

At Home with Ivan Vladislavić

An African Flaneur Greens the
Postcolonial City

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6 *Portrait with Keys*

My friend Liz said the whole Ndebele fad was kitsch. ‘It’s like that braai sauce people slosh over everything to give it an African flavour. Tomatoes and onions and too much chilli. Someone just made it up’.

‘But that’s how culture evolves’, I said. ‘People make things up. Who’s to say what will be regarded as ‘authentic’ a generation from now? Why shouldn’t we have Ndebele patterns on suburban walls? What if the people living there happen to be Ndebele? Anyway, only someone with a custodial view of African culture would regard as ‘traditional’ an art form that arose so recently. Ndebele wall painting is no more than a few decades old, it’s constantly changing, and it’s full of contemporary references.’ ... Liz was impressed with my analysis (which I’d found in a magazine article about Esther Mahlangu, to tell the truth), but sceptical about the mural. ‘It’s so cheerful’, she said, ‘it makes me want to spit. Like a kiddie’s colouring book, with nothing outside the lines. That’s why you whites like it so much. Nice and tidy’.

I thought it was bravely optimistic. It suited the early nineties perfectly: Africa was coming to the suburbs in the nicest possible way. I grew to love that wall That intricate pattern, vibrant and complex as stained glass – it was no child’s drawing, never mind what Liz said – spreading out, segment by segment, over a blank white wall. What a metaphor for the social transformation we were living through! (24–6)

The Afrocentrism of the immediate post-apartheid era is again present in 2006’s episodic novel *Portrait with Keys: Joburg & what-what*. The Africanist fervour of the period is manifest in the Ndebele painting on a neighbour’s wall near the narrator’s house. Vlad, the narrator, loves the Ndebele mural. He celebrates the decline of Eurocentric politics, values, and aesthetics in the new South Africa, and the (re)introduction of African ones: “Africa was coming to the suburbs in the nicest possible way”. There is a charming brave optimism in this honeymoon era of the new South Africa. This is visible in the different subtitles and covers of the local and international editions. “Joburg & what-what” is transformed into “The City of Johannesburg Unlocked” in the Norton international

edition. This elision of the local demotic “what-what” was touristic bowdlerisation it would seem, turning patois into a marketing ploy. Moreover, the cover of the international edition is cheerily colourful, whilst the sepia photograph of the implosion of Van Eck house on the cover of the South African edition is sombre.

Yet, via Vlad, Vladislavić asks the question of whether the BMW “art car” painted with the colours of the South African flag is an artistic or a commercial enterprise. This is the question that Vladislavić has repeatedly been asking of South Africa since 1994: has South Africa since isolation merely joined global capitalism? At the same time, he has interrogated the trend towards cultural authenticity, a vexed notion even without so many ethnic groups under the umbrella of a single nation. Authenticity tends to be at odds with multiculturalism. In South Africa this contradiction was apparent in the variance between the “local is lekker” dictum and the “rainbow nation” rhetoric. Vlad argues that the idea of authenticity is misleading, because many of the traditions viewed as authentic are actually quite recent. The point here seems to be that Vladislavić recognises the importance of the local, but refuses to make a rule out of it or be confined to it, especially if it is used by those with a “custodial view” to embalm culture. Vladislavić views culture as dynamic and evolving; cultural commissars – hands off!

This spirited defence of artistic freedom goes hand in hand with Vladislavić’s critique of institutional authority. In other words, Vladislavić continues courageously to speak truth to power. This truth is couched in a satire of prevailing fashions, especially terms like “new”, “rainbow nation”, “local is lekker”, “Africanist”, “authenticity”, “world class”, that were faddish in the freshly minted new South Africa. The dynamic between the authentically local and the international is visible in the different subtitles and covers of the local and international editions. The local demotic of “Joburg & what-what” is bowdlerised into “The City of Johannesburg Unlocked” in the Norton international edition. The authentically local is opaque to global audiences, but the global market tames local texture and flavour.

Portrait with Keys traces how Africa came to the suburbs in both nice and less nice ways. Africanist chic is colourful, but tends to simplify and bowdlerise culture. Vladislavić contrasts the ersatz elements of “authentic” culture with nature and the negative aspects of the new South Africa. Johannesburg is riddled with violence, crime, fear, corruption, and isolation. Its systems and mechanisms, designed for a small number of whites under apartheid, are creaking under the sheer weight of numbers now that all citizens have been enfranchised and granted the freedom of the city. Yet this freedom is notional. For the narrator, just walking in the city presents a large number of impediments and difficulties. This is partly

because he is white, but blacks are hardly immune from the same obstacles and dangers. In interview, Vladislavić says that:

“There is some sadness in the book [*Portrait with Keys*], and it has to do with the fact that the city is not as free and open as I would like it to be. I feel a sense of loss about certain freedoms that one should have in any city. Part of living in a city is that you should be free to move around in it – within limits, of course I feel it as a real constraint, a real imposition, a real loss that I can’t walk safely at night in my own neighbourhood For me, the dismantling of the system suggested freedom of movement, because so much of apartheid was focused on restricting people’s movement. I am also sad that certain areas of the city that I loved have been allowed to fall apart. I loved Hillbrow, I thought it was one of the most dynamic, interesting places, and also the essence of Johannesburg because it was very dense, very urban. It had an all-night life – it was precisely the kind of place where you could walk around at night. So I regret not being able to do that. What do you need to live here? You need to be smart, obviously, and not do stupid things. You need to look after yourself, protect yourself. But you also have to be open, you have to remain curious about what is out there. You must want to engage, and it takes a bit of effort But for me personally it’s imperative, if I am going to survive as a writer here and have some understanding of my society. I can’t go and live in a gated community somewhere, it’s too constrained and narrow. What version of my society would I have if I spent my days motoring between a gated community and a shopping mall? So I have to get out there and enjoy it – and watch my back at the same time.” (Interview with Kesting & Weskott 57–9)

He would like to be a Dickens, an “uncommercial traveller”, but Johannesburg lacks civic space and community culture, at least in the fortified white suburbs. He compares his own attempts to become a flâneur with those of Dickens, in *Sketches by “Boz”* for instance:

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 the imagination. Or have I misunderstood? Is the problem that I live in a fiction that unravels even as I grasp it?

A stranger, arriving one evening in the part of Joburg I call home, would think that it had been struck by some calamity, that every last person had fled. There is no sign of life. Behind the walls, the houses

are ticking like bombs. The curtains are drawn tight, the security lights are glaring, the gates are bolted. Even cars have taken cover. Our stranger, passing fearfully through the streets, whether in search of someone with open hands of whom he might ask directions or merely of someone to avoid in the pursuit of solitude, finds no one at all. (54–5)

Vlad is not immune to this pervasive fear. Not only does he mourn Johannesburg's relative lack of communal life, he also becomes obsessed with steering locks once his car is stolen, embarking on a disquisition on the "Gorilla" lock that connects animality with crime. This is our "everyday abnormality" (139). Some of the optimism of the immediate post-apartheid era would evaporate in the wake of crime, corruption, and lack of political will, especially after the end of Mandela's presidency.

To its credit, though crime and fear are major themes, the novel does not dwell on crime at the expense of other aspects of Joburg. The narrator Vlad attempts to understand crime rather than simply condemning it, which brings him to a more historically informed understanding of the city:

Johannesburg is a frontier city, a place of contested boundaries. Territory must be secured and defended or it will be lost. Today the contest is fierce and so the defences multiply. Walls replace fences, high walls replace low ones, even the highest walls acquire electrified wires and spikes. (185)

He makes a stand against easy racism (43) and appreciates the desperation and attempts at survival of the poor. Our narrator, and perhaps Vladislavić himself, has a clear-eyed view of how destructive, as well as creative, a city predicated upon mining, migrancy, and exploitation is. The narrator's historian friend Dave describes how,

In Joburg now ... the hunter-gatherer is in the ascendancy. In fact, African cities everywhere are filled with roamers, intent on survival, plucking what they can at the roadside. When people steal the wheels off our cars at night, or scale our walls and make off with the garden furniture, or uproot plants on the embankments beside the freeway, and we raise a hue and cry about law and order and respect for property rights, it's like the Khoikhoi accusing the San of stealing their cattle The urban poacher is a romantic figure. In unequal cities, where those who have little must survive somehow by preying on those who have more, the poacher scavenging a meal from under the nose of the gamekeeper may be admired for his ingenuity and daring. (38 & 137)

In their roaming walks these urban poachers, these immigrant "hunter-gatherers", wrest a personal history from the impersonal cartographic

history of the city. This small-scale history involves “intent”, “plucking”, “stealing”, “scaling”, “making off with”, “uprooting”, “preying”, “scavenging”, “ingenuity and daring”. The narrator, too, invents a personal history via similar peripatetic perambulations, suggesting an admiration for the sheer survival skills of these trespassers and a counter to the judgementalism of the more privileged who throughout the novel tend to rant and gnash their teeth at the mere thought of crime. This admiration is also apparent when the narrator discovers the impeccably tidy lockers of the poor in the water mains. He realises that the poor are often neat because they treasure every material possession: “I kneel on the pavement like a man gazing down into a well, with this small, impoverished, inexplicably orderly world before me and the chaotic plenitude of the Highveld sky above” (51). This confrontation with the unfamiliar opens the door to empathy wider for our narrator, for just as the poor store their belongings neatly in small compartments, so too are they themselves contained out of sight. They are as welcome as their belongings in this place they inhabit. Nevertheless, they, like the narrator, do not stop searching for home, community, and a way of belonging.

By connecting migrancy to ecology, Vladislavić links people with place. This makes sense if one understands home, a sense of belonging to a place, as both a subjective and a suprapersonal ecological experience. Both the self and places are dynamic, in flux. In interview Vladislavić notes that home is not merely a place, but involves a sense of belonging to that place:

“I’ve looked up the meaning of nostalgia. It comes from the Greek word *nostos*, meaning to return home. I think that my book is about that question. How do you feel at home? ... I imagine that nostalgia will be part of any attempt to affirm the sense of belonging to place that home implies. In his seminal essay, ‘Home for Intimacy’, Njabulo Ndebele argues that even though many have returned home to a liberated SA, they are not yet able to feel at home. A history of disruption, demolition, relocation has severed the feeling for home at the root. Yet he makes a case for the rediscovery of intimacy in the act of posing questions, grappling with complexities, and acknowledging ambiguities. Ethical interpretation, the individual consciousness jostling against its neighbours in public exchange, could begin to reconstitute a sense of closeness. In finding a place for the past in the present, part of the challenge might then be a self-conscious, critical kind of nostalgia, one that understands the limitations under which it operates, that is, the conditions that make our access to consoling histories so unequal.” (“Interview with Fred de Vries” 208)

Svetlana Boym’s *The Future of Nostalgia* would understand Vladislavić’s critical nostalgia as an immigrant’s desire to feel at home, whilst simultaneously resisting assimilation in order to retain a

previous identity. This critical kind of nostalgia is at an oblique angle to that common in post-apartheid writing. David Medalie points out some of the key reasons for the proliferation of simple nostalgia narratives, often by white writers: “the preoccupation with the past in the literature since 1994 is entirely understandable and could even have been predicted. In historical periods which feel strongly their own transitional status (the Edwardian age in Britain is a good example) there is an inclination to look at the present with dismay, the future with trepidation and the past with nostalgia” (“The Uses of Nostalgia” 36).

Critical nostalgia, however, tends to avoid these fearful cul de sacs, with Jacob Dlamini’s *Native Nostalgia*, which dares to feel a kind of nostalgia for township life, as a good example. Vladislavić’s critical nostalgia attempts to rediscover intimacy between the body and its place, in the process establishing some sense of home amidst pervasive alienation. This critical kind of nostalgia is acutely conscious of the history that sundered migrant bodies from their homes, particularly within a city where ecology would seem to be on the back foot, if not erased entirely. Arguably *the* reason why alienation occurs so acutely in postcolonial cities is because ecology, or at least a sense of belonging to a place, is lost. The equation is apparently simple: alienated ecology equals alienated humanity.

Vladislavić’s antidote to alienation works at both an intellectual level via the reestablishment of connection between body and place, but also at an affective level. By writing so broadly and sympathetically of alienation, Vladislavić allows the variety of alienations to appear, showing that we are all alienated and hence establishing a sense of community. Moreover, the “topsoil of memory” embedded in a place makes it more fertile, more welcoming for its inhabitants. Vladislavić seems to find some solace for the migrant, unlike Phaswane Mpe who is more bleak in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*.

Behind Vladislavić’s suggestion that critical nostalgia is one way to find “a place for the past in the present” is the sense that time is a continual unfolding. He implies that time is unceasing, that the past helps to determine the present and shadows the future. He refuses the chopping of time into segments. The importance of this is not only that the past is not repressed, that ghosts are allowed, but that this temporal continuum is linked to place. Writing the history of Johannesburg not only explains how we got here, but also where here is and, worryingly, where it is going. Simply put, *Portrait with Keys* is the novel in which ecology, always implicit in his oeuvre, is foregrounded.

Unusually, ecology is partially embodied in aesthetics. As a tic of fashion, the proud Ndebele mural, like the honeymoon era, is doomed to

be painted over by the new owner. As the painter employed by the new householder prepares to “obliterate” the mural, the narrator fears a whitewash:

I couldn't watch. I went on to the Gem to fetch the paper. Coming home, I nearly made a detour along Albemarle Street to avoid the scene entirely, but it had to be faced However, they did not paint it white. They painted it a lemony yellow with green trim, a petrol-station colour scheme. It took a couple of coats; after the first one, you could still see the African geometry developing, like a Polaroid image, as the paint dried. (61–2)

The local is painted over by a corporate colour scheme. Nevertheless, Vladislavić suggests that despite historical change and the fickleness of fashion, the past never goes away completely: “Eddie’s mural comes and goes with the seasons; in the summer, it is obscured by the shrubs growing wild in the front garden, in the autumn, when the leaves fall, it reappears to haunt us” (70). Even in summer, the mural is “developed” by rainstorms:

I am reminded of the Ndebele mural up the road. It is still there, of course, under a thick, lemon-yellow skin. All summer, after every storm, I have been waiting for it to reappear through the paint, its black edges and angles coming to light again like an old master’s pentimenti. (91)

As Jane Poyner points out, “Here, Vladislavić draws upon the work of dramatist Lillian Hellman, one of whose memoirs is titled *Pentimento* (1973)” (44). Memory is layered, involving “seeing and then seeing again” (89). When we look, it is clear that the past never really goes away. When spring is here new growth obscures the past, but winter’s exfoliation, or a storm, reveals that momentarily obscured past again. The current creations of humanity are revealed by nature as so many pentimenti, so many palimpsestic fashions (Huysen). This painting over of the past is an ignoring of time itself in relation to culture, but particularly in relation to nature, which is associated with flux, change, seasonal repetition, cyclicity. In other words, the obliteration of the past in the attempt to embrace the fad, the fashionable “new”, is an immortality strategy that refuses time, the turning earth, and mortality.

In another instance of nature’s time that confounds our constructions, the narrator has to have his sagging ceiling removed which exposes the house as not much more than a bulwark against space and time:

The removal of the ceiling had exposed the house for what it was, a mere shelter, a pile of bricks and boards propped up on the veld to

keep out the elements. Suddenly I was aware not just of the icy air above the iron sheets, but of the musty air below the floorboards, and the damp soil below that. I was suspended, between earth and sky, like an afterthought in brackets. (119)

The transience of human buildings reveals the narrator in all his vulnerability, suspended between the giant spinning marble of the earth and the immensity of the sky, prey to the titanic forces of the elements. Indeed, it is this sense of vulnerability that inspires humanity's attempts to control nature. These attempts are necessary for our survival, but quickly become unsustainable when they are selfish.

Foregrounding ecology has an emotional affect on the reader. Partly this is because of the loss that ecological destruction causes. Partly it is because the reader is close privy to the narrator, who feels this loss acutely. For all of its postcard construction, the reader feels the narrator's voice close by their ear in this novel. The reader may also feel an intimacy with the author. It is impossible to tell just how close Vlad and Vladislavić are to each other, but it seems certain that they are close. Linking environment to self and feeling is the theme and practice of the novel. The eco-flaneur brings an awareness of nature into culture.

Foregrounding ecology reveals Johannesburg's artificiality in stark relief. It is a virtual city, entirely human-created:

Johannesburg, as people often remark, is one of the few major cities in the world that has no river, lake or ocean. It has a reef, of course, but no diving.

I walk, in the afternoons, along something as unnatural and persuasive as an extended metaphor The city, we agree, is no more than a mnemonic In Johannesburg, the Venice of the South, the backdrop is always a man-made one. We have planted a forest the birds endorse. For hills, we have mine dumps covered with grass. We do not wait for time and the elements to weather us, we change the scenery ourselves, to suit our moods. Nature is for other people, in other places. We are happy taking the air on the Randburg Waterfront, with its pasteboard wharves and masts, or watching the plastic ducks bob in the stream at Montecasino, or eating our surf'n turf on Cleopatra's Barge in the middle of Caesar's Afterwards we took a stroll over the little pedestrian replica of the Golden Gate Bridge, with its stays and cables picked out in lights, and watched the reflections dancing on the dead water. (18, 31, & 94)

Very little organic remains in this virtual city. This is not much of a crisis for many Johannesburgers who are "happy" taking the polluted air, eating processed food, drinking "the dead water", living in a highly artificial kitsch environment. Virtuality is most fully and startlingly

revealed by nature. The narrator says, “In the shop-soiled veld around these scatterings of factories and warehouses you could stumble on the essence of Joburg – if such diffuse, fleeting qualities exist in concentrate – bursting into the air like the sap of a plant crushed thoughtlessly underfoot” (104). The “essence of Joburg” that our peripatetic note-taker discovers is like “the sap of a plant crushed thoughtlessly underfoot”, the scent of a nature heedlessly destroyed by a boot. This ecological destruction is not only of the dramatically brutal mining sort, but also appears as the gated community in Crocodile Lodge in *The Exploded View*, for instance, or in the virtual mall. There is great feeling in this writing for the wanton destruction that occurs in the name of progress. Moreover, virtuality tends towards inherent instability and naturally implodes due to its rootlessness, disembedding, and perfection. This is not only apparent in the architectural follies of Montecasino or Caesar’s Palace, but also in the “modernization” of houses which is often haphazard, philistine, motivated by fears about security, and almost inevitably an embodiment of the ambition to transcend nature into a brave new world. Typically the past is ignored or obliterated, haunting the future as a result. So ecology haunts the virtual postcolonial city and this haunting is accomplished by nature’s cyclicity and force, as well as the constitutive instability of that virtuality and its constructions. This is apparent in the long-term effects of pollution, acid mine water, tremors, and quakes. Johannesburg has literally undermined itself.

We can even see ecological damage in the leafy suburbs with their pretty gardens that use a lot of water from Lesotho throughout his oeuvre. Manià argues that Vladislavić is highly critical of these gardens (“A garden” 78), though I think he does appreciate their organicism, even if they are resource-greedy. For all the problems of resource exploitation, the trees of these suburban gardens combine to form a huge man-made forest. So whilst this appreciation of ecological loss is the more critical side of Vladislavić’s critical nostalgia, he is not blind to the positive aspects of our meddling in nature.

My sense from literary critiques, teaching the text at Wits, and speaking to Johannesburgers is that this was Vladislavić’s breakthrough novel that caused readers in the city to take the author to their hearts. He wrote of their place in a direct and personal way that echoed their own experiences, yet also stretched them to think of their home in critical and new ways. Recognition and defamiliarisation are perhaps the key poles of any successful art. This was Vladislavić’s most obviously personal and diaristic writing so far, yet it was also his way to connect intimately with others. The more specific, the more global; the closer I get to me, the better the chance I have of reaching you. This is because, at least physically, we are all the same. It is also because modernity is relatively uniform and has a single culture. Put differently, one could say that all

cities are the same, are one megacity, are megacity one. By stretching deeply into his own life, Vladislavić reached others.

This, however, is contested by Sarah Nuttall who argues that the narrator of *Portrait with Keys*, who is presumably a white man, has no black friends:

... by what force of generation, circumstance and habit is it that the narrator fails to find and create complex associations and friendships across the racial barriers of before? He encounters black people at a distance, on the street, outside their houses – but friends and colleagues are white.

Can one write oneself into a city one feels to be receding from one's grasp unless one inhabits at least the beginnings of a cross-racial world, a world of peers and associates and friends to whom one actually speaks? Is one not writing oneself into the ground without this kind of entanglement of city life in Johannesburg? Vladislavić's narrator points to the difficulty of pursuing inter-racial friendship in a city with Johannesburg's past. The text is marked by its register of complexity in relation to the transitioning of the racial city, but perhaps also by a generational aporia that requires our deconstruction. (*Entanglement* Nuttall 93)

Nuttall has a point, which is that Vladislavić's writing is more focused on whites than on blacks. Indeed, this suggests the unequal access to resources and enfranchisement that bedevils all cities, Johannesburg especially. However, she stretches the point here, because in fact the narrator does have black friends, such as Andries, and the narrator is not of course the author. Moreover, she ignores Vladislavić's analyses of whiteness. Her argument collapses because she generalises, which is precisely the problem with racism, or any –ism for that matter. Unlike Nuttall, I do not think that Vladislavić's writing is problematic because it is not local, not black, not authentic enough. Vladislavić has helped to show us only too clearly that authenticity is a constructed and interest-laden notion. He implicitly refuses the South African obsession with who is allowed to speak, who is allowed to do. Nevertheless, his fiction has not focused on poor, black urban dwellers, often exploring whiteness instead. The contrast between *Portrait with Keys* and Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is instructive. Whilst both of these books display an equal appreciation of how the city is dependent upon the country, the urban upon nature, there is far more of the language and worldview of black inner city residents in Mpe's novel.

For me, what is particularly striking about this book is the spatial sensibility it conveys. An instantiation of "internal GPS", Vladislavić's novel conveys the meaning of place. In this I find an ecological sensitivity that greens the city. Home is found through the body's intimacy with

place, even if that place is highly artificial. Yet this belonging is nomadic and often far from authentic and fixed.

This sense of place partially derives from a keen awareness of history. There are constant references to historical facts, and the way that those facts are still visible if one has eyes to see:

Gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand in the winter of 1886 ... Commissioner Street, the backbone of Johannesburg, follows the old wagon track between two of the first mining camps ... So the city's spine was fused to the gold-bearing reef that called it into life ... Where Commissioner passes the Fairview Fire Station, cracks have appeared in the tar, long, ragged creases following the curve of the road. Here and there chunks of tar have broken loose and rusted steel glimmers in the roadbed. The tramlines, tarred over in the early sixties, coming back to the surface. (60)

The city is embodied, with its historical spine never far beneath its chameleon skin. This Johannesburg has the rapid mutability of the goldrush town about it. This tends to cause superficiality. Johannesburg is a changeable city, with whole suburbs relocating, either by government force majeure, by inclination, or through changing complexion due to historical circumstances.

As a result of this flux that reveals the past, haunting is a repeated motif. A film about a Chinese man who brings ancestral bones from Taipei to bury and create a sense of belonging in his new city is one instance (99). The "ghost alarm" which claims to be an "invisible protector" (101) is another. The narrator's awareness of the past, his own past and its ghostly remnants in the present, prompts exploration of the world of the second hand, the thrown away, the discarded. This investigation has ecological overtones in our throw-away commodity culture obsessed with newness and youth. One of his favourite pursuits is of the second hand, the antique, which he undertakes at "Gem Pawn Brokers", formerly a glamorous cinema:

The alliance of dark cinemas and second-hand goods is a happy one. In this deconsecrated space, objects that would appear lifeless in an ordinary shop throw flickering shadows. The profusion of goods evokes a storehouse rather than a market. These are the cast-off properties of people's lives, mementos of their hopes and failures, and the signs of use that should be off-putting seem poignant. A piano stool with a threadbare cushion, a dented toolbox, a Morris chair with cigarette-burned arms, a vellum lampshade dotted with postage stamps, a soda siphon, a bottle-green ashtray in the shape of a fish – there is nothing so tawdry that it is powerless to summon a host of characters ... because of the circumstances in which it is

acquired, a bioscope book has a special quality: it is attended by a more vivid retinue of ghosts. (65)

The tone here is one of “poignant” pathos, the peculiar plangency that accrues to loss in the world, loss of people, loss of liveliness. This plangency lingers around second hand shops. In this case, the Gem is particularly haunted because it was once a “grand old cinema”, the place for glamorous dreams on the silver screen, but is now a sorting house for the detritus of the demised. The items listed show signs of the life that they were once part of: the piano stool and Morris chair have seen much sitting, the toolbox is dented, the lampshade has recorded the travels of its owner. Their marks and scars are the “vivid retinue of ghosts” that accompany these objects, a parade visible to the artist, even within “this deconsecrated space” of the city.

There are many different understandings of ghosts, from Western perceptions that ghosts are fearful, to ancestor worship in traditional African culture. That the past never really goes away is, however, not merely the superstition of premodern cultures, or fanciful artistic sorts, but is something every bit as visceral as it is phantasmal in Vladislavić’s portrayal. The narrator says, “[I] sliced my forefinger to the bone. It is twenty years since the wound healed, but if a rim of glass even brushes against the scar those livid colours bleed out of my memory” (71). Memory is not just recall, but also a kinesthetic awareness of certain torsions, hydraulics, scars, and behaviour patterns in the body and its surroundings. Ghosts are still alive in the sense that they “inhabit” the objects or people that remain. This is also apparent in the narrator’s putting his objects into storage whilst overseas. He essentially creates a whole of himself within the hole of the storeroom, and whilst his possessions are locked in there, his narrative comes to a halt, only resuming once he unpacks.

Ghosts are created by Johannesburg’s mutability and superficiality, which do not grant the past a place or space. The lack of awareness of history is often a source of chagrin to the narrator. He bemoans the absence of a memorial, even just a “simple tablet” (44), to identify the Bosman family house in Bellevue (this has been rectified since the publication of this novel). Now there are ghost tours, including one to the now-derelict Kempton Park Hospital which was mysteriously abandoned in 1997. But for Vladislavić in 2006, the city is so ephemeral it needs “The Great Wall of Jeff”, “a wall of remembrance” (47) of hollow bricks in which everybody could place an object of significance to them. Vladislavić seems to like the idea of memorials, probably because they need not have the imperial connotations of monuments. Perhaps carping about the purposeful ignoring of history and tradition of a gold rush town is quixotic. Johannesburg obstinately looks to the future and who

can blame it? This raises the debate about history, decolonisation, and monuments that has gripped South Africa since #Rhodesmustfall.

Vladislavić presents us with an imploded view in *Portrait with Keys*. The cover of the Umuzi first edition is a sepia-toned photograph of the 1983 implosion of Escom/van Eck house, a 21-storey skyscraper in central Johannesburg. This appears to derive from Lionel Abrahams's poem "The Fall of van Eck House" which laments the transience of the city (*Lionel Abrahams: A Reader* 40–41). An explosion leads to an implosion. Vladislavić's implosion in this novel is appropriately of the present; the present of corporate globalisation, rampant consumerism and individual isolation that is exploded in *The Exploded View* here comes to rest in an unfamiliar smouldering pile of rubble that reveals the contours of the past. Whereas explosion implies an outward movement, implosion signifies here an inward movement, away from the present social context, into the self and into the past. This is perhaps most powerfully signalled by de Certeau's epigraph to "Point A" in the text: "Haunted places are the only ones people can live in" (de Certeau 108). What is revealed by implosion is what underlay our buildings, our social certainties: implosion exposes the ghosts of the present, all that is not accounted for, has not been honoured, including nature. In other words, what *Portrait with Keys* implies is that ecological consciousness is crucially concerned with time, acutely aware of time passing in the moment.

The text explores the human attempt to master natural time. Paralleling nature's peeling back of the paint on the neighbour's wall, the narrator strips down a door in his house as part of his do-it-yourself renovation, in the process discovering palimpsestic layers of history under the facade of the present:

I am stripping the bedroom door down to the wood. The paint comes off in layers: layers of taste, of personal preference, of style. I wish I could read these strata the way a forester reads the rings of a felled tree, deciphering the lean seasons, the years of plenty, the catastrophes, the triumphs. Instead, I see nothing but fashion. Nineties ochre, eighties ivory, seventies beige, sixties olive. Paging back into the past. (91)

The narrator would like to be a forester, a writer of a memoir that sees through the penitenti of history. This forester-writer is able to read the most intimate and subtle signs in the world about him with his keen, alert senses, "seeing and then seeing again". Who exactly is this forester writer? The botanist author practices an empirical science that enables him to penetrate below the surface and establish the workings of things, a practice that is not merely analytical, but delves into what lies beneath the surface. There are precedents for this creative scientist in Vladislavić's work: the maker of the omniscopes in *Propaganda by Monuments* is one example,

Simeon Majara the neo-curio artist in *The Exploded View* might be another. One of Vladislavić's characteristic innovations is liminal characters who bridge apparently incommensurable splits. The scientist writer is one such character, a person who blends heart and art with analytical science.

The dendrophile writer who decodes the meaning of the present by delving into the past brings to mind the traditional bard, healer, or shaman, who not only tells the stories of the past and the dreams of the future, but also heals relationships: relationships between mind and body, between humans, between humans and nature. In traditional oral cultures that relied on memory for the transmission of information in the form of anthropomorphic stories and songs, the poet/shaman was literally a walking library of knowledge: the keeper of traditions, history, the knowledge of the ancestors, social practices, natural lore. The narrator of *Portrait with Keys* is a modern shaman of sorts with a visceral, lived consciousness. If *The Exploded View* was about driving the city, then *Portrait with Keys* is about walking the city and noting its effects on the body. De Certeau's distinction between the cartographic and pedestrian (*The Practice of Everyday Life*), derived from the flaneur theory of Walter Benjamin (*The Writer of Modern Life*), captures the narrator's walks in this novel. These walks are described thus: "The way and the walker (and the driver, too, if he has time for such things) are in conversation. The 'long poem of walking' is a dialogue" (53). As Aubrey Tearle has it in *The Restless Supermarket*, "perhaps our first language was a dialogue with the earth in prints of hoof and paw?" (162).

In *Double Negative*, a journalist informs the narrator about "the New World of the urban explorer" (163). This involves exploring and documenting derelict warehouses, power stations, hospitals, hotels, theme parks, and so on. Neville satirises the pretention of this "new discipline", pointing out that one is likely to be shot by security guards or mugged by the homeless if one breaks into a "mothballed warehouse" (163) in Johannesburg. Indeed, I think that Vladislavić's African flaneur should probably be called a white African flaneur in that Vladislavić stands out on the streets of South Africa and cannot roam with impunity in safety. Nevertheless, this flaneur, white or black or of other chromatism, practices a kind of urban parkour. He does not jump off buildings or practice free running or break into abandoned buildings, but he does tramp the streets and make notes of what he encounters.

This "urban exploration" is personal, as reflected in the episodic cameos of *Portrait with Keys*, as opposed to the ordered and contained four part square or rectangular structure of *The Exploded View*. We might understand *Portrait with Keys* as less a "novel" than a series of postcards sent by a traveller to the city. Vladislavić is very conscious of these themes in the "Itineraries" at the end of the book: "This index traces the order of the previously published cycles and suggests some other thematic pathways through the book" (205). This is a postmodern

multiple pathway text then, with thematic pathways classified as “long, moderate and short”. In its thematic/episodic structure, this novel presents an alternative to the traditional narratively linear novel: it uses a “found” or cut-up technique in which sections (138 in total) can be shuffled or read in any order. The mosaic-like composite effect will be similar whichever way the text is read. The formalist inventiveness of this is perhaps similar to Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* in which a large number of different cities give a kaleidoscopic overview of cities generally, both actual and imagined. This suggests not only the labyrinthine nature of the city, the alinearity of non-clock time, but also the way in which consciousness works and meaning is created via unfamiliar lateral connections, both physical and mental, as the narrator walks the city. This narrator who tramps the streets, marking their features and affects on his body, thus defamiliarises our sense of the city, opening us up to newness. For this reader, perhaps the major newness opened up is the interconnectedness of nature and the urban.

The poetic dialogue of walking is the somatic interaction between walker and environs that often reveals the unfamiliar, the hidden. Yet this is not just a passive experience of the marginal or liminal outside of the self, it is also an active cultivation of broad-band consciousness. The narrator sees by inclination and chance in passing moments the “extraneous, inconspicuous and minor, that is abandoned or derelict ... a hidden history of obsolescence comes to the surface” (176). The narrator has peripheral vision, an eye, and even a heart, for the marginal and the ignored. Along with the lost, abandoned, nomadic, perhaps the primary instance of this marginalia is what the narrator calls a tomason: “a thing that has become detached from its original purpose” (175–6).

Leaving no stone or manhole cover unturned, our narrator chronicles the city’s present and past, revealing the steel at the heart of the gold. Yet, for all of his difficulty with this unfamiliar place of gold, steel, ghosts, and suffering, like his friends he is a product of this city as much as he has produced it:

This is our climate. We have grown up in this air, this light, and we grasp it on the skin, where it grasps us. We know this earth, this grass, this polished red stone with the soles of our feet. We will never be ourselves anywhere else. Happier, perhaps, healthier, less burdened, more secure. But we will never be closer to who we are than this. (103)

Our urban shaman-scientist is intimately and intricately connected to the city, for all of its shabbiness, ghosts, exploitation of humans and nature. He has succeeded in divining the rings in a cross-sectional defamiliarisation of the city, and he reveals not only the meaning of the banal layers of fashion, but also the ghosts of that meaning that still linger in

the present, constraining that present to repeat its past. He has created a sense of closeness between human and nature, human and human, within the human body, within the postcolonial city. So, for all of the ugliness and unsustainability of the city, he has revealed “a web of light on the veld, impossibly vast and unnaturally beautiful” (109).

In *Double Negative*, the narrator describes how he feels that he is surrounded by stories in England: “I couldn’t go down the Tottenham Court Road or Baker Street or pass through Seven Dials or a hundred other places without feeling that I was in a story” (93–4). Vladislavić succeeded in giving Johannesburg some of its own stories in *Portrait with Keys*. This version of Johannesburg is not overtly shot through with the rural and the traditional that we find in Phaswane Mpe or Kgebetle Moele, for instance. Nevertheless, this novel connects with local ecologies and cultures. It is the opposite of the panoptical and monumental; it inverts the imperial travelogue with its humble microscopic attention to the local and specific. In Johannesburg the absurd elisions of modernity segue into the ghosts that haunt the crumbling pillars of modernity in the postcolony. Weird feelings arise from his Kafkaesque exposé of the multiple contradictions of modern life in Johannesburg.

However, this is also the text in which Vladislavić demonstrated how global cities have become. His writing about Johannesburg echoes the experiences of city dwellers everywhere. This novel is in the tradition of flaneury that becomes visible with Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Benjamin, moves on to Sinclair and the Psychogeographers, and now includes Richardson’s “schizocartography” and Solnit’s “faction”. Moving beyond this tradition of conscious walking, it also echoes urban parkour and the slow movement. His proprioceptive awareness of his body in place is a model of internal GPS that appeals to everyone, because no one likes being lost for any extended period of time.