CHAPTER 7

Joining the Dots: Environment, Disease and Enterprise in the “New” South African Novel

The central concerns of The Worlding of the South African Novel: Spaces of Transition are the ways—thematic and literary—in which the South African novel has negotiated political transition and how transition necessarily entails a radical reworking of the relationship between ideas of national and global politics and culture. Democracy, it would seem, has enabled the thematic and discursive opening up of world affairs within South African literary spheres, just as Jacqueline Rose in her review of Nadine Gordimer’s 2005 novel, Get a Life, implies: “What is a danger in Iran [nuclear proliferation] may be a welcome opportunity for multinational expansion – to be promoted at all costs – in the new South Africa. Uneven development, one might say. Centring her novel on these contradictions, Gordimer brings her writing firmly into the twenty-first century” (Rose).

One direction in which South African novelists are casting their creative, critical eye is towards environmental justice, which embeds environmental concerns within those of social justice and “puts the needs and rights of the poor, the excluded and the marginalised at the centre of its concerns” (Cock 1–2), to highlight the socially produced environmental causes of human crises. Sociologist Mamphela Ramphele was to make these links in 1993; writing about the living conditions in hostel dwellers in Cape Town during apartheid, she notes, “The correlation between socio-economic and health status indicators is beyond dispute.
Hostel dwellers are particularly hard hit by the combined effects of poor environments and the instability of their life circumstances” (Bed 39). In this chapter I explore how two novels, Gordimer’s Get a Life and Imraan Coovadia’s High Low In-Between (2009) (hereafter, High Low), extend the thematic and discursive repertoire of South African fiction to the impact of the environment, and its management by institutions like national governments, upon the well-being of South Africa’s poor. Environmental justice takes account of the missing link between human and planetary well-being: namely, the capitalist world economy. The capitalist world-system has not only impacted directly upon the natural environment, especially in the Third World, which from colonial times to the present day has been harnessed by the First World as a natural resource. Built upon the “development of underdevelopment” and “dependent development” (WReC 13), global capitalism immiserates these societies, so leaving them more vulnerable to the degraded environments they inhabit, which are produced by the capitalist world system in the first place (notice the pervasive circularity here). Such justice ameliorates its correlate, environmental injustice, whereby communities marginalised by a nexus of race and class bear the brunt of environmental crisis because, as Rob Nixon defines environmental racism, they are viewed as “more expendable than others” (Nixon, Slow Violence 59). (I prefer to use “environmental injustice” since “environmental racism” problematically elides the issue of class so central to South African concerns today.) Commentators are increasingly thinking through the gendered nature of environmental injustice too (cf. Harvey, Fiona). It is therefore not surprising that environmental justice movements have proliferated in former colonies like South Africa.

In this chapter I explore how Get a Life and High Low narrativise a failure to imagine the connections and its corrective of joining the dots between global capitalism, human health and the environment. As Nafisa, the wife of murder victim Arif, elucidates, “It came to me this afternoon, Govin. Everything was connected to the court case. I should have connected the dots a long time ago. The first illegal kidney you transplanted was for Arif. You must have paid out of your own pocket” (Coovadia 240). This corrective, I argue, is revealed textually through a process of telescoping divergent scales of existence, from the microscopic to the cosmic, that has been deployed by environmentalists and ecocritics to understand the relationship between human and planetary agency (cf. Chakrabarty, “Four Theses” 207–9; Clark, Ecocriticism 72–5). Central
to environmentalist thinking, for instance, are the twinned concepts of the Great Acceleration and the Anthropocene. The new geological age we have entered, the Anthropocene is marked by the onset of industrialisation and industrial capitalism when humans for the first time became agents in the planet’s well-being. The Great Acceleration describes the period during this age as global warming speeds up as a result of an increased use of fossil fuel and the boom in manufacturing after World War II (cf. Clark, *Ecocriticism* 16; Chakrabarty, “Climate of History” 209) and as the world enters a phase of multinational capitalism. The much needed work of joined up, interdisciplinary thinking is summarised by Dipesh Chakrabarty when he writes, “If, indeed, globalization and global warming are born of overlapping processes, the question is, How do we bring them together in our understanding of the world”? (Chakrabarty, “Climate” 200)? I show how the process of joining the dots prompts us to read human disease such as HIV/AIDS, in part at least, as an issue of environmental injustice. (Writing during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the world looks on with foreboding as President Donald Trump pulls the United States out of its relationship with the World Health Organisation and the virus makes its perilous march through immiserated communities like the hell-hole camps of war-torn Syria and Gaza, I notice the calls internationally to think through the environmental causes of the virus [cf. Brown].) Of course, in the context of HIV/AIDS this risks apparently endorsing Thabo Mbeki’s eccentric response to the AIDS crisis discussed in Chapter 5, when Mbeki argued that poverty causes AIDS, a response that consequently (and catastrophically) contributed towards the delay in rolling out ARV programmes. Yet notions of environmental justice can provide a meaningful, materialist intervention in our understanding of human health. In the process, they can also shed light on the medical humanities in which cancer until now has been regarded as the primal scene (Viney 5). (Not incidentally, I would suggest, Paul Bannerman in *Get a Life* is being treated for an aggressive form of thyroid cancer.)

A failure of the imagination and the corresponding corrective of joining the dots, I argue, are revealed both thematically and in the novels’ literary forms. Both novels depict disciplinary experts who are themselves victims of life-threatening disease, and who animate intellectual spaces on the links between global capitalism, environmental crisis and human health. These spaces are, in *Get a Life*, Paul Bannerman’s childhood garden where his parents still live and in which he recuperates from his invasive radioactive iodine treatment for the cancer; and in *High Low* the
murder scene, Arif’s bedroom. Mobile and in flux, such spaces enable
dialogue and debate constitutive of the public sphere. By offsetting a
failure of the imagination (Paul describes nuclear annihilation as “the
problem, we can’t get people to believe” [Gordimer, Get 114]) with
scalar depictions of the ecosystem, and through irrealist literary forms
that, borrowing from Ian Watt, I call “delayed decoding” (Watt 175), the
novels wrestle with the question, what can we learn from the intersections
and cross-fertilisation of these apparently distinct spheres of knowledge
and existence?

This is not to say, of course, that environmental justice concerns did
not emerge in earlier South African novels published during the apartheid
era (one only has to think of J. M. Coetzee’s Life & Times of Michael K
[1983] or Alex La Guma’s Time of the Butcherbird [1979] [cf. Graham,
James, Land 163]); or that South African novelists are not responding
to increasingly urgent environmental issues. Moreover, as Emily McGiffin
shows in her study of Xhosa imbongi or praise poets, other, indigenous
forms have long engaged in an eco-poetics of the land and their poetry has
performed a spiritual and healing role within their community (20). But a
more outward-looking gaze that envisages a planetary as well as a national
and world scale (cf. Clark, Ecocriticism 99–100) is indicative of this tran-
sitional phase, which consequently has had repercussions in the cultural
sphere as well. Indeed, as James Graham notices, Gordimer’s decision
to focus on the garden-as-Eden motif in Get a Life perhaps reflects this
intellectual transition (Graham, “From Exceptionalism” 195). The novel
offsets notions of Eden with references to the “Cradle of Mankind” World
Heritage Site [Get a Life 115; 73] located near Johannesburg, which is
saturated with the earliest evidence of human life on earth (fossils, tools,
humanoid remains), thereby entertaining thecreationism vs evolution
debate whilst at the same time populating and thus contesting Afrikaner
“Vacant Land” mythology which made land available to the coloniser with
signs of indigenous human habitation. Notions of a pristine landscape
(“Eden”) are thereby tested by culture (“Cradle of Humankind”—in
other words, by the principles of environmental justice. A clue to the links
made implicitly by the novel between different epistemologies of begin-
nings as well as the connections between environmental and social crises
is that a key reference to this Cradle comes shortly after Thapelo’s lament
about humankind’s inability to grasp imminent assured self-destruction if
there were a nuclear leak—“we can’t get people to believe” (Get a Life
114).
It was Gordimer who some years before had written an ideologically scathing review in 1984 of Coetzee’s Life & Times, for presenting “the idea of gardening” as allegorising Michael K’s passive alternative to armed resistance: Coetzee’s epitomic anti-hero, Gordimer argued, failed to represent those Black South Africans who demonstrated a self-determining and central role in the Struggle (“Idea of Gardening” n.p.). Perhaps Gordimer at that juncture was guilty, even at a time when environmentalism was not widely considered a pressing issue, of the kind of failure of the imagination that has plagued the Left globally on the question of the environment: the failure to bridge the gap in human understanding between human and planetary well-being of which Coetzee, we may surmise, was already cognisant.

What if, then, we were to take Michael K’s environmentalism seriously and read Life & Times as recognition of the symbiosis of human and planetary well-being with which postcolonial ecocritics would engage? Crucially, an ecocritical reading should not entail wilfully overlooking the socio-political resonances of a novel—the ones with which, in the case of Life & Times, Gordimer takes issue. After all, aside from the interpretative point that not only can metaphor and allegory function on multiple planes of signification simultaneously, society and culture, as environmentalists now recognise, are always already integral to the Earth system (Global IGBP). In a socio-political reading of Life & Times, Michael K’s institutionalisation within South Africa’s multitudinous camps emerges figuratively through his emaciated, sick body and his refusal of institutional food (he is suffering from severe malnutrition which, in all likelihood, caused the dropsy that killed his mother). Yet his starved body is symptomatic of the environment he inhabits: he is a poorly educated, impoverished and malnourished, so-called coloured, disabled male (he has a harelip which has never been surgically closed). His sickness and poverty are produced by this environment as an outcome of environmental injustice. A deeper green reading would also attend to the vast, global scale of planetary well-being, with Michael K as a kind cosmic steward, tending his pumpkins (Michael K “found his waking life bound tightly to the patch of earth he had begun to cultivate and the seeds he had planted there” [Coetzee, Life 59]). But perhaps the most illuminating readings of Coetzee’s novel would be those drawing together the economic, the socio-political and the environmental. Indeed, joining the dots between these spheres is fundamental to the principle of environmental justice mooted here (cf. Cock, “Connecting” 5).
In the colonial and apartheid contexts we should, of course, be mindful of the historical association between conservation, environmentalism and imperial rule, which has resulted in a lingering suspicion amongst environmental justice campaigners and anti-colonial and anti-apartheid activists over environmental concerns. As William Beinart and Lotte Hughes explain, “European imperialism was [...] inseparable from the history of global environmental change. [...] While natural resources have been intensely exploited, a related process, the rise of conservationist practices and ideas, was also deeply rooted in imperial history” (Beinart and Hughes 1). David A. McDonald points out that in South Africa many thousands of Black peoples were “forcibly removed from their ancestral lands to make way for game parks” and nature conservation was prioritised over the needs of those living in the townships and homelands (McDonald, David A. 1). More broadly, leftists have until more recently tended to perceive issues centring on the environment to be a “bourgeois diversion”, as David Harvey points out (328).

Writing in 1998, Harvey goes on to argue that, whilst these suspicions of class inflections to environmentalist debate largely ring true (328), environmentalism needs to be resituated to put human needs at its core. It is this refiguring of environmentalism that positions and centres human agency within non-human agency that constitutes postcolonial environmentalism and environmental justice. McDonald is one scholar making the necessary leap of the imagination by “connecting the red, the green and the brown” (the social, environmental and urban environmental concerns [Cock, “Connecting” 1; 11]). He suggests that in the South African case urban environmentalism (so-called brown environmentalism)—attending to the “lack of basic services like sewage and sanitation for millions”, including the provision of safe, clean water—is currently one of the “most pressing” environmental justice issues in South Africa today (McDonald 10). Grass-roots activists like the anti-globalisation movement and people-centred environmentalist movements such as South African organisations Earthlife—mentioned in Get a Life— the Environmental Justice Network Forum, an umbrella organisation set up in South Africa in 1994, and Koeberg Alert campaigning against the development of nuclear power sites on the Cape, are putting human needs at the heart of environmental movements and in the process challenging the authority of elites.

On the face of it, Get a Life and High Low are two very different novels: indeed, the latter does not obviously touch upon environmental
questions at all. *Get a Life* is an environmentalist parable about the risks encumbering the world-as-postlapsarian-Eden (the hazards of the nuclear power, dam-building and mining industries) alongside environmentalist Paul Bannerman’s very private experience of treatment for a potentially life-limiting cancer; *High Low* is a murder mystery circling the death of a leading biomedical scientist, Arif, working in a Durban hospital at the cutting edge of research into HIV/AIDS. But the novels share a concern for the difficulties society has in joining the dots between a capitalist world economy (one that produces uneven experiences of modernity and various forms of state and private corruption), and environmental justice and human health; and both draw out, even if obliquely, the socio-economic and environmental factors determining the causes, treatment and outcomes of life-threatening disease.

Both narratives explore notions of the “polluted” or diseased body and, in the case of *Get a Life*, the polluted land and a damaged Eden, from the perspective of protagonists who are simultaneously experts in their disciplinary fields and suffer life-threatening disease. Suggestive of the levelling of class privilege (which largely continues to be racially determined in South Africa today), illness positions these professionalised, middle-class protagonists on a par with those on the peripheries whose cause they champion (to the extent that they all face death). When Arif’s doctor wife Nafisa accidentally infects herself in *High Low* with a needle she is using to perform a lumbar puncture on one of her HIV+ patients, Millicent Dhlomo, she “saw that [like her patients] she had a story of her own to tell. […] When it came to the quantity of tragedy, for the first time, there was no clear and bright line between her, her family, and the rest of the continent” (Coovadia 133). Similarly, in *Get a Life* with the words, “Who knows if the virus covertly hunts this child down as rogue cells may still be holed up somewhere along his bloodstream” (emphasis added; Gordimer, *Get* 154), Paul’s diseased body is linked implicitly to that of HIV-infected Klara, the young Black orphan whom Lyndsay has adopted. Nevertheless, we understand that the medical outcomes for the middle classes are far more hopeful given their privileged access to proper medical care and an education that gives them the capacity and sense of self-worth (cf. Ramphele, *Laying Ghosts* 173) to seek proper help.

Paul Bannerman in *Get a Life* is an ecologist and activist working with a “foundation for conservation and environmental control” (Gordimer, *Get* 6), currently campaigning on three projects: one to block the building of the Koeberg nuclear pebble-bed reactor; a second to stop the damming
of the Okavango Delta in Botswana, an act which, raising environmental injustice concerns, Bannerman says should properly be called “Destructive Development” (Gordimer, Get 92); and a third to build a toll road through Pondoland by an Australian mineral mining company, an area described by Paul’s colleague Thapelo as ecologically unique and itself a kind of garden: “the centre of endemism, the great botanical treasure” (Gordimer, Get 84). Paul, ironically, is himself “literally radiant” (Gordimer, Get 3) with toxic radioactive iodine that is treatment for his cancer; he describes his body as his very own “Chernobyl” (Gordimer, Get 83) and “experimental pebble-bed nuclear reactor” (Gordimer, Get 59), and finds himself confined to a form of “quarantine” (Gordimer, Get 47). Despite being part of a white, middle-class elite, and since potentially life-limiting illness situates him on a par with the poorest South Africans suffering incurable disease, he thus is depicted as an albeit problematic cipher for what Rob Nixon would call “slow violence” afflicting the poorest communities of the world: a “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon, Slow Violence 2). By situating Paul in the subject position of those experiencing such violence on a daily basis, Gordimer perhaps enables his thinking on the connections between poverty, environment and disease. This thinking, as we shall see, is facilitated by Paul’s retreat to the garden.

In High Low, not only does Nafisa work in a hospital treating increasing numbers of patients presenting symptoms of HIV/AIDS, most of whom are Black and impoverished, Arif’s research into HIV/AIDS sets him at odds with the South African President and his health minister, characters based on Mbeki and then Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang (the novel portrays the unnamed Health Minister’s alcoholism, chiming with rumours swirling in the South African media about Tshabalala-Msimang’s troubled private life). Arif has impeccable anti-apartheid activist credentials. Yet his research carried out post-1994 identifying a specifically African strain of the HIV virus is construed by government proponents of the African Renaissance, including the President, as kowtowing to Western imperialism and, relatedly, Western pharmaceuticals distributing ARVs; he is forced out of his post at the university where he works when the Minister of Health “files a defamation suit” (Coovadia 97) against him for making such a claim in his research. It is ironic that, having dedicated his life to a just and equitable South Africa, Arif has
an illegally trafficked organ transplanted to save him from kidney failure by his acolyte, surgeon Govin Mackey, who has become embroiled in a network of financial corruption. Arif urges Govin to come clean about the trafficking, but is shot before the case against Govin and Govin’s surgeon partner David Gerson is resolved.

In what ways is human health an environmental justice issue? As Jacklyn Cock argues in “Connecting the Red, Green and Brown”, environmentalists and health workers in South Africa have largely failed to make the necessary connections between the environment and human disease, primarily because disease has been categorised as a health issue in order to sidestep the environmental question from which, with its historical associations, the poorest South African communities feel alienated. Cock writes:

> Even struggles over access to natural resources such as water are not framed as environmental struggles. According to one key informant this is because ‘the environmental rights in the South African constitution are framed in health terms. You don’t go to a poor community and talk about the environment, you talk about health. The environment has no rhetorical power. The discourse is about health and rights. Water for example is a health issue and a rights issue. […] There is a failure to conceptualize environmental issues because of the constitutional framing of the environment in health terms and the legacy of authoritarian, wildlife conservation’. (Interview, Munnik 2004) (Ellipsis in original; Cock 2)

In terms of HIV/AIDS, environmental factors may not directly cause infection as Mbeki claimed when he suggested poverty causes AIDS (to such catastrophic effect), but they do contribute towards weakening the victim’s immune system, making them more vulnerable to disease. Recent research has shown how one’s environment, including access to adequate resources—air, food, water, sanitation—impacts on the risk of transmission of the virus (cf. Lewis, Nghana 40; Thornton 22–3).

As the HIV/AIDS crisis began to take hold in South Africa from the mid-1990s, the multinational pharmaceutical industry was widely criticised for making anti-retroviral drugs too costly for many of those infected by the disease. Documentary maker Dylan Gray called it “one of the great crimes in human history, whereby millions of people in Africa and elsewhere were cynically allowed to die of Aids, while western governments and pharmaceutical companies blocked access to available low-cost medication” (Gray, “Big Pharma’s Excuses”; cf. Sidley). South African High
Court judge Edwin Cameron, who disclosed his own HIV+ status in a highly personal yet overtly public bid to ameliorate the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS, alluded to the connections between poverty and health when he said, “Those living in affluence […] often do not see, still less have any contact with, people suffering from preventable illness, avoidable hunger and remediable destitution” (emphasis added; Rose). In 2001 more than 40 pharmaceutical companies joined forces to take the South African government to court to challenge its Medicines and Related Substances Act of 1997, which allowed it to import cheaper, generic ARVs from overseas (Sidley). In 2017 US aid cuts meant that the cheaper ARVs made available to South Africa under the pricing programme set up between the UN, African nation governments including South Africa, the pharmaceutical industry, and the US President’s Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR) were under threat (Mythili Sampathkumar). The controversy rumbled into 2014, with the South African government on the brink of “implementing a new law that would allow generic drug-makers to produce cut-price copies of patented medicines and make it harder for firms to register and roll over [sic] patents” (Motsoeneng). In 2017 one report estimated that, despite the Doha Declaration of 2001 on the TRIPS agreement, 2 which endeavoured to override patenting laws in cases of “national emergency” to allow developing-world countries to import generic drugs, ARVs still only reached 50% of the affected South African population (Huddart et al.). Perhaps we can begin to see from this brief sketch of the ARVs patenting scandal why Mbeki viewed Western multinationals as ciphers for imperialist hegemony (cf. Ramphele 232–3), which led him controversially to stall ARV programmes and to turn instead to African Renaissance philosophy, advocating, for instance, traditional African healing practices employed by sangomas, or healers.

Commentators are beginning to make connections between legacies of colonialism, finance, human health and the environment, for instance, calling for organ trafficking and medical testing to be treated as issues of environmental injustice: organ theft amounts to the “colonization and use of [human] bodies as natural resource materials” (Stein 210). In a document titled, “Principles of Environmental Justice” drawn up by the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington DC, October 1991, the movement calls for the “strict enforcement of principles of informed consent and a halt to the testing of experimental reproductive and medical procedures and vaccinations on
people of color” (qtd. in Stein 209). Nghana Lewis yokes HIV infection to the process of decolonisation, interpreting “the HIV/AIDS risk factors with which rural sub-Saharan African women contend today as extensions of the failures of environmental policies and regulatory schema put in place during sub-Saharan Africa’s decolonization to promote the social and economic development of postcolonial African states” (40). Processes meant to facilitate decolonisation in the region coupled with the mismanagement of water distribution, sanitation and health care in rural communities, have made women particularly vulnerable to ill health, including viruses like HIV/AIDS (Lewis 40). Migration patterns amongst rural communities in South Africa, often in the form of economic migration as male family members leave the home for long periods of time in order to work, are, in part, an effect of racial segregation and homeland policies implemented during apartheid and have compounded these risks. Notably, in both novels analysed here, it is largely poor, Black African women and girls who are presented as victims of HIV (the exception is middle-class, South African Indian Nafisa in High Low, who accidentally infects herself whilst treating one of her patients).

Human disease in Get a Life and High Low is portrayed as politically inflected, its outcome determined, in part, by income and class—which in the “new South Africa”, despite a burgeoning Black middle class, continue largely to be drawn along lines of race. In High Low, joining the dots between race, biomedical science and politics, Nafisa as focaliser reflects, “Before, in the old South Africa, race had been politics. Now race was medicine. And medicine was race, medicine was politics” (83). In Get a Life it is Thapelo, Paul’s colleague, who makes the necessary connections between capital, human needs and the environment when Thapelo collapses notions of “human reality” with the reality of the market: “So what is the reality. [sic] The human reality, Chief, Bra, however you’re seen or you see yourself, the immediate, market reality – that’s what counts in what you learn from the mother of your children, one in the womb, is the real world. Okavango left to itself will renew eternally” (Gordimer, Get 183).

Notions of pollution and human disease are laid bare in the novels as, in part, effects of environmental injustice, whereby human life is valued according to the raced colour of one’s skin and one’s social status (cf. Nixon 59). Get a Life more obviously addresses environmentalist concerns than Coovadia’s novel: the hazards of nuclear power are ironically mirrored in the protagonist Paul Bannerman’s cancer treatment
and, despite Paul’s whiteness and class privilege, his condition resonates with the slow violence of environmental injustice. But, like *High Low*, the novel also portrays the impact of HIV/AIDS on the now democratic society when Bannerman’s newly single mother, Lyndsay, adopts the AIDS orphan. The child was raped at the age of two, reflecting the superstition currently circulating within South Africa that sexual intercourse with a virgin cures HIV/AIDS, and she has endured extensive gynaecological reconstructive surgery as a result. HIV/AIDS is thereby implicitly linked to conditions of poor education and high rates of violent crime, which in turn are legacies of apartheid. As we have seen, the narrative implicitly draws parallels between the child’s illness and Paul’s, encouraging the reader to make connections between their suffering bodies, which both host “rogue cells” (Gordimer, *Get* 154). Similarly, both patients would seem to have been miraculously cured: Paul’s wife manages to conceive his child post-treatment and the young girl’s HIV levels are dropping, a medical phenomenon which, as Lyndsay explains, is only possible in a child. As such, Paul and Klara hover between metaphors for the slow violence that afflicts South Africa’s poorest communities and for the miraculous birth of the new nation. Of course the lives of these two patients are marked in distinctly different socio-economic ways. Problematically, as Rose notices, not only does *Get a Life* perpetuate white-woman-as-saviour mythology, the AIDS narrative also skirts around the pressing issue of mother-to-child infection which has been so catastrophic in the South African context (Rose).

In Coovadia’s novel we follow the rapid decline of Nafisa’s patient Millicent, who presents as the typical AIDS victim in South Africa: heterosexual Black African female and spouse to an internal migrant, a man who initially is reluctant to acknowledge the cause of his wife’s illness or to be tested himself. Nafisa’s housekeeper, the exquisite Estella, is also likely to be a victim to the disease: demographically, her chances of being HIV+ were as high as 1 in 4 during the period (Muula) when the novel is set (between 1999 and 2008—the years of Mbeki’s presidency and Tshabalala-Msimang’s period of office as Health Minister). Nafisa comments on Estella’s promiscuous lifestyle, “you cannot be too careful as an African woman. […] This is the one thing which will lead to your comeuppance. You’re crazy for men” (Coovadia 12). Estella’s stubborn refusal to be tested is to the embarrassment of Nafisa because, as the employee of two leading AIDS healthcare professionals, Estella should be seen to set an example for the wider community. In the
case of organ trafficking, Govin and his colleague have been trafficking organs to Israeli recipients from Brazilian donors, clearly registering a core-periphery dynamic and, as described in the literature, a site of environmental injustice. Govin, of course, skirts around this issue when he claims self-aggrandisingly that the money is “irrelevant”: “The point is, we perform miracles. Someday […] the dead will rise” (Coovadia 262).

Refracted between the intellectual sites of the garden and cradle-land, Gordimer’s novel offsets an environmentalist failure of the imagination (over the complexity of cosmic design; the vast scale of environmental crisis; and the means of overcoming it), against the recuperative effort to join the dots between different epistemological and intellectual spheres. The environmentalism conveyed in the novel then can first be approached through figurations of the garden. Signifying multiply, the Bannerman garden teases out the ideological intellectual inflections of “the land” (cf. James Graham, Land 1–2), always harking back via the cradle-land motif to the ways in which humans, and particularly those holding power, have impacted on or tried to harness their environment. The meanings of the garden in the novel linger between a damaged Eden after the Fall (“But it was in the Garden that expulsion came once there was Knowledge” [Gordimer, Get 58]) and a space outside humankind’s impulse to “colonise”. Writing about the significations of “paradise”, Sharae Deckard notices, “That the secularization of our age precludes belief in a literal terrestrial Eden does not mean that paradise has ceased to operate as modern fantasy, regulating and expressing nostalgia for that which is absent or desired” (1). In Gordimer’s novel, the garden figures rather differently via the religious idiom of the Fall, whilst projecting a future-orientated utopia beyond the dominant will to colonise. The garden in Get a Life obliquely counters the Robinsonade in which a castaway Crusoe-figure—the eponymous coloniser—doggedly and meticulously records the passing of time (e.g. “This morning I began to order my times of Work, of going out with my Gun, time of Sleep and time of Diversion, viz” [Robinson Crusoe 72]). Unlike the Robinsonade, the Bannerman garden stands outside time, or, more precisely, is space that Paul does not wish to “colonise” by imposing time upon it. Likening the garden to the unharnessed space of the wilderness, but in an imaginary-intellectualised form, Paul reflects, “Only out there, the garden, could the wilderness be gained, the unfinished homework be escaped. Leg over the sill; lying on the grass the many hours not tallied with a stick tracing in the sand. The days” (emphasis added; Gordimer, Get 51). The
garden represents a utopic space in which possible futures—not necessarily good ones—are imagined; refigured as wilderness, it enables reverie and contemplation beyond human efforts to comprehend and thereby “colonise” it: “To a naked upturned face; no sky; space. No cloud to give scale in the bleach of glare, no blue to give depth” [emphasis added; Gordimer, Get 38–9]). Instead, it is Paul’s sick body that is unable to repel colonising forces, here of a potentially deadly disease: “he watches a few maverick cells dartingly escaping the knife, later fleeing the radiant iodine to set up a new base in what he experiences is the territory of his body” [emphasis added; Gordimer, Get 14]. Thus, whilst levelling the differences between two very different victims of disease, the narrative also suggestively draws links between the environment (land) and human disease through the metaphor of the colonised sick body by rejigging the “body-as-land” trope of imperialist and (post)colonial literatures.

Yet, just as Hulme has argued that “the island setting [in Daniel Defoe’s novel], as in many Utopias, facilitates the isolation necessary for such paradigmatic fables to develop” (187), so Paul Bannerman’s island of isolation, the childhood garden, functions as a “simplifying crucible” (Hulme 186) for Gordimer’s environmentalist parable. Between an intellectually enabling wilderness and an uncolonised space, the garden becomes a “No-Man’s Land” within a family drama (Gordimer, Get 30), facilitating a temporary truce in the conflict of conscience between Paul and his wife Benni, or Berenice, whose work as an advertising agent situates her ideologically and ethico-politically at odds with Paul. Otherwise, their relationship appears loving and it is in part this that troubles Paul’s conscience: he is committed and loves someone whose ethico-political worldview and occupation are radically at odds with his own. Berenice—Benni’s professionalised prosopopeia—is described as lacking convictions, “that persona who has no need of convictions. […] A terrible lack. A kind of awful purity? A virginity; or underdevelopment. That term fits” (Gordimer, Get 57).

Whilst the garden in Get a Life is riven with contradictions—simultaneously a space of isolation, cleansing and quarantine, “the place to be yourself, against orders” (Gordimer, Get 49)—above all, and suggestive of all these things, it provides the intellectual space necessary to facilitate dialogue, even if this is the inner “dialogue” of the self: “there is the wise presence that changes solitude of monologue into some kind of dialogue. A dialogue with questions; or answers never sought, heard, in the elsewhere” (Gordimer, Get 54). Thus the garden, juxtaposed with
the land as cradle, serves as an optic through which the novel channels
its postcolonial environmentalism, which, by calling for environmental
justice, resituates human needs at the core of environmental concerns
(cf. Graham, “From Exceptionalism” 194). In accord with the environ-
mental justice movement, Gordimer’s environmentalism is governed by
two environmental laws, “everything is connected to everything else” and
“everything goes somewhere” (Harvey, David 329). Here is one example:

[T]his garden resounds, echoes with the animation of its past. It’s the
quarters, now, where two men are absorbed in the work that informs their
understanding of the world and their place as agents within it, from the
perspective that everyone, like it or not, admit it or not, acts upon the
world in some way. Spray a weed-killer on this lawn and the Hoopoe
delicately thrusting the tailor’s needle of its beak, after insects in the grass,
imbibes poison. That’s the philosophy of conservation from which Paul
is approaching the great issues in a draft petition of an environmentalist
coaition to the State President he’s writing between discussions in the
garden. (Gordimer, Get 83)

The novel also aligns itself with the deeper green, environmentally conser-

vative notion that “nature knows best” (Harvey, David 330): nature is
“the greatest scientist of all” with which Paul’s “scientific” work is
“in collaboration” (Gordimer, Get 20). David Harvey argues that to
suggest that nature “knows” anything “presume[s] that nature can ‘know’
anything”. Either this means that humankind fully understands nature
(which it does not), or suggests a “conservative” “tread lightly on the
surface of the earth” environmentalism based on the assumption that any
human intervention will be damaging to the planet (Harvey, David 330).

As a transitional space, the garden in Get a Life animates intellectual
debate on the environment, which is portrayed as unfolding during the
course of the narrative and is achieved through delayed decoding. In
Conrad in the Nineteenth Century (1980), Watt defines delayed decoding
as a form of “literary impressionism” (173), which “combines the forward
temporal progression of the mind, as it receives messages from the outside
world, with the much slower reflexive process of making out their mean-
ing” (Watt 175). In Watt’s most well-known example—and Conrad’s
most famous novel, Heart of Darkness—the reader experiences through
this technique Marlow’s emerging realisation that his helmsman on their
voyage down the Congo has been hit by a spear:
Something big appeared in the air before the shutter, the rifle went overboard, and the man stepped back swiftly, looked at me over his shoulder in an extraordinary, profound, familiar manner, and fell upon my feet. The side of his head hit the wheel twice, and the end of what appeared a long cane clattered round and knocked over a little camp-stool. It looked as though after wrenching that thing from somebody ashore he had lost his balance in the effort. [...] My feet felt so warm and wet that I had to look down. The man had rolled on his back and stared straight up at me; both his hands clutched that cane. It was the shaft of a spear. (Conrad, *Heart 77*; qtd. in Watt 177)

“The text”, Watt explains, “gives us a chronological sequence of momentary sensations in the protagonist’s mind; and the reader finds it quite natural that there should be a delay before Marlow’s brain finally decodes his impressions into their cause” (Watt 176). Just as Marlow will realise that “something big” is the spear that will kill his helmsman, simultaneously so too do we as readers. The wetness and warmness of Marlow’s feet, as we are soon to discover, are caused by the spilled blood of the mortally wounded helmsman.

Delayed decoding in Gordimer’s novel may account for the novel’s complex, and often staccato sentence structures, particularly in the use of free indirect discourse, that have baffled reviewers. Jane Stevenson in *The Observer*, for instance, writes,

As the narrative opens, Gordimer is therefore describing a group of people among whom a false, temporary normality is being created with enormous effort. Much of the writing is from the viewpoint of an intelligent person for whom stunned reverie is temporarily the natural state of being. But in their separate ways, the other people who are probed in the course of the narrative are also in shock, which gives the book its curiously remote narrative tone, in which direct speech is quoted, but always as unscrolling memory.

This is a novel of inner lives. We are always within a story which one or another of the principal characters is telling to himself or, at times, herself. (emphasis added; Stevenson)

This “remote narrative tone” is compounded by frequent instances of missing or incorrect punctuation and jarring syntax. Graham Riach in “The Late Nadine Gordimer” argues that the difficultness of Gordimer’s late short stories (he names *Jump [1991], Loot [2003] and Beethoven Was
One-Sixteenth Black [2007]) can be attributed to her “late style”, which Theodor Adorno and then Edward Said implicitly identify with the criticality of committed writing of which Adorno writes in “Commitment” and which typically is characterised by its “dissonance and fragmentation” (Riach 1078)! One reviewer of Loot, Riach notes, even wondered if “Penguin failed to supply an editor” (Riach, “The Late Nadine” 1091–2). Riach explains:

Adorno’s conception of late style is characterised by its ‘ravaged character’, its refusal of synthesis, its unabashed foregrounding of the artwork’s ‘tears and fissures’, and its transcendental temporality; late works, he says, are ‘torn apart in time, in order, perhaps, to preserve them for the eternal’. Building on Adorno’s short essay [“Late Style in Beethoven”], Said asks what we are to do with ‘artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution, but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction’.

In Gordimer’s postapartheid narratives, Riach argues, this manifests as “a sense of temporal unsettledness […] as a literary response to the time-lagged, out-of-joint, post-apartheid disposition”. In essence, Gordimer’s late short fiction (we might add, her late novels too), “time and style are at odds” (Riach 1077–8). For our purposes, this enables the consideration of the ways in which the content of Get a Life, including the public, discursive spaces it opens up through its dialogism, staccato style, narrative uncertainties and delayed decoding, is expressed through her aesthetic choices. Late style, according to Adorno and Said’s understanding, Riach shows, is not simply a matter of an ageing author reflexively and imaginatively looking back upon a life, but “a conscious remodelling of language and experience in a historically particular set of social and political conditions” (Riach 1080). Incorrect or a lack of punctuation and awkward syntax are deliberate stylistic choices that embellishes the sense of disconsonancy the novel projects. In the irrealist delayed decoding the protagonists’ sense of self in Get a Life emerges as the protagonists’ thought processes take shape into reflections, as Stevenson notices. But we might augment Stevenson’s analysis with the observation that not only do the protagonists tell (narrate) themselves, they also formulate their intellectual understanding of the world they inhabit. By this means, Gordimer animates the development of a critical environmentalist consciousness—a kind of drama of consciousness, if you will (cf. Parry, Postcolonial Studies 51)—and revivifies the (counter-) public sphere. The
reader experiences at the same time the process of making the necessary connections between certain intellectual and epistemological spheres. So not only does the novel deals with political transition *thematically,* transition is encoded in its very *form.* In this example, Paul reflects on the being of the eagle on a visit with his mother, son and his mother’s newly adopted daughter, Klara, to the local zoo:

What is survival if not the end of poverty. [*sic*] It’s been pledged at the third inauguration of democratic government: the end of poverty. And if Abel has to be thrown from the next by Cain; isn’t that for a greater survival. [*sic*] The eagle allows this to happen, its all-powerful wings cannot prevail against it. Survival. Ten dams for one delta seen from Space. Civilisation goes against nature, that’s the credo for what I do, I am. Protect. Preserve. But is that the law of survival. [...] Knowledge come in the quarantine of the childhood garden that perhaps whatever civilisation does to destroy nature, nature will find its solution in a measure of time we don’t have [...], that knowledge doesn’t go far enough. A cop-out. Civilisation as you see it in your opposition of nature to the Australians’ mining, the ten dams in the Okavango – it’s child’s play, a fantasy, when you admit the pragmatism in nature. No use returning to the photograph reproduced [of the eagle in the zoo’s pamphlet] of the piece of fluff, morsel of life that is Abel, and looking for a solution. (Gordimer, *Get* 168–9)

In this passage, the reader experiences Paul’s developing consciousness of the connections between Darwinian notions of survival of the fittest and of a greater common good across scales of existence, from the life of the eagle species, to the displacement of indigenous and local peoples by the mining industry. The passage reveals Paul’s deep-green politics as he reflects upon the idea that nature will prevail: civilisation is dwarfed in the context of natural history. And it is Paul’s encounter with the eagle that alchemises his inner dialogue. As his thoughts unfold, we experience with him his dawning realisation that there is “No use returning to the photograph [...] and looking for a solution”.

In *High Low* the bedroom murder scene constitutes the intellectual site in which the connections between capitalism, criminality, scientific research and environmental injustice converge. Arif’s family and friends endeavour through processes of logical deduction and intellectual debate to solve the mystery of his death, expressed through forms of investigative delayed decoding. The Durban police investigating the death are depicted as ineffectual—a sign of national malaise. They are always one
step behind Arif’s family in solving the crime, who in turn must therefore step into their shoes. Nafisa’s son Shakeer (Sharky) believes his father’s case is blighted by the police’s failure to make the necessary connections between the facts of the case:

The police were pretending to begin the investigation. Two constables from the Westville station were rounding up the usual suspects. [...] The police, under a new government, thought along the old lines. They planned to question the black workers in the neighbourhood[ ...]. The police pretence, the irrelevance, disturbed Shakeer. They didn’t connect the facts. There was no relationship Shakeer could see between the London bank account and the workers in Westville. (Coovadia 94)

Racist assumptions about Black subjectivity in the “new South Africa” puncture the polished surfaces of Rainbowism: the police, in this instance led by a white constable, fall back on ready stereotypes of Black, working-class criminality. Ironically, Macdonald Gumede, the detective leading the enquiry, raises this very problem when he advises Sharky, “Just because the police force is run by Africans, do not assume we are incompetent”. He laments that such stereotyping is the greatest challenge the “new South Africa” faces: “This is what our real struggle is against” (Coovadia 102). When the (white) constables pay Sharky a visit, he is struck by their naivety: “They had no knowledge of another country, and another politics. They had lost privileges and recreated their innocence. They were the lucky ones. The accounts had been cancelled” (Coovadia 96). Suggestive of the scales of justice, which ironically in the new South Africa are tainted by their associations with the financial scales of the balance books, these young whites are let off the hook: recalling documented failures of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), retributive justice and reparations have been wiped from the slate of accountability.

The narrative circles Arif’s death in the manner of the classic murder mystery, but there are significant departures from the genre too. The methods of solving the crime, for instance, cannot be described as scientifically forensic: motive and murderer are “investigated” through the focalisation of Nafisa and her son, Sharky, but the clues they glean are drawn from their psycho-social understanding of Arif’s life and his relationships with family, former comrades, colleagues, government and friends rather than from forensic science. Sharky, for instance, is convinced the death is not suicide for, “It’s psychologically impossible. My father was
energised by the opposition of the government[. ...] I know that I am right. I am going to prove it” (Coovadia 61).

By introducing Arif’s death some pages into the narrative, tucked at the end of a chapter, thereby simulating for the reader the sense of shock Nafisa, through delayed decoding, would have experienced on finding him, the novel decentres the “ideal mystery”. Drawing on Tzvetan Todorov’s “The Typology of Detective Fiction” (1977), Carl Malmgren suggests such a mystery, “announces its murder on the very first page and devotes itself to the solution of that murder; the narrative begins with murder, without which it would not exist. The narrative telos is the solution of that murder, which alone can restore equilibrium and bring absolution” (Malmgren 19). Crime functions as a marker of normative social values; as literary scholar Leon de Kock and sociologist Émile Durkheim argue: “society learns to know itself by coming to understand the nature of its own criminal shadow” (de Kock 40). We must add that it comes to know itself too by the ways in which it responds to those crimes, as we have seen in the presentation of an ineffectual police force subject to pervasive stereotypes about Black subjectivity and criminality.

But in the decentred murder mystery, “[T]he evil in the world [...] comes less from the quirks of deviant individuals ... than from society itself” (second ellipsis in qtd. version; Rabinowitz qtd. in Malmgren 147). It is structural and systemic. We see how, in *High Low*, the process of investigating Arif’s murder exposes the larger crime of neo-colonialist corruption, in which even Nafisa with her *ooplung* (black) money (Coovadia 21) has become embroiled, and of the capitalist system that normalises environmental injustice on issues of health and medical treatment. Indeed, through processes of psycho-social investigation, Sharky finds himself on a path to solving this larger crime. When he confronts Swiss doctor Hansel Metzger, who he believes is a charlatan, he “felt as if a riddle was being posed” (Coovadia 172). Metzger allies himself with Mbeki’s brand of African Renaissance politics on HIV/AIDS, claiming that apartheid was a conspiracy by western pharmaceuticals to provide a ready and free supply of (Black) subjects on which to test its products. Instead Metzger offers an alternative treatment to HIV/AIDS from that advocated by mainstream biomedical science. Arif’s research puts him in conflict with Metzger, who does not hold back in sharing with Sharky the details of the tense relationship he and Arif shared, thereby positioning him as a potential suspect in the case. Sharky pays Metzger a visit, ostensibly to help unravel his father’s case: “With his new sense of
power Shakeer decided to confront Metzger in person. Those tens of thousands of shades called for a tribune. Even if he uncovered nothing he had stored up a thousand insults. He would stub the man out like a cigar” (Coovadia 165)! Sharky’s new sense of power is the freedom that his father’s death grants him, “in his father’s absence, he could do anything he chose” (Coovadia 145). By pursuing those he suspects of murdering his father, Sharky is driven towards the larger crime of the whitewashing of the HIV/AIDS crisis which led to countless unnecessary deaths (“tens of thousands of shades”). Sharky sees his moral responsibility to fight the victims’ cause. Juxtaposing the murder of an individual against the calamitous story of the government’s response in the 1990s to HIV/AIDS exposes the bigger crimes of forms of slow violence, both the obscenity of over-priced “Big Pharma” medicines and the institutionalised responses to the South African HIV/AIDS crisis that have been determined, in part, by an ostensible rejection of the capitalist worlds-system but that, through the portrayal of characters like Metzger, reveal corruption and profiteering at their very core.

*High Low*'s attentive, sleuth-like reader, drawing pleasure from the text as murder mystery, might have been duped into thinking the motive for the crime is Arif’s scientific research into the African strain of the HIV virus which has led to his fall from political favour and public grace and which has raised the ire of quacks like Metzger. However, ultimately, we learn that the motive is not connected to Arif’s scientific research at all but to Govin’s desire to protect his own reputation as a surgeon after he has become embroiled in the illegal human organ trade—he and his partner Gerson have been caught transplanting over one hundred Brazilian donor organs into Israeli recipients. Govin’s crime and his attempts to salvage his reputation and career are thus, in part, motivated by financial greed.

We realise that:

Govin wanted the same Mercedes, the same unaffordable Crawford school education for his children, the same contribution at the temple, and the same steady band of the Rolex watch on his wrist. That was Indian materialism for you. This surgical genius had translated into nothing more outstanding than a large house, large wife, large car. (Coovadia 158)

The crimes of the individual in *High Low* are collapsed into larger socio-political and environmental ills: Govin, in a sense, becomes a metaphor for the corruption and environmental injustice of the capitalist system
that produces, nourishes and props up his criminality. Yet he persists in staking a claim to the moral high ground when he bemoans those “who fear the future” trying to “close us down”: “the real culprits in the affair”, he says, “have already skipped the country”; whilst Gerson and Govin have put their own houses forward as security for the business, Vishensky “sits with his fortune in stock, protected by the constitution of Israel” (Coovadia 159). So even though the surgeon is complicit in the trafficking, he presents financial corruption as the greater crime overshadowing his work, a crime on a far greater scale of injustice than Arif’s murder. Testing the teleology of crime fiction, Malmgren argues that, in the decentred version of the genre, notions of motivation, truth and justice are also pressed to their epistemological limits:

[Decentred d]etective fiction undermines the idea of motivation, both in behaviour and signification; in the world of detective fiction, there is no “transcendent true story” to put an end to the play of signification (Hall 113). Detective fiction, in other words, documents and recounts the erosion of basic mystery signs, such as motivation, truth, and justice. (Malmgren 137)

We are presented with a series of murderers (or agents responsible for Arif’s death), guilty on varying scales of injustice and criminality.

If delayed decoding in Gordimer’s novel emerges in its staging of the inner workings of the intellect as their reflections take shape (the drama of consciousness), in High Low, a fairly straightforwardly realist text, irrealist interludes that press against a sense of reality emerge as what I call investigative delayed decoding: namely, the intellectual process of unravelling the evidence relating to Arif’s death. The narrative records one thought sparking another connected one in the emerging effort to solve the crime. The fact that Arif has not committed suicide, for instance, dawns upon Nafisa and Sharky as they index their thought processes, and both separately come to realise that he was not capable, psychologically or socio-politically, of taking his own life. Here, Sharky reflects on the depth of Arif’s engagement with the notion of reality: Sharky “had never met another man who thought into reality with such great concentration” [Coovadia 97]). This triggers a memory of Arif’s sense of urgency in researching the HIV virus, and then, connectedly, the government blaming the IMF and the CIA for the epidemic, and subsequently the consequent defamation case brought against Arif. Sharky recalls his
mother, Nafisa, phoning him to discuss the case in Papua New Guinea where he is on a photo assignment, and regrets that, “His mother was not a psychological person. She refused to step back and survey the canvas in its entirety” (Coovadia 98). Just as trivial matters “prevented [Nafisa] from seeing the main point” (Coovadia 98), Sharky realises that he has struggled with his own perception of reality. He is unable to make sense of the fact of his father’s death whilst the case remains unresolved by the bungling police: “His own feelings, as much as those of his mother, found no definition so long as their subject was indefinite. In this way the obscurity surrounding his father’s actions had surrounded Nafisa and him as well. It prevented some image from developing beneath his eyes” (emphasis added; Coovadia 95).

Illustrating the novel’s investigative delayed decoding as a form of literary irrealism, Sharky and Nafisa must consciously and continually press notions of reality to their limits to reveal “the truth”—not only the identity of Arif’s murderer, alluded to above as “some image” beneath Sharky’s eyes, but elsewhere the political truths of the AIDS crisis and organ trafficking which have been strategically obscured by, and in the interests of, free trade:

From his studies [in philosophy and classics] Shakeer had developed certain convictions. Reality was only too happy to keep you at the furthest distance. Reality – its endless sequence of doors which led inward – let you close only if you pushed past each door. It was a deliberate process, not something that just happened. It involved the will and, between two people, perhaps, a contest of wills to put down the illusions of one party. He was knocking on Govin Mackey’s door. (emphasis added; Coovadia 162)

It is telling, therefore, that the psychological-intellectual act of pushing through to reality here leads Sharky to corrupt medic Govin’s door. Sharky’s need to question, probe and investigate his father’s death reflects a critical mindset: his interest in philosophy and classics “harmonised with some aspect of [his character]” because they “discontented you with the surface of things” (Coovadia 162).

Both narratives turn on a failure of imagination and its correlate, the endeavour to join the dots between discursive, intellectual and epistemological realms in the intellectual spaces of the garden in Gordimer’s novel and the murder scene in Coovadia’s. In the garden in Get a Life Paul reflects on three different, though connected, configurations of a failure
of imagination: the failure to grasp the scale and complexity of the planet’s ecosystem; the (wilful) failure to imagine the scale of environmental crisis; and the (again wilful) failure to imagine how to make the necessary connections between apparently discreet forms of knowledge and expertise to do so. Even Paul’s specialist training in environmentalism cannot, he realises, help him comprehend the intricate complexities and scale of the Okavango Delta. Comparing his own to his wife’s professionalism, Paul realised he knew too abstractly, himself limited by professionalism itself, too little of the grandeur and delicacy, cosmic and infinitesimal complexity of an ecosystem complete as this. The Okavango could never have been planned on a drawing-board by the human brain. Its transformations, spontaneous, self-generated, could not have been conceived. [...] The Okavango delta in co-existence with a desert is a system of elements contained, maintained – by the phenomenon itself, unbelievably, inconceivably. The Okavango is a primal feature of creation, so vast it can be seen by astronauts from Outer Space. This is an excitement that must be confirmed – he had to leave the garden of isolation to go into the house and dial Thapelo. (Gordimer, Get 90–1)

Nature is presented as unfathomable, including in the discursive, professionalised world of the novel’s protagonists by whom the natural world is mediated (cf. Graham, “From Exceptionalism” 199). The novel points up the limits of this discursive realm in crossing epistemological, intellectual and material boundaries. The scale of the Okavango Delta can only be absorbed by the human eye from outer space, and of course this perspective, for all but a very few, will be a mediatised one, conveyed through photographic and televised images. In this passage, Paul must remove himself from the idealised, intellectual space of the garden to convey his realisation that the Delta’s incredible capacity for self-renewal from salinisation might be the means by which the multinational “destructive developers” can be persuaded to abandon their plans. Inconceivably, the Delta manages the problem of salinisation to the extent that its water will eventually become safe again for human consumption.

Humankind’s failure of imagination in comprehending Nature is laid bare in the family’s visit to the zoo—another kind of garden that, like South Africa’s nature reserves on which Berenice casts her professional eye, can be harnessed, branded and packaged for tourist consumption. Both the Bannerman and zoological gardens represent forms of isolation
(quarantine, in Paul’s case), including the isolation of being intellectually incompatible (unconnected) as Benni and Paul appear to be. The zoo, which is intended to educate children about “their existence – co-existence – with animals other than cats and dogs” (Gordimer, Get 158), holds a “dark memory” for Paul of an eagle, “hunched on claws within the stone walls and close roof of a cage”, and a “metaphor for all forms of isolation, the ultimate in imprisonment” (Gordimer, Get 158–9). Working through this image of “despair”, Paul “must find the eagle” (Gordimer, Get 163), but his memory of the abject creature is not reliable for now he is confronted by a thing “named eagle” (Gordimer, Get 163), one beyond the taxonimising impulse of humankind, “not hunched way back in despair, the sail of a huge black wing glancing[. …] They had appeared to be directed only by the intelligence of their own velocities, power over air and space” (Gordimer, Get 162–3). Yet compare this image of freedom, including freedom from human epistemology and taxonomy, with the glossy brochure produced by the zoo, which fails to capture the complexities of the species: “the language of the pamphlet in hand fails to represent the being of the withdrawn black entity on the bed of dead wood and the other disappearing off into the sky and returning in the guise of a menace or as deliverance of omniscience, as the surveyors’ plans and the reports he writes fail to represent the Okavango or the Pondoland dunes” (Gordimer, Get 167). As Graham argues, the “being of the eagle […] cannot be discursively comprehended” (“From Exceptionalism” 201–2), just as the Okavango Delta cannot be comprehended except from images beamed down from outer space. Repeating the pattern of connectivity seen in the comparison of Paul and Klara’s sick bodies under attack from “rogue cells”, here the narrative correlates the failure to comprehend the being “eagle” with Paul’s own failure to capture the complexities of the Okavango and Pondoland dunes in his professionalised reports, thereby laying bare the process of joining the dots.

The web of connectivity the novel emphasises is repeated through the analogy between the pairing of the two eagles and the pairing of Paul and Benni and of Adrian and Lyndsay, who all, supposedly, “mate for life” (Gordimer, Get 160; 161; 167), ironically undercut in Lyndsay’s case by her unwelcomed separation from Paul’s father Adrian—an amateur archaeologist will leave her for the Norwegian tour guide he met on their trip to Mexico. It is through notions of reciprocity and reconciliation—the term is used deliberately here, just as the novel registers
contemporary South African discourses of truth and reconciliation—that notions of discontinuity and irreconcilability are to be bridged within the ethical economy of the novel. Indeed, the balancing of nature in the form of the two eaglets tellingly named Cain and Abel is paralleled with the balancing of the contrasting vocations Paul and Berenice pursue, just as the Okavango Delta “achieve[s]” a “balance between positive and negative” of the water’s salt content (Gordimer, Get 92), which again is beyond human comprehension: “Benni/Berenice is right. Lyndsay offers — She also gets kicked out, I suppose, it’s a way of keeping the balance of nature, Paul? Neither too many nor too few males and females for breeding. But it’s horrible” (Gordimer, Get 167).

If the garden is the space in which the connections between capitalism, the environment and human health are identified and debated, it is a space in which connections are severed too:

...there is no connection to be made between wild creatures, even the half-domesticated frequenters of the suburbs [...], and the summons of technology. Telephone ring. In the bush in the forest among the dunes the mangroves the swamps, the creatures ignore you. Devices that regulate your being have nothing to do with theirs — unless they are hunted, expelled from their places in the universe—yes, air habitat as well as land—by logging, burning off, urban, industrial and rural pollution. Radiant nuclear fallout. No connection between that quarantine room and out here. (emphasis added; Gordimer, Get 49)

The alienating effects of technology only impact on the natural world, the narrative implies, in forms of destructive development, “by logging, burning off, urban, industrial and rural pollution”. This experiential chasm between the technological world and nature corresponds with the lack of connectivity between Paul and Berenice’s vocations, which, the novel suggests, have little—if anything—to offer each other intellectually or ideologically. It is in the garden that the ideological chasm widens between Benni/Berenice and Paul. Not surprisingly, this has implications for the intimate sphere of marriage as well and Paul even mulls over the possibility of divorce:

How could he, himself, whose work, reason-to-be is preserving life, live so long with an intimate, herself, who was successfully complicit in destroying it.

Living in isolation, all along. Even when inside the woman.
Later, in the garden, away from the closeted emanation in that room, what is this all about but an obvious matter of the incompatibility between the advertising industry and environmental protection. […] Can’t even call it by its true term. Irreconcilability. (Gordimer, *Get* 58)

Paul’s life is governed, as he perceives it, by conviction, whereas Berenice, recognising the marketing potential of South Africa’s rich flora and fauna, is unable to conceive of the wilderness because it is always already a commodity to be packaged, branded and sold by South Africa’s lucrative safari tourism industry to wealthy tourists, which Paul calls “Development Disaster” (Gordimer, *Get* 57). Here a conflict between Paul’s conviction of “being in the world” (Gordimer, *Get* 57) and Berenice’s commercially minded notion of selfhood, “that persona who has no need of convictions” (Gordimer, *Get* 57), converge:

Whom does Berenice believe. [sic] Him, her man, or the client. [sic] What is her conviction when he comes from the wilderness and tells of the irreplaceable forest felled to make way for the casino, the fish floating belly-up in all that’s left of a water-course diverted to feed an Olympic-size swimming pool and replica of one of the fountains of Rome. [sic] (Gordimer, *Get* 57)

The enormity of the environmental crises brought about by capitalism perhaps account in this passage for the absence of question marks (Gordimer’s “late style”, if you will), registering a sense of hopelessness. Unlike Paul and Berenice’s working relationship, Paul realises that he must join forces with his mother, Lyndsay, whose professional expertise figured in the image of the legal loophole reveals to Paul that within the context of the harsh realities of the polity under capitalist modernity he must compromise what here might be construed his “deeper green” environmentalism:

His almost angry dedication, there were so many forces, political, economic, against it, had essential dependent connections with her work in the law that they had never really discussed before. The question of how, which rivers and seas should be exploited is decided ultimately by laws promulgated by governments. […] So environmentalists have need of consultation with lawyers who know what loopholes, under the law, used by project entrepreneurs, must be anticipated and exposed while independent research is in progress. (Gordimer, *Get* 25–6)
In effect taking up the challenge to join the dots between issues of social justice and environmentalism outlined by Cock, Paul realises that a productive relationship between environmentalism and the law must be nurtured in the interests of environmental well-being, including human well-being—“humans as nature”. This is seemingly unlike Arif’s disquiet in *High Low* about the coming together of law and medical research in the defamation case brought against him by the Health Minister for raising the spectre of an African strain of the HIV virus, “Doctors didn’t like to be mixed up with lawyers” (Coovadia 97). Yet in Gordimer’s novel this conjoining of distinct professional spheres is figured as a necessary compromise. Paul’s is the view of a pragmatist, in which loopholes—effectively convenient legalistic errors or anomalies—must be drawn upon in order to win the case. Paul must modify his earlier, overly idealised belief in the “nature knows best” maxim (the need for legal intervention suggests that nature cannot fully protect itself from or overcome the negative human impact under a capitalist economy).

*High Low* stages the difficulty South African society has in perceiving reality—another kind of failure of the imagination—through the conceit of the looking-glass world, Coovadia’s wry commentary on a polity in which reality is skewed, inverted, turned on its head. Defined here in the *OED*, the looking-glass world is a parallel universe:

**looking-glass world** n. an imaginary place conceived of as being visible in the image shown in a looking-glass, esp. one in which the principles which underpin the real world (as the rules of logic, the laws of physics, etc.) operate differently, or in reverse; also in extended use. (*OED*)

Sharky, for instance, is confounded when he finds himself examining police records on his father’s murder, handed him by hapless detective, Gumede: “Anywhere else in the world, even in Oakland, California, you would scarcely be sorting through the file concerning the death of a member of your own family. But this was a looking-glass society. Nobody and nothing was in charge” (Coovadia 103). In the ethico-political conditions the novel depicts, everyone is subject to the looking glass, Govin implies: “There’s no logic. The world is upside down and back to front” (Coovadia 159). In order to secure Nafisa’s support in clearing his name, Govin even slyly reminds Sharky of Nafisa’s own embeddedness in such an illogical, and at times corrupt, world: “Confidentially, Shakeer, I hear that Nafisa has her own points of difference with the tax guys but I didn’t
want to say anything to her directly” (Coovadia 159). The looking-glass world, with the likes of Metzger and Govin as its agents, expresses the irrationality of Mbeki’s government’s response to HIV/AIDS, whereby the ambassador to the UN “assert[s] the non-existence of the epidemic which filled cemeteries and hospitals” (Coovadia 168). Nafisa laments, “This continent! People will not believe in the reality of sickness. Why, they won’t believe in their own deaths” (Coovadia 155). The novel lampoons the Government’s African Renaissance philosophy, which calls into question the statistical evidence on mortality rates:

This at a time when the epidemic was the worst in the world. Over the decade, the mortality had increased by a thousand a day.

The government, of course, objected to these terms. First of all, who was counting? Second of all, who were they to define a day? Why should we simply accept the European definition of a day? It was the logic of the looking glass. (Coovadia 151)

Metzger shirks responsibility for his part in the South African AIDS catastrophe. He implicates Big Pharma in apartheid segregationist practices—“Segregation in this country was […] a conspiracy of the pharmaceutical companies” (Coovadia 170)—and argues that, “The violence in this country is the direct result of policies dictated by the World Bank”. The university, Metzger claims, therefore “is taking a stand against Anglo-American multi-nationals” (Coovadia 171). It was for this reason that Arif was ousted from an “institution which orients itself towards African scholarship” (Coovadia 171). In the face of such beliefs, Sharky realises that “reason was useless”: “The masterstroke of the looking-glass creature […] was to step from the mirror into the world beyond. Then, so long as it never looked behind itself, it could argue there had never been a mirror in the first place. But you could catch its image in the looking glass” (Coovadia 170). By drawing the HIV/AIDS controversy under the same organising principle of the looking-glass society as issues around policing, corruption and so on, Coovadia implicitly makes the necessary connections between capitalist enterprise, poverty and human disease.

Engaging in their different ways with a failure to imagine the connections between global capitalism, the environment and human health, both novels reflect upon perceptions of reality manifesting as forms of irreality: the experience of reality as unreal (not wholly dissimilar from the absurdity experienced during apartheid captured in corresponding
Absurdist literary forms). Both novels show how perceptions of reality are malleable and can be produced according to one’s political commitments and proclivities. Paul recognises the need to lighten his deep-green politics and to compromise his environmentalist beliefs, for example, firstly, by acknowledging the usefulness of the law in supporting environmental causes, and, secondly, in challenging the Pondoland toll road project by specifically invoking the human rights of the Amadiba tribe, which his colleague Thapelo implies will be more palatable to those in power and to those to whom the environmentalists make their appeal: “pleas for beauty destroyed in these issues are regarded as going soft, just sentimental opposition to progress[……] Go for them [the Amadiba]” (Gordimer, Get 85). Berenice, as advertising agent, has a blinkered view of the wilderness as commodity on the global tourist market. This is not unlike Sharky’s perception of the commodified landscapes and environments he photographs in High Low. He recalls images of the stone figures on Easter Island, which, presented in a travel brochure he received before his visit to the island, were “an over-used subject but the effect was still dramatic” (Coovadia 41). After dropping out of his university studies in philosophy and classics, and following a brief period in Bosnia as a war photographer, he takes up professional photography of the ethnographic type, working for magazines like National Geographic. His mother finds his exhibition of Hindu sadhus of Benares “curious” and “even outdated” (Coovadia 28).

Sharky’s visit with Estella to the isangoma’s (diviner’s) township home to seek treatment for Estella’s daughter who suffers epilepsy develops his critical awareness of notions of truth and of the ethics of cultural mediation. Sharky believes that “taking a photograph meant understanding the situation on the far side of the lens”, though he realises he has not been able to achieve this with his mother (Coovadia 203). On the trip to Eshowe with Estella to visit the diviner, Sharky realises that “[p]hotographs were irrelevant, unserious [when… p]eople were dying like flies” (Coovadia 203). Yet Sharky continues to pursue his desire to capture good photographs: “The opportunity to take photographs of the ritual was a good one. Shakeer had never taken an interesting photograph at home. He could never quite understand what he was looking at in Durban, what he was supposed to make of it” (Coovadia 208). Nonetheless, despite the isangoma using a photograph of Estella’s sick daughter to bring about her cure—magic in which Sharky holds no faith,
the photographs Sharky takes of the *isangoma*’s home appear to him inauthentic, for “She had a greedy look which none of the photographs had captured” (Coovadia 215).

Ideas of perception are compressed in the photography motif when Sharky determinedly seeks Metzger out at the hospital to confront him over his involvement in disgracing Arif, “Yet there were only photographs to confront” (Coovadia 168). Sharky scans photographs of the Swiss doctor with the South African president and with Robert Mugabe; in yet another he stands at the steps of the Constitutional Court—on the day of his defamation suit. In a poster Sharky sees an image of Metzger attending the United Nations with the South African UN ambassador, a visit marking the “ambassador’s speech to the General Assembly asserting the non-existence of the epidemic which filled cemeteries and hospitals”. Cognisant of the market forces driving corruption and quackery and reflected in Metzger’s ubiquitous presence at high-level meetings across the globe, Sharky reflects that, “No wonder looking-glass creatures like Metzger and Sekolo set up shop in South Africa” (Coovadia 168). When Metzger finally does appear in person, reality and snapshots of a two-dimensional, culturally produced reality in the form of the photographic image merge, for Sharky “had the feeling that one of the photographs had come to life and was grasping him by the arm. He had the sense that, in person as in a photograph, Metzger was flat from the side on. If he turned to the side he would disappear altogether” (Coovadia 169). The image captured in the looking glass and the photographic image coalesce.

Similarly, rather than centring on the physical reality of the environment, *Get a Life* shifts focus to the *discursive realm* of environmentalism as a political tool. As Graham argues, “[t]he narrative is interspersed with Paul’s consciousness of nature[-]in-itself, yet the latter is invariably mediated by his professional, scientific knowledge of a given environment” (“From Exceptionalism” 199). It is in the garden where Paul and his colleagues reflect upon how their environmentalism should be best managed and mediated within the public sphere. Like Eden in Christian mythology, where humankind’s (mis)handling of carnal knowledge precipitates the Fall, it is in the garden where Paul reflects upon the failure to conceive of the scale of looming environmental crisis (just as the cradle-land hovers on the peripheries of Paul’s sphere of existence as a reminder of this failure to remember humankind’s role in this crisis). In the discussion between Thapelo and Paul, for instance, in their attempts to get public and government opinion on board against the building of the
Pondoland toll road, Thapelo demands, rhetorically, that the “government must vuka! Open their eyes. See what’s getting by in the name of development” (Gordimer, Get 85). Probing questions about what constitutes modernity and progress, Paul bitterly terms this “Destructive Development”, a “closed corporation of disaster” (Gordimer, Get 92). “We’re chronically short of water and it’s not understood that this – what, phenomenon, marvel, much, much more than that – this intelligence of matter, receives, contains, processes, finally distributes the stuff [salt]. […] And some fucking consortium’s going to drain, block and kill what’s been given, no contracts—” (Gordimer, Get 92–3). Paul, as focaliser, reflects on humankind’s incapacity to register or conceive of the sheer scale of the slow violence threatening life on earth: “Maybe we see the disaster and don’t, can’t live long enough (that is, through centuries) to see the survival solution” (Gordimer, Get 93). Here it is the very slowness of the damage done to the natural environment and its inhabitants that Nixon identifies as a kind of (environmental) violence because, whilst we may not be able to imagine a way out of disaster, the human agents perpetrating it, even if environmental damage is not their objective, are cognisant of the damage they commit in the pursuit of profit.

By invoking the environmentalist maxim, everything is connected to everything else, Get a Life engages with the failure to join the dots to enable environmental renewal and regeneration through notions of connectivity, figured in the novel, for instance, through the environmental concept of scale, which, as ecocritic Timothy Clark suggests, “usually enables a calibrated and useful extrapolation between dimensions of space or time” (Ecocriticism 71). As Chakrabarty puts it, the challenge facing postcolonial critics during “the current conjuncture of globalization and global warming” is “having to think of human agency over multiple and incommensurable scales at once” (Chakrabarty “Postcolonial” 1). He elaborates, “Climate scientists raise a problem of scale for the human imagination, though they do not usually think through the humanistic implications of their own claim that, unlike the changes in climate this planet has seen in the past, the current warming is anthropogenic in nature” (Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial” 9). As I have been arguing, it is the close proximity of the land-as-Eden and land-as-cradle in the narrative that serves as the necessary reminder of the anthropogenic aspect to the crisis.

Situated within the humanist field of ecocriticism, Clark outlines a reading practice which enables connecting human history to a much
longer, natural history, thereby bridging the culture/nature, human needs/environmental needs divide that hitherto have proved so thorny for leftists. This kind of literary telescoping or “mapping”, as Clark would call it, in turn reflects the material connections between human life forms and the natural world. To make such readings, Clark augments the two scales literary scholars normally deploy, namely the familial and the national, with a global scale. He shows how in current literary practice, our readings of texts are typically derived, through literary devices like metaphor and allegory, from mapping the familial scale on to the national scale. So Robinson Crusoe maps on to (stands for) Calvinistic individualism or the eponymous colonialist, depending on one’s political positioning. National could constitute national or global in its common usage—a world peopled by interconnected communities (the so-called global village) across a more condensed human history. Global, as Clark deploys it, constitutes a planetary scale and would include the idea of natural history (cf. Clark, Ecocriticism 100). Graham effectively makes such an ecocritical scalar reading when he maps a familial reading of the loss of intimacy in Get a Life on to the national and global scales: “Having taken it for granted for so long, the survival of the bourgeois ‘nuclear family’ in the new South African society is revealed to be every bit as precarious as the fragile ecosystem Paul defends” (Graham, “From Exceptionalism” 198). So here the familial sphere, Graham shows, maps on, or is analogous, to contemporary South African society and to the ecosystem: all are revealed to be in a “precarious” state of existence. Clark argues that, by overlooking the vaster “global” scale in our literary mappings, “most given thought about literature and culture has been taking place on the wrong scale” (Clark, “Scale”). With a global/planetary scale (natural history) missing from our understanding of literary texts as well as the environment, ecocritics and environmentalists until relatively recently failed to draw the necessary connections between human and planetary agency, for example, humankind’s role in global warming. Deploying the term “derangements of scale”, Clark is critical of environmentalist models that centre on individual efforts rather than world-wide ones, to lessen our negative impact on the natural environment, efforts which, he points out, are futile. One example would be the notion that by reducing one’s carbon footprint, the individual can have a positive impact on decelerating climate change.

But Clark’s critics have claimed that he foregrounds the “global” or planetary scale of reading at the expense of the familial and national ones.
Such a move, effectively overriding human concerns of environmental crisis, would set him at odds with principles of environmental justice and a postcolonial environmentalism. Clark takes up this point about his apparent “rejection of human agency” or “abdication of human agency” on the global scale (Tavel Clarke, Halpern, and Clark 14) through the example of the carbon footprint. He describes how,

This useful concept relates to the issue of an individual’s environmental impact on the atmosphere or, crudely speaking, the atmospheric pollution for which he or she could notionally be held responsible. However—and this is where scale effects come in—the size of anyone’s carbon footprint could be of no interest or significance in itself[. …] Scale effects are something beyond my individual horizon, perception, or even calculation. (Tavel Clarke, Halpern, and Clark 14–5)

Nonetheless, as I argue elsewhere, Clark does not account for the interconnectedness of the national and the global scales enough: the former plays a significant part in producing the latter (humans as geological agents), but the resulting effects of this dynamic are realised in their uneven distribution; in other words, they constitute forms of environmental injustice (a nexus of race and class as well as gender) because, whilst the poorest communities in the world, very often postcolonial subjects, are in general worst affected by the impact of environmental crisis, they are also likely to produce smaller “footprints” than their richer, typically Western, counterparts (Poyner, “Subalternity” 63). Get a Life pins its environmentalist ethos on ecocritical theories of “scale”—a form of mapping or joining the dots. In the garden Paul as focaliser reflects on the notion of scale:

How long is forever. [sic] How old is the delta that is part of the cosmos visible from Outer Space? Astronauts report it. Will ten dams be visible, the scale of ponds, like all man-made scratchings and gougings in comparison with the planet’s own design.

Maybe we see the disaster and don’t, can’t live long enough (that is, through centuries) to see the survival solution[. …] This heresy is born of the garden, as Evil was[. …] Whatever ‘forever’ means, irrevocably lost, or surviving eternally, himself in this garden is part of the complexity, the necessity. As a spider’s web is the most fragile example of organisation, and the delta is the grandest. […] The inevitable
grace, zest, in being a microcosm of the macrocosm’s marvel. (Gordimer, *Get* 93–5)

The narrative interweaves macro- and micro-scales of existence, from outer space to the microscopic cells of human disease, here, implicitly linking Paul’s radioactive treatment with cosmic design: “He and his wife were told, in the most tactful way such *Outer Space instructions* may be conveyed, that when he was discharged after a few days of total isolation in hospital he still would be radioactive and a threat to those in contact with him” (emphasis added; Gordimer, *Get* 11). To draw connections between the vast and the microscopic in this way is to highlight that these different scales of existence are connected in the first place, the environmental maxim, *everything is connected*. That is to say, it is a means of bridging the human-conceived gap between the social and the environmental. Scalar mapping helps us to see our responsibility to nature because we are reconceived as part of nature, but also to recognise the fallacy that nature is a pristine Edenic space that must be preserved at the cost of human needs. Within the sphere of imaginative literature, linking the miniscule with the unimaginably vast helps us to bridge the failure of imagination that troubles environmentalist thought.

Despite diverging from a conventional environmentalist notion of scale, Coovadia’s novel, like Gordimer’s, telescopes divergent scales of reality. Both, for instance, telescope the cosmic to the atomic. In *High Low*, in a world in which logic has been turned upside down, human existence is scaled to the microscopic proportions of the atom. Nafisa imagines herself as less than molecular, but her sense of becoming invisible is couched in terms of relief: “Just as suddenly, just as perversely, Nafisa realised that she had a piece of news which would remain with her rather than being passed on to Arif. She was an atom where once she had been part of a molecule. […] She took strange pleasure in having thus ceased to exist” (Coovadia 127). At the *mawlud*, Sharky “wanted to be annihilated down to the very last atom … for this alteration to proceed in a split second so that he would have no knowledge of it and feel no pain, make no prediction. Hiroshima was his idea of a happy exit” (original ellipsis; Coovadia 112).

But Sharky remembers too, unhappily, his father’s body “curled up on the big bed as if something singed him”, which makes him realise “the stupidity of his fantasies about extinction” (Coovadia 112). The cataclysmic bomb reduces matter to its essential element of the atom. Most
notably for the discussion here is the way in which the AIDS crisis is framed in terms of scale: we read how the potentially deadly HIV virus which has impacted on human life in epidemic proportions in South Africa, for example, has been unleashed upon Nafisa “[through such a small portal, as small as the eye of a needle[,] a life was altered” (Coovadia 134). For Nafisa, even making sense of family friend and old-school socialist Jadwat, who preys on grieving widows and then unceremoniously vanishes as the women’s affections take root and who is a creature of the looking-glass society, is possible by contemplating his substance atomically, which in turn, she reflects, can only be comprehended by the art of magic: “Why, it was a feat of conjuring that the atoms which made up Jadwat should assemble every morning. If she were Jadwat, caught on her glare, she would have crumbled into dust a long time ago” (Coovadia 143). Nafisa invokes Einstein to defend her brother Nawaz’s name when Jadwat suggests he might have been implicated in corrupt financial affairs and even in the murder of Arif. Jadwat curtly asks whether, if she were to wish for it enough, the matter of her brother’s corruption would simply disappear: “So you think if you never mention something it will eventually vanish?” Nafisa responds with an Einsteinian maxim, “Everything will eventually vanish. You don’t have to be an Einstein to figure that out” (Coovadia 142). But in South Africa, where the scale of mortality from HIV/AIDS has been catastrophic, Nafisa, as focaliser, ponders, “There were things to which these no-Einsteins could hardly close their ears” (Coovadia 143). Recalling the thriving coffin-making business in Zakes Mda’s Ways of Dying (1995), the coffin-making trade is “flourishing” and it has become “impossible not to know the cause and yet just as impossible to know” (Coovadia 143). The horrifying scale of the epidemic may be impossible to comprehend, but a knowing refusal to acknowledge it is, Nafisa feels, a kind of “witchcraft” or “sorcery” for, “To refuse to know, to postpone comprehension, was to obtain a hold over things. Life, love, music, just because they penetrated us before entering our understanding, were modes of sorcery” (Coovadia 143). It will not have passed the attentive reader by, of course, that this idea equally applies to Nafisa’s own HIV+ status, just as Nafisa reflects on the malevolent nurse Rose witnessing her accidental self-infection, “You pushed things to the margin of consciousness where it [sic] could do no harm. Her mind would never return to the existence of Rose the nurse and her morning in the ward which had stuck her in the arm” (Coovadia 143). As the errant needle pierces Nafisa’s skin, she is sure she sees the faint trace of
a smile pass Rose’s lips. AIDS is figured as a kind of slow violence when Nafisa entertains the idea that Rose has “murder[ed] her that morning in slow motion” (Coovadia 141). Such violence is different, nevertheless, in Nafisa’s case from the slow violence of which Nixon writes, because as middle class she has not been infected because she is forced to live in an impoverished environment. (Indeed, her South Asian ethnicity points up a fissure in Nixon’s thesis, which prioritises race over class in its analysis of the environmentalism of the poor.) Nafisa ironically performs a kind of AIDS denialism prevalent amongst ordinary South Africans that Mbeki’s government fostered under the guise of African Renaissance philosophy. In her willed refusal to countenance what has happened to her, she thinks, “If she never did the numbers, if she never worked out the end result for herself, it would never take hold of her” (Coovadia 135). In both instances, Nafisa as a middle-class doctor is resituated into the subject position of those she treats, not unlike Bannerman as environmental scientist in Get a Life suffering toxicity and a potentially terminal illness that gives him a prognosis not unlike the AIDS orphan, Klara. Nafisa even experiences “enormous forces” at work inside her as political transformation becomes embodied. The national narrative, troubled by upheaval and transition, is condensed within the suffering (female) body, in Nafisa’s case through the circumstances of her bereavement and HIV infection: “There was some kind of transformation underway even before the accident in the morning. She could sense it inside herself. There were enormous forces in motion. They were a tide that ran against everything which had conspired to take Arif’s life away from her” (Coovadia 144).

I began this chapter by asking, in the face of environmental injustice, what can be learned from joining the dots between different experiential, intellectual and epistemological spheres? How can fictional representations of human disease like HIV/AIDS meaningfully be incorporated into environmental debate, in so doing departing from literary critical spheres like the medical humanities which focus primarily on representations of disease as, first and foremost, biomedical condition? Resituating AIDS within political debates pertaining to environmental justice by conjoining human health, global finance and environmental concerns allows the novels to cast light on the ways in which capitalist modernity contributes towards producing the necessary circumstances for disease to flourish and take hold, and in catastrophic proportions. Indeed, the two novels analysed here, Gordimer’s Get a Life and Coovadia’s High Low, thematise the very idea of connectivity as a
means of overcoming a human failure of imagination, through (environ-
mental) notions of scale, in which the minutest life forms are
mapped on to the very largest. Connectivity is expressed in the narra-
tive textures, which I have defined as environmentalist and investiga-
tive delayed decoding. By animating intellectual debate and allowing the
reader, alongside the protagonists, to experience the process of cognitive
mapping alongside the theme of mapping across spheres of knowl-
gedge and lived experience, the novels contribute towards the mapping
of intellectual spaces that are recognised as necessary work in the
process of nation-building; Anderson’s “imagined political community”
(Anderson 6).

Notes

1. The International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme website identifies the
“global economic system” as “the prime driver of change in the Earth
System” (IGBP), and points out that 74% of economic activity from this
period of acceleration has been within the OECD countries (the Organi-
sation for Economic Co-operation and Development, predominantly made
up of those countries constituting “the West”) (IGBP).
2. The Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agree-
ment, implemented in 1995, sought to regulate intellectual property rights
amongst member states of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). This
included the patenting laws governing the production and sale of ARVs.
3. A mawlid is a Muslim celebration of the Prophet Mohammad’s birth.

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