Fictions of Rebuilding: Reconstruction in Ivan Vladislavic's South Africa
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In the aftermath of mass violence, how can one imagine a communal future while acknowledging the horrors of the past? This question pervades the work of the South African novelist Ivan Vladislavic, who immerses his readers in the haunted landscape of Johannesburg after apartheid. A second-generation South African writer of Croatian, Irish, English, and German descent, Vladislavic began publishing fiction in the late 1980s. His short stories, novels, and nonfiction writings, ranging from *Missing Persons* in 1989 to *Portrait with Keys* in 2006, frequently examine South Africa's political transformation through the shifting architecture and infrastructure of Johannesburg. A freelance editor as well as a fiction writer, Vladislavic edited one of the most famous accounts of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC], Antjie Krog's memoir *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (1998). In the same year, he also edited and contributed to a collection of work on South African space called *blank_____: Architecture, apartheid and after* (1998). These two works, one concerning the TRC and the other mapping urban development, together prophesy the connection between ethical and material transformation that emerges in his fiction. Vladislavic's work invites us to consider how important confrontations with atrocity emerge not only in the well-publicized hearings of the TRC, but also in the physical character of everyday life. Confronting the past, his writing suggests, requires thinking about how to build and inhabit the future. Vladislavic's work thus reflects on the changing urban space of Johannesburg and calls attention to fiction as a kind of built structure in itself, a form of metaphorical architecture haunted by a violent past but possibly capable of encouraging civic renewal.

The physical texture and shape of Johannesburg constitute an important preoccupation in many of Vladislavic's writings. It animates his novel *The Restless Supermarket* (2001), which concerns a conservative proofreader struggling to make sense of a changing Hillbrow; it provides the governing trope for his nonfiction collection *Portrait with Keys*, which invites readers to travel many different itineraries throughout the urban landscape. In this essay, however, I focus attention on *The Exploded View* (2004), where the question of building achieves a particularly powerful expression. A segmented novel that consists of four independent but thematically linked stories, *The Exploded View* hints in its very title at the need to link the possibilities of rebuilding with the legacy of violence. In technical terms, an "exploded view" is a construction diagram that represents all parts of an object separately while it preserves their positions within the whole. In giving the work this title, Vladislavic aligns his own literary project with the design of mechanical objects. Since each story conceals some aspect of its production that then is brought into "exploded view" by a subsequent tale, the formal structure of the collection exposes the hidden relationships between material and cultural life. This work meditates on social space in its fullest sense, the kind that (in Henri Lefebvre's words) "subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity" (73). In *The Exploded View*, Vladislavic represents ecologies of building as specifically collective events that bespeak a larger yearning for imagined community.

Yet if the idea of an exploded view thus affiliates the text with generative plans for building and rebuilding, the wordplay of "exploded" also implies the spectre of uncontrolled destruction. From a sanitary engineer captivated by brutality on television to a sign maker who finds himself beaten, the tales suggest that postapartheid urban space offers no easy end to violence. The metaphor of explosion is central to Vladislavic's vision of Johannesburg, reappearing in his nonfiction writing as well as in his stories. "When a house has been alarmed, it becomes explosive," begins *Portrait with Keys* (11). Attempts to rebuild shattered space may make multiracial community seem possible, but they may also compel individuals to accept their own erasure. Memorializing vic-

tims of violence may honour the dead, but such work may also depend upon criminal impulses of its own. Through the flawed collective creations that appear in Vladislavic's pages, *The Exploded View* suggests how the spectre of violation and criminality infect and even enable attempts to build new imagined communities.

With limited distribution outside South Africa, only in the past few years has Vladislavic's fiction begun to attract the level of scholarly interest that it deserves.[1] As recent work on his representation of Johannesburg attests, scholars are beginning to emphasize the importance of space, place, and construction within these narratives. The son of a mechanic, Vladislavic claims that "I've discovered that often when I talk about writing, the language I use is appropriate to building or engineering" (qtd. in Miller 117). Shane Graham, writing about public monuments in Vladislavic's fiction, argues that "the disorientation and historical amnesia that characterize postapartheid life and culture result at least in part from the contestation on several fronts of spatial configurations that reinforce older social formations" ("Memory" 73–74). Vladislavic's work, in this light, challenges the desire to fix the past in a museum and satirizes the need to impose order upon a changing Johannesburg. These material readings of Vladislavic's interest in place, however, sometimes downplay the full impact of his innovations in literary structure.[2] In my reading of Vladislavic's fiction, I show how his narratives' preoccupation with material culture contributes to the ethics of writing after mass violence. I argue that his combination of literary structures enables his fiction to imagine a way forward without ignoring the effect of the past. This mode of construction allows Vladislavic to offer an alternative to the widespread belief that confronting extreme violence requires, in the words of Michael André Bernstein, "a certain thematically weighted and deliberately chosen silence as the only ethically unsullied response" (43). My goal, thus, is partly to show how Vladislavic imagines the complex ethical dramas that emerge within constructed objects and built space. But, more broadly, it is to explore how fiction might rebuild itself in the aftermath of atrocity. Like the reconstruction of spaces and artifices in the pages of Vladislavic's works, such rebuilding of literary structure ac-

knowledges its own complicity with violence but transforms this legacy into a new structure of possibility.

I. Reconciliation and Development in the Shifting Metropolis

To date, meditations on South Africa's legacy of violence have often been attributed to the influence of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Immediately capturing domestic and international attention, the South African TRC held public hearings on "the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights" that occurred during the last thirty-four years of apartheid ("Promotion" 43). Whether hailed as miraculous or condemned as unjust, the TRC reflected the call for spiritual, legal, and historical transformation in the aftermath of mass violence. Since the Commission sought, as Susan VanZanten Gallagher claims, to create "a new national narrative" through confessional discourse, its records produced a set of powerful texts amenable to the techniques of literary interpretation ("Reconciliation" 210). The workings of the TRC also inspired prominent postapartheid South African works of art, such as Jane Taylor's play *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1998), Antjie Krog's memoir *Country of My Skull* (1998), and J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (1999), which compelled scholars of postcolonial literature to consider the influence of Commission hearings on postapartheid writing. *Disgrace*, for example, prominently figures a university hearing that mimics and troubles the emphasis on confession and apology found in the TRC. Indeed, linking South African literature to the ideals and ambivalences of the Commission has become virtually automatic in postapartheid scholarship.

Less attention has been directed toward the influence of other important postapartheid initiatives, particularly those that emphasize practical and material reconstruction. To address legacies of inequality, the African National Congress, in alliance with nongovernmental organizations, announced its plans for a seminal Reconstruction and Development Programme [RDP] that would actively combat the underdevelopment of black communities. Sometimes praised as economic redistribution, but also critiqued as neocolonial corruption and opportunistic capitalism, the RDP sought to address the economic, logisti-

cal, and cultural needs that affect the everyday lives of ordinary citizens. Though never as dramatic or systematic as the TRC, the ideas behind the RDP gesture toward the need to account for apartheid atrocities within material culture. In emphasizing the symbolic importance of the goals articulated by the RDP, I seek to complement the extensive attention that the TRC has received in modern literary scholarship.[3] The representation of space and objects, and the structuring of fiction, produce *formal* problems as provocative and productive as the narratives of the TRC.

Despite their intimate connections in the aftermath of atrocity, the TRC and the RDP have often seemed to illuminate competing ideas about human need. While processes of political reconciliation tend to provoke extreme and introspective experiences of anger, confession, and occasionally even forgiveness, programs of reconstruction require mundane and communal tasks of construction, education, and economic growth.[4] When addressing these different endeavors, analysts of truth commissions and scholars of development often seem to illuminate entirely separate visions of a changing nation. Although modern analysts of Johannesburg frequently read the city as a cipher for the contradictions of a representative postcolonial metropolis, surprisingly few scholars have articulated the relationship between the changing space of the city and the astonishing processes of transformative peace-making. For such scholars as Achille Mbembe, the two sometimes appear profoundly incompatible: the work of urban capitalism requires an amnesia antithetical to the TRC's focus on the past ("Aesthetics" 402). The transcendent ambitions of the TRC seem markedly different in character from the pragmatic black empowerment of the RDP.

Yet there are also important precedents that invest acts of rebuilding with ethical significance. One urban drama that does vividly link the imperatives of truth and reconciliation with the goals of reconstruction and development is the Constitution Hill Project, which transformed an infamous prison in Johannesburg, the Old Fort, into the home for South Africa's new Constitutional Court. Mark Gevisser and Sarah Nuttall describes this reclamation of haunted space as follows:

> Between the University of the Witwatersrand and the inner-
> city neighborhood of Hillbrow (the densest square kilome-
> ter of urban space in Africa) is a giant building that emerges
> from rubble and ruins. To watch it rise is to see a city and a
> democracy heaving itself from the debris, carrying with it the
> physical markers and the tangible echoes of an iniquitous po-
> litical system but also of a history stretching back long before
> apartheid. … Constitution Hill will house the new court,
> symbol and guardian of the South African Constitution, one
> of the most democratic public declarations in the world; it is
> also being developed as a "campus for human rights" that will
> house many statutory bodies and nongovernmental organiza-
> tions whose job it is to protect and interpret the constitution.
> ("From the Ruins" 507)

This project explicitly ties the architecture of a new South African de-
mocracy to a doubled set of ethical desires: the need to remember the
past and the need to visualize the future quite literally map onto each
other. Mark Gevisser, the advisor to the project's Heritage, Education,
and Tourism team, articulates these imperatives as follows: "I do have a
sense of the Constitution being not just a document or a set of ideas but
a place of refuge, a place of possibility" ("From the Ruins" 512). This
symbolic location suggests that public memory must be both utopian
and realistic, gesturing toward transcendence while ever mindful of the
legacies of violence. It is just such a multiplicity of constructive mean-
ings that Ivan Vladislavic's fiction invites us to consider.

II. Fragile Buildings, Injured Community

Given the deformation of collective space under apartheid, physical
place and urban infrastructure have played particularly important roles
in modern South African literature. In a study of this fraught politics of
location, Rita Barnard illuminates the "socio-spatial dialectic" of power
and knowledge that emerges through specific South African sites, such
as the white suburban house or the shack settlement (3). As social state-
ments about the nature of community, Barnard argues, these places offer

much more than simple settings for narrative action: they illuminate the very conditions of possibility for lived experience in South Africa. In the words of Yi-fu Tuan, "the built environment clarifies social roles and relations" and "architecture 'teaches'" (102). Its lessons, as Barnard reveals, have exerted a particularly strong influence over South African space.

While Vladislavic sometimes turns our gaze to such established locations as the white suburban house, his work is far more interested in uncovering the hidden social and psychological infrastructure beneath finished constructions. From the building of a wall in *Missing Persons* to the phantasmagorical house of *The Folly* (1993) to the flawed housing developments of *The Exploded View*, Vladislavic's meditations on the process of construction serve as a signature intellectual preoccupation. Rather than simply setting stories in a particular place, his narratives often inhabit the moments of a location's making.[5] In emphasizing such dramas of active rebuilding, the stories offer a glimpse into the text's changing conditions of possibility. *The Exploded View* offers four interconnected narratives of multiracial life that feature a census-taker, a sanitary engineer, a visual artist, and a billboard maker. These narratives investigate the practical and philosophical problems of making sense out of a disorderly urban environment. Fittingly, the narratives in this collection were produced through a direct engagement with material culture. When the artist Joachim Schönfeldt invited Vladislavic to create a written text in response to Schönfeldt's visual images, the result, exceeding both their expectations, became this book of fiction.[6]

Vladislavic explicitly admits that writing in the aftermath of apartheid provokes difficult and competing ethical demands. As he articulated in an interview in 1999, "the actual physical structures of apartheid are going to be difficult, if not impossible, to erase … we're going to be living within those structures for a very long time" (quoted in Warnes 278–279). The question of how to reshape these physical reminders provides an ethical challenge of daily life that complements the vivid dramas of anger, confession, and forgiveness that mark the hearings of the TRC. "On the one hand, there is the pressure to be part of a proposed Renaissance, to present positive images that might help to reconstruct our culture," Vladislavic claims. "On the other hand, there is

an incredible stress at the moment on memory—just in South Africa, although it is very strongly developed here—a sense that writers need to remember, that one of the things writers can do is keep the past alive" (quoted in Warnes 279). *The Exploded View* explores both of these imperatives through the representation of urban space, where remembering the past and rebuilding a future merge within the haunted foundations of the city.

This doubled imperative emerges vividly through the cultural contradictions of Johannesburg. The material character of the changing city provides the meeting ground for the goals of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the aims of the Reconstruction and Development Programme. By most historical and ethnographic accounts, the character of Johannesburg poses social and geographical challenges to a robust multiracial community. "Johannesburg is a frontier city, a place of contested boundaries," Vladislavic argues in a meditation on the metropolis ("Joburg" 129). The city was formally founded in 1886 after the discovery of gold mines, and it burgeoned with the growth of the mining industry. Created through the rapacity of such frontier capitalism, Johannesburg has often struck observers as a city defined by the imperatives of wealth. "Right from the beginning," note Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, "the defining character of the city was its trading square and its commercial streets" ("Writing the World" 362). Johannesburg consolidated this capitalist identity through its transnational aspirations. Its architecture was designed to mimic the consumer capitals of Europe and the United States, reflecting what Mbembe calls "the myth that Johannesburg was a European city in a European country in Africa" ("Aesthetics" 376). After the end of apartheid, Johannesburg became a mecca for migrants from other parts of Africa who sought to make a living in both its formal and informal economic sectors. The city thus figures prominently as a node in a transnational economy of wealth and bodies.

If the needs of capital brought Johannesburg into being, its topography was profoundly marked by the violent imperatives of apartheid that formally restricted where individuals could live and how they could move about the metropolis. As Lindsay Bremner argues, "strategies to

exert control over the population … have resulted in a fragmented, spatially discontinuous city" (B2). Described as "the nowhere city" by the novelist Marlene van Niekerk ("Take your body" F4), Johannesburg is divided between the predominantly white northern suburbs with free-standing houses and the predominantly black southern townships. Beginning in 1906 and continuing throughout mid-century, the cityscape developed through the forced removals of many of its black residents (Bremner B2). "Of a total population of 500,000 people in Johannesburg," scholars of urban development estimate, "60,000 had been relocated" (Tomlinson et al. 6). The most notorious displacements occurred in the 1950s, when the multiracial middle-class neighborhood of Sophiatown was razed to make way for new white housing developments. As the opening pages of Van Niekerk's Afrikaans novel *Triomf* (2004) vividly reveal, the rubble of Sophiatown provided the palimpsestic underpinning of the social imaginary of apartheid. The eviction of black residents from the city center gave rise to Soweto (the southwestern townships), which came to represent the indignities of apartheid in transnational media imagery. Yet for all its discontinuities, Johannesburg has also been characterized by its refusals to accept such state-mandated borders. Mbembe argues that the metropolis is fundamentally *tubular*, "made up of leakages, of several lines of flight that not only coexisted but intermingled, that transformed and crossed over into one another" ("Aesthetics" 386). Such a space allows surprising interconnections among people across seemingly fragmented territory. It is a world where, as AbdouMaliq Simone argues, the people themselves represent a mobile and flexible infrastructure (427). These connections, as we will see in Vladislavic's fiction, offer new possibilities for post-apartheid community. As an ironic parable of "the new South Africa," the section of *The Exploded View* called "Afritude Sauce" offers an explicit meditation on the problems and possibilities of constructing new community. The story of a white sanitary engineer named Egan who visits a black housing development in Johannesburg called Hani View, the narrative examines precisely the kind of new urban infrastructure that the RDP hoped to encourage. On the pages of construction blueprints, the development of Hani View celebrates the anti-apartheid

struggle (its name commemorates Chris Hani, the chief of staff of the ANC's military wing, who was assassinated in 1993). Yet the story focuses on the metaphor of sanitation, thus announcing its intention to probe the unseen and unsavory aspects of urban development.

Both literally and metaphorically, sewage serves as a figure for everything a community hopes to keep out of sight. While seemingly universal in its response to human need, sanitary engineering in "Afritude Sauce" exposes the racialized dynamics that continue to trouble the utopian ideal of a "rainbow nation." The black residents of Hani View request water-borne sewage rather than pit latrines, but because the cost of water is prohibitively expensive, the water service is shut off when residents cannot pay their utility bills. As analysts of urban planning note, water-borne sewage has few practical advantages in such a location; its use reflects "a frankly bizarre commitment to conventional, standardized engineering services (using purified water to flush toilets, water-borne sewerage over long distances, conventional energy sources), when even richer developed countries are installing cheaper, ecologically responsible systems" (Swilling E8). The dysfunctional toilets of the housing development thus evoke the ironic failure of a particular emblem of Western modernity in Johannesburg.

Given that the sewage system of Hani View does not reflect efficiencies of urban planning, its sociological implications stand out more keenly as a form of racialized anxiety. When Egan and a local council official named Milton Mazibuko discuss this problem, their tone takes them into an uncertain interracial territory. Mazibuko mocks the desires of residents who complain about their toilets: "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. … 'I want to shit in style and pull the chain, like the madam'" (54). To Egan, a white outsider to Johannesburg, this critique of the residents' racialized aspirations sends confusing social signals. "This kind of racial humour, or was it interracial humour, made him uncomfortable," Egan thinks to himself. "He was never sure whether it was for his benefit or at his expense" (54). The discourse of sewage, therefore, brings up the metaphorical waste products of apartheid and racial inequity.

If excrement, as Rita Barnard has argued, can be read in earlier South African literature as a symbolic challenge to apartheid that "undermines the very notion of boundaries" (138), its persistence as a trope in writing after apartheid resignifies this image to suggest the troubling ways in which the past continues to haunt the present. This trope also resonates with its broader role in literature from other parts of Africa. As Joshua Esty has suggested in a different context, the rhetoric of excrement, in its most straightforward function, frequently serves to satirize "the failures of colonial development, the corruptions of neocolonial politics, and the residual quality of postcolonial nationalism" (55). In "Afritude Sauce," sewage hints at the racialized anxieties—black and white—that haunt the hidden spaces of RDP architecture. What should be the most universal of bodily signs becomes a new form of differentiation.

Rhetorically, the language of political reconciliation in the story mimics the condition of the stopped toilets. "That seemed to be the end point of every exchange," Egan thinks sardonically to himself. "Reconciliation. A conversation stopper" (62). At a dinner conversation with local council officials, where Egan initially believes a form of interracial camaraderie might occur, the narrative instead suggests such a process is fundamentally blocked. The dinner, with its palpable overtones of bureaucratic corruption, figures the growing irrelevance of white authority in shaping South Africa's urban space. As Egan comes to contemplate his own role as a kind of waste product in the city's logistical and symbolic economy, this realization carries with it the symbolic imprimatur of the postapartheid nation. At dinner, his companions force him to order "Afritude Sauce," which is described on the menu as "'the flavour of the New South Africa'" (83). The sauce is both delicious and unappealing, readily consumable but also (as Egan discovers when it stains his trousers) "babyshit yellow" (50). Advertising itself in allegorical terms, the sauce seems to bespeak the contradictions of Egan's own position: he is helping to construct a system that ultimately will require his own disposal. This logic emerges in the final lines of the story, where Egan confronts the threat of violence on his hotel television screen: "he could hear fists thudding on flesh and bone" (98). The process of rebuilding in "Afritude Sauce" is thus deeply implicated in a larger drama

about the fragility of racial reconciliation in the city's psychological and physical foundations. The ethical epiphany of the story occurs when Egan, back in his hotel room after this demoralizing dinner, realizes that his own conditions of living now mimic the faulty construction of the black housing development he helped to design. If there is to be any sense of identification across racial lines, it will only emerge from this shared sense of disposability.

The symbolic violence of "Afritude Sauce" gains greater purchase in "Crocodile Lodge," the story of a white billboard maker named Duffy who loses his cellphone in the changing terrain of Johannesburg. Punning on the sonic overlap between "*self*" and "*cellph*one," the story figures the search for identity within a hallucinatory postapartheid landscape of urban sprawl. As the story evokes the dislocations of Van Niekerk's "nowhere city," urban mobility, once a sign of white privilege, now provides an emblem of self-loss and placelessness. As an aspiring engineer who once spent hours poring over construction diagrams and exploded views, Duffy further figures an impulse toward material reconstruction that moves from the intimately personal (the search for his cellphone) to the forbiddingly cosmic (rebuilding the world in the case of a millennial apocalypse). Yet if he once dreamed of shaping a new material world, he now finds his greatest sense of identity through the abjections of injury. Like the material objects that he loved to see in "exploded view" form in the pages of magazines, Duffy ultimately gives himself up to a similar kind of dismemberment. Returning to the site where he believes his phone to be found, he is accosted by a group of men who attempt to steal his car. In this increasingly hallucinatory episode, he invites an encounter he knows will lead to his demise: "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 every blow he felt more like himself" (201). As the language of construction (hammer, drill, nail) morphs into the rhetoric of surreal bodily violence, the narrative ends on a disturbing note about the conditions for new collective building. Even if, as Vladislavic himself suggests, we understand this destruction in metaphoric rather than literal terms (Miller 122), reconstruction frequently seems to mimic the violence it was meant to counteract.

III. Seeking New Structures

While the stories register the prevailing forces that render their subjects disposable and abject, Vladislavic's segmented novel also generates an architecture of possibility through its *literary* structure. Though scholars concerned with representations of violence often emphasize the usefulness of particular styles against others, such as documentary realism, traumatic realism, or abstract experimentalism (Norris 20–28, Rothberg 99–106), Vladislavic's work insists not so much on the primacy of any particular literary form as on the importance of combining the contradictory into unified but heterogeneous structures. Such structural mergers perform a kind of reconciliation between past and future, allowing built creations to acknowledge their history of violence without necessarily succumbing to its destructive power.

The metaphorical architecture of this prose provides an aesthetic alternative to the more literal forms of apartheid-era urban development. Historians of South African architecture frequently emphasize the close, albeit complex, relations that link the segregationist impulses of Johannesburg to the spread of international modernist design. Disciples of Le Corbusier built white suburban homes and city high-rises in Johannesburg during the 1930s; signature Afrikaner self-monumentalizations like the Rand Afrikaans University (designed by a student of Louis Kahn) asserted brute power through concrete panopticonic structures; and the creation of black townships reflected modernist ideals of rationality and transparency through an urban planning of separation and confinement (Herwitz 145, 149, 158–159). In the 1950s and 1960s, townships provided monotonous grids of matchbox houses that were made from homogenous construction materials and standardized building plans. As the state withdrew property rights from black residents, urban Africans who had once been owners suddenly became tenants dependent on the whims of the government (Crankshaw and Parnell H8). Architects of the townships sought to use their powers of design to impose new lifestyles upon these inhabitants, encouraging a shift from identifying with a tribe to identifying with a nuclear family. Gary Minkley articulates the importance of these changes when he argues that "the township plan … also became a life plan" (D11). A

certain strain of modernism, then, affiliates aesthetic abstraction and homogeneity with the rigidly controlling impulses of apartheid.

Whether intentional or not, for Vladislavic has declared there to be "very little deliberate" about his style[8] (quoted in Wood 25), the formal shape of *The Exploded View* offers an important alternative to the stylistic conventions of South African modernist architecture. Whereas apartheid township plans stressed uniformity and rationality through regular grids of houses, Vladislavic offers a heterogeneous generic structure that merges the detailed precisions of social realism with the uncanny qualities of psychological surrealism. In bringing together these different forms of discourse, Vladislavic's prose is more closely affiliated with the architectural irregularities of backyard shack additions, street merchants, and informal dwellings that characterize the reclamation of urban space (and that populate Vladislavic's pages).[9] These new forms of vernacular building, often developed in vexed relationship with city authorities, combine gritty realism with glossy postmodernist consumerism. As one of Vladislavic's characters says of the new urban landscape, "he had once noticed a bright sign saying Vodacom, where an enterprising builder had used a billboard for the wall of his house" (20). Just as this "enterprising builder" turns a cellphone advertisement into a form of informal housing, so too does Vladislavic's prose style house its characters in a structure composed of irregular parts. As a work that resembles a short story cycle but also warrants the unifying language of the novel, *The Exploded View* could be described as a work that expands in the manner of architectural add-ons. The result is a literary structure that not only mimics the "exploded view" of construction diagrams, but also resembles the organically growing urban landscape of Johannesburg. Without overstraining the comparison, it might be possible to read Vladislavic's four jagged, fragmentary, yet also intimately connected narratives as a structural alternative to the modernist architectural impulse toward uniformity and repressive political control.

Although *The Exploded View* offers less in the way of tonal variation than some of Vladislavic's previous works, it achieves a decidedly heterogeneous quality by creating structural confusion about the genre of prose it offers. Moments of mixing the prosaic with the dreamscape, the

local with the global, and the mundane with the transcendent appear in many shapes throughout the Johannesburg of *The Exploded View*.[10] Describing a white Development Bank statistician named Budlender, who visits an affluent housing development called Villa Toscana, the narrative tells us that "This was his fifth trip to Tuscany" (3). This understated sentence carries all of the signs of an unremarkable realism, except that Budlender is nowhere near "Tuscany" in its conventional geographical sense. What seems literal and realistic, in other words, is actually metaphoric and surreal. This slippage between the material and the symbolic suggests that Budlender's journeys across the expanding metropolis of Johannesburg are simultaneously local incursions into urban South African space and, as befitting Johannesburg's architectural history, transnational journeys into fantasies of the global. As the text travels in this way, it highlights the intimacy between the earthbound and the hallucinatory. Ordinary perfume bottles in a woman's bathroom cabinet suddenly transform into a dreamscape, where Budlender "found himself falling, horizontally, through the perfumed streets" (46). Common wooden masks on a restaurant wall turn into something "uncannily like a white South African nightmare," "as if they were in a glass house, feasting, while the hordes outside pressed their hungry faces to the walls" (91). Vladislavic's work can slip in a mere sentence from the comforting to the eerie, from a seemingly familiar *here* to an elusively distant *there*. As his characters find themselves shuttled back and forth between realism and fantasy, sometimes leaving them (and their readers) unsure of exactly what kind of fiction they inhabit, *The Exploded View* can be read as an experiment in structural confusion.

The ethical power of this experimentation with structure emerges most vividly in the collection's third story, "Curiouser." Its portrait of Simeon Majara, a rising black African star in the art world, evokes the ideals and compromises that attend initiatives like the RDP. As characters in the story suggest that Simeon exemplifies the new national and international emphasis on black empowerment, they also draw attention to the shadow of corruption and elitism that enables his work. These compromising features, designed to trouble any easy idealization of Simeon's art, nonetheless suggest the enabling complicity between

powerful confrontations with the past and the violence they hope to contest.

"Curiouser," the most metafictional of the four narratives, offers important clues to the workings of *The Exploded View* as a whole. It focuses on an installation of dozens of wooden sculptures and masks, which Simeon has carved up and reassembled into new configurations. The installation thus serves as yet another model for the structure of *The Exploded View*, which might be understood as a novel carved up and reassembled into new form. The art installation, called (like the story it inhabits) "Curiouser," merges different forms of aesthetic production. It joins together the handicraft of artisans from many parts of Africa with the postmodern efforts of an artist like Simeon, not only uniting the labouring classes with the elite but also linking the urban Johannesburg gallery to the craftsmen dispersed transnationally across the continent. In unaltered form, the curios suggest the commodified "face of Africa" familiar to many from museums and craft markets, yet Simeon's alterations make these stereotypical images distinctly uncanny and even frightening: "certain parts of their bodies were unnaturally elongated or thickened. They were like distorted reflections in a hall of mirrors" (137). This is exactly the effect of *The Exploded View*, in which certain parts of the narrative seem recognizably realistic and others (as with the ending of "Crocodile Lodge") seem more like metaphorical dreamscapes. This doubling echoes the title of the artwork, which puns on the wordplay between "curio-user" and "curiouser." While the first suggests the instrumentalism of commerce and utility, the second connotes the hallucinations of Alice in Wonderland. Simeon further insists on this instability of meaning by correcting everyone's use of the word (if they pronounce it "curio-user," he calls it "curiouser," and vice versa). In prizing such multiplicity of meanings, his installation refuses the idea of a correct representation or a representation that can easily correct the past. Simeon's approach, therefore, may tell us much about that of his maker.

If we read Simeon's art as a metafictional "exploded view" of Vladislavic's own literary technique, *The Exploded View* makes itself legible as a new form of rebuilding in the aftermath of violence. In "Curiouser," Simeon's postmodern aesthetic impulse is explicitly linked

to the rhetoric of reconstruction. "'So then it's like you're deconstructing the deconstruction thing, know what I mean? That's really amazing,'" a slightly tipsy friend comments on Simeon's distorted curios. "'I think it's more about *re*construction,' said John. 'It's about putting things together in new ways'" (125). While this exchange allows Vladislavic to satirize the pretensions of academic criticism, it nonetheless points to an important alliance in the story between the techniques of a mixed postmodern aesthetic and the ethics of rebuilding a divided society. Despite, or because of, its refusal to take comfort in uniform idealizations, *The Exploded View* speaks to Andreas Huyssen's call for "memory discourses" that are "absolutely essential to imagine the future" (6).

The ethical valence of such experiments with structure reaches its apex when Vladislavic links the aftermath of mass violence to the project of material reconstruction. "Genocide III," Simeon's meditation on Rwandan massacres in Nyanza, juxtaposes different technologies of remembering through the infrastructure of the installation. In the first room of Simeon's exhibit, viewers confront violence as a visual spectacle meant to overwhelm them. Enormous television screens replay footage from the aftermath of the massacre, showing bodies abandoned on the streets and international peacekeepers fleeing the country. To approach the second part of the exhibit, viewers must walk through a barely visible slit in that screen. The audience finds itself "stranded on the wrong side of the stage curtains, beating at the fabric, until an arm plunged through the gap, and then the whole body slipped gratefully into the image, swallowed up in it" (117). As Simeon's installation turns two dimensions into three, it renders art almost indistinguishable from architecture. The piece, therefore, becomes not only a meditation on the ethics of looking, but also an investigation of the ethics of moving through built space. What can barely be seen—the gap in the fabric—becomes the most important discovery that will allow the viewers to move quite literally beyond the television footage of atrocity as spectacle.

The promise of Simeon's exhibition—the hope of a "beyond" where an audience can confront the past legacy of violence and honour the suffering of the dead—locates these broader ethical goals within the structural possibilities of its built objects. If audience members successfully

navigate the gap in the screen, they enter a room filled with ghostly hanging shrouds. These pieces "bore the impression of a human body, a crying mouth, a twisted arm, a hand raised to ward off a blow. The long white sheets were hung in a dimly lit room like photographs of ghosts" (113). Since the eerie shrouds evoke the absence of bodies, they offer an important alternative to explicit representations of violent content. While watching the television footage registers an ongoing feedback loop of atrocity, the shrouds invite viewers to inhabit the site of violation itself. Realizing that their own bodies might have been the models from which these shrouds were made, viewers gain the possibility of a shared sense of human vulnerability through what Dominick LaCapra calls "empathic unsettlement" (40). Like Simeon, who compels his audience to confront violent content but also asks them to move beyond its spectacle to an imagined community with the dead, Vladislavic's fiction makes similar demands on its readers.

The metafictional quality of "Curiouser" intensifies the importance of such a gaze: it asks us to read what looks like content (descriptions of Simeon's art installations) as an exploded view of Vladislavic's own structural approach. Simeon's proposed installation, "Crime Scene," envisions "death masks, dangling from the ceiling on fishing line—the average man is 1.75 metres, the average woman 1.63—that the height alone invites you to press your face into the smoky hollow" (154). On a screen, the installation would feature scenes of "the peacemakers, the negotiators, the mediators" (154–155). As a commentary on both the postapartheid spike in crime and the potential criminality of elite-level politics, the masks provide the newly constructed lens through which spectators behold the compromises of political reconciliation. This imagined installation, like Vladislavic's own prose, attempts to create new conditions for bearing witness to a haunted past. While *looking at* the masks suggests the spectral replication of violence, *looking through* them suggests new possibilities for collective identification. At the same time, the imagined installation also reminds viewers of what makes their vision of the past possible. "The eyes [of the masks] are shaped like keyholes and television screens," Simeon plans (154). The masks thus shape the viewer as both insider and outsider, at once inviting identification with

the dead and accentuating the specter of voyeurism. The physical shape of the installation suggests the possibility for a new imagined community that admits its own reliance on the power of the violent spectacle. In doing so, it adds a new dimension to the meaning of "exploded view."

"Crime Scene" further suggests that, much as the RDP relied on the ethically fraught factor of elite corruption, these creations of Simeon's depend upon a concealed but enabling criminality. While it comments on the postapartheid rise of crime and the imperfect mechanisms of political peace-making, this art installation is also a crime scene in quite literal form as well.[11] The masks that will dangle from the ceiling, as Simeon ultimately discovers, are almost certainly stolen goods that reflect multiple forms of illegal economic activity. Sold at a price too good to be true, the crates of masks wrapped in newspapers from other parts of Africa arrive in Simeon's life through the operations of a decidedly informal economy. As a character in the story points out, they highlight the imbalance between the anonymous African craftsmen who make them and the elite artists like Simeon who reconfigure them into expensive and highly acclaimed urban art. While Simeon refuses to accept the Marxist reading of his postmodern work as an act of simple exploitation, he nonetheless gestures at a disguised admission of guilt when he titles his hypothetical installation "Crime Scene." What cannot be seen, what is not offered as visual content—the economic history of the masks—is perhaps the most important part of the artwork's ethical meditation on the morphing violence of a globalizing South Africa. One might say the same for "Genocide III," where the shrouds conceal bandages that Simeon covertly steals from the actual site of the massacre. The built object, in other words, is always haunted by more than is visible. Criminality becomes the secret sharer of constructive actions, both haunting and enabling reconstructive and commemorative endeavors.

It is the act of shaping the masks, of building new form, which transforms this complicity with violence into a mode of ethical possibility. While Simeon fantasizes about shooting real bullets into his house, he ultimately displaces this violent impulse into a constructive use of the masks. His new installation, he envisions, will feature "a charred mask, gouged and gaping, made to gape more chillingly. The wound is in the

forehead, an exit wound, drilled with the Black & Decker" (154). Like the gruesome end to "Crocodile Lodge," this image metonymically associates the tools of building with violence toward the human body. But "Curiouser" alters such an impulse into a form of collectively created art that allows for new identification with victims of violence. The tools of building ultimately offer Simeon the opposite of Duffy's grim demise: "The smells in the studio were comforting. Damp plaster, sawdust, creosote, glue" (155).[12] These images offer a material and metaphoric bond that may begin to hold a new imagined community together. Vladislavic ventures forward a view of rebuilding that is not reliant on ideals of harmony or on practices of confession and forgiveness, but instead indebted to the most literal transformations of violent and criminal impulses into art.

IV. Conclusion

Why should it be important to consider the violent past through built objects and artifices? Examining this entanglement, I suggest, allows us to expand the usefulness of idealist and materialist approaches to mass violence. On the one hand, attention to material space helps bring to light the ethical significance of everyday acts that may seem remote from the dramatic and widely publicized testimonies of institutions like the TRC. We can thus understand confronting the past not only through the terms of a theological discourse of transformation or a legal system of accountability, but also as an ongoing, complex, and even contradictory project of collective social construction that pervades ordinary social space. Such a perspective encourages a more comprehensive understanding of the crimes of apartheid, one that recognizes that atrocity occurred not only through the extreme human rights abuses of imprisonment, torture, and murder, but also through everyday violations of the ability to inhabit the world as a full human being. On the other hand, attention to ethical transformation also allows us reconsider the possibilities of social rebuilding, a form of work often dismissed for its compromise with the logic of capitalism and its susceptibility to the abuses of corruption. Since every built space or object will always be imperfect, and will always favour one vision over another, it becomes all too easy

to criticize actually-existing social structures in favour of hypothetical ones that remain utopian, simultaneously perfected and unattainable. Thinking of structures as theatres for transformative peace-making may help us to appreciate surprising moments, if also disappointing ones, of what they make possible.

Vladislavic's work by no means idealizes the work of reconciliation or reconstruction. Indeed, as we see in *The Exploded View*, such words appear in highly ironized moments in his fiction. Yet even as the narrative places distance between itself and a naïve use of politically-charged rhetoric, it nonetheless registers the desire to rethink their possibilities in a globalizing South African metropolis after apartheid. *The Exploded View* speaks to the question that haunts Claudia Braude as she ponders the future of South African urban space:

> Awake, I am left wondering if our creative African lives in a re-viving, nonracial Johannesburg inner city are on the brink, collectively and individually, of a new, meaningful, and engaged urban experience, our spirits freed, or whether we will continue to be threatened by a hollowed-out experience, trapped in a copying and consuming relation to our environment and each other. ("Mammon" 292)

Vladislavic's narratives suggest that both possibilities characterize the changing terrain of Johannesburg. The dead are not safely buried in the archives of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but haunt the cracked walls of RDP housing developments and the ghostly masks of art installations. Through the metaphorical architecture of his literary structure, Vladislavic suggests that the ethical work of reconstruction needs to acknowledge this unburied past.

These literary strategies matter not only because they intervene in national history, but also because they figure reconciliation and reconstruction as transnational undertakings. Unlike the TRC, which made attempts to connect specific victims to specific perpetrators, the Johannesburg of *The Exploded View* offers no such one-to-one correspondence among the inhabitants who shape its character together. The people with whom the protagonists must construct new imagined com-

munity are not always the inhabitants of the old, unreconstructed South Africa; the Nigerians and Somalis whom Budlender sees on the street, for instance, are embedded within dramas of civic reconciliation whether they realize it or not. Likewise, Simeon intuits that part of his role as a South African artist is to break down the borders of violence across time and space through installations that recall atrocities in Europe and in other parts of Africa. "Genocide III" is not a monument to specifically South African crimes, but an invitation to construct a sense of transnational identification in the aftermath of violation. While Vladislavic's writings illuminate much that is place-specific, they also show how detailed attention to local space and artifice helps to confront the legacy of injury and injustice in distant parts of the world. In these narratives, no built creation—including fiction—will ever simply reflect a place of utopian reconciled community. The power of *The Exploded View* arises from its dynamic and sudden shifting between replications of violence and conditions for new collective perception.

Notes

1 A special issue of *scrutiny2*, published in 2006, was devoted to Ivan Vladislavic's work as a fiction writer, literary editor, art critic, and public intellectual.

2 Graham, for instance, specifically distinguishes his materialist argument from previous readings that focus on discourse. See "Layers" 50. Goodman's work on space concentrates its interest in form on the critical edge of Vladislavic's satire, whose "heterotopian principles of deconstruction … demolish the credibility of various sites in *The Exploded View* which offer falsely comfortable utopias" (38).

3 Dozens of works address the relationship between literature and the TRC. For a sense of the dominance of this interpretive paradigm, see Braude, "Archbishop"; Dawson; Diala; Gallagher, *Truth and Reconciliation*; Graham, "Truth Commission"; Hawley; Jolly; Lewis; McGonegal; Poyner; Quayson; Rose; Schaffer and Smith; Titlestad and Kissack; and Urquhart.

4 Although the TRC did include an economic component, in that victims could apply for financial reparations, little progress on this front was made in the years after the Commission, and its real contribution was widely considered its emphasis on truth-telling after decades of silence, denials, and lies.

5 For a discussion of quite different implications of this tendency, see the reading of Vladislavic in Wicomb 146–150.

6 The process resulted in an exhibition of art and writing at the University of Witwatersrand. See Vladislavic, *Model Men*.

7 *The Exploded View* thus might be said to partake in both the dystopian and utopian visions of Johannesburg that Hunt identifies in her reading of Gordimer and Mpe.

8 He does, however, credit his interest in the fantastic to his reading of Afrikaans literature. See Wood 35–36.

9 This irregular architecture also characterizes the part of Johannesburg where Vladislavic lives, as described in "Joburg" 129.

10 Felicity Wood vividly describes Vladislavic's style as "a zany, bewildering realm, which is in part the South Africa we know, and also a surreal, disorderly landscape of the mind." While Wood encourages us to take this playfulness seriously in her article, welcoming its contrast to the leaden realism of much South African fiction, she identifies a different kind of ethical potential in this style (22, 34). Young also notes the inadequacy of realism in Vladislavic's early work (41).

11 In a different reading, Vladislavic may also be alluding to the vexed relationship between gallery space and crime in Johannesburg, since, as Carman argues, the Johannesburg Art Gallery "has acquired the dubious reputation of being the prime crime spot of central Johannesburg" (233).

12 Indeed, one might even offer a more optimistic reading of "Crocodile Lodge" by focusing on the ending's formal move out of realism and into a more hallucinatory, metaphorical language. Vladislavic encourages such a reading in Miller 122.

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