

Inside-out – The New Literary Geographies of the Post-apartheid City in Mpe’s and Vladislavić’s Johannesburg Writing

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ABSTRACT:

This article examines the strategies used by Johannesburg writers Phaswane Mpe and Ivan Vladislavić in their texts *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) and *Portrait with Keys: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked* (2006) to make sense of the bewildering transformations of post-apartheid Johannesburg. The article begins by sketching the transformations of the city in the wake of the dismantlement of apartheid-era segregation, sketching in particular the way in which the city has been turned ‘inside-out’. It then goes on to examine in the texts by Mpe’s and Vladislavić’s figures of the ‘inside-out’, specifically Mpe’s use of narratological loops and Vladislavić’s implementation of the figure of the Möbius strip, to show how these recent literary texts have attempted to elucidate the vertiginous demographic changes in the city.

Sometime in 2011, an apocryphal press release report about Hillbrow, one of Johannesburg’s most notorious inner city areas, appeared in the internet. The press clipping epitomized the break-down of social order in the erstwhile segregated city for which Hillbrow has come to stand. For a reader cognisant of Hillbrow’s reputation as a run-down neighbourhood ridden with drug-dealing, prostitution, slumlord hijacking and violent crime, nothing in the report is particularly surprising:

Gauteng Police just announced the discovery of an arms cache of 200 semi-automatic rifles with 25,000 rounds of ammunition, 7 anti-tank missiles, 4 grenade launchers, 1/2 tonne of heroin, R22 million in forged South African banknotes and 25 trafficked Nigerian prostitutes all in a block of flats behind the Hillbrow Public Library. Local residents were stunned. A community spokesman said: ‘We’re shocked. We never even knew we had a library!’¹

The humour lies of course in the inhabitants’ total absence of reaction to the hyperbolic finds uncovered by the police raid. There is nothing out of the ordinary here, no need for comment. What is truly scandalous in the clipping, for the local residents and the reader respectively, is, on the one hand, the existence of a municipal library in such an improbable environment, and on the other, the residents’ total ignorance of its existence in their midst.

Jest aside, this genuine or feigned horror at the presence of an archive of literary texts at the heart of the metropolis that has produced one of South Africa’s two

¹ ‘Police Raid in Hillbrow’. Available for instance at http://www.emailjokes.co.za/text-jokes-links/more/46378_Police-Raid-in-Hillbrow.htm?tag_name=a, retrieved on 25 May 2013.

Nobel Laureates is indicative of the much-decried demise of literary culture in post-apartheid society. South Africa is a digitally saturated but largely bookless society. Even the educated elite of the rainbow nation, still hampered by the legacy of the segregated Bantu education system, hardly reads. For a disturbingly large majority of South Africans, there is, as it were, no library in Hillbrow.²

Yet if we are to reverse the terms of this dilemma in a chiasmic but intertwining operation which typifies much of what I wish to do in this article, we might reach rather different conclusions. For Hillbrow is certainly in the library. Ever since the publication of Phaswane Mpe's now-classic *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*,³ one of the two texts I wish to visit here, Hillbrow has become very much a literary presence. Indeed, this welcoming slogan has undergone remarkable metastases, as for instance, evinced for instance in an eponymous 2008 urban art sculpture by Maja Marx located on a flight of steps up an embankment off Nugget Street in Hillbrow.⁴

At right angles to one another, along the inner long right-angle of two steps, two stencil-cut strip-plaques read 'WELCOME TO OUR HILLBROW'. The two inscriptions face each other foot to foot at the meeting of plinth and step, their respective scripts running in opposite directions along their syntagmatic axes. Whichever inscription one reads, whether one is ascending or descending the steps, the other plaque, the same though inverted, addresses its welcome to in a different direction, to a different 'outside' – turning its statement inside-out, as it were. (I first learnt about these urban art artefacts from a further metastasis of the slogan, a canvas photo-print of the inscriptions canvas made by Johannesburg street kids involved in an amateur photography social-work project).⁵ So, not only is Hillbrow in the library: more interestingly, such inscriptions and adjacent artefacts prompt a further switch of the chiasmic pair. Contrary to what its inhabitants might believe, there is indeed a library in Hillbrow, minimal though it may be.

What is rehearsed by the apocryphal newspaper report quoted above is the marginalization of narratives, archives or media other than those documenting crime, disorder, disintegration as the face of South Africa's largest metropolis.

² See for instance, P. Stein and D. Newfield, 'Multiliteracies and Multimodality in English Education in Africa: Mapping the Terrain', *English Studies in Africa* 49:1 (2006), pp. 1-21.

³ P. Mpe, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2001). All subsequent references in the text.

⁴ M. Marx, 'Welcome to Our Hillbrow', urban art sculpture 2008, available at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/mezusa/3798056924/in/set-72157621807025331>, retrieved on 25 May 2013.

⁵ See the project website, available at <http://www.iwasshotinjoburg.co.za/Landing.aspx>, retrieved on 23 May 2013.



Figure 1 Maja Marx, 'Welcome to Our Hillbrow', urban art sculpture 2008, Nugget Street, Johannesburg (Photo: Russell West-Pavlov).



Figure 2 Maja Marx, 'Welcome to Our Hillbrow', urban art sculpture 2008, Nugget Street, Johannesburg (Photo: Russell West-Pavlov).

The dearth of alternative narratives to those of mayhem and malaise is evidence of an acute crisis of existential orientation as evinced, for instance, in the recent

diagnosis offered by the erstwhile TRC's figurehead Archbishop Desmond Tutu.⁶ The city has changed radically, and narratives of a more sophisticated variety those of than prejudice, racism, or fear have seldom been found to make sense of the new landscape. Graham documents 'a sense of disorientation amid rapid changes in the physical and social landscape. The changes necessitate new forms of literal and figurative "mapping" of space, place and memory.'⁷ Just such a processes of 'narrative mapping' is emblemized in the opening section of Mpe's novel entitled 'Hillbrow: The Map' (*Welcome*, 1-27). Such mapping instantiates 'an almost compulsive attempt on the part of the narrator to site his protagonist in the city' and is doubtless driven by the author's avowed 'desire to map Hillbrow, contemporary Hillbrow'.⁸ Resonating with this this desire, and also evinced in Marx's minimalist plaques, is a nascent, countervailing trend towards the re-narrativization of the city, the establishment of an alternative archive at times coeval with the urban fabric itself, and articulated in various textual forms as 'secondary modelling systems'.⁹

Pursuing such twists and turns in the city's stories about itself, I read in this article Mpe's now-classic *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) alongside Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys* (2006)¹⁰ with a view to tracing some literary representations of a city which, amidst the tumultuous process of turning itself 'inside-out', is searching for a new language to document its recent transformations. The inside-out imagined by Mpe takes the urban-rural dichotomy which is central to African narratives of modernity, indeed of Modernity in its quintessential European manifestations, and subjects it to a thorough torqueing.¹¹ Mpe's text is written from the perspective of rural immigrants to the city whose moral prejudices are turned inside-out by their trajectory from periphery to centre. By contrast, Vladislavić's text speaks far more from the experience of Johannesburg's white middle-class denizens, disoriented like the parodic protagonist of the earlier novel *The Restless Supermarket* by the 'crumbling order' of the emblematic 'Café Europa' in Hillbrow.¹² Yet Vladislavić's collaged text also, like Mpe's, plays with the chiasmic notion of the inside-out as one of its most powerful topoi.

⁶ D. Tutu, 'Tutu: I Will Not Be Able to Vote for the ANC', *Mail & Guardian* 10 May 2013. URL: <http://mg.co.za/article/2013-05-17-00-where-did-our-future-go-asks-tutu> Accessed 23 May 2013.

⁷ S. Graham, *South African Literature After the Truth Commission: Mapping Loss* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp.1-2.

⁸ M. Green, 'Translating the nation: Phaswane Mpe and the Fiction of Post-apartheid', *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa* 10:1 (2005), p. 7; P. Mpe, 'Healing with Words: Phaswane Mpe Interviewed by Lizzy Atree'. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40:3 (2005), p. 141.

⁹ See J. Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, trans. Gail Lenhoff and Ronald Vroon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan – Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, 1977), pp. 9-10.

¹⁰ I. Vladislavić, *Portrait with Keys: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked* (London: Portobello, 2006). All subsequent references in the text.

¹¹ G. Griffiths, *African Literatures in English: East and West* (London: Longman, 2000), pp. 85, 128, 166-7; R. Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973).

¹² I. Vladislavić, *The Restless Supermarket* (Claremont: David Philip, 2001), p. 181.

The Puzzle of the Post-Apartheid City

Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe entitled their seminal 2008 collection of essays on Johannesburg *The Elusive Metropolis*, and with good reason.¹³ The city is ‘a constantly expanding megapolis’,¹⁴ perennially changing its shape and texture. Half way through the second decade of the twenty-first century, Johannesburg’s population is heading towards four and a half million – according to the most conservative estimates.¹⁵ (Other estimates are much higher. The fact that no accurate population figures are available, because of the constant influx of migrants to the townships, indexes the city’s restlessness.) The gigantic township of Soweto makes up roughly a third of the city’s inhabitants. Johannesburg is gradually merging in the north with Tshwane, or greater Pretoria, which in turn has a population of almost three million (once again this is a conservative estimate). Together the two cities, already linked by a network of motorways and other arteries, as well as by Southern Africa’s only high-speed rail link, are merging into a sprawling, monstrous Southern African megapolis. Travellers speeding along the along the N1 trunk-motorway never leave the urban sprawl as they transit from one city to the other. Symptomatically, Vladislavić writes in a recent novel, ‘The boundaries of Johannesburg are drifting away, sliding over pristine ridges and valleys, lodging in tenuous places, slipping again.’¹⁶

But Johannesburg’s opacity and elusiveness is not merely a result of its size and growth. In the wake of the demise of state-legislated apartheid, South African spaces have been turned inside-out. A whole apparatus of juridically-enforced and geographically-structured racial separation, built into the landscape, has been eradicated. Johannesburg is thus ‘unravelling’ and has been doing so for

¹³ S. Nuttall and A. Mbembe (eds), *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (Durham NC: Duke University Press/Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ M. J. Murray, *Taming the Disorderly City: The Spatial Landscape of Johannesburg after Apartheid* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press/Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2008), p. 9.

¹⁵ Stats SA Online, ‘Census 2011: Population by Municipality’, available at http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Census%202011_data_supplied_to_National_Treasury.asp, retrieved on 25 May 2013.

¹⁶ I. Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* (Johannesburg: Random House, 2004), p. 6.

several decades, according to architectural theorist Lindsay Bremner.¹⁷ Bremner has written that after the end of apartheid, Johannesburg no longer operates in section, it no longer has a below and an above, an inside and an outside. It once did, the logic of extraction and then of apartheid concealing many secrets. It now wears these on its skin, a thick surface of tangled trajectories, muddled hierarchies and latent opportunities.¹⁸

The erstwhile polarization of apartheid Johannesburg into rich white suburbs in the north, impoverished black townships in the south, and a CBD where both groups met in the everyday labour transactions of a major commercial and financial metropolis, abruptly became fluid. Following upon the mass flight of large corporations from the CBD to peripheral centres such as Sandton or Rosebank, the city centre has been ‘hollowed out’, in the words of urban theorist Martin Murray, resulting in a metropolis ‘turned inside out’.¹⁹ The city centre has become a contested zone, its high rise flats occupied by immigrants from other African nations, its streets taken over by a flourishing informal economy in the ‘loose spaces’ of the sidewalks and the parks.²⁰ In Vladislavić’s *Portrait with Keys*, the narrator’s brother Branko comments bluntly on the situation: ‘It’s starting to look like a township around here’ (*Portrait* 46-7, 64). Johannesburg’s rich white suburbs have made space for a rising black middle class, but are simultaneously threatened by inroads of criminality, as control over the impoverished peripheral townships is no longer exerted in quasi-military fashion. These trends are symptomatic of the shifts which have transformed the face of the city over the past two decades – the mutually intertwined ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’ forces at work in cities such as Johannesburg.²¹

As a result, the social landscapes of South African cities have suddenly become fluid.

Now that the buffers of apartheid segregation are gone, there emerge

messy intersections and overlapping realities. Ordinary, everyday lives, which were excluded from the city by Western urban management practices, town planning codes

¹⁷ L. Bremner, ‘Closure, Simulation, and “Making Do” in the Contemporary Johannesburg Landscape’, in Okwui Enwezor et.al. (eds), *Under Siege: Four African Cities – Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos. Documenta 11_Platform 4* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), p. 124.

¹⁸ L. Bremner, *Writing the City into Being: Essays on Johannesburg 1998-2008* (Johannesburg: Fourthwall, 2010), p. 6.

¹⁹ M. J. Murray, *City of Extremes: The Spatial Politics of Johannesburg* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 87-135.

²⁰ K. A. Franck and Q. Stevens, *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life* (London: Routledge, 2007).

²¹ Murray, *Taming the Disorderly City*, p. 9.

or by the legal and administrative apparatus of apartheid, have brought distant geographical, social and cultural worlds into contact.²²

Vladislavić describes in an interview a ‘very fluid situation, in which that large shape of a country begins to melt and shift shape, and neighborhoods change, the particular areas of the city that one’s become familiar with and feels completely at home in, has one’s memories invested in – they change.’²³ How to make sense of a city which has been turned upside-down, inside-out, which has become opaque to its inhabitants as their capacities for cognitive mapping are dislocated by its vertiginous transformations?²⁴

All that is available to the bewildered, disoriented inhabitants of a city such as Johannesburg is what Vladislavić calls ‘the exploded view’.²⁵ This shattering and dispersal of perspectives and multiple realities is generic to contemporary African cities, where soaring populations and the disintegration of infrastructure go hand in hand with astonishing inventivity and creativity in everyday life²⁶ – where the jostling proximity of the extraordinarily rich and incredibly poor bespeak the brutal extremes generated by the turbulences of global capital. AbdouMalik Simone notes that ‘African cities are works in progress, at the same time exceedingly creative and exceedingly stalled.’²⁷ For this reason, according to Rem Koolhaas, African cities such as Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Abidjan, Accra or Lagos sketch out the shape of the global future: such cities

represent a crystallized, extreme, paradigmatic set of case studies at the forefront of globalizing modernity. . . . Many of the much-touted values of contemporary global capital and its prophetic organizational models of dispersal and discontinuity,

²² L. Bremner, *Johannesburg: One City, Colliding Worlds* (Johannesburg: STE, 2004), p.120.

²³ I. Vladislavić, Interview with Stanley Knecht, *The Ledge Files*, available at <http://www.the-ledge.com/HTML/conversation.php?ID=47&lan=uk>, retrieved on 27 November 2011.

²⁴ Compare F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London/New York: Verso, 1992), p. 44.

²⁵ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View*.

²⁶ See for instance A. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 1-23; see also J. Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

²⁷ A. Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 1.

federalism and flexibility, have been realized perfectly in West Africa. This is to say that Lagos is not catching up with us. Rather, we may be catching up with Lagos.²⁸

Catching up, however, especially when its terms (leader-follower, centre-periphery) are inverted or turned inside-out, as here, presupposes a set of hermeneutic tools to make sense of the dizzying pace of change. Johannesburg exemplifies the accelerating multiplication of juxtaposed socio-economic realities which is endemic to African cities, thereby conferring a salient role upon recent literary texts from the city. This role gives credence to Nuttall's claim that 'more attention needs to be paid by social scientists in particular to literary archives of the city, to fiction as ethnography and to the theorising of the city as city.'²⁹ If the writings of Vladislavić (and Mpe) 'might be regarded as the watershed of [South?] African writing as it moves beyond the colonial heritage of the plaasroman and the more recent anti-pastoral (J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, for instance) into the African urban and Afropolitan'³⁰ then there are good reasons for heightened literary-critical attentive to such forms of writing.

How, then, does one decode the post-apartheid city using the hermeneutic 'keys' – to appropriate Vladislavić's eponymous terms – of the literary text? In other words, to reiterate my initial question, is there a library in Hillbrow? To be sure, the city itself is a material archive in time and space of its own transformations over the two decades since the demise of apartheid. In other words, layered palimpsestically in the urban fabric itself, but none the less inseparable from one another, are traces of the past and the present, whose combined effects explain the transformations of the city today: 'The city . . . is no more than a mnemonic' (*Portrait* 33). Yet such traces, hidden under 'topsoil of memory' (*Portrait* 176) as they are, cannot be easily deciphered: 'I wish I could read these strata the way a forester reads the rings of a felled tree, deciphering the lean seasons, the years of plenty, the catastrophes, the triumphs', the narrator says (*Portrait* 87). By their very nature they demand elucidation via another code, in this case that of the literary text. I suggest that Mpe's and Vladislavić's texts carry out their task of deciphering the cryptic urban code via the topos of the entangled inside-outside. This concept is

²⁸ R. Koolhaas, cited in Nuttall and Mbembe (eds), *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, p. 4.

²⁹ S. Nuttall, 'City Forms and Writing the "Now" in South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30.4 (December 2004), p. 739n41.

³⁰ G. Gaylard, 'Introduction', in G. Gaylard (ed.), *Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011), p. 6.

epitomized by the figure of the Möbius strip, which not only provides a figure of the inside-out phenomena exemplified in the city, but also merges the inside-outside polarities of world and perception.³¹ In the words of Leon de Kock, it constitutes a ‘“representational loop” ... found neither in ‘reality’ nor in ‘art’, but in the doubling that occurs when the two intersect each other, like a Mobius [*sic*] strip whose surfaces paradoxically face both inside and outside, and are yet unbroken.’³² The literary text is part of the world, but in its readerly appropriation, a process which is directly addressed by Mpe and Vladislavić, enters the world of signification that the ‘represented spaces’ and the ‘spaces of representation’ of the city also inhabit.³³ The post-apartheid city-text, of which Mpe and Vladislavić are significant exemplars, thus instantiates one central characteristic of ‘post-transitional aesthetics’, what Flockemann has called ‘the use value of “grounded aesthetics”, which allow individuals to make cultural sense of the everyday world’.³⁴

Satirically echoing Michel de Certeau’s vignette of the view of New York from above,³⁵ Ivan Vladislavić’s most recent novel, *Double Negative*, has his protagonists survey Johannesburg from the heights of Melville Koppies.³⁶ A deliberately self-ironizing literary metaphor summarizes the panorama: ‘beneath us . . . the land lay open like a book.’³⁷ Neither of the two texts I propose to read in this paper fulfill this quixotic promise, nor do their authors sincerely believe in such a possibility. This sort of openness is a facile myth. Pile and Thrift state that ‘the city as a whole can never be known.’³⁸ Murray opines that ‘Johannesburg is a place that cannot truly be grasped in its entirety as some kind of fixed or stable whole, since its morphological form, its places, and its people are in constant motion, continuously changing and evolving in ways planned and unplanned, anticipated and unanticipated.’³⁹

³¹ Compare S. Levine, *Lacan Reframed* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), pp. 97-9.

³² L. de Kock, ‘So What Should Academic Critics Be Doing, On the Edge of the Now – Skimming the Surface or Plumbing the Depths?’ *English Studies in Africa* 55:2 (2012), p. 12.

³³ H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicolson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 33, 38-9.

³⁴ M. Flockemann, ‘Little Perpetrators, Witness-Bearers and the Young and the Brave: Towards a Post-Transitional Aesthetics’. *English Studies in Africa* 53:1 (2010), p. 22.

³⁵ M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 91-3.

³⁶ Compare L. Kruger, ‘Theatre, Crime, and the Edgy City in Post-Apartheid Johannesburg’, *Theatre Journal* 53.2 (May 2001), p. 231.

³⁷ I. Vladislavić, *Double Negative* (Johannesburg: Umuzi, 2011), p. 44.

³⁸ S. Pile and N. Thrift (eds), *City A – Z* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. xix.

³⁹ Murray, *Taming the Disorderly City*, p. vii.

Paradoxically, however, it is precisely the opacity or the disquieting multiplicity of the post-apartheid city which makes the literary text as apposite means of understanding its complexity. Lindsay Bremner, speaking of the inadequacy of urban planning discourse or architectural language to encompass the multifaceted complexity of urban spaces, suggests powerfully that cities

cannot be paraphrased, . . . as such, they have more in common with poetic than literal language, with literature than information. Insofar as the city exceeds interpretation, it operates like a work of literature. While the economic, political, social and cultural histories which can be identified and in relation to which they can be described, interpreted, explained or judged, cities also display resistance to such interpretation.⁴⁰

The city, ‘en fuite’ in the language of Nuttall and Mbembe,⁴¹ cannot be encompassed by any single discourse, but constantly eludes the grasp of analysis, thus suggesting the analogy with a modernist or postmodernist understanding of textuality. This, then, may explain why postmodern, experimental literary forms may be a particularly appropriate mode of commentary upon the city and its recent transformations. Rather than the image of the ‘open book’ that Vladislavić teasingly offers and immediately subverts,⁴² he and Mpe experiment more frequently with textualist notions of open-closedness, or more appropriately, inside-outness, entangled terms that better take account of the spatial politics of the post-apartheid metropolis and the way the literary text may attempt to make sense of the bewildering dynamics of the cityscape.

The two recent texts by Johannesburg authors that I read here, Phaswane Mpe’s 2001 novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, and Ivan Vladislavić’s 2006 collection of semi-autobiographical urban fragments *Portrait with Keys*, appear at first glance quite different.

⁴⁰ L. Bremner, *Writing the City into Being: Essays on Johannesburg 1998-2008* (Johannesburg: Fourthwall, 2010), pp. 44-5.

⁴¹ Nuttall and Mbembe (eds), *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, p. 25.

⁴² Vladislavić, *Double Negative*, p. 44.

Mpe's novel relates the intertwined narratives of a group of Hillbrow inhabitants, a number of them recent arrivals from the northern Limpopo province. The narrative is written in the second person, addressed to the initial protagonist, Refentše, who after his suicide looks down from 'the lounge of heaven' an omniscient but impotent narratee seeing, 'simultaneously, the vibrating panorama of Hillbrow and all its multitudinous life stories' (*Welcome*, 79).

Vladislavić's text, by contrast, is a collection of 138 fragments, many of them vignettes of experiences culled from the narrator's strolls around the inner Johannesburg suburb of Kensington, only a couple of kilometres east of neighbouring Hillbrow. The fragments are arranged in no particular order, though an appendix suggest a number of possible 'routes' connecting them in thematically coherent sequences (*Portrait*, 195-9). What the reader is confronted is far more 'the long poem of walking' (*Portrait*, 53).⁴³ Walking, a cultural activity always close to writing,⁴⁴ intimately connects the two texts. Walking outside informs and enables the 'inside' of the text which in turn construes the city outside as a legible text of 'signs', and so on ad infinitum. Despite their differences of preoccupation and of narrative structure, both texts confront and articulate the jumbling of inside and out which has ensued in the post-apartheid metropolis. In what follows, I will examine a few brief extracts from the two texts to give an idea of how these two writers have envisaged the inside-out of Johannesburg since 1994.

Tiragalong is in Hillbrow

The astonishingly entangled plot of Mpe's novel binds together the destinies of a group of young people from rural South Africa, metropolitan Johannesburg, Nigeria and Oxford. The story-telling blurs the boundaries between geographical places: 'Tiragalong was

⁴³ Compare A. Miller, *Slow Motion: Stories about Walking* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2011).

⁴⁴ Compare R. Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Penguin, 2000).

in Hillbrow. You always took Tiragalong with you in your consciousness whenever you came to Hillbrow or any other place. In the same way, you carried Hillbrow with you always' (*Welcome*, 49). By the same token, the narrative erases the borders between moral high grounds and pits of immorality – the 'moral decay of Hillbrow, so often talked about, was in fact no worse than that of Tiragalong' (*Welcome*, 17). The ubiquitous second-person narration stresses the act of narration as a potentially damaging, potentially dialogical and thus healing mode of communication.

Refentše comes from rural Tiragalong to enrol at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, and takes up residence in Hillbrow with a Hillbrow woman, Lerato. Refentše's erstwhile Tiragalong girlfriend Refilwe, consumed by jealousy, invents xenophobic gossip about him which leads his mother to demand that he repudiate his Johannesburg girlfriend. Indeed, according to Refilwe's vicious rumours, the girlfriend may even be half-Nigerian, and thus probably a bearer of immorality and AIDS. Depressed by this news, Refentše stops eating. Lerato, distressed by his depression, confides in their mutual friend, Sammy, and ends up seeking comfort in his arms. Refentše surprises the two in bed and subsequently commits suicide. Ironically, however, he is merely being punished for his own earlier but undiscovered affair with Sammy's girlfriend, the unavowed guilt of which has driven him to start writing a short story which images a future for Refilwe (*Welcome*, 54). I sketch the baroque complications of Mpe's plot merely because the convolutions at the 'mimesis'-level of narration appear to follow the entanglements of the 'diegesis'-level of narration.⁴⁵ Refentše's story is in some ways a mirror of his own experience, but paradoxically it also prefigures the later trajectory of Refilwe, who later dies of HIV related illnesses:

⁴⁵ G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), pp. 29-30)

The diseased woman of your story did not resolve to tumble down from the twentieth floor of her building, to escape her misery. She chose a different route to dealing with her life. Her first resolution was to stop going home, to Tiragalong, where wagging tongues did their best to hasten her death. But then she discovered, like you did, Refentše, that a conscious decision to desert home is a difficult one to sustain. Because home always travels with you, with your consciousness as its vehicle. So her second resolution was to pour all her grief and alienation into the world of storytelling. You had her write a novel about Hillbrow, xenophobia and the prejudices of rural lives. Given the limited length of your short story, you could not explore the issues in satisfactory detail. (*Welcome*, 55)

Here, a character in the protagonist-addressee Refentše's story, one very similar his former Tiragalong girlfriend Refilwe, now suffering from the AIDS-related illnesses that will eventually claim her life, writes the novel that we are reading. We are confronted with an Escher-like structure where a narrative we are reading contains a short story which contains a novel (interiority to the third degree) which is the narrative we are reading (exteriority) which contains the short story which contains the novel... and so on.⁴⁶ Mpe turns narration inside out. Cutting across this eternal loop in which the inside becomes the outside and vice versa is the second-person narrative voice which links narration and protagonist as it is addressed at story level to Refentše, but also includes us at the narrative-discourse level, as Carol Clarkson has shown.⁴⁷ We must imagine an endless loop pinned together with narrative as social action. As Vladislavić says, 'we are stories within stories. Stories within stories within stories. We recede endlessly, framed and reframed, until we are unable to read ourselves' (*Portrait*, 102).

⁴⁶ Compare Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980).

⁴⁷ C. Clarkson, 'Locating Identity in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*', *Third World Quarterly* 26:3 (2005), pp. 456-7

But for Mpe, this does not lead to infinite regression or narrative illegibility. On the contrary, the infinite generativity of his stories, across social space and across narrative space, is intended as an antidote to racism, prejudice and violence. Such social ills, Mpe suggests, depend upon truncated, incomplete, oversimplified narratives: ‘Given the limited length of your short story, you could not explore the issues in satisfactory detail’ (*Welcome*, 55). Such minimalist narratives in turn repose upon binary oppositions (us and them, South Africans and *Makwerekwere*, the derogative term for African foreigners) which cement people in certain essentialized places: Hillbrow as den of iniquity, Tiragalong as locus of moral purity: ‘the danger of the city is never allowed to settle into the negative term in a binary that sets it against the rural. It is in this shifting landscape that, for better or worse, the post-apartheid nation will continue to imagine itself.’⁴⁸ Mpe proposes a process of narrative accretion in which the limits of a story become the site of its extension, in which inside-outside relationships guarantee ever more complex stories:

There would always be another story of love, betrayal, friendship, joy and pain to add to your narrative granary. There would always be the need to revise, reinforce, contradict. For ever new personal experience adds to our knowledge of life and living, death and dying. Every act of listening, seeing, feeling, tasting is a reconfiguration of the story of our lives. (*Welcome*, 51).

Mpe’s shifting, multiperspectival narrative seeks to perform such an accretive narrative process. In tracing a cross-section of ‘Hillbrow and all its multitudinous life stories’ (*Welcome*, 79) it seeks to break down the segregated, frozen narratives of spatio-temporal trajectories which govern postapartheid prejudice.

In the process, Hillbrow becomes ‘Our Hillbrow’. The inclusive ‘Welcome to Our Hilbrow’ of the title is a speech act which does not merely embody the appropriation of the erstwhile segregated city by the citizens of the newly democratic South Africa – and also by those of the newly mobile continent – but also a performative which sets a spatio-temporal project in motion, opening up the city, changing its demographics, turning it inside out. We as readers, for the most part outsiders to Hillbrow, to Johannesburg, indeed in many cases to Africa, gain a stake in its narratives. The performative title summarizes the

⁴⁸ M. Samuelson, ‘The City Beyond the Border: The Urban Worlds of Duiker, Mpe and Vera’, *African Identities* 5:2 (October 2007), p. 251.

inclusive, accretive work done by the narrative as a whole – drawing others into an ongoing business of border-crossing story-telling.

Vladislavić's Möbius Strips

Where Mpe's vision encompasses metropolitan and rural South Africa, and even other African nations, as well as Europe, Vladislavić's text is resolutely centred on Johannesburg. Not unpredictably for a white middle-class writer, his narrator dwells in and primarily dwells upon the more or less well-to-do northern and north-eastern suburbs, eschewing much mention of the post-apartheid inner city or townships. None the less, Vladislavić's novel 'undoes any clear distinction between outsider's and insider's point of view of the unsettling city'.⁴⁹ Its vignettes are full of brief glimpses of the inside-out, topsy-turvy dynamics of the Johannesburg today.

The narrator describes as a 'diptych' two figures who occupy adjacent spaces on either side of one of the entrance ramps to the Gem Supermarket: a black cobbler with his stall and a mentally disturbed white man who paces up and down in the confined but half-open space. These 'two scenes fold[ed] together like the wings of an icon', constituted of 'the black man quietly working, with a pile of old shoes beside him, and the white man restlessly pacing' (*Portrait*, 38) gradually fuse together in the narrator's perception:

A connection crackles between them that will not be easily broken. . . . The caged man is wearing out shoes as fast as the cobbler can mend them. But where does it start? Which panel of the diptych should we favour? Is the caged man making the cobbler work? Or is the cobbler making the caged man walk? (*Portrait*, 38)

This chiasmic doubling is crucial to Vladislavić's project. If Gaylard is correct in claiming that Vladislavić 'is, if anything, a deconstructionist, allowing binaries to collapse under their own tension',⁵⁰ then the work of double-looping is a central means of achieving such blurring of boundaries. The almost homonym 'walk'/'work' brings together in a not-quite unison the two halves of post-apartheid South Africa, 'the just and the unjust city, wrapped in one another like onion skins' (*Portrait*, 201). None the less, the partial non-coincidence of 'walk' and 'work' indexes the way in which South Africa continues to experience a broad-based, non-legislated, residual form of de facto segregation

⁴⁹ L. Kruger, 'Genres of Johannesburg', *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa*, 10:1 (2005), p. 82.

⁵⁰ G. Gaylard, 'Migrant Ecology in the Postcolonial City in *Portrait with Keys*', in G. Gaylard (ed.), *Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011), p. 306.

– between those once regimented workers who now conduct their informal businesses on the city streets, and those still economic elites who increasingly barricade themselves in their luxury mansions and swimming-pooled gardens behind high walls and electric fences. Vladislavić's almost mythical figures are those of the self-perpetuating polarities of the post-apartheid city, the black unskilled worker performing a vital social function, the white inhabitant of a fortress become a prison. Both are here on display in something like a perpetual 'happening', a form of unintentional site-based 'border performance art'.⁵¹ The border runs between the two figures, but also connects them: it is, to appropriate Leon de Kock's generic term for the hybrid operations of culture in South Africa, a 'seam'.⁵² It exemplifies, moreover, the manner in which, in post-apartheid South Africa, black political elites, white economic elites and impoverished black majority populations continue to be connected by complex relationships of mutual distrust and reciprocal interdependence. Where does the causal process begin, where is the centre and where is the periphery, Vladislavić wonders, characteristically providing no answer because none can be found in the post-apartheid era of 'entanglement'.⁵³

The most literal figure of this entanglement is enacted by Vladislavić's narrator when he trips over a loop of packaging material, falling painfully to the ground: 'There is a loop of thick white paper around my ankles. One seamless piece, barely large enough for my feet to fit through. How on earth did this happen?' (*Portrait*, 19). 'Earth' is what has always been at stake from well before apartheid and beyond: from the seizure of land by white settlers, via the Native Land Act of 1913, and the segregation of Johannesburg into north and south with the mining areas as an east-west buffer zone, the establishment of the townships for black urban labour, through to the reconquest of the city streets by informal vendors, or the invasion of white suburbs by criminal elements.⁵⁴ The paper strip gestures towards the undoing of apartheid closure: 'When I look for my keys to the door, the white strip is dangling from my arm like an unravelled bandage' (*Portrait*, 20). The 'white' strip offers semantic, epistemological 'keys' in place of those ubiquitous metonymies of security paranoia, always in excess of real threats (compare *Portrait*, 141-3). Given the title of the book (*Portrait with Keys*) and the way, this phrasing might be seen as instantiating as well as palliating the 'anxiety' some critics see as pervading

⁵¹ See J. Rugg *Exploring Site-Specific Art: Issues of Space and Internationalism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), pp. 157-75.

⁵² L. de Kock 'South Africa in the Global Imaginary: An Introduction', *Poetics Today* 22:2 (2001), pp. 275-7.

⁵³ See S. Nuttall, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009), esp. pp. 1-12.

⁵⁴ See for instance R. Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); J. Beningfield, *The Frightened Land: Land, Landscape and Politics in South Africa in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2006); J. Graham, *Land and Nationalism in Fictions from Southern Africa* (London: Routledge, 2009).

the text.⁵⁵ But falling and unravelling are by no means necessarily negative terms in Vladislavić's lexicon (the narrator would like to read an essay that Canetti never read, entitled 'The Art of Falling' – *Portrait*, 89-90). The fall pulls the narrator into the orbit of a conversation between a security guard and a domestic servant talking through a metal fence: 'I have fallen like a drunkard over the guy ropes of their conversation, dragging them both towards me' (*Portrait*, 19-20). Tripping over the strip of paper actually activates that re-connection of social relationships that apartheid has so carefully disconnected from one another, creating, in an ephemeral way, a fragmentary, hesitant, still-distrustful community on both sides of the fence.

Most significantly, though, it transpires that the strip embodies a well-known geometrical oddity: 'When I pick up the loop again, I realize for the first time that it has a twist in it. It is a Möbius strip. A one-sided figure, a three dimensional object with only one surface. I have fallen over a paradox' (*Portrait*, 21). The Möbius strip offers a concrete figure in which inside and outside surfaces segue into each other, miming the polarized, segregated spaces of apartheid as they blur into one another in the worldly transformations of the post-apartheid era. The Möbius strip turns inside out and vice versa. As a *paper* entity it figures the work of the post-apartheid texts written by Mpe and Vladislavić as they attempt to give an account of the inside-out city. These are texts whose '[l]ogic turns [their] sentence[s] inside out' (*Portrait*, 71), but precisely by virtue of their linguistic and narratological operations, are able to take cognisance of the complexity of everyday existence in the contemporary post-apartheid city.

Is there a library in Hillbrow? Is Hillbrow in the library? The answer to both questions is a cautious affirmative. The protagonist-addressee of Mpe's novel laments 'the scarcity of written Hillbrow fictions in English and Sepedi' (*Welcome*, 29). Mpe himself rectified this 'ommission' (*Welcome*, 30) almost single-handedly by producing a text which is now regularly prescribed on school and university curricula, in South Africa and abroad. Since school prescribed texts are the only books that many South Africans read, Mpe's novel has a significant role to play in the textual articulation of new urban socio-geographics in the world-view of post-apartheid citizens. Vladislavić's text is of a different order and will be appropriated by different audiences, but taken together, such texts make a major contribution, both at home and abroad, to elaborating a new, if fraught, literary consciousness of the spaces of the transformed South Africa and the ways the country's citizens inhabit them.

⁵⁵ R. Goodman, 'Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*: Fudging a Book by its Cover?', in G. Gaylard (ed.), *Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011), p. 278.