted with the AIDS-ridden body. The ailing HIV/AIDS body is never seen; it is privatised and experienced as a source of shame for newly 'liberated' Black South Africans. It is of particular frustration to the emerging group of confident, middle-class Blacks, who have become the central actors responsible for performing 'independence' and 'freedom' in the public spheres of politics and business. Currently, the burden of caring for this ailing body and mourning it becomes primarily the responsibility of the family, in which few want to share. This isolation, as well as being marked by a 'bad death', are experienced as traumatic by individual families.

This experience of living intimately with (particularly) HIV/AIDS-related deaths in communities such as Chesterville has also generated a whole set of *popular languages about 'speaking HIV/AIDS'.* As researchers we are then encouraged to explore how expressive cultural forms, explicitly not linked to issues of HIV/AIDS, are mobilised and do in fact 'speak' to HIV/AIDS. The question of what happens when death, not life, structures your everyday, invites us to then 'see' how those who live in such environments tame and domesticate HIV/AIDS so that they can simply live with it in their everyday lives. I do not think it is an accident that in South Africa HIV/AIDS is commonly referred to as ADIDAS (three stripes of the brand name), Z3 (the BMW sports car), Number 3 (gesture with three fingers) and Hlengiwe Ivy Vilakazi. The latter is a typical Zulu woman's name and surname in KwaZulu-Natal. Referring to HIV/AIDS as 'Hlengiwe Ivy Vilakazi' signals that the virus is something very intimate and familiar to everyone; *she* could potentially be anyone you know. These everyday examples reflect daily attempts by individuals to domesticate and live with the disease by recomposing its meaning through linking it to both highly desired material and intimate objects, while at the same time feminising it. However, what is interesting is that from the 'outside' this could easily be interpreted as collective denial. However, if we take a closer look, we will find that these attempts also bring to our attention the ways in which individuals and communities *mobilise available cultural resources* to live intimately with death. In addition, there is the daily distancing from thinking about AIDS all the time in order to cope with its constancy and, especially, its deaths.

Statements such as 'It's not something you think about all the time', 'You keep it at the back of your head because you must live' and 'sex is life' (see below) surface in young women's narrations. Included as well are notions of refusal, which incorporate invincibility, to confront the actual existence of HIV/AIDS – 'this will not happen to me', typical of the adventure spirit in youth identities.

There are other reasons for not wanting to talk directly about HIV/AIDS. Young women are also strategically avoiding the unknown, since they have no guarantees that they are exempt from being next in what is generally perceived as inevitable death. Such fears are grounded in the fact that many of them swear that they would not put themselves through the nerve-wracking experience of testing, since they have all had unprotected sex in their recent past. We must also keep in mind that in communities where uncertainty and anxiety dominate the structuring of everyday experience, rumours of whether one is positive or not can quickly acquire the status of incontestable truth. Finally, there appears a fear in actually mouthing the words HIV/AIDS, as if *saying it* is tantamount to unleashing its destructive power over you. That is, the power of *speaking certain words* has effects which go far beyond this physical world. The combination of these domesticating acts, distancing and often blind refusals, points to new ways of how young women are structuring aspects of denial as well as coping in their lives. In other words, what these young women highlight is that denial and coping are not monolithic forms of action, but rather, often involve the embodiment of ambivalent ideas and behaviours which have become part of their sexual subjectivities.

When I enquired about whether losing family members and friends, and witnessing neighbours deteriorating from HIV/AIDS, had any effect on how young women were reviewing notions of sex and even life, this is how groups of friends responded:

> SBONGILE: Maybe 2 per cent think about it [HIV/AIDS] in Chesterville…going out and having *sex is life*…Even when you know about HIV, it won't stop you living…You won't leave it just because…especially if you have started doing it…Of course you will be scared…but this is not something you will be looking at/thinking about all the time…that you might have it…*it's not something you look at all the time…*
>
> INTERVIEWER: There are many rumours, because we don't talk about it openly, there will be a rumour that so and so died from AIDS. Others have told me that even if somebody knows that this person died from AIDS there will still be other young women going with him…Is this true?
>
> ALL RESPONDENTS [simultaneously]: Yes, Yes.
>
> DUDU: It happens a lot…a lot, a lot…I mean it happens to such a great extent…Maybe it's because people take this thing [HIV/AIDS] and *put it at the back of their minds and choose to forget that it will affect me…*

A pair of 16-year-old friends added:

> MALINDI: Yes, there are billboards, TV and radio about protected sex or abstain from sex, birth control, condoms, everything but they don't listen…A guy will say I want skin-to-skin and as a girl you are so emotionally involved...I love him...I can't say no…he needs me…You see things like that…or you think he will see somebody who is better than me…
>
> NANA: Girls don't care about AIDS and all the diseases that are there, because no one uses condoms…It is true…It doesn't seem as if they love themselves, or think…Some girls at my school [in the township] sleep around with a group of friends…

These conversations opened up discussions about safe sex, particularly the issue of condom use, or rather non-use. All except one of the women I spoke to mentioned using condoms regularly. They were all aware that using condoms is one of the most effective ways of limiting the spread of HIV/AIDS and yet, as 26-year-old Nonhlanhla, put it:

> Another thing that frustrates me are those people who make fun of those who are HIV positive because we don't like to check our status…Like me I have never been for a blood test meanwhile I'm criticising someone who's HIV positive. Also I have a boyfriend and we don't use condoms…They lie when they say they use them…

The topic of funeral attendance generated a lot of sighs as young women expressed their fatigue at the constancy of deaths taking place around them:

> HLENGIWE: There was a time I was attending so many funerals in a month, weekend to weekend. We would ask ourselves, now who are we burying this weekend?…Now it's casual to talk about funerals.
>
> NONHLANHLA: Sometimes we used to attend funeral Saturday and Sunday…
>
> INTERVIEWER: Do people mention how the person died at the funeral?
>
> HLENGIWE: No! No!
>
> NONHLANHLA: I went to a funeral where they said that the person had died of AIDS.
>
> HLENGIWE: No I wasn't in the church when they said that…But now I remember you and [L] told me about it, what they said…
>
> NONHLANHLA: Yes…her sister said that she died of AIDS, that whoever was dating her must go for a blood test. Lots of people were angry with her and they told her off…But I was glad because she had guts…

And an angry revelation by the 16-year-old friends:

NANA: Recently, [X] she was our age and she died from AIDS…You see her friends, it's like they didn't learn anything from her death…as if nothing has happened this year…they were her friends, they used to go out with her…

MALINDI: They started talking about her behind her back…

NANA: At her funeral nobody was willing to stand up and say something…When she was alive they used to go out with her partying and stuff…When she was sick nobody was there for her, there were friends for now…You just have to live your life…me I am not here from my friends, this is my life…

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean they are still doing the same things?

MALINDI: Doing the bad things they were doing with her when she was still alive…Dealing with different cars…getting pregnant and then aborting babies…Nothing else…They just don't see the use of using condoms…They will tell you that they and a condom rubber don't mix…Her name was [X] and she was from Road [Y].

INTERVIEWER: Have you attended many funerals?

BOTH RESPOND: Yes, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Does all this dying scare you?

NANA: It scares and it hurts…when you see young girls doing these wrong things…

MALINDI: There are so many beliefs about death…Right now I prefer to keep my mouth shut…Well I don't know what to believe in…When my time comes, so let it be…but it hurts…

When I asked whether people were not afraid of living within this atmosphere where death had become such a norm, one of the women quickly responded:

ZINHLE: If we were, why are there *so many pregnant women?*

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I want to talk about this pregnancy issue…Why are there so many young pregnant women here…What's going on?

ALL [speaking at the same time]: Oh my God we were just talking about that the other day…

NONHLANHLA: There is someone I know who fell pregnant and then she did deliver the baby but it passed away within three months…Let me tell you something she's pregnant again and she is HIV positive, the baby was buried this

year January…There is an older child before this one and this is her third pregnancy.

HLENGIWE: Some want to prove themselves, prove by having babies that they are not positive. When I was pregnant and I was at the clinic…even nurses do ask us to have blood tests so that they can give your baby AZT…And we will all go for the tests but when the time comes for us to pick up our result…No one will go [laughs]…The nurse will tell us that, girls your results are back girls…We will be like, Do they think we are crazy? I'm not interested to know my status.

The juxtaposition of death and life is constant in these young women's narrations, and was particularly emphasised when we started discussing the issue of pregnancy in a time of HIV/AIDS. Discussions on pregnancy and HIV/AIDS continue to be a taboo area, and some feminists have attempted to bring in these issues through the lens of reproductive rights (Tallis 2002). However, moving beyond a rights-based discourse, Patricia McFadden (1992) argues that HIV/AIDS is once again forcing us to rethink unresolved questions around fertility, family planning, motherhood and womanhood in Africa. For example, she asks whether the resistance to contraception and the use of condoms is linked to a desire for children by both women and men which goes beyond the cultural, economic and emotional reasons previously assumed. In cases where the woman and the man know their HIV-positive status, McFadden suggests that this lingering knowledge of a possible death may very well generate an even more intense desire to perpetuate oneself through giving birth to a child. Further, with the growing knowledge around interventions such as AZT for pregnant women, one of the women mentioned that even though the parents would eventually *die*, what remained important was that the children would live.

I also observed amongst mothers who are aware of their positive status that the birth of a living child appears to symbolically 'inject' them with a desire to 'live and be alive'. In other words, it provides a way to structure their lives from a position of life as opposed to from a position of death, which being associated with the virus continues to suggest in township residents' popular imaginations. Perhaps, more accurately, it is a fusion of a new mode of existence that incorporates both metaphors of life and death for these mothers, who are also keen to participate fully in motherhood. Ultimately, this demonstrates the extent to which childbearing remains a deeply embedded socialised instinct for many women which, as McFadden (1992) has also observed, remains hard to relinquish even in a time of HIV/AIDS.

Another factor we need to consider is that in conducting everyday sexual relations from a position of 'not knowing' (as several young women attest they would never go for an HIV/AIDS test), giving birth to a healthy baby becomes physical evidence for all to witness that the mother and, by extension, the father are also physically healthy. Surprisingly, this was considered by young women as one of the most compelling reasons why someone would choose to fall pregnant during this time.

There are issues around *sacrifice* that need to be looked into here. An area which also surfaced in conversations, and which needs more research attention, is the choice some young women are making to bear children with men who are openly known in the community to be HIV positive.

> MPUMI: Here in Chesterville we don't talk about it and we don't care…Let say I'm dating someone who is HIV positive and I didn't know…and people will tell me about his status. I will not dump him I will carry on and the sad part is I will fall pregnant by him…You see things like that…I don't know whether it's poverty or just plain stupidity…or you want to prove to others that what they saying about him is not true...I don't know what's going through their minds when this happens…

> HLENGIWE: They date them like nothing is wrong…The worst part is when they fall pregnant.

> NONHLANHLA: The way I see it is maybe they want [to] see that will they survive after a baby…

As mentioned earlier, condom use continues to be the cornerstone of HIV/AIDS prevention strategies. While the national Department of Health has reported a drop in HIV/AIDS incidence amongst youth in South Africa, it has also reported an increase in infection amongst the older age groups, especially married couples. A consistent finding that studies continue to report is that people in relationships for longer periods of time use condoms less frequently than those in relationships for shorter periods (Rivers & Aggleton 1999), a social reality echoed by one of the women: 'I mean really you get so comfortable in your relationship with your boyfriend that after two or three months…Hawu! The condom is out…'

Low frequency in condom use is thus also intricately linked to intimacy issues of trust and expectation of faithfulness between partners, which many women are reluctant to jeopardise. However, what complicates these notions of intimacy is that many of these young women often have a sense that even though they are choosing to have sex with their partners 'skin-to-skin', they remain aware that their partner may have other sexual partners.

This normative acceptance of multiple male partnering within heterosexual relationships appears to be a deeply woven one within township women's subjectivities, and tends to be mediated by a combination of a choice 'not to know', a form of 'denial', or to consider 'knowing as poisonous'. As one young woman explained:

> Another thing is that when you have a boyfriend who lives here in Chesterville…Chesterville is small, we all know each other and boys are naughty…let's say he lives here in Road 12 and I will be proudly walking with him and you don't know that maybe in the morning he was with another

girlfriend…and people will tell you because this is Chesterville and Chesterville is small. They will tell you that in the morning – there was a girl with him…and I will be aware when I come and see him…it is better if he lives far from me because I will not know if he has another girl…

In this specific case the issue is then not whether he has several partners, but the humiliation and loss of dignity and respect that will be suffered in visibly knowing he has other women. One of the keys to maintaining viable intimacies revolved around formulating discreet practices between sexually intimate partners. Therefore, spending shared moments and experiences together and also allowing the distancing of specific knowledge of other possible partners, defines this experience of intimacy. These two positions are not necessarily experienced as conflictual, but rather as a mode of experiencing intimacy where multiple male partnering has for a long time been a visible norm.

It would be short-sighted to frame this notion of intimacy as 'irrational' or simply as a form of denial by these young women. In some ways these young women are also reflecting back the kinds of intimate relationships that are deemed acceptable in their communities. As many of them tried to make clear to me, this was not a partnering practice that they did not challenge within their own intimate relationships. Rather, what they tried to highlight was that, given the contexts in which their subjectivities were being formulated – which, amongst other things, were characterised by material lack; an acceptance of multiple partnering for men and, in more hidden ways, multiple partnering for women; a refusal to engage the pleasures of sex, especially for women; daily hustling and survival – they were also enacting survival strategies that might potentially transcend these very social environments that were structured to numb them and make them not *feel*.

These interventions, which could be termed *flawed agency*, were often shaped in their own terms, taking into account their own lives, not yours or mine. Even within a context of HIV/AIDS we must not lose sight of the *underlying layers shaping intimacies,* and an acknowledgement that these relationships are also being shaped by sexual desire, attraction and the hunger for closeness. Even within these economically depressed situations, young women relate how they will leave relationships where they feel they are not receiving some emotional and material necessities, which are often the precursors of sexual danger.

To illustrate these points, Nelisiwe explained in length how for years she had kept two men and recently dropped the long-term boyfriend after he had a second baby with the publicly 'known' mother of his children. She herself had a baby at 16 with a man she was no longer involved with, and who is currently in jail for '*ukuphanta*', housebreaking in this case. However, she did not perceive herself to be the 'other woman' and, in fact, she jokingly related that polygamy (*isithembu*) was still very much alive in urban townships. She explained that what was really at stake was one's choice in a man and whether he was able to fulfil his emotional and material obligations to both women.

It seemed clear to her that with the second child on the way, her man would be unable to fulfil his emotional and material obligations to her.

Other women admitted to having men on the side, specifically for purposes of '*ukuphanta*', that is, to survive each day, as the majority of them were without employment. When asked if condoms were ever used, all the women I interviewed, except one, said they were not used, and that men desired 'skin-to-skin'. Some women openly expressed their own discomfort with noisy and intrusive condoms, and their preference for 'skin-to-skin' sexual exchange.

Interestingly, Christine Glover-Walton (2001) in her study on HIV/AIDS and condom use in the Eastern Cape found that the best predictor of condom use was the number of people one knew who had died from AIDS. However, what was disturbing was that condom use was higher among those who knew four or fewer people who had died from AIDS, than it was among those who knew more than four.

A focus on the local and subjective forces does not mean that global forces at work in communities are necessarily hidden. In fact, my interaction with these young women highlights precisely how far-reaching national and global economic policies are, penetrating and *transforming sociality and intersubjectivity between members of poor communities.* In other words, these national state and global forces of neo-liberal economic policies were also crucially shaping strategies for survival, and loosening and creating 'new' meanings around viable relationships with the opposite sex. For example, one of the young women I spoke to told me how important it was to have a man with cash, as everybody in the household was unemployed. This meant that she relied on one of her boyfriends to supply her with money to purchase an electricity card. This system of purchasing electricity is a new one in South Africa and coincides with the present government's economic policy (Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy), which prioritises the privatisation of basic services. Recently, members of the Electricity and Water Campaign were arrested for protests against state plans to privatise water in South Africa's poor urban communities. In other words, these narrations show the ways in which forces of changing political economies not only affect the structural elements of these women's lives, but even *enter their subjective constructions of intimacy.*

Finally, what these young women's narrations also force us to realise is that these are also recollections that attempt to map out ways of *loving in a time when social meanings are collapsing and/or in crisis.* In an attempt to restore some notion of order and continuity, these young women are reasserting their own meanings to these existential questions. Their ways of going about it may be morally unacceptable to many, but this does not diminish their desire to find their own answers to explain these dilemmas.

Strategies of survival in Black urban townships as expressed in the philosophy and practice of *'ukuphanta'*

First attempts at defining *'ukuphanta'*

'*Ukuphanda*' or '*ukuphanta*' is a philosophy and practice of survival which can be summarised as a way of 'getting by', 'making ends meet'. Although the term means doing anything that will bring in money, in the township it is mainly used to describe 'illegal'/non-conventional ways to make ends meet. For example, a shoplifter will tell you that she is doing '*uyaphanta*' (the act of 'getting by', 'surviving') because she uses the money from shoplifting to feed her family; a young girl involved with a rich 'sugar-daddy' who helps her poor family is another example of '*ukuphanta*'.

Whether the money is acquired legally or not, '*ukuphanta*' is an accepted way of surviving in the townships. You find parents or mothers of unemployed youth complaining about their children who still look to them for support, when they can go out and '*phanda*'. Young women do not want a boyfriend who is still dependent on his parents. He is expected to '*phanda*', meaning that he must go out there and 'try' something. It does not matter whether that something is legal or not, as long as it brings money to the household. What needs to be noted is that the illegal ways of '*ukuphanta*' are always risky but often bring quick cash. Hence those who '*phanda*' are popular and seen to be the possessors of style. We also need to take note that in the absence of rites-of-passage rituals previously performed in African communities, '*ukuphanta*' has progressively become an *articulation of independence* for those living in urban ghettos.

There are also differences in the ways that women and men '*phanda*', which are closely linked to aspects of femininity and masculinity. Men who make a living from '*ukuphanta*' often dress well and are seen as more generous to their girlfriends, providing them with countless gifts which often include stolen goods. Let me elaborate a little further on this issue of masculinity and femininity. When women '*phanta*' this often means they shoplift, or they are engaged in strategies to extract money from potential sexual partners. Sometimes it is also linked to microeconomic ways of survival, such as earning money by braiding hair, looking after babies, cleaning households, or selling items such as cigarettes, alcohol, dagga, sweets, chips and *vetkoek* (sweetcake) to others in the township. In the context of Chesterville, where the notion of '*ukuphanta*' for men is an old one, it means housebreaking, pickpocketing, stealing cars, or general theft from stores in the city centre and/or from white people's homes and, increasingly, from wealthier Black people's homes. Interestingly, when these same strategies are used amongst struggling people in the township – that is, when 'troublesome' youth steal from their neighbours – other township residents quickly label these actions as theft, and not as part of '*ukuphanta*'. These actions highlight the ways communities shape the construction of boundaries around what they perceive to be 'part of' or 'not part of' their communities. Other more sophisticated forms of '*ukuphanta*' include white-collar crimes such as fraud, especially credit card fraud.

In the context of Chesterville there are elaborate mythical stories of heroes and heroines who are expert '*phantas*' (those who *phanta*). There is even an established hierarchy. Those who engage in the ways of '*ukuphanta*' that involve more danger and risk, such as housebreaking and general theft, are perceived by the majority as 'real men'. This masculinity is enhanced when they use their fast cash on girlfriends, their mothers and friends. These are known as '*isikhokho*' (the resilient crust left after making pap). Furthermore, the danger and risk ripple through to other facets of living, as being '*isikhokho*' means being highly desired by both women and men. And being in the high-risk business of being '*amaphanta*', many of these young men, to counteract the stresses and uncertainty they experience daily, seek pleasure and escape through 'hanging out' with friends, intense partying and consuming alcohol and dagga. Here we observe how the notion of creating normativity out of risk has been a long-embodied one in urban ghettos.

The opposite of '*amaphanta*' is reflected in the creation of categories such as *'abafana bo ma'* (mommy's boys) and '*izinyoni*' (birds). '*Abafana bo ma*' are young boys who dress in the latest fashions, but it is widely known that they do not '*phanta*' for their clothes; rather, they are purchased by their parents – in Chesterville, this means their mothers. '*Izinyoni*' are those men who are easily tricked out of cash and often work legitimately for a living. Being 'mommy's boy' or '*inyoni*' is tantamount to not being a 'real man', terms which are heavily policed by young women in the township. Further, these activities of '*ukuphanta*' are seen to incorporate certain rituals that impart the skills of being an 'urban survivor' to many of these formally uneducated and unemployed young men and women. Incorporated into this act of 'naming' are issues of masculinity, status and contextually formulated forms of authority. It is then not unusual for those who are '*abafana bo ma*' or '*izinyoni*' to seek to escape the usual growing-up pressures and stigmas by joining '*amaphanta*'. My younger brother related to me how most of his friends, known as 'mommy's boys', had opted to become '*amaphanta*' and were now either in jail or had died. Those engaged in white-collar crimes were usually older men who had initially started out at the more risky level of '*ukuphanta*', though this was not universal.

On the other hand, women's strategies of '*ukuphanta*' are predominantly directed towards men who have cash. Women's techniques are subtler and in many ways more complex, often involving coded forms of extraction.

Men with cash

Choosing a 'man with potential' who can support you was a central concern in how these young women selected possible partners. As they explained:

> NONHLANHLA: We are very choosy people, me and my friends...You showing up without a car [shakes head disapprovingly]…and me I love money that's no secret…you can come with no car but you must be financially covered…It's not wrong. You must be able to give me money and I love money and I don't think

this a problem. Without a car, no money and he's not working…that is burden… what are we going to eat?

MPUMI: How will he take you out?

NONHLANHLA: Yes the only thing we will do is to have sex. That what's on his mind…Somebody who does not understand will think I am a bad person. There are guys who come and offer love it's just that Eish…You see…

The targeting of especially older men with cash by young women has been linked to transactional sex – this is sex in exchange for money, gifts, favours, payment of clothing accounts, consumption goods such as cellphones and airtime, and household groceries – which has been linked to increasing women's risk of HIV infection. Mark Hunter (2002) draws a useful distinction between 'sex linked to subsistence' and 'sex linked to consumption', even though we must remember that in everyday township life these concepts are intermeshed and are dependent on the current needs as defined by the young women themselves. In the case of sex linked to subsistence, gifts from these relationships can contribute to the household economy, as 24-year-old Sbongile outlines:

In my family nobody is working so when I go out with a man, I must at least come with something, you see. I just can't come back in the morning and go for the bread meant for the children when I have been away all night…what is that…They all expect that I come with something at home…even R10 to buy bread and milk at least…But hey now my boyfriend is tight on the pocket…so when he is very drunk and sleeping, I go to his pockets and I take some money [laughs] and go home in the morning…

Sbongile makes it clear that there is an unspoken expectation at home that after a 'night out' with her boyfriend, she must come home with 'something' that contributes to the household economy. In a situation where a woman cannot meet her family needs because her man is unemployed, she can strategise around 'picking up another man'. Instead of her being seen as loose or objectified, a young woman may feel empowered because she now has the ability to earn money.

In a comparable study based in Mandeni township in KwaZulu-Natal, Hunter (2002) found similar tacit approval by parents of the practices mentioned by Sbongile. Part of the reason behind the support for such strategies can be traced back to the embeddedness of '*ukuphanta*', the silently accepted way of 'getting by' in order to survive. Many parents in fact coerce their girl children to 'go out there' and find ways 'to get by'. It is for these reasons that how and why transactional sex takes place in Chesterville is also linked to material socio-economic realities. It is thus not surprising that a study such as the one on gendered violence in Soweto found that those who reported intimate partner violence, problematic substance abuse, overcrowding at home, living in substandard housing and working long hours, were also more likely to report transactional sex (Dunkle et al. 2003). This comprehensive study conducted by Dunkle for the

Medical Research Council confirms earlier studies which have found a significant link between transactional sex and violence.

Other important reasons why transactional sex has been argued to increase the risk of HIV infection is that it tends to limit women's sexual autonomy and ability to negotiate healthy sexual preferences, and also that it encourages multiple partnering amongst women. It is common to hear young women in townships jokingly talking about their 'minister of transport' (for mobility), 'minister of finance' (for cash), or the more common 'sugar daddy' (older men, often married), who cater for their consumption and/or subsistence needs. What is clear in these conversations with young women is the extent of their agency, albeit shaped by socio-economic and gendered inequalities, in accessing material resources in a context of lack. As several authors have noted about these actions of township women, they serve to both challenge and reproduce the very patriarchal structures they continue to be embedded in (Dunkle et al. 2003; Hunter 2002, 2004).

Sex for consumption is clearly embroiled in the consumption culture fast emerging in South Africa, and in which everyone is eager to participate. Youth from urban ghettos are not excluded from this desire, and in attempts to experience the possibilities of this 'made in china' material culture – humorous vigilance around 'fong-kong' and the 'original' is also emerging to differentiate between various classes of youth in townships – they map out ways to 'shine' despite the economic conditions they must return to. Sex with older men is thus particularly appealing, as they are more likely to drive impressive cars and to have liquid cash to purchase clothing and fast foods. Thomas (2004) concludes that women and girls who use their bodies as commodities usually equate sex and sexuality with a means of empowerment. This forms part of their attempts to transform despair (material, psychological) into pleasure. However, sex (whether it is for subsistence or consumption purposes) equated with empowerment in times of AIDS becomes a potent force. If not the body, then what other forms of agency become available to them?

Finally, we must be open to the idea that sex may also be a way of sustaining a sense of meaning in the face of meaninglessness. Given that many women live in depressed marginal areas, or what they call 'a place with no life', it is not surprising that sex provides a sense of empowerment in the face of hopelessness. Perhaps this is how some exert bodily agency under constrained socio-cultural and economic circumstances.

'Ukuchutha inyoni' (to pluck a bird): agency in a time of social fragmentation

As young women explained, '*izinyoni*' and '*amakwere-kwere*' (foreigners from other African countries) were easy targets. One of them explained that when you were about to go out with one of these 'easy targets', women would jokingly say to each other, 'I am going to pluck the bird,' or, when identifying a potential easy target, 'Friends, let's pluck that bird.'

Oinas and Jungar (2005) maintain that several feminist accounts tend to portray women as victims, a tendency which has been transferred to HIV/AIDS research. They suggest that this victimhood focus can be problematic, as it may obscure decisions and actions made by women in their everyday lives. Further, it fails to account for the ways women actively participate in daily power struggles to challenge their own intimate relationships. At the same time we may find an overemphasis of agency to be part of a desire by well-meaning, middle-class researchers looking to confer autonomy on their sisters at the margins. Whatever our positionalities, it remains critical to continuously ask ourselves whether the centring of agency and choice really does give us a better understanding of women's lives in communities in pain.

Returning to the notion of agency, clearly when these young women strategise around 'plucking birds', they are enacting bodily agency in their immediate socio-cultural contexts. First, 'plucking' (extracting what you desire from another) involves a task which can be argued to involve the creative ensemble of certain interpersonal skills. This task also requires some form of negotiation between a man and a woman. Within this social exchange, certain kinds of transactions take place which range from extracting cash, food, transport or any other necessities desired at the time. In fact, this wonderfully vivid metaphor used by young women also alerts us to playful ways they incorporate issues of sex, sexuality and exchange into everyday life. Of course we must stress that the issue of *play* takes on a dangerous edge when framed within a context where HIV/AIDS is rampant. So, while we can celebrate young women's ability to make autonomous choices (Emirbayer & Mische 1998), we cannot ignore the environments in which their lives are being shaped. These are places where scarcity and inequality are often played out in and through their bodies. In addition, when we consider the broader social processes of economic marginalisation, political apathy, material lack and employment racism within which their subjectivities are being produced, we are left with celebrating what at best can be termed a *flawed agency.*

Conclusion

Utilising a socio-cultural framework that centres on concepts of survival, agency, creativity, sex, intimacy, desire, loss and fragmentation, this chapter has attempted to surface how individual and community experiences of living with and around an atmosphere of HIV/AIDS impact on ways they remake their fragile social worlds, using their own generated meanings. Avoiding framing these young women as victims, it has also emphasised the role of their *flawed agency* as they attempt to puzzle together a world where death surrounds them, historical violences continue to resonate in the present, and new violences emerge under our young democracy. In this light, the chapter has also explored the ways the HIV/AIDS pandemic has changed ideas about the nature of sexual desire and how material poverty and social inequalities continue to have a

bearing on the increasing commodification of love and desire, not just in the urban ghettos of South Africa, but globally.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to extend my gratitude to the young women who enthusiastically opened their lives to me. I have learned so much from them, which I hope will also inspire others to know more. Please note that all names used are pseudonyms. My family, particularly my mother, also gave emotional and intellectual support when I was conducting these interviews at home in Durban. The loving help of Qhikiza and Buhlebuyeza, who assisted at various stages of the project, must also be acknowledged. And, as in all my writings, I am always fuelled and nourished by conversations, encouragements, comments, and suggestions from friends and colleagues about the existential challenges Black women continue to face – Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Nomboniso Gasa, Khosi Xulu, Helen Bradford, Maurice Vambe, Jacklyn Cock, Sebastian Matroos, Stella Nyanzi, Monisha Bejaj, Rekopantswe Mate, Alcinda Honwana and Rob Kassimir, whose questions and insights really helped to stretch the horizons of this chapter. Since this work is part of a broader project, I must also acknowledge the financial support from the joint partnership of CODESRIA and the Social Science Research Council to carry out initial primary research.

REFERENCES

Bakare-Yusuf B (2003) Fabricating identities: Survival and the imagination in Jamaican dancehall culture. Unpublished manuscript.

Bolton R (1995) Rethinking anthropology: The study of AIDS. In TH Brummelhuis & G Herdt (Eds) *Culture and sexual risk: Anthropological perspectives on AIDS*. Luxembourg: Gordon and Breach Publishers.

Bonnin D (2000) 'Claiming spaces, changing place': Political violence and women's protests in KwaZulu-Natal. *Journal of Southern African Studies,* 26(2): 216–301.

Brummelhuis TH & Herdt G (1995) Introduction: Anthropology in the context of HIV/AIDS. In TH Brummelhuis & G Herdt (Eds) *Culture and sexual risk: Anthropological perspectives on AIDS.* Luxembourg: Gordon and Breach Publishers.

Byarugaba J (nd) Voiceless victims: The impact of political violence on women and children: An assessment of their urgent survival and humanitarian needs. NCRC/UNICEF.

Carton B (2000) *Blood from your children: The colonial origins of generations of conflict in South Africa.* Charlottesville/London: University Press of Virginia.

Cowan R (2003) *Cornel West: The politics of redemption.* Cambridge: Polity.

Das V (1996) Language and the body: Transactions in the construction of pain. *Daedelus,* 125(1): 67–92.

Dunkle K, Jewkes R, Brown H, McIntyre J, Gray L & Harlow S (2003) Gender-based violence and HIV infection among pregnant women in Soweto. A technical report to the Australian Agency for International Development. June.

Emirbayer M & Mische A (1998) What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology,* 103(4): 962–1023.

Feldman A (1991) *Formations of violence: The narrative of the body and political terror in Northern Ireland.* Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.

Feldman A (2002) Strange fruit: The South African Truth Commission and the Demonic Economies of Violence. *Social Analysis*, 46(3): 234–265.

Fine M (1988) Sexuality, schooling, and adolescent females: The missing discourse of desire. *Harvard Educational Review,* 58(1): 29–53.

Glover-Walton CA (2001) HIV/AIDS behavioural changes in the Eastern Cape. Paper presented at the AIDS in context: Explaining the Social, Cultural and Historical Roots of the Epidemic in Southern Africa Conference, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, April.

Gutteridge W & Spence E (1997) *Violence in Southern Africa.* Portland: Frank Cass.

Hunter M (2002) The materiality of everyday sex: Thinking beyond prostitution. *African Studies,* 61(1): 99–120.

Hunter M (2004) Masculinities, multiple sexual partners, and AIDS: The making and unmaking of *Isoka* in KwaZulu-Natal. *Transformation*, 54: 123–153.

ISIS-WICCE (2001) Medical Interventional Study of War affected Gulu District, Uganda. An ISIS-WICCE Report. Kampala: Graphics.

Jeffery A (1999) *The truth about the Truth Commission.* Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations.

Kleinman A (1992) Pain and resistance: The delegitimisation and relegitimation of local worlds. In MD Good, PE Brodwin, BJ Good & A Kleinman (Eds) *Pain as a human experience: An anthropological perspective.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mallki L (1995) *Purity and exile: Violence, memory and national cosmology among Hutu refugees in Tanzania.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McFadden P (1992) Sex, sexuality and the problems of AIDS in Africa. In R Meena (ed) *Gender in southern Africa: Conceptual and theoretical issues.* Harare: Sapes Books.

McFadden P (2004) HIV and AIDS: Behind the iconic re-presentations of gender, race and class in southern Africa. Paper presented at the Learning from our Lives: Women, Girls and HIV/AIDS in Africa and the Africa Diaspora Conference. Spelman College and SisterLove Inc, 10–12 June.

Metha P & Chatterji D (2001) Boundries, names, alterities: A case study of a communal riot in Dharavi, Bombay. In V Das, A Kleinman, A Lock, M Ramphele & P Reynolds (Eds) *Remaking a world: Violence, social suffering and recovery.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Motsemme N (2004) 'The mute always speak': On women's silences at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Current Sociology,* 52(5): 909–932.

Nzimande B & Thusi S (1991) *Children of war: The impact of political violence on schooling in Natal.* Education Policy Unit, Durban: University of Natal.

Oinas E & Jungar K (2005) No passive victims! Agents! The concept of victimhood in contemporary feminist debates, particularly in feminist HIV research. Paper presented at the Writing African Women: Poetics and Politics of African Gender Research Conference. University of the Western Cape, Cape Town. January.

Parker RG (1995) The social construction of sexual risk, on how to have (sex) research in an epidemic. In TH Brummelhuis & G Herdt (Eds) *Culture and sexual risk: Anthropological perspectives on AIDS.* Luxembourg: Gordon and Breach Publishers.

Ramphele M (2000) Teach me how to be a man: An exploration of the definition of masculinity. In V Das, A Kleinman, M Ramphele & P Reynolds (Eds) *Violence and subjectivity.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Reynolds P (2000) The ground of all making: State violence, the family and political activists. In V Das, A Kleinman, M Ramphele & P Reynolds (Eds) *Violence and subjectivity.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Rivers K & Aggleton P (1999) *Gender and HIV epidemic: Men and the HIV epidemic.* London: Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

Ross F (1997) Existing in secret places: Women's testimony in the first five weeks of public hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Paper presented to the Faultiness Conference. University of Cape Town, Cape Town. July.

Scarry E (1985) *The body in pain: The making and unmaking of the world.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Solheim J (2002) UN envoy for AIDS in Africa paints gloomy picture for House of Bishops. Downloaded on 22 January 2006. Available at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/articles/31/50/acns3155.html>

Tallis V (2002) Gender and HIV/AIDS: Overview report. Bridge Development–Gender. Institute of Development Studies. Brighton: University of Sussex.

Thomas MN (2004) The feminization of HIV/AIDS in Trinidad and Tobago. Paper presented at the Learning from our Lives: Women, Girls and HIV/AIDS in Africa and the Africa Diaspora Conference. Spelman College and SisterLove Inc, 10–12 June.

Tin H (2001) Children in violent spaces: A reinterpretation of the 1976 Soweto uprising. In A Zegeye (ed) *Social identities in the new South Africa: After apartheid* (vol. 1). Kwela Books and South African History Online.

CONVERSATIONS

Evelina (pseudonym), domestic worker and single mother. Pretoria, 5 November 2003.

Linke Uli, associate professor of cultural anthropology at the Rochester Institute of Technology, USA. Budapest, July 2003.