

Borderlines ... living on: The Market and the Post---apartheid Polity in Mpe's, Vladislavić's and Dangor's Johannesburg Geographies

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OK Bazaars, Clicks, Spar, CNA and Checkers are the gaudy names of South African supermarkets which, in Phaswane Mpe's classic 'mapping' of crime-ridden Johannesburg in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), mark the protagonist's walk through inner-city (WH 7-8).¹ The names of these supermarkets in Mpe's text resonate evocatively with allusions to the putatively liberal spaces of the post-segregation city of the early 1990s: 'OK' with a new but shortlived optimism, 'Clicks' with the African languages now to be heard on the streets of once-whites-only Hillbrow, 'Bazaar' with the influx of informal street economies into the once regimented grid of the CBD, or 'Spar' with the real austerities and exacerbated inequalities of the neoliberal regime which rapidly supplanted the ANC's erstwhile imaginations of socialist egalitarianism. The names of supermarkets, far more than the residual Afrikaner or newly chosen struggle-leader street-names, delineate the (super)market as the ultimate South African space of deconstruction. There, more than anywhere else, liberation and liberalism, the demise of apartheid and the rise of market ideology, old segregations and new exclusions merge in a space of undecidability and concomitant ethical imperatives. In the supermarket, apartheid differences, now abolished, resolve themselves into the differences imposed by consumer choice upon those who do not have the resources to consume. There, difference, briefly dissolved into a utopian promise of flourishing *différance* or a generative open-ended rainbow-diversity of the sort apartheid could never entirely suppress, is deferred – more or less permanently it may seem, two decades after the end of state-legislated apartheid. In its place, commodity *différance* has come to rule: manifested, for a minority, the endless acquisition of ever-new properties, appliances, experiences; and, for the majority, in the permanent inaccessibility of even the most basic good and services.

In this article I explore this sense of deferred *différance* by looking at central spatial categories of apartheid and post-apartheid geographies: the township, the suburb, and the city centre as they are deployed in two recent Johannesburg fictions, Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2001) and Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys* (2006), though I make reference in passing to several other texts: Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) and Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket* (2001). The deferral of

différance as a temporalizing and spatializing process² is embodied, I argue, not only in the ‘hollowing-out’ and ‘turning inside-out’ of once-segregated Johannesburg³ (the ‘unravelling’ of the customary centre-periphery structure of the city in the post-apartheid city, with the reflux of a poor black South African and immigrant African population into inner-city neighbourhoods such as Hillbrow⁴) but also, more insidiously, in the infiltration of all realms, whether poor townships, decaying inner-city precincts or wealthy white suburbs, by the ubiquitous ‘super-market’. The supermarket, I suggest, is both icon and located exemplification of the way ‘state and media conflate the capacity to consume with a rhetoric of national prosperity that elides the lacunae between rich and poor’ and of the extent to which ‘spatial exclusion continues to operate in South African cities’.⁵

In the opening sections of Mpe’s classic of post-apartheid ‘transition’ literature,⁶ the author contrasts the various meanings of the demise of racial separation and ‘influx control’ in Hillbrow: the mobility of populations (black rural South African and immigrant African, or *makwerekwere*) flowing into the spaces opened up by the erosion of internal and external border-control in the wake of the dismantlement of apartheid (lit. separation); and the mobility of capital (‘OK Bazaar’!), also newly released to transcend the old borders in the (neo)liberal post-apartheid order. Both the influx of formerly excluded populations and of the market are re-making the city in new and unexpected ways, sometimes in cahoots with one another, sometimes in contradiction. Mpe’s glimpse of inner-city mercantilism (and those offered by Vladislavić and Dangor, as I will go on to show) reveal an end to segregation where the suspension of racialized borders often, if not always, appears to sanction their recreation, under the alibi of market freedom, along economic (border)lines. Borders are deconstructed, but rapidly reconstructed, calling forth an ethical impulse which acknowledges the inseparability of diametrically opposed modes of ‘liberalization’; this ethical impetus in deconstruction engages with an intractable complex which is simultaneously the site of a problem to be addressed, the impossibility of a solution, and the necessity of a politicized response.

1.

The spatially segregated system of apartheid as it was brutally enforced in South Africa from 1948 to 1991 provides an epic performances of what academic philosophers have come to call deconstruction: the drawing of binary polarities (white/black) along a

borderline (always spatially manifest) in the face of their prior and ongoing contagion; a futile and increasingly violent pursuit of binary purity dogged by the emergence of 'residues' and 'remainders' inevitably produced by the binary politics of racial/spatial segregation. Apartheid policy was full of contradictions. Racial mixing was to be halted, and mixed areas were to be purified of their heterogeneous elements by forced removals; such strategies sought to prevent the formation of a broad cross-racial base for political unrest.⁷ Yet the excised populations could not be removed too far, as their labour was needed in, say, the mines of Johannesburg or in domestic labour for the white population: cheap black labour, in not-too-close proximity, was the economic foundation of white prosperity, and that prosperity was the political guarantee of Nationalist power. Massive black townships (of which Soweto was the most infamous after the uprisings of 1976) were established, separated from privileged white areas by buffer zones such as the east-west mining strip traversing Johannesburg; but these increasingly overcrowded and under-serviced dormitory conurbations, despite internal segregation, inevitably became a hotbed of revolt whose curbing eventually proved too much of a drain on apartheid-state resources to be sustainable.⁸ The so-called homelands or Bantustans were supposed to become a repository for the families of migrant labour, and for surplus black labour, supposedly removing both social unrest and economic burdens to 'independent' nation states within the nation. But the poverty resulting from state neglect of the homelands merely accelerated the flow of populations back to the cities. Within the cities, moreover, the removal of populations on the basis of race, especially in the inner city, often created a dearth of tenants that opened the door for new waves of illegal, mixed urban influx in the wake of a wave of evictions.⁹ The discriminatory laws of the apartheid state were constantly creating hindrances to their own implementation, thereby spawning constant amendments, which in turn hindered other aspects of their implementation.¹⁰

Thus, apartheid difference never brought about the spatial and political closure it sought, but merely spawned a spate of different effects which deferred undisputed dominance over a restless black population.¹¹ As this stalemate became increasingly obvious, the apartheid Nationalist government gradually moved towards a transition to democracy, motivated primarily by pragmatic economic reasons rather than by any ideological considerations: 'it was not so much the prospect of a revolution that had jolted the apartheid managers: it was the likelihood that the state and opposition would become entangled in a death embrace that could destroy South Africa's integrity as a

nation-state and as a zone for doing business – and with it white privilege'.¹² In the early 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the withdrawal of Eastern bloc support to South Africa's socialist neighbours (and thus the concomitant waning of one set of Afrikaner paranoias), the Nationalist government shifted its tactics. It embarked upon an audacious volte face which would prove, in the long run, better able to preserve white economic privilege than all the removals, segregation policies, pass laws, border wars, quasi-militarized repression and systematic large-scale torture of the previous four decades.

The white minority joined the process of democratization that ushered in the abolition of segregation, race-based discrimination and the dismantlement of the immense para-statal security apparatus. The Nationalist negotiators, speaking on behalf of local global capital, offered their ongoing participation in the polity, which was seen by all parties to be crucial to the ongoing prosperity of the nation: a 1992 commentary presciently remarked that the 'internationalization of capital, and of the markets for the skills possessed by many whites, will constrain any post-apartheid government seeking to attract as well as retain investment and crucial personnel.'¹³ They did so, however, only on the condition of substantial white advantages within a situation of majority rule: the same commentator observed that 'it is hard to see the present [Nationalist] government agreeing [to] a new constitution without some measure of protection for whites from what otherwise might be strong redistributive measures'.¹⁴ The ANC itself capitulated willingly to the demands of local and transnational capital.¹⁵ In effect, all the hall-marks of apartheid (spatial segregation, racialized economic disparity) were at one fell swoop abolished by law¹⁶ and simultaneously preserved by a much stronger force than the previous repressive state apparatus: that of the market. The figures speak for themselves: the sector of the population living under the poverty line has remained much the same as before the end of apartheid; indeed, in the period 1996-2009 it actually rose from 17 million to 20 million (or to 41.3% of the population);¹⁷ the average income of black households fell by about a fifth in the early years of democracy, while that of white households rose by 15%.¹⁸ Such statistics prompt one commentator to observe that '[t]he racial patterns of income inequality remain so stark that one is tempted to question the demise of apartheid.'¹⁹ Already before 1994 commentators were speaking presciently of 'deracialized apartheid'.²⁰

The post-apartheid dispensation accepted the futility of attempting to impose border lines by force – and paradoxically, allowed them, without the use of force, to

persist almost as effectively as before. The 'rainbow nation' is one in which, officially, difference in the rigid sense of apartheid segregation has been superseded, at least in official rhetoric, by a plethora of differences (such as 11 official languages, the freedom of expression and movement, and the tolerance of religious and gender diversity). Yet the hoped-for dissolution of differences into a productive, processual and open-ended *différance* which generates 'the origin or production of differences and the differences between differences,'²¹ a state of generative 'living' on 'borderlines' has itself been deferred. In a South African exemplification of a generic contemporary sense of 'living on in the wake of past political time, amid the ruins, specifically, of postsocialist and postcolonial futures past',²² today's post-Mandela polity sees non-state-sanctioned segregation and its borderlines de facto living on two decades after the dismantling of apartheid (my play with Derrida's word order follows his own example²³). Neoliberal ideology and economic policy stepped into the breach to defer the promised abolition of racial and spatial difference, so that the deferral of difference that plagued the apartheid regime has now been replaced by a two-decade-long deferral of *différance* (in the sense of the rainbow nation's aspirations to open up old nominally binary borders and distinctions to make space for unlimited social creativity). My fusion of the overlapping, entangled meanings of difference/*différance*/deferrance-deferral seeks to lay bare the ways in which economic differences have been re-delineated in lieu of racialized difference, and a true diversity put on hold so as to make space for the endless (and endlessly deferred) ersatz-satisfaction of consumer choice. In this article I go about laying bare these fused structures by reading several contemporary texts which identify the supermarket as the locus par excellence of the new post-apartheid dispensation of deferred *différance*.

In a polity where the deconstruction of differences seems to have subsided almost entirely into stalemate and disillusionment, indeed fatigue, overhauled by a feverish consumption (or, for the majority, frustrated aspirations to consumption), deconstruction, with its pursuit of *différance* of a generative and turbulent sort, appears more necessary than ever before. The academy, or what remainders of it are still safe from the encroachments of market imperatives, would be a residual space for asking such questions, raising the issue of ethics, and seeking to speak in an 'other' idiom in dialogue, for instance, with the sort of literary voices from outside it to which I now turn.²⁴

2.

In one of the many curious vignettes in Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys*, the narrator describes an odd pair of figures regularly stationed in front of the Gem supermarket at the corner of Roberts Avenue and Blenheim street (on the border where Troyeville, Reynolds View and Kensington meet, only a couple of kilometres east of the CBD). The two figures regularly are positioned on both sides of the entrance steps leading up the entrance of the supermarket. They are nestled in niches on both sides of the stairs created by two equidistant L-shaped ramps which flank the stairs to right and left.²⁵ The two figures appear to ignore each other, but for the narrator, their activities are strangely connected. On the one side, there is a black cobbler with a makeshift stall (his workbench is an upturned milk crate, his seat an old paint tin, and his pile of re-heeled shoes is displayed in a cardboard box). On the other side of the stairs, in the matching niche, there is a mentally-disturbed white man who paces back and forth as if in a cage, 'up and down in the narrow stall, four paces to the right, and a clockwise turn, four paces to the left, and an anticlockwise turn, up and down for hours on end, looking at his feet' (PK 37).

The vignette indexes several aspects of the post-apartheid economic order and the spaces it configures. First, the cobbler epitomizes the ubiquitous informal African sidewalk-economy that has sprung up in the city centres since the abolition of legislation regulating 'influx control' (the infamous Pass Laws and the Group Areas Acts in their various emendations from 1950 until abolition in 1991). South African inner-city streets are crowded with street vendors selling every conceivable sort of commodity or service.²⁶ Informal subsistence economies are salient characteristic of the struggle for survival of urban populations right across the continent, and South Africa is no exception.²⁷ Significantly, however, the text places this informal economy in the shadow of the 'super-market' of the national/transnational formal economy. What is presented here merely as apposition is of course a relationship of conflicted and nested relations: the neoliberal economy depends for its profits on paying minimal wages to employees with little bargaining power under conditions of almost 50% black unemployment;²⁸ those who are outside the exploitative labour market are none the less constrained by it and necessarily seek their own solutions. But the black cobbler is not alone. He is flanked by the caged white walker, and together these figures offer another emblem of the economic system in South Africa. The young white man is 'strong and energetic' (PK

37), apparently active, but produces nothing except a form of lack: 'The caged man is wearing out shoes as fast as the cobbler can mend them' (PK 38). At risk of being uncharitable, one could be forgiven for seeing in this mute collaboration a caricature of a stereotypical South African street scene: black labourers toil under the surveillance of a white superior who provides and supervises employment but is otherwise inactive.

This dual emblem, which Vladislavić names a 'parable' (PK 38), can be understood in a much broader sense, however. What Achille Mbembe has called the 'racial discount' allowed working-class whites to rise up the socio-economic hierarchy on the back of an underpaid black labour.²⁹ This upward social mobility for lower middle-class whites was one of the bases of Nationalist power and among the driving economic motivations behind the politics of apartheid. Segregation was designed to conceal and stabilize the racialized economic discrimination that bound the white minority to the black majority in often intimate workplace relations. Whence the narrator's sense that

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

The narrator puzzles over the apparent symbiosis that appears to link the two figures in a hidden but reciprocal (chiastic) causality. What is evident here is not merely the synchronic connections between whites and blacks, but a diachronic connection which connects past to present in a manner that vitiates the rhetoric of renewal. Thus the transition to democracy was brokered to a large extent by Nationalist negotiators cannily defending core white interests, which, at the end of the day, did not depend upon minority rule, but rather upon the rule of the market. Under the threat of the withdrawal of white capital and expertise, South Africa gained a democratic, post-apartheid *political* dispensation at the cost of retaining the apartheid *economic* dispensation. And indeed, this economic dispensation has duly reinforced white prosperity while widening the gap between the rich minority and a growing poor majority. Vladislavić's vignette at the borders of Troyeville and Kensington stands synecdochically for a metropolis where, according to 2007 figures, 18.74 per cent of households have no income in a city that contributes 17 per cent of South Africa's GDP.³⁰ In Vladislavić's formulation, 'these turns cancel out progress' (PK 38). The caged walker 'is going nowhere fast' (PK 38), but the same might be said for the South African polity as a whole, projected into this

microcosm of economic business-as-usual (albeit under the sign of a sinking Rand) and of stalled social transformation.

Thus Vladislavić's phrasing ('a connection [...] that will not be easily broken') lays bare the continuity between apartheid and post-apartheid society. On the face of it, the black labourer and the white walker exist in a space that is no longer segregated. Troyeville and Kensington are areas which were once (poor) white, but have been repopulated since the early 1990s by formerly excluded constituencies from the black townships, as well as migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. As the narrator's brother Branko and other interlocutors complain on several occasions, 'It's starting to look like a township around here' (PK 46-7, 64). Likewise, another character says, 'Troyeville [...] was fucked when I was a kid, in an Afrikaans sort of way. It was fucked as a teenager, in a more Portuguese sort of way. And here I am, fully grown, surrounded by Angolans and Nigerians' (PK 137). We gain a synecdoche of this restored cohabitation in the odd side-by-side of the cobbler and the walker on their respective sides of the stairs.

Yet by the same token, the stairs continue to separate them no less effectively than the old legislation. This renewed cohabitation merely disguises a shift of the forms and (to some degree) the location of the borders: Johannesburg 'shifted from apartheid segregation – the injustices of which were still contested in public spaces – to a "city of walls" divided by class';³¹ 'Johannesburg today is a city of walls, substitutes for the invisible walls of apartheid through which the Other was kept in its place.'³² As Vladislavić's text notes elsewhere,

Johannesburg is a frontier city, a place of contested boundaries. Territory must be secured or it will be lost. Today the contest is fierce and so the defences multiply. Walls replace fences, high walls replace low ones, even the highest walls acquire electrified wire and spikes. (PK 173)

Yet despite these ubiquitous and self-perpetuating walls, the narrator discovers a connection between the two characters, one that can only be explained in a mysterious, indeed quasi-mystical manner. The 'two scenes fold together like the wings of an icon', the two panels of a 'diptych', make 'the black man quietly working, with a pile of old shoes beside him, and the white man restlessly pacing' into 'figures in a parable' (PK 38). But this religious tenor is ingenuous: if this is indeed a parable, it is a parable of something very worldly.

That something is, in fact, is not difficult to find: it is in the framework of the vignette, the site that the stairs and the ramps lead to: the Gem Supermarket. The

supermarket is mentioned in the first line: 'There are three approaches to the Gem Supermarket' (PK 36). Then the supermarket itself fades out of the view as the description zones in progressively on the stairs and the ramps, and the two niches ('stalls') that they half-enclose, and then on the two occupants of the niches. Elided though it may be, like the stairs and the ramps, the supermarket is that which discretely dominates everything else in the episode. Just as the elided ramps configure in spatial terms the minute drama of black and white, so too the supermarket provides a more encompassing economic configuration. The apparent elision of the supermarket, its disappearance into the frame of the episode, reveal precisely what the market does: it frames all other interactions, structuring all subjects positions via the apparently multiple but in fact highly constraining and regulated approaches to it.

Vladislavić calls the scene a 'diptych', wondering which 'panel' should be favoured, and cannot make up his mind. Yet this binarity is destabilized by the opening words of the passage, which enumerates 'three approaches to the Gem Supermarket' (PK 36). The stairs and the two ramps frame the binary 'stalls' and via their symmetrical arrangement, yet their own symmetrical binarity is blurred by the broad stairs in the middle that belong to neither one side nor the other. The stairs enable the binarity yet are not of it. Such complex symbolic work justifies Gaylard's comment that Vladislavić 'is, if anything, a deconstructionist, allowing binaries to collapse under their own tension'.³³

The stairs represent a curiously empty space within the passage which enables apposition (not unlike the cryptic 'black aerosol' graffiti noted by the narrator, ' "blank" "black" ' ['blank' also meaning 'white' in Afrikaans] [PK 172]), but they are also the principal approach to the supermarket. The stairs are the erased borderline upon which the new co-citizens of a multiracial, democratic South Africa, no longer distinguished by race or skin colour, now supposedly live; the stairs embody an emancipatory (inflationary?) 'vision of the future that is onwards and upwards from the present',³⁴ as an ascending ramp which will putatively 'improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person'.³⁵ Yet at the same time, the borderline lives on, a broad band called progress which is empty to the extent that it merely leads deeper into the global neo-liberal order, into the 'super-market'. In the contradictory meanings of the stairs we see embodied the city of Johannesburg's 'aspiration to remedy a long history of exclusion while still policing economic and political borders'.³⁶ Here, crystallized in one of Branko's 'unmarked intersection[s]' (PK 18), and somewhat akin to the multiple axes

of borders in Derrida's text which both underpin and impede the forward movement of reading,³⁷ we find what Vladislavić formulates as 'the just and the unjust city, wrapped in one another like onion skins' (PK 201). No text, much less the present one, can escape from these compromised interfoldings, yet without the acknowledgement of its own problematic position (in this case, located uneasily at an intersection of the imperatives and opportunities of the European and African university systems), no textual enunciation, or concomitant located pedagogic or scholarly practice can even take up its work.³⁸

3.

Past and present, justice and injustice also find themselves entangled on another 'incline to the lower part of [a] Mall', with its cluster of supermarkets, at the close of Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (BF 246). On that incline, at the entrance to Killarney Mall, an erstwhile apartheid-era security-policeman named François Du Boise, is assassinated by Michael Ali, scion of a rape perpetrated by the policeman two decades before. Lydia, Michael's mother, had been raped in the hearing of her activist husband Silas, who was locked in the nearby police van and beaten up by Du Boise's colleagues (BF 16). The murder at the conclusion to the novel is triggered by its inaugural mirroring episode, a chance meeting Du Boise and Silas in a supermarket in Berea, where the Ali family now lives (BF 7-8). This chance meeting drags up the repressed past, throwing the family into a crisis which will eventually result in its dispersal: in the final pages, both Michael and Lydia will leave Johannesburg, the former on the run and heading for India, the latter searching for a new life in Cape Town.

Silas is a high-ranking civil servant responsible for liaising between the government and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). When this old trauma erupts in the present, the stuff of Silas' work abruptly intrudes into the family's private life; public narratives converge excruciatingly with private stories.³⁹ The family's confrontation with its own horrific past is rendered even more acute, at the end of the novel, by Du Boise's application for decision to seek amnesty under the TRC Act (conditional upon his appearing before the commission). Lydia and other victims of sexual abuse committed by him will be summoned as witnesses (BF 145), thus dragging into the public domain a trauma which hitherto could be kept hidden.⁴⁰ Against the background of the ubiquitous supermarket, Dangor's text rehearses violent confrontation

rather than the forms of reconciliation-as- parallel-coexistence presented in Vladislavić's vignette. Once again, the supermarket functions as a framing device, in this case at the narrative-structural level as well the more concretely spatial level as in Vladislavić's episode.

The supermarket and the mall are spatially located, as in in Vladislavić's vignette, with great specificity. The supermarket is placed in (now increasingly non-white or "greying"⁴¹) inner-city Berea. The mall is located in (predominantly white) northern-suburbs Killarney. Significantly, however, the distance between the two is not more than a kilometre or two; as often in South African urban complexes, the borders between quite distinct social or ethnic areas are ones of remarkably close proximity. (Perhaps this explains in part the obsessive violence with which apartheid urban planning sought to disentangle hybrid populations and their constitutive geographies⁴²). In this manner, the text grounds post-apartheid histories in specific borderline sites.

The text affords a detailed lesson in the topography and history of apartheid- and post-apartheid-Johannesburg. The central character Silas Ali grows up in Newclare, an initially mixed but subsequently segregated coloured area (BF 77, 156). (Dangor himself grew up in Newclare after the family had been forcibly removed from Fordsburg in a typical segregative operation; Newclare in turn itself underwent purification after the family arrived there.⁴³) Silas' mother has to leave their 'house in Doornfontein, when the place was declared "white" and the family was evicted. That had been his mother's last nomadic stop in her journey from suburb to suburb, singled out for pursuit, she believed, by the grey-suited men who implemented the apartheid laws' (BF 14).⁴⁴ A generation later and after further removals, Silas and his family live in 'coloured' Noordgesig township, on the north-eastern side of Soweto, in a 'small, two-roomed, government-scheme house' (BF 116). As apartheid crumbles, they return to Berea, the suburb next to Doornfontein, only a stone's throw from Vladislavić's Gem Supermarket. The family moves into a house that is 'a poor man's palace marooned in a seawrack of flats, warehouses and whorehouses' (BF 71). Son Michael thus grows up in a district on the north-eastern perimeter of the CBD, in an area which is described by one of his fellow students at the inner-city Wits University as 'the township in the suburbs' (BF 28). Dangor's Ali family are therefore 'migrants of color [...] whose historic connections to inner-city city districts from Doornfontein [adjacent to Berea] in the near east to Fordsburg and Fietas [...] in the near west makes them, despite the countermeasures of the apartheid regime, returning natives to central Johannesburg'.⁴⁵

The geography of Dangor's novel is circular, with the family taking a circuitous route that brings them back from the townships to the near-inner-city suburbs. This aspect of the narrative is one of a libertarian history in which a process of segregation and marginalization is triumphantly reversed. From the imposed exile of the townships, the non-white population returns to the inner city, searching for the sense of community that Dangor's own autobiographical writings seek to retrieve from an era before the dislocating force of apartheid forced removals.⁴⁶ At face value, Dangor's text sketches a standard narrative of disequilibrium restored: belonging-exile-belonging.⁴⁷ Yet this spatial pattern of restoration is constrained, in structural terms, by the framing position of the supermarket and the mall.⁴⁸ The libertarian narrative is both enabled (diegetically) and disabled (axiologically) by the inaugural episode in the Berea supermarket and the closing episode at Killarney Mall. Whereas Vladislavić's Gem Supermarket furnishes the background for his episode, Dangor's supermarket and mall make up the diegetic boundaries both enabling and problematizing the urban migratory oscillations of apartheid-imposed and apartheid-undone. Dangor investigates this constraining influence by making the supermarket and the mall the bifurcated sites of the irruption of the past in the present. He does this so as to complicate (if not entirely vitiate) the spatial narrative of liberty.

The supermarket and the mall are the locations of two fateful meetings between Du Boise and members of the Ali family – with father Silas in the beginning and son Michael at the end. The meeting, as Bakhtin pointed out, is the archetypal chronotope in which spatial and temporal convergence merge.⁴⁹ In the novel, these meetings crystallize the entire dynamic of the post-apartheid era, epitomized in a moment where Silas, exhausted by his work, wishes to 'sit out there on the grass verge, the border between the past and future. Where the township joins the suburbs, where African has come home to roost. [...] Life was going on, sins were being confessed, murder, rape. Assassins confessing to the Truth Commission' (BF 133-4). Meeting-points on two axes are sketched here: the geographical axis of the reflux of African populations into the one-segregated city centre, and the temporal axis of the recovered or uncovered past. In this passage, both movements are registered in this passage as liberating, as manifestations of the rectification of past wrongs and the restoration of a lost equilibrium – that is, of closure. Paradoxically, however, this closure is disrupted by another form of closure, namely, the constraining logic of the market. Dangor's novel does not analyse economic factors explicitly, but focusses instead on the traumatic and

unresolved relationships between past and present. Yet the text's choice of supermarket and mall as the site for this non-closure of the past indexes the central role of neoliberal market forces in the fateful continuities between the apartheid and post-apartheid orders.

In the novel, the spatial circularity of the return to the inner city is matched by the temporal circularity of the return of the repressed past. The tenor of the two respective circularities are however diametrically opposed to one another. If spatial return appears to heal the wounds of dislocation and forced removal, that of temporal return (the return of the repressed) seem to have exactly the opposite effect. The TRC, which stands symptomatically for the working-through of the apartheid past, is presented from the outside as a site of tension: Silas' job involves negotiating between the government, which does not want its own apartheid-era infringements of human rights made public, and the Commission itself, embodied in the person of its chairman Archbishop Tutu (BF 91).

For Dangor, the TRC is not unequivocally seen as a means to healing past wounds: it may also exacerbate them. On the one hand, the TRC is seen as powerless to palliate past sufferings. Thus, early on in the novel, Lydia is given the opportunity to appear freely before one of the TRC panels: 'It would not have helped her to appear before the Commission, even at a closed hearing. [...] Nothing in her life would have changed, nothing in any of their lives would have changed because of a public confession of pain suffered. Because nothing could be undone, you could not withdraw a rape, it was an irrevocable act, like murder' (BF 140-1). On the other hand, the TRC is presented as re-enacting the past in dangerous ways, especially at the later moment in the text when, as Silas explains to his wife, 'the TRC hearings are over, but the amnesty process continues'. 'So, it is not over?', Lydia interrogates. 'For a lot of people, it will never be over' is Silas' pessimistic reply (BF 144). Indeed, it now transpires that a special amnesty hearing has been announced for Du Boise. At this moment, Lydia realizes that she may have no choice but to testify before the commission. Silas announces,

'Du Boise has applied for amnesty, he and three, four others, for rape, assault, on women mostly. He has named you as one of the cases he is asking for amnesty for.'

She remained silent.

He leaned forward. 'I saw the brief, someone involved with the TRC's investigations recognised your name. The hearings will be in public, some time next year.'

'Stop them, Silas.'

'I can't, not even the President...'

Her hand trembled. He reached out [...] He caressed her hand [...] He was on his knees before her, kissing her face, running his hands down her body, over her breasts.

'No, no,' she said, and pushed him away. (BF 145)

The re-evocation of the traumatic past operates traumatically for both Lydia and Silas. Silas, who had to hear his wife being raped next to the police van he was locked in, speaks of 'public *hearings*' in which the event will be recounted again; and Lydia's attempt to stop this repetition of the event triggers what, via her refusal, is made to look something like incipient marital rape. Certainly there is strong evidence that in some hearings of the TRC, former perpetrators were able to recreate an interrogation-room dynamic, manipulating and humiliating their former victims, and in one case even re-enacting torture methods.⁵⁰ (For similar reasons, some truth commissions have in part dispensed with oral hearings so as not to risk re-evoking the original trauma.⁵¹) The TRC was designed to effect some degree of reconciliatory closure upon the unacknowledged and thus unhealed wounds of the past;⁵² it may, in fact, have failed signally in this function.⁵³

The novel nears its end with Silas' fiftieth birthday party, where he is ceremoniously presented with the five completed volumes of the TRC's report (BF 230).⁵⁴ This coincidence of dates makes Silas' birth coeval with the inauguration of the Nationalist Party's apartheid regime (1948), suggesting an entanglement of destinies that is ongoing rather than neatly concluded. The putative textual closure self-referentially signalled by the handing-over of the TRC report is both echoed and negated by the final episode of the novel, where Michael assassinates Du Boise in front of Killarney Mall. That episode, mirroring as it does the inaugural encounter between Silas and Du Boise, would appear to offer the ideal narrative closure,⁵⁵ especially in proposing a rough justice for former perpetrators as the TRC often did not. In fact, however, the text suggests a great deal more ambivalence around these possibilities of closure.

Both the spatial aspects of the assassination (it takes place outside the mall) and the temporality of the event (Michael fires twice) are worthy of closer analysis:

Michael leans up against a pillar at the entrance to the Mall. [...] He sees Du Boise taking his stooped-walk shortcut through the filling station [...] up the incline to the lower part of the Mall. Michael steps out from the late afternoon shadow, Du Boise is still below him. [...] My heritage, he says in a whisper, unwanted, imposed, my history, my beginnings.

Michael fires – twice – directly into Du Boise’s face, forgetting his carefully worked-out plan: shoot into the heart, it is quieter, tends to attract less attention. He wants to obliterate Du Boise’s face, wipe away that triumphant, almost kindly expression, leave nothing behind but splintered bone and shattered skin. (BF 246)

By having Michael assassinate his biological father, Dangor is implicitly taking a stance on the controversial work of the TRC, which privileged amnesty rather than punishment for perpetrators (while neglecting compensation to victims). The TRC placed a premium upon ‘truth’ as the guarantor of reconciliation. In its eagerness to enshrine forgiveness and repentance rather than retribution as the touchstone of reconciliation, it arguably weakened the authority of the rule of law by sacrificing the opportunity for ‘retributive justice’ as a significant element in transitional, post-autocratic polities.⁵⁶ It is significant that the third and final part of Dangor’s novel, in which Du Boise is assassinated, is entitled ‘retribution’ (BF 203).

But a diametrically opposed reading is emblemized by an odd biographical coincidence: Dangor was for some year director of the Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund and had his offices some five hundred metres further up Riviera Road from the Mall where the fictional Michael assassinates his biological father. This anecdote is significant, because it forces into spatial apposition two incompatible concepts of political transition: paradigmatically, South Africa, achieved its transition to democracy without what Mandela himself called ‘a civil war in which blacks and whites would fight each other’⁵⁷ because he came ‘to see that hatred and enmity were mimetic, a trap laid by the “evil” other: fall into it and you and your adversary become hard to tell apart.’⁵⁸ By contrast, however, Michael’s desire to ‘obliterate [...] wipe away that triumphant, almost kindly expression’ may simply reinscribe the violence at his own origins: ‘Michael [...] sees himself mirrored in the sweat breaking through the powdery brow.

That could be my face one day' (BF 246). The effort to create a caesura in history repeats history's violence in an act of fateful mirroring. For Michael, the effort to prevent himself becoming his father paradoxically instantiates that fate in a moment of violent repetition. Difference merely ushers in the deferral of *différance*, situated, emblematically, as in Vladislavić, 'up the incline to the Mall' and its supermarkets (BF 246). The two aspects of the passage ('Michael [...] sees himself mirrored [...] That could be my face one day' – 'He wants to obliterate Du Boise's face') are separated by a paragraph break but cannot be disentangled from one another. They are an instance of undecidability which, far from vitiating ethics, drives the imperative to debate and decide ethically.⁵⁹

What little Dangor's text says about economic factors is expressed, then, via the negotiation of historical difference. That difference is also manifest in the 'minimal pair' constituted by the *supermarket* in Berea and the *mall* in Killarney. The two sites are only a kilometre or so apart as the crow flies, but separated by the M1 motorway and thus by a socio-economic divide which belies their real proximity. In this way, suggests Graham, Dangor 'presents a critique of *uneven development* in the post-apartheid city [...] in a way that emphasizes the perpetuation of the malignities of apartheid, segregation, and patriarchy through the structuring of space and the containment of mobility in contemporary South Africa.'⁶⁰ The difference between the supermarket and the mall is significant: the mall is the spatial intensification of the supermarket, gathering a number of shops and indeed supermarkets into a cluster (the 'super-market'); its typically South African fortress-like structure manifests the transfer of the state-sponsored racial boundaries of the apartheid period to almost identical market-driven socio-economic boundaries of the post-apartheid era. This is why it is not insignificant that the assassination of Du Boise takes place at the entrance to – that is, *outside* – Killarney Mall: the Mall promises choice and inclusiveness, but in effect entrenches previously existing inequities all the more effectively, thus reinscribing history in the moment of its famous abolition:⁶¹

The trauma continues after apartheid. It endures in an overarching psychosocial and economic context of dispossession, of a generalized violence of denial within a paradigm of power that indexes the profound distinction between being in power (the victory of the South African liberation struggle against legal apartheid, beyond even the political compromise of negotiated transition) and

having power (ossified in the enduring political economy of racial identities, specifically whiteness).⁶²

4.

Supermarkets and their cluster-clones, the malls, have become the new common denominators of post-apartheid society. This new status accrues to them by the manner in which they perform simultaneously contradictory socio-economic operations. The ineluctable spread of the supermarkets/malls erases the old spatial, segregationist distinctions (to the extent that they are infiltrating every niche of South African society, from fortress-like mall-precincts of the white suburbs to the poorest townships such as Erkuhuleni or Gugulethu⁶³), but also by the same token entrenching the inequalities inherited from the apartheid era (by the way they perpetuate and aggravate socio-economic divides at the very moment of offering formerly disenfranchised districts the infrastructure of consumer society). Thus, for instance, it may be worth noting that the inroads recently made into the townships by major supermarket chains such as Pick'n'Pay threaten the income and livelihoods of tens of thousands of the owners of so-called spaza shops – small quasi-informal shops, often in the front room of a shack-home, dispersed through townships.⁶⁴ Similarly, the success of Gugulethu mall rested upon the forced eviction and demolition of long-existing smaller retailers and business at Eyona and in the Langa-Gugulethu-Nyanga area which were seen as competitors to the new mall development.⁶⁵ And the ubiquitous, apparently egalitarian spread of the malls conceals the stratified makeup of their portfolio, with high-end outlets and public meeting-spaces largely absent in the township malls.⁶⁶

This paradoxical dynamic of plasticity, permeability and pervasive inequality is prefigured in Vladislavić's satirical novel of the transitional years between the demise of apartheid and its official abolition, entitled *The Restless Supermarket* (2001). (It is perhaps not insignificant that the novel appeared the same year as Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*.) The restlessness of the eponymous supermarket refers initially to the narrator's old haunt, Café Europa, in Johannesburg's erstwhile multicultural – and, as apartheid influx control wanes, increasingly multiracial – inner-city district of Hillbrow: the proprietor considers moving to an all-night service: 'You'd think we were the restless supermarket' (RS 174). This quip is indicative of the constantly accelerating tempo of global capitalism, which, after the years of economic isolation of apartheid boycotts,

impacted upon South Africa all the more rapidly.⁶⁷ Soon the inflection of the term becomes spatial as well as temporal: in the novel-in-the-novel, the narrator's fictional team of proof-readers, determined to clean up the disorder of the increasingly disorderly city-as-text, resolve to shift the supermarket to an outlying suburb of Johannesburg. There, they hope, the civic order of the apartheid era can be reasserted (RS 245). 'But', as the narrator says gleefully, 'the Restless Supermarket outdid itself. It exhausted every potential, it surpassed every anticipation' (RS 250). Vladislavić's characters restore an endangered apartheid order, but their restoration is itself outstripped by their paradigmatic image: that of a supermarket uncontained by temporal or spatial limits in its drive to transform the post-apartheid city along its own lines, those of neoliberal. This is the supermarket become 'hyper-market'.

South Africa's supermarket and malls have become avatars of Augé's non-places,⁶⁸ not merely because of their breathtakingly tinselly vacuousness, but because of their tendency to proliferate everywhere and to convert all aspects of the society they occupy to their own currency of discourse and exchange.⁶⁹ Differences here are reduced to exchange values whose emptiness exemplifies their built-in obsolescence, thereby propelling serial consumption and deferring closure (the spectre of use-value seldom returns), but does nothing to obviate their inaccessibility for the majority. What is lacking is a resistant *différance* generating diversity at the same time as provoking a meditation upon and a practice working towards democratic inclusion and socio-economic integration. This would be the space of deconstruction as it continues to be called forth by the fallacious opportunities and continuing inequalities of South African society.

The triumphant ubiquity of the new malls arises out of a discourse of the (spurious) erasure of difference which suggests that the superficially egalitarian market should – and can – be accessible to all. And indeed, the new supermarkets do gain access to almost every domain of South African urban space. As Teppo and Houssay-Holzschuch observe regarding the mall in Gugulethu township near Cape Town, 'neoliberal processes are so "variegated" that they possess almost infinite plasticity. This adaptability accords them the effectiveness required to permeate local environments – as the case of Gugulethu mall [demonstrates].'⁷⁰ When, in Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*, some of Silas' erstwhile MK (military wing of the ANC) comrades joke to each other 'Borderline, Bo, go home' (BF 68), they both recognize and misrecognize the nature of the new borderlines: far from being relegated to an invisible space outside the public sphere,

they have become more and more visible, traversing every segment of the new, putatively barrier-free post-segregation society; by the same token, however, they have penetrated to the most intimate zones of everyday public life. In contemporary South Africa, the erstwhile distinction between ‘the shopping mall and the shanty town,’⁷¹ though not genuinely erased, is blurring everywhere – but it is simultaneously preserved and intensified by that self-same blurring. As Teppo and Houssay-Holzschuch note, ‘The increase in social polarization *between* contemporary South African city suburbs and townships has been thoroughly established [...] However, this polarization and differentiation also takes place *within* the townships.’⁷² The ubiquitous supermarket, to be found in suburb and township (even adjacent to shanty-towns), are apparently open to all but closed to most. Offering the trappings of a society of consumer choice, like many other features of the rainbow nation, they simply may ‘provide easy symbols of transformation in the post-apartheid era, when substantial redistribution of resources has not been forthcoming’.⁷³

Contemporary Johannesburg, as the emblematic city of post-apartheid South Africa, focalized through these fictions by Mpe, Vladislavić, and Dangor, exemplifies undecidability between a city turned inside-out and the perpetuation of seemingly abolished borders; between the deconstruction of borderlines and their reinforcement; between the existence of subjects who, against all odds, continue to live on borderlines straddling and contradicting the old and new frontiers, but also experience the insidious living-on of those borderlines. Like one of Vladislavić’s characters, who ‘no longer believes she can make a difference; or rather [...] no longer believes in the difference she can make’ (PK 144), South Africa’s liberated subjects live the neoliberal reinscription of old borders in the very experience of crossing them on a quotidian basis.

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¹ I refer in this article to the following texts, in order of appearance: Phaswane Mpe, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (Pietermaritzburg: U of Natal P, 2001) (hereafter WH); Ivan Vladislavić, *Portrait with Keys: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked* (London: Portobello, 2006) (hereafter PK); Achmat Dangor, *Bitter Fruit* (Cape Town: Kwela, 2001) (hereafter BF); Ivan Vladislavić, *The Restless Supermarket*, 2nd ed. (2001; Johannesburg, David Philip, 2006) (hereafter RS).

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- ² Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David Allison (Evanston IL: Northwestern UP, 1973), p.136.
- ³ See Martin J. Murray, *City of Extremes: The Spatial Politics of Johannesburg* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 2011), pp. 87-135.
- ⁴ See for instance Lindsay Bremner, 'Closure, Simulation, and "Making Do" in the Contemporary Johannesburg Landscape', in Okwui Enwezor et.al., eds, *Under Siege: Four African Cities – Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos. Documenta 11_Platform 4* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), p. 153.
- ⁵ Megan Jones, 'Conspicuous Destruction, Aspiration and Motion in the South African Township', *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 14:2 (2013), pp.209-24, here pp.209-10.
- ⁶ On this category, see for instance Miki Flockemann, 'Little Perpertrators, Witness-Bearers and the Young and the Brave: Towards a Post-Transitional Aesthetics', *English Studies in Africa* 53:1 (2010), pp.21-34; Meg Samuelson, 'Walking through the Door and Inhabiting the House: South African Literary Culture and Criticism after the Transition', *English Studies in Africa* 51:1 (2008), pp.130-7.
- ⁷ Compare Jeremy Gilbert, *Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism* (London: Pluto, 2014), pp.18-19.
- ⁸ Hilary Sapire, 'Township Histories, Insurrection and Liberation in Late Apartheid South Africa', *South African Historical Journal* 65:2 (2013), pp.167-98,
- ⁹ Loren Kruger, *Imagining the Edgy City: Writing, Performing, and Building Johannesburg* (New York: Oxford UP, 2014), p.106.
- ¹⁰ T. R. H. Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History*, 4th ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p.556.
- ¹¹ David M. Smith, 'Introduction', in *The Apartheid City and Beyond: Urbanization and Social Change in South Africa*, ed. David M. Smith (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.1-10, here pp.6-7.
- ¹² Hein Marais, *South Africa Pushed to the Limit: The Economy of Political Change* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2011), p.58.
- ¹³ David M. Smith, 'Conclusion', in *The Apartheid City and Beyond: Urbanization and Social Change in South Africa*, ed. David M. Smith (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.314-17, here p.317.
- ¹⁴ Smith, 'Conclusion', p.317.
- ¹⁵ Marais, *South Africa Pushed to the Limit*, pp., 91-3, 105-20
- ¹⁶ Government of Republic of South Africa, *The Abolition of Racially Based Land Measures Act, 1991*, Act 108, Government Gazette, Vol. 312, 28 June 1991.
- ¹⁷ Daniel Plaatjies, 'Introduction: Building State Capacity in Democratic South Africa', in *Future Inheritance: Building State Capacity in Democratic South Africa*, ed. D. Plaatjies (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2011), pp.xxv-xxxiii, here p.xxvii.
- ¹⁸ Anthony Butler, *Contemporary South Africa*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.90-1.
- ¹⁹ Marais, *South Africa Pushed to the Limit*, p.208.
- ²⁰ Smith, 'Conclusion', p.316.
- ²¹ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p.130.
- ²² David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2014, p.2.

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- ²³ Jacques Derrida, 'Living On: *Border Lines*', in Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey H. Hartmann and J. Hillis Miller, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p.75 (total span 75-176).
- ²⁴ On this topic see, for instance, Peter Brooks, with Hilary Jewett, eds, *The Humanities and Public Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Mikhail Epstein, *The Transformative Humanities: A Manifesto*, trans. Igor Klyukanov (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012); Christopher Fynsk, *The Claim of Language: A Case for the Humanities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1996); Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013); Simon Morgan Wortham, *Counter-Institutions: Jacques Derrida and the Question of the University* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).
- ²⁵ A more concrete sense of this micro-topography can be gained by searching for the north-western corner of the intersection Roberts Avenue/Blenheim Street in Google-Maps street-view; the photograph is dated 2009.
- ²⁶ See for instance, Irene Tinker, *Street Foods: Urban Food and Employment in Developing Countries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- ²⁷ See for instance AbdouMaliq Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 2004).
- ²⁸ Butler, *Contemporary South Africa*, pp. 92-3.
- ²⁹ Achille Mbembe, 'Rule of Property versus Rule of the Poor?' *Mail and Guardian* (Johannesburg), 15 June 2012. URL: <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-06-15-rule-of-property-versus-rule-of-the-poor> (retrieved 10 June 2014).
- ³⁰ Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic, eds, *The Endless City: The Urban Age Project by the London School of Economics and the Deutsche Bank's Alfred Herrhausen Society* (London: Phaidon, 2007), p.198.
- ³¹ Kruger, *Imagining the Edgy City*, p.152
- ³² Lindsay Bremner, *Writing the City into Being: Essays on Johannesburg 1998-2008* (Johannesburg: Fourthwall, 2010), p.203.
- ³³ Gerald Gaylard, 'Migrant Ecology in the Postcolonial City in *Portrait with Keys*', in *Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić*, ed. Gerald Gaylard (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011), pp.287-308, here p.306.
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- ⁵⁸ Stephen W. Smith, 'Mandela: Death of a Politician', *London Review of Books* 36:1 (9 January 2014), pp.17-19.
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