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# "On the brink of the mundane": postapartheid literary representations of Johannesburg in the work of Ivan Vladislavi

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University of the Witwatersrand

PhD Thesis in English Literature

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*Title:* **"On the Brink of the Mundane"[1]: Postapartheid Literary Representations of Johannesburg in the Work of Ivan Vladislavić**

*Supervisor:* Professor Gerald Gaylard

[1] Vladislavić, I. *The Restless Supermarket*. David Philips: Cape Town, 2001, p.215.

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# Declaration for PhD Thesis

I undertake that all the material presented for this degree is my own work and has not been written for me, in whole or in part, by any other person. I also undertake that any quotation or paraphrase from the published or unpublished work of another person has been duly acknowledged.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Not writing is always a relief and sometimes a pleasure. Writing about what cannot be written, by contrast, is the devil's own job. Yet words on a page make all things possible. Any line, even this one, may be a place to begin.

- Ivan Vladislavić, *The Loss Library*[2]

[2] Vladislavić, I. *The Loss Library*. Umuzi: Johannesburg, 2011, Location 947 (Kindle eBook).

# Abstract

This thesis adopts a contrapuntal reading of Johannesburg through the work of Ivan Vladislavić. While it evaluates the dominant and pervasive readings of the city in current and historical scholarship, carefully considering the way in which its gold-mining origins have shaped a city that is dominated by a culture of surface, violence, and socio-historical amnesia, it ultimately aims to show how Vladislavić's fiction subverts and challenges these prevailing means of perceiving Johannesburg. As part of inaugurating a depth reading of the city, Vladislavić sets about defamiliarising both the textual and urban landscape as a means of engendering a momentary state of lostness. The experience of lostness means that habitual markers are no longer able to guide or provide comfort to the textual and urban navigator. As a result, lostness dislodges accustomed ways of seeing, reading, and writing the city, thus allowing for both textual and urban rediscovery to ensue. The abandonment of conventions of meaning allows Vladislavić to render the city afresh. What his depictions reveal are the less commonly noticed aspects of Johannesburg city-life – in other words, what lies beneath its culture of surface. This depth reading uncovers a variety of palimpsests of both an urban and natural variety. Moreover, in this process, nature, something we tend to view as peripheral to the urban environment, is exposed and shown to exist in the shadows of the postcolonial city – haunting culture. This revelation ultimately deconstructs Johannesburg's often paranoid culture of surface and proffers the ameliorative alternatives of natural flow, provisionality, and flux.

# **Dedication:** *La Città d'Oro*

I dedicate this thesis to my late grandmother, my Nonna, who left post-WWII Italy eight months pregnant with my father to come to South Africa for a better life. Three weeks after arriving in Johannesburg she gave birth to my father. At the time she spoke no English, had very little money, no home, a toddler in tow, and another baby on the way. She came to join my grandfather, who, in putting his wartime aeronautical experience to good use, had found factory work, first in Port Elizabeth and then Johannesburg. Having experienced fascist Italy for most of her life, and upon arriving in a country mired by its own despotic, segregative politics, she decried this move from one dictatorship to another. It was something she held against my grandfather for all of his life, and the rest of hers. My grandparents were decidedly working-class, and while many white middle-class women of the time lived a life of leisure, my grandmother worked many long hours as a seamstress (sewing clothes for wealthier women) to help support the family. She taught herself English, and many years later, regaled my sister and I with colourful accounts of embarrassing linguistic misadventures – all drenched in the musicality of her thick Bolognese accent. She had always wanted to study further to become a teacher, but war and Italian gender-politics insisted that she leave school at the age of fifteen to find work to help support her parents. And so it seems that both education and the English language were important tools for success – at least from her vantage point. In retrospect, it makes sense that I have dedicated my life to both the field of education as well as the academic pursuit of English Literature. On her deathbed, just over a year ago, she told me that she did not want her death to interfere with my doctoral studies. It was an unexpectedly selfless thing to say at the time, but completely in character for a woman whose life evinced her admirable magnanimity, compassion, verve, and resilience. For these reasons, she has always been, and continues to be, an inspiration to me.

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I would like to thank and acknowledge a few people whose time, support, and contributions proved invaluable to the development and writing of this thesis.

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I would like to thank Ivan Vladislavić, the man behind this study, for expressing interest in my work and for being generous enough to send me the manuscript proofs of his essay "Flow." I was delighted to be extended this privilege. "Flow" will form part of a collection edited by Vladislavić called *Ponte City*, which has been produced by Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse, and will be published by Steidl in 2014.

My thanks also go to the Wits Transformation Office and the Carnegie Foundation for awarding me a 'Time-off from Teaching' Research Grant for six months in 2012. To both Professors Beatrys Lacquet and Ian Jandrell, thank you for supporting me with a Dean's Discretionary PhD Completion Grant in 2013, which afforded me a further six months off teaching in the second half of 2013. Without these grants, I would not have been able to finish my thesis. I managed to complete about eighty percent of the doctoral work during these two grant periods.

Moreover, I would like to extend my thanks to the University of the Witwatersrand's Centre for Learning, Teaching, and Development for accepting me into their PhD Coaching Programme and for assigning me to one of the most thoughtful, kind, and compassionate people I know, Professor Gillian Drennan. I could not have asked for a better mentor. Thank you, Gill, for helping me overcome various personal obstacles in order to come closer to realizing this life goal.

I would like to thank my family for all their love, support, and understanding during this time. To my mother, thank you for reading almost everything I have produced and for being my number one fan. My love of literature is thanks to you. To my father, thank you for always believing in me and for making the effort to be interested in my work – despite not always enjoying it! I would like to express my gratitude to my sister, Amy, for designing the beautiful cover of the bound copy of this thesis document. Amy, thank you, too, for encouraging me to explore other creative outlets during the process of writing this thesis.

And lastly, to my husband Ernesto Dos Santos Soares, thank you for helping me in more ways than can be expressed. Thank you for your unwavering support, for the countless affirmations, for keeping me grounded and calm and happy. Thank you for ensuring that my teacup was always full and for insisting that I take breaks and respect mealtimes. Thank you for magically producing food and snacks when I could not fend for myself, for accompanying me on walks, and for listening to me ramble on about inchoate ideas and half-formed theories. On one of these walks you were instrumental in helping to develop the 'untended garden' metaphor in my concluding chapter. Thank you for all of this and for what I may have forgotten to mention.

Please note that the fourth chapter of this thesis was adapted and submitted for publication in 2013. It was published as an article entitled "Zoo-keeping in Johannesburg: Man/Beast Contestations in Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*" in *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 25:1, 2013, pp.100-113.

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> Johannesburg is a blank, impenetrable slate for everyone but the local – and only the local with the most honed narrative and observational skills, with the greatest capacity for stillness, knows how to tame the city on paper … Which is why Vladislavić could be the most important writer working in South Africa's intractable heart.
>
> – Kevin Bloom, "Writing the Divide"[3]

[3] Bloom, K. "Writing the Divide" in *Empire*, 1:2, p.63.

# Introduction: Taming the City on Paper

> The veld slopes down to a highway in the south. On the far side, the sawtooth roofs of factories, the rutted flanks of a mine dump. These are the leavings of the mine whose headgear you can see on the horizon in the west, like a model made of matchsticks, an engine of war. The sky is the colour of a week-old bruise. You may hear the whisper of traffic on Main Reef Road, the crack of rifle shots at the range, which is carved out of another dump among the gums. In the east, beyond the billboard advertising Caesar's, you will find a vlei full of poisoned water and a suburb cowering beneath power lines.
>
> Now you must go into the veld – don't forget your walking shoes – slowly there's no rush. Crystals of black ash and charred stalks as brittle as the wing bones of birds shatter under your soles. Already assegais of new grass are thrusting through the scorched earth, prickling your eyes with their pointed green. (pp.181-2)[4]

This establishing shot of the city of Johannesburg, a freeze-frame of the industrial decay of the mine dumps that flank the Main Reef Road, the spine along which Johannesburg was erected, comes to us from "Johannesburg's foremost chronicler"[5], Ivan Vladislavić. He is one of postapartheid South Africa's most pre-eminent authors, having won many of the country's prestigious literary awards. Many of his works are set in the city and can speak either directly or peripherally to the act of representing Johannesburg. While Vladislavić's oeuvre cannot be solely limited to Johannesburg – after all, his works gesture towards issues that extend beyond the scope of a single urban centre, evincing a highly acclaimed literary versatility and subtlety – many scholars have celebrated his work for its ability to render Johannesburg authentically and creatively within the literary realm. Arguably, in *Portrait with Keys*, Vladislavić's most obvious Johannesburg novel[6], the city stands as a character in and of itself. It is not only the backdrop for

[4] Vladislavić, I. *Portrait with Keys: Joburg and what-what*. Umuzi: Houghton, 2006.

[5] Poplak, R. "Writing Johannesburg" in *The Walrus*, July/August 2010. URL: http://walrusmagazine.com/article.php?ref=2010.07-books-writing-johannesburg. Date accessed: 6 July 2012.

[6] I find that the subtitle appending the main title of *Portrait with Keys* helps to substantiate this claim. "Joburg & what-what", alongside the cover-art of the 1983 Van Eck House implosion, prefigure the text's setting and thematic preoccupation, thus situating it firmly within the environs of the city of Johannesburg. One could argue that the text would not exist without Johannesburg. To borrow from the parlance of the theatrical world, the city operates as an off-stage character, informing and guiding the action of its human characters. The setting of the city also frames the bipartite structure of the text so that when the author-narrator leaves Johannesburg for a period of time, narrative hiatus ensues. What can be interpreted from this silence is that without Johannesburg is there is no story. What

action, it also informs and shapes the narrative. Vladislavić's representations of the city are notable for their elegant combination of linguistic precision with a particular tractability for the provisional and the inconclusive. His ludic satire, mixed in with episodes of absurd surrealism, disrupt conventional modes of seeing and writing the city. In gravitating towards the minor and marginalised, his fiction portrays the city from unexpected vantage points, revealing astonishing vistas in the process. His "honed narrative and observational skills" allow him, as Kevin Bloom attests in *Empire*, to "tame the city on paper."[7] Indeed, his fiction means that he is able to "stumble on the essence of Joburg – if such fleeting qualities exist in concentrate – bursting into the air like the sap of a plant crushed thoughtlessly underfoot" (*Portrait with Keys*, p.104).

In the passage provided above, the patina of the rusty headgear is anthropomorphically mirrored by the colour of the bruised sky. The hard edges of the sawtooth roofs are softened by the "whisper" of traffic and the gentle sloping of the veld as it meets the highway. The gum trees, planted for use by the mining sector, symbolise nature reclaiming the uneven ground spawned by the mine leavings. The headgear is representative of "an engine of war" – perhaps a reminder of the military-industrial complex that accompanied the region's history of colonial conquest. This mnemonic is echoed by the "scorched earth" – a linguistic spectre, reminiscent of the devastating British military strategy implemented during the Anglo-Boer war. However, the imposing sight of the headgear in all its monumental glory is diminished and minoritised by the description: "a model made of matchsticks." The accoutrements of industrialism, the power lines, find the "suburbs cowering" like an animal – perhaps figuratively flinching, too, from the "crack of rifle shots." The casino billboard juxtaposed against the "poisoned vlei", most likely formed by mine drainage, defers the expected replenishment one desires from this dry city which has been touted as a Mecca of avarice and materialism. The duality, and at times, paradoxical portrayal of brutalised modernity against the softening, albeit damaged, attributes of nature casts the city in an interesting dialectical tension. The dry and burnt earth is juxtaposed against fledgling green shoots of new grass – little "assegais" that refuse to be completely subdued by pervasive toxic industrialism. This excerpt finds the reader, who, by virtue of the defamiliarising and intimate use of the second person voice, is explicitly invited by the narrator to accompany him, stumbling across the city's essence – if such things exist in concentrate, Vladislavić warns. Earlier on in *Portrait with Keys*, it is significant that Vladislavić chooses to describe the essence of

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*Portrait with Keys* has achieved for the literary map of Johannesburg is often compared to the manner in which Turkey's cultural heart and largest city has been cast in the literary guise of Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul* (2003).

[7] Bloom, K. "Writing the Divide" in *Empire*, 1:2, p.63.

Joburg[8] in distinctly natural terminology: "bursting into the air like the sap of a plant" (p.104). Although the passage above merely indicates a select extract from a much longer and diverse text, this sketch of the city can be used as a humble springboard from which this present study's analysis of Vladislavić's Johannesburg novels takes its cue. This wasteland panorama of Johannesburg fails to deter the narrator from walking the city in order to rediscover it. What he finds on these routes defamiliarises prevailing perceptions of the city and unearths what we ordinarily fail to see. One of the things Vladislavić unveils in this process is the affirming property of natural flow. Nature is subdued in Johannesburg, but its presence still makes itself known, "prickling your eyes with their pointed green." Like the narrator in portrait 63[9], nature "should feel utterly out of place, but instead … belong[s] here" – it does not follow "but conclude[s] as surely as a non-sequitur" (p.87).

The departure point for this thesis seeks to find a discursive and literary means by which the dominant ways of seeing, reading, and writing the city of Johannesburg can be challenged and subverted. Part of the first chapter's exposition concerns the city's gold rush origins and how this frontier town status has permeated contemporary perceptions of the city. Johannesburg is pervasively viewed and depicted as a highly superficial, materialistic city lacking a locally articulated, vernacular architectural language. It is often characterised as an ugly, even toxic city – the "rutted flanks … week-old bruise … poisoned vlei" – and as a crime-saturated dystopia. However, there is more to Johannesburg than meets the eye. Vladislavić is particularly adept in unveiling what is normally hidden and overlooked. To achieve this, Vladislavić employs the aesthetic tool of defamiliarisation in a slightly renovated and updated way. I have called Vladislavić's aesthetic experimentalism postcolonial formalism, which is a term I have derived from Gerald Gaylard's "historical formalism."[10]

This introductory chapter sets the scene by briefly exploring the territory of urban studies, concentrating on the crossover it shares with urban literature. This nebulous and cross-disciplinary field presents the ideal foundation from which to analyse Vladislavić's work. I briefly consider the impact other city writers' work has on the imaginative project of the city. Literature has the power the bear down on the collective cultural currency of the city. It is for this reason

[8] Joburg is a commonly accepted abbreviation for Johannesburg. It is alternatively abbreviated with the apostrophe – as in, Jo'burg. I have chosen to stick to the former variant except where the apostrophied version appears in a quotation.

[9] Please note that for consistency and legibility purposes I have decided to represent the portrait numbers numerically each time I reference *Portrait with Keys* in-text.

[10] Gaylard, G. Introduction to *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.10.

that such a study boasts merit for a South African and postapartheid context. I explore the confines of post-spectacle literature by canvassing the scholarly positions of pre-eminent South African academics, such as Njabulo S. Ndebele, Sarah Nuttall, Achille Mbembe[11], Gerald Gaylard, and Lindsay Bremner. The first chapter then contemplates the dominant ways in which Johannesburg has been perceived. I chart its history from its mining-town origins to today's economic powerhouse and reflect upon the pervasive sense of socio-historical amnesia, hypermodern hyperreality, and heady materialism that characterises one's experience of living and "using" the city. The analysis of Johannesburg's culture of surface dominates much of the critical scholarship on the city and has been taken as a defining feature of its citiness.

The rest of the thesis aims to destabilise and relativise these dominant perceptions of Johannesburg. While Vladislavić's work does not neglect to reflect upon and critique the city for its simulacral culture, as the first chapter evinces, it also digs deeper and shows more. Via the literary instrument of defamiliarisation, which is fleshed out in Chapter Two, Vladislavić subjects his readers to an estranged depiction of both textuality and urbanity in order to disrupt automatised readings. The effect of Vladislavić's modulation of Shklovskian *ostranenie* produces an historical or postcolonial formalism. This experimental aesthetic mode subverts habitual modes of reading and writing the city. I argue that defamiliarisation induces an experience of momentary lostness. Lostness, on both a literal and abstracted level, possesses figurative potency for Vladislavić and becomes the means by which the reader is forced into an abdication of comfortable, automatic markers that guide reading and moving through the city. Accordingly, lostness, as I demonstrate in Chapter Three, becomes an enabling device for textual and urban rediscovery. This state of lostness helps to reveal that which is customarily concealed by the culture of surface. In doing so, it uncovers urban and natural palimpsests. Defamiliarisation and lostness, by virtue of their propensity for disruption, help to inaugurate the establishment of a depth narrative. The depth narrative initiates a reading of Johannesburg that reveals lesser-known and previously unseen elements. Subjecting Vladislavić's work to a depth reading exposes the bizarre and 'othered', the previously submerged, the fecund reservoirs that lie beneath the surface. Chapters Three and Four investigate what the depth narrative brings to the fore. Chapter Four considers the country/city dichotomy and challenges man's superior anthropocentrism by relativising the hierarchically arranged man/beast binary. It shows that nature and beasts still haunt the city's conscience, pushed to periphery, but still present, albeit in

[11] Although Achille Mbembe was born in Cameroon and cannot be strictly considered a "South African academic", he has made significant contributions to the scholarly body of work on Johannesburg during his time at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

an understated and sometimes camouflaged way. Chapter Five reaches what may be considered the logical conclusion of the depth narrative. In contemplating the proliferation of water imagery in Vladislavić's work, it suggests that since water is evocative of the Jungian unconscious, what may be physically scarce is more metaphorically pervasive than what the extant geological reality would suggest. Water in Vladislavić has been taken up as a symbol of flow – an affirming conceptual force, which operates on a literary level, responsive to flux, contingency, and instability.

It is necessary to foregound the fact that this is a contrapuntal thesis. Vladislavić is not a nature writer, but a city writer. That this whole project says something about nature and flow, within the confines of urban texts, is somewhat unexpected and slightly contradictory. My use of this term pays homage to Edward Said's critical reinscription of musical contrapuntalism, which derives from the word 'counterpoint', where one melody is played in conjunction with another to create a notable contrast.[12] In his analysis of colonial texts, Said appropriated and introduced contrapuntalism into the realm of Colonial Discourse Theory. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said defines a "contrapuntal perspective" as an epistemological and hermeneutic mode of comparative literary and historical assessment.[13]

> That is, we must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others.[14]

Reading works contrapuntally requires a re-examination of the cultural archive "with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts."[15] The product of reading through this postcolonially engaged mode of scrutiny means that "alternative or new narrative energies [begin to] emerge."[16] In light of this theoretical underpinning, my examination of Johannesburg, through Vladislavić, involves readings that counter the dominant ones. In trying to achieve this contrapuntalised reading, this thesis employs a mix of genres: history, close

[12] Soanes, C. and Stevenson, A. (Eds.) "Counterpoint" in *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2nd Ed.). Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005, p.395.

[13] Said, E.W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage: New York, 1994.

[14] Ibid, p.33.

[15] Ibid, p.51.

[16] Ibid, p.51.

reading, reportage, urban geography, and urban studies. Metropolitan theories of "using" and traversing the city are read against localised acts of flânerie. Vladislavić's rendering of Johannesburg is thus read against an interplay of intertwined histories and narratives. Furthermore, Vladislavić's works are also read against each other thematically and rhythmically. In engaging with the city and Vladislavić's writing from the different vantage points proffered by these variegated disciplines and modalities, this study embraces digression and openness, and intends to disrupt expectations.

What this contrapuntal reading of Johannesburg through Vladislavić arrives at is a postcolonial ecocritical interpretation of the city. That this whole project says something about nature and flow, within the confines of urban texts, is somewhat unexpected and slightly contradictory. However, what this study seeks to show is that Vladislavić's carefully attuned aesthetic, which reveals the epiphanic in the ordinary, inverts customary readings of the city that have come to depict it by silhouette. Instead, by re-calibrating the literary consciousness of his readers, Vladislavić's irreverent and iconoclastic works playfully unsettle both the textual and urban status quo. As Gerald Gaylard states in his introduction to *Marginal Spaces* (the seminal collection of essays on Vladislavić's entire body of work):

> Vladislavić's consciousness is highly sensitive to the aesthetic and strains against constraints on the imagination, the prison of language, generic limits, the borderlines of context and the walls of Johannesburg, all while celebrating the ordinary.[17]

Ultimately, Vladislavić's Johannesburg novels refract oft-dismissed and overlooked aspects of the city to unveil the ordinary, the minor, the bizarre and the "marginal spaces."[18] Gaylard remarks that Vladislavić's work as a whole "foregrounds the pointillistically particular, idiosyncratic and marginal in postcolonial South Africa's articulation with and disjunction from globalization."[19] In shedding fresh light on the things we tend to ignore, Vladislavić promotes a different consciousness towards the text we read, and the city that exists around us. In embracing flow as a concept, Vladislavić challenges Johannesburg's proclivity for locking down space which hinders movement across different types of boundaries.

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[17] Gaylard, G. Introduction to *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.3.

[18] A term borrowed from the title of Gerald Gaylard's collection of critical essays, *Marginal Spaces*: (2011).

[19] Gaylard, G. "The Death of the Subject: Subjectivity in Post-apartheid Literature" in *Scrutiny 2*, 11:2, 2006, p.64.

This study focuses on the work on Ivan Vladislavić, but has tangentially (and where necessary) considered the work of other city-writers. Specific attention has been paid to Vladislavić's texts set in Johannesburg during the transitional-to-postapartheid era, i.e. *The Restless Supermarket* (2001)[20], *The Exploded View* (2004)[21], *Portrait with Keys* (2006)[22], and *Double Negative* (2011).[23] However, this thesis considers all of the fictional works (including the creative self-fiction) that comprise Vladislavić's corpus. The second chapter, in particular, examines the more formalistically experimental work, such as *Missing Persons* (1989)[24], *The Folly* (1993)[25], *Propaganda by Monuments* (1996)[26], T*he Loss Library* (2011)[27], and *A Labour of Moles* (2012)[28].[29]

A large portion of the critical analyses and close readings place their focus on *Portrait with Keys*, which might alert some readers to an unevenness in the attention paid to this text as opposed to others in Vladislavić's fictional oeuvre. *Portrait with Keys*' favoured status can be explained by its mode of representing the city of Johannesburg. The form of the novel along with its narrator-flâneur's point of view present an ostensibly "walkerly" text that is responsive to lostness, fragmentation, contingency and provisionality – qualities with theoretical and discursive potential that will be extrapolated and finessed in the development of the thesis' argument.

The title of this thesis takes its cue from a line in Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket*. In "The Proofreader's Derby", the second part of the novel, Fluxman – upon discovering the disorder unleashed by the "great unfastening" (p.227) – "pauses on the brink of the mundane to gather himself" (p.215). In context, Fluxman, Aubrey Tearle's proofreading alter ego, has to negotiate a strange world filled with "broken things" and "clutter"; but eventually he sees a light at the end of an alleyway, that which signals the "brink of the mundane" (pp.214-5). I feel that "on the brink of the mundane" stands as an effective metaphor for Vladislavić's writing and this study's evaluation of his body of work. The oxymoronic quality of the phrase situates the

[20] Vladislavić, I. *The Restless Supermarket*. David Philip: Cape Town, 2006.

[21] Vladislavić, I. *The Exploded View*. Random House: Johannesburg, 2004.

[22] Vladislavić, I. *Portrait with Keys: Joburg and what-what*. Umuzi: Houghton, 2006.

[23] Vladislavić, I. *Double Negative*. Umuzi: Cape Town, 2010.

[24] Vladislavić, I. *Flashback Hotel: Early Stories*. Umuzi: Cape Town, 2010.

[25] Vladislavić, I. *The Folly*. Serif: London, 1994.

[26] Vladislavić, I. *Propaganda by Monuments*. David Philips: Johannesburg, 1996.

[27] Vladislavić, I. *The Loss Library and Other Unfinished Stories*. Umuzi: Cape Town, 2011 (Kindle Ebook).

[28] Vladislavić, I. *A Labour of Moles*. (*The Cahiers Series*, No. 17.) Sylph Editions, The American University of Paris: London, 2011.

[29] Please note that, hereafter, all primary texts will be referenced in-text. All other sources will be cited via footnotes.

quotidian and humdrum along the fringes, on the edge – the ordinary within the bounds of what is peripheral. The idiom says a lot about the process by which Vladislavić defamiliarises and de-habitualises mundane and minor aspects of city-life – those things that exist on the margins, which are often left unseen and unnoticed – and imbues them with fresh life, awareness, and relevance. Vladislavić's work is at home with duality, antinomies, and irresolutions and makes capital from the creative potential these "space[s] of undecideability"[30] generate. He is able to make the ordinary seem bizarre, and conversely, refract the odd and peculiar through the portal of a familiar, commonplace viewpoint. Ultimately, this speaks of a literary consciousness that seeks out new perspectives and pathways of urban meaning and representation. As Gaylard observes, reading Vladislavić "requires a sensitivity to margins, emotions and implied narratives that are written as much through absence or negative space as through presence."[31] As the author-narrator notes in *Portrait with Keys*, he is "happy enough on the edge of the city" (p.46). This thesis aims to examine the significance behind what Vladislavić's preoccupation with marginalia, edges, and the mundane reveals.

I feel that a detailed study of Vladislavić's work is warranted for a number of reasons: firstly, he has built up an impressive oeuvre that demands sustained critical attention and, secondly, while his readership has been predominantly South African, his popularity – recently – has been increasing on a global stage. In the introduction to *Marginal Spaces* Gerald Gaylard claims that, "Locally [Vladislavić] has been positioned by critics as the voice of the 'now' in post-apartheid letters for his forensic analysis of South Africa in transition…"[32]André Brink, another distinguished local author, has high praise for Ivan Vladislavić. On the cover of the David Philip 1996 edition of *Propaganda by Monuments*, Brink's testimonial hails Vladislavić as "one of the most imaginative minds at work in South African literature today."[33] Vladislavić's novels have been translated into German, Dutch, French, and Croatian, and his recent promotional tours of The United States and India illustrate his growing prominence in global literary circles. Jenn Mar in *The Kenyon Review* – a journal produced by the prestigious American liberal arts college, Kenyon College – claims that he "is internationally recognized as one of South Africa's most significant

[30] Gaylard, G. Introduction to *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.11.

[31] Ibid, p.9.

[32] Ibid, p.16.

[33] Vladislavić, I. *Propaganda by Monuments*. David Philip: Cape Town, 1996 (cover testimonial).

living writers."[34] This plaudit signals the potential injection of interest into Vladislavić studies from Metropolitan intellectual centres situated in the Global North.

Furthermore, Vladislavić's sensitivity to the urban means that his work speaks exceedingly well to the growing body of work that exists in the crossover between literary and urban studies. Over the past two decades much exciting and stimulating interdisciplinary work has been produced focusing on the way in which cities are represented in literature and the arts. From a South African perspective, over the past decade urban scholarship and research centres in local institutions have been encouraging new forms of intervention in the study of cities. Urban and City research centres at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), the University of Cape Town (UCT), and the University of Pretoria (Tuks) bring together people who study the city as an "object of their research, reading, writing, theorising and practice."[35] This cross-disciplinary field of urban and literary engagement presents an opportunity for dynamic scholarly endeavour from within the South African academy.

Ivan Vladislavić, a second-generation South African, was born in Pretoria in 1957. His surname derives from Croatian origin, while his mother's lineage is a mix of Irish, English, and German. In the 1970s he moved to Johannesburg to study English and Afrikaans Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand.[36] After university, Vladislavić entered the media world, working as a translator "for a while", and then had a "brief and ignominious career in advertising."[37] In the eighties he joined anti-apartheid publishing house, Ravan Press, as an editor. He also worked as an assistant editor of *Staffrider*, a South African literary magazine.[38] He has worked as an editor since his tenure at Ravan Press and has edited various collections (*blank_Architecture* being one of many notable examples) as well as the works of Kevin Bloom, Antjie Krog, Charles van Onselen, and Jonny Steinberg, amongst others.[39] Andie Miller refers to him as "one of the most

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[34] Mar, J. "The Art of Failure: Memory and Apartheid", *The Kenyon Review*, Winter 2014. URL: http://www.kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/2014-winter/selections/the-loss-library-and-other-unfinished-stories-by-ivan-vladislavic-738439/. Date accessed: 21 April 2014.

[35] CUBES and ACC. *South Africa City Studies Conference 27-29 March 2014*, The University of the Witwatersrand, 2014. URL: http://www.wits.ac.za/conferences/citystudies. Date accessed: 21 April 2014.

[36] Warnes, C. "Interview with Ivan Vladislavić" in *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.104.

[37] Ibid, p.105.

[38] Gaylard, G. Preface to *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.xiv.

[39] Ibid, p.xiv.

sought after editors in the country."[40] In 1989, Vladislavić published his first collection of short stories, *Missing Persons*. Since then, Vladislavić has "gone on to become arguably South Africa's most prominent author in the post-apartheid era."[41]

**Representing the Literary City**

This section briefly contextualises the field of urban studies within which this present study of Vladislavić's postapartheid city novels situates itself. Analytical attention will be paid to the hermeneutics of the postapartheid city novel and will also consider what kinds of formalistic and aesthetic conventions inform the project of writing Johannesburg into being (to borrow a phrase from Lindsay Bremner). It will also review the perspectives of critics as they anticipate the defining attributes of post-spectacle urban literature. This evaluation shall set the scene for a thorough examination of Vladislavić's texts.

From the outset this project begs a number of questions. Why the city? Why should so much emphasis be placed on the city and why is it significant that this study concentrates on Johannesburg? Moreover, what role does writing the city play in relation to citiness? What is the relationship between the city and its different modes of literary representation? What bearing does the literary city have on articulating and representing urban space?

The city is an important focus of academic endeavour simply because the experience of modernity is also concomitantly the experience of the city. Thanks to imperialistic endeavours, nineteenth century industrialisation brought about wide-scale and international urbanisation. From a local perspective, the study of Johannesburg as an object of analysis is important for myriad reasons. Johannesburg is the largest South African city and is also the country's economic powerhouse. The semi-mythological proportions of the Jim-comes-to-Joburg trope – which takes it name from the 1949 South African film *African Jim*, which was popularly known as *Jim Comes to Jo'burg*, starring Daniel Adnewmah and Dolly Rathebe[42] – pervades artistic projects that depict the city, from Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy* to Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), to more recent examples, like Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow*, Jonathan Morgan's *Finding*

[40] Miller, A. "Inside the Toolbox" in *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.212.

[41] Gaylard, G. Preface to *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.xiv.

[42] Swanson, D. (Dir.) *African Jim*. Warrior Films: Johannesburg, 1949.

*Mr Madini* (1999), Norman Ohler's *Ponte City* (2003) and Perfect Hlongwane's *Jozi: A Novel* (2013). Lending weight to the prominent place Johannesburg boasts in the national cultural and socio-economic imaginary, Paton's novel famously cries out:

> All roads lead to Johannesburg. If you are white or if you are black they lead to Johannesburg. If the crops fail, there is work in Johannesburg. If there are taxes to be paid, there is work in Johannesburg … If there is a child to be born that must be delivered in secret, it can be delivered in Johannesburg.[43]

Fiction, creative self-fiction, and scholarly works on the city of Johannesburg have exploded over the past decade. In addition to Ivan Vladislavić's impressive oeuvre and some of the Jim-comes-to-Joburg texts cited above, works such as Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* (2005), Heidi Holland and Adam Robert's collection *From Jo'burg to Jozi* (2002), Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* (2007), Kevin Bloom's *Ways of Staying* (2009), Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* (2010), Jacob Dlamini's *Native Nostalgia*[44] (2009), and Craig Higginson's *The Landscape Painter* (2011) to scholarly texts like Richard Tomlinson et al's *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on an Emerging City* (2003), Keith Beavon's *Johannesburg: The Making and Shaping of the City* (2004), Martin J. Murray's *Taming the Disorderly City: The Spatial Landscape of Johannesburg after Apartheid* (2008), Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall's *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (2004; 2008), Clive M. Chipkin's *Johannesburg Transition: Architecture and Society From 1950* (2008), and Lindsay Bremner's *Writing the City into Being* (2010) are but a small selection of the diverse range of genres and titles that take Johannesburg as their creative or discursive focus. This steadily growing body of literary and academic work on Johannesburg signals a dynamic space for enquiry into postapartheid urban literature.

The city as a concept has already been the focus of much multi-disciplinary work. The field of urban studies speaks to the complex and vast array of work carried out by academics, artists, authors, architects, planners, strategists, and politicians assessing a wide spectrum of urban phenomena. Academics within this field try to understand cultural and social manifestations through spatial configurations. Social scientists and literary scholars working within the cognate disciplines of urban studies and urban geography combine aesthetic and cultural critiques as a means of investigating the ways in which material space is transfigured into a social and cultural product. An essential aspect for projects that adopt the city as their theoretical focus is the

[43] Paton, A. (1948) *Cry, The Beloved Country*. Vintage: Oxford, 2002, p.48.

[44] This text primarily places it focus on townships that exist on the periphery of Johannesburg.

recognition that cities do not solely exist as material realities. The city also exists as a corresponding imaginary space. The metaphorical space of a city can be accessed via the various conduits produced by the social imaginary. The social imaginary refers to the ways in which the lived experience of the city is articulated, measured, interpreted, and refracted by a city's inhabitants. One of the fruitful ways this social imaginary can be accessed is through the medium of literature. In their introduction to *The Blackwell City Reader*, Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson claim the "possibilities that the city appears to offer and our daily urban imaginings are influenced as much by the literature we have encountered as by lived experiences that have gone before."[45]

Literary representations reveal the city as a spatial metaphor. Literary scholars who scrutinise urban life via the vehicle of the city-novel are interested in the process by which space is "metaphorised."[46] For authors writing about the city, the challenge is to find ways of rendering urban space in lexical and linguistic terms. Representing the city requires a bridging of the material reality (physical space) and conceptual reality (mental space). Maria Balshaw and Liam Kennedy in *Urban Space and Representation* celebrate the power and critical potency of representations in shaping the narratives of place:

> Representation does powerful cultural work in a wide variety of forms to produce and maintain (but also to challenge and question) common notions of urban existence. Literature, film, architecture, painting, tourist guides, postcards, photography, city plans – all provide selective representations of the city and shape the metaphors, narratives and syntax which are widely used to describe the experience of urban living.[47]

Emphasising the important contribution city-writing makes to the urban studies discipline as well as city life itself, Bridge and Watson in *The Blackwell City Reader* maintain that:

> No city stands in bricks and mortar which is not also a space of the imagination or of representation. The effect of the city on the imagination exists in a constant tension represented on the one hand as stimulating the imagination and enabling creativity and on the other constraining it … Cities are places which enable the realization of the self, or conversely cities separate the self from creativity and imagination in spaces of alienation and estrangement

[45] Bridge, G. and Watson, S. (Eds.) *The Blackwell City Reader*. Blackwell: Oxford, 2002, p.7.

[46] Balshaw, M. and Kennedy, L. (Eds.) *Urban Space and Representation*. Pluto Press: London, 2000, p.2.

[47] Ibid. p.4.

> … Literature and more recently film play a crucial part in forming dominant representations of the city…[48]

Bridge and Watson identify a dialogic quality between urban space and literature, arguing that although many great works of literature "depend upon the city for their existence" (calling upon Dickens's renditions of London in particular[49]), the converse is true too: "urban experience is integrally embedded and formed from our literary readings of the city – from books and poetry we have read or the films and plays that we have seen."[50] In their estimation "city life and literature are so intertwined that our experience of each is mutually constitutive."[51] They assert that there is "no understanding of the city that is not mediated by our literary imaginations."[52] One would find it difficult to deny that our contemporary conceptions of Victorian, and in fact present-day, London are mediated by Dickens's descriptions of the city. The London fog and the Temple Bar as cast in *Bleak House*, or perhaps, the descriptions of Whitechapel and workhouses in *Oliver Twist*, are less neutral physical or historical features of the London landscape than places readers associate with those conjured up in his tales. In visiting the parts of London described in his novels, a reader cannot help but see these sites through the frame of Dickens's representation. Accordingly then, it can be argued that authors are capable of reconfiguring and imaginatively infusing our mediations of space. Another example could be found in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* novels, which made 221B Baker Street more famous for fictional reasons than for any actual persona or event. Bridge and Watson boldly champion the important role literary accounts of the city play in understanding urban phenomena:

> … literary writings on the city … can tell us as much about city life and its senses as a political-economic analysis of urban housing and labour markets. They are simply narratives of a different kind, drawing on the power of the imagination, rather than the power of concrete arguments and evidence.[53]

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[48] Bridge, G. and Watson, S. (Eds.) *The Blackwell City Reader*. Blackwell: Oxford, 2002, p.3.

[49] Dickens is heralded as one of the greatest city writers as he was able to immerse his reader within a specific space and time - that of Victorian London. Dickens describes the texture of nineteenth century London in careful and obsessive detail (chronicling its sounds, sights, and smells) and thus was able to convey a sense of place not only to contemporary readers, but also to generations of readers after that.

[50] Bridge, G. and Watson, S. (Eds.) *The Blackwell City Reader*. Blackwell: Oxford, 2002, p.7.

[51] Ibid, p.7

[52] Ibid.p.7.

[53] Ibid. p.10.

For instance, a reader who has never visited New York would find the works of Edith Wharton (*The Age of Innocence*), E.L. Doctorow (*Ragtime*), and Paul Auster (particularly his *New York Trilogy*), enlightening in that these texts could offer a sense of place or a slice of the urban imaginary in the act of reading. They are "simply narratives of a different kind."

Lindsay Bremner in "Writing the City" asserts that the "imaginary potential of representation is highly productive and highly subversive."[54] Through it, it becomes possible to "reformulate a city, reinvent it, twist it, distort it, reshape it, turn it inside out and upside down, bringing it into view in a particular way."[55] Literature – particularly, fiction – goes beyond the work accumulated by urban theorists and architects by bringing about "new perspectives" on the city, thus providing "scholars with further material for critical analysis."[56] The title of Bremner's book, *Writing the City into Being* (whence the chapter "Writing the City" comes), foregrounds, for her, the importance that can be attached to the act of writing the city. For our purposes, the way in which literature represents, recasts, and reformulates the constantly changing face of the postapartheid city of Johannesburg is of paramount interest to this study.

Be that as it may, it must be noted that urban representative projects are not without their own shortcomings and heuristic dangers. Balshaw and Kennedy caution against accidental and reductive conflations of city and textuality.[57] The act of textual representation is a powerful one – cities are inseparable from them – but representations (mental space), as Henri Lefebvre[58] in *The Production of Space* warns, should never be conflated with the city itself (real space). In other words, there is always a significant disjuncture between the material reality of the city and its representation. Furthermore, despite the important role language plays in describing and portraying the city, representations can also include "material, visual and psychic forms and practices that cannot be reduced to textuality."[59] No matter how successful a representation purports to be, no single or group of accumulated representations will ever be able to fully or adequately capture the essence or totalising 'reality' of the city. Bridge and Watson concur, observing that the boundaries between the "real and the imagined city are ill-defined, shifting

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[54] Bremner, L. *Writing the City into Being: Essays on Johannesburg 1998-2008*. Fourthwall Books: Johannesburg, 2010, p.49.

[55] Ibid, p.49.

[56] Ibid, p.56.

[57] Balshaw, M. and Kennedy, L. (Eds.) *Urban Space and Representation*. Pluto Press: London, 2000, p.4.

[58] Lefebvre, H. *The Production of Space*. Blackwell Publishing: Malden, 1991, p.6; 28.

[59] Balshaw, M. and Kennedy, L. (Eds.) *Urban Space and Representation*. Pluto Press: London, 2000, p.4.

and slippery."[60] Edward Soja, as quoted by Balshaw and Kennedy, warns against the urban imaginary displacing the urban real.[61] Representations are by their very nature partial, inconclusive, and selective.

**Writing Johannesburg Now**

> Johannesburg is an extremely difficult city to live in, but an addictive city to work on. It never reveals itself all at once. In fact it is reluctant to reveal itself at all. One suspects there must be more to it, more than this shimmering mirage and ceaseless activity, this aggressive web of highways, suburbs and shopping malls, this dross, floating on layers of mined-out conglomerate, being endlessly abandoned, reclaimed, recycled and reused. It is this sense of there being 'more' – not as essence, secret or underlying logic but rather as excess – that makes this city so compelling. One can never know enough to claim to know it. It refuses to submit to a reductive logic.[62]

Sarah Nuttall introduces her article "Literary City"[63] with the following question, "What might a Johannesburg text be?"[64] She is particularly interested in the way in which the city emerges on the level of form in contemporary literature. In other words, what literary devices, representational techniques, and mechanisms (in her phraseology, what she calls "literary infrastructures") give "the city imaginary shape"?[65] She argues that citiness in Johannesburg can be viewed as an "intricate entanglement of éclat and somberness, lightness and darkness, comprehension and bewilderment, polis and necropolis, desegregation and resegregation."[66] Figured in these terms, Johannesburg is shown to be a city of conflicting opposites. To find a representational infrastructure and an artistic language adequate to landscape the frontiers of the city is by no means an easy task. However, Ivan Vladislavić's city novels evince a conscious

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[60] Bridge, G. and Watson, S. (Eds.) *The Blackwell City Reader*. Blackwell: Oxford, 2002, p.7.

[61] Balshaw, M. and Kennedy, L. (Eds.) *Urban Space and Representation*. Pluto Press: London, 2000, p.4.

[62] Bremner, L. Introduction to *Writing the City in Being: Essays on Johannesburg 1998-2008*. Fourthwall Books: Johannesburg, 2010, p.1.

[63] Nuttall, S. "Literary City" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*. (Eds. A. Mbembe and S. Nuttall.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2008, pp.195-218.

[64] Ibid, p.195.

[65] Ibid, p.195.

[66] Ibid, p.195.

literary "undecideability"[67] that responds to the incommensurability and complex dualities that constitute the "Elusive Metropolis"[68] that is Johannesburg.

Achille Mbembe, in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (first published as a volume by the journal *Public Culture* and then as a stand-alone edition by Wits University Press) writes that the metropolis "reveals itself first and foremost through its discontinuities, its provisionality and fugitiveness, its superfluousness."[69] Likewise, Johannesburg is a "fundamentally fragmented and kaleidoscopic" city and one that cannot be perceived as a "symbolic totality."[70] Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall thus define Johannesburg as an "elusive metropolis."[71] It is a city that defies easy categorisation and elucidation. For them it is particularly elusive because it is either

> denigrated as being a set of ugly urban agglomerations, a crime city, or a security-obsessed dystopia, or it is elevated as a place of rapacious survival, "making do," and chance encounters. It is an elusive metropolis because of the multiplicity of registers in which it is African (or perhaps not at all, or not enough); European (or perhaps not, or no longer), or even American (by virtue of its embeddedness in commodity exchange and its culture of consumption).[72]

In her essay "City Forms and Writing the 'Now' in South Africa"[73], Sarah Nuttall writes that it is vital for scholarly attention to be shifted towards postapartheid fiction as a means of reconfiguring the 'now'. While noting apartheid's inescapable legacy, Nuttall stresses that the city is a complex space punctuated by intercultural and interracial exchanges; in other words, the dynamic interplay of flux and hybridity in the city should not be overlooked. She argues that instead of reading South African cities predominantly within the "framework of the political economy of urbanisation, segregation and underdevelopment"[74] we should also consider "cultural dimensions" of city life and city form.[75] In the transition from apartheid to democracy, much work on the city has focused on how things have remained the same – especially in terms

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[67] My use of the term literary undecideability has been derived from Gerald Gaylard's "space of undecideability", which can be found in his introduction to *Marginal Spaces* (2011), p.11.

[68] Mbembe, A. and Nuttall, S. (Eds.) *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*. Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2008.

[69] Mbembe, A. "Aesthetics of Superfluity" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis. Public Culture*, 16:3, 2004, p.400.

[70] Ibid, p.404.

[71] Mbembe, A. and Nuttall, S. "Writing the World from an African Metropolis" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis. Public Culture*, 16:3, 2004, p.367.

[72] Ibid, p.367.

[73] Nuttall, S. "City Forms and Writing the 'Now' in South Africa" in *Journal of South African Studies*, 30:4, December 2004, pp.731-748.

[74] Ibid, p.740.

[75] Ibid, p.740.

of the economic status quo of the majority of South African city-dwellers. It is Nuttall's opinion that more effort must be made to reflect the cultural transformations affecting the city. Scholarly endeavours must take cognizance of this shift in cultural register and thus apprehend this situated *now-ness* of the cultural aspect of South African urban centres. Postapartheid fiction is a fruitful site for understanding the complexity of city-culture in a more extended idiom. [76]

Extrapolating upon Jennifer Robinson's argument in "(Im)mobilising Space – Dreaming of Change"[77], Nuttall maintains that "every time we move round in the city we potentially use spaces differently, imagine them differently."[78] Robinson argues that "[d]ifferent people in the city have different resources to draw upon in their imaginative reuse and remaking of the city."[79] As a result, Nuttall argues that we cannot read "space and identity, including racial identity, as one-dimensional."[80] This "always-moving space"[81], which enacts a "constant revising of the inventory of the city" and "its map of streets", is a "tracking and a breaching of its historical construction" and is thus "a way of conceptualising the now."[82] Even though the new South African city is still pockmarked by pronounced socio-economic divisions cut along racial lines, and a crippling fear of systemic crime "delimits dreams of a truly public space", Nuttall urges critics and academics to think beyond fixed terms and instead conceive of urban forms "in terms of movement, journeys through the city."[83]

This goes some way in explaining what the 'new' postapartheid Johannesburg novel looks like. It is likely a text that acknowledges that its representation, both slippery and selective, cannot reduce the city to pure textuality. Furthermore, it is a text that celebrates fluidity and flux and, on the level of form, challenges fixed structures by celebrating movement through and indeterminacy throughout the African metropolis.

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[76] Ibid, p.740.

[77] Robinson, J. "(Im)mobilising Space – Dreaming of Change" in *blank_Architecture, apartheid and after*. (Eds. H. Judin and I. Vladislavić.) David Philip: Cape Town (NAi: Rotterdam), 1998, pp.163-171.

[78] Ibid, p.168.

[79] Ibid, p.168.

[80] Nuttall, S. "City Forms and Writing the 'Now' in South Africa" in *Journal of South African Studies*, 30:4, Dec 2004, p.747.

[81] Robinson, J. "(Im)mobilising Space – Dreaming of Change" in *blank_Architecture, apartheid and after*. (Eds. H. Judin and I. Vladislavić.) David Philip: Cape Town (NAi: Rotterdam), 1998, pp.163-171.

[82] Nuttall, S. "City Forms and Writing the 'Now' in South Africa" in *Journal of South African Studies*, 30:4, Dec 2004, p.747.

[83] Ibid, p.741.

In terms of thinking about Johannesburg as an African metropolis, it would be useful to consider this city in relation to other urban centres on the continent. Much recent and exciting work concentrating on African urban spaces spotlights qualities such as digression, mobility, diaspora, marginality, and disjunctions. The *African Cities Reader*, a creation of Chimurenga Magazine and UCT's ACC (African Centre for Cities), and edited by Ntone Edjabe and Edgar Pieterse, stands as one such example of scholarship placing African cities as its focus. Two volumes of this reader have thus far been published. Both examine urban practices from perspectives other than those emanating from or dominated by the Global North. These *African Cities Readers* encompass an elastic and multidirectional interrogation of African cities ranging from Lagos, Ibadan, Kinshasa, Douala to Johannesburg and Cape Town. Edjabe and Pieterse outline their initiative as one that promotes "an aesthetic agenda" that intends to "capture something about the stylisation of thought and practice as it emerges from the complex indeterminacies of city-making, city-burning and city-dreaming" in Africa.[84] The modality of the *African Cities Reader* not only intends to disrupt canonical academic approaches to urban space, thus consciously writing against Eurocentric "teleological narratives of progress"[85], but also formalistically blends scholarly articles against the dynamic ruptures occasioned by products of the cultural imaginary: i.e. narrative prose, poetry, images, and art. This seems to be an effective mechanism to discuss "the constitutive emergence of pluralism, cosmopolitanism and diversity across Africa."[86]

This way of writing urban Africa has influenced the way in which I speak about Johannesburg via the lens provided by Vladislavić's work. Obviously, it should also be noted how the influx of African migrants throughout Johannesburg's history has influenced the city's character as well as its syntax of everyday spaces and urban practices. This effect of the diversity of African registers and migrancy on Joburg's streets is evident in texts likes Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow*, Beukes's *Zoo City*, Hlongwane's *Jozi: A Novel*, Bloom's *Ways of Staying*, and Vladislavić's own, *The Restless Supermarket*. Evaluating Johannesburg's character in relation to other cities on the continent promises an interesting space for critique and analysis.

While this study acknowledges the important work of various African scholars like AbdouMaliq Simone, Dominique Malaquais, and Edgar Pieterse (particularly considering his contributions in

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[84] Edjabe, N. and Pieterse, E. (Eds.) Preface to *African Cities Reader: Pan African Practices*. Chimurenga and African Centre for Cities: Vlaeberg, 2010, p.5.

[85] Malaquais, D. "Anti-Teleology: Re-Mapping the Imag(in)ed City" in *African Cities Reader II: Mobilities and Fixtures*. (Eds. N. Edjabe and E. Pieterse.) Chimurenga and African Centre for Cities: Vlaeberg, 2011, p.7.

[86] Edjabe, N. and Pieterse, E. (Eds.) Preface to *African Cities Reader II: Mobilities and Fixtures*. Chimurenga and African Centre for Cities: Vlaeberg, 2011, p.5.

places like the *Cityscapes* magazine) – who work on themes relevant to the Global South touched upon in this thesis (for example, urban practices marked by mobility, the unfamiliar, the everyday, and "disjunctive flows and circuits"[87]) – I feel that I could not do proper justice to writings on other African cities in light of the scope of my present investigation on Johannesburg. On this front, Vladislavić posits the following caveat:

> It might start with our making a bigger effort not to take the easy path and simply lump all African literature together. "That is the tendency," agrees Vladislavić, "but it is an unfortunate one. My experiences and circumstances in which I live in Johannesburg are vastly different from someone in Lagos, for example. Each country is vastly different, as are the writers."[88]

However, this does not preclude the valency of future projects that could be undertaken in reading Johannesburg against the themes and registers raised in contemporary scholarly efforts on other African cities.

## The Toolbox[89] of the Postapartheid City Writer

Within the thrust of this argument, it is crucial to reference Njabulo S. Ndebele's essay "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary."[90] Written in 1986, this seminal academic treatise projects what postapartheid South African literature will look like. Ndebele talks about the period of struggle literature as being a literature of spectacle.[91] Literary representation during the struggle against apartheid was one that was, generically-speaking, highly dramatised (histrionic even) and highly demonstrative. It manifestly displayed the violence and brutality that characterised the apartheid era. He acknowledges that this literature was necessary and not surprising, since South African life was marred by brutal killings, draconian laws, racial inequality and segregation, "mass

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[87] Edjabe, N. and Pieterse, E. (Eds.) Preface to *African Cities Reader II: Mobilities and Fixtures*. Chimurenga and African Centre for Cities: Vlaeberg, 2011, p.5.

[88] Nawotka, E. "What Reaches the World Isn't Fully Representative of South Africa" in *Publishing Perspectives*, 1 November 2013. URL: http://publishingperspectives.com/2013/11/what-reaches-the-world-isnt-fully-representative-of-south-africa/. Date accessed: 4 November 2013.

[89] This sub-heading deliberately echoes Andie Miller's article on/interview with Vladislavić, entitled "Inside the Toolbox" published in *Marginal Spaces* (2011), p.211-220.

[90] Ndebele, N.S. "Rediscovery of the Ordinary" in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*. University of KwaZulu Natal Press: Pietermaritzberg, 1991, pp.31-54.

[91] Ibid, p.31.

shootings", as well as racially-applied "mass economic exploitation."[92] Literary texts found a voice through which to speak of this suffering, the crimes against humanity, and broad scale political injustices. It had to articulate this trauma in order to create broader awareness, but also to encourage enduring resistance. According to Ndebele, this literature was typified by exteriority (i.e. displaying the external action of characters took precedence over relaying the character's internal, psychological complexity) and simple binaries (something/someone would be either entirely good or entirely bad) as a means of reflecting marked polarities in South African society. Little fictional effort was expended upon delving into the intricacies of a character's motives or actions. Delivering a message of protest against a culture of oppression was more important than the style or quality of the written work. Denounced as "unartistic, crude and too political", there "was more politics in it than art."[93] It was not an intricate, delicate or complex literature; it was a literature of surface with a simple message – "keep[ing] the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details."[94]

While Ndebele congratulates this literature for its potency and courage, he acknowledges that postapartheid literature will have to move beyond the bounds of the spectacular. It needs to redefine what is relevant. It needs to draw upon a more complex, nuanced, and internalised mode of literary representation in order to shirk off and break "down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression."[95] It should be richer, stylistically. In other words, it needs to re-invent itself. It should also invite the transference of focus from the political to the personal/social realm. While political subject matter should not be eradicated, it should not necessarily form the focus of all literary effort. Michael Chapman, in his foreword to Ndebele's collection of essays, states that the "issues that [Ndebele] raises and the questions that he poses remain key to a people, who, after apartheid, are seeking to rediscover the complex ordinariness of living in a civil society."[96] Ndebele asserts that paying attention to the ordinary and its

[92] Ibid, p.31.

[93] Ibid, p.39.

[94] Ibid, p.41.

[95] Ndebele, N.S. "Redefining Relevance" in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture.* University of KwaZulu Natal Press: Pietermaritzberg, 1991, p.63.

[96] Chapman, M. Foreword to Ndebele, N.S. *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture.* University of KwaZulu Natal Press: Pietermaritzberg, 1991, p.vii.

methods, that which is defined in opposition to the spectacular, "will result in a significant growth of consciousness" as it entails the "forcing of attention on necessary details."[97]

Although Ndebele complains that the "habit of looking at the spectacle has forced us to gloss over the nooks and crannies"[98], Vladislavić, in his fascination with "marginal spaces", turns his back on the literature of spectacle.[99] He is representative of a new force at work writing beyond the literature of spectacle that was produced in the Struggle era. Subsequently, his works, in moving away from the heavy-handed literature of protest, attempt to redefine relevance in postapartheid letters.[100] Vladislavić's work is multi-layered, polyvocal, polysemic, and demonstrates a much more nuanced representation of society and its inhabitants – recognising that the complexity of the new "South African social formation" cannot be "reduced to a single, simple formulation."[101] His Johannesburg novels are indicative of this post-spectacle celebration of complexity and subtlety. Furthermore, his work also firmly recalibrates the personal-political dialectic, affirming the importance of narratives that reflect the experiences of the private, the individual, the small, and the minor. Vladislavić, in an interview, has discussed how the advent of democracy has changed writing in South Africa:

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[97] Ndebele, N.S. "Rediscovery of the Ordinary" in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture.* University of KwaZulu Natal Press: Pietermaritzberg, 1991, p.46.

[98] Ibid, p.51.

[99] It must be noted that other critics do not necessarily fully endorse this over-generalising sweep of protest era literature proffered by Ndebele. Indeed, David Attwell in *Rewriting Modernity* (2005) finds evidence of the contrary taking place in the work of writers like Zakes Mda as well as Ndebele himself. Attwell argues that a collection like Ndebele's *Fools and Other Stories* (1983) illustrates a certain "experimental turn" (pp.169-204) thus distinguishing it from the truism that the struggle-era's "predominant mode" was a "literature of witness, documentary, and protest" (p.169). While part of Attwell's monograph supports Ndebele's "literature of spectacle" classification, he is careful to point out examples of black South African texts written during apartheid that can rather be appreciated via the rarefied critical lens of modernism and postmodernism. Mda and Ndebele's works exhibit "the meaning of a fictional practice informed by a desire to articulate a black, urban South African epistemology" (p.178) – an "experimentalism that is both socially connected and aesthetically reflexive" (p.179). The stories in *Fools*, although informed by political realities and cruelties, are "profoundly about language, knowledge and cultural agency" (p.180). Attwell sets out to show how "black South African writing has from its inception sought to appropriate intrusive technologies and ideas, displace their corrupted imaginaries, and create spaces in which intellectuals and their communities can reconstruct themselves as 'free citizens'" (p.5).

From: Attwell, D. *Rewriting Modernity*. University of KwaZulu Natal Press: Pietermaritzburg, 2005.

[100] Gaylard, G. Introduction to *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, pp.1-18.

[101] Ndebele, N.S. "Rediscovery of the Ordinary" in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture.* University of KwaZulu Natal Press: Pietermaritzberg, 1991, p.51.

> We've been freed from an obsessive focus on the political. Writers have more freedom of movement both literally and imaginatively; there's no sense of having to carry around the past and I think that's reflected in our writing.[102]

Gerald Gaylard explains this shift in dynamics in his essay "The Death of the Subject" by charting the movement away from apartheid-era "metonymic nationalism" towards a postcolonial conception of literary subjectivity, which embraces "difference, incommensurability, open-endedness."[103] Postapartheid narratives appear "to be no exception to this trend towards emphasizing incommensurability in postcolonialism"[104] and are, as a result, "obstinately unamenable to resolution."[105] Vladislavić's fragmented, polyvocal, open-ended and intertextual narratives appear to embrace this postcolonial articulation of difference and incommensurability.

The collapse of apartheid, accompanied by the concomitant deconstruction of the metanarrative of apartheid ideology, not only affected literary modes of representation, but also the landscape of the apartheid city. Lindsay Bremner, in *Writing the City into Being*, writes that

> Even before 1994, the date of South Africa's formal transition to democracy, apartheid Johannesburg was unravelling. Official narratives, creative everyday practices and new urban imaginaries were disrupting and interrupting the given landscape of the apartheid city. Since 1994, and against the drag of apartheid's legacy, the velocity of these changes has escalated, producing a provisional and indeterminate city, exceeding known categories of theory or representation. This has produced an outpouring of new cultural forms and practices as artists have engaged with and given expression to the energies of the emerging city, through music, film, dance, theatre, fashion, and literature.[106]

For Jennifer Robinson, in "(Im)mobilising Space – Dreaming of Change", the "transition from apartheid urban space to – something else – draws our attention from the fixing moments of these historically divided cities to experience mobility, interaction and the dynamism of spaces."[107] It is significant that Robinson is unable or unwilling to label the postapartheid urban

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[102] Roberts, O. "Tales of the City" (An Interview with Ivan Vladislavić) in *Sunday Times Lifestyle Supplement*, 27 May 2007, p.17.

[103] Gaylard, G. "The Death of the Subject: Subjectivity in Post-apartheid Literature" in *Scrutiny 2*, 11:2, 2006, p.64.

[104] Ibid, p.66.

[105] Ibid, p.64.

[106] Bremner, L. *Writing the City into Being: Essays on Johannesburg 1998-2008*. Fourthwall Books: Johannesburg, 2010, pp.261-2.

[107] Robinson, J. "(Im)mobilising Space – Dreaming of Change" in *blank_Architecture, apartheid and after*. (Eds. H. Judin and I. Vladislavić.) David Philip: Cape Town (NAi: Rotterdam), 1998, pp.163-171.

space (this "something else"), thus affirming its inchoate and transitive nature. This celebration of flux and indeterminacy characterises postapartheid Johannesburg as well as the literary efforts of Vladislavić, who attempts to represent it. The city, in the wake of the collapse of apartheid, has allowed a multitude of new registers and ways of using space to come to the fore. This polyvocality and polyvalency has borne fruit in the many new and exciting imaginative projects which attempt to speak to, or about, the indeterminate city.

According to Lindsay Bremner in *Writing the City into Being*, since 1994,

> Fictional writing set in Johannesburg has exploded. Not only have many new novels been written, but many established and new writers have used the city and its transformation as one of the key tropes through which to interrogate post-apartheid society.[108]

In an article for the *Mail and Guardian*, called "Fantasies of the Metropolis", Achille Mbembe remarks that the disintegration of the racial city brings about the capacity for inhabitants to "construct" their own narratives of Johannesburg and form their own "memories of place."[109] This "rupture between the racist past and the metropolitan present … renders possible the production of new figural forms."[110] In a Derridean sense, Johannesburg "becomes the city of deconstructed images."[111] This freeing of the old infrastructures of meaning allows for multiple creative re-imaginings of urban space.

Vladislavić's oeuvre has been described as a literature which concentrates on the minor and the marginal aspects of quotidian reality as a reaction to the monolithic, homogenizing discourses of the grand historical narrative of apartheid. His fiction is decidedly postmodern and postcolonial, involving "linguistic and aesthetic experimentation"[112] on the level of both form and content – thus celebrating the local, the deconstructed, and the aporic. The ironic and satiric stance adopted in his prose has become one of his reactionary discursive practices, which goes against the grain of monumental discourses of power and control. Acting as an "antidote" to the so-called "big stories", Gerald Gaylard in his introduction to *Marginal Spaces* argues that Vladislavić's work values the "unconscious, small, peripheral and

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[108] Bremner, L. *Writing the City into Being*: *Essays on Johannesburg 1998-2008*. Fourthwall Books: Johannesburg, 2010, p.262.

[109] Mbembe, A. "Fantasies of the Metropolis" in *Mail & Guardian Leisure*, 10 March 2005, p.28: in Goodman, R. "Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*: A Bricoleur's Guide to Johannesburg" in *Safundi*, 10:2, 2009, p.225.

[110] Ibid, p.225.

[111] Ibid, p.225.

[112] Gaylard, G. Introduction to *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.4.

incomplete."[113] Gaylard asserts that this "minimalism constitutes a political resistance to monumental power, whether the 'big stories' of apartheid in the past or the globalization of today."[114] Vladislavić has himself commented on this feature of his work, saying that he is interested in "complexity … but not completeness."[115] In affirming this proclivity for the marginal and contingent, the author-narrator in *Portrait with Keys* – upon his chance observation of a tomason – comments that his eye

> becomes attuned to everything that is extraneous, inconspicuous and minor, that is abandoned or derelict, the obvious, useful facts of the city recede and a hidden history of obsolescence comes to the surface (p. 176).

For Patrick Lenta, Vladislavić's work appears to be fuelled "by the desire to defamiliarize banality; to foreground the manifestations of the everyday that are screened off by the narrowness of our habitual modes of seeing."[116] Texts like *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys*, by interrogating the constituents of the everyday, move beyond a cursory evaluation of the urban conditions that characterise Johannesburg. Both novels critique "conventional novel structure"[117] and this formalistic literary challenge to the representational establishment becomes a more appropriate mode to describe and depict Johannesburg-as-now.[118]

Be that as it may, Ivan Vladislavić contends that he is not "particularly comfortable" being regarded "purely as an interpreter of Johannesburg."[119] For him this

> … reflects a critical bias: urban studies, urbanism has become a big field and a focus in literature, art, and other cultural pursuits. It's a massive field of contemporary interest. For me, there is a line of continuity between all [my] books, and I would prefer it if they were regarded

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[113] Ibid, p.1.

[114] Ibid, pp.1-2.

[115] Vladislavić, I. "Interview with Shaun de Waal" in Gerald Gaylard's Introduction to *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.1.

[116] Lenta, P. ""Everyday Abnormality': Crime and In/security in Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*" in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature,* 44:1, 2009, p.119.

[117] Nuttall, S. "Literary City" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis.* (Eds. A. Mbembe and S. Nuttall.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2008, p.207.

[118] Ibid, p.207.

[119] Thurman, C. Interview with Ivan Vladislavić, excerpts of which appear in his article, "'I Take Up My Spade and Dig': Verwoerd, Tsafendas and The Position of the Writer in the Early Fiction of Ivan Vladislavić" in *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.50.

> as elements in a growing body of work – rather than being categorised as 'the Jo'burg guy'. Clearly, I'm fascinated by the city, but I don't think that's all I'm interested in …[120]

In Kevin Bloom's "Writing the Divide", Vladislavić acknowledges that (especially foreign) readers are looking for a writer that "captures South Africa for them … sums it up"[121], but cautions against overlooking the fact that "it's still a single perspective on a complex country" – or, in our case, a complex city.[122] Much stock can be placed in this caveat, and even as this study places Vladislavić's writing at the nucleus of its analysis of Johannesburg in postapartheid literature, it must be heeded that his representations are merely "a single perspective." Admittedly, Vladislavić, by virtue of history and biology, speaks from a rather privileged position – that of the white middle-class South African male. Obviously, critics must be mindful that his representations of Johannesburg cannot help but be filtered through a lens that has been influenced by a history of past privilege. However, one of Vladislavić's many strengths is his recognition that his work only proffers a single and select perspective on the city. It should further be noted that, since Vladislavić has cultivated a voice which embraces the provisional and inconclusive, his work thematically and formalistically resists attempts by critics to assign his fiction neat or static categories of exemplification. He describes the variegated quality and multifariousness of his writing as being produced by "Never one thing. Always one thing and another."[123] This versatility and unpredictability does mean that he is arguably one of the most interesting and sophisticated Johannesburg writers at work today.

As this thesis concerns the interplay between literature and the city, it is further interesting to note that in Vladislavić's work the relationship between mental and real space goes beyond a mere aesthetic appreciation of textual mechanics. Even the writing process for Vladislavić enjoys an element of physicality. Vladislavić, upon reflecting on the language he uses to describe the writing process, discovered that he speaks of constructing his novels in decidedly architectural terms. In an interview with Andie Miller, he speaks about the "construction of the text as if it was an object" with "language appropriate to building and engineering."[124] To him, the "text feels like a construct." Even the way in which he drafts his novels enjoys a physical dimension.

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[120] Ibid, p50.

[121] Per Ivan Vladislavić in Bloom, K. "Writing the Divide" in *Empire*, 1:2, p.63.

[122] Bloom, K. "Writing the Divide" in *Empire*, 1:2, p.63.

[123] Vladislavić, I. "X Marks the Spot: An Essay" in *Scrutiny 2*, 9:.2, 2004, p.128.

[124] Miller, A. "Inside the Toolbox" in *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.212.

The act of writing for Vladislavić is a corporeal one and "very messy."[125] He avoids using the computer in the manuscript stages of compositional development, opting to instead write by hand, as he "seems to need a more physical sense of how the writing fits together."[126] He spreads out short texts and shifts the pages around in an "organic" and "compulsive way" as a means of getting a "physical sense of the proportions of a story."[127] Without getting a "physical sense of the text", he cannot measure the "shape of it" and so gets "lost."[128]

He even speaks about the experience of writing as a spatial experience, albeit an imaginative one. He feels like he "enter[s] another world" – "a parallel existence" – as writing makes him feel like he visits a "place" more "than a page."[129] With this sensitivity for spatial dynamics in his writing it is not coincidental that so many of Vladislavić's novels concern the city in which he lives.

Vladislavić's writing is particularly responsive to the way in which Johannesburg has been written, walked, and perceived by other writers over the course of its history. For instance, 'characters' like Herman Charles Bosman and Lionel Abrahams make various subtle and, at times, not-so-subtle intrusions upon his texts (most notably in portrait 133 in *Portrait with Keys*). The works of these two late Joburg chroniclers have influenced Vladislavić's own writing in quite significant ways. It is then not surprising that this study sporadically cites Bosman and Abraham.

Not only does Abrahams's work directly supply this study with important literary perspectives on Johannesburg but it is also important to note that he was also one of Vladislavić's mentors. References to Abrahams can be found across Vladislavić's corpus. For instance, in the "Author's Note" at the end of *Portrait with Keys*, Vladislavić mentions that Abrahams, whose work "intensely … grappled with what it means to be a citizen of Johannesburg" was "another teacher who had become my friend" (p.209). Both the main epigraph and cover-art for *Portrait with Keys* reference Abrahams's "The Fall of van Eck House." In a similar fashion, the epigraph in the *Missing Persons* story, "A Science of Fragments", comes from Abrahams's poem "Fragments After a Tour (To Lulu, My Niece)."[130]

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[125] Ibid, p.213.

[126] Ibid, p.214.

[127] Ibid. p.214.

[128] Ibid, p.214.

[129] Ibid, p.214.

[130] Abrahams, L. *Lionel Abrahams: A Reader*. (Ed. P. Cullinan.) AD Donker: Craighall, 1988, pp.50-55.

Albeit more distanced than the association with Abrahams, Bosman's work has also exerted an influence on Vladislavić's writing of Johannesburg. One of the most notable occasions where this influence can be perceived is when, in *Portrait with Keys*, Vlad (the narrator) states that he is "an admirer of Bosman's work" and for this reason people should be made aware that a house in Bellevue is in fact the historic site where Bosman killed his stepbrother (p.44). This impact cannot be overstated for, in playfully surrealist fashion, Vlad in portrait 133 claims that he "bump[s]" into Bosman "wherever I go in Joburg" – seeing him "vividly" all over the old Central Business District (p.187). These sightings of Bosman are not his own memories, however; they have been "passed on in a book" written by Abrahams.

The next link in this chain of Joburg scribes is the relationship between Lionel Abrahams and Herman Charles Bosman. Bosman, whom Abrahams described as "magic"[131], was Abrahams's writing teacher. Shortly after Bosman's death, Abrahams starting editing the late author's work, ultimately producing six volumes of Bosman's work.[132] Abrahams is widely credited with helping to make Bosman a household name in South African literature. The interpersonal and intertextual links that exist between these three Johannesburg writers sets up an interesting trajectory – a connective tissue through which the city has been imagined and represented in literary and essayistic works over the course of both the twentieth and the early twenty-first century.

Obviously, Johannesburg has not only captivated the imaginations of Bosman, Abrahams, and Vladislavić. Various other scholars and writers have attempted to understand and make sense of Johannesburg through the act of writing the city. Although Johannesburg can be described in terms that deem it "elusive"[133] and slippery to define, one of the most common ways in which the city has been read features it as mercurial, superficial, materialistic, and excessively violent. This character, many agree, owes a lot to its mining-town roots. In the beginning, it was a wild frontier town populated with louche prospectors. In his scathing essay, "Joburg Blues"[134], Christopher Hope suggests that not much seems to have changed over the course of its 128-year-old history:

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131 Leveson, M. "Lionel Abrahams" in *English Academy Review: Southern African Journal of English Studies*, 21:1, 2004, p.178.

132 Ibid, p.177.

133 Mbembe, A. and Nuttall, S. (Eds.) *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*. Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2008.

134 Hope, C. "Joburg Blues" in *From Jo'burg to Jozi*. (Eds. H. Holland and A. Roberts). Penguin: Johannesburg, 2010, pp.131-136.

> Jo'burg, Joeys, Jewburg, Jozi … Paul Kruger called the place Sodom and Gomorrah and everyone who didn't live there thought he was putting it mildly. They still do. From the dusty sprawl in the southwest that is Soweto, to the swanking suburbs heading forever north, the pursuit of wealth is inversely proportionate to the loss of cerebral matter … But then what do you expect? This is a town that thought mine dumps were pretty, that had a soft spot for slime dams, and thanked God he had given it a reef of gold beneath its feet … Some bright spark took one of the sandcastles, sheered off its head and planted a drive-in movie on the crest. Great stuff. Someone had an even better idea. What about tearing down the dumps and taking them to the cleaners all over again, for the pinpoints of gold they didn't give up the first time around?
>
> Very Jo-burg.[135]

Hope calls upon a number of well-worn tropes when it comes to describing Johannesburg. It is a greedy and capricious city, characterised by the heady "pursuit of wealth." Mine-dumps, Joburg's artificial hills, risibly compensate for a lack of natural scenic beauty. These dumps summon the city's pioneers of which its street-grid is

> … adorned with the names of this city's singular rip-off merchants, its energetic scoundrels, its gold-diggers who built a brothel and a bourse, and never could tell the difference. Not then, not now, not ever …

Its insatiable gold lust established a city moulded by the cold forces of the market, a site from which an "invented city"[136] could be born. The following chapter will carefully consider the dominant ways in which Johannesburg has been read and perceived over the course of its short history.

[135] Ibid, pp.131-2.

[136] Ibid, p.135.

# Chapter One: *Auri Sacra Fames*

## Dominant Perceptions and Readings of Johannesburg

> Johannesburg has always been, and remains so today, a city of spectacle and a city of ruin, where the jarring mismatch between extreme wealth and abject poverty has contributed to an enduring sense of unease and discomfort. While Cape Town with its natural wonders and scenographic beauty has no difficulty in luring globe-trotting tourists, Johannesburg is an angular, jagged-edge place that has never completely shed its original identity as a course, unrefined mining town.[137]

Martin J. Murray in *Taming the Disorderly City* argues that Johannesburg has never truly been able to shirk off its ignominious roots as a boom and bust "unrefined mining town." Despite boasting some of the most impressive structures on the continent and some of the most valuable real estate in the country – "a city of spectacle", no doubt – Murray still characterises this metropolis as a "city of ruin." This paradoxical duality of extravagance and annihilation calls upon a familiar refrain, one that is repeatedly invoked when speaking of Johannesburg.

This same imagery is echoed by Aubrey Tearle: the protagonist of Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket* (2001), who anticipates Johannesburg's descent into chaos at every turn. Tearle has this to say when he looks out of his Lenmar Mansion's flat window and notices a dead body decomposing in the veld:

> It lay among the rusted pipes, blackened bricks and outcrops of old foundations that mark every bit of empty land in this city, as if a reef of disorder lay just below the surface, or a civilisation had gone to ruin here before we ever arrived. (p.7)

This sense of the impending doom that will soon envelope Johannesburg persistently hounds Tearle's perception of the city. For him, the closing down of the Café Europa becomes metonymic of what he sees as Johannesburg's inexorable decline. Later on in the novel, Tearle remarks that the renovation of the Civic Theatre depresses him. He asks if the "endless cycle of

[137] Murray, M.J. *Taming the Disorderly City: The Spatial Landscape of Johannesburg after Apartheid.* University of Cape Town Press: Cape Town, 2008, p.xi.

building and demolition, this ceaseless production of rubble" marks the "end of civilisation" (p.180).

Egoli (the 'place of gold' as it is known in Zulu) is anecdotally viewed as a godforsaken wasteland – a dry, superimposed city with an unveiled market-driven impulse at its core. Its wealth, its very *raison d'être,* is thanks to the Midas touch. Johannesburg exists, not because of its fertile soil, advantageous location, or its natural water supply – of which it enjoys none – but instead, because gold-bearing ore was discovered in March 1886 on a farm called Langlaagte by an Australian prospector, named George Harrison. Keith Beavon in *Johannesburg: The Making and Shaping of the City*, an urban geographical history of the city, writes that the

> … scene was thus set for the creation of an industrial city, an instant city with no former history, not deliberately established on a site that was attractive, or chosen for its … good supplies of water or desirable drainage … or was linked to a major road. All those factors that are usually part and parcel of the urban history and geography of the world's great cities were missing, and their absence would in varying ways undoubtedly bedevil the growth of the city from 1886 onwards.[138]

The motivating factor in setting up such an inhospitable town was to merely facilitate the grand-scale extraction of gold. By September 1886, this first mining-camp in the Witwatersrand region of the Transvaal (now situated in the Gauteng province) was named Johannesburg. Within months it was a name known in the "bourses of the world's major cities."[139] In mid-1886 three hundred diggers and prospectors had congregated in the area; by the end of that year, the number had increased to three thousand.[140] The mining-camp expanded at an astounding rate and very soon became a "boisterous town, with banks, shops, hotels and boarding houses, a stock exchange, and the inevitable saloons and brothels."[141] In 1886, the mines only produced 0.16 percent of the world's output; however, just prior to the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War the figure had risen to twenty-seven percent, and by 1913, to forty percent. The mines produced forty-three thousand tonnes of gold in the first hundred years of production.[142]

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[138] Beavon, K. *Johannesburg: The Making and Shaping of the City*. UNISA Press: Pretoria, 2004, p.23.

[139] Ibid, p.23.

[140] Ibid, p.6.

[141] Ibid, p.6.

[142] Ibid, pp.5-6.

The gold rush attracted prospectors and fortune-seekers from all over the world to congregate on this isolated patch of veld, far from the comforts of 'civilised' amenities provided by more established towns like Pretoria, Cape Town, and Durban. However, the town grew and developed with staggering and haphazard alacrity. A decade after the discovery of gold, Johannesburg overshadowed the size of Cape Town – the Mother City, 244 years its senior. In 1896 Johannesburg was the largest urban space in sub-Saharan Africa with a population of 102 000. The growth of Johannesburg was truly phenomenal: "its municipal boundaries grew from 12.9 km² in 1898 to 23,3 km² in 1901, to 212,4 km² in 1903."[143] In the year 2000 figures recorded that Johannesburg encompasses an area of 1644m² with 3.2 million inhabitants.[144] Gold for the first forty years of Johannesburg's history was the main reason behind such rapid growth.[145]

However, Johannesburg's growth was not always consistent as various geological and historical factors threatened the city's survival. Initially the outcrop of gold near the surface made mining efforts relatively uncomplicated. However, the angled slope of the gold-bearing reef made extraction processes increasingly expensive and hazardous. To reach gold at increments of one hundred metres, then five hundred metres, and then at depths of one kilometre (and more) meant that sophisticated technology, machinery, and abundant cheap labour were required for profitable industry to continue.[146] The sloping veins of gold along the Rand's reef also presented a scientific quandary. Surface deposits had been oxidised by centuries' worth of exposure to the elements and this made the process of separating gold from friable conglomerate relatively easy when the crushed ore was amalgamated with mercury. Yet in the frenzied period of Johannesburg's early days, it did not take long before miners reached a depth of thirty metres.[147] These deeper subterranean deposits (those situated at depths of thirty-seven metres and more) required a much more scientifically advanced method to separate veins of gold set in the hard unweathered, unoxidised, pyritic banket (or iron sulphide).[148] The quicksilver method could now only boast a recovery rate of below fifty percent.[149] Before the arrival of the MacArthur-Forrest process in late 1889/early 1890 (which introduced the use of cyanide solution as a reasonably cheap and successful treatment method), for "months it seemed that Johannesburg might turn

[143] Ibid, p.6.

[144] Ibid, p.6.

[145] Ibid, p.6.

[146] Callinicos, L. *Who Built Jozi? Discovering Memory at Wits Junction.* Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2012, p.48.

[147] Brodie, N. *The Joburg Book: A Guide to the City's History, People and Places.* Pan Macmillan: Craighall Park, 2008, p.40.

[148] Ibid, p.40.

[149] Ibid, p.40.

into another ghost mining town, as profits plummeted and confidence dived."[150] Mines closed down, panicked stakeholders flooded the market with shares, and many financiers simply left the country.[151] During this period, an estimated third of the city's population abandoned Johannesburg.[152] Yet this all turned around with the introduction of the MacArthur-Forrest process[153]: it helped "to offset some of the losses … incurred as the grade of ore decreased with depth" and "could also be used to rework the accumulated tailings."[154] Within "two years … the yield of gold rose from some 40 000 oz per month in 1890 to over a million oz for the year of 1892."[155] This process patented by three Glaswegians (a chemist and two doctors), rescued Johannesburg and investment began to steadily return to the Rand.

Other inhibiting factors in Johannesburg's early growth had to do with the grade of the ore. Although the Rand gold deposits were seen as regular and reliable, touted as being the biggest deposit the world had ever seen, the grade was low.[156] This meant that mining efforts in Johannesburg were both capital and labour intensive. Profitability was further compromised by the fixing of the gold price in 1895, which meant that if the cost of production increased, other cost-cutting initiatives would have to be implemented. This was one of the motivating reasons behind setting up the migrant labour system, which provided cheap black labour to the mines, but irrevocably damaged the fabric of rural black society.[157] Then, around the turn of the century, mining operations ground to a halt at the onset of the Anglo-Boer war. British victory ensured that the mines opened once again after the Afrikaner defeat.

What this brief history of Johannesburg's early mining days shows is that despite boasting the world's largest gold reserves, the city's fate was never quite certain. Its urban trajectory was on one that jolted from boom times to recessions, often in very close danger of going bust. Thus, Murray's initial depiction of the vulnerability of Johannesburg's riches, its marked disparity between wealthy and poor, is a narrative as old as the city itself. Beneath Johannesburg's glossy

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[150] Ibid, p.40.

[151] Beavon, K. *Johannesburg: The Making and Shaping of the City*. UNISA Press: Pretoria, 2004, p.28.

[152] Ibid, p.28.

[153] This method "yielded recovery efficiencies of 85 to 90 per cent on pyritic ores compared with the 75 to 80 per cent efficiency of the amalgam method on oxidised ore." From: Ibid, p.29.

[154] Ibid, p.29.

[155] Ibid, p.29.

[156] van Onselen, C. *New Babylon New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand 1886-1914*. Jonathan Ball: Johannesburg, 2001, p.4.

[157] Callinicos, L. *Who Built Jozi? Discovering Memory at Wits Junction.* Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2012, p.48.

spectacle, "… the glittering veneer that endowed Egoli, the City of Gold, with its distinct qualities of place", is a "recurrent tale of boom and bust, of reinvention, recreation, and make-believe."[158]

That Johannesburg cropped up almost overnight as a mythical "el Dorado-on-the-veld"[159] ties in with this swashbuckling narrative of boom and bust, reinvention, and make-believe. Johannesburg, in order to survive the fickle fluctuations of the market, has had to constantly re-invent itself. Taking this past and thus Johannesburg's protean identity into account – which was necessitated by pecuniary and financial incentives – scholars have dubbed Johannesburg an "instant city" (namely, Keith Beavon and John Matshikiza), an "evasive city"[160] (Lindsay Bremner) and "the elusive metropolis" (namely, Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall). John Matshikiza (in his opinion piece for Mbembe and Nuttall's *The Elusive Metropolis*) envisages Johannesburg's mirage-like history thus:

> There must have been something here, where Johannesburg stands, before the gold rush, but it was never recorded in history. So Johannesburg became and remained, by default, an instant city, periodically growing and being torn down as the gold seams shifted course in one direction or another and the needs of its fickle residents changed.[161]

In referencing its rapid birth and subsequent haphazard development, Matshikiza insightfully renders Johannesburg as this much-decried "instant city." Its origins lie in a dusty shanty-town mining camp and this sense of capitalist-driven impermanence endures to this day. Joburg's metaphorical status as 'tent-city' not only directly references the squalid conditions of impoverished informal settlements that huddle on the outskirts of the apartheid-modelled city, but also indirectly connotes its atmosphere of transience. Matshikiza's statement, "as…the needs of its fickle residents changed", refers to the absurdity of its two central business districts (CBDs):

> It is a wealthy city indeed that can simply abandon its tallest buildings and move onward when the imminent arrival of the barbarians is announced. It is also a mark of a culture that accepts

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[158] Murray, M.J. *Taming the Disorderly City: The Spatial Landscape of Johannesburg after Apartheid*. University of Cape Town Press: Cape Town, 2008, p.viii.

[159] Beavon, K. *Johannesburg: The Making and Shaping of the City*. UNISA Press: Pretoria, 2004, p.28.

[160] Bremner, L. *Writing the City into Being: Essays on Johannesburg 1998-2008*. Fourthwall Books: Johannesburg, 2010, p.1.

[161] Matshikiza, J. "Instant City" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*. *Public Culture*, 16:3, 2004, p.481.

> that its very existence is purely temporary and that a day will always come when it is time for the tribe to move on.[162]

His elegiac register calls upon the period in the 1990s when big business abandoned the Johannesburg CBD for the more attractive and 'safer' confines of Sandton. The exodus was partly due to the 'greying' of the city, inner-city decay, increased levels of crime, and the influx of lower income, previously disadvantaged people settling Hillbrow and other inner city areas. Johannesburg described in this fashion signals a place where things enjoy only temporary value. Its culture is transient – quick to abandon present trends for the latest fashion or simply to move on when the money and excitement have dried up. Its boom and bust history suggests that nothing is quite permanent in Johannesburg. This city is largely characterised by a protean *genius loci* and mercurially fickle residents. Infrastructure and buildings do not endure in Johannesburg. According to Clive Chipkin, it is Johannesburg's fate as a "capitalist city [that it] is never formed, always inchoate, always rebuilding with the debris from the demolitions on the sidewalks."[163]

Until very recently, the preservation of heritage architecture was not high on the municipal agenda, and even now, the redevelopment of the historic 1912 potato sheds in Newtown into another shopping centre and the snail-pace restoration of the Rissik Street Post Office – which was gutted by a fire in 2009 – fails to instil that much confidence in municipal heritage conservation deliverance. Shadrack Chirikure writes in "Heritage Conservation in Africa: The Good, the Bad, and the Challenges"[164] that although the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) is "mandated with heritage protection" it has only very recently started becoming "firm" with the standard of impact assessment reports affecting matters of heritage conservation.[165] SAHRA is a statutory organisation[166] that protects structures older than sixty years, archaeological and palaeontological sites, maritime wrecks, burial grounds and graves.[167] Chirikure claims that conservation initiatives should be a national priority, for heritage

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[162] Ibid, pp.481-482.

[163] Chipkin, C.M. *Johannesburg Style: Architecture and Society 1880s – 1960s*. David Philip: Cape Town, 1993, p.320.

[164] Chirikure, S. "Heritage Conservation in Africa: The Good, the Bad, and the Challenges" in *South African Journal of Science (SAJS)*, 2013, pp.1-3. URL: http://www.sajs.co.za/heritage-conservation-africa-good-bad-and-challenges/shadreck-chirikure. Date accessed: 11 January 2014.

[165] Ibid, pp.1-2.

[166] SAHRA was created under the National Heritage Resources Act, No. 25 of 1999 and is "the national administrative body responsible for the protection of South Africa's cultural heritage."

From: Author unknown. "About Us: Introduction", *South African Heritage Resources Agency*. URL: http://www.sahra.org.za/about/about-sahra. Date accessed: 11 January 2014.

[167] Ibid.

"is a public good, essential for national identity, national cohesion, employment generation, education, and cultural and religious values."[168]

Arnold Benjamin in *Lost Johannesburg*, a book dedicated to Johannesburg buildings now long demolished, appears to concur with this position by arguing that conserving heritage architecture goes beyond mere "nostalgia or sentiment."[169] Rather, the motivation that fuelled the compilation of *Lost Johannesburg* speaks to concerns that affect "our whole cultural fabric"[170]:

> The architecture of an earlier age – quite as much as its paintings, its books, its clothing styles or household objects – tells us about its people: how they lived and thought and designed and diverted themselves. Old buildings, more than any museum exhibit, can still be used as part of a living city environment. They enrich it as a direct and functioning link with the past – even when it is a past as recent as Johannesburg's.[171]

Despite this importance placed on heritage conservation (whether architectural or otherwise), Chirikure argues that "[o]ne of the greatest ironies about African heritage is that … it often ranks very lowly in terms of government priority scales."[172] Indeed, African heritage sites are becoming increasingly

> … threatened with various forms of economic development. The rationale from governments is always that they must create job opportunities and uplift underdeveloped areas … Of course, just as pro-heritage campaigners point fingers at government ineptitude and corruption, the same governments accuse the advocacy groups of campaigning to freeze African landscapes. Governments are required to balance conservation needs against the needs of other stakeholders such as local communities that may need the hospitals, the jobs and the income associated with developments.[173]

Thus various contending needs and priorities compromise African heritage conservation initiatives. Pressing developmental needs of third world African countries suggests that there are

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[168] Chirikure, S. "Heritage Conservation in Africa: The Good, the Bad, and the Challenges" in *South African Journal of Science (SAJS),* 2003, p.1. URL: http://www.sajs.co.za/heritage-conservation-africa-good-bad-and-challenges/shadreck-chirikure. Date accessed: 11 January 2014.

[169] Benjamin, A. *Lost Johannesburg.* Macmillan: Johannesburg, 1979, p.1.Ibid, p.v.

[170] Ibid, p.v.

[171] Ibid, p.v.

[172] Chirikure, S. "Heritage Conservation in Africa: The Good, the Bad, and the Challenges" in *South African Journal of Science (SAJS)*, 2013, p.1. URL: http://www.sajs.co.za/heritage-conservation-africa-good-bad-and-challenges/shadreck-chirikure. Date accessed: 11 January 2014.

[173] Ibid, p.1.

more important social concerns to worry about than heritage conservation. Moreover, the practice of architectural conservation is a polemical issue in that it sets up a cultural hierarchy, prescribing whose history (over others) it is important to conserve and protect. From a local perspective, much of Johannesburg's historical architecture is a physical reminder of its colonial and segregative roots and thus conserving this past may appear to be antithetical to the various ameliorative policies introduced by the postapartheid dispensation. Laurajane Smith in *Uses of Heritage* writes that 'heritage' is a fraught term and is "inherently dissonant and contested."[174] After all, the "idea of heritage" is "used to construct, reconstruct and negotiate a range of identities and social and cultural values and meanings in the present."[175]

It should also be noted that the term 'conservation' does not only apply to human history, architecture, and culture. It has the added connotation of natural or ecological conservation. This second application of the term, appended to the "heritage industry", is marketed as "the way to save the earth for the future … to remind us that it is our inheritance from the past."[176] This varnish of conservation entails a "committed 'consideration for the needs of things [and creatures] other than ourselves'"[177] and speaks to "the responsible management of resources"[178], animal, environmental, or otherwise. The creation of zoos and the protection of national parks and wild game reserves are important initiatives that nation states oversee and manage as a means of conserving the natural flora and fauna that exist within the bounds of their respective geographic regions. This kind of conservation is important in South Africa considering the wealth of game the country boasts. However, its conservation and protection track record on this front is not altogether pleasing either, especially concerning the recent peak in the illegal poaching of rhinos in South African game reserves.[179]

However, environmentalism as carried out by some advocacy groups hailing from the Global North can – especially in the context of the world's poorest communities – engage in strategies that sacrifice the needs of the settled human population for non-human ones or for the natural environment. Thus, even within arena of ecological conservation, other contending needs

[174] Smith, L. *Uses of Heritage*. Routledge: London, 2008, p.4.

[175] Ibid, p.3.

[176] Bate, J. "Poetry and Biodiversity" in *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*. (Eds. R. Kerridge and N. Samuells.) Zed Books: London, 1998, p.60.

[177] Per Judith Wright (1975, p.215) in: Huggan, G. and Tiffin, H. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge: London, 2010, p.88.

[178] Ibid, p.88.

[179] Kings, S. "Rhino Deaths Reach Tipping Point", *Mail and Guardian*, 27 September 2013. URL: http://mg.co.za/article/2013-09-27-00-rhino-deaths-reach-tipping-point. Date accessed 11 January 2014.

demand consideration. The issue of "environmental racism"[180] as discussed by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* is a product of "'hegemonic centrism"' – a dynamic born out of the pejorative intersectionality of colonialism, racism, and sexism that historically work together to exploit nature while 'minimising non-human claims to a [shared] earth."'[181] Huggan and Tiffin assert that western conservationist initiatives carry little currency with local population groups when "humans are pitted against animals in a competition over decreasing resources."[182] This occurs, for instance, when people are "forced off their land" in the establishment of nature or game reserves (that cater to wealthy foreign tourists/interests) or when the protection of an endangered species interferes with "traditional indigenous hunting practices."[183] The social justice movement, in its critique of "environmental racism", intends to balance the needs of a human population with and against those of the natural environment.

Although one needs to be critically self-reflexive when invoking the terms of 'heritage' and 'conservation', realising the pitfalls associated with both ideas – especially when they are used to promote a "consensus version of history by state-sponsored cultural institutions and elites to regulate cultural and social tensions"[184] – Laurajane Smith contends that conservation is as much about the present as it is about the past. She argues that heritage is a "multilayered performance … that embodies acts of remembrance and commemoration while negotiating and constructing a sense of place, belonging and understanding in the present."[185] Heritage architecture is one such thing that confers a "sense of place" in the city; by forming a direct link between the present and the past, it helps to bestow a sense of urban continuity and coherence – something that, according to writers like Benjamin and Herman Charles Bosman, Johannesburg lacks.

This sentiment that heritage architecture bequeaths a "sense of place, belonging and understanding in the present" seems to provide the impetus behind Herman Charles Bosman's essay, "The Standard Theatre." Here he laments the local malaise in urban conservation by critiquing the planned demolition of Johannesburg's late-Victorian Standard Theatre. As one of the city's oldest structures, it was opened in 1891 on Joubert Street, a mere five years after the city's inception, but sadly it was demolished in 1956. While Bosman is mournful about the

[180] Huggan, G. and Tiffin, H. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge: London, 2010, p.4.

[181] Per Val Plumwood in: Huggan, G. and Tiffin, H. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge: London, 2010, p.4.

[182] Huggan, G. and Tiffin, H. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge: London, 2010, p.136.

[183] Ibid, p.136.

[184] Ibid, p.4.

[185] Ibid, p.3.

prospect of this historical monument being torn from the fabric of the cityscape, he realises that this proclivity, so characteristic of Johannesburg, is one that cannot be averted: "Because I know Johannesburg. And I am satisfied there is no other city in the world that is so anxious to shake off its memories of its early origins."[186] These sentiments are also evident in his essay, "Old Johannesburg is Vanishing" where he decries the destruction of the Wanderer's Club and the Old Magistrate's Court.[187] According to Bosman, the Johannesburg Municipality showed "no understanding" and "no veneration for this city."[188]

One of the few texts that memorialises the "gilt-and-plush" Standard Theatre is Arnold Benjamin's *Lost Johannesburg.*[189] Published in 1979, this book reads like an urban obituary. Benjamin claims that The Standard "was probably the first building whose demolition occasioned a public demonstration"[190] – although for a demolition to elicit this kind of public outcry was and continues to be quite a rare occurrence (save for the efforts of a few organisations, like the Parktown and Westcliff Heritage Trust). Five pages of Benjamin's urban record are dedicated to the grandeur of this old Victorian theatre. The other entries, when read together, feel like a litany of departed architectural souls: Hohenheim, Palace Buildings, The Old Carlton, The Old Wanderers, Sophiatown, Majestic Mansions, The Old Arcade, Marshall Square Police Station, Pageview, The Newtown Market, The Plaza Cinema, The Langham Hotel, and so on. The adjective 'old' infers that a newer, 'better' iteration replaced the historical one. Benjamin is quick to remind readers that his book is not a comprehensive list of 'lost' buildings; instead it merely provides a "sampling of some major buildings and important places that have disappeared."[191] In his introduction, he states that there is

> … no record of when the first building was demolished in Johannesburg. My own half-serious guess is that it was towards the end of 1886, within a couple of months of the official proclamation of the goldfields township. It cannot have been long after that anyway, that the first Johannesburger found his corrugated-iron shanty too small, too outmoded, or too insignificant compared with that of Digger Jones next door, and pulled it down in order to build something bigger/better. Thus a restless cycle of destruction and reconstruction was set

[186] Bosman, H.C. *Bosman's Johannesburg.* (Ed. S. Gray.) Human and Rousseau: Cape Town, 1986, p.70.

[187] Ibid, p.75.

[188] Ibid, p.75.

[189] Benjamin, A. *Lost Johannesburg.* Macmillan: Johannesburg, 1979, p.1.

[190] Ibid, p.1.

[191] Ibid, p.iii.

> in motion which has not ceased for the last ninety years, and will no doubt persist for the next ninety.[192]

Of course Johannesburg cannot be held to be completely *sui generis* in this regard; cities all around the world have over time undergone significant architectural changes. In order to keep up with modern styles, changing tastes and needs, and improved building materials and techniques, it is not surprising that the faces of cities change with time. However, it is interesting that various scholars, most notably Bosman, Benjamin, Murray, and Matshikiza, who were incidentally writing decades apart – thus suggesting that this trend is a recurrent one – find it important to highlight the alarming rate at which Johannesburg has continued to re-invent itself. Its so-called "restless cycle of destruction and reconstruction" is a persuasive claim when set against the assertion that within a century the centre of Johannesburg had been almost completely rebuilt a total of four times. Martin J. Murray charts the stages of rebuilding as follows: the period of the late 1880s, when "the Victorian townscape inscribed itself on the ruins of the frontier mining town", entirely replacing the tents and shanty dwellings of the first prospecting camps; Victorianism was largely supplanted by the blooming of the "Edwardian High Style", which followed the "boom of 1908"; then the "modernist city building" came to the fore in 1936, which was, in turn, succeeded by the "sleek International Style" that "reigned supreme" in the 1960s.[193]

This pervasive sense of impermanence, and to call upon Anthony Giddens's term, disembeddedness[194], can be observed in *Portrait with Keys* when Minky's brother, Alan, phones her in sketch 51 to inform her that their childhood home has just been demolished. Alan has lived in four houses, all in walking distance from one another, and over the years three of these houses have been demolished. Alan remarks:

> It's unbelievable … It was there last week and now there's nothing left but the foundations. I'm starting to feel paranoid. It's as if someone is trying to erase me from the record. I half expect to come home from work one day and find my house knocked down. (p.72)

Their father built the house in the sixties and "oversaw every step of the construction and spared no cost" and after completion, would say of the house "You can't take it with you when you go … but you can leave something behind. This house will stand for a hundred years" (p.72). The

[192] Ibid, p.iii.

[193] Murray. M.J. *City of Extremes: The Spatial Politics of Johannesburg*. Duke University Press: Durham, 2011, p.11.

[194] Giddens, A. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Polity Press: London, 1990, pp.1-55.

irony here is poignant. Their childhood home and their father's legacy are both in the process of being wiped away; because their father invested so much of himself in the house-building project, the reader cannot help but feel that Minky and Alan's father and his efforts – like the house – are being erased. The passage reinforces the sense of impermanence pervading the experience of transient Johannesburg reality. Alan is unnerved precisely because he feels as if his mark upon the world, epitomised by the house that his father built, is being obliterated. This passage could be taken as a subtle allusion to the history of the apartheid government's merciless practice of forced removals, summoning up the painful memory of demolished Joburg suburbs like Sophiatown and Fietas. The interplay of memory, identity, and place when subjected to the crucible of "relocation" has further impacted and shaped the city's fractious, shallow-rooted identity.

John Matshikiza's mordant essay feels like a contemporary re-articulation of Bosman's rant in "The Standard Theatre" and Benjamin's lament in *Lost Johannesburg*. Their sentiments resonate through Matshikiza when he complains that:

> In Johannesburg, as soon as you've finished putting a building up, it's time to start thinking about pulling it down and erecting something even more graceless in its place. Johannesburg can afford to be perpetually throwing things out because – well, because it can *afford* to.[195]

As Matshikiza illustrates, from the beginning wealth has afforded Johannesburg the capricious capacity to re-invent and rewrite itself with little regard for history and continuity. Likewise, the Umuzi cover art of *Portrait with Keys* features the 1983 implosion of van Eck House in Joburg's CBD, evoking the subtle intertext to Lionel Abrahams's poem, "The Fall of van Eck House."[196] In this poem, the speaker recounts how he goes to witness the implosion of this building that was also known as Escom House. The experience, which is likened to "abrupt negation", leaves him "strangled with sobs."[197] Here, the sense of the city as evanescent, sellable, changeable, and ultimately destructible is effectively represented. This lack of permanence, combined with a lack of veneration for history and culture, brings to mind Charles van Onselen's contention that members of the city's first-generation bourgeoisie were "shallowly-rooted."[198] This epithet

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[195] Matshikiza, J. "Instant City" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*. *Public Culture*, 16:3, 2004, p.483.

[196] Abrahams, L. "The Fall of Van Eck House" in *Lionel Abrahams: A Reader*. (Ed. P. Cullinan.) AD Donker: Craighall, 1988, pp.40-41.

[197] Ibid, p.41.

[198] van Onselen, C. *New Babylon New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand 1886-1914*. Jonathan Ball: Johannesburg, 2001, p. ix.

evokes a common metaphor used to describe Johannesburg's culture of surface. He claims that this cultural deficit persists to the present day:

> the crass nouveau riche of subsequent generations have always felt more comfortable in the bank, the stock exchange and the sports stadium than they have in attending church, sitting in a concert hall, walking through an art gallery, reading in a library or even serving in the ranks of their city council.[199]

Understandably, Johannesburg's status as one of the richest cities in Africa means that is perceived as a place driven by the cold impulses of capital, not culture. In a letter to a newspaper in 1893, one prospector remarked that, "We are none of us here for the benefit of our health. Money making and money grabbing is the alpha and omega of those resident in the fields."[200] Bosman echoes this testimony in his essay "Johannesburg." He describes the early days of the city as ones that were shamelessly money-oriented and mercenary:

> You can still come across lots of people who can tell you about the spirit that prevailed here in the early days when Johannesburg was a roaring, wide open mining camp, in which every citizen was imbued with the one laudable desire of making all the money he could in the shortest possible time. It was an all-in scramble with no holds barred. The place teemed with short cuts to gaudy opulence.[201]

It would seem as though not much has changed. The narrator in Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys* recalls how he, as a young man selling telephone dixies in the Carlton Centre, after surveying the "unnatural beauty of Johannesburg" from the vantage point of the skyscraper, "resolved to seek my fortune in these streets" (p.28).

This kind of reputation has been hard to shake. Locals still perceive Johannesburg as a predominantly superficial and materialistic city. The *Jim-comes-to-Joburg* trope lives on in the cultural memory; people swarm to the country's economic hub, hoping to make their fortune and move on. As a recent case in point, the narrator in Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* observes: "Behind me Jo'burgers are going up and down, up and down, serving the rand. We are all loyally

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[199] Ibid, pp. ix-x.

[200] Cited in Callinicos, L. *Who Built Jozi? Discovering Memory at Wits Junction.* Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2012, p.51.

[201] Bosman, H.C. "Johannesburg" in *The Collected Works of Herman Charles Bosman*. Jonathan Ball: Johannesburg, 1981, p.448.

serving money."[202] Ironically, people live here in the hopes of acquiring the wealth that will afford them the means to leave – the "none of us here for the benefit of our health" still resonates.

The superficiality and sense of perpetual transformation that typifies such a city driven by market forces contributes towards a feeling of rootlessness. This is a crucial factor affecting the way Joburgers envisage themselves, their urban identity, and in turn, the way Johannesburg – itself – is imagined via its various literary representations. It is thus not altogether surprising that one of the most dominant and persistent readings of Johannesburg is that it is a city characterised by a culture of surface. Much scholarship on Johannesburg, including Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe's *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*[203], illustrates this question of surface. Can one establish roots in a city with this culture of surface? Clearly one can, but it is not made easier by Johannesburg's relative lack of continuity and aesthetic integrity. Its constant reinvention means that its lacks a definable architectural and cultural fabric. Instead, as Murray argues, it is a city that makes capital out of the "make-believe."[204]

It is extremely difficult to pinpoint the architectural and cultural aesthetic peculiar to Johannesburg's built environment. It is a truly eclectic city – embracing a pastiche of imported and foreign architectural languages. It is indubitably a postmodern city where old and new, high and low art, as well as African, American, and European styles are positioned in an often conflictual, postcolonial melange.

An example of American capitalist optimism and commodity fetishism finding its way to the somewhat parochial fringes of a recently 'independent'[205] African colony, and the ensuing disjuncture, is reflected in *Portrait with Keys*, when the narrator recalls the flashy attraction of 1950s-era American-style roadhouses in Johannesburg in the 1960s. Growing up in Pretoria, Johannesburg, by comparison, appeared to be fast and reckless, populated by "Real cowboys" (p.168). Panburgers, "a clash of red and white stripes, sizzling grilles and chiming cash registers", located on a service road off Louis Botha Avenue, "was a sign of the city's American dream-life" (p.169). Despite the misleading street name commemorating the life of an old "Afrikaner Prime

[202] Moele, K. *Room 207*. Kwela Books: Cape Town, 2006, p.71.

[203] Mbembe, A. and Nuttall, S. (Eds.). *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*. Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2008.

[204] Murray, M.J. *Taming the Disorderly City: The Spatial Landscape of Johannesburg after Apartheid*. University of Cape Town Press: Cape Town, 2008, p.viii.

[205] The Republic of South Africa proclaimed its independence from the United Kingdom on 31st May 1961, but still the majority of its citizens were disenfrachised and subjected to systemic and pervasive discrimination and segregation.

Minister and Boer War general", the avenue was an "American way, jammed with American cars and lined with American businesses" (p.169). The young waitrons looked like something out of an "Archie comic" – wearing their "paper hats and striped aprons" (p.170). The Joburg youth were "kids" – adopting the American colloquial nomenclature, whereas Vlad and Branko were merely "children" (p.170). This portrait effectively sums up Johannesburg's postmodern and transculturated fantasy of itself: part globalised American, part African, but not quite African enough.

On this note of lacking historicity and a vernacular architectural presence, André P. Czeglédy claims in "Villas of the Highveld: A Cultural Perspective on Johannesburg and Its 'Northern Suburbs'"[206] that very few styles have been influenced by indigenous structural traditions, excepting the thatched *rondavel* (the cylindrical huts of the Sotho-Tswana people). Older houses in the city boast *stoeps* (verandas) reminiscent of old Cape farmhouses, as well as cast-iron exterior fittings, pressed tin ceilings and corrugated iron roofs – Victorian trends imported from English shores. Suburbs like Killarney and parts of the CBD still bear snatches of art deco boldness. Drab concrete edifices of the modernist era pepper commercial and industrial regions. For a time, especially in the first decade of the postapartheid era, the architectural argot of the city was unabashedly dominated by the mock-Mediterranean design. The "Villa Toscana" chapter in *The Exploded View* engages with the proliferation of Tuscan architecture that can be found along the expanding margins of the city. Czeglédy argues that the diversity of architectural development (in the northern suburbs of the city, especially) demonstrates a "typical Johannesburg lack of contextual sensibility."[207] Ultimately, this "fundamental disregard for either the past or the immediate built environment has encouraged Joburgers to produce a kaleidoscope of structures regardless of wider aesthetic sensibilities" resulting in a general lack of aesthetic cohesiveness in suburban areas.[208]

Although this progression from Victorianism to art deco, modernism, and postmodernist architectures cannot be shown to be all that different to the architectural trajectory of other cities, it should be mentioned that a history of Johannesburg's own local architecture is alarmingly absent. Many commentators, Czeglédy included, remark that Johannesburg has not had (and does not yet have) a vernacular architectural language to call its own. Instead, it has

[206] Czeglédy, A.P. "Villas of the Highveld: A Cultural Perspective on Johannesburg and Its 'Northern Suburbs'" in *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on an Emerging City*. (Eds. R. Tomlinson, R.A Beauregard, L. Bremner and X. Mangcu.) Routledge: New York, 2003, pp.21-43.

[207] Ibid, p.33.

[208] Ibid, p.33.

been inveigled by the visual vocabulary of the old Metropole and the epicentre of globalisation, North America. It has continuously imported foreign styles and movements with little care or sensitivity to its African context. On this note, Clive Chipkin in *Johannesburg Style*[209] writes that:

> Johannesburg was once famous for its seasonal sales, when last season's goods were cleared at knock-down prices in order to make space for new stock. Then the shop windows were plastered with announcements: *Latest from Overseas. Just Arrived.* So it is with the architecture.
>
> In the Edwardian era, Johannesburg attempted to replicate the City, the financial heart of the Empire in London … In the 1930s Johannesburg was called a Little New York or a Little Chicago … Its architecture … is cyclical, linked symptomatically to the behaviour of the overseas bourses where the foreign investment capital comes from …[210]

In *City of Extremes: The Spatial Politics of Johannesburg*, Martin J. Murray argues that since architects, engineers, and corporate builders "relied on models, guidelines, and paradigms that were never quite their own" they were, consequently, "never quite capable of reconciling the local and the indigenous with the imitated and the imported."[211] Thus, as Murray puts it, "the history of city building in Johannesburg has largely been a story of imitation and cannibalization."[212]

In categorising Johannesburg as a postmodern city, it would be prudent to briefly consider Fredric Jameson's notion of the "weakening of historicity" as articulated in P*ostmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).[213] Jameson defines "flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality" as a constitutive feature of postmodernism – the sphere of culture positioned within the "economic system of late capital", one which "explicitly foreground[s] … commodity fetishism."[214] "[A]dvanced capitalist countries today", cites Jameson, are "now a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm."[215] This critique seems a fitting description of the absence of historical authenticity in Johannesburg with its energetic pastiche of built forms, blankly parodying Euro-American styles as well as "depthless" appropriations of perceived African structural and cultural modes. The latter is deftly critiqued in the form of the kitsch shebeen chic and wooden African 'tribal' masks of Bra Zama's eatery in "Afritude Sauce" and

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[209] Chipkin, C.M. *Johannesburg Style: Architecture and Society 1880s – 1960s*. David Philip: Cape Town, 1993.

[210] Ibid, p.320.

[211] Murray. M.J. *City of Extremes: The Spatial Politics of Johannesburg*. Duke University Press: Durham, 2011, p.11.

[212] Ibid, pp.11-12.

[213] Jameson, F. P*ostmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press: Durham, 2005, p.6.

[214] Ibid, pp.6-9.

[215] Ibid, p.17.

the African safari-themed property development of "Crocodile Lodge" in Vladislavić's *The Exploded View*. Jameson pillories pastiche as being parody's debased and lesser twin. Like parody, pastiche involves "imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language", but it is a form of "neutral" mimicry, "amputated of the satirical impulse, devoid of laughter."[216] Johannesburg's built environment then ends up imitating "dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture."[217] The "weakening of historicity" thus refers to the "random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion."[218] Pastiche and late capitalism go hand-in-hand with each other, as styles become reduced to "sheer images" of themselves, playing into consumers' appetite for spectacle.[219] Indeed, the "past as 'referent'" in Johannesburg finds itself becoming "gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether…"[220] Johannesburg signifies a city characterised by temporal and spatial schizophrenia.

In the last two decades, the phenomenon that has most influenced modern architectural practices in Johannesburg has been the impact of violent crime. Crime is a daily reality in Johannesburg. The narrator of Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* remarks that:

> Johannesburg … is the land where the weak, the poor, the rich and the powerful – powerful enough that they can rob you off your own life – mingle and mend … You never know in Johannesburg, but I tell you, walk carefully and think fast; this is Johannesburg, you are either fast or dead.[221]

For Christopher Hope in "Joburg Blues", "headlines roped to lamp-posts" play out Johannesburg's theme song, its "golden city blues."[222] This is a refrain that conjures up "old dark songs" of violence:

> *Ten Shot Dead in Bed*
>
> *Pregnant Housewife's Poisoned Present*

[216] Ibid, p.17.

[217] Ibid, p.18.

[218] Ibid, p.18.

[219] Ibid, p.18.

[220] Ibid, p.18.

[221] Moele, K. *Room 207*. Kwela Books: Cape Town, 2006, p.69.

[222] Hope, C. "Joburg Blues" in *From Jo'burg to Jozi.* (Eds. H. Holland and A. Roberts). Penguin: Johannesburg, 2010, p.133

*School Hall Stolen…*[223]

As a result of alarmingly high levels of urban crime, extensive security measures have been implemented to protect the suburban home, the university campus, office parks, and shopping centres. Closed circuit television cameras track urban movement in ways akin to Orwell's dystopian vision of the future. Access to office parks, apartment blocks, and malls is nearly always monitored and/or controlled by security syndicates. In *Portrait with Keys* Vladislavić observes this trend and describes it thus:

> Every new building in Johannesburg has secure, controlled, vehicle-friendly entrances and exits. The well-heeled – should be able to reach point B without setting foot on the street. Parking garages cling to the malls like deformed twins. Complexes of apparently independent buildings, designed to simulate the neighbourhoods of a conventional city, are undermined by huge, unitary garages that destroy the illusion. (p.166)

The representation of crime in Johannesburg has been a dimension of Vladislavić's writing that various scholars and reviewers have grappled with in their reviews and critical readings of his work. This preoccupation with crime seems to be the case particularly for foreign readers, especially in their reading of *Portrait with Keys*. Peter Carty's review of *Portrait with Keys* for the British newspaper, *The Independent*, is rather gloomy about the text's reflection of crime and violence in the city:

> Vladislavić has no illusions about his membership of a group under siege, because the book's dominant theme is fear of urban crime in South Africa. He remains in the city centre, refusing to decamp to gated and guarded suburbs, and pays a price of constant insecurity. A foreign visitor asks to see his key ring. He has 17 keys on it – normal for Jo'burg, but extraordinary from a European perspective.[224]

The title of the review is in itself telling of his interpretation of the city through reading Vladislavić's text: "Fear Lurks Around Every Corner on the Mean Streets of Johannesburg." From his outsider perspective (as a British journalist), Joburg's streets are "mean" and the ubiquitous fear that accompanies this "constant insecurity" ominously hides behind both urban and textual corners. In a review by another British publication, *The Guardian*, Jan Morris echoes

[223] Ibid, p.133. (Compelling poetic rhythm aside, I am still not sure how a school hall can be "stolen".)

[224] Carty, P. "Fear Lurks around Every Corner on the Mean Streets of Jo'burg", *The Independent,* 27 November 2006. URL: http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/portrait-with-keys-by-ivan-vladislavic-425966.html. Date accessed: 30 July 2013.

this theme of peril on Joburg's streets. In "Mean Streets", Morris finds *Portrait with Keys* a "fascinating work of art that lovingly evokes a city of decidedly unlovely reputation."[225] To Morris, Joburg's streets are apparently "not very beautiful" and its emergence into the postapartheid present is one that can be characterised as a "condition of more or less criminal siege."[226] Johannesburg, we learn, is a "perilous wilderness."[227] The text's "predominant civic images" are "padlocks and keys, security guards, guns, muggers, barricades and shutters."[228] While *Portrait with Keys* extensively considers the impact of crime on everyday urban practices, and Vladislavić incorporates these concerns into his other narratives on the city, it seems that this predominant mode of reading Vladislavić's Johannesburg is somewhat myopic. Perhaps in this way, Vladislavić's texts function as a Rorschach test, revealing more about the paranoid interpreter's mind than the totality of the textual-urban experience. Be that as it may, local architect and academic, Lindsay Bremner in "Crime and the Emerging Landscape of Post-Apartheid Johannesburg", plays directly into the substance of Carty and Morris's anxiety provoking reviews, by claiming that:

> Not just crime, but the elaborate defence against it – the car-tracing device, the walled suburb, the insurance policy – is becoming the base of the new social economy of the city; after-dinner talk, *braai-vleis*[229] chatter, newspaper columns, political rhetoric turn with the predictable repetition around crime, its victims, its culprits, its consequences. Public interaction is marked by caution and suspicion. Social divisions are deepening, social circles narrowing.[230]

From a more critically and contextually nuanced perspective, Ralph Goodman's "Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*: A Bricoleur's Guide to Johannesburg"[231] and Patrick Lenta's ""Everyday Abnormality': Crime and In/security in Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*"[232] examine the presence and impact of crime on *Portrait with Keys*. For Goodman, even the cover

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[225] Morris, J. "Mean Streets", *The Guardian*, 18 November 2006. URL: http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/nov/18/featuresreviews.guardianreview18. Date accessed: 12 December 2012.

[226] Ibid.

[227] Ibid.

[228] Ibid.

[229] Afrikaans meaning *barbeque-meat*.

[230] Bremner, L. "Crime and the Emerging Landscape of Post-Apartheid Johannesburg" in *blank_Architecture, apartheid and after*. (Eds. H. Judin and I. Vladislavić.) David Philip: Cape Town (NAi: Rotterdam), 1998, p.62

[231] Goodman, R. "Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*: A Bricoleur's Guide to Johannesburg" in *Safundi*, 10:2, 2009, pp.223-230.

[232] Lenta, P. ""Everyday Abnormality': Crime and In/security in Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*" in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature,* 44:1, 2009, pp.117-133.

image of *Portrait with Keys* suggests a "self-destructive violence" which lies "at the heart of the city."[233] This could refer to the "literal violence of crime mentioned frequently in the text" or the less apparent violence of change…"[234] Goodman then proceeds to classify the text as being one that is ultimately about loss and insecurity:

> The sense of loss inheres in the obvious sense of criminals taking away people's dignity as well as their possessions, and invading their space, but also in a sense of loss of the familiar, the past, together with the sense of meaninglessness that pervades much of this narrative.[235]

This reading of Vladislavić seems to be inherently fatalistic and pessimistic. Lenta, too, seems deliberate in foregrounding *Portrait with Keys*' quotidian preoccupation with crime:

> Approximately a third of the 138 sections of the book are devoted to representations of crime-related activities, which cumulatively assume the proportions of a defining characteristic of the everyday in post-apartheid South Africa.[236]

Lenta, in considering the "anxiety that it generates" and "the technologies of security and surveillance installed to keep it bay" situates his discussion of crime in *Portrait with Keys* against an awareness of the representation of crime in Vladislavić's earlier works:[237]

> Representations of crime, security and insecurity appear in two of Vladislavić's novels prior to *Portrait with Keys: Joburg and What-what*. In *The Restless Supermarket*, acerbic "Proofreader Emeritus" Aubrey Tearle registers the theft of "bus-stop benches and kerbstones, street signs and fences, water pipes and electricity cables, milestones and monumental masonry. Material for building shacks. Entire houses had been stolen by these cannibals, even schools and factories." He refers to the theft of manhole covers and their being sold to scrap metal dealers, to which passing reference is also made in *The Exploded View*. The conclusion of the last of four narratives which make up *The Exploded View* depicts a car-jacking: an erector of billboards is menaced by four men who demand that he hand over the keys to his vehicle.[238]

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[233] Goodman, R. "Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*: A Bricoleur's Guide to Johannesburg" in *Safundi*, 10:2, 2009, p.223.

[234] Ibid, p.223.

[235] Ibid, p.230.

[236] Lenta, P. ""Everyday Abnormality': Crime and In/security in Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*" in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature,* 44:1, 2009, p.118.

[237] Ibid, p.118.

[238] Ibid, p.118.

However, Lenta emphasises – unlike perhaps Morris and Carty – that his study of crime in Johannesburg will not reduce the experience of life in this city to merely what Nuttall and Mbembe refer to as a "crime city"[239] or "security-obsessed dystopia."[240] Noting this bias towards rendering Johannesburg as a one-dimensional "crime city" abbreviating the "legibility of this extraordinary place" to an "experience of the pathological and of the abnormal", Mbembe and Nuttall in *Writing the World from an African Metropolis* argue that this "loathing of Johannesburg in the social sciences should be seen as part of an antiurban ideology that has consistently perceived the industrial city, in particular, as a cesspool of vice."[241] This thesis, while entertaining the sociological concern of crime, will also be pointing to readings beyond this preoccupation with vice and danger in Johannesburg.

In postapartheid South Africa, particularly in Johannesburg, the pervasively perceived threat of crime has aided the popularity of mall and casino culture. Malls appeal to Joburgers precisely because they feel more secure in controlled environments with their CCTV monitored hallways and security-manned parking garages. Along the same line, Fred de Vries explains in "Megamalls, Generic City" that middle-class Joburg teenagers flock to malls because they have "nowhere else to go."[242]

> Their houses have been turned into fortresses, with alarms, electric fences, and spikes to keep the other out. They are taken to school by their moms and dads in a car. The streets are forbidden territory. Downtown is out of the question. Even parks do not function as meeting places for those full of raging hormones. The only area where they feel free to walk, flirt, and flaunt is the mall. And out of the malls available, Sandton City is unmistakably number one. Someone once remarked: in Johannesburg you don't say in which neighbourhood you live, you say which mall you frequent.[243]

Arguably, the same can be said for a large portion of elite and middle-class adults. Shopping malls and entertainment complexes have largely replaced parks, and outdoor areas (excluding suburban gardens and gated community club houses), as public spaces. The presence of security guards, and boomed-off entrances and exits, give the impression of safety. In response to the

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[239] Mbembe, A. and Nuttall, S. "Writing the World from an African Metropolis" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis. Public Culture*, 16:3, 2004, p.354.

[240] Ibid, p.367.

[241] Ibid, p.354.

[242] de Vries, F. "Megamalls, Generic City" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis.* (Eds. A. Mbembe and S. Nuttall). Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2008, p.301.

[243] Ibid, p.301.

way in which crime has affected leisure activities, Lindsay Bremner, in "Crime and the Emerging Landscape of Post-apartheid Johannesburg", writes that "[t]he city is becoming a giant theme park, an assemblage of fortified and style enclaves, residential, commercial, retail or leisure, to which access is denied and selectively granted."[244]

This ascendency of mall and casino culture – in short any complex that offers a series of amenities (recreational, retail, or commercial) on site – which has arisen partly as a reaction to the perceived threat of urban crime, is one that also neatly dovetails with Johannesburg's acquisitive and materialistic character. In his essay "Aesthetics of Superfluity" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, Achille Mbembe agues that Johannesburg is typified by "the waste of affluence."[245] Johannesburg has been turned into a "commodity" – one that has been "measured, marketed, and transacted" so that "its representational form has become ever more stylized."[246] He calls upon the examples of Melrose Arch and Montecasino in the northern suburbs as cases in point. He scornfully describes these commercial developments as late capitalist "theatres of consumption" which stand as "visual displays of the logic of commodity."[247] Melrose Arch is a spatial hybrid; a couple of years ago the website described it as follows:

> Johannesburg has been infused with a new evolutionary energy. Melrose Arch has created a destination in sync with the 21st century. Open spaces replace the cage and the cocoon, life pulsates on the streets once again. The warm contemporary office blocks are a million miles away from the corporate monolith. Be it leisure, pleasure or business, the change like the environment, is palpable. Because the Arch truly is the space to be yourself.[248]

With a propensity for hyperbole, Melrose Arch is oversold as a "destination" with "evolutionary energy"; it is "warm" and "in sync" with the twenty-first century. Modelled on the European high street, it belies its own fantasy – shoppers park their cars in the basement and then ascend escalators to the ersatz, safe, and self-contained environment above. Melrose Arch is indeed a "cocoon" – housing offices, a hotel, a gym, a nightclub, various luxury and basic-necessity shops, restaurants, bars, and executive apartments all within one convenient and boomed-off complex.

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[244] Bremner, L. "Crime and the Emerging Landscape of Post-apartheid Johannesburg" in *blank_Architecture, apartheid and after*. (Eds. H. Judin and I. Vladislavić.) David Philip: Cape Town (NAi: Rotterdam), 1998, p.62.

[245] Mbembe, A. "Aesthetics of Superfluity" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis. Public Culture*, 16:3, 2004, p.393.

[246] Ibid, p.393.

[247] Mbembe, A. "Aesthetics of Superfluity" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis.* (Eds. A. Mbembe and S. Nuttall.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2008, p.61.

[248] Author unknown, *Melrose Arch Official Website.* URL: http://www.melrosearch.co.za/home.htm. Date accessed: 2 February 2011.

It must be noted that many malls are like this today and these amenities are by no means confined to Melrose Arch – eco-villages, golfing estates, malls, and all-in apartment blocks have all services on site and aspire to self-containment. However, Melrose Arch's aspiration to exemplify a retrofitted European high street goes a step further by blending convenience with hypermodern simulation (after all, "one of the city's oldest residential suburbs" was unceremoniously ripped up to make way for this development[249]). Lindsay Bremner, in "A Quick Tour Around Contemporary Johannesburg", contemptuously describes Melrose Arch as the "perfect lifestyle package for an aspiring cosmopolitan."[250] Its success is based in its "allusion to the traditional city"; with its "intimate streets, small-scale facades, village square, lamp-posts" it creates the "illusion of a suburban main street."[251] This vision shows the city "as we wish it were", representing it as "as an idealised fragment of what it was, accessible only to those with a great deal of disposable income. It all feels rather uncomfortably, upmarket-ly fake."[252] Similar to John Portman's Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, Melrose Arch purports to be a "miniature city" that does not "wish to be a part of the city but rather its equivalent and replacement or substitute."[253]

Melrose Arch is highly evocative of *The Restless Supermarket*'s Café Europa – an establishment that potently evokes a European setting. It is a place where Aubrey Tearle would probably feel right at home. One of the murals in the Café Europa depicts an imaginary European city, which Tearle christens Alibia. The name Alibia is interesting in that it is a derivation of the word alibi: the Latin etymology of the word "elsewhere."[254] The atmosphere of the Café and the mural (and by extension, Melrose Arch) is definitely redolent of an "elsewhere" – an imitation of European urbaneness. For Tearle, it was "a perfect alibi, a generous elsewhere in which the immigrant might find the landmarks he had left behind" (p.21). The Melrose Arch enclave exists as an independent entity, of sorts – an Alibia in Johannesburg. Almost everything that one could possibly need is framed within a single locality. Enclosed, secure spaces are attractive to Joburgers as they promise both safety and convenience. However, these enclaves are inherently artificial and saturated with what Mbembe calls the "aesthetics of superfluity." The "aesthetics of

[249] Bremner, L. "A Quick Tour Around Contemporary Johannesburg" in *From Jo'burg to Jozi.* (Eds. H. Holland and A. Roberts). Penguin: Johannesburg, 2010, p.66.

[250] Ibid, p.66.

[251] Ibid, pp.66-67.

[252] Ibid, p.67.

[253] Jameson, F. P*ostmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Duke University Press: Durham, 2005, p.40.

[254] Soanes, C. and Stevenson, A. (Eds.) "Alibi" in *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2nd Ed.). Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005, p.40.

superfluity" connotes "a complex area of daily life located beyond the sphere of poverty and necessity" which is associated with "luxury, rarity and vanity…conspicuous spectacle"; it is a "mode of relation to objects" in the domain of interior and exterior architecture, food, drink and fashion.[255] Vladislavić describes this situation aptly in portrait 68 of *Portrait with Keys*:

> In Johannesburg, the Venice of the South, the backdrop is always a man-made one … Nature is for other people, in other places. We are happy taking the air on the Randburg Waterfront, with its pasteboard wharves and masts, or watching the plastic ducks bob in the stream of Montecasino, or eating surf 'n turf on Cleopatra's barge in the middle of Caesar's. (p.94)

These artificial "theatres of consumption" pepper the Highveld in the form of leisure and entertainment centres; Joburgers frequent malls and casinos (Montecasino is a hybrid of the two) as a means of fulfilling their recreational needs.[256] Arguably, Joburgers can be said to feel at home in these "theatres of consumption" as any weekend visit reveals hordes of shoppers. Unlike Cape Town, Johannesburg is not known for the beauty of its natural landscape. The prevailing perception is that there is not much else to do in Johannesburg except shop and spend money. The proliferation of strip malls and shopping complexes (to name but a few: Sandton City, Eastgate, Cresta, Southgate, Northgate, Fourways Mall, Maponya Mall, Clearwater Mall, Killarney Mall, The Glen, Rosebank, Hyde Park, Greenstone, Nicolway, and Cedar Square) within the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan area is testament to this pastime. The global language of consumerism and hyper-consumption has been successfully translated into the local context of Johannesburg. With the collapse of apartheid, which also brought about the end of economic sanctions and the cultural boycott against South Africa, corporations and foreign investment flooded back into the country. Starved of international contact for years (corporate, consumerist, cultural, or otherwise), South Africans avariciously lapped up the accoutrements of globalised culture that began to swamp our parochial shores.

A good example of both a fortified and stylised enclave is Montecasino. Taking its cue from Las Vegas (the home of ersatz aesthetics), and thus inventing the scenery as it goes, Montecasino is a thirty-eight hectare upmarket complex that consists of a hotel, a casino, and a shopping mall. The exterior and interior architectural design mimics a rustic Tuscan village. The name – supposedly a clever pun on the word 'casino' embedded within the name of its cultural reference point, Monte Cassino – also inadvertently evokes the Catholic monastery, built at the hill's

[255] Mbembe, A. "Aesthetics of Superfluity" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis. Public Culture*, 16:3, 2004, p.378.

[256] Ibid, p.394.

summit, after which it is named. Joburg's Montecasino, however, stands as the spiritually bereft high church of spending. Any visitor with historical knowledge will know that the Battle of Monte Cassino, a devastating series of assaults between Allied Forces and the Axis Powers, saw the Allied sanctioning of the bombing of the abbey. This trace of destruction rooted in the word Montecasino seems particularly ironic considering Johannesburg's familiarity with demolition.

The interior of the casino complex includes little cobbled streets with forty artificial trees; even plastic ducks bob in a man-made stream and 'recently-washed' laundry hangs off balconies. These contrived touches try to convince the visitor that this is a real, lived-in Italian town. All décor, fittings, and pigments are flavoured according to the Tuscan theme. Casinos such as Caesar's Palace and Montecasino, as well as leisure centres like the old Randburg Waterfront (now called Brightwater Commons) and Bruma Lake, are all artful and artificial places that ape historical fortifications or foreign styles. Caesar's Palace imitates Roman opulence while the attraction of Bruma Lake (and the old Randburg Waterfront) is a synthetic lake (its appeal vested in Johannesburg's lack of a substantial, natural body of water). The importation of foreign tastes and styles, and the proliferation of the artificial, bespeaks an urban space of copies and imitative appearances.

Using Siegfried Kracauer's notion of the "calico" world – "copies and distortions ripped out of time and jumbled together in a dramatic geographical and temporal arbitrariness" – Mbembe argues that these constructions represent a commodification of desires and fantasies – a material consumption of aesthetics.[257] Melrose Arch and Montecasino, and others of their kind, are evocative citations and allusions to other styles, periods, and geographies. They represent ersatz, synthetic, and enclosed totalities that invite the consumption of objects and images.

Mbembe claims that the predominance of "calico" architecture and manufactured-living complexes in Johannesburg reveals a state of disembeddedness and socio-historical amnesia. Fred de Vries notes that, even though malls can bring people from different socio-economic and racial groups together in the postapartheid city, malls ultimately "lead to alienation" and that the "mall is at the same time antihistoric and nostalgic. It offers a re-created past, working as a time machine. Its molds a synthetic, optimistic version of the past…"[258] In a similar discursive fashion, Lindsay Bremner writes that Montecasino is "[m]otivated not by the social obligation to

[257] Ibid, p.400.

[258] de Vries, F. "Megamalls, Generic City" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis.* (Eds. A. Mbembe and S. Nuttall). Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2008, p.304.

remember, but by the commercial imperative to forget."[259] Spaces like Melrose Arch, Montecasino, and Nelson Mandela Square (with its Venetian architectural pretensions) disembed and divorce the present from an ethical awareness of South Africa's brutal past. This further alienates the city from any hope of embedding itself within a sociologically grounded and contextually relevant narrative in the future. The collapse of apartheid left a vacuum in the wake of the imploded and defunct racial city; consequently, the metropolis – in the absence of old master narratives – besieged by a purposeful trend towards historical and cultural amnesia, became reliant upon an "architecture of conjuration."[260] Johannesburg in rewriting, remanufacturing, and remarketing itself, has become the epitome of the commodity.

Thus spaces like Montecasino and Melrose Arch seem to suggest that a pervasive socio-historical amnesia is at play. The city, as a result, lacks historical continuity and cultural depth having been overrun by the commodity and by surface. It imports copies and mimics styles from distant shores and imposes them with little contextual sensibility. Johannesburg – as maintained by Mbembe – is overwhelmed by the "calico", the copy that is inflicted arbitrarily and prolifically.

The ascendancy of the so-called copy (or surface) finds its home in Baudrillardian discourse. Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* describes the state of hypermodernity as one where the referential object (the real) is effaced and is replaced by hyperreality.[261] Baudrillard writes that "simulation is no longer that of territory, a referential being or substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal."[262] In an age of simulation it is no longer possible to distinguish between the image as representation of an external reality and the simulacrum.[263] In the process of simulation, the original is lost and all that is left is the copy.

Baudrillard places focus on third-order simulations, which are the ones responsible for producing hyperreality. In third-order simulations the representation precedes the real (i.e. the map precedes the territory), without blurring the boundaries between the representation and reality; instead, the representation is completely detached from the real. In first and second-order

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[259] Bremner, L. "A Quick Tour Around Contemporary Johannesburg" in *From Jo'burg to Jozi.* (Eds. H. Holland and A. Roberts). Penguin: Johannesburg, 2010, p. 67.

[260] Mbembe, A. "Aesthetics of Superfluity" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis. Public Culture*, 16:3, 2004, p.403.

[261] Baudrillard, J. "Simulacra and Simulations" in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings.* (Ed. M. Poster.) Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1988, pp.166-184.

[262] Ibid, p.166.

[263] Finney, B. "Narrative and Narrated Homicide in Martin Amis's 'Other People' and 'London Fields'", *California State University Long Beach,* 1995. URL: http://www.csulb.edu/~bhfinney/amisotherpeople.html. Date accessed: 25 September 2011.

simulations the real is not displaced (we, in fact, measure the success of the representations against the real). Hyperreality, on the other hand, signals an order lacking a real origin, and Baudrillard argues – using Disneyland as an example to illustrate his point – that this hyperreality will be the principal way of comprehending and experiencing the modern world. Baudrillard writes that it is

> … no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes.[264]

The frightening thing about the simulacrum, this predominance of the sign without referential substance, is that it does not exist within the realm of good or evil, it is measured in terms of its performativity (e.g.: how well it operates).

Within this frame, it would seem then that Johannesburg is acquainted with third-order simulations – particularly as demonstrated by its own literary representations. Has Johannesburg become symptomatic of Baudrillardian hyperreality where the simulacrum has erased the referent of the real? Vladislavić explores simulacral territory in the story, "Villa Toscana", the first part of *The Exploded View* (2004). Budlender, a lonely statistician, arrives at the Villa Toscana cluster development to consult one of the census respondents, Iris du Plooy, a television continuity presenter. The townhouse complex can be spotted from the N3 highway:

> Villa Toscana lies on a sloping ridge beside the freeway, a little prefabricated Italy in the veld, resting on a firebreak of red earth like a toy town on a picnic blanket. It makes everything around – the corrugated iron roofs of the old farmhouses on the neighbouring plots, the doddering windmills, the bluegums – look out of place. (p.3)

The Tuscan architecture is shown to be incongruous on the Highveld; as an imposed style it lacks environmental, historical, and urban contextual suitability. Vladislavić describes it as a dinky toy-land, a mini-rama, fooling the eye's perspective. The simulation – the "little prefabricated Italy" – is completely detached from its environment, alien to the surrounding veld. In response, and in stark relief – the corrugated-iron roofs (a material so particular to old Johannesburg) are made to seem out of place. The street names inside Villa Toscana – named after famous Italian

[264] Baudrillard, J. "Simulacra and Simulations" in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. (Ed. M. Poster.) Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1988, p.167.

landmarks: Via Veneto, Piazza Siena, Monte Aperto – try to convince the visitor of how well it performs as a copy of the Tuscan model. Upon arrival, Budlender in being "[r]epelled at the ramparts", is beguiled, albeit sardonically, by the medieval logic of the place: "Would the defenders of this city-gate pour down boiling oil if he ventured too close?" As soon as he vacates his vehicle, this aura of barbaric fortification dissipates, and he notices that the "tones and textures are passable, clumpy wooden beams, pastel plaster, flaking artfully" (p.9). His first impression is of a well-fortified, medieval Tuscan villa, but closer inspection reveals that this style is merely a skilful veneer – a simulation. The ramparts are a flaky façade – an aesthetic suited to Disneyland. Baudrillard's key point on Disneyland is that it is "a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real."[265] In other words, Disneyland is a hyperreality, but acts as an assurance that what exists outside its bounds is, indeed, real. However, Baudrillard argues that this assurance is false, the postmodern Los Angeles world that exists beyond the perimeter fence of the theme park is just as hyperreal as the park itself:

> Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which is Disneyland … Disneyland is presented as imagery in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation … It is no longer a question of false representation of reality, but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus, of saving the reality principle.[266]

Do Villa Toscana, Melrose Arch, and Montecasino, operate as a kind of Disneyland in a South African context? Is this what Baudrillard suggests – that Johannesburg, like Villa Toscana, is no longer real, but an embodiment of the postmodern simulacrum?

Iris, as continuity presenter, further extends the simulacral flavour of the story. Wearing an expression of compassion – nodding in agreement and comprehension – she listens to her co-presenter speaking in an African language. Budlender, compelled by his statistical need for verification, checks her completed census form and discovers that Iris can speak "English, Afrikaans, schoolgirl French" but "[n]othing indigenous" (p.26). Her responses on screen are thus merely simulated; they speak of no linguistic authenticity. Does this suggest that within a simulacral city such as Johannesburg, there can be no meaningful exchanges, because the hyperreal dominates? The context within which the continuity presenter finds herself – her

[265] Baudrillard, J. "Simulacra and Simulations" in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. (Ed. M. Poster.) Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1988, p.172.

[266] Ibid, p.172.

home, her work, her city – are all illusory and allusory – a simulation. Budlender notes when watching Iris on TV that the blue satin drapes in the background have suddenly changed to crimson. This takes him on an expedition of anxious inquiry:

> Perhaps they were not made of satin at all but of mere lights, lamps trained on a wall or a screen. Or they might be projections like the maps and charts behind the weatherman, combinations of colours and textures chosen off a menu with a click of a mouse. He had no idea. Just as he had no idea, when he watched the news, whether the pillars were really made of marble or the desktops of granite. Common sense told him they could not be real, but how could he be sure? Perhaps all the people he saw on television, the newsreaders, the pop singers, the talk-show hosts and the continuity announcers, were suspended in empty space, waiting for an appropriate world to embrace them. (p.43)

Budlender is thrown into a world of simulacral confusion. Television is ostensibly a realm of simulation, but meeting Iris in person in her simulated Tuscan environment seems to blur the boundaries between TV-simulated hyperreality and day-to-day perceived reality. A further link can be made between the simulacrum and the effects of globalisation, especially concerning the media and the branding industry, in that it creates a blank, faceless global consumer identity – Iris and Villa Toscana seem emblematic of this process.

Budlender questions whether there has been anything genuine or sincere in his contact with Iris – interactions which have always been awkward and stilted. Asking to use her bathroom midway through one of their control group meetings he encounters a menagerie of perfume bottles cluttering the vanity. He pryingly uncaps a few atomisers, but cannot match scent to person. There is a disparity between appearance and reality. Only the appearance is ascendant. The story ends with Budlender dreaming that he is falling through a nightmarish city with skyscrapers made of bar graphs and perfume bottles:

> 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. (p.46)

Waking reality and dream combine to form a chaotic scene where links between signifieds and signifiers begin to falter. His sense of the world around him becomes unhinged and perverted by the signs of things that should guide him: his statistical graphs fail to gesture towards digestible meaning, presenting facts and data which do not accurately reflect what he sees before him; the perfume bottles promise scents, but no commensurate sense of Iris. For Budlender, the city is a

"dreamlike blend of familiarity and displacement" for as the boundaries of Johannesburg start "drifting away", a new "atmosphere evolve[s]" (p.6).

Budlender finds himself in an environment where copies proliferate and the original eludes his conceptual grasp. It is a world saturated by façades with little or no attachment to objective reality. The only value at play is the success of the performativity of the sign: that Iris is convincing and successful in her simulated behaviour, that Villa Toscana helps the inhabitant pretend he/she is living in medieval Italy. This seems to suggest that the sign without referent to the original is ascendant and only the hyperreal copy perseveres. Even within the story "Crocodile Lodge", where it would seem that the use of an African aesthetic is more authentic and contextually apposite to a Johannesburg milieu, the African sign is cannibalised into a romantic illusion. The billboard for Crocodile Lodge frames "an artist's impression of the town-house complex…a tidy, toy-town version of the bushveld" (p.174). Crocodile Lodge is a postmodern bucolic pastiche of African architectural integrity. It is a simulation, an imitation of the exotic safari lodge and is no more 'real' than Villa Toscana.

Is the simulacrum an adequate model to understand contemporary Johannesburg? It would seem so, for Johannesburg is a place of change typified by surface and disembeddedness – a space that is disconnected from its past, an urban locale sated with copies. It is rather ironic that in being caught up in a recurrent and schizophrenic process of self-reinvention, Johannesburg's culture of surface incongruously peddles the illusion of permanence through the model of the simulacrum. The allure of virtuality is that it falsely promises stability, transcendence, and immutability.

Baudrillardian discourse may suggest that Joburg – like Los Angeles – is the postmodern epitome of the simulacrum; an urban space imbued not with reality, but with hyperreality. Is then Johannesburg little more than a city saturated with a culture of surface? Is it totally dominated by Baudrillardian hypermodernity and crippled by what Mbembe describes as systemic socio-historical amnesia? With much resignation, Lindsay Bremner – in her piece for Heidi Holland's *From Jo'burg to Jozi* – seems to agree with this reading of Johannesburg:

> Maybe, at the end of the day, we are still just a mining town after all. Where most people live out-of-sight lives in appalling conditions so that some of the people can get rich quick; where people don't plant things in the earth and watch them grow, but stake their claim, exploit its wealth, and move on. Perhaps, despite all attempts to reconfigure our economy, our politics,

> our society, and our city, it is this unconscious history of self-interested indifference that will continue to shape Johannesburg's future.[267]

This opinion about Johannesburg being shallow-rooted, money-oriented, and mercenary is pervasive and perhaps deservedly so. It is after all the easy fallback position to see Johannesburg purely in these terms. However, by addressing this dominant reading of the city at the very beginning, this study intends to show that while Vladislavić himself responds to (and satirically critiques) the aforementioned aspects of hyperreal hypermodernity, socio-historical amnesia, and rampant materialism that has plagued Johannesburg since its birth, the subtle complexity of his work reveals that there is more at play and more to see when one modifies one's channels of perceiving the city. To defamiliarise the city – which is what Vladislavić does in his Johannesburg novels – becomes the means by which it can be seen in ways other than the dominant modes hereto discussed. Indeed, defamiliarisation becomes the enabling tool for a rediscovery not only of textuality, but the urban space to which it refers. By abandoning habitual markers and customary insight, defamiliarisation makes the reader feel a little lost. As this thesis will show, lostness prepares the ground for opening up and challenging "the dominant ways of seeing Johannesburg."[268] In doing so, Vladislavić opens up "his personal archive of everyday life in the city to imaginative reinterpretation by readers."[269] Lostness through defamiliarisation reveals the lesser seen, the unknown, and bizarre elements of Johannesburg. This study thus favours a depth narrative over a stale surface reading. The depth reading goes a long way to relativise the simulacrum. In couching itself within a metaphorical exhumatory project, this project aims to dig deeper in order to reveal what exists beneath this much-proclaimed culture of surface. Accordingly, Vladislavić is able to show that Johannesburg is much closer to palimpsests of history, nature, elemental time, and flow than what a first reading would suggest.

This project will then put forward the argument that nature and flow work to relativise and subvert the pervasive view that Johannesburg is entirely dominated by a culture of surface, one typified by avaricious materialism and simulacral hypermodernity. Natural flow eventually undermines the sterility and entropy of the simulacrum. As much as the simulacrum aims for immortality and immutability, this aspiration is ultimately sabotaged by nature's "self-

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[267] Bremner, L. "A Quick Tour Around Contemporary Johannesburg" in *From Jo'burg to Jozi.* (Eds. H. Holland and A. Roberts). Penguin: Johannesburg, 2010, p. 68.

[268] Graham, J. "Ivan Vladislavić and the Possible City" in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing.* 44: 4, 2008, p.334.

[269] Ibid, p.334.

renewability" and "cyclicity."[270] The rest of the thesis endeavours to show via a defamiliarised reading of Johannesburg how nature, via its intrinsic forces of "implacable flux"[271], haunts culture from the sidelines, exposing the virtuality of Johannesburg's consumerist driven and globalised hyperreality.[272]

[270] Gaylard, G. "Migrant Ecology in the Postcolonial City in *Portrait with Keys*: *Joburg and What-What*" in *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.293.

[271] Ibid, p.292.

[272] Ibid, p.288 and p.293.

# Chapter Two: Postcolonial Formalism

The very last portrait of *Portrait with Keys* sees Vlad, the narrator, caught up in a security guards' strike gone wrong. Riot police begin firing rubber bullets and teargas canisters into the crowd, whereupon the jostling throng starts to disperse. In describing the ensuing pandemonium, the narrator find himself ensnared in a jumble of hawkers' produce that has toppled over, "spill[ing]" onto the pavement (p.194). In the process, his feet "scatter Quality Street toffees and little building blocks of Chappies bubblegum" (p.194). The narrator is at once a Godzilla or Swiftian Gulliver, clumsily knocking over towers of toffees and chewing gum columns. This description successfully encapsulates the mob's "strange blend of fear and hilarity, faces wincing and laughing" (p.194). In the tumult, his fingers "sink into orange pulp on the stone" (p.194). This image stands as a gruesome metaphor for the fear that some analogous harm will come to pierce his own "soft flesh" (p.194). When he eventually finds himself in the refuge provided by the Johannesburg Public Library, he sits down to read. Yet this moment of sought-after repose is disrupted when he licks his finger to turn the page of the volume in his hand, thus immediately reviving the earlier excitement: his finger "tastes of orange juice" (p.195). This portrait incongruously conveys the spectacle of unanticipated violence via the description of small and trivial foodstuffs, hawkers' wares, knocked over in a moment of chaotic panic by a precipitous city mob. The "everyday abnormality"[273] so characteristic of Vladislavić's prose, banality mixed with the outré, effectively defamiliarises the reader's engagement with this scene. The ordinariness of this violence brings these two opposing forces into propinquity with each other, estranging both. Accordingly, his preoccupation with the quotidian marginalia of this atypical street scene ironically imbues this episode with more force and affect than one would expect from an account of Chappies, toffees, and oranges.

This passage stands as a good example of the way in which Ivan Vladislavić defamiliarises the normal and the quotidian by placing his microscopic focus squarely on the aspects of city-life we tend to overlook. His attention, in gravitating towards the "marginal spaces" of Johannesburg, is fascinated with the flotsam and dross of the city. He is as interested by discarded objects as precious heirlooms. By adopting the technique of defamiliarisation, he is able to disrupt habitual reading patterns as a means of renewing perceptibility and rendering sensation afresh. By

[273] Lenta, P. ""Everyday Abnormality': Crime and In/security in Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*" in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature,* 44:1, 2009, pp.117-133.

representing the city from a fresh perspective, readers are jolted free from habitualised and automatic responses. Experimentation with form, a precise relationship with language, and a keen eye for aesthetic intensification (and distanciation) all contribute towards heightening textual (and urban) perceptibility. This often entails portraying the prosaic and everyday in an unfamiliar light in order to unveil novelties from within.

Although Vladislavić is celebrated as a chronicler of the normal and commonplace, his earlier work tended towards the surreal and fabulous. There is a tension in his work between depicting the everyday with microscopic focus to alienate us from our habitual interpretations versus describing the bizarre within the framework of the familiar. Vladislavić seems to flirt with both extremes of the realist/magical realist spectrum, although he is also just as comfortable striking a disconcerting middle ground. Vladislavić's satirical playfulness with both form and language effectively estranges his reader. Estrangement enforces a momentary feeling of lostness. I shall argue that lostness creates a promising space from which to engage in acts of interpretive and urban rediscovery. However, before we can begin to consider the constructive space of lostness, it is necessary to investigate how Vladislavić's work can be read against Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky's theory of *ostranenie* (and Brechtian alienation) and how this process of aesthetic estrangement becomes an enabling tool for urban rediscovery.

This chapter will place considerable focus on a particular grouping of texts within Vladislavić's oeuvre. While analytical attention will be paid to *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys*, which are more representative of the conditions of the postcolonial everyday, the majority of this chapter's close reading concentrates on the more radically surreal texts within Vladislavić's literary corpus. The experimental aesthetics of *The Folly*, *Missing Persons*, *Propaganda by Monuments*, *The Restless Supermarket*, *The Loss Library*, and *A Labour of Moles* work particularly well within the discursive frame of defamiliarisation. The rest of the thesis concentrates on the more recent and more explicitly Johannesburg texts*, The Exploded View*, *Portrait with Keys*, and *Double Negative*.

The earlier fiction (*The Folly*, *Missing Persons*, *Propaganda by Monuments*, *The Restless Supermarket*) playfully and casually juxtaposes the surreal with quotidian aspects of everyday life. Responding to the effects of the State of Emergency, the last fiery breaths of the apartheid beast, these rather "strange and compelling"[274] texts channel the spectacular, and on occasion, literalise metaphors of violence. For instance, the *Missing Persons* story "When My Hands Burst into Flames" has its

[274] Morphet, T. "An Extraordinary Volume Romps in My Head" in *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, pp.22-24.

narrator's hands spontaneously burst into flame – he literally becomes incendiary. In "The Prime Minister is Dead", a subtle nod to the assassination of H.F. Verwoerd, the spectacle of a state funeral ("Massed bands, tanks, a fly-past of jets… every building draped in crêpe" – p.12) becomes ludicrously hyperbolised (or diminished, depending on one's perspective) when a father-and-son assist the procession by transporting the dead leader's coffin in their garden wheelbarrow. These texts boast overtly experimental narrative and formalistic qualities, which are largely enabled by the application of various defamiliarising literary devices.

More recent fiction like *A Labour of Moles* interrogates the fertile terrain of linguistic polysemy, corporeally imagining the words on the pages of the dictionary. *The Loss Library* self-referentially immerses itself in the provisional terrain of writing-as-process. *The Loss Library* is a collection of unfinished stories and engages in a postmodern project of fragmentation, metafiction, *mise-en-abyme*, provisionality, and intertextuality (for instance, the titular story boasts an intertext with Borges's *Ficciones* and "The Other Tiger"). *The Loss Library* plays with the bounds of literary possibility by putting together the rough and raw edges of various narrative fragments taken from Vladislavić's notebooks. The result is one that modestly and subtly begins to renovate the frontiers of fiction and is thus appropriate for Formalist analysis.

**History of Russian Formalism**

The theory of defamiliarisation (*ostranenie* in Russian) originates from the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky's "Art as Technique", which was published in 1916. The act of 'making strange' is widely considered to be one of the most remarkable and lasting achievements of the short-lived Russian Formalist movement.

Russian Formalism was a movement of Russian academics who began producing literary scholarship in the second decade of the twentieth century. They reached their critical heyday in the 1920s but were forcibly suppressed by the Soviet regime in 1930. Membership was composed of a number of iconoclastic literary historians and philologists, such as Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, Roman Jakobson, and Boris Tomashevsky. These critics worked out of two main scholarly 'centres': firstly and most notably, the Petrograd Society for the Study of Poetic Language (Opoyaz) and secondly, the Moscow Linguistic Circle. Ironically, while many

of its adherents preferred the term "specifiers", they were called "Formalists" by their detractors and the label stuck for posterity.[275]

The impetus behind the Formalist movement was diametrically opposed to the objectives and tenets of its scholarly forerunners. Not only did the Formalists express their distaste for Symbolism (and its "metaphorical bias"), they found that the "social" critics' preoccupation with social ideas and concerns limiting and facile.[276] They disagreed that a particular work should be judged by its social and political message. The Formalists believed that this strain of scholarship prioritised analysis of ideological considerations at the expense of an examination of form. Analysis of the formal qualities of a work was to be the guiding principle in their critical efforts. This focus on form, rhythm, meter, style, composition and other literary devices largely jettisoned careful critique of the content (or material) of the text-under-scrutiny. Unlike the American New Critics, they were not terribly interested in interpreting textual meaning or the overall ideological significance of a text.

The Formalists' clear intention was that the study of literature should be made "specific and concrete."[277] Roman Jakobson delineated this positioning in *Modern Russian Poetry* (1921), proclaiming that the "object of study in literary science is not literature but 'literariness'" (or in Russian, *literaturnost*).[278] Within the confines of these aesthetic parameters, to discover what exactly made a work literary required the Formalists to locate its *differentia*. This was achieved partly by sensitivity to the specific qualities of poetic language and via an exploration of its 'quality of divergence', otherwise known as *Differenzqualität*. The concept of *Differenzqualität* – an aspect of *literaturnost* (which the Formalists believed was the "source of artistic values" and "the core of aesthetic perception") – appears to have meant three different things to the movement's members:

> … on the level of the representation of reality, *Differenzqualität* stood for the 'divergence' from the actual, i.e., for creative deformation. On the level of language it meant a departure from

[275] Erlich, V. "Russian Formalism" in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 34:4, 1973, p.627.

[276] Ibid, p.627.

[277] Eichenbaum, B. "The Formal Method" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Second Edition. (Eds. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan.) Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004, p.7.

For all translated texts, please consult the bibliography; this is where all relevant texts' translators' names can be found.

[278] Ibid, p.7

> current linguistic usage. Finally, on the plane of literary dynamics, this catch-all term would imply a deviation from, or modification of the prevailing artistic norm.[279]

This approach to form (which involved scrutinising how a work deviated from artistic conventions), the use of strange and unusual words, and the institution of creative deformation highlights how much value the Formalists placed on novelty and originality.[280] Novelty, for them, was "capable of restoring the freshness to … perception."[281] The Formalists called for new artistic configurations and constructions as a means of discarding stale and tired traditional forms. Literature's worth was determined by its originality and innovativeness as well as its avoidance of entropy.

Shklovsky was the most responsive to the threat dull diction and worn-out traditional literary norms levelled at the fragility of perceptibility. In his essay "The Resurrection of the Word", he began digging the foundations for his concept of *ostranenie* or 'making strange'. He felt that the

> … most ancient poetic creation of man was the creation of words. Now words are dead, and language is like a graveyard … When words are being used by our thought processes in place of general concepts, and serve, so to speak, as algebraic symbols … then they have ceased to be sensed. We do not sense the familiar, we do not see it, but recognise it … 'artistic' perception is perception in which form is sensed (perhaps not only form, but form as an essential part) … In art, material must be alive and precious … Not only words and epithets fossilise, whole situations can fossilise too … Only the creation of new forms of art can restore to man sensations of the world, can resurrect things and kill pessimism.[282]

Shklovsky believed that the technique of 'making strange' promoted a way in which art (by making material "alive and precious") could restore sensations of the world and heighten perceptibility. He then went on to develop his seminal concept of *ostranenie* (roughly translated into English as defamiliarisation). It is through the artistic appropriation of defamiliarisation that the reader's perception of objects and events can be revived and rendered afresh. However, as far as the literary valorisation of novelty and the important role the process of estrangement

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[279] Erlich, V. *Russian Formalism.* (4th Ed.) Mouton: The Hague, 1980, p.252.

[280] Mose, K. *Defamiliarization in the Work of Gabriel García Márquez from 1947-1967*. Edwin Meller Press: New York, 1989, p.4.

[281] Erlich, V. *Russian Formalism.* (4th Ed.) Mouton: The Hague, 1980, p.254.

[282] Per Viktor Shklovsky, in: Mose, K. *Defamiliarization in the Work of Gabriel García Márquez from 1947-1967*. Edwin Meller Press: New York, 1989, pp.11-12.

plays in achieving literary innovation, the Formalists were definitely not the first group to place emphasis on the productive potential of the act of 'making strange'.

**The History of Making Strange**

It must be noted that the history of "making strange" predates Shklovsky's seminal essay. For many centuries, literary scholars have been preoccupied with methods and modes of representation that heighten perceptibility. Aristotle in his *Poetics* contemplated that poetic diction should employ "unusual words":

> By unusual, I mean strange (or rare) words, metaphorical, lengthened, — anything, in short, that differs from the normal idiom.[283]

Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* (first published in 1817) remarks in Chapter IV that the mark of creative genius resides in the ability

> To carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood; to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar.[284]

In reflecting upon the brilliance of his contemporary, Coleridge observed that William Wordsworth's objective for the *Lyrical Ballads* was to infuse

> … the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.[285]

More contemporarily, T.S. Eliot in his conclusion to *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* states that poetry has the capacity

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[283] Aristotle. *The Poetics of Aristotle: A Translation by S.H. Butcher.* (A Penn State Electronic Classics Series Publication) The Pennsylvania State University: Hazleton, 2000, pp.29-30. URL: http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/aristotl/poetics.pdf. Date accessed: 30 August 2013.

[284] Coleridge, S.T. *Biographia Literaria.* (Ed. G. Watson) J.M. Dent: London, 1956, p.49.

[285] Ibid, p.169.

> … to break up the conventional modes of perception and valuation which are perpetually forming, and make people see the world afresh or some new part of it.[286]

For Jean Cocteau the role of poetry "takes off the veil" and "reveals … the amazing things which surround us and which our senses usually register mechanically."[287] It effectively grabs hold of the "commonplace" and cleans it to "illuminate … its youth, and freshness … its primordial vigor."[288]

The quest for novelty as a means of intensifying perception has not been a phenomenon of the twentieth century alone. Be that as it may, the express contribution of the Formalists lies not in the recognition of the importance of newness and innovation (the rendering afresh), but rather in their systematic (almost scientifically empirical) attempt "to re-define it and then re-evaluate literature in terms of their new definition."[289]

**Ostranenie**

Shklovsky argued that as soon as our perception descends into the territory of the habitual it "retreats into the area of the unconsciously automatic."[290] Hence, if someone performs an action a thousand times, the particular sensations observed and experienced in this act of performance recede into the hazy and unremarkable background of perception. Likewise, the more we see an object, the more our recognition clouds our ability to truly take cognizance of it and as a result precludes our ability to "say anything significant about it."[291] He calls this process the "algebrization" of thought, where we ultimately "over-automatiz[e] objects" and tend not to see

[286] Eliot, T.S. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism.* Faber and Faber: London, 1964, p.154.

[287] Cocteau, J. *Le Rappel à l'Ordre* (1926), pp.215-216 as translated by Victor Erlich in *Russian Formalism.* (4th Ed.) Mouton: The Hague, 1980, p.180.

[288] Ibid, p.180.

[289] Mose, K. *Defamiliarization in the Work of Gabriel García Márquez from 1947-1967*. Edwin Meller Press: New York, 1989, p.11.

[290] Shklovsky, V. "Art as Technique" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology.* Second Edition. (Eds. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan.) Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004, p.15.

[291] Ibid, p.16.

> … them in their entirety but rather recognise them by their main characteristics. We see the object as though it were enveloped in a sack. We know what it is by its configuration, but we only see its silhouette.[292]

Habitualisation deleteriously affects perceptive efforts – it reduces clarity and freshness in our perception of objects and ultimately negates life. Shklovsky draws upon the analogy of people living by the seashore who are so accustomed to their surrounds, they eventually fail to hear the sound of the waves.[293] In the very same fashion,

> we scarcely ever hear the words which we utter … We look at each other, but we do not see each other anymore. Our perception of the world has withered away, what has remained is mere recognition.[294]

When applied to literature, this automatism speaks of petrification, predictability, and the effacement of crisp and concrete representations.[295]

Art, being an example of an exercise in perceptive representation, exists purely and predominantly for Shklovsky as a means by which one can "recover the sensation of life"; it prevails in order "to make one feel things, to make the stone stony."[296] Shklovsky expands upon his treatise by positing that it is the purpose of art to "impart the sensations of things as they are perceived and not as they are known."[297]

> The technique of art is to 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.[298]

Thus, art disautomatises perception by transferring "the usual perception of an object into the sphere of new perception."[299] Traditional modes of description and expression need to be

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[292] Ibid, p.15.

[293] Erlich, V. *Russian Formalism*. (4th Ed.) Mouton: The Hague, 1980, p.176.

[294] Per Viktor Shklovsky, *Literatura i Kinematograf* (1923) in Erlich, V. *Russian Formalism*. (4th Ed.) Mouton: The Hague, 1980, pp.176-7.

[295] Holdheim. W.W. "The Concept of Poetic Estrangement" in *Comparative Literature Studies*, 11:4, 1974, p.320.

[296] Shklovsky, V. "Art as Technique" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Second Edition. (Eds. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan.) Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004, p.16.

[297] Ibid, p.16.

[298] Ibid, p.16.

[299] Ibid, p.19.

wrested free of conventional contexts and stale patterns. That which is prosaic and habitual must be transformed and shown to be unfamiliar. This can be achieved by presenting the familiar in a novel light or by "placing it in an unexpected context."[300]

Vladislavić dislocates conventional idiomatic speech in *A Labour of Moles* as a means of transferring "the usual perception of an object into the sphere of new perception."[301] *A Labour of Moles*, published in 2011 as number 17 in *The Cahiers Series,* harkens back to the experimental mode of his earlier fiction. As the titular collective noun reflects, this is a novella preoccupied by (and literally immersed in) the slippery world of semantics. The narrative begins with the familiar idiom "I found myself in the thick of things" (p.9). Familiar phrases form a cluster of words, which possess a habitual crust of meaning. They are, as a result, most often read in an unconsciously automatic fashion. Defamiliarisation deconstructs the conventional grouping of words in order to relativise and disautomise the content. Idioms refer to linguistic habits, parts of language we recognise by silhouette only; they function by means of dismissing the singularity of its constituent elements. The narrator in *A Labour of Moles* finds himself in a strange and unfamiliar environment and tries to make sense of his surroundings by falling back on the comfort of old idioms – i.e. "the thick of things." However, the familiar is divested of its warmth and reassurance when the narrator questions the usefulness of the idiom in transforming the phraseology into an interrogative: "In the thick of what?" The repetition of the idiom, with slight rhetorical modification, places the idiom outside of its usual context. Recognisable enough to imitate its earlier invocation, its questioning stance, however, forces the reader to perceive the words as separate and distinct from each other. Being in "the thick of things" refers to "the busiest or most crowded part of something"[302] The 'things' part of the idiom usually indicates a lazy placeholder designating the busy context or circumstances in which the commentator finds him/herself. However, here Vladislavić grapples with what it means to be caught up in a flurry of literal 'things'. By subverting the idiom through repetitive alteration, the reader is warned that what follows may be contrary to expectation. What the reader *can* expect in *A Labour of Moles* is a sequence of narrative events that deviate from the norm. Vladislavić then literally expands upon what constitutes the "thick of things": "[a]n orderly clutter, stacked and layered, a surfeit of proper places. A warehouse, perhaps" (p.9). Subjecting idioms to this kind of playful stylistic and contextual twist, disautomises language. Indeed, the content behind the once ossified cluster of

[300] Erlich, V. *Russian Formalism*. (4th Ed.) Mouton: The Hague, 1980, p.176.

[301] Shklovsky, V. "Art as Technique" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Second Edition. (Eds. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan.) Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004, p.19.

[302] Siefring, J. (Ed.) *The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms*. 2nd Ed. Oxford University Press: Oxford, p.289.

words is deconstructed and dislocated; this process of estrangement means that we can read the individuated words outside of their habitual context (hence Vladislavić's mischievous literalisation of the idiom's meaning).

Shklovsky examined the oeuvre of Leo Tolstoy as a means of showing how one's artistic medium can be effectively estranged. Tolstoy is able to defamiliarise the habitual by refraining from naming the familiar object – he "'refuses to recognise'"[303] it. In contrast, he describes an object "as if he were seeing it for the first time" and events as though they "were happening for the first time."[304] Describing something in this way entails the abandonment of the "accepted names of its parts" and Tolstoy instead "names corresponding parts of other objects."[305] In other words, through "the estrangement of the familiar, this constant violation of the horizon of expectations, language is made visible (palpable again)."[306] Shklovsky calls this process "pricking the conscience."[307]

In Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket*, the narrator Tearle adopts a similar technique in describing the Café Europa's patrons held captive by the television:

> Half of them were staring in one direction and half in the other, and although I knew that they might be focused on the same image, to me they epitomised the idea of divided attention. They were so intent, I almost saw the trajectory of each gaze, solid as a beam; and yet together they made a confused thatch, like a jumble of immense pick-up sticks criss-crossing the room, piled to the ceiling. (p.159)

Vladislavić, like Tolstoy, takes one of the most ordinary and commonplace modern activities (watching 'TV') and estranges it. He achieves this by narrating the pastime from the perspective of the atavistic Tearle, who feels that the age of television (especially when the Box is introduced to the Café Europa) signals the demise of civilisation. Here, the activity (if it can be called an activity) is rendered unfamiliar. We are granted a portal into the viewpoint of the observer who watches the spectators. When a TV is switched on, it electromagnetically absorbs the attention of the room. It is thus unusual to consider the perspective of someone outside of that nexus of

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303 Erlich, V. *Russian Formalism*. (4th Ed.) Mouton: The Hague, 1980, p.177.

304 Shklovsky, V. "Art as Technique" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Second Edition. (Eds. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan.) Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004, p.16.

305 Ibid, p.16.

306 Holdheim. W.W. "The Concept of Poetic Estrangement" in *Comparative Literature Studies*, 11:4, 1974, p.320.

307 Shklovsky, V. "Art as Technique" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Second Edition. (Eds. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan.) Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004, p.16.

enthralment. Through the use of metaphors ("epitomised the idea of divided attention") and similes ("solid as a beam"; "like a jumble of pick-up sticks"), Vladislavić conveys the impression of spectators watching TV in a novel light. This episode could easily have described the patrons watching television in one simple and straightforward sentence. Instead, by placing narrative focus on this particular pastime, the reader could feel as though they were being exposed to this modern habit for the first time. That Tearle analyses TV-watching as an incongruous combination of transfixed focus with a cursory degree of concentration becomes an important social critique of this time-consuming pastime. This critique is enabled by the act of estrangement.

Additionally, Shklovsky argues that Tolstoy is also able to 'make strange' by "seeing things outside of their normal context."[308] A horse is the narrator in "Kholstomer", which disrupts anthropocentrism. In "We Came to the Monument" (a story in the *Missing Persons* collection), the narrative is divided into two voices: one corporeal and the other inanimate. The latter focalisation is funnelled through the perspective of a Pretoria statue who witnesses the literalised winds of change as they blow through and destroy the capital. This anthropomorphised statue in post-apocalyptic Pretoria then reflects upon (and integrates 'himself' into) the friezes of the Voortrekker Monument. The story effectively defamiliarises South Africa's history, showing up its brutal racial iniquities, and pockmarked past. The unfamiliar (the narrativising statue, war-ravaged and abandoned Pretoria), defamiliarises apartheid South Africa; the collection was published in 1989, and so the story was likely a response to the continuation of pervasive state-sponsored violence set in motion by the State of Emergency. Tony Morphet remarks that *Missing Persons* was published at a time when "it was impossible to imagine a future" – a future free from apartheid, that is.[309] Thus this half of the narrative, via a shift in narrative convention, presents a disembodied and transcendental view of South African human history. The first line of the story, "I have a few things to tell you and a lot of time" (p.67), gestures towards this different ratio/proportion of time. Witnessing the devastation of collapse, the statue's perspective of the disintegration of the centre of Afrikaner officialdom provincialises the juggernaut of apartheid politics. The statue's statement "They have come to topple me, to drag my body down into the street" (p.69) is similar to the stories "Courage" and "Propaganda by Monuments" (published in Vladislavić's second short story collection *Propaganda by Monuments*) which both consider the provenance of statues as repositories of ideology. The image of the toppling statues resounds

[308] Ibid, p.16.

[309] Morphet, T. "Words First: Ivan Vladislavić" in *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.208.

through both collections as symbolic of the dismantlement of monolithic political regimes and their corresponding credos.

Another manner in which the act of estrangement can be successful is when the author or poet actively disautomatises their medium by subjecting their works to "syntactic, semantic, and metaphorical shifts."[310] The creative usage of language and form can bring about an enhanced perception of the world; this process is often referred to as creative deformation. Before the "poetic image transfers objects to a different plane of reality, making them strange" it must make use of these "semantic shifts."[311] Semantic shifts refer to the usage of words outside of their original (and perhaps historical) context. By subjecting language to this playful adjustment, the poetic image is defamiliarised because the verbal cliché has been obliterated. Victor Erlich, in speaking about the multidirectionality of semantic shifting, maintains that the process of "making strange" can be achieved by using either an ornate word in the place of a simple word or by substituting a "learned or genteel" word with an "profane or earthy term."[312] Mixing up the customary idiom in the fashion effectively defamiliarises the content behind the words.

The beginning of "Autopsy" in Vladislavić's short story collection *Propaganda by Monuments* demonstrates how an unanticipated shift in register can facilitate estrangement. The previous story, the titular "Propaganda by Monuments", ends on the following stirring note:

> Khumalo went and stood at a distance, upwind of the stinking Freedom symbol, with his eyes half-closed, squinting. And after a while he began to see how, but not necessarily why, the impossible came to pass. (p.38)

This serious contemplation of the monumental nature of apartheid is then subverted by a single word on the first line of the following page (signalling the beginning of "Autopsy"): "Um" (p.39). The playfulness and irreverence of this colloquial intrusion undercuts the gravity of the ending of the preceding story. This onomatopoeic utterance jolts the reader. This stylistic convulsion effectively shakes up the prosody from one story to the next and thus defamiliarises what follows. The narrative then advances with a South African filler word, "Basically" (p.39). "Basically" is a stock word in South African parlance and is often employed in situations that require some sort of explanation. When considered within the context of colloquial South

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310 Holdheim. W.W. "The Concept of Poetic Estrangement" in *Comparative Literature Studies*, 11:4, 1974, p.320.

311 Mose, K. *Defamiliarization in the Work of Gabriel García Márquez from 1947-1967*. Edwin Meller Press: New York, 1989, p.12.

312 Erlich, V. *Russian Formalism*. (4th Ed.) Mouton: The Hague, 1980, p.178.

African English, "basically" is hackneyed. This type of linguistic disjuncture can produce a sense of estrangement and thus heighten perceptibility. The reader's sensations are awakened and enlivened by this idiomatic disruption. The "um" and "basically" prepare the reader to stalk the King of Rock n' Roll through the streets of Hillbrow. To update Shklovsky's theory slightly, clichés can be used to defamiliarise content when employed outside of their usual context. As a result, clichés – when used in this conscious way – can subvert reader's expectations; this helps to prevent a habitualisation of perception.

Shifts in register are not only the only way in which estrangement can be achieved. Temporal or diachronic shifts in idiom are just as important to the process of 'strangification'. What this means is that diction, turns of phrase, and figures of speech from an earlier period may be invoked to disrupt habitual reading patterns.

Both the register and idiom invoked by Aubrey Tearle, the atavistic protagonist of *The Restless Supermarket*, can be considered as effective defamiliarising techniques. Tearle's employment of fustian discourse, euphuistic rhetoric, and semi-obsolete diction finds the reader reaching for the dictionary on almost every page of the novel. The complexity (or perhaps perplexity) of this first person narrative voice was a purposeful ploy on the part of Vladislavić to force the reader to engage in the same activity as its Anglophilic proofreading protagonist: that is, reading the dictionary. Trying to keep up with Tearle's pastime of lexical fartlek defamiliarises the way in which we read words on the page. For instance, on one occasion, when he shows off these semantically inclined gymnastic skills to Mevrouw Bonsma, the pianist of Café Europa, the narration takes on an unconventional twist:

> '**Medley**, Mevrouw,' I would say. 'Heterogeneous mixture. See meddle. **Meddle**, busy oneself unduly. And **mêlée**. Same root in "mix" – from the Latin *misceo*.' Then again: 'Do you see, Mevrouw,' I would say. '**Wormwood**. From the OE *wormod*, *wermod*, after worm, wood: cf vermouth. And **vermouth**. From the G. *Wermut*, wormwood. That's what we call a backflip. Let me show you how it works here in the dictionary.' (p.78)

This passage disturbs casual and cursory reading patterns. Instead, the reader's eye is "pricked" by various emboldened and italicised words. The reader cannot merely speed-read this section of prose. Instead, in this particular act of reading, she is exposed to etymological abbreviations ('OE' and 'G') and the symbol 'cf' without any narrative hand-holding. Should she be unaware that the shorthand respectively refers to Old English, German, and the Latin *conferre*, the reader is forced to investigate what these terms mean, which will momentarily take her away from the

page. She will need to consult a dictionary or some other reference book. This subtle manipulation of the readers' efforts, by engaging their active interaction with the text and its meaning, suspends automatism. Instead of glossing over the words, we begin to appreciate the semantic web that connects words all over the lexicon (and the text itself) – what Tearle calls lexical "backflips". This technique makes language "visible (palpable again)."[313]

Significantly, this technique disrupts our habitual reading techniques, forcing us to experientially identify with the uncomfortable Tearle as our fingers trace out the very same journey across the pages of the dictionary. The irony should not be lost on us that as we follow the exploits of a retired proofreader, whose greatest accomplishment to date was proofreading the telephone directory, the author finds formalistic means by which we too begin reading snatches of prose like our protagonist. Indeed, to further intensify this irony, one should consult the David Philip 2006 edition of *The Restless Supermarket*, which is riddled with numerous examples of editing errors and general corrigenda. Within this particular edition, the reader is forced – like Tearle – to decry the devolution of printing standards.

Changes to the semantic fabric of a text create "a texture of braked speech which encourages freshness of view, bringing a richer density to the world."[314] Shklovsky maintained that poetic language requires a "phonetic roughening" of normal speech; it is ultimately the "attenuated", "torturous" and "formed" type of speech found in poetry which differentiates it from unremarkable communicative exchanges.[315] The same effect can be achieved through an alteration of syntax as well as the employment of fresh and novel metaphors.

Sound in poetic language held great importance for the Formalists. Acoustic texture attained through grammatical form, euphonic devices (alliteration and assonance), altered syntax, rhyme and meter are all methods that can be used to heighten perceptibility. Techniques such as repetition and parallelism (transferring "the usual perception of an object into the sphere of a new perception", making a "unique semantic modification"[316]) affect rhythm; the "disordering" and "roughening" of rhythm is another device that boasts a disautomising effect.[317] Other

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313 Holdheim. W.W. "The Concept of Poetic Estrangement" in *Comparative Literature Studies*, 11:4, 1974, p.320.

314 Mose, K. *Defamiliarization in the Work of Gabriel García Márquez from 1947-1967*. Edwin Meller Press: New York, 1989, p.12.

315 Shklovsky, V. "Art as Technique" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Second Edition. (Eds. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan.) Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004, pp.19-20.

316 Ibid, p.19.

317 Mose, K. *Defamiliarization in the Work of Gabriel García Márquez from 1947-1967*. Edwin Meller Press: New York, 1989, p.12.

formalistic devices affecting plot such as comparisons, shifts in narrative voice, complications, tautology, false conclusions, peripeteia, and hyperbole all contribute towards a careful and "aesthetic contemplation of language."[318] The stylistic presence of these devices can be located all over Vladislavić's oeuvre. Variations in the representation of chronological time (regarding a narrative's presentation of events) and retardation (something which decelerates "the main thrust of development" through "deflections, digressions and descriptions"[319]) are further devices that defamiliarise plot. Kenrick Mose states that such "complications and elaborations of a story…enhance perception of the artistic material."[320] Moreover, the act of 'making strange' is less literary invention than literary discovery – tweaking out strands latent in other literary periods and bringing them to the fore.[321]

On the note of chronology and linear narrative, Aubrey Tearle, in explaining his thorough and disciplined approach to reading, remarks that he "went further than most":

> The habit of years, the prospect for rules and regulations, the dedication to matter in its proper order, front and back, that kept me steadily from A to B to 'The End', also made me read past it, through Appendices and Indices and Advertisements, through Bibliographies and Endnotes and Glossaries, until the endpapers loomed in their blank finality. And even then, nothing was more satisfying than to turn the final page of a tome, thinking the race was run, and find a colophon, a 'finishing touch'. A meaningful fragment of the whole, put there to be read, but which no one, perhaps, had ever bothered to read, by which I mean to scan deliberately, to pass the eye over in full and conscious awareness of these particular shapes, impressed upon paper, now impressing themselves upon the retina and the cortex, and thus upon the soft surface of time itself. (p.47)

This passage evinces Tearle's meticulousness as a proofreader. He shows that his perception (of the page) has not withered away; he forces himself to see that which most dismiss or fail to notice. He persists until the satisfying "finishing touch" of a book – the colophon, a small mark overlooked by less discerning readers. His method of reading shows that he is alive to all the components of a text – he passes his eye over in "full and conscious awareness." He allows the impression it casts to imprint itself on his eye, his mind, until it becomes a stamp upon the pliant surface of time. In part, this extract affirms Shklovsky's dictum. Perception of the minor here is

[318] Ibid, p.12.

[319] Ibid, p.12.

[320] Ibid, p.12.

[321] Ibid, p.13.

not only restored, but also lengthened and prolonged (hence the comment about the imprinting of time). However, as much as Tearle's indefatigable eye takes stock of the things most readers fail to see, the manner by which he reads a text with his desire for things to be presented in their "proper order", mindful of "rules and regulations", means that he steadily reads "from A to B to 'The End.'" This speaks to one of Tearle's major shortcomings – his inhibited consciousness which blindly adheres to traditional values. Conversely, defamiliarisation should not just be about being meticulous. It goes further than this in that it prepares the literary territory for adventure and exploration.

Vladislavić purposefully subverts this linear convention in both *Portrait with Keys* and *The Exploded View*. Both texts can be said to disrupt habitual reading patterns by exhibiting forms which defy linear literary progression. *Portrait with Keys*, especially, presents a highly fragmented text and constructs a highly formalistic responsiveness to the representation of space. The text does not enjoy the comfort of a conventional linear and continuous narrative form; instead the text is composed of fractured episodes, which depict the city in fits and starts. This seems an appropriate modality to represent Johannesburg. As Lindsay Bremner notes in her introduction to *Writing the City into Being*, Johannesburg "spawns multiple centres, sends one in divergent directions, weaves multiple paths and reveals itself in its impurities. It insists that to know anything about it requires coming back, again and again."[322] Likewise, the fragmented form of both *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys* "weave multiple paths" through texts with "multiple centres", requiring the reader to come back to the text again and again; the different parts/sketches mean that the reader, like the walker, must approach the city/text from different vantage points, all the while trying to cobble together a semblance of incomplete and provisional knowledge. These texts also buoy up Vladislavić's minimalist style and his characteristic literary "undecideability."[323] They suggest that one can only begin to speak of the city in a selective, and inconclusive way.

This formalistic approach to the construction of the narrative defamiliarises the way in which readers customarily enter a text. Indeed, *Portrait with Keys* begs to be read in an order which deviates from the traditional A to B. Although the bipartite structure of the text is designated by the headings of "Point A" and "Point B", there is no true "The End" that will be encountered

[322] Bremner, L. Introduction to *Writing the City in Being: Essays on Johannesburg 1998-2008*. Fourthwall Books: Johannesburg, 2010, p.1.

[323] In Gerald Gaylard's introduction to *Marginal Spaces* (2011) he speaks about Vladislavić's "space of undecideability" as well as the potential that lostness and emptiness boasts for this writer (p.11).

on the last page of the text. The "Itineraries" section, which appears at the back of the book, provides alternative "thematic pathways" through the text (p.205). In much the same way as one can enter or exit the city from a number of different access points, *Portrait with Keys* grants the reader the same latitude or freedom in this activity of textual navigation. Readers can either follow one or numerous "Itineraries" or they can devise their own "readerly" path. The city has no clear beginnings or endings and this text emulates this fact. By refusing to start at the customary "beginning", thus choosing to enter the text at random, a reader's sense of the proportions of the text is challenged. Automatised perceptive efforts are impeded, as the reader is forced to re-evaluate how to make sense of this unusual passage through narrative. By disrupting the "Point A to B" logic of reading, the reader is adequately poised to take fresh stock of things. The adoption of this formalistic mode unhinges linear narrative progression, which helps to reveal events in a novel light. Moreover, the use of numbers in *Portrait with Keys* to separate and designate the semi-autonomous vignettes emulates a dictionary or list, thus helping to defamiliarise both the novel genre and the travelogue.

Much like *Portrait with Keys*, *The Exploded View* through its form is able to disautomatise our perception by transferring "the usual perception of an object into the sphere of new perception."[324] From a metafictional perspective, these texts challenge conventional generic and formalistic classifications. Causing some controversy in 2005 for being disqualified from the Sunday Times Literary Awards for taxonomic reasons (its genre was found to be a collection of short stories rather than a novel), *The Exploded View* challenges traditional classifications and viewpoints. For Vladislavić, what was most regrettable about this incident, was that it "closes down possibilities of what fiction might be" in the postapartheid literary clime.[325] *The Exploded View*, as its namesake suggests, presents thematically and formalistically an exploded view of the constituent parts of a model city. Each part of the novel represents a piece of a narrative jigsaw puzzle – all requiring the nudging of the reader's finger to bring them together into a composite novelistic whole. It is in this way that it was folly that *The Exploded View* was not considered a novel. The four narrative units do indeed fit together, but not of their own accord. In the true Barthesian sense, this is a "writerly text" as it requires the reader's intervention to render it whole. In a Shklovskian sense, the process of perception is prolonged and made difficult in that

[324] Shklovsky, V. "Art as Technique" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Second Edition. (Eds. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan.) Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004, p.19.

[325] Miller, A. "Inside the Toolbox" in *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.220.

the reader has been placed in an unexpected context out of which they must seek the familiar despite the unusual form.

Tony Morphet interprets the symbol of the exploded view – referenced directly in the text with a description of the contents of Gordon Duffy's copies of *Popular Mechanics* – a little differently (pp.188-190). He argues that instead of needing to come together to create a whole, the disconnected parts of the model – and thus the city they present – are not indicators of an orderly plan, but instead epitomise a "vision of the city that had been blown apart."[326] Thus, unlike the reader who tries to make sense of the pieces by reconstituting *The Exploded View*'s novelistic jigsaw puzzle, Gordon Duffy instead "loses his way in the debris and eventually his life itself."[327] Duffy's lostness – along with the other four protagonists' state of disorientation – becomes an important aesthetic and conceptual counterpoint for Vladislavić. Lostness, instead of 'foundness', establishes a space to renegotiate and re-navigate the conceptual parameters of the city.

As a result of the shifting territory of its own genre, which has been termed creative self-fiction, *Portrait with Keys* likewise defamiliarises its reader by unsettling an automatised suspension of belief. The reader cannot merely retreat back into a habitual mode of interpretation; instead what they perceive is complicated by the narrator-protagonist's positioning within the text, which boasts both insider and outsider status (he is both character and author, narrator and subject). This shift in narrative convention insists that the reader is far more alert and discerning in their level of fictional engagement. The intensity of their experience of navigating the text must be constantly checked and evaluated.

The experimental qualities of Vladislavić's fiction defamiliarise habitual modes of seeing and interpreting textuality. In exposing the reader to less than conventional literary forms, his textual navigator can begin to feel a little lost. The process of 'making strange' creates an experience of momentary lostness. The act of defamiliarisation, if anything, is a conscious aesthetic attempt to destabilise and disorient the automatic and the quotidian channels of perception.

Not only are the reader's habitual textual routes challenged as a means of heightening their responsiveness to the material read, but these texts defamiliarise conventional ways of representing Johannesburg. These fragmentary tales represent the city provisionally and

[326] Morphet, T. "Words First: Ivan Vladislavić" in *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.208.

[327] Ibid, p.208.

selectively. The bird's eye view over a text is denied and we need to traverse the text, as we do the city, without a cartographic perspective over events, making sense of it via a ground level viewpoint, cobbling together bits and pieces. This is an effective means of representing Johannesburg, or any city for that matter, in that it foregrounds the relativity of its own exercise. It must be noted that Vladislavić is not only interested in the aesthetic qualities associated with experimental form. Content, for our purposes (thus departing from the Formalists' philosophy in prioritising form), is still an extremely important component for interpretive analysis. On the level of content, these two 'novels' embody the diversity and multivocality of the metropolis. This fractured and postmodern mode of writing the city has become seminal and can be witnessed in the works of Jonathan Morgan (*Finding Mr Madini*), Kgebetli Moele (*Room 207* in its polyvocal and spasmodic narration) Kevin Bloom (*Ways of Staying*) and Lauren Beukes (*Zoo City* and *The Shining Girls*). Kevin Bloom, in particular, cites Vladislavić as a principal literary influence for his *Ways of Staying* (p.228).[328]

**The Linguistic Territory of the City: Bricolage and Narrative Lists**

One of the most potent ways Vladislavić is able to defamiliarise the territory of the city is through the postmodern technique of bricolage. This literary device subjects marginal and ordinary city objects to intense scrutiny and renders perceptibility thereof afresh. Portrait 58 – subtitled "*Excess (Roll 3)*" – in *Portrait with Keys* discloses another exploded view of the city. This snapshot contains an inventory of random stuff:

> … the cars, the caravans … the driving … the parking … the walking in the parks … the talking … the laughing, the eating in the restaurants, the glasses … the knives, the forks … the reading, the writing … the pen, the ink in the pen. the books, the books, the books (p.80)

This portrait playfully abandons standard capitalisation and even ends the barrage of itemization without a full-stop (Tearle would be horrified at the prospect). The last "the books" hangs on the page and enhances the unvarnished feeling of this scrap of narrative. This collage of disconnected detail conveys intense impressions and moments of city-life – albeit in a disembodied fashion. Visually, the sketch seems to "disorder" and "roughen" the conventional

[328] Kevin Bloom directly cited Vladislavić as an influence during a book-reading event for *Ways of Staying* hosted by the Department of English at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2009.

and syntactical concatenation that words in prose should follow; it creates a "torturous" minefield to navigate. Revamping the semantic fabric in this way creates "a texture of braked speech which encourages freshness of view…"[329] This list of actions also effectively retards the rhythm of the preceding and following portraits. The shift in narrative rhythm, alongside the repetitive acoustic texture produced by the recurrent definite article ("*the* talking, *the* laughing, *the* eating…" – my emphasis) successfully interrupts the reader's tendency to float over an extract of prose in over-automised recognition. Instead, the reader is forced to read each item (or act) separately, taking time (because this form elongates the process of perception) to read each grouping on its own. In working towards the disruption of the withering of perception, this exercise requires the reader to renew their gaze in order to re-appreciate the clarity and freshness of sensation – sensation that is restored by this strange act of perceptive representation. Interestingly, all these items and actions are rather mundane accessories to city-life. By focusing our perception on these quotidian aspects of city-life, we can then pursue enriched avenues of conceptual interpretation (an in-depth analysis of this portrait's significance appears in the following chapter).

Bricolage helps to reveal the city by detailing what Stefan Helgesson calls "found objects"[330] within the confines of narrative. The idiosyncratic cobbling together of random aspects of city-life through the platform of printed language reveals the minutiae and marginal niches of Johannesburg. This type of writing challenges the traditional status quo. It is a technique that prospers as a consequence of the fecundity of language. Bricolage celebrates the kaleidoscopic nature of the metropolis. Moreover, its discontinuous method of representation acknowledges that language's ability to describe the world around us is, at best, provisional. Bricolage, microscopically rendered trifles, and the inventorying of city detail fracture traditional linearity, chronology, and cohesion in a work of prose.

Vladislavić's playful penchant for inventorying city detail takes on mind-numbing proportions in the *Propaganda by Monuments* story "Autopsy." Stefan Helgesson, in his article "'Minor Disorders': Ivan Vladislavić and the Devolution of South African English"[331], argues that this story's reproduction of menus and price lists helps to defamiliarise the language of consumerism.

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[329] Mose, K. *Defamiliarization in the Work of Gabriel García Márquez from 1947-1967*. Edwin Meller Press: New York, 1989, p.12.

[330] Ibid, p.187.

[331] Ibid, pp.175-191.

Helgesson remarks that Vladislavić's compulsive listing of logos and company names across a number of his works help to defamiliarise the "logocentrism of current-day consumerism", and as a result, "such pieces of printed language stand out as changeable and contingent, susceptible to the transformative power of imagination, open to the pleasures of visual and aural playfulness."[332] The setting in "Autopsy" is early 1990s Hillbrow and contemplates a similar landscape to *The Restless Supermarket*. The narrator is seated at the Potato Kitchen enjoying the unremarkable experience of eating some greasy fast food:

> My potato was large and carved into quarters, like a colony or a thief. It had been microwaved and bathed in letcho with sausage and bacon. Also embrocated with garlic butter (R0.88 extra) and poulticed with grated cheddar as yellow as straw (R1.80 extra). Moreover, encapsulated in white polystyrene … The slip from the cash register lay on the table folded into a fan. It documented this moment in time, choice of menu item and price including VAT (15.05.92/letch R9.57/che R1.80/coff R1.90/garl butt R0.88). (pp. 39-40)

The over-Romanticised language employed to describe the food is ludically incongruous. Medieval practices like the quartering of a thief are invoked to describe the way in which his potato has been cut up. Grandiose words like "carved", "bathed", "embrocated", "poulticed" and "encapsulated" confer a laughable formality to the take-away grub. This disconsonance pokes fun at the hyperbolic language of advertising. The repetitive inclusion of parenthetical information that constantly tallies up the cost of the meal, subverts habitual textual recognition. In doing so, Vladislavić not only satirises the tendencies of advertisers to oversell their products, but also criticises hyper-consumerism, where everything comes at a price. Towards the end of *The Restless Supermarket*, Aubrey Tearle warns Shirlaine against the dangers of "shiny" capitalism:

> There's a trend towards the superficial you should be mindful of; everything is being coated in the shiny veneers of advertising … Nothing has done more to take the Christ out of Christmas than the commercials. (p.323)

It is this message that "Autopsy" drives home. Vladislavić's characteristic precision with language (at least within the parameters of contemporary South African writing) calls to mind Tony Morphet's "Words First" where he points out that "the linguistic effects of Ivan

[332] Ibid, p.187.

Vladislavić's prose are already legend in South African literature."[333] Significantly, for Morphet, in Vladislavić's work, "[t]he world of the city follows the frontiers of language."[334] He argues that Vladislavić' imagines the city through the horizon of language: in other words, as art "opens out its sophisticated vision of life in the city it reminds us that we live in a city of words first. The streets and everything in them come second."[335] Language, as a device, is placed at the "very heart of his narrative of the postapartheid city."[336]

While Morphet does not cite defamiliarisation as an important tool in his description of the language Vladislavić uses to furnish his imaginary worlds, he does make a few comments which can be seen as analogous to Shklovsky's *ostranenie*. Morphet claims that Vladislavić's language (especially in the early stories)

> … takes on an independent initiating power, transforming the conditions of meaning and consequent action. The characteristic reading experience is of a sudden swerve in narrative direction or of a radical rupture in the pattern of expectation.[337]

Ultimately, Morphet finds that the

> … value of Vladislavić's work lies first and foremost in the life that he creates between the words on the page. It is the fresh and self-renewing life of the imagination as it draws from the reservoir of meanings lying in the words and makes something new.[338]

One of the ways Vladislavić is able to engender a "sudden swerve in narrative direction" is through inserting lists into the narrative flow. The narrative encroachment of checklists and inventories, as with bricolage, complicates and prolongs perceptive efforts. In Vladislavić, lists are prevalent: they can be found throughout his oeuvre (as has been evidenced above in "Autopsy" and *Portrait with Keys*). *The Folly* is no different in this respect. Mrs Malgas diverts her

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[333] Morphet, T. "Words First: Ivan Vladislavić" in *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.202.

[334] Morphet, T. "Words First" in *Scrutiny 2*, 11:2, 2006, p.87.

[335] Ibid, p.90.

[336] Nuttall, S. "Literary City" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis.* (Eds. A. Mbembe and S. Nuttall.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg: 2008, p.204.

[337] Morphet, T. "Words First: Ivan Vladislavić" in *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.205.

[338] Ibid, p.209.

attention away from (what she sees as) Mr Malgas's disquieting house-building activities with the next-door nuisance, Nieuwenhuizen, by making an inventory of her knick-knacks:

> … copper ashtray, Weltevreden coast of arms (wildebeest rampant). Wicker basket, yellow, a-tisket. Figurines, viz. cobbler, gypsy, ballerina, plumber, horologist, Smurf. Paperweight, Merry Pebbles Holiday Chalets. Cake-lifter, Continental China, coronation centenary crockery, crenate, crumbs. (p.29)

Later on in the novel, Nieuwenhuizen's mania for hardware reaches epic proportions. Vladislavić conveys his instability to the reader as he walks through his imaginary new house through narrative listing:

> For hours afterwards, Nieuwenhuizen was pacing to and fro, upstairs and downstairs, from room to room, from feature to feature, naming them all to himself in a quavering voice: 'Linen cupboard … radiogram … bar … bakelite thing … workshop … barricade, railway sleepers … wine cellar … eye-level oven … dishwasher … working surface … polished polyester finish … burglar-proofing, floral motifs … crazy paving … outdoor living area … moat … rockery … gnomes … swimming pool …' (p.106)

In *Willem Boshoff*, Vladislavić provides insight into the formal and aesthetic significance of narrative listing:

> In the midst of a narrative, passing straightforwardly along its syntagmatic path, logically and progressively, as horizontal as this line, a list is like a swamp, bog, morass, slough, wallow – a place where propulsive logic fails and the reader begins to plunge vertically through the paradigm. A narrative thread is as reassuringly solid as a concrete path underfoot. A list is porous and soft. It reveals the provisional nature of the terms in which we choose to express ourselves.[339]

A list not only confounds narrative progress with its textual quagmire, but also reveals the provisional nature of language. Words often fail to summon up exactly what they mean and can only be defined by calling upon other similar words (within a linked chain of signifiers), which they ultimately differ from. Textual meaning is thus postponed. Vladislavić's referencing of semiology via the concepts of the syntagm and the paradigm again highlights his sensitivity to both language and theory. Ferdinand de Saussure, in his seminal work *Course in General Linguistics*, explains that

[339] Vladislavić, I. *Willem Boshoff*. David Krut: Johannesburg, 2005, p.52.

> … words acquire relations based on the linear nature of language because they are chained together … The elements are arranged in sequence on the chain of speaking. Combinations supported by linearity are *syntagms* … on the other hand, words acquire relations of a different kind. Those that have something in common are associated in the memory, resulting in groups marked by diverse relations … Their seat is in the brain; they are a part of the inner storehouse that makes up the language of each speaker. They are *associative relations*. The syntagmatic relation is *in praesentia.* It is based on two or more terms that occur in an effective series. Against this, the associative relation unites terms *in absentia* in a potential mnemonic series.[340]

In other words, the syntagm indicates a horizontal axis of meaning where a sentence is composed of a sequence of words that convey a particular impression (i.e. 'the canine chased the ball') – i.e. a sentence's syntax.[341] On the other hand, the vertical axis – i.e. the paradigmatic[342] – refers to the system of differentiation provided by language and how any given word in any sentence may be swopped out via a process of synonymous substitution (i.e. 'canine' could be substituted for 'dog,' or likewise 'scrambled after' could replace 'chased').[343] The list, which is an example of the paradigmatic relation, indicates a series of words that lack "linearity." They are rich with associative meaning, but do not signal a chain of signification. Therefore, the list has the reader plunging "vertically through the paradigm." The list forestalls the comfort of the syntagm, but in the process reveals the provisional quality and porosity of language. Vladislavić's lists and bricolage are mechanisms by which he tries to estrange language and textual meaning, thus restoring sensation. The moments of textual lostness they instigate become an enabling device to not only experience the text afresh, but also to dig deeper and beyond conventional readings of urban space.

For instance, the street-scene catalogue that appears mid-way through portrait 63 of *Portrait with Keys* illustrates how both the narrative techniques of the list and bricolage activate a different and unexpected perception of Johannesburg. Although bricolage and the listing mechanism are usually invoked to convey urban and textual fragmentation, Vladislavić playfully subverts this representation by using these devices to portend a sense of urban belonging. The author-narrator

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[340] de Saussure, F. (1972) *Course in General Linguistics*. Open Court: Peru, Illinois, 1986, p.123.

[341] Ibid, pp.124-125.

[342] Ferdinand de Saussure refers to the vertical axis as "associative relations", but this term has subsequently been replaced by "paradigmatic."

[343] de Saussure, F. (1972) *Course in General Linguistics*. Open Court: Peru, Illinois, 1986, pp.126-131.

finds himself standing outside the Plaza Pawn Warehouse in Primrose, observing the street scene before him:

> The sunshine on the tar, which is sugar-frosted with automative glass from the smash-and-grabs, the Saturday-morning bustle … Solly Kramer's. a buckled bus shelter. dim-witted robots blinking into the glare. parking meters … yellow stripes on the fascia of Spares Link. the notices about diffs and carbs and shocks scrawled on the window glass in shoewhite … women in blankets on the verge across the way, besides their enormous lumpy bags of mielies. Myself in the midst of it, held by air, with this beautifully inconsequential book, scrounged in a bioscope junk shop, clutched in my hand. I should feel utterly out of place, but instead I feel that I belong here. I am given shape. (p.87)

The smashed automative glass, evidence of hijackings and muggings that have taken place at this intersection, is transformed by his description – it is "sugar-frosted" sunshine. The glass fragments set the tone by refracting this scene of disconnected urban miscellanea to the reader. If anything this reminder of crime should defer association. The narrator, with his "beautifully inconsequential book" in hand, finds himself completely immersed in this sea of urban bits and bobs. At face value, he seems completely out of place. On the level of form, the jagged shards of narrative extend the theme of the broken window fragments on tar; metaphorically, the reader has to navigate the page nimbly and carefully as though it were strewn with slivers of glass. Thus, textually and thematically, the motif of fragmentation is driven home. However, in spite of this, or because of this, author-narrator find that he is "given shape" by these surroundings. He finds himself in this moment to feel that he belongs here – he is at one with Johannesburg. He recognises that this accord not make sense, but "it's enough to make [him] laugh" (p.87). This innovative exhumation of both text and city-street through the narrative list subverts the reader's expectation; after all, the narrator finds connection and acceptance, where we were primed to expect disconnection and severance. This narrative volte-face subtly blends incongruity with serendipity. In the process, the reader learns to not make assumptions about the text and the city on which it may be based. It is salient that Vladislavić's finds cohesion despite fragmentation. This intuitiveness for paradox and duality points towards the particular brand of literary consciousness that can be discerned in his work. It is also indicative of the manner in which Vladislavić's fiction finds creative ways to subvert dominant readings of the city; for one, this portrait shows that even with Johannesburg's alarmingly high rates of crime and systemic violence (signalled by the reference to smash-and-grabs) one can, in spite of this, still find moments which offer points of connection and belonging in the metropolis.

Broader significance can be applied to Vladislavić's acts of defamiliarisation – significance that goes beyond textual and urban rediscovery. Vladislavić's defamiliarising fiction does not only give us a different way to experience both text and city, but his writings also allow for a different appreciation of consciousness.[344] In "Gross", a story published in *The Loss Library*, Vladislavić considers the experimental fiction and narrative listing of OuLiPo member, Georges Perec:

> His obsessive operations are a pretext for a particularly complex expression of his experience and character; by masking much they make possible the most tender revelations. When he sets himself the task of describing the things on his work-table, what emerges from the list 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 characterization. Drawing up a list is more complicated than people suppose, Perec points out, and contemporary writers have lost 'the art of enumeration'… (Loc.[345] 303)

Perec's "list of objects" provides Vladislavić with a "portrait of his mind" – it reveals an intimate cartography of the psyche as successfully as "more conventional characterization." If lists reveal a brand of consciousness, what do Vladislavić's lists reveal?

One might say that Vladislavić's lists ironically suggest a mind which is free from the constraints of taxonomic ordering impulses. It is a mind that is free to fall through the syntagmatic path – given sanction to wallow in the fecundity and lostness of the paradigm. It is a consciousness that relishes the loosening and un-sticking of routine responses. In suspending formal grammatical conventions and syntax, it iconoclastically challenges more conventional, linear, and expository modes of characterisation and narrative. It is a consciousness that seems more at home with contingency and "undecideability"[346] than certainty. The narrative list, then, as a defamiliarising tool, provides insight into Vladislavić's own literary consciousness which evinces a kind of Keatsian "negative capability." This is a treatise not only on writing the city, but also the broader project of representing the psyche. Vladislavić's fiction in its provisionality and flux suggests that

[344] This idea, a "different appreciation of consciousness" has been influenced by Gerald Gaylard's article, "Migrant Ecology in the Postcolonial City in *Portrait with Keys*: *Joburg and What-What*" in *Marginal Spaces* (2011), pp.287-p.308. Gaylard speaks about the way in which Vladislavić's writing exposes the ecology of the city of Johannesburg, and in doing so, deconstructs our understanding of the city-nature binary.

[345] Please note that I have used "loc." as an in-text abbreviation for "location" – the alternate numbering system used for Kindle eBooks in the Kindle eBook application (when electronic copies' page numbers do not correspond with those in print editions).

[346] Gaylard, G. Introduction to *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.11.

he is "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without" need of an "irritable reaching after fact and reason."[347] It is a consciousness "content with half-knowledge."[348]

**Updating Formalism**

The Formalists' preoccupation with aesthetic and perceptive novelty meant that they largely ignored ideological content as well as sociological and authorial influences. In their quest for newness the Formalists also neglected to consider the relativity of novelty. Kenrick Mose points out that what may seem "novel in one period but automatized and conventional in another" shores up the fact that "perceptibility resides in the moment, in literary fashion and in the reader as well as the work itself."[349]

In placing emphasis on strangeness as a means of renewing perceptibility, the Formalists overlooked the importance of balancing strangeness against moments of recognition. As readers, to be wrenched free of our habitual patterns of seeing helps us to experience sensations afresh, but conversely, we also need to be able to recognise the familiar in the aesthetic project. As Erlich puts it "pure novelty would make the aesthetic experience impossible."[350] Consequently, as much as Vladislavić's satire estranges its reader, the material must still be recognisable enough for the reader to understand the issue within the complexity of its native context. For defamiliarisation to be successful, a balance must be struck between the polarities of novelty and recognition.

As the movement matured the Formalists began to broaden their initially narrow focus, but they retained their original emphasis on form. The Formalists' understanding of the execution of form in literary works as well as their foregrounding the value of *Differenzqualität* as a theoretical precursor to defamiliarisation (which, Mose says, is the major device for "restoring perception,

[347] Keats, J. *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats*. (Cambridge Edition.) Houghton, Mifflin and Company: New York, 1899, p.277.

[348] Ibid, p.277.

[349] Mose, K. *Defamiliarization in the Work of Gabriel García Márquez from 1947-1967*. Edwin Meller Press: New York, 1989, p.15.

[350] Erlich, V. *Russian Formalism*. (4th Ed.) Mouton: The Hague, 1980, p.282.

for making us sense form, see things and situations" anew[351]) provide valuable impetus to understanding the way in which Ivan Vladislavić defamiliarises habitual patterns of recognition.

However, the multidirectionality of Vladislavić's brand of defamiliarisation – a postcolonial formalism, which takes its cue from Gerald Gaylard's "historical formalism"[352] – updates Shklovsky's *ostranenie* significantly, making it more malleable and responsive to the contemporary. Moreover, as a means of updating defamiliarisation's contemporary currency, I shall also discuss how defamiliarisation has been viewed by Lawrence Crawford and Alexei Bogdanov as forming the bedrock for later theoretical developments, in particular Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance*.

**Multidirectional Defamiliarisation**

Vladislavić's exploitation of the defamiliarisation technique is not static. On this count, Vladislavić's works suggest that the act of 'making strange' does not only have to follow one direction. When considered as an oeuvre, his body of work shows how defamiliarisation does not only occur when the familiar has been rendered within the frame of the unfamiliar. Indeed, estrangement can also take place when the unreal and surreal are rendered within the guise of the familiar. While a lot of his work stays true to Shklovsky's conception of *ostranenie*, Vladislavić is also unafraid of speaking back to the theory as a means of ensuring continued artistic freshness. When defamiliarisation itself threatens to "retreat in to the area of the unconsciously automatic"[353], the practice of the theory must be subjected to further aesthetic modifications.

"The Proofreader's Derby", comprising the second part of *The Restless Supermarket*, is the foremost example of counterpoising the strange against the familiar. I say foremost because this bizarre interlude, inserted within the frame of a rather realist text, has the effect of disrupting the more ordinary and familiar aspects of Aubrey Tearle's quotidian existence.

Much of Vladislavić's earlier work foraged into surrealist and somewhat magical realist territory. A collection like *Missing Persons* in particular, aspects of *The Folly*, and a generous handful of

351 Mose, K. *Defamiliarization in the Work of Gabriel García Márquez from 1947-1967*. Edwin Meller Press: New York, 1989, p.12.

352 Gaylard, G. Introduction to *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.10.

353 Shklovsky, V. "Art as Technique" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Second Edition. (Eds. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan.) Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004, p.16.

stories in *Propaganda by Monuments* reveal moments of experimental narrative and form. These oft-playful, politically and aesthetically attuned narratives present the starkly unfamiliar and peculiar within the realm of the familiar. For instance, in *Missing Persons* the Kafkaesque "The Box" features a caricature of the former Prime Minister P.W. Botha characteristically remonstrating against enemies of the state on television. As the camera pans out, and the figure of the Prime Minister recedes, shrinking into the Box, he extends his hand out in a symbolic gesture of friendship and Quentin (the television spectator and narrative focaliser of the story's events), in absentmindedly mirroring the PM's action, puts out his own hand and pulls the politician straight out of the television. The six-inch Prime Minister is then subjected to the ignominy of being caught in an up-turned salad bowl, knocked down by a rolled up newspaper, and contained within a bird's cage. Asked by Mary, Quentin's wife, if they can keep him as though he were a pet mockingly reduces his contextual dominance within the country at the time. His Lilliputian dimensions are diametrically opposed to the sabre-rattling and finger-wagging persona witnessed on the telly and thus, the authoritarian leader of South Africa is provincialised. Moreover, it is interesting to note that through the execution of parallelism (transferring "the usual perception of an object into the sphere of a new perception"[354]) the PM's humiliating circumstances and impotence now mirrors, albeit hyperbolically, the position of the black population who were treated like second-class citizens, or worse, like animals, during the apartheid era.

Reverting to my discussion of *The Restless Supermarket*, "The Proofreader's Derby" takes shape when Aubrey's friend Merle suggests that his collection of corrigenda should be put to some greater purpose. The idea to turn his "System of Records" into a proofreaders' test is thus born (pp.95-98 and p.113). He buys a trophy for the best proofreader and works on it tirelessly in order to have a version ready before the closing down party of the Café Europa. "The Proofreader's Derby" as corrigenda-turned-narrative becomes a fantastical and absurd allegory of Tearle's over-inflated impression of the important role proofreaders play in preserving order against the ubiquitous threat of societal and linguistic decay. "The Proofreader's Derby" thus seems to be a symbolic treatise espousing Tearle's self-made dictum:

> I never lost sight of my main purpose, which was to hold up examples of order and disorder, and thus contribute to the great task of maintaining order where it already existed and restoring it where it had been disrupted (p.98)

[354] Ibid, p.19.

Thus, within the allegorically surreal confines of "The Proofreader's Derby", Johannesburg is featured as Tearle sees it. "The Proofreader's Derby" becomes Tearle's furtive wish fulfilment for the city and reflects upon his own misplaced and trumped up proofreader-as-hero-complex.

In the days before the collapse of apartheid, Hillbrow witnessed mass-scale urban change and demographic flux. The relaxing of the Group Areas Act enacted a 'greying' – to adopt the parlance of the day – of many previously white neighbourhoods. In Tearle's "Derby", the shifting racial boundaries coupled with a general questioning of cultural binaries within Johannesburg are literally evoked by cartographic disorder in its urban counterfoil, Alibia. While this blurring of once violently policed categories was celebrated as a defeat of apartheid-era logic, in Tearle's narrative he shows how this flux throws his neatly arranged world into disarray. Fluxman, Tearle's cipher, wakes up to find his neighbourhood flooded: overnight his front lawn has been replaced by the Wetland Ramble from the Zoological Gardens. This rearrangement of the city – emphasised particularly by the anomalous presence of water (a scarce resource in Joburg as it is) – highlights the disorder unleashed upon the metropolis. As he traverses the city, Fluxman encounters a number of other geographic aberrations. It is obvious that for someone like Tearle, who is at the helm of this *mise-en-abyme* narrative, the only way in which order can be restored is through the efforts of Fluxman and fellow members of the Proofreader's Society of Alibia:

> In the late hours, when the official business had been dealt with soberly, small glasses of sherry, and the thought that common citizens were sleeping easily because good order was in the hands of responsible men, sweetened the camaraderie that bound them all to the professional cause. (p.217)

By correcting the records, Fluxman and company are able to re-establish orderliness to Alibia. In contemplating the city via the allegorical Alibia, Johannesburg is made strange. We know that Alibia is Johannesburg through various subtle suggestions. It is less an amorphous "elsewhere", and more a recognisable "here and now". The Wetland Ramble at the Johannesburg Zoo, firewalkers[355] with their charcoal braziers ("A corn-roaster on the street corner stoked her charcoal brazier and a cloud of bitter-sweet smoke blew over him" - p.216), golf courses, the Café Europa, and the Restless Supermarket (which now lives up to its adjective) are just a few of the signs indicating correspondence between Alibia and Johannesburg. In this parallel universe, Fluxman, and Tearle by extension, witness the entirety of the city descending into chaos after the

[355] Firewalkers' urban presence has been recently monumentalised by Gerard Marx and William Kentridge in their inner city art installation of the same name, which is situated at the foot of the Queen Elizabeth II bridge.

"great unfastening" (p.227). They believe that a bold and corrective hand is needed to bring everything under the yoke once again.

However, we as readers realize that perhaps disorder is closer to the 'true' reality of the city and that the strict Eurocentric and bureaucratic regulation intrinsic to apartheid era ideology suggested by Alibia was a mere illusion of order. The city of Johannesburg since its origins has been characterised by unsteady and erratic development. A boom and bust town since the beginning, Johannesburg started its days peppered with prospecting tents. A dangerous wild-west frontier space, its growth occurred in fits and starts with its fate tied to the fickle and steadily sloping gold seams clinging to the reef below. President Paul Kruger was particularly distressed about the steady flux of *uitlanders* settling the Boer Republic during the Gold Rush.[356] The claims that inhabitants were more predisposed towards brothels than church-worship made him increasingly unsympathetic to the administrative needs of a nascent town fast outgrowing its tent-city origins. Charles van Onselen in *New Babylon New Nineveh*[357] discusses in great depth the extent to which the city was poorly managed by the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek. Municipal mismanagement has plagued the city to this day, with a current billing crisis hitting news headlines on a regular basis. The kind of crowd Johannesburg attracted in its early days, and incidentally still attracts today with its big city lights, were rambunctious fortune-seekers eager to take advantage of its opportunities for material advancement. Poor and slightly haphazard urban planning means that streets in the Central Urban Business District do not completely line up with each other. This combination of rough prospectors and systemic maladministration meant that Johannesburg was built on very rocky foundations. Martin J. Murray has adopted the sobriquet disorderly city in his book, *Taming the Disorderly City: The Spatial Landscape of Johannesburg After Apartheid.*[358] Moreover, in *Portrait with Keys*, Vladislavić defamiliarises our conception of chaos and crime in Johannesburg by relating Dave's "historian's gift of seeing time whole":

> In Joburg now … the hunter-gatherer is in the ascendancy. In fact, African cities everywhere are filled with roamers, intent on survival, plucking what they can at the roadside. When people steal the wheels off cars at night, or scale our walls and make off with the garden furniture, or uproot plants on the embankments beside the freeway, and we raise a hue and cry about law

[356] Beavon, K. *Johannesburg: The Making and Shaping of the City*. UNISA Press: Pretoria, 2004, p.22.

[357] van Onselen, C. *New Babylon New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand 1886-1917*. Jonathan Ball: Johannesburg, 2001.

[358] Murray, M.J. *Taming the Disorderly City: The Spatial Landscape of Johannesburg after Apartheid*. University of Cape Town Press: Cape Town, 2008.

> and order and respect for private property rights, it's like the KhoiKhoi accusing the San of stealing their cattle. (p.38)

This extract, via the technique of parallelism, shows that when you view the past from a transhistorical perspective, the hue and cry raised by Tearle (and likeminded contemporary Johannesburg inhabitants) over rampant disorder in Johannesburg is absurd. By making Johannesburg strange in this way we begin to take careful note of the aspects of Alibia which we may no longer perceive in Johannesburg. Thus, the unfamiliar made familiar is just as proficient in "pricking the conscience" as the familiar made strange.

Moreover, as much as Tearle's hyperbolic vision of implosion in the great collapse might secure our derision, this allegory also tenderly teases local readers into remembering the fear that accompanied the transitional era. We are comfortable to ridicule Tearle in *The Restless Supermarket* because of his foolish and misdirected notion that proofreading will stem the tide of imminent chaos. However, in defamiliarising the landscape of Johannesburg with the smokescreen of Alibia, Vladislavić is able to satirically apply his critique more broadly. Fluxman's methods by which he wishes to restore Alibia to its former glory entails the reinstatement of old segregationist policies:

> … now the appropriate social distance could be restored between the haves and 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. (pp.250-1)

This offensively gives rise to the eradication of "the tramps, the fools, the congenitally ugly, the insufferably ugly" (p.252). Nevertheless, it is hard to brush off the appeal of a city that "pulled itself together again" (p.251). While Fluxman may be able to wave his magic proofreading pen and subdue the recalcitrant world to his will, for Tearle in Johannesburg, this dream for a resurrection of order is dismally deferred. Tearle wants to lock down the city, resisting the flux and contingency that characterised the dawning of the transitional era. Both *Missing Persons* and *The Restless Supermarket* in their fantastical interludes defamiliarise contemporary South African reality as a means of making various satirical comments about transitional politics. As Sue Marais argues in "'Freeze-Frame?' (Re-)Imagining the Past in Ivan Vladislavić's *Missing Persons*":

> South Africa is not simply in transition to a final state, or to some other 'end of history'. To be successful, it must remain in a sort of permanent transition. Just as it once seemed to exist perpetually just ahead of the apocalypse.[359]

That *The Restless Supermarket* ends with Tearle's narrative and not "The Proofreader's Derby" shows that Tearle's obsession with order, and the finality it promises, is implausible. It is wrong to read South Africa, and Johannesburg in particular, in a linear fashion from beginning to 'The End'. There is no finality or 'final state' to the period of transition. Instead, it is far more fruitful to consider this context via a hermeneutics that valorises constant flux. Johannesburg, particularly, has demonstrated an historical tendency to protest against or shirk off stringent ordering impulses, no matter how draconian. Instead, as Vladislavić's protean prose suggests, flux, "undecideability" and uncertainty are more befitting qualities to celebrate Johannesburg. In its ontological resistance to ordering mechanisms, the focus of creative efforts on Johannesburg must instead be placed on the artistic potential of disorder and lostness. *The Restless Supermarket* could be read as a project which defamiliarises the human tendency to valorise order over disorder in the binary.

So much of Vladislavić's writing celebrates flux and defamiliarises reading patterns which search for signs that instantiate order. Marais describes Vladislavić's fiction as "unorthodox and generically ambivalent."[360]

**Differing and Deferring**

Defamiliarisation's continued scholarly relevance can in part be attributed to the influence it has exerted on more contemporary critical theories. Defamiliarisation's influence can be noted in Jacques Derrida's concepts of *différance* and deconstruction. In his article, "Victor Shklovskij: Différance in Defamiliarization", Lawrence Crawford notes various similarities between Shklovsky's technique of *ostranenie* and Jacques Derrida's notion of *différance*:

> What Shklovskij wants to show is that the operation of defamiliarization and its consequent

[359] Per Thornton, R. "The Potentials of Boundaries in South Africa: Steps Towards a Theory of Social Edge" in *Postcolonial Identities in Africa.* (Eds. R. Werbner and T. Ranger). Zed Books: London, 1996, p.158 as quoted in: Marais, S. "'Freeze-Frame?' (Re-)Imagining the Past in Ivan Vladislavić's *Missing Persons*" in *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.41.

[360] Ibid, p.40.

> perception in the literary system is like the winding of a watch (the introduction of energy into a physical system): both "originate" difference, change, value, motion, presence. Considered against the general and functional background of Derridian *différance*, what Shklovskij calls "perception" can be considered a matrix for production of difference.[361]

Indeed, Alexei Bogdanov argues that *différance* ("the 'productive' movement of differences"[362]) is what makes *ostranenie* work. Moreover, it is through the use of defamiliarisation that Derrida tries to explain the concept of deconstruction. The term *différance* denotes two meanings in French, namely 'to differ' and 'to defer'.[363] Crawford claims that before art can restore perception of the world, Shklovsky realized that art must promote the production of difference in both language and form.[364] Placing things or concepts out of their habitual or original context, thus altering our perception of them, effectively defers our recognition of the familiar. This deferral places the familiar within the terrain of the unfamiliar and vice versa.

At this juncture it proves germane to consider briefly the work of Derek Attridge. His work, *The Singularity of Literature* (2004), makes various pertinent comments about the production of literary difference.[365] According to Attridge, the singularity of any given literary work – singular by virtue of its inseparability "from the notions of invention and alterity"[366] – can in part be realised by the performative act of reading. Reading literature constitutes an "event" to Attridge – an activity that is responsive to the interstices that exist between both text and context.[367] He advances the argument that upon each reading of a literary text, we encounter it afresh. The experience of reading is one that allows the reader to confront "otherness." Attridge claims that:

> … the singularity of an artwork is not simply a matter of difference from other works … but a transformative difference, a difference … that involves the irruption of otherness or alterity into the cultural field."[368]

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[361] Crawford, L. "Victor Shklovskij: Différance in Defamiliarization" in *Comparative Literature*, 36:3, 1984, p.212.

[362] Per David Wood and Robert Bernasconi, *Derrida and Différance*, 1988, p.85 in Bogdanov, A. "Ostranenie, Kenosis, and Dialogue: The Metaphysics of Formalism According to Shklovsky" in *Slavic and Eastern European Journal*, 49:1, 2005, p.56.

[363] Derrida, J. "Différance" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Second Edition. (Eds. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan.) Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004, p.279.

[364] Crawford, L. "Victor Shklovskij: Différance in Defamiliarization" in *Comparative Literature*, 36:3, 1984, p.212.

[365] Attridge, D. *The Singularity of Literature*. Routledge: New York, 2004.

[366] Ibid, p.63.

[367] Ibid, p.80.

[368] Ibid, p.136.

Tzachi Zamir, in his review of Attridge's study, explains this to mean that the "inventiveness of (good) literary works does not reside in producing the merely new, but in bringing out otherness."[369] Attridge goes on to point out that the act of interpretation ("a creative reading") signifies a process akin to "invention."[370] The writing and reading of literary works is perhaps fundamentally an exercise in the production of novelty and creativity – acts that generate singularity and otherness. This process brings forth difference and disautomisation. Thus, quite instrumentally, both activities of reading and writing are conceived as means of promoting differing, deferral, and defamiliarisation.

In reverting to the specific discursive matrix that occurs between Derrida and Shlovsky's respective theories, I think one of the places where this interplay between *différance* and defamiliarisation comes to the fore most noticeably is in Vladislavić's *A Labour of Moles*. This novella engages in a surrealist dismantling and semantic deconstruction of the dictionary. It imagines a being immersed within the world that is canvassed by the words contained on a page of the dictionary. The text takes a familiar object, the lexicon, as well as the rather quotidian activity of reading it and turns the thing and the experience into something fantastical. The experience of reading the text engages the reader in a surrealist invasion of the territory of language.

The perplexed narrator who finds that "[e]verything had been taken out of context", tries to make sense of his new counter-world by attempting to inventory the odd assortment of objects he finds "suspended like gestures in the air" around him (p.10). The miscellany appears to share no apparent commonality: a hut, a duck, a hammer, an elevated landing, a marmoset, a mirror, a mask, a large house, and a lute (amongst other things). The "expanse of stilled life, of suspended animation" makes him question his own reality (p.10). He eventually learns from a Romanesque statue, evocative of Brutus with bloody knife in hand, that he is immersed in what he aurally perceives as the "Ems", the M section of the dictionary (p.18). The profusion of signifiers, which initially confused him with their enigmatic expansion of and deferral of meaning, start to fall into place when their synonymous properties come into play. The hut is indeed a mausoleum, the hammer is a mallet, the large house is a mansion, the duck a mallard, the lute a mandolin, the elevated landing a mezzanine level. Brutus is reconfigured as murderer. The narrator, after much thinking and conversing with the murderer, surmises that because he is not tied down he must be a migrant. He is thus free to travel and move around the different sections of the dictionary.

[369] Zamir, T. Review of *The Singularity of Literature* in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 65:4, 2007, p. 419.

[370] Attridge, D. *The Singularity of Literature*. Routledge: New York, 2004, p.92.

The polysemic potential of language means that the reader starts to play "I spy with my little eye" spotting random nouns and adjectives on the page that are analogous to other words that start with the letter 'm'. The counterpoising of images 'torn' from the leaves of *The English Duden* (adapted from *Duden's Bildwörterbuch* – a picture dictionary) allows the reader to continue playing this lexical game. Page 12 shows a mine populated by miners extracted from *Duden's Bildwörterbuch*. Similarly, 'my little eye' picks up a mustard gas mask on page 14, a bishop's mitre on page 34 and marine-related activity on page 41, along with many illustrated examples of miscellaneous machinery. On page 20, the narration moistens itself with an alliterative frolic:

> 'See that meadow?' He put a mocking emphasis on the 'm' and waved the blade extravagantly in the direction I had called east. 'Mosey across there, past the mill, keep on for a mile or two, you'll see a milestone, of course, until you come to a park with a palisade fence. That my friend, is the beginning of the Ps. There's a portal in the wall there and a path on the other side. It's a proper little paradise. I'd come with you if I could, but I have to stay here. You never know, someone might look me up…That's a joke, pal. If I'm right, come back here and we'll talk some more, although I shouldn't really. Lucky for you, I'm not a Mute.' (p.20)

In having successfully disautomised the medium thus far, the reader comes to this passage effectively primed, alliteration being one acoustic weapon in the *ostranenie* arsenal. By using the bizarre (this odd immersion into the lexical world of the dictionary) to defamiliarise the familiar (everyday words beginning with 'm'), the reader's appreciation of the words on the page is transformed by this new awareness. Words are not merely recognised, they are seen 'as if for the first time.' One's eye does not merely float over the prose; instead by "pricking the conscience"[371] of the reader, we read the above passage with careful intent, noticing all the 'Em' words. In their acclimation to this disautomised reading style, the reader immediately understands that the prevalence of words starting with 'p' means that that by this stage of the journey the narrator will find himself in the "Ps' of the lexical counter-world. In a playfully metafictional manner, the novella ends with the narrator intending to visit the 'Ds' to find himself in the dictionary. The fiction, within this particular semiotic venture, turns back on itself to produce a recursive implosion of signs.

This novella effectively promotes the production of difference and deferral in language. Vladislavić literally places ordinary words outside of their conventional context and forces them into new relationships. This is shown in relief when the narrator and the murderer try to find an

[371] Shklovsky, V. "Art as Technique" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Second Edition. (Eds. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan.) Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004, p.16.

appropriate moniker to call him by. This discovery of the narrator's 'me-ness' (another 'Em' word) becomes an exercise in deferral. This nominative process plays with the paradigmatic prospects of language. By being out of sorts and out of place, the narrator could be a "Madman" (p.18). Other options include "Matinee idol, Managing director, Master builder, Minister of the Interior, Mogul, Monumental mason, Mountaineer … Mysterious stranger" (p.36). Then his proximity to the Brutus-figure is taken as a sign that he might just be the luckless "murderee" (p.38). They eventually settle on the word "Migrant" (p.38). Each alternative reached sees the reader trying to fit the noun into the syntagmatic chain of meaning as well as the context of this bizarre fictional realm. The reader tries on each 'vocation', seeing if the cap fits the narrator. This process not only interrogates whether these signifiers accurately reflect the narrator's pursuits, but also examines what we understand by these terms. This act of semiotic deconstruction pares down the words to their linguistic bones until they become strange noises in the mouth. Meaning begins to disassemble, but is also perhaps more free – albeit chaotic freedom – as a result.[372]

This affixing of purpose/occupation to the narrator sheds some light on ontological questions of identity. The narrator tries to understand and locate the meaning of his own identity based on matters of context. Migrancy seems to be the only half-helpful category to explain his placement. To find such a word, a word that fits, should help to designate and categorise him – give him shape and belonging. However, the word 'migrant' infers that the subject is entirely out of place. After all, a migrant is one cast betwixt and between orders. A migrant does not really belong anywhere.[373] Moreover, a migrant is typified by movement – movement across spaces and systems of meaning. Thus the migrant's body is a decentring mechanism; migrancy conflates and confuses binaristic sociological structures. The migrant in postcolonial discourse is of both the 'here and there', s/he is neither citizen nor resident, and is caught between home and away, Metropole and colony. Moreover, in postcolonialism the migrant could also relate to the hybrid and the creole, figures that politically collapse the binary. Almost laughably then, in light of the

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372 Derrida, J. "Différance" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Second Edition. (Eds. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan.) Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004, pp.278-299.

373 While this bold assertion can easily be challenged, I find that my ideas about migrancy are influenced by Salman Rushdie's concept of the "imaginary homeland" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 1992). The migrant does not fully belong to her new world, because her migrant status means she is a character of the betwixt and between; and yet her claim of belonging to the homeland is just as fraught – it is at once nostalgically romanticised, and thus almost entirely imaginary. It is a homeland of the "mind", no longer of the subtance of reality any more. The migrant deals in this business of "broken mirrors" – reflecting an imagined ownership of space where certain "fragments have been irretrievably lost" (p.11). Displacement and migrancy despite peddling a pervading sense of lostness are still capable of tapping into a "rich seam" (p.11) provided by "cultural displacement" (p.20) – effectively defamiliarising and provincialising the new territory of inhabitation.

From: Rushdie, S. *Imaginary Homelands*. Penguin Books: New York, 1992, pp.9-21.

novella's setting being the terrain of the dictionary, our Migrant is an embodiment of Derridean *différance*. As a migrant, he is in constant flux. His state of migrancy, coupled with the novella's absurd and confusing lexical environment – which reacts to the prickly and slippery quagmire that is semiotics – hinders the perceiver's ability to tie him down to any stable and consistent meaning. The migrant is caught up within an almost endless chain of signifiers. The same can be said for all interpretative efforts in general; for Derrida, meaning – being subjectively perceived and constantly fluctuating – shifts upon each reading.[374]

The narrator's sobriquet defers meaning by failing to adequately categorise how he fits or fails to fit within the confines of *A Labour of Moles*. After all, a migrant is a word invoked to explain someone who defies the yoke of societal nomenclatures. The narrator is as much a "Madman" or "Mysterious stranger" as a "Migrant". All the synonyms invoked to possibly identify him not only highlight the proliferation of linguistic difference, but also help to defer an adequate definition of his character. Being placed in the "Ems" becomes an allegorical foil for the way in which meaning and one's identity are gleaned in relation to one's surroundings. However, in a Saussurian sense, the narrator's signifier (Migrant) is altogether an arbitrary attachment, failing to adequately reflect the signified (his selfhood).[375] That the narrator describes his new world as "the murk" seems to stand as a frightening metaphor for the absurdity and arbitrariness of linguistic meaning and ontology (p.12). This sets up a potential contradiction between murky morass and semantic playfulness. This aporic tension redolent of Derridean discourse ties back to the way in which Vladislavić's writing makes capital of the nebulous, the bizarre, the incommensurable. Writing from within these small moments of conflict allows Vladislavić to play with the unhinging and opening up of meaning that inevitably follows. Lexical confusion induces lostness, which then sets the scene for a creative reinterrogation of language. Indeed, *A Labour of Moles* becomes an exercise in confronting the paradox that language presents in its dual processes of deferral and proliferation of meaning.

On this note of semantic deferral and proliferation, this novella, as well as the rest of Vladislavić's oeuvre, is rich in different types of wordplay and figures of speech. Synonyms, alliteration, and puns all work to defer and disrupt automatism. On page 20, the Murderer directs the Migrant to a box with a "neat coil of string" nestled inside. Holding the one end, the Murderer advises the Migrant to hold the other end in order to be able to explore his

[374] Derrida, J. "Différance" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Second Edition. (Eds. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan.) Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004, pp.278-299.

[375] de Saussure, F. (1972) *Course in General Linguistics*. Open Court: Peru, Illinois, 1986, pp.71-74.

surroundings and find his way back, safely. The Murderer advises, "When you reach the end of your tether, as it were, you'll know you've gone a mile" (p.20). Thus the idiom, "end of your tether", which usually functions in a figurative sense only, is appointed literal meaning here too. Indeed, both connotations may overlap: when the narrator has reached the end of the rope, he may no longer have the patience or wherewithal to deal with this bizarre world.

Puns are another linguistic example of the way in which *différance* and defamiliarisation work hand-in-hand. Puns involve a linguistic unstitching of routine connections and force language into new relationships, thus disrupting recognisable patterns. It is unsurprising to discover that puns are rife in Vladislavić's work. In *Willem Boshoff*, Vladislavić remarks that the pun

> … is an assault on the dignity of language. By loosening the ties between a word and its meaning it sets a chain of mistrust in motion. One pun, like a yawn, very often provokes another. It is this infectious, equivocal energy that makes the pun appealing …[376]

*The Restless Supermarket* is riddled with puns. Tearle takes to referring to his fellow Café Europa patron, M.T. Wessels – which stands for Marthinus Thelonious Wessels – as Empty Wessels. The cruel sobriquet relates to Wessels's tendency to shoot his mouth off, with little substance to his statements, at least from Aubrey's point of view.

In decrying the deteriorating standards of English in the sticky 'polyglotinous' surrounds of transitional era Johannesburg, Tearle makes various condescending jokes at the expense of colloquial and foreign invocations of the language:

> The echo chamber slumped down in one chair and propped his plaster cast on another. Seeing the toes of Wessels that close to the table top made my stomach churn. 'Peace & luv' had been printed on the cast in red ink, next to a drawing of a bird. Glory be. The duv of peace, the pidgin. I averted my eyes. (p.23)

The dove of peace is mockingly turned not into a pigeon, but pidgin – abrogated variants of Standard English. Another pidgin can be located in the title of the novel. *The Restless Supermarket* takes its name from the onomastic misnomer of a Greek-owned grocery store, where the manager, Stelios, mistakenly takes "restless" to mean "we ollaways open … twenty-four hour" instead of "never still, fidgety" (p.93). When Tearle visits the Jumbo Liquor Market, this turns into another opportunity for double entendres: Tearle's visual pun "manuel labour" mocks

[376] Vladislavić, I. *Willem Boshoff*. David Krut: Johannesburg, 2005, p.72.

Joaquim and Rosa Da Silva, the Portuguese workforce (p.31). Tearle's tiring sententious displays are, at times, countered by frothy episodes of wordplay, but suggest prejudices that lie beneath the double meanings. In a transliterated pun, Rosa Da Silva ("As in sylvan. Forests and so on. Boscage. Woods" – p.30) becomes Rosie Woods – the English version of her own name. This Anglocentric preoccupation reveals Tearle's contempt for the 'invasion' of other languages into the territory of English and makes him feel like the "wurst is still to come" (p.60). Pidgin dialects, are from the perspective of the postcolony, a refusal of the colonised to ascribe to a normative linguistic paragon imposed by the coloniser.[377] Abrogation thus insists upon a politicised estrangement of standardised European tongues. Indubitably, one of the text's main ironies is that Tearle is oblivious to his own status as an immigrant; his language, after all, stands as a potently unequivocal signifier of British Empire.

From Tearle's point of view, his use of puns literally shows how the 'encroachment' of other languages "is an assault on the dignity of language." This loosening of the ties of English sets about a "chain of mistrust in motion" for him. However, for the reader, the slipperiness of language and the city – this loosening of ties between signifieds and signifiers – symbolises a fertile breeding ground for meaning-making. Puns, by virtue of their intrinsic properties of deferral and differing, estrange the communicative medium.

Defamiliarisation as an aesthetic device has enjoyed remarkable longevity in literary circles and has aged better than the movement which formally theorised it in its guise as *ostranenie*. As this section evinces, defamiliarisation has been responsible for underpinning the foundation on which later theoretical developments were built. Despite its seminal influence upon theories like Derrida's *différance*, I think that one of the most alarming pitfalls of Shklovsky's *ostranenie* was its dismissal of the importance of social and ideological factors in the execution and analysis of any given work of literature.

**Brechtian Alienation**

Shklovsky's *ostranenie* shares various similarities with German playwright Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*. Translated into English as the Alienation effect, and simply referred to as the A-effect in his essays, this technique stands as one of the most distinctive and characterizing

[377] Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. "Abrogation" in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (2nd Ed.). Routledge: New York, 2007, pp.3-4 (Kindle eBook).

features of Brecht's Epic Theatre. The A-effect, Brecht explains in "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" (1936), signals the "effort to make the incidents represented appear strange to the public"[378]; the actor's objective is to tear down the theatrical 'fourth wall' as a means of destroying the audience's suspension of disbelief. For Brecht, what is instrumental is that "the artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience."[379] By "looking strangely at himself and his work" the actor is able to transmogrify everyday things and mundane events "thereby [raising them] above the level of the obvious and automatic."[380] The actor needs to be self-referential and self-aware in his/her performance in order to prevent the audience from completely suspending disbelief in the act of empathic and uncritical character identification. The A-effect was thus used as a distancing mechanism to ensure that the audience remained in a constant state of conscious and alert enquiry, encouraging spectators "to criticize constructively from a social point of view."[381] Similarly – although the medium differs – one could argue that owing to matters of form and narrative voice, Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys* and *The Exploded View* prevent the total suspension of disbelief.

Brecht argues that the A-effect's most striking achievement is that it

> constitutes something utterly ordinary, recurrent; it is just a widely-practised way of drawing one's own or someone else's attention to a thing … The A-effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected. What is obvious is in a certain sense made incomprehensible, but this is in order that it may then be made all the easier to comprehend. 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. However frequently recurrent, modest, vulgar it may be it will now be labelled as something unusual.[382]

[378] Brecht, B. "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (Ed. and Translated by J. Willett). Methuen: London, 1964, p.91.

[379] Ibid, p.92.

[380] Ibid, p.92.

[381] Brecht, B. "The Street Scene" in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (Ed. and Translated by J. Willett). Methuen: London, 1964, p.125.

[382] Brecht, B. "A Short Organum for the Theatre" in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (Ed. and Translated by J. Willett). Methuen: London, 1964, p.192.

Thus, ultimately, a "representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it unfamiliar."[383] Both Brecht and Shklovsky emphasised the importance of estranging the familiar as a way of bringing about a heightened sense of awareness. Victor Erlich claims that this theoretical confluence was purely coincidental though; he is also careful to qualify the extent of the congruity between the two artistic approaches:

> Shklovsky spoke about restructuring the ordinary perception of reality; Brecht, about creating an emotional distance between stage and the audience. Shklovsky's target was force of habit; Brecht's, facile identification.[384]

Thus, the two positions – whilst informed by a similar departure point – find themselves disparate in their artistic intentions. It is also patent that each technique corresponds with a different medium, one being literature, the other theatre. However, I do feel that a certain degree of cross-fertilization between Brecht's conception of alienation and Shklovsky's defamiliarisation should be promoted. The limits to the application of Shklovsky's device were due to its lack of concern for the wider interpretive significance and value in the act of estrangement. Thus, by appropriating this socially engaged aspect of the *Verfremdungseffekt* and transposing it upon Shklovsky's *ostranenie*, the latter's critical valency is significantly expanded and updated. Thus, instead of merely heightening perceptibility for its own sake, this more nuanced and malleable definition of defamiliarisation (synthesised with this aspect of alienation) extends to investigating the significance behind the process of 'making strange.'

The character of Aubrey Tearle is a good example of the distancing property of the A-effect. Vladislavić consciously fashioned his tale to be represented by an embarrassing and fogeyish old man in conflict with the urban changes affecting the inner city suburb of Hillbrow, which he inhabits. He cuts an anachronistic figure as he rages against what he sees as the devolution of standards in the move towards the new, democratic era of South Africa. The choice to cast Tearle as an atavistic fellow with rather cringe-worthy opinions makes it very difficult for the reader to identify with him. Tearle's racism seems to suggest that Vladislavić is following Brecht's instructions "to discard whatever means he has learnt of getting the audience to identify with the characters…"[385] Because I have identified this as a Brechtian process of estrangement, it

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[383] Brecht, B. "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting" in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (Ed. and Translated by J. Willett). Methuen: London, 1964, pp.143-4.

[384] Erlich, V. "Russian Formalism" in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 34:4, 1973, p.629.

[385] Brecht, B. "A Short Organum for the Theatre" in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (Ed. and Translated by J. Willett). Methuen: London, 1964, p.193.

is important to examine the purpose behind this 'making strange.' By failing to identify with the main character in an automatic empathic way, we are able to hold the events that take place in the novel at arm's length. We are provided with sufficient analytical distance to be able to carefully critique what was happening in transitional South African society at the time (and study the changing face of Johannesburg within this historical quagmire). What is especially socially significant is that Tearle is an ordinary type of fellow – an example of the small man caught up within a grand historical narrative. Ironically, by deferring identification with Tearle, *The Restless Supermarket* allows the readers to start noticing the Tearles that populate their everyday lives and perhaps, even more alarmingly, it opens up the evaluative space to recognise the Tearle within themselves.

This irony is not accidental. "Movements" in the *Missing Persons* chronicles the breakdown of a relationship through the charting of a couple's movements in narrative fits and starts, which formalistically reflects the content of the story. Thought, intention, and motivation are all externalized by their physical actions. This sad context initially estranges the reader by suspending the traditional narrative comforts of exposition, characterisation, and an expressly described setting. It begins *in medias res* and islands of disconnected text highlight the hopelessness of their union. The ending comes across almost as a *fait accompli* – a course of action that their bodies were unable to avoid. The two protagonists' characters are reduced to narrative gestures – merely a nonspecific (yet universal) 'he' and 'she' dance the swansong of their doomed coupling. This narrative technique, despite initially creating a degree of distance as a result of the non-specific and vague characterization, actually and ironically imbues the contents of the story with greater immediacy and affective symbolism. Indeed, we come to know the couple by their actions and this depersonalisation becomes a compelling opportunity for identification with their circumstances. Readers can vicariously insert themselves into the blank canvasses that are the categories of 'he' and 'she'. After all, the torment that accompanies failed love can be considered timeless and universal when it comes to matters of the heart.

Thus, the way in which Vladislavić uses the A-effect forces it to abandon its affective limitations. In Vladislavić's fiction, the A-effect's distancing properties are only of momentary and expedient value. In both the examples discussed above, the A-effect can be modified and updated: paradoxically, alienating the reader works as a step in the process to eventually intensify their engagement with the characters and their context. Alienation is useful in that it strips the "familiar … of its inconspicuousness" and reveals the context in its particularity. Yet conversely, and perhaps rather unexpectedly, alienation can also amplify audience engagement and

identification in that something of contextual application can be sought in the work. Alienation, in initially distancing the reader as a means of enhancing perception, helps to bring the reader closer to an awareness of the similarities they may share with the strangest of characters: Tearle for one and the broadly brush-stroked 'he' or 'she' for another.

**Postcolonial Formalism**

The broader social and ideological significance of the text is a crucial element when conducting textual analysis. Thus, while defamiliarisation proves to be a powerful disautomising device, the theory of *ostranenie* must be updated and refurbished to enjoy continued critical currency. The A-effect as promoted by Brecht was used to establish the ideal platform from which the audience could "criticize constructively from a social point of view."[386] However, Vladislavić, in his typically quiet satirical mode[387], pushes the envelope further. Like Shklovsky and Brecht, Vladislavić restores perception by making the familiar strange and vice versa. He goes beyond the constraints of formalism to consider the social and ideological implications of literature. This modification of *ostranenie* can be seen as an appropriation of the more socially inclined A-effect. However, Vladislavić's brand of formalism also manages to move beyond alienation, which defers character identification. He is able to adopt alienation as a means of intensifying a reader's identification and thus engagement with a work.

Vladislavić's fiction has been celebrated for its responsiveness towards local context and this suggests a geopolitically-centred aesthetic. The satirical bent of so many of Vladislavić's early stories addresses the South African political landscape, especially in the transitional years, as well as social responses to cultural, political, historical and urban change. However, as is seen in stories like "Autopsy", and simulacral culture in "Villa Toscana", his critique is not only of local persuasion. Thus, while he considers political and social factors in a particularly local context, he also draws attention to wider societal folly in his critique of the insidious language of advertising and consumer-driven hypermodernity. He is therefore informed by, but not bound to context.

386 Brecht, B. "The Street Scene" in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (Ed. and Translated by J. Willett). Methuen: London, 1964, p.125.

387 This idea has been gleaned from Gerald Gaylard's "quieter satire", which can be found in his article "Postcolonial Satire: Ivan Vladislavić" in *Current Writing*, 17:1, 2005, pp.129-148.

This term, postcolonial formalism, originates in Gerald Gaylard's "historical formalism."[388] In his explication of "historical formalism", Gerald Gaylard in *After Colonialism*[389] motivates why this more nuanced gloss on formalism is indeed pertinent in an African literary context:

> Such a neo-formalism should not be a retreat into a private and purely aesthetic world. African literary studies have tended to be in thrall to the sociohistorical and are in need of a kind of formalism that eschews rigid schematics or a singular focus and embraces detailed intra- and inter-textual analysis of aesthetics (form, genre, style, tone, intertextuality), as well as socio-historicism. This neo-formalism eschews the elitism of the early formalism that tended to ignore history, context, ideology, self-expression, biography and psychology, and rather places the formal qualities of the work within a multiply-constituted context.[390]

Gaylard charts the evolution of his term as a postcolonial response to Roland Barthes's comments on the failings of Russian Formalism. In *Mythologies*, Barthes writes that:

> Less terrorized by the spectre of 'formalism', historical criticism might have been less sterile; it would have understood that the specific study of forms does not in any way contradict the necessary principles of totality and History. On the contrary: the more a system is specifically defined in its forms, the more amenable it is to historical criticism. To parody a well-known saying, I shall say that a little formalism turns one away from History, but that a lot brings one back to it.[391]

While I recognise that the qualifier "historical" is important because its lineage can be traced back to Barthes's acknowledgement that History plays an important role in the act of analysis and representation, I find that I prefer the adjective "postcolonial" over "historical" as I feel that this foregrounds the geopolitically charged energy of Vladislavić's work in that it brings both the trajectories of the postcolonial and Russian Formalism into immediate theoretical propinquity; however, it must be emphasised that my use of this term owes its genesis to Gerald Gaylard's work in this area. This postcolonial formalism indicates a 'literariness', which goes beyond the Russian Formalist's preoccupation with form. It draws upon experimental tweakings of form, not only to extend and intensify artistic perceptibility, but also as a means of eliciting critical socio-cultural commentary on aspects of the contemporary world – whether they be decidedly

[388] This term is fleshed out in Gaylard's introduction to *Marginal Spaces* (2011) on p.10 as well as his *After Colonialism* (2006).

[389] Gaylard, G. *After Colonialism*. Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2005.

[390] Ibid, p.7.

[391] Barthes, R. *Mythologies*. Noonday Press: New York, 1991, p.110-1.

local problems or universal ones. As Gaylard puts it in his introduction to *Marginal Spaces*, the postcolonial aesthetic is neither an "art for art's sake" nor is it "sundered from the mundane, the material, the political." Rather it is a "re-aestheticisation" that

> … might be seen as a re-energising of the political via a more holistic resistance that includes the individual, psychology, desire, style, as well as overt political organisation.

Thus, this type of formalism, which is socio-politically, historically, and contextually responsive, highlights questions of "psychology, interiority, and affect" in relation to "representation, aesthetics, form."[392]

Looking back on the Russian Formalist canon, and the ways in which an updated formalism renovates this old aesthetic theory, it is also fundamentally important to note that the revelatory qualities of estrangement are only capable of enjoying temporary impact. This concession is apparent in Vladislavić's story in *The Loss Library*, "Gravity Addict":

> **all of a sudden**
>
> When I was a schoolboy, I came upon this innocuous phrase in a storybook one day and found myself teetering over a void. Between one word and the next, the line unravelled before my eyes. 'All of a sudden?' How could such an odd sequence of words possibly mean 'quickly and unexpectedly'? How could it mean anything? I grasped that the 'book' might be the object in my hand, that 'I' was me, the person holding the book and reading the story, but the bond that kept 'all of a sudden' joined to its meaning had dissolved. The perception of words as weird shapes that stand for strange noises made me dizzy. (Loc. 687)

The narrator's estrangement from the clichéd "all of a sudden" shows the familiar to be strange. The indeterminacy of the words opens up a chasm of meaning and meaninglessness. The narrator consults the dictionary to ground the meaning of the phrase within its denotative surrounds, but even this does not help. The longer he pores over the phrase, "the stranger it seem[s]" (Loc. 687). Prolonging perceptibility of this clichéd means of expression effectively defamiliarises it. However, this experience of estrangement is not permanent:

> My equilibrium was not ruined forever. After a momentary panic, I stepped cautiously over the gap and carried on with the story. Behind me, those four words settled back into the surface of language and lost their power to alarm. Here I am, I go on reading and writing, trusting 'all of a

[392] Gaylard, G. Introduction to *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.10.

> sudden' to bear my weight. (Loc. 687)

The narrator recognises that this disruption was only temporary. It affected the way in which he habitually read this grouping of words on the page, but its impact was transient. Even though Vladislavić effectively estranges his fictional medium, there is also an awareness that strangification is merely a temporary stage in narrative lostness. This enables a critique which exceeds the bounds of aesthetics and pure form. Defamiliarisation, unlike what Shklovsky propounded, should not be an end in and of itself. Instead, it is merely the vehicle that transports the reader further along the path of literary enquiry. It is in this way, that Vladislavić's brand of Formalism can be termed Postcolonial. It updates and writes back to metropolitan theory. It undercuts the metanarrative propensity of theories like *ostranenie* and the A-effect. It is an aesthetic and formalistic project grounded in the small epiphanies of the everyday. It recognises that whatever interpretations and revelations it begets/foments, they are at best transient and minor.

Likewise, in "Mouse Drawing", Vladislavić discovers how a lead pencil stub having lodged itself in a recess of his computer mouse has been responsible for producing a strange and enigmatic criss-crossing composition on his desk. He imagines a fiction where this drawing is "full of meaning" – it becomes epiphanic and reflective of the creative project that takes place on the computer (Loc. 731). The drawing is a "secondary product, a shadowy illustration, in which he discovers a surfeit of new meanings: faces, animals, ships, the profile of his father, a map of his country" (Loc. 731). This revelatory significance, however, is completely illusory. This fiction belongs on the shelves of "the Loss Library" as it never sees the light of day. This story about an unfinished story illustrates a desire for transcendental significance, but appreciates that revelations of the ordinary and minor is a more realistic project.

Consequently, Vladislavić's postcolonial formalism cannot be regarded as a grand schema. Defamiliarisation is an effective means of disrupting habitual patterns of perceptibility, but is only a temporary and contingent palliative. Defamiliarisation can be seen as a powerful literary tool, but in embracing Vladislavić's characteristic literary "undecideability" we also need to acknowledge that his work vindicates contingency and flux. Thus defamiliarisation is a project that enjoys only evanescent value.

**Conclusion**

Vladislavić's novels have been celebrated for their experimental aesthetics. I have shown how Vladislavić's work makes use of the Formalist tool of defamiliarisation in order to estrange his medium. The literary execution of defamiliarisation helps to disautomise habitual readings as a means of restoring freshness of perception to artistic efforts. Vladislavić tries to rescue language from the "graveyard"[393] of recognition, creatively deforms form, and subverts traditional literary modes to re-infuse his work with new life.

While much of Vladislavić's more recent work – with its careful authorial awareness of what can be found in city niches, boundaries, and "marginal spaces" – attempts to disautomise the habitual, thus rendering quotidian objects unfamiliar, his earlier work conversely fell into the habit of destabilizing the real by casting the surreal within the confines of the quotidian. 'Novels' like *Portrait with Keys*, however, seem to strike a balance between the early surrealism and the 'postcolonial everyday' (I refrain from using the term 'realist' as this category is too restrictive to accommodate Vladislavić's less fantastical texts). However, what is certain is that the generic instability which characterises much of his fiction prevents his work from being too rigidly taxonomised and pigeon-holed. This lack of textual certainty means that each time readers approach or return to his work they will be kept on their toes, unable to retreat into cocoons of routine readings. On the level of form and language, Vladislavić is able to subvert expectations and disautomise the algebrization of perception. However, what both these modes reveal – whether it be the mundane turned sublime or the fantastical rendered familiar – is Vladislavić's desire to shake up the conventional and disrupt habit-forming perceptive processes all in the effort to defer perceptive automatism. However, he cannot always "prick the conscience"; readers, at times, need to be able to apprehend the familiar so that both author and reader can operate within a space of shared values and insights. Thus, at times, recognition must trump novelty.

This chapter raises concerns about the continued relevance and critical currency of defamiliarisation – a century-old theoretical approach to literary scholarship. However, I have shown that Vladislavić's adoption of defamiliarisation is not always canonical. Defamiliarisation is indeed still relevant, but perhaps only because Vladislavić speaks back to the theory. Much of

393 Viktor Shklovsky in "The Resurrection of thr Word" states that without *ostranenie* "language is like a graveyard."

From: Mose, K. *Defamiliarization in the Work of Gabriel García Márquez from 1947-1967*. Edwin Meller Press: New York, 1989, pp.11-12.

his work defamiliarises contemporary situations to make poignant social or satirical commentary. Secondly, the persistent relevance of defamiliarisation has been illustrated via a discussion of the conceptual congruity it shares with Derrida's notion of *différance*. Defamiliarisation, through the production of difference, i.e. the differing and deferring of meaning, helps to restore vitality to perceptive efforts.

For our present purposes, one of the most important aspects of defamiliarisation is that it induces narrative lostness. In other words, if readers' perceptive efforts are estranged, defamiliarisation subjects them to a momentary feeling of lostness. Defamiliarisation lays the foundations for the conceptual richness which can be 'located' in the state of lostness. Lostness establishes a fruitful space for further enquiry into and analysis of Vladislavić's city texts. Lostness, too, becomes the enabling device for a literary rediscovery and recalibration of the city. As I will show in the following chapter, lostness allows for the suspension of habitual and customary readings of space. Instead, through textual disorientation, which breaks down old habits of seeing, the reader is free – through lostness – to embark on a journey of rediscovering the city, accessing it from new entry points and vistas, to discover it afresh. By defamiliarising the way in which he writes the city, Vladislavić is able to "prick" our consciousness and heighten our perceptibility. As a result, the less obvious and less commonly noticed qualities of the city are revealed. Through the execution of defamiliarisation, Vladislavić allows us to move beyond the cursory and routine ways of recognising and reading the city, thus demonstrating that there are other ways to see the city – ones that surpass and undermine its simulacral culture. Defamiliarisation becomes the first step in the process of establishing a depth reading of Johannesburg as a means of countering the predominance of the culture of surface.

At times, Vladislavić's defamiliarisation is readily informed by and responsive to cultural and political factors; after all, his defamiliarisation and satire often work-in-hand to elicit direct and honest social critique. However, broader significance can be ascribed to his project of defamiliarisation – significance that goes beyond that of textual-urban rediscovery and satirical censure. Indeed, Vladislavić's defamiliarising fiction also celebrates states of disorder, incongruity and flux, the instability of language, as well as the proliferation, and deferral of meaning. This kind of writing eludes reductive literary and epistemological taxonomic restraints. As this thesis will argue in the Chapter Three, in encouraging readers to approach the city and texts about the city from a different vantage point, Vladislavić's fictions point towards a different appreciation of consciousness – one that is comfortable with states of Keatsian "half-knowledge", lostness,

and "undecideability."[394] Lostness, contingency, and uncertainty are qualities that ultimately destabilise and disrupt the synthetic totality of the simulacrum.

[394] In Gerald Gaylard's introduction to *Marginal Spaces* (2011) he speaks about Vladislavić's "space of undecideability" as well as the potential that lostness and emptiness boasts for this writer (p.11).

# Chapter Three: "The Art of Getting Lost"[395]

As a seven-year-old boy, Mark Gevisser would recline on the backseat of his father's Mercedes in the garage of their Hurlingham home, and spend his afternoons reading the *Holmden's Register of Johannesburg*.[396] During these solitary hours, the journalist would content himself by playing a map-making game of his own design; called "Dispatcher", he would "dispatch imaginary couriers across the world of the *Holmden's*."[397] Opening the mapbook "at random" he would "settle on a name and address" and then proceed to give his 'man' "intricate directions on how to get there."[398] Looking back on this memory is akin to viewing his childhood "from above, as if it were a map itself."[399] He explains that by getting "lost between the infinite blue of the *Holmden's* covers", he was attempting to cross "the impermeable boundaries that were set around the life of a little white suburban boy" living in 1970s Johannesburg; or just as reasonably, he muses this game was also an escape away from these troubles, into a terrain "that could not even begin to represent them."[400] This game, and the mapbook itself, certainly play upon the desire for the comforts promised by cartographic certitude. Metaphorically, finding one's way through the city could say more about one's identity than about space itself. In other words, knowing space confers a semblance of self-awareness in that space.

However, Gevisser also acknowledges that as he grew older he soon picked up on the shortcomings of the idiosyncratic *Holmden's*. The space it mapped out was decidedly white and suburban and even neglected to represent the contiguous settlement of Soweto. As much as the *Holmden's* tried to demarcate space (w)holistically and systematically, Gevisser notes its inherent blind spots. These omissions had much to do with apartheid-era spatial logic and its concomitant architectonic ideology; nonetheless he comes to the realization that, as much as one claims to know Johannesburg, it still manages to elude one's conceptual and cartographic grasp. At the end of this *Mail and Guardian* piece, Gevisser realizes that his nostalgia for "Dispatcher" is born out

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[395] Vladislavić, I. *Double Negative*. Umuzi: Cape Town, 2010, p.204.

[396] Gevisser, Mark. "Going Back to My Routes: Finding a Way to Call Jo'burg Home", *Mail & Guardian*, 23 September 2011. URL: http://mg.co.za/article/2011-09-23-going-back-to-my-routes-finding-a-way-call-joburg-home. Date accessed: 29 July 2013.

[397] Ibid.

[398] Ibid.

[399] Ibid.

[400] Ibid.

of a desire to thwart apartheid-era spatial logic; it is a desire which calls for the crossing of boundaries. Most significantly, he confesses that "[a]ll maps awaken in me a desire to be lost and found – to find myself – at the same time."[401]

This idea of mapping and getting lost calls to mind the ending of *Double Negative*. Neville Lister recalls a childhood game he played with his father. Lying prone on the backseat of his father's Mercedes and without being able to see out of the windows, he would have to try to guess their terminus upon arriving at their destination. This gestures towards a different type of mapping activity: taking guesses and trying to map them out over the known. Senior and junior Lister become so involved in the game that they begin to dally and father undertakes longer, more complicated routes to outsmart son. Neville relishes the challenge and instead of "following a map and matching it to the outside world" he charts the journey in accordance with "an internal landscape, a journey in memory" (p.202). Again, it would seem that selfhood and space are connected. Eventually, Neville becomes so good he cannot go wrong with "certainty" settling over him "like a blanket" (p.203). He – a "compass needle" with "X-ray vision" – starts to instruct his father "telling him when to slow down, where to turn, when to double back" (p.203). But this mastery comes at a price. The last sentence of the novel resonates with the bitter realization that Neville "had unlearned the art of getting lost" (p.204). This unpleasant epiphany shoots to the quick, perhaps helping to explain Neville's lack of success as an artist in this *künstlerroman*. His inability to wander and engage with novelty, his dislike of being lost, is a limitation – one that impedes the imaginative and creative potential to be found in acts of urban and self-discovery.

The relationship between mapping and getting lost is an important one in Johannesburg. Gevisser's remarks about the *Holmden's* blind spots (i.e. its neglect to map out Soweto within its ring-bound, blue cloth confines) are telling. Both Lister and Gevisser's preoccupation with mapping the city gestures towards either embracing or unlearning the art of getting lost. Since its inception, space and movement in Johannesburg had always been carefully regulated along racial lines, but spatial policing mechanisms intensified during the apartheid era when space was systematically locked down. Non-white residential enclaves were created on the peripheries of the apartheid city. Passbooks regulated who could be where and when. The formal white city and its various guiding instruments, one example being the mapbook, persisted in its cartographic, political, and ethical ignorance of the sprawling townships that existed on the margins of the

[401] Ibid.

'official' city. With the fall of apartheid, the freeing of space and movement through that space ensued. However, this period of optimism – that Johannesburg was open to all, irrespective of race – was short-lived. The fear of systemic violent crime meant that homes and businesses were becoming increasingly fortified.[402] Security-manned boomed-off check-points, gated communities, and walls topped by electric fences hindered movement at every turn. Hence, due to historical factors like the legacy of "apartheid spatialised politics"[403], coupled with the architectural effects of a booming security industry, Johannesburg has become an increasingly difficult city to use, traverse, and know.

We read space according to time-honoured and habitual patterns. However, the convention of reading and using urban space in Johannesburg is further compromised by these aforementioned historical exigencies. Many people in Johannesburg, especially the middle class, become inured to traversing the city via a limited network of what I would like to call comfort zones of familiarity. The effects of the apartheid era bequeathed a certain reluctance, if not full-blown fear, of seeking out new spaces and the unfamiliar. Moreover, in the postapartheid era this reluctance to seek out the unfamiliar is exacerbated by the pervasive fear of urban crime. Crime discourages city-dwellers from leaving their urban comfort zones. Thus, what is familiar and 'safe' refers to a finite network that comprises journeys between work, school, shops, and a bounded index of places of interest.[404] This limited usage of the city is further compounded by the mechanism of travel: the motorcar. Scholars such as Gerald Gaylard in "The Death of the Subject: Subjectivity in Post-apartheid Literature"[405] and Michael Titlestad's co-written piece with Mike Kissack[406] entitled "Secular Improvisations: The Poetics of Invention in Ivan Vladislavić", analyse the autotropolis of Vladislavić's *The Exploded View*. Both articles argue that in driving the city, the characters' experience of and movement through space is compromised by a conspicuous lack of

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[402] Mbembe, A. and Nuttall, S. "Writing the World from an African Metropolis" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis. Public Culture*, 16:3, 2004, p.365.

[403] Poyner, J. "Dismantling the Architecture of Apartheid: Vladislavić's Private Poetics in *Portrait with Keys*" in *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.323.

[404] Shane Graham writes in "Layers of Permanence: Towards a Spatialist-Materialist Reading of Ivan Vladislavić *The Exploded View*" that it "is difficult to drive through the suburbs of Johannesburg… without being struck by the degree to which post-apartheid architecture is one of barricaded exclusion against urban poverty and crime" (*Marginal Spaces*, 2011, p.225).

[405] Gaylard, G. "The Death of the Subject: Subjectivity in Post-apartheid Literature" in *Scrutiny 2*, 11:2, 2006, pp.62-74.

[406] Titlestad, M. and Kissack, M. "Secular Improvisations: The Poetics of Invention in Ivan Vladislavić" in *Scrutiny 2*, 11:2, 2006, p.21.

intimacy between objects and people, and people with other people.[407] If we extrapolate these literary analyses and extend it to the city on which the novel is based, it can be argued that many city-dwellers become accustomed to this 'encased' mode of living and using the city. "Confined to their cars, alienated from the city by a sense of threat"[408] means that Joburgers habitually use the city in a rather dehumanised and fractured way.

Vladislavić's city novels, however, offer a means of countering this urban confinement. Especially via the likes of *Portrait with Keys*, Vladislavić is able to promote a different mediation of city space. Here he designates walking as a means of recapturing urban knowledge – a strategy to relax into intimacy with the city streets. Moreover, he is also able to use the familiar to reveal the unfamiliar. As Jane Poyner argues in "Dismantling the Architecture of Apartheid: Vladislavić's Private Poetics in *Portrait with Keys*"[409], Vladislavić is able to draw upon a particular register of "private poetics" to rehumanise the city. This mode of traversing the city allows for a novel approach to reading space. Only a shift in perspective can render the city anew. As Gerald Gaylard puts it, walking encourages us to see "lostness as a possible virtue."[410] This pedestrian way of approaching space allows for a defamiliarisation of the city, bringing about a fresh perspective on Johannesburg. He is able to find "space within, between and beyond habitual limits and definitions, particularly for marginalia, for the apparently useless, for the new."[411]

Although *Portrait with Keys* is framed by an exposure to crime (i.e. activated home alarms and security guards' strikes), the author-narrator does not allow this experience to limit his engagement with Johannesburg. Instead in the second sketch, the narrator alludes to civic amity in partaking in the "unequal exchange of directions" (p.11). City-dwellers "declare their vulnerability" in asking for directions; in supplying directions, a person "demonstrate[s] a

[407] Titlestad and Kissack, while subjecting *The Exploded View* to a symbolic Certeaudian reading, acknowledge that all four characters: "relentlessly drive across Johannesburg, which is quite obviously an autotropolis as far as the middle class is concerned… Confined to their cars, alienated from the city by a sense of threat, each is unable to engage creatively the possibilities it presents for pedestrian habitation and epistemology." (Titlestad and Kissack, 2006: p.21.)

In Gaylard's article, he makes similar comments about the characters in *The Exploded View* in their driving of the city: "This four- part novel focuses on the suburbs of Johannesburg rather than the city centre, a landscape driven rather than walked through, creating a barrier between subject and surroundings, unlike in his earlier work." (Gaylard, 2006, p.67)

[408] Titlestad, M. and Kissack, M. "Secular Improvisations: The Poetics of Invention in Ivan Vladislavić" in *Scrutiny 2*, 11:2, 2006, p.21.

[409] Poyner, J. "Dismantling the Architecture of Apartheid: Vladislavić's Private Poetics in *Portrait with Keys*" in *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, pp.309-323.

[410] Gaylard, G. Introduction to *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.4.

[411] Ibid, p.5.

capacity for dealing kindly and responsibly with a life put in their hands by fate" (p.12). *Portrait with Keys* searches for points of connection to counteract the way in which Johannesburg has isolated its inhabitants. Indeed, the complexity of modern metropolises

> with 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 and habitual movement over the skin of the earth … It is literally impossible for certain of these paths to cross, which is why 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. But this is all the more reason why the crossing of paths, the places where they touch like wires in a circuit, for no better reason than chance, should be taken seriously. (*Portrait with Keys*, pp.12-13)

This treatise on city movements and connections evokes the 'ships passing in the night' idiom. For this reason, chance encounters should be celebrated as something special. In many ways, this is what *Portrait with Keys* is about – the charting of accidental meetings which creates a sense of community in the city. In asking for directions, the city-dweller is rendered vulnerable in the face of contact with others and in doing so, is made to drop his/her defences. The author-narrator recalls his father's mode of supplying directions, which always involved calling upon his brother Branko or himself to fetch the family's trusty fold-out map to help direct disoriented passersby. He muses that perhaps this was a way to force the stranger to "get out from behind the wheel and pass the time of day" (p.13). It is salient that this portrait is positioned immediately after the preceding sketch, which is one that highlights the dehumanising effects of Johannesburg crime. In portrait 1, the alarmed house reduces the home from sanctuary to activated time-bomb, thus allowing no time for "leisurely departures", and similarly, permitting no "savoured homecomings" (p.11). Every "departure is precipitate and every arrival is a scraping-in" (p.11). Crime in the city promotes the paranoid policing of space and belongings. Jane Poyner argues that the "(armed) response to crime actually … reinstalls the zones that characterised the apartheid city."[412] Portrait 2, then, resists the pull of this historical tendency and resuscitates the promise of interpersonal contact in the city. The gesture of giving directions as a pretence for passing the time of day with a fellow urban-dweller has the effect of rehumanising the city. The vignette concludes with the following statement:

[412] Poyner, J. "Dismantling the Architecture of Apartheid: Vladislavić's Private Poetics in *Portrait with Keys*" in *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.314.

> Since then, experience has taught me, and a host of other writers have confirmed, that getting lost is not always a bad thing. One might even consider misdirecting a stranger for his own good. (p.13)

This suggests that not only will the content of the novel likely follow the peregrinations of a protagonist who contends "that getting lost is not always a bad thing", but that as readers we might also be misdirected textually. Our disorientation may require us to appreciate and read space afresh. In doing so, he invites us to think about and map space in a different way. According to Poyner, "[l]osing one's bearing paradoxically leads to new structures of feeling – a mapping that flouts the regulatory principle of planned space."[413] In other words, getting lost is a way to defamiliarise conventional mappings of space.

Alluding to the work of Roland Barthes, James Graham, in his article "Ivan Vladislavić and the Possible City", calls *Portrait with Keys* a "walkerly"[414] text. The "reader-walker"[415] is forced to rediscover the city in their navigation of the fragmentary composition of the novel. The structure of the text, which consists purely of these allusive fragments, defies a coherent linear narrative. This form, along with the thematic pathways set out in the "Itineraries" section at the end,

> … opens up the possibility of improvisation: chance, unscripted encounters with random fragments, or perhaps with a character, place, sign or figure one has come across on previous textual "walks". Readers might choose to stop and dwell a while, skip a street or ignore a scene, retrace their steps or change direction.[416]

That his work is described as "unscripted" suggests that it is also quite possible that the reader can be left feeling a little lost at times. Gerald Gaylard affirms this position by saying that his work evades "our attempts to fix his writing in the clarity of an amber understanding" and as a result "we [the reader] are never quite satisfied by the understanding we do arrive at."[417] This suggests that Vladislavić's elusive and slippery prose may, on occasion, cast its reader adrift.

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[413] Poyner, J. "Dismantling the Architecture of Apartheid: Vladislavić's Private Poetics in *Portrait with Keys*" in *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.319.

[414] Graham, J. "Ivan Vladislavić and the Possible City" in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing,* 44: 4, 2008, p.338.

[415] Ibid, p.337.

[416] Ibid, p.337.

[417] Gaylard, G. Introduction to *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.11.

Since "lostness has potential for this writer", Gaylard characterises his work as one which sustains a "space of undecideability."[418]

This potential for lostness can be discerned in works other than *Portrait with Keys*. In the first story cycle of *The Exploded View*, the protagonist Budlender, after one of his visits with census respondent Iris du Plooy, gets lost in the sterile streets of the Villa Toscana townhouse complex:

> At first he was irritated. Not just with himself for his carelessness, but with this whole ridiculous lifestyle that surrounded him, with its repetitions, its mass-produced effects, its formulaic individuality. (p.30)

Yet, despite his frustration, this "wrong turn" begins "to exert a pacifying effect on him":

> Gazing out at the pink and yellow facades, rumbling over the cobbled street bumps that kept the car down to a walking pace, he grew calmer. He felt the tension leave his body, draining out into the afternoon, almost invisible, like some dark strand on the pastel air. (p.31)

Here Budlender defies the structuring mechanism of his work schedule and allows himself to sink into the moment. It is significant that such an experience of 'getting lost' should have a redeeming effect on Les Budlender, especially since he, like various other conservative characters in *The Exploded View*, and not dissimilarly from Aubrey Tearle in *The Restless Supermarket*, hankers after transcendental signifiers to structure his frightening social reality. Getting lost seems to counter this quest for fixed meaning. Both texts, set during South Africa's transitional period, consist of characters afraid of changes occurring in their urban milieu. They seem to struggle especially with shifts in the semiotic order of things. Tearle reveals a great "antipathy to linguistic change"[419] and the characters in each of the four parts of *The Exploded View* (excluding the creative maverick, Simeon Majara) battle to read the signs of the new dispensation. Ordering and mapping are cognate exercises. Vladislavić, in touching upon incertitude and anxiety during the period after the fall of apartheid, remarked in an interview with Mike Marais and Carita Backström that,

> that sense of ordering is certainly something that comes out of my own personality … I suppose it operates in all societies, but because of the rigid divisions in this society, when neatly

[418] Ibid, p.11.

[419] Marais, M. and Backström, C. "An Interview with Ivan Vladislavić" in *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.167.

> ordered systems, paradigms that people live within, start breaking down, it's a very threatening thing.[420]

In "Villa Toscana" objects appear to be detached from their original purpose: the large rusty keyhole set in the door of the guardhouse, which helps to extend the Medieval theme, is not for access purposes; instead the much less conspicuous and more practical Yale lock situated just below it performs that function (pp.9-10). Signs do not ultimately signify what they promise: "coffee cups which had looked so French to him at first, had been newly glazed with Italian" (p.35). Boundaries of the city drift away, "sliding over pristine ridges and valleys, lodging in tenuous places, slipping again" (p.6). Within this disjuncture between signifiers and signifieds, even the comfort of memory crumbles: Budlender fails to remember the number plate of the minibus taxi that flicks up a stone that shatters his windscreen (p.22). Urban familiarities become unanchored and unhinged. Unexpectedly though, and despite this background, Budlender, for a brief moment, suspends his exhaustive and exhausting compulsion to cast a statistical net over events, and allows himself to switch off and let this experience of lostness wash over him. One can decipher something salient from the phrasing of the excerpt above: Budlender grows calmer when he slows "the car down to a *walking pace*" [my emphasis].[421]

As soon as Budlender adopts something analogous to "a walking pace" he is able to, albeit fleetingly, defer his tireless quest for fixed meaning. In this brief act of welcoming flow and disorder, he is more at peace with himself. Mike Marais in interview with Vladislavić ratifies this response by stating that in the wake of the wobbling of structuring societal narratives, "the way to go in this country is to recognize that 'disorder' is part and parcel of communal life – that it is the way in which community constantly restructures itself, and it is therefore not an evil but a necessity."[422] As difficult as it may sound, according to Vladislavić, one needs to embrace and thus be at peace with a degree of disorder in Johannesburg. This unhinging, which induces a feeling of lostness, signals a freeing and destabilising of inherited spatial infrastructures.

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[420] Ibid, p.166.

[421] It should be noted that Budlender's intimacy with the streets around him might be compromised by his choice of travel: the motorcar. Admittedly, due to Johannesburg's size and lack of sufficient public transport, inhabitants need to use the motorcar if they need to reach distant places. Be that as it may, the motorcar is used even for the shortest of journeys in Johannesburg.

[422] Marais, M. and Backström, C. "An Interview with Ivan Vladislavić" in *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.173.

**The Pedestrian**

Despite Budlender's desire for transcendence from the confusing complexities and disorder of his day-to-day quotidian reality, his brand of statistical hermeneutics, which aims to deliver the safeguard of "eternal vigilance", inevitably becomes an increasingly flawed and inhibiting tool to explain his changing surroundings (p.22). He craves extrication from a torrent of signs, which refuse to submit to his taxonomic, albeit reductive, logic. Briefly, Budlender is tempted with the promise of extrication when he visits the Star Shop Egoli – a restaurant, which straddles the N1 highway. As he partakes of a coffee, he watches the steady stream of cars from on high:

> It was a perch made for a statistician … His eye took in the stream of traffic, separated it out into its parts, dwelling on sizes and shapes and shades … He counted black cars for a minute, converted the sum into an hourly rate. He counted women drivers, did the conversion. Cars for men, cars for women … He stopped counting and let his eye dance across the trends: roof racks (for luggage, bicycles, kayaks), bull bars, trailers, spoilers, roll bars, bakkies, 4x4s. Entire lifestyles, dissolved in the flow like some troubling additive, like statistical fluoride, became perceptible to the trained eye … There was a lesson in this, which only a statistician seemed capable of learning. (pp.15-16)

This perch affords Budlender a panoptic overview of the drivers' "multiple-lived realities"[423] below. He is disentangled from the multitude and then able to survey their territory at this safe remove. The experience of this moment of extrication bears similarities with a passage in *Portrait with Keys*. In portrait 78, which is the last vignette of Point A, the author-narrator describes the experience of leaving Johannesburg aboard an airplane. He details his last impressions of seeing his home city from above:

> It is always surprising to discover how huge and scintillating the city is, that it is one place, beaded together with lights. As the aircraft lifts you out of it, above it, it becomes, for a moment, comfortingly explicable. Personal connections dissolve, and you read your home from a distance, like one of De Certeau's imperious voyeur-gods. (p.108)

Both excerpts, the second one less subtly than the first, reference Michel de Certeau's vision of Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre, detailed in his essay "Walking in the

[423] Titlestad, M. and Kissack, M. "Secular Improvisations: The Poetics of Invention in Ivan Vladislavić" in *Scrutiny 2*, 11:2, 2006, p.20.

City."[424] From this position, the viewer is freed from the world of the pedestrians (or in de Certeau's terminology, *walkers* – the city's "ordinary practitioners"[425]) below:

> To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law … It transforms the bewitching world by which one was "possessed" into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and Gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more.[426]

This vantage point renders "the complexity of the city readable" and the "ecstasy" of "seeing the whole" confers an "erotics of knowledge" upon the godlike voyeur. Seeing Manhattan at this remove, the city becomes "a transparent text" – "a map, of itself"[427] – which the viewer can read and understand with bird's eye clarity. The "pleasure" which accompanies the experience of extrication, puts the viewer "at a distance" (making "himself alien" to the walkers "down below"[428]) and affords him/her the feeling of cartographic and panoptic knowledge, which is ultimately "a function of a will to mastery and power."[429] For Budlender, this perch places him above and thus free from the exigencies of the "great demographic flow" below, allowing him to extract a statistical "lesson" – i.e. cartographic knowledge and transcendence – at a distance (pp.15-16). In this instance, he is able to make sense of the world below him, but this enlightenment is short-lived.

In *Portrait with Keys*, the ascending aircraft teases the narrator with the promise of seeing "Johannesburg whole" (p.109). However, the banking motion of the airplane, coupled with the "dull-witted economiser in the window seat opposite" who has "pulled down the shade", means that the narrator will not be able to see the totality of Johannesburg one "last time" (p.109). His disappointment "will cast a pall over the future" (p.109). The author-narrator has been looking

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[424] de Certeau, M. "Walking in the City" in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 1984 (Kindle eBook).

[425] de Certeau, M. "Walking in the City" in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 1984, p.92 (Kindle eBook).

[426] Ibid, pp.101-2.

[427] Titlestad, M. and Kissack, M. "Secular Improvisations: The Poetics of Invention in Ivan Vladislavić" in *Scrutiny 2*, 11:2, 2006, p.19.

[428] de Certeau, M. "Walking in the City" in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 1984, p.93 (Kindle eBook).

[429] Titlestad, M. and Kissack, M. "Secular Improvisations: The Poetics of Invention in Ivan Vladislavić" in *Scrutiny 2*, 11:2, 2006, p.19.

forward to this opportunity afforded by the "erotics of knowledge", but disappointment starts to well up in him, knowing that this last glance has been denied. Just in the nick of time, the plane levels out and he is granted his last wish: Johannesburg spreads out beneath him, "impossibly vast and unnaturally beautiful" (p.109). This vantage point of seeing the entirety of the city, the city as a map of itself, "comfortably explicable" and read from a distance confers power on the viewer.

This panoptic experience is described as fleeting and very nearly forestalled. This hankering for extrication from the multitude below promises an "imperious voyeur-god" status; however, little or no "knowledge" accompanies the author-narrator's experience. It is interesting that this seductive vista sneaks into a text like *Portrait with Keys*, where the narrator's predominant means of representing space is channelled through the perspectives of ground-level realities – the streets – and not panoramas from above. Unlike *The Exploded View,* which features its characters mediating city-space via the automobile (thus configuring Johannesburg as an autotropolis), in *Portrait with Keys* the predominant method by which the author-narrator navigates the city of Johannesburg is on foot. In fact the Itineraries index cites twenty-two "Walking" portraits; this forms one of the "long" thematic routes through the text. The way in which the author-narrator processes his experiences of the streets of Johannesburg is largely filtered through his street-level perspective as a pedestrian.

It is thus significant that portrait 78 is positioned at the end of Point A – no other information or understanding of Johannesburg is provided after this portrait, except an enigmatic series of ellipsis dots. This pause in the urban narrative is one that is full of promise and expectation, but one that is also silent. In other words, the view from above is followed by narrative hiatus. The narrator is in the process of leaving the city and thus his ability to speak of it or represent it has been suspended – at least temporarily. It is interesting then that the Certeaudian perspective confers ensuing silence here, rather than ascendency. The narrative recommences in Point B upon the narrator's imminent return to Johannesburg. His return means he can once again begin to write the city as he will be resuming his pedestrian status. After all, the overarching form of the novel effectively captures this perspective of the city as street-level complexity: in reading the novel, the reader is not handed a cartographic version of the city; instead they must navigate each portrait finding their own way through it (this is true too for the pedestrian negotiating city-space). The reader needs to "rely on words and gestures to guide" them through (p.12). Creating one's own pathway of meaning is promoted in *Portrait with Keys* as an important tool in making sense of urban space. In a sense, "readers are brought to ground level and forced into an

improvisational mode of collaborative interpretation" with the narrator.[430] The text, like the narrator, reveals the temptations that cartographic vistas hold over the viewer, but ultimately suggests that meaning can only be made in fits and stops at street level.

For de Certeau, the pedestrians at street level, who inhabit the "dark space" below, "follow the thicks and thins of an 'urban' text they write without being able to read"; they operate blindly, but nonetheless are able to make use of "spaces that cannot be seen." [431] These walkers possess limited agency – they do not enjoy the freedom to invent their city; instead they "inherit its structure and are confined to the possibilities it presents (here a wall obstructs progress, there a bridge compels you to cross the river at a certain point…)."[432] Be that as it may, these ordinary practitioners, via their pedestrian trajectories, are able to construct a localised logic to mediate their signifying systems: "[e]ven while their meanings derive from the established vocabularies of their context, 'they trace out the ruses of other interests and desires.'"[433] To appropriate the terminology of the agency/structure binary, it can be posited that although the walkers are contained within the logic of the structure, they can draw upon their qualified, but aggregated agency (via the rearrangement, appropriation, substitution, and manipulation of elements) to subtly displace and thus transform the register of the inherited system.[434] De Certeau uses the terms *strategy* and *tactic* to flesh out this dynamic. The *strategy* is "expressed in the act of mapping"[435] and can be loosely equated to the structure; it is the sphere where political, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed. Conversely, *tactics* are a tool of the weak and the 'othered' and can be described as "discrete individuated actions and decisions that are not part of an overarching design or strategy."[436] Unlike Pierre Bordieu's argument that the structure is responsible for determining and shaping all the individual actions of social agents, de Certeau sees potential in the "tactical use of cultural forms … to elude structural determinism."[437] Herein, the walker "borrows a place and, through the ruses of appropriation,

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[430] Titlestad, M. and Kissack, M. "Secular Improvisations: The Poetics of Invention in Ivan Vladislavić" in *Scrutiny 2*, 11:2, 2006, p.23.

[431] de Certeau, M. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 1984, p.93 (Kindle eBook).

[432] Titlestad, M. and Kissack, M. "Secular Improvisations: The Poetics of Invention in Ivan Vladislavić" in *Scrutiny 2*, 11:2, 2006, p.20.

[433] Ibid, p.19.

[434] Ibid, p.20.

[435] Ibid, p.19.

[436] Rivkin, J. and Ryan, M. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Second Edition. (Eds. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan.) Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004, p.1247.

[437] Ibid, p.1247.

diverts it to different purposes."[438] As a result, "the inherited order is tricked"; even though the walker is denied spatio-temporal cartographic ascendancy, these "ruses of appropriation"[439] (which are effected via the slow, but continual aggregation and dissemination of tactics) can eventually "alter the *tonality*" of the paradigm of the overarching structure.[440] In sustaining de Certeau's figural speech, walkers are unable to *read* the city they traverse because they are encumbered by various structural restrictions and ground-level realities of the inherited order (i.e. obstacles that obstruct creative movement and usage – bridges, walls, gated communities, bollards and blockades). Yet, as Michael Titlestad and Mike Kissick in "Secular Improvisations: The Poetics of Invention in Ivan Vladislavić" explain,

> in putting the elements of an order to different use, they begin to introduce slippages into the systems of meaning they inhabit. In making (temporary) homes for themselves in orders of being and knowledge, they incrementally destabilize that which they cannot escape. Certeau, then, is optimistic about the political consequences of walking the city of meaning; the tactic, albeit in its almost inscrutable aggregation of multiple turns of local meaning, is potentially a site of resistance and transformation.[441]

For de Certeau walking is "an elementary form of experiencing the city."[442] Walkers create narratives of identity by using cities: they continually inscribe their movements upon the surface of the city (making a "sentence or a story of particular places") without ever been able to read the impact of these aggregated pathways comprehensively.[443] In "City Forms and Writing the 'Now' in South Africa", Sarah Nuttall argues, within the frame of Henri Lefebvre's "representational space", that the city is constituted by the way it is used, the way it is walked; each time a pedestrian moves through the city, he/she potentially uses space differently.[444] In other words, one's passage through the city has the capacity to reconstitute its meaning. Jane Poyner adds that the tactics or everyday practices of urban dwellers (the cooking, talking,

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[438] Titlestad, M. and Kissack, M. "Secular Improvisations: The Poetics of Invention in Ivan Vladislavić" in *Scrutiny 2*, 11:2, 2006, p.20.

[439] Ibid, p.20.

[440] Ibid, p.20.

[441] Ibid, p.21.

[442] de Certeau, M. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 1984, p.93 (Kindle eBook).

[443] Nuttall, S. "City Forms and Writing the 'Now' in South Africa" in *Journal of South African Studies*, 30:4, December 2004, p.741.

[444] Ibid, p.741.

walking, dwelling, etc.) – being minor acts and unseen by the voyeur-gods – "have the capacity to resist the totalising 'strategies' of power."[445]

In *Portrait with Keys* the pedestrian author-narrator, in walking the city, creates a narrative of urban identity. His passage through the city – while unable to provide an overview of the city – is notably able to articulate a "sentence or a story"[446] about its character. In doing so, *Portrait with Keys* makes no grand claims about the project of representation or mapping; it instead celebrates the provisional quality of its fragmented and inconclusive snatches of representation. It is a firmly pedestrian text – a text read and inscribed from a ground level perspective. *Portrait with Keys* thus emphasises the relative and local against the universalising seduction of the cartographic view of the city.

Budlender in driving the city is a failed pedestrian. He hankers after extrication – desiring cartographic knowledge to make sense of his circumstances. However, the promise of "voyeur-god" status is unsustainable. It is interesting that the only time Budlender's anxiety is eased – an anxiety produced by the desire for transcendence – is when his car slows "down to a walking pace". In this approximation to walking the city, Budlender momentarily suspends his pursuit of rationalised, statistical meaning – a meaning ordained by the structure – and exhibits his own agency, albeit limited in potency and influence. As a result he grows calmer and more relaxed when he is accidentally forced to embrace flow and disorder at a street-level reality. His "walking pace" is redemptive and pacifies him, but – as we learn – it does so only for a moment.

In affirming its pedestrian-text status, the narrator in portrait 78 of *Portrait with Keys* effectively relativises the allure of the panoptic perspective by remarking on a "more intimate comfort" (p.108). Looking down upon the city, this comfort is one that "assures you that someone, inevitably, is looking back" (p.108).

> At one of those millions of windows, on one of those thousands of stoeps and street corners, someone must be standing, looking up at the plane, at the small rising light that is you, tracing your trajectory, following your flight path. (p.108)

Effectively, the Certeaudian power of seeing (and knowing) is inverted in this passage. The plane, despite its promise of extrication, is merely a "small light" traced by the finger of the

[445] Poyner, J. "Dismantling the Architecture of Apartheid: Vladislavić's Private Poetics in *Portrait with Keys*" in *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.319.

[446] Nuttall, S. "City Forms and Writing the 'Now' in South Africa" in *Journal of South African Studies*, 30:4, December 2004, p.741.

person at street level. Thus, the so-called 'omniscience' of the Certeaudian onlooker's perspective from above is relativised by mentioning the perspective of the common practitioner below. For that "someone" the light is "small" – not emblematic of an imposing city-god. There is no Certeaudian extrication from the multitude either as the aircraft passenger (here, the narrator) in acknowledging this "comfort" thus repudiates the dissolution of "personal connections" (p.108). Rather, he foregrounds this connection, over the less "intimate comfort" of de Certeau's thesis. For the narrator, it is for this reason that the "crossing of paths, the places where they [the city walkers] touch like wires in a circuit, for no better reason than chance, should be taken seriously" (p.13).

This literary and thematic resistance to the totalising tendencies of cartographic representation flies in the face of the conventional and historical conceptions of maps and mapping space. Instead, Vladislavić provides for an "alternative kin[d] of urban mapping"[447] through his adoption of everyday practices available to the pedestrian. In light of de Certeau's famous phrase, "the long poem of walking" – which is directly mentioned in sketch 34 of *Portrait with Keys* – walking can be "conceived as a kind of writing."[448] The walker adopts a particular register in his usage of the city and in doing so establishes a dialogue with the surrounding urban environment; this "conversation is one of the things that makes city walking interesting" (*Portrait with Keys*, p.53). Walking stages a subversive act "in the commodified and rationalized city-space, as resistance to the panoptical power of the state and capital."[449] In *Portrait with Keys*, walking "leads to chance encounters with people, places and things[450] that, out of context, are new and strange."[451] Consequently, the "contingent, performative nature of walking in the city acts as a catalyst to the experience of seeing anew."[452] Walking the city and charting his observations allows the author-narrator to saliently defamiliarise habitual patterns of using and seeing the city as a means of reading it afresh.

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[447] Poyner, J. "Dismantling the Architecture of Apartheid: Vladislavić's Private Poetics in *Portrait with Keys*" in *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.319.

[448] Ibid, p.321.

[449] Graham, J. "Ivan Vladislavić and the Possible City" in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing,* 44: 4, 2008, p.337.

[450] For instance – people: mural painters, thieves, security guards, parking attendants, Piet Retief; and things: bathroom scales, tomasons, signs, etc.

[451] Poyner, J. "Dismantling the Architecture of Apartheid: Vladislavić's Private Poetics in *Portrait with Keys*" in *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.321.

[452] Ibid, p.320.

Walking the city also allows the narrator to come across a series of marginal as well as quotidian objects. Tomasons, for instance, are "creatures of the boundary" (*Portrait with Keys*, p.176). In *Portrait with Keys* the author-narrator encounters a strange pole on the pavement on Robert's Avenue and is perturbed by its seemingly purposeless nature – he fails to divine its function, until he realizes that it could be a tomason. The tomason – coined by Japanese artist, Genpei Akasegawa – is a "purposeless object found on a city street"; it is a thing

> that has become detached from its original purpose. Sometimes this detachment may be so complete that the object is turned into an enigmatic puzzle; alternatively, the original purpose of the object may be quite apparent and its current uselessness touching or amusing … The natural habitat of the tomason is the city street … they thrive in the man-made world, in spaces that are constantly being remade and redesigned for other purposes, where the function of a thing that was useful and necessary may be swept aside in a tide of change or washed off like a label. (pp.175-6)

The narrator is happy to have been granted a linguistic and conceptual category by which to "hold chance observations so tidily" in the tomason (p.176). This classification goes so far as to "cas[t] the world in a different light" and the very "tilt of [his] head has been altered and significance flares up in odd places" (p.176). The narrator's "focus narrows" as he begins to hunt down tomasons:

> Details snag me, every bracket or niche has become a puzzle. Is this a true tomason? Or a doubting tomason whose apparent mysterious function will suddenly become clear? The world at large is lost to me. My eye becomes attuned to everything that is extraneous, inconspicuous and minor, that is abandoned or derelict, the obvious, useful facts of the city recede and a hidden history of obsolescence comes to the surface. Every time I go walking, I stumble right out of the present. (p.176)

Vladislavić's flair for precise language is exhibited in this passage. This particular focus on the minutiae of the city gives way to a lack of certitude and this impression is deftly conveyed via the appropriation of the idiom of the doubting Thomas, which is adjusted to "doubting tomason." Following his eye to the boundaries and edges of the city, he becomes attuned to the "extraneous", "minor" and "obsolescen[t]." Since "walking is conceived as an exemplary means of opening oneself to difference"[453], Vladislavić is able to undercut official narratives about city space and endorse the everyday and contingent as an antidote to both the metanarrative of

[453] Graham, J. "Ivan Vladislavić and the Possible City" in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing,* 44: 4, 2008, p.339.

postapartheid crime and "apartheid spatialised politics."[454] As Gaylard argues in *Marginal Spaces*, Vladislavić's work "consistently deflates power interests and power mongering, supporting the ordinary person and the marginalised against the 'big stories' of the national, spectacular, monumental."[455]

It is ironic that by focusing on "marginal spaces" the author-narrator finds himself stumbling "right out of the present." Being lifted out of the present implies that the tactics of the weak and 'othered' can be drawn upon to hint at freedom. However, this impulse is mitigated by the phrase "the world at large is lost to me." Yes this category of the tomason helps our narrator see things in a different light, forcing his eye to the "marginal spaces" of the city, but it also has the effect of sowing more doubt than certitude. No grand claims about mapping Johannesburg can be made.

Vladislavić's chronicling of minutiae – in other words, his "rediscovery of the ordinary"[456] – means that the totalizing tendencies of the apartheid legacy are kept in check. His literature promotes what Poyner calls a "private poetics" that rescues the private from an effacement by public politics.[457] Contemplating Michel de Certeau's concept of the pedestrian in relation to Vladislavić's urban novels helps to shed light on this "private poetics". De Certeau's project, which celebrates the "earth-bound and contingent experience of individuals"[458], suggests that reading and writing the city has to be a localised and relative activity at the best of times. Walking the city helps to deconstruct the hegemonic mappings of space, and as a result, works to reveal the marginal, minor, and quotidian aspects of urban life.

While a helpful exegesis, de Certeau's treatise on walking the city cannot be taken as the last word on the subject. In analysing the creative potential of walkers to contingently re-map space from their street-level experiences, it would be remiss if this study of Vladislavić's city oeuvre neglected consideration of Walter Benjamin's flâneur.

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[454] Poyner, J. "Dismantling the Architecture of Apartheid: Vladislavić's Private Poetics in *Portrait with Keys*" in *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.323.

[455] Gaylard, G. Introduction to *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.2.

[456] Ndebele, N.S. "Rediscovery of the Ordinary" in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*. University of KwaZulu Natal Press: Pietermaritzberg, 1991, pp.31-54.

[457] Poyner, J. "Dismantling the Architecture of Apartheid: Vladislavić's Private Poetics in *Portrait with Keys*" in *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, pp.309-323.

[458] Titlestad, M. and Kissack, M. "Secular Improvisations: The Poetics of Invention in Ivan Vladislavić" in *Scrutiny 2*, 11:2, 2006, p.20.

**Vladislavić's Flânerie**

Sarah Nuttall in "City Forms and Writing the 'Now' in South Africa" helpfully defines the figure of the flâneur as an "aesthetic bohemian, drifting through the city like a film director", who invites "us to read the city from its street-level intimations, to encounter the city as lived complexity, to seek alternative narratives and maps based on wandering."[459] In analysing the work of Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin became responsible for popularising the term. Walter Benjamin's conception of walking in the city, as detailed in *The Arcades Project*, constitutes a "conscious cultural act."[460] The flâneur is conceived of as a gentleman stroller, who walks the streets of his city – he is a "person who walks the city in order to experience it."[461] In walking the city, this figure carefully observes and contemplates the scenery around him; the "leisurely quality" of the modern urban spectator "fits the style of the flâneur who goes botanizing on the asphalt."[462] For Benjamin, the streets are intoxicating for the flâneur, who wanders "aimlessly" down them; "for him, every street is precipitous."[463] The flâneur is an important participator in city-making: a kind of informal city detective who, by walking it, begins to understand it, and by observing it, can potentially represent and 'map', or re-map it.[464]

For Benjamin, the figure of the flâneur truly came into being as a result of architectural changes exacted upon the urban landscape of industrializing Paris. One of the most notable of these changes was the creation of the arcades. In the arcade the idle stroller could wander down "glass-roofed and marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings"[465]to peruse elegant shops and other places of business. For Benjamin, the "arcade is a city, a world in miniature."[466] A combination of interior and exterior space, the street of the arcade "becomes a dwelling for the flâneur; he is as much at home among the façades of houses as a citizen is in his

[459] Nuttall, S. "City Forms and Writing the 'Now' in South Africa" in *Journal of South African Studies*, 30:4, December 2004, pp.741-2.

[460] Ibid, p.741.

[461] Ngara, K. "The Itinerant Flâneur: Toloki as a Migrant in Time and Ideological Space in *Ways of Dying" in English Academy Review: Southern African Journal of English Studies*, 26:2, 2009, p.17.

[462] Benjamin, W. *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. Verso: London, 1983, p.36.

[463] Benjamin, W. *The Arcades Project*. The Belknap Press: Cambridge (Ma.), 1999, pp.879-80.

[464] Benjamin, W. *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. Verso: London, 1983, p.40.

[465] Benjamin, W. *The Arcades Project*. The Belknap Press: Cambridge (Ma.), 1999, p.873.

[466] Ibid, p.873.

four walls."[467] Thus, the flâneur inhabits an ambiguous mélange of indoor and outdoor realms, where to him

> the shiny, enamelled signs of businesses are at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to a bourgeois in his salon. The walls are the desk against which he presses his notebooks; news-stands are his libraries and the terraces of cafes are the balconies from which he looks down on his household after his work is done.[468]

The dual interior-exterior spatiality of the arcades imbues the flâneur with a paradoxical nature: he is able to both read and makes sense of the city as an urban spectator (enjoying a degree of intellectual distance), while at the same time being completely immersed in the present realities of the city. He is both spectator and inhabitant, player and observer, narrator and character.[469] The figure of the flâneur can be used as a "powerful literary device" in that he is "capable of outdoing the omniscient narrator in objectivity and the first-person narrator in intimacy."[470] The duality of the flâneur as a "powerful literary device" carries resonance for *Portrait with Keys*. The author-narrator not only walks his city as a means of understanding and capturing an image of the city on paper, but his positionality is one of both insider-outsider status. We, as readers, are afforded the vantage point of intimacy and objectivity through his narrative lens.[471]

A case in point is when Vlad witnesses both the painting and erasure of the Ndebele mural at No.10 Blenheim Street. He looks on with what would appear to be disaffected disengagement, but his account of the experience is saturated with sentiment – growing "to love that wall" (p.25). He regrets not having "documented the making of the mural" (photographing or filming it) as a means of sharing this experience with others. He seems to suggest that his detached, observer status will not be compromised by this professed lack of artistic and social engagement. Likewise, when the "brute" comes to obliterate the mural, he claims he lacks the "inclination to document its demise" (p.62). However, the metafictional significance of this comment misdirects

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[467] Benjamin, W. *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. Verso: London, 1983, p.37.

[468] Ibid, p.37

[469] Crickenberger, H.M. "*The Arcades Project* Project: The Rhetoric of Hypertext", 2007. URL: http://www.thelemming.com/lemming/dissertation-web/home/flaneur.html. Date accessed: 10 January 2013.

[470] Ibid.

[471] Jane Poyner makes a similar point in her essay "Dismantling the Architecture of Apartheid: Vladislavić's Private Poetics in *Portrait with Keys*" (2001), but she places focus on the way in which Vladislavić reintroduces the private into the public sphere and thus rehumanises the city. My point of departure takes its cue directly from the aforementioned scholarship on flânerie and highlights how this act of walking the city complicates indoor-outdoor/insider-outsider dynamics. From a literary point of view, the flâneur can become a powerful narrative tool in foregrounding the interpretive expansiveness embodied by such an ambiguously-positioned narrator.

the reader, because the Blenheim mural is after all recorded for posterity within the confines of the text *Portrait with Keys*. In fact, the Blenheim mural lives on longer by virtue of being chronicled in *Portrait* than it did on the streets. Poyner points out that this combination of intimacy and objectivity produced by Vladislavić's "latter-day flâneur"[472] contributes towards "built forms made habitable by the traces of human interaction."[473] This suggests that "the thrust of the writing is to put the human back in the urban setting", as Poyner puts it.[474]

However, Ralph Goodman has argued that unlike the relaxed and confident (confidence "which bespeaks control"[475]) nineteenth-century Parisian bourgeois stroller, the author-narrator is largely uncertain, on-edge, threatened by the pervasive menace of Joburg crime and lacking the "fixed identity and role" of the conventional flâneur. While I think Goodman overstates Vlad's anxiety (after all, the narrator's commitment in *Portrait with Keys* to continue to walk the streets of his neighbourhood, despite the perceived lack of safety, indicates an undeterred boldness rather than Goodman's frightened and panicked wayfarer), perhaps it would be better to adopt a more nuanced reading of the flâneur and instead read the author-narrator in *Portrait with Keys* as a sort of Afropolitan postmodern flâneur – a walker who cuts against the grain of 'control'. Goodman sees the narrator as a "trickster figure" that relies "implicitly on the postmodern aesthetic of decentring and the instability of meanings."[476] As Goodman then suggests, by adopting a deconstructive approach to unanchoring fixed and static attachments to meaning, the narrator-flâneur is able to recalibrate

> the geography of Johannesburg, segmenting the original cartography of the city in random ways and recombining those segments in different ways to construct new imaginaries for the city.[477]

Thus, instead of affirming city meaning, the author-narrator destabilises meaning and certitudes in his act of walking the streets of the city and in doing so, opens up our reading of the city.[478]

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[472] Carty, P. "Fear Lurks around Every Corner on the Mean Streets of Jo'burg", *The Independent,* 27 November 2006. URL: http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/portrait-with-keys-by-ivan-vladislavic-425966.html. Date accessed: 30 July 2013.

[473] Poyner, J. "Dismantling the Architecture of Apartheid: Vladislavić's Private Poetics in *Portrait with Keys*" in *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.316.

[474] Ibid, p.319.

[475] Goodman, R. "Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*: A Bricoleur's Guide to Johannesburg" in *Safundi*, 10:2, 2009, p.228.

[476] Ibid, p.226.

[477] Ibid, p.226.

He could be interpreted as a reinvented, post-structuralist permutation of the figure that inhabits Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*.

Ralph Goodman is sceptical about Vladislavić's success in the act of postmodern flânerie; he feels that the author-narrator's "guerrilla-like infiltration and examination of the spaces of Johannesburg from a series of marginalized positions serve to mark the text's insecurity and powerlessness in the face of the rapidly evolving city."[479] However, he is quick to acknowledge that Vladislavić's author-narrator possesses "the ability to observe and comment on the process of reinscription of space."[480] In other words, the "intense mobility of Vladislavić's narrator, both physical and in terms of point of view, suggests that he does have access to a certain kind of agency, as he depicts a postmodern process of the free play of spatial signifiers, with no dominant narrative to define them."[481]

I think that *Portrait with Keys* deftly modifies the Eurocentric concept of the flâneur and suitably adapts it to a non-western third world metropolis. We cannot adjudicate the behaviour of the author-narrator solely in the terms of Baudelaire or Benjamin's standards of flânerie. Arguably, these strictures are outdated and perhaps situationally inapposite. Instead, while the concept of the flâneur may be fruitfully applied to the projects of writing and walking Johannesburg, the theoretical application of the concept must be adjusted in order to make contextual sense.

Another aspect of flânerie, which deserves further finessing, is the flâneur's relationship with time. Time is important for the flâneur as the experience of walking the city is one that refutes the regimented clock time of the city. Flâneurs, by refusing to chart their movements purely in accordance with an appointment book, infer that by taking time to walk the city and carefully observe their surroundings, and perhaps allowing themselves the scope to get a little lost, can stumble across new perspectives and mappings of space.

While many of the portraits deal with the industry of walking as a means of coming to terms with the sidewalk, Vladislavić includes three rather odd flânerie sketches called "Details (Route 1)", "City Centre (Route 2)" and "Signs (Route 3)" in portraits 126, 127 and 128, respectively. While sketch 126 chronicles addresses along Kitchener Avenue and features suburban

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[478] Ibid, pp.228-9.

[479] Ibid, pp.228-9.

[480] Ibid, p.229.

[481] Ibid, p.229.

descriptions of what he encounters at those addresses, and 128 describes signage in his area, portrait 127 appears to give – quite literally – instructions for a detailed walking route that both the author and reader must follow. It starts with "Go east on Jules Street – he says – all the way to the end … You'll see the Pure and Cool roadhouse on your left (hope it's still there)…" (p.181). Although the "he" in the "he says" is of ambivalent status, invoking the second person "you" infers language of a dialogic quality: now, it is as if the narrator is passing the time of day with the reader. The metafictional quality of this vignette reminds the reader that there are multiple ways to engage with this versatile city novel. Here, flânerie becomes an opportunity for a more intensive engagement with urban space. Phrasing such as, "Now you must go into the veld" and advice like "don't forget your walking shoes" implies that some sort of real action is expected of the "reader-walker"[482] (p.182). This demolition of the narrative's fourth wall unsettles the reader from his/her habitual modes of reading texts. By defamiliarising the narrative voice via the postmodern technique of metafiction, Vladislavić is able to break down the passivity of reading.

Within this portrait, the 'instructor' starts listing types of bric-a-brac that may be encountered on such a walking route:

> a greasy bottle with a Smirnoff label. half a brick with a scab of cement and an iron rod twisting out of it. a flattened tin. the foundations of a ruined substation. three porcelain insulators thrown down from the pylons by the Escom electricians, as beautifully wrought as vases. a burn-out bulb. a signature. smudge lines. pencil stubs. (p.182)

This listing of ephemera and urban flotsam abandons conventions like capitalisation at the beginning of each sentence. Harkening back to the imagistic style of E.E. Cummings, by dispensing with standardised grammatical practices Vladislavić is able to defamiliarise our routine relationship with language, and perhaps as a corollary, trigger a way of reading anew and thus seeing afresh. This passage shows that the innocuous list of arbitrary, discarded miscellany is the texture of urban life. These objects – pencil stubs and scabby bricks included – would generally fail to catch the eye. Moreover, these objects are not neutral piles of detritus – instead their descriptions warm them by insinuating the hands that once clutched or stroked them. The gift of flânerie is to compel the pedestrian into a state of engaged scrutiny, urging him/her to take the time and have the necessary patience to see beyond the bounds of the cursory. In this way, Vlad-the-flâneur cobbles together seemingly random bits-and-bobs, the remnants and the trash,

[482] Graham, J. "Ivan Vladislavić and the Possible City" in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing,* 44: 4, 2008, p.337.

turning worthless debris into treasured bibelots – narrative trinkets that can be inspected individually, re-articulating their relationship with the city, and the way in which we as readers interpret forgotten objects. By examining the throwaway aspects of urban culture Vladislavić unveils that which we conventionally ignore – the unseen and marginal space of the city.

The instructor calls us back from the inventorying of everyday objects to ask:

> Are you still with me? In this dog-eared field, collapsing from one attitude to another, dragging your ghosts through the dirty air, your train of cast-off selves, constantly discovering yourself at the centre, in the present. (p.182)

The allusive conclusion to sketch 127 marries metaphors of textuality and space. The field is described as "dog-eared" and thus brings home the symbolic alliance of city and novel, reading and walking. In addition, the relationship between the identity of self and the identity of the city is emphasised. Walking the city becomes a way of not only discovering the personality of the city, but also a way to reach one's own selfhood at the very "centre" of it. Bricolage, as a technique, thus "gesturally rehumanises Johannesburg."[483]

Furthermore, the text's repetitive employment of bricolage can refer back to the role of the "reader-walker" and their own state of narrative 'lostness'. The narrative disruption instigated by bricolage can boast the effect of reader-disorientation. The reader has to work extra hard to make sense of how these miscellaneous elements fit together in the text's exploded view of the city.

In portrait 58 there is no mention of the individuals to whom these objects belong or who is performing the actions; only a battery of nouns and gerunds is presented sans human intervention:

> the shoes, the socks, the button-down collars, the corduroy jackets, the tables, the chairs, the pavements, the grass on the verges, the flower beds, the impatiens, the Barberton daisies … the street names on the kerbstones, the white lines, the street lights, the bulbs in sockets … the street lights … the cars, the caravans … the driving, the parking, the driving back … the walking in the parks, the drinking in the bars, the talking … the wine in glasses … the food on the plates … (p.80)

[483] Poyner, J. "Dismantling the Architecture of Apartheid: Vladislavić's Private Poetics in *Portrait with Keys*" in *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.311.

The reader could be forgiven for feeling a little lost at this moment. The preceding and subsequent portraits do not guide or direct the reader and so we must surmise that we are getting lost for our "own good" (p.13). The reader is alienated from conventional literary meaning. Indeed our reading patterns, the way in which we make our way through the text, must shift. This portrait could be said to represent the city 'by numbers' where a composite drawing only begins to develop when each of the separate segments are considered in context. In other words, these disconnected spillikins begin to coalesce when read against the more conventional narrative threads contained within the vignettes that frame portrait 58. The reader needs to read both backwards and forwards before things start to add up.

This passage despite its apparent narrative unfamiliarity points to city objects and verbal nouns which cannot help but be enlivened by members of the civic body that live there. Indeed, portrait 57 sets up the first clue by concentrating its narrative focus on the tiny toytown zookeeper figurine and the inexplicable fascination it holds for the narrator who seems to be the only person to see it in its spot in the decorative brickwork of a street fronting wall. It is significant that such a small and liminal object catches his eye and then becomes an inanimate writing companion. For the author-narrator, the zookeeper's presence in his study begins to summon up a "potential boy" who "grows clearer and clearer in my mind, until he is as familiar as the figure itself" (p.79). Likewise, portrait 59 describes the power that a box of lapel badges possesses to conjure up the memory of the author-narrator's grandfather. This box and its contents – his only physical inheritance to which his memories are tethered – lack material value. However, when two street urchins make off with the box (containing his grandfather's Railway Recreation Club badges), this sense of loss is inversely proportionate to their monetary worth. Here, the badges are infused with the memory of a cherished, departed soul and so the language of objects takes on a corporeal quality.

In light of its positioning, does portrait 58 then suggest that the objects listed are metonymic for the living-and-breathing bodies that perform actions upon them? This portrait operates as a kind of urban synecdoche conjuring city-dwellers by association: by looking at their belongings and referring to their actions, we come to know them. The "socks" and "shoes" and "corduroy jackets" exist in relation to the entities that wear them. The "driving", "talking", and "walking in the parks" are actions signalled by the bodies that perform them. The "pavements", "the grass on the verges", "the flower beds" and "the Barberton daisies" are extant because human hands built or planted them. In describing these rather quotidian objects and actions as if it were the

first time he was seeing them, Vladislavić creates a "special perception" of them and in so doing "prick[s] the conscience" of the reader.[484]

Vladislavić's affinity for the postmodern devices of bricolage or pastiche is in tune with his interest in marginality. Gerald Gaylard describes his style as "[n]ever 'at home', always restless."[485] This narrative appetite for "creatures of the boundary" extends beyond an interest in ordinary, everyday objects (*Portrait with Keys*, p.176). Another arena where this "microscopic focus"[486] falls is the terrain of the homeless.

**Alternative Maps of the Homeless**

In considering alternative modes of mapping urban space, it is useful to consider the representation of how the homeless use the city in *Portrait with Keys*. This usage may not be readily apparent to more privileged members of society and ties in with the depth model in the surface/depth binary. It is unsurprising that the homeless would feature in this text, which has been lauded as a literary exercise in marginality. The homeless possess a marginalised position in the city; their right of entitlement to the city's facilities is liminal at best. Jonathan Morgan's collection, *Finding Mr Madini*, gives voice to these silent members of the civic body. This polyvocal collection consists of narratives composed by several homeless people of Johannesburg who also contribute towards the *Homeless Talk* publication (where Morgan volunteers to give writing classes). Morgan's own narrative reflects upon the process of bringing marginalised perspectives of the city's underbelly to the fore. The plot is largely propelled forward when one of their most promising writers, the titular Sipho Madini, goes missing. Morgan takes it upon himself to find this lost voice. *Finding Mr Madini* then largely becomes a project of reclamation – trying to retrieve what has been silenced, lost, and pushed to the margins of the postapartheid city. It is within the compass of narrative that these voices are given agency and are symbolically 'found'.

In *Portrait with Keys* Vladislavić does not neglect to consider these voiceless users of the city. In sketch 31 the author-narrator recounts Louise's discovery of the homeless people's ingenious

484 Shklovsky, V. "Art as Technique" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Second Edition. (Eds. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan.) Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004, p.19. and p.16.

485 Gaylard, G. Introduction to *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.11.

486 Ibid, p.6.

and industrious use of city-space. Louise, pointing to the pavement, informs the author-narrator that the homeless people of the city use the spaces just below the iron covers of the water mains where the municipal meters are housed as cupboards:

> They stored their winter wardrobes there and the rags of bedding they used at night, they preserved their scraps of food, their perishables, in the cool shade, they banked the empty bottles they collected for the deposits. (p.50)

This revelation "that such utilitarian places should have been appropriated and domesticated, transformed into repositories of privacy for those compelled to live their lives in public" tickles Louise (p.50). This newfound urban knowledge defamiliarises the everyday objects encountered on the street. Vlad begins to see manhole covers beyond their mere utilitarian function and, as a result, they become humanised. Now, the author-narrator's awareness has been recalibrated to read the urban street map in a different way: "Any iron cover you passed in the street might conceal someone's personal effects" (p.50).

Initially, Vlad pities the homeless; he finds it sad that people are so poor that they have to hide their belongings in holes below the city street. Homelessness might be perceived as a state of lostness. Homes are anchoring mechanisms – sanctuaries that provide reprieve from the violent assaults of city-life. According to Alain de Botton, we "need a home in the psychological sense as much as we need one in the physical: to compensate for vulnerability. We need a refuge to shore up our states of mind."[487] However, Louise holds a contrary view: she argues that this endeavour is far from pitiful. Instead, these people are resourceful – "they're making a life out of nothing" (p.50).

For the narrator, this triggers an urban epiphany: his appreciation of the city streets has been transfigured into a "maze of mysterious spaces underfoot" (p.50). The signalling of depth here defies the surface model. This "special knowledge" of the city streets has the unexpected effect of turning the homeless into the "privileged ones." It "made them party to something" in which the homed with their "wardrobes and chests of drawers" and "three square meals a day" could not hope to participate (p.50). What exactly the homeless are party to is slightly unclear, but it would seem that our entitled assumptions regarding the ways in which the city can be used are limiting and condescending. This ingenious "ruse of appropriation" disrupts the tonality of the inherited order. To appropriate Michael Titlestad and Mike Kissack's reading of de Certeau, the

[487] de Botton, Alain. *The Architecture of Happiness*. Penguin: London, 2006, Location 1004 (Kindle eBook).

homeless – in using these niches beneath the pavement to store their belongings – could be said to be "making (temporary) homes for themselves in orders of being and knowledge" so that "they incrementally destabilize that which they cannot escape."[488] Here, Vladislavić suggests spatial politics and urban hegemony where power is conventionally housed can be challenged, even by the most marginalised and subaltern members of the urban framework.

A decade later the narrator needs to switch off the mains outside his house and when he lifts the iron cover he discovers the neatly arranged personal effects of a homeless person. He is overcome by the disjuncture between the "chaotic plenitude of the Highveld sky above" and "this small, impoverished, inexplicably, orderly world" before him (p.51).

Despite their abject position within the urban fabric of society, Vladislavić defamiliarises the lostness with which complacent bourgeois readers might associate the homeless. While it would be ethically irresponsible to suspend our concern for these impoverished and marginalised city denizens, Vladislavić is able to challenge our dominant ways of seeing and treating the subaltern. He shows that despite enduring a bleak urban existence these members of the civic body are not completely hopeless or impotent. Their resourcefulness offsets the dehumanising effects of living in an oft brutal and inhospitable city. Even though Vladislavić may be too optimistic in this respect, the narrative suggests that by finding their own sense of order and anchorage in the chaotic city, the homeless are able to re-articulate the parameters of mapped space in the city. Vladislavić's prose suggests that this, admittedly liminal, act of re-mapping of urban space should be celebrated.

In *Portrait with Keys*, the passages on states of homelessness are salient because they show Vladislavić's sensitivity towards positions of alterity in the city. He is unable to give voice to the subaltern, but he is able to acknowledge the spaces they occupy and respect their 'othered' positionality in the metropolis. That he affords space in his narrative to the alternative maps constructed by the largely 'othered' members of the urban body is illustrative of opening up Johannesburg beyond the ways in which it is used by more privileged members of society.

[488] Titlestad, M. and Kissack, M. "Secular Improvisations: The Poetics of Invention in Ivan Vladislavić" in *Scrutiny 2*, 11:2, 2006, p.21.

**Lost Johannesburg**

Since Vladislavić's writing revels in polysemy it is worth considering the other ways in which we understand the concept of someone or something being 'lost'. Being lost does not only signify losing one's bearings, but can also mean something that cannot be recovered. This again calls to mind Arnold Benjamin's *Lost Johannesburg*. This other meaning of lostness lurks in the shadows of this present chapter and touches upon the fear of erasure and effacement that was raised in the first chapter of this thesis. This particular sense of Johannesburg as 'lost' revises the more positive connotations of lostness discussed thus far. Instead, the phrase 'Lost Johannesburg' seems to suggest that a part of the city or its past is irretrievable or unsalvageable, thus summoning up the dominant reading of Johannesburg as a city of surface – where the past is constantly rewritten and overhauled, while the present is permeated with slavish importations of American and European simulacral hyperreality. However, Johannesburg is not as 'lost' as Benjamin's text pronounces it is. Instead, this reading of Johannesburg can be challenged. In pursuing a depth reading, delving beneath this culture of surface reveals a variety of palimpsests – both urban and natural – which counter and problematise the perceived predominance of virtuality and historical 'lostness'. Ironically, the 'art of being lost' defamiliarises the perception of 'Lost Johannesburg'.

Walking the city, which at times leads to moments of disorientation, allows the narrator of *Portrait with Keys* to view his surroundings in a novel light. Defamiliarising the quotidian means that despite having walked along a particular pavement "a thousand times" at last he notices the short pole on Roberts Avenue. The tomason, which was mentioned earlier in this chapter, acts as a mechanism that aids the narrator in taking fresh stock of his surroundings. Since the tomason is an anachronistic and practically obsolete object, it endures as a visceral reminder of the past. Its historical embeddedness ruptures the space-time continuum, making the narrator feel as though he has stumbled "right out of the present" (p.176). This chance observation means that the author-narrator begins to notice tomasons all over the place. New needs and modern technology have altered the urban landscape, but various remnants of the past remain visible to the educated eye on the city's streets. For instance, in sketch 131 Vladislavić speaks of the "tomason of access" (p.185) as being a speciality of Johannesburg – that which refers to the changing architectural (and aesthetic) face of the city in reaction to the threat posed by violent crime:

> There are vanished gateways everywhere. On any street, you may find a panel in a wall where the bricks are a different colour or the courses poorly aligned, indicating that a gap has been filled in. A garden path leads to a fence rather than a gate, a doorstep juts from the foot of a solid wall. Often, the addition of a security fence or a wall has put a letterbox beyond the reach of the postman. *The ghosts come and go.* (p.185)

In this way, by signalling a referent beneath Johannesburg's culture of surface, the tomason designates an aspect of the city's past. While the presence of the tomason indicates urban change and adaptation, it is also, very importantly, emblematic of a retrievable and knowable past. Instead of the past being completely erased in the process of renewal, the history of that space is readable. Tomasons and time are closely linked concepts.

The tomason stands as one example of the urban palimpsest. The palimpsest denotes a manuscript that has been inscribed more than once, with the earlier script incompletely erased and often legible. The palimpsest visually evokes the co-existence of different temporal and historical layers. Accordingly, the palimpsest suggests depth, a canvas containing a record of past activity – a connective tissue to times gone by – whereas the simulacrum signifies surface and endless disembedded replication. The palimpsest as a symbol of depth, as opposed to simulacral surface, thus inaugurates the process by which Johannesburg can be subjected to a depth reading.

Besides the specific example of the tomason, other palimpsests are evident in *Portrait with Keys*. Portrait 39 chronicles the development of the city's built environment by evocatively and explicitly referencing the layering of different historical strata in the downtown region. The beginning of the vignette reflects upon the effects of the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand region. Vladislavić then describes the cartographical "backbone of Johannesburg", namely Commissioner Street, which "follows the old wagon track between two of the first mining camps" (p.60). By means of a subtle metonym, he charts urban change through the metamorphosis of public transport on a single street. Vladislavić mentions the cracks that have appeared in the tarred surface of the road and consequently "rusted steel glimmers in the roadbed" (p.60). The old tramlines, tarred over in the early 1960s, are "coming back to the surface" (p.60).[489] Very much like a palimpsestic manuscript, city administrators attempted to erase the evidence of the tramlines by tarring the road surface to make way for self-propelled, personal motor vehicles. Unlike cities such as San Francisco and Basel, which have retained their

[489] This is now a defunct means of public transport and has been replaced by buses, taxis, and private motor vehicles.

trams, in Johannesburg this past was scrapped. However, in spite of this persistent trend to update and rewrite, this aspect of the city's transportational past is still legible, rising inexorably to the surface. The temporal disjuncture – explained by the mechanism of the palimpsest – seems to suggest that the present (the tarred surface) is haunted by the ghosts of the past (the tramlines). This transposition of temporal lamina invalidates the predominance of the surface model.

The Ndebele mural stands as another example of the urban palimpsest. Early on in *Portrait with Keys*, the author-narrator describes the painting of this mural on the street-facing wall of No. 10 Blenheim Street. In portrait 40, he documents its demise. He sees a tall man in a "splattered overall" begin to paint over the mural (p.61). It soon becomes clear that a single coat will not be enough to mask the brightly coloured pattern; the intransigent "African geometry" starts to develop "like a Polaroid image, as the paint dried" (p.62). This is probably one of the most explicit examples of the palimpsest in the text. The persistence of the mural's shapes that continue to rise to the surface harkens back to the comments concerning the layering of a history on the streets of Johannesburg.

Although Johannesburg can be viewed as an "instant city", one constantly rewriting the manuscript of its urban identity and history, conducting a depth reading reveals a story different from solely reading Johannesburg as a simulacrum. The palimpsest suggests that there is more at play. The city's urban history revealed via the tomason indicates that the past is not completely erasable by the imposition of globalised consumerist culture. This could owe partly to the tomason's local specificity in that it cannot be fully assimilated into the bland generalisations of globalised hypermodernity. The tomason means that the past is visible, and to an extent, salvageable. The palimpsest visually evokes the process by which the layers of urbanity can be exhumed in order to access what lies beneath. In conceptually accessing the past through the symbol of the tomason, Vladislavić can begin to deconstruct the contemporary culture of surface. In other words the palimpsest exposes the falseness and constructedness of the simulacrum. As an aside, it is also interesting to note that the city novel becomes the safeguard of the urban palimpsest. It is through Vladislavić's fictions, in his description of palimpsests, that the past becomes legible and thus retrievable.

Furthermore, the tomason allows the narrator of *Portrait with Keys* to see the "world in a different light", where the "obvious" facets of the city "recede" and instead a "hidden history of obsolescence comes to the surface" (p.176). Thus, what had previously been hidden beneath the

"obvious" comes to the fore. We can read the "obvious" to stand for the most commonly noticed aspects of Johannesburg – crime, the simulacrum, and consumerist-driven hypermodernity. The tomason is an example of what the culture of surface hides: the marginal, the history of the marginalised, and the past. A ghost of times gone by, the tomason haunts the city-street's present. The palimpsest then operates in the shadows, disrupting the predominant reading of Johannesburg as a city dominated by a culture of surface.

The palimpsest unmasks the simulacrum by virtue of its interconnected relationship with time, and at a further remove, nature. The urban palimpsest of the tramlines in portrait 39 not only records the history of the city, but it also reminds us that "here we are all still prospectors, with a digger's claim on the earth beneath our feet" (p.60). Saliently, for Vladislavić, the urban palimpsest becomes a link to the natural world that preceded the city – that which will outlast it.

This link is further explored in sketch 66 of *Portrait with Keys*. The narrator writes about stripping down his bedroom door to the wood below with the paint coming off "in layers: layers of taste, of personal preference, of style" (p.91). He wishes he could:

> read these strata the way a forester reads the rings of a felled tree, deciphering lean seasons, the years of plenty, the catastrophes, the triumph. Instead, I see nothing but fashion. Nineties ochre, eighties ivory, seventies beige, sixties olive. Paging back into the past. (p.91)

The bedroom door as a palimpsestic object signifies the passage of time. The act of stripping down the door reveals the past decades in layers according to their modish colours. The narrator is able to read the urban palimpsest against the lexicon of stylistic preference and its interrelationship with the passing of human time. However, he expresses the desire to be able to read more from the wooden strata. Like a forester reading the "rings of a felled tree", he wishes to deduce something more beyond the human constructions at his disposal. Significantly, the urban palimpsest dovetails with the natural palimpsest here. The door stands as a symbol of moving through human time to reach the unvarnished wood below, the product of natural time. The tree, from which this door was felled and planed, tells its own palimpsestic narrative.

This portrait touches upon the duality of human versus elemental time. Although regimented clock-time (indicated by the multiple decades of paint) admittedly signifies little more than another human construct transposed over nature, it does ultimately signal the awareness of a past that predates our existence (the tree, from which the door assumes its origin). Time itself is an ordering mechanism – a contrivance that allows humans to make sense of random events

according to a rationalised and chronological apparatus of meaning (here indicated by the "nineties ochre, eighties ivory, seventies beige, sixties olive" – p.91). However, time is also indubitably an ever-present reminder of our own mortality. This implicit acknowledgement signals the awareness of elemental time. Clock time infers a regimented schedule constructed by humans and yet elemental time refers to the passing of seasons as well as lunar and solar cycles (days and years, respectively). Elemental time is a grander scheme of time that overshadows and surpasses the comparable triviality of human time. Nature reveals its own past and history – thus elemental time – in palimpsestic layers. Fossils, geological sediments, and tree rings are examples of natural palimpsests. Its cyclicality and destructive potential can in equal measure reveal natural history or promise the obliteration of human history. At times, natural and urban palimpsests coincide – take for instance the passage above, or alternatively, the historical examples of the volcanic devastation of Pompei and its tomasonic leavings. The tomason, when taken as a symbol of the urban palimpsest, can be read as a recording of human history in the city. However, this should not mean that palimpsests are in opposition to nature or the natural world. Indeed, natural palimpsests can and do co-exist with urban ones.

A natural palimpsest – albeit an imaginative one – appears in portrait 116 of *Portrait with Keys*. A visit to the Joburg Metro traffic headquarters in downtown Johannesburg is likened to a trip down the shaft of a goldmine:

> You enter the cage and it drops into the gloom. Light your lamp. You pass the lava and sediment into prehistory, falling back in time towards the pyritic ores of the Main Reef. At last, in the neighbourhood of hell, as you imagine it, the cage shudders to a halt and the doors open. Mind the gap. But you cannot step out at all because the opening is blocked by a sheet of rock. You lean towards this rich confection, a blue conglomerate studded with almond-quartz, and press your tongue to it … Swallowing sand, you remember the sign in the window of the ticket booth. Take your pick. (p.167)

This portrait, packed with puns and metaphors, appears to gently mock the city's Metro Department (a notably corrupt and inefficient state department) by suggesting that such a visit is analogous to a descent into prehistory (or even hell). The narrator licks the quartz conglomerate as though it were a sweet, calling to mind the Dutch word 'banket', which refers to a nougat-like candy (baked with almonds). This was also the name given to the type of gold-bearing rock found on the Rand. This wordplay signals a sly linguistic palimpsest. This sweet-tooth could also signify Johannesburg's insatiable appetite for gold. At the end of the portrait, he then takes his pick, which ambivalently designates either a ticket number or a pickaxe – a digger's tool. The

choice of subject matter in this metaphorical counterfoil is significant as it effectively summons up the history of the city: Johannesburg's gold-mining roots. The description of the "sediment" and "pyritic ores of the Main Reef" signal the geological gold-bearing strata that evinces Johannesburg's foremost natural palimpsest. The narrator, like a miner, excavates the layers of Johannesburg's past to locate the source and reason for it all. This palimpsestic descent calls to mind Minnette Vári's remark that Johannesburg is a city "that pokes and thunders at the sky" while its "reason for being there is thoroughly subterranean."[490] Therefore, on the one hand, a Johannesburg mine-shaft stands as a reminder of the urban chronology of the city, and on the other, the rock layers discernable in such a mine leave a record of the Earth's geologic time scale.

While palimpsests foreground the human effort to record, they can just as easily signify the passage of elemental time in the natural world. Admittedly, the human impulse to record is conscious and systematic – urban palimpsests record more than natural palimpsests (or, at the very least, are easier for humans to understand). However, the presence of palimpsests in Vladislavić's city novels becomes the first step in bringing us closer to nature. Conversely, the simulacrum model is largely one that evades natural time. The simulacrum and virtuality, in aiming for permanence, operate by stamping out signs of the past and nature. Instead, they create a stable and stagnant hyperreality which endeavours to defy the passage of time, cyclical nature, and natural flux. In this way the palimpsest model is more in tune with nature.

As the author-narrator is sanding down the door, he is reminded of the Blenheim Street Ndebele mural. This memory makes him think of the art-history term "pentimento", which denotes a

> place where the painter 'repented' or changed his mind, revealed with the passage of time as the concealing paint ages and becomes transparent. In her book, *Pentimento,* Lillian Hellman took this process as a metaphor for the writing of a memoir. The appearance of the original conception and the second thought, superimposed within the same frame, is a 'way of seeing and then seeing again.' (p.92)

Vladislavić makes capital out of this concept by imbuing it with redemptive purpose: the author-narrator proceeds to edit his recollection of the manner in which the mural was erased, by "seeing again." In doing so, Vladislavić embraces the fallibility of memory: something pliant and malleable, which is responsive to flux and natural flow.

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[490] Per Minnette Vàri, in: Mbembe, A. "Aesthetics of Superfluity" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis (Public Culture: Society for Transnational Cultural Studies.*), 16:3, 2004, p.382.

> This is the version I will persevere with: he is a sensitive man, not a butcher. It pains him that he has to wipe out this mural, which reminds him of his own past … But he is a pragmatist too, and he has to put food on the table. He steps back to look at the wall, to get the whole thing clear in his mind, to let it settle on the damp soil of his memory. He knows that he is the last person who will ever see it like this. Then he takes up his roller and gets on with the job. (pp.92-3)

The pentimento bears similarities with the palimpsest in that with the passage of time some state or condition of the past comes to the fore. The text, *Portrait with Keys*, seems to proffer the aid of memory, through the realm of literature, to repossess the past, challenging the culture of surface that is so predominant. The metaphorical description of memory as "damp soil" is not without significance. The deep reservoir of personal recollection is likened to rich and loamy earthiness. This image of earthy depth helps to foment this conceptual linkage between the palimpsest, time, and nature.

This intermarriage between nature, time, and palimpsests finds fruition in the concept of roots and rootedness. To counter the culture of surface and hyperreality through the palimpsest – which in itself is suggestive of depth, nature, and the past – promotes the promise of rootedness against the atemporal and sterile disembeddedness of the simulacrum. The depth narrative in seeking out natural palimpsests establishes a conscious embeddedness within context. This link between nature, roots and embeddedness is made evident in portrait 102. Minky and Vlad visit their friend Lesley, who has decided to emigrate, for a farewell dinner. The portrait is interesting because, as much as it concerns the affective implications of leaving and disembedding (a maudlin topic as Minky and Vlad appear to struggle to come to terms with their friend's giving up on the country), Vladislavić's narration focuses on the fruits of Lesley's herb garden – a metonym for rootedness, earthiness, and depth. At the end of the evening, Lesley bestows a parting gift upon the couple: a chilli pepper seedling:

> As we drive back to Troyeville, Minky holds the plant on her lap, a pale sprig sticking up out of the damp soil, with two curved leaves like the flukes on an anchor. (p.154)

The little chilli plant's leaves are symbolic of an anchor. The plant, despite its diminutive size (and perhaps by virtue of its Lilliputian dimensions as Vladislavić generally gravitates towards the small and marginal), gestures towards Vlad and Minky's connectedness to Johannesburg. Despite Lesley's imminent departure, they will practically and physically dig beneath the surface of the soil to plant this seedling so that it may take root.

Subjecting a reading of the city to the depth model reveals a series of historical layers. These palimpsests, first revealed via the symbol of the tomason (an urban palimpsest) and then by extension, earthy depth (natural palimpsests), defamiliarise the simulacrum and the culture of surface.

The depth narrative is not without its own fair share of discursive problems in the postmodern age. Modernists were preoccupied with prefiguring literary depth by way of creating a stable text to withstand the crisis of faith in humanity and meaning (left in the wake of two world wars, revolutions, and stock-market crashes). T.S. Eliot drew upon ancient and classical texts in "The Wasteland" as symbols of cultural anchorage and authority. The modernist author thus positioned himself/herself as the authority on all matters of depth. Depth was rendered as a cultural and literary touchstone of meaning – one that could be located in their texts. It is instrumental to note that Vladislavić does not follow on from this 'great tradition'. Instead, subjecting Vladislavić's work to a depth reading uncovers the marginal and peripheral aspects of city-life, rather than establishing a basis for cultural authority. Unlike Eliot, his employment of intertexts is democratic and postmodern. He is just as comfortable with high art (Charles Dickens, Elias Canetti, Michel de Certeau, and William Kentridge in *Portrait with Keys*; Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* in *Double Negative*; Georges Perec and Jorge Luis Borges's "The Other Tiger" in *The Loss Library*) as low art and consumer culture (hand-painted signs, car-guard bibs, Ndebele garden-wall murals, and the Coca-Cola billboard atop Ponte in *Portrait with Keys*). His texts are even intratextual – making references to each other in dynamic ways (i.e. The "Gravity Addict" sign crops up in *Portrait with Keys*[491] and then appears as a fully fledged story in *The Loss Library*). Scholars would argue that this is the hallmark of postmodernism, not modernism. Indeed, to pick up a Vladislavić text at random reveals a rich slurry of postmodern trademarks. For instance, things like metafiction, self-reflexivity, ironic humour, playfulness, irreverence and iconoclasm, hyperreality, relativism, pastiche and bricolage pepper his works.[492] In their critique

[491] Vladislavić, I. *Portrait with Keys*. Umuzi: Johannesburg, 2006, p. 183 (Portrait 128).

[492] Gerald Gaylard and Michael Titlestad characterise Vladislavić's postmodernism as follows:

> His is a deconstructive project; Kristeva's *jouissance* and Derrida's critiques of structure come to mind in his attempt to limber up the systematic. Indeed, in this emphasis upon the minor, the marginal, peccadilloes, the incommensurable, Vladislavić is a postmodern author who refuses to subordinate the textural to any metanarrative. His postmodernism has been influenced by the work of Borges, Kundera and Schulz, among others … This heritage reflects both Vladislavić's Eastern European background and his current "Third World" context … Moreover, it suggests that Vladislavić has been influenced by modernism, especially the surrealist strain within it, as ratified by his liking for Dada, Duchamp and Kandinsky. This surrealist modernism was arguably to flower fully in postmodernism and magical realism … So Vladislavić's surrealist postcolonialism transculturates the more defamiliarizing strain

of cultural dominants like apartheid ideology, or consumerism as the logic of late capitalism (satirising "hegemonic forms and context"[493]), his works exhibit – what Jean-François Lyotard identified as the defining characteristic of postmodernism – an "incredulity toward metanarratives."[494] While many if not most of his works evince playfulness and irreverence, they cannot be accused of "indifference" (a feature that Jameson identifies as a symptom of postmodern "depthlessness").[495] Certainly, this facility with postmodern play needs to be qualified. Vladislavić's work is quite ethically grounded in place and context. His socially directed satire – classified as "geo-politically charged postmodernism" by Michael Titlestad and Gerald Gaylard, in their introduction to the Vladislavić-dedicated issue of *Scrutiny2*[496] – pushes his art beyond artifice and reveals something behind aesthetic constructedness.[497] What he reveals in this process are not grand touchstones of cultural meaning. They are minor and small. Ultimately, Vladislavić argues for depth against surface, artificiality, and constructedness.

**Conclusion**

One of Vladislavić's many great achievements is his ability to textually defamiliarise the ordinary. As a result he is able to render perspectives and experiences of everyday objects afresh. *Portrait with Keys* effectively engages with a process of re-mapping urban space via the re-modulation of conventional patterns of seeing and using the city of Johannesburg. The flâneur, Vlad, in his traversing of space in this text, reclaims the streets and shows that the act of getting lost can indeed be artful. Getting lost becomes a way of opening space up to re-articulation and provides

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within modernism and postmodernism, again helping to account for the effectiveness and controversy of his writing.

From: Gaylard, G. and Titlestad, M. "Introduction - Controversial Interpretations: Ivan Vladislavić" in *Scrutiny2*, 11:2, 2006, p.6.

493 Gaylard, G. and Titlestad, M. "Introduction - Controversial Interpretations: Ivan Vladislavić" in *Scrutiny2*, 11:2, 2006, p.6.

494 Lyotard, J-F. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.* Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1984. p.xxiv.

495 Jameson, F. P*ostmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Duke University Press: Durham, 2005, p.10.

496 Gaylard, G. and Titlestad, M. "Introduction - Controversial Interpretations: Ivan Vladislavić" in *Scrutiny2*, 11:2, 2006, p.7.

497 As Gaylard and Titlestad put it: "Vladislavić's satirical deconstruction appears to be less a textual sophistication reinventing European models than a result of his background in apartheid South Africa, which was in itself a surreal construction of juxtapositions. Vladislavić's satire results from his being a South African white writer initially trying to avoid censorship by the apartheid regime and later feeling circumspect in the uncertain post-apartheid period." Ibid, p.6.

for alternative modes of mapping and interpreting the city. Lostness here not only refers to physical disorientation, but it can also point a discursive state that celebrates the proliferation of difference, movement, and uncertainty in the transitional urban milieu. After all, to get lost means that conventional markers are missing or ineffective whether they be geographical beacons or conceptual ones. This activity of reclaiming pedestrian-centric intimacy with the streets by cataloguing and defamiliarising that which we fail to ordinarily see reveals the "marginal spaces", miscellany, and oft-overlooked flotsam of the city. Bricolage – which is made visible by acts of flânerie – allows Vladislavić to textually illustrate what this new mode of seeing uncovers. This alternative mode of mapping Johannesburg 'rehumanises' the city, flouting the regulatory principles that have governed (and continue to govern) urban space. In promoting movement across boundaries, I argue that Vladislavić's lostness (which brings about cartographic re-modulation) not only disrupts the legacy of apartheid-era spatialised politics, but also subverts the postapartheid security industry's project of locking down urban space.

This process of rediscovery leads to the discovery of palimpsests. On both a literal level (through the tomason) and a literary level, Vladislavić proceeds to reveal a variety of palimpsests which destabilise the simulacrum. The depth narrative in providing for a depth reading of the city exposes what lies beneath Johannesburg's "shallow-rooted" and simulacral culture of surface. The potency of the depth narrative cheekily suggests – should one adopt a transhistorical point of view – that today's simulacrum is tomorrow's palimpsest. Gerald Gaylard writes that Vladislavić's "palimpsestic vision defamiliarises the present, exposing that present as all too often a hungry future fleeing the past, fleeing the present time of nature."[498]

Lostness and flow are affiliated concepts. And flow is more akin with the natural realm than the disembedded atemporality of the simulacrum. Lostness allows Vladislavić to rediscover Johannesburg, which thus leads to the discovery of the palimpsest. The palimpsest engenders a new awareness of time and space in the city. Ultimately, this new awareness reveals various hidden aspects of the city, one of which is the unexpected interconnectedness between the urban and the natural.[499]

The simulacrum model is largely one that displaces the natural. As Chapter One illustrates, Johannesburg has persistently been perceived as an inherently superficial, artificial, and

[498] Gaylard, G. "Migrant Ecology in the Postcolonial City in *Portrait with Keys*: *Joburg and What-What*" in *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.303.

[499] Ibid, p.296.

simulacral city. However, in defamiliarising the way in which he walks and reads city, Vladislavić's fictions subvert dominant perceptions of Johannesburg and thus reveal how nature prevails in subtle and peripheral ways – forming a backdrop to and haunting the postcolonial city from the margins.

# Chapter Four: Zoo-keeping in Johannesburg

> For he who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man.[500]
>
> What are the perils of jungle and prairie compared to the daily shocks and conflicts of civilisation? Whether a man embraces his dupe on the boulevard, or spears his prey in unknown forests, is he not eternal man – that is to say, the most highly perfected beast of prey?[501]

A few years ago the Nisaa Institute for Women's Development[502] ran a rape public awareness campaign which featured (on billboards and on the sides of city Metrobuses) a close-up graphic of a creature's face – capturing only the mournful eyes of the subject – cut down the middle with the left half representative of a human male; the right, a simian-like beast. The image was accompanied by a hard-hitting tagline: "You're Only Half a Man if You Rape a Woman."[503] The campaign effectively suggested that men who commit rape reduce their humanity accordingly. In other words, a man is no better than an animal should he rape a woman. It is interesting that the graphic artist decided to represent the corresponding symmetry of this half-man as an ape, or more accurately perhaps, as a gorilla. On one level, in a country with one of the worst rape statistics in the world, this polemical poster propagates and shocks its onlooker into an awareness that man's 'baseness' and 'savagery' lies beneath a flimsy veneer of 'civility' – and rightly so, considering the message at the heart of the campaign. The inherent value judgment is one that reminds man that civilisation has been hard-won, and is demonstrable in our treatment of fellow human beings. The tension between man and beast is clearly illustrated in this poster: man is in conflict with his bestial self and needs to repress his primordial desires and impulses

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[500] Samuel Johnson quoted in: Puller-Strecker, H. in "The World's Comforter", *British Journal of Addiction to Alcohol and Other Drugs*, 44: 1, 1947, pp.13-19.

[501] Baudelaire, C. *Oeuvres*, 1932, p.637, in: Benjamin, W. *The Arcades Project*. The Belknap Press: Cambridge (Ma.), 1999, p.445.

[502] The Nisaa Institute for Women's Development, a South African organisation that promotes the rights of women and children, was "started by a group of committed women activists, in response to the growing problem of violence against women."

From: Nisaa Institute for Women's Development. URL: http://www.nisaa.org.za/about/. Date accessed: 9 July 2012.

[503] Nisaa Institute for Women's Development, "You're Only Half a Man if You Rape a Woman", *GBV Prevention Network*, 1999-2012. URL: http://www.preventgbvafrica.org/resources/youre-only-half-man-if-you-rape-woman. Date accessed: 9 July 2012.

before he deserves the taxonomical nomenclature of *Homo sapiens*. Our primitive selves remind us of our animal nature – a nature at least partly antithetical to the civilised values necessary for the functioning of ordered human society.

On another interpretive (albeit controversial) level, this poster is decidedly resonant of nineteenth century pejorative discourses such as Social Darwinism as well as the colonial pseudoscience of phrenology. The so-called barbaric populations of the 'uncivilised' portions of the globe were often characterised as less-than-human specimens whose enlightenment and monotheistic conversion were indispensable conditions before membership of European-like civilised nations could be warranted. This touches upon a history of human domination where hierarchical "anthropocentrism and western imperialism were intrinsically interwoven."[504] This destructive anthropocentrism not only conflated racism and speciesism, but was also one that was premised on the ontological and epistemological matrix of ideas that governed a European understanding of the separate registers of "human and animal being-in-the-world."[505] The contemporary and pervasive ideology underlining this anthropocentrism legitimised imperialist endeavours, and the act of colonisation itself, by seeing "'indigenous cultures as 'primitive', less rational'" and the 'native' people "'closer to children, animals and nature.'"[506]

The Nisaa poster addresses a series of provocative and offensive strands that promise fruitful analysis when applied to the man-beast dichotomy. At the heart of this discussion lies a question that haunts man's understanding of himself. Where do human beings position themselves in the natural order? Are humans separate and distinct from the rest of nature or are we rather at one with the beasts who belong to the flora-fauna continuum? Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* that the "western definition of humanity depended – and still depends – on the presence of the 'not-human': the uncivilised, the animal and animalistic."[507] From a local postapartheid perspective, this history of terminology governing man-beast constructions becomes even more problematic and pejorative as racist discourse in South Africa (and as expected, all over Africa during the age of imperialism), distressingly associated and sometimes continues to associate black people with animals, particularly gorillas and apes.

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[504] Huggan, G. and Tiffin, H. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge: London, 2010, p.11.

[505] Ibid, p.11.

[506] Per Val Plumwood (2003) in: Ibid, p.5.

[507] Ibid, p.5.

The western conceptions of 'human' and 'human civilisation' as categories separate and distinct from the natural realm find their root in the ancient Greek philosophical scheme of the Great Chain of Being.[508] This abstraction conceived that all matter (animate, inanimate, and immaterial) was organised according to a strict and specific hierarchy. Man, within this paradigm, was positioned as separate from and the supreme authority of all earthly creatures. However, the propagation of texts and theories, such as Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* (1859) with his corresponding thesis of evolutionary biology, called man's perceived superiority over all other living creatures on Earth into question. Having likely evolved from great apes, the ignominious origin of human beings (irrespective of race) as primates called for a ferocious deconstruction of the sacrosanct human-beast binary. Indeed, the theory of evolution radically challenged the way in which the 'human' has been defined in counterpoint with nature.

Huggan and Tiffin employ the British environmental historian Alfred Crosby's term "ecological imperialism" to refer to the complex and continuing entanglement of people, animals, and the environment within the flows of capital and practices of domination, brought about by the Age of Empire.[509] Their study outlines the field of postcolonial ecocriticism, which signals a discursive and scholarly attempt to work towards a "genuinely post-imperial, environmentally based conception of community" and brings about "a re-imagining and reconfiguration of the human place in nature."[510] This line of enquiry,

> … necessitates an interrogation of the category of the human itself and of the ways in which the construction of ourselves *against* nature – where the hierarchisation of life forms that construction implies – has been and remains complicit in colonialist and racist exploitation from the time of imperial conquest to the present day.[511]

[508] The Great Chain of Being refers to a term coined by the philosopher Arthur O. Lovejoy which is fleshed out in his book of the same name (*The Great Chain of Being*, 1936). According to Nicholas Bunnin and Jiyuan Yu in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy,* it refers to a tiered structure in "which all beings in the world are not equal with regard to their metaphysical or ontological status. They are hierarchically ordered, with [an] absolute being or God at the top and things of the slightest existence at the bottom." The concept of a great chain of being, however, "can be traced to Plato's division of the world into the Forms …" Moreover, "Aristotle's teleology recognized a perfect being, and he also arranges all animals by a single natural scale according to the degree of perfection of their souls. The idea of the great chain of being was fully developed in Neoplatonism and in the Middle Ages. Dante's *Divine Comedy* presents a literary illustration of his hierarchy."

From: Bunnin, N. and Yu, J. *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy*. Blackwell: Oxford, 2004, p.289.

[509] Huggan, G. and Tiffin, H. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge: London, 2010, p.3.

[510] Ibid, p.6.

[511] Ibid, p.6.

Huggan and Tiffin maintain that if the "wrongs of colonialism – its legacies of continuing human inequalities, for instance – are to be addressed, still less redressed, then the very category of the human, in relation to animals and environment, must also be brought under scrutiny."[512] Accordingly, they argue that:

> … traditional western constitutions of the human as the 'not-animal' (and, by implication, the 'not-savage') have had major, and often catastrophic, repercussions not just for animals themselves but for all those the West now considers human but were formerly designated, represented and treated as animal.[513]

The historic contest of man versus beast (and its concomitant racial connotations) is a fraught one and is by no means confined to the country – the arena where early man battled it out with nature. In creating cities, man tried to distance himself spatially and ontologically from the country, from animals, from nature itself. Cities push nature to the margins. This trend was hyperbolised in the space of the colony. In creating colonies, European imperialists 'othered' colonised subjects, regarding them as part of nature, treating them "instrumentally as animals"[514] thus disenfranchising them as a means of dubiously 'legitimising' their claim over new territories. However, as this chapter will argue, man cannot simply divorce himself from nature, even in the space of the city. The tension between 'civilised' conduct and 'primitive' limbic responses ("inner man"[515]) is one that also plays out over the urban landscape – both in the Metropole and the periphery. Vladislavić's fiction irreverently deconstructs imperialist binaries that aim to formally taxonomise man-beast and city-country constructions. In confounding the 'neat' distinctions set up to delineate the natural world from the human realm, Vladislavić's writing subverts 'triumphant' claims of Eurocentric anthropocentrism, indicating that the man-made backdrop of Johannesburg is one that is haunted and disrupted by nature.

**Man-Beast and City-Country Contestations**

The city is the place where man most symbolically tries to efface the memory of his reptilian nature, his *id*. The binary of city and country can be interpreted to be symbolic of the split

[512] Huggan, G. and Tiffin, H. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge: London, 2010, p.18.

[513] Ibid, pp.18-19.

[514] Ibid, p.6.

[515] Ibid, p.134.

between man and animal. This conflict finds an interesting home in Ivan Vladislavić's Johannesburg novel, *Portrait with Keys*. In South Africa, home to a plethora of luxurious game reserves and nature parks, the presence of nature and beast is, at least from the viewpoint of tourists and travellers, at the forefront of the collective imagination of Africa. In South Africa, a country boasting an array of flora and fauna, nature is (figuratively and literally) not very far away. However, with the onset of colonial rule, expansion, and subsequent, consolidation, this corner of the globe was not safe from the juggernaut of western modernity and its concomitant proclivity towards urbanisation. Industrialisation came to the Highveld with the discovery of gold in 1886, which soon gave birth to the city of Johannesburg. As Michel de Certeau notes, cities are both the "plant and hero of modernity."[516] Cities, as many of the Romantic poets decried, enforced a clear separation between man-made civilisation and nature. The boundaries between the city and its natural surrounds were clearly identifiable, demarcating space according to a hierarchy partisan to human control. In the colonial cities of Africa, this separation of man from nature became even more strict in order to ensure the safe day-to-day functioning of the metropolis – especially when considering the rather immediate threat posed by dangerous, wild beasts displaced from their natural habitat which had previously roamed free on the African plains. One could anecdotally put it as follows: nature is bigger and a more immediate threat in Africa, demanding more 'yoking' to bring it under control. The third stanza of William Plomer's poem, "A Fall of Rock", considers the way in which the industrial city of Johannesburg forcibly displaced nature and replaced the flora and fauna with the constructs of human industry:

> Where springbok bounded screams the tram,
>
> And lawyer, politician, magnate sit
>
> Where kite and vulture flew and fed.
>
> Where the snake sunned itself, white children play;
>
> Where wildebeest drank, a church is built.[517]

Coincidentally, from an historical perspective, the colonial urban landscape was seen as part of the periphery of the metropole, and thus inherently pastoral and already situated "in the

[516] de Certeau, M. "Walking in the City" in *The Certeau Reader.* (Ed. G. Ward.) Blackwell Publishers: Oxford, 2000, p.104.

[517] Plomer, W. "A Fall of Rock" in *Collected Poems*. Jonathan Cape: London, 1973, p.19.

country."[518] This brought about a contradictory impulse: the colony promised a pastoral retreat away from the unwholesome effects of European civilisation, yet the nascent colonial city teetered on the brink of degeneration into wilderness, thus requiring stringent measures of control on the part of the colonialist to bring it into civilised "bloom."[519]

Ironically, as human societies around the world became progressively more urban, thrusting the natural world to the margins of 'planned' human settlement, an inversely proportionate trend arose: city inhabitants became increasingly wistful about nature; as Raymond Williams calls it, the attraction of "the rural innocence of the pastoral."[520] In a simplistic Freudian sense, the *superego* of the city suppressed the *id* of nature and consequently the *return of the repressed* became inevitable. Patrick H. Wirtz, in "Zoo City: Bourgeois Values and Scientific Culture in the Industrial Landscape", argues it was largely as a result of the pervasive trend of nineteenth century industrialisation, that "the negative effects of urban life" roused a great nostalgia for an idealized bucolic past.[521] Nature was seen as the "antithesis of ugly, dirty urban centres."[522] The Industrial Revolution significantly remodelled the fabric of human society; changes were far-reaching and experienced across a range of socio-economic relationships (take for instance, the rise of the bourgeoisie). These changes also brought about a significant re-ordering of the physical environment where the urban and the natural were placed in antinomy – both spatially and ideologically speaking.[523] As Wirtz notes, many urbanites found the urban landscape "less a place of human habitation than an indifferent, overwieldy machine fashioned by atomic individualism, *laissez-faire* capitalism and the ruthless exploitation of nature."[524] In Europe, according to Jeremy Foster, the city was seen as a "fundamentally corrupt, moral wilderness that

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518 Foster, J. "From Socio-nature to Spectral Presence: Re-imagining the Once and Future Landscape of Johannesburg" in *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 10:2, 2009, p.195.

519 Ibid, p.195.

520 Williams, R. *The Country and the City*. Paladin: St Albans, 1975, p.61.

521 Wirtz, P. H. "Zoo City: Bourgeois Values and Scientific Culture in the Industrial Landscape" in *Journal of Urban Design*, 2:1, 1997, p.75.

The exposition of this chapter has come to rely quite heavily upon Patrick H. Wirtz's article "Zoo City: Bourgeois Values and Scientific Culture in the Industrial Landscape" as it has proven to be directly relevant to the issues at stake in this study. I have conducted a survey of zoo-related literature and most other sources concern scientific, architectural, and conservation-specific issues and are thus not completely germane to my present interests. Wirtz's article presents a dynamic interplay of history, historiography, socio-economics and politics, and considers the effects of the industrial revolution and its concomitant force of urbanisation on the development of zoos and man's subsequent relationship with beast and nature. For these reasons, I have been influenced by the trajectory of his argument.

522 Ibid, p.75.

523 Ibid, p.63.

524 Ibid, p.63.

spread evil through the nation" and its antidote, "the supposedly innocent perfection of originating, natural wilderness."[525] Wirtz argues that it was nature that was hankered after as an "ideal environment wherein humanity could rejuvenate itself"; it promised a "surrogate means to cleanse the urban grime off the soiled bodies and minds of the urban masses."[526] Governments of the age promoted the spread of public nature parks "as sites of renewal for battered urban dwellers."[527]

This pining for nature, provoked by the dreary features of urban life, was one of the contributing factors behind the rise of the modern zoological garden. Wirtz argues that zoos, as we know them, only truly came about as a result of the socio-economic and epistemological repercussions of industrialisation and urbanisation; in other words, the "story of the zoological garden is simultaneously the story of urbanism."[528] The "history of wild animals in captivity is as old as the first human civilisations", but until the eighteenth century these existed in the guise of menageries, circuses, or game reserves – and not zoos proper.[529] The main distinction between these types of animal collections and zoos is that the former were owned by private institutions (often tied to the monarchy), while the latter, are publicly-owned enterprises, open to the general public.[530] In *Animals and Architecture* David Hancocks writes that "[c]ollections of rare animals were visible proof of a ruler's wealth, and of his might over brute creation."[531] Moreover, in royal menageries, the way in which animals were displayed was "designed more for the convenience of the spectators than that of their inhabitants."[532]

The European zoological garden did not only come about as a result of nostalgic pastoralism (or the desire to establish green lungs in the squalid industrial city), there were various other (and some nefarious) influences at work. One such impulse can be accredited to the flourishing of modern scientific culture, whose proponents saw zoos as presenting opportunities for empirical study and epistemological expansion. Initially, zoos were intended to function in a didactic

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525 Foster, J. "From Socio-nature to Spectral Presence: Re-imagining the Once and Future Landscape of Johannesburg" in *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 10:2, 2009, p.195.

526 Wirtz, P. H. "Zoo City: Bourgeois Values and Scientific Culture in the Industrial Landscape" in *Journal of Urban Design*, 2:1, 1997, p.75.

527 Ibid, p.75.

528 Ibid, p.63.

529 Ibid, p.62.

530 Ibid, pp.62-3.

531 Hancocks, D. *Animals and Architecture*. Hugh Evelyn: London, 1971, p.117.

532 Ibid, p.105.

capacity – for the instruction and education of city inhabitants. The zoo became an avenue for the elites to collect and collate specimens of nature according to various scientific categories of existence. Accordingly, zoological gardens "became a primary institution by which taxonomic constructions of the natural world were disseminated."[533] Situated within this epistemological zone, zoos began to serve various functions beyond mere educational purposes. The taxonomising impulse became a useful tool for the newly empowered bourgeoisie to inform zoo visitors that "just as animal taxonomies" demonstrated "how the natural world was hierarchically organized" so these "inferred similar hierarchical organizations of human society."[534] In essence, as a result of the changing fabric of nineteenth century society, the zoo "instructed" the recently urbanised populace of their station in the commonwealth of man. Zoos thus became a successful 'scientific' exercise in reminding visitors that the human world also followed a strict hierarchy in the separation of classes and races, one where intermingling or protestations that threatened this taxonomic order were considered scientifically unfeasible. It was not uncommon for nineteenth century zoological directors to organise "exhibits suggesting hierarchical categories in the human world" by showing off "colonized peoples" (for example the exhibiting of a Belgian Congolese pygmy, Ota Benga, in the monkey enclosure, during the 1904 St Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition) or housing animals in non-European structures (such as Hindu temples and Chinese pagodas) inferring that both "immigrants and conquered colonial peoples" were 'inferior' by virtue of their "association with animals."[535] Ota Benga's unfortunate fate carries much resonance for a South African audience. Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman – pejoratively named the "Hottentot Venus", a KhoiKhoi woman from the eastern Cape region of South Africa – was exhibited as a sexual anomaly in freak shows across England and France from 1810 until 1815 (when she died in Paris).[536] Her preserved brain and genitals, as well as a plaster deathcast of her body, were on display in Paris's Musee de l'Homme until the mid nineteen seventies.[537] After much diplomatic pressure, the French government finally agreed to return her remains to South Africa in 2002.[538] Nineteenth century Europe's unabashed fascination with Baartman as an

[533] Wirtz, P. H. "Zoo City: Bourgeois Values and Scientific Culture in the Industrial Landscape" in *Journal of Urban Design*, 2:1, 1997, p.61.

[534] Ibid, p.61.

[535] Ibid, p.78.

[536] Author uknown. "Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman's Story", *Saartjie Baartman Centre for Women and Children*. URL: http://www.saartjiebaartmancentre.org.za/index.php/about-us/saartjie-baartman-s-story. Date accessed: 20 September 2012.

[537] Ferrus, D. "Tribute to Sara Baartman (Written in Holland, June 1998) in *Feminist Studies*. 29: 3, 2003, pp.592-593.

[538] Author uknown. "Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman's Story", *Saartjie Baartman Centre for Women and Children*. URL: http://www.saartjiebaartmancentre.org.za/index.php/about-us/saartjie-baartman-s-story. Date accessed: 20 September 2012.

anthropological curiosity (as a result of her genitalia) has led twenty-first century postcolonial scholars to use her legacy as a transhistorical symbol of the colonial abuse and exploitation of the non-Western subaltern 'other'.

Another insidiously attractive quality of the zoological garden (*ipso facto* serving the interests of the European[539] industrialised elite) was that it kept the labouring classes entertained and placated during their leisure periods. Visiting the zoological garden on weekends became a diversion from their poverty-stricken and disease-ridden experiences of slum life. Thus, in Europe particularly, the zoo functioned as an opiate of the masses – expediently playing into the hands of the owners of the means of production.[540] To the proletariat, the zoo was seen to fulfil two conflicting desires: the pastoral and the carnival.

Wirtz argues that the establishment of zoological gardens in the nineteenth century was also responsible for further augmenting the nature-human dichotomy. Cities "provided not only a paying public but also an environment conducive to packaging and marketing nature as 'exotic' and conceptually distinct from the human experience."[541] The industrial city, via zoos, packaged and marketed nature back to this paying public, highlighting the hierarchical relationship between man and beast in the process. In quoting C.S. Lewis, Wirtz writes that the *Chronicles of Narnia* (an illustration of prelapsarian allegory if there ever was one) author postulated that

> humans created the concept of nature to exist in conceptual opposition to the concept of humanity, a distinction between that which has the power to manipulate and that which is to be manipulated; or, an egoistic distinction between self-willed, purposeful, thinking beings and the rest of matter.[542]

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[539] Wirtz, P. H. "Zoo City: Bourgeois Values and Scientific Culture in the Industrial Landscape" in *Journal of Urban Design*, 2:1, 1997, pp.68-73.

Wirtz charts divergent influences behind the development of American zoos, where the impulse, although also elitist, focused its efforts on the conservation and protection of the land against the perceived threat the steady influx of 'low-class' Italian and Irish immigrants (among other things) posed to the protection of wildlife and undeveloped land.

[540] On the one hand, zoos were used as a distraction from the unpleasantness of urban life, especially for the poor and working classes – zoos were enjoyed as recreational facilities, places of leisure that provided a cheap means of entertainment to the "populous poor" ; on the other hand, they were places of instruction, "for zoological gardens became just one of many forms by which the bourgeoisie attempted to place its ideological perspective as the dominant discourse in society."

From: Wirtz, P. H. "Zoo City: Bourgeois Values and Scientific Culture in the Industrial Landscape" in *Journal of Urban Design*, 2:1, 1997, p.77 and p.62.

[541] Ibid, p.73.

[542] Ibid, p.73.

Lewis's position infers that humans see themselves as "distinct from the rest of the phenomenal world."[543] The zoo, spatially and epistemologically, contributes towards the enforcing of clear lines of separation between the world of man and the world of nature. Zoos thus became emblematic of the process by which man divorced himself from his 'natural'/intrinsic predilections. A visit to the zoo reminds man that he tamed his wild impulses and thus has become suitably civilised. As a result, man must turn his back on his roots in the natural world.

More threateningly, since the natural world connotes "the supernatural, the spiritual, the *wild*" it symbolises a place "beyond the human ability to control."[544] This combined fear of and contempt for (juxtaposed against the occasional reverence for) nature was largely trumped by the ascendance of the zoological garden. Here, the "logistics of captivity" – via the construction of fences and enclosures – ensured that the wild was now successfully contained and controlled by man's ability.[545] These "physical methods of enclosure" (i.e. "regimented metal bars, cross-hatch fencing, plate glass" and "deep moats") not only encouraged "viewing animals as wild beasts inhabiting a space inherently separate from that of human activity", these barriers also emphasised the "difference between 'us' and 'them'."[546] The politics of looking suggests that while witnessing a tiger in the wild promises peril for the hapless human observer, the zoo inverts the relationship between "viewer and object" and ergo the hierarchy of the gaze is reversed in favour of the human onlooker. The bars separating the onlooker from the tiger became emblematic of the "mini-triumph of human mastery" over both beast and nature.[547] Advancing the argument a step further, zoological gardens can be found, in this regard, to be analogous to both prisons and insane asylums (i.e. "facilities of containment and control") in terms of their relationship to modes of "instrumental power" reminding the 'warden' of his claim to hegemony and authority.[548]

The zoological garden thus became indicative of man's mastery over the physical world. The impulse to collect, taxonomise, archive, and contain were epistemological tendencies that pervaded nineteenth century imperial history. This desire to classify and categorise was not only found to be applicable to the natural world, but also to the world of men. This imperial

[543] Ibid, p.73.

[544] Ibid, p.73.

[545] Ibid, p.74.

[546] Ibid, p.74.

[547] Ibid, p.74.

[548] Per J. Berger, B. Mullan, and G. Marvin, in: Ibid, p.74.

taxonomy of space in the physical location of the city controlled the flow of both humans and beasts within and outside of the city. The colonial city, too, became an exercise in taxonomy, but an exercise that went beyond the bounds of merely policing the divide between the world of man and animal. The ethnographic differentiations between humans were also patrolled in a draconian manner. This impact could be witnessed in the urban planning model of both colonial and apartheid-era Johannesburg, where racial groups were regulated to specific enclaves on the periphery of the white-only city.

In *Portrait with Keys*, the policing of this human-nature taxonomic divide bears testimony in the savaging of the "oaks on Kitchener Avenue", which are repeatedly cut down to size (p.179), and, suffering greater ignominy on Roberts Avenue, are shackled by means of iron hoops likened to slave bracelets. Vladislavić's friend, Liz, in true magical realist fashion, suggests that the shackles stop the trees "from wandering off"; yet, the author's more cynical brother, Branko, asserts that the "trees are there to keep the shackles from being stolen" (p.184). Here, the municipality reins in nature to show it 'who's boss'. The oak trees, and perhaps nature more broadly, are shown to be amputated and stunted by the bureaucratic instruments of modernity. The diction employed in these passages demonstrates a degree of brutality by which nature is reined in and manipulated to suit human aesthetic and town planning purposes. Gerald Gaylard makes a similar point in his essay "Migrant Ecology in the Postcolonial City in *Portrait with Keys*" where he argues that portrait 130 speaks to "humanity's Quixotic attempts to control nature."[549] Branko's rejoinder can then be taken as a warning "about sentimental anthropocentrism towards nature and the past"; it is indeed a warning "against clear divisions between nature and humanity."[550]

This attempted human mastery over nature, coupled with the (intended) educational aspect of zoos, was however, undermined in favour of their entertainment value. Humans misbehaved and taunted animals – begging the question of who truly belonged behind bars.[551] The human-nature dichotomy, ultimately reinforced by the institutional impulse that brought about the zoological garden in the first place, also paradoxically threatened to deconstruct it. A London zookeeper once famously remarked, "What they keep in the cages is tame enough; the wild ones walk in

[549] Gaylard, G. "Migrant Ecology in the Postcolonial City in *Portrait with Keys*: *Joburg and What-What*" in *Marginal Spaces: Reading.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.290.

[550] Ibid, p.290.

[551] Unfortunately, the early attraction of zoos "depended upon the entertainment value of captive animals" and so the educational aspect was often undermined by the promise of the carnivalesque; animal exhibits in circuses and freak shows, by promoting the irreverent and sensationalistic, "threatened to break down respectable decorum."

From: Wirtz, P. H. "Zoo City: Bourgeois Values and Scientific Culture in the Industrial Landscape" in *Journal of Urban Design*, 2:1, 1997, p.76.

through the turnstiles."[552] The same trend continues to the present day with zookeepers guarding against "callous, even hurtful behaviour toward their charges."[553] Incidences of animal injury "due to visitor actions" suggest that the cages exist to protect the animals rather "than the other way around."[554] Alain de Botton reflects that a visit to the zoo "unsettles" in "simultaneously making animals seem more human and humans more animal."[555]

Wirtz writes that the entrenchment of pejorative social hierarchies allied to "natural-human world distinctions"[556] exceeded merely linking non-Europeans to animals; these dehumanising tropes were also applied to the lower social rung of the native European urban landscape. Apropos nineteenth-century bourgeois anxieties regarding the proletariat and their perceived lack of social breeding and politesse, writers of this period "began producing urban exposé literature which reported on a vast seamy underbelly of urban life which threatened the health of nations and the White race."[557] At the 1865 Social Science Congress in Sheffield various papers expressed concerns that "a dark savagery" was "lurking in the cities among the working classes."[558] In visiting London in 1861, John Shaw wrote in *Travels in England: A Ramble with the City and Town Missionaries* that he was shocked to find:

> a stone's throw from elegant shops were "back slums, inhabited by people so lost to modern morality and civilization, and so little allied in architecture, manners, and mode of life with their neighbors with whom they are in actual contact, that they may be compared to the wildest colony of savages, transplanted by an act of conjuration from the centre of Africa"[559]

Asa Briggs, in *Victorian Cities*, writes that the social conditions brought about by poverty, which had been triggered by the forces of nineteenth century mass urbanisation, were a cause for major concern.[560] General Booth, a Victorian social commentator, contrasted "darkest Africa" against "darkest London" in his *In Darkest England and the Way Out*; here, he questioned whether the "'lot of the Negress in the Equatorial Forest'" was not "'so very much worse than that of many a

[552] Per W. Blunt, in: Ibid, p.76.

[553] Ibid, p.76.

[554] Ibid, p.76.

[555] de Botton, A. "On Going to the Zoo" in *On Seeing and Noticing*. Penguin Books: London, 2005, pp.36-7.

[556] Wirtz, P. H. "Zoo City: Bourgeois Values and Scientific Culture in the Industrial Landscape" in *Journal of Urban Design*, 2:1, 1997, p.79.

[557] Ibid, p.79.

[558] Ibid, p.79.

[559] Ibid, p.79.

[560] Briggs, A. *Victorian Cities*. Odhams Books Limited: London, 1963.

pretty orphan girl in our Christian capital"'[561] T.H. Huxley, a renowned scientist, remarked that the "Polynesian 'savage"' even "'in his most primitive condition' was 'not half so savage, so unclean, so irreclaimable as the tenant of a tenement in an East London slum."'[562] Thus, Wirtz indicates that nineteenth century English slumdwellers were figuratively considered

> equivalent to non-European savages. In a twist of the natural-human world distinction, the bourgeoisie appropriated wilderness imagery in its perception of the vast underbelly of respectable urban life. The lurid, sensational reports found in urban exposé literature described to middle-class readers a jungle landscape flourishing not in darkest Africa but a few blocks away from their comfortable homes.[563]

Thus, even while the modern city promoted itself as the apotheosis of modern scientific human progress, a teaming underbelly played sinister counterpart to the urbane refinement of the bourgeois city. The other face of the city – a sordid cocktail of disease, ignominious death, poor living conditions, abject poverty and homelessness, filth, thievery, and skulduggery blighted the neat distinctions set up between 'tame', ordered human settlement on the one side of the spectrum and the wild, lawless animal kingdom on the other. Two opposing forces contended for ascendancy: the city, despite its attempts to keep the 'jungle' firmly in its place outside the space of 'tame' human settlement, could not quite staunch the tide of savagery. Beneath this pall, the dark side of city-life evoked the wilderness of the human spirit – the dark undertones of human depravity. In other words, "in one sense the city was closer to the natural world than was realized: the urban landscape was a jungle after all."[564] The 'darkness' residing in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1901) can perhaps be located not on the African continent, but rather in the colonist's home countries and urban centres. The resplendent irony behind the establishment of the zoological garden was that

> … nature was brought into the city to tame the jungle the city had become. At zoos, visitors learned of their place in the natural order as they growled back at the lions and watched the seals being fed.[565]

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[561] Ibid, p.325.

[562] Ibid, p.326.

[563] Wirtz, P. H. "Zoo City: Bourgeois Values and Scientific Culture in the Industrial Landscape" in *Journal of Urban Design*, 2:1, 1997, p.79.

[564] Ibid, p.79.

[565] Ibid, p.80.

In Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys* the author seems to poke his finger through the bars of the very same conundrum, thus challenging supercilious anthropocentrism. Where does the zoo end and the city start? Is Johannesburg an urban jungle – a savage *zoo city*? Various portraits in his spasmodic and episodic text beg this question and blur any easy distinction between the domain of man and the realm of beast – or, expressed differently, the differentiation between man and his primordial nature. Vladislavić shows how this nature haunts and undermines the city's illusions of order and dignified restraint.

A relevant case in point concerns portrait 23, whereby a Johannesburg computer specialist is "savagely bitten in an attempted car hijacking" (p.41). The thieves, after gaining access to his vehicle, proceeded to bite their victim, drawing blood in the process. Despite the specialist managing to get out of the car, the "cannibals" in hot pursuit continued their masticatory assault. During the ordeal, one assailant allegedly remarked, "'You taste good, white boy, I want to bite you more'" (p.41). Early in the text, Vladislavić sets up a complex thematic and linguistic nexus between crime, fear, brutality and savagery in Johannesburg. Perpetrators of violent crime in the novel appear to act in accordance with primeval qualities. Vladislavić manipulates the word 'nature' and frolics with all its various applications. Nature, in Vladislavić's works, can refer to the 'natural world' (the pastoral environment, flora and fauna, etc.), but also seems to carry darker connotations. Nature, in this alternative sense, infers the more insidious, savage qualities of the human animal that lurk beneath a cursory exterior of civility. Thus 'nature' cannot be seen or appreciated purely in romantic, pastoral, or redemptive terms; nature also intimates the more sinister elements of man's bestial origins and biochemical make-up. One cannot overlook or deny the racial dimensions of this episode, either. The cannibalistic overtone of this scene conjures up the damaging apartheid stereotype of the *swart gevaar* (black peril).

Playing with the polysemic potential of 'urban jungle', the narrator-flâneur in *Portrait with Keys* chances upon a plastic toytown figure nestled into a niche of decorative brickwork on the wall of No.58 Kitchener Avenue. The narrator grabs it and drops it into his pocket "scarcely breaking [his] stride" (p.78). Reflecting upon the oddness of his involuntary gesture, a suburban block later he retrieves the object from his pocket to inspect it. It is a "zookeeper grasping a pitchfork with a large cut of red meat impaled on it" (p.78). The zookeeper stands on his desk the next day, watching the author at work. Feeling unnerved by all the questions and associations raised by this figure's somewhat perplexing presence, he wonders "What was he doing standing in the wall?" (p.79). He decides to return the zookeeper to his wall-perch. Even the chipped-paint attire seems incongruous with his line of work: he wears a tie. After a month, no child has reclaimed

the toytown figurine and so "history repeats" itself – the zookeeper is slipped back into the author's pocket. It is interesting that the figurine is discovered on a wall, a symbol of boundaries, peripheries, partitions, and frontiers. He is, by virtue of placement, a liminal figure – noticed only by the narrator, who finds himself in the business of seeking out the "marginal spaces" of the city. Of even greater relevance, is the figurine's guise as a zookeeper. As a children's toy, positioned on the boundary wall of a street-facing property, it is jarringly out of place. He symbolises forces of control and order, yet he finds himself rendered an impotent zookeeper – detached from the context of his toytown animal wards. Being kidnapped by the author-narrator does not help his cause. His diminutive size and childish triviality, humorously hyperbolises the zoo city, where he is too weak and small to control the animals that have escaped their cages. So, what are the animals in the city-zoo which fail to heed the call of our feeble zookeeper?

One possible candidate is Isaac Mofokeng, a thief and violent rapist, better known to the Johannesburg public as the miscreant who infamously shot Max the Gorilla. We learn in portrait 103 that Mofokeng was sentenced to forty years in jail for charges of robbery and rape. "When he was brought to trial, the charge of malicious damage to property arising from the shooting at the Zoo paled beside the other charges of robbery and rape" (p.154). Vladislavić's choice of word, "pale", is effective. The pale – literally a stake or post signalling a boundary – draws further attention to the question of transgressions against the borders of acceptable behaviour and action. Mofokeng not only shoots an ape, but as a rapist himself, in the rhetoric of the Nisaa campaign he symbolically reduces his humanity and becomes ape-like himself. Although, as the presses' tender and anthropomorphic descriptions of Max that follow on in the wake of the shooting show, this association between rapists and apes perhaps does more to degrade animals than the converse.

Mofokeng shoots Max in portrait 16. One winter morning in 1997, Isaac Mofokeng, after being unsuccessfully apprehended by the police upon breaking and entering a Saxonwold home, "took refuge in the grounds of the Zoo" (p.33). In hot pursuit, the police managed to corner the thief, whereupon he "jumped into the gorilla enclosure" (p.33). Max, perceiving Mofokeng to be a threat to his partner Lisa, attacked the intruder, but suffered the retaliation of three bullets from the thief's .38 special, which lodged in his shoulder and neck (p.33). In the tussle to remove the suspect from the enclosure, three policemen were attacked by the enraged and threatened gorilla. The Zoo's veterinarians, unable to adequately operate on Max on Zoo premises, moved the gorilla to nearby Milpark Hospital. Vladislavić reports that on the hospital admission form "Max's profession was given as 'Gorilla', his employer as the Johannesburg zoo" (p.34).

Unsurprisingly, the anthropomorphically presented photos depicting Max laid out on a stretcher, tucked under a blanket, tended by a vet with a drip, elicited "an outpouring of tender concern from all quarters" (p.34). The portrait pokes fun at the irony of a beast being harmed by a human. Also, the sympathy elicited takes the side of the wild animal and not the human.

As an aside, what both the Nisaa campaign and Max's anthropomorphism by newspapers reveal are the "blatant and unresolved contradiction[s]" which pervades the highly problematic human activity of representing animals.[566] On the one hand, when humans act with depravity, they, in their 'bestiality', are likened to animals; on the other hand, when animals are deserving of our sympathy they are "automatically humanised."[567] This problematic transposition of human values onto the animal world highlights the way in which we read animals anthropocentrically and symbolically, "trapping them in distinct representational categories", which reflect our prejudices and biases, and say less about the actual animals themselves.[568]

Vladislavić makes potent commentary here in that the fences bordering the Zoo do more to protect the creatures situated within the enclosures than the humans located on the perimeter. The Western Lowland Gorilla, a creature of the so-called "jungle", is found in the rainforests of Angola, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.[569] However, the crime filled dystopia that is present-day Johannesburg becomes proverbially more wild and dangerous a setting than the natural terrain of the Western Lowland Gorilla. The boundaries between zoo and city, jungle and civilisation, become blurred. One can infer from the subtlety of Vladislavić's virtuoso prose that the positioning of the pale, which demarcates the parameters and constraints necessary for the continued pretence of civility, become inherently problematised. Does the Zoo's perimeter fence exist as a figurative reminder of primordial urges which human society has not completely tamed and suppressed? Vladislavić goes to some lengths to suggest that these spatial markers and the reassurances they provide are little more than convenient fictions. *Portrait with Keys* satirically poses the following question: where do we draw the line between zoo and city? If anything, the distinction between the two realms becomes blurred. Ultimately, this portrait proposes that Joburg is an urban jungle with a thin veneer of civility. The shooting of Max shooting queries

[566] Huggan, G. and Tiffin, H. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge: London, 2010, p.138.

[567] Ibid, p.138.

[568] Ibid, p.139.

[569] Author unknown. "Western Lowland Gorilla", *Animals Nat Geo Wild*. URL: http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/lowland-gorilla/. Date accessed: 12 July 2012.

which part of the city can be considered the zoo: merely the plot of land in Saxonwold, or the entire city?

The complex dialectic between nature and civilisation as played out in *Portrait with Keys* flies in the face of bourgeois imperialist ideology. The modern zoological garden, born out of a rigid structuring of the city-nature landscape (which in itself was triggered by the epistemological and sociological conditions attached to the Industrial Revolution), intended to make delineations between man and beast patent and unequivocal. Vladislavić's text suggests otherwise by deconstructing the modern assumptions that previously worked to sustain the binary. In challenging anthropocentrism, *Portrait with Keys* questions the validity of modernity's hierarchically and rationally ordered urban models which attempt to neatly and perhaps artificially impose a taxonomisation of landscape. By interrogating the 'othered' and perhaps suppressed aspects of human identity, Vladislavić powerfully and satirically conflates the man-animal binary. The resultant epistemological incertitude modestly suggests a reinterrogation of man's human ontology and purpose as an earthly creature. Johannesburg as the setting for this very enquiry is not unimportant. Its urban terrain has been described by the likes of Goodman as a "city of contested spaces", imbued with "mobility."[570] The city's characteristics of "continuous revision"[571] flavours it with a particular brand of "undecideability"[572], which allows for undermining conventional categories of meaning.

The portraits immediately following on from the shooting of Max (portrait 16), and the conviction of Isaac Mofokeng (portrait 103), further shore up this reading of Johannesburg as zoo city. In portraits 17 and 104, the author-narrator describes a man that cuts an idiosyncratic figure: "the caged man… paces up and down outside… a creature in captivity" (p.155). The man occupies the stall next to the cobbler and, despite its lack of "bars on one side" (meaning that he could "simply walk out of it") his "hypnotic" pacing becomes even more "compelling" (p.36). His activity draws spectators, like an animal in a zoo; his oblivion encouraging inspection "as if there really were bars between them to authorize an extreme scrutiny" (p.36). The direction of the "caged animal's" pacing is "[f]our strides, a clockwise turn, four strides, an anti-clockwise turn" (pp.35-36). This does not accumulate distance, but negates progress. He is, in other words, "going nowhere, fast" (p.36). What does Vladislavić mean here? The interminable pacing seems

[570] Goodman, R. "Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*: A Bricoleur's Guide to Johannesburg" in *Safundi*, 10:2, 2009, p.230.

[571] Ibid, p.230.

[572] Gaylard, G. Introduction to *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.11.

to suggest the absurdity of his occupation – he, unlike the cobbler, produces nothing constructive and, if anything, his strides merely confirm the pointlessness of his daily installation. Does the "caged man" operate as a metonym for society at large? His actions, in microcosm, are alarmingly inane and fruitless – are ours, by extension, just as futile? Furthermore, as much as the bars around his cage are figurative, do they stand also as metaphors of the ideological constructs of civilised society, which work to incarcerate our primeval urges? The placement of two respective "caged man" portraits sequentially after the 'Max and Mofokeng' ones appears purposeful and conscious. Therefore, by virtue of the fragmented form of the narrative, readers are expected to draw their own connections and conclusions from the 138 sections of walled-off prose. One of these conclusions would be the link that Vladislavić sets up between zoo and city. These portraits see the zoo invading the city and *vice versa*. In Johannesburg clear demarcations, that act as bars on the proverbial cages governing appropriate human behaviour, are broken down by those who transgress the boundaries regulating the human-nature dichotomy. In *Portrait with Keys*, Vladislavić skillfully unsettles the colonial paradigms set up to regulate the human-animal divide.

Vladislavić wryly reflects on misguided anthropocentrism in *The Restless Supermarket* by bringing another caged man to our attention. On a nocturnal tour of the Johannesburg zoo, Aubrey Tearle, with friends in tow (Merle, Wessels, and Bogey), encounters a peculiar enclosure. Their guide informs them that the occupant is none other than the "the human animal" (p.171). The enclosure's signpost reads:

> 'Homo Sapiens. Mammal.
>
> Typical Male (1,75 m, 76 kg). Omnivorous, omnipotent, omnipresent. Hunts profligately, including its own kind. Considered the most dangerous of all species … ' (p.171).

When Wessels flicks a cigarette butt through the bars of the human animal's cage, "the reaction was explosive" (p.172.) The man, in King Kong fashion, "leapt up, brandishing a club, and hurled himself at us. He struck the bars a mighty blow, so violently that we started back in fright" (p.172). A "deep, sonorous" metallic clang "resounded into the night", setting off a chain reaction: "a cacophony of grunts and cries", consisting of the other animals' "cawing and cackling", the cries of one of the children in their tour, Merle's giggling and the "Bogeymen chatter[ing] like apes" – a contemptuous collective epithet for Bogey and Wessels (p.172). In this episode the boundary between zoo animal and human animal (both within and outside of the enclosure) become satirically conflated. What starts out as an opportunity for social critique,

merely confirms the Johannesburg Zookeeper's point that humans are little more than destructive 'beasts.'

**The History of the Johannesburg Zoo**

In 1904, two hundred acres of land were donated to Johannesburg's Town Council from H. Eckstein & Co., and was "signed over to the people of Johannesburg as a recreational venue in perpetuity."[573] In memory of the firm's late founder this parkland bequest was to be named The Hermann Eckstein Park; currently, this eighty-one "hectare area comprises Zoo Lake and the Johannesburg Zoo" and is "divided by Jan Smuts Avenue."[574]

The Johannesburg Zoo's humble beginnings are largely thanks to Hermann Eckstein's bestowal as well as the efforts of the adventurer and pioneer, Sir Percy Fitzpatrick (author of *Jock of the Bushveld*). Fitzpatrick,

> who was acting head of Rand Mines for a time, housed wild animals he brought back from his hunting trips, in the forest. He brought back a lion that had lost a foot, and kept a baby hippo that lived in the Parktown spruit. Except for the hippo, all the animals were in cages … This eccentric menagerie became one of the 'sights' of Johannesburg for the amusement-starved populace, and eventually made up the first stock of the Zoo.[575]

Joburg's Zoo was most likely influenced by the educational and recreational impulses that accompanied the establishment of bourgeois-managed zoos of nineteenth-century Europe. However, the interesting difference is that the Joburg Zoo's animal collection was initially made up of specimens available a relative stone's throw away from the bounds of the mining town. These creatures were not necessarily the spoils of far-flung and exotic adventures of swashbuckling colonial pioneers, but rather the booty of hunting trips acquired in the lands surrounding towns on the Rand. Nature's boons lay waiting just beyond city limits. Therefore, it could be argued that in the early days of the city, two antithetical impulses competed with each other: one, the desire to build a town grounded in the acquisition of material wealth meant that

[573] Author unknown. "History", *Joburg Zoo*, 2012. URL: http://www.jhbzoo.org.za/history.asp. Date accessed: 16 July 2012.

[574] Geddes, M. "A Brief History of the Johannesburg Zoo", Display Artist: Education Dept., 1994. URL: www.jhb**zoo**.org.za/.../**HISTORY**%20OF%20JOBURG%20**ZOO**%20-.... Date accessed: 16 July 2012.

[575] Davie, L. "Zoo Lake: The Park That Defied Apartheid", *Joburg*. 4 November 2002. URL: http://www.joburgnews.co.za/nov_2002/nov4_zoolake.stm. Date accessed: 16 July 2012.

nature would be displaced, and two, within eight years of its existence the city started bringing back its original animal denizens, housing them on undeveloped land in the centre of a burgeoning man-made forest.

**Sculptural Wildlife**

*Portrait with Keys* subtly contemplates that although Joburg's wildlife was once a literal presence in the surrounding veld, it has now become sculptural. Herman Wald's bronze *Leaping Impala* is a case in point. Symbolic of the exotic landscape of Africa – on both our proverbial and literal doorstep – the sculpture embodies eighteen graceful animals in "full flight" (p.135). The sculpture, initially looking like it would survive intact, despite the deterioration of the inner city in the 1990s, was, by the end of 1999, ravaged by "urban poacher[s]" (p.136). Heads and legs of Wald's impalas began to be "lopped" off with increasing fervour and sold as scrap metal (p.136). Eventually restored, Wald's impalas have found their new home outside the Anglo-American headquarters on Main Street. In 2011, the Ernest Oppenheimer Park, the original home of Wald's antelopes, was relaunched by the city of Johannesburg and now features a fresh herd of "bokkies"[576], constructed out of cast iron – hopefully less attractive to hunters of the urban persuasion. According to Vladislavić (tongue-placed-firmly-in-cheek):

> Johannesburg has an abundance of wildlife, and the poachers have taken full advantage of the open season. They've bagged a steenbok at Wits University; a horse from outside the library in Sandton (first docking the beast, to see if anyone would mind, and then hacking off its head like Mafiosi); a pair of eagles nesting near the Stock Exchange; and another steenbok in the Botanical Gardens at Emmarentia. This little buck, which had been donated to the Gardens by the sculptor Ernest Ullmann in 1975, was taken in 1998. The head turned up afterwards in a scrapyard and was returned to the scene of the slaughter, where it was mounted on a conical pedestal like a trophy, along with a plaque explaining its loss and recovery. But before long the head was stolen for a second time and now the pedestal is empty … Of course, urban poachers are not just hungry for horseflesh, any old iron will do. (p.136)

The city, as cast in Vladislavić's prose, is a concrete jungle. The real animals have been displaced and subsequently replaced by tame bronze replicas. We have removed the threat to our existence

[576] Author unknown. "Oppenheimer Park Relaunched", *Joburg*, 18 April 2011. URL: http://www.joburg.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6516&catid=88&Itemid=266. Date accessed: 23 July 2012.

posed by the indigenous flora and fauna by manufacturing an urban environment suitable for man – the self-anointed "king of beasts"[577] – to subsist in. This largely synthetic environment, with its alien trees, bears little resemblance to its natural roots. However, the romance of the wild and untamed past is resurrected in cold metal and stone (for more recent offerings, the example of Clive van den Berg's *Eland* in Braamfontein works well[578]); the sculptural wildlife that functions as public artworks remind urban inhabitants of the wild world we have claimed as our own, redacting and sanitising it.

This violence exacted upon Joburg's sculptural wildlife is not without its own ironies. The ascent of the urban poacher, the scrap metal thief, reminds more upstanding citizens of the undercurrent of violence associated with the project of modernity. The violence with which man has subdued and contained the natural world to his own manmade territory of dominance implies that this cycle of violence will continue. Man's desire to eke out a territory of his own, extending his control over this space and his concomitant possessions is a fraught act that will require constant vigilance. For Vladislavić, the urban poacher is a "romantic figure", because 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" (p.137). Vladislavić's language here is significant: the urban poacher "scavenging" from the "gatekeeper" (p.137) evokes the intimacy of our bestial roots. Man tries to play gamekeeper in the urban jungle, but the poachers, who find themselves closer to their antediluvian natures, will continuously erode attempts at control and order. Ultimately, the more man tries to weave a web of civility, the more he traps himself to the silky sutures of his own expedient opportunism borne from an innate survival instinct. The modern metropolis is configured as aptly embodying its sobriquet, the concrete jungle.

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577 "'Truly man is the king of beasts, for his brutality exceeds theirs.'" This quote is often wrongly ascribed to Leonardo da Vinci but was actually written by Dmitry Sergeyevich Merezhkovsky (sometimes transliterated as Merejkowski).

From: Merejkowski, D.S. *The Romance of Leonardo da Vinci: The Forerunner*. G.P. Putnam's Sons: New York, 1904, p.144.

578 Maja and Gerhard Marx's *Paper Pigeons* may be another case in point. However, unlike the *Eland* (which monumentalises a creature of the wild), this public installation celebrates a character that is more naturalised denizen of the city streets and less creature of the untamed savannah.

**Max and Other Apes**

The positioning of nature and its city variant, the zoo, within the city become problematised in Vladislavić's work. In *Portrait with Keys* he plays with the semantic permutations of the word 'gorilla'. His work is preoccupied with primate imagery. In Johannesburg, nature is not always what it seems, and thus the gorilla refers not only to Max, the Zoo's most famous inhabitant, but also to steering locks, referential art, retractable security gates, and racist sentiments. Perhaps, what is being intimated is that man is little more than a highly developed ape. The gorilla-centric portraits provide space for satire and a critique of anthropocentrism. It is suggested that we have not really evolved that much and so the arrogance invested in our belief that humans are a superior species is ill-deserved and misplaced.

The play on language bequeathed by the contextually sensitive lexica of 'gorilla' also forms one of the major thematic pathways through the text – a double entendre, sub-entitled "Engaging the Gorilla" (listed at the back of the text under "Itineraries"). Numerous portraits either deal with Max's growing legacy, or more metafictionally speaking, with the author's attempts at researching the Max phenomenon in the Johannesburg Public Library. After the shooting, Max becomes a Johannesburg celebrity ("declared Newsmaker of the Year by the Johannesburg Press Club" – p.131) as a result of his "status as a crime fighter" (p.131), and is adopted by the security company, Maxidor (portrait 90) – which sells slam-lock retractable security doors. Rather conveniently, Max "already embedded in the name of the company … was incorporated into Maxidor as the embodiment of the corporate vision" (p.132). On a further zoo related theme, the brand's logo carries a charging elephant encased within the letter 'o' of Maxidor. Maxidor turns Max into a commodity – his take down of the thief functions as a wry comment on the part of Vladislavić about the profitable industry triggered by crime. The animal in the zoo thus garners corporate sponsorship – the human and material once again claiming ownership of the natural.

*Portrait with Keys* is punctuated by references to the ubiquitous presence of crime in Johannesburg. Amusingly, this affords further opportunity for apish wordplay to prosper. Vladislavić dedicates a number of portraits to the discussion of steering locks. One such famous local brand takes its name from the brutish force associated with the gorilla. The Gorilla, while the "best of the breed" (p.57), is not alone in its predatory animal symbolism. Locks like the Eagle Claw and Wild Dog each depict vicious incarnations of the predatory animals that share their namesake. This penchant for the feral beast is not peculiar to steering locks:

> The association with wild animals known for their speed, strength, or ferocity is also found in other areas of the security industry: tigers, eagles, owls appear on the shields of armed response companies, and rhinoceroses and elephants in the logos of companies that supply electrified fencing and razor wire. (p.56)

This prevalence of animal branding says something about the way in which nature penetrates the South African collective consciousness. The logo of the Gorilla shows a "stylized steering wheel gripped by two huge, humanoid paws, with the shaggy suggestion of an animal body in the background" (p.58). Cognizant that the word "gorilla" can be used to refer colloquially to a "powerfully built, brutish, aggressive man" intimates that leaving your car in the safe-keeping of the Gorilla is like "a simian watchman" protecting your belongings (p.59). Later in the novel, the narrator's mastery of the device has become "second nature" (p.97). From this cue, can one suggest that "Engaging the Gorilla" takes on a more nuanced reading? The steering device, by proxy, allows the practitioner to adopt the traits of the simian watchman endorsed by the company. In other words, the man engages the gorilla from deep within himself. The Gorilla allows the author to "extend my power over my property, laying claim to it in my absence, seizing it in leathery paws with an iron grip" (p.97). The narrator, by virtue of the Gorilla, is able to 'mark' his territory.

The Gorilla steering lock and its fetishistic symbolism has found creative expression in the Arts. Vladislavić describes Renier le Roux's *Apie*, as a case in point. The carved wooden steering lock's title mordantly trades in the lexical game play between crime and the bestial. From another perspective, le Roux's piece speaks to the way in which man has appropriated the linguistic connotations of the natural realm, integrating this semantic cipher into his urban jungle (conferring it to the devices used to protect that realm), thus revealing an antinomy wherein we are at once separated from the pre-modern wilderness, but conversely cannot be divorced from the primordial impulses that stem from within.

As has already been discussed with respect to the Nisaa campaign, the word and corresponding imagery appended to 'gorilla', resonates with pejorative connotations. More pointedly, from a South African colonial and apartheid perspective, it is particularly reminiscent of racist discourse. In light of this, it is thus salient that portrait 61 of *Portrait with Keys* chronicles the incendiary repercussions of Police Commissioner Jackie Selebi's inspection of the Brooklyn Police Station in Pretoria in 1999. Finding that the visit fails to meet his expectations, he calls Sergeant Jeanette Mothiba a "fucking gorilla" (p.84). As Vladislavić reports,

> The incident was widely reported. Some treated it as a joke or at worst a blunder. Others felt that the commissioner's language was not just inappropriate, but unforgivably derogatory and racist. It was an echo of the insulting 'baboon' used so often by white racists against black people, and all the more shocking in this instance because a prominent and powerful black man had used it against a white woman under his authority. (p.84)

The reportage then adopts an ironic gloss as it chronicles the somewhat dubious findings of the Independent Complaints Directorate, whose report maintains that Selebi, in his denigration, used the less offensive word "'chimpanzee'" (p.85). The corresponding wordplay and specious semantic deconstruction that follows in the press becomes an opportunity for great public amusement and satire. Selebi's employment of primate imagery as insult is evocative not only of Social Darwinism, but also of the dehumanising lexicon of South African discriminatory politics of the apartheid era. That this language is so firmly positioned within the psyche of both black and white agents of the country's monumental[579] history, is subverted and teased by Vladislavić's narration. The vignette's concluding paragraph articulates the trenchant censure Vladislavić directs at Selebi, the Independent Complaints Directorate, the media, and the reader:

> In the end, it was hard to say exactly who the joke was on. Commissioner Selebi, who had started this grotesque drama with his ill-judged comment. Or Sergeant Mothiba, who had vanished behind the headline. Or the Independent Complaints Directorate, earnestly offering dictionary definitions as a legal defence. Or the reader, poking a stick through the bars at his own beastly nature. (p.85)

It is not accidental that the very next portrait relates Elias Canetti's hypothesis that our tendency to laugh originates in "an expression of the pleasure taken in prey or food" (p.85). According to Canetti, when someone falls, eliciting laughter as a response, what is really happening is that we are expressing delight in the vulnerability of others – knowing that we "could spring on them now and tear them apart"(p.85). After all, "[o]ur lips are open, our teeth are bared," but we have been trained to "restrain our animal appetites" and instead of devouring the unlucky, clumsy person, "we laugh" (p.85). In other words, "'[l]aughter is our physical reaction to the escape of potential food'" (p.85).

[579] Critics, such as Gerald Gaylard in his introduction to *Marginal Spaces* as well as in his article entitled "Postcolonial Satire: Ivan Vladislavić" (published in *Current Writing* in 2005), detail Vladislavić's support for the marginal against "the national, spectacular and monumental" master narratives of history and nationhood (*Marginal Spaces*, p.2).

These two portraits look beyond the racialised language of the past and dig deeper into the human psyche. Vladislavić suggests that, despite assurances to the contrary, we are all decidedly primitive creatures. The animals in the city are not just the specimens found in zoo enclosures (i.e. not just Max and Lisa), they are not purely the rapists and thieves (Mofokeng), or the purveyors of racist rhetoric (Selebi). Instead, quite radically and offensively, our own collective humanity is called into question. These animal themed portraits obscure the distinctions we endeavour to draw between the savage and the civilised. During the colonial era, the brutal activities of the colonists were made more palatable by various expedient justifications: such as the so-called "civilising mission" narrative. If anything, their actions proved no-one required "civilising" more than themselves. False racial hierarchies pinpointed those perceived to be lower down on the ethnographic ladder as being closer to our bestial brethren. However, Vladislavić's fiction deconstructs this illusion by suggesting that all claims to species superiority, including false hierarchical racial differentiations, are fallacious. We have adopted certain airs and graces to delude ourselves from our original natures. Humans – regardless of creed, race, or class – are little deserving of our self-appointed status as stewards of the Earth. Basically we have duped ourselves into thinking we are positioned at the pinnacle of the Great Chain of Being.

These zoo-portraits within *Portrait with Keys* show that Joburg functions as a zoo. We are kept within the bounds of various socio-cultural and judicio-legal enclosures, but every now and again we escape (read, Isaac Mofokeng) or, instead, we rattle the bars of the cages that restrain us. Civilisation is not much more than a human zoo – an ordering mechanism in the city.

Thus it would seem that our base desires and irrepressible animalistic instincts are located not too far beneath a veneer of civility. We have thinly veiled our brutish instincts. In Jungian psychology this divide between civility and savagery is described as the split between the persona and the shadow. The persona is the mask that every human being is expected to wear in conforming to the 'civilised' roles society expects them to play. Beneath the persona lurks the shadow, deep within the realm of the personal unconscious, where the attributes of our darker, more base selves lie. In the process of becoming civilised, human beings adopt the persona and suppress the shadow.[580] However, the shadow is the necessary flipside of the light of consciousness and is therefore an "unavoidable" aspect of man, who would be "incomplete without it."[581] Thus, for Jung, the barbaric shadow of human nature can never be completely

[580] Fordham, F. *An Introduction to Jung's Psychology*. Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1966, pp.47-49.

[581] Ibid, p.50.

subdued or hemmed in. Humans are thus constantly haunted by the spectre of nature. Being wild within dovetails neatly with the view that Joburg is still an untameable frontier town of the 'Wild West'. Johannesburg, since its early days, was perceived as a town filled with renegades and outlaws, who, like Plomer's "Pioneers, O pioneers", in his poem "Johannesburg"[582], were out to make their fortune "overnight" and move on (with little care for order or "respectability").[583] "Riding bareback under stars" these "lordly anarchs of the veld" partook of "Venison feasts and tribal feasts", taking any opportunity "to cheat, / Or meet the most expensive whores."[584]

If Vladislavić intimates in *Portrait with Keys* that the city and the jungle/zoo are not separate and distinct from one another then Lauren Beukes's urban fantasy, *Zoo City* (2010), hyperbolises this trope. While I do not intend to examine Beukes's novel thoroughly, it presents another perspective on the animal/nature theme in Johannesburg. Zinzi December, Beukes's protagonist, is a "zoo". "Zoos", or "aposymbiots"[585] (the more 'clinical' term) are people who are in a state of being "animalled."[586] In order to be inextricably coupled with a magical animal, one needs to commit a grievous crime. The animal *familiar*, which grants the "zoo" magical abilities, becomes an external signifier of their felonious culpability and chequered pasts. December's crime, her brother's murder, makes her the unhappy counterpart of a magical (and often quite disapproving) sloth. The sloth empowers her with the ability to track lost things – a "shavi" (the magical power conferred by a person's familiar)[587] that instigates a rather dark and disturbing story arc. This novel literalises the city-zoo tension. Set in an indistinct, but not-too-distant-future, *Zoo City* is preoccupied with the subject matter of crime in Johannesburg. Johannesburg is depicted as a dangerous, hostile city and while this representation is neither novel nor unusual, *Zoo City*'s depiction of Joburg crime sees murders, gang violence, shoot-outs, and organised crime conducted with the added accoutrement of wild animals. This could be interpreted that humans' savage proclivities are externalised via the appendage of an animal familiar. The binary between human and animal, urban and rural, implodes as Johannesburg is written as an ugly and irredeemable zoo city.

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[582] Plomer, W. "Johannesburg" in *The Paperbook of South African Poetry*. (Ed. M. Chapman.) AD Donker: Johannesburg, 1986, pp.88-89.

[583] Ibid, p.88.

[584] Ibid, p.88.

[585] Beukes, L. *Zoo City*. Angry Robot. 2010 (eBook). This term, used throughout the novel, refers to humans paired with a magical animal.

[586] Ibid, p.21.

[587] Ibid, p.280.

This text presents a far more literal evocation of the "animalled" (or bestial) self and thus differs dramatically from *Portrait with Keys* – both in terms of representational mode as well as temporal setting. *Zoo City*'s futurity and fetishist fantasy is opposed to *Portrait with Keys*' retrospective narrative that focuses on the quotidian and marginal aspects of city life. Beukes's novel diminishes the degrees of separation between humans and animals by envisaging a (widely stigmatised) symbiotic relationship that occurs between criminals and their animal familiars. While Beukes's novel delights in the spectacle of the animalled, where human and animal familiar are fancifully imbricated within each other, Vladislavić's conception of the man-beast binary is evident in his characteristic sophistication. His nuanced political consciousness is territory foreign to Beukes's caper of fetishised *skop, skiet, and donder*.

**The Man-Made Backdrop**

Johannesburg was not chosen as a site for its natural beauty. Joburg is notoriously dry and dusty and boasts an altitude of 1753 metres above sea level. The toxic waste and mine dumps that are by-products of the mining enterprise, with its accompanying noxious dust and pollution, mean that Johannesburg is not a particularly beautiful or ecologically friendly city. As was discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, mineral resources coupled with material avarice became the driving forces behind the founding of Egoli – a city inhospitably located on a desolate veld. In light of these founding facts, where do we situate nostalgia for the pastoral in an industrial city that arguably lacks the promise of a bucolic past? Despite Johannesburg's capitalist-driven beginnings, it may then seem fairly ironic that the city is home to the largest man-made forest in the world. Be that as it may, this aspect of the city owes very little to the desire to reconnect with nature; rather, these "three million trees" were planted in the area, christened as Sachenswald (now the affluent suburb, Saxonwold), by the likes of Hermann Eckstein, who was involved in the development of early Johannesburg.[588] Eckstein, a partner of Corner House (today's Billiton), which is one of the largest mining companies in the world, was partly responsible for the "biggest afforestation scheme in the city's history."[589] These trees, upon felling, would provide tunnelling supports for mine stopes.

[588] Davie, L. "Zoo Lake: The Park That Defied Apartheid", *Joburg*. 4 November 2002. URL: http://www.joburgnews.co.za/nov_2002/nov4_zoolake.stm. Date accessed: 16 July 2012.

[589] Per E. Palestrant in *Johannesburg One Hundred* from: Ibid.

For Vladislavić, Johannesburg boasts an expedient relationship with nature. Nature's presence in the concrete jungle – even the longing for nature – manifests itself in increasingly artificial ways:

> In Johannesburg, the Venice of the South, the backdrop is always a man-made one. We have planted a forest the birds endorse. For hills, we have mine dumps covered with grass. We do not wait for time and the elements to weather us, we change the scenery ourselves, to suit our moods. Nature is for other people in other places. (*Portrait with Keys*, p.94)

This excerpt from portrait 68 suggests that man has made nature in Johannesburg. The landscape has been engineered by man's materialistic exploits. Johannesburg, perhaps more than other cities, seems to be an urban environment in open battle with nature. The landscape, even the scenery, is man-made. It is a synthetic environment, imposed by man and his materialistic exploits. It is a city turned inside out – our mine dump topography bears witness to the decades in which the contents of a subterranean realm have been brought to the surface to conceal the original lie of the land. Moreover, indigenous flora has been pushed to the margins of the city, subsequently replaced by the proliferation of alien trees (e.g.: bluegums/eucalyptus trees, oaks, etc.). Nature is, as Vladislavić asserts, "for other people in other places."

Jeremy Foster calls this kind of importation of nature, "socio-nature", and comments that Joburg's trees confer a sense of intergenerational sense of place since tree life spans exceed those of humans. Trees thus confer a degree of continuity and stability in the establishment of new urban environments.[590] However, at the time, the environmentally deleterious effects of these thirsty trees (particularly the bluegums) – chosen because they are fast-growing, thus able to provide shade and timber quickly for the needs of the young mining city – were not known. The net effect of planting millions of foreign trees, many of these belonging to the eucalyptus family, in the growing and dry city of Johannesburg is that it further exacerbated the city's water shortages.

For Jeremy Foster, the way in which nature was reintroduced to the urban fabric of colonial cities was contextually inapposite. His argument highlights the nuanced sociological ways in which man has interpreted nature over the course of human history. In the establishment of the city of Johannesburg, a Eurocentric impression of nature was imposed, which was decidedly "un-African" in character, and thus "disconnected the city from its hinterland through the

[590] Foster, J. "From Socio-nature to Spectral Presence: Re-imagining the Once and Future Landscape of Johannesburg" in *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 10:2, 2009, p.195.

construction of an ameliorative European nature."[591] This importation of a Eurocentric "socio-nature" further complicates the city-country binary, in that 'nature' (in and of itself) cannot be deemed a unitary or absolute concept.[592] It was this "environmental determinism of imperial geography, or the compensatory *rus in urbe* of industrial capitalist city"[593] which influenced the ways in which nature 'entered' the city of Johannesburg. Parks, gardens, golf courses, and planted trees followed Eurocentric fashion. Thus the man-made backdrop of 'natural' scenery in Johannesburg was one which conjured up a European urban oasis in the middle of Africa.

However, just outside the bounds of this artificial European garden lay another, 'othered' space: the uncultivated grasslands – a far cry from the metropolitan manifestations of "socio-nature". The veld – open land, untilled, and sparsely treed – stood as a counter-imaginary to imperial geography. This pre-modern space encapsulated the quintessential South African landscape before the arrival of colonial-era industrialisation. This (often) featureless space was perceived as blank and empty by European colonists, but the veld as a polysemic landscape has undergone a number of interpretative and discursive changes over the decades. According to Foster,

> In the early 1900s, for most white residents caught up in the city's rapid development and mercantile values, the treeless savannah surrounding Johannesburg, and which the city was continually displacing, was simply a wasteland, defined by its lack of seasonal change and easy poetic associations. Until the 1930s, appreciation of the veld was largely confined to a wealthy, intellectually-inclined, white minority who eulogized the highveld's austere "monotony" and saw it as a refuge from Johannesburg's crass materialism and jingoistic politics. This romanticized, urban view of the veld survived until World War II amongst urbanites who used capital acquired in mining, industry, law or commerce to buy and maintain remote, essentially uneconomical farms in the surrounding region. Here, they constructed an idea of the veld as a place not only "outside time," but one that resisted the marking of time.[594]

This process of beginning to appreciate the veld as a space both outside of time and a space more contextually allied to the Johannesburg environs suggests that the city's denizens eventually located a more appropriate "socio-nature" to valorise. The ascendancy of this more recently appropriated socio-nature is apparent in the last short story of Vladislavić's *The Exploded View*. This story concerns the building site of a new property development "Crocodile Lodge" – a local

[591] Ibid, p.196.

[592] Ibid, p.197.

[593] Ibid, pp.200-1.

[594] Ibid, p.202.

foil to the denizen of the Highveld milieu, the ubiquitous Tuscan villa. The name of the townhouse complex, brandished on a billboard and observable from the neighbouring highway, signals a building site that promises a return to an 'authentic' African pastoralism. However, Vladislavić calls this claim to authenticity into question. Gordon Duffy, the hapless protagonist of the story, constructs the billboard for the property development which flanks the N3 freeway. The "artist's impression of the townhouse complex" features a "toy-town version of the bushveld" (p.174). It will be "all sandstone and thatch" – a "safari lodge" with "an African theme" (p.174). The billboard evokes a nostalgic return to an imagined bucolic African past. The artist's rendering of the safari lodge envisions a structure fabricated from "[s]tone, wood, and thatch" – a marriage of elements considered more suited to an African clime than perhaps "the medieval treatment" given to Italian-inspired cluster homes. The conical design of the upper apartments' balconies and their accompanying wooden trusses, mimic the "fork and stubs of indigenous trees" (p.187). The backdrop of the rendering is washed with a simulated sunset, more bloody and "gamy" than the real "ash-grey heavens" of the Highveld dusk (p.187). The foreground of the billboard envisages "waterholes edged by rushes" intimating "where the crocodiles that had given the place its name might supposed to be hidden" (p.187). The disjuncture between appearance and reality (i.e. the projections of the complex promised by the billboard's artwork versus Duffy's real-time appreciation of the building site and surrounding veld) adds substance to the discussion regarding exotic versions of the so-called African 'wild'. This architectural project has hyperbolised the natural surrounds, therein sanitizing and commercialising the 'great African outdoors', turning it into a consumer-based simulacrum – ready to be purchased by "account executives, human resource managers, [and] stockbrokers" (p.188). Crocodile Lodge seduces its prospective inhabitants with a glib 'back to nature' kind of settlement. Crocodile Lodge threatens a sort of hyperreality, where the referent – the real Africa – evaporates behind a commercially viable nostalgia for the imagined poetry of the natural world. Crocodile Lodge is emblematic of what Foster calls the "thematic integration of architecture and man-made landscape" which, in the guise of the veld, provides "a tamed, secure 'space in the bush' where one can withdraw."[595] The fictional Crocodile Lodge stands testament to Vlad's claim that, in Johannesburg, "the backdrop is always a man-made one" (*Portrait with Keys,* p.94).

[595] Ibid, p.206.

**Vladislavić's Nature: Counter-Pastoralism and the Rejection of the Simulacrum**

According to J.M. Coetzee, the pastoral tradition in South Africa is a "literature of failure", for it reveals the lack of an "apparent language … to accommodate the white settler to black Africa" and conversely, indicates "no place for dispossessed blacks."[596] The *plaasroman* (the Dutch/Afrikaner farm novel) became the "ideological mainstay for the propagation and perpetuation of self-justifying white-supremacist myths"[597] – sustaining a fantasy of belonging to the land brokered by the ownership of a transgenerational family farm that becomes symbolically transformed into the embodiment of an "enduring bloodline stretching back into a mythicized past."[598] This fantasy is inherently contradictory as it provides "a lens through which to view the native landscape that [in itself] defies the imported vocabulary mapped onto it."[599] Colonists often decried the "rebarbative nature of the land" in South Africa.[600] Essentially, the pastoral mode "offers insight into a durably exploitative mindset."[601]

In Johannesburg a schizophrenic and incongruously urban 'pastoral' myth was effectuated by the implementation of a European *rus in urbe* – one that was inextricably tied to the project of imperialism and capitalism. The colonial exercise subjected nature to a hierarchisation that entailed a demeaning transposition of both racism and speciesism, staging a brutal process of racial and ecological exploitation and displacement that tied the consumption of nature to white, bourgeois capitalist modes of access and wealth. This myth of belonging was sustained by a man-made backdrop that orchestrated an 'appealing' but false Eurocentric "socio-nature" for the rich Randlords in the city of Johannesburg. Vladislavić critiques nostalgia for a bucolic and romanticised African past, partly because of this historical imposition of an imperialist Eurocentric pastoral tradition. This tradition has, in turn, been extrapolated and usurped by the simulacral tendencies of hypermodern Johannesburg (as has been illustrated by the analysis of the Crocodile Lodge lifestyle estate).

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596 Coetzee, J.M. *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South African* (1998) as discussed in: Huggan, G. and Tiffin, H. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge: London, 2010, p.99.

597 Huggan, G. and Tiffin, H. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge: London, 2010, p.104.

598 Ibid, p.98.

599 Ibid, p.110.

600 Huggan and Tiffin cite Coetzee's example of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* in support of this point: "To Schreiner … Africa is a land of rock and sun, not of soil and water" (1988, p.7). In: Ibid, p.98.

601 Ibid, p.110.

However, for Vladislavić there is an alternative way in which nature can enter the city – one that does not have to be perverted by the European pastoral tradition or effaced by the late capitalist simulacrum. The concept of the 'untended garden', something which I discuss at length in the concluding chapter of this thesis, explicates the kind of "socio-nature" Vladislavić puts forward as an alternative. Gerald Gaylard, in reading Vladislavić, states that although "[v]ery little that is organic remains in this virtual city", virtuality is "most fully and startlingly revealed by nature."[602] Virtuality "naturally implodes due to its rootlessness, disembedding, and 'perfection'"[603], and is ultimately disrupted by nature's depth, rootedness, "cyclicity" and "self-renewability."[604] Gaylard goes on to argue that "[e]cology haunts the virtual postcolonial city to the precise extent that it ignores and marginalises nature."[605] For instance, in *Portrait with Keys* the narrator reflects that:

> After a storm, everything is transformed. The cannas burst into wet flames, the dark scents of the earth seep out. Eddie's gladioli, the ones grown from the bulbs he gave me, pop magically from the clean cuff of the air. (p.160)

Nature, through the guise of the restorative and life-giving summer thunderstorm, cleanses off the urban grime and washes the "litter" down the hill (p.160). The flowers popping "magically" after the rainstorm are symbolic of nature's self-renewability. They are a reminder, too, of Eddie, Vlad's erstwhile neighbour, and so become a link to past communal ties – a rootedness to context. This passage illustrates that nature is opposed to the disembedded atemporality of the simulacrum. Thus, in a compact domestic space of the city (i.e. this garden), Vladislavić intimates that the natural backdrop in Johannesburg is not always simulacral or man-made. Although these kinds of spaces are small, scarce, and often overlooked, they can be said to work from the sidelines, undermining the ascendency of the simulacrum.

**The Urban Safari**

In part one of the novel *Double Negative*'s tripartite structure, Auerbach, Brookes, and Lister embark on an urban "safari" – "to cut the spoor" (p.47). They assume the role of poachers

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602 Gaylard, G. "Migrant Ecology in the Postcolonial City in *Portrait with Keys*: *Joburg and What-What*" in *Marginal Spaces: Reading.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.294.

603 Ibid, p.294.

604 Ibid, p.293.

605 Ibid, p.294.

hunting game in the urban landscape, fixing their crosshairs on unsuspecting subjects to shoot (photographically, of course). This image is made explicit when Auerbach encounters Veronica, the domestic servant who lives at the back of the Emerald Street house: he waves the narrator back "like a game ranger concerned for the safety of his charge" (p.50). This phrase, consciously redolent of the dehumanising language of apartheid (equating Veronica with the animal realm), is indicative of the power relations at play with respect to the photographic gaze.

The unmowed lawn of the Emerald Street house elicits a ludic warning, "'Watch out for tigers'" (p.48). Walking up the "faded red path" (p.47), and finding no-one at home after ringing the bell, they discover a wall of animal skulls flanking the side of the house. A dozen bleached skulls, "pale as driftwood", are affixed to the "powder-blue plaster" (p.48). A horse's skull, forming the centrepiece, is surrounded by what the narrator presumes are the skulls of a dog, rabbit, rat, lamb, lizard, and a mole. The arrangement, "with the horse in the middle and the lesser creatures above and below", features each specimen in its "proper station": the "beaked birds under the rafters" and the "head of the dog at a height that invited you to scratch its ear although its jaw was dropped to snap at your ankle" (p.48). The skulls seem more like "ghosts" than "trophies", hauntingly "passing through the wall … hungry for meat and grass, for air and for company, breaking back into the realm of the living" (p.49). A pocket watch – "with its hands hanging down, defeated" – had been suspended in the horse's eye socket (p.49). The transferred epithet of the defeated clock hands is refracted against the rest of the scene – the pocket watch fills the void, functioning as a steampunk prosthetic eye for the long-dead steed. These spectral vestiges of domestic and wild animals are not only defeated, but are also perversely upgraded by the accoutrements of man. This pet cemetery paradoxically mocks and fetishises the skeletal remains. Is it art or Wiccan altar? The careful arrangement of skulls fascinates the narrator who cannot help but reach out to touch them, yet the bone feels "slyly manufactured" (p.49). Perhaps it is not artistic or ritualistic at all, but simply a jape levelled at the characters' (and maybe even the reader's) expense?

On the windowsill, the narrator notices a "bird perched on a branch, a mounted specimen like a display in a natural history museum" (p.49). The narrator cheekily adds, "The creature in its natural habitat" (p.49). The answer to whether this bird is alive or merely a taxidermic display is purposefully ambivalent. The word "mount" is perhaps key – suggesting that the bird is a stuffed animal, and like the skulls, is a shadow of its former self. Being a "creature in its natural habitat" forces the reader to read "natural" with ironic nuances. Its natural habitat is then (tauntingly)

death in the city. Is the skull wall and the taxidermic bird a further play on the proliferation of surface and cosmetic exteriors – mortal remains deprived of depth and life?

While the skull wall's polyvalency can be fruitfully extrapolated, of central concern is the irony, whether pointed or unconscious, that the organisation of skulls reflects the taxonomising impulses of nineteenth century imperial collectors, scientists, and palaeontologists – thus summoning up figures like Charles Darwin, Edward Drinker Cope, and Othniel Charles Marsh. The purposeful placement of creatures according to stature and station parodies various classificatory systems, including the Great Chain of Being. These specimens, though, are devoid of life. The wall is a graveyard, a monument to a few animals that once roamed the Earth. There is no zoo here as nature has been effectively suburbanised and memorialised. Nature has been "defeated" and its ossified remains now adorn the tomblike walls of an unassuming home. Thus, on one level, the urban safari is a morbid adventure into an animal necropolis. It is a mausoleum dedicated to the memory of the natural world. The city, and the human culture responsible for its emergence, shows that "very little that is organic remains" in it.[606] This is especially so for the man-made backdrop that is Johannesburg – "this virtual city."[607]

However, on an entirely different level, the skeletal remains stand as a coy reminder of the way in which the city is, continuously and consistently, haunted by nature.[608] The skulls are ghosts of the animal order, "haunting culture."[609] Most of the skulls have either been taken from domesticated animals (i.e.: the dog, horse, rabbit) or from creatures that were never displaced by the imposition of urban life (e.g. lizards, moles, rats, and birds). In life, and even in death by virtue of this altar, these animals demonstrate that nature has not and cannot be completely effaced from the city. As this chapter has argued, despite being dominated, suppressed, and pushed to the periphery, the natural order returns in unexpected and surprising ways to undermine the city's and humans' control over the world around them. Vladislavić's fiction, by dint of its "quie[t] attentive[ness]" renders "silent" nature, "obvious" again.[610] As Gerald Gaylard in "Migrant Ecology in the Postcolonial City in *Portrait with Keys*: *Joburg and What-What*" puts it,

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606 Gaylard, G. "Migrant Ecology in the Postcolonial City in *Portrait with Keys*: *Joburg and What-What*" in *Marginal Spaces: Reading.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.294.

607 Ibid, p.294.

608 Ibid, p.288.

609 Ibid, p.288.

610 Ibid, p.295.

> … what is most important about this co-revelation that occurs via Vladislavić's placing of nature and culture in such close propinquity, pressurising both terms and any boundary between them, is that this is an act of witnessing, of consciousness. In a nutshell, nature both effects and affects consciousness.[611]

It is further significant that the skulls seem like they are "passing through the wall … breaking back into the realm of the living" (p.49). This description of the skulls as they "pas[s] through the wall" conflates the boundary between life and death. Vladislavić in "pressurising" both the binaristic terms of the natural-human as well as the living-dead, points towards a different brand of consciousness – one that is sensitive to the passing of elemental time; one that reminds humans of their own mortality, and thus relativises the grandness of their constructions. This different consciousness, which signals a different awareness of time made visible by the presence of nature in the city, "exposes the lack of life, of self-renewability … the entropy of human constructions which aim for permanence, even immortality."[612] Thus, that the skulls initially appear "manufactured" might say more about Lister's limiting brand of consciousness than what they could really stand for. Perhaps he cannot help but interpret the bones from within the bounded confines of human epistemology, a consciousness that tries to make sense of the natural realm in human terms. Indeed, maybe it is more comfortable to think the bones are manufactured – made by humans – than to question what their real significance might point towards. That significance could be the penetration of elemental time, represented by nature, that reminds us of the impermanence of human constructions, whether they are urban or epistemological. Ultimately, the urban safari may then force us to engage in an important exercise of existential relativism.

**Conclusion**

Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City*[613], writes that various reductive associations and generalisations developed around the nature-civilisation, country-city dichotomy. The country is associated with "the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue"; whereas the city "has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication,

[611] Ibid, p.295.

[612] Ibid, p.293.

[613] Williams, R. *The Country and the City*. Paladin: St Albans, 1975, p.9.

light."[614] On the other hand, "powerful hostile associations" have sprung up: for instance, the city has been experienced "as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition" and, conversely, the country "as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation."[615]

This tension in representing the city-country dichotomy is a concern carried through Vladislavić's oeuvre. His work wavers between the redemption afforded by nature and the seedy materialism of man versus the danger inherent to shirking off the trappings of civility. This indeterminate oscillation is in fact an important characteristic of Vladislavić's fiction. The sustained contestation between opposing forces, what has been referred to as a purposeful literary "undecideability"[616], means that Vladislavić cautions and queries, but does not reductively deduce or conclude. It comes as no surprise that the heady juggernaut of imperial-era industrialisation was accompanied by an antithetical desire for nature and the outdoors – i.e. the unrestrained wilderness of the untainted African landscape. The backdrop in Johannesburg, as Vladislavić contends, is always man-made. It is artificial in more ways than one. Its articulation is a decidedly European *rus in urbe*: nature was reintroduced to the city of Johannesburg in imported vegetation, parklands, and golf courses that followed an imperial sensibility of landscape. This colonial topographical imaginary set the tone for Johannesburg's future interventions in nature. However, this superimposition on the landscape, with its ever-thirsty alien trees and lush green grass, has been more recently replaced with an aesthetic that reflects the tones and sparseness of the Highveld grasslands – most noticeably along major traffic corridors on the always-growing periphery of the city. Suburbs like Kyalami and Broadacres, and developments like Century City, cannot affordably or sustainably perpetuate the European parklands of Saxonwold and Parkview and thus proffer a more situationally relevant aesthetic (sparsely treed savannah-type landscaped surrounds, thatched roofs, brick façades, stone cladding and earthy toned plasterings). However, these efforts, as shown in *The Exploded View*, are no less simulacral and synthetic than the imperial *rus in urbe* project.

*Portrait with Keys* satirically derides the simulacral and artificial ways in which nature is 'allowed' to enter the city. Nature is cursory in the city – it is diluted, sanitised, and confined to exist within certain parameters. However, as soon as the reader feels confident in having identified the target of Vladislavić's ridicule, the "undecideability" typical of his work comes to the fore. The butt of

614 Ibid, p.9.

615 Ibid, p.9.

616 A term gleaned and adapted from Gerald Gaylard's introduction to *Marginal Spaces* (2011), p.11.

the joke now turns ever-so-subtly towards the antinomical force. *Portrait with Keys* and *The Exploded View* warn against unrestrained romanticised hankerings for a bucolic past – these desires are shown up to be unrealistic, naïve and often commercially opportunistic. Nature in Johannesburg can be likened to a Disneyfied rendering of the so-called wild; like Crocodile Lodge, the romance of the wild has been manufactured in the studios of property developers and town planners. Our exposure to nature is informed by and contingent upon the machinations of man. However, 'real', raw nature – not the kind of nature that has been appropriated by Johannesburg – which is infused with qualities of "cyclicity", "self-renewability", a degree of unpredictability, and flux, is capable of subverting man's attempts to confer permanence and stability to his world, by showing up these constructions for what they are: sterile, sanitary, and lacking life.[617]

Yet Vladislavić's version of nature (as fully divorced from civilisation and the iterations advertised by property developers) does not always enjoy a positive gloss. For Vladislavić, idealistic pastoralism is also problematic. A return to nature, beyond the strangling confines of the civilised world, infers a disquieting revival of our inner nature. Our inner nature – perhaps our true nature as advanced animals, that which lurks beneath the façade of a cursory urbanity – is akin to our primeval roots. Unvarnished man would prove deleterious to the day-to-day functioning of so-called civilised society. Instead, to co-exist relatively peacefully we must pretend this side of ourselves does not exist. However, this dark inner nature continues to lurk in the shadows, haunting our present conception of ourselves as humans, penetrating through to the surface of our skin-deep civility.

Thus, what Vladislavić's fiction shows us is that the nature-civilisation binary is a relationship that exists by virtue of tension and conflict. Ultimately, it is perhaps intimated that these mutually exclusive opposites cannot be conflated because that would engender chaos. The "undecideability" of his fiction acknowledges that these two conflictual forces cannot and should not be hierarchically arranged; the binary sustains and ensures an imperfect sense of order – a see-saw which keeps each force in check. Ideally, the censure present in his work reminds his readers that their negotiation of city-space must be cognisant of the complexities of this civilisation-nature dichotomy. We escape the city (or plan a visit to the zoo) to experience nature, and yet the irony is that nature exists within us as humans, our natural habitat being the zoo city.

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[617] Gaylard, G. "Migrant Ecology in the Postcolonial City in *Portrait with Keys*: *Joburg and What-What*" in *Marginal Spaces: Reading.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.293.

Thus the presence of nature in the city goes beyond mere flora. In terms of fauna, this chapter has considered the semantic potential of zoo-keeping in Johannesburg. The zoological garden arose for a number of reasons, scientific study and conservation being the two primary reasons. However, one cannot view the zoo without addressing the fraught distinctions that exist between the human and the animal world. By virtue of a playful challenge to anthropocentric claims to superiority, *Portrait with Keys* blurs the neat, and perhaps illusory, taxonomies set up to delineate man from beast. Our conventions of civility are successfully undermined in the zoo-related portraits. Johannesburg is cast as an urban jungle, where the borders of the Zoo premises become nebulous and ill-defined. The violent crime that bedevils the city reminds city-dwellers that our primordial roots lie beneath a thin layer of urban sophistication – are we just unsettlingly closer to our baser desires in Johannesburg? Humans have wrapped themselves up in the trappings of urban refinement, but Vladislavić cheekily reveals that these delusions are convenient, nay necessary, fictions endorsed so that human society can sustain itself. *Portrait with Keys* begs the question of where the zoo ends and the city begins, because clear differentiations cease to exist. Indeed, the repressed shadow of our bestial roots returns from time-to-time to haunt the city's present conception of itself as a realm of order and organisation. However, what is key is that the zoo functions to instruct humans how to disassociate themselves from the beast within. The zoo operates as an educational construct: being in the presence of animals, humans are taught to become less bestial. In turn, humans learn to repress their inner animals by metaphorically archiving and packing these versions of self away on zoo grounds.

In more practical terms, zoos can make humans more humane by increasing their environmental and scientific literacy. William G. Conway writes that zoos have played an instrumental role in conscientising the public about ecology and animal rights. Aquariums, for instance, helped create awareness regarding the "indefensibly excessive slaughter" of whales; the public became concerned for these creatures partly because zoos and aquariums had turned these species into individuals; no longer was an "impersonal 'harvest'" of whales being culled, instead it was the "slaughter of the relatives of 'Bubbles' and 'Shamu.'"[618] Thus, following this logic, the presence of the city-zoo is instrumental to the functioning of the modern city. By virtue of one's proximity to animals, an exercise in relativity comes into play; the zoo perhaps informs and reminds city-inhabitants how not to act and thus how to be more effectively 'human' in order to fulfil their role as stewards of the Earth more befittingly.

[618] Conway, W.G. "Zoo and Aquarium Philosophy" in *Zoological Park and Aquarium Fundamentals*. (Ed. K. Sausman.) American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums: Wheeling, 1982, p.5.

This chapter has carefully considered the paradoxical way in which nature is at once subdued in simulacral Johannesburg, but then lurks in the shadows of the collective unconscious of its inhabitants. The deeper we go into the human psyche the more evident our primordial nature becomes. This repressed shadow unfettered by regulatory principles is marked by chaos, flux, and flow. Taking this project of urban exhumation to its logical denouement brings one to the force most akin to flow and flux in nature: the element of water. The next chapter will consider the implications behind the prevalence of water imagery in literary depictions of Johannesburg.

# Chapter Five: Diving the Reef

**Pool**

Where I'm deepest
You may discern
A few muddy secrets
My surface contains the whole sky.

– Lionel Abrahams[619]

In portrait 69 of *Portrait with Keys*, the narrator-flâneur encounters a young girl, dressed in a Jeppe Prep School uniform, walking towards him. This belies a quotidian suburban scene: this little girl would be perfectly ordinary if it were not for the fact that she wears a diving mask and snorkel. Suddenly, the narrator is plunged into her watery world as she snorkels "through the slanting sunlight" towards him (p.95). She cuts an idiosyncratic figure on this landlocked city street. His initial thoughts have her putting on a performance to benefit the spectators she passes on her walk home from school. Surely the incongruity of her dress-up suggests a purposefully humorous act? However, the face behind the "glass" of the mask "is serious" and "her eyes look out with the astounded, strained expression of a diver who has sunk below the surface for the first time and discovered a second world" (p.95). She gazes at the narrator as if he were a fish, "a creature covered in spines, trailing poisonous filaments, jagged with exotic colour", and she passes him, "moving slowly through the air, with bubbles of anxiety breaking around her" (p.95). Her earnestness is inversely proportionate to his bemusement, and he keeps expecting her to giggle when the charade is up. Instead, with her head "drifting slowly from one side to another", she "fords fearlessly" out into the river of traffic on Roberts Avenue (p.95). Her peculiar activity "submerges the world" with the narrator in it: "[t]he light streams like water over everything, the grass on the verges shifts in the currents of astonishment as I press on into the deep end of the city" (p.96). In following the Jeppe schoolgirl down the street, the narrator of *Portrait with Keys* extends the water inflected metaphor of the portrait by turning Johannesburg into a big swimming pool.

[619] Abrahams, L. "Pool" in *Lionel Abrahams: A Reader.* (Ed. P. Cullinan.) AD Donker: Craighall, 1988, p.31.

Johannesburg, "as people often remark, is one of the few major cities in the world that has no river, lake or ocean" (p.18). Ironically, it has a "reef, of course, but no diving" (p.18). Like Vladislavić, the little Jeppe schoolgirl is situated on an "accidental island" – an island formed by "geography and town planners", a rocky outcrop, with a gold reef lapping at its edges. The narrator, on his walks, appreciates how Johannesburg "surges and recedes like a tide" (p.18), and after days spent "combing its long shores while the weather drives currents through the veld" (p.46), he comes home "with shoes full of sand" (p.18). He holds the "shell of the city" to his ear, but the "roar" he hears signals "the absence of water" (p.18). He walks along something as "unnatural and persuasive as an extended metaphor" (p.18).

Paul, the narrator's friend, had a home on the cliff of Bellevue Street, which boasted a seaside view, but unfortunately no ocean to complement it. The view was misleading: lights on the Yeoville ridge twinkled "like beacons on a headland" and "the traffic on Kitchener Avenue in the valley below" with "a rubbery squish of tyres on tar, sounded very much like surf" (p.18). Likewise, driving on Stewart's Drive at night, which is flanked by a stonewall – "a seaside wall" (p.156), makes one "long for water in the dip below" (p.57).

Johannesburg, to Vladislavić, seems to promise water at every turn, and yet this wish is frustratingly and repeatedly deferred. Water, in Johannesburg, is rendered conspicuous by its absence. Why does Vladislavić constantly recycle and return to water imagery in his texts; what metaphorical purpose does it serve and how do we, as readers, make sense of the proliferation of water-inflected diction and description, especially in light of a context that is famously deprived of an adequate water source?

Historically speaking, most of the great cities and towns of antiquity were established in the immediate proximity of a natural body of water – whether lake, river, or ocean. That Johannesburg has departed from this urban custom does not only engender logistical constraints, it also colours metaphorical interpretations of the urban landscape. Charles van Onselen describes Johannesburg as a "concrete encrustation on a set of rocky ridges" lacking "fertile soil, striking natural vegetation, a lake, a mountain, a valley or even an attractive perennial stream."[620] That Johannesburg has to pump its main water from a distance of over fifty kilometres away means that, in geographic terms, the city is notoriously dry and dusty. Johannesburg seems to thirst for water, figuratively and literally. Like a mirage in the desert, the city seems to deceptively

[620] van Onselen, C. *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand 1886-1914*. Jonathan Ball Publishers: Johannesburg, 1982, p.ix.

herald the presence of water. And yet, at every turn, this yearning is denied and rebuffed, except perhaps in various expediently developed "theatres of consumption"[621] scattered across the Highveld. The figurative implications of this physical fact are multitudinous. For instance, in an image by artist Rodney Place, called "The Reef – Diver's Paradise" (2002), the cavity beneath Johannesburg's M1 highway is filled with water and shoals of fish.[622] Like Place's fantasy, various artistic projects based on the city paradoxically transmogrify this fundamental lack as metaphorical presence.

**Water as a Symbol**

In such figurative territory, water as a symbol enjoys polyvalent evocations. At a very basic level, the literary cipher of water relates to rebirth, regeneration, and renewal. Water nourishes bodies and fields alike. Spring rains rejuvenate and revitalise the natural world after the long hibernation of winter. Water is a giver of life in its most elementary sense. After all, it is a well-known fact that the human body can survive a number of weeks without food, but only a number of days without water.

Brian Bates observes how water plays an important role in our linguistic configurations, remarking that much of the "inner language of the waters has remained with us."[623] In English we speak about having "a stream of consciousness", we say "that we will brook no opposition" and when it is necessary, "we will pool our resources."[624] Other examples show that:

> Secrets leak out, and we plunge into new things. Or, at least, we dip our toe in the water. When we see an aesthetically pleasing aspect we drink it in, people are shallow or deep, and you cannot buck the tide. In fact, in dealing with life's issues, it never rains but it pours, and problems come in waves. We fish for a compliment, and throw the baby out with the bathwater. We overflow with emotion, and boil with rage. And, in going to a party, we hope to make a splash![625]

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621 Mbembe, A. "Aesthetics of Superfluity" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis.* (Eds. A. Mbembe and S. Nuttall.) Wits University Press: 2008, p.55.

622 Nuttall, S. "The Invisible City: Surface and Underneath in *Portrait with Keys*" in *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.336.

623 Bates, B. *The Real Middle Earth: Magic and Mystery in the Dark Ages.* Pan Books: London, 2003, p.139.

624 Ibid, p.139.

625 Ibid, p.139.

Bates argues that it is through these images that we see "ourselves at least metaphorically as being at one with water."[626]

The act of swimming is often found extremely therapeutic and soothing because it is said to be reminiscent of prenatal buoyancy in the amniotic sac; ergo water reminds us of the sanctuary of the womb. These calming properties of water can also be associated more generally with sleep: consider for a moment the fad of the waterbed and compact disc compilations and alarm clocks[627] that play sounds of running water[628], and perhaps, at a further remove, water is evocative of the long sleep, death. Being drawn into slumber is often likened to rocking on gentle waves. Neville Lister, in *Double Negative*, describes the childhood experience of falling asleep whilst reclining on the backseat of his father's Mercedes Benz as though the car was "rocking like a river barge on its soft suspension" (p.202).

Water, or the lack thereof, can be used to indicate climactic or seasonal change, as with the coming of spring rains, floods, or even drought, as well as transformation. With respect to its chemical properties, water goes through its own intrinsic metamorphosis in that it can transition from the solid state through to liquid and then to gas. From a Biblical perspective, water can be linked to spiritual transformation via baptismal rites. Alternatively, the symbol of water can suggest the archetypal flood – and so for Christians, water, birth, life and death, are intricately interwoven concepts. Water, in psychoanalytic discourse, stands as a metaphor of the unconscious. Jung uses the trope of looking into still, reflective water as a trope for peering into the depths of the unconscious, which exists beneath the mask of the persona. Since still water possesses reflective qualities like a mirror, a literary reading of mirror images calls to mind the intertext of the Narcissus myth – which, in turn, raises themes of self-awareness, self-reflexivity, and vanity. On the other hand, water does not always enjoy positive connotations. Floods, torrential rain, and tidal waves remind human beings of the destructive capacity of water. Water is safe when the confines of its repository prove stable. However, when these give way, the uncontained cascade has the propensity to bring about remarkable devastation or drowning. Again in literary terms, water can also be used to signify a different construction of temporal

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[626] Ibid, p.139.

[627] For instance, the "Sound Oasis Sound Therapy System" alarm clock sold by Serenity Health (which sells "Quality Fountain and Relaxation Products") comes fitted with "12 amazingly soothing sounds", including: "Ocean Surf, Rain, Stream … Thunderstorm", URL: http://www.serenityhealth.com/sound_oasis_sound_therapy_system/alarm_clock_s-650-p-2590-l-en.html. Date accessed: 2 November 2012.

[628] The sound of running water supposedly affords a feeling of serenity and relaxation to its meditative or sleeping listener.

order. Human beings impose the construct of anthropomorphic time on their world as a means of understanding their passage through life and their role on earth. However, when comparing human time against the seeming atemporality of seas and rivers, our lives, at least relatively speaking, appear even more alarmingly fleeting and transient. Our impact on the world is reduced in the face of grand elemental time.

Seawater carries with it various romantic and literary connotations too. It is symbolic of borders and limits and new frontiers. It can evoke the rigours of high adventure produced by both real and mythical journeys. The sea has featured prominently in a wide range of literary genres, not least adventure and travel literature, even from ancient times (e.g.: Homer's *The Odyssey*), and then with increasing prevalence during and after the Age of Discovery. Voyages across unchartered waters to exotic foreign lands fuelled centuries of imaginative works. The likes of Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, Herman Melville, and Joseph Conrad helped played into the popular fascination with the sea and the fruits of chartering its vast expanses bore. Passage by sea promises the discovery of new worlds and the concomitant treasures these new lands may yield.

This romance of the sea is particularly true for sea-starved Johannesburg. In portrait 65 of *Portrait with Keys* the narrator recalls a small room in a house he lived in many years ago. The reverie vividly conjures the sights and smells of the place. The small room belonged to a woman who "smelt like the sea" (p.90). A small still life of ordinary objects had been arranged on the "red-polished hearthstone" next to her bed, but their mysterious assemblage enchanted the narrator (p.90). A bricolage of items, intimating the seashore, such as "shells, sand dollars, perlemoen" and "twigs of coral" communed with "yellow gourds, cobs of Indian corn" (p.90). This magic interplay of "sheaves of grass", and "small unfired ceramic tiles that seem to have been split from the bed of a dried-up lake", "brought the sea into the room" (p.90). The narrator powerfully articulates the poignancy of this person and the refuge she provides for him in dry Johannesburg: "In a landlocked city, in a place with no water, I was swept away in the salt tides of her body" (p.90). Here, the woman's flesh is set against the promise of the replenishment of the sea – both are invoked in an intoxicating potpourri of desire. Rather tragically, this house, along with its little simulated desert island refuge, was demolished, and the levelled plot of land, paved into a dry, bricked parking lot. Regrettably for the narrator, this little sanctuary promising water in a landlocked city proved to be short lived.

**Johannesburg: An Unlikely Setting for the Sea Voyage Narrative**

Sixteenth and seventeenth century seafaring literature often carried the promise of various swashbuckling themes: far-flung lands 'waiting' to be colonised, exotic people to ogle and dominate, and treasure to loot. In this vein, William Plomer's poem, "Conquistadors"[629], adopts the trope of sixteenth-century seafaring Spaniards, in their guise as greedy conquerors of Mexico and Peru – and its Aztec and Inca gold, respectively – and transposes these associations onto the context of Gold Rush era Johannesburg. Incidentally, two versions of the poem exist: the second permutation is titled "Johannesburg", thus designating its subject matter more explicitly. The former version is more interesting for our purposes in that the diction is carefully inflected with naval and piratical terms, iconography and imagery deeply tied to the narrative of the sea and the voyages of discovery.

Plomer writes that when gold was discovered "Along the Rand in 'eighty-five" a "plundering city was born."[630] The prospectors, morally bereft "Cash-box conquistadors", "sailed the gilt-edged veld" looking to make their fortune.[631] They are described as having "prow-like breasts", upon which they wear "The order of the cartridge belt."[632] This scathing remark suggests that, like a ship's prow parting the seawater ahead of it, these iniquitous "pioneers" of the veld used their ignoble order, one backed by firepower, to get their way and get ahead.[633]

The poem caustically draws metaphoric parallels between the exploits of the Spanish conquistadors in their hunt for gold in Central America and the gold prospectors in Johannesburg. Despite the incongruity between these two very distinctive historical events, the rapacious desire for gold unites them. They bear similitude in the promise of plunder. The very romance of a voyage of discovery is that it anticipates a new frontier reached by virtue of a long sea voyage. The New World was one such frontier. Both enterprises, the voyages of discovery and the forces which founded Johannesburg, signalled colonial exercises of acquisition, the violent displacement and mastery of indigenous peoples, as well as the unquenchable thirst for material wealth and power. The boomtown of Johannesburg called pioneers to the shores of its gold-enriched reef, bewitching them with the promise of high adventure and material fortune.

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[629] Plomer, W. "Conquistadors" in *Collected Poems*. Jonathan Cape: London, 1973, p.18.

[630] Ibid, p.18.

[631] Ibid, p.18.

[632] Ibid, p.18.

[633] Ibid, p.18.

This aspect of Johannesburg's swashbuckling heritage as well as the colonial romance of the voyages of discovery are subtly channelled and subverted in Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*. Although a conspicuously city-based text, it shares various surprising formalistic similarities with sea voyage narratives. On the level of form, *Portrait with Keys* is structured as a travelogue, each episodic portrait detailing and chronicling a particular avenue, or perhaps canal, of the author-narrator's journey through the city of Johannesburg. This voyage is not one of grand or epic proportions, but rather an exploration of the marginal, "small, peripheral and incomplete."[634] The text follows an overarching bipartite structure, signalled by the headings of 'A' and 'B', which respectively separate the two parts. This structure helps to create linearity in a largely achronological novel that defies many other (comforting) traditional literary conventions. It also suggests a journey, progressing from A to B, from "departure to landfall."[635] The structural conjuration of a journey, as well as the repetitive dependency upon water imagery in describing the city of Johannesburg (e.g. even the Portuguese parish in Bez Valley "smacks appropriately of the sea" – p.125), playfully summons up the archetypal sea voyage narrative. The non-linear passage of time in the novel could be said to mimic the seafarer's complex notion of time as both "cyclical and linear." A sea voyage, like the novel, has clear "beginnings and endings … starting and stopping points in the unfolding of chronological time", yet time for a sailor is "also cyclical, just as the rhythm of the waves, because the pattern of a ship's daily routine, watch on and watch off, highlights endless recurrence."[636] For the narrator, life in and passage through the city brings with it many repetitions. The themed pathways through the book indexed by the "Itineraries" section at the end of the text suggest certain cycles where various motifs and images are repeated throughout the narrative. For instance, shop and armed response signs litter the text, which help to create a quotidian rotation of images, revealing a certain degree of continuity, but also the mundanity of city life.

Robert Faulke explains that sea narratives are predominantly about "exploration, discovery, and return."[637] To abstract further, "we embark on voyages not only to get somewhere but also to accomplish something, and, in Western culture, often to discover more about the ways in which human beings can expect to fare in the world."[638] While it may seem rather absurd to liken a book about Johannesburg to the genre of the sea voyage narrative, a number of ironic similarities

[634] Gaylard, G. Introduction to *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.1.

[635] Foulke, R. *The Sea Voyage Narrative*. Routledge: New York, 2002, p.9.

[636] Ibid, p.9.

[637] Ibid, p.10.

[638] Ibid, p.10.

exist. The narrator of *Portrait with Keys* embarks upon a journey to rediscover a city he has lived in for most of his life. While one would expect the narrator to be familiar with this space, and thus his meanderings rather commonplace, the constantly changing face of the city means that he struggles to come to terms with a city that appears to be in ceaseless motion. Herman Charles Bosman famously and repeatedly decried the way in which Johannesburg shirks off its ties with history, taking "pride in obliterating the architectural remnants of [its] past."[639] More recently, John Matshikiza has been even more sardonic about the "screenplay in progress" of the "ever-changing", "unfinished movie" of Johannesburg.[640]

For Martin J. Murray, Johannesburg is a "place that cannot be truly grasped in its entirety as some kind of fixed or stable whole, since its morphological form, its places, and its people are in constant motion, continuously changing and evolving in ways both planned and unplanned, anticipated and unanticipated."[641] For critics and authors alike, Johannesburg is a city in flux. Change, destruction, and renewal are common forces in all major cities around the world, but it would seem that in Johannesburg, these are far more prevalent and more detrimental, endowing "the urban landscape with a contingency and elusiveness that make it difficult to classify, categorize, and define."[642] Thus, finding comparative elements between Johannesburg and the sea may not be too ludicrous a figurative project after all.

As Lindsay Bremner notes, Johannesburg "never reveals itself all at once" as "it refuses to submit to a reductive logic."[643] In this way, it is like the ocean: vast, formidable, incommensurable, and unknowable. It is a difficult city to pre-empt aesthetically and theoretically. Johannesburg, like the ocean, is unfathomable. In such precarious and hazardous conditions one's success in acts of self-preservation is invariably provisional. Like the chartering of a sea voyage, Johannesburg is difficult to anticipate and navigate, in both conceptual and practical respects.

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639 Bosman, Herman Charles. 1986. "The Standard Theatre" in *Bosman's Johannesburg*. Ed. S. Gray (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau), p.70.

640 Matshikiza, J. "Instant City" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*. (Eds. A. Mbembe and S. Nuttall.) Wits University Press: 2008, p.222.

641 Murray, M.J. *Taming the Disorderly City: The Spatial Landscape of Johannesburg after Apartheid*. University of Cape Town Press: Cape Town, 2008, p.vii.

642 Ibid, p.viii.

643 Bremner, L. *Writing the City into Being*: *Essays on Johannesburg 1998-2008*. Fourthwall Books: Johannesburg, 2010, p.1.

The narrator negotiating Johannesburg in *Portrait with Keys* is moreover analogous to sailors navigating the sea, in that their watery world "demands keen senses because they live on an unstable element that keeps their home in constant motion, sometimes soothing them with a false sense of security, sometimes threatening to destroy them."[644] This conflict between threat and comfort is distinctly manifest in *Portrait with Keys*' representation of Johannesburg. The tension between the city as home and haven versus "crime city" – a "security-obsessed dystopia"[645] – pervades both critical and creative disquisitions about life in Johannesburg. *Portrait with Keys*, especially, considers this quandary as it chronicles "the alarmed city" with its "keynotes" of "alarms, keys, locks."[646] Seafarers' attitudes to the sea are "usually quite complex and contradictory, built around polarities of awe and fear, ennui and anxiety, exaltation and despair."[647] Like the sea, Johannesburg to Vladislavić, "both attracts and repels us, calling us to high adventure … threatening to destroy us through its indifferent power."[648]

The evocation of sea voyage metaphors leaks into other texts. In *The Restless Supermarket*, Aubrey Tearle remarks that he unfortunately does not cut the figure of a "debonair sea-captain", but rather a "shabby deckhand … a fogram" (p.14). Later on in the novel, after some hullaballoo at the Café Europa, Tearle finds himself back at his customary table, feeling "like some stormtossed craft back at its moorings" (p.134). This language seems cheekily borrowed from the likes of Joseph Conrad in narratives such as *The Nigger of "Narcissus"* (1897) and *Typhoon* (1902). In *Double Negative*, Neville Lister imagines Dr Pinheiro's nose sticking up as a "skeg" while he sleeps (p.101) and he ruminates that the doctor's illness may have "scuppered" the couple's plans for travel – which had been carefully plotted out on the atlas by marking "their ports of call" (p.102). A few pages later, Lister describes his mother's Illovo-apartment balcony as a "sunlit cabin" (p.104). Then there's the cover art, which further extends the seafaring theme. Taken from a David Goldblatt photograph (which can also be found in the novel's non-collaborative, but co-published counterpart, *TJ*), the haunting quality of the black and white photo depicts a mirrored sailing boat tacked to a roughly plastered wall. This 1977 photograph was taken on the landing of the Docrat home in Fietas before the home's "destruction under the

[644] Foulke, R. *The Sea Voyage Narrative*. Routledge: New York, 2002, p.9.

[645] Mbembe, A. and Nuttall, S. "Writing the World from an African Metropolis" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*. *Public Culture*. 16:3, 2004, p.367.

[646] Accone, D. "Poet of Social Change", *Mail and Guardian*, 28 July 2006. URL: http://mg.co.za/article/2006-07-28-poet-of-social-change. Date accessed: 11 January 2014.

[647] Foulke, R. *The Sea Voyage Narrative*. Routledge: New York, 2002, p.2.

[648] Ibid, p.2.

Group Areas Act."[649] The image has been cropped to accommodate the portrait orientation of the novel's physical dimensions. The sailing boat is positioned on the top left-hand corner of the page, drifting in the doldrums of the blank wall. It is a striking image for the mirror is small and is comparatively dwarfed by negative space, and thus ties in with the wordplay of the title.

I find the decision to use this image for the cover of *Double Negative* striking. The sailboat is evocative of the sea voyage; mythically and poetically, it is a vehicle that embarks upon journeys across previously uncharted waters and facilitates passage to new wonders and discoveries. Likewise, *Double Negative* embarks on a type of voyage into the past – a pilgrimage – as an attempt to reconcile that past with an uncomfortable present. However, this voyage is not one of Homerian proportions, but rather a voyage into discovering the marginal and inconclusive. The surrounding wall, the dark and threatening negative space, the sea that threatens to swallow the sailboat, can be likened to the doldrums experienced by the protagonist, Neville Lister, in his accidental and somewhat aimless vocation as a photographer. That the wall-hanging takes the shape of a sailboat is not the only interesting aspect of the photograph in relation to the text; it also doubles as a mirror. Since the novel charts the lives of various photographers over the course of one man's rather unremarkable life, the issue of reflection is an important one. Photography purports to reflect reality mimetically back to itself, but the novel as well as Vladislavić's story "The WHITES ONLY Bench" reveal that photographs often conceal the politics of their own production. Pushing the metaphor further, the water imagery tied to the symbol of the mirrored sailboat is further significant in that the surface of still water allows the viewer to see their own image as well as their surrounds reflected back to them. The novel embarks upon a self-reflexive journey that interrogates Lister's questioning of his own and others' self-production. Essentially, the entire novel's preoccupation with photography as an artistic medium considers the broader issue of representation and mimesis. The title, both a linguistic and photographic pun, may shed some light on what the novel says about this project of representation. A double negative negates meaning by pairing two tautological and grammatically incorrect negatives in a single sentence. Two negatives when taken together cancel each other out. A photographic negative refers to the piece of transparent plastic film that captures the light and dark tones (or colours) of an image, but in an inverted way. If we combine the linguistic and photographic meanings together, the title can perhaps be interpreted as a warning for the way in which photographs should not be automatically taken to stand as a slice of life. As the text warns, "[s]ometimes photographs annihilate memory; they swallow the

[649] Goldblatt, D. *TJ*. Umuzi: Cape Town, 2010, p.172.

available light and cast everything around them into shadow" (p.87). The photograph, in mirroring, but inverting real life, risks cancelling out the latter. For Lister, although photographs might be laden with experiences and memories, they primarily signal ones "held there in suspension, in chemically altered form" (p.87). Photographs are dangerous when they work to "annihilate", suspend, or replace the lived experiences behind them. Susan Sontag in *On Photography* concurs: as "[a] way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refuting it, by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image…"[650]

Johannesburg sea iconography is subtly perpetuated in another Goldblatt photograph (which also appears in *TJ*). This photo features a yacht absurdly situated on an open plot of land between suburban houses on 5th Street, Orange Grove.[651] The boat is not only beached, but also stranded in a landlocked city. It carries a forgotten air about it; installed upon iron supports, wild veld grass has started to reclaim the struts, growing up and over the supports, working its way slowly up to the boat above, starkly reminding the viewer of its discordance. The incongruity of this image seems to speak potently, albeit non-directly, to the prevalence of water imagery that can be found in aesthetic and literary representations of Johannesburg. Depicting Johannesburg by means of water metaphors seems to merely draw further attention to this respective lack. Johannesburg's scarcity of water has always been a much-documented facet of its urban geography.

**The Johannesburg Sea**

In guidebooks and brochures, Johannesburg is often touted as the "world's largest city not built on or near a major water source." [652] Veronique Tadjo, in her prose poem, "Eyes Wide Open", contemplates Joburg's aridity:

> No river runs through her body of steel. Man-made city. No river to lick the dryness of her skin. No lagoon. No lake to adorn her face and make her features softer, gentler, kinder to the inhabitants.[653]

[650] Sontag, S. *On Photography*. Rosetta Books: New York, 1973, p.6.

[651] Goldblatt, D. *TJ*. Umuzi: Cape Town, 2010, p.149.

[652] Author unknown. "City of Johannesburg", *Joburg Tourism*, 2012. URL: http://www.joburgtourism.com/about-joburg-tourism/city-of-joburg. Dates accessed: 24 October 2012.

This representation is not unusual. Johannesburg is often cast as a dry and barren place, hostile and insalubrious. For Tadjo, its shortage of water is allegorised as parched skin, with no "lick" (i.e. "No lagoon. No lake…") to moisten it. Joburg, by virtue of this lack, is rendered hard and unforgiving, unadorned, and harsh to its inhabitants.

This pervasive sense of lack, this painful absence, has been a concern since the founding of the Highveld boomtown. Despite the fact that twelve minor river systems run through Johannesburg, these proved insufficient to satisfy the needs of a burgeoning metropolis. The early efforts of the Johannesburg Water Works Company were further hindered by the Great Drought of 1895.[654] In a desperate attempt to locate a more adequate supply of good drinking water, the same year saw the appointment of the Water Works Commission, which eventually led to the establishment of the Rand Water Board in 1903.[655] Initially, groundwater from the Zuurbekom Wells (on the West Rand) – accessed via a borehole – supplied water to the growing city but, soon, even this water source could not meet the requirements of the growing population.[656] The Vaal River, situated fifty-six kilometres south of Johannesburg, became the next viable solution and so measures were taken by Rand Water to dam the river in 1923 (which accordingly formed the Vaal River Barrage Reservoir).[657] "In 1938 the Vaal Dam was built upstream of the Vaal River Barrage Reservoir, which is now the main source of water for Rand Water."[658] However, due to the deteriorating quality of the water in the Vaal River Barrage Reservoir attributable to increasing levels of pollution, new river transfer schemes have been initiated.[659] To keep up with the Witwatersrand's ever-increasing demand, water is now moved from catchment areas that feed the Thukela-Vaal Water Transfer Scheme (e.g. Sterkfontein Dam which is located in the Drakensburg region) and the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (e.g. Katse Dam in Lesotho).[660]

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653 Tadjo, V. "Eyes Wide Open" in *From Jo'burg to Jozi*. (Eds. H. Holland and A. Roberts.) Penguin: Johannesburg, 2010, p.261.

654 Author unknown. "Water Origination", *Rand Water*. URL: http://www.randwater.co.za/CorporateResponsibility/WWE/Pages/WaterOrigination.aspx. Date accessed: 24 October 2012.

655 Ibid.

656 Ibid.

657 Ibid.

658 Ibid.

659 Ibid.

660 Author unknown. "Where does our Water Come From?", *Water Wise*, 2013. URL: http://www.waterwise.co.za/site/water/purification/. Date accessed: 6 November 2013.

Johannesburg Water, an independent company that buys potable water in bulk from Rand Water, prides itself on supplying good quality water to approximately 3.8 million people.[661] In 2010, Johannesburg Water "won the 'Blue Drop' award from the Department of Water Affairs, which said the city had the cleanest water nationally and ranked among the world's best."[662] Despite boasting some of the cleanest potable water in the world, many people who live in the underdeveloped townships on the periphery of Johannesburg do not enjoy the luxury of having tap water access in their homes. Thus, even though many city-dwellers enjoy good quality drinking water, pumped over a distance of fifty kilometres or more, this luxury is not enjoyed unanimously or equitably.

Despite the scarcity of water in and around the city, it is interesting from a lexical perspective that the region's name, as well as many suburbs' names, insinuates watery origins. For instance, the Witwatersrand region, which denotes the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan area, translates from Afrikaans into English as "the ridge of white waters." Keith Beavon in his urban geographical history of the city, *Johannesburg: The Making and Shaping of the City*, writes that:

> Notwithstanding the absence of any substantial rivers the north-facing scarps of the Witwatersrand are the source area for a number of small streams or brooks, often referred to in South Africa as spruits, after the Afrikaans *spruit*, fed by storm waters which, in the past, cascaded freely down the ridges of the Witwatersrand during and after thunderstorms in the summer months. The waters of those spruits, unlike those of the muddy rivers farther to the north and south, were clear and rapidly flowing 'white waters'. An alternative explanation for the term *Ridge of White Waters*, or *Witwatersrand*, is attributed to nineteenth-century *boers* (Afrikaner farmers) who had noticed that from a distance the reddish-brown quartzite on the northern face of the ridges, when wet and struck by the rays of the 'south-facing' sun, appeared glistening white in colour.[663]

The Witwatersrand, a long broken ridge that spans a distance of fifty-six kilometres, forms a watershed "for streams draining into two river systems and two oceans"[664] – the water that runs off the southern edge eventually drains into the Atlantic Ocean (running off and joining the Vaal,

[661] Author unknown. "Johannesburg: Our Water is Safe", *Mail & Guardian*, 27 May 2010. URL: http://mg.co.za/article/2010-05-27-johannesburg-our-water-is-safe. Date accessed: 24 October 2012.

[662] Ibid.

[663] Beavon, K. *Johannesburg: The Making and Shaping of the City*. UNISA Press: Pretoria, 2004, p.4.

[664] Ibid, p.3

then the Orange River before eventually emptying into the Atlantic) and the northern water into the Indian Ocean (entering the Limpopo River before reaching its oceanic destination).[665]

Before the discovery of gold on the Rand, the Witwatersrand region, part of which, from September 1886 onwards, would be known as Johannesburg, consisted of veld and farmland. After the Great Trek, white farmers began to settle the land of the recently established ZAR (Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek). For a white male to obtain a farm, all he had to do was find a tract of 'uninhabited' land and register his claim at the local *landrost's* (magistrate) office by describing the boundaries in terms of its surrounding natural landmarks.[666] Beavon notes that

> many of the first farms to be selected were located around a source of fresh water, a considerable asset in that area. The water source might be a little river (*rivier*), a stream or brook (*spruit*), a spring (*fontein*), or a wetland (*vlei)* … Those Dutch or Afrikaans terms would frequently be reflected as a suffix to the name of the farm, the root word of which was often the name or surname of the farmer or the name of the physical feature, an animal, or even a plant that occurred on the farm.[667]

Witwatersrand farm names that linguistically foregrounded the presence of a water source in the immediate vicinity, many of which now form part of the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan area, where their old pastoral nomenclatures now designate suburban areas can be listed as follows: Braamfontein ("Braam being a contraction of Abraham, hence 'Abraham's spring'"[668]), Doornfontein, Turffontein, Roodepoort[669], Elandsfontein (now called Germiston), Wilgespruit, and Witpoortjie amongst others. Even though many of these small *spruits* and springs have been covered by roads and blocked by rubble, the watery names persist. Despite the relatively dry geographical landscape, on a linguistic level, Johannesburg's various suburban names deceptively promise the respite of water.

Considering that modern day Johannesburg is a thirsty[670] town, it seems historically ironic that the entire region was submerged under a body of seawater between 2900 and 2700 million years

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665 Ibid, p.3

666 Ibid, p.18.

667 Ibid, p.19.

668 Ibid, p.19.

669 The Afrikaans *poort*, in English, means 'gorge'.

670 "Rand Water produces some 3 000 million litres of water a day."

ago. Three thousand million years ago, proto-continents called cratons collided with each other (specifically, for our purposes, the Zimbabwe and the Kaapvaal landmasses), to produce mountains. In turn, this process of orogeny or mountain-building brought about a basin. Since these ancient mountains existed before the formation of the atmosphere, and moreover, boasted no vegetation, they were subjected to rigorous erosion and degradation. Streams carried "large volumes of sediment" south "by rapidly flowing water and deposited [it] in what we now term the Witwatersrand Sea, the shoreline of which extended approximately between where Rustenburg and southern Lesotho are today."[671] This sediment, transported in alluvial fans, was deposited in layers over a period of 360 million years. It eventually reached a thickness of eight kilometres in depth, forming a strata of shale, quartzite, and conglomerate, "in which particles of gold associated with the mountain-building and erosion process had been trapped."[672] The gold connected with the phenomenon of orogeny "was trapped mainly in the younger layers, which consequently today form part of the southern set of strata underlying modern Johannesburg."[673]

Then 2023 million years ago, an asteroid collided with the Earth, finding its impact zone ten kilometres east of, what is today, the town of Vredefort. The monumental impact of the asteroid created a crater three hundred kilometres in diameter.

> The crater churned up and melted the subterranean layers of rock and created the geological shape of an upturned bowl. The natural upliftment from below of sediments from the ancient rivers had become sandstone layers of what was once the bottom of the sea.[674]

The effect of the asteroid's impact was to effectively push the gold-bearing reef closer to the surface. This geological event explains why the gold-mining towns on the Rand, Johannesburg included, are all situated along this "curved reef of ridges."[675]

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From: Author unknown. "Tap Water's as Good as Bottled", *Joburg: A World Class African City*, 2012, URL: http://www.joburg.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=402&Itemid=52#ixzz2ADKFzb30. Date accessed: 24 October 2012.

Although this daily amount services five provinces, the Johannesburg, Ekurhuleni, and Tswane Metropolitan areas consume about seventy-five percent of that total quantity.

From: Author unknown. "Consumption Patterns", *Rand Water*. URL: http://www.randwater.co.za/WaterAndInfastructureManagement/Pages/ConsumptionPatterns.aspx. Date accessed: 24 October 2012.

[671] Beavon, K. *Johannesburg: The Making and Shaping of the City*. UNISA Press: Pretoria, 2004, p.5.

[672] Ibid, p.5.

[673] Ibid, p.5.

[674] Callinicos, L. *Who Built Jozi? Discovering Memory at Wits Junction*. Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2012, p.47.

[675] Ibid, p.47.

Thus, when the Earth was still a nascent entity, the region where Johannesburg now stands was home to a gold-depositing sea. Via this rather reductive geological exegesis, it can be said that it was the Witwatersrand Sea that gave us gold. So, as much as Johannesburg's environs have proved largely inhospitable to host a city of its magnitude due to the lack of water, the reason we find ourselves here in the first place, gold, was deposited here thanks to the profusion of water. Ironically, where once there was abundance, there is now an appreciable lack. And yet, a signature of this sea's erstwhile presence is lodged within the auriferous deposits that triggered the city's founding. Humorously then, Johannesburg "has a reef, of course, but no diving" (*Portrait with Keys*, p.18).

**Water and Identity**

Since its early days, Johannesburg has and continues to be plagued by issues regarding the adequate provision of drinkable water. This contestation between the absence and contingent presence of water colours many imaginative projects that take their inspiration from the city of Joburg. In Lionel Abrahams's poem "Thoughts on Johannesburg's Centenary (while by the Jukskei River at Broederstroom)"[676], the speaker reflects upon Johannesburg's "hundred-year-old course":

> There is no city as old as a river,
>
> as old as this minor stream
>
> whose millennia have sculpted the veld.
>
> The wiser cities lie down with great rivers
>
> to learn what rivers teach of time.
>
> or with the timelessness of seas;
>
> but my city's mazed metal of hurried streets
>
> has buried the small white waters.[677]

[676] Abrahams, L. (1986) "Thoughts on Johannesburg's Centenary (while by the Jukskei River at Broederstroom)" in *From Jo'burg to Jozi.* (Eds. H. Holland and A. Roberts.) Penguin: Johannesburg, 2010, pp.13-15.

[677] Ibid, p.13.

In the first stanza, the speaker contemplates the city's past by accessing grand historical narratives of ancient cities – which far outstrip Johannesburg in age and majesty. The "wiser cities", we are told, "lie down with great rivers / to learn what rivers teach of time." Johannesburg, however, has ignored this lesson, by lying down with the Jukskei – "old" yes, but merely a "minor stream." He considers it inappropriate that Johannesburg was established without any concern for this ancient knowledge – not heeding what could be learnt from the timelessness associated with seas and rivers. Abrahams calls upon this water imagery as emblematic of wisdom and eternity. The seas and rivers have withstood millennia – they are symbolic of elemental time, that which transcends the transience of human epistemology and experience. Something should be learnt from their time-honoured ways.

The speaker laments that his "wandering clan"[678] (most likely an autobiographical reference to Abrahams's Lithuanian Jewish roots) deprived him of "one of those old wise cities to be born in."[679] The speaker feels robbed that he could not live out his life in a city where memory and history have taken root in the concrete streets[680]; instead, they gave him to the "raw spawn of payable load", which attracted "loose acquisitive pioneers" (a veiled reference to Plomer's "Conquistadors" and "Johannesburg"), the "chancers and transients" drawn to "unhistoric farms and hills." [681] Johannesburg is a place of "cheap renewal" with "hollow roots"[682] – afflicted with unceremonious reinvention as "it eats and tears itself … renews … renews …"[683] The speaker questions, "how can you love what changes too swiftly" as Johannesburg "too swiftly changes and changes again."[684] He remarks that while "A river is momently different, and daily", the "slow living banks" continue to "hold the shape of memory."[685] In other words, despite the continuous flow, "the self can stay while the river runs."[686] However, Johannesburg's "straight streets hardly / survive their shouting rivers of traffic" – it is a "place that owes too little to

678 Ibid, p.13.

679 Ibid, p.13.

680 An adaptation of a famous line from Abrahams's poem "The Fall of Van Eck House" - Abrahams, L. "The Fall of Van Eck House" in *Lionel Abrahams: A Reader.* (Ed. P. Cullinan.) AD Donker: Craighall, 1988, pp.40-1.

681 Abrahams, L. (1986) "Thoughts on Johannesburg's Centenary (while by the Jukskei River at Broederstroom)" in *From Jo'burg to Jozi.* (Eds. H. Holland and A. Roberts.) Penguin: Johannesburg, 2010, p.14.

682 Ibid, p.14.

683 Ibid, p.15.

684 Ibid, p.14.

685 Ibid, p.14.

686 Ibid, p.14.

time"[687] and "too much to appetite and rage."[688] The poem delicately inscribes a complex interplay between the city and the river, which evokes associations attached to time and history, memory and selfhood (in other words the persistence of identity over time). Johannesburg, unlike older and wiser cities, seems to have degraded this vital interrelationship. The redolence of the fourth stanza's imagery calls to mind the philosophical conundrum of Heraclitus' River, which questions the continuity of identity with the passage of time.

Heraclitus drew upon the metaphor of the constantly flowing waters of a river to substantiate his claim that "All is in flux":

> Into the same river … we go down and we do not go down; for into the same river no man can enter twice; ever it flows in and flows out.[689]

According to Plato, Heraclitus asserted, "all things are in process and nothing stays still, and likening existing things to the stream of a river he says that into the same river you could not step twice."[690] W.T. Stace in a *Critical History of Greek Philosophy* writes that, for Heraclitus, the river indicates that:

> Nothing is ever the same, nothing remains identical from one consecutive moment to another. The appearance of relative permanence is an illusion, like that which makes us think that a wave passing over the surface of the water remains all the time the same identical wave. Here, as we know, the water of which the wave is composed changes from moment to moment, only the form remaining the same.[691]

S. Marc Cohen writes that this position raises "puzzles about identity and persistence" – particularly "under what conditions does an object persist through time as one and the same object?"[692] In Plato's interpretation of Heraclitus, since the waters are different, one effectively cannot step into the same river twice. However, the flux doctrine holds that even though the

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[687] Ibid, p.14.

[688] Ibid, p.15.

[689] Per Heraclitus, in: Stace, W.T. *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy*. Macmillan: London, 1924, p.74.

[690] Per Plato's *Cratylus* from Ferber, M. "River" in *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. (2nd Ed.) Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2007, p.172 (Kindle eBook).

[691] Stace, W.T. *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy*. Macmillan: London, 1924, p.74.

[692] Cohen, S.M. "Identity, Persistence, and the Ship of Theseus" from *History of Ancient Philosophy*. University of Washington, 2004. URL: http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/theseus.html. Date accessed: 25 October 2012.

waters that flow through it are different from one moment to the next, it is still the same river.[693] In other words, it sustains a paradox, a "unity of opposites", which points to the ways in which "things are both the same and not the same over time."[694] Abrahams's poem appears to be sensitive to this paradox. He acknowledges that although a river is "momently different and daily", its "slow living banks" manage to "hold the shape of memory."[695] These lines seem to appreciate that old cities, like the great rivers they lie down with, are subject to change and transformation. Notwithstanding the changes that the cities and their rivers undergo, there is something which insists that their identities persist through time.

However, this is not the case with Johannesburg. Here, Joburg is shown to brazenly exceed the 'reasonable' bounds of the paradox. It has suffocated the Jukskei with the "mazed metal" of its "hurried streets"[696] and its changes are so violent and irrevocable that its streets can "hardly / survive their shouting rivers of traffic."[697] There is no major river to remind us of the continuity of Johannesburg's identity over time. For Abrahams, identity and memory are deeply bound up and connected to the edifices of the built environment, which exist around us. Johannesburg, however, continually changes itself, without any referent or touchstone to which we can infer its origins or an earlier version of itself. Like in "The Fall of Van Eck House"[698] – where "Memory takes root only half in the folds of the brain: / half's in the concrete streets we have lived along"[699] – the juggernaut of change erases identity and so even the city inhabitant's selfhood is imploded as the city "amputates" its own "flesh of dreams."[700]

However, if we approach this from a different angle, one could argue that perhaps Abrahams is slightly too heavy-handed in his critique of Johannesburg. Heraclitus also argued that concepts

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693 "Heraclitus' flux doctrine is a special case of the unity of opposites, pointing to ways things are both the same and not the same over time."

From: Graham, D.W."Heraclitus", *Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2011. URL: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/#Flu. Date accessed: 25 October 2012.

694 Graham, D.W."Heraclitus" from *Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2011. URL: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/#Flu. Date accessed: 25 October 2012.

695 Abrahams, L. (1986) "Thoughts on Johannesburg's Centenary (while by the Jukskei River at Broederstroom)" in *From Jo'burg to Jozi.* (Eds. H. Holland and A. Roberts.) Penguin: Johannesburg, 2010, p.14.

696 Ibid, p.13.

697 Ibid, p.14.

698 Abrahams, L. "The Fall of Van Eck House" in *Lionel Abrahams: A Reader.* (Ed. P. Cullinan.) AD Donker: Craighall, 1988, pp.40-41.

699 Ibid, p.41.

700 Ibid, p.41.

like 'permanence' and 'identity' are illusory; instead everything is in a process of "becoming."[701] This aspect of the Heraclitus thought experiment seems more in tune with the nature of Vladislavić's fictional project of writing the city. His genre-spanning, polyvalent, and nebulous work, which celebrates flow, recognises even on the level of form that Johannesburg is a city in a constant state of flux. The constantly flowing waters of Heraclitus' symbolic river ironically suggest that Johannesburg's defining identity is that it is always in a state of becoming.

In *Double Negative*, Neville Lister undergoes an experience, which similarly links the symbolism of running alluvial water with the subject of identity. Lister, while still in self-imposed exile in the United Kingdom, joins a throng of *émigrés* outside South Africa House adjoining London's Trafalgar Square to vote in South Africa's first democratic elections in April 1994. He describes the experience of being in the proximity of his long lost brethren's accents as "silt" deposited in his ears. He soon flees the scene to immerse himself in a crowd of tourists so that a "babble of other tongues could wash the South African silt from his ears" (p.77). This passage's description, and its particular linguistic conveyance, enjoys a degree of parity with Abrahams's thematic concerns. Water is used as the figurative conduit of memory, belonging, and identity. For Lister, the "broken shale of South African English" (p.76) leaves a deposit in his ears – a familiar reminder of his roots and the collective self which "stay[s] while the river runs."[702] He wonders if his own accent will have been "worn smooth by ten years of English weather", effectively washing out the South African sediment (p.77), and concomitantly, his sense of belonging to a place he once called home. For this reason, he finds the "broken shale" "reassuring and threatening all at once" (p.76).

**"Dead Water" and Rivers of Metal**

For Kevin Bloom, like Vladislavić, water in Johannesburg is made conspicuous by its absence. In *Ways of Staying*[703] he appreciates the vista afforded by the west koppie of The Wilds. As his eyes take in the scenery the gushing he hears below, promises water. However, this portent is fallacious; this river is not one of flowing waters, but rather a river of traffic: it "boils over" with "taxis and cars hooting and surging and growling" (p.9). "This is not a quiet river", he tells us

[701] Stace, W.T. *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy*. Macmillan: London, 1924, p.73.

[702] Abrahams, L. (1986) "Thoughts on Johannesburg's Centenary (while by the Jukskei River at Broederstroom)" in *From Jo'burg to Jozi.* (Eds. H. Holland and A. Roberts.) Penguin: Johannesburg, 2010, p.14.

[703] Bloom, K. *Ways of Staying*. Picador: Johannesburg, 2009.

(p.9). It is an artery feeding the city, bringing its own kind of nourishment. However, when he crosses the bridge which spans the flow of traffic in order to reach the parking lot, this experience – albeit expressed via the constructs of watery metaphor – has been entirely devoid of this very substance. Similarly, the statistician Budlender in "Villa Toscana" from *The Exploded View* looks down over the freeway from his vantage point afforded by the Star Shop Egoli restaurant which straddles the highway and describes what he sees in relation to water-inflected diction and imagery. It is a "perch made for a statistician" as he is "suspended above a great demographic flow, like a boy on a bridge dangling a hook and a line, waiting for rush hour to thicken" (p.15). He watches "the stream of traffic", appreciating the "wash" of colours that float like "ripples" on "the surface…" (p.15).

It is trenchant that the absence of water is accentuated and conceptualised by this particular province of metaphorical language. The city, here, is nourished by a complex network of logistics – tributaries of hot tar and beaten metal having replaced the free-flowing waters of the natural stream. Johannesburg's artificiality and simulacral qualities have been discussed in previous chapters of this thesis, and both come into play where the city's water is concerned. The narrator in *Portrait with Keys* satirically reports that:

> Johannesburg is justly renowned for its scenic waterways. The finest body of water in my part of town is generally held to be the pond at Rhodes Park, established when the city was young on the site of an existing vlei, but I have always preferred Bruma Lake, which replaced the old sewage treatment works on the banks of the Jukskei. (pp.93-94)

The narrator informs us that Bruma lake has been drained a number of times over the years, most recently in 2000 and 2001 when bodies were discovered in the water – prompting the police to empty the lake in their efforts to find clues about the Bruma serial killers. Consequently, this effort was "a salutary reminder that the lake was artificial, that it was nothing but a reservoir lined in plastic" (p.94). Oddly, the narrator found the "reeking muddy hole… fiercely reassuring" and was almost disappointed "when the frogmen and the waders in gumboots had finished scouring the silty bottom, in vain" and the "thing was filled up with water again" (p.94).

Bruma Lake is not the only man-made waterhole in Johannesburg. Joburgers are

> happy taking in the air on the Randburg Waterfront, with its pasteboard wharves and masts, or watching the plastic ducks bob in the stream at Montecasino, or eating surf 'n turf on Cleopatra's Barge in the middle of Caesar's. (p.94)

The Randburg Waterfront – now relaunched as the refurbished Brightwater Commons (with a much reduced waterscape) – was a peculiar example. Built in 1996, it consisted of a shopping complex built around an artificial lake fed by the Jukskei River – the space for which had been formed out of a natural basin provided by Randburg's President Ridge.[704] All the surrounding stores were designed along a nautical theme and the environment attempted to evoke a harbour and warehouse setting. The lake 'facility' offered a series of non-motorised water sports for patrons. For a time, it served as Johannesburg's prosaic analogue of Cape Town's Victoria and Alfred Waterfront (a real waterfront that overlooks Cape Town Harbour). Its somewhat pathetic mimicry showed, in relief, Johannesburg's lack of a substantial natural water source. Similarly, when The Glen Shopping Centre first opened – a large European-inspired citadel situated in the southern suburbs of the city – its entertainment section featured a large outdoor dam replete with a restaurant situated in a concrete boat. It is interesting that both centres have undergone significant remodelling in that their respective water features have been downgraded – reduced to artificial cascades and fountains, and largely replaced by landscaped lawns and gardens. Perhaps Joburg's recreational hankering for water has abated somewhat in the past decade? This might have something to do with Johannesburg's relentless preoccupation with the 'new' and waterscapes are now simply passé. However, I think the cost factor involved in maintaining extensive water features is probably a more convincing reason for the aforementioned revamps.

Once Bruma Lake has been refilled, the narrator and Minky, one night after dinner "down on the quay at Fisherman's Village", decide to take a "stroll over the little pedestrian replica of the Golden Gate Bridge" (p.94). As they cross over the bridge, they watch "the reflections dancing on the dead water" (p.94). The quay and the bridge replica tie in directly with the simulacral attributes of Joburg's urban milieu. Johannesburg's lack of water thus sees the city finding ways in which to simulate its presence in ludicrous imitations and manifestations. Instead of trying to come up with something of its own, the developers construct a replica of the Golden Gate Bridge. This grand evocation of romantic 'elsewheres' through superficial emulations can be witnessed in various building projects – Melrose Arch (evoking the European high street) and Montecasino (summoning a Medieval Tuscan village) being two examples that have already been

[704] Author unknown. "The History", *Brightwater Commons*, 2008, URL: http://www.brightwatercommons.co.za/about/index.html#history. Date accessed: 30 October 2012.

discussed in detail. The "dead water" of Bruma Lake is significant. Not only could it refer to the legacy of the Bruma Lake serial killers, but it also alludes to the superficial artifice beleaguering Johannesburg's imaginings of space. Additionally, it seems expedient that water has been used as a draw-card in what Mbembe and Nuttall call "theatres of consumption."[705] Property developers and financiers capitalise on a major Johannesburg deficiency as a means of quenching the thirst of its inhabitants – ensuring that they consume and spend in the process. Vladislavić is patently critical of this particular brand of Baudrillardian hyperreality, especially when it comes to the introduction of these ersatz water-parks on the Highveld. However, the employment of water imagery in his works runs deeper than mere simulacral critique.

**Water, Elemental Time, and the Unconscious**

Rusty Bernstein, in "Tidal Flow"[706] suggests that the ontological functioning (as well as the changes ravaging the 'shoreline') of Johannesburg is analogous to the rhythm of the tides. His recollections of the past settle on downtown Joburg in the June of 1957 (during the Treason Trial):

> By day, it was busy, heads-down, bustling and thrusting, with life adapted to the daily tides, like an island beach. Each morning a tide swept in a flood of suited businessman and women from *their* homes in the leafy white suburbs, an even larger flood of black workers from *their* hostels or homes in outer townships. Each evening, before the night curfew descended, the tide turned. The human flood flowed out, leaving the downtown buildings beached, the streets quiet and echoing.[707]

The conveying of the demographic flow (paralleled in Budlender's statistical orgy when seated at the Star Shop Egoli) within the linguistic bounds of water imagery is highly significant here. The tidal flow that leaves the "island" of Johannesburg "beached" (i.e. unpopulated) in the evenings is engendered by larger socio-political forces that exist above and beyond the individual drops that make up the wave. Gesturing towards the violent effect of flooding and beaching, Bernstein

[705] Mbembe, A. "Aesthetics of Superfluity" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis.* (Eds. A. Mbembe and S. Nuttall.) Wits University Press: 2008, p.55.

[706] Bernstein, R. "Tidal Flow" in *From Jo'burg to Jozi.* (Eds. H. Holland and A. Roberts.) Penguin: Johannesburg, 2010, pp.46-49.

[707] Ibid, p.46.

powerfully indicts the apartheid government's dislocations in policing the flow of people in the city.

The end of the vignette considers modern day Johannesburg's transformations against the memories Bernstein has of the city in the 1950s. Bernstein describes these changes again in terms of a nautical ebb and flow:

> The tides have eaten into and eroded much of the character of the old citadel. Many of the great financial and commercial headquarters have flown with the ebb to Sandton and other outer suburbs, leaving only their concrete towers as evidence that they once were there.[708]

Tidal currents and waves often stand as literary symbols that reflect the passage of time. This link stems from 'tide's' etymological root in the Old English *tīd*, which denoted "time, period, or era."[709] The sense that is applied to the sea dates from late Middle English.[710] In Shakespeare's Sonnet 60 the first two lines read: "Like the waves make toward the pebbled shore, / So do our minutes hasten to their end."[711] In Shelley's "Time" the speaker cries: "Unfathomable Sea! whose waves are years, / Ocean of time … Thou shoreless flood, which in thy ebb and flow / Claspest the limits of mortality!"[712] Michael Ferber writes that the "endless repetitiveness" of tides and waves and the "sheer enormousness of the sea, has made the sea an emblem of infinity and eternity, and as such it … dwarfs our human doings."[713]

Thus, Bernstein's references to tidal flow in relation to urban change indicate an awareness of the operation of grand historical time. In trying to make sense of present-day Johannesburg – a city at odds with his memory – he wonders if the "tides of new South Africa" have "washed away" the character of its past (p.49). The tide here has been in some senses restorative – it has washed the old out to sea and carried a new current to the shore. The city feels more "human, less driven by greed and ambition" as a result (p.49). The tidal change becomes indicative of the change in political dispensation. However, the dependency upon this particular industry of

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[708] Ibid, p.49.

[709] Soanes, C. and Stevenson, A. (Eds.) "Tide" in *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2nd Ed.). Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005, p.1846.

[710] Ibid, p.1846.

[711] Shakespeare, W. Sonnet 60 in *The RSC Shakespeare: William Shakespeare Complete Works*. (Eds. J. Bate and E. Rasmussen) Macmillan: Hampshire, 2007, p.2445.

[712] Shelley, P.B. "Time" in *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Volume 2. (Ed. T. Hutchinson.) Oxford Wordsworth: Oxford, 1914, p.174.

[713] Ferber, M. "Sea" in *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. (2nd Ed.) Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2007, p.181 (Kindle eBook).

language goes beyond mere temporal and redemptive significance. Thus, despite the water's regenerative powers, he also wonders whether these fresh waves have washed away the "radical progressive heart of the city" (p.49). He once considered Joburg the "liberal, democratic" pulse of the country, but now he is unsure if this aspect of the city has also receded into the past (p.49). He is anxious that the "tidal flow" may have washed away some of the positive features of Johannesburg, especially the heritage of the city.

The story's gesture towards tidal allegory, with its incessant ebbing and flowing, could also inadvertently point to the fact that historical forces are cyclical and recurrent – much like waves of time. Each wave can bring about change, and wash away the vestiges of the past, but the subsequent backwash means that human experience can be considered to be largely circular and repetitive. Thus, despite celebrating urban change, Bernstein's piece seems to carry the caveat that humans are prone to perpetuating the rhythms of the past.

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (as well as her later novel, *The Waves*) places significant emphasis on the impact of the sea on its characters' sense of time, space, and existential meaning. In different ways it reminds them of their inevitable mortality as well as the futility of their actions. They apprehend the triviality of their lives in light of the elemental nature of the sea. For Mrs Ramsay, a centrifugal force in the novel, the sea presents an ambivalent force. It soothes, but frightens her. Its rhythmic cadences reassure her, but its magnitude and force remind her of its capacity for destruction – its propensity for annihilation, of the island and herself:

> The monotonous fall of the waves on the beach… for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature, 'I am guarding you – I am your support,' but at other times … [it] made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another that it was all as ephemeral as a rainbow – this sound which had been obscured and concealed under the other sounds suddenly thundered hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror.[714]

Thus the sea, and its waves, in literary texts, can be used to indicate monumental time – a construct exceeding the bounds of personal, human time. This type of gesture is apparent towards the end of "The Tuba" – the first story of *Propaganda by Monuments*. Sergeant Dundas –

[714] Woolf, V. *To the Lighthouse*. Penguin: London, 1927, pp.19-20.

in a futile attempt to battle it out with the Salvation Army Christmas band – unwittingly gets swept up and away in the musical throng. Initially the strain of his own tune dislocates the harmony of the Salvation Army band, but the conductor manages to find a way in which to accommodate the new notes emitted from Dundas's tuba and gathers the "drifting parts" together as a "new melody" is "assembled" from the "disparate components" (p.10). This new composite tune is described as having the "careless power of a river" (p.11). Within the music, Sergeant Dundas symbolically finds a "new rhythm", which dredges up "hurt and resentment … from the depths of his being" (p.11). The music closes over him "like brown water" (p.11). Initially, the Sergeant fights against this ever louder and more forceful "new melody", but he is powerless against the wave of music, which quickly overwhelms him. He is "churned up and down", and the band "whirled aside", as "if they were all being dragged hither and thither by the same currents" (p.11). Finally, after much thrashing around in unfamiliar waters, he finds his new place amongst the members of the band. Now he is no longer drowning against his will, but rather "swimming in slow motion" (p.11).

In this passage, the Sergeant's attempt to engage in a musical battle with the Salvation Army, and then his rapprochement, is described in watery metaphors. The story is set in early 1990s Johannesburg, the week before Christmas, and features a group of lower-to-middle-class white male friends *braaing* and playing darts as they while away a Saturday afternoon. The Salvation Army band, as was the custom, would walk the streets of Johannesburg in the weeks before Christmas, playing Christmas carols for alms. The story concerns two plot arcs, one with Sergeant Dundas's climactic 'tuba-warring' and the other, the Big Money. The Big Money is a cruel game played by the men on unsuspecting black people. When the Salvation Army "trooped around the corner" (p.3), this prompts the Sergeant to complain that the band is just "trying to make a fast buck" as charity organisations in the New South Africa are full of con-artists, because, after all, there's "big money to be made in charity" (p.6). Dundas's retort reminds the men of the dehumanising jape they play at other people's expense. Cliffie, who worked in the Lost Property section of Jan Smuts Airport, had come across an abandoned treasure chest full of fake, wooden Krugerrrands. The chest had been filled with close to a hundred coins, and initially the men dished them out liberally, but became more frugal when the booty started running low. Cliffie had handed coins out to beggars at robots, tipped waitrons with the fake currency, and had also given them to newspaper vendors – the "memory of these transactions made him laugh until the tears ran down his cheeks" (p.7). The cruelty of this exchange is telling about the socio-economic and political climate that Cliffie and the men find themselves in.

The story, being set during South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy, contemplates the ramifications of regime change for lower class whites. The apartheid government throughout its administration had endeavoured to help the plight of the 'poor white'. The consequences of such a shift in the macro power dynamics of the country, from a white oligarchy to black majority, left poor whites feeling disempowered and disenfranchised. The men in "The Tuba" represent this apprehensive demographic. In order to compensate for their newfound lack of social and political power, the men in the story (the very class of men Apartheid sought to defend) exact the transactions of their ruthless game. Their lack of power is satirically symbolised by the fake currency. Money is emblematic of power. The faux Kruggerrand stands, rather pathetically, as a metonym of the fading legacy of Afrikanerdom. These Krugerrands are now worthless, much like the old dispensation. This fact does not stop the men though, who hope to use their last coin to perpetuate a legacy of domination and subjugation.

The Sergeant proposes that they give the last of the Big Money to the Salvation Army. It could be suggested that since the Salvation Army shares its initials with the country, South Africa, the band stands as an indirect symbol of the new dispensation. The men, via the conduit of their scam, want to assert themselves by furthering a history of unequal exchange. However, significantly the tide has now turned. This is why I think Vladislavić's use of water-inflected imagery is so potent in this scene. The evocation of a current suggests that, while the Sergeant is painfully unaware of how he fits into the grand narrative, he has been swept up in something larger than himself. This current, this new tide, represents grand historical time – the macrocosm of new South African political dynamics. Sergeant Dundas tries to fight against this new flow, but soon realizes that he is powerless against the juggernaut of history, here transfigured figuratively as the sea. Sergeant Dundas, in submitting to the forces of history, cannot keep his head above water – he loses control of himself in the grand narrative; he "thrashed" when the "music closed over [him] like brown water" (p.11). However, the story retrieves from its narrative pockets a promise of redemption. Soon Dundas finds a new rhythm from deep within himself, he manages to swim ("swimming in slow motion") – and in doing so, he is swept by the tide down Chromium Street. He is now a member of a new band of men. History has washed over him, but remarkably, he was not annihilated – largely because he learned how to play a new tune. Despite the "careless power of [the] river" of history, the story manages to recover a transformative element in the wreckage left by grand historical narratives.

Forces of monumental time and grand history, in their literary guise as the sea, also appear in Vladislavić's most recent novel. The beginning of *Double Negative* finds its equivocal protagonist

Neville Lister – "an overly earnest young man" (p.37) – trying to make sense of the obfuscation of his personal destiny. The novel starts with Lister's listlessness: "Just when I started to learn something, I dropped out of university, although this makes it sound more decisive than it was. I slipped sideways" (p.9). At an existential crossroads, having studied towards a liberal arts degree at a progressive university during the repressive years of the apartheid era, he finds himself influenced by the radical (and, at that time, banned) canon. Reading Marxist discourse and the subversive poetry of Breytenbach, but riding around in the Datsun his father bought him on his eighteenth birthday, he epitomises the spoilt white liberal. When facing the conundrum of the personal versus political dichotomy, whether to put his theories into practice by taking decisive political action or accept the status quo and live out a safe quotidian existence, Lister finds himself conflicted. He is preoccupied with the "notion of duty" (p.40). He avoids conscription by emigrating to the UK, but this act is more one of escape than defiance. Lister cannot practice what he preaches – he finds himself at odds with the current regime, but cannot muster the boldness required of his generation, of someone with his education. He then falls into a photography career – a poseur who tries to (lukewarmly) capture reality rather than live and act in it. Lister ends up being a pale imitation – an apolitical simulacrum – of Auerbach. At the beginning of the novel, we encounter Neville in the doldrums of his early twenties. During his first and only outing with Auerbach, he leans against the car – waiting for the esteemed photographer to locate their companion for the day, journalist Gerald Brookes. He begins to reflect:

> Looking back over the brief span of my life, I felt like some object left on the shoreline, toyed with by a rising tide. If you had a sense of historical destiny, if you were sufficiently drunk with it, you might expect to ride out any storm. But I did not imagine I would be carried in one piece to a classless shore. History would break over me like a wave that had already swept through the manor house and bear me off in a jumble of picture frames and paper plates. (p.37)

Here again, water imagery is woven into the tapestry of connotation that links the sea to grand historical time. Lister feels he is too small, too sober, and too trivial to withstand the "rising tide" of history. Monumental history, in its present guise of the sea, is utilised as a symbol of annihilation, an echo of Mrs Ramsay's interpretation of the sea. At the end of the day accompanying Auerbach on his photographic rounds, Neville contemplates the lesson that his father intended him to learn:

> Experience swirls through these channels like water over rock, being shaped in turn and given new direction. The day had diverted a current in me, but I could neither express this change nor predict its issue. If I joked with Brookes about what I had learnt, it was only because I found the lesson baffling. (p.69)

Not only does the current of experience course through Lister, he also fails to understand or predict its destination. The water symbolism indicates an awareness of a momentous force that appears to be controlling his destiny, but he is not afforded the benefit of distance or hindsight required to make sense of it. On the other hand, although Neville consciously apprehends his impotence in this new current, he acknowledges that something deeper and more complex is at play. This hint of inchoate shapes and forms that lie beneath his faculties of critical literacy reappear later in the novel. In one of his encounters with Mrs Pinheiro, Neville describes a sudden silence as

> … an undercurrent like a tap running in another room of the house… And rushing beneath it all, so quietly it was almost imperceptible, an undercurrent of my own thoughts like a subterranean river under the house. (pp.115-6)

The mentioning of an "undercurrent" of his thoughts seems uncannily akin to the introspective space of the unconscious. According to C.G. Jung, in *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, "Water is the commonest symbol of the unconscious."[715] In another resonant passage, occurring towards the end of the novel, Neville finds himself at the mall, and in the Court of the Sun King, he is seduced into sitting in a massage chair. As the chair worked him over,

> The will in my muscles dissolved, the marrow of my resolve turned to water, the last hard fact was knocked out of me like a tooth … the corridor stretched away into the distance like a canal. People were walking there on their reflections and I saw them waving as I sank. (p.200)

Neville Lister, in this acquiescence, deliquesces. Water – as a symbol – plays an instrumental role in Jung's psychology. Neville's sinking – a figurative descent into a body of water – is, for Jung, symbolic of a descent into the dark waters of the psyche.

Jung describes the realm of the unconscious as the "primal waters"[716] that can be accessed through the door of the "shadow." This doorway leads to the deep well of the personal

[715] Jung, C.G. *The Collected Works Volume 9 (1): The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton University Press: New York; 1969, p.18.

[716] Ibid, p.22.

unconscious and "whoever looks into the mirror of the water will see first of all his own face."[717] Thus this first step towards the deep well within initiates the risk of "confrontation"[718] with the self. This mirror of selfhood "does not flatter", instead "it faithfully shows whatever looks into it, namely the face we never show to the world because we cover it with the persona, the mask of the actor."[719] The shadow is the aspect of self that lies beneath this social mask. The shadow connotes depth, a feature of the personal unconscious – our true, primordial selves stripped of the veneer of our civilised posturing. However, the deep well of the psyche goes deeper than the territory of the mere personal unconscious, leading to the realm of the collective unconscious. This space "is the world of water" – "where all life floats in suspension; where the realm of the sympathetic system, the soul of everything living; where I am indivisibly this *and* that; where I experience the other in myself and the other-than-myself experiences me."[720]

Jung argues that the consolidation of consciousness has been the main imperative of man; it is a means of staving off the "dark sea of the unconscious."[721] Rite and dogma have functioned as "dams and walls to keep back the dangers of the unconscious."[722] Yet, for Jung, a time will come when these mechanisms will fail and "then the waters [will] rise and boundless catastrophes [will] break over mankind."[723] The realm of the unconscious frightens us, because when we step through the "door of the shadow we discover with terror that we are objects of unseen factors."[724] Consciousness makes us feel as though we are agents in control of our destiny, whereas, in fact, "the guarded supremacy of consciousness" is always provisional and contingent. It can be questioned and deconstructed by the "unpredictability of the psyche's reactions."[725]

Neville Lister is haunted by the flowing waters that form an undercurrent of his own thoughts. These subterranean rivers hint at meaning just beyond and below his conscious ken. Ironically, even though Lister makes a living out of 'capturing' reality, he shies away from interrogating the very nature of that reality. He cannot help but be aware of the "almost imperceptible" waters that rush beneath the surface of his mind, and yet he is afraid of going under. It is interesting

[717] Ibid, p.20.

[718] Ibid, p.20.

[719] Ibid, p.20.

[720] Ibid, pp.21-22.

[721] Ibid, p.23.

[722] Ibid, p.22.

[723] Ibid, p.22.

[724] Ibid, p.23.

[725] Ibid, p.23.

that the "sinking" passage immediately precedes the publication of Janie's article. He almost compulsively awaits the posting of his profile on Janie's blog. Janie's impressions of Lister, the photographer, signal – to him, at least – an uncomfortable reflection of his identity. The prospective contents of this profile worry him. It seems that he is ill at ease with the prospect of looking into this 'online' mirror. He is not sure what he shall see reflected back. Lister's persona has been carefully maintained to obfuscate the shadow that lies beneath. When he realizes that some act of self-reflection is in the offing, he feels his resolve weaken. His resolve could be interpreted as the strictures of consciousness; when it dissolves, he is released to swim in the dark caverns of the deep well within. However, the last image that stays with the reader is the one of Lister as a boy playing the navigational game with his father. The novel ends with the "bitter knowledge" that he "had unlearned the art of getting lost" (p.203). Thus despite facing the prospect of getting lost in the depth of his inner self, Lister retrospectively realizes that he has unlearnt this act. For Jung, his actions thus far have proved that as a character, he is stunted. In order to be a more fully actualised individual, he needs to relinquish control and get lost, so that he can sink beneath the surface to more meaningfully confront the reflection of his true self. Lostness and the watery flow are affiliated forces: embracing flow signals an abandonment of the restricting conventions that try to circumscribe and constrain the creative industry of discovery and exploration – whether they be of the self or the city.

Thus, in essence, water in *Double Negative* comes to represent a figurative embrocation of elemental time, selfhood, and the unconscious. While water metaphors in "The Tuba" – in its particular manifestation as seawater – largely indicate the passing of eras and regimes, in *Double Negative*, water takes on more immediate personal and psychological significance. The sinking metaphor becomes a patent marker of depth. For Lister, water becomes the symbol of his repressed, true self – the creature he is anxious to meet in acts of reflection. For Johannesburg, water can represent the deep reservoirs of urban identity that reside beneath the predominant culture of surface. Rising water, by that same logic, could be taken to symbolise the resurgence of the unconscious realm, or to appropriate psychoanalytic discourse further, signal the return of the repressed. Accordingly, it is ironic that much of Johannesburg's surface water exists because of its gold mining past. Pumped up and away from the cavities created by mine tunnels and shafts below, brought to the surface and stored, this water becomes a literal embodiment of the unconscious coming to the fore.

**Mining and Water**

From a spatial point of view many of the city's dams and lakes have been formed as a result of mine drainage operations. Underwater streams and leakages in mine tunnels have been pumped up to the surface to ensure that the goldmines are accessible to miners. Thus, bodies of water such as Wemmer Pan[726] which captured run off from slime dams, in the south of the city, and Germiston Lake in the east, are evidence of subterranean waters brought to the surface. Their waters represent the unconscious domain laid bare, which the conscious mind of the city is to be made aware. These dams are significant because they stand as "earthy and tangible" reminders that for Johannesburg it boils down to a matter of surface and depth. The city development on the surface of the soil is indebted to the nuggeted recesses below. In Johannesburg, mining and water currently share a particularly destructive relationship. Although significant technological advances have made it lucrative to re-process extant mine sand (as new methods are able to extract significant gold yields from the old dumps), this initiative to re-mine tailings does not extend to cleaning up water that may have been polluted by acid mine drainage (AMD).[727] AMD can occur "through the contamination of water used in remining old dumps", "through water runoff at the base of tailings" and "as underground shafts, abandoned after mining operations close, fill with contaminated water, and eventually flood."[728] Indeed water pollution is becoming a worrying concern for residents of the city and environmental lobbyists. The return of the repressed takes on fresh significance when polluted water "bubbled up to the surface from overflowing, abandoned mine shafts in 2002." Many of the city's small rivers and streams have shown evidence of mine-related toxins and

> readings taken in some parts of the Klip River, which snakes through Soweto, show a pH as low as 2. This water – used for livestock, family gardens, laundry, cooking, playing, praying – is extremely acidic. It is estimated that the Witwatersrand goldfield has 350 million litres of affected water.[729]

The government seems to be holding companies liable for cleaning up the effects of AMD and companies appear to be of the opinion that government is ultimately responsible. Treating polluted water is an expensive exercise and can cost a company in the region of half a billion

[726] 'Pan' is an Afrikaans word that means shallow lake.

[727] Kardas-Nelson, M. "After the Mines." Essay accompaniment to Jason Larkin's photographic exhibition, published by Fourthwall Books, 2013, p.9.

[728] Ibid, p.9.

[729] Ibid, p.12.

Rand to build the necessary plants and facilities. Even if companies take responsibility for AMD pollution in relation to their own mining interests there are still "thousands" of abandoned mining sites that have been left "unaccounted for."[730]

Water supply and access to water are issues that have plagued Johannesburg since its founding and are profoundly politicised concerns in the postapartheid context. AMD pollution further complicates the scarcity of water resources on the Rand. On a symbolic note, it is interesting that old mines are being flooded due to cessations in drainage operations. The image of water trapped in deep pockets of earth rising to the surface reifies the Freudian notion of the return of the repressed. Water, despite its scarcity, exists in the shadows, filling up the deep recesses of the city's subterranean cavities.

**Conclusion**

This chapter takes its cue from the ways in which Vladislavić and various city authors draw upon water imagery to describe the notoriously dry city of Johannesburg. This chapter endeavours to investigate what can be inferred from this figurative project. The incongruity of this imagery appears, at first glance, seemingly absurd considering the scarcity of naturally existing water on the Rand. This brings about a disjuncture between space and desire. The referencing of water via its conspicuous absence seems to highlight a territory of unfulfilled and thwarted desire – a thirst which has not been quenched. These authors, whether overtly or subtly, draw attention to a profound and pervasive lack.

On one level, this transference of a physical lack into a literary presence suggests that Joburgers are fundamentally unfulfilled – a void which informs a need to fill a debilitating sense of emptiness. Instead of confronting the chasm, Joburgers thus attempt to over-compensate for that lack – manufacturing consumerist centres of capital, which proffer the satiation of the senses. These fake watering holes, like Bruma Lake, The Glen, the erstwhile Randburg Waterfront, etc. promise what Joburgers desire – rehydration. However, this project is surely destined to fail. Essentially, Joburg tries to divert itself with other attractions, simulated sideshows, trying to forget that it has been geographically denied the life-giving and restorative properties that are generally associated with water.

[730] Ibid, p.9.

The works of the Johannesburg authors explored in this chapter have been shown to draw upon a particular industry of metaphor and symbolism in their descriptions of Johannesburg as a means of compensating for a literal lack. This metaphoric application compensates for physical lack by constructing an imaginative space or utopia as an implicit critique of the dystopian qualities of the Johannesburg built environment. Vladislavić in his description of Bruma Lake, appears to critique simulacral attempts to furnish Johannesburg with watery refreshment. Likewise, his tongue-in-cheek treatment of the water features of the Randburg Waterfront, Caesar's Palace, and Montecasino subtly harangues the culture of surface, which frolicks in the hyperreal territory of imposed foreign styles, with little to no appreciation for contextual sensibility. Considering the fact that Vladislavić's writing critiques rapacious consumerism, it is unsurprising that he would reproach these efforts of hyperreal overcompensation.

Water is rich in semiotic and symbolic connotation. Vladislavić writes against the "dead water" and instead, gravitates towards the more affirming potentiality of water to denote flow and flux. With regards to Sergeant Dundas, water becomes the vehicle by which he is transported to a new dispensation and mindset. Water, in its sea guise, is allusively and linguistically tied to the concept of time through the etymology of 'tide'. Along the lines of Abrahams's "timelessness of seas", the ocean has been used as an allegorical marker that denotes elemental grand time dwarfing human undertakings.

Historically, Johannesburg is haunted by the linguistic shadow of a watery presence. The names of the old Boer farms that demarcate suburbs of the inner city (Braamfontein, Doornfontein, Turffontein) designate the urban geographical history of the region. Water in Vladislavić's works not only references grand elemental time in opposition to human time – relativising the momentousness of human achievement in the process – but also directly references the natural elements upon which the city is settled. The land and its river systems lie beneath the human settlement, strangled or pushed to the periphery, but still nonetheless haunt the shadows of the urban environment. Although lacking on the surface, water in Johannesburg runs deep – metaphorically and geologically. Water is ultimately the corollary of the depth narrative, one that symbolises the city's cavernous collective unconscious.

Water, too, is allusively connected with selfhood: water and identity are closely tied concepts. Its reflective properties, mirroring reality, call upon the Narcissus myth, metaphorically allowing for reflexivity of the self. For Heraclitus, moving water becomes the vehicle by which we can come to understand the paradox of the persistence of identity over time. Water, in its fluid state, is by

its intrinsic properties changeable, impressionable, and ever-shifting, but via the "unity of opposites", it simultaneously retains its overarching distinguishing features despite being in constant flux. Similarly so, human identities and identities of place can be subject to forces of flux and flow. Although this thesis has argued that Johannesburg has been subjected to an alarmingly high rate of urban change and reinvention, watery flow could also perhaps suggest that flux and uncertainty can be embraced as positive forces, instead of negative ones, when it comes to reading and interpreting the city.

In Jung's theory, water signals the deep, often frightening, yet fecund reservoir of the unconscious. Jung's deep pool of the unconscious is accessed beneath the stratum of the persona – that which lies on the surface, masking one's true inner identity. This construction exposes a surface/depth tension. Water ties in with the aim of subjecting the works of Ivan Vladislavić to a depth reading.

Ultimately, in its Jungian sense, using water metaphors to describe Johannesburg could be taken as a sign that Vladislavić, in fully embracing the qualities of flux and flow, is able to reach the shadow of Johannesburg's urban identity. It is, and always has been, a city in flux. The understated allusions to the sea and the echoes of sea voyages that can be found in *Portrait with Keys* and *Double Negative* further suggest that Vladislavić embarks on a journey of rediscovery – setting narrative sail to explore and redefine Johannesburg. Moreover, in welcoming the provisional and mercurial aspects of unconscious flow, Vladislavić's characteristic "undecideability" promotes a different kind of literary consciousness, one more in tune with time, depth, nature and flow.

# Conclusion: Flow and the Untended Garden

> The war memorial crumbling away on a traffic island opposite the Darras Centre tells the history of the city in a single word. 'The following men of the Bezuidenhout valley lost their lives in the Great War,' it says, and then follows a list of names, some of them scarred by graffiti, others drifting away into the depths of stone where the leafy reflection of an overhanging oak stirs. A century comes and goes in the definite article. When this memorial was commissioned, the Bezuidenhout Valley was still a feature of the landscape. Now it is impossible to think of 'Bezuidenhout Valley' as anything but a suburb. (*Portrait with Keys*, p.173)

This oblique and enigmatic snatch of prose, which forms the entirety of portrait 122 in *Portrait with Keys* can be opened up to a rich and multi-layered interpretation. It foregrounds the precision with which Vladislavić observes and chronicles the city via what Tony Morphet calls the "frontiers of language."[731] The man-nature dichotomy is subtly conveyed to the reader by the description of the leafy reflection of the overhanging oak stirring above the man-sculpted stone monument. Moreover, the relationship between urban surface and depth is also signalled by the engraved names "drifting away into the depths of stone." Despite the memorial being in a state of disrepair and "crumbling away", that the words are described as receding into stone operates as a metaphor for the way in which the names of the dead have not been obliterated by current trends of simulacral historical amnesia. Instead, by sinking into stone, they are committed to the city's urban memory.

On a deeper level, the memorial enjoys metonymic symbolism. On the one hand, it stands as a reminder of the imperial forces that shaped Johannesburg. Being a colony of Britain, men from South Africa were conscripted for both World Wars to assist the Metropole in its military efforts. On the other hand, and more locally apropos, the wording of the memorial reflects the way in which the human settlement has obscured the natural history of the area. For the narrator, the monument powerfully denotes "the history of the city in a single word." In the days when the memorial was commissioned, "the Bezuidenhout Valley was still a feature of the landscape", but the narrator reflects that now "it is impossible to think of 'Bezuidenhout Valley' as anything but

[731] Morphet, T. "Words First: Ivan Vladislavić" in *Marginal Space.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.206.

a suburb." Indeed, "[a] century comes and goes in the definite article." Something as subtle as 'the' has the effect of foregrounding the natural lie of the land. However, the falling away of the definite article reflects how the human settlement of this Johannesburg suburb now obscures the valley beneath it. The valley is no longer a feature of the city's landscape; instead the suburb, with its houses and streets, is all that meets the eye. The 'loss' of the definite article becomes a metonym for the way in which the city conceals the natural. However, Vladislavić's exercise in linguistic defamiliarisation, intensifying our perception of something as simple as this abandoned definite article, uncovers the natural beneath the layers of the urban palimpsest.

This special attention to the linguistic minutiae of the city and the precision with which his narrative descriptions render urban space highlights one of Vladislavić's many achievements: the way in which he is able to chart the city via the conduit of language. This portrait successfully defamiliarises the definite article, making the familiarity of this common part of speech strange. It is a word that designates noun specification; it is a grammatical determiner. Although it helps to denote specified identification in a sentence, it is a word that is often camouflaged by its semantic surroundings. This portrait then subtly estranges the familiarity of 'the', stripping it of its inconspicuousness.[732] As readers, we are forced to re-read the portrait in order to measure how its corresponding presence (and later absence in the referral to the suburb) is able to summon the history of the city.

The meticulous clarity and specificity of Vladislavić's representations paradoxically open up meaning. James Graham has characterised Vladislavić's writing as one of "openness" which is receptive towards "different ways of being in – but also writing – the city."[733] Through his use of defamiliarising techniques Vladislavić is able to open "the dominant ways of seeing Johannesburg … to reinterpretation and re-articulation."[734]

Much of the extant scholarship on Ivan Vladislavić focuses on well-established thematic patterns that dominate academic scrutiny on Johannesburg: the imprint that apartheid left on the transitional era, the effects and implications of violent and pervasive urban crime, the ascendency of hypermodernity through the simulacrum.[735] This scholarship also relies quite heavily on

[732] Brecht, B. "A Short Organum for the Theatre" in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (Ed. and Tr. By J. Willett). Methuen: London, 1964, p.192.

[733] Graham, J. "Ivan Vladislavić and the Possible City" in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing,* 44: 4, 2008, p. 334.

[734] Ibid, p. 334.

[735] Patrick Lenta's ""Everyday Abnormality': Crime and In/security in Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*" (2009), Ralph Goodman's "Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*: A Bricoleur's Guide to Johannesburg" (2009) and Shane

metropolitan theories of navigating city space, such as Walter Benjamin's flânerie and de Certeau's pedestrian tactics. Whilst acknowledging the continued critical relevance of these topics, this study has tried to dig deeper and go further than these mainstream readings of South African urban space. This excavation process becomes possible by subjecting this study of Vladislavić's body of work to a contextualised application of defamiliarisation theory. Reading Vladislavić's work through the frame of estrangement theory means that the reader is exposed to a different mode of accessing textuality and, at a further remove, the city.

I have evaluated Vladislavić's work in terms of the theoretical frame of defamiliarisation, showing how his fiction disrupts automatic channels of perception. In exploiting the literary devices and methods promoted by proponents of *ostranenie* and the Brechtian A-effect, Vladislavić is able to heighten perception. Not only does this defamiliarising approach to textuality foster a heightened literary awareness in his readers, but it also artistically distorts their habitual responses to the subject matter – which, for our purposes, is Johannesburg – as a means of invigorating new perspectives on urban surroundings.

Habitualisation breeds situational and conceptual complacency. The more we see an object, the more our recognition clouds our ability to truly take cognizance of it, and as a result, precludes our ability to "say anything significant about it."[736] Defamiliarisation aims to rip away the veil that impedes perceptive efforts. By equipping his literary arsenal with various key defamiliarising techniques (such as semantic and idiomatic shifts, hyperbolic and incongruous language, unusual narrative focalisations, experimentation with form and genre, non-linearity, repetition, parallelism, acoustic texture through alliteration, alienation, deferral and deconstruction) Vladislavić's fiction – which is so notably preoccupied with "marginal spaces" and the quotidian – is able to re-imbue the "charm of novelty to things of the every day."[737]

Defamiliarisation engenders a state of momentary narrative lostness. Lostness boasts potential for both textual and urban rediscovery. It occasions a space where habitual pathways through meaning and space, whether through the textual or urban domain, are dislodged. The momentary disorientation that ensues provides for a re-tuning of one's appreciation of the city or the literary landscape. Navigation can no longer be guided solely by recognisable markers. I

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Graham's "Layers of Permanence: Towards a Spatialist-Materialist Reading of Ivan Vladislavić *The Exploded View*" come to mind as critical examples that substantiate this point.

[736] Shklovsky, V. "Art as Technique" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Second Edition. (Eds. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan.) Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2004, p.16.

[737] Coleridge, S.T. *Biographia Literaria.* (Ed. G. Watson) J.M. Dent: London, 1956, p.169.

argue that lostness enables Vladislavić to explore representations of the city, which go beyond and challenge dominant and habitualised ways of readings Johannesburg. This approach ultimately helps him to expose the unseen, the bizarre, the natural and the animalled, as well as the watery unconscious elements in an inherently artificial city.

Since conventional markers are absent during the experience of lostness, it allows for a temporary suspension of our usual readings of space. By being lost, we are also alienated and suspended from our conventional selves in the city. Lostness through defamiliarisation allows for an exhumatory process to take place; it involves digging beneath the habitual and the cursory to reveal the strangeness (and novelty) from within. The motive behind this spadework exercise is to find depth in a city saturated with surface. As Gerald Gaylard argues in "Migrant Ecology in the Postcolonial City in *Portrait with Keys*: *Joburg and What-What*", it is "the skill of defamiliarisation which reveals the palimpsests of history, the vicissitudes of time, and even hidden otherness and difference in the concrete jungle."[738]

Vladislavić engages with literal experiences of lostness in his fiction, but this theme can also be abstracted for discursive purposes. Chapter Three investigates both literal and metaphysical lostness. Vladislavić's momentary narrative lostness is a constructive and artful strategy for urban rediscovery. In responding to the experience of being lost, Vladislavić anecdotally referred to the Garmin as "one of the worst inventions in the world", because, after all, "one of the great pleasures of travelling in a new place is being able to relish "that sense of being adrift…"[739]

The third chapter further seeks to show how – through a contextually nuanced engagement with Michel de Certeau's "Walking the City" and Walter Benjamin's flâneur – Vladislavić is able to defamiliarise our habitual engagements with space through lostness and walking the city. Lostness here not only refers to physical disorientation, but it can also point to a discursive state that celebrates the proliferation of difference in the transitional urban milieu. His flânerie is a celebration of serendipitous lostness. Walking can effectively defamiliarise the city, which is predominantly driven. Vladislavić renders Johannesburg as a kind of Lost City, but prefigures this as a constructive space for rediscovery and creative deformation. Ultimately, the space of lostness, through walking, reveals the tomason – a symbol of the urban palimpsest.

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738 Gaylard, G. "Migrant Ecology in the Postcolonial City in *Portrait with Keys*: *Joburg and What-What*" in *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.298.

739 Per Ivan Vladislavić. Reading and signing of *A Labour of Moles* at Fourthwall Books (44 Stanley Road, Milpark, Johannesburg) on 12th October 2013.

The tomason becomes a symbol of the layers of history and is evocative of depth. Palimpsests are used by Vladislavić as a counterpoint to the simulacrum. Essentially, their urban presence repudiates the perceived dominance of Johannesburg's culture of surface. On the city street, the tomason confutes the socio-historical amnesia that has plagued Johannesburg's architectural practices, particularly the transitional era's obsession with the slavish importation of European and American structural styles.

The tomason is a tangible reminder of a time that has preceded the present era. It inaugurates the establishment of a depth narrative. The tomason, when taken as a symbol of the urban palimpsest, can be read as a recording of human history in the city. However, this should not mean that palimpsests are in opposition to nature or the natural world. Indeed, natural palimpsests can and do co-exist with urban ones. While palimpsests can illustrate the human effort to record, they can just as easily signify the passage of elemental time in the natural world. The simulacrum and virtuality, in aiming for permanence, operate by stamping out signs of the past and nature. Instead, they create a stable and stagnant hyperreality (an overtly human construction), which endeavours to defy the passage of time, cyclical nature, and natural flux. The palimpsest model is more in tune with nature.

Vladislavić's awareness of the omnipresence of elemental time and nature, and the bearing they have on the city, is ostensibly revealed in portrait 135 of *Portrait with Keys*:

> The weather's thumb crushes stone to gravel and rubs wood down to the grain. What comes to the surface is stubborn. Our meanings are tender sheaths, but the heart of things is fibre and flint, it will not yield to the hand or the eye. (p.189)

The above metaphor seems to suggest that human meaning is vulnerable when set against the order of elemental time. Nature will persist and outlive our own "tender sheaths" of meaning. At the very heart of things is nature – indicated by the "fibre" and "flint" – and this force cannot be cowed or contained by human agency ("the hand or the eye"). For Gaylard, "nature's implacable flux" is energetic and dynamic; its "liveliness haunts culture" which is lacking life in comparison.[740] Nature in Vladislavić's work relativises consumerist-driven hypermodernity. It is, to borrow from Gaylard again, "the backdrop against which the frailty of our constructions is

[740] Gaylard, G. "Migrant Ecology in the Postcolonial City in *Portrait with Keys*: *Joburg and What-What*" in *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.292.

laid bare."[741] Nature can be viewed as Johannesburg's shadow – haunting the city's artifice and constructedness. Ultimately, the

> … constant movement and cyclicity of nature exposes the lack of life, of self-renewability, of auto-immunity, the entropy in human constructions which aim for permanence, even immortality.[742]

Digging beneath the culture of surface reveals urban, and then subsequently natural, palimpsests. Beneath the construct of the man-made city, the first natural palimpsest we encounter points to the flora and fauna that predate the discovery of gold on the Rand. Chapter Four foregrounds Vladislavić's somewhat unexpected preoccupation (considering his city-novelist stature) with nature and the animals that roamed the savannah before the gold rush birthed Johannesburg. This chapter discusses the tenuous relationship between the zoo and the city in *Portrait with Keys*. Of central concern is the human-nature/city-country dichotomy and how Vladislavić deals with the complexity of these contrasting forces. Vladislavić challenges arrogant anthropocentrism, but his inimitable literary "undecideability" simultaneously undercuts nostalgia for the romanticised wild.

*Portrait with Keys* works to blur the boundaries between city and country, man and beast. Vladislavić's fiction challenges imperialist taxonomic ordering impulses, and consequently, confounds neat distinctions that try to delineate the natural world from the human realm in the space of the city. Vladislavić deconstructs what he goes on to show are rather artificial, imposed distinctions set up to separate urban refinement/civility from natural chaos. Despite the rationalisation and scientific ordering impulses that accompanied nineteenth century industrialisation and urbanisation, we have not been able to completely suppress humanity's bestial self. Instead, Vladislavić satirically undermines the man-beast binary. *Portrait with Keys*, in revealing that nature is not as peripheral in Johannesburg as we might believe it is, shows the ways in which nature continues to enter and haunt the city's (and humanity's) conception of itself. Ultimately, Vladislavić cheekily subverts supercilious anthropocentrism that attempts to divorce human nature from the rest of the natural order – of which it is a cognate and inseparable component. Be that as it may, Vladislavić's "undecideability" also cautions against a completely insouciant and thus irresponsible conflation of the man-beast, city-country tension. After all, the darker connotations of nature cannot be ignored. Although these two antithetical

[741] Ibid, p.293.

[742] Ibid, p.293.

forces are shown to be not as antinomical as we have perhaps taken them to be, the binary needs to be expediently sustained so that a degree of order and civility in the city can be ensured. Complete conflation might see the city descending into primordial chaos.

Extending the theme of natural flux and flow to its logical conclusion, means that we arrive at the element in nature most analogous to this attribute – water. Beneath the stratum of the landscape lies, both literally and figuratively, the water table. Fiction infused with water or sea-like connotations seems especially incongruous in a city as dry as Johannesburg. Taking its cue from the seminal work of Carl Jung, Chapter Five suggests that water symbolically represents the deepest stratum of the depth narrative: the unconscious. Diving the reef of Johannesburg – paradoxically a reef with little to no water – brings us to the concept of flow, which signals the imaginative dream world space that can be located within the unconscious – an energy which celebrates flux and is alive to the potential of lostness.

**Significance of the Depth Narrative**

The apartheid era's relationship with the urban environment was ostensibly one concerned with the fixing of space and language. Control was maintained by promoting totalising explanatory and discursive mechanisms that locked down the experience and movement through space. The racist impulse to discriminate and separate in terms of outward signs of biological difference was warped into a systematic bureaucratic engine of taxonomisation. Even minute and questionable markers of difference were extrapolated and emphasised to reinforce this Manichean metanarrative.

However, with the fall of apartheid, the democratic era brought about the freeing of space and meaning. Concomitantly, this also allowed for the incubation and production of new voices and new registers, which could begin to represent postapartheid spaces. Virtually for the first time South African cities could embrace positions of alterity, flux, and polyvalency. Walking and writing the city became a project of opening up the metropolis as a means of speaking about other and previously 'othered' experiences. This involved the seeking out of fissures and the discovery of new pathways to urban meaning. Many postapartheid artistic and scholarly efforts have celebrated the transformative conceptual properties of 'leakage' and miscegenation. This moment in history celebrated a freeing of space and the language used to describe it. Vladislavić comments on this trend and notes that:

> During the apartheid era South African writers were focused to a large extent on politics and racism. Everything else was out-of-bounds. Today, and in particularly, over the past ten years we've seen a much broader array of writers emerge – from crime to romance to science fiction. People are more free to explore and it's a much richer reflection of our society.[743]

However, this optimism must be qualified. The fall of apartheid saw a twofold process ensue. On the one hand, efforts to free space from the totalising tendencies of apartheid urban planning were exuberantly demonumentalising the grand historical markers of an ignominious past. On the other hand, space was being further locked down as a result of the pervasive threat of violent urban crime. The security industry that arose to counteract the experience of systemic crime encouraged the fierce patrolling of space. The formidable accoutrements of domestic and commercial safety (i.e. walls, booms, gated communities, CCTV cameras, electric fences) quickly became sobering markers of the postapartheid socio-geographical reality of many South African cities, and foremost amongst those, Johannesburg. Thus, despite the early optimism of the transitional era with its promotional rhetoric of the 'rainbow nation', the urban geography has returned to an uncomfortable practice of policing space.

In response to the combined forces of global consumerist hypermodernity and the pervasive threat of violent crime, Johannesburg has witnessed an unprecedented rise of gated communities and the development of 'secure' shopping complexes. Mall culture has been an especially successful imposition of American urban culture in South Africa and Johannesburg's landscape is becoming increasingly littered with supermalls. Since public areas such as parks are considered unsafe, many city inhabitants prefer the CCTV-lined and security-guard patrolled walkways of Montecasino, Melrose Arch, and Sandton City mall (and their regional variants). These entertainment complexes peddle simulacral fantasies of Tuscan villages (Montecasino), Roman opulence (Emperor's Palace), European high streets (Melrose Arch) or Portuguese harbours (The Glen before its recent revamp). These centres – characterised by socio-historical amnesia – take on the hyperreal proportions that Baudrillard warned would accompany hyper-consumerist markets.

[743] Nawotka, E. "What Reaches the World Isn't Fully Representative of South Africa" in *Publishing Perspectives*, 1 November 2013. URL: http://publishingperspectives.com/2013/11/what-reaches-the-world-isnt-fully-representative-of-south-africa/. Date accessed: 4 November 2013.

Many projects on the city and interpretations of Ivan Vladislavić's work foreground the effects of crime.[744] This thesis has sought to demonstrate how Vladislavić deconstructs and disrupts these dominant perceptions about the city. While he acknowledges the impact of crime on urban inhabitants and speaks directly to the fear we experience living here, the buck does not stop here. He notes in an interview with Andie Miller that

> [a] lot of fiction at the moment is shot through with violent imagery…but how could it not be? It's a question of how one deals with these things, why you're writing about it, what you're trying to do with it. And whether you're able to write about it in a way that gives people fresh insight into the situation. But to expect that hijackings and violent crime are not going to come up in our fiction all the time I think is … it would be disturbing if it didn't.[745]

What is key is that Vladislavić attempts to give his readers "fresh insight into the situation." What this involves is exhuming the city to reveal other narratives besides those that concern hijackings, murders, and burglaries. His fiction does not shy away from representing this uncomfortable reality of the city, but Vladislavić prevents his narrative energies from being preoccupied solely by stories of violence and crime.

Various scholars have noted that Johannesburg is a notoriously difficult city to write on (e.g.: Lindsay Bremner and Martin J. Murray) and Vladislavić acknowledges this challenge. However, I feel that he manages to find a means by which he can begin the exercise of describing it. Through the depth narrative, peeling back the layers of fiction and urbanity, Vladislavić celebrates the multiplicity and multivocality of the city. Although Johannesburg's predisposition towards continuous urban renewal has usually been seen as negative aspects of Johannesburg' built environment, Vladislavić's writing, which celebrates flow, recognises that flux and disorder are necessary components of this urban equation. His work shows the city can only begin to be represented within the confines of literature when qualities of flux and provisionality are celebrated.

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[744] The following critical examples place emphasis on the nature of crime in Johannesburg in Vladislavić's work and were discussed in the first chapter of this thesis: Patrick Lenta's article "Everyday Abnormality': Crime and In/security in Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*" (2009), Jan Morris's "Mean Streets" review of *Portrait with Keys* in *The Guardian* (2006). Projects based or informed by the city of Johannesburg that foreground the effects of crime are to name but a few, Kevin Bloom's *Ways of Staying* (2009), Norman Ohler's *Ponte City* (2003) and Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* (2006).

[745] Miller, A. "Inside the Toolbox: Ivan Vladislavić in Interview" in *Scrutiny 2*. Vol.11, No.2, 2006, p.123.

One can collectively view Vladislavić's city novels as an imaginative project of the city-as-process. To borrow from Mbembe and Nuttall, the city is represented in his fictions as *en fuite*[746] – constantly leaking and percolating, porous and difficult to define. It is not a finished product. Vladislavić's writing is a project of 'process' and unhinging. In a Keatsian fashion, his brand of literature can be typified as being content with "half knowledge"[747]: precisely because the apartheid past was fixated with certainties, his work appears to embrace uncertainty and shirk restraints. His fiction makes capital from lostness, flux, and uncertainty.[748] It is a postcolonial and postmodern project, which sets out to deconstruct the apartheid metanarrative, and is equally as suspicious of any other monumental signifier that comes to the fore.

Defamiliarisation enables Vladislavić to critique the language of persuasive advertising, hypermodernity, and Baudrillardian simulacral culture. In doing so, we – as readers – gain a "technology of consciousness."[749] We are encouraged to be comfortable with a sense of "undecideability". Since so many of his texts engender lostness and uncertainty, we as readers are like the narrator of *A Labour of Moles* and are sometimes cast in mid-air, "between things" (p.9). We need to quickly acclimatise ourselves with a narrative landscape of arbitrariness, ambivalence, and negative space before we can begin to make sense of our surroundings. His writing, as Gerald Gaylard reminds us, evades "our attempts to fix his writing in the clarity of an amber understanding."[750]

In defamiliarising our habitual textual assumptions, Vladislavić's texts engender narrative lostness and lostness allows us to discover what I would like to call the untended garden. The untended garden refers to a redemptive space of conscious literary "undecideability". The term untended garden connotes a process of getting back to one's roots, and ultimately to nature. I would like to reclaim this metaphor from the preserve of nineteenth century bourgeois preoccupations with order and regulation where an untended garden signifies disorder, swarming overgrowth, and decay. Instead, I would like to invert this connotation and interpret the untended garden as an imaginative space that signals positive and enhancing flow – a fecund space of consciousness.

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[746] Mbembe, A. and Nuttall, S. "Writing the World from an African Metropolis" in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis. Public Culture*, 16:3, 2004, p.353.

[747] Keats, J. *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats.* (Cambridge Edition.) Houghton, Mifflin and Company: New York, 1899, p.277.

[748] Gerald Gaylard states that "lostness has potential for this writer" in his introduction to *Marginal Spaces* (2001), p.11.

[749] This term was coined by Gerald Gaylard in conversation (24th October 2013).

[750] Gaylard, G. Introduction to *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.11.

After all, the concept of flow is more akin to the natural world. Thus the untended garden promises a space to shirk off the overly regimented and draconian measures that all too often accompany a human desire for control and order.

However, the oxymoronic quality of this concept cannot be overlooked. It is potently paradoxical in that 'untended' suggests free from the restraints, or the coaxing, of man, yet simultaneously, it directly points back to this negation: the word 'garden' indicates an imposed human construction over nature.[751] Yet this paradox works well as a symbol for the "technology of consciousness" embodied by Vladislavić's work. As I mentioned in Chapter Four, Vladislavić's literary "undecideability" acknowledges that the conflictual forces of order and flow cannot and should not be hierarchically arranged. Thus while his writing embraces natural flow, the complexity of his approach recognises the necessary dialectical component of the human polarity within the human-nature binary. Ultimately, celebrating flux would enjoy no purchase on us if we could not make sense of it in human terms. The untended garden – although indicative of our failed attempt as readers to "crack his code"[752], which in itself recommends a conscious comfort with flux, Keatsian "half-knowledge", and uncertainty – balances flow against the necessity of order and constraint.

The untended garden makes a literal appearance in *Portrait with Keys*. In portrait 100, the narrator recalls digs he lived in as a student. Overshadowed by an apartment building, the "run-down" house was situated on a busy corner in the high-rise inner city area of Berea. These undesirable environs were mitigated by the house's rambling back yard:

> The best thing about the property was its garden. A profusion of shrubs and creepers and flowers made a soft green island in which the house nestled, cut off from the concrete and glass of Berea. You could sit out there on a rickety bench and imagine you were in the countryside or the suburbs. The noise from the traffic was filtered to a muffled rumble through the leaf and stem of green shadow. It was a garden that resisted what little maintenance we were inclined to offer. It simply grew and overgrew and fed on itself. To enjoy it, you waded through grass or forced a path in the undergrowth to a place where you could smoke and talk. (p.148)

The green oasis attached to the Berea house offers a respite from the downtown hubbub. It is a forgotten sanctuary nestled into a niche in the hard edges of the city surrounds. Later when the

[751] Unless we decide to invoke the Biblical Garden of Eden, of course.

[752] Gaylard, G. Introduction to *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.11.

caretaker clears the garden as recompense for some small favour, the narrator is utterly disenchanted with the results:

> It was gone. He had uprooted everything it would not have taken an axe to fell.
>
> We sat outside in Dave's Volksie for a long time, looking in disbelief at the bare earth, raked smooth from fence to fence, and the pile of dead plants as high as the roof. We laughed and laughed, but it did no good. The house was ruined. Without the garden it looked ugly and unloved. It was obvious we would have to move. (p.150)

When the garden was tended, the "house was ruined." The house became part of the "concrete and glass of Berea" (p.148). The gravity of the caretaker's act is conveyed by the narrator's doleful acknowledgement that they would now have to move. Without the garden, the house looked "ugly and unloved" (p.150). The man-made backdrop is now bereft of its stabilizing counterbalance: the natural realm.

On the one hand, this untended garden was appealing precisely because it visually and aurally softened the hard edges of the city. It acted as an ameliorative and calming backdrop, a reprieve against the brutalising modernity of Johannesburg. On the other, the untended backyard becomes a symbol of resistance, nonconformity, and subversion. Being occupied by students the house is understandably shabby. Its dereliction is further exacerbated by the "cultivate[d] squalor" they as middle-class white kids practised so as to "obscure the extent of [their] privilege" (p.148). From this point of view, the tumbledown garden suits their contrived and politicised aesthetics. However, to take this further, it could be argued that the garden appealed to the narrator and his friends for reasons beyond the mere bohemian. Not only does the garden allow for an imaginative escape from the sterility of the "concrete and glass" of the city, but on a more abstract level, it provides them with an environment free from the shackles of inherited perspectives. The garden, a space where they could freely "sit and smoke and talk", "resisted what little maintenance we were inclined to offer" and "simply grew and overgrew and fed on itself" (p.148). The garden resists being reigned in and thus operates as an effective metaphor for the way in which the youth subvert and shirk off the restraints of their parents' world order. Symbolically, the untended garden then exists within the overarching epistemological structures (it is still merely a single, small garden in the city) but its untamed growth subverts those structures from within.

At an even more allegorical remove, nature occasions a space free from the dogma of man. As Mongane Wally Serote notes in his 1970s protest poem "City Johannesburg"[753], via the metaphors of "iron breath", "neon flowers", "electrical wind"[754], and "cement trees"[755], the apartheid city appropriates, subdues, and warps nature. In doing so, apartheid policies are clearly ascribed to the doings and will of man and not that of nature. Powerfully, apartheid is depicted as entirely antithetical to nature. The untended garden thus becomes a symbol for the way in which nature, with its restorative and redemptive qualities (geographically and symbolically), must be allowed to enter, exist, and remain in the city – a backdrop against which our human constructions can be measured. Natural flow ultimately counteracts stringent human taxonomies.

However, as Chapter Four warns, nature is not always a redemptive or positive force. It can be, and is often, extremely destructive. This can be witnessed in the devastation left in the wake of floods, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, and hurricanes. Arguably one of nature's most systemically destructive forces, and perhaps most brutal spawn, is the human being. As a species, we have been the cause of incredible destruction. The "human animal" as Chapter Four argues, boasts a dark, inner nature that lies beneath a superficial layer of civility. The 'untended garden' is then a form of consciousness residing within the human psyche too. The term shores up the antinomy of city and nature, and perhaps, also reflects a more honest understanding of human nature: an enframing and necessary sense of order contains both city and subject, but a wildness within has not and cannot be entirely tamed (or 'tended'). The untended garden can be seen as a humbling of arrogant anthropocentrism as it forces us to see ourselves as a part of, and not divorced from, the natural world. Indeed, this more honest way of looking at ourselves as a part of nature, not divorced from it or superior to it, may lead to an enlightened consciousness informing a more prudent use of natural resources, a more conscientious treatment of the natural realm, and better, more considerate behaviour towards each other. Ultimately, this strain of postcolonial ecocriticism in Vladislavić's writing may generate different "ideas of human and animal being-in-the-world."[756] Postcolonial ecocriticism critiques "the hegemonic triumph of imperialism" [757] and "the global-capitalist system"[758] in their

[753] Serote, M.W. "City Johannesburg" in *The Paperbook of South African Poetry*. (Ed. M. Chapman.) AD Donker: Johannesburg, 1986, pp.166-167.

[754] Ibid, p.166.

[755] Ibid, p.167.

[756] Huggan, G. and Tiffin, H. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge: London, 2010, p.11.

[757] Ibid, p.11.

[758] Ibid, p.15.

respectively subjugative practices that affect people, animals, and the environment. A postcolonial ecocritical reading is thus "morally-attuned to the continuing abuses of authority that operate in humanity's name" and "works towards confirming an environmental ethic that sees 'environmental justice, social justice, and economic justice [not as dissonant competitors] but as parts of the same whole.'"[759] Already, agents in the Global North have begun "re-think and re-capture practices generated through the very respect for animals and nature that the early [colonial] settlers so righteously scorned."[760]

Another untended garden can be located in *Double Negative*. This garden becomes a space for fruitful and imaginative interaction between Neville Lister and Mrs Pinheiro. The first time Lister gains admittance to Mrs Pinheiro's house on Fourth Avenue, and before he learns of Mr Pinheiro's collection of undelivered letters, he looks out of the lounge window and sees that:

> A garden had been left to grow wild there. The grass was so high that a table top appeared to be floating on it like a raft. Shrubbery frothed up on one side, a hedge of unpruned ivy was piled in thunderheads on the other. As I looked out, a ripple passed through the leafy pelt as if the garden had sensed my presence and shuddered. I thought I saw little houses in the foam, things that had been swept away in the flood, adrift but miraculously intact. (p.99)

It is significant that the shrubbery is figuratively described in watery metaphors: it ripples, froths, foams, and floods. The descriptive conflation between grass and water evocatively conveys the conceptual links between the untended garden and imaginative flow. Later in the novel, Lister and Camilla have their tea out in the garden:

> The door to the yard stood open. It was midwinter, but the garden was as lushly overgrown as ever, except that the grass had been cut to uncover a patch of brick paving on which stood a wire-mesh table and two chairs. A sickle lay on the table top like a gleaming question mark. I went into the garden and sat at the table with my coat collar turned up. (p.129)

In this passage, the garden becomes the *spiritus loci*, which sees the subjects of the "dead letters" come to life (p.127). The energy of watery flow allows for the fanciful reification of the subjects of the lost letters. It is almost as if the freedom of the untended garden sets the scene for the magical realist episode that follows:

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[759] Ibid, p.13.

[760] Ibid, p.11.

> A paper chain of men and women, hundreds of them joined hand and foot, clattered like galleys from the printing press. Between us, we folded them at the perforations, running creases between our fingernails, and tore them apart. Free at last, stretching their limbs and cracking their joints, they began to tell their stories. When this envelope was empty, there were others, from which sprang an unbroken line of creatures delighted to suck air into their lungs and born to speak. (p.131)

This excerpt points to the creative potency produced when nature's flow and lostness are taken together. The untended garden occasions a space free from the rigidity of empirical and rational constraints on consciousness. It is almost as if the refuge provided by the garden allows both Neville and Mrs Pinheiro to embrace the imaginative release embodied by the letters themselves when they are unfurled from their envelopes. The contents and subjects of the letters become surreal embodiments of their authors where paper and people become fantastically intertwined. The untended garden, like a secular Garden of Eden, breathes life into the subjects of these "dead letters."

It might be thought rather peculiar for a study concentrating on postapartheid literary representations of Johannesburg to gravitate its focus towards the natural realm. However, taking its cue from Gerald Gaylard's work on the ecology of the postcolonial city, what this thesis has endeavoured to show is that, via a depth reading, Vladislavić's Johannesburg novels reveal that the natural world subtly shadows and haunts the urban surrounds. Nature can be found literally and metaphorically beneath the urban simulacrum. The palimpsest is able to reveal the falseness of the simulacrum as well as the constructedness of consumerist-driven hypermodern culture by pointing towards a natural antecedent. Nature for Vladislavić appears in the background, waiting in the wings, relativising hypermodernity. Unlike the Romantics, who foregrounded the redemptive and restorative properties of nature (think of William Wordsworth's iconic "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"), Vladislavić's untended garden operates in the shadows. As opposed to Wordsworth's sonnet "The World is Too Much with Us", Vladislavić does not completely denounce the effects of industrialism and urbanisation on the natural realm – after all, the city-as-muse has brought forth his most successful works. However, his awareness of nature keeps "the entropy of human constructions"[761] in check. The untended garden celebrates the "self-renewability", "cyclicity", and fluidity of nature.[762] It gestures towards

[761] Gaylard, G. "Migrant Ecology in the Postcolonial City in *Portrait with Keys*: *Joburg and What-What*" in *Marginal Spaces.* (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.293.

[762] Ibid, p.293.

the prospect of an affirming, purposefully undecideable consciousness that exists in the background, revealing the previously unseen and unfamiliar aspects of Johannesburg city life. As Gaylard has it,

> Nature can be invasive, but even when it is distant or merely implicit, it is always there, the silent space lurking within, obscured only by our lack of awareness and attention. When we are quietly attentive, nature is obvious, as are our constructions that obscure it.[763]

Ultimately, the untended garden stands as a contrapuntal litmus test for everything located in the foreground – it relativises the simulacral elements of Johannesburg's hypermodernity.

While Vladislavić, like Baudrillard, is critical of the simulacrum, it would be problematic to declare that he is completely and utterly hostile to all forms of constructedness. His wry wit satirises Johannesburg's materialistic and consumer-driven culture and mocks its simulacral elements, but it would be inaccurate to suggest that he is decrying all manifestations of human industry and achievement. I think his censure is directed against a particularly offensive brand of constructedness and historical amnesia: that is the slavish and bizarre importation of de-historicised Metropolitan copies that perpetuate colonialism.

Vladislavić's city novels stand as a complex counterweight to Johannesburg's superficiality. Vladislavić embodies depth against surface, artificiality, and constructedness. This has primary significance for writing, reading, and living in the city. This study has labelled Vladislavić's style postcolonial formalism, charting its genesis from Gerald Gaylard's "historical formalism."[764] This term seems to move towards a category that reflects both his socio-ethical commitment to third world dynamics as well as his responsiveness to postmodern and aesthetically experimental forms of art. As has already been mentioned, the depth narrative inaugurates a modulation of Keatsian negative capability, which in turn points to the affirming prospects afforded by the untended garden and the concept of flow. His brand of literary "undecideability" subscribes to a conscious imaginative flow that is patient and accepting of uncertainties and lostness. It cautions against a general impatience that seeks resolution of contradictions and binaries. The greatest significance that this present study finds in his work is a literary philosophy that critiques the haste of postmodern society and hypermodernity. Instead, by embracing flow, or being more at

[763] Ibid, p.295.

[764] Gaylard, G. Introduction to *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.10.

ease with flux (allowing oneself to get a little lost in the process), Vladislavić's work ultimately advocates a different appreciation of time – perhaps a time that is more attuned to natural flow.

This different appreciation of time made possible by natural flow is evident in portrait 89 of *Portrait with Keys* where Vladislavić documents the effects on the city on one of the rare occasions that it snowed in Johannesburg. The year was September 1981, signalling a South Africa still mired by the segregative policies of the apartheid era. The narrator remarks that snow during spring in Johannesburg was "inconceivable" (p.128).

> As the snow thickened, you could sense the expectation rising, a wish transmitting itself, binding us into a new community with a single exhilarating thought. Don't let it stop. Let it go on snowing, let it go on until there a drifts in the streets, let's be snowed in, just for once. (p.129)

The desire to "be snowed in" gestures towards a general resistance to the pressures of city-time – a wish to be set free from the regulations of the workday, but perhaps more broadly, from the pressures of the contemporary age. No one minded the "traffic jams" that were "everywhere" – indeed, traffic merely "prolonged our time outside" (p.129). The snow completely transforms Johannesburg. On the streets, "white businessmen and black newspaper vendors were throwing snowballs at one another" (p.129). This white wonderland revises the notion of brutal whiteness in the South African context and becomes "nothing more than a froth that melted between your fingers or burst apart on a turned shoulder" – something "silly that you could play games with" doing "no real harm", something "that would not last" (p.130). Not only does this natural flow-from-above unite the city, bringing its members together in acts of childlike frivolity and insouciance, thus dismissing the constraints of regimented clock time, it also momentarily obliterates differences, relativising the strict ontological taxonomy of this racialised society.

> The snow changed the city miraculously. We were all in it together. (p.129)

The snow disrupts the city's frenetic schedule, allowing the civic body to exist in a liberating now-ness. "Every vehicle had become part of a carnival procession" (p.129). In a Bakhtinian sense, the city's pre-existing hierarchical relationships are subverted by the carnivalesque celebration precipitated by the snowfall. Accordingly, the blizzard temporarily deconstructs the strictures and consequences of urban segregation – nature suspends adherence to the racist policies of apartheid. Furthermore, elemental time indicated by the presence of snow provincialises the perceived monumentalism of apartheid, and instead, suggests that (echoing

Mongane Wally Serote's iconic Struggle poem, "For Don M. - Banned") "seasons come to pass."[765] Ultimately, this portrait demonstrates the overarching argument this thesis has endeavoured to advance: it is through and within nature that the harshness and hardness of the city can and will be mitigated. The unexpected snowfall disrupts the city's control over nature, effectively diminishing human attempts to master and marginalise the natural realm. Here the snow occasions a literal space of flow, flux, and indeterminacy – a symbol that I have taken as a redemptive modality in Vladislavić's work on the city.

Natural flow runs deep in Vladislavić's novels. Again in *Portrait with Keys* even the question of urban belonging is one that is framed by the narrator's awareness of his connection to nature.

> This is our climate. We have grown up in this air, this light, and we grasp it on the skin, where it grasps us. We know this earth, this grass, this polished red stone with the soles of our feet. We will never be ourselves anywhere else. (p.103)

This recognition of the interrelationship between city, nature, and identity courses through Vladislavić's writing like an undercurrent – subtly informing and imbuing his city texts with an unexpected responsiveness to the positioning of nature and flow within the bounds of the man-made metropolis that is Johannesburg.

This use of nature to critique the simulacrum speaks to a rather idealistic project, perhaps one that might only boast limited practical and theoretical success. It seems unlikely that the juggernaut of hypermodernity will be sufficiently subverted by the existence of quiet, unimposing nature that lurks in the shadows at the periphery of the postcolonial city. However, gesturing towards a different brand of consciousness, one more at home with natural flow, makes uncertainty and flux attractive concepts that destabilise the sterility of the simulacrum. In accordance with this nature-as-backdrop philosophy, Vladislavić's urban postcolonialism rejects exercises that wholly favour bucolic or romanticised nostalgia for an African ruralist pastoralism. Instead Vladislavić's works, in promoting the untended garden, signal an urban ecology – a configuration in which nature can be embraced as a necessary component of urban life and not as something that can only be experienced or enjoyed outside the range of city limits.

Thus, I truly believe that Vladislavić's nuanced and contrapuntal challenge to the dominant ways of reading and writing Johannesburg works, as Poyner puts it, to rehumanise what can be seen as

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765 Serote, M.W. "For Don M. – Banned" in *Seasons Come to Pass*. (Eds. E. Mphahlele and H. Moffett.) Oxford University Press: Cape Town, 2002, p.209.

a tough and ugly city. Yet, any changes that may be effected are not wholesale ones, but are rather small and executed from the margins. I concur with Bremner's sentiments that Johannesburg is a difficult city to write on and live in – but perhaps even more so to write on it whilst living in it.[766] The negative facets of this industrial wasteland tend to overpower the subtle and appealing features of its built environment and surrounding landscape. Vladislavić's work, for me, has become an exercise in reading against its many dystopian characteristics. It is easy to expose the city's fault lines and problems, as they rest on its surface; it is a far greater challenge to delve beneath that surface and read Johannesburg from a defamiliarised perspective. This has relevance for scholars, but also for inhabitants of Johannesburg. Vladislavić's satirical subversion of simulacral hypermodernity not only promotes an alternative literary consciousness that is content with the creative potential of half knowns and unknowns – thus priming readers for linguistic, textual, and urban adventure – but it also rescues Johannesburg from the pessimistic representations that tend to dominate its literary scholarship. I think that Vladislavić's use of nature to critique the simulacrum redeems the city. Vladislavić's writing stands as a creative riposte to the question Kevin Bloom's *Ways of Staying*[767] poses: why do we continue to live in such a city if it is so dangerous, so ecologically unfriendly, so materialistic, and hyperreal? For me, Vladislavić's way of writing Johannesburg stands as an articulation of a 'way to stay' and make sense of this city through, and not in spite of, its idiosyncrasies and peccadilloes. There is more to Johannesburg than meets the eye and this is, in part, revealed by Ivan Vladislavić's work on the city. In the words of Tony Morphet, "Vladislavić's fictions give us a city, and a country, in which we can live."[768]

[766] Bremner, L. *Writing the City into Being*: *Essays on Johannesburg 1998-2008*. Fourthwall Books: Johannesburg, 2010, p.1.

[767] Bloom, K. *Ways of Staying*. Picador: Johannesburg, 2009.

[768] Morphet, T. "Words First: Ivan Vladislavić" in *Marginal Spaces*. (Ed. G. Gaylard.) Wits University Press: Johannesburg, 2011, p.202.

# Appendix

**Ivan Vladislavić's Oeuvre and Awards: 1989-2011**[769]

*Missing Persons* (1989) – Olive Schreiner Prize

*The Folly* (1993) – CNA Literary Award

*Propaganda by Monuments and Other Stories* (1996) – Thomas Pringle Prize for 'Propaganda by Monuments' and 'The WHITES ONLY Bench'

*The Restless Supermarket* (2001)

*The Exploded View* (2004)

*Overseas* (2004)

*Willem Boshoff* (2005)

*Portrait with Keys* (2006) – Sunday Times Alan Paton Award for Non-Fiction

*Flashback Hotel: Early Stories* (2010) – the original collection of *Missing Persons* and *Propaganda by Monuments* are republished in a single volume under this new title

*Double Negative* (2010) – University of Johannesburg Prize for Creative Writing

*The Loss Library* (2011)

*A Labour of Moles* – publishes as No.17 of The Cahiers Series (2011)

[769] Please note that this list excludes titles and collections that Vladislavić has edited.

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