

# **Ivan Vladislavić and What-What: Among Writers, Readers and ‘other odds, sods and marginals**

## **Abstract**

This essay is an experimental quodlibet on some recent Johannesburg imaginative writing. It works outwards from a creative ‘overview’ of Ivan Vladislavić’s position in South African literature to a perspective on versions of citiness represented by newer, black authors such as Niq Mhlongo and Phaswane Mpe. Unable to deny the neighbourly appeal of Vladislavić’s signature ‘white writing’, however, I turn to a discussion of *Portrait with Keys: Johannesburg and what-what* (2006), focusing especially on his use of fellow writers as generative literary-cultural antecedents who enable him to bookmark the material streets of Johannesburg through an inspirational, *written* spirit of place.

## **Co-ordinates**

The multiple-award winning writer Ivan Vladislavić is aptly placed in South African literature, affiliated at once with the old and the new. His reputation, premised on the extraordinarily skilful language and style of his prose, nudges that of the eminent literary old guard, an influential “white quartet” of Coetzee, Gordimer, Brink and Breytenbach (Kellas 2004), but nor is it unusual, either, to find Vladislavić’s name invoked in the diverse company of prestigious ‘newer’ (if not necessarily young/er) South African writers like Zakes Mda, Marlene van Niekerk, Etienne van Heerden, and Antjie Krog. Such unsettled positionings, premised on varied literary co-ordinates, are suggestive of Vladislavić’s writerly range, and also imply that this author’s determinedly experimental literariness continues to mark his stylistic distinction from any imagined creative norm, and indeed hints at the awkward problematics not only of generic definition but of canonical categorisation.

Certainly, Vladislavić has shown himself well up to the task of creating strikingly contemporary Joburg scenarios, peopled with characters, like Budlender, who are both deeply, psychologically human and cunningly situated within a socio-textual signifying system (see Marais 2006). However, both Vladislavić’s exceptional linguistic skill and his ambivalent treatment of contemporary culture tend also to set him apart from a younger “vexed generation” (Donadio 2006) of writers whose attention is often gripped by the contradictory challenges of voicing new local stories in a post-apartheid zone that has been opened up not only to democratic possibility, but to the commodified, multi-mediated global marketplace.<sup>2</sup>

For over twenty years – a long time, an adult lifetime – Vladislavić has been writing what Sarah Nuttall persistently calls “the now” (2009) with a degree of marked unusualness. He is an accomplished ‘practitioner’, brass plate of accreditations screwed to the door, but also a notoriously scavenging hoarder of quotable scraps, pencil ends, forgotten figures, anything he finds

valuable. (Discussing his skills as editor of *Country of my Skull*, Krog notes Vladislavić's ability to be both incisive surgeon and brutal hacker [2006].) His early fiction is considered the apotheosis of an incipient South African supra-realism which "reflects [p]ost-apartheid post-modern writing at its best" (Kellas 2004), and even in his later work, where some discern an increasingly realist frame of reference (Morphet 2006), Vladislavić could be said subtly to "play with the conventions of fiction as much as...speak about contemporary realities in South Africa today" (Web 1). One "of the freshest voices in South African Literature", Monica Popescu can claim in 2003 (407; (see also Popescu 2008), and even the disgruntled Elleke Boehmer and Deborah Gaitskell (2004), impatient with the perceived lack of new ideas among South African creative and critical writers 'now', praise his writing as "alone in querying the medium, as against the message, of South African writing" (2004:725).

In some regards, however, critics have recognised among Vladislavić's characters those who are of a piece with the penchant, among older white South African writers, for the ageing, embattled, cynical or disgruntled white male. Take Aubrey Tearle of *The Restless Supermarket* (2001). He is a finicky, curmudgeonly obsessive given to textual-cultural proofreading, a personality type and malaise which find correspondence in J M Coetzee's David Lurie, and Andre Brink's Ruben Olivier (Helgesson 2004:777), as well as Damon Galgut's characters Eloff, and Adam Napier. The ending of Vladislavić's *The Exploded View*, too, is one "which many have found to be excessively dark" (Miller 2006b:122). With protagonists and scenarios like these, post-apartheid white writing has often been labelled pessimistic: "very bleak" (Andie Miller on Damon Galgut's *The Good Doctor* (2006:139)); a "bleak vision of the world around" (Margaret von Klemperer on Kobus Moolman's poetry and plays (2007:13)). Coetzee's prose, in particular, is considered not only sombre and austere, but especially and "relentlessly oblique" (Boehmer and Gaitskell 2004:725), namely, 'dark' as in obfuscatory. For some, as Leon de Kock implies, Coetzee is simply "acid" (2005:78). A very cold fish.

If there is much not to like (not much to like) in Vladislavić's own acerbic Tearle, who "finds the rapid pace of change" in Johannesburg "to be a source of deep anxiety and dismay" (Graham 2007:81), his thwarted attempts to give order to his old-new city of increasingly inclement words and alarmingly porous meanings have been recognised as an unusually original authorial imprint. As Helgesson explains it, through Tearle, Vladislavić can conceptualise the 'minoritisation' of local English literature and language, a metafictional democratisation "of English from within" (2004:778).

Tensions remain, however, for this is a writer, perhaps like South African literature, who just doesn't know his place. Comparatively early in this country's young democracy, the "quirkiness" of Vladislavić's fiction was said to point "a direction in South African 'white writing' which ... parallels ... the new direction taken by our society", replete with all the "ironies, the neuroses, [and] the ludicrous elements" while eschewing "the queasy

seriousness” characteristic of writing by the older white South Africans (Nicholls 1999:159-60). Some years later, the judges of the 2007 Sunday Times-Alan Paton Prize for non-fiction praised Vladislavić’s *Portrait with Keys* (2006) as “an example of how great books can change the way you see yourself. It’s a profound portrait of the post-apartheid landscape” (Donaldson, Jordaan and Jurgens 2007). More recently, though, in Nuttall’s *Entanglement* (2009), Vladislavić’s work is ambivalently received: with his interest in the creolisation of language and genre, and in shifting Joburg geographies, Vladislavić often represents the “new” and the “now” (2009:94) in South African literature; or, as Nuttall pointedly has it, he increasingly “stands in” for these values because of the “drag in scholarship”, meaning researchers’ failure to keep pace with, or even to register, emergent writing “by young and often black South Africans” (94; see also De Kock 2005). Following on from this, her imputation seems to be that Vladislavić’s ageing white eyes, rather like Tearle’s – and his similarly circumscribed social circles – cannot give wider, more necessary account of a South African present. Accordingly, his writing is marked “by aporias”, a racial and “generational aporia” (93), typical of “a white man of a certain generation” (106).

It is no surprise, really, this predictable predicament, derived as it is in part from divisive South African histories. Indeed, such a “critical bind” (Nuttall 2009:106) seems appropriately suited to the continuing uncertainty attached to the protracted ‘post’ in post-apartheid. A post-apartheid nation? A country in a “post-anti-apartheid phase” (De Kock 2005:75)? A country “caught in an unspecified transition” (Boehmer and Gaitskell 2004:725)? A modern African democracy? Who are we? How shall we be named? (My phrasing, here, retains that “obstinate collective intention to assume that there is at least the possibility of a single, common, indigenous [human] nature” (Gordimer 1988:119).)

Some commentators seem to think it’s not worth waiting on word from South African literature. Laurice Taitz (2008), for instance, musing on SA Lit following a Sunday Times Literary Awards dinner themed as “Writers in Troubled Times”, “can’t help feeling disappointed in its ‘un-Africanness’, its seeming dislocation from place and time”. For Jane Rosenthal, even innovative texts by young black writers are marred by a persistent blank: nowhere, she regrets, is there “any sort of racial sharing of the new South Africa” (2008), and Rachel Donadio remarks that “Twelve years after apartheid the South African literary scene remains as fragmented as ever, with writers exploring their own ethnic experience” (2006). Nuttall, however, chooses to take issue especially with Vladislavić, finding it “surprising” that in *Portrait with Keys* there is a “lack of cross-racial friendship in his social life in the city”. She goes on to ask whether one can “write oneself in to Johannesburg, a city one feels to be receding from one’s grasp, unless one inhabits at least the beginnings of a cross-racial world?” (2009:93). I don’t know. ‘One’ is a terribly anxious, solitary figure, and even Vladislavić’s

bitterly displaced ‘Tearle’, as a colleague pointed out, is a telegrammatically hopeful anagram of ‘relate’.

### **Interregnum**

Back in 2005, after the exhilarating highs of Rainbow Nationism had given way to the ambiguities of the postcolony, Vladislavić described South Africa’s situation as “a second interregnum, a parenthetical era, in which a provisional country asserts itself, but drags its history behind it in brackets” (88). This is a disconcerting image. It gives life to a strange, half-formed creature, at once powerful and damaged; a shackle of butcher boy, egotistical infant, and determined walker. Vladislavić was likely conscious of writing his way into the gap of the present through layers of archived memory, and by using the memorable term “interregnum” he brackets a reverberative conceptual space that recalls the title of Nadine Gordimer’s 1982 James Lecture, “Living in the Interregnum”. “The old is dying, and the new cannot be born,” Gordimer declared, and “in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms” (1988:220). Here, re-quoting the epigraph she had chosen for her novel *July’s People* (1981), which resuscitated the phrasing from Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, Gordimer characterises 1980s apartheid while also seeking to anticipate the eschatology to come. For white South Africans, the likelihood was a fearful state of contradictory consciousness and internal friction, an interregnum “not only between two social orders but between two identities, one known and discarded, the other unknown and undetermined” (1988:226). She envisaged tough times ahead for white writers – “a minority within a minority” (227), part of an improvised South African intellectual life. “Can the artist go through the torrent with his precious bit of talent tied up in a bundle on his head?” she asked, replying “I don’t know yet. I can only report”. And as an emissary of the future, girding her strength in preparation for necessary impress; a resourceful Marco Polo elaborating upon his wish to return unscathed from a remote, fabulous kingdom, she went on to report “that the way to begin entering history out of a dying white regime is through setbacks, encouragements and rebuffs from others, and frequent disappointments in oneself” (233).

The challenges for white writing since then have been many. No more confident linguistic certainty and, certainly, the strategic diminution of categories such as English Literature. The quest for relevance: what would come after the hard-hitting, ethically-engaged stories that had found most favour (a morbid critical symptom, in Gordimer’s view) as South Africa’s red badge of courage? How to write – why write? – when the persistent noise of your privilege seemed to rebuke the cries, variously faint and strident, of topics, styles, human lives, previously stifled? Sitting down to write, after all, if not regardless. Listening for the small, persistent scratchings of the cockroach, the story in history, even as white writers, in “this transitional period of South African history” (Horrell 2004:775) were being taken to task for white writing, for “still, uneasily, ‘thinking white’” (776), their ideas and

identities “snagged on the hooks and burrs, shaded with hues of guilt and anxiety” (766).

We’re back, here, in the shackled brackets of Vladislavić’s “parenthetical era” (2005:88), the old story wandering in “a dog-eared field, collapsing from one attitude to another, dragging your ghosts through the dirty air” (Vladislavić 2006:182). However, is it only trite to remember that the all-too-obvious axiom of memory is forgetting, a casual or contrived or latently traumatic emptiness which would be as dangerous a trope, post-apartheid, as the supposedly empty landscape of white writing’s early encounter? This may be one reason, as Shane Graham illustrates, that a “recurring theme in all of Vladislavić’s writing is ... the disorientation and historical amnesia that characterize postapartheid life and culture” (2007:73). This is a morbid symptom, perhaps, something dying to be born, yet as Vladislavić acknowledges through an epigraph from Michel de Certeau that he chooses for *Portrait with Keys*, “Haunted places are the only ones people can live in”.

### **Signwriting**

“I live,” observes Gordimer in the interregnum essay, “at 6,000 feet” (1988:22). This comfortably above sea level, however long a writer may have spent identifying with material struggles and grassroots politics, there’s no telling whether she has seen the writing on the reef, the word MSAWAWA painted on the township roof. But flying over Chiawelo a light aircraft pilot might home in on the spot; winging high, even a bird, passing literate, could make out the huge red letters. MSAWAWA. Loud and clear.

To some – readers? viewers? – this word, scripted upon the roof of Niq Mhlongo’s house, might seem obscure. Yet to the select group of streetwise insiders, neighbours who yet might never see the letters from the sky, this is a homely expression often used to describe Soweto, meaning “here at home”. “I felt it would be the appropriate way to communicate the subculture of the place to whomever happened to see it, whether they were taking a chopper ride over the township, or exploring on Google Earth” (Msimango 2009:5), says Mhlongo, the author of *Dog Eat Dog* (2004) and *After Tears* (2007). He is a youthful talent who has been described in the *New York Times* as “one of the most high-spirited and irreverent new voices of South Africa’s post-apartheid literary scene” (Donadio 2006), while closer to home, in *Entanglement* (2009), Nuttall praises Mhlongo’s student character Dingz as “a sharp reader of the changing political landscape” (2009:54). He is an astute observer who is adept at playing the race card, the tradition card – you name it, it’s up his sleeve, anything to secure his precarious life in Jozi on the Wits campus. “[I]nciting, inducing, seducing, hustling” (2009:55-6), these are but a few of the resourceful tactics through which Dingz, both victim and beneficiary, works to feel ‘here at home’ in the casual crookedness and strangling bureaucracy which have become part of a South Africa post 1994. In *After Tears*, the setting moves from the university possibilities of Cape Town to Bafana’s “beloved township Chi”, a place rendered increasingly uncomfortable through his persistent pretence that he

has not flunked his law degree at UCT. Instead, he is the returning “golden boy”, given the nickname ‘Advo’, and repeatedly called on to mediate in the troubles of his township relatives and friends as they aspire to sue this entity and that, hoping to realise the dream of getting rich (Magubane 2007:37). If the publicity claims of Soweto Funk Tours are to be believed, the township is “no longer struggle, it’s a lifestyle” (Web 2).

Mhlongo’s fictions of the ‘here at home’ are clearly closely linked to his attempts to define a place of belonging. In an interview with Laura Arenschild (2008), for instance, he points out that before he dropped out of his law studies in Cape Town, “fondly called ‘The mother city’”, he found it

not ‘motherly’ at all. For a Jo’burger like me, it was like I was outside South Africa where people behaved in a strange cultured way. It was difficult to adapt. Strangely, I missed the barking of the dogs at home during the night. I missed the drunken people from the seven shebeens along our street. I missed the township lingo/tsostitaal, I missed the kids playing diketo in the middle of the street, and so on. To escape from this loneliness and strangeness I decided to write.

Feeling *not* ‘at home’ in Cape Town – or in law – impelled by recurrent longing and perhaps even displaced by alienation, Mhlongo retrospectively offers the interviewer a narrativised account in which he decided to write, an agency through which he elects to represent his identity, or even the more self-consciously studied persona of successfully authorised subjectivity. He is a writer, not a failed lawyer; and his writing has a particularly material relation to place. His spot, even more specifically than the sweeping generic simplicity of ‘Johannesburg’ or ‘Jozi’, or even the conceptual sprawl of ‘Soweto’, “the township once synonymous with the privations of apartheid” (Smith 2009:12) is Chiawelo. This is variously referred to in sources as a *suburb* of Soweto and an *informal settlement*, categorisations which throw ‘city’ and ‘township’, ‘belonging’ and ‘difference’ sharply into question. As South Africans know, place – ‘location’ – means so many different things. Chiawelo may have begun as a series of basic site and service plots for Tsonga- and Venda-speaking black people under apartheid, but estate agents apparently now tout the place as one of the most metropolitan townships in South Africa, a trendsetter for style and politics. At the same time, though, Chiawelo has a parallel other life as “the backdrop to *District 9*, the hit sci-fi blockbuster of the season”. The film was “shot in the slums” of this township, where one side of the street is a “blasted landscape”, “desolate” and “post-apocalyptic”, “dotted with rubble, cesspools and ramshackle buildings of concrete or tin”, and on “the opposite side. . . are the brick houses and shops of modern Soweto” (Smith 2009:12). An ambiguous place, which evokes ambivalent feelings: “‘We don’t want to move,’” says Matilda Isaacs of government’s plan to relocate people from Chiawelo sixteen kilometres away. “‘We are the people,’” says Sydney Mofokeng, “‘And we

are still here.” Either way, the film-makers’ trailers are long gone (Smith 2009:12). Mhlongo’s novels are pertinent in this regard. As Sam Raditlhalo remarks, for instance, what *After Tears* captures “is the question of *dislocation* in these ostensible ‘locations’...Discussions range from HIV/AIDS, the now standard xenophobia, black economic empowerment, government plans for prepaid water and electricity and resistance to such plans, infidelity, philandering and attempts to get by” (2008). Chi is the particular setting, abbreviated into the familiar short-hand, in which Mhlongo is said to find his inspiration, and yet for many readers – outsiders? – the intimate linguistic tag is quickly recast into the more iconically familiar ‘township’: in *Dog Eat Dog*, “the odors of the township and trains plunge me down the underworld of Africa’s most developed nation” as Mhlongo “allows his characters ... to toss us headlong in to the wild waters of change the country desires to ford...but is afraid to fully venture into” (Umez 2008).

Mhlongo’s roof – a view on, or of, or into ‘the township’?; a voyeuristic township vernacular for outsiders? – is an analogous page for Remotewords, a German-South African art migration collaboration which aims to paint pixellated “messages on roofs across the planet” (Msimango 2009:5). Like his second novel, *After Tears* (2007), which lets a reader in to “the idiosyncrasies of a multi-ethnic, multi-generational community” (Khumalo 2007), Mhlongo’s roof is emblematic of his township belonging writ large, a graffiti screen that designs and announces his affiliation virtually as quasi label of identity. Against more officious or disaffected takes on ‘township life’ – the foraging jobless, “rats crawl[ing] over piles of garbage”, “squalid shacks behind barbed wire” (Smith 2009:12) – Mhlongo’s novels, which are “concerned with the issues experienced by township dwellers” (Isaacson 2008:17) seen through the colloquially-endearing lens of msawawa – affirm a perhaps idealising countermand, that of homeliness and benign emotional affect over alienation, and the improvisatory capacity of the imagination under any circumstance. And yet. As Mhlongo shrugs to Maureen Isaacson, he “was born in Midway-Chiawelo in Soweto in 1973 and still lives there today (“I would love to move out but as a writer, money is too tight to mention”) (2008:17). “Tshiawelo”, I find, “is a Venda name meaning ‘a place of rest’” and “When u have it as Chiawelo it has no meaning” (Web 3).

Written in major cities around the world, the Remotewords rooftops simultaneously turn middle-class interiority inside out, and invite monumentalist marketing machineries into more human housing; the rooftops, visually re-embedded, are partly metafictional name plaques in which the idea of the exceptional ‘writer in residence’, or even the aggrandising place of literature as elite discourse, is re-situated as part of an unexceptional ordinary. In a word, and whatever the writer’s annoyance that in his mid thirties he should be equated with young black literature, msawawa is Mhlongo’s ‘location’ and his signature locution as the “voice of the kwaito generation” who “wrote with verve and candour about the anxieties of his demographic” (Donadio 2006). Msawawa becomes his distinctive individual street address among the broader, implied collective positioning of township

connectivity, part of an imaginative, writer's 'e'ddress to his imagined publics. This, as it were a link to his home page, materialises – in a startlingly visual type or medium – a version of what De Kock identifies in Gordimer's changing fictional foci: a “remarkable move outwards, from closely observed turns” of South Africa's socio-historical fate to “how issues of national identity are traversed by the surges of global and transnational flows, means and potentialities” (2005:76).

Clearly, there are creative, quasi-Situationist views on language flagged by the Remotewords project, and yet looking upon msawawa from the relative distance of my intellectual speculations, I also experience disquiet. Remotewords reminds me, a little, of the invasive mindset of photo reconnaissance, the sinister, disembodied reach of aerial scoping. Long-range missiles grid-locked from afar on a predetermined target. Collateral damage. Cyber-empires. Reading about Mhlongo's roof in the messy privacy of our family lounge, the Sunday papers sprawled over the carpet, I wonder about the 'here, at home' of this country. A 'my space' increasingly gone global in the service of self, rather than trying to imagine even a faint collective good? Each turned increasingly to his or her own against the onslaughts of a chaotic, or often expedient, sociopolitics? And yet even here, at home, you're targeted and tracked online, personal data gathered for resale in mega markets more Microsoft than Loxion Kulcha. Yet who, “in connective South Africa”, would wish to belong to that inconsequential category of “erasure and absence...revealingly known in cyberspeak as 'PONA' ... people of no account”? (Oguibe 1996). Not I.

Reading (about) Mhlongo's msawawa, I find myself wondering about the meanings of home as expediently? necessarily? flagged and fixed, the validity – the emotional and imaginative purchase – of one's 'home' as a brand. Not so much individual homes tagged Costa Plenty or Rose Cottage, which anyway seems a dead habit, nowadays, but more dramatic, frequent contemporary collectives. And not either The Villa Toscana, but The Rainbow Nation. The African Renaissance. A world in One Country. Mzansi fo'sho. Host country 2010.

The roof as a screen, concealing and revealing.

In competitive internationalised economic hustings, hustling on the rooftops means upholding and promoting a nation's global standard, and might even have become an obligatory part of the contemporary artist's attention-getting package. Just so, the “*nom d'artiste*, 'S.Majara'”, of Vladislavić's conceptual artist character Simeon Majara in the story “Curiouser”, “is always written within” quotation marks (Helgesson 2006:31), and Vladislavić makes the point that this artist, working as he does with commodified images, also has a “knack for publicity” (2004:115). “I know many writers who share my ambivalence about the marketing machinery,” says Vladislavić in interview with Pamela Jooste, “But as you know, everyone is now required to double as a performer and publicist” (2006).

Which – a momentary madness after reading De Kock's provocative speculations on the existence or otherwise of a national literature (2005)? –

suddenly prods me towards a tendentious idea: that it might be possible, through a virtual extension of Remotewords, to arrive at a single, babeled structural artifice symbolising ‘South African Literature’. Or, using a teetering mixture of brick sizes, ‘southern African literatures’. So, not just another national monument, or laagered journal of a wall. But hold on a sec: could writers, enough of them odd or egotistical or original, be persuaded to sign on, and if so, under which watchword would each appear? Njabulo S Ndebele might legitimately claim the rights to be ‘ordinary’, and Marlene van Niekerk ... would she demur at ‘gaat’? Coetzee might concede to ‘magister’, and for Kopano Matlwa ... would ‘coconut’ be too offensive? What about Ingrid Winterbach: might she be willing to settle on the untranslated ... ‘toeval’, say, or ‘toeverlaat’? And Ivan Vladislavić? He singles out Winterbach’s *The Book of Happenstance* (2008), in the original Afrikaans of 2006, *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat*, as among his favourite fictional reads, but he’s notoriously difficult to place. In my alphabet of surplus people he might just agree to live in Troyeville under “X marks the spot” (2006b), a suitably un-fixed signifier for his hidden hand as editor of numerous South African texts, his screened self-effacement in his writing (Helgesson 2004), and his controversially tangential representation of contemporary South African situations and subjectivities.

All too soon, however, in the conceptual syntax of the folly I’m planning to house SAL/sAl, I encounter problems. Consider the place of Phaswane Mpe, for instance, author of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) and the posthumously published *Brooding Clouds* (2008). He died, suddenly, of an unspecified illness in 2005, and I’ve had to look hard to find any who will say the word that names his death: “probably of AIDS”, ventures Donadio (2006). And how hopelessly naive, then, to imagine that there is some word – Hillbrow? Avalon? Heaven? Book? – in and under which Mpe could live.

Mpe’s novel, Michael Green argues, translates idealist and inclusivist assumptions about democratic nationhood into more problematic shape, even “damning ... the destructiveness of effusive nationalism” (2008:335). Yet because of a focus on the typically post-apartheid concerns of AIDS, migrancy, sexual violence, identity, xenophobia and language – all of which are preferred “canonical criteria” of new South African literature (335) – the novel has earned Mpe “a regular place in recent accounts of post-apartheid literature”, where he is sometimes listed with Zakes Mda and K Sello Duiker as a “triumvirate forming the kernel of a new canon for the new nation” (334). (What I still recollect, from Duiker’s *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001), more even than the troubled gay masculinities, is his character’s claim that it is the dance floor which is the contemporary social equaliser, and designer labels the new Esperanto.)

Mpe’s book opens with a disturbing apostrophe, “If you were still alive” (2000:1), and the author’s haunted, second-person address follows the travails of characters who have come to Joburg through a series of settings that expands and contracts to take in Hillbrow, Tiragalong and Oxford. Mpe’s “Hillbrow: The Map” is a shifting space, part suburb, part outskirts, uneven

midtown and deep inner city of the heart, and his descriptions emphasise the new South African difficulty, especially acute for black people who have historically been unwelcome participants in the white city's deceptive urbanity, of locating oneself in a space that presents as rapidly accelerated modernity while erratically invoking and respecting the rights of tradition. In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, the details of individual life and self are subsumed in the ambiguous anonymity of the Hillbrow streets, an "our Heaven" (2001:124) which is the emblem of a desired collective in an 'other world' of urban strangers, at the same time as the city street is shown to be a hostile new South African correlative of the unforgiving village, in terms of whose judgment a city woman "deserved what she got. What had she hoped to gain by opening her thighs to every *Lekwerekwere* that came her way?" (54). In a brief 124 pages, the brevity a mark of living curtailed, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* allows a reader to taste "the sweet and bitter juices" (124) of Joburg city life, "city of gold, milk, honey and bile"(56).

The impetus of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, it could be said, is the "resolution ... to pour all ... grief and alienation into the world of storytelling" (55), where the written word is desired as an affirmation of identities which are shaped by the urban modern and not only the oral. Like Mpe, his character Refentše writes. Like Refentše, her diseased character writes. There is a short story about a village woman who comes to Joburg and works in the kitchens, slowly accumulating credits towards her BA with Unisa; a novel "about Hillbrow, xenophobia and AIDS and the prejudices of rural lives" (Mpe 2001:55). Refentše, however, writes in sePedi which, in the predominantly English South African publishing industry (see Green 2008), means that her manuscript is about good as dead. So much, it seems, for the validations of published writing; for who is considered an author, and who not.

And what of the necessary afterlife of published books? In this country of nearly 50 million people, the general book-buying public numbers between 800 000 (Tryhorn and Wray 2009:6) and one million (Morris 2008). This gives a poignant accuracy to Mpe's ingenuous comment that "there's a big big big big audience that I'm not reaching and probably I'm never going to reach" (Attree 2005:143). Here, at home, while a tax on luxury vehicles is removed, Vat on books remains, since to lift this burden, explained Trevor Manuel, would benefit only the rich (Bell 2009). In Hillbrow, home to over 100 000 people, there is but one library, with twenty seats (Gevisser 2008:327). In South Africa, more than 20 million people, 60% of the population, "can barely read or write a few words" (Bell 2009), rendering a voter's carefully-considered X almost meaningless, posthumous before it properly lives.

This, too, is the city, somewhere between "statistics and ... subjective impressions", an antinomial atrocity of "[k]nowledge and unknowability. Intimacy and anonymity. Separation and connection" (Helgesson 2006:27-8). A preposterocity of remotewords far more complex to figure than some

extravagantly silly, pie-in-the-sky signwriting venture featuring all of South African literature at large.

“I live at 6, 000,” said Gordimer, “in a society whirling, stamping, swaying with the force of revolutionary change...The city is Johannesburg, the country South Africa, and the time” – then, it was “the last years of the colonial era in Africa” (1988:22). Now, we are here. Here and now. Now is here. Is it too much to imagine that there might be a writer here, who can now do this justice? Who can do this *now* justice?

In the English-speaking suburbs of South Africa’s city of literary words, critical interest in the last few years has been piqued especially by the tough realism, the “harrowing reality” of recent “novels that explore what young black men are doing with freedom, now that it is here” (Rosenthal 2008). In addition to Mhlongo’s novels (his own impatience with the epithet ‘young’ aside), critics have noted Kgebetli Moele’s *Room 207*, winner of a UJ [2007 University of Johannesburg] Prize for a debut novel, and joint winner of the 2007 Herman Charles Bosman Prize. They have been struck by the book’s devil-may-care humour, its edgy combination of cynicism and idealism, and ‘real’, blunt storytelling. Rosenthal describes the novel as “a pacy, stylish and often heartbreaking sortie into the lives of six young guys who share a bachelor flat in Hillbrow. It is quite shocking in places, but so is the life of these men” (2007:6). Michael Titlestad, however, while crediting Moele’s impulse to “eschew the niceties of novelistic prose” so as “to open a window on the underside” of Hillbrow’s “gritty post-apartheid reality”(2007) – itself an appropriately ‘disorientated’ spatial metaphor – admits to finding *Room 207* “brutally misogynistic” and “fundamentally unfinished”. Rather like the outlines of an emergent contemporary South Africa, it might be said, although Sindiwe Magona offers a less accommodating view of reality in *Beauty’s Gift* (2008), her testing, taboo-breaking novel of HIV/AIDS and related denialisms. In these terrible, terrible times, her narrative insists, if women are to enjoy the gift of old age, they must be done with “irresponsible men who sleep around and produce children all over the place. ‘It’s not enough to sire them, guys. We need to father them’” she tells von Klemperer in an interview. The very phrasing, mediated through the female voice, becomes a sign of the child-rearing burden that is transposed onto women – mothers, sisters, grandmothers...– by the absence of many men as fathers (2009).

Zachariah Rapola would probably agree, as his collection of short stories, *Beginnings of a Dream* (winner of the 2007 Noma Award for Publishing in Africa) unflinchingly represents some of the battered lives which fall through the cracks of contemporary modernity on the Reef. In the especially noteworthy story “Street Features”, the narrative is a labyrinthine phantasmagoria across ten years of social change, conjuring the street as a sinuous place bewitched by a voracious snake. Rapola is no urban romanticist; his imagination allows him no Toloki, Zakes Mda’s optimistic, mid-1990s protagonist in *Ways of Dying* (1995) stepping out into the fabulous dream of urban freedom, where the beautifully tended flowerbeds and well-

maintained streets of the author's geographically obscure city seem, in a reciprocal civic-minded bond, like a hopeful contract, a promise to love and obey, to tend and maintain, Toloki's uniquely modern individuality of living through dying. Instead, Rapola's narrator in "Street Features" "fumbles along the merciless street" (83) of the new city, recognising that even "in the old days" of "woza weekend" (79) the street was "never a piece of architectural genius" or "inspired engineering" (78). It was simply one of many "scrap-heaps" (80), frequently home to gangs of prostituting women, "vulture-like" thieves, and "terrorising" vagrants (80).

As the story wraps, the frantic narrator fails to find his longed-for lover (lost woman, and city of his dreams). He hears all the "familiar sounds: distant laughter, whistles... hooters". But there is no sound that would "nurse her from her sick-bed or intensive care unit ... or awaken her from the grave" (82). Instead, "[i]n the end she merged with the other insignificant particles of that street – artlessly laid granite paving-stones, hurriedly levelled tar ... cigarette stubs ... urine odour. And here and there, orange and banana peels strewn around" (83).

Rapola's original style, coupling the marks of mother-tongue interference with a somewhat formal English, could be considered emblematic of the tensions between innovation and accommodation in new South African writing and perhaps, also, of the push-pull between literacy and the literary. (Interestingly, he acknowledges Nadine Gordimer and Lionel Abrahams as among his creative mentors, a form of "elective affiliation" (Harrison 2003:104) which, as occurs in some detail in *Portrait with Keys*, implies the importance of antecedent writers as an influential 'medium' of a writer's imagined belonging.) Notably, too, Rapola's depictions of Johannesburg and Alexandra cut intriguing paths across a reader's constantly unsure perception of current South African citiness. His stories conceptually crisscross, for example, Nuttall and Mbembe's influential position, which castigates researchers for a cynical 'Afropessimism' according to which local citiness is thought to be "made up of social black holes" (2005:194) rather than resourcefully inventive cultural endeavour. Rapola's fiction acknowledges that the South African urban is now frequently manifest as "the precarious city", a dysfunctional space experienced by middle-class people as inefficiency, inconvenience and intensifying metropolitan failure, and by the unemployed as destitution and deepening despair. At the same time, though, his writing reaches after the truth that "[f]or the poor", in some tangled sense premised at once on the dregs of a fading dream and a final chance for future life, "cities offer a last vestige of hope" (Machen 2008). In Rapola's stories, those who fail hopelessly to make their way in the metropolis have no choice but to reverse their journeys; they "leave the city", heading back to "the rural areas" (Balseiro 2007:x).

#### **"the books, the books, the books"<sup>7</sup>**

Hoping to explore further the literary shapes of contemporary South African citiness, I turn to Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys* (2006). Billed by Umuzi as

a “chain of lyrical texts [which] brings together memoir, history, snapshots, meditations, asides on the arts” (front flap), I find, like Fred de Vries, that the book cannot “really be read for its narrative” (2007). This is in keeping with Vladislavić’s comment that if a “narrative thread is as reassuringly solid as a concrete path underfoot”, other devices for organising ideas, a list, for instance, can be “porous and soft”, illustrating “the provisional nature of the terrain in which we choose to express ourselves” (2005:52). Reading *Portrait with Keys*, I need to keep this in mind, along with Annie Gagiano’s reminder that “the imposition of a sentimental, or false, narrative on the disparate and often random experience that constitutes the life of a city or a country means, necessarily, that much of what happens in that city or country will be rendered merely illustrative, a series of set pieces or performance opportunities” (2004: 813-4, quoting Whitebrook (2001:2).)

Any account of *Portrait with Keys* in relation to citiness, then, must acknowledge the text as a creative miscellany of the urban, a multiplicity that “includes vignettes, second-hand tales, episodic insertions, tidbits from diaries and memoirs, histories and newspapers, along with simple lists of items seen” (Web 4). In this book, it is the close fit between form and subject which “provide[s] the key” (De Vries 2007), with the 138 “seemingly disconnected pieces”, written between 1998 and 2003, conveying “Joburg’s collapse and simultaneous regeneration”, the fragments “a style that reflects the byzantine process” of the city’s changing contemporary spatiality (2007). Vladislavić’s city lives vividly – solely? – in the material of words, whether documentary record or “the alibi of fiction” (Helgesson 2004:784). This textuality is evident, for instance, in the writer’s account of the day when he signed on in 1984 as social studies editor of the magazine *Staffrider*. The eager apprentice, he follows Chris van Wyk up a ladder and into an attic piled with teetering Ravan Press titles, a “little high-rise Hillbrow made of books and magazines” (2008). As his understanding of the editorial environment grew, he could not deny the idealistic feeling that *Staffrider* “held out a simple promise. Here was a South Africa in which Meadowlands and Morningside were on the same page, where Douglas Livingstone of Durban and Mango Tshabangu of Jabavu were side by side, with nothing between them but a stretch of paper and a 1-point rule”. In an imaginative correlative of the democratic charter which would years later be envisaged by the South African Constitution, the magazine was felt by the young white writer, Vladislavić subsequently implies, to be a space which “belongs to all who live in it” (2008b).

In drawing the *Portrait* of ‘his’ city – of himself in this city – Vladislavić cites and alludes to books, stories, papers, and authors, variously familiar and obscure, ephemeral and enduring, regionally particular and more international. The references might be made merely in passing, as natural to his habitus as a close relation, or they might be developed as the focus of deliberate pause and extrapolation. In this, Vladislavić assumes readers’ mutual interest, crediting their intelligence and imagination as implied interlocutors somehow conversant with his invisible city. He has written,

indeed, as if through a wishful longing for an ideal reader, possibly a virtual double of his own education and ‘Afro-European’ intellectual curiosity. The book lover is not (yet) a tomason, he seems to be implying, and reading is not to be equated with abstracted bookishness. Similarly, as in the ‘concluding’ fragment of *Portrait with Keys*, during a security guards’ strike in President Street the Johannesburg Public Library can do odd double duty for all the people hoping to find refuge: the “lobby looks and sounds like a marketplace. A hubbub as if every unread book had begun to speak at once” (195), and while the reference section has been closed (for the safety of the books), the reading room, as ever, is open to the public.

An instance of the expansive, layered textuality of citiness is also to be found in Vladislavić’s *Author’s Note* to *Portrait with Keys*. Here, he expresses a debt to the astute, revealing anecdotes gleaned years back during an informal tour of Johannesburg with the social historian Tim Couzens, for instance, but also explains that he simultaneously felt as if he were entering “one of Calvino’s invisible cities”, the “unhappy city ignorant of the happy city at its heart”, or “the unjust and the just city, wrapped in one another like onion skins” (2006:209). Aptly, then, among Vladislavić’s *Itineraries* to his *Portrait*, alphabetised under **W**, is the “**Writers’ book**”. Here, he bookmarks authors to whom he has referred, offering a reader alternative access through the book, as he has written it, of his city. However, the list of names retains an incomplete, unfinished feel. As in several other places, the punctuation intentionally flouts convention; no end stop concludes the series of commas, for instance, and a quick check suggests that the range of textual influence and citation sprawls far beyond the clear inventory of thirteen named authors to include ‘unregistered’ appearances, elsewhere in the prose, by Italo Calvino, the film-maker Humphrey Jennings, Isobel Dixon, Tony Morphet and Mike Kirkwood....Indeed, in addition to the *Itineraries*, *Portrait* has extensive explanatory material following the text proper – *Notes and Sources*, and *Author’s Note* – an apparatus which not merely extends a reading experience but protracts and perplexes it, further de-forming and destabilising the shape of the unusual book a reader has ostensibly just finished. The implication is that for a reader there is always more reading: the beckoning of the same book, to be read again, differently; of other books, a crisp passage through new titles, and a shuffled rummaging through “second-hand literature” and “reforgotten” writers in libraries and bookshops (Sinclair 1997:326-7).

In terms of the affective, open-plan logic through which Vladislavić imagines the touching, tender geography (Bruno 2002) of his Joburg neighbourhood, it could be argued that even books which do not explicitly feature in *Portrait with Keys* may be experienced by a reader as relevant to the text’s prevailing structure of feeling. One such title is Denis Hirson’s *White Scars* (2006) – runner-up to Vladislavić’s “what-what” in the 2007 Sunday Times-Alan Paton Prize – a generically disruptive, experimental memoir of emotional-political exile as link and estrangement, constructed through the reading of four texts. Raymond Carver, Ambrose Reeves, Breyten

Breytenbach, and Georges Perec, each wrote a book which was experienced by Hirson through its “telling dissonance” (10) with the life he was living at a particular time. Like *Portrait with Keys* – like, indeed, Perec’s *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (1997) a psychogeographic exercise on life in Paris – Hirson’s book works through fragments that shift perspective “from the literary to the historical, from the linguistic to the intensely personal” (16), leaving deliberate gaps which can be but partially filled by the accompanying series of ‘word keys’ (pass, island, amnesia, nomad, corridor, border ...) modelled after Raymond Williams’s *Keywords*. As Vladislavić might read Hirson’s account of reading his ways into and out of place, home and away, *White Scars* “present[s] memory in intriguingly concrete terms”; the key texts chosen by Hirson comprise his “double address, in the echo chambers of the head and street”, the “secret signs for those who come after us, whom we expect to speak the same language” (Vladislavić 2006:188). In this regard, it’s not incomprehensible that Vladislavić’s *Portrait*, X-rayed by cultural historians, might just show traces of his reading of Iain Sinclair’s *Lights Out for the Territory: 9 Excursions in the Secret History of London* (1997). The book is described by Granta as one in which the author, taking “long journeys on foot”, compulsively “walks the streets of London”. A little smugly, perhaps even narcissistically in the know, traits not shared by Vladislavić, Sinclair “reads the hidden language of the city”, making “strange connections between people and places” – the artists, writers and film-makers of London at the edge of the century – all the while “walk[ing] the reader into a deranged [urban] remapping” that has no regard for English niceties and national propriety (publisher’s cover description).

In Vladislavić’s spacious, conceptually ‘hyperlinked’ imagination, Denis Hirson, Dale Carnegie, Iain Sinclair and W G Sebald probably all have a place, and Charles Dickens’s *Sketches by Boz* is potentially as valid a prompt to the thinking about contemporary Joburg citiness as the interdisciplinary, generically experimental material in *blank*, the 1998 volume subtitled *Architecture, Apartheid and After* which Vladislavić co-edited with Hilton Judin. It’s not merely that Dickens wrote ‘about’ London, Vladislavić remarks; rather, his writing wrote this city into public imagination. In other words, we are given to understand, his creative representations made it metropolitan in the sense that writers of Johannesburg would give rise to what Nuttall calls “the literary city” by taking “the city as their constitutive subject” (2009:33).

Vladislavić is aware that his expansive imagined community of print has its limitations. The broken-backed world of his text is scarred with traces of his sometimes cracked logic and frail hopes, the difficulties shown to derive not solely from the limits of South African society in which basic literacy is under threat, an apartheid legacy not well addressed by post-apartheid governments, but also from the lifelong reading habits and preferences which distinguish him as an author and a reader, setting him apart from millions of others. Consider but one of Vladislavić’s takes on citiness, where Dickens, who “couldn’t work without the noisy rhythm of London outside his

window”, is invoked to illustrate his argument against going to live in a secure, gated complex. An intelligent observation, a reader might think. Snappily apt, and in keeping with the habitual flyting which characterises the relationship of the brothers Ivan and Branko in *Portrait with Keys*. But the observation is brusquely unhanded by Branko, who snorts, ““Dickens again. Christ, I wish you’d read some Mayhew instead. Better yet, some Auster or some DeLillo. We’re already in the twenty-first century and you’re still harking after charabancs and gaslight. Get with it, man. The clock’s ticked over and you’re *two* centuries behind the times””(145). Vladislavić flogs no direct reply to either his brother, or a reader; the flinched quality of his piecemeal text is left to represent the obstinate reality: that the question of relevance, like so many other cultural debates, is unresolved by the larger social context, the case frustratingly – democratically? – undecided.

However, *Portrait with Keys* does suggest that reading, for this writer, frequently brings the past into the now, linking distance with immediacy, and setting the unknown in unexpected relation to the familiar. Thus, despite the passing of years, and the separation of continents, Herman Charles Bosman, Lionel Abrahams and Rosamund Lehmann can share the same experiential plane, which is simultaneously the page of the portrait and, explicitly in this particular fragment, the path of the city pavement, at once material tar and ley line. A South African reader might ‘know Bosman’, at least through his ‘Oom Schalk’ stories; the same reader might possibly have heard of the Johannesburg writer Lionel Abrahams, though there are probably few readers who would recollect either Abrahams’s piece on Bosman’s Bosveld for *SA Tatler* in the mid sixties, or his ‘caption’ poems to accompany David Goldblatt’s photo-essay for the same magazine on the lives of white children in the flatlands of 1960s Hillbrow. And what of Rosamund Lehmann? No matter that *The Weather in the Streets* (1936), her lyrical, scandalous novel of Thirties London is obscure, perhaps only to be searched out by Abrahams in Vanguard Books, all three writers co-exist in the space of Fragment 133, rendered proximate through the workings of the memory Vladislavić recounts. This memory, moreover, is shown to be not magically ‘intact’, but dependent on material and imaginative correlation. The built environment, for one, functions partly as a “mnemonic” (2006:31), with particular buildings and locations opening up the cerebral pathways of recollection, vividly bringing to mind – to imaginative life, as it were – people, encounters, books, other memories. In another sense, too, memory is never intrinsically one’s own, or even consciously directed; it comes in inexplicable gathers and drifts, as much as carefully collected pieces, a process which attests to the relationship between millions of pages and the myriad unrecorded footsteps of the city pavement. To different parts of the populous street, in different small studies around the city, the writing of Bosman and Abrahams is variously unknown, forgotten, remembered, memorable; an apostil in the margins, or ambitiously re-collected for literary history. And the processes by which memory works are themselves ‘performed’ in Vladislavić’s prose, as when he claims that ‘his’ memory of

Bosman feeding pigeons from the balcony of the High Court Building is no less valid, or improbable, simply because it has been borrowed, lifted with imaginative licence, from his reading of Abrahams's lively memoir, "Mr Bosman". This, the suggestion seems to be, is the power of excellent writing. "It is the privilege of writers," Vladislavić notes, "that they are able to invent their memories and pass them on between the covers of a book, to make their memories ours" (187).<sup>8</sup>

If Bosman and Abrahams were once familiar figures in the old Johannesburg downtown which is part of Vladislavić's own living neighbourhood, these dead authors ghost Vladislavić's experiences, contributing, now, to his own originality and novelty. Perhaps in the sense of "modernisms recapitulations of antecedent literary traditions" (Harrison 2003:124), Bosman and Abrahams are part of Vladislavić's locative inheritance and his "generative source" (73) as an author, validating him as an authentic Johannesburg writer even as they contribute to the spirit of place which underwrites the city as a cultural, and not only an economic, metropolis. In this, it's not a monumentalising matter of literary heritage or 'conservation', but of heeding half-heard calls, risking kooky, convoluted conversations with the dead. Depending on how far down you go, it is noisy downtown; there is more, Vladislavić knows, than the poetic sea surge into which he lyrically transforms the sound of the traffic. And somewhere in this – if sometimes reduced to white noise – is another vehicle, a latent topos of Johannesburg as a loquaciously written city, pages almost on a par with pavements, logos with leg (see Harrison 2003).

However, as a "keeper of the old school" in the new city, a figure "a little chipped and faded" (2006:76), Vladislavić finds his profession somewhat diminished, his old-fashioned work somewhat 'belittled' by the times. This is in the manner of the miniature figurine of the zookeeper that he finds forgotten among the detailing of a concrete wall, an anecdote developed in *Portrait with Keys*. Out walking, he sees the toy. Takes it, but wonders why, and whether. Puts him "beside the jar of pencils" on the baize desktop, a "little green island" on which he "looks at home among the dictionaries and terminals. And yet he bothers me" (79). The plastic figure, a reader is led to intimate, is an analogue which throws the writer back to some younger self, "a potential boy [who] grows clearer and clearer in my mind" (79). Vladislavić eventually returns the zookeeper to "the hole in the wall", all the while pondering the need to elaborate a pretext, a complicated narrative performativity in order to justify his actions. What tall tale is he telling here, writing this version of himself on to the page? For whom does the small tale tell?

Vladislavić leaves the figure there, again, an inconsequential nothing abandoned in the wall – and leaves a reader uncertain about whether he (who?) is to be considered stranded, or reconciled with place. But after a month the small, discarded figure stands yet in his forgotten place, and Vladislavić disbelieving that no one else has noticed this lovely anomaly, or thought to snaffle the relic, takes him once again on board: "[a]s I'm passing,

my hand rises, involuntarily, and ... puts him in my pocket” (79). Despite the apparent lack of intent, here, the hand having an agency independent of and indeed disassociated from the present of the walker’s-writer’s-thief’s will, where else, finally, for Vladislavić to take “the little man from the hole” than home, writing him into remembered being? “He is here now, as I write, flourishing a fresh chunk of meat at me like Tolstoy’s punctuation” (79).

#### Notes

1. The phrase “and other odds, sods and marginals” is from Iain Sinclair’s *Lights Out for the Territory: 9 Excursions in the Secret History of London* (1997:326).
2. There is no convenient label for this youthful literary talent, although Nuttall’s theorising around Y Culture, Loxion, and the self-styling of The Zone may be pertinent, an imagining which transgresses conventional borders such as township and city (2009).
3. This also connects to the notion of ‘pentimento’ which Vladislavić borrows from Hellman and situates in relation to portraiture as “a metaphor for the writing of a memoir” (Vladislavić 2006:92), and indeed for the method of taking or making a ‘portrait’.
4. *Stanza on the Edge* is the title of Zachariah Rapola’s acclaimed youth novel (2001).
6. There’s another fascinating itinerary to be followed here: if Benjamin’s *flâneur* has become a familiar figure in the literature of citiness, perhaps less well known is his claim that “No matter what trace the *flâneur* may follow, every one of them will lead him to a crime” (2003 volume 4:22). If, as Heyns suggests in his review of recent South African crime fiction, “What’s in the books is what’s on the streets” (2009:17), there may be a case to be made for the urban idler, turned detective, finding renewed social legitimation for his leisurely powers of close observation. (See Salzani 2007 in this regard)
7. Quotation from Vladislavić 2006: 80, Fragment 58 *Excess (Roll 3)*.
8. As Stephen Gray observes in his Introduction to *Bosman’s Johannesburg*, Bosman “felt free to wander the main routes of a vibrant inner city which had not yet been dispersed into the bunkers of the Northern Suburbs and the ghettos of the South West townships....The central business district in which Bosman worked, so clearly laid out in [the piece] *Louis Wassenaar* ... still contained the institutions of a nation within blocks of one another.... In many instances the *only* survival we have of Bosman’s Johannesburg is the records he kept – of a slick, fast-changing commercial mecca which, as he obsessively observes, flourished on vandalizing and extinguishing its own past” (1986:11).

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