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# Reading affect in post-apartheid literature: Compassion and other difficult feelings in Ivan Vladislavi

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English 8003
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# Reading Affect in Post-Apartheid Literature: Compassion and other difficult feelings in Ivan Vladislavić

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Supervised by Prof. Gerald Gaylard

# Declaration

I declare that this dissertation, *Reading Affect in Post-Apartheid Literature: Compassion and other difficult feelings in Ivan Vladislavić* is my own work. It is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not previously been submitted for a degree or examination at any other university.

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Clea Schultz

_____ day of _____ 2013

## Abstract

I aim to explore compassion and affect in South African literature because there is a remarkable dearth of criticism on both compassion and affect in this field. I hope this thesis will be a small remedying contribution. As I wish to explore material conceptions of compassion and affect, this study will also engage in commentary on everyday South African society as reflected by the "web cracked mirror" (Titlestad and Gaylard, 7) held up to it: its literature. My case study is Ivan Vladislavić because he is a writer intricately engaged with everyday South African society, particularly the material realities and lived experiences of the people living within it. He never uses the word "compassion" in his texts, excepting in the mouth of Merle in *The Restless Supermarket*. (192) Nevertheless, the way in which he chooses and portrays his subject matter is infused with compassion, albeit in his aloof style. I have come to this conclusion through close reading of three of his texts – *The Restless Supermarket*, *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys* – and intend to make close reading a large part of this thesis. I must also state this thesis will be my own personal enquiry and research, not an empirical project. The nature of affect is such that a study of affect must always be deeply subjective and, in fact, affected.



## Key Words

Affect; compassion; everyday; Ivan Vladislavić; Johannesburg; *Portrait with Keys: Joburg and what-what*; post-apartheid literature; South Africa; sympathy; *The Exploded View*; *The Restless Supermarket*.

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**Chapter One: Ivan Vladislavić, Affect and Compassion**

> the terms of the novelist's art are alert winged creatures, perceiving where the blunt terms of ordinary speech, or of abstract theoretical discourse, are blind, acute where they are obtuse, winged where they are dull and heavy. (Nussbaum, 5, *Love's Knowledge*)

> Affect is in one sense deeply local, experienced at the level of the body and skin and abstracted from larger categories of shared social identification. In another sense affect is prototypically global, constituted by flows that run over and through individual subjects and singular sites of identification to comprise a larger network. (Cooppan, 52)

In his book, *The Joys and Sorrows of Imaginary Persons (On Literary Emotions)* Donald Wesling writes that "storytelling is the need to understand the significance of lives; the need for context, history, reciprocity, community, and a sense of being fitted into the world". (Wesling, 16) As Nussbaum's quote suggests, storytelling can explore these needs with a simultaneous direct personal appeal as well as historical reach that is not often possible in other discourses. It is for this reason that I wish to focus on Ivan Vladislavić's writing using reader-response theory, specifically looking at the affects that are produced by his texts. His texts are set unequivocally in the context of Johannesburg, South Africa and his awareness of the "echoes of ancient guilts and prejudices" (Morris, 8) that resonate in South African society at large is woven into his exploration of his own "marginal" and specific concerns and spaces in fiction. (Vladislavić as cited by De Waal, 103) His attempts to "understand the significance of lives" through what I shall argue is compassion involve the particular difficulties that a South African context brings to the need for "reciprocity, community and a sense of being fitted into the world". (Wesling, 16)

Vladislavić is a writer who is not traditionally associated with exploring the intricacies of human emotion. On the contrary, he is often associated more with a purposefully

“unspectacular affective dimension” (Gaylard, 98, “Transculturating the Sympathic Imagination”), one that simultaneously examines the intricacies of the written word and the tensions and pressures of the post-apartheid South African everyday. Ralph Goodman goes so far as to call his “view…a primarily disengaged one, interrogating the former authority of the apartheid order of signs only in indirect ways”. (Goodman, 226) As I will argue, however, Vladislavić’s relatively aloof tone only serves to render emotions, particularly that of compassion, more accurately, affectively and subtly. His defamiliarising texts are not written to disengage, but like other defamiliarising and estranging texts, to engage the reader in new ways. Reading his texts, one is able to explore how the characters feel or fail to feel compassion for one another, how Vladislavić the author portrays his subjects with compassion, and how the reader situates their own emotions in relation to these interactions.

**Reader-Response Theory**

My own response as a reader will, necessarily, play a central role in this study. As Louise M. Rosenblatt explains, "that each reading involves a particular person at a particular time and place, underlines the importance of such factors in the [interpretive] transaction as gender, ethnic and socio-economic background and cultural environment". (viii) This becomes particularly true when the subjects of study are affects and emotions that must, necessarily, spring from the reader. The nature of affect is such that a study of affect must always be deeply subjective and, in fact, affected. In other words, reader response, because it entails an interaction between text and reader, inevitably involves affect and feeling which are interactions themselves.

There are several aspects of Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory that resonate with my interpretive strategy. This is no happenstance, given that we might view affect theory as evolving out of reader response theory. Firstly, as Rosenblatt begins to explain above, the way one reads a text is partially defined by one's own background and experience. Iser writes about a literary work as a "virtual position" between text and reader, explaining that the text "cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism". (Iser, 1674, "Interaction Between Text and Reader") In my use of this theory, I do not go

so far as Stanley Fish ("Interpreting the *Variorum*") and assert that the only aspect of reading is one's own interpretation or even as far as Roland Barthes, who asserts that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author". (1470) Iser puts it well when he compares reading to having a conversation. (1675, "Interaction Between Text and Reader") In a conversation, one's intention, history and context form one part of the conversation and the other person in the conversation will have their own that is also important to the trajectory of that conversation. This is similar to Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of "dialogism": "discourse lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context". (1208, "Discourse in the Novel)

Fish's interpretation seems to see reading as a monologue in which all the reader sees in a text springs from their own head:

> What my analyses amount to are descriptions of a succession of decisions made by readers about an author's intention - decisions that are not limited to the specifying of purpose but include the specifying of every aspect of successively intended worlds, decisions that are precisely the shape, because they are the content, of the reader's activities. (2081)

Fish goes on to say that people read texts in this self-referential way not purely because of the workings of their own brains in isolation, but because one has been trained to read the words on a page in a particular way by an "interpretative community". This interpretative community teaches the reader to read and then categorise black markings on a page in singular ways. (2086) Formal and structural aspects of a text are products of our reading strategies, not the other way around. Fish says, finally, that a text independent of its appearance in a reader's mind doesn't "exist". (2086)

There is something to be said for an "interpretive community". In this thesis, I will use particular theorists and critics to support certain ways of reading that I choose and my choice is no doubt as a result of my own context and reading history. To a certain degree, I will (to paraphrase a title of one of his books) "[do] what comes naturally", which is to say I will interpret the texts in a way that seems logical to me after years of school and then academic training. To say, however, that the structural aspects and then

the text on the page does not exist is possibly to over-simplify things. The problem with this formulation is that authors are readers themselves and are part of an "interpretive community". They structure their texts in a way that will be understood (albeit not always easily or completely) by readers. The formal aspects of a text that Fish deems products of our own interpretive acts were, in the first place, products of an author's imagination and written on a page in a specific way for specific reasons. The reasons for these aspects may be interpreted by or affect a reader differently from how an author intended them to be affected, but this not to say that the formal aspects do not affect them because they do not exist.

In addition, a text itself may not exist in the same way (I refer again to Iser's "virtual text" that is reformulated at each reading), but it does still exist, the same way that a person with whom one has a conversation exists. Iser admits the "inexperienceability of one another's experiences" (1675), but also realises that there are some commonalities in human experience (human experience interpreted and written on a page in the example of the text) and, therefore, possibility for dialogue. The inclusivity of the reader's perspective, the author's perspective and the effort in the reader's mind to reconcile the two (after a fashion) in Iser's theory is a fundamental prerequisite for the kind of compassion I believe is present in Vladislavić's texts.

Iser's theory does not assume however, that it is only the reader's interpretation that varies and that the text and author's intentions are consistent. Another important aspect of Iser's theory is his idea of "indeterminicies". These are "gaps" in the text that give the reader the chance to "participate actively" in meaning-making. (Iser, 10, *Prospecting*)

> What is missing from the apparently trivial scenes, the gaps arising out of the dialogue - this is what stimulates the reader into filling the blanks with projections. He [sic] is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said. What is said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning. But as the unsaid comes to life in the reader's imagination, so the said "expands" to take on greater significance than

> might have been supposed: even trivial scenes can seem surprisingly profound. (Iser, 33-34, ibid)

Vladislavić's texts often describe "trivial" scenes and there are many "gaps" in his descriptions. The gaps present in his texts are deliberate as they are a statement about the multiplicity of interpretation, the ambiguity with which he and/or his characters regard some situations and, in *Portrait with Keys*, the possibility of changing one's mind about the same situation when one returns to it in memory. Vladislavić, along the lines that Iser suggests, is an author who wishes to engage a reader in that virtual in-between space that the reader must create. That is not to say, however, that Vladislavić discounts his influence on a reader's interpretations completely.

Indeed, another aspect of Iser's reader-response theory is that reading a text does not just trigger the interpretive strategies Fish details, but can interrupt them and change a reader in some way by making them feel things. Terry Eagleton goes so far as to say that Iser assumes that "in reading we should be flexible and open-minded, prepared to put out beliefs into question and allow them to be transformed". (Eagleton, 79, "Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Reception Theory") I relate this interpretation of reader-response theory to compassion for, as I will go on to explain, compassion has traditionally been associated with transformation: with putting oneself in another's shoes and being transformed by what one discovers. I will suggest (along with Suzanne Keen in her excellent study, *Empathy and the Novel*) throughout this thesis that a reader of a text is "affected" by varying degrees by what they read, and that transformation as a result of this may be possible. Hence affect theory may be seen as an extension of, and instantiation of, reader response theory.

Using my own interpretive community of affect, emotion and literary theorists and Vladislavić critics, this study will be rooted in my close reading of the three texts: *The Restless Supermarket*, *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys*. Following Iser, it will be a virtual conversation between my own reading and interpretation of compassion in these texts and Vladislavić's own literary practises. This conversation is akin to affect in the sense that both involve a dynamic interaction between self and other, reader and text.

**Context of Vladislavić's Texts**

*The Restless Supermarket*, *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys* make appropriate subjects for my study as not only were they written chronologically, but they contain certain common concerns. Vladislavić himself said in a recent interview that *The Exploded View* is a "sort-of" sequel to *The Restless Supermarket* (Vladislavić, *The White Review*), and he considers his own most recent long text, *Double Negative* as a departure from his "last few books" which are the texts I have chosen for this thesis. (Vladislavić as cited by Law-Viljoen, 345) They may not share characters and a continuing plot, but the fascination with shifting Johannesburg society and people's interaction with each other and the material world are common concerns in all three texts. The first two texts explore why people do not act in ways that will enable the formation of a healthy, productive community in post-apartheid Johannesburg. In *Portrait with Keys,* Vladislavić's textual alter-ego, Vlad, presents an alternative way of being that can foster compassion and a sense of community that works around a Johannesburg society that is often repressive and materialist. As Ralph Goodman explains, the texts may criticise the social order implicitly, but they do not offer over-arching, didactic answers: "It is as satire should be, both sceptical and engaged, not offering any specific solutions to the issues it raises but remaining true to the maverick spirit which has always been one of the marks of satire". (Goodman, 46) The texts may not offer any "specific solutions", but the trajectory that I wish to trace through the three texts is one that suggests that having compassion for others can bypass the master-narratives that the social order imposes. Vladislavić's texts are not about compassion, but compassion is integral to his conception of the problems hindering communities. The characters in Vladislavić's texts who feel for others show that "there is a daily resistance to power as well as routine complicity". (Eagleton, 278, *Trouble with Strangers*)

Having "compassion" in order to effect reciprocity and community in the social and cultural context of South Africa is uniquely difficult. In *Willem Boshoff*, Ivan Vladislavić's monograph on the local artist, he writes "a national community is still

under construction. We are in a second interregnum, a parenthetical era, in which a provisional country asserts itself, but drags its history behind it in brackets, like a skin it has not properly sloughed". (Vladislavić, 88, *Willem Boshoff*) The statements he makes about Boshoff's art are not to be restricted purely to that artist's beliefs and processes. As Sally Ann Murray explains, one is "constantly aware of the strange feeling that Vladislavić's discussion of the artist's work seemed also to be signing an indirect route to Vladislavić's *own* imaginative territory". (Murray, 253) While Vladislavić does not claim that his writing "deals with society in a broad, comprehensive way" (Vladislavić as cited by De Waal, 101), part of his "imaginative territory" is nevertheless the social order, or disorder, in South Africa. (Murray, 253) As he explains in an interview with Christopher Warnes,

> Political issues are not peripheral to my life, but having spent a lot of my editing career working with overtly political writing, my inclination is to shy away from the obvious, to be slightly obscure or tangential. At the same time I think that writing politically, dealing with questions of politics and power, is almost inevitable in this country. (Vladislavić as cited by Warnes, 275)

Shane Graham highlights the political issues that hinder the creation of the "provisional community" (Vladislavić, 88, *Willem Boshoff*) in postmodern society in general and in the Johannesburg specifically of which Vladislavić writes. He references, among others, critics such as Achille Mbembe, Lindsey Bremner and Sarah Nuttall who draw attention to the more divisive aspects of South African society. Bremner's view of Johannesburg is characteristic of the most damning criticisms of post-apartheid South Africa. She writes that

> Life in Johannesburg, being the city that it is, is nevertheless centred on money. Its citizens are driven by the acquisition of wealth, through fair means or foul, and aspire to lives of lavish spending (on the body, on entertainment, on cars, on houses and their interiors). The public theatres of consumption and display [...] where life is dominated by private interest and consumer choice, serve for many,

> as their only experience of some form of public life. (Bremner, 23, *Johannesburg: Emerging/Diverging Metropolis*)

She says elsewhere that "Perhaps, despite all attempts to reconfigure our economy, our politics and our society, it is this unconscious history of self-interested indifference that will continue to shape Johannesburg's future". (Bremner, 136, *Johannesburg: One City, Colliding Worlds*) This is a problem Vladislavić's texts acknowledge by creating characters who seem tragically concerned with the acquisition of an empty consumer lifestyle rather than anything else, most particularly *The Exploded View*'s artist Simeon Majara and continuity presenter Iris Du Plooy whose homes are monuments to consumerist amnesia.

As Graham's article suggests, however, Vladislavić's texts tend not to view these characters judgementally. South Africa (and Johannesburg in particular since it is Vladislavić's focus) is not only failing to build a new national community because of "self-interested indifference", but because the social order of Johannesburg makes it incredibly difficult to do so. (Bremner, 136) Post-apartheid Johannesburg is a neoliberal, capitalist, postmodern society. Graham explains how South Africa's "immersion into late capitalism" has been accompanied by "massive unemployment, a widening gap between rich and poor, and a severe segregation of social space, albeit along class rather than strictly racial lines". (Graham, 51) It is very complicated to build an egalitarian post-apartheid community when the inherent social orders inscribed on the material space make it almost impossible even to conceive of alternatives. Admittedly, Graham explains that far from being specific to South Africa, "uneven development is a strategic and integral part of global capitalist expansion". (51) In South Africa, as elsewhere, "uneven development" is often seen as something that is impossible to fix or change, rather than a travesty that needs restitution.

Martha Nussbaum explains that this kind of social order not only causes material inequalities, but that "very often in today's political life we lack the capacity to see one another as fully human, as more than 'dreams or dots'. Often, too, those refusals of sympathy are aided and abetted by an excessive reliance on technical ways of modelling human behaviour, especially those that derive from economic materialism". (Nussbaum,

xiii, *Poetic Justice*) Vladislavić thematises this when he makes one of his four protagonists in *The Exploded View* a statistician. Geoff Budlender is saturated by statistics about his fellow South Africans, but he struggles to imagine them "as fully human". (xiii)

If imagining people as "dots" is part of an inherently unfair capitalist society, then imagining them as "dreams" is just as problematic. (Nussbaum, xiii, ibid) Part of Graham's thesis is that many people ignore the problems South Africa has almost completely, wishing to move on without dealing with what happened in the past. South Africa's attempt to brand itself as a "rainbow nation" is admirable but also "superficial". (Graham, 60) It is harmful because it builds a community from "historical amnesia", which results in a re-inscription of the social order I have detailed. Vladislavić's texts are difficult because he refuses to idealise their subject matter. As Sara Ahmed explains in "Happy Objects", this is ultimately the most compassionate way:

> A concern with histories that hurt is not then a backward orientation: to move on, you must make this return. If anything we might want to read melancholic subjects, the ones who refuse to let go of suffering, who are even prepared to kill some forms of joy, as an alternative model of the social good. (Ahmed, 50)

A truly compassionate portrait, therefore, must be unflinchingly honest about the "past living on in the present" in order to "prevent the past from tainting" a better future community. (Gaylard, 303, "Migrant Ecology") One of the problems that lingers in South Africa is racism. Hundreds of years of racial segregation and mutual suspicion cannot be undone in the less than two decades since 1994. In South Africa, therefore, having compassion for others must often involve remembering the past and transgressing racial boundaries. The Johannesburg characters portrayed in *The Restless Supermarket*, *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys* are minutely affected by the history of separation. Sarah Nuttall goes so far as to argue that "race appears to be hardening in the public, political realm precisely as legalised racism has been abolished". (28) Post-millennial characters Budlender and Egan in *The Exploded View* are just as preoccupied with racial difference as *The Restless Supermarket*'s Aubrey

Tearle in the dying days of apartheid. Nuttall complains that even Vladislavić's semi-autobiographical "Vlad" of *Portrait with Keys* fails to "find and create friendships across the racial barriers of before". (93) She postulates that one cannot write oneself into Johannesburg unless one is immersed in the beginnings of a cross-racial world. (93) Things are seldom, fortunately or unfortunately, that simple. People live many different, often very disconnected, lives that are still undeniably South African although they may not be ethically so. Vladislavić is all too aware of the frequently still divided everyday: Johannesburg as it is rather than as it should be. This does not mean, however, that *Portrait with Keys* is not a nuanced exploration and criticism of this post-apartheid separateness. Vladislavić actively questions and draws attention to all forms of the "new" South African brand of separateness. Nuttall's accusation is perhaps more redolent of her own obsession with difference than Vladislavić's, as Vlad's descriptions of the first names but not the races of his friends would seem to indicate that his creation of his own community crosses racial barriers by acknowledging sameness, not emphasising difference.

Nuttall's criticism is typical of how the separateness that is all too common in public life more often than not leaks into postcolonial literary criticism in the form of the post-colonial fascination with "the other". This has been particularly prevalent in readings of J.M. Coetzee, of whom Vladislavić has said: "It's impossible to write in South Africa without being influenced by him". (Vladislavić as cited by Warnes, 276) It is therefore unsurprising that ways of reading Coetzee also influence ways of reading other South African and postcolonial writing and sometimes, ways of reading all writing. When writing of Coetzee, Derek Attridge writes, "in doing justice to a literary work, we encounter the singular demands of the other". (Attridge, xvii) Terming others, particularly others with different histories, "the other" is an attempt to acknowledge each other person's completely equal and completely different personhood, something almost impossible in the face of our "passionate egoism". (Eliot, 423, *Middlemarch*) In this regard, the attempt is laudable. Achille Mbembe and (perhaps ironically) Sarah Nuttall argue, however, that emphasising alterity means "Africa is not only perpetually caught and imagined in a web of difference and absolute otherness" but also that "the sign is fraught because Africa so often ends up epitomizing the intractable, the mute, the

abject or the other-worldly". (348) What is true of "Africa" is also true of "Africans", and they too are seen as other-worldly and mute, a stereotype on which *The Exploded View*'s Simeon Majara arguably capitalises by making unimaginative art that nevertheless does very well because it often depicts mute African peoples who have experienced atrocities.

Additionally, the very phrase, "the other" objectifies that "other" because it isolates people from each other rather than acknowledges the complex, interdependent relationships people have. As Gerald Gaylard notes, theories of "the other" tend "to ignore those aspects of sameness and self that the other may echo and that may provide an avenue of approach to that other". (Gaylard, 153, "Review of Derek Attridge") Vladislavić does not objectify people in this way, as instead of writing about "the other", he looks at the lives of *others*. The people Vladislavić writes about are other people with different lives and different experiences about which he would never presume to know absolutely, but they are nevertheless other people, fellow "Jo'burg" citizens. Perhaps the divisions of race, neatly divided historical eras or even you and me are more like a "porous and shifting boundary" than "a clear gulf". (Gaylard, 154, ibid)

Having a mindset that sees such overlapping and the "shifting" nature of boundaries in the society around one is a mind that is affectively aware and ideally, compassionate. This is also the conclusion of Eusebius McKaiser, a political and social analyst at the Wits Centre for Ethics, who tackled the issue of bridging these social differences in his recent book, *There's a Bantu in my Bathroom: Debating Race, Sexuality and other Uncomfortable South African Topics*. McKaiser may simplify his reasoning for the conclusions he reaches in the book because he wants to reach wider South African audiences, but I believe the heart of his argument nevertheless holds true. Both the problems that his simplifications cause and the conclusions that he reaches provide a good starting point for my discussion of compassion and its attendant emotions and affects.

The chapter of McKaiser's book in which he writes about the importance of compassion is the one in which he probes the possibilities for and responsibilities of white citizens, like Vladislavić, in post-apartheid South Africa. McKaiser is talking to J.P. Landman about finding a way to live in South Africa that does not involve self-flagellation and withdrawal from society because of guilt about the past (the examples

McKaiser uses are of author Antjie Krog and academic Samantha Vice), or assuming that everyone should move on because apartheid's after-effects are minimal. Landman recommends a three-pronged approach. Firstly, he recommends compassion, as "Compassion is a powerful idea. It forces you to get into someone else's headspace, and their heart – to understand the journey they have been through". (McKaiser, 60) Secondly, he qualifies that the compassion and the participation in society should be tempered by "full awareness of the structural injustices that still persist, and knowing the historic origins of these injustices". (McKaiser, 61) Finally, he cautions that one should have compassion for oneself rather than walking around with a crushing burden of guilt that inhibits contribution to society.

McKaiser's formulation of compassion is important as it emphasises context and specificity rather than universality and it also pinpoints the need for self-compassion before it can be usefully extended to anyone else. It places feeling, specifically feeling with and for others, at the centre of community making. It also poses several problems. Firstly, considering the differences there are between people, it is not clear that it is even possible to get into "someone else's headspace". (60) People who have similar backgrounds and contexts cannot always understand each other's perspective, never mind people who live on different sides of racial, cultural or class divides. In addition, the definition of compassion that McKaiser gives seems closer to "empathy" than it is to compassion, and it leaves the reader wondering what the difference is between the two and if that difference is important. It is also important to question whether in fact feeling "can be part of the problem quite as much as the solution". (Eagleton, 82)

Certainly, compassion is one of the "high" emotions preferred by the cultural canon (Ngai, 11) and as Attridge explains, "the high literary canon, in its most traditional form, is premised upon an assumption of universal moral and aesthetic values". (71) As Gaylard explains in his paper, "Transculturating the Sympathic Imagination", "postcolonial culture, theory and criticism, partly descended from Marxist thought, is built upon a hermeneutic suspicion of universal culture or emotion". (Gaylard, 99) In a similar vein, Vladislavić states in an interview with Shaun de Waal that he does not wish to be an extension of this nineteenth century canon that claims it can "deal with the society in a broad, comprehensive way" but would rather "accustom [him]self to

marginality, engaging with something that makes no claim to completeness". (Vladislavić, 101, 103)

It may therefore seem incongruous to read a sustained engagement with compassion from Vladislavić's texts. I would argue, however, that it is not the emotion that is canonical, but the way in which it is interpreted. In his paper, Gaylard writes of the "transculturation of the sympathic imagination" in two of Vladislavić's short stories and, as Gaylard shows, Vladislavić transculturates compassion differently in each text, and, therefore, not only does he not fall into the trap of universalising emotions, he short-circuits compassion fatigue. Vladislavić's awareness of language and of the interplay of affects that cause and interact with an emotion ensures that he does not pretend "compassion" is universally redemptive or consumable. It is enacted as various versions of itself (according to how one defines "compassion") and is never unknotted from another emotion or affect.

Understanding compassion and how to be compassionate is not something one can learn or begin to understand in "Compassion 101" (Green, 2008), as an exploration of compassion must include the other affects associated and impinging on it, and is therefore necessarily complex and "muddy". (4) "Muddy" concepts are also far more difficult to misuse in the "pedantically shaped phrases or carefully designed apartheids" (Berlant, 9) of public discourse and postcolonial orthodoxy. After all, as "affect emerges out of muddy, unmediated relatedness and not in some dialectical reconciliation of cleanly oppositional elements of primary units, easy compartmentalisms give way to thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs". (Gregg and Seigworth, 4) Affect theory is therefore a valuable lens to use when searching out ways of finding "reciprocity, community, and a sense of being fitted into the world" (Wesling, 16) because it takes cognisance of connections and acknowledges interdependencies, both in a theoretical and material sense.

**Affect, Emotion and Feeling**

> The multidimensional nature of emotions requires a scholarship fully aware that the human being cannot be reduced to biology, social construction, or discourse

> alone, but belongs to all of these; that we invest physically in our emotions and that the body is in the mind and the mind in the body. (Wesling, 16)

In the "information and image-based late capitalist culture" in which "master narratives are perceived to have foundered", "there seems to be a growing feeling within media, literary, and art theory that affect is central to an understanding" of the world both around and within us. (Massumi, 28) In South Africa, too, master narratives fall short of enabling people to think of others as more than "dreams or dots" (Nussbaum, xiii, *Poetic Justice*), and, in turn, of providing adequate solutions to South Africa's problems. Nigel Thrift explains the predicament of concerned individuals:

> Surely we should all be concentrating our attention on the millions without food or water, the terrible wars, the multiple oppressions that characterise so many people's lives. But this kind of linearization of intent, classically associated with those who want to configure a centre that thinks radical practises, too often elides the complex, emergent world in which we live, in which it is by no means clear that everyone could or should suddenly reach a point of clarity and unanimity about means and ends, yet alone a state of compassion. (Thrift, viii)

Affect theory concentrates on the everyday interactions rather than the spectacular, national narratives, and on the interactions within and between bodies rather than on abstract theories. This is because "affects" are the forces that "affect" bodies. Ahmed defines affects as "the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near". (30) To be aware of the affective and emotional interactions between bodies that may or may not include our own can help us to realise what is most important: what matters. Affect is intricately connected to the body. In Elaine Scarry's words, "when 'matter' goes from being a noun to being an active verb" (xxii), it achieves consequence. Vilashini Cooppan explains that affect can be understood as forces that affect not only a singular body, but also several bodies in a social web:

> Affect is in one sense deeply local, experienced at the level of the body and skin and abstracted from larger categories of shared social identification. In another sense affect is prototypically global, constituted by flows that run over and through individual subjects and singular sites of identification to comprise a larger network. (Cooppan, 52)

Emotions and affects are therefore personal, social and physical. In South African terms, affects are forces between South Africans in everyday life, but "affects" also refers to the complex web of historical forces that still drive and reside in the present network in complicated and unexpected ways. "Affect Theory" is the optic through which one explores these interactions. It is also, therefore, a "generative, pedagogic nudge aimed toward a body's becoming an ever more worldly sensitive interface, toward a style of being present in the struggles of our time". (12, Gregg and Seigworth)

From its terminological inception, "affect" has been understood to consist of a combination of overlapping forces. Baruch Spinoza used the word to describe the combination of "drives, motivations, emotions and feelings" in the human breast. (Damasio, 8, *Looking for Spinoza*) Although contemporary affect theory has evolved into something far more complex, the definition is still useful as it highlights the fact that when affects move through or lodge themselves in human bodies, they are often experienced as emotions or feelings. Brian Massumi insists that emotions and affects are completely separate from each other. Influenced by Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, he considers affect as "transitive, as the movement of impersonal, or...'pre-personal' forces in which we are caught up". (Murphie and Bertleson, 140) Massumi sees "affects" as forces that move through people and influence them without being "captured" as emotions. Affects affect people before they know to organise them into emotions and when people do organise them, some of the affects are lost. Affects have therefore "always and again escaped". (35)

Theresa Brennan and Eric Shouse explain the distinction a little more precisely: "when I feel angry, I feel the passage of anger through me. What I feel with and what I feel are distinct" (5). To elaborate, "An affect is a non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential. Of the three central terms...

feeling, emotion, and affect – affect is the most abstract because affect cannot be fully realised in language, and because affect is always prior to and/or outside of consciousness". (Shouse)

Sianne Ngai has a slightly different interpretation of affect, one that relates emotions and affects more closely. She explains thus:

> affects are less formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form and structure altogether; less "socio-linguistically fixed", but by no means code free or meaningless; less "organised in response to our interpretations of situations," but by no means entirely devoid of organisation or diagnostic powers. (Ngai, 27)

In this definition, affect theory has a form of organisation because it is a theory which different academics, whether it is psychologists Silvan Tomkins and Theresa Brennan, or literary theorists like Ngai herself, have refined and delineated, albeit in different ways. Perhaps paradoxically, part of that organisation is openness to fluidity, overlapping and lack of closure. I would argue, therefore, that emotions overlap with affects and, sometimes, as is the way with affects, the two are blurred. People frequently suppress emotions that they do not wish to feel, forcing emotions to become the unconscious affect that drives their behaviour and may even spill over to drive the behaviour of those around them.

Martha Nussbaum has written about emotions (and emotions in literature) extensively, most particularly in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotion*. Like Massumi, her theory of emotions is compelling and unequivocally separates "emotion" from "feeling" and "affect". Philosopher Nussbaum, along with neurobiologist Antonio Damasio, have what Sophie Ratcliffe calls a "cognitive" theory of emotion, in which "'cognition' refers to a language describing all of the brain's operations, including emotions and reasoning". (Ratcliffe, 13) In this view, each emotion is a kind of evaluative judgement that will have a strong link to action based on that judgement, and spring from another judgement that precludes the emotion itself. Damasio goes so far as to say that emotions are rational. Donald Wesling complains that "the cognitivist can't accept that feeling is not, at some level, run by a rational

program". (19) As Wesling's complaint suggests, this "rational" view is counter-intuitive, as it seems to imply that we are very rational creatures who understand our own processes and responses, rather than people who are frequently irrational and are more likely to misunderstand our own underlying drives, never mind the drives of others. Charles Altieri explains that cognitivists believe that even "bodily states have to be rendered as accompanying and even complementing intentionality, but they cannot be cast as producing it". (7) This may be unfair, however, as Nussbaum goes on to say that "by 'cognitive' I mean nothing more than 'concerned with receiving and processing information'. I do not mean to imply the presence of elaborate calculation, of computation, or even of reflexive self-awareness". (23, *Upheavals of Thought*) Though they may not be reflexively self-aware, and though they may be felt in parts of the body rather than in the mind which is more usually associated with "cognition", Nussbaum postulates, nevertheless, that "emotions are suffused with intelligence and discernment". (1) She says that just because emotions are felt in the body does not make them unintelligent. (25) Indeed, the intelligence cannot be restricted to the mind as the body informs all of that mind's intelligence. As Damasio explains:

> The physiological operations that we call mind are derived from the structural and functional ensemble rather than from the brain alone: mental phenomena can be fully understood only in the context of an organism's interacting in an environment. That the environment is, in part, a product of the organism's activity itself, merely underscores the complexity of interactions we must take into account. (xxvii, *Descartes's Error*)

Emotions, feelings and affects are as rooted in the brain as the brain is a part of the body. Damasio and Ngai agree with Nussbaum. Ngai similarly defines "emotions as unusually knotted or condensed 'interpretations of predicaments' – that is, signs that not only render visible different registers of problem (formal, ideological, sociohistorical) but conjoin these problems in a distinctive manner". (Ngai, 3)

Unlike Ngai, however, Nussbaum considers "emotions" to be something very distinct from drives, feelings, affects and even moods. She explains:

> [T]he feeling of agitation all by itself will not reveal to me whether what I am feeling is grief or fear or pity. Only an inspection of the thoughts discriminates. Nor is the thought purely a heuristic device that reveals what I am feeling, where feeling is understood as something without thought. For it seems necessary to put the thought into the definition of the emotion itself. (Nussbaum, 30, *Upheavals of Thought)*

This clarification is interesting because it makes the distinction between affect, feeling and emotion quite clearly. Nussbaum *feels* agitation because she has been *affected* by something. She knows she has been affected because she feels it with her feelings. It is only when her cognition has sorted her feelings out that she can sort it into a category and it becomes an emotion. This echoes Eric Shouse's differentiation between "affect", "feeling" and "emotion". Shouse cites an experiment done by Paul Ekman in which subjects watched images of facial surgery alone, and then in a group whilst the subjects' facial muscles were monitored. When watching alone, the facial expressions were similar. Shouse explains that these personal reactions, unfeigned or filtered by social expectations, were "feelings". When watching in groups, however, their facial expressions changed, indicating that emotions are more likely to be adjusted for the benefit of the people around them, whether consciously or unconsciously (though still, according to Nussbaum's definition, "cognitively").

This is, perhaps, a shaky distinction. It is often unclear to what extent others' reactions affect people without their being conscious of it. The emotions displayed on the subjects' faces in the second round of tests may just have been the effects of a transmission of affect, rather than a feigned reaction for the person next to them. Theresa Brennan points out that "people in crowds or social groups can identify with one another" and "can rapidly produce a group or mob consciousness that overrides their individual reason". (3) If our emotions, that which Shouse writes are our own controlled productions, are not actually "altogether our own" (Brennan, 2), then presumably our very feelings themselves are affected.

As each theorist has their own idea about the differences between "affect', "emotion" and "feeling", and the definitions seem to overlap and contradict each other, I would like to approach the matter from a perspective similar to that of Ngai and Damasio. Damasio explains it best when he describes why frameworks that make such sharp distinctions cannot correspond correctly to the way things work in reality in his book, *Looking for Spinoza*:

> Making whole returns us to Spinoza's claim that body and mind are parallel attributes of the same substance. We split them under the microscope of biology because we want to know how that single substance works…After investigating emotion and feeling in relative isolation we can…roll them together again, as affects. (133)

Like the split between mind and body, the split between emotion, feeling and affect is useful to chart how they work, but it must be acknowledged that all too frequently, these things operate together seamlessly and their functions overlap.

Sianne Ngai also takes issue with distinctions that are too neatly drawn, most particularly between "emotion" and "affect". She is more interested in "the passages whereby affects acquire the semantic density and narrative complexity of emotions, and emotions conversely denature into affects". (27) This implies a far less determined difference between affect and emotion. Considering emotion as "captured" affect is worth keeping in mind, particularly in the light of Vladislavić's tendency to observe and interpret things as he sees them and try to bypass the tendency to cordon off experiences behind neat boundaries and borders according to theoretical definitions.

Nussbaum avoids discussing "affects" as she believes them to be entirely too messy and abstract to explore sufficiently. This is unsurprising, as Nussbaum's philosophical style does rest on logical arguments and affect is not always logical, nor does it have definitive boundaries. It is left to other thinkers, such as the ones I have thus far explored, to test out the uncertain field of affect theory. These thinkers have to be willing to admit that certain aspects of their theory will escape them necessarily, that they cannot define everything exactly.

Following from this, “compassion” could be seen as the result of multiple conflicting affects spinning out from different sources that create multiple, difficult feelings or emotions, one of which is compassion.

**Compassion, Empathy and Sympathy**

“Compassion” is a difficult feeling. It is loaded with many significations, and the varying contexts and intensities in which it occurs need to be teased out because all the different pressures will come into play in one way or another in Vladislavić’s engagement with the concept. His sensitivity to language and its signification on the page as well as in socio-material realities require a particularly nuanced study. “Compassion” is also a difficult feeling to experience, in the sense that it can feel acutely uncomfortable. Whilst “compassion” is related to other words and concepts, such as “charity”, “pity”, “empathy” and “sympathy” (difficult feelings in themselves), compassion may also be related to guilt, frustration, social pressure or norms, and even anger and cruelty. Martha Nussbaum explains how Seneca believed that compassion can quickly become retributive anger on behalf of the sufferer and therefore tip over into its “excessive form”: cruelty. (Nussbaum, 362: *Upheavals of Thought*)

To complicate matters further, the constant pleas for people to feel “compassion” in a fractured society frequently bring about compassion fatigue, so much so that Marjorie Garber goes so far as to say the fatigue has affected the word “compassion” itself. (Garber, 19) Even these multiple definitions are not yet adequate, as “compassion” can come to mean many different things in different contexts. It has been associated with religion, women, literary philosophy, multi-culturalism, reconciliation rhetoric, self-help narratives, consumerist ploys and to describe human kindness. One has to look at what it “is” in semantic terms, but, perhaps more importantly, one has to see how the word is used in differing social and cultural contexts. (Ratcliffe, 11)

A good starting point is Lauren Berlant’s definition of “compassion”, as it is from this that all the others evolve: “There is nothing clear about compassion except that it implies a social relation between spectators and sufferers, with the emphasis on the spectator’s experience of feeling and its subsequent relation to material practise”. (1) In

its most basic form, therefore, a study of compassion is focused on the person feeling the compassion for another, and includes a consideration of the action that the person may or may not take as a result of their compassionate feeling.

Marjorie Garber focuses on the fundamental branching of meaning in compassion's etymology that is echoed in the Oxford English Dictionary's twin definitions. In one sense, "Compassion" means "to suffer together with another", from the Latin "*com*" meaning "together with" and "*pati*to" meaning "to suffer", what Garber calls "fellow feeling". (20) In another sense, it means "pity that inclines one to spare or to succour". (OED) According to Garber, in this second sense "compassion is not felt between equals but from a distance – in effect, from high to low: 'shown towards a person in distress by one who is free of it, who is, in this respect, his [sic] superior'". (Garber, 20) As Sophie Ratcliffe notes, "pity" used to be closely related to sympathy and compassion, but "has recently come to have nuances of condescension and superiority to the sufferer". (8) The first sense is almost synonymous with empathy, in the second sense, with "pity".

In South Africa, as in many unequal societies, this second sense is perhaps the more prevalent definition. The superiority of being free from distress is all too frequently associated with national race narratives and becomes transcribed onto everyday interpersonal relations. In these crude national narratives, therefore, a predominantly white upper and middle class are placed in the position of compassion providers and the predominantly black population of the poor and destitute are victims who require pity. Poverty and disease, both local and international, ensure that there is a constant influx of information about people with desperate need applying for aid. With this overwhelming need pressing on many consciousnesses, it is no wonder that there is a widespread compassion fatigue and even apathy when faced with suffering.

In this context, "compassion" is associated with charity. In popular discourse, "charity" is usually taken to mean the donating of material goods. These donations are often made because it will reflect well on the giver, not because what is given fulfils a need in the best possible way. Politicians and celebrities may wish to make giving aid an attractive, marketable personality accessory. It is this kind of "compassion" that Kathleen Woodward calls "calculating compassion". (Woodward, 59) The self-help narrative that makes up a seminal part of the Oprah brand is – like sentimental novel

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* (the subject of Woodward's critique) – "deliciously consumable and cruelly ineffective". (71) Inadequate or inappropriate gifts given through the wrong channels can exacerbate a problem rather than help alleviate it. The overwhelming need for exactly the right solution in innumerable areas can overcome an ordinary person, making them feel inadequate and confused as to how to begin.

Part of the reason why this kind of compassion is ineffective is that people who utilise it view (in narratives and their real-life counterparts) the receivers of this charitable compassion as nothing more than receptacles into which money or goods needs to be poured. Jacob Dlamini complains of the problem when he writes about townships, the home of much of Johannesburg's poor, saying that township people are consistently described as "docile recipients of state largesse and service delivery". (110) Townships are seen as "problem areas, zones of lack" (112) and "places of trauma and township life as a sad and traumatic experience". (110) In these cases, people are too often confused with the problems they face. (111) He continues, "While material and economic power relations, which differ from place to place, might define broad conditions of existence, they are not all there is to human life". (113) Too often, compassion and compassionate relief is associated purely with the material and economic. George W. Bush won his election by promising "conservative compassion": "merely a word that refers, through a sleight of rhetoric, to economic conservatism". (Woodward, 73) "Compassion", therefore, pervades contemporary societies in different and disturbingly "consumable" (71) and consumerist ways, apart from ethical debate.

Reading "compassion" as charity or "uncritical, sentimental benevolence" (6) is something that Karen Armstrong has argued vociferously against. She says

> *'[C]om*passion' means to endure [something] with another person', to put ourselves in somebody else's shoes, to feel her pain as though it were our own, and to enter generously into her point of view. That is why compassion is aptly summed up in the Golden Rule, which asks us to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain, and then refuse, under any circumstance whatsoever, to inflict that pain on anybody else. Compassion can be defined, therefore, as an attitude of principled consistent altruism. (6, Armstrong)

This is much closer to the first sense of the word, "compassion". In Garber's first usage, "compassion" is restricted to an ethical emotion evoked exclusively by the pain of another human being, in other words, the feeling of "empathy", meaning "the power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation". (OED) Although "compassion" and "empathy" are close to being identical in their dictionary definitions, this is to constrict the definition of "compassion" too much, for reasons I will elucidate later in this chapter. Nevertheless, the two are intimately connected, and frequently used in tandem.

Karen Armstrong, along with Martha Nussbaum, argues that empathy and compassion are integral to a morally aware life. Both Nussbaum and Armstrong have become campaigners for the fostering of compassion: Armstrong through the study of various religious traditions, and Nussbaum through a sustained engagement with canonical literature.

Armstrong won the 2008 TED prize (the acronym for "Technology, Entertainment, Design") for her efforts to make people aware of the centrality of the Golden Rule in religions (do unto others as you would have done unto you). Her TED prize project was to begin a "Charter for Compassion", a pact that people the world over could make to be more compassionate. In order to elucidate what this pact involves, she released "Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life" (2011), a kind of Alcoholics anonymous programme to wean people off bigotry. Whilst any ten or twelve step programme is incapable of encapsulating the complexities of living compassionately, the emphasis she places on "mindfulness", humility, gentleness, compassion for oneself and empathy is integral to the kind of compassionate interaction I believe Vladislavić is writing about.

"Empathy" is step four in the twelve step programme, and has a rather lengthy chapter devoted to it. Armstrong argues that it is through empathy that one can begin to feel and even extend compassion. Antonio Damasio would probably agree. Damasio's theory of the evolution of emotions posits that altruistic and social feelings (like empathy and compassion) were developed for the group: one's own family or tribe. He continues, "[t]he history of our civilisation is, to some extent, the history of a persuasive effort to extend the best of 'moral sentiments' to wider and wider circles of humanity,

beyond the restrictions of the inner groups". (163, *Looking for Spinoza*) The only way to begin having compassion for someone who may seem completely alien is through drawing similarities between oneself and another, knowing that all human beings feel happiness but also have to undergo suffering and despondency.

The "moral sentiments" to which Damasio refers are, in part, those detailed by Adam Smith in his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The first chapter of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is devoted to "sympathy" and its moral outcomes. Indeed, "empathy" has come to mean what sympathy used to mean: an imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience. (Ratcliffe, 8) Sympathy is now understood as "a state in which one develops an understanding of the emotional states of others". (Ratcliffe, 9-10) The latter implies that one simply thinks about the emotions of others rather than making an attempt to enter into their feelings. While it is useful to understand the technical difference, I am unwilling to make too neat a distinction between them. Damasio has shown conclusively that thinking and feeling are not completely separate activities, that they are in fact interdependent. It would also seem to indicate that while "empathy" may have been introduced into the English language to sound more emotionally engaged than "sympathy", they are really not very different as both use a combination of thoughtful emotional processes. I will, therefore, use "sympathy" and "empathy" interchangeably throughout this thesis.

To explain the workings of empathy in fostering compassion, Armstrong uses various examples, not from life, but from Greek tragedy: both from within the plays and in the reactions of the audience to the material of the plays. Using the example of *Heracles*, she describes how the eponymous hero kills his wife and children in a fit of divinely inspired madness. At the end of the play, however, Theseus has taken compassion on the man and helps support the broken Heracles. The tragedy has not only wrought a change on the characters in the play but wrought a change on the audience: "the Greek audience found themselves weeping for people they might otherwise shun". (86)

Also important to note is that more studies in compassion and empathy are drawn about people who are in extreme agony. Armstrong also writes about Oedipus, who is so unfortunate as to kill his father and marry his mother. He then gouges out his own eyes and has to wander the world a friendless beggar until a town takes pity on him. (87)

Armstrong does believe absolutely that empathy and compassion in real life can be fostered by art:

> Tragic drama reminds us of the role that art can play in expanding our sympathies. Plays, films and novels all enable us to enter imaginatively into other lives and make an empathic identification with people whose experiences are entirely different from our own. They can give us moments of compassionate *ekstasis* and we should resolve, during this step, to allow art to unsettle us and make us question ingrained preconceptions. (88)

Armstrong is, unwittingly, a reader-response theorist in the traditional sense as she believes that a text has the power to "transform" a reader. (Eagleton, 79, "Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Reception Theory")

Martha Nussbaum shares Armstrong's belief. Nussbaum is perhaps best known for her championing of the study of humanities for the reason that she believes it can make people more morally aware. She believes that a large part of the reason society is as fractured as it is today is widespread "refusals to imagine one another with empathy and compassion". (xvii, *Poetic Justice*) Furthermore, Nussbaum, like Charles Dickens and F.R. Leavis before her, makes the leap that "fancy" or imaginative engagement with canonical literature, in particular, can increase the reader's sympathy and therefore "moral intensity" in real life. (Leavis, 17) Nussbaum believes that even at the level of well-known nursery songs (the canonical literature of the very young), one's compassion is enlarged:

> To see the moon craters as a face, to speak to a star, to tell a story to a cow – these are things that the factual detached imagination of economic science is unwilling to do. But there is…a charity in this willingness to go beyond the evidence, and this charity is a preparation for greater charity in life. (Nussbaum, 38, *Poetic Justice*)

She goes on to say: “the nursery song itself, like other such songs, nourishes the ascription of humanity, and the prospect of friendship, rather than paranoid sentiments of being persecuted by a hateful being in the sky”. (39) Whilst this may sound farfetched, it has an uncanny resonance with Aubrey Tearle in *The Restless Supermarket*, the character least inclined to “fancy” or to have sympathy of any kind although, perhaps paradoxically, the reader at times feels a deep sympathy for him. At the very end of the novel (which takes place in January, 1994), Tearle looks out over the city of Johannesburg and thinks: “the lights were not twinkling, as lights are supposed to do, they were squirming and wriggling and writhing, like maggots on the foul proof of the world”. (Vladislavić, 339) Tearle sees the world and thinks that it is diseased, a rotting carcass, infested by people who feed off the chaos. He does not have “charity” for the multitudes indicated by each sparkling light. The fact that he calls the world a “foul proof” would also seem to intimate that he believes it must have been created by a “hateful being in the sky” who made it “foul” in the first place. (Nussbaum, 39) It is unlikely that Tearle’s pessimism and paranoia can be absolutely attributed to a possible lack of nursery songs as a child, but the fact that Tearle believes “fiction” is a “conventionally accepted falsehood” that is related to the word “facile” (66) could be a related symptom of his inability to view his world with even a modicum of “charity”.

It is Nussbaum’s use of the word, “charity” that is also related to “compassion”. In this sense of the word “charity”, it can relate to Christian perfect love, or “a disposition to judge leniently and hopefully of character, aims, and destinies of others, to make allowance for their apparent faults and shortcomings; large heartedness”. (OED)

As Suzanne Keen has noted, however, there is a fine line between making allowance for others’ apparent faults and condoning them, “between charity and imaginative complicity”. (Keen, 135) The relationship between the reader’s charity and Vladislavić’s characters is frequently challenged and complicated in this way. This occurs most extensively during *The Restless Supermarket*, in which Tearle’s hatred of disorder is intricately bound up in his racism. As Mike Marais and Stephen Helgesson note, most people do have “an ordering impulse” (Marais, 166), whether it is in the ordering of streets and public places, or in the ordering of the written word into “the definitive spelling” and the “definitive grammar”. (Vladislavić as cited by Marais and Backström,

171) This can be quite natural and necessary, and the reader can easily sympathise with Tearle for his horror of the growing disorder. As Vladislavić explains in one of the interviews on *The Restless Supermarket*, however, a hatred of disorder can also be a way of privileging "the orderliness and tidiness of formerly white Johannesburg" and it therefore "gets in the way of the transformation of the city and the transformation of people's relations with one another". (ibid, 166) By sympathising with Tearle's "ordering impulse", the reader who may seem not to hold the same racist views as Tearle may be complicit in the racism that is often inherent in the "ordering impulse[s]" of many white South Africans.

Vladislavić shows how this is possible in *Portrait with Keys*, when a friend of his becomes incensed by two black men "pissing" against his garden door. (42) When Vlad's friend Martin goes inside, he does not rail against rude people or disorder in general, he shouts that "these fucking people" are "like animals", continuing to warn, "if one more kaffir pushes me, I'll ride over him". (42) When he has calmed down later he is ashamed, and says

> He's astonished at how easily it came to him, the repetitive, fixated language that has always sustained racism. Colonists everywhere have portrayed indigenous people as brutes unable to control their urges. But Martin is not a "settler". He's a middle-class professional, a fourth-generation South African, a political liberal, a democrat. He's not a racist – at least, he's no more of a racist than anyone else, as he always says. He gets irritable, for good reason. He hates the mess, the clutter, the disregard for other people and their property. But he can distinguish between the unthinking behaviour of an individual and the supposed disposition of a race. Now this. Kaffir? He can hardly believe this archaic language is lodged in him. (43)

Martin may never have thought of some of the underlying reasons for his anger. His sympathy for those who hate "*the* mess, *the* clutter, *the* disregard of other people's property" (43, emphasis mine) is studiedly neutral through its use of the definite article rather than pronouns. Yet many of the people who complain about these things are

talking about “they” which means, as it does with Branko, Vlad’s brother, “blacks”. (40) Branko and his ilk do not like the mess and think it is typical of the “kind of people” that are like “badly behaved children” (40), a belief that speaks of the paternalism inherent in much South African racism. When his anger is aroused, Martin’s studiously politically correct “the” is replaced by “these fucking people”, and his sympathy is exposed as the complicity it was all along. When one does not reason through one’s sympathy or compassion carefully enough, one can often be complicit without fully realising it.

It is at this point that it is salient to wonder about whether there is a difference between having compassion for literary characters and real people, and whether the compassion one does feel for characters can cause one to increase one's capacity for compassion in the real world. The tragic plays which Armstrong promotes detail situations of terrible suffering rather than the oppressive grind of everyday disappointments. If one were to accept Armstrong’s theory that art fosters compassion and empathy in real life, these examples would only foster compassion and empathy for extreme situations. There is no precedent here for fostering compassion for the ordinary, the niggling “element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency”. (Eliot, 194, *Middlemarch*)

Despite Nussbaum’s and Armstrong’s arguments to the contrary, Suzanne Keen (in her book, *Empathy and the Novel*) adequately demonstrates that it would be impossible to prove conclusively that novel reading fosters empathy or compassion in readers where none existed before. Even where people do respond to characters sympathetically, it is common for these people to engage sympathetically with characters, but be unable to extend that sympathy to people in real life. In addition, as Sophie Ratcliffe explains in her book *On Sympathy,* much contemporary theory assumes that “treating characters in any way as if they were real, especially responding emotionally to them, is…at best naive and at worst pernicious”. (Murray Smith as cited by Ratcliffe, 47) As she argues however,

> it is [as] salient for us to regard [characters] as having some sort of integrity as it is for us to regard our mothers or fathers or children in such a way. Manfred

> Jahn may argue that talking of 'voices in written texts' may involve 'a certain amount of metaphorical slippage', but we involve ourselves in such acts of metaphorical thinking every day. (Ratcliffe, 51)

The way we think of other people is constructed in our own imaginations from a series of impressions, including their body language, what they say, and what they choose to leave unsaid. It is also constructed by the nature of our own reasoning and perceptive processes, including our emotions. A reader similarly constructs characters and impressions through a series of cues that are organised by emotional responses. As Donald Wesling explains, "Emotions are relations, lines of linkage between ourselves and reality". (198) Emotions, in other words, are what link us to others, and therefore to communities. Literature, by evoking emotions, helps link the reader to imaginary persons and sometimes real ones as well. As Wesling goes on to argue, "The joys and sorrows of imaginary persons are scripts for actors, ourselves, who are practising to give, sympathise, and control their lives in the world". (Wesling, 198) Literature could, in unquantifiable ways, help sensitive readers to understand more about people of whom the characters are representative. As Njabulo Ndebele explains in his book on *Rediscovering the Ordinary*, "Literature cannot give us lessons, but it can provide a very compelling context to examine an infinite number of ethical issues which have a bearing on the sensitisation of people towards the development of the entire range of culture". (Ndebele, 53) Vladislavić's fiction offers nuanced ways of perceiving and responding to everyday life. Considering the need for such perception, an in-depth study of his compassionate and mindful way of perceiving is therefore worthwhile. It is also worthwhile considering not only Vladislavić's depictions of the characters' compassion (or lack thereof) for each other, but the reader's compassion for the characters. In this, the connection between reader-response theory and affect theory is clear.

A final question that must be addressed, however, is whether empathy is inherently ethical. Nussbaum does acknowledge that "these emotions [i.e. empathic ones] have limitations" and that "their function in ethical reasoning must be carefully circumscribed" (xvi, *Poetic Justice*) and Armstrong's online "Charter for Compassion"

specifies that feelings of empathy must be "informed". (5) Keen details the reasons why one may not assume empathy is always ethical.

Firstly, those who use "empathy to get at supposed commonalities or to reach certain judgements about complex events [expose] the empathiser to risks of oversimplification, misunderstanding, and inadvertent harm". (Keen, 159) This returns to the problems with consumerist compassion that sees all people in need of help as a mass of faceless victims, identical in their needs and problems. Alternatively, one may be deluded into empathising with someone who may have nefarious motives. The particular person or group appealing for empathy may use the resulting flow of empathic feeling as a basis for excluding a different person or group from that empathy, so sowing the seeds of hatred or exclusion. As Keen so astutely points out, "empathy and ethnocentrism have often been fellow travellers". (128)

Secondly, even if our empathic feelings do not fall prey to charlatans, we may use our own empathic strengths to "improve our skills in manipulating people to our own selfish ends". (150) Understanding the needs of others does not preclude using this understanding for our own good.

Thirdly, instead of "projecting one's personality *into*" someone else, one frequently projects one's personality *onto* someone else, "occluding the others' true feelings by imposing…ideas about what ought to be felt". (Keen, 142) This results in "false empathy": "self-congratulatory delusions of those who incorrectly believe that they have caught the feelings of suffering others from a different culture, gender, race, or class". (159) Empathic feelings and, indeed, compassion is "dependent on struggles within the personality that are difficult to wage and uncertain in outcome". (Nussbaum, 351: *Upheavals of Thought*) To assume that emotions flow unhindered between two people if they try hard enough to place themselves imaginatively in the another's shoes is rather simplistic.

Empathy is clearly problematic and by no means is it always ethical. It is, however, one of the only means of compelling ourselves out of ourselves. Recent neurobiological studies would also seem to suggest that empathy with others is not purely a projection of a person's own feelings that is unrelated to another's. Wesling explains that "the perceptual neurons for understanding an action are the same neurons used for

performing an action". (51) These are known as "mirror neurons", precisely because the observer's brain "mirrors" the brain patterns of the person or animal performing the action. He goes on to describe the experiments that have been performed to explore this phenomenon:

> In the early 1990s, scientists found a new firing pattern in the brains of apes and humans. Synapses fire sympathetically when the animal being tested watches another animal performing a task, as if the watcher's brain is entering into the risks and rewards of the activity (such as reaching for food), at least to the extent of imitating the brain waves of a performance. That is, some of the same motor-activity parts of the brain light up, in both agent and observer who is being tested. Therefore (if this is credible, and while heavily and ingeniously tested, it remains a hypothesis) emotions have to do with social relationships, something we already knew but never down to this level of physiology. (Wesling, 85)

While Wesling does emphasise that this theory is still a hypothesis, these preliminary neurobiological results seem to indicate that thinking of and feeling another's pain is intricately connected to thinking of and feeling one's own pain. It also emphasises once again the importance of the body in acknowledging others' pain. As Eagleton explains:

> Flesh and blood is the degree zero of humanity, at once monstrous in its anonymity and the medium of our most cherished contact. It is because the mortal afflicted body lies at the root of all culture that the local and the universal are not ultimately at odds…the body is not in the first place disciplined or erotic, emblazoned or aestheticised, but the principle which binds us into unity with bodies of our kind. (Eagleton, 320, *Trouble with Strangers*)

As affect theory suggests, feeling with others' bodies is the one absolute universal, and is frequently a starting point of compassion between human beings. Vladislavić's writing is intricately aware of this dynamic, and the attention he pays to the proximity of bodies

and the importance of touch, metaphorical and literal, is an important part of compassion.

Another important part of this bodily conception of compassion departs from the "power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the *object* of contemplation". (OED, emphasis mine) Ratcliffe writes that "in the end, [a different] view could involve a sense, not of having 'object-relations', but of being, perhaps, something nearer to an object oneself". (19) This is the acknowledgement that one's own centre of self is not also the centre of the world, and that other people have an equally rooted sense of self from which they would view others as "objects" in, rather than the "subjects" of, life. This could be most clearly illustrated by the difference between Aubrey Tearle, the character who is almost completely unable to consider others as subjects, and Vlad, someone who frequently situates himself as the "object" rather than the all-seeing "I" when walking the streets of Johannesburg.

It is at this point that compassion moves beyond empathy. Whilst it is sometimes impossible to enter into the feelings of people who may be fundamentally different from the empathiser, particularly people of whose philosophies they disapprove, it is still possible to feel compassion for others. "John Fuller rightly notes that, as the 'principal emotion that can lift us beyond the pursuit of immediate self-interest, [wonder] is intimately linked with compassion'". (Ratcliffe, 19) It is this acknowledgement of a lack of knowledge accompanied by a sense of fascination for others' difference and sameness rather than suspicion at the difference of someone else that is an important part of compassion as Vladislavić writes about it. Compassion is very subtly explored in his texts. It occurs as an "offering of possibility" that "speak[s] of humility and generosity, which have something in common with sympathy". (Ratcliffe, 235) As Gaylard explains, when Vladislavić portrays and evokes emotions, he "is prepared to go into the most minute, fleeting, arcane and specific of feelings; there is no hierarchy of emotion". (107, "Transculturating the Sympathic Imagination") As a result, "compassion" often surprises the reader as it is couched among many other feelings.

"Compassion" and its related terms "empathy", "sympathy", "charity" and "pity" are all problematic in some sense, but they are also the only ways people can learn to reach out to others. In exploring everyday interaction rooted in physicality, Vladislavić

touches on each of these emotions in their multitude of permutations, the affects that trigger them, and their forays into ambiguous ethical territory.

**Vladislavić on compassion**

Reading *The Restless Supermarket*, *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys* using the lens of affect theory yields many interesting observations about the characters and their interactions, as well as Vladislavić's own interaction with them. The final interaction that I wish to highlight in this chapter is Vladislavić's interaction with his readers. As I have argued, "The joys and sorrows of imaginary persons are scripts for actors, ourselves, who are practising to give, sympathise, and control their lives in the world". (Wesling, 198) The way that Vladislavić writes and structures his texts presents them in distinctive ways that encourage compassionate thought of the flexible kind that I have described.

The first obstacle that Vladislavić must overcome in evoking compassion is the compassion fatigue that burdens many readers. Indeed, crude supplications for the reader to have empathy or feel compassion for others that cross one's path every day only increase the feeling of weariness in readers, already overburdened with the weight of South Africa's past and present. Adam Smith puts it in rather stronger terms when he writes, "We are disgusted with that clamorous grief, which, without any delicacy, calls upon our compassion with sighs and tears and importunate lamentations". (406-407) Vladislavić's writing, while engaged with the everyday problems that perpetually haunt South Africans, does not cause compassion fatigue in the reader. He approaches the issues obliquely and therefore short-circuits the fatigue.

Vladislavić has, perhaps, not been associated with novels about sympathy because such novels that "call upon our compassion" are usually written in the realist mode. (Smith, 406-407) The use of realism clearly differs according to how different authors utilise it, and how different critics interpret it. There are, however, a few conventions that are usually employed and can be cited in this context to provide a contrast to Vladislavić's texts. Realism is supposed to depict characters living an everyday existence in as life-like a manner as possible. Elizabeth Deeds Ermath writes that "some familiar

qualities of fictional realism…are chronology, particularity, interiority, viewpoint and everyday subject matter". (xi) Nineteenth-century realist novels such as *Middlemarch, Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times* tried to effect change in England by depicting the lives of characters in minute detail and commenting on them and their actions in a distinctive tone designed to affect the reader. George Eliot and Charles Dickens hoped if they could affect enough readers, social change could be effected as a result.

Modern realist novels seldom have the same degree of authorial commentary, but the plot is more or less linear, and the characters have detailed, realistic lives laid out for the reader to absorb. This is true of novels from J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* to Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*. In addition, these novels, while detailing realistic situations, do focus on events that, one would imagine, constitute some of the really defining and most dramatic moments of those characters' lives. David Lurie and his daughter undergo a violent attack on a smallholding in the Eastern Cape. Franzen's cast of characters undergo a host of difficulties, from having ill-advised polyamorous relationships to suffering the final stages of Parkinson's and dementia, to helping orchestrate an internet scam from a politically fraught European country. Like Armstrong's examples from Greek tragedy (86-88), these literary appeals for compassion, however complicated by the characters' foibles, are made primarily for characters in extreme situations.

Vladislavić explores everyday and marginal narratives rather than grand, highly manufactured public ones or narratives that catalogue catastrophic breaking points in people's lives. There is a reason for this, for, as Dlamini explains, "there is no better way to strip difference of its mystique than to deal directly with practises of everyday life on their own terms while also linking them to the wider world". (113) In South Africa, as I explained in the beginning, "stripping difference of its mystique" as well as connecting these differences to the wider world is particularly important. (113) A sensitive reader could begin to appreciate how to live compassionately toward others every day rather than thinking of compassion as an emotion that can only be extended in dire circumstances to "the other". Just because Vladislavić is writing about the everyday, however, does not mean that he is writing in a realist mode. None of the texts I will be exploring in this thesis fit into the conventions of a realist narrative.

Defamiliarisation ensures that the reader can never escape into the novel or story and fall under the illusion that they have merged with the consciousness and emotions of the character (or characters) unthinkingly. *The Folly*'s Nieuwenhuizen and many of the protagonists of the short stories are rather opaque and difficult to understand, never mind sympathise with. This is an important feature of writing as it highlights aspects of sameness but never denies difference. Nevertheless, as I will argue, the characters in these texts can evoke compassion and identification of a different sort.

As regards a traditional structure, all three texts depart from traditional forms. *The Restless Supermarket* contains a mix of realistic and flamboyantly exaggerated characters, most notably, the narrator, a pedantic and socially inept proof-reader of telephone directories. The book also jumps backwards and forwards in time, and contains little snatches of Aubrey's corrections and complaints about grammar that interrupt the already fragmented narrative. It also contains a middle section, placed not quite in the middle, called "The Proofreader's Derby" that is decidedly fantastical. Readers are challenged to make sense of it all, and can seldom lose themselves completely as they would in a realist novel.

*The Exploded View* is often not regarded as a novel at all, never mind a realist one. It contains four narratives each focalised by a different character, not intimately related to any of the other characters. They all, however, live in Johannesburg, and readers seeking a more traditional "plot" are constantly frustrated in the wish to connect them in a conventional narrative. There is no sense of a climax or denouement and one does not spend enough time with the characters to become involved with them as one may wish in a realist novel with four focalisers.

*Portrait with Keys* is equally, if not more difficult, to categorise. It falls between the cracks of fiction and non-fiction, and autobiography and city history. It is even more unusually structured than *The Exploded View* and *The Restless Supermarket*, as there is no plot whatsoever and the book is made up of episodes that are sometimes continued (as in the case of the continuing saga of Max the Zoo Gorilla who was shot but managed to apprehend his attacker) and sometimes are isolated episodes that only have meaning in the whole context of the text or in the context of South African history, as when it snows in Johannesburg and the black pedestrians pelt the whites-only buses with snow.

(129) There are also lists of objects that make up sections of their own scattered throughout the book which disorientate the reader further, making one unable to ease into a rhythm of linear narrative.

Derek Attridge quotes Astradur Eysteinsson to explain the problems with writing in a realist mode: "even though realism may be highly critical of capitalist reality (as many nineteenth century realists were), it evinces a tendency to reproduce the narrative structures and the symbolic order that form the basis of this society and its ideology". (4-5) In South Africa, for example, Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* was written to oppose apartheid. In retrospect however, it is clear that parts of the story entrench stereotypes about black people by rendering certain characters simplistic and in need of white guidance. Unwittingly, Paton's novel could be read as supporting some of the apartheid ideology. By writing texts that undermine expectations and deviate from the real, Vladislavić is able to undermine the very idea of a "natural" social order.

Another of the ways in which Vladislavić undermines realist conventions is to defamiliarise everything, including emotions, to such a degree that readers are forced to understand them and feel them in a new way. Viktor Shklovsky writes that "[h]abitualisation devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife and the fear of war". (20) There is therefore a very real need to disrupt habitualisation and "recover the sensation of life". (Shklovsky, 20) One has to be surprised into seeing the everyday pain or suffering of the familiarly distasteful, frustrating or simply familiar because one cannot usually see past one's own distaste or preconceived ideas. Shklovsky postulates that "the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known". (20) Similarly, Bertolt Brecht may have called it "estrangement" but it is closely related to Shklovsky's "defamiliarisation" in that he believed "before familiarity can turn into awareness the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness; we must give up assuming that the object in question needs no explanation". (Brecht, 144)

Shklovsky praises Leo Tolstoy in particular for describing events and objects as though he were seeing them for the first time. (Shklovsky, 21) Vladislavić, too, describes things or uses characters to view events or objects in an unfamiliar or exaggerated light, making the reader view features of everyday South African life from a different perspective. A good example can be found in the final section of *The Exploded View*.

Duffy is a contractor who puts up billboards for a living. One evening, on his way home, he realises he cannot find his cellphone, and decides to go back to the building site to get it. This site is a billboard for a development named "Crocodile Lodge" (which is the name given to this section). On the way, he decides to stop at a petrol station and call his number from a call box to see if he will hear it ring from his bakkie and therefore forego his trip back to the building site. He calls the number; circles around the bakkie; and hearing nothing, returns to replace the receiver. As he picks it up, "he was surprised to hear his own voice, muffled and distant, as if he was speaking from the boot of a car". (179) Vladislavić explains how "a superstitious tremor shook him" (179):

> He imagined the cellphone lying somewhere in the grass at Crocodile Lodge, in a place full of red ants and dry roots, and his own voice calling from it like a small creature. Or even worse, his telephone voice, disembodied and businesslike, speaking out of some thief's pocket. This thought was suffocatingly worse, choked with lint and dottle. The smell of his own aftershave and sweat rising from the plastic handset in the hot pocket of an overall. (179-180)

Duffy, and the reader along with him, has been defamiliarised from this all too familiar object. Cellphones are one of the most ubiquitous objects in South African life. A statistic cited earlier in the book tells the reader that "there are four and a half million cellphones in the country. There are more cellphones than fridges". (18) Yet a cellphone is not an object like a fridge. It is, instead, an incredibly personal one, one that Duffy has come to think of as a feeling extension of himself. When he imagines it lying abandoned at the site, he bestows vulnerability on it by saying his own voice is "calling" from it "like a small creature", lonely in the presence of the unfeeling red ants and "dry roots". (180) It is why he is even more upset by the idea of it being in someone else's pocket as he imagines it is "suffocating" when surrounded by the usual debris that floats there. The fact that he imagines his own scent rising from the pocket of a stranger would seem to indicate that he feels physically violated, as though whoever has it has invaded his body rather than simply stolen an object he once possessed. Duffy goes on to explain, "It's an intimate object, this channel for voices – he'd never seen it that way

before – pressed close to your body and your thoughts, breathed into and spoken through. A catalogue of your own connections too, the pre-programmed numbers to wife, mother, son, daughter, doctor, armed response company". (180) In his article, "Migrant Ecology", Gaylard explains that "Vladislavić's fiction typically embodies and reifies the repressed in actual people and the life of objects, making it tangible and affective for the reader". (302) In this case, Vladislavić is making the reader aware of the extent to which technological items are not just conveniences (like a fridge) but have become a part of the most basic fabric that makes up our lives. Not using them feels like more than an inconvenience, it feels like losing a particularly important extra limb that is of use not only in assisting the owner, but in connecting him or her to the rest of the community of which he or she is a part. It also demonstrates that people have sympathy for things that are not human because people naturally bestow sympathetic human characteristics on things. As Italo Calvino explains, it is impossible to think "about the world except in terms of human figures…of human grimaces and human babblings" because the way one views the world comes into being "in the human brain". (34) People are, more often than not, anthropocentric.

A technique of defamiliarisation that is common to Brecht and Vladislavić is to make "the performer portray incidents of the utmost passion, but without his delivery becoming heated". (Brecht, 93) As Wesling argues, "Impersonal, we've come to learn, is another word for personality that has been sent around a detour, and that just makes the neutral voice more intriguing as a guise". (43) There are many incidents in *Portrait with Keys* where sad situations are described by the narrator (the literary equivalent of the performer in this instance) that are bare of even marginally emotional commentary. In one instance, Vladislavić describes lapel badges that used to belong to his grandfather that he kept in a box with a complex opening mechanism. Neither the box (which used to belong to his mother) nor the badges were worth very much, but his "grandfather came to life in these small things, which evoked his hands, resting on the paper and holding the pen". (82) The physicality of the description heightens the reality and lingers over the distinctive way that his grandfather (and indeed every person who writes) makes marks on paper. It is not a rose-tinted description, just a carefully worded anecdote. When the box with all its badges is stolen by street children and he

finds the smashed splinters in a gutter a few streets away, he does not bewail the incident or embark on a tirade about the moral decrepitude of the youth today. The description is practically scientific in its cool detailing of the facts:

> Later, I came across the splinters of the box at the foot of an oak in Saunders Street, not far from my home. A few sticks of wood and a rusty spring. Frustrated by their inability to open the box, they had smashed it. Instead of the coins it must have promised when they shook it, the box had coughed up a handful of trinkets. I searched in the roots of the kikuyu on the verge, and scuffed through leaves and litter in the gutter, convinced that something must have been left behind, but whether or not they were disappointed with their haul, they had carried off every last one. (83)

There may not be any emotion in the delivery, but it does not fail to affect one, most particularly when it is placed next to a fragment of text that describes an artwork called *Mementoes of District Six*. It is a cabin of resin blocks containing bits and pieces the artist found left behind after the forced removals. Vladislavić's friend Liz explains that experiencing the artwork was "so moving, standing there like a kid in a Wendy house surrounded by these relics, worthless things made to seem precious, glowing like candles. As if each trinket and scrap had been moving to someone". (83-84) By leaving the reader to imagine Vladislavić's feelings at the loss of his grandfather's badges and juxtaposing them with another loss of other seemingly worthless things, the affect is created. As Massumi explains, "potential movements…are in some way made present without being actualised". (41) In addition, Vladislavić has enabled this reader, at least, to feel compassion without the incumbent compassion fatigue.

The parallels between Brecht and Vladislavić cannot be closely drawn, as in some respects they have vastly different philosophies. Vladislavić's writing is infused with humility. Brecht believed that when he wrote, he did not "just give my own private mood, but also the whole world's". (14) Brecht was also scornful of the reliance people placed on empathy between audience and characters, calling it a "crude aesthetic thesis" (145). He posited that reason alone would enable the audience to "understand"

characters rather than "empathise" with them. (15) Brecht did acknowledge that "a creation that more or less renounces empathy need not by any means be an 'unfeeling' creation, or one which leaves the spectator's feelings out of account. But it has to adopt a critical approach to his emotions, just as it does to his ideas". (101) Living in the aftermath of Romanticism, Brecht was opposed to the idea that emotions could be an integral part of critical reasoning.

In addition, Vladislavić does not explore his subjects with high seriousness. There is much room for play and laughter, whether darkly comic or using simple puns. Goodman characterises Vladislavić's writing as satirical, but as Gaylard and Titlestad explain, Vladislavić's "ever-moving guerilla opposition might be characterised as playful" (6) rather than conforming to a rigid satirical opposition. Apart from using humour to oppose the social order, it can also have the effect of lightening the load of the sometimes grim subject matter so that the reader does not feel overwhelmed or fatigued. Touches of humour make it harder for a book to become a "prison" where "thought is pressed flat between the pages into obedient lines of letters". (Vladislavić, 12, *Willem Boshoff*) By inserting humour, whether sly, farcical or darkly comic, his text becomes

> an explosive device primed to unsettle the stable order of things. It is a tomb from which meaning is perpetually resurrected. Opening a book liberates its contents, releases new worlds into the air. (Vladislavić, 12, *Willem Boshoff*)

## Conclusion

> It isn't notions sets people doing the right thing – it's feelings. (Eliot, 196, *Adam Bede*)

Vladislavić wishes to comment on Johannesburg's intricate problems with community, using the most subtle of lenses: storytelling. Although his texts are not about compassion, per say, his way of viewing these problems is compassionate because it is a perspective that actively tries to understand the complexities of each situation in its own context without judgement. It seeks commonalities without assuming sameness,

something which is essential in finding new ways of living in post-apartheid South Africa. Compassionate ways of interacting in Vladislavić's texts do not adhere to any particular theory; they are more a sustained engagement "with something that makes no claim to completeness". (Vladislavić as cited by De Waal, 106)

Using affect theory as it developed from reader-response theory as the lens through which to view compassion in Vladislavić's texts reveals, what I see as, the quiet heart of his writing. This is because affect theory takes cognisance of the body's experience of others on a local level, and then connects that experience to movements in the wider world. Affect theory also refers in part to the working of emotions, which are integral to people's interpretations of the world around them. As literature engages emotions, texts, to a certain, unquantifiable degree, are "scripts for actors, ourselves, who are practising to give, sympathise, and control their lives in the world". (Wesling, 198)

The compassion I wish to describe is therefore necessarily difficult. It is entwined with traditional notions of sympathetic connection, but it also diverges from this in important ways. To note these ways, I will, therefore, be looking at the compassion the author feels for his subject matter, for the compassion the characters feel, and at the compassion this reader feels and fails to feel as a result of these interactions. In this way, I am not focussing only on my own response, but also trying to analyse the textual representation of compassion.

*The Restless Supermarket* – apart from being written first chronologically – is the best text with which to start as it has the clearest resonances with previous literature that actively promotes compassionate interaction with the reader. It is also the text that is most obviously about questions of judgement in interpersonal interactions.

## Chapter Two: *The Restless Supermarket*

> Find a little compassion in that hard heart of yours. (Merle to Aubrey, 192, *The Restless Supermarket*)

*The Restless Supermarket* is the novel out of the three primary texts that engages most directly with the difficulties of writing about sympathy and compassion in a postcolonial context, and of living compassionately in everyday life. These aspects are facilitated seamlessly by Vladislavić's choice of protagonist. He creates a character, an old white South African named Aubrey Tearle, who is obsessed with the idea of "correct" English created for the colonies that is a fundamental part of the English canon. Tearle himself is similar in many ways to Edward Casaubon from George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, a central novel in the Great Tradition that actively involves the reader in sympathising with the plight of unfortunate and unpleasant characters, and explores the nature of feeling itself. Like Casaubon, Tearle is easy to dislike, but as he springs absolutely from a South African context rather than Casaubon's English one, Vladislavić is able to explore the nature of judgement and separateness related and unrelated to the legacy of colonialism and apartheid. Simultaneously questioning and exploring the tradition of reading people (imaginary or otherwise) sympathetically by using other compassionate characters who contrast with Tearle and structuring the novel so that it defamiliarises the reader he manages to effect what Gerald Gaylard has called a "transculturation of the sympathetic imagination". (1) The result is that the reader may glean a refracted version of what Vladislavić believes everyday compassion looks like by examining how certain characters interact with Tearle and their effect on him. It also results in this reader feeling compassion and even sympathy as well as aversion to Tearle, but without the sentimentality often accompanying novels that are written to encourage sympathy, nor a sense of catharsis that maintains an assumption of the universalism of human nature that is the foundation of much literature that is written to engage a reader's sympathy.

**The Sympathetic Imagination, the Canon and *The Restless Supermarket***

The "universalism" of human nature was a kind of bedrock for the idea of the sympathetic imagination. In his 1826 essay, "Reason and the Imagination", William Hazlitt explains that "Man is (so to speak) an endless and infinitely varied repetition: and if we know what one man feels, we so far know what a thousand feel in the sanctuary of their being. Our feeling of general humanity is at once an aggregate of a thousand different truths, and it is also the same truth a thousand times told". (Hazlitt, 124) In writing of the imagination in this way, Hazlitt was capturing one of the fundamental philosophies of many of his contemporaries and predecessors, namely the Romantic egalitarian spirit. In their poetry and writing, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelley, among others, tended towards universalising human emotion in order to get people to enlarge their circles of sympathy. Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* of 1799 rejected the idea of codified canons, at that time, a "set of inherited rhetorical or poetic practises". (Gorak, 59) It was not "so much a revolt against the shared standards and conventions of an earlier age" but rather a "revolt in a more thorough-going sense, against the very existence of dominating shared standards and conventions". (Everest, 2) Instead, they wanted to create and read literature that would "inflame the imagination" (Hazlitt, 108) and so get the reader to realise "truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing on external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion". (Wordsworth, 73)

As Viktor Shklovsky has noted, however, canons are continuously created by canonising the peripheral or revolutionary. (Gorak, 54) Novelists and poets whose texts became a part of the canon were often chosen because their work attempted to "inflame" the sympathetic imagination of the reader. (Hazlitt, 108) Typically, the revolutionary "power of exciting sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature" (Coleridge, 174) became favoured by many authors who sometimes attempted to excite the reader's sympathy not by "faithful adherence to the truth of nature" but by "an outpouring of didactic and sensational fictions". (Keen, 52) They were eager for

sentimental novels to effect real-world change but only really succeeded in writing novels that were highly sensationalist and avidly consumed, possibly increasing the reader's withdrawal from real world problems. (Keen, 54)

The authors who became a part of the canon wrote less lurid material, but could still tend towards sentimentality and didacticism. Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot and Matthew Arnold all made Wordsworth's conception of the sympathetic imagination a central concern of their writing. (Everest, 96-97) Like Wordsworth, they hoped that poetry (or prose, in their cases) could "interest mankind permanently" and be "not unimportant in the multiplicity and quality of [mankind's] moral relations". (Wordsworth, 57) Dickens came to have such faith in the power of the sympathetic imagination that he believed his novels could affect real world change by stirring the sympathy of policy makers and the charitable middle-classes. (Keen, 53)

Arnold, too, had grand ideas for a canon made up of particular writings that would teach its readers about "culture". "Culture", in Arnold's sense, is "a study of perfection, and of harmonious perfection, general perfection, and perfection which consists in becoming something rather than in having something, in an inward condition of mind and spirit". (33) To Arnold, a "cultured" person who was well-read in certain "touchstone" authors would be able to resist the materialist, selfish impulses of industrial society. (Arnold, 34) Jan Gorak explains that Arnold's "touchstones" and his belief in the reforming power of "culture" and the sympathetic imagination were the precedent for the canon as F. R. Leavis imagined it in the twentieth century. (Gorak, 59) Leavis's "currency of criteria and valuation" was exclusively British and did not extend to anything written after the Second World War[1]. For many years afterwards, many English literature practitioners in South Africa and elsewhere were nevertheless unwilling to teach anything that deviated too far from this model. (Helgesson, 781) Vladislavić himself had to learn about contemporary writing from the Afrikaans Department, not the Great Tradition-focussed English Department at the University of the Witwatersrand in the 1970s and 1980s. (Warnes, 274) Those who did not subscribe to the "high" culture of the Great Tradition that was supposed to be universal (but was,

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[1] See Leavis's *The Great Tradition* (1948)

nevertheless, a certain kind of British) were considered, by certain factions, to be uncultured. The idea of "universalism" is all too frequently a form of prejudice.

The Leavis "canon" became part and parcel of the neo-colonial education system that privileged a manufactured idea of sophisticated Europeanness. Characters like Aubrey Tearle and J.M. Coetzee's David Lurie typify the superiority complex of those white South Africans whose standards of right became inextricably intertwined with Western (but not American) "culture". In *The Restless Supermarket* and *Disgrace* respectively, Tearle and Lurie use culture not as a purveyor of "sweetness and light" and of the sympathetic imagination but "as a weapon 'which [they] deploy constantly to assert [their] identity as superior beings, and consequently [their] right to appropriation and suppression of the inferior'". (Douthwaite as cited by Beard, 60) Like Arnold, Tearle is on a constant quixotic crusade to get "the raw person" to like what Tearle likes because it is "culture". (Arnold, 35) It is therefore unsurprising that with the advent of postcolonial, postmodernist and historical materialist readings, the "notions [of] truth, rationality, intelligence, and distinction of intellectual merit or literary or artistic value" that became integral to the canon owing to Arnold "are [now] largely discredited as part of a system of social and cultural oppression". (Marcus, 185) Humanist canonical readings with their assumption of universalism fell out of fashion, and the philosophies they championed, like the sympathetic imagination, became markers of literary history rather than active reading principles.

As I detailed in the previous chapter, however, interest in and criticism of the sympathetic imagination has had a resurgence owing to the affective turn in literary theory and the recent neurobiological studies into the nature of emotions, including that of sympathy. Some critics, most notably Martha Nussbaum, pick up where most universal humanists end off, arguing that the only way to cultivate sympathy is through writing realist texts that "rely on bonds of sympathy and identification". (30, *Poetic Justice*) This is because the texts Nussbaum writes about actively appeal to the reader's sympathy by using passionate language to inflame emotions in the reader and therefore hoping that this change in emotions affects behaviour and causes social change. Hazlitt, in asking if one would "tame down the glowing language of justifiable passion into that of cold indifference, of self-complacent, sceptical reasoning, and thus take out the sting

of indignation from the mind of the spectator" (Hazlitt, 108), is implying that a tragic real situation, passionately described, is the only way one can reach a reader. The kind of contemporary novel that employs these tactics has its roots in the great nineteenth century realist novel that pushed for social change, like those written by Eliot and Dickens. As Zadie Smith explains, "One of the reasons we idolise the nineteenth-century English novel is the way its methods, aims and expression seem so beautifully integrated. Author, characters and reader are all striving in the same direction". (32) Whilst nineteenth century novels are frequently complex, there is passionate language and elements that all "[strive] in the same direction" (32) that are usually engineered to make entering the consciousness of a different character easier for the reader. This ensures that certain moral lessons to do with empathising more with the situation of others are clearly conveyed.

There are critics, like Donald Wesling, Suzanne Keen and Sophie Ratcliffe, who have worked within contemporary parameters to theorise on the sympathetic imagination. As Gerald Gaylard explains, however, no one has yet theorised how the sympathetic imagination might have a place in the postcolonial. Vladislavić realises the link the sympathetic imagination continues to have with canonical texts, which is why his text references Casaubon, *Middlemarch* and Eliot's own theories of imagination. Vladislavić does not theorise, but he goes some way towards exploring the possibilities for the sympathetic imagination in the postcolonial performatively in his texts.

The foundations of his novels depart from the realist novel Nussbaum champions. Of all his books, nevertheless, *The Restless Supermarket* is probably the most traditional. It has a clear climax and denouement and its protagonist is a fully-formed character surrounded by other "traditional" characters. The way that the plot, the characters and their emotions are laid out, however, is highly unusual and deliberately difficult.

The story begins on the eve of the new year of 1994. Retired proofreader Aubrey Tearle's favourite haunt, the Café Europa, is about to be closed down as Hillbrow is no longer the kind of place that supports a small, Eurocentric tearoom. Tearle's Café friends have stopped coming to the Café a few years previously because of the increasing dilapidation and danger in Hillbrow, but he has kept going back, only to be irritated by one of the last people to join Tearle's circle those years ago: Theodosius Martinus

Wessels. Tearle calls him "Empty" Wessels; a piece of paronomasia from the apophthegm, "empty vessels make the most sound" as he thinks Wessels is loud and stupid. Wessels decides to throw a "Goodbye Bash" and have a reunion of all those who have long since stopped coming, which Tearle reluctantly agrees to attend.

The first part of the book has Tearle preparing for the end and reflecting on the years he has spent at the Café, and on the people with whom he came into contact and will soon be seeing again. The most important, and most well-developed, characters are his friends (as far as the unfriendly Tearle can have friends): Mev. Suzanna Bonsma who is the pianist at the Café Europa, a retired optometrist named Mr. Myron Spilkin, a lively retiree named Merle Graaff and an assortment of waiters, shop-owners and Café patrons whom Tearle patronises or openly dislikes. Whilst there are well-developed characters and a clear sense of progression, the way the plot and character development is laid out is non-traditional. There are many jumps backwards and forwards in time, and these are interspersed with sections of Tearle's own philosophising and his excerpts from his lists of errors. Piecing together so many episodes in order to make sense of the text makes it difficult to lose oneself unthinkingly while reading.

The second section of the novel is not strictly part of the storyline at all. In honour of the Café's goodbye party, Tearle has finally completed a long-running project of his, a proofreading competition that he calls the "Proofreader's Derby". This is actually a short story about a super-proofreader named Fluxman (modelled on Tearle) who lives in a kind of parallel universe called Alibia. "Alibia" is the name Tearle gives to a city mural in the Café Europa. It becomes his utopia as everything in it works differently to how things work in Hillbrow, Johannesburg. As Helene Strauss explains:

> Alibia is a city that defines itself in Tearle's imagination against everyone who fails to live up to a specific set of carefully worked out standards of racial and linguistic Europeanness. These "standards" derive easily from colonial constructions of "order" and "modernity" which were employed to justify colonial expansion and which were couched, in South Africa in particular, in explicitly racial terms. (30)

Alibia is, therefore, typical of the alternative kind of exclusionary community-making in which certain sections of South Africa's white population partake. It is an ordered, sophisticated, homogeneous community that is redolent with nostalgia for an imaginary, safe and sophisticated apartheid past. In this utopia, Fluxman can bring that "European" orderliness to the growing chaos of Alibia purely by wielding his blue pencil. Anything that he edits on the page will be edited in real life. The "Lumleys" will no longer exist because he deletes their name in the phone-book. (251) Alibia has descended into chaos because proper attention has not been paid to organising Alibia's textual counterparts. The words, "Zoological Gardens", for instance, are placed in parts in the wrong sections of the phonebook. Fluxman finds "oologi dens Cnstntia" between the names "Lombardo WH" and Lombat D". (249) As a result, the different parts of the gardens suddenly start appearing in the middle of different suburbs: the lake outside Fluxman's house, and the animals somewhere else. In this universe, however, Tearle-as-Fluxman is in complete control of everything that crosses his path. He leads his band of proof-readers to organise the world again by editing texts meticulously. The story is supposed to be riddled with errors, or "corrigenda" as Tearle calls them, and competitors have to read the story and find and correct all the mistakes to win. A corrected version of Tearle's flamboyant, wildly imaginative story makes up the second part of the book, and contains the kind of fantastical detail that is found in Vladislavić's short stories rather than the restrained, ordinary settings of *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys*. This part of *The Restless Supermarket* also interrupts any remaining illusions that the novel has a traditional structure.

The final section of the novel contains the goodbye bash which builds slowly into a literal bash-up (caused by Tearle) which constitutes the climax of the novel. Tearle is stabbed, and thinks he is dying, until he realises that, farcically, the blade has instead lodged itself in the heart of his pocket Oxford English Dictionary. The denouement consists of the aftermath of the party, which involves Tearle and a young girl going to the hospital to help one of the revellers-turned-fighters and then their walk home again that includes a strangely moving dialogue between Aubrey and Shirlaine, the young "improvable" girl. (Vladislavić as cited by Backström and Marais, 297) Shirlaine is compassionate yet tough with Tearle, and their elegiac dialogue is unusual for its

warmth and sweetness in relation to the rest of the novel which is, for the most part, underpinned by Tearle's grouchy and bitter energy.

Despite Tearle's positive encounter with Shirlaine and his recent re-appreciation of the memory of Merle at the goodbye bash, his discontent returns and the ending of the novel is ambivalent. Back at home in his flat, Tearle looks out of his window and thinks, "Languages were spoken there that I would never put to the proof. As if they were aware of it themselves, the lights were not twinkling, as lights are supposed to do, they were squirming and wriggling and writhing, like maggots battening on the foul proof of the world". (339) Tearle knows that his world is not a unified whole. It is a messy and contradictory one and it disturbs him deeply. It may also be disturbing to the reader that the novel ends on this note, without all the ends being tied up neatly in order to affect a catharsis. The elements have not all been made to "strive" in the same direction (Smith, 32), and readers must piece together for themselves the effects, or lack thereof, the novel's incidents have had on Tearle. As Iser explains, the reader must "participate actively" and help to "compose" meaning. (10, *Prospecting*)

Shirlaine and Merle are the two characters who show Tearle the most compassion and are also, perhaps as a result, the two characters that have the most influence on him. Shirlaine's time with Tearle is fleeting but she asks him important questions at a time when he is receptive to hearing their import. Tearle has considerably more interaction with Merle and she also exerts some influence, not least because Tearle is attracted to her (although he keeps his physical attraction firmly repressed). His reaction to the news of her death from cancer at the Goodbye Bash is one of the few truly heartfelt, sympathetic reactions Tearle has. Characterisation and character interaction, while problemitised, are therefore still important when tracing Vladislavić's own concerns about compassion and the sympathetic imagination. For whilst Vladislavić uses the "bonds of sympathy and identification" to get the reader to engage, he uses simultaneous defamiliarisation devices to stop them from engaging too unthinkingly. (Nussbaum, 30, *Poetic Justice*)

The novel can be difficult to follow because Tearle's story keeps jumping backward and forward in time so that his tales are told in episodes. Tearle's mind is also remarkably quick, and he frequently inserts wordplay into his narrative that the reader

must figure out. On page 13, in the middle of a complaint about being "up the creak in a leaky kayak" (13), he inserts a crossword clue: "the same canoe coming and going (5): kayak". (13) The complaint is lightened with a little humour. The reader is also made to think about the words Tearle uses rather than let the words wash through them and form subconscious impressions. This is because Tearle often interrogates the words as they are used by slowing the flow of the narrative to define them. When Tearle imagines his own death, for example, he breaks off in the middle of a rather sad description and defines the word, "flow":

> I saw my own death…as a precipitate efflux of vocabulary and idiom, the hoarded treasures of a lifetime spent in a minute, one immaculate vintage running into another, and the whole adulterated brew spilt on the dirty macadam of an unmemorable corner of a lawless conurbation. **Flow**: glide along as a stream; gush out, spring; (of blood) be spilt; (of wine) be poured without stint (f. OE *flōwan*, unconnected with L *fluere*: flux). (27)

As this passage shows, Tearle also uses words that will drive even the most erudite reader away from the novel to a dictionary, which may literally interrupt the reading process. Finally, Tearle is an unpleasant character, which complicates the "bonds of sympathy and identification". (Nussbaum, 30, *Poetic Justice*) by mixing sympathy and compassion with many less charitable feelings. Tearle's overwhelming narrative voice and the product of Tearle's imagination, "the Proofreader's Derby", leaves the reader in no doubt of just how unsympathetic a character Tearle is.

**Aubrey Tearle: Sympathy (and withholding)**

> character is the most successful means of arousing the viewer's imaginative sympathy. (Haefner, 661)

Hazlitt loved portraiture and vivid characterisation precisely because he believed it was one of the best ways to get a reader to use their sympathetic imagination which he

championed in his essay, "Reason and Imagination". The epigraph for the first part of *The Restless Supermarket* is a quote from the end of Hazlitt's, "On the Conversation of Authors", the essay that precedes his argument on "Reason and Imagination". At the end of "On the Conversation of Authors", Hazlitt is describing an absent-minded but pure-hearted scholar who "reads the world, like a favourite volume, only to find beauties in it, or like an edition of some old work which he is preparing for the press, only to make emendations in it, and correct errors that have inadvertently slipt in". (Hazlitt, 97) Tearle is in some ways like this scholar. A retired proofreader, he spends his days finding and cataloguing errors in any print media he happens to come across. He also itches to make similar "emendations" to the world around him and correct what he sees as "errors". It is at this point that the similarities end, as Aubrey is far from the scholar who "draws the picture of mankind from the guileless simplicity of his own heart". (Hazlitt, 97) As a character, Tearle has a very specific set of beliefs and a strong, often objectionable presence. Unlike the reflective, understated explorations in *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys*, Tearle's narrative voice always crackles with bubbling energy. It is full of contradictions, often deeply offensive, rich in archaic, unusual words, and a mixture of distasteful and dark humour. Tearle is not a character that readily invites the "bonds of sympathy and identification" (Nussbaum, 30, *Poetic Justice*): he is an irascible, old, previously advantaged, white South African. He is a racist given to commenting in minute detail on the colour of black people's skin (182, 183, 273, 293, 309); a snob (48); a cheat (104-106); a chauvinist (257) and an anti-Semite. (336) He even treats the reader as an idiot every now and again, as when he explains that a "gallon" is an "ancient measure for liquids". (12) Fred de Vries has rightly asked, "Could there be a less sexy protagonist than Aubrey Tearle, a misanthropic, racist, retired proofreader obsessed with language in a country where there is no 'common' language?" (de Vries, 192) Aubrey is not only prejudiced and not "sexy", he can be really mean. He describes the pianist at the Café Europa (his friend, Suzanna Bonsma) thus:

> She loomed over us like a damn wall, which had seemed sturdy enough when observed from a safe distance, but appeared to be crumbling away now that we

> squatted, like a pair of truant schoolboys, in the damp shade at its foot. I felt as if I was on the shores of Mev. Bonsma. (77)

Unlike Hazlitt's scholar, the "errors" Tearle sees are people: "the human detritus he found at the margins of the city, the erroneous ones, the slips of the hand, the tramps, the fools, the congenitally stupid, the insufferably ugly". (Vladislavić, 251) Tearle believes that "doing away with them" would be "more humane than trying to improve them". (252) Tearle's view is an extreme case of the "economic materialism" that sees people as part of a larger system of planned obsolescence that Nussbaum and Graham criticise[2]. (xiii, *Poetic Justice*)

These are not strictly Tearle's words, but Fluxman's, the alter-ego Tearle gives himself when he writes "The Proofreader's Derby". Through Tearle-as-Fluxman, the reader is actively alienated as the story shows the worst of Tearle's prejudices and cruelties. The withholding of sympathy by Tearle/Fluxman in the story also highlights several of the things that are related to the withholding of sympathy in real life. These concerns recur again in more naturalistic settings in both *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys*.

Fluxman sees the deaths of the people who drown in the flood caused by the transported Zoo Lake as "one crude disruption after another", not as a human tragedy that he can do something about. (207) He decides instead to "let the catastrophe go on without him" (208): "He switched on the kettle, and its hiss soon drowned out the faint cries skipping shorewards over the lake outside". (209) This is not only an indictment on Tearle/Fluxman, however, but a comment on the general propensity for South Africans to shut themselves away from widespread suffering behind high walls and electric fences.

He does eventually decide to do something only when he worries that he too will become so destroyed by the chaos as to be "beyond repair", like the drowned body that bobs against his front step. (210) He sets off in search of his fellow proof-readers, and comes across a creature that has a mouth on one palm and an ear on the other. In

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[2] See Graham, "Layers of Permanence: Toward a spatial-materialist reading of Ivan Vladislavić's *The exploded view*"

Tearle's mind, the synecdoche denoting South Africa's large newly demanding black labour force become the literal "hands", able to speak for the first time. The "hand" calls Fluxman "master", as many black workers were required to do, and asks to "carry the master's bag" and for "some change". (214) Fluxman fends "the creature" off and runs away from him, only to end up on a cobblestoned street with pavement cafés where everyone is "Normal". (214-215) For Fluxman/Tearle, "normal" is "well-proportioned faces…eyes the recommended distance apart, brows smooth, noses straight, lips finely moulded, ears in pairs, perfect for supporting spectacles". (215) This calm in the middle of the chaos is disturbed when a shanty-town appears on the edge of the street, and "a whole tribe of luminous bubus came spilling out in a rush, men, women and children, reeking of woodsmoke and unthinkable foodstuffs". (236) To Fluxman/Tearle, all these people living in the shanty towns are creatures, not fellow human beings. According to apartheid standards of white normality, black people are creatures because they are utterly different and abnormal. *The Exploded View*'s Budlender and Egan have similar categorising instincts that help them distance themselves from the black people with whom they interact.

As they are just "creatures", Fluxman/Tearle has no qualms about flinging them out of the city when he and the proofreaders start restoring order to Alibia. Fluxman proudly explains how "now the appropriate social distance could be restored between the haves and the have-nots, the unsightlier settlements shifted to the peripheries where they would not upset the balance, the grand estates returned to the centre where they belonged". (251) Tearle, living in the middle of Hillbrow and watching many poor black immigrants streaming into his neighbourhood, can indulge in his own wish fulfilment in this story by imagining flinging them all out of Hillbrow again. In the new South Africa, wealthy people will move further north to Tearle/Fluxman's "grand estates" (251), walled and guarded by security companies. They will shut themselves in and avoid the influx of poor, desperate people moving into the city centre from other parts of South Africa and its neighbouring countries. These movements north were not purely defined as a movement away from black people, but by a search for a haven of order. Democratic South Africa is often a more chaotic place than Apartheid South Africa. It has spurred even liberals and poor black South Africans (who cannot afford to move into

the ordered, gated communities) to long for the order that was sometimes present under apartheid, as Jacob Dlamini details in *Native Nostalgia*. (6-7) These movements and their ramifications will also be explored in *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys*. Tearle's wish that he could "pass this entire city through the eye of the proofreader's needle" is something with which many people would sympathise, even if they do not want to order the cities precisely as Fluxman does in Alibia. (332) As I detailed in the last chapter, a sympathy with people who long for "order" of the white South Africa could be complicit in lingering racist attitudes.

Tearle is "an exaggerated, condensed version" of old, white conservatives (Vladislavić as cited by Knecht, 3), so much so, that some readers have found it impossible to pity him, never mind sympathise with him. And yet, as Lionel Abrahams notes, "rather more than I think I'm supposed to, I sympathetically identify (perhaps even empathise) with Aubrey Tearle, that paralytically conservative old curmudgeon". (Abrahams, 162-163) The reason that many people do, nevertheless, sympathise with Tearle is twofold.

Firstly, Tearle not only makes the reader feel compassion, but sympathy as well. Sympathy and empathy, as I explored in the previous chapter, only arise when there are perceived commonalities. This is a difficult feeling in the case of Tearle, as it is an uncomfortable realisation that one has things in common with such an unpleasant character. As Vladislavić explains, "a lot of readers are looking for some still point which enables them to say, 'Okay, you're being ironical about that and we get all of that, but finally we want some kind of quiet space where we can stand and put it all together.' I think that is something that I resist". (Marais and Backström, 167) As Tearle's alter-ego shows, there are many reasons Tearle withholds sympathy that are related, in varying degrees, to why readers would withhold sympathy and compassion. The reader cannot, therefore, enjoy "tilting at the easy targets" by judging Tearle because it is easy to separate themselves unequivocally from him. (168) Vladislavić is fascinated by "the places where Tearle and I are very similar. Why else write a book like this if one wasn't trying to explore precisely that? The trickier relationship rather than the simple one?" (Marais and Backström, 166)

Not all the correlations are unpleasant ones. Some bonds of identification the reader may feel with Tearle are more straightforward. Tearle's fear of death and anger and helplessness in the face of his obsolescence is something for which a reader can not only have compassion, but sympathy. It is this fear of dying one day, sooner than we might imagine, that haunts all but the most enlightened. If there is one thing that is universal, it is aging and death.

I also found Tearle's attitude toward the death notices in the classifieds remarkably refreshing. When he rails against their hypocrisy, I was tempted, like Lionel Abrahams, to "cheer" (163):

> Too many exemplary demises, milk-fed and arum-scented, too many equable departures for glory. Nine out of ten people died peacefully. Did no one die kicking and screaming any more, cursing God and the sawbones? They all seemed to struggle with such good grace against cruel misfortune. One miserable death acknowledged, one long season of pointless suffering faced with bitterness and resentment, would have been a breath of fresh air. (Vladislavić, 72)

Tearle's "rage against the dying of the light" (Thomas) is somehow inspiring in the face of the burgeoning number of sickly-sweet funeral homes and the obsession with commodifying death. While Tearle's dislike of American commodification springs from his snobbish, "European" interior, he does have a very real sense of the new colonisers and the dangers of the consumer culture they bring. He explains the problem to Shirlaine: "There's a trend towards the superficial you should be mindful of; everything is being coated in the shiny veneers of advertising, that most appropriate exception to the rule. Nothing has done more to take the Christ out of Christmas than the 'commercials'". (323) Ironically, the emotionally stunted Tearle has realised that the commodification of the most intimate aspects of life results in people being alienated from their own feelings and therefore their own internal indicators of what is important to them. Damasio and Nussbaum argue that emotions help facilitate what is important to one. If those emotions are manipulated and simplified by the constant stream of

advertising, then people will lose sight of the pleasures they find most satisfying. (Berger, 132)

Many readers will also sympathise with Tearle because of his pedantry as regards language. Aubrey loves language (it is perhaps his only lifeline) and so bewails the impoverished vocabulary and incorrect grammar he sees more and more frequently. Whilst Tearle uses language to be superior and to strike cruelly at people, he also has a "sheer joy in the power and control of language". (De Vries, 197) As many readers are themselves pedantic about language usage, they will no doubt enjoy Tearle's use of language, and share his longing for enriched social discourse.

Secondly, despite his horrid personality, there are many aspects of his situation that appeal to the reader's compassion. Many of these aspects are similar to those that evoke compassion for Eliot's Casaubon. Tearle and Casaubon are far more pathetic characters than Tearle's "compatriot", David Lurie in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. (Helgesson, 175) Helgesson calls Lurie a "compatriot" because Lurie is also an older, white South-African male who works within the Great Tradition and the sympathetic imagination because he gives lectures on the Romantic poets, most particularly Wordsworth and Byron. Positioning his protagonist within the tradition, Coetzee is also questioning the limits of the sympathetic imagination. As Helgesson explains: "Coetzee is perhaps best understood as the great deconstructor of the romantic legacy in South Africa – he works within the echo-chamber of the Great Tradition even as he explores its hollowness". (Helgesson, 781-782) Lurie is a singularly unpleasant character, and the reader has to battle out the fine line between sympathy and complicity when reading the novel. He is an urbane sexual predator, replete with knowledge of high art and a sharp intellect. He is an older man aware of his fading prowess but still possessing some magnetism and social skill. He has published academic books and is in a position of power as a lecturer which he abuses when he has highly questionable sexual intercourse with one of his students. Lurie then proceeds to lose all of his power and any scraps of contentedness in the most awful ways imaginable. He loses his job, his dignity and his appearance. A group of men attack Lurie and his daughter on their smallholding; killing the dogs, setting him alight and then gang-raping his daughter. Later, she finds out she is pregnant and decides to keep the baby. Their neighbour and the only other person

Lurie and his daughter can rely on is complicit in the attack, but they must keep relying on him nevertheless. Lurie's only consistent employment at the end of the novel is to help put unwanted dogs down, and then break the bones of their stiff corpses so that they can be burned easily. Lurie is a completely different man at the end of the novel, having been made to question the very fundamentals of existence. He has to learn to have compassion under extreme circumstances, hovering between ruin and salvation. The reader is also taken through a gruelling experience. Lurie's horrible descent can induce the most bone-wearying compassion fatigue but also a kind of post-apartheid, post-apocalyptic hope for his own personal, secular salvation.

I do not wish to make an extended comparison between Lurie and Tearle, nor *Disgrace* and *The Restless Supermarket*. I do wish to note, however, that Tearle is only Lurie's "compatriot" in the most superficial of ways, just as the nature of compassion and feeling in *Disgrace* is utterly different to the way Vladislavić explores compassion and feeling in *The Restless Supermarket*. They may have similar starting concerns, but they are handled very differently. Tearle is a character from the everyday. He inflicts everyday cruelties and has to undergo mundane tragedies of life that are no less difficult because they are so common. Unlike Lurie, Tearle may change marginally, but he certainly does not undergo any kind of dramatic change. He also cuts a considerably more pathetic figure from the beginning of the novel as he is (and remains) effectively toothless and socially inept.

In this, he is more similar to *Middlemarch*'s Casaubon. *Middlemarch* is a typical nineteenth century realist novel from the Great Tradition that champions not only the sympathetic imagination, but the importance of recognising that feeling is a kind of knowledge. It teaches that those who repress their feelings, like Tearle and Casaubon, are condemned to remain painfully ignorant and limited. *Middlemarch* was taught consistently as a canonical set-work and therefore set generations of reactionary post-colonialists against it and its methods, not least because Eliot's implied authors and plot-lines tend to be fairly preachy by the standards of the twenty-first century. Whilst she professes to feel compassion for her character, Casaubon, and implores readers to do the same, she ensures that his actions cause him to be suitably punished. He dies alone and miserable because of his pride, never having achieved peace. Dorothea, who

strives to help others and to grow wiser is able to mature emotionally, and has important realisations that enable her to live a happy life. One of the final revelations for her is that one cannot understand something about someone else unless one can "feel with [them], else you would never know". (822) This revelation enables her to forgive her husband's restricting will, and to help effect a kind of rapprochement between Rosamond and her husband, Lydgate because Dorothea understands their equal centres of self and their feelings. Whilst the society in which she lives restricts her to being a good wife and mother, Eliot maintains that "the effect of [Dorothea's] being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs". (838) The reader is given to understand that despite the tribulations of life, compassionate people can always change the world, albeit in small ways.

It may seem odd that the writer who associates himself with the experimental East-European writers should reference an author from the English Great Tradition, but considering that Vladislavić would have studied the novel at Wits and avoids narrow and binary thinking about texts, it is unsurprising that he is unafraid to explore some of Eliot's ideas, most particularly about feelings, sympathy and compassion. As Zadie Smith explains, "It's a mistake to hate *Middlemarch* because the Ichabods love it. That would be to denude oneself of one of those good things Spinoza advised we cling to. Feeling into knowledge, knowledge into feeling…" (40)

Smith is referring to Spinoza's idea of *conatus*, that essence particular to each human being that ensures that each person "strives to persevere in its being". (Spinoza as cited by Nadler, 195) According to Nadler, Spinoza equates this striving with virtue. A virtuous person is someone who "love[s] himself, seek[s] his own advantage" and wants "what will really lead man to greater perfection". (227, Spinoza as quoted by Nadler) Spinoza's virtue seems a kind of supreme selfishness, particularly when one realises that if each person were to follow their own *conatus* absolutely, then there would be much strife as what is good for one person will no doubt clash with what is good for another. As Antonio Damasio explains, however, "The biological reality of self preservation leads

to virtue because in our inalienable need to maintain ourselves we must, of necessity, help preserve *other* selves". (171) Damasio, like Eliot and many others before him, is interested in Spinoza because of his understanding of the complex interconnected relationship between mind, body and affects and their relationship, in turn, to ethics. Smith explains that Eliot, through her characters, was embodying *conatus*:

> From Spinoza, Eliot took the idea that the good we strive for should be nothing more than "what we certainly know will be good for us", not a fixed point, no specific moral system, not, properly speaking, a morality at all. It cannot be found in pursuit of transcendental reward, as Dorothea believes it to be…Instead, wise men pursue what is best in and best for their own natures. They think of the good as a dynamic, unpredictable combination of forces, different, in practise, for each of us. (Smith, 34)

Therefore whilst Eliot's texts sometimes become didactic, her aim was not to cultivate specific, sympathetic real-world action, but to encourage an enlarging of feelings that would show what it means for diverse people to fulfil their *conatus*: to help the reader understand that there are an infinite number of different ways of doing good in the world. Unlike Dickens and Arnold, however much Eliot wanted to affect her readers to become better, she was aiming only to extend the reader's sympathetic feelings; she never claimed that she could cultivate real-world sympathetic action through her fiction. (Keen, 54) As Barbara Hardy explains, "to imagine is to extend self, or to grasp the world outside self, or face what is uncongenial and undesirable, and George Eliot knows that such adventures of the spirit are hard for all striving human beings". (190)

Vladislavić alludes to *Middlemarch* because of these ideas and because Eliot, despite her extensive explorations in fiction and intrusive authorial narration, also never believed in a unified, one-size-fits-all theory. Vladislavić is, however, absolutely rooted to the South African context, space and time. The setting of *The Restless Supermarket* is very specific to South Africa and Johannesburg. Unlike *Middlemarch*, set in an imaginary, typical small town in England, *The Restless Supermarket* is set in Hillbrow, Johannesburg at a particularly tumultuous period in South Africa's recent history. The

problems that Tearle has and the changes that he sees are exclusive to that period and that space. Tearle's complaints, his beliefs and his humour are all particular to his generation of white South Africans and even more so to his character. Fred de Vries's article about how the Dutch translation of *The Restless Supermarket* is such a miserable failure is an indication of how specific the focus of the text is.

By placing Aubrey Tearle, a Casaubonish "incorrigible 'European'" (Vladislavić, 16, *The Restless Supermarket*), and his strongly held beliefs that are associated with the Great Tradition, in Hillbrow, Vladislavić can go some way towards looking at what a transculturation of the sympathetic imagination might look like performatively. He does not work towards a unified theory, he lays out the possibilities and restrictions as he sees them, rather than forming something neat and all-encompassing. Vladislavić may be concerned with the idea of the sympathetic imagination and about issues of judgement which are often-explored philosophical questions, but the context in which he explores them is marginal and specific. The contexts in which Tearle and Casaubon are placed are enormously different. They are couched in different kinds of texts, but the fundamentals of their lives made this reader feel compassion for them for similar reasons.

**Aubrey Tearle, Edward Casaubon and the reader's sympathy**

> I wanted to try and make the reader like a character they shouldn't. (Vladislavić as cited by Knecht, 3)

Authors have often created unpleasant and unsympathetic characters and dared their readers to sympathise with or have compassion for them. These characters are different from the lovable rogues or tearing rebels, such as Lord Byron's Don Juan, Mozart's Don Giovanni and John Milton's Satan, who are loved by readers or audience members precisely because these characters' exploits lend them grandeur and excitement even though they incur censure for their actions from other characters. Truly unsympathetic characters hold untenable opinions, commit inexcusable acts or are unable to extend sympathy to others. They are unattractive and alienated from other characters, often

because of their difficult personalities. Casaubon and Tearle are two such characters. When Spilkin sneers to Tearle that "Merle used to say there was something almost Casaubonish about you and your 'System of Records'", Tearle has far more in common with Casaubon than Spilkin realises. (Vladislavić, 299, *The Restless Supermarket*) Their over-sensitive, self-involved and selfish personalities and ambitions are alike. Like Casaubon, Tearle has

> that proud, narrow sensitiveness which has not mass enough to spare for transformation into sympathy, and quivers thread-like in small currents of self-preoccupation or at best of egoistic scrupulosity. (Eliot, 279, *Middlemarch*)

Casaubon, however, has both a sympathetic narrator and a noble, sensitive wife (Dorothea) to focalise his pain and frustration. Dorothea may be a more central character, but Eliot's authorial voice will not let the reader think only of Dorothea's feelings. She literally interrupts the reading eye, forcing attention to Casaubon's equal centre of self:

> One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea – but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? I protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding being given to the young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble; for these too will get faded, and will know the older and more eating griefs which we are helping to neglect. (278)

Eliot continues to explain Casaubon's emotions and weaknesses, his "small hungry shivering self" (280), and why his view of the world is so narrow. She even goes so far as to say "For my part I am very sorry for him". (280) Eliot asks the reader to feel with all her characters, to join her in a universal "we": "Poor Mr. Casaubon felt (and must not we, being impartial, feel with him a little?)" (375) Eliot is not using "we" without a touch of irony – people are seldom impartial and everyone has a different decidedly partial opinion, most certainly about the unpleasant Casaubon – but she is including every

reader in her play of significances and her appeal for sympathy. Modern readers often misread her subtle use of the narrative voice and are put off by such a direct appeal. At other times she almost does dip into heavy-handed sympathy and universalism, as when she is describing Casaubon's knowledge of his impending death:

> When the commonplace "We must all die" transforms itself suddenly into the acute consciousness "I must die – and soon," then death grapples us, and his fingers are cruel; afterwards, he may come to fold us in his arms as our mother did, and our last moment of dim earthly discerning may be like the first. (424)

As the reader has Eliot's portrait of Dorothea's psychology and her authorial narration, the reader can contextualise Casaubon's prejudices and know they are wrought from his own petty illusions. They have a kind of yardstick by which to judge his thoughts and actions.

The indicators for where the reader's sympathy should lie are more slippery in *The Restless Supermarket*. Vladislavić constructs *The Restless Supermarket* so that it is purely from Tearle's abrasive and angry perspective. His narration is so subjective that it is sometimes difficult to gauge exactly what his relationships are really like, or if events really happen as he says they do, not least because he mishears so much. There is "Bert Middler" (Vladislavić, 44, *The Restless Supermarket*) and "Conrad Mandela" (187), and his penchant for cruel nicknames that he forgets he has made up. At the Goodbye Bash, Spilkin and the others remind him of these shortcomings and explain that he has a "memory like a sieve" and that he chooses what to remember. (290) Spilkin too, however, forgets the cruel jokes that he has made behind Mevrou Bonsma's back, and that he used the name "Eveready" rather than "Evaristus" just as frequently as Tearle. (161-162) Tearle can be awful and he has not let go of his prejudices but he is also a scapegoat for the others who were also complicit in "the regime". (291) Tearle's unreliable narration is a kind of defamiliarisation technique, as the reader has to work at piecing together a more accurate story. They also have to work harder to define their own feelings towards Tearle.

Where Eliot uses strong imagery in her narrative voice to explain in minute detail why one should pity Casaubon rather than despise him, Tearle tells his own story in his own unpleasant (and often very humorous) way which removes high seriousness and the possibility of sentimentality tainting one's sympathy. Vladislavić also ensures that every time one feels moved by something Tearle has said or thought, Tearle's allergic reaction to his own emotion removes the reader from sentimentality. Any time Tearle seems as though he is veering towards a noble moment, Vladislavić ensures that it is preceded or followed by another action or thought so that the reader's eye may hardly notice Tearle's unusual kindness.

For example, Tearle is most often horrible to and about Martinus Theodosius Wessels. There is the incident where Wessels tries to walk Tearle home, saying it will "keep the circulation going". (163) Wessels sees Tearle as sophisticated and intelligent, so apart from wanting to keep him company, his walk is in imitation of Tearle's own "constitutionals". Far from finding it endearing, Tearle finds it intensely irritating and tries to walk in the opposite direction to his home so Wessels will not know where he lives. (163) Then, when the drunk Wessels starts an embarrassingly loud and tearful conversation with a white (a fact Tearle is very clear about) tramp, Tearle only drags Wessels away from the scene because of "sheer irritation" not compassion. (164) He then goes home, leaving Wessels alone and vulnerable, "clinging to a traffic light, with his tie folded over his shoulder and his trousers falling down, garishly enamelled in red and amber and green like a cheap china ornament for the bar counter". (164)

The next section jumps back in time to when Tearle first meets Wessels. He explains that actually he too "felt an unwelcome pang of sympathy for Wessels, with his ears sticking out like the tips of a wing collar". (165) There is no omniscient author to draw attention to this moment of compassion. Tearle has displayed such disdain for Wessels from the beginning of the novel until this point that this one hint of human sympathy is lost in the morass of Tearle's unkindness. The fact that Wessels himself is also irritating and not always sympathetic further complicates the reader's reactions in that one sympathises with both parties while feeling exasperated by their foibles.

It is not only in their personalities that Tearle and Casaubon are similar, but in appearance and bearing. Casaubon and Tearle cut very similar figures. Casaubon is

unattractive, sickly and lacking any social skill. He is described by other characters in the novel as an "ugly" (Eliot, 47) "shadow" of an old man (68) who has "deep eye sockets", a "spare form" (16) and "two white moles with hairs on them". (20) When in company, Casaubon has "not two styles of talking at his command" (25), and so "delivered himself with precision, as if he had been called upon to make a public statement; and the balanced singsong neatness of his speech, occasionally corresponded to by the movement of his head" is the only way he ever addresses anyone (18). Eliot is poking fun at Casaubon here, showing the reader how ridiculous his pomposity is. Apart from introducing some light relief, Eliot is also making the reader laugh at him because it makes him seem a little less tyrannical. If Casaubon is open to mockery, then he is vulnerable, not a dry, unfeeling stick whose dead hand will make his widow's life a misery.

Tearle too "uses an elevated, precious and archaic tone that is typical of a certain type of English-speaking South African". (de Vries, 197) He delights in speaking to those around him (particularly the non-mother tongue English speakers) in ways they will not understand to display his superiority. (Vladislavić, 197, *The Restless Supermarket*) When he continues to speak in his elevated register with other English-speakers, however, it quickly becomes clear that he makes up much of what he "knows" in an effort to squash his own feelings of inferiority. He seems to other characters (and the reader) to be unbearably pompous and superior. The other English-speaking white people (that he is secretly so desperate to please) reject him as a result. Physically, Tearle is vulnerable. He has to take pills for his nerves, blood pressure (106) and spastic colon. (157) This would indicate that he is an extremely highly-strung person whose nervous condition both causes and exacerbates his anxiety. It also seems as though Tearle has a kind of mental disorder that started in childhood that prevents him from deviating from his routine. For example, he will let slip facts like he has had lights off at 10pm sharp his whole life. (74) Unlike his friends, it does not seem as if he has ever left Johannesburg, never mind South Africa. This could indicate a fear of travelling and change rather than lack of financial means, as he could (in his working years) afford "cars out of a box", from which one could assume he could afford to travel. (35) His understanding of the world is limited to his own city experience. When Fluxman has to

fix Alibia and sort out its food supply, Tearle's imagination does not extend to farms and factories, but to a supermarket, which in his experience is the origin of all foodstuffs. I am not suggesting that Tearle is so ignorant he does not know that food comes from farms and factories, but that his world is so limited that he has never seen any farther back in the supply chain than a supermarket. His view of "nature" is similarly narrow, as his own analogy about his creative process shows: "I trusted that this detour through the thickets of invention would bring me back, wiser and happier, to the manicured lawns of the given". (115) Manicured lawns are never "given": their artificiality has to be maintained with much care and chemical fertiliser. For Tearle, however, a forged order is the natural order for him, and he is unable to see its artificiality. It is difficult to despise a character whose obsession with apartheid standards and order is not only white paranoia but also the result of a mild form of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Tearle's descriptions of his physical characteristics are equally as funny and sad as Casaubon's. His narrative voice may be insistent and powerful, but his physical frame is small and ineffectual. He has a "raisiny cranium" and "fish eyes". (14) He also tells himself sternly to "see yourself as you really are: not the distinguished figure you think you cut, not the debonair sea-captain, but a shabby deckhand, a figure of fun, a fogram". (14) He realises that he is overly conservative. He just cannot seem to stop himself. He is also so inadequate physically that he cannot even whistle (326) or click his fingers. (53)

He seems doubly vulnerable because he is utterly alone. He is completely devoid of family, has never been married and struggles to keep regular acquaintances, let alone lovers or friends. There is not one person who will give him love and affection and forgive or even share his beliefs. Two of the three people he sometimes considers his friends, Spilkin and Mev. Bonsma, derive great pleasure from letting him know how much they all come to despise him and his "obsession with raising us up to your level" that showed "exactly how little you think of us". (288) Only Merle remains a friend, although a not uncritical one, for their whole association. He falls in love with her, but convinces himself he has only "grown fond of her". (193)

On the whole, Tearle tries to avoid all mention of sex, even feeling scandalised at pointing out the different parts of the reproductive system on a biological chart of the

body that Merle brings to the Café. (97) His efforts at courting her are sexless and clumsy and his only attempt at physical contact occurs when she is leaving the Café for good: "I did try to give her a kiss on the cheek and dealt her instead a nasty blow on the nose with the frame of my spectacles". (192) It is only in his private universe, Alibia, that he can imagine her with "bare feet" walking on dewy grass (83), an erotic tangent for Tearle. When Fluxman makes love to Ms. Georgina Hole (Tearle's unfortunately named Alibian version of Merle), he imagines the whole act as "proofing": "composing every square word of her into a perfectly ordered meaning, into a sentence that meant exactly what it said". (244, 245) Love is entirely too messy for Tearle. It involves being confronted daily with the fact that a sentence never means "exactly what it said" because it says different things to each person in the relationship. (245) Relationships are also fluid: they involve change and compromise because of these differences. They also involve close, messy physical contact and Tearle's "dryness" is also a symptom of his horror of any of the wet outpourings of emotion, bodily or otherwise. Tearle is possibly unable to enjoy, and possibly never has enjoyed, any intimate physical contact or sexual, never mind Romantic love. Whilst love is painful and causes many confusing changes, it is also wonderful and a source of unsurpassable joy. Being frigid and impotent, and therefore unable to experience this joy, is something that evokes compassion.

Casaubon may seem to have more people around him, but his extreme alienation from them all ensures that he may be as alone as Tearle. Casaubon marries a very young wife: the naive and beautiful Dorothea Brooke to whom he is nevertheless not sexually attracted. He does not realise that there is anything wrong with this, however, and believes that "the poets had much exaggerated the force of masculine passion" rather than that he himself is impotent. (63) As Eliot explains, however, his marrying such a young woman who is totally unsuited to him is "nothing exceptional…nothing but what society sanctions". (278) He is a "man of good position" who "should expect and carefully choose a blooming young lady – the younger the better, because more educable and submissive". (278) Casaubon is both the maker of his and his wife's unhappiness, but he is also a victim of his time. *Middlemarch* is, among other things, a stinging critique of society's dicta defining marriage, particularly as regards women. It also calls

for sympathy from the reader for those characters who are failed by these strictures and end up in unhappy marriages.

Tearle too is a victim of his time. His unsympathetic, instrumental view of other human beings is not only evidence of his unpleasantness; it also has its roots in the apartheid system in which he has been brought up. This will also be clear with the characters in *The Exploded View* who struggle to imagine others as "fully human" (xiii, Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*) because the social system prevents it. The apartheid system was constructed to encourage thinking of others as incommensurably different and even alien. Years of this indoctrination will not leave its population unmarked. The effect of the withholding of compassion has been known since the inception of the idea of the sympathetic imagination. Here, Hazlitt writes about the effects of the slave trade on not just the slaves themselves, but the slave-owners and the population who support it unthinkingly:

> So with respect to the atrocities committed in the Slave-Trade, it could not be set up as a doubtful plea in their favour, that the actual and intolerable sufferings inflicted on the individuals were compensated by certain advantages in a commercial and political point of view – in a moral sense they cannot be compensated. They hurt the public mind: they harden and sear the natural feelings. (Hazlitt, 113)

The feelings that should be "natural" to the already emotionally constipated Tearle have been further hardened and seared and, as a result, he is also a victim of his own context. In the new dispensation, others who also held racist beliefs change with the times. Spilkin, for example, who tells Tearle not to "go native" (Vladislavić, 122) when he has black Brasso marks staining his finger ends up dating a woman of colour named Darlene. Wessels, who claims he fought for the Special Forces that fought Black liberation movements and still uses expressions like "kaffertjies got your tongue" (164), also relaxes and enjoys drinking with his new black drinking partners. It is Tearle's fear of change and limited emotional intelligence that binds him to his old prejudices. It also, however, prevents him from being hypocritical like his friends, who conveniently

forget that they were complicit. By showing the change of their attitudes over time, Vladislavić is able to highlight the histories that are usually buried rather than worked through. As Gaylard explains, if one is "not able to see the past living on in the present", then one will be "unable to prevent the past from tainting the future". (Gaylard, 303, "Migrant Ecology")

Tearle cannot see the new changes in South Africa as anything other than a total collapse, not least because he lives in Hillbrow which did collapse into chaos. His mind, like Casaubon's, "is something like the ghost of an ancient, wandering about the world and trying mentally to construct it as it used to be, in spite of ruin and confusing changes". (Eliot, 18, *Middlemarch*) As Vladislavić notes in his most recent book, *The Loss Library and Other Unfinished Stories*, "The past is a sitting duck. Bringing it home for the pot does a writer no credit". (28) Vladislavić was writing here about his own planned short story based on what he read in a colonial hunter's travel book. He was unable to finish, however, as he realised that by criticising this long-ago, incomplete figure, he would become like the ignorant colonial himself: "The more I picked through *Dragon Lizards of Komodo*, looking for telling detail to spice up a fiction, the more I felt like Burden himself, the object of my disdain, stomping around in the East Indies". (Vladislavić, 28)

Unlike Eliot, Vladislavić does not explain his reticence about bringing Tearle "home for the pot" (28) in *The Restless Supermarket*: it is rather the way Tearle's prejudices so evidently alienate and cripple him that he invokes the reader's compassion. Mike Marais explains that "the reader comes to realise that, in our everyday lives, our perceptions and judgements are regulated by value-laden paradigms, and that these paradigms often limit our ability to sympathise with other beings. This understanding of why it is that Tearle cannot sympathise with others makes us sympathise with him". (Marais and Backström, 166)

What really stirs the reader's compassion in both cases is that Tearle and Casaubon are anachronistic and both realise that the work that has been their life's blood is obsolete. For Casaubon, that is his book, the "Key to all Mythologies", something he believes will prove there is a common source of all religions and mythologies. He has spent almost his whole life looking for this key and is now an old man. What he does

not know, but secretly realises, is that the work that has been his life's blood is null, as more advanced research on the same topic has already been published that proves there is no such key to providing a unifying structure to the multiplicity of cultures and religions. Casaubon has never seen the need to learn German and so has never come across the research that proves there is no such key. (Eliot, 208) Whilst he may appear to be a learned scholar, his intellect and learning is actually very narrow. Dorothea recognises with horror that "the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind were replaced by ante-rooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither". (195)

Tearle has a similarly narrow intellect. He is a retired proof-reader of, among other things, the telephone directory and the book containing all the postal codes. He pretends for most of the book that this is a prestigious honour, but once admits that if he had "had my way (or a better start in life, if you'd rather), I would have been proofreader of dictionaries". (Vladislavić, 106, *The Restless Supermarket*) As a child, he was clearly short of the requisite old boys' network and prestigious education that he overcompensates for by pretending to sophisticated "Europeanness" despite never having been to Europe. For Tearle, "Europe" is about as real as his imaginary country, Alibia. As a telephone directory changes every two years, Tearle has had about as much hope of leaving a lasting legacy as Casaubon. Tearle might pretend to be happy that he has never left his mark anywhere, "there has never been a *famous* proofreader. God forbid" (111) but he is also disgruntled that members of his profession will be forever "unacknowledged as usual". (65)

Yet despite his being retired, Tearle is still working away at proofreading. His version of the "Key to All Mythologies" is his "System of Records": lists of errors, what he calls "corrigenda", from different publications (newspaper articles, shop signs, advertisements and the classifieds) that he corrects and catalogues. He proclaims that this activity will "contribute to the great task of maintaining order where it already existed and restoring it where it had been disrupted". (98) As I have explained, this is something with which the pedantic reader will sympathise. It is, however, also another symptom of Tearle's ruthless organising impulse, the one that pushes him to believe that "doing away with" people who do not conform to his idea of perfection would be "more

humane than trying to improve them". (252) His insistence on order, therefore, (as Vladislavić explains in his interview with Marais and Backström) often "gets in the way of the transformation of the city and the transformation of people's relations with each other". (166)

Of course, the records will never be complete and will, therefore, never be ordered themselves. The futility of this system makes Spilkin mock and prompts Merle to say, "when I see you sweating over this system of yours, it makes me sad". (111) She explains that she wishes it could be of some help to the world. It is from this that "The Proofreader's Derby" is born: Tearle's final bid for some kind of legacy which he almost fails to finish as well. He finishes it for the Good-Bye Bash, having given up on it being a competition, but what he wishes to show his old friends, is never read by any of them. Eventually, he himself realises that his life's work is not as important as he pretends it is but futile and he wonders:

> Has my whole life come down to a pile of papers, I asked myself, and those riddled with corrigenda? Would I have to say, looking back, not 'It was all one big mistake', but 'It was an endless succession of little mistakes'? More than I care to remember, let alone correct. There might be some saving grace in a great mistake, boldly made – but in an unbroken line of piffling errors? (125)

Given Tearle's tendency to blur the activities of his writing life with the activities of his real life, perhaps he is not only writing about the work he chose to do in retirement, but also about the way he has lived his life. Perhaps he is saying, like Eliot, that "it is in these acts called trivialities that the seeds of joy are forever wasted, until men and women look around with haggard faces at the devastation their own waste has made, and say, the earth bears no harvest of sweetness – calling their denial knowledge". (Eliot, 425) Tearle's usual fury at the world is for a moment interrupted by this brief moment of clarity that he himself has caused some of his own misery, one little act at a time.

Like Casaubon, Tearle is approaching the end of his life and having to reflect on what he has and has not accomplished. As Marais notes, "we feel sympathy for Tearle (in the

old-fashioned sense) because he has a strong sense of what we all must face: death; and by implication, the feeling that we are no longer relevant. We will one day feel obsolete". (Marais, 106) In South Africa as in the rest of the Western world, the aged and dying are seldom treated with tenderness. Old people are not seen as dispensers of wisdom but as burdens on society who must be tucked away in old age homes and supported grudgingly by the healthy members of the population or left to wait for death quietly and separately, without causing more of a ripple to mainstream society than a strongly worded letter to the editor. Their presence in mainstream society would remind people of what many are desperate to forget: that they will die one day.

In Adam Smith's chapter on sympathy in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, sympathy for someone who has died and will fade even from memory is portrayed as one of the strongest sympathetic feelings there is: "It is miserable, we think, to be deprived of the light of the sun; to be shut out from life and conversation; to be laid in the cold grave, a prey to corruption and the reptiles of the earth; to be no more thought of in this world, but to be obliterated, in a little time, from the affections, and almost from the memory, of their dearest friends and relations. Surely, we imagine, we can never feel too much for those who have suffered so dreadful a calamity". (Smith, 189-191)

Even the hard-hearted Tearle is not immune to sympathy "in the old-fashioned sense" in the face of Merle's death. (Marais, 106) For the first time in the novel, he truly places himself in someone else's shoes: "A gruesome vision took hold of me. Merle, in her box, disintegrating, liquefying. It was wet, this deterioration. It consisted of leaking and oozing, it struck through crêpe, it wept. And then I saw myself too, mummified, in a box as grey as a ledger, the skin stretched tight as parchment over my irreducible bones. My solid waste, my dry remains". (269)

What really engages my sympathy and compassion for Tearle (and Casaubon to a lesser extent) are their repressed feelings which are so eloquently conveyed to the reader throughout the two texts. In this sense, too, they are victims of their cultures. Tearle, despite his terrible racist, anachronistic exterior feels powerful emotions. He falls in love and is vulnerable. He feels ashamed and persecuted. He is angry, bitter and lonely. He is not an "other", but a character that is a refracted portrait of a person, just as I am a person who is wracked by powerful emotions. Suzanne Keen pinpoints an atypical

postcolonial theorist called Ihab Hassan who believes people should acknowledge "near universals" or "soft universals". (166) These are not only death and sexual reproduction (common causes of sympathy for both Casaubon and Tearle) but "some transcultural practises like languages, rituals, taboos, spirits, social organisations of marriage, hierarchy, and status". (166) Tearle and Casaubon's difficulties with status, marriage, changes to the language they understand and what is considered taboo could therefore be considered on a similar plane. Hassan argues that postcolonial studies can "'qualify, discriminate, contextualise the idea of universals, give it texture and nuance' rather than rejecting the idea that people have anything in common". (Hassan as quoted by Keen, 166) He argues that by focusing on working generalisations, it will be possible to "transcend both ourselves and cultures" to "project ourselves into other selves and other cultures". (166)

Tearle and Casaubon may be mean old men who cause some damage to those around them, but they are also portrayed as feeling intense emotions caused by some transcultural practises, and are, therefore, humanists. They may solicit the reader's sympathy using different textual practises, but both have strong feelings, and both are taken beyond their own centres of self (albeit by a few steps) by the intelligent compassion of others.

**The Twin Hearts: Merle Graaff and Shirlaine Brown**

> The boundary of our sympathy is a circle which enlarges itself according to its propulsion from the centre – the heart. (Hazlitt, 125, "On Reason and Imagination")

Merle and Shirlaine are undoubtedly centres of a kind of compassion in *The Restless Supermarket*. They are the only two of three characters who have compassion for Tearle and (as I will argue) have the most influence on him. The third character is Moses, the black waiter who helps Tearle out of serious trouble twice, but that Tearle barely notices. This is another parallel with *Middlemarch*, as feelings and the influence of others do exert influence on actions, however slight and fleeting:

> A subtlety in *Middlemarch* is George Eliot's presentation of feeling as an influence upon conduct. If at times this presentation is intense and elevated, she concedes that such influence is often transitory. Casaubon is not, as Dorothea nobly but erroneously imagines, solely occupied with fear and sorrow; he is planning the moves of his dead hand. (Hardy, 93)

Tearle, too, is affected by the emotions of others, however fleetingly, and their kindness can change him, however marginally, for the better. Unlike Eliot or Coetzee, Vladislavić does not make his compassionate characters into saints or reformed sinners who are suffused with that emotion. His are characters who live comfortably in the everyday and who extend their compassion as a matter of course. Just as Tearle's character is a criticism of people who are deeply prejudiced, the characters that have a positive influence on him can be read as refracted indicators of Vladislavić's understanding of what constitutes a compassionate person in real life. The attributes of two characters can therefore be explored in relation to their compassionate natures as their compassion flows from their personalities and overlaps with other affects and emotions.

Merle, we learn, astonishes and looks "astonishing" to Tearle. (84) She does not inspire Tearle with worshipful, bettering, platonic love as despite being astonishing she is not beautiful in the transformative, saintly, platonic sense. Tearle describes her as "small, full of bounce, with round wet eyes and limp grey hair in a bob". (81) It is therefore her personality that makes Tearle fall in love with her. Tearle's love is perhaps hard to define as "love" because it is a very selfish and self-involved, like Tearle's other relationships. Tearle has been told she is a widow, and an ex-teacher and librarian but he never wonders anything else about her private life, despite the fact that he has already imagined what her nose would feel like pressed against his cheek (82) and then made her a glamorous, barefoot beauty in Alibia. (83) The first time he wonders about her life outside the café is when she leaves the Café Europa. It will be the last time he ever sees her as he never contacts her again and she dies a month before the Good-Bye Bash. When he reads her death notices and sees how many family members she has, he says they have been "conjured up" (336), implying that her life outside of her relation to

him is almost imaginary. Yet Tearle, in his own selfish way, loves her and is in love with her and this love does wreak changes in him. It is not only clear from his infinitesimal courting gestures such as getting a new haircut in an effort to impress her (262) and calling her "dear". (112) It is also clear from how she affects his language, and therefore also his way of seeing: her metaphors and imagery become his metaphors and imagery. Where Merle uses language playfully and allusively, Tearle generally wields language like a weapon. He uses it to impress his superiority and to catalogue everyone into boxes so ruthlessly that they cannot surprise and therefore hurt him. They are subtle shifts from his usual usage of language, but they are shifts nevertheless. The Tearle who wanders home from the hospital with Shirlaine at the end of 1993 is different from the Tearle who first meets Merle and Benny in the late 1980s.

When Tearle first meets Mev. Bonsma, he is terribly mean about her and her skills as a pianist. He says the "special requests" she plays "could be positively sodden". (78) More importantly, he describes his dislike thus:

> I found the lack of discrimination in Mevrouw Bonsma's dim interior alarming. A great jumble of music had been poured into her, like leftovers into an olla podrida, and it bubbled out in an indiscriminate broth. I am a repository too; but in me, everything has its place. In me, things are filed, whereas she was merely filled. (79)

It is Merle, however, who takes him to task when he complains to her about Mev. Bonsma:

> "If you think she's 'leaking indiscriminately'", said Merle, "you haven't been listening properly, that's all. She never plays anything without good reason. She's like a weathervane, turning with the wind; open your ears and you'll learn something about the air you're breathing, the cross-currents you're borne along by. She responds to the climate in the room, and she can change it too, as easily as opening a window". (85)

Merle's effortlessly poetic diction moves him and he admits that he has "misjudged" Mev. Bonsma. (86) His new statement about her does not have a bite as many of his statements elsewhere in the book do. His new commentary about her is more like Merle's: "Was refinement not precisely an appreciation of those qualities that were hard to see, that always lay hidden beneath the surface, where a superficial eye would fail to appreciate them?" (87) Of course, what Tearle does not realise is that he has, by his own admission, a superficial eye as he has failed to see Mev. Bonsma's qualities. Although Merle's astute observation has momentarily moved him to see Mev. Bonsma's musical skill, he still catalogues her musical ability with his own "untaxing session of lexical fartlek". (86) Tearle's change is not so much a transformation as a subtle shift.

When Merle tells him he's "dry", she continues with "But you just leave it to me. We'll get the sap flowing in no time". (98) From then on, Tearle thinks of himself as dry and "crusty" (103), and of his time with Merle, Spilkin and Mev. Bonsma as "golden days, Caesar salad days, days of whiskey and roses. All in all, a moisturizing season, with the sap rising in dusty veins and the juices in the grey matter trickling". (113) He tries to be "lighter, moister and less crusty" (104) not because he is trying to win their approval, but because on the inside, he has begun to worry that he may be "a bent old stick, a twig, a broken reed" and have "no sense of fun". (101) Tearle does want to be better: it is just that he is so clueless that his efforts sometimes make him worse. For example, he plays a "practical joke" on Spilkin (which is actually cheating at the crossword in private to pretend to be smarter in public) when the two race to see who can finish it first. (104-106)

Tearle says that he enjoyed the days with Merle, Mev. Bonsma and Spilkin because he maintains that they were "stable, reliable, secure". (114) Actually, they are days of change that make Tearle feel insecure enough to want to "adopt a more relaxed approach towards social intercourse and to take the whole idea of fun more seriously". (103) Before and after his "golden days", he has a steady routine and buries himself in his "System of Records". During the years he has with Spilkin, Mev. Bonsma and Merle, Tearle plays board games, cards, takes an interest in politics, takes a night outing to the Zoo and writes an entirely creative manuscript. This kind of flexible, varied activity is all owing to Merle with her bottomless black bag. Merle finds every kind of

entertainment and help in her bag, and this element of magic is an integral part of her character. Her magical bag, catholic tastes and well-developed sense of humour indicate that she is adaptable: an important reason for the ease with which she is compassionate. Merle is comfortable in the company of everyone she meets because she is curious about them and is not repelled by difference. She is gentle and kind to others because she is gentle with herself. Her resultant sense of well-being enables her to have the freedom from the unhappy "egoistic scrupulosity" that plagues Tearle. (Eliot, 279) One of Karen Armstrong's "Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life" is to have compassion for oneself. Armstrong tells the story of a Rabbi Albert Friedlander who insists that the biblical commandant to love one's neighbour is intricately bound up in loving oneself. (67) She explains, "If we treat ourselves harshly, this is the way we are likely to treat other people". (69)

Tearle is an unhappy person who is frequently disgusted by those around him. His rigidity prevents him from being interested in anything very far beyond the end of his own nose and from understanding what goes on within him. For most of the text, he sees anyone who does not live up to his "standards of racial and linguistic Europeanness" as inferior and therefore not worth attention. (Strauss, 30) Tearle applies the same standards to himself, however, and falls woefully short of them. If Fluxman is Tearle's version of an ideal European man, then Tearle does not live up to his own standards. Fluxman has a house in the suburbs with a swimming pool, that symbol of white prosperity. Tearle is very much aware that his life is not that of the white ideal as he has to count out his pennies and live in a flat in Hillbrow. Fluxman is often "taken for [a sportsman], with his youthful physique and fine head of hair". (211) As I have already detailed, Tearle is not a physically strong man. He has also never been in a position of power or performed a vital service. Fluxman has friends who look to him for leadership, and he orchestrates the entire land of Alibia. Tearle can only loathe others as an extension of his self-disgust by what he perceives to be his inadequacy.

His rigidity also prevents him from understanding his own emotions. He believes that one has to "preserve the boundaries between emotions, I think, or they lose their value". (100) He falls into the trap of creating "categories of feeling which are not only inaccurate but lead to illusions of simplification and control". (Hardy, 88) As a result,

subtle distinctions in the feelings of others and himself pass him by. He does not understand his own complex swirl of affects. He therefore cannot realise what is important to him and how he really feels as he represses everything that does not fit into the categories he has demarcated within neat lexical "boundaries". (100)

After Merle leaves, his diction changes again, and he becomes positively repulsive as he does not even try to keep up a veneer of scruples even to himself, as when he comments on the new furnishing in the Café Europa:

> The chairs were covered in a garish new material and a layer of plastic. Plastic upholstery. The New Management defended it on economic grounds, but it was indecent. I still recall the sucking sound the backs of Nomsa's thighs made on the plastic when she crossed and uncrossed her legs. It was like the smacking of lips. I was compelled to stare at her scarlet mouth, while the word "labia" resounded in my head, with that "b" smack in the middle of it, tight-lipped and pressing. (198)

The thing that breaks through all Tearle's defences is human touch, something that Merle is alone in providing. The solitary Tearle, without good friends or family, is never touched lovingly. Vladislavić remarks in *Willem Boshoff* that "The skin is capable of drawing finer distinctions than the eye and acting as a 'bridging tool to help mend the social chasms of the past'. Social distance is closed by the intimate personal touch". (Vladislavić, 61, *Willem Boshoff*) The healing effects of personal touch are not restricted to mending social chasms; they are the key to healing interpersonal chasms as well. Perhaps part of the reason that Tearle struggles to understand anything outside of himself is that he is restricted to watching and seeing other people. He focuses almost exclusively on what Margot Beard calls "the most despotic of the senses" (64): his sight. He constantly refers to himself as a "shameless scrutineer", watching everyone and everything very closely. (Vladislavić, 3) His sight is what notices stark differences and organises everything into categories according to words on the page. It alienates him from everyone.

Tearle is not only restricted through sight by sheer stubbornness: he is restricted by necessity as he is unmarried, has no close friends and no immediate, if any, family. As a result he very seldom has the opportunity to touch and be touched. Merle realises this, almost certainly unconsciously, and she is often moved to reach out and touch Tearle when she feels he needs comforting. The first time Tearle notes this is when she is trying to get him to turn his System of Records into something, and he is becoming upset and tense, arguing defensively. She takes his hand and "squeezed it till it hurt". (113) The second time, Tearle realises the effect of her touch, and is moved so much that he has to use one of his usual lexical alienation devices to keep himself from being visibly moved. He has been up all night polishing his Proofreader's Derby trophy, and he has ended up with a dark, Brasso-stained finger. While Spilkin makes crude jokes, "They'll think he's got a finger in the wrong pie...Mulrooney. Or mulberry" (122), Merle digs in her bag:

> And now finally what she was looking for: a bottle of acetone. She tipped some of it onto a pad of tissue paper and dabbed my finger. It made no difference whatsoever. But it was so long since anyone had touched me tenderly that it brought a lump to my throat. What the rhinopharyngealists might call a tracheal clonus. (123)

This technical language is an effort by Tearle to stop himself from feeling too deeply.

The final time is at the Zoo, where Tearle has been severely shocked by watching a man in a cage. Merle insists on sitting in the back seat of the car with Tearle as she is worried about him, knowing that having her nearby will make him look less as if he'd "seen a ghost". (173) Tearle explains how "In the car she touched my hand, and declared it as rough as sandpaper". (173) Comforting Tearle is not easy because of his prickly exterior, so the emotionally intelligent Merle offers him some Vaseline Intensive Care. (173) This soothing, physical gesture is what Tearle needs.

For Vladislavić, being able to touch is therefore an important part of being able to have and extend compassion. As a character in *Portrait with Keys* says, "the important thing was proximity. You had to be close together. You had to feel the shoulder of the

person beside you against your own. That gentle pressure on the body is the sense of belonging. (178) This is common to all of Vladislavić's writing that engages implicitly or explicitly with compassion and the sympathetic imagination. As Gerald Gaylard explains in his analysis of two of Vladislavić's short stories: "a postcolonial transculturation of the idea of the sympathetic imagination, which involves bodily feeling and identification, is what Vladislavić's writing implicitly calls for". (Gaylard, 13)

The effect that Merle's friendship has on Tearle becomes easiest to gauge when analysing the interaction between Tearle and Shirlaine in the early hours of the morning after the Goodbye Bash. These wandering hours are marked by an oblique "asterism". Before Shirlaine and Tearle embark on their ramble, Tearle looks up and sees astronomical "asterisms" as they are leaving the hospital. (320) An asterism is not only a cluster of stars, however, but also used on the page to draw attention to a section of text, in this case, the section of text that is to follow Tearle's uncharacteristic glance at the stars and more uncharacteristic interaction with Shirlaine. In it, Tearle and Shirlaine take the long way home to Hillbrow from the hospital. They go home via the park, the Civic Centre and finally via a chicken outlet for breakfast. Tearle breaks many of his own rules and does things he normally dislikes. This is not only due to the aftershocks of the Goodbye Bash, but also to Shirlaine herself. His ordeal has stripped him of everything that may have fed his ego and given him stability but rather than feeling completely broken and alone, he is walking with a girl who has a warm, sympathetic ear and non-judgemental attitude towards him. As a result, he does not feel the need to impress his superiority on her. He wishes to include her in his pursuits rather than emphasise the differences between them.

Once again, it is the gentle physical touch that ensures Tearle does not feel as alienated from her as he does from almost everyone else. Shirlaine is the only other character of the novel who reaches out and touches Tearle gently. In the ambulance, Tearle is feeling the after-effects of the alcohol and being stabbed so he begins to feel nauseous. Shirlaine touches his arm to check that he is all right, and then helps him to lie down and lifts his feet "like a pair of shoes, very professionally" and puts them on the stretcher. (313) Tearle is comforted by this gesture, so much so that he can feel his own vulnerability and be "soft and melting". (313) Tearle is never "soft and melting". (313)

Shirlaine also takes care of him in other ways, mainly by treating him like another human being rather than like a pariah. She tries to teach him to whistle (326), and shares a chicken with him for breakfast, getting him to break the wishbone with her. Like Merle, she is unafraid to question his beliefs, and also like Merle, she does so matter-of-factly, not meanly. When he lectures her on the importance of proof-reading, she asks what should have been asked of him many times before: "Aren't there more important things to worry about than commas and full-stops?" (323) She is also very honest about the future of Johannesburg in the "new" South Africa and the way white people will live in it: "I can't believe you're so upset this joint is closing down. It's not the end of civilisation, you know. There are new places for whites opening up in Rosebank". (334) This exchange shows how clear-eyed Shirlaine is: she understands how things will be organised in the new South Africa. Tearle's many superiority complexes clearly do not offend her because his racist insinuations are not out of the ordinary for her.

She is also one of the only other characters for whom Tearle feels sympathy. She herself takes pity on the injured Floyd who stabs himself by accident and is loaded onto an ambulance. His girlfriend refuses to accompany him because he is "not going to spoil her bash with his nonsense", so Shirlaine steps in. (311) Tearle's "heart went out to her" and he thinks he should "do the decent thing" and go with her, partly because he wonders whether he is not responsible for "this fiasco" and partly because "the child looked quite lost". (311) Her altruism towards Floyd helps Tearle, for the first time in the novel, to act altruistically too.

As with Merle, Tearle's language changes when he is with Shirlaine. It becomes less bitter and sharp-edged; more poetic and even gentle. When he is in the ambulance, he describes her voice as "sweetly scented, candy-striped in flavours of green". (313) The synaesthesia is a product of Tearle's drunken mind, but it is also an image that implies a candy cane bought by a child, indicating the paternal light in which he views her. It also puts one in mind of a "fun" activity; something Tearle usually dismissively calls a "three-letter word". (112) He does not frown on her light-heartedness and spontaneity, but enjoys the warmth of her "cheery" atmosphere, and even admits to feeling an "exhilarating recklessness" (324) wandering aimlessly in the hours before daylight.

Tearle is not actually being reckless. He sticks to the pavement when Shirlaine is wandering down the middle of the road, and he still does not venture beyond his little part of the inner city. He just feels reckless because he is freed, in flashes during these hours, from his restrictive, anchoring "egoistic scrupulosity". (Eliot, 279)

That he is not completely freed is clear. When he finally seems to consider Shirlaine's feelings he ruins our illusion immediately: "She'd hardly got a word in edgeways. I should ask her some personal questions; encourage her to speak about herself. If I was going to cultivate her, that is". (324) He is also privately still classifying her colour as he looks at her, finally comparing it to fudge. (329) That he has this interaction with Shirlaine at all rather than storming off on his own or demanding to be taken home is a kind of miracle. Shirlaine is a young, black woman who smokes, whistles in a way that Tearle considers "unladylike" and wears Nike trainers and "active leisurewear". (330) Nevertheless, when she disappears without giving him a chance to "pat" her shoulder and "try not to wound her with [his] spectacles" (335), there is a sense of disappointment. That Tearle had imagined this goodbye and wanted to "cultivate" her indicates that unlike many of his previous "acquaintances" at the Café, Tearle wanted to stay friends with her. He does not say anything more about her disappearance, but the very fact that he does not say anything means she has touched him more than he can acknowledge.

When he returns to his flat afterwards and looks for the notices that announce Merle's death, garrulous Tearle is, for the first time, struck dumb by grief. (337) When he wakes the next night, he discovers that because of all that has happened, he is unable to take Merle's advice and "look on the bright side". (338) The Café has closed, and being the private person he is, he is once again friendless and utterly alone. He is also living in Hillbrow, a suburb that will become untenable for everyone. The readers of 2001 (*The Restless Supermarket*'s publication date) and afterwards know that only the desperate and destitute will end up living there, somehow surviving serious violent crime and general lawlessness. If Tearle is as "fit" for a "man his age" as he says he is (320), the reader can imagine that he would have a very long, very bleak future. Considering his stunted emotional intelligence and the increasingly difficult conditions

he will have to face, it is also unclear from the last lines that the compassion of Merle and Shirlaine will have much effect at all on his future.

**Conclusion**

In the case of Merle, Shirlaine and Tearle, Vladislavić charts what compassionate behaviour might look like in the everyday. A compassionate person has to be kind to themselves before they can have compassion for others, and they have to have a lightness of heart and ready sense of humour. For Vladislavić, compassion is seldom a bedfellow of high seriousness and higher standards that exclude and rigidify. It is most clearly conveyed through "intimate personal touch". (Vladislavić, 61, *Willem Boshoff*) It is not strengthened through higher education or age, but compassion is more likely to be invoked for someone who is younger and therefore vulnerable, or in this case, someone who is older and facing death. Someone who is consistently compassionate really has the other person's best interests at heart, and sometimes pointing out their blind spots or meanness is a part of their best interest. Compassionate people are also compassionate with themselves and this ensures that they live fulfilled lives. These fulfilled lives enable them to be more compassionate, and the two are mutually productive. Most importantly, Shirlaine and Merle both treat Tearle like another human being, not like an inscrutable "other" who is a vessel for all their own insecurities, or a pity project.

Vladislavić does look at what compassion may be, but he does not make any claims for its universality or efficacy. Like Hassan, Vladislavić works with soft universals and then proceeds to specify and emphasise marginality. He writes in the tradition of the most open-ended parts of Eliot's philosophies, most specifically her conception of Spinoza's *conatus*. Vladislavić ensures Tearle is not irrevocably changed, although he is affected by compassion far more than any other interaction. Some readers will feel sympathy and compassion for Tearle but not all of them, by any means. Those who do feel sympathy and compassion will not feel these feelings unmixed with distaste. While Vladislavić does intend to explore "questions of judgement" because it is "another key to unlocking the South African dilemma of some kind of co-existence" (Marais and

Backström, 168), he does not have any expectations that after having learnt to sympathise with Tearle, readers will think twice before judging someone in real life. After all, as Vladislavić realises when he is reading the true adventures in *Dragon Lizards of the Komodo*, "real people are nearly always harder to like than fictional characters". (Vladislavić, 30, *The Loss Library and Other Unfinished Stories*) Just because there are no definite answers to questions around sympathy and compassion, however, does not mean that one should stop asking questions about their nature. For readers in a postmodern, postcolonial epoch who are wary of the sympathetic imagination of the Great Tradition and weary of compassion fatigue endemic to everyday life, Vladislavić frames these feelings in non-prescriptive, highly affective ways that short-circuit these reactions. In doing so, he shows that while sympathy and compassion seldom effect monumental changes, they are important in unquantifiable but vital ways. In *The Exploded View*, the compassion that is felt is even more fleeting and subtle, and its presence manifests itself not as the compassionate understanding of Merle, but as an ugly feeling, seldom given resolution.

## Chapter Three: *The Exploded View*

> [S]cenes of vulnerability produce a desire to withhold compassionate attachment, to be irritated by the scene of suffering in some way. Repeatedly, we witness someone's desire to not connect, sympathise or recognise an obligation to the sufferer; to refuse engagement with the scene or to minimise its effects; to misread it conveniently; to snuff or drown it out with pedantically shaped phrases or carefully designed apartheids; not to rescue or help; to go on blithely without conscience; to feel bad for the sufferers, but only so they will go away quickly. (Berlant, 9)

In *The Exploded View*, the circle of compassionate awareness is larger than that explored in *The Restless Supermarket*. The four characters in the four narratives are sometimes compassionately aware not only of people in their immediate circles, but of the suffering multitudes beyond them and of the world's deepening ecological crisis. It is important to note that sympathy and compassion are not as central to *The Exploded View*'s "project" (as much as any of Vladislavić's novels have a "project") as they are to *The Restless Supermarket*. A close reading of *The Exploded View,* nevertheless, offers a valuable interpretation of the interplay of sympathy and compassion between characters, reader and author alternative to that of a novel that plays on a more traditional sympathy. The four protagonists and their four narratives are panoramic in their differences, but unlike more traditional sympathetic novels drawn from the precedents set by Dickens and Eliot, the characters and their stories are not obviously webbed together. The reader's expectation of being immersed in the community of the novel is therefore frustrated. In similar fashion, the characters long to be part of a community even while struggling to take steps to create a community by forging bonds of sympathy and identification with others. All too often the reader witnesses the characters' "desire to not connect, sympathise or recognise an obligation to the sufferer; to refuse engagement with the scene or to minimise its effects; to misread it conveniently". (Berlant, 9) Far from showing the characters as "blithely without conscience", however (Berlant, 9), Vladislavić shows their inability to connect is in large

part a result of the Johannesburg landscape and the objects within it. By placing the four characters in four different narratives and once again making the characters themselves difficult to sympathise with, Vladislavić's writing helps the reader experience the difficulties of sympathy and compassion in a way analogous to the characters' experience.

**The "exploded view"**

The structure of the "novel" is the first difficulty for the reader in entering into the characters' lives sympathetically. This is because the text is made up of four narratives that overlap through a common system of objects and places rather than common characters and human relationships. The first section focuses on Les Budlender, a lonely statistician interviewing a cross-section of clients for the new National Census. He becomes obsessed with one of them, a continuity presenter named Iris Du Plooy. He keeps returning to her home in Midrand: a gated Italian-themed community called "Villa Toscana", which gives its name to his section of the novel. To get to the Villa Toscana, he has to drive down a highway flanked by an RDP housing development called Hani View on one side and an informal settlement on the other. In the second section, "Afritude Sauce", a sanitary engineer named Egan visits Hani View because he has designed the sanitary systems for it, and is unwillingly made to listen to the community's complaints about shoddy above-ground workmanship. That evening, he goes for a business supper at Bra Zama's, a restaurant decorated with many African masks and returns to his hotel room feeling bewildered by the confusing social signals of his black colleagues. Simeon Majara is the black artist who decorated "Bra Zama's", and he is the protagonist of the third section, "Curiouser". Majara is having a closing party for *Curiouser*, his latest exhibition, at his home in Greenside. Scenes from this party are interspersed with Majara's own memories and musings about his different exhibitions and about the relationship of his art with other people. For the fourth story, the setting returns to Midrand for the evening of Gordon Duffy, a contractor who is paid to put up temporary billboards. He put up the billboard for the Villa Toscana, but his current project is a billboard for another walled African-themed complex called "Crocodile Lodge" (the title of the fourth and final section). Duffy is on his way home when he gets

caught in a traffic jam, and, reaching for his cell phone to call and reassure his wife, realises he has left it at the site. He returns to get it, pondering all the while on old memories, most particularly a humiliating childhood boxing match that returns to him in dreams, and hours of poring over 1950's *Popular Mechanics* magazines. He remembers in particular, the "exploded view" that was utilised extensively in its pages. When he reaches the building site it is dark, and he cannot find his cellphone. It is then that a taxi parks him into the site, and Duffy and the four men who emerge from it have a darkly comedic show-down, from which it is unclear Duffy will emerge intact.

These characters commit acts and entertain thoughts that, like Aubrey Tearle's, are sometimes uncomfortable because they are objectionable yet familiar. As with Tearle, therefore, any compassion the reader feels for the characters is difficult as it is not unmixed with less complimentary feelings. In addition, each narrative ends before the reader can really relax into the thoughts of the particular character. This alienates the reader by not allowing them to get comfortable with a character for too long and making it difficult for them to form Nussbaum's "bonds of sympathy and identification". (30) The lack of clear connections between the narratives also hinders unthinking emotional involvement in the text because the reader may try to organise all the different strands into one unit and so cannot focus exclusively on the emotional narrative arc. Andie Miller records that the readers who judge the Sunday Times Literary Award went so far as to disqualify it from the competition because they complained it was "a collection of stories rather than a novel". (Miller, 220) Trying to connect the bits of the text so they fit together like puzzle pieces involves a more mathematical brain activity than an empathetic one. Even this organising drive is continually frustrated because the different bits never connect in the ways that many other novels condition a reader to expect. The violent ending and lack of catharsis leaves the reader fundamentally unsettled and unsatisfied rather than gratified that, whatever has happened in a novel, it remains tidily within the self-sufficient community laid out by the author.

As Bertolt Brecht explains, however, "A creation that more or less renounces [traditional conceptions of] empathy need not by any means be an 'unfeeling' creation, or one which leaves the spectator's feelings out of account. But it has to adopt a more critical approach to his emotions, just as it does to his ideas". (101) Brecht makes an

important distinction between sentimentalised empathic appeals to an audience member's feelings (or in Vladislavić's case, the reader's feelings) and the unspectacular presentation of an event that nevertheless evokes feelings and empathy. The former kind of appeal is rare in Vladislavić's writing, but through the latter, the reader is brought to sympathise and have compassion for the characters, albeit in a distinctive way. The unspectacular presentation and short association with each character defamiliarises, but the emphasis Vladislavić simultaneously places on absolute and soft universals and specificity of place and time is what evokes feelings in the reader nevertheless. As in *The Restless Supermarket*, all the characters are physical bodies that are aging and will die one day. Sometimes they feel anachronistic or out of place in their environment. As Eagleton explains in his book on ethics, the "secret source" of compassionate principles is actually "alienation. It reflects the catastrophic loss of a sense of common value and everyday solidarity". (Eagleton, 280) Ironically, this sense of alienation is precisely what everyone has in common.

Another part of the reader's compassion must be the compassionate narrative perspective that Vladislavić provides. Its generosity in acknowledging and not trying to resolve difference is an important and difficult part of having a compassionate perspective. This perspective is encoded in the structure of the novel, which remains resolutely "exploded".

*The Exploded View* seems to be structured according to its name. An "exploded view" is "a model or illustrated technical drawing: showing all the separate components as if 'exploded' from the complete unit but retaining their relative positions". (OED) As the title (and my synopsis) suggests, the four protagonists' stories form an "exploded view" as while they do not touch each other directly, they seem to hover just out of reach of one another. This could also be read as a metaphor for the characters' lives which are clearly separated from the "complete unit" of the Johannesburg community. Duffy's definition of "the exploded view" would seem to support this reading as it differs from the dictionary definition in important ways: "Each part hovered just out of range of the others it was meant to meet, with precise narrow spaces in between. All it needed was a touch, a prod with the tip of a finger, to shift everything closer together, and a perfect whole would be realised, superficially complete and indivisible". (171) He goes on to

describe a longing for "the wholes and the parts [to draw] closer and closer together, infected with purpose, until they [press] up against one another, sometimes, and [fuse]". (189) Duffy, like Egan, Budlender, Majara and even Tearle, longs for connection with others and a definable place in the shifting landscape of Johannesburg. What the novel foregrounds is that a community made up of essential parts that could "fuse" if all of them were "infected with purpose" (189) does not and cannot exist because a single-unit community would require an objective unit to define what a community is. A community is made up of a collective of differing elements that cannot fit neatly because each person comes into the collective from a different perspective or "view". As indicated by this title word, each person has their own "range of sight or vision" that is "affected by [the] position" from which they come and in which they have ended up. (OED) As such, each character is a victim of not only their time but their place. Their histories and surroundings define their ability and opportunity to have compassion for others and therefore become part of a community of their own assembling.

Similarly, reading the novel as an "exploded view" according to Duffy's understanding of the concept (as essential parts that can be put back together in a tidy whole) would require that Vladislavić provide the "quiet space" where a reader can "stand and put it all together". (Vladislavić as cited by Marais and Backström, 167) By robbing the reader of this space, they are given the experience of characters robbed of a common vantage point from which to organise their experience into a mythical communal one. The reader may therefore be more likely to sympathise with the characters' inept struggles to belong. That several of the characters' "views" are "exploded" ("held in contempt; rejected") can only increase the reader's sympathy for them. (OED)

**Compassion, proximity and object relations**

> Nature, that great tragic dramatist, knits us together by bone and muscle, and divides us by the subtler web of our brains; blends yearning and repulsion, and ties us by our heart-strings to the beings that jar us at every movement. (Eliot, 41, *Adam Bede*)

In the absence of universalising and organising tendencies of the traditional novel, one can begin to construct a "postcolonial transculturation of the idea of the sympathetic imagination". (Gaylard, 13) I refer back to Ihab Hassan's notions of "soft universals", which "'qualify, discriminate, contextualise the idea of universals, give it texture and nuance' rather than rejecting the idea that people have anything in common". (Hassan as cited by Keen, 166) The notion of "bodily feeling and identification" (Gaylard, 13) – touch – is once again central to Vladislavić's treatment of sympathetic affect. To a certain degree, for the characters in *The Exploded View* as in *The Restless Supermarket*, "empathy and sympathy are phenomena of proximity; they can…be understood as feeling-acts of a tactile rather than a visual subject". (163, Wyschogrod as cited by Paterson) It is not only the proximity and position of human bodies in space that is important in *The Exploded View*, but the proximity and arrangement of the objects and landscape around people that can also affect them. As material culture anthropologist Daniel Miller explains, "Individuals grow up to become, with varying degrees of typicality, members of a given society. This happens in most cases, not through formal education, but because they are inculcated into the general habits and dispositions of that society through the way they interact in their everyday practises with the order that is already prefigured in the objects they find around them". (135) Being touched by something can therefore involve physical touching between people, or it can involve being "touched" by an object that nevertheless puts one in mind of people. As is to be expected of the naturally anthropocentric human mind, in *The Exploded View* objects remind characters of the people who made them, the people who the objects were made to represent or even those people whom the objects are made to exclude. Touch should therefore be considered "as metaphor, as impingement of the world, as shared experience, as the ability to rouse affects and catharsis, as a series of interconnected somatic sensations [and] as the conscious background behind embodied experience". (Paterson, 172) Exploring the nature of sympathetic or compassionate touch in an urban landscape entails, therefore, scrutinising the way ubiquitous material culture and its ideologies – advertising, commodified living environments and roadways – affects and is affected by people.

I have posited proximity as an important pre-requisite for the growth of sympathy but this is not unproblematic, as the nature of touch is made up of two opposing forces. On the one hand, being touched is fundamental to our well-being and our successful integration into and enjoyment of the world.[3] On the other, the world is often a hostile or unpleasant place, and the constant proximity of other bodies and objects can feel dangerous or disagreeable: "We would like to feel the beauty of the world. But the more aware of the world's abundant offering of tactile and thermal delights, the more we are also aware of its repellent aspects: tactile pleasures of living grass and human hair are countered with disgust". (Tuan, 76) The same is true of difficult feelings that impinge on one's consciousness. One would long to be connected to others and to have compassion for them, but sharing someone else's pain or distress is unpleasant and difficult, particularly when commodified society is built on the exploitation of multitudes. One cannot find wide-reaching solutions (and a practical outlet for feelings of compassion) from within a system if the suffering is endemic to that system. This causes one to experience "ugly feelings", defined by Sianne Ngai as feelings that ensue from the knowledge of "restricted agency" in a "totally commodified society". (2) The feelings of compassion explored in *The Exploded View* are non-cathartic for author, characters and reader. In this sense, "compassion" is not a high or noble feeling in the text, but an "ugly" one. Vladislavić's unorthodox handling of these issues must spring from an acknowledgment of the difficulties of compassion, and of the knowledge that the texts he writes are as powerless to effect wide-reaching change as his characters are powerless to effect change in their everyday encounters with everyday problems. As Ngai explains in her book on *Ugly Feelings*, such texts "can [theorise] social powerlessness in a manner unrivalled by other forms of social praxis". (2) Therefore while "social distance is closed by the intimate personal touch" (Vladislavić, 61, *Willem Boshoff*), fear of feeling ugly feelings when confronted with others can also generate an impulse away from touching others.

As Sianne Ngai implies in *Ugly Feelings*, and as seems evident from Vladislavić's writing, making the "process of perception" more difficult through ugly feelings and

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[3] See Montagu, *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin*

defamiliarisation devices is essential to helping the reader move outside of themselves and see the familiar anew. (Shklovsky, 21) As Brecht explains, "Each [person involved in art] ought to move away from himself. Otherwise the element of terror necessary to all recognition is lacking". (26)

What is, therefore, problematic about the material set-up of Johannesburg is that it is designed to keep people comfortably separated and, theoretically, protected from either ugly feelings or "intimate personal touch" that could breach boundaries. (Vladislavić, 61, *Willem Boshoff*) Although, like all major cities, Johannesburg is incredibly cosmopolitan people seldom have to move outside of their small social circles made up of people like themselves. They come across their fellow South Africans through various media platforms more than they do in the everyday. This is due to several factors. Firstly, Johannesburg was built for motor rather than public transport. Budlender and Duffy spend large portions of their stories observing the city from within the sealed-off bubbles of their cars, far from the bipedal realities of the city. Secondly, the city is still largely divided according to race owing to the legacy of separate development policies. This legalised "disgust" at difference is not only a shadow that is cast on continuing beliefs and attitudes about others (Tuan, 76), but is cemented in the geography of the city. As Vladislavić explains, "I think the most divisive and hostile part of the way Jo'burg has developed, and perhaps it's the most obvious legacy of apartheid, is that you don't ever need to share space with anybody else". (Vladislavić as cited by Miller, 220) Thirdly, apartheid and the violence from enforcement of the law and the rebellion against it have meant that violent crime is prevalent in post-apartheid South Africa. Many people move into fortified walled estates away from the general populace because they fear for the safety of themselves and their belongings. In these developments, "the colour of one's money rapidly replaces skin colour" as the great separator. (Bremner, 46, *Johannesburg*) As Lindsey Bremner suggests, it is not only the crime that drives people to move into separate complexes, but the better facilitation of "conspicuous consumption, and having the good things in life". (Vladislavić as cited by Miller, 219) The walled housing estates of "Villa Toscana" and "Crocodile Lodge", the gym in the latter story, and the ubiquitous mall all function as a "built environment which

presupposes commodified relations, such that the world depicted in advertisements comes to be thought of as the only possible world". (Goldman, 35)

The poverty of many other citizens, environmental degradation and one's own complicity in these processes can more easily be forgotten when one lives in an environment that promises to be "aglow with prosperity and happiness". (175, *The Exploded View*) It presents itself as a community that, like an "exploded view" is "superficially complete and indivisible". (171) These environments lead people to believe, in different ways and to different extents, that if they can buy into one of these commodified communities then not only will they be safe from harm, but that they can bypass difficult and ugly feelings and interact easily with others and so achieve the sense of belonging for which they long. As with all idealised and airbrushed worlds, they cannot materialise and some people are left feeling that this failure is their own failure in following the template, not the inadequacy of the template itself. (Halberstam[4], 512)

Fourthly, efforts at closing the distance and undoing the wrongs of the past are too often restricted to cosmetic changes. The citing of statistics about the material lack of various segments of the population is often used to raise awareness, but reducing multitudes of people to a number is seldom conducive to inspiring fellow-feeling. The inadequacy of this strategy is clear in the cases of Budlender and Egan, who despite being disturbed by the numbers, are helpless when it comes to alleviating the ills the numbers describe for reasons that will become clearer in close reading.

Another ostensible effort at undoing the wrongs of the past is changing terminology so that discourse is more politically correct. As Wendy Steiner explains, "previously limited to the academic world, [world as text] thinking has now entered politics, where social injustice is a matter of unjust speech". (144) Changing the words into less historically charged ones does not right the injustices, however, and people rightly feel cynicism over the word changes. It can even taint the words with connotations of

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[4] David Halberstam is writing here about children having false expectations of their families because of the perfect world portrayed in 1950's television, but I believe the similarities between 1950's television and contemporary commodified fantasies are numerous enough to warrant the comparison.

insincerity that can be difficult to dispel in a fashion similar to the fate of words and concepts used in advertising: "The drift if not the impact of the use of these values [love, friendship, neighbourliness, pleasure, happiness] in selling means that genuine feelings are devalued or corrupted, and previously acceptable words become false and used loosely". (Dyer, 80) A good example of this is Simeon Majara's reflections on his life's philosophies:

> Grace was a concept he considered more and more important for negotiating the world. He had picked it up on Oprah…What was that segment of her show called again? 'Remember your Spirit.' Like a sign saying 'Mind the Step'. Perhaps it was to be expected: the more vulgar everyday life became, and the more overwhelmed people were by craven impulses and base desires…the more they reached for old ideals like generosity and grace. (119, *The Exploded View*)

Oprah is a good example of what has now become commonplace: the commodification of emotions and the words used to describe them. This commodification, while it is not always predicated on greed, is still harmful as it simplifies the emotions and therefore sets up false expectations about their nature. It also implies that if one were to watch the segment of the show or buy the related magazine or book, one could feel one has enacted this emotion, even though it has been a purely economic transaction. This becomes increasingly problematic in Johannesburg where advertising and commodification reaches people not just through television shows and in magazines, but is embedded in everyday lifestyles.

The creation of an African aesthetic in this vein is similarly misguided. For example, two of the four titles of the stories – "Afritude Sauce" and "Crocodile Lodge" – are named after various versions of wealthy "African" pastiche. Despite their African sounding names, they have no real connection to the reality of the vast majority of South Africa. African meaning-making is important for building a community of which people can feel a part, but imposing meaning in a commodified setting cannot facilitate community building, which must of necessity be built from the grass-roots level.

These reasons in large part explain why many of the characters in *The Exploded View* think and behave the way they do. They wish to buy into (so to speak) relationships that have their precedence in commodified interaction. Lonely Budlender wishes to be in a relationship with a woman drawn from a template; aging white male Egan wishes to become part of the "new" South Africa by being accepted by his black colleagues; Majara wishes to commodify himself in order to become a successful artist; and economically insecure Duffy wants to be a hyper-masculine, successful engineer from the pages of 1950's (that golden age of advertising) *Popular Mechanics* magazines. (172)

Vladislavić writes that "[Majara] is the only character who doesn't feel like a victim of circumstance" (Miller, 219) and it is true that he is more aware of the pressures that mould him. I do feel, however, that he is a victim of his own public relations process in which he is "an artist" from which "everything else followed". (104, *The Exploded View*) Like *Double Negative*'s Neville Lister, Majara feels he has to "play [him]self", except that unlike Neville, he feels that way all the time. (140, *Double Negative*) In his public persona, Majara acts so that he is imitating or subverting reviews about his artwork which must include his personality. It seems he struggles to define himself without their reference. This is evident when he believes he has a "feline streak" because he was called the "Young Lion of the Art Scene" in an article. (114) He even attributes his new need to prowl to his "rubber-soled trainers, which looked more like a superior form of foot than a shoe, as if his body had magically projected its striated musculature onto the surface of his skin". (114) His swimming pool evokes a similar happiness: "A liquid lozenge of California in the crust of Gauteng. There was something about it that thrilled him, something glamorous and electric that produced a current of longing with no definite object". (109) For Majara, "styling the self is essentially a process of consumption". (Graham, 49) What is clear from "Curiouser" is that Majara must not only acquire commodities to define himself but become a commodity to sell his art. As a result he is, like the subjects of Arlie Russel Hochschild's *The Managed Heart*, increasingly alienated from his own emotions.

Hochschild was writing about companies who use their workers' emotions to sell products and the negative effects this has on "the degree to which we listen to feeling and sometimes our very capacity to feel". (21) Hochschild's thesis is that as it is "from

feeling that we learn the self-relevance of what we see, remember or imagine" (196), being alienated from one's feelings can further alienate one not only from oneself but from everyday life. The highly made-up continuity presenter and model Iris Du Plooy has also made herself the sum of her possessions, perhaps in part because they contribute in no small way to the "false self" she must put on to perform her work. The line between the public persona she has to create and her own personality is blurred. As with an air hostess or a bill collector (the subjects in Russel Hochschild's study), the very role of a continuity presenter is a mix between an acting role and one's own personality. The presenters do not have specific roles to play like actors, nor important, theoretically impartial, information to impart, like a newsreader. They use their own names and have to infuse their banal dialogue or monologue with enthusiasm, warmth and "sympathetic concern". (25) It is clearly not work she enjoys. Budlender, when watching her present on television, sees "There was something in her expression that was close to disdain". (25, *The Exploded View*) As Hochschild explains, "in order to survive their jobs, they must mentally detach themselves – the factory worker from his own body and physical labour, and the [continuity presenter] from her own feelings and emotional labour". (17) Iris's "disdain" is for this "false self": "a disbelieved, unclaimed self, a part of 'me' that is not really 'me'". (195)

Being able to discover the "self-relevance of what we see, remember or imagine" (Hochschild, 196) is an important part of the process of forging a community. For Budlender, Majara and Du Plooy, their alienation from their own emotions is part of the reason they feel alienated from others. Just as Aubrey Tearle cannot have compassion for others without compassion for himself, so these characters are unable to feel with others because they are unaware of their own feelings.

None of the characters manage to achieve the acceptance or sense of social cohesion they seek in large part because of the reasons I have detailed. They find themselves instead,

> working in a world of fragments. The city itself is fractured and adrift; people find themselves in skewed roles that do not fit together; events seem discontinuous and without meaningful sequence. Each story follows its own path

> as the characters struggle to compose a credible existence for themselves. (Morphet, 207)

The stratified physical environment and the discourse of commodified amnesia imbued in almost every object in their environments ensure that people are hopelessly inept at reaching out to others.

The way material Johannesburg life facilitates selfishness and separation is a well-known strand in many commentaries, most particularly Bremner's *Johannesburg: One City, Colliding Worlds*. She goes so far as to say that the "must-have suburban attitude" is "lack of curiosity about everyone else." (46) As I hope I have argued, however, if there is a lack of curiosity, it is in part owing to the stratified environment and is a defence mechanism against the suffering of others. It is also often difficult enough to make a living for oneself without having to worry about others.

What is also highlighted in *The Exploded View* is that material objects not only separate people from others but can also affect people despite themselves. In different contexts, objects cause people to feel emotions that connect them to others. As Iser may have argued, Vladislavić's texts are themselves a good example of this. Texts, like artworks, are also commodities that once acquired (whether permanently after a purchase or temporarily from a friend or library) affect the reader. As Daniel Miller explains in *Stuff*, "We can see that objectification can be positive. Having more things might provide us with resources that enhance our capacity and experience and understanding". (61) Sally Ann Murray views Vladislavić's texts as objects by describing how they "[clear] the way for readers to understand words not merely as the conduit for 'a story' or 'storytelling' but as forms of sculptural 'installation' which make meaning on the page and in the mind". (Murray, 255)

Vladislavić's texts also work as defamiliarisation devices that make readers view mundane and everyday objects described in his texts differently: "assemblages of words representing objects trouvés: familiar found constituents, things we might ordinarily consider aesthetically inexpressive – a wall, an ATM, a bench, a television – ...are imaginatively repositioned, startling readers towards new understandings, aesthetic as well as ethical, of the contexts in which they live". (Murray, 261) As Shklovsky and

Brecht argue, defamiliarising the material world is fundamental to getting people to feel differently about the world around them.

Vladislavić's descriptions of Budlender's interaction with the Villa Toscana, for example, encapsulate the way objects can both immure one against reality or bring one sharply into contact with it. Villa Toscana, like advertisements, works as a closed system of pastiche that has a "pacifying effect" on those who spend time in it, numbing Budlender to the world outside the "mass-produced effects" and "formulaic individuality". (31, *The Exploded View*) Other parts of the Villa Toscana only seem to heighten his awareness of the people it was built to keep out, not least because Budlender himself feels shut out at the gates by its medieval-themed "ramparts": "'Villa Toscana' was printed on a salmon coloured wall to the left. Below each wrought-iron letter was a streak of rust like dried blood, as if a host of housebreakers had impaled themselves on the name". (9) Housebreakers themselves may be physically absent, but the very objects designed to evoke a sense of safe exclusion brings them into closer proximity. Majara's excursion into the warehouse to see the masks he will use in *Curiouser* is similarly infused with the presence of the people who once worked there: "There were windows down one wall, and, huddled together as if for warmth, five or six machines whose purpose he could not fathom". (129)

Other facets of public life that alienate can also bring people into proximity. Cars, for example, whilst sealing people off from other people and from public spaces, are objects that simultaneously connect people and places that would not have been connected in pre-industrial times, or even earlier decades in which roads were not as efficiently built. As Constance Classen explains, "The bodies of the rider in the car…might be physically untouched by the world unfolding before them but, at the same time, when they emerged from the car…they were not the same bodies as before". (Classen, 402) Therefore, whilst the material world of Johannesburg was and is built to ensure people's separateness, it can also bring them into contact with others with whom they would not normally share a common space and enable them to be affected by these others.

As Majara explains, "the lull behind the noisy surface of objects [is] difficult and dangerous". (123, *The Exploded View*) He goes on to wonder, however, if "the voice you heard [in the lull] was a deeper meaning, whispering its secrets, or merely the distorted

echo of your own babble?" (124) *The Exploded View* would seem to suggest that the voice one hears in the lull behind objects is a combination of both. Objects protect and distract the characters from awareness of the brevity and brutality of life, particularly the lives of others. When arranged in the right way, however, objects can frighten the characters out of complacency or cause them to sympathise with the people the objects symbolise, even if the feeling passes through subconsciously as an affect. They also reflect many of the characters' "views" back at them, exploding them.

These issues all emerge with varying intensities throughout the four narratives, and may be most clearly charted by exploring them one by one. As I have detailed, the different strands are not meant to cohere neatly, but to overlap messily and make "objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged". (Shklovsky, 20)

**"Villa Toscana"**

> A man undertakes to count all the leaves in the world. The essence of statistics. (Canetti, 9, *The Human Province*)

Lonely statistician, Les Budlender has much in common with *The Restless Supermarket*'s Aubrey Tearle in that they are unsympathetic characters who may, nevertheless, manage to garner an unsentimental sympathy from the reader. The reader is brought to feel compassion for Budlender because he lives alone and is pitifully socially awkward and unpleasant. His offensive characteristics are partly a result of the apartheid system and a repressed upbringing at which the reader can only guess. He therefore finds the chaotic, surprising, post-apartheid world around him too much to handle and in order to cope he organises people into neat statistical probabilities. Budlender's statistical ordering of his reality acts like Tearle's proof-reading in that it distances him from it. This does not allow for many friendships or meaningful connections to develop, isolating him further. As Tearle constantly finds in his proof-reading endeavors, "There are certainly no statistics that [Budlender] can rely upon to

describe, and hence proscribe, the increasingly overwhelming reality he is experiencing". (Titlestad, 13)

Like Tearle, Budlender is hyper-sensitive and he has chosen a job that enables him to use statistical ordering as his self-defence mechanism against the barbs of others and from the power of his own feelings. This complex nexus of needs and fears leads him to seek belonging and touch from the community of commodified objects in stores and in an obsession with Iris Du Plooy, a continuity presenter he interviews to help compile questionnaires for the National Census. As Tony Morphet explains, "It becomes clear to us, if not to [Budlender], that what he is looking for is a story he can tell himself. The narrative will compose the continuity he needs in the discontinuous world". (Morphet, 207)

Statistics may be Budlender's way of keeping the world at bay but, paradoxically, statistics are often used as a way to get people to have more compassion for others, or to get people to act differently so as to live a safer, healthier life. Budlender thinks of several throughout the story: "fully nine tenths of the cars involved in rear-end collisions were ignoring the recommended following distance" (16); "67 per cent of all household accidents occur in the kitchen" (9); "only 35 per cent of South Africans have access to a landline telephone" (18); "no more than 2 per cent of white South Africans speak an African language". (25) As a white South African unable to speak an African language, Budlender is part of the 98 per cent, but he considers himself part of the one tenth who heeds the following distance as is clear by his asking "What is it with people?" (17), implying that it is other people who make these mistakes. In Budlender's case, as with many others, statistics are meant to shock people into thinking or behaving differently, but they can make a person think of themselves as separate from and superior to the group rather than a part of it that could be affected. In addition, thinking of others as numbers can become a de-humanising process, rather than a process that makes one aware of the state of others' everyday lives.

The same can frequently be said of efforts to change people's thinking by changing their official vocabulary. In the new National Census questionnaires, the writers have changed the terms that describe the different members of the population. Budlender details how the new questionnaire describes the population: "people with diverse

backgrounds (they tried to avoid the old categories of 'race' and 'population group') and in every income bracket (they steered clear too, of 'rich' and 'poor')". (6) After South Africa's painful history of very specific and derogatory labels, the new categories are meant to be less inherently discriminatory. As I have explained, however, this effort is often ridiculed rather than applauded. Certainly, Budlender's description is not without mockery, which is clear in the way he refers to the unspecified "they" who are in power and who make the decisions. His attitude to those of a different "background" or "income bracket" has certainly not become more compassionate as a result of the cosmetic change in language. (6)

Unlike Tearle, Budlender does not have a distinctively idiosyncratic narrative voice. The way in which Budlender is described is incredibly ordinary. Almost no flamboyance or ripple of colour disturbs the evenness of tone. Unlike Tearle's abrasive personality actively alienating the reader, Budlender's story and his motivations seem so affectively neutral as to be a kind of alienation technique in itself. The reader is required to "participate" even more actively to dissect the swirl of affects and emotions underpinning his actions. (Iser, 10)

When faced with hawkers and a beggar at an intersection, Budlender views them as part of his statistical scenery rather than other people like himself. Unlike the other two characters – Majara and Duffy – who also come into contact with hawkers, Budlender does not pause to think of the chain of human endeavour that lies behind the products being hawked, or feel sympathy for the vendors' plight. He winds up his window and glares at them (4), regarding their products as "Junk". (4) He is clearly discomforted by their proximity, not least the vendor who "thrust a bird into the car, some sort of sock puppet with a stiff comb and a scarlet tongue flickering in its throat. Through the stretchy fabric he saw the man's fist flexing". (4) The intrusion of the stranger's hand into the sealed-off world of Budlender's car is what prompts his instinctive reaction away from the scene he is looking at. Others may affect him if he lets them get too close. After sealing himself off physically by winding up his window, he seals himself mentally by categorising what he sees statistically: "Every street corner in Johannesburg was turning into a flea market. Informal sector employment (as a percentage of the total):

30 per cent. More?" (4) If Budlender considers the haphazard, vibrant world outside his window as a statistic, he can make it more remote, containable and less threatening.

He further objectifies the hawker by trying to work out the man's nationality according to his physical features. He recalls a friend at the bank telling him that all Nigerians have small ears, "little ears, flat against the skull and delicate, like a hamster" (5) and he classifies the vendor as Nigerian accordingly. He goes on to wonder, rather like an animal enthusiast, whether "the aliens have outstripped the indigenes", (5) the "aliens" being black African foreigners and the "indigenes" being the local black population. Budlender is unaware that his penchant for classifying different black people according to their physical characteristics is racist. When Budlender remembers discussing it in a bar, he describes how he and his friend discuss it quietly, feeling unconsciously that it would be something that would be frowned upon if overheard. Consciously, however, they "laughed raucously" when they realised what they were doing because they were talking "*as if* the topic were shameful". (5, emphasis added)

Apart from momentary encounters like these, Budlender is the epitome of the isolated city-dweller. He spends hours in his car alone, and probably drives from his home, to work and to the mall to do some shopping and perhaps for some recreational statistics of the kind he does at the Star Stop Egoli. (14-15) He spends his Friday nights not out on the town or with friends or family but in front of the television with a Woolworths instant meal. (24)

Vladislavić's choice of brand is deliberate as Woolworths can be seen as the supermarket choice for those in a high-income bracket or those who aspire to be in one. Budlender can feel part of the moneyed elite of South Africa: a kind of community, even if it is a retail one. Woolworths is also an interesting choice because it is the company with the most overt marketing campaign to convince customers that they are a company who cares. They have "farming for the future" printed on all their vegetable and fruit packaging, including the baby spinach unsustainably flown in from Kenya. Budlender, the man on whose consciousness both greenhouse emissions (16) and oil-slicked penguins (23) impinge, may be a victim of Woolworths's environmental publicity. As John Berger explains, Budlender would scarcely be aware of the reasons for his choice,

as “all of us see hundreds of publicity images every day” and while “one may remember or forget these messages…briefly one takes them in and they stimulate the imagination by way of either memory or expectation”. (129) He can fool himself into believing he is helping the environment simply by shopping in the shining, glamorous aisles at Woolworths, far away from much of the ugly evidence of South Africa’s environmental degradation.

Despite Budlender’s isolating lifestyle and his embedded racism, he cannot completely seal himself off from South Africa’s landscape. When a stone hits his windscreen and cracks it as he is driving home one night because of the reckless driving of a taxi, he angrily follows it off the road and finds himself next to an informal settlement, something he has never before experienced at such close range. Tellingly, the only thing he has previously noticed about the mass of dwellings he has passed every day is that one shack-dweller used a Vodacom sign (another advertisement) as one of the walls. (20) In front of the shacks, he sees a naked man lying cradled in an old tire, illuminated by the glare of his headlights. Still sealed inside his car, Budlender drives slowly past the man, almost meeting his eyes. The man waves and keeps watching the car as Budlender drifts ahead so that the man is only illuminated by the taillights. While twisting his body so that he can still see the car, however, the man upsets the balance of the tire and is sent “tumbling silently into the dust”. (22) Budlender accelerates and moves back onto the road, “the scene in the rear-view mirror…engulfed in a surf of dust”. (21) Budlender says that “the man in the tube disturbed him more than the cracked windscreen” and that whilst he feels he would laugh about it the next day, at that moment he is “filled with anxiety”. (21, 22) Vladislavić does not include any of the precise reasons as to why Budlender is upset, perhaps because Budlender himself is unwilling to delve too deeply into the possible causes of his emotions. He clears his head with another numbers game instead, trying to remember the number plate of the taxi. (22)

The reader could infer several things from Budlender’s anxiety and his own unwillingness to acknowledge his feelings. The prevalence of crime and violence in informal settlements would frighten Budlender and make him uneasy to be in such proximity to the place. More importantly, the randomness of a naked man sitting in a

tire on the side of the road after dark is something that would horrify the orderly statistician. In Budlender's tidy, urban world, the only really destitute people he sees are on television. The nudity of the man is indicative of his poverty and vulnerability. Budlender, buffered by his car and other trappings of wealth and prosperity is faced with man in his most basic form, without clothes, possessions or even the comfort of light in the darkness. The way the man then topples over into the dust and disappears into the blackness of the night would also be disturbing as it emphasises the fragility and the brevity of man's existence. This sight would shock the sensitive Budlender into an acknowledgement of the fragility of his human body, and also that the many people living in the informal settlements do not have the pleasant consumerist trappings that help him forget his vulnerability.

Perhaps this is part of the reason he "falls in love" with Iris Du Plooy: "Falling in love. Falling? He had plunged off the edge of himself". (32) Budlender's love for Iris is necessarily also rooted in her community of commodified objects and relations. Iris's set-up is the complete antithesis to the man in the tyre because it is redolent with the most meaningless of consumerist trappings. Through them, he can move beyond himself and his own vulnerability. The objects act not only as buffers between her and the world at large but as taskmasters who seem to bleach her of any defining features. As Miller explains, "Commodities are not inherently good or bad, but you can't have the benefits without entailing the risk that they will oppress you". (63) Iris is oppressed by what she owns and where she lives. This is clear from the generic nature of all her possessions and furniture. If, as Graham (following Nuttall) posits, many middle-class people see "styling the self" as a "process of consumption" (49), then Iris's style is made up of copies of other movements and other fashions. She has not made anything distinctive of what she has. Her rooms are still painted white (12, *The Exploded View*), her already identical Villa Toscana yard is nondescript (35), and her CD collection is utterly derivative, made up of "Sade, the soundtrack from Cats, Dance Krazy Volumes 1 and 2 [and] Cole Porter". (36) Her character seems less defined by her objects rather than more. Budlender struggles to see her as anything but a reflection of the environment of her objects:

> Everything about her made him think of Italy and the ocean. It was Tuscany, it was the sadly unconvincing atmosphere of Tuscany in which she had chosen to live. It brushed off on everything like cheap paint. When he asked her out to dinner, which he had resolved to do, he would suggest La Rusticana. He was sure she loved Italian food. Seafood. (33)

The environment of objects and his own social inadequacy lead him to rifle through her things as, pitifully, it is the only avenue through which he can experience a relationship with her.

He asks to use her bathroom and then uses the time to create a more intimate picture of her life. He sees her laundry is hanging up over the bath and tries to imagine the shape of her body underneath her clothes. He touches the collar of her shirt and is tempted to do more, but he complains:

> Every impulse he had to press something to his face, to breathe something in – her towel must hold the memory of her shampoo in every fibre – felt ridiculous and false, like something he had seen someone else do and now felt obliged to imitate. He thought of panty raids in college residences, rock star fantasies, peep-show paraphernalia. (30)

He then notices a sponge on the edge of the bath that is shaped like a duck:

> He picked it up and found that it was sodden. He squeezed it so that the water ran out between his fingers. Then he caught sight of his face in the mirror over the basin, looking out from behind a skyline of bottles and jars, like a man in a wanted poster. (30)

What is clear from Budlender's intrusions is that he, along with the reader, finds his voyeurism distasteful. It is unsurprising that he sees himself as a "man in a wanted poster" because squeezing the sponge is perhaps a more intimate intrusion than pressing a piece of her clothing to his face would have been. The sponge is what Iris uses to wash and scrub the skin all over her body and feeling the water trapped in this

sponge run through his fingers could be like feeling the residue from her body rather than her freshly laundered clothes.

His feelings are not only a guide to his own actions, but to the nature of Iris and her dysfunctional relationship with her objects as well. This is clear from an interesting description from the final time Budlender returns to Iris's bathroom and her personal space. While she takes a cell phone call in the next room, he returns to the bathroom and opens her laundry basket, then picks up her shampoo to open it and smell it. What he is really drawn to, however, are her endless bottles of cosmetics and perfumes:

> an immense feminine clutter of bottles, jars and tubes, doubled in the mirror behind. Sample sachets of moisturiser and eye make-up remover, cotton-wool balls in marshmallow colours, tubes of mascara, brushes and wands. Tortoiseshell clips, stretchy hair bands with scribbles of black hair caught in them, combs, tongs. A pink plastic razor, the flimsy kind of thing a woman would use. Emery boards, nail varnish, acetone. (37)

As he looks over these things, "a dim memory from his childhood came back, like a stranger into a shadowed doorway, and went away again without speaking". (37) This memory is of pouring every imaginable ingredient into a bowl to make a cake, and making such a "putrid batter" that he and his friend have to get rid of it by pouring it into the garden. (37) His association of all these cosmetic products with an unholy mess would indicate that Budlender's fascination tends toward horror rather than slavish devotion to Iris. His emotions have brought his childhood memory to the surface, but being unreflective about his own emotions, Budlender lets the memory go away "without speaking". (37)

Even after Iris terminates their business relationships and ensures Budlender has no chance to see her again, Budlender dreams of being in a city made up purely of Iris's objects:

> the buildings were like bars in a gigantic graph, but they were also perfume bottles, glass towers filled with liquids coloured like honey and brandy. The air

> was so thickly scented he could hardly breathe. He began to run, over tiles of tortoiseshell and pewter, gathering momentum painfully, step by step, until his feet detached from the earth and he found himself falling, horizontally, through the perfumed streets. (46)

This dream reflects on both Iris and Budlender and their relationships with objects. Budlender has connected with Iris through rooting through her things, not by trying to engage her socially. This could in part be because Iris does not have pity enough to let him make the attempt, but it could also be because an actual relationship with her would be far more difficult and he does not wish to disrupt his own life. Iris, like Majara, is possessed and defined by her objects. That Budlender dreams of her objects and not her physical presence indicates that she does not have much personality outside them.

By the end of "Villa Toscana", Budlender has failed to find a narrative through an involvement with Iris or via acceptance into the "Tuscan" community. Budlender wishes for connection without proximity and an imaginary homogeneous community. What is clear from Iris's example, however, is that a homogeneous community of the *Villa Toscana* kind is not necessarily a community at all, but rather a lifestyle that is often created to better facilitate consumption. A combination of awkward personality and a separating environment ensures Budlender is ill-equipped to feel sympathy or compassion when confronted with other people, and is therefore unable to find the belonging for which he wishes.

**"Afritude Sauce"**

"Afritude Sauce" is, in part, about the difficulty of including people different from oneself in one's circle of compassion or sympathy and some of the effects of this difficulty. Where Budlender wishes for an idealised homogeneous community, Egan, protagonist of "Afritude Sauce", wishes to belong to a community that exists only in the post-apartheid publicity machine: a "rainbow nation" South Africa. (Graham, 60)

The story begins with Egan, a sanitary engineer, sitting in his hotel room in Johannesburg after a day of conducting business, reflecting over the day's events and waiting for the in-house movie – *Raging Bull* – to start. He thinks back to the beginning of the day when he went to survey how his sanitary systems have been built in Hani View, a new development of government housing. He is guided by a member of the local council, Milton Mazibuko. As Egan swiftly discovers, a house from Hani View is not what anyone would want for their home. The houses have been badly constructed, and the development is situated next to a freeway, which means that all the dust blows straight into the houses. (55) To make matters worse, an informal settlement has sprung up on the other side of the road.

The people who live in Hani View complain, not because the informal settlement uses their water, clinics and schools, but because they are using all the facilities and they are not part of the same community. Egan remembers an editorial: "If these people were *ours* it would be different…but they've been left on our doorstep". (56) There are limits as to who can receive help and acceptance. It is also the first example of the difficulties of enlarging one's circle of compassion.

The second example is the unholy quintet with whom Egan has supper that evening. Milton Mazibuko and Louis Bhengu from the local council, Ramaramela and Marakabane from the Hani View Residents' Housing Association and an unknown fifth man to whom he is not introduced take him for supper at Bra Zama's African Eatery. The men involve Egan in their conversation in the beginning when they want to ask for his opinions, but once these have been given, they swiftly proceed to block him from their conversation by switching to seSotho. Their circle of interest clearly does not involve an awkward white man. Neither does their circle of interest include the people they are supposedly working for: the residents of Hani View. These five men are working together to the detriment of the people who live in the houses, and their evident willingness to enrich themselves rather than build good quality houses for the people of Hani View is one of the narrowest circles of compassion in this story.

The narrowest circle perhaps, is Egan's, which does not, in any practical way, extend beyond his own immediate family. Like Budlender and *The Restless Supermarket*'s Aubrey Tearle, Egan tugs at the reader's sympathy because he is not adept at social

interaction and does not occupy a position of social power. To start with, he tells people he is "in the shit business". (55) This is the kind of self-deprecating humour that engages the reader because it shows that, unlike Tearle, he does not have too strong a sense of his own importance. Like Tearle, his age and evident confusion at navigating the change in the world around him also evokes some sympathy. His drunken tirade against modern fashion makes him seem comically and touchingly pathetic:

> He'd been tucking his shirt into his pants since he was a kid: now suddenly it was a sign that he was "uptight". You were supposed to let it all hang out, starting with your shirt tails. Bugger that. Bugger *them*. He loosened his belt and tucked his shirt into the sides of his underpants, the way he'd always done it. (92)

He is also an older white man living in a "new" South Africa: one in which he is frequently lost. Like Budlender and Tearle, Egan has also grown up under apartheid and lives with its effects. That he struggles to interact with black people in particular is made abundantly clear throughout the story, beginning with his discomfort at having to listen to complaints from black residents who live in the new houses for which he has designed sanitation systems. Firstly, it scares him to be in proximity to so many poor black people as he fears being a victim of crime. (60) Secondly, he feels their problems have nothing to do with him, and that he is powerless to do anything to help. It is a junior planner who tries to convince him otherwise. It is perhaps significant that it is a *junior* planner, someone who may have grown up in the "new" South Africa, who is the one who seems to have more understanding about the plight of poor black people and what they need.

The planner's advice is, however, ambiguous. On the one hand, the planner advises Egan to "listen to people" as "[i]t gave the residents the feeling that their problems were being taken seriously and it gave councillors a chance to lend a sympathetic ear". (61) While this could seem to provide an opportunity for solutions to the problems to be forged, the way the planner phrases it also implies that "listening to people" is more a part of empty political posturing than a part of systemised helping and compassion. (61) The residents only have the "feeling" that their problems are taken seriously. Whilst I

have shown that "feeling" is a kind of knowledge, in public discourse "feelings" are understood as interfering with knowledge. The people therefore do not know absolutely that their problems are being taken seriously, but rather only feel that they are, implying that they are only being duped into believing the system cares. The councillors are also giving only a "sympathetic ear" which is easy to do and ineffective if it is not followed by sympathetic or compassionate action. (61) As Suzanne Keen shows in her book, *Empathy and the Novel*, empathy and sympathy are feelings that all too often do not extend to resulting action. The planner continues by saying that listening could "be of advantage" to Egan's company, "Egan, Gessing and Malan, Sanitary Engineering Consultants". (61) When Egan is still unimpressed, the planner tells him it will be "doing your bit for reconciliation" (62) which is, Egan believes, "a conversation stopper". (62) As a previously-advantaged white man, Egan feels the pressure of the expectation of reconciliation and he knows he cannot argue against "listening", however superficially, if it is associated with an effort to undo the wrongs of the past. That the junior planner advises him to engage in this false echo of conciliatory action could mean that he does not expect Egan to care about people's feelings and so has to appeal to him to appear to care. Alternatively, the planner could himself be so well-versed in the double-speak of post-apartheid relations that this sham has in fact become the only reconciliatory process.

The feeling that the whole exercise is a sham haunts Egan. At the end of the day of his real life encounter with underprivileged black citizens, he feels like it was an exercise in "cheap publicity" that he has to shake off, rather than an engagement in real helping. (94) Like Budlender, Egan is cynical about the reconciliation process and the new dispensation. There has been a change in rhetoric, but no change of heart. The "townships" may no longer have the name (61), but they are still places that receive sub-standard services.

Egan's real-life encounter begins with a close examination of one of the brand new RDP houses. A resident of Hani View, a Mrs. Ntlaka, compels him and his colleague from the town council, Milton Mazibuko to come and look at her house. The house itself is a kind of symbol of the shaky foundations on which the "new" South Africa has been built. The first thing he notices is that "[t]here was a crack through the wall of the house

so wide he could see through it. It started in the foundations, at the bottom of the doorframe, ran up to the left-hand corner of the lintel, and zigzagged to the rafters". (63) He also notices that "the overhang was too slight" and that "there were no gutters", meaning that they would "have trouble with the rainwater sooner or later". (63) Inside, the ceiling generates a "storm of dust" (65) and the "toilet was too high. Instead of being set straight into the floor, the bowl had been elevated on a cement plinth". (68)

These sights clearly disturb him subconsciously, as he dreams about the problems he has seen whilst taking a nap at the hotel that afternoon. In the dream, he is playing with his son, Nicholas. They are playing with "coloured plastic rings that had to be fitted over a peg to form a cone". (76) These dream rings are all problems South Africa has:

> It was just a plastic ring. And yet it was also the 48 per cent of South Africans who lived below the poverty line. Not an image then, not a symbol, not even an idea. The thing itself, somehow, the poverty. But that was also just a word, and this was just a piece of plastic, a coloured quoit. (77)

Other rings are "40 per cent of South Africans who had access to running water", "the 19 per cent who were HIV positive" and the "35 per cent who had access to telephones". (77) Egan's experience with these numbers illustrates the purpose of such statistics but also their inadequacies at bringing to life the real experience. Egan is younger and more eager to engage with others than Budlender is, and so his relationship to the statistics is more involved. His subconscious grapples with these numbers because he has come into contact with a real member of the underprivileged statistic. Up until that day, his concept of poverty has been about as real as a plastic ring or a part of a pie chart. He may have pored over plans for these townships, but he "had never set foot on site". (53) Not only has he never before set foot on site, but like the architects who are working on new projects, "this is the first encounter with previously disenfranchised clients as citizens". (le Roux, 354) This is why when Egan thinks of a township, he thinks of "barefoot street children, barbers with oilcan chairs, coat-hanger hawkers, scrap-metal merchants with super-market trolleys full of stolen manhole covers". (74) What Egan is thinking of are black people who live in poverty outside of the townships and RDP

housing. They are the kind of people that Budlender and Duffy see at traffic lights in wealthy areas, not black citizens in black neighbourhoods where the majority of the population live out their lives. Now that he has just seen the poverty in the neighbourhood itself, first-hand, he realises that people living in poverty and poverty as a distant concept are two different things.

Egan sympathises with people who suffer from his theoretical, distant understanding of poverty but when he is faced with real people living in poverty in Hani View his sympathy fails spectacularly. Shane Graham explains that

> Egan's lack of empathy for the plight of the people who must live in the houses he helps build is symptomatic of a mindset that regards the country's housing shortage as an abstract policy problem to be addressed by bureaucratic social engineering, with scarcely more regard for the needs of residents than was shown by the apartheid policies that created the housing crisis in the first place. (233)

The embodiment of that "bureaucratic social engineering" (233) is Milton Mazibuko, the "council official in charge of housing subsidies and deed registration". (52, *The Exploded View*) Like many of his wealthy, corrupt contemporaries, he wears a "watchstrap like a manacle" as a symbol of his power and wealth. (52) Egan does look to Mazibuko, not only to solve the problems with the housing, but also for emotional and social cues in this unfamiliar environment. Mazibuko has already been drinking (although it is still morning and he is technically still at work) (65) and he is "tolerantly amused" by Mrs. Ntlaka and her problems (61), although outwardly he fixes "a concerned frown to his face". (67) In part, Egan lacks empathy because he has been affected by Mazibuko's lack of empathy.

Egan's dream would indicate, however, that he does feel something for the people he meets and that he is not lacking empathy completely. It is more, perhaps, that the sights he sees, and their discrepancy from what he expects overwhelm him, and he responds to the situation with a straight-forward, mocking laughter designed to alienate himself from his own more confused feelings.

Even though he sees the terrible state of Mrs. Ntlaka's house, he laughs at the way she keeps repeating the word "fucked" to describe it, saying "[s]he clearly had no sense of the power of the expletive". (66) It is rather clearer that Egan has no idea how awful it would be to live in such a house. Mrs. Ntlaka also has constant proof that she has been "fucked" by a system that was supposed to help her so she does understand the power of the expletive and is using it exhaustively to describe her own situation.

Egan is further alienated by her large size, and keeps inwardly berating her for being so angry about the state of her house:

> If she's so hard done by, so deprived, why the hell is she so fat? Hasn't it occurred to her that she's too big for the house? Isn't it better than living in a shack anyway? Does she need reminding what a really fucked structure looks like? He should give her the talk about counting her blessings, about losing some weight. (67)

To his credit, Egan does realise his thoughts are "unreasonable" (67) but when he calls his wife that afternoon, it is the "unreasonable" comments he repeats. He also complains that he is being left out of Mazibuko's plans, not that he has just seen worrying evidence that poor people are being shockingly neglected. (71)

For despite Egan's simmering resentment towards Mazibuko and his well-heeled ilk and his inability to socialise with black people, he simultaneously desperately longs to be able to do so. He wants to be included in Mazibuko's circle and by implication, the processes happening in the new South Africa. He began trying to get involved years ago by working "with a black architect on a low-cost development in Cape Town". (73) Egan explains proudly that this "was quite unusual in those days, practically unheard of". (73)

When he meets the men for supper later that night he wears a "Madiba shirt", (75) trying to look the part of a "new South African" by wearing clothes made famous by its symbol, even as Egan realises it is a "dated" concept. (81) When he orders, he avoids ordering LM (Lourenco Marques) prawns because it "smacked of colonialism" (80) and orders instead what the men tell him to order: beef with an "Afritude" sauce. His

happiest moment in the day comes when he feels that "he, Egan, and the five black men, an equal among equals" have a "special status" (84):

> They represented something important. They were the only racially mixed party in the place. Glancing around at other tables, at the pale Danes and Poms, taking a quick census, he felt weirdly proud of himself. He was part of the new order, that part of it that did not need to be labelled "new". It even tickled him that he might be part of an "arrangement" of some kind, something vaguely disreputable". (84)

Egan's euphoric feeling of being part of a group is perhaps similar to the feeling he has when he originally shakes hands with the men. He describes it as being like a "schoolboy playing at being a spy". (65) Egan clearly imagines himself and his actions as having as few consequences as they would have had in a schoolboy's games. It is amusing, he thinks, to be part of something "disreputable", forgetting that by his silence he is aiding corruption which is built on exploitation of the poor. (84) His feeling of involvement is short-lived, however, and soon the men leave him out altogether, and Egan is left to amuse himself by looking at the decor (assembled by the protagonist of the next story, "Curiouser"). This material environment reminds him of the people he encountered during the day. This is because the wall is covered with African masks that make him feel as though "[he and the five men] were in a glass house, feasting, while the hordes outside pressed their hungry faces to the walls". (91) Despite being in an affluent, African-kitsch environment, the objects bring him paradoxically to remember others because he has suppressed his guilt and helplessness.

Back in his hotel room, he feels emotionally and physically exhausted by the strain of the day and of overreaching himself to maintain the required managed emotions. He still feels like he carries the residue of the talcum powder Mrs. Ntlaka wears and the spices from the supper he eats with the five men. (49, 93-94) He cannot even hide from the evidence of others in the relative privacy of his hotel room because he is assaulted at this point by more people, albeit indirectly. He comes across a complaints form that has been filled in by the previous guest and whilst reading about the many problems with

the hotel room (malfunctioning shower, tired decor and worn bedclothes) he comes to an awareness of the number of people with whom he shares the room:

> Suddenly he wished he had slippers. He should put on his socks, at least, to avoid the sticky prickle of the fibres on his bare soles...At the thought of all the strangers who had passed through this cramped space, breathing, dripping, shedding skin, spilling fluids, his stomach tightened. Involuntarily, he put his hand over his mouth. (96-97)

Egan has come to an uncomfortable awareness of how much people in cities share involuntarily. Once again, however, he is setting himself apart: others have left their mark on the room, but he too is "breathing, dripping, shedding skin" and "spilling fluids" in the hotel room. (97) He watches *Raging Bull* instead of finishing the complaints form, perhaps hoping it will distract him from his epiphany, but it brings more physical awareness:

> A skinnier Robert de Niro was having the crap beaten out of him now, sweat sprayed off his battered head, cursive exclamations of blood and saliva trailed from his broken mouth. Egan drew his knees up protectively and cupped his hands between his legs. Even without the sound, he could hear fists thudding on flesh and bone. (98)

While Egan's mind sets himself apart, Egan's body connects him to others by reacting to the figure on the screen. In fact, he is reacting much as Adam Smith expects one to react when witnessing a blow: "When we see a stroke aimed and just ready to fall upon the leg or arm of another person, we naturally shrink and draw back our own leg or our own arm; and when it does fall, we feel it in some measure, and are hurt by it as well as the sufferer". (Smith, 98-101)

Egan has been deeply affected by what he has seen during the day. As he is unprepared to connect with others affectively and they are unprepared (or unwilling) to connect with him, none of them are able to have relationships that are sympathetic to each other's needs or the needs of the community as a whole. Everyone is impoverished

as a result. The four men have not forged any long-standing connections that will enable them to better the community they represent; the people at Hani View are robbed of any agency and are therefore left to nurse their discontent; and Egan is left feeling not joy at increased understanding and connection, but over-exposed to others' affects and emotions, and exhausted by the knowledge of the teeming humanity and their needs. In "Afritude Sauce", compassion is an ugly feeling: frustrating, alienating and exhausting. By restricting the reader to Egan's own mindset, this reader is left feeling helplessly compassionate towards Egan. Helpless compassion, in this context, is frustrating for its lack of catharsis. In addition, the restricted viewpoint means that the reader struggles to see a bigger picture than that of the hapless protagonist.

**"Curiouser"**

Teeming humanity is also on the mind of Simeon Majara, artist and protagonist of the next story, "Curiouser". Art, Majara's in the case of this story, is a powerful example of the way inanimate objects provoke affects and emotions. "Curiouser" is different from the other stories in the collection for several reasons. Firstly, it is about an artist and the process of making art: specifically art that draws attention to atrocities. In this way, Vladislavić is able to explore Majara's relationship to his subjects, and the techniques he uses to get the viewers of his art to think about them in a different way, or perhaps just to think about them at all (as Egan does when he sees Majara's walls in "Afritude Sauce"). Secondly, Majara is a black artist, and while Vladislavić explains that Majara is not particularly defined by his race (Miller, 219), his race does differentiate him from both from his peers and from the other three protagonists of *The Exploded View*. Shane Graham explains that as he is a "successful black artist, Majara struggles not with the linguistic multiplicity of the country, but rather with his own position of privilege in the midst of a continent full of poverty". (Graham, 234) Majara may not struggle with race relations, but that does not mean he does not carry a burden of helpless guilt at his own wealth and privilege.

Majara has created an entire series of installation artworks about genocide, named simply, *Genocide I, II and III* about the Holocaust, Ahmici and Rwanda respectively.

People find them very moving because they "made you painfully aware that you were corporeal and mortal". (104) Their elements are simple: ashes and soot for *Genocide I*, bone "ground and splintered" for *Genocide II* and dust for *Genocide III*:

> People became aware of it sometimes in the soft lisp of their soles on the gallery floor, or hours later, when they were back in the full colour world, in a white smudge on the sleeve of a jacket, as if a soul expiring there had left behind this soap-bubble residue. (104)

For Vladislavić, physical touch and the remembrance of one's own vulnerability and mortality is, as I have already explored, an important part of being able to have compassion and sympathy. Actually coming away with physical reminders of the artworks imprinted on the body or clothing is an unnerving and moving experience. Majara's choice of the words, "a soul" rather than "souls" is also significant, for as Gerald Gaylard notes, "The point here is that if individuals are no longer seen as such but as mere numbers in an inventory, or otherwise as mere parts of a whole, then virtually anything can be justified in relation to them". (Gaylard, 69, "Death of the subject?") Majara's art could seem to work in direct contrast to Egan's or Budlender's statistics. Getting people to think about victims of the atrocities as individual souls rather than one distant morass of faceless dead could, in theory, hinder future atrocities. In practise, however, his artworks are simply another way of thinking of others as less than fully human, except that rather than being "dots" on a graph, they are insubstantial "dreams" that have no real impact on our capacity to "see one another as fully human". (Nussbaum, xiii, *Poetic Justice*)

This is clear because Majara himself begins to think of the genocides as raw material for his art rather than as testaments to terrible suffering. "Excess. He splashed the concept around in his mind. Style? If you had one of anything, it was simply an object; if you had three it was design; if you had three hundred it was a work of art. On a large enough scale, with sufficient repetition, everything became conceptual, whether you were talking about art or murder". (134) He may call his genocide artworks his "stock-in-trade" in jest (103), but in truth that is exactly what they are. His artworks are not

monuments, but products with "price tags". (117) Majara knows this, as he acknowledges an uncomfortable affinity with a tourist he meets on the bus ride to Nyanza. Henk from Groningen "had done the concentration camps in his own backyard (Auschwitz, he said, was still the must-see), the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh and a five day drive along the Trail of Tears. This was his first African visit, but South Africa was next on his list". (105) Henk has turned going to see the sights of terrible atrocities into a process of consumption. Majara

> could not bring himself to say he was an artist. The idea made him queasy. It suggested an intolerable common purpose with his fellow traveller, whose bony knee was rubbing against his own. (105)

Despite Majara's reluctance to be associated with Henk in any way, Majara acts as the most destructive of tourists, robbing the site of an abandoned Rwandan hospital of bandages for souvenirs. (111) He then uses them to make shrouds that feature prominently in *Genocide III*, and it is the fine dust from these bandages that leaves the imprint on visitors to his exhibition. The reader is told, however, that Majara "felt no guilt about the theft. He did not even think of it in those terms". (112) On the contrary, Majara gives the impression that he believes they were left there for him: "what he had come for". (111) If Majara, "does not even think of it" as theft, then it must be the implied author himself who views it that way. The reader, therefore, is also being invited to think of it in these terms and to wonder why Majara does not. In this situation, compassion for such an act would be inappropriate as it springs only from harmful self-interest.

Majara's disassociation from *Genocide III*'s objects and their questionable provenance becomes a common feature of his relationship to both the subject matter of the artworks and the materials that constitute them. Unlike Budlender and Egan, Majara has had to think about where what he consumes comes from. Towards the end of the story, he describes an experience he had with a "Marxist firebrand" at university that made him think about the means of production for the first time. (147) Majara remembers being positively overwhelmed by the realisation but now he thinks it is

"strange that such an obvious perspective – one could hardly call it an insight – had struck him with the force of revelation". (149) He is dismissive of the "revelation" in hindsight, but many people never imagine, let alone see, the "reality rooted in a system of human sweat and desperate poverty" that lies beyond the product that "glitters and appears to float unencumbered in the air". (Graham, 58)

It is therefore doubly disturbing that Majara seems particularly uninterested in where his own products come from. He has used similarly nefarious means to acquire the materials for *Curiouser*. After trying to buy curios in bulk, he finally buys a consignment from a questionable curio seller named Roger who tells him it once belonged to another curio seller, Victor, who was unfortunately murdered. (128) Majara accepts the story at face value despite what he must suspect about their origins. He then proceeds to make artworks that do "violence" to the "ordinary clutter" that is the curio. (120) Through this "violence", he is able to make the viewers of his art frightened into new awarenesses of the curio and what it represents, but Majara himself maintains a distance from his artworks in the most fundamental way.

Shane Graham speculates that Majara is not uninterested in where the products come from: "Majara's reluctance to acknowledge these complex webs of work that underlie even the simple carved wooden animals he deconstructs in his work suggests a kind of postmodern existential despair, perhaps rooted in the consuming subject's alienation from both his or her own labour and the products of consumption". (Graham, 60) Instead, he has to think of the products as "a single element, as raw material" because it "suited him". (144) This is different to the bandages that Majara deliberately steals and uses for his own advantage.

One of the guests at Majara's *Curiouser* closing party, Amy, takes him to task for what he does to the wooden curios because of their relation to the people who make the curios originally, saying that "they would care very much" about the prices Majara gets for artwork that is arguably little more skilfully put together than the curios themselves. (145) Once again the reader becomes aware of the human element behind the objects: "she dropped her hand onto the mask and ran the tip of her middle finger along the ridged surface of its lips. In this tender gesture a human being became visible, a man with a chisel and a mallet". (144) Seeing the objects through her eyes, even Majara is

forced into a reluctant awareness of the human beings behind the artwork: "by invoking the makers, the hands and eyes behind these things, she was changing them subtly, and it irritated him". (144)

This irritation is fuelled by his having his careful disassociation disrupted, but it is also because Amy questions the validity of his art and its role in the subjection of poor people. He lashes back at her in his thoughts, ruthlessly categorising her:

> He knew the type. They drove to their televised protests in snappy little cars, they took their djembe drums on board as hand luggage, they gazed upon exploitation and oppression through their Police sunglasses. And all along their radicalism consisted in making manifest the impossibility of change. (149)

Categorisation, as with Tearle and Budlender, indicates that Majara is distancing himself from Amy and those like her. As has been consistent with Majara, however, he is unable to fool himself into imagining himself as completely exempt from their "type". While watching television, he sees soldiers in the Congo shooting at an unarmed man on television, "firing with casual gestures, taking potshots, like children playing at war". A "wick of rage sputter[s]" in his mind (152) and he imagines taking out his pistol and shooting wildly round the garden. This rage is in part a result of Amy's criticisms and the subtle insults an artist rival, Leon, has been directing at him all evening, but it is also a result of his own feeling of absolute helplessness (a kind of "ugly compassion") in the face of such desperate cruelty and need. In his comfortable house and increasingly successful "industry" (125), Majara feels as helpless and overwhelmed as Egan after a day in Hani View, or as Amy, "gazing upon exploitation and oppression through [her] police sunglasses". (149) While he cannot take action to solve some of Africa's problems (an over-abundance of sweatshops and bloody wars among them), his sudden wish to brandish his pistol is a possible outlet for his frustration.

Where his desperate and aimless need to do something is finally channelled, however, is into his art. This time, he imagines an evocation of what people do to each other when they murder and is already naming his new projects *Crime Scene I*, *II* and *III*:

> A room full of death masks, dangling from the ceiling on fishing line – the average man is 1.75 metres, the average woman 1.63 – so that the height alone invites you to press your face into the smoky hollow. The eyes are shaped like keyholes and television screens. (154)

This artwork forces people to look through the victims' eyes, to place themselves in their shoes literally, rather than at the remove of the television screen or metaphorical keyhole. That he is using the African masks also foregrounds black, African victims of crime rather than white victims who are more frequently profiled by the media. For Majara, and also for the reader, it could also symbolise individual victims of crime, like Victor the curio seller, about whose death (whether real or made up to facilitate a quick sale), Majara cannot bear to hear. (128)

Majara tries to help by using his art to make people aware of others' corporeality. His egoism is tempered by his acknowledged feelings of doubt about the validity of his art: "How were you to judge whether the voice you heard was a deeper meaning, whispering its secrets, or merely the distorted echo of your own babble?" (124) His uncertainty stems from his admission of self-reflecting "false empathy", a process in which one projects one's own feelings onto someone or something else instead of empathising with what they are feeling. (Keen, 159) Although he is also a victim of consumer-driven fantasies, Majara is more aware of the processes of consumerism and everyday life than the other two characters. This awareness, however, never translates into action and his helpless fury is a result of his own sense of restricted agency. This chapter makes clear that when feeling compassion, "full awareness of the structural injustices that still persist, and knowing the historic origins of these injustices" (McKaiser, 61) are not sufficient in themselves in order to effect positive change.

**"Crocodile Lodge"**

Gordon Duffy shares Majara's sophisticated awareness of the material world. "Crocodile Lodge" circles back to the roads and landscape of instant community housing estates in Midrand. This time, the landscape is not a Tuscan estate, but an African one, "Crocodile

Lodge", for which Duffy has erected the billboard. This is the epitome of much meaning-making in the new South Africa: "a self-contained little world in the African style, surrounded by electrified fences, rising from the African veld". (177, *The Exploded View*) There are many "self-contained little world[s]", in which "Africa" is reduced to a voguish style.

Like Majara, Gordon Duffy seems particularly aware of objects and their power to invoke different people and atmospheres. Unlike Majara, his interest in objects leans more towards the mechanical and the everyday. He is also therefore aware of the finitude of the material world, and the ecological consequences of over-consumption. When a 4x4 cuts his car off in the traffic, he complains that while they are "hard bodies, according to the advertising…they looked milk-fed and soft with their puppy-fat fenders and bumpers like dodgem cars". (161) Whilst this is partly a mild form of road rage springing from the fact that Duffy is stuck in a traffic jam, it is also another symptom of what Duffy will come to call "the true image of our times: the bedridden obese". (193) Duffy is sensitive to the environmental cost of conspicuous consumption. Needlessly large cars guzzle fuel and emit more harmful carbon dioxide than most other cars and the large numbers of obese and overweight people are as much a stress on resources as over-population. (Walpole et al)

Not only is he aware of objects' effects on the natural environment, he is also aware of the human cost and chain of production that so haunts Majara. Where Budlender sees only "junk" (4), Duffy is aware of the probable origins of the traffic light hawkers' products and how these origins infuse the object:

> A balsa wood schooner, swept up in a black boy's hands, came sailing through the Highveld air. From a distance there was an illusion of intricacy and craft; from close up it was shoddily made, stuck together with staples and glue. A slave ship, mass-produced, he supposed, by children in a sweatshop somewhere in Hong Kong or Karachi or Doornfontein. (162)

The wooden ship is simply an ordinary "balsa wood schooner", but Duffy sees it as a "slave ship" because of the appalling conditions and low pay of the workers who made

the ship. Duffy is much more matter-of-fact about the process than Majara, as this is no more than a passing thought. He is quickly distracted by the beggar who has "a sign round his neck – Keep South Africa Beautiful: Give Me Your Litter – holding out a waste-paper basket in one hand and cupping the other for a tip". (162-163) The beggar is playing on the common phrase used in marketing campaigns at the time to encourage people to stop littering and, by extension, help the environment. Perhaps Duffy would rather not dwell on the "ugly feelings" of compassion when faced with the "slave ship" (162) because a litter campaign is more manageable than changing a corrupt system.

Duffy's sensitivity to objects is partly the result of his childhood fascination with 1950's copies of *Popular Mechanics*, which are filled with "an endless series of improvisations on the material world". (173) In this way, Duffy was inculcated into various, airbrushed worlds of material objects. Of the four protagonists, Duffy is the one who gives the most explicit explanation of why people live half in the world of advertising. Duffy admits the attraction is twofold: he loves the exploded view that is used to display all the pieces and the "light falling benevolently on every surface, aglow with prosperity and happiness". (175)

The "exploded view" is one in which nothing is extraneous. As Michael Titlestad explains,

> The detailed precision of the exploded view reveals a world of planning, order, proportion and precise combination. It is a view in which the plan of the real is revealed; in which everything is waiting to be put in its place, nothing is lacking and in which every element is essential to the integrity of the assembly. For the young Duffy this Utopian dream of the harmony of parts is expressed as "America" and it is for this imagined homeland that he longs. (Titlestad, 18)

Duffy wanted to grow up to be an engineer from *Popular Mechanics*. He explains how he wanted to "wear these chiselled features, clench this square jaw and narrow these appraising eyes. I want crisp waves carved into my hair, as hard and smooth as scrolled maple". (172) This is the solidity and masculinity of a figure who has a clearly-defined

and well-respected place in society because (according to the imagery of the advertising at any rate) a *Popular Mechanics* engineer is someone who is integral to the building of society and its betterment. Instead, Duffy has grown up to be a billboard contractor. He has to convince companies that his services are necessary, that he could do "a better, cheaper job" than they could of erecting one. (173) He does not help build bridges or contribute towards a home; he puts up "inexpensive structures with a limited lifespan". (173) Duffy's experience of life has been directly contrary to one typified by an "exploded view". His life's work is not "essential to the integrity" of any assembly (Titlestad, 18) and it is likely he feels, on a subconscious level, extraneous. Like Budlender, Duffy is also seeking a narrative and community that will give him purpose.

As I detailed in my introduction, advertising worlds create spaces in which every person has their own place in life, and that this place is "aglow with prosperity and happiness". (175) In many ways, this kind of advertising had its beginnings in 1950's American advertising and the rise of television. The world of *Popular Mechanics* 1950's advertising (like that of 1950's television) portrayed

> a wonderfully anti-septic world of idealised homes in an idealised, unflawed America. There were no economic crises, no class divisions or resentments, no ethnic tensions, few if any hyphenated Americans, few if any minority characters. Indeed there were no intrusions from other cultures. (Halberstam, 508)

Everything fits together and has its place in this white world. It is populated by "warm-hearted, sensitive, tolerant Americans" and is "devoid of anger and meanness of spirit and, of course, failure". (Halberstam, 514) This (white) American ideal has been fundamental to its definition from the time of Thomas Jefferson:

> Jefferson never elaborated on what he meant by "the pursuit of happiness,"...but given his lifelong obsession with the improvement of convenience and comfort, it seems reasonable to infer that he believed their successful pursuit would result in happiness. (Crowley, 90)

Mrs. Ntlaka's uncomfortable house is what emphasises the lingering inequality in South Africa, and is posited as a sign of her unhappiness. As John Crowley goes on to explain, however, Jefferson's ideal (and that of the American way) is based on unattainable wishes. The characters all, to differing degrees, discover this for themselves.

Duffy loves this 1950's airbrushed, advertising world, and he acknowledges that "some people…will find the same pangs awakened by Crocodile Lodge". (175) Yet he dislikes the similarly airbrushed conspicuous consumption and the contemporary trappings of advertising worlds come to life about him. When he visits his wife's Health and Racquet Club, he compares the "exercise junkies" to a "bunch of old socks". (166) His view of the "European" and "African" housing complexes is similarly sceptical, as he calls them "Stage sets on which to dramatise work and leisure". (177)

Perhaps it is because his "painful longing" for "containment" was for a place that he knew was "impossibly distant and unreal". (175) They were clearly an "artist's impression" (187): advertising acknowledging its own "unreal[ity]". (175) In addition, the objects in 1950's *Popular Mechanics* magazines were "made in the USA". (4, Anon) They are "gleaming with old-fashioned optimism" and their "inner workings [are] laid bare, frankly and practically, as the product of enterprise and effort". (170) This world of objects conveys dreams of a future where every American citizen can pursue their happiness in the style of Thomas Jefferson if only they put in enough "enterprise and effort". (170) The optimism is a patriotic one that wishes to better the quality of life, at least for all white citizens.

Now, however, "the fanciful images were practically indistinguishable from the photographically real, were more vividly convincing in fact than the ordinary world". (187) The Crocodile Lodge billboard itself has "a printed sky redder and hotter, more full of blood and gamy juices than the ash-grey heavens behind the screen, the fading backdrop of reality". (187) This ideal world has not been created with the "enterprise and effort" (170) of its occupants or by the country's citizens, however, but like the "slave ship" has been "mass-produced", piece by piece, "by children in a sweatshop somewhere in Hong Kong or Karachi or Doornfontein". (162) Indeed, these housing complexes and lifestyles are not purely optimistic projections of a better future, but also fortresses of what Achille Mbembe calls "traumatic amnesia" (374): both of the

provenance of the objects they live in and own, and what literally surrounds them outside the boundaries of their "electrified fences". (177, *The Exploded View*)

The final show-down between Duffy and the four identical men seems, while violent, to be a fulfilment of Duffy's subconscious longings. Apart from Vladislavić's own assertion that it is "not to be taken as literal" (Miller, 218), the cinematic, fictional quality of the episode is foregrounded by the description preceding the incident: "the headlights threw his shadow over Crocodile Lodge, the enormous grey blur of his head, and it reminded him of the irritating disruption of fantasy that occurs when a careless operator passes his hand in front of the lens of a projection room". (195)

His longing for the narrative of America's consistency and familiarity is fulfilled by his enactment of that archetypical American film narrative: a "Wild West Showdown" in which "the little guy" stands up "to the jocks". (Vladislavić as cited by Miller, 218) He can see a "reason" for his life: "he had been given a chance to demonstrate something to these men, to himself". (200, *The Exploded View*) It also grants him some of the hyper-masculine identity he always hankered after, both in his *Popular Mechanics* alter-ego and in his prematurely ended boxing career that has returned to haunt him in dreams since childhood. He has only recently beaten his dream-opponent, and it "left him feeling strangely dissatisfied". (168) When he is surrounded by these men, "They struck out, as if they were driving nails into him, and with every blow he felt more like himself". (201) In his narrative, Duffy is becoming part of a community of heroes and underdogs by being beaten up and therefore being touched by others in one of the most fundamental, albeit violent, ways.

The problems that hover on the edge of Duffy's consciousness and permeate his life in unexpected, affective ways are often the result of feeling alienated from the world around him and yearning instead for an imaginary American homeland in which everyone has equal opportunities at the "pursuit of happiness". That Duffy acknowledges that this utopia is imaginary is important, as it enables him to draw on the imaginary homeland for comfort rather than live half within it. The objects with which Duffy works help him to understand the world better, not immure him against it. Vladislavić's reading of the wealthy members of Johannesburg's population is insightful rather than damning. He shows that people move into these citadels seeking utopian

spaces in which everyone is fulfilled and prosperous. In this way, they are living the life that the poorest of the population, like Mrs. Ntlaka, would want to live.

What is also evident from the ecological concern that hovers on the edges of Duffy's consciousness, however, is that for everyone to live these opulent lives is not only impossible in the capitalist system but unsustainable on a finite planet. In this section, as with others, frustrated compassion is not limited to the fate of people, but to the fate of the ecosystem of the planet.

**Conclusion:**

In *The Exploded View*, Vladislavić examines the interplay of affects between human and non-human objects in South African society. What becomes clear from the four protagonists is that while they are frequently concerned with their inability to connect with others and with the problems of the world, they are seldom moved to act compassionately or empathetically to effect change, either in their interpersonal relationships or in society at large. A landscape that is hostile to touch and proximity and rich in amnesic fantasies facilitated by the consumerist paradise cannot facilitate meaningful interaction or compassion. On the contrary, its citizens are more likely to "not connect, sympathise or recognise an obligation to the sufferer; to refuse engagement with the scene or to minimise its effects". (Berlant, 9) As I have shown however, this does not necessarily mean that they "go on blithely without conscience" (9), but that the interconnected longings for touch and compassionate empathy manifest in unusual ways.

In Budlender, it manifests in his longing to be involved with the commodity-possessed Iris and her equally commodified community lifestyle. Egan longs to be accepted by the interracial South African society he thinks he sees but cannot reconcile the real interracial society with his airbrushed version of it. Neither can the black men with whom he spends time find it in themselves to engage with him or help others. Majara makes art that foregrounds the suffering of others, even while he escapes full acknowledgement of it through a preoccupation with himself as a commodity. Duffy's object utopia is redolent of an interpersonal utopia in which everyone has plenty of

material goods and an emotional prosperity which would negate the need for compassion.

In my next chapter, I shall explore *Portrait with Keys*, in which the protagonist, Vlad finds a way to work around the South African social order and see and act compassionately. Unlike Tearle, Budlender, Egan, Majara and Duffy, Vlad works actively and intelligently towards bringing his compassion into a more effective affective dimension.

## Chapter Four: *Portrait with Keys: Jo'burg and what-what*

> the important thing was proximity. You had to be close together. You had to feel the shoulder of the person beside you against your own. That gentle pressure on the body is the sense of belonging. (Vladislavić, 178, *Portrait with Keys*)

*Portrait with Keys: Jo'burg & what-what* is a radically different text from the previous two, and yet it could also be argued that it is a "kind of sequel" to them. (Vladislavić as cited by Steyn, *The White Review*) It covers territory seldom explored in South African literature: interaction and ways of forming communities in the everyday and mundane of Johannesburg life. While this unusual focus has been the heart of the previous two texts, in *Portrait with Keys*, the subject matter is framed as fragmentary, autobiographical, non-fictional literature. Unlike the previous texts, therefore, it is not only a study of certain harmful or uninformed attitudes (however compassionately portrayed) towards others in the city, as with those of Aubrey Tearle in *The Restless Supermarket* or the four protagonists in *The Exploded View* respectively. It is, rather, a study of something very close to the author's compassionate way of seeing and being in the city. This way of seeing is generous because it is willing to make connections and acknowledge interdependencies. It is sensitive, nuanced and humble rather than self-righteous, but in a non-traditional way and it results in a "strong, active" tolerance that "requires work". (Vladislavić as cited by Marais and Backström, 174) Vladislavić, therefore, writes a text not just about Johannesburg, but of a way of seeing Johannesburg. By arranging this text in an unusual way, Vladislavić enables the sensitive reader to consider more compassionate ways of viewing others in everyday, divisive, post-apartheid South Africa.

## *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*: Vlad as compassionate narrator of the everyday

> the ordinary daily lives of people should be the direct focus of political interest because they constitute the very content of the struggle [which] involves people not abstractions. If it is a new society we seek to bring about in South Africa, then that newness will be based on a direct concern with the way people actually live. (Ndebele, 55)

Ostensibly, *Portrait with Keys: Joburg and what-what* is about just that: Johannesburg and the various "what-what" that Vladislavić wishes to relate to the reader through his almost auto-biographical narrator, Vlad. Vlad is and is not Vladislavić. The two share histories and memories, and so Vlad is a version of Vladislavić himself. There is also a disjuncture between what Vlad is saying and what Vladislavić is using Vlad to say. It seems to this reader that Vladislavić uses Vlad as a "pentimento", showing the places where he "'repented' or changed his mind" about things. (92) Vlad explains that Lilian Hellman thought that this word aptly described the writing of a memoir because "The appearance of the original conception and the second thought, superimposed within the same frame, is a 'way of seeing and then seeing again'". (92) Vlad is, therefore, a little more naive and wondering than Vladislavić. He retains more misconceptions about the world around him and Vladislavić can therefore use Vlad as a figure who orientates the reader and enables them to have realisations about others along with him. Vlad's flaws in understanding are acknowledged unflinchingly but gently, and the compassion that Vladislavić extends to Vlad is similar to the tenderness that Vlad extends to others. In this way, Vlad is the antithesis to Aubrey Tearle whose antipathy to everyone else springs from a deep self-loathing and insecurity. Like Tearle, Vlad walks around Johannesburg and like Tearle, he is fascinated by the changes and the grammatical improvisations on shop signs. Unlike Tearle, however, he regards them not with bristling, self-righteous judgement but with curiosity and a kind of admiration for the creativity involved.

Even in his naivety, Vlad is far more aware of injustices in South African society, and the history from which these injustices spring than the other characters. As a result, he is more affectively aware of both the minor and major currents that run through his society than all the characters except Majara. He is able to be more creative in the ways he tries to work around a material space that does not facilitate compassionate interaction and, unlike Majara, he chooses to make very different choices about his own artistic practises and his own way of living in the everyday. He does not ignore his complicity in the system and then direct his helpless anger at those closest to him. (152-153, *The Exploded View*) He does what he can to help despite his frustration at his own restricted agency, and never stops seeking for better ways of seeing and being.

*Portrait with Keys* returns the reader to the bipedal realities of Johannesburg experienced by Tearle, yet from the socio-historical perspective of *The Exploded View*. The Johannesburg of *Portrait with Keys* is, therefore, very different from that portrayed in *The Restless Supermarket*, and also from that in *The Exploded View*. As Gaylard explains, "The primary point about this consciousness in the narrator of *Portrait with Keys* is that it is a visceral, lived engagement with physical reality – if *The Exploded View* was about driving the city, then *Portrait with Keys* is about walking the city and noting its effects on the body". (Gaylard, 295, "Migrant Ecology") This project of describing ordinary people may have begun in *The Exploded View* but what is different about *Portrait with Keys* is that rather than being separated from the world around him, as with the four protagonists in *The Exploded View*, Vlad walks the streets and describes the encounters he has with others and with the material world.

Vlad, like Vladislavić, is minutely aware that in "the labyrinthine world of the flesh, actions are endless, their consequences continue to unwind long after their subjects have turned to dust". (Vladislavić, 67, *The Loss Library*) Vlad knows that the choices he makes will affect the world around him just as much as the world around him affects him. This awareness of each person's unique physical way of being in the world is evoked in the second "episode" of *Portrait with Keys* in which Vlad writes about the "skin of the earth": "the complexity of cities, the flows of traffic across ever-changing grids, coupled with the peculiarities of physical address, occupations, interests and needs, produces for each one of us a particular pattern of familiar or habitual movement

over the skin of the earth, which if we could see it from a vantage point in the sky, would appear as unique as a fingerprint". (12) Later in the text, he will write about the "weather's thumb" that "crushes stone to gravel and rubs wood down to grain". (189) Vlad evokes a kind of universalising Gaia metaphor by writing about the earth as having a skin and a shaping thumb. The earth can shape us and our man-made environments just as it shapes stone and wood. By personifying the earth and choosing an element that every single person has in common (skin), he is also, albeit indirectly, extending the reader's concern to the state of the earth as well as the state of other people.

The marginal, unspectacular observations of the walking subject in *Portrait with Keys* do have predecessors in the European sketches of Walter Benjamin, Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* and Charles Dickens's early journalistic pieces, *Sketches by Boz*. Like these texts, *Portrait with Keys* is told using socially-aware autobiographical fragments. Like De Certeau, Vladislavić creates an "anthropological" view of the city rather than a geographical or geometrical one. (De Certeau, 93) Like Dickens, there is a humorous touch and, as in Benjamin's writing, the story is told from the perspective of a culturally sophisticated city walker, known as a "flâneur". As Jane Poyner warns, however, the comparison of Vlad with a flâneur is "problematic" because the flâneur is "socially aloof", something that cannot be said of Vlad. (Poyner, 319) This is because he is constantly interacting with the people and landscape around him.

Vlad's choices of subject in *Portrait with Keys* are not the major subjects, people or places in Johannesburg. Despite having lived through the Soweto Uprising, the 1994 elections, the 1995 World Cup Rugby and the Millennial New Year's celebrations, it is the more everyday occurrences and celebrations that Vlad mentions. This is not to say that they are not indicative of more wide-reaching national narrative, but the instances he describes are always local and not necessarily generally applicable. Instead of writing about the "new" South African euphoria of the 1995 Rugby World Cup, which is what most people describe as the peak of widespread nineties optimism, he writes about something more local: some people in his neighbourhood painting their wall with Ndebele designs. He explains: "Africa was coming to the suburbs in the nicest possible way". (25) Then, a few years later, they paint over it, sell the house and move elsewhere. The time of optimism had faded.

As he is a high-profile editor, Vladislavić also knows many newsmakers. He does not write about them, but makes Vlad focus on the people he passes and interacts with by chance, and on his own small circle of friends and family. Each person is described with the same even-handed care. In this way, the community of people he describes may be fluid and haphazard, but no one is carelessly passed over. Notable in particular is the way he always takes care to ask and remember the name of whoever is guarding his car or helping him at the till. (121) He knows that "Mannie" owns the Gem Pawn Brokers (62) and that the young security guard who comes to look after their guests' cars is called Bongi. (126) When paying tribute to certain people, he does not extol the virtues of South Africans famous for their compassion or their work, but rather ordinary people for whom he has admiration. He pays tribute to various car guards, so essential to any car-owning individual in a city with a high crime rate. He includes the name tags from two different car guard companies verbatim (38, 76) in the book and in a passage where he has a conversation with one, Vlad makes a point of asking the man's name. (121) This is a stark contrast to Tearle and Egan, the two men who struggle to remember anyone else's name.

He also focuses on Ben Homan, a seventy-five year old builder and handy-man who works on Vlad's house. Vlad admires (and is exasperated by) Ben because he does everything "methodically, precisely and implacably", including the "long-winded, relentless" stories he tells. (120) Ben builds for the utmost safety of all concerned, which means his taps are placed the right way around so that curious toddlers do not scald themselves (184), and walls are built around old trees so that the two live in harmony. (120) One cannot help but remember Mrs. Ntlaka's house in *The Exploded View*, built to fall apart after only a few months. Ben and his implacable practicality is the antithesis to the "throw-away commodity culture obsessed with newness and youth" that is so harmful to the natural world. (Gaylard, 299, ibid)

In addition, a white person walking in Johannesburg is more politically charged and risky in a way that a white person walking in European cities is not. As Poyner explains, "By walking rather than simply driving through the streets of a city notorious for violent crime, Vlad symbolically divests himself of the privilege whiteness bestows and, in what amounts to a reconciliatory gesture, self-consciously inhabits the space of

the other". (Poyner, 321) Moral political philosopher, Joan Tronto writes about taking responsibility for one's own intellectual activities as well as one's physical ones, and situating them "in the context of how they help to confer power". (Tronto, 140-141) By walking his neighbourhood streets and writing about the experiences in the way that he has, Vladislavić is, as Nuttall says, "excavating a kind of cultural potential" (206, "Literary City") but more than that, he is conferring power on the ordinary and neglected rather than the "extremes" which Poyner and Bremner highlight.

Vlad attempts to place himself in a Johannesburg community in ways that none of the other characters I have explored thus far has been capable.

**Vladislavić and compassionate conceptions of community**

> The superficial inducement, the exotic, the picturesque has an effect only on the foreigner. To portray a city, a native must have other, deeper motives... (Benjamin as cited by Szondi, 19)

This is not to say that Vladislavić claims to fit seamlessly into this society of everyday people on the street, nor does he claim to portray an objective or encyclopaedic view of Johannesburg society. He tries to be as honest as possible about what he sees without trying to resolve the contradictions. He may be looking for hope and optimism and be working towards building a community, but that is not to say that he is blinded to his own shortcomings in understanding, the limits of his influence and the severe endemic problems in his corner of the Johannesburg landscape. On the contrary, he frequently feels anachronistic, "aware of my own incongruity, not just of race and class and language, but of predilection, of need". (87) He says that:

> I certainly don't think of my own experience and what I make of it as typical. What would the typical experience of Johannesburg be? Who is a typical Joburger? My supposition, regarding a book like *Portrait with Keys*, is that I am writing about a few corners of a vast, diverse city, a place that is difficult or

> perhaps impossible to imagine whole, that these corners have been summoned by the demands of a particular time and place, and also a particular literary structure, and shaped by my particular moods and interests. (Vladislavić as cited by Steyn, *The White Review*)

Therefore, while the longing for a community and a sense of belonging is potent, it is as Ralph Goodman notes, "a looser concept of community than most". (229) If one were, like Tearle, to expect a seemingly tidy apartheid community or the post-apartheid commodified, amnesiac living spaces of *The Exploded View*'s Iris Du Plooy, one is naturally disappointed. As Michel de Certeau posits:

> Perhaps cities are deteriorating along with the procedures that organised them. But we must be careful here. The ministers of knowledge have always assumed that the whole universe was threatened by the very changes that affected their ideologies and their positions. They transmute the misfortune of their theories into theories of misfortune. (95)

Goodman writes in the same vein when he says, "*Portrait with Keys* is, in large measure, about accelerated changes in the nature of community, with its structures subject to continuous revision, undermining conventional continuity". (Goodman, 230) In *Portrait with Keys*, as in *The Exploded View*, Vladislavić makes the sense of discontinuity in a city the very thing that unites everyone: "By writing so broadly and sympathetically of alienation, Vladislavić allows the variety of alienations to appear, showing that we are all alienated and hence establishing a sense of home". (Gaylard, 292) Vladislavić would, therefore, seem to be echoing the sentiments of Wendy Steiner, who argues that each community must be painstakingly forged, both literally and figuratively "for once we leave behind our childhood we learn there is no such place as home except what we create". (Steiner, 115)

Vladislavić manoeuvres Vlad into acting out this realisation. Vlad writes longingly about Dickens's London, with "'miles upon miles of streets' in which to be lonely and then have 'warm company' at every turn once [the night walker's] loneliness had been

satisfied". (54, *Portrait with Keys*) As Johannesburg, as *The Exploded View* so adequately demonstrates, is laid out according to the American and not the European model, it is often impossible to walk the vast distances between places. Even when distances are not quite as long, however, many people are afraid to walk anywhere. As a result,

> A stranger, arriving one evening in the part of Joburg I call home, would think that it had been struck by some calamity, that every last person had fled. There is no sign of life. Behind the walls, houses are ticking like bombs. The curtains are drawn tight, the security lights are glaring, the gates are bolted. Even the cars have taken cover. Our stranger, passing fearfully through the streets, whether in search of someone with open hands of whom he might ask directions or merely of someone to avoid in the pursuit of solitude, finds no one at all. (54-55)

Vlad (and Vladislavić) do long for Dickens's London because it was not as dangerous and violent a place as Johannesburg. Where Vladislavić departs from Vlad and therefore manoeuvres Vlad into realisation, is in the matter of the invention of the city. Vlad explains that Dickens "invented London" (53) and, indeed, for many of Dickens's readers, "Dickens and London were virtually the same". (Baumgarten, 117) Vlad seems to complain when he says Dickens was lucky to "live in a city that collaborated enthusiastically in its own invention" because Johannesburg is a city that "resists the imagination". (54) What Vlad goes on to wonder, however, is whether "the problem" is that he lives "in a fiction that unravels even as I grasp it". (54) This could be seen as Vladislavić's sly way of hinting that in the postcolonial sensibility, one that shies away from generalising universalisms in a multi-cultural society, communities that are not built on exclusion must emerge according to how we create them. Antonio Damasio explains that our outdated evolutionary drives prompt us to build communities of people who look like us, and to have hostility for those who are different. (40, *Looking for Spinoza*) Even predicating a sense of community on locality rather than race is problematic, as the sporadic violent attacks on foreigners that occur in South Africa show. A growing, ever-changing city with high levels of mobility cannot provide a sense

of belonging and continuity; one has to create a community that is built on change and difference. It is for this reason that a compassionate, flexible mindset is so important.

In an interview with David Goldblatt and Bronwyn Law-Viljoen about his most recent novel, *Double Negative*, Vladislavić asserts that unlike his previous texts (*The Restless Supermarket*, *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys*) *Double Negative* is about the way we see Joburg and the world rather than Joburg itself. (349) It seems to this reader, however, that this outlook begins in *Portrait with Keys*. Part of writing about the everyday, ordinary and local is that it is very specific to Vlad's time and place. Also, as Benjamin's quote about city-writing suggests, Vladislavić's own memoirs are intertwined inextricably with the portrait of Joburg. As he explained in a recent interview: "In the case of *Portrait with Keys*, I consciously decided to write about places of significance to me, to find a set of 'street addresses' that would allow me to map my own attachments to Johannesburg. One could say I sought out places where the topsoil of memory lay thick". (Vladislavić as cited by Steyn, *The White Review*)

The idea of memory as "topsoil" is an interesting one for, as the name suggests, it is the top layer of soil that is the most nutrient rich and therefore where plants and other living things will grow. That Vlad sees memory as "topsoil" indicates that memory and experience cover everything one sees so that one's perceptions and beliefs grow from it. It is also what roots one to a place: helps one hear the "call of home". (188)

### *Portrait with Keys* as topsoil

If *Portrait with Keys* is a handful of Vlad's "topsoil of memory", then for Vladislavić it is not only physical memories that constitute this topsoil but literary memories and experiences as well. The very idea of a "topsoil of memory" is an idea that Vladislavić read in a book by Lionel Abrahams. (188) City writing as conceptualised by Dickens, Benjamin and de Certeau is also a literary way of seeing that has been compounded by experience. The memories of the writers and their words are what influence Vladislavić, not only in the choice to approach writing about the city the way in which he has, but also in how he chooses to approach the city in the first place. His way of being,

therefore, has been influenced by what he has read. He writes: “It is the privilege of writers that they are able to invent their memories and pass them on between the covers of a book, to make their memories ours”. (187). In this way, Vladislavić is acknowledging the power of words, suggesting, as Gaylard explains, “that language is important because it structures our thought; in order to change our thought, our selves, we have to access language at its most primary level within our subconscious”. (Gaylard, 306) Elias Canetti, when writing of the power of words in causing abominations, says that “words, deliberate and used over and over again, misused words, led to this situation, in which war became inevitable. If words can do so much – why cannot words hinder it?” (Canetti, 239)

By writing *Portrait with Keys*, Vladislavić is entering the reader’s subconscious by “making [his] memories ours”. (187, *Portrait with Keys*) As memory is not “just recall, but also kinaesthetic awareness of certain torsions, hydraulics and behaviour patterns in the body and its surroundings” (Gaylard, 300), it is Vlad's very distinctive, compassionate way of seeing that he is passing on to the reader along with his memories. This way of seeing wonders about others and their well-being without prescribing, and while it searches for commonalities, it never assumes sameness.

When I focus on the new way of seeing that Vladislavić proposes, I am not suggesting that this book will revolutionise the reader’s way of being, but neither am I saying that it is impossible that *Portrait with Keys* will not influence it. As Suzanne Keen explains at the end of her study into *Empathy and the Novel*, “readers themselves, especially those who discuss books and bring others into conversation about the implications of fiction, possess the power that they so often attribute to the novel”. (Keen, 168)

In *Portrait with Keys*, the reader is introduced to this new way of seeing performatively, as in each of the other texts I have explored thus far. In *The Restless Supermarket*, Tearle’s unattractive narrative voice makes him an unsympathetic character even while Vladislavić explores the nature of judgement. *The Exploded View* is made up of four parts that make the reader feel like “Each part hovered just out of range of the others it was meant to meet”. (171, *The Exploded View*) This foregrounds the difficulties of reaching across boundaries to connect with others and the impossibility of a community in a traditional sense. The structure and narrative

technique of *Portrait with Keys* is similarly expressive of its concerns. Rather than emphasising the difficulties of sympathetic interaction by foregrounding the "apartheid cityspace" in four separate sections of equal length, the narrator of *Portrait with Keys* winds his way across boundaries and spaces to create his own sense of community. (Poyner, 317) As Michel de Certeau explains in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, "What the map cuts up, the story cuts across". (129)

Vladislavić foregrounds the importance of the structure in the second section of *Portrait with Keys* when he writes about the habitual movement of a person being as unique as a fingerprint. (12) These movements are like the different pieces of the text, which seem to touch or intersect "like wires in a circuit, for no better reason than chance". (13) Most of the time, people move according to their own patterns and it is therefore impossible to believe oneself part of a community like that of the country locals in the second piece of *Portrait with Keys*. Country locals "know the world around them like the backs of their hands" (12), and form a community because the small space ensures they run into each other all the time. In the city, however, people live in different areas and have sometimes vastly divergent patterns: "acquaintances may live in the same city, meeting by appointment as often as they choose, without ever running into one another in the daily round". (13) As he goes on to say, "this is all the more reason why the crossing of paths…should be taken seriously". (13) One has, therefore, to construct one's own community painstakingly from chance encounters and analogous connections. In similar fashion, the reader has to make their own connections between the pieces: to construct the text as they must construct a community.

The one-hundred-and-thirty-eight sections are put together in interesting ways that create certain meanings that I will explore, as they do contribute towards conveying Vladislavić's particular perspective. A reader need not follow the text as Vladislavić has laid it out, however. Vladislavić has created alternative paths through the book, listed under "itineraries" at the back. (205-208) The varied topics indicating the itineraries denote once again that these are not just paths that cross geographically. In the text, walking routes cross with old memories, stories from books and descriptions of hand-written signs and hand-made stalls. As Ralph Goodman explains, by "depicting Johannesburg in a fragmented and unconventional way", Vladislavić is "suggesting that

there are many ways of seeing Johannesburg, many possible ways of mapping this city – or, indeed, any city". (Goodman, 226)

Another part of the second section focuses on the communal importance of giving directions. Giving directions, Vlad explains, is "one of the most touching relations possible between people in the city" because in giving directions, wary city people "demonstrate the capacity for dealing kindly and responsibly with a life put in their hands by fate". (12) Johannesburg has "dead ends and false turns on every side, some of which might prove disastrous for the unwary". (12) It is a city in which one feels fundamentally insecure at home, never mind on the street. In addition, giving directions is an interaction that can foster that communal sense of "share[d] space". (Vladislavić as cited by Miller, 220) In this vein, Vlad writes about his father, who delighted in giving directions and, "even when he knew the way himself", would get a map and "spread it out on the bonnet of the stranger's car to point out the route". (13) He goes on to wonder whether "the whole exercise was an excuse to have the stranger get out from behind the wheel and pass the time of day". (13) This memory is significant because this interaction would have happened under apartheid, in the "days of the garden-variety wire fence, long before the advent of the candy-striped boom and two-metre wall". (13) Security was clearly less of a problem then, because "the world belonged to us, we were masters of all we surveyed". (13) Just as "they" often means "blacks" (40), "we" means the always emerging white middle-class, as Tearle makes clear on the seventh page of *The Restless Supermarket*. The past is often remembered in popular discourse in a rose-tinted way by this demographic. White cities were less crime-ridden and seemingly less insecure during apartheid because of restrictive policies. This physical safety was often mirrored by a mental and moral complacency about the state of the country and one's place in it.

Significantly, it is at this point that Vlad stops praising knowing precise locations and directions, and says that "since then, experience has taught" him that rather than giving very good directions, one might consider "misdirecting a stranger for his own good", as "getting lost is not always a bad thing". (13, *Portrait with Keys*) Getting lost is often how one finds new places, and similarly, being put off-balance through defamiliarisation can help one find new realisations. It is the opposite of being a "master" of all one

surveys (13), and as such, Vladislavić may be intimating that if people have their master narratives interrupted, they are less likely to believe themselves all powerful and superior.

Appropriately, this comment on directions will be a signpost for the reader navigating their way through the text. They will always be dealt with "kindly and responsibly" (12), but similarly they will be misdirected and defamiliarised for their "own good". (13) As always with Vladislavić's texts, this misdirection is effected with a sense of mischief rather than a sense of seriousness. Neither Vladislavić nor Vlad places himself in the position of a kind of omniscient narrator, as Vlad is frequently at a loss as to how to deal with situations or make sense of his surroundings and Vladislavić does not always provide solutions, explicit or implicit, to Vlad's confusion, perhaps because Vladislavić himself is at a loss as to how to resolve certain problems or questions. Taking light-heartedness and being lost seriously is an important factor in the creation of art. As Vladislavić says of Willem Boshoff:

> He talks about disqualifying the text, trying to dislocate or uproot it, "to show how expectations of text or scripture are unrealistic". And the more he works at this disruptive task, the more authoritative he becomes. This is one of the paradoxes of making art that values the secret and inarticulate; the more creatively it communicates, the more it undercuts its own premises. You cannot outsmart authority without becoming an authority yourself. (106, *Willem Boshoff*)

In order to remain lost, one has to enjoy being lost and admit one's own confusion, or one becomes an "authority". (106)

One of the ways in which he enables the reader to get "lost" is to drop sections into *Portrait with Keys* that are lists, something which Vladislavić has written about in *Willem Boshoff* and *The Loss Library and other Unfinished Stories*. His description in *The Loss Library* is more relevant to my purposes here:

> When [writer, George Perec] sets himself the task of describing the things on his work table, what emerges from the lists of objects, and his thoughts and second thoughts about their use and significance, is as intimate a portrait of his mind as would be any attempt to capture an individual psychology through more conventional characterisation. (32, *The Loss Library*)

What Vladislavić chooses to describe in *Portrait with Keys* is indeed significant. He lists the components of a street vendor's brazier (45-46) in order to marvel at its ingenuity. In a related list, he itemises the hand-written signage in his neighbourhood, archiving the tragically impermanent businesses on which so many people depend. (65-66) These lists are obliquely contrasted with his own list of what he calls the "excess" of life: clothes, leisure vehicles and boats, eating out, and "the books, the books, the books". (80) The content of the lists is very different, but the fact that they are both objects on which people rely for a living also draws commonalities. His care in describing each object indicates his compassion for their makers.

The final thing that is important to note about this section is the way that memory is incorporated into the text. Even while Vlad implicitly acknowledges the faults of the past, that does not mean he decides to paper it over and forget it and nor does he dismiss it as invalid. Vlad's father, for example, was a kind man who loved fostering a sense of community and passed on this consideration to his sons, despite being a conservative man who was a product of the apartheid era. As Gaylard suggests, "Vladislavić's project appears to be that of restoring the ignored past to the city in order that it not unwittingly replicate the past". (Gaylard, 303, "Migrant Ecology")

In these ways, he is making Johannesburg strange to the reader, and laying out possibilities for thinking differently about it. As Jane Poyner explains, "The juxtaposition of and crossing of diverse forms of disciplinary knowledge – urban geography, architecture, race studies, fictional and non-fictional prose, the realm of the private – can contribute towards defamiliarising the spatial logic of the apartheid cityspace". (Poyner, 317)

The text may be written to defamiliarise, but it evokes familiar feelings. The sections that seem to be juxtaposed at random are often placed next to each other because

feelings, emotions and affects help to link them together and create new thought processes where a more prescriptive and delineated connection might not. As Antonio Damasio explains, “Feelings help us solve nonstandard problems involving creativity, judgement, and decision-making that require the display and manipulation of vast amounts of knowledge”. (177) By using affect to connect the different parts, affect that the reader must provide, Vladislavić is enabling the reader to juggle the encyclopaedic scope of the material. For this reader, the affectively aware way of seeing is what links all the pieces together and occasionally brings the reader to feel compassion.

### *Ways of Seeing*

This way of seeing is, I shall argue in close reading for the remainder of this chapter, often newly compassionate. This concept of compassion, like the concept of community, is “looser” than the traditional one in that it is highly flexible. (Goodman, 229) It is truthful, ever aware of fluctuations, changes and exceptions in the situations described. It is also rooted in the material everyday.

From the very first section, *Portrait with Keys* foreshadows the concern with being as honest as possible about the problems besetting Johannesburg, most particularly the endemic violence and crime. The text as a whole is marked by an unwillingness to tell untruths or to gloss over the problems one will encounter in the city. To gloss over them would be to partake in unconstructive discourse that imagines a utopian future by ignoring South Africa’s violent legacy. Such a legacy will take the work of generations to undo, and forgetting it or burying it could only exacerbate it. There is too much at stake to airbrush it or to manoeuvre neat conclusions.

Vlad does not, therefore, allow himself moments of self-congratulation for any emotion he feels or action he undertakes that borders on “compassion” because he is too minutely aware that to act in a way that is truly for the benefit of others is incredibly difficult. Both in the sense that it is difficult to know what will be best and difficult to act. As Martha Nussbaum explains, “We should be on our guard lest the invitation to weep over the distress of others should motivate self-indulgent and self-congratulatory behaviour, rather than real helpfulness. People can all-too-easily feel that they have had

an experience of compassion – without having to take any of the real steps to change the world that might involve them in real difficulty and sacrifice". (399) Living in crime-ridden parts of Johannesburg when people of Vlad's demographic move away to supposedly safe enclaves and choosing to walk its streets are part of that difficulty and sacrifice. Removing oneself from everyday life on the street can only deepen existing suspicions of difference because experience will never prove otherwise. In addition, Vlad may be a writer (a profession with minor forms of influence), but he still has more social power than many of his economically powerless fellow pedestrians. If people who have more social power avoid places that need social upliftment, then that power is seldom exerted for the good of those places. The places (and people who live and work there) are instead wilfully forgotten and the problems left to fester.

In addition, Vlad's humility ensures that any empathic feelings are juxtaposed with feelings that he lacks the empathy with and understanding of others, not least because they are different. A passage in which he describes walking past a black priest makes this clear:

> As he walked he patted his hair with the palm of his hand, and looked at the shadow of his head on the ground. Involuntarily I smoothed my own hair by combing it through with my fingers, and was reminded that we live differently in our bodies and our houses. But I had resolved not to pursue such difficult and divisive lines of thought, especially over weekends, and so I veered into Tile City in Op de Bergen Street for a chat with the hardware man. (22-23)

The differences between white hair and black hair is indicative of many different issues between the races from both past and present. Under apartheid, the relative thickness of hair was used as a deciding factor in racial classification. In contemporary popular discourse, black hair and the different ways one wears it has become a social and political issue, partly because of this history. In this passage, Vlad shows that he is relatively pragmatic about these irresolvable differences. He knows that one can never step into someone else's shoes completely and that the misunderstandings that different living patterns cause often hinders the creation of communities. One could argue,

however, that simply by mirroring the man's gestures, Vlad is already acknowledging a commonality in that they both have hair and that they both care how it looks. More than that, he acknowledges that people (himself included) have a limited capacity for agonising over their own shortcomings in traditional imaginative sympathy. What he decides to do rather than worry about it is nevertheless a kind of community building, as he goes in for "a chat" with the hardware man when all he stepped out to do was to buy a paper. (22) This incident would indicate, then, that Vlad does what he can to build a community in the ways that he knows how.

This is not to say that he does not try to undo the culture of separation and suspicion. Vlad talks to all sorts of people who "live differently in [their] bodies" (22), and some of his efforts are more successful than others. One of his less successful interactions is with the security guard at his local Gem Pawn Brokers. He tries to strike up a passing friendliness with him by greeting him every day. When he waits to see if his friendliness will be reciprocated by waiting for the guard to greet him first, the security guard keeps silent. From that day forth, the security guard is "bewildered and resentful", and can never again be prevailed upon to greet him. (63)

There is a chance the security guard is hostile because he has never had an interaction with a white man, or perhaps with a middle-class man, that is not charged with tensions of the past and present separateness. Vlad has interactions with other ordinary black people who, while they may be less hostile, are often still incapable of crossing invisible boundaries. An earlier encounter makes this clear. Vlad is walking to watch a soccer match in 1998 and falls over a piece of plastic, landing almost flat on his face on the pavement. There is a security guard and a hawker sitting nearby. The man says, "Haai shame" with a "worried face" but does not get up. (16) The woman gets up and "comes closer. If we were different people, if we were the same people in a different place, she might put an arm around my shoulders; instead she lifts her hand and drops it a couple of times, meaningfully, and clucks sympathetically". (16) This inability to touch a white man, even in an emergency, shows how deeply ingrained the fear of touching another person of a different race can be.

To sentimentalise these problems, or to soften the edges and generalise is to flop into a morass of feeling without thinking. The defamiliarising effect of moving from one

story to another and one type of writing to another helps counter any tendency towards sentimentalising. As Walter Benjamin explains, "What is sentimentality if not the flagging wing of feeling, which settles down anywhere at all because it can go on no further, and what, then, its opposite, if not this tireless movement, which so wisely holds itself back [and] settles down on no experience or memory, but rather remains hovering, grazing one after the other". (Benjamin, 75f, *Deutsche Menschen*) As Benjamin's quote suggests, whatever Vladislavić intends to convey about his own way of community-making and compassion, it is specific to his time and place, specific in fact, to being inside his skin. His writing implies that the "good" towards which he strives and the way he goes about striving for it is akin to Baruch Spinoza's *conatus*: "a dynamic, unpredictable combination of forces, different, in practise, for each of us". (Smith, 34, "*Middlemarch* and Everyone") Similarly, Vladislavić's "compassion" is not unmixed with other emotions, feelings and attitudes. As Gaylard explains, "That sympathy is so complex and difficult suggests that ideally it should involve responsibility and generosity. Most importantly, [Vladislavić] is prepared to go into the most minute, fleeting, arcane and specific of feelings; there is no hierarchy of emotion". (16) These other attitudes, as well as Vlad's own "topsoil of memory" must help facilitate a considered compassion that is fluid enough to interact with everyday material life.

**The challenges of compassion in the material everyday**

> Vladislavić's fiction typically embodies and reifies the repressed in actual people and the life of objects, making it tangible and affective for the reader. (Gaylard, 302, "Migrant Ecology")

It is not only the legacy of apartheid that poses a problem for interpersonal relations, but also the material differences and inequalities. As I argued in my chapter on *The Exploded View*, compassion is often fostered in proximity to others and in proximity to objects that are "haunted" with the presence of others. (De Certeau, 108) To this end, Vladislavić is concerned with people and how they relate to material objects, as well as compassion for material objects themselves. Firstly, when Vladislavić writes about

material objects, particularly in unequal Johannesburg, he delves into class differences and poverty and how one feels or fails to feel sympathy for those who have few or no material objects. Secondly, he considers crime. Most crimes have their root in the need for others' material objects. Vladislavić makes this correlation particularly clear in section fifty four, in which he juxtaposes theft figures with salary figures and the costs of basic and then luxury material goods. He explains that in 1998, 107 675 cars were stolen and 14 965 cars were hijacked (295 and 41 cars per day respectively). (75) He then goes on to explain that executive salaries were "sixty times higher than shop-floor wages". (75) A factory worker would "take five years to earn what the average company director earned in a month". (75) As Patrick Lenta explains, Vladislavić is "detailing…the 'true scandal of crime': its pervasiveness in the post apartheid everyday produced by socio-economic inequality": the fact that it is not "exotic" but "endotic". (Lenta, 125) Vladislavić, therefore, explores the qualified compassion one can feel for certain criminals in the face of such crushing inequalities and also those times when compassion is inappropriate.

Thirdly, Vladislavić is interested in how human beings interact with the material world on a very basic, physical level: how the material world affects moving, thinking and being, and how objects can bring us into closer relation to the presence of others or defamiliarise us from others so that we see them anew. This is a continuation of his exploration of this concern in *The Exploded View*.

In the first section, Vladislavić brings these concerns together by writing about Vlad's house and the measures Vlad must take in order to feel secure. When a Swedish journalist wants to take photographs of his enormous set of keys to the various locks and gates in his house, Vlad says they "shame" him, "lying like the keys to my psyche, a feeler gauge for every insecurity". (122) He even calls them "turnkeys" (122), indicating both that he feels he is imprisoning himself, and that he feels he has betrayed his optimistic ideals by being so suspicious of others.

As the rest of *Portrait with Keys* bears out, however, the presence of crime is not imaginary. As Patrick Lenta notes in his study of crime in *Portrait with Keys*, "Approximately a third of the 138 sections of the book are devoted to representations of

crime-related activities". (118) There are many instances of crime and instances of people who emigrate, not because they are racist or prejudiced, but because of the serious violence of life in the city. The most striking example is Vlad's tale of a farewell supper with a friend who had always been such a "South African" (153):

> The ties to people and places, the bonds of work, friendship, conviction we thought would have to be hacked through with a will, have loosened too. The writing, the photography, the film-making on working people, colonial history, Aids, the political work, the teaching, the activism, none of it can hold her. She no longer believes she can make a difference; or rather, she no longer believes in the difference she can make. She has lost faith, she is afraid of living alone, of growing old in this violent city. (154)

That Johannesburg is such a "violent" city is part of the reason why it is so difficult to foster a sense of community and fellow feeling. When writing "envious[ly]" (54) of Dickens's London, Vladislavić explains that "his most threatening encounters with other creatures – a furtive figure withdrawing into a shadowed doorway, a ragged beggar – they are as suspicious and frightened as he". (54) In fact, "the most alarming figure of all, [is] a man who produces a meat pudding from his hat, stabs it with his knife, tears it with his fingers and gobbles it down". (54) In London, "the darkest villains of the piece" are "possessed of...extravagant habits and showy appetites". (54) The closest story in *Portrait with Keys* to such a theatrical figure is that of the housebreaker who, while running away from the police, jumps into the Gorilla enclosure at the Johannesburg Zoo and engages in a tussle with one of the gorillas. In the incident, the attention falls on Max, the Gorilla who was protecting his mate, Lisa. The public shows huge support for the Gorilla, and, comically, the housebreaker is visited by a man in a Gorilla costume with the sign, "We're looking forward to seeing YOU behind bars". (131)

The story of the Gorilla and the housebreaker is told in parts, and is only completed towards the end of the text. After various heart-warming stories in relation to the incident, the reader is told that "Isaac Mofokeng, the man who shot Max the Gorilla was no lovable buffoon, he was a violent rapist". (154) Unlike the villain in Dickens's tale, a

villain of *Portrait with Keys* is a criminal who locks a man up in a car boot after robbing his house while he rapes the man's girlfriend in a field. (154) The final part of the story about Isaac Mofokeng is placed directly after the farewell supper for the friend who is immigrating, and the juxtaposition is a way of saying that fears for safety are legitimate. It is also a way of saying that not all criminals commit crimes because of an unequal society. Isaac Mofokeng kidnaps his victims because of his own violent proclivities, and as such, compassion for his situation is inappropriate.

Yet the housebreakers who break into Vlad's own house are not completely unsympathetic characters. The first housebreaker asks a houseguest for the time as he is making his escape, as though he were pausing in the middle of an ordinary work day. In a sense, perhaps he was doing just this. This is probably why Vlad and Minky keep the monkey wrench he drops, "less a trophy than a measure of everyday abnormality". (139) Crime is so rife that any study of the everyday must include crime, not least because, for the criminals, it is a way of making a living as much as being a security guard is making a living. Vlad's discussion of urban poachers is illustrative of this way of seeing. (38)

The second burglar to break in is more threatening, as he and Vlad actually grapple. Vlad surprises the thief in his home, and after a brief scuffle, Vlad manages to get away and call the flying squad. He is terrified, "speaking in gasps" with "trembling fingers". (142) His partner's blue silk shirt, a personal and almost intimate item, has been left lying in the open on the kitchen floor and the door "threshold smells of thief, as rank as if a cat had sprayed against the doorpost". (142) The smell of cat urine is one of the most penetrating and unpleasant smells, and the fact that it is this he smells at this point show how violated and disgusted he feels.

While he is waiting for an answer from the flying squad, however, he wonders why the thief did not run away when he heard him coming. He realises it is because "He's been crouching there in terror…he's as scared as I am". (143) The housebreaker "is scarcely more than a teenager, slight, with a yellow canvas hat on his head, a silly round kwaito hat like a toddler's". (143) This terrified burglar could remind the reader of Dickens's "furtive figure withdrawing into a shadowed doorway", the poor person who is "as suspicious and frightened as he". (54) The comparison is given a little more weight

by the juxtaposition of the section about Vlad's traumatic burglary with the following section that references Dickens. In it, Vlad's brother, Branko tries to convince him to move to Sandton where it is "so much more agreeable" and safe. (145) The reader is not told that this conversation takes place right after the burglary, but considering the topic of the conversation, it is reasonable to suppose the two are connected, in theme if not in chronology. Vlad tells Branko "Not everyone needs earplugs. Dickens couldn't work without the noisy rhythm of London outside his window". (145) Certainly, much of Vladislavić's writing springs from his personal experiences with the city, even if they are unpleasant. Yet despite Vlad's own optimism, by including the incidences of violent crime Vladislavić does not condemn those who choose to live elsewhere, and nor does he trivialise their concerns. This anecdote and its implications also emphasise that the poor who remain behind in dangerous areas are even more at risk from crime because they cannot leave.

Even Vlad himself considers moving away to England. He and his partner, Minky, pack all their things up in storage and move away for a year. When they return to South Africa, their removal man, André is concerned because his sister is abducted in what looks like a burglary. It turns out, however, that the woman's husband, a dentist, hired two men to kill her so that he could cash in her life insurance policies. The judge at the trial pronounces a sentence, ending with "people may use alarms, high walls and bars on their windows to defend themselves against strangers, but there is no defence against someone you know". (117) Therefore, to a certain extent, security in Johannesburg is a symptom of people's efforts to shut out people's "beastly nature". (85) Too often, this is projected onto the easy targets of the poor and black members of society from which many of the criminals necessarily come, but it must not be forgotten that monstrous crimes are committed in all strata of society.

Vlad may be championing the "innocent bystander", but he has no real illusions about the innocence of anyone. (194) This is typified by an encounter Vlad has with a beggar:

> Sometimes, when I put the coins in his hand, my fingertips brushed the skin of his palm. It was leathery, but not folded or creased like glove. It reminded me of

> a shoe. The fat pads of his palm, the swollen base of his thumb, the bulging fingers were like the often-polished uppers of old shoes. Why were his hands so big? What work had he done to give them this shape? What substance, grasped or stroked or kneaded over a lifetime, could have given his skin this sheen? It could not be soil. Perhaps it was skin. Is this what skin does to skin? (125)

Aubrey Tearle and Geoff Budlender are so pitiable in part because they are seldom touched by anyone, even accidentally, but this beggar may have had to touch and have been touched too much. That the skin of the beggar is compared to an "old shoe" is unsettling as it reminds one that shoes are often made out of the skin of animals and become worn from over-use. The comparison makes one aware of the corporeality and fragility of the human body and also that like an animal's body, a human body is often used and thought of instrumentally by other bodies.

The beggars (and the other street people who make appearances in *Portrait with Keys*) are at the mercy of the kindness of strangers for their survival and it is clear that not many of them receive kindness. Certainly none of the characters in either *The Restless Supermarket* or *The Exploded View* shows any mercy towards the street people whom they see. For the street people, therefore, it is their material objects that provide them with comfort, as is evident by the way some of them store their material possessions with infinite care in the spaces under the manhole covers in the streets. They are "repositories of privacy for those compelled to live their lives in public". (50) For Vlad, it is like a "well" that is an "inexplicably ordered world" that exists in direct contrast to "the chaotic plenitude of the Highveld sky". (51) Beggars and other street people are a common sight in South Africa, and they also feature as inscrutable others in *The Exploded View*. For the first time, however, the reader is made to wonder about what the world is like from their perspective.

> Any iron cover you passed in the street might conceal someone's personal effects. There was a maze of mysterious spaces underfoot, known only to those who could see it. And this special knowledge turned them into the privileged ones, made them party to something in which, those who lived in houses with wardrobes and

> chests of drawers, and ate three square meals a day, could not participate. Blind and numb, we passed over these street places, did not even sense them beneath the soles of our shoes. How much more might we be missing? (50)

Wonder, as Ratcliffe so eloquently argues, is intimately linked to compassion. (19, *On Sympathy*) In wondering, Vlad does not presume to understand how the beggars feel or see the world, but wondering about it in this way casts them in a new light. Rather than being "objects" of compassion, they are shown to have their own agency and to work towards fulfilling their needs like every other human being. Ratcliffe's conception of compassion is clear here, as "a [compassionate] view could involve a sense, not of having 'object-relations', but of being perhaps, something nearer to an object oneself". (19)

Typically, Vladislavić foregrounds how Vlad himself does not at first see it this way. He thinks at first that it is "pathetic…that people are so poor they have to store their belongings in holes in the ground". (50, *Portrait with Keys*) By foregrounding this, Vladislavić does not exclude himself from the number of people who, when they look at a poor person, see a "backward rustic" (146) full of the naive goodness of a rural black person simplified by the sketches in Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Nor does he exclude himself from occasionally seeing that other stereotype, the face "made in the make-up department: a droll and drunken coloured face below a greasy cloth cap, missing teeth, smashed nose, boozy breath". (73) These make-up department faces of the poor become what one sees when compassion fatigue sets in. Vladislavić gives credit for his insight to his friend, Liz who helps him see instead "these people are resourceful, they're making a life out of nothing". (50)

Liz may have started Vlad's (and possibly the reader's) new way of seeing, but when he reaches under the manhole cover outside his house by chance ten years later and finds possessions neatly stored underneath, Vlad's description of what he finds there could further defamiliarise the reader from stereotypical expectations. (51) He describes extra clothes and food as well as two empty glass bottles and a copy of *Penthouse* magazine. On the one hand, this little collection provides a sharp contrast to the excess of clothes and consumable goods in Vlad's and in most readers' possession, as

Vlad's own list of his possessions show. (80) On the other, the objects are not radically different from those that everyone owns. For these street people, their lives are ordinary and everyday: they all have "an equivalent centre of self" (Eliot, 211, *Middlemarch*), and have to worry about how to feed themselves, how to keep warm and how to satisfy their sexual desires.

The next section that describes a similar kind of care for material objects is a situation in which an old black worker takes off his worn, broken boots and replaces them with brand new running shoes. Vlad says that "The whole episode seemed like a parable about the dignity of labour, the moving congruence of hard work rewarded by simple but intense pleasures". (52) The juxtaposition with the previous section is clear: the poor work hard for and treasure their possessions and when they are rewarded through their own efforts; it can give one a "lump" in one's throat and a dose of compassion. (52) The irrupting of typical representations of the poor is being continued. Then, this narrative is also interrupted by Vlad's walking a few blocks further and seeing that "a passer-by had flung a brick through the plate-glass window and snatched some goods from the display". (52) Instead of railing at the culprits, however, he focuses on the aesthetics of the brick in the window. The affectively neutral description enables the reader to draw their own logical conclusions and emotional reactions. Vlad shows that the poor do not always work hard for their goods: sometimes they snatch them with no more effort than it takes to toss a brick through a window and grab what is there.

A similar juxtaposition occurs just over twelve pages later. While Vladislavić ostensibly casts his brother Branko as the suspicious, racist one, he too makes mistakes because of his suspicions about others, rather than recognising them as "innocent bystanders". (194) When he sees a well-dressed black man next to scale with a sign saying, "50c", he slips into suspicions reminiscent of the storyline behind Simeon Majara's stolen masks: "When you offer him fifty cents for the scale, he'll say he has another two thousand of them in a warehouse…Give him a small deposit, say a hundred bucks, and he'll fetch them for you. And that's the last you'll see of your cash". (67) Then he realises that the man is offering the scale so that people can weigh themselves

for the price of fifty cents. By giving this realisation at the end, and without spelling out what exactly the man is offering, the reader is made to feel as humble as Vlad.

The next section shows that Branko is not as suspicious as he might pretend to be. He sees a man in a suit dragging a large briefcase and thinks that it is a door-to-door salesman struggling with the weight of his samples in the heat. (67) After walking past the man, Branko nearly falls into the manhole and realises the man is actually dragging away the manhole cover in his briefcase. (68) Vlad does not rail against these "urban poachers" however, saying instead that "In unequal cities, where those who have little must survive somehow by preying on those who have more, the poacher scavenging a meal from under the nose of the gamekeeper may be admired for his ingenuity and daring". (137) One must wonder, however, what happens to the precious belongings of those street people when the cover is stolen. While Vlad may be looking for ways to sympathise with the poachers and their own right to income, he must also acknowledge that their pilfering is not without cost to the most vulnerable members of society.

This ambivalence about the creative solutions people find to their problems is also brought to the fore when Vlad sees a street child, "filthy as a chimney sweep" in the Johannesburg Art Gallery bathrooms. (31) He sees two more "crammed" beneath a concrete ledge, smelling of "wood smoke and sweat". (31) He goes "on [his] way ambivalently", trying to decide whether to tell the security guard or let them have a warm bed for the night. His choice of expression "filthy as a chimney sweep" (31) is intriguing as he is not comparing the child to any modern equivalent, but to those abused and helpless children described in Dickens's Victorian England. In this way, the children are both familiar and defamiliarised. They are not begging at traffic lights, which, as *The Exploded View* demonstrated, is where street children are most often encountered by the middle-class. They are instead carving out the spaces available to them to keep themselves clean, warm and dry. Vlad's "ambivalence" about their occupying the space may have to do with the worth of the artworks contained in the building and the danger they are in from the children who seek shelter there. At the same time, these are children who have nowhere to go who may be quite harmless in seeking what all human beings seek: shelter and a clean source of water. This ambivalence results from his wish to do what is most fair and even to all things and

people concerned and his being unable to decide what action would contribute most to the good.

Perhaps Vlad's idea of utopia is one in which everyone has an equal amount of material goods. One of the most contented moments in the book is when Vlad's possessions are packed up and stored by André, the removal man. Through his dexterity, Vlad imagines, André can ensure that no matter how many possessions people have, he acts as a "great leveller" because he makes them all fit into the same amount of space:

> It is surprising to discover that all one's worldly goods can be assembled together in such a confined space. Countless people have more, of course, and countless others have less. But this is a peculiarly satisfying estate: a unit's worth. Perhaps that is the genius of André, the removal man, the great leveller? To ensure that no matter how much one possesses, or how little, it finally amounts to a unit. (107)

This moment of imagining everyone being equal is not the only time Vlad pauses and wishes for a revolutionary shift in thinking that would make the world less divisive. When snow falls in Johannesburg in 1981 and the city becomes completely white, Vlad comments wistfully on the interaction:

> White kept falling, this cold and foreign substance. People threw colour at one another. "You want to be white?" the newspaper vendors said, "well here it comes. How do you like it?" And the businessmen said, "You think you're white, chucking snowballs at us? Try this for size." And this "being white", this "white" itself, was nothing more than a froth that melted between your fingers or burst apart on a turned shoulder, was something improbable and silly that you could play games with that did no real harm, that would not last. (130)

Here, whiteness is not an indicator of privilege or a hated separator but a unifier tinged with elements of impermanence and the ridiculous. These longings for equalising

impulses are, of course, destined to remain fantasies. As he made so clear in *The Exploded View*, material things are often what separate people. While we all "live differently in our bodies and our houses" (23), everyone uses material objects and moves through the streets past common buildings, albeit in different ways.

This is highlighted especially in a proposed artwork and an actual artwork: "Great Wall of Jeff" (46-48) and *Mementoes of District Six*. (83) The former is a proposed memorial to every person on the voter's roll in Greater Johannesburg. (46-47) Each person will have a block of resin with a memento from their lives enclosed and this will then be made into a wall. This wall morphs into a kind of "Hyperama of Sentimental Value", for as Vlad complains, "Half the city has already vanished behind walls. Even a semi-transparent one can only make things worse". (49) The objects he chooses to immortalise are ordinary, everyday ones and are reminiscent of the ordinary, everyday people who made them. They are also easily recognisable by others: "diamond rings and Krugerrands", "a button or a piece of string", "keys, coins, lapel badges, pencil sharpeners" and even "appendixes, gallstones, wisdom teeth" and "run-of-the-mill fetishes". (47) The artwork never materialises, probably because "this was one of those artistic projects that would be easier to realise on paper than in the world". (47) As Vlad describes it in *Portrait with Keys*, the artwork and the ideas behind it are realised on paper.

The actual artwork, *Mementoes of District Six*, is eerily similar to "The Great Wall of Jeff". It is a cabin made of resin blocks that contain mementoes. In this case, however, each memento is a discarded item collected from the ruins after the forced removals. The items are ordinary, even "worthless" but incredibly moving because they are not items chosen with care and donated as they would be in the Great Wall of Jeff, but "relics" that are reminiscent of the remnants of a shattered civilisation one finds at an archaeological dig. (84) These are not ancient relics, however, but objects that are all too familiar because they are indicative of our civilisation and more than that, our interpersonal relations and private lives. That the everyday objects with which the viewer is familiar have become indicative of a shattered civilisation makes one aware of one's mortality and of the cruel transience of fortune for those whose objects have been left behind. Making such an artwork (even indirectly, as with Vlad's description of "The

Great Wall of Jeff") is a way of memorialising those people and their lives, not least because forced removals were usually followed by the erasing of everything that was there before: from the buildings to the names.

This is probably why Vlad finds such pleasure when trawling through the junk shops that inhabit old bioscopes. Unlike the amnesiac spaces that litter the outskirts of the city, bioscope shops "take the names of the old establishments, as if it is important to preserve the association". (64) As one might imagine,

> The alliance of dark cinemas and second-hand goods is a happy one. In this deconsecrated space, objects that would appear lifeless in an ordinary shop throw flickering shadows. The profusion of goods evokes a storehouse rather than a market. These are the cast off properties of people's lives, mementos of their hopes and failures, and the signs of use that should be off-putting seem poignant. A piano stool with a threadbare cushion, a dented toolbox, a Morris chair with cigarette-burned arms, a vellum lampshade dotted with postage stamps, a soda siphon, a bottle-green ashtray in the shape of a fish – there is nothing so tawdry that it is powerless to summon a cast of characters. (64-65)

Vlad's interest in material objects stems from this fact: they are resonant with traces of the people who used them. His interest in these forgotten pieces of furniture and renovated spaces is twofold. Firstly, Vlad shows an admiration for the people who are creative enough to fashion their livelihoods from principles of inclusivity. The proprietors do not tear down the old space; they adjust it to suit them. In this way, they are recycling both the space and the objects within it which is an important, everyday way to help solve the ecological problems of a profusion of non-biodegradable objects and unsustainable ways of producing them. Secondly, Vlad feels for these objects because they "summon a cast of characters" (65), the kind of characters about which he writes. Aubrey Tearle, forgotten and unloved, worries at the end of *The Restless Supermarket* about "who will marshal" his dictionaries when he is gone. (338) The objects of people like Tearle no doubt end up in a bioscope junk shop. Vlad's sympathy for these objects, therefore, is sometimes symptomatic of his sympathy for people who

are similarly discarded or tucked away in these "dark" spaces, both literally and figuratively. (64) One is reminded of the street people and their possessions tucked away under the streets, and of the separate development that is meant to keep other people out of sight and out of mind.

Vlad, however, often looks at objects for the traces of themselves that people have left behind: "We are like tramps, leaving secret signs for those who come after us, who we expect to speak the same language". (188) This is a common concern of the text from the first epigraphs. Places and things are "haunted" by what (or more precisely, who) came before, and in this way, one lives in community with hundreds of others indirectly, not least because in cities, a higher volume of people share the same spaces. When looking at a window, he sees "a hand slipped here" as it is spattered with paint. (189) On another part, "fingers toothed with a coin or a key scratched out the view". (189) He is also ever-aware of the design aspects of functional objects and their relation to the body. His pencils have a "chewable end" (124); and the objects he packs away when he and Minky spend a year overseas are a "community": "touching one another reassuringly". (107) For Vlad, the idea of community is intimately linked with proximity. It is why he walks the streets so many people shun, and why he tries to undermine the structural separations by showing how each object is man-made and carries traces of the people who forged them.

Vlad mourns the destruction of places that could be remade. In the third section of the text, there is a rather loving description of the "Marymount Nursing Home". (13) The hospital operated for fifty years, and therefore "You can hardly turn a corner in Johannesburg without bumping into a Marymount baby". (14) While Vlad explains that he did not choose his house because "of its proximity to the Marymount, like some peasant eager to live in the shadow of the church or within walking distance of the well", his drawing this analogy makes the reader think of these older places of connection and community. (15) While people may no longer have opportunities for connection through the necessity of a shared well or a common religion and place of worship, everyone must be born and many people will have children. While under apartheid it must have served only white babies, in post-apartheid South Africa, babies of all races and creeds would be born there. It could be a building of new beginnings in more ways

than one as families would have the chance to intermingle for a common purpose. Vlad's pleasure in the thought of being near this building stems from that sense of community and connection. It is therefore not so much the "marmalade brick building, with its white plaster and corrugated iron roof" that makes Vlad feel attached, but rather that "every week, a flock of new human souls came into the world on my doorstep". (15) This unusually poetic sentence that hints at its own transcendence of petty human squabbles is followed by a kind of jolt down to earth again with the short sentence: "And so it is a pity that the home has closed down". (15) He states, matter-of-factly, that the white doctors and their patients have all moved north because they "no longer believe that a decent person would want to be born on this side of town". (15) The juxtaposition of a poetic sentence with two matter-of-fact, brusque ones expresses a sharp disappointment and anger without emotive words. Vladislavić's use of his affectively "neutral" tone to express prejudice and snobbery makes it more stark and shocking than if this event was couched in emotive phrases because one cannot protest against a statement of fact. The reader has space to supply their own gradation of sadness at yet another frustration of community.

Vlad's attitude toward the "dry-cleaners and panel beaters" who want to take over the building is sanguine as he calls them and what they do, "new lives of a different sort". (15) It is not, therefore, that Vlad objects to industry or change, but rather that he objects to snobbery and its results, namely that the sense of separation between the wealthy and not so wealthy (which is often still drawn along racial lines) is strengthened even at birth. The longing for a community and a post-apartheid communal meeting space is, in this case, frustrated.

The different aspects of the text are brought into sharp focus at the end of *Portrait with Keys*, during the most dramatic incident on the largest scale the narrator experiences. Vlad is caught up in a clash between riot police and striking security guards outside the Johannesburg Library in the city centre. The reason he finds himself in this predicament is because he "want[s] to approach the library along a city street like an ordinary citizen, passing from the company of people into the company of books". (191) In retaliation against the strikers, the police throw tear gas and fire rubber bullets. Vlad has to crouch down and hobble between parked cars for safety, stepping on

squashed oranges from the street sellers' now-mangled stalls all the way. When the hubbub moves to another street, he wonders whether to leave the area immediately and return home, not least because three "scabs the strikers were teaching a lesson about solidarity, are sitting on the edge of the pond…coughing up water. Blood and slime bearding their chins". (194) Seeing the effect of the violence written in blood on the three strikers makes Vlad realise that he too is at risk.

He decides not to run away because he sees other people who slowly emerge from the wake of the chaos: "Innocent bystanders, my kind of people". (194) Despite the extraordinary events he has witnessed, there are still ordinary people who were not important players on either side but who have been caught in the crossfire. He follows them into the library rather than returning home. Inside, there are not wailing crowds or hysterical women, but "Children laughing and talking, acting out their narrow escapes for one another, librarians hurrying upstairs with armfuls of precious papers or manning the barricades, grimly amused or stoical". (195) Ordinary life has continued, and the people in the library have let the incident energise them, not defeat them. This incident, so typical of the dynamics that recur in *Portrait with Keys*, is aptly what he is researching in the library that day. There are violent incidents on the street down which one must walk, but there are also ordinary people who walk along them and long for a safer street as much as those who move to the gated suburbs to escape them. If this incident reached the newspapers and other types of news media, it is the violent retribution on the scabs and the police brutality that would garner the attention. What inspires Vlad to stay is his rubbing shoulders with other ordinary people who are continuing. Their example enables him to regard his situation more optimistically. They transmit their optimism to him. Putting himself in proximity allows a transference of affect.

After being in the library for a while, he wonders whether to sneak out the "back way" and avoid any more confrontation in the streets. (195) The "back way", discovered earlier in the text, leads to make-shift safe parking for "the few white suburbanites who still venture here" (166) because it enables them to enter the library without walking on the street. The back entrance and its parking lot are indicative of some of the most divisive aspects of suburban life, those vividly evoked in *The Exploded View*. The idea of

using this exit does not, therefore, appeal to Vlad. He realises he is not in a hurry, and can, like the other library patrons, "read until it quietens down". (195) Instead of becoming hysterical himself about leaving, he becomes quite philosophical about it, and realises he wants to read for a while longer anyway. The final sentence of the passage and of *Portrait with Keys* as a whole is "When I lick my finger to turn the page it tastes of orange juice". (195) The bittersweet taste of orange juice is the most obvious sign of how the experience has written itself on his body and how it will affect his thoughts and the way that he reads: not only the words on the pages but how he reads the city. It is also a conscious decision to savour the small, simple moments. As life is partly made up of a series of small, simple moments, deciding to focus on simple pleasures as they occur, even in the face of much despondency, can help one to see goodness in the world again.

In these ways, it is also the most optimistic ending out of the three texts. Where Aubrey Tearle seemed to see an apocalyptic future and Duffy is feeling more like himself with every violent blow, Vlad leaves the reader instead with the taste of orange juice on his lips and with a "sense of belonging" to that time, that place, and those people through that ephemeral physical sensation. (178) All the characters of the three texts live in the same city, yet only Vlad garners joy from the experience. It is how he chooses to feel that makes the difference. As Damasio explains, "Feelings are the mental manifestations of balance and harmony, of disharmony and discord. They do not refer to the harmony or discord of objects or events out in the world, necessarily, but rather to the harmony or discord deep in the flesh". (139-140, *Looking for Spinoza*) A more flexible way of seeing the world can enable one to forge contentment in any situation, however difficult it may be.

## Conclusion

*Portrait with Keys* frankly acknowledges many of the difficulties and problems of living in Johannesburg. Many of them, including the endemic violence, desperate poverty and insurmountable differences are unresolved by the end of the text. What the text also suggests, however, is that for Vlad (and therefore Vladislavić) at least, one can forge a

good, new community if one's idea of the "good" is fluid and creative enough to forge it. As Sally-Ann Murray explains, "Vladislavić is ever-present as a master of the mundane, and he toys with the possibility that wonderful things can be made from surprisingly unlovely circumstances and materials". (Murray, 269) *Portrait with Keys* seems to illustrate that if one has the compassionate, flexible mindset to see it, it is often in the mundane and the ordinary, among the company of "innocent bystanders" (194) that wonderful moments, however fleeting, can be enjoyed. Vlad's thoughtful, compassionate way of life can leave not the gall that chokes Tearle, and the nervy adrenaline that fuels Duffy, but moments of sweetness, all the more sweet because they have been painstakingly carved from the difficulty of a consciously lived everyday life.

## Conclusion

> I have called the *Dichter* the keeper of metamorphoses: but he is a keeper in a further sense as well. In a world of achievement and specialisation, a world that sees nothing but peaks, towards which one strives in a kind of linear focus that exerts all strength on the cold solitude of the peaks while scorning and blurring the adjacent things, the many, the real things, which do not offer themselves for any help towards the peaks – in a world that prohibits metamorphosis more and more because it hinders the overall goal of production, which heedlessly multiplies the means of self-destruction while simultaneously attempting to stifle whatever earlier human qualities are still extant – in such a world, which one might label the most blinded of all worlds, it seems of cardinal significance that there are people who, nonetheless, still keep practicing the gift of metamorphosis. (Canetti, 242, "The Writer's Profession")

Elias Canetti writes in his essay, "The Writer's Profession" of the "*Dichter*", a German word meaning "writer" or "poet". A true *Dichter*, Canetti says, has an important role in an increasingly mechanised and utilitarian society precisely because what he or she does is anathema to the goal of production and to the specialisation endemic within all facets of society. Canetti aligns "metamorphosis" with "empathy", but even more closely with "compassion", a word which "may seem improper to the practitioners of the mind" because it "is kept remote from the objective decisions of our daily life, which are determined more and more by technology". (245) In practising the "gift of metamorphosis", the *Dichter* creates space within himself for knowledge "which he acquires for no recognisable purpose" and "space for people" (243), "particularly those who are paid the least attention". (Canetti, 242)

I would like to use Canetti's conception of the *Dichter* as a conclusion to, and also as a gesture towards a possible departure point from, this thesis because his conception of the importance of the writer's compassion is intricately linked to what I believe to be the importance of reading affect in literature. Canetti's conception of the compassion of the

*Dichter* is that this compassion is expansive and unsystematic. Canetti's *Dichter* is important to society precisely because he or she seldom appoints him or herself as a custodian of what is important. It is rather that the writer, as Vladislavić explains through Vlad in *Portrait with Keys*, is "walking around with my eyes wide open, taking everything in like a vacuum cleaner, coughing bits of it out on paper". (26) This "vacuum cleaner" metaphor resonates with Canetti's *Dichter* who picks up the detritus and does not pick these things up or "cough bits" of them out according to any particular hierarchy. This is not a sign of being uncaring or of carelessness, but rather a sign of painstaking care. It is difficult to think and feel deeply about things and then to write of them with such an even, "neutral" tone that leaves space for the reader to feel and interpret the subject matter in their own way, those "gaps" of Iser's theory.

Canetti goes on to say that "a man can be a *Dichter* only if he feels responsibility, even though he may do less than others to realise it in individual actions". (245) Vladislavić feels a responsibility towards his subject matter and his craft. If he did not, he would not describe the cornucopia of objects and obscure happenings using the unusual vocabulary and phrasing that he does. Vlad complains that he should produce something more documentary and full of "facts" about what he sees than the way that he does. (25-26, *Portrait with Keys*) I would argue, however, that the careful way in which Vladislavić tells Vlad's story by including his own self-doubt indicates a greater sense of responsibility to tell the truth as he saw it in that moment. Canetti circles again to explain that "one should not be ashamed to say that this responsibility is nourished by compassion". (245)

Canetti's essay marries cognitive responsibility with feeling compassion. In a way, therefore, Canetti's belief in the importance of writers and writing is akin to that of the affect theorist, who must take into account thinking, feeling, the personal, interpersonal and even global. In this thesis, I have argued that Vladislavić's writing is imbued with the sense of all these connections and difficulties. In the first chapter, I set out to explain the often complex inter-linking of affect, emotion and feeling and how it is intertwined with thinking and that the union of thinking and feeling is indivisibly fused with the body and affects how the body interacts with the world. Compassion and other difficult feelings are not strictly named and delineated. Nor are they relegated to one

particular area of life, or to one particular group of people, or even to humans; they are rather an ever-evolving conglomeration of different “drives, motivations, emotions and feelings”. (Damasio, 8, "Looking for Spinoza") I also explained that a certain conception of compassion can play an important part in the building of community, and that while sympathy and empathy can be integral emotions in compassion, compassion reaches further than those two emotions. This is because compassion that is rooted in Canetti’s marriage of thinking and feeling and the addition of a compassionate bodily awareness does not require full agreement with the object of compassion. In fact, it acknowledges that the person feeling compassion is closer to an “object” themselves. (Ratcliffe, 90) In other words, the subject feeling compassion is also an “object” in the mind and to the body of someone else. This is the effect of Vladislavić’s carefully neutral tone. It emphasises the fact that his voice is one of many and can have no authority over other voices nor can it position itself as an authority on the subject matter. In this way, Vladislavić’s compassion is a form of absolute tolerance, “a strong, active value; an active attitude, rather than an attitude of passive acceptance”. (Vladislavić as cited by Marais and Backström, 174)

I also explained that Vladislavić’s defamiliarising techniques helped this reader to realise the slippery nature of compassion, tolerance and other difficult feelings. In his texts, the more traditional bonds of sympathy and identification are constantly interrupted by the unusual and fragmentary structures and problemitised by the characterisation. The reader can feel compassion, but this compassion is often mixed with other difficult feelings. For example, along with feeling compassion for the protagonists, this reader also felt disgust at the reprehensible opinions or actions of the protagonists, or unease and frustration because of the lack of authorial interference in effecting catharsis. In feeling compassion, one would like to believe that this difficult feeling will get some restitution for the expense of a fatiguing emotion. No resolution, and, therefore, no restitution, is forthcoming, and I was left feeling unsettled rather than comforted that compassion will always have positive, evident results. Compassion often becomes one of Ngai’s “ugly feelings” rather than a “high emotion” because it frequently involves the sense of restricted agency and helplessness in a world with many problems but no wide-reaching solutions. The feelings also feel "ugly" because they reminded this

reader of the incommensurable differences between people, and the resultant struggle for connection and belonging. As Suzanne Keen explains in her chapter on "Contesting Empathy", feeling with others can not only be an exercise in difficulty but also in active harm if it presumes too much knowledge of others' feelings or way of being. In addition, feeling compassion as "an attitude of passive acceptance", albeit a sympathetic attitude, is not enough. (Vladislavić as cited by Marais and Backström, 174) Some restitution can only come when thinking, feeling and acting compassion inform each other and evolve together.

In the academy, presuming universality and an easy flow of compassion and sympathy between people has been rightly criticised. Qualified compassion, however, is the only route to connecting with others, however different they may be. It can even be helpful in creating communities and healthier societies sometimes, something which judgment and separation will never be able to effect.

In *The Restless Supermarket*, Vladislavić obliquely explores these notions using the tradition of the sympathetic imagination and of judgement. The defamiliarisation devices and the unusual structure of the novel mean that any compassion the reader feels for Tearle is not unthinking. Tearle is not a redeemed man, but he is a changed one by the end of the novel, in part because of the compassion shown him by Merle Graaff and Shirlaine. Vladislavić's attention to creating the atmosphere of not just the place but the time indicates a generosity and compassion in acknowledging the reasons for the foibles of the past. The compassion the reader may feel for the characters is therefore equally specific to the time and the place of the novel. This also means that while the sympathetic imagination is a strong thread running through the novel, it is built using soft universals made nuanced through specificity.

*The Exploded View* is even more experimental than *The Restless Supermarket,* and any sympathy the readers may feel for the characters is further complicated as the characters do not have narrative voices that are as emotive and distinctive as Tearle's. The third-person neutral narration means that no tone or emotion is privileged and the swirl of difficult affects that emanate from the text is not overtly categorised for the reader. My own reading of where the heart of the text lies is in the material aspects of Johannesburg and how they condition and separate people and yet how feeling works

around and through this separation to make connections. No matter how isolated, physically and mentally, the characters are from other people, they nevertheless feel connected to others through those objects, places or spaces. Sometimes they are even brought to feel compassion: compassion for other people, for things or physical spaces, and sometimes for the world as a whole. No matter how sterile the environment, whatever and whoever they are in proximity with affects them with different feelings, albeit ones that may be fleeting or unacknowledged. These feelings are frequently diverted to fantasies and to conscious actions different from the subconscious feelings. Budlender and Duffy are shown to live lives that are often very cut off from other people. Budlender obsesses over Iris and her commodities after driving past the destitute man in the tire. His obsession is, in part, a result of this sight. Duffy wonders about the health of the earth in the face of over-population after seeing a beggar with a sign saying, "Give me your litter". (163) Egan feels claustrophobic and an accompanying compassion fatigue, despite the fact that he is in his empty hotel room (98), and Majara makes artworks that are supposed to evoke compassion for the people the artworks were made to represent. His relationship to the artworks and his audience, however, indicate that he is playing on the compassion of others for financial gain. His compassion borders on the "calculating compassion" of which Woodward writes. (59) The characters in *The Exploded View* struggle to realise the ways in which they are affected by their environment, and, therefore, while they long for a meaningful connection and to feel some sort of compassion for others, they struggle to bring it out of the realm of affect and into the one of emotions and critical consciousness where they could figure out how to turn "feeling into knowledge [and] knowledge into feeling". (Smith, 40) In addition, the cases of Budlender's obsession, Egan's compassion fatigue, Majara's calculating compassion and Duffy's darkly comic longing for violence and connection, the less pleasant emotions and affects accompanying and sometimes merging with compassion are underscored.

Vladislavić's semi-autobiographical narrator Vlad in *Portrait with Keys* is far more aware of the conditioning influences of his environment and of his own marginal place in the society that surrounds him. As a result, he is humble about how much he understands about the world around him, and about how much of a difference he can

reasonably make. He puts himself into proximity with ordinary people of all races so that his limited awareness of others is given more depth and subtlety through experience of them. He also tries, as far as is possible, to put himself in the shoes of others by acknowledging those soft universals and commonalities between him and others, but never forgetting the differences and specificities of the particular circumstances he is examining. In this way, Vlad goes about making the community for which the characters in the previous books long. He works at transcending the instinctual impulse that "detect[s] difference in others because difference may signal risk or danger, and promote withdrawal or aggression". (Damasio, 40, *Looking for Spinoza*) He makes the community in the everyday. Those whom he meets by chance in the regular round of his days are incorporated into his community just as his friends are, and he therefore transcends his tribe. In the world of the text, beggars with whom he has running conversations and car guards to whom he gives money are as much a part of his neighbourhood as his own neighbours. This is difficult to do, and Vlad is frequently saddened, frightened and even physically harmed in his endeavours. Yet of all the protagonists, Vlad manages to find joy and cause for hope in what he sees. This is because Vlad's compassion is informed by the union of his thinking, feeling and by his bodily experiences in everyday life.

These ideas about the nature of community and belonging, so crucial to individual and communal health, are conveyed in this way to show that Vladislavić's ideas relate to spaces that are specific, private and personal. They never claim to be applicable to all situations, but neither do they claim to be divorced from any real-life situations. Novels are "a web-cracked mirror held up to our world". (Titlestad and Gaylard, 7)

If "storytelling is the need to understand the significance of lives; the need for context, history, reciprocity, community, and a sense of being fitted into the world" (Wesling, 16), then reading affect, with its simultaneous focus on the bodily and local as well as how that body is connected to wider networks, is necessarily an important part of understanding storytelling. More importantly, the inclusive nature of affect theory that acknowledges subtlety and commonality as well as difference is an important antidote to the kind of ideological and academic extremism that Wendy Steiner writes about in *The Pleasure of the Text*. As Ndebele explains, in South African

literature and criticism, too, the writing and the discourse that it generates has frequently been polarised and our understanding of the literature itself and the world it reflects has been impoverished as a result.

Storytelling is about one's place in the world, and it can ask interesting questions about the nature of ethics and the nature of feelings. The importance of storytelling can, however, simultaneously reside in providing necessary escapism or the pure beauty of the aesthetic and affective experience unconnected with ethics. While I have chosen to write about how Vladislavić's texts intersect with and diverge from the world, an important part of Vladislavić's texts is his successful avoidance of what Charles Altieri says is Martha Nussbaum's mistake in her books, namely that she "succumbs to a temptation endemic to philosophy, the temptation to sacrifice what is different about the ways others imagine their lives in order to identify with and reinforce the opportunities for righteousness". (31)

Steiner is correct when she quotes Katha Pollitt, saying,

> Books do not shape character in any simple way, if indeed they do at all...Books cannot mould a common national purpose, when in fact, people are honestly divided about what kind of country they want...The way books affect us is an altogether more subtle, delicate, not to say private affair. (Pollitt as cited by Steiner, 138)

It is more that "experiencing the variety of meanings available in a work of art helps make us tolerant and mentally lithe. Art is a realm of thought experiments that quicken, sharpen, and sweeten our being in the world" (Steiner, 8). Vladislavić's texts do sweeten this reader's being in the world, but equally, they unsettle and complicate it. These three texts do all of these things because they are often illuminated by compassion, "sensorily divided into all its individual phenomenal forms", never coalesced "into a mere concept". (Canetti, 245) Reading affect is fraught with difficulty, but it is also crucial in helping others and, therefore, ourselves, to avoid becoming victims of an often cruel, utilitarian post-modern society.

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