

https://dspace.org/

Textualization and re-textualization: the construction of identity in South Africa

Fainman, Ronit

2015-03-11
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/17243

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

The Other is only apprehended from the side of a detached observer whose own ideology dissects and resurrects to fit its own viewpoint. Gloria speaks Afrikaans without 'a coloured accent' which is why 'she fancies herself as white'[53], white being equated with an attitude which gives deference to no one else. Chrisjan's disappearance is only thought of in terms of an unwieldy garden and the possibility of theft after working for the family for thirty years. It is only Karla who questions his wellbeing from the margins.

> Chitado repeats itself all around you- together with the tattered locals who flee the war...Thousands of the uprooted flee in all directions, babies tied to the backs of bony mothers, bare-chested black men walking ahead and prodding the road to warn against lurking landmines which lie waiting to maim careless pedestrians in a cloud of rock and metal, and black girls with missing limbs who hobble along on self-devised wooden legs, their arms hooked into forked branches that serve as crutches.
>
> We see it all.[54]

---

[53]Behr.The Smell of Apples p.g.7.

[54]Ibid.p.g.30.

As a soldier, Marnus observes the misery of war without acknowledging or even seeing either his own or South Africa's complicity in the atrocities. He states "We see it all" rather than "We do it all". Responsibility is denied, and still firmly placed at the steps of an amorphous history without seeing that human agency defines historical determinism. It is this aspect of the text which remains unclear, that of choice. Karla appears on the margins of the narrative representing both the alternative voice and the consequences of dissent.

> Of everyone in our family, Tannie Karla used to be our favourite. She always made us laugh...when Tannie Karla was at university in Stellenbosch, she often came to visit over weekends, and once Ilse went and stayed in the university residence for a whole weekend. But things with Tannie Karla started changing when she finished university and went to work for the Cape Times.[55]

Karla is firmly placed within the family until her political views begin to shift and she argues with Marnus's father. Her choice to work for an english-medium newspaper is queried as her mode of dress (platform shoes and jeans) changes, which is

---

[55]Ibid.p.g.105.

perceived as an external manifestation of her liberalization. Her difference becomes otherness reaching the point where "...Dad said he'd had enough of her strange ideas. He didn't want her coming into our house any more."[56] Leonore and the children continue to see her in private until she questions Leonore's choices after marriage. After an argument, she sends Leonore a letter which she refuses to read. Yet, Ilse and Marnus open the letter which their mother does not.

> ...Why are we educated to be afraid of people who think differently from us, or who do differently from us, or who look different from us?...Why are you afraid of hearing me explain why I say Johan is the master of your life?... Leonore, don't you see- it is not your marriage that I want to criticise- it's every marriage where the potential of a woman is lost because it is the man's imagined right to be the leader. Are the answers to these questions all that different from why he didn't want to let the children hear what it means to be a black South African?[57]

This letter is framed by Marnus saying that he did not understand

---

[56]Ibid.p.g.105.

[57]Ibid.p.g.110\111.

all of it, yet the narrative continues without rupture after he sees it, either implying that he understood none of it or that he somehow chose to ignore all of it. This encapsulates the dissenting voices in the text- neither Karla nor Ilse impact on Marnus's world view. They merely appear as tangential interludes which disappear without trace or explanation.

> ...the social evolutionists secularized time and placed it at the disposal of the national,imperial project. The axis of time...was projected onto the axis of space and history became global...The merging of the racial evolutionary Tree and the gendered family tree into the Family Tree of Man provided scientific racism with a simultaneously gendered and racial image through which it could popularize the idea of linear national progress.[58]

The linear notion of the progression of history in the text is intimately connected to the conservative Afrikaner nationalism in which it is framed. Marnus's father serves the function of both bearer of family history as well as national history with his militant paternalism and stories of flight from Tanzania.

---

[58]McClintock,A.Imperial Leather:Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest (New York:Routledge,1995) p.g.359.

Leonore gives up her career as a concert pianist and soprano in order to become a military wife in a family setting which resounds with the history which her husband constructs and she supports with Calvinist religious explanations.

> The other day, after twelve drunk blacks were killed by police at Western Deep Levels gold-mine, some countries said that they were going to stop selling arms to South Africa. They just won't listen when uncle John Voster explains to them that they don't really understand the problems we face in this country. Dad says that it doesn't matter that much what the rest of the world says, anyway. From now on we'll just make our own weapons...[59]

Marnus internalizes his father's explanations which are passed onto him in a form which combines Afrikaner nationalism with family loyalty. Vorster is constructed as his "uncle" which connotes both respect and family ties when translated from Afrikaans, enforcing the relationship between male authority and nationalist discourse. According to Benedict Anderson, the nation is an "imagined community" where people imagine a shared experience of identification with an extended community and are

---

[59]Behr, The Smell of Apples p.g.70.

thus historical in that social difference is constantly invented and re-invented, distinguishable in terms of the style in which it is imagined.[60] The text is constructed in terms of the style of such imaginings- Marnus's immersion within Afrikaner nationalist culture and his perpetuation of it.

> 'Pleased to meet you, Mister Smith,'says Ilse, and steps forward to shake his hand the way we've been taught. Mum says its rubbish that women shouldn't shake hands. She says if more women could learn to shake hands there'd be more women like Golda Meir in this world. Even though she's a woman, Golda Meir is the one whose going to teach the Arabs a lesson.[61]

While a strict gender boundary is enforced, certain behaviours are changed to fit the function of the ideology. Nationalist discourse is not constructed coherently but is rather contested, viewed in terms of specificity and difference- negating and affirming difference simultaneously.[62]

---

[60]Anderson,B.Imagined Communities (New York:verso,1983) p.g.6.

[61]Behr.The Smell of Apples p.g.35.

[62]Epstein,R."Between the Lines":The Star and Sowetan and the Construction of National Identity in the New South Africa (M.A. dissertation,Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand,1995)

> When we look at the word 'culture' we should see it as a site of a struggle, a problem, a discursive production, an effect structure rather than a cause.[63]

Yet the 'culture' which emerges from the text is not one of struggle or contestation but rather one of consistent enforcement of particular meaning where the hypocracy and violence on which the society is built ensures it continuation, not its contestation.

> 'These apples are rotten or something,' says Frikkie, and he turns his apple around in his hand after sniffing at it. 'They stink. Smell this,' and he holds the apple to my nose. I smell the apple in his hand. It smells sour.[64]

The child is molested by the embodiment of the system in all its forms- the family the military and the extended community with the smell of apples which earlier was one of nationalist pride becoming one of violence and perpetuating itself in the silences which surround its abuse of authority. According to Stuart Hall,

---

p.g.21.

[63]Spivak,G.The Post-Colonial Critic (London:Routledge,1990) p.g.123.

[64]Behr.The Smell of Apples p.g.179.

practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we write or speak.[65] Behr constructs a text in which personal agency is deferred, becoming an effect of historical circumstances in which escape is only found in death. Yet the narrative seems to invert itself in its inability to deal with the dissent of Karla or Ilse who have managed to escape this history and remained alive. It is the author, who in constructing Marnus, has constructed himself as choiceless.

Behr, like Marnus, diminishes personal responsibility in terms of his own choices. The text could therefore be seen to be autobiographical in terms of motivation, in that Marnus is depicted as the logical outcome of a particular environment in his inability to 'escape history'; the implication being that Behr too was unable to escape history.

> Using the terminology of Laclau, autobiography is an attempt to manage and force coherence on a diversity of 'subject positions'. One or a selection of subject positions are privileged at the expense of others. A person can only be reduced to one or a subset of such positions through the surgery of the creative act. In the process

---

[65]Hall,S."Cultural Identity and Diaspora" p.g.392.

> diversity is censored, structured and given direction in pursuit of order and in accordance with an evolving purpose.[66]

The identity presented in the text is consistent, never breaking beyond the boundary of a conservative Afrikaans paternalistic paradigm, in the process dissent is censored and diversity diffused. The narrative of the soldier functions as a type of allegory in the text in which this consistency is both enforced as well as rationalised. All these narratives take place during war in southern Angola, consisting mostly of internal monologues which reveal a continuity between child and adult in terms of a strict understanding of self and morality- Marnus reflects on the 'calibre' of new recruits, seeing their unwillingness as conscripts but not understanding it because 'you had a choice- like me- and you made the easier one.'[67] This is curiously ambiguous in that Behr is saying that there was choice but is equating his choice (to join permanent force or become a spy) with the choice between conscription and prison - the implication being that to have broken any familial pattern is equivalent to

---

[66]Gready, P. "Political Autobiography in Search of Liberation: working Class Theatre, collaboration and the Construction of Identity." p.g.166.

[67]Behr. The Smell of Apples p.g.83.

prison.

The black section leader comes over and asks whether I have any instructions. No, I answer, let every man sleep until he wakes. He lies down on his back next to me in the grass.

'Lieutenant?' he asks.

'Yes?'

'Why did you keep on running, Lieutenant? Didn't you hear me calling?'

I look him in the face and slowly shrug my shoulders. I turn over to sleep.[68]

The function of the soldiers narrative is allegorical in that Marnus's flight is from an imagined enemy, a soldier from his own company which his mind has converted into an Angolan soldier due to fear in a violent context; the connotation being that in a South African context, the Other is an imaginary enemy constructed in a violent context- once again displacing responsibility in terms of how such contexts are created.

...the projection of one's own systematic codes onto the 'vacant' or 'uninscribed' territory of the other. By this

---

[68]Ibid.p.g.178.

> process, the Other is transformed into a set of codes that can be recuperated by reference to one's own systems of cultural recognition. The unknowable becomes known; and whatever 'spillage' might have occurred in the problematics of racial and cultural difference becomes stoppered by the network of textualization that is inscribed onto the Other...[69]

The text could therefore be seen to function as a type of meta-construction in that it portrays how a child is shaped in an Apartheid context which regulated every aspect of life to ensure its continuation. It attempts to depict how the 'systematic codes' of Apartheid are inscribed onto the 'vacant' or 'uninscribed' territory of a child's mind. Yet that child, in turn, projects those codes onto the 'vacant' territory of the other.

Behr, in attempting to create a tabula rasa view of both self and other, is unable to move beyond the parameters of colonial descriptions which relied on the concept of the other as undefined, not existing before being observed and described in this manner. The sense of identity which emerges from this

---

[69]Spivak.The Post-Colonial Critic p.g.1.

> process, the Other is transformed into a set of codes that can be recuperated by reference to one's own systems of cultural recognition. The unknowable becomes known; and whatever 'spillage' might have occurred in the problematics of racial and cultural difference becomes stoppered by the network of textualization that is inscribed onto the Other...[69]

The text could therefore be seen to function as a type of meta-construction in that it portrays how a child is shaped in an Apartheid context which regulated every aspect of life to ensure its continuation. It attempts to depict how the 'systematic codes' of Apartheid are inscribed onto the 'vacant' or 'uninscribed' territory of a child's mind. Yet that child, in turn, projects those codes onto the 'vacant' territory of the other.

Behr, in attempting to create a tabula rasa view of both self and other, is unable to move beyond the parameters of colonial descriptions which relied on the concept of the other as undefined, not existing before being observed and described in this manner. The sense of identity which emerges from this

---

[69]Spivak. The Post-Colonial Critic p.g.1.

depiction is therefore one which conforms to Hall's delineation of identity being conceptualised as beyond time and therefore change, and beyond choice in terms of The Smell of Apples.

CHAPTER TWO:*Missing Persons* in a missing ideology.

In *Missing Persons*, Vladislavic emphasises textuality as a site of representation, revealing the epistemological assumptions of a decentered urban context of the South African landscape in which meaning is constructed. The boundaries between external and internal are blurred in this metafictional text in an "attempt to unsettle our notion of the 'real'".[70]

> [Metafiction]...is a term given to fictional writing which self consciously and semantically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality...it also reflects a greater awareness within contemporary culture of the function of language in constructing and maintaining our sense of everyday 'reality'. Metafiction does not abandon the 'real world' for the narcissistic pleasures of the imagination. What it does is to re-examine the conventions of realism in order to discover- through its own self-reflection- a fictional form that is culturally relevant

---

[70]Waugh, P. *Metafiction:The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London:Methuen,1984) p.g.52.

and comprehensible.[71]

Metafiction, in drawing attention to itself as an artifact, necessarily reflects on the nature of narrative itself as its medium of construction. Hayden White speaks of narrative as a meta-code in which "messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted."[72] Narrative consists of words; and each word is "imprinted with the meanings, intentions and accents of previous users."[73] Bakhtin's concept of the word is one of a two-sided act rather than a two-sided sign, rendering the word dialogic in nature where meaning is to be found in the interaction between the two sides.

Each use of language is therefore distinctive but the word of self also expresses a world view where each "message bears that view as encapsulated ideology."[74] Truth thus belongs to no-one as it is realised in the realm of dialogue between self and other. The word is therefore contextually dependant and a bearer of a

---

[71]Ibid.p.g.52.

[72]White,H.The Content of the Form:Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore:John Hopkins University Press,1987) p.g.1.

[73]Lodge,D.After Bakhtin.Essays on Fiction and Criticism (London:Routledge,1990) p.g.21.

[74]Ibid.p.g.60.

potential multiplicity of meanings, rendering meaning perpetually unfinished and open to appropriation and re-appropriation.

Vladislavic draws attention to both the act of writing as well as the significance of words enforcing the idea that "Metafiction...merely foregrounds its complex and at times problematic relationship with history and society."[75]

> ...I have to feed the insatiable earth. I put in bones, leaf-mulch from the gutters, vegetable peelings, blankets, papers. I soak it all down. The ink begins to run. I take my spade and dig it in.[76]

The compost heap becomes one of history, absorbing meaning in the form of ink narratives which combine with the vegetable peelings and leaves. Emphasis is thereby placed on the construction of the narrative of the story as well as the historical narratives which the story deals with.

---

[75]Attwell,D.J.M.Coetzee.South Africa and the Politics of Writing (Berkeley:University of California Press,1993) p.g.18.

[76]Vladislavic,I.Missing Persons (Claremont:David Philip, 1989) p.g.98.

> A long tiled corridor called WHITES led to the Urinals. There was a sign that said 4U2P. While I was P-ing, I remembered that it was my birthday...[77]

Every day word usages are highlighted, placing them in contexts which illuminate their absurdity. "Whites" is placed in the same paradigm as P-ing thereby demonstrating the absurdity of social constructions in the form of the words used to create such meaning.

> The late R.G. Collingwood insisted that the historian was above all a storyteller and suggested that historical sensibility was manifested in the capacity to make a plausible story out of a congeries of "facts" which, in their unprocessed form, made no sense at all. In their efforts to make sense of the historical record, which is fragmentary and always incomplete, historians have to make use of what Collingwood called "the constructive imagination"...[78]

---

[77]Ibid.p.g.14.

[78]White,H."The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" in Canary,R.&Kozicki,H.The Writing of History:Literary Form and Historical Understanding p.g.46.

Vladislavic constructs a stories from the 'congeries' of historical 'facts' blurring the boundaries between a monolithic historical truth and personal history. In **The Prime Minister is Dead**, Verwoerd's death and funeral procession are anchored to the building of a compost heap in the mind of the child narrator of the story, resulting in a merging of these events in the child's account of what occurred.[79] The story opens with the narrator saying that the Prime Minister died in winter when the narrator was ten years old. "When the Prime Minister died he left us a compost heap, on which practically anything would grow."

> 'That may well be so,' my mother said,'but the point is that we shouldn't think that way. You can't go through life taking the great events of history for granted. When one comes along you've got to grab it with both hands.'[80]

The funeral procession is seen as the great event of history rather than the death itself, illustrating the ordinary internalization of a national event. The narrator attends with

---

[79]Vladislavic could be pointing to the psychological phenomenon where ordinary people are able to account with precision, their activities at the exact point when a national event occurred as in the case of the assassination of J.F.Kennedy.

[80]Vladislavic.Missing Persons p.g.5.

his father and a wheelbarrow which becomes the mode of transport for the coffin when the hearse breaks down.

> The box bucked violently. My father began to run...He ran towards the hole. The mouths of the people at the graveside opened. The man with the book held out his pale palm like a traffic officer. My father ran on. At the last moment, on the very lip of the grave, he dug the metal prow of the barrow into the earth and heaved.[81]

The grave and the compost heap merge, leaving the child a legacy in his own home. A pile of debris and rot on both a literal and figurative level. The small or personal events of history conflate with the large or national events forming a compost heap of history which is fed by the ordinary before it is placed beyond reach, only to be understood in personal terms once institutionalised. The Prime Minister is buried 'in spring' although he died in winter, forming a new season in politics. The compost heap is constructed from that which is not wanted, symbolising construction and deconstruction, textualization and re-textualization in terms of history.

---

[81]Ibid.p.g.9.

Tsafendas's diary links directly to **The Prime Minister is Dead** in terms of the child narrator and the grandmother who sits in her rocking chair knitting. The story is divided into numbered paragraphs, opening with Granny who is 'off her rocker' knitting the narrator a thinking cap and saying that 'We must have Tsafendas's diary' because 'We are its rightful owners'.[62]

> Granny smiles. 'You must fetch it for us,' she says. 'Tsafendas's Diary is the key to all mysteries. The mysteries of meat and imagination.'
>
> 5 In the mean time, Granny keeps me busy feeding the hole in the backyard.....
>
> 6 Granny has the meat hook. She tacks the meat together. She pulls the meat blanket up to my ears and tucks it in. By morning it will be rotting.[63]

Tsafendas who killed Verwoerd and his diary which never existed become the focus of ordinary lives where a grandmother knitting her grandson a cap as he tends a suburban compost heap is defamiliarised to narrate the violence which underlies the ordinary- the knitting stitches become meat hooks which cover the

---

[62]Vladislavic.Missing Persons p.g.91.

[63]Ibid.p.g.92.

child in rotting meat which he grows to feel comforted by after being forced to wear the cap. The blanket which she knits is a map of the police museum where the diary is supposedly kept while the knitted black scarf becomes a snake in a parody of the reason Tsafendas gave for killing Verwoerd.

> 14 'Have you got it, child?' she asks, looking at my empty hands. I shake my head. 'It doesn't matter,' she says. 'Perhaps I had it all along.' She taps the lid of her wooden basket with fingernails like beaks.[84]

The non-existent diary which the child looks for in the police museum is something she suddenly says she has had all along, while the child narrator says that he has composed it, "dredging it up from my dreams".[85] The story itself is composed like journal entries with its numbered paragraphs and short entries. The result is a multi-layered construct which highlights the disjunctures between appearance and reality- a search for what never existed, is constructed, becoming real as the motivation for the killing is one which can be understood by both child and geriatric in a context of violence where things are never what

---

[84]Ibid.p.g.95.

[85]Ibid.p.g.96.

they seem to be.

Missing Persons represents the most cogent recent example of a work in which "the function of irony...is neither incorporative to a hidden or explicit centre, nor relocative within a framework, but translocative across the lines of the multiple discourses that are constructing the cultural nodes and spaces of the society" since in the text "the intersections of different discourses open up not only the cross-cutting tracks of history but also the problematic relations between subjectivity and location".[86]

Vladislavic 'fictionalises' the idea of a shared South African history or identity, replacing certainty with fragmentation and alienation. The world he creates is one filled with 'missing people' within a context of official attempts at determinism which leads to ambiguous and fragmented conceptions of the self and society as a whole.

In **Journal of a Wall** the vicissitudes of personal memory are linked to historical memory in a world perceived entirely from

---

[86]Marais,S."Ivan Vladislavic's Re-Vision of the South African Short Story Cycle" p.g.41.

one side of a wall. The narrator is unable to communicate with his neighbours except through recording the history of the wall being built.

> The combined haze of the dust-cloud and the net curtain behind which I was standing was making it very difficult for me to see what was going on. By this time a sense was growing in me that it was very important to catch every detail, although I was still blind to the fact that I should have been writing it all down as it happened.[87]

Perceptual bias is highlighted as is the importance of recording history, but it is an ordinary history of mundane events thereby levelling the distinction between the ordinary and the extra-ordinary within history.

The wall becomes one made of the bricks of history in its construction of the walls of Apartheid. The unreality of the situation is reinforced by television interludes through which broader society is mediated.

> I returned to the television set...the news came on. It was

---

[87]Vladislavic. Missing Persons p.g.29.

> Michael de Morgan. He told us there was unrest in the township again. He showed us a funeral crowd being dispersed with tear-gas...soldiers. Some people hurling bricks into the burning bus.[88]

Meaning is constructed in layers of mediated histories which diverge but are presented in the media as empirical news. Vladislavic is exposing the meta-construction of this process as well as the interiorization of meaning in the alienation of the narrator's suburban life.

> The breeze smelt of formalin. Everything was covered in wax and powdered and pinned. I brought back a newspaper billboard that said THREE MORE DIE IN UNREST and it was easy to believe in unrest and death with the rattle of leaves in the throats of the drains, the letterboxes choked with pamphlets, the bottles of milk souring on the doorsteps.[89]

Life has become frozen within the walls which limit the suburbs while the rest of the country burns behind the screen of official

---

[88]Ibid.p.g.24.

[89]Ibid.p.g.32.

explanations which never echo along suburban streets.

A similar feeling of dislocation is depicted in **When My Hands Burst into Flames** where the protagonist is mentally ill, believing that his hands are burning and setting everything that he touches on fire.

> Wednesday afternoon, mid-winter, finds me at the counter in the United Building Society (Hillbrow), minding my own business, making a cash withdrawal, when my hands burst into flames. I react predictably: fling myself on the floor, cry out, roll around, try to beat one flaming hand with the other.[90]

The narrator's midas touch of fire is what distinguishes him from other people, he becomes irritated when no one notices him, highlighting his isolation and need for any type of attention. He returns to his flat where there "is nothing much to do" and contemplates torching the park. According to Foucault, madness can be seen as a type of lost truth, a way of seizing the "racinating groundwork of the truth that underlies our more

---

[90]Ibid.p.g.99.

specific realizations of what we are about."[91] The narrator could therefore seem to be articulating a 'truth' of his environment - "I am highly inflammable. Better, I am incendiary."[92] He is a living embodiment of official jargon, internalising that which is perceived as receiving the most attention and becoming it as an escape from his monadic existence while simultaneously revealing the absurdity of such terminology.

In **Movements**, the impact of social fragmentation is portrayed in terms of its inter-personal cost in the relationship between a couple attempting to communicate while on the point of breaking up.

> He cries for the first time, in black and white. This is during a confession, in a parked car. The radio provides the soundtrack. The sky co-operates with rain. The windscreen mists over. A streetlight tosses in some lighting.[93]

Their lives have become scripted or un-real, mimicking a

---

[91]Foucault,M.Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason (London:Routledge,1961) p.g.vii.

[92]Vladislavic.Missing Persons p.g.103.

[93]Ibid.p.g.63.

television program, as real as the violence on the news. Their tears become weapons used to gain the upper hand, while later their means of communication is that of interpreting each others' gestures. Yet he construes the opposite meaning from her hand gestures while believing that his movements convey his message, only to discover at the conclusion that he has not moved at all. The story emphasises the idea that the inability to communicate spills into everything, where the unreality presented as the real in South Africa results in an inability to distinguish it at all.

> What is pertinent here is that...South African history may be construed as a narrative of cumulative disaster...It was a social text that tried to write us all into a particular scenario. The nation's as well as the individual's autobiography was to be permanently fixed... the Population Registration Act, which would constitute for each of us, preclusively and forbiddenly, the only authorised story.[94]

A Science of Fragments encapsulates the main ideas of the text as a whole- of the fragmentation of reality and identity as mediated through memory and history. The story consists of

---

[94]van Wyk Smith.M."Waiting for Silence;or, The Autobiography of Metafiction in Some Recent South African Novels" Current Writing (3,1991) p.g.93.

different memory sequences after a death, which cut across time and space in a search for consistent meaning without finding any.

> Fragments neither close
> nor open meaning:
> they may mean anything except
> wholeness, except certainty.[95]

Meaning is only found in fragments which, when put together, never form a whole. The narrator remembers his friend in snatches of memory- sitting in a tree, giving him a birthday present, eating apricots- but each is merely a different version of her which does not capture her entirety.

> On the anniversary of her death, his grief, he takes two versions of her, a dancer and a sleeper, from their shroud. He can no longer remember why he chose these two from among hundreds. He pins them up, pushing the pins carefully into familiar wounds.[96]

The implication is that memory, and therefore history as the memory of events, is fragmented. Feelings can only be apprehended

---

[95]Vladislavic.Missing Persons p.g.83.

[96]Ibid.p.g.90.

in textual form in that her death "became more believable with every word he set down."[97] The othering process is so complete that the self becomes other, only experienced from without.

One of the memory sequences of the story occurs in the bar of the Flashback Hotel, establishing a direct link to the story **Flashback Hotel** in which the narrator is in disguise after planting a bomb. The landscape is surreal with bloated patrons and starving waiters amidst wreckage which includes craters in the floor filled with dead waiters for the patrons to step over to complete the violent context which is normalised. Identity is fluid with the narrator being able to pass for a "general or a traffic cop or a train driver".[98] The ironic twist at the story's conclusion is that he attends a fancy dress party as a missing person - he is missing in the sense that he is evading the law, as well as in the sense that his identity is missing both literally (He has some one else's passport) and figuratively in terms of the identity prescribed to him by the Apartheid system.

> When is a person missing? When he is not there, or not all there, for that matter. When he is caught up in a time warp

---

[97]Ibid.p.g.83.

[98]Ibid.p.g.15.

> that has left him behind, or when he has never possessed the impetus to actually arrive. When he misses the point, or the person he seeks to engage.....[Vladislavic] hold's the satirist's mirror up to 'our very strange society' so that, in Arthur Koestler's words,'the reader is thus made to recognize familiar features in the absurd, and absurdity in the familiar.'[99]

Many of the stories in the collection operate on an allegorical level. Post-colonial allegory challenges both prevailing theoretical assumptions as well as received ideas of history.

> But whether allegory is enlisting tradition in the service of historicism or is exercising its own "will to power" against that tradition, the allegorical text is seen to be bound up with the question of the authority of the past, locked in a 'dynastic relation' to it, and reduced to 'mere contingency' upon the historical or literary 'pretext' to which it refers.[100]

---

[99]Brown,V."Missing Persons" in English Academy Review (7,1993) p.g.127.

[100]Slemon,S."Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History." in Journal of Commonwealth Literature (32,1,1988) p.g.158.

According to Slemon, Post-Colonial allegory revises history as a concept, asserting new codes of recognition which focuses on history as discourse through the binocular lens of allegory which simultaneously highlights history's fixity, while asserting its discursive nature thereby opening it up to the possibility of transformation.[101] It has to be situated within historical material as well as its fictional re-enactment where our "depth perception is our inherited concepts of history itself."[102]

In **The Box**, Vladislavic allegorizes the construction of the South African republic. Quentin discovers that he can remove people and objects from the television set after he reaches in and grabs the Prime Minister.

> The professor week didn't work out too well. After an argument with a professor of divinity Quentin changed his mind, and started taking handfuls of spectators at sport events. 'Ordinary people, that's what we need,' he said to Mary, who was standing by with a picnic basket to ferry the new arrivals through.[103]

---

[101]Ibid.p.g.161.

[102]Ibid.p.g.160.

[103]Vladislavic.Missing Persons p.g.59.

A lilliputian republic develops in the spare room amidst confusion and a random selection of boundaries which serves to allegorize one of the 'important' historical events in South African history- its own formation as a republic is rendered as random and absurd. The authority of the Prime Minister is dismissed along with his physical shrinkage as he begins to bargain with Quentin for greater freedoms. An agreement is drawn up and the Prime Minister is 'relocated' from the hamster cage to the spare room which becomes his 'homeland'.[104] The story allegorizes both the formation of the republic as well as the homeland system, highlighting the absurdity of having to negotiate for freedoms with the people who stole them initially.

In **We came to the Monument**, a Voortrekker statue comes to life in an apocalyptic landscape where remnant Voortrekkers wander the landscape as refugees seeking shelter in their ruined monuments. The story consists of two narrative voices- the statue and a young woman who the statue loved when he still lived in a park. The story allegorizes the violence behind official symbols, deconstructing historical mythologies.

---

[104]Marais,S."Ivan Vladislavic's Re-Vision of the South African Story Cycle." p.g.52.

> But then the local historians, who wanted to give our city a history with footnotes, began to say that sometimes the hand that was open in the morning was shut at night. They said that I was some kind of miracle or, at least, that I contradicted myself. The people paid no attention. There were no tour buses full of pilgrims. The people knew that a statue is only a statue.[105]

Official mythologies are offset against popular knowledge. The statue becomes a person while people move into monuments, becoming relics of history. The landscape itself is violent with a "ravenous wind", beating sun and eroding rain[106] while the city limits become the walls of an asylum-

> I walked through the gutted city. I walked past the survivors, asleep in the ruins, in their stainless-steel beds, in their striped pyjamas, above their patient shoes, next to their incorruptible clocks. I walked out of the city, along the route taken by the refugees. And so I came at length to the monument and it seemed like a place to

---

[105]Vladislavic.Missing Persons p.g.73.

[106]Ibid.p.g.72.

stay.[107]

The story constitutes a meta-narrative, highlighting the narrative behind official symbols with its attendant violence and mythologising processes where the only thing incorruptible is a clock, a measurement of linear time or history which is a clinical dissection of the past which cannot record the subtleties or events which surround it.

> The interlocking allusions to monuments, statues, and stone which are encountered throughout the collection point to a nation's preoccupation with the record of its achievements and unity, and to its desire to perpetuate itself. However, the dislocated and alienated experiences of the characters in the stories- the "missing persons" of the title- each of whom is in some sense in transit, dispossessed and faceless, negate this sense of a shared history and destiny, and expose the fractured reality constructed by the architects of apartheid.[108]

Apartheid aimed to collectivize identity, neglecting the idea

---

[107]Ibid.p.g.76.

[108]Marais,S."Ivan Vladislavic's Re-vision of the South African Story Cycle" p.g.55.

that identity is predicated at a specific moment from a concrete position where sameness is intimately connected to presence (sharing the same space and time). Fabian equates "same time" with more than physical synchronicity as it is relational, bounded by events; while "same place" is seen as a construct of expectation. Thus shared time and space are fused into identities called community, society, civilization and history.[109] Apartheid, in fracturing both space and time, could not ultimately hold these identities within the fragmented bounds it constructed as the impact of the system as a whole resulted in the fragmentation of identity within as well as between these bounds.

Missing Persons could be seen to be the autobiography of an internal mindscape, reflecting an intelligence imploding or turning in on itself as it relates to the unreality of the external world in which it is formed, thereby placing it in the realm of lived ambiguity. The process in which both self and other are defined has generalised from Apartheid "otherings" in terms of racial classifications and become one, in the mind of the narrator, of self and all others which, in turn, forms a discursive loop back onto the self.

---

[109]Fabian. Time and the Work of Anthropology p.g.229.

The text could be seen as an attempt to portray a society held together by ambiguity rather than the social determinism of official policy. This idea is reinforced by the racial "un-specificity" of the characters whose race classification under the Apartheid system is gleaned from the areas they inhabit or access to particular services and responses within their environment thereby creating a meta-construction of the ideology which underpins a system.

> There is always something decentered about the medium of culture, about language, textuality, and signification, which always escapes and evades the attempt to link it, directly and immediately, with other structures. And yet, at the same time, the shadow, the imprint, the trace of those other formations, of the intertextuality of texts in their institutional positions, of texts as sources of power, of textuality as a site of representation and resistance, all of those questions can never be erased....[110]

Missing Persons dismisses the notion of a shared history or culture in South Africa, highlighting the layers of mediated

---

[110]Hall,S."Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies" in Grossberg,L.Nelson,C.&Treichler,P.Cultural Studies (New York:Routledge,1992) p.g.284.

histories in an attempt to expose the violence which underlies the context in which identity is formed. Identity is presented as being overdetermined by the Apartheid system to the extent that it has turned in on itself, fragmented and dislocated from the social context in which meaning is usually found. Hall's delineation of identity as being fluid and socially constructed is depicted in the text in its portrayal of the ruptures and discontinuities of the self.

CONCLUSION

The Smell of Apples and Missing Persons interrogate the construction of identity in South Africa. Both texts are written by white males who occupy positions of power within society, yet their depictions of identity differ while sharing concerns. The texts emerge from a context of Apartheid ideology which attempted to regulate all aspects of social structure but its determinism gave rise to difference rather than conformity as epitomised by these texts.

Mark Behr's The Smell of Apples is a depiction of an identity shaped by and perpetuating official ideology as mediated through history and memory. History is depicted in terms of its transmission and appropriation in upholding ideology. The disjuncture between appearance and reality is foregrounded in terms of historical duplicity- the South African involvement in the war in Angola, revising the past by denying genocide in terms of the self but placing responsibility for those actions on the side of the other. A strong relationship is established between official history and family history, both made to cohere by the violence which attends it. History is presented as a meta-

construction, textualized and re-textualized in official and family discourse, appropriated to support its ideological tenants. Memory is selective in establishing a history consistent with its ideological view of itself. The other is presented in terms of race as well as ideology, which links into the textualization of history as illustrated by Karla who becomes other in liberalization. The Smell of Apples produces a world in which dissent is re-incorporated into the dominant paradigm, neutralising heterogeneity in its maintenance of power in a negation of agency.

Ivan Vladislavic's Missing Persons is also a depiction of identity shaped by official ideology but with very different results. Vladislavic portrays the fragmentation of identity due to official overdetermination, also emphasising history and memory in terms of textualization but using meta-fiction as a mechanism to highlight the constructedness of narrativization. History is revealed not only in terms of layered meanings but also in the absurdity of its creations - the familiar is de-familiarized in order to depict the fractures within the dominant ideology. Apartheid is delineated as a total institution which, in its extreme determinism, resulted in implosion- in the inability to distinguish appearance from reality at all where the

othering process is so complete that it is generalized into self and all others, resulting in dislocation and fragmentation.

Both texts make use of a child narrator. Behr utilises the implicit innocence of a child in order to create an identity which is mouldable in terms of social norms, illustrating how violence is internalized and sublimated in a child's mind, emerging in later life as a preference for war situations. The child narrator is used as tool in order to create a character whose complicity in perpetuating Apartheid is minimalized and constructed as an actor within historical determinism. Vladislavic's use of a child narrator in two of the stories functions as a template in which to examine the disjuncture between how events are presented and the meaning they come to occupy in memory. The child anchors national events to personal ones, mixing them up in terms of meaning to highlight their absurdity where Verwoerd's legacy becomes the compost heap that he is digging on the day of the funeral. Official meaning is thereby transposed onto personal meaning, creating an alternative to official explanations of events. The permeability of a child is used to show the fractures within Apartheid structures as the child internalizes the explanations as well as the absurdity of the explanations, resulting in a meta-construction of meaning.

Author Fainman R
Name of thesis Textualization and re-textualization: the construction of identity in South Africa 1997

PUBLISHER:
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
©2013

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg Library website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the Library website.