Small and joined in print: Ivan Vladislavić, “Tsafendas’s Diary,” and Staffrider magazine (1988)

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ABSTRACT
This essay looks to the presence of the publishing “backroom” in the work of South African writer Ivan Vladislavić. Vladislavić was employed by Johannesburg-based Ravan Press as their Social Studies Editor in 1984; his short, overtly anti-realist story, “Tsafendas’s Diary,” was published in Ravan’s flagship magazine Staffrider in 1988 (7 (1)), notably the first issue to which Vladislavić was formally attached as assistant editor. Prior to its appearance in Missing Persons (1989), Vladislavić’s first single-authored collection, this story’s publication in Staffrider provides an opportunity to revisit its critical ethical drives in ways unavailable in the relatively unitary product of the book. I offer a “small” reading of “Tsafendas’s Diary” in its earliest print context as a formative example of Vladislavić’s unique, cooperative way of working with others, arguing for the various ways the text “joins in” with the overlapping sets of the smaller, centred print communities gathered by the radical activist and anti-apartheid solidarities of the magazine. The centrality of independent publishing, editing and production become legible in this reading, and so, their significance to Vladislavić’s ongoing literary labour and its subtle textual negotiations of his position as a white anglophone writer and editor, art critic and “public intellectual.”

KEYWORDS
Ivan Vladislavić; small magazines; Staffrider; Ravan Press; editing; alternative comics

From the emergence of his first book, Missing Persons in 1989, writer, editor and art critic Ivan Vladislavić has been celebrated as a leading proponent of innovative anglophone fiction writing in and of South Africa. Published by leading oppositional press David Philip into a liminal year for South African politics, rapidly transitional but not yet “post-,” the eleven-strong story collection was heralded locally as an important departure from previous trends in South African short story writing, by turns “showy,” “outrageous,” “astonishing” and “extraordinary” (Murray 1991; Brown 1990; Marais 1992; Morphet [1990] 2011; respectively). Its fantastical, experimental energies were seen as marking a new orientation in the passing of a historical moment; renovating a dominant literary language of social realism conditioned by the political anti-apartheid urgencies of its time; and in its redevelopment of the short story cycle form, effecting a disaggregation of previously held, imagined South African communities (Marais 1992). For one critic, Missing Persons was a book from a thinker “so
thoroughly mediated through the meshes of South African reality, so welded by the metaphor[9] as to fit “the times perfectly”: times and a text, then, in which “anything can happen” (Morphet quoted in Marais 2011, 24).

Since and increasingly, Vladislavić’s body of work has received consecration on the world literary stage, with a series of unconventional, often playful, critically astute prose fictions that refuse explanation for an international audience and that tend to slip market and generic categorisations. Relationships that have developed with international publishers tend towards the values consistent with the small, independent press. With what many see as belated visibility for such an exceptional prose stylist has come renewed recognition of Vladislavić’s role as a “public intellectual,” as Gerald Gaylard and Michael Titlestad’s introduction to a (2006) special issue on his work has it, both in the trajectories of his own writing and in the broader development of South African literary culture: as one of South Africa’s most highly sought after editors (Graham 2007, 2016); as a reflexive art critic and essayist (O’Toole 2017); as well as critical interest in the co-operative, shared art-book projects that he has undertaken with new and established South African visual artists, photographers, architects and curators with concerns and topographical interests proximate to his own, urban in focus, specifically of Johannesburg (Riach 2015; Reid and Graham 2017).

This essay will turn back through these concerns, re-reading a story from Missing Persons in its neglected first publication context and in conjunction with Vladislavić’s “backroom” literary labour. Vladislavić was employed as Social Studies Editor for anti-apartheid publishing house Ravan Press in 1984, a job and position “crucial,” as he describes it, to his “whole sense of the world” (Vladislavić and Warnes 2000, 274). Between 1988 and 1990, then working freelance with the press, he was formally attached as assistant editor to Staffrider, Ravan’s flagship magazine. Notably the first issue Vladislavić edited in this capacity (7 (1)) also carried the first of his own stories to be published in the magazine, “Tsafendas’s Diary” (Vladislavić 1988).

While not the first, nor the only of Vladislavić’s stories from Missing Persons to appear in literary periodicals from Johannesburg-based oppositional publishing houses prior to their collection in the relatively unitary form of the book, Staffrider has particular significance.1 It is the sole example of these early magazine publications to carry his name as both editor and contributor. It therefore represents a decisive stage in the development of a particular kind of creative signature that he goes on to put to shared print products in the post-apartheid period: a range of composite, collectively compiled mixed-media art-books, these span from blank_Architecture, Apartheid and After in 1998, co-edited with Hilton Judin, to the more recent Ponte City (2014), produced with photographers Mikhael Subotsky and Patrick Waterhouse. Through this dual signature, the traditional model of the editorial role as a technical one shifts. It is made more visible in formal recognition of its cross-disciplinary imaginative and conceptual capacities, especially as it becomes intertwined with others’ creative contributions in the context of the collection, so closing the conventionally instituted gap between writing and editing in print production and publication (see Graham 2017).

One of Vladislavić’s most overtly experimental and recognisably postmodern short stories from Missing Persons, “Tsafendas’s Diary” in Staffrider is a key, albeit nascent example in the development of this creative signature and Vladislavić’s unique co-
productive way of working with others. Reading its exuberance through this incipient example of such a combined signature as it marks *Staffrider* magazine in 1988 gives view to the institutional context of Ravan, the environment in which Vladislavić’s dual writer/editor career and working practices were formed. Among the protean network of literary subcultures springing up in defiance of the late-apartheid deformations of the literary establishment, *Staffrider* (1978–1993) was the leading magazine for black cultural and aesthetic activism, outlasting and by far the most popular of the Botha era (1978–1989). From its inception, its model was non-racial, synergistic, with a strong democratising ethos. An emphatic registration of the scope of the small magazine form as a public, participatory forum, through *Staffrider*, Ravan courted the opportunities for writers and readers to enter into critical and co-constitutive relationships with the ideological stance of the publishing house and its production team, its editors and designers.

In the renewed repression of South Africa’s successive states of emergency and cultural isolation through the 1980s, Ravan’s responses to the pressures of the state censor and the apartheid-capitalist, white-owned book trade were key to the opportunities for these co-generative relationships *Staffrider’s* pages were able to offer. Vladislavić’s later cooperative labour can be recontextualised through this arguably “smaller” scene of involvement with Ravan and *Staffrider*, its opportunities for innovation, participation in leftist politics, and social interactions through its communities of print. As I will suggest, it is the set of “small” concerns involved in this publication that opens this text to its “bigger” implications, informing the ways in which “Tsafendas’s Diary” works through its first production context to become a complex site of sociality in itself, a formative instance of what Vladislavić has referred to in an exchange piece with writer S.J. Naudé as the “bonded autonomy of a joint project” (2014).

In a 2011 interview with Paola Splendore, Vladislavić outlines the then decade-long development of this distinctive “bonded” way of writing alongside pre-existing collections of images. In a set of processes initiated by the conceptual artist and friend of Vladislavić’s, Joachim Schönfeldt—whose approach with a set of paintings offered as “illustrations” for an “as yet unwritten text” (Schönfeldt quoted in Vladislavić 2004, 9) provoked Vladislavić to write his self-standing, subtly linked quartet of stories, *The Exploded View* (2004)—Vladislavić describes a kind of force-field of adjacency. Writing “within the magnetic field of another body of work . . . with its own forms and preoccupations,” his own creative production is “nudged into new territory by the proximity of [these] other visions and approaches” (Vladislavić and Splendore 2011, 57–58).

The resulting book products are not made in direct interplay or as a result of a collaborative relationship, where two or more people work together in a process of building a pre-envisioned whole. Less predetermined, the associative links are, rather, textual and relational, made between the writing and the images, with the latter acting as potential “narrative accelerators,” to cite Schönfeldt again (quoted in Vladislavić 2004, 9). Each contributor is thus responsible for self-contained elements that come together as a composite artwork. The individual parts can then go on to lead an “independent life” (Naudé and Vladislavić 2014). Meanwhile, they continue to be of value to and comment on the other because they are also, as Vladislavić elaborates in another interview, “sympathetically enmeshed,” where “sympathy,” he qualifies, encompasses relations that allow for “a degree of antagonism as well as affinity” (Vladislavić and Steyn 2012).
Writing about instances of this “joint” work as they enter the world literary market, James Graham (2017) broadens the lens to include a sociological reading of the significance and economic necessities involved in Vladislavić’s “double life.” Considering examples of the “quieter” labour involved in editing others’ work behind the scenes, as well as those where he is visible as simultaneously editor and contributor, Graham argues that the “comingling” in Vladislavić’s own literary practice of “the work and worlds of editing and artistic production” affords the possibility of “symbolic capital being translated between [their] separate fields” (61). Both the extrinsic, “worldly” artist and aesthetic recognition, and the intrinsic value located in Vladislavić’s editing skill supplement market legitimacy. The cooperative aspects of the working partnerships in the book products that result play a fundamental role in their consecration and marketability; also, as Graham concludes, mitigating the competitive market logic advanced by influential studies of world literary production that see authors “struggling” as lone, discrete actors for national and international commercial recognition. Instead, there is a co-productive leveraging of the “enhanced” because “blurred” and combined cultural capital for everyone involved in the project, and here Graham cites the conviviality of “Howard Becker’s ‘art world’ [as a] ‘network of cooperating people, all of whose work is essential to the final outcome’ (1982: 25)” (66).

“Tsafendas’s Diary” as published in Staffrider in 1988 is an apposite text to consider such “joint,” “comingled,” and cooperative labour. I pick up at the point from which Graham’s analysis of Vladislavić’s post-apartheid work proceeds, looking back to the practices formed within “the apparatus of institutional consecration” of Ravan Press when Vladislavić worked there in the 1980s (Graham 2017, 57). I include the highly localised and unusual publishing environment at Ravan to foreground its significance, and with the magazine’s broad anti-apartheid solidarities in view. In the first part of this essay, I trace the spread of cultural authority and legitimacy between the conventionally demarcated fields of literary and visual arts production which the counter-cultural, multi-modal scope of the magazine opens for Vladislavić’s short experimental story. While not directly the outcome of the joint working processes Vladislavić describes, this instance of publication shares in some of its “jointness,” in its relational dynamics and sidelong bonds, as well as in the enhanced visibility of the results of the immaterial labour and textual production roles that its adjacencies and interconnections bring forward.

As such, I work towards a looser critical filter of “joining in” to denote the formative nature of the kinds of comingled labour that the text performs. In this early institutional context, these connective links also make available some of the more problematic aspects of the mobilisation of symbolic capital that the more radical nature of Staffrider’s interventionist aims afforded its contributors. The positioning of Vladislavić’s story, in the magazine’s body and through its institutional classificatory systems, reflects both the specificities of its publication moment in late apartheid resistance politics of 1988 and Vladislavić’s tenure with Ravan as Social Studies and Fiction editor from 1984. I go on to explore the social nature of editing as part of Ravan’s non-racial collective spaces, for a small independent publisher committed to a revisionist, democratising literary project that took its most energised expression through Staffrider. The final section looks again at the questions of creative labour that the print partnerships of Staffrider raise in relation to Vladislavić’s conception of “joint” work and labour, opening a number of interrelated
concerns with publishing in apartheid South Africa from a site of cultural privilege, and with them, attendant questions of anti-apartheid assembly, custodianship, and proprietary relations.

I favour the term “small” for the magazine and its print affiliations throughout. With a history of an internationally oriented Euro-American avant-garde, and as sites of experimental writing in the self-conscious establishment of alternative creative communities, the modernist “little mag” has consistently raised questions about the place of the popular and elite and the reshaping of national literary imaginaries in relation to existing aesthetic drives and norms. On the one hand,Staffrider shares with the “little” a common grouping of magazines living a “kind of a private life of their own on the margins of culture . . . the gathering places for the ‘irreconcilables’ of . . . literary tradition . . . non-commercial by intent” (Hoffman, Allen, and Ulrich 1946, v). However, in its range of localised interrelationships and exchanges,Staffrider subjects each of these delineations to a series of protean redefinitions, each of which reflects its specific response to the explicit challenges of operation in the constraints of the late-apartheid literary field.

Although Staffrider had some circulation as an international consciousness-raising periodical, at this time in South Africa the alternative magazine form provided an avenue for an intensely local focus and the constitution of smaller and, by their nature, decentred literary publics. My reading of “Tsafendas’s Diary” is also, and correspondingly, “small,” as is the model for reading the text’s internationalist orientation through the multiply affiliative, social connections invited by its first publication context. Removed from the internally referential, associative links bound by the book and story-cycle, “Tsafendas’s Diary” accrues these smaller kinds of connective meanings and bonds, particularly as it is routed by small magazine production through the increasingly complex oppositional culture of the late 1980s.

**Joining in**

Just over halfway through Staffrider’s first issue of 1988 (7 (1)), excerpts from a surrealist, heavy line-drawn sequential graphic narrative splash across a double page spread (62–63), drawn by “proper artist” (Vladislavić and Steyn 2012) and friend Jeff Lok. “Tsafendas’s Diary: the comic-book” (Lok 1988) prefaces Vladislavić’s complete unillustrated text (64–69), reproducing the story’s prose verbatim in its hand-written text boxes. Lok was also Staffrider designer at the time, this issue being the first he was named in this role, so joining Vladislavić’s first-time position as assistant editor for the magazine. Illustrating the story, Lok’s pages do not have the same enigmatic relationship to the work of writing as with the pre-existing body of images of the “joint” project. Yet some similarly “paradoxical” results, as Vladislavić identifies them in his 2012 interview with Steyn, unfold in the reading in terms of the autonomy of each, as they are “nudged” into new territories by Staffrider’s print environment and its conditions of production.

Germane to its oppositional context, “Tsafendas’s Diary” steps in to reoccupy an exceptionally vexed moment in the apartheid narrative, the assassination of its notorious “architect,” “Die Rots” (“The Rock”), Hendrik Verwoerd in 1966. Mortally stabbed as he sat on the front bench of the whites-only chamber of parliament by Demitrios Tsafendas, a lowly uniformed courier and Mozambican citizen of mixed racial descent, the prime minister’s death created a high profile but deeply unstable entry into the national
imaginary. The “murder by farce, by bureaucratic bathos” was tightly controlled by a regime attempting to recuperate the sovereignty of white supremacy (Posel 2009, 343), while the numbing contingencies and absurd contradictions of the racialised legal identity taxonomies that Tsafendas had been subjected to were silenced in state-summoned myth-making.

Relegating the possibility that the act was a conscious decision against the immorality of Verwoerd, or more troublingly on behalf of black South Africans (Thurman 2011, 48), the killing of apartheid’s arch-patriarch was written off as an act of psychosis, his assassin a dismissably “freakish footnote in the liberation story” (Jon Robins quoted in Twidle 2015, 4). He was widely reported as having acted on the instructions of a tapeworm lodged deep in his guts, a monstrous symbol drawn on as legal justification for his sentencing on the grounds of insanity (A Question of Madness 1998) and immediate incarceration under apartheid’s brutal maximum-security conditions. He remained there until 1994 in the longer-term maintenance of the state-draped “veil of silence around Verwoerd’s assassin” (Adams 2018, 916). Popularly known as the “mad Greek,” his legendary name became synonymous with urban and prison slang, from the “arts” of “stabbing in the townships . . . ’I will tsafenda you’” to those of the popular satires in the storytelling of the commuter train and bus, and the street (Ndebele 1984, 47).

Writing into the assassination’s “psychic archive,” in historian Zuleiga Adams’s fitting phrase (2011, 2), itself replete with iconic symbols of the violence and psychotic delusions apartheid was generative of, “Tsafendas’s Diary” is unremittingly restless and unrecuperative. Never directly that of Tsafendas, Verwoerd, or the event itself, like many of the stories in Missing Persons, the narrative charge lies not so much in what it says but in its unspoken and uncanny absences. Preoccupied with its own haunting by other narratives, those writ large or made opaque by apartheid control, its primary motor is the hunt for its ever-elusive titular “master-script,” the “key to all mysteries” (fr. 4, 64). Made up of 22 non-chronological but consecutively numbered short text pieces, narrated by an unnamed boy, in all the immediacy that the present-tense, first-person child’s perspective brings, the Diary’s pursuit circles us around a story dense with anachronisms, legacies and redundancies.

Playing on its own disorienting gaps, the story occupies Broederbond conspiracies in the obscure corridors of apartheid power (Thurman 2011, 58–59) and the confused intensity of the boy’s familial, personal spaces in the disturbed corridors of white suburbia at once. Ranging across temporalities and locations between the assassination and the narrative present, collapsing subjective dreamscapes and verifiable historical detail, we are compulsively returned to a primary scene of a claustrophobic domestic setting, with a cloying two-person cast in the child narrator and his “Granny.” Raising only to disturb the linearity presumed by ordinary apartheid identities, it is Granny who instructs the boy to fetch the relentlessly proper noun throughout that is “Tsafendas’s Diary” from the Police Museum come “Prison” in Pretoria. There, she says, Tsafendas has been held “‘all these years . . . Sitting on his secrets, hatching them out, feeding them from his filthy mouth’” (fr. 9, 66). Shouldering a covert knowledge of the Diary that she refuses to directly impart to the child, she instead architects his imagination to his own realisation of it by means of a set of homely but dangerously shapeshifting things, saturated throughout by satirical metaphors of simultaneous fertility and rot.
She roots his development to the confines of their house, making him keep a fecund pit in their backyard “fed” because “it cannot help itself” (fr. 5, 65), knitting him a “thinking cap” that is also a suffocating “furry stew” come dream percolator, so he can think about “it” there while remaining “incommunicado” (fr. 1, 64). Tacking together a pungent meat-blanket for him, also a “map” to the Diary, a “rambling lopsided … breeding-colony of tassels, pom-poms, fringes and frills” (fr. 8, 65), and, tipping from the macabre into the lampooning exaggerations of the cartoonish, she “drives” him down the Ben Schoeman highway with it in her “motorized rocking chair” (fr. 9, 65–66), so he can “Go in and get it.” “Do not be afraid,” she adds, “no one will suspect a child” (fr. 13, 66). It is Granny, too, who articulates rights to its abstract property, pulling the boy into her assertion of ownership and collective identity, “we are its rightful owners” (fr. 3, 64).

As gatekeeper and caretaker of the Diary’s strange secrets, “off her rocker” Granny (fr. 2, 64) hands the boy her set of injunctions with indirection, deferral and substitution organising their communication. Form augments content, working with the first-person focalisation to dramatise the doubling gestures of fictionalised self-writing – between opacity and transparency, private and public – troubling the authentication of the narrating subject as the sole producer of meaning. Stealing in a playful lightness of touch in the simple ironies of the child’s eye view, while its numerals and assertive “I” indicate the consoling self-fashioning of the diary form, the fragments bounce us around a story of everyday ideological confinement in the white apartheid suburbs. As a metonym, the Diary remains simultaneously closed and the gateway to this formal, narrative and discursive play. Its looming unknowns open the potential of its everyday plot to knowledges and narrativity outside of its shared fields of perception and the “things” it puts forward, ceding out from Granny’s authoritative control to other submerged and indeterminate logics.

In all of its undecidability, slippery locations, sliding signifiers and unstable referents, “Tsafendas’s Diary” reaches beyond itself for broad and diffuse intertextual connection. Read through the associative bonds in operation across the stories of Missing Persons, literary critical reception is dominated by a concern with the story’s recalcitrance and how its disconcerting abstractions might form the ground for its metafictional possibilities (Marais 2011; Thurman 2011; Twiddle 2015). Focusing primarily on the shared characters and setting of the other of the stories in the collection that revisits Verwoerd’s assassination, “The Prime-Minister is Dead,” these potentials are regenerated through the backyard that features in both: part of the “compost from which these stories grow,” in Alf Wannenberg’s review (1990, 84), coming to signify the “adult world [of the] implied writer and reader” (Marais 2011, 32).

Invited in to the world-making of “Tsafendas’s Diary” in possibilities that its deferrals and substitutions offer, we are forced to occupy the story’s instability as we read it. Tied up in the “amalgam of guilt, dream and delirium” that Marais identifies in the child’s dislocating fantasies and projections (2011, 31), we must acknowledge it and the ways that this “adult world” and narrative position is unavoidably dependent on, even productive only because of Granny’s grotesquely embodied “mysteries of meat and the imagination” (fr. 4, 64). When she claims to have had the Diary “all along” in fragment 18 (68), it is in the reappearance of the same “long black ribbon” she knits in fragment 10. There its “fanged head” is “buried in the fleshy folds of her hands;” the body, “fat and
bloated” is “heaped coil upon coil” (fr. 10, 66); its flicking tail in the corner of the room, ominously reminiscent of the curling one on the boy’s thinking cap and the “social alibi” of Tsafendas’s talking tapeworm.

With the understanding that Granny’s possessions cannot be but possessed by other things comes the sense that Granny is also divided. “Other” than and to herself, she is consumed by the demented narrative work of the apartheid’s originary constructions, its secrets and veiled events, even “the killer” himself (fr. 11, 66). The underlying threat of assimilated apartheid complicities is redoubled as, in his thinking about “it,” the boy begins to take control of a number of Granny’s “tools:” with her crochet-meat hook, he “knots” and crafts his own versions of the Diary/blanket while personifying “Death” (fr. 20, 69), becoming sole inheritor and feeder of what she calls simply “the earth.” When eventually, the connecting thread of Granny’s knitted Diary-ribbon-worm exceeds itself to unravel and ingest her, muffling her in a “wringing heap” (fr. 18, 69), her similarly multivalent timekeeping chair rocks her “to the mouth of the grave” to cook “in the meaty broth” of the backyard. In one of the story’s most macabre turns, the boy is compelled to continue to “take up [his] spade,” digging his Granny’s ham-like body and her knitting in to its “insatiable” maw, as “bones . . . blankets . . . papers” and running ink add to its mulch (fr. 21, 69).

Christopher Thurman (2011) conceptualises the boy’s labour literarily. Noting the allusion to Seamus Heaney’s poem “Digging,” Thurman argues for the boy’s sustenance of the pit as an acceptance of apartheid inheritance and constraint, a striking metaphor for the challenge of “trying to find a position . . . [as] a ‘white writer’” (63–64), entering what Vladislavić labels the “big public spectacle of apartheid” (in discussion with Thurman, 63). This is persuasive, bringing forward the imaginative re-rendering of the National Party’s ameliorative narrative of the “mad Greek” and, in its repressed return, the story’s own “critique of white South Africa at large which, persuaded . . . to give either tacit or vocal support to the apartheid state, brought a kind of trauma upon itself” (Thurman 2011, 59). Neglected in analysis, however is this compact text’s recourse to the languages of the visual, to art, museum and gallery practices and, significantly, to their contexts of consumption. In the visually distinct bibliographic surrounds of Staffrider and through the dynamic interrelations with Lok’s comic, the story’s own engagements with visual cultures as liberating narrative reorientations of the apartheid archive are condensed. Tracing various creative and production-based decisions unavailable in its book format, this visual arts emphasis also amplifies the story’s displacement of the individual writing hand through the contextual surrounds of Staffrider’s collective venue.

Despite standing at just two excerpted pages, Lok’s comic book renditions are attuned to the story’s zanier experiments, its multiply fragmented topographies, temporalities and authorities. All three of the story’s primary locations, Parliament, the Police Museum, and Granny’s meaty thinking-cap in the boy’s bed at home, are pictured. But it is the expressionistic style and darkness of mood that brings forward the story’s neuroses and delusional qualities, recalling the anarchic “art-zine” aesthetic borne from the radical underground of the early 1980s New York comics movement (see e.g., Art Spiegelman and Francoise Mouly’s Raw). The vehemence with which the deceptively simple black and white strokes are committed to the page foregrounds the narrative’s paranoiac instabilities, their potency and immediacy signalling its nightmarish scenario.
“Alternative comix” legacies of the 1960s, owing to Dada, junk and pulp collage, add to the countercultural aesthetic economies in play, combining the melodrama of Lok’s illustrations with the distillations of the form. While the graphics lose the text piece’s chronological numerals, the mounting tension in the boy’s grasp at managed disorder and self-consolation, inferred by the story’s separated text blocks and echoes of the personal journal, finds visual emphasis in the “blanks” of the comic’s gutter spaces, their conveyance of the passage of time and movement between the fullness of the static panel images they connect (McCloud 1993, 63). Panel and text-caption, the handwritten box-in-a-box mounting of the story’s prose, reasserts its trapped, confessional vein and claustrophobia, while images overspill to break the restraint of all organising frames, reflecting its surreal excesses.

Comics is a medium “seductively visual and radically fragmented” (Hatfield 2005, xiii). Its polysemiotic character and inherent plurality allows the eye to play around the particular syntax of the comics page – its patchwork of panels, frames, gutters and text boxes – in time and space at once. The linear processes of reading written language are mediated by the different temporalities of looking at images, in an art founded “not only on illustration but on a flow, a guided course of reading in which images and language propel each other” (Gunning 2014, 37). Enabling a focus on the interweaving of its complex narrative processes, both temporally and spatially, these dynamic text/image interrelations foreground the involvement of the reader in the generation of meaning. Something Hillary Chute and Patrick Jagoda designate as a “ludic engagement” (2014, 1), reading comics is “significantly about the aesthetics of attention – the fullness of concentration required to absorb its narrative or discursive procedures” (4). The reading eye is simultaneously steered and liberated, freer to “choose a route which follows the contours of their personal interest” (Sabeti 2012, 172).

Employing reader-response theories to teenagers’ experiences of reading graphic novels, Shari Sabeti’s study (2012) demonstrates that these choices and self-determining processes can extend to the full-length object the reader holds, flicking back and forth, in and out, finding routes through according to individual preference. With this and the multi-modality of the magazine in mind, Lok’s comic appears to come on the scene of “Tsafendas’s Diary” in Staffrider as its singularly well-suited formal partner, and in more ways than may first meet the eye. Both “Tsafendas’s Diary” texts are reflexively involved in their own avant-gardist experiments with the formal demands of the story’s fragmented form. As they proceed across Staffrider, an extra-semantic language emerges between them in common – between narrative and spectacle, wholeness and break, interstice and continuity – perforating the smoothness of each of their pages’ surfaces. As they each formally attest to the ungovernable fractures involved in “Tsafendas’s Diary,” they do so, both, as strikingly visual and spatial texts. So comingled, they are also conjoined by the paratextual bibliographic environment between Staffrider’s covers, where the signifying system that is the magazine we hold is concentrated by the openness of the form to multiple modes and materials.

A vital part of Staffrider’s irreverent disturbance of the “polite” literary site, visual cultures were as central to the magazine’s re-envisioning of otherwise obscured apartheid spaces as the intentionally disruptive steer of its new written aesthetics. Established in 1978 as a community oriented magazine intended to fill the gap created by the banning of progressive black organisations in the wake of the 1976
Soweto Uprising, *Staffrider* welcomed and networked a range of contributors, established and new. Held to the common interest account of vital creative and critical energies generated by oppositional processes not recuperable in conventional print publications, the volume and variety of *Staffrider* content is remarkable for its shelter and its exposure of multiple, because racialised, epistemologies, geographies and modernities. Publishing “stories, poetry, plays, essays, visual art, and social documentary photography, as well as interviews with writers, musicians, and working people” (Oliphant 1990, 360), from its earliest issues, the magazine reached an expanded audience, entering homes and everyday intimacies previously absented from segregated national imaginaries.

Signalling its more populist ambitions (McDonald 2009, 144), the legitimation of established literary forms, the various locations, authorities and ascriptions to liberal political economies that underwrite them, were undercut by the magazine’s strong visual dynamic. A series of dynamic off-page *Staffrider* initiatives and community meetings were returned between the covers in print, including oral performances, writing and visual arts workshops, photography exhibitions and trade-union and worker gatherings. Contributing to the magazine’s generic and non-hierarchical admixture, this expanded print map and its diffuse socialisations drew attention to the roles of broad cultural intervention in resistance and protest politics: the importance of the graphic artist as a “cultural worker” (Mnyele 1988, 297–302); and unusually, even in the network of small magazine cultures that incorporated visual cultures, the significance of documentary photography to localised expressions of the popular anti-apartheid movement (Ozynski 1988, 163–164).

*Staffrider*’s commitment to a social witness function takes its clearest realisation in new arrangements and exchanges between the lively strategies of popular print cultures (Manase 2005). Critical visual interventions supported the magazine’s textual range, appearing as cover art, artistic illustrations and in the designated pictures’ sections of the magazine. Providing non-prescriptive connective relationships, these arrangements make space for the declamatory and the everyday, conveying the magazine’s creative non-conformism and sense of a life beyond its own institutions, even its pages. Typography and hand-drawn illustrated captions combined with innovative, often unruly layout to acknowledge more resonant subjects and topographies, particularly in the early issues of the magazine, where attribution included community group affiliation and its location. Criticisms levelled at *Staffrider* about its promotion of the single dimensionality of cultural production “weaponised” in the service of the struggle, its alignment with an “aesthetic of flags and fists” (Lesley Lawson quoted in Godby 2004, 37), can be seen to be mediated by the refusal of unitary page compositions found in these more complex, collage-like sets of interrelations between the visual and written fields.

In “search of symbolic attachment” as well as “a job description along with some solutions to the dilemmas of a young writer,” in his first working days as a Ravan editor in 1984, Vladislavić turned to the magazine, noting the social and political import of its “striking . . . sense of place”:
Here was a South Africa in which Meadowlands and Morningside were on the same page, where Douglas Livingstone of Durban and Mango Tshabangu of Jabavu were side by side, with nothing between them but a stretch of paper and a 1-point rule. The resonance of such a simple idea is almost impossible to recapture now, but in the demented, divided space of apartheid it was bracing. All the other borders the magazine crossed between fiction and autobiography, written and spoken word, lyrical flight and social documentary rest on that first idealistic gesture. The magazine belongs to all who live in it. (Vladislavić 2008)

By 1988, when the two “Tsafendas’s Diary” texts made their way across these, their Staffrider pages, they could be affirmed as doubly cooperative: joining in with each other, they are also joined with and by the lively experimental energies necessitated by Staffrider’s anti-apartheid solidarities. With Vladislavić wielding the editorial “blue pencil” and Lok handling visual design, both in production roles invested with the powers to decide who should or should not come to “live” in the magazine, a set of relations also emerge in the story/comic print partnership that are less assimilable in the flat structures and unity that acts and movements of solidarity imply.

As Staffrider expanded and diversified the public voice, it became an increasingly important site for the arbitration and “guardianship” of the emergent cultural expressions its platform enabled. The print communities gathered together by Staffrider’s pages saw “Tsafendas’s Diary” emerge into 1988’s first issue marked both by the “radical transformative possibilities the eighties espoused” (O’Brien 2001, 1–6) and the “balkanisation” of the cultural imagination (Chapman 1996, xvi), which in literary debate had taken much of its moral authority around genre and form: in anglophone terms, “black,” Africanist-focused social and mimetic realism, politicised with the aim of minimising the boundaries between literature and materialist, social discourse; and “white,” abstracted and “European” postmodernist aesthetics, more conventionally evaluated as “literary” and politically unengaged; as well as an “anguished” Anglo-American liberal realism, affective positions formed in relations of sympathy with the oppressed, associated with the maintenance of literary norms in the name of universalised humanist values (Mkhize 2001). “Tsafendas’s Diary” is an example of a deliberate departure from the politicised confines and what Vladislavić has seen as the “trap” of realism, in favour of the Euro-American avant-garde and the experimental Afrikaans literature he has cited as a direct inspiration for his own fiction (Vladislavić and Warnes 2000, 274). Its surrealist Anglo-European experimentalism takes up, sidesteps and negotiates these divided archives of literary “commitment” in itself.

Conspicuous as it is among the literary expressions predominating the magazine, the visual emphasis and translation into the explicit informality of the comic that Lok’s graphics bring to their neighbourly cohabitation of Staffrider affords “Tsafendas’s Diary” a distinctly ambivalent place in the magazine’s own self-consciously demotic project. In the array of other popular visual arts so central to Staffrider’s dissenting cultural capital, Lok’s is the first example of a hand-drawn sequential narrative graphic, as distinct from the single frame cartoon or comics aesthetic. While there is evidence of a vibrant fotoboekie (photobook) comics reading culture in South Africa at the time, and one that forged an actively interracial readership (Saint 2010), in 1987, underground artist Andy Mason (in Brown and Van Dyk 1991, 425) described the alternative comics scene
as “pitifully retarded” by South Africa’s cultural isolation. “Undesirable” to the point of moral panic in the controlled environment of Afrikaner censorship (Sanders 2006), and an “uncomfortable fit between the perceived needs of a South African political movement and a popular art form whose aesthetics and conventions derive from the United States” (Brown and Van Dyk 1991, 425), this lone appearance of the “foreign” medium in the radically oriented Staffrider is notable.

Lok’s is an energetically subversive visual, produced as a member of the performance-based, influential Possession Arts, a febrile Dada-derived art collective active in the South African cultural underground of the 1980s (O’Toole 2017, 17). Drawn by the magazine’s designer, its “easy,” “reading gateway” form absorbs the “difficult” literary experimentalism of the story it depicts, a text penned by the issue’s assistant editor. From their relative positions of power in their publishing and production roles with the magazine, the partnership that the two Diary texts establish in print in the magazine concentrates their common setting of the white suburbs in the Afrikaner state stronghold of Pretoria. From this locale, they open the veiled archive of the “mad Greek” in all of what Hedley Twidle (2015) refers to as its “unusability” for the moral certainties and rational collective processes assumed by resistance politics. In terms of available aesthetic positions, the “whiteness” of these social, spatial connections, predicated on apartheid cultural economic privilege, is emphasised by the internationalist-facing, cosmopolitan trajectories of their chosen modes of anti-apartheid expression.

**Small print matters**

Compounding the questions of access, education and socio-economic mobility that the Vladislavić/Lok print partnership in Staffrider emphasises, this “Tsafendas’s Diary” publication comes forward as an aggregate of “small” forms: the short story, the comic, and, in Staffrider, the small magazine. Published from a small alternative press, circumventing the censor and the subsequent conservatism of the South African book trade, these are ephemeral forms, necessarily responsive to the strategies and conditions of their production, circulation, dissemination and consumption. With an intensive relationship to their often loyal specialist readerships and communities, their localities and time, they perform a series of indirect relations to commodity culture, commercial requirements and to canon-formation, requesting attention to the fullness of their material lives.

In a short comparative sketch for Poetry magazine, “Secret Labor” (2013), comics theorist Hillary Chute offers a useful stage from which to ground the “small work” of Lok’s graphics with “Tsafendas’s Diary” in Staffrider magazine. Working towards a sense of the materiality and dynamism of comics’ graphic and narrative functions, Chute engages with Johanna Drucker’s writing on the avant-garde poetic page to view the language of comics as enacted across a “space of performance,” and “a site-specific medium” (2013, stress in original). Drucker’s insights about the subversive play of Tristan Tzara’s Dadaist poetic experiments “unlock” a key aspect of the “spatially fixed grammar” of comics for Chute. The eye perceives the visual information “as material in its own right,” as she quotes Drucker on reading concrete poetry, one in a set of discrete compositional elements that exist meaningfully in relation to its others. The dual semiosis of the page is set in motion by an attentive reader enacting complex interactions with comics’ “‘secret language’ (to use a phrase of Art Spiegelman’s).” Chute’s titular and
thematic quote riffs from this, Spiegelman’s conceptual construct, and another from an earlier interview with the equally influential comics practitioner Scott McCloud (Chute 2007), that “comics is ‘secret labor in the aesthetic diaspora.’ . . . Nobody picks up a comic off the stands and gasps in admiration at all the unnecessary panels that were left out. You don’t see that – it’s secret, it’s hidden.”

With these practice-based quotes underlying, Chute cedes into another series of theoretical points, implicitly made, bringing with them to the one space of the comics’ page: the special alchemical relationship that results from the word-image relation in the form; the status debates of comics as “art” in the shape of a sophisticated comics’ reader also literate in the political clout of the aesthetic strategies of the poetic avant-garde; and the critical intellectual work involved in comics’ conception, crafting and production. Thus, the conception of the “secret labour” of comics takes us beyond their paper and ink. Tacitly evoking the embodied materiality that is comics’ constitutive feature, in the hands that draw, construct, circulate and eventually hold, share and read them, the bodies behind the more abstracted mechanisms of valuation and consecration also come into view. Relocated to Staffrider’s first issue of 1988 and reorienting attention to its “small print,” “Secret Labor” provides a compact entry point to the social and material ways “Tsafendas’s Diary” and its comic book adaptation work through the specificities of the magazine’s mixed bibliographic environment.

As the two “Tsafendas’s Diary” texts begin to perform across Staffrider’s set, with Ravan’s oppositional democratising stance as its backdrop, a more multiply and “secretly” signed text lifts from the multiply figured “labour” of their pages, proffering alternative, extratextual invitations to join us in to its making. Coming to Lok’s graphics first, we are thrust in medias res to each of Lok’s pages’ respective excerpts (62–63). Both are interrupted and interrupitive, performatively incomplete. Subdividing each of the story’s narrative fragments through its own formal language of panel and handwritten text-box within their boxes, each “beginning” of each excerpted page requires us to turn the pages forward and back again through Vladislavić’s unillustrated text for narrative understanding, and for each of their completion and entry points. This is an authority and narrative desire both evoked and frustrated in the unfound, unrealised nature of the “Diary” the story goes on to relate. The linked work-in-process effect that results graphically illustrates “Tsafendas’s Diary” as a story multiply figured and intertextually co-generative.

To borrow again from adaptation and comics studies, readers encountering “Tsafendas’s Diary” for the first time in Staffrider do not experience Lok’s “adaptation as adaptation” in any straightforward sense (Linda Hutcheon quoted in Sabeti 2012, 175). Unintroduced, untitled, the comic’s credit comes in the form of an unobtrusive label in the bottom right-hand corner, the only extra-graphic typeface on the page: “Excerpts from a comic-book by Jeff Lok, based on the story “Tsafendas’s Diary” (63). “[B]ased on,” interpreting the story, the comic comes “after” it. However, in the order we come to it, led by strength of Lok’s graphics and “easy” demotic form in the visual-spatial environment of the magazine’s developing topographies, and in its selective repetition of Vladislavić’s sentences as they are absorbed into its text-boxes, the relations the organisation sets up begin to muddle the hierarchies of the textual authority conferred by Vladislavić’s postmodern, “literary” credentials, that would consecrate it as the world of the “original.”
This gestures to the magazine’s levelling of textual elitism in the interactions between its literary and visual fields, inviting while not prescribing a particular kind of close attention to their blurring and textual interrelations. Beginning to indicate proprietary rights in their discrepancy, though they are cheek-by-jowl in their formal cleaving and this conjoined attribution in the body of the magazine, the two versions are more decisively separated on the issue’s Contents page: “Tsafendas’s Diary” by Ivan Vladislavić is listed under the page’s opening category of “Short Stories;” “Tsafendas’s Diary: the comic-book” is attributed solely to artist “Jeff Lok,” coming under the penultimate grouping of “Visuals/Graphics.” A flick of the eye across to the issue’s inside cover and the legal copyright functions of its explanatory front-matter pluralises the business further. The publishing line up lists Andries Oliphant as Editor and Vladislavić as Assistant Editor, followed by the seven-strong group of the magazine’s “Editorial Advisors,” rounded up by acknowledging Lok as its Designer. Sitting just below this register, a selective “Notes on some contributors” informs us that Ivan Vladislavić is “an editor at Ravan [whose] stories have appeared in South African and American journals,” and Jeff Lok, “a book designer and graphic artist working at Ravan Press.”

The crediting variance may appear to be minor, a difference in emphasis rather than in kind. Yet through its gap and invitation for the reader to turn the pages to locate narrative order, an alternative, composite “Diary” text lifts between the two versions, somewhere between production and consumption. Imaginatively constructed by the reader from the interactions and exchanges between the two, this is an experience of text that is manifestly plural as it is social, paradoxically both more thickly handled and involved in the materiality of the magazine and abstractly extra-textual, individually “made” in a creative, interpretive space beyond what appears in print. While ostensibly co-authored by Vladislavić (story/text), Lok and Vladislavić/Lok (visuals and comic book), as the reader is invited “in,” the texts’ positioning also directs attention to the involvement of the other roles that these names co-sign (editorial and design). These movements broaden the text-based sociality to those of the other hands in its “authoring,” including the wider advisory set in a spread beyond the day-to-day publishing staff.

Decisions that are more usually confined to the legal matter or the private marginalia of the publishing archive become legible in the making of “story” and “text,” acknowledging the shared nature of its spaces and the smallness of the press it comes from. This accesses another facet of the “quieter” and “smaller” ways that “Tsafendas’s Diary” joins in with its first publication context, signalling, too, the riskier entanglements involved in literary production in South Africa’s racially mandated marketplace as Staffrider adapted to commercial shifts in the politics of late-apartheid. What Vladislavić describes as his formal attachment to the magazine begins with this first issue in 1988, continuing through to 1990, assistant editing volumes seven, eight and nine with Oliphant at the helm, a partnership which included two co-edited special issues: the commemorative anthology Ten Years of Staffrider (which took the place of 7 (3&4)); and the Worker Culture issue in 1989 (8 (3&4)). Prior to these conjoined creative and editorial signatures (Lok/Vladislavić, Oliphant/Vladislavić), Vladislavić’s work with Staffrider began as an editor for Ravan.
**The small press**

Vladislavić was one of a number of young editors taken on in 1984 as part of an experiment by then director of the press, Mike Kirkwood. Enabled by an injection that year of donor funding from anti-apartheid bodies, mainly in Europe, Kirkwood set about devolving the management structure. He set up the non-racial Ravan Trust, a body of notable, socially committed figures who would hold the majority of its shares without expectation of financial return and oversee Ravan’s overall policies, and formalised a related collectivist day-to-day staff operation (Moss 1997, 17–19). A point of renewed freedom from the needs of commercial viability for Ravan, these processes re-energised Kirkwood’s materialist project. Taking up his directorship of Ravan in 1978, Kirkwood had established Ravan as the home of *Staffrider*; building a literary list that aligned with his conception for Ravan as a “transitional” publisher, he simultaneously tapped into a current of academic writing that prioritised social histories and voices “from below,” coming to operate, as Vladislavić recalls, as an informal arm of Wits University Press (personal interview with author, 2010).

Vladislavić has noted the significance of the exposure and immersion of the social working environment at Ravan. Sitting together in the single office space in the Ravan house in downtown Johannesburg, the editors “talked and joked, overheard one another’s telephone conversations, edited and argued” (Vladislavić 2014). In this informal capacity, Vladislavić read pieces for the magazine at others’ requests alongside the main work on his desk in his role as Social Studies editor (personal interview with author, 2012). These consensus-based editorial practices developed from those which emerged in the more radical approach of the earlier founding of *Staffrider*. A poet and literary academic, and a fierce critic of the exclusivity of universalist norms put forward in the guise of aesthetic standards in contemporary white liberal journals (Oliphant [1991] 2001), Kirkwood brought to Ravan his experience of founding and editing, with Tony Morphet, *Bolt* (1970–1975), the magazine of the literary society at the University of Natal. Although *Bolt* had encouraged, received and published black writing, by 1978, urgent calls for self-sufficiency from Black Consciousness and Africanist adherents had become acute. Working particularly closely with Mothobi Mutloatse, a writer and journalist who would go on to co-found and manage black publishing house Skotaville in 1982, Ravan put *Staffrider* into production as a literary magazine able to “respond to the new creative forces inside South Africa” (Kirkwood 1980, 22).

The unattributed editorial comment opening the first issue of the magazine, “About *Staffrider*” (1 (1), 1978), announced it as an “attempt to respond, as publishers” to “the new writing … alter[ing] the scope and function of literature in South Africa” by harnessing the “‘direct line’ to the community in which the writer lives.” This move towards writers’ groups and so to community-based “prose forms … re-emerging in a new mould” overlapped with another of the magazine’s primary innovations: the active deauthorisation of the white publisher/editor role. The same anonymised voice of “the publishers” in “About *Staffrider*” declared the magazine to be the collective editorial property of its contributors, the aim “not to impose ‘standards’ but to provide a regular meeting place for the new writers and their readers.”
Indicating some of the practical complications of this community-based self-definition as a strategy for literary production in apartheid South Africa, the first copyright notice that conferred ownership rights to individual authors self-identifying as “Staffriders” was introduced in 1980. This remained the magazine’s standard until its close in 1993. Also in 1980, Kirkwood persuaded writer and editor Christopher Van Wyk to return to Ravan with Wietie, one of the smallest of the small-run contemporary magazines at just a single issue, immediately banned on the grounds of obscenity and sedition (Gardiner 2002, 23). Van Wyk had set up Wietie with Hazel Johennesse in explicit rejection of the effects on new black literary writing of Staffrider’s early “loose editorial policy [and] … system of self-editing” (Van Wyk and Oliphant 1988, 166). Addressing the uneven “political megaphone” (Vladislavić 2008) reputation of Staffrider’s literary contributions, Van Wyk established more regulatory editorial policies, coming to function as a form of informal mentorship for contributors who, as Vladislavić relates, arrived “at the [Ravan] house like pilgrims from all over the Rand” (Vladislavić 2014).

In turn, these evolving publishing practices mapped complex shifts in political allegiance across the assorted localising nodes of the magazine’s varied print communities. Reflecting the elongated period of transitional culture-building, these affiliations gathered across the grassroots collectives and non-racial umbrella organisations, which “in the early Eighties began to marginalise Black Consciousness and reassemble intellectual and social life around the forces of the ANC, the UDF, Cosatu and, in terms of writing, the non-racial Congress of South African Writers” (Chapman 1990, 379). As the magazine evolved in response to the changing needs of its print public through its lifetime, Ravan’s operational model continued to draw its cooperative ethos and intellectual energies from the blueprint of its early “in a sense” editorial collective and “spread of the decision-making process”: from those who “found,” discussed and worked on the magazine in its early years in the Ravan office – and Kirkwood (1980) acknowledges the influence of Jaki Seroke, Matsemela Manaka and Mutloatse – to the “great many people” who contributed to Staffrider’s wider site, including the anonymous “those” whose marks were made “invisibly, with a blue pencil” (Kirkwood 1988, 10).

Circulating in a “culture of excisions” (Nuttall 2002, 288), these anonymous marks in the context of Staffrider’s public role, non-racial and officially politically unaligned (Penfold 2017, 48), persistently returned the magazine to the structural conditions of operation of the press and the anomalies of white capital, a black readership and post-liberal paternalism. Speaking from Skotaville as a black publisher, Seroke (1985) decried the era’s “repressive tolerance” in censorship as “sensitive literature [circulating] among the educated, the politicised, so that the converted would be speaking to the converted;” he explicitly aligns restrictions on the black imagination with paranoias about the anonymity of the “blue pencil,” a facelessness deployed at the end of a white apartheid arm. Ari Sitäs’s combative response to Albie Sachs’s liberalising proposal to ban the phrase “culture is a weapon of the struggle” in a position paper to the ANC in 1989 returned wholesale to aesthetic standards imposed by a colonial intellectual elite and the patronisation of the “donor” experience of Dlomo, Biko and other Black Consciousness writers, as he castigated “the castrating practices of Ravan Press editors” (quoted in Ménager-Everson 1992, 62).
Epitomising Ravan’s revisionist print activism, Staffrider was at the heart of Kirkwood’s successive attempts to collectivise and address the conflicts of running as a “white quasicommercial publisher committed to publishing black writing” (McDonald 2009, 143). The first issue of Staffrider in 1988, the first that carries Vladislavić’s name, demonstrates a “normalisation,” as Anthony O’Brien (2001) terms it, in South Africa’s move towards the negotiated settlement of the early 1990s and re-entry on the global stage, demonstrating the instability of Ravan’s egalitarian experiment with it. Of note is the single annual issue preceding it in 1987 (6 (4)): with no named editor or team, it is left to its back cover to announce a series of “new features” for its upcoming tenth year and “new phase of growth.” The second of the 1980s states of emergency in 1987 imposed tighter media restrictions and wide-ranging prohibitions on any statements considered to be subversive: Ravan was anonymously firebombed, a targeted attack on its radical position; the Botha government moved to restrict foreign donor support for the internal democratic movement altogether, a wider threat to the independent funding possibilities of alternative publishing and its ecosystems (McDonald 2009, 154).

By Staffrider’s tenth year, in “the progressive collapse of Ravan’s internal structures” (Moss 1997, 19), Van Wyk and Vladislavić had resigned, although both retained links with the press as freelance editors and authors; Kirkwood had left South Africa. After a brief management interregnum, Glenn Moss, co-founder and up to then editor of progressive, intellectually oriented magazine Work in Progress (1977–1994), was appointed as director to establish a “conventional hierarchy” and return the press to a related commercial model. Andries Oliphant became editor of the magazine, and in consultation with the Ravan staff, reconstituted its editorial policy and direction (Oliphant 1990, 259). Staffrider’s new look for 1988 heralds a move to a managed, forward facing vision. A precursor to the decisive cultural and political shift at the turn of the decade, the issue formalises a number of new first-named roles, including Vladislavić, now working independently for the press as assistant editor, and Lok as its designer. The magazine’s new editorial board consciously echoed the make-up of the dissolved body of the Ravan Trust, with advisers “consisting of representatives from the literary, visual, and performing arts, music and theatre worlds, and popular history,” ensuring continuity of its popular appeal and “principles of non-racialism and non-sexism” (Oliphant 1990, 359).

Perhaps most significantly, Oliphant’s “Comment” (1988, 2–3) is the first editorial for the magazine since its abdication was announced in the founding issue. While Oliphant reconfirms Staffrider’s space as a social forum, inviting participation and comment, his is a determinedly scholarly introduction. Intellectually oriented to literature as the magazine’s primary response to broader cultural currents in a progressively plural society, it warns that it will regard as “comical,” any simplification “foisted on [it] . . . from the vantage points of historical and political reductionism or idealist transcendentalism” (3). The position of Staffrider, in terms of the contestations around the local literary field it had itself welcomed to its pages and the “real differences in politics and aesthetics” which, as Vladislavić later concedes, “could not be resolved in the layout” (2008), becomes clear in the reconceptualisation of audience and address.
Reading small professional mysteries

“Tsafendas’s Diary” troubles the expectations of the then established literary modes of anti-apartheid commonality and moral “responsibility” demanded by its iniquities, and in the process, those of Staffrider as its primary shared forum. That Vladislavić’s self-consciously and recognisably “literary” story appears in this issue of Staffrider, the first that he edits independently for the Press and a year ahead of Missing Persons, suggests some continuing stake in the print activist, cooperative possibilities of the magazine’s changed platform and an institutional organisation more accommodating of its startling postmodernity. I return to the fantastical, metanarrative qualities of “Tsafendas’s Diary” now in light of its inclusion of the languages of the visual arts and the exhibition.

Through the story, I read traces of the complex positions of cultural brokerage and authority, the combination of custodianship and excision, that Vladislavić’s situation as a white, middle-class anglophone writer and editor necessitates. The narrative position of “Tsafendas’s Diary” both occupies and displaces the singular authority of its own writing hand, opening it simultaneously to an artist’s imaginary and a custodian role. Although these positions can be read in the context of Missing Persons, they are indexed by the story’s Staffrider publication, and print partnership with Lok and the comic in particular, traversing the multiple authorities and the politicised divisions of the cultural fields its aggregation of small forms brings together. It is through the legibility of different forms of aesthetic labour, the “comingling” of the “work and worlds of editing and artistic production” in Graham’s words (2017, 61), that the centrality of Vladislavić’s formative institutional experience with Ravan comes through, reaffirming the text’s ethical capacities in ways unavailable in the book.

Vladislavić approaches the boy’s understanding of Verwoerd’s assassination and “the Diary” most directly in interlinked visions prompted by Granny’s meaty “thinking-cap.” Each contain examples of “notional ekphrasis” (Hollander 1988) in the boy’s fictional narrative “voice,” describing and so creating the “silent” fictional art object for a reader/viewer to “see.” In the first, the boy’s ethical urge takes shape in a very mature dream: he is “the curator at the Houses of Parliament,” peeling back its “desert of grey carpet” for tourists to view “the historic bloodstains” where “Tsafendas slaughtered the Prime Minister” (fr. 7, 65). Following Granny’s map to the recesses of the Police Museum, “(past Dangerous Weapons, Forgery, Terrorism and Ritual Murders)” (fr. 13, 67), instead of the Diary the boy finds a conceptual artwork, hidden behind a black curtain: across a miniature landscape comprising hill, suburb and veld held in a glass cabinet, a “perfect fluorescent arc” traces the passage of a bullet from a man’s rifle pointed at the sky directly into the brain of a young girl in bed (fr. 15, 67); another cabinet displays a “piece of corrugated iron with a hole in it and a bullet dangling on a length of string” (fr. 15, 67). These “installations” are tangentially coupled to another: as the boy’s “thinking cap outdoes itself” (fr. 17, 67), he finds himself in a burning “forest of fluorescent arcs,” one of which has its roots in the “sweaty palm of Tsafendas’s right hand” while its other end “shafts the Prime Minister’s brittle skull, and bursts into bloom” (fr. 17, 67–68).

These metatextual shifts to visual-spatial languages are the story’s most exciting and liberating moments, travelling relatively independently to break out beyond the suburban anchor of Granny’s logocentric hunt for the Diary’s unattainable script. Additionally, from curare, to care, the boy’s curatorial role is one which registers the uncertainty in the
responsibility of the individual archivist and its gatekeeping impulse: what to include, what to make visible, how best to deem and register what may have been missed or masked. Lok’s comic book excerpts emphasise these connections, and the settings of these transformative visions in buildings of state power made vulnerable by the assassination into visual artistic and curatorial spaces. Both pages lead the eye with images of Tsafendas. Heading the first excerpt (62, illustrating fr. 11) is a page-width panel dominated by Tsafendas’s face; an extra-narrative text box, small and densely bordered, labels the pavement Tsafendas steps out onto “PARLIAMENT.” On the other page (63, illustrating fr. 17), while it is Verwoerd who looks directly out from a single “splash” page as his skull is splintered, Lok’s internal narrativisation again prioritises Tsafendas. The primary internal panel frames Tsafendas’s right hand holding his fluorescent weapon’s root, through which Lok marshals the visual language of Black Power and solidarity symbols to portray Tsafendas’s as a raised and clenched “Amandla” (Power) fist.

Appearing in this self-assertively evolutionary issue in the magazine’s history, with these moments of the story “interpreted” visually by its graphics, “Tsafendas’s Diary: the comic-book” brings a number of issues around the text’s publication in Staffrider into relief. The prominence of Tsafendas’s visual presence in the selected comic excerpts defuses the charge of the gap that is his uncanny absence in Vladislavić’s text. The livelier and less knowable directions that the story’s notionally ekphrastic moments nudge wider are domesticated by Lok’s confident visual cipher and the “accessible” demotic of the “low” comics form. The iconic familiarity of the ANC and allies’ resistance symbol is the most prominent single image of Lok’s graphics, headlined in the magazine’s oppositional content. As the comic’s own alternative “foreign” art-zine aesthetic is relocated to the affiliations and specific cultural work of Staffrider’s mode of anti-apartheid resistance, it takes the story’s anti-realist engagement and all its “difficult” reading with it.

The visual gesture unequivocally positions Tsafendas’s act as moral and political, an act of liberation striking at the core of white supremacist power. This “reads” to explicitly re-narrativise the much more abstract network of meanings already obliquely available in the story that serves to challenge the “alibi” of Tsafendas’s insanity. Simultaneously, the story’s indictment of complicities, of the hidden intimacies of apartheid sinkholes and inheritances in the white suburban imaginary, is decentralised in favour of its politically “usable” imagery. Devoid of any shading, conspicuously white against its densely black-lined, cross-hatched background, Lok’s illustration of Tsafendas’s fist signals the determinedly non-racial solidarities accumulating in its moment of publication that are centralised by the issue’s renewed editorial stance.

As the magazine stages the Lok-Vladislavić/writer-artist comic book, the story’s inclusion of the museum and exhibition spotlights whites-only spaces, the repressive scopic regime and questions of mobility and access. The boy’s artist-curatorial role cedes these issues into the challenges of a custodian, gatekeeping one, in a print-performance choreographed by the magazine’s designer and assistant editor. In the text’s key points of political imaginative description and ekphrasis, we are invited to participate in the text’s meaning-making as viewers as much as readers. Extending the invitations to participatory reading of the fragmented, non-linear form to a visual imaginary, a conceptual flight takes us through the written and the metafictional to go somewhere beyond it. The productive internal tension between text and image offers an abstract echo of the liberated reading possibilities in the “secret language” of comics, to Lok’s expressionist adaptation and its internal
narrativisations, and the relational dynamics set in motion between its written and visual signs. We are returned, then, to the lack of predetermination and openness involved in the “secretly” plural and social experience of reading text in the small magazine, and so to the privileges, provocations and ethical difficulties of participating in its community of print.

Neither Diary text quite fits in to the established expectations of Staffrider’s political content. In the metatextual subtleties of Vladislavić’s expanded writing hand and Lok’s internally narrativising visualisation of it, both the longer radical project of the non-racial Staffrider, its sharing of decision-making and collective accountability, and the specificities of the more literary, intellectual space of its new organisation led by Oliphant, come into view. The accommodations and series of localisations to the magazine’s aesthetic that the comic book makes of “Tsafendas’s Diary” are then also germane to the political shifts we see with this Staffrider issue. Moving towards the liberalising perspectives that anticipate negotiated transition and cultural settlement, it comes from a press re-entering the hierarchies and structures involved in the commercial business of publishing, tied to the racialised capital of a still internationally isolated state. This “small” print context focuses the significance of the text’s material lives, ultimately returning the creative partnership of “Tsafendas’s Diary: the comic-book” to the challenges of the small press and alternative publishing, the local books trade and the determining factors of the shifting economies of value, symbolic and financial, delimiting avenues for anti-apartheid print-activist solidarities.

Performing its partnership with Lok’s comic book, Vladislavić’s story both occupies and suspends itself from Staffrider’s various cultures of non-conformity. Not strictly a “joint” project, both “Tsafendas’s Diary” texts “join in” with each other and with Staffrider’s variegated print socialities, but not without friction. This is generative of a conversation that speaks across the two in “bonded autonomy,” “sympathetically enmeshed,” to recall Vladislavić’s conception of “joint” work, these sets of relations encompass and productively maintain antagonism and difference, as well as commonality and connection, “denoting an effect which arises in response to a similar action elsewhere” (Naudé and Vladislavić 2014). Sidestepping liberal affective economies of “speaking for” or “over” other articulations in expression of unanimity, the two Diary texts are discrete and particular, while refocusing attention on the cultural authorities and power dynamics provided by their shared print context. This informs the Vladislavić/Lok conjoined creative signature as one which performs its series of aesthetic, modal and immaterial labour crosses from both sides of the desk. The questions of creative labour the Staffrider partnership provokes – who writes and/or makes, and for whom? – are brought in a particular legibility to those of cultural authority, consecration and ownership – who owns, publishes, and disseminates and for whom?

Revisiting Missing Persons’ “exposure of the textuality of contemporary South African history” (Marais 2011, 28) through this dynamically localised site of production and reception evinces as much a mode of writing that reinvents the “foreignness” of avant-garde Euro-American models for contemporary Anglo-South African realities as one that is, and is rather, more productively mixed and multiple. Informed by cosmopolitan, worldly literary and counter-cultural, visual demotic currents, this is a writing signature that is performatively open and located by the materiality of the magazine, its conditions of operation in the downtown Johannesburg publishing house of Ravan Press. Reading the close engagements “Tsafendas’s Diary” makes with the politics of its place through the
marks of its “secret,” “smaller” print labour resituated it in light of its germination in the working ethos of Ravan’s editorial desk and the various participating authorities – hands, times, geographies, energies, spaces, modes, institutions – involved in the making of text. Both Vladislavić’s emergent and later aesthetic, and his reflexive approach to art criticism, can be relocated here and to South Africa’s successive states of emergency.

Moreover, anticipating the later multi-valenced prose-fictions of Vladislavić’s oeuvre, what Stefan Helgesson has referred to as “staged print cultural performances” (2004), the emergent participatory praxis of the Diary texts’ interrelationships and the ethical challenges that their “field-comingling” labour relations make visible, suggest the possibility of a more radical opening of “the book.” Carried by a small magazine, Staffrider, and in their own various “small” and transitory materialities, the sub-cultural specificities of Lok’s alternative comic and Vladislavić’s short experimental text present a challenge to singular, unitary literary spaces – the book, the publishing house, the canon – and to unidirectional flows of circulation and valuation. In this sense, this neglected pre-life of “Tsaendaz’s Diary” not only relocates the experimentalism of Missing Persons to Staffrider’s plural print cultures. It provides an opportunity to read the centrality of publishing and editing at Ravan Press as a determinant part of Vladislavić’s ongoing creative practice, a useful vector to consider the textual negotiations of the cultural privilege, authority and market terms that run through his work, particularly as it joins others’.

Notes

1. Publications of Vladislavić’s stories in local small magazines prior to inclusion in Missing Persons include: “Flashback Hotel “TYYY” in anglophone Sesame (1985, 5 – Autumn) and “We Came to the Monument” in the Winter edition of 1988; and “The Box”, also in 1988, in Stet, a subversive, predominantly Afrikaans magazine that occasionally published pieces in English of merit (1988, 5 (2) – April).

2. In this interview with Splendore (2011) on the release of his novel Double Negative (2010), first produced as one half of the boxed art-book project with photographer David Goldblatt, TJ/Double Negative (2010), Vladislavić provides key examples in the development of his way of writing in response to pre-existing bodies of images, over “about a decade” (59): alongside those by German design duo Jörg Adam and Dominik Harborth in Helfershelfer (2000); with the photographs of Scottish artist Roger Palmer in Overseas (2004); and some of the texts that originally appeared exhibited with photographs by David Goldblatt, later included in Vladislavić’s paradigmatic “city text,” Portrait with Keys (2006). Vladislavić also mentions standalone fiction The Exploded View (2004), made in relation to images by Joachim Schönfeldt, as a significant precursor to the joint Double Negative project.

3. References provided are to the story’s publication in Staffrider (1988, 7 (1)) and denote the number of text fragment, followed by page.

4. Staffrider’s editorial advisory group during the Oliphant/Vladislavić editorship (1988–1990) are listed in the front matter of the magazine as: Njabulo S. Ndebele, Nadine Gordimer, Kelwyn Sole, Paul Weinberg, David Koloane, Gary Rathbone, and Christopher van Wyk.

5. Moss (1997) lists the Ravan Trust established in 1984 under Mike Kirkwood’s directorship of the press: the authors Achmat Dangor, Ahmed Essop, Nadine Gordimer, Chabani Manganyi, Njabulo Ndebele, and Christopher Van Wyk; Ravan’s theological origins were represented by Beyers Naudé and Desmond Tutu; the press’s involvement in academic publishing was reflected by the appointment as trustees of historian Peter Delius and sociologist Eddie Webster; Ravan’s founder Peter Randall with Kirkwood as his successor, made up the remaining trustees.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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