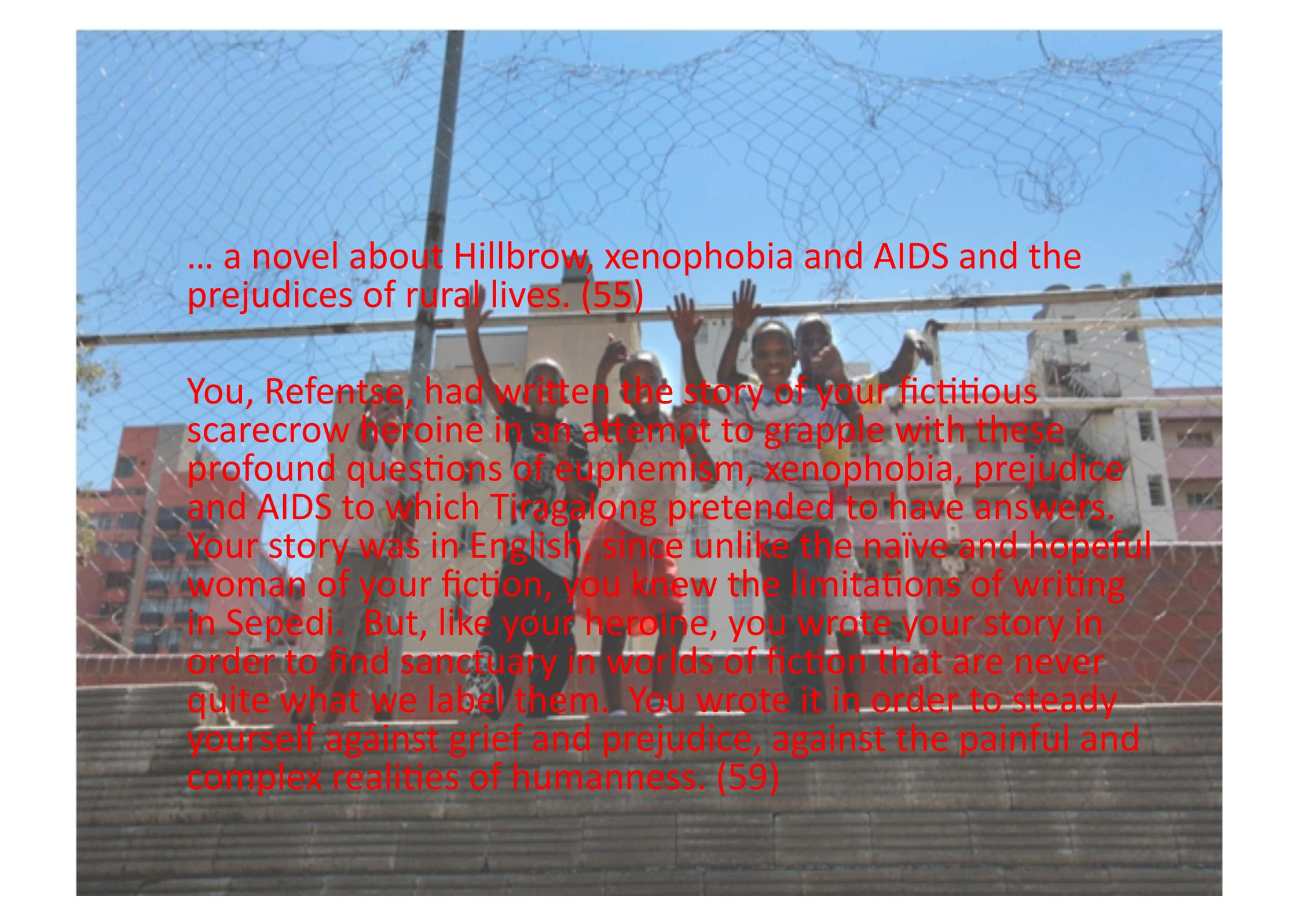


Welcome to Our Hillbrow

Phaswane Mpe



Stimela's song was not attractive to you simply because it was nice music. You loved it—and in fact the whole album—because of the associations the words had for you. *See the World through the Eyes of a Child...* in particular, was special to you because it was a song about a neglected, homeless child, exposed to much street violence and blood, and subsequently grown to be scared of darkness. It was a song of prolonged pain and suffering; but it was also a song of hope and love. It reminded you strongly of your own loneliness and fear of rejection and certain dark times of your life. (84)

A photograph of a group of children standing behind a chain-link fence. The children are smiling and some have their hands raised. In the background, there are several multi-story buildings under a clear blue sky. The fence is made of metal and has some vines or debris on it.

... a novel about Hillbrow, xenophobia and AIDS and the prejudices of rural lives. (55)

You, Refentse, had written the story of your fictitious scarecrow heroine in an attempt to grapple with these profound questions of euphemism, xenophobia, prejudice and AIDS to which Tiragalong pretended to have answers. Your story was in English, since unlike the naïve and hopeful woman of your fiction, you knew the limitations of writing in Sepedi. But, like your heroine, you wrote your story in order to find sanctuary in worlds of fiction that are never quite what we label them. You wrote it in order to steady yourself against grief and prejudice, against the painful and complex realities of humanness. (59)



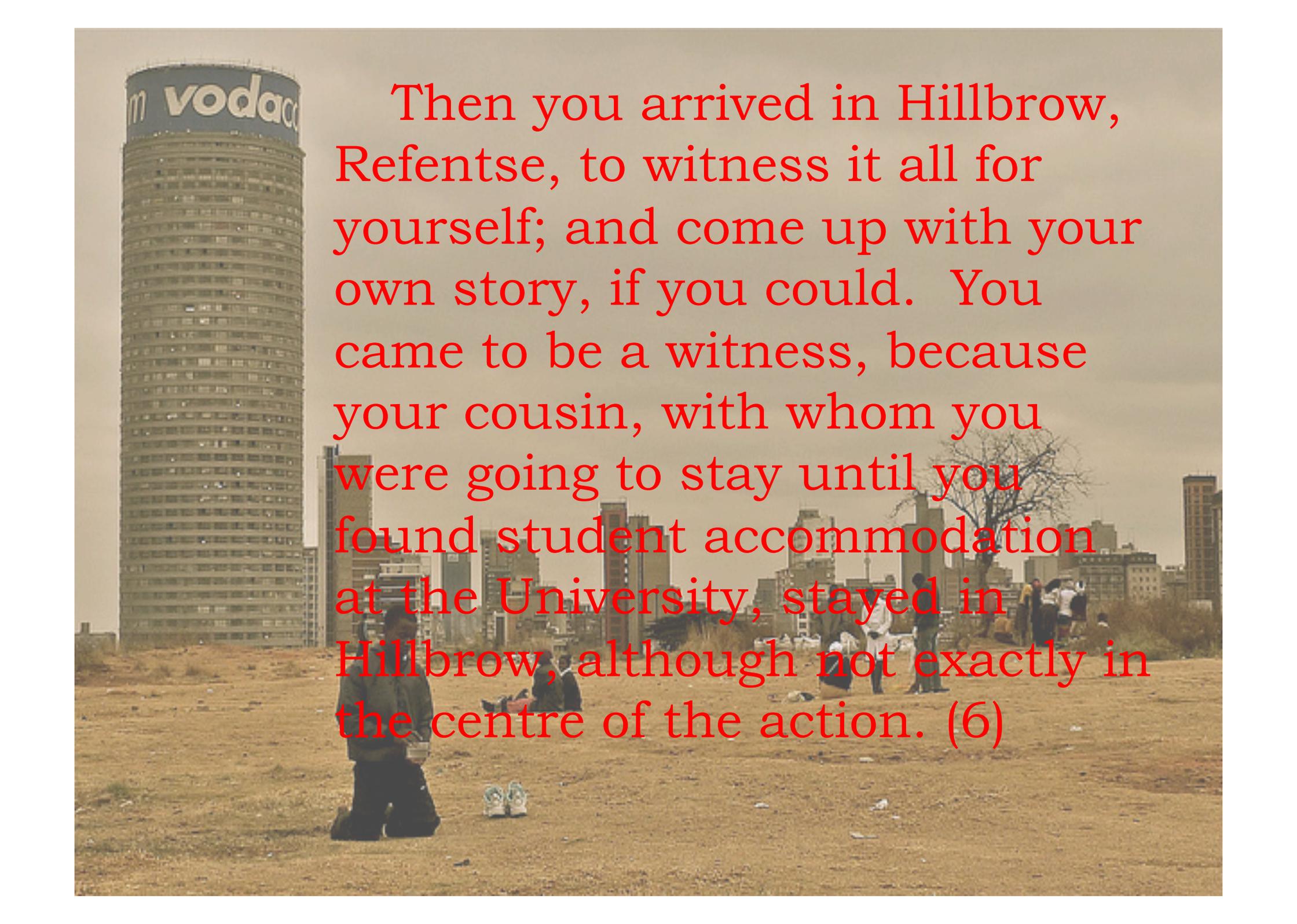
CENTRAL JOHANNESBURG



Hillbrow: The danger zone some call home

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?
v=zRaJka_1l28](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRaJka_1l28)





Then you arrived in Hillbrow, Refentse, to witness it all for yourself; and come up with your own story, if you could. You came to be a witness, because your cousin, with whom you were going to stay until you found student accommodation at the University, stayed in Hillbrow, although not exactly in the centre of the action. (6)

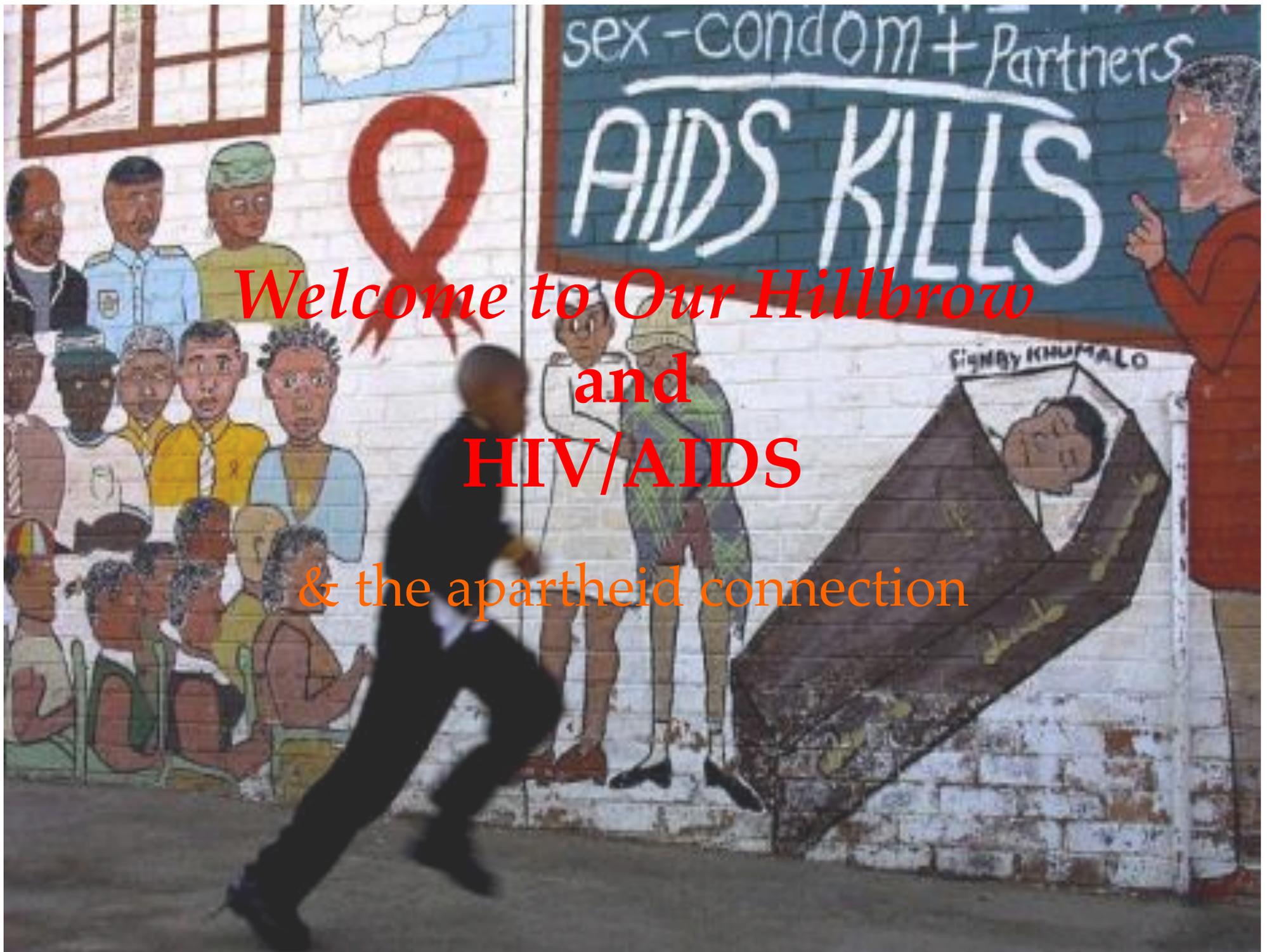
If you were still alive, Refentse, child of Tiragalong, you would be glad that Bafana Bafana lost to France in the 1998 Soccer World Cup fiasco. Of course you supported the squad. But at least now, you would experience no hardship walking to your flat through the streets of Hillbrow—that locality of just over one square kilometre, according to official reports; and according to its inhabitants, at least twice as big and teeming with countless people. You would remember the last occasion in 1995, when Bafana Bafana won against Ivory Coast and, in their jubilation, people in Hillbrow hurled bottles of all sorts from their flat balconies. A few bold souls, boasting a range of driving skills, swung and spun their cars in the streets, making U-turns and circles all over the road. You would recall the child, possibly seven years old or so, who got hit by a car. Her mid-air screams still ring in your memory. When she hit the concrete pavements of Hillbrow, her screams died with her. A young man just behind you shouted:

Kill the bastard!

But the driver was gone. The traffic copes, arriving a few minutes later, found that the season of arrest had already passed. Most people, after the momentary stunned silence of witnessing the sour fruits of soccer victory, resumed their singing. *Shosholoza*... sounded its melodies from `Wolmarans Street, at the fringe of the Johannesburg downtown, to the head of Clarendon Place, at the boundary of the serene Parktown suburb. *Shosholoza*... drowned the choking sobs of the deceased child's mother. (1-2)

**NARRATION FROM THE DEAD, OF THE
DEAD, ADDRESSED TO A READER IN THE
POSITION OF THE DEAD**

You discovered, on arriving in Hillbrow, that to be drawn away from Tiragalong also went hand-in-hand with a loss of interest in Hillbrow. Because Tiragalong was in Hillbrow. You always took Tiragalong with you in your consciousness whenever you came to Hillbrow or any other place. In the same way, you carried Hillbrow with you always. (49)

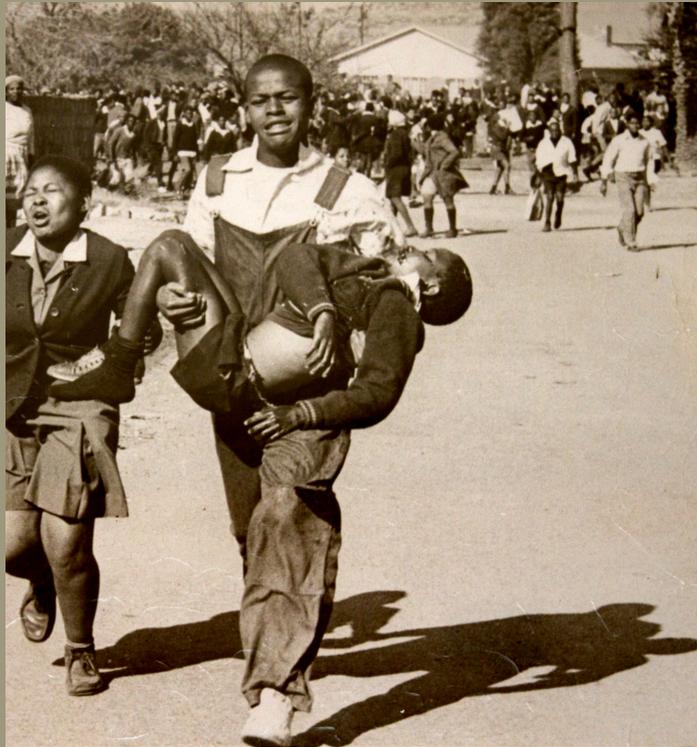


Welcome to Our Hillbrow
and
HIV/AIDS

& the apartheid connection



Sam Nzima, photograph of a schoolmate carrying the body of Hector Pietersen, Soweto riots, 1976



“This famous image has acquired a second iconic life in the context of HIV/AIDS by having the caption ‘Who is killing South Africans now?’ appended to it. This appropriation and recirculation of the image marks an assertion of the horrifying continuity in a narrative of rupture, liberation, and transformation. In the words of South African satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys: ‘In the old South Africa, we killed people, now we are just letting them die.’” (Hoad 335)

HIV prevalence (%) by province 2002-2008

<i>Province</i>	<i>2002</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>2008</i>
KwaZulu-Natal	11.7 1	6.5	15.8
Mpumalanga	14.1	15.2	15.4
Free State	14.9	12.6	12.6
North West	10.3	10.9	11.3
Gauteng	14.7	10.8	10.3
Eastern Cape	6.6	8.9	9.0
Limpopo	9.8	8.0	8.8
Northern Cape	8.4	5.4	5.9
Western Cape	10.7	1.9	3.8
National	11.4	10.8	10.9

Source: <http://www.avert.org/south-africa-hiv-aids-statistics.htm> (The South African National AIDS Survey, 2008)

HIV prevalence by population group, 2008

Population group	Prevalence (%)
African	13.6
White	0.3
Coloured	1.7
Indian	0.3

...I think issues like xenophobia and HIV/AIDS have not been discussed very much in South African literature written in English... But I think in South African literature in English, having xenophobia and HIV/AIDS treated in such a sensitive way is unusual.

(Mpe, in Attree 144)



Acknowledging a unifying and arbitrary vulnerability to HIV / AIDS becomes the condition of welcome to our Hillbrow. To engage in love, and sex, and to be desiring subjects is to share in this vulnerability. The novel is clear that the virus respects neither national boundaries nor even the integrity of discrete individual bodies. Questions of origins and certainties of identity can offer no protection. (Hoad 341)

One of the stories that you remember vividly was of a young man who died of a strange illness in 1990, when you were matriculating. The migrants said it could only have been AIDS. After all, was he not often seen roaming the whorehouse and dingy pubs of Hillbrow? While his poor parents imagined that he was working away in the city, in order to make sure that there would be a huge bag of maize meal to send back for all at the homestead. The migrants, most of whom insisted that he was a stubborn brother, who suffered because of blocking his ears with gum while they dished out advice to him, also said he was often seen with *Makwerekwere* women, hanging onto his arms and dazzling him with sugar-coated kisses that were sure to destroy any man, let alone an impressionable youngster like him. (3)

...This AIDS, according to popular understanding, was caused by foreign germs that travelled down from the central and western parts of Africa. More specifically, certain newspaper articles attributed the source of the virus that caused AIDS to a species of called the Green Monkey, which people in some parts of West Africa were said to eat as meat, thereby contracting the disease. Migrants (who were Tiragalong's authoritative grapevine on all important issues) deduced from such media reports that AIDS's travel route into Johannesburg was through *Makwerekwere*; and Hillbrow was the sanctuary in which *Makwerekwere* basked.

There were others who went even further, saying that AIDS was caused by the bizarre sexual behaviour of the Hillbrowians.

How could any man have sex with another man? they demanded to know.

Those who claimed to be informed—although none could admit to having seen or practised it personally—said such sex was done anally. They also explained how it was done—dog style—to the disgust of most of the people of Tiragalong, who insisted that filth and sex should be two separate things.

Surely, this large group argued, it was the shit that the greedy and careless penises sucked out of the equally eager anuses, that could only lead to such dreadful illnesses?

Such were the scandalous stories that did the rounds on the informal migrant grapevine. (3-4)

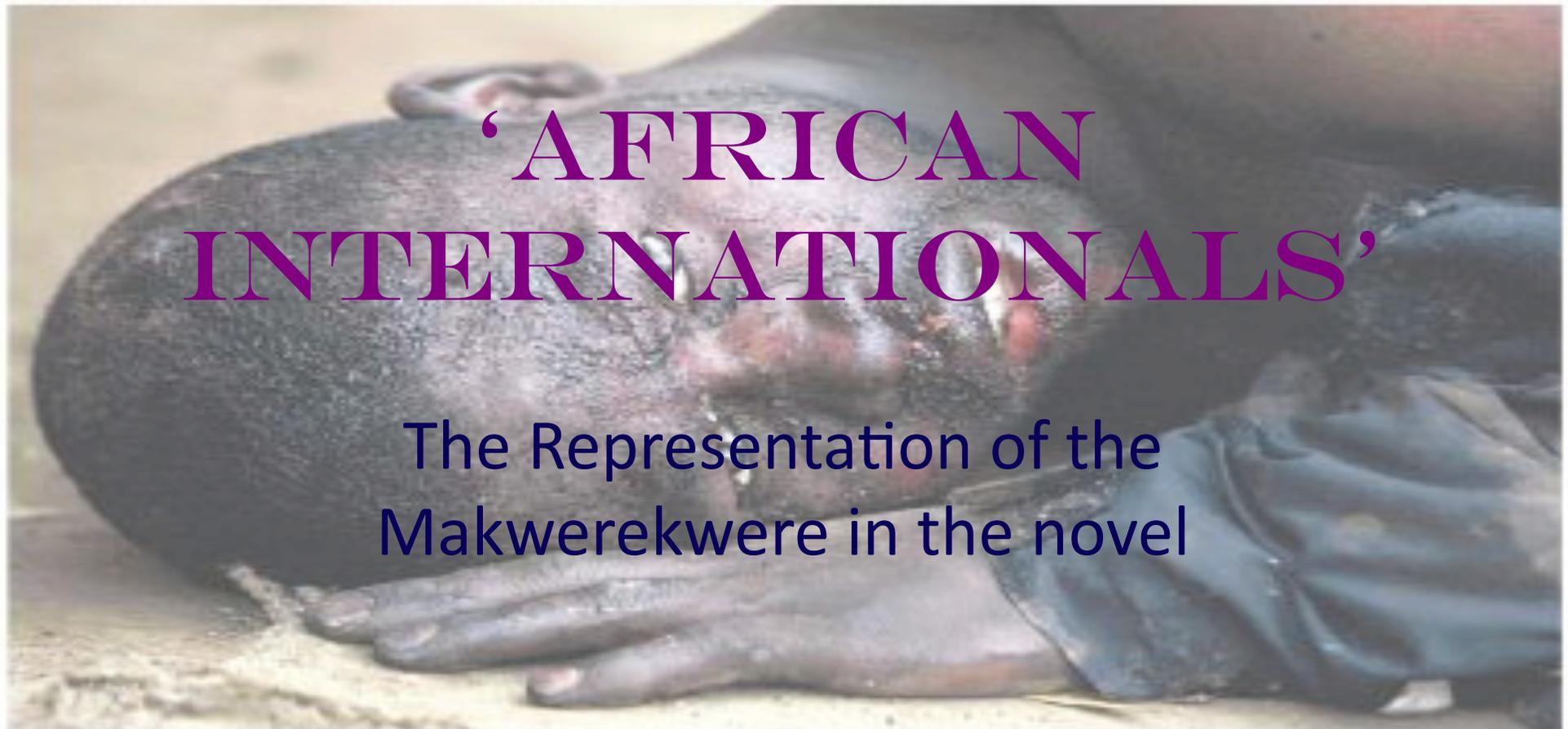
The Tiragalong migrants, themselves displaced people of a sort, would like to claim safety from HIV / AIDS in that they are not green monkey eaters from West Africa nor homosexuals who have anal sex. Yet the people who die in the novel are the young, educated respectable people from Tiragalong. The previous passage is further noteworthy for the description of sex in terms of part-objects—body parts that are unruly and have a life of their own that are not subject to rule by will. The novel is not willing to deny the humanity of desire, as doing so would risk embracing the migrants' hypocrisy that the narrative voice is at pains to escape. Yet Tiragalong and its values, no matter the critical distance taken by the protagonists, remain part of home... I think Mpe's novel can move its protagonists and readers from a xenophobic, exoticizing position in relation to the African HIV / AIDS pandemic to the melancholia of a cosmopolitanism that can embrace other people's dead. (Hoad 342,343)



TAC (Treatment Action Campaign) Demonstrators

And as Refilwe comes to this part of her journey to AIDS and Tiragalong condemning her and the Bone of her Heart and Refilwe herself reaping the bitter fruits of the xenophobic prejudice that she had helped to sow Hillbrow and Tiragalong flowing into each other in her consciousness with her new understanding of life love and prejudice gained in Oxford and Heathrow Oxford London and Lagos demystified Tiragalong sweating its way through the scary invasion of AIDS apparently aggressively sown by migrants and all witchcraft becoming less colourful and glamorous in the face of this killer disease the impact of which could be seen with the naked human eye without the assistance of diviners and bone throwers love crossing oceans and flying over the highest mountains life reconsidered in the light of the harshest possibilities of rural virtues laid bare under the eyes of human microscopes all these and many more things flowing into and blending with Refilwe's expanding consciousness...

Welcome to the World of our Humanity... (113)



‘AFRICAN INTERNATIONALS’

The Representation of the Makwerekwere in the novel

A man lies stunned after being beaten and set on fire yesterday near Johannesburg. Zimbabweans and Mozambicans have borne the brunt of the attacks. (AP/WIDE WORLD)

Xenophobic rage explodes in South Africa

Mobs kill at least 22 foreigners and injure hundreds as violence sweeps townships around the capital

BY STEPHANIE MOLES
JOHANNESBURG INFORMAL SETTLEMENT,
SOUTH AFRICA

In his haste to leave, Paolo Cosa left behind the things that once had pride of place: the framed family photographs nailed on the walls of his tin-clang shack, including the one that showed his beaming, dimpled daughter in blue cap and gown, graduating from primary school.

He hauled out the furniture that was still intact and heaped it in a truck, then left the shell of his small home behind yesterday afternoon. He was determined to get as far away as he could from this squatter settlement that has been his home for 15 years, since he moved to Johannesburg from Mozambique.

"If they have a gun, they'll shoot you, and if they don't, they will take some fire and

put it on top of you," said Mr. Cosa, a 32-year-old bricklayer.

Just down the road, a mob set another Mozambican on fire here yesterday morning, and laughed while he burned to death. They burned another immigrant alive the day before.

While Mr. Cosa loaded his hired truck, a swaggering mob of about 20 men was just 15 metres away, brandishing sticks, iron bars and home-made wooden truncheons.

They leapt onto a roof and began dismantling a shack, chanting "Kambanzi makwerekwere" - "Foreigners, get out!"

A wave of horrifying violence has swept the townships around Johannesburg in the past five days. At least 22 people are dead, hundreds injured and an estimated 4,000 have been left homeless, most of them refugees and immigrants from other African countries.

©-SEE 'SOUTH AFRICA' PAGE 14



If they have a gun, they'll shoot you, and if they don't, they will take some fire and put it on top of you.

Paolo Cosa

- Think back to the short film version (and feature length version) of *District Nine*... and the representation of the aliens.. and of the Nigerian gangs
- 'Prawn' as slang for cockroach in Jo'burg
- The 'alien' as the new, unifying enemy in the post-apartheid period

Now she herself was, by association, one of the hated *Makwerekwere*. Convenient scapegoat for everything that goes wrong in people's lives. (118)

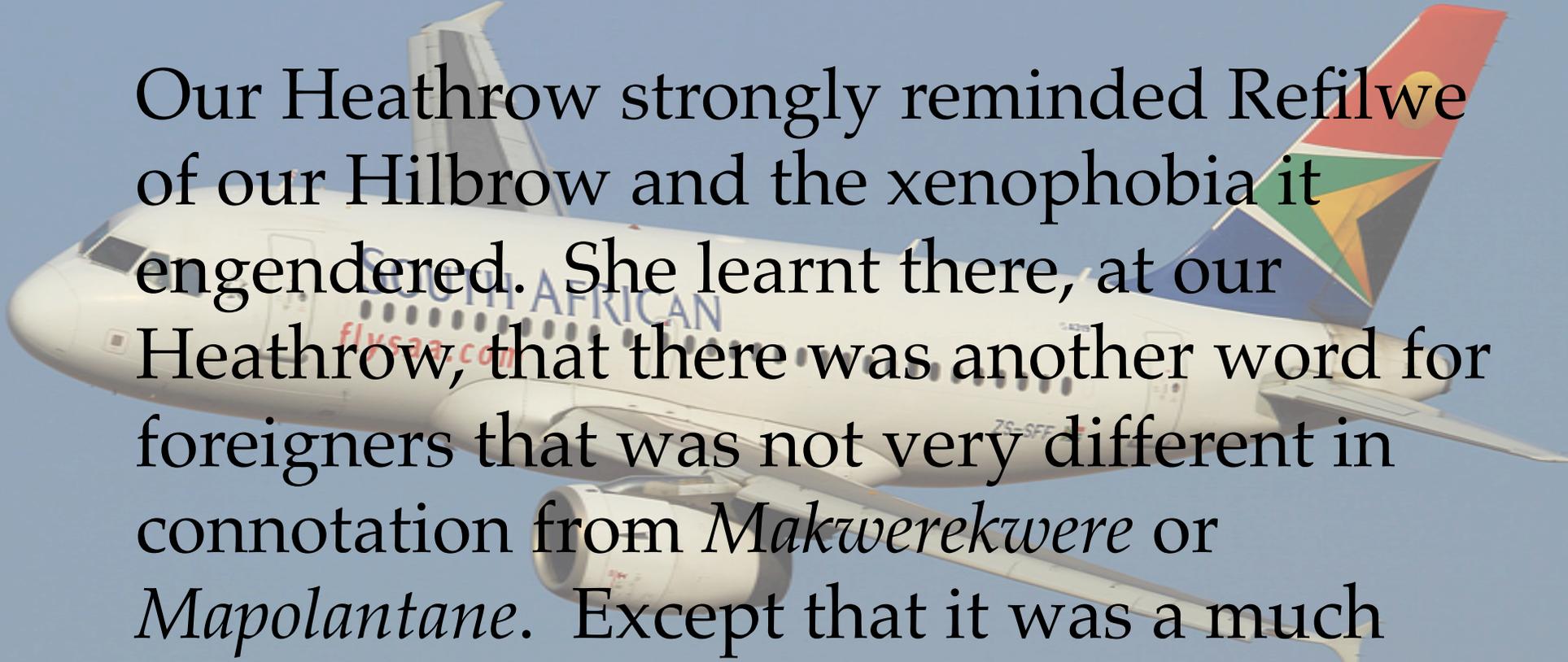
- Narrative consistently presents, then contests, prejudiced views of the Hillbrowians and the villagers and migrants from Tiralagong towards African internationals.
- Charts how internal problems—disease, poverty, joblessness, etc.—are projected onto them.
- This projection parallels Tiragalong's projection of such problems onto witchcraft.
- Refilwe's transformation from someone who circulates gossip about other Africans to someone who loves 'an other' African in Oxford (outside the local context) holds a significant place in the narrative.
- This transformation also induces her to break the silence around AIDS when she returns to South Africa.

...You often accused him of being a hypocrite, because his vocal support for black non-South African teams, whenever they played against European clubs, contrasted so glaringly with his prejudice towards black foreigners the rest of the time. Cousin would always take the opportunity during these arguments to complain about the crime and grime in Hillbrow, for which he held such foreigners responsible; not just for the physical decay of the place, but the moral decay. His words were echoed by many others—among them, the white superintendent at your place in Van der Merwe Street, who told you when you moved in that Hillbrow had been just fine until those Nigerians came in here with all their drug dealing. (17)

Many of the *Makwerekwere* you accuse of this and that are no different to us— sojourners, ere in search of green pastures... (18)

No one seemed to care that the treatment of the *Makwerekwere* by the police, and the lack of sympathy from the influential Department of Home Affairs, ran contrary to the human rights clauses detailed in the new constitution of the country. Ambiguities, paradoxes, ironies... the stuff of our South African and *Makwerekwere* lives. (23)

...*Makwerekwere* stretching their legs and spreading like pumpkin plants filling each corner of our city and turning each patch into a Hillbrow coming to take our jobs in the new democratic rainbowism of African Renaissance that threatened the future of the locals Bafana Bafana fans momentarily forgetting xenophobia and investing their hopes in the national team... (26-7)



Our Heathrow strongly reminded Refilwe of our Hilbrow and the xenophobia it engendered. She learnt there, at our Heathrow, that there was another word for foreigners that was not very different in connotation from *Makwerekwere* or *Mapolantane*. Except that it was a much more widely used term: *Africans*. (102)