

WHITENESS IN WORKS BY IVAN VLADISLAVIĆ

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Abstract

This project is a literary study that will analyse the multiple ways in which whiteness is constructed within a selection of literary works by the South African novelist, Ivan Vladislavić. The texts chosen for this project are the “The Book Lover” and “Courage” in *Propaganda by Monuments* (1996), the novel *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) and his work *The Exploded View* (2004). These works display the various and complex ways identities are constructed in the context of a transitional period, and the varying degree of influence whiteness is given in different contexts.

Keywords: whiteness, Ivan Vladislavić, “Courage”, “The Book Lover”, *The Restless Supermarket*, *The Exploded View*, race, Europeanness.

Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Masters of English Literature in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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Introduction

This project is a literary study that will analyse the multiple ways in which whiteness is constructed within a selection of literary works by the South African novelist, Ivan Vladislavić. Vladislavić has become one of the most influential postmodern writers of South Africa. The texts chosen for this project are the “The Book Lover” and “Courage” in *Propaganda by Monuments* (1996), the novel *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) and his work *The Exploded View* (2004). These works engage and address different ways of creating whiteness. It is hoped to achieve a further understanding of the fluid category of whiteness itself and its function within the complex works of Vladislavić.

The first chapter considers previous international and South African research that questions the category whiteness. It outlines the function of whiteness, not as a fixed category but rather as a fluid signified. Historically, whiteness has been considered the dominant norm from which all other races are studied. In foregrounding the question of whiteness, one can perhaps undermine this normative position and, with this, begin the process of dismantling the associated ideas of power and privilege that it invokes. The chapter discusses whiteness within a South African context and the main themes which surround the concept such as power and privilege, the question of belonging and community as well as the ways in which race influences other aspects of identity such as masculinity. The analysis leads onto a discussion of how literature reflects certain social realities but remains a flexible space that purposefully evades definitive readings of such themes as whiteness. Finally, the chapter focuses specifically on why the works of Ivan Vladislavić are particularly useful in examining the complex category that is whiteness.

The second chapter examines the two short stories “The Book Lover” and “Courage” within *Propaganda by Monuments*. The stories are set in the transitional stage between apartheid and a postapartheid South Africa. Within “The Book Lover” race plays a minor role in the construction of identity. This story depicts an understanding of whiteness that is only available through insinuation. It is rather a colonial European perception of race and cultural identity than a focus on overt physical aspects of whiteness. The narrator constructs a world through the books that he collects and is alienated from the realities of a social South Africa. At the other

extreme, race is at the centre of the short story “Courage” as an artist is sent to a rural village in order to capture the embodiment of “courage” in a sculpture. The story is told through the eyes of a young black boy and the physical aspect of whiteness is portrayed as grotesque and dislodged from its normative position of privilege. “Courage” depicts a community where, despite the optimism of a ‘New South Africa’, not much has changed in the roles that whiteness embodies. This chapter highlights the different values that whiteness is given in different situations and facets of society.

The Restless Supermarket is almost a continuation of the character in “The Book Lover”. Aubrey Tearle’s creation of identity is informed by a stringent version of race. This is apparent through a psychological over-identification associated with an old, almost Victorian, Europeanness. He has appropriated a very set version of standards that is affiliated, not within the real Europe, but a ‘Europe of the mind’ and uses the Café Europa as a palimpsest of this Europe. This chapter will show how Tearle orders his world and leaves no room for extending the boundaries he creates. He is unwilling to negotiate the postcolonial reality that surrounds him. But with the changing times his world, that of an old South Africa, appears to be falling apart. He attempts to rein in the chaos by ‘correcting’ the society around him. He is unable to contain his world and denizens of the street infiltrate the café and chaos finally breeches the wall of his version of civilisation. This chapter will explore the creation of an identity situated in Europeanness and Tearle’s alienation from the realities of a South African context.

The final work, *The Exploded View*, is set in 1999 and Vladislavić uses four intersecting stories to examine South African life five years after the elections. Within this work Vladislavić ‘explodes’ the notion of race along with other cultural aspects of South Africa. In *The Exploded View* whiteness has become, along with the rest of society, a shifting and multiple layering of signs in which the real is impossible to locate. It is no longer invested in a Europeanness that is evident in both “The Book Lover” and *The Restless Supermarket*. The three white characters appear to be bewildered by the postcolonial world that surrounds them. They are trapped within a society that bears to no resemblance to reality.

The chapter on *The Exploded View* also concludes the discussion on whiteness within the works of Ivan Vladislavić. The chapter closes with the argument that while the identities of the narrator in “The Book Lover” and Aubrey Tearle appear to be invested in a colonial Europeanness and in an identity that is situated outside of a South African reality, whiteness within *The Exploded View* depicts a gradual fragmentation of this rigid, colonial version of whiteness. Race becomes merely one aspect among many that informs identity.

Chapter 1

The Question of Whiteness in South Africa

The concept of whiteness has recently held interest both internationally and in South Africa. It is a relatively new field of study as, up until recently, the focus of race studies was generally engaged in 'otherness'. That is, whiteness was assumed to be the norm, '... an unchanging and unproblematic location, a position from which all other identities come to be marked by their difference ...' (Nuttall 2004:137). In shifting the focus, and premising whiteness as the subject, its assumed position is challenged and, consequently, the ideas that create whiteness can be deconstructed.

This project will question the concept of whiteness, and the complexities of the construct within the works of Ivan Vladislavić. Whiteness is not a fixed constant; it is a social concept based on an association of meanings. 'Above all, whiteness is understood as a process that can be contested as well as deconstructed' (Ware & Black 2002:25). In South Africa the creation of whiteness becomes even more complex because of the nation's historically artificial construction of race, the history of apartheid and its subsequent collapse. The change in South Africa's political economy has provided a fundamental alteration in the way in which race is inscribed within the political arena. Despite this shift in state policy the boundaries that contain the construction of whiteness as a position of power have not been dismantled. It is important from the outset to separate the construction of whiteness from racism, as they are not interchangeable. 'The emphasis, in other words, has been more racism than on race, and this has tended to foreclose a complex investigation into how race works,' (Nuttall 2001:118 - 119). This study is not a sociological study of whiteness in South Africa but rather an interrogation of how different versions of whiteness are represented in the literary texts of Ivan Vladislavić.

Race is an imaginary construct opposed to an immutable fact based on biological differences. 'We tend to think of race as being indisputably, *real*. It frames our notions of kinship and descent and influences our movements in the social world; we see it plainly on one another's faces. It seems a product not of the social imagination but of biology' (Jacobson 1998:1). But race is not dependent on insignificant differences such as the physical or geographical, it is

rather an artificial category that has been created through a historical process. ‘All races are invented categories – designations coined for the sake of grouping and separating people along the lines of presumed differences’ (1998:4). The biological differences between people are mostly inconsequential. ‘The issue is not how *natural* differences determine and justify group definitions and interactions, but how racial logics and racial frames of reference are articulated and deployed, and with what consequences’ (Donald & Rattansi 1992:1).

Race is reliant on, and has been built upon, many variables. While social and historically constructed sets of identification are influential in the creation of race, one of the most prominent factors is how the political state of the nation informs the creation of racial identity. Race becomes a labyrinth of ‘social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle’ (Donald & Rattansi 1992:1). It is through state policy that citizens are influenced in their imagination of race.

Despite the artificial construction of race, physical differences between people still provide a yardstick from which to measure identity. ‘While it may be relatively easy to conclude that “race” refers to an outdated system of classification based on imagined notions of biological divergence of the species, the salience of those visible markers of racial difference continues to act as a mnemonic to the idea of race, which still has to be reckoned with in everyday life’ (Ware & Black 2002:28). Therefore, corporeal distinctions between people provide a trigger that has been established through a history, and sustained by a process of repetition. Depending on the ideas that are related directly to the difference between salient features of the human body, different reactions, interactions and behaviours are performed. These behaviours are taught and influenced directly through a process of social conditioning.

Race influences how the self is created and imagined. The self is not in a stable and fixed position but is rather a matrix, ‘a complex shifting interconnected series of strands. This matrix has no core, and is not stable’ (Distiller & Steyn 2005:4). The self constantly has to re-figure itself in terms of changing social conventions. It is not a static and unchanging feature of an identity. It transmutes as social and individuals metamorph with time. ‘Rather than existing as

an object outside of history and politics, the self is continually created and recreated as and by actions, and in relation to a social audience' (2005:4).

There are two opposing themes with regards to whiteness and its future in international debates. The first debate conceptualises a society without racial boundaries that is, a society in which race has no influence on the construction of the self and is not considered a marker of identity. This debate is problematic as Tony Morrison states; 'The world does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by assertion. The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act' (1992:46). The concept of race does not form in isolation and is not static, but constitutes a multitude of ideologies that are continually shifting in order to keep up with social realities. It is therefore to reason that in attempting to discard, or neutralise language that is racialised would in fact 'cover-up' problems. It would result in the elimination of entire histories of individuals and societies. History is vital to the construction of both the self and communities; therefore this will not solve the 'problem' of race. The second and more feasible debate considers that whiteness needs to be shifted from its position of power, that race will always be a part of an identity, and that, therefore, the challenge is to change the way in which society understands race in order to dismantle associated positions of power and privilege.

It is important to establish why there should even be a study of whiteness. Historically it is those races that are not white (black, Indian etc) that are considered to be racialised subjects and are, therefore, the focus of study. Whiteness, on the other hand, is situated as the 'silently normative dominant identity position(s)' (Distiller & Steyn 2004:6). This assumption gives the category whiteness its power as it occupies a central position from which all 'otherness' is read. Richard Dyer in his paper, 'A Matter of Whiteness,' (2000) explains that whiteness is not an absence of colour, and 'until we see whiteness, see its power, its particularity and limitedness, put it in its place and end its rule' (2000:541) it will always be part of a power structure. Therefore in studying whiteness, by 'making it strange' one can perhaps move away from the ideas that associate whiteness with power and privilege. By reversing the gaze and placing whiteness under scrutiny, its overarching position as the standard from which all 'otherness' is

considered can be firmly reassessed. It is from this position that the social concepts that maintain whiteness as the privileged race can be renegotiated.

The problem with centring a study on whiteness lies in the danger of 'reproducing an unhealthy dualism that does little to challenge the fundamental principle of 'race'' (Ware & Black 2002:19). In other words, by focusing on a loaded construct such as whiteness, one is in danger of involuntarily reinforcing its position of power and privilege. A study of whiteness is in no way meant to reinscribe its position of power but rather to examine its shifting boundaries.

Yet these criticisms and caveats are not meant to obscure the potential benefits to be gained from analyzing and disaggregating whiteness as part of a more holistic political project against injustice, and against the notion of 'race' in general. Developing the tools to demonstrate the contingency, the changeability, the inconsistency of all racial categories, over time and place, requires rigorous and concerted work across the demarcation lines drawn by race-thinking. Within this context the deconstruction of whiteness presents vital opportunities to smudge and blur these lines instead of rendering the distinctions even sharper. (2002:19)

The study of whiteness is by no means fully developed, but it is a necessary step in the right direction in order to challenge historically constructed categories of race.

Race does not function as a category on its own, it is influenced and influences class, gender and sexuality. Race plays a major part in the formation of masculinity. 'Masculinity is not inherent nor is it acquired in a one-off way. It is constructed in the context of class, race and other factors' (Morrell 2001:8). Studies of maleness are few and far between and studies of *white* masculinity appear to be even less researched in favour of their female counterparts. Historically the white male is regarded as the position of the normative, that is, maleness is considered, like whiteness, to be the position from which all 'otherness' is read. 'Within the ideological structure of patriarchal culture, heterosexual masculinity has traditionally been structured as the normative gender' (Berger et al 1995:2). There has been little research on the white male as the subject, rather arguments are premised in highlighting the repressed 'other'.

Men tend to be stereotyped and ‘except where they were situated as part of the problem (the abuser, the oppressor, the patriarch), were neither the object nor the subject of study’ (Reid & Walker 2005:6). But, masculinity, like whiteness, cannot be inscribed with binary and simplistic characteristics. In considering the construction of masculinity in conjunction with the creation of whiteness one might oppose the false stabilisation that inscribes the category of the white male as the dominant norm.

Whiteness is conceived in many varied and multifaceted ways. It is not the intention to fix whiteness with a definitive meaning and attribute it to one rigid function in society. One must never be complacent in the understanding of the category whiteness. While it plays a definitive role within society, its meaning is not fixed. It is always in flux and shifting in relation to the world around it. Rather, one must consider ways in which the category of whiteness colour identity and foreground questions on how and why it works within different facets of society. Whiteness plays various different roles and one must be vigilant in observing the danger in inscribing the category with blanketed terms and behaviours.

South Africa’s history is complex and unique therefore it is essential to consider how emerging debates regarding whiteness in first world countries, such the UK and the US, are translated into a South African context. Although international debates in the construction of whiteness are useful, one must not be mistaken in thinking they can be translated into a South African context without adaptation. Like the UK and the US, whiteness in South Africa is equated historically with privilege, but, unlike these countries, white people living in South Africa are in the minority. Therefore ‘the majority of this literature (from the USA and UK) focuses ... on contexts in which ‘whiteness’ is a majority position, and consequently easily justifiable as normative and dominant’ (Salisbury & Foster 2004:93).

Spatially, apartheid provided physical boundaries in which races were actively separated. As Richard Ballard points out, racism was useful to ‘white’ people in various ways, allowing for economic gain, control and power and ‘a less developed theme ... is that racism helped

‘white’¹ people shore up their identity as ‘white’ (2004:52). The physical separation of races enabled white South Africans to create what Ballard describes as a ‘comfort zone’ (2004:54). That is a space which allowed for the discrimination and building up of ‘otherness’ while at the same time containing a particular set of ideas with regards to their own whiteness. ‘To create living environments which would facilitate their modern, European sense of themselves, the minority government removed those people, values, behaviours, languages which were seen to contradict this identity’ (Ballard 2004:51). This construction of race and the self-contained notion of the ‘self’ were premised in a distant and idealised Europe.

The effect of such classification was to produce a positive self image for Europe/the West/‘white’ people as hard-working, moral, clean: broadly, as civilised. The identity of ‘white’ people became cast as ‘white’ supremacism, where a secure self image came from one’s ‘whiteness’ or at least Europeaness to which the virtues of civilisation were automatically attached. (2004:52)

Apartheid formalised segregation into policy, this gave the illusion that it was unconditionally unopposed in its position of power. By removing the people who might challenge the construction of an identity, those understood as white were not threatened and therefore never examined. ‘We attempt to find comfort zones within which it is possible to ‘be ourselves’. These are places which do not challenge our self conceptions’ (2004:51). The creation of identification lies within the State, as the State constructed the policy of apartheid, the authority and supremacy of the white race was assumed to be stable.

In 1990 Nelson Mandela was freed and in 1994 the Government of National Unity was created; following the first democratic elections. The construction of whiteness within the apartheid era was inextricably tied into notions of power and privilege, the change in the political government equated with a social demotion. Suddenly the whites are confronted with the fact that ‘in the new context, belonging could not be assumed’ (Nuttall 2004:118) and, in a post-apartheid era; ‘The category “whiteness” no longer carries the same meanings that it did under colonization or apartheid’ (Nuttall 2004:135). Although the political state of the nation shifted and the legislation that provided safety in the physical separation of the races was abolished, the

¹ While other authors have placed the category whiteness and race in inverted commas in order to show that the concepts are under discussion, I have decided against this as the categories are in all respects provisional and

fundamental associations of whiteness were not challenged. The collapse of boundaries between races did not automatically translate into a collapse in the way in which white people identified themselves. Whiteness still functions within a set of social discourses that provide the category with its power, the issues of white social demotion are therefore complicated by relics of power and the constant negotiation of historical subtleties within a society in transition.

Historically South Africa's past was riddled with violence and oppression by the elevation of one race above another, this left a problem of resentment and anger towards white people. By virtue of their physical whiteness, they symbolise years of oppression and control and without the State's assurance white people believed they were vulnerable. The history that created racialised identities cannot be forgotten or discarded in the face of this new nation. Politically the new government did not encourage resentment or violence, but, instead, offered a new blanketing term the 'Rainbow Nation'. This notion was supposed to encourage cultural diversity. But, the past is still very influential, and while white South Africans have to come to grips with a shifting understanding of what it means to be white without legislation that enforces separation, they still have protection of the State as well as the economic power and privilege that is associated with whiteness.

One of the main themes with regards to the construction of whiteness in a post-apartheid context is the question of belonging and community. Despite having been born and bred in South Africa, English-speaking South Africans associate with a generalised and idealised European identity; despite being over 10 000 km away, and for many white South Africans, displaced by more than two generations. Sarah Nuttall attributes this identification to the white settlers of South Africa's history, 'It is most often in terms of the "settler" that white identity in postcolonial African contexts has been given content and meaning' (2004:117). Because the settler was 'marked as "coming from elsewhere" rather than "being of the place"' (2004:118) there is a sense of displacement that is never resolved. This European identification is based on a very rigid set of ideas that pertain to the modern, civilised and enlightened. It is an imaginary ideal, as it does not reflect a European reality with its own poor, disenfranchised and uneducated. As a consequence of this identification Africa becomes the foreign country, and

therefore there is no need to continuously use inverted commas.

white English-speaking South Africans appear to struggle to find a 'real' place within a South African context. The question of belonging becomes more apparent in the transitional stages of South Africa's history as the place and function of whiteness within the space of a new South Africa is questioned.

The fears experienced by some 'whites' today are similar to those of the past; the main difference is that the State no longer shares them, and now organises against them. The fear of mixing that once drove the colonial and apartheid state projects, as with many modernist projects around the world, is now privatised ... The result, then, is a degree of alienation and displacement, which prompts the avoidance of areas where 'whites' feel they lack control and they attempt to find spaces within which control can be adequately maintained. (Ballard 2004:58)

The identity which was once protected by legislative law, is now in the balance as the white identity; 'Deprived of the archaic identity of the settler, (is) conceivably deprived ... of citizenship in the present' (Nuttall 2004:118). The difficulty in placing whiteness within an African context is complicated by the authority the category invokes. There is a dissonance between the power whiteness is presumed to hold and its displacement. Despite this 'break' in the settler identity, white South Africans still associate with imagined European values.

The question of whiteness within a South African context is a non-linear and unpredictable process. This process parallels Raymond Williams' 'epochal analysis' that considers a dominant society to be the result of both resistance and negotiation. While Williams' theory cannot be translated into every situation, it is a useful way of understanding the negotiation and transformation of whiteness in society. All cultures, according to Williams, are in a dominant phase whereby a 'cultural process is seized as a cultural system' (1977:121). South Africa's post-apartheid state is currently the dominant. This dominant stage is dynamic as it is at any one time influenced by the both residual and the emergent.

The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. (1977:122)

The residual, in terms of whiteness, is the link to a past European identification that still functions as a part of the dominant society. Through the 'emergent' Williams speaks of, 'new

meanings and values, new practices, new relationships are being created' (1977:123). There is a sense of a society evolving but this evolution is not a clinical process and the rules cannot be followed as 'a social order changes, in terms of its own development needs' (Williams 1977:125). It is a dynamic scheme whereby a new order comes into being but the changes in society are never entirely linear or completely predictable. While whiteness plays a part within this society it is neither completely present nor absent. It is always there in part leaving space for creative possibilities.

Studies of South African white male identities tend to be overlooked in that, 'it became apparent that the history of South Africa sorely lacked a gender perspective which went beyond the examination of women ... Existing gender literature, however remained effectively synonymous with the study of women' (Morrell 2001:xi). In recent years masculinity has become the subject of examination and study, both in the international field and in South Africa. As Robert Morrell examines in his paper, 'The Times of Change; Men and Masculinity in South Africa,' the mercurial identity makes it difficult, if not impossible, to assume specific characteristics of the South African male. 'Masculinities are fluid and should not be considered as belonging in a fixed way to any one group of men. They are socially and historically constructed in a process which involved contestation between rival understandings of what being a man should involve' (2001:7).

The arguments of social demotion of masculinity in a post-apartheid society mirror the arguments of the perceived social demotion of whiteness. The discourse used in relation to whiteness and maleness is almost interchangeable. Both whiteness and masculinity undergo transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. 'If colonialism and apartheid shaped the masculinity of the past, the transition to democracy in South Africa in the 1990s has had the effect of unsettling and unseating entrenched masculinities: masculinities, which were ... patriarchal, authoritarian and steeped in violence' (Reid & Walker 2005:8). Although there has been research with regards to masculinity in the USA and UK, it, like whiteness, cannot be shifted wholesale into a South African context as international studies 'handle race as a minority unit of analysis' (2001:11). Morrell attributes the state as the most important means of change within masculinity identity. 'The state is the most important single agent of change. It is

both the result of the political transition and the catalyst and motor of transition' (2001:20). The political change in South Africa is a catalyst for transformation in the construction of white maleness. 'The state is trying to stabilise and unite a country, it is engaged in nation building, and its male citizens are unsettled and unsure of their place in the new order' (2001:21).

Historically, 'scholars have pointed to the influence of colonialism and apartheid on men and the study of masculinity' (Reid & Walker 2005:7). There appears to be a double-bind with regards to white males, as not only are the boundaries for identifying themselves with race collapsing, but also their masculinity is undermined. Whiteness and masculinity are privileged, both in a South African context and global context, but this privilege is a fabricated construct which faces a significant shift in the post-apartheid and is 'part of a wider attempt by men to deal with feelings of emasculation or the actual loss of status and power' (2001:33). Despite the conflict that white masculinity appears to face the white male is still at the forefront of authority and advantage.

Literature provides a particular space in which to study social realities as, 'writing (at its best) relates to its envioning condition as the latter's most fully reflexive self-knowledge' (Pechey 1998:57). It reflects the reality and history of the surrounding world, but is also flexible in that it doesn't require precise analysis and knowledge of sociology. Literature is a malleable form, allowing writers to create, inform and mirror society. Writers are able to explore aspects of their social surroundings through the literary imagination.

... many designated "white" writers confess to in their own work: their motivation stems partly from a recognition that their "whiteness" ties them historically into a system of race privilege from which it is hard to escape, but by providing a critique of whiteness, they begin to situate themselves outside that system. (Ware & Black 2002:29)

Literature is used to express and represent nuances of a social context through a creative process that is at once dynamic and interactive. Whiteness and identity are premised in language and writers are able to 'transform aspects of their social grounding into aspects of language' (Morrison 1992:4).

The change in society through the transition of the apartheid state into a democracy is reflected in the literature of South Africa. 'Post-apartheid writing turns from the fight against apartheid, with its fixation upon suffering and the seizure of power ...' (Pechey 1998:58). New subjects and themes have emerged and post-apartheid literature is inclined to replicate the sense of unease and displacement within a New South Africa. It is through the medium of literature that themes such as whiteness can be questioned. 'In effect, all writing in South Africa is by definition a form of protest or acquiescence ... since all writing in South Africa has obvious and immediate political consequences' (Ashcroft et al. 1989:83-84). Literature provides a form that does not allow a single and definitive reading of themes. Boundaries are purposefully oblique, distinctions blurred and meanings evaded. Whiteness, at any one time, is merely one aspect within literature, and therefore the space of literature forces one to consider whiteness as only one part of the whole, not as an answer to all questions.

This project will examine selected texts by the South African author, Ivan Vladislavić. Vladislavić has a growing critical reputation; he has received the Sunday Times Literary Award for *The Restless Supermarket* (2001), the Olive Schreiner Prize for *Missing Persons* (1989) and the CNA Literary Award for *The Folly* (1993). These acclamations increasingly suggest that he is one of the most important writers of post-apartheid South Africa. The texts chosen for this project question the varied and multifaceted ways in which whiteness is conceived in literature; they are the short stories, "The Book Lover" and "Courage" in *Propaganda by Monuments* (1996), the novel *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) and his work *The Exploded View* (2004).

Vladislavić uses play, satire and defamiliarisation to depict the subtle ways in which race is constructed in a society that is changing. He is aware of the unpredictability and dynamic scheme of an emergent society. Meaning is purposefully evasive and oblique within his writing. He self-consciously engages with the process of identity and being. Through his texts he demonstrates the complexity of the construction of race, the fluidity of whiteness as a signifier as well as its continual and unpredictable transformation. The texts interrogate many themes within a society in transformation; one of these themes deals with the construction of whiteness. This connection is provisional, as whiteness cannot be simplified to a single

category or answer and is far more complex than merely a broad category that tints all ways of understanding and creating identity. Through the writing of Vladislavić one can begin to comprehend the multifaceted variations of whiteness that are always present within a society, but only in part.

The project aims to observe how the categories of whiteness are given meaning in the literature of Ivan Vladislavić. Historically, whiteness has not been the subject of study, but rather the norm from which all other races are examined. Recently there has been a shift in theoretical thinking, which includes whiteness as a subject of study in order to dislodge it from its perceived position as the standard. Within a South African context the study of whiteness takes on added complications because of the nation's diverse and violent history. With the advent of democracy the notion of whiteness shifts, as there is a perceived social demotion. The literature of Ivan Vladislavić reflects this dissonance and sense of displacement, providing a space in which to question the multifaceted category that is whiteness.

Chapter 2

“The Book Lover” and “Courage”

Vladislavić wrote the collection of short stories *Propaganda by Monuments* (1996) in the transitional period of South Africa’s history. This project will examine two of the stories, “The Book Lover” and “Courage”, in combination. “The Book Lover” tells the story of a man isolated from the world around him; it is only through his books that he is able to create a community. Whiteness in this instance is only available through association and implication. “Courage” is narrated by a young black boy in rural South Africa and tells the story of a white artist who arrives in the village in order to find an embodiment of ‘courage’. The artist’s whiteness is overtly grotesque and the story centres on the actual physical representation of race, which contrasts the understated role of race in “The Book Lover”.

Both stories, “The Book Lover” and “Courage”, are set in the transitional period of South Africa’s history. The late 1980s had been marred by widespread violence. In 1989 President Botha fell ill and was succeeded, first as party leader, then as president, by F.W. de Klerk. De Klerk’s government began relaxing apartheid restrictions, and in 1990, Nelson Mandela was freed after 27 years of imprisonment after which he became head of the legalised ANC. The intervening period between the dismantling of the apartheid state and the establishment of a democratic state created an unusual state of dissonance and tension within South Africa’s society.

The narrator of the “Book Lover” is never named. Although it is never specified, it is apparent through the construction of his world that he is both white and English speaking. The story highlights a complex interaction between race and a cultural identity. The physical aspect of race is underplayed throughout the text. Language is not racialised, and whiteness, when

mentioned, is passive and unthreatening such as ‘I believe that this bus-stop was for the exclusive use of whites’ (102). Therefore is it only through a process of insinuation that whiteness is given any meaning. The Book Lover’s construction of an identity emulates a cultural ideal which is based within a colonial European understanding of race and identity rather than the physicality of race. These ideas are premised in the constructs that the European is civilised, developed and modern. ‘Acceptance of other ‘races’ was conditioned upon conformation of these assimilated groups to the culture, norms and standards laid down by the ‘host’ white group’ (Ballard 2004:58). There is a strong cultural construction through the way whiteness has been historically understood as being ‘not from here’.

The narrator’s uncertainty regarding the transitional period of South Africa reveals itself in his nostalgia for the past. He dwells on the images that evoke memories of a past society and highlights the constantly shifting changes. ‘They were all gone – Pickwick’s and Vanity Fair and Random Books and L.Rubin Booksellers and Stationers’ (95). The influence of history on his identity is depicted throughout the text. He is caught up in the threads of the past; the books he owns and collects are constant reminders of this. They are physical, tangible artefacts of an older era. He does not focus specifically on the significant changes of the social climate of South Africa, the transformation from the legislation and oppression of an apartheid society but, rather, on small physical changes in the world immediately surrounding him. He says, ‘Have you noticed that the snapshots have been getting larger over the years? Very few of them will fit into a wallet these days ...’ (97) and ‘It must be true that pockets have been getting smaller over the years’ (83) These, seemingly insignificant differences, allude to a change in society as a whole. It is through fragmentation, by breaking up the changes into small and manageable pieces; that the Book Lover attempts to understand his new context. In this way he does not have to face the overwhelming entirety of the change within society. The unstoppable progress of time highlights his disjunction with the present world, ‘I did a quick calculation. The book was 1 815 weeks over-due. Allowing for inflation and an unfavourable exchange rate, Helena owed the JPL twenty-seven thousand rand’ (88). The changing value of money is also indicative of the changing times. The fact that the narrator takes the time to calculate the value of the fine highlights his concern.

Many of the second-hand books that he buys are ‘struggle writing’ texts. The first of the books he purchases is at a Black Sash² Fête. Although it is not overt, it is implied throughout the text that he considers himself to be a liberal. White liberals are assumed to be willing and open to the change in South Africa’s political sphere. It is therefore interesting that his extreme sense of displacement and nostalgia for a past era is at the centre of the story. He does not appear to discriminate against people of a different race, but rather against those who have a lower education or do not fit in with his ‘standards’, ‘I am not a snob, you see, but I am a stickler for standards’ (87). These standards that he is a ‘stickler for’ are exclusive to an Anglophile identity, this speaks to a strict understanding of culture as based within a colonial Europe. That is, the Book Lover associates, not so much with his whiteness as a racialised construct, but rather as a mnemonic of a high-culture that is premised in ‘Europeanness’. ‘Being First World is not a necessary property of ‘whiteness’ in South Africa. Thus, while the ‘racial’ way in which ‘white’ people historically understood themselves and social difference is now seldom expressed, much of the substance of the way ‘white’ people understood themselves and others continues’ (Ballard 2004:55). This Europeanness, or over-identification with a high-culture has no real base within South Africa or Europe. It is an artificial construct that has no place in either reality. The Book Lover quotes well-renowned European writers such as Augustine Birrell³, and collects books that he considers to be literature of a high standard. The books themselves embody this world of education and civilisation. While he associates strongly with high-culture, he is almost completely alienated from the realities of the world around him. He is dislocated to such an extent that he feels that he only exists through his books; ‘In my own modest library there is silence. The books speak only when they are spoken to, in their silent company, I believe that I exist’ (85). His understanding of self is constructed out of a very particular set of Anglophile ideals which were created in a specific white context of the

² The Black Sash, dating from 1955, is the longest-standing South African human rights organisation. It is a woman’s organisation (although men can be associated members). While it does not aspire only to deal with “woman’s issues”, it has a particularly valuable perspective on such questions. Although it began as an organisation of white, liberal women, there is a clear consciousness among many members and staff of the need to outgrow those origins. (*The Status of Human Rights Organisations in sub-Saharan Africa* [Internet])

³ BIRRELL, AUGUSTINE (1850-), English author and politician. He was educated at Amersham Hall School and at Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He went to the bar, and gradually obtained a good practice; in 1893 he became a K.C., and he was professor of law at University College from 1896 to 1899. But it was as a literary critic of unusually clever style and an original vein of wit, that the public first knew him, with his volume of essays entitled *Obiter Dicta* (1884). In the House of Commons his light but pointed humour gradually led to the coining of a new word, ‘birrellir’, and his literary and oratorical reputation grew apace. (LoveToKnow 1911 *Online Encyclopedia*. © 2003, 2004 LoveToKnow. [Internet])

apartheid era, this sense of self is constantly interrupted by the present, which is always in a state of flux.

The physicality of the Book Lover's collection of books is itself an element of the past. The subjects of the books he collects deal, almost exclusively, with South Africa's turbulent history. They are also physical reminders of the past; they are objects that have been produced out of a specific history and communities and they speak to a certain set of ideals that the Book Lover associates with. The narrator belongs to the same history of the books and community the books evoke. 'It is admitted that literature and history cannot be adequately studied in modern books alone. Even if modern editors were adequate in the information they furnish – and notoriously they are not – they do not satisfy that Sense of the Past without which the study of literature and history is unimagined and formal' (Carter 1948:8). The books provide the narrator with a 'Sense of the Past'. They give him a direct connection to other people in the same community. Even though the books may bear the marks of time, essentially they are a constant feature in a fluctuating world. The narrator collects the permanent aspect that they embody. The books are a residual of a previous society that is still very active within the new, dominant, culture. The Book Lover is trapped between two very different realities and attempts to negotiate between the two in order to create meaning.

The narrator places his book-plate under the signed name of the people who have owned them before. By placing a physical mark under the names he is able to authenticate his own identity and to establish that he belongs to this community of people. He says; 'Incidentally, my book-plate is based on a woodcut by Dürer: St Jerome in his cell' (86). This book-plate is significant in understanding how entirely the Book Lover constructs his identity through the books he owns. Albrecht Dürer's⁴ copperplate engraving of St. Jerome, completed in 1514, is one of the German artist's most famous works. It depicts St. Jerome, a saint born in Dalmatia in 329AD, who was passionate about books (Guerin 2003: [Internet]). Pope Damasus summoned him to Rome to revise the Latin Bible. St. Jerome spent thirty years in a solitary cell dedicated to the one book. The book-plate of the narrator reflects the Book Lover's image of his own self. He is

⁴ Albrecht Dürer was a German painter, wood carver and engraver. He is known to be the greatest exponent of Northern European renaissance art; Dürer is well know for his engravings and prints which range from religious to mythological scenes. T.L. Ponich (for Artyclopedia) www.artyclopedia.com.

isolated from the rest of the world, using the books that he owns as the bars of his own 'cell'. This is not only in order to keep himself in, but also to ensure the unwanted attentions of 'others', those not part of his society, are kept out. 'This one (second-hand book store) has the finest catchment area – good, educated, moneyed, liberal homes' (79). As a consequence of the books he collects, he is able to establish intimate connections with others who affirm his own sense of self, despite the fact that he never physically 'knows' them. He shares similar ideas and tastes as the people who have owned the books before him. By placing his name under the names of the other owners of the books he illustrates that he possesses the history of that particular book, and thus he possesses the histories of those who have come before him. By owning and marking these books he is able to be part of a community, but still able to maintain a respectable distance from the intolerable 'babble' that challenge his construction of self. 'The tension between the desire to withdraw from the crowd while at the same time maintaining control over the world is probably symbolic of the absolute liberty made possible by commerce with books' (Chartier 2002:130).

The narrator has almost no human contact, the contact he does have is brief and insignificant. The community that he constructs is created solely through the books that he collects. This community is what Benedict Anderson terms an 'imagined community' as they 'are to be distinguished ... by the style in which they are imagined' (1983:6). They are imagined because 'members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (1983:6). The community that the Book Lover depends on is in fact a community of strangers that are sustained through the books that he owns. He has never met them, and, as the marks in the books reveal, most of them lived before his time. Essentially the Book Lover depends on people he does not know and therefore, despite his isolation from the world around him, he is able to create a community through his own imagination. Although this is a tenuous connection, he requires their absence in order for the construction of his own identity to be contained and his rigid creation of his own reality, unchecked.

The fact that the books are second-hand is vital to the construction of the Book Lover's own identity and the community that sustains it, as they give him an essential link to the past. 'It is

undoubtedly true, Augustine Birrell says, that the best books are necessarily second-hand – but what trials one has to endure to acquire them’ (83). It is through the material objects that he owns that he is able to establish both an identity and a community. The community of the Book Lover is self-organised by virtue of selection, through his capacity to choose and purchase. Inscribed within this very particular space he is able to forge a relationship between himself and others. Through his purchases he is constantly making new connections, and thus is able to sustain his own reality, that of a literary high-culture. In this way the Book Lover does not have to meet or contend with people who challenge his sense of self. ‘They (whites), therefore, begin to engage more proactively with space by shrinking or shifting the boundaries around their communities in order to find a zone that accords with their identities’ (Ballard 2004:57). He is able to regulate the people who threaten his sense of self by sifting them through the books that he collects. His identity depends on exclusion, but in order for him to ensure its existence he is forced to continually buy and own the books.

The narrator’s reality is dependent on a rigidly ordered and sustained world. This order is disrupted by the arrival of Helena Shein. He is subconsciously aware of a similar thread running through some of the books he has collected, ‘fully two-thirds of my haul ... had all once belonged to Helena Shein. The coincidence banged a window open in my mind and the present billowed out like a lace curtain in a sudden breeze’ (80-81). At first he ignores the seemingly chance selections but then something occurs which ‘attracts his imagination’. He stumbles upon *A Ghost in Monte Carlo* by Barbara Cartland, a library book that Helena has appropriated from the Johannesburg Public Library. The single book captures the narrator’s imagination as it gives him a window into the character and identity of Helena, a glimpse into a private moment. ‘I had been forming an impression of Helena Shein, and she did not strike me as the kind of person who would steal from a public library’ (88).

The identity of Helena Shein is formed through *A Ghost in Monte Carlo*. It is a romantic novel set in the high-society of Monte Carlo. The European setting and the frivolous romantic subject of the novel are far removed from a South African context and the strong African subject matter of the books that the Book Lover usually collects. At first he is ashamed of the acquisition, ‘I bought it, a little shamefacedly; indeed, I threw in a copy of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, which happened to come

to hand, simply to raise the tone of the purchase and scurried home' (87). The book itself appears to contain the identity of Helena Shein who, through her own collection of books, belongs to the same community as the Book Lover. Both the history of the physicality of the book, as well as its text, give the Book Lover markers of Helena Shein's identity. Mademoiselle Fantôme, the main character in the text, is known as the Ghost. Helena appears to be a ghost within the books that the narrator collects. The books that she has owned seem to be calling to the narrator '... a voice hailed me from inside. It was a clear hollowed-out voice, like the tone struck from an empty Goblet ...'(86). From this moment the Book Lover's name takes on two meanings, an admirer of books and a more erotic twist, as a 'lover', as his maleness comes into play. He is compelled to try to discover the 'true' or authentic self of Helena. He is not satisfied with her as a stranger and believes that he has the right to claim her. 'It pained me to think that with every passing day Helena's precious books were being swallowed up by the libraries of perfect strangers' (95). The Book Lover is only able to organise his understanding of the world through the books that he collects. Therefore Helena exists as a particular literary style, more specifically, a petrarchan style. She becomes part of a long history of elusive women who are more fiction than real and assumes the qualities of the unattainable, unapproachable lady. This is a very European literary concept that the Book Lover has adopted. As his books give him a way of understanding his race, masculinity and culture, it stands to reason that he is only able to conceive of love through their materiality.

The narrator's reality depends on a highly ordered and contained world. It is within this world that both his race and masculinity are negotiated, constructed and given meaning. At first he attempts to capture Helena Shein within this order world. He carefully notes the material aspects of the books, thus categorising them. He then decides to construct a bibliography, cataloguing each of the books. 'I began to worry that this disorder would prevent the essential unities of the library from manifesting themselves, so one evening I carried all the books to my study and sat down to make a list' (96). Through this system he hoped to impose his reality onto Helena and thus 'discover' her true identity. This imposition of order in a vastly unpredictable world is never to be. The Book Lover's attention is interrupted by reality when he finds a photograph of Helena, her actual self, not the ghost of her self within the books. He studies the photograph meticulously.

The third photograph showed Helena and her parents. There was no caption on the reverse side, just the number 9056/3 written in pencil and the word EPSON, the trade name of the photographic paper, repeated in red ink seven times (and an eighth EP with the SON cut off). (98)

The narrator goes on to describe Helena, her parents and the area around her in detail and it is not as he imagined. ‘What I have failed to imagine is her black hair, her dark eyes, her olive skin’ (99). The order he sought to impose on his ‘imagined’ world, and hence on Helena, is lost with an interruption of reality, the actual truth, a world not highly ordered, and unable to be categorised into his own standards. He abandons his task and falls upon the other books looking for clues, destroying his catalogue, which essentially destroys the way in which he measures and understands the world around him.

In obtaining the books Helena had previously owned the narrator believes he is collecting her. The link becomes even more apparent when he realises that the majority of the books are inscribed with the date 1956, the date of his birth.

Then it hit me like a ton of books: we were brothers and sisters, the books and I, Helena’s offspring. Helena’s abandoned children! Cast out into the streets, thrown upon the mercy of strangers. A sense of kinship with the books overwhelmed me as I gathered my long-lost family into my arms. ‘They are mine and I am theirs,’ I said with Birrall. (100)

The narrator takes his connection with the books to an absolute, he makes them family and personifies them. They are not merely symbols of a community they *are* his community. As the same books have become more than symbols of Helena, they become her. Because of his historical knowledge of South Africa he is able to contextualise the sign in the background of the photograph; ‘I believe that this bus-stop was for the exclusive use of whites. The sign for a black bus-stop would have included the words SECOND CLASS’ (102). This sign in a public space ruptures the bracket between the past and the present. The ‘white’s only’ sign was part of the Separate Amenities Act of 1953; ‘this involved enforcing *verzuiling* (separation) ... This came to be called “petty apartheid” – that is, separate restaurants, hotels, hospitals, beaches, sports clubs, buses, trains, and so forth’ (Louw 2004:50). With the ability to decipher signs of the past (both the literal and the figurative) he is able to track the real Helena down. The Book Lover has had to break with his contained world in order to meet with her. With the novel A

Ghost in Monte Carlo in his hand he alights the bus and walks up to her. But even at the end, when he is on the street and not protected by his library, he still reads the world around him as a text. ‘On the cool fabric of her blouse, between her sculpted shoulder blades, I saw in English Times the legend: THE END – and I walked towards it’ (104). She has literally become the text that the Book Lover has imagined her as.

The story is left open-ended and vague. The reader is left with an uncomfortable sense of their own voyeurism as they are given no indication of who the real Helena is. This ambiguity ensures that no one definitive meaning can be mapped onto the story. The Book Lover is dependant on uncompromising exclusion of others that is maintained through the books that he collects. Race within this context is merely one aspect among many that serve to inform his identity and while whiteness does not appear to have a major influence on his identity it is always present in part, as a link to a literary high-culture which is indicative of an ideal Europeanness. These boundaries serve to contain the narrator’s own sense of self while keeping those who may challenge this self at an arm’s length. He is isolated and alienated from any real community and it is only through the books that he collects that he is able to establish a community. Helena’s interruption in the narrator’s ordered life causes him to begin to stretch his borders, and perhaps with this begin to forge a new identity.

While whiteness is not a significant aspect of the Book Lover’s identity it comprises a major part of the story “Courage”. “Courage” is set in rural Africa, far from the postcolonial cities that constitute most of Vladislavić’s stories. It is told through the eyes of a young African boy and in a sense reverses the gaze, dislodging whiteness from its position as the normative. It tells the story of the arrival of young white man in a small rural community of Lufafa, in Kwa-Zulu Natal, in search of an abstract version of ‘courage’ in order to construct a sculpture for the new government.

The story is narrated by a young African boy and the text creates a dialogue between whiteness and blackness as, ‘Whiteness ... is not only a matter of how one perceives oneself, but also of how one is perceived by others’ (Nuttall 2004:133). From the moment the artist steps out of the bus ‘My Mother’s Love’, the boy notes his clear disjunction with the environment. He

refers to the artist as the 'white man'; each time that he speaks of him which immediately foregrounds the physical aspect of his whiteness. While in the "Book Lover" whiteness was the normative position, in this context it is displaced. His whiteness serves to alienate him from the small rural community and the normative position where whiteness is usually situated is compromised. Despite this the artist still invokes a set of ideas and behaviours, although; 'These were the first days of our freedom and it was not really necessary to be nice to whites any more' (115). The bus-driver, Banoo, fetches his baggage from the roof-rack, 'Able-bodied passengers were usually expected to bring their own sacks and boxes down from the roof-rack but on this occasion he scaled the ladder himself and fetched a leather bag from under the tarpaulin' (115). The unusual presence of a white man instils a sense excitement in the community, and he is at the centre of attention. By virtue of his whiteness he is rendered different and out of place but is still in a position of authority, as the bus driver demonstrates, his 'hands bowing and scraping so earnestly in the air we could almost hear them' (115).

The new government had sent the artist to the isolated village. Although the government's name is not mentioned his shirt is 'dotted with assegais and shields in the colours of the new ruling party' (116). The colours are those of the ANC (African National Congress) who came to power after the 1994 elections. The people of the village are clearly surprised at the decision; "Tell him (the chief) the government of the people has sent us a white man" (119). Obviously they do not consider this white man to be part of their 'people'. The villagers are curious at the choice of their new government. The community appeared to be forgotten by the 'old' government as an incomplete clinic in the village demonstrates; 'the government of the day never got round to supplying the electricity and the water that would have filled these fixtures with purpose' (120). The community has great expectations of the new government, but the appearance of the 'white man' is not consistent with these expectations.

From the outset, 'Peter Meyerhold Becker, artist' (119), is a figure of ridicule and his physical whiteness incorporates elements of the grotesque. The grotesque has 'a strong affinity with the physically abnormal' (Thomson 1972:9). The town's people call him 'My Old Becker', an obvious misunderstanding of his name. There is an overemphasis on race, on his physical whiteness, throughout the story. This grotesque version of whiteness is juxtaposed with the

underplayed whiteness formed by the Book Lover, with a whiteness that is associated with the civilised and educated. Whiteness is defamiliarised within this context. 'From close up he looked fatter and pinker ... He reminded me of a picture-book pony' (118). The human is mixed with the animal and vegetable in order to emphasise its horrific nature. 'His feet put me off my food. They were pale and fleshy like vegetables, with blue veins in the ankles and sprinkles of red hair on the toes, and the heels were extravagantly patched with sticking-plasters' (121-122). Whiteness, in this instance, is also very much equated with the actual colour of his skin. 'I had thought of him as a pink man, as if 'white' was just a way of speaking – but parts of him usually concealed by clothing were as white as paper' (125).

The physical aspect of the artist's whiteness makes him at complete odds with the rural environment, the grotesque is viewed as a 'fundamentally ambivalent thing, as a violent clash of opposites, and hence, in some of its forms at least, as an appropriate expression of the problematic nature of existence' (Thomson 1972:11). The rural environment of Kwa-Zulu Natal is described in rich detail. 'The descent offered memorable views of the sea and the spray against the rocks at the mouth of the river, but the white man did not have eyes for any of it. He was too busy trying to keep his balance' (116). The impracticality of his whiteness is highlighted as he is 'other' to his environment and is alienated through the physicality of his skin colour. His flesh blisters and peels in the hot sun; 'the back of his neck, which a deep crease divided into two fleshy humps, was like a segment of lobster shell slicked with some buttery ointment, and there were puffy blisters on the tops of his ears ...' (124). He cannot negotiate the environment without slipping or tripping, unlike the young boys. He chooses the worst place to swim in the ocean and is flung around by the natural elements. 'He let himself be bumped against the rocks and rolled over in the jagged shells and slimy kelp on the water-line, until a wave finally beached him' (126). The grotesque is usually used as a form of producing something 'simultaneously as horrifying and laughable' (Thomson 1972:3) and 'the copresence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable' (1972:3). While the descriptions of My Old Becker are amusing there is also something deeply disturbing about him. His whiteness is physically revolting to the young boy, 'The thought of breathing in the slough of My Old Becker turned my stomach' (127). Every element of his whiteness appears to work against him in this environment. But, unlike the

Book Lover, he is not trying to find a place within a community. He appears to be unaware of his own dissonance with the people and the environment around him.

My Old Becker is searching for an embodiment of courage as he had been commissioned to make a statue 'for the government of the people' (122). But, as he explains, 'although this statue would have the shape of a man, it had to show not the man himself but an idea – the idea of courage. The government wished to honour the people for the courage they had shown in the struggle for our freedom' (122). He states that it was not the bravery of the man, but the way the man looked, physically, that would reveal this abstract idea. This is an interesting notion to explore as "Courage" implies that the surface of the world speaks volumes. The functionality of My Old Becker's physical whiteness is questioned within this context. He hopes to find a subject that will portray, through its surface, a notion of courage. The surface of his whiteness and the surface of the notion of courage both imply more than their mere physical attributes. Through their surfaces they indicate elements of society. He is unable to find a suitable model and has something to say about each of the proposed men. 'It seemed that our village demonstrated just how unequally physical resources were distributed in a population. Those whose bodies were well shaped invariably had something wrong with their heads, and visa versa' (128). The derogatory comments made by My Old Becker are ironic in light of his own repugnant whiteness.

Many men in the village attempt to demonstrate that they embodied 'courage' but My Old Becker settles on Kumbuza, the village drunk. Kumbuza had gone to work on the mines and lost three fingers. He had returned and, 'He got drunk as often as he could' (131) incurring further injuries due to his own carelessness and intoxication. The man My Old Becker chooses is an outcast in the society. The community has left him to 'pursue his reckless course on the outskirts of their lives' (131). My Old Becker's choice further ostracises him from the rural community, as they are horrified at the decision, but are given no authority in the matter. 'The choice aroused unexpectedly strong feelings among the men and women of Lufafa. They were outraged. They were filled with shame' (132). My Old Becker refuses to see the problem and pompously states that it is the job of the artist is to return the lost part of a man to him. 'To pick up the pieces, to make broken things whole, to restore the lost unity' (132). My Old

Becker believes that he is able to restore unity through his art. The boy states that ‘It was a laughable claim’ (132). It is more than merely laughable, as the artist’s presumption and delusion highlights his blindness to his own profound displacement within the community. This statement appears to speak to a much bigger issue than the distortion of courage. It comments on the seeming impossible reconciliation between the people of South Africa after the state of apartheid.

The story demonstrates just how at odds whiteness is with blackness. With the new government many new changes were expected, but these did not materialise. My Old Becker leaves the village ‘He promised to send us photographs of the statue, he promised to invite us to the unveiling. But we never heard from him again’ (135). The misrepresentation of courage and the alienation of whiteness paint a bleak picture that seem to suggest that whiteness and blackness are irreconcilable. Not only does My Old Becker not try to understand or fit in with the community, he never even makes the effort. The villagers never understand the artist, and the artist doesn’t understand the villagers. As the boy’s mother states emphatically ‘I’ll never understand these whites’ (123). My Old Becker grotesqueness has become a caricature of all whites and whiteness in South Africa. Nothing has changed in the lives of the community despite the change in government.

Our new found freedom broke its promises too. It did not bring us things we expected, like water, electricity, prosperity and peace. It brought new battles and new factions to fight them. Within a few years the war returned and this time we were not spared. (135)

The short story ends with the now grown-up boy returning to his homeland. He is now an Education officer of the British Council. ‘On my first Sunday back home, in a park near my hotel, I found My Old Becker’s statue’ (135). The statue in no way represents courage. It adorns a soldier’s outfit and ‘He has all his working parts in their proper place, including his trigger-finger’ (136). My Old Becker has not restored unity by restoring broken pieces of a man and, ironically, instead of representing courage, the surface of the statue reflects back on the misreading of the artist himself. Kumbuza himself is begging near the statue, as a young boy asks for money for his picture. ‘Five rands is nothing,’ the boy assured me. ‘He is a true hero of the people’ (136). The physical aspect of the embodiment of courage that is supposed

to represent a new reality, in fact only highlights the dissonance between the idealised picture of a new South Africa and the actual reality. The statue closes the end on My Old Becker's misunderstanding of the community.

Despite the apparent bleakness of the short story, there are positive aspects within "Courage" which do offer a glimpse of optimism for the future. The fact that Vladislavić, as a white South African writer, is writing from the point of view of a young African boy in a rural community, suggests that a dialogue is occurring between blackness and whiteness. The first step in dismantling pre-conceived ideas with regards to whiteness and its construction is in recognising them. Vladislavić is able to revoke the presumed norm of whiteness through its grotesque description and juxtapose it with the liveliness and interaction of the rural community. Whiteness does not assume the same civilised qualities it does in his other texts. Also, despite the seeming stagnation in the post-apartheid society the young boy who is depicted has changed his life to some degree. In his ability to recognise the difficulties and the challenges of a new nation, as well as his own blackness in contrast to whiteness, he is able to deconstruct whiteness and therefore, it is suggested that it is perhaps with people such as he, that the change can begin.

"The Book Lover" and "Courage" both depict different versions of whiteness, amongst other themes. "The Book Lover" demonstrates a sense of dissonance within the new South Africa and represents at an extreme the boundaries that are required in order to contain one version of the self. "Courage" deals with the estrangement of whiteness from a rural community. Whiteness adopts a grotesque quality and whiteness and blackness are portrayed as at complete odds. Despite this, both stories suggest, in their different representation of whiteness, that the constructs on which whiteness is built are not fixed and that therefore, the future may bring about a change in the way whiteness is conceived.

Chapter 3

The Restless Supermarket

The Restless Supermarket depicts the life of a staid proofreader, Aubrey Tearle who, despite the changing world around him, clings to a past order. The world that Tearle knows and understands, that of an old South Africa, appears to be falling apart. His identity, masculinity and race are threatened by the encroaching new South Africa. He is obsessed with the decline of standards that, he believes, has transpired with the shift in regime and demise of apartheid, and attempts to control this decline through the correction of words. Tearle comprehends South African society as a problematic document that requires stringent proofreading. This novel effectively highlights the way in which whiteness is situated in language and, in Tearle's case, with an over-association with a 'Europe of the mind' that renders him displaced within an African environment. His identity is precariously perched upon a strict notion of order and control but this is an artificial construction that is unable to be protected.

The city of Johannesburg is changing and Hillbrow, which used to be a mostly white part of the city, is according to Tearle, degenerating. The novel is centred on the inner city suburb of Hillbrow. This is an interesting and telling choice of space in which to set the novel. Hillbrow was one of the first suburbs to experience the effect of 'greying' which was the beginning of mixing of the races after the introduction of the Group Areas Act of 1936⁵. 'Greying' was the influx of different races into the previously 'whites only' areas of the city. The gradual greying of the town coincided with the demise of apartheid and 'the disappearance of Hillbrow, and even Johannesburg, as it used to be – a largely white, orderly suburb inhabited by large numbers of Eastern European immigrants who benefited from apartheid privileges' (Nuttall 2004:746). Ballard states that 'much of the uncertainty experienced by 'white' people in the 1980s and 1990s stemmed from a fear of the unregulated access by people previously excluded from 'their' cities' (2004:58). This gradual 'greying' of the city caused apprehension and anxiety. 'Silently, while we slept, the tide was darkening' (130). Tearle believes that he will be able to halt the inevitable march of change by proofing the actual social signs of Johannesburg.

⁵ '(A)partheid involved redesigning South African cities according to *verzuiling* logic. Each ethnic group was to have its own group within which would be located its own educational and cultural facilities' (Louw 2004:58).

In this way he would be ordering the unruly society around him, 'because of the rigid divisions in our society, when the neatly ordered systems, the paradigms that people live within, start breaking down, it's a very threatening thing' (Interview: Marais & Backström 2002:120).

The novel begins and ends on the day before New Year 1994, the pinnacle year of change in South Africa's history. The isolated existence of the protagonist, Aubrey Tearle, resembles that of the Book Lover. Tearle's profession constitutes his self in its entirety and he reacts to his environment, at all times, as a proofreader. He perceives the world around him in detail; 'A life-time of practice has turned me into one of the world's most shameless scrutineers' (3). The novel becomes a stage for the various conflicts that emerge when he is unable to correct that which he deems unacceptable or socially incorrect. For, unlike the Book Lover, who imagines his community in anyway he desires, Tearle is hindered by the presence of actual people, who, mostly, refuse to be 'corrected'. According to Tearle the standards of South Africa are slipping; '(A)s the century declines to a conclusion one has come to expect undignified behaviour as a matter of course' (3). The standards he refers to are a certain set of ideas that are conflated with linguistic perfection, historical context and an affiliation with an imagined concept of Europeanness. He sets himself firmly in the past and is not willing or able to transform. 'Changing with the times is not for us. Staying the same is our forte' (9). He views the world in which he is situated, namely Hillbrow, South Africa, in need of his proofreading skills. It is only through its correction, he believes, that the old 'golden' days can be recovered.

Tearle's identity is situated firmly within language; a language that he believes reflects perfection, wholeness and stability. He carries '(T)he *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* (the incomparable fourth edition, revised and reprinted with corrections in 1957, henceforth referred to as '*the Pocket*')' (14) in the '... place it was made for' (14). It is his reference to the world and everything in it. Ironically the instability of his identity, and with it the mutability of his whiteness is apparent in his choice of the dictionary which functions in securing his world. The dictionary has undergone seven revisions since it was first published. This speaks to the fluidity of meaning and the precarious position of Tearle's own whiteness. His understanding of the world is through language, grammatically perfected language, but the object in which he places his construction of self is itself unstable. '[E]tymology is precisely the last place you should

look to establish a fixed meaning for a word. It's a wonderful misapprehension. It's precisely where you look to establish the fluidity of meaning in language, and yet so often people look to it for the opposite' (Interview: Marais & Backström 2002:125).

The dictionary is his link to the world of precision and he lives his life by its words. His discourse is 'premised on racial differences' (Nuttall 2004:103). Tearle's association with his own whiteness is with the ideas that it instantiates, namely; 'order,' 'civilisation,' 'knowledge, 'reason' and 'literate'. His awareness of his whiteness is through a psychological over-identification that is specifically associated with an old, almost Victorian Europeanness. He has appropriated a very set version of standards that is affiliated, not within the real Europe, but a Europe that is constructed within his mind. Tearle belongs to a generation and class of an old South Africa. To be African is regarded, by Tearle, as a decline in standards. This is ironic as he is very much a citizen of South Africa, having never left its borders. This alienation from his immediate, South African context is self-inflicted as his identification with a Europe of his imagination, renders Africa the foreign country.

Café Europa serves as a fictional palimpsest of Europe which is essential for Tearle's construction of self. Although the idea of a colonial Europe was essentially formed by a colonial enterprise the legislation of apartheid, amongst other factors, preserved the creation of "a piece of Europe on the tip of Africa" (Ballard 2004:54). This was made possible through the Group Areas Act that was put in place to separate people based on racial differences. With the collapse of the apartheid system these ideals did not necessarily disperse. The Café Europa serves as an extension of this idea.

Our sense of space and sense of self are mutually constitutive. As much as we try to shape our worlds to fit in with our identities, our environments also shape us, challenge us, and constrain us. We attempt to find comfort zones within which it is possible to 'be ourselves'. These are places that do not challenge our self-conceptions. (Ballard 2004:51)

The Café Europa acts as the setting for most of the story. It is essentially a confined space that excludes those who do not function within a specific set of ideals. It appeals to people such as Tearle as it provides a palimpsest of a European comfort zone. It is a

space in which Tearle is able to live safely and comfortably as his own identity is not opposed. The café presumes to exclude those who do not fit in with a colonial, European, white identity and include those who affirm Tearle's version of civilisation much in the same way as the Book Lover's books ensured a community of like-minded people. The external pressure required for change is not immediately present within the controlled world of the Café Europa.

The café suggests an imagined European ideal.

A European ambience. Prima. The least one would expect from an establishment that called itself the Café Europa. Importantly, it was ambience rather than atmosphere. You might find 'atmosphere' in fast-food restaurants, thick enough to cut with a plastic knife ... Atmosphere is an American commodity ... Europeans prefer ambience, which cannot be pumped in overnight or sprayed on with an aerosol, but has to be accrued overtime. (17-18)

Ironically Café Europa does not reflect the actual realities of Europe; it is a conglomeration of ideas that attracts Tearle's nostalgic sense of civilisation. On the wall a mural of a fictional European city, Alibia, is painted. The city appeals immensely to Tearle's sense of self. Alibia is 'nowhere in particular. Or rather anywhere in general. It's a composition' (74). It is not situated in Africa, which speaks to Tearle's feelings of dissonance and displacement as a white African. But, ironically, it is not anywhere in Europe. It is a false and sentimental place; a world vastly more civilised and ordered than the one he currently occupies. With the changing times the Café Europa is closing down and; 'The impending loss that grieved me most was Alibia, the painted city that covered an entire wall of the Café' (10). Tearle's identity is dependent on factors that are not premised in an actual South African reality, but a European imaginary. This imaginary is impossible to recreate except within the artificial boundaries of the café. Ironically, despite Tearle's almost desperate over-association and reliance on the space of the café, it itself is a fabricated space and the security it offers is uncertain. The café is not impervious to change and disruption, much like the dictionary, it is not a transcendental signifier.

Tearle stereotypes those who do not align with his version of white Europeaness and renders them 'other' and sub-standard. 'Some misguided people find me unbending, but that doesn't bother me in the slightest. It serves my purposes. My one aim has been to raise the standards of conduct and thought, not just between these four walls, but the world beyond' (259). He is dismissive of not only black people, but anyone that does not fit in with his world of the civilised. His understanding of this concept is very limited as even actual Europeans do not conform to his standards, as one of the café's patriots points out; 'Ah yes, the Europeans, you're very big on them. But when you meet one in the flesh, like Bogey, you can't stand him' (260). The only people to meet up with his expectations are those he encounters within the walls of the café. He has no patience for those he deems as 'heathens' or 'illiterate peasants'. He stereotypes all 'others' in broad sweeps including Europeans. 'I have always liked the Germans. I admire their discipline' (159).

The café appeals to the 'right sort of people', those who fit in and hold-up Tearle's sense of self; 'We seemed to be participating in the primary activity that the café as a social institution made possible: being on one's own in the company of congenial strangers' (57). These 'right sort of people' are other white people who firstly exhibit admiration for him and his art of proofreading and secondly those who exhibit the self-same 'qualities' as him, but even they do not measure up to Tearle's strict understanding of standards. Like the Book Lover, Tearle attempts to create a community in which his values and ideas are acceptable. But, unlike the Book Lover, this community is comprised of real people and therefore they can never conform exactly to Tearle's expectations and occasionally challenge his views. The few who do manage to filter into his world consist of; Spilkin, an optician with the same panache for words as Tearle, Mevrouw Bonsma, the pianist and Merle Graaff, a retired English teacher.

The four of us made for solid geometry. We were bricks, regular good fellows. Four-square was that term that came to mind. Four squares too, I'd have no objection to that: four of a kind, four equals, coevals, discriminating human beings, adults with compatible systems of thought and feeling, gathered around a table to amuse themselves, to pass time pleasantly in conversation, in listening to music, in reading and other pursuits that broadened the mind. (79)

The foursome is tolerable to Tearle who is very particular about the company that he keeps. While Tearle has no patience for those he deems 'other', strangely, his friends are not that different from his enemies. They negate his sense of self, as they are close enough to him to point out his blindness. Their ability to adapt to the changing times highlights the precarious position that he has constructed for himself.

Tearle's dependence on crutches such as the café implies that without these stringent borders his identity, and with it his construction of race and culture, may find itself in danger of collapse as the outside world threatens to encroach. He requires these inflexible borders in order to maintain a sense of self. He does not condone behaviour that 'overflows' or is in any danger of crossing borders. This also relates to emotion, which he keeps very much under control. He finds excess emotion repulsive. 'I have always found the notion of laughing until one cries repugnant. One wants to preserve the boundaries between emotions, I think, or they lose their value' (90). The café, which he depends on for a sense of order and discipline, no longer acts as a filter that Tearle depends upon. Slowly, it is changing and is infiltrated with those that do not respect or live by the same standards as Tearle. The self-sustaining community of the café breaks-up leaving the space which previously filtered out the undesirable, open for 'invasion'.

The Restless Supermarket is filled with historical indicators such as the freeing of Nelson 'Madiba' Mandela and the collapse of apartheid laws such as the Group Areas Act. Tearle is dismissive of the up-coming elections. 'The new order. The new disorder is more like it' (166). He finds the new times difficult to comprehend, 'the new regime threw everything out of kilter' (157) and 'the standards plumbed new depths (long since superseded) on the day Nelson 'The Madiba' Mandela was released from prison. You couldn't get a pot of tea for love or money, because the waiters would not be dragged away from the screen' (166). Tearle is in a state of anomie in the interregnum between the new democratic South Africa and the old regime. He finds it very difficult to adapt to the new environment and clings to the café and its community as his only link to a civilised world. The people, who inhabit the café and the café itself, act as a residue of the past. The 'good old days' are juxtaposed with the disorder of the new era of post-apartheid South Africa.

When I think of those times now ... they are dappled with daylight sifted through the north-facing windows of the Café Europa. Like gold dust blown off the dumps. My golden days, caesar salad days, days of whiskey and roses. All in all a moisturizing season, with the sap rising in dusty veins and the juices in the grey matter trickling. (102)

The narrative of the novel is bi-linear. Memories of the past run parallel with the new and chaotic present. The linguistic nature of the past and present is different. Tearle's description of the past is lyrical and the sentences longer, while his present-day narrative is clipped and harsh. The people who inhabit the two different worlds reflect the progression of time. The community of the 1980s was made up of his contained 'foursome' while the new community, the new management 'Tone' and the 'Errols' and 'Floyds' who infiltrated his world are noisy and uneducated. TVs have replaced Mevrouw Bonsma's piano playing. The old world appears to be disintegrating around Tearle, while he clings to his position and standards.

Darlene is an interesting figure as an opposite of Tearle's whiteness as well as his maleness. Spilkin takes Darlene, a woman of colour, as his partner, to Tearle's utter astonishment. Spilkin appears to mirror Tearle in his values, standards and concern with language. Darlene is a coloured woman. She is not part of Tearle's imagined world and therefore it is inconceivable to Tearle that Spilkin would accept her. Tearle is only able to see her in terms of her surface features. 'I marked the chipped nail polish, the bruised eyeshadow, the great buckles as trusty as a steeplejack's on the straps of her brassier, the bent pins holding together the frames of her sunglasses. None of it up to scratch. I didn't like her colour either ... Coffee finds favour in some quarters, but this was insipid' (163). The worst fault that Tearle has to find about her is that she is 'barely literate' (163). Darlene, according to Tearle, had 'changed my opinion of Spilkin irrevocably' (164-165). Tearle is careful to reiterate that he is not concerned with her colour. It is her overt womanliness and cultural difference that he objects to. 'Couldn't he see that they had different standards of behaviour, different systems of pronunciation, different grazing habits? (I never said a word about her colour)' (165). It is a historical and out-dated set of ideals that defines his unbridled disgust and inability to comprehend Spilkin's respect of her. She does not embody the typical quiet and respectful colonial woman, or the 'civilisation' of the educated white person and, therefore, she is not within Tearle's realm of understanding.

This is agitated by his illusion of a binding class affiliation. She, in her entirety, opposes everything that constitutes Tearle's maleness and whiteness.

'Darlene ... said it was amazing how the very people who thought they knew everything about the world knew nothing about their own country. 'You whites', she said, and it struck me as odd, with Spilkin sitting there as large as life' (168). This statement speaks to the complicated nature of race within the context of this novel. Tearle's whiteness has little to do with the superficial surface colour of his skin, but is rather situated within the performances that he exhibits and inhabits. Spilkin's whiteness, despite his apparent closeness with Tearle, does not occupy the same position. While whiteness always informs identity to a degree, it is not a transcendental signifier. It is a fluid signifier that has variable values and can be made to function as little or as much as needed in any given situation. Spilkin may admire the same ideas as Tearle, but fundamentally his acceptance and understanding of those who Tearle renders as 'other' places his whiteness outside of the stringent boundaries that Tearle occupies. The value of Spilkin's whiteness is, therefore, conceivably different from that of Tearle's despite their apparent similarities. Darlene, despite her 'otherness', is able to recognise the difference between these versions of whiteness. While Tearle dismisses Darlene on the basis that she is coloured as well as the fact that she is a woman, she has far more insight into his own whiteness than his own, limited, understanding.

Tearle believes that 'the solution to the problem of declining standards lay with the individual, in revivification of outmoded notions of personal responsibility ...' (81). He sets on a 'big clean-up' (83) in order to alert the shopkeepers of Hillbrow to the 'errors of their ways' (83). Alas he is met with 'inarticulate incomprehension' (83). Tearle is not able to make a difference to the world around him, and in the face of this he decides to use a form that would obey him, literature and language, in the form of "The Proofreader's Derby". This project began as a System of Records, 'aimed at maintaining the highest level of skill and fitness ... 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' (88).

Tearle creates the story “The Proofreader’s Derby”, in which he is personally able to control the physical landscape through his ability to control words and language, something that he has failed to do in the ‘real’ world. In the “Proofreader’s Derby” the proofreaders of the city of Alibia wield the power and the importance to alter the actual geography of the landscape. Even within his fictional story Tearle requires a community that will affirm his sense of self. ‘The Proofreaders’ Society of Alibia was as old as the city itself. In every age, the Members of the Society had gone quietly about their business, maintaining order without making a fuss’ (195). The city of Alibia parallels the new democracy of South Africa in its degeneration and the stubbornness of the people in charge to listen to people such as the proofreaders. The world of civilisation and order of Alibia is under threat.

Aubrey Fluxman, the protagonist, awakes one morning to find that his garden has been washed away and a corpse lying at the bottom of his garden. He ‘resolved long ago not to busy himself with the affairs of the world ...’ (186) but the disruption in the geography of the city is immense and he finds himself, and the other proofreaders of the city, attempting to rein in the chaos by proofreading the social spaces and correcting them. Tearle’s greatest fear is disorder and his greatest joy the restoration of order. Within the space of literature he is able to create a type of utopia whereupon it is within the power of his protagonist to make these changes. There were ‘massive disturbances and transformations that seemed somehow wilful, that actually resisted correction’ (198). It was a ‘gloomy picture of the future in which everything was out of order, and nothing ran smoothly to a creditable conclusion’ (206).

The errors in the papers translated into geographical errors where ‘(S)tructures were shifting closer together or further apart, skylines were rising and falling, streets were narrowing, views were opening up, cracks were appearing’ (201). Under the guidance of the Proofreader’s Society, and the leadership of Fluxman the city ‘pulled itself together’ (226). The restless supermarket was one of the most tricky situations to correct as ‘the ceaseless and senseless changing of places with which the products had been charged’ (222). Aubrey Fluxman is able to achieve what Aubrey Tearle was unable to in real life. He is able to rearrange and restore the order to the restless supermarket. Most notably, in terms of Tearle’s own identity, “The Proofreader’s Derby” reflects his wish to delete the ‘human detritus he found in the margins of

the city, the erroneous ones, the slips of the hand, the tramps, the fools, the congenitally stupid, the insufferably ugly' (226). The success of Tearle's fictional character in restoring order and halting the decline merely highlights his own failure in restoring order to Hillbrow.

It is at the closing of Café Europa that Tearle decides to unveil the "Proofreader's Derby". The party is held the day before New Year and consists of a collection of people who occupied the café during its life, both old and new. It is here, in the space of the café, that he is violently confronted with his own whiteness and construction of an identity within an idealised and imagined Europeaness. Tearle has already ordered the evening before it has begun. He imagines a civilised proceeding in which he is at the centre. He prepares a speech and pictures the reactions of the other people. The evening does not begin as he has planned. He discovers that Merle Graaff has passed away. It was more a 'professional failure' than a personal loss as he missed the announcement in the newspaper. Spilkin asks Tearle how his monoblepsia is. Monoblepsia meaning 'condition in which vision is perfect when one eye is used, but confused and indistinct when both are used. What was he driving at?' (241). Tearle's blindness is almost obsessive. He takes words of others literally and refuses to see the deeper meaning behind them, despite his pride in his ability to play with words and their multiple meanings. He resents his friends' transforming capabilities that allow them to adapt to the changing times. He finds himself on the margins of the party and not at the centre as he envisaged. Spilkin will not be engaged in one of Tearle's linguistic conversations. He is more concerned with Darlene. Mevrouw Bonsma plays music Tearle thinks is unsuitable and describes it as 'musical mayhem'. 'I was disappointed in Mevrouw Bonsma. She was cultivated in her own way and what she lacked in sophistication she always made good with certain rustic charm. But this was uncalled for' (255). He is disillusioned, as the order that he creates in his mind is not emulated within the reality of the café.

The space of the café no longer provides Tearle with comfort and civilisation, the people are reduced to wild dancing and Tearle himself becomes intoxicated. His own community begin to attack his values and contrived standards. Spilkin says 'Your European affectations were always nauseating' (260) and Darlene accuses him of working for the Regime. '(And)you are as much to blame for (the terrible things that happened in the country) as the men who did the

dirty work' (262). He is unable to present the "Proofreader's Derby" as; '(I)t would be madness to raise a serious subject in the company of this rabble' (247). The chaos of the outside world has finally breached the walls of Tearle's version of civilisation. 'To think that the Café Europa had once been a haven in an urban jungle, and now the jungle was in here too, on our side of the pale' (269). Finally both Tearle and Spilkin are engulfed by the wave of chaos and he is 'blackened'; his face painted with black shoe-polish. While Spilkin finds it humorous, Tearle is mortally offended. The complete breakdown in his civilisation is paralleled by his closeness to death as he is stabbed in the chest. The dictionary, whose words he lives by, ironically ends up saving his life. His pencils are 'reduced to tinder' (277) and later he returns to the café but the "Proofreader's Derby" is nowhere to be found. Every one of the objects that symbolise his whiteness and civilisation; his dictionary, pencils, written work and actual white skin is lost, hidden or reduced to nothing; without them Tearle feels that he is losing his own definition. He, ironically, is the catalyst for this disorder, as his obsession with standards and order results in the upheaval and violent reactions of the others around him.

Floyd, one of the new denizens of the café, is actually stabbed in the fight, trying in misguided sense of loyalty to help Tearle. In a strange twist Tearle's community turns on him and it is left to a 'substandard' member of the café's community to defend him, however inept. Tearle finds himself on the street with Shirlaine, a young coloured girl, after accompanying Floyd to the hospital. Shirlaine and Tearle begin to wonder aimlessly through the streets of Johannesburg. This is an interesting and important break in the stringent borders he creates between people. He still attempts to resist aimlessness as he tries to establish a teacher-student relationship with the girl.

Tearle's engagement with Shirlaine depicts an almost imperceptible shift in his identity. '(T)he process of identification – of being who we are – comes into existence by the *act* of being itself ... Rather than existing as an object outside of history and politics, the self is continually created and re-created as and by actions, and in relation to a social audience' (Distiller & Steyn 2004:4). Tearle envisages a relationship with Shirlaine whereupon he is the master, imparting his wisdom onto another generation, but after that initial meeting he never sees her again. Despite this her presence left a definite space in his sense of self. He is more affected by his

interactions with her than the overwhelming engulfment of otherness experienced in the café. The minor alteration in positioning in the world, despite its seeming insignificance, demonstrates its fluidity. ‘Tearle, perpetually out of touch with his city throughout the novel, even though he calls himself a ‘true Johannesburger’, finally comes actually to inhabit its streets, to fall kicking and screaming into the future’ (Nuttall 2004:746).

The fragility of Tearle’s construction of civilisation and the standards he sets for himself and others around him is apparent at the end of the novel. The boundaries which limited Tearle’s view on the world, although not completely collapsed, have been shifted enough to cause doubt in his understanding of the world. The ending registers in some ways that Tearle has changed positions. It’s fractional but he’s not quite in the same place he was before. The last three sentences of the novel show that Tearle is beginning to understand that there are spaces he has no control over, and cannot correct. This leaves him displaced within the very world that he has so carefully built.

Movements were afoot in those dark spaces that would never be reflected in the telephone directories. Languages were spoken there that I would never put to the proof. As if they were aware of it themselves, the lights were not twinkling, as lights are supposed to do, they were squirming and wriggling and writhing, like maggots battenning on the foul proof of the world. (304)

Chapter 4

The Exploded View

The Exploded View is set in 1999, and comprises four loosely interrelated stories. It is set on the developing outskirts of Johannesburg. Within this text Vladislavić ‘explodes’ the notion of race. The stories seem to suggest an incomplete transformation has occurred in South Africa. In this work identification of the white characters appears to move away from a ‘Europe of the mind’ and language, although the residual of both within a post-apartheid society is apparent, and into another, thus unidentifiable, emergent order of globalised commodities of signs and meanings that flood post-apartheid society. Whiteness appears to have fragmented and is left suspended and unresolved within this postcolonial society. Each of the white characters appears to be attempting to negotiate some sort of meaning, but is left in a state of ‘groundlessness’. The black character serves as a balancing force within the work. He is involved in a heuristic process that manipulates meaning. It is through this, and not his race, that he is able to establish an anchor within the cacophony of signs.

Vladislavić sets *The Exploded View* within the developing borders of Johannesburg, a place where clear meaning is in a precarious position. ‘The boundaries of Johannesburg are drifting away, sliding over pristine ridges and valleys, lodging in tenuous places, slipping again’ (6). Like the boundaries of Johannesburg white South Africans find their grip on meaning and understanding slipping within a post-apartheid context. Vladislavić reiterates the fragility of the self as well as the difficulty of reconciliation. The work suggests that the identity of white South Africans is caught in a gap between the plans for a ‘New South Africa’, an illusion of order and wholeness, and the disintegration, dissonance and chaos that inhabits reality. The gap created leaves whiteness and identity suspended on an edge.

The work is set five years after the democratic elections and the process of whiteness has become further complicated as the transformation from an isolated apartheid state into an ‘exploded view’ has not been a neat conversion of systems. The residual that binds people to a past also traps them, as they are unable to relate to the new meanings of the present and the future. Whiteness within this context is constitutive. As Vladislavić says in one of his

interviews; 'I am unequivocally grateful and relieved that we live in a transforming society. But I would like to be living in a society that's somewhat more transformed' (Interview: Warnes 2000:279). There is a sense of a world that is becoming something else but there is no clear path or understanding of what it is changing into.

The first story follows the efforts of a statistician, Les Budlender, to gather information; 'Seconded from the Development Bank by Statistical Services, he was helping to redraft the questionnaires for the national consensus ... the first non-racial headcount in the country's history ...' (5). He is a middle-aged white man who is isolated and alienated from the world around him. Of the four characters his life is the most desperate. The world around him is indecipherable and is constituted of many signs that he is unable to read or give meaning to. His isolation emulates that of the Book Lover. Budlender constructs his world out of statistics. These statistics purport to be reality reflecting the functioning of the world; they serve to counter the disorder and collapse of society.

Isn't it true that 42 per cent of all road fatalities are pedestrians? That 67 per cent of all household accidents occur in the kitchen. That 83 per cent of all infant mortalities could be prevented if the mothers would follow the basic rules of hygiene? (9)

Through the fragmentation that statistics suggests, he believes that he is able to 'manage' reality and in this way, avoid its full impact. Through this process he hopes to order the world into logical portions. His use of statistics reflects a failure of imagination on his part. The context in which Budlender finds himself is complicated and meaning is illusive. It is impossible to break-up the meaning into simplistic and binaristic ways of understanding.

While race is not a major part of Budlender's world, it is still a functional category of his identity and he attempts to understand how and why it works within a postcolonial society. He hopes to understand the 'other' by learning the signs that constitute them; a friend gives him pointers in telling the difference between people from neighbouring countries. He realises that he should be trying to understand but there is a sense of sterilisation and the mechanical to his understanding of an alien world. 'Was he Nigerian? It was time to learn the signs' (4). This

'learning' proves to be futile as he is unable to decipher the 'signs' within the real world. He is unable to fall back on any 'reliable statistics' (5) and therefore he is not sure how he is supposed to make meaning out of the differences. In terms of his own racial identity, the statistics that he continually refers to do not bode well for the growth of whiteness; 'It is a fact that no more than 2 per cent of white South Africans speak an African language' (25). Statistics are his only reference to the real world and this provides a bleak view of the function of whiteness and the space in which the 'other' resides. His inability to imagine a purpose for whiteness or to place it within a South African context leaves the category as a meaningless entity.

One evening he takes a wrong turning and finds himself in a squatter camp, a place he has only seen from the highway. There is no space between the world that Budlender attempts to hold onto, a world of order, and the actual chaos that surrounds him. 'A squatter camp had sprung up here in the last year on the open veld between this road and the freeway, directly opposite the new housing scheme ... an arrangement of little RDP houses on one side and a clutter of corrugated-iron and board shacks on the other' (20). This 'arrangement' reflects his own position within the world; while he attempts to break-up meaning into smaller and more convenient pieces in order to understand, he is constantly faced with the incommensurable that throws this logic out of kilter. In order for him to contain his version of the world he requires constant separation from the chaos that is reality. But, unlike the Book Lover, he is unable to live a life of complete isolation. His job requires that he travels and he is therefore constantly faced with the shifting boundaries that constitute South Africa's society.

He would have stopped altogether, but something drifted into range of his headlights: the inner tube from a tractor tyre, a huge black rubber doughnut, and a man reclining in it, with his head thrown back and his arms and legs dangling. He was floating there, in spiky new shoots on a blackened fringe of veld, with his fingers trailing in the ash of burnt grass like someone bobbing in a swimming pool. (21)

The floating man represents Budlender's incomprehension. With the intrusion of reality Budlender becomes a stranger both to himself and to his context.

While sitting above the Star Stop restaurant he observes the moving traffic below him.

It was a perch made for a statistician: he was suspended above a great demographic flow, like a boy on a bridge dangling a hook and line, waiting for the rush hour to thicken. His eyes took in the stream of traffic, separated it out into its parts, dwelling on sizes and shapes and shades ... Entire lifestyles, dissolved in the flow like some troubling additive, like statistical fluoride, became perceptible to his trained eyes. (15-16)

This passage highlights the way in which Budlender would like to view the world, as a map onto which he can project an imposition of logic and understanding. He appears to wish for an overview of the world that will, at any one time, make perfect sense as a whole. But this wish is unfulfilled as he is constantly confounded by the workings of the reality and he is met with signs that merely give way to other signs leaving him at multiple levels away from reality.

The 'Villa Toscana' is a representation of an Italian villa. It is a simulacrum of a reality that is based within an imagined and distant Europe. 'The architect has given the entrance the medieval treatment ... the wheels of the car made the driveway rumble like a drawbridge ...' (7). While Budlender recognises the signs he is unable to attribute meaning to them as they are dislocated from their familiar position. 'A strange sensation had come over him when he first drew up at the gates of Villa Toscana, a dreamlike blend of familiarity and displacement' (6). The simulacrum of the villa becomes, in itself, fragmented. Reality is lost within the multitude or repetitive signs that do not, in fact, symbolise anything authentic within a South African context. It is in this world of simulacrums that he meets the television presenter, Iris du Plooy, and begins a voyeuristic love affair with her.

Iris du Plooy is a continuity presenter. She is part of a technological world that is incomprehensible to Budlender. 'Why did everything have to happen so quickly? So incompletely? It was nothing but bits and pieces of things' (24). He can only understand Iris 'incompletely' not in terms of a reality that reflects a whole and functioning woman but only in pieces of a whole. He tries to imagine her naked body but '... he could not imagine it precisely, all he saw was bits and pieces of other women, the thighs of his last lover, breasts out

of magazines, hips and shoulders that were ambiguously, softly angled, like her face' (30). He finds himself within her home, in her space, but is unable to equate this with any real meaning. His search for the authentic Iris emulates the Book Lover's search for Helena. 'At first he was irritated. Not just with himself for his carelessness, but with the whole ridiculous lifestyle that surrounded him, with its repetitions, its mass-produced effects, its formulaic individuality. But then this very shallowness began to exert a pacifying effect on him' (30-31). The constant reproduction of signs serves to create a world in which no meaning is ever stable. He finds himself in her bathroom, searching for a sign that will act as a transcendental signifier that will at once give him a clear understanding of who Iris du Plooy is, instead he discovers *The Perfumed City*.

On the shelf was a little Manhattan of perfume bottles. There were bottles of every shape and size, crystal and smoked, corseted and shoulder-padded, pinched into feminine shapes or squarely masculine. He opened a tapering glass pyramid with a shiny top. Too sweet. Smelt of overripe oranges. The slim tower was Dolce & Gabbana. He unscrewed the bright-red cap. Also unfamiliar. Why does she have all these things if she doesn't use them? (38)

He asks questions that are never to be answered; he is given no insight into who she is. He is merely faced with multiple representations and many different scents that she could or could not be wearing; they in no way represent her. In the end his hope to incorporate Iris into his life is abruptly cut off. She does not wish to see him again and, 'There was a note attached, on a yellow sticker, to say that it was perfect just as it was and she now considered her part in the project at an end' (45). He is never reconciled with the real Iris, and is left only with the Iris presented by the television.

Budlender's dream at the end of his story reveals his sense of vertigo.

One night, not long afterwards, he dreamt that he was walking in a foreign city, down avenues lined with sky-scrapers. The buildings were like bars in a gigantic graph, but they were also perfume bottles, glass towers filled with liquids coloured like honey and brandy. The air was so thickly scented he could hardly breathe. He began to run ... step by step, until his feet detached from the earth and he found himself falling, horizontally, through the perfumed streets. (46)

Budlender is unable find a context in which he can belong, and is 'falling' through a city that is foreign to him and he has no control over. The city of his dreams emulates the endless simulacrums of *The Perfume City* of Iris du Plooy. Although he recognises the signs that surround him, he is unable to given them any meaning as they merely give way to other signs.

Budlender has no real place within an African society and the space that he attempts to chisel out is based on an order of statistics that are themselves, not a reliable source of information. He has lost the ability to define himself within the vast boundaries of Johannesburg and inhabits a state of non-being. The stability that the past presented has fallen away and is considered taboo. 'Without thinking, he had filled in the old number with its concluding T, claiming allegiance to the vanished Transvaal' (8). It is a bleak view of whiteness and identity five years after the transitional stage. Whiteness, in this instance, has not matured with post-apartheid and is left suspended with no real sense of belonging.

The second story "Alfritude Sauce", describes a day in the life of a sanitary engineer, Egan. This story deals the most explicitly with race within *The Exploded View*. Egan is in the city in order to inspect the RDP housing project, Hani View, on the outskirts of Johannesburg. It is the same housing project that Budlender notices. He is given the status of the authority, and therefore, according to its occupants, accountable for all the problems this new development is facing .

It was always the same. Wherever you went in the townships – although you weren't supposed to call them that any more – in the former townships, in the black areas, when people saw a man with a clipboard or a blueprint, they assumed he was collecting complaints ... On his last trip to Mpumalanga, the junior planner who was driving him around had convinced him that the best thing was to listen to people. It gave residents the feeling that their problems were being taken seriously. (61)

But the people's problems are not being taken into account, Egan has no authority and therefore he is unable to change the situation or improve it. 'What a performance, Egan thought' (64).

There appears to be an irreconcilable difference between the blueprints and the real world.

Egan always found it strange to set foot for the first time in a place he knew from the plans. It was like folding out of two dimensions into three ... You imagined gardens, shady avenues and parks. And then you got there and found rows of impossibly small houses, not a leaf in sight, dust everywhere, shadowless walls, and the immense blue well of the sky which reduced the earth to sediment. (56-57)

The plans do not reflect the reality of the African township. Instead of the perfectly presented order and organisation that is depicted in the architect's plans, the real township is riddled with mistakes as the construction workers and planners have not implemented the project correctly. These townships contrast the elegant, European based complexes such as Villa Toscana that have sprung up around Johannesburg. The problem appears to be everywhere at once and overwhelming. 'There was a crack through the wall of the house so wide he could see through ... But how had such a crack appeared in a brand-new structure?' (63) The blueprints have not taken into account poor construction, damage through its inhabitation or the citizens who live in the houses, in other words, it does not take into account reality. The cracks in the houses parallel the cracks in society. Egan spots many more problems with the housing projects that will emerge at a later date. This seems to speak to the problems of South Africa as a whole, the homogenous notion of the Rainbow Nation has passed and the cracks in society are beginning to show. 'New South Africa'. How dated is seemed. When had it been coined? Five years ago? Already it was worn out and passing quietly from use' (81). The plan for the city of Johannesburg by the democratic government, while appearing perfect and orderly at the development stage, cannot be mapped straight onto a postcolonial city that is shifting and transforming. The logicity of plans unravels at the stage of implementation. When real people inhabit the townships the plans can no longer contain order.

The problem of resolution is apparent in one of the plans for a low-cost development; the drawn figures of the people in the township were white. 'The race of these stock figures, these little loiterers and passers-by, was apparent less in the obvious features, like their paper-white skin or ruler-straight hair, than in their styles, their attitudes ... They were not just white, they

were European' (73-74). The plans reflect an idealised European world, far removed from the 'poor black people' (74) that actually inhabit everyday life. This difference in representation is considerable and reflects the simulacrum of Villa Toscana. There appears to have been no attempt to reconcile with the realities of a South African context. This replicated world of an imagined Europe reflects the worlds of the Book Lover and Aubrey Tearle whereby people manipulate an inherited discourse of generalised Europeanness and attempt to map it onto a South African context. This Europeanness is no longer a functional category in post-apartheid South Africa, and certainly not in the postcolonial city of Johannesburg. The discrepancy between reality and the blueprints is inordinate.

That evening Egan goes to dinner with Mazibuko, 'the council official in charge of housing subsidiaries and deed registration ...' (52), the town clerk Bhengu and others of the Resident's association. The restaurant is Bra Zama's African Eatery and is in 'a peri-urban no-man's-land'(78). The space that it creates is contrived; it is a performance of Africa that does not in any way parallel the reality of the townships. In a way it is as false as the plans depicting the European people. The waitress was 'clearly *in costume*, dressed up as something, although he wasn't sure what. Some national costume or other. Nigerian, say. Or was she supposed to be a shebeen queen? (80)' Africa is presented as a style, it appropriates an interior design. The pastiche of Africa reflects the simulacrum of the European world, neither reflect reality but rather a swirling set of signs that speaks to a postmodern superficiality.

At first Egan is proud to be part of the group; 'He, Egan, and the five black men, an equal among equals, he became conscious of their special status. They represented something important. They were the only racially mixed party in the place' (84). But as the evening progresses he begins to realise that this is merely an illusion as the others 'slipped back into Sotho' (87) and he is excluded from their world. He is suddenly unsure of his status. 'He began to suspect that *nothing* important was being discussed with him' (87). The value he placed in his participation is deceptive; he has no real place as his place is on the periphery. There are masks that line the walls of the restaurant, 'These wooden masks everywhere, with their poppy eyes and round surprised mouths that were just made to hold a blowpipe, their bulging foreheads and scarred cheeks' (88-89). Egan notices parallels with regards to the masks and the

people at the table, the unidentifiable. They seem to be repeated without any individual features. 'It was uncannily like a white South African nightmare, he thought. An *old* one' (91). He realises that there should be a change with this new context and whiteness is supposed to take on a new meaning, but the distance between the past and the present seem to be blurred and Egan is uncertain of his position within this situation. He wishes that he were in the future looking back.

He could already see himself looking back on it, from a tremendous distance, and understanding, at last, what it was all about. He wished he was there now, at that reassuring remove, on a height, filled with the wisdom of hindsight. (80)

This constant need to create order out of reality reflects Budlender's wish that the world was a map he could look down upon. It speaks to a desire to be removed from the chaos of the world and retreat to a place in which meaning and understanding will suddenly become clear. This wish will never be fulfilled because the reality of the world is one of continual chaos and disorder.

Egan returns to the space of the hotel, which also seems to have shifted, instead of the privacy and luxury, he notices differences and problems. 'At the thought of all the strangers who had passed through this cramped space, breathing, dripping, shedding skin, spilling fluid, his stomach tightened' (97). The dissonance of the artificial space of the restaurant translates into the contained space of the hotel. Both are designed as restricted places, which are supposed to be controlled. The sanctuary of the hotel room has been exploded as well as his whiteness. He watches the movie *Raging Bull* and reacts to the violence as though it is real. This moment becomes a complex web of interrelated meanings. In this scene Jake La Motta, the aging white boxer, fights an up-and-coming young black boxer Sugar Ray Robinson. He has fought him before, but towards the end of his career he is beaten significantly. The visual shots are of him against the ropes, being violently beaten but refusing to fall. This moment seems to suggest a disturbing process in which meaning is created through a violent confrontation. Egan responds to this scene as though it is him that is being beaten. He has begun to realise the unavoidability of his position within the world, that he is not separate from the plans and the immediate chaos that surrounds him. He is engulfed without a real understanding of how to react. Egan is caught

between the transforming societies; he wishes to belong to the New South Africa but is unable to translate this desire into tangible or effective action.

The only black narrated story in *The Exploded View* serves as a balancing force within the work. The protagonist is Simeon Majara, he is an artist who ‘had made his name – ‘S.Majara’ – with three shows on the theme of genocide’ (104). He, like the white characters, is also struggling with representation and a transforming context. He uses his art as a way of creating meaning out of a culture of surfaces which serve to confound both Budlender and Egan. Blackness, in this instance, represents the position that whiteness should be situated, in terms of creating meaning as well as making a space for oneself within a South African context.

One of his artworks is the creation of the masks that appropriate the walls of Bra Zama’s African Eatery. Majara’s art plays with aspects of style. The curios are not African; they are commodities that represent a culture of curios. The masks are objects whose function is to signify, superficially, an Africa. Majara breaks them up in order to create something else. There are three types of representation and creation, his own artistic works, the representation within the words that Vladislavić uses and then again within the readers own imagination. While Simeon is faced with the same problem of creating meaning out of a space as Budlender and Egan, he is not alienated within the space that he occupies as he actively attempts to shape and define the space around him. This can be seen through the creation of the masks; ‘Sawing, sawn. Already his arm was itching to do it again to cut down through solid substance, and keep cutting down through it until his muscles ached’ (136). He physically creates the masks with the view of other people’s responses; ‘There’s something frightening about it. It’s like a crowd ...’ (141). Instead of waiting for the space to make sense, he makes sense of the space around him; ‘Things do shape themselves if you give them the space, they find a way of hanging together’ (141). He tries to find his own self and his place through the deconstruction and then reconstruction of physical objects. By shifting objects from one system into another he is actively deactivating the meanings that they acquire through a system of signs within one particular context. In fragmenting the objects Majara is mirroring the reactions of Egan and Budlender in viewing the world as manageable pieces in order to create meaning. The difference between them and him is that he has created his meaning out of a controllable scale,

and is not attempting to understand the entirety of the context that surrounds him. He is reworking the commodities of blackness into new and contesting forms.

Majara is aware of both his own blackness as well as the whiteness of others. Within the entirety of the work, he represents and understands whiteness far better than the white characters do. They are too close to themselves and their situations and occupy a position of groundlessness. Majara is able to decipher meaning far more accurately and astutely than the white characters. He is able to pin-point the problems with whiteness in a post-apartheid context. He meets the girlfriend of his friend Leon, Amy; ‘He knew the type ... they gazed upon exploitation and oppression through their Police sunglasses. And all along they demonstrated that there was nothing to be done. Their radicalism consisted in making manifest the impossibility of change’ (149). At first he is interested in her, but then he realises that she embodies a typical whiteness; ‘Was it Leon’s cadences he heard, Leon’s colours he saw, the dark ground of the affronted painter shining up through her the thin wash of her own thought?’ (146) He is aware of the hypocrisy, the false sentiment and blindness that accompany the white South African. She says; ‘But I can’t help being aware of the balance of power, the imbalance, one should say. The way you live here, the way the people who made these masks must live’ (146). She perceives a problem with him making money out of his art, but is completely blind to her own position of power. Despite the seeming dissonance and displacement that white people perceive, whiteness still occupies a central position of privilege and power. He points out to her; ‘‘And you, poor thing, sleeping on a bench at the station’’ (147). She will not listen or understand within which lies the problematic root of whiteness; in its inability to mould to a new context. It is only through the black character, Majara, that readers are aware of the distance between the white character’s perception of the world around them, and their actual position.

Despite Simeon’s self-awareness, he struggles with the same identification problems as both Egan and Budlender; ‘Deciding that he knew more about authentic African style than she did - he was black, after all, never mind the private-school accent...’ (106). It is ironic that he uses the phrase ‘authentic African style’ as a style, in itself, is a representation. Therefore she is using him as a representation, a simulacrum of Africa. By virtue of his blackness he appears to

represent Africa as a whole. His physicality parallels that of his masks and his art; surfaces that represent a style. The main difference between him and the white characters lies in his 'performance' or rather, 'non-performance'. "More and more, he wanted to attach value to disconnected, insignificant moments like these. This was how he should express himself, he decided. In entirely private performances, meant for his own eyes only' (131). There is a perceptible difference in his performance in the social sphere. Majara does not calculate his reaction to whiteness while, in contrast, the white characters' reaction to otherness is carefully measured and always unsure. He notices the over-acting, the performance of the 'Sociable White'. He is far more aware of the community around him. Although there is a sense of displacement and alienation that mirrors that of the white characters he is prepared to deal with this alienation through a heuristic process.

In the last story, "Crocodile Lodge", the protagonist is once again a white male, whose company erects advertising billboards that feature across the Johannesburg landscape. The story threads back through the other character's lives and *The Exploded View* becomes a complex interaction of signs and representation. This story echoes the first, there are similar veins with regard to the traffic and flow and ebb of everyday South African life, both notice the arrows that indicate the spaces between the cars and the lay of the land. Duffy's dialogue consists of recurring memories of the past, which translate into his present life. The one memory is of the magazine Popular Mechanics, the perfect Americanised world and the other is of Willie Pieterse, a young boy who beat him in the boxing ring and whose memory still haunts him.

One of the billboards that he has erected is of Villa Toscana. This speaks to the endless repetition of signs. The billboard represents a picture of a complex, which itself is made up of signs that is a stage for a distant Italy. The lodge that he is currently working on is a simulacrum of Africa, it parallels a style of Africa that is seen in Bra Zama's African Eatery and in the masks that Majara's creates.

Crocodile Lodge as it was meant to be, a bulwark of robust stone rising against the sunset, a printed sky redder and hotter, more full of blood and gamy juices than the ash-grey heavens, the fading backdrop of reality. Stone, wood and thatch. The

upper apartments have little gazebos instead of conventional balconies, with conical thatched roofs supported by wooden beams that mimicked the forks and stubs of indigenous trees. In the foreground, flat-topped thorn trees and waterholes edged by rushes, where crocodiles that had given the place its name might be supposed lie hidden. (187)

The Crocodile Lodge mimics an Africa that is not real. There is no clear sense of a certainty as reality is pushed further and further away. Duffy notices that the plans for the Lodge ‘... were practically indistinguishable from the photographically real, were more vividly convincing in fact than the ordinary world ...’ (187). It becomes very difficult to locate the real within the web of simulacrum, the value and understanding of everything becomes constantly and radically uncertain.

As a young boy Duffy read *Popular Mechanics*, a representation of a perfect mechanical world; ‘It was an American world he entered there, its surfaces airbrushed to perfection, gleaming with old-fashioned optimism; and its inner workings laid bare, frankly and practically, as the product of enterprise and effort ... he wanted to live in this world, passing effortlessly between its countersunk dimensions, where he felt he belonged’ (171). This desire for perfection appears to parallel the improvisation that occurs within Majara’s world. ‘This must be the meaning of America, an endless series of improvisations on the material world. A kind of jazz’ (178). It speaks to the necessity of creating new paths and new meanings whereby identity can be obtained. The ability of Majara to create new possibilities contrasts the chaos of the contemporary world as multiple layers of possibilities are created out of the disorder of reality.

Gordon Duffy is obsessed with understanding popular mechanics. He longs for the ‘perfect whole’, which reflects his desire for order and precision that emulates Budlender’s obsession with statistics and Egan’s obsession with plans. This desire translates into an obsession with America; ‘This place, impossibly distant and unreal, filled him with painful longing, an ache for containment that was peculiarly like homesickness’ (175). There is a sense that reality is ‘caught in a gap’ between an emergent and perfect wholeness, which in this case, appears to lie between an Americanisation, and the chaos of a real South Africa. A misplaced nostalgia for an American dream is apparent in each of the stories, including Majara’s. America appears

symbolic of the perfect plan, an effortless society whereupon ‘a perfect whole would be realized’ (171). This suggests that whiteness within a post-apartheid society is moving away from its definition within a settler-based identity but is still premised within an unobtainable illusion that is situated within a foreign context. Despite the transformation this world of precise order that the constructor longs for does not exist in post-apartheid South Africa. Whiteness is premised on a foreignness that bears no resemblance to a South African context, whether it is an American or European ideal.

One of Duffy’s recurring memories is of his failed boxing days, when he was younger ‘It was my father’s idea that I should box: now that I was going to school I had to learn to ‘take care’ of myself’ (182). The reality of the world is slipping away from anything genuine. His wife now ‘boxes’ but it is a simulation of boxing with no real contact ; ‘She had the head-bob, the hooks and jabs, the nifty footwork, all put together with a ferocity that surprised him. My wife, the middleweight’ (167). On the evening the story occurs Duffy leaves his cellphone at the construction site and decides to go back to fetch it. There he is confronted by four thieves, instead of driving away he turns to face them. It is a moment that is replicated in the scene from *Raging Bull*, the decision to stand and fight. To regain a sense of self and reality through violent intervention, and it achieves just that as ‘... with every blow he felt more like himself’ (201). This violence speaks to an older world, a world without technology. It is a disturbing idea that the only way to break through stagnation and create meaning is through violent confrontation. Duffy is facing both his past, as well as his future within that moment and the story is left suspended as the reader is given no clue to the outcome. This violence becomes a type of improvisation as through it, through the beating, he feels himself becoming something new. Within this violence he is able to locate the real. There appears to be a process of transformation as he is carving out a new white identity, instead of living stagnant in a no-mans land he actively confronts otherness. In the end he faces his past demons in order to move towards a new sense of belonging.

Whiteness within *The Exploded View* has become fragmented and the concept of race has, in a sense, ‘exploded’. The white characters are trapped in trying to manufacture meaning in a world in which signs are constantly giving away to other signs. Negotiation within this

semiotic system is futile. The text raises many questions on the location of the real within a society that has become merely a reflection of multiple layers of signs and simulacrum.

There is a definite trajectory apparent within the literature of Vladislavić that points to a progression in the concept of whiteness. The character Aubrey Tearle from *The Restless Supermarket*, the narrator from “The Book Lover” and the artist in “Courage” are all invested within some version of race. Race within “Courage” is overt and within the short story the physicality of whiteness is at its most visible. Whiteness, in this instance, is stripped of any notions of self-respect and becomes ridiculous and grotesque. At the other extreme the narrator in “The Book Lover” and Aubrey Tearle in *The Restless Supermarket* are invested in a version of race that speaks to colonial sense of self. This sense of self is located firmly outside of a South African context and within an idealised ‘Europe of the mind’. Both men retreat behind walls of their own making, the Book Lover behind his books, and Aubrey Tearle within the Café Europa. They position this creation of identity against the ‘disintegrating’ society that threatens to engulf them and refuse to negotiate meaning within a new post-apartheid society.

Within *The Exploded View* this ‘Europe of the mind’ appears to have dissipated to an extent. The characters do not aspire to an idealised Europeanness or cling to a past order. While the Book Lover and Tearle are not willing to negotiate the postcolonial society and its multiple meanings, the characters in *The Exploded View* wish to create meaning within this new society. Despite this different response they are not capable of creating any one single meaning and are bewildered by the multiple signs that surround them. No individual subject is equipped with the means to create meaning out of the cacophony of signs. Race becomes merely one aspect among many different semiotic elements that the characters have to negotiate. Whiteness has become relative and fragmented. These fragments are still held in place but relics of a white order that is informed by the past. This allows the question of whiteness to remain suspended within a postcolonial society but remain unresolved; leaving the white characters with a sense of groundlessness and within a state of perpetual deferral.

The black character within *The Exploded View*, Simeon Majara, is the only character that is able to manipulate meaning within the clash of systems. His ability to invest meaning in

different possibilities is not situated within his race. Although his actual blackness can be linked to the idea of surfaces explored in “Courage” whereupon through the physical colour of his skin certain ideas are assumed, it is not through his race that he creates meaning. Majara manipulates meaning through a heuristic process; by fragmenting the chaos of reality into manageable pieces. Through this he is able to create a possibility among the many, and is able to begin to negotiate a place within a society whose meaning is constantly shifting. It is through this character that the white characters may find a way out of their state of perpetual deferral and begin to construct a sense of self that is situated within the realities of a postcolonial South Africa.

There is no clear route suggested for the development of whiteness beyond the work *The Exploded View*. Vladislavić has purposefully left the concept whiteness ambivalent. The trajectory of whiteness, from being situated firmly outside of a South African context to its fragmentation depicted in *The Exploded View*, suggests perhaps that, in the future, the deconstruction of whiteness will be complete.

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