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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.