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## Troping the City of Johannesburg in *Portrait with Keys* by Ivan Vladislavić

**Abstract:** From early years, literary criticism and urban studies have perceived Johannesburg as a city escaping the strictures of literary and civil concepts, the paradigms of literary genre and of *concept city*. Unlike Cape Town, whose history spans centuries, and the chance for her shape and existence to consolidate and to have been “properly” re-told — by both inhabitants and visitors — appears to be more tangible, the City of Gold remains formless, evasive and still immersed in the process of discovering her narrative/narratives. The present article seeks to provide some insights into a recent postmodern, post-antiapartheid project of rendering the cityness of Johannesburg put forward in *Portrait with Keys: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked*, the first nonfiction work by South African iconoclastic novelist Ivan Vladislavić who, as I hope to show, has developed an accretive style for recounting in the brief, at times photographic at other times epiphanic “prose poems,” his encounters in and with the city of Johannesburg. The following looks at the diverse contexts of Vladislavić’s explorations in search of a method, which includes his earlier work, where he reflects on attempts to comprehend the city in the course of semiotic analysis reducing the urban to language, and the later where he cooperates with David Goldblatt on a multimedia representation of Johannesburg. Finally, the article gives examples of Vladislavić’s strategy whose objective is to un-lock the city rather than construct its legible image.

Ivan Vladislavić not only discovers, documents, satirises and writes about Johannesburg, but also reflects on the creative process as writer and reader of his own work, a reader analogous to all other subsequent readers one can imagine. Contemplating the diversity of his own involvement in the process of endless “re-editing,” the author emphasises the seemingly obvious fact that “the writer is never totally in control of his ... productions” (Backström et al. 2002: 119). In the same interview with Backström and Marais, the author elaborates on the reader’s contradictory desire (the author in all the roles he assumes strives to resist) to put an end to this fluidity and to locate a still point which would enable the reader to find a “quiet place” in the text (Backström et al., 121) where he could, undisturbed, commence the process of ordering and judging, a location exempt from the ongoing ironic commentary rendering the desire for a stable focalisation in the narrative — and

a correct point of sight in the urban landscape — historical, relative and contingent. Hence, trying to understand the ironic ingenuity of *Portrait with Keys*, originally subtitled *Joburg&what-what*, it might be useful to consider the context of the author's prior and later interrelated writing variously involved in attempted constructions of Johannesburg, as well as the broader context of literary and cultural antecedents including urban writing in South Africa, by referring to comparisons with the perception of earlier travel narratives about the City of Gold.

A purely language-oriented analysis of the urban semioscape of Johannesburg encourages the reader — including Vladislavić (in the roles of writer, reader and professional editor<sup>1</sup>) — to imitate the first-person narrator-editor, Aubrey Tearle, in *The Restless Supermarket* (first published in 2001) and thus to become absorbed in detecting language errors in the text of the city. By assuming this approach in *The Restless Supermarket*, the author reduces the potentially complex urban experience, now deprived of its materiality, to what Tearle imagines safely as a manuscript in need of proofreading and editing. However, even Tearle, looking from Hillbrow<sup>2</sup> in the direction of Soweto, notices the shortcomings of the approach and realises that the task is more complex and that it is more than the matter of a single languages' competence. Contemplating the view, he concludes that “[l]anguages were spoken there that [he] would never put to the proof,” and later adds that it is not only the language but primarily the materiality of the city that resists his editorial authority and aesthetic preconceptions: “aware of it themselves the lights were not twinkling, as lights are supposed to do, they were squirming and wriggling and writhing, like maggots battenning on the foul proof of the world” (Vladislavić 2006: 339). The difficulty of grasping that which is visually available to the onlooker implies not only the obvious diversity of languages spoken in South Africa but also the variety of discourses and narratives Tearle senses lie beyond both his linguistic competence and his imagination.

To complement this conclusion, the epigraph to Part One of *The Restless Supermarket* derives from William Hazlitt's essay “On the Conversation of Authors”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Apart from interviews and general information on Vladislavić as editor, it is Helgesson's article which comments interestingly on the conjunction of typography and topography in the writing of several South African writers including Vladislavić, Knopfli, Jensema and Boshoff (Helgesson 2006: 86).

<sup>2</sup> In the 1970s Hillbrow used to be a “whites only” area which soon turned into a grey one. Today most of the residents are migrants from townships like Soweto. As far as I know, initially Hillbrow was (in the context of apartheid) a sophisticated urban, cosmopolitan place. By the 70s it had become more edgy but was still whites-only. Between the late 70s and the early 90s it changed dramatically; emptied of all but a handful of whites and inhabited by black South Africans who had defied apartheid laws and an increasing number of foreign nationals.

<sup>3</sup> William Hazlitt's “On the Conversation of Authors,” the electronic source editor explains, was first published in the *London Magazine* in September 1820 and can be found reproduced in *The Plain Speaker* (1826); *Selected Essays* Geoffrey Keynes, ed. (London: Nonsuch Press, 1930); *The Best of Hazlitt*, P.P. Howe, ed. (London: Methuen, 1947); and *Essays & Characters* (London:

which, in the passage selected by Vladislavić, provides clues for understanding the narrator's, here Aubrey Tearle's, cultural antecedents. By invoking an eighteenth-century traveller, Hazlitt refers to but Vladislavić hides from the reader, who "reads the world, like a favourite volume, only to find beauties in it" (Hazlitt 1820: n. pag.) and prepares an aesthetically attractive edition for the press, the South African writer characterises Tearle as rooted in European Romanticism. The author leaves out the preceding remarks where the essayist speaks about what an idealistically predisposed connoisseur of landscapes for whom "love and friendship" are the finest things, "both in practice and theory" (Hazlitt, n. pag.), and for whom the legend of good women is a fact, might imagine. Referring to the hermit-like seclusion of his traveller-narrator, Hazlitt makes clear that his mediated experience of the world outside — shaped by the European literary and painterly tradition, with tangible echoes in Geoffrey Chaucer's gentle recantation,<sup>4</sup> and protected by the distancing methods of *camera obscura* — prevents the traveller's/narrator's need to differentiate between fact and fiction. In other words, the otherwise essential difference between fact and fiction is marginalised in a thus formulated *universe of discourse*. Further on, idealisation or modelling inherent in the perceptions of the Romantic explorer implements a sense of order subjecting the experience of viewing to predefined aesthetic criteria. However, in contrast to this totalising/idealising background which provides a point of departure/object of desire, the self-reflexive and ironic mode of the urban text in *The Restless Supermarket* disrupts even the signification that resides in language itself and prevents the novel from reaching closure. As Marais notes,

this meditation on language invests the novel with a form that indicates the *failure* of presence and, in so doing, the text acknowledges the ultimate impossibility of the ordering gesture which constitutes it as text. Differently put, then, the novel foregrounds the aporetic dimension of writing, that is, the fact that the act of writing is required to achieve what it cannot. (Marais 2002: 113)

The novel enacts its inadequacy and a sense of incompleteness in the face of the task it undertakes: it is necessary yet inevitably in-operative. Thus, a significant question *The Restless Supermarket* poses concerns the possibility of revealing successfully the evasive cityness of Johannesburg in terms of novelistic writing, a writing always immersed in constricting genre antecedents and pre-existing knowledge. *The Exploded View* (2004), the following work of fiction by Vladislavić, continues these investigations. It replaces the centrality of the editor-character in

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Nelson, n.d.). The present article makes use of the electronic source: <http://www.personal.psu.edu/jxm22/browse/read/hazlitt.html>.

<sup>4</sup> The reference is to *The Legend of Good Women* (ca 1385–86) by Geoffrey Chaucer. Collette writes, "*The Legend of Good Women* is also a palinode, a recantation of Chaucer's portrayal of women and love in his earlier works, especially *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Romaunt of Rose*" (Collette 2006: 157–158). The poet recants the earlier somewhat defamatory statements reinstalling the idealised images of famous good women.

the earlier text with four characters-residents — a statistician, an engineer, an artist and a contractor — providing four post-apartheid stories and four points of view separated by distance in the exploded centralising pattern of the editor-character. The metaphorical explosion, emanating from the middle, undermines the idea of enframing centrality<sup>5</sup> that holds the city together, letting the boundaries drift away and fade into the veld, and thus rendering the city once again unimaginable.

The background of post-colonial travel narratives in which the city is variously involved and against which Vladislavić is assembling his Johannesburg project, assumes a contrasting approach as the narratives tend to reconstitute the city, according to Jonathan Crush, “as a moral text” and the often foreign travellers “bring narrative order, significance and meaning to the city’s landscape” (Crush 1994: 257). Numerous recent studies show how travelogues that take on autobiographical, semi-autobiographical, pseudo-ethnographic or journey of exploration forms totalise, *enframe* and prepare the experience for consumption (Leed 1991; Mills 1991; Clifford 1992; Pratt 1992). Pulped, to conform to the expectations of the traveller-outsider, the city is edited in accordance with the external logic of the narratives of exploration so that, as Crush emphasises, Johannesburg becomes an entirely unAfrican creation, for example “a testament to European ingenuity” or an “island of imperial progress” (Crush, 263). Adam Hochschild, for example, an American and a journalist like Vladislavić, writes an account that constantly accentuates the distance between the viewer and the city where the “escorted” (Hochschild 2007: 255) traveller gazes upon Soweto through the back-window of a limousine (Hochschild, 130) only to disappear into the safe and luxurious interiors of the mythologised Carlton Hotel. Johannesburg, to Hochschild, is the capital city and his “base” because it is reminiscent of New York, where he was born.<sup>6</sup> Still, unlike the American metropolis, it is a city of walls as “its buildings are all one — oddly linked in a huge, jagged circle with no breaks, a design that mimics the Voortrekkers’ *laager* or fortified ring of ox wagons” (Hochschild, 127). The image of the ring makes it more familiar to the North American scholar/teacher who observes the urban structure from the vantage point of an outsider trying to familiarise what he sees. Even if Hochschild cherishes the idea of being an

<sup>5</sup> *Enframing* is a term used by Mitchell (1992). Mitchell borrows and adapts the term from Martin Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology.” The technique of enframing is a technique of fixing the interior and the exterior, which enables the positioning of an observing subject in a privileged point of sight (centrality) where he contains and disciplines the object. The world appears to such an observer as a relationship between picture and reality, as representation and the represented. The method of enframing enables an abstract code to appear in separation from practices and to create an appearance of order, an order, Mitchell claims, that “works by appearances” (Mitchell 1992: 59–60).

<sup>6</sup> In her discussion on representations of post-apartheid Johannesburg in South African theatre, Kruger writes on the significance of the fall of Carlton as well as on an analogy drawn between Johannesburg and New York in relation to the view “from above” contrasted with the disillusionment with reality at street level (Kruger 2001: 231–232).

insider, as onlooker he remains an outsider who reports on “long talks” with activists<sup>7</sup> he sympathises with and whose fates set an example: “In South Africa it was as if I had stepped, for a brief few months, [into a] moral territory that previously I had only read about, in accounts of events like the resistance to the Nazis” (Hochschild, 9). The city inscribed in the moral discourse about race and oppression fails to subvert/transgress the gaze of imperial tradition and, as Vladislavić rightly diagnoses, remains in waiting to be explored, though not from a base in Carlton Hotel but on the street level of commercial exchange, or in asking for directions and giving directions — declarations of “vulnerability” and a “capacity for dealing kindly and responsibly” (*PK*, 15).<sup>8</sup>

Vladislavić publishes *Portrait with Keys: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked* in 2006. In 2008 the book is translated into German as *Johannesburg, Insel aus Zufall*, with a title rightly suggesting the importance of *chance* and *randomness* in the material city and in its textual correlative. Creative non-fiction, or a nexus of a non-chronological autobiography and fiction, in 2007 *Portrait with Keys* receives the *Sunday Times* Fiction Prize and the *Sunday Times* Alan Paton Award for Nonfiction. Vladislavić traverses his city as observer/walker/stroller and collector inviting participation in often curious encounters and a sharing of associations. Chronologically, but also in accordance with a certain logic in Vladislavić’s search for a mode of expression adequate for the rendering of the complex cityness of Johannesburg, *Portrait with Keys* is both followed and preceded by ideas fully developed in his later publication, *TJ/Double Negative*<sup>9</sup> (2011), a pairing of fiction and photobook, published by the author together with photographer David Goldblatt. Commenting on their most recent joint project, Vladislavić explains that “some of the work in *Portrait with Keys* ... appeared in David’s catalogue *51 Years* (2001)” and adds that “[u]sing some of the *Portrait with Keys* pieces that were already in progress, [he, Ivan Vladislavić] had the opportunity to shape them and shift them in such a way that they would fit with David’s photos, without having to function as a ‘critical essay’ on the work” (Law-Viljoen 2010: n. pag.). Thus particular sections of the *Portrait* were written at different times, some published with photographs and reedited, finally, enabling the reader to enter the collection of 138 pieces either by following different thematic paths/itineraries or by reading the most recent arrangement provided by the 2006 book edition. The “Itineraries” Vladislavić appends to the *Portrait* include 27 thematic routes additionally

<sup>7</sup> Adam Hochschild was a civil rights worker in Mississippi in the early 1960s, so his remarks on the dedicated activists who suffered imprisonment, torture and some lost their lives are a mixture of amazement and detachment.

<sup>8</sup> For page references in parenthesis *Portrait with Keys: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked* (2009) is abbreviated as *PK*.

<sup>9</sup> Roger Field reminds me that TJ used to be the car number plate sign for Johannesburg in the apartheid era when Johannesburg was part of Transvaal province (T for Tvl; J for Jhb), suggesting that there is a joke/nostalgia issue in the title. Roger Field (University of the Western Cape) is the author of *Alex la Guma. A Literary and Political Biography* (2010).

classified as Long, Moderate and Short. The paths include, for instance, collections of pieces entitled “An accidental island,” “Artist’s book,” “City centre,” “Engaging a Gorilla,” or “Gardens,” “Memorials,” and “Security” (*PK*, 195–197). They inform the reader that the present order/edition, whatever it implies, is provisional. The fragmentation often pointed out as a characteristic feature of Johannesburg, for instance by Kruger (2006: 153), and resulting from its jagged frontiers between rich and poor, white and black or settled and migrant, finds expression in the fractured boundaries amongst the pieces and their “small” or local narratives effectively defying, as creative non-fiction, clear generic categories.

Vladislavić’s encounter with photography, both in *51 Years* and in *TJ/Double Negative*, documents his effort to reach beyond a semiotic analysis of the textual material, that is beyond the indulgence in editorial activity with which Aubrey Tearle is obsessed in *The Restless Supermarket*, and to distance himself from the literary antecedents (including his own writing) and their cultural topography. This means also a withdrawal from the necessity of resorting to the subversive power of the ironic mode. The ever-widening perspective gained by the character of the young man who leaves South Africa to return as a changed observer in *Double Negative*, makes clear that the complexity of life, domestic dramas and family histories of its myriad inhabitants remain ungraspable and do not contribute to what is called an image of the city. Striving to cut off the textual, literary and journalistic antecedents, the views on African urbanity expressed by both the most recent, joint project and by the preceding one, *Portrait* speaks to contemporary urban and sociological studies of Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, who argue that writing the social back into our understanding of African “life forms” requires an examination of everyday practices, with emphasis on the imperative impact of incessant mobility, and imaginaries as they unfold at the intersections of those multiple crossings that constitute urban spatiality. Referring to a macro context of the continent, the studies consider African urbanity “a space of flows, of flux, of translocation, with multiple nexuses of entry and exit points” adding that “the continent we have in mind exists only as a function of circulation and of circuits” (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004: 351). This macro/micro-mobility and rhizomatic flexibility with multiple entrances is traceable especially in the *Portrait*.

Both *Portrait* and *TJ/Double Negative* are, either covertly or overtly, involved in staging a relationship between the visual and the written, which inevitably provokes questions concerning their interdisciplinary antecedents. Affinities can be found with the relationship between Josef Sudek and John Banville’s *Prague Pictures: Portrait of a City* (2003); between Micheal Ondaatje’s *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976) and E.J. Bellocque’s photographs of prostitutes in New Orleans in the 1900s; between Richard Powers’s *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985) and a photograph of three young men by August Sander, or the novels of W.G. Maximilian Sebald, for example *The Emigrants* (1992), where the black-and-white photographs counterpoint rather than illustrate the text. Vladislavić admits

to an interest in André Breton's *Nadja* (1928), which inserts over 40 photographs into the narrative, where, Vladislavić explains in an interview, "[the] photos of the text, and some of them are almost like court exhibits. ... they often obscure rather than illuminate" (Law-Viljoen, n. pag.). The physically present visual material of *TJ/Double Negative* and the metaphorically invoked material in *Portrait* neither follow the journalistic technique of capturing the moment nor do they provide critical commentary; indeed, they are facts or pieces of evidence. The act of seeing foregrounded by the presence of photographic material does not follow the Romantic concepts expressed in Hazlitt's essay where the connoisseur of landscapes, here the photographer/writer, occupies the privileged position of a seer and a sayer. Rather, like in René Magritte's 1929 photomontage *Je ne vois pas la [femme] cachée dans la forêt*,<sup>10</sup> where the female figure is mounted on a *passe-partout* holding photographs of the surrealists — all of them depicted dreaming with their eyes closed — the dazzling overt visuality of the surrealists dismantles the ocular-centric hierarchy encouraging the inflow of imaginaries. Magritte comments even more explicitly on the denigration of sight as a cultural and distinctly Eurocentric category in *La race blanche* (1937, 1967) and demands an alternative for his art.

David Goldblatt, involved in several projects with Vladislavić, refutes any suggestions of antecedents or meta-intrusion on the process of taking pictures by stating that he just takes pictures which are informative, not artistic, in spite of the fact that some of them are "straight-up" while other ones are "oddball," made in the car mirror, and therefore showing a different aspect of reality (Law-Viljoen, n. pag.) The pictures, whether photographic or textual, seem to be incidental and random. By analogy with the paragraphs that await further editing, they are incomplete and open to reinvention resisting the temptation to create "images of the city." In his review, Ian Volner refers to the Johannesburg depicted in the *Portrait* as a city "unlovely, if not unloved" and to the book as a study of "the disintegration of civil society" (Volner 2009: n. pag.), thus emphasising the city's unrelatedness and its restless mobility. The city appears to be a dynamically self-transforming and self-reinventing battleground:

Johannesburg is a frontier city, a place of contested boundaries. Territory must be secured and defended or it will be lost. Today the contested is fierce and so the defences multiply. Walls replace fences, high walls replace low ones, even the highest walls acquire electrified wires and spikes. ... Around here people must make the most of what they've already got, and therefore the walls tend to grow by increments. ... These piggyback walls (my own included) are nearly always ugly. But sometimes the whole ensemble achieves a degree of elaboration that becomes beautiful again, like a page in the *Homemaker's Fair* catalogue. (PK, 173–174)

In *Portrait with Keys*, with the author's view obscured by the "piggyback walls" he puts up, the city cannot be conceived of as a concept city but, in accordance with Julian Wolfreys's proposition, as a city "taking place" in response

<sup>10</sup> *Je ne vois pas la [femme] cachée dans la forêt* (1929) translated as *I Do Not See the [Woman] Hidden in the Forest*.

of the materiality of the author's language to the ruined materiality of the urban (Wolfreys 2004: 5), produced and lived imaginatively by its inhabitants (Highmore 2005: 6). Such a city reveals itself, rather than is revealed, at the conjunction of the material (everyday) and the imaginary (invented). There the perceptions and ability to experience are in some degree only generated in recourse to what James Donald calls symbolic constructs (Donald 1999: 27), the perfect templates. The process of revealing, on the other hand, takes place more in the course of *encounters* with acceptance of randomness and fragmentariness. Not only Wolfreys, in reference to English literature, but also Stotesbury in reference to the South African indicates the importance of the material forms, of the visual and psychic encounters and practices in the urban representation. In the latter case of a South African experience, the author warns openly against purely semiotic readings positing the city as analogous to some abstract language (Stotesbury 2005: 269–270) — an approach discussed in *The Restless Supermarket* and rejected by Vladislavić as entirely ineffective in case of Johannesburg.

Writing *Portrait with Keys* and inventing its provocative title, the author openly calls upon concepts traditionally used to organise the experience of urbanity, though he seems to be more interested in its changing experience. Vladislavić follows different modes of writing ranging from short fiction to brief, information-oriented journalistic accounts analogous to photography, which can be either deliberate and *studium*-oriented or incidental (*punctum*). On the other hand, the idea of a portrait, also photographic, entails questions concerning the sitter and the artist, the genre of portrait or self-portrait as well as auto/biography. The idea of a portrait with keys is paradoxical as it invokes the image of St Peter, never generically a portrait, with the iconic motif of the Keys to Heaven as a sign of authority on the Papal coat of arms. The City of Gold is thus juxtaposed with the Golden City or New Jerusalem. Problematisation of the symbolic reference on both the iconic and the verbal levels pervades the whole text. If Johannesburg *takes place* in the course of experience, its diagnosis requires an investigation of what has happened to the organising symbols/authorities. Indeed, one of the thematic routes Vladislavić offers in drawing the portrait of the City of Gold promises an answer as it is called “Memorials,” not *monuments*. While the function of the *monuments* is to glorify, the *memorials* commemorate and thus, instead of promoting examples of achievement, virtue and heroism, they help sustain memory/memories. In spite of the difference, both can stand for symbolic gestures providing meaning and order to urbanity. Here, none of the memorials constituting the tour around Johannesburg meets conventional expectations. There is a collection of abandoned material structures whose significance has evaporated so that their potential to organise space symbolically is lost. For example, two pieces of writing focus on the confusion caused by a discussion concerning houses in which Mahatma Ghandi is said to have lived and on the related story of the importance of his stay in Johannesburg; a story which can hardly be reconstructed. Another case is that of a marooned



and dislocated memorial whose significance is almost entirely obliterated — the inscription is “scarred by graffiti” (*PK*, 161). It is the story of a spatially marginalised war memorial commissioned to commemorate the death of men from Bezuidenhout Valley who lost their lives in the Great War 1914–1918. Once in the landscape, it is now situated opposite Darras Centre on a traffic island in an expanding suburb.<sup>11</sup> For Guy Debord, this shift marks an era of urban self-destruction in the course of which the exploded, formless urban debris invades the landscape (Debord 2006: 123) creating space for new “centres,” the restless supermarkets whose new “essence” is exchange. Thus the fate of the memorial may only serve as witness to the uncontrollable extension of the urban whose effect is a dismantling of the symbolic. Still another memorial, included in the tour, remembers the time when public parks, such as Pieter Roos Park, flourished promoting a Jane Fonda-like healthy life-style. Before it disappears, stolen by scrap collectors, the metal sculpture, suggestive of a prehistoric bird, provides shelter for tramps. The once visually central Voortrekker Monument once “squatted on the distant horizon” has been displaced by electricity pylons, a new installation, marching “across the veld” (*PK*, 35). Vladislavić avoids mapping Johannesburg in terms of a simple post-apartheid replacement of one set of monuments, the old symbolic order, by another. Change appears to be a spontaneous unworking, an interruption and suspension leaving behind installations which no longer signify. Hence no landmarks assist the visitor in his attempts to decipher and understand the city.

New installations, or their projects, remain more in line with Mark Dion’s postmodern exhibition *The Thames Dig* (1999), displayed in the Tate Modern. Their aim is to focus on the *new* ruins rather than the past. It is Jeff Lok’s idea of a “wall of remembrance” (*PK*, 47), the OK Bazaar-like “Hyperama of Sentimental Value” (*PK*, 49) that Vladislavić juxtaposes with *Mementoes of District Six* by Sue Williamson and with Genepei Akasegawa’s *A Collection of End Bits of Lead from a Mechanical Pencil* (*PK*, 116). While Dion retrieved the detritus carried by the River Thames and enclosed the archaeological waste in museum cabinets, Williamson’s installation commemorated the recently erased city areas in Cape Town:

*Mementoes of District Six* is a cabin made of resin blocks. Enclosed in each block is an object or fragment that the artist Sue Williamson collected among ruins of District Six after the removals: a shard of pottery, a scrap of wallpaper, a hairclip, a doll’s shoe. (*PK*, 81)

Jeff’s wall, a memorial to be, is an analogous though entirely fictitious project whose aim, as opposed to Williamson’s politically and temporally oriented installation, is to capture the city that is passing away now, “as we speak,” and thus a memorial of the city taking place:

<sup>11</sup> In the present article, there is no space for a proper discussion of the forms of re- and de-territorialisation in Vladislavić’s Johannesburg but he traces change not only referring to monuments/memorials but also to gardens and plants. Indigenous gardening effaces the former styles and while some places become a site of wilderness, in some alleys trees are chained to prevent change (pieces: 114, 119, 125). On the subject of gardens see Murray (2006).

We must build ourselves a memorial while there is still time. Every person in the Greater Johannesburg area ... must be required to donate an object to the artist for use in the work. This object, which shall be no larger than a standard brick, will be enclosed in due course in a transparent resin block ... These object-enclosing bricks will be used in turn to construct a wall. The Great Wall of Jeff. ... We are looking for any little thing the donor can be induced to part with. It could be nothing more than a button or a piece of string. (*PK*, 48)

It is a project on paper or in the minds of its architects, ordinary people, leaving the city still without significant material landmarks recognised by a community<sup>12</sup> as a support for some urban concept but securing what Vladislavić calls “private niches” in the public space of the city (*PK*, 176). Memorials in *Portrait* are consistently reduced to uncontrollable particular memories of what is no longer there, like Alan’s four knocked-down houses that “would retrace his passage from child, to teenager, to young married man, and return to the present” (*PK*, 70) or the memory of the “grandest gesture” a Joburger ever made performed by Mr Xenopulos who at the opening of his bakery and takeaway business “threw the keys of the shop into the crowd” (*PK*, 151). Personal associations, Vladislavić claims, form a topsoil of memory in the city, “[they] carve out or fill a space in the material world” forming the private niches in public space, spots” which have a hand-warmingly physical quality” (*PK*, 176). Thus Vladislavić develops a psychogeographical concept of unlocking the walled city by emphasising the importance of the physical and emotional relations of individuals with particular places, forms of re-territorialisation made up of the thoughts and feelings which remain not only in the heads of the individuals but also as “secret signs” (*PK*, 176) for those who will follow. Neither image nor portrait in any imaginable genre can emerge from the above collection of memorials/attributes, but a network of personal relations is possible. There is no single key to Johannesburg and thus the *keys* in the title multiply endlessly in the continually referenced locks of all the alarmed houses in the city: the text opens with focus on keys aglow and a series of amusing references is made to the Gorilla lock.<sup>13</sup> A separate thematic route deals with Safety/Security. When the Swedish journalist takes a picture of the author’s amazing collection of

<sup>12</sup> Several critics notice that contemporary South African fiction explores the complexity of identities — personal, cultural or racial — in relation to territory and community. The dissolution of traditionally conceived concepts of home and community does not prevent search for new formulations of these concepts. See, for example, Clarkson (2005: 451, 454 ff). The sense of *public identity*, according to deKock is “emptied out of particularity” (deKock 2005: 82) which Vladislavić shows in *The Exploded View* and thematises further in *Portrait*. The idea of the “locked city,” defending its territory, is explored in the *Portrait* in particular. Wamba writes on the mechanisms of keeping Africa at bay pointing to the fact that the walls are also built by the “monied blacks” against the country and the newcomers (Wamba 2003: 13).

<sup>13</sup> “Engaging the Gorilla” is a longer collection of pieces (18) in *Portrait*. A shorter version of this cycle was published in German under the title “Die Lebensweise des Gorillas” in 2000. The Gorilla is not an animal but a type of lock. Vladislavić makes use of the connotations, e.g. in piece 37: “‘There is no substitute for brutal force.’ The pun on ‘brutal force’ furthers a play of meanings

the 17 keys he needs in his everyday life, Vladislavić realises they gauge the sense of insecurity and anxiety.

Neither travelling to Johannesburg as an explorer nor visiting it as a tourist, both burdened with preconceptions apparent in earlier travel writing, but walking in the city where the “way and the walker ... are in conversation” (*PK*, 53) becomes a poetic and dialogic mode Vladislavić adopts from Dickens who writes about conversing and arguing with the streets. However, for Vladislavić there is a difference between the two: the London invented by the author of *The Sketches by Boz* and *The Uncommercial Traveller* “collaborate[s] enthusiastically in its own invention” while Johannesburg “resists the imagination” unravelling even when he grasps it (*PK*, 54). The resistance of the city appears also in its inhospitality towards strangers: with its back turned, curtains drawn, gates bolted and security lights glaring, it exposes the walker to an acute sense of isolation, if not anxiety, and fear. Branko, the author’s brother and one of his interlocutors in *Portrait*, believes that the Dickensian mode of conversation is outdated and should be replaced by the style of Mayhew, Auster or DeLillo. However, what fascinates the author is not only the graspable image of London but the incomprehensible noise of the city Dickens found indispensable for his writing (*PK*, 136). In a city which has no river, lake or ocean the writer hears its sound, transforming it imaginatively: “For a moment the shell of the city was pressed to my ear” (*PK*, 21), and thus the whole walk becomes an “extended metaphor” (*PK*, 22). The son of a walker with a “map in hand” (*PK*, 16), Vladislavić confides that “getting lost is not always a bad thing” (*PK*, 17). It is during these wanderings that the city is produced and lived imaginatively revealing itself (rather than being revealed) at the conjunction of the material “garbology” of urban facts and the imaginary of the ocean and the reef.

Reminiscent of Orhan Pamuk’s *Istanbul*, *Portrait with Keys* relies more consciously on de Certeau’s *Practice of Everyday Life* where blindness is the organising principle in the bustling city (de Certeau 1997: 93). Piggyback walls, extensive storage areas and labyrinthine streets form a homology with the walkers who are verbal Chinese boxes. They are, Vladislavić writes, “stories within stories” receding endlessly “framed and reframed, until [they] are unreadable to [themselves]” (*PK*, 102). The verbal illegibility is compensated by a network of memory niches and private associations. Two episodes stand out in contrast to this prevalent strategy: pieces referring to Carlton Centre (piece 11 and 12) and those concerning the aeroplane flight (piece 78). The Carlton Centre episode starts in 1972, when the office tower is built, and remains the tallest in South Africa for 38 years. Like the Carlton Hotel in the travel experience of Hochschild, the Tower is a base that offers access to the panoramic city, even to Vladislavić at the time he was a young hawker of telephone dioxies:

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already suggested by the trade name ‘Gorilla’ ... there is no substitute for unbending steel. ... In English, mechanical devices are very commonly given the names of animals (*PK*, 57).

Here, with the whole city for a backdrop, every white person capable of sitting up straight behind a desk appeared to be a business magnate. Up we went, floor by floor. The higher we toiled, the more spectacular the views became. On a clear day, it was said, you could see Pretoria. I began to relish the moments when the person whose precious time I was wasting would leave the room ... so that I could stand before the window and look down at the immensity of the city ... my sense of Johannesburg's unnatural beauty was born and ... I resolved to seek my fortune in these streets. (*PK*, 30)

From its offices, the city is made available for consumption epitomised by the centre itself. Its "life and death" could be charted by "the sequence of coffee shops," "the unsettling smell of food" (*PK*, 30–31) and other pleasures. Seemingly graspable, from Carlton the city remains only an artificial, theatrical backdrop and thus, even if to the reader's surprise, it is disparaged by the suddenly empowered though paradoxically blinded Cartesian viewer who experiences a quasi-epiphanic insight in which he perceives the city's beauty as "unnatural." The unnatural beauty of the enlightened vision remains abstract, serving the writer as a paradoxically confusing starting point because real exploration begins on street level: a city gazed upon cannot be lived in. An aeroplane flight over Johannesburg, another view from above, retains the memory of vastness and unnatural beauty but carefully juxtaposes gains and losses of such viewing by invoking the poetry of Lionel Abrahams. The pristine view from the office tower is replaced by a comforting explicability of the aerial perspective which obliterates landmarks and dissolves personal connections leaving, however, hope that "someone, inevitably, is looking back" (*PK*, 103). Indeed, not all otherness is reduced to the order of the aerial subject and thus the ethical is not precluded.

The spatially organised collection of texts accumulated by Vladislavić over several years traces shifts and changes as in the case of Carlton Centre and Carlton Hotel or some of the memorials, but remains essentially ahistorical in its design. Places, streets and subjects are revisited, either as unrelated entities or as micro-narratives, with a different perspective, yet by avoiding any progression of events, not speaking of progress. No sense of either neighbourliness or community as commonality, fusion or a unifying organic whole is attempted. "Being-in-common," to borrow from Nancy (1991: 27), withdraws in favour of encounters with radical singularity as the eye of the author, Vladislavić concludes, "becomes attuned to everything that becomes extraneous, inconspicuous and minor, that is abandoned or derelict," while the "useful facts of the street recede" (*PK*, 164). In the inoperative community the narrator becomes a hunter of encounters with *tomasons*<sup>14</sup> of which some, like the abandoned motorcycle (106), turn out to be locally epiphanic.

<sup>14</sup> Vladislavić explains the term *tomason* as follows: "coined by Genpei Akasegawa to describe a purposeless object found on a city street ... a thing that has become detached from its original purpose. Sometimes this detachment may be so complete that the object is turned into an enigmatic puzzle" (*PK*, 163). It is a form of conceptual art, an avant-garde action practised by Marcel Duchamp. A *tomason* is a ready made and, here, a *found object*, i.e. *objet trouvé*.

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