

**Writing Johannesburg into Being: Rituals of Mobility and
the Uneven City in Mark Gevisser, Ivan Vladislavić and
Lindsay Bremner's Writing**

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The city of Johannesburg looms large in the South African cultural imaginary, particularly within literary fiction, and narratives that take the city as its setting are legion.¹ Contemporary fiction writers such as Phaswane Mpe, Lauren Beukes, Niq Mhlongo, Marlene van Niekerk and Eben Venter have used the city to conjure dystopian futures and to grapple with identity politics, xenophobia, HIV/AIDS as well as the place of literature in a changing and heterogeneous society. As Loren Kruger suggests, there “is no singular Johannesburg story”, nor is there a singular genre that encompasses the imaginative possibilities of writing this city into being (Kruger 78). However, the representation of urban mobility is a common theme across much of this literature, beginning with the “Jim comes to Joberg” trope,² and developing through more recent pedestrian narratives like Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Restless Supermarket*. This article explores the role of Johannesburg in the

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literary imaginary by bringing together the work of three contemporary South African writers: counterposing Mark Gevisser's memoir *Dispatcher: Lost and Found in Johannesburg* (2014) and Ivan Vladislavić's semi-autobiographical work of creative non-fiction *Portrait with Keys* (2006) with Lindsay Bremner's collection of personal and architectural essays *Writing the City into Being* (2010). These white South African authors are keenly aware of their privileged position: they use the space offered by writing to make sense of their relation to Johannesburg and the access granted to them because they have the choice to walk or drive. I argue that this seemingly mundane choice, indicative of the continuing inequality of post-apartheid South African society, is foregrounded in Gevisser and Vladislavić's literary writing as they use personal rituals of urban mobility to index and expose the boundaries and continuing unevenness of the city. A similar preoccupation is evident in Bremner's essays, though to a lesser extent given their scholarly rather than poetic approach.

Jeremy Black notes that cities are organised not around neighbourhoods, but around streets, and maps follow the same organisational logic. Referring to street atlases like the London A-Z, Black writes that "In the 'A-Z'ing of life, habitations emerge as the

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spaces between streets” such that signs of economic, social and environmental inequality are erased. Consequently:

The city is a space to be traversed, a region to be manipulated or overcome in the individual’s search for a given destination, not an area to be lived in and through. Far from being composed of neighbourhoods, the city is a sphere of distance to be negotiated, indeed overcome, by road. (Black 13)

The narratives of mobility constructed in Gevisser, Vladislavić and Bremner’s texts offer an alternative view of the city; a map profoundly attentive to the habitations of modern life and to the multiplicities and inequalities of urban living. These urban imaginaries insist on the individual’s rootedness in the city. *Lost and Found in Johannesburg* is Gevisser’s autobiographical account of growing up in Johannesburg, his family’s migration from Eastern Europe to South Africa, his adolescent explorations of the city’s boundaries as well as his experience of the gay community therein. In his review of the memoir, Hedley Twidle suggests that the autobiography is an “inquiry into the mysterious ways in which the spaces of our early lives come to structure imagination, creativity, the self – and what happens when these primal attachments must weather disaffection, estrangement

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and violence” (Twidle n. pag.). I would suggest, too, that the memoir reveals its author’s fascination with how the city is accessed, driven, walked and navigated, given that the title of the South African edition and the book’s organising metaphor is taken from Gevisser’s childhood navigation game, Dispatcher.

A similar fascination with urban space and mobility is clearly discernible in Ivan Vladislavić’s oeuvre as a whole. While Vladislavić is often described as a “writer of place”, he explains that *Portrait with Keys*, in particular, is concerned with the “layering of memory and place”: “I consciously decided”, he explains, “to write about places of significance to me, to find a set of ‘street addresses’ that would allow me to map my own attachments to Johannesburg. One could say I sought out places where the topsoil of memory lay thick” (Steyn n. pag.). This semi-autobiographical text is an almost reverent construction of Johannesburg and its imaginative possibilities.

Vladislavić and Gevisser are the primary focus of this article since they are intent on mapping their urban environment and their ritualistic cartomania facilitates their own incorporation into the city. Lindsay Bremner offers a counterpoint to this need for personal integration. An architect who has written extensively about the transformation of the city, Bremner’s remarkable collection of essays,

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Writing the City into Being, reflects her profound fascination with Johannesburg. The essays are not organised by a cartographic or incorporative imperative; rather, they are astute and sensitive observations about the spatial planning of the city and how the relation of its inhabitant has changed during and post-apartheid. Bremner is less concerned with incorporating herself into the city and more with reconstituting her sense of self after the traumas of apartheid. As she explains:

Because of the incomprehensibility of social and urban change that began in Johannesburg in the late 1980's, writing it has been a way of reacquainting myself with it, finding a route through unfamiliar territory, finding moments in the city in whose reflection I was able to pause and reconstitute myself and my own identity, shattered by the end of apartheid. (Bremner 61)

Like Gevisser and Vladislavić's texts, Bremner's personal and intellectual engagement with Johannesburg in her writing is a way of formalising her attempts to make sense of the transforming city, and what her position is within this changing system. All three authors self-consciously use the act of writing to bring their own version of the city into being, as we shall see, but these seemingly disparate versions

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are equally attuned to the sedimentation and uneven layering of history in the differentiated spaces of the city.

Bringing Joberg into Being: The flâneur, the migrant, the driver

Since gold was discovered in the area in 1886, the spatial planning of Johannesburg has been defined by the need for cheap migrant labour.³ Now the wealthiest and largest city in South Africa, apartheid Johannesburg's commercial centre and its suburbs were available for white residence and business, while black South Africans were legally conceived as a temporary presence, a presence strictly regulated by pass laws.⁴ "To the extent that urbanisation was permitted", Michael Titlestad explains, "it occurred in a uniquely constrained and regulated way: cities came to comprise a combination of dormitory (black) townships, (white) suburbs and industrial areas, all gathered around a central business district (CBD) which coordinated the flows of capital" (Titlestad 676). The racist logic of urban development meant that, "from the start", Johannesburg was "divided against itself, foreclosing the possibility of a single city emerging" (Bremner 11). The segmentation of Johannesburg continues, as the suburbs tend towards atomisation and the townships to overcrowding; meaning that the city

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is now indelibly “marked by maps of mobility and schisms of segregation” (Samuelson 248).

These are only some of the conditions that make Johannesburg a difficult city both to live in and to navigate. Many critics – Jean and John Comaroff (1993; 1997; 1999; 2001; 2012), Sara Nuttall and Achille Mbembe (2004; 2007; 2008) and the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, among the most influential – have dedicated substantial scholarly attention to the emergence of the post-apartheid, modern and globalised South African city, and to the question of urban imaginaries in particular. Nuttall notes that much of this work has turned to Michel de Certeau, Walter Benjamin and the trope of the flâneur in order “to name neglected urban spatialities and to invent new ones, and to use hybrid, in-between figures to connect that which has been held apart, thereby revealing the diverse urban worlds that have been edited out of contention” (Nuttall 741).

The well-worn literary figure of the flâneur⁵ became emblematic of the “public and heroic potential of the city” despite his embeddedness in “commercial mass culture” (Gluck 54; 55). For those theorising or imagining the modern African city, the flâneur has provided a conceptual route into the interstitial spaces of the postcolony. Mbembe and Nuttall argue that the “the migrant worker

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more than the flâneur is the paradoxical cultural figure of African modernity". In Johannesburg, as in other postcolonial cities, "[l]iving in places and circumstances not of his or her choosing, the black migrant worker is constrained to experience the metropolis as a site of radical uncertainty, unpredictability, and insecurity" (Nuttall and Mbembe 23). Clearly attuned to Nuttall and Mbembe's reading, Gevisser's juxtaposes the precarity of the migrant worker with the financial security implied by the phrase, "The rest of us drive":

The people who walk Johannesburg daily are not flâneurs at all, but migrants, or workers, to whom the city still denies the right to public transport. [...] [T]he stories their feet tell, unlike those of the idealised flâneurs, imagined by Baudelaire or Walter Benjamin, are often ones of pain and dislocation. The rest of us drive. (Gevisser *Lost* 21–22)

Economic inequality is framed here as a question of mobility: distinguishing those who are able to drive from those who are forced to walk. While developments have been made in the provision of public transport,⁶ it remains unevenly distributed through the city. The hubris of the flâneur, characteristically conceived as a white European

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urbanite, clashes against the presence of the typically black migrant pedestrian in the South African metropolis. To walk, in this instance, is neither an act of leisure nor a marker of authority over the space; rather, it is an indication of socio-economic vulnerability and unequal social mobility.

The profound structural inequalities and the daily dissonance of living in Johannesburg fascinate Gevisser, Vladislavić and Bremner. For them the city is, in a certain sense, sublime: it seems to resist their attempts to conceptually capture its essence, to encapsulate in a single sentence, paragraph or book all that the city might be. Bremner describes her desire to reacquaint herself with the city, as seen in the quotation above; Vladislavić writes of his desire to excavate the topsoil of memory in the urban spaces with which he has a personal connection; and, similarly, Gevisser writes:

I have found, to my perpetual surprise, that my hometown eludes me, however assiduously I court it. There is always a suburban wall, there is always a palisade fence, an infrared beam, a burglar bar, a thick red line, between the city I think I know and the city that is. (Gevisser *Lost* 21)

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The elusiveness of the city is precisely what fascinates these writers – specifically, the ways in which the boundaries, fences and liminal spaces of the city determine how one moves through or is impeded by the spatial planning. Gevisser and Vladislavić’s mobile descriptions are remarkable for their ritualistic nature. In what follows, therefore, I look at how these authors use the rituals of writing and mobility to construct an intimate version of the city attentive to its divisions.

J. Z. Smith explains that “ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (i.e., the accidents) of ordinary life have been displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful” (Smith, “Bare” 124–25). This sense of overwhelming excess is clearly expressed by the three authors above, but the elusive, uneven city seems to ignite their creative energies and to catalyse a desire for understanding and rootedness. This rootedness is achieved in two ways: through their rituals of writing and via rituals of mobility. For Smith, “[r]itual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualised perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things” (Smith ‘Bare’ 125).⁷ He also notes that the “*the act of writing*” is “the chief ritual activity” (Smith *Relating* 226, emphasis in original). The

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ritualistic nature of de Certeau's notion of "pedestrian enunciation" is often overlooked (de Certeau 99). This theorisation asserts that walking enables the subject to articulate and narrativise their identity in relation to their urban environment. Bremner echoes this concept when she writes that Johannesburg is "accessible only through the practice of walking, of knowing with the feet" (Bremner 47). The physical and conceptual connotations of the term "accessible" further privilege the access granted by pedestrian routes, but Bremner expands the possibility of knowing a metropolis through an analogy between living in a city and reading a book:

A city becomes a city analogously to the way a book becomes a work. Reading is to the book what living in, moving through, walking, playing, working is to the city [...] careless daily lives assert the citiness of the city. For this there are no words, only routines, gestures, desires, textures, sounds, shadows, light, glamour, noise and money. (Bremner 47)

Here, Bremner finds a middle-ground between de Certeau and Smith's positions. She accounts for the interrelation of subject and city, describing how living in and moving through the city allows her to

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attach meaning and significance to its uneven, unruly, metropolitan sprawl. This is how the city comes into being, how it gains its “citiness”. But the practice of reading the city is comprised, not of words, but of “routines” and “gestures” that are repeated daily as she makes her way through the streets of Johannesburg. While Bremner does not detail her urban routines, her ritualistic habitation of the urban environment and her narrativisation of that experience allow her to construct – or write into being – her version of the city, and to do so “in conscious tension to the way things are” (Smith, “Bare” 125). The reality of the city that informs Bremner’s imaginatively constructed Johannesburg is hereby informed by it, in turn. This mutually constitutive relation between urban reality and subjective experience is similarly apparent in Gevisser and Vladislavić’s texts. Reading this work through their rituals of mobility attunes the reader not only to the divisions of the city, but also to the writers’ attempts to expose and transgress those boundaries and, in so doing, to create a space for themselves within the post-apartheid cityscape.

This is precisely what *Portrait with Keys* performs so successfully, since the form and content of *Portrait* enacts the narrator’s rituals of mobility. Vladislavić’s narrator is South African and grew up in Pretoria, but has lived in Johannesburg for a number of

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decades. His cultural, geographic and historic knowledge of the city facilitates his ritualistic engagement with the urban environment as well as his imaginative construction of the city in and through the text. In this way, the narrator is able to incorporate himself into Johannesburg, while detailing its divisions, high crime rates and now mundane installation of security alarms and anti-theft devices.

Vladislavić and ritualised constructions of Johannesburg

Portrait is an artfully constructed assemblage of textual pieces that offers an ever-shifting urban imaginary. The immersive and affecting fragments are numbered. The impulse is to read them linearly; however, Vladislavić offers alternative “Routes” of varying lengths, short, medium and long, through which the reader can explore the text. In this sense the book seems to speak to Bremner’s earlier comparison of walking the city being akin to reading a book. The final section, “Itineraries”, lists the text’s conceptually organised, curated fragments: “Walking” and “Street addresses, Johannesburg” are two cycles or pathways through the text that speak directly to the narrator’s peripatetic rituals and, in doing so, incorporate the rituals of mobility into the structure of the work.

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Portrait begins with an epigraph from Lionel Abrahams, “Memory takes root only half in the folds of the brain: half’s in the concrete streets we have lived along”. The division of memory between the subject and the city intricately binds the former to that particular locality. As the work unfolds, each entry offers up a new memory: a fragment situated precisely in the topography and the history of the city. In a later reference to Abrahams as part of the “Writers’ book” itinerary, the narrator recalls Abrahams writing about how “certain stray corners of the city” assume personal significance through association: “places where we feel more alive and more at home because a ‘topsoil of memory’ has been allowed to form there” (Vladislavić *Portrait* 188). The text facilitates an excavation of the narrator’s personal topsoil; an excavation of the places where the sediments of memory have settled – while the book as a whole is an interpretive engagement with Johannesburg. The structure which encourages the use of alternative but still ordered pathways through the text performs an imaginative organisation, and therefore ritualisation, of the narrator’s urban environment. The narrator locates himself in the time and space of the city and, in the process, asserts his belonging therein.

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It is also true that the complexity of cities, the flows of traffic across ever-changing grids, coupled with the peculiarities of physical addresses, occupations, interests and needs, produces for each one of us a particular pattern of familiar or habitual movement over the skin of the earth, which, if we could see it from a vantage point in the sky, would appear as unique as a fingerprint. (Vladislavić *Portrait* 12)

The habituated pathways, those driven and walked, “would appear as unique as a fingerprint”, and would leave a mark as delicate and almost always unseen. The text nevertheless makes those patterns explicit by bringing to the surface private, ritualised trajectories that are inscribed with personal knowledge and situated history.

Vladislavić, for example, describes the area where he lives in Johannesburg as an “accidental island”:

I live on an island, an accidental island, made by geography and the town planners who laid out these city streets. Roberts and Kitchener, avenues in the uniforms of English soldiers, march away to the east, side by side. A spine of rock, an outcrop of the gold-bearing reef on which the city depends, blocks every

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thoroughfare between the avenues, except for Blenheim and Juno. When I am driven to walk, which is often, only the long way round, following this shore – Blenheim, Roberts, Juno, Kitchener – will bring me back to the beginning. Johannesburg surges and recedes like a tide. I come home with my shoes full of sand. (Vladislavić *Portrait* 18)

Accidents of geography and history have conspired to shape and give name to the streets of this neighbourhood. The mimetic layering of this account, which brings Vladislavić's historical knowledge of the city to bear on the descriptions of the streets, mirrors the experience of walking those streets. His descriptions in this extract, and in many others in the text, seem to abstract the perspective in order to bring a fuller image into view. The structure of the fragments is almost cubist. In this passage, the streets named Roberts and Kitchener – after the two successive English commander-in-chiefs during the South African War – are figured in the metaphor of their soldier garb marching off together to the east. Recalling a history ignored or forgotten by many inhabitants, the narrator uses his knowledge of these details to anchor his place in his neighbourhood and in the city beyond this “accidental island”. The narrator walks the edge of the island; he is “driven to

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walk” the boundary where the sea of Johannesburg, a city without water, begins to encroach. Returning home with his pockets weighed down by the sandy matter he has collected along the way, the residue of the city remains with him.

Paraphrasing Robert Young, Ronit Frenkel writes that: “The textual [...] involves a discursive act: an enunciation that both creates and circumscribes the material world”. As such, Frenkel argues that “a palimpsestic reading of post-transitional fiction opens up the possibility of reconceptualising the relationship between space, place, and transnational connectivity in South Africa” (Frenkel 26). While Frenkel is concerned with the transnational potentials of a palimpsestic reading, a concern shared by Meg Samuelson (2007) in her discussion of cross-border fictions, this analysis of the layers of historical and literary sedimentation is also productive for reading the personal and political layering of history that Vladislavić, Bremner and Gevisser each manage to convey.

For example, Vladislavić’s narrator describes the topography of the city in somatic metaphors: “spine” and “backbone” (Vladislavić *Portrait* 60). In this way the urban environment is cultivated as a presence in the text: a presence that is fleshed out by the stories and historic details the narrator relates. The layering of information in

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these passages seems to bring multiple historical moments to exist within in the same space – a purposeful palimpsest of historical time in order to expose the fractious overlaps of historical space. The city’s material history is “coming back to the surface” – tramlines from the sixties pushing up through the tarred street (Vladislavić *Portrait* 60).

Material histories are ever-present in a city founded on mining: “Today, going down Commissioner into the high-rise heart of the city, I am reminded that here we are all still prospectors, with a digger’s claim on the earth beneath our feet’ (Vladislavić *Portrait* 60). The narrator feels himself and the rest of the city’s inhabitants to be prospectors trying to lay claim to the ground. His claim, like others, can only be speculative: “a digger’s claim” to the land and what it might provide. These speculative claims of belonging are amplified through the narrator’s performance of urban knowledge. Shopping malls, residential homes, the maternity hospital Marymount which becomes a home for the elderly – each entry specifically locates the reader and narrator, and as the chronology of the entries progress, we see the city change. The persistent feeling of alteration is exacerbated by the transitions between entries: the narrative, like the city, is constantly shifting.

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The pedestrian fascination in the narrative comes through in the mobility generated by the structure of the work – almost like a conversation moving seamlessly from one everyday subject to another:

The way and the walker (and the driver, too, if he has time for such things) are in conversation. The ‘long poem of walking’ is a dialogue. Ask a question of any intersection [...] and it will answer, not always straightforwardly, allowing a quirk of the topography, the lie of the land, a glimpse of a prospect to nudge you one way or another. (Vladislavić *Portrait* 53)

Vladislavić echoes de Certeau’s comparison between the acts of speaking and walking by referring to walking as a conversation or poem. The way and the walker are mutually constitutive, engaging in a dialogue that propels them through time and space. The puns “straightforwardly”, “lie” and “nudge” extend the metaphor of this conversation, personifying the ways in which urban topography might mislead or waylay the walker.

Yet it is precisely this elusiveness that fascinates the author: “I live in a city that resists the imagination. Or have I misunderstood? Is the problem that I live in a fiction that unravels even as I grasp it?” (Vladislavić *Portrait* 54). Experience made fiction or fiction made

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experiential? The city resists imaginative capture by evading the narrator's attempts to signify it in singular terms, to map it along a single vector. Even though each entry is an attempt to grasp some facet of the narrator's urban environment, what emerges is striking in its shifting multiplicity. An epistemological gamble, the text as a whole operates as an imaginative resignification and ritualisation of the mobility and immobility allowed in Johannesburg, one which treasures the conceptual slipperiness of such a city. Where, the narrator writes: "I should feel utterly out of place, but instead I feel that I belong here. I am given shape. I do not follow but I conclude, as surely as a non sequitur" (Vladislavić *Portrait* 87). Emerging from a pawn shop with a worn copy of *The Pre-Raphaelite Dream*, the narrator sees a group of off-duty black miners laughing and making their way towards him when a drunken man bothers them and is pushed aside. The narrator finds this scene satisfying; it makes his "situation more interesting": "me standing here, with my irrelevant book, the woman on the verge with her mielies for sale, the men in their sweat-stained overalls, made pale by deep-level dust, faces turned to the weekend, the comical drunkard" (Vladislavić *Portrait* 88). Punctuated and framed by commas, each image contributes to the sense of multiplicity that is notably mundane in a city like

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Johannesburg: the mineworkers, the woman selling corn, and the white middle-class writer with his comically “irrelevant book” unevenly coexist within its constitutively uneven everyday spaces. This tableau of the labour, gender and class divisions in South African society is only possible in the public street where mobility is provisionally granted to all parties. In this scene, and others in the text, Vladislavić carefully curates a version of the city attuned to its imbalanced divisions and inherent inequalities.

In *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe reflects on the entanglements, multiplicities and contradictions that characterise cities of the postcolony. He asserts that the violence, vulnerability and threat of these environments, rather than foreclosing creative potential, seem to feed and inspire resistance and creativity (Mbembe 242). This constructive potential certainly comes across in Vladislavić’s text, as in Gevisser’s, as we shall see. However, Pablo Mukherjee cautions against the possible erasures of such a perspective. Mukherjee articulates the ways in which Vladislavić’s work registers the unevenness of Johannesburg as a paradigmatic example of an African metropolis. He argues that urban theorists such as Nuttall and Mbembe glorify the mobile and flexible characteristics of African experience, and somewhat myopically claim them as unique to African

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modernity. Instead, Mukherjee contends that the “casualized and migratory mode of human existence signals [...] the unfolding of a single, uneven, global modernity over time and space”, and further,

that it is precisely in the resistance to the enforced and involuntary conditions of migration, circumlocution and “flexible existence” that the creativity and dynamism of contemporary modernity’s human subject becomes most obvious. That is, they often fully realise themselves in acts of rooting and habitation instead of acts of uprooting and travel. (Mukherjee 476)

Mukherjee looks through the flux and fragmentations of global modernity to see that resistance is offered, not through further flexibility, but through habitation and assertions of belonging. This is certainly the case for Vladislavić, Bremner and Gevisser. Thus, it is through the narrator’s rootedness in Johannesburg that he is able to flout the alienating logic of the street map and the cultural politics of post-1994 South Africa. Vladislavić’s narrator insists on his pedestrian access, and it is this reverential movement through the city, mirrored in textual form, that facilitates Vladislavić’s (re)imagining of the uneven city.

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In an analysis of *The Exploded View*, another of Vladislavić's experimental texts, James Graham challenges the primacy of the pedestrian in South African literary scholarship. Noting that "cars are not just machines whose meanings are stamped out by culture but have their own qualities which increasingly approximate the anthropological spaces that de Certeau is so concerned to foster and protect", Graham argues that the "the car-driver hybrid or automobilized person" is an expression of and protest against "the abject social discontinuities of the city" (Graham 76; 81). Automobility and pedestrian access are, for him, interrelated modes of urban living; unevenly hybridized ways of being in, moving through, observing and "re-imagining the ever-changing social landscape" (Graham 81). Graham's concern with the representation of automobility is the way it "explodes" the uneven development of the city and the class, race and gender dynamics that determine who has access to a car, who does not and what privileged or endangered positions this unevenness grants.

While the narrator's movement in *Portrait* is primarily peripatetic, Gevisser's imagined and actual movement through Johannesburg is principally in the car. It may seem as though this mode of transport withholds him from the city, since the space he inhabits is the car rather than the urban landscape, however, as

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Graham indicates, automobility is an equally productive method of observing and “re-imagining” the metropolis and exposing its uneven development. In fact, it is Gevisser’s reliance on automobility that awakens his political consciousness and forces him to consider how black South Africans navigate Johannesburg’s streets during apartheid.

Not Walking but Driving: The Uneven, Globalised City

Mark Gevisser’s ritual of mobility is apparent in his account of *Dispatcher*: the courier game he played as a child. The memoir intersperses recollections from Gevisser’s life with historic and topographical details, which together with the plotted routes, street names and urban landmarks locate the reader and the narrative firmly in Johannesburg. With a street atlas of the city from 1979, titled *Holmden’s Register of Johannesburg*, feeding his cartomania, the young Gevisser sends his imaginary couriers out on journeys through the streets. The title and game offer a “master metaphor” for the memoir, positioning Gevisser’s “street-map obsession” as the primary plot device in the text (Twidle n. pag.; Gevisser *Lost* 27). The game of *Dispatcher* opens Johannesburg up to Gevisser’s imagination: he sends his imaginary couriers out on their deliveries, while selecting

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and tracing the routes they will travel. As a child these streets were limited to those in the *Holmden's* atlas; as an adolescent, his routes “plotted outward journeys both sexual and social”, leading Gevisser out “of atomised suburbia and into the troubled world of Johannesburg in the 1970s” (Gevisser *Lost* 103). However, as a politically sensitive adult, who could walk but chooses to drive, his experience of the city shifts:

According to the *Holmden's*, here is your route. You are to travel west up Roosevelt, (as Alfred Nzo was previously called), crossing into the industrial area of Wynberg and continuing along 2nd, over the old Pretoria road. And here, as you hit Andries Street at the top edge of page 75, you will find yourself in trouble. For here you are up against that uncrossable divide between pages 75 and 77. (Gevisser *Lost* 308)

The present tense, third person narration generates the immediacy of a conversation, making it easy to forget that these directions are not given according to the streets themselves, but to their representation in *Holmden's* map. The inclusion of page numbers as impediments to mobility finds purchase in the cityscape itself. What the young Gevisser comes to realise is that the neat, discreet suburban borders in

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his map book do not adequately represent the geography of the city – between pages 75 and 77 is the cartographic blank where the township of Soweto should be. The awareness of the politics of the map, of the unevenness of the cartographic representation, consequently frames the rest of the narrative.

The intention of the game, and the text itself, reflect the interpretive investment and performative dimensions of ritualisation; with obsessive consistency, Gevisser enacts in form and content, the cartographic rituals of his childhood game. The narrative shifts, within a phrase, between actual descriptions of moving through the streets and those imagined in the terms of the game. Paradoxically, then, it is the very nature of the game that at once gives him the capacity to imagine and navigate the city beyond his personal orbit, and also delimits and confines the world he is permitted to imagine: “With the *Holmden’s* as the map of my world, my own notion of boundaries was innate” (Gevisser *Lost* 89). Reflecting and reinforcing the city’s racist urban planning, the *Holmden’s* did not provide a route for Gevisser’s courier to enter Soweto. In fact, Soweto, the “huge, sprawling agglomeration of townships was a phantom in that bottom left-hand corner [...] unmarked, unheeded, home to hundreds of thousands of people who commuted to the rest of the city to make it

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work each day” (Gevisser *Lost* 16). The city imagined in Gevisser’s youth is indelibly marked by the segregation of the *Holmden’s*; however, the impetus of the Dispatcher game – and of the memoir itself – is to push against those boundaries, and to find alternative pathways through the city in order to construct a perfected version of Johannesburg in conscious tension with the reality of the city.

In the closing section of the memoir Gevisser asks Hopey, the daughter of Betty, the domestic worker who looked after him as a child, and who still works for his mother, “how she might actually have shuttled across the boundaries of the *Holmden’s* while [he] only fantasized about doing so from the backseat of [his] father’s Mercedes” (Gevisser *Lost* 287). Hopey’s simple response is that she “crossed it every day” (Gevisser, *Lost* 289) in order to commute between the white suburbs of his youth and Alexandra High school where she was a student. By walking for thirty minutes as well as taking a bus, Hopey transgressed the *Holmden’s* boundaries almost daily. With this revelation, Gevisser’s imagined Johannesburg expands to include Hopey’s urban mobility, as Gevisser’s conception of the city’s apartheid boundaries become more porous.

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Nevertheless, Gevisser is vexed by his privileged and contingent position in Johannesburg. His experience of his urban milieu is primarily one of barriers, edges, security fences and violence. He seems unable to overcome these feelings, perhaps because he isolates himself within the speed and security of a car. In many ways Vladislavić's narrator inhabits a similarly precarious position except that, rather than driving, he walks the streets, insistently affirming the validity of his belonging. Gevisser's rituals of car-bound auto-mobility help him to narrate the way the city has informed his sense of self while simultaneously alienating him from his local community. Referencing Teju Cole's *Open City*, and the accessibility of New York, Gevisser remarks:

it leads me to think about Johannesburg as anything but that: it draws its energy precisely from its atomization and its edges, its stacking of boundaries against each other. It is no place to wander; no place, either, to throw your window open and let the world blow in. (Gevisser *Lost* 21).

For Vladislavić's narrator, Johannesburg is – despite its dangers – a place to wander. But regardless of Gevisser's access to the city, by foot or by car, there is the unmistakable trauma of a home invasion that

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bookends the narrative, and contributes to the overall sense of urban unease.

Although the memoir's final chapter narrates a cathartic journey to his childhood home for dinner with his mother, for Gevisser and his readers, the memoir is quite literally framed in terms of the invasion of private property: "On the evening of January 11, 2012, at about 9:30 p.m., three men [...] opened the locked kitchen door of Katie and Bea's flat without any force" (Gevisser *Lost* 5). In Part II of the memoir, entitled "Attack", Gevisser goes into detail about the home invasion, the assault and the rigmarole of the judicial process in its aftermath. He admits to suffering "intense hypervigilance, a feeling distressing to me in its unfamiliarity, as I am usually what my friend Charlotte calls 'Joburg Man': briskly, almost unconsciously vigilant (if such a state is possible) without being neurotic" (Gevisser *Lost* 259). This sense of being a "Joburg Man", of being "unconsciously vigilant", manifests in recognisable gestures and behavioural patterns: you do not leave your valuables on a restaurant table; you do not leave your bag hanging on the back of your chair; you wait at a safe distance as your garage door opens and the security beams turn off, so that you can speed away in case of an attempted hijacking. This is what it means to be unconsciously vigilant in Johannesburg. Bremner and Vladislavić also

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pay heed to their surroundings and the prevalence of crime that determines their relation to and understanding of the city. The first section of *Portrait* describes the otherworldly green glow of the alarm panel that is ubiquitous in South African homes. Moreover, “Engaging the Gorilla” and “Security” are two of the itineraries that route the reader through *Portrait’s* Johannesburg. The Gorilla is a security device that is affixed to the car’s steering wheel to prevent theft; it, too, is a common feature of daily life in the city.

Crime is a prominent feature of Gevisser, Vladislavić and Bremner’s accounts of their city. It defines their daily routines, circumscribes the routes they travel, and forces a constant awareness of their surroundings and quotidian interactions with security guards, parking guards and alarm systems. The experience of crime and the vulnerability it suggests are clearly represented in Vladislavić and Gevisser’s texts. But while they are both clear on the ways in which South Africa’s continuing inequalities and uneven development contribute to the prevalence of crime in Johannesburg, Bremner is most astute on this issue:

Crime [...] weaves around and through the soft underside of the emerging landscape – the inner city, the suburbs, the townships and the mining land. It

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makes incisive forays into the vulnerable white suburbs, where signs of privilege become indictors of attack. [...] A new security aesthetic dominates: walls, wire, barbs, locks, gates, intercoms, fortifications... fading into fantasy and pastiche. Combine this with the signs of poverty: squalor, irregularity, clutter, leaking sewer pipes, leering corrugated walls and broken windows, and you have the image of the emerging South African city. (Bremner 230)

The discordant aesthetic of Bremner's imagined Johannesburg attests to the daily collisions of crime, security and unequal privilege. Here, as in Gevisser and Vladislavić's narratives, crime shapes the urban landscape as it "creates new centres of power and locales of weakness" (Bremner 230) that determine where one might walk or drive and where one should not. It marks certain spaces of the metropolis – the inner city and townships – as raw and dangerous, and the ability to be mobile in and through these spaces once again becomes a sign of socio-economic status. Despite the proliferation of suburban security systems, it is the areas that were "most disadvantaged and unprotected under apartheid" that continue to be the "areas most vulnerable to murder, armed robbery, rape and violent assault – Soweto, Alexandra

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and Orange Farm.” As Bremner explains: “These areas were characterised by extreme forms of political disempowerment and economic hardship and as a result they are fragmented, disparate, demeaning places, designed as warehousing for migrant labour” (Bremner 217). In her transition from the past to present tense, Bremner here draws attention to the continuing impact of apartheid’s urban planning: the areas designated for the habitation of migrant labour remain true to their original purpose, while the crime rates and high population density make the townships ever more perilous urban spaces.

Soweto, Alexandra and Orange Farm are the areas excluded from Gevisser’s *Holmden’s*. Alexandra or Alex, as it is colloquially known, is where Hopey lives and where Gevisser learns that the “uncrossable” divide between his home and Hopey’s is one that she traversed daily. These areas of Johannesburg are all but overlooked in Vladislavić’s primarily pedestrian wandering; for him, the concatenations of modern South Africa are experienced in the incongruity of his position on a busy Johannesburg street. As Bremner notes:

Streets and public spaces are in the hands of the people – vendors, taxi drivers, the unemployed and black consumers, for whom the inner city remains the

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most convenient place to shop. Between these two worlds lies a gulf, filled to a large extent by ignorance, fear, paranoia, entitlement, resentment and socio-economic inequality. (Bremner 221–22)

Gevisser, Bremner and Vladislavić insert themselves into this gulf as they attempt to account not only for their own experience of the city, but for the structures of inequality that define urban life in post-apartheid South Africa. Bremner's essays provide critical insight into the construction of the apartheid city, and how the transition to democracy can be mapped onto the transformation and stagnation of the metropole. Her writing thus provides a personal and scholarly counterpoint to the literary narratives of Gevisser and Vladislavić. Though Bremner is clear about the habituated and ritualistic nature of her engagement with her hometown, Gevisser and Vladislavić's rituals of mobility come across forcefully in the form and content of their texts. All three authors self-consciously use their written work to bring Johannesburg into being. Either walking or driving, each author recounts how their movements in and through the city define their urban landscape; how through their rituals of mobility they are able to imagine a personal version of the city to which they enjoy relative access, yet one that is always in tension with Johannesburg's uneven

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reality. Such authorial mobility exposes the continuing inequalities of the post-apartheid city, albeit from the writers' respective positions of privilege, but also gestures towards their shared attempts to better understand their place in the elusive metropolis that is contemporary Johannesburg.

Notes:

1. I am most grateful to Lucy Potter for her comments on a draft of this article.

2. “‘Jim comes to Joberg’ is an organising trope of representations of black urban experience before and during apartheid” (Titlestad 676). Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* is a well-known example of this trope, though this metaphor has also been rewritten to some extent in post-apartheid fiction.

3. There are several substantial studies of the history of Johannesburg and its post-apartheid present: Keith Beavon’s *Johannesburg: The making and the shaping of the city* (2005), Martin J. Murray’s

Taming the disorderly city: the spatial landscape of Johannesburg after apartheid (2008), and Tomlinson et al. *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on the Postapartheid City* (2003) Nuttall and Mbembe's *Johannesburg: the Elusive Metropolis* (2008).

4. The legal segregation of urban areas officially began with the Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923, which categorised urban areas as “white” and required black South Africans to carry passes to enter, work in and leave the cities. This was amended in 1945 to the Natives (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act which was primarily concerned with influx control and provided regulations for removing people from urban areas. This act was amended again in 1952, and became the Black (Natives) Laws Amendment Act of 1952. This version stipulated that any black South African of 16 or older had to carry a pass and was prohibited from remaining in the city for longer than 72 hours, without permission. The pass laws regulated the presence of black migrant labour in apartheid cities, and defined urban areas a “white”. The influence of these laws is still felt in the spatial planning of the city.

5. The flâneur, “the stroller, the passionate wanderer emblematic of nineteenth-century French literary culture” would seem to be timeless since “he removes himself from the world while he stands astride its heart” (Stephen n. pag.).

6. In recent years South African cities have made important strides towards the provision of public transport and the integration of paratransit operators such as minibus taxis (Schalekamp and Behrens). Johannesburg’s Rea Vaya Bus Rapid Transit system, the first of its kind on the African continent, aims to provide safe and affordable transport in and around the city. Despite its challenges, this system is recognition of the fact that the spacial planning of the city still reflects the apartheid logic of separate development.

7. Catherine Bell’s *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* and *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* offer extended discussions of ritual and practises of ritualisation.

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