Imagining and Imaging the City – Ivan Vladislavić and the Postcolonial Metropolis

KUDZAYI M. NGARA

(2618559)

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor Philosophiae, in the Department of English, University of the Western Cape.

Supervisor: Prof Wendy Woodward

Co-supervisor: Prof Loes Nas

Co-supervisor: Prof Kristiaan Versluys

11 November 2011

Imagining and Imaging the City – Ivan Vladislavić and the Postcolonial Metropolis

Kudzayi M. Ngara

KEYWORDS

Johannesburg

Ivan Vladislavić

Postcolonial metropolis

Post-apartheid

Representation

Identity

Urbanity

Flâneur

Irresolvability

Dialogic Postcolonialism

ABSTRACT

Imagining and Imaging the City – Ivan Vladislavić and the Postcolonial Metropolis

Kudzayi M. Ngara

PhD Thesis, Department of English, University of the Western Cape

This thesis undertakes an analysis of how six published works by the South African writer Ivan Vladislavić form the perspective of writing the city – Johannesburg – into being. Beginning from the basis that Vladislavić's writing constitutes what I have coined dialogic postcolonialism, the thesis engages with both broader contemporary urban and postcolonial theory in order to show the liminal imaginative space that the author occupies in his narrations of Johannesburg. Underlining the notion of postcolonialism being a "work in progress" my thesis problematises the issue of representation of the postcolonial city through different aspects like space, urbanity, identity and the self, and thus locates each of the texts under consideration at a particular locus in Vladislavić's representational continuum of the continually transforming city of Johannesburg.

Until the recent appearance of *Mariginal Spaces – Reading Vladislavić* (2011) the extant critical literature and research on the writing of Ivan Vladislavić has, as far as I can tell, not engaged with his work as a body of creative consideration and close analysis of the city of Johannesburg. Even this latest text largely consists of previously published reviews and articles by disparate critics and academics. The trend has therefore largely been to analyse the texts separately, without treating them as the building blocks to an ongoing and perhaps unending project of imaginatively bringing the city into being. Such readings have thus been unable to decipher and characterise the threads which have emerged over the period of the writer's literary engagement with and representation of Johannesburg.

I suggest that, as individual texts and as a collection or body of work, Ivan Vladislavić's *Missing Persons* (1989), *The Folly* (1993), *Propaganda by Monuments and Other Stories* (1996), *The Restless Supermarket* (2006 – first published in 2001), *The Exploded View* (2004) and *Portrait with Keys: Joburg & what-what* (2006), are engaged in framing representations of the postcolonial city, representations which can in my view best be analysed through the prism of deconstructive engagement. To this end, the thesis examines contemporary South African urbanity or the post-apartheid metropolitan space (as epitomised by the fictive Johannesburg) and how it is represented in literature as changing, and in the process of becoming.

As a consequence, the main conclusion I arrive at is on how the irresolvable nature of the city is reflected in the totality of Ivan Vladislavić's writing. In that way, it was possible to treat every text in its own right (rather than forcing it to conform to an overarching thesis). This central insight allowed for the effective application of urban theory to the close readings of the texts.
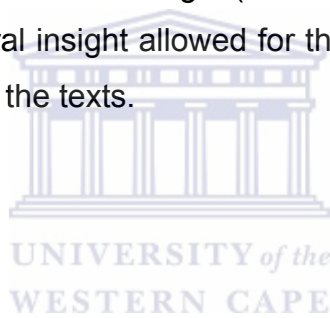
DECLARATION

I declare that **Imagining and Imaging the City – Ivan Vladislavić and the Postcolonial Metropolis** is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references

Kudzayi M. Ngara   November 2011

Signed:……………………

UNIVERSITY *of the*
WESTERN CAPE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Table of Contents

Dickens was blessed to live in a city that offered the walker 'miles upon miles of streets' in which to be lonely and 'warm company' at every turn once his loneliness had been satisfied. Moreover, to live in a city that collaborated enthusiastically in its own invention. I live in a city that resists imagination. Or have I misunderstood? Is the problem that I live in a fiction that unravels even as I grasp it?[1]

1 Introduction: Background, Critical and Theoretical Perspectives

1.1 Contextual Background

Johannesburg, as a geo-political and economic entity, has rightfully been at the centre of how different writers, over generations, have imagined and written about South African urbanity specifically, if not as a conception of the general archetype of an African city. At the very least and due to the history of the presence of migrant labour in the goldmines of the Witwatersrand, especially, the city has resonated in fictional and non-fictional narratives in countries that form part of the southern sub-continent of Africa, initially as a direct consequence of the stories and life experiences that the returnees carried back to their countries of origin. In the post-apartheid era, this influence of Johannesburg (and South Africa) has extended beyond the immediate neighbouring countries to the rest of the continent, largely as a result of perceptions of better economic opportunities and political freedom. The growth and increasing cosmopolitanism of the city has been accompanied by an increasing variety of the ways in which it has been conceived and understood, both in creative literature and in non-literary writing. Among these multifarious voices has emerged, from the late 1980s up to the present, the work of Ivan Vladislavić which is marked by its insistent, focused and repeated rehearsal of Johannesburg as theme and metaphor. Vladislavić writes about a period which spans the end years of apartheid and the emergence of a democratic polity, and therefore his body of work

---

[1] From Vladislavić's *Portrait with Key – Joburg & What-what* (2006:54). Emphasis added.

is an important commentary on the assumed transition of Johannesburg from an apartheid city to a democratised metropolis. Indeed, part of the rationale for the choice of his writing as the subject of this dissertation lies in his almost exclusive and singular fascination and persistent literary engagement with the city.

In order to gain a historically grounded understanding of Vladislavić's creative re-imagining of the city, one needs to have an appreciation of the multiple perspectives from which the phenomenon of urbanity or urban life has been theorised. The great European age of large scale industrialisation coincided with the coalescence of large populations of people into the many great modern cities that have become the hallmarks of western civilisation. From the late 1800s and throughout much of the next century, the zenith of the colonial project, there was also the establishment of urban administrative and industrial centres in the respective colonies and these have grown into the current postcolonial metropolises, among the most notable of which are cities like Johannesburg, Lagos in Nigeria, Mumbai in India and Brazil's Sao Paolo. These developing world conurbations are not exact replicas of their western models because of obvious reasons like differences in historical setting and functional necessity, but to attain fuller insight into the theoretical reflections and fictional renderings of the postcolonial cities some in-depth conception of western theorisations or notions of the city is still necessary. This is so because, in spite of the different histories and characteristics peculiar to each respective urban space, there are some common threads and urban practices that are found in the older models as well as the latter-day, postcolonial cityscapes.

In the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th many interpretations of the city, save – among others – for the notable exceptions of the work of Walter Benjamin for instance, are to be mainly found in the province of sociology and physical planning. These interpretations take into consideration the relevant, dominant, political philosophy of the day. It is in this light that the social geographer E.W. Burgess (writing in the early 1920s) produced a concentric diagram of Chicago and what he perceived the essence of a city to be (James S. Duncan 1996:237). Such a view is, by definition, instrumentalist or functionalist, seeking as it does to read the city through the prism of perceived functions of the different zones of the

city, but does not seem to give proportionate weighting to the determination or agency of the residents of the city in as far as a reading of the cityscape may be arrived at. Such views, by inference, also sought to reduce the city to an essence, something which I will argue over the course of this thesis to be impossible. Over the succeeding years this kind of reductive thinking, whose project is premised on the discovery of an essence or universal truth, has given way to more epistemologically sound interpretations of the city. These acknowledge urbanity as more than a built-up space, representing the city rather as a lived-in space whose meaning or meanings derive from the spatial practices exercised therein by individuals from diverse backgrounds and with multiple connections and attitudes to the city. Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall state in 'Writing the World from an African Metropolis' that:

> […] a city is not simply a string of infrastructures, technologies and legal entities, however networked they are. It also comprises actual people, images and architectural forms, footprints and memories; the city is a place of manifold rhythms, a world of sounds, private freedom, pleasures and sensations.
>
> (2004:360)

The city, then, is more than bricks and mortar; it is constituted by more than companies and institutions of exchange and regulation or control. It is also made up of people - individuals who live, breathe, affect and are affected by the city. City life shapes individual identities in a similar way in which the residents of the city may be seen as shaping the city. When people make reference for instance to "the New York"[2] or the "Johannesburg" character – ignoring for the moment the totalising connotations of such concepts – they are not merely alluding to the physical skyline or topography of the city in question, but rather mean what may be discerned to be the typical behaviours of the denizens of the respective places. It is, in the same vein, also true that within one city there may be different archetypal traits depending on the area of the city in which the subjects reside. It is from recognition of this

---

[2] As also expressed in popular culture, for example in the lyrics to *"New York" (Empire State of Mind*) – Jay -Z ft Alicia Keys; or even Frank Sinatra's *"New York, New York.*

"reality" that the concept or notion of many "urbanities" within one urban centre arises.

Similarly, just as there may be many different kinds of urban life within one city or even one locale of the city, there are varied expressions of individual identity whether one looks at urbanity from the viewpoint of a whole city or a demarcated space within the city. The postcolonial period has ushered in alternative perspectives on identity, alternatives which challenge the hegemony for instance of previously dominant discourses such as colonialism (apartheid) and nationalism (the struggle for national self-determination). These latter discourses privileged notions of a homogenous identity that was based on political considerations such as race, and in both paradigms - colonialism and nationalism - the quest for an individual identity has often been superseded by the need to assert a perceived communal "good". One of the effects on individuals has been that they become aliens in their own communities as they are unable to fully express their senses of the "self". In the decades coinciding with the nationalist struggles for independence in the various African countries, a great proportion of literary works and literary criticism emphasised social realism and its poetics, to the detriment of a deeper understanding of the ways in which a poetics of the imagination might be shaped by perceptions of the individual as subject. Much of the literary work that is in the tradition of protest literature, with its foregrounding of the idea of nation and nationhood, may serve as examples.

The "imagining" and "imaging" of the title of this thesis thus refer to the author's conceptual re-imagination and representation, through various tropes and images, of the city of Johannesburg. In the epigraph to this introductory chapter, extracted from Vladislavić's 2006[3] publication *Portrait with Keys: Joburg & what-what*, the narrator is engaged with the problematic of representation, which is the problematic I shall concern myself with in my dissertation on selected writing by Ivan Vladislavić. Vladislavić is a second-generation South African of migrant Croatian and Irish-English extraction - on his paternal and maternal sides respectively - and a South

---

[3] At the time of the conception of this thesis in 2008, *Portrait with Keys: Jo-burg & what-what* was Vladislavić's last published complete new work on the city, but that has since changed with the coming out of the collaborative project with the photographer David Goldblatt, *TJ/Double Negative*, in late 2010. *Double Negative* has since been published as a stand-alone text in 2011.

African writer whose published fictional and more autobiographical work imaginatively traverses the "transitional" period from the last decade of institutionalised apartheid to the emergence of the postapartheid state and beyond. The city of Johannesburg, in which the majority of the imagined lives of Vladislavić's characters subsist, is a complex mix of the modern and the postcolonial. Due to this aspect of the manifold sources that give rise to its identity or identities[4] as a city and space, Johannesburg can be read as an intriguing subject of fictional representation and critical engagement.

The central hypothesis of this research will be that in his attempts to read and write this city "that resists imagination" the author does so through the simultaneous conflation and disavowal of the narratives of colonialism and apartheid, and in so doing arrives at what I term *dialogic postcolonialism*, a postcolonialism that is constantly self-reflexive and interrogative of the logic and justification of its own existence. Postcolonialism as used here and in the rest of the study is not a completely distinct category from postapartheid or postmodernism, but will at different points be demonstrated to be positively intersecting and overlapping with these and other discursive categories. These crossings and connections will be discussed in greater and more nuanced detail with reference to specific moments in the texts, but for the present I want to highlight and place emphasis on the unstable nature of the postcolonial city of Johannesburg whose paradoxical, fragmented and simultaneously fluid quality is reflected in the medium of its literary interpretation and representation. In his analysis of cinematic narratives and urban form in postapartheid Johannesburg, Loren Kruger argues that:

> The city has appeared to planners and artists alike to be *unimaginable* as well as *unmanageable*; it has seemed to *elude* representation [...] [it seems] to sabotage it.
>
> (2006:141)[5]

---

[4] Identities would be the more accurate term because, as Vladislavić's writing shows, there are several 'versions' of Johannesburg which means that it is difficult, if not impossible, to reduce the city into one single identity.

[5] Emphasis in the original.

Due to its peculiar nature and history, Johannesburg as a postapartheid city perhaps resists representation because of the uncertainty inherent in the term "postapartheid".[6]

To begin with, the term postcolonial is itself problematic and according to Javangwe (2005) the concerns lie in the periodicity implied by the term in the sense that the colonial period is perceived as having been followed by a 'post', as in after colonialism, implying a shift of focus away from what Mongia, cited in Javangwe (2005), sees as "the present iniquities – political, economic, and discursive – in the global system". Read in such an overly simplistic sense, postcolonial would mean a definitive break from the colonial period at the moment of independence and the ushering in of a new, equitable system of social relations. Christopher Warnes makes similar conclusions on the postcolonial, about which he states:

> The postcolonial condition in post-independence countries is an ambivalent one: political freedoms coexist with structures of cultural and economic relations that maintain dependence on metropolitan powers. If apartheid represented a chapter in the narrative of colonialism in Southern Africa, then the abolition of apartheid likewise results in ambiguous consequences.

> (2000a:71)

The ambiguities, to further paraphrase Warnes (2000a:71), arise from the disjuncture between the sense of expectation stemming from the abolition of racial segregation on the one hand, and the realisation of the extent to which the consequences of apartheid are still firmly lodged in the new, unfolding political reality on the other. However, suffice it to say for the present that when used together, the postcolonial and the urban or metropolitan, represent a discursive narrative and terrain – a time and space continuum – in which the individual subject performs his or her identity in the process of becoming or being. A key facet of this process of becoming is defined in Gerald Gaylard's postulation that:

---

[6] See Christopher Warnes (2000a) for a lucid discussion of this uncertainty and deconstruction of the term "postapartheid" both as a temporal designation and ideological trope.

6

Postcolonial individualism is a space of opposition to liberalism's cultural uniformities. In other words, postcolonial writing attempts to create a kind of sociological reading that contests a nationalist reading of individualism because it tended to obliterate or wanted to subordinate that individual or individualism to its apparently higher function […] if we are to oppose a generalizing, flattening globalization, then we cannot do so with a generalizing, flattening nationalism.

(Gaylard 2006:67)

The gist of Gaylard's argument above is that the postcolonial moment is one in which the individual should truly assert his or her individuality, an individuality which marks the respective person as being distinct from his or her compatriots. Put differently, at the heart of the postcolonial ethos is consistent engagement with what may be termed alternative discourses on identity, of which socially constructed and validated categories such as "whiteness" and "blackness" are part. Such categories will, in this dissertation, be demonstrated to be bereft of the totalising signification that they had in the ambit of the colonial/apartheid narratives.

At an individual level, Vladislavić occupies a somewhat ambiguous or unstable space. As already alluded to, he is a white writer re-"imagining" the postcolonial city. The ambiguity and instability stem in part from his "whiteness" – which is itself a fluid category that cannot be applied as a blanket term – as well as his migrant roots. This means the preclusion of whiteness, as it would be applied in terms of the orthodox vision that culminated in legislated apartheid, but does not at the same instant preclude the perceived advantages which resulted from such a classification during the time of apartheid. In order to arrive at critically objective readings of Vladislavić, one needs full cognisance of the socio-political as well as other influences that direct the literary and aesthetic choices that underpin Vladislavić's imagining and representation. I raise this point not in order to privilege the writer's race as an influence in his aesthetic strategies, but to begin to interrogate and validate the notion of a "dialogic postcolonialism" that I have made reference to in the introductory remarks to this chapter. The departure point in this quest is marked by locating Vladislavić in the debate on the ambiguities of being a member of a

previously socially and politically privileged racial group; one who at the same time is re-imagining the alternate narratives that are in the process of supplanting the older hegemonic narrative of apartheid, which was the source of the assumed privileges. In this regard and to the greatest extent possible, I will attempt to illustrate the ways in which the writer's own world of experience interact, converge with and influences his representations of the city.[7] A key aspect for consideration in this process is the writer's sensitivity to history, not just as past time but as a dynamic present.

An often understated role of the novelist, in my estimation, is that of the literary work as a reflection on the state of society. Warnes notes as much in the summation below:

> However wilful (*sic*) Vladislavić's insistence is on the freedom of the imagination and on language's ability to construct its own points of reference, there is nevertheless a trenchant commentary on aspects of South African society in virtually all of his work.
>
> (2000a:69)

In an interview conducted by Warnes in 1999 and published a year later, Vladislavić sheds some light on his conception of the city, describing it as a place of extremes, a place where one has to daily experience the "exhilaration that you live in such an exciting, dynamic place where there's so much potential, and complete despair that things haven't changed, or that there are so many basic problems" (Warnes 2000b:275). This paradox is also apparent in the formulations of theorists of the city such as Georg Simmel who describes "the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli" (Simmel 1995:31). The extremes of "exhilaration" and "complete despair" that Vladislavić makes reference to here are also in keeping with what Ato Quayson, as paraphrased by Rita Barnard (2004), sees as the role of the critic[al writer], whose responsibility is to

---

[7] It is important here for one not to commit the 'intentional fallacy,' that is to use the writer's private opinions to clarify his writings or vice versa. The literary work has, as far as practicable, to be probed as an independent entity.

... "postcolonialize", to align himself or herself with an ongoing struggle against colonialism and its after-effects. While oriented to the future, this work-in-progress requires a complex sense of historical configurations.

<div align="right">(Barnard 2004:279)</div>

Barnard's remarks help to explain Vladislavić's earlier comments because, in the absence of objective critical reflection, the short-comings of the new postcolonial dispensation would be indiscernible. In his writing, Vladislavić is able to focus on the minutiae of the transition to the post-apartheid city with an apparent awareness of the historical inequities that resulted from apartheid. Thus, we have a character like Aubrey Tearle, in *The Restless Supermarket,* who demonstrates the pitfalls of attempting to hang on to a position of privilege based on an unjust past. Vladislavić is not pursuing an overt political agenda, but as a general trend his writing displays a consideration of the nuances of the peculiar socio-political realities in the postapartheid city. There is none of the verdant optimism that is implied in the once oft-used term – New South Africa. To quote from Warnes' journal article, 'The making and Unmaking of History in Ivan Vladislavić's *Propaganda by Monuments and other stories*',

> Vladislavić is a writer whose embrace of the literary politics of postmodernism does not take place at the expense of his desire to engage with society in his fictions. His work foregrounds and highlights without overtly condemning, providing ironic juxtapositions and exaggerated realities without attempting to arrogate the final word on any of the concerns that are raised in the narratives.

<div align="right">(Warnes 2000a:84)</div>

In his own words, Vladislavić professes his disinclination to pursue the overtly political, choosing instead what he refers to as the "obscure and tangential", and yet at the same time acknowledging the inevitability – in the South African context – of somehow "writing politically" and "dealing with questions of politics and power" (Warnes 2000b:275). Later in the same interview, in a statement that lies much closer to the crux of this thesis and perhaps presages sentiments expressed in the

epigraph that I have used at the beginning of this chapter, Vladislavić makes the astute observation that "[a]s people write about the making and re-making of South African cities, the question of what's changed and what hasn't becomes urgent" (Warnes 2000b:278). In the imagining and representation of the "new" South African city, one has to remain sensitive to the fact that "the actual physical structures of apartheid" will be difficult to elide and that they are going to exist and bear influence on the literary imagination for the foreseeable future. The reality of apartheid planning and social engineering is, in other words, not a nebulous fancy whose after-effects can be wished away because of its incongruity with the ideals of postapartheid rapprochement.

1.2 Aims

In light of the contextual background above, I will suggest that, as individual texts and as a collection or body of work, Ivan Vladislavić's *Missing Persons* (1989), *The Folly* (1993), *Propaganda by Monuments* (1996), *The Restless Supermarket* (2006 – first published in 2001)[8], *The Exploded View* (2004) and *Portrait with Keys* (2006), are basically engaged in framing representations of the postcolonial city, representations which can in my view best be analysed through the prism of deconstructive engagement. My understanding and use of the term "deconstructive engagement" is informed by Stuart Hall who states that:

> Unlike other forms of critique which aim to supplant inadequate concepts with 'truer' ones, or which aspire to the production of productive knowledge, the deconstructive approach puts key concepts under erasure. This indicates that they are no longer serviceable – 'good to think with' – in their originary and unreconstructed form. But since they have not been superseded dialectically, and there are no other, entirely different concepts, with which to replace them, there is nothing to do but continue to think with them – albeit now in their

---

[8] For the avoidance of doubt, the page references made in this thesis to *The Restless Supermarket* are based on the 2006 imprint (edition) which has quite different pagination from the original edition. Most of the critics I refer to have used the 2001 imprint so there may be some difference between my page references and theirs.

detotalised or deconstructed forms, and no longer operating within the paradigm in which they were originally generated.

<div align="right">(1996:1)</div>

The deconstructive paradigm is a productive method of analysis of texts that engage with their respective characters' fragmentary experiences and sets of circumstances in the city, such as I will demonstrate Vladislavić's oeuvre to be. The theoretical postcolonial metropolis requires tools of evaluation that are in tune with the historical and "psychological" peculiarities of such a city. This implies an awareness of the city's ambiguous trait of simultaneous connections and disconnectedness, for instance. While the city may be built on the premise of unending connections through the various networks of production and consumption, it is demonstrable that the urban space is also at the same time a centre of major disconnections within society. These severed paths arise as a result of myriad socio-economic factors such as the level of education attained by individuals and the work they do. In a postcolonial urbanity the character of the city is also influenced to a large extent by the considerations of race, in light of colonial and apartheid policies on the separation of races such as the Group Areas Act (1950) and others that were promulgated in South Africa before 1994.

When Ivan, the narrator in *Portrait with Keys*, ruminates about a city that resists the imagination in the epigraph cited above, he is posing rhetorical questions similar to those I will be engaged with. These, in the main, fall under the general rubric of what constitutes city life and the lived urban experience. Considerations that are relevant to the discussion include identification of examples of archetypal urban images and the possible aesthetic reflection that is entailed in the authorial choices that inform the selection or privileging of certain images over others. It is also necessary to reflect on the probable narrative effects or consequences such selection may have. This last line of investigation will be particularly fruitful in terms of comparative analysis of Vladislavić's writing with that of others. I have in mind here a comparison of *The Restless Supermarket* and Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* (2001). Some comparative reference will also be made to Ken Barris' *What Kind of Child* (2006) and Patricia Pinnock's *Skyline* (2000) as examples of the

variety of urban practices that individual characters dramatise, albeit these latter two texts are set in the psychically different space of Cape Town. Barris' novel focuses on an elderly tattoo artist who is estranged from his only daughter and grandchild, and is dying alone, while *Skyline* highlights the perspective of a child who practically has to raise herself and her sibling – with some assistance coming from a motley collection of neighbours which includes a pair of cross-dressing homosexuals, migrants from various other African countries and a very old white couple who barely leave their flat. The young girl-narrator quickly has to learn to fend for herself and assumes responsibility over her younger sister due to her mother's perpetual drug-induced lethargy. Vladislavić's representation of hybridity and difference in the cityspace is also echoed in the writing of Patricia Pinnock. In *Skyline*, set in Cape Town and which is a story of the encounter between African migrants and an eclectic group of locals, Pinnock uses the child narrator to deconstruct and destabilise some of the power structures that are based on notions of belonging or un-belonging by virtue of being a citizen or migrant.

Significantly, all the questions above have to do with various notions of representation and, as thematic enquiry, can provide a basis or point of departure for my analysis as to how Vladislavić represents or imagines the (new) African metropolis. This will necessarily require the examination of contemporary South African urbanity or the postapartheid metropolitan space (as epitomised by Johannesburg) and how it is represented in literature as changing, and in the process of becoming. In deference to the notion of different urbanities, both within and between cities, more light can be shed on Vladislavić's version of Johannesburg by also looking at contemporary fictional and non-fictional depictions of other cities such as Harare and Cape Town, cities with which Johannesburg shares historical connections. The only proviso associated with this analysis is an awareness that, in spite of these connections of colonialism and apartheid, the cities did not develop in identical ways and thus developed, at times, subtly different textures and characteristics, whilst at other levels the differences are so vast as to be described as being stark. The figure of Aubrey Tearle, the first-person narrator in the first and last sections of *The Restless Supermarket*, looms large as a representation or

figuring of the disintegrating colonial subjectivity and I find that fragments of this character are echoed in other parts of Vladislavić's work discussed here.

1.3 Rationale

Up until mid-2011, the extant critical literature and research on the writing of Ivan Vladislavić has, as far as I can tell, not engaged with his work as a body of creative consideration and close analysis of the city of Johannesburg.[9] The trend has largely been to analyse the texts separately, without treating them as the building blocks to an ongoing and perhaps unending project of imaginatively bringing the city into being.[10] Such readings have thus been unable to decipher and characterise the threads which have emerged over the period of the writer's literary engagement with and representation of Johannesburg. "Threads" is used here guardedly because of my wish not to insinuate that, in the totality of his oeuvre, the author always considers the various aspects of citiness from one particular and uniform standpoint throughout. To the contrary, "threads" is meant to connote the consistency with which Vladislavić seems to return, with each passing volume, to the concrete and abstract characteristics of what the city means or purports to be. The degree to

---

[9] *Marginal Spaces – Reading Ivan Vladislavić* (2011) is a collection of reviews, mostly previously published critical articles and a few pieces of new work edited by Gerald Gaylard. This volume therefore represents the first comprehensive attempt to pull together critical and other kinds of responses to the total breadth of Vladislavić's creative literarture by various writers. With the possible exception of a few new articles and review pieces made obscure by virtue of being archived in newspaper collections, I have had prior sight of the majority of the articles that make up this present collection in their original form, and my reading of them necessarily made up part of my formulation of my hypothesis on Vladislavić and his writing of the city. I make this point as a qualification of the novelty factor of both my own thesis and *Marginal Spaces* as well.

[10] To my knowledge, Irikidzayi Manase's 2007 thesis *"From Jo'burg to Jozi": A Study of the Writings and Images of Johannesburg from 1980-2003* is the only PhD work that has looked at Vladislavić's work in some detail. The thesis itself is an insightful overview, as its title suggests, of representations of Johannesburg in some post-1980 fictions about the city. However, critically and in keeping with the general trend, Manase limits his engagement by restricting himself to analysis of the changes in the inner city social spaces as they appear in *The Restless Supermarket*. The result is a necessarily truncated (because of the nature of his project) view of Vladislavić's writing that, while providing some useful scaffolding, cannot by any measure approximate a detailed analysis of Vladislavić' vision and version of Johannesburg, such as would be availed by a more sustained engagement with his writing – an endeavour that I attempt in the present thesis. Similarly, Emma O'Shaughnessy's (2010) ongoing PhD study (with the University of Cape Town) takes a broader view of what she refers to as the "metropoetics" crisis in four postapartheid fictions, only one of which is Vladislavić's – *The Explode View*. Again, I suggest that as in Manase's case, a fuller mapping of the totality of Vladislavić's fictional and creative oeuvre is not quite achievable in the manner that I propose to, because of the limits imposed by O'Shaughnessy's selection of just one Vladislavić text.

which he is able to re-imagine and re-vision the city means that each new textual encounter with his version of Johannesburg is not a mere rehashing of an old story, but rather takes the form of the successive peeling off of layers of the visual (and other kinds) of experience of the city. Taken as a whole, Vladislavić's work can help one to arrive at an understanding of the depth and originality of the imagined city, especially through the way in which he seeks to engage with the peculiarities of a city in transition. For instance in the title story of the collection *Propaganda by Monuments* Boniface Khumalo's wish to have a communist-era bust/statue of Lenin delivered from Moscow to Atteridgeville, in Pretoria, as the centre-piece of his newly-established restaurant shows the way in which images and icons, such as that of Lenin, are undergoing semantic transformations with the passing of old eras and their replacement by newer ideological formations. There is an obvious irony in the intended use of a communist icon as the main branding and marketing tool for what is essentially a capitalistic venture. A real-life analogous reference to this transformation of the symbol or image is the currency that Ché Guevara's bereted image has recently enjoyed in western youth culture, especially in the field of fashion. The use to which his "face" has been put is, on the surface, antithetical to what the man might have stood for – that is, the Marxist teachings by which he tried to live. The same is also true with regards to Lenin, whose statues have been often appropriated in post-Soviet times as adornments to some distinctly capitalist commercial enterprises such as fast-food restaurants in the west (Popescu 2003). Both Lenin and Ché Guevara's cases serve as illustrations of the manner in which cultural practices in the metropolitan spaces are seen as occupying constantly shifting ground. In this case communism (and apartheid) is passé, whereas an age of unbridled capitalistic accumulation has been ushered in. Johannesburg is a city whose objective reality and subjective interactions have been heralded by the struggle for, and the arrival of, the post-apartheid state. In this light then, it is important to examine and evaluate the representation of symbols, signs and monuments in mapping the transformation of the city, and the extent to which the city may be read (defined) as text. Or more accurately, multi-layered texts.

Linked to this continual appropriation and re-appropriation of symbolic images are the ways in which local and cosmopolitan conceptions of the city are mapped

across the cityspace through the behaviour of individual characters. In their daily interactions individuals tend to self-dramatise or perform themselves, not always in isolation but usually in interaction with, and in reaction to other *players*. In the words of Vivian Gornick, a writer on urban life in New York, "On the street nobody watches, everyone performs" (Gornick 1996:3). As they affirm and attest to their identities, characters situated in the city are demonstrably engaged, to varying degrees, in role-playing. The character may be a street vendor, an office worker driving or walking to work, a bar-tender, or even a retired proof-reader going through the cryptic puzzle at a bar-table. They are all fulfilling a role, the only distinction being perhaps the relative degree of freedom each individual may have in the selection of the role he or she fulfils in the daily drama that is urban life. Ultimately, this is a question of the agency exercised by each citizen. The roles they play are not necessarily constant but are usually transient in nature as urban identity is not a *fait accompli* but rather a process of being or becoming. As characters are imaginatively engaged in role-playing, understanding performance and performativity become crucial in considering representations of aspects of city life.

The original impulse for my project arose partly from a random bringing together of two seemingly disparate phrases, "men of gold" and "city of glass", over which I have exercised some poetic licence in order to bend them to my purpose by conjoining them into the metaphor of "men of glass". "Gold" speaks to the historical foundations of Johannesburg as a city built on the fortunes and miseries of gold-extraction, while "glass" alludes to the many high-rise buildings with glass facades that now dominate the physical topography of the place. The image of "men of glass" then refers not only to the fragility of life in the city – in terms of the apparent "aura" of restlessness and the constantly changing social dynamics – but also to the way in which the city is visualised through its inhabitants and, in this case, mainly through the envisioning eyes of Ivan Vladislavić. The "men of glass" are therefore the brittle windows through which one looks into the "soul" of the city – at the risk of utilising an essentialist term that connotes the existence of an "essence" or ultimate truth, and is contrary to the ethos of postcolonial thinking about any kind of metanarrative. (Postcolonial art does, of course, champion alterity and multiple perspectives and shuns the concept of a single truth.) In the various selected texts characters travel

through the imagined city, either on foot or by car and public transport, but one also gets the sense that the city similarly travels, at least imaginatively, through them as the characters adopt different strategies in order to fashion a reality of their own making, as opposed to accepting a place within the bounds of a predetermined objective reality. I am interested in the manner in which characters seem willingly to write themselves into the cityscape.

1.4 Literature Review – Reading Vladislavić

From the earlier generalised reflections on what the postcolonial city is and what it means to write about it, let me also consider some of the more specific critical responses that have been formulated in reaction to Vladislavić's art. The early reaction to his writing, by and large focused on the linguistic quality of the writing, to the almost complete occlusion of other important characteristics of Johannesburg such as the inter-linkages between the city's material spaces and the identities that appropriated them or manifested therein. Writing in 2000, Christopher Warnes correctly notes that while the corpus of Vladislavić's work spans the transition between apartheid and postapartheid (2000a:69). He also remarks that "[t]here has been little serious commentary published on the work of Vladislavić to date, a state of affairs which perhaps has something to do with the playful surreal and at times bizarre nature of his fictions." Warnes' concerns at the time have to do with what he perceived to be the disinclination among critics to tackle the socio-political ructions that attended "the transition between apartheid and post-apartheid" and which Vladislavić's fiction – if often in very subtle ways – bore witness to. While there may have been quite a number of studies on Vladislavić since 2000, the tenor of Warnes' remarks still largely hold true with many reviews of his work still privileging his use of language. The examination of Vladislavić's work has thus not been, and perhaps cannot be exhaustive enough.

Further to the preponderance of linguistic analysis, one also gets the sense that a vast amount of scholarship on Vladislavić has tended towards what may be termed as atomised readings of his writing. These readings cannot be dismissed for their

brevity as they provide useful stepping stones in the general direction of a conceptual understanding of what I perceive to be Vladislavić's project of writing his version of Johannesburg into being. Because of their fragmented nature, these diverse and piece-meal efforts have the unintended effect of compartmentalising the respective texts, and thus isolating one from the next, when in effect – as I shall argue – each volume represents a locus point in the narrative arc of the writer's Johannesburg.

This means that there is room for research from a different perspective, such as that of writing the urban. In an article published in 2006, Shane Graham, in remarks that echo Warnes' 2000 analysis, makes the following observation:

> Vladislavić's fiction on the other hand, is highly attuned to questions of cultural production and identity formation within the material conditions, physical spaces, and continuing inequities of South African society. Yet most critics of Vladislavić's previous works [...] focus on the linguistic and discursive aspects of Vladislavić's writing, while ignoring or underemphasizing the writer's clear preoccupation with physical and social space.

(Graham 2006:49)

It is precisely this "preoccupation with physical and social space" in the writing of Vladislavić that I will engage with in order to gain a clearer understanding of his vision and representation of postcolonial urbanity. Cursory readings of the relevant texts can sometimes lead the reader to conclude that the texts are no more than playful, or give the impression of a preponderance of superfluous word-play. In contradistinction, I will advance the argument that rather than being mere embellishments, the passages in which the linguistic word-play seems most prominent are in fact central to the discernment of the ways in which individual characters interact within, as well as attempt to mark and appropriate, physical and social space. Above everything else, urban life is a physical and social experience because of the proximity of one individual to the other. It is in this sense that narrations of the city have to be connected to the uses to which city space is put, physically and socially. In a paper published a year later in 2007, Graham pretty much re-expresses sentiments similar to the ones mentioned above. In this later

article, Graham places emphasis on how the connections between "memory, representation, and public spaces remain curiously undernoted in existing criticism of Vladislavić's work, despite the author's longstanding interest in architecture and urban space" (2007:73). Indeed, it is this gap in criticism that constitutes part of the rationale for this study.

While Vladislavić's work has received critical acclaim and positive reviews on the South African literary scene, and even as most of the critics have touched on the most important threads in his body of work such as his concern with the post-apartheid transformation in South Africa (with all the questions that that definitive epochal nomenclature implies), there remain gaps in the critical field in terms of problematising Vladislavić's literature as being specifically engaged with "writing the urban". In other words, while most criticism about Vladislavić rightly places his work in the generic rubric or domain of postmodern/postcolonial/postapartheid writing, there is an insufficient recognition of the fact that Vladislavić is, above all else engaged with the paradox of the urban condition in a specific South African city. The publishers of *Scrutiny2* brought out a special issue on Ivan Vladislavić in 2006 but tellingly, all the peer-reviewed articles in the issue are about a single text, *The Exploded View*. Almost all the articles are concerned with spatial practices in the context of a postcolonial transition, as they are represented in the four stories that make up this one text.

Writing specifically on *The Exploded View*, Susan van Zyl remarks on the manner in which the central characters of the four-part narrative seem, at critical points, to "encounter, reconsider or re-enact some aspect of the way in which the urban landscape of post-apartheid South Africa does, can or ought to be made to signify." (2006:75) Her line of enquiry can be extended to the rest of Vladislavić's fictional works that I propose to study because of the questions it raises about signification and or representation. As I suggested earlier, identity formation is the process of becoming rather than being. One therefore has to examine the relationship, characterised by instability, between the signifier and the signified, between the modes of representation and the subject of a representational practice. The city that Vladislavić imagines Johannesburg to be cannot be the "totality" of what

Johannesburg as a place is or means. In other words a universal definition of the meaning of the city is impossible to arrive at because of the myriad perspectives of the people who live in and imagine the same. The lens of the deconstructive method allows for analysis of multi-dimensional perspectives, such as those engendered by the city. Because of the history of segregation, race is an important dynamic or aspect of these multi-dimensional perspectives due to the fact that the postapartheid city is also the site "of the post-apartheid interracial encounter" (Strauss 2008:40). It is therefore important to see how "whiteness" or any other racial identities or sets of discourses about race are being re-imagined in the postapartheid moment.

The title of the thesis – "Imagining and Imaging the City: Ivan Vladislavić and the Postcolonial Metropolis" – refers at one level to the intention I have to make an enquiry into the way in which individual characters relate to the city spaces that they appropriate and the way that the appropriation is rendered through text and symbol. Moreover I intend to identify, in the same manner in which I will uncover different 'identities' in the imagined city, different representations of urbanity both within the one city of Johannesburg, for instance, and other cities such as Cape Town and Harare. In the author's note to *Portrait with Keys*, Vladislavić makes reference to 'symbiotic gadgets' and I will take some liberty in mangling that phraseology to 'semiotic gadgets', which is what I believe Vladislavić's fiction to consist of. The very texts themselves are constituted as "fields of signs", a term Titlestad and Kissack (2006:11) use to denominate the ways in which various signs and symbolisms mark the transformation of the city from the closed spaces of apartheid to the democratising spaces of an emergent postcolonial reality.

The city is conceived in the popular imagination as a place of unlimited economic opportunity resulting in high levels of migration from rural to urban spaces. The reality is quite often directly opposed to the perceived splendour that has been the catalyst for the initial impulse to migrate to the city. The competition for limited resources is, at the best of times, frenetic for the "locals", but when there is an influx of foreign nationals – as has happened in South Africa in recent history with arrivals from the rest of the African continent, and even from Eastern Europe because of perceptions of relative economic and social advantage – the situation becomes more

intensely fluid and potentially more explosive. Hillbrow in Johannesburg has evolved from its origins as an area of high-rise accommodation exclusively for white residents to its current manifestation as a run-down inner-city area inhabited, in the main, by poor black South African citizens, as well as being one of the preferred first ports of call for the poorer class of African migrant arriving in Johannesburg.

Notwithstanding the attendant socio-economic challenges of drug-running, crime and prostitution currently associated with the locale of Hillbrow, the fact that it houses all these "different" groups of people in a way marks its uniqueness as an occupied space in the city. While Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket* characterises the beginning of the "decline", for lack of a better word, of Hillbrow, Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* offers a different perspective in as far as it tells a somewhat different story about the same place, but from the point of view of a black South African. In spite of the different perspectives, Mpe's narrator and social group, ironically, are seen to share some of Aubrey Tearle's jaundiced prejudices against immigrants. The metropolitan city is cosmopolitan in nature, and therefore tends to be more culturally tolerant than provincial towns. I would want to examine the ways in which xenophobic traits are represented in the texts that I have selected for analysis, as well as the extent to which xenophobic behaviour preoccupies the concerns of the author. Mpe's *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* and Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket*, for example, offer different portraits of the meeting of the migrant and the local, with the novels proffering characterisations/representations of the black African and Eastern European migrant in Hillbrow, respectively. The contestation for space is framed differently in the two texts, thus exemplifying the possibility of different readings between and within texts of a city or a particular cityspace.

As already stated, my research will focus on detailed analysis of Vladislavić's novels *The Folly*, *The Restless Supermarket*, and *Portrait with Keys*, as well as the collections *Missing Persons, Propaganda by Monuments & other stories* and *The Exploded View*. One of the key objectives will be to explore the ways in which Vladislavić's perception of the post-apartheid/postcolonial city, with hybridity at its core, lends itself to the challenges of a multicultural society in which individuals from

diverse backgrounds and of divergent beliefs contest ideological, intellectual and social space. I have already made mention of the attempt to socially engineer zones of exclusion on the basis of race during apartheid and how this failed, for instance, in the case of Hillbrow where black people began settling even before the repealing of the relevant apartheid statutes. From the Malgases in *The Folly* to the characters in *Portrait with Keys*, Vladislavić demonstrates an awareness of the futility of attempting to enforce and maintain closed spaces, including the compartmentalisation of the different races and social groups because the perceived differences between individuals do not quite fall into the neat categories that are invented by some hegemonic power structure within a particular society. In acknowledgement of the above I will have to consider how notions of home and exile (belonging and not belonging) influence individual and group identities in the urban space. The ideas of individual and group identities are based on the suppositions of difference from the 'others' or what Iris Marion Young (1995:251) defines as the exclusion of difference or the 'other'. How, therefore, are urban spaces negotiated and/or appropriated by individual characters or groups in relation to other individuals within the groups and in relation to 'foreigners'?
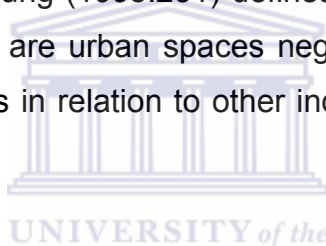
Because of its history and contemporary reality, Johannesburg can arguably be described as the paradigmatic city of African literature and narrations of it necessarily constitute a point of departure in the study of the imagined African city, be it in literature or in other fields of the humanities. In the same thought-provoking article already cited, Mbembe and Nuttall convincingly argue the case for Johannesburg as the archetype of the postcolonial metropolitan centre:

> Contemporary Johannesburg is the premier metropolis in Africa in terms of technology, wealth and racial complexity, as well as cultural practices and formal institutions – apparent through the sheer quantification of the world of goods, of production and consumption. It is a thoroughly polyglot urban formation whose influence, connections and identifications extend beyond its locality and well beyond South Africa.
>
> (2004:365)

It is against the background of the hegemonic binaries of apartheid-colonialism versus democracy-nationalism, described earlier in this chapter, that Ivan Vladislavić's voice emerges as both witness to and manifestation of an alternative poetics with his narrations of the city of Johannesburg. Vladislavić as a writer lends himself well to the purpose of the proposed project because of the fairly comprehensive nature of the body of work he has produced on Johannesburg. Commenting specifically on *The Exploded View*, Titlestad and Kissack remark on how each of the four parts of the text reveals a protagonist who inhabits, in their words, "a field of signs, material objects and ideological possibilities and limitations that comprise the transforming post-apartheid South Africa" (2006:11). Through an intensive textual analysis of Vladislavić's fictional writings that I have listed above, I propose to study the various strategies that individuals adopt in the modern African cityspace, of which Johannesburg is emblematic, in order to define their sense of the self, especially in the face of the challenges wrought by globalisation and migration. These last two phenomena have necessarily meant a change in the ways individual members of communities relate to each other and to the "new" arrivals in the sense that the 'original' residents re-examine their shared values, re-affirm them and simultaneously repudiate new influences, or even appropriate the "new" irruptions and values. The overarching concern of the study in this regard is the way in which the individual subject and the city are conceived and represented or imagined and imaged by the author. Alongside the work of Vladislavić it is important to counterbalance my particular line of enquiry by recognising other writers contemporaneous to Vladislavić who have expressed in fiction and essay form, notions of the postcolonial/post-apartheid city. Texts that may provide points of reference to the overall study are literary works such as the Phaswane Mpe's novel *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* (2001) and Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* (2006), as well as some of the short stories in the collections by Zimbabwean writers, *Can We Talk and Other Stories* by Shimmer Chinodya (2001), and *No More Plastic Balls and Other Stories*, edited by Clement Chihota and Robert Muponde (2000). The novels *What Kind of Child* by Ken Barris (2006) and Patricia Pinnock's *Skyline* (2000), together with *A City Imagined* (Stephen Watson ed., 2006), a range of poignant and informed essays, raise interesting counterpoints to the versions of Johannesburg and Harare in the other texts by offering unique views of the city of Cape Town.

This thesis is more than just a mere synthesis of the existing analyses of Vladislavić's writing. It seeks to do more than pull together all the various critical strands that have emerged in response to the author's creativity into what approximates, as far as this is possible, a unified and coherent theoretical engagement with Vladislavić's postcolonial metropolis. Beyond the above, I hope to fully enunciate a vision of the fraughtness of representation – be it representation of place, identity or the city – that lies across the totality of Vladislavić's creative writing, and ultimately concluding that in his re-imagining the city the writer's work is reflective of a specific condition I term dialogic postcolonialism. The rationale for the articulation of such an overview does not lie in the necessity for a metanarrative on Vladislavić's version of the city. Rather, the logic stems from the fact that such a view initiates new processes of discovering and thinking about the various ways in which prior academic studies have responded to Ivan Vladislavić's imagining of the city of Johannesburg. While such processes should exhibit full recognition of the existing knowledge and debates, it is also important at the same time that my methodology is not constitutive of mere rehashing or repetition of previous positions, but that it avails itself of these resources in order to, in deconstructive fashion, consider the terms of these debates anew whilst looking for and shedding light on the possible new directions that the discourse on Vladislavić's writing of the city may fruitfully proceed. In short, the present study cannot be the final word on the writer's work, but does represent, to my knowledge, the first attempt at an academic study or critical reading of the complex relationships between urban spaces and ideas of identity across the entire corpus of Vladislavić's Johannesburg fictions.[11]

The years stretching from 2000 to 2010 are thus far the most prolific of Vladislavić's writing career and, consequently, the same decade seems to have produced a correspondingly high number of critical responses to his published work. Among the earliest minds and voices to engage with Vladislavić's material is that of Christopher Warnes. In an interview conducted by the latter, the author expresses a

---

[11] As explained elsewhere in this chapter, Vladislavić's published work on Johannesburg numbered six texts up to very late in 2010, when he published the collaborative *TJ/Double Negative* with the photographer David Goldblatt. As a consequence this text was not part of the original formulation of this project and therefore has not been fully considered in this thesis.

conscious desire to "shy away from the obvious" (Warnes 2000b:275) in response to a question on the place of the political and the ordinary or peripheral in his craft. The obvious in this case is represented by what has already been alluded to in an earlier sub-section as "overtly political writing". The gist of the interview is the consideration of the writer's own sense of his 'place' in the South African canon as well as some of the major influences on his creative process and writing. In acknowledging and agreeing with Warnes' analysis that he tends to avoid or resist the "tradition of realist political novels" (Warnes 2000b:275), Vladislavić sets his writing apart from the frame of realist writing that sometimes manifested as "a heavy-handed, message-laden political writing" (Warnes 2000b:276). This is also the kind of writing, sometimes described as protest literature, that Njabulo Ndebele (2006) decries in his *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* essays. Vladislavić, however, allows the "proviso" that we should not make too abrupt distinctions between realism and what may be termed his postmodernism because his writing is not just the result of a purely and consciously theoretical agenda, but is rather the sum total of "a whole range of ideas and experiences, out of books, politics, social interaction and so on" (Warnes 2000b:275-276). This last statement is important in as far as it foreshadows the many weird and wonderful elements of Vladislavić's urban texts, but also serves as an analytical double-edged sword for both writer and reader in that, in their multi-disciplinary nature, the sources of Vladislavić's writing mean the negation of neat categorisations and, consequently, the unravelling of the representational paradigm, or fictions that unravel even as we are about to grasp them – to paraphrase the thesis' epigraph.

Writing a review of Ivan Vladislavić's *Willem Boshoff* (2005), a groundbreaking text on the work of the acclaimed South African multi-media artist, Carrol Clarkson (2006) comments on the relationship between language and meaning, and how "[t]he linguistic movement from text to texture, from meaningful sign to sensual form and back again is the narrative thread that Vladislavić discerns throughout Boshoff's oeuvre" (Clarkson 2006:106). This observation is almost uncanny in its applicability in that, whereas in this instance it is made with reference to Vladislavić's analysis of someone else's work – albeit from a different artistic field – the same remark could be applied to the latter's own writing in terms of his use of language in relation to the

abstract and concrete dimensions of the city spaces. I would add to Clarkson's analysis above the fact that, used in this way – that is, to transcend the realms of the abstract and the material – language (for Vladislavić) is important beyond the word-play and games that some critiques have been unable to proceed beyond in their reading of Vladislavić's early texts, especially.

1.4.1 Contesting Pasts and Contested Space in *Missing Persons*

While most of the available literature has mentioned Vladislavić's first published volume, *Missing Persons*, largely in passing or as scant mention in footnote, Neil Lazarus' 'Cosmopolitanism and the Specificity of the Local in World Literature' (2011) proves to be an exception to this general trend. This article addresses the text in considerable, somewhat almost unprecedented detail by zeroing in on the story 'When My Hands Burst into Flames' as an illustration of what Lazarus and others define as world literature.[12] I make use of the qualification *somewhat* here to underline the fact that though the article does not engage with any of the other stories in the collection, in terms of the intimacy of the analysis achieved with regards to the chosen story, Lazarus' study is in that sense a fore-runner. Writing on 'magical realism' as applied by critics to the work of Koji Laing, Sony Labou Tansi, Mia Couto and Ivan Vladislavić, he posits that:

> The conclusion typically drawn by critics is that the formal experimentalism of these writers registers the exhaustion of the received "modern" political projects (including nationalism) that [...] had been entailed by realism. However, there is no need to suppose that the combination of fantasy and naturalism in Vladislavić's writing, say, functions to this end. Certainly, his work produces a disorienting image of an alternative world that, while mirroring the "real" world with sufficient regularity to guarantee recognition of it, displaces or subverts or challenges it in other respects. But to refer this effect abstractly to "postmodernism" is to fail to see just how committed it is to

---

[12] Lazarus (2011) notes that he and other colleagues at the University of Warwick are collaboratively engaged in a project whose main thrust is the reconstruction of the idea of 'world literature', taking their cue from recent scholarship that de-links the "category of modernity from the idea of the 'West', t[ying] it instead to the idea of the capitalist world-system."

representing the psycho-social dynamics of *South African* life during the last years of the apartheid era and in the contemporary period of "normalization".

(2011:132)

Lazarus' position here seems to suggest that magical realism as a trope of postmodern or even, with reference to my purposes here, postcolonial writing somehow precludes or negates the possibility of "representing the psycho-social dynamics of *South African* life" in late-apartheid and the postcolony. As I have argued elsewhere[13], some writers can use elements of magical realism as an alternative strategy for narration of the self or individual subject in the face of dominant and suppressive ideological narratives, such as apartheid and nationalism. The utilisation of such literary devices should not be construed as abstractions that fail to take into consideration or bear no relation to the reality of the South African transition from racial segregation to a more democratic polity. Rather, they point to the possibility of transcending the old dichotomies and ushering other more, resourceful responses to the same "psycho-social dynamics". In the context of urban studies, in which the city is classically seen as the site of modernity, I argue that such manoeuvres have the effect, not of decentring the subject as suggested by Lazarus, but of re-centring it in a new locus. Ultimately, through processes of deconstruction (an originally Derridean term, and as described by Hall 1996), the centre is conceptually re-configured and re-located as the old ways of seeing and making meaning are shown to be, in some ways, inadequate for the representation of the emergent reality. Tellingly "normalization", which of itself is quite an abstract term, remains undefined in Lazarus' postulation.

With specific reference to the story 'When My Hands Burst into Flames' Lazarus proposes that it

... cannot be understood outside of the specific ideological/experiential context of South Africa in the final years of apartheid [...] the South Africa in which "total strategies" were being devised paranoically by the state to defeat the

---

[13] For a detailed study of magical realism as a narrative trope in the writing of Zakes Mda, a contemporary black South African writer to Vladislavić, see Ngara (2007).

phantasmatic (*sic*) "total onslaughts", with the result that the mere presence [...] of most of the nation's people was projected as incipient criminality, latent terrorism.

<div align="right">(2011:132)</div>

Lazarus uses the story and its fantastic(al) focaliser as illustrations of his basic thesis that there exists

> no necessary contradiction between the ideas of the "universal" and the "local" or the "national", but that, on the contrary, there are *only* local universalisms (and, for that matter, only "local cosmopolitanisms", where "cosmopolitan" is taken to describe a particular way of registering selfhood in a particular time and place), which it becomes our task as readers to situate as completely as we can.

<div align="right">(2011:134)</div>

While Ivan Vladislavić himself has admitted, in interviews (see for instnace Warnes 2000b cited above) and elsewhere, that he frequently writes tangentially or, as he puts it, "in peripheral ways", Lazarus' analysis here to some extent remains unclear as to the basis for the connections between the story of the burning hands and the crisis, marked by the various extremes of state paranoia in late-apartheid. Despite the fact that his argument for the lack of contradiction between "the ideas of the 'universal' and the 'local' or the 'national'", that in fact "there are *only* local universalisms" is largely plausible and sustainable, his reading of the story's narrator as the implied thorn in the side of apartheid, the "latent terrorist", is short in terms of the details of how these connections are being made. From the textual evidence, the posture of the central character of the story is of one who belongs to a different class and (most importantly) race to the implied latent terrorists, the black majority. That said, this character therefore represents a contrary subject position to the one advocated by Lazarus in his broader argument for world literature as "the literature that registers and encodes the social logic of modernity" (2011:122). In short, he excoriates writing that is produced by middle-class writers, including but not limited to Charles Dickens (*Hard Times*), as being "class-based" and in which "the narrative voice issues from outside the frame of what it describes" (2011:126).

The narrative voice in 'When My Hands Burst into Flames' is not from the frame of "most of the nation" as described by Lazarus and is, to my mind, not relating the story that he says it is. *Au contraire*, it appears that Lazarus reads the story to fit into his pre-conceived socio-political strait-jacket or structure, instead of discerning such a structure (if it is present) as issuing out from the story. In other words, he reads *into* and not *out of* the story. On a related issue, the overarching concern with defining Vladislavić's writing as an exemplar of "world literature", albeit used with the caveat of "local universalisms", to a certain extent overlooks the aspect of the representation of the particularity of Johannesburg as a postcolonialising city which, I argue, is the central tenet of Vladislavić's writing. While the 'specificity of the local' implies local context, the conclusion that Vladislavić's story is merely political allegory is, on the basis of the presented evidence, quite problematic and seems to be rather based largely on the date of publication of *Missing Persons* and thus foregoes fuller engagement not only with this story, but with the compendium broadly. The city or postcolonial urbanity – to be exact – is not seen by Lazarus as a problematic category, if at all he recognises it as a category in the first instance.

Another view of Vladislavić's writing that is not is not solely focused on the linguistic aspects in *Missing Persons*, is proffered by Felicity Wood (2001) in 'Taking Fun Seriously: The Potency of Play in Ivan Vladislavić's Short Stories'. Wood's article is premised not on the narrow definitions of word play, but rather takes a wider consideration of the effect of the sometimes-uncanny juxtaposition of language and historical moment or social situation. By so doing, she avoids the pitfalls of privileging word games as the prime concern of the author, yet at the same time she seems to keen to occupy a kind of 'critical middle-ground' to make a nuanced reading of the stories that does not reduce them to mere allegories of the political realities of 1980s South Africa. Wood suggests that prior commentary to hers on Vladislavić, typified in the examples of Oliphant (1990) and van Niekerk (1990) tended towards readings steeped in realism that resulted in simplistic connections between the text and socio-political context. In this regard, Oliphant and van Niekerk are criticised for ascribing "highly specific socio-political purposes" (Wood 2001:21) to the stories in *Missing Persons*.

1.4.2 The Folly – Living Beyond the Realms of the Imaginable

In similar terms to Oliphant and van Niekerk, Ina Grabe's analysis of *The Folly* falls short because of the conclusion that the novel is mainly concerned, in its depiction of Nieuwenhuizen as a squatter, with the "exploration of the condition of the homeless" (cited in Wood 2001:21). It is obvious then, that as far as Vladislavić's earliest writing is concerned, two kinds of critiques have emerged, each a kind of conceptual extremity. In the in-between spaces of such opposite intellectual poles, one finds Wood's postulations. Her deft formulation is that while there are recognisable elements of play in the short stories and novel that constitute Vladislavić's pre-independence collection of writing, "[h]is work is infused by a sense of unbridled glee in imaginative possibilities" which takes it beyond clever use of the lexicon, but extends the play to "characters, ideas and [even] his readers" (Wood 2001:22). Following Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia, Wood reaches the conclusion that any attempt to "pin down the expression of one particular, straightforwardly serious message about contemporary South African society is likely to fall short" (Wood 2001:21).[14] This interpretative indeterminacy, a term that I will return to in later sections of this thesis, is due to the fact that the worlds of Vladislavić's narratives are often strange amalgams of phantasm and reality. Linguistic dexterity is not an end in itself but is utilised to initiate motifs of parody and the carnivalesque, which are just some of the notions that Wood posits to be glaringly lacking – with a few notable exceptions such as Vladislavić - in writing in English in South Africa even as late as the early 2000s. Outside the likes of Gordimer and Vladislavić himself, the dominant mode of writing in English in South Africa in from the 1970s to the early 1990s was the protest mode, typified for example by works such as Menan du Plessis' *A State of Fear* and others. In a number of interviews Vladislavić himself has commented on the fact that he found himself drawn to Afrikaans authors during his creatively

---

[14] In an ironic turn, Wood herself has come under some criticism from Caitlin Charos (2008) for privileging pleasure "as the *essential* impulse behind the use of the fantastic elements in his text." Charos' main bone of contention, which I share, is on the idea that for Wood pleasure becomes an end in itself, the logical result of the imaginative play with words, or as Charos puts it, Wood "seems to subordinate the political resonances of the author's texts to the purely imaginative aspects of his writing" (2008:26).

formative years whilst at university because he found their writing to be less stifled in terms of content and form.

The sub-text of Wood's article, possibly drawn from an unpublished 1990 interview with the author, is that Vladislavić bucks the trend in that writing in English at the time tended to be more stilted and pedestrian. Vladislavić is quoted attributing "the sources of the 'fantastical' elements" in his work mainly to Afrikaans literature, which he discovered as a university student. The noted influence of writers like John Miles and Breyten Breytenbach on his formal experimentalism is intriguing in that Afrikaners are traditionally more associated with the country or the description of the country, as in the case of the *plaas-roman*, whereas English-speaking South Africans tended to be thought of as more urban.

Wood's approach to the wordcraft in *Missing Persons* is shared by Chris Thurman (2007) who draws linkages between aesthetics and politics. The latter concludes that "'politics' and 'play' are not far removed" (2007:69) from each other as concepts in Ivan Vladislavić's writing. This formulation is related to Wood in that words are brought into play not just for the sake of play, but also for the purposes of political satire. Writing with regards to *The Folly*, Thurman notes that "Vladislavić is a lexicographer and cataloguer par excellence" (2007:73); however, "the close rendition of specific material objects is not an act of disengagement from the wider political reality" (2007:80). Along similar lines, Clarkson describes Vladislavić as being a "virtuoso when it comes to the vicissitudes of abstract meanings and material signs" (2006:107). Writing generally with reference to some of the short stories in *Missing Persons*, *Propaganda by Monuments* as well as to the novel *The Folly*, Stephan Helgesson also points out that Vladislavić does not "accept the notion of language as a transparent conveyor of reality" and that "he has short-circuited assumptions of an unfailing correspondence between word and world" (2004:777). Beyond language or the word, Helgesson perceives a broader ethic to be at work in *The Folly*, that of "the metaphysic of form and order" (2006:31). He therefore infers that the novel relies solely on Nieuwenhuizen's capacity to conceptualise, "in his mind's eye how every nail and every brick will fit together in the house-to-be" (2006:31). Nieuwenhuizen's words narrating his vision of the house can be taken to

be potentially representing something out of themselves, creating meaning that is beyond their assumed arbitrary significance. Thurman rightly gives the example of the Malgases' watching of the television news as evidence of how Vladislavić's writing shows awareness of a broader political context, in this case the daily unrest in the South African black townships. Malgas' attempt to shut out that particular reality by muting the TV volume during the news bulletins is, to a large extent, futile. Whilst Thurman's thesis on the interaction of the political and aesthetic elements in the novel is – by and large – accurate, there are occasionally momentary lapses or slippages in his argument wherein the actual plot of the text seems to be manipulated to suit a pre-existing conceptual framework. An example of this is when he makes the claim, with reference to Mr and Mrs Malgas, that "[b]y the end of the novel they too have lost their precious possessions; ultimately, like the unfortunate occupants of the burning shack, they too are attacked by members of their own community" (Thurman 2007:81). For me this is a highly problematic reading, mainly due to the fact that there is, in my view, a total *lack* of textual evidence to affirm such an interpretation. Unless there is a particular edition of the novel with a different ending (Thurman's reference list seems to suggest that we both rely on the same edition of the text), this conclusion makes little sense and seems to an instance – isolated as it may be – of Thurman reading the narrative to suit a preconceived theoretical paradigm.

While there is, in reality, nothing to prevent different reviewers from arriving at different interpretations of the same text, it is equally important that critics maintain a certain amount of fidelity to what the author has *actually* written, lest the exercise of critical analysis is rendered meaningless by the act of making the original text, on which opinions are being based, so open ended as to be changeable by each successive reviewer or critic. A new debate that arises here is that concerning the *implied readership* of Vladislavić's texts. This is an important point to raise here because it has direct relevance to the claims one can make with regards to what the writer is perceived to be *doing*. What we all, as readers, have to work with is the writer's word on the page and that should be the basis of investigation and interpretation. At no point in the story are the Malgases, as Thurman puts it, "attacked by members of their own community", although at the end the antics of

Otto Nieuwenhuizen and Mr Malgas are sufficient to draw crowds of onlookers (including TV journalists) who at the same time see the two as objects of intrigue and pity or ridicule (depending on individual sensibilities), but at no point as targets of physical violence.[15] Although Thurman's reading may be ultimately inconsequential in terms of the broader aims of his research hypothesis – that of drawing the links between play, politics and aesthetics in Ivan Vladislavić's writing – it does however echo earlier analyses, in particular that of Ina Grabe (cited in Wood 2001), in its rather simplistic and facile deducing of connections between words on the page and historical context. Thurman repeats, almost to the letter, Grabe's (1995) theorisation (paraphrased by Wood) that *The Folly*'s depiction of the "squatter" Nieuwenhuizen is "an exploration of the condition of homelessness" (Wood 2001:21). Thurman's words are that "the Malgas-Nieuwenhuizen camp […] echoes the broader problem of housing and homelessness in South Africa" (2007:81). I posit that Nieuwenhuizen – who is white and appears to be just mad rather than merely homeless – is hardly the epitome of South Africa's homeless in 1993 or later, if one has to directly read the narrative into a particular historical context. In any case, Thurman's reading of the later passages in *The Folly* seems to be contrary to the tenets of the new aesthetic in South African writing that Thurman himself (echoing Wood) sees Vladislavić's writing as being constitutive of. Above all considerations and for the stated purpose of this study, there seems to little in the manner of specific consideration or recognition in virtually all the authorities cited in the preceding paragraphs that Vladislavić is actively engaged – in *Missing Persons* and *The Folly* – with notions of representation of the city.

---

[15] When the crowd surges past the police barriers they raid the plot for souvenirs, picking up the odd gadget and some of the utensils loaned to Nieuwenhuizen by Mr Malgas. This is not quite the total dispossession of the Malgases that is intimated by Thurman. Nieuwenhuizen escapes up a tree with his suitcase, while the Malgas household remains untouched.

1.4.3 *Propaganda by Monuments and Other Stories:* The Poetics of Memory

Monuments, as public markers of history in the spaces they are erected in, are the subject of several studies and interventions that have been published in direct reaction to the stories (especially to the title story) in the collection: *Propaganda by Monuments and Other Stories*. The general theme of these critical response lies along the lines of the transformation or re-configuring of history and historical meaning-making at a time of socio-political transition in South Africa. 'Propaganda by Monuments' and 'The WHITES ONLY Bench' seem the most obvious choices for analysis in that regard and have consequently elicited the academic interest and response in as far as aspects of memory, monuments and space are concerned in Vladislavić's writing. In the literature that I reviewed there is none that makes any sustained enquiry into the story 'We Came to the Monument' in *Missing Persons* and I have used it as an exemplar to theorise some of the ways the writer engages with the notion of shifting spaces using transient bodies and the unstable categories of historical meaning and memory. Christopher Warnes (2000a) begins his analysis of the dynamic tension between history and monuments, as well as the social and physical spaces in which they are situated in *Propaganda by Monuments*, by looking at the poignancy of the act of covering up the statues of Louis Botha[16] and Barry Hertzog[17] on the occasion of Thabo Mbeki's swearing in as president of South Africa in 1999. Botha and Hertzog were both pivotal in the formulation of racial policies that later manifested as apartheid and Warnes sees the act of covering up the monuments of the two as having the effect of "temporarily removing them from the public space they inhabit" (2000a:68). The Union Buildings in Pretoria, where the South African presidents are inaugurated, are themselves the epitome of irony as they were built to mark the coalescence of South Africa into a unitary state in 1910, yet at the same time the fact of becoming a single nation also ushered in the

---

[16] Louis Botha was a Boer veteran of the Anglo-Boer War who later became the first Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa in 1910.

[17] Like Botha, Hertzog served as a Boer general and ultimately became Prime Minister from 1924 to 1939. One of the conditions of the negotiated settlement tha gave birth to the Union of South Africa was that black and coloured voters in the Cape Colony (where the British held sway) be disenfranchised.

disenfranchisement of the majority black population. In that sense then the 'union' became a double-edged sword because it was also an instrument of racial division. Warnes comes to the very germane conclusion that:

> Neither dismantled nor openly displayed, the shrouded statues can be seen as powerful symbols of an ambivalent relationship between past and present in postapartheid South Africa. They raise the vital questions of how to negotiate the past without being limited by it and how to negotiate the paradoxes of change.
>
> (2000a:68)

For me, this act of covering up results in the somewhat ironic renderings of the urban palimpsest that Vladislavić is so enamoured of and frequently returns to in his writing. The present-absent nature of the monuments to the fore-bearers of apartheid provides a backdrop to the instantiation of more democratic procedures and serves as a subtle yet at the same time ambiguous reminder of the fluidity between an age past, and one that had only been ushered in five years previously. The palimpsestic effect is achieved, in this instance, through the overwriting of different histories onto the space of the Union Buildings and grounds, histories that are contesting but are nevertheless inextricably interwoven. One can use the term 'postapartheid' as utilised by Warnes himself to problematise these competing narratives and illustrate how the word 'postapartheid' encapsulates "a similar ambivalence to that which characterizes the spectre-creating gesture of shrouding the statues of Botha and Hertzog" (2000a:69). In further elucidation of this concept, Warnes reads 'Propaganda by Monuments' and 'The WHITES ONLY Bench' as highlighting the impossibility of closure or complete, definitive breaks of the present from the past. This, he suggests, is apparent in the way that Vladislavić's supposed focus on the "terminations of the narratives of communism and apartheid" (in 'Propaganda by Monuments) actually turns out to be a "reminder that closure itself may be provisional and artificial, despite appearances to the contrary" (2000a:80). Similarly, with reference to the second story quoted above, Warnes reminds us that the author "stages a moment of confrontation between a person and a historical artifact in order in order to highlight resonances from the past that reverberate in the present" (2000a:81).

Warnes' emphasis lies not on the immutability of the meanings suggested by the various artefacts and monuments, but rather in the symbolic and structural flows that exist between what may be considered to be historical and the present. The specific meanings that different individuals may attach to particular historical events or their avatars (read as symbolic representations such as monuments) may vary, but at the same time these responses are quite often framed along structurally similar, if emotionally and aesthetically different planes. In short, the heroism or villainy of a Botha or Hertzog largely depends on the political position or attitude of the individual towards what the two may or may not have 'achieved'. Elaine Young ('"Or is it just the angle?" Rivalling Realist Representation in Ivan Vladislavić's *Propaganda by Monuments and Other Stories*') takes a slightly different approach to the problem, unlike Warnes whose focus is directly on the making and repudiation of history, by accentuating considerations of realism and representation. Her key hypothesis, made with reference to the story 'The WHITES ONLY Bench', is that in Vladislavić's writing "[t]he ideas of 'museumising' and historicising, as opposed to representing and inventing are in tension" (Young 2001:40).

Young's position is therefore similar to Wood's, arguing for a new kind of aesthetics as she theorises that what the author is engaged in is the problematising of realism as a means of fictionally narrating history. The result of such analysis on the part of Vladislavić, Young argues, is to show that imaginative representation and invention is a more dynamic and preferable mode of engaging with the past, as opposed to simply storing historical artefacts. Briefly referring to Jean Baudrillard's concepts of the hyperreal and simulacrum, Young sketches a figurative illustration to expose how the model on which Charmaine's invented WHITES ONLY bench is based, is itself unreal because it masks an absent reality. The bench is not really a WHITES ONLY bench but becomes so because of the meaning invested in it by the policy of apartheid. I will further elaborate on this notion of 'authentic' representation in the third chapter when I discuss the staging of 'authenticity' in the short story 'The WHITES ONLY Bench'. Extending the logic of the palimpsest – which I suggest to be the effect achieved by either removing the respective benches from their original contexts or re-painting and labelling them with new signage – as outlined above, I

will also look at the iconic name of Hector Peterson[18] as another example of how one contesting history can be directly written over another, but without completely eliding the older version. In the short 'The WHITES ONLY Bench', Reddy – who is one of the characters involved in the museum project – wryly notes the discrepancy between the spelling of the surname Pietersen as marked on the grave, and Peterson, as pronounced in the newspapers in the immediate of the June 16 riots in Soweto in 1976 and even up to this day. The latter version of the name has become part of the official record and even the Hector Peterson Memorial attests to this fact. In the context of the causes of the student uprisings – the imposition of apartheid as a medium of instruction and learning – the change to the anglicised version is an instantiation of the same palimpsestic effect that occurs when Botha and Hertzog's statues are shrouded in cloths. In a way, the personal history of Pietersen, as reflected on the tombstone, becomes subsumed by the official (public) history of the struggle against a particular aspect of apartheid. The irony is, though, that the overwritten account continues to seep through the gaps (such as the tombstone) in the authorised rendering of the name.

Also writing under the general rubric of the transition from apartheid to a more democratic system of government, Monica Popescu (2003) focuses her attention on the translation of meanings of monuments located in the transforming space of the city. Like Warnes, Popescu's attention is largely focused on the story 'Propaganda by Monuments' and she concentrates on what she calls [t]he symbolic residue and surplus rendered in the process of translation" as well as "the optical aberrations that accompany the mirroring". These, she suggests, "speak of the different modes of emplotment of the same artifact (the same statue, in this case) in different cultures and critical discourses" (2003:408). In her analysis of Grekov (the fictional Soviet bureaucrat in the story) as the figure of the translator, Popescu intimates that "[i]f a translator could ever be imagined as a transparent tool mediating unobtrusively between two texts, Grekov proves the contrary" (2003:409). This formulation is, it appears to me, a reiteration of Elaine Young's similar thesis on the use of

---

[18] Hector Peterson was shot dead by police during the June 16, 1976 Sowet Uprisng and the picture of him being carried by an older boy, with his sister running alongside, was one of the most poignant representations of the violence of that age.

photographs in 'The WHITES ONLY Bench' in which she posits that the narrator reveals "a keen awareness of the impossibility of any transparent or disinterested depiction of reality" (2001:44). Monuments and photographs, seen in this light, are shown to serve the same end in terms of the way both modes of representation attempt to capture an essence of a particular historical period or moment. The conclusion that both critics come to is that the monument and the photograph, respectively, can never be an unbiased depiction of history because their 'authors' invest, intentionally or otherwise, certain biases in them in the first instance and we, as the 'readers', also view them from our own particular 'angles' (to use Vladislavić's phraseology) in the second. Popescu begins her analysis by looking at the 'shocking' impact of the presence of a seven-tonne statue of Lenin at a crossroads in Fremont, Seattle and notes how the relic of a by-gone era is now given new 'life' and significance in the most unlikely of spaces – in the heart of capitalist America. This present study's critical interest in the whole *Propaganda by Monuments* collection, although following a similar trajectory to that espoused by Popescu and Young with specific regards to the story 'Propaganda by Monuments', lies even more in how the majority of the stories instantiate the immediate aftermath of the end of legislated apartheid in 1994. They are thus significant in the interrogation of the transformations that are taking place in the formerly racially segregated city spaces and the emergence of postcolonial urban practices. Though Popescu and Young fully elaborate on the ideological transformations and the politics of representation that the stories 'Propaganda by Monuments' and 'The WHITES ONLY Bench' impute respectively, neither has specifically theorised the ways in which local and cosmopolitan conceptions of the city are mapped (through monuments and apartheid relics) across the changing cityspace. Contrary to Popescu and Young, in Chapter Three I intend to fully and directly engage with these notions of how Vladislavić's writing, as exemplified in the two short stories, reflects and animates the tensions between urban space and memory.

On the other hand, Shane Graham (2007) offers (unlike Popescu and Young) a more detailed account of the instability of monuments as signs and the "inscription of memory and identity" in the postapartheid city (2007:78). Graham's posture also avails itself as a way into considering the specificities of the translation of

monuments and artefacts as being instantiations of emerging representational practices that are aligned to Vladislavić's vision of the postcolonial city. The main question in this regards is how space and memory are configured in the postcolonialising apartheid-postapartheid city. Following and elaborating further on Graham's utilisation of the figure of signs as unstable referents, I will elucidate on this notion of the constant reinvention of memory and resignification of history. As I have earlier stated, Vladislavić's creative engagement with the notion of shifting meanings of particular spaces does not first appear in *Propaganda by Monuments and Other Stories* but, rather, much earlier in 'We Came to the Monument' from the *Missing Persons* compendium in which both memory and space are represented as unstable categories of meaning. Manase's critique is similarly based on the idea of a Johannesburg in the throes of transition and suggests, with reference to 'The WHITES ONLY Bench', that:

> … the past and the present and symbolic considerations associated with historical events, visuals and monuments […] are used by the author to reveal the anxieties and contradictions experienced during the transformation of the Johannesburg museum.
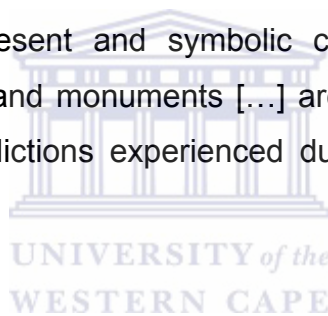
(Manase 2009:55)

Manase's framing of this problematic explains, in part, the reasons for the instability of the signs as expressed, for instance, in Shane Graham. The challenges of transforming the museum from being a narrative of segregation to actually celebrating the 'anti-narrative(s)' of the apartheid era are, in the author's hand, representational devices deployed to resonate with the lived experiences of the citizens of the transforming city as they attempt to discover new identities for the city and for themselves.

The transition engenders uncertainty in the manner people relate to their social and public spaces, as well as to each other. The meanings they attach to different spaces and markers of historical events and time are similarly put into crisis and remain contradictory and complex. Manase quite justifiably describes the disagreements (mainly between Strickland and Charmaine) in 'The WHITES ONLY Bench' as "personality clashes and professional conflicts" which Vladislavić

"unpack[s] and interrogate[s] in relation to the unfolding transformation of Johannesburg's public spaces and the constitution of new urban and national identities" (2009:56). In fact, I would go further and argue that the said "conflicts" are symptomatic of the different processes of interpretation and representational conventions of the different characters, with each privileging different categories and considerations with respect to aesthetics and authenticity. These oppositions are equally applicable with regards to the bench and other cultural artefacts, as well as historical memory. Due to the fact of transformation, the signification attached to various spaces and places also undergoes some kind of change; there is an unstable relationship between the signified and the signifier because a concrete (as set in stone) meaning is unachievable. Sue Kossew has recently reminded us that "monuments can be 'read' in a similarly semiotic way to literary texts" and in the process "providing examples of the same representational and interpretational instability to which literary representation is subject" (2010:572). In light of this and another assertion by Kossew that "monuments are the indices for the 'orchestration of memory and forgetting' that accompanies shifts in power and the construction of and reconstruction of national histories" (2010:572), the only logical conclusion one can therefore reach (as I have already hinted above) is that monuments, as signifiers of historical moments and epochs are just as unstable as representations. The immediate question that arises for consideration has to do with the relevance of personal histories to Kossew's formulation of nationhood. In other words, the question to considered is how does each individual character relate to these monuments, which are essentially national narratives, and then proceed to locate themselves in said narratives.

1.4.4 Ode to 'Order' in an Age of 'Chaos' - *The Restless Supermarket*

With regards to his magnum opus – *The Restless Supermarket* – Ivan Vladislavić really comes into his own and the critical responses to the novel have been almost as varied as the classifications of Aubrey Tearle's corrigenda. In an interview with Mike Marais and Carita Backstrom (2002) Vladislavić is at pains to make a point which he is to revisit with a number of other interlocutors, namely that the narrative's overall significance lies in its interrogation of the social transformation in

postapartheid Johannesburg, and not just in its linguistic qualities and experimentations of form which some of the early reviewers of the text seemed to have focused on. While the central figure of the narrative, the seemingly hidebound and yet engaging Aubrey Tearle fetishises or reifies general neatness and linguistic order in particular, Vladislavić insists that Tearle's standpoint is unsustainable in the process of democratising the spaces of Johannesburg. Explaining that his fictional character is an extremist emblem of the milder positions 'normal' people might ordinarily express, the author notes how

> … people who experienced the orderliness and tidiness of formerly white Johannesburg overreact, now that the city has become more relaxed, when they encounter a bit of 'chaos,' a little bit of 'dirt', a little bit of 'disorder'. […] this is not just petty: it gets in the way of transformation of the city and the transformation of peoples relations to one another.

<div align="right">(2002:120)</div>

The setting of the story in Hillbrow accentuates the urban character of Vladislavić's writing in ways in which, perhaps, he did not achieve in his earlier writing because this brings to the fore the conflicts and inversions of subject positions that accompany the figurative and physical transfiguring of urban space. Aubrey Tearle is portrayed as an individual who attempts to shield himself from an emergent objective reality that is not to his liking by using a fabled linguistic competence as a kind of buffer. Sarah Nuttall instructively describes this condition as "[t]he loss of the fantasy of Europeanness", which is also equated to "the disappearance of Hillbrow, and even Johannesburg, as it used to be" (2004:16). In *The Restless Supermarket* the city's centre is unambiguously foregrounded, whereas as in the preceding short story collections and *The Folly* central Johannesburg does not always occupy the pivotal locus of the imagined city but is occasionally only a backdrop, an idea lying at the metaphoric periphery of the imaginary. The Hillbrow in which Tearle resides is the epitome of conundrum with its simultaneous intimations of cosmopolitanism on the one hand, and the spreading shadow of third-world poverty and violence on the other. Following on Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Nuttall sees "the city form – and the city lives it gives rise to – [a]s the most conducive space to the remaking of culture and identity, because it is the place of most difference –

where difference, that is, the juxtaposition of culture, works to revise and reread the orthodox, any stable notion of who is who" (2004:19). Hillbrow at the time of transition and as rendered in Vladislavić, one can therefore infer from the above, is a site of the collocation of so many varied socio-cultural differences, to the extent that in that period it becomes the nexus point for the reinvention of the city.

Marais (2002; 2003),[19] on a slightly different tack, suggests that Tearle as having been invested "with a hermeneutic sensibility" by the author, the result of which is that he becomes a "social proofreader", on top of being a linguistic one. Echoing the conflation of the linguistic and social proofreading, Stefan Helgesson views language in the novel as being "not severed from social reality" but that "the difference between the two is collapsed" (2004:278). The figure of the proofreader is therefore important as a means of deciphering the changes in the social morphology of the cityscape but, crucially, Tearle's 'reading' of the city appears to be based on false premises or coordinates and thus his interpretations thereof prove somewhat faulty. Marais (2002) also points out that Vladislavić believes in what is termed as a "post-Saussurean postulate that language is not a closed, and neutral system of nomenclature" (2002:102), but Tearle ironically – in his insistence on linguistic order as a direct referent for social order – holds the opposite to be true. For him language is a closed structure which is beyond negotiation and, consequently, it becomes increasingly difficult to navigate the fluidity that marks, at every conceivable level, the streets of the emerging postcolonial city because he ultimately lacks the proper linguistic tools, with the requisite structural elasticity, to be able to do so.

The notion of fluidity is enunciated separately but in related ways to my theorisation immediately above by Lindsay Bremner and Carrol Clarkson. Bremner (who is a lecturer in architecture) writes on the reframing of township space in Kliptown (Soweto) after apartheid and suggests that because of its "unlocatedness"[20]

---

[19] In truth, the second article – 'Reading against Race: J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Justin Cartwright's *White Lightning* and Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket*' – is a summary of the argument he develops in the first. There are in the 2003 article large verbatim chunks that were lifted directly from 'Visions of Excess: Closure, Irony and the Thought of Community in Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket*'.

[20] According to Bremner, this sense of 'unlocatedness' derives primarily from a feeling or condition of being located in many places at once because Kliptown feels like many different bits of the city. Loren Kruger (2005)

it is a place "of teeming, undisciplined practices and trajectories" (2004:522). For all intents and purposes this (or what she argues) is the exact antithesis of Tearle's vision of what the city ought to be, but there are some stark similarities between Kliptown and Vladislavić's imagined Hillbrow. In the transitional period described in *The Restless Supermarket*, Hillbrow carries the self-same air of a place that is figuratively drifting in terms of its identity. It is an in-between place and its residents are for the, most part, transient characters who, with the possible exception of Tearle, give the impression of travellers and seekers who do not in the end quite know the directions of the paths they tread or what exactly it is that they seek. Any notions of fixed identities in such a context become contestable. In her analysis of the *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* by Phaswane Mpe, Clarkson conjectures that the novels "calls up expectations of a community in propertied relation to a specific place, but the narrative […] systematically undercuts expectations of a locatable community premised on a shared set of beliefs and obligations" (2005a:452). The presumptions of community in both texts are similarly illusory as they are subverted by the way identity, the basis on which a sense of community is founded, is vicariously performed and expressed (and ultimately destabilised) by different characters who may share an assumed affinity because of race or fact of a common rural home.

Apart from the location of identity in the postcolonial city, as represented in the fictive writings of Vladislavić and Mpe, Clarkson also concerns herself with the notion of surfaces and space. In her figuring of the visible and invisible surfaces of the city, she highlights the notion of how "[w]hat is visible to each one of us constitutes a different visible landscape in each distance to the extent that it is not possible to delimit the perceptual field in an a priori or objective way" (2005b:86). The gist of Clarkson's argument is that the way an individual views an event or physical object differs (or at least can differ) from the next person to such an extent that the meanings derived from said event or object are invariably diverse. Clarkson extends this metaphor of invisibility in her contention that "what is invisible or past […] informs

---

echoes this thinking with her theorisation of a multi-generic Johannesburg, of a city which has many genres all at the same time as a result of the multiple influences of its residents seeing it in varied ways.

one's perceptions of the present in important ways" (2005b:89). Building on Clarkson's views, I will proceed further and argue that the way an individual recuperates that which may no longer be visible or is now in the past is crucial to the conception one has of the present or the "here and now", to borrow from Clarkson again. This point has direct relevance to the fictional and real fears about impending 'disorder' expressed by Aubrey Tearle and the people whom Vladislavić has described (to Marais and Backstrom above) as ordinarily holding mild viewpoints, but who have 'overreacted' in the face of social transformation. A number of critics and writers, not least of all Vladislavić himself,[21] have also commented on the fact that the visible Johannesburg was built on the slavery-like depredations that went on in the invisible, beneath the surface strata from which its [in]famous mineral riches were extracted, and therefore offering yet another different angle from which to engage with the dichotomous figuring of visibility and invisibility.

Aubrey Tearle, the protagonist and narrator of *The Restless Supermarket*, is generally referred to as a relic of a past social order but rather than shrink into invisibility, his procedure is the opposite, notwithstanding the irrelevance of his posture in the present. As Tony Morphet succinctly puts it, Tearle is a tomason but "a speaking tomason" who "insists on making his marginal position central to the fate of the city" (Morphet 2006:87). The analogy of the tomason is, for me, quite apt and interesting in light of the definition of a tomason as a redundancy that inevitably attracts attention to itself. For much of the text, Tearle is blissfully and self-righteously unaware of just how unstable the ground is on which he bases his ideological stance. To utilise Morphet's metaphor of redundancy, the more Tearle insists on privileging his conservatism in the face of overwhelming evidence that suggests a new age marked by fluidity and contestation of orthodoxy, the more his position becomes incongruous to the emerging versions of the city he knew. As Graham puts it, *The Restless Supermarket* – with Tearle as the personification of an extended metaphor – serves as a more complete portrayal of the "conundrums of

---

[21] In an interview with Stacey Knecht (2005), Vladislavić discusses in considerable detail "the idea of Johannesburg as a city that is 'undermined'", first using the image of "honeycombs" to represent the networks of tunnels under the city, and then discarding that particular symbolism mid-sentence when it occurs to him that it is too euphemistic a representation of the reality of mining on the Witwatersrand. In the end 'undermined' has both literal and figurative significance.

memory and representation confronting postapartheid South Africa" in the manner the narrative "depicts the nation and especially inner-city Johannesburg, as a postmodern space of flux and transition" (2007:72). Again, it is important to reiterate here how any preconceived notions of memory, identity and space are put into crisis by the juxtaposition of many complex ways of being in the city, ways to which Tearle seems largely oblivious.

In an essay that interrogates the very concept of 'transition' as used, often somewhat blithely, with reference to the period narrated by *The Restless Supermarket*, Caitlin Charos articulates a notion of 'post-apartheid play' that initiates a view of transition as being open-ended. Transition, with its intimations of transformation or change, is conceived as an ambiguous trope in the case of South Africa because the nature of the changes is often of evolutionary, rather than revolutionary. Besides, some of the desired conditions of the postapartheid era come into existence before the end of legislated apartheid, thus making the 'post-' in postapartheid or postcolonial that much more difficult to date with any amount of certainty or confidence[22]. James Graham (2008; 2010) has also remarked on the sense of ambiguity in terms of whether transition can be formulated as change or non-change in the novel. Charos' ideas of 'play', as I expressed in passing earlier when discussing Wood's use of the word, goes beyond the proposal of aesthetic pleasure as the ultimate goal of Vladislavić's imaginative use of language and the fantastic. "Post-apartheid play" therefore has a goal, a purpose framed by Charos as being not only the representation of "the 'in-betweenness' and the openness of the transition," but is also used to "disrupt boundaries, deconstruct racist discourses and show us how to 'mix'" (2008:27). In order to illustrate socio-political significance that lies at the heart of the conflictual renderings of the past and present through Vladislavić's (via Aubrey Tearle) word play, Charos invokes the example of Wessels – who is Tearle's Afrikaans friend – "embrac[ing] the isiZulu name" for Johannesburg, whereas Tearle himself refers to it as "the Golden City" (2008:29) in the following extract of the opening lines of the novel:

---

[22] See also Warnes 2000.

A salesman buggering a pink elephant (excuse my Bulgarian). Not a sight one sees every day, even on the streets of Johannesburg—the Golden City as it were, Egoli as it are, to quote my pal Wessels, the last of the barnacles. As the century declines to a conclusion one has come to expect undignified behavior as a matter of course, but this was an ''all-time low'' (as the newspapers would put it). I see it before me now as if it were yesterday.[23]

(Vladislavić 2006:3)

Charos frames her argument by analysing the respective use of the verb tenses "were" and "are" by Tearle and Wessels, highlighting how this difference gestures towards not only "distinguish[ing] the past and present designation of the city, but [that] their plural form also suggests its multiplicity of culture." While she rightly also sees Tearle's parenthesised "excuse my Bulgarian" as evidence of his idealised notions of his own ethnic and linguistic superiority, at a simplistic level, the distinction could mark the irruption of new 'Englishes'. These new dialects, rather than pointing to the deterioration in social and linguistic standards that so fixate Aubrey Tearle, can be explained as evidence of the way that 'proper' English, or any language for that matter, cannot be fixed or cemented in a particular position but is always a system of representation that is open to influence from sources outside of and, supposedly, inferior to itself.[24] The notion (already mentioned above) of fluidity is, at various social and cultural levels, continually be re-instantiated in this way across Vladislavić's imagined postcolonial metropolis.

Helen Strauss' 'Squirming White Bodies: Interracial Encounters in Anton Kannemeyer's "True Love" and Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket*' (2008) represents one of the most direct considerations in the available literature of whiteness as both a physical and social category. Strauss holds that the "[t]he manner in which identity is staged at the site of the interracial encounter depends on how the culturally and racially coded identity of the 'other' is interpreted and how these interpretations are then used to imagine and construct corresponding

---

[23] I shall return to this excerpt in Chapter Four, where I will discuss Vladislavić's deployment of the uncanny and the spectacular in his narration of the postcolonial city.

[24] As a slight aside, anecdotal evidence also suggests that a significant number of Afrikaans speakers frequently confuse the conjugated forms of the verb 'to be', for example rendering it as "we *was*" or "they *is*".

performances of identity" (2008:22). Whereas in the majority of the literature or reviews that I have cited thus far, racial difference is often inferred rather than directly enunciated, Strauss' framing of the difference as a corporeal manifestation of the social inequalities of the postcolonialising 'society' allows for a fresh look at how race-based identities manifest, for the purpose of this thesis, in the city of Johannesburg. The "Squirming White Bodies" of the title of her essay bespeak of the physical and social discomfort of South African whites when confronted with the possibility of a transformed society and the loss of privilege. This image is also an uncannily apt echo of Aubrey Tearle's 'final' thoughts at the end of *The Restless Supermarket* where he speaks of the lights "squirming and wriggling and writhing, like maggots battening on the foul proof of the world" (Vladislavić 2006:339). In the novel, Strauss further suggests, the white body is made the focus of the novel's "satirical performance of a particularly neurotic strain of white anguish produced by the changes taking place in South Africa as a result of the transition" (2008:29). Beyond the writhing body of Tearle, one ought also to ruminate on the implicatedness (but not necessarily in an over-deterministic way) of the author as a white writer in this gesture of discomfort, and yet at the same time still trying to imaginatively represent this transition. This rumination, I posit, will make possible the distinction of various categories of whiteness and South Africanness, as opposed to the bland assumption and adoption of a uniformly single version of each category. My rationale for attempting such distinctions is mainly in response to theorists who write of unproblematic classifications of race as in, for example, Strauss' analysis of "the frantic revisions of whiteness and South Africanness engendered by the political transition" (2008:22). Besides the fourth chapter, I will also make specific reference to this notion in Chapter Five in relation to Simeon Majara's apparent conflicting identity as a black man who has had the 'benefit' of a 'white education' and now moves in largely white social circles. It appears to me that this logic inaugurates the same universalising pitfalls that I have already mentioned earlier in this section with respect to Felicity Wood's concept of a "South African society", an idea in response to which I pointed out that such a society, a unified and undistinguishable entity, can currently only exist at the level of abstraction and not in concrete terms – given the history of division and inequity in South Africa.

Where Strauss has privileged the body as the site of the interracial encounters in *The Restless Supermarket*, Irikidzayi Manase problematises Hillbrow itself, as the physical setting for the manifold 'new' ways of being in the city. And unlike Strauss (and others) who perceive the transition as evolutionary, Manase sees "contradictory and complex urban perceptions and experiences [being] created in some of Vladislavić's characters owing to the *radical transformation*[25] of the social and public spaces" (2009:53). Whilst there are ongoing changes at various levels in the socio-political spheres of Tearle's Johannesburg, least of all visible in the fact that the transition engenders uncertainty in the manner people relate to the city and to each other, the cautionary note sounded by several writers with regards to the slow place transformation of the architecture of apartheid still holds true. Where Hillbrow, in Manase's estimation, may be regarded to be radically transformed, the truth conceivably lies closer to the idea that the systemic prejudices and inequalities may have just been migrated to other parts of the city. In that case then, the systemic discrimination has merely been translocated out of Hillbrow, but has not been completely eliminated or transformed in the radical manner suggested by Manase above. In the Knecht (2005) interview, Vladislavić reminds us of how sometimes when things seem to have profoundly changed, the underlying infrastructure might not have shifted quite so significantly:

> [T]here are certainly people who have managed to maintain a lifestyle that's not very different, partly by retreating into private spaces […] the disappearance of public space in South Africa recreated a special version of American mall culture and the 'gated community'. I know these things are not unique to South Africa, there are versions of them around the world, but the South African version has really allowed people to keep the new society at bay, outside the walls, and also to regulate *who* and *what* gets admitted into that world.
>
> (Knecht 2005)

Whilst this is certainly not true for all formerly privileged South African citizens (read as white), the essence of Vladislavić's argument above is that legislated apartheid may have been removed from the statutes, but some people have still found ways

---

[25] My emphasis.

through which they re-enforce the exclusionary practices of the past. Beavon (2000) has written of these new enclaves of privilege as the manifestation of the "neo-apartheid" city in the making and in Chapter Five (with particular reference to the short story 'Villa Toscana') I will make a detailed analysis of how the author represents and re-imagines these latter-day versions of the Voortrekker and Pioneer Column laagers.

To round off my consideration of the critical responses to *The Restless Supermarket*, let me briefly review the important question of the kind of vision of the postcolonial city that the novel represents. Jennifer Robinson (2009), in particular, uses Tearle's Hillbrow to rebut suggestions that the future African city is essentially dystopic. That is the kind of narrative vision enunciated by Mike Davis in *Planet of Slums* (2006). Robinson's position, with which I agree, is premised on the notion that Aubrey Tearle ultimately, in spite of himself and his conservative tendencies, is forced into the realisation that the ideological position that he fights for in most of the narrative, is untenable. He thus has, at the very end, to imagine new ways of being in the city, even if these are only tentative steps in that direction. Tearle, following Robinson's logic (which is also found in James Graham 2008; 2010), moves into theoretical ground that lies somewhere between the dystopia (and implied utopia) postulated by Davis. Robinson holds that:

> The dystopic narrative strategy might well be an effective means to provoke critical responses and stimulate imaginative reactions to what is, by all accounts, a global emergency. However, it also functions to structure the description of the problem in particular ways, and to shape, if not constrain, the form of possible responses.
>
> (2009:4)

Davis' city of the future, when read against Robinson's theorisation immediately above, seems too irretrievably bleak because the dystopic strategy tends to limit possible responses by virtue of precluding some other plausible discursive categories. The essence of Robinson's paper is to question whether "some unexamined assumptions" (2009:2) (which she posits Davis' *Planet of Slums* to be

illustrative of) in the genre of urban studies lead to an unwarranted and unquestioning casting of many places into the category of dystopic. By way of reiteration, I shall return to the notion of the dichotomy between the utopian and dystopic vision of the imagined city in greater detail in the relevant sections of the thesis discussing the texts *The Restless Supermarket* and *Portrait with Keys: Joburg & what-what*.

1.4.5 Dissected Postapartheid Selves - *The Exploded View*

Ingrid de Kock and Gerald Gaylard make loosely related points in their analyses of Vladislavić's writing (albeit in slightly different contexts), both focusing on the marginal subject. Writing with reference to *Missing Persons* and *Propaganda by Monuments* as well as *The Folly*, de Kock (2002:125) suggests that they "illuminate the sadness of urban dislocation as well as the humor and creativity of the lost, abandoned, mismatched and migrant." On the other hand, Gaylard (2006: 63) remarks on what he refers to as "postmodernism's emphasis upon a kind of radical democracy which appreciates the small, specific, minor and marginal and is not prepared to subject that to a metanarrative...". De Kock is essentially speaking of the manner in which identity is formed and performed at the margins and in the act of appropriating city spaces, whereas Gaylard's comments are useful in as far as they show the author's ability to focus on the minor and marginal characters and details that are usually not the subjects of metanarratives. I intend in this thesis, for example in Chapters One and Five , to take up and develop de Kock and Gaylard's arguments, and demonstrate how, in effect, the "margins" and the "marginal" have imaginatively moved from the periphery to the centre of the postcolonial city.

Gaylard's synopsis of the subject in postapartheid literature has two fundamental tenets at its core. The first is that with arrival of political freedom in South Africa, the canon has witnessed a simultaneous shift from what Gaylard terms "metonymic subjects" to subjects that "more incommensurable with the mass cultures prevailing in their contexts" (2006:66). The second aspect is what he refers to as the "(re)vivification of the individual subject" (2006:67). These two precepts,

incommensurability and revivification, are of relevance to my general arguments about Vladislavić's rendering of the city because they speak to my notions that the traditional (realist) modes of representation, ways of writing that held sway in the periods of apartheid (colonialism) and the nationalist struggle, are not necessarily equipped for the portrayal of the transforming reality at the micro level of the individual. Hence, Gaylard suggests the movement away from type or metonym to more individuated characters that do not fall into the stereotypes or categories advanced by the preponderant metanarratives.

In a posture related to Gaylard as summarised above, Shane Graham's 'Layers of Permanence' (2006) essay also zeros in on the idea of the subject by emphasising the notion of a subject within a specific spatio-materialist location. Graham takes issue with readings of the postapartheid, notably that of Sarah Nuttall ('Stylizing the Self' – 2004), which seem to offer what he considers to be dehistoricised representations of the self. In further elucidation of the point, Graham suggests that,

> [...] a recurring theme in all of Vladislavić's writing is that the disorientation and historical amnesia that characterize post-apartheid life and culture result, at least in part, from the contestation on several fronts of spatial configurations that reinforce older social formations.
>
> (Graham 2006:50)

Proceeding from the basis laid out by Graham above, I will suggest in Chapter Five that the processes of constructing new urban selves, as portrayed in *The Exploded View*, are fundamentally flawed as they are premised on the false foundations of a shared vision of the postapartheid present and future. The result, which I term alienation and Graham has rendered as disorientation, is partially predetermined by the underlying infrastructure of historical inequities which is impossible to ignore. An awareness of such flaws then re-doubles the sense of doubt with regard to Nuttall's notion of a self that is self-stylised, almost as if it (the self) subsists in a historical vacuum.

Stefan Helgesson's approach to the Johannesburg of *The Exploded View* is related to the historicised stance adopted by Graham, with Helgesson (2006) laying his emphasis on the idea of the city not just as a metropolis, but "an *African metropolis*" (2006:27).[26] This position recalls Mbembe and Nuttall's (2004;2008) insistence that Johannesburg should be read or analysed on the basis of its own terms as an African city, rather than through the prism of a methodological framework that is essentially Eurocentric or Western. In short, this notion privileges the dialectical relationship between the postcolonial subject and the history of relative deprivation and privilege that has produced the postapartheid conurbation of Johannesburg. It is following from this argumentation that I shall propose the sense of what I have referred to, earlier in this chapter, as a dialogic postcolonialism, wherein the very meaning of being postcolonial – either in terms of subjectivity (identity) or place (city) – is fraught and is constantly interrogated. I am in agreement with the thinking of Helgesson, and like-minded others, in this regard because by insisting on the distinction of an African metropolis, one avoids some of the major analytical pitfalls that are attendant to readings of Johannesburg that are too closely linked to derivative formulas of what the Western construct of citiness is.

So, when a Mike Davis (2006) refers in *Planets of Slums* to the slum as the de facto African modern or Martin J. Murray (2009) writes of *Taming the Disorderly City*, it is imperative that one appropriates a, somewhat, more circumspect posture because, all too often, the referents "slum" and "disorder" are based on conceptions of the city that are preconceived or based on historical realities too far removed from that of Johannesburg. The inhabitants of places described as slums may not necessarily consider themselves to be living in *slums*, nor is it always clear from what parameters the normative oppositions of chaos and order are derived. The caveat – there is always one where abstract concepts are utilised – is that Africa or African as signifiers are not themselves beyond doubt or ambiguity. A universally accepted notion of what Africa means, beyond stereotype, is difficult – if not

---

[26] The post-apartheid City of Johannesburg has for several years now, as a metropolitan council, been marketing itself as "a world class African city".

impossible – to arrive at. Further elucidation with respect to this point is provided by Helgesson's assertion that,

> Every attempt at representing or constituting an identifiable Africa in the metropolis of *The Exploded View* is as artificial as the various kinds of Europe that spring up on the periphery of Johannesburg. These versions of Africa and Europe both go into the making of the African metropolitan form without giving access to anything else other their own performance of a de-historicised geopolitical imaginary.
>
> (2006: 32)

The import of this conclusion is that, because of the myriad historical influences on a city such as Johannesburg – both western and African – it is inevitably futile to attempt to categorise such spaces as being African or otherwise. Similarly, representations of the same that tend towards discerning what may be termed the essential version of the place ultimately amount to little more that false reductionism. The truer analyses allow for the existence of multiple versions of the reality of a place, a point which I continually reiterate in the chapters that follow. The physical manifestation of the manifold ways the city is experienced can be seen in the ways communities continue to occupy compartmentalised spaces, a reality Ivan Vladislavić himself alludes to when conversing with Andie Miller (2006). The respective communities therefore have different conceptions of what the city – albeit being one general geographic location – means and represents. The generic communities, expressing their identities differently within a specific space, constitute what Tony Morphet has described as "marginal situations" or "microworlds" that point to or gravitate towards the same centre, and in which individual "characters endeavour to keep their balance in the surges of a changing world" (2006:88).

Susan van Zyl, in both 'Skyhooks and Diagrams: The Signing of South Africa in Ivan Vladislavić's *The Exploded View*' (2006a) and 'A Homo Calculator at Large: Reading the Late Work of Foucault in the Light of Ivan Vladislavić's "Villa Toscana"' (2006b), offers intriguing readings of *The Exploded View* that are more markedly

psycho-analytic than any that critics at the time. There is, in both articles, an increased sense of the interior struggles of the subject's conception of the self and the ways in which characters like Gordon Duffy, for instance, utilise external signs and skyhooks (such as the radio traffic broadcasts are) to navigate, rationalise and validate their own senses of place in the fluid social geography of the transforming metropolis. In essence, both of van Zyl's studies are about the question of the arbitrariness of signs as signifiers, with difference residing in the fact that in the 'Skyhooks' article makes direct analysis of the "nature, power and limitations of signs and signifactory practices in post-apartheid South Africa" (2006a:75), whereas the latter is an evaluation of some of Michel Foucault's ideas on the subject and power through a consideration of the 'Villa Toscana' narrative.[27] In the second instance, especially, van Zyl inverts the presumed 'normal' order of critical analysis by, in effect, using the literary practice to explain the theory, instead of the more conventional formula of critical theory being used to explain literary works. Nonetheless, both papers are relevant for my overarching hypothesis of a postcolonialism that is nervously dialogic because it ultimately reveals the fraught nature of the relationship between the subject, signs and power.

The above formulation goes some way to reveal the cause of the "irresolvability" that I shall conclude to be one of the hallmarks of Vladislavić's Johannesburg. This "irresolvability" is also apparent in Jeremy Foster (2009) and Shameem Black's (2008) explorations of the postapartheid city as a landscape haunted by the atrocities and inequities of apartheid. In both instances there are gestures towards re-imagining and re-building, but the act of reconstruction is not a straightforward case of social and monetary reparation, because the process is constantly undermined by a taxonomical fluidity – in terms of the "links between place and identity and city and citizenship" (Foster 2009:177) – that always results in the aforementioned irresolvability.

---

[27] Brenner et al (2010) build on this motif, to examine – in a visual essay titled 'Gestures of Defamiliarisation' – the arbitrariness of the sign through the metaphor of "veneer and complex surfaces" in the continually emerging gated communities of the postapartheid metropole. These residential complexes have fanciful names like Tuscany and Toulouse by which they are supposed to signal their apartness from a 'dreary' Africanness.

1.4.6 *Portrait with Keys: Joburg & what-what* – Infinite Imponderables, Intangible Possibilities and Intractable Futures

Of the selected texts in this thesis, *Portrait with Keys* represents Vladislavić's writing at perhaps its most autobiographical and therefore the text avails itself as a unique perspective on the author's notions of the relationship between the individual and place. One of the stated objectives of this project is an evaluation of how different characters in Vladislavić's texts seem to self-write themselves into the transforming cityscape. Individuals, whether they are the occasionally encountered vegetable vendor or cobbler, often carry with them written and other signs of the city's transformations. However, more importantly, the boundaries between people as writers and carriers of signs, and the actual signs themselves are frequently collapsed resulting in the characters becoming part of the interwoven tapestry or fabric of the city. This interweaving of the individual narratives into the generic form of citiness contributes greatly to the overall effect of the city as being layered text(s), and consequently also reiterates the element of irresolvability – as discussed in the previous sub-section. Nuttall and Mbembe's (2007) travelogue/essayistic piece 'Afropolis: From Johannesburg', without necessarily offering textual analysis of *Portrait with Keys*, proposes that postcolonial Johannesburg "is an environment studded with texts" which are "shifting, superficial, sensational [and] singular" (2007:282). This interpretation is pertinent for my consideration of this particular text because of the suggestion or imputation of the city as text. The idea of the textual city is not itself new but has particular relevance for any reading of *Portrait with Keys* because the narrative fragments that constitute the book are littered with written and physical signs that open up the city to multifarious interpretations. The key outcome of this line of enquiry will be the highlighting of the fact that it is impossible to uncover a single, unitary and universal essence or meaning about the city and that the same shall continue to escape all attempts at metafictional definition.

James Graham's 'Ivan Vladislavić and the Possible City' (2008; 2010) is one such study that begins to acknowledge this notion of multiple outcomes because it is premised on the multi-faceted nature of the experiencing as well as the writing of the city. For Graham *Portrait with Keys* "bring[s] into being an imaginative space that

exists in a tension between individual memory and the possibility of a different kind of communal future […] as a *possible city*" (2008:334). The exact nature of this possible city is not too clearly spelt out, but Graham's analysis is significantly shorn of some of the utopian rhetoric that perhaps springs from the Rainbow Nation mantra of post-1994 South Africa. And as Graham further suggests, by using "narrative devices that compel readers to assume an active role in traversing the text, Vladislavić opens dominant ways of seeing Johannesburg (his own included) to re-interpretation and re-articulation" (2008:334). Thematically, there seems to me to be no difference between the "aesthetic" city of Mbembe and Nuttall's (2004) formulation, and the "possible city" suggested in the present instance by Graham. The terms are not mutually exclusive and it is from an awareness of this constant "re-interpretation and re-articulation" that I have characterised Vladislavić's writing as being constitutive of a dialogic postcoloniality. An example, in passing, of this recurring shifting meaning is captured in Nuttall and Mbembe's description of description of Johannesburg thus:

> In Johannesburg the formal and the informal, official and unofficial, cohabit and at times become entangled, so that the city resembles now Los Angeles, now Kinshasa or Cairo, now all three at the same time.
>
> (2007:282)

The import of this description is that different kinds of city are expressed simultaneously, often within the same locales. The apartment blocks of Hillbrow were conceived of as an expression of metropolitan modernity, but in their post-apartheid manifestations (as relayed by the narrator in *Portrait with Keys*) the living conditions of the tenants are indicative of what would nominally be referred to as township or, at worst, squatter-camp circumstances. In this condition of inner-city decay, most of the high-rise buildings represent vertically stacked informal settlements.

The transformation of space exemplified above, brings one to consider a slightly worrisome Graham's characterisation of Vladislavić's Kensington (portrayed in *Portrait with Keys*) as being *inner-city*. For instance, Graham writes of "Vladislavić's own inner-city perambulations in *Portrait with Keys*" (2008:334). The main question that arises is the extent to which Kensington and Troyville can be denoted to be "inner-city" in the common-sense meaning of the term, for example as

it can be ascribed to Hillbrow. The question arises mainly on the basis that a 'mis-reading' of the book's Kensington as inner-city space, as opposed to what it essentially is in the text – a white suburban enclave with a smattering of residential blacks – has the potential effect of contributing to the mis-formulation of Vladislavić's understanding and writing of the city. In other words, such a 'false' characterisation can lead to untenable interpretations of some of the urban processes and dynamics that define what the imagined Johannesburg does and can mean, especially when taking the selected texts by Vladislavić's about the city collectively. The point is that Tearle's Hillbrow and the one narrated in *Portrait with Keys* are conceptually worlds apart; take for instance the latter narrator's fear-filled and furtive sojourns into the inner-city to research material for the book that would become *The Restless Supermarket* and the easy (if arrogantly prejudiced) confidence with which Tearle occupies the same space. The way in which characters occupy different spaces of the city is crucial to understanding their relationship with, and expression of agency within the respective cityscapes that they occupy.

Where James Graham (cited previously) rather takes the overseas title of the text (*Portrait with Keys: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked*) somewhat too literally, Ralph Goodman's (2009) review article, 'Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*: A Bricoleur's Guide to Johannesburg', offers a shift of perspective that emphasises the instability of the city as a subject and mode of representation. Goodman concludes that *Portrait with Keys* is a guide to a Johannesburg that is not a guide at all" because the "fragmented", "rambling" and "random" nature of the account suggests that Vladislavić is offering but "one of many possible cartographies of that city" (2009:225). For Graham the text represents a master-key to the mysteries of the city but, to the contrary, Goodman sees it as just one of many avenues into an understanding of the city. One of these ways of seeing the city is exemplified in Patrick Lenta's (2009) view, following Lindsay Bremner (2000), of crime and insecurity in the narrative as marking "*Everyday Abnormality*", which is itself an oxymoronic term. That the high level of crime is a real concern is indisputable, but it cannot be all that defines Johannesburg. Building on Graham and Goodman's (separate) notions of the possible, I will propose in the sixth chapter that Vladislavić's characterisation of the city in *Portrait with Keys* points ultimately to the notion of the

impossible city. 'Impossible' because of the implausibility of selecting any one aspect as the definitive essence of the city or place. For me, more than the "Keys" in the story's title, the "What-what" more accurately represents the elusivity from categorisation that Vladislavić's Johannesburg represents. "What-what" in the local parlance means things or qualities of people and places that are at once abstract and specific. Everybody supposedly knows what 'they' are but cannot name 'them'.

1.5 Conclusion: False Endings, New Beginnings

In summation, the project is concerned with the typological description of Vladislavić's body of literary works as being focused on notions of the postcolonial city. Among other considerations, I will proceed by discussing 'writing about the city' within given culturally-specific spatialities, and will argue that a study of the city in the work of Ivan Vladislavić requires an appreciation of a similar dynamics of the imagination within the context of Southern Africa. For instance, the shared history between South Africa and Zimbabwe of colonialism, segregation and migrant labour will be examined in passing in terms of how Vladislavić and the other writers imaginatively represent different cultural specificities occasioned by the phenomenon of inward migration in their urban texts. Throughout the study, occasional cross-referencing will be made in passing to the works of other Southern African writers of novels such as Ken Barris, Phaswane Mpe, Dambudzo Marechera, Patricia Kinnock and others. The collection of short stories by Zimbabwean writers *No More Plastic Balls and Other Stories*. *A City Imagined* and Shimmer Chinodya's *Can We Talk and other Stories* also provide interesting points of reflection.

I will show through the prism of deconstruction, how Vladislavić is engaged in his writing in portraying the postcolonial city as being constituted by characteristics that go beyond the mortar and brick edifices (the manifestations of the physical structure of the city), to encapsulate some of the nature and qualities of the city's inhabitants. Vladislavić's connections and location as a white writer imagining and engaging with a multi-racial, paradigmatic African city will also be discussed in detail. Specifically, Vladislavić by virtue of his 'race' comes from a background of assumed

privilege, and one will need to locate him as a writer of literature relative to all these cultural and ideological influences.

Another point of emphasis in the study will be the exposition of the way in which Vladislavić uses character as a narrative strategy, in the selected texts, to formulate new definitions of the self or of the self as subject in postapartheid South Africa. Questions to be considered in this regard include the characters' notions of identity and the self and how these relate to an individual's perceptions of their place in the city as seen through the respective spaces that they negotiate and appropriate.

The first chapter will focus on analysing elements of some the stories that form the collection *Missing Persons*, which reveal the extent to which the author is engaged with the paradox of the transforming urban condition of a specific South African city. The point of departure in this endeavour is of a view of the city, least of all a postcolonial[sing] one, as contested space. In this regard, the idea of social space as theorised by Lefebvre will be deployed to analyse the imagined social environment of the city, and how meanings are created and negotiated therein. Chapter Two, on *The Folly*, concerns itself with two quite broad ideas. The first has to do with notions of intrusion into the physical and psychic spaces of individuals, and the resultant disruptions in the lives of characters that are ill-suited or prepared for irruption of new kinds of urban identities. In *The Folly* the Malgases' tranquil and mundane suburban lives are disrupted by the sudden arrival of Nieuwenhuizen on the empty plot next to their house which they have hitherto paid scant regard to. Nieuwenhuizen represents a physical and ideological disruption in the Malgases' ordered lives in that he is unknown and even unknowable. The second notion introduces into my formulation of this thesis certain considerations on the trope of mapping, which I consider to be one of the central tenets to the idea of citiness. It is an idea I shall continually re-iterate in the succeeding chapters because of the connotation of the map as an attempt to totalise the meanings generated about a particular space.

The third chapter examines how the theme of space and territoriality is continued in several of the stories in the collection *Propaganda by Monuments*, for instance in 'The Tuba' and 'Propaganda by Monuments' in which questions of

belonging and the spatialisation of memory are considered respectively. In a few of the stories in *Missing Persons* and *Propaganda by Monuments* there are also considerations of how human characters and inanimate objects, primarily statues and monuments, relate to each other and the spaces they occupy.

In Chapter Four my attention will centre on a reading of *The Restless Supermarket*. I will look at Aubrey Tearle, the central figure and narrator, as a figure struggling with notions of self-definition as subject in the context of a democratising city that has a growing global outlook and influence. Johannesburg is also a magnet for migrants who, in Tearle's own subjective estimation, contribute to the disruption of the establish order he so highly values. The metaphor of linguistic order is central to Tearle's method and his relations to other characters and the city. In this light I examine how he uses language, a familiar cultural artefact, and the allegory of the imaginary city of Alibia to try and impose his sense of order on what he feels to be a deteriorating Johannesburg. The trope of walking is evaluated with specific emphasis on inquiring as to how the act of walking and or traversing the city instantiates the appropriation of cityspace and the affirmation of individual identity.

In the next chapter, Chapter Five, I suggest again through a deconstructive reading of *The Exploded View* that the writer's creative genius is very much in evidence. To begin, from a cursory reading the structure of the book appears to be composed of four disparate narratives, but on closer examination is revealed to be in essence the same story told from multiple perspectives. In 'Villa Toscana' Les Budlender is represented as having a keen awareness of the inner workings or construction or architecture of buildings to the extent that he imaginatively breaks them down to their composite parts. Simeon Majara in 'Curiouser', a play on curious and curios, uses artefacts, curios and art pieces by breaking these down or putting them together in new ways thus creating new art with new meanings. These are acts of de-construction and re-appropriation of cityspace. Notions of belonging are analysed in terms of the manner in which individuals perform their belonging and un-belonging as they appropriate urban space based on notions of entitlement. 'Afritude Sauce' and 'Crocodile Lodge' delve into the intricacies of re-configured identities in the context of the postcolonial state as well as the physical and social signification that mark the transforming city.

The sixth chapter will demonstrate how by spatialising the actions of individual characters in different parts of the city in *Portrait with Keys*, from suburbia to the city centre and on to large shopping malls or 'edge-cities', the author represents the city of Johannesburg as a semiotic surface – a field of signs – that is potentially "readable" as text or is, in the words of Ivan the central character and narrator, a "city that resists imagination". It is a city that resists representation. It is in the street names and signs, in the layout of buildings and the streets of the city that meanings are generated and mutate. From these crossings and mutations of meanings, different visions and "versions" of the city emerge for the different characters that traverse its side-streets and main streets, its by-ways and highways.

In the Conclusion, I will review some of the major highlights emerging from the research and consider the place and possibilities of writing about the city in the canon of writing in Southern Africa in generalised terms, using Vladislavić as a catalyst for posing new enquiries regarding the irruption of new methods and preoccupations into the literary body. Writing about postcolonial urbanity should not be seen in the context of trying to establish a definitive metanarrative on the subject, but questions can still be considered and positions taken in relation to the limitless directions in which the canon of postcolonial urban texts can develop. Vladislavić's latest novel *Double Negative* is perhaps also an indication of new or different directions that he is turning to in terms of representing the city. He seems to be continually reassessing his modes or representation and the marrying of documentary photographs or photographic documents with a novel, as in the book's original collaborative combo version as *TJ/Double Negative* (2010) with the acclaimed photographer David Goldblatt. The main thematic principle behind this thesis is that of the city in transition and as a result I have selected the texts that I felt best portrayed or mapped the parallel political transformation from late apartheid to a postapartheid reality, texts that instantiate the fluidity and fraughtness that I identify as being at the heart of Vladislavić's postcolonial city. *Double Negative* in its reaching back into middle apartheid, thematically and in terms of plot, may at one level represent a rehearsal of some of the main arguments and theorisations I have meade with regards to Vladislavić's other work. But at another level, for instance that

of the poetics of intertextual representations of the city, the book is a good candidate as an object or subject of follow-up studies that make a more sustained enquiry into the nature of the dynamics of story-telling that may be theorised between the photographic image and the written word.

2 Chapter One: Fragments of Passing Urbanities

2.1 Introduction

The first three chapters of the thesis examine Ivan Vladislavić's short story collections *Missing Persons* (1989) and *Propaganda by Monuments and Other Stories* (1996), as well as the novel *The Folly* (1993). The reasons for grouping these texts together have as much to do with chronological convenience as they have with shared thematic concerns. I do not suggest, as a consequence, that thematically these three present a clear break with the texts by Vladislavić published on later dates. On the contrary, there are many stylistic and subject affinities in these books that are shared by all of the writer's literary work. There are even certain elements that are introduced by the author in sections of the early part of the opus that are later echoed and enunciated in the rest of the oeuvre. By and large, these first three books, which were published before and just after the advent of political independence in South Africa, have a common periodicity, while *The Restless Supermarket* (2001), *The Exploded View* (2004) and *Portrait with Keys: Joburg & what-what* (2006) were all published well after the emergence of democratic rule in 1994. This demarcation is also made in full recognition of the fact that a number of the short stories in *Missing Persons* and *Propaganda by Monuments* were previously published through various media as single stories and not necessarily as parts of the collections of which they are now constituent segments.

Another cautionary note is that in these first three texts, the author hardly – if at all – overtly refers to Johannesburg as a named place in the manner of the other three works. There are, however, certain ideas and ways of thinking about spaces and places that are hinted at in the first half of the corpus that are given fuller and clearer expression in the later books which specifically name and theorise Johannesburg. Suffice it to state here that Vladislavić's ideas on the representation of the postcolonial city – a city in and marked by transition – are evident from the beginning of his literary production. A further caveat is that Vladislavić's body of mostly fictive work is almost entirely concerned with the representation of the city in general, sometimes referring to Pretoria but with a preponderance of Johannesburg in particular. Such being the case, I think it is a productive enterprise to evaluate the

author's imagining and rendering of the postcolonial metropolis across the broad range of his literary oeuvre. The author's consistent return to the theme of the city is itself indicative of the scope of the subject and the wide array of possible imaginings of Johannesburg as postcolonial urbanity and place. In short, I utilise this first group of texts to consider how in these early works the city of Johannesburg is adumbrated as a theme, and note that many of the concerns touched upon therein return at a later stage in the writer's career.

This present chapter is concerned with close readings of *Missing Persons*, and I must note here that, beyond passing mention in a few articles and as far as I have been able to tell, there has been little prior in-depth critical or theoretical output on the text.[28] This general paucity of prior critical analysis of these short stories may in part be due to the fact that *Missing Persons* is a first published collection for Vladislavić and the author may at the time not have attracted the kind of critical attention that he garnered with later publications. Another plausible explanation might involve the possible difficulties that critics and those in the academy might have had in categorising the writing, suggesting that there is, initially, insufficient recognition of the fact that the author is engaged with the paradox of the urban condition of a specific South African city.[29] I will examine some of the stories in the collection by beginning from the point of view of the general rubric of the city as contested space. The city is contested space primarily because of the agglomeration of dense populations into a relatively confined space (relative to the countryside) where often contrary and competing needs are expressed. Alternatively, the city is a space where different social environments or "social space," as theorised by Henri Lefebvre (1991), and meanings thereof, are created and negotiated. The city is not only contested in terms of its physical spaces, but also in the sphere of its interpretation and theorisation. In his evaluation of some of Hayden White's work, James S. Duncan makes the following assertion:

---

[28] The very recent appearance of *Magical Spaces – Reading Vladislavić* (2011 ed. Gerald Gaylard) not withstanding (see note 7 in the Introduction chapter above).
[29] It is on this basis, that of the non-recognition of the writer's craft as being generally concerned with the city from the very beginning, that one can begin to suggest the existence of certain gaps in the critical consideration of Vladislavić's writing as a whole.

> Discourse analysis takes as its problematic, the unstable relationship between the data we collect and the interpretive structures which we erect to understand.
>
> (Duncan 1996:253)

In this form, the statement is very broad and does not seem to bear any direct relevance to Vladislavić but it is still useful in the present context, because it expresses some of the conceptual enquiries on representation which the author, in his writing, is engaged in. The present project concerns the problematic of the instability between what the postcolonial city is (its historical and physical "reality"), how it is seen and how it is represented through fictive narration. As with the term "postcolonial", the classification "postcolonial city" is fraught with instability as it refers to a whole range of influences and effects that may be deemed to bring such a city into being, as well as to result from the existence of such a city. For the purposes of this thesis the postcolonial city is defined as a city in a former colony that grew out of the colonial enterprise. Further, such a city has undergone or, more accurately, is going through the process of achieving new identities and functions beyond that of being an outpost of colonialism in its various facets and guises. My thinking in this regard is also informed by the formulations of Ato Quayson on the postcolonial, a condition or state which he perceives of as "a process of postcolonializing" (Quayson 2000:9). Quayson proposes an operational characterisation of the term that hinges, in his words, on:

> ... a studied engagement with the experience of colonialism and its past and present effects, both at the local level of ex-colonial societies as well as at the level of more general global developments thought to be the after-effects of empire [...] the term is as much about conditions under imperialism and colonialism proper as about conditions coming after the historical end of colonialism.
>
> (Quayson 2000:2)

Quayson's ideas on the postcolonial speak to the problems of historical timing, or time in history, inevitably engendered by the pre-fixing of "post-" in the same way suggested by Mongia's analysis that I alluded to in the introductory chapter of this thesis. In addition to the various possible meanings that the term awakens through

the demarcations outlined in the excerpt above, postcolonialism is clearly not an event that occurs 'after' or 'post-' colonialism but is a set of experiences that encompasses the time of empire(and even then not necessarily its end) and the emergent epoch. The city of Johannesburg is located within all these innumerable contradictions of time and place, one consequence of which is that various contradictory perceptions as well as interpretations of the city consequently flow from such ambiguities. These discontinuities are also reflected in Sue Marais' suggestion, with general reference to all the stories in *Missing Persons*, that "the dislocated and alienated experience of the characters […] negate any sense of shared community, history or destiny, and expose the fractured reality constructed by the architects of aparthied" (2011:37).

More specifically, and with regard to the compendium *Missing Persons*, my analysis of this text is sub-divided into four parts. These are organised around, but are not exclusively limited to a corresponding number of related aspects of Vladislavić's writing on the postcolonial city. Amongst other aspects or themes, he explores the fantastical realist imaginary or the absurd in the stories 'When My Hands Burst into Flame', 'Journal of a Wall', 'We Came to the Monument' and 'The Terminal Bar'; the operation of the (suburban) gaze is in the foreground in 'Journal of a Wall', 'When My Hands Burst into Flame' and 'The Terminal Bar'; 'The Prime Minister is Dead' and 'The Terminal Bar' most clearly enunciate the theme of performing agency; while the idea of monuments and that of the creation of historical memory are more prominent in 'The Prime Minister is Dead' and 'The Terminal Bar'.

The first of these subsections looks at the notion of transient bodies and how they relate to shifting spaces. In something of a paradox, I begin to use the trope of monuments as an exemplar of how memories of a place are constructed notwithstanding the transience suggested by time as a construction of space. Through such a line of enquiry I also begin to examine the operations of agency in the space of a transforming history. Put more simply, the irony or paradox lies in the suggestive permanence of the monument (or memory) even in the face of its being a marker for a particular time, a time that is shifting and evanescent. By way of illustration, I will make use of the stories 'The Prime Minister is Dead', and 'We Came to the Monument'. In doing this the focus is not merely on the literary, that is on the stories in and of themselves, but rather on how the author uses them to portray or

flesh out various thematic and conceptual visions of a *particular* postcolonial urban environment. In the introductory chapter I have highlighted the sense I have that a disproportionate amount of the criticism on Vladislavić's work has focused on the linguistic qualities of his writing but my thesis works off this beaten track by marrying together the narrative strategies and representations of space or discontinuities. The prior emphasis on 'particular' is deliberate in order to underline the negation of the notion of a universal, singular truth about the meaning that is generated about a city – Johannesburg in this case, an analysis which is applicable to any city or locale.

The story 'Journal of a Wall' will be utilised in the next sub-section to show how the postcolonial city is often a place of close juxtaposition of opposites, both in terms of people or characters and in terms of notions of the city as lived space. Whereas in more traditional and rural societies the tendency is that people who share some kinship relationship are often to be found living as neighbours, city residents generally do not have the luxury of making such choices possibly because of the structure of the capitalist economy. This frequently means that people who might not have otherwise chosen to co-exist find themselves as unwilling neighbours. For some people the difference between the kind of people they may, or may not, choose to have as neighbours might lie not in the more obvious distinctions of social class or race, important as they are in a city such as Johannesburg or Pretoria or Harare, but in more subtle considerations such as lifestyle attitudes and character. An interesting point here is the parallels that may be drawn in trying to define postcolonialism as theoretical practice on the one hand and categorising Vladislavić's writing on the other. Neither neatly fits into a descriptive box and Gaylard and Titlestad's characterisation of Vladislavić's fiction having the quality of "hermeneutic indeterminacy" (Gaylard and Titlestad 2006:6) has resonance in the theorisation of postcoloniality as lacking interpretative certainty or precision. This is an aspect of the air of elusiveness that Nuttall and Mbembe pay a lot of attention to in, and forms the thematic basis of their edited text, *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (2008). Indeterminacy is a feature shared by postcolonialism, the metropolis and Vladislavić's fiction, and one of the overall conclusions that this thesis will make centres on this quality of elusiveness, that is the ultimate impossibilty of arriving at a singular sense of what the city of Johannesburg, as represented by the

author, signifies. It is indeterminacy, as I will consistently reiterate at various stages of this study, that lies at the heart of the city's *resistance to imagination*.

Drawing on Simmel's ideas on the blasé outlook or attitude of the city dweller (Simmel 1995:35, 36), I will also use 'Journal of a Wall' to elucidate my own notions of the city as a contradictory experience of space. The third sub-division focuses on the motif of the journey, with emphasis on the necessity of the imagined journey within and between different city spaces, as well as altogether separate cities. Some of the journeys remain at the level of the imaginary while some appear finished, yet retain the aspect of being unbegun/unstarted. 'When My Hands Burst into Flames' exemplifies the performance of identity by an individual character in the city and simultaneously instantiates the notion of the way in which, in a city, the abnormal tends to be made familiar and vice-versa. The spectacle becomes part of the everyday in this representation of urban space as the central character traverses the city. The last story in the collection, 'The Terminal Bar', serves to pull some of the threads named above together by further illumination of how space in the imagined city is appropriated through the performance of identity. This tale of characters in an airport bar sets up a comparison between notions of fixity and transience, and Saskia Sassen's formulation of 'joint presences' (Sassen 1996) will be used to provide insight on how different characters perceive particular urban spaces and proceed to occupy them.

2.2 Ephemeral Spaces and Monuments – Performing Agency and Making Memory

The ideas of a number of the most prominent thinkers on the urban condition seem to coalesce around the view that the urban metropolis, at least in its western manifestation, has had the effect of stifling (or at the minimum, putting into crisis), to one extent or the other, the expression of agency and subjectivity by the individual. Georg Simmel and Louis Wirth, for instance, make similar points in their analyses of individual identity and personality as expressed in the urban setting. Simmel (1995:30) reads the city from a psychological perspective and proposes that "[t]he deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence...". From a more sociological

standpoint, in 'Urbanism as a Way of Life' (1938) Louis Wirth stresses the depressing aspects of city life, especially when he compares the nature of contacts between city-dwellers and those established by inhabitants of smaller rural towns and villages. This, however, is not to suggest that Simmel is anti-urban or that he has no hope for the city. Rather, his analysis is quite nuanced on this point because while he refers to the ways in which the individual is curbed in the city, likewise he also points to new forms of autonomy and freedom that are only possible in the city. These include but are not limited to, for example, the idea that "the citizen of the metropolis is 'free' in contrast with the trivialities that which bind the small town person" (1995:40). The latter tends to suffer from more inhibitions than large-city dwellers because of the notion that in a small town *everybody knows everybody*, whereas in the city "[t]he mutual reserve and indifference" as well as "the intellectual conditions of life in large social units are never more sharply appreciated in their significance for the independence of the individual than in the dense crowds of the metropolis" (1995:40). Wirth sees relations in the city as being characterised by shallowness and superficiality, which flow from the agglomeration of dense and socially diverse populations. Expressing a starkly contrary viewpoint, the political philosopher Iris Marion Young speculates on how,

> ... the ideal of community fails to offer an appropriate alternative vision of a democratic polity. This ideal expresses a desire for the fusion of subjects with one another, which in practice operates to exclude those with whom the group does not identify.

(1995:295)

Young's view, which is critical of urban communities based solely on the exclusion of difference and the affirmation of sameness, is somewhat antithetical to Wirth in this respect because she is great believer in city life where Wirth tends to view it in terms of what he perceives as its pathologies. The passage quoted above does not specifically refer to city life but to the communitarian ideal, which, in Young's view, is defective because it is exclusionary, while city life is inclusionary because individuals can express themselves in the way they choose to. Her words portray a sense of almost inevitable tension between the individual and community and it is a trope that is evident throughout most of the stories and texts that I consider here. The most recently published collection of critical reviews and studies on Vladislavić, *Marginal*

Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić, has as its central organising principle the idea that the author is engaged, in the totality of his writing, with "a   political resistance to monumental power" (Gaylard 2011a:1). Monumental power is referenced here as the "'big stories' of apartheid in the past or globalisation today", which is similar to my own theorisation in the introductory chapter of apartheid and its theoretical opposite – nationalism[30] – as constituting the overarching metanarratives against which Vladislavić's art speaks. While Gaylard, specifically, and the rest of authors in this collection of essays correctly acknowledge that Vladislavić's "fiction is that of decentralisation, a movement paralleled in the democratisation and the sprawling of Johannesburg" (Gaylard 2011a:2), there seems to be a certain reticence, on their part, to privilege the idea of the city or urbanity as being key to the the author's imagining and represenation of the movement towards a democratic polity. The city, be it Pretoria of Johannesburg, is almost relegated in these reviews to being an inconsequential footnote or coincidental context. To the contrary, I will argue that the notion of urban space, epitomised in the twin-cities of Pretoria and Johannesburg, are central to any analysis of Vladislavić's oeuvre because the specific relations of individual characters to the respective spaces of the city(-ies) shapes their understanding of that space and, ultimately, the ways in which it is or is attempted to be represented. My interest lies in the peculiarities of Johannesburg as symbolising the "colliding worlds" described by Bremner (2004). Whatever one conceives his writing to be constitutive of, I suggest that Vladislavić's portrayal of the dynamics of the local or global (in all their forms) is framed by his own conception and understanding of what the postcolonial urbanity, in which he lives and about which he writes, means.[31]

In light of Young's analysis (cited above), compounding these fissures in *Missing Persons* is the author's use of sometimes unreliable first-person narrators whose words are often undermined by events. With these views in mind, I propose that Vladislavić is at one level, through his fictional narrations and characters, engaged in a form of postcolonial reassertion of agency by the individual. The views

---

[30] Apartheid was also nationalistic, but in a very exclusionary way.

[31] Vladislavić has, in an unpublished interview (cited in Christopher Thurman 2011:50), expressed a discomfort about being characterised as "the Jo'burg guy". While he would rightly want to be thought of more than just "an interpreter of Johannesburg", there is no denying of the centrality of the city to his imaginative vision.

of Wirth, in particular, are relevant here because in 'The Prime Minister is Dead' for instance, there is the rejection of the universalising or totalising trope that the two theorists, Young and Wirth, have suggested to be characteristic of the modern metropolis and a simultaneous substantiation of Young's vision which regards the city as being conducive to agency and subjectivity. The postcolonial city, because of its idiosyncratic history, is attuned and conducive to the instantiation of agency by the individual. The peculiarity of the postcolonial city arises in the main because of the multiple cultures – from the traditional to the colonial and postcolonial – that influence the character of the city and the myriad agencies that act upon it. In the short story 'The Prime Minister is Dead' the narrator's father is one example of such an individual who consciously breaks the mould of how society expects him to behave, even if his motives for doing so are never made quite clear. He seems to behave out of the ordinary purely because he can, because of "blind impulse".[32]

'The Prime Minister is Dead' – the first story in the collection *Missing Persons* – tells the story of a young white boy who witnesses the funeral procession of the slain leader, first from the shoulders of his father before actually becoming part of the cortege as a result of a less than seemly accident that occurs during the march to the graveyard. The Prime Minister died at the hands of a knife-wielding assassin, which in itself is a somewhat "undignified" death for one of his stature. Historically, Hendrik F. Verwoerd (largely viewed as the primary architect of legislated apartheid) was stabbed to death by Dimitri Tsafendas in Parliament in Cape Town on 6 September 1966. The narrator's Granny, who has prior to this moment seemed conjoined to her rocking-chair as she sits in it while crocheting a quilt and listening to the radio on the veranda, announces the news to the family with no shortage of drama and ceremony. She is described as "swaying solemnly" as she bellowed:

> The Prime Minister is dead! Some madman chopped him up with a panga!
>
> (*Missing Persons* 2)[33]

If the grandmother is to be believed, Tsafendas – beyond being a murderer- is also mentally unhinged, making the death even more undignified. Wood (2001:25)

---

[32] The father's freedom of action here can be likened to Dambudzo Marechera who writes in a short poem that alludes to his own unpredictabilty: "I am against war/And those against war./I am against anything/That diminishes the individual's/Blind impulse (cited in eds. Veit-Wild and Schade 1988:35).

[33] All further page references to *Missing Persons* will be preceded with the abbreviation *MP*.

remarks on the "ghoulish glee with which the narrator's grandmother greets the news of the Prime Minister's murder" which can be contrasted to the normal "display of the power and dignity of the state" (2001:25). For Wood, the absurdity is not an end in itself but the story further illustrates the ways in which Vladislavić's writing runs counter to established trends within South African English-language fiction during the apartheid era" (2001:25). Thurman, writing about the story 'Alphabets for Surplus People' from Vladislavić's second collection *Propaganda by Monuments*, remarks that "politics and play are not far removed from each other" in that particular piece (2007:69). A similar point can also be accurately made about 'The Prime Minister is Dead' in that there is a deeper meaning to the story than the apparent surface flippancy with which the Prime Minister's death is treated. Throughout the piece, there runs a consistent interrogation of the meaning of death, or at least the consequences of it. This enquiry is not conducted bluntly, but rather through consistent undertones or understatement. Parallels may also be drawn between the two deaths that are mentioned in the story, that is, that of the Prime Minister as well as that of the narrator's grandfather. The latter dies leaving nothing but a suitcase containing little but the most random and bare mementoes of his existence.

'The Prime Minister is Dead' sets up an uncanny contrast between the death of a Prime Minister and the beginning of a new, lived experience in the shape of the story's young child narrator. Tellingly, the assassination occurs in the winter and the burial in the spring. Winter and spring, as seasons, are used here as metaphors for the passing of an older era and the emergence of a newer epoch. I have suggested earlier that Vladislavić is clearly grappling with representing the transformation of the apartheid city into a postcolonial one. The symbolic death and burial is suggestive of this general notion of transition which is quite prominent among the writer's thematic concerns. The city and suburb in the description are unnamed[34] but the sense of a living history is nonetheless clearly established, and enhanced by use of the first person child focaliser. The assassination itself understandably leaves little impression on the mind of the ten year-old child, who appears to be more concerned with the ceremony accompanying the funeral parade. It is in the imaginative spaces created by the 'limited' vision and comprehension of the narrator that the writer

---

[34] Anecdotal evidence irrefutably points to Centurion in Pretoria, which was formerly known as Verwoerdburg, named in honour of Hendrik Verwoerd.

invites the fusion of new meanings. The Prime Minister's passing away is rather relegated to the status of a footnote to other 'real events' that occupy space in the boy's life. For the narrator, the primary material consequence of the assassination is the compost heap that he and his father are busy constructing at the time Granny makes her melodramatic announcement. The compost heap, with its metaphoric connotations of life-from-death and its obvious paralleling of the winter to spring transformational analogy, becomes the imaginative focus with which the young storyteller associates the dying of the Prime Minister:

> When the Prime Minister died he left us a compost heap, on which practically anything would grow. Mealies grew there once, all by themselves. Granny speculated that Lazarus, who sometimes worked in the garden, must have thrown away the sweetcorn that she had given him for lunch.
>
> (*MP* 2-3)

In this way, the heap of compost with its close yet contradictory evocation of death and rot becomes emblematic of the potentiality that resides even in situations that seem to be the least life-affirming. The gardener's name – Lazarus, the biblical figure who rose from the dead – re-iterates this notion of the figurative recuperation of life from decay or death. I agree with Sue Marais when she surmises that the boy's father is insightful in his comment to Granny – "He leaves more than that" (*MP* 4) – with reference to the fact that the historical Verwoerd leaves behind more than a widowed wife and six children. The father's comment uncannily evokes "the 'grim legacy' of apartheid bequeathed by Verwoerd to South Africa" (Marais 2011:29). Apartheid is the compost heap that the child's mind most closely associates with the dramatic assassination of the Prime Minister.[35]

The key ingredient in the construction of this apparent distinction between death and life is the use that Vladislavić makes of a child's perspective to emphasise the sense of forward-looking, the sense of future possibilities or possible futures. This perspective of a young boy negates to a large extent the prospect of the creation of sterile memories that a much older narrator would have greater predilection for, in light of the tendency of adult narrators to be generally more

---

[35] Chris Thurman (2011:62) has gone on to suggest, in his discussion of Vladislavić's position as a writer, that rotting compost can also be figuratively used to connote apartheid as a putrid carcass from which writers such as Vladislavić gained creative insight, even if they did not necessarily agree with the tenets of the system.

backward-looking. The sense of hopefulness is underlined further still a little later in the story as the boy narrates other outcomes of the untimely demise of the Prime Minister. For instance,

> [o]nce the Prime Minister was dead they started renaming streets after him, and stations, and schools, even pleasure resorts. Then they renamed our suburb after him. They wanted us to live in a monument. It was a new suburb and no one minded.
>
> (*MP* 3)

Sue Marais finds the child-narrator's comment on living in a monument as "an unconsciously ironic and naively wise reflection on the metaphysical entombment of the suburb's inhabitants" (2011:36). Marais reflection here is somewhat morbid because it cannot envision a present and future of possibilities, based on the formula of entombment, for the inhabitants of the re-named surburb. To the contrary, I suggest that lived-in monuments are invigorated and thus reflect a living history. As can be seen in the third chapter when I discuss the authenticity of the WHITES ONLY benches as museum pieces, it is the acted upon space of the museum – even if it houses a non-authentic exhibit – that generates the most controversy and ultimately becomes more meaningful to the museum's visitors because they are able to more intimately react to that open space. This in stark contrast to Room 27 with its frigid roped-off sections and bold prohibitions not to touch or sit on exhibits.

The image above of the suburb as being a living monument strikes me as being particularly poignant because of the use of the geographical space of the suburb as a place to make connections between the dead and the living. This is in contrast to the classic formulation of the monument as a constructed manifestation of a historical memory that is sometimes set apart, even far away from the inhabited and everyday spaces of the city. An example that easily comes to mind is that of the Zimbabwe National Heroes' Acre, located on the western margins of Harare. The only time that it is truly a public monument to the heroes of Zimbabwe's independence struggle is annually on the 11th of August, the public holiday set aside to commemorate the gallants, or when a deceased hero is actually being interred. During the rest of the year access is strictly controlled by AK47-toting soldiers and limited to select groups and individuals. This is in spite of official pretensions that the

place is a national museum or monument. In this case the connections between the sacrifice that the monument celebrates and the lived lives of the vast majority of the people become somewhat tenuous. In the story 'The Prime Minister is Dead', by getting people "to live in a monument", the effect is to enliven the imagined monument, making it a "living" history. Still, there is an uncanny, in-built contradiction in the image of the living monument. The tension arises from the fact that the suburb becomes a monument to a hero of apartheid, in a way which ossifies the space because of the blatant connections to a dead or dying history. The re-naming of the suburb shows the regime as all-invasive as it abuses space for propaganda purposes – not just space set aside for the purpose of monuments – but the everyday living space of the common man and woman. As the character of the suburb evolves, so should the meanings attached to it as dynamic, organic space.

The narrator's mother encourages her husband, who has some sort of undefined military background – judging from his dress and mannerisms – to take the boy to witness the procession. She feels it to be their parental duty to ensure their son becomes a witness to history. In her words,

[y]ou can't go through life taking the great events of history for granted. When one comes along you've got to grab it with both hands.

(*MP* 5)

The mother's sense of history is different from that of her son because for her history is made up of passing fragments that have to be grabbed at, whereas for the boy, it is part of the everyday and does not exist on a separate, distinct plane. The house and suburb that the family lives in are new. Only the grandfather has resisted the move to the new place, saying he is too old to make a fresh start. Somewhat symbolically, he dies a little time after. The question raised is whether he dies because he has failed to "move" with the time. For his part, the father being an ex-soldier of one description or the other, intermittently lives in the past glory of his soldier days. In the present circumstances though, he is reduced to practising his martial art in the sphere of domestic chores like clearing weeds from the yard and making compost. Even more pathetically, the number of men under his command has been drastically reduced to one, his own son. However much the father's

character borders on the farcical, he is an important example in the story of the performance of identity by an individual or individuals. He may not have initially and self-consciously set out to do so but through his acts of delusion he seems to gain agency over his own representation. Writing on the unrelated issue of the staging of xenophobia in *The Crossing*, Flockemann et al (2010) have forcefully argued that performing oneself is not only a form of dissent, but also a means of asserting agency. The categories and criteria of the performance are chosen by the father in this case.

The Prime Minister's funeral procession begins staidly enough but quickly descends from the stately sombreness befitting a slain Prime Minister into what can best be described as a theatre of the absurd. The crowd dutifully lines the streets through which the parade passes on the way to the cemetery, soberly paying their last respects. Mapping the movement from the leafy tree-lined avenues of the suburbs to the centre of the city – from the newer parts of the city to the older – father and son make their way to the marked route, the parent in his old military fatigues and the child inside a wheelbarrow with a clanging wheel, an unintended caricature of a military tank. The revolutions of its metal wheel become comically louder on the "quiet and empty" avenues as they approach the procession route in the city. As the vehicle drawing the gun carriage bearing the coffin of the Prime Minister rolls past, in front of the father and son who are now part of the strangely quiet yet flag-waving crowd, it suffers a mechanical failure that signals the final descent into utter parody and chaos:

> Then, as the gun carriage drew level with us, the truck suddenly coughed, jerked and came to a halt. A cloud of black smoke poured from the exhaust pipe. The soldiers behind faltered. The front ranks began to mark time. Those behind marched slowly and solemnly into those in front. A few of the men dived for cover under the gun carriage.
>
> The band and the first soldiers marched on. Between them and the stalled truck a fascinating gap began to open.

(*MP* 8)

The father "saves" the situation by putting the casket on the wheelbarrow and noisily setting off after the band, and towards the cemetery. He seems to gain strength as he approaches the grave to the extent that the son has to run in order to keep up. A

priest and the other people at the graveside can only open-mouthed and ineffectually gawk at the advancing spectacle. The man runs past the cleric's feebly extended arm to unceremoniously deposit the dead Prime Minister (in his box) in the open grave, as the metaphor of the compost heap is made complete.

In spite of his military background, the father wears the uniform for purposes that do not go beyond mere show, beyond mere spectacle. His performance after the breakdown of the hearse is testimony to his irreverence for the occasion and the person of the Prime Minister. By tipping the corpse into the grave he engages in an act of both resistance and reclamation. He resists the narrative/discourse of patriotic conformity, choosing instead to reclaim agency in terms of his own actions as well as the parameters of his representation. His demeanour at the end is quite subversive of the notions of "normal" behaviour. Parallels can be drawn between him and the figure of Toloki, the professional mourner, in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995). Like Toloki, who fashions his own space in the city by choosing to be a professional mourner, the character of the narrator's father expresses his individuality by not sinking into faceless and anonymous conformity. He does not allow himself to disappear into the mass lining the city streets and to become forever indistinguishable in the grieving human morass. On the contrary, he embarks on a process of self-definition by subverting the historical significance of the assassination through the metaphorical "reduction" of the dead body into compost. I concur to a certain extent with Marais' contention that the compost heap metaphorically represents, on one level, "the 'grim legacy' of apartheid bequeathed by Verwoerd to South Africa" (2011:29). However, I differ from her in that Marais does not seem to suggest any possible transcendence of this 'grim' legacy and, to the contrary, I see the regenerative potential of the compost, as shown in my earlier discussion in this sub-section of the contradictory associations of life and death that are signified by the heap. In the given context, the death of Verwoerd possibly points to the death of moribund ideologies that he represented and the re-birth of the country, much in the same way the compost heap of the story gives life to the sweetcorn and other plants that rely on it for nutrition.

This transformation of history into footnote is epitomised by the undermining of the sense of bereavement and the nonchalance with which the body is dumped. While a first impression would lead to an interpretation of the narrator's father as a

prop of history and adherent of apartheid, given his omnipresent uniform and saluting of the corpse, his actions in the end bear no mark of the conformity suggested by the uniform. In a subtle reminder of the old adage – it is not the clothes that maketh the man – he demonstrates that his soldier's uniform is no more than a relic from his military past. To the contrary, his actions serve to set him apart from the mourning crowd and are a manifestation of his self-individuation because they undermine the discipline implied by the uniform. Though he has no discernable or overt political agenda, the father literally and figurative destabilises the mood of sombre reflection and appropriateness. He literally breaks out from the norm. In a way, the father's position is the antithesis to the communitarian ideal that Young has described, as cited earlier in this chapter, as being undemocratic and effectively anti-urban. Beyond this obvious point, one can also rightly argue that the apparent transformation of the father, from uniform wearing patriot to something of a dissenter, has wider political implications whose significance lies in what the story suggests of the tragi-comical nature of apartheid. The father's dramatic assertion of individual agency therefore also serves to satirise a political system that was essentially flawed, even if it took itself quite seriously.

Continuing with the theme of the city, 'We Came to the Monument' dispenses with the device of a chronological linear narration, as it tells the story of a motley band of families, which has apparently survived some cataclysm and now seeks to return to the city that they used to inhabit and had deserted at the height of a siege effected by an unnamed enemy. The details of this disastrous event are not fleshed out but there is a pervading sense of a homecoming that has been preceded by a violent uprooting. This story is told from twin perspectives, that of the daughter of a man called Steenkamp – who now leads the survivors – as well as that of a literal "living monument" in the form of a statue that imagines it/himself transmogrifying (in a magical realist fantasy) into a flesh-and-blood man. Even this is an overly simplified description of the narrative strategies employed by the author because boundaries of past historical time and the living present are blurred to such an extent that the twin narrators appear to be interchangeable in the unfolding drama. The blurring interchangeableness of the twin raconteurs finds parallel reflection in the constant movement between the ruin that is the monument and the modern presence of the city.

This brings to mind an analysis by the late Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera of the ancient city of Great Zimbabwe. In typically irreverent fashion, he wrote that "It's the ruin not the original which moves men; our Zimbabwe ruins must have looked really shit and hideous when they were brand-new" (Marechera 1978). This statement speaks to the change in meaning and significance of the space of the city from the time it is still a lived-in present to the age when it becomes a historical referent, a monument. Beyond that, is the re-emphasis on the constant interrogation of received meaning and the process of meaning-making that is at the heart of the postcolonial 'project.' In this example of the construction of memory and space there is constant allusion to the notions of a dialectic relationship between history (memory and time) and identity formation within a specific spatiality.

In terms of identity, the statue epitomises a paradox of promise, simultaneously showing awareness of its own inanimate nature as well as its imaginative representational possibilities:

I have a few things to tell, and a lot of time.

I stand with my back to the world, my hands in my pockets. To tell the truth I have no hands: these pockets are empty. I am only surface. There is no more to me than meets the eye.

Except that I have a heart and a brain. And I can invent a tongue. That is all I need to make a monument as quick and fickle as a kite. [...]

I lived in the city once. I lived there for a long time. I stood on my pedestal at a busy intersection, and thought I was fortunate to find myself at the heart of it all, in a place full of people and incident.

I watched carelessly over the people. Generally, they watched carelessly over me. Few of them knew what I stood for. Industry, some might have said, or Courage, or the People Themselves, their past, or maybe their Future.

(*MP* 69)[36]

The statue, in its dual-worldliness, represents the potential of the imagination, in that the extent of its identity is not limited to the stone from which it is carved but rather to

---

[36] Italics in the original.

the conceptual imagination that gives shape to it. Writing on the role of memory, history and representation in selected short stories by Ivan Vladislavić and Zoe Wicomb, Sue Kossew argues that for both writers "the struggle over the meaning symbols in the built environment is embedded in wider conflicts over representation itself" (2010:573).

Related to the above, in the introductory chapter I also mentioned in passing Shane Graham's analysis of what he perceives to be the shortcomings in the existing criticism of Vladislavić's work, relative to the "interconnections between memory, representation and public space [...] despite the author's longstanding interest in architecture and urban space" (2007:73). From such similar points of view then, it is worthwhile to reiterate the point that the author's writing, even in the early stages of his career, goes beyond mere trickery with words and moves into an inter-textual realm of the imaginative transformation of the literary word into a version of material concreteness. The second half of the excerpt from 'We Came to the Monument' above speaks, in particular, of the generation of multiple meanings both with regard to the monument and the city in general. The monument and the city mean different things to different people in the same way alluded to in the epigraph to the preceding chapter, in which the narrator of *Portrait with Keys*: *Joburg and What-What* speculates on the city's amenability to representation of any kind. In this case these multiple meanings are generated by the residents of the city and the transmogrified statue in terms of how they, the residents, relate to the monument and it, in its turn, relates to them:

> *I lived in a city of rock. In the morning a tide of flesh and blood came in, it surged through the streets, crashed against the buildings, voices slid over one another like pebbles. In the evening the tide receded, leaving the streets full of sand.*

> (*MP* 70)[37]

The city spoken of here is one which fills up with people in the morning and yet is deserted overnight. The concrete and stone imagery serves to express a material affinity between the city and the monument. The two constructions are essentially

---

[37] Italics in the original.

similar and are thus only vivified by human presence. When people have abandoned the city, as is the case when they daily return home in this short story, what remains are merely lifeless concrete edifices. Using the naturalistic imagery of the metaphoric tide washing over the city, the statue-narrator graphically illustrates a very human sense of being overwhelmed, as the crowd daily surges into the centre, and relief when the streets empty themselves of their almost stifling human traffic in the evenings.

The statue, which speaks in a voice directed to an unidentified lover, expresses a fear that is the subject of a recurring nightmare. It dreams that one day it will be toppled and left to rot. Just like the city, which he describes as "reeling between monument and ruin," he fears being left to rot to insignificance. In a gesture that is somewhat recuperative, the dream ends with the people scavenging the toppled statue for souvenirs:

My eye becomes a paperweight, my foot a doorstep. What bits of me will make bookends, flowerpots, stepping-stones, a wreck for the bottom of the fish-tank? But those who pull me down are surprised to see a sticky heart pacing out the confines of my broken ribcage.

(*MP* 72)[38]

It is in the act of being physically and metaphorically broken down into so many souvenir pieces that the statue assumes new life as a "living monument." New interpretations evolve about the meaning of the statue as parts of it are put to new uses. The representational significance of the monument transforms as it, or parts of it, occupy different spaces. In his love for the girl, the statue imaginatively appropriates a space next to the bus-shelter. Because he cannot turn his head, he shapes that 'fixed' space in the form of the girl and expresses unrestrained delight if and when she so happens to occasionally occupy the framed space while she passes or waits for the bus. The blank space thus attains significance in the narrator's imagination as a representation of the girl.

---

[38] Italics in the original.

Steenkamp's daughter is the second voice telling the story, but is not named as the object of the statue's love. However, there are subtle hints that she may be, in the way in which she ultimately discovers him now ensconced in the corner formerly occupied by another sculptured sentinel in the Monument. The survivors had hoped to return to their destroyed homes but only go as far as the "Monument" that was built before the current disaster to pay tribute to their ancestors' journey north. This insinuation of the historical Afrikaner trek north from the then Cape colony and the description of a "black block on the broken hills" in the fading light roughly suggest this Monument to be the Voortrekker Monument outside Pretoria.

The girl rediscovers the museum which forms a part of the Monument, with its various artefacts dusty, but otherwise intact. She chooses to wear one of the bonnets she finds and brings it back to the camp, thus inadvertently igniting a debate amongst her family and fellow-sojourners on the use of the monuments and artefacts:
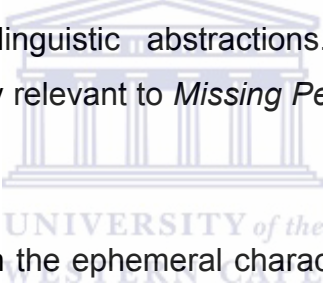
> I told him there were all kinds of useful things in the museum, clothing, blankets, buckets – things we needed. It would be foolish to let them lie there. Grandfather accused me of treachery. Others joined the argument, most of them arguing we needed to be practical.

(*MP* 77-78)

Grandfather is vehemently against this idea which he views as a desecration of the memory of their forefathers. His sarcastic suggestion that they might as well occupy the actual Monument itself has unintended results, as the other people eagerly take him up on it and move in. In a scene reminiscent of the grandfather figure in the story 'The Prime Minister is Dead,' the narrator's grandparents stoically resist joining in the sacrilege until inclement weather forces their hand after a week. The occupation and practical use of the Monument, as well as the artefacts within it transfigure it into a "living monument" in a similar manner to the change effected on the museum bench in 'The WHITES ONLY Bench'. The "ruin" is occupied and recuperated.

In order to imaginatively evoke the city in its current form, Vladislavić takes the route to a an imagined past city. By going back in historical time he is able to set up a 'dialogue' between the monument and the living city, a dialogue which serves to illuminate both spaces and to demonstrate the way in which the postcolonial city has

leakages and slippages. But more importantly he does so in a manner which for the most part seems to have confounded the critics and academy into silence. Gaylard and Titlestad (2006), the editors of a special issue on Vladislavić in *Scrutiny 2*, have remarked on how their explicit call for papers on all his published work did not elicit any response concerning *Missing Persons* (2006:7). In Tony Morphet's essay 'Words First' (2006:89) the collection is mentioned as little more than a bibliographical footnote, whereas Stefan Helgesson's 'Minor Disorders – Ivan Vladslavic and the Devolution of South African English' (2004:780) still seems to privilege the linguistic aspects of the writing. Helgesson finds that the writer is, from *Missing Persons* onwards, generally "engaged with multiple levels of English, from 'oneiric' and 'archaic' language to street-talk and ad-jargon," and that "[t]he profusiveness of his vocabulary is unparalleled in contemporary South African literature, and arguably in anglophone literature anywhere" (2004:780) The body of criticism on the collection, what little of it exists, does not (on the whole) seem to move beyond such cyclic linguistic abstractions. Perhaps the most cogent commentary that is tangentially relevant to *Missing Persons* has come from Popescu who writes:

> Vladislavić meditates on the ephemeral character of history, despite people's attempts to monumentalize it and, therefore, to fix it for eternity. The monuments in his short story are in continuous movement, transformation, and displacement, as a re-confirmation of his interest in the physical and symbolic changes undergone by public spaces and architectural constructions, an interest he displayed in the volume of short stories *Missing Persons* (for instance, in the piece "We Came to the Monument")...
>
> (Popescu 2003:419)

Popescu is mainly writing here in reference to the use of monuments in Vladislavić's 'Propaganda by Monuments' but her analysis is still relevant for its recognition of the uses that the author makes of history and monuments, in full acknowledgement of the lack of fixed meaning in history and space.

2.3 Destabilising Juxtapositions – Writing the Willing and Unwilling Suburban

As earlier alluded to, the story 'Journal of a Wall' – which Sue Marais describes as "[p]erhaps the most overtly self-reflexive story in the collection" (2011:37) – is mainly concerned with the contradictory notions and experiences of cityspace by different characters in the city. The self-reflexivity outlined by Marais above is, as I have already indicated in the Introduction, a central to my hypothesis of dialogic postcolonialism. The story focuses on the diarised observations by a nameless narrator who watches the progress his suburban neighbour is making in the construction of a security wall around the latter's house. At a simplistic level the journal is apparently about the building of a wall. However, it is more accurate to say that while the diary entries narrate the mundane details about the construction of the façade, significantly, they also reveal a lot about the character of the persona making the entries. Vladislavić uses the journal to map the narrator's growing frustrations at what he perceives to be the rebuffing of his friendly overtures by Mr and Mrs Groenewald, his neighbours across the suburban road.

The story and the oppositions it inaugurates in that suburban space illustrate at one level, and to a limited extent, Georg Simmel's perception of the city-dweller as being characterised by what he terms the "blasé attitude". In Simmel's formulation the denizen of the city is marked by the "psychic phenomenon" of "indifference toward the distinctions between things" (1995:35). In this case the indifference is not towards material things but towards people because of the Groenewalds' emblematic act of distancing themselves from any meaningful and intimate human contact with their neighbour. For instance, the narrator only really begins to notice the Groenewalds as distinct individuals three weeks after the delivery of the bricks. For their part they do not have the faintest interest in him as a person and contact is only begun because he has decided to actively pursue them, at first by just observing the construction process:

> Frankly, he was a disappointment to me. It was the first time I had
> really seen him from close range. Indeed, until the day before it would

be true to say that I had never seen him. He was simply the driver of a

car or the pusher of a lawnmower.

(*MP* 27)

I use the concept "blasé attitude"[39] here not as originally envisioned by Simmel, but in a slightly modified sense to describe the reticence to socially engage, even in the circumstances of unavoidable proximity. This characteristic often allows for the possibility that people, whether in the inner city or suburbia, can be next-door neighbours for years without establishing any form of social or other contact, even to the extent of wordlessly passing each other on the street or the corridor of apartment complexes. For some time before the narrator's interest is piqued, the Groenewald husband is conceived as being no more than a faceless "driver of a car" or "pusher of a lawnmower". The Groenewalds, of all the characters in the collection *Missing Persons*, most closely personify the posture which Simmel alternatively describes as a "mental attitude [...] of reserve" (1995:37). Substituting "aversion" or "mutual strangeness" or "repulsion" for "reserve", Simmel further suggests that notwithstanding the cause and context of the contact, it "can break into hatred and conflict" (1995:37). Though the contact between the narrator and the Groenewalds does not deteriorate into open physical conflict of the kind described by Simmel, the text seems to suggest that ultimately this is only avoided as a result of the couple's decision to sell their house and move on. Although Simmel's essay specifically focuses on the "city"[40], I still find it useful in thinking about community relations or lack thereof in suburbia because of the aspects of psychological neuroses that it introduces into the debate.

Furthermore, in spite of the apparent isolation and lack of solidarity which are the hallmarks of suburbia, at another level the diary also reflects on the essence of what Sarah Nuttall (2009) describes as "entanglement" in her theorisations of the visible and invisible connections that link people of diverse backgrounds and ideologies in the postcolonial cityscape. In the 'Journal of a Wall' the narrator's frustrations arise out of the rejection of his willingness to socially engage, but even in

---

[39] In 'Urbanism as a Way of Life', Louis Wirth(1938) similarly writes of a "blasé outlook" in which "reserve" and "indifference" are "devices for immunizing [urbanites] against the personal claims and expectations of others".
[40] The city when seen as being distinct from its suburban and, in the case of a postcolonial city like Johannesburg, township surroundings.

the act of rejection there is the establishment of ties, there is still an element of entanglement. As distinct and separate entities, the blasé posture and voluntary and involuntary contact or engagement are not of themselves my primary concerns here. What is more intriguing is the dialectic that evolves between the two, showing opposing segments/extremes along the continuum of the urban psychic experience.

White suburbia in the pre-democracy South African city is a site of pretence. In 'Journal of a Wall' the Groenewalds and their neighbours, as representations of type, appear to be peacefully going about the business of living in and enjoying middle-class existence. However, there are a number of reminders that point to the reality of the presence of darker undercurrents to the surface contentment. The first and more obvious one is the use Vladislavić makes use of television news, while the second device is the wall itself. Early in the story, the first Saturday on which the speaker notices the delivery of the bricks outside the house across the road, he moves from observing the activities of his neighbours to watching the news on his television set. The gaze or the act of looking is established as a trope quite early in the story and the narrator, as a good diarist, is meticulous not only about such mundane details as the date but is also painstakingly diligent in capturing and documenting the minutiae that he observes as well as his own feelings:

> I returned to the television set. The game was over. I watched for a while, hoping to get the final score. But I was restless. The news came on. It was Michael de Morgan. He told us there was unrest in the township again. He showed us a funeral crowd being dispersed with tear-gas. A bus burned in the background. Then a camera in a moving car tracking along the naked faces of houses, and children peeling away from the vehicle like buck in a game reserve. A cloud of black smoke from a supermarket. Soldiers. Some people hurling bricks into the burning bus. [...] I switched off the set. I was upset enough.

> (*MP* 24-5)

There is a pronounced sense of being apart, of being elsewhere from the scenes captured on camera. The townships are a world removed from the tranquil suburbs and this funeral crowd in the news is very different from the one encountered in 'The Prime Minister is Dead', which I have analysed above. The township houses are

naked in their lack of plasterwork in direct contrast to the plush suburban homes, and the township, through its people, is described as an altogether more vibrant space, even if that vibrancy is necessitated by the urgency of the everyday life-and-death choices that the residents have to make. By disrupting the almost utopian vision of white privilege, epitomised by the suburban space of the city, these TV images serve as poignant reminders of the juxtaposition of the narratives of injustice and deprivation on the one hand, and that of race-based plenitude on the other. The images also suggest the tenuous security of those who have appropriated and currently occupy positions of privilege. In spite of the narrator's refusal to watch the report of the violence in its entirety, "entanglement" – to use Nuttall's term again – has already occurred between his world and that of the children he describes using the metaphor of terrified game animals. In this regard 'Journal of a Wall' serves as a precursor to sections of the novel *The Folly* in that for the ordinary white characters in both texts, the unrest in the townships is mediated through the medium of television. Witnessing the violence in this way creates an illusory distance from which they can "safely" watch history unfold. The TV is, on the viewer's part, an attempt to contain the disturbances within a particular, manageable space while maintaining the deception of an untroubled or undisturbed urbanity.

Later, in the evening of the same day , the narrator drinks himself into a stupor and imagines the bedroom in which he sits, floating away from its foundations as well as the rest of the house, and then disintegrating to pieces brick by brick. The episode begins with a description of the sensation of spinning and the man's attempts to keep the room firmly engaged with its moorings:

> The room wanted to spin. That impulse came to me through the bed-springs, just a little tremor at first, but the walls of the house held fast. I put one foot on the floor, trying to weigh it down. Then it came again, the room trying to twist itself free from the rest of the house, rip up its tap-root and ascend into the sky.

> (*MP* 25)

The incident ends with him vomiting in his bathroom, but not before he hallucinates that the bricks that drop from his bedroom walls, fall into the Groenewalds' yard and self-assemble into a variety of structures, the most fantastic of which are bomb

shelters. This apocalyptic vision is prophetic of the writings, for instance, of Mike Davis on militarised urban spaces in such tomes as *City of Quartz* (1992). The scale of fortification described in the text is not yet at the levels attained in Davis' 'Fortress L.A.', but the founding principles are the same. Although this particular nightmarish paranoia is alcohol-induced, it is remarkable in its illustration of the inexplicable and inextricable psychic bonds and associations that the diary-writer has developed towards his neighbours. The episode also serves as a prelude to a similar one in *The Folly*. In both instances the imagined coming apart of a real or fanciful house suggests a transient or ethereal quality that belies the permanence and solidity that is often evoked by the brick and mortar edifices of the walls. The apparent concreteness is imaginatively undermined and shown to be of an unstable nature.

The high garden wall is an emblematic construction in South African urban space – which Marais correctly refers to as "a country in crisis" (2011:37). While there may be some aesthetic and ultimately financial considerations in the wall's construction, the primary motive for building the wall is that of securing an individual or family's private space and material belongings from the lurking threat posed by the class of dispossessed or have-nots, some of whom are always assumed to be part of the 'hordes' making nightly appearances in the news as described earlier. Quite early in the wall-building exercise, Vladislavić's focaliser doubts Groenewald's building skills:

> The trench seemed to me inordinately deep – although I must say that I have never actually built a wall myself – eighteen inches or more. And at least two feet across. It was possible that he was planning to build an extremely thick, high wall of the kind fairly common in our suburb, in which case the foundations would have to be more secure. But I was more inclined to think that he was simply an amateur. He didn't look as if he had built a wall before either.
>
> (*MP* 26-7)

Besides the obvious search for affinity with Groenewald, in a shared inability to build, the narrator's comments here also reinforce the notion that an illusory, safe haven away from the township unrest is called into question by the "fairly common"

occurrence of the high and thick security walls in suburban spaces.[41] In the act of building the wall the involuntary "entanglement" with the feared other is simultaneously, irrevocably established and acknowledged.

Reduced to the intermittent and surreptitious gaze, for example from behind a newspaper or his own living-room curtains, the narrator considers Groenewald's physical exertions to be feeble and disappointing:

> His neck was burnt slightly red. He was wearing long pants, which looked clean and ironed, not at all like work pants. What bothered me most was the way in which he swung the pick; there was no conviction in it at all. I wished I could take a good look at his hands.
>
> (*MP* 27)

Despite the sense of disappointment, the narrator awaits the coming of each Saturday morning – for Groenewald only builds over the weekend – with a keenness that approaches religious fervour. Not to belabour the point, while the journal is about watching, in the final analysis it does reveal more about the watcher than the watched. The gaze is in this case self-reflexive. Even during the times when he is an obvious presence on his veranda, Groenewald does not deign to return the watcher's gaze: "He never looked my way once" (*MP* 27). There is no acknowledgement of his presence, let alone any encouragement for more substantial engagement. The window from which he sometimes watches the Groenewald household becomes a metaphoric lens through which we examine the narrator's own empty and pitiable existence. His life derives meaning from his involvement with the lives of others, in this case the Groenewald couple. As the wall rises over the weeks, the man discovers that the thing through which he seeks to make contact with his neighbours – the wall – is in actual fact further underlining his sense of separateness and isolation. What he seeks, in fact, is a sense of community or belonging and he is rebuffed at every turn.

Young, in 'City Life and Difference', states that the "the ideal of community denies the ontological difference within and between subjects" (1995:256). While

---

[41] Vladislavić returns to security walls as a feature of the postcolonial metropolis and as an instantiation of one of the thematic concerns in his writing in *Portrait with Keys: Joburg & what-what* (2006).

Young writes in reference to the "city", I still find that the premise of her suppositions is also applicable to analysis of the space of suburbia as "community". Her basic thesis is that the idea of community, much stressed in the work of the "Chicago School" of sociologists, typified by Burgess, Louis Wirth, R. E. Park and others, runs contrary to the democratic project which she thinks ought to be the hallmark of the city. In place of the ideal of community, Young proposes "an ideal of city life as a vision of social relations affirming group difference" believing as she does that "city life instantiates social relations of difference without exclusion" (1995:251). In the story, the narrator seeks identification or oneness with his neighbours who – it must be stated – are not as "different" as the township dwellers on TV. The Groenewalds, for their part, adopt the opposite posture of seeking to affirm their "difference" from their neighbour to the extent of later selling their home and moving out of the neighbourhood. Their decision to move could have been based on other considerations such as looking for more secure accommodation (the wall they construct suggests that crime is a huge concern for them), but the textual evidence focuses on the concurrent offering and repudiation of intimacy.

Pathetically, the central figure of this suburban drama is reduced to absurd, ineffectual gestures such as removing a brick from the pile in the street and marking it with a dot of white paint before returning it in the dead of night. In the end he gains entry to the Groenewalds' closely guarded sanctum only by pretending that he has run out of sugar and needs to borrow some from them. Even this comically desperate ruse is partially repudiated as he is allowed to proceed only as far as the patio and not into the house. He desires to gain access to the house in order to satisfy his ever growing curiosity about the couple. The Groenewalds spurn all attempts at intimate contact to the end and, as a final if unintended insult, sell the house not long after the completion of the wall:

> I stood right next to the truck with my hands on my hips. I dared them to meet my eye but they seemed not to notice me, or not to care. They put a few boxes on the back seat of the car and followed the pantechnikon. I watched until they disappeared.

> (*MP* 44)

The intrepid narrator, all the previous humiliation notwithstanding, still insists on having the last word and quickly shifts his gaze to the new occupants and the now-complete wall. It is also thematically significant that the Groenewalds sell their house soon after they complete the wall because this points to the sometimes precarious and fluid nature of urban life, a precariousness they make an ironic and futile attempt to obviate by building the wall. They try to hide from the world but the world catches up with them, much like the unrest of the townships that comes sipping through the television screens.

The postcolonial and post-apartheid period in South Africa is marked by the emergence of new canons of literary endeavour, diverging from the overtly political purpose of protest literature of an earlier epoch that was more attuned to servicing the political struggle against apartheid. The urban texts of Vladislavić and other writers like Phaswana Mpe and Marlene van Niekerk for instance, avail themselves, as fertile fields of the imagination, of various problematics to exercise the enquiring mind. In light of this, it is worth examining Vladislavić's strategy to deal with difference in the city in a way which, in the words of Gaylard, exemplifies "postcolonial individualism [as] a space of opposition to liberalism's cultural uniformties" (2006:67). At the heart of this apparent postcolonial existential crisis of alienation, is the need to affirm what Iris Marion Young has, in a different context, described as "group difference", which can be defined simply as the categorisation of people into variegated classes according to considerations of wealth or education or religion and so on. In other words, Vladislavić's writing, in this instance and elsewhere, can be read as contesting a nationalist interpretation of individualism (to paraphrase an earlier citation of Gaylard) and beyond that, is exemplifying the manner in which diverse individuals can socially express their difference "without exclusion", or seeking to dominate those who may be configured as Other(s).

2.4 Fantastically Ordinary – Fragments of the Urban Spectacular

Of all the stories in the collection *Missing Persons*, one of the shortest yet most engaging is 'When My Hands Burst into Flames'. It is surprising to me, then, how the story has been almost totally overlooked as an object of critical analysis, from the time of the earliest reviews after the publication of the collection in 1989 to the most

recent available critical text on Vladislavić, Gerald Gaylard's (2011) edited volume *Marginal Spaces – Reading Ivan Vladislavić*. In the volume there are three articles on the section on *Missing Persons*, one of which is a short, two-page long review by Tony Morphet (2011). The remaining pieces are full-length academic articles by Sue Marais and Chris Thurman. All three pieces do not refer to 'When My Hands Burst into Flames,' even by title and as a consequnce, apart from Neil Lazarus' (2011) 'Cosmopolitanism and the Specificity of the Local in World Literature', my consideration of the story in this section is, at the microcosmic scale of this particular short narrative, akin to my breaking new ground. In keeping with my engagement with Gaylard's 'Death of the Subject' research article at the end of the sub-section above, I read this story as a reiteration of the affirmation of the subject in Vladislavić's writing, contrary to the deliberately ironic suggestion in the title of Gaylard's essay.[42] There is, consequentially, little danger of overemphasising the fact that this paradigm is of utmost importance as a tool of analysis across the breadth of Vladislavić's oeuvre because of the manner in which the relations between the individual and social as well as physical space are foregrounded and staged. In relation to the above, I have chosen the story 'When My Hands Burst Into Flames' partly because it is also one of the most effective in its imaginative representation of the contradictions of a city and city-life. It is the only one in this volume with a specific reference to Hillbrow, and by implication Johannesburg, as a named space.

Writing on the difficulties encountered in the reading and writing of the African city, Mbembe and Nuttall have emphasised the need for a reappraisal of the current approaches to space and the production of space in the postcolonial metropolis. They posit that cityspace,

> [...] is a space that is not only "produced", it is also a space that circulates, that is constantly in motion. One of the more potent ways of disrupting and "jamming" the dominant imaginings of Africa is therefore to concern ourselves anew with space and discontinuities [...] to overturn predominant readings of Africa, we need to identify sites within the continent, entry and exit points not

---

[42] I use the phrase "deliberately ironic" here to explain the fact that whilst the title of the essay apparently suggests the opposite, the central thesis is actually the affirmation and "(re)vivication of the individual subject" (Gaylard 2006:67)

usually dealt upon in research and public discourse, that defamiliarise commonsense readings of Africa.

(2004:351-2)

The "commonsense readings" referred to by Mbembe and Nuttall are related to the anthropological and cultural studies paradigms which tend to be premised on Africa's inferiority or difference, as opposed to looking at Africa in the same terms as everywhere else. Granting that this analysis is generally true for most of the stories in the collection, it has particular and poignant resonance in 'When My Hands Burst into Flames'. It is possible to see the story as one way of achieving a new "entry point" into the African metropolis described above through its juxtaposition of the fantastical, even magical realist imaginary with the rational and concrete imagery suggested by the high-rise office and shopping blocks that are described in this narrative of a particular postcolonial urban space. The 'presence' of irrational fantasy in the context of the rationalised reality of the modern city lends to the story peculiar nuances of contrasts and meetings between conceptions of the old and new. The irrationality of the fantastical or magical realism, as I stated in the introductory chapter, is an essential aspect of postcolonial letters because the disputation of the received knowledge that is at the heart of conventional western logic or the Enlightenment, and Vladislavić deploys it to good use in this short story in order to put into crisis the epistemological foundations of rationality, of what it is that is generally accepeted as normal behaviour or what is perceived as abnormal.

In Vladislavić's writing, the city, among other aspects, therefore "always operates as a site of fantasy, desire and imagination", to use Mbembe and Nuttall's (2004:356) formulation. This 'new' envisioning of the city is in stark contrast to the former version that subsists, for example, in writing that has been characterised as 'protest literature' with its emphasis on versions of social realism. I propose that it is in these ways that much of Vladislavić's imagining of the city offers a more nuanced view of the city and individual subjectivities in the space of the city than some prior texts which tended towards engaging and forceful critiques of the apartheid state, which however largely lack nuance.[43] These are however not the only distinctive

---

[43] I have in mind here texts like Menan du Plessis' *A State of Fear* (1983) and *Longlive!* (1989), as well as Michael Cope's *Spiral of Fire* (1987).

features of the story under   consideration. More importantly, this narrative aptly illustrates a privileging of the operations of the eye over the auditory senses in the performance of identity within a given cityspace. In the process of identity formation and performance on the streets, even though much of the attention focuses on the narrator as the central character in the unfolding drama, the people and spaces, with whom and within which he interacts and operates, also become active and unwitting role-players as well as witnesses. The question of narrative strategy here becomes doubly important because we only have the authority of the first person narrator to rely on and it is only his view of life and the streets which we have. The distinctiveness of the "performance" is not only marked by its supposed quirkiness but also by the responses of the other people to seeing a man with hands that *seem*[44] to have spontaneously combusted. On the city street, strange or odd occurrences have become so familiar as to seem normal.

Neil Lazarus (2011:132) has suggested that 'When My Hands Burst into Flames' is an example of how Vladislavić's writing is concerned with the decentering of the subject, an aspect that is common to most postmodern writing. If by "decentering the subject" Lazarus means, as it seems to me, the negation and pushing of the subject to the margins, I would suggest that, to the contrary, Vladislavić (in general but especially in a story like 'When My Hands Burst into Flames') is actually engaged in imaginatively bringing the marginal or ordinary subject into foreground or centre-stage of the imaginary. This is so because, considering the contemporary socio-political realities of the time of *Missing Persons'* publication, Vladislavić deliberately eschews the metanarratives, preferring instead to focus his and our attention on the otherwise little ordinary and quirky details of the postcolonial city.

My hypothesis in this respect is that the urban subject is recentered to a new locus, which new location is effectively a new centre for the enunciation of identity,

---

[44] The emphasis on *seem* here is deliberate because a possible, different reading of the story, which is equally as plausible as the first, is that in fact the narrator possibly suffers, periodically, from epileptic seizures and that the onset of such a seizure occasions the sensation of burning hands. The spoon inserted in his mouth when he experiences the burning sensation whilst in the bank queue would therefore be meant to stop him from swallowing his tongue as is normally done for epilepsy sufferers when they experience fits or attacks. His hands do not actually combust but he imagines that they do so and being a first-person narrator, the whole story is appropriately framed around the burning of the hands which only he can perceive.

also taking into consideration that the characteristics of urban spaces have more to do with the qualities of their inhabitants than just the mere fact of physical infrastructure like buidings. The process of re-configuring takes place through processes of deconstruction, as I have noted earlier, and new ways of seeing and making meanings about the city are inaugurated. The basis for Lazarus' conclusion that the narrator represents a "latent terrorist" remains problematic and elusive because he seems to make the assumption that the main character of the story is black, something which is patently untrue. In seeking to illustrate his notion of Vladislavić's writing as exemplars of "world literature" with "universal localisms," Lazarus chooses to overlook the peculiarities of Johannesburg as postcolonialising urban space, and elects instead to read 'When My Hands Burst into Flames' as a kind of political allegory in which the down-trodden mass of black people, of whom the narrator is the supposed emblem, imaginatively burn the city in protest. An exclusively political reading precludes the nuances of identity formation and appropriation of city spaces, threads which one can trace throughout the texts discussed in this thesis and are central aspects to the ways in which Vladislavić imagines and represents the postcolonial city. Lazarus does not problematise citiness as a category in the way that I do throughout this thesis.

'When My Hands Burst into Flames' begins innocuously enough by describing the mundane, routine activity of going to a bank building in Hillbrow, doing little to hint at the extraordinariness of the events that are about to unfold. However it is soon made clear that Johannesburg and Hillbrow, as general and specific spatialities, are (from the perspective offered by the narrator at least) sites of the marvellous and the spectacular:

> Wednesday afternoon, mid-winter, finds me at the counter in the United Building Society (Hillbrow), minding my own business, making a cash withdrawal, when my hands burst into flames.
>
> (*MP* 99)

If there is an agenda as suggested by Lazarus above, then it is more broadly a moral one than purely political, if one considers the fact that the narrator's hands begin to flame when he is in a bank – a symbol of capitalist avarice. The sudden catching fire of the narrator's hands disrupts the dull monotony of his "minding [his] own

business", introducing both a challenge to be dealt with and an excitement to be savoured. The city, which from a certain perspective could be seen as a place of order and predictability, again reveals itself instead to be highly fluid, complex and spontaneously dynamic. In the moment of crisis the narrator is still able to apply his gaze to those around him:

> I stop resisting and look around. I am surrounded by a circle of old faces. It is the end of the month and the place is full of pensioners. Their mouths open and close. I speak but I cannot hear my voice. The cashier is wearing too much eye-shadow: her lids look bruised. The security guard's cap has fallen over his eyes.

> (*MP* 100)

In spite of the apparent disruption caused by his flaming hands, the narrator is still able to calmly look around at the banal details of the faces surrounding him. He does so with what may be termed a trained eye, thus accentuating the very urban idiosyncrasy of unflappability that is one of the defining characteristics of the occupier of urban space. This quality of poise or level-headedness in the most shocking situations has its logic based in what Simmel has referred to as the "blasé attitude," as I have already described earlier in this chapter. It is born of an aloofness that is caused by the nature of city-life, in which, because of the high population density of the city, personal space is limited and, depending on the subject's circumstances, at times frequently intruded upon. This is likely to result in the development of a combination of a thick skin and the detachment just described – or as a result of a desire not to appear foolish.

The city crowd is equally composed. In the excerpt quoted in the paragraph above the mouths of the pensioners wordlessly open and close, and the narrator himself speaks, but is unable hear his own voice. The sense of sight has therefore been privileged above those of speech and hearing. Taking the way in which people in the bank look at him as being representative of a type of city-gaze, he makes the following comments on their collective gaze:

> I can't hear a thing. The mouths of the old faces open and close. I think I decipher expressions of concern and dismay, and this banishes less

charitable thoughts from mind. I have seen people behave this way at the scene of an accident.

<div align="right">(MP 100)</div>

This episode as narrated has a sensory effect similar to watching film without the sound or looking at crowds 'noiselessly' pass in the street as the viewer stands behind the thick plate-glass of shopping windows. Typically, the crowd looks upon the spectacle of burning hands or the imagined accident scene quite intently, but the enthralment hardly ever translates into active interference or assistance. At an individual level, considerations uppermost in the minds of the people in the crowd centre on questions of whether one remains just a witness to the spectacle or actually takes responsibility for it by "joining" it. The implications of joining it are manifold but one of the primary consequences is that of the opening up and overlapping – or entangling as Nuttall (2009) refers to it – of personal space. By consciously getting oneself involved in the drama of other peoples' lives one also has shared responsibility in the final outcome, hence the reticence on the part of many in the city to reach out beyond the barriers of their defined personal space to fellow city residents, even in extreme situations of need.

One way of removing the aspect of strangeness from the spectacle is by prolonging the gaze of the crowd and in this case this is achieved by taking the spectacle from the dour confines of the bank building into the streets which are literally and figuratively laden with kindling and fuel for the narrator's glowing hands. While the streets provide greater scope for the enactment of the spectacle, they also allow for the it to become familiar:

> I take the card and the wad of ten-rand notes she pushes under the glass. The money bursts into flames at once.
> Cupping this small fire in my palms, careful not to drop any cinders, I walk out into Kotze Street. [...]
> Pedestrians passing by look at me curiously and I show them my hands and shrug my shoulders.

<div align="right">(MP 101)</div>

The passing pedestrians muster no more than short-lived curiosity at the sight of the man and continue on their way. There is no sense that they are fully engaged with

the oddity that is the narrator's burning hands; they epitomise a reaction that is at an opposite extreme to the fully rapt city gaze. Their attitude can perhaps be described as one of 'uncommitted' curiosity in the sense that while they acknowledge the strangeness of the scene, the pedestrians either have more pressing business elsewhere and thus have no time to dally, or they just treat the sight as one of the many strange occurrences that one is bound to encounter in the city streets. The oddity is rationalised as being an element of how one daily experiences the city and that the people merely move on, probably to further strangeness just around the next corner or city block. Put alternatively, such as in Simmel's formulation on what causes the blasé attitude, the overexposure of the senses to certain stimuli, for example in the strange sights that the city apparently constantly offers, leads in some respects to the numbing of the senses against the strange and spectacular (1995:35-6). In this way the reactions are not those of surprise and wonder, but rather those of familiar indifference. Such kinds of meaning-making as a part of the process of identity formation in the city is an aspect of writing and representing the city that Vladislavić continually returns to in this text and others.

In the time that the narrator moves out into the streets he has forgotten the spoon that has been placed in his mouth by the bank teller with the help of the security guard. (When he collapsed they had probably assumed him to be epileptic.) As he tries to enter a shop called Fontana a group of boys points and laughs at him and he assumes that the cause of hilarity is his burning hands which he cannot hide in his trouser pockets without burning his clothes. Wandering "this way and that," he happens upon a mirror in the display window of a gift shop and he stops to "observe the spectacle [of him]self"[45]:

> To my consternation I see that the spoon is still sticking out of my mouth. I spit it out. Then I concentrate on the sight I have come to see: Man with burning hands. I look at myself from various angles, in profile, hands at sides, hands

---

[45] In a way, the self-reflexive nature of the act of looking at oneself in the mirror becomes the figurative instantiation of the dialogic postcolonialism that I propose, in the Introduction, to be at the heart of Vladislavić's representation of the city. In looking at himself in the mirror there is an intimation of doubt (however momentary) about the reality of his self, much in the same way that I suggest Vladislavić's narrations of Johannesburg (read as constituent parts of a larger whole or project) to be continually self-reflexive and interrogating of the logic and justification of the assumptions that they seem to make about the postcolonial urbanity that is Johannesburg.

covering face, and so on. For a moment I am filled with horror but this soon passes.

<div align="right">(MP 102)</div>

Using the 'trick' of the mirror, the narrator is able to project himself outside of his own spectacle. In this moment "outside" he is temporarily able to create an ironic distance between the perception he has of himself and the man he sees in the mirror. This is expressed through his momentary horror at the apparition he sees in the mirror. But as with most things that are connected to the hyperrealist dimensions of the lived experience of the city, the sensation of the spectacle is transitory and is quickly replaced by the acceptance of the strange. The horror soon passes as he does not find his fiery hands quite as objectionable to the sense of what he considers proper. At least not in the manner he finds the spoon sticking out of his mouth in the middle of a busy city street to be disagreeable. The man's use of the mirror bears close resemblance, at a certain level, to Lacan's "mirror-stage" in the process of child development as described by Todd McGowan. McGowan paraphrases Lacan as arguing that "infants acquire their first sense of self-identity (the formation of an ego) through the experience looking in a mirror and relating to their bodies" (2007:1). When the narrator looks in the mirror he looks at his body as if seeing it for the first time.

The act of familiarisation of the strange and out-of-place is completed by his removing of the spoon from his mouth, and the crowd's new reaction to seeing him affirms this. Without the spoon the narrator becomes "ordinary" in the eyes of the other people. The flames on his hands are inextinguishable, suggesting normalcy:

> With my hands hanging at my sides like two forgotten torches I go along the arcade towards Pretoria Street. There is a queue of people at the Computicket kiosk, but not one of them stares at me. I retrace my steps with my hands more prominently displayed. No reaction. It seems that without my spoon I am an ordinary man. I find this irritating.

<div align="right">(MP 102)</div>

The irony of the ordinariness of a man without a spoon in his mouth, notwithstanding his blazing hands, is not lost upon the narrator and he almost wistfully recalls the

effect that the sight of him with a spoon in his mouth has only just recently engendered. He goes back past the people lining up outside the kiosk in order to attempt to recreate the particular reaction the spoon had evoked. The narrator is irritated that without his spoon he is denuded or deprived of the element of spectacle but it is also possible that the crowd's indifference, if it is such, is a result of a process of desensitisation that results from prolonged exposure to spectacle and oddities in urban living. The sight of a man with burning hands has acquired the status of the banal and clichéd, yet the man with a spoon in mouth – an altogether more plausible and probable sight – draws the greater response of surprise from those who witness it. Such contrasting reactions serve to illustrate how, in the city space, aesthetic and other valuation categories are often inverted.

The narrator begins to enjoy and make the most of his new-found status as a human-lighter, proceeding along the pavements and torching wicker-baskets that are being sold by curio-sellers. He watches in obvious delight as "a German tourist buys a conflagration and carr[ies] it away proudly" and then follows her to the Chelsea Hotel, "sniffing the smoke and watching the embers scatter." By torching the baskets he has created a new kind of artwork from the old in the same way in which Simeon Majara, the central character of 'Curiouser' in *The Exploded View*, refashions collections of masks by combining some of them into lanterns.

In Exclusive Books the man with the burning hands sets entire shelves on fire and yet the customers react nonchalantly, continuing to go into the bookshop to browse amongst the blazing books as if it is the most natural thing in the world. The strange has become familiar and the narrator grows into his role, traversing the locale of Hillbrow and leaving his fiery signature. The burning hands have become a central feature to the performance of his identity.[46] They are the hallmark of his individuation which would not have been possible in the absence of the watching crowd. Writing of the street scene in New York, Vivian Gornick highlights, in 'On the

---

[46] This reading of the story approaches the narrator's situation and relationship to the crowd from one angle that of the seeming indifference of the urbanites, which I have explained by referring to Simmel's idea of reserve or aloofness. A second possible and equally plausible angle to the story is the idea that the burning of the hands is something that only the narrator perceives. In this reading the suggestion is that his hands do not burn at all but rather that he is only under the illusion that they do. As they begin to burn when withdrawing money, it may be a symbol of greed, which indeed infects everything (and in that sense incinerates everything).

street: nobody watches, everyone performs', the complementary roles of the crowd and 'actors' in describing her reaction to a group of street-performers:

> They had performed and I had received. My laughter had given shape to an exchange that would otherwise have evaporated in the chaos.

(Gornick 1996:2)

The watching crowd gives shape to the man's performance, like Lacan's mirror gives shape to the child's ego.

What is achieved by the story 'When My Hands Burst into Flames', in particular, and as I argue in this chapter, is that Ivan Vladislavić is able to make the strange or unfamiliar seem normal or everyday, notwithstanding its apparent quirkiness. The effect can be described in the terms of bringing the peripheral (or the carnivalesque – after Rabelais) into the centre or mainstream of the urban imaginary.[47] Elements of the magical or fantastical that are normally associated with country or rural contexts are brought or used to actively think about ways of being in the city, again marking Vladislavić's writing as postmodern in that respect. However, Wood (2001) somewhat self-contradictorily, commits an interpretative faux pas similar to the critics she quotes as having wrongly sought to ascribe a unified meaning to Vladislavić's writing when she herself repeatedly writes of "South African society" (2001:21). This would suggest that such a South African society is an indistinguishable unified entity, whereas the reality is that many possible communities of South Africans are discernable. This point bears particular relevance to my own hypothesis of Vladislavić being engaged in writing the city into being because, as I shall argue, there are multiple kinds of urbanities that are possible and revealed through the author's narrations of Pretoria and Johannesburg, primarily. Even the very aspect of urbanity or the urban condition is crucially missing from Wood's formulation of what constitutes this "South African society", such that the city – as a way of being or a social imaginary – is reduced to inconsequential footnote. To the contrary, I suggest that whatever narrative tools he utilises, be it humour or parody or the carnivalesque

---

[47] In earlier research (Ngara 2009) I have proposed that whereas in most modern literature characters have to leave the city in order to experience the magical, Toloki in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* "enacts, amongst other possibilities, an inversion of this construction as he actually leaves his rural home, and its implied rusticity, but actually ends up discovering the magical dimension to his persona in the middle of the city. The city is normally viewed as the epitome of modernity and logic, and not the pantheon of the preternatural and inexplicable."

and so on, Vladislavić is throughout the vast majority of his oeuvre constantly engaged and re-engaging with the notions of representing the postcolonial city.

2.5 Joint Presence in Confined Space

'The Terminal Bar', the final story in this instalment, sharply contrasts with 'When My Hands Burst into Flames' in the way in which the former is marked by a dominant feeling of restricted or confined space, whereas in the latter literal freedom of movement and imaginative freedom are pronounced. 'The Terminal Bar' also highlights a marked sense of stasis or inertia, as most of the characters in the story tragi-comically have the air of people waiting for "something" to happen. The form and timing of the cathartic event is undefined, adding to this aura of aimless drifting as the characters appear to be continuously ready to go somewhere, yet are undisputably stuck in their present circumstances. I do not suggest, though, that the characters are all one-dimensional and lacking in depth. On the contrary, even in the confined spatiality of the airport terminal-building, they display a wide range of responses and coping strategies to their conditions. The forced "joint presence" of the characters serves to enhance the sense of a siege or laager mentality among the characters as they have no choice but to co-exist.

The setting of the story in an airport departure lounge foregrounds the idea of travel, and perhaps more importantly, the notion of flight as a metaphor for escape. But as soon becomes apparent, the majority of the role-players are literally grounded in that space. The story, therefore, centres on how identities are imaginatively constructed and performed within the confines of that particular cityspace. The passage of time is dismissed as inconsequential and is ultimately unacknowledged as the hours are only recognised in terms of the opening and closing of the bar – which are in themselves arbitrary events dependant on the random whims of the long-suffering barman and proprietor:[48]

---

[48] In their redolent postures and interminable waiting, the characters in 'The Terminal Bar' have similar airs about them to Samuel Beckett's dramatis persoane in *Waiting for Godot*.

Another night in the Terminal Bar, in the Transit Lounge. Another kick-out time, another unhappy hour. It is always closing time here in the Terminal Bar, but no one leaves. I switch off the aquarium lights and switch on the fluorescent tubes. No one takes notice.

(*MP* 105)

The Terminal Bar is a place of contradictory existences and identities. While "Terminal Bar" and "Transit Lounge" suggest the potential fluidity of various comings and goings, the majority of the patrons in the bar appear interminably stuck there, thus belying the flux suggested by the context of the "Terminal Bar". Save for the odd individual making a desperate dash to an almost mythical plane that is already at the end of the runway, departures from the bar and the lounge are highly infrequent. Time passes by un-regarded and the Terminal Bar becomes the centrepiece of its patrons' existence, as their lives are marked by the cycle of the bar's opening and closing. The journeys inferred by the spatial location of the airport-building remain un-begun. In a way the patrons are reduced to a version or aspect of Simmel's "blasé attitude" in their seemingly eternal display of terminal indifference. I use terminal here to reflect the cyclic nature of their lives which are marked by fixity as opposed to movement. The indifference is terminal in the sense that there is a lack of productive, regenerative engagement amongst the characters, as well as between characters and the space that they occupy beyond appropriating the Terminal Bar as a "home away from home". It is a space for sedentary practices. The phrase "Time, gentlemen!" which opens the story and is repeated on several occasions, is really an unanswered call to action. The patrons, in a way, become literally and figuratively ossified as they appear to turn into or become part of the fixtures in the bar, remaining there constantly to forlornly weep, sleep and vomit. In this evocation of the hypnotic stupor of the characters, there are shades of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (2006), another aspect which which other critics of Vladislavić seem to have overlooked. In these narrations of cyclic misadventures, which underpin what can be taken to be a veiled allegorical reference to the sterility of apartheid and the apartheid city,[49] the characters wait (as do the personae in Beckett's *Waiting for*

---

[49] The basis of such a reading or interpretation lies in the imagery of unfulfilled desires to flee the city en masse in the face of impending changes in the material circumstances of the residents, changes which they appear ill-equipped to countenance, hence the rush to the exit point that the airport represents. The flight

Godot) for an escape that does not materialise. In this regard, I fully concur with Felicity Wood's intepretation of the story as depicting a group of white South Africans gathered at the airport and waiting [in vain] to flee their country while they bear the various trappings of their possibly soon-to-be-past lives, for example the Cadac Mini-Braai and the Kreepy Krauly (Wood 2001).

The women and children are largely confined to the equally inappropriately-named Transit Lounge next-door. Like the bar, the lounge is an ironic space because the suggestions of transit are again belied by the unending occupation of the place by the women and children who are generally excluded from the lives of the men:

> Perhaps a few will roll out of the batwing doors to the Transit Lounge, where their wives and children lie asleep. There is a place here for women and children too, a home of sorts.

> (*MP* 105)

The Terminal Bar is a gendered space and the only female presence tolerated within this precinct is that of Josephine who works there as a cleaner. The obvious irony, though, is that the masculinity represented by the patrons is an emasculated kind, in which maleness remains but as a pathetic shadow and representation of its former self. Keeping the women and children in the Transit Lounge is virtually the last desperate act possible, through which the little that remains of the said machismo can be asserted. In the midst of the disaster that dispossesses them of the status they had enjoyed in the world outside the airport, the men cling to the shards of a shaken manliness. Through their drunken ramblings they display the extent of their enfeeblement as they take refuge in the Terminal Bar. They seek refuge not only from the chaos which they cannot exercise control over, in the city outside, but also from their families who serve to underline the men's hapless position of failure. The aquarium in the bar aptly epitomises the situation of the men with its transparent walls beyond which, however, the fish cannot venture. The men are figuratively and literally stuck in the bar.

---

from the city is not rationalised by the characters and they are reduced to the absurd and interminable waiting for planes that do not come to their rescue.

Some specific representations of the absurd are to be found spatialised in the Terminal Bar, especially in the form of the character of Boshoff, who ultimately shoots dead his wife and daughter in order to vent his pent-up frustrations.[50] Boshoff is known by the patrons to be short-fused and frequently whips out his revolver or tears open his shirt whenever he is upset at one person or situation. The barman, from training and being usually the only one who is sober, is the one to first notice when Boshoff's bouts of anger are close to erupting:

> I can see trouble coming. Boshoff is getting angry, perhaps even angry enough to rip his shirt. No one's listening to him, they are all crowded around the tub, where the Kreepy Krauly is gasping and gurgling as it comes back to life. I turn my back on them to polish some glasses: that way I can watch them in the mirror.
>
> Here it comes. Boshoff pulls out his revolver and fires a shot in the ceiling. Fists fly, the tub overturns, Smith rushes in (Moloi hot on his heels) screaming, "Barbel! Kurper!"

(*MP* 108)

In this confined, contested space the restrained energy of all the characters occasionally breaks out in negative ways such as illustrated in the excerpt above. The barman, from whose point of view the unfolding tragi-comedy, wears the mask and demeanour of detachment, clinging to the pretence of tranquillity from a by-gone era. On a later occasion he describes Boshoff (who is a fretful opposite) in the metaphor of a caged animal that had been previously "used to the wide open spaces" (*MP* 115). Like the caged animal, Boshoff needs little excuse to lash out. Wilson[51] is a salesman of Kreepy Kraulys – a self-propelled pool-cleaning gadget –

---

[50] From the point of view of plot in the story, the sequence of events that lead to the shooting by Boshoff, of his wife and daughter, present a certain amount of difficulty. The barman and proprietor of the Terminal Bar (who is also the narrator), indicates in the first instance that the killings take place before the date of the braai (*MP* 109) and therefore the arrival of the soldiers. But then again he also suggests that the shooting occurs a few nights after the departure of the soldiers. (*MP* 115) This fault-line in the trajectory of the plot is, however, of less significance than the act by Boshoff of to taking his wife and daughter into the departure lounge and shooting both in the head without any obvious provocation or reason. He cannot, however pull the trigger when he turns the gun on himself, suddenly discovering "that he had too much to live for". Perhaps he has something to live for now that he has rid himself of his wife and daughter who, in a way, epitomise and remind him of his failures as a man.

[51] When Wilson offers to demonstrate how the Kreepy Krauly works, Boshoff feels that the upstart salesman – always a figure to be hated – is not only invading their space, but simultaneously seeking to become the centre

and is one of the last arrivals in the bar. The Kreepy Krauly – a South African invention- is so prominent in the story that I would like to think it has some allegorical or symbolic import. The most probable, in light of earlier considerations of Vladislavić's narrations of the city as being constitutive of a dialogic postcoloniality, is that the gadget is a parallel metaphor to the city and modernity. For the critic Verna Brown the Kreepy Krawly's death throes after being shot more directly suggests the "demise of white South Africa" (1990:129), while Wood sees the passage describing the Kreepy Krauly's death as a poignant "comment on that society, providing a vivid image of the paranoia and random violence that characterises it" (2001:26). Later in the story as the Kreep Krauly runs amok, it serves as a cautionary tale of the latent pitfalls for ultimate self-consumption and destruction that lie in the version of modernity that the late-apartheid city represents. For Wood, the instrument's 'murder' can be read as the satirising of "commodity fetishisation" (2001:27). The situation or context of the 'death' acts as self parody in the ridiculous juxtapositions of "the farcical and the ghastly" (Wood 2001:27) that it instantiates, highlighting yet again the aspect of dialogic postcolonialism that I argue Vladislavić's writiting to be constitutive of. Further, the laager mentality, which the characters in the story display and which is the hallmark of the segregated apartheid city, teases into view the subtle political allegory that is utilised by Vladislavić.

Marais (2011:39), however, views the symbolism of the gadget slightly differently, seeing it as the reincarnation of the tapeworm that supposedly drove Tsafenda to kill Verwoerd. The tapeworm is part of the mythology – based on Tsafenda's alleged confessions – surrounding the assassination, and is the subject of the story 'Tsafenda's Diary' which is also part of the *Missing Persons* collection, but which does not form part of my broader analysis in this thesis. In Marais' formulation the Kreepy Krauly, as the fattened present incarnation of the tape worm, is a "symbol for society gone wrong" (2011:39). In her argumentation for what she refers to as the "most obvious explanation" (2011:39), Marais seemingly eschews the symbolic significance of the Kreepy Krauly's "death", choosing instead to focus on its relevance when still "alive". The obvious question or gap that remains

---

of attention through his demonstration. The situation quickly descends into the absurd chaos described by the narrator in the excerpt quoted above.

unanswered in her theorisation is that of the direct correlations between the tapeworm supposedly eating up the insides of Tsafenda, thus driving him to murder, and how the living gadget represents the fact of internal societal rot. I would suggest, instead, that the violent "murder" of the Kreepy Krauly is necessary to complete the metaphor of rot, otherwise it would remain a largely innocous commodity.

Besides the absurd, the bar is also haunted by the macabre – described by Marais as a "grotesque and manic microcosm" (2011:40). Father O'Reilly, one of this eclectic mix of characters who patronise the bar, suggests a braai as a distraction from the mounting madness. The corpses of Mrs Boshoff and her daughter Little Bossies are in storage – supposedly for interment when the situation becomes more practical – in the refrigerator from which Weinberg (reluctantly on his part) and the barman have to retrieve cabbages for the salad.

The preparations for the braai are interrupted and effectively forgotten by the melee caused by the sudden arrival of a group of soldiers in the Transit Lounge, where the women and children are by now in a huddle. The comedic aspect of the tragi-comic frame of the story is revived, in spite of the cowering, helpless women and children, through the performance of Smith and Moloi in the face of the real threat posed by the soldiers:

> Weinberg shivers. "Those jokers are going to get us into a lot of trouble."
> "Damn right," Boshoff says. "Any second now these terrorists are going to start performing for the camera."
> "Maybe someone should tell them that the camera doesn't have film in it," Weinberg suggests. "They ran out of film six months ago."
>
> (*MP* 111)

Smith and Moloi have for some time now been banished by the other men to the Transit Lounge just like the women. Smith directs Moloi, who wields the filmless camera, and the two clutch onto a caricature of the memory they have of themselves as a news crew. In the present they go through all the motions of capturing the news notwithstanding the empty camera. For the two, such performance has become the ritualistic affirmation of their identities and they provide some of the more light-hearted moments in the story. Father O'Reilly, who volunteers to put the soldiers at

their ease, is promptly shot in the foot but the wildly gesticulating Smith and Moloi are allowed to go unharmed. Eventually the soldiers withdraw without many casualties, save for Father O'Reilly's foot, taking with them the salad and one of the women. The narrator expresses parenthesised gratitude that the abducted woman was no one's wife, which in itself suggests that women only matter here if they are male possessions, and thus reiterating the earlier point I made about The Terminal Bar being a gendered space.

Time literally stands still in the Terminal Bar, just as the clock has stopped working at eleven o'clock. The characters are caught in an interminable round of nights with no hope of the passing of the darkness. Only false dawns appear outside the windows of the Terminal Bar. The situation and circumstances of the characters most closely foreshadow that of Aubrey Tearle in *The Restless Supermarket*, which novel examines in greater detail the performance of identity, as well as networks and movements, in Hillbrow at the moment of the transformation in the political space, the transition from apartheid to a democratic dispensation in South Africa, and about which more is written in Chapter Four.
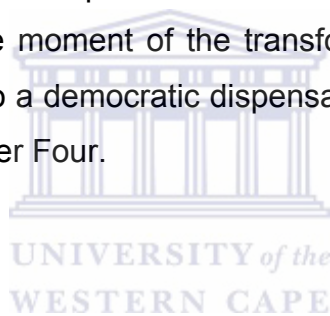
2.6 Conclusion

The stories highlighted in this chapter serve to introduce Vladislavić into the literary scene of South Africa, and as he points out in a 1996 interview with Shaun de Waal for *The Mail&Guardian*:

> [T]he world is already so overloaded with big stories and important information that the small and peripheral has come to me to seem a positive value. That's what I mean about accustoming oneself to marginality, engaging with something that makes no claim to completeness. To complexity maybe, but not completeness.

(Morphet 2006:86)

Vladislavić's writing does not make any claims to any grand narrative, but deliberately seeks out what he calls the "small" or "marginal" stories, of which this collection is a good example. The ideas outlined in *Missing Persons* about the urban space of the city are themes which the author returns to in one form or other in all of

his later texts. So, in many ways the collection becomes a foundational text for his oeuvre and for the manner in which Vladislavić imagines the postcolonial city generally and Johannesburg especially. For instance, 'The Prime Minister is Dead' highlights notions of contradictions or contrariness in subjects and space, as in the character of the narrator's father. There is a dichotomy between his military background and actions which points to the instability of the categories through which we perceive history and make meaning. The naming of the suburb after the hero of apartheid in the face of a dying history shows an attempt to create a particular order through the re-writing of history and is echoed in the historical bulldozing of the predominantly black Sofiatown to build Triomf – an Afrikaans working-class suburb. In all these stories, history as a temporal and social space, has different generational significations attached to it, much as the significance of the geographical space of the city shifts for different people.

To recapitulate the major points I argued with reference to the selected short stories, the first section of this chapter has primarily focused on the idea of transient bodies and shifting spaces – a combination which gives rise or points to the fluidity of the construction and signification of meaning in the late-apartheid city as represented in 'The Prime Minister is Dead' and 'We Came to the Monument'. In the following sub-section I read the story 'Journal of a Wall' as illustrating how the juxtaposition of opposites (both of people and notions of the city as space), are used by the author to imaginatively foreground questions of agency and the individual as subject by contrasting these with ideals of community or cummunitarianism. In short, I looked at various individuals contradictory experiences of space. 'When My Hands Burst into Flames', I argue in the third section, utlises the journey motif – even if the imagined journeys take the form of largely cyclic traversal within and between the city's psychic and physical spaces – to show the normalisation of the spectacular, or how the spectacle is made familiar. The last sub-section was concerned with bringing together some of the thematic threads described above and offering further illumination of how the city in transition is imagined and appropriated as space through contrary notions of fixity and transience, as well as through the performance of identity in a kind of theatre of the absurd. 'The Terminal Bar' *is* a surreal space of the absurd.

One could criticise the stories by pointing at the almost total absence of black faces and voices. The cityspaces in these narratives are dis-embodied of any significant black presence, an aspect which is self-contradictory when one recalls that the cities imagined are African. But then again, such apartheid spaces are necessary to foreground the various neuroses and psychoses that result from the white, mainly suburban characters attempting to shut out history. That Vladislavić returns to these themes (not in a repetitive fashion) is testimony to the difficulty and challenge of "resolving" the conundrum that is the postcolonial city.

3 Chapter Two : "Foreigners in our Midst" – Plans, Invasions and Spatial Discord in *The Folly*

3.1 Introduction

Ivan Vladislavić's first novel[52] *The Folly* (1993) is set in an unnamed South African suburb at the cusp of the political transition in South Africa, and is centred on the interactions between a well-established and elderly married couple on the one hand and an upstart of indeterminate age who is a recent arrival on the empty plot of land next door to their suburban home. Mr and Mrs Malgas, a middle-aged white couple who have an established routine, are seemingly set and content in their way of being and of doing things. Otto Nieuwenhuizen, whose appearance on the empty plot is as sudden as it is mysterious, irrevocably disrupts the staid lives of the Malgas couple and changes their sense of self-perception before he disappears much in the way that he came – suddenly and to an undefined destination. The action is set in an unnamed suburb in which the characters act out their individual fantasies.

In review articles first published in the year after the novel's publication Ivor Powell and Ingrid de Kok both allude to how the text engages with specific suburban space, and its attendant tensions and neuroses, as a parable of late-apartheid. Pre-1994 suburban South Africa was largely a de facto zone of exclusion for the country's urban blacks except perhaps in the roles of domestic servants and garden "boys". The drama between the Malgases and Nieuwenhuizen unfolds on an artificially placid surface of suburban tranquillity while the underbelly that makes such an idyllic utopia possible – the generic black township – constantly rumbles due to poverty and discontent. These undercurrents occasionally but infrequently surface in the narrative in the form of "the unrest reports" on television news.

While Felicity Wood in 'Taking Fun Seriously: The Potency of Play in Ivan *Vladislavić*'s Short Stories,' is generally of the opinion that Vladislavić's writing marks

---

[52] Some critics, most recently Gaylard (2011) refer to the text as a novella, a technical point that has little bearing on how I read the narrative as postcolonial urban writing. For me, whether it is in the short stories or the novels, Vladislavić is still engaged in the imaginative representation of postcolonial cityscapes and city subjects.

a distinct departure from the social realism that marked, and limited, South African fiction in English in the late 1980s to early 1990s, she makes a curious exception in that otherwise fulsome praise with specific regard to her analysis of *The Folly*. For Wood the novel is an illustration of how "Vladislavić's fiction is not always effective" because it has a "flattened and abstract nature" arising from what she determines to be the "dry, even pedestrian" descriptions of events that have been "observed from a distance and methodically but mechanically recorded" (2001:34-35). This would seem to me to suggest that Wood momentarily falls into the same critical lapse that she accuses a few of the earlier reviewers of Vladislavić of occupying, namely that of making direct connections between the content and form of the novel as a result of social realist readings. Having identified play as the central driving force in the author's method, Wood perhaps precludes alternative readings of Vladislavić that do not necessarily fall into the categorisation that she has formulated. In the Introduction I noted how, for Wood, imagined and imaginative pleasure almost becomes an end in itself and thus forecloses other possibly more nuanced readings that lie outside the ambit of her configurations. Contrary to Wood, I do not find *The Folly* to be an example, to borrow her words again, of "sterile and clinical" writing (2001:35). She possibly conflates the Malgases apparent initial suburban lethargy or indifference with the "absence of meaningful content" (2001:35).

My reading of the novel *The Folly*, which focuses on the elusiveness of identity and space, follows a different trajectory and attempts to illustrate what Clarkson, as already cited, has described as the "vicissitudes between abstract meanings and material signs" (2006:107) in Vladislavić's writing. As a consequence, my analysis of the text is subdivided into two broad subsections which address, firstly, the very abstract notion of the late apartheid suburban city subject, and secondly, the attempts to attach totalising, material significance to processes of the imagination, which are essentially abstractions. The first of these sections looks at notions of intrusion or invasion and the resultant disruptions that are occasioned in the lives of characters who are ill-prepared for and ill-at-ease with the emergence of new kinds of urban identities, if we take the encounter between Nieuwenhuizen and the Malgases as a microcosm of a broader frame of reference. For Mrs Malgas, in particular, the newcomer represents all her late-apartheid white and middle-class

fears brought to life. This is caused by Nieuwenhuizen's apparent lack of roots, which implies lack of trustworthiness, and his being prepared to survive, like a homeless person, on scavenged contraptions. The perceived shiftiness in the 'interloper's' character (as perceived by Mrs Malgas) is in fact akin to what she would ascribe to most of the black people she sees on television every day. Mrs Malgas expresses her dis-ease quite early in the text that the arrival of Nieuwenhuizen, with his makeshift accommodation, will herald the demise of the neighbourhood into a version of the squatter camps occupied in the main by black people. The question of Nieuwenhuizen's presence in the neighbourhood therefore becomes the question of the foreigner and I will partially frame my multi-pronged interrogation of the responses to his presence within a reading of Jacques Derrida's theorisation of the problem of the foreigner as outlined in *Of Hospitality*,[53] his philosophical 'discussion' with Anne Dufourmantelle. As Flockemann et al (2010) note, Derrida in *Of Hospitality,* postulates that the foreigner is a destabilising presence in our midst. By his mere presence amongst the indigenes (us) he is posing questions. These questions relate not only to *who he is*[54] and what potentialities his presence amongst those who claim to belong to a particular space point to, but ultimately to who "we" are and what we signify in relation to him.

The second part of my consideration of *The Folly* will centre on ideas of plans and maps, examining the way in which they are attempts to exert influence and control over a particular urban space, even if it is at the microcosmic level of an individual residential plot or stand. Using the trope of mapping, I will analyse two contesting perspectives on physical planning, with Malgas representing the time-

---

[53] *Of Hospitality* consists of two seminars delivered by Jacques Derrida, 'Foreigner Question: Coming from Abroad/ from the Foreigner' (dated 10 January 1996) and 'Step of Hospitality/No Hospitality' (17 January 1996), accompanied by what is defined as an 'Invitation' by Anne Dufourmantelle to create a call-and-response scenario that complements the delivered-speech effect of the seminars (as opposed to written publications). There is a minor sleight of hand in that the 'Invitation' is actually written as a review of the two but it is done so in a manner that is suggestive of a conversation between Derrida and Dufourmantelle.

[54] My emphasis. The question of the 'foreigner' unsettles the 'native' community or individuals, very much like Iris Marion Young (1995) sees communities or communitarian living arrangements based on the notion of sameness, as often being undemocratic polities, which are enunciated and distinguish themselves from others on the basis of differences between and amongst individuals. The fact of belonging or non-belonging is determined by such perceived similarity or difference from the accepted norms of behaviour and appearance. For Young the city, with its mix of people from varying backgrounds and class, is the ideal. As a point of emphasis, it is important to reiterate that Young's strictures apply to communitarian living arrangements and not to the city.

honoured conservative pragmatic viewpoint, while Otto Nieuwenhuizen epitomises a position that is organic and dynamic, yet illusory and utopian, in its postmodern fluidity and disdain for ordered structure.

In this chapter and elsewhere in the thesis – particularly in the discussion of *The Exploded View* in Chapter Five – I use maps, survey plans of planned land-use (such as new residential suburbs) and the building plans of individual houses and other structures interchangeably. I regard the building plan as a particularised version of the map which maintains the latter's limited two-dimensional aspect of rigidity. Michel de Certeau's definition of the map in *The Practice of Everyday Life* is essential here for understanding the restriction of meanings about a particular space which are occasioned by use of the terms 'plan' or 'map.' In this respect, De Certeau (1988:120) argues for instance that maps attempt to encapsulate and totalise the meaning of a place or a city. As a consequence, the plan or map can never render a full representation of the place it purports to. Maps attempt to, but remain unable to achieve totalisation. When I will discuss de Certeau's figuring of the map later in this chapter, I will show how his thinking on maps as a way of seeing is closely cognate to the analyses of Benjamin (1983) and Chambers (1994) who consider maps to be a particular kind of gaze. In *The Folly* imagined plans are central to the way in which characters, especially Malgas and Nieuwenhuizen, think about appropriating and occupying space. But perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Nieuwenhuizen's plan is the counter-plan or anti-map in the way it subverts the intent to totalise meanings. Because it is never written down, his plan remains open to multiple possible meanings and infinite interpretations. The plot is a site of fluid imaginings and possibilities. A related point is made by Robert Fishman when he characterises the difference between the old and new [readings of the] city. He finds that,

> Instead of the logical division of functions of the old metropolis, one finds a post-modern, post-urban collage. [...] The new city has no center or boundary because it does not need them.
>
> (Fishman 1995:411)

Although Fishman's views are based on the western metropolis[55], his evaluation is pertinent to an examination of how Vladislavić' writes or imagines the postcolonial city which, like Nieuwenhuizen's 'map', is characterised even more by a marked vagueness or distinct lack of the boundaries referred to in the excerpt from Fishman above. This is not just in the physical demarcation of the city spaces, but also in the ideological practices that inform the individual ways of being in and between city spaces. While the apartheid city may have approximated the rigid demarcations of the zones of the city based on race, such prohibitions were never completely enforceable so that there were always zones of overlap, in which the different social and physical practices intermingled, each thus incorporating something of the character of the other.

3.2 On the Intimacy and Chaos of Some Urban Spaces

By way of preamble, Derrida's figuring of the foreigner or other appearing among the hosts sets up an intriguing interrogation of the meanings generated in the interactions between the host and the stranger. The stranger's presence alone ignites and catalyses a crisis of uncertainty in the host as questions arise about each individual's 'place' in the scheme. The older practices of occupying the same space are shown to be inadequate because the arrival of the stranger requires new readings of what it means to be a host or stranger. For Derrida,

> the question of the foreigner is a question of the foreigner, addressed to the foreigner. As though the foreigner were first of all *the one who puts the first*

---

[55] Robert Fishman's essay examines the emergence of a new kind of city – as opposed to the centralised agglomerations – that has been made possible in the main by the ever increasing use of car transport. As alluded to in the introductory chapter, Fishman's city has become, for the individual, where and how one chooses it to be. It is not bound by geography any more. Nieuwenhuizen's map is made possible by giving an equally free reign to the imaginary, as opposed to the continued use of 'old' paradigms to determine what constitutes a proper map.

question[56] or the one to whom you address the first question [...] But also the one who, putting the first question, puts me in question.

(2000:3)

Derrida's configuration of the foreigner-host dichotomy is essentially, for me, a question of identity and status within a particular community or in this case, urban locale. Through the series of images arising from this opposition I will explore further the questions of rejecting, finding a new identity or fixing one's old one; or, alternatively, having one's identity fixed by others. The arrival of the foreigner-stranger figure occasions the casting of doubt about the status of the host because the mere presence of the newcomer poses questions of belonging and unbelonging, of how differently the host can lay claim to the physical and psychic space that he or she currently appropriates as a space of privilege. Any notions of the fixity of place and identity are thrown into self-reflexive doubt because the host realises that there is essentially little that distinguishes him from the late-comer and therefore his hold onto a privileged status becomes increasingly tenuous. For Ingrid de Kok, in *The Folly* "Vladislavić shows us an unrealisable cooperative venture; characters who cannot define their own, now understand each other's histories, motives and plans; and a language which deludes and dissembles" (2011:76).[57] The arrival of Nieuwenhuizen on the 'empty' space next to the Malgas' house triggers two very distinct imaginative responses in the husband and wife respectively. Malgas immediately sets off on a trajectory of the imaginary in which he figures their new neighbour, whom he imagines (in narrating their first encounter to his wife) to be involved in "real estate", "[p]roperty development, renovations, restorations, upgrading, that sort of thing", as the embodiment of progress and action. Such a construction, by affiliation to this vision of Nieuwenhuizen, presupposes Malgas' own sense of industrious accomplishment, especially when contrasted with the vapid routine of middle-class existence that the latter and his wife seem to have been drifting in prior to the arrival of the newcomer. Malgas, who coincidentally runs a

---

[56] My emphasis. For Derrida, the mere presence of the stranger amongst his hosts is itself an act of posing a question as to the meaning of host and stranger and the dynamics of the dialectical relationship between the two. The question is ultimately what makes one a host and the other a stranger, a question which throws into doubt the claimed legitimacy and inferred superiority of the host in relation to the supposed foreigner.

[57] Ingrid de Kok's review of *The Folly* – 'Citadel and Web' – first appeared in *New Contrast* (1994) Issues 22, Volume 1 pp 91-94.

hardware shop in the city, is quick to build on the theme of transforming empty space, giving his mind free rein in wondering about the shape and size of the house that he is sure Nieuwenhuizen – even without the latter himself explicitly saying so – is soon to construct. Mrs Malgas' reaction is predictably antithetical to the one espoused by her husband because she sees the newcomer as a shifty interloper who is not only invading "their" space but who also represents a tangible threat to what she perceives to be their way of life:

> "Building operations, I can just see it, noise and nuisance, generators, compressors, pneumatic hammers, concrete-mixers going day and night, strange men – builders. Dust all over my ornaments. It's terrible. I'll complain."
>
> (*The Folly* 26)[58]

Her complaint above is doubly ironic. Firstly, for someone who has affectations of indifference and ignorance, she is surprisingly alive to the material artefacts and sensory imagery that fall within the ambit of her husband's professional space at his building supplies business. Secondly, she displays a perceptual disconnect in her inability to link the reality of her suburban "bliss" with the hard objects and sounds that seem so much like potential disruptions to her now. This latter kind of thinking, to a large extent, informs the way she relates to the space she occupies in the sense of her house and suburb being something of an entitlement that has no external links to productive processes and networks beyond the walls of their garden. She similarly invests this attitude in her perception of people other than herself and her husband, deeming these others to be intrusive outsiders bent on visiting chaos on her ordered life. In this instance the text can be certainly read as displaying some elements of sexist bias as the wife is portrayed as standing guard over a restricted sense of domesticity, while the husband is seen to be more adventurous with a suggested, inherent greater entrepreneurial spirit.

One constant intrusion into this white middle-class idyll comes in the unlikely form of one of the markers of bourgeois progress, namely the television, or the television news to be more precise. This device of news as an unsettling montage that serves as the background to an almost utopian foreground of calm is also

---

[58] Further page references to *The Folly* will be prefixed by the abbreviation *TF*.

present in the short story 'Journal of a Wall', as discussed earlier in the previous chapter. Although the specificities of character and spatial setting may be different, the reactions of the characters in the present narrative are eerily similar to those in the earlier story. Close to the beginning of the novel Malgas gruffly comments to his wife, "Here we go again," (*TF* 2) before he promptly switches the set into mute mode by remote control. This happens as they watch the "unrest"[59] report on the 8 o'clock evening news. Tellingly, he does not switch the set off completely and the effect created echoes the crowd in the story 'When My Hands Caught Fire' which wordlessly gazes at the spectacle of the accident or burning hands without overtly trying to be involved in it. The "unrest" report has become a daily feature of the news because of the pervasiveness of the troubles.[60] The South African city of the 1980s is wracked by continual strife and the disturbances have come to constitute some kind of macabre spectator sport for those, such as the Malgases, who are not directly affected. Formal apartheid is in its death throes and those in white suburbia, of whom the Malgases are the representatives, seem far-removed from the life and death realities of the strife. Though the "unrest" has become routine to the extent that Malgas mutes the sound of the television because there may be nothing actually new for him to hear or learn, another possible explanation is that by muting the TV he may be attempting to silence an unwanted reality that he is unprepared to confront. Tellingly, he does not switch off the set completely and in this way displays some of the characteristics of the gaze deployed by members of the public when viewing a 'grotesque' spectacle such as the scene of a traffic accident. Inherent in such a gaze is a simultaneous yearning for distance from the horror, as well as an involuntary wish not to disengage from the sight or thing being viewed. The "unrest" becomes a thing both distant, yet intimate, more so when one juxtaposes the historical correlations of white privilege and black disempowerment which are in this instance spatialised in the suburb and the township – as viewed through the medium of the television screen. Such contradictions create the perceptual disconnect that allows Malgas to pass remarks like the one he makes on the "[b]eautiful piece of

---

[59] In the apartheid ideology,"unrest" came to signify motiveless disturbances rather than the agentive protest that they actually were.

[60] Television, de Kok suggests in an early review of *The Folly*, has become "modern Greek chorus" (2011:75 [1994])

iron" (*TF* 3). The piece of iron he drily refers to is one of the corrugated sheets of a burning township shack, someone's blazing home, and the question that arises from Malgas' response to this image is the extent to which he is removed from the reality portrayed daily on his TV screen. Instead of passing comment on the unfolding real-life tragedy of someone losing his home, Malgas is more interested in the quality of the corrugated sheet. When one takes him to be representative of type, then the incident (and others like it) serves as an illustration of the imaginative dichotomy between white suburban and black township life. The author does not linger over this point – as he no doubt could have – but in its understated quality lies the true nature of the description's power to evoke critical reflection. This disinclination for grand political gestures is a hallmark of much of Vladislavić's writing here in *The Folly* and in other texts.

The world of the black township is, for Mr and Mrs Malgas, the site of the unknown and perhaps unknowable. The arrival of Nieuwenhuizen is, for the latter in particular, a version of the encroachment of a version of that unknown world into her contented existence. In an ironic turn, she figures him as one of the squatters more commonly found in the black townships, who resides in structures similar to the shacks that they see burning daily on the news. She foresees a dire future and the end of civilised life as she knows it:

> "Is he one of the squatters we've been hearing so much about? Will he put up a shack and bring hundreds of his cronies to do the same? "Extended families." What do you think? Will they hammer together boxes and rubbish bags, bits of supermarket trolleys and motor cars, notice-boards and yield signs, gunny sacks and jungle gyms, plastic, paper, polystyrene [...] brass, bronze and Beaverboard. Fine. We'll be forced out of our home. They'll play their radios loud. They'll go in the streets like dogs. They'll tear up our parquet for firewood."
>
> (*TF* 11-12)

Derrida's formulation of the questions and self-doubt arising from the encounter between the host and the foreigner are echoed in this episode. In the excerpt above, Mrs Malgas' lament betrays her palpable fear of the unknown and unknowable other.

Seen in this light, Nieuwenhuizen not only represents a physical disruption in the vicinity of the Malgas household, but is also a symbolic threat at the level of imagined space. Imagined space here refers to the psychic notion of the imaginative appropriation of specific space or spatiality by a group of people by virtue of their belonging to a certain socio-economic class. In this case, the class is white middle-class and the spatial reference is white suburbia. In the event then, Nieuwenhuizen is for Mrs Malgas an instantiation of all her social paranoia writ large. Her biggest fear is not the violence that every night burns its imprint silently onto her television screen but rather the potential poverty that their new neighbour epitomises. He has no known past and, from the evidence of his tent and hand-made utensils, little financial means with which to easily fit into Mrs Malgas' vision and version of suburbia. She fears that he (and his kind) will bring the neighbourhood down in the sense of cheapening the aesthetic space that she now occupies with her husband. In fact, she fears that Nieuwenhuizen's presence will reduce them to the same levels as the blacks she sees on the news. It is in this way that he represents not only a physical intrusion but also a psychological transgression, again recalling Derrida's postulation – after Aristotle – that the stranger is not so different from the host, if at all.

Mr Malgas, to the contrary, welcomes Nieuwenhuizen's sudden appearance next to them, and attempts to justify his support for the new settler by ironically inverting the psychology of fear that his wife has used to rationalise her own repudiation of the newcomer. While she fears becoming like him, her husband reasons from a different perspective in advocating that the stranger should indeed enjoy peaceful occupation of the empty plot in order to prevent the attraction to it of the wrong kind of people. Discounting Mrs Malgas' contention that their privacy would suffer as a consequence, he asserts that their security would instead be enhanced by Nieuwenhuizen's soon-to-be-built, possibly double-storey house:

> "Never mind that. In this day and age it's security that counts. You can't afford to have an empty plot on your doorstep. Ask anyone. It attracts the wrong elements."

(TF 30)

The fears expressed by both individuals are not mutually exclusive, for while his wife's version is fear of poverty itself and the ruined reputation that comes with unsuitable neighbours, Malgas' variety is fear of the potential insecurity resulting from the material inequalities caused by historical, racially based imbalances in the distribution of economic opportunities and wealth. The late apartheid city is therefore a site of vulnerability, a space in which the appropriation and occupation of physical and imaginative space becomes an increasingly tenuous exercise because the old categories and certainties have begun to shift and are progressively mobile. The sense of susceptibility to loss and deprivation is born of a lack of critical self-awareness on the part of characters like Malgas who do not fully appreciate the tenuousness and lack of sustainability of their position of isolated privilege in a seething sea of want. Nieuwenhuizen's name ironically means "new house", a coincidence which Mrs Malgas finds rather too convenient given the context, and which provides her with further cause for disputation. The irony of the image of Nieuwenhuizen as a stranger doubles on itself in this debate between wife and husband. For one he represents a hypothetical threat of viral proportions, while for the other he is a potential bulwark against an as yet unnamed hazard. Beyond the different concerns with urban space, this example also demonstrates the divergent perceptions of identity and its constructions that the two have.

Mrs Malgas soon falls into a pattern that oscillates between periods of ostentatious indifference and surreptitious gazing at Otto Nieuwenhuizen's daily activities. Against her own better judgement she is drawn, almost proverbially like a moth to the flame, to taking long looks (usually from behind the relative safety of her lace curtains) at his daily round of tinkering around the plot and with his self-made gadgets. This proves to be both a source of intrigue and disenchantment:

> Nieuwenhuizen's wanderings over the veld, as much as they annoyed her, reassured her too by their aimlessness. They made him seem indecisive, ineffectual and itinerant. But when he settled down under the tree to hammer beer tins into soup plates [...] it seemed that he was practicing for something bigger, it became conceivable that he would really build a house next door [...] and this prospect made her feel utterly despondent.

(*TF* 30)

In spite of her best efforts to the contrary, Mrs Malgas becomes connected – in the manner theorised by Derrida in his analysis of the dialectic between the host and the stranger – to Nieuwenhuizen's narrative through watching him. They begin to share the same imaginative space and later in the text, when he is aware that she is watching, there are moments in which he actually puts on a "show" or spectacle for her simultaneous "benefit" and revulsion. She finds his behaviour and manner to be, in her words, "unspeakable" (*TF* 80). The degree of the affront to Mrs Malgas that he poses is encapsulated in such a phrase because for her Nieuwenhuizen's behaviour is so traumatising as to become unnameable. He does little that is according to custom or with acceptable etiquette, thus setting himself up for conflict with Mrs Malgas, to whose moral fibre his actions are the antithesis. A silent drama or duel, mediated by the windows or the curtains of the Malgas household, evolves between the two parties with Otto Nieuwenhuizen – even without overtly seeming to do so – doing his best to shock and provoke a response. Predictably, he does not think much of Mrs Malgas as a person, seeing her as flaky and pretentious He declares that "[i]f you hold her up to the light you can see right through her"[61] (*TF* 57), and refers to her as "that flimsy Mrs of his" (*TF* 56). Whilst she silently seethes and drives herself to distraction behind the curtains during the day, she awaits the return of Malgas in the evenings to vent her considerable frustrations on her largely disbelieving and unsympathetic husband. Nieuwenhuizen is not only "a source of dirt and chaos" (*TF* 56), in the sense of the dust rising from his efforts to clear his yard of vegetative growth – exertions which by dint of a deft sleight of hand he largely manages to pass on to the willing Malgas. Mrs Malgas seals all her windows "but His dust continue[s] to sprout like a five o'clock shadow on the smooth surface of her home." (*TF* 56) While she tries not to even think about him, he increasingly insinuates himself into the space of her imagination. Her detestation of Nieuwenhuizen quickly approaches pathological proportions. Ultimately, she cannot even bring herself to call him by name, preferring to refer to Nieuwenhuizen by the indeterminate "Him". The use of the honorific capital letter "H" is ironic on two fronts, the first being that Mrs Malgas has a palpable disdain for Nieuwenhuizen but in trying to avoid referring to him by

---

[61] This description is apt and the image is echoed in Zakes Mda's *Heart of Redness* (2000) where Sir George Grey is said to be a man through whose ears the sun shines, which is a sign of his whiteness, but is also figuratively interpreted by the villagers to be an indication that the man lacks substance and fortitude.

name she gives a title that inadvertently bestows a mark of respect upon him. The second irony, which flows from the first, is that the "Him" – normally used in reference to a deity or God – also unintentionally reveals how Otto Nieuwenhuizen has come to occupy, against her stated wishes, a central place in her imagination.

Another illustration of the similarity between 'Journal of a Wall' and *The Folly* is found when one compares the character of the journal's first-person narrator with that of Malgas. Firstly, both interest themselves in and wish to be involved in the real or potential building projects of their apparently disinclined neighbours. While the former is rebutted with finality, Malgas is able to achieve a relative degree of success, albeit through a combination of his ingratiating himself to Nieuwenhuizen (by giving him water, food, building supplies and even labour) and the latter's own subterfuge in pretending not to require Malgas' assistance, materially or physically. In his desperation to break the monotonous drudge of his daily existence, Malgas literally grovels in order to be allowed to assist. In this headlong rush he is unable to discern the subtle machinations and manipulations that Nieuwenhuizen deploys to put him in a position where he, Malgas, physically expends more energy in the clearing of the yard than the owner of the plot. As they toast to the work "well-done" afterwards, Malgas is overcome by a sense of community that his encounters with Nieuwenhuizen seem to provoke:

> His host's gratitude, so deeply felt and tastefully expressed, brought a lump to Malgas's throat, and he had to wash it down with a slug of the mixture before he could voice his own appreciation for everything.
>
> (*TF* 86)

Above everything, Malgas yearns for social contact beyond that which is available at his store and what company Mrs Malgas provides in their home. The two live such insular lives that when an opportunity arises for him to break out of the cyclic tedium that is his social space, he seems to abandon his logic and reason in an endeavour to accommodate his new neighbour. The chance unfortunately (in the sense of irony) comes embodied in the person of Nieuwenhuizen, who is quick to exploit Malgas' apparent naivety and complete ineptitude as a judge of character. In the meantime,

his wife continues to keep her vigil in the shadows and windows, whilst doing her utmost to appear disinterested. Her typical remark is:

> "Don't ask me. I'm not interested in Him and His house. I just happened to glance that way once or twice when I was making a pot of tea."

<div align="right">(TF 100)</div>

In the 'initiation ritual' contrived by Nieuwenhuizen, in which the two could have passed for members of an Aboriginal tribe, Malgas becomes the person whom his wife probably fears the most. He, in a sense, becomes the Other to his own wife. Nowhere else in the text is the Derridean formulation of the crisis of legitimacy of the host occasioned by the presence of a stranger more marked. By joining in the ritual, Malgas brings himself to the same level as the foreigner, a humiliating preposition for his wife.

Jacques Derrida, in *Of Hospitality* (2000), theorises on general yet intriguing distinctions between the Other and the Foreigner, a taxonomical paradigm which I use here to illustrate the respective differences in the conceptual imagination of what Otto Nieuwenhuizen represents by Malgas and his wife. For the French philosopher the Other is a completely unknown and unknowable category, one who is not even known by name, while the Foreigner is knowable because he has a name and must therefore be afforded the hospitality of the state, including the protection of the courts of law. Mrs Malgas' perception is that of the intruder as Other – thus she is mostly unable to refer to him by name - even as her husband treats Nieuwenhuizen as a sojourner who must be accorded all rights and ethical treatment. Whereas Mrs Malgas claims not to be really watching Nieuwenhuizen's incrementally absurd drama, explaining away her daily narration of his activities as being a result of accidental glances in his direction, she unknowingly becomes a key component of the same. She is the figurative theatrical audience sitting in the darkened auditorium which, though the actor may not clearly see them, is central to the structuring of the performance in terms of her response to the staged action as well as the influence she bears on the future direction of the spectacle. Try as she may not to, she is inexorably drawn to the confusion outside her windows. On another level, the absurd humour in and the allegorical sheen over the novel is continuing evidence, as first

suggested in Chapter One with particular reference to the story 'Terminal Bar', of the possible influence of Samuel Beckett in Vladislavić's writing, as argued in the previous chapter.

The disarray and resultant lethargy in the Malgas household is almost complete when Malgas becomes so excessively involved and inscribed in Nieuwenhuizen's project that he stops going to work, and prefers to spend his days in the company of the morose Nieuwenhuizen. In reaction, Mrs Malgas' own resolve is utterly broken and she even gives up on the domestic chores that had served to root her in her version of normalcy. Her former affectation of proud and active indifference is replaced by an attitude of silent, hapless observation as her life, as she knew it, dissolves into the dust accumulating within and outside the house. Both husband and wife suffer mental anguish and physical deterioration as a consequence of the weeks-long indolence. The absurd drama evolves into the grotesque as the Malgases, and Nieuwenhuizen himself, due to a combination of weight loss and illness, all literally attain the ghostly appearance of moving, spectral shapes:

> Mr took off his clothes. He rubbed sand and ash all over his skin and scraped it off with sticks and stones. He danced around. He put his clothes on again and went and stood next to Nieuwenhuizen, staring out. They walked together arm in arm, and stopped, walked apart and waved to each other, lay down on the ground like a pair of brackets, and went to sleep.
>
> (*TF* 126)

Malgas, above everything else, has not only become complicit in Nieuwenhuizen's self-deception, but has become himself mentally unhinged to an extent. The toll of this is felt most keenly by his wife, who can only look on helplessly. The act of complicity on Mr Malgas' part also serves as an illustration of how adept Nieuwenhuizen is in appropriating the material, spatial and human resources in his immediate environment, and how these are inscribed into the process of imaginatively fashioning Nieuwenhuizen's identity. It is not only Nieuwenhuizen's identity that comes to fruition, even if he is the character who instantiates the expression of agency more than any of the others. His arrival also instigates the

coming into being of different identities for Malgas and his wife. The Malgases begin to occupy and think about space in new ways which are completely different to the manner in which they had hitherto been accustomed to. The three characters relate in different ways to "the plan" and to each other, and it is in the process of defining and negotiating these various links that some of the tensions and politics of the relation of individuals to the urban spaces that they occupy are revealed. I will, in the following sub-section, discuss in more specific detail the operation of Nieuwenhuizen's plan but I briefly refer to it here in order to draw attention to the ironic subtext of chaos/mayhem engendered by the ostensible orderliness implied in the term "plan".

While I have argued for the Derridean notion of hospitality as the most accurate characterisation of the impact of Nieuwenhuizen's sudden appearance, it is also worthwhile to make a concurrent consideration of Gaylard's (2011b) notion of "mateship" as explanation for the doting admiration that Mr Malgas develops for his new neighbour. Writing from the perspective that Vladislavić's writing has long been concerned with the architectonics of power, power between the state and the people as well as power relations among individuals, Gaylard notes that:

> […] apart from its salving his conscience, there is another subconscious motivation for Malgas's embrace of the vision of the new house: his own subjectivity, masculinity and desire for homosociality. Nieuwenhuizen's presence relativises his masculinity which no longer seems attractive to him in this new light.

(2011b:88)

While confirming, in an indirect way, the Derridean paradigm of the presence of the stranger posing unsettling questions of the host, Gaylard's formulation of Malgas' simultaneous entrapment by and acquiescence to Nieuwenhuizen's plan as expressing a "desire for homosocial bonding" warrants further elucidation. To begin, Gaylard's characterisation here is further evidence of the untenability of Wood's analysis, cited earlier in this chapter, that *The Folly* is dry and mechanical. Added to that, is Gaylard's later suggestion of how this aspect of homosocial bonding or mateship morphs in the text into a virtual kind of homoeroticism. The suggestion of

imagined sexual contact between the two men is intriguing because the general tendency in Vladislavić seems to me to be towards asexual beings. In the instances where sex and sexuality are hinted at, they are normally associated with some manner of depredation as in Darryl having 'sex' with the liquor store mascot in *The Restless Supermarket*, or Les Budlender locking himself in Iris du Plooy's bathroom in 'Villa Toscana', or there are prostitutes involved – as in *The Restless Supermarket* and *Portrait with Keys*. It is never a 'normal' kind of sexual interaction, and Vladislavić's imagined city seems in that repect a sterile space. In *The Folly* Malgas "channels his eros for his wife into his new relationship with Nieuwenhuizen" (Gaylard 2011b:94). More than anything else, Gaylard's view illustrates again how the text avails itself of many possible interpretations at many different levels, contrary to Wood's assertions about the text. However, like the critics that I referred to above, Gaylard does not focus, as I do, on how it (the text) is another instantiation of Vladislavić writing the postcolonial city into being.

To further elaborate on the point that Gaylard raises above on sex and the city, I would like to examine my own notion of asexual beings and Gaylard's formulation of homosociality that morphs into homoeroticism. Conventional wisdom, no doubt expressing traditional modes of masculinity – some of which are described by Robert Morell (2001)[62] – used to be or still is that two men cannot engage in an intimate relationship that included for instance something as mundane as the holding of hands without the individuals concerned being viewed as homosexual. Society at large seems to be more accepting of intimate female-female relationships, whether these are sexual or mere platonic. I raise this point in order to interrogate whether Gaylard's argument and conclusions, in respect of the relationship that develops between Mr Malgas and Otto Nieuwenhuizen, are not too easily subsumed by notions of traditional notions of masculinity which impute the impossibility of two men having an intimate platonic relationship.

The answer to that question lies, in part, in the motives that the respective individuals, Malgas and Nieuwenhuizen, have for engaging in contact. For the former, I would suggest that rather than the homoerotic fantasy postulated by

---

[62] See also Shefer et al (2007) for the changing constructions of masculinity in post-apartheid South Africa.

Gaylard, his agenda is much more innocent. Because he is represented in the text as a white man of a certain age, probably middle age, he is facing certain existential questions at the time of Nieuwenhuizen's arrival. For Malgas, who lives alone with his prissy wife, the latter's project not only represents an opportunity to depart from mundane routine, but in a strange way also serves as a spiritual, almost religious fulfilment and hence the appellation "Father" (*TF* 25, 82 and 87) that he attaches to his new neighbour. Malgas thus perceives Nieuwenhuizen as a kind of spiritual guru or mentor, whose express purpose is to lead the former out of what, imaginatively, seems like a barren spiritual wasteland. For his part Nieuwenhuizen is a crafty operator, a version of Rita Barnard's "survival entrepreneur," who lives and survives by the sheer strength of his guile. He takes advantage of Malgas' need for social interaction with someone other than his wife and the married man's vulnerability, which he utilises to string Malgas along in his hare-brained plan.

As the novel draws to a close, two things occur which combine to break the "spell" of intimacy between Nieuwenhuizen and the Malgases, namely the arrival of other spectators and the appearance of Malgas and Otto on the TV news. A crowd has gradually gathered on the edges of the plot to see the spectacle of two seemingly deranged adults do their 'worst' and are soon followed by a large media contingent, possibly seeking some distraction from the daily reportage on the "unrest". Even the police arrive, complete with crime-scene tape to fence the plot off from the accumulating numbers. The plot has truly become a stage and the audience of one has grown into a multitude. When Mrs Malgas watches her husband on the news, she is finally stung and galvanised into decisive and recuperative action. The surreal broadcast has the effect of bringing a feeling of immediacy between herself and the "news" that she is watching. News is for her no longer something that happens on some township street but rather much closer to home. In fact by dint of personal and social affiliation with her husband and Otto Nieuwenhuizen, she is reinvented as the news. This moves her to re-appropriate and re-imagine her sense of self, also in relation to Malgas. She thus chooses a course of action that in its ordinariness undermines the bizarre set of circumstances in which it is carried out. By bringing to her husband and "his chum Otto" (*TF* 149) a tray laden with the normal breakfast accoutrements of tea, eggs, bacon and so on, she refuses to

indulge the growing crowd by possibly throwing a public tantrum as a long-suffering wife would and thus add to the fodder of the two men's actions as spectacle. Rather, she elects to redefine the way she relates to her husband by reinforcing the ties that bind them together. In her words, "That's my husband and his chum Otto. Make way" (*TF* 149). These are words of reclamation and recuperation. She reclaims her husband as hers but at the same time she shows an awareness that she cannot take anything for granted and relate to her husband in exactly the same way she has related to him before the crisis. Nieuwenhuizen, who departs as he had arrived – in the dead of night – after burning away all signs of his existence on the plot in the ultimate expression of agency, teaches the Malgases the plausibility of many possible ways of being and of experiencing space. So the name Nieuwenhuizen, meaning new house, takes on double meaning here, having created a "new house" for the Malgases as well.

3.3 *"Absolute antithesis" - Plans as Illusions of Grandeur*

Plans and maps in general can be viewed as instruments of asserting organisational and social order over individuals and space. Iain Chambers paraphrases Benjamin's argument that "[t]o arrive at the 'purity' of the gaze is not difficult; it is impossible." (1994:92)[63] Benjamin's views, as seen through Chambers, are validated by the latter's assessment of the city as "a metaphor for the experience of the modern world" (1994:92) - metaphor implying in this instance the contemporary metropolis' readability and its being a map for "the experience of the modern world". An aspect of this formulation is the notion of the lack of purity or sanctity in the gaze, an idea Chambers expounds on by highlighting the potentialities for contradiction that arise from the modern metropolis' "mixed histories, languages and cultures, its elaborate evidence of global tendencies and local distinctions" (Chambers 1994:92). In short, the 'pure' gaze is impossible because it is not exercised in an experiential and cultural vacuum. There are inherent historical and social influences that determine

---

[63] This remark by Walter Benjamin (taken from *Paris: cpaital of the Nineteeth century*) is used by Iain Chambers as an epigraph to the chapter 'Cities Without Maps' in his 1994 book *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*. Amongst other issues, the chapter delves into the contradictions of the planned, rational city – as the embodiment of Western modernity and enlightenment – and the rigid, empty logic of homogenous time represented therein.

the refractions of the lens through which the gaze manifests. It is in this light that I have read maps and plans, which (following on de Certeau 1988) constitute a particular kind of gaze and must be considered as incomplete attempts at totalising the meaning of space and the behaviour of individuals within the 'mapped' spaces. Chambers has also persuasively demonstrated the contradictoriness of the map as a representation, especially with reference to the city, concluding that,

> the very idea of a map [...] seems to contradict the palpable flux and fluidity of metropolitan life and cosmopolitan movement [...] Maps are full of references and indications, but they are not peopled.
>
> (1992:92)

Seen this way, maps operate at the level of symbolism or representation with an inherent oxymoronic effect, because the premise on which they are built - totalisation of meaning - is contrary to the natural dynamism of the city. The quality of being peopled points to the unpredictability of the city as a space, in spite of the "references and indications" that may be given in a map. Wherever there are people there is an element of volatility and Otto Nieuwenhuizen, one of the central figures of *The Folly*, is the very epitome of spontaneity and unpredictability, and therefore embodies the manner in which spaces occupied by people can elude all attempts at mapping or categorization.

When Otto Nieuwenhuizen arrives on the unoccupied plot, with his unique proprietary manner which is also suggested in his name, there is an air of the frontier-man about him:

> Nieuwenhuizen turned to the plot. It was smaller than he had been led to believe, no more than an acre, and overgrown with tall grass and weeds. [...] He tightened his grip on his change with one hand and on the sponge-swaddled handle of his portmanteau with the other, high-stepped over a tangle of wire, and pushed through the grass, onwards.
>
> (*TF* 1)

This excerpt from the opening sequence of the novel, evokes as well as parodies a little of the frontier narrative with our modern-day hero disembarking from a taxi in

the dark night (a night made to appear even darker by the absence of lights on this particular suburban street) to confront a one-acre wilderness. There is an ambiance of an 'elsewhere' and 'nowhere' about the plot that serves to enhance the mystery of Nieuwenhuizen's sudden appearance. He rises from his makeshift bedding of "sheets of newspaper and blankets of grass" the next morning and:

> Only then did he lift his eyes to survey his new dominion.
>
> He liked it. Its contours and dimensions were just right, and so too were its colour schemes and co-ordinates, not to mention its vistas and vantage-points. The sheer cliffs of the hedge towering at his back, dappled with gold and amber, tapering into the far-off haze on either side; the vast and empty sky, baby-blue on the horizon, and sky-blue in the middle distance, and navy-blue in the dome above; the veld rolling away before him in a long blond swell, reefed by the shadows of the hedge and stirred by a breath of wind, swirling now through thickets of shrubs and weeds, spilling now over rocks, boiling into heathery foam, spending itself at last against the wagon-wheel in the distance – all these things pleased him enormously.

(*TF* 7)

The exaggeration of the dimensions of the plot speak of an inflated sense of self-worth while the wagon-wheels in the walls surrounding the Malgas residence recall again the Voortrekkers and Cecil John Rhodes' Pioneer Column that arrived in Salisbury (now Harare) in September 1890.[64] This description of Nieuwenhuizen's first impressions of the plot helps to elucidate the manner in which different individuals experience space differently. Although he noted at the time of his arrival (on the previous night) the limits of the physical extent of his property, in the light of day he allows free reign to his imaginative perception of the place to the extent that he reinvents not only the physical dimensions but also the possible significations and attachments that he gains from and has with the physical space. He is thus able to conceptualise his piece of land as vast expanse, in the same manner that dominated accounts of the encounters between early European settlers and the seemingly

---

[64] The Pioneer Column by royal charter of Queen Victoria, led the occupation and colonisation of the land between the Limpopo and the Zambezi Rivers, now called Zimbabwe.

unpopulated African wilderness.[65] The category of frontier hero has, however, already been undercut through bathos, in this case by the mentioning of Nieuwenhuizen's suitcase whose handle is wrapped in a sponge, as if to protect the hero's 'delicate' hand.

In the classic frontier narrative, the metaphor/trope of the wide and open space is a convenient site for the exercise of agency by a (usually) white male figure. Nieuwenhuizen's strategy for exerting control over this untamed space, even if he is a pale shadow and parody of such a classic frontier hero, is to map his land – in his mind at least:

> To begin with, he ruled with his eyes, from one little landmark to another, twig to knoll and kerbstone to leaf, pillar to post and branch to berry, so that his territory lay enmeshed in a handsome grid, and he numbered the blocks methodically, Roman numerals down one side and capital letters down another, and spent hours plundering each one until it delivered up its riches.
>
> (*TF* 13)

By mapping his terrain and dividing the plot into these imaginary grid-squares, Nieuwenhuizen seeks to impose his will upon it. Seen in this way, mapping is a scheme for the effecting of domination over the seemingly unruly plot of land. In place of the tools of formal mapping, Nieuwenhuizen relies on the imaginative capacity of his mind to 'record' a map, maybe a rudimentary one but a map all the same, and it is from this imaginative version that the rest of the narrative's action and relative disasters are to issue. Although the map in this case remains at the conceptual level, or in the imagination of its drawer, it is nevertheless an attempt to achieve some totalisation of what the piece of land signifies to Nieuwenhuizen. At the very least, this map is an illustration of his quite vivid imagination, especially when this is contrasted by juxtaposition with his apparent disinclination for physical

---

[65] See Hermann Wittenberg's (2004) doctoral thesis *The Sublime, Imperialism and the African Landscape*, which though it has no direct or indirect reference to the emergent, postcolonial metropolis, is useful here in as far as it defines the posture of the 'settler' (2004:129-130), characterised – or perhaps more accurately, satirised – in this instance in the person of Nieuwenhuizen as he strides on to the 'empty' plot, much like the European arrivals of yore encountered the empty landscape of Africa to attempt to mould and fashion according to their whim. That the plot is "no more than an acre" immediately foregrounds the notion of the primacy of the imagination.

exertion, as I will show in this continuing discussion of the role and significance of the map. This aspect also serves to further undermine the figure of the frontier hero, as earlier alluded to, in that the predominant characteristic of said hero is his corporeal presence and general preparedness to physically confront and alter his objective environment.

If Nieuwenhuizen seeks to establish order by mapping his territory, the results in his own immediate space and in the terrain of his neighbours, the Malgases, is anything but orderly. For instance Mrs Malgas observes him going methodically from one imaginative grid to the next and digging for whatever he can find there, but takes affront just with the manner of the process and the way she perceives Nieuwenhuizen to carry himself. Her gaze, which she initially tries to exercise surreptitiously, moves from secrecy to blatancy when she notes that her presence – of which she is certain Nieuwenhuizen is aware – has no effect on what, to her mind, is his 'offensive' behaviour. Mrs Malgas disputes his presence for what she thinks he represents rather than any objective facts she may have about him. As shown earlier, she feels he has invaded her space and has in the process disrupted the order she has known in her own space – space about which she is less certain and feels less safe occupying. Although he poses no immediate physical competition because he limits himself to his empty plot, his presence there nonetheless changes the dynamics of how Mrs Malgas relates to and experiences her own space that she has hitherto occupied non-problematically. These changes also extend to the way the Malgases engage each other in the space that they share:

> The left foot of Mrs, which was daintily arched and pigeon-toed, stepped out of the bath, dripping soapy water, and stretched down to the floor, where it met with something cold and slimy. A plastic bath mat. She knew at once whose hideous creation it was ... She dropped the mat in the bin under the hand-wash basin and sat on the toilet seat, wrapped in her towel, trying to figure out when Mr had smuggled it into her house. He was becoming more devious by the day.
>
> (*TF* 43-44)

Of interest in the above extract is the way in which the domestic space of the Malgas house has been mapped by Mrs Malgas as "her house" into which her husband would have to resort to smuggling, in order to bring in anything which his wife might disapprove of. The space inside the house has been increasingly domesticated as her own, it has become gendered space into which Malgas ventures with little effect or sense of belonging. This is one of the myriad ways in which Vladislavić represents the Malgas household as a site of increasing contestation for ideological space between husband and wife. Seen from this angle, space is conceived by the author as a marker for identity, with the manner in which it is used being viewed as a reflection or expression of the identity of the respective individual. In this case Mrs Malgas takes affront at the mat not only because it is from Nieuwenhuizen, but moreso because it is hand-made from old plastic shopping bags. In her view this has the potential effect of reducing her status to levels below social acceptability. There is no consideration, on her part, of the aesthetic beauty of the mat and the resourcefulness that went into making it. It is into this defined space of illusory grandeur that her husband has the temerity to bring the hand-made artefact given to him by his newly acquired friend. Put differently, the bathroom – specifically – and the house, in general, has become the space in which different identities are performed according to the idiosyncratic inclinations of the various characters.

Outside the walls of the Malgas house, a different but related war of attrition rages between Mr Malgas and Otto Nieuwenhuizen. After the two men clear the land, an exercise in which the larger burden of physical exertion is skilfully passed onto Malgas, a substantial period of time characterised by lethargy passes. Little of significance happens concerning the proposed house and Malgas naturally begins to display a little irritation and impatience. It is a confrontation of disparate imaginations and relates to the different ways in which the two men conceive of the house that is to be built on the empty plot. Malgas approaches the matter from the practical perspective of ordering the materials necessary for the building project, whilst Nieuwenhuizen insists that the imaginative conception of the plan of the house should take precedence above all other considerations:

> "There you are. That's what I'm talking about. No conception of the new house, but you are worrying yourself sick over what it's made of! You'd

better sort out your priorities, man, or we won't be able to carry on collaborating on this project."

(*TF* 75)

Nieuwenhuizen who himself is a new house (going by his name), and who Malgas now routinely addresses with the deferring moniker "Father" (a striking echo of Mrs Malgas' "Him"), threatens Malgas with exclusion from the "project", a fate equal or worse than excommunication in the mind of the threatened victim. During the course of discussion and interactions between the two about the planned house, a reification of the project to almost mythological status has crept into their discourse. This discourse of illusory grandeur is fed and used to different ends by both characters. For Nieuwenhuizen, it is a means to keep Malgas interested and willing to provide physical labour and material to the project, as well as serving to keep his enthusiasm in check by holding aloft what for the latter amounts to the Damoclean threat of exclusion. In Malgas' case this kind of discourse forms part of the ways in which he defines a sense of his own identity because, in his imagination, the proposed project assumes such proportions that it becomes a justification and affirmation of his reasons for being. He thinks that the plan, even if he has difficulty in deciphering it, by the mere fact of its existence in Nieuwenhuizen's head gives meaning to his (Malgas') own existence, in short. The fact that the plan of the house does not yet exist even at the two-dimensional level of a plan drawn out on paper is seemingly unimportant to Malgas' rationalisation. What is important is the 'idea' of the plan, in as far as it holds promise to break the mundane monotony of Malgas' domestic and business life prior to Nieuwenhuizen's arrival. This is why, in spite of appearances to the contrary and which seem to point to him as a clueless loafer, Nieuwenhuizen is able to skilfully manipulate Malgas into a position of serving him. Nieuwenhuizen continues to play with Malgas' mind and emotions, accusing him of a lack of conceptual or imaginative acumen.

Just as quickly as Nieuwenhuizen had burst into a rage, his temper soon dies down as he intimates to Malgas, for the first time and in detail, his vision of the house that they are about to build. As he begins the description, the house is a simple double-storey abode, but as he allows his imagination free rein, it turns into a three-storey version with "bathrooms *en suite*":

"All tried and tested stuff, bricks and mortar and polished panels, the stuff of your dreams, none of this rotten canvas and scrap metal, transitional, all this, temporary, merely. Forward! Nothing tin-pot! Everything cast iron! Bullet-proof – we have to think of these things I'm afraid – with storage space for two years' rations. And on top of that wall-to-wall carpets in a serviceable colour, maybe khaki, and skylights and Slasto in the rumpus room. Materials galore, Malgas, right up your street."

(*TF* 75)

In phrases and words such as "bullet-proof", "rations" and "khaki" there is again the hint of the Afrikaner mapping of the interior, as well as the sense of siege or the atmosphere of the laager. For the moment, the planned extents of the house crucially remain at the level of the imaginary and are not made somewhat more concrete by being put down on paper. These imaginative plans thus do not have the fixity of more conventional plans but rather maintain a fluidity that allows for multiple conceptions of the lived-in space. This is in keeping with my earlier comments on Nieuwenhuizen's schemes being constitutive of counter- or anti- or non-plans in their subversion of 'normal' maps and plans. Malgas, who is more used to the operations of rational logic than flights of fancy, still has difficulty in visualising the plan – notwithstanding Nieuwenhuizen's detailed description of it – and concedes that while he still "can't see *it* as such", he feels he has made a beginning in understanding his partner's vision of what "will be a fantastic place!"

When Nieuwenhuizen finally decides that the time for setting out something approximating an actual house plan on the bare ground has arrived, he begins in Malgas' absence and his initial efforts resemble comedic farce[66]. Nieuwenhuizen's 'plan' is the very antithesis of what plans are usually known to be. He begins by haphazardly hammering a few of the huge nails he has received from Malgas – at no cost – into the ground. Inspired by random movements and spontaneous gestures, the 'plan' illustrates a complete lack of method to his 'madness'. At the level of

---

[66] The actual sequence from *The Folly* (1993:77-78) is too long for insertion here, but Nieuwenhuizen's actions in setting out the house 'plan' on the ground can perhaps best be described as the spectacularly uncoordinated and spasmodic gestures of a singularly, mentally unhinged "surveyor". His actions here irreverently caricature the science of survey to great comedic effect.

symbolism, this plan may be read to signify an irreverence for and rejection of any essentialising narrative. This point recalls the idea, formulated by de Certeau and noted earlier in this chapter, of maps as being an attempt to totalise the meaning of a space.

In the introductory remarks to a special collection of critiques and essays that appeared as a volume of the journal *Scrutiny2*, Gerald Gaylard and Michael Titlestad characterise general aspects of Vladislavić's writing as "insurrectionary playfulness" (2006:6). To somewhat pre-empt fuller engagement with Gaylard and Titlestad's phrase in later chapters - the insurrectional playfulness suggested by Nieuwenhuizen here should not be viewed as an end in itself but can be read as a comment on the empiricism of 'sciences' in general, which often tend to take themselves and their methods a little too seriously. Time and space are completely subject to Nieuwenhuizen's will, while the logic and rationale of the 'plan' seem to only be perceived and understood by its author.

Later in the day, when Malgas realises – from his wife's narration of the dramatic first steps in that direction – that Nieuwenhuizen is finally making an actual plan, his enthusiasm returns undiminished despite the earlier rebuffing and admonishments. In his eagerness to please and have a sense of belonging through affinity or association with Nieuwenhuizen's building project, he is willing to endure his 'friend's' capricious nature and occasional abuse. They work well into the night, dispersing the balance of the 300 nails over the cleared plot, with Malgas again providing much of the required labour in hammering in the make-shift pegs under direction from Nieuwenhuizen. Malgas even takes what is described as "the unprecedented step of running a lead-light through his kitchen window" (*TF* 85) as "Mrs wept" silently at this latest infraction against her dignity and peace of mind. Only later, as they drink cocktails from tin mugs and after the final nail is in place, does Nieuwenhuizen deign to begin to explain the intricacies of his plan to his avid pupil and assistant:

> The long shadow of Nieuwenhuizen's forefinger brushed over the smooth heads of the nails, weaving a web of diaphanous intent in which Malgas was willingly ensnared and cocooned. Nieuwenhuizen's hand, moving

now with the delicate poise of a spirit-level, now with the brute force of a bulldozer blade, levelled terraces and threw up embankments, laid paving and plastered walls. With a touch, his skittery fingers could open a tracery of light and air in a concrete slab, and through it his papery palms would waft a sea breeze laden with salt and the fruity scent of the orchard. Apricot, blueberry, coconut-milk. He made it seem so simple.

(*TF* 87)

While there is later mention of the dimensions of the rooms and other details about "layers, levels, cutaway views and cross-sections" (88) and so on, the plan still requires strenuous exercise of the imagination to be visualised in any recognisable shape. Even with these added details Malgas admits to being unable to conceptualise it. In a new spirit of rapprochement Nieuwenhuizen concedes the difficulties that exist in trying to understand the plan for the untrained eye and mind, and suggests that perhaps only when they "join up the dots" will everything become clear and simple. As per the previous pattern, such a burst of activity and drama is followed by a drawn out period of idleness. This time of indolence drives Malgas to distraction while Nieuwenhuizen insists that the hiatus is necessary for the "maturing" of the plan. In his distraction, Malgas visits the plan in the dark of night in order to practise seeing it and eventually comes to the rather startling conclusion that the reason why he could not see the house was that "it was underground!" (*TF* 95)

Finally deciding that the time has arrived to complete the plan and not to begin building as Malgas is hopeful for, Nieuwenhuizen proceeds to tie and draw string onto and in-between the various nails. It, however, soon becomes apparent to the watching Malgas that this exercise is even more haphazard than the planting of the nail-pegs had been. As soon as he imagines that he recognises the shape of an edifice or room in the drawn-out string, Malgas is soon disabused of the thought by Nieuwenhuizen's next move which would have the effect of cutting across the imaginary wall or room at an angle or dimension that was so awkward as to obliterate the conceived shape:

But sooner or later his house, rising reasonably, wall by wall, would tumble down as Nieuwenhuizen backed into it in his big boots, unreeling his string, and crossed it off his palm.

<div align="right">(TF 98)</div>

The plan simultaneously unravels as it emerges and its instability as a signifier of a concrete possibility is marked by the constant change in what Malgas imagines to be Nieuwenhuizen's plan. The lines and dimensions of the imagined house are not guaranteed in any durable manner or direction. The site of the plan is thus utilised as an exemplar of the fluid possibilities that lie in the experiencing of space. Nieuwenhuizen's plan is, I suggest, an anti-map because it goes againgst the tenets of the traditional map. As cited a little earlier in this chapter, Chambers describes maps, in their conventional form, as contradictory to the fluidity that is typical of metropolitan life and movement because "they are not peopled" (1994:92). One can therefore view Nieuwenhuizen's map as a progressive and pioneering instance of the appropriation and mapping of suburban space because, in its antithetical stance to 'normal' maps, it attempts to anticipate the random crossings and overlaps through which the flux and fluidity are manifested. In its multi-faceted nature, the plan points to or suggests multi-layered possibilities and urbanities. While Malgas' vision sees only the surface or concrete possibilities, Nieuwenhuizen's sight conjures the symbolic and beneath-the-surface meanings of the relationship between the individual and the geographic place within which that individual identity is expressed.

The latest turn of events predictably reduces Malgas to tears of disappointment as he is unable to conceive of the house from the web of string knotted around the large nails in the ground. Nieuwenhuizen, who knows the plan to its most minute detail, is elated with his efforts and condescends to give the distraught Malgas some assistance:

"What you need is the guided tour," said Nieuwenhuizen. "It's a pity, I had high hopes for you once, but now it can't be helped. Wait here and keep your eyes open. And your ears."

<div align="right">(TF 105)</div>

He goes into the webbing of the plan and 'points out' various rooms and physical features of the house, like balustrades and staircases, to the increasingly despairing Malgas. For the moment, the plan has literally transformed from being just a plain idea into being an actual 'house', in Nieuwenhuizen's mind at least. The labyrinth that he conjures up is the manifestation, at a microcosmic level, of one of the ways Chambers (1994) defines the city. For him,

> [t]he city suggests an implosive disorder, sometimes liberating, oftentimes bewildering, that results in an interpolation in which the imagination carries you in every direction, even towards the previously unthought.[67]

(1994:93)

As an imaginative enterprise, Nieuwenhuizen's version of a house transcends the limits of possibility as he charts new creative territory. The disruptions and volatility of his plan – which only takes shape and form in accordance with the viewer's ability to divine it – run contrary to the stable representation suggested by formal maps and plans.

In earlier argumentation I made reference both to de Certeau and Derrida, and how they see maps as totalising devices. But Nieuwenhuizen's map, which is clearly the work of a madman and which leads to confusion rather than overall order, works in a different way. *The Folly* seems to imply that the extreme logic of the map necessarily leads to an extreme illogicality.[68] Writing about Vladislavić's craft in general, Gaylard and Titlestad note that "Vladislavić's project is to widen cracks in the systematic by displaying its contradictions and hypocrisies via an insurrectional playfulness" (2006:6). The import of this analysis is to be found in Nieuwenhuizen's posture – in all its varied moods – which is one of being anti-establishment. He neither conforms to convention at the level of ideas nor in terms of social interaction.

---

[67] The theoretical difficulty that arises here is that Chambers clearly refers to the liberating aspect of the city – the stimulus that arises from its diversity – whereas Nieuwenhuizen's actions seem to be the result – not of a newfound liberty- but simply of a brand of 'madness'. I still aver, however, that even if one would judge Nieuwenhuizen to be 'mad', his compulsive behaviour or condition liberates him from the strictures of the conventional and ordered thinking, and he is thus able to express a sense of agency and experience space that he appropriates in the city in ways that are not open to a supposedly more rational individual.

[68] This formulation is similar, for instance, to that arrived at by Theodor Adorno when he concluded that instrumental rationalism led to the mayhem of `Nazism and the death camps.

Poor Malgas is ill-equipped to accomplish the required leap of the imagination and, in anguish at the thought of being conceptually left behind beyond recovery, he despairingly jumps over one of the random lines into a space he figures to be and labels as a "Guest-room". This does not have the intended effect of atoning for his lack of 'vision' but rather causes Nieuwenhuizen to fly "into a towering rage" (105) marked by much wild gesticulation and histrionics, as well as no shortage of abusive language:

> "You clueless monkey! How did you get in there? Can you walk through walls? Come out at once!"
>
> Malgas fled. Nieuwenhuizen trotted after him, shoving him in the small of the back and shouting, "You are a big waste of time, you blind buffoon. You're a stink-bomb. You'll never see the new house. Get off my plan! Off! Off!"
>
> (*TF* 105)

The irony, as described by de Kok, is that "[t]he mansion that was meant to secure the future is destroyed, apparently by the same wilful act of the imagination that produced it" (2011:76). Malgas blindly runs into the street and homewards in absolute hurt and humiliation while his tormentor descends into his periodic ritual of indolence and apparent hibernation, which lasts for weeks. Notwithstanding the embarrassment, Malgas soon returns to the plot of his own volition and begins to lovingly spruce up the plan against the ravages of the weather. His affection for Nieuwenhuizen is unabated and the ultimate irony is that only through his tending the plan on his own is he able to begin to visualise the house in all its fantastical 'glory':

> It was a magnificent place, every bit as grand as Malgas had thought it would, but it had its shortcomings, which he was quick to perceive too. It had no depth. It had the deceptive solidity of a stage-set. The colours were unnaturally intense, yet at the slightest lapse of concentration on his part the whole edifice would blanch and sway as if it was about to fall to pieces.
>
> (*TF* 116)

The plan doubles as both a means of seeing the house as well as being the ultimate object or goal that needs to be perceived. In other words, the plan is a tool through which to imaginatively see the representation of the house, and yet at the same time it is the very thing which must itself be perceived. It is a conundrum that must be solved for it to make sense as a symbol of itself. Malgas, perhaps out of sheer desperation or force of will, now "sees" the house. However its ephemeral quality requires Malgas' complete concentration in the effort of seeing in order to make its envisioning possible. Unlike Nieuwenhuizen, Malgas cannot effortlessly conjure up the vision of the house because he is not used to operating along the imaginative plane, but rather in the more tangible realm – that of building materials, nuts and bolts. His world is that of material things that are already in existence, and not necessarily what could or would be possible. Malgas recognises the fact that he has "learned to see the house, and understood that this accomplishment was somehow connected with his love for the plan" (*TF* 116). This then brings me back to the point I have mentioned earlier, in which the map (in this case 'plan') is figured as a way of seeing (de Certeau), or a particular kind of gaze (Benjamin and Chambers). Seen in this light, Nieuwenhuizen's plan represents a peculiar vision and Malgas' difficulties in understanding it do not necessarily emanate from its complexity, but are rather due more to the fact that Malgas possesses an inadequate way of seeing or a different kind of gaze to that which is required to see the plan in the way its author does. The inadequacy results from the fact that the vision or seeing is premised on the 'wrong' principles. Prior to the moment of the present epiphany, Malgas has therefore been experiencing the space differently because he has seen it differently from Nieuwenhuizen. And when the latter 'awakens' from his latest slumber, the plan becomes a version of a wonderland and Malgas stops going to work in order to enjoy the house with his friend.

However, no sooner have the two settled into some sort of rhythm, than the whimsically unpredictable Nieuwenhuizen decides to pull up the plan, and with it the 'house'. He decides that he has to get "rid of this old thing" (*TF* 131) much to Malgas' dismay. The latter's apoplectic appeals are ignored as the walls crash around them and the floorboards soundlessly but spectacularly sink beneath them. This dream-like sequence echoes an episode in the short story 'Journal of a Wall' in which, as

earlier discussed, the implosion of the imagined walls serves to undermine the sense of physical permanence that is suggested by both the plan and the walls. At this moment Nieuwenhuizen reasserts his ownership of the imaginative vision and physical space that the plan represents and is not hesitant to deliver a final, stinging rebuke and humiliation:

> "This is my house [...] My namesake. You're just a visitor... not even that, some sort of janitor – a junior one, with no qualifications and precious little experience, and damned lucky to have a broom cupboard to yourself. What were you when I discovered you and took an interest in your welfare? A DIY good-for-nothing, that's what, a tongue-tied nobody. What I say around here goes, is that clear? Look at me when I'm talking to you. Crumbs! To think that you'd turn on me like this, after all I've done for you. It hurts me, it really does."

> (*TF* 133)

In the sequence that preludes Nieuwenhuizen's final humiliation of Malgas cited a few paragraphs above, the latter seeks out the "guest-room" and here he is no more than a "visitor". It would seem that the relations of the host and the stranger have been totally inverted and the former interloper has become the indigene. In spite of Malgas' feeble protestations that he still needed the plan and that he could not see without it, Malgas literally has the ground swept from beneath his feet. This has the effect of dislodging him from his newly acquired imaginative moorings and he feels lost without the plan. The irony of course is that having invested so much effort into visualising and physically maintaining it, it is deemed redundant almost as soon as he has grasped its peculiar concepts. Writing on the Dickensian representation of the city, Efram Sicher has made a closely cognate point and concluded that:

> No description of the city could convey the totality of the city so Dickens proceeds by negation, by describing the failure to describe, or by giving us catalogues of disconnected objects which disturb us in their unexpected and absurd combination.

> (Sicher 2003 cited in Alter 2005:56)

Nieuwenhuizen's plan and "house" similarly unravel just as soon as they are described. The transience of the plan as representation is finally marked, amidst loud applause and the flashing of camera bulbs, by the crashing in of the outside world into the pair's chaos. Like Ivan, the narrator of *Portrait with Keys* (which I turn my attention to in a later chapter), Malgas experiences the uprooting of the plan just as its inner secrets have begun more clearly to dawn on him. This is a similar process to Ivan Vladislavić's ruminations about "a fiction that unravels even as [he] grasp[s] it" (Vladislavić 2006: 54).

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the experiences of social and physical space by the three main characters in Ivan Vladislavić's novel *The Folly*. The setting of the story's action in an idyllic white suburbia is crucial to teasing out the various fears and foibles of Otto Nieuwenhuizen, as well as Mr and Mrs Malgas. Their encounters and interactions, focused as they are on the empty plot that Nieuwenhuizen takes momentary (it would seem) occupation of, are the foreground to subtle yet insistent undercurrents of a socio-political transformation of the apartheid state that can no longer be ignored or postponed. The drama of the novel does not directly engage with the unfolding political reality but the fears of Mrs Malgas, in particular, serve to highlight the state of uncertainty that underlies the seemingly fixed, permanent and placid nature of suburban existence.

The first half of this chapter has analysed the notion of occupation or appropriation of physical and social space, and the mainly psychic ructions that occur when some of the characters like Mrs Malgas, with their proprietary airs of 'belonging' more to particular spaces than the perceived 'others', encounter what they conceive to be intrusions or invasions by people they feel to be different or do not know. The more conservative characters are ill-prepared for the emergence of 'new' kinds of identities, or at least identities that are different from what they are accustomed to. For Mrs Malgas, Nieuwenhuizen is, for most of the narrative, assigned into the category of being Other, which is conceptually being equal to the unknowable (and feared) blacks, because he lives in a shappy tent – the equivalent of a shanty – she also initially fears that once he is allowed to settle he would invite

his extended family something that blacks are stereotypically expected to do. The imaginative figure of the foreigner among the natives has been uppermost here in my consideration of the varied responses (between husband and wife) to Nieuwenhuizen's destabilising presence.

I have moved on from there into the second half of the chapter where I have examined the role of plans and maps in the appropriation of space. Although maps are generally used to demarcate physical space and boundaries closer examination reveals that maps are ultimately imaginative endeavours to exert control and influence over space. The most prominent dichotomy in the book with regard to the map or plan is the perceptual difference between Nieuwenhuizen and Malgas with the former epitomising an approach to mapping that is beyond the epistemological boundaries that the latter is aware of or competent in. In the end, Nieuwenhuizen's imagined plan (for it is never set on paper but remains in his head) irrefutably undercuts the two-dimensional rigidity of the conventional plan that Malgas' conservative pragmatism represents. The meaning of a space is shown to be impossible to encapsulate in a map or plan.

In the final analysis, Nieuwenhuizen is not merely a physical disturbance but an imaginative one too. He catalyses changes in the way in which the Malgases imagine themselves and near the end of the novel even Mrs Malgas is able to 'name' him as her husband's friend and to accord him all the ethics of hospitality that are due to him even if he is a 'foreigner'. Mrs Malgas' final gesture serves to rehabilitate and recuperate her own husband through the act of accepting the stranger, of no longer seeing Nieuwenhuizen as a threat.

4 Chapter Three: Heritage and (Memory in) Public Spaces in *Propaganda by Monuments and Other Stories*

4.1 Introduction

In analysing stories from the collection *Propaganda by Monuments and Other Stories* the focus of my attention will be on the stories 'The Tuba', 'Autopsy', 'The Book Lover', 'Propaganda by Monuments' and 'The WHITES ONLY Bench'. These stories stand out in this compilation because of the way in which they elaborate some of the writer's thematic and representational concerns that I already touched on with reference to *Missing Persons* and *The Folly*. The theme of space and territoriality is continued in several of the stories in this collection; for instance in 'The Tuba' and 'Propaganda by Monuments', in which questions of belonging and the spatialisation of memory are considered respectively. In 'Autopsy' and 'The Book Lover' especially, ideas about walking or touring the city space are brought to the fore and I shall use the figure of the postcolonial flâneur to illustrate how the city is imaginatively mapped and represented using the trope of walking. In terms of critical attention, *Propaganda by Monuments* has garnered far more analytical responses than Vladislavić's first two books.

As noted in the preceding chapters, most of the earliest available critiques on these early texts took the form of short book reviews, as in the case of Tony Morphet's appraisal of *Missing Persons* (1990),[69] as well as Ivor Powell, Ingrid de Kok and Peter Horn's initial reactions to *The Folly*.[70] The turn of the century ushered in a burgeoning of interest in Vladislavić's writing that culminates in the special issue of *Scrutiny2* in 2006, already referred to before. This burgeoning growth into what could ultimately be defined as Vladislavić studies may, in part, be explained by a growing awareness, both in the public sphere and in academia, of the author's incrementally relevant contributions to the canon of South African writing in English, as well as by the recognition of the new pathways charted in the present text in

---

[69] Tony Morphet's review first appeared in the *Weekly Mail* 6. 6 (23 February – 1 March 1990) and has been recently republished in ed. Gaylard (2011).

[70] Powell, de Kok and Horn's reviews all appeared in 1994, after *The Folly* was published in 1993. They have all also been republished in Gaylard ed. (2011).

terms of different ways of engaging with the emergent postcolonial city. This is one of the objectives of this dissertation. Ivan Vladislavić's writing is different, for instance, from the monochromatic divides or oppositions of country versus city, and black against white, that one finds in texts like Alan Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country* (2002 [1948]), Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy* (1989[1946]), and Alex La Guma's *In the Fog of the Season's End* (1992[1972]) and *Time of the Butcherbird* (1979). For Vladislavić "[w]riting about the obvious images isn't the problem: it's being able to write about them in an interesting, fresh way" (Warnes 2000b:278) that sets him apart from the rest that is the real challenge.

Among the fairly recent critical engagement with the collection *Propaganda by Monuments*, there have been two broad trends that are discernable. The first concerns critics who focus on the stylistic methods of the stories, and the second trend involves considerations that tend to lean more decisively towards my own interest in how history and memory manifest themselves in the emerging postcolonial city. Gerald Gaylard (whose analysis, along with that of Morphet and Helgesson, is an example of the first type of engagement described above) mentions the compilation more in passing (as opposed to sustained analysis) in his discussion of subjectivity in post-apartheid literature, commenting that post-apartheid writing, on the whole, emphasises "incommensurability in postcolonialism and seems [...] to foreground individuality rather than resolving it" (Gaylard 2006:66). Tony Morphet's focus is on the linguistic aspects of the stories and he interprets Ivan Vladislavić's early work up to and including *Propaganda by Monuments* as being constitutive of "counter-worlds, each with its own internal logic of performance, but each supporting a different order of meaning" (Morphet 2006:86). In 'Minor Disorders: Ivan Vladislavić and the Devolution of South African English', Stefan Helgesson (2004:777) sees Vladislavić as "thematis[ing] language itself". It is not clear to me whether "devolution" is used in the sense of spreading or passing on, or whether in fact it is used in the degenerative sense of the English language progressively losing its purity as time passes. The second group of critics includes Christopher Warnes, Monica Popescu and Shane Graham all of who specifically theorise on the making and translations of memory, especially in the title story 'Propaganda by Monuments.'

I will engage in greater detail with their positions on precise aspects of the later on in this chapter.

The stories I have chosen for consideration also share the common thread of being set almost immediately after the political watershed of 1994 when the first democratic elections were conducted in South Africa. This chronology is important because of the ways in which the stories instantiate the moment of legislated transition. They are also significant in capturing the beginnings of the transformation of the apartheid city into a postcolonial urban space. Some of the selected stories demonstrate the ways in which local and cosmopolitan conceptions of the city are mapped across the changing cityspace. Examples of this phenomenon include, but are not limited to, the way individual characters in the respective short stories self-dramatise or perform themselves. They do this sometimes in interaction with and in reaction to other 'players' in the space of the urban stage, and not always in isolation. The overarching question in this consideration is the degree to which the characters are imaginatively engaged in active and involuntary role-playing. In other words, I will take performance and performativity as aspects of city life into consideration. Due to the specific historical moment with which the stories are concerned, it is beneficial to analyse them both as being a way of engaging with an uncomfortable past and as a means to imaginatively fashion future possibilities in which history is not so much of a burden or impediment, but rather a catalyst for positive social interaction.

It is with due consideration of the salient points above, that this section is divided into two thematic segments. The first is concerned with what I refer to as the reversal of the classic gaze, as well as illustrating the walking of the city by figures that may be loosely termed as postcolonial flâneurs, partially following of course Benjamin's theorisation of the flâneur figure. My use of the classic gaze is informed by Beryl J. Wright's description of it as "dominant representations of gender and race constructed by those who have historically assumed the position of the primary spectator" (1996:397). The stories 'The Tuba', 'Autopsy' and 'The Book Lover' all share elements of these thematic concerns and I will use them here to examine how the physical traversal of the city by different characters is utilised at a symbolic level to represent the contestations that arise within different urban localities as various

characters seek to appropriate particular space and advantages for themselves within those locales. This sense of contested space also comes through in the different ways characters attempt to perform and assert their identities.

The second sub-section focuses mainly on the use of monuments, history and historical memory to mark the passage of time in the postcolonial metropolis. The stories 'Propaganda by Monuments' and 'The WHITES ONLY Bench' readily lend themselves to the investigation of operations of memory in the postapartheid city because of the questions that they raise about authenticity and the privileging of certain practices of remembering such as the constructions of monuments and museums. Through these short narratives, Vladislavić again broaches the possibility of different and perhaps competing avenues for the memorialising of history as events and process. This is in keeping with the broad framework of his fictional oeuvre that, as suggested in the introductory chapter, is premised on the recognition of the existence of multiple representations of the postcolonial city. In the two stories, the sterile monuments to the past are therefore brought into sharp contrast with what one may refer to as living museums that rely less on the conventions of passing traditions, but more on forward-looking dynamism and relevance. In this emerging urbanity, with its absence of stable referents, individual characters have to constantly reinvent their senses of themselves as well as the way in which they appropriate and make use of their physical environment.

4.2 The Transformation of the Gaze and Segments/Figments of Postcolonial Flânerie in 'The Tuba', 'Autopsy' and 'The Book Lover'

The three stories 'The Tuba', 'Autopsy' and 'The Book Lover' all exemplify in different ways the operations of the classic gaze and elements of flânerie through central characters who try to assert and perform their identities within urban landscapes that are undergoing rapid socio-political transformation. Dialectical tension is created because of the distance between self-perception and the reality of the transition from the meta-narrative of apartheid to a more democratic state of affairs. The old categories that some of the characters have previously utilised to frame their actions have been or are in the process of being subverted to the extent that these

classifications are no longer viable in the newer, emerging dispensation. For instance, in the old formulation of apartheid the dominant gaze operates in an almost uni-directional manner with black people being the subjects of the gaze and not being expected to 'return' it because of the existing set of power-relations that favoured the white viewer or practitioner of the white gaze. Wright has aptly described the effects of the racialised (or gendered) gaze as a form of "objectification through which particular genres of representations come to dominate the public and private consciousness and exert social control" (1996:397). The black subject would therefore normally perform at the behest and pleasure of the white viewer. In the process, the spectator who decides the terms and duration of the performance event and as a result, its signification, appropriates agency. While this is the convention, it is also important not to foreclose the possibility of transgression in such contexts.

In 'The Tuba' in particular, a story that Wood characterises as a "carnivalesque triumph" (2001:32), this paradigm is sabotaged to a large degree when the Salvation Army band (whose members are all back) decides to take their performance into the heart of white suburbia. The protesting hordes that Mrs Malgas viewed via newsflash in *The Folly* have manifested themselves in the flesh at the door of white privilege but appear to be far more benign than she has imagined. The intrusion has a destabilising effect on some of the white characters that feel put upon by the presence of "these jokers", "these chancers" (*PBM* 5,6). In the era of high apartheid, blacks were usually present and tolerated in the suburbs in the roles of servants, so the presence of the band constitutes a degree of dissent against the previous social order. 'The Tuba' begins with juxtaposed references to elements of the past and the cosmopolitan:

> They hung Saddam Hussein on the door to Cliffie's room at the side of the house, and kept the braai fires burning, and played on in the summer evenings under a string of jaundiced moons.
>
> (*PBM* 1)

The burning "braai fires" are distinct cultural markers speaking to idyllic evenings in the country. In the urban context, especially with respect to white urbanites, the braai fires are an apparent tradition that provides a link between modernity and the longed

for or remembered rusticity of the past in the seemingly incongruous setting of the modern urban space. "Saddam Hussein" is in actual fact a dartboard with the picture of the now late Iraqi dictator.[71] The reference is still effective in exemplifying an outward-looking disposition, even if the example is made through the use of caricature.

The narrator, who is Richie's mother, is quick to recognise the tension and potential for danger as soon as the Salvation Army band arrives in the street outside her home. Sergeant Dundas, who is her neighbour and a prison warder, "start[s] puffing away at an invisible instrument" (*PBM* 3), and Richie's mother knew this to be an omen of trouble to come. The city becomes a space for contestation as the band is regarded by Dundas to be competition, a disruption of the supposed bliss of suburbia. Before the musicians' arrival, the group on the porch has been playing darts and watching live cricket on television. This suggestion of leisure is in sharp contrast to the intimation of privation in the "little white collection tin" (*PBM* 4) that is in the hands of a female band-member. The live TV cricket marks a change from the "unrest" reports the author makes use of in *The Folly* and some of the stories in the collection *Missing Persons*. The difference in viewed subject matter may be indicative of the political transformation that South Africa is undergoing, but there is also the proviso that cricket, even up to the present day, is perceived by the majority of the population to be an elitist sport at best, and a white one at worst. The transition at the political level, however, does not necessarily translate to immediate changes in the attitudes of individuals like Dundas:

"Turn it up," said the Sergeant, wincing. "These jokers are giving me earache. Funny thing about *blacks*, you know, they can't hold a tune. Not one of ours, I mean. Their ears are different."

(*PBM* 4 – italics in the original)

These comments illustrate the operations of racial stereotyping and Othering while at the same time bringing to the fore questions of belonging or not belonging. The black musicians in the band are not only physically intruding into 'white' space, but are also

---

[71] The real Saddam Husein is not 'late' in the period described in the story. He dies after the second Bush "Gulf War" – the supposed war on terror.

attempting to appropriate ideological space that is not "theirs" by playing Christmas carols – and playing them badly, in the opinion of the jaundiced Dundas. In truth, the band members are quite adept at improvising and the question that arises is whether or not the band's music is more authentic because they play better when they improvise. Of themselves, as cultural artefacts, Christmas carols can point to a residual affinity to a Eurocentric identity. The question that arises as a result is who between these two groups actually belongs to this space more than the other, if at all such a difference can be defined. In this postcolonial urban spatiality[72], tensions between a colonial perspective that claims justification on the basis of its ties to 'European-ness' and an emergent African identity that is neither atavistic nor a direct mimic of the settler image are dramatised.

One of the ways in which the postcolonial turn is marked is by the emergence of the formerly oppressed from the subaltern position. As hinted earlier, the parameters of identity performance as well as the direction of the gaze are irrevocably shifting in the moment of transition. The ground beneath the previously hegemonic groupings becomes unstable, as they are less sure of their status, which they are no longer able to take for granted. For instance, Richie's mother who is also the narratorial voice in this story becomes doubtful of her place in relation to the members of the band, as she is unsure who is performing for whom because of the way the bandleader looks at them from beneath his sunglasses:

> I felt that the conductor was looking at me through his ridiculous sunglasses, as if I was a character in a three-dimensional film. They were all looking at us. You would think we were the show and they the audience.
>
> (*PBM* 5)

The gaze has been reversed, or at least the narrator feels that it has been reversed and that she is now subject to it. In this instance and others like it, Vladislavić is also problematising the questions of performativity and the specific interactions between

---

the audience and performers in the course of a performance event. In the colonial paradigm of black/white relations, blacks have almost always been construed as performers for white audiences, be it in the workplace, street or at home. Such moulds are increasingly broken or subverted due to the dynamism and fluidity of the nascent postcolonial city. When Cliffie decides to offer one of his oversized, wooden play coins as his contribution to the bands' fund-raising efforts, the intended joke – which is in bad taste in any case – is quickly turned back on him and his friends. Richie – an unusually silent and possibly autistic boy who does not utter a word throughout the story – runs off with the coin and climbs into the foliage of a tree and out of reach of the chasing adults. If any confirmation of the shift of the gaze and the reversal of roles is necessary, it is provided by the comic events that flow from Cliffie's misplaced attempt to poke fun at the band. One member of the group, Basil, tries to follow the boy up the tree but when he (Basil) falls, this engenders quietly mirthful smiles on the musicians' faces as they continue to play, which in turn provokes outrage in Dundas:

> "Bugger this for a joke," Sergeant Dundas burst out. "He's making us look like fools. They are laughing at us. [...] It's the same wherever you go, some *black* face laughing at you. They'll be toyi-toying in your front garden just now." [...] They did seem to be enjoying themselves. One of the trumpeters was actually smiling as he blew. I hadn't thought it was possible. [...] The idea that the Salvation Army had come especially to ridicule us seemed suddenly feasible.
>
> (*PBM* 8)[73]

Dundas has already made known his opinion of the blacks as lowly and uncultured, so his further reaction here is not unexpected. The statement "[s]ome black face laughing at you", has quite obvious political connotations in light of the social and political changes that the country is undergoing. The narrator's comments, though, are a little more complex because, on the available evidence, they are not based on any overt racism or feelings of superiority. In the narrator's imagination, the group on the patio has become objects of ridicule. A partial explanation for her response is

---

[73] Emphasis in the original.

that there is a psychological apprehension wrought by living in the city, in close proximity to large numbers of strangers, recalling the point made earlier in the Introduction and in Chapter One in connection with how urban living necessitates often unwanted social and physical closeness. She thus has a fear of the strange faces looking at them, a fear not necessarily of any physical threat posed by the band, but a more subliminal or psychological anxiety with regards to being viewed as worse than the and Other, and in this way rehearsing yet again Derrida's concept of the host and stranger as discussed in the previous chapter. In the performance of her identity she naturally sets up comparisons of superiority and inferiority with other individuals occupying the same space with her. As a consequence her conception of her own identity is defined more by what she thinks to be the stranger/other's perception of her, and not an objective self-evaluation of the content of her character.

The laughter of the blacks described above is ironic when one considers the different perspectives of Dundas and Cliffie on the subject. While they express dissimilar opinions on the matter of humour, their views share a commonality in that they are grounded on a racist rationalisation. In the case of the former, the blacks should not even be laughing in his presence and, worse still, at his expense. For Cliffie, they should continue to fulfil the centuries-old stereotype of the grinning savage, even when the cost of the humour is the blacks' own humiliation:

> After the initial surprise, the victims of Cliffie's pranks usually became angry and started to argue with him. Some of them begged for the real money that was owed them. A few joined in the laughter – and they were nearly all white, Cliffie said, which just went to show that your blacks didn't have a sense of humour, it was the funny thing about them.
>
> (*PBM* 9)

In Cliffie's estimation the presence, or lack thereof, of a sense of humour is a distinction that can be noted between races and is a marker of cultural refinement. In this light, Dundas' gruff reaction to the comical context ironically places him squarely in the category of the unrefined, because he is unable to discern the humour of the situation. If we are to follow Cliffie's logic then Dundas is equated to the very blacks

for whom the latter shows so much disdain. This proves again how the old paradigms and assumed binaries are shifting. In the heat of his rage, Dundas ill-advisedly tries to silence the band by loudly playing his own instrument – he played the tuba for the Correctional Services band. His intention to silence them flops because they turn his discordant notes that are meant to disrupt their rhythm into new spontaneous melodies that "closed over Sergeant Dundas like brown water" (*PBM* 11), displaying again the creative versatility of the band to which I have alluded to in reference to the Christmas carol. This scenario reiterates the carnivalesque aspect of the band, which "serves [here] as an agent of disruption, and also as a means of incorporating the supernatural or the fantastical into everyday reality" (Wood 2001:32). Without making any conscious effort, Dundas involuntarily finds his limbs jerking and twitching to this new beat, "nodding his head and stamping his feet, swimming in slow motion" (*PBM* 11). Dundas is taken up – literally[74] – up by the magical power of this new music, of which he is also a symbolic integral part, against his will and prejudices. These new notes that the band invents from the chaos designed and desired by the sergeant are new ways of being, and of experiencing the postcolonial city. The new music signifies irrevocable changes not just for Dundas, but also in the lives of all around him.

The short story 'Autopsy' is a quick visual tour of a section of Johannesburg's Hillbrow area. Unlike in most of the other stories in this collection and even in *Missing Persons* before it, Ivan Vladislavić provides distinct time – 15 May 1992 – as well as place settings that give the story a sense of immediacy and particularity, which is perhaps not achieved with the other tales that are not as clearly situated or marked. As a place, Hillbrow is a graphic illustration of fluidity and porousness or what Mbembe and Nuttall call "entry and exit points" (2004:351-2). As mentioned earlier,[75] these entry and exit points are manifestations of the unusual and atypical about Africa, in this case the postcolonial urban space, that serve to undermine and destabilise the conventional and received wisdom that is transmitted in most western narratives of Africa as a physical and imagined place. Designed in the 1970s as a high-rise suburb for younger white professionals, Hillbrow is a physical and figurative

---

[74] As the story closes Dundas is 'carried off' by the band.
[75] See Mbembe and Nuttall (2004:351-2)

breaching point of the apartheid city in that it is an early site for negation and overlap of the legislated social boundaries. It is also a locale for the irruption of new cultural practices within the cityspace as it is historically the arrival point for many national and foreign migrants. All of these different groups represent new influences and ways of being in the city such that the present suburb is almost unrecognisable in its character when compared to the original version.

By 1992, Hillbrow as a representative segment of the formerly discriminated cityspace of apartheid has undergone many fundamental changes. The emergence of edge cities and the movement of the big commercial entities out of the city centre have caused its transformation. Apartheid's failure at social engineering is initially marked in Hillbrow by the growth of a multi-cultural, multi-racial community that is not necessarily composed of the well-heeled white professionals that the suburb had been conceived for. The story is set at the time when the city is made up of plural identities and not the static monochromes legislated by apartheid. The narrator is sitting on the pavement tables and about to dig into his meal when he first notices the King exit a bookshop in the same street:

> Although it was chilly, I had chosen a table on the pavement so that I could be part of the vibrant street-life of Johannesburg's most cosmopolitan suburb. [...] The street-children squatting at the kerb looked preternaturally cold and hungry with their gluey noses and methylated lips.
>
> One of the little beggars was an Indian. Apartheid is dead.

<div align="right">(PBM 40)</div>

Johannesburg, of which Hillbrow is an emblematic representation, is a transforming postcolonial city, and is also socially multi-layered with the haves and have-nots sharing the same cityspace, and walking the same streets. Hillbrow in particular, has many varied textures and is multicultural in its aspect. An example of the signs of the times is the poverty that cuts across races in the ironic comment that "[a]partheid is dead" above. The little Indian beggar bears testimony to the fact that poverty is no longer the exclusive preserve of the black majority. The narrator finds this to be noteworthy because – *from his perspective* – in the passing political dispensation

(apartheid)[76] the fact of belonging to the black racial group is assumed, in the discriminatory discourse of apartheid, to predispose an individual to the experience of poverty. I emphasise this view to be the narrator's own perspective here because any reading that characterises or equates blackness with poverty without making all the necessary qualifications is overly simplistic and cannot withstand objective analysis or testing. In the event, the narrator's comments[77] are anecdotal generalisations as is proven by the building of the poor white suburb of Triomf on the ruins of the razed black suburb of Sofiatown and which is the setting of Marlene van Niekerk's acclaimed novel of the same name, *Triomf*.

At the level of the imaginary, Hillbrow provides fertile ground for the undermining of the old binaries of, for instance, black township-vs-white suburb, or city-vs-rural, and indeed black versus white. Such oppositions are favoured by the mode of protest literature, and Mbembe and Nuttall find that "these accounts envision the city not as an aesthetic project but as a space of division" (2004:357). In such constructions, identity or citizenship is read as being constructed as a result of racial difference, and apartheid "planning serves to delineate different city spaces separated by boundaries of class" (2004:357). The differences between the diverse city spaces in this kind of literature seem to be too stark and arbitrary. I will make further elaborations on this point in the chapter on *The Restless Supermarket*, especially with reference to how such formulation of set opposites does not allow for the various imaginative and physical crossings that naturally occur in the city. I will also show how liminal zones exist and overlap between and over supposed lines of rigid demarcation. Vladislavić, through 'Autopsy', is beginning to counter some of the positions that hold that the African city is "an emblem of irresolvable conflict" (2004:353).

---

[76] The African National Congress as well other liberation movements were unbanned in 1990 but political democracy in South Africa is only achieved some time later, with the first expression of universal suffrage being the general elections of 27 April 1994 and negotiations for a new constitution being concluded in 1996. I refer to this moment as a passing dispensation because the political negotiations are still ongoing and the formal instruments of apartheid still exist on the statute books. However, historical changes are now ongoing and cannot be reversed.

[77] The narrator's commentary that "[a]partheid is dead" refers less to the political than the social reality. This is an anecdotal generalisation in the sense that poverty knows no racial bounds, hence even at the height of apartheid the South African government had had to build a suburb to specifically accommodate the poor whites of Johannesburg. The irony is that they razed a relatively affluent black suburb (Sofiatown) in order to achieve this.

In 'Autopsy' the imagined place of Hillbrow is toured through the eyes and first-person voice of the raconteur who is following another character, referred to just as "the King". The narrator makes no direct contact with the object of his visual pursuit but is in "no doubt about it" – that it is the King. Though the reader is less certain as to the meaning of this mystical referent, there are hints in the description of the swagger, dressing and manner of this King character that this may be the latest in the litany of posthumous sightings of Elvis Presley. The title of 'Autopsy' seems to lend weight to this interpretation. Elements of flânerie, as defined by Walter Benjamin in his consideration of the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, are discernable in the King, and by proxy the narrator himself. In Benjamin's estimation "[t]he street becomes a dwelling for the flâneur; he is as much at home among the façades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls" (1983:37). If the flâneur is given to strolling the city in order to experience it, the King's traversal through a section of Hillbrow defines his experience of that cityspace. Beyond that, the narrator who follows him and mentally[78] journals or makes mental diary notes of his 'quarry's' stops and starts also gets to feel a sense of the place and that feeling is in turn transmitted to the reader. Benjamin's flâneur often finds that in certain circumstances,

> ...he has to play detective [and] strolling gives him the best prospects of doing so [...] If the flâneur is thus turned into an unwilling detective, it does him a lot of good socially, for it accredits his idleness. He only seems to be indolent, for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eye off a miscreant.
>
> (Benjamin 1983:40)

In Benjamin's formulation, the flâneur has ultimate agency in deciding the timing and routes of his journey through the city – he can choose to sit and observe the other residents of the city pass by, or to walk in limitless directions himself. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau (1988) makes similar conclusions in his considerations of the practice of walking the city. He finds that,

---

[78] The narrator's posture also recalls Georg Simmel's formulation of "a marked preponderance of the activity of the eye".

Walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects [...] the trajectories it speaks. [...] These enunciatory operations are of unlimited diversity. They therefore cannot be reduced to their graphic trail.

(1988:99)

The flâneur's possible routes are limitless and the narrator's agency here is not diminished because he follows the King, as he makes the conscious decision to do so. Agency is manifested in the choice to follow the spontaneous cuts and turns executed by the subject of his pursuit and gaze.

Shortly after his 'sighting' of the King, the narrator decides to trail him and rushes into the restaurant to settle his bill. Inside, he exchanges pleasantries in German with the lady behind the counter whom he refers to as "the Potato Woman of Dusseldorf" (*PBM* 41), so named to probably emphasise her German origins. The author uses this reference and other such small details elsewhere in the story to underline the cosmopolitan character of Hillbrow. For a moment, the narrator appears lost and unsure of his exact location and he interrupts the recounting of the King's specific movements to wonder where he is:

Where am I? Or rather: Where was I? Hollywood Boulevard? Dar es Salaam? Dakar? The Botanical gardens in Durban?

(*PBM* 41)

Due to its transformations and varied cultural influences, Hillbrow as a space now has the feel or ambience of being an "everywhere", hence the narrator's temporary doubt as to his exact location. Many little segments that reflect these diverse places have been infused into the different quarters of the suburb, resulting in the cosmopolitan ambience discerned by the narrator. Beyond the mere strolling in the city, the flâneur also displays the qualities of acute observation. The narrator displays these powers of detailed scrutiny in his tailing of the King. It is an aspect of the flâneur that he is at once of the city and yet at the same time not of it:

He opened the magazine to the feature on Steffi Graf and flattened it with His left forearm. With his right hand he peeled back the greaseproof paper and

with His left he raised the yiro. His kingly lips mumbled the meat as if it were a microphone.

(*PBM* 43)

The narrator is of the city and not of it in the way walks its street following the King but is able to blend himself into invisibility. The King's motions are observed in the minutest detail, showing the extent of the narrator's powers of observation. This attention to detail is also applied when the King later traverses Hillbrow with the result that the reader is able to imaginatively experience its nooks and spaces in the manner in which the King and the narrator do. The flâneur's role in the city is an ambiguous one in this case because, while the narrator is an integral part of the story, he also has to maintain a certain imaginative distance from the story that he is telling. 'Elvis' walks the city and, through the narrator's pursuit of the King, the reader also 'tours' the imagined Hillbrow. In a remarkable sequence, not only are all the names of shops and places along the King's route mentioned by name, but the speaker also goes so far as to count the specific number of paces walked by the King from one landmark to the next. The effect that the writer creates throughout the King's journey is that the narrator walks, eats and drinks with the King, but without the two of them actually being socially connected. It is an instantiation of a version of proximity as postulated by Georg Simmel (1995), the difference being that in this case there is a simultaneous attraction and repudiation or repulsion. The city creates a sense of closeness or proximity between total strangers who may live as neighbours for long periods without knowing one another. The King and the narrator travel the same routes without physically meeting, as if one is a shadow of the other. The latter only imagines that he knows who the King is and his inventiveness is borne out by the cautionary revelation that closes the story: "The very next morning I saw Steve Biko..."[79]. This moment echoes the doubt generated in the story 'When My Hands Burst into Flames' when we wonder whether the hands of the narrator actually caught fire or not. The fictional "truth" is not something that can be taken for granted because, in the space of the postcolonial[-ising] city, both physical and imaginative paradigms or criteria constantly undergo transformation. In view of my

---

[79] Steve Biko is a hero of the anti-apartheid struggle and was central in the formation of the Black Consciousness Movement. He died in police custody on 12 September 1977.

intention to examine the symbolic effects of traversal of the city by different individual characters, the story 'Autopsy' highlights how the locale of Hillbrow enables both the King and the narrator to express agency and appropriate spaces of the city in their different ways, the first going through his mundane routines, and the second vicariously experiencing the same because he chooses to follow the King.

Ivan Vladislavić further illustrates the theme of proximity and sometimes-involuntary intimacy in 'The Book Lover', a story about a man with a passion for second- hand novels who develops an obsession for books that were once owned by a particular Helena Shein. Where 'Autopsy' narrates the journey of the King by following his walk through the spaces of Hillbrow, 'The Book Lover' recounts Helena Shein's life by means of plotting or mapping her book purchases by date and place, and in that way situating her personal history in the various bookshops and places that she visited to make the purchases. The phantasmagorical resurrection of Elvis in the former story finds an uncanny parallel in the bringing to life of a past existence in contemporary Johannesburg in the second. The two stories also share the elements of traversing and observation of the city – the key qualities central to the notion of the flâneur as a way of being and experiencing the city. The trope of the journey – both back in time as well as across contemporary space – is crucial in making comparisons between these two narrations. These representations of the city make use of versions of flashback, with the narrator in 'Autopsy' viewing the King's movements as if through the lens of a movie camera. The King is appropriately dressed for, and appears to be performing a scripted role. In 'The Book Lover' the gaze has the quality of a perusal through the archives as the narrator pores through numerous books in search of the historical evidence of Helena Shein's presence in the city.

The narrator in 'The Book Lover' is keenly, and perhaps claustrophobically aware of space, with his penchant for avoiding, as far as is physically possible, crowded places of any description. In this regard, he cuts the figure of the anti-flâneur in his detestation for crowded places. Walter Benjamin has described how the crowd can act as a cover for the asocial person who wishes to lose himself (in the crowd) and who is averse to dealing with the vagaries of intimate, face-to-face contact:

> [t]he masses appear as the asylum that shields an asocial person from his persecutors. Of all the menacing aspects of the masses, this became apparent first.

> (1983:40)

Of Baudelaire himself, Benjamin remarks that "Baudelaire loved solitude, but he wanted it in a crowd" (1983:50). The Book Lover's posture, however, is one of complete withdrawal from society, to the extent that is possible. Unlike Poe's understanding of the flâneur as one who seeks out the crowd, The Book Lover is very much more comfortable in his own company.[80] A tension is quick to manifest itself between his simultaneous desires for solitude on the one hand, and on the other, his longing for second-hand books that approaches addiction or obsessive compulsion. He is therefore always torn between these two impulses, especially when he has to venture from the relative 'safety' of his home into public spaces in pursuit of the next fix for his growing habit. As a consequence, a trip outside the house has to be planned with utmost meticulousness. Even a second-hand book-sale in a neighbourhood garden is evaluated on the strength of the distances (read as space) between the tables, as in the following example where the arrangements meet with the narrator's rare approval:

> These arrangements are a godsend: one does not have to endure the crush of human bodies one associates with jumble sales or, worse, the intimidating configurations of book-lined walls in the second-hand dealers.

> (*PBM* 79)

The protagonist of the tale experiences the city in some of the ways that can be read as patently psychological, as suggested by Georg Simmel in 'The Metropolis and Mental Life'. In this article he promulgates a psychological perspective or dimension on reading the city attributing what he perceives to be the challenge of city life to "the attempt by individuals to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society" (1995:30). The narrator's fear of crowds and crowded places reaches pathological proportions and he thus develops a state

---

[80] Here I paraphrase Walter Benjamin (1983:40). Benjamin finds that Poe deliberately "blurs the difference between the asocial person and the *flâneur*."

of constant anxiety because the city street, either in its modern or postcolonial manifestations, is marked by the omnipresence of the crowd.

The city, as spatial location and crowded place, assumes the status of a character and is a foil to the narrator's protagonist. The importance of the connections between location and character is suggested in an intertextual excerpt from Alan Paton's preview of Harry Bloom's *Episode,* which appears on the inside flap of one of the narrator's purchases: "It is the location itself [...] which is the real character of the novel..."(*PBM* 81). The crowded city is thus a physical presence that is felt to be pressing in on the hapless raconteur, whose behaviour is heavily influenced by his spatial location:

> As a rule I avoid bookshops. Books en masse repel me. I dislike crowds of people too, even relatively small gatherings of strangers in which everyone speaks at once. I find intolerable the babble that assaults my ears as I enter a bookshop.

> (*PBM* 83)

The man's specific expressions of agency are limited to a degree by his reactions to the presence of other people within a particular locale. As a consequence, his way of being in the city is characterised by the extremes of short periods of fearful forays into public space, and longer withdrawal into hermetic privacy. In the event, his experience of the city is quite curtailed and his interactions – if they can be called that – with other people and the outside world do not develop much beyond the functional necessities required for completing his book purchases. In a way, what he knows of the city is mediated by the fictional world of the books in which he is engrossed and by the 'ghostly' pathways charted by Helena Shein as she made her own book purchases.

The psychological facet of being in urban space is perhaps best illustrated by some of the journeys that the narrator makes out of his house to buy books. These trips are generally marked by a dream-like, nightmarish edginess in which he seems to be on the verge of being consumed. The subtle irony is that what threatens to overcome him are not the stereotypical perils normally associated with city-living like drug-abuse, violence or womanising; instead, the menace presents itself as a

palpable fear of interaction and engagement with other people. One such moment is described below:

> Screwing up my courage I tumbled headlong down the shaft and plucked the book from the shelf. It turned out to be Barbara Cartland's *A Ghost in Monte Carlo*. I bought it, a little shame-facedly; indeed I threw in a copy of *Cry, the Beloved Country* which happened to come to hand to raise the tone of the purchase, and scurried home. [...] I am not a snob, you see, but I am a stickler for standards.
>
> (*PBM* 87)

This passage is interesting on two counts. Firstly the narrator has to "screw up" his courage in order to enter the public space of The Booknook, from which emanates the voice of a book that he *hears* calling his name. The imagery of a shaft, with its connotations of dank, underground or enclosed spaces, and made even more potent with the contextual associations of Johannesburg as a city that was founded on the basis of mining, serves to magnify his sense of foreboding. Secondly, his intellectual conservatism makes him look on his purchase with a hint of shame for buying a common romance by Cartland instead of *real* literature. In maintaining the idealised notion of a literary hierarchy where there are distinct levels denoting what is proper literature and what is not, the narrator bears the hallmarks of a precursor to the not so affable Aubrey Tearle of *The Restless Supermarket*. They share a love for reading and very pronounced notions of literacy and linguistic order. The book-lover is largely reclusive, briefly and intermittently appearing – it would seem – only to buy second-hand books, before retiring to his indeterminate private space to voraciously consume the same. While Aubrey Tearle has a much more visible public presence or persona, he determinedly guards his privacy and insists that all his respective acquaintances maintain a certain distance from his personal space. He in turn avoids intruding on theirs. The two characters also share the characteristic of having towering obsessions, with the book-lover fixated on collecting books that were once in the ownership of Helena Shein. Tearle, for his part, is consumed by the collection of corrigenda and both men have to overcome their respective inhibitions in order to fulfil their obsessions. For instance, they have to act against their nature, as exemplified in the book-lover's declaration that:

I was obliged to overcome my aversion to crowds. I had to harden my heart by plunging it repeatedly in the raucous air.

Such strategies can be read as constituting their individual practices of being in the city, although the specific parameters and the significations of "being in the city" may differ for each man.

In a similar vein to the almost religious homage that he pays to Helen Shein's former books, the book-lover also traverses the city by tracing the locations of old bookshops, or buildings that were formerly booksellers but have since been converted to other usage. This underlines in him a distinct propensity to dwell on the past, and is suggestive of a possible explanation for his "aversion to crowds". The lively, almost riotous atmosphere of the contemporary postcolonial city is for him a thing to be feared, hence his constant imaginative burying of himself in books and in the past. In this, he displays a marked disinclination to forge ahead with time, choosing instead to cling to the nebulous heritage of a past, which he can now only conjure up by means of the old buildings and books as relics. These speak of a past time of literary vibrancy when there was almost a bookshop on each city block. On the days that he manages to pry himself away from his reading, he visits – in ghost-like fashion – his old haunts that have found new uses and does so with wistful reminiscence. As he lists them by name, there is a melancholy tone in his remembrance of "...the vanished bookshops [...] they were all gone". (*PBM* 95)

The book-lover's yearning for a slice of the past finds partial fulfilment when he discovers a set of three photographs in one of Helena Shein's old books. These add a new dimension not only to his understanding of and relationship to Helena, but also to the imagined interaction with the old cityscapes that are represented in the pictures:

I know these bricks, these houses. Although the photograph is black and white, I can see the marmalade colour of them, the glazed rind of brick and the plaster thick and white as pith. This is a Highlands North house, a Cyrildene house, an Orange Grove house. The streetlights nod against a wan blue sky, crossed in one corner by telephone lines.

Presented above is an echo of Paton's formulation of the relationship between character and place as earlier cited, in which he suggests that places can become characters. In this excerpt, the book-lover speculates on the location of each successive house in the snapshots based purely on the types of bricks used. These urban spaces can therefore be mapped in this way, using the bricks as signs or markers of places. Just as the trajectory of Helena's life can be plotted to a degree by tracing the books that she purchased, these photographs and the locales they represent serve to fill out some of the details about certain periodic changes in her life as reflected by the different suburbs in the city that she called home at different times. By this stage the narrator is referring to Helena as if to a long-known friend, with an intimacy based on the discoveries he feels he has made about her life. Using the evidence from the pictures, he is able to find her home in Orange Grove, going by the same bus route that a young Helena might, in all probability, have used on countless trips to the various bookshops and elsewhere. Instead of finding the picturesque house in the photograph, the narrator is confronted by the towering façade of a high security wall from behind which the house is barely visible. The wall and the advertising plaque hanging from it belong to a more modern era of insecurity and commercialism but he is not disheartened in his quest. In the end he is still able to reincarnate a version of Helena by imaginatively willing her into existence, in the same form that he had imagined her. He is a schizophrenic character that, ironically, tends to seek and to enjoy solitude, but has to endure very public places in order to acquire the books that make his loneliness enjoyable. His split personalities arise from conflicting impulses to acquire books and also to remain largely isolated. The Book Lover is a social hermit, a stark contrast to the idea of city living, but he can also be read occasionally as approximating the archetype of the asocial individual envisioned by Benjamin (1983) as finding cover and anonymity in the crowd, even if he resents being part of it. At the same time, he appears as the antithesis of the flâneur figure that genuinely enjoys proximity of other city residents. He is the epitome of contradictions, the ultimate irony being that people or the crowd he strives so strenuously to dissociate or not to engage with, hardly notice him and he therefore has nothing to fear.

4.3 Reinventing Memory in Postcolonial Public Spaces

The stories 'Propaganda by Monuments' and 'The WHITES ONLY Bench' highlight the interplays between history or memory on the one hand and different city spaces on the other. Through the different characters portrayed in each of the stories and the interactions they have amongst themselves as well as in relation to the spaces they occupy, Vladislavić gives representations of various contradictions that play out between particular historical moments and the space in which they become manifest. An example in the first story is in the dichotomous perceptions of the Lenin monuments between some members of the Russian bureaucracy and an emergent postcolonial entrepreneur in a South African city. Similarly, as in the second tale, the historical artefact has different signification depending on the locale it is situated in. While the monument or artefact is an attempt to inscribe or totalise the meaning of a particular historical moment, the connotation derived from such an endeavour is never stable but is always dynamic.

'Propaganda by Monuments' tells the story of two very unlikely protagonists and correspondents, Pavel Grekov and Boniface Khumalo, who only encounter one another through an exchange of letters initiated by the latter as he seeks to acquire one of Lenin's busts that have been recently uprooted in the wake of glasnost in Russia. Khumalo's motivation is, on the face of it, innocent enough, as he wishes to establish a themed restaurant in Atteridgeville, Pretoria called the *V.I. Lenin Bar and Grill*. For him, this would mark the completion of his own transition from a tavern-owner operating on the edges of law and profitability into a fully-fledged businessman in the recently liberated South Africa. Through the intertextual media of written letters and the displaced monuments of Lenin, Ivan Vladislavić maps the period of transition in Moscow and Pretoria, with all the attendant ironies implied in the linguistic and cultural dichotomy dramatised in the exchanges between Grekov and Khumalo. Vladislavić uses the artefacts of the Russian transition from Soviet communism to provide fodder for the staging of the South African version, albeit a miniaturised version in the individual ambit of the life of Khumalo. Monica Popescu insightfully comments that:

As landmarks of the hegemonic discourse of the communist past, the statues representing Lenin need to be obliterated or "translated" *into* more useful forms or *to* remote cultures that might make use of them.[81]

(2003:408)

Popescu further argues that the gap between "two individuals", "two cultures at a time of transition" and "two critical discourses" can best be "approached through the figure of translation" (2003:408). A paradox lies in the fact that where the unwanted statues are emblematic of the discarding of history in Russia, in Boniface Khumalo's vision they are symbolic of entrepreneurial genius and success.

As Grekov walks the cold streets of Moscow, he observes his environment in a manner not unlike that of the flâneur as described in earlier sections of this chapter. He remarks upon the familiar looks of the strangers he encounters, finding that they "were like himself" (*PBM* 16). Making his way to Bulkin Street, he comes upon one of the many heads of Lenin that are in the process of being uprooted from their bases. From the perspective of the narrative voice, this particular head has very imposing dimensions:

In the middle of the cobbled space, on an imposing pedestal, was a large stone head. Not just any old head – a head of Lenin. And not just any old head of Lenin either. According to Roads and Pavements it was the largest head of Lenin in the city of Moscow.

(*PBM* 17)

Lenin's stone head is a landmark, not just of Moscow but also of history. It speaks to and is of a particular historical era in the same way that all other large and well-known landmarks are referents for their respective epochs in history. But the workmen clambering over it with what Grekov deems to be "gleeful daring and lack of decorum" (*PBM* 18) undermine the solidity suggested by the huge monolith. One can draw parallels between the sequence that follows and the televised scenes from Iraq that portrayed Saddam Hussein's final humiliation as the general population dismembered his statues. These rather macabre dramas also point to the ways in

---

[81] Emphasis in the original.

which the heroic image is often subverted and undermined, especially when the historical era that generated its previous signification has passed. In the case of the fictional Lenin, the sense of heroism has deteriorated to the extent that his sculpted head is now referred to as a "monumental lump of history" (*PBM* 18). As he sits on a bench in the square and bears solitary witness to the removal of the head, Grekov wonders at how quickly memories are made and lost:

> How soon people become bored with the making and unmaking of history, Grekov thought, remembering the hundreds of thousands who had taken to the streets to watch the first monuments fall.
>
> (*PBM* 18)

The brevity of the attention paid to the monuments, either in their making or in the destruction, emphasises the ephemeral quality of the meanings that are attached to them. Vladislavić, through the figure of the historical artefact, is suggesting that memories or historical meanings and the processes that give rise to them continuously have to be reinvented or re-imagined in order to have continual relevance.

In a further ironic twist, one of the labourers reveals that the most valuable statues, those made of marble and by famous artists, are the least reusable and are thus "cleaned up and put in museums". The cheaper ones are more readily recyclable as the bronze ones are melted and remoulded into useful everyday objects like door-knockers, while the stone statues are crushed into gravel for paving. Just like Lenin's statues, the city of Moscow itself undergoes a form of literal and figurative deconstruction as the various pieces from the old monuments are put to new uses in the different spaces of the city, such as being crushed into paving stones. Despite the symbolic permanence called to mind by these original cenotaphs and other memorial objects, the city is continually remaking itself and memories of itself, as in the excerpt below of Grekov's meditations:

> A single thread of iron, a severed spine twisting from the concrete, marked the spot where the head had stood. The head of Lenin. It was hard to imagine something else in its place. But that's the one certainty we have, he thought. There will be something in its place.

In the spaces formerly occupied by such statues, new forms of appropriating space will emerge as new histories are created. The monolithic narrative of the heroic image is almost always shown to be pretentious with the passage of time, as new truths emerge and perceptions of the heroic character transform.

A slightly different way to think about and problematise the relationship between space and memory or history in this story is to take a closer look at the two correspondents – Grekov and Khumalo – in terms of the way they perceive history and what this says about themselves as individual beings. What the one 'knows' about the other is, as mentioned earlier, mediated through the letters that they exchange. Khumalo's letter requesting a bust of Lenin for his township bar triggers the correspondence and the style of writing is designed to impress the Soviet bureaucrats through its affective register that is meant to underscore the writer's revolutionary credentials. Take for instance the letter's opening paragraph below, with Grekov's equally humorous and off-kilter comments appearing in brackets:

> I am greeting you in the name of struggling masses of South Africa, comrades, freedom fighters, former journeyman to Moscow – you may know some… [Never met a military trainee, but believe they existed.] Also in the name of boergois (*sic*) countrymen known up and down [business 'contacts'? class alliances?] here at home. I myself am struggle [struggling – infamous Apartheid].

These exchanges have the added complication that the language of communication is English and, though neither of them is functionally illiterate, certain faux pas are committed by both in the process of writing and reading, especially in the case of Grekov. For instance, Khumalo renders bourgeois as "boergious" and in that slip of the pen unknowingly not only writes on behalf of the masses, but also their former oppressors – the Boers. Another typical example of the perceptual disconnect between the two occurs when Grekov discovers a piece of Khumalo's hair in the latter's letter to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

> Grekov read the letter through again, although he practically knew it by heart. In a dimple in the middle of the sheet his eye came to a tight spring of black hair. It was in fact a hair from Boniface Khumalo's head [...] but Grekov, understandably failed to recognise it. He blew it into space in a cloud of steam.

> (*PBM* 21-22)

This 'encounter' between the story's protagonists is intriguing in the way it poses the possibility that Grekov has no conception of Khumalo as a person (with black and kinky hair). Without attaching a necessarily anthropological importance to physical difference as epitomised by the different hair textures and Grekov's lack of recognition of Khumalo's hair, it is interesting to examine how the latter is perceived, or not, in the imagination of the Russian bureaucrat. While Khumalo may not be symbolised by this single hair, it is a physical aspect of his person that Grekov could have coalesced his perceptions of Khumalo around.

An alternative point that can be made is that the episode marks an instance or illustration of the unknowability of the other. Grekov cannot imaginatively grasp the spring of hair as a corporeal manifestation of Boniface Khumalo because it is beyond his imaginative realm. The limits of his experience of the world lie within the confined space of his role as an English translator in the mundane-sounding Department of Everyday Affairs. The hair is, for him, disembodied and therefore lacking in signification. It has no meaning beyond that which he is capable of divining. Unlike Popescu, I would not go as far as to suggest that Grekov "gracefully" occupies the interstitial space that she defines as "the intersection between Russian (and former Soviet) culture and the English-speaking South African cultural landscapes" (2003:409). I would, however, agree that Grekov's translation of Khumalo's letter shows "the imperfect globalizing character of English" (2003:409). My objection primarily rests on the fact that the translation produced is, in spite of Grekov's efforts to exude knowledgeability, quite an awkward, ungainly one in the end, especially where one considers the originator's semantic intentions. In addition, the interpretation is premised on the literality of a standard code of English but Khumalo does not emanate from such an "English-speaking South African cultural landscape", at least not as imagined by Popescu. In truth, there is no single "English-speaking

South African cultural landscape", but rather there are many Englishes and the letter is one such manifestation or version. A further illustration of the imaginative distance between Khumalo and his Russian correspondents is shown later in Christov's[82] enquiry as to the health of the livestock on the South African version of the steppe:

> On a new thread. What is doing in the Transvaal? Do the cows and sheep graze on the veldt nearby free from harm?
>
> (*PBM* 30)

This interjection of the pastoral imagery could not be further divorced from the urban vision encapsulated in the dreams that Khumalo has for his tavern – a place of consumption and capitalism, notwithstanding the communist nomenclature. The letter bears all the hallmarks of Grekov's semantic 'interference', with the conceptual dichotomy being doubled as a result of the latter's transformative mediation through translation.

The original letter from Khumalo is an attempt at bridging the experiential and perceptual chasm between the two characters, as well as at drawing them into a space of commonality. In the letter's highfalutin and affective tone, Khumalo is performing a role, as is Grekov, in the interesting 'exchanges' that occur between the two in the form of Khumalo's original words and the editor-like notes that Grekov scribbles in-between them. The South African uses grammatically deficient language, which is only further mangled by the latter's attempts to correct it. The letter becomes a multilingual space in which new 'Englishes' have arisen. To aid full appreciation of the operations of these new Englishes, I juxtapose the original remark by Khumalo:

> Hence it is I am taking up space to search out whether spare statues of V.I. Lenin are made available to donate me or if necessary I would be obliged to purchase on the most favourable terms (lay-by).
>
> (*PBM* 23)

---

[82] In the story, Christov is the aide or civil servant in the Russian Department of Foreign Economic Relations who had made the request for a translation of Khumalo's letter from the Administration for Everyday Services, where Pavel Grekov works as a junior translator.

and Grekov's annotated response in the brackets in which they appear within the text of the letter after each 'problematic' phrase or sentence:

[In a nut-case: His overweening desire is to buy a statue of Lenin. One can't help but bravo.]

(*PBM* 23)

And so this kind of call-and-response 'dialogue' proceeds in the rest of the letter. Grekov's notes, strictly-speaking, are possibly rendered in Russian but they can also be regarded as a new kind of English because they are in any case mistranslations of the English sense that the writer, Khumalo, intended. (One can also point to the fact that the 'original' meaning intended by Khumalo has in the first instance been distorted by his own linguistic inadequacies, such that Grekov's translation has the effect of doubling the misrepresentation.) Though these are not standard versions of English, the correspondents are still able to effect some level of communication with one another. I find a later interpretation of the name Lucky Dube[83] as "sweepstake" (*PBM* 24), to be similarly ingenious and at the same time disarming because Grekov relies on the literality of what he is reading as he has no conceptual context with which his translations can be nuanced.

At another level Boniface Khumalo's letter, notwithstanding Grekov's sometimes-erroneous insinuations, inferences and emendations, also constitutes an instantiation of the former's identity. With Grekov's interpolations, the letter becomes a space of contested meanings, a site of meaning in translation or transition. The logic of an analytic paradigm of contestation can be extended to enunciate, at an extreme level, contestation between identities. That is to say, there is contest between the identity of Khumalo, as originator of the letter on the one hand, and that of Grekov as the assumed and presumptuous translator on the other. Both disparate identities seek to find expression on the written page because that is the site of their engagement. This, in effect, is tied to and brings us back to one of the earlier points that I have made in reference to the fluidity of the meanings that can be attached to

---

[83] Lucky Dube is the name of a famous South African reggae artist who died in a botched car-jacking in 2007, and Khumalo intended to have 'him' perform at the re-launch of his tavern as the V.I. Lenin Bar & Grill. Car-jacking has become stereotypically synonymous with post-apartheid Johannesburg.

historical monuments at different phases in history and in terms of geographical location. It is in the nature of the multi-textual tableau that is portrayed by Vladislavić to allow for the possibility of multiple meanings in terms of identity and the signification of the monuments. It is in light of the above that Warnes posits the following sentiments with which I concur:

> Just as the Russian workmen play on the stone surfaces of Lenin's head while removing it, so Vladislavić plays with the conceptual and historical significance of the event by transforming an icon so previously invested in Marxist-Leninist significance into an item of exchange, an object of petty capitalism's desire for newness.

> (2000a:74)

In addition to the above analysis, I suggest that the relationship between concrete symbols and written, often abstract, words illustrates the notion of just how porous the statues, as representations of the signification of particular histories, can be.

An example of Vladislavić's use of these intertextual tableaux is the "*off-cut*" "Lunarchaski and Lenin"(*PBM* 25ff) which draws on a 1935 article by A. Lunarchaski entitled 'Lenin and Art'. The "off-cut" appears in the story as a kind of interlude in-between the two letters from Khumalo and Christov respectively and its primary purpose is to show how, even in their original form at the time of their conception in the fervent days of the 1930s USSR, the statues' construction was accompanied by disputation over what they should mean or signify. As a 'fictive' device then, the inclusion of Lunacharski's article serves to authenticate and historicise some of the imaginary responses to and sentiments about the monuments. In the 'Interview with Ivan Vladislavić', the author describes to Warnes how the idea for the story 'Propaganda by Monuments' had sprung out of the writer's accidental discovery, at a garage sale in Highlands North, of "[a]mong a lot of other rubbish [...] a set of literary magazines from the Soviet Union, published in the thirties, presumably the property of some old Jo'burg Communist" (Vladislavić cited in Warnes 2000b:277). The fictional version here intersperses Khumalo's letter and Grekov's translation of the official response from a Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations apparatchik, one A. Christov. In a way the 'article' is an intertextual flashback that seeks to provide a

contemporaneous theoretical frame for the putting up of Lenin's statues in the first place by engaging with some the essential contemporary views on the status of art as a store of historical memory in Russian society in the 1930s. In this way, the article then becomes a way of showing how far the late 20th century signification of the statues has departed from the original conceptions. The quasi-fictional treatise also reflects, in part, the multifaceted mosaic that is the postcolonial city and condition.

Russia and South Africa in 1992 (Khumalo's letter is dated 5 January 1992 while Christov's reply is written on the 28th of the same month) are undergoing the transitional throes of the demise of communist control and legislated apartheid respectively. Warnes accurately surmises how 'Propaganda by Monuments' "focuses on the terminations of Soviet communism and apartheid, and as these fixing, unifying metanarratives are dismantled, the polysemic properties of signifier become clear in a way that makes evident the provisionality of fixed meanings and interpretations" (2000a:75). In a related point which similarly reflects on the statue as a site of paradox, Shane Graham concludes that "[t]he absurdity of an enormous head of Lenin [potentially] installed beside a township tavern in South Africa emphasises the instability of such signs, which were intended to guarantee the permanence of the state's values" (2007:75). State refers in the above excerpt to both the communist and apartheid states, for both the ideological *coups de grace*, slow in coming as they may be, are administered in the Russian case by the twin prescriptions of Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika, while in South Africa the release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990 set off a series of events culminating in his election as president in 1994.[84] In this historical flux, individuals seek to find new means of expressing and representing themselves or their identities. Tellingly, the "off-cut" suggests that,

> ...the proletariat should assimilate existing bourgeois culture and "recast the material in the crucible of its own class-consciousnes".[7] Lunarchaski himself argued against gimmicky experimentation. "The independence of proletarian

---

[84] Some could rightly argue that the unbanning of the ANC and other political parties was F.W. de Klerk's equivalent version of Gorbachev's glasnost. De Klerk served as South Africa's last apartheid president.

art does not consist of artificial originality but presupposes acquaintance with all the fruits of the preceding culture."**8**

(*PBM* 25 – footnotes in the original)[85]

In a nutshell, this quasi-fictional journal article – being the result of a self-confessed liberal cannibalisation of the original (Warnes 2000a:277) by the author – speaks of a deconstructive engagement with history, recalling Stuart Hall (1994) as I have described in the introductory chapter of the thesis. Hall points out that the deconstructive form of analysis or critique does not seek the outright replacement of one method of analysis by another, but rather the erasure of key concepts within the theory that, in his words, "are no longer serviceable – 'good to think with' – in their originary and unreconstructed form." (Hall 1994:1) In effect, Vladislavić fictionally renders the original Lunarchaski article in such a way that it serves to self-reflexively critique its own thesis. The reference to deconstruction as used by Hall is therefore pertinent in the sense that the narrator does not necessarily write a counter-argument to said article, but rather rewrites the article in such a way that its conceptual weaknesses become magnified.

Vladislavić makes interesting use of the different multi-textual media such as the formal letter (Khumalo and Christov), the sculpture and the "journal article", giving the whole exchange a measure of authenticity or rootedness in historical truth. Lunarchaski's supposed argument is that there is no need for superficial or fake originality. Bringing the deconstructive argument to bear here, I suggest that there must be new forms or ways of unpacking historical reality without necessarily resorting to the facile formulations that the imagined reality of the postcolonial state is bound to be divorced and distinct from the colonial period. The 'quotation' from Lunarchaski is therefore self-reflexive, even if only in a tongue-in-cheek manner, as the off-cut is itself showing "an acquaintance with [...] preceding culture" in the manner in which it is referencing an existing study on the subject of the originality of art.

---

[85] For the avoidance of doubt, the 'footnotes' in this excerpt have been quoted 'verbatim'; they appear in the 'original' Lunarchaski article that forms part of the fictional story.

Through 'Propaganda by Monuments', Ivan Vladislavić also reveals how history is not the exclusive province of narratives of the heroic, such as Lenin's statues were intended to demonstrate. Rather, history is also marked by the nuanced minutiae and poignant gestures of the everyday. Njabulo Ndebele (2006) has forcefully argued for the "re-discovery of the ordinary"[86] in South African writing generally and, in a way, the failure of Khumalo's attempt at the spectacular (acquiring Lenin's statue) teases out the meaning and importance of the everyday and commonplace. Khumalo's personal history of living in the apartheid city is revealed by his actions after he reads the reply to his letter:

> Boniface Khumalo put the letter in the cubby-hole along with the tub of Wet Ones. On second thoughts he took it out again and slipped it under the rubber mat on the passenger side. Then he caught his own furtive eye in the rear-view mirror, and asked himself why he was playing postman's knock. [...] He retrieved the envelope again and put it in the pocket of his jacket, which hung from a hook on the door-pillar behind his seat.
>
> That everyday action dispelled the threat and left nothing in the air....
>
> (*PBM* 31)

Years of living in an apartheid city and police state have been habit-forming to the extent that when the transition begins to become a reality, characters like Khumalo have to re-imagine or reinvent themselves. They have to adjust themselves to the new freedoms in order to find different ways with which to perform and express their identities. The excerpt offers an example of some of the psychic practices by individuals that are inaugurated by the existence of certain urban conditions. The actions by Khumalo here are symptomatic of the complexities of historical transformation as he retains some of the gestures necessary for the successful negotiation of life under apartheid, especially as a black man in the city. Over time,

---

[86] The collection *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* consists of Njabulo Ndebele's essays that were first published in the 1980s. The first two essays in particular – 'Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction' and 'The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa' – focus on what he describes as the "inadequacies [of] the modes of story-telling", which inadequacies arise from preoccupation with the "surface" as opposed to the "process" of "rediscovering the ordinary and the creative". For Ndebele the latter process involves, for example, the development of "independent narrative" or "plot line[s]" instead of an over-reliance on considerations of the grand narratives of nationalism and apartheid.

he has developed habits in reaction to certain circumstances that are characteristic of the police state and these result in him "furtively" looking around him to hide the letter, an impulsive gesture expressing a fear of being discovered, even when the circumstances that engendered the wariness have seized to exist.

A corollary to the idea that history is not exclusively evident in the monumental, is the fact that it manifests itself equally in the ordinary and in the lived-in spaces. For instance, Khumalo remarks on the fact that he could tell that white people called Van Riebeecksvlei suburb home:

> ... he could tell at a glance it was a white suburb, even though there wasn't a white face in sight. Was it because the walls of the houses were pastel plaster rather than raw face brick? Or precisely because there was nobody to be seen? Even at a distance it looked like a ghost town? Where was everybody?
>
> (*PBM* 31-32)

The racial character of the suburbs can be defined by the presences or absences of people outside the houses and in the suburbs' streets. The whites tend to keep themselves to themselves, unlike people in the black townships who mingle and socialise more freely. Through a combination of a different habitus of socialisation and the limits imposed by the amounts of living spaces available to them, whites and blacks have different experiences of the emerging postcolonial urbanity, differences that are underpinned by historical factors such as segregation along the colour-line. This is not to suggest, however, that history is the only determining factor in the present circumstances of Boniface Khumalo and other characters in the story, but rather that in their lived lives they reflect some aspects of the historical reality. There are therefore more ways to recount the past than through official narratives such as, for instance, the monuments to Lenin.

As a consequence, history is not as heavy a burden[87] for Khumalo because he continually re-imagines himself as he reinvents his enterprises:

---

[87] Maybe a little qualification or disclaimer would be appropriate in this regard. Khumalo is not completely without certain hauntings from the past. He does, after all, momentarily throw furtive glances about himself

A new decade dawned. On the day Nelson Mandela walked from the shadows into the glare of the daily news, Khumalo decided that his establishment needed more than a change of name to face the future in: it needed a change of clothes.

(*PBM* 32-33)

Khumalo does not rest on the laurels of past successes but always seeks to keep himself in touch with and relevant to what he imagines to be new trends in business and in fashion. From an old man "salvaging unbroken bricks and tiles from the rubble" (*PBM* 35) of a demolished building he learns the salient lesson that even from the ruins, there can be found things of beauty and utility.

One of the comparisons in the text that is key for comprehending the transformative effects of time on the significance of the monuments is the almost imperceptible counter-posing of the images of Lenin and that of J.G. Strijdom, the Prime Minister of South Africa from 1954-1958. Khumalo's encounter with and reaction to Strijdom's statue is described towards the end of story in tones that seem to echo Grekov's ruminations about Lenin as the narrative begins. While Grekov's 'meeting' with the sculpted Lenin is expressed in terms of changing understanding of the statue with increased proximity to it, Khumalo seems to move more in terms of his ideology. Grekov comments on how his reading of the face of Lenin changes as he closes the physical distance between it and himself, and his perspective on the facial features changes:

The eyes were looking at him even though he had changed pavements. [...] They were kindly eyes, if not quite grandfatherly, then more than avuncular; but as the mouth came into focus, beneath the sculpted wings of the moustache, the whole face changed, it became severe and irritable [...] And then, quite unaccountably, as he came closer still, the face foreshortened into friendliness again.

(*PBM* 17-18)

---

for fear of being apprehended by the notorious apartheid secret police for his Russian letter. That is, before he remembers that those days of terror have now passed.

On the other hand, Khumalo's visualisation has more to do with political representation than mere change of physical point of view:

> In Khumalo's mind Strijdom's face had never borne the serene, far-sighted expression he saw on it now, as the bronze head came into view over islands of greenery. Rather, it had the look of stupefied terror. It was the face of a slow-footed pedestrian, a moment away from impact and extinction, gaping at the juggernaut of history bearing down on him. *This* Strijdom is *that* Strijdom, Khumalo thought with a smile. As secure on his pedestal as a head on its shoulders.

(*PBM* 36)

In these excerpts, the two characters experience the respective monuments and the spaces that they are in differently. In Grekov's case there do not appear to be any overt political meanings in Lenin's visage as he perceives it and his attitude is one of near-indifference. For Khumalo there is an inferred but still distinct ideological scale to his rationalisations. His understanding of "*that* Strijdom" emanated from a different set of (political) impulses than the ones that inform his current conception of "*this* Strijdom". The Strijdom of the past is represented as a cowardly figure about to be inevitably overrun by history, whereas Khumalo is a lot more magnanimous in his contemporary evaluation of Strijdom as a symbol. Past dogmas have given way to present rapprochement and open-mindedness. A possible caveat is that, in Khumalo's imagination, Strijdom no longer occupies the space of symbolic power and therefore is not necessarily a figure against whom to direct a fantastical destruction. The reference to a head secure on its shoulders is a subtle reminder of the insecure ground occupied by the historical symbol, such as the monuments of Lenin and Strijdom do. As with Lenin's statue, the head can just as easily be separated from its shoulders as the original veneration is supplanted by more insurrectional ideologies.

4.4 "It is our duty to be authentic." - (Signposts of) History in the Present

Among the most visible symbols of what is often referred to as petty apartheid is signage reading WHITES ONLY, which was designed to demarcate the spatial territory that different races could occupy, especially in the so-called public spaces of the city. Placed over doorways or on park benches, these plaques were designed to allot and confine people within particular physical domains to avoid the mingling of people of different races. According to Westwood and Williams' reading of Foucault's account of governmentality "racism comes to rest on the body, using the visibility of the body as a major signifier but also as a site for racial abuse and violence" (1997:9). In the potential absence or presence of the physical bodies that were 'othered' and became the sites of racial abuse, the WHITES ONLY and other such signs that formed part of the exclusionary diction of apartheid served to mark the spaces that these absent or present non-white bodies could potentially occupy. They were, in effect, attempts to signpost people's occupation and experience of city spaces by creating zones of prohibition and exclusion, especially for the non-white citizens, of whom it was always thought necessary that they should be kept at the margins both in terms of the physical/material sense as well as in terms of intellectual and spiritual signification.

One such bench is the central artefact in 'The WHITES ONLY Bench', a tale that also dramatises different people's divergent viewpoints on memory and history in the present. The foregrounding of this emblem of segregation and its simultaneous juxtaposition to an icon of the American civil rights movement, Coretta Scott King, serves to highlight the tensions inherent in the making and preservation of memory. The spatial setting of these contradictions is in a recently opened museum in the city of Johannesburg with the generic name – The Museum – where the narrator works. The binaries of past and present, as well as authentic history and fake recreations of it are instantiated in the black and white (fittingly) photograph of Mrs King that appears on the front page of the Johannesburg daily, *The Star*. The snapshot shows her seated on a WHITES ONLY bench in the courtyard of The Museum in a pose described mainly in terms of its contradictions:

There's an odd ambiguity in her body, and it's reflected in her face too, in an expression which superimposes the past upon the present: she looks both timorous and audacious. [...] The rest of her features are more prudently composed, the lips quilted with bitterness, but tucked in mockingly at one corner.

(*PBM* 52)

Mrs King's picture, in combination with the bench itself, helps to flesh out some of the arguments regarding the meaning of 'true' history or memory, especially within the space of a museum, because of the discussions that have raged among the museum staff prior to the opening of the exhibitions to the public. There has been divided opinion over whether to use a fabricated mock-up of the historic artefact (of a WHITES ONLY bench), or to source the genuine article from wherever it is to be found. The two schools of thought are represented respectively by Charmaine – a younger curator who is less given to orthodoxy and reverence, and by museum-director Strickland whose approach is more formal and conventional. These views arise from disparate impulses, with one displaying a less conformist approach and the other more tradition-bound.

In the words of the narrator the "little drama" had begun six weeks earlier as the staff prepared for the museum's opening and there seemed to be no one in charge, allowing for the individual staff-members to proceed very much on their own whims. Strickland comes into the workshop one day to acquaint herself with the preparation of the exhibits and she finds Charmaine working on 'her' bench. Strickland's manner is very striking in its offhand quality and her penetrating gaze, which the others find to be simultaneously aloof yet intrusive. She carries herself in a way that seems to privilege her gaze above all else, as she silently observes and absorbs all that the staff is doing. In a scaled-down and mutated version of Georg Simmel's formulation, via Walter Benjamin (1983:38), in which the activities of the eye take precedence over the aural senses, her gaze gains ascendancy over sound here because it has the effect of silencing the others, at least temporarily. In the words of Vladislavić's narrator, "[t]he silence congealed us, slowing us down, making us slur our movements [...]" (*PBM* 55).

The contentious bench is a result of an ingeniously disguised subterfuge on the part of Charmaine. Every facet and effect of the bench has been manufactured, from the iron legs moulded into looking authentic to the signs of wear-and-tear:

> The arms and legs were made of iron, but cleverly moulded to resemble branches, and painted brown to enhance a rustic illusion. The bench looked well-used, which is often a sign of thing that has been loved. [...]all these signs of wear and tear were no more than skin deep ... Charmaine had even smeared the city's grimy shadows into the grain.
>
> (*PBM* 55)

Charmaine's bench, because of its verisimilitude, puts into crisis notions of the credibility of an image or symbol as expressed in Strickland's sharp retort to the former's explanation for the necessity of a "recreated" bench. The museum director's curt response is that:

> "This is a museum, not some high school operetta. It is our historical duty to be authentic."
>
> (*PBM* 56)

The older woman's dismissiveness engenders questions on the reliability of Charmaine's bench as a symbolic representation of a historical era, chiefly, on whether the recreated article is inadequate as a means of epitomising some of the meaning of a particular historical epoch. In an ironical twist that is typical of Vladislavić's writing, it turns out that the first 'real' bench that they acquire is from the 1960s, but had been in fact a 'black' bench, that is to say a bench for non-whites. The rather sardonic elaboration is that the bench had been at a black bus stop for Indians, and this convoluted logic is subtly used to show up apartheid as being, at certain levels, both petty and ridiculous. The confounding absurdity of these taxonomies gets further entangled later in the story with the sourcing of a genuine bench from the Municipal Bus Drivers' Association that reads EUROPEANS ONLY.

Reddy, who is another worker in the museum, effectively demonstrates some of the difficulties encountered in gathering what are considered to be "genuine artefacts" by advertising for these. Strickland has made this suggestion in her single-

minded pursuit of 'honest' representation. The museum has previously advertised for the bullet that killed Hector Petersen (more properly spelt Pietersen) at the start of the Soweto Uprisings in 1976. In response, they have received a lunchbox full of slugs and shells of all description and have come to the collective realisation that such a route should not be embarked upon in their collection of artefacts of apartheid. Reddy's cautionary tale also helps to illustrate the possible existence of many historical truths due to the varied interpretations that people may have about a particular event. Any of the scores of bullets collected could be the 'genuine' one, but at the same time each one also represents, at a symbolic level, how each respective donor is staking a claim on history. It is in the interrogation and validation of these competing assertions that dynamism is injected into the historical project. The Museum, as a public space, is a key site for the playing out of these nervous tensions.

The discovery of the EUROPEANS ONLY bench means the forestalling of Charmaine's project and her version cannot be part of the planned exhibit in Room 27. She clandestinely saves it from being destroyed and on the eve of The Museum's opening, surreptitiously places it in the courtyard, under "the controversial kaffirboom"[88] (*PBM* 65). Strickland's 'real' WHITES ONLY bench duly occupies pride of place with an extra, non-racial proscription. It now has the universally exclusive legend – PLEASE DO NOT SIT ON THIS BENCH – hanging between the armrests. As a concept, Charmaine's bench also instantiates the varied uses to which postapartheid public space can be put by different people. At the end of the story, an old white man is seen nonchalantly resting there, but a little later the narrator describes a different reaction altogether:

> Then again, I'll look up to see a black woman shuffling resolutely past, casting a resentful eye on the bench and muttering a protest under her breath, while the flame-red blossoms of the kaffirboom detonate beneath her aching feet.
>
> (*PBM* 66)

---

[88] In 'Propaganda by Monuments' the tree is still designated with the racially derogatory name 'kaffirboom' to underline the sense of irony and the conflicting meanings between the apartheid past and the more democratic present of the story.

There is an 'explosion' of possibilities, contestations and multi-level dialogue that is aroused by the supposedly 'inauthentic' bench made by Charmaine, which is in sharp contrast to the 'dead' response that is engendered by the 'authentic' EUROPEANS ONLY bench that Strickland has sourced and insists on installing as the official exhibit. The fate of the latter bench is sealed by the notice placed on it, prohibiting people from sitting on it. Charmaine's bench, on the contrary, even makes it onto the front pages of the newspaper, with a little help from Mrs King's sense of the ironic. For her part, Coretta King is quite consciously performing a role by deliberately placing herself – an acclaimed campaigner for civil liberties – into close proximity with such a symbol of discrimination. I concur with Graham's suggestion that "[h]owever authentic the bench in Room 27 may be, it has been rendered ineffectual by being removed from its context, whereas the 'fake' bench occupies precisely the kind of public space that 'petty apartheid' was meant to regulate" (2007:78). Manase, writing on the "traditional and historical symbolism" of the city's geographical spaces, finds that "new metaphors [are] arising out of the transforming Johannesburg" (2009:54). Due to said transformation, the signification attached to various places and spaces also undergoes change because there is an unstable relationship between the signifier and the signified, making universally accepted meaning remote if not unachievable. Building onto Graham's analysis above, it is pertinent to add that in Room 27, the 'real' bench becomes sterile in its signification because it has become, to a certain extent, a sanitised exhibit beyond the reach of the public who come to view it. As I alluded to in the Introduction, Young is correct in her argumentation that imaginative representation and invention is a more dynamic and preferable mode of engaging with the past, as opposed to simply storing historical artefacts. In marked contrast, Charmaine's 'falsity' is to be found in the courtyard, where it is potentially available for practical use. Here it stirs up many kinds of responses, negative and otherwise. It is truly a living history.

4.5 Conclusion

In summation, this chapter has attempted to further enunciate the thematic and representational concerns of Vladislavić's oeuvre such as the notions of belonging and the spatialisation of memory as they are manifest in the transforming socio-historical context of an emergent postcolonial urban space. By mapping the traversal

of Hillbrow by the King in 'Autopsy', Vladislavić inaugurates his version of the figure of the postcolonial flâneur, a figure who is less an idle stroller but more of a "botanist of the sidewalk" and is in many ways a precursor of the towering fictive creation that is Aubrey Tearle of *The Restless Supermarket*. The narrator in the short story and his quarry (the King) are utilised to illustrate how different characters perform their identities in the process of becoming and being, and thus highlighting how the postcolonial is more a process of becoming, rather than a definitive event that marks an acquired or complete[d] identity. In 'The Tuba', one characteristic of 'being in the city' is the reversal of the apartheid gaze as an act of expressing agency and becoming the self. The black musicians of the Salvation Army band are thus able to subvert Sergeant Dundas' intentions to keep them in an inferior subject-position to his own.

The tangible paranoia about public spaces that the book-lover has in 'The Book Lover' is an instantiation of Simmel's principle of proximity and its effects as a psychological dimension of being in the city. The notion of proximity and involuntary intimacy is counterbalanced by the trope of the journey in time and across contemporary space. The narrator is the antithesis to the flâneur-figure as shown in his aversion to the public spaces of the city and how he experiences the city as nightmare, feeling safe only when he retreats to the sanctum of his home. The contrast drawn between such a character's different experiences of private and public space will be recalled, reiterated and sometimes reversed by the central figures of the three remaining texts under discussion in this thesis, that is, in *The Restless Supermarket*, *The Exploded View* and *Portrait with Keys*.

Through analysis of the short story 'Propaganda by Monuments' I have uncovered the fluid meanings that may be attached to historical monuments during different phases of history, in particular the notion of the transience and translatability of meaning. By using various media such as letters, academic papers and the statues of historical figures in this story, the author plots a path towards a rediscovery of the ordinary history of the everyday in which white and black characters experience the emerging postcolonial urbanity differently. With its reflective examination of the history of petty apartheid, and the social and physical zones of exclusion and prohibition, 'The WHITES ONLY Bench' has a lot in common

with most of the other stories in the collection. Memory and history in the present (in the form of artefacts) are used to signpost the appropriation, occupation and experience of the city. Through the ingenious juxtaposition of an apartheid emblem – the bench – and the iconic Coretta Scott King, Vladislavić's writing initiates questions about authenticity and the truthfulness of history, even in the context of an imagined museum. These contentious histories are what lead to a notion of what I conclude to be living history, such as the use of the old prison in Johannesburg as the seat of the South African Constitutional Court at Constitution Hill. Similarly the Old Prison Complex in Gweru, Zimbabwe now serves as administrative offices for various government departments. In short, the process of walking the city and spatialising memory invokes an explosion of possibilities, contestations and multilevel dialogues about what it means to be in, and being or "becoming" in the city.

5 Chapter Four: Order, Dislocation and Layers of Impermanence in *The Restless Supermarket*

5.1 Introduction

The Restless Supermarket is Ivan Vladislavić's second novel. This text is expansive not only in terms of its length but also because in it, the author expatiates on the theme of writing the city by moving the setting of the story from the relative margins of suburbia, as in his previous work, to the hustling and bustling downtown and physical centre of the city. In his first novel, *The Folly*, the city centre is somewhat reduced to sporadic, infrequent mention as a place to work and conduct commerce; it is an elsewhere, a mere footnote whose energy occasionally flashes to life against the backdrop of a mostly bland suburban dreariness. In *The Restless Supermarket* the city attains a definable character, rather than remain a faint nebulousness on the edges of the imagination and memory. The novel is set in Johannesburg's Hillbrow suburb and I will look at Aubrey Tearle, the central character and first-person narrator of the story as a figure struggling with notions of self-definition as a subject in the context of a democratising city[89] that has a growing global outlook and influence. The city is also a magnet for migrants who, in Tearle's estimation, contribute to the disruption of the established order he values so highly. A large proportion of the less well-heeled (especially African) migrants into South Africa over the last few decades have used Hillbrow as their first-port-of-call and springboard into the rest of the country. This has contributed to the hastening of what Saskia Sassen, a Dutch sociologist credited with coining the term "global city", has described as the "peripheralization at the center of major cities" (1996:71). Hillbrow exemplifies the development of such inner-city zones of deprivation next to the commercial hub of the city, which ultimately leads to a form of 'capital flight'[90] from the centre to new edge cities like Sandton in Johannesburg. As Jennifer Robinson

---

[89] Democratising in the qualified sense that Johannesburg is a city in a society that is undergoing social and political transformation as a result of the end of legislated apartheid. The intricacies of the realities of the changes mean that such democratisation is not equally or universally spatialised across the city.

[90] In *Megalopolis Unbound* Robert Fishman (1996:397) describes this as a state whereby "the peripheries have replaced the urban cores as the heartlands of our civilisation."

has usefully observed, for many the history of Hillbrow "captures well the complex trajectories of utopian hopefulness and dystopian despair, as it moved from an all-white neighbourhood of high-rise modernism to a pre-dominantly black neighbourhood with declining infrastructure and poorly maintained apartment blocks" (2009:13).

For Tearle the social and economic 'deterioration' of the inner city, epitomised in Hillbrow, is reflected in what he judges to be a concomitant slippage in the standards of the English language. In his article on the work of Vladislavić as an editor, Fred de Vries succinctly sums up the notion that Aubrey Tearle's "use of language and his command of English define the man" because "his superiority, his resentment, his nostalgia, his class, his style, his longing, his belonging, everything is contained in his language" (2006:104). The metaphor of linguistic order is central to Tearle's method of observing the city, as well as how he relates to other characters and the city itself as lived-in space. It is in this light that I examine how he uses language, which is a familiar cultural artefact, and the allegory of the imaginary city of Alibia to try to impose his sense of order on what he feels to be a deteriorating Johannesburg. In the introductory chapter I discussed how Vladislavić (as cited in Marais and Backstrom 2002) ruminates on the idea of his own implicatedness as a white writer. The author attempts to explain some of Tearle's apparent extremism by noting how the latter represents people who experienced the orderliness and tidiness of what was formerly white Johannesburg overreacting in the post-apartheid circumstances because the city has become less stringent, and they are liable to encounter a bit more disorderliness than they had been used to. In a related gesture, the trope of walking – reminiscent of Benjamin's flâneur – I evaluate with specific emphasis on inquiring how the act of walking and/or traversing the city instantiates the appropriation of cityspace and the affirmation of individual identity. Across most of Vladislavić's oeuvre, walking is represented as being a key aspect to the way individual characters relate to their city. In the first chapter I discussed how, for instance, walking is used to re-imagine the city in the short story 'Autopsy' while in Chapter Two Nieuwenhuizen walks all over his plot as a sign of appropriation of that space. In the preceding chapter I highlighted more forcefully, with reference to some of the stories selected for discussion, for the idea of the postcolonial flâneur. In

certain instances, as in the following chapters, I will argue how the lack of walking (through the utilisation of motorised transport) can lead to a truncated experience of the city. In the present chapter and for the avoidance of doubt due to perceived ambiguity in this regard, it might be beneficial to set out clearly from the beginning that Aubrey Tearle, as the incarnation of stasis and conservatism, is a character that fails to mobilize the emancipatory potential of the city as highlighted by de Certeau, Young and others. While Tearle walks the streets and seems to embody pedestrian epistemologies just like the flâneur, his narrow-mindedness and prejudice run counter to de Certeau's view of walking as "liberating".

The Johannesburg that Ivan Vladislavić is re-imagining in the novel is a virtual cultural melting pot with ceaselessly dynamic demographics.[91] Aubrey Tearle, the central character and narrator in *The Restless Supermarket*, is a retiree whose job had been to proofread the telephone directory, and in the later years of service he had noticed and wryly remarked on the changing character (and Tearle would probably add quality) of the surnames in the formerly 'whites-only' suburbs as people from previously disadvantaged communities moved into these former citadels of privilege. I envisage showing that Vladislavić is engaged, in his writing, in the postcolonial deconstruction of ideas about identity. By way of illumination, I will juxtapose comparative readings of relevant sections of Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* (2001), which is similarly located in the Johannesburg suburb of Hillbrow, and also make some reference to Dambudzo Marechera's *House of Hunger* (1978), but to a considerably lesser extent. This comparison will be made with particular reference to the notions of belonging and of the appropriation of social and physical urban space. The city is made up of characteristics that go beyond the mortar and brick edifices, which are the manifestations of the physical structure of the city, to encapsulate some of the nature and qualities of the city's inhabitants. In the primary and accompanying texts, characters travel through the imagined city but one also gets the sense that the city too travels, imaginatively, through them as the

---

[91] It is perhaps more accurate to suggest that early 1990s Johannesburg, as represented in *The Restless Supermarket*, is a city that is – in its different locales and at different social planes – at various stages of transformation, such that (in truth) it lies somewhere between being a conglomerate of disparate nationalities and a cosmopolitan cultural melting pot.

characters adopt different strategies in order to fashion a reality of their own making, as opposed to accepting a place within the bounds of a predetermined objective reality. I am interested in the manner in which characters seem to willingly write themselves into the postcolonial cityscape as well as how the author deploys the uncanny, the unfamiliar, and uses spectacle to represent the physical and psychic fissures and openings of the city of Johannesburg in general and Hillbrow in particular. The physical refers to the material infrastructure of urban space whereas the psychic refers to the ways of imagining and representation, as well as to the ways individuals develop identities and notions of the self.

Ivan Vladislavić and Phaswane Mpe are both South African writers, with the latter now deceased, and their respective texts (*The Restless Supermarket* and *Welcome To Our Hillbrow*) share a similarity not of just time of publication (2001), but also of place setting, with the narratives of both novels unfolding in Johannesburg's Hillbrow. They also share what the literary critic Loren Kruger, has denoted, in partial reference to the ideas of de Certeau, as "a critical attachment to pedestrian enunciations, to walking the city as an act of knowing as well as travelling" (Kruger 2005:82). However, they differ in terms of the historical context represented and there are ways in which Mpe's book could be read as an imaginative, sequential continuation of the Vladislavić text. Taken together, the two stories fictively render the transformation of Hillbrow from a demarcated apartheid space to a post-apartheid/postcolonial reality. This does not necessarily imply that the 'new' geographical entity is a completely democratised urbanity – democratised as meaning fully cosmopolitan and racially integrated – because new kinds of discrimination are inscribed, as shown in the case of Mpe's version of Hillbrow, into the cityspace and the characters that appropriate it. Rather, it points to the fact that change is a process that is continuous and that the respective novels represent certain stages along that transformational arc. The terms "post-apartheid" and "postcolonial" are quite problematic and are not read here as meaning definitive breaks with the past, as the periodicity implied in 'post' would seem to suggest, and Tearle is tellingly unable to exemplify either of these categories. Christopher Warnes (2000) and Ato Quayson (2000) have, among others, detailed the ambiguities that generally characterise the genre of postcolonial writing in this respect but, for the

present, suffice it to say that when used together, the postcolonial and the urban or metropolitan represent a discursive narrative and terrain – a time and space continuum – in which the individual subject performs his or her identity in the process of becoming or being. In this direction, the objective of this chapter is to trace or draw together various strands which show the ways in which the postcolonial city is constructed in layers of impermanence, contrary to the best efforts of individuals with conservative mindsets as typified by Tearle. The temporal nature of the city is to be found in terms of the uncanny presences and behaviour of some of the characters in the novel, *The Restless Supermarket*; in the manner in which various individuals locate themselves, walk and see the city; in the representational practices that define their individual identity, sense of self and subjectivities, and in the quest for physical and material certainty through an ephemeral linguistic order.

In terms of plot, the novel is divided into three parts of unequal length. The first is called 'The Café Europa' after the fictional café in Tearle's Hillbrow that serves as his intellectual and emotional centre, and in terms of the latter aspect does so even more than his apartment. While the taciturn Aubrey expresses no overt sense of spirituality, the café represents the closest approximation to a spiritual home because of the way it is closely tied in his imagination to the metaphysical equilibrium of what he perceives to be the 'natural' order of life. 'Part Two' is named 'The Proofreader's Derby' and consists of the imagined physical manifestation of the dream-like city of Alibia where order is maintained by a group of proofreaders and where linguistic order is a metaphor for life.

'The Goodbye Bash' is the third part of the sequence and in it the narrative is brought to its climax through a rather inopportune party that is meant to mark the closing down of the Café Europa, an event which Tearle also interprets as the passing of an old and better epoch. As is often the trend with Vladislavić's writing, the title of the novel *The Restless Supermarket* has already been nonchalantly 'introduced' to the avid Vladislavić reader or scholar. This occurs in the story 'A Science of Fragments', which forms part of the collection *Missing Persons*, the author's first published compendium. The writer typically sketches little vignettes and even characters in some of his shorter pieces that he later fleshes out or utilises to surprise the reader with pleasurable moments of recognition in the longer narratives.

It is a postmodern trait that the beginnings and endings of the story are not definable with any absolute certainty, but rather that the threads of seemingly disparate tales randomly interweave, the result being that at times it is difficult to say with confidence where a particular line of narration ends and a new one begins or whether one has been ended and another begun at all. In the short story, then, one of the characters makes a purchase from a (Hillbrow) supermarket of that name – Restless Supermarket – but nothing more is made in the said story of that quaint title.

That, in itself, is unremarkable. What is noteworthy, however, is the author's talent for taking the small minutiae of life and the everyday, and using these to highlight the quirkiness of the city, especially of Johannesburg. Although the owners of the shop intend "restless" to mean something quite different to its everyday signification, "restless" aptly describes the state of constant animation that I believe Vladislavić's city to be in. The store-owners, who are recent migrants from Eastern Europe and have limited facility in the use of Standard English as the novel reveals, simply meant to convey the fact that their shop was open daily for 24 hours. However, the common sense interpretation (at least according to Aubrey Tearle who arrogates upon himself the duty of policing the use of English amongst his acquaintances) is that of a state of agitation. Similarly, in *Welcome To Our Hillbrow*, Mpe's focaliser remarks how Refentsĕ, who had just arrived in the city for the first time from his village (Tiragalong) in rural Limpopo, had reacted to the constant energy of Johannesburg:

> It had amazed you that there should be many people jostling one another in the streets at nine in the evening. When did they prepare their meals and go to sleep.
>
> (Mpe 2001:7)

This statement echoes the nervous vitality of the city in Vladislavić's text. Even if unintended and though the restlessness may be at times imperceptible to merely literal readings, it unveils itself within considerations of the text that move beneath the surface. These figurative enunciations are manifest in the changes that the city and the characters that inhabit it undergo in time and space, aptly metaphorically

represented in the constant state of flux that constitutes the postcolonial city of Johannesburg.

The chance encounter in front of the Jumbo Liquor Market has the effect of introducing a prominent stop along the narrator's routes, a key landmark of the narrator's city in the manner described by Robert Fishman (1996). The three characters Arch, Darryl and The Third Man are designated as a "little triumvirate, holy and unwise" (*The Restless Supermarket* 4)[92] according to Tearle's first (and only, since he only sees them only one time) impressions of the men, but more importantly they are described as "citizens nevertheless of the conurbation in which I find myself" (*TRS* 4). The last concession is important because it marks the beginnings of the instantiation of questions of identity and belonging in the novel. In the third section of this chapter I will consider the question of how citizenship of this "conurbation" of Johannesburg is defined and represented, as well the import of the narrator's pronouncement of just happening to find himself in the city. Key considerations here are the levels of agency Tearle or any of the other characters in the text exercise as well as the arbitrary and designed circumstances that lead them to occupy the specific places in the city that they do. If, as in Tearle's case in particular, the fact of happening to find oneself in a space is indicative of indifference or an approximation of Simmel's blasé posture, it is important to interrogate the honesty and sincerity of such an attitude or whether it is merely a thin facade – a pretence and an acting out of disinterestedness. The importance of such interrogations lies in determining whether the blasé attitude is genuine or feigned.

Tearle's imagined utopia of Alibia, constructed in the main to counter the perceived dystopic nightmare that he fears Hillbrow to be descending into, underlines (in the same vein) the fragility of meaning and the implausibility of arriving at a point of essence in terms of what the city does or can signify. It is in this light that the allegory of Alibia can be considered to be an echo of the island in the play *The Tempest*, with Tearle as the reincarnation of the domineering Prospero in his almost fetishised insistence on the use of correct and grammatical English, whereas

---

[92] Hereafter, page references to quotations from the text *The Restless Supermarket* shall be prefixed with the abbreviation *TRS*. e.g. (*TRS* 3). I am using the 2006 imprint, which has different pagination from the 2001 edition.

Shakespeare's character displays similarly ossified ideas about what is proper and as a consequence attempts to use his magic to maintain his vision of order. In true Shakespearean tradition, Vladislavić uses the fantasy of Alibia as the play-within-a-play, the story-within-a-story, through which reality or versions of the 'truth' may become unravelled or are further convoluted.

5.2 The Uncanny/The Spectacle

In his collection of essays 'Rediscovery of the Ordinary', the South African cultural and literary critic, Njabulo Ndebele (2006) has advocated what he terms the rediscovery of the ordinary in South African literature. In *The Restless Supermarket* and in large parts of the rest of his writing, Ivan Vladislavić goes beyond such a gesture by, in fact, making the ordinary into the un-ordinary. Among other facets, the author's Johannesburg is marked by the presence of the uncanny, spectacles that suddenly appear on the streets but also go some way in defining the unpredictable nature of the city. The dramatic opening lines of *The Restless Supermarket* feature the strange and somewhat unsettling sight of a man in a pinstriped suit having 'sex' with a pink elephant:

> A salesman buggering a pink elephant (excuse my Bulgarian). Not a sight one sees every day, even on the streets of Johannesburg – the Golden City as it were, Egoli as it are, to quote my pal Wessels, the last of the barnacles.
>
> (*TRS* 3)

Beyond the connections drawn between "ethnic and linguistic 'impurity'" as "symptoms of cultural 'mixing'" that Tearle associates with "decline" (Charos 2008:29), one could also suggest that this sarcasm may point to the deterioration in social and linguistic standards that so fixate him. The excerpt above is also interesting on several other counts, for instance Tearle's love for wordplay as evidenced in the use of "excuse my Bulgarian" where the commonplace phrase is excuse my French.[93] While the word Bulgarian in this context plays on the conjugated verb "buggering", it also reveals the narrator's disdain for the Eastern

---

[93] Emphasis added.

European migrants into Johannesburg[94], a disdain that is dealt with in greater detail in the later sections of the novel. The migrants are equated with vulgarity and the symbolic buggering or bastardising of the English language. The content of the quotation also speaks of the blurring of boundaries, moral and social, that has become a hallmark of the postcolonial urban space of Johannesburg in the process of transformation. The city has become a site of transgressions but Tearle seems to suggest that what he is describing, in this case, may even be beyond some of the extremes that he has become 'accustomed' to. This blurring of borders is partially responsible for the creation of what I termed an uncanny effect, especially in the reader's mind, in that the 'familiar' sexual act has been projected onto a space in which the real is inseparable from the unreal.

In keeping with the theme of the uncanny one may be tempted, at first glance, to interpret the elephant as a crude reference to a plus-sized woman. However the pink elephant is in reality a fibreglass mascot for the 'Jumbo Liquor Market'[95] that is chained to a parking metre outside the premises, also a regular haunt for the narrator's closest acquaintance, Wessels. Such mascots have become part of the everyday experience of the city, especially through the growth of a commercialised consumer culture, although this one may have a more localised frame of reference and recognition, unlike global signifiers like Ronald Macdonald. In this light, Shane Graham has postulated that the novel "reveals an awareness of consumer capitalism as a force that profoundly shapes perceptions and uses of space, place and time" (2007:83). The mascot is transformed from its everyday significance by the act of an individual man directing his desire towards it. Even the normally taciturn narrator and central character of the story, Aubrey Tearle, who "has come to expect undignified behaviour as a matter of course" (*TRS* 3) is shocked. This in spite of the fact that living in the city in such proximity to total strangers has, in Georg Simmel's formulation, the effect of producing what he describes as the "blasé attitude" or posture. (Simmel 1995:35) The city is a place where one can expect to encounter the unusual, but here even a 'hardened' Johannesburger like Tearle is unsettled by

---

[94] In conversation with Knecht (2005:3) the author notes how even before the influx of black people, Hillbrow "was always a place that a lot of newcomers to Johannesburg moved through".
[95] Jumbo Liquor Market is a franchise chain of liquor stores extending across South Africa's major urban centres, with each branch displaying such a mascot. The mascots are about the size of baby elephants.

the sight, notwithstanding his general demeanour of aloofness and unconcern or seeming laissez-faire with the private matters of his 'friends'[96] and the people around him. Louis Wirth (1938) expands on the theme of the blasé outlook by framing it as a defensive mechanism rather than the result of overstimulation:

> The contacts of the city may indeed be face to face, but they are nevertheless impersonal, superficial, transitory and segmental. The reserve, the indifference, and the blasé outlook which urbanites manifest in their relationships may thus be regarded as devices for immunising themselves against the personal claims and expectations of others.
>
> (1938:192)

Wirth's articulation above also best explains the way in which private space is framed in the novel, especially with reference to Tearle, whose residential address none of his friends seems to know. In the incident concerning Darryl and the pink elephant mascot the narrator stops to stare, whilst expressing at the same time the contradictory thought that "[a] lifetime of practice" as a proof-reader had turned him "into one of the world's most shameless scrutineers". (*TRS* 3) He stares because of the scale of the shock/aberration. Displaying some elements of the flâneur – as an idler or gentleman stroller – the retired Aubrey Tearle now has all the time in the world to indulge his gaze. The gaze in this case is, however, not uni-directional because it can be reflected back on itself and the original watcher. The description of Darryl as a salesman is, by the narrator's own surprisingly self-critical and candid admission, an act of labelling based on the stereotype of salesmen wearing pinstripe suits. Tearle's description of the scene before him serves in this instance to reveal some of his own presumptions and prejudices, which he euphemistically describes as "[o]ld-fashioned associations" (*TRS* 3).

In *The Restless Supermarket* Tearle, as do the other onlookers, watches Darryl's "buggering" of the pink elephant and remarks on the details of the man's

---

[96] Single quotation marks are used for 'friends' to emphasise the fact that the true nature of the relationship between Aubrey Tearle and his circle of acquaintances does not extend to the levels of social intimacy implied by the term. A fuller discussion of this aspect will be made in the section below subtitled '*Postcolonial Urban Subjects - Considerations of Identity and the Self*'.

actions. Tellingly, in the middle of "thumping away" (*TRS* 4), "huff[ing] and puff[ing]", and "ooh[ing] and aah[ing]" (*TRS* 5) as the crowd continues to gather, Darryl opens "one eye to gauge the response of his growing audience" and the gaze is returned, now turned upon the original viewers. (*TRS* 5) It is Darryl who now evaluates the reactions of the watchers while at the level of morality his actions constitute a challenge to the social lines drawn to demarcate what is acceptable behaviour and what is not. The overall effect of Darryl's performance is that in the postcolonial metropolis, the Rabelaisian carnival in Bakhtinian terms, which necessarily includes a festival of the grotesque, has moved from the fields beyond the margins of the city and elements of it are now found closer to the centre. In some respects the spectacle has become part of the everyday. Performance is not reserved for the festival only but becomes part of the street-level intimations of identity. This 'doubling' or turning back of the gaze on itself can be further illustrated by a sequence from Mike Feder's short story 'Paralegal'[97] about a paralegal working for a firm of New York attorneys as he sits on the bus to work, a part of the ritual of getting to work that he daily dreads:

> The 104 bus goes down Broadway. I look out the window. Every sort of person in the world is out there, bums, businessmen, drunks, killers, ballet-dancers –all crushing downtown like mad schools of fish, going to make a big score, become a star. We pass Lincoln Center. Dozens of Japanese tourists are taking snapshots of people shooting a magazine layout.
>
> (Feder 1988:140)

The gaze is refracted and replicated. Feder's narrator 'gazes' from the bus at the people on the street below, trying to decipher each passing individual's character and profession, much in the same way as Tearle tries to divine Darryl's. He then notices what he assumes to be a group of "Japanese tourists". The first question that arises is whether they are in fact Japanese or whether the narrator, like Vladislavić's focaliser, resorts to typecasting a group of oriental-looking people as Japanese. Is the gaze here an objective and reliable one or rather a jaundiced one that rushes to

---

[97] Though the story 'Paralegal' bears no direct relationship with *The Restless Supermarket*, I cite it here as a useful example of how the gaze can be made, by a resourceful author, to refract the light of its vision upon itself in a way which results in ironic and unintended self-reflexive analysis.

judgement? For their part, the "Japanese tourists" are taking pictures of people who are themselves engaged in photographing models for a magazine. Through the lenses of the narrator's eyes, then through the lenses of the tourists' cameras and finally through the work of the professional photographers, the gaze is replicated and refracted in myriad ways. The kaleidoscopic image produced by the varied gazes is typically postmodern in the sense that the picture produced can never be reduced to an essence of the truth.

In a similar vein to the Darryl-and-the-mascot incident described in the preceding paragraphs, Dambudzo Marechera's *House of Hunger* also makes use of a public sexual act in its instantiation of the narrator's grappling with notions of identity as a young pubescent boy growing up in the working class suburb, more properly called Vengere Township, in Rusape in late 1960s Rhodesia.[98] Peter, the narrator's older brother, invites his age-mates and the younger boys (among them, the impressionable narrator) from all over the township to a public display of masturbation, a rite of passage to show "us infants that he had actually become capable of making girls – any girls – pregnant" (Marechera 1978:49). The astounded narrator describes the scene thus:

> The size of his organ astonished us. It was stiff and huge and its mouth was tense. He quite casually cradled it in his right-hand fingers and began to masturbate. We watched him with mounting eagerness. Above us white termites flashed and spurted about the naked light bulb of the solitary streetlight. I began to sweat. He groaned, and – moved. He was losing control. We could see a great happening taking over his soul. It was in his spine, arching him backward, and yet lifting him gradually. It was as if he stood between two magnets, and the iron filings of his nerves were being tortured into a pattern. The taut cloth of his being, unable to bear the strain, tore. And, moaning like something out of this world, he came and came and came like new wine that cannot be contained within old cloth. The gang drew

---

[98] Rusape is a small, largely farming town in Zimbabwe's eastern districts where Dambudzo Marechera was raised. *House of Hunger* is mostly autobiographical.

closer and closer and sighed. I swallowed thickly, but my mouth was dry. And my mouth, it seems, has been dry ever since.

(1978:49-50)

The surreal display under a street-lamp is designed to inscribe and affirm Peter's masculinity in the same way that the pink elephant incident referred to above defines Darryl's agency and his assertion of his sense of his own identity. In terms of demographics and other such indicators, Marechera's Vengere Township does not approximate the general character of Johannesburg, or even less so Hillbrow, but I make reference to this incident here to show how through using situations of the uncanny, different identities are performed or dramatised and spatialised (as in made specific to or characteristic to particular locales) across the city or urban space.

Related to the use that Vladislavić makes of the uncanny, or of representing everyday situations in ways which make them appear sometimes strange and unreal, television and TV news is another form of spectacle utilised by the writer as means to re-imagine and represent the postcolonial city. However, Tearle finds this to be a completely unedifying medium. The broadcast of the CODESA[99] proceedings leaves him cold:

For some time now, Wessels had been making a show of interest in national affairs. Oddly enough, I had a feeling he was trying to impress the waiters. CODESA this and CODESA that. The country was disappearing behind a cloud of acronyms. As for the decor at the 'World Trade Centre'[100] – how could one expect proper political decisions to be made in those dreadful surroundings? The place looked like a brothel.

(*TRS* 13)

Throughout the story Aubrey exudes a sense that the decline of what he refers to as "standards" in Hillbrow and Johannesburg generally, has coincided with the moment of democracy. In stark contrast to his lexicographical skills, Tearle displays a distinct

---

[99] The Convention for a Democratic South Africa was a series of meetings after the unbanning of the South African liberation struggle movements like the ANC and the release from prison of Nelson Mandela in 1990 that led to a negotiated transition to democracy, culminating in the election of the iconic Mandela as president in 1994.
[100] The South African version, located in Kempton Park, Johannesburg.

inability to gauge history and, in the form of the television bulletins about the progress of the negotiated resolution to the existential and political conundrum that was apartheid, history seems to pass imperceptibly before his unconvinced eyes. In his fictional work, Ivan Vladislavić frequently employs the device of TV news as a strategy for making subtle, allegorical political commentary. Though there may be no overt and sustained engagement with the grand ideological narratives of the day, such excerpts are deftly used to unravel the subterranean shifts in the political landscape by analysing the reactions of key characters to the unfolding events. In an earlier novel by the same author, *The Folly* (1993), the characters Mr and Mrs Malgas react to the regular appearance of "unrest reports" on the TV news by muting the sound in an attempt to shut out that reality from their suburban idyll. In *The Restless Supermarket* the trope of the unrest report has transformed into the CODESA negotiations, which constitute an almost imperceptible narrative thread, and thus also signify progress in historical time. The almost daily marches through the centre of Johannesburg that are now held peacefully without inviting the customary violent reaction of the authorities are the street-level manifestations of the fluidity of the political ground. The talks highlight the inevitability of change in the apartheid city, change which is evident to Aubrey Tearle, but that he appears unwilling or unable, initially, to deal with.

A further example of the use of spectacle in the novel is the incident in which some of the patrons of Café Europa go on a night visit to the city's Zoological gardens. The group, comprising of Merle, Wessels, the "Bogeymen"[101] and the narrator Aubrey Tearle, are part of a tour of the zoo, the highlight of which is an exhibit of a man in a cage. Homo Sapiens – as the display is labelled – however has all the accoutrements of modernity like a refrigerator, a television and he even sleeps in a bed in the corner of the cage:

> The man in the cage sat up on the edge of his bed and gazed back at us with an expression compounded of suspicion, belligerence and boredom. I

---

[101] Tearle's derivative nickname for the Eastern European migrants in his circle but whose names he has difficulty in pronouncing, for example Dan Boguslavic and Zbigniuew.

recognised the look: it was the same one we had seen on the faces of a dozen other animals in the past hour or two.

<div align="right">(TRS 172)</div>

A series of provocations follows and culminates in the man grabbing a club from behind his chair and striking the bars of the cage "so violently that we started back in fright" (*TRS* 172). This then sets of a chain reaction of "cackling and cawing" that radiates outwards across other sections of the zoo, causing a child in the tour to start crying and some of the adults to laugh:

> Merle giggled, the Bogeymen chattered like apes. I hesitate to say it, but I only fell back in shame, while the cacophony of grunts and cries rolled out over the treetops, and the man in the cage, switching off the television set and then the lamp, went back to bed.

<div align="right">(TRS 172)</div>

The placing of the man into a cage in the zoo, a human otherwise doing the 'ordinary' things that any man would do in his home has the effect of turning the ordinary into the extra-ordinary. To further compound this effect is the uncanny blurring of the borders between animal and human in that the grunts and cries of the animals as well as the giggling and "chattering" of the humans become indistinguishable. The uncanny lies in our inability to tell, for a moment, who or what is the animal and the human. Similarly, when Tearle looks through the clear glass pane into the cubicle at the Café Europa in which the slot-machines are located he is "reminded of a gas chamber" and even comments that "the effect is uncannily lifelike" (*TRS* 177).

The city is also a place of contrasts and uncanny juxtapositions. In Mpe's *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* such dramatic representations of distinction can take the form, for instance, of the spatial location of two buildings with very dissimilar functions in very close proximity. Hence we have the Jabula Ebusiku shebeen[102] sharing a fence or wall with the Universal Kingdom of God church, between which

---

[102] Originally a type of illegal liquor outlet that developed in the black townships at the time of segregation, increasingly many shebeens are now licensed and form part of the regular fare on some tourist routes in the major cities of South Africa. *Jabula Ebusiku* can be literally translated as 'enjoy the night'.

the narrator wryly remarks that there is a competition for the spiritual attention of the Hillbrow residents. The presence of the shebeen in the inner city exemplifies both how the township has, in the sense of physical and social infrastructure, come to the city, and also how the demarcations of space that apartheid has attempted to legislate, have become porous. In the narrator's imagined Hillbrow in *The Restless Supermarket*, the relative opulence of the Chelsea Hotel and even the narrator's favoured haunt of Café Europa are in marked contrast to the poverty and deprivation of the beggars and street-people like the Queen of Sheba. Such cleavages in the social structure of the city reflect on how the lived experience of a metropolitan urbanity such as is Johannesburg is fragmented. In *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* the narrator, at times, resorts to the use of the device of a stream of consciousness to relate the sensual, fragmentary reality of the city because of the multitudinous stimuli.

An aspect that I briefly referred to in the introductory section to this chapter is the narrative device of clues that Vladislavić sometimes deploys in his writing of the city. These 'random' vignettes or clues may not always have direct referents in the stories in which they have been used but are, in effect, ingenious sleights of hand by which connections between different places and characters may be made across different narratives, as I earlier demonstrated with the example of 'Restless Supermarket' as the name of a business concern and the title of the book. Even within the same text or story, the clues retain the same function. For instance, the story-line of *The Restless Supermarket* is peppered with references to, if not direct quotations of, crossword puzzles, especially cryptic ones like: "Sausages for a Greek island (7): Salamis. Ruled by Ajax, the king of detergents" (*TRS* 16). The numerical digit "7" represents the number of letters that form the required word and the narrator's comment that Salamis was "[r]uled by Ajax, the king of detergents" is a typical 'Tearle-ism' in its playful combination of aspects of Greek mythology and modern consumer culture. The first part pays homage to the warrior of ancient

Greece and the second appears to be a tag-line in a detergent advertisement.[103] Later, Tearle is to engage in a form of intellectual jousting with Spilkin, an acquaintance, at the Café Europa as they compete to see who is able to find the answers to the cryptic crossword in the shortest time possible. Tearle even launches an ultimately successful letter-campaign to the editor of *The Star* newspaper when the crossword layout was changed, with the answers to the puzzles immediately following the clues, and thus taking the challenge out of the exercise, unless one were to fold the broadsheet over in order not to see the solutions. But above all, here the writer – through the character of Tearle – reveals how the experience of living in the postcolonial city has become akin to the solving of cryptic clues. The square grids of the puzzle may be the symbolic echoes of the physical geography of the city-blocks but the enigmatic prompts more faithfully represent the challenges and non-linear nature of the lived experience of the city in which there is a constant negotiation of space and identity. The recognition of the coded signs and successful navigation of the labyrinth all add to the effect of the uncanny, both in terms of how the characters in the novel experience the imagined city as well as how the reader's conceptions are shaped.

5.3 Walking as Seeing [and Being in] the City

In this section I examine how walking, routes, maps and stops along journeys are part of what define Aubrey Tearle and other characters' experience of the city as urban space. Walking is central to seeing and being in the city. For Michel de Certeau "[t]he story begins on ground level, with footsteps. [...] Their intertwined paths give shape to spaces. They weave places together" (de Certeau 1988:97). As a corollary therefore, I also have to bring into the conversation elements of flânerie and delve further into the exercise of the gaze as it manifests itself in *The Restless Supermarket*, which can be read as a fictional representation of an emerging postcolonial city. The ideas of Benjamin, de Certeau and Fishman are central to my

---

[103] Such other idiosyncrasies of Tearle's character are discussed in greater detail in a later section of this chapter marked 'Postcolonial Urban Subjects - Considerations of Identity and the Self'.
.

examination of these fundamental aspects of city life in general. Following up on Benjamin's ideas, Michel de Certeau (1988) focuses on the trope of walking the city, defining aspects of both the horizontal and vertical plateaux, with the walker not only moving through the city but, by extension, the city itself also moving imaginatively through the walker. De Certeau makes a clear distinction between tours and maps in The Practice of Everyday Life, arguing that maps attempt to encapsulate and totalise the meaning of a particular place or city, whereas tours are the lived realities of an individual within the city as they appropriate cityspace. To illustrate this distinction, de Certeau offers the example of the description of the location of a bathroom in a house and contrasts that cartographic description with the various routes that may be used to access the same bathroom. In short, for de Certeau "maps" simply refer to the seeing of a place whereas "tours" mean the acting out by individuals that occurs within a specific place and in this way converts a geographic territory into an appropriated space. Read differently, for de Certeau (1988:120) place is where actions are spatialised in the process of becoming space.[104] Robert Fishman (1995) frames space along similar lines as de Certeau in his examination of the myriad destinations of individual members of a suburban family, finding that:

> The pattern formed by these destinations represents "the city" for that particular family or individual. The more varied one's destinations, the richer and more diverse is one's personal "city". The new city is a city a la carte.
>
> (1995:409)

---

[104] This formulation may appear to be somewhat contradictory because, on the face of it, space is the more abstract term which we would expect to be more closely related to maps; whereas place is the more concrete experience of space and as such is related to walking and touring. However, I still think de Certeau's analysis is correct in as far as for him space means a physical place in which social action has been conducted, as opposed to a physical, cartographic place which has not been acted upon and thus has not been transformed socially as a result of human actions. It therefore remains 'barren' ground because it has not been appropriated by the spatialisation of human action.

In this construction the city is where the individual chooses it to be. It is not bound by geography as suggested by the concentric rings postulated by Burgess and others.[105]

Literary critics Michael Titlestad and Mike Kissack have suggested in 'Secular Improvisations' that in de Certeau even walking as a practice is "an instance of qualified agency" because "his walkers do not have the freedom to invent the city they inhabit" and that "they inherit its structure", as well as "being confined by the possibilities it presents" (Titlestad and Kissack 2006:20). To the contrary I would argue that the practice of walking is liberating, even in de Certeau's formulation, because the walker invents the routes that he follows in the city and in that way appropriates certain space that he chooses to. This is not the same as following cartographically determined pathways. At the same time one must take cognisance of the fact that certain stops along the walker's route may indeed be defined by certain factors which are exigent or external to himself such as the location of the public toilet or the library.

The flâneur, as conceptualised by Benjamin (1983) in his analysis of Baudelaire's poetry, is both a dweller in, as well as a watcher on the city streets. Georg Simmel, in remarks cited by Benjamin and which would suggest that Simmel was the first to pronounce on this idea, has noted how "interpersonal relationships in big cities are distinguished by a marked preponderance of the activity of the eye over the ear" (Benjamin 1983:38). This notion privileges the visual over the aural sense. Because of economic necessity the city brings large groups of people, in some cases even millions, into close physical proximity without the people necessarily engaging in any form of social communication except, perhaps, to silently regard one another. Commenting on the physiologies – a narrative style popular in Paris at the time of the writer Charles Baudelaire – Benjamin posits that in these texts everyone

---

[105] The social geographer E.W. Burgess was part of the Chicago School with, among others Louis Wirth and R.E. Park. Writing in the early 1920s (refer to James S. Duncan 1996:237), he produced a concentric diagram of Chicago and what he perceived the essence of a city to be. Such a view is, by definition, instrumentalist or functionalist, seeking as it does to read the city through the prism of perceived functions of the different zones of the city, but does not seem to give proportionate weighting to the determination or agency of the residents of the city in as far as a reading of the cityscape may be arrived at. Over the succeeding years this kind of reductive thinking, whose project is premised on the discovery of an essence or universal truth, has given way to more epistemologically sound interpretations of the city.

in the city "was able to make out the profession, the character, the background and the life-style of passersby" (Benjamin 1983:39). The actions of Mike Feder's paralegal, described in the previous section, closely approximate this posture as he sits on the bus commuting to work and trying to assign a profession or vocation to all the people he sees on the pavements below. Followed to its logical conclusion, this formulation means that people on the city street are continuously watching and being watched by others in reciprocal gestures of the gaze. At the same time, those who are watched have imagined attributes and identities ascribed to them by those that do the watching. This paradigm of the refracted and self-replicating gaze makes for interesting analysis when used as a tool to examine the social interactions of the characters in Vladislavić's writing precisely because the eye is often used in place of the spoken word, or more precisely, spoken words exchanged between people.

Through Tearle, Vladislavić establishes the connections between place and identity in the city, in a manner which shows how certain characters define their identity through the kinds of spaces they appropriate and occupy. The Café Europa looms large in his narrations of self; hence Tearle views the establishment's gradual 'decline' as being reflective of his own personal downhill slide, as well as the qualitative deterioration of Johannesburg as a socio-political space. In its centrality to how Tearle configures Johannesburg, the café goes a long way to illustrate what Fassil Demissie has correctly observed as the roles played by "colonial architecture and urbanism" in "shaping the spatial and social structures of African cities during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (2007:1).

Although Demissie is theorising postcolonial African cities in general, I extend his rationale to look at how the Café Europa, as an instance of such colonial architecture, implies certain exclusions and how these limits are then perforated or breached in the moment of transition. In stark contrast to the idea of someone who avowedly hates the increasing crowdedness of Hillbrow, Tearle spends a considerable amount of time away from his flat, preferring to haunt instead the streets of Hillbrow and the confines of the Café Europa – in spite of the fact that these spaces become increasingly disagreeable for him. In the early stages of the novel, it appears that the café represents more of a sanctuary than his home "whose view of the skyline [is] all nickel and paste by night and factory roofs and television

aerials by day" (*TRS* 17). However, he finds some of the public spaces similarly not alluring as "once there had been benches for whites only, now there were no benches at all to discourage loitering" (*TRS* 17).[106] So he resorts to the one of the few places in Hillbrow which he still feels meets his personal standards – the Café Europa – where he can continue to act out his fantasy of the "incorrigible 'European'"(*TRS* 17). The café provides him with "[a] European ambience [...]the least one would expect from an establishment that called itself the Café Europa. Importantly, it was ambience rather than atmosphere" (*TRS* 19). One way to assess Tearle's attachment to Europe is to consider Helgesson's assertion that "[b]y aligning himself […] and identifying himself with the 'we' of the colonisers and a 'civilised' Europe of his imagination, he expects to inhabit that microtechnically distributed power and to be rewarded by it" (2004:785). The distinction that Tearle makes between ambience and atmosphere is at the heart of his imagining of the space that he occupies and, ultimately, how he constructs his own identity. The first is European and the second American, that is to say, ambience is European and atmosphere American. Tearle's thinking displays the old-versus-new dichotomies (or old European refinement versus new Americanised artificiality) as he represents an attachment to the old order and what he considers to be refined. Commercial culture as epitomised by America and, by extension, globalisation in all its myriad facets, are to be frowned upon without question as they are seen as brash and detestable. The unanswered problem is the extent to which America and globalisation represent the postcolonial future.

Alibia is a city painted in a mural on one of the walls of Café Europa. In Tearle's imaginings Alibia is the perfect, utopian city with a bit of something for all its citizens. It is also Tearle's utopian fantasy to counter the dystopic nightmare that Hillbrow and Johannesburg have become for him.[107] Interestingly, Tearle's vision is

---

[106] There are echoes here of Vladislavić's earlier short story 'The WHITES ONLY Bench' which also problematises the use of space and apartheid-era artefacts in the present. The story is from the collection *Propaganda by Monuments and other Stories* (1996).

[107] It is not my suggestion that Vladislavić's vision of the contemporary Johannesburg is a dystopic one but rather that Aubrey Tearle's resistance to change, on the whole, makes him view Hillbrow through the distorted prism of dystopia. Jennifer Robinson (2009) makes a sustained critical deconstruction of dystopia in her articulate response to some of the cataclysmic models of the African city proposed, for instance, by commentators like Mike Davis in *Planet of Slums*.

never quite national as it hardly goes outside the locale of Hillbrow. In Mpe's text, Refentsĕ's first entry into Hillbrow is described as being the "culmination of many converging routes" whose origins are unknown beyond vague associations with "the stories of migrants" (Mpe 2001:3). As with the Vladislavić treatment, Hillbrow is seen as the city's centre, with the routes (and maps) suggesting places of origin away from the city. Refentsĕ had vicariously followed the paths of previous migrants to the city. Typically, and unlike the predominantly white characters in *The Restless Supermarket*, the central figures of Mpe's writing here exude the sense of having arrived in the city, in Hillbrow, from a place other than the city itself. At best Tearle makes a few cursory mentions of Johannesburg, even fewer of Soweto but all these are usually tempered with a validating reference to Hillbrow or a frame of reference puts that puts Hillbrow at the 'centre'.

As a space, Alibia also represents a way of seeing. The perfection that Tearle seeks in his imagined sanctum results from his view of Hillbrow as a degenerating locale, a perception which in turn stems from his racialised gaze. For example, he explains his reluctance to take part in the traditional festivities of New Year's Eve:

> It had become far too dangerous, with flat dwellers of colour using the occasion to heave unwanted furniture from their windows onto the streets below. In fact, the entire 'festive season' had degenerated into a drunken street fight, and the wise lay low until it was over.

(*TRS* 25)

The blacks, local as well as migrant, the feared Other, moved in and the decline of Hillbrow is directly linked, in Tearle's eyes, to a concurrent regression in the quality of the people now living there. His jaundiced gaze is again in evidence when he is able to re-call the words on a sticker of a lorry that almost runs him over, but is unable to recall the facial features of a black prostitute who accosts him in the lounge of the Chelsea Hotel. She is the Other and therefore unknowable. At his hasty retreat from her presence she is said to have "made a crack in isiSotho or whatever" (*TRS* 28) thus underlining, in Tearle's estimation, her indefinable difference from himself. This racialised gaze also operates according to the logic of a stacked hierarchy, similar to the one Tearle employs in his collection of corrigenda and etymological

references for his planned "Proofreaders' Derby". At the bottom rungs are the black immigrants from the African continent, then the local blacks, and higher still, the Eastern European immigrants who fare marginally better. Whites from Old Europe are acceptable, especially if they speak good English.

Like the narrator of *Welcome To Our Hillbrow*, Aubrey Tearle has intimate knowledge of the streets of Hillbrow.[108] The first-person narrator in Mpe's novel, maps Johannesburg by detailing the route that Refentsě and his cousin take from Hillbrow to the University of the Witwatersrand. Some of the street-names are similar to those in Vladislavić's version of Hillbrow as are some of the landmarks like the Chelsea Hotel, thus meaning that the fictive characters from both texts generally perambulate the same locale. The difference in the two accounts lies mainly in the points of view of the respective raconteurs, though they share a pronounced sense of belonging to the space of Hillbrow. The racialised gaze of Tearle is transformed in Mpe into new categories of fear and prejudice because in the latter the paradigms shift from the older black-white dichotomies to representations of new kinds of blackness, nationalism and 'authentic South Africanness'. Examination and comparison of these shifts will be discussed in fuller detail in the next sub-section of this chapter, but suffice it to state for the present that the narrators demonstrate how different varieties of the city can emerge from the walking and seeing of the same physical space.

Because he is now retired, Tearle does not wander far from the local circuits and as he traverses the suburb, he constructs virtual maps of what constitutes the city for him. One such instance is when he surreptitiously follows Bogey – one of the new immigrants – as the latter acquaints himself with his new surroundings. In this way, Vladislavić combines elements of walking the city, as described by de Certeau, with something of the 'idle', incognito watching of the flâneur, as formulated by Walter Benjamin. In a limited sense, Tearle makes an ideal flâneur because of the amount of time he has as a retiree, but the unintended consequence of his closely

---

[108] Hillbrow is mapped in Mpe's text through the narration of a long list of street names through which Refentsě must walk and the landmarks that are to be passed on the way to Cousin's place. There is a strong sense of place engendered through the naming of the streets and landmarks. Hillbrow is identifiable as such through these.

watching those around him as he walks the streets of Hillbrow (in his retirement he hardly leaves the suburb) is that he gets a first-hand view of all the subtle changes in the social and physical character of his 'city', transformations and shifts to which he is so antithetical. The other necessary qualification as to why Tearle's flânerie is never fully realised is that he is intrinsically conservative and is thus unable to let go of all dogma and be in a position to fully avail himself of the liberation technologies that the act of walking the city presents. On occasion wistful, and yet at times arrogantly taciturn, he also expresses a fear that he would leave no impression or mark on the city. The near-miss with the bread-van occasions some introspection as to the meaning of his being in the city and he concludes that were he to meet a sudden death, there would be little evidence left of his ever having existed because "[t]he city had a short memory" (*TRS* 27) and because there are potentially many deaths that could have happened at the exact place of which there was now no sign of confirmation. As with the "decline" of Hillbrow, Tearle resorts to linguistic taxonomy to explain his palpable metaphysical fear of being unremembered in the event of his death, describing it as "a precipitate efflux of vocabulary and idiom, the hoarded treasures of lifetime spent in a minute [...] and the whole adulterated brew spilt on the dirty macadam of a lawless conurbation" (*TRS* 27). The city, then, is forgetful and lawless, the latter characteristic not just referring to the breaking of civil and criminal statutes but also to the degeneration or near-absence of linguistic rules which, to the narrator, are the key ingredients of an orderly society. All the aspects mark the city as a space of transience, emphasised by the image of the uncompleted 'Proofreader's Derby' being dumped (after Tearle is dead) at a landfill site where "in the fullness of time another housing development would arise [...] and bury it forever" (*TRS* 28). The theme that is common to both *The Restless Supermarket* and *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* is the sense of a nervous energy in the city, indeed, the restless "supermarket" that is envisaged in Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket* (being cosmopolitan, the city is a shopping-trolley of cultures and identities).

Another good example of the convergence of both the gaze and Hillbrow's multiethnic character is provided in the instance where Tearle visits a German eatery in Kotze Street owned by Herr Kurt Toppelmann. It is not quite clear whether "Herr"

210

is used by Tearle as a genuine mark of respect or as a tongue-in-cheek appellation that is meant to mock Toppelmann who, though he has been in the city for a considerable period of time, is not yet fully competent as a speaker of English. It could be that the narrator is specifically marking the shop-owner as German and therefore not belonging in the sense that Tearle himself feels to be. In his observations about the place, he cleaves to stereotype, even in his descriptions of Steffi Graf (in a picture hanging from the wall) as being "improbably, impeccably muscled, undoubtedly well-fed, a living tribute to scientific nutrition" (*TRS* 57-8). The description is as if of a specimen of livestock or a machine, coming as it does amongst other references to the sturdiness of the German character and "a certain German stability". The shop, the pictures on the wall and the culinary references to German food, all have the effect of appropriating that limited space of Hillbrow and defining it as German. Tearle's relation to this space is somewhat ambiguous as noted in the half-mocking tones with which he converses with Toppelmann and the simultaneous acceptance and rejection of some of the menu items according to his notions of the "principles involved, of linguistics and cuisine" (*TRS* 58).

This truncated version of the flâneur figure is constantly reincarnated throughout the narrative in various guises and poses, a case in point being the initial 'interaction' between Tearle and Spilkin, who is also to become a regular patron of the Café Europa. In the preceding chapter I cited Walter Benjamin and how he describes the way in which the crowd can act as an asylum or cover for the asocial person who frowns upon intimate contact with other people and wishes to lose himself in the faceless anonymity of the crowd (1983:40). The early forms of the contact between Tearle and Myron Spilkin, is framed along similar paradigms of mutual indifference:

> 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.
>
> (*TRS* 63)

Because of the relatively confined space of the Café Europa, absolute inconspicuousness is unachievable, unlike what would have been possible on the

crowded streets, for instance. From Tearle's perspective, the congeniality of the other characters is generally measured by their willingness to mind their own business, and letting him be. A hallmark of the narrator's relations to his acquaintances is ambiguity, in that he has an ironic yearning for the public spaces of Hillbrow like the café while at the same time affectively repudiating any close relations with the people with whom he interacts. Even those 'closest' to him are only allowed to advance to within a particular distance of familiarity beyond which he is unwilling to let them proceed.

To a certain extent therefore, Aubrey Tearle also displays an ambiguous relationship with Hillbrow and the city. His preferred haunts are the old areas of Hillbrow, places with older, colonial architecture like the Chelsea Hotel and the Café Europa which speak of civilisation and refinement (in its most conservative, Tearlean sense). These older constructions are contrasted to what he perceives to be the more ostentatious and garish cosmopolitan philosophy represented in the taller, more modern buildings, of which the Hillbrow Tower is a prime example:

> Some people thought that the most cosmopolitan touch on our skyline was the Hillbrow Tower: the flats that offered a view of a view of it were actually the most expensive. When I was flat-hunting[109] the caretaker at Milrita Heights had presented it as a feature, flinging back the curtains in the lounge with a theatrical gesture to show the smooth grey shaft plunging past the window. How was she to know I found it vulgar? Like an enormous parking meter.

(*TRS* 100-1)

Tearle chooses instead a place in the Lenmar Mansions that faced south but still "my view of the skyline was all nickel and paste by night and factory roofs and television aerials by day", which is hardly an improvement on the first flat. In the distance, however, is the green of the Southern suburbs of Johannesburg. Tellingly, the only

---

[109] Carrol Clarkson(10 March 2010) has recently made a very interesting, if not directly relevant (to the concerns of the thesis and *The Restless Supermarket*) observation about how some property agents have gone to the extent of "erasing" Hillbrow from the map of Johannesburg by 'refusing' to label it on a map showing the various properties that are available on the market in the environs of the CBD area of the city. A map from the property supplement of The Star newspaper of 16 October 2010 shows this contnuing trend.

view that is given of Soweto[110], the iconic black township, is in the dark of night. For Tearle it remains an unimaginable elsewhere and all he knows is information gleaned from second-hand accounts by Gideon, the night-watchman at his block of flats. Thus it can only be represented as "blocks of tawdry marcasite, marred by empty sockets" (*TRS* 100). Soweto is characterised by darkness and absences, the dull street lights punctuated by voids of emptiness. The absences here refer to the residents of Soweto, who Tearle is unable to imagine. Another way of seeing the city for Tearle is through the prism of his former profession of proofreading the telephone directory. Through this he is able to map the migration of the various ethnic and racial groups into different areas of the cityspace:

> I was browsing one evening when I came across a Merope with a Hillbrow address. 'M' was then the fastest-growing section, thanks to the burgeoning number of African subscribers. [...] Silently, while we slept, the tide was darkening. [...] It was not my imagination: there were more and more people of colour in Hillbrow. And it was so obvious to me that they were living in our midst. Were the authorities turning a blind eye?

(*TRS* 144-5)

The 'invasion' of Hillbrow by people of colour is equated, as implied by the use of the possessive pronoun our in "our Hillbrow", with the arrival of an alien species or race. The whole sequence, which begins a few pages earlier than the material cited directly above, illustrates and maps (in graphic detail) the influx of the 'invaders', suburb-by-suburb and block-by-block. The use of the pronoun "they" here recalls the shrill they uttered by the fearful Mrs Malgas in Vladislavić's first novel, *The Folly*, as she contemplates the possible arrival of squatters on a neighbouring plot of land. Apartheid laws that, like the Group Areas Act of 1950, decreed separateness are, in Hillbrow, subverted and "circumvented by the registration of residential contracts for these outsiders[111] in the names of white proxies" (*TRS* 145). The views of Johannesburg from Tearle's accommodations and the patterns he discerns from his analysis of the telephone directory, it seems, are largely aesthetically and

---

[110] Initially, this was an acronym for South-Western Townships, but is now the generic name for the group of settlements that constitute the largely residential urban sprawl.
[111] My emphasis.

symbolically unappealing, from the perspective of both the horizontal and vertical plateaux, to borrow a term posited by Michel de Certeau. That is, the city as viewed from ground level and from the heights afforded by skrscrapers. The space of Hillbrow is racialised and non-whites are deemed outsiders not just of the physical place but, by implication, of the social and political geography of the city. In short, at the time that the novel is set, Tearle cannot imagine that they are entitled to full citizenship.

In a scene that evokes the sequence in 'Autopsy', the short story in the collection *Missing Persons* about a man who sees and follows Elvis Presley around the streets of Hillbrow,[112] the narrator follows Bogey, who is one of the Eastern European migrants who now patronise (much to Tearle's chagrin) the Café Europa, around the city. The routes taken by 'Bogey' and the stops he makes serve to define his version of the city, based upon his personal preferences and interests. Moving in-between and stopping at a variety of consumer goods stores (from 'Exclusive Books' to 'Diplomat Luggage Specialists'), he winds up in coin-operated photo-booth taking pictures of himself in his recently acquired leather jacket. In sharp contrast, where 'The King' visits a variety of take-away establishments and a pharmacy in Hillbrow (perhaps insinuating and symbolically rendering the real Elvis Presley's debauched state in the last months before his demise), 'Bogey' reveals how he is a recent convert and adherent to consumer culture. His version of consumerism is at this stage leaning more towards the acquisition of the material artefacts of that culture such as shoes and clothes, than the self-destructive decadence displayed by the Elvis character in the short story. The common factor in the two scenarios described above is how the 'walking' through and seeing the city can be practised by proxy, that is, the respective narrators walk and look at the city as if by proxy, by taking the routes determined by their respective 'quarries'.

But the second scene has even more significance in its demonstration of the slippages and flows that are occurring in the transforming Johannesburg, the "entry and exit points" that are features of the postcolonial cosmopolitan city. In the introductory chapter and elsewhere in this thesis, I alluded to how Mbembe and

---

[112] Described in Chapter One of this thesis.

Nuttall (2004:348) have advocated against what they term commonsense readings of Africa and Johannesburg, encouraging readers of the city instead to identify these not so obvious "entry and exit points" that will lead to readings of the African metropolis that are essentially based on its own terms, and not those of cities elsewhere in the world.

While Aubrey Tearle affects the demeanour of one who belongs to Hillbrow and the city, there are some infrequent moments of doubt when circumstances force him to adopt the posture of an outsider, however temporarily. More accurately, these are times when Tearle looks at himself through the gaze of others, from outside of himself. One such incident is when he arrives at the café immediately after the expulsion of a young black drunkard. Finding the doors locked, he ventures to look in through the glass doors at the patrons inside, his gaze finally settling on Spilkin:

> He looked back at me with an expression so lacking in sympathy it made me shudder, as if he had never clapped eyes on me before. And then one by one, the other gazes trembled and fell away from the screen.
> I must have looked a fright, with my nose pressed to the glass and my spectacles misted over.
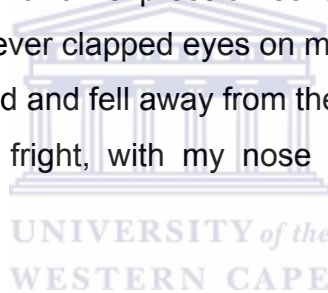
(*TRS* 161)

The others had been watching the silent TV screen as Mevrouw Bonsma plays the piano but they all now turn to look at the 'apparition' through the glass of the door. For a fleeting moment, the gaze has been turned and Tearle, so long accustomed to subjecting others to his scrutiny, is now subjected to it. He briefly becomes the Other as he stands at the door looking into the sanctum of the Café Europa, which, when he had first discovered its charms, "had opened its arms" (*TRS* 159) to him but now seemed to be offering "this cold shoulder" (*TRS* 159). The incident and the feelings of doubt about 'his' place that it arouses in Tearle, are a further illustration of the uncertainty suggested in the term "layers of impermanence" as used in the title of this present chapter. The recognition of his own social insecurity moves the narrator to the point of near-tears. A similar effect of doubt is produced by the visit to the zoo and Tearle ruminates on the possibility of 'their' extinction. As stated, the hesitation is temporary and the narrator soon reverts to type until the next instant of misgivings,

for example by describing the attention the waiters pay to the live TV broadcast of Mandela's release as the attainment of new depths in the café's standards as one "couldn't get a pot of tea for love or money, because the waiters would not be dragged away from the screen" (*TRS* 185). The spontaneous breaking out amongst the staff of the black anthem 'Nkosi Sikeleli' is derisively described as the singing of a "plaintive gobbledegook" (*TRS* 185). The fictional figure of Mandela fares marginally better and is pronounced as being "not unreasonably black" (*TRS* 186), perhaps unlike some of the African migrants from the north who are perceived to have darker hues.

There are hints, as the narrative draws to its end, that there may be some paradigm shifts that are possible as Tearle encounters again the reality of the fraught material and ideological ground that he occupies. One night after his temporary hospitalisation, having escaped mortal injury by a whisker during the fracas that breaks out at the café's closing down party, he looks at the valley below the hospital grounds and is unable to discern whether the view is of a squatter camp "[o]r was it Harold Oppenheimer's place" (*TRS* 315).[113] Johannesburg, as a place, continually throws up all kinds of contrasts, the majority of which may not always be as stark as that between the squatter[114] and one of the richest men in South Africa (and the world). To the contrary, this scene suggests that social, cultural and identity oppositions can often be much more difficult to distinguish because of the absence of clearly defined borders between categories and thus evoking once more the notion of impermanent layers of meaning which, like the postcolonial city, has fluidity at its core.

---

[113] The Oppenheimer family are the majority shareholders of De Beers and Anglo-American Corporation, two key companies in the exploitation of South Africa's mineral wealth, especially diamonds and gold, and lately platinum.
[114] Nuttall (2004:746) suggests, with little or no elaboration, that Tearle is in fact a "vagrant in the making".

5.5 Postcolonial Urban Subjects - Considerations of Identity and the Self

The behaviour of Darryl with the pink elephant and the self-styling of the Queen of Sheba, a homeless woman living on the streets and alleyways of Hillbrow, constitute instances of writing the self or of writing oneself into the cityscape. As already discussed in some of the earlier chapters of this thesis, the democratic polity that Iris Marion Young (1995) foresees with reference to the city, is one in which the individual has agency to express his or her own sense of self, without necessarily kowtowing to an oppressive group identity. In the space of the postcolonialising city, such expression of agency is essential to achieve a functional measure of 'true' liberation from the repressive tropes and dogmas of the past, such as apartheid race laws, in which the physical as well as socioeconomic boundaries and status of communities were prescribed by edict.

A slightly different way to make this point is by deploying Iain Chambers' articulation in which he describes how "[t]he idea of cultural complexity [...] weakens earlier schemata and paradigms, destabilises and decenters previous theories and sociologies." (Chambers 1994:93) This segment of the thesis therefore briefly examines the ways in which characters seek to individuate themselves (to the extent such a process is possible) in the fictive representation of Hillbrow. We can thus speak of the Queen of Sheba having a retinue of courtiers who speak in "indigenous tongues" and are the source of "multilingual sobbing" when the queen falls to the pavement while trying to join Darryl atop the mascot. The multilingualism referred to here points to the growing multiracial, cosmopolitan nature of Hillbrow, and by implication the city of Johannesburg. Even at the time of the beginning of radical political transition (generally regarded historiographically as 1990) there is still a relatively large population of whites, some from the middle-class, who are still domiciled in Hillbrow and the city centre and have yet to move out to the edges of the city, to suburbia.[115] This multi-class and multiracial milieu forms the backdrop to

---

[115] It is a moot point that it does not necessarily follow that all white inhabitants of Hillbrow at the time discussed in the novel had the financial wherewithal to be able to move out. But those who were totally indigent formed a comparatively small, even insignificant proportion to those who had the means to re-locate.

the characters' self-definition. This 'city' of fissures and mixtures defies what Mbembe and Nuttall describe by as the "commonsense readings of Africa" (2004:350) because it is not packaged into neat, readily consumable blocks that are based on some formulaic paradigms that read the African city primarily based on misconception and stereotype.

Along with a critical awareness of the implausibility of "an integral, originary and unified identity" (Stuart Hall 1996:1), the following considerations of the concept of identity (and of the self) are informed and shaped by the proviso that "identities are never unified and, in late modern times, [are] increasingly fragmented and fractured: never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (Hall 1996:4). Carl G. Jung (1958) has also similarly written of selves that are multiple, contingent and combinations of supposedly individual selves. This is an important qualification in the context of avoiding entrapment of the discourse on identity by the use of universalising or essentialising terms. In their fixity such labels tend to preclude the possibility of grey areas and border crossings, the layers of impermanence suggested by the title to this chapter. A simplified reflection on this aspect could be the extent to which language and identity can be said to be mutually exclusive of one another, taking the character of Aubrey Tearle as an example. In terms of Tearle's character, his identity is entangled with how he uses language to the extent that one can say that the latter shapes the former, and also that the opposite holds true. One cannot, therefore presume to talk of language without acknowledging how identity shapes it, while at the same time the notion of identity cannot be fully articulated without due consideration to the role of language in the construction of identity. By logical extension, it can be argued that the identity of any single person is the amalgam of many different identities and selves. Such being the case, any contemplation on identity must be mindful, as Hall (cited above) states, that such a construction is "fractured and fragmented", and is a product of many socio-historical impulses and confluences.

To begin, Aubrey Tearle in his demeanour and vision (or lack of it), is a relic or monument from a by-gone era of racial privilege. "I am the last gentleman in Hillbrow," (*TRS* 32) he says, and with this statement makes a last stand for 'culture'

and 'civilisation'. Gaylard and Titlestad have suggested two interesting readings of Tearle's character either as "an anachronistic retentive racist" or as an "idiosyncratic throwback gentleman" (2006:5). The evidence available is supportive of both conclusions and shows the extent to which there can be contradictory readings of Vladislavić's texts. His portrayal does not elicit sympathy in the reader because it is not intended to. While the narrator is within his rights in taking up and expressing a particular cultural attitude, but where that vision diverts from Young's democratic "ideal of city life as a vision of social relations affirming group difference" and instantiating "social relations of difference without exclusion" (Young 1995:251), is where he displaces those whom he considers as Other from the cultural space of the city, Hillbrow specifically. In other words, Tearle's adoption of a cultural posture should not be predicated on the denial of similar democratic cultural expressions of other residents of the city with whom he comes into contact. From the early stages of the novel, Tearle's fortunes and what he imagines himself to be are inextricably tied to the Café Europa. It is the centre of his orbit (of his city) because of its initial signification to him of all that is refined and civilised. It is, for him, an oasis of rationality and order – the two things that define him – in a sea of disappointing, madding and maddening chaos. The space of the café also partially signifies identity for the regular patrons. Tearle in particular, steadfastly holds onto a utopian vision that allows little room for the acceptance of a new reality, and when Mrs Mavrokordatos (who had been the proprietor of the café in its heyday) begins to serve liquor he feels that "her own standards had slipped in the direction of the shebeen" (*TRS* 9).

The shebeen is the antithesis of the refinement that had been suggested by Café Europa in its former glory. In Ken Barris' *What Kind of Child?* (2007), which is set in Cape Town, there is a similarly named Empire Café which is the haunt of the city's literary set. It is an enclave in which this group of people systematically ensconce themselves when they feel the need to escape, as it were, the mad rush of the city. Similarly, one of the characters in Barris' story is an old man who, like Tearle, seems to be caught in a time warp beyond which he is unable to progress. He cannot have normal relations with his daughter and grandchild and therefore immerses himself in his work as tattooist as a way of clinging on to a formerly

glorious and comfortable past. The present and future are not so easily confronted. Tearle fears change and what it represents and has a palpable terror of the new and unknown, the unforeseeable. His life is based on what he perceives to be the certainty of linguistic signs. The question arises as to what extent it is possible to remain unchanged, especially in circumstances of radical transformation, such as that undergone by Johannesburg and South Africa from the early 1990s up to the present.

At another level, identity may be seen not only in terms of the choices that characters make and their expression of agency, but also in how they enunciate and exercise difference from others. According to Mike Marais "when Tearle encounters "black" people, he does not perceive the singularity of the individuals involved", but "what he does see are culturally inscribed differences among people" (Marais 2003:283). One of the most common differentiations between people in the socio-historical context of a city with a racial history such as Johannesburg, is primarily that of race, followed by nationality and ethnicity. Moses is one of the waiters in the café and his name is sardonically rendered, by Tearle, as Moçes for the simple reason that the man is from Moçambique. He is identified as Other on two levels, these being his blackness and the fact that he is foreign, and not because of any perceived deficiencies of character. Darryl's repugnant public display does not, however, attract any moral rebuke because he is considered to be one of 'us'. He has a shared affinity to the group by virtue of being a white South African male, notwithstanding his idiosyncrasies as an individual. In short, the narrator's reactions to and perceptions of the behaviour of Moses and Darryl rely solely on whether the particular individual is black or white.

In making the point above, I would like to recall Helen Strauss' (2008) formulation of "squirming white bodies" with its insistence that racial difference is framed as the corporeal manifestation of social inequalities, the latter of which are very strongly aligned to race especially in a formerly segregated society. The squirming, paradoxically echoed in Tearle's fictional ruminations on "squirming maggots" close to the end of the novel, is evidence of apparent unease in the face of impending social transformation and the attendant loss of privilege. Manase has noted how Vladislavić utilises "the trope of chaos and death to describe Tearle's reading of the

deterioration of the city's built and social spaces", for instance how the "inner-city's public spaces, such as the once well-maintained and orderly streets, parks and libraries, are now disordered and abandoned" (2009:58). Using a register of pathology, Tearle therefore equates the deterioration of Standard English with "chaos and death", thus underlining his cynicism and ill-preparedness to deal with the transformation of the social and physical spaces of the city. Proverbially, he clutches at linguistic straws whilst radical and overwhelming change writes itself into the spaces in-between and outside his collection of corrigenda and its proposed manifestation as 'The Proofreader's Derby'. Manase has also asserted that Vladislavić's white characters' perceive the "represented transformation of Johannesburg" as leaning towards the "chaotic over-commercialisation of some [the city's] spaces" (2009:59). Extending directly from this analysis, I would go further and suggest that Vladislavić sets up such characters like Tearle and Spilkin for critical ridicule because he makes obvious the conceptual limitations of what amounts to their blissfully ignorant claims on the spaces that they occupy. Their assumed rights to occupation and privilege show lack of self-reflexive evaluation, being as they are, based on the flimsy justification of the socially constructed category of race.

For much of the novel, Tearle maintains a low-intensity tirade against people of colour generally, with his most vituperative comments reserved for black African immigrants from "north of the border". There is an interesting parallel here between Tearle's figuring of the African arrivants and the use of *makwerekwere* in Phaswana Mpe's novel *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* (Mpe 2001:4). *Makwerekwere*[116] is a derogatory term usually used by black South Africans to denote black foreigners and difference here is marked, in the main, by language. The term, as a sociolinguistic entity, encapsulates all that is to be feared about African migrants (the unknown and unknowable others) who have all kinds of negative connotations ascribed to them through the use of the term. These attributed traits include the strangers', to return to Derrida's use of the term in *Of Hospitality* (2000), purported propensity to 'steal' the jobs, women and living space of the locals, as well as their alleged tendency for

---

[116] The accepted meaning of *makwerekwere* is that it denotes people who speak a language that the locals cannot understand. They are *'kwerekwere'* in that they are making sounds which are not intelligible. White migrants are not conceived of as *Makwerekwere*.

homosexual behaviour. The radio news of Radio Lebowa, like the grapevine that carries news and views of the city to the village of Tiragalong[117], offers a largely dystopic vision of the city. Danger, death and disease are said to be its hallmarks and the *makwerekwere* are seen as playing a disproportionately large role in all that is thought to be wrong with Johannesburg. Another ascription is that of having introduced HIV/AIDS into Hillbrow. Both AIDS and non-local Africans are othered and evoked in terms of constituting a mortal threat to the locals. The trope of the virus is extended to the foreigners who are perceived as invading the city or Hillbrow, thus causing disease like the virus. (For Aubrey Tearle in *The Restless Supermarket*, blacks generally represent a danger to the moral fabric but this is not enunciated in the terms of disease.) In a moment of rare concordance, the white superintendent of Refentsĕ's apartment block confides in the latter that "Hillbrow had been fine until those Nigerians came here with all their drug-dealing" (Mpe 2001:17). These xenophobic sentiments are all based on generalisations and when expressed by black characters constitute a form of black-on-black apartheid. For Tearle's part, apart from "Moçes" and a few others who have worked at the café, he knows very little about blacks, whom he refers to as "these people". Tearle seeks to retain some of his identity, which he feels to be disappearing with the decline in social and linguistic standards, by remembering the café at its best, that is, before the glory began to fade. That yearned for time is, naturally, before the blacks became a part of the café's clientele. This also speaks to the possibility of selecting memories of a place and packaging them in a preferred format or state (a time-capsule mentality), and thus serves as a precursor to the fantasy of Alibia – dramatised in the middle segment of the novel – whose near-implosion demonstrates the narrative fallacy of Tearle's insisted-upon linguistic and, consequently, therefore social order.

But the capsule, that is, the café which the narrator chooses as the repository of these selected histories is not impervious to and is constantly breached by the

---

[117] In *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* the rural village of Tiragalong remains part of how characters that originate from there construct their identities because the rural roots are not completely severed with the arrival of the individual in the city. The village is an alternative moral and social reference point whereas an individual like Vladislavić's Aubrey Tearle seems completely immersed (embedded) in the physical and social space of Hillbrow. For Tearle a referent that may approximate this 'consciousness of village' as home and moral source is that of Europe. Tearle's 'European' sensibility is marked, for instance; by the way he jealously guards his private space, thinking that it is a hallmark of refinement.

'alien' interruptions against which it, as a refuge, is originally conceived. Thus Tearle continually notices the increasing number of new (and mainly black) faces that are patronising Café Europa:

> Floyd and Nomsa came back from the kitchen with bottles of beer and a girl I hadn't seen before. There are more of them every day and I confess they all look rather alike to me. It's probably the colouring.

<div align="right">(TRS 53)</div>

Nomsa and the other girl are black, and therefore Other. They are indistinguishable, one from the next. In this, there is a facelessness that is inscribed by the narrator (who is white and Eurocentric, even if he is not actually European) in the black women, similar to the formulation in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In Conrad's tale Kurtz is besotted with an African "goddess", a nameless woman who can be read as the metaphorical representation of a purported African spirituality and physicality in her "savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent" (Conrad 2002:167-8) demeanour. Tearle's assumption that Nomsa and the other black girls are prostitutes shows how, for him, the city is both racialised and gendered because he makes no similar conjectures about the female white characters that frequent the café and other public spaces of Hillbrow. A comparable manoeuvre is at play in *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* where connections between character and place are expressed in slightly different terms. When Refentsě falls in love with Lerato, his mother and other relatives describe her as the "Hillbrow woman" (Mpe 2001:39), even if she is from Alexandra – another Johannesburg township. The term Hillbrow woman is used to connote the immorality thought to be inherent in a city woman and, in the rustic imagination of Refentsě's mother, Lerato epitomises this imagined rot. In such kinds of constructions, the city and especially city women are to be feared, thus bringing to the fore and problematising issues of agency, with men often represented as helpless victims to the wiles of women[118]. In Mpe's Hillbrow females are configured as the third Other, after disease (AIDS) and foreigners (*Makwerekwere*).

---

[118] In Dambudzo Marechera's *House of Hunger* a prostitute who returns from the bush for an assignation with a client drips "splotches and stains" of semen behind her and is used by the narrator "as a symbol of Rhodesia". (Marechera 1978:50)

The complexity is further compounded by the fact that at times it is other women –
for instance Refentsě's mother, who constructs other women as such.

Tearle's unapologetic and admitted racism is interesting because it brings to
the fore an aspect of his identity that can loosely be described as his "sincerity". In a
recent paper entitled 'Reform/Perform', Jane Taylor has posited the following
question: "What is sincerity and how is it performed?"[119] She proceeds to present a
set of formulations about the possibility of sincerity on the part of individuals in the
context of historical events like South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission
that was led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, for instance. Taylor poses questions as
to whether identity 'performances' rendered against such backgrounds can be
deemed "sincere". The relevance of this framework, for me, has less to do with the
moral problems but more as a way of thinking about Tearle's apparent
forthrightness, even when he is morally wrong and especially in a historical age in
which conciliation and forgiveness or acceptance are soon to become buzz-words.
The perspective of such a reading of Tearle's character delves less into the morality
of what he says but more into the degree of honesty (read as sincerity) with which he
says it. In his sincerity, he therefore expresses his agency rather than becoming
subservient to a discourse of political correctness. In contrast with the Truth
Commission witnesses, Tearle's honesty is beyond doubt because he does not
necessarily have any motivation to fabricate or manipulate his feelings in order to
suit them to a particular audience (what he may think they want to hear) and
agenda.[120]

Tearle is also a creature of habit in the way he performs his identity and
appropriates city space. This would seem to be a slight contradiction in terms,
according to Jane Taylor's formulation on the performance of sincerity. However, the

---

[119] Full quotation reads: "What is sincerity and how is it performed?" The very idea of the "performance of
sincerity" seems a contradiction, in that sincerity cannot stage itself. It is something of an intangible precisely
in that its affects and its effects must remain beyond calculation, must exceed rational description and
instrumental reason. Sincerity cannot be deployed. Anywhere that "sincerity" names itself, it ceases to exist. It
is a value that is vouched for through a circuit of social consensus in which it cannot itself trade. – Jane Taylor
(2010) 'Perform/Reform' Seminar Presentation: UWC Centre for Humanities Research(27 July 2010)
[120] This question of sincerity, in a way, serves as a prelude to later, very tangentially related considerations I
will make in Chapter 5 on the representability of trauma, especially large-scale trauma like the 1994 genocide
in Rwanda.

caveat here is that it is not sincerity being performed, but identity that is being enacted with sincerity. When he goes to the café he always takes the same seating place and follows the same order of recreative behaviour, such as going through the cryptic crossword puzzle in the newspaper first before reading the rest of the paper, and he expects of others the same courtesy of knowing their place. He opines that:

> Habit maketh the manners and all the rest that maketh the man. Predictable behaviour is what makes people tolerable, and obviates a risky reliance on goodwill and other misnomers.
>
> (*TRS* 52)

This cherishing of certainty, expressed later in statements such as "routine is the foundation of happiness" (*TRS* 74) and "there is nothing I admire more than a system" (*TRS* 87), forms an aspect of the self-expression of Tearle's identity but there always arise questions as to how tenable such an insistence can be in the context of the transforming city of Johannesburg. The city, which is in the process of becoming postcolonial, is the antithesis of such dogmas of stability because of the volatility suggested by the very act of transformation. Even in the sphere of social interaction with his fellow patrons at the café, Tearle meticulously adheres to formulae and feels better when they are just a group of four who "made for solid geometry", implying that adding more people to their number would lead to irregular shapes with consequential instability. The number 'four' assumes in Tearle's imagination a mythical, magical quality and he sees them as being "four of a kind, four equals, coevals, discriminating human beings, adults with compatible systems of thought and feeling" (*TRS* 88).

Besides being short-lived as a functional unit closed out to the rest of the café and the city, the group of four, remarkably, only finds expression and social amity at the specific round table around which they gather in the café. Away from the table, little familiarity and cohesion subsists. An illustration of this fragmented state of relations between Tearle and his acquaintances is how it is possible that, for two months immediately prior to the final coalescence of the group into a recognisable form, the narrator had lain in bed with 'flu but none of his erstwhile friends had been able to visit him for the simple reason that no one knew where he actually stayed.

This is again a reflection of Simmel's blasé posture of social indifference and unwillingness to engage in interaction beyond a certain level which would be defined as personal and intimate. Another interesting aspect of Tearle's character that is revealed in the course of social intercourse is how his fussy 'reading' of the habits of people he meets is an extension of his proofreading "self". This proofreading is evident, for instance, in the juxtaposed images of a group of dirty street-children "with their big feet jutting out of blackened clothing" (*TRS* 57) and another of a picture of Steffi Graf holding aloft the Wimbledon trophy, "a silver platter ideal for a sucking pig" (*TRS* 58). Tearle constantly examines the words and gestures of characters around him, finding what is said and done being less important than how it is said and done. He is always on the lookout for the minute, odd details – the things out of place, the linguistic and physical corrigenda (*TRS* 58). The people literally become the subject of his etymological and lexicographical analysis, their speech patterns analysed with probable causes and effects, strengths and weaknesses of character allotted accordingly. Contrary to Shane Graham's conclusion that Tearle "uses archiving as a means, not of ensuring the past is remembered, but rather of burying the past in an avalanche of minutiae" (2007:80), I suggest that Tearle uses any form of cataloguing, not for the purpose of hiding the past, but as an attempt to maintain control and order through the process of naming and classification. The conflation of linguistic and social order demonstrates how Vladislavić's poetics extend beyond the mere aesthetic play presupposed by some critics to be the ultimate significance of his writing, and thereby reiterating Wood and Charos' conclusions (separately) that there is more than just play in Vladislavić's art.

In the previous sub-section I dwelt on how, Tearle's gaze and his subjective view of the Other is, on occasion, refracted and reflected back at him. These are among his moments of greatest doubt about his 'place' in the city. Such a moment is when he stops at the Jumbo Liquor Market to alert the proprietors that the elephant's ear, which had been torn off the mascot's head by the Queen of Sheba, had been

put back on back-to-front.[121] Catching sight of himself in a mirrored pillar, he is unable to recognise himself:

> And then the trolley ... I stooped over it like a geriatric in a walking frame. I looked like a tramp – worse, like a hobo, one of the bag ladies and gentlemen, the collectors of old iron and empties, the perpetual window-shoppers, pushing their stolen trolleys through the streets as if the city were no more than a vast parking lot for supermarkets. These scavengers had turned the trolley into a symbol of want rather than plenty. Had I become one of them? I barely recognized myself.

(*TRS* 129)

This scene reincarnates a similar one in the short story 'When My Hands Burst into Flames' (*Missing Persons*) in which the narrator looks into a shop's glass window to view the reflection of his burning hands as the other city-dwellers indifferently proceed along the routes and by-ways of the city. They do so without a second glance because the man is alone in thinking that his hands are on fire. Exemplified here is the power of the reflected gaze to distort the view of reality through refraction. When Tearle is unsure of who he is because he cannot ascertain what he thinks he sees in his reflection (the reflected image is further distorted by the writing on the mirror to advertise the liquor prices), he questions his own identity and perception of self. There is a symbolic subversion of the relationship between the sign and notions of identity in which he is unable to rely on the older codes of signification to define who he is. For instance, the status of the shopping trolley as a signifier of plenitude has been transformed into a "symbol of want" as more and more trolleys fall into the hands of "these scavengers", the have-nots. The ideal of a city as a cornucopia is undermined and the use of the powerful naturalistic imagery of "scavengers" throws Tearle into a moment of reflective doubt in which he is unsure about whether he is at the top or bottom of the social (and evolutionary?) pile. Where he originally constructs himself as the epitome of refinement, the reflection cast back at him is not

---

[121] Tearle has left his lodgings with his voluminous papers – "files full of clippings, boxes of index cards, notebooks, typescripts of fasciles, the lot" – his life's work and the raw material for his proposed Proofreader's Derby project, with the intention of dumping them but has changed his mind. Growing weary of carrying the large shopping bags, he happens upon an abandoned shopping trolley in which he is now conveying his papers.

a mirror-image but, rather, a version of him embodying the grime and lack of culture that is most antithetical to his concept of himself. (Even Rosa and Joaquim, who run the liquor market, do not immediately realise who he is simply due to the trolley he has in his possession.) As he proceeds "[d]own the length of Kotze Street, up and down kerbs at five robots [...] not a soul would meet [his] eye" (*TRS* 129). This reaction could be explained in several ways, one of which is the tendency of city-dwellers to mind their own business, but the most plausible reason being that people everywhere generally are not predisposed to interaction with lowly beggars and people living off the streets. These classes of the deprived are seen as representing and serving as unwanted reminders of the precarious nature of city-life especially.

Aside from socio-economic status as a marker of different identities, Tearle also deploys the trope of race as an indication of difference in the formulation of the self. That is to say that the narrator often defines who he is based on some perceptions of racial difference, along with the implied and assumed qualities thought to be characteristic of each racial grouping and identity. Interestingly, though, this instantiation of disparity is rarely represented in absolute and dichotomous terms of black and white. Unlike Tearle, Mrs Mavrokordatos who owns the Café Europa, seems unfazed by the increasing number of black women (some of them possibly prostitutes) who frequent her establishment. Her response to his concerns is an axiomatic: "You have to change with the times or you get left behind" (*TRS* 147). Tearle's description of the black women in the café runs counter to this mood of conciliation displayed by Mrs Mavrokordatos and is worthy of lengthy quotation and analysis here:

> The dark women had fleshy shoulders, upholstery puckers of skin in their armpits, and glaring red lips, which made their mouths seem even larger than they were. So large that the rest of their features looked somehow devoured. Black women. There would be black men too, one of these days, sleek and tufty, here and there.

> You have to change with the times or you get left behind. And if you're left behind, is that such a bad thing? Is the past such a terrible place to be?

> (*TRS* 147)

While keeping in mind the earlier contention that Tearle delineates his sense of self through a number of strategies, including that of enunciating racial difference, it is important for one to note that both female and male black bodies are constructed as not belonging in the space of the city. The black women are (in the eyes of Tearle) misshapen and unsightly while their male counterparts are "sleek" and wild ("tufty"), and therefore untrustworthy. The introduction of the TV into the refined ambience of the café elicits the dire warning from him that this would "bring in the wrong crowd" (*TRS* 155), which is again a veiled reference to blacks.

Outwardly, it appears as if Tearle operates along a 'them-and-us' paradigm but closer examination of his stated dogmatic position reveals that 'them' and 'us' are just overarching themes within which there are various substrata that are organised in a hierarchical manner. In this imaginary there are layers of otherness with black men, for example, occupying the lowest rank of acceptability while black women are only slightly more tolerable. Though they are Caucasian, the Eastern European migrants are also viewed through the prism of alterity because of their perceived linguistic failings. Tearle's slanted hermeneutic taxonomy seems to shy away from the necessity for, and recognition of the reality of, radical historical transformation. The questions posed in the excerpt cited above point to a search for comforting affirmation in a past or passing reality. It is with ironic effect that he later comments on the idea that a clock can run anti-clockwise as being a concept that is most "disquieting". The irony lies in the fact that his own subject-position is that of turning back history, like the hands of the novelty clock on Herr Toppelmann's wall that rotate backwards. He fails to recognise that it his own posture that should he should find even more disquieting.

Darlene is Spilkin's lady friend and is of Indian origin. She is initially not subjected to the same anatomical scrutiny that is brought to bear onto the black women as Tearle concentrates on the quality of her make-up and fashion accessories like her belt and sunglasses, finding fault with all. In the end he declares: "I didn't like her colour either. One isn't supposed to say so but I am past caring" (*TRS* 182). In the midst of the disappearing utopia, taking the café (in its original state when he begins to patronise it) as being a symbolic representation of such a space, Tearle's attitude to racial matters does not shift very perceptibly. He

fears to open himself up to new friendships and ways of relating and remains sardonically taciturn. When he discovers that Spilkin and Darlene have a mutual romantic interest he is shocked, almost to the point of vomiting. A plausible explanation for Tearle's lack of what in the current parlance would be called 'political correctness' is that his 'honesty' is a mark of his sincerity and ability to 'honestly' perform his self. This 'honesty' also leads him to make what amounts to an early fictional enquiry into the meaning of Nelson Mandela and the debates around the Madiba Myth:

> I ventured the opinion that The Madiba might not be all he was cracked up to be. One shouldn't expect too much of a man who had led such a sheltered existence. He had passed nearly thirty years of his life behind bars, and it would take more than a year or two in the outside world to catch up. What would he know of topical concerns?

> (*TRS* 266)

This draws a sharp rebuke (couched in the language of race) from Darlene about how Mandela "had more knowledge in his *pinkie*[122] [...] than I had in my entire white body" (*TRS* 266). Typically, here Aubrey Tearle's ostensible want of 'political correctness' disrupts and destabilises the narrative in the way that questions are engendered about the true significance of Mandela to the transforming history of Johannesburg and South Africa generally.

The imaginary city of Alibia has its genesis in the mural on one of the walls in the Café Europa which symbolises for the narrator a pure city-state. In his dreams it assumes the proportions of a physical space, a territory that has to be defended against "Wessels and the others" who flit "through it like migrant workers without the proper papers" and were "as insubstantial as shadows" (*TRS* 169). The symbolic significance of the above lies in the fact that Tearle seeks to define his agency by appropriating the imagined spaces of Alibia. The rest of the characters in the café are reduced to migrant workers who have no claim to this utopia. They can never share in the acute sense of belonging to this city that Tearle has. The analogy of the

---

[122] Emphasis in the original.

migrant workers is in this case an apt configuration of the absence of rooted links to the space of Alibia which he proclaims his fellow patrons suffer from. He defines himself by the connections he has constructed with the imagined space. The strategy that any individual deploys to occupy space can therefore provide one of many avenues for the individuation of the self.

For Tearle, whose existence is grounded in perceptions of order, death signifies the ultimate chaos. The announcement by Mrs Mavrokordatos, to him, of Merle's death (a month after it happened and illustrating again the social chasms in the characters' lives) leaves him despondent and floundering:

> Death itself was the greatest decline in standards of all. That was the certainty I had always been trying to evade. And expiring was just the beginning: unpleasant as it was, it was infinitely more palatable than the decomposition to which it led.
>
> (*TRS* 269)

Death is the definitive state of the unruly in the sense that, as mortal individuals, we exercise little or no control over it. As he imagines Merle in her coffin he has nightmare visions of her body liquefying and disintegrating. The loss of corporeal order and harmony is something that Tearle is antithetical to and this fact has already been evident in his attitude to street people like the Queen of Sheba whose body he describes in the denigrating terms of loose folds of flesh that need to be constantly rearranged by the owner.

5.5 Alibia and the Allegory of [Linguistic] Order

Language and linguistic order, or what literary critic Irikidzayi Manase refers to as the "linguistic rationality" through which the protagonist "imagines that his city can be preserved from collapse" (2009:60), is closely associated with how Tearle defines his

'self'[123] but the irony is that in his digging up the etymological roots of words, for example, he instantiates the ephemerality of meaning, and of being. In his quest for the essence of words, he discovers multiple significations. In the end, Aubrey Fluxman and his colleagues, who are the guardians of the imagined city of Alibia and are armed with proofreading tools such as pencils and erasers, recognise the futility of religiously insisting on a particular order of space. They realise that the ground is constantly shifting beneath them and that the city is in flux. Tearle's 'Proofreaders' Derby' which he intended as a sort of ode to his craft, remains no more than an exercise in intellectual flânerie. Alibia is a fiction within a fiction, a version of the famed Chinese boxes (that seem to endlessly fold one over the other) or the *mise-en-abyme* effect of Russian dolls, and serves to illustrate the self-reflexive aspects of postcolonial writing generally, and Ivan Vladislavić's oeuvre particularly.

An interesting proposition is to 'read' Alibia, as a utopian idyll, through allegorical reference to Prospero's island in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The island functions, in this interpretation, as both an elsewhere and nowhere, a space over which Prospero can (presumably) exercise complete dominion and agency while Alibia is the fanciful incarnation of the ideal city and the ideal state of being. For Tearle such a state begins and ends with linguistic order. Prospero's vision in the play is undermined by the nascent claims to free will by the likes of Caliban, Gonzalo (who has his own fantasy of a "commonwealth [where] I would by contraries/Execute all things...") and even the gentle Ariel's dreams to be free. Similarly, Aubrey Tearle (or Aubrey Fluxman as he is portentously known in the Alibia narrative) is undone by the ructions that are inherent in his conflated vision of the unities between language, architecture, urban planning and culture. All of these are combined into a narrative of refinement and civilisation, Tearle's version of these in any case. Even outside the frame of the Proofreader's Derby/Alibia, he still finds much to criticise:

---

[123] Mike Marais (2003:283) describes this as the collapsing of "the distinction between [the] protagonist's *linguistic* proofreading and his *social* proofreading". He is referring to the manner of Tearle detecting "error". Similarly, Hegelsson (2004:778) concludes that the difference between "language" and "social reality" is "collapsed".

I should try to like them, I thought, despite their broken English. [...] I made resolutions to that effect. But they came to nothing, watching the girl Nomsa [...] the way she held the pen! It was worse than Wessels himself. You would have thought it was a vegetable peeler.

(*TRS* 44-5)

"Them" refers to the blacks and other people whose difference to him was marked by their linguistic competence in English. In spite of his resolve to the contrary, he cannot get beyond his narrow prejudices. In Nomsa's hand the pen becomes a sign or marker of her [il]literacy and lack of civilisation, in fact of all things that are anathema to Tearle. Correspondingly, he takes issue with most of the foreigners with whom he makes contact and some of them become the target of his self-declared "big 'clean-up'" (*TRS* 92). At the Haifa Hebrew Restaurant he tries to convince management to correctly spell a particular menu item as "hummus" and not "humus" as had been rendered, making it a point to even bring one of his favoured reference texts – the "seventh edition of the Concise [Oxford Dictionary]" – to the eatery to prove his point. Schlomo, the manager, has very limited competence in English and can only communicate his incomprehension through halting monosyllables. The absurdity of the situation is enhanced by Tearle's discovery that his trusted dictionary lists the word as derived from the Turkish "humus", and this causes him to quickly close the Concise to hide his potential embarrassment.

The humorous drama described above is replicated in the Restless Supermarket, where the narrator is engaged in a futile quest to get them to change their trade name. The farcical scene is best captured in this exchange between Stelios and Tearle:

'My friend, we ollaways (*sic*) open. You come any day, twenty-four hour.'

'I accept that, Stelios[124] (if I may). But the point is "restless" doesn't mean that you never rest. Don't you see? It means and I quote, never still, fidgety.'

'But we ollaways busy, never close."

---

[124] The manager actually introduces himself as "Stan" but Tearle, ever the proofreader, chooses to call him by the name on his lapel badge – hence the courtesy in parenthesis.

'You'd be even busier if you'd just listen to me, man. The name "Restless Supermarket", it creates the wrong impression. One thinks of mess, of groceries jumbled together, of groceries jumbling *themselves*[125] together, of wilful chaos. Is that what you want?'

(*TRS* 93)

The dialogue quoted here is important in the context of the narrative as a whole for a number of reasons, the first being that it instantiates the reality of new Englishes with new meanings as inflected by the migrant. To Tearle, however, this signals that "standards were slipping" and in this regard Helgesson rightly remarks on how "Tearle's sense of righteousness and power derives not from any personal authority […] but rather from actively subjecting himself to the power of English discourse" (2004:785). Secondly, when taken together with the preceding incident at the Hebrew restaurant, the supermarket incident illustrates the extent to which the imagined Hillbrow is a very cosmopolitan space. This diversity is underlined by the existence of not just many local ethnic and racial groups, but also of multiple nationalities. A third consideration is that the excerpt is an example of how Ivan Vladislavić deploys dramatic irony. (Even the narrative does not follow linear plot-lines but is rather staged in fragmented scenes and thus reflecting the fraught/fragmentary nature of the postcolonial metropolis.) The irony becomes most apparent at the unravelling of the illusory city of Alibia, but is also very perceptible with reference to the space of Hillbrow, especially when one takes into account Tearle's declared purpose; that is "to hold up examples of order and disorder, and thus to contribute to the great task of maintaining order where it already existed and restoring it where it had been disrupted" (*TRS* 98). The outcome in such instances seems to be almost always opposite to the intended effect. In Alibia, it is not just the groceries in the supermarket shelves that jumble themselves but whole buildings, pointing to the futility of the proofreaders' task. Further to the analysis above, I would like to stress how the notion of new Englishes serves again, as alluded to in the introductory chapter, to underline the ways in which social and cultural fluidity are

---

[125] Emphasis in the original.

constantly rehearsed and reinstantiated at various levels across Vladislavić's imagined postcolonial metropolis.

A related obsession, or pet hate, of Tearle's is the slang or shortened forms of words, which he regards as symptoms of degeneracy. Over time and with the appearance of television entertainment in the café, newspapers (the crossword puzzles are less popular than the TV programmes like "Tellyfun Quiz") increasingly become less influential in drawing the patrons together. The narrator predictably rounds on the television:

> Telly. The word turned my stomach. Loo, brolly, iffy, butty, bumf. A degenerate vocabulary descended from the nursery. Words without spines, the flabby offspring of a population of milksops. 'Telly' was bad enough on its own, but squatting on 'fun' like a slug on a cowpat, it was repulsive.
>
> (*TRS* 160)

This is another example among many of how Tearle constructs a concept of a direct relationship between language and social order. People's values are in this instant determined by the supposed 'quality' of their vocabulary.

The section of the novel called 'The Proofreader's Derby', constructed as a stream of consciousness about the imagined physical manifestation of the city of Alibia, reads in places like a magical realist text. In it, the ideas and collected corrigenda of Aubrey Tearle's Proofreader's Derby project transform into the assumed utopia of Alibia which serves as an alibi of the imagined city of Johannesburg, with Fluxman as a version/alibi of Tearle. The transmogrification of inanimate physical structures into organic forms that have an agency of their own has the same effect as the conflation of the mythical and the real in narratives such as Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drunkard*, in which the dream-like state allows for perceptions of layers or dimensions of reality beyond the conventionally accepted paradigms. In this way the allegory of Alibia works to effect the 'suspension of disbelief' in the reader, but more importantly, it also undermines the notion of totalising narratives (such as maps and plans are) by exposing the flows that run through and flaws that exist in the ideological and discursive frameworks. In a preceding chapter (on *The Folly*) I highlighted how maps (plans) can be seen to

operate as totalising narratives in the sense of trying to encapsulate, in their two-dimensional diagrammatic representation of space, the totality of meanings of a particular place. The spontaneous uprooting and self-displacement of the buildings of the imagined city of Alibia undercut the logic of city-planning and, by extension, the enforcement of order by Aubrey Fluxman and the other proofreaders whose duty it is to maintain everything in its given place. (It is also important to remember here that linguistic order is, in the Tearle/Fluxman imaginary, the lynchpin from which social order is supposed to flow.)

In a scene resembling one of the opening movements in *The Tempest*, Fluxman retrieves a body from the waters off the shore, probably a sailor drowned in the capsizing of a vessel called the "Muscovy". When he lands the body on dry ground he is little prepared for what he sees:

> He was prepared for savaged flesh, for puncture holes and lacerations, but not for the chaos that met his practised eye, the jumble of sprockets and yellow vinyl and rubbery connective tissue, the ooze of blood and lubricating gels, the tangle of wiring beaded with solder. He rolled the bobber over, shuddering at the touch of gizzard flesh and bristles, the crab apple of the eye, the broken springs, the oily feathers, the webbed fingers, the shattered lenses, the socket filled with ground glass and riverweeds.[...] A cacophony of categories, a jumble of kinds, an elemental disorder, wanton and fatal.

(*TRS* 209-10)

The body has, like the 'drowned' King Alonso, undergone a sea-change but instead of changing into "something rich and strange" (Shakespeare 1968: I.2 line 402)[126] it is now a "cacophony of categories". All notions of anatomical unity and specie-specific physiological taxonomy are destabilised in the description of this body, which is part-machine, part-man, part-animal and part-bird. It is a corpse from a science-fiction mortuary and Fluxman, so set in his perceptions of reality, is unable to make much sense of it. "[T]he last official street guide to Alibia" (*TRS* 210) is in similar

---

[126] As far as I can tell in the extant litarature, this thesis is the first instance in which this section of the novel, comprising 'The Proofreader's Derby'and Alibia, have been read as parallel to *The Tempest*.

disarray and formerly unified neighbourhoods are barely recognisable in the shambles of chunks of space that are strewn haphazardly across the map.

The map itself, which to Fluxman is the symbol of ultimate truth and order, seemingly 'rebels' and he has to take "his alpenstock from the stand at the door and [go] out into the disjointed city[127]" to try and physically restore the symmetry of the place. (*TRS* 210) Alibia is a "disjointed city" and coming apart at the seams because the previously "neat and orderly rows of houses" (*TRS* 210) and buildings have been planned on a false premise and conception of organisation and propriety. In the midst of the chaos and carnage Fluxman re-imagines the order and perfection of the old boulevards where everything was in place and "so idiomatically proper, that tears started to his eyes" (*TRS* 215). Displaying elements of the flâneur, he falls in with "the strollers" but his pleasure is tempered by the knowledge that "[i]n these troubled times, there was no activity more fraught with danger than aimlessly wandering in the streets" (*TRS* 210). In a way, this fear of a new possibility (a fear of change and the new) makes him resort to what is known and that comfortable reality is his time in the eponymously titled Proofreaders' Society of Alibia,[128] whose mandate was to keep order and shape to the city. This resort by Fluxman to a historical period of some certainty echoes Tearle's reminiscence of the glory days of Café Europa and Hillbrow in the main narrative. However, at the climax of the dislocation of the city, all the proofreaders are extended almost beyond their bearing as all kinds of categorisations, from the library catalogue to the maps of the city, are subject to spontaneous deconstruction. The quest to re-order the city begins initially with the Restless Supermarket, which is first removed to a place outside the city where the restorative work can be done safely. A key consideration in the enterprise is recognition of adaptability, that is, the shape and form of the city needs to be adaptable to new social realities:

> Experience taught them that nothing is perfect. They reconciled themselves to
> the errors of judgement and perception that beset the best-planned

---

[127] My emphasis.
[128] The Society holds their meetings in a cubicle in the Café Europa, thus extending the metaphor of the mirror-within-a-mirror in which an image is endlessly reflected. A similar technique is deployed in *The Exploded View* (in 'Villa Toscana') where a television image is replicated in itself in incrementally smaller scales.

operations.[...] In time everything was returned to its proper place, which sometimes was not the place it had started out, but the place it deserved to end.

<div align="right">(TRS 252-3)</div>

The relief takes the form of momentary respite because restoring order and 'writing' the wrongs becomes a daily task as "Alibia basked in its imperfect glory." (*TRS* 253) In *The Tempest*, Prospero's obsessive pursuit of order and control is in the end conquered by the random vicissitudes of romantic love when his daughter, Miranda, falls in love with Ferdinand and avails them all an opportunity to engage in new sets of relations and a return to Naples. Unlike Prospero who "abjure[s]" his "rough magic" before setting sail, Fluxman still furtively lingers to sweep "the last of the delenda up from the gutters" before getting on the boat and dumping them in the lake. However, the acceptance of "one error in five pages" is an acknowledgement of the impossibility of perfection. In the manner described by the literary theoretician Stuart Hall, as earlier cited in the introductory chapter, all categories undergo a unique form of erasure in which they are not completely obliterated, but are merely altered in form such that they are thought of and utilised in new ways. These are the new ways of understanding the postcolonial city that the narrator (in his manifestations as Tearle or Fluxman) seems slow to learn. Linguistic order, as an organisational paradigm, is on its own no longer adequate to make sense of the emerging city.

5.6 Conclusion

In summation, the chapter has sought to show the imagined postcolonial city as a site of instability in terms of identity and methods of inscribing the self. By using the trope of walking the city and the device of the uncanny or the spectacle, the city has been shown to be fraught in terms of both social infrastructure, as well as notions of identity. The thread that holds together all the concepts that have been highlighted is that of the implausibility of a perpetual constant in terms of language and identity, and therefore of space and its meaning.

The beginnings of political transformation of the formerly balkanised city are seen to undermine even the most conservative ideas about the literal and figurative appropriation of space in the city, and Aubrey Tearle is seen walking near the end with a coloured girl Shirlaine, making very tentative steps towards understanding of the Other, and without trying to impose his sense of order on his world. This little act on its own is enough to negate or dispel any notions of the postcolonial city of Johanesburg as an arena of endless dystopia. Also, by examining the juxtaposition of the nervous, cosmopolitan vitality of the city with the fraught questions of identities, citizenship and belonging, the chapter mapped a sense of the city as the site of a metaphorical flux in which individual characters have a tenuous hold on the physical and social spaces that they have appropriated as their own.

6 Chapter Five: Manoeuvres in the Dark – Avatars of Integration in *The Exploded View*

6.1 Introduction

If in *The Restless Supermarket* Aubrey Tearle is struggling with notions of his own identity in the context of a city on the cusp of radical, historical transformation, the central characters in the four narratives that constitute *The Exploded View* (2004) fictionally represent four possible off-shoots that stem from the transition to the post-apartheid state. In other words, Les Budlender, Egan, Simeon Majara and Gordon Duffy are in their different ways Vladislavić's further explorations of the construction and spatialisation of urban identities. As stated in the introductory chapter, the postcolonial city should be recognised as one that is in the "process of becoming or being,"[129] and thus the characters that inhabit such a space are themselves subject to, or manifestations of, continual redefinition. In the previous chapter I dealt with the causes of and the strategies for Tearle's instinctive resistance to the transformation of the apartheid city, as well as the personal effects of such reactionary thoughts on Tearle himself. The present chapter, then, is concerned with how different characters attempt to construct their 'selves' in the context of the post-apartheid city with its twin philosophical mantras of reconciliation and integration, as espoused in an era of the Nelson Mandela-inspired notions of a New South Africa and a Rainbow Nation. The import of this chapter is to show how the process in the process of constructing 'new' urban selves the characters ultimately fail[130] because of the fact that these constructions are based on false premises and false notions of a shared vision of the possible, both present and future, as well as the roles of the respective individuals in that vision. The most fundamental effect of this misconception is that of alienation.

---

[129] I use the present continuous state here to emphasise the idea of the incompleteness of the process. In "becoming or being" the postcolonial city does not arrive at a static state or form, but rather undergoes continual redefinition.

[130] On the face of it, this term may seem contradictory to the earlier assertion that identities in the postcolonial city are about the process of becoming or being, but I have used it here simply to indicate the disparateness between the actual and desired outcomes of the processes and actions of individual characters in the text. In short, the characters do not become the kinds of people that they hope to.

The Exploded View tells the stories of four seemingly unconnected individuals who inhabit the shared imaginative space of Johannesburg. It is through their manoeuvres of belonging and self-affirmation that Vladislavić further instantiates the ideas of writing the postcolonial metropolis, and, in doing so, shows again what I contend his writing to be constitutive of – that is, the entire oeuvre of Vladislavić thus far is almost entirely concerned with the paradox of the urban condition in a specific South African city. I argued in the Introduction to this thesis that there is a critical gap in terms of theorising the representative expanse of the writer's authorship as writing the 'urban'. My conclusions in this regard are based on recognition of the fact that what academic considerations of his work there have been so far, only constitute what can best be described as atomised readings of Vladislavić (notably the *Scrutiny 2* journal's special issue on Vladislavić edited by Gaylard and Titlestad in 2006 and *Marginal Spaces – Reading Vladislavić*, edited by Gaylard in 2011). Such readings do not recognise that his short stories and novels lie at various stages along the theoretical continuum of his fictive rendering of an emergent metropolis. With specific reference to the narratives 'Villa Toscana', 'Afritude Sauce', 'Curiouser' and 'Crocodile Lodge' that make up the text of *The Exploded View*, I suggest that these stories can most fruitfully engaged be through the lens of deconstructive engagement. This is because the totality of Vladislavić's method in his writing amounts to considerations of what I denoted in the Introduction as the respective characters' fragmentary experiences and sets of circumstances in the city. As an analytic paradigm, deconstruction is a tool well-suited for the examination of such experiences because it entails a re-composing or taking apart of sorts in order to unravel implied and hidden meanings in the text. The four narratives of *The Exploded View* require just such a deconstructive critique in order for the reader to arrive at what approximates an informed analysis of the full range of possibilities that are unbound by the author's engagement with the postcolonial city.[131] The nature of the writing in this text and in other places in Vladislavić's oeuvre forces one, at times, to adopt the posture of a literary detective in order to take apart and bring back together again the narratives in ways that fully explore the writer's ideas on a city

---

[131] This is not to suggest that deconstruction strives for a unified meaning but rather that it looks for gaps, contradictions, and so on.

that is to be later described in Vladislavić's (2006) novel *Portrait with Keys* (see thesis epigraph) as "a city that resists the imagination". These ideas have to do with notions and modes of representation and the thematic premise which I will utilize as a point of departure in my enquiry on *The Exploded View* is how Vladislavić represents or imagines the (new) African metropolis through the way the various characters construct their identities and how these are spatialised. This will entail a further examination of contemporary South African urbanity or a post-apartheid metropolitan space (as epitomised in Johannesburg) and how it is represented (in literature) through a variety of postcolonial urban characters as changing urbanities.[132]

While one can potentially deconstruct any text, *The Exploded View* lends itself particularly to deconstructive readings, as evidenced (to begin with) in the structure of the book, which from a cursory reading appears to be comprised of four totally disparate narratives, but on closer examination is revealed to be a narration of the same basic space[s] but rendered from multiple perspectives. These perspectives offer glimpses into the transient social and material spaces of the city in which characters are located and imagined events take place. Writing in answer to what he perceives (rightly so) to be the critics of Vladislavić's early fiction's predominantly "dehistoricised textual readings" that only note "the writer's clear preoccupation with words and word games" (2006:48) Shane Graham surmises that:

> [...] Vladislavić takes up the metaphor of the exploded view as a representational strategy through which he exposes the multifaceted social and physical infrastructures of contemporary Johannesburg.

> (2006:52)

The exploded view (as metaphor), with its intimations of disrupted logic, simultaneously suggests the idea of multiple perspectives, as well as the re-looking at, and re-engagement with, the contemporary reality of the post-apartheid city. This re-visioning occurs both at the level of the fictional characters themselves and in the reader. Graham's article is also critical of the rendering by Sarah Nuttall, in 'City

---

[132] The plural 'urbanities' is deliberate and denotes the idea that there are several different kinds of urbanity that may be imagined and discerned in the same geographic urban space such as Johannesburg is.

Forms and Writing the Now in South Africa' (2004a), of Walter Benjamin's flâneur figure as a depoliticised "aesthetic bohemian, drifting through the city like a film director" (Nuttall 2004a: 741), as well as her reading of Johannesburg youth culture ('Stylizing the self: The Y Generation in Rosebank' – Nuttall 2004b). In both the vision of the flâneur and the styling of the self in youth culture in one of Johannesburg's more prominent ostentatiously affluent locations (Rosebank, along with places like Sandton, Houghton and Melrose Arch) of affluence, Graham perceives a "blind spot" (2006:49) in which the "unexplored implication is that the ability to shape one's own identity in the post-apartheid, postmodern city is contingent on a certain level of financial and educational privilege" (2006:49). A summary of his critique is that Nuttall fails to address the historicity of both the flâneur figure and the new aspirational class, and in the second instance, how the very poor youth can hope to "stylize" themselves in the manner achieved by their more affluent or, to use contemporary parlance or discourse, more empowered counterparts. In the same way that Graham can point to critical "blind spot[s]" in the reading of Vladislavić and the city in general, I suggest that some of the characters in *The Exploded View* "misread" what I have already highlighted above as "a shared vision" of the possibilities availed by the post-apartheid city. The characters themselves could be said to be showing signs of having blind spots to their contemporaneous reality because of the false principles on which their reading and the interpretation of the present (and future) are based. It is therefore important, to use Graham's term, to historicise the actions of the characters but at the same note the potential for the same characters to misread the signs of history as well, something that Graham does not specifically theorise on.

In preceding chapters I attempted to draw clear links between the actions of individuals and the material realities that inform and affect such actions and decisions. Similarly, in the quadruple-pronged narrative of *The Exploded View* I will make similar connections in order to better contextualise the writer's consideration of the characters' [multiple] identities within specific and shifting historical milieux. The first sub-section of this chapter will show how Les Budlender, in 'Villa Toscana', is trapped in something of an existential nightmare, in which he attempts to define himself and make sense of his surroundings by, in ways similar to Tearle in *The*

Restless Supermarket, trying to order everything, using statistics and statistical probability. 'Gestures of Belonging', the second segment, pays close attention to Egan's struggle, in 'Afritude Sauce', to integrate himself into the spaces of the new post-apartheid socio-political realities using what are ultimately futile and alienating gestures. Thirdly, in 'Of the Re-Visioning and Deconstruction of Identities' I will begin from the theoretical framework provided by what Graham has described above as Vladislavić's use of the "metaphor of the exploded view as a representational strategy". By, in effect, doubling this metaphor on itself I will use it as a tool of analysis to examine the attempts of Simeon Majara (the central character in 'Curiouser') at re-signification and re-presentation of the Rwandan holocaust – in particular – as well as how he re-works original pieces of art and curios to give them new meanings. An important insight into Majara's artistic rendition of the genocide is gained, in my view, by a pertinent parallel consideration of some of the views of the Ivorian writer Veronique Tadjo who, in *The Shadow of Imana: Travels in the Heart of Rwanda* (2002), considers the difficulties of finding the appropriate idiom, as well as the role of language and memory in representing trauma on the personal scale and at the level of genocide. Finally, in 'Memory and the "Architecture of Hysteria"' I will, through a cursory glance at 'Crocodile Lodge', discuss the nervous energy and backward glances that accompany Gordon Duffy's forays into a discursive terrain that is alive with old dangers and new possibilities. This chapter is therefore entitled 'Avatars of Integration' in reference to these shadow identities that appear on and fleet across the stage of a cityscape that is itself undergoing constant change in its physical infrastructure, as well as its socio-political dynamics. Taken together as a composite whole, the characters give the impression of being the embodiment of post-apartheid identities that typify the philosophical and social integration at the heart of the Rainbow Nation.[133] The narratives and lives of the characters are linked in subtle, implicit and not too easily discernable ways, an aspect that is reflective of the often-unintended interactions, anonymous path-crossings and accidental entanglements that characterise the postcolonial city.

---

[133] The term is first attributed to the retired Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town and prominent anti-apartheid activist, Desmond Tutu and was also used by Nelson Mandela in his 1994 Inauguration Speech – 'Glory and Hope'.

6.2 *"Distressed Surfaces" and "Discontinuous Lives"*

'Villa Toscana' is the first instalment in the series that constitutes *The Exploded View* and tells the story of the professional and personal misadventures of the 40 year-old central character, Les Budlender. He is a trained statistician working as part of an enlarged group canvassing people's views and drafting questionnaires for the upcoming census. In his own words "those used in the census of 1996, the first non-racial head-count in the country's history, had flummoxed half the population" (*The Exploded View* 5)[134]. The considerations of questions of race and identity within the personal and public spheres are usually fraught in most countries, especially those with long traditions of racial segregation like South Africa. As a consequence, in this text 'race' is an arena in which the fictional white characters, especially, try to tread with utmost care and this position of nervousness is reflected in the due diligence that the questionnaire drafters are meant to take in making sure that "the new versions spoke to everyone" (*TEV* 5).

In his paper on a spatial-materialist reading of *The Exploded View*, Graham concludes that "[t]hough Budlender does not make the connection, the notion that people might use the census form as a means of inventing their identity has destabilising implications for his project of archiving and documenting the world through ordered facts and statistics" (2006:55). The language of statistics and the hierarchical orders that they invoke are used in Budlender's world for maintaining the historical past and memories of it, whereas the suggested new structure of the questionnaire potentially avails respondents of new ways of imagining (inventing) their identities.

Writing on the idea of "Johannesburg as Africa", in response to early practice in which the city and Africa are seen as different concepts, Stefan Helgesson notes how "[t]he destabilization of boundaries is a prerequisite for the identification of this metropolis with an Africa modernity" (2006:29). These boundaries are not merely the physical borders that mark regions of the city, but are also psychic frontiers that

---

[134] For considerations of space and repetition, page references to *The Exploded View* will be denoted as *TEV* in any further citations in this chapter and the rest of the thesis.

emerge through culture and history. Such abstract margins also have to be imaginatively breached for the realisation of identities that amount to the postcolonial African modern. However, the dissuasive philosophy (in terms of racial categories) behind the desired new format for the questionnaire, however, does not seem to hamper Budlender's own admitted personal tendency for profiling, packaging and stereotyping people. In spite of being required to actively desist from doing so as part of the drafting process, he still finds himself resorting to the discouraged taxonomical categorisations, which he is used to. At another point in the text he describes himself as having "the mind of a clerk" (*TEV* 26) and lies awake at night thinking of Iris[135] and imagining that the edge of his pillow was "like the soft edge of a bar graph" (*TEV* 33).

In the course of his duties, Les Budlender develops a burgeoning romantic interest in Iris du Plooy, who is one of his assigned respondents in the development of the new census questionnaire. She lives alone in the gated suburban complex of Villa Toscana that lends its name to the title of the story, though Budlender often refers to it, in tones of mockery, as Little Tuscany. Unsure of how to transform his fledgling interest in Iris into mutual romantic attention and interaction, his feelings soon sink into the realm of the perverse and voyeuristic. The inclination towards categorisation and taxonomical descriptions – a trait he shares most starkly with *The Restless Supermarket*'s Aubrey Tearle – is carried into the ambit of personal relations. Unlike Tearle's reliance on language for the creation and maintenance of order, for Budlender logic and meaning are to be found in the patterns proffered by facts and figures as entities, and as codes of probability or certainty. However, the real-life need to elicit a positive response in Iris to his overtures proves less amenable to statistical interpretation. The consequence is that he is reduced to impotent gestures, such as when he has to trick his way into her bathroom just out of curiosity to see what is there and perhaps learn a bit more about her. The first time he goes in, Budlender tries to use her laundry and underwear to evoke images of Iris' naked body but "all he saw was bits and pieces of other women, the thighs of his last lover, breasts out of magazines and shoulders, that were ambiguously, softly angled"(*TEV* 30). On a second visit he spends an inordinately lengthy time in the

---

[135] Iris du Plooy is a TV continuity announcer-cum-actress-cum-model.

bathroom poring over her make-up kits and bottles of perfume. Denoting Budlender as a "failed pedestrian" in the way defined by de Certeau because he is unable to improvise meaning from the chaotic signs of his dreamed-of street, Titlestad and Kissack further state that:

> In place of an overview, we have only the fetish: Budlender's plans are reduced to a fixation on the signs of Miss du Plooy's corporeality, that is, onto signifiers that defer and displace the real. Even at this rather pathetic elevation, trapped in her bathroom staring down at the counter, he cannot gain control of what he surveys.

> (2006:21)

But beyond the sense of failed pedestrianism suggested by Titlestad and Kissack above, which they explain as a failure by Budlender to improvise meaning "from the chaotic, dislocated and often dissonant range of signs he encounters" (2006:21), I propose that his inadequacy as a the street-level operator envisioned by de Certeau also springs from the way that the postcolonial city seems to have evolved. Where Aubrey Tearle's Hillbrow precinct represents the city as a centralised locale in which the characters live and work, Budlender exists in a dispersed post-apartheid urban terrain in which physical and social space ironically appears to be much more fragmented and therefore much significantly much more difficult to make sense of. Because of the reality of urban sprawl the localised identity and character of the city streets is less in evidence as individuals do not relate to space in the manner illustrated in *The Restless Supermarket*, and partly also due to the fact the distances involved in traversing these far-flung city spaces necessitate vehicular transportation which precludes a certain kind of intimate knowledge of the streets. Iris du Plooy has, in the end, to rouse Budlender from his reverie and he is forced to make a rather embarrassing exit accompanied by mealy-mouthed excuses as to what had delayed him.

There is evidence of a truncated masculinity[136] in Budlender's attitude. He is reduced to insignificant tokenism, described above as "fetish[ism]" by Titlestad and Kissack, because he cannot relate to Iris in the manner he wishes to and she remains unyielding to his advances. There is a space beyond which she is unwilling to let him proceed and the professional engagement that is necessitated by the draft questionnaires is the only and temporary recourse through which he can channel his unrequited feelings for her. While he tries to reach out and make personal, intimate contact with Iris, Budlender lacks the charm and effective social strategies to turn this into reality. It does not aid his cause that she is the epitome of urban aloofness, hence his resorting to the ineffectual gesture of closing himself in her bathroom where he tries to imbibe or consume something of her 'essence' and thus make her his own. Budlender's version of the social proofreading practised by Tearle and the confidence he displays in statistical data prove to be inadequate in the arena of interpersonal relations. His self-assuredness and mastery of urban space(s) through the idiomatic language of statistics is undone by Iris' cold reactions and he is left floundering.

Unlike Tearle who seems, for the most part, to be indifferent to women (if he does not actually despise them), Les Budlender embraces the idea of women as physical and sensual beings, as is manifested in his longing for the body of Iris. Her feminine physicality attracts him. He does not believe that these feelings (Tearle would possibly call them 'base instincts') should be something hidden or about which he should pretend ignorance. Saying that he has keen powers of observation seems, in light of the outcomes of these particular episodes[137], to be a contradiction in terms. However, this is explainable by showing that his analytical gaze is misdirected and based on faulty parameters. Due to his tendency for rather mechanically reducing

---

[136] Budlender shares this trait of a truncated masculinity, a masculinity which is never fully defined or fulfilled, with several other characters in Vladislavić's writing like Boshoff in the story 'The Terminal Bar' (*Missing Persons*) and Darryl in *The Restless Supermarket*. Boshoff physically abuses and then murders his wife and child in order to exert his control over them while Darryl engages in a public display of his virility by appearing to copulate with the Pink Elephant mascot outside the Jumbo Liquor Market. Aubrey Tearle himself gets very squeamish at public displays of affection between some of his acquaintances and their lady 'friends'.

[137] On a particular night after their last meeting all he can do is watch her on TV with the volume muted, to better be able "to consider the way she was assembled, to extrapolate from the curves of her breasts to her belly, her thighs." (*TEV* 41) Budlender here imaginatively de-constructs Iris in the same manner he analyses the faux medieval lock at the gatehouse and the architecture of the houses in Villa Toscana – as described later in detail in this section.

most of life's experiences to numbers and tables, he is unable to decipher the transient and fragmented signals that are at the core of human relations. In the end, his reading of Iris' character reveals less about her than about himself because by looking at her through the gaze of a statistician he is unable to establish contact with her at the romantic level, reiterating again my hypothesis that certain urban characters, as they are represented in *The Exploded View*, relate to the city and other people around them on the basis of false notion, and thus are unable to fully appropriate the space they occupy nor sustain the relationships they seek to make. Budlender's own shortcomings become more apparent than any classification he seeks to make of Iris based on the objects he sees in her house.

Les Budlender shares his keen interest in people (and space) with Egan in 'Afritude Sauce', who is similarly grappling with notions of identity in the democratised space of South Africa. Theirs are acts of de-construction and re-appropriation of cityspace. The effects of these attempts at redefined and negotiated identities do not always add up to a whole, that is to say the sum of the parts do not always equal the full measure. Such endeavours are none-the-less important illustrative examples of the strategies that different individuals adopt in post-apartheid urbanity, if not to 'fit in' with the new sets of societal relations then at least to survive them. Notions of belonging are analysed in terms of the manner in which individuals perform their belonging and un-belonging, as they appropriate urban space based partly on notions of entitlement.

As already stated earlier in this chapter, Les Budlender is in some specific respects a re-incarnation of the figure of Aubrey Tearle, especially with respect to their common focus on details that most other characters they interact with, would consider banal and insignificant. In a Tearle-like gesture he advocates for "eternal vigilance" (*TEV* 22). Budlender's love for figures and facts, often of a very trivial nature, is also apparent in his considerations of the demographic "difference" of the people whom he encounters in his daily travels and travails. In 'Secular Improvisations – The Poetics of Invention in Ivan Vladislavić's *The Exploded View*', Titlestad and Kissack have shown that, contrary to the assumption that de Certeau's theorisation of pedestrian habitation and epistemology in *The Practice in Everyday Life* is redundant in the context of the motorised city, each of the three chief white

characters in this text is caught between "the quotidian" and "some form of transcendence" (Titlestad and Kissack 2006:21). I understand this to mean that the assumption would be that a character like Budlender, for instance, does not engage with city streets in exactly the same way that Benjamin's flâneur nor de Certeau's pedestrian would. At another level or order of meaning his statistics do offer him a version of an overview of the political and social milieux. In this regard his posture moves in the direction of the vertical view (panorama) proffered by de Certeau without ultimately reaching the desired heights. It is in this respect that "Budlender's statistics express the rational overview of the social and political domain: they present the patterns and the tendencies of an order of existence that can be measured, described and represented" (Titlestad and Kissack 2006:21). Life, from Budlender's perspective, has thus been reduced or rationalised into numbers and figures, much like Tearle classifying people on the basis of words, syllables and intonation. For instance, in the 'opening'[138] sequence to the "Villa Toscana" narrative he is described as wondering about a vendor on the side of the road:

> Budlender tilted his head so that the crack in his windscreen, a sunburst of the kind made by a bullet, centred on the body of the vendor and broke him to pieces.
>
> Was he a Nigerian? It was time to learn the signs. A friend of his at the Bank had given him a crash course in ethnography one evening after work, over a pint at the Baron and Farrier on the Old Joburg Road. He and Warren had sat in a booth, speaking softly, as if the topic were shameful, and then laughing raucously when they realized what they were doing. 'Small ears?' 'That's what I said. Little ears, flat against the skull and delicate, like a hamster?'
>
> (*TEV* 4)

Again, the metaphor of the exploded view is given prominence in this passage with the mention of the fragmented view of the body of the vendor in which Budlender

---

[138] 'Opening' is in single quotes to emphasise the fact that Budlender's story is not told in linear chronology, but rather in staggered shards and fragments that emphasise the time-space disruptions and disunities that are the hallmarks of the emergent postcolonial metropolis.

manipulates the refractions of light through a crack in his windscreen to create a visual illusion of breaking the body of the vendor into pieces. The reader learns later that the crack is caused by a stone that shoots out from beneath a mini-bus taxi that Budlender drives behind one evening on the road between "an arrangement of little RDP houses on one side and a clutter of corrugated-iron and board shacks on the other"[139] (*TEV* 20). He does not know the names of the formal and informal settlements but the realisation of the type of area that he is driving through, fills him with an indefinable sense of foreboding, a wariness that cannot be attributed to any clear threat of danger. The presence, at the side of the road and in the thickening dusk, of the ghost-like apparition of a naked man whose waving gesture is indistinguishable between "greeting" and "warning" (*TEV* 21), seems to confirm Budlender's worst fears. His mere presence in that space causes the statistician to be even more alert and cautious as he speeds away from the place with occasional furtive glances into the rear-view mirror.

There is also an implied contrast between the lush green and clean air of Villa Toscana and Glen Marais, where two of his white respondents reside, and the smoke and dust of the 'black' areas he is passing through. These 'small' details of the broken windscreen and the unnamed residential areas are examples of some of the hints that Vladislavić uses to suggest connections between the four parallel narratives, without which the narrative threads would read like four unconnected novellas or short stories. For instance, a small amount of deductive reasoning in the next segment of the novel – 'Afritude Sauce' – reveals that the Hani View and Hani View Extension 1 of that narrative thread are the nameless locales of Budlender's small nightmare.

The trope of breaking down into pieces, which can also be seen as a manifestation of the deconstructive method or process, is emphasised in the lengthy excerpt above through the manner in which Budlender and his friend (Warren) focus

---

[139] RDP is an acronym for the Reconstruction and Development Programme that was initiated by South Africa's post-apartheid government post-1994 in order to address some of social challenges that were a legacy of the skewed infrastructure and service delivery policies of the time of apartheid. The little houses, sometimes derisively referred to as 'matchbox houses', are (the housing-provision aspect of RDP is still running at the time of writing) meant for the poor who would otherwise have no means of owning urban houses through their own means.

on the seemingly innocuous – the size and shape of the vendor's ear – in order to discern some ethnographic detail about the man. When one historicises this particular post-apartheid moment against the backdrop of apartheid's social engineering, one can argue that this kind of fascination with taxonomy and categorisation is not necessarily a new paradigm that arrived with the postcolonial, but rather that the quality and focus of the lens of the gaze shifted from the old binaries, for instance of black versus white, to newer concerns such as the migrant identity that is supposedly personified in the person of the vendor. (In *The Restless Supermarket* there is some mention of people from "north of the border", in reference to African migrants into South Africa and Hillbrow, but the narrator's voice generally points to a largely undifferentiated consideration of blackness on the part of Aubrey Tearle. In his eyes local and foreign blacks are, on the whole, equally socially inadequate and unknowable.) A little later the narrator's voice builds on this theme of migrant identities:

> Since he had been made aware of the characteristics – a particular curl to the hair or shade to the skin, the angle of a cheekbone or jawline, the ridge of a lip, the slant of an eye, the size of an ear – it seemed to him that there were Nigerians everywhere. He had started to see Mozambicans too, and Somalis. It was the opposite of the old stereotype: they all looked different to him. Foreigners on every side. Could the aliens have outstripped the indigenes? Was it possible? There were no reliable statistics.

(*TEV* 5)

The assumption in this passage that the vendor is foreign and Nigerian is itself a mark of a stereotypical reaction and reveals the shift in ideas not only about identity, but also the fluidity of the notions of belonging and un-belonging that have resulted from the influx of African migrants into South Africa. In the graphic imagery of the "aliens outstripp[ing] the indigenes", rest a number of intriguing assumptions and false suppositions, two of which I take a brief glimpse at here. The first is the connotation of an alien invasion during which the indigenous populations become outnumbered. In Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to out Hillbrow*, this metaphor is

rendered in the form of an unknowable and incurable disease – AIDS.[140] Secondly, the concept of "indigenes" is fraught, especially when espoused by a white character or individual in Africa. A whole body of literature and criticism, too broad to be delved into in detail for the purpose of this thesis, has developed over the years on the question of whether a white person can or should be referred to as an African, whether indeed such a person 'belongs' to Africa.[141]

The credentials of indigeneity are constantly called into question. To his credit, perhaps, Budlender partly recognises the ambiguity of the situation and his own worldview when he acknowledges that he is operating at the level of the stereotype, notwithstanding the fact that it is "the opposite of the old stereotype". The old stereotype is, of course, one in which every black subject appears identical to the white gaze. When he winds up his car window as he waits at the robots and "glare[s] at the curio-sellers and their wares" (*TEV* 4), there is the sense that Budlender feels that "his" space has been invaded and that the old order has been irrevocably destabilised or disrupted. He closes his car windows in an attempt to keep the new, chaotic world out. Simultaneously he creates for himself a delusory cocoon of safety and control. Glaring is itself a very antagonistic gesture.

The first time he arrives at Villa Toscana, a gated community on the edge of the city where one of the respondents to his draft resides, Budlender 'naturally' encounters a security guard at the entrance to the complex. Though the encounter is necessarily brief, the meeting is still rich in symbolism and representation of the wider concerns of the text as whole. Apart from his keen sense of statistical

---

[140] See Chapter Four of this thesis, especially the section sub-headed as 'Postcolonial Urban Subjects - Considerations of Identities and Selves'.

[141] Two pioneering novels set on African farms (ironically), Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1986 [1883]) and Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* (1994 [1950]), I readily lend themselves as examples of this conundrum. Schreiner's text has often been the subject of criticism because it is bereft of black or African characters, while in Lessing's novel one of the few highlights of the social lives of the main characters is the occasional trip to the local town's post office to collect mail and magazines, and to gather news from home – home invariably being England. There is irony in the fact that I use two farm novels in the discussion of some postcolonial urban phenomena. It is not this writer's intention to recuperate the stereotype of Africa as being all countryside and wilderness. For more on the Farm Novel as a genre, see J.M. Coetzee's '*White Writing – On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*' (1988).

awareness – he maintains throughout the story an interior monologue looking to make sense of any percentages and probability as he finds them in aspects of everyday life – Budlender displays an acute perception of the inner workings or construction and architecture of buildings, to the extent that he is always figuratively breaking them down to their composite parts. His awareness in this regard is also connected to the title concept of the exploded view. These critical observations and analyses of physical structures echo the paradigm of the "exploded view" in the way in which he imaginatively takes objects apart and re-constructs them. In this regard, Budlender bears similarity to *The Restless Supermarket*'s Aubrey Tearle, with the difference being that one has more interest in numbers whereas the latter concerns himself more with language in order to make more sense of the world. The authorial voice, through which the central character's thoughts are frequently reflected, first remarks on the architecture of the gateway[142], describing it as medievally[143] inclined – which is perhaps appropriate, considering the supposed Tuscan influence (which in truth is just a pastiche version of what is truly Italian) in the design of the housing development – and thus immediately setting it apart from the "pristine ridges and valleys" (*TEV* 6) outside Johannesburg and the hectic energy of the streets in Aubrey Tearle's Hillbrow.

> 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.

(*TEV* 6)

The aura of 'other-worldliness' of the housing development is indicative, in part, of characters that seek some sort of differentiation from the common or quotidian and from the other. It is a form of what I refer to as a post-urban dissonance – post-urban as a reflection of the 'retreat' from the city into protected villages, and dissonance as an illustration of the dichotomy between the fantasy of Tuscany and the material realness of postcolonial Johannesburg. The attempts to re-construct reality that such

---

[142] Gerald Gaylard summarises the story as "a satire of architectonic taxonomy" (2006:67), thereby signalling again how Budlender's mechanical reductiveness of his experience of the city is unsustainable because it fails to take into account the inherent porosity of the categories on which his classifications are based.

[143] While Italy and Tuscany are more commonly associated with the 16th and 17th centuries, my use of the term medieval is based on the narrator's description of the gateway to Villa Toscana as having been "given the medieval treatment" (TEV 7).

developments represent, are not always successful, as the "other" reality/world often comes flooding in without invitation. That this becomes evident, was also noted by Graham, who argues:

> It is difficult to drive through the suburbs of Johannesburg [...] without being struck by the degree to which post-apartheid architecture is one of barricaded exclusion against urban crime and poverty.

(2006:51)

The security guard, the supposed gatekeeper to this make-believe,[144] brave new world – instructed to keep the undesirables out – is an ironic token of the implausibility or impossibility of the dream. In his humble station he functions to provide a sense of security to the residents of Villa Toscana, but at the same time is also a reminder of the fragile nature of that security because of the ever-present threat posed by the others or have-nots who have necessitated the employment of the security guard in the first place. The entrance gate, with its oversized medieval dimensions, can only serve to enhance this ambiance of fortification and the gated communities are the new laagers designed to keep the poorer classes out.

When the guard prevents Budlender from entering the complex for not knowing the registration number of his car,[145] the statistician feels as if he has been "repelled at the ramparts" and speculates on what would be the reaction of what he imagines to be "the defenders of the city-state" (*TEV* 9). The gated community uncannily evokes the medieval city with its defended entrances and battlements. It is only when he disembarks from the car to wait for Iris du Plooy, the intended object of his visit, that he feels that "the fortress-like atmosphere of the place dissipated" (*TEV* 9). While waiting, Budlender trains his observant eye on the guardhouse and ruminates as follows:

> In the door of the guardhouse was a keyhole so enormous that he could have put his fist through it, and just below it the brass disc of a conventional and

---

[144] There are shades of Umberto Eco's (1986) *Travels in Hypereality* here.

[145] The latter has changed from the old Transvaal plates to the post-apartheid Gauteng ones the previous week and this act of omission is in itself a marker of shifting identity.

presumably functional Yale lock. He wondered whether the beams really extended through the walls. They had probably been screwed on afterwards. There was probably mortar in the 'drystone' walls.

(*TEV* 9-10)

Much like the false beams and ornamental medieval keyhole in the quotation above, the "Tuscany" in Villa Toscana is illusory. On his last fruitless visit to see Iris, with whom he is increasingly (if not perversely) infatuated, he wryly observes:

Villa Toscana, seen from the N3 as he drove back to the office, was less convincing than ever. You might have thought it was made of cardboard and paper, as if the building contractor had taken the architect's model too literally. The stand of bluegums on the plot next door looked like shabby old men, irritable and disapproving.

(*TEV* 45)

We see that the artificiality of Villa Toscana lies in its affectations of being a (hyperreal) construed elsewhere, of being a place apart and different from the city of Johannesburg. Its pretentiousness is also reflected – beyond just the physical architecture – in some of its inhabitants, like Iris du Plooy. Iris is simultaneously an actress, model and TV continuity presenter. Seemingly multi-talented, her domestic life shows a distinct lack of fulfilment. The gated complex only serves to highlight her alienation and the term "community", when used in the context of such residential developments, usually proves to be a contradiction in terms, because the respective individuals seem to shut themselves up behind their walls and there is little personal interaction.

In an interview with Andie Miller, Ivan Vladislavić commented on this absence of community as "the most divisive and hostile part of the way Joburg has developed, and perhaps […] the most obvious legacy of apartheid, is that you don't ever need to share space with anybody else" (Miller 2006:123). Similarly, Helgesson remarks on how Budlender "traverses exceptionally diverse spaces that belie any sense of a transcendent unity or community" (2006:30). This lack of a true sense of

community contributes to the feelings of isolation and alienation engendered in both Budlender and Iris.

In her various public personae, Iris 'speaks' daily to the nation but lives a life of private anguish and loneliness. These multiple selves show her versatility in a quest to achieve the material well-being that is at the heart of most postmodern societies. On the other hand, however, these instantiations of self could also point to inner struggles for meaning and affirmation in light of the city's potential for alienation. The public face that appears on TV[146] is no less a façade than the faux wooden beams and renaissance ornaments that adorn the gatehouse and houses of Villa Toscana. Both as a place and a concept, Villa Toscana – a little Tuscany or slice of Italy – appears, because of its incongruous aspirations to European 'high society' and false cosmopolitanism,[147] as a stark contrast to the surrounding African veld. It is a shard of an imagined Italy set apart from the rest of the city. The total effect seems to be one of alienation. Iris, if she typifies the young and upwardly mobile residents of such communities, is an unsettled and utterly unhappy exemplar. When Budlender leaves her house for what turns out to be the last time she bids him farewell with a forced smile and a look like "the one continuity announcers got on their faces when the camera failed to cut away at the end of a segment" (*TEV* 40). The warmest aspects about her home are the pictures of her family on the lounge walls. These speak of another life, another place – an elsewhere.

One aspect of Johannesburg that seems to have changed about Vladislavić's view of the city from the time of Aubrey Tearle in *The Restless Supermarket* is the sense one gets in the story 'Villa Toscana' that the major characters are increasingly motorised. Sociologist Robert Fishman has remarked in 'Megalopolis Unbound' how "the automobile gives rise to a complex pattern of multi-directional travel that largely by-passes the old central cities" and how "the very concept of the 'center' and 'periphery' becomes obsolete" (Fishman 1995:399). These comments above speak

---

[146] In *The Exploded View*, from the point of view of narrative or stylistic devices, there is a marked (and continuing) change noticeable in Vladislavić's deployment of the television image. This has changed from the predominant "unrest reports" utilised in some of the earlier texts (e.g. *The Folly*), to the more flippant imagery of pop stars as well as increased visibility of other less politically inclined content. This is reflective of the changes that the city and country have undergone that are reflected in the media.

[147] In keeping with the Italian theme on the outside of the houses, Iris' perfume cupboard is dominated by names such as Dolce & Gabbana and Valentino – the royalty of Italian haute couture.

to how the car has shaped and shifted the urban identity, in both literal and symbolical senses. The car is both a means of flight from the city centre as well as a metaphor for the escape. The pedestrian enunciations that are so visible in Tearle's Hillbrow have been replaced by the cult of the car and the flâneur figure displaced by the cocooned, fidgety driver. Also, that city centre, for example retail shops, has moved away from the centre into far-flung shopping malls. In a sense, the car is a moving prison cell, taking the people in 'cages' from the "safety" of home to the "safety" of the parkade or the mall. His 'fly-by' vision of the city is often blurry (and prone to ever more misinterpretations), besides being fragmented – as with Egan's visualisation of the vendor through the fractures in his windscreen. Due to the car, "[t]he boundaries of Johannesburg are drifting away, sliding over pristine ridges and valleys, lodging in tenuous places, slipping again." (*TEV* 6) As Budlender sits on his perch (the Star Stop restaurant that straddles the N1 freeway between Johannesburg and Pretoria), he marvels at "the demographic flow" that passes beneath him. It is as if the pedestrian crowds of the city centre have metamorphosed into the rush of vehicles below him. Automobiles catalyse the dispersal of the city, thus echoing the allegory of the exploded view as described by Graham (and as cited in the introductory section to this chapter).

As this thread closes, Budlender dreams he is walking in a foreign city with perfumed streets – inspired no doubt by the contents of Iris' bathroom cabinet and also as a sign of his unrequited passion for her. Notwithstanding the pleasant aromas, his progress is tortured until he finds his feet detached from the ground and he falls, horizontally, though the city. In their public and private lives the characters in 'Villa Toscana' such as Budlender and Iris du Plooy illustrate how different individuals attempt to appropriate space and experience the transforming postcolonial city. In their various states of becoming, of being in the process of defining their selves, they occupy unsure ground. The city comprises, in this way, the uneven "distressed surfaces" (*TEV* 43) that continually shift beneath the characters' feet and result in individuals truly leading "discontinuous lives" (*TEV* 44). Budlender makes this comment with reference to Iris in ironic ignorance of the fact that the forces that shape her lives, public and private, are also very much at play in his own.

The fluidity and disruptions that he remarks on with regard to Iris are very much in his own circumstances, even if he is unaware of their presence.

6.3 Gestures of Belonging

In the story 'Afritude Sauce' Egan is a sanitary engineer who is involved with the planning and construction of sewage systems for many RDP housing developments. The houses are the centrepiece project for the post-apartheid government as it seeks to accelerate service delivery to the previously disadvantaged majority. He is taken on a tour of some of the projects, such as Hani View (named after the slain leader of the SACP[148]); by some of the recently installed officials so that he gets a sense of some of the challenges that the new residents are facing regarding their newly acquired houses. Later he is taken for supper at one of the increasingly fashionable African-themed restaurants, in this case Bra Zama's African Eatery.[149]

The encounters between Egan, and his clients and hosts are significant here because of the way in which they typify the framing of social relations as well as the way in which identities are performed in the peculiar moment of transition into the postcolonial epoch - which is not to suggest that such a moment can ever be clearly demarcated or defined. For his part, Egan is lodging in a hotel. Although it is a slightly better one than one of the franchise or chain-hotels (in which he usually stays on such trips) that are one of the symptoms of the spread of global capital – "bland places in which software salesmen and retail buyers were propped like cardboard cut-outs advertising beer" (*TEV* 50) – there is an almost tangible sense of alienation that is inescapable. This sense of detachment caused by the impersonal quality of

---

[148] South African Communist Party. Chris Hani was also a leading figure in the armed wing of the African National Congress and was assassinated on 10 April 1993 – with almost disastrous consequences for the negotiated transformation of South Africa from apartheid to a democratic dispensation.

[149] There is an interesting contrast in vision and aspired for identities that are expressed in Boniface Khumalo's VI Lenin Bar and Grill in 'Propaganda by Monuments' (See Chapter Two – Heritage and Public Spaces in *Propaganda by Monuments and other stories*) and Bra Zama's African Eatery here. The first aspires to global recognition through the (quaint and ironic) use of Lenin's name in combination with an originally American term (bar and grill), while the second attempts to assert a more 'authentic' local and African identity.

the hotels he stays in on his travels to the city of Johannesburg has some ironic reflection in his own relationship to the Hani View project that he has helped to design, when he admits that although he knew "every square centimetre of Hani View on the plans, he had never set foot on the site" (*TEV* 53).

In order to problematise this relationship between Egan and the section of the city that he in a sense created, an earlier reference I made to the writing of Michel de Certeau (1988) refers. In focusing on the trope of walking the city, and defining the horizontal and vertical plateaux that form part of the matrix of the individual's experience of the city, de Certeau shows not only how the walker moves through the city, but how, by extension, the city itself also moves imaginatively through the walker. In the same vein, de Certeau has theorised on the clear distinctions between tours and maps, concluding that maps attempt to encapsulate and totalise the meaning of a particular place or city, whereas tours are the lived realities of individuals within the city as they appropriate cityspace.

Clearly, in his admission that he had not set foot in Hani View, Egan is operating on the level of the plan or map, and his preconceived ideas are informed by the totalising paradigm referred to above. It is only when he is able to visit (tour) the place and be in regular interaction with some of the residents that he can begin to get some appreciation of the lived realities of Hani View, as opposed to conceptions of it based purely on drawn plans. That two-dimensional view can never be adequate to engage with the vicissitudes of life in any part of the city. Even when he is finally able to be physically present in Hani View, Egan's knowledge and experience of it have the detached significance of a map, a plan. There is no sense of the lived reality, the street-level intimations suggested by de Certeau. Egan can therefore have little appreciation of the idiosyncratic challenges faced by the residents of the project. Like the hotel experience, his site visits are reduced to a mechanical formula:

> 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. You could almost hear the creases popping as you broke through the barrier. Sometimes it was disenchanting. You had convinced yourself, looking at the neatly inked blocks

on the paper, at the street names, the community facilities, the cookie-cutter trees, that the place was rather pleasant. 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 wall, and the immense blue well of the sky, which reduced the earth to sediment. At other times, the contrast between the flat world of the plan and the angular world of the township galvanized him. It was a beginning, wasn't it? You couldn't expect everything to change overnight.

<div align="right">(TEV 57)</div>

As stated from the earliest chapters of this thesis, the plan or map – whether as a flat drawing or three-dimensional architectural model – can never totalise the meanings about a place. The stark differences between the plan and the reality on the ground are encapsulated in the quotation above by the images of unrelenting sun and dust where the architects had imagined pleasant, tree-lined streets. There is an interesting dichotomy between the vision and the executed dwellings, and this also suggests some sort of cognitive distance or dissonance in the character of Egan.

Milton Mazibuko is the council official charged with accompanying Egan to Hani View, although Egan had expected to be in the company of the town clerk, Louis Bhengu. On their drive from Kempton Park they engage in light-hearted banter about the demands of the residents for modern amenities like reticulated sewage and indoor toilets. Mazibuko comically describes the peoples' aspirations in this regard:

"I don't want a hole in the ground, like a dog, I want a throne at the end of the passage. [...] I want to shit in style and pull the chain, like the madam."

<div align="right">(TEV 54)</div>

This kind of repartee serves to break the ice and seems to establish Egan and Mazibuko as equals, at least on the face of it, In their shared mockery of either people who yearn for toilets in their houses, or who do have indoor ablutions but

cannot afford to pay the municipal service charges and so have their water periodically cut off, there is a 'strange' consensus or concurrence between the black council official and the white sanitary engineer. The old antagonisms of race have apparently died away and a new spirit of mutual respect seems to emerge. For a time, at least, the Othering that is a prevalent feature of race discourse as portrayed in *The Restless Supermarket*, for instance, is imaginatively relegated to the margins of consciousness. There initially appears to be no colonial or apartheid preoccupations with race in the dialogue between the two, and their dialogue is couched in the tones of two professional men reflecting on the challenges of changing society and experiencing a sense of camaraderie induced by shared burdens.

In such moments it is important to consider what other identities, besides those of Mazibuko and Egan, are performed or constructed and how they manifest. For example, an interesting theme to emerge here is the baas-or-madam[150] construction evident in the excerpt cited directly above. In expressing wishes to "shit in style and pull the chain, like the madam", the figure of the madam is inscribed with connotations of luxurious and carefree living, something the residents of Hani View aspire to.[151] With the achievement of political transformation, attention now shifts to the attainment of material comfort. And the "madam"-figure, an object of hate in the context of political oppression and apartheid, now epitomises a desired state of being. The residents do not wish to become white but rather want to have a standard of living that they assume is synonymous with being the "madam". The use of the term in the postcolonial city has in this way become ironic and again points to the notion of shifting identities. It is ironic in the sense that it exemplifies how a term formerly associated with superiority and subservience has been deconstructed, and instead of being supplanted by new terms, has been inflected with new meanings. The porosity of geographic borders, such as is evident in the boundaries between

---

[150] Historically connoting white people, in both South Africa and Zimbabwe, but has since acquired associations of social class as opposed to purely racial signification.

[151] Having indoor toilets may be considered by some to be a basic necessity and not a luxury, but for communities that have been deprived of such amenities (largely on the basis of colour) for generations and have had to make-do with pit-latrines or the bucket-system an indoor toilet is quite an expression of luxury. The recent controversy over uncovered toilets in informal settlements in both Cape Town and the Free State town of Bethlehem poignantly provides a context.

Hani View and its informal cousin Hani View Extension 1, echoes the changes that occur in the more abstract realms of identity.

Humour is a device that Vladislavić deploys in this text not just purely for comic effect, but also to undermine respective individuals senses of self-assuredness. Milton Mazibuko is described in these unflattering terms:

> He was a small round man in the cruel grip of fashion – thickly treaded shoes that made him look like a wind-up toy, a Nehru collar as tight as a tourniquet, a watchstrap like a manacle on his wrist. He shook hands with Egan through the window of the hired car and squeezed into the passenger seat.
>
> (*TEV* 52)

From this perspective Mazibuko is a caricature[152] of the newly rich and empowered class, the so-called Black Diamonds. (His portfolio in the council includes housing subsidies and deeds registration.) While Egan may get a few private laughs at his guide's expense, the more important consideration here is how the different subject positions are framed and understood. For example, what is the position that Egan occupies in relation to this 'caricature'? If, as becomes increasingly evident, the success of Egan's business hinges on remaining in the good graces of men such as Mazibuko, then Egan's position is much more disempowered than the overt display of equality between the two would suggest. When Mazibuko jokes about "shit[ting] like the madam", Egan forces himself to join in the laughter:

> This kind of racial humour, or was it interracial humour, made him uncomfortable. He was never sure whether it was for his benefit or at his expense. When a black associate called him 'baas', he got the joke, give or take. But when the same associate called *himself* 'boy' or 'bushie', Egan was never sure what was really going on.
>
> (*TEV* 54)

---

[152] In his ill-suited clothing he evokes images of Charles Dickens' Joe Gargery (in *Great Expectations*) looking like a scarecrow in his Sunday best.

Egan's lack of self-assuredness in this instance is further illustration of just how fraught subject-positions have become for certain previously confident white characters in the now of post-apartheid. Like the term "madam", the titles "baas", "boy" and "bushie" undergo a kind of deconstructive erasure when they are used by the black people who, in the names' original colonial/apartheid signification, the terms were either supposed to demean or to mark their position of inferiority or subservience in relation to the white baas or madam. This erasure has the double-edged effect of simultaneously divesting the power of that the terminology implied when formerly used from the perspective of white privilege, while at the same time marking (in an ironic way) the empowerment of blacks through the appropriation of such words on their own terms.[153]

A little later when apprised of the residents' complaints about the state of roads in Hani View, Egan's first impulse is to point out that that was the council's responsibility, and not his, but he stops himself before he utters the words. This again illustrates the lack of confidence with which he occupies the new ground of the post-apartheid city. This is a territory of new power relations that have to be negotiated with a different set of strategies from the ones that he is used to. As with the "interracial humour", Egan finds that he has to be guarded in his responses to Mazibuko, as he is unsure of what would be deemed offensive or not. This walking-on-eggshells strategy is also in evidence later when they go out to dinner and he is afraid of bringing up the incident at Hani View involving a certain Mrs Ntlaka[154], members of the residence association and a photographer – all of which Egan quietly thinks was a set-up at his expense. Similarly, he is even unable to tell his Michael Jackson joke (circulated to him by e-mail) because he is unsure of "what status Michael Jackson would have in this company" and whether he would be considered "a figure of fun" or "a role model" (*TEV* 90). In terms of constructions of

---

[153] The irony lies in the use of a formerly denigrating term as an assertion of black racial identity, similar perhaps to the way in which some African-Americans use the term "nigger" as a mark of pride in their blackness. In South Africa "darkie" also elicits similar controversy because such terms tend to mean different things depending on the race of the person saying them.

[154] A rather obese female resident of Hani View who complains about the size of her house and its substandard construction (there is a huge crack in one of the walls and the toilet has been set too high off the ground). Egan thinks that she should just be thankful that she is no longer living in a shack and that she should do something about her weight, but does not verbalise these thoughts.

identity, the fact that Egan condemns himself to an ultimately rueful silence is just as important as what he is able to enunciate in spoken words. Both his silence and any potential words that he could have uttered in the event go some way in defining as an individual and the subject position that he occupies.

Even in circumstances of interracial discourse that are outside the ambit of humour or parody, Egan shows himself to be unsure and, in some cases, he becomes defensive. This reflexive gesture is part of the broader matrix of post-apartheid white anxiety wherein even the most innocent mentioning of someone's race as white is taken to impute collective historical guilt for the conditions of deprivation suffered by the black population. By way of illustration, when Egan finally gets back to his hotel, he recalls earlier work he had done with a black architect on a similar low-cost development in Cape Town. Meintjies, the architect, had made the point that the one thing that was wrong with their plan of the new township was that "[a]ll the people were white." On the point of making a defence because he thought that "[p]eople were obsessed with race" and that "he was sick of it", he takes a closer look at the plan and realises that the architect was right. The figures on the plan were white in "their styles and attitudes" (*TEV* 73). There is a conceptual gap between the world of the map and the real one of the township, between the sign and the signified. Titlestad and Kissack refer to the plans as an example of a "dislocated semiotic, a language of representation that has no meaningful relation to the context of their implementation" (2006:13).

This means that the plans with the white models bear little resemblance to the types of social and physical spaces that they purport to be representing, and therefore Titlestad and Kissack's formulation above confirms and re-iterates the theoretical schema on which I base my reading (after de Certeau) of the mapping of space in Vladislavić, namely that maps cannot totalise the meanings of space. Egan's solution is to have the plan re-drawn, as it were, with a line of black people, of poor black people, a couple of waxy sheets of barefoot street-children, barbers with oilcan chairs" (*TEV* 74) and so on. Helgesson correctly notes that Egan's act of ironically resorting to stereotype at this juncture, through "[t]he substitution of a cardboard Europe changes the labels", has the unintended consequence of keeping "the colonial surveyor's gaze intact" (2006:33). Beyond signalling Egan's uncertainty,

this episode also illustrates the peculiar problematics of representation, any kind of representation – be it a map or plan drawing, a written text, a sculpture, a painting and so on. The debate centres on the politics of representation, on how realism can be achieved, if at all, and what signifiers are selected to attain realistic representation. However, in light of Helgesson's analysis on the pervasive intractability of the colonial gaze immediately above, his later proposition on the metropolitan form in *The Exploded View* appears to me to be problematic: He suggests the folllowing:

> The metropolitan form of Johannesburg, as narrated by Vladislavić, exceeds the social metaphor of race as well as the colonial binary of "Europe" and "Africa". Not because race is no longer a factor in the distribution of identities or because "Europe" and "Africa" are no longer invoked but because the flux of metropolitan life brings the usefulness of these categories into continual crisis.

(2006:34)

I contend that the latter analysis on how the imagined city rises above race is to a large extent contradictory of the point he makes with reference to the difficulty Egan has in shirking his 'colonial' perspective, and also that the implied notion of transcendence of racial consideration is prematurely utopian in its hopefulness. This contradiction appears even more so when one reflects on the fact that the fictional character that Helgesson largely relies on for this conclusion, Egan, displays no metropolitan outlook, as do neither of the majority of the other characters in the text with the possible exception of Simeon Majara in 'Curiouser'. To the contrary, the novel highlights the preponderant emphasis on fragmentation as a consequence of difference, and as opposed to the democratic polity suggested, by Iris Marion Young, that is based on and actually celebrates difference – as alluded to in an earlier chapter.

The general idea of Johannesburg as an African metropolis is one that Helgesson shares with Mbembe and Nuttall (2004 and 2007), especially in respect of the latter's' insistence that Johannesburg, as I mentioned in the thesis introduction, should be read and understood on its own basis as an African city. While I agree to a

large extent with the framework of their reasoning in this instance, mainly based on the premise that the metropolitan form of an African city should be regarded as one that is distinct from and is not too closely implicated in the idea of Western citiness, I am also aware of the potential contradiction (or hermeneutical crisis) that arises from any terminology prefixed with African. It is in this aspect that I diverge from the thinking of Mbembe and Nuttall, because their use of the term in this regard appears to presuppose an unproblematic relationship between the signifier African and what it signifies, that is, what it means to be an African city. What African represents does not have universal signification and consequently there are different types of African metropolises. Thus to insist on a unitary sense of African urbanity is equal to resorting to the conventional European and African binary without interrogating the contextual specifities of what constitutes either construct. To do so is, in effect and in ironic contrast to what Mbembe and Nuttall argue in 'Writing the World from an African Metropolis' (2004), to describe African citiness in the very same oppositional or dichotomous terms that they sought to avoid.

In light of the aforegoing, I propose that it is perhaps more useful to imagine, speak or write of Johannesburg, as a postcolonial city than the nondescript African metropolis. Theorising on postcolonialism as critical and political practice, postcolonial theorist Ato Quayson defines it as "a *process of postcolonializing*"[155] (2000:9) while Childs and Williams posit that "the condition it [postcolonialism] names does not yet exist" (1997:7), thus denoting that it is not an event that occurs after postcolonialism, as in a "post- event", but rather is an area of overlap between [the end of] empire and the emergent socio-historical epoch. As Quayson puts it even more succinctly, "[t]he term is as much about conditions under imperialism and colonialism proper as [it] is about conditions coming after the historical end of colonialism" (2000:2). In coining and defining the term "dialogic postcolonialism", which is the theoretical keystone of my considerations of Vladislavić's representation of the imagined metropolis, I am partially following this notion of postcolonialism as a yet-to-be-achieved condition. The dialogic self-reflexivity, for me, lies in the constant questioning of the relations between the hoped-for-present/future, and the level of

---

[155] Emphasis in the original.

individual agency requisite to the brokering or influencing of the dynamics of these relations.

To reiterate and further elaborate on the points raised earlier in this section with reference to the representativity of the cardboard model of the township, I concur with literary critic Susan van Zyl who, in considering what she terms "the signing of South Africa" as it manifests itself in *The Exploded View*, rightly points out that Egan's reaction in the face of this cognitive disjuncture is to resort to an overly simplistic gesture of "dream[ing] of a space in which signs and the worlds they represent are one and the arduous task of changing the world can be done by the relatively easy one of changing signifiers" (2006:83). Egan's dream of a perfumed city reflects an otherwise repressed desire for the fantastic idyll, much in the same way that Aubrey Tearle in *The Restless Supermarket* conjures up Alibia as a setting for his utopian vision of the linguistically ordered city. But much like Tearle who finds that whole blocks of his imagined city randomly break free from the moorings that are meant to fix them to their allotted space, Egan discovers himself falling endlessly and uncontrollably *through* the streets. The certitude of plans and models upon which he is so reliant in making sense of his world, proves to be fleeting because in falling through the streets he illustrates just how little control he is able to exercise over his subjective environment.

Egan's council contacts take him for dinner to Bra Zama's African Eatery, to provide him with relief, perhaps, from the drudgery of hotel food. In keeping with the theme for the evening, he decides to wear his "Madiba shirt"[156] – a decision he admits later as having been a mistake. His five dinner companions – Bhengu the town clerk, Mazibuko, Ramaralela and Marakabane, the latter two being part of the Residents' Association of Hani View, and another man whose name Egan promptly forgets as soon as the introductions are over – are all dressed formally in suits (Ramaralela and Marakabane having discarded their leather jackets), which makes Egan feel sillier for his choice of dress. Their waitress for the evening is Miriam,

---

[156] A colourful shirt style made popular by Nelson 'Madiba' Mandela in early years of democracy in South Africa.

dressed 'appropriately' in ethnic prints and she unknowingly becomes a focaliser and instantiation of Egan's notions of nation and belonging:

> While Miriam was speaking he examined her costume. She 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?

> (*TEV* 80)

While Egan's attention is focused on whether Miriam is South African or Nigerian, as denoted by her dress, the more pertinent question that he does not consider, is the extent to which all people – himself included – may in fact be *in costume* and playing various roles. That his dinner companions are all dressed formally is no accident, but is rather a way of expressing a particular kind of identity as well as the appropriation of specific social and economic space. By dressing formally, Mazibuko and the others intend to divest themselves of their township roots and seek to cast themselves as serious businessmen instead. Egan also seems preoccupied with nationality and ethnicity in the same way in which Budlender is in 'Villa Toscana'. The two characters are always intent upon deciphering the 'identity' or origin of any black characters they encounter who appear to them to be non-South African. They do not display such eagerness with regard to South African blacks, though. The circumstances of the meal, the banter and progression of the conversation are used to illustrate and frame the way in which identities are performed and spatialised. In his choice of attire for the evening – the Madiba shirt – Egan seeks to appropriate and occupy space, and affirm his identity within the general rubric of the "New South Africa" and its cosmopolitan urban space. And for the early part of the evening this seems an astute position to occupy:

> As they sat there in the middle of the room, the focus of attention, 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 group in the place. Glancing around at other tables, at the pale

Danes and Poms, taking a quick census, he felt weirdly proud of himself. He was part of the new order...

(*TEV* 84)

Egan's remarking on, and his insistence that Miriam was "*in costume*" in the penultimate quotation above and his own appropriation of the Madiba shirt as a mark of his belonging (like a tribal scar) serve as instances of some dramatic irony at this moment in the story, because Egan is unaware or otherwise unable to recognise that he is just as much "*in costume*" and playing a role as is Miriam who is fulfilling the part of a demure African hostess. The real question is whether any among the gathered group is not. Being *in costume* transcends the mere physicality of items of clothing and goes into the realm of ideology, as it concerns the roles people assign themselves and others in the course of human interaction. This has to do, in short, with how we construct our identities and delimit those of others. Exploring the notion of performance further, Titlestad and Kissack (2006) suggest that Bra Zama's African Eatery as the supposedly authentic African world, "is itself a performance" because "not only does the imposition of the European onto an African landscape represent a dislocated semiotic, but even Africa is performed as pastiche" (2006:15).

Any illusions Egan has about his place in the unfolding drama are, however, eventually dissipated as the evening progresses and he finds himself increasingly out of the loop of the discussions that are taking place:

Egan made a point about the floodline. Bhengu agreed with him. Then they slipped back into Sotho. What were they talking about? [...] he began to suspect that nothing important was being discussed with him. That the real purpose of the exchange, in which he appeared to be an equal partner, was in the sidelong chatter, the small talk he didn't understand.

(*TEV* 87)

Egan comes here to the realisation that it will take much more than the Madiba shirt for him to belong in a constructive and meaningful way to the group he is merely physically part of. The costume of rapprochement, of which the shirt is the iconic emblem, proves inadequate as a means to fulfil the role he conceives for himself in

the motley group, because it is an inadequate substitute for the more significant identity markers such as language and culture. Bhengu, Mazibuko and the other black men, allow Egan to progress into their circle only as far as they deem appropriate. Beyond that, they erect the glass wall of a language he does not understand, from behind which he sees their lips move but cannot make sense of what they are saying. This scenario is a *version* of the "empire writing back" paradigm because the centre has shifted and the former "centre", as epitomised by Egan, has yet to acquire the new linguistic and other competences that are prerequisites for negotiating existence in the new order.

In framing this question of the empire writing back I have to add the necessary caveat, denoted in my accent on the word 'version', that this is not simply a binary process where the literary imagination can only occupy one of two positions. Quayson suggests that critics who conceive of postcolonial literature as simply an unproblematic exercise in "writing back to the former metropolitan centre" thus "foreclose the possibility of a more complicated pursuit of the question by instituting a singular […] view of what postcolonial writing aspires to and what kind of politics it imagines itself engaged in" (2000:77). This point provides clear validation of my posture vis-à-vis Ivan Vladislavić's writing, which writing I consider to be constitutive of dialogic postcolonialism. For Vladislavić, then, it is not simply a matter of writing back to the empire because the centre (empire) has shifted. In some respects Johannesburg could be thought of as a neo-empire, in light of the influence it wields over the African hinterland in terms of politics and the economy. Flowing from this fact of the multiple positions that the imagined city occupies, with suggestions of hybridity and Homi Bhabha's third-space framework and more, Vladislavić's writing therefore reflects this self-reflexivity and is truly dialogically postcolonial.

Theorising the gesture or device of defamiliarisation discussed a paragraph or so ago, Gaylard has describes it as being not "the only way in which the imagination tends to function […] but [it] is also a feature of postcolonial writing and writing in non-indigenous languages which must wrest the colonizer's language to new utilities" (2006:68). I would go further and suggest defamiliarisation is achieved not only by utilising the language of empire in new and surprising ways, illustrated for instance in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, but that in the case of the black

characters in 'Afritude Sauce' they are able to totally disregard English as a metadiscourse and conduct their business in their own language to show how much things have changed in the post-apartheid city. This new terrain is one that is unfamiliar and breeds uncertainty for an individual like Egan who, because he is a white male of a certain age, would have grown up in apartheid with a particularly assured sense of his place in that society. That Egan's dinner companions slip into their own dialects when they discuss the things that really matter to shows just how little the success of their venture rests upon their ability to articulate themselves in the language of the colonizer, which has now been reduced to seeming redundancy and how Egan – who cuts an emasculated figure – is now no more than a dispensable extra to the unfolding drama. His position serves to highlight what I termed in the introductory chapter as alienation resulting from his ultimately misconstrued attempts to fashion a new urban self in the postcolonial city. Misconstrued because they are reliant on a non-existent shared or imagined understanding and vision of the post-apartheid present and future.

Egan is reduced to examining every little gesture made by the people around as he wonders "whether people were being nice to him or taking the mickey" (*TEV* 90). He is increasingly unsure about his place not just in the present company but in the larger scheme of things as well. Towards the close of the story, his humiliation complete and back in the hotel room, Egan is left to ruminate about the symbolic vacuousness of the hotel-room - in spite of the drab furnishings - and to ponder the many 'passings-through' that his particular room has witnessed prior to his own arrival, especially after he discovers a complaint questionnaire that had been filled in by a previous guest:

> There was always something unsettling about hotel rooms, when you thought about it. A long line of strangers slouching about on the same furniture as if it belonged to them. Usually you did not know their names, every identifiable trace of them had been erased – the sweat, the cigarette smoke, the scuffing and scraping were unavoidable but generalized – and so it did not bother you much. This was too close for comfort.

> (*TEV* 95)

The city and this hotel room, in particular, become sites of encounters with named and unnamed strangers, with whom he recognises his shared humanity. Egan is unnerved by the fact that he can put a name to the imagined face of the room's previous occupant, thereby shrinking some of the distance that is the hallmark of the urban encounter, where people are often only faceless components of the seething mass of the crowd, even if they are standing next to each other.

In 'Afritude Sauce', as in other segments of *The Exploded View* and, as indeed in the rest of his writing, Ivan Vladislavić is engaged with the fictional construction of different 'African' identities as well as with the question how various individuals locate themselves in cityspace. Above, with regards to 'Villa Toscana' and 'Afritude Sauce' I have shown how the author represents the post-apartheid Johannesburg as a place of multifaceted influences, of old and new cultures. Egan tries to integrate and blend himself into the emerging cosmopolitanism but because his attempts are based on incomplete readings of the socio-political realities, he is unable to incorporate himself fully into the fabric of the new urban community that is beginning to appear. The city thus appears as contested ideological and physical terrain as various urban characters seek to make it their own. In Vladislavić's writing, this confrontation is evident in the tensions, and crossings, across socially constructed racial barriers, or in the form of a contestation between people of different races and nationalities with regards to who does and who does not belong.

6.4 Of the Re-Visioning and Deconstruction of Identities

Simeon Majara, the main character of 'Curiouser' is an established black multi-media artist who resides in suburban Johannesburg. He represents something of a departure from the more familiar 'Vladislavić characters', who are generally speaking white males battling to assert their agency in an alienating and disillusioning city. Majara or 'S. Majara', as he often somewhat egotistically refers to himself, instantiates a different kind of postcolonial city subject and identity. Along with Boniface Khumalo in 'Propaganda by Monuments' (see Chapter Three), he is one of only two major black characters in the fictional writing by Vladislavić that is analysed in this thesis but even then, he represents an enigmatic individual in ways

that his predecessor, Khumalo, does not. The latter is conceived and portrayed in the manner of a man who is conscious of a particular material upbringing (mainly because of his race) and continues to engage with the post-apartheid city largely from that perspective. This is not to suggest that Khumalo is racist or that he continues to fight a racial struggle, but rather that he utilises the cultural capital and tools at his disposal, mainly as a result of his race and background, to fashion new sets of identity for himself in the emerging metropolis. His attempts at entrepreneurial activity are linked to and steeped in the broader struggles for social and political justice in South Africa and he maintains a consciousness that is grounded in his township background.[157]

For his part, Majara does not overtly display any supposedly 'black traits' or signs of 'blackness'. He appears to be culturally disembedded in ways not too dissimilar to the ones that Shane Graham (as earlier cited and who uses the term "dehistoricised"[158]) appears to have taken issue with in the portrayal of Sarah Nuttall's Rosebank Mall subjects, in her paper 'Stylizing the Self: Rosebank's Y Generation'. In the appellation 'S. Majara' – evoked with the requisite flourish – the name comes to define the individual identity more than is the case with any of Vladislavić's other fictional characters. Quite often in the text, the character introduces himself as 'S. Majara', as if he is signing on his latest artwork and not engaging in a mundane conversation. It is an instance of the self-indulgent branding that has become increasingly visible with the growth of celebrity culture, an extreme example of which is how the *name* of a person replaces or supercedes any artistic or other merit that they may have. In this way, Vladislavić also shows how the postcolonial city is linked to global trends.

The main question to be considered, in this light, is whether and to what extent Majara is a new kind of postcolonial subjectivity, more so when one reflects on the fact that most of his acquaintances, girlfriends included, are white. These new subjectivities and ways of being are shown not only in the way that Majara, in the

---

[157] This is not to suggest that Khumalo is inward-looking in a developmentally fatal way but that he acts locally, while attempting to think globally. His marketingg of his township tavern as the V.I. Lenin Grill and Bar shows just such global 'awareness'. For instance, Khumalo's letter to the authorities in Russia is couched in Marxist terms that identify it with both the Soviet communist party and the struggling masses of South Africa.
[158] See Chapter Four.

guise of the figure of the artist, is represented but also in the strategies that he adopts in constructing and positioning his own identity. Basically, he builds his celebrity and reputation more on his ability to shock, as opposed to the aesthetic value of his work. Further to the above consideration is the interrogation of what Majara's art suggests, in broad terms, about representation and how this self-reflexively sheds light on him as a figure occupying a specific locus in the continuum of the emergent postcolonial city. It is with regard to the last aspect that I will make a comparison between the fictional artist and the author Veronique Tadjo – who uses the medium of the written word in her representations of the Rwandan genocide – in an effort to understand the factors influencing the selection of the idiom and form of the representational strategy.

To celebrate his latest show[159] – *Curiouser* – that has just come down at the Pollak gallery, Simeon Majara holds what is known in the parlance of the day as "a closing" – as opposed to an opening. In preparation, he lines his garden path with lanterns made by tying together random groups of four wooden masks. The connection between 'Afritude Sauce' and 'Curiouser' is established with the revelation that he had been contracted to assemble the collection of masks in Bra Zama's African Eatery, and that is also how he winds up with enough surplus masks to indulge this fancy. *Curiouser*, his exhibition of everyday tourist curios that have been disassembled or otherwise reinterpreted and reconstructed as 'serious' art has received critical success. The title of the display – an overt play on 'curios' and 'curious' – shows how quickly and easily, with the aid of often very subtle adjustments, the signification of signs and artefacts can be changed. A case in point is that when he is making the mask-lanterns by drilling holes in the temples of each mask, through which to tie the string that holds them together, Simeon notices how the mere act of wielding the drill changes the peculiar meanings evoked by one of the masks:

---

[159] The staple of the show are animal figures or curios that are taken apart and then put together again in new ways, sometimes with parts of one animal incorporated into a biologically different one or even parts of the same animal re-assembled in new configurations and patterns. It is literal deconstruction.

As he pressed the bit against the forehead, he studied the expression. You could imagine that it was gritting its teeth – but that was just the effect of the drill. If you took the bit out of the picture, the grimace turned to a grin.

(*TEV* 102)

In the quotation above, the expression on the masks can be read as grimaces or grins depending on whether the artist is holding the drill bit or not, and illustrating yet again the fluidity of signification. While actual expression on each respective mask remains the same, what each signifies changes depending on the context in which it is viewed, as in the example of Majara holding or not holding a drill next to each art-piece. For the Bra Zama project, he had acquired six crates of masks from a Malawian vendor who imported curios, and hence had more than he needed. The artistic value of the masks is diminished by the fact of their mass production[160] and Simeon seeks to restore some of the elements of unique creativity (that define the difference between original art and reproduced crafts) by putting them together in new and unexpected/unpredictable ways.

The opportunity to be involved with the themed design of the interior decor of the eatery comes through a third party, a white woman who was an acquaintance of Simeon and occasionally framed his printed artwork. She had, however, decided to share the commission with him because she thought that "he knew more about authentic African style than she did – he was black, after all, never mind the private-school accent" (*TEV* 105). This statement, which on the face of it is rather patronising, puts into question several key aspects of Simeon's character. The first is the definition or evaluation of Africanness, especially where its supposed qualities are defined as being somehow an inherent part of the make-up of the individual. There is a suggestion that blackness or being African is more a biological and less a cultural fact since she assumes that because he is black or African he is therefore naturally attuned to what is authentically African. Resorting to stereotype, she quickly dismisses any impact socialisation (through attending private school) might have on his sensibilities. The terms African and black[ness] are not unproblematic because

---

[160] An ironic process of commodifying 'art' which, though intended to ensure economic survival for the artist, often has the opposite effect of cheapening the artefacts to the extent of wiping out any financial benefit.

they are not universal signifiers that are equally applicable to all individuals who are racially defined as such. I mentioned a little earlier perceptions of Majara as being acontextual in his demeanour, at least in the sense that he does not seem to draw his artistic and cultural inspiration from any recognisable font that is part of his personal and national histories. The other consideration that flows from this construction of Simeon as the disembedded subject is that of authenticity as defined by his unnamed friend.[161] The latter starts from the assumption that the design of what is an "authentic African style" flows naturally from the fact of Majara being black.

The second[162] in a series of exhibitions on the theme of genocide, Majara's show on the Bosnian massacre at Ahmici is met with the predictable reaction of "people [who] were intrigued that a black artist should be dealing with Bosnia" (*TEV* 104). Again, the question is the extent which a black artist can authentically represent a historical event that occurred somewhere in the Balkans, a place from which the artist is culturally removed. But, judging by the reaction to the display, the origin of the artist had no effect on the impact of the artwork as "no one who saw it remained unmoved" as "[i]t made you painfully aware that you were corporal and mortal" (*TEV* 104). This is an illustration of the power of all forms of artistic expression to transcend at times the normative strictures of culture and history. The follow-up project, which Majara christens Genocide III, focuses on the scene of the Nyanza massacre, one of the many heinous incidents of mass slaughter that occurred during the time of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and now the site of an open-air museum. With respect to the two earlier exhibitions, there is no mention that he actually travelled to the sites of the genocide, but for the Nyanza Shrouds – as they will come to be known among his critics and admirers – Simeon Majara does travel to Nyanza as part of a motley group which includes journalists, a cultural

---

[161] With reference to the short stories 'Propaganda by Monuments' and 'The WHITES ONLY Bench', as discussed in Chapter Three, the point was well made that the terrain of authenticity is a very contested area in terms of the spatialising of memory and history. In dispute in that story is whether a manufactured WHITES ONLY bench or an original segregated bench would serve as the most authentic museum representation of the era of petty apartheid. As it turns out, the 'fake' bench becomes more popular and instructive because it is more accessible.

[162] The first in the series was on the holocaust of World War II and used ashes and soot as its primary medium, thus evoking the gas chambers.

researcher, a socio-religious activist involved in a church programme to assist orphans and even a few a tourists.

As a theme travel, transnational travel especially, is quite unusual in Vladislavić's writing, as his characters generally tend to perambulate within the same urban locale. In this respect Simeon Majara represents something of a departure from type. Among the travelling group is Henk from Groningen (in The Netherlands), a self-styled "cross-cultural adventurer" for whom genocide held a special appeal:

> He had done the major concentration camps in his own backyard (Auschwitz, he said, was still the must see), the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, and a five-day drive along the Trail of Tears. This was his first African visit, but South Africa was next on the list.

> (*TEV* 105)

Henk's involvement in the group and his revelation that genocide sites are more or less an obsession for him, raises questions as to what constitutes the authentically 'tourist' experience and whether visits to such sites can be considered edifying when viewed from such a perspective.[163]

The principles involved in Henk's visits are similar to those in the artist's consideration of which subject [matter] to represent and how to do so in a manner that is both original yet authentic, thus echoing in some respects this thesis' concern with representation. By styling himself as an adventurer who visits all the sites of the major genocides of modern history, Henk comes across as little more than a callous and sadistic voyeur, who just wants to retrospectively witness scenes of extreme human suffering. Interestingly enough, Majara – when probed – could not reveal to his fellow traveller his true vocation as an artist:

> [...] Simeon could not bring himself to say he was an artist. The idea made him queasy. It suggested an intolerable common purpose with his fellow traveller, whose bony knee was rubbing against his own. He said he was a journalist and patted his bag.

---

[163] There is a broader field of the study of the politics of traversal, which is epitomised, for instance, in John Urry's *The Tourist Gaze* (1990).

What makes Majara "queasy" is fear of being perceived as a practitioner of art for art's sake, of being a purveyor of artistic shock that has little or no value beyond the defined universe of the specific artwork itself. This is not suggest that the buyer or viewer is not also involved or invested in this "universe", but rather he wishes his art to be perceived as being more profound than having mere shock value. Hence he resorts to what he imagines to be a more acceptable explanation of his presence in Nyanza. The individual members of this group are, by and large, visiting out of their own personal and professional volition, whereas the group of writers that Veronique Tadjo was part of on her 1998 visit had lived in Rwanda for a few months (under the aegis of the UN) with a specific brief.

In an interview with Stephen Gray (2003:146) she asserts that the premise on which the writing of *Travels in the Shadow of Imana* was based was that they should attempt to write about the Rwandan genocide purely from the standpoint of writers, as opposed to journalists or historians. There are always questions as regards the effects of stylistic mode on the authenticity and realism of representation, hence Majara's 'resorting' to the guise of a journalist while Tadjo and her colleagues are 'instructed' to write as writers in order to (presumably) avoid some of the prejudices and value judgements that journalists (in an age of CNN-esque sound bytes) and historians are culpable of. In a way, both fictional Majara's fake journalism and real life Tadjo's writing as a writer are examples, in their different ways, of the two attempting representations of "reality" – a state in which the act of representation is beyond aesthetic and symbolic reproach. However, the purity of the gaze implied above is not ultimately possible because reality will always, as suggested by Derrida, be mediated through language.

In a destroyed clinic in Nyanza, Majara discovers old plaster bandages that had remained untouched since before the time of the massacre, as he takes still pictures and films videos of the vacant rooms. The plaster on the bandages has dried into fine dust and becomes the motif for *Genocide III* (the Holocaust exhibition was themed on ash and soot, and the Bosnian one on bone). He furtively deposits the 20 rolls of bandage in his camera bag – removing the hotel-provided provisions

and his sweater to create space – and successfully returns to Johannesburg with his 'contraband' to be used later. The exhibition comprises a large screen onto which battle scenes from other parts of the Rwanda where projected; still photographs that are woven into a tapestry and hung from the ceiling; a video montage of footage that he had shot on his Nyanza visit; and twenty billowing shrouds, into each of which one of the bandages had been woven, were hung behind the giant screen as the *pièce de résistance*. Imprinted onto the shrouds were images modelled on his own body, such as "a crying mouth, a twisted arm, a hand raised to ward off a blow" (*TEV* 112). This last aspect naturally draws protestations about his vanity, criticisms which he fends off by rationalising that his actions were actually "a mark of humility" in that he took himself "as the template" and "immerse[d] himself in the image of the other like an armature in a sculpture" (*TEV* 115).

By putting his likeness into the images that are supposedly commemorating lives that were so brutally lost Majara raises issues and contestations around the question whether he merely indulges his ego, and whether indeed the exhibition is less a memorial to the genocide than a celebration of the artist, the individual. In some respects he is no different from Henk, because they both feed on human disaster. Seen this way, his art is about individuating and stylising himself as 'S. Majara', rather than about the Nyanza massacre. Such a position, on his part, is contrary to the ethos of Ubuntu[164], is against the spirit of an African humanism that tends to foreground communal and social good ahead of individual attainment. Majara displays, in this instance, some characteristics that illustrate how he has more than just the private-school accent but has rather internalised more fundamentally euro-centric or western conceptions of the self. In this respect he has the appearance of the 'coconut'[165], a much-ridiculed figure of the post-apartheid era. The very thing that he discerns and abhors in Henk – the idea of an adventurer seeking out sites of genocide as a source of thrills – is what Majara becomes with his utilisation of the exhibit as a means of self-affirmation or validation.

---

[164] A basic tenet of Ubuntu is '*umuntu umuntu ngabantu*', which can be loosely translated as 'a person is a person because of other people'. This philosophy privileges the primacy of the group over individual considerations.

[165] The term 'Coconut' refers to someone who is said to be black outside and white on the inside. The image evokes some of the social and cultural contradictions that emerge in the postcolonial city.

By seeming to self-promote himself at the expense of the victims, Majara also initiates another tangential consideration of the role of art and other representational strategies. Writing on the 10th anniversary commemoration of the genocide by Rwandan President Paul Kagame's government – held under the thematic banner of 'Never Again', which is also a post-World War II mantra – visual literary theoretician Nicholas Mirzoeff is of the view that the remembrance of the genocide in Rwanda has in this way "resist[ed] representation and retreated into invisibility" (2005:37). The first part of the excerpt above, in particular, speaks to the general notion of the difficulty of representation, an idea around which this thesis is loosely organised. It is my contention that, even taking into account the differences in scale between the national act[s] of remembering by the Rwandan people and Majara's gallery showpiece, which uses his own body as proxy[166], the fictional artist in similar ways erases the memory of the genocide. Mirzoeff's analysis is relevant here because when Kagame frames the 1994 killings in the same rhetoric as the holocaust of World War II, the Rwandese events are not defined in their own terms, which accounts for the resistance to representation and its (Rwanda genocide) sliding into indistinctness. It is for this reason that Simeon Majara's show becomes just that, a show about the artist and less about the ethnic cleansing.

The multiple textures of the exhibition allude to the multiple voices through which any story can be told and thus recall the metaphor of the exploded view, as earlier alluded to. Majara finds that neither the bandages, nor the still pictures, nor the shrouds can encapsulate and represent the specific meanings that he seeks to disseminate about the genocide. This notion of a multiplicity of perspectives – accidentally also present in the writing of Tadjo about the genocide – arises from the many voices that seek to tell, and make sense of the story of ethnic cleansing in Rwanda, not least that of the artist and the writer. It is at the heart of the difficulty of and resistance to representation. Tadjo's journey through Rwanda begins even before she arrives in the country when, in Durban, she has a chance encounter with a Rwandan refugee who is now eking out a survival by guarding parked cars. He is

---

[166] In the pamphlets for the show, Majara does not intimate the source of the bandages that are sewn into the shrouds and also edits footage out of the video that shows the moment of their discovery, thus protecting and enhancing his own reputation as a creative genius.

described as having "fled to the very edge of the sea" (Tadjo 2002:5), and this chance encounter is marked by a quite instructive irony of circumstance. On the one hand, there is the survivor-victim of the genocide who seems to only have been stopped by the sea in his desperate flight from his homeland; had there been no sea, it is implied, he would still be running. Yet, on the other hand the author is headed in the opposite direction and hoping to make sense out of the events in Rwanda. The challenge for Tadjo as a writer is to verbalise this man's peculiar trauma in a manner that is both accurate and not demeaning of his dignity. But as she accedes, "The truth is revealed in people's eyes. Words have so little value […] See what is inside" (2002:5). The guide for Majara's party in Nyanza is also a survivor of that slaughter, surviving it only by lying amongst the corpses and pretending to be dead. In fact he had 'become' death as the trauma of hiding himself amongst the dead and dying had meant that "[d]eath had rubbed off on him, it was there in his skin" (*TEV* 110). As with Tadjo's car-guarding refugee who has witnessed horrors that have induced in his eyes an opaque and lifeless quality, (his eyes could be said to have died in like fashion to the guide's skin which now has death infused in it), the trauma of a living death is something not quite definable or tangible. It remains just beyond comprehension and depiction. The connection between the Rwandan genocide and living in the postcolonial city is implicit in the acts of one individual, Majara, who utilises the repertoires of representing the genocide to also articulate his own sense of his self and agency. He marks himself as different from all the other residents of Johannesburg, artistic or otherwise, through his art.

Beyond the art gallery, 'Curiouser' as a narrative thread continues to instantiate questions of identity and how it shifts through and with discourse. This is a reiteration, in slightly different paradigms, of the unsettling doubts that assail most of Vladislavić's (mainly white) characters in terms of whether or not they have any sense of belonging to and identification with the social, physical, and psychic space of the postcolonial city. In the course of the evening gathering to celebrate *Curiouser* (the art show), debate turns to the source of the mask among those assembled (all arty types and predominantly white with an insignificant sprinkling of black faces like Bheki). On its own this is a fairly innocuous enquiry, but one which soon ushers in a broader discussion on the meaning of being black and, or, African. Simeon Majara

narrates how he came upon the cheap masks through Rodger, a Malawian curio vendor at Bruma in Johannesburg. The vendor's story, as told by Majara, is that the masks actually belonged to a recently deceased compatriot and that his efforts of quickly disposing of them (and cheaply) were in order to repatriate what little money they could raise to the late departed's now indigent widow. This raises accusations of Majara's complicity in the disposal of stolen goods:[167]

> "You are dealing in stolen property, you shit."
>
> "I'm hardly dealing. Mind you, it's quite a nice twist. If you consider how much African art has been swiped by the real dealers, the wheeler-dealers."
>
> "I'm sorry, you'll have to explain. How is this different?"
>
> "I'm an African for one thing."
>
> "You mean you're black."
>
> "That's not what I said."
>
> "This Roger," James butted in, "the seller, the fence – he was African too."[168]
>
> (*TEV* 131)

This is the only time in the narrative that Majara overtly lays claim to an 'African' identity. At all other times in the story he is happy to individuate himself as 'S. Majara' – the artist – but in the excerpt above he identifies with the collective concept of an 'African' identity. His reasons for this have less to do with any sudden realisation that he is indeed African – before everything else he might claim to be –

---

[167] A related point is raised later in the evening by Amy, concerning the fact that Simeon makes more money with the reconstructed masks and curios than the original artists. He replies that, "the curio is in one system and the art work in another. If you move an object from one system into another, by the sweat of your brow, you change its purpose and therefore its value". (*TEV* 146) Still Amy gets to have the last word asking him to imagine how "the people who made these masks must live" and compare that "with the way you live here". (*TEV* 146) For her "[i]t's just a question of awareness, of being conscious and *staying* conscious of how things are, even if you can't change them. Especially then." (*TEV* 147) Amy's position, even if suspiciously liberal in outlook, shows a greater mindfulness of the social and historical complexities involved in the production of Simeon Majara's art.

[168] After they have the food Simeon reveals that he has been invited to show some of his work in Sweden whereupon Leon, with whom he seems to be waging a low-intensity civil war of attrition, cynically suggests that the invitation had been extended "because you're an African" and not, as Simeon had attempted to pre-emptively say: "She invited me because I'm black?" Majara's response here is markedly different from his earlier self-definition as "African". The main question is whether he is using the terms "African" and "black" interchangeably now where before he has been so assertive in stating that he is African as opposed to being just black. This again illustrates the notion of identity as a fluid terrain and how, in the context of the postcolonial city the sense of self constantly faces disruption and change.

but, rather, that it is a means of deflecting criticism that he has an exploitative relationship with the makers of the curios that he deconstructs into new art-works, and in that respect is no different from the figure of the colonial European. In the exchange quoted above there is an intriguing distinction that Majara makes between being black and being African, a distinction that also illustrates the difference in perspective that different characters have in their perceptions of identity. In the incident involving Henk in Nyanza (Rwanda), the construction of such an identity is much more implied (in the disavowal of the "intolerable common purpose" with Henk, who is the archetypal European "thrill-seeker") than it is directly asserted. On the other hand, in the context of South African racial discourse, being black often carries with it the connoted baggage of victimhood and entitlement. By displacing the signifier 'black', Majara can therefore pre-empt some of the potentially patronising criticism that would be direct against him because of the perception that he behaves the way he does because of his blackness.

In the previous chapter of this thesis I showed, how under Aubrey Tearle's gaze, the two terms (blackness and African) are generally conflated and considered to be indistinct, whereas with reference to Mpe's characters in *Welcome To Our Hillbrow*, African – as an entity that is dissimilar to black South African – is the new Other. It is significant that Majara positions himself in the discourse by privileging the aspect of his Africanness over that of his race as a black man. There seems to be no debate amongst the participants in the conversation as to what makes the two diverse expressions of identity and it is implied that all understand the distinction.

There are two possible explanations for the paradox that is Majara, who seemingly is simultaneously able to occupy space outside and within his own history. The first is that he is a purveyor of the new African cosmopolitanism that is espoused by South Africa's second post-apartheid president, Thabo Mbeki, in his 'I am an African' speech to parliament on 8 May 1996. In this speech, made when he was still the deputy president and acclaimed by some as one of the greatest speeches ever made by an African, Mbeki speaks of an African identity that is not purely atavistic and the subject of a demeaning anthropological discourse but, rather, an African humanity that is forged in the furnace of the diverse histories of all the peoples who

have called, chosen to call or been forced to call Africa home (available online at http://www.afrika.no/Detailed/18444.html).

The second possibility is that Majara resorts to an African identity as a defensive strategy in the face of accusations that he is plundering African art in a manner not dissimilar to the colonial and latter-day European "wheeler-dealers". By inference, he is saying because he is African, he cannot then be said to be engaging in such exploitative exchanges. In asserting this pan-African identity, which can also be termed as an Afropolitan sensibility, Majara attempts to signal that, as a consequence, he can therefore not be deemed to be an exploiter of African art and artists. In the second consideration, an African identity then becomes a convenient cloak that is worn and discarded, as the situation requires. Even more importantly this shows how, in the context of the concerns of this chapter and thesis as a whole, some characters in the postcolonial city that is the subject of Vladislavić's writing are able to assume particular identities as they appropriate space. Identity can therefore not be seen as static or complete because individual can assume particular identities, depending on the socio-economic space they find themselves or aspire to.

Consequent to attending to a phone-call, Majara also has a moment to reflect further on the dialogue in the excerpt above. The short time that elapses between his moment of assertive certainty about Rodger's identity and the rising doubts about whether in fact the vendor was Malawian clearly shows the fluidity in the perceptions and constructions of identity:

> What did a Malawian look like? There had been a Malawian kid at school with him, a couple of classes below, the son of a diplomat – 'from a diplomatic family,' his mother said. Was Freddy Chavula typical? He could hardly remember now what he looked like. The only other Malawian he could picture was Hastings Banda.[169]

(*TEV* 133)

---

[169] Hastings Banda led Malawi to independence from colonial ruler Britain on 4 July 1964, before declaring himself life-president in 1971.

In the quotation above, Majara seems to have retreated from the pan-African posture that I described a few paragraphs before because he is trying to differentiate between people on the basis of the flimsy category of nationality, as portrayed in the question: What did a Malawian look like? However, Majara is more circumspect in this respect than, for instance, Les Budlender is in his description of the Nigerian hawker whom he views through his fractured windscreen at the traffic lights. Expressed in Majara's thoughts is the idea of identity as being an abstract concept as he battles to define anything that is tangibly Malawian about Rodger or Freddy his schoolmate, or even the late former Malawian dictator – Hastings Banda. In describing the "Nigerian", Les Budlender resorts to a false taxonomy where biological features such as "little ears, [that lie] flat against the skull [...] like a hamster" (*TEV* 4) are used as determinants of a person's identity and character. Budlender's descriptions – which are reminiscent of the colonial gaze and taxonomy – take the form of zoological classifications that use physical features to distinguish between the genera of different animal species, whereas in humans such distinctions have become, except in the most extreme cases, very unreliable over time due to migrations and inter-marriage.

In this reading of the 'Curiouser' segment of the text *The Exploded View* my intention has been to show how in the act of self-styling, or otherwise defining notions of the self in the postcolonial cityscape of Johannesburg, Simeon Majara lays bare some of the socio-historical pitfalls attendant on the exercise. These have to do with the premises on which such constructions of identity are dependant and also the fact that individuals in interaction with others have their identities construed and constructed by the people with whom they are in contact. Individuals shape each other's identities in reciprocal fashion.

In the course of stylising himself through his art, other people are also able to construct their own notions of his identity through their responses to his art. I have used the difficulty of finding a universally resonant idiom that adequately reflects, for instance, the Rwandan genocide – by looking at Majara's art and glancing comparatively at the difficulties enunciated by Tadjo in her efforts to render in written words the trauma of the genocide – to show the difficulty of selecting, in general terms, a metaphor of representation. Through the parallel discussions of the almost

imperceptible dichotomies between being African and being black, I illustrated how the terms are not mutually exclusive as highlighted in the instance in which Majara is seemingly confused in referring to himself as black whereas before he has been forthright in declaring that he is African.

6.5 Memory and the "Architecture of Hysteria"[170]

Gordon Duffy is, on the face of it and unlike the three other main characters of the narrative quartet that forms *The Exploded View*, a rather unassuming and dour figure quietly going about the daily business of surviving the city. His demeanour is not immediately eye-catching in the way Les Budlender, Egan and Simeon Majara are. It is almost as if he wishes to remain invisible, not by hiding in the crowd but by keeping away from the streets altogether. Middle-aged Gordon owns a small company that erects billboards, especially at the construction sites of new housing developments. While his trade is not the most lucrative at the scale he carries it out, there is enough work related to the mushrooming developments in and around Johannesburg to keep him busy. As with Budlender, Duffy's experience of the city is largely through his car, as he traverses the veld around the city in executing his work. This kind of mobility introduces different kinds of sensations from the street-level enunciations that are the hallmarks of the flâneur. His story is told to the accompaniment of the traffic news report that regularly filters through on his radio and becomes something of a refrain or chorus that maps not only the congested nodes of the city's major arteries, but also assists individuals like Duffy to negotiate their way round the city, in the physical and metaphorical senses.

The exploded view of the title of the novel literally manifests itself in this section through the use of the actual words (*TEV* 189) and in the figurative sense as a strategy of viewing and gaining an insight on various objects by breaking them down into their constituent parts – a strategy that he adapts from the magazine *Popular Mechanics*:

---

[170] Originally used by Achille Mbembe (2004) and further enunciated as well as utilised in reference to Vladislavić's writing by Shane Graham(2006).

He closed his eyes and began to detach the components of the house one by one as if easing apart a delicate puzzle, finding the sketchy Braille of the plans on the tips of his fingers, reading the bones concealed beneath the coloured skin. He separated board from board, stone from stone.

(*TEV* 189)

There are echoes of Budlender engaging in a similar process of disassembling the security gate at Villa Toscana but Duffy's method is even more sustained and exhaustive. At the heart of Duffy's process is the fact that he is struck by the way things perfectly fit together in *Popular Mechanics*. As a consequence America comes to stand, in his imagination, for a perfect entity. In this yearned for world, everything has a place into which it seamlessly slots and life is thus safely predictable. This is in contrast to the jagged variety that exists in postcolonial Johannesburg, a variety that Duffy ultimately finds to be more threatening than colourful.

Having established that Duffy's strategy of disassembling things is a mechanism for coping with the pressures of the present by invoking a past of perfection and order, I will now examine, within the general rubric of depicting the postcolonial metropolis, the twin themes of remembering and the now. As I demonstrated earlier, especially in Chapter Three with regards to the short stories 'Propaganda by Monuments' and 'The WHITES ONLY Bench', individual characters differently avail themselves of the processes and technologies of memory and remembering in order to articulate their particular understanding of the historical moment of the present, as well as to appropriate certain social and physical space in the emergent postcolonial city. In this connection Duffy's enunciations of the latter evoke a certain kind of poignancy that is not so pronounced in any of the other three principal characters in this text, because he makes no claim to any form of superior wisdom or talent in the manner displayed by the others, or even a character like Aubrey Tearle from *The Restless Supermarket*. In spite of his keen childhood interest in the field of mechanical engineering (as seen in his love for *Popular Mechanics*) he does not grow up to become an engineer but more of a semi-skilled handyman drifting from one job to the next, until (in his 30s) he decides to start his own businesses. For the most part these ventures follow his own early, non-descript

patterns in that they show a lack of focus and specialisation in a particular skill. That is, until he starts erecting billboards. In his uncertainty with the now, he constantly looks back into his past in search for meanings. The postcolonial now is for Duffy a new discursive terrain but the survival skills of the past, which he may not have even fully mastered, prove hopelessly inadequate for the present contingencies. The world of *Popular Mechanics*, with everything neatly assigned its place, I take to be a metaphor for the order of the apartheid city in which everyone knew their place, whereas post-apartheid Johannesburg displays far much more volatile unpredictability than Duffy has the social and mental resources to successfully navigate.

Writing on the poetics of invention in *The Exploded View*, Michael Titlestad and Mike Kissack have rightly pointed to the "two structures of memory" that are discernable in the 'Crocodile Lodge' narrative (2006:17). These are namely, "a recurrent boxing dream in which Duffy compensates for his childhood humiliation at the hands of Wilkie Pieterse by beating him senseless" and "the world of Popular Mechanics." Titlestad and Kissack are generally correct in their conclusions as to how Duffy's memory is structured and operates. However, they misread the text of 'Crocodile Lodge' in their assertion that Duffy is always beating his adversary in the recurrent dreams. This is because the plot alludes to the fact that in the dreams it is Wilkie Pieterse who usually beats Duffy (as was the situation in 'real' life when they met in a boxing match in their boyhood) and not the other way round. It is only in the latest version of the dream that the latter emerges victorious. I would suggest that Titlestad and Kissack's following of the plot in this instance is flawed to the extent that that they suggest that Duffy's dream 'victories' are part of a strategy to compensate for his real-life humiliation. At issue is the interpretative difference between dreams in which he emerges as winner and the dreams, in which he is beaten, save for the one time. If, on the other hand, all the dreams had ended in a Gordon Duffy triumph, only then would it be justifiable for Titlestad and Kissack to see this as a compensatory gesture.

While the dreams are important to the structuring of memory, Titlestad and Kissack's analysis suffers from placing too much emphasis on the outcome, an outcome which – in my opinion – they have misread. The point of emphasis should

rather be on the recurrence of the dream as a measure of how Duffy is preoccupied with a past he is now powerless to change. This fact is buttressed by the revelation by the character that "[t]his was his first victory" and "[i]t left him feeling strangely dissatisfied" (*TEV* 168). Dreams in which he would have constantly conquered would have been the more appropriate gesture of compensation and his disgruntlement with the single 'victory' when it finally comes (as opposed to elation) illustrates how, in my estimation, Duffy is not merely seeking to rid himself of a past humiliation. Rather, the recurrence of the dream points to a level of dissatisfaction with the present, the now of post-apartheid Johannesburg, in which the humiliations of the past seemingly continue to manifest themselves and are replicated.

In a paper on what he describes as the 'Aesthetics of Superfluity'[171] in which Johannesburg is defined as "an African form of metropolitan modernity" (Mbembe 2004: 373), Achille Mbembe states that:

> In the South African context, surfaces such as Montecasino and, to a lesser extent, Melrose Arch represent new genres of writing time. But this new inscription of time is paradoxical. For it to be possible at all, the built form has to be construed as an empty placeholder for meanings that have been eroded by time rather than remembered by it. That is why they are largely the manifestation of the failure of the racial city to assimilate the passage of time. While bearing witness to a demand that the past be forgotten, this architecture asks the spectator to forget that it is itself a sign of forgetting. But in so doing, it reiterates the pathological structure and hysteria inherited from the racial city. This is an architecture of *hysteria*.

(2004:402)

For Mbembe, places like Montecasino and Melrose Arch instantiate, in their reiteration of otherworldly architecture, the notion of wanting to forget the separations of the past. The paradox lies in the fact that while these forms of architecture are meant or designed to show that people can move on from the things which divided

---

[171] First published in a special issue of *Public Culture* (2004) and later as part of an expanded monograph, *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (2008), which is concerned with the difficulty of representing the city. Mbembe co-edits both of these volumes with Sarah Nuttall.

them in the past, the structures become self-evidently contradictory in the sense that in their apartness from other areas of the city, they show that little or nothing has been learnt from the history of the apartheid city. Put simply, the new edge cities represent a new form of economic apartheid as they are designed to be enclaves for an affluent class that figuratively exists in a different world from the poor majority. With respect to Duffy and following on Mbembe's argument above, the recurrent dream represents the failure, at the personal level, "to assimilate the passage of time". The consequence of this failure is a form of hysterics that manifests and is performed at the personal level by Duffy in which the dream represents an inability to constructively mark and integrate the passage of time. This is true, even if Mbembe's article is, to a greater extent, concerned with the physical architecture of the post-apartheid city such as Montecasino and Melrose Arch, which in their evocations of places 'other' than or elsewhere to the specific African context in which they are located represent "new ways of writing time". In the broader context of Vladislavić's writing, Mbembe's analysis is also applicable to 'Villa Toscana' in its rendering of a 'Little Tuscany' on the veld of Johannesburg – a hyperreal simulacrum, because Tuscany as a style does not exist, and thus making Villa Toscana an imagined Italianicity. Duffy's hysteria, as marked by his dream, takes the form of constant and nervous backward glances into the past in search of comfort and meanings that remain unattainable. To a large extent, Duffy is unable to fully inscribe himself into the present because his sojourns into the past (a past which in any event appears to some extent to have been possibly disenchanted) do not yield him the appropriate tools for doing so, that is, to assimilate himself fully into the present.

The second "structure of memory" as identified by Titlestad and Kissack is that of *Popular Mechanics*, a magazine that has been popular with do-it-yourself boffins since the time of Duffy's childhood. The basic premise of the magazine is to instruct its readers about gadgets and technologies by offering pictorial perspectives in which these objects are broken down, or figuratively blown up, into their constituent parts – down to the last nut, bolt and screw – and hence, the exploded view. This world which the young Duffy gets access to through his father's magazines is described by Titlestad and Kissack as a "nostalgic ideal" (2006:17). Gerald Gaylard similarly defines Duffy as "a utopian functionalist who has to face his

own fears in a forbidding new context" (Gaylard 2006:67). The import of both descriptions is that Duffy, as an individual, retrospectively occupies this utopian world in which everything is in its place and "[a]ll it needed was a touch, a prod with the tip of a finger, to shift everything closer together, and a perfect whole would be realized, superficially complete and indivisible" (*TEV* 171). Duffy's problems partially lie in the fact that the order of this world, one in which "surfaces [are] airbrushed to perfection" and are "gleaming with old-fashioned optimism" (*TEV* 171), cannot be used to rationalize the 'new disorders' of the (postmodern) post-apartheid city because the paradigms of the new reality are based on totally different premises to the old, for example that of hybridity, whereas the older framework was one of rationalised separation. Tellingly, he is frustrated by the realisation that the "surgical ability to see how things fitted together" (*TEV* 190) – a skill he had developed through reading *Popular Mechanics* – is an increasingly redundant talent in the contemporary world of the postcolonial metropolis:

> But, in truth, this skill seemed to him increasingly outmoded in the world he lived in. It was no longer clear even to the most insightful observer how things were made or how they worked. The simplest devices were full of components no one could see, processes no one could fathom.

(*TEV* 190)

The new world lacks the predictability to which he is used and thus he is unable to make sense of it. His missing cell phone, for instance, represents a whole that is less than the sum of its parts, as he considers all the possible fates that could have befallen it. This is so because the cell phone has functionality through unseen circuits, networks and infrastructures that lie outside those represented by the interconnections in its physical parts. In the imagination it connects him to all kinds of people and places that are beyond his normal, ordered trajectories. Duffy speculates on "his telephone voice, disembodied and businesslike, speaking out of some thief's pocket" or his "phone lying on a makeshift table in a shack, among four beer bottles and ashtrays" (*TEV* 180). The radio traffic reports that function like a refrain to constantly retrieve him from his reveries and the past, offer panoramic views of the

city but also, in the almost perpetual gridlock that they relate, show how the city does not function in the orderly flows suggested by the *Popular Mechanics* diagrams.

By the time he arrives back at the billboard at Crocodile Lodge to look for his phone, darkness has settled over the veld and he has to search by the light of his car headlamps. In the meantime, four black men disembark from a minibus, which may be the same one encountered by Les Budlender in 'Villa Toscana', and approach with obvious menace as one of them is holding a length of piping. (The four men he had imagined drinking in a shack around his stolen phone transform from dream to reality.) Their calm approach to rob him transfixes him and he is literally like a hare caught in the headlights of a car as he stands in the light cast by his own truck. I read this hare-in-the-headlights moment as a poignant metaphor for the imaginative paralysis that seems to afflict the majority of the white characters. The beating, when it comes, restages the childhood humiliation at the hands of Wilkie Pieterse in Duffy's inability to defend himself, or otherwise take any kind of evasive action. There is no chorus like that of the traffic report to forewarn him of the imminent danger and the irony is that "with every blow he felt like himself" (*TEV* 201). The paradox of this violence lies in the fact that it is only through this medium that Duffy gets a strange sense of affirmation in, and affinity with the present, and thus welcomes it. In a strange way the beating becomes a catalyst for his recuperation.

6.6 Conclusion

The four protagonists in the different narrative threads of *The Exploded View* are individuals who are struggling with notions of self-definition in post-apartheid city Johannesburg. In the context of Ivan Vladislavić's oeuvre and his representation of the postcolonial metropolis, the imaginative terrain has shifted again from the inner city and Hillbrow to the peripheries of the city as represented by the suburban enclaves (Villa Toscana) and the townships (Hani View). As the terrain has shifted, so have urban practices, the result being that there is less emphasis on the pedestrian enunciations of city life that are seen in *The Restless Supermarket*, and more focus on a city that is much more dispersed, disjointed and motorised. So, in a way, Vladislavić's work itself is moving in form and time too. This urban sprawl increasingly manifests across postcolonial Johannesburg as a symptom of white anxiety about the socio-political transformation that the city undergoes.

For the central characters in the four narratives, the process of spatialising their identities in the emerging postcolonial city results in different levels of alienation. This sense of isolation is more keenly felt by Les Budlender, Egan, Simeon Majara and Gordon Duffy, than perhaps by most of Vladislavić's previous fictive urban characters. Paradoxically, the social and historical realities of the postcolony are less certain than the ossified delimitations of the apartheid past where individuals could proceed with greater assuredness of their 'place' in the hierarchy of the divided city, whether that 'place' was one of predetermined privilege or privation. These divisions have not magically disappeared but the characters, largely aware of the pressing new priorities, attempt to fashion and negotiate multitudinous new pathways of appropriating space and being in the city. The impediments to the successful outcome of this process lie chiefly in the arena of misconception – misconception about the terrain or ground on which actions are spatialised; misconception about defining the 'self' by respective individuals; and misconception about the tools and idioms of urban practice necessary for the creative engagement with the postcolonial city.

In the final analysis, the disillusionment and alienation that accompany the process of integration of the divided city, graphically illustrate the complex nature of the postcolonial city as an urban form and how it 'resists' representation, especially through the cold logic of rationality. The characters remain avatars, shadows of their potential selves. This is not to imply a notion of unified subjectivity or of the self – because that is not possible. Rather, the characters remain avatars or shadows because they express a truncated sense of agency resulting from their strained relation to the emergent urbanity.

7 Chapter Six: Portrait of the [Im]possible City

7.1 Introduction

Prior to the publication of *Double Negative* (2011), which also goes back into his earlier years, *Portrait with Keys: Joburg & what-what* (2006)[172] represented Ivan Vladislavić's most autobiographical writing and in this way the book constitutes a problematising of the representation of the city of Johannesburg by the author in ways that the previous five texts did not necessarily (overtly) do.[173] The personal voice is privileged in this melange of fragments that simultaneously hint at conflation of the life (writing) of the author and the history of the city, yet at the same time they still disavow the idea of chronological and historical relativity. The multiple narratives of *Portrait with Keys* represent an attempt to recount the individual's experience and definition of what the city means to him, but without the neat logical progression of narration that marks many life-stories or autobiographies. The vignettes that make up the outwardly disjointed narratives reflect the spatial and temporal segmentation of the city. The text is as close to a self-portrait as Vladislavić has come in any of his prior work that was discussed in the preceding chapters, but is nonetheless not the final word that he has, or can say, about a city which seems to preoccupy his mind (almost to the extent of obsession, if one considers the sheer volume of writing that Vladislavić has produced on the city). The several mentionings in this text of Charles Dickens' "love affair" with the city of London therefore serve to underline the writer's own devotion to Johannesburg.

As a self-portraiture, the text's trope of self-writing is enhanced by the use of the journal or diary format in which the reader is directly addressed and invited to experience the city in the ways in which the writer remembers it. The reader becomes implicated in the imagining and writing of this city. Though they are mostly

---

[172] Published overseas as *Portrait with Keys: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked* which, in light of the outcomes of the text, sounds like an overly hopeful and ambitious version of the title.

[173] As explained in the introductory chapter, at the conception of the project *Double Negative* had not been published and it is purely for the structural reason of tracing and mapping what I coin as Vladislavić's representational continuum of the postcolonial metropolis that I have eschewed discussion of this latest text at this stage. It is, however, earmarked as an object of postdoctoral study.

without specific dates (as would be found in a diary for instance), the fragments create the effect of being nuggets of consciousness about the city and its myriad spaces as experienced by Vladislavić. His musings about city and life typically run the gamut from art to architecture to literature to crime and politics, and also touch on the generic in-between spaces. The entries are shards of personal reflection and sometimes serve to overlap with or recall some of the writer's earlier published work, for example, through direct references, such as when he refers to the *Missing Persons* transcript or when he mentions his rehearsal of Aubrey Tearle's route[s] in the imagined Hillbrow of *The Restless Supermarket*. Alternatively, there are some oblique connections to spaces and events that have already been made mention of in the earlier fiction about the imagined city, all of which highlight what James Graham (2008) describes as "an ongoing revision in the writing" of Ivan Vladislavić. Graham's notion is made in the context that there are always changes in "the relationship between the city as conceived as a text and as the material of a social imaginary on the one hand, and on the other a self-conscious awareness of the conditions that make it possible to imagine and experience the city in different ways" (2008:333). In similar fashion Lindsay Bremner argues that writing "both destroys the city as a real thing and substitutes an idea to fill this absence" because "[i]t forms the city as an idea, as a mental construct, which then becomes the locus of theoretical or cultural work" (2010:48). The idea of a city that is constantly being re-defined or a "revision-in-progress" echoes the textual Vladislavić's own 'lament' about a fiction (read as city) that continues to unravel just as he is about to grasp and understand it (*Portrait with Keys* 54).[174] In the broader historical context of postcolonialism, Rita Barnard – after Ato Quayson – also refers to the postcolonial as a "work-in-progress" (Barnard 2004:279). A similar configuration can be applied to the conception and representation of the postcolonial city. Writing on the "imaginary potential of representation", Bremner has succintly argued that through representation "we can reformulate a city, reinvent it, distort it, reshape it, turn it inside out and upside down,

---

[174] I have used the fuller quotation as the epigraph to the thesis: "Dickens was blessed to live in a city that offered the walker 'miles upon miles of streets' in which to be lonely and 'warm company' at every turn once his loneliness had been satisfied. Moreover, to live in a city that collaborated enthusiastically in its own invention. I live in a city that resists imagination. Or have I misunderstood? Is the problem that I live in a fiction that unravels even as I grasp it?" Any further page references to *Portrait with Keys* will be marked by the abbreviation *PWK*.

bringing it into view in a particular way" (2010:49). It is in this light that one can propose that *Portrait with Keys* represents to a certain extent an attempted summary, if this is at all conceptually possible, of the ways in which the author imagines and figures the city of Johannesburg in the totality of his writing. But as the authorial voice is keenly aware, such a reduction of the city to its 'essence' is not practically possible. The aforegoing all serve to reiterate the constant theoretical state of questioning or self-examination and nervousness in *Vladislavić*'s writing that I have concluded to be constituting a dialogic postcolonialism.

The theoretical underpinnings and classifications that I use to frame this chapter, as a reading of a locus point along the continuum of Vladislavić's representations of the city of Johannesburg, are varied but not exclusive of each other. In this text, as in the earlier work, there are no clear and artificial boundaries or demarcations in the writer's treatment of the categories of space, race and identity, walking and mapping the city, as well as the peculiar kinds of paranoia that accompanies the occupation of urban space generally.[175] The classification of themes in this section has more to do with organisational convenience and practicality in terms of interpretation, and less to do with the stating of these kinds of separations as ontological fact.[176] This is because, as 'categories' of experiencing and writing the city, they are all closely interlinked and overlapping, to the extent that it is difficult to state with any confidence where one theme (as classification) distinctly ends and another begins. These themes and related concerns have been imagined and re-imagined in the previous fiction by Vladislavić and this present text is therefore an example of what Graham has described above as the possibility to "imagine the [same] city in different ways" (2008:33).

In recent theoretical considerations of the African city in literature and urban studies, two key positions have emerged about the postcolonial urbanity. Both Jennifer Robinson (2009) and James Graham (2008, 2010) recognise these axes (by inference if not by overt articulation) as the dystopian and utopian views about

---

[175] I return here to the ideas of Georg Simmel who describes the individual's experience of urbanity from the perspective of psychological encounters.

[176] Ontological fact because the classification I make is a function of epistemological discrimination, but not an ontological reality.

the African city generally and Johannesburg in particular. Robinson is critical of what she sees as "the deployment of a dystopic narrative structure in contemporary urban studies [which] rests on the assumption that the urban condition in many places is already dystopic" (2009:1). In such visioning and constructions there is no looking forward to a 'brighter' future for the city. Robinson therefore questions whether "some unexamined assumptions" in the genre of urban studies lead to an unwarranted and unquestioning casting of many places in the category of dystopic. With reference to Ivan Vladislavić's writing and using *The Restless Supermarket* for critical illustration, Robinson makes the further postulation that Vladislavić employs a "form of futurism, which we might call anti-dystopia, [which] draws our attention to the intertwining of the past, present and future in the diverse spaces of the city" (2009:2). The implication of this formulation is that Vladislavić, in his writing, does not propose an immanently bleak vision of the future in the way suggested for instance by Mike Davis' theroretical treatise *Planet of Slums* (2006). Davis' vision of third-world cities such as Kinshasa is marked by the active disavowal of "any sense that the dominant informality of poorer cities or the inventiveness of their citizens holds any promise in the face of the formidable forces which lead, apparently inexorably, to a deepening poverty" (Robinson 2009:6). For Davis, then, there is no hope for the future. Bremner, along a similar analytical vein to both Robinson and Graham, generally finds that "what characterises urban space and ways of thinking [about] it" is a sense of "openness, fluidity and hybridity", which then marks Johannesburg as a "city and a discourse defined by spatial openings and lines of flight" (2010:52). Bremner's position is the theoretical middle-ground between what she sees as the "closure" (2010:53) and occlusion associated with the urban discourse of the apartheid years on the one hand, and the "positivist approach" that considers cities as global according to taxonomical processes "that position them within a stratified hierarchy of competing world cities" (2010:60).

The opposite theoretical pole to Mike Davis' apocalyptic-dystopic vision is perhaps best instantiated by Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall's collective and individual work on the notion of Johannesburg, epitomising the postcolonial through its post-apartheid enunciations, as an "aesthetic project", as opposed to "a space of division" (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004). In philosophical tandem in 'The Elusive

Metropolis' project, a special issue of *Public Culture* in 2004, as well as in later critical and essayistic work (Mbembe and Nuttall 2007; and Nuttall 2009), the two urban critics have advocated for generally much more forward/future-looking views of the city - views which do not dwell on the negative legacy of apartheid and division, nor on the class disparities wrought by capitalist accumulation and exploitation. In their formulation of the city always operating "as a site of fantasy, desire and imagination" Mbembe and Nuttall critique some of the vision that was the basis of what became generically known as *protest literature*, as well as the social historiography of the city, which privileges division and separation (2004:356). For them only imagining Johannesburg through the terms of dispossession and spatial exclusion from the apartheid city and polity, amounts to "an important failure in most studies of the city – the failure to speak of the city in terms that warrant comparison with other cities in the world" (2004:356).

As discussed with reference to *The Exploded View* in Chapter Five, Shane Graham (2006) is critical of Nuttall's notion of self-styling, seeing it as an example of de-historicised identity formation. James Graham's 'Ivan Vladislavić and the Possible City' (2008; 2010) utilises a reading of *Portrait with Keys* to offer a critical riposte to the optimism of Mbembe and Nuttall by engaging with the debate of whether indeed Johannesburg is an "aesthetic project" and not a "space of division". Making points that are similar to Robinson's, he also concludes that it is "between two possible cities, the utopian and the dystopian, that we find Vladislavić's literary Johannesburg" (2008:335). The latter Graham thus resolves that the possible city is both an aesthetic project and a space of division. Thematically, the aesthetic city and the possible city do not have to be mutually exclusive. The terminology of a *possible* city is also true as a referent to the local circuits and connections described by the pedestrian journeys undertaken by the text's narrator, and thus recalling Fishman's argumentation (as already cited in earlier chapters) that the city means for the individual, the different places he or she chooses or are able to go to. However, I would like to diverge slightly from the above and propose that Graham's possible city does not lie neatly in-between the dystopic and utopian poles (with the oppositions always perfectly aligned), but rather that the city is marked by irregularities, imperfections and fluctuations. These disjunctures are so prevalent and so variable

as to render the description or imagining of any single "possible city" in the manner narrated by Graham to be inadequate or not fully plausible. In this light, I suggest that these disparities point to the impossibility of the simple and total unlocking of the *meaning* of the city because of the erratic nature of the city, as physical space and social imaginary.

My consideration of the text *Portrait with Keys* focuses on the general rubric of space: social space as conceived through the prism of race and identity, the acts of [un]walking the spaces of the city, as well as the conscious and unconscious locking up – literally and figuratively – of certain private and public spheres of the city. This is done by examining, at various levels, the notions of presences and absences in the formation of post-apartheid urban identities and how these express themselves through appropriation and avoidance of particular spaces. I will also be re-consider (revisit and re-iterate but not necessarily revise) pedestrian, suburban and other enunciations of citiness, as referred to in the earlier chapters, particularly as they refer to the ideas of the city being a post-apartheid Johannesburg, a postcolonial African metropolis. Specifically, I look at the author's self-location in the post-apartheid era. As an autobiographical portrait of an individual's experience of a city, the text of *Portrait with Keys* provokes a number of questions about the representation of the city - questions which recall and reiterate many of the ideas articulated in the earlier chapters of this thesis. By returning to the epigraph (see Introduction chapter) which I highlighted as the central problematic and template for this research, the purpose is to show how the question of representation is to some extent irresolvable in that the encapsulation of the meanings and form of Johannesburg remains largely "elusive", to use Mbembe and Nuttall's (2004) terminology.

7.2 The Limits and Rhythms of Cyclic Space

In their analysis of Henri Lefebvre's seminal work, *The Production of Space* (1991), Mbembe and Nuttall remark how the city "is a space that is not only 'produced' [but] is a space that circulates, that is constantly in motion" (2004:351-2). Using this frame

as a theoretical departure point, I would like to consider how space is "produced" and "circulates" in the literary Johannesburg imagined and conjured by Vladislavić in *Portrait with Keys*, and then relate this analysis to representations of space in some of the earlier parts of his oeuvre. A necessary and logical adjunct to this process is the consideration of the limits and cyclic oscillations of the spaces of the city. These lie at the heart of the various individual's conceptions and appropriations of space, as well as the kind of links they construct in relation to and within it. This rationale also re-evokes, to a certain extent, Michel de Certeau's[177] (1988:116-117) formulation of space as "a practiced place", an articulation which begins by examining the shape and dimensions of the street as designed through urban planning. Up to that point the street remains a geometric expression of the planning process. It remains a geographic place, but is transformed into space by the fact of being acted on by walkers. The place of the street is transmuted into imaginative space by having the practice of walking acted out upon it; as shown in the discussion of space in some of the earlier chapters, the practice of walking produces space.

Space is susceptible to different historical as well as personal imperatives and interpretations, and thus the meanings attached to it change over time. Space is therefore open to manipulation and configuration. An example of such dynamism is shown through the narrator's reminiscence of growing up in suburbia. For the author, his childhood spent in a new suburb in Pretoria is reflected on through the lens of nostalgia as a space and time of simplicity:

> These were the days of the garden variety wire fence, long before the advent of the candy-striped boom and the two-metre wall, when a stranger who had lost his way might hail a man mowing his lawn or tinkering with the engine of car in the driveway.
>
> (*PWK* 13)

The remembered open spaces of childhood in which "the world belonged to us" and "and we were masters of all we surveyed" (*PWK* 13) are immediately contrasted with

---

[177] There are a number of direct and indirect references to the work of Michel de Certeau in *Portrait with Keys*, so much so as to suggest that Vladislavić has a critical and philosophical affinity with the ideas expressed by the French philosopher.

the sense of confinement invoked by the high "two-metre wall". The open space of childhood is markedly different from the closed areas of a more grown-up age. In a related example, the author, who in adulthood lives in the Johannesburg suburb of Kensington which is relatively close to the CBD, comments on the closure of the neighbourhood Marymount Nursing Home:

> The last baby had been born there in June 1997. The number of births had been tapering off for years, as more and more white doctors moved further north, taking their patients with them. People in the northern suburbs no longer believe that a decent person would want to be born on this side of town.

(*PWK* 15)

These two examples above highlight the transience of the meanings of specific spaces over time. The replacement of the garden fence with high-walls changes the relational dynamics between the individual and space and this is rendered in the text through the psychic distinction childhood-adulthood. The changes illustrated by the transformation in use of the Marymount hospital reflect the broader changes in the community, for instance the sense of perpetual flight and migration as the city residents continually seek to appropriate spaces that are not, figuratively, "this side of town". Though the narrator does not dwell on the exact significance or socio-economic symbolism of this imagery, in the context of the post-apartheid city the inference can safely be made that the "white doctors" were among the many affluent classes of people that sought to avoid the social rupture wrought by the end of apartheid. This they did by either closing themselves up behind the "two-metre wall", if not by completely uprooting themselves and relocating into new, often more isolated spaces. Such spaces of isolation are manifest, for instance, in the gated complexes that are the subject of the 'Villa Toscana' narrative thread in *The Exploded View* as described in the previous chapter.

This yearning for a past city of garden-fences, which sounds ironically colonial when taken together with the remembered spaces of childhood above, is also instructive in that it stages the contradictions of the memory of a particular space and the concomitant non-reflection of the authorial voice on the material conditions

that enabled the existence of such places and the practices articulated thereon. Some of these conditions have apparently – in adulthood, in the present – now disappeared or otherwise been altered and thus necessitate different sets of relations between the individuals and the spaces they occupy. One possible way to attempt to untangle this paradox, is to re-formulate the technique, mainly utilised in art, of negative space as the presence of absence, or simply present absence. In art, negative space is used to refer to spaces that surround and exist between the subject (often presumed) of the artistic image, where the supposedly 'empty' (and therefore 'negative') space generates equal, if not more, interest as an artistic shape of an image.[178] In a 1999 interview with Christopher Warnes, Ivan Vladislavić remarks how he often perceives his writing, with its detailed attention to the workings of language, as causing him to "fall through language" and to have a "sense of the mechanics of it all, a particular sensitivity to what the connections are between words" (2000b:278).

This "hyper-awareness of language" is then described as being "analogous to the painter's perception of negative space" (2000b:278). Stefan Helgesson, citing the same interview, refers to the concept of negative space to underline the materiality and visual quality of Vladislavić's language, describing it as "self-consciously staged [...] print performances" (2004:782). Helgesson only limits his interpretation of negative space to the literal, visual model of art. I, however, extend this principle of space to the realm of the figurative and symbolic to show how meaning often lies somewhere in the liminal zones, suggested by Homi Bhabha's (1994) third space analogy, somewhere between or even outside words.[179] The analogy can then be re-configured (or stretched) to refer to the ways in which the imaginative meanings may be read in what remains undescribed, or that about which the narrator remains silent. In this case, the falling through language is manifested in the dark silence of what is not said and the material conditions which enable and disable both the expression of a liberated communality and a siege-like mentality of isolation and

---

[178] Rubin's Vase, an image developed by the Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin in the early 20th century, is one of the most celebrated examples of the use of negative space.

[179] Meaning may be mediated through language but it is also true that when certain words such as the "garden-variety wire fences" are used, depending on the context, other meanings beyond those directly referenced by the uttered/written words are evoked. In this case the enabling context is apartheid.

paranoia, respectively, and in this way it constitutes the present absence. Using this model to enunciate the altering meanings of space, Vladislavić is thus able to describe Johannesburg in terms of what it is not:

> Johannesburg surges and recedes like a tide. I come home with my shoes full of sand, empty my pockets at the kitchen table and pick at the findings. The roar in the air is the absence of water.

<div align="right">(PWK 18)</div>

The ironic marine imagery, ironic for a landlocked city without even a major river, imagines Johannesburg in terms of the sea, in terms of its antithesis, and recalls the utopian ideal conjured by Aubrey Tearle's imagination in *The Restless Supermarket*. Tearle's Alibia is configured as an idyllic city-state which is an island or by the sea. In various guises this conceptual negative space/present absence construct is repeated in a number of contexts in *Portrait with Keys*.

Just as much as space can be produced, it can also be appropriated and acted upon. Apartheid attempted to regulate the different races and ways in which people related to specific areas of the city and one of the present absences that replaces the departed white doctors is the figure of the "neighbourhood's first street-corner hawker" (*PWK* 19). He represents a different kind of entrepreneurial spirit by appropriating space that is outside the regulated zone of the neighbourhood shopping centre. His ethic, something akin to what Rita Barnard (2004) has referred to as "survival entrepreneurship" in her analysis of the figure of the Professional Mourner in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*, pioneers new ways of being in the city, of being in the locale of Kensington by pushing the boundaries of the 'proper' utilisation of specific spaces. Under the hawker's influence, suburban space proves to have elasticity and he is soon to be followed by a cobbler who sets himself up beside the steps leading up to the neighbourhood's Gem Supermarket. The hawker is an innovator in the same way that Mda's Toloki is, but is also at the same time a contradiction. While he displays his adaptability to the changes in the city environment, he also has a tenuous relationship with the space he occupies because of his limited resources and the fact that he has to operate outside the regulations. Each night, both hawker and cobbler have to presumably cart off their wares to their

places of residence (probably a township) outside Kensington. They cannot relate to the suburb in the same manner as the narrator does because of their daily migrations into and out of the area. The township, epitomised by Soweto, is the unknowable place to which the black population of the city recedes overnight. In the earlier texts by Vladislavić, especially in *The Folly*, it only manifested itself as a place of violent eruption as it is portrayed in the TV news reports of "unrest". In *The Restless Supermarket* the central figure, Aubrey Tearle, conceives of it through images of darkness and absence, as it is an unimaginable elsewhere that he only knows through second-hand accounts and chance encounters with some of the people who live there. But the hawker and cobbler's daily migrations out of the suburb at the end of each day also show how space is constantly contested in the city. The hawker leaves behind the trampled earth where his makeshift stall stands during the day, thus reminding us of his itinerant occupation of that space, while the cobbler's detritus are the "black crosses and arrows, sprinklings of rubber filings from the past day's work, which have stencilled the corners of boxes and crates on the cement paving, [and] still mark the space as his" (*PWK* 35). Again, we have the illustration of the present absence.

The hawker and cobbler represent the infusion of the township into the largely white and middle-class space of the Kensington suburb. In a 2007 article, written in the style of a travelogue, Nuttall and Mbembe describe the outcome of this process thus:

> The city is now a complex mélange of city and township, and the township increasingly occupies, even as it is remade by, the city. This is one reason why one architect recently referred to Johannesburg as a township metropolis.
>
> (2007:281)

This analysis presents an interesting set of contradictions in that the township is figured in some urban writing as being somehow not of the city, whereas in truth it is the result of colonial and apartheid urban policy and development in which black labour was to be housed on locations at the fringes of the "city". The difficulty arises out of the reliance on the older (western) definitions of citiness and can be resolved

by treating the townships as new forms of expression of urbanism, similar to the growth of suburbia and 'edge' cities. The question is whether the township is the most dominant way of being in, or experiencing this postcolonial city – a problematic that preoccupies the number of essays in (eds.) Edjabe and Pieterse's (2009) *African Cities Reader*. The township, with its social and cultural referents as a black space, is thus the 'other' city, a version of Johannesburg that is virtually unknown by the narrator and his fellow white residents of Kensington. Their universe of the city is a truncated vision of being in the postcolonialising metropolis, at least until they are exposed to other diverse cultures and ways of being in the city. At all levels, the physical and psychic, cityscapes are increasingly contested spaces as the hawker and cobbler show when they stage their informality in the ordered space of suburbia.

Another hint at the impending changes of the suburban space comes in the form of the painting of a Ndebele design on the garden wall at No. 10 Blenheim Street.[180] The design transforms the garden wall from merely being a structure of security to one in which the vertical dimensions of the wall become space for the staging or articulation of new identities. While his friend dismisses the painting as "kitsch", the narrator thinks it "suited the early nineties perfectly: Africa was coming to the suburbs in the nicest possible way" (*PWK* 25). This presence of "Africa" on the garden wall is seen as benign, innocuous and the narrator actually fears that "some racist would deface it". The painting and the different characters' reactions to it further problematise the notion of the presence of an *African* city alongside and or within a proper or white (European) city. The term Africa is not fully reflected upon in the text and does not have its possible meanings elaborated on and drawn out. The narrator does not seem to have a clear conception of what it means to be African or to live in an African metropolis. It is therefore not clear whether the term is used as stereotype, referring to Africa as the expression of a state of cultural and social backwardness, or whether Kensington or Johannesburg is configured as a place apart from the rest of Africa. This is an important point to consider because it goes a long way towards defining the individuals' relations to the spaces of the city,

---

[180] The narrator also makes reference to the advertising campaign by BMW as part of which a BMW 525 is coated in Ndebele colours. For Vladislavić, this is "a striking symbolic moment in the invention of the new South Africa [because] a supposedly traditional indigenous culture [was] laying claim to one of the most desirable products our consumer society had to offer" (*PWK* 24).

especially in terms of notions of belonging and having an affinity for the city. In "coming to the suburbs in the nicest possible ways", the Ndebele mural – as a version of Africanness – represents an unobjectionable presence that does not destabilise the physical space and social imaginary that is the white suburb. Conceptually, it is the antithesis of the figure of the black criminal, a figure I discuss in greater detail later in this chapter in the section on the spatialising of racial identities, as well as that on confinement and negative space.

The narrations of the space of the city centre in *Portrait with Keys* are equally enthralling, as they also reflect the nature of Johannesburg as a city in perpetual transition. As a young man still living in Pretoria, the narrator and his high-school friend would travel to the high-rise office-blocks of the Johannesburg CBD to market telephone dixies invented by his friend's father. The Carlton Centre is from an era when the buildings in the centre of the city reflected the concentration of financial power there, before the age of dispersal when edge cities such as Rosebank and Sandton emerged out of the urban sprawl, and thus signalled the shifts in the power dynamics of the city. These shifts are later echoed in the 'flight' of the white doctors and others of similar class from places like Kensington in the first decade of democracy as discussed above. His ascent to the top floors of the Carlton Centre affords the young Vladislavić a vertical, panoramic perspective on the city:

> I began to relish the moments when the person whose precious time I was wasting would leave the room to attend to more pressing concerns, so that I could stand before the window and look down at the immensity of the city, assured that even a hawker of telephone dixies could occupy the centre of it all.

> (*PWK* 27-8)

The writer's view and experience of the city from a point of extreme elevation gives him "a sense of the unnatural beauty of Johannesburg" and informs his resolution to seek his fortune in the streets below (*PWK* 28). This experience mirrors de Certeau's (1988) theorisation that the city may be seen from both vertical and horizontal plateaux, and that the view from the top of a (New York) skyscraper tries to reduce the city into an essence, a totalisation, a map. But as de Certeau rightly points out,

the "ordinary practitioners of the city live down [in the streets] below" (1988:93) and it is fitting Vladislavić seeks to make his living there.

The hawking practices of the "first hawker" in Kensington and the boys trying to sell the telephone dixies represent different kinds of practices (by different itinerant merchants), even if the basic principle of selling involved is the same, because the street-side hawker and the white boys occupy diverse social spaces and are driven by different economic exigencies or imperatives. This results in them experiencing their respective spaces of practice in different ways. The hawker is limited to the space on the chosen street corner whereas the young Vladislavić and his friend have the advantage of being allowed access into the inner sanctums of the corridors of commerce. The former is more reliant on chance and passing trade while the latter are able to directly market their wares. The street trade does, however, also have the potential benefit of unpredictability in that people on the street are more likely to make random purchases than would be the case in the more formal setting of corporate environments.

In its earlier manifestations, the Carlton Centre is described as a bustling labyrinth of offices and shops, both above and below street level. It is a space of "pleasurable consumption", a cornucopia bearing testimony to the city's pretensions to capitalist modernity. The availability of parking space in the nearby parkade charts the economic fortunes of the centre and the city centre generally. The author is able to map these changes because, for a time, he and his brother Branko meet there monthly for coffee and are therefore able to witness and plot the transformations that the various spaces of the centre undergo over a fifteen year period. Over time, the coffee shops assume a number of guises and he is able "to chart the life and death of this great complex" through these changes (*PWK* 28). Similarly, in the mid-nineties the demand for parking wanes and it is "like a barometer of change in the city centre" and he realises that "[t]he people with cars were clearly going elsewhere" (*PWK* 29). Eventually some of the shops and offices are abandoned for suburban malls like Illovo and Eastgate but the centre, though testifying to the decentring of the city and the deterioration of the inner city precinct, remains a space haunted by the memories of its former glory.

A related but different sort of haunting sometimes occurs when people move out of spaces that they had occupied for extended periods. Eddie is a former close neighbour of the narrator's who had sold his house in Roberts Avenue and moved to Germiston. Generally, the places that all who leave the suburb go to remain unnamed in the text, except in Eddie's case and that of Chas who not only changed suburbs but completely uprooted himself from the city and went all the way to Cape Town, driven mainly by perceptions of its better safety. On his return to his erstwhile neighbourhood six months after selling his house, Eddie displays a high level of uncertainty:

> He's looking up and down Blenheim Street, walking up a step or two downhill and then hurrying back up again. Homing. [...] Up and down, up and down. His pacing is like paging; he has lost his place in the world.
>
> (*PWK* 69-70)

These cyclic perambulations in the Kensington streets, however brief and misdirected in their futility, emphasise the intangible attachments that people develop to particular spaces. They can also be contrasted to the author-narrator's own relaxed walks through the same streets, thus illustrating the different ways in which the two individuals relate to the physical and imaginative space of Kensington. Vlad, as the protagonist names himself in the text, does so with calm assuredness for the most part, while Eddie is a lot more furtive and unsure because the structures of belonging to this space have been altered and remain largely at the level of the imagined. The meaning of the house (which both the narrator, and later, Eddie himself still consider to belong to the latter) and the neighbourhood, as a whole, to Eddie is inscribed in the act of returning and remembering what the place signified at the personal level. Eddie's hesitant and initially faltering steps underline the sense of loss and emptiness; emptiness because the new space to which he has moved does not resonate with him in the manner of the old. He still speaks of the avenue in terms of endearment and attachment – "there isn't a finer street in Joburg than Roberts Avenue" – but he can do no more than wistfully remember a space that once was, but is now confined to memory: "My garden is not looking so good" (*PWK* 70). The futility of the remark is stressed in the forlorn figure he cuts as he views "his" garden from across the street. Michel de Certeau has claimed that "[h]aunted places are the

only ones people can live in" (1988:108).[181] The haunting of old spaces described here is important in drawing out the psychological links between the individual and space, especially where space has been 'lost' and appropriated. Eddie has come back to 'haunt' the old places and his actions have the effect of posing the question of whether we can ever leave our pasts behind or whether we always return to them. He is so emotionally invested in and attracted to the old house that he still speaks of it as his. The spaces of the past continue to endure in the present, in the psyche of the now. In his 'neglect' of the garden, the new owner of the house strangely marks the property as his as well by expressing a different, if negative kind of agency over the same space.

Returning to the figure of the hawker-cobbler as a practitioner of survival entrepreneurship in the space of the city, one can notice how he occupies something of a middle ground in terms of how he appropriates space through his informal practices. Lying at the extreme ends of this configuration are, on one end, "the street people – we did not call them 'the homeless' in those days – the tramps, car parkers and urchins" at the one end (*PWK* 38). The other end is occupied by what Dave, a historian and acquaintance of the narrator, describes as a "hunter-gatherer" class that is in ascendancy to the extent that "African cities everywhere are filled with roamers, intent on survival, plucking what they can at the roadside" (*PWK* 38). The homeless constitute a class who utilise the society's cast-offs and salvage other material remains of the city to fashion an existence. The hunter-gatherers are more pro-active and do not wait for things to be thrown away but rather actively hunt for anything they can carry away like car-wheels and unsecured garden furniture. This last group's practices can be classified more as petty crime in comparison to the acts of invasive burglars who violate the most personal space of their victims and haunt the dreams of the residents of suburbia. The street people especially, then, use the resources of their environment – the urban space – to attempt to ameliorate their personal circumstances of abjection. As Louise, another friend of the writer, points out to him, this class often occupies the physical and figurative subterranean strata

---

[181] Vladislavić uses this quotation as the epigraph to 'Point A', the first of three parts into which the text is divided.

of the cityscape, utilising drains and manholes as storage and, sometimes if they are big enough, even as living space:

> There was a maze of mysterious spaces underfoot, known only to those who could see it. And this knowledge turned them into the privileged ones, made them party to something in which we, who lived in houses with wardrobes and chests of drawers, and ate three square meals a day could not participate.
>
> (*PWK* 50)

The coming into view of this subterranean level, which for the author happens only gradually (he only physically discovers the plausibility of what Louise suggests to be happening ten years later when he opens the cover of the water mains outside his own house), ties in with Mbembe and Nuttall's (2004) postulation that:

> [o]ne of the characteristic features of a metropolis is an *underneath* [...] in other words beneath the visible landscape and the surface of the metropolis, its objects and social relations are concealed in other orders of visibility, other scripts that are not readable to the built form, the house facade, or simply the street experience of the metaphorical figure of the flâneur.
>
> (2004:333-334)

The *underneath* does not subsist only in the material physicality of the city as manifest in manholes and drains, but also on the more abstract plane of the social and cultural, of ways of being in the city that have to do with or subvert the received notions of citiness. In other words, the below-the-surface enunciations of the city are present both in terms of the literal and the imaginative.

In the Introduction I stated that the postcolonial city that Vladislavić is imagining comprises more than just the brick and mortar edifices, or the various institutions of exchange and control or regulation. Rather, the city is defined also by people who, as individuals and collectively, live and affect or are affected by the city in return. It is in the exchanges and interactions between people that much of what may be inscribed as abstract and invisible about urbanity lies. This formulation is articulated, interpreted and reiterated in different ways by a number of

commentators. It brings to mind for instance Filip de Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart's (2004) interpretation of Kinshasa as the invisible city in the sense that:

> ...in a city like Kinshasa, it is not, or not primarily, the material infrastructure or the built form that makes the city a city. The city, in a way, exists beyond the architecture [...] the infrastructure and architecture that function best in Kinshasa are almost totally invisible on a material level.

(2004:233-235)

Similarly, in postcolonial theorist AbdouMaliq Simone's (2004) theorisations on Johannesburg and other postcolonial cities, it is the people themselves who are the infrastructure of the city. These related views all point towards the enabling of sets of relations between individuals and the space they occupy in the cityscape that allow for the manifestations of various kinds of survival entrepreneurship, as highlighted above. Homi Bhabha's (1994) Third Space analogy can also be fruitfully engaged with in this context because of its idea of liminal zones in which various practices that are outside the ambit of the conventional wisdom may find expression.

Not every citizen of Johannesburg is reliant upon these kinds of desperate resourcefulness to 'survive' the city. Others, such as the textual Vladislavić, exist at more aspirational levels where they are able to more freely indulge in some of the city's offerings in terms of cultural and social capital and leisure. Following and building from Fishman's proposition that the various destinations of each individual or family in the city come to represent what "the city" is or means for the respective individual and family, I suggest there are select spaces which constitute the defined city for Vladislavić in *Portrait with Keys*.[182] The narrator's experience of the space of the city library and its precincts, as retold in the last few sections of the book, encapsulates some of the stark contradictions inherent in Johannesburg as a postcolonial city, thus recapitulating the notion (mentioned in the introductory section to this chapter) that there are ways that, as a conundrum, the city may seem irresolvable, socially as well as epistemologically. In this text, the narrative device of township 'unrest' or protests, so ubiquitously present in the fictional television news

---

[182] Also elaborated on in the Introduction. These are ideas from *Megalopolis Unbound* (1995), Robert Fishman's essay on the polycentricity of the modern metropolis.

of the 'pre-democracy' texts is, in this representation of the city post-apartheid, apparently supplanted by the trade union demonstrations. And these occur at the city hall – the symbolic centre of the city – whereas the political demonstrations of the apartheid days were mainly confined (by brute force) to the townships. On this particular day, striking security guards are massed in the gardens of the library, and the author who is blissfully unaware of this, declines the opportunity to pass from the parking garage directly into the library (and thus avoiding the agitated crowd) because he would not "go sneaking up the back stairs like a thief" (*PWK* 191). To the contrary, he wishes "to approach the library along a city street like an ordinary citizen, passing from the company of people into the company of books" (*PWK* 191). In this instance he represents something of Edgar Allan Poe's version of the flâneur, "someone who does not feel comfortable in his own company" and thus "seeks out the crowd".[183]

There is a strange sense of familiarity about the faces that surround him: "There are security guards everywhere in Joburg, and now they look like people I have seen before" (*PWK* 192). Trying to remember the categories of crowd "devised by [Elias] Canetti", he wonders what kind of crowd it is.[184] It is certainly not the kind he can, in flâneur-like fashion, merge into and disappear but rather one from which he is set apart due to race and the fact that the guards are all in various shades of uniform. He stands out and instead of anonymous observation of the crowd from within it, the gaze is quickly reversed and he finds himself increasingly the subject of passing glances:

Strangers kept catching my eye, casing my white features. No doubt they were wondering what the hell I'm doing here.

(*PWK* 193)

---

[183] Poe paraphrased in Walter Benjamin (1983:48).

[184] Elias Canetti (the Bulgarian-born 1981 Nobel Laureate for Literature) distinguished five categories of crowds based on what he calls their emotional content. These are the baiting, flight, prohibition, reversal and feast crowds. The exact nature of these classifications (see Canetti's *Crowds and Power*, 1962[trans]:48-63) are not the principal concern of the thesis at this point. However, the mention of the crowd by the narrator shows what one may term the double-reflexivity of Ivan Vladislavić's 'writing' the city in the whole of his oeuvre, in that in the process of rendering his representations of the city he is also constantly enquiring into the nature of citiness. The crowd is a prominent feature of the urbanscape and he (Vladislavić) simultaneously fictively imagines it while also theorising it.

The crowd suddenly erupts into unregulated and tumultuous waves of fleeing and falling humanity as the riot police arrive in the gardens to break up the demonstrations. The writhing and heaving mass carry onlookers, vendors and strikers in random directions. In the time that it takes the police to clear the plaza, the library gardens for a moment re-enact a war zone. When the frontlines of the strikers and the law-enforcers initially collide there is a brief moment when the security guards threaten to over-run them. The clash between police and strikers is the physical embodiment of the notion of the city as contested space. Different individuals or groups seek to appropriate space and express their peculiar kind of agency over it. The contest between the two here is a speeded-up dramatisation of a longer process of attrition that often marks competing relations in the city. It is like the images of blooming flowers or unfurling clouds that are taken through time-lapse photography and then shown in a few seconds. The narrator soon escapes from the pandemonium to find refuge in the sanctum of the library where he joins other "innocent bystanders" and "[m]y kind of people" (*PWK* 194). Like him, these had been allowed to enter the library unhindered before the doors were again quickly shut against the continuing chaos outside. The expression of affiliation with "my kind of people" raises several important questions in terms of the affinities shared with the people in the library, which he did not share with security guards. These have to do with what makes him a part of one group and not of the other, as well as at what point and why he stops simply being "in the company of people", requiring instead to be in the company of "my kind of people".

In the first chapter I referred to Sarah Nuttall's (2009) definition of entanglement in partial explanation of the encounters between individuals in urban spaces. To re-iterate, for Nuttall,

> [e]ntanglement is a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored or uninvited. It is a term which may gesture towards a relationship or set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also implies human foldedness.

(2009:1)

The incident at the library illustrates some of the limits of entanglement as a rationalisation of the relations between individuals. When Vladislavić arrives upon the scene he feels himself to be in the company of people, in fellowship with these strangers with whom he shares a common humanity. However, when the violence breaks out he quickly seeks out and finds refuge amongst his "kind of people". In this case, then, entanglement is a limited paradigm because it does not sufficiently account for the readiness with which, in one moment the narrator accepts implication in a common, undifferentiated sense of universal people-hood, while in the very next moment he reverts to a specific and distinct type or kind. The affiliations he felt he shared with the crowd are too readily shed in a gesture that contradicts the principle of entanglement. Intimacy might have been briefly attained but entanglement, with its suggestion of an irrevocably entwined common fate, is not.

A possible explanation or even way around this theoretical problem lies in the image of slipping and sliding, in which urban characters sometimes come into contact without the establishment of any kind of intimacy, at least not always in the manner described by Nuttall. In coming into contact they do not become irrevocably "entwined" or ensnared, but rather momentarily negotiate space as well as routes around each other, before slipping past in their different directions, to different itineraries – both literally and figuratively. The mayhem that has spilled to the streets surrounding city hall, is just a temporary distraction and the narrator is still able to clear his mind and quickly "settle down to work" in the library, even if the air seeping from outside is reeking of teargas and conflict. Ultimately, the separateness of the world of the security guard and that of the writer could not have been more distinctly emphasised. In the event, entanglement is a somewhat optimistic proposition and clearly emanates from both Nuttall and Achille Mbembe's philosophical ethos of regarding the city as an aesthetic work-in-progress.

The production and appropriations of space are key features of citiness because, essentially, the city is a place of practice or practiced place. The limits and ways of circulation of the physical and imaginative spaces of the city are influenced by how different people imagine and interpret them, and they are often the staging grounds for bouts of nostalgia and memory. This haunting of the spaces of the city (the act of looking back) occurs in spite of the general premise of the postcolonial city as a

place of forward-looking. The principle of negative space (echoing the notion of the absent-present) is a key tool for insinuating into the imaginary that which is not overtly present or remains unsaid. In *Portrait with Keys* the township is one such instantiation of negative space in its being 'there' without literally being so. The transformation of the cityscape is marked by gestures of flight from and migration into particular spaces, and these flows are complemented by acts of survival entrepreneurship by individuals who transcend the limits inflicted by social and political regulation. The idea of the invisible city can then be utilised to [185]explain the negative space as the invisible city, or the socio-cultural practices of some of the city's residents that are not solely reliant on the materiality of the city, on the city as physical space. In the final analysis, the limits of the paradigm of entanglement point to the difficulties in unfurling the city as a complete representation because not all kinds of relationships in the city can be rationalised and accounted for.

7.3 Space and Race: Writing Blackness Into and Out of the City

While this thesis is mindful of not using race in an overly-deterministic way in its reading of the inscription of identity in the space of the postcolonial city - something that both Mbembe and Nuttall have consistently warned against - it is at the same time difficult not to notice how the racial divisions of the past continue to manifest themselves with varying intensity in the now of post-apartheid Johannesburg. In *Entanglements* (2009) Nuttall mentions race and "racial inflection" but does not proceed far enough in theorising the flows and directions of racial "flight" from the Johannesburg CBD, in her analysis of Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*. She rightly argues that there are new kinds of cultural practices (especially in the city's artistic enclaves like Newtown, I would suggest) which begin to point to the possibility of "other models of reading" that are not based solely on the "surface"/"underneath" (Nuttall 2009:86) dichotomies of racial division. But I propose that it is, at the same time, difficult to envision a democratic polity in all aspects of the city's life, in which

---

[185] That is to say, race is not viewed as the sole determinant of the process of fashioning and expressing identity in postapartheid Johannesburg.

such racially coded forms of expression and experience have been completely elided - at least not in the now of the generation of people that Vladislavić is narrating about in *Portrait with Keys*, but perhaps at a time in the future when the social consequences and benefits that arise from the mere factor of belonging to a particular race group have been narrowed in general terms.

The suburban Johannesburg (epitomised in the text by Vladislavić's Kensington) and the inner city (Hillbrow in *The Restless Supermarket* and Phaswana Mpe's *Welcome To Our Hillbrow*) are two different kinds of space in which the social constructs of whiteness and blackness are differently inscribed. In the first instance, the post-apartheid Kensington described by Vladislavić in *Portrait with Keys* is still essentially a white space in which black identities are an intrusive presence which does not belong, whereas in the second (in Hillbrow) blackness is found to be dominant. In terms of race, the city resists representation in both Vladislavić and in the analyses of some of the major critics because of the limitations of the reflections made on what it really means to be black or white in the context of the postcolonial city. The most pertinent question in this regard is that of the peculiar responsibilities, actions and attitudes that are inferred by each label. In his 2000 'Interview' with Christopher Warnes, Vladislavić alludes to his despair about the running-down of the city-centre (an ironic accompaniment to the racial transformation of its space) but at the same time expresses a sense of satisfaction that "the conditions that made it possible for the city center to thrive" are over (Warnes 2000b:279). He further adds that he wishes he "lived in a society that's somewhat much more transformed than it is" (2000b:279).

The textual evidence of the slow pace of change lies in his representation of Kensington, as well as of other areas of his fictional writing. In the six texts under consideration in this thesis there are only two significant black characters, Boniface Khumalo in the short story 'Propaganda by Monuments' and Simeon Majara who is at the centre of the 'Curiouser' narrative in the novel *The Exploded View*. The question of Vladislavić's own point of view as a 'white' writer imagining and narrating the postcolonial metropolis is reflected in what can be termed a certain tentativeness in his characterisations of the black urban subject. In spite of his obvious inventiveness, Boniface Khumalo is too close to the stereotypical view of the

uneducated but politically connected black figure that is given further expression in characters such as the corrupt (by inference) council officials Bhengu and Mazibuko that the white Egan has to deal with in 'Afritude Sauce' (*The Exploded View*).[186] As noted in the previous chapter, Mazibuko is essentially a caricature and his foregrounding in the narrative raises questions as to whether such a personality as his typifies the post-apartheid black city-dweller. This is not to suggest that such figures are inconceivable but rather that by privileging such representations of blackness, the author unconsciously reverts to stereotype.

One of the key periods in Vladislavić's own life is the time he spent in the 1980s as an editor at the *Staffrider* literary magazine, published by Ravan Press from 1977, with the express purpose of bringing into the limelight those voices of individuals and communities that were outside the mainstream.[187] In the beginning, the magazine exclusively published literary and cultural articles by black writers but in the 1980s they drew from a multi-racial spectrum of authors. I raise this point here to show that Vladislavić cannot be justifiably accused of elitism, because – in his own words to Warnes (2000) – "for a rather long time - six or seven years" he was at the coalface of the literary and cultural encounter between black and white critical engagement with the imagined city. He adds that these years were crucial to his "whole sense of the world" (2000:274). It is with a certain amount of surprise then that one notices the complete absence of any reference to these *Staffrider* years in the biographical account that is *Portrait with Keys*. In light of this progressive gesture at knowing the 'other' that *Staffrider* represents, the absence of fully grounded black urban characters in his own writing, except for the caricature/stereotype (Khumalo, Bhengu or Mazibuko) or the seemingly deracinated and essentially 'white' Simeon Majara, is problematic in terms of imagining the postcolonial city. This absence either points to the difficulty of imaginatively transcending the limits of race as a literary writer, or it could be a way (intentionally or not) of bringing into question the present

---

[186] See also Zakes Mda's (2009) Black Diamond for a satirical look the age of the politically connected entrepreneur in South Africa.

[187] Irikidzayi Manase's 2007 PhD Thesis entitled *"From Jo'burg to Jozi": A Study of the Writings and Images of Johannesburg from 1980-2003* describes at length the historical background of the Staffrider magazine and through analysis of some of the articles, charts the magazine's location in the canon of imagining and writing the city of Johannesburg.

position of privilege that the white subject continues to enjoy as a legacy of apartheid. The lack of knowledge (or acknowledgement) of the 'other' in this case leads to a version of myopia, itself a companion or parallel structure to the "hysteria" or "*regressive forgetfulness*" that Achille Mbembe describes in 'Aesthetics of Superfluity' (2004:402). This gesture is myopic or short-sighted in that it looks for the meaning of the city only in the forms of the city that are close and already familiar to it, while ignoring the more distant and stranger articulations of the same.

In *Entanglements* Sarah Nuttall merely hints at the "racial inflection" of the urban spaces by pointing out its presence in the fabric of the postcolonial city but, like Vladislavić, she is tentative in considering its fuller implications in the writing of Johannesburg. For instance when she alludes, with reference to *Portrait with Keys*, to the "present-absent figure" as "that of the criminal" (2009:89) there is no elaboration on the racial codes at play in defining the space of Kensington as white and the potentially intrusive criminal, against whom suburban space is to be defended, as black. Beside the criminal element, the black presence in Kensington is announced in terms that are not very auspicious. Along with the pioneering hawker and cobbler, the black people who actually move into a neighbourhood house are soon revealed or, more accurately, thought by Branko to be prostitutes,[188] who use the house as brothel. This smattering[189] of blacks constitutes a negative presence and re-ignites the fear that has caused the majority of the white population to avoid the city centre, a space the latter now largely by-pass in their cars but visit only sporadically either to go into the city library or to research material for books, as Vladislavić does in *Portrait with Keys* to get a sense of Tearle's Hillbrow. In one part of the text the narrator recounts a stage in his and Minky's life together when they packed up all their belongings in storage and left the country. Rather cryptically, he does not say where they went, for how long and why they left in the first place. All we

---

[188] When "the tenants of 32 Albemarle Street" were suddenly evicted, the narrator "counted ten double beds, and not much else" (*PWK* 52).

[189] Nuttall claims in *Entanglements* that many of the narrator's neighbours are black but that begs the question as to why the white residents all seem to react with surprise and discomfort if there is already a significantly high proportion of black residents. To the contrary, besides the "prostitutes" and one other black family (who feel, ironically, that they have to allay the fears of their new white neighbours by putting up a sign at the gate with the proclamation "I DON'T DO CRIME") little else is mentioned in the text about black residents. There are the usual figures of black shop workers, security guards and criminals, however.

have are his simultaneous disappointment and his wonder that all their material possessions can fit into one of the storage units, together with memories of the Johannesburg lights as seen from the plane. It is true, however, that many whites have left South Africa since the advent of democratic governance, many citing crime as a major concern. Having 'abandoned' the city centre, it is not inconceivable that some would migrate out of the country completely because of perceived and real dangers to personal safety.

The divisions wrought by 300 years of colonialism and apartheid cannot be erased overnight, as the psychological effects often outlive the legislative regulations that enforced social separation of the races. In 1998, as Vlad rushes to meet his brother Branko so that they can watch South Africa's soccer World Cup match against Denmark together on TV, he trips over a looped piece of paper as he walks past the Kensington Clinic. The reaction of the onlookers – a security guard and a hawker who are both black – clearly illustrates the manifestations of apartheid as a psychic hangover. The two witnesses both express their sympathy but do little more than wear worried looks:

> If we were different people, if we were the same people in a different place, she might put an arm around my shoulders; instead she lifts her hand and clucks sympathetically.

(*PWK* 17)

The narrator is aware of how history structures the encounter between him and these individuals who, in a different set of circumstances, would probably rush to render assistance. In 1998, while the security guard and the vendor-lady can sympathise with his unfortunate mishap, they are still unable to transcend the invisible mental barrier that is a remnant from past ages of social engineering. The two do not physically touch the white man because that would be a transgression against what were, once, expected codes of behaviour. Theirs is not an expression of the urban posture described by Georg Simmel (1995) as the "blasé attitude" and, slightly differently, by Louis Wirth (1938) as the "blasé outlook" – although it may be said that their reaction derives from a similar rationale of minding one's own business. In some earlier references in this thesis to these same theorists I noted

how such a posture is defined by a deliberate psychological *indifference* to others adapted by urban individuals in order to "immuniz[e] themselves".

The guard and hawker are not indifferent to the fallen man but by not acting and rushing to his assistance, which would have been the natural thing to do, they actually *immunize* themselves against the perceived potential consequences of such contact. Four years after freedom, they have yet – or it is possibly still too early for them – to learn new ways of relating to the white man. *Vladislavić*'s reaction to his nasty fall and the actions (or non-actions) of the witnesses is initially to put on the pretence of calmly dusting himself off and resuming his trek home, but then he begins to limp as soon as is out of sight of the two witnesses. He says of the loop of paper over which he trips: "I have fallen over a paradox" (*PWK* 17). The loop, in the isolated context of the suburban street, has no self-evident functional use. It is a palimpsest just like some of the concrete posts and objects which the writer encounters on his walks in the suburb. In its inexplicable materiality, the loop of paper can serve as a symbol or description of the postcolonial city as a conundrum, a space of unending possibilities and simultaneously irresolvable paradoxes. He performs two different identities within a few short steps, the first an act of bravado to avoid looking weak in front of the bystanders and the second identity is one of self-pity because the limp is exaggerated, as it has more to do with his bruised ego than any actual physical pain.

An ironic sense of the frontier pervades the encounter between black and white in the previously white suburbs into which blacks are beginning to move, except that the roles have been reversed to a large extent. Branko, the author's brother, epitomises a siege mentality, elements of which can be traced back in Vladislavić's writing as far back as the dramatic arrival of Otto Nieuwenhuizen on the empty plot of land next to the Malgas household in *The Folly*. Aubrey Tearle, in *The Restless Supermarket*, resorts to social proofreading in the face of new ways of being in the city, represented by the movement of blacks into the city-centre, which he thinks pose a threat to order. In the four conjoined narratives that constitute *The Exploded View*, there is increasing evidence of this laager mentality, for instance, in the mushrooming of the closed housing estates such as Villa Toscana. This isolationism is accompanied by growing alienation, especially amongst white

individuals like Egan, Les Budlender and Gordon Duffy. Duffy's tragic end seems to confirm white fears about blacks generally, even though he dies at the hands of criminal elements. The three characters described immediately above all seem to be stumbling towards new ways of defining their spaces and identities in a city which is transforming quickly. But they do not resort to racism in the manner that Branko does to counter the perceived challenge to his sense of place. When the first few black people have moved into the suburb and their children begin to play soccer on the streets he remarks:

> "What's wrong with these people?" my brother Branko said during one of our walking tours. "Why don't they stay inside like normal people? Why are they always lazing about in the yard? Have they got nothing better to do with their time than sit around in the sun?"

> (*PWK* 21)

As reflected in J.M. Coetzee's *White Writing* (1988), perceptions of the indolence or laziness black people is often the result of a racial or racist construct. The vituperative image of 'the lazy blacks' is typical of Branko, forthright and unabashed. The mere presence in Kensington of "these people" is an affront to him and sparks off tirades in which he makes clear that "they" do not belong. It is without any hint of irony that he is critical of "their" habits and expressions of agency, even though, as the author tries to remind him, as children, he and Ivan also played cricket in the streets, like the black children now playing soccer. In fact, when he feels offense in this instance, the brothers are on a walk around the suburb, but he still expresses the view that "these" outsiders (in the sense of not belonging) should keep themselves indoors and out of his sight. The city is, in this sense, still very much contested terrain even if the lines of division are no longer so neat and clear.

In contrast to his brother's forceful, if flawed, assertions of a socio-cultural superiority that is predicated on race, the narrator's own posture in *Portrait with Keys* is what Nuttall correctly terms "avoidance" (2009:92). For Nuttall this "avoidance" entails a gesture of bringing out the "(racial) difference he himself feels" without necessarily trying to resolve the "point of difficulty" or adopting his brother's posture of affirming difference through the binary opposition of racial superiority and

inferiority. This avoidance has to be analysed in the context of the effort to try and find new modes of living and writing the post-apartheid city which are not solely based on racial difference. Nuttall's analysis and conclusions on avoidance are based on the following extract from Vladislavić's text:

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

This is the narrator's description of a black "churchman" he sees coming out of the house on 22 Albemarle Street on a Sunday morning, the same house that Branko insists has been turned into a brothel. We have the potentially unsettling picture of the churchman either visiting a brothel on his way to prayer, or otherwise sharing living space with prostitutes. Branko's rush to pass judgement, however disagreeable and misinformed, provides a stark contrast with the narrator's non-committal gestures. I argued earlier in this section that this can be seen as tentativeness on the part of the author and only adds to the atmosphere of ambiguity and irresolvability, both in terms of the specific circumstance of the encounter between the white narrator and the black clergyman, as well as the wider ones of re-writing the city into new, less racialised forms. In the event, instead of directly tackling the "difficult and divisive lines of thought" about racial difference, the textual Vladislavić (Vlad) flees into the tile shop to escape these nagging and unsettling thoughts. This strategy is similar to when Vlad and Minky temporarily leave the country for an unknown destination, or to the 'white flight' from areas into which black people move. In all cases the issues of contention remain unaddressed and may possibly have been misconstrued as being contentious to begin with. In the extract cited above Nuttall sees the registering of difference based on the physical texture of the hair but I would like to suggest that the incident goes beyond alluding to this basic differentiation. Assuming for a moment that Branko's conjecture about the house having been turned into a brothel is correct, it is possible that what makes the

author uncomfortable is not just the difficult question of racial difference, but perhaps a more moral shock at the incongruity of the clergyman leaving the brothel coupled with his unwillingness to be critical for fear of being a racist like his brother. Branko's posture is more honest while the author's unwillingness (or is it a liberal reluctance) to criticise the formerly oppressed is to a certain extent patronising. This incident also recalls Egan's inability to share jokes with his black dinner-mates at Bra Zama's African Eatery (in 'Afritude Sauce') because he fears to cause offense, but he has no such qualms about sharing the same jokes with his wife or white colleagues at the office.

There still are moments in *Portrait with Keys* when the effects of race on social relations seem to be completely negated. Such occasions, on which racialised identities appear to be in a state of flux, can be the result, for example, of some extraordinary natural phenomenon that touches all without considerations of race. The writer recalls just such an occurrence in September 1981 when Johannesburg experienced its first snowfall after a period of several decades:

> The snow changed the city miraculously. We were all in it together. There were traffic jams everywhere, but it didn't matter because they prolonged our time outside. In the streets, white businessmen and black newspaper vendors were throwing snowballs at one another. My double-decker inched its way up Eloff Street. Our bus, our whites-only bus, came under repeated attack from gangs of black snowballers, messengers and cleaners from the office blocks, free to bombard us.

(*PWK* 129)

In a strange way, identities are shown here to be shifting. The snowfall has the effect of a national sports event, like the recent 2010 FIFA World Cup staged in South Africa, when the old divisions were temporarily shelved because of a shared national pride. But above all, because this snowfall happens at a time when legislated apartheid is probably at its most entrenched, it markedly shows the potential for a sense of community that cuts across the divides of skin colour. We have a momentary glimpse of James Graham's "possible city" and wonder whether the

divided everyday ways of being in the city can be like this occasional, special day. However, Graham also sounds a cautionary note:

> [W]hile it is necessary to recognize the new ways in which people are making use of the "old" city, the memory of that city, with its separations and inequalities encoded in its very fabric, still has a bearing on the present.
>
> (2008:335)

The snow, which occasions this glance into the possible, is also the ironic metaphor of the ephemeral quality of the equanimity displayed in the excerpt about the snowfall. The sense of being equal lasts only as long as there is snow to be thrown at each other and as soon as there is no more snow, 'normality' returns and different individuals recuperate their 'proper' roles as white businessmen and the black underclass of messengers, cleaners and vendors. Graham's words cited directly above are paraphrasing the ideas of Christopher Warnes (2000) in which he alludes to the fact that while new ways of being in the city continually emerge, these cannot completely elide the separation and inequalities of the past.

Piet Retief,[190] "a sunburnt Afrikaner with a drinker's complexion under the tan", is a tramp with whom the narrator develops a level of acquaintance over a period of time. He represents a different kind of whiteness in which his race does not necessarily translate into relative wealth and privilege. Due to his indigent circumstances he pretends that he is not surviving on alms because begging is not the 'white' thing to do. The writer usually encounters him in the parking lots of various shopping malls and he willingly collaborates in Retief's elaborate ruse:

> He always wanted to have a chat, so that it felt less like begging, I supposed, more like borrowing a couple of bucks from a mate. Sometimes, if I reached for my wallet too soon, he would carry on speaking as if he didn't see the money in my hand. And he always pocketed what I gave him without looking

---

[190] Christened so by the writer. The historical Piet Retief was one of the leaders of the Voortrekkers that led the great trek of the Afrikaner nation from the Cape Colony in the first half of the 19th century. As a figure of Afrikanerdom, Vladislvic's version is a caricature but perhaps also a testament to the survival instincts and innovation that Afrikaners are generally known for. In many ways parallels can be drawn between him and the figure of the Professional Mourner – Toloki – in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying,* whom I described earlier as a "survival entrepreneur".

at it in my presence. In this way we colluded in the fantasy that he was not a beggar.

<div align="right">(PWK 133)</div>

Over time, between the two of them they construct whole new identities and life stories in which the narrator is credited with children he does not have and a profession as a swimming-pool chemicals supplier. The motivations for this re-imagining of their lives are different for the two characters. For Piet Retief the whole schema represents an opportunity to claim a dignified existence, and not one of begging, through the pretence of an intimate relationship with the author. In Vlad's case the motive lies in not having to confront the uncomfortable situation of a white beggar. The gesture is an extension or re-configuration of Nuttall's formulation of "avoidance", as described in the paragraphs above. Through these performed identities the two avoid the unsettling question of loss, as in Retief's lost privilege and position as a white subject who now has to endure the indignity of surviving on handouts. Retief's trauma emanates from effectively having to live hand-to-mouth, like a high proportion of black people, and his poverty is a reversal of 'normal' expectations. As James Graham also rightly asserts:

> In reading his work one cannot but be struck by how Vladislavić's critical, if often oblique, exploration of his own position of inherited privilege as a white, middle-class, male writer is fundamental to the imaginative power of his writing.

<div align="right">(2008:340)</div>

Ultimately, whether it is through "avoidance" or some other equally "oblique" process, in certain instances (and not always) Vladislavić stages the social construct of race and holds it up for criticism. In the text of *Portrait with Keys*, the reader is invited to participate in this exploration as the author offers no ready answers or quick fixes and thus underlines the ways in which the city of Johannesburg maintains the aura of irresolvability.

While new modes of being in the city are constantly generated (Nuttall points these out in her article on the Rosebank Mall project as new ways of black self-styling), they can hardly be read to be the typical modes of writing the self amongst

the majority of blacks in the city. The encounter between black and white continues to be couched in tones of attrition. A character like Branko typifies this frontier mentality in his resistance to the presence of blacks in Kensington. Blackness in the city appears in the text largely through representations of its negative extremes like crime and prostitution, thus putting to question the possibility of 'true' representation of the city. In this light, I suggest such 'truer' meaning can only be more fully discovered by reading into the silences and absences, along with that which has been articulated or voiced and been written. For a city built upon the structures of racialised violence and exploitation, the conundrum remains how to unravel the racist strictures of the past city in order to fulfil the potential of the future city as a more congruous community, while taking care not to resort to the divisive and discredited methods of the past. This requires a delicate process of racial untangling, in which the fortunes of a group or race are not inexorably tied to the misfortune of another.

7.4 Walking Spaces/Mapping Lives

Reflecting the author's noted interest in urban space, architecture and cartography, *Portraits with Keys* offers various routes through which Vladislavić's city can be discovered. The text is also helpfully suffixed with suggested tour-maps which can be used to negotiate the random fragments that constitute this narration of the city as lived and experienced by the author. Because of the perceived and real danger of crime associated with much of the centre of Johannesburg, the majority of its white citizens have retreated to the suburbs and sprouting shopping malls, in the process abandoning the centre to people of colour. The pedestrian experiences of the city as epitomised by Aubrey Tearle in *The Restless Supermarket*, have been increasingly replaced – for Vladislavić's characters such as Les Budlender, Egan and Duffy – by vehicle-based circulations around Johannesburg in which the centre is frequently by-passed. Walter Benjamin's flâneur figure walks the city to experience it, operating at its centre, while Michel de Certeau's formulation in *The Practice of Everyday Life* is mostly based on the pedestrian enunciations that occur in the vertical and horizontal tableaux at the heart of the city and not so much in suburbia. Mbembe and Nuttall assert that "driving is ubiquitous to Johannesburg" and that "so much of what is seen

appears through the enclosure of a car window, in private cars, buses and minibus taxis" (2007:281). Seen from moving cars, with windows tightly shut (sometimes in vain[191]) against crime, most of the sensual experience of the city's centre is lost. As Mbembe and Nuttall show in their account of traversing Johannesburg to go shopping in the suburban markets and malls, for them the city is now defined by what may be termed as sanitised pockets of urbanity and cornucopia that the various 'edge' cities and shopping centres represent.

Experiencing the city through the kinds of vehicular modes listed by Mbembe and Nuttall represents, in the context of Vladislavić's oeuvre, a departure from the pedestrian view of the city. Still, even so the city is constituted and experienced differently depending on what kind of transportation one uses, whether public or private. Mbembe and Nuttall drive their own car, selecting particular routes and stops, and determining the durations of their visits. The city for them consists of these destinations, in the manner described by Robert Fishman, as cited earlier in this chapter. The use of their own vehicle differentiates the meaning of Johannesburg to them from individuals who are totally reliant on public transport, because different temporal and spatial exigencies are in operation. In the confined and involuntarily shared space of the minibus taxi different sets of rules exist and sensations such as fear manifest themselves differently. The private motorist may fear a smash-and-grab, whereas the commuting passenger may be more concerned about hazards such as accidents caused by reckless driving or becoming a victim of taxi wars waged by rival operators. The experiencing of the city through the windows of motor vehicles initiates a different kind of circulation within the city which is structured on whether one has one's own vehicle or not. In some respects, this is antonymic to the experience of living [in] the city through pedestrian habits. The crowded city street manifests itself as a kind of social democracy in which all classes seem to participate.

The city narrated by Vladislavić in *Portrait with Keys* and by Mbembe and Nuttall in their 'Afropolis' article appears as a kind of heterotext because of its

---

[191] Some criminals specialise in breaking into and stealing from cars that have stopped at traffic lights and similar junctions.

combination of the motorised and ground-level views of Johannesburg. The effect of such a mixed procedure of 'writing' the city is both to expand the horizon and space of the city that each individual may come into contact with, and to produce a city represented through fragmented pockets of experience. As people traverse between their homes and particular destinations such as malls and markets, they imaginatively 'write out' of existence vast swathes of the city and ways of being in those elided spaces. Ultimately, the vision of post-apartheid urbanity that is narrated bears more resemblance to the divided, apartheid city than the aesthetically integrated one that some analysts have theorised. The majority of the city, literally and symbolically, remains undeciphered because it lies beyond or outside the viewer's (and therefore the writer's) field of vision.

I shall now proceed to consider the scope and limits of the pedestrian and 'vehicular' enunciations of the city in *Portrait with Keys* and evaluate how these help to inscribe the meanings of space in Vladislavić's Johannesburg. Walking is one of the many "itineraries" through which the author suggests that his text and city can be negotiated and read. The idea of how walking is important to the way individuals relate to urban space is foregrounded in the book as early as the second fragment, in which the narrator engages with the (po)ethics, as in *poetics*, of giving and receiving directions in the different contexts of the country and city. This passage, echoing some of the ideas of Georg Simmel on the peculiar psychologies of rural and urban residents, uses the Dickensian character Scrooge[192] as an extreme model of metropolitan reserve and aloofness. According to Vladislavić, Scrooge's indifference – his "solitary mean-spiritedness" (*PWK* 11) – is illustrated by the fact that no one ever stopped on the street to ask him directions or even to beg alms of him. Noting that "the unequal exchange of directions is one of the most touching relations possible between people in the city" (*PWK* 11-12), the narrator shows how, even in the rush and crush of city life, some basic level of intimate (if transient) engagement is still possible. It can be initiated between individuals by the seemingly mundane act of asking for directions. In this kind of exchange the ones asking for directions "declare their vulnerability," while those giving the directions "demonstrate a capacity for dealing kindly and responsibly with a life put in their hands by fate"

---

[192] From Charles Dickens' novel *A Christmas Tale*.

(*PWK* 12). The total effect on both enquirer and giver of directions is the mutual affirmation of each other's humanity - an important gesture against the backdrop of the city as a manic and unforgiving space.

Beyond the point made about directions, the text also highlights the importance of the different paths and routes taken by individuals and how these facilitate or inhibit various kinds of meetings and crossings , depending on the choices that are made with regards to what paths to follow. [193] The fact whether these paths and routes are followed through pedestrian, or motorised, or even a combination of both means, acts as contingent in determining the nature of the meetings and crossings that flow from the specific enunciations of movement within or traversal across urban spaces. The art of "walking and driving" (*PWK* 13), of which the narrator's father was an exponent, and which is necessitated by the suburban experience of citiness, culminates in a reinvention of the idea of the flâneur, instantiating a different kind of flâneurism in the text to that depicted by Aubrey Tearle and some of the central figures of the short fictions by Vladislavić.

To recapitulate, Benjamin's flâneur has the whole city as his canvas on which to express himself but in *Portrait with Keys* the narrator, as flâneur, is limited by the considerations of crime and safety and thus (increasingly) does not experience the city in all its random ways. Where Tearle could safely walk in Hillbrow's streets, in *Portrait with Keys* the narrator empties his pockets in his suburban home before driving to Hillbrow to plot the fictional paths his invented character Tearle is to follow in *The Restless Supermarket*. In the sub-section on 'The Limits and Rhythms of Cyclic' space earlier in this chapter, I noted how the city centre has evolved over time into an arena of discomfort for the author and how his experience of it becomes limited to sporadic moments. Examples of these are when he drives into the city's parkades and directly accesses the required buildings through basement entrances without having to walk the streets. The narrator seems to walk most freely in his own neighbourhood of Kensington, but even there his perambulations are not unproblematic.

---

[193] The narrator's ideas here again recall Robert Fishman's postulation, as previously highlighted, of the city being definable as the sum of an individual or group's destinations within a particular urban setting.

James Graham remarks that for de Certeau, "walking in the city is itself a potentially transformative act" (2008:337). Walking is in this sense seen as an act of liberation for the individual. For Nuttall, Vladislavić does not "walk to the tune of the flâneur, who occasionally feels a frisson of fear, but is essentially safe to experience what may turn up" (2009:88). The narrator takes frequent walks in Kensington despite it being not "essentially safe", as Nuttall puts it. Another literary critic Ralph Goodman makes a related point when he states that "Vladislavić's narrator treads the streets against the grain, lacking the certainty engendered by the fixed identity and role of the flâneur, and always conscious of the constant threat of criminal intent, of one kind or another" (2009:228). My focus, for now, is not on the aspect of the walker/narrator's safety, but rather on the question of choice as it relates to the liberating potential of walking. The narrator and his brother Branko circulate daily in the same streets, even using the same specific routes around the suburb repeatedly. While this helps them to gain intimate knowledge of the people and architecture of the place, for example, it inevitably initiates limitations with regards to how space is experienced and what, to utilise Nuttall's phraseology above, "may turn up" (2009:88).

Through repetition and over time, patterns of circulation become established and almost everything is familiar. An analogous illustration of these stultifying cycles is the figure of the young white man who occupies the stall opposite the cobbler's at the shopping centre.

> His pacing is hypnotic, up and down in front of the railing, like a caged animal. The fact that the cage has no bars on one side, that he could simply walk out of it if he chose, makes his ceaseless pacing more compelling. [...] Four strides, a clockwise turn, four strides, an anti-clockwise turn. It would be better if both were clockwise: then one might console oneself that he is accumulating distance. [...] He is going nowhere, fast.
>
> (*PWK* 35-36)

The frenzied motion of the apparently mentally unhinged white man is later contrasted with the calm efficiency if the black cobbler working quietly on his pile of shoes in the adjacent stall. Speaking figuratively, the narrator's rounds around his

suburb approximate the constricted turns that the young white man engages in because Vladislavić's pedestrian routes follow defined paths in Kensington that eventually become predictable because of the regularity with which they are used. The practice of suburban space when restricted in this manner amounts to what de Certeau – paraphrased by Nuttall (2009:88) – has described as the "inert, conformist and repressive" nature of suburban life. Restricted to the same beaten paths, the residents' experience of suburban space can be stultifying, the result of which is that their imagined and lived city is often limited just as effectively as if they were caged like the pacing man. The physical infrastructure of the walls that surround the residential complexes such as Villa Toscana manifest themselves as imaginative barriers, as individuals find it difficult to conceive of the city and city living beyond the narrow realms of their own experience. In *Portrait with Keys* the narrator wistfully reminisces on the past time of largely decorative garden fences which have since been replaced by high walls. This is a possible explanation for the fact that even the slightest intrusion of the unknown and unfamiliar can be so potentially unsettling for suburban residents like Branko.

Segment 34 of the text narrates "[t]he long poem of walking"[194] which is conceptualised as "a dialogue" between "[t]he way and the walker (and the driver, too, if he has time for such things)" (*PWK* 53). The poem of walking integrates elements of de Certeau's philosophy of walking as a gesture of liberation for the walker, as well as some of the ideas on the city that emerge out of the writing of Charles Dickens – of whom it is said "[l]ong before he invented London, [he] knew that cities exist primarily so that we can walk in them" (*PWK* 53). Writing of walking as a rhetorical gesture, de Certeau asserts that,

> The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations no matter how panoptic they may be: it is neither foreign to them [...] nor in conformity with them [...] It creates shadows and ambiguities within them. It inserts its

---

[194] This is a direct reference to Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*. *Portrait with Keys*, perhaps because of its autobiographical tone, engages with the theory of the city in much more direct ways than Vladislavić's fictional writing. Canetti's postulations on the city crowd, as earlier cited, is one other example of such direct reference to urban theory and works in tandem in the text with considerations of literature of the urban, for example that written by Charles Dickens.

multitudinous references and citations into them (social models, cultural mores, personal factors).

.(1988:101)

The irony of walking for Vladislavić, in light of de Certeau's formulation and as Graham rightly points out, is that in narration of walking in Kensington "it is those who already inhabit a position of relative privilege and representational power who do the walking" (2008:337). The paradox in this case is that the paths or circuits described (narrated) by the writer's feet seem to become increasingly narrower with the passage of time, to the extent that at times the walks often involve just the few streets that are adjacent to the writer's own.

It is in this regard that Vladislavić's walks seem somewhat antithetical to the premise proposed by de Certeau, because the act of walking is in this case not liberating with respect to the reorganisation of city space (or manipulation of the spatial organisation of the city in a manner that is easily discernible). To the contrary, the walks become tighter in scope and depict a narrowing of space as opposed to the desired outcome of it being opened up. On the figurative level, the author can then be said to be pacing a cage similar to the one in which the young man finds himself, when he endlessly paces within the confines of the stall. Whilst his own space diminishes, the narrator sees Dickens as having been "blessed to live in a city that offered the walker 'miles upon miles of streets' in which to be lonely and 'warm company' at every turn once his loneliness had been satisfied" (*PWK* 54).[195]

The narrowing of space serves as the partial trigger for the white flight that is described in the text, which may also be expressed in terms of a retreat from the streets into motor vehicles. The reconfiguration of the practice of the flâneur ultimately results in the individual's experience of the city being proscribed into little pockets or vials of urbanity which are both fragmented and truncated in that limits are placed on the exploration of what it means to be urban. The self-imposition of limits on what space of the city the individual appropriates and expresses agency

---

[195] In marked contrast to the narrator whose space seems to continually dissipates and become smaller, contrary procedures of appropriating space are displayed by the invisible individuals who survive by "poaching" metal from public sculptures and manhole covers. These urban poachers show unlimited powers of the imagination and represent the extremes of innovation and survival entrepreneurship.

over naturally leads to a brief consideration of another of the leitmotifs in *Portrait with Keys*, that of locks and keys in various shapes and guises, and how they represent a kind of post-apartheid paranoia.

7.5 Negative Spaces: Locks and Keys as Expressions of The Paranoid City

The figure of the black criminal in white suburbia has been a dominant one in literature that imagines Johannesburg. A famous example is found in Alan Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country*. Absalom, the Reverend Stephen Khumalo's son leaves rural Natal to go to Johannesburg where he becomes involved with the wrong crowd. A botched robbery in the suburbs results in the death of Arthur Jarvis, an altruistic, liberal intellectual and lawyer, and the naive Absalom ends up confessing to and getting punished alone for the murder. In short, in Paton's imagining of Johannesburg, the story of the murder and subsequent judicial hanging becomes a morality tale of how the city corrupts the blacks, turning young men into criminals. Versions of this stereotypical figure have continued to exist even in post-apartheid literature. With specific reference to *Portrait with Keys*, this metaphor of the "present-absent" criminal figure – to use Nuttall's words – who is always black, I would like to suggest that he is the instigator of the paranoia that is inscribed across sections of this text and the suburban parts of the city. The paranoia manifests itself in the engrossment with locks and keys by the majority of white characters in the text, a fascination that is enunciated almost as a kind of fetish and also inspires the title of the text.

In Chapter Five of the thesis I used hysteria to define the sense of incompatibility that arises from individuals' inability to constructively mark and integrate themselves to the passage of time. Mbembe reminds us in 'Aesthetics of Superfluity' that "[t]he architecture of hysteria in contemporary South Africa is the result of a painful, shocking encounter with a racial alterity let loose by the collapse of the racial city" (2004:403). Mbembe makes this point in his analysis of the growing trend for exclusive residential commercial centres in Johannesburg like Montecasino and Melrose Arch. The mantra of keys and security that is a running thread and an

itinerary on its own in Vladislavić's text, is a logical extension of the thinking that informs such developments. The irony is that in attempting to secure personal space in this manner, individuals also inadvertently subject themselves to panoptic conditions in which they become self-made prisoners in their homes and social spaces.

The opening fragment of the book offers a detailed look at the effects of this growing obsession with security, using the example of a house in which an alarm has been installed:

> When a house has been alarmed, it becomes explosive. It must be armed and disarmed several times a day. When it is armed, by the touching of keys upon a pad, it emits a whine that sends the occupants rushing out, banging the door behind them. There are no leisurely departures: there is no time for second thoughts [...] there are no savoured homecomings either: you do not unwind into such a house, kicking off your shoes, breathing the familiar air. Every departure is precipitate, every arrival is a scraping in.
>
> (*PWK* 11)

Home is no longer *home*, or a place of refuge.[196] The individual's experience of domestic space is marked by tension due to the elaborate, military-like process of leaving and entering one's own house. The fortification of suburban households through alarms and other gadgets, when seen together with the sprouting of citadels of privilege as described in 'Villa Toscana', creates these conditions of perpetual fear and nervousness. Mike Davis, writing in City of Quartz on the militarisation of the urban spaces of Los Angeles, discerns the impetus behind such processes as being a situation whereby,

> the defense of luxury lifestyles is translated into a proliferation of new repressions against space and movement, undergirded by the ubiquitous 'armed response'. This obsession with physical security systems, and,

---

[196] A visit to see Max the gorilla at the zoo serves to underline just how much Vlad and the other characters' own lives have become imprisoned. The cage has similar "protection" to any given home in the city like high gates and "fences topped with electric wire" and the narrator wonders "what suburban landscape would be complete without these things?" (*PWK* 131). The home might as well be a cage or prison cell, just like the car has become a moving prison cell, as shown in the previous chapter.

collaterally, with the architectural policing of social boundaries, has become a zeitgeist of urban restructuring, a master narrative of the emerging built environment of the 1990s.

(1990:223)[197]

While Vladislavić's Kensington has not been militarised or 'shut down' in the manner described by Davis, areas of Johannesburg have become virtual cantonments with boomgates slung across roads leading into residential estates. Villa Toscana as described in *The Exploded View* (discussed in the previous chapter) is one such enclave that has become emblematic of the constant search for security.[198] The physical aspects of these measures, which are ostensibly erected to keep criminals out have, as Davis points out, the sociological effect of acting as barriers to effect class separation. Space is marked in this way to preclude those who are deemed not to belong. The many keys and locks that are mentioned in the book *Portrait with Keys* are the less extreme manifestations of the philosophical rationale from which the extremes narrated of Los Angeles derive.

The security devices come in all shapes and sizes and each claims to be better and more effective than its predecessor. A steering lock called the Gorilla, as recommended to the narrator by his father, seems to be the device of choice for securing cars but poses hazards of its own to the car it is securing – if it is locked in place while touching the windscreen it may expand in the sun and crack it – and to the driver who must be careful where he stores it whilst driving lest it gets "caught under the pedals" (*PWK* 57). In a quaint irony, all these measures (when taken together) become a perceptual ball-and-chain through which individuals appear burdened or even endangered by the very devices that are designed to ensure their safety and peace of mind. When a visiting Swedish journalist asks to take pictures of his considerable bunch of keys, the narrator feels a sense of shame because they "l[ie] there like the keys to my psyche, a feeler gauge for every insecurity" and he fears that they have turned into "a tribe of turnkeys" (*PWK* 122). Tammy, an

---

[197] The original chapter is simply called "Fortress L.A. from *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. A shorter version of the article has been published as 'Fortress Los Angeles – The Militarization of Urban Space'.
[198] In a similar examination of the trope of keys Zakes Mda's (2009) *Black Diamond* looks at attempts to secure domestic space from the point of view of Don Mateza, who works as a bodyguard for a private security firm.

acquaintance of the author is described as fingering "the rosary of her keys" (*PWK* 151). Keys have acquired the symbolical presence normally associated with religious icons such as rosaries or Islamic prayer beads and the sum of one's fears are narrated in the size of the bunch of keys that one has. City life becomes inscribed in the keys that an individual carries and when Tammy discovers the palimpsest-like presence of a black key whose function she does not know, this causes a psychic disruption in her. For months after the discovery she still ruminates over the key's possible use.

The final irony lies in the fact that all the measures taken to secure space are not fail-proof. Chas' garden wall is not quite high enough to stop an intruder and the writer comes home one day to find a burglar in his home. The ensuing exchange, in which the burglar pretends to have actually been busy chasing out a 'real' thief is interesting in terms of how the two characters involved perform their identities and negotiate the psychological terrain that the situation presents. By declaring himself not to be a burglar, the intruder effectively displaces the house-owner from the position of moral right. As in the case with Piet Retief, the white beggar who likes to pretend that he is not begging, Vlad acquiesces to the role that he has been assigned by the other man, thus helping to defuse a potential dangerous confrontation by pretending that the situation is not what it is. Though the exchange is quite humorous and physical violence may have been averted, but the violence done to the mind is longer-lasting.

Suburban space, through the metaphor of locks and keys, has become an arena for the staging of primal fears. The present keys speak of an absent criminal who sporadically emerges into visibility but he is still only an avatar, a representation of the outcome of unequal social relations. Security measures have limited effectiveness in circumstances where some individuals feel that the only recourse they have for survival may be to rob those who have more than they do.

7.6 Conclusion

Vladislavić's Johannesburg, even when rendered through the intimate lens of autobiography, still eludes representation and *Portraits with Keys* is not the writer's final word, as the appearance of *Double Negative* proves, on the metropolis that seizes his imagination, because he continually discovers new ways of inscribing meanings into the spaces of the city. The city is always a work-in-progress and these inscriptions reveal a city that imaginatively lies in the cultural, social and literary realms, beyond the physical infrastructure of the built environment. There are therefore multiple ways to imagine the city in terms of its social, temporal and spatial manifestations. The emergence of new ways of self-styling amongst the black populace cannot, however, be read as the typical modes of writing the self for the majority of blacks in the city.

Literal and imaginative space in this postcolonial urbanity is a tenuous category that cannot be appropriated by the various residents of the city with full and confident certainty because it is liable to shift and ebb beneath them, as the terms for its possession are subject to constant re-definition. The present is always haunted by the memories and nostalgia of the past just as the negative space of the township haunts the space of suburbia by staging its informality in the ordered and often fortified suburb. Space is always contested.

The meanings of Africa in the 'African metropolis' begin to be teased out through the mapping of the relational dynamics between the run-down post-apartheid city centre and the suburban enclaves. Changes in the city, which are not always positive, are also tracked through the psychological links that individuals develop between them and the cityscapes they occupy. The invisible city, made up of people as infrastructure and the destinations that residents travel to, are part of what constitutes this city that resists its own writing. It is a city not made up exclusively of immovable concrete infrastructure but also of spatialised racial identities, a city where notions of belonging and not belonging equally play themselves out in the historical memory and the urgent present.

Vladislavić's Johannesburg is a 'heterotext' in which the combination of pedestrian enunciations and vehicular flows can lead to the 'writing out' of parts of the city. Its high-rise buildings grow proportionally with the depths to which the gold mines of the Rand reef extend and its history of exploitation does not remain beneath the surface of the present-day. Through *Portrait with Keys*, the writer shows the impossibility of a single story, the elusiveness of a metanarrative of Johannesburg and its shees irresolvability. Vladislavić's Johannesburg resists representation and is truly many cities that manifest themselves in the same geographic space.

8 Conclusion

This thesis has been concerned with looking at how Ivan Vladislavić imagines and represents Johannesburg as a version of the postcolonial metropolis, and noting how several versions of the city emerge over time through the project. Vladislavić's writing of the city is a continuous project (and typically postcolonial in that sense) and each of the six texts examined represents a stage or locus in a representational continuum along which the author variously conflates and disavows the narratives of colonialism and apartheid. I have described this posture of self-reflexive interrogation as a dialogic postcolonialism. This is a result in part of the fact that Johannesburg, as epitome of the postcolonial metropolis, is an unstable category because of its paradoxical, fragmented and fluid nature and history. For instance, Christopher Warnes (2000) describes how Johannesburg has the unique history of being both a colonial and metropole centre. One can therefore conclude that literary interpretations of it are consequently in a similar state of flux because of the impossibility of arriving at what may be described as its essence, and this point served to prelude my ultimate conclusions on its irresolvability.

Multiple versions of the city of Johannesburg, it has been shown, arise from the multiple perspectives that have emerged during the transformation of South African society, resulting in manifold identities and significations. The thesis therefore proceeded from the premise that there is no universally accepted notion of the meaning of the city (Johannesburg), what James Graham (2010) alludes to as the "impossibility" of the city. The numerous voices that give rise to many versions of the city were seen, for instance, through the emergence of marginal subjects, identified by de Kok (2006) and Gaylard (2006) as the minor (downtrodden) and migrant subjects and voices that have moved from the imaginative periphery to the centre of the (postcolonial) city. This movement approximates what Ndebele (2006) sees as the re-discovery of the ordinary in South African literature. A key aspect to imagining and writing this city is how characters appropriate and relate to each other (or think of themselves and others as belonging/not belonging) to the city space(s), and Henri Lefebvre's (1991) ideas on relational, social and physical space are important in this regard, as is the Derridean construct of the host-stranger relationship (Derrida 2000).

In the Introduction I also engaged with some late 19ᵗʰ and early 20ᵗʰ century interpretations of the city through sociology and physical planning tropes, for example the ideas of Louis Wirth (1938) and the 'Chicago School', to show how urban theory has evolved to a state where the idea of a city is represented by more than just the physical infrastructure. Simone's (2004) and de Boeck's (2004) respective ideas on people as infrastructure and the invisible city were deployed to show this progression, and how the foregrounding of people in the various meanings attached to the idea of citiness naturally leads to considerations of varied expressions of individual identity as outlined by, among others, Mbembe (2004) and Nuttall (2004 and 2009). The variety of individual identities is apt illustration, in its plurality, of the manifestations of postcolonial notions of identity, in contrast to the colonial (apartheid) and national hegemonistic narratives. Taken as an example of postcolonial writing, Vladislavić's oeuvre refutes the idea of homogenous identities. By looking at the myriad traversals of Johannesburg by the characters in Vladislavić's texts, and following the ideas of Benjamin (1983), de Certeau (1988) and Fishman (1995) on the flâneur, pedestrian enunciations and individual destinations, respectively, as constituting the city, various versions of the metropolis are conceptualised through the eyes of its inhabitants. From the earliest chapters I was concerned with specific questions on writing about the transforming or postcolonialising city, or "writing the city into being", as Bremner (2010) puts it, in a South African/Southern African context. Echoing Warnes' (2000) "colonialism of a special kind" paradigm, the thesis also sought to examine Ivan Vladislavić's collocation as a white writer (from a position of assumed privilege) imagining and engaging with a multiracial, increasingly black city.

In Chapter One, I began by briefly examining the universal applicability of the rubric of the city as contested space (Sassen 1996) due to the agglomeration of dense and diverse populations. This is a problematic at the centre of the entire research project, and concerns the instability between what the postcolonial city is, how it is seen and how it is represented through narrative fiction/fictive narration. In direct reference to the "postcolonial metropolis" of the thesis title, I deployed Quayson's (2000) idea of "a process of postcolonialising" as the basis for rationalising the ways in which Vladislavić's imagined city (as seen in the collection *Missing Persons*) increasingly becomes an arena of contestation (ideologically and

spatially) during the time of socio-political transformation. The ambiguity of (physical and social) architecture, material and social reality – hallmarks of the postcolonial city – are brought into close relief in the clash between "old" and "new", between empire (read as aconflation of colonialism and apartheid) and the postcolony (Mbembe 1992). Beyond mere contestation for space, I suggested that in *Missing Persons* space is actually shown to be shifting, as seen through: elements of the fantastical realist imaginary (the absurd); the operation of the suburban gaze; the diverse ways of performing agency; the conception and use of monuments; and the creation of historical memory about a city or place. All these categories are not mutually exclusive, but the various ways in which they intertwine serve to underline the lack of fixity in the meanings through which a city may be understood.

Among other considerations I also analysed the twin notions of transient bodies and the relationships they have to shifting spaces (notions in which very the corporality of some of the individual characters of the texts is itself brought into doubt), as well as the construction of the memory of a place in spite of the inherent transience suggested by time. These last two, I surmised, point to the challenges that the individual encounters in expressing agency in the temporal space of a transforming history. In keeping with the theme of ambiguity and fluidity as hallmarks of the postcolonial city, I examined the juxtaposition of opposites that I discern in Vladislavić's writing, looking at both people and notions of the city as lived space. Urban residents do not normally have the freedom to choose who their neighbours are, based – for instance – on kinship, so the closely cognate ideas of Simmel (1995) and Wirth (1938) on the blasé attitude and blasé outlook (respectively), as well as Iris Marion Young's (1995) theory of community, are utilsed for the purpose of characterising the interactions between the residents of the city. These characterisations range from entanglement, to pretence to dystopia, and their indeterminacy – which is a shared aspect of postcolonialism, the metropolis and Vladislavić's writing – emphasises the difficulties of neat theorisations about postcolonial urbanity and shows why constant re-engagement is necessary with regards to the meanings attached to such spaces.

Using the motif of the journey (or even a short trip within the city), a section of the Chapter One contrasted the fantastic and realist imaginaries, concluding that the former is more nuanced in its attempt to describe the city, whilst the latter tends

towards blandness. In the performance of identity and the staging of the spectacle, conventional aesthetic valuations are often inverted, with the seemingly abnormal becoming normal and the strange made familiar. The final part of Chapter One considers how space in the city may be appropriated by the performance of identity (and therefore agency), even in circumstances like the Terminal Bar (in *Missing Persons*) where the characters seem confined to a very limited space. While there is potential for stasis or inertia in such a restricted space, I suggest that different kinds of identities are formed in the confined space and utilise Sassen's notion of joint presences (of contradictory existences and identities) to highlight the potential for simultaneous fixity and movement, both in terms of people and ideas, in the city.

Continuing to draw out the thematic thread of joint presences analysed at the end of the previous chapter, Chapter Two read the suburban area of the city as a site of social conservatism which is brought into sharp focus by both the unwanted presence of the foreigner (Derrida 2000), epitomised by Otto Nieuwenhuizen and the absence of the black residents. *The Folly* stages the peculiarities of late-apartheid middle-class fears by ranging white suburban bliss against the figure of the foreigner. Black rage and deprivation (shown in the seething "unrest") forms the backdrop to this drama. The figure of the 'other' initiates, in the people who feel they belong, a crisis of uncertainty and legitimacy because he or she either looks like them or foreshadows what they potentially could be. For Mrs Malgas, especially, the stranger occasions a shifting of ground about her own sense of self. The text also highlights how individuals use maps and plans differently to control or influence the meanings of particular urban spaces (de Certeau 1988) and in this way reinforces the notion of who belongs or does not belong in certain sphere of the city.

In keeping with Robert Fishman's notion of the 'new city' that has no set or distinct functions I found that, at the microcosmic level, Nieuwenhuizen's 'anti-map' undercuts the notion of a plan as the totalisation of the meaning of a space and thus inaugurates new ways of appropriating and occupying space. This repudiation of convention is a feature of the postcolonial city. The purity of the gaze, if maps and plans are taken as versions of the gaze, is impossible to achieve as gazing does not occur in an experiential or cultural vacuum. As Nieuwenhuizen and Mr Malgas display with reference to the empty plot, different individuals can experience the same space in vastly different ways and the plan as representation, proves to have

transient signification. Other interesting tangential off-shoots of this aspect of relating to space are the retrospective intimations of the frontier narrative (highlighted in Wittenberg 2004) in which Nieuwenhuizen expresses agency as the (caricature/parody of the) white male 'hero', as well as the introduction of a discourse of illusory grandeur through which space becomes reified. Ultimately, however, the hero's posture is anti-establishment and subversive – which may be attributed to the "insurrectional playfulness" noted by Gaylard and Titlestad (2006) to be at the heart of Vladislavić's writing. Through the psychic ructions occasioned by the interactions between host and stranger, those who claim to belong and the Other, Nieuwenhuizen changes the way the Malgases imagine themselves.

Chapter Three proceeds with the analysis of the writer's thematic and representational concerns by again looking at questions of belonging as well as the spatialisation of personal and spiritual memories. Beyond stylistcs, the stories in *Propaganda by Monuments* are insightful for considerations of how history and memory manifest themselves in the postcolonial city. They instantiate the consequences of both radical, revolutionary change as well as more evolutionary, legislated transition, traversing different locus points in the transformation of the apartheid city into postcolonial urban space. I proffered, as a consequence, that local and cosmopolitan conceptions of the city are mapped across the changing cityscape as characters self-write and perform their identities. History, Vladislvic suggests, is not seen merely as a burden but can be a catalyst for future positive social interaction. The figure of the postcolonial flâneur is made possible, in part, by the reversal of the classic (apartheid) gaze and serves as reiteration of the thesis' overarching proposal of a dialogic postcolonialism.

Aligned to this question of individual self-doubt and uncertainty above, is that of the authenticity of historic and institutional practices of remembering in the postcolonial metropolis. By looking at both the antithesis of the flâneur figure, and the psychological experience of the city (Simmel 1995), I theorised the interplay between the expression of agency, identity, memory and space, especially in terms of the contradictions between historical monuments and the spaces that they 'manifest' in. Underlined in this analysis is the idea that monuments operate along similar strategies to maps, by seeking to totalise the meaning of a specific historical moment. However, the connotations of these iconic artefacts prove to be consistently

unstable. In this light, it becomes important to have a deconstructive engagement (after Hall 1994) with history because memories or historical meanings, and the processes that give rise to them continuously have to be reinvented. Similarly, characters such as Boniface Khumalo have to re-imagine (reinvent) themselves after years of living in the apartheid city while, like Strickland discovers, there are more ways to recount the past than through the official narratives. The deft juxtaposition of Coretta Scott King, a then living icon of the American civil rights movement, with a symbol of petty apartheid – the WHITES ONLY bench – foregrounds the idea of the body as a site of racial abuse and violence. The fake bench puts into crisis notions of the credibility of an image or symbol and questions the criteria of authenticity in the symbolic representation of historical era.

Chapter Four, in its consideration of the urban perspective in *The Restless Supermarket*, foregrounded Aubrey Tearle as a character who is struggling with notions of self-definition in a democratising city that has both a global outlook and influence. In an extension of the trope of history in the city, I noted how Tearle resorts to the metaphor of linguistic order in the face of historic transformation of both the city and what it means to occupy that space. He is in most respects the incarnation of stasis and conservatism, a character who in certain considerations is an anti-urban figure who fails to mobilize the emancipatory potential of the city as highlighted by Certeau (1988), Young (1995) and others. Because of his perambulations on the streets of Hillbrow, it is possible to rush to conclude that Tearle is a flâneur but it would be more correct to point out that he is more complex than a straightforward gentleman stroller because he occupies an ambiguous position in relation to the city. His narrow-mindedness and prejudice run counter to de Certeau's view of walking as "liberating". Similarly, the reality of the cultural complexity of the city runs counter to the the fact that Tearle tends toward nostalgia and longs for a vanished (and self-invented) simplicity.

In contrast to *The Folly*, *The Restless Supermarket* is centred on inner city and not the suburban versions of the city and thus enables discussion on the peripheralisation of the centre as local and foreign migrant flow into Hillbrow. This influx introduces new cultural practices, and this thesis articulates how, at one level, Vladislavić imaginatively concerns himself (through his writing) with a form of postcolonial deconstruction of ideas about identity. I re-emphasised in this fourth

chapter that post-apartheid and postcolonial do not mark definitive breaks with the past but suggested rather that these are useful terms with which to consider processes of ideological and social realignment that accompany the transition to a democratic society. Further, I figured the postcolonial metropolis as representing a discursive and narrative terrain (a time-space continuum) in which the subject performs his identity in the process of becoming or being. This chapter also recapitulated the idea that through the staging of various individual identities across the cityscape, the author is able to rediscover the ordinary (Ndebele 2006), often re-imagining it and rendering it as unordinary, as uncanny. The blurring of boundaries (moral and social) is a hallmark of the postcolonial urban space of Johannesburg, making it a site of transgressions. S. Graham (2007) highlights the operations of "consumer capitalism" but using the now familiar tools of the blasé outlook or attitude (Simmel 1995 and Wirth 1938) I showed how, using the example of the pink elephant mascot, everyday significance is transformed by the quirky depravity of one man. Even through the fictional allegory of Alibia, I made the point that the imagined city is a site of instability in terms of identity and methods of inscribing the self.

Whereas the identities analysed in Chapter Four are those of urban characters at the cusp of political democratisation in South Africa, Chapter Five reads *The Exploded View* as a different, further stage along the representational arc in which Vladislavić is engaged in drawing out his version(s) of the city of Johannesburg. At this locus point, I argued, *Vladislavić* makes further explorations on the construction and spatialisation of identity in the postapartheid urbanity. I conclude that the process of constructing 'new' selves by the central characters in these four narrative threads ultimately fails because of the fact that these constructions are based on false premises, not necessarily the false conceptions of order as seen in *The Restless Supermarket*, but rather due to the misplaced notions of a shared vision of what is socially possible, as well as the roles of different individuals from diverse backgrounds in that vision. The fundamental consequence, I proposed, is that of alienation or what can be termed as post-urban dissonance. In light of the fact that some early reviews of Vladislavić's writing tend to be preoccupied with the linguistic aspects of it, often ignoring historical context, in this chapter I sought to show how – in terms of notions and modes of representation –

the author imagines and represents the emerging postcolonial African metropolis through the ways different characters construct and spatialise their identities.

The multiple perspectives format of *The Exploded View*, I suggested, makes it amenable to deconstructive readings by offering multi-lensed glimpses or views into the transient social and material spaces of the city. It is for this reason that in Chapter Five I made connections between the actions of individuals and the material conditions that affect those actions and decisions in order to contextualise Vladislavić's consideration of identity(-ies) within specific historical and cultural milieux. I go on to characterise these identities as 'avatars' in reference to their temporality as individuals fleet across the stage of the city, a cityscape that is itself undergoing constant change in its physical and social infrastructure. Notions of belonging and unbelonging – pitting the self-perceived 'from-heres' against the intruding 'come-heres' – were analysed in terms of how individuals perform their identities as they appropriate urban space, partly based on a sense of entitlement.

The fascination with taxonomy and categories (labelling) is not necessariliy a new feature of the postcolonial city but the quality of the gaze that enables this classification is shown to be not exclusively concerned with the old binaries (white versus black), but to have shifted somewhat to fresher concerns such as the migrant identity that is encapsulated in the body of Budlender's vendor at the traffic lights, or Miriam in Bra Zama's African Eatery. The increasingly motorised city, in which the car allows complex and extended patterns of travel also partially contributes to a sense of the absence of community. Significantly, I illustrate again how – taking Vladislavić's creative writing to be an oeuvre almost entirely dedicated to representations of Johannesburg – the imaginative terrain has shifted again from the centre of the city to the suburban peripheries, and how too the urban practices have been correspondingly transformed: from the pedestrian enunciations espoused by Benjamin and de Certeau (among others), to a dispersed, disjointed and motorised postcolonial urban sprawl. The specific acts of spatialisation of identities results in different levels of alienation marked by recurrent dreams (Titlestad and Kissack 2006) and hysteria (Mbembe 2004), as characters seek new pathways of appropriating space and being in the city.

The final chapter essentially works as an overview of Vladislavić's portrayal of the city as it ties together a number of the strands that are analysed in the earlier parts of the thesis. I concluded that at the core of Vladislavić's writing is the essential elusiveness of his imagined metropolis, highlighting still the notion of dialogic postcolonialism. As a result, I posited that *Portrait with Keys* is an example of Vladislavić's ongoing revision(-ing) of Johannesburg (Graham 2008) as a city that unravels just as the writer thinks that he has made sense of it. This constant revision echoes Quayson (2000) and Barnard's (2004) notions of postcolonialism as a work-in-progress. I proposed that, in a way, the text can be read as attempted summary (if one is possible at all) of how Ivan Vladislavić imagines and figures Johannesburg throughout the entirety of his oeuvre.

The contentious matter of race in this book is dealt with by treating Vladislavić's "avoidance" (Nuttall 2009), or what I called tentativeness, as a further manifestation of the mysterious and irresolvable nature of the city, and thus further highlighting the complexity of his writing. One could have faulted him strenuously for not being more militantly anti-racist but that would be reading the text "against the grain". By bringing out the author's puzzlement one not only respects the integrity of the text but also clarifies the various pressures that account for Vladislavić's hesitancy and ambiguity, and in this way also highlighting again the dense texture of his urban writings.

Going forward, one can begin by further considering the genre to which Vladislavić's writing, including the recently published *Double Negative*, belongs. In a way, Vladislavić practises a variant of the physiognomy, a very old form of city writing, to which Walter Benjamin (1983) pays a great deal of attention in *The Arcades Project*. The fragmentary nature of the genre itself underscores (and to an extent even produces) the irresolvability that is typical of Vladislavić's Joburg. Theoretically, there are no clear (as they would be artificial) demarcations in the writer's treatment of space, race and identity; the walking and mapping of the city; and the exhilarations and paranoia that accompany individuals appropriation and occupation of urban space.

9 Bibliography

Abrahams, Peter

    1989 *Mine Boy* Oxford: Heinemann

Alter, Robert

    2005 *Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel* New Haven: Yale Univeristy Press

Achebe, Chinua

    1987 *Things Fall Apart* London: Heinemann

Barnard, Rita

    2004 'On Laughter, the Grotesque, and the South African Transition: Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*' *Novel* 37 (3), 277-302

Barris, Ken

    2006 *What Kind of Child?* Cape Town: Kwela Books

Beavon, Keith S.O.

    2000 'Northern Johannesburg: part of the 'rainbow' or neo-apartheid city the making' http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP1300kb.html

Beckett, Samuel

    2006 *Waiting for Godot* London: Faber and Faber

Benjamin, Walter

    1983 *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*

        London: Verso

Benjamin, Walter

    1986   Paris: Capital of the 19th Century

              Turin: Enaudi

Bhabha, Homi K.

    1994   *The Location of Culture* New York: Routledge

    1996   'Culture's In-Between'in eds. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay *Questions of Cultural Identity* London: Sage

Black, Shameem

    2008   'Fictions of Rebuilding: Reconstruction in Ivan Vladislavić's South Africa' in *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 39(4) Available at: <http://ariel.synergiesprairies.ca/ariel/index.php/ariel/article/view/2177/2131> Accessed: 11 November 2011

Bremner, Lindsay

    2004   'Reframing Township Space:The Kliptown Project' in *Public Culture* 16(3) 521-531

    2010   *Writing the City into Being: Essays on Johannesburg 1998-2008* Johannesburg: Fourthwall Books

Brenner, Joni; Horsler, Alexander; Moiloa, Molemo; Munise, Paula; Vorster, Stacey and Zeelie, Tim

    2010   'Gestures of Defamiliarization' in *Visual Communication* 2010 9 51-65

Brown, Verna

    1990 *'Missing Persons*: A Review' in *English Acedemy Review* 7 127-129

Canetti, Elias

    1962   *Crowds and Power* London: Gollancz

Chambers, Iain

    1994   *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* London: Routledge

Charos, Caitlin

    2008 '"The End of an Error": Transition and "Post-apartheid Play" in Ivan Vladislavić's The Restless Supermarket' in *Safundi* 9(1) 23-38

    2009 'States of Shame: South African Writing After Apartheid in Safundi 10(3) 273-304

Chihota, Clement and Muponde, Robert

    2000 eds. *No More Plastic Balls and Other Stories* Harare: College Press

Childs, Peter and Williams, Patrick

    1997 *An Introduction to Postcolonial Theory* London/New York: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf

Chinodya, Shimmer

    1998 *Can We Talk and Other Stories* Harare: Baobab

Clarkson, Carrol

    2005 Locating Identity in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* in *Third World Quarterly* 26(3) 451-459

    2005b 'Visible and Invisble: What Surfaces in Recent Johannesburg Novels?' in *Moving Worlds* 5(1)

    2006 'Verbal and visual: the restlesss view' in *Scrutiny2* 11(2) 106-112

    2010 'In Conversation with Ivan Vladislavić' Unpublished interaction at the Cape Town launch of Ivan Vladislavić's *Flashback Hotel* March 2010

Coetzee, John Maxwell

    1988   *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* Johannesburg: Radix/Yale University Press

Conrad, Joseph

    2002   *Heart of Darkness* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Cope, Michael

    1987   *Spiral of Fire* Cape Town: David Philip

Couzins, Tim

    2006' The Warrior Ant: A Personal Reflection on Ivan Vladislavić as an Editor' in *Scrutiny2* 11(2) 97-100

Davis, Mike

    2006   *Planet of Slums* New York: Verso

De Certeau, Michel

    1988   *The Practice of Everyday Life (translated by Steven Rendall)*

    Berkely: Univeristy of California Press

De Kock, Ingrid

    1994   'Citadel and Web'in *New Contrast* 22(1) 91-94

    2002   'Review: *The Restless Supermarket*' in *World Literature Today* 76(1) 125

    2011   'Citadel and Web' in ed. Gerald Gaylard *Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić* Johannesburg: Wits University Press

De Vries, Fred

    2006   'Lost in Translation: A Personal Reflection on Ivan Vladislavić as an Editor'in *Scrutiny2* 11(2) 101-105

Demissie, Fassil

    2007 'Imperial Legacies and Postcolonial Predicaments: An Introduction' in ed. Fassil Demissie *Postcolonial African Cities: Imperial Legacies and Postcolonial Predicaments* New York: Routledge

Derrida, Jacques

    1970 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' in eds. *The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy* John Hopkins University Press

    2000 *Of Hospitality: Ann Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond* trans. by Rachel Bowlby Stanford: Stanford University Press

Du Plessis, Menan

    1983 *A State of Fear* Cape Town: David Philip

    1989 *Longlive!* Cape Town: David Philip

Duncan, James S.

    1996 'Me(trope)olis: Or Hayden White Among the Urbanists' in *Representing the City*, ed. Anthony D. King (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

Eco, Umberto

    1986 *Faith in Fakes*:*Travels in Hyperreality*

Feder, Mike

    1988 'Paralegal' in *New York Son* London: Sceptre

Fields, Darell Wayne - 'Review Article: Archiecture Denied' in *Social Identities* 10(4) 49-58

Foster, Jeremy

    2009 From Socio-nature to Spectral Presence: Re-Imagining the Once and Future Landscape of Johannesburg in *Safundi* 10(2) 175-213

Fishman, Robert

    1990   'Megalopolis Unbound' in *Wilson Quarterly Review* 14(1) 25-44

Flockemann, Miki; Roberts, Wahseema; Ngara, Kudzayi and Castle, Andrea

    2010 The Everyday Experience of Xenophobia: Performing *The Crossing* from Zimbabwe to South Africa' in *Critical Arts: A Journal of South-North Cultural and Media Studies* 24(2) 245–259

      Published in July 2010 at UNISA, Pretoria and Routledge (Taylor & Francis), London.

Gaylard, Gerald

    2006 'The death of the subject? Subjectivity in post-apartheid literature' in *Scrutiny2* 11(2) 62-79

    2011a 'Introduction' in ed. Gerald Gaylard *Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić* Johannesburg: Wits University Press

    2011b 'Fossicking in the House of Love: Apartheid Masculinity in *The Folly*' in ed. Gerald Gaylard *Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić* Johannesburg: Wits University Press

Gaylard, Gerald and Titlestad, Michael

    2004 'Introduction: Contreversial Interpretations of Ivan Vladislavić' in *Scrutiny2* 11(2) 5-10

Goldblatt, David and Vladislavić, Ivan

    2010 *TJ/Double Negative* Johannesburg: Random/ Cape Town: Umuzi

Gornick, Vivian

    1996 'On the street: nobody watches, everyone performs' in *approaching eye level* Boston: Beacon Press

Goodman, Ralph

2009 'Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*: A Bricoleur's Guide to Johannesburg' in *Safundi* 10(2) 223-230

Grabe, Ina

1995 'Voices in Contemporary South African Narrtive: An Exploration of Narrative Strategies for Engaging with Current Socio-Polital Issues' J*ournal of Literary Studies* 11(2) 33-37

Graham, James

2008 'Ivan Vladislavić and the Possible City' in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 44(4) 333-344

2010 'Ivan Vladislavić and the Possible City' in ed. Ranka Primorac *African City Textualities* London: Routledge

Graham, Shane

2006 'Layers of Permanence: Towards a Spatial-Materialist Reading of Ivan Vladislavić's *The Exploded View*' in *Scrutiny2* 11(2) 48-61

2007 'Memory, memorialisation and the transformation of Johannesburg: Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket* and *Propaganda by Monuments*' in *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 53(1) 70-97

Gray, Stephen

2003 'Interview: Veronique Tadjo speaks with Stephen Gray', *Research in African Literatures* 34(3) 142-147

Hall, Stuart

1996 'Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?' in Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay *Questions of Cultural Identity* London: Sage

Helgesson, Stefan

> 2004 ''Minor disorders': Ivan Vladislavić and the devolution of South African English' in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30(4) 777-787

> 2006 'Johannesburg as Africa: a postcolonial reading of *The exploded view* by Ivan Vladislavić' in Scrutiny2 11(2) 27-35

> 2006 'Sing for Our Metropolis: Self, Place and Media in the Poetry of Rui Knopfli and Wokpo Jensima' in *English in Africa* 33(1) 71-92

Horn, Peter

> 2011 'A House/ A Story hanging by a Thread: Ivan Vladislavić's *The Folly*' in ed. Gerald Gaylard *Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić* Johannesburg: Wits University Press

Javangwe, Tasiyana

> 2006 'Deconstructive Engagement: A Postcolonial Interpretation of C. Mungoshi's *Coming of the Dry Season*' in eds. M. Vambe and M. Chirere *Charles Mungoshi: A Critical Reader* Harare: Prestige

Knecht, Stacy

> 2005 'Interview with Ivan Vladislavić' in *The Ledge* Available Online at http://www.theledge.com/flash/ledge.php?conversation=47&lan=UK Accessed: 22 June 2011

Kossew, Sue

> 2010 'Re-Reading the Past: Monuments, History and Representation in Short Stories by Ivan Vladislavić and Zoë Wicomb' in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 36(3) 571-582

Kruger, Loren

> 2006 'Filming the Edgy City - Cinematic Narrative and Urban Form in Postapartheid Johannesburg' in *Research in African Literatures* 37(2) 141-164

Kruger, Loren

    2005   'Genres of Johannesburg' in *Scrutiny2* 10(2) 78-85

La Guma, Alex

    1979   *Time of the Butcherbird* Oxford: Heinemann

   1992   *In the Fog of the Season's End* Oxford: Heinemann

Lazarus, Neil

    2011   'Cosmopolitanism and the Specificity of the Local in World Literature' *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 46(1) 119-137

Le Marcis, Frederic (trans. Judith Inggs)

    2004   'The Suffering Body of the City' in *Public Culture* 16(3) 453-477

Lefebvre, Henri

    1991   *The Production of Space* (trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith) Oxford: Blackwell
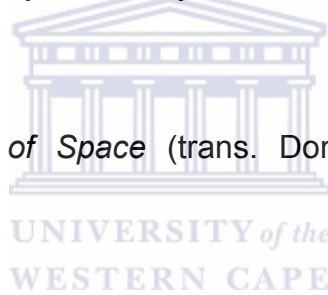
Lenta, Patrick

    2009   '"Everyday Abnormal": Crime and In/security in Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys'* in Journal of Commonwealth Literature 44(1) 117-133

Lessing, Doris

    1994   *The Grass is Singing* London: Flamingo

Manase, Irikidzayi

    2005   'Mapping the city space in current Zimbabwean and South African fiction' in *Transformation* 57 88-105

    2008   *"From Jo'burg to Jozi": A Study of the Writings and Images of Johannesburg from 1980-2003* Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal

Manase, Irikidzayi

>2009 'Johannesburg During the Transition in Vladislavić's "The WHITES ONLY Bench" and The Restless Supermarket' in *English Academy Review* 26(1) 53-61

Marais, Mike

>2002 'Visions of Excess: Closure, Irony and the Thought of Community in Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket*' in *English in Africa* 9(2) 101-117

>2003 'Reading Against Race: J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace, Justin Cartwright's White Lightning and Ivan Vladislavić's The Restless Supermarket in *Journal of Literary Studies* 19(3) 271-289

Marais, Mike and Backstrom, Carita

>2002 'An Interview with Ivan Vladislavić' in *English in Africa* 9(2) 119-128

Marais, Sue

>2011 '"Freeze-frame?" (Re-)imagining the Past in Ivan Vladislavić's *Missing Persons*' in ed. Gerald Gaylard *Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić* Johannesburg: Wits University Press

Marechera, Dambudzo

>1978 *House of Hunger* London: Heinemann Educational

Massey, Douglas S.

>1990 'Segregation: American Apartheid and The making of the Underclass' *The American Journal of Sociology* 96(2) 329-357

Mbeki, Thabo

>1996 'I am an African' (Speech to Parliament) Cape Town 8 May 1996 Available online at: at http://www.afrika.no/Detailed/18444.html Accessed 2 September 2010

Mbembe, Achille

    2004 'Aesthetics of Superfluity' in *Public Culture* 16(3) 373-405

Mbembe, Achille and Nuttall, Sarah

    2004 'Writing the World from an African Metropolis' in *Public Culture* 16(3) 347-372

McGowan, Todd

    2007 *The Real gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* Albany: State Unicersity of New York Press

Mda, Zakes

    1995 *Ways of Dying* Cape Town: Oxford Univeristy Press

    2000 *Heart of Redness* Cape Town: Oxford University Press

    2009 *Black Diamond* Johannesburg: Penguin

Morell, Robert

    2001 'The Times of Change: Men and Masculinity in South Africa' in ed. Robert Morell *Changing Men in Southern Africa* Pietermaritzburg: Univeristy of KwaZulu-Natal Press

Mirzoeff, Nicholas

    2005 'Invisible Again: Rwanda and Representation After Genocide' in *African Arts* Autumn 36-39 and 86-96

Miller, Andie

    2006 'Inside the Toolbox'in *Scrutiny2* 11(2) 117-124

Morphet, Tony

    2006 'Words first: Ivan Vladislavić' in *Scrutiny2* 11(2) 85-90

Morphet, Tony

2011   Án Extraordinary Volume Romps in My Head in Ivan Vladislavić's in ed. Gerald Gaylard *Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić* Johannesburg: Wits University Press

Mpe, Phaswane

2001   *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press

Muchemwa, Kizito Z.

2009   'Zimbabwean urban space and the cartography of social imaginaries' Seminar Paper Presented at the Department of English, Stellenbosch University November 2009

Murray, Martin J.

2008   *Taming the Disorderly City* Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press

Ndebele, Njabulo

2006   *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press

Ngara, Kudzayi

2007   Imagining the Real - Magical Realism as a Postcolonial Strategy for Narration of the Self in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna Of Excelsior* Unpublished Mini-Thesis, University of the Western Cape

2009   'The Itinerant Flâneur: Toloki as Migrant in Time and Ideological Space in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*" in *English Academy Review* 26(2) 16-24

Nuttall, Sarah

2004a 'City Forms and Writing the 'Now' in SA' in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30(4) 731-749

2004b 'Stylizing the self - The Y Generation in Rosebank' in *Public Culture* 16(3) 430–452

Nuttall, Sarah

  2009 *Entanglement* Johannesburg: Wits University Press

Nuttall, Sarah and Mbembe, Achille

  2007 'Afropolis: From Johannesburg' *PMLA* 122(1) 281-288

  2008 eds. *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* Johannesburg: Wits University Press

Oliphant, Andries

  1990 MissingPersons a Superb Collection *The New Nation* 19 April (15): 23

O'Shaughnessy, Emma

  2010 '"Splinters in the Eyes"– Reading the Metropoetics of Crisis in Post-apartheid Johannesburg Fictions' in *Postamble* 5(2)

Paton, Alan

  2002 *Cry, The Beloved Country* London: Vintage

Pinnock, Patricia

  2000 *Skyline* Cape Town: David Philip

Popescu, Monica

  2003 'Translations: Lenin's Statues, Post-Communism and Post-apartheid' in *The Yale Journal of Criticism 16(2)* 406–423

Powell, Ivor

  2011 'Postmodern Castle in the Air' in ed. Gerald Gaylard *Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić* Johannesburg: Wits University Press

Quayson, Ato

  2000 *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice and Process* Cambridge: Polity

Quayson, Ato

    2004 'Symbolization Compulsion: Testing a pschoanalytic category of African literature' in *University of Toronto Quarterly* 73(2) 753-773

Robinson, Jennifer

    2006 Review of Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall 'The Elusive Metropolis' in *H-SAfrica* (October, 2006)

    2009 – 'Living in Dystopia: Past, Present and Future in Contemporary African Cities' Seminar Paper presented at Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town August 2009

Samuelson, Meg

    2007 'Yvonne Vera's Bulawayo - Modernity (Im)mobility, Music, and Memory' in *Research in African Literatures* 38(2) 22-36

    2007 'The City Beyond the Border: The Urban Worlds of Duiker, Mpe and Vera' in ed. Fassil Demissie *Postcolonial African Cities: Imperial Legacies and Postcolonial Predicaments* New York: Routledge

Sanders, Mark

    2002 'Disgrace' in *Interventions* 4(3) 363-373

Sassen, Saskia

    1996 A' New Geography of Centers and Margins: Summary and Implications' in eds. Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout *The City Reader* London: Routledge

Sassen, Saskia

    2002 ed. *Global Networks, Linked Cities* New York: Routledge

Schreiner, Olive

    1986 *The Story of an African Farm* Craighall: Donker

Shakespeare, William

    1968   *The Tempest* (ed. Anne Righter) London: Penguin

Shefer, Tamara; Ratele, Kopano; Strebel, Anna; Shabalala, Nokuthula and Buikma, Rosemary

    2007 *From Boys to Men: Social Constructions of Masculinity in Contemporary Society*

Simmel, Georg

    1995 The Metropolis and Mental Life in *Metropolis. Center and Symbol of our Times* , ed. Philip Kasinitz New York: New York University Press

Simone, AbdouMaliq

    2004 'People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg' in *Public Culture* 16(3) 407-429

Strauss, Helene

    2008 'Squirming White Bodies: Interracial Encounters in Anton Kannemeyer's "True Love" and Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket*' in *Journal of Literary Studies* 24(2) 21-44

Tadjo, Veronique

    2002 *The Shadow of Imana: Travels in the Heart of Rwanda* Oxford: Heinemann

Taylor, Jane

    2010 'Reform/Perform' Seminar Paper Presented at the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, 27 July 2010

The Star Newspaper

    2010 'Steet Guide' in *Saturday Property Guide* 16 October 2010

Thurman, Chris

    2007 'Playing the Game: Vladislavić, Aesthetics and Politics' in *Current Writing* 19(1) 69-86

Titlestad, Michael and Kissack, Mike

    2006 'Secular improvisations - the poetics of invention in Ivan Vladislavić's *The exploded view*' in *Scrutiny2* 11(2) 11-26

Tutuola, Amos

    1961 *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* London: Faber and Faber

Urry, John

    1990 *The Tourist Gaze* London: Sage

Van Niekerk, Marlene

    2004 *Triomf* Cape Town: Quellerie

Van Zyl

    2006 'Skyhooks and Diagrams: The Signing of the New South Africa in Ivan Vladislavić's *The Exploded View*' in *Scrutiny2* 11(2) 75-84

    2006 'A Homo Calculator at Large: Reading the Late Work of Foucault in the Light of Ivan Vladislavić's "Villa Toscana"' in *Journal of Literary Studies* 22(3/4) 257-275

Veit-Wild, Flora and Schade, Ernst

    1988 *Dambudzo Marechera, 4 June 1952-18 August 1987 : Pictures, Poems, Prose, Tributes* Harare: Baobab

Vladislavić, Ivan

    1989 *Missing Persons* Cape Town: David Philip

    1993 *The Folly* Cape Town: David Philip

    1996 *Propaganda by Monuments and Other Stories* Cape Town: David Philip

Vladislavić, Ivan

   1998 'Street Addresses, Johannesburg' in eds. Hilton Judin and Ivan Vladislavić *blank___Architecture, apartheid and after* Rotherdam: NAIPublications

   2006 [2001] *The Restless Supermarket* Cape Town: David Philip

   2004 *The Exploded View* Johannesburg: Random House

   2006 *Portraits with Keys – Joburg & what-what* Johannesburg: Umuzi

   2011 *Double Negative* Cape Town: Umuzi

Warnes, Christopher

   2000a 'Interview with Ivan Vladislavić' in *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 46(1) 273-281

   2000b 'The making and unmaking of history in Ivan Vladislavić's *Propaganda by Monuments and Other Stories*' in *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 46(1) 67-89

Watson, Stephen.

   2006 ed. *A City Imagined* Johannesburg: Penguin

Westwood, Sallie and Williams, John

   1997 'Imagining Cities' in eds. Sallie Westwood and John Williams *Imaging Cities: Scripts, Signs and Memories* London: Routledge

Wirth, Louis

   1938 'Urbanism as a Way of Life' in *The American Journal of Sociology* 44(1) 1-24

Witternberg, Hermann

   2004 *The Sublime, Imperialism and the African Landscape* (Unpublished PhD Thesis) University of the Western Cape

Wood, Felicity

    2001 'Taking Fun Seriously: The Potency of Play in Ivan Vladislavić's Short Stories' *English Academy Review* 18(1) 21-37

Wright, Beryl

    1996 'Back Talk: Recording the Body' in *Callaloo* 19(2) 397-413

Young, Elaine

    2001 '"Or is it just the angle?" Rivalling Realist Representation in Ivan Vladislavić's *Propaganda by Monuments and Other Stories*' in *English Academy Review* 18(1) 38-45

Young, Iris Marion

    1995 'City Life and Difference' in *Metropolis. Center and Symbol of our Times* ed. Philip Kasinitz. New York: New York University Press