

Re-placing Dis-placed/missing Persons in Vladislavic's Short Stories

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For James Ogude and Isabel Hofmeyr, who suggested that, in the articulate silences of texts, in the gaps and holes of narrative, one may discover intriguing stories demanding attention.

Tracking Narrative in the Cracks of History

Ivan Vladislavic, in the short story 'Movements' in his first collection of stories, *Missing Persons* (1989:64), draws the reader's attention to the 'prophetic silence between tracks on a record'. Adopting a satiric mode, Private, the ten years old narrator-protagonist in another story, 'The Prime Minister is Dead', narrativises such silenced and repressed sites in the old recorded history of apartheid. In this story, history personified translates itself into spectacle. History, incarnated in the persona of Verwoerd, transforms into parody when its moments of punctuation, hesitancy and fatigue are caricatured.

These cracks in the story of (apartheid) history become the grotesque fascinations of a re-membling Private. He reminisces, imaginatively of course, the detours, bumps, ruptures and breaks in history's paths. This narrator re-memembers how in the course of history, the alleged omniscient and infallible protagonists of apartheid, feeble and fumbled, ushering specific moments for the ridiculing of power. With remarkable artistry, Ivan Vladislavic renders visible and audible the silenced clattering noises in the pauses of history. History's pauses, contrary to a supposedly forward marching journey of a 'voortrekkerik volk', are vividly enacted in the image of the jammed truck that carries Verwoerd's corpse.

This truck, Private re-memembers, 'suddenly coughed, jerked and came to a halt' (1989:8). Here, history is allowed a momentary break, a relaxation, as it were. Despite this pause in this theatricalised history, one already notices restless impersonators (soldiers in this case), who betray a predisposition to overtake history. The truck, history's carrier, is inert. But 'the band and the first soldiers marched on' (1989:8). The gap that emerges between the truck and the soldiers is the exciting moment of narration for Private. He intones, 'between them and the stalled truck, a fascinating gap began to open' (1989:8).

The purpose of this paper is to display the gaps and ruptures which Vladislavic enacts in his depiction of South African whiteness (and) in his renarrativisation of apartheid. The second section of the paper develops this theme by focusing on the author's self-consciously deconstructionist mode of presentation which raises crucial questions about the nature of knowledge and its interpretation. The conclusion specifically re-replaces the agency of Vladislavic's dis-placed persons in their construction of historical reality.

De-authoring Apartheid: Rewriting the Locales of White ethnicities

Missing Persons (1989) creatively disrupts the officialised myth of the grand design called apartheid. The story of apartheid has often been told as the triumphant transcription of a grand plan designed by a group of white conspirators—such representation is revisited in more detail in Deborah Posel's *The Making of Apartheid* (1993:1-6). Vladislavic's stories, by contrast, question the notion of a monolithic, unchanging, transhistorical whiteness. The story, 'Journal of a Wall' specifically re-enacts internal discrepancies among white South Africans. Possible entrenched divisions among whites are captured in the widespread erection of monumental walls. In a landscape already demarcated white by the Group Areas Act, the Groenewalds are busy constructing, 'an extremely thick, high wall of the kind that is fairly common in [the] suburb' (1989:26). Finding this particular wall, 'a little high ... a little forbidding' (1989:40), the narrator resolves to 'speak to them before they disappear entirely' (1989:38). This narrator tells Mr. Groenewald, 'Perhaps you have seen me. I live right across from you' (1989:40). But feeling treated like an unknown intruder by Mr Groenewald and his wife, the narrator shouts curses: 'They were such a perverse people. What were they planning to do behind those ridiculous walls? Volkspele? Nude Braaivleise? Secret nocturnal rituals ...?' (1989:42). It is Vladislavic's focus in such ruptures in whiteness, a political colour (to use Fusco's term) that serves as a useful strategy at denaturing whiteness.

David Roediger, in *Towards The Abolition of Whiteness* (1994) explores the multiple complex ways through which whiteness centres itself in the articulation of a racial supremacist ideology. His discussion on the history of early white immigration in the US, reveals that not every white immigrant automatically qualified to be classed 'white'. Borrowing from John Bukowczyk, Roediger refers to the white aspirants of whiteness as the 'not-yet-white ethnic'. Citing Fusco, Roediger (1994:12) forcefully argues that 'racial identities are not only Black ... they are also white. To ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalising it.

In the same vein, *Missing Persons* (1989) raises intriguing questions about the visibility (and probably the roles) of white ethnic groupings other than the Afrikaners in the story of racism in South Africa. Vladislavic does not however invite a simplistic

mere listing of white ethnics inhabiting South Africa. The specific ethnicity of the neighbour of Groenewald remains anonymous. This anonymity serves to stress the fact that ethnicity itself is not singular and static, but capable of infinite and unpredictable variations. This anonymous narrator raises questions about his own agency in the enabling of the erection of divisive walls. He completes the journal, an allegory of the brick wall, by saying, 'I must remember to take a stroll past the wall some time and see if I can spot my brick' (1989:44).

This narrator stresses the need to overcome historically constructed boundaries. He does so by attempting to subvert the meaning of frontiers. He writes, 'We have so much in common. The wall I began to see it not so much as a barrier between us, but as a meeting point' (1989:39). This echoes very well Martin Heidegger's conceptualisation of a frontier: 'A boundary is not that at which something stops ... [but] it is that from which something begins its presencing' (cited in Bhabha 1992:1).

Vladislavic does not in any way create a fiction of a white South African society devoid of conflict. His short fictions are immensely littered with white ethnics whose interests are frequently competing. In 'Sightseeing', the unidentified white tourist takes pride in the fact that he 'knows that he is not a voortrekker' (1989:20). This story also makes visible the presence of a racist German: 'The German finds natives here more savage, hardly civilized' (1989:20). In 'When My Hands Burst into Flame' (1989:103), one encounters a woman German Tourist approaching Chelsea Hotel in Hillbrow.

A plural, heteroglottic, white South African identity is further emphasised by the enactment of Italian identity in these stories. In 'Movements', one finds an 'Italian neighbour under buttery verandah' (1989:62). The woman who 'cries in broken English' (1989:64) is probably Italian too. Private's granny shouts in Italian, 'Numero Uno' (1989:4). Private receives 'a pair of lucky nail-clippers given to his grandfather by an Italian prisoner of war' (1989:2). The 'Terminal Bar' was at some stage inhabited by an Italian. Boshoff's sticks of grissini which he uses to torture terrorists were 'a gift from an Italian' (1989:113). The dish cloths used in this bar are 'a gift from an American who was passing through' (1989:106). The presence of a Swiss identity in South Africa is inscribed in the business they run like the 'Cafe Zurich' (1989:38).

Vladislavic also retells the chronicle of South African liberation struggle by representing white ethnics as actors in this story. In 'Flashback Hotel', the narrator who, 'went as a missing person' (1989:15) is probably Jewish. He fits the description of a 'terrorist', a category that tended to be synonymous with black freedom fighters during apartheid. The reader is invited to think that this narrator is a terrorist. He blows and kills men and women in the hotel. The suggestion that this 'terrorist' could be a Jewish white rests in the fact that he 'married at Temple David, Morningside' (1989:13). In the hotel, he walks to the urinals using the 'long tiles corridor called whites' (1989:14).

Quentin and his girlfriend who kidnap the Prime Minister in 'The Box' are probably white too. The story begins by suggesting that Quentin was thought to be a close ally of the Prime Minister. But the Prime Minister later suspects that Quentin 'sows the seeds of discord ... of a bloody revolution' (1989:45). After imagining a successful kidnap of the Prime Minister, Quentin and his girlfriend admit that they 'never actually liked him' (1989:27). Also in 'Tsafendas's Diary' the narrator re-members the assassin of Verwoerd, Dimitris Tsafendas, whose ancestry was also Greek.

The depiction of poor white men and women, 'the dislocated dentures' (1989:118) in, 'The Terminal Bar' is an assault on the fiction of white supremacy. Ann Stoler (1989:149) argues that the presence of poor whites, and hence the narration thereof, 'undermine[s]' the image of a healthy, empowered and 'rigorous' race'. The landscape and the mindscape inhabited by 'the dislocated dentures' is diseased and nauseating. Josephine, who was abandoned by the Weinbergs is constantly cleaning the vomit of the 'drunken and the disorderly' (1989:105). Famine is written over the bodies of these inhabitants. They are captured in the metaphor of 'the broken veins, gaping pores, greasy lips, scars, age-spots, acne' (1989:105). This narrativisation of whites raises questions about the actual beneficiaries of the Apartheid state. By foregrounding this chaotic and diseased milieu, Vladislavic directs the reader's attention to the underrepresented, repressed city spaces in the official apartheid map.

Many of the stories illustrate how South Africa's public memory tends to be constituted through colonial, official maps. It is such a map that Private's father followed so dogmatically from his home to the cemetery, 'Hereo's Acre' (1989:4). The obsession with maps is further displayed by Granny in 'Tsafendas's Diary': 'When you set out to find Tsafendas's diary you shall take the map with you' (1989:93). The diary itself contains 'a map of the world [and] a map of South Africa' (1989:97). In 'Journal of a Wall', the narration of urbanity is filtered through the rigid contours of a map: 'The city was spread out below me like a map' (1989:25). It is at such moments when the official contours encoded in colonial maps are transgressed that one discovers the dislocated white (and black) ethnics inhabiting the Terminal Bar.

Ann Stoler (1989) in an essay, 'Rethinking Colonial Categories' has also remarked that the caricaturing of apartheid as a coherent, uninterrupted master-plan is analytically limiting. She points out that the literature in this tradition captures limited features of colonials and tends to homogenise whites. Stoler's criticism has been echoed in a remarkable book, *Apartheid's Genesis* (1993). The editors, Philip Bonner, Peter Delius and Deborah Posel critique the representation of apartheid as a thorough-going system. Their focus on popular resistance and competing interests between the Afrikaner states and mining capital is a sharp critique of the liberal and radical literature of the 1960s and 1970s. This literature, 'depicted the evolution of apartheid as an uninterrupted, linear process, originating in the prescription of a grand plan' (Bonner et al. 1993:123).

A supposed overwhelming master-narrative of apartheid is undermined by Private in 'The Prime Minister is Dead'. The death of Verwoerd is displaced to the periphery of Private's consciousness. This historic day allows Private to re-member the important events in his life. He recollects that during this year his parents moved into a new house. This day evokes the memory of his granny and his deceased grandfather. Gardening is more central to the consciousness of Private. In keeping with the genre of the short story, this narrator takes detours and provides elaborate notes and tips about the uprooting of weeds. During the burial, Private and his father were occupied with the planting of an orchard. They later participate in this 'big occasion' after being reminded by Private's mother that, 'you can't go through life taking the great events of history for granted' (1989:5). During the procession, Private and his father deprive Verwoerd of the ritual attention he is accorded by the spectators. The clanking noise of their wheelbarrow transforms the two into a spectacle. It is finally Private and his father who carry the monumentally dignified prime in a wheelbarrow, and dump him into a hole. Employing a comic mode of representation, Vladislavic rewrites the tragedy of apartheid. Apartheid's intellectuals and architects are re-presented as commoners. In these pages one discovers a 'Prime Minister [who] sank his teeth into Quentin's forefinger, and Quentin gasped and dropped him and [the Prime Minister] fell with a soft thud on a bean bag' (1989:46).

The context is apartheid. The content is not always apartheid. The walls inside the Terminal Bar, for instance, portray famous sportsmen. Cinema is part of the mental geography, hence a shaper of the intellectual categories of these commoners. The reader is told that the idea that 'drunk people are like fish' is 'a quote from Smith, the film director' (1989:107). But Vladislavic could also be suggesting that sports and cinema were central to anaesthetising many whites, reinforcing and compounding their ignorance of the political alienation of black people during the apartheid era.

Discursive Sites of Knowledge: (De)Composing the Materiality of Narratives.

In *Beginnings* (1978:82), Edward Said articulates the idea that fictive narratives are the 'aesthetic objects that fill gaps in an incomplete world'. *Missing Persons* (1989) bears the stamp of the plenitude of narrative that Said refers to. Yet plenitude in Vladislavic's stories does not define a fossilised, pre-given reality. Here, reality is always negotiated as radically contingent. He is an author who opens up more gaps by enacting more holes in what he construes as an already fractured milieu.

South Africa's 'articulate silences', to borrow a phrase from Bhabha, are forcefully captured in striking metaphors of emptiness, displacedness and dismemberment. These 'tales of pot-holes' (1989:20) are told through such images like, 'my skull cracked open like an egg' (1989:81); 'a butcher with three fingers' (1989:89); 'the pregnant

girl presents the hungry foetus' (1989:19); 'there was my house with its gaping wound' (1989:25); 'I climb into a hole'; and so on.

Disintegration is the principal construct in *Missing Persons* (1989). It is the trope of decomposition that structures these fragmentary narratives. The 'Prime Minister is Dead' serves as a prologue for the recurrent motif of a decaying social body. Verwoerd's corpse becomes 'a piece of meat' that will be 'rotting in the soil' (1989:4). When he dies, he becomes a 'compost heap on which practically anything would grow' (1989:2). The 'fallen fruit [that] rots into the ground' (1989:4) allegorises the (de)composition of Verwoerd's body.

The sea itself enacts the disappearance of words. A missing person writes in large letters in 'the margin of the sea' but 'the sea erase his message' (1989:86). Old statues are described as 'the flesh blistered and corroded' (1989:7). The materiality of statuary, vegetation, bodies and even words is emphasised. Hence their tendency to decompose. All of these items seem to be composed of the granny's decaying 'meat blanket' (1989:98). The narrator indicates that granny 'pulls the meat-blanket up to [his] ears and tucks it in. By morning it will be rotting' (1989:92). The story of all these (im)material artefacts, *Missing Persons* (1989) itself, (dis)appears destined for the inevitable (de)composition in 'the meaty broth at the centre of the earth' (1989:98).

Missing Persons (1989) constitutes numerous instances that bear testimony to the 'intriguing materiality' of language (Bhabha 1989:107). Words have a mass. Notice for instance, 'her bones [are] heavy with words' (1989:87). Words like bricks can inflict a wound. In 'Journal of A Wall', the 'words ... like bricks are as bland and heavy and worn as the metaphor itself' (1989:43). One hears of 'a wounded world' (1989:76). In the townships, the liberation fighters are crafting freedom by 'hurling bricks into the burning bus' (1989:24). It is this possibility of viewing words/language as 'the very material of literary practice' (Bhabha 1989:112) that enables one to conceive of *Missing Persons* (1989) as Vladislavic's own museum of words in which specific identities may be, and indeed are, articulated, performed and naturalised.

Vladislavic does not, however, exhaust the possibility of agency of the recipients of official knowledge. The texts illustrate that the audience does not passively embody the politicised identities official texts circulate. William Cohen (1989:512) describes monuments as 'ways of constructing and communicating a political culture'. He sees the erection of public statuary as a strategy for imagining communities. Vladislavic shows how the meaning of such artefacts is contested. A narrator describes a monument as 'a chronicle, telling the whole story of our people. A story of origins, of pioneers, of battles and massacres, of long journeys marked by heroism and suffering' (1989:71). But some people assault these memorials simply by disregarding their rituality: 'The people paid no attention. There were no tour buses full of pilgrims. The people knew that a statue is only a statue' (1989:73).

Krishenblat-Gimbelet (1992) conceives of a monument/museum as a 'tomb with a view'. Vladislavic's own 'corpse of a text', his museum of words, is self-consciously deconstructionist. Vladislavic dislodges the alleged neutrality of the act of writing. Writing, he shows, may be an important act in the process of displacing, disciplining and configuring of identities. The contestation over words and meaning causes 'a wounded silence' (1989:51) in the story 'Box'. The pen is capable of performing both corporeal and psychic violence. The tourist's pen in 'Sightseeing' is both an 'equipment for violence' and an instrument to 'inflict metaphor' (1989:17). In this sense, Vladislavic dramatises less overt forms of 'verbal assaults' whose enactment display the capacity to displace and illegitimise oppositional discourse.

It is in this sense that Vladislavic (de)constructs the underlining power operative in the (de)composition of texts, museums and monuments. To take a further instance, bricks, hence by extension words, assume infinite, ambivalent and contradictory significations. A brick possessing a 'stony silence [and] an impenetrable skin' (1989:33) can suddenly transform into a surrealistic, rioting object. Remember, a brick encapsulates power in its material form. A brick is an end-product of fire. The brick in 'Journal of a Wall' 'began to look like a loaf of bread, hot from the oven, steaming and fermenting inside' (1989:33). It is these 'bubbling and hissing' bricks that dis-members and disfigures the house, leaving it with 'a gaping wound' (1989:25). The bricks are also reminiscent of the compost 'mixture [that] bubbles and steams' (1989:92) in 'Tsafendas's Diary'. Bricks too, Sue Marais (1992:33) states, 'are part of the compost mixture of South African reality'.

Sue Marais (1992:54) further illumines that Vladislavic depicts a white society that is 'pre-occupied with recording its achievements and unity and its desire to perpetuate itself'. One way of achieving this objective is to alter artefacts into chronicles. In search of a 'usable part' the architects of apartheid re-compose the decomposing corpse of Verwoerd into a chronicle which becomes imprinted on the landscape. 'Once the Prime Minister was dead', Private remembers, 'they started renaming streets after him, and stations and schools and even pleasure resorts. They even renamed the suburb after him. They wanted us to live in a monument' (1989:3). Carol Duncan (1991:94) views museums and monuments and similar ritual sites as 'the means through which the relationship between the individual as citizen and the state is enacted'.

In *Museum and Communities* (1992:279), Ivan Karp stresses the need to recognise museums (and monuments) as 'contested arenas, settings in which different parties dispute both the control of exhibitions and assertions of identity made and experienced through visual display'. Vladislavic depicts statumania as a mode of communicating and manipulating knowledge. The erection of public statuary, William Cohen (1989) observes, expresses the desire to inscribe 'a stronger imprint' in an 'already dominated space'. Ivan Karp further shows that the contestations over exhibitions

often result in debates about the 'ownership of culture and how it is defined' (1989:283). This attempt at propertying culture is displayed by the grandmother: 'We must have Tsafendas's diary we are its rightful owners' (1989:91). The statue in 'We Came to the Monument' frowns upon the fact that she is gazed upon 'as if she was public property' (1989:72). Vladislavic critiques however, the uncritical valorisation of sacrifice and martyrdom, what people elevate as 'the historic bloodstains' (1989:93).

Vladislavic's museum, his monument, *Missing Persons* (1989), depicts an ethnicised, racialised, divided society. He shows that apartheid's apparatus of power, its 'symbols of power' like state monuments, attempt to displace and obliterate missing persons from the national psyche. The persons missing from the public memory are 'the homeless, and the hungry, the persecuted, the pursued, the forgotten, those without friends and neighbours' (1989:43). Vladislavic's numerous and complex first person narrators, seeking identification with the missing persons—'those in transit, dispossessed and faceless', negate, 'any alleged sense of shared history' (Sue Marais 1994:54). Vladislavic tells stories of the South African rural dispossessed whose experiences remain uncommemorated in a context of apartheid political culture. The white tourist in 'Sightseeing', 'sees some characters demanding to be documented: a toothless old man sucking pilchards through a hole ... in the tin, a baby breast fed (he averts his eyes); a child whose face is full of the newsfronts of the world' (1989:21f).

Within all cultures, writes David Ruffins (1992:509), 'various versions of the past exist simultaneously'. Vladislavic shows that the act of remembering privileges particular versions of the past as more significant than others. In 'Science of Fragments', he writes that 'there were hundreds of versions of the heroine, herself, each differing slightly from the next' (1989:87). But on the anniversary of the heroine's death, the heroine's lover recalls only 'two versions of her, a dancer and a sleeper' (1989:90). Sadly, he 'can no longer remember why he chose these two [versions] from among the hundreds' (1989:90).

Vladislavic's re-presentation of displaced and dismembered versions of the past forces the reader to journey towards the re-placing and re-memembering of missing persons. His sometimes disorienting mode of narration cracks the tracks of canonical narratives, enabling a shift in focus away from the mundane to the more disturbing accounts. The nightwatchman in 'Terminal Bar' describes himself as a 'stickler to detail' (1989:106). It is this ability to read closely that makes visible for the night-watchman 'the broken veins, pores, greasy lips, scars, age-spots, acne' (1989:105). It is not an ordinary daylight but, 'mist that forces [the sightseer's] attention to finer details' (1989:17).

Contradiction, irony and ambivalence characterise the nature of meaning derived from attempts at sticking to detail. The curator of 'Journal of a Wall' reaffirms the notion that, 'it [is] very important to catch every detail' (1989:29). Gaps and holes

begin to emerge, allowing for the de-authorisation of the genre called 'objective reality'. Vladislavic skilfully enacts subjectivity in order to allow the reader to disclaim the assertions of the curator. This narrator-character thinks that he has developed 'sufficient emotional distance from the incident to put it down objectively as it happened' (1989:38). Feeling insulted by the Groenewalds, this person suddenly rages, 'who the fuck were they anyway? Lunatics, blind people, fat slobs, smug shithouses' (1989:41). Like many of the narrators in the stories, this journal writer obscures reality by viewing it through the corner of his eyes: 'Out of the corner of my eye ... I've watched the wall edge' (1989:42). Even the racist German in 'Sightseeing', 'out of the corner of his eyes he sees the faces of the people' (1989:22).

This is the moment of ambivalence, contradiction and irony. The racist German who 'finds natives here more savage, hardly civilised' (1989:20) filters (and pigeonholes) reality through a racially tainted lens. This German is actively engaged in displacing Vladislavic's already disappearing, missing persons. Vladislavic therefore resists the fixing of *Missing Persons* (1989) into a simplified, monolingual and hegemonic narration of the past. The meaning is always provocative, amorphous and open-ended.

Memory, the fundamental prop in re-membering the past and imagining future identities, is a political act. Memory is always mediated. The nightwatchman in the Terminal Bar narrates, and in parentheses he puts the emphasis ' (if my memory serves me correctly)' (1989:115). The narrator in 'Journal of a Wall', realising that 'already memories are fading' (1989:24) because his vision has been obstructed by the monumental wall, invents in the domain of the imaginary narratives about the Groenewalds: 'I imagine that she is there with him, holding a bottle of champagne' (1989:42). During a seminar at the Department of African Literature, Wits University (1997) Vladislavic used the term 'semi-fictionalized memory'. It is the idea of a 'semi-fictionalized memory' that captures well the notion in *Missing Persons* (1989) of a box, 'full of chaos and decay' (1989:85). In this 'box', *Missing Persons* (1989) itself, narrators 'spill out the bits and pieces of a puzzled world' (1989:87).

Ivan Vladislavic is himself a missing person. In the presence of absence, 'missing' becomes truthfully intelligible. He is a writer whose authority over meaning of his stories tends to be absent. Is *Missing Persons* (1989) 'missing a chapter or two' (1989:86) like the heroine's story in 'A Science of Arguments'? Vladislavic's desired authority appears to be the desire to re-place and transform his unidentified, missing reader, into an active creator of meaning. Verna Brown (1990:127) encapsulates this aptly:

The reader is freed from the guiding hand on the elbow anxiously pointing the way. He is allowed to co-create each story, constructing and deconstructing at a nudge and a wink from its confident author

Accounts of the past seem to remain incomplete for this author so long as there exist unpublished, repressed stories in people's pockets. In 'Science of Fragments', for instance, the unposted letter becomes, 'a voice speaking softly in his pocket' (1989:84). *Missing Persons* (1989) is destined to remain a story of fragments. Quoting Lionel Abraham, Vladislavic writes, 'Fragments neither close/ nor open meaning:/ they may mean anything except wholeness, except certainty' (1989:84).

Re-memembering Agency: Extratextuality and Violence

The agency of missing persons, those actively marginalised by the dominant groups, may become more visible if one begins to listen to the audible, yet silenced and unread 'extratexts' like the unposted letter. The notion of extratextuality may serve as a useful index for the sites of knowledge familiar to common people, but which could be deemed trivial or unnecessary by officials. These hidden texts may be retrieved from such unfamiliar shelves like a trouser's turn-up. Notice, for instance, the military iconography readable in Private's father's turn-ups: 'My father said he had desert sand in the turn-ups of his khaki pants, left over from the war dyed with the blood of the patriots ... if the sand was red' (1989:3f). The 'thinking cap' that the granny knits using flesh is also 'shaped like a turnip' (1989:91).

Private's father gives the orchard a chronicle when he gives every of its thirty trees a name tag. War and violence is textured over his body which is said to be 'stained with combat' (1989:6). Accordingly, he calls the orchard, 'a platoon of trees' (1989:3). Also, the body of Boshoff is a text depicting power and violence. The 'word Bossies' for instance, 'is tattooed across his chest, in letters six inches high and coiled around with serpents, the "i" dotted by a hairy nipple' (1989:114).

Missing Persons (1989) re-memembers a sensibility of violence and dislocatedness characterising a South Africa of the 1980s. The violent context of the 1980s in which many of the stories are set, is an era characterised by massive political unrests in the townships. A cyclic brutal violence and the state of emergency engulf large sections of black townships. Violence is one such material that (de)composes the society's social fabric. This violence is recycled and re-invented in domestic spaces via the print and electronic media: 'I for one was finding the news more depressing—full of death and chaos' (1989:28). The journal writer asks, 'who would build amid these ruins' (1989:28). These ruins were the very same foundations of apartheid. Private reminds us that, 'When the Prime Minister died he left us a compost heap, on which practically anything would grow' (1989:2). The text shows that South Africa's narrative of freedom cannot be separated from a violent struggle against apartheid.

Achille Mbembe's (1992:3) conceptualisation of power in the postcolony as 'those elements of the obscene and the grotesque', characterises very well the naturali-

sation of the vulgarity of power depicted in 'The Terminal Bar'. Mbembe uses the 'postcolony' in order to capture a specific consciousness of an epoch in history. The postcolony refers to 'those societies recently emerging from the experience of colonisation and the violence which the colonial relationship, par excellence, involves' (1989:3). Mbembe also stresses the need to surrender the old binary categories of ruler and ruled, collaborator and resistor in order to understand the effectiveness of postcolonial relations of power. Of great significance, is Mbembe's illustration that 'ordinary people' are 'not impervious to the charms of majesty'. Mbembe thus speaks of 'the logic of conviviality', that is, 'the dynamics of domesticity and familiarity, which inscribe the dominant and the dominated within the same episteme' (1989:10). Below, I seek to illustrate, briefly, how Vladislavic employs the modes of the grotesque and the obscene in 'The Terminal Bar' to direct our attention to the manifestations of postcolonial relations even during the apartheid era.

Characters in this story betray a fascination with the monstrous and outrageous. It is a stylistic whose logic is akin to the grotesque and the obscene. Vladislavic displays such obscenities as 'the dregs go into a bucket for the New Year Punch' (1989:105). Boshoff and his associates are preparing a 'horse-meat' braai (1989:110). The effectiveness of the grotesque as a narrative technique lies in its ability to shock readers about the obscenities of power which have become so banal, especially in a socially starved environment like the Terminal Bar. The alienating (shocking) effect inherent in the grotesque is better dramatised in the depiction of Boshoff who took his wife and his daughter into, 'a duty free shop' and simply 'blew their brains out' (1989:115). Boshoff, whose conduct betrays discernible semblances of military lunacy, is probably an ex-war ruin(wreck) like Private's father. The assertion is plausible. Consider the fact that Boshoff is 'familiar with the wide open spaces. Here he's like an animal in a cage' (1989:115). It is for this reason that this compost heap from the army, Boshoff, keeps ripping his shirt 'so that his chest can bear witness to the fact that he's Bossies' (1989:114). Boshoff also re-plays and re-lives how he tortured 'terrorists' by clamping Wilson's hands in the nutcracker's jaws of the pliers. Boshoff does not bury the dead bodies of his wife and daughter. Instead, he erects a memorial, as it were, by freezing the corpses in his refrigerator. The attempt at narrating 'historical bloodstains' is also evidenced in the portrait hanging in the police museum which depicts, 'the path the bullet took between the barrel of the rifle and the brain of the child' (1989:95). In the Terminal Bar as in the police museum, the vulgarity of raw power achieves a state of ordinariness which even ordinary people mimic.

Violence has become endemic in the Terminal Bar. The narrator depicts the bar as a stage where 'major battles, with teeth kicked out' (1989:107) have been fought. Rather than expressing remorse at the death of Mrs Boshoff and her daughter, the 'dislocated dentures' had 'a great deal of drinking that night' (1989:117). Even when

Boshoff staged the torture of Wilson using the pliers, we heard that it remained 'quiet in the Terminal Bar [and that] the silence [was] thicker than blood' (1989:114). Achille Mbembe reads such silence as a marker of possible co-option of the ruled in the postcolony.

The women 'carrying sticks and stones and pieces of concrete from bomb craters' (1989:117) attempt to punish Boshoff for murdering the child and her mother. The irony, however, is that the men in the bar, probably experiencing an assault on their masculinity, join Boshoff in chasing these women away. Mbembe describes the postcolony as 'a simulacrum, a hollow pretense' (1989:11). These are the same men who are always giving 'spontaneous applause' (1989:116) when Wilson is buying them drinks. Wilson is the man who advises Boshoff to 'keep [the corpses] in the refrigerator as facts' (1989:116). When Boshoff beats Smith in the bar, we are told that, 'Wilson does likewise to Moloi (out of a sense of loyalty to his friend, he says)'. Is it also 'out of a sense of loyalty' that the 'ordinary men' in the bar assist Boshoff in displacing the women? These men, the narrator intones, 'surge[d] forward, carrying Bossies like a banner' (1989:117). Boshoff is transformed into a kind of a fetish. Even when Boshoff is asleep, he is captured in the metaphor of statuary: '[he is] balanced like a fallen statue between two bar-stools' (1989:119).

Boshoff is not depicted as a protagonist or genius of apartheid like Verwoerd. The space he occupies is rendered invisible in the master-narrative of state apartheid. In many ways, Boshoff and the inhabitants of the bar are the marginalised, displaced, missing persons. In re-membering Boshoff and his applauders in the bar, one is forced to confront their own sense of agency. These particular subaltern subjects may laugh and ridicule power, but they also seem to share a certain imaginary of what power is about. If indeed marginalisation through official discourses and state power does not exhaust the possibility of an agent, it is possible for us to avoid reducing the complex and contradictory experiences of Vladislavic's missing persons into mere victims of externally imposed systems of domination.

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