CHAPTER 5

South African AIDS Narratives and the Question of Modernity

The South African novelist Sindiwe Magona does not mince her words when she declares that the ANC-led government, in its response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic within South Africa, has committed nothing short of genocide: “It is genocide! When a government deliberately turns away” (qtd. in Attree 49). This sentiment also emanates from her novel Beauty’s Gift (2008), a kind of Bildungsroman or “education novel” through which the protagonist Beauty’s HIV infection by her husband and her subsequently succumbing to AIDS serve as dire lessons in safe and responsible sex for her group of FFF (“Five Firm Friends”) as well as for the implied reader (hinting at its pedagogical nature, Magona has spoken about the book being part of a “war” against AIDS [qtd. in Attree 56]). Echoing Magona’s words spoken in interview, community leader Mrs. Mazwi in the novel pronounces, “We would have cried ‘Genocide!’ had the apartheid government dragged its feet the way our democratically elected government is dragging its feet now – even as our people die in their thousands” (Magona). In naming the epidemic in South Africa genocide, Magona registers the local controversy surrounding HIV/AIDS that has centred on the government’s eccentric response to the onslaught of the disease. This controversy has three key sites: President Thabo Mbeki’s “denialism” of the link between HIV and AIDS; successive health ministers obstruction of antiretroviral (ARV) treatment programmes; and then Deputy President Jacob Zuma’s trial for rape—
of which he was acquitted—when he admitted that he knowingly had unprotected sex with an HIV positive woman and showered afterwards to avoid infection. Zuma notably had been part of the presidential commission on AIDS and would therefore have been expected to set some kind of example. Whilst this controversy, broadly speaking, appears to bring traditional cultural practices to bear upon biomedical science, at stake, according to the key “dissident” (Posel, “Sex” 142; Butler, Anthony 594) players like Mbeki, have also been perceptions of national and African identity exercised by the legacies of colonial and apartheid rule and ongoing Western imperialism. Accordingly, as Anthony Butler argues, “public sector institutions circumscribed the viability of biomedical interventions” (591). In this light, AIDS, not unlike like the rights discourse of the TRC discussed in Chapter 2, can be viewed as part of the ANC’s reconstruction agenda, though in the case of AIDS, it was propped up by Mbeki’s African Renaissance philosophy.

It is my contention that, where traditional culture jostles with “science” in the South African AIDS controversy, the virus has become the preeminent site where the combined and uneven character of modernity manifests itself and is contested, just as the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing as I sit and write this book, tests the inequities the world-system produces. Shula Marks comments, “In Africa, as elsewhere, AIDS is seen as resulting from the corruptions of modernity, and the desertion of ancestral ways by women and youth” (14). Of particular interest to me here are the manner and mode by which AIDS narratives like Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) and Niq Mhlongo’s first two novels, *Dog Eat Dog* (2004) and *After Tears* (2007), which we might classify as forms of “world–literature” in the their relationship to modernity, critically embed notions of a combined and uneven development by dynamically staging the opposing elements of the South African HIV/AIDS controversy: namely, by pitting notions of African tradition (culture) against a science perceived by the dissident faction as Western-centric and capitalist-driven. Following Franco Moretti and Fredric Jameson, the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) describe how world-literature registers modernity “under the sign of combined and uneven development”, and is characterised by its “spatio-temporal compression, its juxtaposition of asynchronous orders and levels of experience, its barometric indications of invisible forces acting from a distance on the local and familiar” (WReC 17). A combined and uneven modernity in Mpe’s and Mhlongo’s novels is refracted through the trope of the
university, in turn helping to illuminate the socio-cultural meanings of HIV/AIDS and the ways in which modernity is understood and experienced through them. The university, as standard-bearer of knowledge production and exchange and thus also occupying the hallowed ground of exclusivity and elitism, is depicted as the exemplary site in which ideas about modernity can be publicly tested and scrutinised; it is in the university, after all, that the inconsistencies and contradictions of modern South African life are so radically exposed; in which students from the poorest communities, where time has been described by Mhlongo in *Dog Eat Dog* as “slow moving” and marked by insufferable boredom (9), must traverse boundaries of poverty and privilege, inclusion and exclusion, tradition and modernity, if they wish to succeed according to the principles of capitalism in which higher education is subject to the kind of globalising managerialism we see in higher education J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999).

Given the speed with which the HIV virus has taken hold in South Africa and the scale of infection and mortality—albeit reaching such cataclysmic levels about fifteen to twenty years later than most other countries on the African continent (Posel, “Sex” 133)—literary responses within the region to HIV/AIDS remain “rare” (Attree 5). One might speculate whether this apparent quietism in the cultural sphere reflects the twinned notions of denial and stigma that have inhibited public discussion about HIV/AIDS more generally within South Africa (and across the continent). The question of education has tended to arise in the context of the preventative role culture can play in debunking myths that have sprung up around HIV/AIDS (namely, that to sleep with a virgin cures HIV/AIDS; that “quack” remedies like beetroot, garlic and the African potato are effective treatments against the disease; that HIV does not cause AIDS, and so on), as well as educating about safer sex and regular HIV testing—*Beauty’s Gift* would be a prime example, but many NGO projects have deployed local theatre and education programmes to this effect.

Alongside literature that performs a preventative function have appeared texts that similarly foreground education, but on rather different terms. The three novels on which the present chapter focuses, the aforementioned *Welcome, Dog Eat Dog* and *After Tears*, are all forms of academic novel in which the protagonists are university students struggling with the competing demands of university life. Here, the representation of “education” tests the socio-economic meanings of HIV/AIDS through which ideas of national and African identities are filtered. Other examples include Imran Coovadia’s *High Low In-Between* (2009), the
protagonists of which are the products of medical school and are at the forefront of biomedical research, including research into HIV; and even Magona’s *Beauty’s Gift*, because although Magona has been candid about its preventative “message” (Attree 56), and hence its inherently pedagogical nature, the novel also thematises education by presenting four of the Five Firm Friends as teachers. In these works we are confronted by the irony that, in seats of (higher) learning, the mythologies that have accrued to HIV/AIDS within South Africa persist. In such texts, educational institutions, and particularly the university, serve to house the apparent disciplinary and experiential opposition between culture and science (approximating the tradition/modernity paradigm) so as to lay bare the manner and mode in which notions of combined and uneven development emerge from our (mis)understandings of HIV/AIDS. In the process, the sanctity of these institutions is ruptured, and the continuing inequities of modern South African life exposed, inequities that are, indeed, a contributory factor in the spread of the virus. Yet HIV/AIDS in these texts is not simply reduced to metaphor, standing for something—the (diseased) state of the nation; the legacies of apartheid necessitating healing through truth and reconciliation, or, indeed, an uneven modernity. HIV/AIDS is portrayed as a lived experience, with all the suffering, even in the context of Mhlongo’s picaresques, that this entails.

To prepare the ground for my readings of representations of HIV/AIDS in Mpe and Mhlongo’s novels, I will first sketch what has become known as the South African AIDS controversy, situating HIV/AIDS within the period of political transition. Emerging from apartheid and the “legal illegalities” it perpetrated (Coetzee, *Doubling* 363), South Africa from roughly 1990 onwards then tragically began to experience the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS. Statistics “broadly accepted in the AIDS literature” on the spread of AIDS within South Africa speak for themselves:

Of the approximately 40 million adults and children in the world with HIV/AIDS in 2000, more than 70 per cent were in sub-Saharan Africa, 3.8 million of whom were newly infected in 1999. More than 12 million have died in the last decade, 3.7 million of them children. An additional 12 million have been orphaned by AIDS. Some 90 per cent of mother to child transmissions are in Africa. […] There are said to be over 1,500 new infections every day in South Africa alone, most of them young women. (Marks 15)
It is widely accepted that South Africa “allegedly has the largest number of people living with AIDS in the world”—writing in 2002, Marks puts the figures at “approximately 23 per cent of its adult population infected, up from 13 per cent in 1997”; these figures have since fallen, with the NGO AVERT putting the figure in 2013 nationally at 19.1%, whilst in KwaZulu-Natal, the worst afflicted state, the figure in that year was nearer 40% (AVERT). Particularly striking about the spread of infection in South Africa is the speed with which the virus has taken hold, notably in the years following the demise of apartheid: “As late as 1990 the estimated prevalence of AIDS in South Africa was less than 1 per cent; by 1998 this had risen to 22.8 per cent with the prevalence as high as 32.5 per cent in ante-natal clinics in KwaZulu-Natal” (Marks 16). Whilst this sharp rise in infection rates from 1990 might be due, Marks speculates, to earlier “under-reporting and under-diagnosis” (16), nonetheless, the momentum of the rate of infection has been nothing less than calamitous, reflected in the lexicon that has emerged around the disease: HIV/AIDS, as Magona has declared, is the genocide or plague of our times. Marks describes the speed of the onset of infection as “a pandemic waiting to happen in South Africa” (17) due to the convergence of a set of high–risk factors defined by Anthony Zwi and Antonio Jorge Cabral as “the range of social, economic and political forces that place groups at particularly high risk of HIV infection”, including poverty, disenfranchisement, population displacement, labour migration and urbanisation (qtd. in Marks 17). Given that South Africa’s Black population during the 1980s, at the height of apartheid, experienced all of these “high risk situations”, and as a consequence suffered high levels of “social dislocation” and poor health conditions, Marks argues, it was no surprise that “AIDS would wreak havoc” there (Marks 17). Yet in a recent article that takes stock of the outcomes of HIV/AIDS infection in South Africa, Tom Lodge describes how forecasting overestimated infection rates, mortality and their combined consequences. Lodge assesses Alex de Waal’s 2003 ominous predictions about the long-term effects of the disease to South African society and the establishment; de Waal “warned that the sudden changes in life expectancy resulting from the epidemic might profoundly alter the behaviour of governments and citizens” (Lodge, “Politics” 1570). De Waal’s revised picture, published three years later, most notably focused on an “absence of crisis”: South Africa’s social and institutional fabric was not under threat, as had been predicted, nor were African governments forced to prioritise AIDS (Lodge, “Politics” 1571). The
primary reason for this marginally less apocalyptic outcome is widely attributed to the scaling up of ARV treatment programmes within South Africa from 2003.

Up until late 2002, which marked a turning point in government policy on ARVs, then President Thabo Mbeki was leading what has widely been termed by his critics a “denialist” response to HIV/AIDS within the country. We can schematise the controversy very broadly within two apparently competing camps: firstly, that of modern biomedical science—perceived by the likes of Mbeki as the preserve of Eurocentric Western medicine and, connectedly, multinational, capitalist pharmaceuticals (Big Pharma)—and, secondly, that of traditional African culture, which has been used to bolster conceptions of national and “African” identity. Butler terms these the “biomedical/mobilization paradigm”, which largely followed the treatment response to HIV/AIDS, and the “nationalist/ameliorative paradigm”, which followed the preventative route (Butler, Anthony 602). Mbeki aligned himself with the latter camp under the banner of what he heralded the African Renaissance, by which he means the “renewal” and “rebirth of our continent” (Mbeki, “Prologue” xiii–iv). This renewal would be brought about from within Africa, by and for African peoples: “[I]t is not their view [the West’s] which should determine our direction and pace of march, but our own sovereign perspective of what is good and necessary for us to achieve the new birth of Africa” (Mbeki, “Prologue” xiv). Ironically, as Neil Lazarus points out, Mbeki’s posturing on the African Renaissance was significantly weakened by his ready alliance with the interests of global capitalism as his government, following Mandela’s lead, continued to push forward its programme of neo-liberal economic policies: “The ANC leadership has proceeded on the assumption that the world market is the overriding motive force of contemporary economic development. […] The only possible strategic response for any particular nation-state is to try to catch the wave, to ride the juggernaut” (Lazarus, “South African” 616). The ANC’s ideological backsliding is particularly evident from July 1996 in the government’s GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution) policy (Lazarus, “South African Ideology” 617).

Mbeki’s stance on biomedical research led him notoriously to claim that HIV does not lead to AIDS; that AIDS is also a socio-economic disease (poverty causes AIDS); that Western pharmaceutical companies have unscrupulously used HIV/AIDS to justify selling extortionately priced, potentially toxic ARVs to its mostly impoverished victims; and
that it has been used by Western powers to confirm the racist stereotypes of Black African, especially male (hyper-)sexuality (cf. Butler, Anthony 603). In a South African *Sunday Times* article published in 2000, when he was still pursuing a “denialist” line, Mbeki wrote, “The hysterical estimates of the incidence of HIV in our country and sub-Saharan Africa made by some international organizations, coupled with the wild and insulting claims about the African and Haitian origins of HI, powerfully reinforce these dangerous and firmly entrenched [sic] prejudices” about Black male sexuality (qtd. in Posel, “Sex” 143). Yet, whilst Mbeki speaks of the Renaissance’s central aim of “the provision of a better life for those masses of the people whom we say must enjoy and exercise the right to determine their future” (“Prologue” xvi), he pointedly omits the issue of HIV/AIDS from his manifesto.

Nevertheless, Butler argues, Mbeki’s suspicion of Western medicine is not entirely groundless or “irrational”, as typically claimed:

Such attributions of denial make all too easy assumptions about the intrinsic authority of biomedical claims to know. Orthodox biomedical characterizations of the epidemic have been widely interpreted as the instruments of a continuing racist supremacy. From the passage of the first public health legislation in the late nineteenth century to the forced removals of the 1960s and 1970s, public health has been used in South Africa as a justification for racial segregation. From the scientific racism of the late Victorian period to the bizarre official anthropologies of high apartheid, the social sciences have served as the instruments of racial oppression. South Africa’s white medical professionals, it should be remembered, created and enforced apartheid’s ruthlessly segregated health system without the need for any legislative framework. (emphasis added; Butler, Anthony 604; cf. Posel 126)

For Mbeki, medical research into HIV/AIDS is to be treated with suspicion because of historical associations between biomedical science and racial supremacism, colonialism and apartheid, which, centring on forms of segregation (including the withholding of access to good quality land), in turn, are exacerbated by global capitalism (the extortionate cost to developing-world countries of ARVs by multinational corporations would be a prime example). Taken together, these factors exacerbate forms of environmental racism or injustice, as I discuss below and in Chapter 7. In a document widely attributed to Mbeki as co-author that surfaced in 2002, during the nadir of the controversy (Posel, “Sex” 143), bearing the unwieldy title, “Castro Hlongwane, Caravans, Cats,
Geese, Foot and Mouth and Statistics: HIV/AIDS and the Struggle for the Humanisation of the African”, the authors claim that the “HIV/AIDS thesis” is “informed by deeply entrenched and centuries-old white racist beliefs and concepts about Africans and black people[; …] it makes a powerful contribution to the further entrenchment and popularisation of racism” (qtd. in Butler, Anthony 605). Similarly, Mbeki’s assertion that poverty is the greatest cause of HIV/AIDS is built upon statistical data which shows correlations within South Africa between poverty and HIV infection (cf. Butler, Anthony 605). Where Mbeki’s positioning has been so disastrously ill-advised in terms of his failure to initiate ARV treatment programmes in the late 1990s and early 2000s is his claim that poverty is the cause of AIDS—there is no doubt that the impoverished are statistically more likely to be infected by HIV because of the socio-economic and, relatedly, the environmental factors that make them more vulnerable to infection. This claim, coupled with his distancing from the multinational pharmaceutical companies selling over-priced drugs, stalled rolling out quickly enough vital ARV treatment programmes across South Africa (following Mbeki rescinding on his “denialism” in late 2002, the ARV programme was stepped up in 2003). Robert J. Thornton notes that wealth “permits a degree of filtering of the common resources (air, water, food) and limits the [sexual] networks of contact with others through customs and behaviours associated with what may be called ‘class’ or other social differentials” (22–3). Such factors can facilitate the spread of pathogens like HIV and thus poverty can be seen to catalyse the spread of HIV/AIDS (which is not the same as poverty being the cause of AIDS). Indeed, South Africa’s highly mobile population, in large part a consequence of economic migration historically rooted in colonialism and apartheid, can be linked to the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS. Labour migration both within South Africa and from beyond its borders, for instance, was in part an effect of segregationist laws whereby millions of Black people were relocated to the so-called homelands and townships, and consequently menfolk were often obliged to work away from their families for months at a time. So whilst socio-economic factors have played their part in the spread of HIV/AIDS throughout the world, needless to say, Mbeki’s disputing the scientific link between HIV and AIDS delayed the rolling out of ARV treatment programmes in South Africa with calamitous consequences. Lodge, for instance, cites a study that estimates that 330,000 deaths could have been prevented and 35,000 babies might not have been infected with HIV through mother-to-child transmission had
an anti-retroviral treatment programme been rolled out by the South African government in 2000.\textsuperscript{4}

Compounding Mbeki’s disastrous interventions (or failures to intervene) were the responses from successive health ministers within the South African government, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma (first minister of health under Nelson Mandela) and Manto Tshabalala-Msimang (under Mbeki), who in different ways also obstructed efforts to treat HIV/AIDS victims and, in turn, to limit the spread of the disease. Although Dlamini-Zuma was a key player in successfully forcing pharmaceuticals to lower their prices on ARVs, perversely, she refused to allow both government hospitals to prescribe AZT (zidovudine), a well-known ARV, and to use Nevirapine, which has helped combat mother-to-child transmission—she finally had to bow to a court order overturning her proscription of the drug (Thornton 162).

Instead, Dlamini-Zuma backed a “quack” remedy for AIDS, Virodene, and poured vast sums of funding into an educational play, \textit{Sarafina II}, which, beset by a corruption scandal, was scrapped after its first performance (Butler, Anthony 594; cf. Thornton 164). Tshabalala-Msimang refuted biomedical research on the disease in favour of “traditional” remedies advocated by \textit{sangomas} (healers), becoming derisively known in the process as Dr. Beetroot or Auntie Beetroot (Magona qtd. in Attree 67) for promoting natural remedies like beetroot, garlic and the African potato over ARVs—she notoriously presented a shambolic display of these at the International HIV/AIDS Conference in Toronto in 2006 (Thornton 174). Under Mbeki’s and Tshabalala-Msimang’s stewardship, the government in early 2000s “evad[ed] analysis of ARV options” (Butler, Anthony 595). By late 2002 the government revised its policy, “scal[ing] up the provision of ARVs” in 2003 (Butler, Anthony 595), so that today South Africa has the largest ARV treatment programme in the world. The future president, Jacob Zuma (married to Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma from 1982 to 1998), who was involved in government efforts to limit the spread of the virus, fanned the flames of the controversy when, on trial for the rape in November 2005 of a family friend and prominent AIDS activist, he admitted to having had unprotected sex with someone whom he knew to be HIV positive. At trial, Zuma was acquitted of the rape charge. He claimed that he had showered following sex to compensate for the fact that he had not used a condom. Thus, he concluded, the chances of transmission of the virus (already lower because it was from female to male) were slight and outweighed by his desire for sex. Such a defence
was itself inflammatory in the context of government educational initiatives promoting safe(r) sex amongst a by now confused and ill-informed general population. Popularly celebrated as a “man of the people”, whose roots are rural and uneducated rather than those of the typical ANC elite, Zuma invoked his Zulu identity in his defence, claiming that to reject a woman’s sexual advances would offend Zulu culture. In this way, Zuma was following Mbeki’s lead in aligning himself through his cultural identification to the national camp discussed above. Notoriously, in court Zuma stated: “And I said to myself, I know as we grew up in the Zulu culture you don’t leave a woman in that situation because if you do then she will even have you arrested and say that you are a rapist” (qtd. in Waetjen). As Thembisa Waetjen points out, in so doing, Zuma was putting himself forward as mouthpiece of Zulu masculinity and thereby absolving himself of personal responsibility for the events of November 2005: “He was acting, he claimed, as a Zulu man.” At stake in terms of the AIDS controversy (setting aside the grave accusation of rape), was Zuma’s public admission that he had failed to use a condom.

Whilst it is widely acknowledged both within South Africa and beyond that, in sum, these apparently outlandish responses to HIV/AIDS have further contributed to the devastation that the virus has wrought upon the newly democratic nation, in what ways have post-apartheid literary representations of HIV/AIDS contributed towards the analysis and understanding of the controversy and its meanings? Why within a body of texts described as “rare” has the university become such a prominent setting? What is the relationship in these texts between HIV/AIDS and higher education? In what ways and to what effect do these kinds of AIDS narratives engage with the question of modernity in contemporary South Africa?

The troubled protagonist Refentše of Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is originally from rural Tiragalong. He moves to the inner-city suburb of Hillbrow in Johannesburg to become a Humanities student and then lecturer at the neighbouring University of Witwatersrand and is thus part of South Africa’s rapid urbanisation as inhabitants of rural areas move into the cities in search of work. In 1991 Refentše enrolls on a Bachelors programme at the university—the Braamfontein campus neighbours Hillbrow. His first journey to university exposes along class lines his sense of being out of place in this new environment:
The following day you […] washed yourself thoroughly; quite a treat. Water being such a scarce resource in Tiragalong, you only used to take a bath once a week. […] You left the bathroom [in Hillbrow] feeling fresh enough to be able to approach the officers of the big University without worrying that your presence might be something offensive to their sense of smell. (Mpe 10)

So with varying degrees of success, Refentše traverses the borders of rural/urban, working class/bourgeois, educated/uneducated, and tradition/modernity. In his short journey to the “big University” from his inner-city residence, he experiences the “space-time compression” characterising combined and uneven development: his morning ablutions anoint him under its sign.

On its publication in 2001, Welcome was heralded as the quintessential post-apartheid novel: in the brutalising, apocalyptic world it lays bare, it checks off all the ingredients on Michael Green’s list of “the new canonical criteria”, in which Welcome, Green believes, is “thorough[ly] immers[ed]”: “In terms of content, no concentration on race and little mention of apartheid – instead, engage with one or more of AIDS, crime, xenophobia, homosexuality, returning exiles, urbanization, new forms of dispossession, and identity displacement” (6). In terms of style, Green suggests, the post-apartheid novel would “take as much latitude from the standard realism associated with struggle literature as possible” (Green 6). The most technically experimental, irrealist of the novels analysed in this chapter in its expression of uneven development, most striking, perhaps, is its deployment of a deceased second-person narrator, whose omniscient perspective of the transitional, post-apartheid Hillbrow community, looking down from “Heaven”, weaves seamlessly backwards and forwards through past and present, giving formulations such as the following in which Refentše is addressing himself:

You did not know how that part of the story had come about. Had you known, you would perhaps have forgiven your Lerato, instead of taking this spectacular route to the world of the Ancestors. You have since come to learn the facts, because Heaven affords you the benefit of retrospect and omniscience. Heaven, you now know, is not some far-off place where God sits in judgement […] This Heaven that is your present abode is a very different thing. It carries within it its own Hell. (Mpe 47)
This shifting time frame and narrative setting (only ever a notional “Heaven”, as I explain below) presented in a confessional mode inaugurates an ethical gesture. By following the progression from a before, beginning and after of the tragedy that unfolds, we follow the maturing consciences of the central protagonists, the reconstruction of the self being one of the tenets of confession: the moralising and blame typically associated with HIV/AIDS are laid bare, often in quasi-religious terms, to reveal how they are themselves a form of denial and stigmatising that is to the detriment of the fight against HIV/AIDS (because it effectively silences public discussion of the virus). “Heaven affords you the benefit of retrospect and omniscience”, the narrator sagely advises. Hence, Heaven in the novel becomes the ideal but ironised site from which to institute this critique; after all, the narrator describes how Heaven “carries within it its own Hell”. In so doing, the novel rejects simplistic binaries of good versus evil: taking responsibility for one’s own actions (including responsibilities about practising safe sex) entails the awful knowledge (or Hell) of one’s own culpability as well. So the novel, through its humanist critique, presents a sense of shared responsibility. The quasi–religious aspect of the language employed by the narrative to work through the complexities of guilt and responsibility around HIV infection also provides commentary on the limits of confession in the public sphere of the TRC, the final report of which was presented to government in 2003—two years after the publication of Welcome. Reflecting on his telephone conversation with Sammy’s girlfriend Bohlale, with whom Refentše has had sex, when Bohlale implores him to reveal their betrayal to Sammy, Refentše ponders, “I wish we could simply confess and cleanse our consciences. But it’s not that easy” (Mpe 52).

It is not self-evident that Refentše is narrating the story and this aspect of the novel has often stumped readers. But as Green points out, the lyrics of the South African Afro-fusion band Stimela’s song, “See the World Through the Eyes of a Child”, a refrain repeated on several occasions during the course of the narrative, include the line, “Won’t you please, write a letter to yourself” [sic] (Green 9). Like the notional “Heaven”, this conceit, whereby Refentše addresses himself in the second person, allows him to reflect on his actions as events unfold from a temporally and spatially omniscient vantage point, thereby opening a space for him to re-evaluate his perception of the events that have unfolded and his own and his friends’ part in, and responsibility for, them. In the present of the narrative, Refentše has committed suicide over the discovery of his
girlfriend Lerato’s infidelity with their mutual friend, Sammy. Lerato, wracked with guilt and fearing the accusations of her fellow students and what they “would have to say about her sexual looseness” (Mpe 69), follows Refentše’s route to “Heaven”. But the previously self-righteous Refentše, comforting Bohlale over her boyfriend’s infidelity, had succumbed to his own sexual desires and had sex with her. This forces him to reconsider his earlier moralising about Lerato and his former Tira-galong girlfriend Refilwe’s sexual “looseness” (Refilwe was also unfaithful to Refentše). Refilwe subsequently learns that she has contracted HIV some years before the main events of the plot (which are from 1991 to 1998), a fact she discovers when studying for a Masters in publishing at Oxford Brookes University in the UK. Refilwe, depicted as having a vicious tongue, is the primary vehicle in the novel for rural Tiragalong’s bigotry, of its moralising and xenophobia over issues ranging from migration and the “makwerekwere”—an offensive term for African migrants (xenophobia being on Green’s checklist of the typology of the post-apartheid novel)—female sexuality, witchcraft and HIV infection. Yet, ironically, Refilwe learns of her HIV status whilst conducting a relationship (in the UK) with a Nigerian. Whilst the novel distances itself from this kind of stigma and moralising associated with AIDS-talk—AIDS, we are told, “is a disease that lent itself to lies” (Mpe 121)—Mpe evidently sees some kind of poetic justice in having Refilwe die from AIDS. Crucially for the ethical driver of the novel, her death is not before she has come to the realisation that, on entering Heaven and meeting Refentše,

You know that you are not the same Refilwe that you were when he was alive. You can no longer hide behind your bias against Makwerekwere. You do not blame them for the troubles in your life, as you once did. You have come to understand that you too are a Hillbrowan. An Alexandran. A Johannesburger. An Oxfordian. A Lekwerekwere, just like those you once held in such contempt. The semen and blood of Makwerekwere flows in your Tiragalong and Hillbrow veins. Now you are the talk of the town and the village, and there is no Refentše to add his voice to the few voices of reason – who say that disease is just disease. That choice is choice, and no one in particular can be blamed for the spread of AIDS. (Mpe 123)

Of course, Refilwe’s “expanding consciousness” (Mpe 113) is conveyed through Refentše’s focalisation: Refentše is thus absorbed into her ethical awakening. In the passage quoted above, the narrative registers the
uneven progression of modernity through a “spatio-temporal compres-
sion”: traditional culture and a notion of reason always already synony-
mous with modernity collide within a single mindset—Refilwe’s. Refentše
is part of a minority bound to the “voice of reason” amid the tide of
superstitious, backward-looking gossip and rumour–mongering. Refentše
thus aligns himself with the biomedical understanding of HIV/AIDS as a
particular configuration of microscopic pathogens. Nevertheless, notions
of an even progression of modernity are troubled by the sense of comfort
Refentše finds in traditional culture—the “juxtaposition of asynchronous
orders and levels of experience” described by the WReC—when, in the
passage quoted above, he tells of his “spectacular route to the world of the
Ancestors”. Here, belief in modern science does not preclude an attach-
ment to traditional culture. Magona corroborates this view when she hints
at the limitations of thinking in binaristic terms of tradition/modernity
when she describes how the arrival of Christianity stymied an openness
to sexuality that has been to the detriment of HIV prevention: the “mis-
sionaries and other white people came to South Africa and ‘discovered
us’, and decided nothing, nothing about us was worth preserving. Nothing
in how we lived had any value. And we bought that. Traditionally there
was sex education for young people – but we were taught, and we have
adopted, the ‘say no’, which has never worked for us – and now we are
scrambling to go back to sex education” (emphasis added; qtd. in Attree
42).

Whilst Welcome to Our Hillbrow challenges notions of individual
responsibility for the spread of HIV/AIDS, the talk that the narrative
produces is presented as positively murderous. The stories Refilwe, as the
primary agent of Tiragalong’s retrogression, conveys back to Tiragalong
after Refentše’s suicide

sent you hurtling towards your second death. She blemished your name
more than anyone else could have hoped to do. Her tongue was a
generous flow of milk, nourishing Tiragalong with stories of your intel-
lectual achievements, coupled with your sad emotional naïveté. It was this
naïveté that had allowed you to get hooked up with the Johannesburg
woman who was your final nemesis. […] Refilwe rewrote large chunks of
the story that Tiragalong had constructed about you, which was that you
committed suicide because your mother had bewitched you. In an attempt
to drive your heart from the Johannesburg woman, Tiragalong had said,
your mother had used medicines that were too strong. (Mpe 43)
Tiragalong’s kangaroo court necklaces Refentše’s mother as gruesome punishment for her supposed witchery. Here, the narrative ironises the idiom of the Struggle in references to the “Comrades of Tiragalong” (Mpe 43)—necklacing, of course, was used in particular in the townships against those accused of collaborating with the apartheid regime. Tiragalong “drank in the scandal eagerly” that Refilwe helped to weave, but “had little regard for hard facts. With rumours and imaginings taken as testimony” (Mpe 44). Here invoking the popularised vocabulary of the TRC, gossip-mongering masquerades as law. In a society so susceptible to superstition, it is not surprising that it also “drank in” the quack AIDS remedies sanctioned by the government and associated with traditional healers, who continue to retain the trust of many Black Africans today. Yet by the time Refilwe returns home, her body wracked by AIDS, her family

knew the moment they saw her, that the African Potato, a medicinal plant that looked like a bulb of beetroot, would not be able to cure her. The African Potato was said by some to work much better than Virodene (which was then the latest pharmaceutical invention for the treatment of AIDS) providing the disease was caught in the initial stages. […] The African Potato was said to out-perform all other pharmaceutical inventions. (Mpe 118–19)

The story of Refilwe’s demise takes a life of its own but is hastened, nevertheless, by branded technical goods signifying capitalist modernity:

Stories of Refilwe’s decline brewed along the village grapevines, spilling out into the streets of Tiragalong and then to other areas; via the N1 … Telkom … Vodacom… MTN. Refilwe [sic] the Incarnation of AIDS … Former beauty turned into a scarecrow … An example of what Oxford, Johannesburg and Makwerewere could do to the careless thighs of the otherwise virtuous ones of Tiragalong. Refilwe, welcome to our Tiragalong, where your fellow villagers are awaiting your arrival. (original ellipses; Mpe 121)

Amongst a community in which those deemed witches are necklaced, we are made aware of the potentially sinister intentions of Relifwe’s “welcome” party.

Mpe thematises euphemism—itself a form of denial—in the narrative and, confuting Green’s accusations that this particular post-apartheid novel pays scant attention to the past, explicitly yokes the euphemism accruing to HIV/AIDS to the heinous crimes of the former National
Party regime. In a therapeutic gesture reminiscent of the AIDS autopathography, Refentše embarks upon a fictional account of a young female university student infected by HIV. Rather than “resolv[ing] to tumble down from the twentieth floor of her building, to escape her misery[, ... s]he chose a different route to dealing with her life”. Firstly, she would no longer visit Tiragalong, her home, “where the wagging tongues did their best to hasten her death”, and, secondly, she would write fiction, “pouring all her grief and alienation into the world of storytelling” (Mpe 55). Writing, if not a cure, becomes a form of therapy. Yet Refentše’s protagonist is confronted with the “curse” of publishing in her local, “African” language, Sepedi (Mpe 56). Her novel is “branded vulgar” by reviewers because linguistically it is regarded as too direct, lacking the social niceties deemed palatable within the South African educational publishing industry, in which “it [was] fine […] to call genitalia by their correct names in English and Afrikaans biology books […] yet in all other languages, they criminalised such linguistic honesty” (Mpe 56). This form of euphemism is linked explicitly in the novel with apartheid, which “had been confusing writers in this way. Trying to make them believe that euphemism equals good morals” (Mpe 56–7). Writing one year after the demise of apartheid, in 1995, Refentše’s protagonist experiences problems similar to

the damaging and dishonest indoctrination system which had been aimed at forcing South Africans to believe that life’s realities lay exclusively in euphemisms. These spaces called euphemisms, where arid Bantustans – into which hordes of black South Africans were driven according to their language groups (real or imagined) by the agents of the Apartheid system – became homelands; where any criticism of Apartheid thinking became a threat to public morals; where love across racial boundaries became mental instability. (Mpe 57)

Christopher van Wyk’s well-known 1979 poem, “In Detention”, published three years after the murder of student leader Steve Biko in police custody, exposes the distorting effects of euphemism in its most extreme form. Parodying police reports of such deaths during apartheid, the poem uses word play to lay bare the absurdity of their accounts, so that in the poem, “He fell from the ninth floor/He hanged himself”, eventually becomes, “He washed from the ninth floor while slipping/He hung from a piece of soap while washing” (50). In the context of
HIV/AIDS transmission in the post-apartheid state, euphemism is re-politicised and plagues government discourse: as a form of denialism and stigma, its consequences have been truly dire, particularly where it has been deployed to political ends to promote African Renaissance philosophy and specifically African cultural identities in contradistinction to biomedical research.

Magona in interview has discussed the use of euphemism in the townships—for instance, AIDS is often referred to as lo gawulayo [the chopper]. Indeed, across the continent, AIDS has acquired a wide-ranging vocabulary of euphemisms, from “worms” (a term Mhlongo uses in After Tears [106]) to “slim” (Uganda) and “standing on a nail” (amesimamia msumari, Tanzania). For Magona, the words, “HIV” and “AIDS”, “need to be made more everyday, to be absorbed into everyday language, so that the fear factor is lessened and the stigma factor is dissipated” (qtd. in Attree 35). Fear, she suggests, is one reason why people are refusing to get tested. Euphemism from this perspective mystifies local understanding about HIV/AIDS and risks further alienating its victims.

Mhlongo’s two AIDS picaresques, Dog Eat Dog and After Tears, seemingly take up this call to normalise HIV/AIDS: rather than the virus becoming the driving force of the novels, it is made ordinary by being woven into the social fabric of township life and incorporated, often to comic effect, into everyday public discourse. This strategy is nicely illustrated in Dog Eat Dog when the friends pass a traditional healer selling his wares at market. The healer reels off an inventory of medical conditions for which he sells remedies: “This will help you pass your exam[ . . . .] Which one do you want, boys? I’ve got everything; muti for impotency, low libido, weak erections, early ejaculations, AIDS-prevention medicine, headaches, stomach-aches, cancer, malaria, pregnancy; everything, boys” (Mhlongo, Dog 189)! AIDS has become one facet amongst many of the rainbow nation’s social reality. At stake in the fiction is whether this leaves the public discussion of HIV/AIDS vulnerable to side-lining and the response to the virus—governmental and popular—being represented uncritically. Mhlongo himself confirms the “ordinariness” of his portrayal of the virus in these, his first two novels, when he says in interview that, “I decided that AIDS should be just a background in my story, in some way.” But, crucially, Mhlongo claims, this facilitates a critical edge: “Because […] I wanted to show it where it started, you know, and also the denial. Because South Africa is in denial in terms of AIDS: from top to bottom it’s in denial” (qtd. in Attree 143). By referring to AIDS
“denial”, Mhlongo musters the language used against Mbeki in his catastrophically inept response to the epidemic, but Mhlongo’s endeavour to trace the origins of the virus within South Africa in this way, situating it as part of the wider social milieu, draws important connections between the political, sociocultural and biomedical spheres: something to which the opposing camps have been at times resistant.

Whilst *Dog Eat Dog* and the later *After Tears*, as Christopher Warnes argues, “map the aspirations of their protagonists to make real the promises of the post-apartheid project by leaving poverty behind” (Warnes 549), escaping deprivation via a university degree, both novels are underpinned by negative experiences of academic life; as Warnes goes on, “both novels expose the cultural and psychological dimensions of a young man’s experience of university structures for which Bantu education has ill prepared him” (emphasis added; 549). This under-privilege is exposed in *Dog Eat Dog*, for instance, when we learn that the protagonist Dingamanzi Makhedama Njomane’s (Dingz’s) new girlfriend Nkanyezi is not coping well with higher education because, like him, she is from a DET school—a school run by the former Department of Education and Training during apartheid and designated black (the derogatory term being “Bantu”) (Mhlongo, *Dog* 102). With their lives rapidly becoming determined by academic failure, the protagonists of both novels, characterising the picaresque, fall back on chicanery and living by their wits.

At the outset of *Dog Eat Dog*, Dingz faces a form of social exclusion when, in March 1994—notably just a few weeks before the vote for the ANC-led Government of National Unity—his application for a bursary to study on Wits’ Arts programme is turned down despite the evident poverty of his family. Dingz wonders, besides knowledge of his father’s recent death, of the nine surviving family members, of the fact that the family’s home in Soweto was leased to them, “What more information do these people want about the poverty that my family is living in” (Mhlongo, *Dog* 8)? Instead, he interprets his rejection in racial terms, alluding to the pernicious easiveness of racism Mpe addresses via the euphemism theme in *Welcome*:

> They should have told me plainly, ‘We regret to inform you that you are black, stupid and poor; therefore we can not waste our money on your thick Bantu skull.’ I could have swallowed the words if they were simple and direct. (Mhlongo, *Dog* 8)
Dingz finds himself forced out of what he calls the “cheese life of the Y”, that is, the YMCA, and instead “pushed back into a gorge filled with hungry crocodiles[ , ...] the life of the unemployed and unemployable, whose days in the township fold without hope” (Mhlongo, Dog 8; 9). Higher education is shorthand for privilege and the promise of a comfortable life beyond the townships. On election day, Dingz recounts,

Our Big Brothers had promised beautiful things to those who lived a life of poverty[ . . . ] I was standing in that queue because we had been promised access to a better education. I wanted to vote for whoever claimed to have fought tooth and nail to overthrow the apartheid government so that I now found myself admitted to a formerly whites-only institution. (Mhlongo, Dog 61)

Fully aware of the value of a university degree, Dingz feigns a black-out as a means of avoiding an exam for which he is ill-prepared, and then embarks upon an elaborate ploy to procure a fraudulent death certificate for a fictitious cousin, the news of whose death, he tells the dean of faculty to whom he is applying for an aegrotat, brought about his fainting fit during the exam. Dingz’s friend Dunga justifies the “dog eat dog” mentality of the friends by invoking the autobiography of the preeminent figure in Black South African intellectual history, Es’kia Mphahlele, in the process securing the novel within the historical context of apartheid:

the only language that whites understand in this country is lies. You haven’t read Africa [sic] My Music by Professor Mphahlele? He says exactly what I am saying; [sic] that you must lie to the whites in order to survive in this country because the whites themselves already live in the web of a big lie. (Mhlongo, Dog 167–8)

Following the line of argument in Chapter 2 of this volume, I take the “big lie” to mean the larger, systemic truths of apartheid, including the socio-economic impoverishment of Black people. Ultimately, Dingz will fail two of his first-year courses, Introduction to South African Law and Philosophy, but as a result of his persistence is granted the aegrotat and allowed to pass into the second year of his degree programme.

This episode picks up Mamphela Ramphele’s discussion about the problem of mediocrity in the transforming higher education sector. Promoting high standards in universities is crucial, she argues, for the successful transformation of the sector as it widens access to increasing numbers of Black students. She points to the socio-economics of failure when she writes that:
Mediocrity is unaffordable to poor people. People with adequate resources can afford second chances; poor people might only have one. […] They cannot afford to repeat courses and risk losing scholarships. Tolerance of mediocrity would betray their aspirations. Black people did not fight against apartheid only to settle for mediocrity. (Ramphele 219)

Like anti-colonialist intellectual Frantz Fanon, a longstanding champion of the idea that education is key to political transformation, Ramphele couples high educational standards with a fairer society: “Equity and equal access to mediocrity is an injustice that undermines the future of our nation” (Ramphele 226). Fanon writes, “We ought to uplift the people; we must develop their brains, fill them with ideas, change them and make them into human beings. […] In the end everything depends on the education of the masses” (Fanon 158–9). The opening paragraph of After Tears ends with the words, “The four years that I had spent there [in Cape Town], shuttling between the university lecture theatres and libraries, had come to nil. My fate had been decided. I wasn’t fit to become an advocate the following year. I was a failure” (Mhlongo, After 7). The protagonist Bafana Kuzwayo, from the Chi (Chiawelo) district of Soweto, is studying Law at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and, when he fails his finals, concocts his family and friends a complex yarn about passing his exams. He goes as far as setting up a bogus business as an advocate. In a form of “Black tax”, described elsewhere by Mhlongo as the sense of responsibility Black South Africans experience in their need to provide economically for extended families, which can be both a “burden or a blessing[; …] some kind of tax or an act of ubuntu” (Mhlongo, “Introduction”), Bafana is desperately trying to meet the expectations of his proud uncle, Nyawana, who has been so confident in his nephew’s success that he gave Bafana the nickname “Advo” before he had even completed his degree programme, and of his mother, a woman who had a “limited Western education” and “had boasted […] that I was going to be the youngest advocate to come out of Chi” (Mhlongo, After 9). Explaining the embeddedness of Black tax in postapartheid society, Mhlongo points out that many Black South Africans believe “there is no Black middle class in South Africa, only poverty masked by graduation gowns and debts. ‘Black tax’ therefore affects every black person and not only a particular class because we are all taxed and surviving on revolving credit” (“Introduction”). The consequences of this “tax” are evident in the novel as Bafana’s deception spirals beyond his control: he tells his
family that UCT is withholding his results until he pays his fees and, as a consequence, his mother decides to sell their house in order to pay off his debt. This ultimately leads to his two uncles losing their Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses, acquired by corrupt means, and to the discovery that Bafana’s now-deceased father procured fraudulent title deeds during apartheid for the house on the point of sale. When Bafana’s bogus attorney business, set up alongside his Nigerian business partner’s Internet café, finally becomes a reality and Bafana’s mother’s “eyes were bright with pride”, he, on the other hand, “just felt like a criminal” (Mhlongo, After 161). Bafana remembers vividly the day when he discovered that “everything had fallen apart” and “I realised that I had failed everything except for Criminal Law” (Mhlongo, After 10).

In the wider, African context, “things falling apart” alludes to Nigerian Chinua Achebe’s now canonised 1958 novel, in which the breakdown of the Umuofia Igbo community is attributed not only to the implosion of the community, embodied in the central protagonist Okonkwo, in its failure to embrace modernity (signalled most prominently in representations of an entrenched patriarchy and, in Okonkwo, a masculinist pride), but also to the arrival of the British coloniser. Questions of responsibility in After Tears for Bafana’s failure, which he experiences as Black tax, likewise abound, and can be ascribed both to his own personal failings and to wider systemic conditions still in place following the demise of apartheid to which Bafana is subject, implying that responsibility for his failure, as in Achebe, largely lies elsewhere.

In Dog Eat Dog, HIV/AIDS is sedimented and normalised within the broader context of what Shaun Irlam has called the “unravelling rainbow”. Styled in the blurb on the dust jacket of the Modern African Writing edition as “providing a glimpse into South Africa’s pivotal kwai to […] generation”, the narrative shifts focus from the Wits campuses to the rich textures of Sowetan township life during a period of political upheaval informed by Mhlongo’s own childhood. At university, Dingz has been thrown out of his YMCA accommodation, having been caught entertaining his new girlfriend, Nkanyezi, in an institution in which overnight stays by the opposite sex are strictly prohibited by the priest. Dingz contracts gonorrhoea as a result of this encounter, having “forgotten that there was a thing called a condom as I reached for the heaven that lay between her legs” (Mhlongo, Dog 111). It is only when he bends down to retrieve his jeans under the bed that he sees “an open box of free condoms that I had collected from the campus clinic the
previous month”, and, “[q]uietly, […] started blaming myself for putting myself under unnecessary stress” (Mhlongo, Dog 112). Typifying the picaresque’s trickster figure, Dingz makes light even of this potential catastrophe: the possibility of HIV infection is reduced to an “unnecessary stress”. The first reference to HIV/AIDS is made a few chapters earlier, when, ogling Nkanyezi and her friend as they pass Dingz’s Orlando West home during election-day celebrations, Dunga cautions Dingz to “be careful” about “Z3”—slang for AIDS (Mhlongo, Dog 85). The ignorance of the group of friends is exposed when Dingz retorts that the young women “are still new in the game” (Mhlongo, Dog 85) and therefore unlikely to be carriers. That it is the shy Nkanyezi with her appealing dimples who passes gonorrhoea to Dingz points up their naivety. It is the female voice in the novel that presents the vanguard of a reason synonymous with modern-day science. Babes curbs the sexual licentiousness of Themba and Dworkin as they savour the prospect of another sexual encounter: “Guys, you must be careful nowadays[…] Because AIDS kills, my boy” (Mhlongo, Dog 119). Themba falls back on homophobic rhetoric when he baits her, “Don’t you know that circumcised straight men never catch the gay plague?” This initiates a discussion of traditional circumcision schools, which Dworkin initially claims do not exist in the townships. Dworkin reproves Themba for apparently denigrating “our ancient and noble tradition”, one that Theks, Dunga’s former girlfriend, lambasts as “still creeping in the heart of darkness and should be brought to the light of modernity” because “It’s doing more harm than good in the community” (Mhlongo, Dog 120). The “heart of darkness”, of course, invoking Conrad, not only calls to mind racist notions of Congolese “incivility”, but also Western perceptions of its lack—after all, Conrad’s novel ultimately turns upon the darkness at the heart, not of Africa, but of European capitalist mercantilism. Kurtz’s notorious dirge on his own deathbed, “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad 112), captures his moment of realisation about the “civilising” project and his own heinous part in it.

The “after tears” of the title of Mhlongo’s second novel is a reference to the post-funeral parties popularised in Soweto that celebrate the life of the deceased. Whilst these do not specifically commemorate victims of AIDS-related illness, as Mhlongo has pointed out, no doubt they have proliferated in the face of the epidemic, especially given that most of those dying in Soweto, according to Mhlongo (qtd. in Attree 140), are youths who have fallen prey to AIDS. In After Tears, such a party is
held in memory of Bafana’s much-loved if roguish Uncle Nyawana, who
dies following a period of illness after an unspecified accident. But it also
refers, as Mhlongo notes, “in a broader sense[…] to the after tears of
apartheid” and the continuing challenges young Sowetans face in their
daily lives: “crime, poverty, unemployment, xenophobia, hunger” (qtd. in
Attree 140). Nyawana’s teacher friend Dilika, dismissed from the profes-
sion as a result of his alcoholism, tells Bafana, “the cost of living has
seriously become higher after these tears of apartheid” (Mhlongo, After
15). HIV/AIDS in this novel figures, firstly, in the family tragedy of the
AIDS-related illness of Bafana’s ten-year-old cousin Yuri, who surprises
everyone by “ma[king] it” to the millennium’s eve in 1999 (Mhlongo,
After 117), and the death at 27 from, again, an AIDS-related illness
of Yuri’s young mother Thandi (Bafana’s aunt), who had infected her
daughter, and, secondly, in Bafana’s friends’ sexualised repartee. AIDS is
presented as an everyday reality alongside which one must exist.

Whilst in Dog Eat Dog and After Tears popular discourse on
HIV/AIDS helps to render AIDS-talk ordinary, at the same time the
substance of such talk risks perpetuating the myths, stigmatising and
silencing that have accrued around it. In the friends’ light-hearted discus-
sion in Dog Eat Dog of the origin of AIDS, Babes believes it started
“somewhere in Central Africa in the late 1960s[. …] Somewhere in
the Congo” (Mhlongo, Dog 126), but Themba quips that it origi-
nated in Soweto in the 1980s and proceeds to weave a fanciful story
about Vera the Ghost, who, in revenge for being gang-raped, infects
her five assailants with HIV. But on the arrival of two “Kiwi-black
Shangaans”, Dingz’s friends Tawanda (T-Man) from Zimbabwe and
Mohammed from Ethiopia, they find “something to divert us from the
AIDS topic” (Mhlongo, Dog 128), namely their own xenophobic percep-
tions of other Africans. Although this very insouciance brings AIDS-talk
into the open, enabling the friends to speak freely and publicly about
HIV/AIDS, paradoxically, it exemplifies what Babes earlier has attributed
to the “mythomaniac” Dworkin (Mhlongo, Dog 124): a kind of xeno-
phobic bigotry that reproduces the silencing and denialism associated
with Nelson Mandela’s and then Mbeki’s regimes.

The normalising of AIDS-talk in After Tears is facilitated amongst the
friends by the uninhibited discussion of sex, which in turn has been incor-
porated into a nexus of sex, capital and HIV infection—Bafana’s mother
warns against the “over-sexualised township world” (Mhlongo, After 48).
Sex is another commodity in a marketplace of branded goods and flashy
cars. Zero, for instance, explains that a past lover sees him as “her walking ATM” (Mhlongo, *After* 49) and equates success at attracting women with owning fancy cars, telling Bafana that, whilst Bafana has a “bright future” because of his university education, “Unless I hijack a nice Gstring BMW, these women will always look down upon the likes of me” (Mhlongo, *After* 129). Zero blames scantily clad women for the spread of AIDS: “Some of them wear revealing miniskirts just to challenge you, man. That’s why Avalon Cemetery is full, it’s because these ladies are living advertisements for AIDS” (Mhlongo, *After* 48). Uncle Nyawana’s reprobate friends, the alcoholic Dilika and notorious car-jacker PP, recount fanciful stories of AIDS infection like the man who was infected by a sex worker who “tripped, fell and landed right” onto his erect penis (Mhlongo, *After* 107–8); and Dilika even claims that the poor deliberately get infected in order to receive state grants (Mhlongo, *After* 108).

As in *Dog Eat Dog*, whilst it is women who are often blamed for the spread of HIV, it is also the female voice which measures the myth-making emerging around HIV/AIDS. Bafana’s mother and her friend sis Zinhle in this episode repeatedly dismiss the storytellers as liars.

Writing about the proliferation of discourses on sexuality during the period of political transition in South Africa, Deborah Posel distinguishes between what she calls the “politics of sexuality”, which, she argues, is always present in any society, and the “ politicization of sexuality”, which occurs only “intermittently” in the “sense of becoming the site of heated public argument, mobilization and conflict” and the “product of particular historical conjunctures” (127). Whilst Posel begins with the very obvious politicisation of sexuality as an effect of apartheid law (via legislation like the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act [1949] and the Immorality Amendment Act [1950]) when (talk of) one’s sexuality was censured and policed, she argues that in the transitional society the South African HIV/AIDS controversy,

although immediately concerned with questions of science and drugs[,] is also a struggle over the discursive constitution of sexuality, in a form which dramatizes the ways in which recently heated and contentious struggles over the manner of sexuality are enmeshed in the politics of ‘nation-building’, and the inflections of race, class and generation within it. (Posel, “Sex” 128)
HIV/AIDS in this analysis is one constituent of a public sphere that is necessarily in the process of being shaped and reimagined during a period of political transition. In *Dog Eat Dog* and *After Tears* the friends’ discussion of HIV/AIDS dramatises just such a struggle, mapping the contours of the HIV/AIDS controversy in the process: sexuality in Mhlongo’s fiction is the site in which debates about cultural identity “versus” capitalist modernity and nation-building are staged. As Mhlongo, speaking about his fiction in interview, has commented:

I wanted [...] something that will help me mirror the broader South African society in terms of how they perceive this kind of epidemic. [...] There is also the debate about African medicine and treatment, if you look at it properly, in a broader way, look at it from the top structures of South Africa, from the government, there is this thing that a beet-root can cure AIDS, and things like that. [...] So there is an element of traditionalism and an element of scientific medicine. (qtd. in Attree 143)

It is the act of dramatising the debate in the fiction rather than the credibility of its participants that serves to render AIDS-talk “everyday”, as Magona would have it. The dialogic nature of Mhlongo’s fiction, in which conflicting voices reflect the scope of contemporary socio-political debates within South Africa on HIV/AIDS are aired, suggests that Mhlongo is not attempting to align his own views on the controversy with those of his roguish characters.

Posel comments on the speed and extent of changing attitudes towards sexuality, post-1994, and the proliferation of discourses on it, remarking on the “veritable explosion of sexual imagery, display and debate”. Yet, she believes, change has not by any means been welcomed or accepted in all quarters: “Indeed, the anxieties, denials and stigmas which persist in the midst of new and unprecedented declarations of sexuality – often provoked directly by them – contribute directly to the new sites and intensities of the politicization of sexuality” (Posel, “Sex” 129). Here, the fissures of combined and uneven modernity are exposed. Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* brings to light just such anxieties about modern-day sexuality, siphoned through the backward-looking attitudes of the Tira-galong community and thematised in the novel as gossip, especially on the topic of “loose-thighed” Hillbrow women (Mpe 43). Modernity encroaches upon tradition in the sexual realm in *After Tears*, with Dilika
warning Bafana that the “problem with being overeducated” is that “education makes one forget tradition”, such as the superstition that “young boys should never look at the private parts of older women because they’ll go blind” (Mhlongo, After Tears 95). But PP, functioning as a voice of reason, dismisses the idea as “those boring old cultural rules”, which, since his own mother is older than his father, would have meant he would never have been born, and Bafana is similarly sceptical, viewing it as “our nasty little conversation” of which he would be embarrassed to be overheard (Mhlongo, After 95). Sexual excess at Kwaito parties in Dog Eat Dog, portrayed in the “moans and groans of one-night stands” on residents’ front lawns; dogs “stabbed with a broken bottle by an angry male party animal who had been trying to invade their yard for kinky sex” (Mhlongo, Dog 99); car sound systems so impressive that “most girls wouldn’t give a damn about the size of your dick” (Mhlongo, Dog 98), is a sign of uneven development since Dingz rationalises it in terms of the social reality of township life: the “overwhelming pressure of the environment in which we live makes people pursue their own pleasure at whatever cost”, lifestyles often propped up by loan sharks or “mashonisa” (Mhlongo, Dog 100).

One key consequence of such politicisation post-1994, as Posel argues, has been that sexuality “is now first and foremost a matter of the allocation of rights (on the part of citizens) and responsibilities (on the part of fellow citizens as well as the state)”. In the context of discourses of post-apartheid democracy, she claims, the question of rights eclipses the “contending and shifting moral positions associated with particular party political programmes” (Posel, “Sex” 129). Rights are the standard bearers of liberal politics (as I argue in Chapter 2, associated with the new regime’s neoliberalism) and, in South Africa, are supported by a constitution lauded as the world’s most progressive, and enforced by a Constitutional Court (Posel, “Sex” 129). But we can see how grass-roots rights-activism has energised the post-apartheid public sphere by helping to mobilise those formerly excluded from it; for instance, as Lodge comments, “the TAC’s [Treatment Action Campaign’s] (rights-based activism […] has had the additional effect of opening new space for the exercise of citizenship in local patriarchal settings in which poor people are too often expected to behave as subjects, not citizens” (“Politics” 1585). Yet contemporary discourses on sexuality are also scored by seams of conflict (one might argue this is what characterises the public sphere). On the one hand, “sex has become a sphere – perhaps even
pre-eminently the sphere – within which newfound freedoms are vigorously asserted” (Posel, “Sex” 131–2), catalysed by the undoubted need to bring “the subject of sex out into the open and stimulate a national conversation about sex, sexuality and the risks of contracting HIV” (Posel, “Sex” 133) and “to constitute an essentially modern sexual subject, one who is knowledgeable, responsible, in control, and free to make informed choices” (Posel, “Sex” 134) through frank, responsible and open talk about sex. This project is endorsed by HIV/AIDS NGOs like loveLife, the TAC and Soul City. On the other, HIV infection has become associated with wanton, excessive sexuality and hence with moral shame (Posel, “Sex” 139): “With the virus a signifier of ‘bad’ sexuality – rampant and polluted – sexuality is a locus of moral shame – the shame of ways of life which were fuelled by the old social order and which persist, hidden by refusals to talk openly about them” (Posel, “Sex” 139). So, paradoxically, increased discourse on sexuality has led in certain conditions to increased secrecy and stigmatising, and consequently to silencing: “The politicization of sexuality, therefore, is evident as much in the public refusals to talk sex as in its unveilings and thrusting into public spaces of debate and entertainment. It is a politics of evasion in the midst of confrontation; each animates the other” (Posel, “Sex” 139).

Posel describes how Mbeki’s nationalist-Africanist rejection of Western stereotypes of an uncheckable Black male sexuality effectively “uncoupl[es]” HIV/AIDS from sex (Posel, “Sex” 142). Mbeki wanted to sever the association between Black African sexuality and AIDS, debates over which, he believed, had been racialised; as Posel explains: “The call to provide antiretroviral drugs to HIV-positive women – which included a plea to include women who had been raped – he declared, had an offensive racist agenda, rooted in stereotypes about the rapacious and violent sexuality of black men” (“Sex” 142). At a speech at the historically Black Fort Hare University, Mbeki spoke of the Western imperialist racialisation of HIV/AIDS: “Convinced that we are but natural-born, promiscuous carriers of germs, unique in the world, they proclaim that our continent is doomed to an inevitable mortal end because of our unconquerable devotion to the sin of lust [Mail & Guardian, 26 October 2001]” (qtd. in Posel, “Sex” 143). HIV/AIDS, Mbeki contended, had been hijacked by Western imperialist powers with a capitalist agenda and, in fact, is primarily caused by poverty and a symptom of global capitalism.

The discussion in Dog Eat Dog that ensues between Dworkin and Theks about traditional circumcision by school doctors rehearses Mbeki’s
controversial nationalist-Africanist rhetoric against biomedical research, which Mbeki identified with the “West”. Dworkin chastises Theks, “Do you think that our traditional rites of passage should be forsaken in favour of those of the whites? Do you favour waiting until you turn twenty-one to celebrate your passage into adulthood with that stupid key” (Mhlongo, *Dog* 120)? For Dworkin, observing traditional culture equates to rejecting Western cultural hegemony and all that this signifies, circumcision being preferable to “that stupid key”. (It has been widely shown, of course, that circumcision does reduce HIV infection rates. Statistics suggest a 60% drop in infection amongst populations in which men have been circumcised [John Lazarus].) Dworkin’s seemingly light-hearted banter satirises the role global capitalism, with America at its helm, is seen to play in the response to the virus—Dworkin calls this “economic fundamentalism”: “It is not that AIDS is incurable, but that the Americans are making money out of this disease by making you believe that it is” (Mhlongo, *Dog* 123). The notion of economic fundamentalism calls to mind Mohsin Hamid’s novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), published some years after *Dog Eat Dog*, which steadfastly refuses to identify fundamentalism with radical Islam despite charting the Twin Towers atrocities of 2001. Changez, the US-educated Pakistani protagonist, has been hired as a financial analyst by a New York firm and the novel painstakingly historicises the contemporary “war on terror” within US imperialism (the novel thereby suggests that this “war” has sprung, not from the forces of good versus evil as the Bush regime would have it [whereby the United States stands for all that is good and certain Muslim and/or Arab states stand for all that is evil], but from a long history of America exercising its [financial] muscle overseas).

Mhlongo painstakingly yokes HIV infection in *After Tears* to the socio-political milieu, thereby giving some credence to government claims that HIV/AIDS is a socio-economic disease. As in *Dog Eat Dog*, set some six years earlier in 1994, in *After Tears* life in Soweto is marked by the struggle to board “the gravy train”: “If you’re black and you failed to get rich in the first year of our democracy, when Tata Mandela came to power, you must forget it”, Zero tells Bafana. “The bridge”, he goes on, “between the stinking rich and the poor has been demolished. That is the harsh reality of our democracy” (Mhlongo, *Dog* 14–5). This again calls to mind Mhlongo’s discussion of Black tax, which forecloses any possibility of Black South Africans being upwardly mobile because they are always already contending with the legacies of apartheid and caught
within networks of familial dependency, support, obligation and debt. The accoutrements of capitalism sit jarringly amongst the poverty of the township: branded, luxury goods like BMWs and Audis, Rolex watches, J&B whisky, satellite dishes and Nokia cell phones are widely on display within a largely impoverished community that sets store by conspicuous consumption. Johannesburg is portrayed as the exemplary global city: “It was busy in the Jo’burg city centre. Everybody was trying to make money” (Mhlongo, Dog 72). Yet Bafana’s friends observe a degree of scepticism about what a township protestor against prepaid meters calls the “monster of capitalism”, which has replaced the inequities and injustices of apartheid (Mhlongo, After 158). Whilst Mhlongo’s comments in interview suggest his cynicism towards Mbeki’s position on the virus, After Tears, like Dog Eat Dog, nevertheless endeavours to unravel the very complex relationship between the South African government’s response to HIV/AIDS and issues like poverty and political corruption. Zero, who startles Bafana with the knowledge that he was an early Fort Hare University dropout during the days of apartheid and subsequently became a litter picker, is vociferous in his critique of the new regime in its handling of the amenities crisis in the townships. The amenities suppliers claim they are owed for electricity and water and that, until the debt is paid, the district will remain disconnected. Underscored by his mantra harking to the failure of the South African dream, “the revolution will not be televised”, Zero bemoans the ANC government in terms of capitalist modernity: “these capitalists”, he tells Bafana,

have removed the [electricity] cables. Ever since we voted for them they don’t give a fuck about us any more. [...] They claim that we are stealing their electricity. To get reconnected we need to pay one thousand five hundred bucks. That’s why there’s an urgent meeting today. The residents are angry, Advo. I’ve never seen people as angry with the government. [...] The government is taking us for shit! This is Msawawa, our matchbox city, and we’ll show them like we showed the apartheid government before them. (Mhlongo, After 156)

HIV/AIDS becomes one amongst many “issues” capitalism is seen to produce. The narrative probes the nature of the relationship between the virus and poverty when, during the protest march that ensues, HIV/AIDS appears on the red banners of the marchers alongside the issue of prepaid meters (more costly than standard meters):
Invoking the idiom of the Struggle, the protestors identify the fast unravelling rainbow:

Water is life, comrades! We used to pay cheaper flat rates for water and electricity during apartheid. Why do we have to have this expensive prepaid with a black ANC government? Why are we, the poor people, discriminated against by our own government? (Mhlongo, After 157)

Confirming Patrick Bond’s argument that essentially racial apartheid has been replaced by class apartheid (Elite 198), the “monster of apartheid” has been replaced by the “monster of capitalism”, and, the protestors believe, it is capitalism that has “led to the outbreak of cholera in KwaZulu, comrades, because our people can’t afford to buy water” (Mhlongo, After 158). Of course, insanitary conditions make communities more susceptible to HIV infection as well, a point I pick up in Chapter 7. “Black Economic Empowerment” has become shorthand for “Black Economic Enrichment”, and is the preserve of those Black politicians who, according to Zero, have lined their own pockets on coming to power after 1994. Even language, perceived by Bafana’s mama as a preserve of culture—specifically, culture in African forms—is susceptible to the law of the market. When Mama dismisses Bafana’s new girlfriend Lerato in part in terms of “not once hearing her speak Sesotho”, in the process “undermin[ing] our African way of life”, Bafana retorts that the only South Africans enacting such cultural recuperation are “those that find it difficult to rise above the yoke of poverty”; that is, “the ones selling fruit and vegetables in spaza shops and chicken feet on the pavements” (Mhlongo, After 175). As Bafana sees it, “You can’t think big in African languages, Mama, and you can’t move out of the township either. I don’t want to be trapped in Soweto forever” (Mhlongo, After 175). Mama wonders whether this is the “shit [they teach you] in your university” (Mhlongo, After 175)? English here is endorsed as the preeminent “global” language, the language of (global) finance, and the language that “even the so-called black intelligentsia speak […] amongst themselves” (Mhlongo, After 175).
Higher education in Mhlongo’s novels is perceived to be the ticket out of a society that continues, postapartheid, to be riven along lines of race and class, and in the townships, from crippling poverty and stagnation perpetuated by the failures of the neo-liberal postapartheid state. The friends in *Dog Eat Dog* associate global capitalism with academia and academic expertise, revealing a deep scepticism about the university as institution. Speaking “as if he was our primary school teacher” and in the process toeing Mbeki’s denialist line, Dworkin quips that AIDS does not stand for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome but “American Invention for Discouraging Sex”, or, “in a more scholarly form ‘Academic Imaginary Death Sentence’”. In other words, he claims, “It was fabricated to marginalize the illiterate and the poor. [...] The rich and the arrogant are conniving with the academics against the poor and the ignorant so that they will be the only ones able to enjoy the worldly paradise of sex” (Mhlongo, *Dog* 121). He airs a kind of anti-intellectual sentiment within his critique of global capitalism by yoking economic with intellectual elites. Academics are perceived to be in cahoots with global capitalism in the knowledge they produce about HIV/AIDS, and the manner and means by which such knowledge is deployed to subjugate the poor. As Edward Said has pointed out, though, academia does not map neatly on to intellectualism: academics and intellectuals are not necessarily one and the same because academics serve the interests of the university (and funding bodies and sponsors) and therefore lack the impartiality of the public intellectual (*Representations* 67–8). Dworkin, like Mbeki, identifies these “interests” as global capitalism, tarring academics with the same brush of privilege and double-standards as the bourgeoisie, a class to which of course they belong:

Only the bourgeois can afford the Lovers Plus condoms, my dear. And where does this leave us? In other words, the academics and bourgeois are telling us that if you’re rich, go to the nearest whorehouse and fuck any prostitute in the world and you will still live longer. But if you’re poor you are at great risk of contracting their disease because you are bound to use the cheap fong-kong condoms supplied through the beneficence of the rich bureaucrats. (Mhlongo, *Dog* 124)

Themba sums up Dworkin’s anti-capitalist posturing when he asks, “are you saying that sex has become the social activity of the rich while AIDS is a discriminatory disease of the poor” (Mhlongo, *Dog* 124)?
Dog Eat Dog calls to mind Ayi Kwei Armah’s scatological critique of neo-colonial Ghana in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born (1968) (Warnes 554), which indeed forms part of Dingz’s library of Black Consciousness reading, numbering amongst writings by Mphahlele, Richard Wright and Steve Biko (Mhlongo, Dog 55). Dingz describes his bodily excavations in great somatic detail, as in, “I sat there inside the ceramic shitpot thinking about my victory. As I relaxed, staring at the ceiling, I felt something coming out of my bowels. I tried to push but it went back into my colon again” (Mhlongo, Dog 31). Township life is characterised by grubbing for food at funerals, disposing of garbage, cleaning shit. In an early passage evoking the spirit of Armah, Dingz recounts,

I was happy at the Y. I had almost forgotten the smell of sewage that filled the air at home each time the chain jammed in the cistern of our small toilet[ . . . ] I was enjoying the luxury of using the soft and freely supplied toilet paper; the skill of softening pages from a telephone directory when answering the call of nature in the township was no longer necessary. (Mhlongo, Dog 9)

The metaphoric qualities of these scenes are evident in After Tears as well. Bafana, advocating the use of English over indigenous African languages, tells his mother that, “You can’t think big in African languages. […] You know, when I enter our family house in Chi I can smell the poverty inside”, to which Mama replies, “Is this what they teach you in your shit university” (emphasis added; After Tears 175)?

Township life in Soweto is characterised in Dog Eat Dog by queuing and waiting, by the “slow-moving time” Dingz, who is “tired of [his] uneventful township life”, is trying to kill (Mhlongo, Dog 9). Whilst time stretches out into indeterminacy, registering the slow time of underdevelopment within what the WReC describes as the “multiple temporalities extant in the combined and uneven development of a periphery” (WReC 89), space is at a premium, for in the family’s “four-roomed Soweto house” privacy is impossible. The new “cheese life” is defined by what it is not: Dingz is no longer reduced, just like Toloki in Zakes Mda’s Ways of Dying (1995), to “walk[ing] the streets of the township to find funerals at which to get my weekend lunches” (Mhlongo, Dog 9). At “the Y [he] could differentiate between [his meals]” and he is “no longer forced to
short-change [his] aunt” when he is sent out to the shops (Mhlongo, *Dog* 10). Higher education is his meal ticket out of immiseration.

Just as one of the closing scenes of *Beautyful Ones* depicts the corrupt politician Koomson being forced to make his swift exit during a political coup in postcolonial Ghana from his persecutors through a shit-smeread latrine, *Dog Eat Dog* ends with the failure of the slumbering, drunken Themba’s “anal brakes”: he “fire[s] a long, loud anal explosion” and, in the context of HIV/AIDS, Dingz rather pointedly interjects, “You can’t stop the force of nature” (Mhlongo, *Dog* 222). The novel suggests that higher education, postapartheid, has been absorbed into a capitalist world-system, reflected in Dworkin’s comment upon the “liberal” subjects South African universities produce. Dworkin accuses Dingz of being “Witsified”: “Studying in this liberal institution”, he tells him, “has turned you into a typical example of the product of our historic abortion” (Mhlongo, *Dog* 214). The liberalisation of South African culture is exemplified in the row between the two sparring friends, sparked over what Dworkin calls “this absurd post-apartheid renaming”—Dingane Day, or in Afrikaans, *Dingaans Dag* or *Geloftedag*: the Day of the Vow—which formerly commemorated the historic battle in 1838 between Zulu King Dingane and the British, has become Day of Reconciliation, and Sharpeville Day has become Human Rights Day. Of the latter, Themba ponders the “undermining of the struggle of the black people in this country […] so] that we can please the white people” (Mhlongo, *Dog* 214). Dingz believes that Dingane Day meant different things to different racial groups anyway. Dworkin plants the blame for Dingz’s apparent brainwashing squarely at the doorstep of the educational institution, identifying “the power of the liberal education” (Mhlongo, *Dog* 214). That the day of the Sharpeville massacre is now commemorated as Human Rights Day smooths over those race-class inequities which the Sharpeville protests originally contested and that have persisted through transition. The mobilisation of human-rights discourse, the novel suggests, is indicative of the neoliberalising of South African politics. As Eric Posner argues, the project of implementing of universal human rights by bodies like the United Nations is flawed, for instance, exposing inconsistencies in the interpretation from one country to the next of what constitutes a human right—a question of morality—and a top-down approach resembling the nineteenth-century “civilising mission” of colonialism. Posner writes: “human rights were never as universal as people hoped, and the
belief that they could be forced upon countries as a matter of international law was shot through with misguided assumptions from the very beginning” (Posner). In *Dog Eat Dog*, the student friends are sceptical of contemporary politics and some are not taken in by the ubiquitous discourses of forgiveness and reconciliation: Themba lambasts the “same old rhetoric of reconciliation” (Mhlongo, *Dog* 213) and Dworkin criticises Babes’ reconciliatory politics as “liberal, lightweight” (Mhlongo, *Dog* 213); in the case of King Dingane, “we now think of reconciliation with the same enemy who killed him” (Mhlongo, *Dog* 213). So their discussion probes ideas of nation-building, just as their AIDS-talk comes to signify beyond the biomedical condition itself as an index of the national and African imaginary. Mbeki’s denialist approach to HIV/AIDS that was in part motivated by his desire to promote the African Renaissance and protect African integrity has filtered down to Dingz’s friends, with Dworkin uncritically reproducing it. Whilst Mhlongo seems to resist providing a definitive response to the HIV/AIDS controversy, his novels play an important part in revivifying public debate and the sphere from which this debate emanates. AIDS-talk is presented as a shifting and unstable terrain through which notions of an equally unstable, uneven modernity are filtered.

Although Dingz questions the assumption that a university education leads to personal betterment, Zimbabwean T-Man talks of Black aspiration: “It is the struggle of the black man everywhere in the world; to rise above our situation” (Mhlongo, *Dog* 219). The friends debate the demographics of the university and the representation of Black South Africans. Dworkin claims other Black Africans are used as “window dressing” to satisfy the university’s “affirmative action programme” (Mhlongo, *Dog* 220), whilst Dingz identifies higher education as a product within the capitalist market when he says that “an institution like this one is run like a corporation, where vice-chancellors are like CEOs, academics like managers and students like me and you are the customers” (Mhlongo, *Dog* 220). So the very institutions where forms of knowledge are produced are subject to the market, just as HIV/AIDS is perceived by the likes of Dworkin to be a convenient tool for Western capitalist exploitation. The most calculating of the friends are able to turn racist discourse and notions of African culture, and white South Africans’ apparent ignorance of them, to their advantage. Dingz knowingly “play[s] the race card” during an angry exchange at an ATM, when a white woman asks
Dingz to enquire why a Black woman at the ATM is struggling to complete her transaction:

I could tell that my words had had a strong impact. Yes, it is true that I was implying that she was a racist. It was the season of change when everyone was trying hard to disown apartheid, but to me the colour white was synonymous with the word and I didn’t regret what I had said to the blonde. Anyway, I had been told that playing the race card is a good strategy for silencing those whites who still think they are more intelligent than black people. (Mhlongo, *Dog* 35)

Dingz invokes the “season of change” with a biting sarcasm, registering his disillusionment with notions of transition. He also participates in the deception to secure his aegrotat for the missed exam: fabricating the story of the death of his cousin, he tells the dean that he cannot produce the death certificate immediately because, “According to my culture, the deceased’s property is regarded as sacred for about a month after the burial” (Mhlongo, *Dog* 158). The sanctity of African culture, he knows, during the “season of change”, is off-limits to whites like the dean, who would dare not risk accusations of a racism closely associated with the former regime. The friends’ cynical invocation of culture highlights the problem during times of transition of periodisation: as Dingz and his friends well know, racism has not dissolved along with regime change. But, more positively, it also points to the friends’ refusal to become victims of successive political systems: invoking their cultural “otherness” also allows them to reappropriate it. Higher education in *After Tears* translates as a means, according to Dilika, to make “big money from […] bursaries and the National Student Financial Aid Scheme” (Mhlongo, *After* 13). Bafana’s law training, his uncle tells him, will make them rich: “Our days as part of the poor walking class of Mzansi will soon be over. We’re about to join the driving class, with stomachs made large by the Black Economic Empowerment. Yeah, we’ll be fucking rich” (Mhlongo, *After* 14). They are suspicious, too, of institutions like UCT, which Dilika describes as “the great white man’s institution” (Mhlongo, *After* 17), despite in recent times Mamphela Ramphele and Njabulo Ndebele numbering amongst its vice chancellors.

I began this chapter by asking, in what ways have Mpe’s and Mhlongo’s AIDS narratives contributed towards the analysis and understanding of the South African HIV/AIDS controversy and its wider meanings? What
is the relationship in these novels between their literary form as academic novels, the controversy and notions of modernity? Naming the debate on the virus AIDS-talk captures its discursive aspect that is a key feature in all three. Mpe’s (quasi-)confessional narrative calls into question moral problems obtaining to HIV/AIDS across the African continent about blame and personal responsibility through the thematising of modes of telling, be they in the form of confessions, gossip, or the act of writing fiction (and in a minority language). Through the filter of the confessional mode, one that clearly invokes, yet ironises, the idiom of the South African TRC, we are given access to an alternative understanding of the meanings of HIV/AIDS and the wider socio-political structures that shape them. The university setting magnifies the continued inequities experienced by South Africa’s marginalised majority, serving to throw light on the disparities of the lived realities across classes. Whilst the institution of the university is associated with medical advances into the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS—and the possibility in the future of a cure—at the same time, its sanctified domain is depicted as the preserve of the privileged few and perpetuates an unequal society so that, ironically, the mythologising of AIDS-talk associated with traditional cultural practices—sangomas, witchcraft, quack remedies for AIDS—are allowed to take root and flourish. University life, which should exemplify modern progressive society and all the benefits it bestows, is shown to reproduce these distinct social divisions of race and class. Whilst the protagonists of Mpe’s and Mhlongo’s fictions are all university students—Refentše goes on to become an academic, and together with Refilwe’s, closely mirroring Mpe’s own educational trajectory—they all retreat to the more deprived settings of Jo’burg’s inner city suburbs or the townships in their struggle to assimilate to the life of privilege and exclusivity to which higher education shuttles them.

Whilst troubling the denialism associated with Mbeki on the spread of HIV/AIDS, the novels all to some extent follow his move of uncoupling—if to different effect—the virus from (Black African) sexuality. Mpe shifts the ground from questions about personal (moral) responsibility and blame to wider, systemic questions about entrenched cultural practices that the Government not only failed to demystify but actively promoted. Euphemism about AIDS is paralleled in Welcome with the euphemism deployed by the apartheid regime to sanitise its acts of legal illegality against the racial margins and those others participating in the Struggle (here my reading departs from that of Green because the
narrative to my mind is deeply immersed in the past whilst tracing the neo-colonial trajectory of which Fanon foretold in his portent on the xenophobia and tribalism into which the newly postcolonised state was liable to decline). In Mhlongo, higher education is one emblem amongst many of capitalist modernity. His narratives weave a nexus of capitalism, higher education and HIV/AIDS in discursive, dialogic form, to suggest that, whilst Mbeki has been misguided in perpetuating myths about the spread and prevention of HIV/AIDS, myths that are in contradistinction to biomedical research, poverty has nonetheless catalysed the rate of infection of the disease, making AIDS an issue of social and environmental justice—a point I pick up in Chapter 7. The novels all show how capitalist associations with modernity have led Mbeki down a blind alley of culturalism to an African Renaissance that has sacrificed good sense on biomedical science in its rejection of Western imperialist hegemony.

**Notes**

1. Whilst global pharmaceuticals did block the sale of affordable ARVs (Gray, “Big Pharma’s), Mbeki claimed that the antiretroviral AZT was potentially toxic (Butler 594).

2. I argue in Chapter 7 that HIV/AIDS needs to be addressed, in part, under the rubric of environmental injustice. This is not to re-enact a form of denialism, but to acknowledge the links between a poor environment, social injustice and human disease.

3. Thornton argues that the spread of HIV/AIDS should be considered in terms of “sexual networks” rather than individual responsibility. However, the study is weakened by Thornton’s methodology, for instance, that he largely and purposefully sets aside questions of race and regional difference in the South African context.

4. Lodge writes, “One calculation is based on the assumption that a programme that began in 2000 would succeed in treating 5% of those in need of the therapy in its first year and would have good prospects of expanding its scope so that, by 2005, it might reach half the HIV-positive population by then in need of ARVs. This rate of progression is comparable to the experiences of Botswana and Namibia. [...] See Chigwedere et al. 412)” (Lodge 1587 n.27).

5. One study argues that traditional healers, currently consulted by an estimated 80% of Black South Africans, “provide culturally familiar ways of explaining the cause and timing of ill health and its relationship to the social and supernatural worlds” (Walker et al. qtd. in Attree, Blood 9).

6. The title is *Afrika My Music*. 
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