READING THE GOLDEN CITY: SPATIAL REPRESENTATION AND URBAN SEMIOTICS IN THE WORK OF IVAN VLADISLAVIĆ

by

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Abstract

With the fall of apartheid in 1994 came the erosion of previously demarcated social spaces throughout South Africa, a process which necessitated a drastic reimagining of South African national identity. Since this transition, South Africa has legislated the collapse of apartheid and the attendant reorganization of movements of people through urban landscapes while simultaneously negotiating its re-entry into international networks of commerce and cultural exchange. There are, however, numerous ways in which literary works have challenged the narrative of the “rainbow nation” by pointing to how South African urbanscapes physically manifest various anxieties of post-apartheid subjectivity. To illuminate this interaction, this thesis explores the interrelationship between formations of national identity and fictionalized representations of urban space in the works of Ivan Vladislavić.

Vladislavić is an acclaimed yet surprisingly under theorized South African author whose work gestures to the conceptual challenge of rethinking the relationship between subjectivity and social space. Vladislavić’s characters are frequently architects or city planners; his narratives focus on the symbology of the contemporary cityscape, enabling him to illustrate how, in the specific context of Johannesburg (the setting for each of his major works), imagining and representing space is foundational to understanding and influencing the material reality responsible for controlling human movement. The central contention of this thesis is that Vladislavić’s novels The Restless Supermarket, The Folly, and The Exploded View, provide a critique of urban development discourse by deconstructing discursive systems that produce static, closed, and diagrammatic spatial representations and in doing so reveal key ideological foundations of apartheid that both pre-existed and currently survive its formal regime. Additionally, his novels Double Negative and Portrait with Keys provide examples of alternative subjectivities whose spatial imaginations offer different vantage points for mapping the built environment that remain changeable and open to alterity and that therefore suggest a potential ethical response to existing inside/outside social demarcations that are currently spatially realized in South Africa.
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Chapter 1- Introduction: What We Are Talking About When We Talk About Reading Cities

Ivan Vladislavić: Reading and Writing Joburg

This thesis presents a reading of several major works by Ivan Vladislavić, a South African novelist, short-story writer, essayist and noted editor, through a particular lens: the analysis of literary representations of the built environment. Just as any act of cartography must obscure the layered richness of the reality it seeks to render, so must my readings of these texts reduce them to a particular framework that suits my own thematic agenda. Therefore, I wish to maintain from the outset that I am not attempting an all-encompassing articulation of Vladislavić’s literary vision, but am instead analyzing and close reading his works within a critical rubric that I find particularly suited to illuminating their intricacies. If what I provide here must ultimately remain, at least in some ways, a limiting representation of his work, a map whose details cannot always trace the full complexity of the landscape it renders, then it remains my hope that these pages nevertheless tease out new areas for exploration and reveal networks of meaning that have yet to attract the consideration they deserve.

In choosing Vladislavić as a topic on which to hang a thesis, I had to ask myself why books about cities are worth reading and discussing. Especially in a South African context, why are books that draw attention to how cities are imagined and represented worth special consideration, particularly in light of non-fictional material realities that merit immediate concern and even action? The answer, or at least the answer in terms of the specific subject at hand, is that several of Vladislavić’s major works, namely, *The Folly* (1994), *The Restless Supermarket* (2001), *The Exploded View* (2004), *Portrait with
Keys: *The City of Johannesburg Unlocked* (2006), and *Double Negative* (2010) identify particular narratives common to non-literary discourses on the contemporary representation of South African public and private spaces and proceed to illuminate and critique their ideological underpinnings and consequences, both potential and realized.

The central contention of this thesis is that Vladislavić’s novels *The Restless Supermarket*, *The Folly*, and *The Exploded View*, provide a critique of urban development discourse by deconstructing discursive systems that produce static, closed, and diagrammatic spatial representations and in doing so reveal key ideological foundations of apartheid that both pre-existed and currently survive its formal regime.

Additionally, his novels *Double Negative* and *Portrait with Keys* provide examples of alternative subjectivities whose spatial imaginations offer different vantage points for mapping the built environment that remain changeable and open to alterity and that therefore suggest a potential ethical response to existing inside/outside social demarcations that are currently spatially realized in South Africa. Lastly, throughout his work, Vladislavić highlights not just how macro/national level acts of identity formation are fostered within social spaces, but further reveals the narratological and even performative nature inherent to the act of representing those spaces.

Essentially, I posit that Vladislavić’s critique of contemporary urban development theory is grounded in a dialogue with modes and methods of thinking about and imagining the urban environment that are common to the practices that, in large part, are the driving forces behind the actual construction (economically, politically and physically) of the urban environment. The works I have selected for close reading embody a particularly insightful and creative intervention into institutional discourses.
whose ideological foundations currently enjoy both the benefits of idealization and also what often amounts to consciously crafted subterfuge. This is to say, the spatial focus of Vladislavić’s imaginings are themselves preoccupied with revealing how space is imagined, by whom it is imagined, and why it is imagined in the ways that it is.

At the heart of Vladislavić’s work is a critique of functionalism, which is, simply put, the idea that the built environment can best be categorized, identified, understood, and ultimately utilized, in terms of what practical (usually material) function its various component units were intended to perform. Banks are for banking and not for being bookstores. Attendant to the functionalist perspective (which, it should be said, remains the common modality of neoliberal urban planning and development) is a misplaced dependence on the role of prescriptive texts (blueprints, designs, architectural briefs, models, municipal development statements, etc) as sources of unwavering authority, “correct” usage, or stable/static lodestones of spatial identity—a dependence that, often unsuccessfully, tries to mitigate or obscure the creative re-identification that actual human practice can generate. Vladislavić’s critical project reveals how functionalist methodology lends itself to panoptic imaginings and totalizing representations, often in the form of panoramic-gaze images (maps being the most obvious) that perform reductive readings of urban spaces while obscuring the extent to which these readings elide the complexities of the spaces they claim to represent with something akin to positivistic objectivity. Vladislavić adroitly illuminates this attempted erasure by consistently gesturing toward the performative nature of the act of mapping.  

1 Regarding the socially constructed nature of space in relation to performative acts, see Yi-fu Tuan’s *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), Michael Curry’s *The Work in the World: Geographical Practice and the Written Word* (1996), and Patricia Seed’s *Ceremonies of*
Vladislavić’s critique of these ways of representing space is particularly important in a South African context because of the extent to which these methods are salient in both apartheid ideology and the neoliberal economic policies that have come to replace it; this commonality underscores how the legacy of apartheid is maintained in many of the power structures that ostensibly celebrate its demise and further dispels the notion that apartheid can be relegated to the past in some clean sense of being “finished”. The import of Vladislavić’s work therefore extends outside of a strictly South African context as well, demonstrating the extent to which apartheid’s ideological foundations were neither original nor confined to its particular historical and local circumstances. For human societies more generally, apartheid is not a curious anomaly, a kind of sociocultural hiccup that we can safely view behind the pane glass of time and distance, but rather the potential conclusion of particular, and actually quite common, methods of representing, and thereby creating, social spaces.

Apartheid Now

Vladislavić’s intervention is of particular import in light of South Africa’s relatively recent segue from an oppressive state into an ostensibly liberal democracy.

Indeed, spatial imagining has a resonance in the context of South Africa that is both heightened and rendered volatile by the historical and material realities of apartheid. Racial segregation had existed in South Africa since the early colonial era under the Dutch and British; however, from the inception of apartheid in 1948 until its official termination in 1994, the policies of the National Party governments, with varying degrees of success, established a network of zoning based on systemically assigned racial identities. Any and all South Africans became “native” (black), “white”, “coloured” or “Asian”, a categorization that would determine your rights to citizenship, the places where you could find employment, your place of residence, and where you could or could not be and with whom you could or could not be. The spatial contingencies of this formation proved to be dependent on physical segregation, the codification of specific modes of development (particularly in the urban residential landscapes of non-white zones), forced migration (particularly of labour in and around urban centres), and the establishment and application of a rigorous system of surveillance coupled with an equally rigid control exercised over all forms of media and their respective flows through domestic and international networks. All of this necessitated the entrenchment of a system which became deeply embedded in not only the cultural, social, and political realities of South Africa, but sculpted into its spatial frameworks, that is, into the very makeup of the landscape itself.

Since the transition out of apartheid, in reality a long and complicated process, but more generally heralded as occurring with the free elections of 1994, South Africa has been legislating the collapse of these policies and the attendant reorganization of movements of people through urban landscapes while simultaneously negotiating its re-
entry into international networks of commerce and cultural exchange, a process which has necessitated a drastic reimagining of national identity. While there is much to celebrate in the demise of apartheid, caution must be exercised regarding how the narratives of its collapse are conceptualized and represented. In *World City Syndrome: Neoliberalism and Inequality in Cape Town*, the urban development theorist David McDonald suggests that “the transition out of apartheid was driven in large part by a crisis in capital accumulation and by efforts on the part of the ruling elite to preserve the market and rekindle economic growth” (64). In the early twentieth century, it was in the best interests of the owners of the mines and farms that made up the backbone of the South African economy to curb the flow of Africans seeking better paying employment from rural areas into the city. This was also in the best interests of the working class whites employed in urban factory-based jobs; and so controlling human movement through the Natives Urban Areas Act of 1923 set the stage for systemizing racially bounded areas of human movement in what would eventually, with the National Party’s election in 1948, become apartheid. At the time of their implementation, these policies were generally successful at maintaining their desired economic outcomes. Populations were more or less relegated to their “proper” spatial categories, access to cheap labour was abundant in rural areas, the wages of white workers were not threatened in the cities, for the body of work that was largely influential in forming and guiding my perception of South Africa’s transition out of apartheid and the still entrenched problems of race and class inequity, see Julian May’s *Poverty and Inequality in South Africa: Meeting the Challenge* (2000), Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass’ *Class, Race and Inequality in South Africa* (2005), Hein Marais’ *South Africa Pushed to the Limit: The Political Economy of Change* (2011), Katherine Newman and Ariane De Lannoy’s *After Freedom: The Rise of the Post-apartheid Generation in Democratic South Africa* (2014) and Kevin Durrheim, Xolisa Mtose and Lyndsay Brown’s *Race Trouble: Race, Identity and Inequality in Post-apartheid South Africa* (2014).

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3 The infamous law that required documentation to be carried by African people who were inside designated “white” zones some 25 years prior to the actual beginning of apartheid.
and the government possessed the surveillance and military apparatuses needed to control
the entire affair at what was deemed an acceptable level (McDonald, 61).

By the 1970’s, however, this was no longer the case as white consumers were no
longer creating enough demand for commodity and “there were not enough black
consumers to buy the goods being produced due to insufficient (or nonexistent)
disposable incomes, high rates of un(der)employment and weak or nonexistent
infrastructure, particularly in heavily populated rural areas…” (McDonald, 61-62). These
economic difficulties were further exasperated by the international boycotts leveled at
South Africa which made it difficult to alleviate the lack of consumers available to the
manufacturing sector by broadening out to globalized markets. Additionally, both the
swelling of armed resistance from the African National Congress (ANC) and the black
labour movement in line with the United Democratic Front (UDF) made the forced nature
of the racial demarcations increasingly untenable. It was not entirely surprising then,
that corporate South Africa began to have an interest in dismantling the systemic strictures of
apartheid in the interest of promoting capital accumulation. It wasn’t long before “the
urbanization of the African population was to be turned from problem to solution, with
the processes of industrialization and cultural change expected to transform a
discontented and threatening people into more compliant members of a mass-
consumption society” (David M. Smith 1992, 2 [qtd in McDonald 63]). In essence,
economic reform driven by the neoliberal policies of the ruling elite necessitated the
collapse of apartheid, and it was not a coincidence that apartheid-era systems of
governance were dismantled only after they ceased to remain conducive for generating
profit. The ANC, the political body largely credited for the collapse of apartheid,
however, prefers to conceptualize this process in terms of revolutionary activism against a system of racist oppression and so foregrounds this aspect of transition while obscuring the extent to which they currently conform to the neoliberal policies that sustain economic inequality in South Africa today. When it has been politically expedient to do so, the ANC has represented the inequalities established under apartheid as belonging to the past in an attempt to segregate these contemporary inequities from their historical foundations and precedents. This allows the ANC to erect and maintain neoliberal economic and social policies that foster class (and by extension race) divisions while simultaneously portraying itself as both a revolutionary body whose purpose is to battle oppression and a source of moral political authority.

As a result, many of the spatial divisions fostered by apartheid have recalibrated to accommodate new modes of inequality and the security crises these inequities foster in the built environment. Similarly, the whitewashing by government officials regarding the current state of inequality in South Africa is reflected in the architecture constructed to narrativize the history of apartheid. A particularly salient example of this is to be found in the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg which is described by various South African tourist organizations as “the story of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity”. The narrative of the triumphant rise of the human spirit obscures the economic and material realities that allowed for the collapse of apartheid (such as South Africa's inability to remain competitive in the manufacturing sectors) in favour of an ephemeral, and less

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4 For an overview of how this process of recalibration has affected the makeup of the built environment, see David Smith’s The Apartheid City and Beyond: Urbanization and Social Change in South Africa (1992), Udesh Pillay, Richard Tomlinson, and Jacques Du Toit’s Democracy and Delivery: Urban Policy in South Africa (2006), and Leslie Bank’s Homes Spaces, Street Styles: Contesting Power and Identity in a South African City (2011).
problematic, representation of human will overcoming a vaguely defined form of opposition, one similarly denuded of its contextual reality. Contained in this triumph is also the finality of apartheid’s defeat and current absence, an absence that also engulfs whatever apartheid’s malevolent “adversity” embodied. The compound containing the museum is surrounded by pillars with words such as “Democracy”, “Diversity”, “Equality”, and “Respect” in a spatial and textual display of the success of equitable reform. In fact, while the stark and readily apparent disparities established under government mandates in the most literal terms have largely subsided, South Africa remains rife with gender, racial and class inequalities which are no less real for their lack of prescriptive legislation. New hierarchies of power, resulting from neoliberal concerns with economic, industrial, and infrastructural development, have done far less than the ANC would like to acknowledge in terms of empowering the victims of apartheid, and in many cases have established practices that aid the private service sectors at the expense of both the poor and working classes. In light of this, it is hardly surprising that some South Africans have proffered criticisms of these practices and the narratives of national re-identification in which they are conceptualized and validated.

**Apartheid and Post-apartheid Literature**

During apartheid, and in spite of attempts at direct suppression, South Africa produced a body of literature that incisively criticized the mechanics of the apartheid state while simultaneously retaining a level of complexity that transcended the didacticism and sanctimony often found in politically motivated narratives. It is not possible to delimit exactly how much of South Africa’s cultural output in the last few
decades has been, in part, a reaction to apartheid, but it is not unreasonable to view at least some of the earnest reception and exposure of South African literature on the world stage as the result of its rendering of the vital struggles that were the consequences of, and responses to, the oppression of the apartheid government. It is hardly surprising then, that the literature that grew under apartheid’s shadow is highly attuned to formations of socially constructed environments and the way that racialized bodies occupy and navigate them. Similarly, in the wake of apartheid, there are numerous ways in which literary works are currently challenging the contemporary ur-narrative of the “rainbow nation” by pointing to how South African urbanscapes physically manifest various anxieties of post-apartheid subjectivity. This challenge is in no small part issued by interrogating simplified representations of South African urban and rural spaces and then further by deconstructing those fictions through the articulation of counter-narratives that reimagine social, economic, and material realities with a fuller complexity and an increasingly geographic emphasis.

Perhaps the most comprehensive treatment to date of this tendency within contemporary South African literature is Rita Barnard’s *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (2006), a text that is framed as something of a response to former prime minister B.J. Vorster’s claim that “If I were to wake up one morning and find myself a Black man, the only major difference would be geographical” (qtd in Barnard 6). Notable for its concern with “the situatedness of textual production and consumption”, which Barnard describes as “the way in which writing for or from a particular location makes a difference in the form and significance of a text” (3), *Apartheid and Beyond* focuses on the cultural and political influences of particular sites of symbolic import: specifically theatres, farms, shanty towns and townships, and suburban homes present in the works of J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Athol Fugard, Miriam Tlali, and Zakes Mda. The goal of such an exercise is to provide an overview of the larger historical dynamics at play and to provide a reading of the sociospatial elements inherent to the transition out of apartheid. The introduction to *Apartheid and Beyond* ends with an invitation to others to “fill the gaps left open by this book” by writing about authors whom Barnard has neglected, and she mentions Ivan Vladislavić as an “excellent candidate” (14) for such treatment. Although there remains a dearth of critical work on Vladislavić, several scholars have picked up the gauntlet laid by Barnard,

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and have done considerable work to place Vladislavić’s oeuvre at the centre of the larger spatial reimagining of post-apartheid South Africa that is currently unfolding in the South African literary community.

Some Critical Responses to Vladislavić

Certainly, any current overview of literary works centred on the spatial dynamics of apartheid and its fallout will remain incomplete without a treatment of Vladislavić. A number of publications have appeared in the past few years to address the surprising paucity of research surrounding his work. Of particular note are three texts; two of them (Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić and a special edition of scrutiny 2, a peer-reviewed journal dedicated to South African writing) are collections of articles, reviews, interviews and the like centred on Vladislavić, and the other (South African Literature After the TRC: Mapping Loss) performs a wider, multi-author reading of South African literature (employing a scope of engagement similar to Barnard’s) which includes Vladislavić (largely due to his novel The Restless Supermarket) as a figure of central importance. Taken together these texts are the major bodies of critical work that currently exist about Ivan Vladislavić.  

Since I conceptualized this thesis in 2009 a number of dissertations have been completed that, to varying degrees, touch on Vladislavić’s work in ways that are sometimes similar to my own without, however, infringing on the originality of my reading of Vladislavić’s critique of contemporary neoliberal urban development theory through urban semiotics. If a common observation of those who write on Vladislavić is that there is something of a dearth of critical work on him (it is and there is) then the following list might be something of an assurance that a bevy of emerging scholars have been galvanized to pick up the slack. Some dissertations that touch upon his work include Emma Hunt’s Urban Space in South African Literature: Johannesburg (2005), Helene Johanna Strauss’ Hesitating at the Intersection: Trans-Cultural Encounters in the Post-1994 South African Literary and Cultural Imagination (2006), Ken Barris’ Fractious Form: the Trans/Mutable Post-Apartheid Novel (2008), Andrew Clarno’s The Empire’s New Walls: Sovereignty, Neo-Liberalism, and the Production of Space in Post-
Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić was published in 2011 under the editorship of Gerald Gaylard, a professor, and previous Head of the English Department, at the University of Witwatersrand, more commonly known as “Wits”. In the preface, Gaylard tells us that Marginal Spaces is the first volume to gather a significant portion of existing critical material on Vladislavić’s oeuvre and is composed of academic articles, reviews, and interviews. The diversity of material is striking, with pieces ranging from formal academic critique to more creative and casual responses to his work. Gaylard writes, “This book is thus not only a critical celebration of Vladislavić’s work, but also gives readers a sense of how literary and cultural production and reading has changed since apartheid, via a collection of the original interpretive directions that Vladislavić’s work has been a part of, enabled and encouraged” (xv). As the title suggests, Gaylard emphasizes what he sees as Vladislavić’s concern with hitherto marginalized subjects of South African literature, particularly in relation to aesthetics and the minutiae of society that are usually obscured. Gaylard writes:

This minimalism constitutes a political resistance to monumental power, whether it be the ‘big stories’ of apartheid in the past or globalisation today. It suggests a radical notion of democracy, namely that nothing – human or otherwise – is too small to be disenfranchised. Moreover it refuses to separate the political from the aesthetic. His

insistence upon the writerly, aesthetic, and affective within a society that still tends to ignore or vilify these as merely marginal or irresponsible demonstrates how apartheid’s ‘big story’ brutalized our realities, feelings, and creativity. (“Introduction” of Marginal Spaces 2)

Some of this suggests that Vladislavić’s minimalism is an attempt to address macro-level concerns (apartheid, globalization) through the lens of particular subjectivities in a way that draws attention to how macro-level formations are present in the everyday practices of the people that live under them. This insight is crucial for my work because this thesis explores how Vladislavić’s critiques of various elements of contemporary, neoliberal urban development theory are grounded not in an explicit rendition of those practices, but rather by a representation of their effects in the daily lives and spatial imaginations of particular characters. This tension in Vladislavić’s work that Gaylard draws our attention to is represented in the minutiae of personally felt, everyday experiences that come into being while navigating the built environment of Johannesburg and will serve as an important framework for me in comprehending Vladislavić’s project.

Gaylard also edited, with Michael Titlestad (another important literary critic in relation to Vladislavić and current Head of the English Department at Wits), a special 2008 edition of the literary journal scrutiny 2, which was conceived as a wide range of responses to Vladislavić’s oeuvre but which instead became a series of articles more focused on what was then his newest, publication: The Exploded View. Also included were a series of smaller essays, reviews, interviews, and reflections that retain the original concept’s more generalized spectrum. Several of the articles discuss The Exploded View in relation to the idea of national literature and what this concept means in a postmodern, globalized context, an issue that is explored by discussing a number of
thematic elements, including how the protagonists variously relate to their shared (in an open and multi-contextual sense) apartheid history; Vladislavić’s relentless deconstruction of “antinomial oppositions”; the anxiety inspired by the new, or rather rediscovered, heterogeneity of post-apartheid South Africa; the novel’s metafictional meditations on the creation of and role of art; and the processes of “world making” in signs and signifactory practices which at times become “semantic pathologies”. This edition remains an important volume, and one that adroitly introduces a fairly wide array of frequently conflicting responses to Vladislavić’s work, presenting a critical ambivalence that, as the editors suggest, is demonstrative of his thematic richness and complexity. While Marginal Spaces and the scrutiny 2 are each notable collections of articles on Vladislavić’s work, their existence might be misleading regarding the amount of critical work that actually exists on him due to the substantial overlap that exists between them, with much of scrutiny 2’s special issue being reprinted in Marginal Spaces. This is not to say that both volumes are not useful and, in fact, for anyone interested in Vladislavić, crucial. It does mean, however, that the reality that two volumes dedicated to the work of Vladislavić have been produced suggests a larger body of work than is existent. This overlap bleeds over into the third text, Shane Graham’s South African Literature After the Truth Commission: Mapping Loss (2009), as much of Graham’s work on Vladislavić in Mapping Loss was previously printed in both scrutiny 2 and Marginal Spaces.

Nevertheless, Graham’s book remains a seminal text on contemporary South African literature in relation to representations of space. Characteristics of post-TRC literature that Graham identifies are: “narrative forms such as confession and second-
person direct address; representational strategies utilizing displacement and condensation; recurring tropes involving mapping, archiving, and curating; the symbolic conflation of bodies and landscapes; evacuations and holes; and palimpsests” (5). Considered as a whole, these techniques, strategies, and motifs teach us about the intangible importance of spatial relations, and about the ways in which generating and sustaining social memory is tied up with questions of time, space, place, and public memorialization. Graham further suggests that they also teach us to be suspicious of fixed, immutable narratives of historical truth, and to query the motives and interests of those who most insistently proffer such narratives (5). While Graham’s exemplary rendering of the spatial dynamics of post-apartheid literature alone grants this text a considerable salience, *Mapping Loss* is also notable for the central position it affords Ivan Vladislavić. Given the thematic scope of Graham’s treatment of post-TRC literature it might seem unsurprising to include Vladislavić, even necessary, but, as Graham notes, there currently exists a curious “dearth of literary criticism that explores Vladislavić’s work in terms of the intersections between national memory, narrative representations of national identity, and the human spaces these narratives encapsulate” (19).

Despite the excellent quality of the critical response Vladislavić has thus far inspired, there remains considerable room for work. This is in part because of the smaller scale of existing material. While both the above mentioned anthologies contain a sizable body of criticism, each takes the form of collections of article-sized endeavours by a multitude of thinkers. The benefits of such a variety of perspectives are, I hope, obvious, but the fact remains that articles, however incisive and however many of them are taken together in an anthology, are necessarily limited by form. This is less a criticism and
more an acknowledgement that larger scale readings of his work have become necessary.

A work of such a scale, intended here, will allow for a concentrated and cohesive
treatment of several of Vladislavić’s major texts and an expansive discussion of his works’ thematic import as well as of the relationship to the cultural and material milieu in which it was, and is being, produced. As such, my reading of Vladislavić will connect a series of four interrelated issues and arguments at stake in the relevant material. The first is an expanded articulation of what modes of imagining and narrativizing cities

Vladislavić is critically engaged with (including where and how they are currently manifested and how his work challenges them, which would help to place Vladislavić’s work in relation to larger discourses of architecture, space, and human geography). The second will be a review of Vladislavić’s emphasis on how the macro-level narratives of national identity are manifested in the particular and common practices of everyday life of South Africans. The third will be a demonstration of how Vladislavić’s work deconstructs the supposed uniqueness of apartheid ideology in a way that undermines the distancing performed by both post-apartheid national narratives and other Western cultures in their imagined relationship to South Africa (the “apartheid is unique and therefore not a valid source of critical introspection” fallacy). Lastly, although perhaps most significantly, I will provide a reading of the relationships between the texts

Vladislavić writes and the city spaces they represent. Regarding this last point, since Vladislavić’s work evokes and interrogates the textuality of cityscapes, it is important to take this position seriously, and to read the intertextual relationship between the representational modalities of his fiction and the built environment they both represent and engage in dialogue with. In short, this thesis will engage what has come before it
while expanding upon particular thematic issues that are both crucial to Vladislavič’s project and that remain conspicuous in their absence from existing criticism.

Whatever appraisal one cares to make of the literary merits of Vladislavič’s work, it is not a stretch to suggest that no other writer, in South Africa or otherwise, living or dead, has crafted a body of work as attuned to the multifarious debates within and among the (at times overlapping and amorphous) fields of urban development, urban planning, urban semiotics, cognitive and human geographies, architecture, and spatial theory, or has incorporated the resonant discourses currently produced by these practices into their literary output as consistently or critically as Ivan Vladislavič. As a result, in spite of (and, in actuality, in large part because of) his concentration on a specific place, I argue that his work merits attention outside of a national literary context and bears import to all readers who dwell, work, consume, create, and otherwise participate in the practice of everyday life within the dynamics of socially constructed spaces. In light of this, my treatment of Vladislavič will unfold with an audience in mind who may or may not be familiar with some of the basics of South African history and socio-political contexts in the hopes that it will be readily accessible to both Vladislavič’s burgeoning international readership as well as those more intimately familiar with the streets and settings he so vividly evokes.

**Reading the City**

In discussing cities, it is worth pointing out that the concept of “city” is common and noncontroversial enough to obscure its own ambiguities. Indeed, most of us live in cities and experience little in the way of uncertainty when it comes to what that means
exactly, both for ourselves and for those with whom we share that spatial
context/identity. Pressed for an answer, we might say that a city is a human settlement of
some permanence and of a certain population operating under some cohesive,
overarching form of municipal governance and/or within particular boundaries. These
responses, however, underscore the socially constructed identity of what many of us take
for a simple material reality. Given merely the spatial demographics of an urban space
like that containing New York and Jersey City, or Tokyo and Yokohama, one might be
hard pressed to delineate where the municipal boundaries exist without fore knowledge of
the historical and geographical legacies of those sites, and yet the sociocultural identities
of those places and their inhabitants remain, in some ways, distinct in the popular
imagination and in many cases for valid, if not stable and absolute, reasons. In another
context, the urban identities of city dwellers may have less to do with legislated
municipal designations and more to do with the concept of the “city” as a larger shared
space from which cultural fealty is derived and to which it is owed. When Dre and Tupac
rap about the “city of Compton”, or New York rappers feud over the cultural cachet of
their respective boroughs, they aren’t being metaphorical in their usage of the term
“city”, which throws into question the authority and stability of official designations. In
“A Guide to Urban Representation and What to Do About It: Alternative Traditions of
Urban Theory”, the urban development theorist Rob Shields succinctly points out that
“While we may happily speak of the ‘reality’ of the city as a thing or form, [cities] are the
result of a cultural act of classification. We classify an environment as a city, and then
‘reify’ that city as a ‘thing’. The notion of ‘the city’, the city itself, is a representation. It
is a gloss on an environment which designates by fiat, resting only on the assertion of the
self-evidence that a given environment is ‘a city’” (227). This stance does not, however, mean that the conceptualization of the city is without foundation in material realities or that its status as a “cultural act” is not one that reverberates within the built environment it attempts to delineate. Whatever else it may be, any given city is composed of intentional arrangements of materials whose physical constructedness and layout have a direct bearing (intentional or otherwise) on the social relationships that are formed within and through them. Shields suggests this himself when he states that “the truth of ‘the city’ is that it is a ‘concrete abstraction’: an abstract form which nevertheless has concrete implications. Hence the short-sightedness of both a simple empiricism which accepts the city as reality, not representation, and of a cynical idealism which dismisses the ‘equivalent to real’ status of representations of the city. The city is a concept with a very concrete affect” (231).

Shields is not tilting at windmills. A surprising number of people are willing to imagine and discuss cities according to the either/or formulation he decries here, attempting to articulate city spaces in terms of either political economies or symbolic economies, a binary whose supposed oppositional stances might seem very strange to those who spend their lives studying the political ramifications of cultural productions (or more specifically, English literature). The fact remains, however, that cities are frequently (I hesitate to use the word “typically” although it may well fit) discussed solely in light of one without much in the way of attention to the other. The political perspective concentrates on movements and transitions of material commodity, ownership of land, labour practices that are entrenched in the built environment, class distinctions manifested in residential and employment location, and basic land usage (for
instance, which areas of a city may or may not be likely candidates for industrial waste dumping), all of which are primarily concerned with manifestations of capital. If capital is the focus of the political economy, then symbolic economy (which is admittedly foregrounded to some degree in my own work) is centred on the act of representation. A central question to this method of inquiry is “how are particular social groups (usually based around categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, age, or profession) represented in the cultural meanings produced by and communicated via built forms?” This is to ask how, and to what extent, private and/or public spaces create, reify, dismantle, enforce, or respond to social identities, often in terms of in group/out group statuses that affect practices of human movement. The distinction between these two approaches is grossly limited by an inability to articulate the nature of their very real interrelationship, an articulation that strikes me as necessary for fully comprehending the complexity of either with any hope of efficacy. In “Space and Symbols in an Age of Decline”, the urban development theorist Sharon Zukin convincingly articulates this exact relationship when she posits that, “Occupation, segregation and exclusion on every level are conceptualized in streets and neighbourhoods, types of buildings, individual buildings and even parts of buildings. They are institutionalized in zoning laws, architecture and conventions of use. Visual artifacts of material culture and political economy thus reinforce—or comment on—social structure. By making social rules legible, they represent the city” (43-44). Under this conceptualization, it is impossible to convincingly maintain the separation between these supposedly distinct approaches and this thesis will similarly make no attempt to do so.
Although this thesis will at no point abandon its usage of the term “city”, it is worth mentioning that the terms “built environment”, “urban environment”, and “urban landscape” will frequently be used in relation to the physical makeup of spaces more commonly designated as cities. In *Meaning in the Urban Environment* (1979) Martin Krampen asks “What kind of meaning is connected to the city and by what kinds of mechanisms? ... i.e. what conditions must be fulfilled to enable one to attribute communicative functions to objects in general and to architectural objects in particular?” (2) This is an important, if enormous, question but I include it here because it gestures to the extent to which “the city” is often conflated with the particular objects that make-up its materiality. The urban environment and the built environment are two ways of saying the same thing in this regard, and with fewer of the abstractions caught up in the term “the city”. In “Built Environment Correlates of Walking: A Review”, Saelens and Handy define the built environment according to a fairly widespread and accepted definition as “the part of the physical environment that is constructed by human activity” and suggest that “the built environment consists of the following elements: land use patterns, the distribution across space of activities and the buildings that house them; the transportation system, the physical infrastructure of roads, sidewalk, bike paths, etc., as well as the service this system provides; and urban design, and the arrangement and appearance of the physical elements in a community” (550). Worth noting here is the relationship between the materially constructed elements of the built environment and human activity, suggesting that this environment is about human processes and production as well as movement.


Reading Johannesburg

It is also worth noting that many of the apprehensions that might proliferate within the ambiguities surrounding the definition of the term “city” are more or less dispelled in this thesis by the fact that a particular city is the main focal point of criticism. Johannesburg is the main setting of all the primary texts under study here, and the term “Johannesburg” in this thesis will correlate to the definition of the city as commonly articulated in municipal and federal South African law while at the same time remaining mindful of the extent to which any social space is also an imagined space whose identity is in a continual process of reinvention and is perceived from the vantage points of millions of unique subjectivities which, taken together, form a deeply complex set of relationships that conceptualize and represent the city.

Johannesburg was founded in 1886 as the result of a mining boom centred on gold. In terms of its bare bone material realities, whose mercurial characteristics and complexities are only briefly and partially captured by the following data, Johannesburg is currently a city of some 3,845,459 people living in 1,648 square kilometers in the North East of South Africa (South Africa Institute of Race Relations). Its physical makeup has shifted dramatically over a short number of years, as the collapse of apartheid meant that not only were the South Western Townships, known as Soweto, officially incorporated into the urban space but that hundreds of thousands of people, the bulk of whom were marginalized blacks, were newly capable of moving into the downtown core. This folding together was merely the official recognition of a longstanding relationship whose existence was, in the first place, the result of apartheid’s strict adherence to mapping sites of access according to racial guidelines. According to
the same 2012 survey that provided the above statistics, Johannesburg is made of people who self-identify in line with the following racial demarcations: black (74.8%), white (15%), coloured (5.9%), Indian (4.3%), other (1.29%) (South Africa Institute of Race Relations). It is worth noting that the usual problems associated with the accuracy of census data are exacerbated by the proliferation of informal settlements in South Africa and Johannesburg especially, and that a major theme of this thesis is that, even when accurate, such data sets reveal only a limited sense of any given city’s identity, but nevertheless all too frequently form a kind of framework that makes thinking in terms of everyday practice, interpersonal relationships, or the social spaces in which these practices and relationships are conceived, seem superfluous.

Rather than detail further data sets, which are readily and easily available, I would like to take this opportunity to quote at length the urban development theorist Martin J. Murray whose work on the spatial-material and social realities of Johannesburg has been a key source for this thesis. In *Taming the Disorderly City: The Spatial Landscape of Johannesburg After Apartheid* (2008), Murray opens by acknowledging that “Johannesburg is both a material entity, identified and defined by its geographical boundaries, and an imagined place…” (1). He goes on to write that:

> It is a restless unsettled city whose own self-identity has always revolved round its vitality, its novelty, its crassness, and its seemingly boundless opportunities and insatiable appetite for material gain. The fluid, chaotic quality of the city life in Johannesburg after apartheid is reflected in the unresolved tension between the overall plan of urban space and its specific details, between the durability of the built environment and the transitory use of urban locations, and between the deliberate regulation of spatial practices and the uncontrollable anarchy of chance encounters in public places. (1)
In short, Johannesburg is a city much like any other, except that particular aspects of urban reality, such as changeability and fluidity that resist the regulatory measures of official spatial practices, are given a boost by the extent to which its dynamism is propelled by the collapse of apartheid. As a result of this, and its position as a centre of South African commerce, Johannesburg is a focal point for the nation’s wider process of self-reidentification. These hyper-mercurial elements of the city’s transitional moment mean that, particularly for those who previously inhabited both the figurative and literal centre of the city, a certain amount of post-apartheid anxiety is generated. As Murray continues:

Generally speaking, middle-class urban residents have looked upon this lack of symmetry and order, this absence of harmony and clarity, with a great deal of trepidation and anxiety. Yet there is actually nothing surprising about this seemingly confusing, ambiguous state of affairs: after all, like South Africa’s other cities, Johannesburg is the by-product of colonialism in the postcolonial era of unrelenting globalization, and it still bears the enduring imprint of the apartheid spatial order at a time when its racially codified rules, regulations and restrictions no longer apply. (1)

This particular characteristic, the anxiety of the white middle class, is foregrounded by Murray as a defining element of Johannesburg, and this thesis will follow his lead in that regard, largely because Vladislavić’s own concerns with representation focus so clearly on this same dynamic. Indeed, the subjectivities represented by Vladislavić in the primary texts covered here are, with some exceptions, those of the white middle class who are attempting to reposition themselves in light of the changes wrought by the collapse of apartheid. The extent to which these anxieties provoke defensive spatial schemas that attempt to ameliorate or halt this transformation, or alternatively, the extent to which
these anxieties provoke a process of self-reflection and the potential for constructive (re)placement and the shedding of claims to subject-mastery positionality, is at the core of Vladislavić’s spatial imagination. By representing Johannesburg in this sense he is participating in creating the imaginary city of Johannesburg, a fictional counterpart that is in many ways inseparable from the material structures which constitute its physical makeup.

The relationship between the city “proper” (read: more traditional, material notions of what constitutes the city) and the city as imagined is bound up in the relationship between the city as conglomeration of social spaces and the city as textual. This relationship between texts and cities is adroitly articulated by the architecture and development theorist Lindsay Bremner in her 2010 collection Writing the City into Being: Essays on Johannesburg 1998-2008 wherein she posits that “Writing ... both destroys the city as a real thing and substitutes an idea city to fill this absence. It forms the city as an idea, as a mental construct, which then becomes the locus of theoretical or cultural work” (48). For Bremner, and I wholly agree with her, it is impossible to talk about the city at all except through representations, which means that, ultimately, the distinction between representation and materiality, while not nonexistent, may be wholly inconsequential. As she suggests, “even the most prosaic, factual descriptions of cities are, to some extent, imaginary constructions” (49). This underscores the relationship between cities and texts because of the extent to which representing the city, for instance through text, is building the city. This perspective gives Vladislavić’s own textual representations of Johannesburg an added importance in terms of the project of
intervention into development discourse that I am suggesting is a core theme of his oeuvre.

In light of Bremner’s conception of the idea of the city as the city, she posits that a central prescriptive text for the city of Johannesburg, and South African urban spaces more generally, was the body of thought that came out of what she calls “the most far-reaching of the modernist manifestos [on architecture]”, the Charte d’Athènes (Athens Charter) published by the Congrès Internationale d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) in 1933. The CIAM was a European architectural forum for what was then a contemporary exchange of ideas regarding the purpose of urban development and planning. Essential to this project was what Bremner calls the “combined ideas about unity and control with expert skills, state intervention and municipal politics into a utopian planning programme for remedying the pathology of urban areas” (9). Under the theme of “The Functional City” urban spaces “were portrayed as being in a state of chaos, suffering from overcrowding, air pollution, slums and lack of open space as a result of the uncontrolled and disorderly development of industry and the growth of private interest” (9). In order to save the modern city from itself, “planned action was required, using modern techniques (rational planning, large-scale redevelopment zoning, the replacement of the street with park space) and the collaboration of specialists” (10). This mindset, of the urban planner being a specialist whose intention and purpose is to save the city from its own creeping chaos, becomes one of the foundational myths of the apartheid regime and its proclivity for demarcating and regimenting the social spaces of the city according to existing racial anxieties. It is this representation of the city that Vladislavić is primarily concerned with, and it is my contention that Vladislavić’s work can be positioned variably as a critique of
these formulations and as a set of representations of potential alternatives for ways of thinking about, representing, and by virtue of these actions, creating, Johannesburg and cities more generally.

**Reading Spaces as Social Productions/Processes**

Before turning to this argument, however, it is important to delineate more clearly a few terms and sources of methodology. The first stage of doing so will necessitate articulating the relationship between my work and two related concepts, namely, Henri Lefebvre’s idea of space as a social product and the practice of urban semiotics; the second will involve briefly discussing how these concepts can be brought to bear on literary close reading.

Due to its enormous influence, Lefebvre’s concept of space may seem familiar, even commonsensical, to those with a passing familiarity with cultural theory. Essentially, where the traditional concept of “space” might be defined, materially, as an area bounded by some set of physical particularities for a functional purpose, Lefebvre broke with this to emphasize the extent to which any given space is a process as opposed to a state. Space is not merely that which exists in a given location at a given time, but rather the set of social circumstances and relationships that both actively produced that space and maintain it, meaning that the resonance of a space is defined by its past and cast into its future. For Lefebvre, the modes of production that reify space are representation (for example in planning or maps), practices (as in the patterns of everyday life) and representational spaces (spaces that are intended to communicate some meaning or message, such as we commonly associate with monuments). These elements are not
meant to be taken as disparate forces, but rather different ways of thinking about the relationships among socially produced ways of constructing space. For Lefebvre then, and for this thesis, the built environment is inherently and inescapably social. As M. Gottdiener, an urban semiotician, writes in “Culture, Ideology, and the Sign of the City”:

Urban space, and, in fact, any space belonging to a stratified society with an oppositional social structure, represents the material manifestation of dominant interests orchestrating social organization along with the traces of historical challenges to this hegemony. The surface naturalness of appearance and its taken-for-granted quality provides false testimony for what is a constant, often contentious process of group struggle over the control of spaces. (215)

Gottdiener garners this sense of urban space directly from Lefebvre, who tells us that “One of the most crying paradoxes of abstract space is that it can be simultaneously the birthplace of contradictions, the milieu in which they are worked out and which they tear up, and finally, the instrument which allows their suppression and the substitution of an apparent coherence. All of which confers on space a function previously assumed by ideology” (420). A consequence of this line of thought is that social spaces, like texts, are themselves ripe for reading and for reading through similar lenses with which we read the texts that we more commonly associate with (re)producing ideology, such as books and films. This is the intellectual background from which urban semiotics arises, a discipline and methodology that attempts to read the city in a similar fashion to how we read texts.

In 1986 M. Gottdiener and Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos compiled, edited, and published a collection of works on the field of urban semiotics with the intention of providing a survey of the field and introducing, in translation, many key works published in urban semiotics in languages other than English, opening them up to a much larger
international audience. Gottediener and Lagopoulos begin by suggesting that urban semiotics is “the inquiry into the social signification of urban forms, or, more generally, forms of settlement space, such as villages, tribal camps, and the like” (2). Of course, such a definition is far too broad and only cuts to the methodological grounding that makes urban semiotics distinct from a multitude of other models with similar aims.

Further clarification is provided:

For urban semiotics in particular, material objects are the vehicles of signification, so that the symbolic act always involves some physical object as well as social discourse on it. In the case of urban semiotics these objects are the elements of urban space, for example, streets, squares, buildings, and facades. Semiotic analysis can also be extended to include codes of property ownership, written texts of planning, the plans of designers, urban discourse by the users of the city, and real-estate advertising. (3)

A number of things are important here, but for the matter at hand a particularly salient feature of urban semiotics is its textual treatment of urban spaces. Not only are streets and buildings imbued with signification, but the analysis of such signification can, and should, be extended to textual objects whose meanings reify or conceptualize these spaces, suggesting not simply a relationship between what we generally conceive as buildings and what we conceive as texts, but an overlap in their systems of signification that suggests a more direct comparison. Furthermore, and even more germane to my project, is the inclusion of not just prescriptive texts drafted by city planners and architects, but also “urban discourse by users of the city”. While “urban discourse” is not defined here, Vladislavić’s works—narratives that represent cities in a way that engages other acts and methods of spatial narrativization in intertextual dialogue—are most certainly relevant to such discourse. This thesis will read his works as being composed of
an urban semiotic project, one that serves as a poignant intervention into contemporary modes of representing Johannesburg.

**Reading Books as Spaces**

By now I have gone some distance in tracing modes of thought that implode the common demarcations erected among spaces as physical manifestations and spaces as representation. It still bears noting, however, that my work here is not a direct reading of the textual signification of Johannesburg, so much as it is a reading of its signification as imagined through the literary output of Ivan Vladislavić. This means that what my thesis is engaged in, for the most part, is not a serious departure from the discipline of English Literature in that close reading fictional texts is the core activity being executed. I have already touched upon Lindsay Brenmar’s work, but there is a growing trend that is more explicitly literary in terms of cartographic or geographic close readings of literature, and briefly touching upon a by no means exhaustive sampling may help elucidate my own concerns. Two relatively recent collections, *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies* (2011) and *Literary Cartographies: Spatiality, Representation, and Narrative* (2014), take a growing body of work on spatial representation in narrative and offer a compelling selection from it on a wide array of subjects, which suggests that this may be a potentially rich area of exploration, even with regard to writers who are less explicitly spatial than Vladislavić, including both canonical and contemporary figures. As Robert Tally posits in “Mapping Narratives”, the introduction to *Literary Cartographies*, “Indeed, although certain narratives may be more ostensibly cartographic than others, all may be said to constitute forms of literary
cartography. In works of fiction, in which the imaginative faculty is perhaps most strongly connected to the verbal and descriptive, this mapmaking project becomes central to the aims and effects of the narrative” (1). In this introduction, Tally frames this collection, and the concept of “mapping narratives”, in a fashion that bears a direct and unmistakable resonance with my own project. He writes:

My use of the phrase “mapping narratives” as the title to this introduction is thus intended to give expression to a productive ambiguity. On the one hand, consistent with my view of literary cartography as a fundamental aspect of storytelling, I mean to indicate that narratives are in some ways devices or methods used to map the real-and-imagined spaces of human experience. Narratives are, in a sense mapping machines. On the other hand, narratives—like maps, for that matter—never come before us in some pristine, original form. They are always and already formed by their interpretations or by their interpretative frameworks in which we, as readers, situate them. Further, as readers, we cannot help but fit narratives or spatial representations into some sort of spatiotemporal context in which they make sense to us, thereby also becoming more or less useful to us in our own attempts to give meaningful shape to the world in which we live. (3)

Inasmuch, then, as I suggest Vladislavić is mapping Johannesburg, I am myself mapping Vladislavić’s novels, and, as stated at the beginning of this introduction, I hope to engage in this activity with as much awareness and self-reflexivity as possible. Therefore it bears

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mentioning that I am acutely aware of my non-South Africaness and the limits that this
places on my research. As much as possible, I wish to acknowledge the disparity between
writing about a place and writing about a place while living there, and I recognize that the
experiences shared during the brief two-month sojourn in South Africa that constituted
my field research is not an adequate replacement for the quotidian realities lived by those
who experience the everyday textures of Johannesburg in a way that I will never truly
know. In that regard, I can offer little recompense except to say that I welcome critiques
of my work that are grounded in an earnest push toward the sharing of knowledge, both
in terms of where my argument is limited but also where it might be extended to cover
more than I initially realized. I would also suggest that an international reading of
Vladislavić’s treatment of a specific place is neither unwarranted nor without certain
benefits. I believe that the specificity of apartheid has become exaggerated in a way that
allows for the disassociation of an international audience from acknowledging complicity
in the ideological underpinnings of apartheid, and it is one of the core contentions of this
thesis that Vladislavić’s specific treatment of place offers a deeply insightful and
important intervention not just into the urban dynamics of Johannesburg, but into the
nature of how cities are represented and built in a far more general way. Vladislavić is the
rightful subject of study of South Africans, yes, but also of everyone with a vested
interest in how people navigate and represent the built environment. Additionally, if
knowledge is to be disseminated among peoples, at some point one must read about,
think about, and even write about people and places with which one is not immediately
familiar, or at least as familiar as one might like. In that light, while I acknowledge the
A Rough Map of This Thesis

The main body of this thesis is broken down into three chapters which are themselves each broken down into two parts. What follows is a brief synopsis of how this breakdown works and what each section covers. Importantly, each section is written through a lens that presumes that the reader is familiar with what precedes it, meaning that the order is intentional and not inconsequential. The argument develops over the course of the text, so unlike some of Vladislavić’s work, or work he has inspired, a linear progression is strongly suggested.

“Chapter 2: The Restless Supermarket and the Spatial Imagination of Aubrey Tearle” introduces several of the main themes of Vladislavić’s oeuvre via his seminal novel The Restless Supermarket. This chapter serves primarily as a character study of Aubrey Tearle, the protagonist and narrator. In essence, this chapter attempts to map Tearle’s spatial imagination in order to demonstrate the key criticisms that Vladislavić proffers regarding both traditional and popular ways of thinking about the relationships between buildings, texts, and people. In the first section, Part A, a visual map of Tearle’s spatial imagination is presented that demonstrates how Tearle’s comprehension of these relationships is fostered by his anxieties about in/out group demarcations and his conservative proclivity for categorizing human behaviour and movement according to what he believes are static and stable identity formations. Part B of this chapter turns to the novel’s mise en abyme, a novella called “The Proofreader’s Derby” that is “written”
by Tearle himself. Like “The Grand Inquisitor”, “The Proofreader’s Derby” serves as a compelling window into the mind of its fictional author, which establishes a foundation for the next chapter’s more explicit focus on how Vladislavić’s novels are, in fact, pointed critiques of urban development theory. “Chapter 3: Diagrams and Blueprints: Dismantling Prescriptive texts in The Folly and The Exploded View” is neatly divided according to each novel, and each novel is discussed in terms of how it furthers the critiques outlined in The Restless Supermarket. The Folly and The Exploded View are both close read with an eye toward how the relationships in the novel represent and deconstruct the anxieties of the protagonists in relation to their placement within the changing urban semioscape of Johannesburg. “Chapter 4: Alternative Spatial Imaginations/Representations in Portrait with Keys and Double Negative” provides something of a departure from the first two in that the subjectivities introduced and interrogated are less examples of the previously established critiques than alternative perspectives on how to imagine city spaces and the human relationships they encapsulate. The chapter opens with a discussion on urban semiotics and cognitive mapping, two opposing methods of conceptualizing and representing the built environment. The second part of this chapter discusses the work of Michel de Certeau, particularly his famous The Practice of Everyday Life, which Vladislavić’s texts allude to, sometimes directly, as a framework for interpreting the variant perspectives provided by each of these novels on the city itself. Finally, the conclusion will look at a number of texts that demonstrate how Vladislavić’s alternative models for imagining social spaces might be enacted outside of his own fiction, providing examples of what his ideas regarding representation might look like “in action”.

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Walking the Golden City

Before moving onto the body of the thesis, it is worth acknowledging that, as part of my research for this thesis, during the summer of 2013 I traveled to Johannesburg to see the city for myself. As Johannesburg is the setting for the majority of Vladislavić’s stories, making at least a passing appearance in the city would be prudent for any postcolonial scholar writing on his work who wished to avoid the label of armchair anthropologist. Vladislavić’s treatment of setting, however, is far from incidental, and my trip’s focus was significantly less cynical and performative in its conception than a “passing appearance”. Nevertheless, my plans may have been a little naïve and my experience proved to be a fruitful failure.

The core “problem” that had me packing my bags was understanding how Joburg is represented by the texts that proliferate within it, texts that are generated out of the everyday practices of the people that live and/or work within the space. If texts are interrelated and in dialogue with one another, how is Vladislavić’s work in dialogue with these spaces/texts? I had carefully read Vladislavić’s oeuvre, but it was impossible for me to speak to how his work reflects South African sociopolitical and economic realities in terms of representations of urban spaces without access to or experience of the places themselves. The idea was that traveling to them and performing a firsthand “reading” of these spatial texts would bridge this gap. In addition to seeing, experiencing, and reading these city spaces, going to Joburg would also allow me to personally meet with and interview Ivan Vladislavić, to meet with several important South African literary scholars, and to visit several key locations that house documents important to my work,
including The National English Literary Museum (NELM), the major institutional resource centre on South African writing in English. The trip would take two months.

I became a visiting scholar at the University of Witswatersrand in Johannesburg, and stayed at a graduate residence called Trematon House at the Wits School of Business in Parktown, a neighbourhood just north of Braamfontein in the downtown core of the city. I was shown around Johannesburg by many of its long-term residents, from Professor Gerald Gaylard and Professor Michael Titlestad (previously mentioned and accomplished academics with an interest in Vladislavić), to other Witswatersrand University students, to cab drivers and random people that I encountered. Being escorted to various locations by people of diverse ethnic and economic backgrounds helped to open the city to me and allowed me to experience at least some of the versions of Joburg that exist. Perhaps most significantly, I was able to meet with Vladislavić himself on numerous occasions, joining him for coffee, attending book launches, poetry readings and gallery openings with him, accompanying him on a walk through the neighbourhood of Kensington, where Portrait with Keys is largely based, and sitting down with him in his home for an extended formal interview that I recorded. These experiences alone justified the expense and effort of undertaking the trip.

As I have indicated, to a significant degree my trip was a “failure”, and perhaps in ways that I should have been more aware of before setting out. It was a failure in the sense that I did not have access to the spaces that I imagined I would, and as a result my idea of reading the city’s textual surfaces in relation to Vladislavić’s representations of them (engaging in something of a comparison between two inter-texts involved in a dialogic exchange) was not possible. This impossibility exists for a number of reasons,
but can largely be explained by the mercurial nature of Johannesburg itself, a metropolis whose vicissitudes and variations fluctuate with a rapidity that is surprising even when compared with other cosmopolitan urban environments. Johannesburg changes with alarming speed and, simply put, the Johannesburg I thought I could explore in relation to Vladislavić’s writing no longer exists. While I understood that the city would not remain the same, the extent to which these changes would alter and limit my own movement within Johannesburg caught me by surprise. This limitation is due to a variety of factors, most of which stem from the influx of previously marginalized African peoples into the core of the inner city and the effects that the suddenly apparent socioeconomic inequities fostered under apartheid had in altering how people navigate public spaces in post-apartheid Johannesburg. A neighbourhood like Hillbrow, which is the setting of The Restless Supermarket and right in the downtown core of the city, is not accessible in any immediate sense to someone like me, who is culturally encoded as an English-speaking white male. I am, and will continue to be in the foreseeable future, a visible target for physical violence and theft in much of Johannesburg, to the extent that going for a walk in many parts of city would pose a risk to my wellbeing.

Of course, one might counter that any city past a certain size possesses such areas, but, at the risk of relying on anecdotal information, I have traveled to well over thirty countries across Asia, South America, and Africa, and have never experienced a city whose physical make-up was so entrenched in concerns over security and personal safety. From the moment I entered Johannesburg, I couldn’t help but notice that every residential area is ensconced in physical barriers that bring to mind the tools of defensive warfare: concrete walls, gates, guard dogs, fences composed of metal spikes, rotating beams of
steel spears, shards of smashed glass glued to the tops of walls in makeshift attempts at creating jagged obstacles, barbed wire, razor wire, electrical wire, and sign after sign pronouncing the occupants’ access to armed response by the corporate defence sector that has blossomed in the wake of the violence following the collapse of apartheid. For racists, this is the violence that apartheid prevented, the chaos that merited a systemic control of human behaviour and movement based on racial designations. For the rationally inclined, this is the legacy of apartheid; this is what happens when people have been denied basic human rights for generations under a system that inevitably collapses, exposing grotesque material disparities among groups of people now inhabiting the same social spaces.

While I had gleaned this knowledge previously from reading about the city, actually experiencing the spatial dynamics in terms of my personal navigation was an invaluable experience. In learning about how the public transportation system works (or does not), where I could go and when (demarcations connected to my gender and race), and how systems of human movement, such as the flourishing minicab industry, operate according to an underground economy and systems of signification, I discovered as much by what I couldn’t do as I did by what I could. In short, my “failures” only further convinced me of how essential my experiences in Johannesburg have been to my work.
Published in 2001, *The Restless Supermarket* is Ivan Vladislavić’s second novel after *The Folly* and, despite receiving critical acclaim and a Sunday Times Fiction prize, is not well-known outside of South Africa. The novel is concerned with modes of spatial conceptualization and representation, particularly in relation to navigating the social spaces of post-apartheid Johannesburg. In this sense, Vladislavić’s second novel fits into a larger body of development theory that focuses on how cities are largely determined by processes of movement (Ash and Thrift, Bank, de Certeau, Livesey, Marshall, Soja, Southhall). In “Memory, Memorialization, and the Transformation of Johannesburg: Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Restless Supermarket* and *Propaganda by Monuments*”, Shane Graham accurately posits that the novel “reveals the complex ways in which memory and consciousness are mapped into space and place in the aftermath of apartheid” (78). The distinct consciousness at hand is that of the narrator, one doggedly unrepentant Aubrey Tearle, a recently retired proofreader of Johannesburg’s municipal phone book, author of the novel’s sub-narrative “The Proofreader’s Derby”, and general curmudgeon about town (town being the Hillbrow area of Joburg in the early nineties, once a bastion of white privilege, now one of the largest and most dangerous urban ghettos in South Africa). Tearle is “singularly well suited for the occupation of proofreading, as he has an overriding obsession with archiving, documenting, and imposing order” (79), traits which
tend to accentuate the fact that he is, in many ways, an unsympathetic character. Adding to this, Tearle’s racism is apparent (although his racial attitudes are frequently implicit and filtered through rhetorical strategies such as appeals to linguistic, as opposed to racial, purity), as is his generalized and more explicit resistance to the social and spatial changes in which he is immersed. It remains surprisingly difficult, however, to simply read him at arm’s length. As Gerald Gaylard points out in “Postcolonial Satire: Ivan Vladislavić”, “[Tearle] is an intimately-drawn character whose point of view, erudition, and sense of humour are difficult to disentangle from those of the author, and in this lies the problem posed by the novel. How are we to understand irony and satire in a novel where we are asked to identify with a character whom we do not and should not like?” (144)

Importantly, the shifting dynamics that Tearle is impotently warding off are frequently ones that many other, English speaking, white South Africans also have difficulty navigating, despite lacking Tearle’s racism. Indeed, the trajectories between centres and margins that Tearle resists indicate a general disempowerment of white English speaking peoples. Saffron Hall, in “South African English in the post-apartheid era: Hybridization in Zoë Wicome’s David’s Story and Ivan Vladislavić’s The Restless Supermarket”, suggests that “Tearle in Café Europa, just like whites in South Africa, just like Standard English in South African language, has to shift in accordance with hybridization and adapt to disempowerment” (25). Similarly, Stefan Helgesson has argued that “Vladislavić’s writing in general, and The Restless Supermarket in particular,

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9 Tearle’s personality faults lead Peter O. Stummer to assert that, “No doubt the great achievement of the novel consists in the fact that the reader takes sufficient interest in a character whose traits are surely not likeable” (227).
enacts a *minoritisation* of English from within the very site of power that this language constitutes in the semiotic context of South Africa” (“Minor Disorders” 177). Extending this point from a linguistic focus on English to the tandem discourses of whiteness surrounding English’s status in South Africa, Helene Strauss posits that “Tearle’s almost aggressive repetition of previously sanctioned and stabilising discourses of whiteness in the face of enormous change, signals the extent to which these discourses are always already compelled to confront their own tenuousness. The white male subject and body at the site of translation are at risk, thus producing increasingly frantic iterations of previously legitimising identity performances” (“Squirming White Bodies” 29-30).

Essentially, Tearle is a figure who finds his central status usurped by marginal forces and mourns this period of transition while trying to combat it by falling back on the discursive modes and linguistic norms that sanctioned the central and “pure”, as opposed to marginal and mixed, status of whiteness and English. Of course, nothing would be easier than to create a racist, white narrator to castigate in the wake of apartheid (as Gaylard points out, “… all satire begs the question of whether or not it can only impotently create characters in order to deflate them” (“Postcolonial Satire” 142)), but Vladislavić is less interested in burning effigies of the apartheid regime than he is in exploring a nuanced representation of its more insidious and far reaching causes and effects. Aubrey’s belief system is shown to be grounded not simply in apartheid rhetoric, but also in several colonial spatial categorizations that produced and maintained the foundations of apartheid discourse and legislation, foundations which in many ways

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10 Gaylard further reminds us that “satire is a trickster art and can fall into the trickster trap of reaction if it does not maintain a balance between systematicity and play. Satirists can easily lose their ludic purpose when they appear to rant, for humour relies on timing and surprise, as does defamiliarisation, though perhaps to a lesser extent” (“Postcolonial Satire” 131).
predate apartheid by thousands of years, and which in many ways have survived the
events of 1994. Hall suggests something similar when she posits that the novel implies
“that segregation, and in its extreme form apartheid, is not a remote, improbable
historical phenomenon, but rather is a latent potential in any ordering process…” (24).
Hall refers to the work of Helgesson, who, in “Minor Disorders: Ivan Vladislavić and
Devolution of South African English”, has also suggested that Tearle’s ordering
processes demonstrate that “apartheid is no longer a separate history that can be looked at
from a distance, but an inherent potential in the modern discourse of order and normality;
specifically in what Freidrich Kittler calls Aufschreibesystem, or the discursive network
of print which every literate person, every reader of this Anglophone novel is party to”
(185). In this sense, Tearle is less easily dismissed than a caricature of a racist might be,
and although we may find him repugnant, it soon becomes apparent that we are at least
embroiled (if not directly complicit) in modes of spatial imagining with which he
sympathizes.

In one of the most frequently cited critical articles on the novel, “Visions of
Excess: Closure, Irony, and the Thought of Community in Ivan Vladislavić’s The
Restless Supermarket”, Mike Marais discusses how this attribute of Tearle’s makes it
difficult to establish a clear space of ironic distance between either Vladislavić and
Tearle, or Tearle and the audience, or similarly disregard Tearle as a harmless anomaly or
an allegory for an expired sociopolitical phenomena like apartheid. Marais suggests that
“irony not only distances the reader from Tearle but, in foregrounding the hermeneutic
nature of which the former is engaged, identifies him/her with Tearle” (109). In part, this
is because what Tearle wants is what all readers reading texts want, what all writers
writing texts want, or, as Gaylard has suggested, “Tearle’s attempts to impose order and attain completion and closure are those of all narrative creators” (“Postcolonial Satire” 146). Marais, also, suggests that “while Tearle behaves as though his reading activity is neutral and necessary – a process through which he measures what he reads against a system of absolutes – the novel reveals that this activity is, in fact, a highly conventional, culturally determined operation” (102). What conventions are Tearle’s activity grounded in? For Marais, Tearle’s reading of the world around him “is informed, even determined, by colonial discourse” (103) and is caught up in “… the expression of this discursive formation’s territorial desire for closure, its impulse to construct itself as a finite bounded totality” (105). I agree with Marais’ general position here, but I will be focusing on a more specific element of this discourse, on that which Marais alludes to when he mentions “territorial desire”.

For my purposes, the most salient characteristic of Tearle is how he conceptualizes the relationships between the built environment, the people that navigate the social spaces of this environment, and the textual nature of this process of producing/traversing social spaces. Tearle’s narrative communicates a blurry balance between pragmatic insight and a flagrantly racist lack of introspection that marks his entry into the canon of unreliable narrators and potentially reflects, in those willing to look, an illuminating portrayal of one’s own nostalgia for the ostensibly clear-cut demarcations of times past, for the attractiveness inherent in portraying human behaviour as systematic, and an accompanying anxiety regarding the shifting dynamics of social order that threaten to marginalize or destabilize identities. After all, the crime that Tearle finds threatening, the pop cultural degradations he finds repellent, and his appeals to a
higher standard of erudition are neither particular to him nor specific to white, middle-
class racists in South Africa. Tearle’s dilemmas may not be allegorical in a
straightforward sense, but neither are they particular. When he is repugnant (and he
frequently is), his conservatism and racism are tellingly rooted in archaic models of in/out
groupings.

The close reading of *The Restless Supermarket* contained below, which (despite
its thematic focus) provides one of the more comprehensive readings of the novel in
existence, establishes Tearle’s worldview in this regard. This will lay the foundation for
the subsequent chapters, wherein the dynamics of Tearle’s spatial imagination are re-
examined in light of the other novels, both in how they continue or expand Vladislavić’s
critique of urban development theory in line with *The Restless Supermarket (The Folly,
The Exploded View)* or how they offer alternatives to thinking about cities that go beyond
assuming an antipodal position to the one the text critiques (*Portrait with Keys, Double
Negative)*.

This chapter is also, as the subsequent chapters are, split into two parts: Part A
and Part B. Part A will cover the opening of the novel and then provide a nonlinear
reading of the text based around a series of tropes that highlight the dynamics of Aubrey
Tearle’s spatial imagination. Beginning with the opening of *The Restless Supermarket*, as
I do, is not merely a consideration of chronology, but also a convenient way of
introducing my subject material, since the literary density of the novel’s opening
manages to touch on almost every thematic aspect of the text I wish to explore. As such,
it will serve as something of an introduction to the rest of the chapter. Subsequent to this
reading I then offer a diagram that serves as a “map” of Tearle’s socio-spatial
imagination; a brief description of the diagram’s makeup in relation to the novel will follow, along with a six-point breakdown of the map’s key intersections. These six points will be further amalgamated into three thematic subsections, wherein much of the novel will be read in relation to the “map”. Part B will provide a more straightforward and chronological (as opposed to thematic) reading of the novel’s mise en abyme novella “The Proofreader’s Derby” before turning to the ending itself and how Tearle’s spatial imagination and rhetorical strategies can be linked to contemporary urban development theory. Taken as a whole, the reading of the novel in this chapter is, much like the novel itself, a study primarily in both characterization and setting.
Part A: Mapping the Mind of Aubrey Tearle

Beginnings

A salesman buggering a pink elephant (excuse my Bulgarian). Not a sight one sees every day, even on the streets of Johannesburg – the Golden City as it were, Egoli as it are, to quote my pal Wessels, the last of the barnacles. As the century declines to a conclusion one has come to expect undignified behaviour as a matter of course, but this was an ‘all-time low’ (as the newspapers would put it). (3)

In contrast to the usual evocation of setting (which will be immediately established in the following line), the first sentence of The Restless Supermarket is composed of graphic imagery, an allusion to linguistic translation, an etymological play on words, and jarring, mildly grotesque nonsense, all of which, in the space of nine words, neatly establishes the major themes and foregrounds language in place of place. Or rather, in addition to place, as Bulgaria is already evoked and as Johannesburg — “the Golden City as it were, Egoli as it are...” — is subsequently declared the setting. The image of the opening line, in conjunction with the placement of the second, is rounded out by the curmudgeonly conclusions of the third, which suggest that the depicted behaviour is “a matter of course” but also an “all-time low”, a point rendered by engaging in what Tearle considers the debased vernacular of popular media. He feels forced, by the repulsive commonality of the situation, to fall back on cliché. In these opening lines, the frenzied, comedic carnality, the cartoonish, drunken buffoonery, is juxtaposed with our narrator’s eloquence and erudition, giving salience to his implicit

11 Tearle’s use of the term “Egoli” (the Zulu name for Johannesburg) to refer to the setting may be a reference to Egoli: Place of Gold, a popular soap opera set in Joburg that ran in South Africa from 1999 to 2007. In this sense, Tearle may already be gesturing disparagingly to forms of popular culture that represent his built environment, although the “vernacular” I am referring to here is that of print media.
connection between what happens in the social spaces of the built environment and cultural (in this case, specifically linguistic and textual) degradation. The mortal gravity of this connection is rendered by the progress from the human/animal (or human/inanimate animal figurine) pseudo-copulation to the almost immediate breakdown of social order a few paragraphs later in which races collide, languages clash, liminal spaces invade the centre stage, and firearms discharge in a terrifying cacophony of misplaced places. Essentially, what first appears to be a comical moment is soon revealed to be a deeply sinister falling apart of social order.

The curtain opens on “the Jumbo Liquor Market in Kotze Street”, a setting which highlights how, in the eyes of Tearle, the built environment of Johannesburg, increasingly designed to accommodate the interests of foreign capital, has been crafted to facilitate what he views as transgressions of human behaviour and movement. The Jumbo Liquor Market “is a ‘convenience store’ in the American mould. Sliding glass doors open directly onto the pavement so that the passing trade can totter in and out with a minimum of effort. From till to gutter in three easy steps” (4). It is this movement of the white professionals from within the store that awakens the residents of the “gutter”, most importantly the “Queen of Sheba” (Tearle’s humour is often centred on sardonic acts of naming), and that causes the ensuing conflict. Drawn to the attention received by Darryl’s facetious fornication with the Jumbo Liquor mascot, a cartoonish pink elephant¹², and the

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¹² This “Jumbo” elephant immediately strikes one as an allusion to Disney’s Dumbo character whose eponymous film contains a scene depicting a myriad of pink elephants, a reference that would tie in with Tearle’s distaste for American cultural hegemony and serve as an example of an African/American transculturation. It is those things, obviously, but neither Jumbo Liquor nor their mascot are inventions of Vladislavić. When Professor Michael Titlestad, to whom I’m deeply indebted, drove me around Hillbrow in 2013, he showed me where this elephant was and
carnivalesque atmosphere this creates, the Queen of Sheba (apparently a local homeless black woman of some infamy) “stagger[s] out of the alley between the Jumbo and Hypermeat”, and in doing so enacts a movement from the liminal margins of “between places” (alleys, empty lots, shanty towns) to the centre of our narratological attention, a symptom of disorder that Tearle will prove to be obsessed with. What is missing from Tearle’s narration, however, is an acknowledgement that the dissipation of those boundaries he valorizes marks a cessation of violent regulation regarding the movements of others under apartheid. As the literary critic Anne Putter points out, Tearle’s anxiety about human movement in post-apartheid South Africa “…highlights the sense of fear that engulfs most of the inner city… but in the same instance also underscores a new sense of freedom, access, and independence for Johannesburg city dwellers” (157).

Once in close proximity, the Queen of Sheba and Darryl exchange in a kind of indirect intercourse through the ridiculous plastic body of the pink elephant. This coupling lends itself to a literal imbalance, sending the Queen plummeting to the earth unconscious and Darryl into the querulous arms of his white companions. The accident is punctuated by “Multilingual sobbing” while “four letter words fly, the whole dashed alphabet” as the Babel of Johannesburg is erected and swiftly disassembled through a blurring of centres and peripheries.

This seemingly inconsequential moment of street life opens the novel because it functions as a microcosmic, although paragonic, example of Tearle’s fear that “digressions”, even slight ones, elicit the onslaught of large-scale organizational disaster.

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how it has moved from the street level to the roof of the establishment, in part because of incidents like the one Vladislavić describes here.
As the calamity worsens “The air grows dark with obscenity, the leading players are obscured by it, the bystanders grow restless...” (6) and within moments shots are fired, punctuating the potentially mortal consequences of inanimate elephant humping. For Tearle this serves as solid ground for an opening because it demonstrates how the inattention and lack of seriousness of those who should know better (educated, professional whites) leads to “in a word, chaos” (6). It is worth noting, however, that his preoccupation with race, while clear, remains implicit rather than directly expressed, which is important for understanding our narrator’s myopic comprehension of his own motivations. Furthering the point, Tearle abruptly segues from this scene to another of notably increased morbidity:

One Sunday morning not too long ago, on an overgrown plot in Prospect Road, I saw a body in the weeds, under a shroud of pages from the Sunday Times. I saw it from the window of my own flat, where I stood with a carton of long-life milk in my hand, and I could almost smell the pungent scent of kakiebos crushed by its fall. It lay among the rusted pipes, blackened bricks, and outcrops of old foundations that mark every bit of empty land in this city, as if a reef of disorder lay just below the surface, or a civilization had gone to ruin here before we ever arrived.

What do I mean by ‘we’? Don’t make me laugh. (6-7)

Here we have the central intersections of the built environment, corporeal human forms, and text coming together in a fashion that adroitly encapsulates Tearle’s fascination with the conflation between these seemingly disparate elements. The body itself remains racially ambiguous, covered as it is by black and white (and read all over!?!) text. It functions as a focal point of disorder befitting the landscape upon which it resides, or perhaps which produced it. And what has the urbanscape produced, but a body out of order; and what is a body out of order? A corpse. Important here is the visceral
apprehension of the human form, its sights and smells, coupled with its textual covering 
or barrier which gestures towards our own, disparate textual apprehension of the same 
body. It is an intersection between representation and the real, and one that erodes that 
same distinction. As a point on a map of Johannesburg, the corpse embodies and 
encourages the fatal disorder inherent to the “rusted pipes, blackened bricks and outcrops 
of old foundations” that in turn suggest that perhaps “a reef of disorder [lies] just below 
the surface” of the entire urbanscape of Johannesburg. This disruptive potential is 
heightened by its pervasiveness, by its commonality, and by its dichromatic evocation of 
both a lazy rot at the cultural core of this structure and a potentially explosive volcanic 
eruption of this same fecundity into the lives of those, such as Tearle, who would protest 
against it. What might seem like a passing excursus on a morbid scene is actually a set 
piece whose imagery brings together the core spatial dynamics of The Restless 
Supermarket.

**What we are talking about when we talk about “we”**

The question of “civilization” and to whom it belongs at the end of the above 
passage lends itself to manifold, and potentially overlapping, readings, and it is worth 
mentioning how these opening pages set up some of the core themes that run throughout 
the novel and that frame Tearle’s spatial imagination in relation to social identities more 
generally. Whom does Tearle mean by “we”? And who is asking the question? Tearle is 
asking, obviously, but in a way that suggests he perceives it as a likely response to his 
own ruminations. He repeats it back to his readers (the suspected interlocutors) and 
dismisses it with disdain. Is his dismissal simply a negation of the optimistically naive
view of a unified “New” South Africa in the years following apartheid? A rejection of the current emphasis placed on inclusivity? In part, yes, but its potential racial and cultural implications stretch considerably further. Is the “we” then more specifically the descendants of European colonizers and therefore a tacit racial demarcation? This is also likely, given Tearle’s strong identification with, and adoration of, European culture. This, however, raises the question of the nature of the previous civilization and how, in Tearle’s mind, it has led to, or been the subject of, ruination. This implication, coupled with Tearle’s rejection of the question itself, would suggest that Tearle is willfully ignorant of the hypocrisies inherent in the colonial ambitions he valorizes, and that his sense of “we” isn’t fixed but is instead widely sweeping, mercurial, and hierarchal. In essence, Tearle is in the process of mourning one meaning of “we” while floundering to comprehend what the word has come to mean not only to South Africa, but to himself. Both Mike Marais and Carrol Clarkson have suggested, as I do, that Tearle’s use of the word “we” is both contingent and provisional and that, as Marais points out, “far from being a fixed and finite totality, Tearle’s ‘we’ is an imaginary community whose foundation is in discourse rather than material reality” (“Visions of Excess” 105). Without positing that the novel is allegorical in some direct sense, I think it is clear that Tearle’s grappling with “we” is fundamental for reading the interrelationship between his ultimate inability to adhere to the standards of linguistic rigidity that he believes in and the novel’s core representation of post-apartheid anxieties regarding identity. Like Marais, Clarkson, while suggesting that *The Restless Supermarket* belongs to a group of novels that challenge, dismantle, and reconstruct the “parameters of ‘we’”, similarly posits that for Tearle “‘We’ does not confidently assert a harmonious intersubjectivity,
instead it announces the ephemeral and unstable limits of its reference” (363). Tellingly, both Clarkson and Marais compare Tearle’s smarmy dismissal of “we” at the outset of the novel with his confusion and dread regarding its usage sometime later in the novel during his trip to the Zoological Gardens.

Even a casual reader will notice the question of “we” raised once again midway through the novel. This time with less certitude, giving us the sense that although Tearle is relating these events from an undefined reference point of chronological “presentness”, he is losing his grasp on the story along the way and feeling less and less sure of himself, a development that, as for many that fear uncertainty, serves only to harden his resolve. Tearle is accompanying Merle, a friend and potential love interest of sorts\(^\text{13}\), and several other people on a night-time outing to the Zoological Gardens in Johannesburg. To the group’s surprise, the final exhibit is “the human animal”, something of a gimmick wherein a man sits in a cage which has been decked out to look like an apartment. This encounter affords Tearle a rare moment of introspection worth quoting at length:

> While the others asked jokey questions (…) I had time to examine my own feelings. I felt—what would capture it—threatened? No, that was too reminiscent of ‘endangered’. Certainly not merely affronted. I felt—I had to stop myself from quaking—that we were in *mortal danger*. We were on the verge of extinction, I realized and the fact seemed chillingly explicit. But what did I really mean? Who were ‘we’? The human race? People of good sense and common decency? The ragtag remnants of the Café Europa? Was it a royal ‘we’? (171-172)

At the heart of Tearle’s response is a set of ambiguous anxieties emanating from the act of scientific categorization placed before him. Seeing this specific individual categorized

\(^{13}\) “Of sorts” because one of Tearle’s chief characteristics is his inability to directly confront his desires, particularly sexual ones.
as human, and in the process being called upon to perform a kind of synecdochal representation of humanity, throws Tearle into a panic, a state which is in no small part accentuated by his inability to locate (and thus categorize) its source. The vernacular he employs to trace this fear is borrowed from the gimmick itself, ramping up from “endangered” to “the verge of extinction”. In short, the zoological categorization/representation put before Tearle threatens to unwind all his established modes of demarcation and this, albeit temporarily, erodes the certitude of the in/out groupings he views as fundamental to human order and survival such that even when he is at last able to grasp the substantial depth of his fear, he is still unable to articulate on whose behalf he is afraid. His categorization begins at the macro-level (“The human race?”) and filters down to smaller groupings until he arrives at simply himself. Tellingly, each subset is a group of people that he more closely associates with whiteness and with “proper” modes of human behaviour until only he remains, but the man in the cage being employed to represent that largest initial grouping has somehow threatened the delimitations among the other groups and Tearle’s own emotive relationship to them. But why?

Tearle neglects to mention, until a few pages later when he relates one of his infamous “letters to the editor”, that the man in the exhibit is black. Before arriving at that point in the letter, however, he covers what he would likely maintain are the more salient issues regarding the display: that it upsets the true animals; that it degrades the visitor (largely because there were no books in the enclosure); and that it augments the tide of exhibitionism in contemporary culture. Only when he comes to his closing point, which by now might seem incidental (and which he certainly did not acknowledge when
retelling the event initially), does he mention race: “It damages race relations. Was it wise to choose a black man? Apart from the question of just what sort of man might be regarded as ‘typical’ of the species, this display provides easy ammunition for South Africa’s extremist critics abroad” (174). Tearle’s true objection, when it is finally presented, is couched in the language of racial reconciliation and with a concern for the larger community. Tearle is ostensibly worried about racial harmony and fears that the poignant imagery of a black man behind bars (which is actually more apropos in a South African context than he is willing to acknowledge) will cast South Africa in a poor light. The central problem, however, is framed as an aside, which is that Tearle’s definition of humanity, while it might include blacks, is not best represented by them. In another article, “Reading Against Race: J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace, Justin Cartwright’s White Lightning and Ivan Vladislavić’s The Restless Supermarket”, Marais, while close reading another scene from the novel, makes an assertion that I think is well proven by the episode of the zoo:

… when Tearle encounters “black” people, he does not perceive the singularity of the individuals involved. What he does see are culturally inscribed differences among people. In other words, that which he sees is mediated and produced by a network of differential relations in which the signifier “white”, and its numerous attendant terms – such as “Europe”, “civilised”, “order”, “knowledge” and “reason” – occupy a privileged position in relation to the signifier “black”, and its attendant terms – such as “Africa”, “barbarous”, “disorder”, “ignorance” and “emotion”. (284)

What this means in the context of Tearle’s apprehension here is that, if pressed, he would acknowledge that blacks are human, but that what terrifies him in the zoological exhibit is the extent to which a black person can represent humanity more generally, and thereby
elide the central status afforded to Tearle by his whiteness. Strauss, in one of the better articles written on the novel, “Squirming White Bodies: Interracial Encounters in Anton Kannemeyer’s ‘True Love’ and Ivan Vladislavić’s The Restless Supermarket”, has suggested that this scene contains “Cross-cultural and cross-racial contact, that is, the crossing of boundaries hitherto fetishized, and the transformation of cultural source texts central to the production of whiteness...” and that “Tearle’s feelings of endangerment are reliant on his racialization as ‘white’, and his rare expression of self-reflexivity in pondering the signifying reach of the pronoun ‘we’ suggests his awareness of the constructedness of his imagined community of Europeanness” (37). I would say “dim” awareness as Tearle never seems to fully comprehend the source of his anxiety, but certainly since “we” no longer privileges him, the mortal danger at hand is the threat of being marginalized, of losing the battle between centre and periphery, or perhaps of realizing that the battle is already lost. Given the history of how marginalized peoples have been dealt with, particularly within South Africa, perhaps his fear of death, although clearly hyperbolic regarding his own case, stems from a precedent as opposed to mere paranoia. Whatever the case may be, Tearle’s spatial imagination is largely defined by ascertaining proper categorical demarcations and then remaining obsessed with their eventual dissolution.

Mapping a Sentence That Means Exactly What it Says

Something that becomes obvious early on in The Restless Supermarket is that for Tearle it will always be boundaries that hold back the creeping chaos of death: boundaries of text, of language, of law, of space, and of human bodies. These boundaries,
the markers that differentiate between the crucial categories of “we” and “not we”, are in part maintained by a spatial imagination that uses the concept of the origination of meaning as a source of stasis and fixation. Is Tearle’s process metonymical instead of metaphorical? In the world as rendered by Tearle’s spatial imagination, one object does not stand for the other, but rather becomes that other, creating a unified (although illusory) sense of systemic stability through a shared identity and origin. Thus, at the level of conflation between texts, buildings, and bodies, Tearle is also expressing his perspective (founded on his desires) regarding language and its relationship with normative, and therefore “healthy”, patterns of human behaviour and movement. By conflating the interrelationship of text, bodies, and the built environment in such a way that they become one another, Tearle envisions a world that can contain “a sentence that says exactly what it means” (245). In light of this, I have composed a diagram, or map of sorts, of Tearle’s spatial imagination.
This diagram is actually a map of sorts, one that plots out the interrelationships between texts, bodies, and the built environment as envisioned by Tearle while simultaneously illustrating his concern with boundaries, with in/out group binaries, and with centre versus marginal or peripheral spatial alignment. Although Tearle is the narrator of *The Restless Supermarket* and the meta-author of “The Proofreader’s Derby”, this diagram is intended to fully capture neither the thematic complexities of the novel as a whole nor even to adequately render Aubrey Tearle as a fictional character. Any such claim would grossly simplify Vladislavić’s work. This diagram is, instead, a useful tool for framing
the main interconnections among disparate real-world objects in terms of their symbolic register and relationship (and even sameness) in the eyes of a narrator who is often, despite his claims of linguistic acuity, incapable (at least when it is expedient for him to be so impaired) of distinguishing ironic modes of connotative representation from a kind of denotative ontological homogeneity where meaning and thingness remain inseparable. As Strauss points out, “Tearle hopes, paradoxically, to achieve fluency by halting the signifying chain and arresting meaning within fixed parameters of denotation. He refuses to engage with the ludic in language, hoping instead to draw all meaning back to a standardising, lexical source text” (34). Essentially, at the level of language itself, Tearle seems willing to ignore the widely accepted notion within linguistic philosophy and science that the relationship between signifier and signified is mostly arbitrary, or at least socially constructed, and instead prefers to posit a direct and objective relationship between textually rendered forms of signification and things themselves, a view of language, and meaning-making, that helps to justify both his penchant for social and racial hierarchies as well as his attendant anxieties regarding their usurpation. Tearle’s concern with rigid sources of meaning has prompted Helgesson to suggest that “this tension between the slippage of meaning and Tearle’s faith in its unchangeability constitutes the novel’s basic irony” (“Minor Disorders” 183). Indeed, his worldview allows Tearle to not only stress the relationships between bodies, buildings and texts, but also to frequently conflate those same objects to suit his rhetorical ends. The ironic mode of the novel means that Tearle’s narration is unintentionally “short circuiting realist assumptions of an unfailing correspondence between word and world” (“Minor Disorders” 176).
What follows is a brief breakdown of the diagram’s component parts, followed by a close reading of the novel itself. I believe foregrounding this diagram will provide a contextualizing map that frames the relationships I will be discussing in such a way that the close readings will be better comprehended as part of a thematic whole. The order of presentation here is somewhat arbitrary, given the circular nature of the diagram and the two-way interrelationship between each aspect, not to mention the significant overlap that exists among some of these categories. Basically, each of the components is based on Tearle’s generation of a particular trope, by which I mean, in accordance with the standard definition, the repeated and sustained use of figurative phrasing for rhetorical purposes that, in the case of Tearle, involves the metaphorical conflation between two disparate objects. Significantly, however, Tearle’s use of tropic rhetoric is ambiguous, as the slippage between the figurative and literal blurs the extent to which he is ever sure of the extent to which he is actually using a trope. This is to posit that at the centre of Tearle’s spatial imagination is the above mentioned confusion about how direct the relationships are between definitions and the things they define, and as a result, an attendant confusion/conflation among things like texts (blueprints) and the social spaces they prescribe (buildings) and vice versa.

**The built environment as text:**

The idea that the built environment is inherently textual is not specific to Tearle or Vladislavić, and has been previously theorized by artists, writers, and scholars.\(^{14}\) It is,
however, an integral component of the network of relationships Tearle has already established at the outset of the novel, as well as an instance in which his literal-minded representation regarding the co-mingling of cities and texts is valid. City spaces are undeniably filled with texts, such as street signs, billboards, posters, store fronts, etc; and these texts establish and maintain patterns of human behaviour through categorization. Just as important, however, is the way in which spatial elements communicate within established modes of architectural symbology to suggest positive and freeing markers (such as transparency, openness, equality, democracy, strength, freedom) or negative or restricting ones (such as class distinctions, limitations of access, authority, dominance) without being overly “textual” in terms of written language. Sites of access, tiered seating, colour schemes, lighting, pathways of movement, gendered spaces, sculptural imagery, monumentalism, and visual perspective are all formal elements of the built environment that can communicate within the discourse of architectural symbology. Tearle’s readings and misreadings of the semiotics of Johannesburg are at the core of his spatial imagination.

**Texts as spaces/maps for bodies:**

This particular relationship works in two distinct but (interrelated ways), and together these are the least overlapped of Tearle’s imaginings represented on the diagram

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entitled *The Cultural Meaning of Urban Space* (1993), Sharon Zukin’s “Space and Symbols in an Age of Decline” in *Re-Presenting the City: Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the Twenty-First Century Metropolis* (1996), and William J. Mitchell’s *Placing Words: Symbols, Space, and the City* (2005). For a specific concentration on the textuality of Johannesburg, see Lindsay Bremner’s *Writing the City into Being: Essays on Johannesburg 1998-2008* (2010) and Bettina Malcomess and Dorothee Kreutzfeldt’s *Not No Place: Johannesburg. Fragments of Spaces and Times* (2013), both of which are discussed at some length in the conclusion of this thesis.
since he envisions this connection in terms of enjoinment through processional relationships rather than conflation. The first is the representation of texts and bodies as a social space constructed for human movement. In this conceptualization, the human body literally “navigates” the space of the text through the act of reading, which is embodied by the movement of eyes across the expanse of the text itself. Figuratively, this is variably represented by Tearle as tightrope walking, performing gymnastics, mine sweeping, and with “high adventure” tropes derived from colonial-era exploration (a metaphor with obvious racial significance in a South African setting). Tearle’s infatuation with the proper navigation of human bodies through social spaces is directly related to his proofreading wherein he prioritizes a “proper” form of movement through any given text, a form which, when deviated from, can produce lethal consequences. Secondly, to Tearle’s way of thinking, texts prescribe bodies in much the same way that blueprints prescribe buildings. For Tearle, forms of documentation such as birth certificates, registries, and (in apartheid South Africa) racial identification, not only map the locations and identities of specific people through a communal registrar, but also create a kind of panoptic database of information that allows for the monitoring and control of human movement. The texts/bodies trope serves to illuminate Vladislavić’s positions on the performative nature of geography and mapping more generally, positions that are in key ways similar to those of Robert Sullivan, a cultural geographer, who, in the introduction to Geography Speaks: Performative Aspects of Geography, writes that “maps inscribe ideologies onto their surface (indeed, that they must do so), and [the fact that] maps have frequently been used to create rather than reflect relations of power testifies to their performative capabilities” (1). For Tearle, the most significant document that maps
human movement in Johannesburg is the city’s phone book, which is also the particular
document to which he has devoted his career as a proof-reader.

**Bodies as the built environment:**

This trope is represented by Tearle in a number of important ways, but its
underlying feature is the conflation of human forms with the built environment. The
shape of a person, and other markers of their physical form such as the smell and texture
of skin and hair, are all directly correlated to the proper maintenance of prescriptively
demarcated sites of national origin, sites of socioeconomic and racial access, and forms
of architectural design that either conform or do not to a particular standard pre-
established by Tearle (in accordance with the modes of colonial discourse he subscribes
to). In short, bodies are reflections of the settings that contain them, or rather (and
paradoxically), they *are* the settings that contain themselves, such that the breakdown of
boundaries within cities (such as gated communities, racially segregated areas, or
privatized zones of commerce or recreation) will facilitate a similar breakdown between
barriers not only among individuals, but within them, leading to the mutation and
disfigurement of what Tearle sees as the ideal human form. This breakdown is usually
represented through a corpse, although there are moments where Tearle’s imagination
provides an animated example. Essentially, the conflation between buildings and bodies
frequently evoked by Tearle is indicative of his desire for closed systems (in
signification, in discourse, and in modes of movement).
**Bodies as texts:**

This is perhaps the most common trope evoked by Tearle, although his apprehension of the human body as a text is often very literal. Tearle constantly proofreads the bodies of others, and this habit is one of the more frequently discussed characteristics of his in critical work on *The Restless Supermarket*. Strauss has suggested that “Tearle’s jealously guarded Europeanness flows directly from Vladislavić’s presentation of the interconnectedness of the linguistic, the social and the spatial in the novel. Throughout the text, Tearle’s proofreading is extended beyond the page, as he sets out to eradicate error in both the urban landscape of Hillbrow and in the people he meets…” (33). Similarly, Marais posits that “Throughout the novel, Vladislavić collapses the distinction between his protagonist’s linguistic proofreading and his social proofreading, that is, the obsessive manner in which Tearle detects ‘errors’ in the world around him as he goes about his daily business” (“Visions” 101). Marais also suggests that “while Tearle behaves as though his reading activity is neutral and necessary—a process through which he measures what he reads against a system of absolutes—the novel reveals that this activity is, in fact, a highly conventional, culturally determined operation” (102). Marais’ point about the culturally determined nature of Tearle’s world view is significant for a number of reasons, but for my purposes it adroitly illustrates the way in which Tearle is bound up in forms of rhetoric that pre-exist him by millennia. Marais connects Tearle’s social proofreading to colonialism, and I would expand this to include ancient conceptual models of cities that still inform contemporary models, a series of teleological spatial imaginings that are deeply and inextricably related.
Texts as buildings:

This is simply the well-established prescriptive relationship between texts (blueprints, designs, models, drafts) and buildings taken to an extreme.\textsuperscript{15} When Louis Sullivan coined the term “form follows function” he was merely elucidating something that many people implicitly believed about buildings: that what defined, or should define, the built environment was the utility for which it had been originally conceived and produced. Functionalism led to an aesthetic style, but it also foregrounded formalist approaches to thinking about the signification of buildings, approaches which obscured social hierarchies and modes of production that reify the concepts of prescriptive texts. Looking at a building as a realization of a prescriptive text also posits an ahistorical conceptualization of social spaces, which ignores the variable ways that social uses of spaces evolve. Such a way of thinking is attractive to Tearle because it simplifies the built environment, grants it a static source of origin, produces a singular and correct meaning, and resists change. Tellingly, in Tearle’s fantasy novella, “The Proofreader’s Derby”, altering the blueprint alters the building, which suggests that there is more than a simple relationship between them, that instead they have achieved a kind of ontological sameness not unlike quantum entanglement. This conflation between texts and buildings is rooted in Tearle’s previously mentioned linguistic sensibilities regarding the extent to which he is willing to discard the distinction between signifiers and signified, a distinction that carries over into his conceptualization of the relationship between form

\textsuperscript{15} For an excellent account of the relationship between prescriptive texts and the buildings they prescribe, see \textit{The Words Between the Spaces: Buildings and Language} (2002) by Thomas A. Markus and Deborah Cameron.
and function. A building’s function is its correct and “true” identity, other appropriations are usurpations and misuses, potentially destructive aberrations.

**Built environment as bodies:**

Tearle’s proclivity for imagining the built environment as an organic body operating according to systemic, rational patterns is the natural consequence of his more generalized desire for an order achieved though regulatory flows and spatial demarcations. This particular mode of representation is perhaps the trope that connects Tearle’s spatial imagination most explicitly to the “organic city” model currently popular among city planning officials. Rob Shields states that, “The rational city of urban planning is one where the ‘urban body’ has been recoded or represented as a circulatory system of rationalized flows, traffic patterns, and functional organ-like zones…” (242).

Certainly, Johannesburg has not been exempt from such representations. Such a representation encourages “treating” the city along the lines of a body experiencing various states of health or pathology, and prescribing, in accordance with the rational functionalism of the organism, a variety of remedies that envision the urban environment as a complicated system (but nevertheless a system) whose inputs and outputs can be understood in rational and objective terms. Such a representation of the city as organic also obscures the destructive and displacing elements of urban renewal, instead focusing on harmonic imagery centred on metaphors of growth and functionality that promote “health”. For Tearle, the conceptualization of the city as a body allows him to make strong claims for the consequences of ignoring systemic functionality, and his portrayal of these consequences is primarily communicated through the opposite trope: bodies as
buildings. When the built environment is out of order, the bodies within it are similarly disordered, and what follows is the breakdown of the circulatory systems in a human frame.

**(Close)Reading Joburg via *The Restless Supermarket***

Having briefly parsed out the diagram into six tropes, I will now provide a close reading of the novel focused upon the spatial map of Tearle’s imagination. The six directional flows will be congealed into three, with each point on the diagram (bodies, texts, and the built environment) serving as a starting point from which the other two points are conflated. Essentially, *texts* → *built environment* and *texts* → *bodies* will be treated within the same subsection: *texts* → *built environment, bodies*. The reason for this is that Tearle often moves quite quickly from one to the other, or treats both at the same time in more of an intersectional representation, and therefore parsing them out into different sections while performing literary analysis may cause more confusion than clarity. At times, the starting point of conflation may seem somewhat arbitrary, given the nature of Tearle’s thought processes, but such are the limitations of imposing closed systems on complex forms of literary representation.

**Texts → Bodies, Buildings.**

As has been mentioned, a defining characteristic of Tearle’s is treating reading as a spatially defined activity, one defined by the reader’s physical form navigating particular spatial/textual relationships. This process is represented by Tearle as moving through a dangerous environment or landscape, one that casts the reader as hero adventurer while at
the same time underscoring the potentially lethal consequences of deviation from proper modes of movement/reading. Also important is the significance of text as a mapping mechanism, which illustrates the geographical nature of textual space.

The following passage is a perfect example of how Tearle, when discussing the act of reading and his specific methodology in this regard, pays due attention to the spatial nature of the text itself, and conflates the act of reading a text with human movement more generally:

I went further than most. The habit of years, the respect for rules and regulations, the dedication to matter in its proper order, front and back, that kept me reading steadily from A to B to ‘The End’, also made me read past it, through the Appendices and Indices and Advertisements, through Bibliographies and Endnotes and Glossaries, until the endpapers loomed in their blank finality. And even then, nothing was more satisfying than to turn the final page of a tome, thinking that the race was run, and find a colophon, a ‘finishing touch’. A meaningful fragment of the whole, put there to be read, but which no one, perhaps, had ever bothered to read, by which I mean to scan deliberately, to pass the eye over in full and conscious awareness of these particular shapes, impressed upon paper, now impressing themselves on the retina and cortex, and thus upon the soft surface of time itself. (47)

When Tearle tells us that he “went further than most”, he is setting up the double meanings that follow, which further suggests not only that he adheres to reading a book from cover to cover, but also that he “reads” past what most would consider the final pages. Books themselves become important representations of the proper spatial organization of physical material or “the dedication to matter in its proper order, front to back”, and textual formatting therefore becomes an arrangement of space that also strengthens Tearle’s emphasis on the relationship between texts and the human form. Key to this relationship is discipline, discipline to not read things out of place, despite
temptations. At first it would seem that he is referring to reading the ending of a novel ahead of time (or rather space), but soon it becomes clear that his fastidiousness regarding page order extends to the appendices, bibliographies and endnotes as well, placing his sense of textual order at something of an ironic distance from our own, while also, ironically (in terms of Tearle’s usual emphasis on functionalism), undermining the intended functionality of those paratextual elements. As such, it is his “respect for rules and regulations”, and not for the craftsmanship of textual construction, that keeps him “reading steadily from A to B to ‘The End’” and then past it.

By evoking the order of the alphabet in his discussion of reading, he is again highlighting the spatial nature of textuality, as the essentially arbitrary placement of alphabetical symbols into an alphabetical order is also employed in geographic and geometric measurements of spatial organization between points of reference. By plotting “The End” as a point along this series, Tearle suggests that narrative structure itself is spatially plotted and that this formation must similarly be adhered to if it is to remain sensical. Tearle believes that by following this process as rigidly as he does, he is given privileged access to colophonic elements of the text, finishing touches that are meaningful as representations of the whole. When representing his form of reading, Tearle makes sure that it is a conscious process, one that implies both willful action and cognition. One must “scan deliberately” if one is to read, and pass the eye over shapes impressed onto paper. In doing so, the text and the body are linked as the shapes impressed upon the page become impressed upon “the retina and cortex”, joining the text in a corporeal sense with the physicality of the human frame and from there “upon the soft surface of time itself”. Textual into spatial, spatial into cognitive physicality, and
corporeal into temporal: Tearle’s discussion of reading follows a course of conflation that underscores the fundamental interrelationships between texts, spaces, and human bodies, bodies that read texts and move through spaces. One will likely recall at this point Marais’ position on how Tearle’s desire to fully read a book, to grasp it entirely, goes some distance towards collapsing the ironic space that one might assume the novel is erecting between Tearle and the reader, as his desire to garner meaning from the text is, in some ways, at the core of the act of reading more generally.

In light of this, Tearle’s profession, that of a proofreader, is an exercise in spatial movement and the result of a series of spatial relationships. Tearle says that:

Proofreading as a skill only comes into its own at the level of the sequence, in the order of the motion; a solitary word, set firmly in space, is beyond its purview. The eye has to move. The proof-reader is a tightrope artist, managing the difficult tension between momentum and inertia, story and stock, sentence and word. As soon as he becomes too engrossed in the sense of what he’s reading, he loses sight of the unitary word; on the other hand, the failure to register sense at some level, however rarefied, will lead to harrowing technical misjudgements. If he is to survive this hazardous passage without falling, he must find the still moving point between the excitement of the chase and the rapture of possession. (69-70)

A sequence, textual or otherwise, is determined by the ordered variation of its parts, a kind of pattern of temporal and/or spatial nodes of communication, whose meanings, as independent signifiers, are almost wholly absent, but whose Gesaltian relationship renders the wider whole significantly greater than the sum of its parts. A single word does not “register” because, like a single object in vacuum, its presence has no resonance within a wider contextual framework. With textual sequencing, what is required is human movement through a series of signs and Tearle is always more than willing to gesture
towards the physicality of this textual absorption: “The eye has to move”. For Tearle, the preferred metaphor for this process, that of a tightrope walker, entails both the human process of movement and also the mortal peril that the maintenance of proper systems of order suggests to him. For the tightrope walker to proofread successfully, he (Tearle has no qualms with gendered pronouns of this nature, here or otherwise) must enact a kind of cognitive balance of attention, to momentum, story, and sentence on the one hand, and to inertia, stock, and word on the other. Only by understanding parts as points along a path can the tightrope walker be successful, avoid “harrowing technical misjudgements” and “survive the hazardous passage” (70). That Tearle conceptualizes this effort in terms of mortal endangerment is no longer particularly surprising, and neither is it easily dismissed as rhetorical hyperbole. What catches one’s attention is the extent to which he closes his metaphor by sexualizing the efforts of the proofreader. The balancing act becomes one of giving due attention to both “the excitement of the chase and the rapture of possession” and it is difficult not to think of our engendered tightrope walker as a lover attempting to delay the moment of orgasm. This is interesting for several reasons, not the least of which is Tearle’s confusion and embarrassment regarding erotic matters elsewhere. It is perhaps fitting then, that the erotic nature of the tightrope walker’s quest is one that denies, rather than encourages or engages fully with, sexual gratification. The sexuality represented here is also predatory, as the acts of chase and possession belong to a long tradition of sexual hunting tropes in which an active male subject seeks out and conquers a dehumanized female object/animal.

The utility of proofreading, and the relationship between reader and proofreader, is touched upon a bit later in the novel, when Tearle represents the proofreader as a guide
employed to assist the reader on a perilous journey: “The proofreader is a trailblazer and a minesweeper. The readers who follow him take any path with confidence, may go down any passage and cross any border, and never lose their bearings” (89). The act of proofreading becomes one of heroism and potential sacrifice for the wellbeing of others who may, as a result of the sanitizing act of proofreading, cross boundaries without fear of danger. Of note is the act of border crossing, since Tearle is deeply concerned with systems of demarcation. If, however, one has properly structured the landscape and has established proper modes of human movement within it, then border crossings lose their potentially deconstructive and discursive nature. The lethal consequences of poor form become readily apparent when Tearle goes on to assert that “Dotting one i might be regarded as a mere punctilio, and failing to do so dismissed as a trifle. But all the dots left off all the i’s accumulate, they build up, they pack together like a cloud over a field of stubbly iota. Soon there is a haze of them in every hollow, and the finer distinctions begin to evade us” (89). Here, slippages in formal elements that seem trivial snowball into a kind of infestation that contaminates the landscape, causing ambiguity and myopia. They are not isolated lapses, but rather a mob of likeminded antagonists who operate in tandem. If the previous example of mines is a metaphorical representation of mortal imperilment, Tearle is more than willing to extend the same message with a literal correlation between proofreading and the condition of the human body that eschews figurative hyperbole: “Standards of proofreading have been declining steadily since the nineteen sixties, when the permissive attitude to life first gained ground, and so have standards of morality, conduct in public life, personal hygiene and medical care, standard of living, and so on” (90). The chain of cause and effect is, to Tearle, quite obvious.
In keeping with the motif of reading being an act of physical maintenance and protection, Tearle says that before reading he likes to “to limber up with a few minutes of basic lexicology, stretching the verbal tendons if you like, to guard against injury” (65). Again, proper reading becomes a safeguard against the degradation of the human form. While reading, Tearle performs “backflips” by flipping the pages of his pocket dictionary from one definition to its etymologically related root, and thus engaging in what he calls “fartlek”.16 When describing this premise of his to Spilikin Tearle says “They say it’s as important as taking care of the body, you know” (67). On the other end of the spectrum, but keeping with Tearle’s connection between slippages of meaning and the subsequent erosions of order resulting in death, Tearle writes about the “territory” of the obituary page as being a space that is particularly prone to lapses of proofreading. Tearle tells us that “In later years, the death notices became so consumed by corrigenda that I was able to venture back into that territory from time to time. The rot reached such unnatural proportions that it began to subvert the purpose of the service itself, and the whole enterprise acquired the tone of a macabre joke” (72). The connections between slippages of textual meaning, corrigenda, and the disorder of the human body represented by the physiological state of death are navigated in this territory, a place Tearle finds so rich in lapses of grammatical order that he cannot keep away, despite his disgust regarding dead bodies, imagined or corporeal. The “unnatural” aspect of the whole affair is emphasized and the intended authorial purpose of the obituary pages is usurped by the disorder that accompanies the dismantling of the human form, making the space itself an impossible

16 “Fartlek” is a Swedish term meaning “speed play”. Typically it is used to refer to the mixing of sprints and longer forms of exercise, but Tearle uses it to describe his game of making etymological connections between words at a rapid pace.
one. Further locating his concern with typographical errors within the human form, Tearle demands to know, when correcting the misspelling of T-shirt as “t-shirt” in the local paper, “what manner of monster would wear such a thing”. Answering his own query he suggests: “A one-armed bandit, I suppose, some twisted wreck of a human being, the sort who would live in an a-frame house made entirely of i-beams…” (63). The intersections of text, the human form, and the built environment all come crashing together here, as the twisted wreck that results from a lower case “t” inhabits a grotesque/impossible space, one founded upon its own misspelling which, in turn, will likely lead, in Tearle’s fevered imagination, to even larger denigrations and lethal slippages. Essentially, Tearle’s treatment of text suggests that it has a direct relationship to the reality it represents and maps. It is not surprising then, that much of Tearle’s readerly attention in this regard is fixated on the phone book, both for the obvious reason that he spent the majority of his career proofreading it, but more so because it serves as a palimpsestual map of his environment.

**The Phone Book**

Tearle’s map of Johannesburg is largely dependent on a palimpsest, a text that is both prescriptive, in that it outlines a numerical codification of human placement and communication, and reactive, in that each new edition corresponds to the shifting economic and social realities of the people it encapsulates. Shane Graham has suggested that Tearle’s relationship with the phone book indicates that “the phone book, properly read, becomes a means of mapping social relations and demographic patterns, especially in the (formerly) carefully segregated spaces of the apartheid city” (“Memory” 80). In
this light, the phone book retains a dual status as both a prescriptive text and also a form of documentation that responds and adapts to human movement. It is prescriptive in the sense that it normalizes systems of human movement and fosters the rigidity of human location according to a numerical system, one that corresponds with, and works in tandem with, other methods of urban development and planning. It also regulates what parts of the urban environment have direct access to modes of communication and exchange along carefully regulated lines, rendering spaces that exist outside of municipal jurisdiction (but not authority) even more marginal. If the phone is a voice, it does not speak to the communities of shacks in and around Johannesburg. If it is an ear, it does not listen. And yet, it does not merely function as a plan or map, because of its responsive status. As people move to new locations, and as new locations come into existence through these movements, the phone book’s system of ordering must change to accommodate this or it will lose its functionality, and for what other reason could such a text exist, if not a utilitarian one. In a sense the phone book can neither be condemned as a closed system of reading a particular place, nor praised as a map to a future form of spatial imagination. It is prescriptive, but also entirely reactionary, dealing with what was once in place. The moment a single phone line changes, it is no longer up to date.

Because of his work as a proofreader for the municipalities of Johannesburg, Tearle is acutely cognizant of how the “Book” (as he terms it) reveals the everyday practices of the lives it orders: “A large part of my working life has been devoted to the proofreading of telephone directories, and specifically the Johannesburg Book. Quite apart from the technical challenges of the task, ... there were unique insights to be gained into the city and the ways of its inhabitants” (142). Originally this takes the form of punny word
games, noticing a Cook on Baker’s Street and the other types of semantic showmanship Tearle enjoys. Before long, however, he becomes aware of more sophisticated groupings:

But as my eye matured, I began to notice subtler things, submerged reefs beneath the placid surface, patterns that only came into focus when one had squinted until one’s eyes watered. I noticed, for example, a preponderance of Baums and Blooms in Cyrildene; and likewise of Pintos and Pinherios in Rosettenville; and of Le Roux in Linmeyer. Fully eleven percent of the Van Rensburgs in the Book of 1973 had settled in Florida, whereas eight per cent of the Smiths, of whom there were more than four hundred, were in Kensington. By contrast, there were only three Schlapoberskys, and they were all in Oaklands. A small mercy, some might say. Don’t suppose that I was obsessed with ethnic groups—the concentration of medical men in Hurlingham, for instance, struck me with equal force—but it is the nature of surnames to conceal age, status and sex, and reveal race. (142)

Tearle’s concern with what is “submerged” harkens back to the opening of the novel, where what currently resides under the city is envisioned as a cacophony of malevolent chaos. Here the phone book becomes a record of the collapse of spatial demarcations, a way of not only grouping people according to specific patterns, but a way of observing patterns breaking down or repositioning themselves into new systems of order. Tearle is correct that names, and surnames in particular, are more accurately signifiers of race than other forms of categorization, but his claim of not being “obsessed with race” is soon undermined by his response to the changes he notices.

Tearle tells us, in an observation that recalls my previous sentiments regarding the phone book as a prescriptive text, that “In the twilight of my career, some intriguing trends became apparent in the Book, signs of the momentous changes that lay in store for the city and the country, glimmering between the lines, if one had eyes to see them, even before they became visible in the world” (143). It is the twilight of Tearle in more ways
than he might have realized; his position, both at work and within the larger society in
which he exists, is about to become radically altered and, in many ways, significantly
diminished. Tearle’s implicit language here, once again, betrays his biases. The “trends”
eventually give way to momentous changes but for now remain “glimmering between the
lines”. The act of glimmering suggests a kind of nebulous instability, one that phases in
and out of existence, but more importantly that takes place “between the lines”. This
suggests both that a kind of subtextual reading is necessary to properly view these trends,
but also that they exist on either (or perhaps neither) side of a demarcation; they are a
potentially destructive element that is neither easily located nor defined.

Essentially, the phone book, as a prescriptive text, allows the reader, or at least the
reader possessing the necessary erudition, access to an almost precognitive articulation of
the future city, one that hints at its own dissolution. Tearle’s barely concealed boast here
is rendered ironic by his own myopia; the transition he is discussing is not one that he
“discovered” and he is, if anything, late to the party (a figure of speech given literal
salience at the end of the novel). Tearle continues, “The fact that they were flowing back
into the city fascinated me. There were more of them every year. And it soon became
clear, to this latterday Canute, that the tide would not be turned. An historic migration
was afoot, comparable to the great scattering of the tribes before Chaka, the King of the
Zulus” (143). Tearle’s concern with “we” here is highlighted by his evocation of its
opposite: “they”. Flows of human movement are described in terms of natural
phenomena, a kind of mindless surging of primal force. Once again, the ironic context of
Tearle’s commentary eludes him when he alludes to King Canute, a monarch who
displayed his wisdom precisely by demonstrating that turning the tide was beyond his
power, and therefore not within his jurisdiction. The second historical allusion, also to a monarch, underlines what Tearle sees as the violent, and deeply negative, underpinnings of this flow of human bodies. In keeping with the “we” and “they” dynamic he tends to erect, it also displaces blame from systemic racism and socioeconomic disparity onto an imaginary and self-inflicted struggle within the black community. Graham has suggested that, in his response to the phone book’s variations, “[Tearle] fails to make it explicit that the migrations he observes are a direct result of the apartheid state, and of the subsequent collapse of its social schemas” (“Memory” 80) and further, that “Tearle is either oblivious to or disingenuous about the ways in which his systems of imposing order on chaos very much resemble the methods that the apartheid state used to impose social control on the black population…” (“Memory” 81). This lack of introspection on Tearle’s part forms a kind of ironic schism between his emphasis on properly proofreading others and his simultaneous inability to fully comprehend the sources of his own motivations.

Tearle’s exposition about his relationship with the phone book continues in a passage worth quoting at length:

There were some remarkable developments, notably the growing number of Hi’s, Ho’s and Fats in the Bedfordview area, an influx of -ićs and -wicz and -ova into all areas, including my own, and an inexplicable outbreak of MacGillicuddies in Orchards. But the most striking of all seemed less a trend than an aberration. I was browsing one evening when I came across a Merope with a Hillbrow address. ‘M’ was then the fastest-growing section, thanks to the burgeoning numbers of African subscribers, but naturally one expected all these Mamabolas and Mathebulas and Masemolas to be in Mdelnds and Mbpne and other far-flung places. This one was in Hillbrow. The 642-prefix corroborated it. I went at once to my desk and dialed the number. A child answered it, a daughter of Africa, and while the little one was summoning her daddy, I put the receiver down. (144)
Here we see, as the races become progressively removed from the normative white standard, a kind of increased urgency in their descriptive labels. A “growing number” becomes “an outbreak” becomes an “aberration”. Also here is the tendency of the “Book” to not be merely a prescriptive text, but also a reflective one. “M” is the fastest growing section of the phone book, thanks, Tearle notes, to the increase in African subscribers. Not only are blacks appearing in the physical spaces they were previously segregated from, but the systems of communication, and the codification of those systems, is formally acknowledging them and incorporating them into regulated zones of habitation and commerce. Before long, Tearle’s reading of texts in terms of regulating bodies becomes an act of reading bodies as texts to formulate their relationships to the social spaces of the city.

**Bodies -> Buildings, Texts**

Tearle’s infatuation with human bodies and forms is often centred on himself, on maintaining the proper proportions within his own frame in relation to those around him and to his physical environment. His body, as a system of categories, is imperiled by instances where the organic systems that keep him alive are threatened with displacement. After nearly being hit by a van, Tearle imagines his death and the aftermath in light of these conceptualizations:

Strangers rifling through my clothing, making a show of ascertaining my identity while lifting my small change, reading my notebook, leafing through my *Pocket* with their greasy fingers, scattering my bookmarks to the wind... farceur... feather... fiat... fleck... flint... I saw my life ebbing away. I saw my death, touch wood, as a precipitate efflux of vocabulary and idiom, the hoarded treasures of a lifetime spent in a minute, one immaculate vintage running into
another, and the whole adulterated brew spilt on the dirty macadam of an unmemorable corner of lawless conurbation. **Flow**: glide along as a stream; gush out, spring; (of blood) be spilt; (of wine) be poured out without stint (f. OE *flōwan*, unconnected with L *fluere*: flux).

Unconnected. This city has a short memory. How many deaths might have occurred on this very spot and left no memorial? (27)

On display, in an almost stream of consciousness fit, is Tearle’s alarming erudition, eloquence, wit, and utterly demoralizing fear of change. The imagined strangers’ duplicity, their disingenuous overtures to ascertain his identity through the reading of a textual marker (presumably a driver’s license, library card, or similar identification), ironically leads to the dismantling and disconnection of his actual textual identity, the scattering of his bookmarks, the imagined spreading and separation of which brings Tearle to his first sense of the liquid nature of disorganization when he envisions his life “ebbing away”. Death is a “precipitate efflux of vocabulary and idiom” with “precipitate” being fed by tributaries of denotation, both the terminology used in chemistry to separate (or disconnect as it may be) a solid from a fluid, but also the violent plunging-downward occurrence of its more common usage.17 The “efflux” of this vocabulary enforces the streaming imagery at hand, but also bears connotations regarding the act of shitting, itself associated with the relaxation of muscles that occurs with sudden death. This expulsion of one’s inner fluids onto the “macadam of an unmemorable corner of lawless conurbation” highlights Tearle’s concern with death, but also with the instability and impermanence of identity commonly associated with it. The conurbation suggests a landscape of nameless quality with ill-defined boundaries, the unmemorable corner a kind of blank marker. If (as we shall see later) his birth is granted salience by its

17 OED definition of precipitate.
proximity to Hillbrow Tower, then his death is rendered absolute, his existence utterly extinguished, by its failure to form a connection with a relevant signpost of significance in the urban semioscope. His “inner text”, in this visualized death, forms no cohesive relationship with the place where it becomes separated from his body, and the mixing of vintages here alludes to the absence of hierarchies established by the solid forms (bodies, bottles) that once contained them. This unconnectedness that death entails is therefore the end result, but its potential is also the root, the prime mover, that sets into motion a series of events that leads from Flow to the Latin *fluere*: flux, the breakdown of meaning that ends with a disconnection among potential linguistic origins, themselves the anchor for Tearle’s sense of order.

Tearle’s imagined death scene resembles the one from the opening pages; both present a body splayed out in an urban setting (the resting place being a conurbation of nameless and jumbled parts whose lack of specificity lends itself to the anonymity of the corpse at hand) and both suggest a strange relationship between the body and the text surrounding it. Tearle realizes this similarity himself when he says “I saw myself lying there, sprawled across the elephant’s ear, newsprint fluttering around me like the Prospect Road corpse” (28). Of course, the elephant’s ear also bookmarks the opening of the novel, and its presence alludes to the tomfoolery that leads to potentially lethal forms of disorder and disconnection. For Tearle, the lack of attention paid by the driver to his/her driving is not unlike the lack of attention paid in the novel’s opening scene by the white professionals regarding proper standards of behaviour, and in both scenes the end result is the unravelling of the human form into that of a dead (disorganized, empty) body.
Tearle’s interest in bodies, however, does not only focus on the singular, but just as importantly extends outwards to the interrelationships between human forms and the co-mingling of bodies, particularly regarding physical proximity and sex. In fact sex, more generally, seems to elicit disdain from Tearle, as his sentiments on the subject range from the prudish to the genuinely confused. When Raylene, a young black woman who represents the “new” crowd at the Café Europa, balances her leg on her boyfriend while the couple are seated, Tearle tells us that “It was unnerving, as if they were one person, Siamese twins joined at the thigh, a single creature that didn’t know whether it was Arthur or Martha” (41). Tearle’s distaste for sex, it would seem, is connected to his desire to erect and maintain sites of difference, as the joining of two bodies creates a kind of hybrid creature that disrupts the simple, clean binaries he prefers to operate within. Tearle appreciates the lack of overt intimacy involved in his relationships with other people, preferring a “seemly” distance with Spilikin, his friend at the Café Europa, as opposed to the fleshy overlapping of bodies inherent in the displays of affection between Errol and Raylene. He likes “being on one’s own in the company of congenial strangers” (63). In essence, Tearle becomes caught up, as Marais suggested above, in the proofreading of people, both in the “text” of the person themselves, but also in terms of how their bodies move in relation to those around them. Tearle says of his friend’s name, “Spilkin. It suited him, this combination of soft and sharp, lip and bodkin, wet flesh and dry glass” (54). In keeping with Tearle’s habit of “proofreading” people, he tends to ascribe their physicality to their names, once again collapsing the distance between the sign and what it signifies.
Essentially, for Tearle, the names of people become the people themselves and vice versa, as the signifier becomes intimately connected to the corporeal form that it designates. In looking at people’s bodies then, he is equally pressured to understand them in terms of unitary words that serve the purpose of providing a definition. When introducing Mevrouw Bonsma, he tells us that, “Her big plates of meat, tilted on the wineglass heels of slippers made of silver chain-mail, pumped up pedals, while her hands rolled over the keys, setting up a pale vibrato in the flesh of her upper arms. She looked like a navvy driving some shiny piece of earth moving equipment. Five-letter word: spade. Or: piano” (76). Tearle’s sense of her physicality, which is mixed with some disgust regarding what he deems her sloppiness and the ways in which her body does not conform to his compact aesthetics, is defined by a synesthetic textual act of labelling, one that objectifies her and compares her to a tool for human use. Her presence at the arid table shared by Tearle and Spilkin becomes troubling to Tearle as her physicality, her “bulk”, as well as her potential sexuality, threaten the previously established relationship.

Tearle says that:

She loomed over us like a dam wall, which had seemed sturdy enough at a safe distance, but appeared to be crumbling away now that we squatted, like a pair of truant schoolboys, in the damp shade at its foot. I felt as if I was on the shores of Mevrouw Bonsa. The phrase rang in my head, trying to fit itself to the tune of ‘Loch Lomond’ or ‘On Top of Old Smokey’, without success. Always, it was Rotterdam I saw. Such a watery fecundity! What if she burst? I would be washed away like a stick of balsa on a flood of evergreens. (77)

Mevrouw’s bulging imposition is articulated in architectural terminology: she becomes a wall holding back a flood, full to the point of bursting. Echoed here are Tearle’s readymade phobias regarding fluidity, the breakdown of systems of order, and an easy
conflation between human bodies and the built environment. Her potential sexuality is linked with wetness, and her physical form becomes a body of water which threatens to overwhelm Tearle and Spilikin, displacing them from one another in a kind of Sedgwickian triangle gone awry.\textsuperscript{18} The imagery here, of the erosion of solid receptacles followed by the chaotic expulsion outwards of their contents, is reminiscent of Tearle’s imaginary death at the hands, or wheels, of a passing van, whose similarly intimidating bulk threatened to displace his watery innards. Not surprisingly, Tearle says that, as a result of Mevrouw’s presence, he “More than once... felt like drowning” (78). At the centre of all of this is the potential for unwanted “mixing”; as the waters from “the shores of Mevrouw Bonsa” fill Tearle’s lungs, we are reminded, once again, of his phobia regarding the potential for contamination from the breakdown of inside/outside distinctions. Tearle, in keeping with his proclivity for indirect confrontation, highlights this when he demonstrates his lexical gymnastics to her: “’Medley, Mevrouw.’ I would say. Heterogeneous mixture. See meddle. Meddle, busy oneself unduly” (78).

Tearle’s concern with wetness and dryness, it turns out, may be something of reaction to a label he had previously taken offense at. When Merle, the patron of the Café with whom he goes to the Zoological Gardens (and who inspires some limited romantic interest within Tearle), calls him “dry” he responds, “It’s not dryness. It’s rigour” (98), to which she replies, “Of the mortis variety” (98). This exchange leads him to begin to “take fun more seriously” in an effort to demonstrate to his friends at the Café Europa that he is not the curmudgeon he is being made out to be, especially after watching Merle laugh

\textsuperscript{18} I am alluding here, of course, to Eve Sedgewick’s theories on homosocial desire, as outlined in her seminal work \textit{Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire} (1985), and in particular, the literary trope of two men who use the body of a woman to engage with one another as a way of mitigating the potentially homosexual implications of their interest in one another.
until she cries. He tells us that, “I have always found the notion of laughing until one cries repugnant. One wants to preserve the boundaries between emotions, I think, or they lose their value” (100). Tearle’s concern with human bodies and their “leaking” becomes literal when he finds that kind of outpouring of emotion, and the resulting potential for mixing of emotional states, to be deeply unsettling. Before too long he is back to discussing these subjects in light of human movement, and when discussing the nature of textual error he tells us that “Every error matters, not the least because admitting even one into respectable company opens the door to countless others. Everyone’s welcome! the cry goes up, and the portals are flung wide. Only by striving constantly for perfection, and regretting every failure to achieve it, can the hordes be kept at bay” (106-107). In many contexts, Tearle’s analogy here would raise eyebrows, but in post-apartheid Johannesburg the connotations are obvious, as much as Tearle might deny them. The “cry” of welcoming and of mutual inclusiveness that Tearle cautions against here is part and parcel of the national self-redefinition that the “New” South Africa was attempting to undertake, and Tearle’s implicit distaste for it is obvious. It is no mistake that he voices his concern regarding the contagious nature of error in terms of human movements and bodies though built environments such as doors and portals, nor that his emphasis is on the architectural dimensions of the metaphor and the fear of contagious “hordes”.

Someone as etymologically inclined as Tearle is likely to know the origins of the word horde and its roots in Russian responses to Mongol nomadic migrations, which further underscores its apropos evocation of unwanted racial and cultural mixing. This is reiterated by Tearle again in a diatribe worth discussing at length:

Such an error is sent out into the world to multiply. It inveigles itself into the hearts of a trusting public. It works
its mischief, like an odourless poison or a magistrate’s moustache, under the very nose of authority. It is exuberant and prolific. It has the capacity to generate misleading progeny in an infinite number of places. It may introduce errors where none existed before, and unteach the best learned lessons. It may settle down in respectable company and become naturalized as a citizen of good standing, until not even the most discriminating neighbour knows its shady past. The Great Cham himself gave us several bastards born on the wrong side of the galleys. (108)

Tearle’s usual concerns with spatial movements and people are at work here, but foregrounded is the concern with contagion and the capacity for regeneration. Is Tearle using people as a metaphor for literary errors, or is he not, as evidenced by his continued concentration on the matter, more interested in extending his approach to proofreading texts to his ideology regarding the proofreading of people? Again the concern with the body as error “inveigles” itself in the hearts of the unsuspecting public. This sense of contamination, of the invasion of the human form by a poison, is quickly extended toward the act of procreation, which underlines the potential for error in multiplying and generating progeny with “respectable company”. The settling down in respectable company and the covering of a “shady” past suggest that Tearle’s anxieties regarding racial mixing are really what is at stake here. Additionally, the idea that such migrations will lead to sexual relationships (itself a source of contagious contact) which will in turn lead to a lack of discrimination regarding what constitutes “shady” (something Tearle is circumspect about), suggests his fear of physical co-mingling, particularly between interracial bodies. This excursus is rounded off by a tellingly “exotic” reference to Samuel Johnson and his introduction of illegitimate words into his famous dictionary. Referring to Johnson by his nickname, “The Great Cham”, suggests a kind of racial identity slippage or appropriation, which complements the figurative sexual mixing that
is readable in the metaphorical identification of words of dubious origin as “bastards born on the wrong side of the galleys” (108).

This aside from Tearle regarding the shifting of the urban environment along lines of human movement is quickly reinforced by an anecdote whose literal events gesture toward, and blur the lines between, the figurative shifting of buildings and human bodies that Tearle so frequently evokes, while simultaneously underscoring the threatening sexuality of the non-white Other in Tearle’s worldview. Tearle relates how Errol and Floyd, two of the Café Europa’s new black clientele, bring in a mysterious sack that Tearle initially assumes contains a corpse but turns out to hold something rather different: “Then [Errol] hauled it up, swiveling his hips as he did so, and slowly, in obscene mimicry of a gigantic male member, tumescent, from the Latin tumere, swell, the Hillbrow Tower rose into the light” (132). Errol is a member of the “horde”, the undesirable element that Tearle wishes to exclude from his company. Tearle articulates this most explicitly in terms of Errol’s behaviour, attitude, and demeanour; however, Errol’s presence is actually the result of the collapse of racially defined spatial segregation, which is what is implicitly being lamented. As Graham suggests, “the Hillbrow Tower plays a significant role in providing fixity and a stable sense of place within urban spaces otherwise constantly in flux” (“Memory” 82), so Tearle’s lament here is about the centre blurring with the margins (we will soon revisit Hillbrow Tower as a sight on which to hang a stable sense of identity).

The “Hillbrow Tower” that Errol is gyrating phallically around the Café Europa turns out to be a model of the building that he, or friends of his, have stolen. A later article from the Star tells us that “‘For the second time in three months, vandals’——my
word exactly——‘went on a rampage at Santarama Miniland, the miniature village that raises funds to fight the spread of TB, hurling entire buildings into the harbour and turning the Carlton Centre upside down’” (135). In fact, Tearle had used this word, “vandals”, when he told Errol and Floyd, “Vandals, that’s what you are, it’s the sack of Rome all over again” (132). This marks a point where the motifs Tearle has been employing are given literal salience, as Errol literally displaces a built environment (albeit a model representation) while incorporating it into a lewd pantomime as his own penis. The violent “hurling” of buildings through the air is re-invoked later during “The Proofreader’s Derby”. Tearle’s choice of word here, “vandals”, brings to mind the same kind of in/out groupings he gestured to earlier with “horde”, and his connection of the term to the sack of Rome (in keeping with his epistemological proclivities) also demonstrates his concern that the urban centre has been invaded and defiled by an out-group of cultural and racial others. This metaphor also indicates Tearle’s favouring of colonial and imperial methods of maintaining order and policing space, as well as the fact that such methods of control predate apartheid by thousands of years.

The lack of seriousness, the crude sexuality, and the underlying threat (here more sexual), also harken back to the opening pages, and it is not long before Tearle’s narration segues from this spectacle to the earlier episode in a fashion that highlights the similar concerns he has over both these disruptions to normative movements of human bodies through space:

How could I have foreseen such an outcome, in the gold-flecked afternoons of my past, how imagined that I would become a stranger in my home away from home, beset on all sides by change and dissolution? Or imagine: a pink elephant with its ear on backwards standing on a street corner, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, a
dead body lying in an empty plot on a Sunday morning, burnt beyond all recognition, a man of advanced years bearing what is left of his life in two paper shopping bags. (137)

His home away from home is the Café Europa, his bastion of European ambience, but the sense of alienation it now provokes in him is one that extends to his feeling of displacement in a larger sense with the macro-cosmos of Johannesburg and even South Africa, a nation that is certainly, by anyone’s standards, “beset” on all sides by change and “dissolution”. The invasive imagery evoked by being beset on all sides—the backwards state of the elephant’s ear, the lying of a dead body in an empty plot, and the deracinated middle-class white male reduced to methods of transportation usually reserved for marginal, transient figures—all evoke spatial relationships intended to convey a sense of inversion, invasion, dislocation, displacement and disfigurement. The barbarians have invaded and the result is that the “civilized” members of society (such as Tearle) have become increasingly indistinguishable from the figures like the aforementioned Queen of Sheba and her host of homeless cohorts. Indeed, the body is burnt beyond all recognition, with recognition being a way of demarcating the corpse via racial signification. Tearle tells us that: “(I’d taken a good look at the Prospect Road corpse through my opera glasses: black male, fortyish, fifteen stone. But the next day the Star said it was a white man, burnt to a char)” (131). The violence visited upon the body of the white male has rendered its racial characteristics unrecognizable, and as a result the demarcations distinguishing human forms from one another have collapsed, rendering the body unreadable. This concern with mixing with the “horde”, with the violence they (as opposed to we) enact through careless contagion and propagation, climaxes in the phobia that the end result will not only be death, but just as significantly, the erasure of systems
of order that previously allowed for racial hierarchies to exist and maintain the in/out
groupings necessary for the security of the urban environment and that are enacted within
the built environment through walls, fences, barriers, and other material and literal
limitations on human movement.

The Built Environment — Texts, Bodies

Tearle’s concern with delineations between inside and outside, and with
maintaining markers of difference, is also manifested in the geometric configurations of
his home. Although he rarely mentions his apartment, when Tearle does, briefly, narrate
the space of his private domesticity, it evokes his phobias regarding urban “decay” by
negating them. He describes the building as “square and solid” (28), a shape fitting with
the geometric social dynamic he attempts to conserve around the table at the Café
Europa, and he admits that the “minute I set foot in the place I felt at ease” (29). The
“spacious rooms” are “separated by proper walls and doors” and the entire apartment is
“paraquet throughout” with “black and white tiles in the kitchen and bathroom” (29). Of
course, the emphasis on doors and proper walls belies Tearle’s regard for perimeters, and
the paraquet floors, with their angular demarcations of shading, affirm (just as the overall
form of the building does) his esteem for straight lines as opposed to potentially chaotic
curvature. The tiles, once again evoking squares and right angles, are black and white,
and his rarely verbalized yet salient preoccupation with the separation of white and black
peoples is mirrored in the staggered sectors of colour on his bathroom floor. This is to say
that his home is in keeping with his general aesthetic sense, not surprising but perhaps
particularly fitting for a narrator whose account is so meticulous in its projection of his inner phobias onto his external, physical environment.

Tearle’s apartment is located in the Lenmar Mansions, where he lectures the guards on their duties, telling them that they “were to open and shut the door of Lenmar Mansions and to guard their fixed and movable assets, indeed to frustrate the relentless efforts of criminals to transform the one kind into the other” (126). The guards are part of the system of order and their position within that order is to maintain portals of access among sections of the built environment and in doing so to regulate the material makeup of that same environment. Of course, no one wishes to be robbed of their positions, but at the heart of Tearle’s concern with the “fixed and movable” (and the degenerate desire to confuse the two) is his preference for stasis and his distaste for contagious foreign bodies usurping social order by the reorganization of spatial construction. He continues in this vein:

As fast as the Parks Department planted trees and shrubs on traffic islands and freeway embankments, thieves dug them up and carried them off, either to replant them in their own gardens or to resell them. Another species of thief stole manhole covers and sold them to scrap-metal dealers. Yet others specialized in bus-stop benches and kerbstones, street signs and fences, water pipes and electricity cables, milestones and monumental masonry. Material for building shacks. Entire houses had been stolen by these cannibals, even schools and factories. (127)

Here, plants and trees, the natural environment or order, are displaced along freeways and traffic islands, sites of movement and channels by which people gain access from one part of the urban environment to another. It is no coincidence that Tearle links the onset of this displacement with these locales as they are the points of transgression through which contagious human bodies infiltrate. As Tearle lists the materials which become
caught up in the process of redistribution, he begins with bus-stop benches and street signs until climaxing on milestones and monumental masonry and even whole buildings. This transformation (earlier alluded to as the transformation between the fixed and the moveable) becomes the destruction of houses, schools, and factories to give birth to “shacks”: sites of impermanence, suggestive of a lack of regulation and of the movement of the black poor into the urban centre of the post-apartheid city, figures who become devouring cannibals. Cannibals are typically non-white “savages” whose penchant for devouring human beings suggests a threatening desire to eradicate the difference between self and Other. Obscured or discarded is any consideration about the material necessity that has prompted this process of redistribution or the systemic racial violence that previously held it in check, which further highlights Tearle’s myopia regarding the socioeconomic fallout of apartheid.

Outside his home, and the setting for the majority of the novel, is Tearle’s “third space”, the Café Europa, a small café in Hillbrow that he sees as a bastion of European ambience in a sea of transition. While providing exposition on the Café Europa and his role within it, Tearle asserts that he is an “incorrigible ‘European’” but not a “member” because “we were never a club” (16). The ambiguity of “we” notwithstanding, Tearle’s identification as a European is, at least partially, consciously ironic. However, he is quite serious about the extent of his sympathies toward what he considers “European” and equally serious about his membership in the imagined community this represents to him. His denial of a shared in-group status with the café’s other patrons is an attempt to assert that merely being physically present within the space of the Café Europa is not enough, that an appreciation of the right elements is required, and that Tearle both possesses this
and is able to recognize its presence in others. This suggests that while the space of the café is important to him, it doesn’t fully lose this significance when the social boundaries that open the club up to a wider clientele are eroded.

The “ambience” of Café Europa is what makes it inviting to Tearle, as opposed to what he deems to be the kitschy consumerist aesthetic of “atmosphere”. Tearle posits that “Atmosphere is an American commodity. And it is why the citizens of The Golden City covet it. They want to breathe deep-fried oxygen, they want to be part of the Space Age. Europeans prefer ambience, which cannot be pumped in overnight or sprayed on with aerosol” (19). As ambience accrues over time, recent immigrants are unable to cultivate it, and by logical extension they are prevented from worthy cultural production by virtue of this inability. It is this less direct form of racism that most appeals to Tearle, as it allows him to avoid the full implications of his attitudes. According to his logic, if he is repulsed by the movements of people into the urban centre, it is because they necessarily lack ambience; the fact that they are not white is ostensibly of secondary or coincidental consequence. In short, he is unable and/or unwilling to comprehend how his attitudes regarding in/out grouping in social spaces are actually rationalizations for the more explicit racism of apartheid.

Tearle first arrives at the Café Europa in a misguided attempt to bring the past into the present through sheer force of memory, and while sitting there his attention is inevitably brought to bear upon Alibia, the mural of a distinctly, yet abstractly, European urbanscape that decorates one wall of the café. He tells us that “My eye was drawn to the city on the wall, to the walled city of Alibia, where I had roamed so often in my imagination” (20). The chiasmus contained within this sentence draws our own attention
to the walls, both to the walls that serve as the spatial enclosure of the café but also to the walled nature of Tearle’s fantasy of Europe, an architecturally realized demarcation of in and out, of civilization and barbarism, of “they” and “we”. As Strauss suggests, “…
Alibía is a city that defines itself in Tearle’s imagination against everyone who fails to live up to a specific set of carefully worked out standards of racial and linguistic Europeanness. These ‘standards’ derive easily from colonial constructions of ‘order’ and ‘modernity’ which were employed to justify colonial expansion and which were couched, in South Africa in particular, in explicitly racial terms” (30). Since Tearle is so deeply concerned with the maintenance of centre versus periphery, it makes sense that his preferred rendering of utopian urban landscape would incorporate a physically manifested representation/idealization of this spatial formation.

It is equally fitting that Tearle’s favoured visual representation of European essentialism is a nowhere-land pastiche of European spatial aesthetics as opposed to a depiction of an actual place. Tearle tell us that Alibía was “a generous elsewhere in which the immigrant might find the landmarks he had left behind. I had seen pointed out St Peter’s and St Paul’s, the Aegean and the Baltic” (21). In light of this conflation between present South Africa and a pastiche of European cultural identity, Clarkson suggests that Alibía’s “landmark significance is thus situated in a future anterior, and is located on the basis of an elsewhere Tearle has never visited…” (93). As a jumble of European qualities, Alibía suspends the discomfort that Tearle might feel at appropriating an actual place, since its vague yet familiar depictions of the “ambience” of the city stand in for the places themselves.
When Tearle rationalises his attachment to Alibia he demonstrates both his lack of introspection, since he avoids a potential damning admission of nostalgia for a place he has never been, but also an acutely keen understanding of the relationship that exists between bodies and buildings, that is, between corporeal human forms and the constructed landscapes they inhabit. Tearle’s thought process in this regard is bound up in insights spliced together with ignorance. Tearle says, “What did Alibia mean to me? Certainly it was not ‘home’. I am a true Johannesburger, because I was born within sight of Hillbrow Tower, our very own Bow Bells — or so Spilkin used to say” (21). Here Tearle denies citizenship regarding Alibia, partially because to do so would entail denouncing his authority as a native of his current environment, a status that he considers important due to his distaste for immigration and the premium he places on cultural stasis in regards to a similar stillness of the human form. Significantly, his status as a true “Johannesburger” is affirmed by the placement of his birth and its proximity to an architectural landmark, one used to evoke a particular narrative of place and placement. The evocation of the Bow Bells here is a genuflection to a similar landmark with a similar hold on the identities of those within its sphere of influence, an allusion that underscores the novel’s emphasis on the narrative power of architecture as well as the connection between place and the formation of personal identity. Tearle goes on to say, “Of course, this was long before the Johannes Gerhardaas Strijdom Tower (properly) was built, but [Spilkin] said it had a retrospective effect: had it been standing at the time of

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19 The term Bow Bells refers to the bells of St. Mary-le-Bow, a church in London. Traditionally, in order for one to be considered truly Cockney, one had to be born within earshot of these bells. The fact that this is no longer a practical demarcation of space given the lack of residential homes surrounding the area and the ambient urban noise that significantly decreases the distance the sound of the bells can travel, may be a gesture to the arbitrary nature of such an in-grouping.
my birth, I would have seen it from my crib” (21). This caveat illustrates the importance of naming, the emphasis Tearle places on an originary static meaning, and the connections this implies for his complicity in the apartheid regime. Tearle refers to Hillbrow Tower by the name it possessed during apartheid, the name that the tower was constructed under and that it was commonly referred to as before “Hillbrow Tower” took over in common parlance.\(^20\) In doing so, Tearle unwittingly links his predilection for originary meanings (which is the root for his love of etymology) with the apartheid regime, since the name JG Strijdom is synonymous with the National Party and its policies of racial segregation through spatial control.\(^21\) Tearle’s distaste for neologism means that he, in an effort to remain “proper”, prefers to call the landmark by its original name, despite the connotations. Not only does his aversion to change evoke the apartheid past in a direct sense here, but the appeal to an authoritative guideline to be found in language and acts of naming is the source of this historical resurgence, which symbolically connects the two in the discourse of the text. Propriety, it would seem, has more to do with maintaining the status quo than it does with disinheriting the consequences of racist legislation through the reclamation of social spaces. This particular act of naming is rendered especially significant since Tearle seems willing to use the landmark’s “retroactive” influence to craft his own identity, an identity which then turns around and attempts to narrativize the meaning of the same landmark in order to maintain its sense of self in relation to its environment, creating a kind of circular and

\(^{20}\) The tower was renamed in 2005, four years after the publication of *The Restless Supermarket*, as Telkom Joburg Tower.

\(^{21}\) Johannes Gerhardus Strijdom, an Afrikaner nationalist, was Prime Minister of South Africa from 30 November 1954 to 24 August 1958. He was a strong proponent of racial segregation, and many of his policies helped establish and maintain apartheid.
ultimately futile attempt to bring oneself into being by one’s relationship with a static place.\textsuperscript{22}

It is also worth noting, however, that Tearle’s textual readings of the built environment do not entirely eschew traditional texts in favour of urban semiotics. Tearle reads texts imprinted on the urban landscape as well, and proofreads the literal texts of the city (storefront signs, billboards, menus, etc.) for signs of error. Even in seemingly small “infractions” Tearle can find upsetting connections between texts and bodies. When describing a local dish called “curry-wurst” Tearle tells us that his distaste stems from the “principals involved, of linguistics and cuisine. Currywurst? It was ersatz, a jerry-built portmanteau if ever I heard one. I had denounced it the very first time I came in here, this having been the express purpose of my visit, but he refused to remove it from the menu” (58). The arrangement of the word is disagreeable because of its “mixing”, the substitution of one “proper” flavouring with an ersatz one, and his visceral disgust at the “portmanteau” word itself, and not simply the food, is yet another example of Tearle’s inability to acknowledge the largely arbitrary relationship between signs and referents. The menu, itself a textual mapping of the cultural influences operating within the spatial boundaries of the restaurant, is proofread by Tearle and found lacking, and he attempts to correct this infringement upon standards in much the same way as he does when pointing out grammatical errors in letters to the editor of the local newspaper. Equally important, his concern with the city’s texts is grounded in a conservative apprehension of English

\textsuperscript{22}Interestingly, in contemporary Joburg, “Hillbrow Tower” has come to symbolize a neighbourhood, Hillbrow, to which Tearle would now have little access by virtue of his race and class, and which is also largely populated and controlled by expatriate Africans from places such as Nigeria. In short, its contemporary symbolic register is largely the opposite of how Tearle apprehends it here for the sake of claiming proper Joburger status.
which is in no small part a reaction to the increasing appropriation of English by second-language speakers at the dusk of apartheid. The following sentiment, expressed by Penny Silva in her 1997 essay “South African English: Oppressor or Liberator?” captures both what Tearle is reacting to and in what manner:

> With [English’s] increased public use by the new black elite, and in the electronic media, it seems likely that standard SAE [South African English] is entering a period of accelerated change. This has already led to an intolerant reaction from some conservative English-speakers, and ‘standard’ is likely to become an increasingly difficult issue. If English is to be seen as ‘liberator’ by the average second-language speaker, the attitudes of mother-tongue speakers are significant. Triumphalism, arrogance, and irritation towards second-language speakers result in resentment. If it is to be ‘liberator’, English should be a resource to be appropriated and owned by all South Africans, not just the elite, to be used as a gateway to the wider world. (22)

When Tearle relates his experience at the Haifa Hebrew Restaurant he manages to undermine and confound his concern with correct spelling, the authority he usually connects to originary sources in language, and the central position in society this authority once granted him but that is now being dissolved. After pointing out to the proprietor that hummus is spelt with two m’s, Tearle relates: “‘English not so good’, he said with a sympathetic grin, which made me suspect he was referring to mine! Then I noticed a derivation: from the Turkish humus. An awkward moment. A version with one m could only cloud the issue” (92). In fact, this conversation highlights the ways in which slippages of language are impossible to contain, how language is not restricted within any one linguistic system, and how origins, rather than suggesting the stability of language, gesture to the ways in which linguistic form is arbitrary and indicative of how language is anything but the static series of referents Tearle wants to believe in. Certainly “English
not so good” can have multiple meanings, both the obvious (that the proprietor is suggesting that his English is not so good), the paranoid (that Tearle’s grasp on the language is being cast into doubt), and the double meaning suggested by the dictionary; that English doesn’t have the authority over its usage in the way that Tearle supposes and/or desires.\(^{23}\) It is not important to get to the bottom of a “correct” version; instead the statement sits there as an example of how the indeterminate nature of language generates, rather than obscures, potential meanings. That Tearle’s obsession with correctness is a matter of arbitrary phrasing rather than an important system of order is further illustrated when he accosts the owner of the titular Restless Supermarket. While arguing over the use of the word “restless” to mean that the store is open 24/7, Tearle gestures toward a sign that claims the produce is “fresh and clean” and says, “Clean food? I’m sorry, it doesn’t make sense” (93). Of course, it does make sense, and Tearle, or anyone else with a passable grasp on English for that matter, would have some idea what “clean” means in this context. Tearle’s complaint is not actually that the sign’s meaning is impossible to grasp, but that the store is refusing to conform to linguistic standards Tearle conforms to. Such “errors” are what Tearle refers to as “corrigenda” and he collects them, and corrects them, obsessively. Unsurprising then, is the fashion in which these phobias regarding spatial alignment become manifested in Tearle’s own literary output, specifically the novel’s metafictional mise en abyme, “The Proofreader’s Derby”.

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\(^{23}\) For a concise and interesting takes on the history and complex status of English in South Africa, see more of Penny Silva’s “South African English: Oppressor or Liberator?” (1997) as well as Njabulo Ndebele’s “The English Language and Social Change in South Africa” (1986).
Part B: Proofreading the End of Apartheid

This section of the chapter will transition back into a more or less chronological reading of the last two parts of The Restless Supermarket: “The Proofreader’s Derby” and “The Goodbye Bash”. This does not, however, mark a departure from the thematic emphasis of my reading thus far, but rather, will illustrate how the tropes discussed in Part A are clarified and extended in “The Proofreader’s Derby” and “The Goodbye Bash”, and eventually what these tropes might mean in relation to Vladislavić’s larger critiques of urban development. This will provide the bedrock for the subsequent chapter. Having parsed out the tropes that frame Tearle’s conflations between bodies, texts and the built environment, we can now examine those intersections through a close reading of his novella that will grant us insight into his representational habits from a new angle. In essence, my reading of “The Proofreader’s Derby” will explore the ways in which this mise en abyme works to reflect, refract, and broaden the tropes that best illuminate the spatial imagination of its “author”.

Over the course of The Restless Supermarket, Tearle refers to his habit of collecting “corrigenda”, textual mistakes whose slippages open new avenues of meaning, usually through whimsical (though unintentional) punning, or that simply become nonsensical grammatically. Using this collection of slippages, Tearle crafts a novella entirely composed of corrected corrigenda, that is, a text entirely composed of pasted together sentences from a massive collection of corrected errors he has accumulated over the course of his life, no doubt a fitting exercise for a man who imagines himself as a
crusader in a losing battle against a tide of human error. 24 “The Proofreader’s Derby”, like The Restless Supermarket, is about a man, Fluxman, dealing with a transitional moment in the built environment (in this case, the fictional city of Alibia, set in the imagined landscape of the mural on the Café Europa, but whose textual and spatial breakdowns are curiously reminiscent of mid-90’s Joburg). As this transitional moment threatens to deconstruct Alibia entirely, our hero, Fluxman, proofreader extraordinaire, must act swiftly to use the powers of his corrective pencil to, quite literally, edit the cityscape back into place. Significantly, the changes that occur in Fluxman’s universe represent “fantasy” according to two common usages of the term in that they are fantastic in accordance with the literary genre of fantasy, and also inasmuch as Fluxman’s responses to them enact a fantasy of Tearle’s (in terms of desire) of competence and control over the built environment. As a result, it is often difficult, and perhaps sometimes unnecessary, to differentiate between the anxieties and desires of Fluxman and Tearle, with the notable exception that Tearle’s impotence is largely replaced by Fluxman’s demi-god like manipulation of the built environment, hence the fantasy (both types). Therefore, it should not be surprising that my focus in each of the subsections of my reading of “The Proofreader’s Derby” illuminates a particular way in which the novella’s treatment of theme is connected to the spatial imagination of Aubrey Tearle.

**What the Derby Does and Some Critical Responses**

The “Proofreader’s Derby” merits a sectioned off reading for a number of reasons, the most apparent, and perhaps the most arbitrary, of which is its own sectioned

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24 Furthering Marais’ earlier point regarding the ambiguity of ironic distance between Vladislavić and Tearle is the fact that Vladislavić, himself a renowned editor/proofreader, actually wrote “The Proofreader’s Derby” using Tearle’s exact method!
off relationship with the rest of the novel. More compellingly, as a work of fiction written by Tearle, it serves as a particularly revealing illustration of his social anxieties, and while *The Restless Supermarket* has Tearle as a narrator, within the larger narrative he is bound by some fidelity to objectivity (even as we recognize or acknowledge the failures of his attempt). By contrast, in “The Proofreader’s Derby” Tearle is freed by the conventions of the fantastic to express himself more figuratively, a luxury he takes up with unchecked fervor. In essence, the story foregrounds the spatial imagination of Tearle, but also mirrors the framing narrative in ways typical of the mise en abyme genre. Ken Barris, in “The Politics of Originality: Reading Ivan Vladislavić through J.M. Coetzee’s Early Fiction”, relates this method of Vladislavić’s to similar narratological devices in the early fiction of Coetzee and suggests that between Vladislavić, Tearle, and Fluxman, “the proliferated personae sharing the narrative burden reflect on and against each other, as in contra-posed mirrors where images reflect only other images in a compounding series” (300). In what Barris calls the text’s “compound reflexivity”, the spatial imagination of Tearle gains the immediacy granted by metaphorical reification, by the blurring of the real and the surreal rendered by the fantastic. J.C. Peters has noted that “The Proofreader’s Derby” “takes place in the imaginary city of Alibia, and makes literal the connection Tearle draws between life and text” (48). Similarly, Helgesson points out that “Maps determine the make-up of Alibia, not the other way around. Punctuation makes sure buttons are kept in place, and the continued existence of individuals depends on their inclusion in the phone book” (184). In the world of Fluxman, erasing a person’s name from the phone book literally erases that person, although, as in magical realism, this seemingly bizarre relationship between sign and signified is accepted as an
ontological norm by the novella’s characters. In other words, it is the reification of the
tropes discussed in Part A that best illustrates the fantastic elements of “The
Proofreader’s Derby”.

“The Proofreader’s Derby” as Fantasy

In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson traces the roots of
fantasy literature to Bakhtin’s concept of menippean satire, a “genre which broke the
demands of historical realism or probability” (14) and reaches back to ancient Christian,
Byzantine, medieval, Renaissance, and Reformation texts. Jackson suggests that for
Bakhtin, fantasy “was a genre which did not claim to be definitive or knowing. Lacking
finality, it interrogated authoritative truths and replaced them with something less
certain” (15). As Bakhtin states, “The Fantastic serves here not as the positive
embodiment of truth, but in the search after the truth, its provocation and, most
importantly, its testing” (15, qtd. in Jackson). My position is that “The Proofreader’s
Derby” is framed as a kind of anti-menippean narrative, that is, a screed against the
carnivalesque atmosphere engendered by such works and the similar atmosphere Tearle
imagines is foundational to post-apartheid South Africa. “The Proofreader’s Derby” is
situated in the genre of cautionary conservative fantasy centred on socio-spatially
invasive elements of the chaotic and monstrous. In such narratives, subversive elements,
most commonly fantastic ones, must be normalized to re-establish and maintain proper
modes of human behaviour and hierarchies of human categorization relating to class and
race. If, as Jackson suggests, the thematic elements of the fantastic derive from “a
dissolution of separating categories, a foregrounding of those spaces which are hidden
and cast into/as darkness, by the placing and naming of the ‘real’ through chronological temporal structures and three-dimensional spatial organization” (48), then Tearle’s narrative is certainly bound up in the central themes of the fantastic. Essentially, fantasy springs in no small part from an anxiety regarding the constitution of the “real”. In the carnivalesque tradition, such literature can have a subversive (although just as frequently hegemonic) potential, but fantasy is not necessarily either progressive or subversive in and of itself. Instead, the potential for subversion is exposed, and perhaps in a way that is fearful, reductive, and ultimately conservative, or in a way that gives attention to subversive modes so as to mitigate their potential. “The Proofreader’s Derby” is, in this sense, an anti-menippean fantasy, one where the fantastic facets of the subversive and invasive elements are heroically reconstructed (undeconstructed?) by authoritative truths in relation to static spatial demarcations. To achieve this end, Tearle employs a heroic quest narrative, one centred on the protagonist’s ability to proofread the bodies of those around him in relation to their positionality within the built environment of Alibia. Right from the opening, “The Proofreader’s Derby” conforms to Rosemary’s Jackson’s representation of the genre of the fantastic. Here, Jackson touches upon the work not of Bakhtin, but of Irène Bessière: “The fantastic, as Bessière understands it, cannot be closed off. It lies inside of closed systems, infiltrating, opening spaces where unity had been assumed. Its impossibilities propose latent ‘other’ meanings or realities behind the possible or the known. Breaking single, reductive truths, the fantastic traces a space within a society’s cognitive frame. It introduces multiple contradictory ‘truths’: it becomes polysemic” (23). Tearle’s concern lies in restoring a unitary truth in the face of multiplicity, of erecting a “single reductive truth” that maintains “society’s cognitive
frame”. To evoke this struggle from the perspective of a particular individual, he opens with one of his favourite tropes: that of a flood.

A Tide in the Affairs of (Flux)Men…

The opening sentence has our hero, Fluxman, lying awake in bed “when water began to run by his window” (205). Again, the liquid/solid binary favoured by Tearle is threatened by watery dissolution. This water out of place opens the narrative while its displacing potential, and Fluxman’s resistance to it, establishes the core conflict: “He thought he heard people crying out, footsteps pounding on the stoep, the rasping of rushes against the hull of a wicker basket” (205). The lamentations of people, combined with their abrupt and intrusive movements into Fluxman’s domestic space are likened here to rushes (unkempt, disorganized nature) brushing up against the boundaries of a wicker basket, itself a container made by adapting natural elements to a preconceived pattern, while the mud-brown water creates the potential for a “drowned world”, suggesting that the consequences of this flood are multifarious and mortal. When Fluxman looks outside, the scene before him is one he remembers from “before on his travels, but for the life of him he can’t remember where” (205), suggesting that the invasive water is a source of ambiguity, one whose most immediate effect is to confuse the visually apprehended distinction between here (solid, intentionally formed, and familiar) with there (outside, ambivalent, lacking in form and rife with chaos both potential and realized), a re-articulation of the in/out group dichotomy at the centre of Tearle’s spatial imagination (as suggested in my diagram). Just as in the opening of the

25 Stoep is a South African term for a terraced porch in the front of a house.
novel where Tearle describes Joburg as a place where “a reef of disorder lay just below the surface” (7), in the brown waters outside Fluxman’s window lies an explosive potential for danger, as evidenced by the hippopotamus that bursts from the depths and destroys the hetero-normative scene of a hero saving a damsel in distress (208), a narratological disruption that is redeemed only by Fluxman’s own subsequent questing. The water brings the nonhuman into the realm of “Civilization” proper, and before long the lethality of this mixing is displayed in the form of a corpse, another salient example of the opening of “The Proofreader’s Derby” echoing that of the novel in which it is contained, as both present a pattern of growing disorder suddenly producing a dead human figure.

When “something stirred in the shallows and a body floated to the surface” (209), Fluxman is confronted by a deceased human form whose physical properties mirror Tearle’s anxieties regarding the intersectional relationships he imagines between bodies, texts, and buildings:

He was prepared for the savaged flesh, for puncture holes and lacerations, but not for the chaos that measured his practiced eye, the jumble of sprockets and yellow vinyl and rubbery connective tissue, the ooze of blood and lubricating gels, the tangle of wiring beaded with solder. He rolled the bobber over, shuddering at the touch of gizzard flesh and bristles, the crab apple of the eye, the broken springs, the oily feathers, the webbed fingers, the shattered lenses, the sockets filled with ground glass and riverweeds. Beyond repair, he thought desperately. A cacophony of categories, a jumble of kinds, an elemental disorder, wanton and fatal. (210)

This remains the novel’s most graphic description of a body out of order, and the most concrete depiction of Tearle’s anxieties regarding categorical displacements that result in death. The blood and tissue are at once human and nonhuman, and it becomes difficult to
determine where metaphor begins and ends, where the corpse’s “rubbery connective tissue” is or isn’t literally enjoined with “wiring beaded with solder”. This is, however, the world of Fluxman, a more fantastical realm than Tearle’s, and at least some of the garish hybridity, while overtly symbolic, is, for Fluxman, a literal phenomenon. Essentially, Fluxman’s apprehension of the chaos presents not merely a collapse of physical form and function, but an appalling hybridity joining human and nonhuman, as well as organic and inorganic, material. There is the human/animal hybridity present in the feathers, the bristles, the gizzard flesh, and the crossover point of human/animal deformity manifested in the body’s webbed fingers, all of which remain in keeping with Tearle’s frequent depictions of chaos being inexorably linked to the nonhuman animal and nature (the jungle, the ocean, human disorder as regressively animalistic). Just as important, however, is the presence of wires, broken springs, shattered lenses and ground glass which usher forth from the corpse’s broken skin, as though the shifting of the built environment of Alibia has a cause and effect interrelationship with the human forms occupying the city, such that the distinctions between the two (humans and the social spaces they occupy) have ceased to exist.

What is built and what is born have invaded one another’s space, and in doing so render their designations meaningless as well as create a homogenized state of death/non-life where the self becomes indistinguishable from its environment. In keeping with this representation of the lethal nature of invasive elements is an accompanying and parallel anxiety regarding spatial contagion that immediately follows the viewing of the corpse:

Beyond repair! Not once in all his long career had such an unholy perception entered his mind. His heart sank sickeningly and he willed it back into place with a cry. He felt peculiarly loose and disconnected. He gazed in alarm at
the back of his hands, at the palms and wrists, at his arms, his chest, his thighs. Even as he was proofreading himself, he was walking back into the house, his knees and ankles buckling and squeaking like dislocated hinges. (210)

The “perception” has entered Fluxman’s mind through the act of witnessing, and this visceral apprehension creates the potential for a comparable discord within the organization of his anatomy. At this turn from the corpse to Fluxman’s corporeality, the linguistic element of his anxiety\(^{26}\) forms, within “The Proofreader’s Derby”, the tripartite intersection between the built environment, human bodies, and texts. Fluxman’s career (like Tearle, that of proof-reader) is evoked here as the measure for previous experiences, an important point since Tearle’s text/body conceptualization establishes the basis for his protagonist’s reaction to the corpse. The clichéd metaphor of the sinking of Fluxman’s heart becomes a potentially literal spatial displacement within his own body that must be willed back into place; Fluxman’s proclivity toward physical dissolution must be consciously guarded against. Certainly, the experience has left him disassociated from his body, a state commonly associated with psychological trauma, but here also suggesting a physiological dislocation and disruption of organic functionality, which further underscores what Tearle thinks of as the mind/body dynamic at the centre of proofreading the text of one’s own body. The invasive and contaminating nature of Fluxman’s interaction with the “disembodied” body is further emphasized by Fluxman reentering his house, the private domestic space meticulously ordered to his preference and the fact that in performing this act he leaves “a trail of slimy footprints on the paraquet—from the right foot only, like a one-legged man—to his study” (210).

Jackson’s assertion that “one of the central thrusts of the fantastic is an attempt to erase

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\(^{26}\) Which is, unsurprisingly, an exact mirroring of Tearle’s anxiety.
distinction itself, to resist separation and difference, to re-discover a unity of self and other” (52) is particularly relevant to this scene. Both the incursion of the muddy liquid into his home (and even more significantly his study where one assumes he performs the important act of proofreading), as well as the comparison its markings draw between Fluxman’s body and that of a one-legged man, highlight the fact that at the core of Tearle’s anxiety regarding the Other is the suspicion that the Other’s presence will dissolve the difference between the self and everything else.

The built environment’s role in the intersectional conceptualization of texts and bodies is foregrounded soon after Fluxman returns to his study when he discovers that the proper alignment of social spaces has not merely shuffled in the world outside his house, but also, and to Tearle just as importantly, within the prescriptive mapping that simultaneously represents and defines the properly sanctioned layout of the city.

Then he took down the last official street guide to Alibia and opened it to Astra Vista, where he lived. He put his finger down on his neighbourhood. The error glared out at him. Where once there had been neat and orderly rows of houses just like his own, there was the Zoological Gardens. Or a chunk of it anyway. Gar… the map said. Gar. The rest seemed to have been left behind on the other side of the city. (210)

The schism of the morpheme here is inextricably linked with the signified space’s literal disconnection from itself, a correspondence suggesting the extent to which, in this world, there exists a direct relationship to signs and the things they represent. In fact, in Fluxman’s universe (the world of Tearle’s imagination) mapping and labelling are not acts of representation at all, but rather the originary things themselves. The relationship between the dual narratives of The Restless Supermarket is highlighted once again, this time by the placement of the spatial schism: the Zoological Gardens. One will remember
that it was at this location that Tearle experienced his moment of “mortal danger” (172) in the face of a categorical racial usurpation of the centre (whiteness) by the periphery (blackness) in the form of what Tearle could only perceive as a misplaced body; and thus it is Zoological Gardens that, in Fluxman’s reality, has become displaced from itself in a fashion that similarly evokes “mortal danger” by its sudden conflation between human and nonhuman categories and spaces. The previously enclosed and caged zones of the zoo have, through the slight linguistic rupture of a single severed word, leaked into the “neat and orderly rows of houses, just like his own” (210). After the hippo attack from the murky waters and the presence of the disfigured corpse, the danger inherent to this relocation of humans into previously demarcated zones of non-entry is apparent: “His old neighbours the Armstrongs, from number 93 across the way, had come off badly: in its new position, their front door opened into the elephants’ enclosure” (211). The schisms and hybrid joinings these alterations manifest establish the central conflict of “The Proofreader’s Derby”: the problem of Fluxman’s response to the bestial nature of chaos.

Fluxman and the Problem of Action or Inaction

Fluxman is again revealed as a representational extension of Tearle’s anxieties transformed into redemptive fantasy in that the moral dilemma at the heart of this affair is Fluxman’s decision to either fight against what has become a literal tide, or to ignore it to focus on preserving his own bubble of ordered space. This choice becomes the central conflict of the narrative. Although the gravity of this decision is mitigated by the eventual realization that the latter is impossible, the narrative’s ethical thrust serves to valorize Tearle’s own “real world” efforts at maintaining linguistic standards in the face of
change, and suggests at least a minor insight on Tearle’s part into the impossibility of drawing a line between private and public conceptions of socio-spatial dynamics, even if his general understanding of private/public delineations remains simplistic and naïve. Indeed, Tearle’s characterization of Fluxman also recalls the disparity between Tearle and his enthusiastic descriptions of the act of proofreading. Essentially, the self that Tearle imagines in the act of proofreading is not the Tearle that one recognizes from reading the novel. Where Tearle is overly cautious, the proofreader is daring (recall that the proofreader is at one point a tightrope artist, at another a minesweeper); whereas Tearle is physically inert, the proofreader is infused with explosive energy; and whereas Tearle is static, the proofreader moves through the space of the text with gymnastic leaps and somersaults. Proofreading then, is the fantasy at the core of Tearle’s insecurities about himself, that which gives him some measure of control over the chaos he finds himself bewildered by and impotent to harness or change. At its heart, “The Proofreader’s Derby” is a fantasy of hypermasculine competence enabled through the act of reading/editing. In line with masculine decisiveness and action, Fluxman’s reaction to the flood is immediate and elicits the beginning of a journey in line with the classical quest narrative: “There was no time to lose; he had vacillated far too long as it was. He must go to Munnery at once” (211). Fluxman packs “maps, spare pencils, sharpeners, the Phone Book, an apple or two, a packet of trail mix, a bag of pistachio nuts, a month’s supply of notepads, a torch, a flask of fresh water, and a loaf of rye bread” (211). This list, in addition to the khakis and boots he dons, forms an odd pastiche between the stuff of proofreading and that of high adventure and even sartorial clichés of exploration. Fluxman’s proofreading endeavours manifest in the form of a trek into the wild, an act
with no small resonance with South African history. It is not long before adventure falls upon him in the form of physical confrontation with a “bandit” (213).

**Fluxman and the Bandit: The Deformed Body as Monstrous Contagion**

This bandit is the living version of the previously encountered corpse, and its body is equally significant, although it additionally bears a linguistic and social component that further reifies the connections being formed, or rather in this case deformed, within the narrative:

A bandit crashed out of the undergrowth. A thickset man in a bottle-green suit, tattered at turn-up and cuff, muddied at the elbow and knee, shoes scuffed to rawhide, belly wobbling between the ripped tails of his shirt. He burst from behind the trees and bore down on Fluxman like some animate guy escaped from the bonfire, grass sticking out of his collar and cuffs, greasy hair standing on end. Close kin to the bobber from the lake. Fluxman fell back brandishing the alpenstock like a club. To his surprise, the creature stumbled to a halt and raised its own hands in surrender. A bloody head, featureless as a turnip, covered with purplish bruises and stiff bristles, raw feet and open hands, panting for air. In one palm, an ear was turned to the wind, in another, a mouth opened and closed like an anemone, trying to form the words. ‘Police,’ it said, ‘police’. (213)

Significantly, this precipitate interlocutor sprouts from the untamed margins of the “undergrowth”, and his movement is described as a “burst” (sporadic, unmeasured, and incautious) from “between the trees”. Given this spontaneity, combined with his “muddied” state and manner of dress (and with grass coming out from under his clothing), he appears to be what Fluxman may have been reduced to when experiencing his own potential moment of inner dislocation, which serves as a reminder of the contagious nature of the threat of disorder. Contagion seems to be Fluxman’s primary
concern when he tells the bandit, “Lay a hand on me… and I shan’t be responsible for what I do to you” (213). This living mirror of the “monstrous bobber” possesses a similarly hybrid and displaced body with hands containing dislocated portions of facial identity and a head like a vegetable, all of which suggest a human/nonhuman form which may have once been separated into proper categories of being and place, but is now reduced to a jumble of parts. This is in keeping with the literary scholar Jeffery Cohen’s take on the monstrous, which he suggests is a “genus too large to be encapsulated in any conceptual system” and whose “very existence [is] a rebuke to boundary and closure” (4), as well as Derrida’s, which suggests that the monstrous is “mutation without tradition or normative precedent” (123). In “Domesticating Monsters: Cartographies of Difference and the Emancipatory City” the cultural theorist Susan Ruddick touches on these ideas of monstrosity, and adds an interesting spatial characteristic by suggesting that a “monster… threatens the city/civilization by raiding or destroying its civic spaces” and further posits that monsters that do so generally “share a common structure in terms of the attributes signaling their difference, the nature of their alterity, and the location of their origin” (28). Ruddick suggests that “We are taught to think of them as appearing both literally and figuratively from beyond the boundaries of the known world” (28) and also that “through contact with the ‘outside’ we bring these monsters into the centres of our worlds… [into] our city spaces…” (29).

This reading of representations of monstrosity is also in line with Jackson’s take on the two major forms of monster myth in fantastic literature: the Frankenstein myth and the Dracula myth. In the first, the source of danger stems from the self, with forbidden knowledge being a common theme (Faust is another example). “The Proofreader’s
Derby”, however, belongs to the second myth type, that of Dracula (zombies are another prevalent example). In this kind of myth “fear originates in a source external to the subject: the self suffers an attack of some sort which makes it part of the other” (58). Like the subversive waters that invade the city of Alibia, what follows is a “sequence of invasion, metamorphosis and fusion, in which an external force enters the subject, changes it irreversibly, and usually gives it the power to initiate similar transformations” (58). This type of myth is “far less easy to contain, far more disturbing in its countercultural thrust” (60), and as mentioned above, threatens to destabilize the borders between the self and the Other.

Adding to this human/nonhuman dissolution of binaries is the creature’s criminality. It is described as a bandit, its appearance is narrativized as a potential or attempted assault, and it is likened to an “animate guy escaped from some bonfire”. These characteristics form what little personality is initially communicated by the bandit, and the Fawkes allusion in particular suggests both a criminal, even conspiratorial, nature but also a likeness to a nonhuman effigy, that is, an imitation of humanity that has somehow been animated and as a result of this unnatural state of animated inanimation has become dislodged from its proper place. In contrast to its (criminal) attributes, the creature’s first utterances, while denotationally nonsensical in terms of a greeting, possess a strong connotation regarding legislated forms of order as applied by the state through institutionalized authority figures. In and of themselves, the repeated utterances of “police” are displaced from a grammatical and situational context which would provide them with more meaning, but they lend themselves to a reading which accepts them as a plea for help, both in light of the bandit’s seeming difficulty with its own state,
but additionally because many of the other utterances it manages to form are pleas for sustenance or employment from Fluxman, whom the bandit soon refers to as “Master”, a label with an obvious racial subtext (214). As much as it is a threat, the bandit is also in dire need of correction and guidance, of the kind of “mastery” provided by men such as Fluxman and Tearle. Later, this paternal supervision is extended outward more generally because, as the narrator informs us sometime later, “… it is the lot of ordinary people that they are seldom aware of the loose threads in the seams of their own lives. And a missing button, as they say in Alibia, leads to a lost coat” (223). The sartorial connection between lives and clothes here enables Tearle to rhetorically underscore his theory regarding the importance of minutiae and in keeping with this, clothes are the first relationship established between a body and its environment; and this relationship is, at its simplest level, one of survival.

Fluxman and the City: The Built Environment as Body (and vice versa)

Given the correlation between human bodies and landscapes encountered thus far, it is hardly surprising that the setting from which the bandit appears is itself an ambiguous pastiche of mashed-up categories. As Fluxman continues on his journey, “Broken things crunched underfoot, as if the madman’s ravings had washed up here—chicken gristle and statuary, pieces of English, A-frames and I-beams28, […] dining room suites, instant dinners, poems” (214). This wanton disarray of linguistic and

27 It may also be an allusion to the naturalized master-slave relationship Robinson Crusoe immediately forms with Friday, itself a kind of idealization of the colonialist’s relationship to the colonized.
28 One may recall Tearle’s letter to the editor and his references to the man wearing a “t-shirt” who lives in an a-frame made entirely of i-beams—an earlier encounter with monstrosity.
physical objects soon falls into sharp contrast with the scene that greets Fluxman as he arrives at his intended destination, which first appears to him as “A rectangle of sunshine traversed by people and cars” (215). The right angles and light, in opposition to jumbled shapes and ambiguous muddy textures, give way to an even more clearly ordered sense of place where the streets and signs all seem to be perfectly congruous with the bodies that inhabit them. For Fluxman, “Everything was running along so smoothly, so perfectly punctuated by parking meters and kiosks, so elegantly phrased into blocks and squares and loading zones, so idiomatically proper, that tears started in his eyes” (215). The obvious use of terms such as “punctuated” and “phrased” suggests that at the core of the built environment’s formal and proper ordering lies a textual blueprint. The emphasis that Tearle places on prescriptive texts and their role in formalist ideations of urban development is soon realized by Fluxman in a spatially inspired metaphor of functional ordering: “The simple truth: stop putting the cart before the horse. Take care of the paperwork, and the world will take care of itself” (228). For Tearle this is evident because he does not draw a distinction between the paperwork (in the case referred to in this quotation, a map of the city which needs to be edited) and the built environment which these prescriptive texts represent. In short, for the city to function in an orderly (and therefore safely, hygienically, organically, and ideal) fashion, it must be properly aligned with the text that prescribes it.

This concrete relationship between texts and urban environments is extended toward the human form when Fluxman notices that, in opposition to the “bobber” and the “bandit”, the denizens of this stretch of the city are in perfect order themselves, that is, their bodies match the environment through which they traverse: “he drank it all in: the
clean swept gutters, the fashionable throngs, the polished sedans. Everything seemed to be in order. Normal, well-proportioned faces met his gaze, eyes the recommended distance apart, brows smooth, noses straight, lips finely moulded, ears in pairs, perfect for supporting spectacles” (215). The clearly indicated correlation between the built environment and the physical proportions of the people within it (as well as their class designations) suggests that the functionality of the human form itself is dependent on the same prescriptive texts from which city spaces originate. A common source of textual origination for bodies and buildings also suggests a static and concrete moment of conceptualization/creation as well as a simplistically harmonious vision of the organic nature of city spaces, all of which fits neatly into Tearle’s understanding of how language is related to the world it represents (or rather creates). Tearle is able to embody his rhetoric when referring to actual signs: “all it took was for the street signs to make one quarter of a turn, anticlockwise, and the city would be clogged with people who had lost their way” (224). Here, the semiotics of urban space lead to an unofficial (and therefore debased) movement of people, a movement that is echoed when Fluxman notices that within the city itself “… buildings had wandered away from their official locations” (221).

**Fluxman and The Walled City**

Tearle and Fluxman share an illustrative concern about the nature of walls as boundaries. Tellingly, a particular moment that inspires Fluxman to action is one centred on the notion that fluctuations within the landscape of the city will literally collide with the people that navigate it. This comes to the forefront when a moved wall causes the
death of a child, an incident brought to the attention of Fluxman by Toyk, a colleague of his in urban planning. The importance of formally demarcating the presence of barriers is highlighted when the narrator tells us that:

As the official responsible for granting licenses and approving plans, Toyk took a particular interest in the city wall, and especially in the preservation of those sections that had survived from antiquity. There was a building regulation expressly prohibiting the erection of any structure that abutted upon the wall. It was clear from the photograph that the law had been broken. (221)

Here is perhaps the most literal articulation of the proper maintenance of walls as boundaries, suggesting many things that we have, by this point, come to expect from Tearle’s spatial imagination. Foremost is the emphasis placed on prescriptive documentation (licenses and plans) and the correlated importance of officiated acts of granting and approving. The connections between these texts, the human acts associated with them, and their significance for the formation and maintenance of the building themselves suggest the central role afforded in Tearle’s mind to acts of proofreading and editing: that is to say, the corrective reading of the urban environment. In keeping with this pattern, the wall has come to Toyk and Fluxman’s attention because its displacement results in the death of a child whose body has been dashed against it, once again underscoring the lethal import of shifting boundaries. Perhaps most significantly, however, is the fact that the wall is a holdover from “antiquity”, a characteristic with important connotations regarding spatial and temporal dimensions of Alibia’s make-up.

Despite being the fictive site of Tearle’s post-apartheid anxieties, Alibia is decidedly not just an allegory for South Africa, but rather, as has been mentioned, also a pastiche of European architectural clichés, a fact which the presence of a city-wall dating back to
antiquity helps to underscore. This tells us two things, one spatial and one temporal, but which are actually two ways of suggesting the same thing. The wall pre-dates apartheid by thousands of years, as do many walls, which indicates that the in/out groupings at the centre of apartheid ideology are neither recent nor particular to apartheid’s socio-spatial project. Similarly, the non-South Africanness of Alibia (despite its elsewhere being a blatant analogy of South Africa) as well as the generalized Europeanness of its border-inducing built environment both suggest that methods of spatial control and the restriction of human movement according to prescriptive categorization are also neither recent nor particular to apartheid.

That is to say, city walls, and their segregational function, are crucial for our original conceptualizations of urbanity, a claim given salience by archeological records that indicate the presence of city walls in the earliest known cities in both Mesopotamia and Europe. Although their defensive utility as a city enclosure no longer exists, the relationship between walls and “cityness” has important spatial ramifications for contemporary urban environments. In *Divided Cities: Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar and Nicosia*, urban development theorists Jon Calame and Esther Charlesworth discuss how the legacy of physical segregation that city walls enacted in antiquity is currently propagated in contemporary efforts of racial, ethnic and cultural segregation, suggesting that:

> Issues of protection, separation, identity, siege, and social unity in the face of recurrent threats have long been linked to the presence of such physical barricades. In this context, divided cities do not present an exception to the rule of urban development, but rather offer a variation on the theme of urban fortification. They are only the latest reminder that the prosperity of cities has always relied on
exclusion and fortification. Wall building is frequently inseparable from city building. (19)

In antiquity, wall building was also frequently inseparable from establishing group identities because of the relationship between those structures and legislative texts that established behavioural codes and rules of human movement. As Calame and Charlesworth posit: “strict boundaries lent a clear meaning to citizenship, since the rules governing social, political, and economic survival inside the city walls were unmistakably different from those shaping the rural tradition” (20). Prescriptive texts therefore had a direct interrelationship with barricades, a correlation that continued long after city walls had given way to more complicated forms of internalized division, such as ghettos and zoning legislation. Essentially, the spatial imagining and in/out group ideology which was foundational for the earliest cities still delineates our popular conception of urban environments. As Calame and Charlesworth put it:

Long after cities had firmly established their ascendency over their hinterland rivals and outgrown their farthest perimeter wall, city managers continued to refine the politics of exclusion and the art of engineering social enclaves. They used every strategy at their disposal: construction of both visible and invisible barricades, activation of voluntary and involuntary boundaries, and exacerbation of real and imaginary intergroup antagonisms. (27)

Tearle’s concern with the proper categorical boundaries of humans and human movement is revealed to be bound up in his longing for a European version of a walled city, although as a South African he remains outside of those walls. Is the nostalgia for Europe that Tearle, a non-European, feels not very similar to the nostalgia for a return to racial homogeneity that propelled apartheid in its foundation and throughout its existence? In short, his appreciation of the walled city aesthetic and ideal is a sub-textual longing for
the carefully demarcated racial zones of apartheid, an indirect nostalgia that, while it might appear to be obvious to some extent, has important ramifications regarding how apartheid is apprehended internationally, and how *The Restless Supermarket* speaks not just to a particular moment within a South African context but to larger issues regarding the representation of social spaces more generally. What I am suggesting here is that by revealing the way in which Tearle is reluctant to admit that he is nostalgic for apartheid directly, and instead expresses an appreciation for the less immediately problematic (and even quaintly archaic) walled city, Vladislavić is gesturing to how similar acts of division are manifested in contemporary modes of city planning. This also stresses how an international audience cannot simply deny being complicit in the systems Tearle admires, simply by virtue of not being South African.

Worth noting is that the sudden, frequently violent, dislocation of the built environment is a common occurrence in the city-gone-bad fantastic urbanscape of Alibia, but, typical of Tearle, this representation of the malleability of the urbanscape is a way of articulating something not about buildings, but rather about the movements of the people who occupy them. Essentially, migrations and (re/dis)locations are represented by Tearle as movements and transformations within the physical make-up of the built environment, but these alternations reflect two disparate and distinct forms of transposition as they represent both the primary conflict Fluxman desires to resolve (un-regulated movements of undesirable peoples) and the solution he enacts to achieve that end (the re-categorization of those spaces/peoples after being relocated back to the margins). On the one hand, both the author Tearle and protagonist Fluxman are perturbed by the movement of peoples from the periphery of urban spaces to the centre, and by the nature of informal
settlements more generally, as the inherent mixing and lack of formal methods of
demarcating social spaces leads to the kind of chaos he fears. The creeping chaos of
Alibia informs Tearle’s narration here: “Blocks of flats turned topsy-turvy, raining down
the occupants and their possessions, and re-established themselves with their roots of
cables and pipes twisted in the air, like so many baobab trees. People found themselves
living on top of one another, cheek by jowl with exactly the types they wanted nothing to
do with” (230). The sense of inversion (the roots twisting in air suggesting a usurpation
of natural order) and displaced bodies, as well as the sudden, forced, and unwanted
physical contact, underscores Tearle’s phobic responses to the migration of previously
segregated peoples into the white zones of Johannesburg, while deflecting racial
implications by referring to the ambiguous categorization of “types”. Although “The
Proofreader’s Derby” is rife with examples, the following moment is particularly
suggestive. A shopping mall suddenly generates a strange sound, as though it has a
basement “full of hippopotamuses” (one will remember the hippo from the opening scene
of “The Proofreader’s Derby” and its attendant symbolism), before suddenly taking
flight:

Hardly had the thought crossed his mind when the store
flew into the air and vanished over the rooftops, scattering
a potpourri of saloon cars and scented girls from the make-
up counters. A flying building! There was a moment of
blank embarrassment, while a cloud of red dust swirled in
the gaping socket. Then something crackled in the distance
and a shanty town appeared on the horizon, just where the
store had diminished into a speck, grew larger with
frightening rapidity, and fell with a crash into the hole. The
impact caused several shacks to collapse, and all the rest to
creak and shiver. Plumes of smoke rose up from the jumble
of corrugated iron and splintery wood, and a river of
moaning and wailing poured out. (235)
The spontaneous exchange between central (inner city mall) and peripheral (shanty town from the outskirts of Alibia) is sudden, violent, ridiculous, nonsensical, fantastical, and filled with thunderous crashings and wailing of human despair. These depictions and their “frightening rapidity” emphasize the presence of the human form in these migrations, but also connote a certain lack of agency, as though the buildings were being flung about the locales of the city by random acts akin to natural disasters. Absent is any comprehension of why it is that marginalized peoples performed massive migrations into the urban centre of Joburg (“Alibia”), or an acknowledgement of the conditions that precipitated and fostered these movements.

**Fluxman and The Fantasy of Final Solutions**

To alleviate the chaos such disruptions incur on Alibia, another form of dislocation is enacted, one that Tearle describes in very different terms, and these disparities reflect how Vladislavić is forming parallels with Tearle’s rhetoric to common tropes within the discourse of city planning more generally. In *Taming the Disorderly City: The Spatial Landscape of Johannesburg after Apartheid*, the urban development theorist Martin J. Murray discusses these rationalizations:

> By constructing the alleged necessity for intervention through the simplifying (and hence distorting) lens of urban renewal and revitalization, real estate developers, city planners, and code enforcement officials are able to rationalize the need for eradication of the places that provide the urban poor with shelter and their means of livelihood, and to justify the displacement of those city dwellers least able to fend for themselves. (5)
Tearle imagines Fluxman and his cohorts exacting such a displacement, except, because of his willingness to conflate buildings and people, he is able to do so without explicitly discussing the effects of this marginalization on the human bodies transposed.

It was Munnery’s idea to remove The Restless Supermarket to the countryside, where they could work on it without fear of injuring passers-by. They had decided to act more circumspectly in such matters, and so the implications of the removal were first examined from every angle. What if it harmed the very people it was meant to help? ... When such questions had been answered to everyone’s satisfaction, the renowned transposer went to work. (245)

Fluxman and his companions move the eponymic Restless Supermarket, where Tearle’s proofreading efforts were previously ignored, to the peripheral space of the city’s margins. Unlike the explosive upheaval of the shopping mall (a dislocation), this planned movement (a relocation) is choreographed by experts, causes no deaths, does not disrupt the everyday life of humans nor kill them, and is a project aimed at providing urban renewal through careful and deliberate acts of proper categorization. In a South African context, this representation parallels the forced removals of inner-city informal settlement dwellers to government settlements, displacements that are a part of the ANC’s plans for urban renewal. Discussing this phenomena, Murray writes:

Armed with their cognitive maps of what a “good city” should be and how it ought to function, [urban planners] have operated with the premise that the physical elimination of blighted buildings, the forcible removal of unauthorized squatters, and the enforcement of city bylaws amount to self-evident, unquestionable, and inevitable prescriptions for bringing about the desired regeneration of the inner-city core. (7)

Tearle’s depiction similarly obscures and justifies the “relocation”, and the singular instance of removing, then re-categorizing the interior of, the Restless Supermarket
becomes a foundational effort for restoring the city to its previous systemic functionality. Tearle writes that “The campaign to recapture the Restless Supermarket had been intended as a trial run to prepare the members for the war of attrition that lay ahead, and it achieved that end. ... What remained now was to repeat the point over and over again on a grander and grander scale” (250). Eventually, despite the absence of human forms in this process, its results are described in terms of proper delineations between human bodies and the social spaces they inhabit when Tearle writes,

The displaced masses of Alibia had flung down their makeshift houses in the buffer zones: now the appropriate social distance could be restored between the haves and the have-nots, the unsightlier settlements shifted to the peripheries where they would not upset the balance, the grand estates returned to the centre where they belonged. (250-251)

Knowing that this return to the proper in/out group formations of Alibia is due to the reorganization of the Restless Supermarket, Fluxman realizes that ultimately, “… it was no more difficult, and indeed no more important, than the sorting and packing and pricing of boxes and tins on a shelf” (251). At this point, the dehumanizing effects of Tearle’s utopian fantasy become as apparent as his desire to obscure the violence inherent in the processes of removal. His rhetoric, however, concerning these groupings of people and the boundaries that maintain them is always couched in a basic concern for human well-being and, tellingly, his preoccupations with order are idealized in the human form.

Tearle’s desire for the perfect human body to “proofread” is disturbingly rendered in the only truly erotic scene in the novel. Fluxman, in a dream, has sex with an ex-girlfriend, and his fingers become “upsilons” while his lover’s thighs are “parenthetical curves”, her nipples “full stops”, and so on (244). Well-ordered punctuation, proper
punctuation, establishes the desired human frame, the kind of body represented by the
“normal well-proportioned faces” with “eyes the recommended distance apart” that
Fluxman sees all about him in the city of Alibia. But another, more subtle, connotation is
also being evoked here. If the ideal human body is framed by punctuation, that is, if the
body is delineated by black marking, then it follows that the skin of that body is white, as
in paper. The space between those marks, the substance of the body, is whiteness. Tearle
claims that “The most beautiful and mysterious of all the proofreader’s charms is the
delete mark: ¶” (187). Tearle adds, “Make it nothing the mark insists. Plunge it in a white
hole, where it will vanish forever. Paint it the colour of this little swatch: paper white on
paper white” (188). The beauty of the delete mark rests on its purity, its ability to render
whiteness, its erasure of blackness. This mark is a sign through which “an endless
quantity of bad copy has been passed and voided. Spoilt material, repetitious and dull
verbiage, misplaced stops, misspellings, solecisms, anacolutha. Throw them in, sear
them, make them hop. Keep our country beautiful” (188). The final line gets at the larger
picture. While “keep our country beautiful” is a common phrase regarding the proper
disposal of waste, Tearle’s major concern regarding South Africa is the collapse of ethnic
boundaries. In the erasure of text in favour of paper, blackness is aligned with waste, with
error, and with degeneration; it is deleted in favour of the singular presence of whiteness,
in the face of which the possibility for error, for slippage, for deviations and
misreadings—in short, for contamination—is ultimately eradicated. Tearle’s aesthetic
appreciation of absence is therefore not only a penchant for a misguided form of racial
“purity” but the negation of physicality itself, which cuts to his distaste for the liquidity
of human bodies. In the culmination of the intercourse, Fluxman composes “every square
word of her into a perfectly ordered meaning, into a sentence that meant exactly what it said” (245). This climactic moment of desire accentuates Tearle’s idealized representation of language, as any slippage between meaning and saying is dissipated and all that remains is pure and uncontaminated form and theme coexisting in the same space/text/body.

Saying Goodbye

From “The Proofreader’s Derby”, The Restless Supermarket transitions to “The Goodbye Bash”, the party that marks the closing of the Café Europa where Tearle plans what will prove to be an unsuccessful unveiling of “The Proofreader’s Derby” to his fellow patrons (unsuccessful in that he is incapable of going through with it). The metaphorical connotations of the closing of the Café Europa are readily apparent, with Tearle even exclaiming (ironically, given that he’s dismissing the idea), “You’d think it was a farewell do for me” (259). Indeed, the novel’s closing serves as an ambiguous departure for Tearle, and we leave him reflecting on the urbanscape of Johannesburg and his place within it.

I want to focus on just a couple of moments here that mesh succinctly with the thematic avenues I have been exploring thus far, the first of which is the “offstage” death of Merle. Throughout the novel, Tearle is beset by, not unrequited, but rather unexpressed affection for Merle, whose vivaciousness, intelligence, and simple kindness both attract and inspire Tearle in his rare moments of introspection. Her absence at the goodbye bash is something of a “The Beast in the Jungle” moment that Tearle never fully acknowledges, just as he never overtly states his affection for her, even within his own
narrative. He does, however, finally realize that his obsession with linguistic standards is directly connected to his fear of death:

Then it bore in upon me, unavoidable and crushing, like some juggernaut with ‘How am I driving?’ carved into its treads. Death itself was the greatest decline in standards of all. That was the certainty I’d been trying to evade. And expiring was just the beginning: unpleasant as it was, it was infinitely more palatable than the decomposition to which it led. (269)

One remembers the “How am I driving?” bumper sticker from the van that inspired Tearle to fantasize about his own death earlier, and the goodbye bash comes to remind him of his own mortality in a myriad of ways, including providing a mirror image, within his own body, of the corpse from the opening pages. The connection between death via the disintegration of the human frame with “standards” has been woven throughout The Restless Supermarket, but its direct evocation here helps to set up the final moments of the novel. Before jumping ahead, however, the goodbye bash itself deserves our consideration.

If “The Proofreader’s Derby” is a conservative fantasy of containing a Bakhtinian-carnivalesque inversion of social hierarchies within Alibia, then “The Goodbye Bash” (both the section of the novel and the event itself) is a conservative nightmare of that same carnival playing out in Joburg proper, with many of Tearle’s phobias coming together at once. Tearle is roundly castigated for his abusive behaviour towards his fellow patrons of the café, then forgiven by the same, and then, in a moment of levity, both he and the other white people in attendance are jokingly mobbed and held down to have their faces painted black with polish by their nonwhite friends. After being painted black by his fellow patrons, Tearle looks around: “The Café was barely
recognizable. They had turned it upside down. Nothing but black faces on every side.

Who were the invaders? The newcomers? The old regulars? One couldn’t work out who was who anymore. I felt abandoned by friend and foe alike” (303). While Tearle elsewhere fetishizes uniformity, this moment illuminates the extent to which totalizing homogenization is actually a source of profound anxiety for him, particularly homogenization of the “wrong” type. This prevalent and, in this moment, unifying blackness is contrasted against his earlier fantasy of the deletion of all difference depicted in the total whiteness (or rather, blankness) of the human form, a juxtaposition that evokes a threatening inversion (upside down), a reversal of the course of human correction (blackness deleted into whiteness) that erases the ready-made delineations Tearle uses to organize his sense of self in relation to others. Tearle’s prevailing concern with human bodies causes him to conflate them with the spaces they inhabit, so it is not surprising that his anxiety moves him to a representation of the urban environment featuring his favourite imagined city, Alibia: “The sea was spilling over the breakwater in the Bay of Alibia. The other walls were streaming too. What was this liquid? Some frightful solvent in which all things would float and dissolve, gradually losing their shape and running into one another. A solution of error” (304). In a reconfiguring of Fluxman’s flood, the sea, the jungle, the unformed or formless space, devoid of purpose or intent, is invading the solid, structured demarcations of human space, enacting the dissolution of boundaries; in essence, the “out” attributes of my map of Tearle’s spatial imagination are flooding the “in”. Here, again, is Tearle’s fear of disorder catalyzed by invasive and contagious mixing, and the borders of the built environment against this chaos are collapsed by a failure to properly categorize the textual markers of the human form (skin
colour, race, ethnicity, class), and, again, those erosions are symbolized by the mixing and dissolving attributes of liquid in opposition to solid and structural forms. This process of things “gradually losing their shape and running into one another” recalls the similar “solution of error” Tearle previously evoked at the moment of his imagined death under the tires of the lorry, where his bodily fluids mingle together with no distinction of vintage, and where the interruption of organic order results in a wet and meaningless cessation of existence.

While the other white patrons of the café laugh in response to the spontaneous face painting, Tearle turns defensive to the point of violence. He reaches for a pool cue, causing an eruption of chaos, during which he is stabbed in the chest. Looking down at his body, knife still protruding, Tearle thinks, “Black and white and read all over” (306). This joke of Tearle’s, as he lies with a knife in what he imagines to be his chest (but is really his Oxford Companion dictionary), is a call back to the corpse from the opening of the novel, whose racial ambiguity and blanket of newspaper (the textual equivalent here of the skewered dictionary, and one that evokes a similar joke) both echo and refract Tearle’s current condition. These corpses, each literal and figurative in a myriad of ways, serve as bookends to the novel, with Tearle at last becoming the corpse that he previously envisioned as being the result of minor deviations from hierarchical decorum, indeed, becoming the corpse he’s feared becoming since the outset of the novel. Just as the corpse lies in the ruins of Johannesburg, Tearle now lies in the ruins of Joburg-miniature: the newly racially ambiguous, mixed, and physically eroded social space of the Café Europa. He doesn’t, however, die.
Instead, Tearle is, fittingly, saved by his pocket dictionary and is in no danger of becoming a corpse at all. In place of a death scene, the novel ends with Tearle looking over the city from his apartment window, in a moment that nevertheless evokes the decomposition of the city and Tearle’s place within it:

The lights of motor town lay before me, the highways coiled like cables on the matt black of the mining wasteland, and beyond them the southern suburbs, the buffer zones, filling up with informal settlements, and the townships. Movements were afoot in these dark spaces that would never be reflected in the telephone directories. Languages were spoken there that I’d never put to proof. As if they were aware of it themselves, the lights were not twinkling, as lights were supposed to do, they were squirming and wriggling and writhing, like maggots battening on the foul proof of the world. (338-339)

The built environment is a text, a “foul proof”, and a body in the latter stages of decomposition that is being consumed as it decomposes, and Tearle’s final moment in the novel is spent bemoaning the marginal spaces that his reach will never grasp, the movements and utterances that will remain forever out of his sphere of editorial influence. The three points of Tearle’s spatial imagination come together once more, in what amounts to, at last, an admission of defeat. Some critics read this admission as a moment of hope, particularly Gaylard who posits that, “Here Tearle is closest to admitting that his way of understanding the world is limited, and that it is his death that will be the compost for new life and energy. A character able to see this, and possibly to change despite his rigidity, invites the understanding of the reader” (“Postcolonial Satire” 145). While I agree with Gaylard’s general sentiment, my reaction to Tearle’s final moment is that even as he admits defeat, he is unable to imagine himself out of the boundaries he has set within his spatial cognition; he is, as it were, going down with the
ship, and the disgust and antipathy with which he views the vitality of Johannesburg does not actually suggest the possibility of hope for change, but rather the certainty of damnation for those incapable of doing so. If there is hope, it is a hope in the maggots and the potential therein for rebirth, for a new way of imagining and being in Johannesburg, but that future is largely lost to Aubrey Tearle.

**Tearle’s Spatial Imagination as a Critique of Simplifying Representations**

The next chapter will discuss how Vladislavić’s works, specifically *The Folly* and *The Exploded View*, further connect Tearle’s worldview to aspects of urban development, urban planning, and representing/imagining city spaces in South Africa. Tearle’s predilection for closed systems, for in/out group dynamics, and for linguistic stasis will serve as a foundation of sorts for further exploring these two novels, but before turning to them it remains crucial to underline some significant models for imagining complex social relationships that Tearle elides in favour of a kind of “unified theory” of human interaction. In doing so, I will be discussing the difference between complicated and complex systems as outlined by Brian Walker and David Salt in *Resilience Thinking: Sustaining Ecosystems and People in a Changing World*.29

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29 Of late, “resilience theory” has come under fire, in no small part because of the ease with which its positions have been appropriated by neoliberal agendas that place the responsibility of survival in the hands of the oppressed and encourage “resilience” at the expense of resistance (and also at the expense of social programs aimed at alleviating poverty). For some critical responses to how resilience rhetoric has been appropriated to these ends, see Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper’s “Genealogies of Resilience: From Systems Ecology to the Political Economy of Crisis Adaptation” (2011) and Brad Evans and Julian Reid’s *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously* (2014). Brian Walker and David Salt are careful to stress the amoral nature of resilience, that is, to suggest that its adoption does not render any given system more desirable. In fact a fascist government, for instance, could be highly resilient and its citizenry the worse off for it. My own work is less concerned with the debates on resilience and more centered on
I would posit that at the heart of Tearle’s concern for a singular system of truth and truth making lies an investment in social optimization: that is, in generating efficiency in the policy and management of urban social spaces in such a way that the “Truth” (read: Tearle’s own value system) fosters and maintains a narrow range of interests, ostensibly for the good of everyone. Salt and Walker take issue with this approach to management suggesting that:

… there is no sustainable “optimal” state of an ecosystem, a social system, or the world. It is an illusion, a product of the way we look at and model the world. It is unattainable; in fact it is counterproductive, and yet it is a widely pursued goal. It is little wonder, then, that problems arise. And when they do, rather than question the validity of the model being applied, the response has been to attempt to exert even greater control over the system. In most cases this exacerbates the problem or leaves us with a solution that comes with too high a cost to be sustained. (8)

Although not addressing apartheid directly, this is what happens when ideological systems of repression run the course of their ability to control their subjects, and apartheid’s demise mirrors Salt and Walker’s premise. In place of modeling social management resources according to unitary optimal visions, Salt and Walker propose an appreciation of, and tolerance for, complexity. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, moral responsibility to the Other may be founded upon a process of accommodation that includes the alienation of the self from the centre; in a similar fashion, Salt and Walker stress the extent to which we must be able to operate outside of rigid, systemic models of categorization and control.

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30 In this sense, Tearle’s indirect justifications of apartheid rule are not unlike the utilitarian rationalizations of slavery that were popular in the eighteenth century.
In essence, the thematic import of *The Restless Supermarket* is that city spaces are properly understood as complex adaptive systems as opposed to complicated systems. The difference between complex adaptive systems and complicated systems is explained by Walker and Salt using two metaphorical realms, “cogworld” and “bugworld”.

Cogworld is a system composed of a great many parts that are interrelated to one another in a cause and effect sense with linear progression. One might imagine a vast network of cogs working together to some mechanised end, although other metaphors, such as a computer program, will also suffice. One of the central attributes of a cogworld is that an input may be placed into the system and have a particular effect. It may be difficult to discern that effect because the system may be intensely complicated; however, that effect or output is the result of a cohesive and functional system of causes and effect, and if one has access to the right set of data, one will be able to determine this system entirely. When dealing with cogworlds, or complicated systems, one can hope to achieve specific effects with specific stimulus, as the relationships between things (think here of Tearle’s conceptualization of linguistics) is finite and direct. Bugworld, on the other hand, is a world populated not by cogs but by, wait for it… bugs. Some groups are only loosely connected to others, each system is dependent on the relations among elements that may or may not be working in cohesion with a larger totalizing system of functionality, and different bugs or subsystems of bugs may react differently to different modifications that enter the environment. Full predictability is not possible, and approaching the system with predictability in mind becomes a detriment as opposed to an asset. Unlike cogworld, bugworld “is not a simple system but a complex adaptive system in which it’s impossible to predict emergent behaviour by understanding separately its component subgroups”
In essence, bugworld, and complex adaptive systems generally, are, when compared to complicated systems, a more accurate way of understanding the organizational reality of ecosystems, economies, societies, and even individual minds. Certainly, the built environment of any given city is a complex adaptive system. And yet “most of our management is based on the cogworld metaphor” (35). Tearle’s worldview relies on the idea that humans and the social spaces they inhabit can best be viewed as a complicated system whose underlying mechanistic reliability is the result of the congruity between sign and signified in the prescriptive texts of urban planning, and on an even more basic level the congruity between words and the world they represent. Once again I will emphasize my position: given that Tearle, like the majority of urban planners, relies on this systemic formulation of the world to maintain a coherent and stable sense of self, the criticism of his worldview within The Restless Supermarket is directed neither merely at him nor apartheid, but at larger, contemporary, and multivarious ideological modes of representing, thinking about, and creating social spaces.
Chapter 3

Diagrams and Blueprints: Dismantling Prescriptive Texts in *The Folly* and *The Exploded View*

I ended the last chapter by discussing the concept of complicated as opposed to complex modes of sociospatial representation and Aubrey Tearle’s own proclivity for representing urban environments in terms of closed systems. I also connected Tearle’s spatial imagination and his attendant proclivity for singular conceptions of “truth” with his parallel concern with social optimization. In essence, Tearle’s idea of social optimization is a way of representing and creating “efficiency” in development practices in such a way that what is enacted (or would be enacted) actually serves a narrow range of interests (his), while ostensibly operating for the benefit of a wider, common good. Tearle’s lack of introspection means that he is unable to comprehend this process in relation to the biases and anxieties that shape it. This chapter will cover *The Folly* and *The Exploded View*, taking where I left off with Tearle as a starting point. Before delving into these texts, however, we must more fully illustrate Vladislavić’s critiques of urban development theory via the term “development” itself, which has become so ubiquitous a word and a discipline that its meanings and virtues are largely taken for granted. Interrogating the general conceptualizations commonly associated with “development” and “development theory” will provide a foundation with which to read the two novels covered by this chapter. In order to do so (and to better illustrate the interrelationship between acts of representation typical of urban planning and systemic ways of
conceptualizing human behaviour) I will be briefly referring to the works of James Ferguson and Tania Murray Li.

**Development: The Anti-Politics Machine**

In *The Anti-Politics Machine: “Development,” Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, published in 1990, James Ferguson forms a critique of the concept of “development” in a general sense, based largely on case studies in the Thaba-Tseka Development Project in Lesotho from 1975–1984, with which he was directly involved. He begins by positing that “development” has become “a dominant problematic or interpretive grid through which the impoverished regions of the world are known to us” (xiii). Ferguson further suggests that “development” has a central position in the cultural imagination in the way that “civilization” had in the nineteenth century, or “God” had in the twelfth (xiii), such that it is so commonly accepted in contemporary discourse that serious interrogations of its meaning have been largely elided. Ferguson acknowledges that “development” can mean different things to different people and within different contexts, but argues that there is a dominant interpretation which is rarely threatened by diverging conceptualizations/articulations of the term, and it is this dominant interpretation upon which his argument is centred. Ferguson accurately points out that, “if ‘development’ is… from time to time challenged, it is still almost always challenged in the name of ‘real development’. Like ‘goodness’ itself, ‘development’ in our time is a value so firmly entrenched that it seems almost impossible to question it, or to refer to any standard beyond its own” (xiv). Ferguson, like any good anthropologist, is
concerned with how ideas and discourses have very real social consequences and
discusses the problematic of “development” in a section worth quoting at length:

Within this interpretive grid, a host of everyday observations are rendered intelligible and meaningful. Poor countries are by definition “less developed,” and the poverty and powerlessness of the people who live in such countries are only the external signs of this underlying condition. The images of the ragged poor of Asia thus become legible as markers of a stage of development, while the bloated bellies of African children are the signs of social as well as nutritional deficiency. Within this problematic, it appears self-evident that debtor Third World nation-states and starving peasants share a common “problem,” that both lack a single “thing”: “development.” (xiii)

Here Ferguson parses out the rhetoric surrounding development in terms of nation-states; it is, however, easy to see a parallel dynamic playing out within the borders of a nation like South Africa where, thanks to the largely unmitigated adoption of neoliberal socioeconomic policies, the grotesque inequity fostered by apartheid has yet to abate in any meaningful sense, despite two decades of democracy (Hein Marais, South Africa Pushed 208). Just as in Ferguson’s example, the problems of South Africa are commonly discussed/represented in terms of developed as opposed to undeveloped sites of settlement, with formal (i.e., regulated, mapped, and legislated) settlements being more directly involved with contemporary neoliberal economic processes aimed at creating development than the “informal” ones. This internal dichotomy represents particular groups as a series of problems incapable of (re)solving themselves and therefore necessitates the intervention of an expert class of concerned urban developers into the
lives, and spatial dynamics, of un(der)developed peoples.\(^{31}\) Tania Li, in *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development and the Practice of Politics*, names this desire to mitigate inequity through a relationship defined by the problematic of development with the eponymous phrase “the will to improve”.

**The Will To Improve**

Li is attracted to development theory in no small part because of what she perceives as “the inevitable gap between what is attempted and what is accomplished” (1). Her basic line of inquiry involves determining how and why so many programs (she would suggest nearly all of any significant ambition) conceived through the lens of “development” fail to enact their goals and why, despite these failures, the core concepts shaping these processes remain unchallenged. Li’s work is complicated and her scope far-ranging; for the purposes of the project at hand, however, I will be honing in on both her portrayal of the expert class alluded to by Ferguson, whom she terms “trustees”,\(^ {32}\) as well as her attendant concept of “rendering technical”. Li posits that a trustee is “… a position defined by the claim to know how others should live, to know what is best for them, to know what they need. ... The objective of the trusteeship is not to dominate others—it is to enhance their capacity for action, and to direct it” (5). Trustees once included colonial officials and missionaries, and now include politicians, city planners,

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\(^{31}\) See also James C. Scott’s *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998) wherein Scott makes the argument, similar to Ferguson’s, that centrally managed social agendas fail when they impose systemic and generalized ideologies onto complex interdependencies.

\(^{32}\) A term I will be employing for the remainder of this thesis.
developers, NGOs, international aid donors, and specialists in a variety of fields. This concept is significant to Vladislavić’s critique of development for a number of reasons.

The first is that this position of knowledge (the Foucaultian roots are palpable here, and his definition of “government” is central to Li’s argument) is inherited by a number of Vladislavić’s characters. Certainly, Tearle’s characterization, as discussed in the previous chapter, would be emblematic of such a persona, one who is convinced of the certainty of his own knowledge regarding how others should live their lives. This is to say, Tearle, as any good trustee, largely conceptualizes his relationships to others not in terms of domination, but in terms of directing the actions of others to ends that serve what he perceives as their own well-being. The distinction between “domination” and “enhancing… capacity for action” is important to Tearle because it obscures the colonial and apartheid roots of his desire for the proper maintenance of modes of human behaviour/movement. Which leads to the second significant aspect of Li’s definition: the way in which positions of knowledge formation and expertise previously performed by figures such as colonial officials and missionaries are now occupied by city planners, developers, politicians, etc. These figures, under the guise of development, perform a similar erasure to Tearle’s, and their rhetorical methods serve to similarly distance them from the colonial forms of power upon which they are in fact relying in order to preserve their trustee status. Li’s definition also lends support to my reading of Vladislavić’s general critique as being one that transcends a narrow focus on apartheid because the rubric of the trustee relationship regarding undeveloped peoples points toward a dynamic that, while certainly encapsulated by apartheid, both predates and survives the South African apartheid regime.
Li suggests that two practices are performed in order to “translate the will to improve into explicit programs” (7). The first step is problematization, which she defines as simply “identifying deficiencies that need to be rectified” (7). The second and tandem practice is a term Li borrows from Nikolas Rose, “rendering technical”. Rose, in *Powers of Freedom*, defines rendering technical as not a single practice, but a series of practices representing “the domain to be governed as an intelligible field with specifiable limits and particular characteristics… defining boundaries, rendering that within them visible, assembling information about that which is included and devising techniques to mobilize the forces and entities thus revealed” (33). Of particular import here is the act of representing the governable domain in terms of intelligibility within specific limitations, a characteristic of imagining socio-spatial processes in line with Salt and Walker’s “cogworld” concept and a way of thinking, I have suggested, that is in keeping with Tearle’s conceptualization of Johannesburg. This form of representation achieves two important things. First, it renders the built environment closed and predictable in a way that lends itself to systemic approaches and solutions.\(^{33}\) Second, it establishes a hierarchy of relationships within the process of development because, as Li tells us, “… the practice of ‘rendering technical’ confirms expertise and constitutes the boundary between those who are positioned as trustees, with the capacity to diagnose deficiencies in others, and those who are subject to expert direction” (7). Not only does the process of rendering technical erect and maintain the hierarchal distinction between the “underdeveloped” and the “trustee” in a kind of doctor/patient relationship, but it also encourages an objectified

\(^{33}\) For a detailed rendering of this effect, see Herbert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow’s *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (1982) and Timothy Mitchell’s *Rule of Experts: Egypt Techno-politics and Modernity* (2002).
representation of development, one that obscures political and social realities. In essence, by representing social and economic realities as closed systems, the trustee figure is cast as an objective observer/expert whose analysis and subsequent diagnoses are based on a survey of fact. This is to say, the ostensible neutrality of the clinical trustee is enforced by the “common sense” notion that one knows what “development” is, that “development” is a good thing, and that the trustee is merely attempting to provide development to improve the lives of those whose lack of development prevents them from helping themselves. However, as Li points out “… the claim to expertise in optimizing the lives of others is a claim to power, one that merits careful scrutiny” (5), particularly because “trustees use a particular population’s failure to improve… as rationales for their dispossession, and as a justification to assign resources to people who will make better use of them” (21). Li’s position here obviously links her concerns to Foucault’s conceptions regarding the creation and maintenance of institutional power hierarchies, but she is more interested in resistance than Foucault, and much of her work examines “the conditions under which expert discourse is punctured by a challenge it cannot contain; moments when the targets of expert schemes reveal, in word or deed, their own critical analysis of the problems that confront them” (11). In achieving this end, Li spends considerable time connecting the discourse surrounding expertise with colonial modes of power, which once again underlines how these power formations are neither new nor particular to apartheid South Africa.

Vladislavić’s Critique
Li’s stated aim here is a worthy one and she executes it admirably, but Vladislavić’s approach varies from hers significantly, particularly regarding the starting point of the critique. While Li examines the ways in which expert discourse is resisted by the targets of its development schemes, Vladislavić’s work illuminates the ways in which the subjectivities inhabiting trustee status are themselves betrayed by their dependence on systemic modes of spatial representation/imagination, ways of thinking that limit their capacity to engage with their surrounding urban environment in a productive and healthy fashion. As such, Vladislavić’s novels do not follow the progress of a particular development project from start to finish, nor catalogue such an event’s successes against its failures, but instead provide intimate perspectives on how manifesting a “cogworld” spatial imagination leads one to deeply problematic inter-personal dynamics—an angle of urban development criticism that is at once deeply novel, desperately needed, and perhaps best provided by fiction.

Both The Folly and The Exploded View, the novels published just before and after The Restless Supermarket, provide a number of such perspectives and are read in tandem here because of how they allow for a reading that expands upon the thematic thrust of the previous chapter while simultaneously complementing one another. Additionally, both The Folly and The Exploded View relate the difficulties experienced by men who misread various prescriptive texts of the urban landscape and in doing so simplify the city they live in. Vladislavić’s rendering of these inner lives reveals a series of struggles centred on comprehending basic relationships with social space through practices of representation, particularly plans, diagrams, and mapping. In other words, each of the protagonists, to a greater or lesser extent, fails to organize reality according to systemic precepts that they
hope will help stabilize the social spaces in which they find themselves. Therefore, this chapter will treat these novels together because of their thematic focus, but in different parts, as my intention is to perform distinct close readings as opposed to the compare and contrast structure of the fourth chapter. Part A will be dedicated to *The Folly*, and Part B to *The Exploded View*.

I will be treating *The Folly* first, in part because it is Vladislavić’s first novel, but more significantly because it so adroitly outlines many of the themes I wish to address. A first novel is still a first novel, however, and by my estimation it lacks some of the subtlety and nuance that define his subsequent work. *The Folly*, first published in 1993, the year before the official end of apartheid, is the story of two suburbanite Joburgers, Mr. and Mrs. Malgas, who find that a homeless man by the name of Nieuwenhuizen (literally “new house” in Dutch), has taken up residence in the empty lot adjacent to their own. “New House” has plans for a new house, and soon the couple find their own lives enmeshed in his machinations.
Part A: The Folly of Spatial Imagination as Replacement for Action

Beginning on the Verge

The novel begins: “Nieuwenhuizen stood on the verge, in the darkness, looking down the street. In one hand he held a brown imitation-leather portmanteau; in the other some small, cold coins given to him by a taxi-driver moments before. The tail lights of the taxi flared up at the end of the street, and vanished” (1). *The Folly* opens with a moment of transition between settings, a mundane in medias res instant that, despite its seeming banality, adroitly captures Nieuwenhuizen’s liminality and changeability, his inherent otherness that is dependent on his spatial placing. The previous setting is not depicted and is only referred to. It remains forever deeper in the “darkness” from which/where he has freshly emerged, despite his present placement on “the verge”. His position on the street gestures to the nature of his sudden appearance and the dependence of this appearance on transportation infrastructure. In his hands he bears the markings of both his class and his nomadicism, although perhaps distinguishing between the two is arbitrary in this case. His luggage (a cheap imitation), containing his sole belongings as far as can be determined, is indicative of his lack of material wealth, while the small cold coins in his other hand register his lack of vehicle ownership (as does the departing taxi) and the scarcity of his monetary capital. He is immediately established as poor, as an outsider, and as a new arrival.

The second setting, the current, present setting, is also quickly established and delineated, and, just as with many of Vladislavić’s works, this setting will prove to be much more than a backdrop or contextual frame; it will become the centre of the story.
around which the characters revolve and through which they communicate with one another:

Nieuwenhuizen turned to the plot. It was smaller than he’d been led to believe, no more than an acre, and overgrown with tall grass and weeds. The land was bound on two sides by an unruly hedge, breaking against the night sky, and on a third by a prefabricated cement wall with panels in the shape of wagon-wheels. The fourth side, where he found himself, had once been fenced off from the street: the remains of this frontier – crumpled scrolls of barbed wire, a gate, some clubfooted wooden posts in concrete boots – lay all around. (1)

Given Vladislavić’s penchant for representing spaces as texts (and vice versa) it is tempting to see a double meaning in Nieuwenhuizen’s “turn to the plot”. What is of more importance, however, are the details of the plot itself, characteristics that present two potential, and seemingly contradictory, ways of looking at this space and Nieuwenhuizen’s relationship to it. On the one hand, the space is still open, an “overgrown” and weedy wasteland with little to nothing of value within its borders. Peter Horn, in “A House/A Story Hanging by a Thread: Ivan Vladislavić’s The Folly” posits that “The plot itself – ‘smaller than he had been led to believe’, [is] obviously a parody of the ‘wide open spaces of the colonial novel’” (80). Parodic intent notwithstanding, the plot’s untamed nature grants Nieuwenhuizen a kind of status as surveyor/explorer, and his ensuing quest to tame this landscape and to hoist from its meager provisions a home for himself puts his desires and actions in line with the South African mythos contained

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34 The genre being parodied is also the “plaasroman” or Afrikaans farm novel, which is intimately connected with the colonial novel. Some familiarity with these genres is being assumed in my analysis, but for an excellent essay on the genre and its relationship to English language farm novels from South Africa, see J.M. Coetzee’s aptly titled “Farm Novel and Plaasroman in South Africa”. (1986)
in such historical narratives as The Great Trek,\textsuperscript{35} narratives that were intimately connected with South Africa’s colonization. The cement wall with panels in the shape of wagon wheels provides an image strongly connotative of such endeavours. This image of settlement and its associated rugged and hard-fought freedom is part of the property’s bounding structure, and ironically (as Horn points out above) delimits the space as opposed to opening it up. The presence of walls therefore illustrates the second characteristic of the plot: the newness of its accessibility.

On the fourth side, where Nieuwenhuizen finds himself, lie the remains of a shattered barrier, with “crumpled scrolls of barbed wire, a gate” and some fence posts. The remnants of a broken barrier suggest that this space is newly open to Nieuwenhuizen which further implies that this space is a microcosm of sorts of South Africa’s more general sociospatial transition at the time this novel was produced. In short, the walls are falling in South Africa, and new avenues of human migration and settlement are becoming reified. These overlapping and seemingly contrasting readings of the plot as early colonial project and the result of human migrations brought about by the demise of apartheid are not accidental or the result of an indelicate smattering of self-contradictory imagery, but rather a key characteristic of the setting and one crucial to understanding the underlying symbology of the novel.

\textsuperscript{35} The Great Trek was a migration of Boer people to the East and to the North from the Cape Colony during the 1830’s and 40’s, largely to escape British imperial hegemony. The Great Trek (or Treks) is a major historical-myth in the founding of apartheid-era South Africa and a source of patriotic and national pride to Afrikaans culture. \textit{The Great Treks: The Transformation of Southern Africa 1815-1854} by Norman Etherington is a good source of information regarding this period and its importance to contemporary national representations of South Africa.
Reimagining South Africa

_The Folly_ is deeply critical of the process of “reimagining” social spaces insofar as representation, while a potential (and only a potential) starting point for further action, should not be conflated or confused with this action. In _The Folly_, reimagining social spaces is neither an end in itself nor an adequate fulcrum around which to reconfigure spatial dynamics of socioeconomic and political relationships. Hence, the eponymous “folly” is the process of conflating (re)imaginings and (re)presentations (the house “built” of string) with actual changes in the built environment (the imagined house as an ontologically real structure), a mistake that is popular with urban development/design theorists because it suggests that a kind of perpetual malleability is an inherent characteristic of urban landscapes. This perceived changeability lends itself to rationalizations/justifications of multifold reimaginings while obscuring the tenacity of entrench dynamics of human movement in any given setting, and is largely responsible for the frequent failure of Li’s aforementioned “will to improvement” within urban planning. By portraying the empty plot with imagery evocative of both South Africa’s colonial past and South Africa’s contemporary mode of transition, Vladislavić deftly undermines any easy or convenient distancing of those two ways of thinking about space. As a result, this novel can be read as a critique of both apartheid-era spatial imaginings, as well as the naivety of imagining that a “New South Africa”\(^\text{36}\) could come into being merely through representation and desire. It is more, however, than a critique that works on both modes; it is also a critique that closes the distance between the two, suggesting that colonial-era spatial discourses neither rose, nor perished, with apartheid. Instead, as I

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\(^{36}\) Although this term has since fallen out of popularity, it was very much in the public imagination at the time _The Folly_ was written and published.
have previously argued, Vladislavić’s work traces the lineage of the spatial ideologies of apartheid to the roots of European colonialism and beyond while simultaneously suggesting that the collapse of apartheid will not mean a de facto cessation of these ideologies in the “new” South Africa.

Scholars have variously argued that The Folly depicts either South Africa’s apartheid past or South Africa’s post-apartheid future. Others have argued that the novel’s allegorical thrust is adaptable to a wide variety of potential readings and that the novel’s postmodern underpinnings simply do not allow for a more concentrated focalization around a specific critique. Ivor Powell, in his article “Postmodern Castles in the Air” suggests that

… there is no single metaphor or allegory being pursued in The Folly. In appropriately postmodern fashion it explores a variety of not necessarily connected possibilities within a basic symbolic structure. So, at one moment the book makes you think that you are reading about the fears that the privileged landowning South Africans felt about a democratic future. At another, the text explores the possibilities of a reading related to the histories and processes of colonialism. (73)

Such readings do, I think, demonstrate a healthy respect for the complexity of the text, but undermine the novel’s critical import by rendering it overly ambiguous. Bucking this trend, Gerald Gaylard has argued for a reading of the novel in which Nieuwenhuizen is representative of apartheid, a reading that is both specific and contrary to the more popular take on the house being a vision for/of post-apartheid South Africa. In “Fossicking in the House of Love: Apartheid Masculinity in The Folly” Gaylard writes that “Nieuwenhuizen represents the apartheid state and its visions of construction, order, and systematicity” (86). I generally agree with this statement, but just as Tearle’s
concerns with order and systematicity aligned him with the apartheid regime in certain respects while suggesting that the regime’s roots are part of a larger problem of spatial conceptualization, so too does Nieuwenhuizen open up to a wider reading. Each of Gaylard’s claims about the novel is true and poignant, but they are also true of contemporaneous discourses surrounding urban development in South Africa, which suggests that the allegory is a pointed critique of urban development strategies common to the apartheid state and post-apartheid neoliberalism. Similarly, what Powell describes as not “necessarily connected possibilities”, such as “the fears that the privileged landowning South Africans felt about a democratic future” and “a reading related to the histories and processes of colonialism”, are both deeply and necessarily related in this novel. Again, this is in part because Vladislavić is tracing the historical lineage of one into the other.

**Nieuwenhuizen’s New House**

Parsing out Nieuwenhuizen’s simultaneous status as marginalized nomad on the one hand and patriarchal source of centralizing authority on the other is crucial for illuminating the intersections of the novel’s representations of pre-apartheid, apartheid, and post-apartheid development discourse. Newhuizen’s first glance around the landscape is termed his “survey” (2), and this depiction of his relationship with the land is furthered throughout the novel, but significantly at the dawn (dawn and dusk will, we shall soon discover, have important thematic weight within The Folly) of his first new day on the plot:

Only then did he lift his eyes to survey his new dominion.
He liked it. Its contours and dimensions were just right, and so too were its colour schemes and co-ordinates, not to mention its vistas and vantage points. The sheer cliff of the hedge towering at his back, dappled with gold and amber, tapering into the far-off haze on either side; the vast and empty sky, baby blue on the horizon, and sky-blue in the middle distance, and navy-blue in the dome above; the veld\textsuperscript{37} rolling away before him in a long blonde swell, reeled by the shadows of the hedge and stirred by the breath, swirling now through the thickets of shrubs and weeds, spilling now over rocks, boiling into heathery foam, spending itself at last against the wagon-wheel wall in the distance – all these things pleased him enormously. (7)

The imagery here is crucial: the vastness of the landscape with its distances, its hazy depth, its emptiness combined with the undulations of the rolling land which is itself bound up with the airy elements, with winds blowing and twisting over the terrain and the booming open sky domed overhead. The immensity of those proportions, also realized in the sheer cliffs and sweeping vistas, and aestheticized with its colour schemes of gold, amber, and various shades of blue, is another significant nod to the plaasroman genre, and to Romantic visions of nature more generally. The vast expanse, however, is cut short by the wagon-wheel wall, and at this moment one suddenly transitions from this description back to the reality/realization that the land Nieuwenhuizen is looking at is merely an empty plot in a residential area in suburban South Africa. Co-mingling the vernacular of the land developer (co-ordinates, vistas, vantage points) with the aesthetic of narratives of exploration and colonization establishes a tonality that is juxtaposed with the actuality of the setting, which provides a first glimpse into the possibility that Nieuwenhuizen’s spatial imagination is in conflict with the reality it apprehends.

\textsuperscript{37}Veld is simply a term for a kind of open, flat grassland native to Southern Africa.
Nieuwenhuizen’s physicality is in keeping with this paradoxical confusion, and his likeness to a colonial explorer is simultaneously both genuine and parodic. Both his appearance and placement within the site he occupies elicit a satire of nostalgia for rugged South African masculinity and individuality. When Mr. Malgas sees Nieuwenhuizen clearly for the first time in the novel, the text becomes focalized around Malgas’ perceptions (as it frequently does), and Nieuwenhuizen is described as follows: “He was wearing a khaki safari suit a few times too big for him and a pair of home-made boots with tyre treads, which accentuated how long and stringy his legs were” (9).

Nieuwenhuizen is outfitted in the rustic garb of the adventurer/settler figure, but the mismatch between his frame and the size, as well as the symbolic import of the uniform he is attempting to fill, bring to mind the childhood game of dress-up, a juxtaposition that is soon underscored by his stated desire to be addressed by Mr. Malgas as “Father”. The colonial explorer/settler trope encapsulated by a patriarchal father figure is a keystone of national founding mythology in Afrikaans culture, just as it is in many settler colonies, and Nieuwenhuizen’s attire suggests both that he is inadequate to the task at hand and also that the “uniform” itself is a specious misfit in the context of contemporary South Africa. Not surprisingly, Nieuwenhuizen’s relationship to his plot and his active role as a settler is similarly disjointed, as is evidenced in this exchange between Mr. Malgas and himself:

‘I’ve been acclimatizing, building myself up for the first phase: namely the clearing of the virgin bushveld.’
‘What do you consume, to build yourself up I mean?’
‘Oh, birds, roots, that kind of thing. Berries. I’m living off the land. Naturally I get my basics from the corner café, and the occasional luxury to keep me going. I’m especially fond of chocolate digestive.’ (38)
The parody here is not Vladislavić’s most subtle work, but it remains effective. On the one hand Nieuwenhuizen adopts the rhetoric of settler discourse in a straightforward fashion and presents himself as a man who is “living off the land” and consuming a sparse diet provided by what his hunter-gatherer prowess affords him while, in the next breath, he admits to patronizing the local store for “the basics” and having a fondness for chocolate digestives, a consumer habit that calls into question how frequently he actually ingests roots and wild birds. This contrast is, like the imagery surrounding his apparel, comedic in nature and underscores the text’s ironic stance regarding Nieuwenhuizen. This characteristic inconsistency is further highlighted by how the other characters perceive him, specifically the only other two fleshed out characters in the novel, Mr. and Mrs. Malgas, whose different readings and responses to Nieuwenhuizen suggest that the duality he represents is more complicated than mere comical hypocrisy allows.

Certainly neither Mr. Malgas, nor his wife, Mrs. Malgas, views Nieuwenhuizen, or his sudden presence next to their house, through a lens that suggests comedy. This blindness to the ironies of Nieuwenhuizen has the effect of rendering their perspectives ironic as well, and as such their responses and relationships to Nieuwenhuizen become folded into the layers of the novel’s satiric thrust. Indeed, their disparate takes on their new neighbour represent responses to the state of contemporary South Africa from the white middle class and the apprehensions of white liberals on the one hand and white conservatives on the other, particularly regarding the looming collapse of the apartheid regime.
The Malgases

The Malgases, referred to as “Mr” and “Mrs”, first spot Nieuwenhuizen’s campfire in the adjacent lot, and Mrs’ initial reaction is to call the authorities, first the fire brigade and then the police. Mr is less concerned, and sometime later suggests that, instead of being a criminal “He could just be a professor, fallen on hard times” (11). Mrs’ response is revealing:

Is he one of these squatters we’ve been hearing so much about? Will he put up a shack and bring hundreds of his cronies to do the same? ‘Extended families.’ What do you think? Will they hammer together tomato boxes and rubbish bags, bits of supermarket trolleys and motor cars, notice boards and yield signs, gunny sacks and jungle gyms, plastic, paper, polystyrene…? (11)

This initial response serves as the foundation for Mrs’ apprehensions regarding Nieuwenhuizen for the rest of the novel. As South Africa undergoes the still continuing process of the erosion of racialized sites of demarcation and access, cycles of material redistribution, often violent and/or illegal, become unavoidable, particularly when inequity is so entrenched. Mrs perceives this as a catastrophic change, and casts Nieuwenhuizen as a marginalized member of society whose presence threatens to overwhelm the Malgases with a flood of debris, both figurative in the form of attendant people (family, cronies) and literally in the form of the hammered together refuse that makes up much of the built environment of informal settlements. There is a direct correlation or comparison here between human bodies and garbage, as both belong to the same outsider abject status, and Mrs’ attitudes toward Nieuwenhuizen are something of a thematic prototype for Tearle’s similar socio-spatial phobias. Mrs continues by saying “we’ll be forced out of our home. They’ll play their radios loud. They’ll go in the streets
like dogs. They’ll tear up our paraquet for firewood” (12). Again, the cycles of human migration and redistribution of materials are conceptualized as a threatening tide, one whose catalytic displacement possesses the potential to infectiously enact, in a cacophony of animalistic invasion, further displacement on those who previously enjoyed central, and thereby stable, status.

The concerns Mrs expresses here are a direct result of the media she exposes herself to on a regular basis; indeed, when we first see the Malgases they “were watching the eight o’clock news on television” (2). Before long, images of the city appear on screen:

At that very moment there appeared on the screen a burning shanty made of split poles, cardboard boxes and off-cuts of chipboard, and patched with newspapers and plastic bags. It was hemmed in on all sides by a great many shanties just like it, except that, for one reason or another, none of these others were burning. (2)

This burning building, which eventually collapses, foreshadows and parallels the similar breakdown of domestic space that the novel enacts at its conclusion, and this deconstruction similarly enters/invades the home of the Malgases. Furthermore, when Nieuwenhuizen and Mr eventually conspire to build a house together, the resulting methods of construction (mostly clearing the land of vegetation) kick up dust which begins to settle in various nooks and crannies of the Malgas household: “Nieuwenhuizen revolted Mrs Malgas. He was a source of dirt and chaos. She sealed all the windows, but His dust continued to spout like a five o’clock shadow on the smooth surfaces of her home” (56). Once again, this representation of Othered filth/debris entering the domestic space, or rather, one’s “own” space, is an example of the theme that would become more fully realized in The Restless Supermarket, a fact rendered even more explicit by Mrs’
most prolonged and direct tirade. While holding a newspaper in one hand she, addressing Mr. lectures:

Terrible times we’re living in. Death on every corner. The forces of destruction unleashed upon an unsuspecting public. Trains colliding, ferries capsizing, mini buses overturning, air liners plummeting from the sky on top of suburbs, massacres in second-class railway coaches, public transport in general becoming unsafe, rivers bursting their banks, earthquakes shaking everything up, volcanoes erupting, bombs exploding, businesses going bang, buildings collapsing, among other things. And on top of all this, as if we don’t have enough on our plates, a lunatic on our doorstep. And on top of the top, his accomplice under our own roof. (95-96)

Prominent here is the death and destruction wrought on an “unsuspecting public”, a group of people who have been subjected to the fact that public transport has become unsafe, which is to say, the non-criminals. The criminals, on the other hand, are the outliers of society and the instigators, instead of the victims, of “massacres in second-class railroad cars”. Foregrounded simultaneously is the infrastructure of transportation, itself the vessel through which the threatening movements of dislocated bodies result in “death on every corner” (meaning our corner as well). This disintegration of order represented by the performance of transport vehicles performing the exact opposite of their function (boats sinking, planes falling, trains colliding) is correlated with a pathetic fallacy from the natural world, underscoring the deep and unbalancing characteristics of the transgressions at hand in contemporary South Africa in the eyes of Mrs. It eventually comes back to collapsing buildings (the primary motif of the novel) and finally to the single transgression at hand, namely “a lunatic on our doorstep” whose invasive and contagious presence has created an “accomplice under our own roof”. At this point Mrs turns her tirade back to the subject of Nieuwenhuizen and furthers her point: “Here, a cat
cracking jokes in English. Ducks in suits and ties, a dog in a flashy sports coat, a mouse driving a car” (96). Mrs is referring to the visual tropes of the Saturday morning cartoon variety, and in doing so highlighting the comical backwardness that she sees in Nieuwenhuizen. Like Tearle again, however, she is a staunch believer in the idea that seemingly innocuous departures from normality lend themselves to the kind of carnage and death she was describing only moments earlier, and so she ends with: “And here’s your foolish friend to a T: this man is walking on thin air, if you don’t mind, until someone points it out to him… and that makes him fall like an angel” (96). By connecting Nieuwenhuizen’s cartoonishness with a Satanic aspect, Mrs aligns herself with Tearle, and with many conservative South Africans, in viewing the presence of marginalized peoples newly arrived in the urban centre as simultaneously a ridiculous absurdity and a mortal danger.

If Mrs’ reaction to Nieuwenhuizen is centred on her rejection of him and his marginal otherness, which is immediately and acutely abject to her, Mr’s reaction is marked by a reverse desire for collaboration and even cohabitation. Eventually he more or less accepts the patriarchal aura assumed by Nieuwenhuizen, as well as its accompanying authority, and desperately wishes for Nieuwenhuizen’s acceptance and approval, suggesting an anxiety regarding his own placement, both socially and spatially, within the new house that Nieuwenhuizen’s arrival portends. In essence, while Mrs immediately adopts a conservative and hostile stance to Nieuwenhuizen and his attendant proclivity for change, Mr’s response, one of eagerness to participate based on his desire for inclusion, is aligned with white liberal responses to the potentiality of constructing a
“New South Africa”, something that emphasizes The Folly’s treatment of the reformation and representation (through narrativization) of national identities.

Certainly, Mr’s treatment of Nieuwenhuizen suggests he possesses something like a sympathetic imagination, and he garners more sympathy compared to his wife, but although his attitude is ostensibly forward thinking in that he embraces the transformation of the built environment and the coming of a new “house”, his progressive attitude (relative to Mrs’) is actually based on a nostalgia for the tropes embodied by Nieuwenhuizen and their attendant South African colonial discourses involving masculine representations of patriarchal exploration/settlement/development typical of the plaasroman genre. This dynamic between the two characters is revealed by Mr’s covetous desire for the “rugged” outdoor life that Nieuwenhuizen possesses and that Mr wishes to exchange for his routine domesticity. The narrator tells us that “While Mrs was dishing up the supper, Mr kept watch in the darkened lounge. The camp, alone on the moon-bleached veld, with the hedge bearing down on it like a wave about to break, appeared to him as an island of light and warmth” (17). The camp, a singular space of warmth and light on a dark plain, is placed precariously in the throes of an indifferent and potentially threatening natural world, and the imagery here evokes a ship at sea, suggesting that this finite space of refuge in the vastness of place is both a welcoming respite but also a testament to masculine individuality and resourcefulness in the face of the forces of nature—or rather “and also”, given that these two moods are dual shades of the same affect. This imagery, provided by the focalization around Mr, is soon reinforced: “‘I’ve been studying our friend and his camp”, said Mr as they ate. ‘It looks quite jolly.’ He was thinking, too, that it looked almost – what? … Brave’” (17). Here the
warm and desirable qualities are explicitly paired with a boldness that evokes the masculine ideal that so attracts Mr to the camp. Little time passes before he approaches the space himself and acts in accordance with the desires that the camp elicits within him. As he approaches the camp “He wasn’t sure what to do next: there was no gate to rattle, no doorbell to ring. After a while something came to him, a phrase he had heard in a film about the Wild West, and he tried it out: ‘Hail the camp!’” (21). The memory experienced here and his re-enactment of its performative social scripting bolsters points already made, but it also brings to light the nostalgic element of Mr’s spatial imagination. The “Wild West” gives his desires both a chronological underpinning (Mr is romanticizing times past) and also suggests that he is nostalgic for a past he never directly experienced, perhaps in a similar fashion to Tearle’s fondness for all things “European”. Similarly, this desire for re-experience and its relationship to the space Nieuwenhuizen is constructing follows Mr even when he is not present at the camp. Vladislavić writes that “Only the night before he had chanced upon a picturesque view of Nieuwenhuizen’s camp, framed between two spokes of a wagon-wheel, and he was anxious to recapture it; with luck he would pick up a wholesome aroma and a snatch of melody or other” (31). Mr’s anxiousness is centred on recapturing and re-experiencing the visceral essences, the sights, smells, and sounds, of the space Nieuwenhuizen has appropriated. This anxiety compels Mr because of the cultural associations, and their attendant freedoms, that Nieuwenhuizen’s campground evokes.
The Site Itself

In so much as Mr’s representation of the camp is paralleled in colonial discourses, the site in question soon moves from imagery evocative of an exploratory narrative to that of settlement and development. Mr’s perceptions of the built environment, once again, mark this transition. Within days, he asks if he can look around the site:

Taking a shrug as permission, Mr Malgas made a tour of the camp and its environs, allowing the rudimentary footpaths that had appeared with time to guide his steps. He took a childlike delight in the signs he found everywhere that the plot had become lived in, that the newcomer had made himself a home. ‘A dwelling-place carved out of the veld,’ Malgas thought happily, examining the bare, compacted soil around the hearth. (34)

In the chronological unfolding of colonial narrative, the phase of burgeoning settlement is marked by the entrenchment of human practice on the land itself, typically represented as “virgin” and hitherto uninhabited. The footpaths and their associated patterns of movement suggest to Malgas a “carving out” of the veld, a kind of seizing possession of the previously daunting and indifferent landscape which is nothing short of a taming of nature to the will of the sentient and ruggedly determined/competent individual. These markings also provide Mr with a model of emulation, as his steps are guided by the paths in a way that highlights his desire, both literal and figurative, to walk in the footsteps of Nieuwenhuizen, an image of movement whose resonance is echoed in the “childlike” happiness Mr experiences in the camp of “Father”.

Mr’s emotive schema regarding the camp complicates any direct reading of Nieuwenhuizen as either “apartheid” or “the New South Africa”. Nieuwenhuizen’s new house may be a vision for the future, and it holds the promise (or at least the pretense) of inclusivity, but its mythical semiotics are heavily reliant on tropes of colonial land
possession and appropriation. A reading of this symbolic content in a straightforward fashion (Nieuwenhuizen = apartheid, or colonial history, or etc.) neglects the marginal nature of Nieuwenhuizen, a characteristic that mitigates a reading of him as a source of genuine authority or power. As we have seen, despite the heavy undertones of colonial patriarchal authority satirized in the figure of Neiuwenhuizen, Mrs’ perspective also places him in the role of migrant outlier, a figure who, in addition to his other thematic intonations, represents the resilient practices of displaced peoples. A clear example of this resides in Mrs’ suggestion that “If it’s the wide open spaces he wants, let them put him on a train to the platteland” (10). Nieuwenhuizen’s duality in this regard is largely defined by the juxtaposition of the conflicting and antipodal perspectives of Mr and Mrs, and this lends to the novel’s symbology an ambiguity that is adroitly captured in one of The Folly’s major motifs: the rising and setting of the sun.

Or rather, representations of rising or setting suns. Significantly, it is Nieuwenhuizen who first notices this ambiguity:

In mid-afternoon, when his handiwork was almost done, his eye fell for the hundredth time on the prefabricated wall – and he noticed with a jolt that the wagon wheel panels were interspersed with rising suns. He was still puzzling over how these panels had escaped his attention thus far when it struck him, with another jolt, that perhaps they were setting suns! And who could tell? (14)

The indeterminate nature of this sun imagery that bounds the lot is connected with Nieuwenhuizen’s own temporal indefiniteness and the extent to which he comes to represent different epochs depending on the lens, or consciousness, through which he is viewed. The poignancy of the walled suns and their connection with the antipodal aspects
Niewenhuizen brings out in his neighbours is driven home when Mr turns to Mrs while they are watching TV and begins the following exchange:

‘I wasn’t going to mention it, it’s not important, but he asked me the strangest question, with a straight face too. You know the wall? You know the wagon wheels?’ Mrs prepared a triumphant expression but Mr. cut her short with, ‘Well, not them. You know the suns? … He wanted to know whether they were rising or setting.’

‘Now I’ve heard everything.’ said Mrs. ‘Any fool can see they’re setting.’ (28)

This is a “is the glass half empty or half full” line of questioning but it works on a grander, national scale while fitting neatly within the characterization we have already established regarding Mr and Mrs. The archetypal resonance of cyclical day/light patterns is fairly obvious, as is its connection to the births and deaths of not just people, but also nations. Certainly, as a symbol it can work in a myriad of related ways. Sunset: decline, descent, the onset of darkness with its attendant stifling of guiding light and protective heat, the end of an era, the fall of apartheid. Sunrise: ascent, the coming of light, the beginning of an era, the rise of a new nation after the long night of apartheid. More important than these clichéd readings of sun imagery, however, is their central and defining ambiguity within the novel.

The “suns”, being a representation and plural, are neither rising nor setting, and their countenance tells us nothing with clarity regarding their temporal state of being. Instead, the certitude of Mrs clashes with the ponderous nature of Mr, suggesting that the suns imprinted on the wall, the wall that establishes the boundary between chez Malgas and Nieuwenhuizen’s camp, are merely receptacles for any given beholder’s previously established attitudes regarding their potential. For Mrs, the setting of the suns corresponds with the incoming collapse of the demarcation into which they are
imbedded, one erected between her home and an informal settlement founded by an abject outsider. She, like many conservative white South Africans at the time of transitioning out of apartheid, views her environment as itself embodying the death of a nation, the dissolution of bounded sites of access that kept proper social and economic hierarchies in place, and the subsequent/impending decline into a chaotic darkness.

Mr, on the other hand, is less sure, but his take on Nieuwenhuizen is significantly more optimistic, even naively so. When finally invited by Nieuwenhuizen to help with “the clearing of the land” (45) to prepare the way for the building of the new house, Mr is delighted to be included, happily noting that “Father” used the pronoun “us” instead of “me” (45). In light of this task, Mr rises at dawn whereupon “The wagon-wheels began to plash through the sunshine: soon he would be bathed in the full splendour of a new working day” (52). As previously mentioned, The Folly is strongly focalized around Mr, and while he never explicitly says as much, when it comes to the new house, Mr is a “the suns are rising” type, as reflected in his actions, his attitudes, and by the way the setting is often focalized around his desires.

Nieuwenhuizen never comes to a conclusion regarding the suns, largely because the ambiguity they represent is intimately connected to his own equivocations. In response to this ambiguity, for much of the novel Mr attempts to suss out Nieuwenhuizen’s essential nature, his desires and plans, and exactly what the dynamic of their personal relationship actually entails. The intricacy of the relationship between the two men complicates Li’s concept of trusteeship, as The Folly navigates a precarious moment of transitional power rearrangement whereby Mr’s higher social and class statuses no longer provide him with a centralizing authority. The shift in trustee status
from home owner to informal settlement dweller indicates the partial displacement of white middle-class South Africans from spaces of power and elicits, within the subjectivity of the Malgas household, accompanying anxieties regarding inclusivity and belonging. Therefore, Mr’s desire for admittance within the social space of the “new house” has to be considered in light of his nostalgia, which suggests that he is hoping for a kind of projection of the past into the future, even while this ridiculously obscures the reasons why the dynamics that fostered South Africa’s colonial history, and eventually apartheid, are in the process of being, again at least partially, usurped.

The Malgases and Rendering Technical

As mentioned earlier, the first part of the process of the will to improvement is “rendering technical”, and the first part of rendering technical is locating the problem, a dilemma usually represented as being some form or another of a lack of development. For the Malgases, this becomes their shared source of concern regarding Nieuwenhuizen. Mrs begins:

‘He’s dangerous. Ask yourself: Where does he go? Does he dig a hole and squat over it like a dog? ... I’m talking about the principle. Where does he get his water from? He’s got a drumful there, for washing and cooking and all his household needs. Probably siphons it out of our pool in the dead of the night, when normal people are sleeping. ... What does he eat? What’s cooking in that two-legged pot of his? Four legged chickens? Pigeons? Cockatoos and budgerigars?’ (30)

Mrs expresses some of the concerns typical of development discourse in that the subject of her concern is not merely Nieuwenhuizen and his ability to take care of himself, but also what his potential inability with regard to self-preservation might mean for the wider
community, particularly in relation to crime, and how this imbalance might foster a breakdown of boundaries of possession regarding property and capital. Mr suggests “running a hose over there” (30) and providing Nieuwenhuizen with the occasional meal. In terms of the dangers of under-development, there seems to be a rare point of overlap between Mr and Mrs, and Mr posits that “In this day and age, it’s security that counts. You can’t afford to have an empty plot on your doorstep. Ask anyone. It attracts the wrong elements” (26). Mrs, however, is not a trustee, not a developer, and is, in fact, adverse to the notion of developing Nieuwenhuizen or his plot at all. She responds to Mr with “Building operations, I can just see it, noise and nuisance, generators, compressors, pneumatic hammers, concrete mixers going day and night, strange men—builders. Dust all over my ornaments. It’s terrible” (26). As we’ve already established, Mrs prefers appealing to the authorities to remove Nieuwenhuizen and to re-establish/restore previous spatial relationships that maintain a safe distance between herself and undesirable outsiders. Development discourse has little appeal to her.

Mr, however, desires nothing so much as being included in the building process and harbours a deeply held conviction that he possesses the raw materials, tools, and knowledge to aid Nieuwenhuizen, a belief that does not, it seems, parallel Nieuwenhuizen’s own feeling regarding Mr’s potential contributions or capabilities. When Mr first asks “‘Need a hand there Father?’” (46), the response is blunt: “‘Thanks but no thanks,’ Nieuwenhuizen responded without looking up. ‘I’ll give you a call when I need you. You go home and watch the news’” (46). This response is somewhat surprising to Mr, whose previous assurances regarding his own authority and importance, particularly as the owner of a hardware store, begin to unravel as his relationship to
Nieuwenhuizen becomes increasingly obsequious. “Father’s” body language and lack of
eye contact suggest the distance between the two men and the invitation to “go home and
watch the news” might be a recommendation to catch up on current events in the sense
that Mr’s estimation of his own worth is not in keeping with the social changes taking
place in contemporary South Africa. In short, the new house is going to be built with or
without the guidance of men like Mr Malgas, and they would do well to participate if and
when asked to do so. Mr, however, is not so easily dissuaded:

The call for Mr Malgas never came. But he was not one to
stand on ceremony: every evening after work he went next
door uninvited, bearing some little excuse for a visit filched
from the store. On Monday, for example, it was a brand-
new spade with a pillar-box red ferrule to match
Nieuwenhuizen’s tent; on Tuesday, again, it was a
pitchfork to match the spade and a five-litre keg of fuel for
the hurricane-lamp.

Nieuwenhuizen humoured him. (47)

This moment highlights a number of things, most notably the uninvited nature of Mr’s
visits, the extent of his desire to participate and through his participation be rendered
necessary, and the spurious reasoning behind some of his choices: aesthetic matches
among tools and supplies that would have little resonance with Nieuwenhuizen’s own
concerns. Just as Li suggests, Mr Malgas has difficulty interpreting the needs of others
outside of his own worldview, and his ideas on the proper development of
Nieuwenhuizen’s “property” are not necessarily compatible.

Before long, this disparity comes boiling to the foreground:

‘You’ve got your nails,’ [Mr] said, rolling back the tide,
‘and rather too big than too small, I suppose. But forgive
me for pointing it out, you’ve got nothing to nail together.
Forward planning is becoming more and more urgent. It’s
high time you ordered your materials: bricks, cement—‘
‘Enough is enough in any man’s language!’
Nieuwenhuizen said crossly. The fellow was already
getting too big for his boots.
   ‘Timber and allied products—’
   ‘Shut up.’
   ‘Pardon?’
   ‘Be still. I can’t take this obsession with brass tacks
any longer.’
   ‘Tacks?’
   ‘You’ve got hardware on the brain my friend, and it
leaves you no room for speculation.’ (73)

Not only does this mark a breaking point in their relationship and final shift in trusteeship
from Mr to Nieuwenhuizen, but it also brings to our attention the fundamental distinction
between the perspectives of the two men, a variance that comes to mark key criticisms of
“development” within the novel. Mr’s “obsession” with material practicalities is decried
by Nieuwenhuizen as a failure of the imagination, and certainly Mr’s attitudes and
apprehensions regarding Nieuwenhuizen and the settlement indicate that same lack. The
miscommunication, or rather lack of any communication, between the two men regarding
the nails (Mr assumes they are for nailing wood together when actually Nieuwenhuizen
intends to use them to illustrate the house’s plan at a 1:1 ratio using string tied to the
heads of the nails after they have been pounded into the ground at key points) serves as a
microcosm for their general dynamic, but soon the condescension of Mr is reversed as
Nieuwenhuizen begins planning the house with the desires of both men in mind, a new
relationship that the cowed Mr is only too happy to perform into existence. As this
pattern develops, Nieuwenhuizen takes on the role of trustee and guides Mr through the
process of planning, and eventually “building”, the new house. Nieuwenhuizen
eventually encourages Mr’s participation, but only if Mr is willing to envision the entire
process in Nieuwenhuizen’s terms, something that is articulated as being the best thing
for all involved: “I’ve got your best interests at heart,” Nieuwenhuizen said. ‘You’ve been a sport, but there’s really no point in seeing bits and pieces of the plan. To get the proper effect you need to see the whole thing, fully assembled’” (96). Essentially, the panoptic vision of the plan that Nieuwenhuizen is advocating not only is an aid to assembling the house, but it is the actual process of construction. What is one to make of this conflation between plan and building so similar to Tearle’s conflation between signified and signifier?

**The House Itself**

Thus far I have largely skirted around the nature of the house itself, and it is now important to break down how the symbology of the structure is working in terms of metaphorical and allegorical representation. In order do so, looking at the characteristics of the plan is essential, since the distinction between the plan for the house and the house itself is quickly collapsed. What is, as it were, “the whole thing, fully assembled”? At its core, as Ivor Powell puts it, “[The Folly] enacts a conflict between systems of knowledge and systems of reality, what philosophers used to be pleased to call ontologies and epistemologies; the instabilities of the realities in which we live and the difficulty of transcending them” (73), and the creation/manifestation of the new house is foundational to this conflict.

The house is, first and foremost, an idea of a house. This idea, through sheer force of will, or by believing in it enough (connecting the novel’s world with fairy-tale physics) materializes neither by the implementation of its prescriptive map nor the practical materials and labour so coveted by Mr, but by the act of training one’s mind to perceive
it. Believing is seeing, and seeing is all that is required for the house to become manifest. *The Folly*, however, never allows for a definitive reading regarding whether the novel is actually engaging with fantastic elements in a straightforward sense, or whether the materialized house is merely the result of a kind of shared delusion, although the two possibilities are not mutually exclusive, and parsing out the difference is largely insignificant. What remains important is that in order to comprehend the house’s thematic essence, a close reading of how the house is characterized via its conception becomes crucial. In that light, the following conversation between Mr and Nieuwenhuizen is worth quoting at length. Nieuwenhuizen opens by dismissing the dilapidated condition of his previous dwelling:

‘Whatever. Point is, the new place will be nothing like that. In fact, it will be its absolute antithesis. Ironic. Where that place was old, for instance, this will be new. Where that one was falling to pieces, this will be holding together very nicely thank you. That was rambling and draughty, this will be compact but comfortable. Spacious, mind, not pokey, and double storey…’

‘I knew it!’

‘… to raise us up above the mire of the everyday, to give us perspective, to enable surveillance of creeping dangers. Make that triple-storey, don’t want to cramp our style. Bathrooms en suite. Built-in bar. All tried and tested stuff, bricks and mortar and polished panels, the stuff of your dreams, none of this rotten canvas and scrap metal, transitional, all this, temporary, merely. Forward! Nothing tin-pot! Everything cast-iron! Bullet-proof – we have to think of these things I’m afraid – with storage space for two years’ rations. And on top of that wall-to-wall carpets in a serviceable colour, maybe khaki, and skylights and Slasto in the rumpus room. Materials galore, Malgas, right up your street. Malgas?’

Malgas opened his eyes, which were unnaturally bright.

‘Can you see it?’
‘I can’t see it as such,’ said Malgas, ..., ‘but I can see that it will be a fantastic place! I’ve made a start. Thank you.’ (75-76)

Nieuwenhuizen’s new house (or Newhouse’s new house) is conceptualized most precisely in relation to what it will not be, establishing a binary between the old and new where each is defined by what it is not. As much as this binary is material and spatial, it is also chronological, a characteristic that underlines the house’s nascent qualities, its permanence, and its forward thinking, ostensibly progressive vantage point. Here the material dissatisfactions of the past are to be replaced by their antithesis. While this formation clearly parallels much of the rhetoric surrounding the concept of the “New South Africa”, a term particularly popular around the time The Folly was produced, it remains important to realize that this relationship between the actual disappointments of the past and the imagined rewards of the future is typical not only of mid-90’s South Africa, but also of the reinvention/representation of national identities in moments of transition more generally. In this light, Nieuwenhuizen’s rhetorical bent, and the allegorical thrust of this passage, may equally fit previous South African socio-historical contexts, such as the move away from British colonialism and power bases, both ideologically and spatially, that took place at various points in South African history, or even the founding moments encapsulated in settlement narratives across a wide spectrum of social and historical contexts. This is not to suggest that the subject matter of The Folly is not South African, it surely is, but rather that Vladislavić’s critique is not limited to a unique space or instance in a totalizing, cut-off sense. Instead, Vladislavić appears to be generally pessimistic about the idea that merely imagining a space, or a new way of
enacting space, is the same as this space actually being constructed, and uses the locus of his nation as the lens through which to portray this.

In relation to this disparity between physical reality and conceptualized reconfigurations is the descriptive listing of building materials. The emphasis on “bricks and mortar and polished materials” is at odds with Nieuwenhuizen’s tendency to forgo actually acquiring the basic building blocks (figuratively and literally) needed to begin construction, and he tellingly refers to these products, in a moment of unintentional irony, as “the stuff of dreams”. There exists an emphasis on the quality of materials, but no practical means of procuring such materials is presented, nor even required. To actually concern oneself with materials as material is to miss the point of Nieuwenhuizen’s particular brand of re-imagining. Therefore, it is not surprising that “materials galore” are to be employed to craft a structure of a particular size and standard, since the actual prescriptive text of the house is not in keeping with the present physical needs of either man. Nieuwenhuizen appears to be without friends or family, but the dream home is nevertheless furnished with multiple bathrooms, a bar, a nursery, and (one gets the sense) whatever else might strike him as important at any given moment, suggesting that the need for many of these spaces, much like the house itself, is nonexistent. Nieuwenhuizen, as a trustee, prefers to deal with idealized standards as opposed to practical realities. In keeping with this characterization, and perhaps most tellingly in this passage, is how deeply Nieuwenhuizen borrows rhetorical tactics from architectural prescriptive texts whose explicit goals are to craft buildings that render narratives of national self-identification “real” within urban landscapes. Put simply, Nieuwenhuizen’s words here echo the impulse of urban developers to reify national themes in the physicality of the
built environment. This impulse is explored in *The Words Between the Spaces: Buildings and Language*, wherein Thomas Markus and Deborah Cameron posit that “the authoritative knowledge produced by professional architects and planners, and codified in such forms as building planning regulations or design guides for certain building types, has enormous power to affect people’s everyday lives” (69). They choose the Scottish Parliament building as a core example, and I believe it will be illustrative here as well.

**Words Between Spaces**

Since the building in question was built as a result of a separate Scottish parliament being established in 1997, and since the original brief states that the building was to be a marker of “the Scottish people’s authority and their aspirations as a nation”, one major theme surrounding the construction, even before it began, was “the architecture of democracy” with a further emphasis placed on the somewhat ambiguous ideals of “openness” and “transparency” (76). Markus and Cameron point to how the brief for competition crafted by the Scottish government contained liberal democratic ideals but also a textual contradiction that suggested a pervasive concern with the restrained movement of human bodies, categorized by employment and visitation status, through carefully demarcated sites of access. This contradiction is actually quite typical, and prescriptive texts for government funded buildings frequently offer a conflict between the ideological concerns surrounding democracy and accessibility on one hand, and the hierarchal idea of “power as something exercised by the government over the people on the other” (76). Markus and Cameron suggest that architects often resolve this dilemma by establishing a “division of labour between the formal aspects of the building...
and its spatial organization” (77). With the Scottish Parliament this means that the way that space is traversed is parallel to the mechanisms of control, with certain people of particular socio-political status accessing carefully bounded routes of movement and points of entry, but that the formal elements physically manifest metaphors of democratic value. For instance, in the winning bid, the debating chamber was semi-circular to suggest egalitarian politics and the amount of glass in the chamber fitted to the motifs of transparency previously mentioned. Interestingly, what is a metaphor in the prescriptive text becomes a materialization of actual transparency, but nevertheless does not necessarily move any closer to initiating the signified ideal it represents in doing so. The underlying contradiction is not resolved by this strategy, but rather one discourse, the one embodying the more positive democratic reading of power, is made “visually dominant”, while the discourse of control is “submerged and made relatively less obtrusive” (77). As such, the buildings that we see are often answers to problems suggested by a textual contradiction within a brief, and we are accorded the ability to access this answer without, generally speaking, the contextual background of the initial problem with which to frame it.

Similarly, Nieuwenhuizen’s conceptualization of the physicality of the house conforms to certain thematic markers he feels are important to manifest metaphorically. The second (and tacked on third) storey will give the house height to “raise us up above the mire of the everyday”, as though the literal height might impact the figurative distance idealized here, suggesting a (perhaps intentional) confusion between the two modalities. This height will also “give us perspective”, a statement that while literally true regarding one’s ability to view the surrounding landscape from a higher vantage
point, does not actually have the literal weight this phrase suggests more generally, much in the same way that adding transparent walls to a government building does little to render political processes any more transparent. Nieuwenhuizen ends this line of thought, however, by suggesting that this height will also enable surveillance of creeping dangers, repositioning the motivation for the elevation in relation to movement and spatial relationships, this time in a way that conforms to the “home as castle/fortress” motif that has become so popular in contemporary South Africa. Sites of access, of permittance, become intertwined with an elitist separation from the “everyday”, a distancing that segues rather neatly into an attendant anxiety with lines of visual perspective and security. With this rhetoric, Nieuwenhuizen employs a system of visually oriented tropes that are common within the discipline of architecture and uses them to address specifically South African concerns regarding inclusion and social distancing through language that appears impartial and progressive but is actually neither. This is a core contradiction inherent to the house.

An accompanying and prominent contradiction is the simultaneously systemic and chaotic nature of Nieuwenhuizen’s work and vision. Just as his conceptualization of the house becomes the house itself, and just as the material basis for the house is entirely immaterial, Nieuwenhuizen attempts a performative framing of the house as a systemic and cohesive whole, despite the fact that in actuality the house is both mercurial and whimsical in characterization.

Nieuwenhuizen put forward a plan of action, starting with the grid – big letters down this side and Roman numbers down that – and explaining tersely how one might approach the intersections as appropriate points at which to heap up the dead vegetation. Then he posed an important question: At a later stage, when the ground had
been cleared in an economical fashion, might one not convey each of these small provisional heaps to a depot in the vicinity of the camp, on the spot occupied by the fireplace, and amalgamate them into one mountain to facilitate incineration? No?

Malgas listened with mounting excitement. The grid system was a revelation. As for the words hovering in bubbles around Nieuwenhuizen’s head, moored to his lips by filaments of saliva – ‘economical’, ‘provisional’, ‘accumulation’, ‘depot’, ‘vicinity’, ‘incineration’ – they left him in no doubt that a great deal of intelligent forethought had gone into the plan, and he felt a thrill of vindication.

Here, the squared-off grid formation, a classical alignment based on the symmetry and sameness provided by right angles, positions the plot as a finite, well demarcated spatial arrangement that has been carefully measured and planned. This ostensibly systemic treatment of the land, however, is at odds with Nieuwenhuizen’s spastic and chaotic labour patterns, a dichotomy that in practical terms translates to Mr performing most of the work. After clearing the land, Nieuwenhuizen uses large nails driven into the earth as anchors for bits of string that he ties together to form a life sized “plan” of the house.

Vladislavić, describing Nieuwenhuizen’s acrobatic method of parsing out the placement of these nails, writes, “He stepped off with his right foot and took six stiff paces. ... When his left foot came down for a third time, in the middle of IE, he flung the hammer in his right hand forward with all his might, pivoted on his heel, toppled sideways, flew into the air, flapped after his hammer like a broken wing, went rigid as a statue in mid-air, hung motionless for a long, oblique instant, and crashed to the earth with a cry of triumph” (77). This spastic series of movements comes after Nieuwenhuizen marks out space according to his gait, a methodology completely at odds, in terms of accuracy and precision, with the clinical professionalism of the grid system. These swinging, leaping
gesticulations mark the placement of each nail, each nail being a solid focal point from which the plan is apparently formed, and yet their placement and their relationships to one another remain ambiguous and difficult to ascertain.

Also of importance here is the performative nature of Nieuwenhuizen’s authority, an act which Mr readily absorbs. Malgas’ eager acceptance of the linguistic coding performed by Nieuwenhuizen is evident in the “bubble” imagery he uses to close read Nieuwenhuizen’s speech. Mr sections off the words, disembodying them from any larger context and letting them stand as unrelated markers of authority, which assures him that forethought and intelligence are present in Nieuwenhuizen’s plan. This linguistic cache and the grid system are both examples of Nieuwenhuizen’s status as trustee, and of the extent to which he asserts authority by Li’s aforementioned tactic of “rendering technical”. Although his plan is changeable and crafted by ambiguous methods, Nieuwenhuizen’s performances, both through speech and by territorial acts of mapping, are employed to link him with discourses of development. Malgas, as both an external audience (it will not be his house) and a hopeful participant (he may be afforded some access and even a spatial allotment in the form of a guest room) is willing to invest in these markers as they validate his interest in and support of Nieuwenhuizen’s project. At first, however, Malgas is not entirely successful: “Mr Malgas spent all his spare time practising to see the new house, racking his brains to recall Nieuwenhuizen’s guidelines and finding them all reduced to the unhelpful ambiguity of dreams” (93). This inability on Malgas’ part is seen by him as a personal failure, and the focalization of the narrative supports this perception. Nieuwenhuizen, now strongly entrenched as the benevolent trustee/developer figure, offers his support in a key sentence worth briefly returning to:
“‘I’ve got your best interests at heart,’ Nieuwenhuizen said. ‘You’ve been a sport, but there’s really no point in seeing bits and pieces of the plan. To get the proper effect, you need to see the whole thing, properly assembled’” (96). It is crucial that Nieuwenhuizen knows what is best for Mr, even though the latter might not see it for himself, a disparity of knowledge, and the ability to act upon this knowledge that signals the role of trustee has passed from Mr to Father. Equally relevant is the reversal of chronological order in requiring that the entire project be apprehended before the plan, as a prescriptive text, can be properly understood. Once Malgas has been subjected to the changes wrought by Nieuwenhuizen, he will come to understand them, but not before. Of course, in order to see the changes, he must first believe in them and not in part, but rather as an entire and totalizing investment of belief and certitude, a leap that is required to bring the house into sudden existence. In order for Malgas to progress, he must place a blind faith in Nieuwenhuizen’s vision.

**Seeing the House**

Mr retains a deep seated desire to see the plan and “welcome[es] the onset of delusion” (115) until, finally, the moment occurs and the house presents itself to him. At first Mr sees a floating balustrade out of the corner of his eye, it fades, but then “it glowed again and with new intensity, and appeared to stabilize and solidify somewhat. It grew a landing, it excreted a film of crimson linoleum, it oozed wax” (114). From here, the house births itself, and folds outward, becoming a complete structure almost simultaneously. When asked by Mrs if he is hallucinating, Mr replies “The new house… materializes. It’s a manifestation” (115). Mr further describes it as “a paintbrush with a
tousled head swooshes across a blank screen, and swooshes back again, scattering gold-dust and glitter, and 1-2-3, a multi-storey mansion appears, in full colour” (115). The gold-dust and glitter that erect a mansion with the swoosh of a single paintbrush point to the immediacy of the building’s construction and the lack of physical effort normally required to erect such a structure. This obscuration of labour fits with the emphasis placed on the purity of imagination posited by Nieuwenhuizen, whose passing attempts at labour are more gesture than action, and with the idea that imagining a place is the fulcrum around which its construction rests.

In spite of his desire to believe in the house, Mr is simultaneously cognizant of its ephemeral status. Vladislavić writes that:

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

The phenomenal/corporeal reality of the house is precarious at best, and its physical characteristics suggest that it may slip out of existence at any moment. The performative nature of the house is again highlighted by its likening to a stage set, while its mercurial colouring similarly gestures to an underlying changeability. Despite the permanence Nieuwenhuizen suggests in his vision of the house, its materialization is anything but. The house also contains a “secret nail”, a lynch pin of sorts around which all the other nails are relationally defined (not unlike Tearle’s desire for an elusive, originary point of meaning) as well as an enclave under the stairs within which a hammock for Mr marks the inclusive, albeit marginal, space reserved for Nieuwenhuizen’s neighbour. That this
entire framework comes apart on a seeming whim from Nieuwenhuizen, who abruptly dismantles the house deeming it to be “shit” is not surprising, given all that has come before.

A house materialized through imagination, dependent on sheer and unwavering belief, and never becoming anything more substantial than a shared illusion: what is being critiqued here? As previously mentioned, some readings include either apartheid or the dawn of post-apartheid South Africa, while others suggest that the symbology is too ambiguous to contain any specific critique. Nieuwenhuizen’s reliance on colonial symbology and discourse, as well as his rhetoric regarding carefully demarcated spatial arrangements, sites of access, and surveillance, can be, and have been, read as a critique of apartheid ideology. These same elements, however, also lend themselves to modalities that conceptualize spatial relationships in ways that predate apartheid and, if my reading here (and of Vladislavić’s oeuvre more generally) is correct, are further represented as being capable of surviving its collapse. My interest, however, does not lie in pinning down the house’s symbolic import to a specific moment, and certainly, the text’s evasion of a defining chronological characteristic of this sort is intentional. Illustrating this point, after the disassembling of the house, Nieuwenhuizen, looking over the Malgas’ home from his now empty again lot, says, to no one in particular, “‘We are condemned to renounce and repeat, the head and the tail, the one barking and the other wagging, with the body of the same old dog between them’” (143). In other words, this relationship between follower and leader is not an instance out of time, but rather a cyclical relationship between two disparate groups that nevertheless belong to the same animal.
The closing pages of the novel reinforce this theme further, and return to the motif discussed earlier: the rising suns. The third to last sentence reads: “Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but even as the sun dropped behind the Malgases’ roof, the suns in their wall sent out a host of lack-lustre rays, which got longer and longer, so they appeared to be rising” (152). The question of rising versus setting is at stake once again, and again, no clear answer is provided. The sun itself is setting, but this literal act gives the figurative/representational suns in the wall the *appearance* of rising. The disparity between appearances and reality may suggest that the setting is a “truer” state of affairs, but within the context of the novel’s symbology a better reading is that the distinction between beginnings and ending is blurred to the point of irrelevance, and that the sudden cycles of development and decay appear doomed to repeat themselves indefinitely. In keeping with this theme, the final lines suddenly circle back to the beginning: “Nieuwenhuizen picked up the portmanteau and found his way to the edge of the plot. He sat on the verge, in the fallen darkness, holding up one finger, looking down the street” (152). In the opening lines, we found Nieuwenhuizen freshly emerged, via taxi, from this same marginal darkness: “Nieuwenhuizen stood on the verge, in the darkness, looking down the street” (1). The obvious parallels here once again reinforce the simultaneously timeless and cyclical nature of the novel’s thematic thrust. Additionally, the suggestion of migration highlights the idea that Nieuwenhuizen’s home construction process is not bound to any particular place, thus opening the novel’s contextual setting outwards. Nevertheless, one is left with the sense that the lives of Mr and Mrs Malgas have been
irrevocably changed. As Mr tells Mrs when she celebrates the return of normalcy: “We’re back to where we started… but let’s not pretend that things are the same” (150).

What is the significance of this ending and what hope, if any, does The Folly hold out for South Africa as it comes out of the apartheid era? Certainly a consistent target is the ANC and the wider rhetoric surrounding the “New South Africa”, a political party and ideology that were both emerging into the foreground of the national stage at the time this novel was written. In that sense, this novel appears rather cynical in a time of what seemed like boundless optimism. Some two decades later, however, the inequities that were supposedly overcome by the collapse of apartheid seem as entrenched as ever, so “accurate” may be a more fitting descriptor than “cynical”. Essentially, The Folly rejects the idea that simply imagining a new national identity into being is going to free anyone from the past, particularly when the development theories that push agendas of re-creation forward rely on the older models of spatial representation that fostered the problems you are resisting in the first place. This is the irony of Nieuwenhuizen: his claim to new beginnings is in fact a cycle born of the past and one that remains, by the novel’s end, unbroken and set to begin again. The question of whether or not this is a despairing attitude to adopt is the wrong one. The Folly’s thrust is primarily deconstructive, and its intent is to gesture to the ways in which a desire for newness can enforce, rather than undermine, the structures of the past. In that sense, asking for hope, or an alternative, is to miss the point. As a warning, a dystopia gains its efficacy by rendering the potential future as a bleak probability, one that will be unavoidable if not guarded against. In this light, the call to action, as opposed to despair, within this novel takes the form of both not getting swept up in the rhetorical promise of easy renewal (as
attractive as that may be) and trying to think outside of systematized trustee development projects as a way of combating social injustice. If Tearle’s view of Johannesburg lacks resilience because of the extent to which he cannot imagine his social reality outside of a simplifying cogworld representation, so too will Nieuwenhuizen’s house remain untenable.

In a similar fashion, each protagonist of The Exploded View suffers from an inability to think outside of a systematized, cogworld version of his socio-spatial reality, and the limitations of his spatial imagination inevitably become a source of anxiety that serves only to further alienate him from the city he is so desperate to come to terms with. While the idea of a direct comparison and contrast of The Folly and The Exploded View strikes me as something of an empty undertaking, it does merit pointing out that the critique of systemic development-oriented worldviews is salient, and similar, in both texts. As we shall see, The Exploded View uses the diagram evoked by its title as a motif for the desire to comprehend the functionality of society in the same way that one comprehends the design of a constructible appliance. This connects it directly with the spatial imaginary of The Folly, a text that Stefan Helgesson has suggested “depends, perhaps too heavily, on Nieuwenhuizen’s capacity to see in his mind’s eye how every nail and every brick will fit together in the house-to-be” (“Johannesburg” 31). Being able to see, or desiring to see, how every element within a space fits with every other element to form a cohesive and functional core is at the centre of Nieuwenhuizen’s spatial imagination, but it is also the visual trope at the core of The Exploded View.
Part B: Exploding Systems of Spatial Imagination

Vladislavić’s third novel enjoys a comparative glut of criticism in relation to the earlier works, in part because of Vladislavić’s increasing reputation, but also in part because its publication date was fortuitously close to a call for papers on his oeuvre disseminated by Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa. This CFP resulted in a special issue dedicated exclusively to his work, published in 2006. As the novel had just been released shortly before the CFP, the majority of respondents chose to write on The Exploded View, and what had originally been intended as an issue about Vladislavić more generally, became largely centred on this particular novel instead. The critical work surrounding The Exploded View tends to focus on the alienation experienced by the various protagonists and their attempts to understand themselves in relation to the built environments they traverse. Of particular interest is the fragmented nature of the novel and the way that it is broken into four, seemingly distinct parts. It was because of this structural feature that, although critically well received, The Exploded View was excluded from contention for the Sunday Times Fiction Award (a prize earlier won by The Restless Supermarket) with the reasoning that it was not a novel, but rather a short story collection, an exclusion that provoked a considerable amount of controversy within South African literary circles. Indeed, it is easily apprehended as a “collection”, given its breakdown into four sections, with four narratives each centred on four distinct characters, none of whom are aware of the existence of the others and whose lives do not intersect with one another in what we might think of as a direct sense. In light of this, the Mail and Guardian review (which, like most reviews, had a positive response to the
novel) introduces *The Exploded View* as “… a collection of four longish short stories, set in the present” (Jo’Burg Stories). While hardly a glaring error, given the novel’s structural makeup, such a take on the text bypasses its spatial and thematic cohesiveness and overemphasizes the extent to which these narrative arcs are acting independently from one another. Settings such as the Villa Toscana residential compound, Bra Zama’s African Eatery, and a Star Stop Egoli, feature in multiple stories, as does the suspicious minivan carrying those who will become the assailants of the final section’s protagonist. Disparate characters have the same ring tones, watch the same tv shows, and are conscious of the same “off screen” incidents. These features link the narratives through specific placement within socioeconomic networks, but more importantly, the thematic parallels resonate throughout the work in a dialogic exchange with one another, forming a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Ultimately, this means that the interpretation of each narrative is frequently dependent on its brethren in a way that is more intimate than if they merely had the same setting. In short, *The Exploded View* is better understood as a totality, albeit a fractured one, than as a collection of stories.

In discussing this aspect of the novel, the literary critic Tony Morphet posits that: “The four stories of *The Exploded View* are parts of a single novel, each one pointing from a marginal situation towards the same centre. The centre is never given explicit definition but it registers as the force shaping each of the microworlds in which the characters endeavour to keep their balance in the surges of a changing world” (207). Morphet’s take is apt, and adroitly addresses the structural dynamic of the novel explicitly communicated in the title itself. In technical drawing, an “exploded view” is a diagram that illustrates how the parts of a machine fit together to form a functional unit,
usually apprehended as a singular whole that has been visually dissected. An exploded view diagram looks something like this:

![Figure 2: Exploded View Diagram](image)

Significantly, the parts are displayed at a slight distance from one another, but in a proximal spacing that suggests their interrelationship. Using the title and the novel’s structure as his point of reference, the literary critic Shane Graham suggests that:

This representational strategy becomes a trope for the novel’s own operation, which attempts to dissect what one character sees as the city’s ‘layers of permanence.’ By exploring the genesis and everyday use of ordinary, mostly ignored, objects at the microscopic level, Vladislavić helps us to better appreciate the complex interactions of people, material commodities and social and physical space that
constitute life in post-apartheid Johannesburg. (“Layers” 224)

To a certain extent I agree with both Graham and Morphet here, but there is another element to the nature of exploded views that I wish to explore, namely that they represent a spatially organized group of relationships in such a way as to give systemic structure to a machine-like pattern of interaction and, as such, are a deeply limited way of thinking about or representing human relationships. Essentially, an exploded view details the component’s individual parts, but each placement only makes sense when perceived as a cog within a larger system or whole. Of course, this kind of representation fits very well with Vladislavić’s critiques of development theory in relation to Salt and Walker’s “cogworld” systems of social interaction. In light of this, and in the close readings that follow, I contend that the exploded view is not only the novel’s central motif, but also the representational ideology being critiqued, and that the novel eschews, rather than embraces, the representational modality exemplified by the exploded view diagram. In that sense, I disagree with Graham’s contention that “this representational strategy becomes a trope for the novel’s own operation” and also disagree when he further suggests that “Vladislavić takes up the metaphor of the exploded view as the representational strategy through which he exposes the multi-faceted social and physical infrastructures of contemporary Johannesburg” (54). The Exploded View is not an exploded view, but instead offers a perspective that deconstructs that particular form of spatial imagination. In fact, the representation of relationships among the stories is ambiguous (as Morphet suggests above, “the centre is never given precise definition”), and the overall sense is one of fragmentation and yearning for a stable centre, as opposed to a cohesiveness which brings everything to rest on a cogent sense of order.
Not surprisingly, there is a considerable critical consensus that the tone of *The Exploded View* is one of fragmentation. Helgesson, in “Johannesburg as Africa: a Postcolonial Reading of *The Exploded View* by Ivan Vladislavić”, touches upon this theme, suggesting that “One aesthetic task of *The Exploded View* is ... to respond imaginatively to the contradiction between fragmentation and abstract unity” (30). Indeed, “fragmentation” is a recurrent theme evoked by a significant number of critics, even those with conflicting readings of the novel, and this sense of fragmentation is usually related, either directly or implicitly, to the characters themselves in terms of their various quests to assume a stable sense of self in a shifting urban landscape. As Morphet suggests: “The characters find themselves working in a world of fragments. The city itself is fractured and adrift; people find themselves in skewed roles that do not fit together; events seem discontinuous and without meaningful sequence. Each story follows its own path as the characters struggle to compose a credible existence for themselves” (207). Similarly, Michael Titlestad and Mike Kissack, in “Secular Improvisations: The Poetics of Invention in Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Exploded View*”, assert that each section “reveals a protagonist inhabiting a field of signs, material objects, and ideological possibilities and limitations that comprise the transforming post apartheid South Africa” and further suggest that the novel is focalized around “the limited capacity of each protagonist to make sense of the transforming world he inhabits” (11). In keeping with the focus on the struggle to define or maintain a sense of oneself in a mercurial world, another literary critic, Susan Van Zyl, in her essay “Skyhooks and Diagrams: the Signing of South Africa in Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Exploded View*”, suggests that the novel is “Vladislavić’s exploration of the inner life of characters engaged in the kinds of
signing they need to make the small, changing world around them visible and intelligible to themselves and others” (76). Whatever one’s take on the novel, there seem to be two widely agreed upon elements: fragmentation on the one hand and a reactionary attempt at conceptual unity on the other.

The exploded view diagram the title refers to, however, is more a fantasy of comprehension and competence, shared by the protagonists to varying degrees, than an accurate summation of their lived reality. Morphet suggests that “The exploded view is a plan; a vision of order and precision. But the phrase carries the counter vision of a city that has been blown apart” (208). To that I would add that it has a double meaning in that perhaps rather than the city being blown apart, it is the characters’ “views” (or representational strategies) of the city that are being blown apart and that are unable to come back together. The idea of taking something apart and putting it back together, something visually realized in the together-yet-separated mapping of an exploded view diagram, is a symbol of particular salience for turn of the century South Africa. This idea of fragmentation and the need for restructuring, while simultaneously being incapable of fully realizing this objective, is thematically resonant in both The Restless Supermarket and The Folly. In short, The Exploded View continues in the vein of deconstructing various representations of city spaces, particularly those common to development theory. My reading will echo Vladislavić’s construction of it, in that I will discuss each section distinctly, and in the order it is provided, but with an eye toward framing thematic cohesiveness.
“Villa Toscana” and the Dreamscape of Systemic Bodies/Buildings

The Exploded View opens with the section “Villa Toscana” which begins:

Villa Toscana lies on a sloping ridge beside the freeway, a little prefabricated Italy in the veld, resting on a firebreak of red earth like a toy town on a picnic blanket. It makes everything around – the corrugated-iron roofs of the old farmhouses on the neighbouring plots, the doddering windmills, the bluegums – look out of place. (3)

Beginning with setting is common, but as usual Vladislavić’s depiction of setting cuts directly to the thematic core while remaining inconspicuous regarding the depths of its own complexity. Villa Toscana is located next to a freeway, contextualizing its placement in relation to the infrastructure of human movement in such a way that suggests its suburban (and therefore simultaneously central and marginal38) status within Johannesburg. As a “prefabricated Italy on the veld” it is a place out of place, and its commercial and preplanned nature is underscored by its representation as a “toy town”. As Titlestad and Kissack suggest, the compound is rife with “imported chains of signification dislocated from the (supposed) context of their origin and destination” (12). This characterization is extended with the juxtaposition between this pre-fabbed Europe (one can’t help but recall Tearle’s Alibia and its attendant Eurocentric qualities) and its surroundings, which “look out of place” despite being the pre-existing built environment and the natural vegetation of the area. Undoubtedly, there is an ironic inversion of belonging at play here, such that the corrugated-iron shacks whose class signification clashes with the economic and social realities of Villa Toscana appear to be impinging

38 In the specific context of South Africa, such areas are indeed both central and marginal: central because of the middle-class socioeconomic status of suburban neighbourhoods such as these and because of their role as enclaves for the exodus of whites from the increasingly dangerous city-center; marginal because of the “minority” status of whites and because of their literally marginal placement within the urbanscape.
upon the pseudo-Italian development and not the other way around. Of course, this
narrative is heavily focalized around the protagonist Les Budlender, so such a disparity is
perhaps unsurprising. Relating to the trope of the exploded view, already we have a place
out of place and an incongruous lack of harmony among parts and their spatial
relationships to one another. Far from harmonious, the relationship between a gated
community and its surroundings is more often one of defensive enclosure and an attempt
at limiting any undesired accessibility that proximity might facilitate. When Budlender
approaches the community, the focalized narrator tells us:

The architect had given the entrance the medieval
treatment. Railway sleepers beneath the wheels of the car
made the driveway rumble like a drawbridge, the wooden
gates were heavy and dark, and studded with bolts and
hinges, there were iron grilles in drystone walls. A security
man gazed at him through an embrasure in a fortified
gatehouse, and then, satisfied that he posed no immediate
threat, stepped out with a clipboard. (7)

To be fair, much of the architectural security here is typical of Johannesburg. The
combination of violence and lingering apartheid paranoia/anxiety have made it such that
the overwhelming majority of private residences in the city are gated and walled at a
minimum, with additions such as spiked fences, electrical wire, razor wire, and guard
posts more common than not. Regarding Vladislavić’s representation of this within the
barriers of the Villa Toscana, Ralph Goodman, in “Ivan Vladislavić’s The Exploded
View: Space and Place in Transitional South Africa”, suggests that, “... the aesthetic
statement of the architecture conceals a determined attempt by one group (organized in
terms of race or class) to define and defend a specific space against other groups, as was
the case with the historical city states which Vladislavić seems to be evoking here” (39).
This evocation echoes Aubrey Tearle’s similar preoccupation with borders and sites of

access, as well as his fetishization of the in/out groupings reified by the built environment of the earliest cities. The Villa Toscana also has incorporated a fortress-like aesthetic which suits the European nostalgia it fosters while dramatically enforcing the in/out distinction between the residences and those that live outside its gates. If an exploded view illustrates functional compatibility, then the opening pages of The Exploded View describing the nature of Villa Toscana suggest something rather different.

This juxtaposition underscores the disparity between the lived reality of human practice within contemporary urbanscapes and the neatly delineated and choreographed functionality of prescriptive texts employed to map such spaces, in this case a particular genre of diagram. This contrast is experienced by each of the novel’s protagonists as their mutual desire for an ordered and sensical relationship between their bodies, identities, and environment, a desire that echoes the practical cleanliness of the novel’s eponymous illustration, and furthermore, a desire that can never fully (or perhaps more accurately: completely) realize a similar closure of unity in any meaningful sense. The novel, while a critique of closed systems of “development”, manifests this critique by examining subjectivities of a group of men who, to varying degrees and in varying ways, have internalized the desire for an “exploded view” of themselves in relation to the city they inhabit. Instead of framing the novel on a larger scale, or more didactically tracing the progression of a particular case of failed development, Vladislavić’s emphasis rests on the minutiae of everyday life, demonstrating the dead ends and limitations of these ideologically grounded spatial representations by revealing their fallout within the deeply personal inner-lives of his characters. Such a perspective is particularly illuminating because, as the urban development theorist Raphael Fischler points out in “Strategy and
History in Professional Practice: Planning as World Making”, “Professional culture is also the product of a confrontation with conditions of practice, with a field of strategic action. This is why planners’ representations reveal not only their image of the city but also their image of their position in the planning process and in the process of urban development” (21). Vladislavić’s approach is to look at how these representations reveal this inner sense of placement within his characters. The exploded view is therefore, for these men, a fantasy of sorts, not unlike Tearle’s “Alibia” or Nieuwenhuizen’s new house, a fantasy of human interaction codified by a particular representational modality. Unlike these earlier works, however, this fantasy remains in the realm of desire and never breaks free to become manifested in a fantastic reality, such as those present in “The Proofreader’s Derby” or the ephemeral structure of Nieuwenhuizen’s vision of a country reborn. As Tony Morphet suggests: “None of the stories shows the kind of linguistic exuberance and obsessional precision that characterizes the earlier fiction. The dominant temper characterizing [The Exploded View] is much closer to what might be called ‘realism’” (207).

For the protagonist of “Villa Toscana”, Les Budlender, the world is one best measured by statistics, but simultaneously one whose patterns refuse to conform to his desire to “render technical” the landscape of contemporary Johannesburg. Budlender is helping craft a new census, one that will hopefully reflect the newly forged ideals of post-apartheid South Africa. Vladislavić writes:

At this point in his career, Budlender had been obliged to combine a passion for statistics, if one could call it that, with a professional interest in immigration. Seconded from the Development Bank by Statistical Services, he was helping to redraft the questionnaires for the national census – those used in the census of 1996, the first non-racial
headcount in the country’s history, had flummoxed half the population. To make sure that the new versions spoke to everyone, as the brief put it, the drafters had engaged a group of respondents, people with diverse backgrounds (they tried to avoid the old categories of ‘race’ and ‘population group’) and in every income bracket (they steered clear, too, of ‘rich’ and ‘poor’). For months now, he had been shuttling between the Documents Committee and his share of the sample fine-tuning questions, ferrying revised drafts to and fro. Driving, always driving. (6)

Budlender’s passion for statistics is part of his larger “passion” (or anxiety) regarding patterns and proper modes of human movement. His anxieties in this regard echo Tearle’s, even if they are less blatantly racist. Like Tearle’s phone book, the census is a way of tracking migrations of people within the built environment, except the census has a more overt eye toward using the data produced for planning development. Like the paradoxes of draft briefs for buildings discussed by Thomas Markus, the brief for the census is self-conflicted, aiming to trace the socioeconomic patterns of the population but without positively identifying people according to the labels that demarcated the grotesque inequities of the apartheid regime. In essence, Budlender’s job is to provide information, but within a rhetorical rubric whose interests lie in obscuring the demographic inequities of South Africa under the guise of supporting and sustaining equity. As Helgesson puts it “The [census] assumes that there is a common denominator – the empty universal of national citizenship – that authorizes the phrasing of ‘inoffensive’ questions aimed at differentiating between citizens” (“Johannesburg” 30). Like Tearle’s phone book, the census is both a map and prescriptive text, and, as van Zyl reminds us, “demography is itself the staple diet of bio-politics, a modality of power in turn, often regarded by Foucault, for example, as inseparable from the rise of modern nation states and the forms of government required to produce and maintain them” (77). The census,
like any representation of complex human environments, is a form of mapping, and as such is partially defined by the limitations inherent to representation.

As a social cartographer and aspiring trustee, Budlender’s actual view of the people the census is ostensibly going to bestow “development” upon is complicated by his distaste for their unruly otherness, an alterity best characterized by its lack of formality. As Budlender approaches the Villa Toscana community he comes to a robot\(^\text{39}\) and directs his gaze toward the hawkers who have gathered at the intersection:

He wound up the window and glared at the curio-sellers and their wares, ranged on the verges and traffic islands: a herd of wooden giraffes as tall as men, drums and masks, beaded lapel badges promoting Aids awareness and the national flag, fruitbowls and tie-racks and candelabra made of twisted wire. Arts and crafts. Junk. Every street corner was turning into a flea market. Informal sector employment (as a percentage of the total): 20 per cent. More? (4)

The in/out group dynamics are rendered in part by the nature of placement in the space of the highway. As a driver, Budlender is using the transportation infrastructure in question for its intended “functional” purpose, aligning him with the prescriptive centre while the curio-sellers are arranged on the verges and islands in a way that suggests an active appropriation of those spaces for alternative uses, uses that are provided by the everyday practices of people, such as Budlender, whose usage is comparably conventional. This difference is also highlighted by the spatial placement of driver versus pedestrian, and Budlender is able to distance himself from these figures in the margin by rolling up his window, an act of border enforcement that still allows him the privilege of glaring at them from his enclosed vantage point. This watching/distancing of others and

\(^{39}\) A South African neologism for traffic lights so ubiquitous that it would no longer be accurate to call it slang.
simultaneous critique of their behaviour patterns is a familiar act in both *The Restless Supermarket* (with Tearle’s obsessive proofreading of human bodies and movement) and *The Folly* (particularly with Mrs’ habit of watching Nieuwenhuizen, and critically appraising him, through the windows of her home). Also at play here is an art/junk binary, by which Budlender identifies the craftsmanship of these marginalized people as being sub-par and their works therefore abject and literally waste. Although mentioned in passing, this binary, and the object of the “curio”, will become central to the section “Curiouser”. This binary between art and junk is related to the binary of formal/informal in the sense that the distinction is created and maintained by a kind of institutional recognition of status. As an agent of the census, and a statistician, Budlender possesses a distaste for the informal nature of the arrangement before him, and for informal modes of human existence more generally, and it remains important to note the extent to which the practices of his profession inform both his attitudes toward other people and his aesthetic sensibilities.

Informal settlements and informal employment rankle developers for a number of reasons. For a statistician such as Budlender, they are “off the grid” and therefore make statistical analysis more difficult and less reliable (and by extension less useful, lowering the capital utility of the statistician). They further complicate things by stealing or poaching (or perhaps re-appropriating) resources, such as water and electricity, which makes it difficult to track who is using what and to what extent. Their migrations, settlements, appropriations and trade frequently do not conform to the larger scale vision of the developer, and may impinge on previously set goals, particularly when these goals are not resilient in the ways discussed by Salt and Walker. Informal settlers, although
frequently the targets of development, often resist the aid of the trustee, either explicitly or otherwise, and as a result end up being forcefully evacuated, migrated, or imprisoned. In short, informal settlements and informal employment undermine “cogworld” systems by demonstrating that human resourcefulness and resilience will often establish methods of self-preservation that do not conform to established protocols. And yet, were it not for these informal modes of existence, many socioeconomic systems that ostensibly resent informal settlement and employment would be in dire jeopardy. Where, for instance, would Johannesburg be without the informal minibus system to provide transportation to working class blacks within the city? Lastly, just as Tearle’s fear of mixing catalyzed his appreciation for borders, there is an underlying sense that informal settlements will breech formal spatial arrangements and corrupt them, rendering formal social spaces chaotic. Vladislavić writes:

A squatter camp had sprung up here in the last year on the open veld between this road and the freeway, directly opposite the new housing scheme. He had no idea what either place was called, but he had seen them from the freeway often enough, under a cloud of smog that drew no distinction between the formal and informal, and he had passed between the two zones earlier that evening, an arrangement of little RDP houses on one side and a clutter of corrugated-iron and board shacks on the other. (20)

This ambiguous boundary is the meeting point “between the formal and informal”, but Budlender’s inability to label either place with precision and the smog’s lack of discernment between the two zones suggest a kind of arbitrary ambiguity at play here. On the one side, the homes built under the Reconstruction and Development Program

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40 The minibus industry in Johannesburg provides a compelling example of how the formalization of informal services can go wrong, as discussed by Roland Lomme in “Should South African Mini-Taxis be Scrapped? Formalizing Informal Urban Transport in a Developing Country”. 196
represent the ANC’s attempt to resolve the current housing crisis in South Africa, but by merely existing on the other side of the road, the informal corrugated metal shacks represent the failures of this initiative to meet its goals or to satisfy the needs of many of those the program targets for development. Essentially, the reality of the built environment reveals the fault lines in the process of development that has attempted to prescribe the makeup of the city.

Despite his proclivity for stats, however, Budlender remains aware of their limitations, even as he obsesses over them as a way of coming to terms with his environment and a source of genuine meaning. These moments of recognition, however, do little to alleviate his concern with statistical accuracy, and instead suggest to him the presence of unsettling gaps or movements which inject a threatening, or at least confusing, instability into his surroundings. Budlender thinks, “Foreigners on every side. Could the aliens have outstripped the indigenes? Was it possible? There were no reliable statistics” (5); shortly thereafter he similarly posits that “The boundaries of Johannesburg are drifting away, sliding over pristine ridges and valleys, lodging in tenuous places, slipping again” (6). These thoughts could just have easily belong to Aubrey Tearle, as they suggest a parallel between the ambiguity of human bodies and the ambiguity of the boundaries which establish and identify proper demarcations of placement. Like Tearle, Budlender is a man who follows the rules and has trouble understanding why others do not. True to his role as a trustee, Budlender thinks that the formal methods of infrastructure provided by development can and, if followed, will provide the proper path forward for those lacking development:

Fully nine tenths of the cars involved in rear-end collisions were ignoring the recommended following distance.
Axiomatic: had they been heeding the distance, they would not have had the accident. What is it with people? They treat the rules of the road as suggestions whose limits are there to be tested. They gamble with their lives. Do those arrows painted on the tar make any difference? Little patches of arrows on the road surface and a sign on the verge: *Always see three arrows.* (17)

Three related things are at play here and, given their chronological relationship, we can trace something akin to a failure of development, one that Budlender deeply sympathizes with. The first is Budlender’s concern with a genuine problem regarding road safety, a problem with mortal consequences, and one whose apparent solution is statistically verifiable. After assessing the issue and, like a good trustee, rendering it technical, a solution is put into place, one that conforms to the analysis. By creating a sign in the form of three arrows on the road, and then adding an attendant sign instructing the viewer on how to interpret the information provided by the first, the proper and safe method of moving through this space is communicated. The lack of response this process instigates, however, disheartens Budlender, and he feels bewildered at how “people” could fail to immediately implement a practice, regardless of previous social and cultural habituation, that might very well save their lives. As van Zyl writes, “Budlender lives for signs: he is driven ... by the symptomatic wish to shape the world in the terms the signs themselves dictate, rather than shaping the signs to the shapes of the world” (78). This frustration on behalf of the trustee (Budlender here stands in for the original figure he imagines conceiving the signs through an expression of sympathy) regarding how development is denied efficacy is hardly particular to South Africa. The desire to rationalize human patterns of behaviour, born from a desire to think of humans as wholly rational agents, is so strong, however, that acknowledging the source of this failure becomes, for a trustee
figure like Budlender, impossible. Instead, the self-preserving move of projecting blame onto those who need development and yet resist it for reasons that remain unknown and unimagined takes over, while still not providing a satisfactory alternative to the original method of erecting roadside signs.41

Budlender’s insecurities become most apparent in his romantic overtures, or rather, in his inability to communicate his desires in a way that aligns even remotely with his fantasies. Thus far, I have neglected to discuss the central relationship and conflict of “Villa Toscana”, which focuses on the connection, or lack thereof, between Budlender and Iris du Plooy, a woman selected to read sample drafts of the aforementioned census to help discern the applicability of the format and diction across various ethnic and class groupings—a kind of census-taking of the census. As it happens, she lives in Villa Toscana, hence Budlender’s journeys to and from this location and his access to this space soon become paralleled with his access to her, driving home the interrelationship between sites of access and the movement/connection of human bodies so recurrent in Vladislavíc’s work. Shortly after meeting her for the first time, Budlender develops an unprofessional interest in Iris, an unrequited one as far as he is made aware. Given the narrative’s limited third-person perspective and focalisation around Budlender, the motivations and desires of Iris remain ambiguous, which serves to further underscore the sense of alienation as he tries to realize a sense of himself through his relationship with his surroundings. He is trying to place himself, as it were, within his exploded view of Johannesburg.

41 This moment links Budlender’s worldview with that of later protagonists: Egan, in the section “Afritude Sauce”, a character who will undergo a similar, although more explicit, crisis of ineptitude and misplaced blame; and Duffy, who will see the same arrows on the road in a different light.
Iris is a continuity announcer\textsuperscript{42} for the SABC1 television channel, a position that renders her rife with irony in relation to Budlender’s desire for her and his experience of seeing her on screen. Budlender is not an habitual television watcher, and “drama of any kind bored him” (23), but as his work for the census hits a lull he finds himself watching TV, no doubt in the hopes of catching a glimpse of Iris, although the extent to which he is aware of this underlying motivation is unclear. This nascent habit of his frames the thematic core of his relationship with Iris in a scene worth quoting at length:

Once, in some public-service advert for abused animals, he thought he saw Iris in dungarees and rubber gloves clutching an oil-soaked penguin, but she came and went in an instant. Why did everything have to happen so quickly? So incompletely? It was nothing but bits and pieces of things. How much of any given hour on the screen was actually explicable to the ordinary person? What proportion of it was composed of objects that were whole, actions that were uninterrupted, sequences that were linked by more than an insistent rhythm? An endless jumble of body parts amid ruins, a gyrating hip, an enigmatic navel, a fossicking hand, a pointing finger, sign language from a secret alphabet, fragments of city street, images flaring and fading, dissolving, detaching, floating in airtime, dwindling away into nothing. \textit{Simunye, we are one},\textsuperscript{43} the signature tune insisted. (24)

Budlender thinks he has seen her in this moment, but cannot be sure, and it is this lack of certitude, and the frustration it inspires, that sets off his chain of visceral responses. At

\textsuperscript{42} Although no longer popular in North America, continuity announcers are still prevalent in much of the world. Their role is to mention, in between programmes, what has just been on and what is coming up, providing a sense of flow between programmes. They also might engage in local soft news stories or advertisements, or provide information regarding changes in scheduling. In this way, they help to render the flow of programming more “continuous” and provide a sense of cohesion to the programming.

\textsuperscript{43} ‘Simunye’ is a Zulu word meaning ‘we are one’. Given the context of this passage, this is almost certainly an allusion to the iconic ‘Simunye, We Are One’ phrase and jingle that were a central part of the introduction of the South African Broadcasting Corporation’s (SABC) premier television channel, SABC 1, in 1996.
the core of this experience, he feels an overwhelming lack of completeness, seeing only bits and pieces of a multitude of disparate bodies and objects. This feeling is in direct conflict with his desire, which is predicated on an exploded view: a totalizing sense of how everything slots together, a metanarrative about precisely how he “fits” within the framework of social spaces he inhabits. Instead of this perspective, he is exposed to a fragmentation of space, of time, of bodies, and of the physical objects that make-up his built environment, a dissolution which erodes any potential for meaning because, for Budlender, meaning requires stasis and unity, as does, to a certain degree, the statistical accuracy he hopes will grant this meaning. In this moment, his desire for Iris is bound up in the mélange of media representations he is slowly becoming acclimatized to; the connections, implied by their near simultaneous presence on screen, among fragmented bodies, cityscapes, and language itself, become a pastiche of parts whose lack of unity ironically coalesces into a kind of shared blankness, or unifying lack of unity. In this sense, his unrequited desire for Iris becomes a cog in his larger unfulfilled desire for establishing a firm sense of place and placement within his environment more generally, and she becomes a potential anchor point upon which Budlender hopes to erect a foundation of self-identification that can defy the constant slippage he feels taking place all around him. His desire for a complete image of her is actually a desire for a unified image of himself in relation to her. This anxiety at the core of his subjectivity connects him with Aubrey Tearle, and to a certain brand of conservatism among white South Africans.

Before long, the fragmented qualities of representing human bodies on television become his internal way of conceptualizing her as well. Vladislavić writes, “[Iris] was
inclined to conceal herself, he had noticed, beneath loose-fitting blouses and full skirts. Her underwear evoked her naked body, but he could not imagine it precisely, all he saw was bits and pieces of other women, the thighs of his last lover, breasts out of magazines, hips and shoulders that were ambiguously, softly angled, like her face” (30). Iris is not truly a person to him, possessed of full subjecthood, but rather, like the fleeting images flickering on his screen, a pastiche of parts which, taken together, form a representation of what his desire for women embodies more generally. The false wholeness of this generality is essentially a failed exploded view of his desires because they do not and cannot fit together to form an actual cohesive body, and are instead merely a series of shards of half-remembered fantasies that he projects onto Iris, ultimately denying her personhood despite his genuine desire for her, or rather for what she represents to him. In short, this is a deftly rendered portrayal of the objectifying qualities of the male gaze, crafted in such a way as to explore the linkages between the simplification of personhood inherent to objectification and the more generalized desires of Budlender’s spatial imagination. These linkages imply a critique of development theory as an extension of objectifying modes of imagining people and the relationships between them.

The Exploded View also illustrates the effects of this worldview on the subjectivity that possesses it, foregrounding the sense of loss experienced by Budlender, whose alienation feels inescapable by the closing of “Villa Toscana”. Nothing materializes between Budlender and Iris, and in the end he is only afforded a fleeting dream, one that once again encapsulates his desire for an exploded view of himself and the lack of completion this desire manifests via its unattainability:

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

“Villa Toscana” closes on this dream, and like Tearle’s “Proofreader’s Derby” this moment gives us an important, albeit fleeting and partial, insight into the relationship between Budlender’s attachment to Iris (or his limited conception of her) and the way he perceives his placement within Joburg. That this occurs in a dream suggests a certain dearth of conscious acknowledgment on Budlender’s part, and therefore the narrative forgoes any traditional short story epiphany. A small but important detail is that this dreamscape is not positioned as Joburg, but rather an unnamed “foreign city”, which underscores Budlender’s sense of detachment and alienation from his surroundings and his failure to place himself within them. The skyscrapers, however, are connected to Iris viscerally, through the sense of smell, being made of perfume bottles which allude to the miniature “city” of cosmetics he discovers earlier while snooping in her bathroom, and which he covertly sniffs, granting him a kind of indirect access to her physicality. But the buildings are also graph-like, which simultaneously alludes to his preoccupation with data sets and statistical analysis as ways of creating order out of the shifting urbanscape of Johannesburg. His inability to satisfactorily utilize either of these forms of self-identification, hard data or interpersonal relationships, is suggested by the lack of control his dream-self exhibits in navigating this landscape wherein his movements become increasingly fast to the point that he finds himself flying, or rather falling, horizontally. Touching upon the same passage, Titlestad and Kissack write that “Budlender, inhabiting
the logic of pastiche, finds himself groundless, falling through the semiotic assemblage of a fragmented text” (13). That this falling occurs horizontally is not incidental, but rather brings to our attention an inversion of normal patterns of movement, an inversion that is evocative of Budlender’s increasing sense of misplaced placement encroaching upon an ordered and “rational” series of socio-spatial interrelationships. This disorder is characterized by the community of Villa Toscana, by his relationship or lack thereof with Iris, and by the refusal of these components to fit within the always ephemeral ordered unity provided by the exploded view perspective.

“Afritude Sauce”: Reestablishing Systems of Whiteness in the New South Africa

The emphasis “Villa Toscana” places on a lack of communication between interlocutors (read; Budlender’s inability to speak to Iris, or to apprehend her subjectivity, on a genuine level) is paralleled with a similar disconnect within development discourse in terms of the relationship between the trustee figure and those they are attempting to develop. This lack is emphasized more directly in the next section, “Afritude Sauce”, which features a sanitation engineer named Egan attempting to navigate racial relationships among his colleagues as well as with the people his development initiatives are intended to help. Egan’s role in the wider narrative serves to underscore Budlender’s earlier frustration with the urban semiotics of traffic signs and the slippages they illuminate between the aims of infrastructure development and what this same development is capable of achieving, particularly in relation to modes of human movement and habitation/habituation. Like Budlender, Egan is a member of post-apartheid South Africa’s “expert class” (to refer back to Ferguson’s term), and as such,
his position as a sanitation engineer is wrapped up (to recall Tania Li’s phrase) in a “will to improve” the lot of under-developed black South Africans. His struggle to operate within the (neo)liberal rhetorical modes of development theory is related to a tandem anxiety regarding his own placement and belonging in South Africa as a white male, and his simultaneous cynicism and anxiety regarding urban development in Johannesburg highlight that he is, like the other protagonists of *The Exploded View*, endeavouring to place himself during a period characterized by displacement. I mentioned earlier how numerous critics have suggested that *The Exploded View* is largely about this process of self-identification/placement. As the title of “Afritude Sauce” suggests, this act of self-placement is further complicated within this narrative by the semiotics of “Africa” and “Africanness”, labels that also lend themselves thematically to the penultimate narrative, “Curiouser”.

The connection between Egan’s role as trustee/developer and his apprehensions regarding racial identity and inclusion are adroitly captured in a conversation between Egan and his African colleague of sorts, one Milton Mazibuko. Given that he is representative of the employment redistribution taking place along racial lines in post-apartheid South Africa, and given that he is “the council official in charge of housing subsidies and deed registration on RDP projects…” (52), Mazibuko is a fellow trustee figure. He passes along directions to Egan on how to get to Hani View, the RDP housing project they are working on, because “although Egan knew every square centimetre of Hani View on the plans he had never set foot on the site” (53). This emphasis on the distance between the lived reality of Hani View and Egan’s penchant for the prescriptive textual world afforded by plans sets up the following dialogue:

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‘How are things in Hani view?’
‘No, everything is good.’ Mazibuko crossed his short legs in the narrow space in front of him and rested his knee against the dashboard. ‘Rubicon finished another fifteen houses last month. The people have moved in already. We had to put them in quick-quick before there was even glass in the windows, so the squatters didn’t get there first.’
‘So you’re on schedule?’
‘Well, let’s say we’re not further behind schedule than is strictly necessary.’ (53)

The disjuncture between the question (How are things?) and the response (No, everything is good) might be a minor point of language difference, but it is also accurately interpreted as a particularly loaded reading of Egan’s question on Mazibuko’s part, which isn’t to say it is a misreading. Responding in the negative suggests that Mazibuko expects a cynical take on the situation from Egan or perhaps that Egan’s question was implicitly framed as a query regarding problems. Mazibuko’s apprehension here is likely based on experience. The dialogue is also rife with development-speak, with phrases such as “not further behind schedule than is strictly necessary” putting a pro-active spin on complications, while acknowledging that the people who are being moved into the project, because they need affordable housing, are threatened with displacement by a significant group of others who are likewise looking for housing. The dialogue continues:

‘Any more blackouts?’
‘No, we sorted that out. It was a mix-up at the substation. The big problem is still with the toilets, I’m afraid. Half the houses don’t have water. I mean, they’ve got pipes, but the people can’t pay, and so we have to cut them off. Then they complain that the toilets don’t work.’
‘That’s why we call it water born sewage folks.’
‘Some of them say they don’t want a stinking toilet in the house anymore.’
‘A little bit late to change their minds, don’t you think?’
‘Very. Now when they see the size of the water bill, they’d rather have a long drop in the yard. But when we offered them pit latrines to begin with, they were all up in arms. You remember the story: “I don’t want a hole in the ground, like a dog, I want a throne at the end of the passage.”’

‘It’s the same everywhere.’ If Janine could hear me now, he thought, this petulant tone. (53-54)

This passage highlights the disparity between the aims of development and the lived reality of those the development is targeting. This is not a problem with an easy solution; merely providing people with pit latrines against their own judgment would almost certainly give rise to a new set of complications. Regardless, a considerable amount of miscommunication is taking place and the schism between the infrastructure and the daily practices of the people that inhabit it is the direct result of people speaking past one another.

Also palpable here is the related and equally jarring contrast between, on the one hand, the optimistic “public transcript” of material redistribution and a set of reforming policies aimed at righting hundreds of years of racial inequity by crafting a kind of national, harmonious totality and, on the other, the frustrated “private transcript” of the mid-tier trustee professionals expected to enact this transition on the ground level. In Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts, James C. Scott posits that a “public transcript” reflects the “public performance required of those subject to elaborate and systemic forms of social subordination: the worker to the boss, the tenant or sharecropper to the landlord, the serf to the lord, the slave to the master, the untouchable to the Brahmin, a member of the subject race to one of the dominant race” (2). By contrast, the private or “hidden” transcript conveys “discourse that takes place ‘offstage’, beyond direct observation by power holders. The hidden transcript is thus derivative in
the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript” (4-5). As a mid-level expert, Egan’s role in the process of crafting a new South Africa is largely predicated on the extent to which he is loyal to the development discourse regarding equity. Throughout “Afritude Sauce” he feels an anxiety regarding the way he speaks to others in his hidden transcript moments (some of which are only in the form of unspoken thoughts) in light of the fact that he is actively contributing to a public transcript that obscures socioeconomic inequalities while ostensibly combating them. Vladislavić’s representation of this anxiety is, however, fairly complicated. Egan is not powerless, but what power he possesses is caught up in larger systems of representation to which he is thrall. Also, his moments of “resistance” are not aimed at usurping the system, but merely surviving within it, and his performances do not conceal any real potential for change, but merely reflect moments of awareness where his thoughts and actions are not as aligned as he would like them to be.

Vladislavić’s focalization of the narrative around these internal private transcripts allows for a compelling glimpse of the small-scale realities that make-up the various fractures whose tendrils run through pre-fabbed built environments such as those of Hani 1. Like Budlender before them, Egan and Maibuko project any insecurities they possess regarding the inefficacy of this process onto the “un-developed” peoples who resist reformation, and therefore the core problem, from Egan and Maibuko’s point of view, stems from the short-sighted capriciousness of those who require assistance. This mutually agreed upon representation then relieves those possessed of the “will to improve” of any responsibility regarding the disparities that arise between ideal settings and material realities. In short, if the “new house” cannot be built satisfactorily, then it is
the thankless inconsistency of the residents that must be blamed. Egan is conscious of the juxtaposition between this private transcript and the public one of harmonious development, and is equally aware that in another context, provided here by the ambiguous figure “Janine” (who we later learn is likely his wife and mother of his children), his attitude would appear repellant due to this hypocrisy. He is, in part, able to rationalize this position because his interlocutor is a black African. Soon, however, the nature of his relationship to Mazibuko also becomes blurred, and Egan has trouble affixing in/out demarcations to those around him, including Mazibuko, a breakdown in the distinction between trustees and those in need of development that further destabilizes his self-identification as a progressive white liberal. This breakdown become apparent within the following dialogue:

‘People are never satisfied.’
‘Exactly. “I want to shit in style and pull the chain, like the madam.”’

Mazibuko gave another chubby laugh, and Egan forced himself to join in. This kind of racial humour, or was it interracial humour, made him uncomfortable. He was never sure whether it was for his benefit or at his expense. When a black associate called him ‘baas’, he got the joke, give or take. But when the same associate called himself ‘boy’ or ‘bushie’, Egan was never sure what was really going on. (54)

When the joke is at Egan’s expense it is easier for him to laugh at his own denigration, because the irony of the label allows him to assume the role of a progressive white who, like his interlocutor, rejects the affirmation of whiteness present in the term. The flip-side of the coin, however, makes him uncomfortable because laughter aimed at the marginalized majority renders the intent less apparent when it comes from a white person. In one sense, the joke is still comprehensible, but what precisely his role as
audience is becomes less so. Mazibuko’s joke, moreover, seems to puncture the earnest will to racial equity that Egan’s development agenda propagates, and as such could potentially be read as a critique of Egan’s hypocrisy in working for equality while laughing at its representation as absurd, and Egan is aware of this potential. Like many of Vladislavić’s characters, Egan navigates the complexities of white subjectivity in post-apartheid South Africa. His responses to the difficulties of this transition are easier to sympathize with than Tearle’s relentless self-affirmation, but are nevertheless similarly geared toward eliding his complicity: moments that have the potential for self-reflexive insight are thus met with an almost stubborn confusion. Although he begins from a better point than Aubrey, Egan’s narrative is similarly non-redemptive.

In comparison to Budlender’s, Egan’s narrative is likewise personal, but also gives us more of a general sense of Joburg’s urban landscape as its setting opens out onto the large-scale social housing projects that dot the city, instances of urban development whose inconsistencies and problematics underscore a number of key elements of The Exploded View’s spatial representations. These elements include the treatment of private versus public transcripts, the disconnected nature of urban landscapes of Joburg, and the in/out group dynamics that define the spatial realities of cities despite their typical representation as cohesive units. As Mazibuko and Egan drive toward Hani View, the focalized narrator notes that

The history of the area was complicated. The formal housing project had been an initiative of the Kempton Park council, designed to take the overflow from Tembisa. Two thousand houses in the usual unbending rows, a school, a community hall, a clinic. Louis Bhengu had scarcely turned the soil for the foundations of the hall – an embarrassing moment: the ground was so hard he could not drive the blade of the spade into it, despite repeated blows from the
heel of his Bally slip-on – when an informal settlement sprang up on the opposite side of the road. Sprang up overnight, quite literally. The squatters had been dumped there by the Midrand council, on a tract of waste land acquired from the province. (56)

In this passage, the embarrassment of Bhengu, a trustee character we meet later who has limited knowledge of the site (as evidenced by his soil turning moment) is echoed by the springing up of an informal settlement, as both instances indicate the slippage between intentions and reality within urban development practices. Again, the distinction between formal and informal settlements is foregrounded, but in such a way that the boundary between the two seems untenable, or at least, unenforceable. The disparity between the two sites is not directly questioned here, however, as the focalization around Egan remains myopic regarding the extent to which the legislated boundaries are incurably porous. Indeed the melding of the two sites occurs through labeling, but in such a way as to conjoin them while still articulating their difference:

Although Hani View Extension 1, as it soon became known, was nominally under the jurisdiction of Midrand, its proximity to the housing project on the other side of the municipal boundary effectively connected it to the neighbouring council. The people from the shacks sent their kids to school in Hani View, they brought their broken bones and whooping coughs to the Hani View clinic, they drew their water there and carried it back in tins. If these people were ours it would be different, ran one editorial in the *Express*, but they’ve been left on our doorstep. (56)

Here Vladislavić posits that the demarcations of legislative jurisdiction and municipal governance do little to inform the everyday spatial practices of those within the city, but that they nevertheless do retain the power to cognitively map the sites in such a way that outsider/insider status is maintained, regardless of the arbitrary nature of the boundaries. As a result, the informal name of the informal settlement suggests, as I mentioned above,
both the interrelationship between the two sites as a functioning spatial unit and their
disparate socioeconomic dynamics. Simply put, the term “extension” serves to emphasize
that they make up a whole in some sense, while at the same time effectively relegating
the informal part of this whole to a secondary and peripheral/marginal status. The
simultaneously unified/disjointed nature of Hani View suggests that the realities of urban
spatial dynamics are much more complicated than either the prescriptive legislation that
attempts to qualify such spaces or the “exploded view” vision of the built environment
erected by Budlender and Egan. The various appropriations listed also suggest that the
practices of everyday life enacted by marginalized peoples can form a kind of
resilience/resistance to the prescriptive development machinations of the neoliberal elite.
These forms of resilience, however, do not suggest a return to full agency, as these people
have, after all, been “dumped” at this location regardless of their desires and in
accordance with larger political maneuvers beyond their control. In that sense, their
resilience may actually benefit and sustain the political and economic systems which
have relocated them. Certainly, the ire of the original occupants is directed at the bodies
of the invaders, and not the social and economic realities that landed these bodies on their
“doorstep”. Viewed from this perspective, this passage touches upon the nature of
regional infighting, between have and have-nots certainly, but also between municipal
districts competing over infrastructure and resources by taking advantage of the spatial
dynamics at hand, spatial dynamics that have in turn been created by prescriptive
legislation regarding boundaries of jurisdiction. Such a representation of the built
environment explicitly disrupts the notion of a unified Greater Johannesburg, let alone
South Africa.
It is telling that, immediately following this passage, the disparity between prescriptive texts and the reality they map is once again foregrounded, and in a fashion that speaks to Egan’s subjectivity as a man trying to navigate the nature of his trustee status:

Egan always found it strange to set foot for the first time in a place he knew from the plans. It was like folding out of two dimensions into three. You could almost hear the creases popping as you broke through the barrier. Sometimes it was disenchanting. You had convinced yourself, looking at the neatly inked blocks on the paper, at the street names, the community facilities, the cookie-cutter trees, that the place was rather pleasant. You imagined gardens, shady avenues and parks. And then you got there and found rows of impossibly small houses, not a leaf in sight, dust everywhere, shadowless walls, and the immense blue well of the sky, which reduced the earth to sediment. At other times, the contrast between the flat world of the plan and the angular world of the township galvanized him. It was a beginning wasn’t it? You couldn’t expect everything to change overnight. That was the problem – it was like the pop song – people wanted it all, wanted it now, for free. (56-57)

This is perhaps Vladislavić’s most blatant and direct representation of someone experiencing the jarring difference between the plan and the planned. The visceral representation of the plan folding out into a three-dimensional space is one of discordance, with creases popping and barriers being broken. Likely due to its lucid rendition of such a common theme of Vladislavić’s work, it has been touched on by a number of critics, perhaps most concisely by Titlestad and Kissack, who write:

Cartographic plans are an ordered domain of representation unencumbered by the complexities, the sediments, and the contestations of daily habitation. Analogous to Budlender’s longed-for overview, they are constituted in the gaze of the planner, and link more directly to a desire for an ordered and predictable future than to actual rivalries, expectations,
conflicts, histories and vested interests that comprise the ways in which individuals inhabit cities. (14)

The distance between spatial map and space mapped is well articulated here, although one element worth pointing out is the continued rhetorical method applied by Egan (and as I’ve mentioned, Budlender before him) of projecting the problems onto the expectations of those whose environments are being developed. They are, to Egan’s mind, expecting too much, and this, as opposed to a fault in development discourse, is the root of the problem. In short, I agree with Kudazi Ngara, who posits that this moment “suggests some sort of cognitive distance or dissonance in the character of Egan” (261), but I would add that it further represents his strategy (regardless of the extent to which it is successful) for displacing and projecting the blame for his confusion onto the “unrealistic” expectations of others/the Other.

The plan/planned disconnect is further rounded out on “the ground” by Egan’s interactions with a resident of Hani 1 in a scene that highlights semiotic slippage and a lack of communication between developer and “developee”, while again underscoring the coping mechanism I am attributing to Budlender and Egan. While Egan is visiting Hani 1 with Mazibuko, a woman described as “fat” emerges from a gathering crowd and demands that Egan accompany her to her house to hear her litany of complaints about the project. Egan, being a sanitation engineer, is reluctant, but goes along to do his part for “reconciliation”. Since they do not speak the same language, the woman relies heavily on a word they both know: “A single word kept leaping out of the flow: *fucked*. Uttered too bitterly, and with such italic emphasis it was almost comical, and Egan had to suppress a

44 See also Susan Van Zyl’s aforementioned “Skyhooks and Diagrams: The Signing of South Africa in Vladislavić’s The Exploded View” (2008) and Kudazi Ngara’s PhD dissertation Imagining and Imaging the City – Ivan Vladislavić and the Postcolonial Metropolis (2011).
laugh” (65). As she continues her complaints, “Fucked resounded. She clearly had no sense of the power of the expletive. Despite the stagey vehemence, she might as well have been saying something innocuous, like on the blink” (66). Mazibuko translates her actual complaints about the spatial dimensions of her house, and particularly her toilet, which has been raised so high off the ground by its foundations that her feet dangle in the air, but for Egan, this moment is largely defined by this woman’s use of the word “fucked”, and what he perceives as her misuse of it. The women is not capable of speaking to Egan directly, or rather Egan is not capable of hearing her, because of their mutual lack of a common language. Additionally, Egan is incapable of resolving her problems, as, being a sanitation engineer, he has nothing to do with the design or planning of the homes themselves, so in essence the woman is venting her frustrations at a man who merely appears to be in a position to do something about it. As Shane Graham suggests, her use of the word “fucked”

effectively draw[s] the reader’s attention to the shortcomings of the post-apartheid government’s efforts to transform systemic spatial inequities. Egan’s lack of empathy for the plight of the people who must live in the houses he helps build is symptomatic of a mindset that regards the country’s housing shortage as an abstract policy problem to be addressed by bureaucratic social engineering, with scarcely more regard for the needs of the residents than was shown by the apartheid policies that created the housing crisis in the first place. (56)

Stressing how Vladislavić is not willing to section off the history of apartheid as belonging in the past, Graham also suggests how development practices can echo, rather than supplement, the systemic modes they are trying to replace, even while development discourses obscure this echoing. For his part, Egan does not sympathize with the woman
or understand the nature of her distress, instead choosing to fall back on what is by now a familiar refrain, namely, blaming the expectations of those receiving development:

Taking Mazibuko’s cue, Egan fixed a concerned frown to his face. Unreasonable thoughts ran through his mind. If she’s so hard done by, so deprived, why the hell is she so fat? Hasn’t it occurred to her that she’s too big for the house? Isn’t it better than living in a shack anyway? Does she need reminding what a really fucked structure looks like? He should give her the talk about counting her blessings, about losing some weight. (67)

Although Egan knows such thoughts are “unreasonable” (the focalized text mirrors his apprehension) he can’t refrain from indulging in them, and certainly does not provide an alternative approach outside of pretending to lend a sympathetic ear and then departing. The word “fucked” operates as a semiotic anchor around which their conversation is based, but its slippage is apparent in the fact that Egan feels she is misusing it, although this feeling isn’t grounded in any context outside of his own perception that her home is a relative improvement over what he imagines she lived in before. A disenfranchised person, speaking to the trustee she hopes can help, but who cannot, and using only the word “fucked” as a direct line of communication, while her powerless interlocutor listens with disdain and a lack of sympathy, is an evocative representation of the relationship between the “expert class” and those their expertise is designed to benefit. Once again, the schism between his private transcript (his thoughts about what is happening) and his public transcript (his performance as a sympathetic expert) illustrates the disparity between the intentions of development and their application.

The second half of “Afritude Sauce” is largely taken up by a dinner scene with Egan, Mazibuko, the aforementioned Lou Bhengu, and several of their trustee associates. Much has already been said about the in/out group dynamic of the table, the linguistic
barriers that Egan must either circumvent or accept, and the attendant anxiety he experiences regarding his proper placement among his colleagues. Of particular note, Graham has suggested that “[Egan’s] inability to decode the simplest of cultural signifiers points to another source of disorientation for many white South Africans, beyond the socio-economic forces underlying postmodern time-space compression. Egan struggles with only partial success to find his way in a new social landscape in which the back-room deals that shape the physical landscape are conducted in languages he does not understand” (“Layers” 234). Graham’s position fits within my reading of “Afritude Sauce”, as well as what I have suggested about The Exploded View and Vladislavić’s oeuvre more generally; it also further illustrates Egan’s desire to have an “exploded view” of himself in relation to those around him as well as his being unable to map this particular social dynamic according to the standards of that diagrammatic model.

This scene compounds the novel’s wider representations of anxieties regarding placement/belonging and conceptualizations of the “New South Africa” that were prevalent at the time, but what interests me is the way that this anxiety interacts with the semiotic coding of the built environment Egan is navigating during the dinner scene. In particular, the symbology present within the social space of the restaurant itself enacts a discourse of “Africanness” that feeds into Egan’s concerns with his own status. Even his own social-semiotic coding, the Madiba t-shirt he chooses to wear to the dinner, signals his desire to properly execute the semiotic cues that would suggest his placement as a white liberal progressive figure in the “New South Africa”.

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45 Madiba being a nickname for Nelson Mandela.
The name of the restaurant is “Bra Zama’s African Eatery”, a label that operates along a number of important tracks simultaneously. “Bra” is a South African colloquialism taken from “bro” or “brother” (although it is not unique to South Africa and variations of it appear across the world), but its roots are significantly English, while the term “African” is weighted with the generalization of a homogenous and stable African identity, a popular trope of European colonization that enjoys considerable cachet today, particularly among development organizations centred on financial contributions culled from progressive liberals in the global North as well as neo-liberal efforts that espouse a general “African” spatial placement as a fertile ground for investment.

Upon entering Bra Zama’s African Eatery, Egan has the “fleeting impression of carved wooden posts and thatch” (78) before going down a hallway filled with “rusty braziers” at the end of which the host leans on a “44-gallon drum” (79). The semiotic dynamics of the restaurant signify not only a spatially inspired evocation of “Africa”, but also, and just as significantly, a chronological collapse, simultaneously juxtaposing and conflating a mélange of aboriginal thatch and township steel, with each material authenticating a different regional and temporal representation of “Africa”. The thatch and carved posts, natural materials taken from “African” tribal art and architecture, stand in for the rural/tribal (and play into tropes of “Africa the primordial”) while the steel barrels and grills (as well as, we shall see, the crushed can menus) speak to urban township life and the resilient strategies necessitated by contemporary poverty. The tonal ambience here is, however, not one of sharp contrast, but one of complementary elements functioning as a representational whole. Even the décor on the walls plays into this same motif: “The wall behind him was papered entirely in packaging, like the inside of a
shack, Glenryck Pilchards and Motorola phones, while the walls to the left and right were dotted with African masks” (79). This décor, it turns out, was crafted by the protagonist of the subsequent story, “Curiouser”, connecting the narratives via themes of representation and the production of social space. The African Eatery, then, was partially produced by the desires of those like Egan and Budlender who strive for a place where different components are distinct while their symbolic register is complementary and functional in the manner of an exploded view. In short, Bra Zama’s African Eatery is a fantasy of Africa, as any articulation of “Africa” must be, and one that fits into the spatial rubric provided by the exploded view diagram that frames the novel thematically.

Egan has some comprehension of how the signs here are operating since much of this is tailor-made for people like him, but the vagueness of the setting helps to catalyze his inability to situate himself within it. For instance, he is quick to recognize that the waitress “was clearly in costume, dressed up as something although he wasn’t sure what. Some national costume or other. Nigerian say. Or was she supposed to be a shebeen queen?” (80). Egan’s grasp of the tropes is present, but he can’t nail things down as precisely as he would like. Similarly, his lack of knowledge regarding the menu items translates to his inability to situate himself in relation to his colleagues, whose linguistic economy allows them a functional superiority to his own. The menu is the most obviously textual text in the establishment, and it is not surprising then that its semiotic coding becomes central to Budlender’s experience here. As previously mentioned, it is made from crushed cans, and is meant “for your amusement and education” (81). Egan notices that the words “New South Africa” have been printed in bold red letters on every page and thinks to himself, “New South Africa. How dated it seemed. When had it been
coined? Five years ago? Already it was worn out and passing from use” (81). This realization does not, however, keep Egan from feeling proud that he is part of the only interracial group in the restaurant.

His reading of the menu, and the subsequent confusion Egan experiences regarding its contents, begins with the same kinds of pan-African pastiche representations he has been greeted with thus far: “He was embarking upon a sensory safari, the menu said, unimaginable sights and smells were in store for him” (81). The safari, and its hold on the international imagination of “Africa” is foregrounded, with its sense of adventure as well as exploration, but so too is “… a range of authentic delicacies…” (81) which speak to the genuine nature of this set of “unimaginable” experiences. “Africa’s” inscrutability as well as exoticism are built into the rhetorical mode of the text, but they are coupled with an affirming authenticity regarding the production of “African” ambience. Egan’s anxieties lead him to first decide what he will not eat: “He made a mental note of the LM prawns, drew a line through it. Lourenco Marques smacked of colonialism. He should have something more adventurous, more equatorial” (80). Egan has already acknowledged that his food preferences are bound up in his identity, or rather in how he is about to identify himself to his black colleagues in light of his reaction to this tableau of “Africa”. Egan does not want to send out the incorrect signals. He makes several wrong choices, and is laughed at, until eventually the correct choice is made for him: “‘The Afritude Sauce is the specialty of the house,’ Bhengu was reading off the menu. ‘It is the flavour of the New South Africa, an exhilarating blend of earthy goodness and spicy sophistication’” (83). Another colleague adds. “It is the real thing” (83). The
eponymous Afritude\textsuperscript{46} sauce is predicated on the terminology he just finished rejecting (the New South Africa) and the name of the dish itself neatly encapsulates the homogenous qualities of the restaurant at large. Being assured of its authenticity, Egan orders the dish, but the social dynamics of the table do not accommodate him as a result. Ultimately, his anxiety regarding his placement here is caught up in the vagueness of the symbology surrounding him. Its mirroring of his colonial conceptualizations of Africa does not allow him to get any closer to feeling accepted; instead, he is held apart and expected to play the role of racial and cultural tourist. Retreating to his hotel room he finds a list of complaints compiled by another guest that echoes the “fucked” sequence from earlier in the day, and falls asleep to \textit{Raging Bull} during a scene with parallels to the end of the novel.

\textit{“Curiouser” and Systems of Cultural Production}

As previously mentioned, the décor of Bra Zama’s links “Afritude Sauce” with the subsequent narrative, “Curiouser”, wherein the protagonist, Simeon Majara, is revealed to be responsible for the interior design in question, and particularly the addition of “African” (actually Malawian) masks. Majara is a black middle-class artist who, not unlike Vladislavić, gives his audience “goosebumps by doing violence to their ordinary clutter” (120). Much of his work depends on taking materials from a particular site, and then reconfiguring those materials in such a way as to draw attention to their origin. As “Curiouser” opens, Majara is working with materials garnered from the souvenir tourist

\textsuperscript{46} I am unaware if this is an allusion to the “Afritude” clothing line aimed at backpackers in Cape Town, but it is an interesting parallel regardless. There is certainly another clear parallel here with the Negritude movement and it is one that underscores the disparate and mundane consumerist meaning of both the restaurant and the potential clothing line allusion.
industry, specifically, “wooden animals arranged in groups on the windowsills and the seats of chairs, carvings of buck and zebra and elephant of the kind displayed for sales to tourists by hawkers all over the city. Curios” (101). Looking at his collection, he is of course conscious of their wider reception and status, surmising that the trinkets he works with represent “The face of Africa ..., the one made familiar by ethnographic museums and galleries of modern art, B-grade movies and souvenir shops” (102). In keeping with his frank appraisal of his “raw” material, Majara’s attitude towards Bra Zama’s is that it is “a touristy place on the edge of Germiston where people could pretend they were in a shebeen” (106). The harsh designation earlier assigned by Budlender to the curios (“arts and crafts, junk”) sold on the side of the highway is re-established here, although Majara’s take on cultural production is, in stark contrast to Budlender’s, far more complicated and nuanced. In fact, Simeon, or “S. Majara” as he refers to himself, is a character whose concept of self is largely predicated on his art, which itself entails a playful, but deeply earnest, crossing of boundaries, particularly in relation to categorical “high” and “low” artistic modes. As a result of this, much of the commentary on this character is both varied and conflicting, perhaps to a larger degree than any other character in Vladislavić’s oeuvre save Aubrey Tearle. It is worth admitting, however, that despite the richness of his character, Majara, and “Curiouser” as a whole, do not fit within my thematic focus as well as the other protagonists. S. Majara is not a developer and his profession, unlike every other protagonist in The Exploded View, is not directly linked to what we think of as “development” or even what we commonly associate with the construction of urban spaces.
This is not to suggest that “Curioser” is limited, but rather to suggest that my necessarily limited thematic focus has less to work with given Majara’s interests and his profession, particularly given that he is the only character whose profession does not in some way directly link him with the production of “expert” representations of urban development. He is certainly producing texts within the urban environment and, not surprisingly, works of art can be among the most compelling examples of such texts, but his work doesn’t speak as directly to development and development theory as his fellow travelers Budlender, Egan, and Duffy, and his placement within the novel is more precarious than theirs in terms of the interrelationship between each narrative. Nor does Majra’s art create a framework for comprehending or mapping urban spaces in a fashion similar to Tearle’s phone book or Nieuwenhuizen’s blueprint of string. There remain, however, some significant ways in which S. Majara is bound up in establishing himself as an authority regarding spatial representation, and there also exists an important overlap between his systemic “cogworld” thinking with regard to his role as artist and his means of production, a characteristic that connects his spatial imagination to the more blatant “trustee” protagonists and how they try to maintain a sense of self in relation to the built environment. This reading of Majara puts me in the “cynical” camp regarding the critical response to his character. By this I mean that critics have responded to Majara in contradictory ways. Many respond to him as a glaring mismatch whose differences with the other protagonists offer a beacon of hope (and an alternative model of action/representation) while others read him, and his artistic endeavours, far more pessimistically. As Gaylard and Titlestad point out in their introduction to the Scrutiny 2 issue on Vladislavić, “Readers tend to regard Majara as either a typically pretentious con-
man selling his hyped cut-n’-paste pastiches as postmodern art to equally pretentious well-heeled customers, or as a trickster who uses the material at hand to craft interesting challenges to contemporary South African culture” (5).

On the side of optimism, Goodman posits in the aforementioned article “Ivan Vladislavić’s The Exploded View: Space and Place in Transitional South Africa” that Majara seems “at home with fragmentation” (38), and singles him out as the exception within The Exploded View from the other protagonists’ utopian idealizations. Similarly, in one of the more compelling articles from the optimistic camp, Michael Titlestad and Mike Kissack posit that “The difference between [Majara’s art and] Budlender’s groundlessness and Egan’s abjection, is that, rather than being overwhelmed by the infinite possibilities of interpretation and the fragile nature of signification in the cacophonous clash of systems of meaning, Majara plays with the opportunities this dissonance presents” (17). They further claim that, compared to the other points of view inhabited by the other characters, “Majara’s aesthetic practice functions as a more optimistic counterpoint” (25) and that “The extent to which his creativity represents a qualified version of individual freedom is the extent to which he can act against the grain of the very structures that enable his tactical interventions” (25). For Titlestad, and Kissack, and to some degree Goodman, Majra is not only a “counterpoint” but a potential model for action, one whose strategic appropriations can potentially establish sites of resistance to the hierarchal standards responsible for the privilege he enjoys as a member

47 Goodman’s take on utopian representations in The Exploded View stems from Foucault’s utopia versus heterotopia distinction. In fact, this formulation of Foucault’s underscores Goodman’s reading of the novel, and it will be similarly important for my readings in the next chapter wherein I make some suggestions about Vladislavić’s oeuvre as a whole in relation to Foucault’s theory of heterotopia.
of the cultural elite. As such, Majara is both a creative force unshackling himself from the exploded view modality which binds the other protagonists, and also a catalyst, via his material production, for wider change in the socioeconomic and cultural systems within the city of Johannesburg.

Other critics, however, are less inclined to interpret “S. Majara” in such a complimentary light, and instead gesture to his potentially cynical self-stylization and his various forms of appropriation to suggest that any creative resistance on his part is mitigated by his self-absorption, lack of introspection, and economic interests. Helgesson suggests that “the reader is quickly relieved of any illusions that Majara could be free from economic interests. His nom d’artiste, ‘S. Majara’, is always written within quotes (EV: 101, 104, 118) and the point is made that he has a ‘knack for publicity’ (EV: 115). This is no naïve player on what Bourdieu calls the field of cultural production” (“Johannesburg” 31). In addition to this, Gaylard’s reading of the novel, to my mind the most complicated and sustained reading of “Curiouser” to date, is critical of the idea that Vladislavić is particularly optimistic about the saving graces of artistic intervention. On the matter of Majara getting his inspiration for the concept of “grace” from Oprah Winfrey (something “S.M” would never admit to), Gaylard writes that, “This suggests not only a dishonesty about inspiration in the heart of so-called found art or postmodern self-reflexive art which is selective about what it foregrounds, but that all art is plagiarism that preys upon relics and regalia in a greedy and dissimulating fashion” (“Death of the Subject” 70). Regarding his appropriation of “African” art, Gaylard further suggests that “Majara is complicit in the exploitation of Africa and its art, even though he is trying to counter that exploitation, and this complicity appears to be because he is scrupulously
honest” (72). While Helgesson’s and Gaylard’s critiques do not line up neatly (Helgesson suggests that Majara is more consciously deceptive and cynical, for instance, than Gaylard is willing to posit), their takes on his character suggest ways of reading Majara that gesture to the problematic nature of artistic modes of resistance, particularly when they revolve around the cult of the artist as saviour/prophet.

My own reading of Marjara, however, is perhaps most aligned with Graham’s, which suggests that the protagonist of “Curiouser” struggles with “his own position of privilege in the midst of a continent full of poverty” (“Layers” 57). In spite of this, Simeon is not willing to admit the full implications of his privilege or the nature of his relationship to the systems of production which provide him with his “raw material”. His attitude toward systems of cultural production is highlighted in the following passages, wherein Majara has a conversation with a woman who indirectly challenges his assumptions about his art when she mentions the labourers who crafted the original figures he later breaks down and reconfigures. Vladislavić writes, “Simeon turned away and perched on the edge of the desk, gazing at the mass of masks. By invoking the makers, the hands and eyes behind these things, she was changing them subtly, and it irritated him. He had become used to thinking of them as a single element, as raw material, and it suited him” (144). Furthermore, when he is again pushed to extrapolate on his relationship with these materials Majara says “‘The curio is in one system and the art work in another. If you move an object from one system into another, by the sweat of your brow, you change its purpose and therefore its value. There’s no point in comparing the systems unless you want to understand this transmutation’” (146). Titlestad and Kissack’s optimistic reading of Majara diverges from my own here, particularly when
they read the above scene and suggest that “This is a version of material improvisation: the elements and systems of meaning are inherited, but the artist reworks this existing language into new pathways of meaning” (16). This is an accurate rendition of Majara’s stance, but one that elides the point that Vladislavić is making about Majara’s relationship to his materials: that this view of cultural production obscures the material realities that make it possible. Graham touches upon this adroitly when he writes, “Majara’s reluctance to acknowledge these complex webs of work that underlie even the simple carved wooden animals he deconstructs in his work suggests a kind of postmodern existential despair, perhaps rooted in the consuming subject’s extreme alienation from both his or her own labour and from the objects of consumption” (“Layers” 58). I would posit that Majara’s reluctance is predicated on his desire to avoid complicity in any acts of appropriation, a desire that compels him to simplify the “complex webs of work” that provide him with his material. His ease of access to various systems of production and representation is portrayed by him in a straightforward, even mechanistic, light wherein his representations of the interrelationships at hand have all the seeming clarity and functionality of an exploded view diagram. In short, Majara, just as Egan and Budlender before him, wants a simplified version of the socioeconomic relationships he exists within, in part to mitigate any responsibility he might have to those within his sphere of influence.

This overlap is key to my reading of Majara, and highlights the extent to which, despite his very real departures from Egan, Budlender, and Duffy, he can still be read in light of both “trustee” status and as a person whose spatial imagination depends on complicated as opposed to complex (cogworld as opposed to bugworld) configurations of
urban space. Indeed, by taking objects from one site (such as bandages from a place associated with genocide) and reconfiguring those same objects at another site (such as an art exhibition) in a way that gestures to their origins, Majara is creating social spaces and discourse about the relationships among those spaces. Even if he is less blatantly a professional developer, or involved in what we typically view as the discipline of development, to the extent that Majara is able to reach an audience, and to convince them of the legitimacy of his endeavours, he relies on a rhetorical authority that has significant parallels with that of a trustee figure. While trustees might try to rationalize their prescriptive interventions based on ostensibly pure, empirical data in a half-conscious attempt at obscuring their political motivations, Majara’s artistic authority hinges upon a performance of the self as “high artist” in a way that maintains a rigid binary between low and high art while obscuring the extent to which such categories are dependent on social constructs along a spectrum. Like a trustee, Majara is willing to ignore the extent to which his project is dependent on social and economic realities that might call into question how progressive his end product actually is. Just as Budlender and Egan depend on a cogworld version of the urbanscape of Joburg to ameliorate their post-apartheid anxieties about placement, Majara’s emphasis on neatly divided “systems” of art production suggests that he relies on a spatial imagination that simplifies his relationship with the built environment such that he can more conveniently conceptualize his relationship with and within it. Perhaps then, Majara’s inclusion in this novel is not as divergent as it might first appear, and perhaps his presence points outward so that we think of trustees not just in terms of those who are directly involved in the discipline of development in obvious ways, but in terms of a more general pattern of representing and
reconfiguring social spaces according to the vantage point of any given subjectivity whose identity is dependent on others recognizing their authority to represent social space. In essence, if Tearle’s idea of social optimization is a way of representing and creating “efficiency” in development practices in such a way that what is enacted (or would be enacted) actually serves a narrow range of interests (his), while ostensibly operating for the benefit of a wider, common good, then Majara’s idea of artistic endeavour is a way of representing and creating art in such a way that what is enacted actually maintains the social binaries that generate his artistic authority while ostensibly operating according to deconstructive practices.

“Crocodile Lodge” and the Systemic Diagramming of Social Space

Duffy is a labourer whose job it is to put up billboards, typically ones that advertise for real estate development projects. As such, he is intimately connected with the symbology of the city, and more precisely, with the built environment’s representations of itself, and we soon discover that one of his previous projects was an advertisement for the Villa Toscana. Like Majara’s representation of Africa via Bra Zama’s, Duffy’s current project is erecting a billboard for “Crocodile Lodge”, an African safari-themed town-house complex in the middle of a South African landscape, or rather, “a self-contained little world in the African style, surrounded by electrified fences, rising from the African veld” (177). Certainly, the connections between this place, The Villa Toscana, and Bra Zama’s offer a compelling treatment of space and spatial semiotics. As Helgeson suggests “Every attempt at representing or constructing an identifiable Africa in the metropolis of The Exploded View is as artificial as the various kinds of Europe that
spring up on the periphery of Johannesburg. These versions of Africa and Europe both go into the making of the African metropolitan form without giving access to anything else other than their own performance of a de-historicized geopolitical imaginary” (“Johannesburg” 32). It is not a stretch to think that part of what makes it difficult for the protagonists to find a stable sense of self is the extent to which they are caught up in environments that rely on disingenuous performances of cultural identities that are themselves grotesque simplifications. Although Duffy’s sign-making connects him to the urban development projects he represents in his billboards, “Crocodile Lodge” is actually more directly geared toward his spatial imagination of, and his ideals and apprehensions regarding, his placement within Johannesburg.

“Crocodile Lodge” opens with a visceral rendition of Gordon Duffy driving; the setting is a transitory one, a kind of moment between moments. His senses are harmoniously attuned to the mercurial flow of traffic as he listens to a radio report confirming that his journey through Johannesburg, at least, is proceeding according to plan:

The cadences of the traffic report were as familiar as a liturgy. Usually it was reassuring, this invocation of rises and dips and the states associated with them, a map of sensations keyed to his own body, to the ball of his foot pressing on the accelerator pedal and the palm of his hand lazing on the gear lever. It would soothe him to hear that each of the named intersections had become the hub of a failed mechanism, the end point of an incomplete trajectory, and that he was implicated in none of it, he was still on course. (159)

Duffy’s familiarity with this experience is emphasized, as the traffic report engages him with a “map of sensations keyed to his own body”; his feet and hands find and match the rhythms of the road, helping him navigate the urban landscape with a functional precision
that gives him comfort and propels him through the city according to the mechanistic ebb and flow of traffic. This mild conflation between body and built environment echoes Tearle’s comparably organ-like comprehension of the city, and in a similar sense, Duffy’s spatial imagination is soothed, and even defined, by the functional relationships he experiences between his physical frame and the spaces he is traversing. In fact, his perceptions in this regard frame the novel’s thematic thrust, and it is Duffy, we shall see, whose spatial apprehensions and anxieties most explicitly evoke the exploded view paradigm. Duffy’s mind is filled with intersecting hubs, mechanisms, end points and trajectories; his is an intellect accustomed to a patterned modality for comprehending space, and it is not long before his spatial awareness is linked to the protagonist of the opening narrative, Budlender.

The extent to which Duffy overlaps with Budlender is affirmed through a parallax exposure to the same urban semiotic system: traffic signs, and in particular the arrows that signify, in a rather literal sense, the proper spatial allowance drivers should leave between their vehicle and the one in front of them:

*Observe safe following distance. Always see three arrows.*

He usually slowed down when he saw the sign, so that there were three painted arrows on the tar between the bonnet of his bakkie and the tail of the car in front. He was exactly the kind of person this experiment in inculcating sensible driving habits was aimed at: attentive to the rules and regulations and willing to take instruction. But in the rush-hour traffic on a Wednesday afternoon there was no point even trying to comply. No sooner had a gap opened up in a lane than someone barged into it, convinced that it would get him to his destination more quickly. The experiment had the opposite of its intended effect: it triggered a reckless Pacman instinct in people that made

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48 Bakkie is a South African slang term for a small truck with an open body and low sides.
Like Budlender, Duffy comprehends the signs according to their design and seems willing to comply with their functional purpose of regulating proper modes of human movement, but this moment allows him direct insight into the practical navigation of this space, an insight lost on Budlender because Budlender views the same sign through a different context, a context that he has trouble imagining his way out of in no small part because it suggests a glaring problem in the logic of development. Duffy’s insight, however, does not manifest itself as a saving grace and his narrative, like the others within *The Exploded View*, is not redemptive, even if it carries something akin to a traditional epiphany at its closure. Like Budlender and Egan, Duffy desires a systematic realization of spatial relationships that will allow him to comprehend himself in terms of his placement within the built environment, both physically and socially, and like Budlender and Egan he is continually frustrated and confused by his inability to realize this sense of unity.

In fact, it is Duffy whose spatial fantasies quite literally, and explicitly, focalize on the exploded view diagram. Duffy’s childhood memories of exploded view diagrams are rendered at length:

> In these well-thumbed pages all things were the sum of their parts. A slatted bench for the garden, a rocking horse for the nursery, a toolshed, a boathouse, and entire mansion made of wood. On the plans that accompanied the do-it-yourself projects every solid thing had been exploded, gently, into its components, arrangements of boards, springs, rails, nails, veneers, bushings, cleats, threads. Each part hovered just out of range of the others it was meant to meet, with precise narrow spaces in between. All it needed was a touch, a prod with the tip of the finger, to shift everything closer together, and a perfect whole would be
realized, superficially complete and indivisible. Until then each element waited, in suspension, for finality. Not a single nut or bolt or washer had been forgotten; every last screw was poised a quarter of an inch away from the hole into which it would soon be driven, vibrating in the yellowed air of the paper, emitting what the boy, lying on his stomach with the open magazine propped against a pillow, took to be anticipatory music.

Want to be an engineer?
Yes he thought, I want to be a popular mechanic.

(171-172)

Although this is the first time an exploded view diagram is explicitly discussed, the thematic undertones of Duffy’s fantasy are, by this time, familiar. The sterilized simplicity of the exploded view is underscored, as is the functional relationship between each part that was “meant to meet”, as if somehow ordained by the sheer logic of utility. Precision is here, but also a kind of ease, as only a simple touch is required to make each piece fall into place, a kinetic moment suspended in “anticipatory music”. But these elements are denied closure or contact, because they are suspended in “finality”, and this finality is, I believe, a key characteristic of Duffy’s fantasy, one given particular salience at the end of the narrative. For now, however, it is important to note that an exploded view is a perspective frozen in time, and as such it is a perspective that does not allow for external contexts or influences. The difference between Budlender viewing the arrow traffic signs at one point in the day and Duffy viewing them at rush hour is not something that could be apprehended by a static representation of those signs as such a rendition would not, and could not, capture the variability of their semiotic import across time. An exploded view has no context outside of itself: it is a moment meant to capture a singular totality, a unit of mapping whose functionality rests on simplification.
Typical to the spatially focalized fantasies of many of Vladislavić’s protagonists, Duffy’s desire is caught up in a particular place, a specifically “American world” (170) of “porches and patios” (171), and like Tearle’s vision of Europe, Duffy is seized by a nostalgia for a spatial identity he never had, or as Titlestad and Kissack suggest, “this utopian dream of the harmony of parts is expressed as ‘America’ and it is for this imagined homeland that he longs” (18). Titlestad and Kissack’s characterization of the text here is precise, as is made clear when Vladislavić writes: “This place, impossibly distant and unreal, filled him with a painful longing, an ache for containment that was peculiarly like homesickness” (175). In his “painful longing” and “ache for containment” we see the familiar Vladislavić rendition of the conservative white middle class, people whose sense of organizational boundaries have been thrown into disruption by the inescapable violence of the recreation necessitated by the transition out of apartheid into liberal democracy. It is also significantly bound up in the desire to attain a hypermasculine ideal, including the gaze of competence: “I want to wear those chiseled features, clench this square jaw and narrow these appraising eyes. I want crisp waves carved into my hair, as hard and smooth as scrolled maple” (172). Here the panoptic power and totalizing competence of the apprehending subject is as much as part of the fantasy of the exploded view as the simplicity and organizational stasis of the diagram itself, and it also what is denied the white subject by apartheid’s demise. Duffy finds that, as he gazes around Johannesburg, he is capable of breaking down the built environment he apprehends, imagining the seams and interconnections of houses in a fashion not entirely unlike Nieuwenhuizen’s spatial projections, but he nevertheless also comprehends that “in truth, this skill seemed to him increasingly outmoded in the world
he lived in. It was no longer clear even to the most insightful observer how things were made or how they worked. The simplest devices were full of components no one could see, processes no one could fathom” (190). In short, Duffy is experiencing the shortfalls of his exploded view fantasy and in doing so is simultaneously projecting anxieties of post-apartheid white subjectivity onto the built environment.

These anxieties come to the fore at the novel’s conclusion, where Duffy, who has been having reoccurring dreams about a beating he received in the boxing ring as a child, encounters a group of black men at the construction site of The Crocodile Lodge, men who clearly wish to rob him. Duffy is there after sunset because he returned to retrieve a forgotten phone. This scene simultaneously enacts, from the perspective of Duffy, both a central anxiety and fantasy regarding racial violence in South Africa, and is worth quoting here at length:

He saw his shadow, and enormous projection of himself, on the billboard. He was crouched over, butting the air with his fists. He was bobbing and weaving. Making patterns in the air with his head, tracing figure eights and zeds, practicing a sort of calligraphy, an American art. A boxing machine in molasses. A primitive thing, clankier than Gutenberg’s press .... He saw exactly what would happen. They would beat him and hammer him and drill him. He bobbed, and ducked, and refused to fall. They struck out, as if they were driving nails into him, and with each blow he felt more like himself. (201)

In the final moment of “The Crocodile Lodge”, Duffy’s physicality is “projected” onto a canvas whose purpose is to allow the city to signify itself such that his body’s relationship to the city is foregrounded. The harmony of the opening traffic report is replaced with violence, but this event is no less functional in its representation. His obsession with both America and the brutal beating he took in the boxing ring as a child
both well up here, and we see a man self-destructively trying to enact something from a past he never experienced in a scene that reminds one of Egan’s viewing of *Raging Bull* at the end of “Afritude Sauce”, a scene that similarly depicts the beating of a stubbornly resistant white protagonist at the hands of a black opponent. Like Jake Lamotta, Duffy prides himself on taking the beating, despite its unwinnable nature, and one gets the sense that he hopes this moment will define him in the same way. That this moment is encoded with a kind of Hollywood symbology of heroic resistance in Duffy’s imagination speaks to the extent that he is unwilling, and perhaps unable, to shift his paradigms even to survive. Present as well is a mechanistic view of himself, one where he has taken on the functional simplicity of a machine, and the beating he endures thus becomes the coming together of the exploded view to form a cohesive whole – the “nails” driving into him making him feel “more like himself”. This is perhaps the most self-destructive representation of a character coping, or failing to cope, with the limitations of his worldview in Vladislavić’s oeuvre, and the sense of finality here, as well as the very real possibility of death, lend the novel’s attitude toward its themes a weight that even Tearle’s final abjection does not approach, and yet Duffy, whom one can’t help but feel is doomed whatever his fate, seems to be experiencing a moment devoid of the insecurities that have haunted him.

Duffy, like previous Vladislavić protagonists, and like Nabokov’s Humbert or Achebe’s Okonkwo, or countless other tragic protagonists, is damned by his flaws, and this is at least partially why his section, and not the others, rounds out the novel. Given the glimpses into Duffy’s childhood and emotional make-up, he is perhaps the most sympathetic of the protagonists covered thus far, which adds some weight to the fact that
the closing of his narrative, while ambiguous, is both the most morbid and the most
weighed down with a sense of finality. That coupling of closure/finality with a sense of
self (or at least, becoming “more like himself”) illustrates a stark contrast with the
alienation and frustration experienced by most of Vladislavić’s other protagonists (with
the aforementioned possible exception of Majara) at the ends of their respective arcs.
Tearle’s fetishization of absence and Budlender’s out of control careening through a
dreamscape both hint at the potential for self-destruction present at the core of their
spatial imaginations, but in Duffy we have a physical enactment that closes The Exploded
View with a stark example that may kill him. It is a particularly damning critique to
suggest that the end game of these journeys to stabilize the self through the exploded
view paradigm is actually a journey toward self-abnegation or that Duffy’s misguided
sense of redemption is caught up in something akin to suicide.

Conclusions

Having gone through each of the narratives in turn, and on their own terms, I
contend that it becomes increasingly clear that the text’s thematic resonance would break
down considerably were each story read without the wider context provided by its
companion pieces. Not only do sequential events carry resonance between each story and
afford brief, but informative, moments of parallax, and not only do thematic notes
register in interrelated ways that allow each story to illuminate aspects of the others, but
the intertextuality within the text, the Bakhtinian dialogic exchange among the forms of
textual representation, reveals a web of influences between the urban semiotics of each
narrative and the exploded view motif that frames the narrative as a fractured and

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prismatic whole. For Budlender the census, his television, and the semiotic codification of The Villa Toscana compound; for Egan his plans, the menu, and the décor of Bra Zama’s African Eatery; for Majara his sculptures and his raw material; and for Duffy his billboards and the nostalgic memories of the exploded view diagrams that he absorbed in his youth: these prescriptive texts each become ways of trying to read one’s relationship to the city at large, and they are bound to one another through the various failures, and perhaps minor triumphs, that each of the protagonists experiences while (mis)reading them. Not that the genre distinction is particularly important, and not that it should be central to informing one’s critical stance toward the text, but, in the sense that I have outlined above, an appraisal of The Exploded View that denies its cohesiveness by categorizing it as a collection or sequence of short stories will inevitably be a partial reading.

Both The Folly and The Exploded View provide a general critique of contemporary development theory via the spatial imagination of their protagonists. Foregrounded in each is the role of a prescriptive textual framework, a system through which the characters attempt to comprehend both their urban environments and themselves, and each text illustrates a number of important ways in which these perspectives are inherently limited. These limitations raise a number of questions regarding what the alternative might be, as forming a critical response to anything inherently suggests (or at least should suggest) that alternatives are both possible and desirable. So what, then, is Vladislavić proposing? One answer might be that he is proposing nothing, and that the mere act of revealing the fault lines of development theory and deconstructing systemic and static representations of the built environment is
enough. It is not his “job”, as it were, to provide an alternative, and the lack of one makes his work no less incisive or important. Another, more accurate, answer would be that Vladislavić’s alternatives lie in the antithesis of the modes he critiques; that is, if the development theory he criticizes is rigid, static, Eurocentrist, totalizing, and myopic, the theory he is advocating would be changeable, variable, open-ended, particular, and revealing. This cuts closer to the truth, and I think the argument can be made that The Restless Supermarket, The Folly, and The Exploded View do precisely that. Indeed, critical responses to these novels tend to parse out Vladislavić’s views via contrast. To take one example, Goodman suggests that “The search for a desirable future place is something which Vladislavić’s text tacitly warns us to undertake without utopian goals since, as The Exploded View demonstrates, such goals have in the past betrayed us into inflexible paradigms” (“Space and Place” 37). If the folly is to seek utopian ideals, the antithesis (namely, to be wary of such ideals) must be the “solution” so to speak, but this is as far as these early works take us. Although we might be tempted to read Tearle’s ending with some optimism, or see in the art of Simon Majara a form of deconstructive resistance, ultimately these arcs are not redemptive and they tend to eschew alternatives in favour of warnings.

Certainly, the idea that withholding an easy or satisfying ending equates to a form of quietism is ridiculous, and we would not think to apply such a criticism to a work like 1984. This is particularly true of Vladislavić’s narratives as his characters are relevant precisely because they either do not, or cannot, act in a way that resolves their anxieties. Every protagonist encountered thus far (Tearle, Mr, Budlender, Egan, Majara, and Duffy) possesses a spatial imagination bound up in, and limited by, its systemic cogworld
representational depth. Because these limited frameworks for comprehending social spaces do not accurately reflect the complexity of the social spaces these men inhabit, they experience a set of distinct (due to their particularity) but related anxieties revolving around their relationship to, and status within, the built environment of Johannesburg. In an effort to stabilize a sense of self in relation to this infinitely changeable urbanscape, each figure acts on a desire to represent himself as, or to become, a trustee figure of sorts, an authority whose spatial representations can, he presumes, be employed to properly delineate and structure the material world around him. This desire for subject mastery becomes something not unlike Tania Li’s “will to improve” and, like trustee figures more generally, each of these characters fails, for one reason or another, to make explicit in his own mind the connection between his anxiety and his limited sense of sociospatial complexity. In short, each subjectivity thus far explored is the result of an attempt at self-preservation/identification, one that ironically ensures that the person in question is incapable of resolving the anxieties that his representations are intended to alleviate.

Again, ending the stories of these men without them “seeing the light” does not strike me as problematic, but in turning to the next chapter it is important to note that in his later works, Vladislavić begins to treat this subject differently. If The Restless Supermarket, The Folly and The Exploded View form a critique of urban development theories via the subjectivities of particular men who cannot think their way past them, then Portrait with Keys and Double Negative provide examples of subjectivities whose apprehensions regarding the built environment are markedly different.
Chapter 4

Portrait with Keys and Double Negative

My attention now turns to *Portrait with Keys: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked* and *Double Negative*, two of Vladislavić’s comparatively recent, major works. There is a certain chronological logic to placing these texts in my final chapter; however, as I previously mentioned, their treatment here have more to do with their thematic import in accordance with developing my argument than when they were published. If *The Restless Supermarket, The Folly*, and *The Exploded View*, to varying degrees and in different ways, can each be read as critiques of particular modes of imagining and representing the social spaces and semioscapes of contemporary Johannesburg, it is largely because the characters possess the worldviews and spatial imaginations that Vladislavić is actively critiquing. Similarly, to the extent that *Portrait with Keys* and *Double Negative* can be read as alternatives to the modalities represented in the earlier novels, such readings are possible because the characters, and more specifically the narrators, of these works possess worldviews and spatial imaginations that challenge, disrupt, or undermine the notions and motivations Vladislavić frequently associates with closed, non-resilient, systemic, diagrammatic, and static ways of interacting with one’s spatial environment.

Essentially, alternative models are represented and foregrounded but in terms of individual subjectivities as opposed to paradigmatic models of reform. Whereas the earlier novels gestured to the possibility of an alternative through basic binary opposition (open as opposed to closed, changeable as opposed to static, etc.) implicit in the form of critique (if not this, then the other), these later works provide more concrete examples of what alternative subjectivities might entail. In other words, more than implicitly
suggesting an alternative by critiquing particular modes of spatial imagining, the later novels provide explicit examples of what people possessing alternative spatial imaginations might think like.

Toward the end of the last chapter, I suggested that Ralph Goodman’s take on *The Exploded View*, in which he suggests that “The search for a desirable future place is something which Vladislavić’s text tacitly warns us to undertake without utopian goals since, as *The Exploded View* demonstrates, such goals have in the past betrayed us into inflexible paradigms” (“Space and Place” 37), is actually a compelling frame for Vladislavić’s larger oeuvre. Goodman’s position is that Vladislavić is anti-Utopian and simultaneously heterotopian in line with Foucault’s sense of both terms. From Goodman I turn to another literary critic, Ralph Pordzik, for clarification on what these terms mean, and why I see them as illustrative of Vladislavić’s wider project. In *The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia, A Comparative Introduction to the Utopian Novel in New English Literatures*, Pordzik writes:

> While [Utopian fiction] employed a narrative mode of representational realism based on causal relations and highly ordered succession of events in order to convey a future compatible with their readers’ conception of history and identity, much recent utopian fiction offers the view of a world in which fragmentation, discontinuity, and ambiguity determine the course of action and the striving of the protagonist/reader to make sense of what he or she is given to understand is constantly undermined by the introduction of new perspectives and points of reference that cannot be integrated into a meaningful whole. […] Derived from Foucault’s definition of space in postmodern literature as a “counter-site” or effectively enacted utopia in which “all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted” (Foucault 24), the term heterotopia seems to be helpful in the classification of texts that are written in the manner of a utopian novel, yet differ from a classical
understanding of this type of fiction in that they tend to undermine or debunk the belief in the possibility of a perfect future. (3-4)

From here Pordzik discusses what he terms a new genre of heterotopic fiction:

“postcolonial utopia”. Vladislavić’s Joburg is, however, not a postcolonial utopia because, while heterotopic, it is not realized within a “setting displaced in time or space” (12). Unlike the novels considered by Pordzik as postcolonial Utopian novels,49 Portrait with Keys and Double Negative are not set in the future, in space, or in some imaginary country (leaving aside the idea that a fictional representation of a nation is always, on some level, imaginary), and in fact deal with the past through the lens of realism. “The Proofreader’s Derby” fulfills this requirement, but the impetus of the narrative renders the goals of postcolonial fiction only through irony. Tearle’s Utopic ideals are not those of Pordzik’s postcolonial Utopia and the underlying fantastic elements are used to evoke conservative anxieties and fantasies. Nevertheless, Double Negative and Portrait with Keys are certainly implicated in the literary critic Naomi Jacobs’ definition of “open-ended utopias” as being texts that defy “narrative stasis through ambiguity, contradiction, fragmentation and hetero/tropia, which counter the centripetal forces of reason and coherence that can be so self-deceiving on the private level and so life-denying on the public” (Jacobs 110). Vladislavić’s work also has in common with Pordzik’s take on postcolonial Utopia the characteristic that they are both willing to “dialectically respond to a particular set of conditions created by their historical links with the imported culture of the ‘colonizer’ and the literary forms in which this culture has been reproduced and

perpetuated. They share what comparatists refer to as a contextual analogy—a common sociocultural and/or historical background against which opposite writing strategies and perceptual alternatives can be developed” (Pordzik, 18). In this sense, my position is that his earlier novels are critiques of Utopian fiction from a heterotopic perspective that operate via, often ironic, representations of subjectivities who embody the spatial models being critiqued, while his more recent novels, specifically *Portrait with Keys* and *Double Negative*, are instead representations of subjectivities who themselves explicitly conceptualize urban spaces according to heterotopic formulations.

Despite the claim that these alternatives provide a “positive” counterpoint to the previously critiqued positions, neither *Portrait with Keys* nor *Double Negative* come across as particularly didactic. In part, this is because of the fallibility of the narrators (more on this later), in part because of the slippage inherent to the postmodern representational modes the novels employ, and in part because, as opposed to Tearle, Budlender, Egan, Duffy, and even Nieuwenhuizen, both the narrators seem largely detached from processes of forming or enacting urban development policies on any meaningful level, either figuratively or literally. In “Ivan Vladislavić’s *Portrait with Keys*: Fudging a Book by its Cover”, the aforementioned Ralph Goodman has suggested that, “Vladislavić’s text avoids… politically engaged views – or addresses them only obliquely – since his view is a primarily disengaged one, interrogating the former authority of the apartheid order of signs only in indirect ways” (280). The “indirect” nature of this critique exists because Vladislavić is, as has been previously suggested, not interested in critiquing apartheid as merely a moment in history, but rather as a phenomenon whose root causes and lingering effects still inhabit the everyday lives of
South Africans. It is true that these narrators, Neville Lister in *Double Negative* on the one hand and a fictional approximation of Ivan Vladislavić in *Portrait with Keys* on the other, proffer potential substitutes to the mindset of a person like Aubrey Tearle, but they are nevertheless still not to be taken as models of human behaviour and do not provide programmatic or prescriptive theories intended to lead the way for South Africa or to take the place of the urban development practices Vladislavić has hitherto criticized. Their function is not to provide such information, which would, at any rate, be better relayed in the form of careful research via data accumulation, statistical analysis, surveying human geography, and ultimately a protracted engagement with theoretical and practical modes of urban development and socio-economics. Instead, Vladislavić’s aim here, in creating literary fiction, is to represent alternative modalities by examining particular subjectivities as they develop over the course of everyday practice. Gaylard has written at some length on the presence of the “mundane” in Vladislavić’s works, and in his “Migrant Ecology in the Postcolonial City in *Portrait with Keys: Joburg & What-What*” he suggests that, “[*Portrait with Keys*] implodes History into the felt minutiae of personal interaction with immediate environs, thus providing us with a sense of the lived texture of everyday life” (296). Certainly it can be argued (and will be here), that individual subjectivities are the particle form of social matter, and that by offering up these fictional subjectivities, ones preoccupied with questions of art and representation, Vladislavić is making an ethical claim about how we imagine social spaces while avoiding the pitfalls inherent to the erection of models of proper behaviour. Treating each novel in turn will help illustrate how they are doing so.

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50 From this point forward, this fictional approximation will be referred to as “Vladislavić” to delineate between Vladislavić the person and Vladislavić the narrator of *Portrait with Keys.*
A Portrait of the Artist as Keys: Can a City be “Unlocked”?  

_A Portrait with Keys: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked_, is a book composed of 138 interrelated, yet distinct, vignettes, which the back cover blurb refers to as “precisely crafted snapshots”, many of which detail a semi-fictional semi-autobiography of Vladislavić’s own relationship with the city of Johannesburg. Unlike Vladislavić’s previous works, _Portrait with Keys_ was published internationally and is the most widely read (or at least purchased and marketed) work of his outside of South Africa. This bit of publication history comes replete with a telling anecdote. In its international edition, _Portrait with Keys_ was reimagined as a tour guide of sorts, a travelers’ handbook to Joburg, was marketed as such, and located, in many instances, in the “Travel” section of bookstores. In order to render the text more inviting (read: less alienating) to an international audience, the publishers insisted on changing the subtitle of the work, which was, under its South African publication, “Joburg & what-what?” “Joburg” was deemed too slangy for a non-South African audience while “what-what”, a common South African term that finds something of a North American equivalence in Jerry Seinfeld’s “yadda yadda”, was thought to be similarly confusing. In its place, W.W. Norton positioned a new subtitle: “The City of Johannesburg Unlocked”, a phrase that played off the mention of keys in the main title while entirely missing the point.

“Joburg & what-what” refers to the slippages of the urbanscape and to the extent to which a full, panoptic representation of a city is impossible/inexpressible. A writer as honed to spatial discourse as Vladislavić, and writing more directly than ever about the particular urbanscape upon which his literary career is more or less founded, is unlikely
to attempt to position his work as a definitive expression of that space. Not surprisingly, the thematic treatment of the social spaces of Joburg lies in the opposite direction. As Goodman writes:

*Portrait with Keys* is a guide to Johannesburg that is not a guide at all, nor does it bear any resemblance to a portrait—a word with connotations of coy stasis, as well as modernist containment. Its title purports to offer ‘keys’ to the city, which suggests the ability to open doors and come to know Johannesburg in some orderly way, though this of course does not happen, and the second last section of the book offers ‘Itineraries’ which appear to be more playful than helpful, the so-called ‘routes’ labelled—in a seeming mock pedantic way which confounds the non-linear quality of the narrative—as long, moderate, or short. In fact, the entire text is a fragmented and rambling account of the narrator’s life and thoughts about Johannesburg, which, by offering an idiosyncratic cartography of Johannesburg, produced by a process of physically wandering its streets and encountering people and places in random ways, as well as remembering numerous other incidents and people, suggests that he is offering one of many possible cartographies of that city. (“Fudging” 279)

Despite the accuracy of Goodman’s summary of the South African edition, the use of the term “unlocked” in the international edition conversely, and incorrectly, suggests that Vladislavić is assuming the mantle of “insider” or native who can, particularly for the foreign reader making up the target demographic of the international edition, provide access to a singular, genuine/authentic version of the city, one that has been more or less denied previously, presumably in part by the reader’s foreignness. Although Goodman is reading the South African edition, the core text, as opposed to the paratextual cover art and subtitle, remains the same, so his reading is a relevant and well-articulated counterpoint to the international subtitle, even if not intended as such. Due to the fact that

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51 The cover of which Goodman close reads in a compelling fashion.

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one of my interests is the extent to which Vladislavić’s thematic thrust bears resonance in an international context, and given my own status as a non-South African reader of his work, I have opted to write on the international edition, qualms notwithstanding.

In the images below, of the international and South African covers respectively, one immediately notices the differences in colour and representation: Johannesburg, vibrant and whole against Joburg, grey and decaying.

![Figure 3: Covers of Portrait with Keys](image)

Just as importantly, the suggested unlocking of Johannesburg in the subtitle of the international edition (the formal, proper and recognizable label of the space, as opposed to “Joburg”) is something like solving it, or at the very least explaining it, an act that has been anathema to Vladislavić when it comes to the treatment of his home in relation to international audiences. The title also connotes something of a resolution to one of the core problematics the novel explores: the ways in which the city is becoming increasingly
inaccessible and walled off from itself due to the rampant crime and consequential security measures undertaken, particularly by the white middle class. In fact, the locked down nature of the city introduces and concludes the narrative in a way that does not allow for one to assume that the problem of unlocking Joburg will be solved by any book and least of all this one.

Not surprisingly then, the novel actually begins with a brief meditation on the nature of a locked-down home, and the sense of alienation and segregation evoked by this scene establishes currents that run through the text as a whole. *Portrait with Keys* opens with the following:

> When a house has been alarmed, it becomes explosive. It must be armed and disarmed several times a day. When it is armed, by the touching of keys upon a pad, it emits a whine that sends the occupants rushing out, banging the door behind them. There are no leisurely departures: there is no time for second thoughts, for taking a scarf from the hook behind the door, for checking that the answering machine is on, for a final look in the mirror on the way through the hallway. There are no savoured homecomings either: you do not unwind in such a house, kicking off your shoes, breathing the familiar air. Every departure is precipitate, every arrival a scraping-in. (15)

By now, Vladislavić’s tendency to begin a narrative with a representation of the nature of a particular space, or a particular spatial dynamic, typically one that exposes the central themes, should be expected. The example here, however, is perhaps his most blatant treatment of how a space is experienced only in relation to the social processes that have produced it. Although the installation of a security system is a relatively minor intrusion in terms of how any given space is apprehended by its own occupants, this opening passage illustrates the extent to which it nevertheless colours the everyday practices of those same occupants while gesturing to the fundamental irony of anxieties that arise out
of protecting oneself and one’s property. In essence, this is an articulation of how the much larger socioeconomic processes that are the inevitable consequences of the collapse of a political system aimed at fostering social inequity are causing people to become alienated even from their own domestic settings. The “explosive” nature of one’s own house, coupled with the cycles of arming and disarming and the accompanying frenetic relationship with departure portray an increasingly common reality for the South African middle-class, both white and black.

In keeping with his text as space motif, Vladislavić labels the first and last half of this novel as “Point A” and “Point B”. Vladislavić sets up this passage, and “Point A”, with an epigram from Michael de Certeau’s The Practice of Everyday Life, “Haunted places are the only ones people can live in” (13). The haunting suggested here is not something that people need in order to live somewhere, but rather the unavoidable fact that the social processes that produce social spaces will “haunt” (read: inform our relationship to/with) those spaces. The haunting of the place is therefore a projection onto that environment by its inhabitants. The haunting of the alarmed house is the ghost of apartheid’s present: the legacy of apartheid and how it is playing out, at least in this particular space, in the subjectivities of the white middle class speaker. In this passage, many of the fears of characters such as Egan, Budlender, Duffy and Tearle are represented, including a basic fear of invasion, of the dismantling of the distinction between private and public spheres, and of the consequences of the process of reparation and the redistribution of material in the new South Africa. This work is semi-autobiographical and we should read Vladislavić as including himself here. So how, then, is this not merely a lament of the white middle-class, a “woe is me” moment of self-
absorption that focalizes around the new realities of white South Africa while ignoring or marginalizing the suffering of countless others? In answering this, it is worth noting that while Vladislavić treats many of these characters, and the extent to which they are guided by their social phobias, ironically, it has never been his intention to whitewash the violent realities of contemporary Johannesburg.

To properly respond to how this text represents anxieties about personal safety in a socially responsible manner, it is important to examine how Portrait with Keys, similarly to Double Negative, narrativizes a way of conceptualizing social spaces that is both self-reflexive and open ended. In other words, it presents an alternative way to navigate white subjectivity than the path envisioned by Aubrey Tearle while not discounting the idea that a certain level of discomfort is an inevitable and even necessary part of the process. The passage that follows the opening is: “In an alarmed house, you awake in the small hours to find the room unnaturally light. The keys on the touchpad are aglow with a luminous, clinical green, like a night light for a child who’s afraid of the dark” (15). The imagery and symbolism here perform a number of functions. Most obviously, likening the glow of the security pad to a nightlight infantilizes the occupant and might suggest that their fears, like those of a child, are largely imaginary. Such a reading, however, elides the fact that security systems such as these are responses to real threats. A more compelling response to this passage entails seeing the self-inflicted indignity inherent in becoming obsessed to this extent with personal security, and the childlike helplessness experienced by the occupant, in terms of how to imagine oneself out of this predicament. This is a starting point, and one that opens out from the personal,
private space of the home onto the city at large in a way that allows for an outward looking gaze that remains aware of its own complicities, anxieties, and limitations.

**The Picture Book: Mapping Joburg Through the Bildungsroman of Neville Lister**

*Double Negative* is a narrative centred on a series of photographic portraits and the fallout the process of taking them has on the narrator. It is similarly concerned with how we visually apprehend, and through that apprehension conceptualize, the urban environment, an environment once again realized in the particularity of Johannesburg. This emphasis on the visual and the characteristics that render and frame the visual (perspective, vantage point, access, lighting) in relation to how we conceptualize and therefore represent the city is, just as it was for *Portrait with Keys*, caught up in the history of the publication of the text. In fact, *Double Negative* was conceived, written, and originally published as, one half of a collaborative project – *TJ/Double Negative*. The other half of the project, *TJ*, a collection of urban photography detailing a visual history of David Goldblatt’s pictures of Johannesburg, was published in a box set that included both texts as distinct entities within the same packaging. Such a dichotomy might cause one to assume that Goldblatt’s role was to represent the visual element of the city and leave the textual to his collaborator, but as the title of Vladislavić’s text suggests, his contribution is equally preoccupied with photography, if less directly. There is, undoubtedly, an insightful article to be written on the interrelationship between these two works, between the picture and the textual treatment of image, and between the two men that crafted this dual text. For the sake of this thesis, however, and due to necessary limitations in the scope of my project, I will be discussing *Double Negative* largely as a
text unto itself, as it was later published, and eschewing the complications that present themselves in relation to its formal makeup in terms of its original, dual publication with another work. Instead, I wish to explore the extent to which *Double Negative* is a meditation on the nature of our relationships to the cities we live in, how these relationships change over time and place, and how the particular subjectivity foregrounded, that of Neville Lister, provides an alternative way of thinking about space when compared with the characters of Vladislavić’s earlier novels. In this light, one of the core elements of this text that I wish to explore in relation to *Portrait with Keys*, is how both gesture to a certain ambiguity that eludes the finality (or attempted finality) of a figure like Tearle, or similarly the spatial imaginings performed by various characters within *The Exploded View* or *The Folly*.

This novel is something of a Bildungsroman that traces the narrator’s experience on a single day and then details how subsequent experiences are in turn shaped by that same moment. The novel is separated into three parts: “Available Light” relates the foundational experience, that of an afternoon spent in the company of a famous fictional photographer, Saul Auerbach, as together they enter the homes of various South Africans so that Saul might take portrait shots of them. “Dead Letters” relates Neville’s experience when, later in his life, he returns to a house that they did not previously enter, and his own experience with the elderly woman they would likely have photographed. “Small Talk” details an interview Neville, now middle aged, gives at the behest of a young blogger who wants to ask him about his own photography. He is in the process becoming something of a new arrival on the photography scene (at least new in terms of “high art”, as he is already an established professional photographer in the advertising industry).
Throughout these various parts, the experiences of the first trip with Auerbach colour and refract Neville’s comprehension of his relationship to his surroundings, a comprehension that remains in a state of flux that is never finally resolved. Neville’s ambiguity regarding his role in the world, not unlike the disorientation experienced by Vladislavić’s early narrators and characters, is expressed in a passage from the opening page:

How can I explain it now? I wanted to be in the real world, but I wasn’t sure how to set about it. My studies had awakened a social conscience in me, on which I was incapable of acting. So I wandered around in town, seeing imperfection and injustice at every turn, working myself into a childish temper, and then I went home and criticized my parents and their friends. We sat around the dinner table arguing about wishy-washy liberalism and the wages of domestic workers while Paulina, who had been with my family since before I was born, clattered the dishes through the serving hatch. (9)

This passage opens with a question wherein the “present” Neville wonders how to represent the narrative he is in the middle of representing, which underscores the extent to which he is a narrator who questions both himself and his relationship to the story he is recounting about himself. Having left the abstractions of the university, Neville desires meaningful contact and placement within the “real world”. The real world is not simply the physical as opposed to the mental, but rather the material economic processes unfolding in the city spaces of South Africa, processes that are highly contingent on social constructs, such as race. While navigating the twists and turns of the built environment, Neville’s visually apprehended image of the city is increasingly defined by these material realities and he becomes acutely aware of the economic disparities that are entrenched in the social spaces he witnesses. His ability to affect change, however, does not grow in relation to this awareness, and he is soon confronted by, and frustrated with,
his inability to mount an effective response. It becomes clear that this ineffectuality is bound up in the social realities of his domestic space, realities that reflect the nature of the macroscopic cityscape in which his home is located. In other words, the “wishy-washy liberalism” has little practical bearing on the very real barriers that separate Neville’s family from Paulina, whose segregation through the serving hatch mirrors, or perhaps more accurately is simply an instance of, the general entrenchment of apartheid within the make-up of the built environment, meaning that Neville is always inevitably caught up in the processes against which he desires to rally because he is a product of them. Like many of Vladislavić’s other stories then, *Double Negative* is about the subjectivity of a white South African trying to figure out his place in the changing social dynamics around the collapse of apartheid. Like the narrator of *Portrait with Keys*, however, he marks a contrast from Vladislavić’s earlier characters in several ways, particularly in ways that may best be approached via particular, competing modes of urban development discourse, namely cognitive mapping and urban semiotics. The following section operates according to my premise that Ivan Vladislavić’s critique of popular, neoliberal modes of representing city spaces frequently mirror critiques made by urban semioticians regarding the theory and practice of cognitive mapping.
Part A: Urban Semiotics and Cognitive Mapping in Portrait with Keys and Double Negative

Cognitive Mapping and/or/versus Urban Semiotics: What’s at Stake?

In my introduction I claim that Vladislavić is something of an urban semiotician, and certainly my reading thus far has suggested that his take on Johannesburg is in line with the basic tenets of the field of urban semiotics, and that this approach frames his critiques of representations of city spaces that are less comprehensive in their complexity, such as the “cogworld” perspectives discussed (but not supported) by Salt and Walker. Although the criticism on Vladislavić is often attentive to socio-spatial elements of his texts, my particular intervention uniquely connects him to actual discourses surrounding urban development theory and practice. In light of this endeavour, this section is focused on demonstrating how cognitive mapping and urban semiotics are two forms of development discourse and theory whose underlying tensions are analogous to the tension between Vladislavić’s fictive representations of Johannesburg and the urban development practices his novels critique.

This is not an arbitrarily drawn parallel, but rather one that will serve to illustrate how Vladislavić’s œuvre is part of larger, often fractious competition between two ways of representing city spaces, and illustrating his participation within this dispute will frame my subsequent close readings of both Portrait with Keys and Double Negative. Although he is not interested in forming a “complete” representation of Joburg, Vladislavić is nevertheless trying to communicate something tangible and/or cogent about the nature of the city, even if only from several possible, and limited, perspectives out of a vast
multitude of potential vantage points. As Goodman suggests in his reading of Portrait with Keys:

Vladislavić redraws boundaries by depicting Johannesburg in a fragmented and unconventional way, suggesting that there are many ways of seeing it, many ways of mapping this, and indeed any, city. The new juxtapositions he presents are attempts to evade finality, rather than abolish meaning, to plot a trajectory of vectors operating within the city of Johannesburg that do not offer the comfort of linear patterns, but are nevertheless not free of meaning. (“Fudging” 280)

For the purposes of this thesis, the “meaning” that is not lost with the discarding of linear patterns is a representation of city spaces that grants due diligence to their complexity. This is a diligence which, as my close reading of Portrait with Keys and Double Negative will demonstrate, frames how each of the protagonists of these novels comes to realize that one’s own conceptualization of the built environment is not just a mental map of a physical landscape, but rather an embodiment of one’s foundational ethical relationship to others. Essentially, my reading of these two novels will demonstrate how the lapses of complexity that urban semioticians argue exist in cognitive mapping are taken up by the narrators as they try to increase and expand their own awareness of their relationship to the city of Johannesburg.

In my introduction to this thesis, I discuss the field of urban semiotics via a collection of essays, The City and The Sign, edited by M. Gottdiener and Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos, whose intention in creating this text was to provide English language readers with an overview of some of the major works in the field, including entries by Greimas, Eco, and Barthes. Gotti-diener and Lagopoulos suggest that a crucial difference between urban semiotics and cognitive mapping lies in the contrast between urban semiotics and
the research method of “cognitive mapping” championed by Kevin Lynch in the 60’s and 70’s, and whose basic tenets, or variations of them, enjoy popularity with urban designers and developers to this day. Gottfried and Lagopoulos posit that “… Lynch’s attitude of arriving at the meaning of the urban experience through the acquisition of mental maps has become the cornerstone of cognitive geography and represents therefore the principal means at present for researching signification in the city” (6). As I have stated, in this section I wish to explore how the critiques Gottdiener and Lagopoulos level at cognitive mapping resonate with Vladislavić’s critiques regarding the worldviews of particular characters whose flaws can be largely traced to their neither comprehending nor accepting the extent of the complexity of the urban landscapes around them. As I shall also demonstrate, his alternatives to the shortcomings of the cognitive mapping model link Portrait with Keys and Double Negative to urban semiotics, particularly in how the city space is visually apprehended and conceptualized by the narrators in a way that demonstrates the complexity and ethical maturity of urban semiotics at the expense of cognitive mapping.

In discussing cognitive mapping, one must begin with Lynch’s seminal The Image of the City (1960), the end result of a five year series of case studies on Boston, Jersey City and Los Angeles focusing on how people that observe the city take in and process information. In this text Lynch pioneers “cognitive mapping” as a method of constructing an “image” based on a group-oriented mental map of the city, one that can then become a text that can be used to “read” the spatial make-up of that same urban environment with an eye to potentially improving its “legibility”, and in doing so constructing a more accessible (meaning comprehensible) and aesthetically pleasing experience for those who
live there. In discussing the positive attributes of the city, Lynch tends to talk about value
judgements such as “fine quality” and “pleasant fragments” as if these were more or less
agreed upon opinions with more or less agreed upon components, largely due to his belief
that human subjects share something of a universal aesthetic sense. In discussing the
subjective experience of reading the city, Lynch concentrates on one particular visual
quality:

… the apparent clarity and “legibility” of the cityscape. By this we mean the ease with which parts can be recognized
and can be organized into a coherent pattern. Just as this printed page, if it is legible, can be visually grasped as a
related pattern of recognizable symbols, so a legible city
would be one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are
easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an over-all
pattern. (2-3)

To be fair, Lynch does not believe that everyone will interpret the city the same way, and
that much of how we interpret our place within the city will necessarily be culturally
defined. Lynch sees the viewers as “not simply observers of this spectacle, but
[themselves] part of it, on the stage with the other participants. Most often, our perception
of the city is not sustained, but rather partial, fragmentary, and mixed with other
concerns” (2). Lynch’s point, however, is that if enough people share a stable, if not
static, sense of the city as image (and therefore as a text), this image can be mapped and
then utilized for practical ends. Fitting to my purpose here is Lynch’s easy conflation
between text and city, between the act of reading and comprehending the words on a page
and navigating the built environment in a way that suggests an apprehension of its
recognizable symbols as belonging to a coherent pattern. Vladislavić is similarly
interested in the idea of reading the city, but in a way that drives at the impossibility of
Lynch’s project, of conceptualizing the relationships between districts and landscapes as
“easily identifiable” and of utilizing an “over-all” patterned representation of a city-scape as encapsulated by diagrammatic formulations. We see this impossibility in the failed conceptual projects of Tearle and other protagonists of Vladislavić’s earlier major works, and in analyzing Portrait with Keys and Double Negative, we can see alternatives to these failures that, rather than resolve the “problems” that the likes of Tearle see in their environments, provide a different lens through which to conceptualize Joburg.

A telling point of departure between Vladislavić’s own methods of spatial representation and the methodology of cognitive mapping exists in how Lynch believes an image of the city may “serve as a broad frame of reference, an organizer of activity or belief or knowledge” (4); “furnish the raw material for the symbols and collective memories of group communication”; and “give its possessor an important sense of emotional security” that can help “establish an harmonious relationship between himself and the outside world” (4,5). As we have seen in Chapters 2 and 3, much of Vladislavić’s treatment of broad frames of reference that serve as organizers of activity, belief, or knowledge (think here of Tearle’s spatial imagination and its emphasis on the relationship between sign and signified and the exploded view model of urban reality adopted in various degrees by various protagonists in The Exploded View) gestures to the consistency of slippages in communication as opposed to the ease of crafting and employing anything like collective memory. Similarly, these maladapted frames that seek to simplify the complexity of the urban environment grant their possessor, instead of a sense of emotional security, a failed rubric for trying to place themselves in relation to the social spaces around them. Such frameworks are wrapped up in the pursuit of emotional security based on stabilizing identity, but the extent to which they provide this security
remains doubtful. Whether Tearle’s post-apartheid anxieties are the result of trying to apply outmoded frameworks to a changing metropolis or whether trying to apply outmoded frameworks to a changing metropolis created his post-apartheid anxieties is largely irrelevant, and at any rate, his dynamic is more accurately read as an interrelationship between the acts of perceiving and imagining social spaces than a simple cause and effect relationship. As we shall see, the narrators of Portrait with Keys and Double Negative are more adept at existing without the full extent of the “emotional security” proffered by a “legible” city, and instead valorize experiences that displace and destabilize any easy answers regarding a sense of oneself in terms of an identity fostered by a relationship with one’s environment.

Despite my having aligned Vladislavić with urban semiotics in relation to cognitive mapping, Vladislavić’s oeuvre is something of a cognitive mapping project itself, taking together perspectives of a particular urban environment to render and communicate some underlying aspect of the city, but he deviates from Lynch’s methodology in a number of ways. The first, and perhaps most significant, way that Vladislavić’s approach differs is the focus he retains on conceptual versus perceptual cognitive processes. From this flow two other keys differences: his concern with the ideological as opposed to the (ostensibly) visceral apprehension of the city and the extent to which his narratives detail the process of coming to terms with fragmentation as opposed to manufacturing any sense of easy cohesion, particularly when approaching the subject of vastly numerous subjectivities inhabiting and navigating the same social spaces. Essentially, this contrast is parallel to a difference between urban semiotics on the one hand, and cognitive mapping on the other. Gottdiener and Lagopoulos suggest that,
“... cognitive mapping research relies on a methodological individualism which accepts unquestionably intra-subjective pictures of the environment as the basis for urban behaviour. Thus, cognitive approaches arrive at the signification of the city through the perception of its inhabitants rather than their conception” (7). Vladislavić’s formal techniques align him with urban semiotics in several ways, including by eschewing the priority given to visual memories (perception) and instead foregrounding conception, meaning the larger chain of semiotic coding that gives cultural significance to social spaces. Given our limits to objective access to the thought processes of our fellow human beings, and even ourselves, this form of representing cognition is particularly well served by narrative fiction. The unquestioning desire for a “picture” of the built environment as espoused by Lynch is not unlike the desire for a comprehensible sense of placement shared by the various protagonists of The Exploded View, or the desire to see Nieuwenhuizen’s plan that so strongly motivates Mr. Malgas, or Tearle’s desire for a sentence that says exactly what it means. Indeed, visual perception grounds all of their apprehensions, from Malgas’ sighting of the plan/house, to Duffy’s visual breakdown of appliances to basic components through the exploded view paradigm, to Tearle’s obsessive proofreading of the city and the human bodies within it. In addition to their visceral perception of the city, however, Vladislavić reveals the ways in which the ideological underpinnings of his various characters inform their comprehension of the spaces they are viewing in a way that distances him from Lynch and aligns him with urban semiotics because, as Gottdiener and Lagopoulos posit, “The fundamental ideological bias of mental mapping is its unwillingness to recognize that the primary data of its research is itself an ideological product” (11). Again, this unwillingness may be
shared by certain characters in Vladislavić’s work, with Tearle being perhaps the most glaring example, but what, albeit slippery, ironic distance exists does not allow for us to follow Tearle down the rabbit hole, and the narratives themselves are keenly aware of the ideological scaffolding that maintains any given perspective of the city even if the characters that inhabit them are not. In light of this, Portrait with Keys and Double Negative will be discussed in terms of how they provide vantage points from subjectivities more aware of their ideological biases, particularly in terms of how they eschew the attractive pitfalls of certain visually related modes of conceptualizing their built environments.

Vladislavić’s spatial imaginary also differs from the representations of Lynch because Lynch wants to unite individual perceptions together to construct a consensus of perceptual (and by extension, functional) urban reality. Lynch writes, “Each individual creates and bears his own image, but there seems to be substantial agreement among members of the same group. It is these group images, exhibiting consensus among significant numbers, that interest city planners who aspire to model an environment that will be used by many people” (Lynch, 7). Gottdiener and Lagopoulos, however, point out that “… there is no sufficient basis for moving from the cognitive maps of individuals to hypothetical group modes of conceptualizing space” (10). The infinite variation among perceptions of individuals, and even within particular individuals, coupled with the

52 By “subjectivity” I am referring to the philosophical term in line with contemporary philosophy of the mind, particularly as espoused by Thomas Nagel in his “What is it like to be a bat?” (1974), although I side with Robert Van Gulick in his rebuttal of Nagel’s rejection of physicalism in “Physicalism and the Subjectivity of the Mental” and David Papineau’s materialist conception of consciousness and rejection of mind-body dualism as expressed in his Thinking about Consciousness (2004).
variable ways that perception can operate within sociocultural and economic systems of meaning-making, is inadequately represented by Lynch’s insistence on cohesion. The multiple perspectives of a novel like *The Exploded View*, on the other hand, gesture to a fragmented and exceedingly complex network of social realities. Further, and perhaps more importantly, by foregrounding conception, Vladislavić’s spatial imaginary is illuminating and deconstructing ideological representations/perceptions of the built environment and the social processes that construct and maintain them. Both of these elements are discussed by Gottdiener and Lagopoulos when they write:

> The cognitive map is so much a product of social interaction that even individuals living near each other in the very same neighbourhood will hold different conceptions of their area as a product of separate social networks. The mental map, therefore, depicts the *imaginary city*. It is itself a part of the urban ideology. This imaginary picture of what each individual believes to be the surrounding social reality constitutes[…] the basis of the ideological representation of social process. (11)

Vladislavić is no doubt producing an imaginary city populated with characters whose visual experiences establish the framework for their comprehension of this space and their placement within it. It is here that we run into an issue in establishing an easy dichotomy between Vladislavić and cognitive mapping, for what is he depicting if not a version of an imaginary city (even if claims to being “the” imaginary city are withheld). We have, however, already addressed this above by admitting that Vladislavić’s project is something of an act of cognitive mapping, but one that places an emphasis on urban semiotics in a way that undermines the end game of the cognitive mapping process, at least as defined by Kevin Lynch. Unlike Lynch, Vladislavić’s treatment of urban space recognizes that “… signification is derived from cultural codes originating outside the
individual and emerging from processes of social interaction—both areas of investigation which are generally ignored by cognitive approaches” (12). There exist, however, a multitude of appropriations of Lynch’s theory, particularly literary and cultural studies ones, that line up with and depart from Vladislavić’s in different ways.

**Literary and Cultural Models of Cognitive Mapping**

As influential as Lynch has been in urban development theory, his concept of cognitive mapping has also found resonance in the (ostensible) bastion of pluralism that is literary criticism. In “Cognitive Mapping and the Understanding of Literature”, the literary critic Richard Bjornson takes Lynch’s theory at face value and discusses how he feels it can be applied to the creation of fictive worlds, making the author a kind of cartographer of cognitive maps. He writes:

> This model is generally based upon some form of analogy between mental activity and the making or modifying of maplike structures that allow individuals to situate themselves in their environments. For literary scholars and critics, the idea of cognitive mapping holds out the possibility of re-establishing links between their activities and the dominant concerns of the larger community in which they participate. Without requiring a systematic repudiation of all previous work in the field, isolating texts from their contexts, or reducing them to exemplars of narrowly defined substructures, the cognitive mapping model sanctions the treatment of literature as a mode of knowledge, including a knowledge of how the object world impinges on human consciousness. (52)

In drawing upon cognitive mapping as a potential source of insight into literature and literary criticism, Bjornson is attempting to move beyond the stark pluralism of contemporary literary theory and toward new avenues of interdisciplinary study that
might prove fruitful, an endeavour with which I can partially sympathize. His idea of how writing a text is a process of cognitive mapping entails:

… three extremely important points about the generation of literary texts: (1) they are always the result of plans that the individual writer can only formulate in terms of his or her general knowledge of the object world; (2) this knowledge, which serves to map that world, is constructed on the basis of existing, culture-bound systems of symbols (including those embedded in literary works like those of Faulkner); (3) texts map imaginary territories that respond to the writer’s goals and needs, and insofar as they are comprised of structures and logical relationships employed to model the object world, they embody a type of knowledge. (57)

To a large degree, Bjornson’s explication of how cognitive mapping is central to the project of crafting a literary world is true to Vladislavić’s project. However, there are several major deviations, some of which have already been touched upon, that suggest that Vladislavić complicates the process of cognitive mapping as much as he is aligned with it. Bjornson and Vladislavić see eye to eye in so far as they both recognize that any given cognitive map is a “type of knowledge” that can be deconstructed or whose ideological foundations can be called into question, but Bjornson does not seem sufficiently concerned with dismantling the notion that cognitive maps are more or less useful ways of framing physical realities. Rather than critiquing the form like Vladislavić, Bjornson advocates it.

Out of the realm of urban development, and within the realm of cultural studies, the term “cognitive mapping” is more associated with Fredric Jameson than it is with Kevin Lynch, despite Jameson’s overt lifting of the term directly from The Image of the City. Jameson introduces his version of cognitive mapping in his famous Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991). He argues that we need to develop an
“aesthetics of cognitive mapping” to combat the disassociation and alienation caused by the ubiquity of the postmodern condition and the extent to which increasingly complex circuits of international trade and commerce make it impossible to situate our place within them. In contrast to Lynch’s work, Jameson’s concept of cognitive mapping is taken up not as the individual’s relation to a particular locale or built environment, but rather as the individual’s placement and role in an entire system of political and economic reality that extends far beyond their own borders. Jameson suggests that “The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale” (54).

Jameson takes Lynch’s model, combines it with Althusser’s definition of ideology as “the representation of the subject’s imaginary relationship to his or her real conditions of existence” (Althusser 109), and extends it out from the city into the globalized world of capital at large.

In believing that representation in the form of cognitive mapping could capture something like the totality of global capitalism, Jameson seems nostalgic for a time before the eminence of capitalism, when socioeconomic systems were simple enough that the practice of everyday life could be traced to knowable and legible socioeconomic realities and any given individual that was of sound mind and attempted to do so could readily situate themselves within this same system. However, with the increase in international trade routes and the broadening of national economies onto the global, the locality of any given place became increasingly opaque until it was no longer feasible to comprehend how one’s situational reality corresponded with the wider systems that reified it. Jameson’s hope then, is that the everyday practice of human beings might form
a kind of framework with which to accurately conceptualize one’s own relationship with this larger unrepresentable system.

Jameson is not incorrect to say that the daily lives of citizens of England in the eighteenth century were fundamentally altered by things like colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade in ways that they were often entirely unaware of, and equally correct in positing that our current condition is all the more complex, and subsequently unintelligible, by virtue of telecommunications and the speed at which capital can transfer and accumulate. For Jameson then, cognitive mapping is a progressive reconfiguring of one’s sense of self that has the function “to enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole” (Postmodernism 51). This “totality” becomes, for Jameson, the key to political action, since our behaviour in this realm are invariably crafted by our conceptualizations and subsequent representations of overarching social structures. Colin MacCabe, in the preface to Jameson’s The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System (1992) suggests that “What Jameson requires is an account of the mechanisms which articulate individual fantasy and social organization” (xxi), a requirement that sounds similar to what I have been claiming Vladislavić has been attempting to accomplish in his fiction. And yet despite Jameson’s emphasis on the underlying ideological processes that urban semioticians accuse Lynch’s followers of negating, it is here that we begin to see his major departures from Vladislavić’s methodology. Jameson is advocating for a return to the creation and maintenance of some kind of stable identity fostered through one’s apprehension of a systemic totality, a stance for which he has been duly taken to task by
the kind of poststructural academics who would no doubt more readily valorize

Vladislavić’s incredulity toward metanarrative than Jameson’s nostalgia for totalizing representation. As the literary theorist/cartographer Robert T. Tally writes in “Jameson’s Project of Cognitive Mapping: A Critical Engagement”:

Jameson’s concept, or project, of cognitive mapping has elicited a great deal of spirited criticism. For example, Jameson’s insistence on comprehending and mapping a social totality has drawn fire from a generation of critics who, following poststructuralist interventions, take any notion of totality to be both impossible and, indeed, an undesirable dream. Jameson has said that cognitive mapping is centrally defined by a crisis in representability, and the question of representation remains central to Jameson’s antagonists as well. Representation not only causes trouble in regard to totality—How can one represent a totality?—but also in terms of who is doing the representing and who is being represented. (407)

A typifying poststructural literary response along the lines Tally is referring to comes from Jon Simons who, in “Postmodern Paranoia? Pynchon and Jameson” suggests that:

Jameson’s insistence on the very possibility of total and untranscendable cognition of the world understood as a single system is inimical to his political aim of interpreting the world in order to change it. [B]y telling this story as if it were the ineluctable truth of Marxist science, Jameson unwittingly induces political helplessness, or the same sense of resignation with which [Pynchon’s] Oedipa Maas confronts her fate after failing to resolve the plots of her life into a single, true account. Jameson’s excessive ambitions for his Marxist science undermine the possibilities for political action. (207)

Impetus for political action aside, Jameson’s critics are correct to point out that his aspirations, given his desire for a single system of comprehension, are Utopian in their

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53 For an overview of the criticisms Tally mentions, see Crystal Bartolovich’s “Mapping the Spaces of Capital” (1996). For a more recent reclamation of the value of Jameson’s concept of cognitive mapping, see Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle’s Cartographies of the Absolute (2014).
ambitions and highly dependent on his positivistic worldview. Jameson himself posits that “Still, even if we cannot imagine the productions of such an aesthetic, there may, nonetheless, as with the very idea of Utopia itself, be something positive in the attempt to keep alive the possibility of imagining such a thing” (“Cognitive” 356). Where Jameson’s vision is Utopic in the sense that even if we fail to build a Utopia, the effort itself is likely to be of value, Vladislavić is drastically heterotopic, and in this sense he is more aligned with poststructural critical analysis. In fact, much of Vladislavić’s work touches upon how the conceptualization of a totality, in a utilitarian mode or otherwise, is a framework that will inevitably recreate the modes being resisted, those being, in his case, the spatial realities of apartheid. Both Vladislavić and Jameson are deeply concerned with the issue of representation and specifically representing the relationship an individual has within the systemic machinations which compose their socioeconomic realities, but Vladislavić is rightly dubious of simplifications that dismiss their inherent erasures and obfuscations for ostensibly utilitarian ends. Additionally, his work brings to light the self-destructive nature of such simplifications when they manifest themselves in the spatial imaginations of even well intended people. Essentially, Vladislavić is interested in critiquing Utopic spatial imaginations in his earlier work and, in Portrait with Keys and Double Negative, representing subjectivities whose heterotopic comprehensions of the city provide alternatives to Jameson’s emphasis on totality. In this sense, his own acts of cognitive mapping and representation deconstruct, rather than validate, Jameson’s similar ambitions.
Narrating The City

One of the most fruitful points of comparison between the early and later major works is found in their forms of narration. *The Restless Supermarket, Double Negative* and *Portrait with Keys* are all told by first-person homodiegetic narrators, narrators who are themselves characters within the narrative, while *The Folly* and *The Exploded View* are told by heterodiegetic narrators, although often with heavy focalization. All of these stories, however, focus on acts of navigating social spaces and all of them touch upon the extent to which the characters employ their personalized modes of cognitive mapping in ways that render their environments legible or that conversely (although sometimes simultaneously) obscure or ignore reality. For now, my focus will remain on the homodiegetic narrators, in part because the texts covered in this chapter employ them, but also because the distinctions and similarities that exist between Aubrey Tearle, Neville Lister, and “Vladislavić” are particularly illuminating.

Forms of narration serve as a particularly compelling entry point for what are perhaps obvious reasons, as point of view is a crucial framing device and lays the representational foundations for any narrative. It is important to remember that these fictive worlds are not merely filtered through this perspective, but rather created by it, in the only way which we have any actual access to (since we cannot know the mind of the author as directly through the text). All three of the narrators in question fit within the traditional model of the unreliable narrator; however, all three simultaneously subvert this model as well. In “Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators” the literary critic Greta Olson suggests that most models of unreliable narrators “have a tripartite structure that consists of (1) a reader who recognizes a dichotomy between (2)
the personalized narrator’s perceptions and expressions and (3) those of the implied author (or the textual signals)” (94). One of the key models that Olson is referring to is that of Wayne Booth, who, in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) suggests, through the regrettably gendered parlance of his time, that:

All of the great uses of unreliable narration depend for their success on far more subtle effects than merely flattering the reader or making him work. Whenever an author conveys to his reader an unspoken point, he creates a sense of collusion against all those, whether in the story or out of it, who do not get that point. Irony is always thus in part a device for excluding as well as for including, and those who are included, those who happen to have the necessary information to grasp the irony, cannot but derive at least a part of their pleasure from a sense that others are excluded. In the irony with which we are concerned, the speaker is himself the butt of the ironic point. The author and reader are secretly in collusion, behind the speaker’s back, agreeing upon the standard by which he is found wanting. (304)

As Olson is quick to point out, this rubric is dependent on an implied reader and an implied author, two extra-textual entities whose cognitions are not directly represented, making the reliability of the narrator an oft-times tricky point of literary analysis.\(^54\) As demonstrated in Chapter 2, Vladislavić’s use of the unreliable narrator, specifically Tearle, collapses any easy sense of ironic distance usually associated with this literary device.\(^55\) From Booth’s model, Olson posits an important distinction between different kinds of unreliable narrators, and this applies to a distinction I want to make in

\(^54\) Olson includes a problematization of attempts to avoid these extra-textual elements, specifically Asgar Nunning’s reformulation of Booth’s model in her “Reconceptualizing the Theory and Generic Scope of Unreliable Narration” (1999).

\(^55\) Specifically, Mike Marais covers this in his article “Visions of Excess: Closure, Irony, and the Thought of Community in Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Restless Supermarket*” (2002) which is discussed in my first chapter.
Vladislavić’s work as well. On the one hand, she posits that there exist “untrustworthy” narrators. She writes:

[Untrustworthy narrators] strike us as being dispositionally unreliable. The inconsistencies these narrators demonstrate appear to be caused by ingrained behavioral traits or some current self-interest. Moll Flanders demonstrates a consistent tendency to equivocate morally; the Underground Man appears mentally unstable during the entire course of the tale he relates. We surmise that other narrators could behave differently (more reliably) in the same narrative situation and that untrustworthiness is a distinct characteristic of the narrator. […] What the narrator says will be greeted by skepticism and rapidly amended when it is inconsistent. (102)

Given his racism and his dependence on spatial formulations that are intertwined with his post-apartheid anxieties, Tearle is unable, or pathologically unwilling, to give an accurate account. To what extent this is conscious on his part is ambiguous, but the truth is likely to be found somewhere in the middle. It is this “disposition” that is the source of his reliability, and therefore, it is quite likely that one would categorize him as this type of narrator. Certainly, many critics greet him with skepticism and much of the work on The Restless Supermarket is focused on teasing out his various inaccuracies, misrepresentations, and myopic shortcomings. As Mike Marais has pointed out, however, Tearle’s obsession with reading those around him tends to undermine and complicate, if not entirely erase, any easy ironic distance we would like to imagine exists between him, Vladislavić, and ourselves as readers.

As opposed to dispositionally unreliable narrators, another type of unreliable narrator is discussed by Olson, one whose specific circumstances render them, for whatever reason, unable to communicate the truth. Such narrators are “fallible” and Olson suggests that:
readers regard the mistakes of fallible narrators as being situationally motivated. That is, external circumstances appear to cause the narrator’s misperceptions rather than inherent characteristics. Readers may justify the failings of fallible narrators just as they would tend to justify their own similar mistakes on the basis of circumstances that impede them rather than on their intellectual or ethical deficiencies. (102)

This is more likely the lens through which one would apprehend the narrators of *Double Negative* and *Portrait with Keys*, although the idea of the circumstances being situational and external does not seem to fit. It does not seem to fit because although the narrators of these works are unreliable, they are so in relation to epistemological shortcomings that are common to human experience as opposed to specific external situations. It is not so much that another narrator would do better in their place, but rather that both of these narrators fall victim to the limitations of memory and the very human tendency to invent fictions about ourselves. The difference between them, however, and a figure like Tearle, is that they are aware of these tendencies, and as a result have a much more reflexive attitude toward their own narratives.

**Unreliability in Double Negative**

One of the features separating the narrative voice of Neville from Tearle, and from foundational characterizations common to Egan, Budlender, Duffy, S. Majora and Nieuwenhuizen, is a lack of certitude garnered through introspection and self-awareness. In *Double Negative*, it is Neville’s knowledge of himself and his attendant comprehension of the limits of this knowledge that allow him to better situate, and even sometimes lose, himself within the urban environment of Johannesburg. As a result, his spatial imagination is more open-ended, dynamic, ambiguous, and changeable than these
earlier characters while also less dependent on systemic or static representations of the
city-urban environment. Like Tearle’s, Neville’s narrative position is retrospective. He
provides a perspective on past events from a future vantage point, but unlike Tearle he
uses this point of view to illustrate both the faults in his earlier patterns of
thinking/identity formation, and also the extent to which memory proves to be a
problematic vessel for conveying something like the capital “T” truth, a theme that also
becomes bound up in the treatment of photos and photography. As a result, Neville is less
concerned than Vladislavić’s earlier characters with using a visually apprehended
representational system, such as the denotative status of semiotic systems or spatial
diagrams, to gain access to a stable, objective version of “the real”, and more content to
examine and re-examine his process of acquiring/creating a spatial awareness. While
Tearle may reveal similar themes, he does so ironically, and in a mode more closely
associated with traditional renditions of the unreliable narrator. Neville may be unreliable
himself, but, like a good postmodernist, remains relatively reflexive regarding the
shortcomings of his objectivity, often drawing our attention to the presence, or even just
the potential, of gaps within his story, like a narrator from a Rushdie or Calvino novel.
This contrast between Neville and Tearle is significant enough that Double Negative and
The Restless Supermarket fall into distinctly different genres as a result, with the former
resembling a Bildungsroman and the latter being the tale of a man whose rigidity and
metathesiophobia negate multiple opportunities for personal growth. Conversely Double
Negative hearkens back to some of the deepest roots of the Bildungsroman genre,
including opening on a “young son venturing into the world to seek his fortune”
narrative, or something very similar, but other plot developments, including an ambiguity
regarding the protagonist’s inclusion, and desire for inclusion, into wider society are less conventional.

A crucial text on the conventions of the contemporary Bildungsroman is Joseph Slaughter’s *Human Rights, Inc: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (2007), wherein he posits that the Bildungsroman is a novel “whose plot we could provisionally gloss as the didactic story of an individual who is socialized in the process of learning for oneself what everyone else (including the reader) presumably already knows” (3). Slaughter suggests that the Bildungsroman genre has become part of the same discourse as human rights law and legislation. He does not suggest that one form critiques the other, but rather that the Bildungsroman and human rights legislation are mutually enabling fictions as “each projects an image of the human personality that ratifies the other’s idealistic visions of the proper relations between the individual and society and the normative career of free and full human personality development” (4), or, as Slaughter later clarifies, “Both human rights and the idealist Bildungsroman posit the individual personality as an instance of a universal human personality, as the social expression of an abstract humanity that theoretically achieves its manifest destiny when the egocentric drives of the individual harmonize with the demands of social organization” (20). In this light, there is substantial overlap with Vladislavić’s treatment of the genre, particularly given the extent to which Vladislavić emphasizes the issue of individuals struggling to harmonize with new modes of social organization. Slaughter suggests that originally this mutual enablement between fictive and legislative modes served a nationalistic cause, providing a model for the relationship between the citizen and the state. He writes:
Those institutions, along with modern human rights law, not only served to make the emergent nation-state formation legible and sensible—they legitimated its democratic integrity, formal unity, and egalitarian imaginary by introducing the popular media of enfranchisement into a national society of readers and by naturalizing the sociopolitical terms of disenfranchisement. Abiding what we might call the Westphalian narrative unities of nation-time and –space, the traditional Bildungsroman provided the dominant novelistic form for depicting and acquiring this new national and historical consciousness, which it emblematized in the individual’s emergence in the public sphere as a right-and-duty bearing citizen—as a person before the law. (31)

In the more contemporary, postcolonial examples of the Bildungsroman, however, the journey toward individual identity/actualization instead becomes an “emancipatory tale of self-sponsored development and self-determination” (244). Slaughter suggests that out of this narrative

the rightless and marginal emerge as creatures who lack (either innately or practically, depending on the rhetorical politics of the praxis) what the incorporated citizen-subject enjoys. Thus, the literary and legal collusion I am describing projects a normative process of human personality development. From the perspective of international human rights law, “Bildungsroman” becomes the generic name for the conventional novelistic form of the story of the rights claimant, for the literary articulation of an individual’s claim to have normative rights. (43)

In light of Slaughter’s reading of the postcolonial Bildungsroman, *Double Negative* traces an unconventional path; in fact, something of the opposite narrative trajectory is in place for most of Vladislavić’s protagonists, who find themselves not in an “emancipatory tale” in which “the rightless and marginal” seek placement in society through a claim to “normative rights”, but rather in a mercurial urbenscape where they are the remnants of a previously entitled racial class whose relationship to and placement
within (both figuratively and literally) post-apartheid society is in the process of a drastic renegotiation. Essentially, the character development of Neville in *Double Negative* (and “Vladislavić” in *Portrait with Keys*) entails coming to terms with a certain amount of estrangement from, as opposed to identification with, the new nation state of South Africa. Tearle’s situation has certain similarities, but is obviously marked by his failure to comprehend to what extent his previous “normative rights” came at the expense of other people.

It is worth noting at this point, that just as Tearle is not adequately read as merely a villain proffered for the sake of derision, reading Neville as a heroic counterpoint is equally misguided. Neville is, at times, self-centred, incurious, traditional, condescending, judgmental and even curmudgeonly. He is also not cast as a “way forward” for South Africa, and his withdrawal from society and his tendency toward political quietism do not provide a didactic framework for “how to be” in contrast to Tearle. Instead, these faults illustrate a common anxiety for many contemporary, white South Africans who, while opposed to apartheid, did not, for the most part, participate in anything resembling armed struggle against the state. Neville’s subjectivity is therefore more about coming to terms with oneself in this regard and thinking, with honesty, about one’s position in the current urbanscape of South Africa. In this sense, his spatial imagination provides an alternative to Tearle without necessarily providing a model.

**Suspending Certitude/Authority in *Portrait with Keys***

Much of *Portrait with Keys* relates the narrator’s experience of walking the streets of his own neighbourhood, Kensington. Gerald Gaylard suggests that this activity is
related to the formal and thematic undercurrent of the novel, and writes that a “… lived physical engagement with the present is achieved via the narrator walking the city. The personal here is a direct physical, sensual engagement with Kensington, and Johannesburg in general, and this is reflected in the thematic, episodic cameo style of the text, as opposed to the ordered and contained four part structure of *The Exploded View*” (“Migrant” 295). The mini-narratives, espoused through over a hundred vignettes, are less about exploration and more about paying careful attention to what is routinely before us, but in way that suggests that such attention can only ever be partial. In fact, the narrative does little to establish the narrator as an authority on Joburg or as a guide to the city, and instead gestures with some frequency to his own fallibility, sometimes in the most literal of ways. Toward the beginning, the narrator relates the simple event of falling down, of tripping in the street in front of others, because a piece of debris, a Mobius strip shaped piece of thick, white paper, gets caught up in his feet. This seemingly minor event underscores the emphasis on themes of spatial disorientation, but just as importantly, it suggests that the narrator’s relationship to the city is one of uncertainty and inquiry. Lying on the pavement he wonders, “Am I being mugged?” and later “How did this happen?” (19). In fact, these types of questions are scattered throughout, and if one trains one’s eye to look for the telltale sign of the question mark, one only has to flip through a few pages before finding one after the other: “A brothel?” (25), “Where would his congregation meet?” (25), “[…] beneath a tree on Langermann Kop?” (25), “Or was it an art project?” (27), “Perhaps this same woman had wound up here in Kensington?” (27), “Why shouldn’t we have Ndebele patterns on suburban walls?” (27), “What about Eastgate?” (32), “What should I do? Should I tell the security guard? Or should I let them
have a warm bed for the night?” (33). Where do we go? […] What do we talk about? […] What do we see?” (33). The questions range from passing thoughts, earnest inquiries, and rhetorical strategies but at its core Portrait with Keys attempts to open the city as opposed to delineate it, and the formal element of patterned questions continues throughout the book, establishing inquiry as its mode of inhabiting the semiotics of the urban landscape. Similar to Double Negative is that this mode of inquiry signals the extent to which the narrator of Portrait with Keys is willing to destabilize or undermine his own narratological authority, and erodes the extent to which the reader is invited to apprehend him as a reliable source of information. Both texts situate this theme spatially by their treatment of the theme of “becoming lost”.

**How Being Unreliable Gets You Lost (and why that’s a good thing)**

Related to this theme of fallibility, and in terms of contrasting spatial imaginations, a particular point of contrast between, on the one hand, Neville and “Vladislavić”, and on the other, Tearle, Mr. Malgas, and the various protagonists of The Exploded View, is their antipodal attitudes toward the state of “being lost”. By “being lost” I mean the act, or perhaps rather the state, of not being able, or of suddenly becoming aware of being unable, to use spatially situated markers external to one’s self to determine one’s location within any given area. It is entirely possible to be lost in a shopping mall while still retaining a larger, more generalized, sense of one’s placement (for instance, within the city where the shopping mall is located). Being lost is a subcategory of disorientation that exists within a spectrum bounded by poles of physical specificity and metaphorical abstraction. One can be lost in a building, literally unable to find one’s way out, or one
can be “lost” in a city, unable to determine one’s sense of belonging because of a confusion regarding one’s relationship to one’s surroundings. In Vladislavić’s work, as is common to the experiences of many, including myself, these various senses of being lost are not mutually exclusive, and more often than not are directly interrelated. As previously mentioned, the state of being lost is experienced by many of Vladislavić’s characters; their reactions to being lost, however, mark a point of departure.

Earlier I discussed how Vladislavić’s treatment of spatial representation via cognitive mapping differs from Kevin Lynch’s, and this disparity is again highlighted by their similarly antipodal ideas regarding the act of getting lost. Lynch writes:

To become completely lost is perhaps a rather rare experience for most people in the modern city. We are supported by the presence of others and by special way-finding devices: maps, street numbers, route signs, bus placards. But let the mishap of disorientation once occur, and the sense of anxiety and even terror that accompanies it reveals to us how closely it is linked to our sense of balance and well-being. The very word “lost” in our language means much more than simple geographical uncertainty; it carries overtones of disaster. (4)

Lynch’s articulation of the anxieties that attend the state of being lost have strong parallels in the work of Vladislavić, specifically his treatment of various white subjectivities in post-apartheid South Africa. As we have seen, the desire for stability, for placement, and for a grounded sense of self in a changing landscape, coupled with fears of disorientation, of the slippage/replacement of the central into the marginal, and of the impending realization, only half understood, that true stasis is impossible, is deeply rooted in the characterizations of Tearle, Mr. Malgas, Duffy, Egan, and Budlender. It is also directly related to how these characters attempt, and to various degrees and in different ways fail, to cope with their shifting statuses/identities in the “New” South
African landscape. Certainly, these characters establish just how closely orientation can be linked to a sense of balance and well-being.

Essentially, these characters all share an unwillingness to be lost, or in some cases, an inability to confess to being lost. This characteristic is connected to a desire to retain a mastery of their subject positions, an authoritative grasp on identity that is, for them, quickly becoming irrelevant. This lack of stable identity is coupled with an uncertainty about what exists, or could exist, in its place. Neville Lister and “Vladislavić”, however, both express an appreciation of the act/state of being lost, an attitude that I posit both correlates to a willingness to “let go” of their central status and also indicates an introspective knowledge of their white privilege and their accompanying epistemological limitations and biases. The theme of being lost is foregrounded in a literal sense in both *Double Negative* and *Portrait with Keys*.

In *Double Negative*, the most explicit example occurs at the end, and choosing this specific representation of getting lost as a closing is surely a way of emphasizing the import of this scene on everything that has come before it. *Double Negative* is a retrospective narrative, and although the narrative is more or less linear in tracing the progress of the protagonist from late adolescence through to middle age, the novel ends with a recounting that goes further back than the opening, to a childhood memory of a game that Neville would play with his father. The game is rather simple: “When I was a boy, my father invented a game for us to play in the car. Perhaps it was a way to amuse an easily bored only child or a ruse to get an overtired one to fall asleep. I had to lie down on the broad back seat of the Merc, so that I couldn’t see the road ahead, and when we came to the end of the trip I had to guess where we were” (201). The game is simple and
safe. At its core, it is not a game about getting lost, but a game about resisting the process of getting lost, or attempting, despite the difficulties, to retain a sense of geographical location without the usual cues we typically take for granted, particularly visual ones. Its processes, and its conclusions, are divested of the weight Lynch associates with the act of becoming lost:

As we drove towards some familiar place, like Rosenthal’s where my father bought his fishing gear or my grandparent’s house in Orange Grove, I had to set what I remembered of the route we usually took against the stops and turns of the car, making rather than following a map and matching it not to the world but to an internal landscape, a journey in memory, keeping it clear until he pulled up and said, ‘Okay, that’s enough. Where are we?’ (202)

This passage is explicitly about cognitive mapping. The game involves divesting the young Neville of his sight, the sense one uses in Lynch’s model to create a cognitive map, and forces him to rely instead upon his “internal map”, his visual memory that established his image of the city, to borrow the title of Lynch’s text. The “map” is not followed here, but rather made, pieced together from what sensory input is still available to him and then compared against his memory of Johannesburg.

This process is, at first, difficult for him, but it does not have the same emotional consequence that other depictions of getting lost frequently entail:

In the beginning, he always bamboozled me. All it took was one unexpected turn down a street we normally drove past and he could throw me off the trail. Then with every subsequent stop or bend in the road, the map I was making in my head grew less and less reliable. If I was lucky, some landmark like the turnip-top of a water tower or the pylon at a sports stadium would let me pick up the thread, but often it was lost for good. […] Finally, my father would pull over and ask me the all-important question. After I had
given my answer, I would sit up, and then we laughed to see how wrong I was. (202)

The “game” is different from genuinely getting lost for a number of reasons. It is performed under the guidance of his father: this patriarchal figure is in control of the settings of the game and knows where they are going and where they are. Therefore, at no point is Neville lost in the sense that he has no access to a means of locating himself, but rather he is allowing himself to become physically disoriented while ceding control to his father in a safe fashion, much in the same way that a roller coaster might simulate the act of falling, and roller coaster riders will literally fall, in an environment that has been amended to erase any actual, physical danger. Thus, instead of fearing the outcome, it becomes a source of amusement to both of them. This exercise is also, however, sharpening Neville’s cognitive mapping skills in a way that will profoundly change him. He discovers “more subtle clues” and gets “better at the game and start[s] to win sometimes” (202). Soon he “learn[s] to read the bumps in the road, the rumble of the tar under the wheels, the way the car jolted across railway lines or yawed through subways” (202). This process continues until “A day came when I could do no wrong” (203). Neville finds that he has become so attuned to his environment that he is no longer able to become lost like he once was. He remembers that “I had become a compass needle. Rather than trying to figure out where [my father] was going, I was giving him directions, telling him when to slow down, where to turn, when to double back” (203). In mastering his cognitive map, Neville has also supplemented the control he had previously ceded to his father, which serves as a fitting conclusion to a Bildungsroman, even as it hearkens to a childhood memory. Importantly, however, Neville’s tone is not triumphant. When his father stops the car on their final drive, he asks Neville where they are, and the novel
ends on these lines: “For a moment, I could not answer. I lay in the dark with the bitter
knowledge that I had unlearned the art of getting lost” (204). The reversals here are not
subtle. Instead of having learned the art of finding his way and rejoicing in it, the young
Neville realizes that he has “unlearned” something like an art, an art because the act of
becoming willfully lost requires a sense of appreciation for the state of being lost. This
realization of Neville’s at the end of the novel colours everything one reads before it,
because we know that this experience occurred, chronologically, before we are
introduced to the adolescent Neville in the opening. This ordering helps to illustrate why
his adult subjectivity is not as centred on achieving orientation as other Vladislavić
characters, and how in fact he is often more than willing to engage in the act of letting go
of mapping or defining the urban environment, a letting go that lends itself to a process of
becoming lost in a way that opens up other avenues of exploration and discovery.

In Portrait with Keys, the act of getting lost is similarly foregrounded, and just as
explicitly. Instead of ending with a meditation on the art of getting lost, the second of one
hundred and thirty seven vignettes centres on a childhood memory of a father figure,
cognitive mapping, and the social act of giving directions. He begins with an allusion to
Dickens, the first of several, and this one centres on Scrooge in “A Christmas Carol”, and
particularly the fact that “… no man or woman ever once in all his life inquired the way
to such and such a place of Scrooge” (15). The narrator says that, “The unequal
exchange of directions is one of the most touching relations possible between people in
the city, and so it is a measure of Scrooge’s inhumanity that he was never once, in all his
life, engaged in it” (15). In contrast to the first vignette, which emphasizes how the
anxieties surrounding security in contemporary Johannesburg isolate people not just from
one another, but from their homes as well, this passage emphasizes the social elements, particularly among strangers, that can occur in the practice of everyday life in Johannesburg, and indeed in any city. This contrast differentiates the two opening sections, but also highlights their relationship, as the contrast would not be as poignant were the order randomized or if they were apprehended entirely separately, which maintains the general thematic cohesion while simultaneously underscoring the paradoxical realities of urban life.

This allusion to Scrooge is furthered with an articulation of cognitive mapping, and the intensely personal and individualistic nature of forming an image of the city:

The busy city person must rely on words and gestures to guide the stranger through a clutter of irrelevant detail, with dead ends and false turns on every side, some of which might prove disastrous to the unwary. Giving directions is a singular skill, and doing so well a reliable measure of character. We need not be judgemental: the way we live in cities today, it is possible to lead a useful, happy life without learning the names of the streets in your own neighbourhood. It is also true that the complexity of cities, the flows of traffic across ever-changing grids, coupled with the peculiarities of the physical addresses, occupations, interests, and needs, produces for each one of us a particular pattern of familiar or habitual movement over the skin of the earth, which, if we could see it from a vantage point in the sky, would appear as unique as a fingerprint. (16)

Here we see an echo of Lynch’s portrayal of getting lost, a representation that acknowledges the fact that “dead ends” and “false turns” may “prove disastrous”, which is something that pedestrians of Johannesburg, particularly those unfamiliar with the city, may recognize as being especially true in terms of one’s personal safety. The disastrous potential of getting lost is mitigated by a fleeting social relationship between strangers, and by the competency of an individual with a solid cognitive map of the area in
question. Vladislavić moves from this acknowledgment to the caveat that while one’s spatial imagination may be in some ways indicative of one’s character (and certainly he uses spatial imaginations to characterize), the urban environment is so complex and changeable that each individual’s relationship with it is unique in every instance. This uniqueness is represented as a pattern of movement any given individual takes through the city, the relationship between this movement with the “skin of the earth” and ultimately the mark we leave upon it in the intimacy, familiarity and idiosyncraticity of our fingerprint. This suggests the extent to which our relationship with the built environment is predicated on a relationship between our bodies and the social spaces we inhabit. This imaginary fingerprint is envisioned from the similarly imaginary vantage point above the city, a point of view that alludes to the Michael de Certeau passage, from The Practice of Everyday Life, that serves as an epigraph to this section and to which we will soon return. For now, however, it is significant that from this vantage point Vladislavić transitions to a general childhood memory, one that intimately maps out a kind of micro-Bildungsroman regarding the act/state of getting lost.

Just as in Double Negative, the act of mapping the city, and of getting lost, is similarly translated through a father-son relationship. Vladislavić writes, “When I was a child, my father, a city man through and through, a lover of walking and driving, finely attuned to the changes in the world around him and therefore able to give directions with creativity and precision, taught me that it never harmed anyone to have a map in hand” (16). Again, just as in Double Negative, the father figure is a source of way-finding, a kind of lighthouse in the darkness. Vladislavić writes, “No lost soul was ever turned away from our door without a set of directions that would take him to his exact destination”
(17), reinforcing the patriarch’s status as a shepherd and protector who guards the vulnerable lost, just as Neville’s father watched over Neville’s disorientation without exposing him to genuine risk. But, like Neville, this narrator undergoes a process that differentiates him from his father and the philosophy that it “never harmed anyone to have a map in hand”. He tells us that “Since then, experience has taught me, and host of writers have confirmed, that getting lost is not always a bad thing. One might even consider misdirecting a stranger for his own good” (17). The second vignette ends here, and, just as with Neville’s assertion that getting lost is an “art” to be valued, any further explication is not provided, leaving one to piece together, from the rest of text, what value there is in getting lost.

I posit that the state of being lost articulated by Vladislavić is a letting go of subject position mastery and a state of being that can both open one up to alternative experiences as well as make one more aware of one’s limitations. I further posit that this conceptualization of being lost is directly related to the particular mode of unreliability consciously employed by both Neville and “Vladislavić” in recounting their respective narratives. As such, it is also the foundation for an alternative spatial imagination that finds its antithesis in the cogworld spatial models favoured by Tearle and the other, earlier narrators/protagonists whose ironically rendered inability to cope with the transitions of South Africa into a democracy form Vladislavić’s core critique of various aspects of contemporary urban development theory and practice. Essentially, the act of being lost involves an admission of being lost, to oneself and, as is suggested in Portrait with Keys, to others in one’s immediate vicinity, which sets the groundwork for a representation of oneself and one’s relationships to others in a way that emphasizes an
ability to admit the ways in which access to a definitive truth that places oneself in a stable relationship with one’s built environment is an impossibility. Later, I will return more directly to what Portrait with Keys and Double Negative suggest about ethical responses to the other, which is also bound up in this concept of being lost. For now I want to demonstrate how a close reading of the narrative style of Neville Lister demonstrates how reflexivity regarding the process of storytelling directly corresponds to the theme of being lost that both begins and ends each of these texts.

In Double Negative, much of Neville’s introspection is granted by the retrospective frame of the narrative, meaning that, looking back on his life with the distance afforded by time, he is able to see the hypocrisies of his youth, and admit to them. The uncertainty and lack of direction commonly associated with the transition to adulthood (at least in the middle-class culture of the global North) are encapsulated by the opening lines: “Just when I had started to learn something, I dropped out of university, although this makes it sound more decisive than it was. I slipped sideways” (9). This sets up the novel as a traditional Bildungsroman, and also foregrounds the theme of epistemology: how it is we learn and know. More than this though, the slipping sideways as a movement based metaphor connects to his literal departure from the university as well as a figurative slippage of purpose/meaning. In relation to the idea of “getting lost” this is a novel about finding one’s ways and how this process plays out in the life of a particular person in a particular place and time, being Johannesburg, South Africa, during the twilight of apartheid.

The incertitude Neville acquires (and which is shared by the questioning narrator of Portrait with Keys) becomes something of a double-edged sword. It keeps him from
being as politically motivated and invested as he feels he should be, and unquestionably apartheid in South Africa required the direct and focused resistance of thousands of people in a way that compares favourably with Neville’s tentative half-measures.

Neville’s position, however, was the position of hundreds of thousands of white South Africans who are currently in the process of coming to terms with the nature of apartheid, their complicity during apartheid, and their complicity with the inequities fostered by apartheid that still persist today. In that sense, Neville’s self-reckoning makes him aware of his youthful posturing, and better equipped as a narrator to discuss his role in that environment. Neville tells us about his relationship with his more politically engaged friend: “In those days (this is one of those lines I use too much) I was overly impressed by people like Sabine. I’ve learned to take their stories with a little paper sachet of salt. Now that it was safe to do so, every second person was joining the struggle, and backdating the membership form too. In retrospect, everyone had done their bit” (83). He continues discussing this tendency of white South Africans to overemphasize their role in the resistance to apartheid, saying:

People were not lying either: they were merely inventing. Perhaps the freight of the past had to be lightened if the flimsy walls of the new South Africa were not to buckle. How much past can the present bear? There was already talk of a Truth Commission. But people are constitutionally unmade for the truth. Good, reliable fictions, that’s what the doctor ordered. (83)

Neville is unsure of himself, but unwilling to placate his sense of guilt with a reliable fiction that repositions him as someone who put himself in harm’s way to challenge apartheid. He is also acutely aware of how the celebratory reimagining of the “New” South Africa is predicated on a series of fictions that might do serious harm by
obfuscating the extent to which the social realities/inequities and spatial imaginings that founded the apartheid regime are still present.

Neville is therefore frequently in a state of doubt where questions appear as frequently as answers and the presence of a question mark is seldom rhetorical. Constructions like “Or so I imagined. Perhaps it was the other way round? […] But what did I know? (35) and “What do I know? This question ran like a hairline crack through my thoughts” (36) gather force until they are fully articulated in moments such as: “My head was like the stacks in the basement of the Cullen [Library]. New ideas fell out of old volumes and I tried to unriddle them in the gloom. The air was full of dust. I could scarcely breathe in the space between my ears” (36). Significantly the imagery and tone here are not a self-congratulating representation of ignorance by which one’s knowledge of one’s limitations is indicative of a Socratic wisdom, but rather a genuine, and even fearful or scattered, apprehension regarding one’s own lack of certitude and an awareness that self-representation often takes the form of a desperate disguise to cover this lack up. One gets the sense that our narrator is more willing to admit to these shortcomings than he was at the time he experienced them, which also lends itself to a Bildungsroman-like reading of the novel.

Certainly, Neville’s conception of how people teach and learn from one another is connected to this Bildungsroman element and with his comprehension of how identity formation and spatial imaginations are linked. He tells us:

Young people learn things intensely. They’re impressionable, we say. The proper image is not a tabula rasa, we are not written upon or etched or branded, but moulded from a substance already dense with thought and feeling. Our teachers reach into us, skillfully or clumsily, it’s the luck of the draw, and shape this substance, they
make ridges there, hollows and curves, and perception runs over them, bending to the contours, breaking against the sharp edges repeatedly, until they are as familiar as the roof of your mouth to your tongue. Experience swirls through these channels like a water over rock, being shaped in turn and given a new direction. The day has diverted a current in me, but I could neither express this change nor predict its issue. If I joked with Brookes about what I had learned, it was only because I found the lesson baffling. (69)

The evocation and refutation of the tabula rasa model of epistemology is not a wholesale dismissal of empiricism per se (in fact, experience via external stimulus is foregrounded here) but rather an acknowledgment that, even while relatively young, and certainly at the age of the narrator when meeting Auerbach, we have already developed into exceptionally complex emotional and cognitive beings whose response to what we perceive cannot be entirely passive. This passage marks an illuminating point of departure from the depictions of learning and/or stimulus reaction provided by Tearle and comparing this excerpt with his representations of another specific learning experience, the act of reading, which he casts as a regimented, one-way process of absorption, demonstrates some of the key differences between the narrators at hand.

Where for Tearle the written page is a two-dimensional text apprehended through the eye in a straight, linear navigation and then imprinted upon the cortex in a fashion not unlike etching or branding, the process described here emphasizes a three-dimensional interaction between interlocutors. A physical co-mingling between disparate human forms, anathema to Tearle’s sensibilities, establishes a “landscape” within the mind of the student, which then serves as a framework, albeit a changeable one, for the reception of more information. This mindscape employs a figurative intersection between space, the human body, and cognition, one replete with the edges and contours Lynch positions as a
core characteristic of spatial cognition in the urban environment, but Neville’s model, unlike the practice of cognitive mapping, is precisely concerned with the social process that establishes the makeup of individual perception. Perhaps most significantly, the above passage incorporates a chronological dimension in contrast to the stasis favoured by Tearle, a stasis present in both the imagery of “branding” knowledge into the human brain through reading, and also in Tearle’s desire for an impossible grounding of semiotic coding that renders any change an unhealthy deviation. In place of this stasis, Neville imagines a flow of experience in relation to an individual subjectivity shaped by prior instruction, a watery deluge that once again underscores the opposition between this model and the dryness favoured, almost to the point of aquaphobia, by Tearle. This flow whose presence alters the landscape simultaneously illustrates the changeability of cognitive patterns as well as the extent to which they become entrenched over time, a representation of consciousness that adds another dimension of complexity by highlighting temporality.

In turn, the complexity of the interaction as represented by Neville, in contrast to the linear simplicity imagined by Tearle, positions Neville as being aware of the unpredictability of how experience will shape future cognition, the limitations we possess regarding ever attaining full comprehension of both ourselves and our placement within our environments, and the struggle that exists between experiencing an event and satisfactorily expressing it. In terms of its temporal emphasis, its changeability, and its complexity then, Neville’s mindscape is also a pointed contrast to the exploded view models of comprehension that emphasize totality, a core and comprehensible unity at the centre of any fragmentation, and an impossible moment of fixed, systemic meaning-
making wherein the relationships between all points of reference are comprehended in relation to one another. Neville’s subjectivity provides a salient example of Vladislavić representing an alternative to the spatial imaginations of his earlier novels, and therefore an alternative process of developing spatial/temporal identity through a lack of simplified and comforting idealizations.
Part B - Vantage Points: Seeing and Representing the Other in *Portrait with Keys* and *Double Negative*

**Panoramic View in The Practice of Everyday Life and Portrait with Keys**

*Double Negative*, as we have seen, employs consistent questioning to establish a sense of fallibility and positions getting lost as part of acknowledging and embracing this vulnerability. The same holds true of *Portrait with Keys*, where possessing a comprehensive and totalizing concept of the city, as opposed to paying due diligence to its infinite complications, is explored via two vantage points of visual apprehension discussed in the work of Michel de Certeau. A significant avenue of exploration exists in the ways in which *Portrait with Keys*, and as we shall see, *Double Negative* as well, establishes a tension between two ways of being in the city, which become two ways of seeing/conceptualizing the city and, eventually, a juxtaposition of modalities dependent on visual vantage points and contrasting processes of navigation. The first viewpoint in this binary is the “from above” perspective captured in most forms of mapping and that one achieves in relation to distance and, usually, height. The totalizing and removed nature of this view is then contrasted with acts of navigating the social spaces of the city at “street level”, a perspective that allows for a comparatively limited, segmented, and specific apprehension of the city but one which also foregrounds active, bodily participation and that consequently collapses the sanitized relationship, or even lack thereof, afforded by distance. In this regard, Vladislavić is unabashedly and openly inspired by de Certeau. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, his influential meditation on the nature of urban realities, de Certeau, in the key chapter “Walking in the City”, describes
the act of looking down on Manhattan from the heights of the World Trade Centre. He
writes, “To what erotics of knowledge does the ecstasy of reading such a cosmos belong?
Having taken a voluptuous pleasure in it, I wonder what is the source of this pleasure of
‘seeing the whole,’ of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts”
(92). De Certeau’s rather artful description of this experience contains a number of
important touchstones, not the least of which is the recognition that the mere act of
looking, of visually apprehending, is itself a means of knowledge production; that simply
casting one’s gaze over the city from a given angle inevitably becomes, and must
become, a way of conceptualizing both it and one’s place in relation to it. Also crucial
here is the illusory nature of the sense of wholeness attained by this vantage point, a view
that totalizes, and therefore necessarily simplifies, the “human text” it captures. Like
Lynch, de Certeau understands the jouissance of legibility, and the immensely satisfying
nature of feeling that one comprehends so vast an array of social spaces in a unified
moment of completion. Vladislavić’s representations tend to focus more on the
frustration experienced when, for whatever reason, this vantage point and its
accompanying unity of vision are denied, when coherence is ultimately suspended, or
when the complexity of the built environment refuses closure, but the anxiety provoked
by this denial suggests a recognition of the deeply pleasurable, even ecstatic, nature that
this simple act of temporary mastery promises to provide.

In this regard, the “erotics” of this knowledge are no doubt caught up in the
hypermasculine sense of utter competence and accompanying dominance afforded by the
downward gaze. In fact, much of the frustration Vladislavić portrays stems from the
temporary nature of this act, for once one has perceived the simplistic beauty of the
elusive coherence offered by something like an exploded view, or any other totalizing gaze, the illusion that such a vantage point is attainable as a permanent state of being, as opposed to a fleeting mirage, is given ample opportunity to manifest. De Certeau marks this disconnect between the self and the city when he writes:

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Centre is to be lifted out of the city’s grasp. One’s body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic. When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators. An Icarus flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one is “possessed” into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more. (92)

Like Vladislavić, and like Lynch, de Certeau emphasizes the textuality of the city and one is reminded of the mastery that accompanies Tearle’s representations of the act of proofreading. Here the disembodiment resulting from distance allows the viewer to feel separated from the ebb and flow of human traffic, from the movement that robs one of the ability to identify oneself as “author” or “spectator” and then grants the ability to assume the mantle of authority that such identities permit. One is so separated from the human that one becomes disassociated from oneself, such that the foibles and baser instincts that inhabit our minds seem to no longer impede one’s sense of all-comprehending consciousness. Instead of feeling possessed by the vicissitudes of the urban landscape that prompt an embodied set of anxieties, one is granted a god-like gaze,
the ability to read the now exposed and vulnerable city with all the attendant claims to knowledge and ownership that such an act entails.

De Certeau contrasts this vantage point with another, that of “ordinary practitioners of the city…” who live “below the thresholds at which visibility begins” (93). Certeau writes:

The walk—an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmanner, whose bodies follow the thick and thins of the urban “text” they write without being able to read it. The practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other’s arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility. (93)

Whereas the “eye-in-the-sky” panoptic/panoramic vantage point allows for a false sense of the legibility so coveted by Kevin Lynch, here the practice of everyday life, and the necessity of walking through the city itself in the course of this practice, eludes this same legibility despite being directly involved with the processes that “write” the city into being. This “blindness” and the act of walking are parts of a formative process that highlight the complexity of the city and evade not only legibility, but impede the success of attempts at totalizing, functional representations of the built environment.

This dichotomy de Certeau establishes between the panoramic “floating eye” view and the street level navigation of one’s everyday migrations becomes, in both *Portrait with Keys* and *Double Negative*, a central theme based on the distinction between particular spatial imaginations and modalities captured in certain moments by various characters, and as such, the transition from one vantage point to the other parallels, or even frames, the pattern of intellectual growth experienced by the narrators of each novel.
Essentially, each narrative relates how Neville on the one hand and “Vladislavić” on the other encounter the built environment of Johannesburg in such a way as to reveal the complexities of their everyday practices and how this complexity is alternately illuminated or obscured by each of the vantages points discussed by de Certeau. In short, the process behind their realizations regarding the nature of social spaces is an important part of their subjectivities and one that sets them off from Vladislavić’s earlier characters.

The importance of visual witnessing and acts of navigation on how we conceptualize our place within the built environment in terms of the above stated binary is touched upon early in *Portrait with Keys*, in the eleventh vignette, when the narrator relates the childhood experience of selling, office door to office door, a phone directory filing device called a “telephone Dixie” in downtown Joburg’s Carleton Centre. In 1972, the year this memory harkens back to, the Carleton Centre had just been built and was an intimidatingly large complex of offices and shops in what was then the heart of the Johannesburg business district. The young “Vladislavić” must navigate the “vast and labyrinthine dimensions of the place” (29) in order to sell his wares and in the process experiences, and enjoys, his first rapturous view of the city from on high:

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 a person whose precious time I was wasting would leave the room to attend to more pressing concerns, so that I could stand before the window and look down at the immensity of the city, assured that even a hawker of telephone dixies could occupy the centre of it all. It was in those reflective moments that my sense of the unnatural beauty of Johannesburg was born and that I resolved to seek my fortune in those streets. (30)
One of the key features of the spectacular views afforded by the Carleton Centre is not just the appreciation of beauty that it inspires in our narrator, but just as significantly the centrality they afford him. The white people, regardless of their actual employment, appear to him as business magnates, so long as they are situated in office spaces that grant the necessary backdrop of the city itself. It even imbues the child with a sense of his own power, or his potential for power, and strengthens his resolve to seek his “fortune” (the pursuit of which is the core conflict of the traditional Bildungsroman). Interestingly, although further distanced from the street level floor by floor, the distancing effect, while granting him an inflated sense of self, nevertheless simultaneously prompts a desire for street navigation/interaction.

The opposite vantage point, offered by de Certeau’s active “walking”, of the same building is granted immediately after this vignette with another memory, although this time from an adult perspective. It is not by coincidence that these two passages are paired, and taken together they illustrate the key differences being discussed. The narrator relates his habit of meeting his brother, Branko, at the Carleton Centre once a month over coffee. He says, “I could chart the life and death of this great complex by the sequence of coffee shops which came to serve as our regular meeting place over the year: from the Koffehuis, where the waitresses were got up as Dutch dairy maids in clogs and lace caps, to the Brazilian Coffee Bar, where the cups and saucers arrived and departed on a conveyer belt” (31). The conceit is established here, that the Carleton Centre is a map of sorts, a frame of reference for the socioeconomic changes occurring around it. The changes in terms of the establishments themselves, however, are only part of the building’s textual resonance; more importantly, the ins and outs of the building, that is
the movement it inspires and the sites of access made available or denied, do as much and
more to illuminate how Johannesburg is changing. The narrator tell us: “When we first
began meeting, the parkade in Main Street, opposite the hotel, was always full. You
would have to wind up the spiral ramp to the fourth or fifth floor to find a bay. Little
arrows and neon signs saying FULL and UP, in red and green respectively, kept you
circling higher until a floor would accept you” (31). The parkade, typically a marginal
part of a building usually only thought of in terms of utility, becomes foregrounded here,
particularly its role as a gauge regarding the quantity of traffic. Soon however, this gauge
begins to suggest something else: “Then, in the mid-nineties, the parkade begin to shrink.
The demand for parking fell, level by level, like a barometer of change in the city centre.
The people with cars were clearly going elsewhere. You could find parking on the fourth
floor now, and after a while on the third, and then always on the second or first. Finally
the illuminated arrows were switched off” (31). The mid-nineties are, of course, the years
that mark the formal transition out of apartheid, and with it the influx of previously
barred black newly-made citizens into the urban core and an accompanying movement of
the upper class, largely white, population to alternative locations, less accessible to the
world outside Joburg by common sites of access such as train stations. These changes are
reflected in the makeup of the Carleton Centre:

In May 1998 – it would have been Thursday the 14th –
when I turned into Main Street, there was a chain slung
across my usual entrance. […] Instead a sign urged me
down an unfamiliar ramp into the basement. A long tunnel,
with odd twists and turns in it, peculiar level landings and
sudden lurching descents, took me down below the ground.
I soon lost my sense of direction. Eventually I found myself
in a crowded corner of the basement, where the cars were
all huddled like refugees. An armed guard oversaw my
arrival. I made my way to the nearest lift, but there was a
label pasted across the crack between the doors, as if to prevent them from opening: Hotel Closed. It reminded me of a crime scene in an American TV series. The guard appeared at my shoulder and directed me to a distant lift, which brought me out in an unpopulated alley of the centre, an area I had last ventured with a telephone dixie in hand. (31)

The white narrator is discombobulated, trying to navigate the changing cityscape according to an outmoded image of the city and soon loses his sense of direction, a process that, as previously discussed, might be the beginning of a new way of thinking about the city. Branko, his brother, (and the vessel of conservative racism) has a different attitude, however, and champions the exodus responsible for the decline of traffic. Vladislavić writes that, “As we sat drinking our espressos at the little counter in the office block, which has a knack of making you feel like you’re in New York, my brother told me that he couldn’t face the city any more. It’s too dangerous, he said, and unpleasant anyway, what with the empty shops and echoing corridors and the smell of piss in the doorways” (32). Eventually Branko simply states: “We should move our monthly meetings to Rosebank or Illovo. There are coffee shops in the suburbs where you can still read your paper and eat your biscotti in peace. What about Eastgate?” (32).

Branko’s rationale has implicit, although very clear, racial undertones, and the “peace” that he seeks is an avoidance of the material redistribution enacted by the collapse of apartheid and the threats to his personal security that the black urban poor now represent. There is nothing to suggest that the narrator agrees with Branko’s motivations; however, it would appear that his hand is more or less forced to a certain degree simply by the realities of the social spaces themselves and their changing make-up. The scene ends with “When I resurfaced into the chilly air a little later, a fierce light
caught my eye. Welders in overalls were sealing off the canopied entrance to the Carlton Hotel behind a palisade fence” (32), which suggests that his patterns of human movement are going to be forced into some level of co-operation with the changing dynamic of the city. On the one hand, this could be read as a conservative sentiment, one that mourns the passing of the old into the new. A more accurate reading, and one that pays due diligence to the treatment of things like being lost and accepting one’s new status in a changing world, might conceptualize the text as suggesting that the white Exodus from the Carleton Centre is the kind of reaction that entrenches inequity into the built environment and establishes new modalities of distance and segregation according to contemporary neoliberal models of urban development.

This building, which in his childhood was merely a pedestal from which to see the city and fantasize about one’s mastery over it, has become in relation to his adulthood navigations a “chart” for mapping the socioeconomic vicissitudes of Johannesburg. The flows of human traffic and the signage employed to direct or mitigate this movement are demonstrably related to the rise and fall of the prosperity of the Carleton Centre, changes which are themselves linked to, and mirrored by, wider social changes and movements surrounding the collapse of apartheid, particularly this movement of white professionals from Central Johannesburg to suburban areas, gated communities, and areas such as Rosebank, which are at a further distance from the increasingly ghettoized urban core. The “barometer” measured by the demand for parking, the “people with cars” going elsewhere, the signage shutting down, new signs prompting a descent into a basement as opposed to an ascent where “pleasurable consumption lay ahead” (31), the presence of armed guards, the original sites of access being chained, the suggestion that the monthly
meetings occur at a new location, and the sealing off of the Carleton Hotel, taken together, demonstrate the extent to which the building, properly read, is a map for the city.

In essence, the antipodal viewpoints in this section depict, on the one hand, the timeless, static, simple, and distant conceptualization of the city held by the narrator’s immature spatial imagination, and, on the other, the emphasis on movement, on nearness, on complication and the changeability of the built environment over time. The latter is not an exploded view where the parts easily fit together in a legible and utilitarian fashion, but a representation of the city that highlights the relationships among parts while not obscuring the extent to which those relationships are fragmentary and segregated. The routes of human traffic are representative of larger scale social changes in the city, and the Carleton Centre, the site at which, as a child, he felt as though he was at the centre of things, becomes cut off to him in degrees. White privilege is not lost here, but rather integrated into new modes of class based segregation that retain starkly racial undertones.

**Two Vantage Points in Double Negative**

*Double Negative* similarly provides a contrast between enjoying the experience of a panoramic view of the urban landscape and acknowledging the complexity of the social realities that operate there. In a defining moment, Neville, accompanied by the famous photographer and brief mentor of Neville, Saul Auerbach, and a journalist friend of
Auerbach’s, Gerald Brookes, drives to a vantage point looking out over Johannesburg.\textsuperscript{56}

The simple pleasures of looking out over the city in accordance with de Certeau’s view of Manhattan are realized in this scene:

> When we emerged into the open, Auerbach was atop a rain streaked outcrop with his hands on his hips, grinning. The gloomy inwardness of the morning had lifted entirely. ‘You won’t find a better view of the city,’ he called out as we approached. ‘You can see clear to Heidelberg. That’s Jan Smuts over there.’

> Beneath us, along the spine of the Reef, the land lay open like a book. Auerbach pointed out the townships and suburbs, hostels and factories, mine dumps and slimes dams. His pleasure in the exercise was infectious. (44)\textsuperscript{57}

The view of the city is similar to what de Certeau experiences and what the young “Vladislavić” experiences\textsuperscript{58} while looking out at their respective urban environments, from their respective vantage points. As Lynch wrote in \textit{The Image of the City}, just as a page, “if it is legible, can be visually grasped as a related pattern of recognizable symbols, so a legible city would be one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an over-all pattern” (3). So here, the city lies before them “like a book” ready to be read by these particular men from this particular position in such as way to form a unified concept of the spatial dynamics at hand. Once again, the textuality of the built environment is foregrounded, and the act of witnessing the city is compared to an act of reading. Unlike the young Ivan, however, and in contrast to de Certeau’s take, Auerbach’s artistic sensibilities regarding the complexity

\textsuperscript{56} While showing me around his old neighbourhood, Vladislavić pointed out the summit where this scene is set; however he refrained from driving me there for security reasons.

\textsuperscript{57} Heidelberg is a small town that serves as a kind of suburb of Johannesburg while Jan Smuts, named after the statesman whose views on segregation were a precursor to apartheid, is the name of the largest street that runs through the downtown core.

\textsuperscript{58} “Vladislavić’s” view of Johannesburg from the Carleton center is from the center of downtown facing north to Pretoria, whereas this view is from the West of the city and facing South East.
of human experience do not allow him to wallow in the kind of power that comes from holding a single unified view of the city from an elevated vantage point, and he negates the idea that the city is “legible” in the way that Lynch posits. Vladislavić writes:

Stunned by the sunlight, we slumped against the rock with our faces turned to the sky, while Auerbach spoke about the history of the valley and the people who had lived there as it passed from gentility to squalor and back again. You could still see some of the grand mansions on the opposite slope. Down in the dip, there were houses that went back to the beginnings of the city that had survived the cycles of slum clearance and gentrification and renewed decline.

‘You think it would simplify things, looking down from up here,’ he went on, ‘but it has the opposite effect on me. If I try to imagine the lives going on in all these houses, the domestic dramas, the family sagas, it seems impossibly complicated. How could you ever do justice to something so rich in detail? You couldn’t do it in a novel, let alone a photograph.’ (45)

At first, Auerbach is moved by this scene to recite a history of the area, itself an act of comprehensive narration whose genre characteristics suggest a unified and cohesive pattern of representation is possible. But Auerbach is merely informing them of the area’s sociopolitical makeup, the hows and whys of the disparate economic realities reflected in the contrasting architecture, while remaining fully aware that this narrative is itself a limited reflection of reality, rather than a sum totality. He posits that “you would think it simplifies things”, an allusion to de Certeau’s Manhattan gazing, but then, at length, articulates how the complexity of the social realities of this city, like all cities, cannot be so easily or simply rendered, the point being that once one is attuned to this complexity, it is no longer possible to go back to a perspective that engages in the kinds of limitations that represent the city as easily legible. The metafictional aspect of Auerbach’s ruminations revisits the earlier simile of the city as a book, and dismisses the idea that a
book, like the one we are currently reading, could hope to encapsulate the complexity and richness before them. The idea that photos can do no better refers to Auerbach’s role as a famous photographer of the city, but it also points to the wider project of *Double Negative*, since the novel was conceived and produced as a collaboration between Vladislavić and David Goldblatt, with Vladislavić providing the novel and Goldblatt a retrospective of his photography of Johannesburg.

At this moment, Brookes interjects, suggesting that Auerbach is downplaying the power afforded to him as an artist to represent the city, and begins a conversation that establishes Brookes as a foil to both Auerbach and Neville, and that additionally provides the impetus for the second part of their day, namely, a voyage into the territory below them to explore the same urban landscape from a different perspective:

Brookes started as if something had bitten him.
‘You were talking earlier about how you choose your subjects, or rather how they choose you. How does that work from up here?’
‘It doesn’t. There’s no way of telling from here what’s interesting.’
‘Oh, I thought your point was that everything looks interesting from up here.’
‘I said complicated, not interesting.’
‘I’ll say interesting then. That’s what I think.
Everyone has a story to tell.’
‘But not everyone is a storyteller.’
‘Fair enough. Everyone has a story, full stop.
Someone else might have to tell it. That’s where you come in.’ (45)

Brookes and Auerbach never seem to be in direct conflict, at least in the sense that Auerbach does not rise to Brooke’s various challenges or criticisms in a way that suggests real animosity exists between them. A careful reading suggests that the negativity inherent in how Brookes is portrayed is largely the result of Neville’s bias
against Brookes, something the more mature, retrospective narrator later admits to.

Nevertheless, Auerbach and Brookes have seemingly irreconcilable attitudes toward Auerbach’s profession, specifically the manner in which the power dynamics play out between Auerbach, as the photographer and artist, and his subjects. Auerbach prefers the artist as vessel metaphor for articulating this relationship and uses this cliché to cast himself in the role of passive recipient of the subjectivity of others. This is largely in keeping with common perceptions of photography, with the photographer being something of a recorder of objective reality (albeit a framed reality captured by the trained eye) as opposed to an artist projecting themselves onto the material world in some fashion, be it clay or canvas. Auerbach’s take is more or less in line with Henri Cartier-Bresson’s concept, as expressed in *The Decisive Moment* (1952), that successful composition is not planned or manipulated by the photographer and that the photographer, as much as possible, simply responds to “the decisive moment” by accurately capturing it due to their honed artistic instincts. Cartier-Bresson writes that “photography is the simultaneous recognition in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organisation of forms which give that event its proper expression” (14). While there is an “organization of forms”, photography as represented here is essentially responsive.

Brookes, on the other hand, insists on a version of Auerbach’s role that includes narrative direction as well as the appropriation of the stories of those who, due to a deficiency of proper artistry, are unable to tell them. Under this rubric, Auerbach is a kind of middleman between the subject and the audience, one who possesses the proper skill set to bring the “interesting” elements of any given person to light in an artistically
compelling fashion, but rather than being a vessel, he actively creates a framework for reception. This difference between their attitudes is also spatially represented in Auerbach’s distinction between what is “complicated” on the one hand and what is “interesting” on the other. Essentially, despite the fact that, for Auerbach, the panoramic view is one that complicates rather than simplifies, it is not conducive to eliciting what he finds compelling about his subject, which has more to do with the everyday, personal practices and environments of individuals than it does with shots of the wider urbanscape. The panoramic view of the city may suggest to Auerbach the depth of complexity inherent to the built environment, but what remains interesting to him is the specific “fingerprint”, to refer to Vladislavić’s term from Portrait with Keys, that each person carves into the city for themselves. Brookes is less inclined to make that distinction, and he formulates an activity that he imagines will prove his point that what is complicated is what is interesting. He suggests that each man, Neville, Auerbach, and himself, select a location, somewhat randomly, from their current vantage point and that they then head down into the valley to each preselected location and see what there is to photograph. As I mentioned, this “adventure” serves as a point of contrast between the two perspectives, totalizing panorama and street-level interaction.

The first house, Brooke’s pick, turns out to be a student lodging with nobody home. In the back, however, is “the long side of a garage and the front of an outbuilding that was no more than a shack” (50). The woman living there, Veronica, whose husband is at work, seems dubious about their presence at first, and almost immediately the social realities that are obscured in the top-down viewpoint are felt by Neville, who tells us “[…], it hardly mattered whether she grasped what we were up to. Who we were was
clear. We were white men. We would do as we pleased” (51). He furthers this with “I was embarrassed. On my own behalf, for being there; on hers, for being unable to prevent me. I remembered my father speaking to Paulina in the yard, how she always came out of her room and pulled the door closed behind her, drawing the only line she could” (51). The placement of the shack in the back of the house suggests the marginal spatial status of Veronica, her husband, and their two children, even on the lot where their home is located, and suggests that she is a servant to the occupants of the larger house. This fact, and the realization that Neville and his accomplices are present within this space without the uncertainties one might normally experience upon entering someone else’s property, ironically causes Neville to become acutely aware of how his white privilege makes this exercise possible and how the spatial dynamics he is currently witnessing are similar to those that demarcate and define the roles and spatial identities of his own domestic reality, which in turn causes him to project the anxieties these provoke in him onto the current setting. Veronica, however, although wary of their presence, does not share Neville’s apprehensions, and gladly allows herself to be photographed by Auerbach. Neville is able to describe the scene in great detail, not because he was there (his concerns with invading her privacy prevent him from entering her home) but because he is able to describe the photo. When Brookes asserts that Auerbach has found a subject, thus proving Brookes’ argument, he says “‘That’s one nil to me. You’ve found a subject. Not just Mother and Child but Mother and Children. Twins’” (53), but Auerbach replies, “‘I’m afraid it’s more interesting than that. […] Or perhaps I should say more complicated. There were triplets, but one of them died’” (53). Although it does not register for Brookes, the experiment is not proving his point, but rather illustrating the
stark disparity between what is afforded by the panoramic view as opposed to the intimate experience of coming face to face with a person in a specific social, albeit intensely private, space, in particular the often dramatic circumstances inherent to domestic life.

This disparity is further reinforced by the photo of Veronica itself:

Behind the mother, over her shoulder, is the snapshot of the triplets, propped on a wooden crossbeam against the iron wall. It is possible to miss that picture-within-a-picture entirely, but once seen it looms larger, or you wish it would. […] The third child, the dead one, irreplaceably absent in Auerbach’s photograph, persists in that smaller frame like an echo. But who can tell which child it is? The mother could say, perhaps, but she is absent too. In the circle of your eye, they all go on, living and dying, then and now. (54-55)

The difference between the two perspectives is once again highlighted. The “echo” of the third child in this picture is what Roland Barthes, in Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography (1980), would term the “punctum”, by which he means the aspect of any given photo which is intensely personal and unexpected, but often only if you are aware of a larger context. Vladislavić’s treatment of the photo suggests that although the photo is a moment captured in time, this picture also conveys a history, and a chronology, but not one that we, as viewers (and certainly not as readers) have direct access to in the same way as Veronica. Instead of observing from a distance, we are brought face to face, and instead of a totalizing unity there is a lack at the centre of this picture that causes the observer, at least in the case of Neville, to frame further questions without receiving an answer. Neville is also careful to refer to Veronica as “the mother” to better represent the lack of information and detail that an observer who was not present for the photograph would experience. From this perspective, the observer is not the god-like unifier of de
Certeau’s Manhattan gaze, but rather a person afforded a fleeting glimpse of a larger and inaccessible complexity that renders the individual humanity of its subjects. In this sense, Brooke’s idea that Auerbach is telling the stories of other people rings false, as Veronica’s story is ultimately denied to Auerbach’s general audience through anything save a fleeting glimpse given salience by being frozen in time via the medium of photography. A story is told, perhaps, but a fragmented one whose gaps do not suggest the unity that we can more easily afford ourselves at a distance.

The second site extends the difference between the street-level and panoramic views, but also serves as a contrast to the first picture so as to simultaneously emphasize the complexities contained within the valley. Where Veronica is a poor black woman, living in the margins of a white residence and the mother of a dead son, the second subject, Mrs Ditton, is a middle-class white woman, whose son was almost killed but remains alive. Her son’s brush with death occurred from riding in a “hippo” over a land mine, presumably laid by forces resisting apartheid. The door of this vehicle, blown from its frame, now serves as a coffee table in her living room, a fragment of the past that shapes the space of her home. Different races, different socioeconomic statuses, dual sons in peril, one lost and the other saved, one the victim of poverty and the other the potential victim of his privilege; these gaps and similarities between these two women once again serve to highlight a set of circumstances that could only be guessed at from a distance. Like Veronica’s, Mrs Ditton’s photo similarly serves to frame the moment it captures against the complexities of her life. Neville claims that, when looking at this second picture, “you can see the relief on Mrs Ditton’s face as she drops from the fullness of life

59 Hippo is common slang for an armoured troop carrier or ATC.
into a smaller, diminished immortality” (66). Once again, the “smaller diminished immortality” of the photograph is a representation that narrows down the spectrum of a human existence into a particular moment. In that way, a picture is like a diagram or a map, one whose reduced complexity and timelessness make it easier to absorb as a representation that stands in for (at least from the perspective of a neutral observer) reality itself. And again, just as with Veronica’s photo, Auerbach’s approach to his subjects tends to highlight these discrepancies rather than obscure them. In other words, Auerbach’s photos draw attention to these gaps or slippages between reality and representation, and in doing so are not unlike the unreliable narrators of Portrait with Keys and Double Negative, storytellers whose representations gesture to, perhaps not their failings exactly, but their limitations, and in doing so provide a more compelling representation of human complexity than they would otherwise.

When the picture of Mrs Ditton is taken, Neville narrates his own perception of how she conceptualizes this moment, a juncture where she becomes cognizant of the schism between her self and a representation of her self:

For a moment after the picture was taken, she was reluctant to leave the chair. Captured and released in the same instant, she was unsure of her will. She had two destinies now. One of them she still occupied, the other stepped away from her; it was receding into the past, but with its face turned toward the future. She hovered in the chair, unblinking, afraid to move a muscle, as if stirring would smudge that other body in the camera and she needed to match it for as long as possible to preserve a semblance. (67)

Of course, we do not usually weigh the moment of having our picture taken with such gravity, particularly not in this digital age of ubiquitous selfies, but we might if the person photographing us was a famous photographer and the picture of us had the
potential to “outlive” our conscious existence, perhaps even becoming a significant portion of our lasting effect in the world. As phototheorist Susan Sontag posits in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), “The photographer’s intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it” (39) These two “destinies”, that of her lived life in the continual present of conscious existence and that of her photograph’s future “meaning” as interpreted, created, and maintained by the “diverse communities” of its reception as an artifact of the past (as all photographs must be), are simultaneously both interconnected and yet materially and chronologically distinct. In essence, this moment captures the complexities of the relationship between the subject (person) and its representation (photograph) in a way that illustrates the anxiety of the “semblance” between oneself and representations of oneself. In order to help assuage this anxiety, after taking the picture, Auerbach asks Mrs Ditton several questions about her life, formalities rather than inquiries evoking intimacy, and Neville observes that “With questions that opened into the rest of her life, into her complications, she was charmed back into the well-lit room of the present” (67).

As previously discussed, these two moments, orbiting around the pull of their respective photographs, highlight the extent to which the act of going down into the urban environment brings the spatial dynamic of the city to the fore. No longer is the “all-seeing eye” perspective possible, nor its attendant detachment, as all three men must navigate this space as players in the environment. Brookes, however, seems keenly unaware of this, and maintains that the experiment has wholly proved his argument that what is interesting from one vantage point is interesting from the other. It is likely that,
for Brookes, this is true. His own apprehension of the spaces they pass through suggests that his own experience is deeply different than Neville’s, despite the fact that much of what they did and where they went was the same. At the first location, Brooke’s behaviour is described in the following way:

A car door slammed in the street. Brookes did not seem to notice. He found a kitchen chair in the corner of the yard, sat down with the notebook resting on his knee, and went on writing. His head looked like an egg extruded from the glistening shell of his jacket. Once again, I had the sense that he was directing us. Not that he was writing down what we were doing, but that we were moving or standing still, turning left or right according to his design. Dialogue was no longer possible: all we could do was act. Respond to stage directions. (53-54)

Here we have Brookes as the designer, the creator, the centre of a kind of meaning-making devoid of introspective criticism. He is possessed of the certitude that Neville finds so unnerving and which he cannot bring himself to possess, despite being acutely aware of its desirability. Brookes often appears to be insensate regarding what is outside of his immediate attention, and similarly insensitive to the perspectives of other people outside common modes of politeness. Neville, who acts as our only line of contact with Brookes, casts himself as an actor without dialogue who is merely responding to Brooke’s directions.

Perhaps more revealing than Neville’s sense of his own relationship with Brookes, however, is his sense of how Brookes navigates the spaces of the homes of the people they visit. When he hears that Veronica’s photograph contains another photograph in the background, one on her mantle that captures all three of hers sons, including the one who is presently dead, the following occurs:
‘Is that them?’ Brookes asked. He was back in the doorway.
‘It’s the only picture of all three.’
‘May I?’
It was unclear who he was asking. He brought a snapshot out into the sunlight and studied it. ‘Also a boy? This one who died?’ Auerbach nodded. Brookes wrote in his notebook. Then he thrust the photograph at me, with an impatient grunt, as if to say, ‘Here, see what you’ve done. Happy now?’ (53)

While Neville hangs back, projecting his embarrassment onto Veronica, Brookes willfully enters her home on numerous occasions, and, although asking to take a look at the photograph of the triplets, does so in a coarse and entitled manner. Brookes translates what we infer as a positive response to his query into more than just permission to enter and look at the photograph, but permission to do with it as he pleases, including moving it from one location into another. His vocalization of the fact that one of Veronica’s children has died also marks an insensitivity regarding her feelings on the topic, and how she might feel about these men openly discussing this fact among one another, in her living space, as if she were not present. All of this is not much in the way of a close reading, but more of an obvious synopsis of Brooke’s general behaviour, caught rather concisely in this illuminating moment. His behaviour at the site of the second picture similarly captures how he relates to the spaces of other people, and by extension, to those people themselves.

Brookes was like a visitor in a museum whose point he cannot fathom. He stooped to look at objects in the lower shelves of the cabinets and ran his fingers over the embossed set of spines of a set of encyclopedias. He paused in the doorways of rooms as if they were spanned by chains, leaning in for a better view. There must be something interesting here, his attitude suggested, perhaps it’s hidden in the corner over there. In the kitchen, where the makings of a stew lay on a chopping board, he held a
chunk of butternut up to the light as if looking for a flaw. Once, he fanned himself with his notebook, but wrote nothing in it. (65)

The museumification Brookes enacts on these domestic spaces grants him a voyeur status, while the boundaries he erects for himself suggest a perfunctory politeness as opposed to genuine respect. When possible, he collapses the distance between the objects of his scrutiny and his own body, allowing his hands to touch the possessions of other people, even their food, all of which suggests a folding of the subjectivity of the Other into her material possessions, allowing him to more readily experience them as objects as well. Brookes is a journalist and his treatment of these objects is suggestive of how he conceptualizes his own subject-master position in relation to other people as the inquirer, the viewer, the (proof?)reader. He grants a similar role to Auerbach’s identity as a photographer and artist. These responses to the Other as a mode of investigative journalism suggest that the treatment of space, as in the act of moving through and interacting with the semiology of that space, is connected to how we conceptualize our relationships within social spaces and how we subsequently represent them. In fact, the characteristic of how one responds to the presence of the Other is an important distinction between both Double Negative and Portrait with Keys and the early novels.

**Othering the Other**

I have thus far capitalized the word “Other” in keeping with its typical usage in postcolonial theory, but I am going to transition into “the other” here for reasons that should become apparent. By “the other” I am referring to something close to the usage of
the term as conceptualized by Derek Attridge in *The Singularity of Literature*,
which differs from, but overlaps with, definitions of the term commonly employed in postcolonial literary theory. In postcolonial studies, typically speaking, the Other, as opposed to the Self, is discussed in Levinasian terms as a fetishized, exoticized, potentially abject subject defined largely by a “not-I” outgroup status: the lesser, marginalized half of a relational, hegemonic binary. The Other, particularly in colonial discourses, tends to be racially defined, although markers of class, and particularly gender are significant points of demarcation as well, and any marked point of difference has the potential to serve as a catalyst of othering acts. In this sense of the term, the Other, while he/she/it/they may be dehumanized within the discourse that casts them as other, is usually a human subject. In fact, a shared humanity is often a source of great

 Given the manifold uses of the term “singular” and “singularity” within the field of postcolonial theory, it is important to make a distinction here, namely between Attridge’s use of the term and the critique launched against postcolonial theory by Peter Hallward in his *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific* (2001). Hallward suggests that “Singular configurations replace the interpretation or representation of reality with an immanent participation in its production or creation: in the end, at the limit of ‘absolute postcoloniality,’ there will be nothing left, nothing outside itself, to which it could be specific” (xii) and further that “the singular comes to be in the absence of others, deprived of an ethical or political environment as such” (7). Attridge, on the other hand has recently clarified his own use of the term in relation to other common usages, writing that:

> I like this word because it captures the uniqueness of the literary work without implying that that uniqueness arises from a fixed, absolute, and self-present identity; rather, singularity, as I use it, denotes a distinctive constellation within a cultural field. Singularity is constituted by general codes, by differences and relations (remember Saussure: in language there are no positive terms, only differences!), not by solid and unchanging entities. Others have used the term somewhat differently... Peter Hallward, in *Absolutely Postcolonial*... chooses to use singular to refer to any entity that has no relation outside itself and *specific* to refer to an entity that is constituted by its relations—which is exactly the opposite to the way I would use the terms. *(Conversations, 7)*
anxiety for the subjectivity enforcing or enacting the othering (think here of Tearle’s concern about a black man representing humanity in the exhibit at the Zoological Gardens). At the centre of my own project, however, lies the relationship between ethical responses to people on the one hand, and patterns of conceptualizing social space on the other. Essentially, if I am arguing that the acts of cognitive mapping by characters such as Tearle are exclusionary or limited largely because of their respective desires to operate within totalizing, closed systems of representation, I am also suggesting that their relationship/response to alterity is based on something that may be a person or persons but need not be, regardless of how caught up in racial categories those characters might be. For instance, Tearle’s distaste for particular spatial configurations may, in some instances, be based purely on his apprehension of the physical configuration of the built environment, but given (following Lefebvre) the socially produced nature of that space, his objections are typically caught up in his attendant and inseparable anxieties regarding out-group members and their potentially destabilizing/intrusive presence. What is manifested in the built environment via social relations is the potential for a novelty that usurps previous patterns of recognition and meaning-making. Therefore, one’s response to newness in the presence of the other may come from the Other as a person whose race/gender/sexuality/nationality/religion is the source of otherness, or it may come from an aesthetic response to otherness in music, literature, food, etc. Essentially, the response to the Other as a person or the other as a more generalized alterity is, at its foundation, about the ways in which otherness disrupts pre-established schemata.

In a similar fashion, when discussing his own experience with the act of writing, Derek Attridge relates that, “What I have to resist is my mind’s inclination toward
repetition, its tendency to process any novelty it encounters in terms of the familiar” (17). Attridge identifies this ingrained impetus as a limitation that he struggles against, and suggests that his project when writing, and indeed the project of anyone attempting to “create”, is to enact a kind of change, not just within ourselves, but more generally through acts of representation. He asks, “… how does it happen that, via the work of an individual or a group of individuals, otherness enters, and changes, a cultural sphere?” (18) This change through the introduction of otherness, in whatever form, is cast as a struggle, of various magnitudes, against a previously established status quo, and it is, to my mind, a very relatable struggle that gestures to a common issue with human cognition in terms of its proclivity for efficiency, often at the expense of apprehending complexity. The binary distinctions, for example, that frame in/out statuses have their roots in either/or categorical representations that organize reality according to their most obvious sites of deviation, sites typically defined by sociocultural, and frequently hegemonic, norms but that are conceptualized and represented as empirically based, objective, and irreconcilable points of difference, all of which makes binary thinking such a fertile ground for efforts of deconstruction. Whether binary or complex, whatever the pre-established systems for comprehending one’s place in the world are, they will serve as the foundation for how that person moves forward and interprets new information. What interests Attridge in this regard is:

… the way an individual’s grasp on the world is mediated by a changing array of interlocking, overlapping, and often contradictory cultural systems absorbed in the course of his or her previous experience, a complex matrix of habits, cognitive models, representations, beliefs, expectations, prejudices, and preferences that operate intellectually, emotionally, and physically to produce a sense of at least
relative continuity, coherence, and significance out of the manifold events of human living. (22)

Obviously, the “mind’s inclination” to incorporate stimulus according to pre-established norms is part of being a mentally healthy person capable of perceiving the world in a fashion compatible with basic utility, but the ability to think past or through the erasure of complexity this tendency evokes is key in crafting a spatial imagination capable of accommodating newness and thereby evolving. Significantly, the cognitive model in play for my purposes is cognitive mapping, which is core to our basic sense of self, at least in terms of how we function in the spaces around us. Caught up in the act of cognitive mapping is not just a cognitive model, but also the “complex matrix of habits” inherent to our everyday practices that make up our movement through the built environment, which themselves come with a set of “representations, beliefs, expectations, and preferences”. Most notably, Attridge affirms the extent to which such systems of thought are maintained to achieve a sense of continuity and coherence, twin facets of what Kevin Lynch refers to in cognitive mapping as the “legibility” of city spaces. In other words, the same willful acts of accommodation that Attridge proposes need to be realized in order to ethically respond to the other more generally are at the heart of opening up one’s cognitive map to otherness as well. Such an accommodation is crucial for incorporating and ethically responding to the other.

Before discussing how such an accommodation might take place, a more precise articulation of the other should be foregrounded. Attridge suggests the following:

One approach that will allow us to develop a fuller account is to say that it is a handling of language whereby something we might call “otherness” or “alterity” or “the other” is made, or allowed, to impact upon the existing configurations of an individual’s mental world, which is to
say, upon a particular cultural field as it is embodied in a single subjectivity. Otherness is that which is, at a given moment, outside the horizon provided by the culture for thinking, understanding, imagining, feeling, perceiving. (We shall have to complicate this notion of the outside and the implication of a simple opposition to the inside in due course; for the moment, let us just note that there is an important sense in which otherness is not simply out there; but is produced by the same operations that constitute what is familiar.) (19)

Attridge’s focus is literature, hence the emphasis on language; however, he admits that his usage should be more or less fungible across a variety of media of artistic creation, in which I include the act of cognitive mapping because, as I argue above, cognitive mapping creates a mental map that operates within, and creates, reality in accordance to pre-existing beliefs and preferences in a comparable fashion. Attridge is concerned with the cultural field as it is realized in a single subjectivity, while Kevin Lynch’s version of cognitive mapping is about schemas that arise out of a wider sampling pool and are then averaged out into a kind of generalized representation through a process that remains largely ambiguous. Attridge, however, is also interested in how moments of negating or thinking through cultural norms can affect common practice. As Attridge writes, “In the case of most types of invention, once it has brought about change in an individual or a culture its work is done: its effects will continue to be felt through those applications, reproductions, and reworkings” (28). In essence, otherness is important not only for the creation of art, but for maintaining its discursive potency after the fact via its wider reception. Importantly, Vladislavić’s representations of cognitive mapping focus on individual subjectivities in a fashion that complements Attridge’s position here. Attridge suggests that otherness is “outside the horizon” of a culture, but immediately acknowledges that an in/out binary doesn’t properly capture the relationship here, largely
because the other, in order for it to be produced at all, must be conceived and then represented as other via modes of production that are caught up in the familiar. As Attridge later clarifies, “We are not talking about what is ‘ineffable’ or ‘inexpressible’ in a general sense, only what cannot be thought or said in a particular culture at a particular time. Absolute alterity, as long as it remains absolute, cannot be apprehended at all; there is, effectively, no such thing” (30).

One of the foundational claims of this chapter has been that the characters and narrative modes discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 differ significantly from their counterparts in Portrait with Keys and Double Negative. This difference has been articulated as a contrast between critiquing particular ways of imagining/representing space on the one hand, and on the other, providing potential alternatives to the modalities being critiqued. In Vladislavić’s work, the characteristic of narratological unreliability—when connected with self-reflexivity; an openness to the vulnerability inherent to “getting lost”; and the experience of relating to the urban environment from various vantage points (panoramic/panoptic versus street-level navigation)—defines the qualities of his alternative representations. Attridge’s sense of the other, and how the other can be experienced/created by the self, directly relates to those characteristic attitudes toward one’s relationship with social spaces, and, by extension, the other people that inhabit them. As Attridge writes: “The coming into being of the wholly new requires some relinquishment of intellectual control, and ‘the other’ is one possible name for that to which control is ceded, whether it is conceived of as ‘outside’ or ‘inside’ the subject” (24).
This “relinquishment of intellectual control” is at the heart of the experiences of personal growth, particularly surrounding artistic sensibilities, in both the narrators of *Portrait with Keys* and *Double Negative*. While prone to many of the same anxieties as the narrator of *The Restless Supermarket* and the characters of *The Folly* and *The Exploded View*, the protagonists of the later works, instead of continually attempting a futile form of control through the mapping of space according to linguistic norms or diagrammatic spatial representations, accept the changeable nature of the urban environment and simultaneously comprehend that their own place within it is a continuing, ceaseless process of re-imagination and re-identification. An underlying characteristic of this acceptance is an acquiescence to a newly marginalized status, coupled with a reflexive comprehension of lingering privilege. On the other hand, in the earlier works, an inability to embrace the other, either as a change in one’s environment (the external) or a re-identification of oneself via an original reading of the urban semioscape (the internal or “self”), is the result of being unable or unwilling to think outside of entrenched norms. Attridge articulates the difference between these two approaches in terms of creation versus production: “By contrast with creation, straightforward production, what is often called ‘making’ introduces no alterity and instigates no transformation of the cultural field: it redeploy[s] existing components according to accepted norms” (25). Tearle’s struggle to adapt to the changes in South Africa are, as discussed in Chapter 1, intrinsically linked precisely to his aversions to both the outer alterity produced around him and the inner transformations necessary to better situate himself in relation to these same changes. Hence, his spatial imagination is the result of “production” as opposed to “creation”, resulting in his failure to resituate
himself in contemporary Johannesburg. Neville and “Vladislavić”, however, operate within a different modality, one that allows them to apprehend, experience, and even create the other. As Attridge writes: “Otherness exists only in the registering of that which resists my usual modes of understanding, and that moment of registering alterity is a moment in which I simultaneously acknowledge my failure to comprehend and find my procedures of comprehension beginning to change” (27). Indeed, the act of getting lost may best be summed up as a “failure to comprehend” which subsequently allows for a change of comprehension.

Clearly, Attridge’s usage of the term “the other” is distinct from the previously mentioned popular usage within postcolonial literary theory. As Attridge points out, “In colonial and postcolonial studies ‘the Other’ tends to stand for the colonized culture or people as viewed by the dominant power” (23). The capital “O” definition is more specific and focuses on the presence of actual human beings. From this perspective, Attridge’s conceptualization of the other might be criticized for eliding the issue of personhood and equating the failure to recognize an individual’s basic humanity with an aesthetic shortcoming, meaning that the transatlantic slave trade or the Trail of Tears are best understood as something akin to bad taste. The potential problem here is both that generalizing this type of ethical shortcoming into the realm of the aesthetic and positioning it as a failure of creativity has the potential to minimize injustices enacted on actual human beings and may obscure the extent to which committing violence is the result of a more insidious cognitive process than being close-minded about cultural production.
At first blush, this criticism seems to possess merit, because, typically speaking, we do not tend to recognize the failure of not appreciating new music as being categorically comparable with the moral failure of something like committing genocide. This criticism, however, fails to take into account what Attridge is suggesting is actually at stake, and it is worth quoting him at length on this point because of the extent to which my argument depends on a similar conflation. Attridge suggests that the ostensible “stark contrast” between the more general definition of the other as conceptually challenging and the more specific definition of the Other as a person or persons “does not survive closer inspection” (25). He writes:

…to the extent that I apprehend the “already existing other” in the form of a person it is not other: I recognize the familiar contours of a human being, which is to say I assimilate him or her to my existing schemata of understanding. One aspect of my response, it is true, may be an acknowledgment of the other person’s subjectivity as impenetrable to mine, or an acceptance that his or her claims as an ethical subject are not limitable by mine. But these are responses to the person not as singular individual but as (generic) person, with an “equivalent centre of self” to my own, another “origin of the world.” However, if in this process I remain aware, or become aware through an act of attention, of some failure in the process of assimilation, some strain or internal conflict in my categorization, I may be responding to the singular otherness of the other person. It is in the acknowledgment of the other person’s uniqueness, and therefore of the impossibility of finding general rules or schemata to account fully for him or her, that one can be said to encounter the other as other, in the same moment that those rules and schemata shift, however momentarily, to take account of the now no longer other. While affirming the other as other, therefore, I encounter the limits of my own powers to think and to judge, my capacities as a rational agent. In this way, the encounter with a human other is not different in its essentials from the experience of the other as one attempts creatively to formulate fresh arguments or to produce an original work of art or philosophy. (25)
Inherent to the process of recognizing the other as other then, according to Attridge, is an ability and willingness to transcend the essentialism inherent to categorical frameworks provided by rubrics such as race and gender, coupled with a similar ability and willingness to admit to the shortcomings of one’s own schemata to fully account for their subjectivity. In other words, recognizing the status “other” according to one’s own standards of “self”, that is, recognizing that you are responsible for the mental process of othering another person, is a crucial step toward no longer othering that person and to changing your worldview that caused you to other that person in the first place. This realization, in order to be efficacious in prompting change in how one conceptualizes a given other, must be accompanied by an acknowledgment of one’s own limitations. This ability to recognize and honour another’s subjectivity while simultaneously acknowledging a core difference is a key characteristic in those able to evoke a sympathetic imagination. When we comprehend this fact, we then also comprehend how ethical responses to the complexity and diversity of our fellow humans are fundamentally and inextricably linked to how we react to, and re-create through representation, complexity in a more general sense. This conflation is crucial for understanding Vladislavić’s project because of the nature of the built environment as a web of social spaces which are themselves produced by human relationships. The cognitive maps employed by Vladislavić’s characters are constructed around their own willingness to include or exclude that which does not conform to their existing schemas. Obviously, this

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61 This should not be confused with ignoring the sociocultural significance race and gender play in human societies or the “I don’t see race” claims made by contemporary conservatives. Such claims attempt a pseudo-leveling of the playing field by ignoring very real disparities. Instead, Attridge is positing that acknowledging someone’s individuality and otherness in relation to the self is also an acknowledgement that individual subjectivities are not fully defined by nor limited to such categories.
inclusion/exclusion includes how we conceptualize our relationships with other people. In post-apartheid South Africa, this is particularly important because of Attridge’s idea that “We can specify the relation between the same and the other a little more fully by thinking of it in terms of that which the existing cultural order has to occlude in order to maintain its capacities and configurations, its value-systems and hierarchies of importance; that which it cannot afford to acknowledge if it is to continue without change” (30). This relation exists everywhere, but interrogating its machinations in South Africa is granted a particular urgency given the transition out of apartheid and the extent to which South Africa’s current exclusions are obscured by a celebratory stance regarding apartheid’s demise.

I would hope that, by this point, the extent to which Vladislavić’s work is able to discuss the other as people through representations of place is more or less apparent; however a salient example from each of *Double Negative* and *Portrait with Keys* might remain illustrative even now. For *Double Negative*, this apprehension of the other through navigating or viewing space is rendered quite plainly in the scenes discussed above, and it runs throughout the work. For instance, toward the end of the novel, Neville’s nostalgia prompts him, not to mourn apartheid’s passing, but rather to lament the extent to which new modes of segregation that have replaced apartheid are reconfiguring his city:

> I tried to explain my longing for the vanished city. As the walls go on rising, the character of the place grows more and more obscure. The mood of a street or suburb, that unlikely blend of outlooks expressed by the houses and the people living in them, no longer brushes off on you as you pass. You think there is life behind the blank stare, but you cannot be sure. (148)
Here, Neville bemoans the loss of access to other people’s everyday domestic practices in terms of the shared space of the street. Neville’s conflation between the character of a place and the people that inhabit it in this scene should not be confused with Tearle’s seemingly similar conflation of buildings and people, which seeks to limit the complexities of both. Instead, Neville understands that the makeup of a city reflects the social realities of the people that inhabit it as much as it prescribes them, and he sees the alienation inherent to contemporary Johannesburg as a process that limits the ability of people to experience one another in a productive way. Basically, access to the other, that is, the ability to comprehend a person as other and in doing so witness the limits of one’s own subjectivity in a way that can prompt self-examination, is limited by social spaces that enact segregation. In this sense, apartheid and other forms of explicit and implicit segregation are self-fulfilling prophecies, limiting people’s access to one another and thereby making strangers of those who live next to one another. Earlier in *Double Negative*, Brookes acts as Neville’s foil in his attempt to ameliorate this problem via an almost forced entry into the spaces of other people, touching their personal belongings and taking in their lives like a museum exhibit. In the final section, Neville’s foil comes in the form of a young millennial woman, Janie, who has come to interview him about his photography. Janie, too, thinks of herself as an explorer, and feels little compunction about entering the spaces of those she deems as Other to gain what she thinks of as access to their lives. When they are out on a photoshoot, she discovers an informal settlement in a series of back alleys and says to Neville: “It’s a village back there! You’d never say so, but there must be twenty shacks behind this wall, a whole shanty town in the middle of a suburb. I reckon there could be a hundred people there. Want to take a look?” (160-61).
Neville replies that he’d rather not, that he is “allergic to drama” in a way that seems incongruous with his earlier lament but that signals his refusal to take on the role of voyeur of human tragedy merely to satiate his own curiosity. The problem of Joburg’s walls, and the Othering these barricades help maintain, is not solved by the access to witnessing poverty, but not participating in it, afforded by white privilege.

This problem of the opening up of social spaces, and openness to one’s relationship to the Other in the urbanscape of post-apartheid Joburg, is lucidly rendered by contrasting two passages within *Portrait with Keys*. Spaced roughly one hundred pages apart, and placed in the sixty-third and one-hundred thirty-sixth vignettes respectively, there is nothing about these passages or their placement that suggests Vladislavić is attempting to draw our eyes to a direct comparison, nor to view these representations as opposite ends along the same spectrum, but the exercise proves illuminating nevertheless. Vladislavić writes about a sudden moment experienced by the narrator while standing in the middle of a street:

I become aware of my own incongruity, not just of race and class and language, but of predilection, of need. Far from making me feel uncomfortable, the whole situation pleases me. The sunshine on the tar, which is sugar-frosted with automative glass from the smash and grabs, the Saturday morning bustle, the East Rand detail – the massive palm near the Plascon paint shop. the Solly Karmer’s. a buckled bus shelter. dim-witted robots blinking into the glare. parking meters along Rietfontein Road all ears, absurdly attentive to petty transgression. the yellow stripes on the fascia of Spares Link. the notices about diffs and carbs and shocks scrawled in the window glass in shoewhite. the pink towels behind the burglar proofing in Top Creations Unisex Hair Salon. the yellow-brick flats above, the potted cactus and caged budgie on the balcony. the woman in blankets on the verge across the way, beside their enormous lumpy bags of mielies. Myself in the midst of it, held by the air, with this beautifully inconsequential book, scrounged in a
bioscope junk shop, clutched in my hand. I should feel utterly out of place, but instead I feel that I belong here. I am given shape. I do not follow but I conclude, as surely as a nonsequitur. It’s enough to make me laugh. (84)

“Vladislavić” has left a used bookstore and, upon viewing the street before him, experiences a moment of jouissance, a moment in which his suddenly apparent incongruity delights rather than repulses him. The description of the scene becomes a list composed of sentence fragments, ones that retain their punctuation but lose their capitalization and become, as a result of this formal device, bound up in a half-stream of conscious representation, one where their unity and flow as part of a cohesive street is articulated as surely as their simultaneously distinct and fractured natures are equally realized, highlighting the related yet fragmented nature of the urban semioscape. The realization of the disparity of need might be read as the white viewer reveling in his privilege, but there is more going on here, and such a reading does not parse out the depth of the scene at hand. In as much as Vladislavić’s texts are about reconfiguring the white subject position in post-apartheid South Africa, this is a moment of replacement. Capitalization returns to the syntax with the return to the self, but a self who is then not positioned as simply the viewer, as a centre or fulcrum of meaning, but rather one component “in the midst” of a larger landscape. Vladislavić does not define this environment, but instead he is himself “given shape” by it and therefore instead of being a source of meaning, he retains the status of a “nonsequitor”. In place of the dread or anxiety experienced by narrators of earlier, major works, “Vladislavić” laughs and revels in the complexities and incongruities of his placement in a representation that figures as something of an anti-exploded view. In short, it is a representation of white middle-class subjectivity that recognizes its own privilege while acknowledging, and accepting, the
slippage of this position from central status. It celebrates a letting go of the master subject position in accordance with the kind of narrator who is willing to embrace the art of getting lost and whose response to the other is in line with what Derek Attridge would suggest is an ethical response.

The point of comparison I wish to make is between this scene and a vignette about an emperor of the Sui dynasty in China who came to power in the year 604 AD after murdering his own father:

When Yang-Ti went travelling to the outpost of his empire, he took with him a painting on silk two thousand paces long. Every evening when a halt was called, his painters and soldiers unwound the silk and spanned it in an immense circle, like a laager, and the emperor rested within. The painting, as complete as the horizon, showed a prospect of Lo-Yang. To the south, over the roofs and battlements and the suburbs where the tradesmen lived, the mountains. To the west, the setting sun. To the north, the black lands where the ancestors were buried, the furrowed hills full of sepulchers. To the east, where the moon was swimming, the forecourts of palaces, ministries, halls of justice, houses of pleasure. In the middle of his resting tent, in a small tower, the emperor dwelt, suspended in space and time, between west and east, yesterday and tomorrow. Even in the desert, Yang-Ti kept his city with him, believing that it was unbecoming for an emperor to live like a vagabond in the wilderness. He would not countenance a change in scenery.

Victor Segalen\textsuperscript{62}: ‘That was not understood in his time. Yang-Ti left behind a reputation of an egoist and a sedentary, since, true to Himself, he disliked to contemplate the world in any other way but at its centre.’ (178)

\textsuperscript{62} Victor Segalen was a French poet, novelist, and literary critic, but also an ethnographer and archeologist who worked on and in China in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Chris Bongie’s \textit{Exotic Memories} contains a chapter entitled “The Protocol of (Re)Writing: Victor Segalen and the Problem of Colonialism” that discusses Segalen’s reenvisioning of the “exotic”, particularly via a reading of Segalen’s novel about Westerners in Beijing (then Peking), \textit{René Leys}. 

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Yang-Ti, as historical figure, is the perfect counter to Vladislavić’s embrace of the feeling of “belonging” (as opposed to merely being) out of place. As one of the most prolific urban developers of human history, Yang-ti put eight million people to work constructing roads, palaces, The Grand Canal, and the reconstruction/extension of The Great Wall, in which some six million people lost their lives, many of whom are buried in the foundations of the wall itself. It is fitting that the worst example of the worldview Vladislavić renders in largely comic characters such Aubrey Tearle is also responsible for the largest structural demarcation ever constructed. Yang’s spatial concerns also extended to matters of ownership, and during his reign, widely considered one of the most tyrannical in Chinese history, he expanded the Sui dynasty to its greatest territorial area. Whether the story of the silk border is historically accurate is irrelevant. The drive to remain at the centre, even when placed in the margins, and to reconstruct the environment in accordance with one’s own aesthetic-spatial sensibilities instead of adapting to dis/relocation, is at the core of this narrative, apocryphal or no. In other words, the Yang-ti of Vladislavić’s story is, above everything else, a man who refuses to get lost by always finding himself at the centre. The centre for Yang-ti is his cognitive map of his own city, a transportable image of the city that bears his name (Lo-Yang) and in which he can ensconce himself regardless of his actual location. Tellingly, this image Yang-ti brings with him fittingly provides a barrier between himself and the non-placeness of the wilderness, all that he would consider other, thereby creating a visually apprehended wall that translates the otherness of elsewhere into the domesticity of here. Tearle’s in/out groupings and nostalgia for walled cities pales in comparison, but perhaps only because as an emperor of the ancient world, Yang-ti possessed the unchecked power necessary to
fulfill even the most extreme desires that manifested as a result of his spatial anxieties and the crisis of identity one assumes they must have provoked. None of this makes his tapestry any more real.

I posit that the binaries in *Double Negative* between Neville and his foils and between the above two scenes in *Portrait with Keys* parallel an underlying binary between Vladislavić’s own fictive spatial representations and the modes of urban discourse, theory and practice to which he is fundamentally opposed. His work critiques the Utopic, closed, and panoramic representations of the city that are crafted with the desire of inoculating white middle-class South Africans from the threat of the other, while proffering representations that are heterotopic, open, and “street level”. In light of this, the question that will conclude this thesis is what representing the city actually looks like according to the alternative modalities posited by Vladislavić’s fiction. In other words, how might forms of “mapping” the city engage with the complexity of the built environment in a way aligned, to various degrees and in various ways, with his approach? This is important because if Vladislavić is to be understood as writing within a larger context of responses to contemporary urban development theory, and he should be, then looking at the texts that can potentially form this alternative mode of representation is important in terms of validating his perspective. Essentially, if Vladislavić is critiquing representations, then what might the alternatives he proposes look like, and to what extent are they already present? These two elements, representation and practice in modes of writing and building the city, will provide the context of my reading of Vladislavić and might also suggest his potential influence, were he more widely read and studied.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

If Vladislavić is, as I argue, critiquing a patterned and popular way of conceptualizing city spaces and if, as I further argue, his works both proffer this critique and represent some of the characteristics of potential alternatives, then the question of how those alternatives are, or can be, manifested outside of his own writing is a fitting, perhaps necessary, concluding point of discussion. What follows will be a brief, and by no means exhaustive, look at a number of texts, each of which bears a varying degree of similarity to Vladislavić’s project of reimagining how we think of cities. These texts are not explicitly fictional, although they may contain fictional elements. They were chosen not because they tell stories in a similar fashion to Vladislavić, but rather because they demonstrate that Vladislavić’s set of critiques and alternatives puts forward a genuine set of potentials for reimagining city spaces as opposed to merely a well-intended deconstruction. The following texts demonstrate ways in which urban theorists and thinkers have taken issue, specifically in relation to Johannesburg, against some of the same forms of representation that Vladislavić critiques, and in doing so exemplify potential avenues of influence for his work.

The core texts that will be discussed in this light are *blank___: Architecture, apartheid and after* (1998) (a series of essays, most written, some photographic, on the architecture of the city of Johannesburg edited by Hilton Judin and Vladislavić), *Not No Place: Johannesburg. Fragments of Spaces and Times* (2013) (a compilation of scraps of writing and photography from various artists compiled by Bettina Malcomess and Dorothee Kreutxfeldt with an emphasis on pastiche), and *Writing the City into Being:*
*Essays on Johannesburg 1998-2008* (2010) (a collection of essays by Lindsay Bremner that range from formal scholarship to personal essays on Johannesburg and the relationship between the city and the written form). These texts were chosen because of the aforementioned thematic import, but also because they represent various points along a spectrum in terms of how closely they are related to Vladislavić and what vernacular or vernaculars they employ (from academic essay to photographic pastiche).

The first text is the most directly related to Vladislavić, largely because of his position as editor. *blank___: Architecture, apartheid and after* is a collection of essays that was conceived as “a story about the architecture of South Africa, a country where architecture and urban planning are inextricably linked with politics and culture” (np, Foreword). The collection is a sprawling, full colour textbook-sized piece that contains a number of compelling articles, particularly Njabulo Ndebele’s take on game lodges and their resonance within colonial history and discourse in light of the emergence of the black tourist as well as Lindsay Bremner’s piece “Crime and The Emerging Landscape of Post-apartheid Johannesburg”, which details how the physical makeup of the built environment of Johannesburg helps to maintain the inequity that in turn generates the crime, which then causes the middle class to assume defensive construction postures and practices, which helps to exacerbate existing inequities, all in a downward spiral. One of the more notable characteristics of this collection, however, and the one I want to focus on here, is not the essays themselves, but rather a paratextual organizational tool, the table of contents, or rather “Map of Contents”, which playfully diagrams the text in a way that blurs the lines between figurative and literal mapping. In the section that introduces this map, “Directions”, we are told that:
This book had its origins in a conceptual map. The map itself was an attempt to organize the vast and relatively unexplored field of architecture in South Africa. An attempt was made to represent key architectural concepts in geographical terms, in the context of apartheid and thereafter. In this map, affinities were represented by proximity, tendencies by directions and intensities by accumulation. The map showed the major conceptual positions as landmarks, as well as some minor features. The edges of the map indicated connections between points at the top and bottom and on the left and right. (“Directions”, Judin and Vladislavić, np)

Essentially, the map plots a sphere wherein the top and bottom and left and right all converge (unlike most maps of spheres, where the left and right edges are in proximity but the poles are not). The map connects the text to themes of exploration and thus the colonial history of the region while emphasizing the relationship between texts and social spaces in a way that resonates deeply with Vladislavić’s wider literary projects.

Such an approach gestures to the way in which mapping the built environment is a way of representing and even creating the relationships among locations that define those same locations and also criticizes the idea that forms of representation such as maps are, or can ever be, divested of their ideological underpinnings. Apparently, the fact that this book had its “origins” in this map is not exaggerated, as the potential contributors were given the map before their essays were submitted. We are told:

The essays in this book, both written and photographic, developed in response to the map. Each of the writers, photographers and artists was given the map in order to gain an overview of the terrain. The diverse disciplines and interests of the contributors ensured that much of the terrain was covered. Essays were positioned on the map according to their main focus. In addition to the conceptual landmarks, the map now included the contributors, who were positioned in relation to the landmarks and one another. (Judin and Vladislavić)
This might appear to be something of a playful gimmick, and that is partly because it is. This kind of conflation between textual representation and spatial mapping, however, both underscores, and enacts, several key innovations in the way we apprehend and represent the urban environment. It draws our attention to the prescriptive nature of mapping in relation to development, particularly in how the essays were “developed in response to the map”. It establishes a firm parallel between how we conceptualize an open space for development, a “terrain”, and the body of an anthology. It also breaks down the linear assumptions frequently associated with texts by creating no firm beginning and ending point and by positioning the essays in relation to one another to suggest the thematic interrelationships that are at play in the “larger picture”. Instead of looking up a page number in the table of contents, one must look at the map, find the article or author one is looking for, and then use the grid reference to find the location of the article within the book, such as “C4” or another coordinate. Outside of the simple aesthetic contrast between a conceptual map and a straightforward, chronological list, the process involved makes one navigate the text as a fragmented unity whose disparate parts are interrelated, which means that in the act of looking up one essay it is impossible not to gain some sense of what other pieces are about and how they are related. What appears to be a gimmick is, in actuality, a way of thinking about the relationships between prescriptive texts and mapped spaces that resonates with the themes explored in many of the articles themselves, meaning that, if nothing else, blank___: Architecture, apartheid and after is an exercise in harmonizing form and content. The emphasis on this relationship between form and content illustrates one way that literary disciplines can
interact with development theory and (re)positon new ways of thinking about, representing, and navigating city spaces.

In addition to editing, Vladislavić contributed to *blank*___: Architecture, *apartheid and after* by submitting a series of vignettes from *Portrait with Keys*. Similarly, the next book in question uses a fragment from the same novel, although these few pages from *Portrait* make-up the entirety of Vladislavić’s contribution to *Not No Place: Johannesburg. Fragments of Spaces and Times*. *Not No Place* is described by the editor’s blurb on the back cover as “At once dystopian and utopian…” and as a text that “… skillfully meshes together the written history of the city and its built environment with that which is less certain, less defined: the invisible and visible seams and ridges that hold the city together”. These “invisible and visible seams” appear to be an assortment of articles, largely fragmentary, many of which are “incomplete” and which are grouped together under particular themes in an attempt at creating thematic cohesion without establishing firm demarcations. The entries include “direct quotations from current, historical and fictional sources, first-person accounts; letters; memories; fictional narratives; reflexive texts based on research; archival documents and images; drawings; tables; [and] original sourced materials and photographs” (21). Like *blank*___, part of what makes *Not No Place* distinct is the way its paratextual framing elements are focalized around the themes. The contents are divided into two parts: “Introductions”, which catalogues the various ways that the text is organized and provides a methodological foundation for “the Reader”; and “Sections”, whereby the various fragments that make up the text are compartmentalized according to fairly general themes, such as “Fragments of Spaces and Times”, ‘Water’, and “No Place, Non Place,
Future Images”. These sections are then grouped together by proximity, with more related topics being less spaced out than related ones, which suggests that other, overarching, but not explicitly stated themes are also present.

The index, however, is where the form becomes more experimental and something of a conceptual map that has some similarities to the one in blank__. In “Notes for the Reader” the index is explained at some length:

The book’s index consists of a non-sequential set of terms that present categories by which the reader can navigate the entries in the book: uncertainty, at risk, deep-level, uitvalgrond, won or lost, fantasy, instant, anachronism, by numbers, etc. The indexical terms are usually associated with different thematic sections; some terms, such as anachronism, water, green, function as themes and indexes; while other terms such as at risk are not associated with a particular section. Each double-page spread has three indexical terms that apply to the entries on those two pages. The index allows for the reader to make cross-references between entries within different thematic divisions, providing a kind of vocabulary with which to enter the book at almost any point. There is a visual map of the index by Francis Burger. Entries often refer the reader to relevant entries in other sections. (9)

Although these maps are intended to improve legibility in a fashion that bears some resemblance to Lynch’s theory of cognitive mapping, and although the diagrammatic representations suggest a series of interrelationships among parts in something like an exploded view, the emphasis is still on fragmentation and ultimately a lack of a singular cohesive unity. Essentially, the emphasis is placed on complexity and the multivarious ways in which the text can be navigated. Indeed, the non-sequential nature of the text as well as its explicit invitation to enter at any point and to use thematic associations to explore further afield, all serve to disrupt the idea of a text as a linear series of chapters or sections that are formally demarcated and distinguishable. Looking at the visual map by
Francis Burger does not give one a sense of neatness, order, or legibility in a way that we might be accustomed to. The idea, however, is not to obscure meaning, but rather draw attention to complexity in a way that transcends simplifying trends in urban representation. These characteristics of Not No Place are further emphasized in the “Entries” sub-section of “Notes to the Reader”.

It is here that the formal elements of Not No Place are articulated in such a way as to emphasize the interrelationship between texts and social spaces, particularly Johannesburg, that this compilation is attempting to explore. In keeping with the theme of multiple entry points, this section contains four paragraphs, each of which opens with “This book begins with…”. The first anchors the text’s creation in relation to the particularity of sites:

This book begins with a site, then a multiplication of sites, and returns to them. An abandoned mine shaft along the M2 highway, a 1950s medical building now occupied by immigrant traders, the sealed entrance to a once-fashionable hotel, the ruin of a beach on the edge of Soweto, a stalled development on a golf course in the northern suburbs, a highway bridge, and a swimming pool no longer in use. (9)

The various sites and connections among them, despite their variability, suggest that the fragmented and disordered nature of the text is reminiscent of the city itself and that this is a prescriptive text that simultaneously responds to the urban environment it is prescribing/mapping. These are sites of transition, either of actual movement and relocation, like the M2 Highway, or of urban transformation, as evoked by a medical building now utilized for an entirely different function, thereby undermining static representations of the city while communicating the changeability of built environments more generally, but all the while locating the source material within the particularities of...
Joburg. The next paragraph continues with: “This book begins with collecting. Books, documents, photographs, newspapers, pamphlets, telephone directories, obscure city council publications, surveys, plans, court proceedings and architectural objects from demolition sites” (9), which calls attention to the relationship between social spaces and the texts that conceptualize, categorize, legislate, survey, develop, map, and represent them. In short, Not No Place is a text about the city as seen through texts about the city.

The third beginning refers to the conversational nature of interdisciplinary work and of anthologies more generally, but also foregrounds the personal nature of the project in terms of its grammatical methodology:

This book begins with a conversation. Between us as makers of the book, but also between us and the material that constitutes the city, as lived experience, as encounter and as representation. The reader will notice a proliferation of the personal pronoun, ‘I’. This is intentional, as the book is, on the one hand, defined by a collaborative conversation, and on the other, by the citation of the city’s primary and secondary material. It is as much a personal account of the city over time as it is a collection drawn from four years of reading and research. The slippage of the personal pronoun reflects a multiplicity of authorial and disciplinary voices, while acknowledging our role as subjective ‘author’ of what constitutes an idiosyncratic collection of fragments. (9)

This “beginning” foregrounds a variety of ways that the city is encountered, both as a set of lived experiences involving an inherently personal apprehension of the physicality of the built environment, but also as the result of reading and research which constitute an indirect “secondary” set of experiences. These encounters meld into a kind of dialogic mélange of voices that are nevertheless given shape by the authorial “I” that Malcomess and Kreutzfeldt use to situate themselves in relation to Not No Place as a directed compilation. The “I” in question situates the lens through which the text was conceived.
and crafted, and self-reflexively positions the work in terms of the subjectivities that created it.

The fourth and final beginning returns to the ideas of materiality and intertextuality, which suggests that multiple points of entry are available through the same themes:

This book begins with the city as material. The entries, and the themes by which they are arranged, are inseparable from the specificities of the city itself: its spatial arrangement and architecture; its past, present and future images and their translation into the lived realities of cultural, social, and class complexities; its facts; its self-mythologisations; its fictions and truths. As such, this book is interwoven with the city that is its subject. However, it is also an iteration of the many representations of cities in books; not only written about this city, but other cities. By default these cities enter our pages, if only as image, and sometimes as spectre. It begins with other books. (9)

Here is a by now familiar sense of conflation between the city as text and a text representing the city, which is itself suggestive of the ways in which cities and the processes of mapping them are constantly caught up in cycles of reinvention and self-identification. Ending the section on beginnings with another beginning is simply a way of underscoring this theme and positing that even closures are beginnings as texts lead from one to the other (as do spaces).

The final text I wish to highlight is a series of essays by one of the contributors to blank___. Although less innovative in its formal makeup, Lindsay Bremner’s Writing the City Into Being: Essays on Johannesburg is not only one of the most salient and convincing examples of how cities are prescribed by texts, but it is also, as its title suggests, about Johannesburg, making it particularly relevant here. I have already discussed this text in my Introduction and at various points throughout this thesis, but as
the focus of this Conclusion is on connecting Vladislavić’s positions to actual methodologies for textual production and spatial representation, it is worth revisiting not just Bremner’s foundational positions but rather her approach to them. She tells us on the first page that “This book explores the relationships between writing, photography, pedagogy, architecture and city-making. It is not only commentary on and analysis of a rapidly transforming city, but also, I suggest, a mode of city-making” (1). Bremner recognizes that the represented city and the actual city are not easily demarcated from one another: that, as a result, representing the city has an effect on, and is bound up in, the material processes that produce the city, which means that to represent the city is to, on some level, make the city. She writes, however, in opposition to the trend in architecture of producing a unified vision of the built environment according to traditional modes of discourse, including the manifesto and the idea of the city as utopia. She tells us, “This book is, in a way, an anti-manifesto. If it establishes a position from which to act, it is an anti-utopian one” (2), and also that “The book writes a city into being in the gap between the spatial representations of architects and planners and the places occupied and imagined by those who inhabit the city” (2-3). As such Writing the City into Being “does not attempt to construct a complete picture of Johannesburg’s history or transition; it does not interpret the city from a particular perspective, nor does it offer an analysis or blueprint of the city’s future. Instead, it constructs a selective, idiosyncratic, provisional, constantly changing, rhetorical view of a city in the making. As a result, it offers a “critique of knowledge that claims to be total, objective, complete, or theoretically or disciplinarily pure” (3). By now, it is my hope that the extent to which this offering is paralleled in the work of Ivan Vladislavić will be more or less obvious. What is
significant is that Vladislavić’s critiques, alternatives, and discursive methods share a certain amount of overlap with burgeoning theories within the discipline of urban development that are currently gaining traction. The relationships between his work and these texts, some of them mostly thematic and some of them more direct, suggest that his literary works are engaged in intertextual discourse that is responsible for how people apprehend Johannesburg as a web of social spaces, and that they may serve as the sites of continuing influence and dialogue if granted the attention they merit.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Exploration

As I noted in my Introduction, the lens through which I explore Vladislavić’s work is by necessity a limited one. I have chosen only particular texts that suit my interests, and they are not fully explored because a more exhaustive examination would prove too digressive. It is important to register the extent of these limitations, in part because they keep my own work honest, and in part because they might offer potential sources of further study.

One of the rhetorical models I have largely avoided in this work is situating my readings of Vladislavić via a lens of “Africa” or “Africanness”. Although I have frequently contextualized his work in relation to a South African setting and the history the texts are situated in and were produced by, I have largely elided any broader discussion regarding his work’s relationship to Africanness or similarly situated methodologies and theories, such as the concept of the Afropolis for a definition of Afropolis see, Sarah Nuttall’s and Achille Mbembe’s. “Afropolis: From Johannesburg” (2007). For a reading of Vladislavić’s work through this lens, and one that goes
how African cities are inherently distinct from urban spaces outside of Africa. In part, this stems from my suspicion about the specificity of many of the claims regarding African cities and a tandem and larger suspicion regarding the essentialism, strategic or otherwise, inherent to these concepts. It is also related to my belief that a reading of Vladislavić’s work in terms of how it applies to cities more generally is an area of study that will do greater justice to Vladislavić’s body of literature, as it is almost taken for granted that he is an insular (South) African writer whose limited international readership is the result of its specificity. Essentially, while I think any decent reading of Vladislavić must be grounded in the appropriate context, I do not subscribe to the idea that his work can only have merit, or appeal, to those whose practices of everyday life take place in Johannesburg, South Africa, or even Africa. In writing this thesis I have endeavoured to explain context where and when I realized it was necessary, but also gesture to the ways in which Vladislavić’s representations of the specificities of his own locale have an important bearing on representing and conceptualizing urban social spaces more generally.

Regarding the context of his work, a potential avenue for exploration exists in how his fictional output is bound up and connected to his other literary endeavours, most significantly as an editor of South African fiction and as an editor at the seminal Staffrider magazine. Such a project might detail his work from a book history approach and do an exhaustive job of locating his circles of influence. His personal letters, available at the National English Literature Museum in Grahamstown and his work on texts such as Antjie Krog’s Country of my Skull, could all provide a larger context from some distance toward refuting the concept of Afropolis, see Pablo Mukherjee’s “Ivan Vladislavić: Traversing the Uneven City” (2012).
which to explore his work. Most significantly, this thesis only explores a section, albeit a significant one, of his oeuvre. His collections of short stories and the more recent *The Loss Library* and *A Labour of Moles* are not included here as they did not fit as neatly within my thematic scope. This is in part because his newer works follow a general trend of South African writing which is becoming more concerned with personal modes of meaning-making that might be less connected to larger social processes, processes that the nature of apartheid made unavoidable.

Unlike the many (although certainly not all) people working in the field of literature, the author of my primary texts is very much alive and continuing to produce work. This comes with particular challenges, as does the fact that I know Vladislavić personally. This means that I am in no position, perhaps fortunately, to make any sweeping commentary on the nature of his oeuvre or his critical and literary legacy. It also means that over the course of writing this thesis I have had the pleasure, and the trepidation, of watching Vladislavić produce work even while I am writing on him.64 I will watch, in the coming years, Ivan Vladislavić continue to write and publish, and for more critical responses to be produced in return. It is my hope that this thesis might contribute to this production and reaction and might inspire further interest in his work, particularly outside of South Africa.

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64 His newest short story collection, *101 Detectives* (2015), was published while I was editing the final draft of this thesis.
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