Verena Jain-Warden / Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp (eds)

Representing Poverty in the Anglophone Postcolonial World

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With 8 figures

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Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp

Introduction

Originally a concern primarily of social studies and economics, poverty has emerged as a significant thematic focus and analytical tool in literary and cultural studies in the last two decades. The "new poverty studies", as Birte Christ termed the field of enquiry in her 2014 survey[1], is dedicated to analyzing representations of poverty and the poor in literature and the visual arts, in the news media and in social practices, with the aim of exploring the frameworks of representation that facilitate or disavow the affective and ethical responses of audiences to disenfranchised groups such as the poor. While there is no doubt that poverty reduction requires political measures, scholars are unanimous in their conviction that representations impact on "the public imagination or 'social imaginary', that is, the knowledge, values, attitudes and emotions with which societies and individuals perceive poverty and take measures against it".[2] Of course, as Gareth Griffiths reminds us, this social or cultural imaginary has always been the foundation upon which "both oppressor and oppressed" have constructed their identity and social environment.[3] Representations of poverty and the poor thus might also have the effect of stabilizing prejudices against the objects of representation, furthering their exclusion and silencing, eliciting no response other than sympathy or compassion on the part of the audience. At the same time, socio-political change requires an act of the imagination to envisage alternative futures, to assume responsibility and spur action. As Griffiths has pointed out:

> Imagination allows human beings to conceive of a reality different from that which they are experiencing and to understand their world as part of a changeable past and future.

1 Birte Christ. "The New Poverty Studies: Current Concerns and Challenges." In: Ansgar Nünning and Elizabeth Kovach (eds). *Key Concepts and New Topics in English and American Studies.* Trier: WVT, 2014, 31–54.

2 Barbara Korte and Georg Zipp. *Poverty in Contemporary Literature: Themes and Figurations on the British Book Market.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 2.

3 Gareth Griffiths. "Introduction." In: Gareth Griffiths and Philip Mead (eds). *The Social Work of Narrative: Human Rights and the Cultural Imaginary.* Stuttgart: ibidem, 2018, 1–11, 9.

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> The exercise of this power to imagine allows human beings to manipulate their world in a unique way.[4]

While poverty has always been an object of social inquiry and also a thematic focus of literature and other media, the recent surge of poverty studies in the humanities can be attributed not only to the mediatized awareness of the ever-widening gap between rich and poor across the globe, but also to a shift in definitions of poverty. For many years conceived of in monetary terms of income and consumption, social scientists such as Amartya Sen[5] and Martha Nussbaum[6] have argued that poverty is linked with deprivation of social capabilities that limit a person's freedom to pursue their goals in life and to participate fully in society. Both consider capabilities as "fundamental entitlements inherent in the very idea of minimum social justice, or a life worthy of human dignity"[7]. This approach implies that poverty must be understood "not only […] as (relative) material deprivation, but also as encompassing socio-cultural exclusion and a lack of agency, opportunities and access (to knowledge, traditions, rights and capabilities)", as Barbara Korte and Georg Zipp claim in their study *Poverty in Contemporary Literature* (2014).[8]

Poverty is a contested term and has different meanings in different parts of the world, which is a challenge this collection of essays, with its focus on the Anglophone postcolonial world, faces. While there are a variety of definitions and measurements of poverty[9], the United Nation's Development Programme observes the capability approach to poverty. Its Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), using global data and national statistics, looks beyond income, such as the International Poverty Line of US $1.90 per person per day, and charts trends across the three main dimensions health, education and standard of

4 Ibid. See also Melissa Kennedy on the relevance of the imaginary to neoliberal critique, in *Narratives of Inequality: Postcolonial Literary Economics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 218.

5 See e.g. Amartya Sen. *The Idea of Justice*. London: Penguin, 2010, esp. Part III: "The Materials of Justice", 225–317; "Capability and Well-Being." In: Martha C. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (eds). *The Quality of Life*. New York: Routledge, 1993, 30–53.

6 Martha C. Nussbaum. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2011; "Capabilities, Entitlements, Rights: Supplementation and Critique." In: *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 12,1 (2011): 23–37.

7 Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 24–5. For a concise survey and critique of the capability approach, see Ruth Lister. *Poverty*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004, 15–20.

8 Korte and Zipp, *Poverty in Contemporary Literature*, 2.

9 For a survey, see chapters 2 and 3 in Anthony B. Atkinson. *Measuring Poverty Around the World*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019. Atkinson's study was published posthumously and remains in part a fragment. Also see Lister, *Poverty*, chapters 1 and 2, and Pete Alcock. *Understanding Poverty*. 3rd edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, chapters 5 and 6.

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living, comprising ten indicators altogether. According to the 2019 MPI, almost a fourth of the world's population lives in multidimensional poverty, half of them children under age 18 and two-thirds of them living in middle-income countries.[10] While the Human Development Report (HDR) 2019 notes unprecedented achievements in the narrowing of the gap in basic living standards and reduction of extreme deprivation – a development put at risk in the current pandemic –, it records steadily increasing inequalities both between and within countries not only in terms of wealth and income, but also a "New Great Divergence"[11] in enhanced capabilities related to education, technology and climate change.

In many societies, poverty and inequality and their potential impact on political stability and social cohesion have become the subject of intense public debate. Bestselling and award-winning publications by economists stimulated the discussion and emphasized its urgency: the publication in 2014 of the English translation of the French economist Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, a study of long-term trends in wealth and income inequality, received unprecedented media attention and his book was widely discussed on an international scale both by economists and the wider public.[12] In 2019, Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo, economists at the MIT and authors of the study *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty* (2011), which argued against our clichéd perception of poverty and the poor, were awarded, together with Michael Kremer, the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences.

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10 For its key findings, see "Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2019: Illuminating Inequalities," 1–2. <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/mpi_2019_publication.pdf> (accessed 15 September 2020).

11 United Nations Development Programme. "Human Development Report 2019: Beyond income, beyond averages, beyond today: Inequalities in Human Development in the 21st century", 199. <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf> (accessed 15 September 2020). Poverty and inequality are not the same; inequality is a matter of distribution. As the 2019 MPI explains: "Poverty identifies people whose attainments place them at the bottom of the distribution. Inequality considers the shape of the distribution: how far those at the bottom are from the highest treetops and what lies in between" (2). <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/mpi_2019_publication.pdf> (accessed 15 September 2020). In *Measuring Poverty*, Atkinson illustrates the relationship between poverty and inequality using the example of India: "The poverty head count with the $1.90 International Poverty Line was 46 per cent in 1993 and 21 per cent in 2011. If growth had been distribution-neutral, however, poverty should have dropped to 15 per cent. In India, too, inequality had increased, and this reduced the impact of growth on poverty" (221). According to the HDR 2019, global income and wealth inequality has been increasing since 1980, as a result in particular of "the growing inequality of asset return rates, as the returns on financial assets, disproportionately owned by the wealthy, increased" (132). The report concludes: "On a global scale, if current trends continue, by 2050 the global 0.1 percent could end up owning as much of the world's wealth as the middle 40 percent of the world's population." (Ibid.) <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf> (accessed 15 September 2020).

12 For contexts and details, see Sieglinde Lemke. *Inequality, Poverty, and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 3–4 and 49–50.

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In 2020, the aforementioned Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, winner of the 1998 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, was awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade for his work on global justice and the fight against inequality.

The recent attention to poverty and inequality is partly due to the shifting geographies of world poverty, the fact that poverty is no longer identified as an issue and a reality restricted to the Global South or developing countries. Instead, countries in the Global North are recognized to be likewise affected by the consequences of global neo-liberal capitalism and other, partly related, reasons for the rise in inequality and concomitant poverty such as environmental degradation or war and terror leading to migration on an unprecedented scale. Countries in the Global North thus lose their mythical status as spheres of affluence, which again serves to undermine traditional binaries and pave the way for a sense of global entanglement.[13] "The 'rediscovery' of poverty in rich countries helped in the past to place poverty on the political agenda"[14], Atkinson notes drily, and it has obviously served to place poverty on the agenda of scholars, not least in the humanities, effecting also a rapprochement between formerly distinct disciplines and opening up a path to more interdisciplinary research.[15]

Surveying trends in 21st-century writing and criticism, Julia Hoydis has noted an "undeniable return to ethics, realism, and history."[16] Inquiries into repre-

13 See, e.g. Ananya Roy and Emma Shaw Crane (eds). *Territories of Poverty: Rethinking North and South.* Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015; Ella Harris and Mel Nowicki. "Cultural Geographies of Precarity." In: *Cultural Geographies* 25,3 (2018): 387–91, 388–89; Melissa Kennedy. "Postcolonial Economics: Literary Critiques of Inequality." In: Jenni Ramone (ed.). *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Postcolonial Writing: New Contexts, New Narratives, New Debates.* London et al.: Bloomsbury, 2018, 53–69. 54–6, and Kennedy, *Narratives of Inequality*, 6.

14 Atkinson, *Measuring Poverty*, 2–3.

15 See Pavan Kumar Malreddy. "Introduction." In: Pavan Kumar Malreddy, Birte Heidemann, Ole Birk Laurson and Janet Wilson (eds). *Reworking Postcolonialism: Globalization, Labour and Rights.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 1–15, 4, and Kennedy, *Narratives of Inequality*, 8. See also the introduction (Ellen Grünkemeier, Nora Plesske and Joanna Rostek, "The Value of Economic Criticism Reconsidered: Approaching Literature and Culture through the Lens of Economics", 118–125) and the contributions to the panel on (new) economic criticism in the same issue, in: Anne-Julia Zwierlein, Jochen Petzold, Katharina Boehm and Martin Decker (eds). *Anglistentag 2017 Regensburg: Proceedings.* Trier: WVT, 2018. 117–179. For an example of disciplinary crossover, also see David Lewis, Dennis Rodgers and Michael Woolcock (eds). *Popular Representations of Development: Insights from Novels, Films, Television and Social Media.* London and New York: Routledge, 2014.

16 Julia Hoydis, "Introduction." In: *Focus on 21st-Century Studies*, special issue of *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studie*s 26,2 (2015): 5–13, 6. Realism is by no means a representational strategy preferred by writers and artists representing poverty and the poor. Gayle Salamon has referred to the call for realism as a "kind of moralist anti-aesthetic" which "is astonishingly common when the subject is poverty". According to her, it is an ideology that "imagines itself to be pure attentiveness, a language that lets the reality of poverty disclose

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sentations of poverty and the poor in literary and cultural studies are closely tied to the ethical and social turns in criticism and informed by the current debate about the legacies of postmodernism and poststructuralism, the charge being that a focus on discourse and identity politics has blinded critics to the reasons for and material manifestations of poverty and other forms of social exclusion and marginalization whose "culturalization"[17] obscured them and thus prevented critics to fully engage with them. The canonization of the new research of poverty in literary and cultural studies reflects these debates and concerns: surveys tend to begin with Walter Benn Michaels' attack on the academic left for privileging identity politics over questions of social class and their foundation in material conditions in his bestselling book *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* of 2006, and they continue with Gavin Jones's 2008 study *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in American Literature, 1840–1945*, which is considered a foundational text in the "new poverty studies" and the first to make poverty the "organizing frame of inquiry"[18] into literature.[19] Michaels reclaims the category of social class for analysis, describing it as fundamentally different from identity markers such as race, gender and ethnicity in that it is not socially constructed and an innocent instance of diversity but rooted in economic and material conditions. While his intervention reflects the current dissatisfaction with poststructuralist approaches and calls upon readers to engage with (representations of) increasing socio-economic inequality and impoverishment in order to take measures against it, it leaves the tension between materiality and signifying practices unresolved and also ignores intersectionality, that is, the multiple ways in which race, gender and ethnicity impact on social class.[20]

itself unhindered by prose that delivers it. In fact it is a derogation of the poor in the guise of a recognition." "Here are the Dogs: Poverty in Theory." In: *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 21,1 (2010): 169–177, 171.

17 Michael Butter and Carsten Schinko. "Introduction: Poverty and the Culturalization of Class." In: *American Studies* 55,1 (2010): 5–18.

18 Gavin Jones. *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in American Literature, 1840–1945.* Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008, 149.

19 For surveys of poverty research in the humanities, see Christ, "The New Poverty Studies"; for a focus on American Studies, Sieglinde Lemke. "Facing Poverty: Towards a Theory of Articulation." In: *American Studies* 55,1 (2010): 95–122, as well as her article on "Poverty and Class Studies." In: Winfried Fluck, Erik Redling, Sabine Sielke and Hubert Zapf (eds). *American Studies Today: New Research Agendas.* Heidelberg: Winter, 2014. 37–64, and her 2016 monograph *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture*, esp. 6–9; for a focus on British Studies, Barbara Korte. "Dealing with Deprivation: Figurations of Poverty on the Contemporary British Book Market." In: *Anglia* 130,1 (2012): 75–94.

20 Pitting the material against the discursive and disregard for intersectionality are also features of Kennedy's research on inequality; for example, in her study *Narratives of Inequality*, she notes that "the issue of inequality replaces that of cultural identity as the driving concern of our times", 26.

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By making poverty his principal category of analysis – like, e.g., Sieglinde Lemke and Barbara Korte – Gavin Jones circumvents the complex relationship between poverty and social class. Poverty, he argues, is not central to the category of class and might actually get displaced in discourses of class; moreover, class runs the danger of being essentialized and is prone to economic determinism, or, if deessentialized, it becomes an unstable category unable to capture the specificities of socio-economic deprivation.[21] Instead, Jones proposes to focus on the category of poverty in its own right, which he defines as "a specific state of social being, defined by its *socioeconomic suffering*" and thus characterized by both an objective and a subjective dimension, "the materiality of need" as well as the "nonmaterial areas of psychology, emotion and culture".[22] Jones thus posits a "dialectical relationship between the material and the discursive"[23] and poverty as a category of social being marked by in-betweenness. "At once outside the discourse of identity altogether, in the realms of social structure, institutional organization, and material conditions, poverty is clearly connected to the cultural questions of power, difference, and signifying practice that animate any discussion of social marginalization in its most basic and universal sense", he had already argued in his 2003 article on "Poverty and the Limits of Literary Criticism"[24], adding as further evidence "how socioeconomic factors have gone hand in hand with culturally based factors of racism and sexism throughout American history".[25]

As to the function of representations of poverty in literature – and this holds true for other media of representation, too – Jones notes that "[l]iterature reveals

21 Jones, *American Hungers*, 6–13. One might add that the category of social class has also become more diffuse in recent decades and that it does not easily transfer across cultures. See, e.g., Guy Standing on the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis and the ensuing austerity measures that have affected all levels of society in Western societies, with insecure employment extending even to the educated middle classes, creating a precariat he calls "the new dangerous class", *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class.* London: Bloomsbury, 2011. On class in contemporary Britain, see also Dominic Head, who argues that "recognizable and stable class identities have disappeared from British society, and from the novel in Britain". "The Demise of Class Fiction." In: James F. English (ed.). *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction.* Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. 229–47, 246.

22 Jones, *American Hungers*, 3.

23 Ibid., 4.

24 Gavin Jones. "Poverty and the Limits of Literary Criticism." In: *American Literary History*, 15,4 (2003): 765–92, 778.

25 Ibid. The relationship between materiality and signifying practices keeps being debated, for example, also in the field of ecocriticism, where recent materialist approaches, rather than oppose nature and culture, emphasize the mutual entanglement and interdependence of continuously transforming environments and signifying strategies that agentically bring each other into being; see Sonja Frenzel and Birgit Neumann, "Introduction: Environments in Anglophone Literature." In: Sonja Frenzel and Birgit Neumann (eds). *Ecocriticism – Environments in Anglophone Literatures.* Heidelberg: Winter. 2017. 9–32, 14–7.

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how poverty is established, defined, and understood in discourse, as a psychological and cultural problem that depends fundamentally on the language used to describe it."[26] Christ aptly summarizes the responsibility arising for the literary and cultural critic from this, namely "to analyse representations of poverty with a view to the ways in which they thematise, problematise, mask, expose, and complicate the relationship between material and non-material aspects of poverty."[27] Of course, literature does not replace statistics but it complements them, giving individual "faces and voices to poverty"[28] by making accessible to readers the specific experience not only of the material aspects of poverty, as manifest in items of material culture such as clothes, furniture, and housing, but also of its non-material aspects such as shame, humiliation and powerlessness, or resilience, for that matter. Literature also reaches larger audiences than social and economic studies of the phenomenon; indeed, literary works are often the only access the mainly middle-class readers have to poverty and the poor.

Research in representations of poverty and the poor in literature and other media has so far prominently focused on Britain and North America.[29] This is one of the reasons why the contributions to this volume broaden the geographical focus to include the Anglophone postcolonial world. As Korte already noted ten years back, the treatment of poverty in fiction and the visual arts has received surprisingly little attention from scholars in the field of Postcolonial Studies,[30] given that the field has long been concerned with conceptualizations and analyses of marginalization and subalternity, with the asymmetry of discursive power between the observer and the observed, with constructions of identity and alterity

26 Jones, *American Hungers*, 4.

27 Christ, "The New Poverty Studies," 36.

28 Korte and Zipp, *Poverty in Contemporary Literature*, 4.

29 Extensive research has been submitted by Lemke in the field of North American Studies and Korte in the field of British Studies. Apart from their articles mentioned, see especially Lemke's study *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture* (2016), and Korte and Zipp's study *Poverty in Contemporary Literature: Themes and Figurations on the British Book Market* (2014), as well as the edited volumes Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard (eds). *Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain.* Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2014, and Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard (eds). *Narrating Precariousness: Media, Modes, Ethics.* Heidelberg: Winter, 2014.

30 Barbara Korte. "Can the Indigent Speak? Poverty Studies, the Postcolonial and the Global Appeal of *Q&A* and *The White Tiger.*" In: *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate* 20,2–3 (2010/2011): 293–312, 294 and 306, n. 4. There are quite a number of critical articles that explore representations of poverty in selected texts from the postcolonial world, but few book-length studies. Exceptions are, e.g., Miriam Nandi. *M/Other India/s: Zur literarischen Verarbeitung von Armuts- und Kastenproblematik in ausgewählten Texten der indisch-englischen und muttersprachlichen indischen Literatur seit 1935.* Heidelberg: Winter, 2007; Phenyo Butale. *Discourses of Poverty in Literature: Assessing Discourses of Indigence in Post-Colonial Texts from Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe.* (PhD thesis Stellenbosch 2015). <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/37438039.pdf> (accessed 15 June 2019).

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and processes of othering as well as with questions of voice and agency; all of them concerns that are central to the analysis of poverty representations. This methodological affinity between poverty studies and Postcolonial Studies is the second reason why this volume focuses on representations of poverty and the poor from the Anglophone postcolonial world.

To complete the survey of research in representations of poverty and the poor in literature and other media, the titles of Lemke's and Korte's studies show that scholarly attention to poverty quickly broadened to include precarity and inequality. Precarity refers in particular to a lack of access to supportive and protective institutional structures. As famously defined by Judith Butler:

> Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection.[31]

Following this definition, poverty thus forms a subcategory of the broader concept of precarity or one shape amongst many that precarity can take.[32] As mentioned before, inequality, as a decidedly relational category, refers specifically to uneven distribution of income and wealth.[33] Unlike poverty studies, approaches with a focus on precarity and inequality have regularly included narratives and visual art from the postcolonial world, and this also applies to more recent scholarship that has further shifted the focus to questions of justice

31 Judith Butler. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2009, 25–6.

32 For etymology and a survey of scholarship in precarity studies, see Lemke, *Inequality, Poverty, and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture*, 14–8. For analyses of precarity in literature, see also Jago Morrison. "The Turn to Precarity in Twenty-First Century Fiction." In: *American, British and Canadian Studies Journal* 21,1 (2014): 10–29; Jens Elze. *Postcolonial Modernism and the Picaresque Novel: Literatures of Precarity.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, and Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp, Marion Gymnich and Klaus P. Schneider (eds). *Representing Poverty and Precarity in a Postcolonial World.* Leiden and Boston: Brill/Rodopi (forthcoming).

33 On the shift of emphasis from poverty to inequality, which she reads as a response to the 2008 financial crisis, see Kennedy, *Narratives of Inequality*, 6. Kennedy has produced extensive research in the field of literary representations of inequality, which includes, apart from her monograph and the articles so far mentioned, also her articles "How to Be Rich, Popular, and Have It All: Conflicted Attitudes to Wealth and Poverty in Post-Crisis Fiction." In: Helga Ramsey-Kurz and Melissa Kennedy (eds) *Uncommon Wealths in Postcolonial Fiction.* Leiden and Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 2018, 287–304, and "Urban Poverty and Homelessness in the International Postcolonial World." In: Pavan Kumar Malreddy, Birte Heidemann, Ole Birk Laurson and Janet Wilson (eds). *Reworking Postcolonialism: Globalization, Labour and Rights.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 57–71.

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and human rights,[34] again, owing to the fact that "poverty is increasingly being conceptualized as a denial of human and citizenship rights".[35]

While poverty – like precarity and inequality – is a global phenomenon, its representation in Anglophone literatures and other fictional and non-fictional media can be approached by using established frameworks of Postcolonial Studies. Since the representational appropriation of disenfranchised groups with usually limited access to self-representation poses both an ethical and an aesthetic challenge, investigations therefore address the power of and over representations, questions of agency and voice, of authenticity and essentialisms, of marginalization and subalternity, including material conditions and the legacies of a long history of colonization with its concomitant history of impoverishment and subjugation.[36] Scholars in the field of poverty studies have amply commented on the pitfalls resulting from the asymmetries of power between those represented and those representing.[37] To give but a few examples, representations of the poor can serve to make visible marginalized groups and thus raise awareness and empathy, or they can confirm stereotypes of diverse kinds, such as the saintly or the abject poor, the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor, the benign victim or the malign welfare dependent. They can call for political action or merely serve the emotional needs of readers; they can spectacularize those represented into passive victims and objects of the voyeuristic gaze, or emphasize their agency and resilience, which, again "runs the risk of romanticization and idealization".[38] Othering can work to stabilize the boundaries between those represented and those representing, but it can also serve to prevent the representation of others as objects of positive knowledge and thus the assimilation of their difference and safeguard their dignity. While no representation of poverty, however well-meaning, can remove the discrepancies in discursive power, much depends on the way such narratives are framed or configured. "The frame", Butler points out, "does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality."[39]

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34 See e.g., Anke Bartels, Lars Eckstein, Nicole Waller and Dirk Wiemann (eds). *Postcolonial Justice.* Leiden and Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 2017, and Griffiths and Mead's collection of essays *The Social Work of Narrative: Human Rights and the Cultural Imaginary* (2018).

35 Lister, *Poverty*, 14.

36 See Kennedy's assessment, engaging with the writings of postcolonial critics Neil Lazarus and Benita Parry, of the failures of postcolonial criticism to address the material realities of poverty and their historical roots in "Urban Poverty and Homelessness in the International Postcolonial World" and in *Narratives of Inequality*, esp. 26–7 and 217–18.

37 See, e.g. Korte and Zipp, *Poverty in Contemporary Literature*, 3–5 and 12–5; Christ, "The New Poverty Studies", especially 36–47, and Lemke, *Inequality, Poverty, and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture*, 6–9.

38 Lister, *Poverty*, 125.

39 Butler, *Frames of War*, xiii. On framing, see also with further bibliographical references Lemke, *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture*, 9.

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Korte and Zipp have introduced a "box of analytical tools"[40] for approaching representations of poverty in literature. Their "figurations [or, configurations] approach to poverty literature" starts out from the assumption that "literary texts mould images and imaginations of the world through their specific textual elements and structures".[41] The authors suggest that, firstly, we need to investigate the configuration of "lifeworlds" "in terms of the text's characters and the environments in which these characters are situated".[42] Secondly, we need to pay attention to the formal aspects of the text: the "modes and associated styles", "such as realism, sentimentalism, sensationalism or humour"; "a text's *perspectivisation*, that is, its narrating and focalising agents",[43] and, finally, voice (speaking for/about/as the other) and agency as "the socially constructed capacity to act".[44]

Ethics and aesthetics are, of course, closely entangled. A novel's formal aspects, such as discussed – mode, perspective and voice –, frame readers' affective responses towards the lives represented, which may range from empathy and the shocked awareness prerequisite to taking action to revulsion or detachment, and, consequently, affect their attitudes to the poor.[45] What is required from scholars exploring poverty representations is the critical reflection of their own (privileged) position of listening and speaking and the constant revision of their epistemic frames. This echoes the warning against Western intellectuals' assumed capability to represent the Other, the kind of imperialist knowledge production that had already been famously criticized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: "The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. This project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subjectivity."[46]

Kennedy argues that "hunger, homelessness, and the humiliation of material lack have very similar vocabularies, no matter where or when they were written",[47] thus justifying a comparative approach. At the same time, focusing on a

40 Korte and Zipp, *Poverty in Contemporary Literature*, 12.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., 13.

44 Chris Barker. *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice.* 4th edn. London: Sage, 2012, 241.

45 See Kennedy's engagement with Rita Felski's phenomenological approach to literature in Felski's *Uses of Literature.* Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2008 that focuses on "the reader's affective and cognitive modes of textual engagement through recognition, knowledge, shock, and enchantment", *Narratives of Inequality*, 11–2.

46 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In: Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds). *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture.* Urbana: University of Illinios Press, 1988. 271–313, 280.

47 Kennedy, *Narratives of Inequality*, 13.

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variety of different cultural contexts as the contributions in this volume do, makes the discussion about representations of poverty more complex because it requires that we observe both culture-specific contexts and representational conventions. For example, in Aravind Adiga's widely discussed novel *The White Tiger* poverty is represented as inscribed on the body when his protagonist describes the Indian rural poor as "stick-men", as "thin, sticklike men",[48] while he mocks at the same time the American Pink Lady's aspirations towards thinness and fitness. Representations of poor white characters in post-Apartheid South African texts, like in the plays of Reza de Wet or Marlene van Nierkerk's novel *Triomf*, have a decidedly different historical context and thus effect than similar representations in North American literature and culture. Ideas of social class, or, more generally, social hierarchies, are complicated in India by traditional caste divisions and in Australia by myths of egalitarianism. Narratives of upward as well as downward social mobility are distributed unevenly across the postcolonial world, and spaces associated with poverty, such as townships, slums or council estates, refer to distinct local environments. As concerns representational conventions, for example, Miriam Nandi has shown that in Indian literature, both in English and in other languages, the poor tend to be represented as abject Others;[49] whereas Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes have argued that the very choice of English in representations of subalterns or the poor is problematic because "it is a language which the subjects of discussion can hardly access, let alone represent themselves in."[50] While poverty is a problem of global magnitude, the contributions to this volume demonstrate the necessity and value of applying a regional lens to analyze its representations in literature and other media.

Representations of poverty and the poor in the work of writers and artists from regions as diverse as India, Australia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and the UK are discussed in this volume. The contributions embrace the genres of spoken word poetry, the novel and young adult fiction, drama and creative non-fiction, film, TV-dramas and cartoons. Concerns include the ethics and aesthetics of representing poverty and the poor in general and, e.g., slum inhabitants and the homeless in particular, renegotiations of stereotypes about the unprivileged, intersections of gender, class and race, narrative strategies such as humour, but also voyeurism and sensationalism, the privilege of English, poverty in the context of global and local displacements, spatial representations of poverty,

48 Aravind Adiga. *The White Tiger*. New York et al.: Free Press, 2008, 23.

49 Nandi, *M/Other India/s*.

50 Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes. "Authorities of Representation: Speaking To and Speaking For. A Response to Barbara Korte." In: *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate* 22,1 (2012/2013): 137–43, 138. On the "fundamental inequality" of languages, see also the Warwick Research Collective. *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015, 26.

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ambivalent politics of blame as well as narratives and counter-narratives of social mobility. The volume has its genesis in a two-day workshop at the University of Bonn in June 2015 and includes a selection of the conference papers as well as additional invited essays.

Overview

The contributions to Part I focus on the ethics of representing poverty and the poor. **Barbara Korte** discusses two representations of poverty in India that adopt a global, outsider perspective: American journalist Katherine Boo's book of creative non-fiction *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012) on the experiences of people living in Mumbai's Annawadi slum and British playwright David Hare's adaptation of the same title of Boo's book for the London stage (2014). Korte shows that, despite their different aesthetic strategies, both authors circumvent stereotyping and sensationalism by representing the inhabitants of Annawadi not as victims but as resilient and ambitious individuals, by openly addressing the asymmetries between observer and observed involved in representing poverty and the poor, and by eliciting a reflected ethical positioning on the part of their audiences.

Katharina Engel focuses on language used in contemporary discourses on poverty in the current period of austerity in Great Britain, in particular on stigmatizing and malign labels employed in a systematic campaign of demonization of the poor that emphasizes the failure of the individual rather than systemic reasons. Her contribution demonstrates how the spoken word epic *Brand New Ancients* (2013), written and performed by Kate Tempest, on the one hand feeds on the typical portrayal of dysfunctional families in the media, and especially in reality TV, and, on the other, manages to renegotiate stereotypes of the disadvantaged in a way that is not aimed at voyeuristic pleasure but at unsettling the audience by reflecting on their attitudes and behaviour towards the unprivileged. By merging epic structure and content with spoken word about contemporary precarious lives in London, Tempest encourages her audience to recognize the 'godly' and 'mythical' in her characters and their stories and their dignity as humans.

Similar to the contribution by Barbara Korte, the analysis by **Rainer Hillrichs** of the film *Soul Boy* (2010), a co-production of One Fine Day Films based in Berlin and the Nairobi-based production company Ginger Ink, redresses the stereotypical association of slums and their inhabitants with poverty. Set in Kibera, Nairobi's largest slum, *Soul Boy* not only offers an insider's perspective by following the slum inhabitant Abila; in contrast with the reformist and voyeurist modes predominant in other slum narratives, it is characterized by an affirmative

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mode and affirmative slum politics that does not foreground economic and social problems but focuses on the complexity and diversity of life in Kibera. Hillrichs discusses questions of voice and agency over representation, the cinematic modes of Kibera's representation and the ambivalent poverty politics of the film, which does not show the slum as a problem to overcome but neither questions social and economic disparity and the systemic reasons for them.

Intersectional aspects of poverty and agency are the main concerns of the contributions to Part II. Starting out from the observation that poverty is closely linked to the social, political and cultural denial of agency to the unprivileged, **Devindra Kohli** discusses the indigent protagonists' dealing with the denial of agency and opportunity in the face of their desire for upward social mobility in recent iconic Indian socio-fictions such as Adiga's *The White Tiger*, Swarup's *Q & A* and Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia.* In contrast to these novels, in which the protagonists identify with the prevailing socio-economic structures, R.K. Narayan's novel *The Guide* (1958) features a protagonist who embraces poverty and self-denial and transforms from tourist guide to spiritual guide. The contribution explores the representation of self-volitional deprivation and self-examination in the novel as well as their transformational value on a larger social and political scale, including models from Gandhi to Anna Hazare.

Verena Jain-Warden investigates the dynamic, non-linear interconnections between poverty and social class as represented in Lauren Beukes's novel *Zoo City* (2010). Set in the fictionalized Johannesburg suburb of Hillbrow, an abject environment, the novel as a blend of detective story and speculative fiction opens a realm of ambivalence in which social exclusion and limited capabilities are not based on ethnicity or gender but on Hillbrow's inhabitants being animalled, i. e. having an animal attached to them as material evidence of their guilt or trauma. The fact that the protagonist is subjected to downward social mobility additionally offers the opportunity to explore anxieties about social status in the face of global economic crises and the mechanisms of social and cultural capital.

The contributions to Part III focus on revisions of poverty discourse generally and the transformation of stereotypes specifically. **Miriam Nandi** explores the related stereotypes of the "idle poor" and the "lazy native" as parts of a discourse that sustains inequality and puts poverty down to individual failure rather than systemic reasons. She argues that sociological theories of acceleration, like that of Hartmut Rosa, which mark out acceleration and the contraction of the present as the most striking feature of Western modernity, fail to take into account the role of colonialism and hence of the Global South in the formation of acceleration. Her test case for a revised transcultural, class-oriented and gendered theory of the relationship between poverty and acceleration is Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) which, in contrast, addresses the global interplay of acceleration and exploitation and shows the working poor in and from the Global

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South to be the victims of acceleration with little or no control over their use of time.

Indigenous Australians suffer multiple forms of deprivation and exclusion, as the contribution by **Jan Alber** spells out. No laughing matter, one should think; yet Alber shows how in Indigenous writing humour is strategically employed by authors to reclaim agency and to counteract stereotypical representations of Indigenous poverty and the potential victimization of protagonists. His contribution analyses the narrative strategies employed in Dot Collard's life narrative *Busted out Laughing* (2003) and Alexis Wright's novel *Carpentaria* (2006), specifically the use of rebellious characters who ridicule white authorities and official policies, the foregrounding of Indigenous cultural practices, and the use of satire and humour, not least to ward off despair.

Linguist **Vijaya John Kohli** confronts the myth that Indians speak a variety of English called "Indian English": this myth, she argues, is based on discounting the impact of social diversity and economic disparities, of factors such as poverty, exclusion and economic deprivation, on variety formation. Since English in India is transmitted through education, some of the features attributed to "Indian English", she argues, are in fact learner varieties that reflect the deep inequities of educational opportunities and economic privilege in the country. Kohli therefore advocates a diversity-centred approach to the study of English in India that takes into account both geographical varieties and learner varieties and centralizes the socio-economic conditions under which English is transmitted.

The contributions to Part IV foreground spatial representations of poverty. **Miriam Gertzen** analyses two young adult dystopian novels, *Exodus* (2002) by Scottish author Julie Bertagna and *Matched* (2010) by US-American author Ally Condie, with a view to the allocation of specific riches and deprivations to geographical spaces and their inhabitants. While at first sight both novels are based on the centre-periphery model, indicating the geographical and ideological segregation of a metropolitan centre endowed with power and privilege and the marginalized and exploited fringes, they subvert this dichotomy through their border-crossing protagonists and by spelling out the specific deprivations as well as capabilities of both spaces. As novels addressed at young adults, they not only reflect the liminal position occupied by adolescents and its subversive potential, but also fulfill the genre's didactic function of challenging readers to reconsider their notions of poverty and lack, material and otherwise, and to reposition themselves with a view to what is considered central and what marginal.

Townships in South Africa continue to be a symbol of the social, racial and economic divisions of the country. Reading fictional and autobiographical texts alongside statistics and policy papers, **Ellen Grünkemeier** addresses complex questions regarding the politics of imagining and defining poverty before she focuses on the realities and representations of poverty in townships with par-

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ticular attention to housing and neighbourhoods. She analyses in detail Sindiwe Magona's novels *Mother to Mother* (1998) and *Beauty's Gift* (2008) and her autobiographical text "Home" (2006) with a view to how the texts represent the living conditions and imagine poverty in townships, including consideration of aesthetic aspects such as binary oppositions, metaphors and phrasing.

The final three contributions in Part V focus on poverty in the context of global and local displacements. **Katrin Berndt** uses a figurations approach to explore representations of poverty in Zimbabwean writer NoViolet Bulawayo's novel *We Need New Names* (2013) in conjunction with the extra-textual relations of Afropolitan writing. Both settings of the novel, the Zimbabwean shanty town, home of the novel's impoverished child narrator Darling, and Kalamazoo in the United States, to where Darling escapes, are marked in different ways by systemic deprivation, more precisely, the interdependence of material deprivation, cultural disempowerment and emotional isolation, which is prominently signified by metaphors of food and hunger. Berndt argues that the conflicting responses to Bulawayo's novel, which was celebrated in Zimbabwe, but criticized by some international reviewers for stereotyping "Africa", epitomize the dilemma of poverty representation which is expected, on the one hand, to present a truthful picture and raise awareness, and, on the other hand, to avoid stereotyping and sensationalism.

Poverty, simplistically understood as economic hardship, is not a central but rather a "collateral motif" in the literature by and about refugees and asylum seekers, as **Katrin Althans** argues quoting Barbara Korte and Georg Zipp. Her contribution on Australian representations of refugee experiences examines the contrasting framing of refugees in a comic launched by the Australian Government in 2013 and in three textual examples from the anthology *A Country Too Far*, edited by Rosie Scott and Thomas Keneally the same year. While the Government comic, intended to deter immigration to Australia, shows material deprivation to be the sole reason for the protagonist to leave his home and thus brands him as an "economic migrant", the narratives from the anthology frame the refugee experience in entirely different categories that focus on persecution as a motivation for departure, on the traumatic experience of the journey and on questions of bare and political life on arrival. Althans discusses the controversial distinction between absolute and relative poverty and examines the usefulness of Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life and Judith Butler's thoughts on detainees' loss of legal rights for describing the complex status of contemporary refugees.

Homelessness has come to be regarded as an iconic marker of poverty in popular and academic discourse. In the final contribution, **Marion Gymnich** examines two singularly influential representations of homelessness on British television, which not only drew large audiences but also impacted on actual social

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work in Britain: the BBC1 documentary drama *Cathy Come Home* (1966) and the 2012 Christmas special of the BBC1 drama series *Call the Midwife*. Her analysis of genre conventions, voice and camera work outlines similarities as well as striking differences in the two TV productions: while both narratives blame structural deficits for homelessness and focus on the particular plight of individualized female characters, their effects are radically different. By blending the conventions of the documentary and drama, *Cathy Come Home* foregrounds the social problems of post-war Britain. In contrast, *Call the Midwife* caters to a seasonal interest in homelessness and, with its optimistic ending verging on melodrama, emphasizes the efficacy of social welfare systems.

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1. The Ethics of Representing Poverty

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Barbara Korte

Mumbai's Slums on London's South Bank: Ethics and Aesthetics of Staging Poverty 'Globally'

Configuring Poverty Globally

Representations configure how we perceive and respond to poverty – whether our own or that of 'others'.[1] The 'postcolonial world' is in many respects a very suitable frame for discussing poverty and its representation.[2] Not only has it generated theoretical concepts for discussing poverty (such as subalternity or alterity), but also some of the most haunting images of social misery that circulate in the countries of Western capitalism. Such images, as used, for instance, by aid organisations, often emphasise material deprivation, but poverty also encompasses issues of inclusion vs. exclusion, of agency, of capabilities and of opportunities. Images of abject, pitiful poverty in underdeveloped areas of the world tend to make one forget that the spread of economic liberalism around the world has re-drawn traditional borderlines of poverty: between rich and poor countries, and between the rich and poor people living *in* these countries. This change intersects with the ways in which the older colonial/postcolonial pattern is now entangled with a thinking in global terms. These entanglements complicate our conceptions of poverty in the postcolonial world, and they have encouraged new global perspectives for its representation – from both inside and outside the postcolonial world. It is symptomatic of this trend that in early 2015 a season of the BBC's World Service was dedicated to our "richer world" and inquired who *really* benefits from the increase of prosperity in various parts of

1 For a 'figuration approach' see Barbara Korte. "Dealing with Deprivation: Figurations of Poverty on the Contemporary British Book Market." In: *Anglia* 130,1 (2012): 75–94, and Barbara Korte and Georg Zipp. *Poverty in Contemporary Literature: Themes and Figurations on the British Book Market.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

2 I understand poverty as "(relative) material deprivation" that also encompasses "socio-cultural exclusion and a lack of agency, opportunities and access (to knowledge, traditions, rights and capabilities)" (Korte/Zipp, *Poverty in Contemporary Literature*, 2).

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the world, in traditional centres of Western capitalism as well as newly prosperous countries.[3]

This contribution will discuss a recent representation of poverty in India that also adopts a global perspective: The play *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* by the British playwright David Hare is based on a book by the American journalist Katherine Boo and was first performed in the National Theatre on London's South Bank, from where the Square Mile of the City, the super-hub of global finances, is visible across the River Thames. I will ask whether the play and its production found an ethically and aesthetically sensitive way of addressing 'postcolonial' poverty from an outside perspective. First, however, some contexts have to be established.

As is sufficiently known, South and East Asian societies have experienced an economic boom that generated new opportunities, new wealth and new inequalities on an unprecedented scale. At the same time, countries of the so-called Global North, including the former centre of the British Empire, have been confronted with a new pauperism and austerity, especially in the wake of the crash in 2008. Beggars, homeless people and food banks are now as much part of the British (and generally Western) imaginary of poverty as pictures of starving children in Africa. Furthermore, in the global 'scapes' of late modernity[4], with economic hubs in *all* parts of the world, North and South are connected in ways that also affect the representation of poverty.

All representations of poverty have ethical implications, not only because they are concerned with denial, indignity, suffering and injustice. The ethics of poverty representation also concern representation itself, especially because this representation so often implies asymmetries of perspective and articulation: Speaking about and imaging poverty, and feeding its representations into the circuits of cultural communication is easier from a privileged position than from that of the affected themselves. The agency of representation has been a longstanding issue in cultural and postcolonial studies, and voices from these fields have spearheaded the critique of poverty representation from people, and for people, who are not poor themselves – see the lively debate around the film *Slumdog Millionaire*.[5] What such debate shows is that depicting poverty demands a *reflected* ethical positioning on the part of both the producers *and* the audiences of representations. This is also emphasised by Nick Couldry, a critic of neo-

3 The 'A Richer World' season included productions by BBC World News and BBC World Service across television, radio and online platforms, see www.bbc.co.uk.

4 Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

5 Barbara Korte. "Can the Indigent Speak? Poverty Studies, the Postcolonial and the Global Appeal of *Q & A* and *The White Tiger.*" In: *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate* 20,2–3 (2010/11): 293–312.

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liberalism, who writes that "voice as a social process involves, from the start, both speaking *and listening*, that is, an act of attention that registers the uniqueness of the other's narrative".[6] So, how did *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* succeed in this respect?

The National Theatre production of Hare's new play opened on 18 November 2014. It was directed by Rufus Norris, who was soon to become the National's new director. It was a big and prestigious production for the NT's main auditorium, the Olivier, and it was successful with audiences (for whom it offered extra performances and a live broadcast to cinemas) as well as critics. The promotion flyer for the production cited praise from the reviews of leading national papers: "Compelling" (*Daily Telegraph*); "Outstanding performances. […] [L]eaves one deeply affected" (*Guardian*); "Magnificent. Rufus Norris's production has a humane, dignified sweep that captivates" (*Independent*).[7] But *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* is not just a play. It is a play adapted from Katherine Boo's book of the same title: an award-winning and bestselling piece of creative nonfiction[8] (translated into more than thirty languages) about the experiences of people living in Mumbai's Annawadi slum. To Sumit Chakraberty, an Indian reviewer, the book offered an unexpected perspective:

> At first, the stories, characters and situations will seem familiar, almost stereotypical. Another voyeuristic tour of Slumbai, another rap on our knuckles for the inequalities, inequities and injustices that surround us even as our economic growth rate becomes

6 Nick Couldry. *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism.* London: Sage, 2010, 9.

7 For the full reviews see Michael Billington. "Behind the Beautiful Forevers Review – a Triumph for David Hare and Meera Syal." <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/nov/19/behind-the-beautiful-forevers-review-stage-david-hare-katherine-boo> (accessed 6 July 2015); Dominic Cavendish. "Behind the Beautiful Forevers, National Theatre, Review: 'A world in which life is cheap'." *The Telegraph.* 19 November 2014. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/11235899/Behind-the-Beautiful-Forevers-National-Theatre-review-A-world-in-which-life-is-cheap.html> (accessed 6 July 2015); Paul Taylor. "Behind the Beautiful Forevers, National Theatre, Review: Magnificent." *The Independent.* 19 November 2014. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/behind-the-beautiful-forevers-national-theatre-review-magnificent-9870196.html> (accessed 6 July 2015).

8 The genre, anticipated by the New Journalism, is also known as narrative or literary nonfiction. See Lee Gutkind. *The Art of Creative Nonfiction: Writing and Selling the Literature of Reality.* New York: Wiley, 1997, and the introduction to Barbara Lounsberry, *The Art of Fact: Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction.* Westport: Greenwood Press, 1990. Boo herself refers to her writing as "narrative nonfiction" in an interview reprinted in the programme of the National Theatre's production: "Does it still need saying that journalism is not a perfect mirror of reality, that narrative nonfiction is a selective art, and that I didn't write this book while balanced on an Archimedean ethical point?" (Kate Medina and Katherine Boo. "Behind Behind the Beautiful Forevers." National Theatre programme, 2015).

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> the envy of the world. But as you read on, it becomes apparent that the book is more penetrative than a shock-inducing, attention-grabbing depiction of slumdogs.[9]

The review in *The Hindu* likewise conceded that the book has moments when it "shows us not how certain 'others' live, but how any life may be lived in the shadow of instability and uncertainty".[10]

Speaking and Listening in Katherine Boo's Creative Nonfiction

Boo is an experienced, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist on the staff of the *New Yorker*. She had reported on poverty in the United States before her attention turned to inequality in the newly prospering India, the country of origin of her husband, the Cambridge-educated Indian political scientist Sunil Khilnani. In her Author's Note, Boo writes how she had grown "impatient with poignant snapshots of Indian squalor: the ribby children with flies in their eyes and other emblems of abjectness that one can't help but see within five minutes of walking into a slum".[11] Boo was driven to find answers to such questions as "What is the infrastructure of opportunity in this society? Whose capabilities are given wing by the market and a government's economic and social policy? Whose capabilities are squandered? By what means might that ribby child grow up to be less poor?" (247–8) Accompanied by translators, Boo followed inhabitants of Mumbai's Annawadi slum, especially young people and women, from November 2007 to March 2011.

Situated right next to the international airport of India's financial capital (and actually on airport land), Annawadi was first settled in 1991 by Tamil airport workers and grew into a place with about three thousand inhabitants. For Boo, the slum is emblematic of the new inequalities in 21st-century India, "a country that holds one-third of the planet's poor" but is also "dizzy now with development and circulating money". (3) What obviously intrigued Boo about Annawadi is the bizarre juxtaposition of the airport as a centre of global mobility and business, with its jumbo jets and luxury hotels on the one hand, and the slum's makeshift huts, mud and sewer lake on the other. As her text says, the slum looks as if it had been "airdropped into gaps between elegant modernities" (xii), and this explains why it is a thorn in the flesh of Mumbai's authorities: "There were

9 Sumit Chakraberty. "Book review: 'Behind the Beautiful Forevers'." *DNA – Daily News and Analysis*. <www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/review-book-review-behind-the-beautiful-forevers-1651971> (accessed 7 July 2015).

10 Aman Sethi. "As things fall apart…" *The Hindu*. 23 April 2012. <http://www.thehindu.com/books/as-things-fall-apart/article3345774.ece> (accessed 7 July 2015).

11 Katherine Boo. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Slum*. London: Portobello Books, 2012, 247.

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opportunity costs attached to the fact that the Indian financial capital was alternatively known as Slumbai." (42) However, as Boo makes very clear, Annawadi is not simply a site of abjection. It is, as one of the people she portrays perceives it, "magnificently positioned for a trafficker in rich people's garbage" (xii). It is a place where people dream about upward social mobility, where they use the capabilities and opportunities they have to their best advantage. Annawadi may be part of Mumbai's "undercity", as Boo' calls it, but it remains connected to the "over-city" and thrives from the waste it receives from there. As Boo phrases it: "It was a smogged-out, prosperity-driven obstacle course up there in the over-city, from which wads of possibility had tumbled down to the slums." (xii) Boo's portrayal of Annawadi subverts expectations that Western readers might have about Indian slums and slumdwellers, especially when she points out that these people are not even poor according to official Indian definitions. By 2008, she writes,

> almost no one in this slum was considered poor by official Indian benchmarks. Rather, the Annawadians were among roughly one hundred million Indians freed from poverty since 1991, when, around the same moment as the small slum's founding, the central government embraced economic liberalization. The Annawadians were thus part of one of the most stirring success narratives in the modern history of global market capitalism, a narrative still unfolding. (6)

As depicted by Boo, Annawadi is a social space in which people are resilient and have ambitions, in which there are social climbers and losers, where people suffer but also profit from India's political and institutional corruption, and where multiple inequalities exist amongst the slumdwellers themselves. The people of Annawadi are no pitiable victims. Indeed, some are quite unlikable, greedy and power-hungry people, like Asha, who desires to become the new slumlord and who exploits her fellow Annawadians when she fixes affairs for them through her political connections. She also has no scruples about using government anti-poverty funds for herself. Boo's text makes such recklessness understandable and draws her readers' attention to the ethical paradoxes behind it:

> In the West, and among some of the Indian elite, this word, *corruption*, had purely negative connotations; it was seen as blocking India's modern, global ambitions. But for the poor of a country where corruption thieved a great deal of opportunity, corruption was one of the genuine opportunities that remained. [...] Everyone in Annawadi wanted one of the life-changing miracles that were said to happen in the New India. They wanted to go from zero to hero, as the saying went, and they wanted to go there fast. Asha believed in New Indian miracles but thought they happened only gradually, as incremental advantages over one's neighbors were parleyed into larger ones. (28–9)

It is with such passages that Boo realises her hope "to portray these individuals in their complexities – allow them not to be Representative Poor Persons – so that

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readers might find some other point of emotional purchase, a connection more blooded than pity".[12] Perhaps the most surprising of such connections to many readers is the fact that Annawadi's inhabitants were just as affected by the 2008 crash as their betters in the over-city and people in the West: "Suddenly, once-profitable links to the global markets were pushing the slumdwellers backward. The price of recyclable goods declined." (181)

Boo was highly aware of her being an invasive presence in the slum and of the representational asymmetry involved in her project, a difficulty also noted by William Dalrymple in his review of the book for the *Guardian:*

> The book takes on a number of difficult technical challenges. It is never easy for a middle-class intellectual to convey the struggles of the lives of the poor and disadvantaged; Orwell pulled it off, but few others have succeeded without sounding either condescending or voyeuristic. It is more difficult still if that writer comes from a different country and does not speak the requisite languages. Yet thanks to several years of rigorous research on the ground, following her characters around as they live their lives, months of research retrieving court documents through India's Right to Information act, and, most of all, through close observation and a deep human empathy, Boo has created as detailed, convincing and moving a portrait of urban deprivation as *The Road to Wigan Pier.*[13]

In his review of the book, also for the *Guardian*, Amit Chaudhuri points out that the asymmetry of representation would have been very similar if he had written the book:

> For middle-class people like me who grew up in Bombay, forays into the slums were infrequent. One sensed the goings-on and exchanges inside them as one would a foreign world, without completely understanding what was being said, in spite of (unlike Boo) knowing the language.[14]

Boo took care to reflect her own position towards Annawadi's people: "There being no way around the not-being-Indian business, I tried to compensate for my limitations the same way I do in unfamiliar American territory: by time spent, attention paid, documentation secured, accounts cross-checked." (249) Her book is based on countless interviews, recordings made by herself and by Annawadi children as well as carefully researched public records. The people she portrayed gave their permission for their lives to be made public – not only in Boo's book, but also its theatre adaptation, as the reviewer of the production in

12 Medina/Boo, "Behind Behind the Beautiful Forevers."

13 William Dalrymple. "Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Slum by Katherine Boo – Review." *The Guardian.* 22 June 2012. <http://www.theguardian.co.uk/books/2012/jun/22/beautiful-forevers-katherine-boo-review> (accessed 6 July 2015).

14 Amit Chaudhuri, "Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Slum by Katherine Boo – review." *The Guardian.* 29 June 2012. <http://www.theguardian.co.uk/books/2012/jun/29/behind-beautiful-forevers-katherine-boo-review> (accessed 6 July 2015).

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the *Mumbai Mirror* emphasised, citing Boo saying that "The Annawadi families I've portrayed agreed to a theatrical representation of their lives".[15] And Boo not only makes her own position explicit. She also positions her readers, especially through her use of fictional techniques. Most significantly, she gives her readers access to the consciousness of the people she portrays. This grants these people a share in representational agency and lets the readers *share* their experiences rather than gazing at them as voyeurs. For example, the passage that explains the book's title and its symbolism of spatial segregation is mediated through the perception of the boy Sunil, a garbage collector who comes across as an intelligent child with a keen awareness of where he lives and how he can find opportunities there:

> It interested him that from Airport Road, only the smoke plumes of Annawadi's cooking fires could now be seen. The airport people had erected tall, gleaming aluminium fences on the side of the slum that most drivers passed before turning into the international terminal. Drivers approaching the terminal from the other direction would see only a concrete wall covered with sunshine-yellow advertisements. The ads were for Italianate floor tiles, and the corporate slogan ran the wall's length: BEAUTIFUL FOREVER BEAUTIFUL FOREVER BEAUTIFUL FOREVER. Sunil regularly walked atop the Beautiful Forever wall, surveying for trash, but Airport Road was unhelpfully clean. (36–7)

The cited passage demands attentive reading if one wishes to figure out the deictic reference of 'behind' in the title of Boo's book. The advertisement for the home beautifying tiles cannot be seen from inside the slum; the slum is behind it, and the slogan points to a better life enabled by the world beyond the slum. Amit Chaudhuri finds the special quality of Boo's book not in the "information or research that Boo is bringing to us, but a quality of attention".[16] And this attention is enforced by Boo's narrative technique, which manages to avoid the two main traps of poverty representation, sentimentalism and sensationalism.

Adapting Boo's Book for the London Stage

While Boo was researching her book, a conflict emerged in Annawadi which became the focus of her narrative and would later provide the plot for Hare's dramatic adaptation: The Husains, one of the few Muslim families living in Annawadi, are resented for religious reasons but even more because they have

15 Danish Khan. "Mumbai to London, via Annawadi." *Mumbai Mirror*. 23 November 2014. <http://www.mumbaimirror.com/others/sunday-read/Mumbai-to-London-via-Annawadi/articleshow/45242858.cms> (accessed 6 July 2015).

16 Amit Chaudhuri, "Behind the Beautiful Forevers."

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achieved relative economic comfort. They are the traders of the garbage which others collect for them. Their ambition is to make enough money to own a proper house elsewhere, and Mrs Husain enjoys showing off what they already have in scene 14 of the first act: "Let's show we can live better than other people."[17] This causes social envy that escalates when the Husains set out to improve their hut with tiles from the 'Beautiful Forever' advertisement; as a result of their efforts, the wall shared with one of their neighbours is damaged. This neighbour is the one-legged Fatima, and in the row that ensues, the woman, who is emotionally disturbed, sets fire to herself to get attention and to emphasise the injustice she feels to have suffered from the Husains. Contrary to her intentions, she gets burnt so badly that she dies (also due to inadequate medical treatment that is hushed up). The Husains are accused of having deliberately caused a suicide, are drawn into a court case and experience the corruption of the Indian police and judiciary system. Having to pay bribes, they lose their relative wealth. In the end, an uncorrupted judge acquits the Husains and they return to Annawadi in order to take up their struggle for a better life.

When Hare adapted Boo's book for the National Theatre, this process involved translations on several levels: from an American to a British writer; from the relatively unspecific readership addressed by the international book market to a much more limited and localised audience in one of the UK's leading theatres; from a personal reading experience to the collective watching of a stage event; from the aesthetics of narrative nonfiction to the performative aesthetic of drama and theatre, where Boo's real people are impersonated by actors that lend them not only voices but also faces and bodies. As the reviewer of the production in the *Times Literary Supplement* justly points out, the intimacy of Boo's representation gets lost when text originally rendered as narrated monologue becomes dialogue actually spoken on stage. "At the Olivier", he writes, "by necessity, everyone is a performer."[18] And, he points out, not everything in Boo's narrative can be performed: The Olivier stage can only make a poor attempt at capturing the slum's squalor, claustrophobia and stench which Boo's narrative continually evokes.[19] Matt Trueman, who reviewed the production for *Variety*, even found that the slum from Boo's book looked "positively idyllic in Rufus Norris' staging: sun-soaked, colorful and even, on occasion, bedecked with fairy lights", and noted further that "everyone speaks David Hare – that is, pithy left-wing one-liners".[20]

17 David Hare. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: A Play by David Hare. Based on the Book by Katherine Boo.* London: Faber, 2014, 30.

18 Toby Lichtig. "The Discarded World," In: *Times Literary Supplement* 12 December 2014, 17.

19 Ibid.

20 Matt Trueman. "London Theater Review: 'Behind the Beautiful Forevers'." *Variety.* 20 November 2014. <http://www.variety.com/2014/legit/reviews/behind-the-beautiful-forevers-play-review-david-hare-national-theatre-london-1201358437/> (accessed 6 July 2015).

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However, Hare's play shares a considerable amount of text with Boo's book as well as a basic ethical position that takes the Annawadians seriously as individuals. But they have to use different aesthetic strategies, and the question therefore arises how Hare and Rufus Norris as director manage to translate the ethics behind Boo's special way of reporting into an effective play for a big stage. In the adaptation process, the connection to Boo's book was explicitly maintained, also beyond the text: on the production's website, which included an interview with Boo interspersed with documentary footage of Annawadi, and in the programme, which includes another interview with Boo and photographs of Annawadi and its people. In the theatre, these para-productional elements helped to preserve the ethical appeal of Boo's nonfiction which is essentially rooted in the fact that it is about real people and real ways of coping with poverty.[21]

Hare's script not only uses much of Boo's original text but also keeps its many characters, thus maintaining the multiplicity of experiences that Boo aimed to portray. But it makes no attempt to come across as documentary or verbatim theatre. In the production of the National Theatre, it was obvious to the audience that all roles were played by a cast of professional actors led by the well-known Meera Syal in the role of Mrs Husain. The play's two acts, both consisting of many short scenes, were produced as grand-scale theatre that emphasised its theatricality through a spectacular set and striking effects, especially in transitions between scenes. The most impressive ones were instances when a big plane seemed to fly over the stage and auditorium[22], signifying both the slum's connectedness to global phenomena and the way it is passed over by them. Where Boo's reportage is intimate and personal, the production in the National Theatre had to go for some big effects to arouse a strong emotional response in its spectators. Like Boo's book, however, it avoids sentimentality, and Boo's reflectedness as a journalistic narrator is translated into the play's Brechtian moments: when characters address the audience, when the audience watches the set gradually building up from an empty stage in the first scenes[23], and when the BEAUTIFUL FOREVER phrase appears as a writing on the wall that hovers over the action in the slum, challenging the spectator to position him- or herself in relation to the wall on which the phrase is written.

21 Indeed, the reality effect of Boo's book was lost for some spectators; the production struck its reviewer Matt Trueman as "Hollywood-neat" ("London Theater Review").

22 See the stage directions in 1.8: "*A massive shadow moves across as a 747 passes low overhead, lights flashing. Then the jet disappears*" (16), and in 1.22: "*At once the sound of an aeroplane approaching from the back. Everything shakes again, as the jumbo goes screaming over, lights flashing, apparently just yards above Annawadi*" (51).

23 See the first stage direction in 1.1: "*A bare stage, epic: It's a maidan as yet undefined.*" (3) Only in 1.17 is the whole slum revealed in the set.

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The first character to appear on the still empty stage is the boy Sunil. He speaks *ad spectatores* and makes the social distance between the world on stage and the London audience (a cultural elite of waste producers rather than collectors) explicit and thematic. Where Boo's book invited its readers to share Sunil's consciousness, the boy's opening monologue bears the burden of a dramatic opening, setting the tone for the spectators' reactions and demanding their attention. The appearance of the boy in the first scene immediately gives 'Indian poverty' a personal voice and a body, and it forces the audience to listen since Sunil provides the only point of focus on the bare stage:

> *Sunil:* You ask me what I want? I want cotton buds. I want ketchup packets. Because silver paper is good. Chocolate. Cigarettes. Cigarette packets. Umbrellas. That's what I want. Cardboard. Plastic. Batteries. Shoelaces. Metal. Problem: there's always a wall. Wherever you go, you'll find a new wall. With barbed wire, or bottled glass. All the time, new guards, new dogs, new guns. There's a lot of good stuff in the world, that's why they've electrified the fences. Have you been to the airport? Mumbai airport? Have you? It's not just that rich people don't know what they've got. They don't even know what they throw away. They don't notice. We notice. […] Somewhere, there's a place full of rubbish no one else has thought of. (3)

To an audience on London's South Bank who could spend between 15 and 35 pounds for a ticket – and even more for the whole evening out – this opening has an element of provocation. It addresses the social and cultural gap between the character and the spectators as well as the preconceptions the spectators are likely to have concerning life in an Indian slum. Furthermore, Sunil's monologue plays with notions of want, lack and value. The audience is made to see that the young slumdweller has another definition than they have of what is valuable "good stuff". His remarks about walls receive a special poignancy because they are delivered while another wall – the invisible fourth wall between stage and audience – is being overstepped. All this raises attention, demands a readjustment of expectations, lends the character a strong agency and makes him come across as a knowledgeable, resourceful and articulate boy, especially because he speaks in the "cheerful" manner that Hare's stage direction demands. The play so manages to realise an aim that Boo formulates in the interview about her book that was re-printed in the National Theatre's programme: "If we don't really grasp the intelligences of those who are being denied, we're not going to grasp the potential that's being lost."[24]

The second scene establishes Sunil as a positive character with strong ethical principles since he explicitly resists the temptation to increase his meagre income by stealing more valuable stuff from the airlines' recycling bins. He insists that he

24 Medina/Boo, "Behind Behind the Beautiful Forevers."

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is a picker, not a thief, and it is only the decline after the 2008[25] crash that will make him stray from his principles with unfortunate consequences. However, the ending of the play re-establishes Sunil as a non-victim when he returns to honest waste collecting and takes the risk of jumping on a dangerous ridge in order to get at bottles which other collectors have not dared to pick. Sunil's jump concludes the play, and it emphasises his precarious situation as well as his agency and resourcefulness. The hope articulated in his opening speech has come true – he has found "a place full of rubbish no one else has thought of" (3).

Sunil's appearances frame the main plot that evolves around the Husains' predicament. As in Boo's book, it is 16-year-old Abdul Husain who undergoes a significant development. While at first he comes across as a character who wishes to keep a low profile, in a later scene (2.22) he resists corruption openly and refuses to pay bribes. The impact of the scene – both on the other characters and the audience – is supported by the fact that in just that moment, "*bulldozers arrive, and with a great crash the wall at the back begins to shake*" (119). While the bulldozers seem to suggest at first sight that the airport and city authorities have won and the Annawadians will lose their home and source of income, the destructive act also holds a new promise: Annawadi will now become an object of speculation and the families see a chance to claim compensation. Once more, the slumdwellers seize an opportunity from the debris of economic liberalism.

Like Boo's book, Hare's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* presents its characters as individuals that challenge stereotypical views of the Indian poor. But they carry more representative weight than the people Boo portrays because they articulate their positions on the public stage of a big (national) theatre. And this weight is enhanced by the play's moments of Brechtian didacticism which steer the audience's attention more directly than the multiple perspectives in Boo's narrative, whether in Sunil's opening monologue or another passage spoken *ad spectatores* by Asha, who justifies her complicity in corruption. This speech is delivered after the airport hotels have appeared in the set for the first time:

> *Upstage, Glimmerglass hotels shimmer behind the wall. They become a permanent background, towering over the action. [...]*
> *Asha:* Five hotels. In Annawadi, we live under five hotels. They built walls, so the guests wouldn't have to look at us, so the guests wouldn't know we were here. [...] Mumbai doesn't seem modern. Why not? Obvious. Because of us. Here we are, sitting in the way beside the airport, stopping the economic miracle being a miracle. (8/1.5)

25 Sunil is the character who also explains the impact of the crash on the slum to the audience in another passage of direct address in 2.8: "A kilo of empty water bottles – a few weeks ago, you got twenty-five rupees. Today you get ten. A kilo of newspaper was always five rupees. Today they give you two. And it happened suddenly. [...] Wall Street's down and no one's making a living. Anywhere." (86–87).

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One could argue that passages which break the fourth wall also counter the voyeuristic gaze that bodily performances of poverty invite. Hare also uses a meta-theatrical reference to remind spectators that what they are watching is less 'exotic' than they might presume: Manju, Asha's daughter, goes to college and has read Congreve's *The Way of the World* (as also mentioned in Boo's book), whose parallels to Annawadi she spells out explicitly: "Everyone's in their own world. It's all about position and power. It's about doing well. And advancing." (33/1.15) On the stage, this works as a meta-theatrical-moment that allows the characters on stage to break the audience's gaze.

The National Theatre as a Space of Discussion

In their own ways and with their own aesthetic strategies, Boo's book and Hare's play demand an ethical response from audiences whose members are much more affluent than the people whose lives are portrayed. The communication about poverty in both representations has an asymmetrical element that cannot be denied and which both writers therefore openly address. Both also challenge the stereotypes that are often connected with such asymmetries. As mentioned above, representation has a potential to configure and re-configure how we think, feel and behave in relation to poor people and poverty, and both writers lay the ground for such reconfiguration. Essentially, this includes an awareness that the world represented and the world of the readers or spectators are different but also connected through global finanscapes. This is a point which the production of Hare's play pushed even more than its text, and especially though its para-productional materials.

The NT's programme includes an essay written by Boo's husband, Sunil Khilnani, then Professor of Politics and Director of the King's College London India Institute and author of *The Idea of India*. The essay, "Overcity, Undercity, Everycity", draws attention to the fact that "Mumbai's overcity has become more and more like any other global overcity".[26] It also suggests that *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* is "a glimpse of what non-poor looks like in a global market age". This refers to the Indian Government's definition of poverty that would classify most slumdwellers as above the official poverty line. But it also has resonances in new-austerity Britain, where the officially non-poor also often live under highly precarious circumstances. At the end of his essay, Khilnani is even more explicit about the possible relevance of the play for an audience in Britain's National Theatre:

26 Sunil Khilnani, "Overcity, Undercity, Everycity." National Theatre programme, 2015.

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> Watch the choices the Annawadians make and feel distant and insulated, or watch the choices Annawadians make and feel a little recognition. In Britain and other Western countries, citizens live in the twilight era of the richly provisioned social state, and the age of the temp-job economy is well begun. There is frantic competition and hope and economic volatility and extra-legal improvisation, especially when the usual avenues of upward mobility close down. The new Indian economy, playing out in elemental form in cities like Mumbai, may be hope-stoked in the way that Western economies no longer are, but in many of its particulars, it looks very much like the new global economy. And it's coming to your city soon.

To the *TLS* reviewer of the NT's production, it seemed fitting that the actors, after the end of the performance he had attended, made a final direct appeal to the audience:

> [A]s the actors take their bows, Syal intervenes and asks us to stop clapping. She reminds us that the story we've just witnessed is true, that the characters exist, that a charity – Magic Bus – will be waiting outside the auditorium with collecting tins. Art is not politics, but this feels appropriate. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* demonstrates how hard it is to do good in a world stacked against you. By contrast, for a London theatre audience to fumble for loose change is not just easy but uncomfortably so.[27]

The performative representation of theatre here allowed for a very concrete positioning of the audience, one that tried to turn ethical attention into immediate re-action in the form of a donation for an organisation in India that "steers children towards a better life with better awareness, better life skills, and better opportunities, in the journey from childhood to livelihood".[28] The donation was not meant to be given out of pity but in response to a representation that aimed to affect the way in which Western audiences perceive Indian slums and the people who cope with life there. The *Times of India* reported on the play's opening, citing Boo's reaction when seeing the theatre version of her book:

> Was she worried about the subject transitioning mediums? 'I worried a lot about over-simplification, over-amplification, and whether theatrical concerns would trump nuanced human connections,' the author reveals, 'But balanced against such worries was a big hope that a play might open up a different space for discussion of grave structural problems affecting a huge number of lowincome people in this world.'[29]

The National Theatre did open a space of discussion, but of course, as a theatre production, its impact was limited, and the *Times of India* article closes with

27 Lichtig, "The Discarded World," 18.
28 See the NGO's official web page: www.magicbus.org.
29 Joeanna Rebello. "Scavengers on London stage." *The Times of India*. 23 November 2014. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/deep-focus/Scavengers-on-London-stage/articleshow/45 245759.cms> (accessed 6 July 2015).

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remarks that caution expectations concerning the effect of poverty representations for those still living in a 'postcolonial' world:

> But Annawadi continues to live its measured life out, unaffected by reviews or ticket sales. 'Today I was on the phone to three people in Annawadi, and in passing mentioned the reviews, which were quite good, and that I'd be bringing a DVD for everyone to see. The residents were only mildly interested,' Boo says.[30]

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30 Ibid.

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Katharina Engel

'Poverty Porn' in Spoken Word Poetry? Kate Tempest's* *Brand New Ancients*

Introduction

A poetic representation of poverty in the UK takes centre stage in this contribution: *Brand New Ancients*[1] (2013), a spoken word epic, written and performed by Kate Tempest, the South London poet, playwright, rapper, and novelist, who currently proves to be successful with projects in all of these genres.[2] In her long performance poem, which won the Ted Hughes Prize for Innovation in Poetry, Kate Tempest draws connections to ancient mythology to tell the stories of two half-brothers, Tommy and Clive, growing up in contemporary London. This article, as the buzzword 'poverty porn' in the title suggests, focuses on how Tempest handles stereotypes about the disadvantaged in British society. It analyses how her poetry – especially in performance – foregrounds the appeal of myths about 'broken Britain'[3] while working towards the aim she states expressively at gigs or in interviews: that is, "dismantling the dominant narrative"

* This paper was written for the conference at the University of Bonn in 2015 and edited when Tempest still published and performed under this name. In August 2020, Tempest came out as non-binary. They changed their name to "Kae Tempest" and started using the pronouns "they/them".

1 Kate Tempest. *Brand New Ancients.* London: Picador, 2013.

2 In 2014, Tempest was selected as one of the 20 Next Generation Poets, who are chosen only once in a decade by the Poetry Book Society; for her debut solo album *Everybody Down* she was nominated for the 2014 Mercury Prize and her debut novel *The Bricks That Built the Houses* was published by Bloomsbury in April 2016 to wide acclaim. These publications, along with a rewriting of the Tiresias myth in the collection of loosely interconnected poems *Hold Your Own* (2014) and her play *Wasted* (prem. July 2011 at Latitude Festival), are all thematically linked to *Brand New Ancients* [*BNA*] as they revolve around the same cast of characters, their precarious lives in London, and Tempest's criticism of neoliberalism.

3 A phrase coined by the British Conservative Party and their leader David Cameron during the electoral campaign 2005–2010, which has, however, become a term used in arguments of both left-wing and conservative politicians – naturally with different foci on what is 'broken'.

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and "replac[ing] it with a new one" by means of "a revolution in how we think about each other. More empathy, less greed".[4]

Before delving into Tempest's poetry, the use of the terms 'poverty' and 'precarity' in this article is clarified. The main point is to highlight how contemporary discourses of poverty in the UK are replete with stigmatising narratives, or 'myths' in the sense of false discriminatory beliefs, about 'the poor', the un- or underemployed and underprivileged precariat of British society. Selected passages from *Brand New Ancients* will then illustrate how Kate Tempest's spoken word myths are embedded in and reflect on these discourses of social othering. Two of the main characters are of particular interest: firstly, Clive, the underprivileged, criminal half-brother of more successful Tommy, and secondly, Gloria, Tommy's girlfriend, who leads a precarious life as a barmaid and whose past is described as similar to Clive's, full of violence and drug abuse, lacking family support and education. The close reading of selected passages from the text is complemented by references to the three short films which were produced in collaboration with the Battersea Arts Centre in London and which show excerpts from Tempest's 90-minute stage performance,[5] as well as by referring to a studio recording of the poet delivering her text accompanied by the same musicians as in the live show. Commenting on the spoken word performance and its (possible) effects on the audience shall help to provide a better picture of the context of Tempest's critique of capitalist society and her approach to precarious lives in this poem.

Discourse and Demonization: Defining 'Poverty' and 'Precarity' in the UK

When discussing poverty and precarity in the UK, it makes sense to look beyond income and poverty lines, beyond the technical definition used for EU countries (including Great Britain before Brexit) that "people falling below 60 % of median income [of their country] are said to be 'at-risk-of monetary poverty'".[6] To

4 Amanda Purdie. "Kate Tempest." *Georgie Magazine*. 30 August 2015. <http://georgiemagazine.com/music/kate-tempest/> (accessed 17 August 2016).

5 For developing the show, Tempest had help from Ian Rickson, former Artistic Director at the Royal Court Theatre in London (1998–2006). Musical director and composer Nell Catchpole, who works for the Royal Opera House and the Royal Ballet, created the score. *BNA* toured from its home base, the Battersea Arts Centre in London, around the UK, to Canada and the U.S. The performance is set on a bare stage, which is, however, 'furnished' by the changing lighting. Tempest speaks the words from memory, using different microphones, accompanied by a live band consisting of tuba, cello, violin, drums and electronics.

6 European Anti-Poverty Network. *EAPN Explainer #6. Poverty and Inequality in the EU.* Brussels: EAPN, 2014, 19. In 2014, for the UK this at-risk-of-poverty threshold was at 12,35 € per

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measure poverty as a multi-dimensional phenomenon proves more adequate, as Nanak Kakwani argues in *Poverty in Focus*, a publication of the United Nation's International Poverty Centre: "[P]overty should be viewed as the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely as low level of income. Poverty encompasses not only material deprivation (measured by income or consumption) but also many other forms of deprivations in different aspects of life such as unemployment, ill health, lack of education, vulnerability, powerlessness, social exclusion and so on".[7] At the EU level, an extended set of indicators of poverty has been adopted,[8] which takes the wider range of deprivations besides the three key indicators monetary poverty, material deprivation and low work intensity into account. Especially the factor of social exclusion, i. e., the "processes which drive people to the edge of society, which limit their access to resources and opportunities, and curtail their participation in normal social and cultural life",[9] is central to capturing the experience of poverty and inequality in affluent societies like the UK. As people are left "feeling marginalised, powerless and discriminated against",[10] they get caught in "a dynamic process" that is often visualised as a downward spiral of "descending levels: some disadvantages lead to some exclusion, which in turn leads to more disadvantages and more exclusion and ends up with persistent multiple (deprivation) disadvantages".[11]

The image of descent also figures prominently in the most recent publication of German sociologist Oliver Nachtwey, who describes German society as "Abstiegsgesellschaft", a society in which downward instead of upward social mobility becomes the main threat or actual reality for the large majority of the people.[12] Nachtwey compares the experience of social decline to being on an

day for a single person household; see Eurostat. *Community Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) Survey.* <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/-/ilc_li01> (accessed 17 August 2016).

7 Nanak Kakwani. "Poverty and Wellbeing." In: *Poverty in Focus. What Is Poverty? Concepts and Measures.* UNDP International Poverty Centre (December 2006), 20–21. <http://www.ipc-undp.org/pub/IPCPovertyInFocus9.pdf> (accessed 18 August 2016).

8 See EAPN, *Explainer #6*, 21: In 2010, the "Europe 2020 Strategy" was adopted to promote "a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth" in the EU with the aim of "lifting at least 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion" by 2020. It remains to be seen how the UK decides to act on this resolution after their decision to leave the EU.

9 Ibid., 10. Also see Caterina Ruggeri Laderchi et al. "Does it matter that we don't agree on the definition of poverty? A comparison of four approaches." In: *QEH Working Paper Series* 107 (2003), 20.

10 See EAPN, *Explainer #6*, 20.

11 Eurostat Taskforce, Statistical Programme Committee. *Recommendations on Social Exclusion and Poverty Statistics.* Luxembourg: Eurostat, 1998, 26. <https://www.ibge.gov.br/poverty/pdf/eurostat1.pdf> (accessed 16 April 2016). Also see Ruggeri Laderchi et al., "Does it matter," 21.

12 Oliver Nachtwey. "In der Abstiegsgesellschaft." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.* 15 June 2016. <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/arm-und-reich/soziale-ungleichheit-gesellschaft-des

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escalator moving downwards and focuses on the fact that even keeping a position of relative well-being means constantly putting in an exhausting amount of effort. For Nachtwey, being in this frustrating situation captures the condition of precarity. His findings can be applied to UK society and correspond with the work of British economist Guy Standing: In an article for *The Guardian*, Standing explains how the currently "emerging major class", the precariat, suffer mainly from a lack of job security and "feel their lives and identities are made up of disjointed bits, in which they cannot construct a desirable narrative or build a career, combining forms of work and labour, play and leisure in a sustainable way".[13] That the precariat is, in his eyes, "the new dangerous class" as they are "approaching a consciousness of common vulnerability",[14] underlines that social decline and social exclusion are closely related not only to lack of voice and agency, shame and stigma, but also to feelings of anger and frustration. The resulting increased potential for violence and the danger of the precariat being appropriated by neofascist movements need to be addressed, according to Standing, by means of "a progressive agenda […] that must be egalitarian at its core and respond to the emerging class" providing "a reinvention of the progressive trinity of equality, liberty and fraternity".[15] However, in order to 'respond' to the precariat, a crucial first step for progressive thinkers is to reflect on the *language* that is used to describe, define and thereby exclude those living in poverty and precarity.

"The Language of Poverty" was the title of a podcast for *The Open University*,[16] in which Gerry Mooney, senior lecturer in social policy for *The Open University* in Scotland and author of numerous publications on poverty and welfare, and Owen Jones, political activist, columnist for *The Guardian* and author of *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*,[17] join Geoff Andrews, senior lecturer in politics for *The Open University*, to discuss the othering that people who live in poverty or lead precarious lives between short term contracts and unemployment experience. Jones points out that stigmatising stereotypes are associated with

-abstiegs-und-der-prekaritaet-14281707.html> (accessed 30 July 2016). The article summarises the main arguments from his book *Die Abstiegsgesellschaft. Über das Aufbegehren in der regressiven Moderne*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016.

13 Guy Standing. "Who Will Be a Voice for the Emerging Precariat?" *The Guardian*. 1 June 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jun/01/voice-for-emerging-precariat> (accessed 18 August 2016). The article summarises the main arguments from his book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury, 2011; see especially the subchapter "Defining the Precariat," 7–13.

14 Standing, "Emerging Precariat."

15 Ibid.

16 Gerry Mooney et al. "The Language of Poverty." (5 Tracks) *The Open University Podcast*. 28 February, 2013. <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/society/politics-policy-people/sociology/the-language-poverty> (accessed 18 August 2016).

17 Owen Jones. *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. London: Verso, 2016 [2011].

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terms like "the underclass", "chavs", "skivers", or "scroungers" and other malign labels used by British politicians and the media to refer to the allegedly "undeserving poor", who are misrepresented as "work-shy benefit fraudsters" even if they are *working* poor, i.e. underemployed and underpaid.[18] Gerry Mooney similarly stresses how much language matters, because how poverty and the precariat are constructed determines political as well as personal responses to it. In the current period of austerity, Mooney and Jones diagnose an increasingly punitive approach to people living in poverty, a tendency towards ever harsher language along with actual cuts and sanctions. Owen Jones even speaks of a "systematic campaign of demonization" going on in British society.

With regard to the public's concept of poverty, Mooney and Jones both further criticise that attention is being drawn away from large-scale economic causes of poverty and inequality and instead redirected to the supposed failure of the individual.[19] Globalisation or long-term demographic, social and economic changes are described as factors which are beyond the control of the national government. Similarly, national phenomena, such as class inequalities and forms of exploitation and oppression, which contribute to the production and reproduction of poverty and precarity in the UK and should be addressed by the state, are too often dismissed. Instead, Mooney and Jones argue, the individual is being blamed for his or her supposed inadequacy and irresponsibility which led them into and keep them in poverty. Hence, they speak of an "individualisation of poverty".

Attitudes like these are propagated mainly by conservative politicians and they are spread in newspapers and other (social) media, online as well as offline. British reality TV programmes – with telling titles like Channel 4's *Skint* and *Benefits Street*[20] – are particularly powerful in enforcing the "line of attack"[21] against the poor. As Jones points out, these programmes not only present a "biased and distorted view" of the socially excluded but they are also "aimed to turn the poor against the poor, [while being] commissioned and produced by the privileged".[22] This propaganda, which feeds on "chaotic life-styles and larger-than-life caricatures for viewers' voyeuristic pleasure",[23] came to be criticised as exploitative 'poverty porn'. From the perspective of Media and Communication

18 See track 2 "Strivers v Skivers" by Mooney et al. *OU Podcast.*

19 See track 3 "The individualisation of poverty" by Mooney et al., *OU Podcast.*

20 See Owen Jones. "Preface to the 2016 Edition." In: *Chavs*, xiv–xvi, for a discussion of these and further examples. Also see Helen Hester's examples in "Weaponizing Prurience." In: Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard (eds). *Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain.* Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014, 205–206.

21 Jones, *Chavs*, xvi.

22 Ibid., xv.

23 Ibid., xiv.

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Studies, Helen Hester defines poverty porn in her contribution to Korte's *Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain* as "pandering to prurience by stressing the viewer's distance from the scenes represented and by facilitating an unethical passivity before representations which are framed and marketed as entertainment".[24] Obviously, this label can also be used for literature in general and spoken word in particular, because writing on page and its performance on stage may also be perceived as creating a "distance from the scenes represented" and may equally allow for "an unethical passivity" on the part of the reader or audience. And finally, the aspect of being "fram[ed] and market[ed] as entertainment" is as important for the success of a spoken word performance (or its publication) as it is for a TV programme.

From these introductory remarks on discourses of poverty and precarity, the following questions for an analysis of Kate Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* can be derived: Are stigmatising narratives about 'the poor' (re-)presented in Tempest's poetry? Are the disadvantaged in *Brand New Ancients*, Clive and Gloria in particular, presented as 'other' by the textual voice and/or the performer in her performance, keeping 'them' in a marginalised inferior position, while the readers or the audience, 'us', get to voyeuristically enjoy the depiction of their precarious lives from a comfortable distance?

Brand New Ancient Storytelling: Genre(s), Politics and Performance

Brand New Ancients was selected for this contribution because it literally takes up the idea of re-creating 'myths' about poverty, precarity and social exclusion. (Re-) Writing contemporary life stories in the style of an epic and performing this poetry as spoken word creates a 'brand new ancient' hybrid. This is Tempest's form(at) for playing with the recognisable plots and stereotypes stored in the (British) "imaginary of poverty".[25] Hence, her spoken word epic addresses the challenge inherent in all (literary) depictions of poverty or precarity:[26] the difficulty to find adequate ways of representing precarious lives in a text and in a spoken word performance. Tempest is critically aware of the stereotypical images and set plots which are ready at hand in literature (and other discourses) of the past and present to be re-presented when writing and speaking *about* 'the poor' and 'the precariat'.

24 Hester, "Weaponizing Prurience," 208.

25 Barbara Korte. "Dealing With Deprivation. Figurations of Poverty on the Contemporary British Book Market." In: *Anglia* 130,1 (2012), 76.

26 See ibid., especially 78–79.

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That *Brand New Ancients* is inspired by the myths of "the old days" (1) is written into its structures: it starts with a prologue (1–4), or *prooimion*, introducing the themes and aim of the epic to the audience, and it ends with an epilogue (43–47) that provides closure after the violent and yet open-ended climax of the narrative. It features a chorus for which Tempest switches from speaking to singing, which re-emphasises the epic's main theme in its three occurrences (5–6, 24–25 and 27, 42–43) and which, moreover, functions as a commentary on the conflicts and crises of the characters. Playful intertextual references[27] and other small formal gestures to ancient epics[28] further highlight the parallels between Tempest's spoken word piece and the (oral) tradition of (re-) telling and (re-)writing myths. Besides such formal links to ancient epics, Tempest's poet-narrator also explicitly comments on the (f)act that she is retelling epic content. She regularly reminds her audience that "all that we have here is all that we've always had" (3). In the metafictional reflections of the prologue she elaborates on the idea that everyday life is still full of archetypal constellations, the "curses and gifts" (3), "the heroic and the pitiful" (1), which already figured in ancient myths. There is continuity in humankind and its predicaments – "we're the same beings that began" (4) – and therefore in the basic narratives: "really there's no difference" (4). These thoughts are summarised in the overall theme of *Brand New Ancients* which is repeated frequently in variations of the phrase: "We are still mythical."

Confronted with Tempest's hybrid text in performance, the audience are asked to merge their knowledge about epics with that about contemporary life narratives in order to make sense of what Tempest presents to them. Based on their reading (and other) experience and their familiarity with spoken word, recipients try to identify familiar "scenarios" and "scripts".[29] They enter the dynamic process of applying "schemata" to *Brand New Ancients*, i. e. they compare their

27 The main explicit intertextual references are comparisons between the contemporary characters and mythical figures, but Tempest only very loosely links her 21st-century London to the world of ancient gods. And it is not just Greek and Roman mythology her text refers to, but Tempest also nods to medieval "legends" (1) as sung by "troubadours" (28) or the biblical form of the "parable" (3) as model texts.

28 For example, desperate Tommy's journey through London on the underground is a nod to the classical *katabasis*, i. e. the epic hero's journey into the underworld; and there are Tempest's versions of *epithets* via recognisable motifs for characters in the musical score of *Brand New Ancients*. See Justine McConnell. "We Are Still Mythical." In: *Arion* 22,1 (2014), 198.

29 See Catherine Emmott and Marc Alexander. "Schemata." In: Peter Hühn et al. (eds). *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. Hamburg: Hamburg University Press. <https://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/33.html> (accessed 4 August 2016): "Scenarios" (or "frames") are "mental representations of objects, settings or situations", "situational knowledge"; "scripts" describe the "knowledge of stereotypical goal-oriented event sequences". Such "schema knowledge" is historically and culturally specific as readers form it by (reading or other) experience, i. e., exposure to and involvement in discourses (see §§ 2–4).

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ideas of stereotypical characters, settings and events to what they hear and see in the performance along with their "knowledge of the overall structure of stories",[30] which includes "sets of expectations about how stories will continue".[31] Schemata are seen as historically and culturally specific because readers form them from exposure to and involvement in the various discourses they encounter in their life. How Tempest's text handles such preconceptions in the recipients' minds, how she deals with the social imaginary, is the interesting question when it comes to discussing *Brand New Ancients* and discourses of precarity. As the basic function of schema knowledge is to allow the reader to fill in gaps and create coherence in a narrative,[32] another advantage of Tempest's choice to work with myths becomes apparent: Her references to well-known stories facilitate the process of recalling and applying schemata, which is a great help to the audience considering the rather fast-paced delivery of a spoken word poem. Readers and listeners are able to quickly recognise familiar character types, events and settings in *Brand New Ancients* and hence have a better chance of following the story as they can guess how the spoken word narrative might develop.

A real strength of Kate Tempest is her ability to support her diverse audiences' understanding of the lengthy spoken word narrative in whichever kind of venue she performs.[33] That she started her career as rapper and slam poet at open mic events in London surely helped to develop this skill. As her most basic strategy, Tempest keeps the bites of spoken word that the audience has to chew at a manageable size. On stage or in the studio, each spoonful is between 30 seconds and one minute long followed by a short break, and the whole portion of a scene does not add up to more than three minutes of constant listening, which the audience can digest in the longer breaks with music between the scenes. The main reason, however, why Tempest does not lose her audience's attention is that she builds such a strong connection to them.

Kate Tempest makes a point of speaking to "you" in the singular as well as the plural, including herself in "us", creating a "we", a community, from the very beginning of *Brand New Ancients.* A strong voice emanates from the text, and Tempest reminds readers on the title page of the book that "[t]his poem was written to be read aloud". When performed on stage, a central effect of the

30 Ibid., § 9.
31 Ibid.
32 See ibid., §§ 5–6.
33 *The Guardian*'s theatre critic Lyn Gardner comments on this in her blog entry "From Glastonbury to Book at Bedtime: the uncontainable Kate Tempest." 24 May 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2016/may/24/kate-tempest-book-at-bedtime-radio-4> (accessed 4 August 2016): "When I went to see *Brand New Ancients* for a second time, it was fascinating to see an audience that ranged from teenagers to pensioners. [Tempest] gets everywhere and embraces the Royal Opera House and Radio 4 as natural homes for her work as well as Glastonbury or a small arts centre or YouTube."

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prominent lyrical I is that it invites conflation of *the performer* Kate Tempest with *the fictive speaker* or *poetic persona* of the written text. Because her pseudonym 'Kate Tempest' already functions as a sort of mask, as a persona used for her public performances,[34] it seems legitimate to create this connection between the performing poet-persona on stage and the poetic persona on the page. They are both consciously constructed identities (with political views) that are not to be confused with Tempest's private self. Nevertheless, for the audience the strict distinction between real author and fictive poetic persona is destabilised by the fact that the real poet performs her work.[35] Another particularity of the communication situation at a live performance is that the audience are likely to perceive themselves not as mere recipients but rather as *participants* in the event. They feel immediately addressed by the poet's delivery of what is (actually) aimed at the fictive addressee of the text.[36] Hence, the performance, as opposed to the poetry on the page, is to be understood as a "shared experience" in a specific social and spatio-temporal setting.[37] Just as Kate Tempest claims, this puts less emphasis on the poet/performer (on "how clever, important or educated" they are) and more on the (communication with the) recipient.[38] She stresses that "a poem on a page isn't finished until somebody reads it", and the advantage of spoken word is, then, that "in a performance, the poem happens the minute it reaches the audience".[39] The immediacy that the text gains in the direct communication between performer and audience also affects its political potential.

Tempest works hard for the (seemingly) personal connection with her audience in order to successfully bring across her political message. That she is a political performer with a mission – primarily concerned with the "new dan-

34 Tempest comments on the split between private and public self in an interview with Nicholas Wroe for *The Guardian:* "[W]ith my family, or friends I have known a long time, I'm still Kate Calvert. But Kate Tempest could do things that Kate Calvert couldn't do, and through her I did things that would have seemed impossible. You just have to fucking own it! But it's also nice to be able to sometimes turn Kate Tempest off." Nicholas Wroe. "Kate Tempest: Rapping changed my life." *The Guardian.* 4 October 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/04/kate-tempest-rapping-changed-my-life> (accessed 19 August 2016).

35 See Julia Novak. "Performing the Poet, Reading (to) the Audience: Some Thoughts on Live Poetry as Literary Communication." In: *Journal of Literary Theory* 6,2 (2012), 358–82. She discusses the specific communication in live poetry in terms of Peter Middleton's concept of "performance of authorship" and Anthony Howell's notion of the poet constructing a "performance self" (365–66), to the effect that the audience is likely to enter Philippe Lejeune's "autobiographical pact" (367).

36 Ibid., 362–63.

37 Ibid., 362.

38 Michael MacLeod. "Kate Tempest slams conventional poets' disdain for performance". *The Guardian.* 19 August 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/aug/19/kate-tempest-slams-conventional-poets-disdain-for-performance> (accessed 19 August 2016). This is just one example of similar statements made in other interviews.

39 Ibid.

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gerous class"[40] of the precariat – is not only clear from her own comments at performances, on social media or in interviews,[41] but it is also spelt out in the first pages of the text: On the title page, Tempest quotes William Blake,[42] and this reference hints at parallels between the Romantics' understanding of poetry, their belief in a social and ethical function of poetry, and Tempest's (self-)image as a spoken word poet in the 21st century. Reading or watching *Brand New Ancients* creates an impression of Tempest as a poet in the tradition of Shelley's "legislators, or prophets", who "not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but [s]he beholds the future in the present".[43] In the prologue, the poet-narrator idealistically sets out to tackle the void, depression and loneliness she registers in contemporary society. Social exclusion, she suggests, is the result of the heightened individualism in capitalist cities. The lack of community is depicted in the image of people "watching telly on their own" (6). To capture a general loss of belief, "empty skies rise" (1) over Tempest's London; its inhabitants "have forgotten their myths / and imagine that somehow now all that there is / is a sorry plight, / all isolation and worry" (3–4). To fix this 'broken Britain' poetically, Tempest appeals to her audience for a change in attitude: in the prologue of the epic, she asks for empathy and compassion, for equal recognition of and respect for each individual. To her, everyone is a god: "The Gods are all here. / Because the gods are in us" (5), and with a playful riff on a quote from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* she assures the audience that: "You were born for greatness; / believe it. Know it. / Take it from the tears of the poet" (4). In her eyes, everyone has a story worth telling and worth listening to; there are "[m]illions of characters, / each with their own epic narratives" (2) who deserve being seen: "Look again, and allow yourself to see *them*" (2). Even though they celebrate single heroes, myths and epics were mainly used to create community, and according to Tempest

40 Subtitle of Standing, *Precariat*.

41 See footage of performances on YouTube, Kate Tempest's Twitter account @katetempest or, for example, these interviews: Purdie, "Kate Tempest" and Dorian Lynskey. "Kate Tempest: 'We live in crazy times. You can't tell a story without it feeling political'." *The Guardian*. 23 October 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/oct/23/kate-tempest-we-live-in-crazy-times-you-cant-tell-a-story-without-it-feeling-political> (accessed 19 August 2016).

42 The quote she chooses is "All deities reside in the human breast", taken from Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* which – like *Brand New Ancients* – combines genres, i. e. poetry, prose, song and illustration, to express the poet's personal, revolutionary ideas in the style of (biblical) prophecy, parody and polemic attack. See William Blake. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. London et al.: Oxford University Press, Trianon Press, 1975 [1790–93].

43 Percy Bysshe Shelley. "A Defence of Poetry." [1840] In: Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck (eds). *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. 10 Vols. London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1965, Vol VII, 112.

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should be used for that purpose again.[44] Thus, the brand new ancient experience of collectively telling and listening to "everyday odysseys" (4) at a spoken word event is supposed to help "explain ourselves" (1) in times when "we hate ourselves" (ibid.) and "overcomplicate ourselves" (ibid.). Her performance poem with its dramatic, serious tone is an attempt at encouraging, even teaching her audience (how) to re-claim this particular ancient narrative approach – characterised by its belief in respect and empathy, honesty and equality – and apply it to their contemporary lives in order to (re-)create community and move away from the void and isolation brought about by neoliberalism. Tempest's famous, much-quoted credo "More empathy, less greed"[45] sums up these ideas. As such, Tempest's spoken word epic seems to have the potential to engage her audience in a collective rewriting of judgmental, excluding myths about the underprivileged.

With the connection to the audience firmly established in the prologue, Tempest does not let go of them.[46] She constantly activates the audience, most strikingly after the first chorus (see 5–6),[47] so that they feel as if they were discovering the following stories with her in the present moment. She takes the crowd by their hands and encourages them: "So choose one. / Choose any of these gods […] / Choose one. Look again" (6). The following imperatives "Now focus. / […] Pan out slowly, draw back" (6) show how Tempest directs the participants in her performance, guiding them like a film director but at the same time asking them to use their 'cameras', their own eyes. Rhetorical questions, such as "Why is this interesting? Why are we watching?" (28) are another technique of keeping the audience's attention, of making them listen closely. By offering such a poetic 'guided tour' through 'her' London, Tempest seems to provoke a more immediate

44 See Karen Armstrong. *A Short History of Myth.* Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005, especially "What Is A Myth," 1–11.

45 See, for example, Purdie, "Kate Tempest."

46 See Lyn Gardner. "Brand New Ancients – Review." *The Guardian.* 10 September 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/sep/10/brand-new-ancients-review> (accessed 19 August 2016). As other reviewers, Gardner remarks on how Tempest is "acutely responsive to her audience".

47 The three choruses are delivered in a particularly memorable chanting voice and rhythm in a melody played by all instruments. They consist of a long list of parallelly structured sentences, each beginning with the word "The Gods…", to which Tempest adds where they are, what they do or how they feel. The wild mix of states and activities stresses that there are millions of other possible stories going on parallel to the one Tempest chose to tell in detail and thus they keep the principle of equality among the contemporary characters, the "Gods", firmly in the audience's mind. Another implicit claim made by these seemingly random choices of activities and states is that Tempest does not judge: She seems to merely observe 'real' situations with the insertion of 'the Gods' as a homogenous non-individualised group, an ageless, genderless, and classless blank – or mask, in line with the idea of the chorus. While Tempest works against stigmatising, the audience, however, might catch themselves immediately judging what they hear: thus, the chorus works towards awareness of the mechanisms of social exclusion on several levels.

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response in the audience to what they hear and see. Furthermore, the direct address is to spark critical thinking in the audience and remind them of their agency not only as participants in this event but also as subjects with agency in their lives. Even though the text also self-reflexively comments on its mediatedness, Tempest never turns into a detached performer and she clearly does not aim at having a detached audience who do not care about what they hear, which ties in with her dramatic style of presenting *Brand New Ancients.* As the text is charged with strong emotion, her political convictions and an underlying belief in the audience's power to change the world, Tempest's voice frequently changes from a purely percussive rap into a melodic style of sing-rap that is reminiscent of preaching, chanting or lament. While this intensity could result in the audience being sceptical about her show, thinking of it as a 'make-belief' in a negative sense, reviews of her performances clearly suggest the opposite: Tempest's urgency rather creates fascination with her, a strongly felt belief in her sincerity and honesty. In the context of analysing representations of precarity in *Brand New Ancients*, this activation, emotional involvement and (mild) challenging of the audience as potential world changers presumably has the effect of them agreeing with Tempest's discourse of precarity, her ways of telling about the underprivileged.

Focus on Clive: 'Same Old Story' about an 'Underclass Chav'?

True to the scope of an epic, Kate Tempest introduces the parents of the male protagonists to present Clive's and Tommy's origins in a generation of 'gods' who are depressed, dissatisfied and bored with their marriage and life in general. The boys' homes are given as the root cause of their future problems, which provides a first impression of the predetermination at work in Tempest's myths. Both couples "haven't been happy for years" (7): "Mary and Brian, / she's sick of his lies and he's sick of her crying / they're sick of each other, no point in trying" (7). Of the other parents it is "Jane [who] is […] ready for change / [but] Kevin don't see it, he's steady and plain" and she feels "her marriage [is] robust / to the point it was gathering dust" (7). Fate-like and fatally, Tempest has Jane and Brian start an affair and the product of this liaison is Tommy. Brian's other son Clive is born by his wife Mary. Using the topos of two half-brothers who do not know of each other's existence, Tempest constantly jumps back and forth between their stories. In paragraphs, of which the shorter take up between four to ten lines while the average stanza is about twenty lines long, Tempest provides rough sketches of selected stages in the protagonists' lives. First, she alternates quickly between the half-brothers to describe their early childhood, then she focuses on descriptions of formative events in Clive's youth (14–20), and after that on Tommy's and

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Gloria's early twenties (20–31) before building up to the climax of the epic, for which Tempest goes back to switching quickly between the protagonists' different storylines. The effect of adding up short scenes to develop the characters' stories is best compared to a comic strip (a parallel that will be considered in more detail) while the single 'images' become alive like a film scene in Tempest's spoken word performance.

The poetic comic strip of Clive's life shows him growing up in a broken home of which presumably everyone in the audience has a stereotypical image, a schema, in mind. Clive's parents fight regularly in front of him: "Brian shouts at Mary, Mary shouts at Clive,/ and little Clive soaks it up with wide eyes" (9).[48] Clive's father turns into an abusive alcoholic (see 44) and his mother starts to neglect the flat, herself, and her child. The audience is given an insight into Mary's breakdown which feeds on the typical portrayal of dysfunctional families in the media, and especially in reality-TV programmes that can be labelled as poverty porn. Mary's depression, her loss of self-confidence and her lack of hope are captured in the surroundings of a flat that is "in a state" (11): she drinks vodka, eats microwave pizza "off her knees", "chain-smokes" while "watching the chat shows", and the climax of this description is how "when Clive gets home from school, / that's where he finds her, fast asleep" (ibid.). The description of Mary's crisis provides rhyming triggers like the "vodka [in] a dirty tea-cup" and the woman who "should have a bath and a clean up" (ibid.) which evoke the scenario of an underclass home in accordance with the audience's expectation (also see 12). The characters seem to be taken directly from anti-poor discourse: the economically and emotionally struggling single mother and her teenage son who lacks a strong father figure.

However, Tempest's descriptions differ from demonising discourse and poverty porn in crucial ways: She links the fate-like development of the characters' precarious lives to the broader structures of society and the shared experience of contemporary lives in "these cities in all of their rage and their tedium" (3) instead of merely blaming "individual moral failings".[49] As the example of Mary shows, Tempest's text meets stereotypical expectations, but she does not reduce her characters to the typical negative ascriptions "lazy, spendthrift or lack[ing] aspiration".[50] There are small poetic extensions to the clichés that add depth to the character sketches, like the description of Mary's emotional instability: she feels "like a piece of dust / on the edge of a table top, threatened by every gust" (11). And even though Mary "feel[s] small" and "frightened" (ibid.),

48 Clive's "wide eyes" (9) introduce the motif of focusing on the characters' eyes as a link to their identity and inner lives that runs through *Brand New Ancients* and figures most prominently in the climax of the epic.

49 Jones, *Chavs*, xxvi.

50 Ibid.

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Tempest does not present her only as weak. She stresses that Mary has "the courage / to leave" (12) Brian, shows her at work in the supermarket earning money for herself and her son Clive, whom she loves but is deeply worried about (see 12–13). The single mother who is the "traditional target of right-wing moralizers"[51] becomes, in the eyes of the poet-narrator, a strong woman, a "Brand New Medea",[52] "a hero, knee deep in the desolate grind / of raising a boy to a man on her own" (13). Thus, Tempest's stories clearly do not aim to come across as judgmental but as exemplary of the courses of lives – anyone's life if they are born into these circumstances in London in the 2000s.

After getting an insight into Mary's and Brian's struggles, their depression and helplessness, it gets harder for the audience to simply blame the parents, and it seems likely that they feel sympathy for Clive when Tempest draws the link between Clive's childhood and his later life: "Tough nut, never got enough love, / grew up in a house where his mum and dad / never said a word to each other / except when they was [sic] fighting, / that's how he learned that if you had something to say, / you said it with violence". (13) What at first reads like an over-simplified and over-used, (pseudo-)psychological excuse for Clive's character development, becomes – especially when uttered in the dramatic voice of the serious narrator-performer – a convincing part of Tempest's explanation why Clive cannot choose who he becomes. Confronted with Clive's life narrative in the performance, the audience may start to feel a growing tension: between judging Clive as a typical failure, a 'chav', on the one hand, and acknowledging, on the other hand, the deprivations he faces. In an ideal second step, the recipients might even start to reflect on how revealing their reactions to Clive's story and their expectations of what he can(not) become are: they are living proof of the stigmatising power of myths about the underprivileged.

Telling Clive's story, Tempest acts as an omniscient narrator. She is detached enough to make the broader structures of Clive's (and the other characters') lack of capabilities visible and to criticise the corresponding failings in the capitalist system, but not too detached to give insight into the complex inner lives of her characters, who are types nevertheless. Thus, she depicts how Clive gets caught in a downward spiral, as explained above. Following the familiar logic (or 'schema

51 Ibid., xxxiii.

52 The fact that Mary's story does not really match the plot of the Medea myth is exemplary of the freedom Tempest takes with intertextual references. She focuses only on the most basic, common associations with the mythological character mentioned, as in this case, the image of a strong woman and mother with ambivalent feelings towards her child(ren). Other examples are the comparison between Pandora and adulterous Jane who took "the lid off the box" (11) by giving birth to Tommy, or the parallel drawn between Zeus and Brian, the father of the two half-brothers, who in the epilogue is described as living with a young girl in Thailand, "in paradise, this fair Olympus" for "old Western men" (46).

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knowledge') regarding (narratives of) poverty, he develops from the deprived boy to the working class 'chav'. By contrast, the story of his half-brother Tommy is expected to follow an upward movement towards success as the middle class 'hero' of the epic.[53] Clive's gradual decline is traced in two decisive events. The first is his meeting his "real mate" Terry (15). Only 12 years old, Clive already lacks the dream perspective a child usually has for his life. Asked by Terry: "*mate, if you could / be anything in this world / when you grow up, what would you be?*", his answer is: "*I don't wanna be nothing*" and he resumes "staring at the TV" (ibid.). Clive's disillusionment is put into stark contrast to Terry's excitement about the idea of being a firefighter, a superhero like the X-Men they are, very fittingly, watching on TV as the scene opens. He wants to "*save people's lives and all that, / rescue ladies from burning buildings / and carry babies down ladders*" (ibid.). With a coldness that is typically expected in 'the villain' (particularly in comics and their film adaptations), Clive puts the curtains in Terry's bedroom on fire and locks his friend in to test if he really is capable of being a fireman. Clive risks Terry's life, although his perverted logic is that he is "*trying to help [Terry], get [him] prepared*" (17) for the reality of his dream job. Clive rescues Terry in the last minute – he is his "real mate" after all. The symbolic fire functions as a rite of passage for both boys. Terry's world is disenchanted. He accepts Clive's view that the fire was a test of his abilities and gives up on his dream: "*maybe I'd be a shit fireman, and I'd only hurt myself*" (ibid.). As Terry 'loses his innocence' and bonds with Clive he is also visibly changed: a red burn is left on his face, and Clive gives him a new name: Spider. For Clive, the incident provides a feeling of being in control like a god (or devil), having power over destructive elements (fire, water) and over another human being (the symbolic re-naming). For the audience, this scene functions as a warning about the threat emanating from Clive. The mythical allusions in the symbolic fire and the intertextual/-medial references to comics highlight at the same time that Clive needs to be read as a type: he is now marked as 'the villain' with Spider as his sidekick.

The references and allusions to comic art, as another form of adaptation of the epic in contemporary popular culture, are central to *Brand New Ancients*' depiction of precarious lives. Tempest encourages recipients to see the link between the genres, which becomes even more evident from the second protagonist's story: Clive's half-brother Tommy is passionate about comic books, and he has a

53 In Tommy's narrative of progress, similar to a *bildungsroman*, he has to overcome obstacles: he has to survive a phase of precarity and depression before he embarks on a career which brings financial success but provides only superficial satisfaction. Even though he fails to act as Gloria's saviour at the climax of the epic, he eventually develops a deeper understanding for what is meaningful in his life, i. e. his love for Gloria, and hence remains a hero – especially in contrast to Clive.

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talent for drawing and writing graphic novels.[54] The parallel is further underlined by the fact that the second short film (of three) of *Brand New Ancients* presents the fire sequence as a grim animated graphic novel.[55] Tempest's explicit references to the popular genres of comics and graphic novels and their film adaptations help the audience if they do not feel at home in ancient mythology or the epic form. They can rely on the possibly more familiar scripts and scenarios associated with comics and merge those with their schema knowledge about contemporary life narratives. The main story schema associated with comics (and epics) that is fused with the characters' stories in *Brand New Ancients* is the war between good and evil. For the analysis of representations of poverty and precarity, Tempest's invitation to transfer this overarching theme to her spoken word epic is crucial because it carries stereotypical dichotomies of what is deemed right, just, or honest as opposed to what is judged wrong, cruel or immoral. When (quickly) trying to make sense of Clive's, Tommy's and Gloria's life stories, the black-and-white 'comic book-thinking' in terms of 'good vs. evil' can easily be matched with contemporary 'poverty porn-thinking' and its moral judgments, as in 'well-off vs. poor', 'middle class vs. working class/underclass' or 'Strivers (i.e. deserving) vs. Skivers (i.e. undeserving benefit claimants)'.[56] Similarly, the major comic book plot line of portraying the contrasting developments of hero and villain as the story builds up to their battle is adapted: as soon as Tempest introduces the two unequal brothers who do not know of each other's

54 It is symbolic that Tommy as a kid "would read his comic books, happy for hours, / waiting for the day when he'd discover his powers" (13–14). Later, his life and his art remain immediately connected ("he lives for picking up his pen like a farmer with a pitchfork", 21), however, he chooses a career in a "PR team in the city", "do[ing] graphics for adverts". As Tommy is drawn into the world of "big money" (29) and loses the connection to what (and who) really matters to him, he also forgets about his "secret collection of comic book sketches" (32). By the time the epic reaches its climax, "his supermen [have] abandoned him" (40). Hence, Tempest uses Tommy's comic art not only as a mirror of his personal development as (anti-)hero, but also to make a statement about the role of art and creativity and the precarious lives of artists in a capitalist society.

55 Watch Battersea Arts Centre London. "Brand New Ancients on Film. Part Two". *YouTube.* 2:31mins. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpqJZrVwZTw> (accessed 19 August 2016). In this adaptation, the fire Clive kindles in the paper basket is visualised as small spiders which crawl off, amass and grow into one large spider monster that attacks Terry (00:49–01:34 mins). Taking up the ambiguity in Clive's role, his appearance as Terry's 'saviour' is captured in a threatening image: Clive's dark silhouette stands in a door frame carrying a massive axe, which is shown in close-up exactly when Tempest says: "he's got a bucket of water in his hand" (1:35 mins). The following graphic images of Clive's fight with the spider stand in telling contrast to the much more innocent extinguishing of the fire with water, the "stamping" and "smothering" of the flames that Tempest talks about in the performance, or the voice-over in the film. Hence, the textual foreshadowing is translated into the comic film by creating its own visual language of foreshadowing, inspired by the text's imagery and yet creatively developed within the different genre.

56 See track 2 "Strivers v Skivers" of Mooney et al., *OU Podcast.*

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existence, the audience expect the spoken word epic to develop towards their meeting and a battle between the good and the bad brother.

However, as already hinted at above, Tempest does not fulfil stereotypical expectations in their entirety and the character sketches of the protagonists remain ambiguous, like Clive's image of the evil villain which is destabilised by his strong feelings for his "pal" Spider (19), as is explicitly stated: "And he [Clive] cared about him, though / he'd never tell it to his face" (15), as well as implied: "Spider and Clive/ spend every day side by side", "wear the same jacket, / […] walk with the same stride / and when Clive gets in trouble / Spider's never far behind" (17–18). Tempest's seemingly simple, stereotypical scenes transport an atmosphere and create an emotional response to her characters that do not match simplistic judgments. Her epic does not demonise Clive and Spider, but instead tries to change the attitude with which the audience approach the typical story of these 'chavs'. Tempest wants to teach 'us' (including herself) compassion so that we "allow [ourselves] to see *them*" (2) as two young men, as contemporary "gods".

The second formative event in Clive's life provides an explanation for why the two young men feel they are "disenfranchised" (19) victims and become "angry" (ibid.) villains. At 17, Spider tries to chat up a girl and Clive witnesses his best mate's humiliating rejection by this "really smart girl who wants to put the world to rights, / [who]'s doing A-levels, / [who]'s gonna go to uni" (ibid.). Tempest treats the incident as exemplary for Spider's and Clive's negative and hurtful experiences of being othered by those to whom they feel inferior: in this case, by the other sex, by someone who is better educated. She addresses the teenagers' search for a male identity and counts on the audience's empathy as she explores the reasons for Clive's and Spider's frustrating feelings of being undesirable. At this point, another technique of how Tempest evokes empathy in the audience can be analysed: She frequently incorporates Clive's and Spider's (as well as the other characters') idiosyncratic speech in their scenes – in italics into the text, and as recognisably different voices into her performance. Thus, it is not only their looks or body language which Tempest imitates at the mic when performing *Brand New Ancients*, but it is mainly Clive's and Spider's slang which marks them as underprivileged teenagers. Shy Spider, for example, asks the girl he fancies "with his best gravelly voice" (18): "*Do you wanna, I don't know, twosie up on a fag?*" (ibid.). After clumsy Spider is laughed at by the girls, Clive comforts him – and reassures himself, too – in four angry lines: "*Spider, mate, people are muck – / you either fuck them or they fuck you up. / It's you and me pal, we don't need girls or anyone, / me and you are tougher than anyone*" (19). At closer inspection, including the teenagers' direct speech and adopting their language has conflicting effects, though: on the one hand, it is a(nother) means of bringing them closer to the audience. By making the fictional characters appear more real the

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audience is encouraged to feel more strongly about and with them. For example, Clive's rude way of expressing himself helps to show how tough he acts on the outside, while the insights into Clive's character reveal the insecurities, sadness and softness he is trying to hide. Confronted with Clive's voice and the voice-over by Tempest the poet-narrator, the audience most likely show understanding for his anger and frustration. On the other hand, Tempest's imitation of Clive and Spider's South London slang functions as a marker of their low social status that might also distance the audience from the young men. It showcases their limited ability to express themselves, their deficient education, and even provokes laughing at their childhood naivety (in the fire scene) or the teenage clumsiness of the "desolate fella[s]" (18) in the failed chat-up. This latter audience reaction highlights that Clive and Spider are not just shown as developing into others, but are also being turned into others by the performance. Despite the fact that Kate Tempest herself is from South London and identifies with those parts of the city which are not wealthy, her presentation of Clive and Spider is not a case of giving underprivileged youngsters a voice. Their speeches are too clearly embedded within a text/performance that talks *about* them as stereotypical others. They are representatives of marginalised Londoners whom Tempest gives insight into from her privileged narrator's/poet's perspective.

The paragraph following the lively description of the failed chat-up is the last of the episodic description of Clive and Spider's youth. In this passage, Tempest summarises their "shared weakness" (19) of being socially excluded and stigmatised. Their multiple deprivations are linked to the government's failure to live up to its responsibilities: in an extended metaphor, Clive and Spider's "hunger for vengeance" (20) becomes the result of not being fed properly by the personified city of London. Like a neglectful mother, the capital, metonymically standing for the state, only "raise[s] them so sour" (ibid.) and leaves the young people with "starving mouths desperate to devour, to digest" (ibid.). To further make Clive's and Spider's reality of being stigmatised felt, Tempest reveals 'our' collective role in creating mechanisms of social exclusion: "If you see them, hoods up, / prowling the pavement at night / you'll walk quickly away, skin prickling with terror" (19). Including herself in this general 'you', Tempest implies that reactions to young men like Clive and Spider are actually a response to fears in 'us', which are typically fuelled by anti-poor discourse and its myths about 'them'. As a way of re-writing these myths, Tempest wants the audience to look more closely at the two young men, beyond the threat: at their "punch-happy fists" (ibid.) *and* "sad eyes" (ibid.). The descriptions of their intimidating, dangerous side are opposed by a "but" twice (put in prominent position at the beginning of a line, see ibid.) and followed by elaborations on how Clive and Spider "know love, […] know laughter, know each other as brother, friend, father" (ibid.). Tempest uses bold words and simple repetitions, like anaphorae, in such lines and (yet) the

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effect is that Clive and Spider become more complex than just the aggressive 'bad guys'. Tempest points out that they have principles – "decency", "rules and conventions" (ibid.) – just like the people (we!) in that society from which they feel excluded and from which they separate themselves. In their own "two-man nation" (ibid.) they show respect to each other and they are what they understandably want to be: "Equals" (ibid.).

So far, the close reading proved that *Brand New Ancients* is aimed at unsettling rather than reassuring the (assumed to be comparatively well-off) audience by reflecting (on) their attitudes and behaviour towards underprivileged 'others'. Contrary to what Gerry Mooney and Lynn Hancock deem a main characteristic of poverty porn, *Brand New Ancients* does not remain "wholly de-contextualised from a critical understanding of the broader […] structural processes that shape working class lives and life chances"[57] either. Furthermore, in opposition to Hester's criticism of poverty porn, the spoken word performance in its collective nature (which is preserved on the page in the poem's use of the 'we' / plural 'you') does not "[reduce] the issue […] to the level of the atomised individual viewer feeling in response to the depiction of an atomised individual subject" and thus it does not "detract […] from […] the vital importance of rationally-driven collective action for effecting social change".[58] The climax of the epic, however, stands in contrast to the previous, ambiguously clichéd descriptions of Clive and Spider's youth and their social context discussed above. While these probably evoked conflicting feelings of compassion or pity *as well as* disgust or fear about these contemporary "warriors" (20) who have "nothing to fight for but fighting itself" (ibid.), Tempest now turns her sympathetic eye/I away from their inner lives and regards Clive and Spider through Gloria's eyes as "these big ugly men" (35).

The Cl-'eye'-max of the Epic: Clive and Spider as "Abject Whites"

The big showdown of *Brand New Ancients* is set in the pub where Tommy's girlfriend Gloria works as a barmaid. In the performance, the crisis is clearly reflected in Tempest's sped-up, excited delivery of the shorter lines which display an increased number of internal rhymes, and which are contrasted with some deliberately slow parts in the text. The dramatic music also changes accordingly: There are purely instrumental parts which bring across the threat of physical violence and the movements of the bodies, then Tempest's voice is accompanied

57 Gerry Mooney and Lynn Hancock. "Poverty Porn and the Broken Society." In: *Variant* 39/40 (2010), 17.
58 Hester, "Weaponizing Prurience," 214.

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by the quick rough strokes of the violins and the beat of the percussions, but there are also periods of strategic silence of the instruments in which there is nothing but the spoken word. Clive and Spider are turned into "abject whites"[59] now, described as deformed creatures, drunk, drugged and violent: "they're hideous, pit bull necks and dried up saliva / each side of their mouths" (34), "they look out of their minds, / […] on fire from what looks like a big binge, / speed or something much worse" (ibid.). It is again the destructive natural element of fire that is frequently used as a symbolic image in these passages which cover the archetypal battle between good and evil, between the woman who is "burn[ing] brighter than any one of Zeus's daughters" (40) and these two "savage" (36), "disgusting monster[s]" (39). However, the focus of the scene seems to be on the characters' eyes, to which Tempest constantly directs the audience's gaze: in Clive and Spider's "red eyes" (34) the gradual build-up of rage is reflected, while Gloria's eyes capture how she "reconnect[s] with a strength she had forgotten she possessed" (41). The eye/I-dentity symbolism is a recurring motif throughout the epic: a nod to the formulaic repetition of symbolic images in the ancient genre that helps memorising the lines, on the part of the poet, and supports aural comprehension, on the part of the audience. Additionally, the obsession with eyes underlines *Brand New Ancients*' indebtedness to comic art and film again, which typically focus on characters' faces and especially their eyes.

Clive and Spider's eyes are no longer "sad eyes" (19) as before, but entering the pub "they stare back emptily" (34) at Gloria, who nevertheless "summons the energy to offer them empathy" (ibid.) and gives them a friendly welcome. As Clive starts to abuse her verbally in the now empty pub, the men's aggressiveness comes through down to the level of the sibilant consonances: "faces are twisted, eyes full of spite, looking vicious" (35). Clive corners Gloria at the bar, and when he pushes himself on her he is described as having "eyes full of agony and shame" (38). However, a few lines later, when Gloria is "intent on discovering some tiny trace / of grace, some snatch of goodness … / […] there [i]s nothing" (39) in his eyes: switching from the past into present tense to heighten the sense of immediacy, Tempest describes how "he just stares at her, she stares back;/ the stares were weighted, as they waited / for a sign that the time had come, and then it came" (38). The conduplicatio of "stares", the repetition of the verb "come", and the homophones "weighted/waited" in this last quote give a good impression of how frequent repetitions of words and sounds, especially anaphorae and the parallelisms in sentence structures, help the dramatic scene to quickly gather speed and build up tension. About to rape her, Clive is no longer able "to meet [Gloria's] gaze" (39) but she "stare[s] straight into his eyes" (mark the recurrence of "stare"

59 Chris Haylett. "Illegitimate subjects? Abject Whites, Neoliberal Modernisation, and Middle-class Multiculturalism." In: *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 19 (2001), 351.

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and “eyes” again as well as the consonances) and she “wouldn’t look away” (ibid.). Tempest highlights that Gloria tries but fails to make Clive realise by force of eye contact that they are both human, that she deserves respect, and how they are responsible for what they do to each other. When Gloria strikes him with a smashed bottle and “st[i]cks it in him” (40) – a very fitting self-defense against the rapist – the audience at last get to see Clive’s “eyes rolling” (ibid.): he is knocked out and defeated by the woman whose “eyes [a]re all force” (ibid.). Spider, who is described as being aroused by watching Clive’s attack, standing “at the door like a minotaur playing at a sheriff” (36), takes all in with “eyes [that a]re dark and large” (41). After Clive goes down, he also attacks Gloria, but she quickly overpowers him “and spit[s] into his eyes from a bloodied mouth” (ibid.). At the beginning of the scene it is Gloria who “look[s] away” because “she don’t [sic] want to stare too long” (34) at Clive and Spider so as not to fuel their anger. However, in the end she is the one who is in control and has “the fight in her eyes” (40).

The very physical description of the attempted rape at the epic’s climax is likely to arouse strong feelings of resentment towards Clive and Spider in the audience. However, the exciting climax is very likely to also “provid[e] experiences of voyeuristic titillation and prurient pleasure”,[60] which Helen Hester describes as typical of poverty porn. Given the fact that the audience are witnessing suffering, this is a “conflicted, morbid”, even “forbidden desire”.[61] The audience only allow themselves to succumb to this desire because they can indirectly justify watching within the general framework of compassion and empathy (the “appeal to the sympathetic impulse”[62]) on which *Brand New Ancients* is based. Hence, it feels like a “licensed transgression”[63] that ‘we’ ultimately other Clive and Spider as abject whites and enjoy the spectacle of the fight. From the sympathetic perspective, the young men’s “ancient hatred” (38) may still be read as a consequence of their frustrating experience of social exclusion. Nevertheless, despite the reference to Clive’s “eyes full of agony and shame” (ibid.) at the beginning of the scene, this does not work as an excuse for their extreme, abusive behaviour. The audience’s sympathy is (re)directed towards Gloria and her payback “for every time she’d been beaten down, used and made weak” (ibid.). For Clive and Spider, the climax seems to seal their fate as predicted by anti-poor discourses: both reach the very bottom of the downward spiral as rapists.

However, thinking within the mythical framework of *Brand New Ancients*, their attempted rape does not meet the same level of damnation as in con-

60 Hester, “Weaponizing Prurience,” 209.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.

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temporary discourse. Tempest prepares the ground for Clive and Spider's wrongdoing by reminding her audience in a metafictional comment a few pages before their attack that "[i]n the old stories, the gods […] sometimes […] turned themselves into animals, / came down upon us and raped us" (28). She goes on to explain – as a renewed reference to the epic's theme – that ancient gods, too, "had badness in them; […] had conflicted natures. / *They felt what we feel*, they were imperfect and faulted" (ibid., emphasis added). Highlighting the parallel between gods and humans in their shared basic affects and their shocking effects seems to aim at preparing the audience to acknowledge the humanity in Clive and Spider even when they are "incensed to anger, barbarity" (29). Without excusing the attempted rape as such, the mythical approach still functions as a means to foreground the continuing dignity of a human: "A god remains a god for ever, no matter what it does" (42), to use Tempest's words from the chorus immediately following the climax. The poet's constant appealing to the audience's empathy also underlines once more that ample opportunity is given to find absolution for any experience of prurient pleasure in *Brand New Ancients*, not only in the final fight but generally in the epic's depictions of precarious lives.

Glorious Gloria: A Real Heroine and Survivor or an Idealised Poor Saint?

With Clive and Spider defeated and the supposed hero Tommy an "invisible and useless" (40) onlooker of the battle,[64] the audience can no longer fail to notice the crisis of masculinity portrayed in *Brand New Ancients*. In interviews, Kate Tempest has repeatedly admitted that she changed this final scene from a version that had Tommy save Gloria from her attackers to the current climax of her "defending herself like a heroine, a god" (42). In an interview for *The Guardian*, Tempest describes how she had not realised at first what an anti-feminist statement this other ending would have been, but she also immediately uses this opportunity to draw attention to how much we all have internalised clichéd plots like the one of "a passive, weak female who might be saved by a man".[65] However, Gloria's glorious victory over Clive and Spider is not just that of a strong woman

64 Tommy seems to come to Gloria's rescue like a hero as his way from a strip club to her pub is described in imagery associated with Greek mythology: "The tube becomes a chariot of fire […] his shoes become wings and he flies towards her side" (37). Closer to the comic/graphic novel theme, a few lines later "he can feel himself twice the size he was before" (38). However, when he finally enters the pub, he does not act. He fails as a hero because when trying to "summon[…] the heroes he used to draw …/[…] his supermen abandon[…] him" (40) and he "f[inds] himself weeping / […] unable to move" (ibid.).

65 Wroe, "Kate Tempest."

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over "big ugly men" (35). She, too, "used to be a troubled type" (21), and thus her final display of strength, "the fury" (39) and "force" (40) that rise in her, are part of a different, but no less stereotypical plot: Gloria's story follows the myth of the 'good' disadvantaged who eventually exercises agency, even if drastically violent in the end. Gloria's "rage" (ibid.) in the final battle is presented as a justified reaction, at last, to "everyone who's ever fucked her over" (39). In Tempest's cast from London's precarious class, Gloria represents women who are seen as doubly marginalised by being female and poor.[66] Among these women she stands for those individuals who empower themselves and fight – in Gloria's case also literally, that is, physically fighting for her life. In the context of public discourses of poverty, being 'strong' is linked to a moral judgment, in the sense that the 'strong' disadvantaged are more determined to change their lives, more willing to work, which turns them into 'good' poor people and this, hence, (ironically) means they are more deserving of governmental support than the greedy, lazy, undeserving poor who do not manage to get themselves out of poverty.[67] Gloria's generic life trajectory as a deserving underprivileged woman is quickly summarised in two pages of the epic (21–23): she runs away from home aged 17 for a relationship with "the man of her dreams" (22), who turns out to be a wife beater and whom she leaves "wiping the blood off her jaw, / thinking I deserve more" (ibid.). Gloria quits her life style of drugs and promiscuity and now she is "[l]ess flesh, more spirit / less chemistry, more physics" (21). The choice of words in this quote, just like Gloria's telling name, implies that Tempest plays with the myth of the "poor saint"[68] as the opposite to Clive and Spider's myth of the 'undeserving scroungers'.[69] Gloria embodies saintly qualities as she (still) believes in those basic principles which were promoted in the prologue but which, according to the poet-narrator, seem to have been forgotten in contemporary neoliberalist societies: "[Gloria] believes that everybody deserves to be treated right" (21), "[s]he don't [sic] compare herself to others, / she believes everybody has their own strengths" (22), "she just wants people to be honest, / […] and she's never broke a promise" (23); but she is also practical, "straightforward, no-nonsense" (ibid.).[70]

66 See Ruth Lister. *Poverty. Key Concepts.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004, 55–59 of the chapter on "Gender".

67 See Jones, *Chavs*, 89–96 on the 'aspirational' vs. 'non-aspirational working class' and Mooney and Hancock, "Poverty Porn," 16–17, on the "neoliberal agenda that promotes individualism and individual self-help" (17).

68 Lister, *Poverty*, 116.

69 See track 2 "Strivers v Skivers" of Mooney et al., *OU Podcast.*

70 In her relationship with Tommy, Gloria is portrayed as equally perfect: She remains loving and supportive, even when Tommy changes into a selfish careerist as he falls for the vacuous promises of a capitalist company and the false friendship of his coke sniffing colleagues. Gloria, of course, warns Tommy — "*I'm worried that they'll use you, / chew you up, spit you out, confuse you*" (30). She sees through the narcissists: "something about them she found so

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In Lister's words she is "a heroic survivor",[71] especially after she proves she can defend herself by fighting off Clive and Spider on her own. In one of Tempest's playful references to antiquity Gloria's character is summed up like this: "if she was a statue she'd be less marble, more cement" (22).

In the last passage that is to be analysed in terms of its significance for the discourse of urban poverty in *Brand New Ancients*, Gloria is presented at her workplace as the 'Angel of the Pub', so to speak. The friendly regulars find a surrogate home at *The Albert and Victoria*, where Gloria "serves them happily, listens when they speak to her" (33); "she knows 'em all well" (ibid.), by name and their life stories. Hence, Gloria is shown to sustain a supportive social network for the pub's patrons, when "a lot of them don't seem to have much else" (ibid.), which is a form of agency that is typically exercised by women in deprived communities, as Lister explains referring to studies made in the UK.[72] Tempest delivers this short passage about the pub without music as support to underline the peacefulness of the scene and to strengthen the impression of authenticity. As she paints a highly romanticised image of the honest and kind unemployed as deserving poor, Tempest strives to bring across the "pride and identification with the locality, as well as a strong community spirit", which, as Ruth Lister explains, typically "exist alongside the shame associated with [the neighbourhood's] stigmatisation"[73] in deprived urban areas. In the pub, the "old blokes" who are "too often dismissed as no hopes" are "laughing at the old jokes", "whistling tunes", "reading yesterday's papers" (32–33) – all of which underlines that they have lost connection to the busy (work) life of London outside the pub. They are "hang[ing] out", "getting drunk all day", "liv[ing] on a diet of chips and gravy" (33), accompanied by a dog that is fed on half-a-pint of Guinness – a scene which, from the pub's name down to the cameo appearance of the dog Darrel the "fluffy barrel" (ibid.), is reminiscent of the depiction of urban poverty in Victorian novels.[74] Tempest's idealising description of the poor in the pub culminates in the statement: "These are good people by nature, they just got worn out faces" (ibid.). Referring to their 'good nature' reminds the audience once again of Tempest's straightforward politics in *Brand New Ancients:* we (still) need each other, we need a functioning community, and hence we need to be able to be empathetic.

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lacking, / […] she couldn't make out the grain of their wood through the layers of varnish, / they seemed unreal somehow, fake ease, she noticed that not one of them / said please when ordering drinks, they were full of themselves, / and […] they looked down on everybody else" (30–31).

71 Lister, *Poverty*, 116.

72 See ibid., 136–37.

73 Ibid., 72.

74 Korte comments on and gives examples of literature of the Victorian period as the "most significant" influence that "has stayed with us for ready reference" in contemporary representations of poverty ("Dealing with Deprivation", 77).

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With the pub scene, Tempest warns the audience once more that judging people by appearances or sweeping categories, as in terms of class, gender, race or age, is the first step towards social exclusion. As stated in the prologue, you need to “look again / and you will see the Gods rise / in the most human and unassuming of eyes” (6).

Conclusion: *Brand New Ancients* as Political ‘Poverty Porn’ in Performance

Kate Tempest’s choice to merge epic structure and content with spoken word about contemporary precarious lives in London results in modernised versions of ancient types and plotlines. The recipients of *Brand New Ancients* recognise the well-known scenarios in Tempest’s hybrid form: with the story of the villains, Clive and Spider, who are victims at the same time, as well as saintly Gloria’s story of heroic survival, Tempest takes up the parallels that can be drawn between epic (or comic book) schemata and the stereotypes that public discourse offers for representing the underprivileged in (British) society. Hence, Tempest’s text reflects on how *telling about* lives, and especially the lives of the precariat, relies on stereotypical plot lines and fixed identities that are contained in the shared schemata of a society. However, as Tempest’s narrative remains so close to the stigmatising myths encountered in real life, one can become suspicious of the effect of her epic: does it not reinforce prejudices about ‘the underclass’ in the recipients? As the analysis of the representation of Clive and Gloria’s development has shown, Tempest adds (some) complexity to her characters’ life stories as she comments on the narrative process to highlight the stories’ exemplary nature, plays with the audience’s conflicting reactions to the characters and mirrors their responses back to them, while always being constrained by the main requirement of the spoken word genre, i. e., the need to keep it simple enough for quick auditory processing. However, the most important argument against reading *Brand New Ancients* as judgmental poverty porn is that the stories are performed in a context of (epic) storytelling which is constructed by Kate Tempest as a literary space of equality and community, of empathy, of respect and recognition for all human beings, who are treated as gods. Thus, Tempest’s epic does not ever ‘demonise’ in the same way as discriminating discourses or exploitative poverty porn. Instead, her focus lies on evoking sympathy in the audience in order to remind them of their shared responsibility for their fellow citizens who lead precarious lives. This ties in with Hester’s idea that the recipient’s enjoyable involvement in representations of poverty “could be weaponized

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towards activist ends".[75] The audience's feelings of compassion, which are, Hester argues, intricately linked with their experience of prurience in the face of the depictions of poverty, "may indeed promote political engagement".[76] However, even if political poetry is a more fitting label than poverty porn with its negative connotations, *Brand New Ancients* remains a popular performance poem which speaks *about* the deprived and, strictly speaking, does not give them a voice. This is despite the fact that Kate Tempest includes characters' direct speech, even though she herself comes from Lewisham and speaks with that "particular South London intonation that is almost patois",[77] and despite the fact that she claims her work is "a direct response to south London".[78] Coming back to the dilemma of representations of poverty and precarity in literature, *Brand New Ancients* does not break free from the implications of privilege that its medium carries, even in Tempest's live performance or the audio recordings, and certainly not in the short films, which work as a promotion for ticket and book plus CD sales. The epic is necessarily part of a discourse of a privileged (performance) poetry community who can afford to other the underprivileged. Still, as the analysis has shown, Tempest is determined to use her spoken word epic's "power and appeal"[79] to channel her audience's reactions in such a way that it has a political effect.

Hence, Tempest's hybrid performance poetry can be seen (watched, listened to and read) as an asset to contemporary leftist rhetoric as her work is spread on (web)pages and stages: millions of readers, followers in social media and other on- and offline channels as well as the fans at her live performances are enthralled by Kate Tempest and ready to engage with the political ideas that inform her play with genres, words and music. Throughout the epic, audiences are confronted with Tempest's straightforward criticism of capitalism and its discontents, such as: "[It] feels like we've forgotten we're much more than the sum of all / things that belong to us" (1). They celebrate the poet-prophet Kate Tempest who understands herself as part of a long tradition from ancient times to Romanticism up to the contemporary era of spoken word, who wants to share an idealist vision for a life post capitalism that is more focused on equality and community (again). Thus, *Brand New Ancients* is "not a story told for its own sake"[80] but it aims to fulfil what Karen Armstrong identifies as the function of ancient mythology: it sets out to "[put] us in the correct spiritual or psychological posture for right

75 Hester, "Weaponizing Prurience," 220.
76 Ibid., 219.
77 McConnell, "Still Mythical," 204.
78 Lynskey, "crazy times."
79 See Hester, "Weaponizing Prurience," 220.
80 Armstrong, *Short History*, 6.

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action”[81] and “shows us how we should behave”[82]. If Kate Tempest’s audience embrace the idea(l)s that are (re)presented in her political spoken word epic about the age of precarity, they may well help change structures that only seem to be set in stone, or in Kate Tempest’s words: “The Gods are […] fighting to be bold, / conviction is a heavy hand to hold, / grip it, winged sandals tearing up the pavement – / you, me, everyone: Brand New Ancients” (43).

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81 Ibid.

82 Ibid., 4.

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Rainer Hillrichs

Slum Affirmation and Magic Neorealism in One Fine Day Films' *Soul Boy*

Introduction

In September 2008, German film director Tom Tykwer and his partner Marie Steinmann-Tykwer teamed up with the Nairobi-based production company Ginger Ink to teach practical film skills and produce a feature film in Nairobi, Kenya. Kenyan writer Billy Kahora developed the idea for a film entitled *Soul Boy* and wrote the screenplay. Hawa Essuman – a Kenyan-Ghanaian who had been working in the theatre before – directed the film under the supervision of Tykwer (of *Lola rennt* fame). Shooting took only 13 days, which makes the 57-minute *Soul Boy* an incredibly quickly produced film.[1] The success of *Soul Boy* prompted the organizers to formalize their efforts in further workshops with subsequent feature film productions under the label One Fine Day Films.

Soul Boy tells an eventful one-and-a-half-day episode from the life of Abila, a preteen living with his parents in Kibera, Nairobi's largest slum. Abila wakes up one morning and finds his father delirious, mumbling that a mysterious woman took his soul. After asking his mother for advice without avail, Abila searches for and finds the woman. She puts him on a quest to fulfil seven tasks to cure his father. A "sun shining very brightly" is promised to lead him to each task. The film follows Abila on his quest. Through some of it, he is accompanied and supported by Shiku, a girl he will fall in love with towards the end of the film.

This article analyses the representation of Kibera in *Soul Boy* and compares it to the representation of Kibera and other slums in films such as *The Constant Gardener*, *Kibera Kid*, and *Slumdog Millionaire*. The analysis focuses on the agency over representation, the nature of Kibera and of life in Kibera in the film, the cinematic mode of Kibera's representation, and the politics of the film with regards to poverty and social stratification. As it turns out, in *Soul Boy*, unlike in

1 Unless stated otherwise, all information about the production, distribution, and exhibition of the film was retrieved from the film's website: One Fine Day Films. "Soul Boy" and "Production Notes." *Soul Boy*. <http://www.soulboy-film.org/> (accessed 29 September 2017).

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other films, 'slum' does not epitomize poverty and other economic and social problems. In contrast with the reformist and voyeurist modes that predominate elsewhere, an affirmative mode and an affirmative slum politics characterize *Soul Boy*.

Kenyan/Kiberan perspectives, strata, and viewers

Kibera is anything but an unexplored place for people from the Global North. It is "one of the most-studied slums in Africa"[2] because it sits right at the centre of a capital city and because UN Habitat – the United Nations Human Settlements Program – has its headquarters close by. It is also a slum which is frequently covered by the press[3] and which is the setting of several movies. It can be argued that in its representation of Kibera *Soul Boy* is also negotiating previous representations.[4] *The Constant Gardener* (2005), a mid-sized Hollywood production directed by Fernando Meirelles, was shot and is set in Kibera and other parts of Nairobi. It tells the story of a British activist who is murdered by an international pharmaceutical company for investigating illegal drug testing in Kibera – and of her husband who investigates her death. As Ginger Wilson, one of the co-owners of Ginger Ink and co-producer of *Soul Boy*, points out, *The Constant Gardener,* like most other "films about Africa", tells a story "about white people in Africa, seen from that perspective".[5] In these films, "Kenya is used as a backdrop and is seen from an observer's point of view. This is not what Kenyan films are interested in communicating."[6] *Soul Boy* is a case in point. Throughout its course, the film follows the slum inhabitant Abila. Viewers' knowledge of the story is largely restricted to his knowledge. And there can be no doubt that Abila is the character that we are meant to identify with and support. One of the tasks Abila has to fulfill brings him to Karen, an affluent suburb with a predominantly white Kenyan or

2 Enrico De Angelis et al. "Environmental and Comfort Upgrading through Lean Technologies in Informal Settlements: Case Study in Nairobi, Kenia and New Delhi, India", In: *AIP Conference Proceedings* 1758 (2016), 4.

3 E. g. Martin Robbins. "The Missing Millions of Kibera." *The Guardian.* 1 August 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/the-lay-scientist/2012/aug/01/africa-propaganda-kibera>; and "Boomtown Slum: A Day in the Economic Life of Africa's Biggest Shanty-Town." *The Economist.* 22 December 2012. <http://www.economist.com/news/christmas/21568592-day-economic-life-africas-biggest-shanty-town-boomtown-slum> (accessed 14 March 2017).

4 This seems to be a trend in contemporary representations of slums, see: Igor Krstic, "Slums Analog / Slums Digital." In: *parapluie* 28 (2012). <http://parapluie.de/archiv/slums/slumdarstellung/> (accessed 29 September 2017).

5 Munyao Mutinda. "Accolades for Filmmakers Who Took Kibera Fairytale to World." *Daily Nation.* 27 February 2010. <http://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/lifestyle/1214-870088-dkpxow/index.html> (accessed 29 September 2017).

6 Ibid.

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European population. Perhaps it is no coincidence that this particular suburb is Kibera's antipode in the film: the Nairobi suburb in which Karen Blixen's farm was located, the farm made famous in *Out of Africa*, a novel (1937) and film (dir. Sydney Pollack, 1985) which can be seen as a model for fiction about white people in Africa with the continent as a mere backdrop.

The short film *Kibera Kid* (dir. Nathan Collett, 2006) was produced by the Hot Sun Foundation, an initiative similar to One Fine Day Films, and also has a young Kiberan as its protagonist. He is a street child and gang member, stealing mobile phones and searching for food on a dump "to survive". In the end, he leaves Kibera to go to school and pursue his dream of becoming a hip hop artist. *Kibera Kid* is largely a film for 'us' about 'them'. English, and not Swahili or other native languages, is spoken through most of the film. With one exception, the film was only shown at festivals in the Global North.[7]

The films of the One Fine Day project, by contrast, were created both for a Kenyan and an international audience. With regards to the communication of cultural specifics, this required the negotiation of the interests of people familiar and unfamiliar with these specifics: The former required less signposting or explaining than the latter. In *Soul Boy*, there is a balance between aspects that are explained and those that are left unexplained and are thus allowed to remain enigmatic and foreign to international audiences. While structurally the film's story of a young man put on a quest is reminiscent of folktales as they are common in many cultures, it also weaves in specific myths of the Luo, the ethnicity which most of Kibera's inhabitants belong to. The woman who allegedly stole the soul of Abila's father is referred to as a Nyawawa by some of the residents Abila speaks to. In Luo culture a Nyawawa is the spirit of a dead person who haunts the living.[8] Throughout the film, Swahili and Kikuyu are spoken, interspersed with individual English words, for example when Abila tells Shiku to "relax" (12:20). Obviously, the difference between Swahili and Kikuyu will not be noticed by viewers who are not familiar with these languages and who rely on reading the English subtitles.

The opposition between Kibera and Karen stands in for an opposition of relative poverty/wealth and of black/white in *Soul Boy*, which seems to be coherent with the income situation and demographics of these areas.[9] Still, this

7 See "Kibera Kid" on *IMDb* and *Wikipedia*. <www.imdb.com/title/tt0835485> and <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Kibera_Kid> (both accessed 23 April 2017).

8 Wolfgang Hamdorf. "Etwas Notwendiges: Tom Tykwer und sein filmisches Engagement in Afrika." *Film-Dienst* 8 (2013). <http://www.film-dienst.de/filmdienst-inhaltsangabe/einzelansicht/etwas-notwendiges, 157718.html> (accessed 14 January 2016).

9 Martin Dias. "What Makes Nairobi's Karen Tick." *The Standard*. 1 January 2015. <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000146414/what-makes-nairobi-s-karen-tick> (accessed 29 September 2017).

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choice was not without alternatives. Notably, in *Nairobi Half Life* (dir. Tosh Gitonga, 2012), the next film produced by the initiative, the opposition poor/rich is not congruent with black/white. The poverty of black urban slums is opposed to the wealth of black and white upper middle class suburbs in *Nairobi Half Life.* Viewers unfamiliar with Kenyan society still get an idea that there is a conflict between Luo and Kikuyu in the country and that the Luo outnumber the latter in Kibera – but not much more. When Abila visits his mother at work to find out what happened to his dad, one of her colleagues offers the boy "delicious" arrowroot. Another colleague comments: "We Luo have become like the Kikuyu. We even feed our children arrowroot." The others laugh. When Abila and Shiku encounter a bunch of boys Abila occasionally hangs out with, the boys use "Kikuyu girl" in a disparaging way. Viewers may notice graffiti saying "Say no to violence" and "Keep peace alive" on walls in the background of several scenes. Still, they may not know how the ethnic tensions and the violent conflict alluded to by the graffiti are related. *Soul Boy* was shot less than a year after violence swept Kenya following a contested election. In December 2007, former president Mway Kibaki, a Kikuyu, was declared the winner of the presidential election. The opposition led by Raila Odinga, a Luo, and international observers reported fraud.[10] Two months of protests and general ethnic unrest followed, which involved organized killings of Kikuyu by Luo and by other ethnic groups. Contributing 22 % to Kenya's population, the Kikuyu are the largest ethnic group in the country.[11] In Kibera, by contrast, there are 7 % Kikuyu and 35 % Luo.[12] All of this may be known to Kenyan viewers and thus put the fragments presented in the film into context – but probably not to international viewers.

Soul Boy was shown on numerous festivals in Kenya, other African countries, and in the Global North. In the absence of a cinema in Kibera, the Kenyan premiere was held outdoors in the slum on a mobile screen.[13] *Soul Boy* received an Audience Award in Rotterdam, a Signis Award at the Zanzibar International Film Festival, and a Best Editor Award at the Africa Movie Academy Awards. At home in Kenya it received three Kalasha Awards and two awards at the Kenya Inter-

10 BBC. "Kenya Rivals Agree to Share Power." *BBC News.* 28 February 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/ 2/hi/africa/7268903.stm> (accessed 29 September 2017).

11 CIA. "Kenya." *World Factbook.* <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ke.html> (accessed 10 March 2017).

12 Anabel S. Erulkar and James K. Matheka. *Adolescence in the Kibera Slums of Nairobi, Kenya.* Nairobi and New York: The Population Council, 2007.

13 See premiere announcement on *Nairobi Now:* Ugomatic. 4 March 2010. "New Kenyan Movie Premiere: Soul Boy, from Mar 4 2010 @ Kibera & Silverbird Cinemas." <https://nairobinow.wordpress.com/2010/03/04/new-kenyan-movie-premiere-soul-boy-mar-4-2010-kibera-southern-borders-mtoni-valley/> (accessed 29 September 2017).

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national Film Festival.[14] Given the lack of interest of Kenyan cinema operators and viewers in the cinematic output of their own country,[15] it is even more remarkable that *Soul Boy* was successful in regular (i. e. commercial) exhibition in Kenya. According to the film's director, the producers "were really good at negotiating deals" with cinema operators; "they wrangled […] a week" of screenings with a regular cinema. Still, the screenings were extended week after week "by popular demand", which "meant that Soul Boy had legs of its own".[16]

Agency and voice

Most of the Kibera residents in the film, including Abila and Shiku, were played by actual residents of Kibera and other Nairobi slums. Casting took place in the streets and in schools. By the same token, the Karen family Abila encounters was also played by members of Nairobi's white minority, by co-producer Ginger Wilson, two of her children, and by Nick Reding. The latter is an English actor who founded S.A.F.E. Kenya, a joint British charity and Kenyan NGO charity, whose work is also shown in one scene of the movie. The producers and co-producers – the people initiating, running, and in charge of the project – were Germans and Brits living in Kenya. The film was financed by the producers, Goethe-Institut Kenya, Hubert Bals Fund Rotterdam and Göteborg International Film Festival Fund – two European institutions supporting filmmaking in the developing world – and the German camera manufacturer ARRI.

Overall, 80 % of the crew were "local people" according to the director.[17] Key creative staff – writer Billy Kahora and director Hawa Essuman – were at least partly Kenyan and living in Nairobi – which distinguishes *Soul Boy* from *Kibera Kid* which was written and directed by Nathan Collett, an American. However, Kahora and Essuman were not from Kibera or the same social strata as the people whose story they were narrating. Their background was middle-class and included a tertiary education.[18] This is not meant to discredit their film and rep-

14 "Soul Boy." *Wikipedia*. 21 June 2016. <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Soul_Boy> (accessed 29 September 2017).

15 Mwenda wa Micheni. "No Space for African Films, We Serve Hollywood." *Africiné*. 11 April 2008. <http://www.africine.org/?menu=art&no=7499> (accessed 29 September 2017).

16 Essuman on *SmartMonkeyTV*. "Director Hawa Essuman Talks about Her Film Soul Boy and Traditional African Beliefs." YouTube, 17 May 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57ZMr7Y6278> (accessed 29 September 2017).

17 Essuman on *Soul Boy* website.

18 See Margaretta wa Gacheru. "The Right Man to Steer Kenya's Literary Journal." *Daily Nation*. 23 December 2013. <http://mobile.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/The-right-man-for-Kenyas-literary-journal-/1950774-2122728-format-xhtml-8xo1uvz/index.html> (accessed 8 March 2017); Tambay Obenson. "Kenyan Director Hawa Essuman Talks 'Soul Boy'". *IndieWire*. 17 May

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resentation of Kibera: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of the key theorists on the issues of subalternity and voice, denounces the view "that only a native can know the scene" as a "tired nationalist claim".[19] It may even be impossible for people from the lowest social strata to write or direct a feature film. In order to do so, knowledge of narrative and aesthetic conventions and skills of putting them into practice are necessary. In order to attain this knowledge and these skills, time and money for a formal or informal education are needed. Apart from that, to turn an idea for a film into an actual film, a writer/director will have to convince funders to finance it. This task requires social capital: a professional social network and a reputation. If all of these conditions are met, it can be doubted that the writer or director is still a member of the lowest social strata because poverty is characterized by a lack of such resources. Of course, this predicament of voice in representations of poverty is not specific to One Fine Day Films.[20]

An affirmative representation of Kibera

The term slum itself and images of slums typically signify poverty, i. e. material, educational, social, and health deprivations. Igor Krstic identifies both a reformist and a voyeuristic mode in traditional representations of slums, for example in Jacob Riis' photographs of New York City in the late 19th century.[21] Today, the reformist mode can be found in charity advertising and donor-funded filmmaking, which is sometimes disparagingly labelled "development film".[22] As Nyasha Hungwe points out, "the dominant narrative form on Africa has cast the continent and its people as a 'problem'".[23] In charity advertising, making a donation is promised to lead to reform and alleviate economic and social problems in Africa. In development films – fiction films which are financed by governmental or non-government organizations from the Global North and made for African audiences – behavioural change of Africans is meant to improve their situation. Ben Zulu, a former executive of Media for Development International (MFDI), summarizes the rhetoric of such films as "there is a

2013. <http://www.indiewire.com/2013/05/kenyan-director-hawa-essuman-talks-soul-boy-upcoming-supernatural-drama-djin-167949/> (accessed 29 September 2017).

19 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "French Feminism in an International Frame." In: *Yale French Studies* 62 (1981), 156.

20 See e. g. Miriam Nandi. "Beyond Authenticity of Voice: A Response to Barbara Korte." In: *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate* 23,1 (2013), 154, 168.

21 Krstic, "Slums Analog / Slums Digital."

22 Alexander Fisher. "Funding, Ideology and the Aesthetics of the Development Film in Postcolonial Zimbabwe." In: *Journal of African Cinemas* 2,2 (2010), 112.

23 Nyasha Kedmon Hungwe. "Narrative and Ideology: 50 Years of Film-Making in Zimbabwe." In: *Media, Culture & Society* 27,1 (2005), 91.

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problem, here is the message".[24] Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Everyone's Child* (1996), which deals with the issue of AIDS orphans, is an example of such a film. MFDI makes the message explicit in the synopsis on their website: "Tamari and Itai are devastated after the tragic death of their parents. […] It is a time of survival, as they wait for the community to realize that they are everyone's children," i. e. realize that everyone in the village is responsible for taking care of them.[25] Overall, "dominance of Western donors in the financing of film projects may inhibit the development of alternative film narratives" in Africa.[26] Alexander Fisher sees "lines of continuity" between the educational cinema of the colonial era and development films.[27] With an inverted prefix or turned inside out, the reformist mode is also present in films that disappointedly point out how aid has failed to alleviate poverty and stimulate development (e. g. *Süßes Gift*, dir. Peter Heller, 2012) or decry how international corporations – at times under the label 'aid' – exploit people in developing countries (e. g. *The Constant Gardener*). The voyeuristic mode may be found in popular feature films like *Slumdog Millionaire* (dir. Boyle, 2008) and *City of God* (dir. Meirelles and Lund, 2002) which showcase and maybe even aestheticize extreme poverty, violence, and dirt.[28] The overall mode of slum representation in *Soul Boy*, by contrast, is affirmative of the slum as a place to live and as a social space. Unlike in other movies, the slum Kibera does not primarily signify poverty and related problems. Overall, in *Soul Boy* Kibera is a place where people live – it is not a place where people do not live but merely survive or die. This will be demonstrated in the following.

It is common for slum literature and film to focus on the plight of street children,[29] picking out the most vulnerable stratum of slum society with a guarantee for empathy from viewers in the Global North. *Slumdog Millionaire* is a popular recent example of such a film; a film in which the most memorable abode of the young protagonists is probably an open tent on a dump. *Kibera Kid* is another example. It is a paradox that slum films typically contain extreme long shots of masses of makeshift houses next to each other – thus making a point about crowded living conditions and overpopulation in developing countries in general – but rarely narrate the lives of people living in such houses and focus on street children instead. The protagonist of *Soul Boy*, by contrast, is shown to be

24 Quoted in Hungwe, "Narrative and Ideology," 92.
25 "Everyone's Child." *Media for Development International.* <http://mfditanzania.com/everyones-child/> (accessed 29 September 2017).
26 Hungwe, "Narrative and Ideology," 91.
27 Fisher, "Development Film," 112.
28 See Ellen Dengel-Janic. "Danny Boyles Slumdog Millionaire: Die Popularisierung der Armut." In: *parapluie* 28 (2012). <http://parapluie.de/archiv/slums/slumdog/> (accessed 29 September 2017).
29 See Krstic, "Slums Analog / Slums Digital".

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living with his parents in such a house. The first scene is set in their family home. We see items of everyday life: beds, clothes, dishes, a calendar and other decorations. We also see that this particular home is at the same time a store for food and other goods.

Obviously, the house and its interior will strike viewers from the Global North as makeshift, worn, crammed, or even dirty. Still, there is no camerawork and editing that specifically makes such evaluative points, for example by singling out a dirty toilet, sink or a broken roof. The camerawork in general is very traditional in showing locations and objects only insofar as they are relevant for the narration of the story. In this way, we become acquainted with the house 'only' because we are following Abila, who wakes up from the clamour of customers wanting to be served, searches for and ultimately finds his father who did not open the store that morning (Fig. 1). Likewise, we become acquainted with the quarter in which Abila is living 'only' because he is running to his mother to ask for advice. A crane shot first shows Abila in front of the store telling customers that it will remain closed on that day, and then moves up to show him running along the street disappearing in the distance (Figs. 2–3). Likewise, the music is only motivated by the narrative and does not evaluate settings either. This enables alternative readings: Apart from pitying slum residents for their living conditions, a viewer might marvel at their creative building techniques for example.

Fig. 1. Abila at his father's bed.

Living in a place obviously involves making a living. Typically, in slum films options for making a living are limited to begging, stealing, garbage picking, selling drugs, sex work, becoming a gang member or leader, and doing odd jobs for Europeans or Americans, for example as tourist guides or 'informers' (see, for instance, *Kibera Kid*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *City of God*, and *The Constant Gardener*). In the logic of these films, slum inhabitants die if they do not make a

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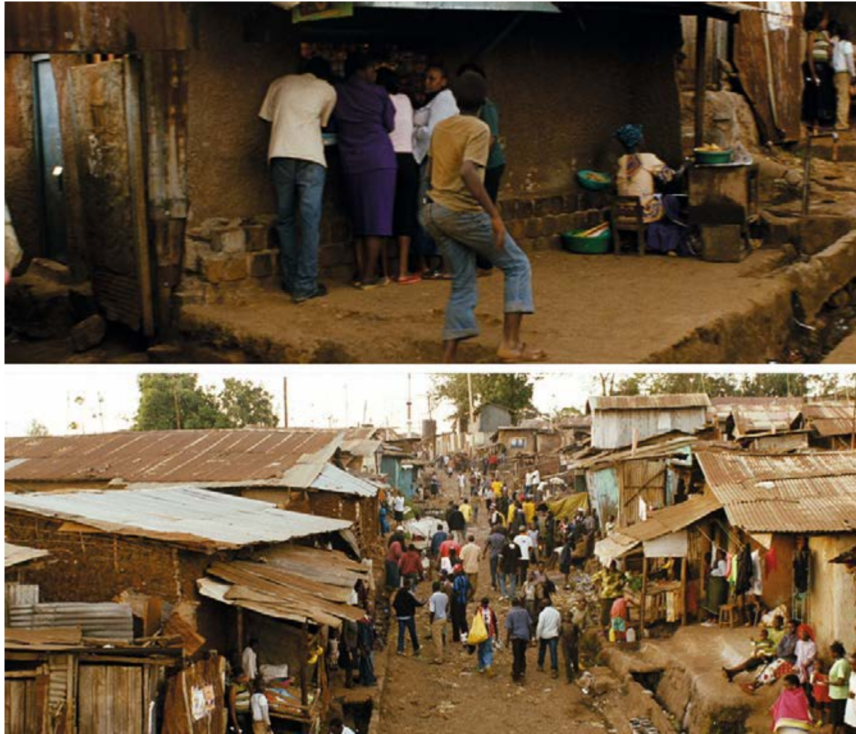

Figs. 2–3. Abila tells customers that the store will remain closed and runs to visit his mother at work.

living by these mostly illegal means. The Kibera of *Soul Boy*, by contrast, is a place where people have various kinds of jobs and conduct various kinds of business. Abila's mother is spinning wool in the "Ayany Women Group" which seems to be a cooperative textile workshop. Her sister is working as a cook for a rich white family in Karen. There are various shops shown in the film: shops that sell fruit and vegetables, clothes, kitchen utensils; there is a butcher and a chemist, restaurants, even a "Calfonia Hotel". There is an overall busy-ness in the streets of Kibera which confounds preconceptions of equating poverty with idleness.

The impression of various livelihoods – at least for men – in Kibera is confirmed by empirical research and press sources about Kibera.[30] Indeed, taking the United Nations' Multidimensional Poverty Index as a yardstick,[31] not all in-

30 See Erulkar and Matheka, *Adolescence in the Kibera Slums of Nairobi*, 10–2; and The Economist, "Boomtown Slum."

31 Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative. "The Dimensions, Indicators, Deprivation Thresholds and Weights of the Global MPI." *Oxford Poverty & Human Development Ini-*

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habitants of Kibera would be considered poor.[32] A family like Abila's, for instance, would not be considered poor because they do not fall below the respective thresholds for education, health, and living standards.[33] Overall, poverty in Kenya is much more common in rural than in urban areas. While 47.8 % of Kenyans are MPI poor, the poverty rate is merely 3.9 % in Nairobi, which makes it the lowest of all regions in the country.[34] An empirical survey of 1675 adolescents living in Kibera shows that Kibera is a place where people who are living in poverty in rural areas go to *improve* their condition. This slum is much less a reservoir of chronic destitution than *Kibera Kid* and *The Constant Gardener* would make us believe. The participants of the survey consider schools, vocational training, and work in their new home superior.[35]

Functional relationships between people are an exception in slum films. The best relationships are probably the friendships or companionships between individual street children or gangsters. In *Soul Boy*, by contrast, Kibera is a place where people can be part of functional relationships. While he needs to be on his own for his quest, it is understood that Abila has good relations with his parents and his aunt. Abila is also more or less part of a group of preteen boys, and not of a criminal gang. And he is starting a romantic relationship with Shiku towards the end of the film. Both in *Slumdog Millionaire* and in *Soul Boy* the romantic union of the protagonists is only achieved at the end after all obstacles provided by the narration have been overcome. It is significant, however, that in *Slumdog Millionaire* this union does not take place in the slum anymore but on a train station, signifying the transition to a new, wealthy, and happy life. The slum could not be the site for fulfilled love because it was part of the problems that had to be overcome. In *Soul Boy*, by contrast, the slum is a place in which people can fall in love and find fulfilment. This is epitomized when Abila and Shiku, after his final challenge of playing 'chicken' on the railroad tracks, sit beside each other among the rubbish besides the tracks towards the end of the film (Fig. 4). The slum is not represented as a problem to overcome – neither through individual career efforts

tiative, 2010. <http://www.ophi.org.uk/the-dimensions-indicators-deprivation-thresholds-and-weights-of-the-mpi/> (accessed 20 April 2017).

32 See school status and socio-economic status in Erulkar and Matheka, *Adolescence in the Kibera Slums of Nairobi*, 5.

33 For all MPI indicators for which the film provides 'information', the family does not fall below the respective thresholds: Abila is still going to school. There are no signs of undernourishment in the family. They are living next door to a water tank. There is a light switch which indicates that they have electricity. Their house does not have a dirt floor. It has several "assets", such as a refrigerator. See Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative, "The Dimensions, Indicators, Deprivation Thresholds and Weights of the Global MPI."

34 Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative. *Country Briefing: Kenya.* Oxford: Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative, 2013. <http://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Kenya-2013.pdf> (accessed 29 September 2017).

35 See Erulkar and Matheka, *Adolescence in the Kibera Slums of Nairobi*, 7–8, 14.

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nor through reformist development schemes, such as the replacement of Kibera's makeshift homes through high-rise apartment blocks which was started a couple of years ago.

Fig. 4. Sitting among rubbish, Abila and Shiku recognize each other as lovers.

Slum society usually has a simple structure: In *The Constant Gardener*, Kibera's society uniformly consists of people who are potential or actual recipients of aid and who are, at the same time, victims of pharmaceutical corporations. In *Slumdog Millionaire*, the street children are opposed to the people who exploit them. The same goes for *Kibera Kid*, with the addition of an individual virtuous Community Security Man. In *City of God*, there are the gangsters, the police, and a non-descript mass of ordinary slum inhabitants in whom the film is not interested unless they become victims of crime. Typically, the aim of an individual is survival; and the sole principle of social 'cohesion' is dog-eat-dog. In *Soul Boy*, by contrast, Kibera has a relatively complex society. Abila's family and their business are integrated into the neighbourhood, which can be seen by the customers' referral to Abila's father by his first name Mbuyu and by Abila's referring to them by their first names. There are ethnic (e.g. Luo and Kikuyu) and economic divisions (e.g. the landlord vs. Abila's family). Overall, Kibera appears to be a very sociable place; most people in the street are walking in pairs or groups and are constantly engaged in conversation. As the production manager of *Soul Boy* says, people in Kibera actually are "cooperative and helpful".[36] Other statements about "a community with solidarity and self-identity" in Kibera confirm his view.[37]

There are also spatial divisions in Kibera: The characters frequently mention the names of landmarks, roads, and the 'villages' of which Kibera consists. Kibera

36 Quoted in One Fine Day Films, "Production Notes."

37 See comment by Redbrick to Robbins, "The Missing Millions of Kibera" (second set of comments).

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is not a uniform spread of makeshift houses and a maze of paths. It has a spatial order and an infrastructure which make orientation possible (for the inhabitants). Infrastructure, of course, also encompasses transport (e. g. matatus), shops and public facilities (e. g. a school and a library) that can be seen in the film.

Problems out of focus

While economic and social problems are not at the centre of the *Soul Boy* story, various problems are addressed along the way. The film offers three alternative explanations for Mbuyu's inability to get up in the morning. The explanation which receives the biggest amount of screen time is that the Nyawawa stole his soul – not an economic or social problem. However, it could also be the result of excessive alcohol consumption, as Abila's mother suspects. Other Kiberans say that extramarital sexual relations with the Nyawawa are the reason for men 'losing their souls'. If Abila does not cure his dad, an economic problem would be the mid-term outcome, because he does not open his shop on the morning he wakes up delirious. A further problem for Abila to solve appears about a third into the film: Because his father has not paid the rent for several months, the landlord threatens to evict the family. The first 'sun' Abila encounters is a decoration of a S.A.F.E. Ghetto stage. The social workers of the NGO pick Abila and Shiku from the crowd and ask them to enact a father and a mother arguing about the responsibility of educating their children about HIV and AIDS. Abila recalls the Nyawawa's task "Slip into someone else's skin and inhabit it in front of others" in this situation. Fulfilling the task of helping "a sinner who's in trouble", Abila hides the petrified thief of a mobile phone who is being chased by a mob. On the way to another task, Abila and Shiku chance upon the crime scene of a street murder. Rubbish in the streets, along the creek and the railroad tracks can be seen in various scenes. The list of problems addressed in the film, then, comprises alcoholism, adultery, HIV/AIDS, mid-term shortages of cash (i. e. transient poverty), theft, murder, and pollution. While some of these problems are part of the story, none of them is central, presented dramatically or emotionally charged. These issues are presented offhandedly in a matter-of-fact, even neutral, fashion. The by far most frightening presence in the film is the Nyawawa – not an economic or social problem, as mentioned above.

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Magic neorealism

It will be clear by now that *Soul Boy* sits between different cinematic modes and genres. To a certain extent, it can be seen in the tradition of Italian neorealism. In films like Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (engl. *Bicycle Thieves*, 1948) and Roberto Rossellini's *Germania anno zero* (engl. *Germany, Year Zero*, 1948), real-world settings and lay actors were used in feature films that raised awareness of or negotiated social problems.[38] It is still one of the most influential historical film styles, also for the filmic representation of slums.[39] Real-world settings and residents were used for *Soul Boy* as well. Curious looks at the camera in several scenes indicate that some of the people in the film are not acting at all. Most likely, they simply chanced upon the shooting while running errands or on their way to/from work (Fig. 5). In showing Kibera and its residents enacting themselves, *Soul Boy* is thus partly a documentary.

Fig. 5. Abila searches for the Nyawawa, accompanied by Shiku. Various onlookers to the shooting can be seen in the background.

Still, *Soul Boy* differs from Italian neorealism in the way in which settings are put into the scene and in its negotiation of social problems. Neorealism was realist in its turn toward social reality but not in terms of style. Real-world settings, such as the rubble of post-war Berlin in *Germania anno zero*, were 'dramatically' presented, accompanied by emotional music which was meant to shock viewers and make them sad. Neorealist films were concerned about the problems they depicted – and viewers were expected to be concerned as well. Social problems, such as unemployment in *Ladri di biciclette* and the plight of war orphans in *Ger-*

38 Irmbert Schenk. "Neorealismus: Konzept." *Lexikon der Filmbegriffe.* 2013. <http://filmlexikon.uni-kiel.de/index.php?action=lexikon&tag=det&id=7595> (accessed 29 September 2017).

39 See Krstic, "Slums Analog / Slums Digital."

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mania anno zero, directly provided the material of the story. In terms of story and mode, these were social problem films, that is, fiction films which centrally negotiated a social problem via a set of characters.[40] The same would be true for development films, *Kibera Kid*, and *The Constant Gardener*. *Soul Boy*, by contrast, is decidedly not a social problem film. There is no overall tone of concern. It is matter-of-fact and affirmative in its presentation of Kibera and addresses problems only on the sides.

Magic realism – "the matter-of-fact inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction"[41] – is another tradition that impacts on *Soul Boy* and that is in interplay with the neorealist tradition. The Nyawawa is represented as a woman with a horse leg in the film, evoking popular representations of the devil. Between naming one task and the next, she miraculously moves from one side of Abila to the other. The whole idea of fulfilling seven tasks to redeem a soul defies everyday 'rational' reality, of course, as does the way in which a 'sun' leads Abila from one task to the next. Abila soon understands that he has to follow all types of representations of the sun – for example, printed onto a T-shirt or dress – to find and face the tasks. As it is typical in magic realist fiction, the fantastical occurrences are not called into question either by the narration or the protagonists. They are simply part of the postcolonial reality that is presented.

Karen: Kibera's 'other'

Interestingly, while the film is reticent when showing poverty, it is much more explicit and upfront when showing wealth. After a guard has opened the gate to let Abila and his aunt into the expansive, lavishly green estate in Karen, they encounter the lady of the house. Presumably coming back from a ride, she is leading a horse across the open space in front of their mansion, passing a 4wd car. In a single shot, the film thus presents three stereotypical indicators of wealth: a big house, a big car, and a horse. When Abila encounters Amy, the daughter who is about his own age, she 'happens' to be carrying a basket full of plush toys from one part of the house to another. A reason for the different modes of representing poverty and wealth might be that the growing awareness about the ethics and

40 Ursula von Keitz and James von Hüningen. "Problemfilm." *Lexikon der Filmbegriffe.* 2012. <http://filmlexikon.uni-kiel.de/index.php?action=lexikon&tag=det&id=5605> (accessed 29 September 2017).

41 "Magic Realism." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1999. <https://www.britannica.com/art/magic-realism> (accessed 29 September 2017).

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politics of representing poverty is not accompanied by a like awareness about representing wealth.[42]

Charity advertising is another audiovisual practice to contextualize *Soul Boy* with. Anno's Africa, a charity/NGO which organizes arts workshops in Nairobi, helped with casting the lay actors and received an "in association with" production credit. The work of another charity, S.A.F.E. Kenya, is shown in the film – a charity whose founder Nick Reding is playing the part of "Mr. Brian", the proprietor of the Karen estate. After Abila applies a trick to relieve Amy of a fishbone that got stuck in her throat, and after he tells Mr. Brian about his father's lost soul and the overdue rent, Mr. Brian writes out a cheque to pay the rent for a year and another cheque for general supplies. Charity advertising commonly works by contrasting shocking images of poverty, disease, and war in developing countries with images of comparative wealth, health, and peace in the Global North, thus aiming to induce feelings of guilt which are promised to be relieved by making a donation.[43] Even if *Soul Boy* is not presenting Kibera as a destitute place, it is, of course, contrasting the two parts of Nairobi. What is missing in *Soul Boy*, however, is an attempt to make viewers from the Global North identify with the Karen family. In order to make viewers feel responsible, the Karen family would have to become 'us', yet they remain 'them'. We are aligned with Abila throughout the Karen segment of the film. Amy is represented as a spoilt brat who is discontent in spite of having diverse and abundant food and toys. Mr Brian – as he himself and his children tell us – is "neglecting" his family by working during dinner and dropping out of "promised" leisure activities with his children (38:40). The Karen family remain strangers. Contributing to their 'otherness' are perhaps also their living standards which are way above average living standards even in the Global North.[44]

42 This is possibly due to the fact that extreme representations of poverty reaffirm the status of the represented subjects as destitute and powerless and feast on their lack of agency, while extreme representations of wealth reaffirm the status of the wealthy as powerful. Whereas the former representations are not in the interest of the represented, arguably, this is the case for the latter. The former add cultural exploitation to the existing economic and social exploitation of the poor. At the end of the day, social stratification is reaffirmed by extreme forms of representation of both strata; thus a critique of such forms in both domains would be necessary.

43 Sophie Hudson. "Are Emotive Appeals Effective in Persuading People to Give to Charity?" *The Guardian.* 2 September 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/voluntary-sector-network/2013/sep/02/effective-emotive-appeals> (accessed 29 September 2017).

44 The family seems to be part of a Kenyan upper class with European roots. Mr. Brian could be working for a large international company or an organization such as the UN.

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Soul Boy's poverty politics

Poverty is relative in *Soul Boy.* Abila and the viewers who are following him through the movie become aware of deprivations only when the narrative moves to Karen. In Karen Abila takes what seems to be his first shower with warm tap water. Only upon seeing the abundance of toys in Amy's arms may viewers recall that no toys could be seen in Abila's home. Such a notion of relative poverty is at odds with the concepts of absolute poverty which are implemented in the Multidimensional Poverty Index and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, both of which are based on the idea that all human beings are entitled to a certain standard of food, housing, health, and education.[45]

All economic hardships in the film are the result of individual irresponsible behaviour or decisions. Because Abila's father has not paid the rent for several months, the landlord threatens to evict the family. It is not indicated that the family cannot generally afford to pay the rent for the house – in that case, they would not be living there in the first place. It is not indicated either that the rent has gone up. The most likely explanation for failing to pay the rent are Mbuyu's occasional stretches of drunkenness and idleness. Abila's mother says that excessive alcohol consumption has repeatedly been an issue, and her overall demeanour suggests that she does not think too highly of her husband as a provider of the family. Similarly, a Kikuyu man encountered by Abila lost his job because he was drunk at work. The thief of the mobile phone is also in trouble solely because of his own doing. No reason is provided why he stole the phone (for example, to cash it in order to buy food). In the Nyawawa's task he is simply categorized as a "sinner". It is a remarkable decision to set a film in a slum and to make poverty not the prime signified of 'slum', thus challenging preconceptions and pointing to the diversity of slum life. On the other hand, the attribution of all responsibility for economic hardships to the individual – and leaving systemic, contextual explanations out of the picture – is troubling. The question could have been asked, for instance, why Abila's father and the Kikuyu man are drinking, or why the young man stole the mobile phone. This could have brought overarching economic and social conditions into the picture.[46]

45 See Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative, "The Dimensions, Indicators, Deprivation Thresholds and Weights of the Global MPI."

46 Birte Christ has observed similar structures in other fictional texts: novels of poverty in which "systemic explanation[s] for poverty", such as the "exploitation of one group of society by another", are missing and the manifestations of poverty are the results of individuals' laziness, uncleanliness, and lack of "moral principles". Such a representation "confuses or even exchanges causes and effects of poverty and thus invites the readers to blame the poor for their own misery." "The New Poverty Studies: Current Concerns and Challenges." In: *Key Concepts and New Topics in English and American Studies.* Ansgar Nünning and Elizabeth Kovach (eds). Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014, 43.

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The argument that wealth does not guarantee or equal happiness is made with some emphasis by the film. In the final scene that shows Abila and Mr. Brian together, Abila asks: "Are you happy?" Mr. Brian hesitates, obviously being hit in a weak spot, and responds: "I don't know, unfortunately." This scene complements a previous scene in which Mr. Brian is only reluctantly and distractedly having dinner with his family. The narration suggests that Mr. Brian is not happy, in spite of his wealth. The message that wealth does not guarantee or equal happiness may be comforting for Abila and some of the viewers of the film. Still, it can be argued that it works to downplay the significance of economic disparities and to undermine a critical discussion of such disparities.

In *Soul Boy* there is a message that doing good and staying on the path of righteousness – while resisting temptations to make easy money by illegal means – will ultimately be rewarded. One of the tasks set by the Nyawawa is "Pay someone else's debt without stealing from someone else." When the thief of the mobile phone – out of fear of the mob that is pursuing him – hands the phone over to Abila, the son sees an opportunity to pay his father's overdue rent. Shiku lectures him that selling stolen goods is as bad as stealing and that he himself would risk being killed by the mob. Abila does not listen to her, but he does not cash in the phone either; the narration thus postpones the fulfilment of this task and the solution to the moral conflict. In the next scene, the sun pattern on his aunt's dress leads Abila to Karen where he saves Amy's life. Afterwards, Mr. Brian has a sit-down with him to thank and reward him for saving his daughter's life. He writes out the two cheques. Noticing Abila's attention for a drawing case on the table, he asks Abila if he likes drawing. When Abila answers in the positive, he is given the case. Back in Kibera the next morning, Abila gives the first cheque to the landlord, fulfilling the postponed debt task, and returns the phone to its owner. Oliver Twist (Charles Dickens, 1837–1839) is among a myriad of young adult fiction characters who are ultimately rewarded for resisting the temptations of illegal breadwinning. *Kibera Kid* and development films, like *Sunshine* (dir. Karabani, MFDI, 2014), also transmit this message. Interestingly, the next One Fine Day film digresses from this pattern: Only crime pays in *Nairobi Half Life*, while it comes at the price of moral integrity and possibly one's life.

On the one hand, the gifts Abila receives are a reward. On the other hand, they can be seen in the context of international aid. Mr. Brian says these gifts are "a start". The drawing case comes with the announcement of a long-term relationship, the obligation to use it, and the announcement of an inspection of the results: "Next time you show me your drawings, okay?" Unsurprisingly, Abila agrees. Paying the rent would be emergency aid. The drawing case can be seen as development aid in the arts sector, in which Anno's Africa and One Fine Day Films are active. Obviously, Mr. Brian is a white saviour figure: a "knightly savior" of black "'others' who are redeemable as long as they consent to assim-

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ilation and obedience to their white benefactors".[47] Still, Mr. Brian emerges as a white saviour only after Abila has emerged as a black saviour of Amy.

The aid logic is in conflict with the logic of slum affirmation in *Soul Boy*. Significantly, only a couple of hours after receiving the drawing case, Abila gives it to Shiku as a present: a first gift that seals their romantic slum relationship. No words are lost about who gave it to him and about the obligation to use it to the likings of Mr. Brian. The affirmative view of the slum has the last word over the reformism of development aid.

The ethnic opposition between Luo and Kikuyu can be overcome in *Soul Boy:* Love is the answer. The crass economic opposition between the relatively poor and rich, which coincides with the racial opposition of black and white in the film, cannot be overcome. There is not even a hint of an option of a romantic relationship between Abila, who certainly turns his head after Amy has passed him on their first encounter, and Amy. The first question Mr. Brian asks Abila is: "What planet are you from?" The notion of parts of a city which are more like planets/worlds apart is picked up when Abila is falling asleep on Amy's sofa, gazing at a mobile of the universe. The planets Kibera and Karen remain apart.

Unlike in so many novels and films about poverty – including *Oliver Twist*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Kibera Kid*, and *Nairobi Half Life* – there is not even the idea of pursuing a dream, of working oneself up and out of the slum in *Soul Boy*. There is no advice about what to do to achieve this goal either. The struggle is the everyday: paying the rent, dealing with a periodically alcoholic parent. Happiness is falling in love among rubbish. The affirmative view of the slum in *Soul Boy* thus seems to come at the cost of a lack of a vision for upward social mobility. But then, if we compare this lack of a vision to the utterly implausible post-capitalist vision of social mobility in *Slumdog Millionaire* (i. e. winning a game show), it can also be seen as the welcome prevalence of realism over utopianism.

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2. Intersecting Aspects of Poverty and Agency

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Devindra Kohli

The Relevance of the Transforming Image of Self-volitional Deprivation: R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*

I

Recent fictional as well as non-fictional constructions of post-colonial India have focused on economic poverty and how the indigent protagonists deal with the denial of agency and opportunity. In view of the expected societal equalisation that is often claimed by right-leaning politicians for the current global spread of economic liberalism, such images of poverty, whether constructed by indigenous writers or by diasporic and Western writers, acquire an added dimension since nearly one in three of the world's poorest people live in this largest democracy and the world's second-fastest growing economy.

Behind the Beautiful Forevers (2012) by Katherine Boo is a non-fictional exploration of the hopes, struggles and disappointments of the inhabitants of Annawadi, a temporary slum throbbing in the immediate vicinity of luxury hotels near Mumbai international airport. Boo's well-researched and empathetic evocation of "the harsh human economy of Mumbai",[1] the financial capital of India, and its second most populous city, was adapted for the stage by David Hare in London in 2014. In the following year in a similar vein, the BBC ran a season of a larger debate on *A Richer World – But For Whom?*[2] examining the paradox that while the world is growing richer, nearly half of its population survives on less than $ 2 a day.[3] While India occupies the fourth position on the Forbes global

1 Charles Isherwood. "On the Edge in Mumbai Slum." *International New York Times*. 18 December 2014, 13. Also see Charles Isherwood. "Forlorn Lives of a Mumbai Slum." *Deccan Herald*. 23 December 2014. <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/449431/forlorn-lives-mumbai-slum.html> (accessed 14 June 2016).

2 The *A Richer World* season included productions by BBC World News and BBC World Service across television, radio and online platforms.

3 According to the United Nations, nearly half the world's population, 2.8 billion people, survive on less than $ 2 a day. About 20 percent of the world's population, 1.2 billion people, live on less than $ 1 a day. The United Nations. Resources for Speakers on Global Issues. Hunger. <http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/briefingpapers/food/vitalstats.shtml> (accessed 6 March 2016).

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billionaires list 2015, it ranks, ironically, 130 on the U.N. Human Development list.[4] Instead of actively reflecting a society debating with itself, space for investigative stories of poverty has shrunk drastically in a rapidly corporatized Indian media. "We are not in the newspaper business. We are in the advertising business. […] if you are editorially minded, you will make all the wrong decisions," so declared the owners of *The Times of India* multimedia news organisation.[5] This revenue based policy of paid news which has a symbiotic relationship with celebrity endorsement has resulted in "a structural shutout of the [Indian] poor", especially the rural poor, from the media, as Palagummi Sainath, the author of *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* (1996) reminds us.[6] Because *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* and *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* focus on rural and urban poverty respectively as processes rather than events, they exemplify investigative journalism at its incisive best.

Fictional representations of poverty in the last decade, such as Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) and Vikas Swarup's *Q & A* (2005), have focussed on how their urban socially and economically disadvantaged protagonists respond to such a lack of agency. In *The White Tiger*, for example, Balram Halwai gleefully adopts unscrupulous methods to break the disabling barriers of poverty, caste, and class. After killing his rich employer in Delhi for whom he has worked as a chauffeur, he steals his money, flees to Bangalore and, assuming his employer's name, fights his way up against a corrupt and corrupting social and political system and sets up a lucrative taxi service. His seven confessional epistles addressed to the Chinese premier in anticipation of the latter's visit to India read like a Do It Yourself-guide to material success. Enunciating his magic mantra in his first epistle that "the Indian entrepreneur has to be straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, at the same time", folding his hands reverentially and closing his eyes, he invokes "the gods to shine light on my dark story".[7] As if written on cue, Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), set recognisably in Pakistan, reads like an ironic endorsement of the dubious success-ethic of *The White Tiger*, announcing in its opening pages that "the idea of self in the land of self-help is a slippery one".[8] This mock philo-

4 United Nations Development Programme. Human Development Reports. India. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/IND> (accessed 6 March 2016).

5 Ken Auletta. "Citizens Jain: Why India's Newspaper Industry is Thriving." *The New Yorker*. 8 October 2012. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/08/citizens-jain> (accessed 6 March 2016).

6 Palagummi Sainath. "Back to the Grass Roots." NL [*Newslaundry*]. 6 January 2015. 4:20–4:35. <http://www.newslaundry.com/2015/01/06/back-to-the-grass-roots/> (accessed 12 August 2016).

7 Aravind Adiga. *The White Tiger*. New York: Free Press, 2008, 8–9.

8 Mohsin Hamid. *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. London: Penguin, 2014 [2013], 3–4.

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sophical trope is addressed to the 'you,' who is the unnamed narrator in a novel of unnamed people and places as well as the generic reader.

The White Tiger, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, *Q & A*, and its film adaptation *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), use innovative narrative techniques to both mirror and critique the existing urban-based social reality of the Indian subcontinent. The iconic attention which these works have received seems in part attributable to the seductive commodifying nexus of media-publisher-marketing-literary awards-festivals as well as the starry gaze of the visual image in media, popular culture, and book launches sponsored by corporate conglomerates. *The White Tiger* won the Man Booker prize, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* was the winner of the Tiziano Terzani International Literary Prize, and *Q & A* was short listed for the Best First Book by the Commonwealth Writer's Prize besides winning several awards. Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* was a phenomenal success at the box-office and the Oscars. Unsurprisingly, these works made dramatic television news; the narrative structure of *Q & A* and *Slumdog Millionaire* is taken directly from the format of the international television game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire.* Both the novel and the film have invited charges of inauthenticity. *Slumdog Millionaire* was criticised as emblematic of "poverty porn" that "wallows in tired clichés of abysmal poverty and mindless villainy".[9] For some of its underwhelmed critics the film adversely deviates from the original novel and misses the rooted honesty of *Salaam Bombay!* (1988) or *City of Joy* (1992) and thus ends up showcasing "India as the accidental millionaire, which in fact happens to be a slumdog".[10] Like most of India's corporatized news media, these socio-critical texts represent the perspective of the urban privileged class on the urban poor and, notwithstanding the quintessentially optimistic vision underlying the ironic treatment of the characters, these representations appear to "flaunt 'our preconceptions' about the poor in the Third World"[11] and thus endow the "indigent" with "agency and powers of enunciation".[12] *The White Tiger*, which is intended to "catch the voice of the men

9 Priya Rajeskar. "'Slumdog' Sacrifices Indian Pride." *The Irish Times.* 28 February 2009. <http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/slumdog-sacrifices-indian-pride-1.711828> (accessed 10 February 2016). Also see Alice Miles. "Shocked by Slumdog's Poverty Porn." *The Times.* 14 January 2009. <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/law/columnists/article2048284.ece> (accessed 10 February 2016).

10 Arindam Chaudhuri. "Don't See 'Slumdog Millionaire'. It Sucks!" 25 January 2009. <http://arindamchaudhuri.blogspot.de/2009/01/dont-see-slumdog-millionaire-it-sucks.html> (accessed 10 February 2016).

11 Miriam Nandi. "Beyond Authenticity of Voice: A Response to Barbara Korte." In: *Connotations* 23,1 (2013/2014), 153.

12 Barbara Korte. "Can the Indigent Speak? Poverty Studies, the Postcolonial and Global Appeal of *Q & A* and *The White Tiger.*" In: *Connotations* 20,2–3 (2010/2011), 297.

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you meet as you travel through India – the voice of the colossal underclass"[13], seems to some critics "fundamentally an outsider's view and a superficial one", leaving out "so many other alternative Indias out there, uncontacted and unheard".[14] Instead of finding the much touted "glimpse into 'real India'", the author, academic and journalist Amitava Kumar asks: "Whose India is real, Adiga's or mine?"[15]

Irrespective of whether or not the writer has experienced poverty, and notwithstanding the risks of possible inauthenticity, creative writing must have the freedom to engage in enquiring and critiquing how lack of economic well-being is not only demeaning but also a consequence of the perpetuation of social, political and cultural denial of agency to the disadvantaged in a society. It is doubtful, however, if such socio-critical fictions, even when consciously influenced by current political/literary movements, can effectively influence the policies of the political dispensation of the day to bring about socio-economic equalisation.

In the 1930's, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936) portrayed protagonists as victims of economic backwardness created by caste hierarchy and perpetuated during the British administration in India. For his critique of rural poverty and economic discrimination in his novels such as *So Many Hungers!* (1947) and *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1954), Bhabani Bhattacharya poignantly drew on the savage memories of the Bengal famine of 1943, and a "holocaust"[16] precipitated by "Churchill's Secret War"[17] that aggravated hardship for the poor by diverting food instead to British troops in the Mediterranean and the Balkans. The protagonists of Anand and Bhattacharya may be more acted against than enacting the cocky voice of Balram Halwai in *The White Tiger*. While

13 Aravind Adiga. Quoted in Victoria Young. "Novel About India Wins the Man Booker Prize." *The New York Times*. 14 October 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/15/world/europe/15booker.html> (accessed 20 July 2016).

14 Kevin Rushby. "'His Monster's Voice,' *The White Tiger*." *The Guardian*. 19 April 2008. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/apr/19/featuresreviews.guardianreview19> (accessed 8 March 2016).

15 Amitava Kumar. "On Adiga's The White Tiger." *The Hindu*. 2 November 2008. <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-literaryreview/on-adigas-the-white-tiger/article1438227.ece> (accessed 23 February 2016).

16 The term in this context is attributed to Dr. Gideon Polya, an Australian biochemist, in Joseph Lazzaro. "Bengal Famine Of 1943 – A Man-Made Holocaust." *International Business Times*. 22 February 2013. <http://www.ibtimes.com/bengal-famine-1943-man-made-holocaust-1100525> (accessed 10 February 2016).

17 In a review of Madhusree Mukherjee's *Churchill's Secret War*, Shashi Tharoor quotes Churchill as follows: "'I hate Indians,' he told the Secretary of State for India, Leopold Amery. 'They are a beastly people with a beastly religion.' The famine was their own fault, he declared at a war-cabinet meeting, for 'breeding like rabbits.'" Shashi Tharoor. "The Ugly Briton." *Time*. 29 November 2010. <http://content.time.com/ time/magazine/article/0,9171,2031992,00.html> (accessed 6 March 2016).

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we may not be invited to identify with Balram, the dubious ruthless success-ethic through which he is transformed reflects a gruesome social reality that Anand's Bakha and Munoo are not touched by even though they too covet the well provided life of their British and Indian employers.

Viewed and judged in terms of a dichotomy between realism and resistance, Anand's and Bhattacharya's novels have been dismissed as being cast in "the sentimental–melodramatic mode",[18] yet Anand, "the veritable Dickens of the East",[19] and Bhabani Bhattacharya were ground-breaking and polemical in their own time for critiquing both India's caste system and British colonial rule for acquiescing to it. Rejected by 19 publishers for its perceived 'dirt,' *Untouchable* was published in London when E.M. Forster commended the novel as being "indescribably clean" and for having "gone straight to the heart of its subject and purified it".[20] It is pertinent to mention here the parallel between Anand's Bakha and the sweeper boy in "Untouchable", the first autobiographical story that Ruskin Bond,[21] the English writer and an Indian by adoption,[22] wrote when he was sixteen and published in the 1950s. It is a nuanced portrayal in just 1200 words of an East-West cultural encounter in which a lonely English boy of ten overcomes his own reluctance and the disapproval of his neighbour's family and recognises and appreciates an anchor of companionship in a sweeper boy of the same age who works for his father. Bond negotiates the social binaries of caste and class without being either sentimental or employing decentring indicators such as a textual rupture.

In addition to the commodifying nexus of media-publisher-marketing-literary awards-festivals mentioned earlier, another reason why socio-fictions like *The White Tiger*, *How to Get Filthy Rich* and *Q & A* are iconised seems to be that they enable "intellectuals [to become] increasingly aware of the need to theorize and criticize the ever widening gap between rich and poor all over the globe", and that they offer an "elite discourse on postcolonial Indian identity" within a "deconstructionist framework".[23] Implicit in such a view is academic dissatisfaction with the realist novel on the ground that its monolithic narrative is rooted in colonial inheritance and is therefore inadequately equipped to present multiplicity and political resistance or even subversion. In other words, there is

18 Nandi, "Beyond Authenticity of Voice," 154.
19 K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar. *Indian Writing in English.* New Delhi: Sterling, 1999, 130.
20 E. M. Forster. "Preface." In: Mulk Raj Anand. *Untouchable.* London: Penguin, 1939, v.
21 Ruskin Bond. "Untouchable." In: *Dust on the Mountain: Collected Stories.* New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009 [1996], 1–4.
22 "Race did not make me one. Religion did not make me one. But history did. And in the long run, it's history that counts." Ruskin Bond. "On Being an Indian." Cited in Meena G. Khorana. *The Life and Works of Ruskin Bond.* Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003, 2.
23 Nandi, "Beyond Authenticity of Voice," 154.

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no privileging of a transforming role through a voice or act of resistance. On that count, Anand's Bakha or Munoo, Velutha in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Kalo in Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger*, and Raju in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) are perceived as passive and their stories as being sentimental, melodramatic, and exotic. An alternative reading of such novels is that in their own way and to varying degrees they are politically concerned if not "politically charged realist texts"[24], which provide in the words of Wilson Harris, a "re-visionary potential within texts of reality".[25]

II

It seems pertinent, therefore, to revisit fictional representations that explore how a competitive desire "to get filthy rich" can in some of its cultural manifestations in the Indian context be self-critical through contrasting transforming images of self-volitional deprivation. Drawing on religious and mythological sources, Bhabani Bhattacharya uses satire and self-irony in *He Who Rides a Tiger* whereas R.K. Narayan utilises the resources of comic irony and narratorial distance in *The Guide* to explore the transforming role of self-volitional deprivation.

In *He Who Rides a Tiger*, Kalo, a poor low-caste blacksmith, is jailed for stealing a bunch of bananas. After his release, with no work and oppressed by hunger, he decides to take revenge on the system. As a self-devised "step towards a basic reincarnation"[26] he masquerades as a Brahmin priest under the assumed name Mangal Adhikari which suggests both auspiciousness and natural authority. Claiming to have had a vision, he raises money to build a Shiva temple and is gratified when even the magistrate who had sentenced him to prison is among those who deferentially touch his feet. He is dismayed, however, that poor and deprived people like himself also do the same. In the process of enacting his fraudulent priestly role, his "secret embers of conflict" (*He Who Rides a Tiger* 117) lead him eventually to rebel against his self-crafted deceitful self. The Hindu goddess Kali who rides a tiger is a ubiquitous reminder as a backdrop. Finally, because he cannot "trick himself too long" (174), Kalo rejects the lie which has served as his tool of symbolic revenge against an iniquitous system. He decides to dismount the "lie" which he "rode as if it were a tiger" (85) and triumphantly confesses to the rich and upper-caste that he had fooled them all this while: "A

24 Laura Moss. "'The Plague of Normality': Reconfiguring Realism in Postcolonial Theory." In: *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 5,1 (2000). <http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v5i1/moss.htm> (accessed 20 July 2016).
25 Wilson Harris. "The Fabric of the Imagination." In: *Third World Quarterly* 12,1 (1990), 176.
26 Bhabani Bhattacharya. *He Who Rides a Tiger*. New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1977 [1954], 81.

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downtrodden Kamar has been in charge of your inmost souls, souls corrupt with caste and cash" (227). This is reinforced by the narrator's sharper register and a rebuke to the system: "They had come back in time to hear him, to see him drive his steel deep into the tiger. The scum of the earth had hit back, hit back where it hurt" (231).

In this paper, my focus is on R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* for a different treatment of poverty as self-volitional and self-affirming. Written as a kind of *Bildungsroman* but innovatively eschewing the conventions of the traditional linear plot, *The Guide* is about a small town boy, Raju, who cannot finish school because his old father needs him to help run their shop near the railway track and subsequently, when the station is built, their second shop on the railway platform. Using his entrepreneurial instinct and his gift of the gab, he establishes himself, over time, as Railway Raju, a successful tourist guide. He finds romantic love in Rosie, the unhappy wife of Marco, one of his clients and a dedicated archaeologist whose "nature flourished on solitude, and cave frescoes",[27] and who uncompromisingly disapproves of his wife's passion for classical dancing as a lowly profession of "street acrobatics" (*The Guide* 130). Reluctantly forced into separation from Marco, Rosie gets involved in a live-in relationship with Raju. Through his support and initiative Rosie becomes Nalini, a famous classical dancer. Moving beyond his profession as a guide, Raju exclusively manages Rosie's dancing career. In "this glow of radiant existence" (174), as he puts it, they achieve financial and social success but the greed and *hubris* now dominate him. "My philosophy was", as he remorsefully recalls much later, "that while it lasted the maximum money had to be squeezed out" (173). He erroneously assumes that Rosie shares this philosophy and so grows insensitive to her inner, though silent, discontent with what she calls "the circus life" (197) of endless concerts, money and fame, as well as to her dormant ambivalence towards Marco. Overcome by fear that he might lose her to Marco, and even more afraid that he will lose his managerial control over her, Raju forges Rosie's signature on bank documents sent by Marco, is jailed and financial ruin and ignominy follow.

Uncertain of his future after his release, but choosing not to return to his mother or to Rosie, Raju takes shelter – and this is how the novel begins – in an abandoned shrine in a village called Mangal where he is mistaken for a holy man by Velan, the first person he meets. The word 'Mangal,' in this novel as in *He Who Rides a Tiger*, is significant because Mangalam from which it is derived (in Sanskrit) means auspiciousness or welfare. As the word goes around about his alleged holiness, the villagers begin to assemble reverentially around Raju seeking counsel and guidance. When a drought hits the land they come to believe that if he prays and fasts for 12 days the rain will come and liberate them from

27 R.K. Narayan. *The Guide.* London: Penguin, 1988 [1958], 112.

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their plight. At first embarrassed and reluctant, he ultimately undergoes the fast and embraces the larger saintly role that has been conferred upon him. Unlike Aravind Adiga's protagonist Balram, who actually kills his employer and steals his money in *The White Tiger*, the nearest Raju comes to killing anyone, albeit in a purely psychological sense, on his journey to material success, fall and imprisonment, is to conceal from Rosie the book about the cave paintings which Marco has published and sent her, even though Raju's help has been acknowledged. He likens this act, as he recalls, to "hiding a corpse" (176).

III

The political impact of fictional images of self-selected and self-affirmed poverty may or may not be immediately visible, and arguably such images in creative literature and art do not impact political dispensations, but an image such as Raju's in the service of both personal and the larger good is sanctioned in the major religious traditions of the world and the Indian subcontinent, including Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. Both in the religious and political spheres public figures such as the Buddha, Mahavir Jain, the Emperor Asoka, the Bhakti poets, Christian Sadhus and Muslim Sufi saints as well as Gandhi rejected identification with the prevailing socio-economic structures of the India of their own times and embraced poverty and self-denial. Friedrich Schlegel, Schelling, Herder and Schopenhauer were all deeply impressed by some of the Indian examples just mentioned. Amartya Sen tells us, "'Schopenhauer at one stage even argued', that the New Testament 'must somehow be of Indian origin: this is attested by its completely Indian ethics, which transforms morals into asceticism, its pessimism, and its avatar,' in 'the person of Christ'."[28]

In recent world history, the most compelling image of self-selected poverty is the life of Gandhi and the role he played during the Indian Independence Movement against British rule. Pejoratively dismissed by Winston Churchill as the "half-naked fakir" and "an Inner Temple lawyer, now become a seditious fakir of a type well known in the East",[29] Gandhi is now widely regarded as the

28 Amartya Sen. *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity.* London: Penguin Books, 2005, 94.

29 Quoted in R. K. Prabhu. *Anecdotes of Gandhi.* Abridged from the book *This was Bapu.* Ahemadabad: Navajivan Trust, 1954. <http://www.mkgandhi.org/students/thiswasbapu/144halfnakedfakir.htm> (accessed 20 July 2016). Also see "The Churchill You Didn't Know." *The Guardian.* 28 November 2002. <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2002/nov/28/features11.g21> (accessed 20 July 2016).

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"articulate voice of the conscience of humanity".[30] Although a five time nominee he never won the Nobel Peace Prize. Regretting this omission in 1989, and invoking Gandhi as "the Missing Laureate", Egil Aarvik, Chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, acknowledged that the award of the Peace Prize that year to the Dalai Lama was "in part a tribute to the memory of Mahatma Gandhi".[31] Both in the private and political space, Gandhi's self-volitional poverty involved practising vigilant empathy for the rural poor in India and included the sartorial simplicity of his loin-cloth, "the dress of [his] principles, the people of India […] the symbol of [his] mission",[32] so that he refused to change it even for his meeting with King George V because "[i]n any other dress [Gandhi] should be most discourteous to him because [he] should be artificial".[33] Another integral part of his ascetic lifestyle of prayer and meditation which Gandhi used as a nonviolent weapon of moral persuasion whenever his inner voice directed him were his fasts. He used these fasts to protest against the British raj as well as to stop Hindu-Muslim riots and promote communal harmony, as he did in Calcutta in September 1947 immediately after the Partition of India. For his fast in Calcutta, the grateful appreciation he received from Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, in retrospect, sounds like an unintended rebuke of Churchill: "In the Punjab we have 55,000 soldiers and large scale rioting on our hands. In Bengal our forces consist of one man, and there is no rioting."[34] Whether his fasts were politically directed or guided by introspective self-purification, they were a part of Gandhi's larger vision of social change and an equitable economic society. Gandhi situated his vision not in any individual innovation but in advancing the legacy of human kind.

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30 Description used for Tolstoy in Ernest Joseph Simmons. *Introduction to Tolstoy's Writings.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968. <http://www.ourcivilisation.com/smartboard/shop/smmnsej/tolstoy/chap13.htm> (accessed 20 July 2016).

31 Egil Aarvik. "The Nobel Peace Prize 1989. The 14th Dalai Lama. Award Ceremony Speech." *The Official Website of the Nobel Prize.* <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1989/presentation-speech.html> (accessed 21 July 2016). Also see: Øyvind Tønnesson. "Mahatma Gandhi, the Missing Laureate." *The Official Website of the Nobel Prize.* 1 December 1999. <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/themes/peace/gandhi/> (accessed 5 March 2016).

32 Mahatma Gandhi. "My Loin-Cloth." In: *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi,* vol. 48. New Delhi: The Publications Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1971, 79–80. <https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org/cwmg_volume_thumbview/NDg=#page/108/mode/2up> (accessed 7 March 2016).

33 Mahatma Gandhi. "Mahatma Gandhi Talks, 30 April 1931." Fox Movietone News. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpjBWw5w444> (accessed 21 July 2016), 2:54–3:45.

34 Lord Mountbatten. "Letter dated 26 August 1947." Cited in Philip Ziegler. *Mountbatten: The Official Biography*. London: Collins, 1985, 436. Also see Madhu Dandawate. "Gandhi's Human Touch." <http://www.mkgandhi-sarvodaya.org/humantouch.htm> (accessed 21 July 2016).

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It is very likely, had Gandhi lived longer, that he would have used his non-violent weaponry of fasts against the Indian government for its failure to satisfactorily address the continuing poverty in post-independence India. In 2010–11, following a series of public protests against multiple financial scandals involving Indian ministers and officials, a nationwide movement against corruption gained momentum. An unassuming figure, Anna Hazare, a 72-year old social activist with no family, no property and no bank balance, undertook a 96-hour fast unto death which he called off when the then Indian Government agreed to constitute a joint committee of government and civil society representatives in order to draft a legislation, the Jan Lokpal Bill, for the appointment of an independent ombudsman to deal with corruption in political and public institutions. Influenced by Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda, Hazare adopted a Gandhian approach to clothing, demeanour and identification with the rural poor, describing his movement as a "second struggle for independence".[35]

Gandhi, and to a lesser extent Hazare, have effectively played transforming roles politically. Neither the transforming role that Kalo adopts in *He Who Rides a Tiger* in order to symbolically expose social and economic inequities nor the transforming role that Raju plays in *The Guide* can be regarded as being politically effective in any way; nevertheless Bhattacharya and Narayan drew on their sense of the Gandhian path through which transformation is realised.

IV

While it is an open question whether life influences literature or vice versa, Narayan acknowledged that the incident of the reluctant holy man in *The Guide* was based on a real event which he had read about in the newspapers.[36] It is also likely that Narayan knew about the drought that hit the Madras state (now Tamil Nadu) in the 1950s when its Chief Minister Rajagopalachari, who, like Narayan himself, was an eminent writer and re-teller of the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Gita*, asked his supporters and priests to pray for rain and was not surprised when the rain did come and break the drought.[37] Railway Raju is perceived as a disciple of Gandhi who has come to 'save' the drought-ridden people. While Narayan himself was not a conventionally religious person, his sense of comic irony and human comedy was "an extension of his religious

35 "India Wins Again, Anna Hazare Calls off Fast." *The Times of India.* 9 April 2011. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/India-wins-again-Anna-Hazare-calls-off-fast/articleshow/7921304.cms?referral=PM> (accessed 5 March 2016).

36 R. K. Narayan. *My Days: A Memoir.* London: Penguin Books, 1989, 165.

37 See Ian Copland et al. *A History of State and Religion in India.* London and New York: Routledge, 2012, 233.

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sense".[38] "An intricate alliance", to use William Walsh's phrase,[39] of comic irony and a moral and spiritual vision distinguishes Narayan, who was "with his glories and limitations", as Naipaul described him in a characteristically self-revealing way, "the Gandhi of modern Indian literature".[40]

While Raju is perceived as a disciple of Gandhi, the archetypal myth for Raju's transformation is the story of Valmiki, the highway robber-turned-devotee-turned poet who composed the epic *Ramayana*, which, as Narayan affirmed, "pervades […] cultural life" in India "in one form or another at all times".[41] The word 'mara' (which means either the active verb to 'kill' or the passive state of 'being dead', depending on which syllable is emphasised) is an anagram of Rama. In the myth, the robber was tricked into reciting Rama unwittingly by repeating 'mara' and was thus eventually transformed into Valmiki. This element of trickery which appealed to Narayan's sense of comic irony resonates benignly with the villagers and eventually with Raju himself to accept his criminal aberration as a preparatory act of attrition.

Among the stories that Raju still remembers from his childhood is the one about Devaka, "a hero, saint, or something of the kind" "who begged for alms at the temple gate every day and would not use any of his collections without first offering them at the feet of the god" (*The Guide* 17, 15); and also his mother quoting from a Tamil poem, "If there is one good man anywhere, the rains would descend for his sake and benefit the whole world" (96). As he is obliged to fast, Raju instinctively emulates Devaka and offers the fruits brought by Velan to the idol in the shrine before he eats them, and cites the Tamil quotation to evoke hope when the news of drought is first brought to him. Whether this is a Freudian slip or a clever guide's self-goal is unclear. What is clear is that Raju is genuinely touched and moved to tears by the earnestness of the villagers. In the eyes of the narrator-observer, "[Raju] felt that after all the time had come for him to be serious – to attach value to his own words. He needed time – and solitude to think over the whole matter" (95).

Although he begins as a reluctant holy man, Raju does make crucial choices before and after his imprisonment including, finally, his self-denial. In prison, Raju moves away from his obsessions with money and Rosie and takes interest in

38 V.S. Naipaul. "The Master of Small Things." *Time.* 11 June 2001. <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2047404,00.html> (accessed 3 April 2016).

39 William Walsh. "The Intricate Alliance: The Novels of R. K. Narayan." In: *A Review of English Literature* 2,4 (1961): 91–9.

40 Naipaul, "The Master of Small Things."

41 R. K. Narayan. "Introduction." In: *The Ramayana: A Shortened Modern Version of the Indian Epic.* London: Penguin Books, 1977, xi. "Almost every individual living in India", writes R. K. Narayan in the same Introduction, "is aware of the story of The Ramayana. Everyone of whatever age, outlook, education or station in life knows the essential part of the epic and adores the main figures in it – Rama and Sita. Every child is told the story at bedtime." (ibid.).

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the well-being of other prisoners who begin to look up to him as *Vadhyar* (a teacher). He helps the jailor whenever needed and is "considered a model prisoner" (201). In fact, he begins to feel so reconciled to his social life there that he almost chokes with tears when he leaves the jail after two years. At the end of the very first chapter, surprised and touched by Velan, an older man seeking his wise counsel, Raju wonders: "Have I been in a prison or in some sort of transmigration?" (18) As someone who, in his heyday, enjoyed being addressed as "Raju Sir", he recoils even when "he [is] attaining the stature of a saint" from people touching his feet, reminding them that "God alone is entitled to such a prostration" (13).

V

How effectively does Narayan process Raju's transformation from a tourist guide to a spiritual guide? In *The Argumentative Indian*, Amartya Sen points out that "voice", the dialogic, heterogeneous voice "is a crucial component of the pursuit of social justice".[42] As this voice is also engaged in issues relating to values that are material, ethical and spiritual, Sen rightly traces dialogic learning within the Indian tradition to the rise of Buddhism which emphasised public discussion.[43] The Mogul emperor Akbar, though illiterate, used to hold evening assemblies to engage the proselytising Jesuits, Brahmins, Buddhists, Jews, Parsees and Islamic clerics in discussing matters of religion and spirituality. "Whether one goes back to Ashoka or to Akbar", remarks Sunil Khilnani, "even our most imperious rulers were attended by some self-questioning, a trace of self-irony, the odd mood of detachment."[44]

This explains a distinctive characteristic of Narayan's art as a storyteller: his innate use of the voice of the characters rather than extensive annotations of an all-knowing authorial voice. Narayan's frequent shifts in the narrative from the third person narration to the first person and vice versa in *The Guide* draw on the argumentative tradition to provide dialogic public space between Raju and the villagers. From the time Raju is spotted in Mangal, his story moves through his interactions with Velan, his daughter, the school teacher, and various others from the village. Narayan effectively employs the dialogic mode, interlaced with comic irony, involving moments of silence, suspense or short and seemingly elusive

42 Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, xiii.
43 Ibid., 81.
44 Sunil Khilnani. "A Democratic Asteroid that Wiped out Many Old Habits." *The Economic Times*. 18 May 2014. <http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-05-18/news/49925938_1_india-s-narendra-modi-indian-history> (accessed 3 April 2016).

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answers, and alternates between the authorial mode and Raju's confessional mode.

Being a novelist and not a sociologist or historian, Narayan's use of dialogic space to portray the stages of Raju's spiritual transformation is also an exploration of the role language plays in such a process. For example, in the following excerpt when Velan deferentially asks Raju to give them a discourse, Raju feels awkward and assumes a contemplative expression to buy time. Similarly, in an earlier exchange with the school teacher seeking his guidance, Raju circumvents a clear answer, saying: "I'm but an instrument accepting guidance myself" (39). Narayan exploits the comic irony of the situation while retaining the dialogic format of a discourse using not just two voices but virtually three: Raju's, Velan's, and that of the narrator. Seen from the perspective of a detached outsider, Raju's response could seem a put-on and Narayan allows for that reading but he also allows for the possibility that his humility and spirituality are authentic.

> Raju felt cornered. "I have to play the part expected of me; there is no escape." He racked his head secretly, wondering where to start. Could he speak about tourists' attractions in Malgudi, or should it be moral lessons? How once upon a time there was a so and so, so good or bad that when he came to do such and such a thing he felt so utterly lost that he prayed, and so on and so forth? He felt bored. The only subject which he could speak on with any authority now seemed to be jail life and its benefits, especially for one mistaken for a saint. They waited respectfully for his inspiration …
>
> After a long, brooding silence, he brought out the following words: "All things have to wait their hour." Velan and his friends who were in the front row looked worried for a moment; they were deferential, no doubt, but they did not quite realize what he was driving at. After a further pause, he added grandiosely, "I will speak to you when another day comes."
>
> Someone asked, "Why another day, sir?"
>
> "Because it is so," said Raju mysteriously. "While you wait for the children to finish their lessons, I'd advise you to pass the hour brooding over all your speech and actions from morning till now."
>
> "What speech and actions?" someone asked, genuinely puzzled by the advice.
>
> "Your own," said Raju. "Recollect and reflect upon every word you have uttered since daybreak –"
>
> "I don't remember exactly. . . ."
>
> "Well, that is why I say reflect, recollect. When you don't remember your own words properly, how are you going to remember other people's words?" This quip amused his audience. There were bursts of subdued laughter. When the laughter subsided Raju said, "I want you all to think independently, of your own accord, and not allow yourselves to be led about by the nose as if you were cattle."

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> There were murmurs of polite disagreement over this advice. Velan asked, "How can we do that, sir? We dig the land and mind the cattle – so far so good, but how can we think philosophies? Not our line, master. It is not possible. It is wise persons like your good self who should think for us."
>
> "And why do you ask us to recollect all that we have said since daybreak?"
>
> Raju himself was not certain why he had advised that, and so he added, "If you do it you will know why." The essence of sainthood seemed to lie in one's ability to utter mystifying statements. "Until you try, how can you know what you can or cannot do?" he asked. He was dragging those innocent men deeper and deeper into the bog of unclear thoughts. (43–4)

Within the fictional frame of his comic irony Narayan shows how the perceived excess of altruistic instinct changes both the listeners and Raju. Although we are aware of Raju's sense of discomfiture through the authorial perspective, Raju's words and his manner would not seem out of place if this were a dialogue between a real saintly figure and his followers, and the narrator's comment that "[t]he essence of sainthood seemed to lie in one's ability to utter mystifying statements" (44) would be equally true then.

Very early in the novel Raju's counsel to Velan's sister, "We may not change it [i.e. her problem], but we may understand it" (18), sounds prophetic for Raju's future. Raju cannot prevent people from believing in his holiness but towards the end he begins to appreciate the story which his mother used to tell him in his childhood, of Devaka, the beggar who would not partake of his daily alms before offering them to the idol in the temple, even if he does not actually believe in it any more now than he did then. Despite temptation to "run away from the whole thing" (96) and seek anonymity, his sense of people's gratitude comes in the way because "[h]e would not like to cheat them altogether about the fast if he could help it" (97).

In the last chapter, after Velan has heard Raju's nightlong confession, we have Raju's 'dialogue of one' in reported speech in which he strengthens his resolve to continue with the fast so that by the fourth day he enjoys "a peculiar floating feeling" (212), which he does not want to lose – "something Velan cannot take away from me" (ibid.) – because "for the first time he was doing a thing in which he was not personally interested" (ibid.). In the last scene, on the twelfth day, even when Velan and others show Raju the government telegram conveying the doctors' advice to suspend the fast, Raju rises on his feet, held by Velan and others, and proceeds towards the river:

> He stepped into it, shut his eyes, and turned toward the mountain, his lips muttering the prayer. […] The morning sun was out by now; a great shaft of light illuminated the surroundings. It was difficult to hold Raju on his feet, as he had a tendency to flop down. They held him as it were a baby. Raju opened his eyes, looked about, and said, "Velan,

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> it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs –" He sagged down. (220)

Although Raju's transformation is self-affirming, the ending of the novel is both affirmation and negation. The rain seems distant, but will it fall, and will the sagging Raju survive the fast? Dieter Riemenschneider has pointed out that "non-closure and the shift of perspective", employed here by Narayan in 1958, are "two narrative devices rarely employed in the Indian English novel written between the 1930s and 1950s".[45] This was Narayan's "innovative procedure"[46] that became a distinctive feature of the Indian novels in English of the post-1980s. While Forster appreciated Narayan's novels as "[h]igh-class comedy, without any isms",[47] Narayan, who had met E.M. Forster in Cambridge on several occasions, regarded Forster's interest in India as "deep and abiding".[48] The ending of Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), too, is opening out, with Aziz and Fielding reconnecting in an affectionate embrace while their horses swerve apart and everything around them in a "hundred voices"[49] echoes: "No, not yet" (*A Passage to India* 316). And the twinning of mystery and muddle around the visit to the Marabar caves is crucial to the way *A Passage to India* develops and ends. In a similar vein, the meeting between Rosie and Marco in the cave discovered by Marco, "a fierce, terrifying place" (*The Guide* 129) where Rosie imagines cobras "on the ancient floor, amidst cobwebs and bats, in that dim lantern light" (130) reverberates through Raju's passage from Malgudi to Mangal.

Graham Greene, who liked the story when Narayan narrated it to him in London, was definite that the hero should die at the end while Narayan hesitated whether to leave his hero dead or alive. "So I have on my hands", he pondered, "the life of a man condemned to death before he was born and grown, and I have to plan my narrative to lead to it."[50] As it happened, he ended the novel still as an observer, not as a controller of the fate of his protagonist, with a hint of the continuing relevance of transformational value of self-volitional deprivation in the larger context, although open to individual interpretation.

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45 Dieter Riemenschneider. "'The Train Has Moved on': R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* and Literary History." In: *Asiatic* 3,2 (2009), 96. Riemenschneider points out the exception of G. V. Desani's *All About H. Hatterr* (1949) "with its host of voices and the open-endedness of its last words" (ibid.).

46 Ibid.

47 Kunwar Natwar Singh. "Our Man in Malgudi." In: *Heart to Heart.* New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2003, 15.

48 R. K. Narayan. "When India Was a Colony." *The New York Times Magazine.* 16 September 1984. <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/09/16/magazine/when-india-was-a-colony.html> (accessed 27 June 2016).

49 Forster, E. M. *A Passage to India.* London: Penguin, 1989 [1924], 316.

50 R. K. Narayan. *My Days: A Memoir.* London: Penguin Books, 1989, 165.

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VI

Narayan's protagonists are small town people of limited means with whose struggles Narayan could easily empathise. Early in his life he chose to be a freelance writer and had faced discouragement, uncertainties, debts, and precarity when "[m]oney was a big worry".[51] The sudden death of his wife of typhoid, within five years of marriage, leaving a daughter of three, resulted in disorientation and creative stasis which he relived in *The English Teacher* (1945), "very little part of it being fiction".[52] Feeling anchorless but "with no faith in spiritualism",[53] he joined on an impulse a group of acquaintances who engaged in psychic experiments and he soon discovered that he could spiritually communicate with his dead wife. Even if the whole thing had seemed unscientific and "a grand fraud" at the beginning, these psychic contacts eventually "transformed [...][his] outlook",[54] and, more importantly, "out of all this experience a view of personality or self or soul developed which [...] remained with [...][him] ever since. 'Now we know in part, then fully, face to face ...' said St Paul; our faculties are limited by 'now' and 'here'."[55]

In leaving *The Guide* open-ended, Narayan appears to be suggesting that a similar process of thinking, sceptical at first, *seemed* gradually to lead Raju towards a "philosophical understanding of life and death".[56] Clearly, Raju's contrarian response to the experience of precarious living, as against the pull of competitive will to achieve material success by hook or by crook, springs from a process of self-examination different from the more generalised one stipulated by the author of *The White Tiger:*

> At a time when India is going through great changes and, with China, is likely to inherit the world from the west, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society. That's what writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens did in the 19th century. That's what I'm trying to do – it's not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self-examination.[57]

The moot question remains to whom this "greater process of self-examination" is addressed. Is it addressed to the indigent Indian struggling for a subsistence-level existence or to the successful entrepreneur, lawmaker, corporate, employer,

51 Ibid., 111.
52 Ibid., 131.
53 Ibid., 138.
54 Ibid., 141.
55 Ibid., 144.
56 Ibid.
57 Aravind Adiga. Quoted in Stuart Jeffries. "Roars of Anger." *The Guardian.* 16 October 2008. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/oct/16/booker-prize> (accessed 23 February 2016).

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ensconced in a corrupt self-serving nexus of which the novelist herself / himself may be a willing beneficiary? If the latter it seems that, as Sidharth Bhatia, journalist and author, points out, the "lions" of entrepreneurial success in India shy away from confronting issues of poverty not merely because of their "lack of understanding of civic responsibility" but because

> [b]ecoming rich and famous makes one part of an elite that begins to think in terms of class interests – politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen, celebrities, they are all part of a cozy club that has a tremendous survival instinct. They not just need each other, but they feed off each other. They are ready to help, provided it is to one of their own and done quietly behind the scenes and without any fuss.[58]

Is it surprising, then, that an iconic Indian entrepreneur such as Suhel Seth, counsellor to Chairpersons and CEOs on branding and marketing, columnist, and a ubiquitous TV panellist should promote in deed and in his books *Get To The Top: The Ten Rules For Social Success* and *India's Finest CEOS and their Mantras of Success*[59] the philosophy that not only branding and economic success is the key to social success but it is social befriending of the already successful and powerful that makes for economic success? This philosophy is alluringly echoed in the 'self-help manual' of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and in *The White Tiger*, and unapologetically extended to include a radical maxim: "Be prepared to use violence" (*How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* 117). In their bildungsroman-like journey from rural poverty to urban affluence both Adiga's protagonist Balram and Hamid's nameless hero enact the life of the aspirational nation, but seem incapable of "the greater process of self-examination" that Adiga invokes, nor do they seem to have any use for it. In fact, their vision, as Nandita Ghosh notes, "expresses the predatory nature of global capital in the world today and of a globalizing India that will put all its nonrenewable ecological resources on the market for a quick turnover".[60] Balram's grand gesture of temporal appropriation "I'm always a man who sees 'tomorrow' when others see 'today'" (*The White Tiger* 319) suggests how he intends to improve upon the present. His present, which he has come to represent, is the scam-ridden, systemic corruption in India

58 Sidharth Bhatia. "Silence of the Lions: Why Do Big Names in India Never Speak Up?" *The Wire*. 10 June 2016. <http://thewire.in/2016/06/10/silence-of-the-lions-why-have-the-big-names-not-spoken-up-for-udta-punjab-42192/> (accessed 12 July 2016).

59 Suhel Seth. *Get to the Top: The Ten Rules for Social Success*. Noida: Random House India, 2011; and *India's Finest CEOS and their Mantras of Success*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2015. Also see "The Age of Suhel Seth: Decoding the New Bible of Social Climbing." *FirstPost*. 30 November 2011. <http://www.firstpost.com/living/the-age-of-suhel-seth-decoding-the-new-bible-of-social-climbing-144248.html> (accessed 20 July 2016).

60 Nandita Ghosh. "Footloose Labor: Understanding Globalization and Migrancy Through Literature." In: *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society* 15,1 (2012), 46.

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where "34 percent of the elected members of the Indian Parliament have criminal records, up from 30 percent in 2009 and 24 percent in 2004."[61]

In his attempt to emulate Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens, Adiga in *The White Tiger*, "expresses many images of a globalized India where the condition of the underprivileged unsettles the dominant images of an emergent economy. This unevenness of scale is the result of uneven development within India."[62] This unevenness is in turn the result of a dubious success-ethic and "the fat-cat cronyism",[63] and the protagonist begs the question as to what constitutes "the greater process of self-examination". In what reads like a parody rather than a reflection, a rhetorical question rather than self-examination, Balram Halwai commodifies "the matter of murder" (*The White Tiger* 318) with an entrepreneurial flourish: "All the skin-whitening creams sold in the markets of India won't clean […] [his] hands again" (ibid.). He also invokes the Buddha only to announce that, having "switched sides", "[he is] now one of those who cannot be caught in India" (320).

The idea of self-examination that Narayan invites us to explore is different. According to Jhumpa Lahiri, Narayan shows the same "realism and constraint" as Guy de Maupassant in his exploration of "the frustrations of the middle class, the precariousness of fate, the inevitable longings that so often lead to ruin".[64] The strength of Narayan's naturally "compassionate realism",[65] lies in its uniquely layered comic irony, which is an extension of his religious sense; this allows Raju, as he rises from deprivation only to fall into it again, to undergo "the greater process of self-examination" that has a bearing on the personal and societal transformation. Raju is no more educated than Adiga's Balram, but he can tap into the resources available to him in Indian written and oral tradition, which has also existed in Western history. This tradition, referred to in section III, treats as a given the idea that self-adopted poverty and deprivation foster identification with the poor, and that this process of "giving up" can lead to upward transformation in individuals and communities. Narayan's comic, idiosyncratic and rather playful exploration of this idea is a valid literary representation of

61 Neha Thirani Bagri. "In the Newly Elected Indian Parliament, Worrying Trends." *The New York Times.* 23 May 2014. <http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/23/in-the-newly-elected-indian-parliament-worrying-trends/?_r=1> (accessed12 July 2016). Also see Charlotte Alfred. "India's New Parliament Has the Most Members Facing Criminal Charges in a Decade." *The Huffington Post.* 23 May 2014. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/23/india-parliament-criminal-charges_n_5365225.html> (accessed 21 July 2016).

62 Ghosh, "Footloose Labor," 42.

63 Barkha Dutt. "*Udta* Rajan, *Reh Gaya* Pahlaj." *NDTV.* 20 June 2016. <http://www.ndtv.com/opinion/udta-rajan-reh-gaya-pahlaj-1421061> (accessed 12 July 2016).

64 Jhumpa Lahiri. "Introduction." In: R.K. Narayan. *Malgudi Days.* London: Penguin Books, 2006, ix.

65 Anita Desai. "Narayan Country." *The New York Times.* 7 March 1982, 14.

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human response to deprivations that are social, economic and indeed even nature-related, if we take the drought into account. It can even be argued that while Adiga appears to be exploring the downward spiral of an individual caught in a systematically skewed socio-economic structure, Narayan is exploring, playfully and non-deterministically, the possible upward spiral that an individual could possibly traverse if he chooses to disengage from the systematically skewed socio-economic structure.

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Verena Jain-Warden

Facing Loss – Downward Social Mobility in Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City*

The Representation of Poverty and Social Class in *Zoo City*

Lauren Beukes's 2010 novel *Zoo City*, a combination of hardboiled detective story and speculative novel, is set in a fictionalised version of Johannesburg in which the gap between the rich and the poor is as wide as it is in the real city. Unlike the non-fictional Johannesburg, where poverty is inseparably linked with racial injustices, *Zoo City* connects issues of poverty with a fictitious condition that turns people into "the animalled",[1] who are also called "zoos" (ibid.) or, in (an equally fictitious) medical terminology, "Aposymbiots" (180). In the aftermath of a crime or a trauma, an animal attaches itself to the characters and from then on can never be left behind. By way of this fictional condition, Beukes negotiates poverty and its interconnections with social capabilities[2], exclusion, and social class[3]. In line with Martha C. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, Barbara Korte and Georg Zipp define poverty "not only […] as (relative)

1 Lauren Beukes. *Zoo City*. Oxford: Angry Robots, 2010, 181. All in-text quotations from this source.

2 Martha C. Nussbaum identifies a number of capabilities that are "central requirements of a life in dignity." Among these are, for instance, the ability to "live to the end of a human life of normal length," the ability "to be secure against violent assault," and the ability to "have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; […] in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger." Martha C. Nussbaum. "Poverty and Human Functioning: Capabilities and Fundamental Entitlements." In: David B. Grusky and S. M. Ravi Kanbur (eds). *Poverty and Inequality*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006, 57–9.

3 Within the framework of this article, a social class is defined as a group of people with similar access to socioeconomic resources and capabilities. In contrast to social status, class is understood as a category of identification with a collective, which may "live on in the popular imagination […] long after the economic basis for traditional class affiliation has changed beyond recognition." Dominic Head. "The Demise of Class Fiction." In: James F. English (ed.). *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*. Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, 232. This leads to the phenomenon that "poverty is not inevitably associated with a single, lower-class group […] but is cross-class in nature." Gavin Jones. *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840–1945*. Princeton and Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2008, 17.

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material deprivation, but also as encompassing socio-cultural exclusion and a lack of agency, opportunities and access (to knowledge, traditions, rights and capabilities)".[4] Beukes's representation of poverty explores the relationship between these different factors. While social exclusion and a limitation of options in terms of "what people are actually able to do and to be"[5] are aspects of poverty, *Zoo City* demonstrates the complex ways in which they relate to material deprivation. Besides, since poverty in the novel is often the consequence of a disease to which no one is immune, it is represented as dynamic and intersects with social class in ways that are not always linear.

Beukes is a South African writer known for her genre-blending books with elements of thrillers and fantasy, set both in South Africa and in the United States. In her first novel, *Moxyland* (2008), which is set in Cape Town, "racial stratifications seem to have been replaced by economic apartheid"[6] in which the poor are cut off from the urban centres and, at the same time, are not given a voice at all. *Zoo City* again represents an urban location, this time Johannesburg, as deeply fractured. However, mirroring the real demographic structures of the two cities, this time the poor are located in inner city slums in Hillbrow. The representation of Hillbrow,[7] which is called Zoo City in the novel because its population consists primarily of animalled people, is reminiscent of nineteenth-century British representations of slums and poor areas.[8] Like those, Zoo City is described as a place of dirt and moral decay. A stench of "stewing garbage and black mould" (8) is "floating up the stairwell" (ibid.) of the protagonist's house, and her everyday life is accompanied by "the dull crackle of automatic gunfire, like microwave popcorn" (59). Prostitution is so common that "the owner of the local brothel" (234) even goes so far as to "parade her girls and their menagerie naked down the street hoping to drum up new business" (ibid.). In many literary representations of poverty, the slum as a place of dirt and crime is revealed via an outsider's gaze, which means that poverty is turned "into a spectacle for the middle class, serv[ing] voyeuristic desires, and thus perpetuat[ing] the ex-

4 Barbara Korte and Georg Zipp. *Poverty in Contemporary Literature: Themes and Figurations on the British Bookmarket.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 2.

5 Nussbaum, "Poverty and Human Functioning," 48.

6 Andries Visagie. "Global Capitalism and Dystopian South Africa: *Trencherman* by Eben Venter and *Moxyland* by Lauren Beukes." In: Paul Crosthwaite (ed.). *Criticism, Crisis, and Contemporary Narrative.* London and New York: Routledge, 2011, 101.

7 Since the publication of Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), the largely poor, black Hillbrow with its alarming crime levels has become an iconic setting in South African literature. Other texts about Hillbrow include Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) and Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* (2006), to name just two.

8 See Igor Krstic. "Slums Analog/Slums Digital". In: *Parapluie* 28 (2012). <http://parapluie.de/archiv/slums/slumdarstellung/> (accessed 20 January 2016).

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ploitation of the poor".[9] Due to its narrative perspective, *Zoo City* does not reproduce such a "gaze that objectifies the poor".[10] The novel's female protagonist, Zinzi, a former journalist who now works as a private investigator, is also the narrator. She is poor as well as animalled, and lives in a rundown building complex ironically called "Elysium Heights". By representing poverty from the perspective of the poor, Beukes avoids constructing it as a sensational revelation, and instead depicts it as the naturalised environment of the narrator.

In fact, while Zinzi does not downplay the difficulties of life at Elysium Heights, she does not fully condemn the place either. Seeing how drug addicts have used light bulbs to get high, she comments: "[I]sn't that the way of the slums? Even the stuff that's nailed down gets repurposed" (12). Her comment is not free of sarcasm, but her choice of words also betrays her pride in a world where "an enterprising bunch [of squatters]" (51), including herself, continually find new ways of inhabiting the space around them. By way of phrasing her remark as a question, Zinzi simultaneously breaks down the barrier between text and reader and presupposes a shared conception of 'the slums', thus inviting readers to agree with her perspective of poverty. Similarly, Zinzi describes her – not entirely voluntary – decision to move to Elysium Heights as follows:

> There was something comforting about the barbed wire and the broken windows, the way all the buildings connected via officially constructed walkways or improvised bridges to form one sprawling ghetto warren. It reminded me reassuringly of prison. (61)

Again, Zinzi's tone is sarcastic, the mention of her stay in prison a reminder of the novel's hard-boiled genre. At the same time, the passage shows how the inhabitants of Elysium Heights use their resources in innovative ways to construct new walkways apart from the official ones, and it creates a vivid visual image of the protagonist's surroundings while stressing that she does not consider herself an outsider to this world.

The novel's autodiegetic narration thus avoids an imbalance of power between the narrator's gaze and other represented characters, and it also, to a certain extent, alleviates concerns about the uncritical appropriation of voice. Zinzi comes from a similar socioeconomic background as Beukes herself and as, presumably, the majority of the novel's readership. Formerly a middle-class lifestyle journalist, Zinzi's drug addiction leads her to attempt getting money for drugs by staging a high-jacking of her brother's car. When the plan goes awry and her brother is shot by one of the high-jackers, a sloth attaches itself to Zinzi and she loses her home, her job, as well as all contact with her family and the rest of

9 Birte Christ. "The New Poverty Studies: Current Concerns and Challenges." In: Ansgar Nünning and Elizabeth Kovach (eds): *Key Concepts and New Topics in American and English Studies.* Trier: WVT, 2014, 39.

10 Christ, "The New Poverty Studies," 40.

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her social environment. This focus on a formerly well-to-do character presumably invites identification and prevents class essentialism as well as the establishment of a simplified 'us and them' dialectic: Zinzi's history is a reversal of the familiar rags-to-riches story; it emphasises the dynamic nature of poverty and implies that anyone can become poor. Simultaneously, it demonstrates that exclusion and diminishing social capabilities are not necessarily a result of material deprivation, but that they can also be its cause. Gavin Jones, who has written extensively on the representation of poverty in North American literature, states:

> The fact that poverty so disproportionately affects African Americans, Hispanics, and – increasingly – women should make us realize how socioeconomic factors have gone hand in hand with culturally based factors of racism and sexism throughout American history.[11]

The close links between poverty, sexism, and racism described by Jones find their equivalent in *Zoo City*, where discrimination is no longer based on ethnicity and gender, but on animalism. While Zinzi's situation is largely due to her drug debts, those alone would not have triggered her exclusion from all aspects of her former life, thereby making her identification as middle class impossible. It is her animal, the sloth attached to her, which prevents her from finding a job as a journalist or an apartment in any other area of Johannesburg but Zoo City. *Zoo City* thus clearly works against stereotypical representations of the poor as 'other', while pointing to the interconnectedness between material deprivation, social capabilities, and discrimination.

Sensationalist representations of the poor as exotic 'other' are not only implicitly criticised in the novel, but they are overtly addressed as well. At one point, Zinzi meets a photographer who agrees to drive her home to Elysium Heights late at night as, in Zinzi's words, "the chance of a guided tour is too much for [him] to resist" (153). The narrator's sarcasm reveals her awareness of middle-class attempts at instrumentalising poverty for their own voyeuristic desires. In fact, the nickname "Zoo City" itself invokes a place where the disenfranchised are on display and can be looked at, even against their will. When the photographer tries to convince Zinzi to write some "insight pieces. Scenes from the street, what it's like to live here" (155), she declines, saying: "It's *kak* ['crap'], Dave. What more do you want to know?" (ibid.) By refusing to give out information other than on her own terms, Zinzi confirms her agency. The scene explicitly condemns slum tourism and draws attention to the novel's awareness of the connections between power and representation. In a later part of the text, Zinzi's refusal to give the

11 Gavin Jones. "Poverty and the Limits of Literary Criticism." In: *American Literary History* 15,4 (2003), 778.

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photographer the information he wants is complicated though: Since she is working as a private investigator to earn a basic living and needs his assistance to solve a case she is working on, she ultimately agrees to share her insider's perspective. It could be argued that Zinzi uses the media's desire for "poverty porn"[12] for her own ends, and that her decision implies that she has a choice. However, the narrator is financially dependent on solving her case, which opens up questions about how valid the term choice is under these circumstances.

Downward Social Mobility and the Dynamics of Poverty

Zinzi's interactions with the photographer reveal her current situation as the exotic 'other' to middle class characters and her ambiguous status due to her former occupation and social contacts. While Zinzi's animalism largely cuts her off from her previous social environment, and clearly indicates her exclusion from the middle class, she retains a limited access to the people and institutions from her past. With her focus on a character who rapidly moves down the social scale, Beukes takes up contemporary insecurities about the stability of one's social status in the face of global economic crises. However, while this is a particularly widespread topic in American culture for instance,[13] such insecurities have not been addressed as much in South Africa. Poverty, especially among the black population, is still prevalent and systemic, but discussions of downward social mobility have usually been limited to the former Afrikaner elites. Nonwhite families were often only able to become part of the (upper) middle class after the end of apartheid, and while their positions are far from stable, public discourses are more commonly concerned with those for whom nothing has changed for the better in the past 25 years.

The fictional universe of *Zoo City* seems to parallel historical developments in South Africa to some extent – "the dark days of apartheid" (159) are mentioned in passing – but the past does not seem to have any bearing on the novel's social elites in the present. With its focus on Zinzi's downward social mobility, *Zoo City* addresses insecure social positions in South Africa, but it also takes into account what Pierre Bourdieu and others have termed social and cultural capital. Bourdieu defines social capital as

12 Gerry Mooney and Lynn Hancock. "Poverty Porn and the Broken Society." In: *Variant* 39/40 (2010).

13 In recent years, popular TV series such as *Orange is the New Black* (2013 –) or *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013), and novels such as Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012) have depicted the consequences of shifts in the characters' socioeconomic status and the lengths they go to in order to keep their status.

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> the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various sense of the word.[14]

Thus, once a person has accumulated a set of social relationships that allows them access to material resources, information or other advantages, they may not be as severely affected by sudden material deprivation as someone without such relationships, because they can claim a credit (of material or non-material kind). Similarly, cultural capital refers to the acquisition of education, knowledge, and skills, which are usually retained in circumstances of sudden material deprivation.[15]

There is no doubt that Zinzi, in *Zoo City*'s narrative present, is poor in terms of material resources as well as social capabilities. She owns a totality of nine items of clothing, lives in a "dank room with [a] precariously tilted floor and intermittent plumbing" (8), and no reliable power or water supply, and she is forced to reduce her drug debts by writing scam e-mails for a shady drug lord. The extreme levels of violence in her environment make safety from physical assault impossible, and being animalled she is also at constant risk of what is called "the Undertow" (14), a particularly violent form of premature death connected with the death of one's animal. Moreover, Zinzi's social contacts consist of small-time gangsters who take every chance to rat her out for a bit of cash and refugees from other African countries who share her precarious situation. This shared precariousness causes an instability of human connections that prevents lasting attachments and severely limits Zinzi's ability to allow herself to trust – as well as grieve for – her Congolese lover Benoît, for instance. Nevertheless, Zinzi still possesses some social and cultural capital from what she calls her "Former Life" (37) or briefly "FL" (57). When she works on a case which involves finding a missing teen pop star, it is possible for her to activate her old relationships and to enlist the help of some of her former colleagues. The skills she has acquired while studying and working as a lifestyle journalist help her to pose as one when she is working undercover, and her knowledge of Cape Town's upper middle class club culture allows her to blend in, if only temporarily. At times, her in-between status even proves to be an advantage: While retaining a limited access to the world of those who are not poor, her poverty has made Zinzi more innovative as well as tougher than her former peers.

14 Pierre Bourdieu. "The Forms of Capital." Translated by Richard Nice. In: Alan R. Sadovnik (ed.). *Sociology of Education: A Critical Reader.* London and New York: Routledge, 2007 [1986], 88.

15 See Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," 84–6.

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At one point in the novel, it seems as if for the protagonist poverty may indeed be a temporary state, and as if she might manage to climb back up the social ladder. Zinzi's pretence to be a lifestyle journalist turns out to have a potential to become reality when she realises she has the chance to really write the pieces she pretends to do research for. She says, for instance: "From nowhere, anything is a step-up, even tabloid journalism. Maybe after this I'll write that rehab tourism story after all – for a decent publication" (305). The large fee she receives for her successful retrieval of the pop star allows her to buy a new phone and a fake snakeskin briefcase, offhandedly stating: "I can afford it" (275). However, the novel only builds up the expectation that Zinzi can return to her former life to violently shatter that illusion. The first chapter of the short second part of the novel, in which Zinzi is falling to pieces after having taken drugs again, ends with the sentences: "I think I've been here before. Rock fucking bottom" (265). It turns out that the money she has received for solving her case, and which she uses to pay off her drug debts, is counterfeit, which makes her more financially dependent on the outraged drug lord than ever. Moreover, the teenage pop singer she has found and returned to her manager is revealed to have fled her manager – Zinzi's employer – out of fear and Zinzi's returning her leads to her brutal murder for "*muti*" (300), a kind of alternative healing practice that can resemble dark magic. Due to this disastrous turnout, Zinzi sees her only option for the future in disappearing; the novel ends with the words: "Maybe I'll get lost for a while" (349).

While social class is represented as unstable, the end of the novel confirms the protagonist's failure to return to a more stable, financially secure environment. This is due to two factors: First, the novel implies that once the exclusion from a social class has happened, it seems close to impossible to return to it. Even if social and cultural capital allow the claiming of certain favours, such credit is limited and it does not necessarily go along with the giver's identification of the receiver as part of the group. Second, and more importantly, the lack of social capabilities that accompanies poverty leads to a power imbalance between those who have money and those who do not. While Zinzi is represented as being tough, clever, and active, her position of material need makes her prey to various instances of exploitation by those who have more money than her. *Zoo City* thus does not deny the lack of power that goes along with being poor. Nevertheless, to a certain extent the protagonist remains an agent of her own fate to the end. Because her lover Benoît is severely wounded in his attempt to rescue the pop singer Zinzi was hired to find, Zinzi's last decision before she disappears is to try and find Benoît's wife and children who he lost long ago in Rwanda. To that end, Zinzi again makes use of social capital, but this time it is capital she has accumulated at Elysium Heights, via her acquaintance with a thug called D'Nice:

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> The Capri has had a paint job. It's now black. The window has been fixed. It has new plates to go with my new Zimbabwean passport in the name of Tatenda Murapata, twenty-nine, full-time nanny going home for a holiday. D'Nice sourced the papers for me, to make up for pointing the cops in the direction of my apartment. But only after I threatened to frame him for Mrs Luditsky's murder. (347)

While the rules might be slightly different, the mechanisms of social capital are the same in every social class, and Zinzi's actions indicate that despite her failure to return to her middle class life, she is not a stranger to these new rules either.

Loss as the Protagonist's Defining Feature

Downward social mobility always implies loss, and in fact the narrator of *Zoo City* is defined by it in various ways: She has lost her brother, contact with her parents, her home, her job, and her financial resources. Moreover, and perhaps in acknowledgement of her material losses, her becoming animalled has created the magical ability to find lost things by tracing the strings of attachment from people to the things they have lost. Zinzi's ability is described in the novel as follows:

> The problem with my particular gift, curse, call it what you like, is that everybody's lost *something*. Stepping out in public is like walking into a tangle of cat's cradles, like someone dished out balls of string at the lunatic asylum and instructed the inmates to tie everything to everything else. On some people, the lost strings are cobwebs, inconsequential wisps that might blow away at any moment. On others, it's like they're dragging steel cables. (13)

Zinzi's position is depicted in ambiguous terms: Like her losses, her ability is both a curse and a gift. On the one hand, her losses have made her more sensitive to other people's emotional bonds, but on the other hand she must bear the constant reminders of life's precariousness.

While Judith Butler, in her book *Precarious Life*, is interested in loss as a constituent of political life, in particular life in the United States after the events of 9/11, her argument can partly be used for a reading of *Zoo City*. In fact, in her chapter "Violence, Mourning, Politics", Butler starts out from a rather general vantage point. She presupposes a 'we' that is independent of "our differences in location and history"[16] and exclusively consists of our shared capacity for experiencing loss. Political life, then, is understood primarily as the formation of a community based on this vulnerability. Butler claims that "each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies"[17] and that "loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted

16 Judith Butler. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2006, 20.
17 Ibid.

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bodies, attached to others at risk of losing these attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure".[18] In *Zoo City*, human beings' losses and their exposure to trauma and violence are made materially manifest in two ways: in the animals, which can be read as metaphorical burdens of grief, guilt, or trauma, and in the protagonist's ability to see the strands of lost items and attachments that surround others. Just like Butler describes mourning as the "undergo[ing] [of] a transformation",[19] the process of becoming animalled is described in *Zoo City* as a visible form of transformation following an unbearable trauma, and the animalled are constructed as a community based on loss. In this community, Zinzi plays a unique role. Her animal, a sloth, does not signify in the Christian tradition as a personification of the eponymous deadly sin, but instead it is relevant for its phonetic similarity to the word 'loss.' Her ability to see the ties that bind other people to what they have cared for makes her a particularly sensitive member of her social surroundings, one that cannot easily block out other people's pain. Since animalism, we learn in the novel, is not restricted to South Africa, Beukes thus creates a world in which loss and trauma constitute a global community. By investing her narrator with the ability to see loss, she explores a scenario in which empathy is no longer a matter of choice. However, this heightened sense of the other's vulnerability does not necessarily imply a more humane world. While, confronted with the pain of others on an everyday basis, Zinzi constantly has to negotiate this vulnerability and decide whether she will she use her knowledge against others or to help them, she has also become cynical in the face of the suffering around her.

At the same time, loss and trauma are deeply invested with the protagonist's, and other animalled characters', social status. The interactions between those who are animalled and those who are not can therefore be read in terms of a clashing between social classes, but also, from the perspective of those who are not animalled, as a confrontation with loss and trauma. While other characters' first reaction when they meet Zinzi is often to flinch, the knowledge that she used to be 'one of them' causes some of them to "adopt [her] as [a] pet cause" (146). In fact, some characters seem downright thrilled at an encounter with the exotic 'other' in relatively safe circumstances. In general, though, the animalled are constructed as abject. This is partly due to fear of crime and violence, but at the same time facing an animalled person visualises the risk of loss for those who are not yet animalled. This fear, of course, can be interpreted as a statement on contemporary reactions to poverty and the question why the poor often figure as abject: They may simply show those who are not poor that the environment and the luxuries they are used to may easily be lost.

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 21.

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Genre, Form, and the Representation of Poverty as Hybridity

One of the central characteristics of *Zoo City*'s narrator is, as the previous sections have demonstrated, her occupation of in-between spaces. As a person who is inseparably linked with a sloth, she has become a hybrid – someone who is no longer considered completely human by other people, but who is nevertheless the object of desire and curiosity. Her animal-human hybridity goes along with other in-between states: Zinzi is poor, but has a limited access to her former environment; she is a drug addict, but is sober most of the time; and finally, her former occupation as a lifestyle journalist makes her familiar with the world of celebrity and consumption, though not quite a part of it. Thus, just as the beginning of animalism is described as a disruption of the "fragile state [of] the world as we know it" (29), Zinzi herself is always a disruptive presence. Wherever she goes, she is, or was in the past, part of the group – whether she meets her former colleagues, her clients from the music industry, the patients of a rehabilitation centre, or other animalled people. At the same time, Zinzi always remains partly outside and never fully fits in or makes sense. Her fragile status draws attention to what Bhabha has described as the "Third Space of Enunciation",[20] an "anxious contradictory place between the human and the not-human, between sense and non-sense".[21] Her location at the interstice of the known and that which is impossible to understand prevents her assignation to essential categories, and at the same time it creates new meanings.

The protagonist's occupation of this in-between space goes hand in hand with the novel's form. For one thing, Beukes uses the technique of pastiche, supplementing Zinzi's narrative with a variety of – fictional – sources, ranging from a psychology paper to an entry in an online documentary database. Some of these sources, the acknowledgements tell us, were written not by Beukes herself, but by experts in the disciplines they are supposed to relate to, to give them an air of pseudo-authenticity. Almost all of these fragments cover aspects of animalism, and together they create an impression of the many ways the disenfranchised are talked about. The views and voices in the different sources often contradict each other, leaving an impression of instability, ambiguity, and confusion, and this uncertainty is not remedied by Zinzi, who does not venture any definite opinions.

Many of the reviews of Beukes's fiction stress the "strange and fascinating things [she does] with genre".[22] Like Beukes's other books, *Zoo City* is not easily

20 Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994, 37.
21 Ibid., 125.
22 Tim Martin. "Broken Monsters by Lauren Beukes, Review: 'strange and fascinating'." *The Telegraph*. 7 August 2014. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/11002895/Broken-Monsters-by-Lauren-Beukes-review-strange-and-fascinating.html> (accessed 26 January 2016).

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categorised. On the cover of the book, the British publisher Angry Robot markets it as "urban fantasy" and it would be just as valid to describe the novel as hardboiled detective fiction, yet it does not completely fit into either category. Just like Zinzi, who is almost, but never quite, part of the groups she comes across, the text thus creates the comforting recognition we expect of genres, but simultaneously twists these expectations, leaving its readers with a sense of strangeness and anxiety. Moreover, *Zoo City*'s indebtedness to various genre traditions influences readings of the protagonist's poverty. If Zinzi is understood in the tradition of hardboiled detectives such as Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, or Kinsey Millhone, both her in-betweenness and her poverty take on new meanings. Like the traditional hardboiled detective, Zinzi provokes both identification and admiration. The novel's narrative situation draws readers in and invites them to share the narrator's perspective, and her faultiness makes her relatable. At the same time, Zinzi is not only tough, intelligent, and able to blend into various circumstances, but she is also, undoubtedly, 'hip'. *Zoo City* employs countless popcultural references, some of them fictional, others not, which create a sense of Zinzi's vast knowledge in questions of style and urban culture. Like her male forebears from the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, Zinzi's 'otherness' – her animalism, her poverty, the impossibility to place her – thus does not make her abject, but attractive instead. Beukes does not represent poverty as desirable, but she creates a character who is relatable, and even, to some extent, enviable, despite the many burdens she carries.

The bleak realism of earlier hardboiled detective fiction is countered, in *Zoo City*, by a large array of fantastical elements. By creating a world which transcends the borders of the known, Beukes adheres to her technique of employing ambiguity for the purpose of letting new transfigurations of that which is known emerge. Within the world of the novel, poverty is constructed as limiting the characters' capabilities, as making life harder for them in many ways, but in no way does it limit their creativity, their vibrancy, and their integrity. The placing of poverty within the framework of the unknown and fantastical overwrites traditional, often problematic representations of the poor without completely erasing such notions. The ambivalence that pervades the text thus makes it possible to negotiate poverty and exclusion, as well as the pitfalls of their representation, without being weighed down by them.

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3. Transforming Stereotypes, Rewriting Poverty Discourse

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Miriam Nandi

"Idle Poor and Lazy Natives?" – Re-Writing Stereotypes about the Global Poor

There is nothing idyllic about being poor. Living in a condition of economic deprivation, without access to healthcare, education and other "central capabilities",[1] is a lifestyle that hardly anybody would voluntarily choose. Yet, with neoliberalism at its full swing, we are witnessing an uncanny return of problematic, often racialized stereotypes about the poor, according to which they are themselves held responsible for their disenfranchisement. Defending the policy of austerity, Angela Merkel perpetuated the cliché of the hardworking Northwestern European Protestant and its lazy Southern European counterpart. Commenting on allegedly long holidays in Greece, the chancellor attested that "[w]e can't have a common currency where some get lots of vacation time and others very little".[2]

Merkel's statements are a neoliberal echo of much earlier discourses stemming from the eighteenth century according to which "the poor are essentially idle", as Sally Jordan summarizes.[3] Since these discourses worked to the economic advantage of the middle and upper classes, it comes as little surprise that the eighteenth-century discourse on the idle poor is accompanied by the emergence of colonial stereotypes about the lazy native, who is similarly considered to be slothful. According to such racialized ideologies, both the working classes and the lazy native can only be forced to work under "the ever-present threat of starvation".[4] This does not imply that stereotypes about the poor in England are completely identical with those about the lazy native. One important difference

1 Martha Nussbaum. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach.* Cambridge: Belknap, 2011, 17.

2 Quoted in Sven Böll and David Böcking. "The Myth of a Lazy Southern Europe: Merkel's Clichés Debunked by Statistics." In: *Spiegel Online.* 9 May 2011. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/the-myth-of-a-lazy-southern-europe-merkel-s-cliches-debunked-by-statistics-a-763618.html> (accessed 29 October 2015).

3 Sarah Jordan. "Idleness, Class and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century." In: Monika Fludernik and Miriam Nandi (eds). *Idleness, Indolence and Leisure in English Literature.* Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2014, 108.

4 Ibid.

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between the two discourses is the image of romanticized idyllic native idleness, which draws on biblical images of human life before the Fall,[5] whereas images of the "idle apprentice" for instance are unequivocally negative.[6] However, as Edward Said pointed out many years ago, positive stereotypes about the "Other" are not necessarily politically innocent, but can similarly work to sustain what he calls "latent Orientalism".[7] Viewed through a Saidian lens, idleness is thus not just "the incriminatory stick with which to beat the social underdog"[8] but part of a discourse that sustains, perpetuates and even produces the unequal distribution of wealth and power internationally.

Such ideological stereotypes about the global poor need to be countered, just as poverty itself needs to be fought on an economic, political and social level. This article is a warning against ideologies which put the blame on the victim. It argues that even very sophisticated sociological theories about Western modernity are at risk to underwrite problematic notions about native idleness.[9] I will take Hartmut Rosa's much acclaimed work *Social Acceleration* (2013) as my starting point to critically assess how his theory of "Western societies"[10] is hampered by a lack of understanding of colonialism and the global dialectics of power and unequal distribution of wealth and indeed time. In this context, I want to stress that the

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5 See, for instance, Monika Fludernik. "The Performativity of Idleness: Representations and Stagings of Idleness in the Context of Colonialism." In: Monika Fludernik and Miriam Nandi (eds). *Idleness, Indolence and Leisure in English Literature.* Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2014. 129–53; on the lazy native see also David Spurr. *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, and Syed Hussein Alatas. *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism.* London: Cass, 1977.

6 See, for instance, Emily Anglin. "Idleness, Apprentices and Machines in Deloney and Dekker." In: Monika Fludernik and Miriam Nandi (eds). *Idleness, Indolence and Leisure in English Literature.* Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014. 86–106.

7 Edward W. Said. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient.* London: Penguin, 1995 [1978], 206. Said's distinction between latent and manifest Orientalism sparked a lot of controversy in its day, but it remains a crucial reminder to address power structures in discourses that appear to be politically innocent on a surface level. On criticisms of Said's distinction between manifest and latent Orientalism see, for instance, Homi Bhabha. "Difference, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism." In: Francis Barker (ed.). *The Politics of Theory.* Colchester: University of Essex Press, 1983. 194–211; Robert Young. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race.* London: Routledge, 1995.

8 Monika Fludernik and Miriam Nandi. "Introduction." In: *Idleness, Indolence, and Leisure in English Literature.* Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014, 6.

9 See James Gleick. *Faster: The Acceleration of Just about Everything.* New York: Pantheon, 1999; Hartmut Rosa. "Social Acceleration: Ethical and Political Consequences of a Desynchronized High-Speed Society." In: *Constellations* 10,1 (2003): 3–33; Hartmut Rosa. *Beschleunigung.* Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2005; Hartmut Rosa. *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity.* Translated by Jonathan Trejo-Mathys. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

10 Rosa, "Social Acceleration," 7.

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disenfranchised from the Global South are not minorities in a numeral sense. Rather, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty has reminded us, these groups make up the “majority world”, whereas the middle classes of the North are actually a small minority.[11]

This article follows a twofold strategy. First, it argues that sociological theories of acceleration need to be reworked critically, since we need to include a critical assessment of the predicament of the poor in the South. Rather than developing an alternative postcolonial theory of acceleration along theoretical, heuristic lines, I will take Kiran Desai’s novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) as a test case to analyse how the concept of acceleration might still serve as a useful analytical tool to address poverty in postcolonial literatures.[12] Accordingly, this article is divided into a theoretical section in which I discuss to what extent Rosa’s concept of acceleration has to be modified, and a case study in which I examine how Kiran Desai’s novel *The Inheritance of Loss* deals with poverty, acceleration and idleness.

Faster! Sociological Theories of Acceleration

Hartmut Rosa’s seminal *Beschleunigung* has received wide acclaim and has recently been translated into English.[13] Despite its title, Rosa does not envisage his study as a contribution to the emergent field of the sociology of time. Instead, he attempts to “contribute to an adequate social-theoretical grasp of current social developments and problems in the context of modernization and also the debate concerning the fracture in this process between a ‘classical’ age of modernity and a second *late* or *post*modernity”.[14] In this vein, Rosa’s notion of acceleration is part and parcel of a theory of Western modernity, in which he claims that “we cannot adequately understand the nature and character of modernity and the

11 Chandra Talpade Mohanty. “Under Western Eyes Revisited.” In: *Signs* 28,2 (2002): 499–535.

12 I am thus continuing my earlier concern with poverty in postcolonial literatures, taking a slightly more optimistic stance. While in the past I focussed on the way socio-critical literature remains invested in the very discourse it criticizes, I am now placing a stronger emphasis on the potential subversion of ideologies about poverty in literature. This is a question of nuance and emphasis, not of substance. See Miriam Nandi. *M/Other India/s. Zur literarischen Verarbeitung von Armuts- und Kastenproblematik in ausgewählten Texten der indisch-englischen und muttersprachlichen indischen Literatur.* Heidelberg: Winter, 2007; Miriam Nandi. “Longing for the Lost M/Other – Postcolonial Ambivalences in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things.*” In: *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46 (2009): 175–86; Miriam Nandi. “Beyond Authenticity of Voice: A Response to Barbara Korte’s ‘Can the Indigent Speak? Poverty Studies, the Postcolonial and the Global Appeal of *Q & A* and *The White Tiger*’.” In: *Connotations* 23,1 (2013/2014): 153–71.

13 Rosa, *Beschleunigung*; Rosa, *Social Acceleration.*

14 Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 2.

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logic of its structural and cultural development unless we add a temporal perspective to our analysis".[15] Drawing on the work of James Gleick and Paul Virilio, he argues that "acceleration" is the single most striking feature of "Western societies".[16] He identifies three dimensions of acceleration: first, technological acceleration, i. e. the speed of transport, has increased at least by 10^2 the speed of data processing by 10^6, the speed of communication by 10^7 in the post-War period.[17] The second, less tangible dimension is the acceleration of social change. According to Rosa, "Western culture" has witnessed a process of "dynamization" since the beginning of the twentieth century.[18] Therefore, "attitudes and values as well as lifestyles, social relations and obligations" are speeding up in the sense that occupational structures, for instance, no longer change with generations but *within* one generation.[19] For example, family structures are no longer stable in "late modern" Western societies.[20] Taking his cue from the social philosopher Hermann Lübbe, Rosa argues that "Western societies experience [a] contraction of the present" ("Gegenwartsschrumpfung"): If the past is defined as that "which is no longer valid" and "the future denotes that which does not yet hold", then the present is the time-span for which "the horizons of [our] experience and expectation coincide".[21] In "Western societies", these moments of relative stability are becoming shorter and shorter to such an extent that they almost disappear.[22] Rosa thus comes up with the following definition: "*Social acceleration is defined by an increase in the decay-rates of the reliability of experiences and by a contraction of the time spans definable as the present.*"[23]

The third dimension of acceleration – the acceleration of the "pace of life" – is even less tangible than the first two and, as Rosa himself admits, "fuzzy", as it is near impossible to measure the pace of life along exact empirical lines.[24] He argues that even though technological innovations should actually decrease the time needed to fulfil our everyday duties, "Western societies *do* feel under heavy time pressure and they *do* complain about scarcity of time."[25] Also, on a more

15 Rosa, "Social Acceleration," 4.
16 Ibid., 3; see Gleick, *Faster*, and Paul Virilio. *The Great Accelerator*. London: Polity, 2012.
17 Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 74.
18 Rosa, "Social Acceleration," 7.
19 Ibid., 7, 8.
20 Ibid., 8.
21 Ibid., 7; see also Hermann Lübbe. "Gegenwartsschrumpfung." In: Klaus Backhaus and Holger Bonus (eds). *Die Beschleunigungsfalle oder der Triumph der Schildkröte*. Stuttgart: Schäfer Pöschel, 1998. 129–63.
22 Rosa, "Social Acceleration," 7.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 8, 9.
25 Ibid., 9.

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objective level, Rosa sees “plenty of evidence” for a tendency “to eat faster, sleep less, and communicate less with our families than our ancestors did”.[26]

Even from this admittedly broad-brush summary, it should have become clear that the subject of acceleration is a Western, middle class subject, a fact that remains often unacknowledged. In this context, the transculturally informed reader is left to wonder how globalization fits into the picture of Rosa’s theory of Western modernity. It can only be inferred negatively that the Global South is associated with non-industrialized production on the technological level, slower patterns of social change and a more decelerated “pace of life”. Societies outside the Euro-American world are not, apparently, considered to be “high-speed societies”[27] but pre-modern residual phenomena. Such an allegation would, however, come dangerously close to the colonial stereotype of the lazy native, albeit in its idyllic and idealized variant.

Although Rosa does not explicitly evoke such clichés, his theory of acceleration is considerably hampered by a lack of understanding of the role colonialism and hence the Global South has played in the formation of acceleration. Like other sociological theoreticians before him (Weber, Giddens, Beck, to name but some very prominent examples), Rosa locates modernity and its experiences in the West and ignores “the rest”, as Stuart Hall has put it memorably.[28] Thus, Rosa unwittingly endorses a form of self-occidentalization that has come under critical scrutiny in transcultural and particularly postcolonial criticism.[29] What is more, modernity and its accelerated mode of production and lifestyle emerged in the largest part through the colonial exploitation of the South, specifically in the New World slave plantations. Crucially, this exploitation has not ended with the independence of the former colonies, but has simply taken on new forms such as outsourced manufacturing. This unequal distribution of wealth and rights is an issue a theory of modernity and acceleration has to address. In a nutshell, I would venture that “we” (as the quotes demonstrate, Rosa keeps referring to “us”, meaning the Euro-American world) accelerated “them” (the former colonies in the Global South). More specifically, Rosa’s definition of acceleration as a pace of life in which expectations and experiences hardly ever coincide is perfectly appropriate with respect to the condition of the *Global South* because this is pre-

26 Ibid.

27 Hartmut Rosa and William E. Scheuerman (eds). *High-Speed Society: Social Acceleration, Power, and Modernity.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009.

28 Stuart Hall. “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power.” In: Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben (eds). *Formations of Modernity.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992. 275–332.

29 See, for instance, Shalini Randeria, Martin Fuchs and Antje Linkenbach (eds). *Konfigurationen der Moderne: Diskurse zu Indien.* Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 2004; Shalini Randeria. “Entangled Histories of Uneven Modernities: Civil Society, Caste Solidarities and Legal Pluralism in Post-colonial India.” In: Yehuda Elkana et al. (eds). *Unraveling Ties: From Social Cohesion to New Practices of Connectedness.* Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2002. 284–311.

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cisely what the (post)colonial predicament is. To overstate my point: The Global South and, in particular, the *poor* in the Global South have been accelerated since the sixteenth century and we, in the North, are only catching up. Doreen Massey made a similar suggestion many years ago when she pointed out: "The sense of dislocation which so many writers on [globalisation] apparently feel […] must have been felt for centuries, though from a very different point of view, by colonized peoples all over the world."[30] If read spatially and transculturally and if thus modified, Hartmut Rosa's theory of acceleration might actually provide a useful tool to address the general predicament and specific temporality of being poor.

Another issue which Rosa addresses rather insufficiently is gender. Being industrious and "accelerated" has been a crucial feature of Western middle class concepts of masculinity ever since the eighteenth century.[31] Conversely, middle class women "were often viewed as leisure personified, as the ornamental companions of men's non-working hours".[32] The image of delicious, leisured, middle-class femininity was only comparatively recently supplanted by the 1980s "working girl"[33] and the neoliberal performer who "leans in"[34] to achieve her economic gains, and is still circulating in the cultural imaginary – otherwise women's magazines would not sell.

To sum up, what we need is a theory of acceleration and deceleration which is more openly sensitive to class, robustly transcultural, gendered, and which gives more room to adjustments and dialectics. Instead of developing such a theory along heuristic lines, I will investigate to what extent Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) as a literary text may serve as a test case for such a transcultural, class-oriented and gendered theory of poverty and acceleration. Set in New York and in a remote village near the Indian-Nepali border, and dealing with poverty in both places, the novel captures the global interplay of acceleration and exploitation in a very sophisticated and ultimately also very tangible way.

30 Doreen Massey. "Power-Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place." In: Jon Bird et al. (eds). *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change.* London: Routledge, 1993. 59–71, 59.
31 Jordan, "Idleness," 118–21.
32 Ibid., 113–8.
33 Mike Nichols, dir. *Working Girl.* 20th Century Fox, 1988.
34 Cheryl Sandberg. *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead.* New York: Borzoi Books, 2013.

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"A bucking yodeling taxi" – Acceleration and Poverty in *The Inheritance of Loss*

The Inheritance of Loss is Desai's second novel and in many ways more complex and intriguing than her *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard.* Written in a fragmented, late modernist style with multiple perspectives, it relates the intertwined stories of four people in two settings. Its first setting is an isolated, crumbling house at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga on the India-Nepal border in the Himalayas. Three people live on the estate: the seventeen-year-old orphan girl Sai, her grandfather Jemubhai Patel, the owner of the house, who is only called "the judge", and their cook Panna Lal, who, like the judge, is hardly ever called by his real name. The cook sends his son Biju to the United States, hoping that he will find a better life there. Biju, however, cannot apply for a Green Card and remains a so-called illegal immigrant or a *sans papiers* throughout the narrative. He becomes part of the underworld of undocumented migrants in New York and moves from poorly paid job to poorly paid job until he decides to return to his father in the Himalayas with "far less than he'd ever had".[35] Biju can indeed be viewed as an accelerated figure in Hartmut Rosa's sense, even if, or particularly because, Rosa does not speak of undocumented migration.[36] Biju's life in New York is structured by breathtakingly quick cyclical movements: He looks for a job, is rejected over and over again, eventually finds a job and keeps it for a few weeks until he has to quit, either because the authorities are about to find out about his illegal status, or because of some whim of the respective employer. Then the cycle starts afresh and Biju has to look for a job again. Viewed through a sociological lens, it is safe to say that Biju's life is speeded up in a most gruesome manner. The cause of his accelerated lifestyle is not some "Western notion" of what makes a "good life", as Rosa suggests[37], but his economic and juridical predicament of being a *sans papiers.* His undocumented status leaves him vulnerable to hyper-exploitation by his respective employers. It is not without irony that one of his uncountable workplaces is the Restaurant Le Colonial:

> Biju at the Baby Bistro.
>
> Above, the restaurant was French, but below in the kitchen it was Mexican and Indian. And, when a Paki was hired, it was Mexican, Indian, Pakistani.
>
> –

35 Kiran Desai. *The Inheritance of Loss.* Hardmondsworth: Penguin, 2006, 317.

36 He mentions migration in the context of globalization, but does not assess how migration may impact acceleration and vice versa. Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 222.

37 Rosa, "Social Acceleration," 13.

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> Biju at Le Colonial for the authentic colonial experience.
> On top, rich colonial, and down below, poor native. Columbian, Tunisian, Ecuadorian, Gambian. (21)

Desai here uses a tell-tale spatial metonymy to convey how colonial patterns of exploitation re-emerge in a neoliberal, globalized setting. The staff hailing from the Global South is "below in the kitchen", while the urban middle classes enjoy their French food above in the hall. The rich and the poor are separated from each other – spatially and economically – but ultimately also connected with one another in terms of a dialectics of labour: Without the cheap labour of the Mexicans, Indians, Pakistanis etc., the middle-class customers of Le Colonial would not be able to enjoy their leisurely activity of eating out. Thus, not the colonized (or the poor) are "lazy", but on the contrary, they do all the work, while the metropolitan middle and upper classes can idle their time away. Translated into Rosa's idiom, not the white, urban middle classes are the victims of the *High Speed Society* – those classes have a certain amount of control over their time – but undocumented migrants from the South, people originally rooted in societies that are allegedly not yet accelerated because they are not "modern" in a Western, bourgeois sociological sense.[38]

It is one of the great achievements of Desai's text that it actually addresses the predicament of these 'working poor', who are not protected by the state and its (albeit not very robust) labour and employment laws. Intriguingly, Desai keeps using images of speed and acceleration in the passages in which she describes Biju's workday. The following example will illustrate my point. Here, Biju is working as a delivery boy for a place called Freddy's Wok:

> Szechuan wings and French fries, just $3.00. Fried rice $1.35 and $1.00 for pan-fried dumplings fat and tight as babies – slice them open and flood your plate with a run of luscious oil. In this country poor people eat like kings! General Tso's chicken, emperor's pork, and Biju on a bicycle with the delivery bag on his handlebars, a tremulous figure between heaving buses, regurgitating taxis – what growls, what sounds of flatulence came from this traffic. Biju pounded at the pedals, heckled by taxi drivers direct from Punjab – a man is not a caged thing, a man is wild *wild* and he must drive as such, in a bucking yodeling taxi. They harassed Biju with such blows from their horns as could split the world into whey and solids: paaaaaawww! (49)

Already on a stylistic level, this extract evokes a pervasive sense of rush, speed, and flurry of activity. The tone is breathless and the sentences are elliptic. We get the impression that the narrator does not even have time for verbs. Taxis and buses overtake "Biju on his bicycle" as he hurries helplessly through New York's overwhelming traffic. The delivery bags on his handlebars prevent him from

38 Rosa and Scheuermann, *High-Speed Society*.

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going faster and thus metonymically echo his disenfranchisement. Acceleration in this passage is devastating, even monstrous – New York traffic is best characterized as a postmodern, transcultural version of Dante's inferno. The place where Biju works, the Chinese fast-food take-away, is itself an epitome of an accelerated lifestyle in which eating is viewed as too time-consuming. Even ethnic food morphs into fast food in the diaspora.

Another issue that is worth noting here is that Biju's workday seems to pass in a blur: Throughout the whole section, we do not know whether Desai describes a specific workday of Biju's or a general routine of his days. Biju's past, present and future merge into a 'time zero', the present disappears as Biju is under constant pressure to fulfil the next task on his list even faster. Hartmut Rosa quite appropriately argues that a sense of a "contraction of the present" characterizes high-speed societies.[39] While completely agreeing with Rosa that such phenomena do exist, I insist, however, that Mohanty's "majority world", i.e. the disenfranchised 'under-classes' of the South, suffer most from the sense that the present is shrinking and from a predicament in which experience and expectations hardly ever overlap.

Furthermore, the passage illustrates that acceleration is gendered on multiple levels. On a surface level, driving fast is associated with masculinity, here specifically with diasporic masculinity – the taxi drivers hail from Punjab. Biju, however, does not have access to this specific lower-middle class diasporic masculinity. He is riding a *bicycle*. Thus, he cannot live up to what Raewyn Connell has called "hegemonic masculinity", a masculinity associated with a modicum of economic success, aggressiveness, heterosexuality etc., all of which can be symbolized by a car.[40] But still, it is Biju, with his marginal masculinity, who is hyper-accelerated in a deeper sociological sense: His life is marked by a "frenetic standstill"[41] – a hectic attempt to move from one task to the next –, which paradoxically is one of the consequences of a high-speed lifestyle. No matter how hard he tries, he will never keep up with the taxi drivers from Punjab. In a particularly painful passage, Desai describes how Biju delivers food to a group of female Indian students. These upper-class women embody a leisured femininity that Biju admires but also fears tremendously. As a poor, undocumented immigrant with very little education, he is quite simply not in their league. Their object of desire is obviously not a have-not on his bicycle, but a "Marlboro man with a PhD" (50). He feels humiliated by their cosmopolitan upper class nonchalance, their "self-righteousness common to many Indian women of the English-speaking upper-educated" (ibid.). In this little scene, in

39 Rosa, "Social Acceleration," 7.
40 Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.
41 Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 299.

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which Biju feels "a mixture of emotions: hunger, respect, loathing" (ibid.), we can see how class, gender, and acceleration interact in complex ways. Here Anglophone diasporic academics enjoy a comparatively leisured lifestyle – gossiping about men, enjoying food without going to the trouble of cooking – because the disenfranchised of the South such as Biju have been "accelerated" in a sociological sense. In this vein, the global dialectics of acceleration and exploitation I described earlier takes centre stage in Desai's text: "We" – the diasporic middle classes of the North – can still lead the kind of life that is decelerated in Rosa's sense, a life in which a certain amount of time can be spent at leisure, because the Bijus of the world run our errands for a petty salary. Desai very ingeniously points to a global dialectics of acceleration and deceleration, which is only insufficiently characterized as a marker of "Western modernity". Rather, I would venture that acceleration is part of a late-colonial pattern of exploitation and hence the production of poverty inherent in globalization.

Biju is indeed an accelerated figure par excellence. As he moves from odd job to odd job, he gets to know other undocumented immigrants, but poverty, restlessness, and fear of the authorities keep them from forming close friendships. The diasporic underworld of undocumented migrants is thus characterized by what Hartmut Rosa has called the acceleration of "late modern" forms of human relationships. The "decay rates" of such relationships are utterly short.[42] Even though Rosa has a Western European middle class persona in mind – a manager, an engineer, a professor, as it were –, the phenomena he (justifiably) criticizes affect the criminalized underclass of the poor *sans papiers* from the Third World even more drastically than they do "us".

Poverty beyond High-Speed Society

The disenfranchised Indian migrant Biju personifies the predicament of what Hartmut Rosa calls "high-speed society" on both an objective and a subjective level. His poverty is paradoxically both the *cause* of his acceleration – had he been richer, he could have entered the US legally, and he would not have fallen prey so easily to exploitation at the various workplaces – and its *symptom:* Being poor entails living in a state of instability, of a shrunken present in which expectations and experiences hardly ever coincide.

I will now move on to discuss how poverty is dealt with in the passages of the novel that are set in India rather than New York. Intriguingly, the isolated house at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga, in which Biju's father works, is associated with slowness and a certain amount of stability. Nothing happens for weeks,

42 Rosa, "Social Acceleration," 10.

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except for the domestic routines and mealtimes and time spent in reading dated magazines. There is no Internet (the story is set in the 1980s) to connect the judge, the cook, and young Sai with the rest of the world. The nearest town, Kalimpong, is hours away, and neither of the three seem to visit it on a regular basis. The novel's two settings are structured along binary lines at least to a certain extent. There is a hyper-accelerated urban space – New York – and a site of rural slowness, of "postcolonial idleness". Both spaces are sites of poverty; however, poverty in Kalimpong is pictured as less devastating than in New York:

> It pained Sai's heart to see how little he [the cook] had: a few clothes hung over a string, a single razor blade and a sliver of cheap brown soap, a Kulu blanket that had once been hers, a cardboard case with metal clasps that had belonged to the judge and now contained the cook's papers […]. And, in the sateen elastic pocket inside the case, there was a broken watch that would cost too much to mend, but was still too precious to throw away – he might be able to pawn the parts. (13)

Desai describes the cook's poverty through the gaze of Sai, who is herself not poor. Unlike Biju's fellow New Yorkers, Sai feels empathy and sympathy for the cook to the extent that "it pains her heart". It is tempting to read this passage as a sentimentalized, late Victorian version of poverty; however, there is also a matter-of-factness, a sense of heart-breaking comedy with which Sai observes the few possessions. The "broken watch that would cost too much to mend" captures both the cook's desperate hope for a better future and a sense of deprivation. Furthermore, it can also be read as a pre-technological, maybe un-alienated relationship to time in Rosa's sense, a residual, pre-modern phenomenon.

Indeed, Sai and the cook do have time that can be spent in sociable idleness and not just in busy toil. So even if the cook is poor, he does not face temporal deprivation as his son does. In a certain way, Desai also underwrites the romantic colonial image that in a rural, Third World context, material deprivation is easier to bear than in an urban accelerated setting. At least there is time for leisure, even if there is little money and technology. The following passage, in which Desai describes the effects of the monsoon on the everyday life in Kalimpong, illustrates my point:

> This aqueous season would last three months, four, maybe five. […] Condensation fogged the glass of clocks, and clothes hanging to dry in the attic remained wet for a week. A white scurf sifted down from the beams, a fungus spun a shaggy age over everything. Bits of color, though, defined this muffled scene: insects flew in carnival gear; bread, in a day, turned green as grass. […] Sai had always been calm and cheerful during these months, the only time when her life in Kalimpong was granted perfect sense and she could experience the peace of knowing that communication with anyone was near impossible. She sat on the veranda, riding the moods of the season, thinking how intelligent it was to succumb as all over Kalimpong modernity began to fail. Phones emitted a death rattle, televisions turned into yet another view of the downpour. And in

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> this wet diarrheal season floated the feeling, loose and light, of life being a moving, dissipating thing, chilly and solitary – not anything you could grasp. (106–7)

The rain here is associated with a standstill. Clothes do not dry, transport and electronic communication become impossible, people do not visit each other. Life indeed becomes decelerated through the forces of nature. And then again, as time almost stands still and nothing much happens, there is movement and change: "Life [is] a moving, dissipating thing, chilly and solitary – not anything you could grasp." In scenes like these, Desai literally pictures the dilapidated house as an Eastern pre-modern idyll.

Intriguingly, however, slowness here is not associated with stability and reliability. For Sai, the rainy season entails a sense of surrendering to the whims of nature, "succumbing" to its forces. Life at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga is not a stable overlap of expectation and experience, but rather a sense of giving oneself up to forces that are larger and stronger than human expectations. One might venture that Sai espouses a receptive, non-individualist sense of self, which could be associated with Buddhist and Hindu philosophies of the "non-self".[43] Seen from a feminist angle, Sai's decelerated receptive sense of self could also be viewed as echoing a gendered subjectivity. The rain would then mirror Hélène Cixous's notion of *écriture feminine*, a non-essentialist, non-individualist, flowing, moving form of writing the self.[44] Thus, the sense of control and agency that Rosa associates with decelerated lifestyles is missing in this scene. We get a very complex and ambiguous image of the Indian setting: Life is "loose and light" but also "chilly and solitary". Similarly, nature is not pictured as beautiful or even sublime, but as abject. It is a "diarrheal" season, everything is covered by fungus and scurf. Desai paints the picture of a rotting paradise, drawing on a vocabulary of decay. Poverty is not idyllic in her Indian setting, but maybe a little bit easier to bear than in New York, because it does not consume all human energy and hence friendship and affection are possible. From a postcolonial angle, this may still be problematic. One might indeed conclude that Desai's text remains invested in colonial discourse picturing the East as a space of dissipation and decadence, but also as a romanticized place, a discourse the novel also vociferously attacks in the passages set in New York. And yet, this does not defuse its critical, subversive potential. *The Inheritance of Loss* creates space for "resilience, growth, and modest hope".[45] It is an intriguing re-writing of the American myth of the migrant's transformation and of the neoliberal notion of victim blaming. In the

43 Jonardon Ganeri.*The Self: Naturalism, Consciousness, and the First Person Stance.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012. 63–76.

44 Hélène Cixous. "The Laugh of the Medusa". In: *Signs* 4,1 (1976). 875–93.

45 Margaret Scanlan. "Migrating from Terror: The Postcolonial Novel after September 11." In: *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46,3–4 (2010), 273.

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final pages of the novel, Biju is robbed of his possessions by nationalist Nepali terrorists, and as a consequence returns to Cho Oyu without the gifts he had bought for his father and even the money he had hidden in the soles of his shoes. There is no “system to soothe the unfairness of things” (219), and indeed “the guilty […] never pay” (ibid.), but at least, Biju is not blamed for his failure. The novel suggests that he cannot be held responsible for his poverty.

Conclusions

My analysis of Desai’s novel has illustrated that the sociology of acceleration with its concern with time provides a helpful analytical tool for the analysis of poverty across the globe if it is read along postcolonial lines so as to overcome its Eurocentrism. Viewed through the lens of the sociology of time, social acceleration has hit the disenfranchised from the Global South much more drastically than the middle classes in the North. From a postcolonial, transcultural angle, we can observe a global dialectics in which the leisured, decelerated lifestyle of the upper and middle classes all over the world – “the minority world”, to use Mohanty’s phrase – is made possible by the acceleration of the working classes of the majority world – the global poor.

I will conclude by giving two more examples of how acceleration and deceleration, if read along transcultural, dialectical lines, might be useful categories for analysing poverty and its specific temporality in Anglophone Indian novels.

Aravind Adiga’s award-winning novel *The White Tiger* (2008) tells the story of how a self-styled entrepreneur is both victimized by a system of capitalist acceleration and yet manages to use this system for his own self-advancement – he ends up running a taxi business. *The White Tiger* constructs two spaces, one urban, rich, glitzy, accelerated along technological lines, but decelerated and leisured along socio-economic lines; the other poor, abject, decelerated along technological lines, but accelerated socio-economically: The lower classes are forced to spend the entire day working just to make ends meet. The grim, in-your-face tone of the novel utterly satirizes Indian middle class obsession with entrepreneurism and accelerated market-economy, but at the same time never romanticizes rural space as a decelerated, pre-modern idyll.[46]

Mulk Raj Anand’s earlier sociocritical novels *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936) are bitter comments on how ‘pre-modern’ patterns of exploitation such as

46 On space see Pia Florence Masurczak. “The Glocal Metropolis. *Tokyo Cancelled*, *The White Tiger* and Spatial Politics.” In: Cecile Sandten and Annika Bauer (eds). *Re-Inventing the Postcolonial (in the) Metropolis.* Amsterdam/New York: Brill, 2016. 249–65.; on poverty see Barbara Korte. “Can the Indigent Speak? Poverty Studies, the Postcolonial and the Global Appeal of *Q & A* and *The White Tiger*.” In: *Connotations* 20,2–3 (2010/2011): 293–317.

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caste go hand in hand with the colonial, capitalist exploitation of India. His protagonists remain in abject poverty throughout the narratives, but do not have access to a stable, decelerated temporality. They indeed live in a "shrunken present" in which the patterns and rhythms of their work are dictated from without. Thus, they are "accelerated" in Rosa's sense, but they have no access to "Western modernity" as an emancipatory model.

Desai, Anand, and Adiga offer novels that indict a global economic system that sustains poverty *spatially* as the predicament of the South, and *temporally* as a state of having no or only very little control over one's use of time. As Rosa and others lament the lack of time in "high-speed societies", they tend to forget that "we" (the middle classes in the North) can still opt out of the system, get a different job, work less, "shift down" and make do with less money, and still survive. It is an option that the Bijus of this world do not have.

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The Humorous Negotiation of Aboriginal Poverty: *Busted out Laughing* by Dot Collard and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*

Introduction

This article is a contribution to the 'new poverty studies', a field which Birte Christ defines as "fully explor[ing] the politics of representations of poverty in its economic as well as in its psychosocial dimensions".[1] More specifically, this essay deals with the question of how Aboriginal authors negotiate poverty in relation to the Western Australian Noongar and the Waanyi in the highlands of the southern Gulf of Carpentaria. It focuses on the life narrative[2] *Busted out Laughing: Dot Collard's Story as Told to Beryl Hackner* (2003) and Alexis Wright's novel *Carpentaria* (2006).[3]

Poverty is still a severe problem in many Aboriginal communities in twenty-first century Australia, and it also influences numerous other factors that are related to the quality of life. According to Pete Alcock, poverty is "not just about money", but rather about "a wide range of dimensions of deprivation and exclusion".[4] Indeed, it is not only the case that indigenous Australians are two to three times more likely to live in poverty than non-indigenous ones;[5] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also have worse health conditions than white

1 Birte Christ. "The New Poverty Studies: Current Concerns and Challenges." In: Ansgar Nünning and Elizabeth Kovach (eds). *Key Concepts and New Topics in English and American Studies.* Trier: WVT, 2014, 48.
2 Since the autobiography is a western genre or mode tied to certain Enlightenment ideals, critics prefer terms such as Aboriginal "life writing", "life-history", "life-story", or "life-narrative". See Graham Huggan. *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins.* London: Routledge, 2001, 162.
3 Both authors identify as Aboriginal and are accepted as such by their respective indigenous communities. Dot Collard is a descendant of the Noongar people and Alexis Wright of the Waanyi.
4 Pete Alcock. *Understanding Poverty.* Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2006, 4.
5 Fran Baum and Angella Duvnjak. "The Politics of Poverty in Australia." In: *Social Alternatives* 32,1 (2013): 13.

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Australians, and they face lower life expectancies.[6] In addition, deaths of indigenous Australians are more widely spread across all age groups than for non-indigenous Australians (partly because more Aboriginal people commit suicide), while indigenous children under five die at three times the rate of non-indigenous children.[7] Furthermore, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are overrepresented in Australia's prisons,[8] and indigenous Australians are twice as likely as non-indigenous Australians to report high or even very high levels of psychological distress.[9]

In a first step, *Busted out Laughing* and *Carpentaria* draw our attention to what Wright calls the "enormous tragedy of transgenerational poverty, neglect and dispossession"[10] as a consequence of Australia's violent history and the attempted extermination of all forms of indigeneity.[11] However, these two texts do not primarily reproduce and thus potentially stabilize Aboriginal poverty; instead, they actively transcend what Kim Scott calls a social context that "reduce[s] the possibilities of expression of Indigenous identity, and create[s] a sense of self and culture that is reactive and trapped within parameters estab-

6 Angela Durey and Sandra C. Thompson. "Reducing the Health Disparities of Indigenous Australians: Time to Change Focus." In: *BMC Health Services Research* 12,151 (2012), 1. In 2006, Patrick Wolfe wrote that "Aboriginal life expectancy clings to a level some 25 % below that enjoyed by mainstream society." Patrick Wolfe. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." In: *Journal of Genocide Research* 8,4 (2006), 399. Theo Vos et al. estimate that the burden of disease associated with alcohol use by indigenous Australians is almost double that of the general Australian population. Theo Vos et al. *The Burden of Disease and Injury in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 2003.* Brisbane: Centre for Burden of Disease and Cost-Effectiveness, University of Queensland, 2007.

7 Maria Anderson et al. "Closing the Support for Indigenous Loss." In: *Australian Nursing Journal* 19,10 (2012), 24.

8 In 2011, the imprisonment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was 1,868 indigenous prisoners per 100,000 adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. The equivalent rate for non-indigenous prisoners was 130 non-indigenous prisoners per 100,000 adult non-indigenous population. Australian Bureau of Statistics. "Imprisonment Rates." *Prisoners in Australia, 2011.* 8 December 2011. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/875C813AF74635EBCA25795F000DB4EF?opendocument> (accessed 16 October 2015).

9 Anderson et al. "Closing," 24.

10 Alexis Wright. "Politics of Writing." In: *Southerly* 62,2 (2002), 15–6.

11 In the nineteenth century, many 'full-blood' individuals were deported to reservations. In addition, following the 1869 Aboriginal Act in Victoria and the 1905 Aborigines Act in Western Australia, mixed-race children (the so-called "Stolen Generations") were separated from their indigenous families. A. O. Neville, the so-called "Western Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines" (1915–40), writes that his goal was "to breed white natives" so that "in the third or fourth generation no sign of native origin whatever would be apparent." A. O. Neville. *Australia's Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community.* Sydney: Currawong, 1947, 75, 59.

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lished by colonization".[12] *Busted out Laughing* and *Carpentaria* counteract the representation of Aboriginal poverty through humor: They mock the absurd contrast between the spiritual richness of poor indigenous characters and the metaphorical poverty, i. e. the spiritually and ethically impoverished attitudes, of economically wealthy white characters.[13] These narratives seek to actively reclaim indigenous agency by means of three narrative strategies, namely (1) the use of indigenous characters who 'talk back' to those who ridicule them; (2) the foregrounding of Noongar and Waanyi cultural practices; and (3) playful forms of expression (such as satire and humor).[14]

Why do I analyze a life story and a novel? Life histories obviously differ from novels: The former are expected to be truthful, while the latter are written in the fictional mode and thus make no claims in truth-referential terms.[15] For Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh fictionality matters because "human beings are concerned not only with […] what is the case but also with evaluative questions that encompass possibilities and alternatives – […] with what is not the case but could be the case, with what should have been the case, and so on".[16] However, the relationship between (truthful) Aboriginal life stories and (fictional) novels involves continuity and interconnectedness rather than radical opposition. In a sense, Aboriginal novels developed out of Aboriginal life narratives, which dominated the indigenous literary scene in the 1970s and

12 Kim Scott. "From Drill to Dance." In: Beate Neumeier and Kay Schaffer (eds). *Decolonizing the Landscape: Indigenous Cultures in Australia.* Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014, 10.

13 Indigenous academic Lillian Holt argues that humor is an integral part of Aboriginal culture. Also, for her, humor "is a brilliant vehicle for conveying those unpalatable truths that we all would prefer not to confront in ourselves." Lillian Holt. "Aboriginal Humour: A Conversational Corroborree." In: Fran de Groen and Peter Kirkpatrick (eds). *A Serious Frolic: Essays on Australian Humour.* St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009, 81.

14 This tendency towards resilience and playful aesthetics can also be found in many other Aboriginal cultural productions. Examples are novels by Sam Watson (*The Kadaitcha Sung: A Seductive Tale of Sorcery, Eroticism and Corruption* [1990]) and Kim Scott (*Benang: From the Heart* [1999] and *That Deadman Dance* [2011]), new life histories by Florence Corrigan (*Miles of Post and Wire* [1998]), Alice Bilari Smith (*Under a Bilari Tree I Born* [2002]), and Robert Lowe (*The Mish* [2002]), plays by Kevin Gilbert (*The Cherry Pickers* [1988]) and Jack Davis (*No Sugar* [1986] and *The Dreamers* [1996]), the dance performances by the Chooky Dancers (such as "Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style" [2007]), and the television series *Bush Mechanics* (2001). See Jan Alber and Natalie Churn. "Creative Indigenous Self-Representation in Australian Popular Culture as a Vital Communication Channel for Refiguring Public Opinion." In: *Anglistica* 17,2 (2013). See also Jan Alber. "Towards Resilience and Literary Virtuosity: The Negotiation of Indigenous Australian Identities in Twentieth-Century Aboriginal Prose." In: *European Journal for the Study of English* 20 (2016).

15 According to Lejeune, the so-called *pacte autobiographique* affirms the identity between the author and the first-person narrator, and guarantees the truthfulness of the text to the reader. Philippe Lejeune. *Le pacte autobiographique.* Paris: Seuil, 1994 [1975].

16 Henrik Skov Nielsen et al. "Ten Theses about Fictionality." In: *Narrative* 23,1 (2015), 64.

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1980s.[17] The Aboriginal novel and life story analyzed in this essay share the following features: They are narratives (because they tell stories); they are politically committed and centrally address the poverty of indigenous Australians as a topic; and, contrary to Mark Davis's sweeping and essentializing claims, they are highly interesting from a formal perspective.[18] In what follows, I will focus on the representation of Aboriginal poverty but I will also demonstrate that *Busted out Laughing* and *Carpentaria* counteract the potential victimization of indigenous Australians through rebellious Aboriginal characters, the 'richness' of indigenous cultural practices, and the use of satire and humor.

Busted out Laughing: Laughing off the Colonialist Heritage

Busted out Laughing is about the life of the Noongar Dot Collard, as it was told to the non-indigenous Beryl Hackner. As Graham Seal has shown, one important feature of the so-called new indigenous Australian life histories is that they feature a non-indigenous collaborator who assumes the role of "trusted interviewer/recorder, transcriber and preliminary editor of the manuscript".[19] This form – the combination of an Aboriginal storyteller and a non-indigenous listener – closely correlates with Dominick LaCapra's idea of 'working through' trauma, which he associates with mourning: "Mourning brings the possibility of engaging trauma and achieving a reinvestment in, or recathexis of, life which allows one to begin again."[20] The fixed roles of this communicative set-up (the indigenous person relates his or her story and the non-indigenous person is only allowed to listen) are designed to make sure that the concrete 'losses' of Aboriginal Australians (such as the deportation of so-called 'half-caste' or 'quadroon' individuals) are not conflated with the more general sense of 'absence' which was

17 Anne Brewster writes that "in the 1970s and 1980s, the most popular choice […] for Australian indigenous writers was the life story. […] This trend has changed as the genre of the novel has become incorporated into indigenous literary subjectivities." Anne Brewster. "Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*." In: *Australian Literary Studies* 25,4 (2010), 89.

18 Mark Davis argues, rather disparagingly, that indigenous authors "don't generally exhibit the paradigmatic aestheticism of canonical writings, are often autobiographical, lack self-conscious displays of literary virtuosity. […] The best opportunity on offer is to document either racist oppression or static tribal traditions." Mark Davis. "The Clash of Paradigms: Australian Literary Theory after Liberalism." In: *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 7 (2007), 15–6.

19 Graham Seal. "Indigenous Australian Life Histories: A New Genre of Writing and Publishing?" In: *International Journal of the Book* 3,1 (2005–6), 79.

20 Dominick LaCapra. *Writing History, Writing Trauma.* Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, 65–6.

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experienced by many (above all the British colonizers).[21] Finally, this form goes hand in hand with the communal focus of the new life narratives: the perspective on the community rather than the individual "is very much the Aboriginal way of doing things".[22]

In her introduction to *Busted out Laughing*, Hackner already alludes to the economic disparity between non-indigenous and Aboriginal people when she points out that while she had "a lovely Shirley Temple doll to dress", Collard had to rummage "through rubbish tips in search of pictures of Shirley Temple".[23] Dollard's actual life narrative frequently thematizes poverty as a consequence of the assimilation program, i. e. "the mass arrests and internment in concentration camps like the Moore River Settlement in the '30s", and it also addresses "the ongoing battles of urban Aborigines with unemployment and alcoholism, and Aboriginal deaths in custody" (73–4). *Busted out Laughing* is about "the enormity of suffering inflicted upon the Aboriginal people by whites" (76).[24] For example, Collard tells her readers that her father's job at the Millars Timber Company "didn't bring in enough food to feed our big family" (2). Later on, when her brothers Harold and Jack are sent to the Moore River Settlement, the economic situation gets even worse because her father also has to pay for the train

21 LaCapra distinguishes between "loss" and "absence"; losses concern concrete and particular events, whereas absence involves a more general feeling of not-belonging: "When absence and loss are conflated, melancholic paralysis or manic agitation may set in, and the significance or force of particular historical losses […] may be obfuscated or rashly generalized. As a consequence one encounters the dubious ideas that everyone (including perpetrators or collaborators) is a victim, that all history is trauma […]." LaCapra, *Writing History*, 64. The character of John McIvor in Andrew McGahan's novel *The White Earth* (2004), for instance, consistently highlights the hardships white settlers had to endure. For him, "Australia began" with the "hard work and self-reliance" of the colonizers: "It took those men years and a lot of them died, but slowly they built up their stations. Built better houses. Built stockyards and shearing sheds, brought their wives and children up from down south. It was the end of the earth, but they made it work somehow." Andrew McGahan. *The White Earth.* New York: Soho Press, 2004, 129. For LaCapra, there is a qualitative difference between such experiences (which involve a general sense of an absence of belonging) and the atrocities committed against indigenous Australians (which involve concrete losses).

22 Seal, "Indigenous Australian Life Histories," 80.

23 Dot Collard. *Busted out Laughing: Dot Collard's Story as Told to Beryl Hackner*. Broome: Magabala Books, 2003, v.

24 Collard's ancestors were taken away from their parents and they were reared by white families in the context of the assimilation program (1). This was usually done to mixed-race, i. e. so-called 'half-caste' or 'quadroon' children. Belinda Wheeler explains the ideas behind this scheme by stating that "some believed the half-caste children could become a cheap source of labour for whites. Others believed if the children were brought up in white culture they would forget their past, embrace white ways and with the full-bloods left to die out, the remaining half-breeds would reproduce with other whites […] until the Aboriginal race was eliminated entirely." Belinda Wheeler. "Helping Reshape Australia: Female Aboriginal Writers." In: Amit Sarwal and Reema Sarwal (eds). *Reading Down Under: Australian Literary Studies Reader*. New Delhi: SSS Publications, 2009, 238.

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fare and their "maintenance at the settlement" (6). All in all it is a "real struggle providing for [the] big family" (4). After her father's death in 1932, the family has to move to a camp which is "next to [a] rubbish tip" (11). Food is scarce so that they have to rely on government rations (12), and the children have to go hunting (18); water has to be carted "in an old kerosene drum" (26). The mother of Collard's stepfather is sent to the flea-infested Carrolup Mission, where she then dies (34). In the 1950s, Collard starts a family with John Collard but their house still has "no running water" and also "no electricity" (58). Even though her husband John fought for Australia in World War II and was wounded, it takes him a long time to get "the full TPI (Totally and Permanently Incapacitated pension)". Once he receives it, it is still "not enough to keep [Dot] and the kids" so that he has to do "heavy work" on top (66).

Moreover, *Busted out Laughing* highlights the heartlessness of many white Australians: Even though Collard's mother works very hard to sustain her family, the so-called "Deputy Chief Protector of Aborigines" refers to her as "lazy bones" (17); doctors and employers do not treat Collard like a human being but like an object (44, 51); Collard's aunt Maud is tortured in order to get information from her (49); and the overall attitude of white Australians is based on the racist separation of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians (55, 67). At one point, the narrative alludes to the idea that the official policies try to stifle Aboriginal laughter:

> I remember when us kids went with Mum to get our rations, we'd be laughing and talking while we waited – until the policeman came in and looked at us as though we were shit. Then we'd shut up. But as soon as he was gone, we'd laugh and talk again. (13)

Ultimately, however, this attempt at silencing Aboriginal laughter is unsuccessful. Graham Seal writes that "despite the hardships, obstacles and barely credible racism" she had to deal with, Collard displays "a resilient ability to laugh these off".[25] Indeed, *Busted out Laughing* refuses victimhood. For instance, Collard and other Aboriginal people burst out laughing (28, 33, 53) several times during her life history to laugh off hardships and forms of injustice. Also, Collard accentuates her life-affirming attitude at the end of her narrative as follows: "It has been a good life and still is, and I wouldn't change it for anything. I count my blessings for my wonderful family and the life I have lived" (95).

In this context, it is worth mentioning that *Busted out Laughing* is full of resilient Aboriginal characters who rebel against the official policies: Collard's mother tells insulting government officials "to pack [their rations] all up again and get out" (11); John starts a scuffle when a white barman refuses to serve him (52); when Collard receives a dirty mug of coffee in custody, she throws it back at

25 Seal, "Indigenous Australian Life Histories," 80.

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the policeman who gave it to her (53); and, as a form of retaliation for the shooting of dogs that belong to indigenous Australians, John and Dot Collard poison the sheep of a white farmer (53). Finally, Collard's life history also foregrounds Noongar cultural practices. We learn that the point of traditional Noongar stories is "to teach […] moral lessons" (2), and we get insight into the idea of the interconnectedness of all entities in the world. In the words of Bill Ashcroft et al., the belief system of the Dreaming (*alcheringa*) brings indigenous people "into relationship with the other-than-human kin (in the form of animals, climatic phenomena, stars, land-forms)".[26] For instance, Collard repeatedly sees a frog as a messenger of impending doom (52) or mourning (54). Also, when their son Robert drowns in a waterhole, Dot and John Collard find a mouse in their home, and "somehow that little mouse d[oes] the trick and t[akes] some of the sadness from [them]" (55).

Busted out Laughing uses humor to contrast the spiritual richness of poor indigenous individuals with the spiritually and ethically impoverished attitudes of the wealthy white ones. To borrow the words of Paula Anca Farca, humor serves "to critique the harsh social and political tensions of contemporary Aboriginal existence. Though it does not make the social problems […] disappear, humor raises awareness of these issues."[27] As I will show in what follows, *Carpentaria* operates in an analogous manner.

Poverty, Resilience, and Satire: *Carpentaria*

Carpentaria is set in Desperance, a town on the Gulf of Carpentaria in Queensland. There is almost no interaction between the indigenous "Pricklebush" people and the non-indigenous inhabitants of Uptown. We learn that "the descendants of the pioneer families […] said *the Aboriginal was really not part of the town at all*"[28] and thus marginalized them: They live "on the edge of Desperance" (12). Even though the story is set in a post-Mabo world (where "Native title claims" [388] are possible),[29] the indigenous "edge people" (62) live "amidst

26 Bill Ashcroft et al. *Intimate Horizons: The Post-Colonial Sacred in Australian Literature.* Sydney: ATF Press, 2009, 23.

27 Paula Anca Farca. "Humor in Contemporary Aboriginal Adult Fiction." In: Belinda Wheeler (ed.). *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature.* Rochester: Camden House, 2013, 126.

28 Alexis Wright. *Carpentaria: A Novel.* New York et al.: Atria, 2006, 4.

29 In 1992, the High Court of Australia rejected the myth of *terra nullius* (i. e. the idea that Australia was uninhabited when the British settlers came) by recognizing native title. The campaign that led to the decision was organized by the Torres Strait Islanders Eddie Koiki Mabo, David Passi, and James Rice. The decision *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)* is commonly referred to as "*Mabo.*"

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the muck of third-world poverty" (8). The house of Norm Phantom and Angel Day, for instance, is built next to a "rubbish dump" and Angel feels that this is "magnificent, as anyone dirt-poor would" (14). Angel creates the home of her family out of "pieces of sheet iron jerry cans, bits of car bodies, lengths of rope, logs, plastic, discarded curtains, and old clothing" (15). Most Aboriginal people in the novel live in "rubbish-dump trash shacks" (54) and have to "slosh […] around like wild pigs in ankle-deep mud to get anywhere" (240) during the rain season. At one point, Norm Phantom thinks about the situation of the Pricklebush people that "a fish lives far better off than a dry old blackfella from Desperance" (255). Also, if anyone had ever visited the Pricklebush people, they would have told him or her "*you is in hell*" (60). Other indigenous individuals push up into Uptown itself – but only to inhabit "abandoned car bodies" (324) or "little grey fibro" (334) huts. When Angel Day leaves Norm Phantom for Big Mozzie Fishman, a "holy pilgrim […] of the Aboriginal world" (119), she inhabits a place "with cracked and broken fibro louvres, sad and sorry walls" (334).

The white characters in *Carpentaria* either do not care about the Pricklebush people at all or they resort to physical and psychological violence when they deal with them. The fat policeman Truthful, for example, arrests three indigenous petrol-sniffers – "Tristrum aged ten, and his brother Luke Fishman aged twelve, and Aaron Ho Kum aged eleven" (310) – for a murder they did not commit (308–9).[30] Truthful employs his usual racist strategy of "arresting the first likely suspects to catch his eye" (29), i.e. the first Aboriginal people he comes across.[31] While the citizens of Uptown "grumble[…] into the bar that it [i]s a bloody waste of taxpayers' money and why don't they shoot the little buggers?" (310), Stan Bruiser, the mayor, who follows the motto "*Hit first, talk later*" (325), almost beats the three boys to death. He throws them "around the walled space as though they were sacks of potatoes" (331). Afterwards, they look "as though they had been put through a mincing machine" (331), but the only thing that Truthful cares about is that "he would have to clean up" (331). When the three boys hang themselves in their cell, Truthful at first believes that they are "tricking" him (356); then he thinks that they are "playing a game" (357). When he finally realizes that they are actually dead, he tells himself that things are "going to be better in the morning" because he will prepare a great breakfast "for his boys with his own two hands" (357). Given this overall attitude of racist hostility, it comes as no surprise that whenever Mozzie Fishman has to deal with white people, he

30 We learn that the first two boys are children of Angel Day, while Aaron Ho Kum is the son of the white barman Lloydie Smith and an indigenous woman who "had only been half a kid herself at the time" (328). Also, Smith has never "owned up to his paternity" (313).

31 Norm's daughter Patsy knows that the police do not care about Aboriginal people at all. She argues that "police don't care about our truth" (222).

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crawls into "invisibility and nothingness. [...] It seemed it was white people who could tug on his conscience, making him degrade himself like this" (413).

Most of the white inhabitants of Uptown are self-deluded and misplaced individuals. They are prosperous – this is particularly true of "the rich white people" who own the Gurfurritt mine (404) – but they lack both spirituality and ethical principles. For instance, it is impossible to find even a "single heroic deed about Uptown" (58). The inhabitants do not have "any religious places of worship"; "no sanctified ground" which would be "too holy to walk on"; "no culture, no song, no sacred places" (58). They have "come from so far away *to be lost*" (50, emphasis added). Bruiser, for example, pompously describes himself as a "self-made 24/7 man", and we learn that he was voted citizen of the year ten times in a row (34). However, we are also told that the vote "was rigged" (34), and that he rapes ("brands") Aboriginal women after running "them into the ground" (41). Truthful lacks a sense of purpose because "nobody ha[s] use for a policeman anymore" (71). He thus decides to spend his time on plants and transforms "the barred cells into a hothouse for *Ficus elastica* and *Monstera*" (71). Libby Valance, the overweight town clerk, follows the insignificant occupation of ringing "the bell in case of emergency" – but only if he does not feel down and prefers "someone else to do it" (68). The slightly deranged Captain Nicoli Finn believes that he is doing "undercover work [...] as an enlisted soldier for the Australian army" (65), and the amnesiac Elias Smith, whose "memory was stolen" (50) and who tries "hopelessly to save his identity" (44), goes "on patrol searching for clues about what he should be guarding against" (85).

By contrast, the old Pricklebush people keep "the chronicles of the land hereabouts since time began" (48); they see "huge, powerful ancestral creation spirits occupying the land and sea moving through the town" and they cannot be stopped by "stone walls, big locked gates, barred windows, [and] barbed wire" (59). Norm Phantom, for instance, keeps "a library chock-a-block full of stories of the old country stored in [his] head". Among other things, we learn that there is an ethical dimension to these stories: They contain "the good information, intelligence, etiquette of what to do, how to behave for knowing how to live like a proper human being, alongside spirits for neighbours in dreams" (245). Anne Brewster thus states that

> [...] although the white inhabitants have a higher socio-economic status within the racialized hierarchy, there is little dignity attaching to them. The indigenous characters have dignity and authority, occupying the subject position both within the cross-racial milieu of Desperance and within the wider cosmology of the land, a cosmology of which they are a part.[32]

32 Brewster, "Indigenous Sovereignty," 87.

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Carpentaria foregrounds the cosmological thinking of the Waanyi; the novel highlights the relatedness of the Aboriginal sacred on the one hand, and political and ecological questions on the other. Like the Yanyuwa from the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria region, the Waanyi "perceive their environment as cosmological. It is a universe whose ecology consists of many diverse forms, including spirit beings, or the spiritual aspects of flora, fauna, and phenomena, each of which is able to interact with all the others."[33] What matters is an understanding of the interconnectedness of all entities in the world. According to this thinking, there is "no difference between you and the movement of water as it seasonally shifts its tracks according to its own mood" (*Carpentaria* 3).[34] Wright argues that for her, "the land is […] the central character. Most of the images and ideas relate to the land being alive and having important meaning, which is tied to the ancient roots of our continent."[35] Wright's novel also accentuates the spiritually impoverished attitude of the Uptown people with regard to natural phenomena. While the Aboriginal characters see "the great bat drive" (*Carpentaria* 461) and the "cyclone bird, the spiritual messenger of the ancestral creation serpent" (462) as rather obvious signs of a dangerous cyclone, the white characters are initially ignorant of these emissaries because "invisible things in nature made no sense to Uptown" (78). Towards the novel's end, however, the Bureau of Meteorology translates "the message from the ancestral spirits" (463).[36]

Carpentaria not only reclaims Aboriginal agency by foregrounding indigenous cultural practices, but, like *Busted out Laughing*, the novel is also full of rebellious Aboriginal characters that rebel against the official policies. For example, Angel Day not only spits on the shoes of policemen who annoy her (388); when a delegation visits the Pricklebush people, Angel "dance[s] around [them] like a strutting pigeon" (39) and tells them to never "come back here again" (40). Also, Will Phantom, a separatist guerilla warrior, and Mozzie Fishman, who organizes "ancient religious crusade[s] along the spiritual travelling road of the great ancestors" (119), sabotage the Gurfurritt mine, whose representatives claim "not to know what was required from Native title claims" (388). At one point, they

33 John J. Bradley. "*Wirriyarra Awara:* Yanyuwa Land and Sea Scapes." In: *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 98,4 (1999), 801.

34 *Carpentaria* begins by illustrating the central ideas behind the Dreamtime (*alcheringa*): "the ancestral serpent" creates the Gulf country (1) but it "continues to live deep down under the ground". Its spirit infuses everything that exists: "It is all around in the atmosphere and is attached to the lives of the river people like skin" (2). One of the many results of this thinking is that the past, the present, and the future become fused and exist wholly as one.

35 Jean-François Vernay. "An Interview with Alexis Wright." In: *Antipodes* 18,12 (2004), 121.

36 One might thus read *Carpentaria* "as a highly politicised exploration of the Indigenous sacred." Frances Devlin-Glass. "A Politics of the Dreamtime: Destructive and Regenerative Rainbows in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*." In: *Australian Literary Studies* 23,4 (2008), 395.

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cause an explosion after which the mine looks like "a big panorama of burnt chop suey" (408).[37]

The novel's satire is mostly biting. In the words of Carole Ferrier, *Carpentaria* uses "black humour […] as a mode of resistance".[38] Similarly, Paul Sharrad argues that the "satiric denunciations of careless and brutish white life in the tropics" serve "to inspire correction of racist practices".[39] For instance, Angel Day becomes "a prime example of government policies at work" (*Carpentaria* 16) by walking "back and forth to the [rubbish] dump two dozen times a day" (15). The novel ridicules these policies, which do not lead anywhere, by means of government officials who seriously believe that living off rubbish is such a great form of "blackfella advancement" that they have to take "pictures of her with a Pentax camera for a report" (16). Other instances of satire in the novel concern the name of the policeman Truthful (who is not truthful at all) and the transformation of discarded objects into something beautiful. The taxidermist Norm Phantom, for example, turns stinking dead fish into "priceless jeweled ornaments" (208). Also, after the cyclone, Will Phantom finds himself on "an extraordinary floating island of rubbish" (490) where all his wishes materialize. Will's island in particular points towards hope, and it is expressive of a certain "spiritual lightheartedness" (67) that plays a role throughout *Carpentaria*. Will considers the destruction caused by the cyclone to be "salubrious" (489), and the island is linked to the idea of a rebirth (he is "clinging to a foetus inside the birth canal" [491]): It closely correlates with the possibility of "singing the country afresh" (516). Furthermore, Aboriginal characters crack up laughing during the novel again and again. For instance, when the inhabitants of Uptown change the name of the river to "Normal's River" the Pricklebush people "belly-laughed themselves silly because the river had one name from the beginning of time. It was called *Wangala*" (10). Humor is one strategy through which *Carpentaria* suggests a way of being "released from the cages of poverty" (128), to borrow the words of Mozzie Fishman. Indeed, Wright states that "there's a lot of humor in Aboriginal society. It relieves a lot of energy and strain. It's a good weapon to have, otherwise you just despair and melt away, waste away. You have to see the world as a funny place, a wonderful world and that's good."[40]

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37 Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs list many conflicts between Aboriginal people and the mining industry at the end of the twentieth century. See their *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998, 66–81, 117–34.

38 Carole Ferrier. "'Disappearing Memory' and the Colonial Present in Recent Indigenous Women's Writing." In: *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* (Special Issue 2008), 48.

39 Paul Sharrad. "Beyond *Capricornia:* Ambiguous Promise in Alexis Wright." In: *Australian Literary Studies* 24,1 (2009), 57.

40 Vernay, "Interview," 121.

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Conclusions

Both *Busted out Laughing* and *Carpentaria* provide complex discussions of Aboriginal poverty. In a first step, they convey a sense of what it is like to live in a state of destitution. The major difference between the two texts concerns the time period they refer to: *Busted out Laughing* deals with poverty in the early twentieth century, while *Carpentaria* addresses the situation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The existence of poverty in many indigenous communities today should come as no surprise. Since "invasion is a structure [and] not an event",[41] the colonialist past reverberates in the current situation of Aboriginal communities in Australia. Wright describes the relationship between the past and the present as follows:

> We had missions, we had reserves where thousands of Aboriginal people were forced to live, and many people still live in former missions and reserves, where once they couldn't leave unless they were given permission, and they couldn't marry unless they had permission, and their children could be taken away and so on. In a way, *we're still living in that world; we're still detained by policy and restricted in what we can do.*[42]

At the same time, the two narratives of my corpus also seek to counteract the potential victimization of Aboriginal people. Wright, for instance, wants to "contribute something to disrupting the stagnating impulse that visualizes the world of Aboriginal people as little more than program upon countless program for 'fixing up problems.'" She thus moves beyond "the typical, pathological, paternalist viewpoint from which Australia typically portrays Indigenous people – as pathetic welfare cases unable to take care of [them]selves, and, at worst, as villainous rip-off merchants".[43]

As I have shown, *Busted out Laughing* highlights the resilience of rebellious Noongar individuals; the story foregrounds indigenous cultural practices and includes "a considerable body of traditional lore and mythology"; and "humour […] comes through as an integral aspect of the […] worldview and lifestyle" so that there is "a surprising absence of bitterness".[44] Similarly, in Wright's novel, "Indigenous heroes are celebrated", and "the resilience of ancient beliefs overlay[s] the inherited colonial experience".[45] Wright stresses the importance of Aboriginal humor as a defense mechanism against despair: "We deal with hard

41 Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism," 388.
42 Alexis Wright and Arnold Zable. "The Future of Swans." In: *Overland* 213 (2013), 27–30 (emphasis added).
43 Alexis Wright. "On Writing *Carpentaria.*" In: *Heat* 13 (2007), 81, 85.
44 Seal, "Indigenous Australian Life Histories," 79–80.
45 Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*," 85, 83.

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issues but we have the ability to laugh it off, to laugh at ourselves, but we do not forget who we are and what is happening around us."[46]

Finally, I would like to note that the negotiation of poverty in *Busted out Laughing* and *Carpentaria* is admittedly rather binary: It involves conflicts between poor (but spiritually rich) indigenous and wealthy (but spiritually impoverished) non-indigenous characters. Even though these two narratives try to laugh off this absurd contrast, they seem to share the idea of Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs that "reconciliation is never a fully realizable category." Instead, Gelder and Jacobs imagine an uncanny Australia "where difference and 'reconciliation' co-exist uneasily."[47] Indeed, when Vernay asked Wright how she "perceive[s] the reconciliation issue," she responded quite clearly, "I don't perceive it."[48] She argues that "there is no healing road of reconciliation for many thousands of Aboriginal people" because they are "still on the road of genocide at the hands of Australian governments." For her, "reconciliation" is a "weapon […] to flog Aboriginal people"; it "cuts the wound deeper in the present-day wretched reality of the lives of our people, which translates into a continuation of the massacre of Aboriginal people by ensuring that they continue living unhealthy, sad and degraded lives, and go to an early grave."[49]

In *Busted out Laughing* and *Carpentaria*, there are only isolated instances that suggest the possibility of some kind of approximation or dialogue between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. I am thinking of the communicative set-up of *Busted out Laughing* through which the indigenous Dot Collard and the non-indigenous Beryl Hackner work through trauma together, or the friendship between the indigenous Norm Phantom and the non-indigenous Elias Smith in *Carpentaria.* Elias is the only white character who becomes Norm's "good friend" (211): While Norm is not at all convinced of Truthful's "seaworthiness" (232), he is sure "that there [i]s communication between the fish and Elias" (235). In any case, the strained relationship between Aboriginal and non-indigenous Australians will not change as long as the country "remains very much colonial or, perhaps more accurately, *neo*-colonial in its treatment of its own indigenous peoples".[50] And one of the most pressing issues in this context is, of course, the persistent problem of Aboriginal poverty.[51]

46 Vernay, "Interview," 121.
47 Gelder and Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, xvi, 138.
48 Vernay, "Interview," 122.
49 Wright, "Politics of Writing," 15.
50 Graham Huggan. *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 27.
51 Baum and Duvnjak, "The Politics of Poverty in Australia," 13.

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Vijaya John Kohli

Ignoring Poverty in Sociolinguistic Discourse: The Curious Case of "Indian English" as a Linguistic Concept

In tracking the relationship between science and myth, and the role of a critical attitude in differentiating between these two ways of interpreting the world, Karl Popper observes that science, like myth, begins in popular beliefs, and not with a "collection of observations, nor with the invention of experiments".[1] Popper goes on to add that what distinguishes science from myths, magical techniques and practices, is the critical attitude: "The theories are passed on, not as dogmas, but rather with the challenge to discuss them and improve upon them."[2]

My endeavor in this paper is to suggest that some of the ideas that prevail as scientific theories in sociolinguistics, particularly in the area of what is known as "postcolonial varieties of English", or "World Englishes", must be subjected to far more critical, interrogative attention than has been the case. To press this point, I take as my example the manner in which linguists have treated the supposed variety of "Indian English". My argument is that this theoretical linguistic construct is really still only a widely accepted myth, which has not been put through sufficient critical scrutiny along a number of possible logical parameters.

In this paper, I hope to show that this supposed theory falls apart if one begins, not with the discourse of linguists and the claims made for "Indian English" as a variety, but with the reality of the socio-economic conditions within which the learning and use of a second language are embedded. I should like to show, further, that in failing to acknowledge the role played, for example, by such factors as poverty and economic deprivation, linguists researching in the field of the supposed "second language varieties" are blinding themselves to some seminal truths. The most obvious of these truths is that in many postcolonial contexts where English is a second language, and not the primary source of

1 Karl Popper. *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge.* London and New York: Routledge, 2002 [1963], 66–7.
2 Ibid.

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engagement with family and friends, it is virtually a "commodity"[3] that has been obtained at a cost. Naturally, the quality of this commodity varies according to its socioeconomic price-tag, and for linguists in this field to argue that one or another brand of the commodity is a national preference is deeply questionable.

One clarification is essential at this early stage. In using the term "Indian English" in this paper, I am referring only to a specifically *linguistic* construct. The term "Indian English" is used widely outside the realm of descriptive sociolinguistics as a modifier, for example, in phrases such as *Indian English writer,* or *Indian English poetry*; with such usages there can be no disagreement whatsoever. My focus here is limited to a supposed variety of the English language which some linguists have sought to describe in structural terms.

The belief that there is a specifically *Indian* variety of English attained mythic status as early as in the mid-1800s, when much of the geographical land-mass which now forms the Indian nation was ruled either directly or by proxy by Britain. It is this popular myth that has given rise to the linguistic construct of "Indian English" which exists today. What exactly is the myth? And, what sort of critical attention does it need? In this paper, I shall address these and related issues through three sets of questions. First, how did the concept of "Indian English" that exists today emerge, and what are its claims? Second, why is this concept ill-founded from a logical and linguistic perspective? How does a discussion of poverty and social stratification influence the concept? And, finally, if the concept of "Indian English" is abandoned, how can the English used in India be represented in a way that is more sensitive to socioeconomic factors?

In order to understand how the linguistic construct of "Indian English" was shaped, we need to foray briefly into the history of the term. By the mid-1800s, it had come to refer to the English of Britons who had lived or worked in India. Charles Dickens, for instance, uses the term "Indian English" in a rant against journalists in Britain who used words of Indian origin. He asks rhetorically: "Am I to sit down to my Times with a Tamil lexicon on one side and a Teloogoo on the other?"[4] Like him, most Britons of the 19th century would have regarded the usages in *Hobson Jobson*,[5] a glossary of Anglo-Indian terms popular at the time, as "Indian English".

3 Deborah Cameron. "The Commodification of Language: English as a Global Commodity." In: Terttu Nevalainen and Elizabeth Closs Traugott (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of History of English.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 352.

4 Charles Dickens. "Indian Recruits and Indian English." In: Charles Dickens (ed.). *Household Words.* London: Bradbury and Evans, 1857, 319.

5 Henry Yule and Arthur C. Burnell. *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive.* Sittingbourne: Linguasia, 1886.

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In the decades that followed, the term began to be increasingly applied by Britons, usually with amusement, to the English produced by Indian servants or students, whose lot it was to bridge the language gap with their colonial overseers. Errors in such things as leave applications, or answers to scripture questions, were treated as tokens of "Indian English".[6] The immense popularity of novels such as *Baboo Jabberjee, B.A.*,[7] which mimics an Indian narratorial voice, is another illustration of such use. The "Indian English" poems of the Indian poet Nissim Ezekiel,[8] which are meant to mimic the English of Indians, are interesting examples of how colonial language attitudes can sometimes become internalized by the elite among the colonized. It is also interesting that in a stinging critique of these poems, Harish Trivedi is prompted to ask what type of English Ezekiel believed himself to be using in his supposedly non-"Indian-English" poems.[9]

Though identified as the English of Indians, the term "Indian English" had no specifically linguistic focus till the early 20th century. An early notable expression of this focus is found in the studies of A. F. Kindersley,[10] a civil servant turned amateur philologist. He painstakingly recorded what he observed in the use of the English produced by Indians from various geographical regions and socio-economic strata. He claimed no pan-Indian spread for any of the features which he noted; neither did he assume that his observations were valid for all socio-economic backgrounds. Kindersley found that Indians from some social strata produced grammatical structures in which articles were misused, the present progressive was overused, direct questions were not inverted and inversion was not cancelled in indirect questions. It is noteworthy that these are still some of the core grammatical features linguists claim for "Indian English".

The concept of "Indian English" took a more definite linguistic shape after 1947 and in the early years of India's independence from British rule. Various premier technological educational institutions (such as the older Indian Institutes of Technology) were set up with support from nations such as the USSR, the USA, West Germany, and Britain. Britain also supported the establishment of higher institutions for the education of teachers of English. This support was purveyed through the British Council, whose role in promoting English Language

6 An example of this can be found in Robert Chambers. "Comicalities of Indian English." In: *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts* 874 (1880), 609.
7 F. Anstey [Thomas Anstey Guthrie]. *Baboo Jabberjee, B.A.* London: J.M. Dent & Co, 1897.
8 Nissim Ezekiel. *Hymns in Darkness.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976.
9 Harish Trivedi. "Foreword." In: Rita Kothari and Rupert Snell (eds). *Chutnefying English: The Phenomenon of Hinglish.* New Delhi and New York: Penguin Books, 2011, vii–xxvi.
10 Arthur F. Kindersley. "Notes on the Indian Idioms of English: Style, Syntax and Vocabulary." In: *Transaction of the Philological Society* 37 (1938): 25–34.

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Teaching (ELT) programs in the former British colonies is well-documented in Phillipson's *Linguistic Imperialism.*[11]

The teaching staff in Indian ELT institutions included British teachers, typically on short-term contracts, who represented the "native-speaker specialist", a concept based on the tenet, promoted internationally by the British Council, that the ideal teacher is the native-speaker.[12] It is safe to assume that the Britons who came to India on short-term contracts actually knew far less about India and Indians than their colonial forebears had done.

It was under the tutelage of these visiting specialists that "Indian English" came to be regarded as a "variety": It was a "variety" consisting of a collection of random features in the speech of random individual Indians, bundled together primarily because these features differed from the speech of educated Britons. In other words, it was deemed a variety on the basis of the polarizing, and fallacious, logic that any difference from one pattern of stable norms necessarily implies the existence of an equivalent and stable pattern in the speech of the "other".

It is a moot question whether these visiting British teachers actually believed that all Indians produced the same kind of English. What is clear is that some of them, such as Peter Strevens, who did recognize differences based on economic strata and education, chose deliberately to identify the "Indianness" of "Indian English" with the language of clerks and low-level office staff. Strevens writes:

> The Indian (or Pakistani) doctor who communicates easily in English with professional colleagues at an international medical college is using a type of Indian English […] in which Standard English dialect is spoken with a regional accent. The Indian clerk who uses English constantly in his daily life for communicating with other Indians, by correspondence or telephone, may employ an Indian English in which the dialect is not Standard English and the accent is regional or local. The lorry-driver, who uses English occasionally, as a lingua franca, may be using an Indian English which is for all practical purposes a pidgin. *It is the second of these three examples which constitutes the typical Indian English* […].[13]

Clearly, for Strevens, the clerk is the defining image of India; why this might be so is itself an interesting issue for speculation at some future point.

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11 Robert Phillipson. *Linguistic Imperialism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

12 See ibid. 193–199. In recent years the very idea of the "native speaker" has been questioned. See, for instance, Thomas M. Paikeday. *The Native Speaker is Dead!* Toronto and New York: Paikeday, 1985; Thomas P. Bonfiglio. *Mother Tongues and Nations: The Invention of the Native Speaker.* Berlin and New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 2010. The idea that the native speaker is necessarily the most effective (or ideal) teacher of language has been questioned as well (e.g. Peter Medgyes. *The Non-native Teacher.* London: Macmillan, 1994; George Braine. *Non-native Educators in English Language Teaching.* Mahwah and New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999).

13 Peter Strevens. *New Orientations in the Teaching of English.* London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, 140–1 (emphasis added).

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Be this as it may, there are obvious fallacies in the logical and linguistic reasoning of the people who created the linguistic term "Indian English". It is intrinsically illogical to generalize from the ad-hoc, the random and the individual to the national whole. This is prone to be especially misleading in post-colonized settings where nations (and groupings) were demarcated not on the basis of the cultural integrity of communities in a given geographical region, but on the basis of the outcomes of internecine exploits of multiple colonizers.

From the linguistic perspective, the error is in the use of the term "variety". An ad-hoc aggregate of usages from random speakers does not add up to a variety. A *linguistic variety*, following Hudson, is "a set of linguistic items with similar social distribution".[14] For a variety to exist, a language needs to be used in sufficiently similar ways, either by a given population, or in the performance of a given type of language activity. Varieties display what Weinreich *et al.* have referred to as "orderly heterogeneity";[15] mere random difference from a standard norm does not imply the existence of an alternative variety.

The role of the linguist Braj B. Kachru in re-branding the supposed variety of "Indian English", converting it into a nationalist Indian issue, and marketing it globally, is well-documented in the literature in this field of study. The nature of this re-branding is the curious case of "Indian English" referred to in my title: It is essentially the bottling of the old wine of colonial linguistic observation, a product of the British colonial gaze at the language of the "other", transferred into a new wineskin of anti-colonial, reverse-imaged ideology. It is, simultaneously, the re-branding of a myth as a scientific theory. Such bottling has led, paradoxically, to both obfuscating issues related to linguistic analysis and to clarifying issues related to language politics.

What exactly is the linguistic nature of "Indian English" that has been so vigorously promoted and defended? It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into every claim, so I will confine myself to just one. This is the claim that there is a structurally describable, stable, pan-Indian variety of English which incorporates a range of hierarchically ordered sub-varieties. The proposed hierarchy of sub-varieties is based on the extent to which an Indian's first language has influenced, and thereby "acculturized", "nativized" or "Indianized"[16] his /her English. The

14 Richard A. Hudson. *Sociolinguistics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1980], 22.

15 Uriel Weinreich et al. "Empirical Foundations for a Theory of Language Change." In: Winfred P. Lehmann and Yakov Malkiel (eds). *Directions for Historical Linguistics.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968, 100.

16 These are all terms used by Kachru in a range of publications. E.g. Braj B. Kachru. *The Indianization of English: The English Language in India.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983; Braj B. Kachru. *The Alchemy of English: The Spread, Functions, and Models of Native Englishes.* Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1986; Braj B. Kachru. "World Englishes: Approaches, Issues and Resources." In: *Language Teaching* 25 (1992): 1–14.

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implication here is that such things as the production of questions that are not inverted and indirect questions that are inverted (such as, "Why this has happened?" and, "I wonder why has this happened", respectively) are an outcome of cultural carry-over. Kachru emphasizes that this supposed variety is *not* based on "acquisitional inadequacy"[17] or issues related to second language learning.

There is a striking difference in the way Kachru's assertions have been received by linguists within and outside India. A number of Indian linguists have rejected the theory outright, and others such as Sahgal and Agnihotri have shown that socio-economic background, such as class and educational privilege, invariably influences the nature of the English that an Indian produces.[18] Balasubramanian, for example, concludes:

> The English used in India is far from homogenous; rather it represents a cluster of variables. This study has revealed that Kachrus's 1992 claims about the concept of homogeneity being applicable to the Indian situation are not true.[19]

The claim of my paper is that though the role of socio-economic factors has been emphasized in many empirical studies carried out by Indian sociolinguistics, even these scholars shy away from reframing the English of Indians in terms that centralize the socio-economic conditions under which English is transmitted. Thus, the attention paid to English as a commodity, has been kept to the margins.

Outside India, Kachru's version of "Indian English" has been unassailable. While he has been challenged over one or another minor claim, the basic myth that Indians use "Indian English" has not been contested. It is surprising that this is so, despite the fact that there is so much information available in the public domain today about the range and scope both of sociolinguistic diversity and of socio-economic disparity in India. Why Kachru's monolithizing construct has found such widespread acceptance from otherwise hard-headed linguists, is itself an interesting sociological question relating to the construction of human knowledge.

The fact that little or no reference is made to the socio-economic backgrounds of the largely anonymous contributing subjects stands out starkly in many corpora-based studies of "Indian English". What such linguists find, therefore, depends on where they obtain their data. For example, Sedlatschek, much of whose data derives from online texts by journalists, concludes: "From a structural point of view, there is little evidence in the corpus data that would suggest a

17 Kachru, *The Indianization of English*, 10.

18 Anju Sahgal and Ramakant K. Agnihotri. "The Common Bond. Acceptability of Syntactic Deviances in Indian English." In: *English World-Wide* 6 (1985), 117–29.

19 Chandrika Balasubramanian. *Register Variation in Indian English.* Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2009, 233.

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major structural divergence of Ind E away from Standard English."[20] In contrast, studies by Schilk and Lange claim not only to have established pan-Indian status for the supposed variety but also either imply (Schilk) or state explicitly (Lange) that transmission through education plays no role.[21] Both Schilk and Lange draw heavily on grammatical contrasts between, on the one hand, British English corpora produced by first language users for whom the language is in no sense a commodity and, on the other hand, a range of "Indian English" corpora, including those that do not comply with the fundamental requirements of the International Corpus of English (ICE).[22]

The case that I have tried to make so far is that while "Indian English" may appear, seemingly, to be a plausible concept when one has what Dasgupta has described as "a tourist's attitude to the details of an unfamiliar culture",[23] it becomes less plausible when scrutinized critically. Indeed, a very different perspective emerges when English is seen not as a unique European language outposted to a far-off nation, but as one tongue among hundreds, that is acquired mostly through education, in a sub-continent that is both too linguistically diverse to have a national language, and too economically stratified to have uniform practices of transmission through education. Even a very sketchy overview of the scale and range of Indian social, linguistic, geographical and economic stratification will show how unlikely it is for a pan-Indian variety to have emerged.

India's vast population of almost 1.03[24] billion people, spread out over 3,287,240 square kilometres, speaks 447[25] languages, of which 29 have more than a million speakers each. These languages have their origins in at least six[26] different language families, which are typologically distinct from one another. There are over 13 writing systems, several of which have been used in unbroken literary

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20 Andreas Sedlatschek. *Contemporary Indian English: Variation and Change.* Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2009, 315.

21 See Marco Schilk. *Structural Nativization in Indian English Lexiogrammar.* Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2011; Claudia Lange. *The Syntax of Spoken Indian English.* Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2012.

22 The unreliability of these two studies along multiple parameters relating to design and data is discussed in Vijaya J. Kohli. "Review of Marco Schilk. *Structural Nativization in Indian English Lexicogrammar.*" In: *Anglia – Zeitschrift für englische Philologie* 130,4 (2012): 547–51, and Anju Sahgal Gupta and Vijaya J. Kohli. "Review of Claudia Lange. *The Syntax of Spoken Indian English.*" In: *Anglia – Zeitschrift für englische Philologie* 131,4 (2013): 634–43.

23 Probal Dasgupta. *The Otherness of English. India's Auntie Tongue Syndrome.* New Delhi and Newbury Park: Sage, 1993, 130.

24 Census of India 2011. <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/India_at_glance/popu1.aspx> (accessed 6 March 2016).

25 SIL Ethnologue. <http://www.ethnologue.com/country/IN> (accessed 2 February 2016).

26 Central Institute of Indian Languages. Language Information Service. <http://www.ciil-lisindia.net/> (accessed 2 February 2016).

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traditions that go back to the pre-Christian era. Contemporary newspaper circulation in a number of the major Indian languages far outstrips the circulation of English newspapers. There are languages which have a relatively thin spread throughout India (such as Urdu, Sanskrit and English) and languages (such as Khasi, or Nicobari) that have a dense distribution in relatively small regions.

There are no reliable numbers relating to how many Indians know English; estimates range from no more than 1 %[27] to 20 %[28] depending on the source of information, and doubtless, also upon what "knowing" English means. Although there are miniscule communities of native-speakers of English (and these refute the Kachruvian claim that "Indian English" is a non-native variety), for the majority of Indians who claim to know English it is a language learnt at school in order to serve social and professional aspiration rather than to replace the languages spoken at home.

Of great significance in this context is the role played by a number of parallel, and economically-differentiated, school systems, where English begins – and all too often – ends for most Indians. Seventy-five different languages are used in India's education system[29] and both English and Hindi are taught in virtually all the states and territories. English is without exception the medium of instruction in elite institutions for the economically privileged few, while for the vast majority it is merely one of several subjects taught through the medium of the local language. The differentiation in school systems reflects differentiation in economic strata and the distribution of wealth. In rural India, where the majority of the Indian population lives, some under conditions of extreme want, some form of basic English is taught in very basic school structures. It is this minimal English that can become useful linguistic currency to the aspiring rural migrant who seeks a livelihood in the cities and mega-cities of India.

Socio-economic disparities in India reflect the deep divisions that exist between regions, and between the rural and the urban. While four Indians figured among the ten richest people in the world in 2008,[30] the most recently released Census figures[31] relating to rural India tell a very different economic story.

27 David Graddol. *English Next India – The Future of English in India.* London: The English Company for The British Council, 2010, 66.

28 David Crystal. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 50.

29 Ramanujam Meganathan. "Language Policy in Education and the Role of English in India: From Library Language to Language of Empowerment." In: Hywel Coleman (ed.). *Dreams and Realities: Developing Countries and the English Language.* London: British Council, 2011, 57–86.

30 Forbes List 2008. <http://www.forbes.com/forbes/2008/0324/080.html> (accessed 1 March 2016).

31 Socioeconomic and Caste Census data for Rural India 2011. Released on 3 July 2015. <http://secc.gov.in/ reportlistContent> (accessed 4 March 2016).

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Summarizing some of the significant findings about the multi-faceted nature of rural poverty, *The Hindu* reports that "in nearly 75 per cent of rural households, the main earning family member makes less than Rs 5,000 per month. Fewer than 10 per cent make it to higher secondary or above and just 3.41 per cent of households have a family member who is at least a graduate."[32] An independent status report from *The Mckinsey Global Institute*[33] goes further and calls into question the official Indian definition of what counts as poverty (i. e. having less than ₹ 26[34] to spend per day). The report asserts that 680 million Indians (approx. 56 % of the entire population of India) cannot meet their essential needs; these needs include food, energy, housing, drinking water, sanitation, health care, education, and social security.

Moving from the issue of poverty and deprivation in India to that of language variety, it is clearly the case that the overwhelming majority of Indians who are economically and/or socially disadvantaged have acquired English only partially. Since such people function fully in their other languages, and their knowledge of the linguistic code of English is in the nature of a social commodity, it is not appropriate to refer to them as learners of English; it is more appropriate to refer to them as *users* of what Klein has referred to as "learner varieties" of English.[35]

That several of the features attributed to "Indian English" are features of learner varieties is consistent with the findings of recent research on the development of structural learning in second language acquisition research. Learner varieties, particularly at the grammatical level, are sequenced and have well-defined developmental routes[36] and stages, through which everyone must go regardless of what their first language may be. These common processes of second language acquisition are shaped largely by an accruement in the capacity that we share as humans to *process*[37] a language that is being learnt. For example, the types of question-formation structures which Kachru considers characteristic

32 Rukmini, S. and Samarth Bansal. "8 Reality Checks from the SECC." *The Hindu.* 3 July 2015. <http://www.thehindu.com/data/socio-economic-and-caste-censuss-data-on-standard-of-living-of-rural-households/article7383259.ece> (accessed 1 March 2016).

33 Rajat Gupta et al. "India's Path from Poverty to Empowerment." McKinsey Global Institute. February 2014. <http://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/asia-pacific/indias-path-from-poverty-to-empowerment> (accessed 4 March 2016).

34 Equivalent to about 35 cents as of 6 March 2016.

35 Wolfgang Klein. *Second Language Acquisition.*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, 29.

36 Patsy M. Lightbown and Nina Spada. *How Languages are Learned.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 77–107.

37 Manfred Pienemann. "Developmental Schedules." In: Manfred Pienemann and Jörg-U. Keßler (eds). *Processability Approaches to Language Acquisition Research and Teaching, Vol. 1. Studying Processability Theory. An Introductory Textbook.* Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2011, 3–11; also, Manfred Pienemann. *Language Processing and Second Language Development.* Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1998, 89–116.

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of "Indian English"[38] are actually typically representative of different stages of grammar learning that every learner of English as a second language will pass through.

Thus, both the socio-economic demographic realities of India and research on processes related to second language acquisition support the conclusion that a number of grammatical features attributed to "Indian English" are really features of learner varieties which mirror the competence of individual users. They do not reflect community language use, nor are they an outcome of "nativization", "acculturation" or "Indianization"; they are, to be more precise, tokens from the ideolects of individuals who reflect the deeply stratified nature of the distribution of educational and economic privilege in India. This leads to the crucial question of whether structures that derive from incomplete language learning in individuals can lead, in principle, to the development of a social variety or a dialect. If this is possible – and the majority of linguists would concede that it is – why has it not happened at the national level in India? What is an appropriate alternative narrative to the "Indian English" myth?

An alternative analysis of linguistic processes is possible if the relationship between language and multiple types of stratification is placed at the very heart of the discourse in the study of English in India, and indeed perhaps in the study of World Englishes, as a whole. In other words, in post-colonized settings of scale and diversity, there is a need for a diversity-centred, differentiating approach to the study of English. In the Indian context, a diversity-centred linguistic approach begins by affirming the existence of a number of distinct, largely independent, and describable geographical varieties of English, such as Tamil English, Hindi English, or Naga English. These varieties, usually phonological in nature, have all obviously arisen from language transfer from typologically different first languages. Running right across the palette of these geographical varieties are the learner varieties referred to earlier: And these learner varieties, as emphasized before, mirror the inequalities of educational opportunity, which arise from the deep abysses of poverty within which some Indians live.

The big cities of India are the settings where users of every type of variety come together in interaction. These include users of Standard English, and a wide range of non-standard geographical and/or learner varieties; here the privileged millionaire and the migrant from perhaps the poorest village in India are thrown together in situations that can be either fleeting or stable in nature. In such urban settings, the linguistic processes that are set into motion when English is used regularly can potentially be extraordinarily productive; these processes can lead, in principle, to the creation of new and varied forms of English at the phonological, lexical and even grammatical levels.

38 Kachru, *The Indianization of English*, 76–81.

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For example, a work-place in an urban setting can become the location in which people with different first language backgrounds and different socio-economic backgrounds might have to use English with one another on a regular basis. This could lead, over time, to the formation of relatively stable English-using speech networks. The linguistic feature of the English used by each participant can be regarded as contributing to what has been referred to as a "feature pool"[39] or a "supermarket of features".[40] In the Indian context, every grammatically-defined feature pool is likely to contain three basic types of linguistic features. These are features of learner language, contributed by those whose socio-economic backgrounds have precluded an English-medium education; features from participants with a range of different first language backgrounds, and features of Standard English grammar contributed by the more privileged members of the network. The exact proportion of the mix of these various types of features is likely to differ from network to network.

What kinds of processes of change can a language undergo in such a network? Since participants are likely to adapt their speech to one another in the course of interaction, a phenomenon known as "language accommodation"[41], a certain degree of linguistic convergence is likely to take place, over time, in stable speech networks. In other words, some features in the feature pool are likely to become increasingly favored over others within the network as a whole. This can, in principle and over a period of time, lead through a sequence of linguistic stages to the possible emergence of a new variety of the language, as Trudgill's study of New Zealand English has shown.[42] The dialect-formation process, however, is a long one which typically involves a sequence of other processes that take place over generations. Trudgill identifies these processes as mixing, levelling, unmarking, interdialect development, reallocation and focusing and refers to them collectively as "koineization".[43] Defining the term koineization, Tuten says it

> refers to a process of mixing of dialects (or mutually intelligible varieties of language) which leads to the rapid formation of a new dialect or koine, characterized by mixing, levelling and simplification of features found in the dialects which formed part of the original mix. Koineization generally occurs over the course of three generations (including first-generation adults during the "pre-koine") and is often found in new

39 Salikoko S. Mufwene. "Competition and Selection in Language Evolution." In: *Selection* 3,1 (2002): 46; also, Salikoko S. Mufwene. *Language Evolution.* London, Continuum, 2008, 16–26.

40 Peter Trudgill. *New-dialect Formation: The Inevitability of Colonial Englishes.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, 110.

41 Howard Giles and Philip M. Smith. "Accommodation Theory: Optimal Levels of Convergence." In: Howard Giles and Robert N. St. Clair (eds). *Language in Society: Vol. 1. Language and Social Psychology.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1979, 47.

42 Trudgill, *New-dialect Formation.*

43 Ibid., 83–99.

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towns, frontier region and colonies which have seen sudden in-migration followed by the establishment of a permanent community.[44]

Thus, urban settings in India have the potential, in principle, to generate new varieties of English which might well have numerous elements of learner language in them. The most appropriate way to refer to such possible varieties is to describe them as inter-language-based urban koines. Such possible koines are bound to vary not only from city to city, but also from network to network within the same city.

I must emphasize that variety-formation is possible, in *principle*. In reality, however, such variety-formation processes have actually not gone very far in the Indian context. My own analysis of koineization processes in India suggests that grammatical variety formation is deeply constrained, and has never actually gone beyond the initial sub-processes.[45] This may be due to a number of possible social factors such as the probable openness, or instability, of urban speech networks, as also to the limited number of domains in which English is used in the country as a whole.

There is also an over-riding linguistic factor which plays a crucial role in constraining the emergence of grammatically stable, non-standard urban koines: This is the presence in the feature-pool of items that are clearly ascribable to Standard English. The presence of Standard English, internationally recognized as being the gold standard in English language education even by people who cannot themselves use the variety, dramatically delimits the scope for the development of non-standard features that deviate from it too greatly. Standard English inhibits the development of non-standard varieties especially in contexts where English has been transmitted through education. Thus, the argument presented here explains not only why Indian English does not exist as a pan-Indian variety, but also why it is most unlikely that it ever will, at least at the levels of syntax and morphology.

In concluding this paper, I would like to suggest that those who adhere to the myth of "Indian English" have been able to retain their stance only because they have discounted the impact of socio-economic realities on variety-formation. Ignoring the value of such realities in linguistic study can lead to loss of another kind as well. It is likely to encourage linguists to remain gloriously unsighted to

44 Donald N. Tuten. "Koineization." In: Carmen Llamas, Louise Mullany and Peter Stockwell (eds). *The Routledge Companion to Sociolinguistics*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006, 186.

45 Vijaya J. Kohli. *Indian English? Reframing the Issue: A Diversity-centred, Sociolinguistic Approach to the English of Indians*. New Delhi: Pragun, 2017. My analysis suggests that the majority of grammatical features attributed to "Indian English" do not reflect "variety" (as defined earlier in this paper), and that no morphological or grammatical feature can be regarded as having being koineized on a pan-Indian scale.

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social or political movements that have the potential to change the entire sociolinguistic profile of a language and a nation. In India, for example, such a major re-definition of English is playing out. This has to do not only with the poverty-related issues that are driving more people out of villages to the big cities, but also with the caste-driven, politically and economically motivated espousal of English by the Dalit community, which comprises between 16 and 18 per cent of the entire Indian population. The Dalit advocacy of English, a language free of the caste-lects that mark the major Indian languages, could well lead to a complete reversal of the claim that English is a marker of elitism in India. There are, obviously, fascinating social and linguistic processes at work here; these, however, are likely to remain a closed book to linguists who continue to maintain a version of "Indian English" that does not take social diversity and economic disparities into account.

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4. Spatial Representations of Poverty

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Miriam Gertzen

Space-situatedness and Localised Poverties in Recent Young Adult Dystopian Novels

Many British and US-American young adult dystopian novels published since the early 2000s address themes that have been discussed in postcolonial studies for a while, such as neo-imperialism, and they also engage in the contemporary debate on poverty. In their study *Poverty in Contemporary Literature: Themes and Figurations in the British Book Market* (2014), Korte and Zipp point out that "speculative writing, science fiction and its generic neighbour, utopian and dystopian fiction […] 'often imply […] critiques of contemporary conditions or possible future outcomes of current social trends'",[1] which are "targeted [at] capitalism, (neo-)colonialism and inequality".[2] Furthermore, these genres are said to have "sympathies with the marginal and the different",[3] and their "particular amenability to experimentation"[4] has rendered them popular for appropriation by formerly marginalised social groups, which underlines their relevance to a discussion in the present context. This analysis will draw on concepts borrowed from postcolonial studies, in particular the well-known (and perhaps well-worn) centre-periphery-dichotomy, as this concept includes a very clear spatial aspect and links it with the distribution of material wealth and questions of socio-cultural exclusion and capabilities. Martha Nussbaum's approach to and conceptualisation of capabilities will also be underlying this analysis. She identifies ten central capabilities which she understands as "fundamental entitlements inherent in the very idea of minimum social justice",[5] thus

1 Barbara Korte and Georg Zipp. *Poverty in Contemporary Literature: Themes and Figurations in the British Book Market.* Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, 46. They in turn quote Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. "Marxist Theory and Science Fiction." In: Edward James (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 113.

2 Korte and Zipp, *Poverty in Contemporary Literature*, 46.

3 Adam Roberts. *Science Fiction.* London: Routledge, 2000, 29.

4 Dunja Mohr. *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2005, 45.

5 Martha Nussbaum. "Capabilities, Entitlements, Rights: Supplementation and Critique." In: *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 12,1 (2011), 24–5.

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shifting the focus of attention from material deprivation alone to, in Korte and Zipp's words, "an encompassing socio-cultural exclusion and a lack of agency, opportunities and access (to knowledge, tradition, rights and capabilities)".[6] Both aspects of poverty, material deprivation and a more general social exclusion, are negotiated in many young adult dystopian novels and allocated to different spaces within the societies and worlds they represent.

Out of the many titles that have been published for young adults in the dystopian genre since the millennium, two titles have been selected to be examined in this paper, one from each side of the Atlantic. *Exodus* by Scottish author Julie Bertagna was first published in 2002,[7] while *Matched* by the US-American author Ally Condie was published in 2010.[8] In each case, the main focaliser is a teenage girl. While the narrator in *Exodus* is heterodiegetic with the protagonist, Mara, as the main focaliser, Cassia in *Matched* serves as an autodiegetic narrator. Both novels are the respective first instalments in a trilogy, but for practical purposes only these first novels will be analysed here. Both novels deal with questions of poverty and space-situatedness in a similar way, but from different perspectives, and both novels represent socio-political conditions that can be regarded as neo-imperial. In the following, the way in which the centre-periphery concept is evoked in – and contested by – these novels and in which aspects of poverty and capabilities are intertwined with this representation and contestation will be outlined. Furthermore, it will be shown how the position of the 'other' is reconfigured as the driving force behind the struggle for social justice and as engendering agency. It is particularly rewarding to look at such representations, contestations and subversions in the context of young adult literature for several reasons. Firstly, it is one of the functions of young adult or adolescent literature "to socialize its audience by presenting desirable models of [...] human behaviour [...] and ways of being in the world".[9] Young adult dystopian novels encourage young readers to question their perception of poverty, both material and otherwise, as well as their own space-situatedness. Secondly, many critics have pointed out that 'the adolescent' or 'the young adult' is often perceived as a "borderline identity, situated on the threshold between childhood and adulthood"[10] and as "occupy[ing] an uncomfortable liminal space"[11] in

6 Korte and Zipp, *Poverty in Contemporary Literature*, 2.
7 Julie Bertagna. *Exodus.* London: Young Picador, 2002.
8 Ally Condie. *Matched.* New York: Razorbill, 2010.
9 Robyn McCallum and John Stephens. "Ideology in Children's Books." In: Shelby A. Wolf (ed.). *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature.* New York: Routledge, 2011, 361.
10 Alice Curry. *Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction. A Poetics of Earth.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 6.
11 Roberta Seelinger Trites. *Disturbing the Universe. Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000, xi.

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society. Consequently, youth or adolescence are perceived as "disruptive categor[ies]".[12] Young adults thus can be said to occupy an interstitial and potentially subversive position and are therefore already confronted with having to negotiate their space-situatedness, namely that between childhood and adulthood. The liminal, disruptive and subversive aspects ascribed to adolescence and evoked in these dystopian novels for young adults seem particularly apt for challenging traditional concepts and ideologies such as those linked to (neo-) imperialism and other forms of inequality.

Edward Said has defined imperialism generally as "the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory",[13] while the term 'neo-imperialism' denotes a continuation of such domination, especially economically and culturally, after the former colony has gained independence. Said's definition already includes the centre-periphery-model, indicating the geographical as well as ideological segregation of these two spheres. The novels under discussion evoke this concept by clearly establishing the spaces of a powerful, materially affluent metropolitan or urban centre on the one hand and setting it in opposition to a violently oppressed and exploited periphery on the other hand. However, the distances implied in the colonial and postcolonial centre-periphery-model are considerably shrunk in these novels. In the respective futures envisioned here, the segregated spaces in the neo-imperial situations represented exist within one and the same (former) country or nation-state (e.g. the US), and, as in the case of *Exodus*, even in direct neighbourhood to each other. Importantly, these areas or former nation-states are situated in the traditionally wealthy countries of the Global North. Cassia, the protagonist of *Matched*, grows up in a metropolitan centre of the Society, a socio-political system that has replaced the United States. The protagonist of Bertagna's novel *Exodus*, Mara, on the other hand, originally comes from a small island in the far north of Scotland, which she and most of the other islanders have to leave as their home is threatened by the rising ocean levels that have already drowned most of the world. They become refugees in search of a new home, which they hope to find in the sky city of New Mungo, built on the drowned ruins of Glasgow. While, in contrast to Cassia, Mara thus represents a 'marginal(ised)' perspective, both her original home and the place she hopes will become her new home are located in the West. Assuming that the implied readers are situated predominantly in wealthy Western countries, this transplanting of the spatial dichotomy as well as of the implied ideologies from a global scale to the de-familiarised but still very recognisable territory of countries of the Global North, confronts the implied

12 Kimberley Reynolds. *Radical Children's Literature. Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction.* Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 84.
13 Edward Said. *Culture and Imperialism.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1993, 8.

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reader with issues of domination, socio-cultural exclusion and disenfranchisement. Moreover, this confrontation happens within the space of countries she/he either calls home or recognises as symbolising similar cultural and political values to her/his own home countries. Additionally, the arbitrariness of being situated in a specific place and taking a certain ideology for granted is underlined.

The novels represent the distribution of material wealth or poverty as well as that of (neo-)imperial domination and oppression along the traditional lines of the poor and oppressed being situated in the margins and the wealthy and powerful being situated in the centre. After having left their home island, Wing, to travel south on a perilous journey in search of New Mungo, the existence of which Mara has learned of from a Fox-avatar in the remains of the internet, she and her fellow islanders find that the sky city – so called because it stretches into the sky in a tree-like structure – is surrounded by a wall barring entrance to anyone outside (*Exodus* 66). Along the wall, another marginalised space in the form of a huge refugee boat camp has formed, in which people who, like Mara and her group, have been displaced through the drowning of the planet live in desperate conditions. The first description of this boat camp as well as further graphical descriptions in which the terms "horror" and "terror" reoccur frequently recall the material poverty and abjection of slum-life:

> There is no land or harbour, only a blurred mass that heaves and bobs around the city. A huge, dull-coloured live thing. The vile, rotting stench of an open drain hits as the clustering thing sharpens into focus. Mara gasps as she sees it's a heaving mass of humanity. A chaos of refugee boats crams the sea around the city and clings like a fungus to the huge wall that seems to bar all entry to refugees. […] all kinds of people […] are crushed here into a common pulp of human misery. The sea runs red with sunrise, the water steams, the noise and stench are terrible. This is unreal, thinks Mara. It's hell on Earth. […] The putrid, stomach-turning stench of sewage, sweat and sickness is overwhelming. (*Exodus* 66; 69–70)

Fiona McCulloch also links this scene to aspects of abjection when she contends that "[t]he walls surrounding New Mungo […] metaphorically denote the border dividing the privileged from society's abject and dispensable."[14] The division, however, is not only metaphorical but very real and with very real consequences for the refugees' lives. As Bradford and Baccolini have argued with regard to another young adult dystopian novel, "[s]patial distribution becomes […] one more way in which inequalities are maintained".[15] The fact that the refugees are

14 Fiona McCulloch. "A New Home in the World. Scottish Devolution, Nomadic Writing, and Supranational Citizenship in Julie Bertagna's *Exodus* and *Zenith*." In: *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature.* 38,4 (2007), 74.

15 Clare Bradford and Raffaella Baccolini. "Journeying Subjects: Spatiality and Identity in Children's Texts." In: Kerry Mallan and Clare Bradford (eds). *Contemporary Children's Lit-*

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unwelcome is underlined by the arrival of the city's armed sea police, commanding the new arrivals to turn back (*Exodus* 67). It thus becomes apparent that the authorities governing the sky city are well aware of the existence of the refugees but are unwilling to help them. Worse, in regular intervals the city conducts so-called "Pickings" among the refugees (*Exodus* 81). As Mara later learns, these serve to recruit slave labour for the expansion of the sky city and the entire New World, which encompasses all sky cities across the planet (*Exodus* 161). To her utter dismay, "Mara finds her safe town [safe from drowning, unlike her island home] only to realise that it is neither safe nor just."[16] The protagonist, situated outside of the sky city, finds herself deprived of some of Nussbaum's central capabilities[17] in that her bodily health and integrity are threatened by the conditions in the boat camp, the lack of adequate shelter and the danger of violent assault. The terms 'slave labour' and 'New World' already evoke the discourse of (neo-)imperialism, which is emphasised even more strongly by explicitly referring to the network of sky cities as an "empire in the sky" (*Exodus* 194), cruelly exploiting those it excludes. Material wealth and the power to dominate are thus undoubtedly allocated to the metropolitan centre of the sky city.

In *Matched*, the references to neo-imperialism are not as overt as in *Exodus*, which is at least partly due to the fact that the narrator-focaliser Cassia represents a metropolitan perspective on the society she lives in. However, a neo-imperial context is still clearly implied as the ruling Society upholds a relationship of domination and exploitation to its Outer Provinces and to people within the Society that are declared 'other' by being classified as "Aberrations" (*Matched* 46). Unlike "Anomalies, who have to be separated from Society" because they are categorised as dangerous, "Aberrations live among [the rest of Society]" (*Matched* 46). However, they are still relegated to the margins and exploited as "menial laborers" (*Matched* 284) in dangerous jobs that reduce the usual life expectancy (*Matched* 287). Similarly, the so-called Outer Provinces are described as marginal and as inferior to the rest of the Society early on in the novel:

> The Outer Provinces are on the geographic fringe of the Society where life is harder and wilder. Sometimes people refer to them as the Lesser Provinces, or the Backward

erature and Film: Engaging with Theory. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 52. The novel analysed by Bradford and Baccolini is M.T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002), but their argument fits many young adult dystopian novels.

16 Claire P. Curtis. "Educating Desire, Choosing Justice? Susan Beth Pfeffer's Last Survivors Series and Julie Bertagna's *Exodus*." In: Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad and Carrie Hintz (eds). *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults. Brave New Teenagers*. New York and London: Routledge, 2013, 95.

17 See Martha C. Nussbaum. *Creating Capabilities. The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2011, 33.

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> Provinces, because they have so little order and knowledge there. There's a higher concentration of Aberrations there than in the general populace. And even Anomalies, some say. (*Matched* 56)

This is almost an exact mirror image to colonial representations of the colonies and it also echoes present-day images of the Global South in many Western media representations. The spatial allocation of material comfort and prosperity as well as of 'civilisation' is obvious in this quotation. As the novel continues, further details on the Society's dealings with the Outer Provinces and with those it has labelled as "Aberrations" transpire. The Society is waging a war on a neighbouring territory and has used the population of the Outer Provinces as cannon fodder. A film that Cassia initially thinks is fictional because it seems "over the top" and "[g]arish" in its representation of "sullen, hard, sad-looking" people, "dangerous, almost-empty streets" and "sinister black aircraft" attacking the people (*Matched* 90), is later identified by Ky, a boy from her neighbourhood and Cassia's love interest, as actual footage (*Matched* 274). While Cassia thinks that "[t]his isn't what death looks like" (*Matched* 90), Ky confirms that "[i]t happens in all the Outer Provinces" (*Matched* 274). When "[a]ll the original villagers are dead", the 'Aberrations' are conscripted and sent to almost certain death (*Matched* 322). This practice is reminiscent of colonial/imperial practices such as shipping off convicts to far-away places, thus 'outsourcing' "unsolved social problems such as violence and poverty: […]. Spatial displacement thus mirrors social aberration from the standard."[18]

Cassia finds out about these goings-on only slowly. Despite her earlier claim that the people in the Outer Provinces have "so little […] knowledge" (*Matched* 56; see above), it becomes more and more obvious that it is she, and by extension many others who like her are situated in the urban, central and therefore favoured areas of their Society, who are lacking in knowledge and awareness of the situation. In this way, this novel and also Bertagna's *Exodus* subvert the ideology behind the centre-periphery-concept. The colonial 'centre' perceived itself as the centre of "culture, power and civilization",[19] which implies, amongst other things, an awareness of and pride in its traditions, heritage and cultural production ('culture'), political and economic superiority ('power') and the upholding and promotion of enlightenment values and ideas ('civilization'). The areas marginalised in this concept were, at least partly, defined by a lack of the above, and imperial as well as neo-imperial enterprises were justified by claiming to alleviate the cultural and civilizational poverty in the exploited countries. This ideology of allocating specific 'riches' and 'deprivations' to specific geographical spaces and,

18 Mohr, *Worlds Apart?*, 92.

19 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Studies. The Key Concepts.* London and New York: Routledge, 2013, 43.

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by extension, the people situated in these spaces, is deconstructed in the novels examined here. Despite their material poverty and disenfranchised status, that is their lack of economic and political power, the marginalised spaces in these novels and the characters associated with them possess other 'riches', linked to aspects of 'culture' and also of 'civilization', which are not granted to those living in the centres. Far from being spaces of culture, heritage, enlightenment and knowledge, the centres and their inhabitants are deprived of large parts of their history, cultural heritage and memory (and even of personal memories in the case of *Matched)* by the ruling authorities. Furthermore, they are prevented from gaining any substantial insight in the present condition of their society and the surrounding world. Their minds, in fact, are thoroughly colonised in the sense that they internalise those discourses with their implied norms and values that are distributed and upheld by the hegemonic power. To a certain extent, this status of the inhabitants of the sky city is similar to the condition of the colonised described by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind*[20] in that the colonisation of the mind results from the suppression of alternative versions of history and culture. However, while the colonised subject experiences self-alienation to the extent of seeing her- or himself as 'other', the inhabitants of the sky city are not necessarily alienated from themselves so much as from their surroundings. The "narrowing of geographical space" through "isolation and segregation"[21] from those that are materially disenfranchised consolidates the power of the ruling elite in the centres. As Mohr points out: "The less physical contact the differing social classes and cultures have, the better myths and propaganda can flourish."[22] Such "practices of ideological manipulation" are clearly "designed to exclude alternative realities".[23] It therefore transpires, for the reader, that the people in the centres are disenfranchised, too, but in contrast to those marginalised they are not or only partially aware of it.

Cassia is initially uncritical of the Society and accepts the strict regulation of people's lives, which ranges from the kind and amount of food they take in to which person they will marry (or be "matched" with) to the date of their death, without questioning any of it. In this respect, she strongly resembles the protagonist of the traditional dystopia, whose "citizen moves from apparent contentment into an experience of alienation and resistance".[24] Only when she starts

20 Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind.* In: John Thieme (ed.). *The Arnold Anthology of Postcolonial Literature in English.* London: Arnold, 1996, 79–83.

21 Mohr, *Worlds Apart?*, 93.

22 Ibid.

23 Curry, *Environmental Crisis*, 115.

24 Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan. "Introduction: Dystopia and Histories." In: Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (eds). *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination.* New York and London: Routledge, 2003, 5.

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to fall in love with Ky, who is not only *not* her official match but also classified as 'Aberration', does she notice the fact that the Society's regulations deprive her of central capabilities. Far from being a centre of 'culture' (tradition, heritage, art), the Society has reduced 'culture' in the widest sense to "the hundred best of everything: Hundred Songs, Hundred Paintings, Hundred Stories, Hundred Poems. The rest was eliminated." (*Matched* 29) Furthermore, children and teenagers are not taught how to write by hand or how to draw (*Matched* 81). In this strictly utilitarian society a development of the senses, the imagination and of critical thought, listed under Nussbaum's central capabilities,[25] is clearly prevented. Freedom of speech and expression or political participation are unthinkable, which runs counter to the image metropolitan centres have been producing of themselves ever since the time of colonialism. The first person to make Cassia self-consciously aware of this inability as a kind of deprivation, a poverty of expression, is her grandfather. After he has received a letter from Cassia that consists of sentiments she has cut, pasted and copied from a letter-making programme (*Matched* 71), he encourages her to "trust [her] own words" (*Matched* 81). But it is Ky, her love interest, who is most influential in alerting her to her lack of agency, which she shares with all people situated in the Society's centres. Like Mara in *Exodus*, Ky has been uprooted and displaced. Having grown up in the Outer Provinces before he was relocated to his aunt and uncle's place in Cassia's neighbourhood, Ky is not only fully aware of the Society's dealings in this marginalised area – he has lost his parents in the war –, thus possessing knowledge that is otherwise withheld, he is also able to draw and to write by hand. He begins to tell his story to Cassia by drawing pictures of himself accompanied by poetic short texts. Deeply admiring his ability "to create" (*Matche*d 170), she persuades him to teach her how to write. Simultaneously developing her emotions as well as her literacy and imagination makes her question the regulations imposed by the Society and to start the process of decolonising her mind. Ky's essential role in this process is emphasised repeatedly, since without the information he shares with Cassia and the skills and knowledge he passes on to her, she would have remained disenfranchised. It is therefore the socially and spatially 'other' to the metropolitan power as represented in the character of Ky who helps the metropolitan character, Cassia, to alleviate her lack of knowledge and poverty of expression. He becomes 'central' to her gaining agency.

Like Ky in *Matched*, Mara in *Exodus* is an outsider to the metropolitan space she encounters. Both characters transgress spatial and ideological boundaries by moving from the 'periphery' to the 'centre'. Like Ky, Mara possesses knowledge and insight that the people situated in the sky city are deprived of. When she is still part of the refugee boat camp Mara already asks herself: "Are the people of

25 See Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 33–4.

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the sky city so bedazzled by their glittering New World that they can't see beyond it to the human catastrophe right outside their wall? Do they not know what is happening?" (*Exodus* 72) The answer to the latter question, clearly, is 'no'. This fact is foreshadowed when Mara and the other islanders are still on Wing, debating whether or not to try and find the sky city. Mara's friend Gail is sceptical of the existence of such cities because she thinks that "'if there were giant cities out there […] [s]omeone would have come and told us'" (*Exodus* 21). Gail's brother Rowan is suspicious of the sky city's politics because he is critical of people's behaviour in general. He argues that "'[t]hey'd do exactly what we've done and just look after themselves'" (*Exodus* 22). The sky city's initial isolation thus becomes more understandable, but at the same time its behaviour towards the refugees who come and seek help right outside the city wall is not excused. Once Mara manages to get past the wall, she realises that underneath its huge towers and connecting tunnels there are some small islands, the highest peaks of the old city of Glasgow, that still remain above water. Situated directly underneath the sky city, they are cast in the almost constant shadow of this "arrogant monolithic structure".[26] The largest of these is populated by a group of people that call themselves Treenesters because of the nest-like structures they have built as their homes in what they call the netherworld. Like Mara and the other boat refugees, they have no secure home and remain unacknowledged by the people in the sky city. As in the boat camp, here again "Mara must witness the abject misery of human suffering and degradation."[27] From the oldest woman of this group Mara learns how the sky city was built in the time when the Earth started drowning and how it was supposed to take in or at least provide help to everyone in need but instead "barred its doors […][,] became a fortress" and only allowed access to the brightest people (*Exodus* 196). Similarly to Ky's personal story told in pictures and poems, the old Treenester's stories "function as counter-hegemonic narratives, foregrounding beliefs, ideas and understandings that challenge"[28] the centres' 'official' narratives. In a change of focalisation from Mara to the boy behind the Fox-avatar who triggered her journey and lives in the sky city, it becomes clear that the rulers of the city have "*remade or banished*" the past and replaced it with "*a synthetic Theme Park of the past*" (*Exodus* 216), thus depriving the people of their heritage and collective memory. Again their minds seem to have been colonised through this manipulation of certain aspects of 'culture'. As in many dystopian texts, "[h]istory is envisioned [here] as a tool in the hands of the reigning hegemony: a relic of colonialism and an instrument of domi-

26 McCulloch, "A New Home in the World," 74.
27 Ibid., 85.
28 Curry, *Environmental Crisis*, 116.

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nance".[29] Fox, who is aware that something is amiss and tries to recover what has been remade or banished, experiences this colonisation of the mind as an acute lack and actually compares knowledge of the past to material wealth: "*he seeks what he knows is the real treasure, the lost gold that is the past.*" (*Exodus* 215) Only when he meets Mara, who has managed to secretly access the sky city and shares her own experience of the outside world as well as the old Treenester's story with him, is he able to overcome this lack of knowledge and resolves to take action to change his society. Thus, as in *Matched*, it is again the 'other' who is represented as an agent and as engendering the development of agency in others. The fact that Mara has to rely on Fox's technical skills and familiarity with the geography of New Mungo in order to rescue the slave labourers, boat refugees and also herself furthermore implies the importance of "dialogue between people from different positionings as the only way to 'approximate truth'",[30] thus countering and transgressing the isolation and segregation created by the centre. This point is elaborated in the further instalments of both Bertagna's and Condie's series, and as they continue, it is emphasised not only that "the relational connections established among *similarly marginalised characters* create opportunities for transforming action", as Yvonne Hammer contends,[31] but also that co-operation between initially marginalised and initially centrally-positioned characters is necessary in order to create a better future for everyone.

Concluding, in both novels, those situated in the margins, while still being cast as materially poor, socially excluded, oppressed and 'other' to the metropolitan centres, are the ones that possess coveted knowledge and skills that are important for creating social justice for everyone. Each space of the centre-periphery-dichotomy represents different aspects of poverty, lack and exclusion, and it is the characters' space-situatedness that determines what they have and know. Thus the 'centre' is de-centred and the 'margins' are valorised, emphasised by the fact that the metropolitan characters Cassia and Fox physically and voluntarily re-situate themselves at the end of these novels. While Cassia has herself sent to a work camp in the Society's periphery on purpose in order to find a way to save Ky, Fox "*jumps* [from the sky city] *into the black water of a netherworld he has never known*" (*Exodus* 308) in order to learn more from the Treenesters and to start a revolution in the New World. Both Cassia and Fox can be said to fulfil the disruptive and subversive potential linked with adolescence. Their development into questioning and resisting characters is represented as indispensable for their

29 Ibid., 112.

30 Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davis. "Standpoint Theory, Situated Knowledge and the Situated Imagination." In: *Feminist Theory* 3,3 (2002), 319.

31 Yvonne Hammer. "Confronting Ecological Futures: Global Environmental Crises in Contemporary Survival Quests for Young Adults." In: *Barnboken* 2 (2010), 38–9 (emphasis added).

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gaining of agency and thus serves as a positive example for the implied readership. The characters of Ky and especially of Mara, by contrast, represent the revalued position of the 'other', but at the same time, through their embeddedness in the remnants of Western culture as the implied reader knows it, serve as figures the reader can identify with. These characters' dual function serves both as an embodiment of the liminal, interstitial position supposedly occupied by adolescents in general, and as a possibility for readers to experience themselves as 'other'. Such an experience and the fact that life in the metropolitan centres is represented as materially secure and comfortable but undesirable if it goes hand in hand with ignorance, conscious or unconscious cruelty and a colonisation of the mind has the potential to raise young readers' awareness of their own space-situatedness and to make them question it. The novels discussed here as well as many other recent young adult dystopian novels fulfil the didactic function of socialising their audience in that they ask the readers to critically engage with and to confront their own notions of what is 'central' or 'marginal' and of how they perceive poverty, be it material or otherwise. Through an active engagement with these texts, readers might find that they, too, need to 'reposition' themselves in current discourses on local and global poverty, capabilities and social justice, in a similar way that Cassia and Fox re-situate themselves in the novels.

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Ellen Grünkemeier

South African Townships – Narrating Poverty in Spatial Terms in Sindiwe Magona's Writing

Introduction

"It is not merely the lack of income which determines poverty. An enormous proportion of very basic needs are presently unmet."[1] This evaluation is one of the starting points for the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) that the ANC-government under Nelson Mandela implemented in 1994. Defining poverty in broad terms in the opening lines of her introduction to *Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain*, Barbara Korte states, "Poverty is commonly understood today as material deprivation that goes hand in hand with social exclusion and lack: of agency, opportunities and access to knowledge, traditions, rights or capabilities".[2] Although focussing on Great Britain, this understanding of poverty holds true for South Africa as it stresses the non-material repercussions of material deprivation. Alleviating poverty is a central concern of the post-apartheid South African government because, as stated in the RDP: "No political democracy can survive and flourish if the mass of our people remain in poverty […]. Attacking poverty and deprivation must therefore be the first priority of a democratic government."[3] In addition to jobs, nutrition, health care and social welfare, housing is one of the basic needs addressed in the policy framework.

There is no set methodology on how to analyse poverty in spatial terms. Yet by studying the realities and representations of South African townships it becomes

1 *Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). A Policy Framework.* 1994. <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv02039/04lv02103/05lv02120/06lv02126.htm> (accessed 16 September 2015), Section 2.1.2.

2 Barbara Korte. "Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain: An Introduction." In: Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard (eds). *Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain.* Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2014, 1.

3 *Reconstruction and Development Programme*, Section 1.2.9. In 2011, this statement is reiterated in the National Development Plan, which shows that the South African government continues to stress the interrelation of democracy and people's living conditions.

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evident that South Africans are characterised as poor because of their inadequate dwellings and low standard of living. Townships are symbols of the social, cultural, racial and economic divisions that shaped and continue to shape (post-) apartheid South Africa. The neighbourhoods, streets and dwellings are largely defined by what they lack: street names, open space, recreational facilities, public transport, connections to the city centre, solid building structures, access to water, sanitation, electricity and other services – in a nutshell, urban planning. In Sindiwe Magona's writing – especially in her novels *Mother to Mother* (1998) and *Beauty's Gift* (2008) as well as her autobiographical text "Home" (2006) – townships take centre stage. The imagined spaces not only provide the setting, but serve to narrate poverty in spatial terms.

Bearing in mind the social, cultural and political dimensions of poverty, it is necessary to reflect upon the imbalances of power that shape public debates about and (literary) representations of poverty. These theoretical considerations shall set the ground for the subsequent analysis of Magona's writing.

The Politics of Imagining and Defining Poverty

The voices and perspectives of poor people have long been marginalised in politics, literature and culture. For this reason, questions concerning the power of and over representation are particularly pertinent when investigating poverty. In *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams defines "representative" historically in terms of a "considerable overlap between the sense (a) of making present to the mind and (b) of standing for something that is not present".[4] As far as representations of poverty are concerned, this double meaning has the effect that the poor are simultaneously present and absent: They are present(ed) in that they are spoken or written about, but they remain absent as social or historical agents. Representations of the poor are therefore shaped by the imbalance of power between the observer who creates and controls the images and the observed who have comparatively little scope for making decisions in this signification process.

Drawing attention to the production of mental images and meaning, Robert Asen states in his analysis of US-American public policy debates in *Visions of Poverty. Welfare Policy and Political Imagination:*

> Seeing is more than the perception of objects with the eyes. Sometimes it does not involve this kind of sensory perception at all. Seeing engages the imagination. It proceeds in this manner through the construction of mental images and impressions. This

4 Raymond Williams. *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [1976], 262.

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> mode of seeing invokes the polysemous quality of seeing as understanding, cognizance, acceptance, knowledge, experience, and heedfulness.[5]

Seeing – and seeing others – in this way has considerable social consequences because the "collective imagination […] often serves as a diffused background of shared assumptions, values, perceptions, and beliefs for matters identified explicitly as topics of discussion".[6] Stressing the creative and possibly radical and activist potential of imagining, he goes on to argue: "If imagining can conceive of things that are not present to one's senses […], then it also invokes actions or events not yet in existence. Imagining looks beyond the bounds of the existing and the limits of the established order to create and consider that which is not yet."[7]

Raymond Williams's and Robert Asen's discussions can be fruitful for the study of literary representations of poverty. Given the complex relations between language, meaning, text and context, literature does not simply 'reflect' its historical, social, and political contexts but serves as an aesthetic mediation between social reality and imagination. Constructing fictional settings, plot lines, characters and character constellations, it allows for different perspectives and alternative realities. Literature is therefore a means to engage with and challenge dominant fields of knowledge. In poverty studies, the critical scrutiny of literature can play a pivotal role because it adds to the debates and findings of the social and economic sciences.[8]

Yet, poverty is not only imagined in literature and culture but also in political debates because the understanding of poverty is based on different, and possibly competing, definitions of adequate living standards. For statistics and poverty measurement, the South African government sets a poverty line below which individuals are unable to purchase sufficient food to provide them with an adequate diet.[9] While there is no corresponding poverty line for accommodation, the following discussion shall help define poverty in South Africa in spatial terms.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme states in its section on "Housing and Services": "The RDP endorses the principle that all South Africans have a right to a secure place in which to live in peace and dignity."[10] While the statement identifies 'security', 'peace' and 'dignity' as the defining characteristics of adequate housing, these terms and concepts are too vague to serve as an actual

5 Robert Asen. *Visions of Poverty. Welfare Policy and Political Imagination.* East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002, 5.
6 Ibid., 6.
7 Ibid., 9–10.
8 See Korte, "Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain: An Introduction", 2.
9 See Statistics South Africa. *Poverty Trends in South Africa. An Examination of Absolute Poverty between 2006 and 2011.* Pretoria: Statistics South Africa, 2014, 7.
10 *Reconstruction and Development Programme*, Section 2.5.4.

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point of reference. The RDP therefore continues to specify minimum housing standards:

> As a minimum, all housing must provide protection from weather, a durable structure, and reasonable living space and privacy. A house must include sanitary facilities, stormwater drainage, a household energy supply […], and convenient access to clean water. Moreover, it must provide for secure tenure in a variety of forms.[11]

This detailed definition lists features of housing that can also be used as analytical categories in the discussion of literary representations. Yet the definition still leaves room for interpretation. What exactly is "reasonable" living space and privacy? Do these categories refer to individual houses only (e. g. number and size of rooms) or also to the density of dwellings in a certain area? What is "convenient" access to clean water? Who is in the – very powerful – position to decide which conditions are reasonable or convenient? These and similar questions cannot be answered on the basis of the RDP document.

The *General Household Survey 2013* by Statistics South Africa provides further data that help define standards of accommodation. It distinguishes between various types of dwellings including "dwelling/house or brick/concrete block structure on a separate stand", "semi-detached house in complex", "dwelling/house/flat/room in backyard" and "informal dwelling/shack in backyard" or "not in backyard".[12] As this selection shows, the survey focuses primarily on the building materials (e. g. brick) and the location of the dwellings (e. g. backyard). Each of these categories is sub-divided by the number of rooms in the dwelling, i. e. one to three rooms, four or five rooms and six or more rooms.[13] Across all population groups, the largest number of households by far live in a detached house with six or more rooms. This still holds true when considering the black population only.[14] Yet among the black population, a large number of households also live in an "informal dwelling/shack not in backyard" that features one to three rooms.[15] Not only are the types of dwellings sub-divided by the number of rooms but also by the main source of water and of energy for cooking, heating and lighting.

Studying the provision of basic services, the report *Poverty Trends in South Africa. An Examination of Absolute Poverty between 2006 and 2011* states that in 2011 almost 90 % of the households had access to electricity, almost three-quarters to piped water either inside their dwelling or in their yard, and more

11 Ibid., Section 2.5.7.

12 Statistics South Africa. *General Household Survey 2013.* Pretoria: Statistics South Africa, 2014, 121.

13 See ibid., 121.

14 See ibid., 122.

15 Ibid.

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than 60 % of the households to a flush toilet.[16] However, these general figures disregard the high levels of inequality that persist in South Africa, especially with regard to access to water and sanitation.[17] While approximately 80 % of households above the poverty line had access to water in their house or yard, only about 50 % of poor households did.[18] 75 % of non-poor households had access to a flush toilet, compared with 35 % of households below the poverty line. The report also shows that housing is expensive. In 2011, housing was the single largest contributor to the annual average household expenditure: It accounted for 32 % of expenditure, showing an increase of 48 % from 2006. While this was true for all population groups, the increase was highest among households headed by blacks.[19]

The conditions and cost of living are also of central concern to the political activist Ashwin Desai in his study *We are the Poors. Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa.* Focussing on Chatsworth, a township on the outskirts of Durban, he sketches the stories of some residents and locates them in the broader contexts of poverty, unemployment, solidarity, resistance and anti-government protests. In so doing, he draws attention to the "ongoing spiral of struggle against market-driven measures to make residents of poor communities become paying customers in a capitalist society supposedly made non-racial by the defeat of apartheid and by the embrace of the free market in its place".[20] Outlining how the high hopes and democratic ideals brought about by the end of apartheid have been co-opted by neoliberal policies of privatisation, he shows that the basic living conditions of the majority of South Africans have not improved: "Echoes of the apartheid past were heard in the neo-liberal present. Evictions, relocation, and disconnections vied with promises of housing, water, and a culture of human rights."[21]

Taking into account the challenges that definitions and representations of poverty entail, I will now turn to Magona's writing about the living conditions in South African townships.

16 See Statistics South Africa, *Poverty Trends in South Africa*, 50.

17 By comparison, differences in access to electricity are not that significant: about 90 % of non-poor and almost 80 % of poor households have access to electricity. The report attributes this similarity to the electrification that has taken place across the country; see ibid., 52–3.

18 The poverty line refers to the level of consumption below which individuals cannot purchase adequate food and non-food-items; see ibid., 7.

19 See ibid., 51. The second largest contributor to household expenditure is transport, which accounted for about 17 % of expenditure; see ibid., 50.

20 Ashwin Desai. *We are the Poors. Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa.* New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002, 7.

21 Ibid., 16.

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Imagining Poverty in Sindiwe Magona's Writing

Sindiwe Magona's novels *Mother to Mother* (1998) and *Beauty's Gift* (2008) as well as her autobiographical text "Home" (2006) narrate poverty in aesthetic terms by means of binary oppositions that contrast the deficient conditions in townships with a comfortable life in the suburbs. The category of 'lack' shall therefore serve to structure the following analysis of the fictional and non-fictional texts, all of which are set in and around Cape Town. Townships feature prominently in Magona's writing – especially Guguletu, located on the outskirts of Cape Town, where Magona herself lived for many years. This article will not offer a biographical reading of Magona's writing but I point out this overlapping of biography and fiction as a reminder of the complexities concerning the politics of representation. Following Raymond Williams's argument, it would be simplistic to read Magona as a 'representative' of the poor in the sense that she 'stands for' or 'speaks on behalf of' township dwellers.[22] Instead, her texts can be read as aesthetic products that address, negotiate and confront the simultaneous presence and absence of the poor in South African literature. Studying how the texts imagine poverty in townships and what functions these representations have, I will pay special attention to the aesthetics of the constructions by focussing on binary oppositions, metaphors, word choice and syntax.

Township vs. Suburb

In *Mother to Mother*, 'township vs. suburb' is a spatial opposition that introduces and characterises the setting. It sets apart the white suburb in which the first-person narrator Mandisa works as a maid from the township Guguletu where she lives with her family. While the text does not specify the suburb, Guguletu is named explicitly and described in detail, which shows that the novel foregrounds township life. Moreover, it is significant that the novel takes place in this particular township because the text straddles fiction and history by drawing on the historical case of the American student Amy Biehl who was killed by black youths in Guguletu in August 1993. Mandisa introduces the difference between suburb

22 In her compelling article "Class in the Discourses of Sindiwe Magona's Autobiography and Fiction", Margaret J. Daymond contends that Magona makes race so prominent an issue, especially in her autobiographical writing, that she forecloses questions of class in the construction of black South African identities. On a more general level, Daymond thus challenges the genre classification of autobiography as a 'view from below' that might help to understand how people experience oppression. See Margaret J. Daymond. "Class in the Discourses of Sindiwe Magona's Autobiography and Fiction." In: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21,4 (1995): 561–72.

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and township when she states: "Madam is not taking me to Guguletu […]. She never takes me to Guguletu. White people are not allowed to go there."[23] Mandisa attributes the behaviour of "Madam", Mrs Nelson, to a law that stops white South Africans from entering the townships. This fictional account seems to correspond to the historical contexts. As the *Apartheid Handbook. A Guide to South Africa's Everyday Racial Policies* explains, "[u]ntil mid 1985 non-Africans […] could legally enter African townships only if issued with a permit to do so."[24] Yet in 1985, an amendment relaxed the law considerably so that by 1993, the year in which *Mother to Mother* is set, it would have been possible for whites to enter a township. As apparent in Mandisa's comment, the novel highlights that visiting a township is not only a question of legal issues but also a matter of habit and attitude. The text thus underscores the contrast between suburb and township.

The spatial divide 'suburb vs. township' is also evident in *Beauty's Gift* as the women protagonists leave the township for the suburbs:

> Only Amanda still had a township house. Edith and Beauty had moved straight from their parents' homes to suburbia after they had married, and Cordelia had sold her Gugulethu house to raise a deposit on her suburban home. But Amanda and her husband, Zakes, had had enough between them, and she had not had to sell her house in order to buy the house in Muizenberg.[25]

Moving to the suburbs functions as an indicator of the women's upward social mobility. Yet the reference to Amanda who "had not had to sell her house" implies that a township house also has its benefits. In the course of the novel, the township house becomes a place of refuge for the women, "*our* Gugs home" (*BG* 92), where the women can stay (and stay away from their partners and families). In Amanda's case, the house is a visible marker of her emotional connection to the township. Working as a teacher at a local high school, she refuses to accept a post at a school in a more privileged suburb, not least because of her bad conscience: "She couldn't join the brain drain. She felt guilty enough as it was, running away to live in the relative safety Muizenberg appeared to offer." (*BG* 52) This careful phrasing implies that safety is a big issue in the townships but, as the narrator critically points out, also in the suburbs because it is only a "*relative* safety Muizenberg *appeared* to offer" (emphasis added).

23 Sindiwe Magona. *Mother to Mother.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1999 [1998], 24.

24 Roger Omond. *The Apartheid Handbook. A Guide to South Africa's Everyday Racial Policies.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986 [1985], 122.

25 Sindiwe Magona. *Beauty's Gift.* Cape Town: Kwela, 2008, 42.

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Lack of Safety

While a house should provide what the *Reconstruction and Development Programme* refers to as "a secure place in which to live in peace and dignity",[26] crimes as well as people's fear of crimes feature prominently in *Beauty's Gift*. One family has burglar bars and security gates installed to make their house and thereby their lives at home safer (see *BG* 132). Moreover, Amanda's neighbours in the township "are not at all thrilled that her house was unoccupied most of the time. They said the vacant look of the house encouraged thieves to prowl around, making the whole block vulnerable." (*BG* 43) Describing the neighbours' reaction as "not at all thrilled" is an understatement that expresses their worries about their well-being and their possessions in a polite way; yet it can also refer to their irritation with Amanda.

Even more so than houses, township streets are imagined in Magona's novels as possible crime scenes. While houses offer at least some security with their walls, windows and doors, streets lack such protection. This is particularly true for *Mother to Mother* as the American student is killed in the streets of Guguletu. The fears triggered by open and unprotected streets also become evident in *Beauty's Gift* when Doris, one of Amanda's friends, sits in her car outside of Amanda's township house: "What had she been thinking? Doris asked herself. […] A young woman alone in a white four-by-four, waiting opposite a house known to be uninhabited. And at night. In the middle of Gugulethu. Was she looking for trouble or what?" (*BG* 88) The incomplete sentences indicate that the surrounding – at night in a township – adds to the general lack of safety in the streets. Besides, it signifies that Doris sits in a four-by-four: While she can feel relatively safe since her car offers some protection, this particular car might also be prone to car-jacking.

Driving home from Guguletu to Muizenberg at night, Amanda wonders which route to take:

> She could take a roundabout route […]. It was safer, to be sure, but the drive towards the police station […] was long and lonely, especially this late at night. It would be faster to leave Gugulethu through the south side […]. That way, she'd be out of the township and its many dangers in less than a minute. (*BG* 51)

Readers do not learn which way Amanda chooses. Her actual decision is therefore presented as less significant than her thoughts and worries. Moreover, the quote clearly shows that Amanda associates danger exclusively with the township. As soon as she leaves behind Guguletu and drives towards her suburban home, she considers herself 'out of danger'.

26 *Reconstruction and Development Programme*, Section 2.5.4.

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In the event of a crime, another lack becomes evident: land lines. In order to call the police, a neighbour has to turn to "the only people in that whole long street with a land line" (*BG* 132). The land line makes this one family stand apart and, in terms of social hierarchies, above the other people in the "whole long street". By means of this detail, the novel draws attention to the differences among the township inhabitants.

Lack of Habitable Space

In one of her first descriptions of the township, the narrator of *Mother to Mother* states that "there is always trouble in Guguletu [...] since the government uprooted us from all over the show: all around Cape Town's locations, suburbs, and other of its environs, and dumped us on the arid, wind-swept, sandy Flats." (*MtM* 26) In this account of the forced removals[27], the verb 'dump' is telling as it characterises blacks – from the government's perspective – as 'rubbish' that is collected and left to rot. Following this logic, the "arid, wind-swept, sandy Flats" of the townships provide an appropriate location for black South Africans. Mandisa refers to the forced removals as "government's 'Slum Clearance' project" (*MtM* 29). The quotation marks and capital letters identify 'Slum Clearance' as the official apartheid terminology to describe and justify the relocations. With this label, the removals are classified as social welfare measures that seem to improve the living conditions of the underprivileged black South Africans. Yet Mandisa challenges the government's supposedly good intentions with a single rhetorical question: "Were we not still living in shacks?" (*MtM* 29)

References to both the sand and the wind are recurring elements in Mandisa's description of the township:

> Many families had to put up shacks on the white, white sand that said that the sea had withdrawn from this area only yesterday. Bleak. Unable to hold down anything, not even wild grass. In no uncertain terms, the coarse, unfriendly sand told us nothing would ever grow in such a place. It would take a hundred years of people living on it to

27 Colonial powers introduced townships in South Africa in the 1920s as separate residential areas for the non-white population. Such policies of racial segregation served to control the African majority and to secure the political, legislative and administrative privileges of the colonial forces. This practice of racial discrimination could be witnessed not only in South Africa, but across the continent. Not until 1948 did South Africa begin to stand out for its drastically rigidified racial divisions. The Afrikaner Nationalist Party came to power and introduced 'apartheid', which was designed to separate South Africans in virtually all spheres of social life on the basis of race classifications. Laws passed to implement this state policy included the Group Areas Act (1950), an attempt to physically separate the racial groups. In keeping with this government policy, many people were forcefully evicted from their homes and relocated to outlying suburbs.

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> ground the sand and trample some life into it so that it would support plant and animal. (*MtM* 28; also see *MtM* 30)

Emphasising its "white, white" colour sounds as if Mandisa praises the sand for its cleanliness. Yet this first impression is exposed as a misreading by the subsequent characterisation that presents the area as unwelcoming and as unsuitable for human habitation. The personification of "the coarse, unfriendly sand" goes even further by personifying the sand as an active opponent of the dwellers.

Sand is also a central element of how Magona characterises the setting of Blouvlei in her autobiographical piece "Home": "Sand. Sand. Sand. And everywhere and all around, sand."[28] With this syntax and repetition, she highlights the omnipresence of sand. In fact, she goes on to state that "the dominant feature of Blouvlei was the sand: bright-white, blinding-to-the-eye at the hilltops; and at the lows or flats, dull, dirty, almost black […] – any number of shades you care to guess in between these two extremes" ("Home" 108). None of the many different kinds and shades of sand provide suitable conditions for plants, animals or humans.

Lack of Open Space

While the township abounds in sand and wind, it lacks open space, which can also be read as an indicator of poverty in townships. Mandisa describes the township in terms of a paradox when she states that "Guguletu is both big and small. The place sprawls as far as eye can see. It is vast. […] All that space. But even as you look you suddenly realize that it will be hard for you to find a place where you can put a foot down. Congested." (*MtM* 27) Standing all by itself, the adjective 'congested' is particularly emphasised. To characterise the overcrowded conditions of Guguletu, this one word suffices and needs no further explanation in a grammatically complete sentence.

The verb 'to sprawl' has similar connotations as it is defined as "to spread or stretch out (something) in a wide or straggling manner".[29] Not only does 'to sprawl' refer to the enormous spread over a large area but also to the arbitrary development which, in this case, implies the lack of urban planning. This lack of regulations seems to contradict the policies of forced removals during apartheid. At closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that the lack of planning fits the political agenda. While the apartheid government has a strong interest in creating

28 Sindiwe Magona. "Home." In: Stephen Watson (ed.). *A City Imagined.* Johannesburg: Penguin, 2006, 108.

29 *Oxford English Dictionary (OED).* <http://www.oed.com.oxfordenglishdictionaryonline.shan01.han.tib.eu/> (accessed 16 September 2015).

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townships as separate residential areas for blacks on the outskirts of cities, the exact arrangement within the township is of no particular concern to the politically influential white South Africans. The straggling quality of township development corresponds to the image of 'dumping' blacks in these areas.

In fact, the verb 'to sprawl' is not only used in *Mother to Mother* but in different texts by different authors, which indicates that it is an established way of imagining townships.[30] In "Home", Magona presents Blouvlei as "a sprawling sea of shacks" ("Home" 108). The image of the sprawling sea underscores the metaphor's connotations of a vast and unregulated, yet undulating area. Magona actually makes explicit the lack of urban planning: "No one had thought to plan the location or, events having overtaken city planning, upgrade it" ("Home" 108). Yet she leaves open to interpretation what "events" exactly have overtaken city planning.

In *Mother to Mother*, Mandisa stresses the density of houses and people when constructing Guguletu as a "tin of sardines" (*MtM* 27) and a "forest of houses" (*MtM* 27). Both images draw attention to the lack of individuality as the township features a large number of uniform dwellings. The "tin of sardines" is an industrially manufactured item, whereas the "forest" metaphor suggests that this overcrowding is 'natural'.[31] With this reading, the image of the forest goes against Mandisa's conviction that the government can be held responsible for the poor living conditions in townships. Still, the metaphor also serves to illustrate the irregular and unplanned accumulation of houses. Moreover, the nature metaphor fits the subsequent personification in which Mandisa presents the houses as 'organic':

> Hundreds and hundreds of houses. Rows and rows, ceaselessly breathing on each other. Tiny houses huddled close together. Leaning against each other, pushing at each other. Sad small houses crowned with gray and flat unsmiling roofs. Low as though trained

30 In the introduction to his collection *A City Imagined*, Stephen Watson also uses the verb 'to sprawl' to characterise the townships on the outskirts of Cape Town. Arguing that Cape Town has often been constructed as "a tale of two cities", he states: "There is the city of the privileged, their rose and vanilla mansions hugging those contours of privilege close to the city's mountain chain, its forest slopes, and better beaches. On the other hand, there sprawls the immense city of the disposed and deprived, the apartheid dormitory towns and squatter camps, steadily filling up the waste ground between the city's mountain backbone and the barrier range of the Hottentots Holland." Stephen Watson: *A City Imagined.* Johannesburg, Penguin 2006, 3. With his collection, however, in which nineteen writers imagine their Cape Town, Watson shows that the city is more complex than the intertextual reference to Dickens seems to suggest.

31 The reference to 'forest' can also be read differently when taking into consideration Magona's autobiographical piece "Home". The section of Blouvlei where she lived with her parents was called 'Forest'. In "Home", Magona muses about the designation 'Forest': it might have been used "perhaps in sad recall of some faraway time when trees still lived in that now barren and dune-dotted landscape of tired sand and sad scrub" ("Home" 108).

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> never to dream high dreams. Oppressed by all that surrounds them… by all that is stuffed into them… by the very manner of their conception. And, in turn, pressing down hard on those whom, shameless pretence stated, they were to protect and shelter. (*MtM* 27)

Drawing on human activities such as breathing, smiling and dreaming, the narrator Mandisa presents the houses as animate. Expressing what effects the poor living conditions in townships have on buildings, she suggests that the situation is even worse for the inhabitants. While protection and shelter are held to be defining features of a house, this definition hardly applies to township dwellings as it is classified as mere "pretence". Nonetheless, the personification also implies that the houses and, by extension, the dwellers form a community by 'huddling close together' and by 'leaning against each other'.

Lack of Private Space

Not only do the overcrowded conditions in townships become apparent in the density of houses but also when studying individual accommodations. Before moving to Cape Town, Magona has "visions of grandeur" ("Home" 107): "A brick house with windows of glass. Electricity instead of candles and the infernal rag-and-can paraffin lamp. Water – not from the river but spouting right out of the inside walls of the very house in which I live – what magnificence! What splendour!" ("Home" 107–8) She anticipates that her future home in Cape Town will provide everything that her current dwelling lacks, namely a solid structure as well as access to electricity and piped water. The terms "grandeur", "magnificence" and "splendour" show that she does not take this standard of living for granted but considers it a luxury. Upon her arrival, however, she finds that her expectations are not met: "My Cape Town turned out to be a small, dark, damp room at the back of another family's shack" ("Home" 108). Furthermore, the dwelling is situated in "an area with no waste-disposal services" ("Home" 108). With these descriptions, Magona provides insight into *her* Cape Town, namely life in Blouvlei which lacks space, light, sanitation and privacy.[32]

After a shack fire, Magona's father is allowed to build "his own house to his own design – Kwazwelitsha! Our parents had their own bedroom – another first!" ("Home" 110) As these exclamations highlight, the space and privacy of a separate bedroom for the parents is extraordinary and, in view of the omnipresent poverty in Blouvlei, it can be read as a luxury for a family with three children. Yet,

32 This focus fits the agenda of Stephen Watson's collection *A City Imagined*, in which "Home" was published. Sindiwe Magona is one of the nineteen contributors to the collection who draw attention to the city's ambiguity.

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as with poverty, the meaning of luxury is also subject to change. The family continues to live in this house even when there are "three more children; and big brother and I were now in our serious teens" ("Home" 110). Poverty is here understood in terms of overcrowding as too many people have to share the two bedrooms. Judging by the quote, although Magona does not explain the criteria upon which her evaluation is based, the age and sexes of Sindiwe Magona and her brother add considerably to the congestion.

Poor conditions are not only found in private dwellings. In Blouvlei, the school, the church and the shop are also situated in small shacks (see "Home" 109). By comparison with the dense living conditions, the surrounding nature offers much open space that is accessible for free and for everyone, at least in terms of looking. Magona's "eyes, like all eyes, could feast freely on the mountain and the sea – the sea and the mountain" ("Home" 110). The verb 'to feast' denotes the pleasure that she derives from the mere sight of this environment. The repetition of the nouns 'mountain' and 'sea' emphasises their significance; the reversed order suggests that people's eyes can move back and forth between these open spaces. While referring to "the mountain", the text does not explicitly mention Table Mountain. The *lacuna* can be read to imply that the sight of any mountain can serve as a mind's refuge from overcrowding or, alternatively, that Table Mountain, as one of the most prominent South African landmarks and tourist attractions, is visible but beyond the reach of township inhabitants.

In *Mother to Mother*, the narrator Mandisa ironically comments that "these one-size-fits-all houses of Guguletu don't expand as the children come" (*MtM* 6), which is why her two oldest sons sleep in a *hokkie*, a shack in the backyard of their house. Her daughter stays in the house, in "the smaller of the two bedrooms" (*MtM* 6). While it does not become clear exactly how many rooms the house features, this arrangement implies that their dwelling allows for the separation of parents and children as well as of the sexes. Judging by bourgeois ideals of 'decency', the house thus allows for a 'respectable' standard of living. This is not to suggest, however, that township houses necessarily provide privacy. As Mandisa points out, "our walls are nylon thin; visitors from outside the townships often request their hosts to lower the volume of the radio so that conversation can proceed at normal pitch of voice only to be informed that the radio blaring away is the neighbour's" (*MtM* 118). By using the plural when speaking of "visitors", "hosts" and "townships", she highlights that this anecdote does not refer to a particular incident but holds generally true for the living conditions in townships.

In fact, Mandisa's evaluation of different kinds of township dwellings changes in the course of her life. As a young woman and single mother, she is happy to find "a *hokkie* for rent at the back of someone else's house. A *hokkie* of my own" (*MtM* 145). Even if it is only a small shack with no further amenities, it serves as a

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metaphor for independence and privacy. Mandisa refers to the house at the back of which she lives as "the big house" (*MtM* 146), which suggests that she regards the house with respect because of its size and other conveniences. Later on, when she herself lives in such a township house with a *hokkie* in her backyard, her evaluation is less positive than the phrase "big house" suggests.

Conclusion

What it means to be poor is contingent as the understanding of poverty shifts with perspective, with historical, political and cultural contexts. It is therefore important to read various texts alongside each other, including documents on statistics, policy papers, (auto)biography and fiction. Engaging with literature can be particularly productive: While literature does not – or at least not necessarily – 'speak for' the poor, it imagines poverty and the poor. Read by a comparatively wide public, literature makes room for the issue in society at large. In so doing, it goes beyond the scope of scholarly investigations and can also add to political attempts at curbing poverty. However, bearing in mind the complexities of the signification process, literature cannot simply provide a 'straightforward' insight into poverty. As a polyvalent aesthetic construct, it allows for diverse ways of narrating and reading poverty.

Studying the realities and representations of South African townships, it has become apparent that accommodation can be read as a marker of poverty. In her writing, Sindiwe Magona addresses in some detail the material circumstances of everyday life in South African townships. Via the neighbourhoods, streets and dwellings, the fictional township inhabitants are indirectly characterised as poor, underprivileged and black. As for the aesthetics, binary oppositions serve as rhetorical devices to emphasise, if not to exaggerate, differences between townships and suburbs. Yet Magona's writing not only draws on but also challenges this dichotomy. By means of comparisons, metaphors, repetitions and other stylistic devices, her texts imagine poverty in South Africa in more complex and ambiguous ways.

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5. Global and Local Displacements

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Paradise Lost: Intersections of Material, Cultural, and Emotional Poverty in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

Introduction

The theme of poverty and its different dimensions permeate the content, form, and the extra-textual relations of *We Need New Names* (2013), the first novel of Zimbabwean writer NoViolet Bulawayo.[1] Narrating the childhood and teenage years of Darling, a girl who grows up in present-day Zimbabwe and then moves to the United States at the age of thirteen, Bulawayo draws attention to the multiple faces of deprivation in both these countries: In Zimbabwe, people struggle with economic crises and hunger, the ravages of AIDS, political oppression, violence exerted by government partisans, and the dissolution of family and communal life. In the United States, the story focuses on the precarious situation of illegal immigrants and on their consequent feelings of anxiety and marginalisation, which are enhanced further by a consumer culture that thrives on instilling feelings of inadequacy and insecurity.[2] The loose episodic structure mirrors what the novel recurrently and intertextually refers to as 'things falling apart', a state of continuous and progressive disintegration that affects socio-economic configurations as well as human relationships.

This chapter will employ the analytical approach of figuration to explore the novel's representation of indigence in character portrayals, settings, and literary form in conjunction with the extra-textual relations of African writing in the

1 NoViolet Bulawayo is the pen name of Elizabeth Zandile Tshele, who was born in 1981 in Tsholotsho, Zimbabwe, and moved to the United States at the age of 18. Tshele adopted her pen name at college in order to honour the memory of her mother, Violet, who died when the author was eighteen months old. In Northern Ndebele, Tshele's mother tongue which is spoken by about 20 per cent of the Zimbabwean population, 'No' means 'with.' Tshele's pen name therefore expresses identification both with her mother and her home town Bulawayo. See Alice Driver. "Writing about Women at the Margins: An Interview with NoViolet Bulawayo." In: *Vela – Written by Women.* <http://velamag.com/writing-about-women-at-the-margins-an-interview-with-noviolet-bulawayo/> (accessed 17 February 2016).

2 See Renata Salecl. "Success in Failure, or How Hypercapitalism Relies on People's Feeling of Inadequacy." In: *Parallax* 9,2 (2003): 96–108.

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diaspora. It will demonstrate that Bulawayo identifies poverty as a structural phenomenon both in Zimbabwe and in the United States that is distinguished by an interdependence of material deprivation, cultural disempowerment, and the emotional isolation of the individual. The intersection of these dimensions of poverty, my analysis of the novel will show, undermines the characters' self-awareness and their ability to establish profound relationships, eventually leading them to disregard values such as empathy and compassion. Based on the sociology of Norbert Elias, the figurations approach was chosen because it facilitates the examination of connections between intra-textual and extra-textual aspects of poverty representation. Elias aimed to overcome the "conceptual polarization" of the sociological categories "individual" and "society" which, he argued, represent "different but inseparable levels of the human world" that are interdependent in configuration and process.[3] In literary criticism, 'figuration' examines how literature presents "images and imaginations of the world through their specific textual elements and structures" and "the way in which literature performs in society", which takes into account the literary marketplace, author positions and perspectives, and their discursive impact on the text:

> A figurations approach to poverty in literature [has] to address levels of presentation that concern individual texts as well as their extra-textual relations. In addition to the *market* configurations […] and a basic configuration through *genre* (which predetermines a text's decisions on content and form as well as the relationship between a text and its readers) it entails questions on several dimensions.[4]

Dimensions explored in a figurations analysis include intra-textual features of a novel such as characters and their circumstances, narrative mode, perspective and voice, and rhetorical means of poverty representation as well as extra-textual aspects like the question of agency, which problematizes the "dilemma of poverty representation" describing "the contradiction between poverty that has been existentially experienced, and access to and agency over representation".[5]

Proceeding from the UN definition of poverty as "the lack of basic capabilities to live in dignity" and as "a human condition characterised by sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights",[6] the analysis will investigate and

3 Norbert Elias. *What is Sociology?* Translated by S. Mennell and G. Morrissey. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984 [1978], 129.

4 Barbara Korte and Georg Zipp. *Poverty in Contemporary Literature: Themes and Figurations on the British Book Market.* Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 12.

5 Ibid., 14.

6 United Nations. *Substantive Issues Arising in the Implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Poverty and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.* UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,

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compare the representation of want in the two national settings of the novel, Zimbabwe and the United States. The chapter will begin with a discussion of the extra-textual relations of the novel and correlate Bulawayo's depictions of Zimbabwean society and US-American culture with her position as a diasporic writer. Reflecting critically on the text's international reception, it will problematize the accusation that the author exploits 'Africa' by imagining what Helon Habila dismisses as a sensationalist "Caine-prize aesthetic"[7] arguably conceived for a Western, metropolitan audience.

Double Binds and Diasporic Writing

NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* made her the first Black African woman to be shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. In Zimbabwe, her novel was enthusiastically received, hailed as an example of the return of the younger generation of writers to their country's "traditions of [literary] dissent [that has now] been revitalised through articulate craftsmanship and clever plotting […] not weighed down by the message".[8] The novel's "deceptively simple narrative style, which is underpinned by a subtle humour and an inventive use of imagery"[9] was praised by Zimbabwean reviews as successfully portraying

> the main characters, young street children in Bulawayo, [as] a reflection of their elders; *their poverty is an indictment of those who robbed them.* The world that comes to light in this narrative has many dimensions, by no means all in harmony with one another, because it is complex and contradictory, and the writer did not simplify it into a political pamphlet or reduce it to an ideological thesis. She managed to let the real Zimbabwe with all its crazy contortions appear on the pages of this book.[10]

E/C.12/2001/10. Geneva: United Nations. 10 May 2001, 2–3. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cescr/docs/statements/E.C.12.2001.10Poverty-2001.pdf> (accessed 22 February 2016).

7 Helon Habila. "We Need New Names by NoViolet Bulawayo – Review." *The Guardian.* 20 June 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/20/need-new-names-bulawayo-review> (accessed 17 February 2016).

8 "Literature Now Devoid of Political Rage." *The Standard.* 10 March 2014. <http://www.thestandard.co.zw/2014/03/10/literature-now-devoid-political-rage/> (accessed 23 February 2016).

9 Daniel Mandishona. "*We Need New Names:* a Review." *Harare News.* 9 September 2013. <http://www.hararenews.co.zw/2013/09/we-need-new-names-a-review/> (accessed 23 February 2016).

10 Oscar Wermter SJ. "Surviving the Great Robbery. *We Need New Names*, by NoViolet Bulawayo." *Mukai / Vukani. Jesuit Journal for Zimbabwe* 67 (2014): 24. <https://issuu.com/jescomzimbabwe/docs/mukai_67_booklet_final_draft> (accessed 23 February 2016) (emphasis added).

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Bulawayo's decision to explore the alienation experienced by Zimbabweans in the diaspora was noted with particular appreciation. Daniel Mandishona draws attention to the novel's sensitive portrayal of the dilemma faced by illegal immigrants, who first have sacrificed their belonging to a home, and in exile are forced to realize that they are alienated even further because their new experiences cannot be communicated to those who have remained behind:

> Darling cannot tell her friends about Tshaka Zulu, a wandering minstrel who sings traditional songs at weddings in between bouts of a pernicious derangement. She cannot tell them about Dumi, her Aunt Fostalina's ex-boyfriend who has a sham wedding for the sole purpose of securing the "papers" that will legitimise his stay. She cannot tell them that the humiliation Dumi endures at his own wedding is a small sacrifice; the prize is worth the shame.[11]

Zimbabwean writer and critic Tendai Huchu calls *We Need New Names* "the Great Zimbabwean Novel" not least because it "delights in playing with the English language, bending it, distorting it, hammering it into the shape of a uniquely Zimbabwean novel, with Shona and Ndebele in the text [and] weird humour layered upon serious issues".[12] A review article in *The Standard*, Zimbabwe's largest Sunday newspaper, lauded Bulawayo for successfully dramatizing "our society's manifold connections with the wider world", claiming it was "the interconnected experience of home and life abroad [that] makes her writing […] relatable to everyone. If this is the direction Zimbabwean literature is taking, the future is bright."[13]

In notable contrast to the novel's reception in Bulawayo's native country, international criticism has been less unanimously positive. The Nigerian-born, US-based writer Helon Habila dismisses the novel's "Caine-prize aesthetic" which he believes misrepresents "the existential realities of Africa",[14] whereas Nigerian-Canadian poet and critic Amatoritsero Ede accuses Bulawayo of a "strategic exoticism"[15] that

> resurrect[s] a historically familiar metropolitan black persona – the performing "black face," [which now combines] new textualities with self-anthropologizing themes and sensational narrative strategies, further "haloed" by extratextual identity politics based

11 Mandishona, "*We Need New Names.*"

12 Tendai Huchu. "*We Need New Names* – Review." *The Standard.* 28 July 2013. <http://weaverpresszimbabwe.com/index.php/reviews/101-we-need-new-names/559-we-need-new-names-the-standard-by-tendai-huchu> (accessed 23 February 2016).

13 "Literature now Devoid of Political Rage."

14 Habila, "We Need New Names by NoViolet Bulawayo."

15 Amatoritsero Ede. "Narrative Moment and Self-Anthropologizing Discourse." In: *Research in African Literatures* 46,3 (2015): 120.

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> on personal tales of dislocation, [which has] potent market value, a potential for attracting metropolitan prizes and its resultant consecration and canonizing status.[16]

US-American writer Uzodinma Iweala disagrees with these critics insofar as he claims that it is the novel's depiction of present-day Zimbabwe that is particularly "strong in its ability to make Darling's African life immediate without resorting to the kind of preaching meant to remind Western readers that African stories are universal".[17]

The conflicting responses to Bulawayo's novel epitomize the "dilemma of poverty representation"[18] mentioned above. While the depiction of indigence in creative writing is often considered a political practice that is supposed to raise awareness and encourage activism, it is also expected to avoid the snares of stereotyping poverty and the poor – here of 'African' origin – that come with narratives using supposedly sensationalist images designed to elicit sympathy. In a figurations analysis of *We Need New Names*, the diasporic position of the author and the question of who responded from where are of particular relevance. Several diasporic African reviewers who criticized the novel's depiction of Zimbabwe read it as a contribution to an international discourse about Africa. They identified Bulawayo as an African writer whose representation of her native country would be considered 'authentic' by non-Zimbabwean readers, and who is therefore expected to create a comprehensive image of the southern African nation that is aware of, and carefully avoids reaffirming, colonialist stereotypes. These demands determine the critique of Ede and Habila in particular. Ede considers neither Bulawayo nor her novel as portraying Zimbabwe; he discusses her only as an "African writer", her characters as "African" children and the poverty depicted as typically "African dystopia",[19] whereas the novel's own "critique [of] stereotypes about Africa" is regarded as a "metafictional double bind".[20] And while Habila briefly mentions that parts of *We Need New Names* are set "somewhere in Zimbabwe" where "pro-Mugabe partisans [are] attacking white folk", he dismisses the features that identify the country as "palpable anxiety to cover every 'African' topic; almost as if the writer had a checklist made from the morning's news on Africa."[21]

Tendai Huchu rebuffs such diasporic criticism of Bulawayo's novel, wryly suggesting not only that Habila's own fiction "is perhaps a stronger candidate

16 Ibid., 123.
17 Uzodinma Iweala. "Difficult Terrain. 'We Need New Names,' by NoViolet Bulawayo." *The New York Times*. 7 June 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/09/books/review/we-need-new-names-by-noviolet-bulawayo.html> (accessed 17 February 2016).
18 Korte and Zipp, *Poverty in Contemporary Literature*, 14.
19 Ede, "Narrative Moment," 121.
20 Ibid., 122.
21 Habila, "We Need New Names by NoViolet Bulawayo."

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when it comes to 'ticking boxes of international interest'" but also insisting that "[t]hese critics miss the point in that authors are not tourism PR employees, and are free to choose any topic that interests them. Africans, Zimbabweans in particular, cannot airbrush the fact that there are desperately poor people in society and the state has, with impunity, violated their rights for decades."[22] The debate on whether Bulawayo or her critics are trapped by the double bind of the metropolitan gaze adds another dilemma to the challenge of poverty representation, and it can only be described as ironic that a novel which was celebrated in Zimbabwe for giving a realistic impression of the betrayed hopes of the country's younger generation is criticized abroad as reaffirming the bleak and stereotypical images that arguably continue to dominate Western ideas of 'Africa'. The figurations approach contributes to resolving the dilemma insofar as the analysis regards the depiction of the particular societies in question and the author's diasporic position as extra-textual interdependencies of the novel. Bulawayo has emphasized on several occasions that she considers herself to be a member of Zimbabwe's post-independence generation:

> [W]e really don't buy this stance against the west [sic] because we are aware of our problems, and our problems are really specifically home grown. I feel like it's a distraction, it's time people faced up to who and what is our problem. […]
> The election wasn't stolen by the west, the violence of 2008 wasn't carried out by the west. It's time to deal with facts as they affect us.[23]

To Bulawayo, addressing her native country's problems is a sign of self-confident citizenship. It is also an attempt to deal with Zimbabwe's economic decline during the years of her living in the United States, the impact of which astonished her upon her return: "I went there in search of the Zimbabwe I knew and it was a shock: power cuts, water cuts, just driving down the streets the potholes were amazing, and 80 % of the population not working. […] That was a picture of the country that I never knew."[24]

22 Huchu, "*We Need New Names* – Review."

23 David Smith. "NoViolet Bulawayo Tells of Heartbreak of Homecoming in Mugabe's Zimbabwe." *The Guardian.* 4 September 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/04/noviolet-bulawayo-homecoming-mugabe-zimbabwe> (accessed 17 February 2016).

24 Ibid.

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"The Home of Things Falling Apart"

We Need New Names is a novel about deprivation, enforced migration, the longing for home, and about "the fragility of expectation"[25] of an impoverished homodiegetic child narrator who gives voice to a symbolically dense perception of the processes and dimensions of disintegration she experiences in two twenty-first-century societies. The episodic structure of the novel, which consists of thematically connected short stories first set in the fictional Zimbabwean shanty town Paradise and then in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the protagonist's American place of exile, mirrors the disrupted lives and feelings of the so-called "born free" generation, which has grown up in an independent country but still feels forced to build a future elsewhere.[26] Published in 2013 after Bulawayo won the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2011 for her short story "Hitting Budapest", which forms the first story in *We Need New Names*, the novel features episodes of the childhood and adolescence of Darling Nonkululeko Nkala. Ten years old at the beginning, Darling moves to the US at the age of thirteen, where she spends her teenage years. An attentive and unsentimental observer, the girl's increasing isolation is illustrated by her detached observations from the margins of two countries, neither of which encourages in her a sense of belonging. Poverty is an omnipresent theme of the text, where it determines the personal lives, circumstances, actions, and perceptions of the characters as well as the conditions of their societies. Eventually, emotional privation becomes another dimension of poverty that influences Darling's self-awareness and reflections, reducing her response to her lifeworld to feelings of loss and loneliness.

At the beginning of the novel, material deprivation and hunger dominate the daily activities and adventures of Darling and her friends, none of whom have a protective family or attend school. They wander about the squatter settlement Paradise and occasionally leave for Budapest,[27] a wealthier area of their city where

25 Mandishona, "*We Need New Names.*"

26 While the novel gives no indication in which city the squatter settlement Paradise is supposed to be found, Wermter believes to have identified the author's hometown Bulawayo as the Zimbabwean setting of *We Need New Names.* See Wermter, "Surviving the Great Robbery," 24.

27 In Anglophone Zimbabwean literature, features such as apt names, repetitions, and formulaic structures show the influence of Shona and Ndebele oral narrative traditions. See George P. Kahari. *The Search for Zimbabwean Identity: An Introduction to the Black Zimbabwean Novel.* Gwelo: Mambo Press, 1980, 33. Bulawayo's novel contains several apt names that comment on the hopes and projections of the characters with ambivalent irony. For example, the name of the squatter camp, Paradise, highlights the inhabitants' lost hopes as well as the fact that the shanty town is all but paradisiacal, whereas the name of the wealthier area, Budapest, alludes to an otherwise unknown place the characters associate with a better life. The more explicit designation of the cemetery, Heavenway, betrays both a down-to-earth kind of sarcastic humour, and it intimates doubt in religious beliefs.

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they steal guavas and hungrily watch middle-class people eating unknown delicacies:

> Then there's the woman's red chewing mouth. I can tell from the cord thingies at the side of her neck and the way she smacks her big lips that whatever she is eating tastes really good. I look closely at her long hand, at the thing she is eating. It's flat, and the outer part is crusty. The top is creamish and looks fluffy and soft, and there are coin-like things on it, a deep pink, the color of burn wounds. I also see sprinkles of red and green and yellow, and finally the brown bumps that look like pimples.[28]

Their demand for food, drawn in brightest sensational colours, is overwhelming; it directs the children's steps and it shapes their metaphorical appropriation of their lifeworld. While the ravenous craving Darling feels is translated into "the color of burn wounds", an image indicating her experiences with physical pain and violence, the place that is Paradise is described in mouth-watering allegories of lack and want: "tiny shack after tiny shack crammed together like hot loaves of bread" (28). The shanty town is "a terrible place of hunger" (51), the "home of things falling apart" (193), where permanent shortage turns Darling and her friends into "hunting animals" who "prowl Budapest [at the end of the] guava season" (106), even though the fruits give them digestion problems, "ripping [our] anuses" (162). And just as they comprehend life through images of this most urgent desire for any kind of nourishment, so they understand death: Heavenway, the cemetery in Paradise, "is mounds and mounds of red earth everywhere, like people are being harvested, like death is maybe waiting behind a rock with a big bag of free food and people are rushing, tripping over each other to get to the front before the handouts run out" (134).

The hunger that inspires Darling's imagery serves as a synecdoche for the characterization of Zimbabwe as a country which is suffering from economic depression, inflation, and the ravages of AIDS. The novel makes a point to distinguish between the Zimbabwe of the first decades of independence, and the present-day living conditions of the population. Darling remembers well that her family did not always inhabit a dilapidated shed, for they once had

> a home and everything and we were happy. It was a real house made of bricks, with a kitchen, sitting room, and two bedrooms. Real walls, real windows, real floors, and real doors and a real shower and real taps and real running water and a real toilet you could sit on and do whatever you wanted to do. We had real sofas and real beds and real tables and a real TV and real clothes. Everything real. (64–5)

The anaphoric repetition, a popular rhetorical device of oral storytelling used to emphasize central motifs and to conjoin different elements of a text, reveals the

28 NoViolet Bulawayo. *We Need New Names.* New York: Reagan Arthur, 2013, 8. All in-text quotations from this source.

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incredulity that Darling feels when contemplating how much her life has changed since they were forced to leave their home. In an ironic inversion, her insistence on her past home being 'real' indicates how *sur*real her life, being reduced to sheer subsistence, must appear to the girl and, by extension, to Zimbabwean citizens who had enjoyed a thriving economy, functioning health care and education systems, and a reputation of being southern Africa's "breadbasket" until well into the 1990s.[29]

Bulawayo blames political oppression for the increasing material deprivation and social disintegration of her country. The characters' life in squatter slums is presented as a direct result of Operation Murambatsvina, the Zimbabwean government campaign beginning in 2005 that destroyed supposedly illegal settlements in many cities and towns under the pretense of fighting the spread of diseases, forcing hundreds of thousands to leave their demolished homes.

> The men driving the bulldozers are laughing. I hear the adults saying, Why why why, what have we done, what have we done, what have we done? Then the lorries come carrying the police with those guns and baton sticks and we run and hide inside the houses, but it's no use hiding because the bulldozers start bulldozing and bulldozing and we are screaming and screaming. […] And [then] there is dust all over from the crumbling walls; it gets into our hair and mouths and noses and makes us cough and cough. (67–8)

The men's amused brutality, signifying the arbitrary exertion of violence, serves to highlight the desperation and helplessness of the inhabitants who are about to lose their homes. The motif of vulnerability is continued in the text in the form of figurative dispossession, when the displaced meet again and try to understand what has happened: "There were some who appeared speechless, without words, and for a long while they walked around in silence, like the returning dead. But then with time, they remembered to open their mouths. Their voices came back like tiptoeing thieves in the dark" (77). The novel compares the political oppression in present-day Zimbabwe with the colonial occupation of the land, summarizing the citizens' disappointment with their post-colonial rulers in the bitter acknowledgment that it was "[b]etter a white thief do that to you than your own black brother. Better a wretched white thief" (77). The dichotomies of the era of racial segregation have become outdated; they have lost their meaning in a time when an aging president draws the legitimacy for his oppressive politics from his erstwhile involvement in anti-colonial struggles.

Forced to relocate to a shanty town, the characters find themselves excluded from conventional means of securing an income. Darling's mother struggles to

29 For an overview of the causes, effects, and the chronology of Zimbabwe's political and economic crises, see "Zimbabwe Crisis." *Thomson Reuters Foundation News.* 1 January 2010. <http://news.trust.org//spotlight/zimbabwe-crisis/> (accessed 24 February 2016).

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make a living by trading unnamed goods, regularly travelling to the border to "sell things" (23), while her daughter stays with "Mother of Bones" (21), a neighbour. Darling's father has gone to South Africa to find work, "but he never writes, never sends us money, never nothing" (24). The girl narrator describes Paradise as a place of dirt, want, and garbage. It is littered with the cheap products of foreign economies that sell to Zimbabweans what is not meant to last. The "made-in China" shoes given to Darling "just fell apart, so I walk carefully and make sure to lift my feet to avoid things on the dusty red path; a broken bottle here, a pile of junk over there, a brownish puddle of something here, a disemboweled watermelon there" (28). Even the gifts the children occasionally receive from Chinese business people appear to be the clutter of more prosperous economies: "Last time, they gave us a black plastic bag full of things – watches, jewelry, flip-flops, batteries – but like those shoes that Mother bought me once, the items were cheap kaka and lasted us only a few days" (48). Darling's repeated dismissal of various cultural artefacts and items as "kaka" has been criticized as "captious" and "irritating" in its verbal simplicity.[30] As narrative and rhetorical means of representing poverty, however, her recurrent references to "kaka", "crap" and "things" are effective in exposing the translation of material indigence into cultural marginalization and, eventually, emotional privation. The poverty of Darling's language becomes a symbol of her exclusion, rendering her speechless first as a displaced person in her home country, and later as an immigrant who remains at a verbal and proverbial distance from US culture and society.

In Zimbabwe, the poverty of Darling and her friends and family is contrasted with the construction of new shopping malls selling luxury goods (48) that are planned and financed by Chinese investors and built by Zimbabwean men:

> [The men] are working in regular clothes – torn T-shirts, vests, shorts, trousers cut at the knees, overalls, flip-flops, tennis shoes […]. [S]ome of them pause to watch us. They look like they've been playing in dirt all their lives – it's all over their bodies, their clothes, their hair. They don't look the way adults always try to look, making like they are in charge, so we pity them a little bit. (44, 46)

Wearing the same ragged clothes and cheap plastic shoes as the children, the adults have no authority over them. The unprofessional attire suggests the workers have been hired for unskilled, temporary jobs that will not make a lasting contribution to a significant improvement of their living conditions. It is tempting to read this passage – which shows workers building luxury shopping malls that most Zimbabweans will not have the means to visit as customers – as an allegorical comment on the general impact of Chinese investments in Zim-

30 Rayyan Al-Shawaf. "'We Need New Names,' by NoViolet Bulawayo." *The Boston Globe*. 3 June 2013. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/books/2013/06/05/book-review-need-new-names-noviolet-bulawayo/IA7tw3rL FakZ0zRVcP9PBP/story.html> (accessed 17 February 2016).

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babwe. While Habila considers the passage an "inexplicable chapter on how the Chinese are taking over Africa",[31] Iweala believes the text acknowledges that "the Chinese have arrived speaking the language of money".[32] Huchu identifies the scene as a standard piece of the depressing jigsaw that present-day Zimbabwe has become and which Bulawayo seeks to portray. Through the eyes of the protagonist, "we see the hardship endured by Zimbabwe's poorest and the most vulnerable. Everything from the poverty, disease, the Chinese, clueless NGOs, and iron fist of the state is woven into this narrative, but Darling's characteristically dark, Zimbabwean humour buoys the reader through."[33]

Exposed to indigence and oppression, the inhabitants of the squatter settlement want "basic capabilities to live in dignity".[34] While deprivation leaves them little capacity to change their circumstances, several scenes propose sympathy and compassion as means to acquire agency, and to counteract brutalization and moral disintegration. When the children witness a marauding gang of government partisans abusing a white Zimbabwean, Darling's friend Sbho angrily confronts Bastard, another member of their group, who wonders why she cried over the ill-treatment of white people: "They are people, you asshole!" (122). And when Darling's father returns from South Africa terminally ill, her friends keep him company during his last hours; insisting that there is no point "hiding AIDS" (102), they comfort him and Darling, helping her come to terms with her father's imminent death:

> Then Stina reaches and takes Father's hand and starts moving it to the song, and Bastard moves the other hand. I reach out and touch him too because I have never really touched him ever since he came and this is what I must do now because how will it look when everybody is touching him and I'm not? We all look at one another and smile-sing because we are touching him, just touching him all over like he is a beautiful plaything we have just rescued from a rubbish bin in Budapest. He feels like dry wood in my hands, but there is a strange light in his sunken eyes, like he has swallowed the sun. (105)

Such moments of shared humanity alternate with violent encounters, which show most of the adult characters as having become indifferent both to their own suffering and to that of others. During the local evangelist service, Darling witnesses a rape masquerading as exorcism when the minister and his men force themselves on an apparently possessed woman until she "looks like a rag […] just lying there under Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro like Jesus after they clobbed him and nailed him on the cross" (42). Cheered on by a congregation symbolizing the "mesmerized crowds in Zimbabwe [that] celebrate their lead-

31 Habila, "We Need New Names by NoViolet Bulawayo."
32 Iweala, "Difficult Terrain."
33 Huchu, "*We Need New Names* – Review."
34 United Nations, *Substantive Issues*, 2.

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ers as 'divine' who rape their country, deceive and rob them",[35] the adults' indulgence in violent ecstasy alienates and saddens Darling. For her friend Chipo, however, the sexual assault becomes a revelation of its own kind, for the pregnant eleven-year-old girl finally understands what has happened to her. "[L]ooking around like she was lost but has found herself" (42), Chipo confides to Darling that she was held down just like that by her own grandfather: "I want to laugh that her voice is back, but her face confuses me and I can also see she wants me to say something, something maybe important, so I say, Do you want to go and steal guavas?" (43) Poignantly, it takes a re-enactment of the abuse to comprehend and express it, for as Darling's reaction illustrates once more, the children engage with their world through images of hunger.

Plot elements such as Chipo's recollection of being raped by her grandfather, and her friends' subsequent attempt to abort her "stomach" with a clothes hanger (80, 85), have been criticized as sensationalist writing that employs an aesthetic of suffering suspected of accommodating Western readers' presumed image of 'Africa'. To Bulawayo, however, child abuse is not an African problem: "I think that is a form of violence that is out there. I am always concerned about children, not just in Zimbabwe, but in society [in general]. Children are part of everything, and it means that they suffer the most."[36] The novel in fact presents a hopeful ending to Chipo's story: The final pages re-introduce the character as a dedicated mother who has found comfort and reassurance in her responsibilities, and who confronts Darling about having left their home instead of contributing to build a better life in their own country (287–8).

"Destroyedmichygen"

As Barbara Korte has pointed out, "the literary narrative has a special capacity to present poverty as the multi-faceted experience of individual human beings."[37] Through privileging Darling's narrative perspective and voice, *We Need New Names* centres on the experiences of its protagonist, but it also establishes an interdependence of individual response and communal encounters and interactions. The novel builds up slowly and at first tentatively the argument that material indigence and social disintegration not only result in resignation with one's own fate and indifference towards the suffering of others: Shared hardships also have the potential to become a source of common identity and empower-

35 Wermter, "Surviving the Great Robbery," 24.
36 Driver, "Writing about Women."
37 Barbara Korte. "Can the Indigent Speak? Poverty Studies, the Postcolonial and the Global Appeal of *Q & A* and *The White Tiger*." In: *Connotations* 20,2–3 (2010/11), 293.

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ment. As mentioned above, the text shows Chipo (re)gaining agency over her life as a mother who derives strength from her new role, even naming her daughter after her once best friend (287). The exiled Darling, on the other hand, faces new and unexpected dimensions of deprivation and vulnerability in her new US-American home. After moving to Kalamazoo, Michigan to live with her aunt Fostalina, Fostalina's Ghanaian partner Kojo and his son TK, Darling feels up-rooted, alien, and alone. The malapropism she uses to characterize the place, "Destroyedmichygen" (149), demonstrates her confused disappointment and anger. Darling's first impression of the North American winter metonymically communicates that she feels only the loss of the familiar, expressed again in metaphors of hunger, where she had anticipated living in an actual paradise of hitherto unknown pleasures:

> It is a greedy monster [...], the snow, because just look how it has swallowed everything; where is the ground now? Where are the flowers? The grass? The stones? The leaves? The ants? The litter? Where are they? As for the coldness, I have never seen it like this. I mean, coldness that makes like it wants to kill you, like it's telling you, with its snow, that you should go back to where you came from. (150)

Michigan – usually generalized in the text as 'America' just as her native country now becomes 'Africa', which until then had been used as an umbrella term only by racist government partisans (113, 175) – does not in the least meet the bright expectations she had: "this place doesn't look like my America, doesn't even look real" (152).

In the United States, hunger is no longer the dominating force in Darling's life. It becomes replaced, in fact, by another form of food obsession, namely various eating disorders to which the protagonist responds with a mixture of disgust and contempt. Darling measures people's eating habits against the standards of hunger she has known for so long, noticing that "[a]ll that food TK eats in one day, me and Mother and Mother of Bones would eat in maybe two or three days back home" (159). In contrast to her stepson, Fostalina constantly diets and exercises in the attempt to look like the fashion models on TV. A merciless observer, Darling compares her aunt's obsession to the AIDS pandemic in Zimbabwe, describing Fostalina as too "thin and very soon she will begin to look like Father's bones, drowning there on the bed and just waiting to die" (157). Kojo uses food as comfort: He is an outsider in his own family because nobody speaks his (unnamed Ghanaian) language – his son was born in the United States to a US-American mother. It is Darling who makes the effort to prepare Ghanaian dishes for him (284), for she has noticed that the only moments in which Kojo seems content is when he is listening to "that weird Ghanaian music that sometimes makes him forget himself, like maybe there's something inside his head that's calling him away to somewhere far" (165). In Zimbabwe, the food

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shortage is the reason why the only 'meals' that characters enjoy together consist of stolen guavas; in the US, excess supply and eating disorders are shown to have put an end to commonly shared dinners.

Food and, by extension, hunger are major signifiers in the novel for the building and disintegration of companionship. Their different attitudes to eating illustrate that the members of Darling's new family all seem occupied primarily with themselves and their individual pursuit of happiness. Their preoccupations further alienate Darling, who responds by feeling isolated rather than encouraged to emulate them, and who reads TK's preference for video games as a mere symptom of her cousin's loneliness: "What kind of game do you play [all] by yourself?" (155). Having escaped the abject poverty of the Zimbabwean shanty town, to Darling cheap food is one of the few things aplenty in her aunt and uncle's lives – and indulging in it eventually becomes a way to join the community of exiles from impoverished countries:

> At McDonald's we devoured Big Macs and wolfed down fries and guzzled supersized Cokes. At Burger King we worshipped Whoppers. At KFC we mauled bucket chicken. We went to Chinese buffets and ate all we could inhale – fried rice, chicken, beef, shrimp, and as for the things whose names we could not read, we simply pointed and said, We want *that*.
>
> We ate like pigs, like wolves, like dignitaries; we ate like vultures, like stray dogs [...] We ate for all our past hunger, for our parents and brothers and sisters and relatives and friends who were still back there. [I]f only our country could see us in America, see us eat like kings in a land that was not ours. (241)

Only in exile does Darling develop a plural identity with which she presumes to speak not only for other Zimbabweans, but for all those who long for a home they have left. Food metaphors had helped her to comprehend her lifeworld in Paradise; in Michigan, food expresses her allegiance with an imagined community with which she shares neither culture nor history, but the experience of being foreign. By the end of the novel, Darling has lived in Kalamazoo for several years; like Fostalina and Kojo, she has familiarized herself with the country and learned how to use its culture, but their functional adaptation lacks genuine attachment to the nation and its citizens. Bulawayo's biography differs from her main character's in that she moved to the US only at the age of 18, yet some of Darling's sensations seem inspired by the author's own experiences. Insisting that she sees herself as a Zimbabwean writer, and "by extension [...] an African",[38] Bulawayo admits that, even after more than a decade in the US, her place

38 Fungai Machirori. "NoViolet Bulawayo Pays Tribute to Her Father at Zimbabwe Book Launch." *Her Zimbabwe*. 30 August 2013. <http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2013/08/noviolet-bulawayo-pays-tribute-to-father-at-zimbabwe-book-launch/#.UiBUPuAzmZg> (accessed 23 February 2016).

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of residence "does not feel like home […] I miss home. I want to go and write from home. It's a place which inspires me. I don't feel inspired by America at all."[39]

In addition to individual isolation and cultural marginalization, the novel represents US-American deprivation through general phenomena such as homelessness and family disintegration, and in the more particular form of the illegal immigrants' constant fear of discovery by the authorities. Racial discrimination, for example through the police, is shown to instigate a special quality of angst in those who live bereft of their civil rights. Their insecure legal status also confines them to low-paid work: Fostalina and Kojo have several jobs not only to earn their own living but also to send money across the Atlantic to their families. Politically and economically, the novel presents illegal immigrants as trapped. They do not want to go back to "the tatters of [their] country left behind, barely held together by American dollars" (245), but in the United States, they are excluded from the full rights of citizenship, unable to obtain decently paid work, and forced to raise their children in a culture they find intimidating and inimical. Emotional privation completes a marginalization that is shown to affect all of the characters in exile, whose inability to verbalize their feelings manifests their isolation: "They stay silent for a while, as if they have no more words, as if both our language and English are not enough for them. […] The silence doesn't go away; it's like they are using it to talk" (182).

The representation of poverty in the US differs from the novel's depiction of Zimbabwe insofar as it identifies different dimensions of indigence in these countries. In exile, even as illegal immigrants, the characters have more means to provide materially for themselves and their families, yet they are reduced to subsistence on every other level of participation – be it culture, politics, or civil engagement in their communities. Some reviewers have criticized what they read as the novel's "unoriginal and trite musings on Americans, as well as predictable instances of culture clash",[40] yet Darling's simplistic observations highlight that while immigrants learn to read their host culture's language, and to abide by its rules, they remain excluded from, and consequently fail to comprehend, all of its complexity. This detachment is addressed both on a thematic and narrative level in the novel's representation of the social dimensions of poverty. Darling's observations of US-American culture and society exemplify her misrecognition when she dismisses the activities of Occupy demonstrators as "trying to pretend they knew what suffering was" (256), and scorns at celebrity singer Rihanna who

39 Alison Flood. "NoViolet Bulawayo Wins 'African Booker'." *The Guardian.* 12 July 2011. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jul/12/noviolet-bulawayo-caine-prize> (accessed 17 February 2016).

40 Al-Shawaf, "'We Need New Names,' by NoViolet Bulawayo."

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is acting "like her face was a humanitarian crisis" (220) after a domestic violence incident. With sarcastic humour, she mocks her superficial adaptation to US-American society as merely collecting words "that I keep under the tongue like talismans, ready to use: *pretty good, pain in the ass, for real, awesome, totally, skinny, dude, freaking, bizarre, psyched, messed up, like, tripping, motherfucker, clearance, allowance, douche bag, you're welcome, acting up, yikes*" (196).

In several episodes, Darling's cultural vocabulary is presented as wanting the precision and insight that the emotional and intellectual comprehension of her US-American world would require. Her cognitive indigence translates into a lack of sympathy and compassion when confronted with Western forms of deprivation and anxiety such as eating disorders, feelings of inadequacy, and gun violence committed by school kids. To substantiate its representation of Darling's continued isolation and emotional privation in the US, the novel portrays her attitude to two forms of human bonding, friendship and sexual intimacy, as utilitarian and commercialized. Darling's relationships in particular emphasize that her adjustment to her host culture remains perfunctory. Compared to the companionship she shared with her childhood friends in the shanty town Paradise, the bond with her schoolmates Kristal and Marina remains superficial. Darling spends her time with them but she does not betray any genuine affection for the girls:

> Kristal thinks that since she taught us to wear makeup and has a weave, she is better than Marina and myself, but the truth is she can't even write a sentence correctly in English to show that she is indeed American. They are my friends mostly because we live on the same street, and we're all finishing eighth grade at Washington Academy. (201)

One of their leisure time activities is watching porn in Darling's basement. The girls consume commercialized pornography as a dare game, watching "the flicks in alphabetic order so we're not all over the place" (202) and mute the sound "to do the noises" (204). When one day they accidentally start what is described as a snuff movie,[41] which shows a girl whose "scream sounds like it has devoured all the pain there is and is now choking on it" (214), Darling is paralysed with terror. Suddenly remembering the rape of the possessed woman she was forced to watch as a ten-year old, Darling finds she cannot leave the room and merely covers her eyes to block her vision:

41 The term snuff pornography describes movies and videos that show recordings of actual murder and torture, and which were filmed for customers' entertainment. While there is controversy about whether the genre exists as a commercial enterprise, or whether it represents an urban myth, videos of actual killings produced for the purposes of propaganda were published by militia groups such as the Islamic State. See also Neil Jackson et al. (eds). *Snuff: Real Death and Screen Media.* New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

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> When I look again there is a lot of blood on the floor. The girl has been moved to a corner. Her dress has been straightened out over her legs; you could not tell what had happened just a few minutes before. The screaming and kicking is gone, like whatever was raging inside the girl has grown wings and flown away, leaving her looking like a flower pulled from wet earth, roots and all. Kristal and I sit there, not moving, just staring, and I know, from how we are not looking at each other, that we will never talk about what we have seen. (216)

The scene is in line with the novel's representation of sex as either violent assault or a casual act unrelated to emotional intimacy. It signifies the social and moral disintegration in both the text's cultural settings, showing Darling living in worlds where "[r]elationships have no permanence, express nothing, [and] mean very little".[42]

We Need New Names represents poverty as an intersection of material indigence, cultural marginalization, and emotional privation that characterizes the protagonist's perspective and voice, the Zimbabwean setting, and the immigrant characters' experience of US-American culture. The novel also reflects Bulawayo's interest "in what happens when two different worlds meet in a problematic way[;] I'm interested in honesty and in violence. These are real issues and real things."[43] The final scene shows Darling more isolated than ever: Still occupying the insecure and estranged position of an illegal immigrant, a phone conversation with her childhood friend severs the protagonist's imagined link with her Zimbabwean home, for Chipo tells her: "[Y]ou are not the one suffering. You think watching on BBC means you know what is going on? No, you don't, my friend, it's the wound that knows the texture of the pain; it's us who stayed here feeling the real suffering" (287). Chipo rejects the option of exile ["Why did you just leave? If it's your country, you have to love it to live in it and not leave it" (288)], insisting that companionship and communal response must confront hardships and oppression, and ward off emotional privation. Her call to action acknowledges the interdependence of individual experience and society, a contention in Elias' sociology, and a fundamental principle of southern African Ubuntu philosophy: "A person is a person because of other people" (295).

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42 Wermter, "Surviving the Great Robbery," 24.
43 Flood, "NoViolet Bulawayo Wins 'African Booker'."

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Katrin Althans

Representations of Australian Refugee Experiences: Poverty or Bare Life?

In November 2013, the Australian Government launched a comic which was aimed mainly at asylum seekers from Afghanistan.[1] This comic caused an international outcry in February 2014, when *The Guardian* reported on the campaign.[2] Designed to be understood universally, the comic features no text except for the first and last page, which have the text "If you go to Australia by ship without visa, you cannot settle there" in both Farsi and an Afghan language printed in bold letters.[3] The panels, however, are indeed self-explanatory: They depict the story of a young, presumably Afghan, man who is working as a mechanic and is being urged by his family to leave for what looks like Perth. On his way, he meets several people smugglers and finally boards a vessel which brings him straight to a ship of the Australian Border Force and then to an offshore detention centre.

Also in November 2013, Rosie Scott and Thomas Keneally published *A Country Too Far*, a collection of "stunning fiction, memoir, poetry and essays"[4]

1 The Australian government's Custom and Border Protection Service (CBPS) has published two versions of this comic, labelled storyboard, which were only available on those sections of their former website addressed to native speakers of Pashto and related languages (e.g., Dari, Quetta, and Urdu), http://www.customs.gov.au/site/Translations/documents/Storyboard-Afghanistan.pdf. This website has long been taken down (it was still accessible in June 2015, but no longer in August 2016), and as at 2020, only one image of the comic has remained online, at https://newsroom.abf.gov.au/photos/a-storyboard-on-people-smuggling (accessed 19 February 2020). Only accredited journalists, however, are allowed to download this image in full size. The publication history of this comic and the media reaction it received has been traced in detail by Aaron Humphrey, "Emotion and Secrecy in Australian Asylum-Seeker Comics: The Politics of Visual Style, " 465–69.

2 See Oliver Laughland. "Australian Government Targets Asylum Seekers with Graphic Campaign." *The Guardian.* 11 February 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/11/government-launches-new-graphic-campaign-to-deter-asylum-seekers> (accessed 24 August 2016).

3 My thanks go to Ms. Atefeh Derakhshanfar for this translation.

4 Penguin Random House Australia. Blurb for *A Country Too Far*. <https://penguin.com.au/books/a-country-too-far-9780143574132> (accessed 24 August 2016).

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on the theme of refugees and asylum, albeit from a different angle. The pieces included in this collection range from experiences after WWII to contemporary stories of people smuggling, SIEVs (Suspected Illegal Entry Vessels), and detention centres, and it is these stories which stand in stark contrast to the narrative evoked in the Australian Government's comic. Especially the way refugees are framed in both narrative versions of the same event is telling: Whereas the comic firmly roots its representation of refugees in terms of material poverty, the examples chosen from *A Country Too Far* call for an entirely different set of categories to frame refugee experiences, categories which can be assessed with the help of, but which also question, Agamben's concept of bare life[5] and Butler's discussion of precarity.[6] Firstly, there is the short story "Zahra's Lullaby" by Arnold Zable, which is the fictionalized life story of Faris Shohani and his family, Kurds from Iraq, chronicling their life before the flight, their journey across Asia and finally onboard the ill-fated SIEV X as well as Faris's life in Melbourne afterwards. Secondly, there is an excerpt from Robin de Crespigny's multi award-winning non-fiction book *The People Smuggler: The True Story of Ali Al Jenabi*, which also deals with the protagonist's flight from Iraq, but centres only on crossing the border from Sulaymaniyah in Iraq to Qom in Iran and on the technicalities behind the smuggling of people. Finally, there is the short story "The Garden" by Denise Leith, which is set in an Australian detention centre. Its protagonist, Sa'eed, is given some seeds by a visitor and through his gardening reclaims his and his fellow inmates' humanity. By taking a closer look at the most important loci which have come to constitute *the* narrative of refugee experiences – home, journey, destination –, I will show how the immigration comic neglects the precarious situation of refugees, thus depriving them of any valid basis for

5 In *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben revisits Aristotle's distinction of ζωή , i. e. mere biological existence, and βίος, i. e. political life, and develops his own concept of bare life, which is not to be confused with ζωή but rather denotes a form of life which is defined by being stripped of its political component but which still goes beyond a mere biological life. See Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.* Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998 [1995], 109.

6 In *Frames of War*, Butler defines precarity as "designat[ing] that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. […] Precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized precariousness for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence." Judith Butler. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 25–6. She does not use the term again in *Precarious Life*, but her line of argument there, and especially in the chapter "Indefinite Detention", suggests a conflation of the terms precariousness and precarity: Analysing various forms of precarious life in that book, Butler in this chapter discusses a new form of state sovereignty in the form of governmentality with the help of analysing the legal status of detainees at Guantanamo. The denial of legal status is comprised by her definition of precarity, which is why I use this term in my essay even though I refer to "Indefinite Detention" only. See Judith Butler. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence.* London: Verso, 2004.

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seeking refuge under international law at a time in which new ways of dealing with the refugee situation are needed.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term 'poverty' denotes "[t]he condition of having little or no wealth or few material possessions [...]".[7] In the field Korte and Zipp refer to as poverty studies, on the other hand, poverty "is not only understood as (relative) material deprivation, but also as encompassing socio-cultural exclusion and a lack of agency, opportunities and access (to knowledge, traditions, rights and capabilities)".[8] This understanding of poverty is based on a definition by Amartya Sen, who suggests translating material deprivation into "basic capabilities" rather than insisting on an "income-centred view of poverty" in order to adequately assess poverty.[9] Most literary representations put poverty at their centre for the sake of "(re-)configur[ing] how we think, feel and behave in relation to poverty and the poor", as Korte and Zipp propose.[10] In "much literature dealing with migration", on the other hand, poverty is only a "'collateral' motif".[11] Unfortunately, Korte and Zipp do not go into further detail here. In this essay, however, I am bringing poverty to the centre in literature about migration: I am interested in the way poverty is used and exploited by the Australian Government as a means to classify refugees and to what extent this use is contested by the representation of refugee experiences in selected texts from *A Country Too Far.* As I will argue, those texts show that the situation of refugees in all its complexity can be more adequately assessed with the help of Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life and Judith Butler's writing on the legal status of detainees as a starting point. In order to do so, I will first give an overview of the preconditions of being recognized as a refugee as stated in the *Convention* and *Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* and then follow the classic tripartite structure of refugee narratives by dividing my discussion of the different texts along the lines of home, journey, and destination.

This tripartite structure is owed to the fact that, as Goodwin-Gill writes, "having crossed an international frontier is an intrinsic part of the quality of refugee, understood in the international legal sense".[12] Due to this requirement of alienage, every refugee experience involves a place of origin, a journey, and a

7 "Poverty, n." Def. I1a. In: *Oxford English Dictionary Online.* Oxford University Press. June 2006. <www.oed.com/view/Entry/149126> (accessed 29 August 2016).

8 Barbara Korte and Georg Zipp. *Poverty in Contemporary Literature: Themes and Figurations on the British Book Market.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 2.

9 Amartya Sen. "Capability and Well-Being." In: Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (eds). *The Quality of Life.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, 41.

10 Korte and Zipp, *Poverty*, 3.

11 Ibid.

12 Guy S. Goodwin-Gill. "The International Law of Refugee Protection." In: Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee & Forced Migration Studies.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 38.

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place of arrival. Who is legally regarded as a refugee is defined in the 1951 *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, which was amended by the 1967 *Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* and which is based on the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of 1948.[13] In Article 1 A, para. 2, the term "refugee" is defined as to

> apply to any person who […] [a]s a result of *events occurring before 1 January 1951* and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (emphasis added)

The wording of Art. 1 A, para. 2 sets certain limitations to the status as refugee which met the concerns of several signatory states as to the scope of obligations they would subscribe to, as Zimmermann and Mahler summarize.[14] Even though the "well-founded fear of being persecuted" is causally linked to "events occurring before 1 January 1951", Zimmermann and Mahler argue "that it is rather the cut-off date as such than the term 'event' [sic] which constitutes the limiting factor concerning the scope of application of Art. 1 A, para. 2".[15] In effect, the 1951 Convention was drafted as a response – and limit – to the high numbers of refugees originating from Europe after WWII. This limitation, however, was revoked in the 1967 Protocol, which in Article 1, para. 2 states that

> [f]or the purpose of the present Protocol, the term 'refugee' shall […] mean any person within the definition of article 1 of the Convention as if the words 'As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and …' 'and the words' [sic]… 'a result of such events', in article 1 A (2) were omitted.

Thus, the present definition in international law as to who qualifies as a refugee rests on two elements, the "well-founded fear of being persecuted" and the reasons for this persecution, which originate in the individual refugee and his/her "race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" (Art. 1 A, para. 2 in connection with Art. 1, para. 2). Of these elements, the notion of persecution seems to be the most important term, yet it is, according to Zimmermann and Mahler, not defined in any document of interna-

13 See António Guterres. "Introductory Note." *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.* 2010. <http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10> (accessed 25 August 2016), 2.

14 See Andreas Zimmermann and Claudia Mahler. "Article 1 A, para. 2 (Definition of the Term 'Refugee'/Définition de Terme 'Réfugié')." In: Andreas Zimmermann (ed.). *The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol: A Commentary.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 321–2 mn. 114.

15 Zimmermann and Mahler, "Article 1 A, para. 2," 323 mn. 120.

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tional law but has come to be "referred to as a severe violation of human rights accompanied by a failure of the State to protect the individual".[16] Consequently, the exact meaning of this key term and thus the validity of any person's refugee status is a matter of legal interpretation.

This task of interpreting the situation of refugees is also taken on by both the selected texts from *A Country Too Far* and the Australian Government's immigration comic they challenge. As I will show, they use very different categories to frame refugee experiences, which in turn also offer a commentary on international law. The first page of the immigration comic introduces the reader to the world of the Afghan protagonist and immediately renders it in terms of poverty (Fig. 1).

The panels are dominated by the use of brownish colours for the environment and the depiction of run-down houses in front of a mountainous backdrop clearly signifies poverty, a reading which is also supported by the derelict overland power supply lines, the lack of streets, and the simple market stall to the left of the first panel. For the character himself, the same colours are used and the zoom to a close-up of his work implies a pre-computerized society still using old cars and relying on mechanical skills. The environment envisaged in the thought bubble, on the other hand, shows a neatly trimmed footpath in surroundings which are full of natural colours and have a CBD as backdrop – clearly designed to represent a city in the Western world. On the next page, in another thought bubble, it becomes clear that the city in question is Perth (Fig. 2).[17]

Again, the Australian city is painted in lively colours and the emphasis is on the modernity of the buildings in the CBD area and a well-groomed nature. In these panels, Australia's wealth is contrasted with the poverty the protagonist is subject to in Afghanistan. Such a reading of an impoverished Afghanistan on the one hand and wealthy Australia on the other hand, however, is problematic when one takes into account the sociological distinction of absolute from relative poverty. Absolute poverty, as Giddens and Sutton explain, implies the lack of even fundamental requirements for subsistence, such as "sufficient food, shelter and clothing".[18] Yet the concept of absolute poverty is one of controversial debate, according to Giddens and Sutton, since a universal standard for measuring poverty does not take into account the fact that "poverty is culturally defined and cannot be measured according to a universal standard – that is, a standard which

16 Zimmermann and Mahler, "Article 1 A, para. 2," 345 mn. 216.

17 In the second "edition", a pdf entitled "HazaraStoryboardFinalQuettaDariUrduPashto" which has by now been completely removed from the internet, Perth was replaced by Sydney, a city more easily recognizable internationally by its architectural landmarks such as the Sydney Opera House.

18 Anthony Giddens and Philip W. Sutton. *Sociology.* Cambridge: Polity, 2013 [1989], 527.

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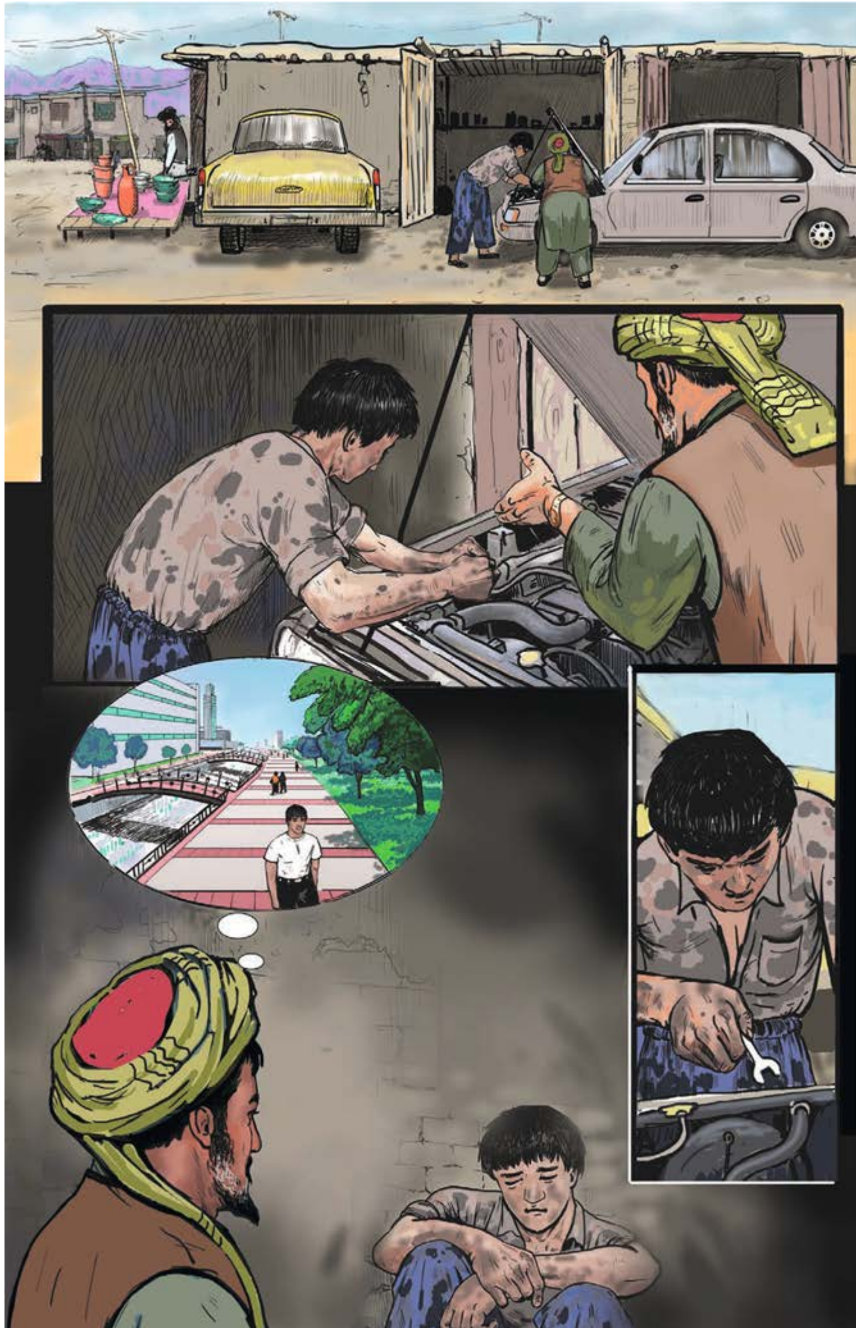

Fig. 1. (*Storyboard* 2)

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Fig. 2. (*Storyboard* 3)

applies to all".[19] Instead, poverty should better be understood as relational, the point of reference being the "overall standard of living of a particular society".[20] The comic, however, compares two cultures with one another in terms of poverty and takes as reference, it seems, the definition of poverty in an industrialized society such as Australia. Due to this problematic use of signs denoting poverty, the Australian immigration comic reveals its inherent prejudices in that it insinuates that the young Afghan protagonist shares the Australian understanding of poverty and is thus legitimately cast as an economic migrant.

When it comes to the journey the young protagonist undertakes in order to reach this city, however, the poverty which dominates much of the first pages gives way to money and modern and comfortable means of transportation within a working infrastructure: From his village, his journey takes the protagonist to a bigger city and on to Jakarta via Karachi, as easily recognizable landmarks in now colourful panels show (Monumen Nasional and Jinnah International Airport, respectively). All these cities do not only mark different stops along his journey, they also highlight possible final stops of this journey which all would offer an improvement in economic terms and which are decidedly not in Australia. By framing the protagonist of the comic as what is commonly referred to as an "economic migrant", one who is seeking to improve his situation in financial terms and as such can make no valid claim to refugee status, the comic denies him

19 Ibid., 529.
20 Ibid.

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any recourse to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol. Even though the *Australian Migration Act* 1958 (Cth) lists "significant economic hardship that threatens the person's capacity to subsist" as one instance of "serious harm", which itself is a necessary condition of persecution to qualify as refugee-related persecution, it requires this economic hardship to be the direct result of persecution "for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" (ss 5 J(5)(d), (1)(a)). Similarly, Zimmermann and Mahler state that the question of whether or not "violations of […] economic rights do amount to persecution" is "highly disputed".[21] As Goodwin-Gill and McAdam write, the focus on human rights demands some kind of violence (and thus the infringement of human rights) in order to be eligible for protection under the 1951 Protocol, whereas "those who move because of pure economic motivation […] are excluded".[22] By immediately situating its protagonist in terms of material lack and deprivation, the immigration comic insinuates "pure economic motivation" and completely neglects the reasons for this "economic hardship". Thus, the comic deliberately glosses over any instances potentially constituting persecution and hence entitling the protagonist to claim refugee status.

"Zahra's Lullaby" by Arnold Zable, by contrast, gives a detailed account of the kind of persecution the protagonist of the story, Faris Shohani, suffered from in his country of origin:

> His family lived in the city of Wasit, two hours southeast of Baghdad. His great-grandfather was a Kurdish Shia who lived in Iran […]. With the outbreak of the Iranian-Iraqi war, his people were placed under suspicion. To be both Kurdish and Shia was perceived as a threat in the paranoid regime of Saddam Hussein. […] His entire family had been herded there [at the police station] […]. They were stripped of their identity papers, robbed of citizenship. Rendered stateless. Interrogated for two days, they were driven by army vehicles to the Iranian border and left to fend for themselves. […] The Kurdish people in the north of Iraq were Sunni. (119–20)

The story related here at once satisfies several conditions of Art. 1 A, para. 2 of the 1951 Convention, as it describes Faris as being a Sunni Kurd originating from Iran, which would make him eligible in terms of race, religion, and membership of a particular social group. Furthermore, he no longer holds any nationality and cannot apply for protection in either Iran or Iraq, the countries of his then current and former "habitual residence", as the persecution emanates from state officials. What is striking is the fact that money-related issues are not the focus of attention but rather details in a chain of causal events:

21 Zimmermann and Mahler, "Article 1 A, para. 2," 356 mn. 257.

22 Guy S. Goodwin-Gill and Jane McAdam. *The Refugee in International Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007 [1983], 49.

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> [Faris's] son Ali was nine, and his daughter Zahra seven, when the family pooled their last resources to purchase passports and tickets. […] He [the people smuggler] would accept payment once the boat arrived in Australia. He offered to take Ali for free. […] Faris, running short on money, was to pay him in gold jewellery. (120)

In the excerpt from Robin de Crespigny's *The People Smuggler*, the issue of money is similarly only broached in order to describe people smuggling as a simple business transaction: "Then there is the problem of paying for a smuggler. […] I had hidden fifty American dollars and some Iraqi dinars in my shoe, but it is hardly going to be enough to live on" (62). This assessment, however, changes in the course of the flight: "When we arrive, Mustafa gets the money we owe from his friend and we pay Fadi [the people smuggler]. I wish I had some more to give him extra. I had misjudged him. He is wily, diligent, clever and professional. Getting us here seemed to matter to him more than the money" (68). The same indifference towards money is expressed in "Zahra's Lullaby": "Two of Majida's brothers […] had been imprisoned in Baghdad. Her father did not care about the loss of his home and possessions, his truck-hire business. In Iran he worried only for the two sons" (125).

A similar understanding of the material situation of refugees is prevalent in the description of the journey – a story well-known from numerous media reports. Surprisingly, the stories told in the immigration comic and, for example, "Zahra's Lullaby" as such do not differ at all. Rather, they both tell the familiar tale of overcrowded boats in rough seas and the short story may even be considered the written version of the comic (Storyboard 7–9; "Zahra's Lullaby" 120–2).

What is left out in the comic but is a central motif in the story is the trauma connected to the last leg of the journey: Whereas in the comic the passengers of the boat – together with plenty of luggage – are rescued by the Australian Border Force, the people onboard the ill-fated SIEV X meet (and actually met) their death: "Zahra, Layla, Ibrahim, Sara, 353 men, women and children, all gone" (126).[23] Both examples, Majida's father worrying only about his sons and the 353 victims of the SIEV X tragedy, show that absolute poverty is not an appropriate category for framing refugee experiences. Instead, these instances call for different categories which go beyond material deprivation to make refugee experiences understood. Especially Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life as opposed to political existence, together with Judith Butler's discussion of indefinite detention as detailed in her study *Precarious Life* (2004), provide helpful im-

23 The historical SIEV X sank in international waters somewhere between Indonesia and Australia on 19 October 2001. An estimated 353 people drowned and only 45 were rescued after having floated in the water for about 20 hours; see Marg Hutton. SIEVX Chronology. 2014. <http://www.sievx.com/chronology> (accessed 26 August 2016).

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pulses for the discussion of refugee experiences despite the universalism they display in their works.[24]

In the chapter "Indefinite Detention" in *Precarious Life*, Butler is primarily concerned with the consequences the actual suspension of law with regard to the detainees at Guantanamo has in terms of sovereignty: "And with the suspension of law comes a new exercise of state sovereignty […]."[25] In using the detainees as a means to her end of dissecting the workings of state power in producing dehumanized and thus extra-legal objects, Butler anticipates the use of refugees in the Australian Government's immigration comic: In the off-shore detention centres, they also exist in a "pre-legal state" and for them "the protection of the law is indefinitely postponed".[26] The comic does not concern itself with the rights of refugees under international law at all; instead, it casts them as criminals at the mercy of their guards, as the third panel on page 12, showing refugees who are sitting in front of a standing guard, suggests (Fig. 3).

Of importance here is the loss of legal status, which reduces the subject to something "less than human without entitlement to rights, as the humanly unrecognizable. […] It is also the process of their de-subjectivation."[27] In the comic, it is also the computer-produced "visual style" which, as Humphrey writes, "conveys bureaucratic authorship and authority", thus "reflecting the politics of its authoritarian and dehumanising message".[28] What, for Butler, is equally disturbing about this process is the fact that it is administrative authorities rather than the judiciary who decide about this suspension of law for the individual.[29] This delegation of state power, which for Butler marks a new kind of state sovereignty,[30] finds its equivalent in the Australian practice of privately, and for profit, run detention centres.

Butler explicitly links her discussion of detention to the writings of Giorgio Agamben, who uses the figure of the refugee and the concentration camp as examples of his ideas on biopolitical issues. Although Agamben, as David Farrier has noted, is "more concerned with 'the refugee' as an archetype than with

24 For a summary of criticism of "a tendency to universalize […] in discourse about 'the refugee'", see David Farrier. *Postcolonial Asylum: Seeking Sanctuary before the Law.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011, 9.
25 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 51.
26 Ibid., 64.
27 Ibid., 98.
28 Aaron Humphrey. "Emotion and Secrecy in Australian Asylum-Seeker Comics: The Politics of Visual Style." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 21,5 (2018): 472–73.
29 See ibid., 51.
30 See ibid.

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Fig. 3. (*Storyboard* 12)

asylum seekers per se",[31] his arguments regarding refugees and camp inmates in terms of bare life nevertheless also offer a valuable starting point for a discussion of contemporary refugee experiences. Bare Life, that form of life which is left after life is stripped of any political element but which is not yet mere biological life as it is still being defined by and within the limits of sovereign power, is a state of exclusion and, together with its opposite political existence, one of the "fundamental categorical pair[s] of Western politics".[32] Refugees, he writes, "put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis", as they constitute bare life due to their loss of citizenship.[33] In this Agamben follows Hannah Arendt, who identifies the quality of being human in absence of any legal personality bestowed by the nation-state as the main constituting factor of the refugee existence.[34]

31 David Farrier and Patricia Tuitt. "Beyond Biopolitics: Agamben, Asylum, and Postcolonial Critique." In: Graham Huggan (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 256.
32 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 8.
33 Ibid., 131.
34 See Hannah Arendt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* New York: Schocken Books, 2004 [1951], 380, 382.

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While for Arendt, however, as Seyla Benhabib suggests in her reading, the quality of being human involves both "being worthy of moral respect but also as having a legal status that ought to be protected by international law",[35] Agamben regards "the 'politicization' of bare life", that is, citizenship rights bestowed upon the individual by the nation-state, as the factor which decides "the humanity of living man".[36] What both approaches have in common is that they consider refugees as by definition deprived of legal rights because they are no longer citizens of their states of origin.[37] This, however, is owing to Agamben's and Arendt's focus on post-WWII Jewish refugees and concentration camp inmates, who were stripped of their legal identities by National Socialist laws.[38] This restriction effectively limits their argument when it comes to contemporary refugees, as under contemporary international law it is not the actual loss of citizenship or denaturalization but rather an unlawful denial of the rights citizens are entitled to by the respective nation-state – and the treatment they receive by the host nation – which reduces refugees to bare life.

In the Australian Government's immigration comic and the selected texts from *A Country Too Far*, this reduction of the refugee to bare life is approached from different vantage points. The comic, on the one hand, depicts the denial of rights under the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol and thus the denial of political life by showing how several people, among them the young protagonist, board a plane and are flown from mainland Australia to one of the offshore detention centres on some unnamed island. Furthermore, the comic stays true to its emphasis on poverty and pictures the protagonist's life in detention in terms of material deprivation when finishing with a page-covering panel which shows innumerable refugees having to share camp beds, thus lacking any kind of privacy and being deprived of human dignity, under makeshift shelters which can hardly be termed tents (Storyboard 16).

The texts, on the other hand, go beyond the state of bare life in order to represent refugee experiences and thus call for yet another category of description. In the short story "The Garden" by Denise Leith, which was inspired by a poem written by Hassan Sabbagh, a former refugee and detainee at Villawood Immigration Detention Centre, the description of the inmates of the detention centre at first sight seem to fit Agamben's clear-cut differentiation of political life as opposed to bare life, but in the end they also challenge Agamben's categories by exposing their rigidness. Some of the inmates are described as being in an indistinct state of existence due to having lost their human dignity. Raheem, for

35 Seyla Benhabib. *Another Cosmopolitanism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 14.
36 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 8.
37 See Arendt, *Origins*, 381, and Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 131.
38 See Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 132.

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example, with whom the protagonist Sa'eed shares a bunk-bed, is described in terms of absolute apathy, as he is only interested in TV: "[…] I'm worried about him and I know the doctors are too because they keep asking me questions about how he sleeps, and what he says to me, and how long he sits in front of the TV" (80). This brings to mind Agamben's reading of the *Muselmann*, a term which at Auschwitz was used to describe those inmates who had become the living dead and who, according to Agamben, inhabit "the extreme threshold between life and death, the human and the in-human".[39] For him, there is "[n]othing 'natural' or 'common' […] left in [the *Muselmann*]", not even mere biological life.[40] The state which some inmates of the Australian detention centre are reduced to in "The Garden" is therefore even worse than the state of ζωή and poverty imagined for them in the immigration comic. Sa'eed, however, reclaims humanity for himself and the other inmates by planting a garden and thus giving their lives new meaning: "This is a new, more talkative Raheem who hasn't been watching so much TV. He bends and lays the knife he's been working with back on the ground" (88). Even though Sa'eed is not regaining his political life, i. e. citizenship, at the end of the story, he has risen above the state of the *Muselmann* and reclaimed a status of bare life, a natural life with a purpose: "'That's one bloody huge garden you've got there, Sa'eed,' Colin [one of the guards] says as he stands over my bent figure. My garden has begun to attract all manner of things, not just insects. I smile up with pride […]" (83). There are also instances of political life invading the bare life of Sa'eed, as he has access to legal counsel in the form of a lawyer who comes to discuss his case and the authorities' proceedings with him. Despite the possibility to read parts of the inmates' existence in terms of Agamben's categories, the story nevertheless suggests that those categories are not mutually exclusive (as Agamben has it) and thus that refugee experiences are in need of being reconceptualised in order to be adequately approached.

"Zahra's Lullaby" likewise challenges the idea that refugees are left with as much as bare life. In the story, the death of his family, especially of his daughter Zahra, is narrated by her father, Faris, as a traumatic event which marks the end even of mere biological life. Familiar strategies of narrating trauma can be found in the short story, as the death of Zahra as experienced by Faris is recounted twice[41]: "His daughter's hand is in his. She slips from his grasp. He follows her, but she is like melting butter, appearing, disappearing. Vanishing" (116). This is then repeated again later, with an emphasis on the very last sensation by means of a

39 Giorgio Agamben. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive.* Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books, 1999, 47.

40 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 185.

41 For a discussion of the narrative strategies employed in trauma narratives, see Laurie Vickroy. *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction.* Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2002, 27–35.

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verbatim repetition: “Zahra lost her grip. Faris saw her slip from his grasp. […] Faris followed his daughter like a fish. She was wearing a life jacket, but she was elusive. Like melting butter. Appearing, disappearing. Vanishing” (122). The narrative even suggests the scarring nature of Faris’s trauma: “The tattoo will never be washed off. To expect so, is an insult” (126). The continuous reference to the sheer number of people who drowned when SIEV X sank adds yet another dimension and suggests that not only a complicated interaction of political and bare life as well as death-in–life (the *Muselmann*) constitute refugee experiences. Unlike Sa’eed of “The Garden”, Faris is a legal subject from the start, as his story is told retrospectively, yet due to his trauma he at times still remains in that state of less than bare life Agamben describes as “another world without memory and without grief”[42]: “He cannot sleep. He paces the living room late at night. He watches television into the early hours, yet cannot sit still. He descends the stairs from his second-floor flat. And walks. Allows the beat of his steps to still his thoughts” (116). The steps have replaced the heart, as if to suggest not only the monotony which brings a short respite but also the non-life Faris is leading. Here, Faris is not primarily described in his capacity as a bearer of citizenship rights (which he is at the time this event takes place), but as a traumatized man whose trauma reduces him to a state of apathy – a state Agamben would grant only to those who have neither political nor bare nor mere biological life. As is the case with the characters in “The Garden”, Faris in “Zahra’s Lullaby” can on the one hand be read with the help of the concepts of bare and political life. On the other hand, their descriptions also reveal the universalism of Agamben’s categories by conflating these seemingly exclusive states of life.

As I have shown, the Australian Government’s depiction of refugees in its immigration comic relies heavily on simplified understandings, especially when it comes to identifying poverty as the reason for its protagonist to leave Afghanistan. The reduction of the inmates’ status to mere biological life in the portrayal of the off-shore and thus exterritorial detention centre is equally simplified: Even though the comic does not explicitly discuss any legal issues, it nevertheless makes clear that refugees are stripped of political life and human dignity and left with nothing but their natural life. Especially the depiction of Afghanistan at the beginning of the comic is firmly rooted in an understanding of poverty as material deprivation. Only at the end does the comic allow for other concepts of poverty when it depicts life in the Australian immigration detention centre in terms of both material deprivation and exclusion from society. The textual examples taken from *A Country Too Far*, on the other hand, frame the refugee experiences they depict in terms of categories different from poverty altogether. Valuable tools for approaching those experiences are Butler’s thoughts on the

42 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 185.

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effective loss of legal rights of detainees and Agamben's concept of bare life, which equally denotes the deprivation of legal identity. Even though their concepts are helpful for establishing guidelines for dealing with representations of refugees and their status, they are also limited in their scope of application, since both Butler and Agamben are originally not concerned with the status of contemporary refugees: Butler writes about the detainees at Guantanamo and touches upon refugees only as a generalized group and Agamben, influenced by Arendt, is guided by an immediate post-WWII understanding of refugees. As a close reading of "The Garden", "Zahra's Lullaby", and the excerpt from *The People Smuggler* has shown, the exclusionary practices proposed by Agamben and Butler (which would define and reduce refugee experiences in absolute terms of bare life in the sense of being deprived of legal identity and rights as citizens) do not do justice to the complex status of contemporary refugees and the variety of contemporary refugee experiences. Rather, new and flexible approaches need to be established in order to fully account for the versatile status of refugees, who are situated not in absolutes but in a constant state of "not quite, but also".

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Marion Gymnich

Two Representations of Homelessness on British Television – *Cathy Come Home* and *Call the Midwife*

Introduction

Representations of poverty and precarity[1] appear in a wide range of different genres on British television. They constitute a recurring feature of documentaries and news coverage, but one also encounters narratives focussing on poverty and/or precarity in various fictional and semi-fictional TV formats. The politics informing audiovisual representations of poverty and precarity may at times seem quite doubtful from an ethical point of view: Adaptations of nineteenth-century social problem novels such as Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854–1855) sometimes offer almost picturesque images of poverty in Victorian England; the controversial documentary *Benefits Street* (Channel 4, 2014–) arguably privileges a type of voyeurism that has become known as 'poverty porn', and the series *Shameless* (Channel 4, 2004–2013) has been accused of featuring a "glossy comedy-driven narrative presenting an implicitly patronising, absurd, and romanticised view of Britain's contemporary working class".[2]

Poverty has many different facets. While some types of poverty may even go largely unnoticed, "the 'street practices' of homelessness – most particularly rough sleeping and begging – are where poverty becomes visible, public, and open to judgement and action: to be tolerated, avoided, ignored, tallied, or in-

1 For a distinction between the two concepts, see Korte: "Poverty is commonly understood today as material deprivation that goes hand in hand with social exclusion and lack: of agency, opportunities and access to knowledge, traditions, rights or capabilities. Precarity […] refers to insecure existential conditions that result from economic and social circumstances." Barbara Korte. "Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain: An Introduction." In: Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard (eds). *Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain.* Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2014, 1.

2 Glen Creeber. "'The truth is out there! Not!': *Shameless* and the Moral Structures of Contemporary Social Realism." In: *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 7,4 (2009), 423.

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tervened into."[3] Thus, it is hardly surprising that "[i]mages and photographs of destitution and homelessness are used routinely as signifiers for 'the poor' in popular culture, the media, and academic research".[4] The present paper seeks to examine two representations of homelessness on British television which were watched by a very large number of viewers in the U.K. when they were first broadcast. The first of these is presumably the single most influential depiction of homelessness on British television so far, the BBC1 documentary drama *Cathy Come Home* (1966), which was written by Jeremy Sandford, directed by Ken Loach and produced by Tony Garnett. This classic docudrama will be compared to a more recent representation of homelessness in the 2012 Christmas special of the internationally successful BBC1 drama series *Call the Midwife* (2012–), which was created by Heidi Thomas.[5]

Raising public awareness of homelessness: *Cathy Come Home*

Cathy Come Home was first broadcast by BBC1 in 1966, in the framework of the channel's series of 'Wednesday Plays' (1964–1970), which have gained the reputation of having provided serious and occasionally provocative content. The black-and-white documentary drama *Cathy Come Home*, which was based on research by writer Jeremy Sandford[6], sparked a lively debate on homelessness in Britain and has remained a touchstone in this debate to the present day. The docudrama traces the social downfall of a young couple – Cathy (Carol White) and Reg (Ray Brooks) – and their three children, which culminates in the family being torn apart by social workers. The fact that the story of Cathy and Reg is fictional has been used by some critics to question the merits of this particular Wednesday Play.[7] Others have argued that "[t]he effect of *Cathy Come Home* was derived precisely from the *showing* of evidence which was already available as statistics for discussion".[8] In other words, the focus on a *fictional* poverty tra-

3 Jessica Gerrard and David Farrugia. "The 'Lamentable Sight' of Homelessness and the Society of the Spectacle." In: *Urban Studies* 52,12 (2015), 2220.

4 Ibid.

5 Christmas specials constitute a format that is typical of British television: "In Britain it is very common for channels to broadcast Christmas specials of popular sitcoms [and other series, MG], with these one-off episodes often at the core of the prime-time schedules, and routinely garnering the biggest audiences of the Christmas periods" (Brett Mills. *Television Sitcom.* London: British Film Institute, 2005, 6).

6 See John Hill. *Ken Loach: The Politics of Film and Television.* London: British Film Institute/ Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 53.

7 For more information on this discussion, see Derek Paget. "'Cathy Come Home' and 'Accuracy' in British Television Drama." In: *New Theatre Quarterly* 15,1 (1999), 76.

8 John Caughie. "Progressive Television and Documentary Drama." In: *Screen* 21,3 (1980), 11.

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jectory made the problem of homelessness more tangible for viewers. Despite the fact that *Cathy Come Home* was "[c]learly marked as television drama […] [it] was nevertheless accepted by a deeply moved mass audience as a convincing account of the situation in the UK at the time".[9]

Critics widely agree that the impact *Cathy Come Home* has had on the public perception of homelessness can hardly be overestimated. Barbara Korte, for instance, sees this documentary drama, which was watched by almost 24 % of the population in the U.K. when it was first broadcast,[10] as "a landmark intervention on homelessness that even led to a change in legislation".[11] John Caughie claims that "the screening of *Cathy Come Home* is an event with material effects within the history of British social work"[12] and David Sharp even argues that "[h]omelessness as a topic for public debate could be said not to have existed in the U.K. until November 16th, 1966, when BBC Television aired the play *Cathy Come Home*".[13] Derek Paget describes the immediate reactions to this particular documentary drama as follows:

> In Birmingham on Monday 28 November 1966, to take a local example, a public discussion took place as a direct consequence of *Cathy Come Home*'s transmission just twelve days before. Sandford and Loach discussed homelessness with Birmingham city councillors, who were incensed that their city had appeared in such an unfavourable light in the film. Policy in respect of the conditions in the city's hostels for the homeless changed almost immediately; the inhuman separation of man and wife – which so ironically flew in the face of post-war society's alleged commitment to what have become known as 'family values' – ceased in Birmingham.[14]

Even the charity organisation Shelter, which was founded in 1966, has embraced the images provided in the documentary drama, having repeatedly used stills from *Cathy Come Home* to remind people in the U.K. of the problem of homelessness.[15]

To a certain extent, the remarkable impact of *Cathy Come Home* can be attributed to the format chosen by Sandford and Loach. The hybrid genre of the documentary drama combines strategies that lend the narrative an air of factuality and authenticity, while simultaneously "tap[ping] into the emotions of

9 Ulrike H. Meinhof. "From the Street to the Screen: *Breadline Britain* and the Semiotics of Poverty." In: Ulrike H. Meinhof and Kay Richardson (eds). *Text, Discourse and Context: Representations of Poverty in Britain.* London and New York: Longman, 1994, 73.

10 See Hill, *Ken Loach: The Politics of Film and Television*, 61.

11 Korte, "Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain," 6.

12 Caughie, "Progressive Television and Documentary Drama," 33.

13 David Sharp. "The 'Literally' (and Not So Literally) Homeless." In: *Journal of Urban Health: Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 84,3 (2007), 311.

14 Paget, "'Cathy Come Home' and 'Accuracy' in British Television Drama," 77.

15 See ibid., 78.

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drama"[16] and thus inviting viewers to feel sympathy with the homeless family and, first and foremost, with the female protagonist, whose point of view is singled out by various techniques, as will be shown below. Although *Cathy Come Home*, which has been referred to as "an accomplished blend of fictional and documentary techniques",[17] presents a fictional story, the fate of the protagonist is meant to be perceived as being representative of what many people experienced in the U.K. in the 1960s. The choice of locations constitutes one of several devices that contribute to the documentary character of *Cathy Come Home:*

> […] [T]he showing of real places within *Cathy* is central to its claim to be about 'real' problems that can be demonstrably 'documented'. The team, for example, was particularly pleased (as well as surprised) to be granted permission to film in Newington Lodge, the notorious hostel that Sandford had previously visited and reported on in his journalism.[18]

The docudrama was shot in London as well as in Birmingham in order to "avoid any perception that the problem of homelessness was confined to London".[19] Given the fact that Birmingham is not mentioned explicitly, however, *Cathy Come Home* even appears "to construct an image of a composite city that stands in for urban experience more generally".[20] The overall lack of establishing shots, which would specify the setting, suggests that "questions of time, space/place and action [are left] to be resolved later, if at all",[21] and reinforces the impression that the problems depicted in the documentary drama affect different cities in the U.K.

A balance between the particular and the general is characteristic of *Cathy Come Home.* Throughout the documentary drama there are "descriptive montages, composed of documentary-like shots of people and places",[22] which serve to embed the story of Cathy and Reg in a wider social context, emphasising that their fate is indeed representative of what many people had to cope with in the U.K. The documentary effect is further enhanced by favouring a "mediated style which is clearly marked",[23] i.e. visual aesthetics that are based on "apparently casual camerawork and untidy framing that give the impression that actions are not being staged for the camera but are being observed as they happen".[24] This

16 Derek Paget. "Jeremy Sandford: A Docu-Retrospect." In: *New Theatre Quarterly* 20,1 (2004), 47.

17 Bert Cardullo. "A Cinema of Social Conscience: An Interview with Ken Loach." In: *Minnesota Review* 76 (2011), 81.

18 Hill, *Ken Loach: The Politics of Film and Television*, 57.

19 Ibid., 56.

20 Ibid., 56–7.

21 Stephen Lacey. *Cathy Come Home.* Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 65.

22 Hill, *Ken Loach: The Politics of Film and Television*, 58.

23 Caughie, "Progressive Television and Documentary Drama," 27.

24 Hill, *Ken Loach: The Politics of Film and Television*, 57.

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type of camerawork includes, for instance, the use of (partial) visual obstruction in some scenes showing the female protagonist.

Sequences featuring a wide range of different voices from the off (reminiscent of the 'sound bites' often used in both radio and TV documentaries) constitute one of the most striking characteristics of the soundtrack. This juxtaposition of different voices is one of the principal "documentary techniques that not only provide the means of generalising out from the individual predicament but also of 'documenting' the social realities that the play identifies as responsible for the characters' plight".[25] Many of the voices, which are individualised by means of their accents and intonation, comment on the dismal living conditions countless people were exposed to in Britain in the 1960s, as the following passages exemplify: "[Male voice:] 'This is what you call the island of paradise? I mean, kids here, they've seen rats running around the place nearly as big as cats' ";[26] "[Female voice:] 'They're so old, the damned old places, they're so old they want pulling down!' " (*Cathy* 0:15:05–0:15:09) In addition to the voices of people facing poverty or precarity, the film includes several speakers who are meant to represent the position of local authorities or social workers in order to complete the picture.

Within the polyphony of "expert and vox populi voice-over",[27] there are two voices that clearly stand out. One of these is that of a male speaker who provides background information and straightforward social criticism, as the following passage illustrates:

> There's 200,000 more families in the London area than the homes to put them. And in addition, there's 60,000 single persons living without sinks or stoves. In seven central London boroughs at least one in ten of all households is overcrowded. That is to say, living more than one and a half people per room. […] A few years back, figures released by the LCC [London County Council; MG] revealed that families of certain sizes, at the rate of building in force, would be 350 years on the housing list before they were offered a house. […] The present target of 500,000 set by the government is not high enough. Even if it is reached, there's still people living in slums 10 years from now. What's needed is a government that realises that this is a crisis and treats it as such. (*Cathy* 0:13:09–0:14:08)

The impressive numbers as well as the clear political message in the passage quoted above already lend this particular voice a high degree of authority. This effect is reinforced by the matter-of-fact tone adopted by the speaker. *Cathy*

25 Ibid., 56.

26 Ken Loach, dir. *Cathy Come Home*. UK: BBC1, 1966, 0:14:41–0:14:48.

27 John Corner. "British TV Dramadocumentary: Origins and Developments." In: Alan Rosenthal (ed.). *Why Docudrama? Fact-Fiction on Film and TV*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999, 41.

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Come Home famously ends with captions that – similar to the male speaker's voiceover – remind the viewers of the wider picture:

> All the events in this film took place in Britain within the last eighteen months. 4,000 children are separated from their parents and taken into care each year because their parents are homeless. West Germany has built twice as many houses as Britain since the war. (*Cathy* 1:15:36–1:15:49)

These captions as well as the "discourse of authority"[28] introduced by the male voice from the off imply an explanation of homelessness that is in line with the so-called structural approach, which "emphasises the importance of social circumstances and social forces in determining the life-courses and life chances of people".[29] According to this position, the government and social services are called upon to take action against homelessness. On the story level, there are several social workers who contest this stance, however, expecting Cathy to take care of her situation without any help.[30] Given the fact that officials and social workers are generally presented very negatively in *Cathy Come Home*, the viewers' sympathies are likely to lie with the female protagonist. In this way, the structural approach to solving the problem of homelessness is implicitly privileged.

The second voice that stands out throughout the documentary drama is Cathy's. Her voiceover provides further documentary-style information. What is more important, however, is that her comments highlight the personal and emotional dimension of the representation of social decline. In terms of its relation to the visual track, Cathy's voiceover almost resembles "a post-production commentary"[31] since it appears to be "given in a self-reflective past tense",[32] as the following account of her decision to leave small-town life behind, which accompanies shots of the protagonist travelling to London, exemplifies: " 'Well, I was a bit fed up, you know. There didn't seem to be much there for me. You know how these little towns are. One coffee bar. It was closed on a Sunday' " (*Cathy* 0:01:04–0:01:12). Cathy's voiceover invites the viewers to feel empathy with the protagonist, and stylistic features such as the use of terms of direct

28 Lacey, *Cathy Come Home*, 40.

29 Pete Alcock. *Understanding Poverty*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 35.

30 For a definition of this position regarding strategies of coping with the challenge of poverty, see Alcock, *Understanding Poverty*, 35: "The focus on *agency* […] suggests that we are all ultimately the authors of our own fortunes, or misfortunes. All individuals make choices about the life courses they wish to pursue and the social relations they want to foster […]. […] [F]or society to function, individuals must take responsibility for managing their own living standards and social relations, for instance, those who are unemployed should take responsibility for seeking to get a job."

31 Hill, *Ken Loach: The Politics of Film and Television*, 55.

32 John Corner. "*Cathy Come Home.*" In: Glen Creeber (ed.). *The Television Genre Book*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008 [2001], 3.

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address in the passage above additionally reinforce the appellative nature of her utterances. Barbara Korte's observation on the emotional impact of literary representations of poverty also holds true for the way homelessness is depicted in *Cathy Come Home:* "Since literature is attentive to the particular and can render characters' inner worlds, it is an important complement to the general categories and statistics of the social and economic sciences."[33] The focus on the fate of one particular (fictional) woman gives homelessness a face as well as a tangible emotional dimension. As Paget points out, "Cathy is both main dramatic protagonist and principal documentary interviewee, her story at once personal and general".[34] The voiceover lends Cathy a certain amount of discursive agency, granting her at least the right to comment on her situation and to express her point of view. Since Cathy's accent characterises her as being of middle-class origin, the documentary drama implicitly claims that nobody is immune from becoming homeless.

By focussing on a modern and quite attractive woman *Cathy Come Home* represents homelessness in a way which contests the prevailing images "of members of arguably the most marginalized group in British society"[35] that are disseminated in news media.[36] Moreover, depictions of homeless people more often than not tend to rely on anonymity,[37] whereas Cathy is individualised. In addition, news media frequently "portray homeless people as miserable, isolated, diseased, dependent and troublesome strangers who lack friends and purpose".[38] Cathy, in contrast, is presented as a very likeable woman. A feature of this particular documentary drama that is significant in terms of making the protagonist more appealing is the fact that the viewers are not immediately confronted with Cathy as a homeless person, but are introduced to a modern young woman who is looking forward to leading a happy life. At first, things look very promising indeed: She finds a flat and a job in London and meets a young man (Reg), whom she falls in love with. The couple's initial happiness is emphasised by romantic shots showing them, for instance, kissing under sunlit trees while Ben

33 Korte, "Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain," 2.

34 Paget, "Jeremy Sandford: A Docu-Retrospect," 46.

35 Darrin Hodgetts and Andrea Hodgetts. "Life in the Shadow of the Media: Imagining Street Homelessness in London." In: *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9,4 (2006), 500.

36 Glen Creeber, for instance, observes: "Played by actress Carol White, Cathy's pretty blonde features (the actress was later dubbed 'The Battersea Bardot') makes her a particularly attractive and sympathetic character". Creeber, "'The truth is out there! Not!'," 427. Some critics have suggested that "Carol White's 60s-style attractiveness blurred the political impact of the film by courting an identification based on desire rather than awareness of the social issues". Lacey, *Cathy Come Home*, 99.

37 See Hodgetts and Hodgetts, "Life in the Shadow of the Media," 503: "Images of faceless strangers pervade media reports and are used often as establishing shots to 'set the scene' for an investigation of homelessness."

38 Ibid., 505.

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E. King's rhythm-and-blues song "Stand by Me" from 1961 is playing (*Cathy* 0:02:13–0:02:57). In the following minutes, the viewers catch glimpses of Cathy and Reg getting married and moving into a modern, stylish flat. These initial scenes are full of optimism, which is underlined by a soundtrack featuring upbeat pop music from the 1960s – the decade that has come to be associated with The Beatles and 'Swinging London'. The use of non-diegetic music in the first part of the documentary drama, which shows Cathy and Reg anticipating a bright future, enhances the dramatic nature of the first scenes, rather than privileging the documentary stance, which becomes more prominent once Cathy's decline into homelessness begins.

Paget aptly describes *Cathy Come Home* as consisting of "three 'acts' which enact Cathy's decline, fall, and descent into social hell".[39] Soon after Cathy has found out that she is pregnant the couple's social downfall begins. Reg loses his job due to an accident, and the couple moves in with Reg's mother for a while, although the flat of the elderly woman is already overcrowded, which causes considerable tension for the family. Afterwards, Cathy and Reg find cheap accommodation in an area where many houses have been boarded up and are supposed to be demolished. When they are evicted from this place, they try living in a caravan and a derelict house, but they are confronted with threats and finally are evicted again. Moreover, the viewers witness the couple being turned away by one landlord after the other due to the fact that Cathy and Reg have children. Thus, the U.K. in the 1960s is shown as an environment that is extremely hostile towards young families. After having moved into a tent, Cathy and Reg apply for temporary emergency accommodation. Yet only wives and children are admitted in the hostel, which means that Cathy is separated from her husband.[40] At this point an anonymous voice from the off informs the viewers that many people in the U.K. share the fate of Cathy and Reg: "Bus drivers, lorry drivers, coalmen, GPO sorters, general labourers, scaffolders. All sorts of groups of workers have become homeless" (*Cathy* 0:52:04–0:52:17). This comment emphasises that many people in the U.K. were homeless simply due to a lack of cheap accommodation and not necessarily as a result of the fact that they were unemployed. After three months, Cathy and her children are forced to move on to yet another emergency accommodation, where they stay in a dormitory with other homeless women and

39 Paget, "'Cathy Come Home' and 'Accuracy' in British Television Drama," 76.

40 See Steve Platt. "Home Truths: Media Representations of Homelessness." In: Bob Franklin (ed.). *Social Policy, the Media and Misrepresentation.* London and New York: Routledge, 1999, 104: "Homeless families' accommodation at the time often made no provision for husbands and fathers, who were expected to make their own arrangements elsewhere. Indeed, the 'no husbands' rule was so strictly enforced that, on two occasions in 1965, Kent County Council actually had men jailed for breaking court injunctions prohibiting them from staying with their families at one of its hostels."

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their children in an ethnically diverse environment. Despite the cramped living conditions, the women in the temporary accommodation on the whole express remarkable solidarity with each other, which serves to reinforce the contrast between the homeless on the one hand and the social workers, who lack empathy, on the other hand. Yet the solidarity among the women does not entail the kind of empowerment which could actually improve their situation; instead, they remain victims.

After a fight with a nurse, who accuses the mothers of not taking proper care of their children, and having been effectively abandoned by her husband, who does not pay the fees anymore, Cathy is eventually evicted from this hostel as well. When she is getting ready to spend the night inside a railway station, her children are forcibly taken from her by social workers – an outcome she anticipated, as her voiceover tells the viewers: " ' We had a bite to eat from the cafeteria. Of course the kiddies didn't know what was going to happen. But I knew they'd catch up with us wherever we tried to bed down for the night' " (*Cathy* 1:14:34–1:14:44). The final scenes of the documentary drama suggest that trying to fight back (e. g. against the nurse) in order to preserve her dignity is what ultimately seals Cathy's fate. There seems to be no way in which she can get out of her predicament, and nobody is willing to help her in a situation that is shown to have been caused primarily by structural problems.

In praise of the post-war welfare state: *Call the Midwife*

The BBC1 drama series *Call the Midwife* has become one of the most successful British television shows in recent years. It was inspired by Jennifer Worth's memoirs, which provide an account of the years Worth (née Lee) spent as a midwife and nurse in the borough of Poplar (East London) in the 1950s. The series addresses a wide range of social problems, including the shortage of housing in the wake of World War II, which is visualised time and again by showing families living in derelict and overcrowded houses. Homelessness plays a prominent role in the first Christmas special of the series. Introducing the topic of homelessness in a Christmas episode seems to cater to

> the documented needs of the domicile majority to engage in seasonal patterns of sympathy towards less fortunate people. This is reflected in a drastic rise in the number of media reports on homelessness in the build-up to Christmas and a rapid decline from January.[41]

41 Hodgetts and Hodgetts, "Life in the Shadow of the Media," 503. Steve Platt in fact argues that the impact of *Cathy Come Home* may partially also have been due to a "seasonal nature of the media interest": "*Cathy Come Home* relied for some of its impact on the fact that it was

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Apparently, melodramatic narratives involving homeless people are considered appropriate television fare for the holidays. The portrayal of homelessness in *Call the Midwife* resembles that in *Cathy Come Home* in some respects. The most striking similarity is the fact that both representations of poverty blame structural deficits for homelessness. Yet they differ radically in terms of both the depiction of social workers and the images of homeless persons that are constructed.

The way viewers are introduced to the topic of homelessness in *Call the Midwife* is very different from the manner in which this is achieved in *Cathy Come Home*. In the documentary drama the viewers see the protagonist as an attractive, hopeful young woman before witnessing her gradual social decline, which may encourage viewers to identify with the character's plight. In *Call the Midwife*, in contrast, an old woman called Mrs Jenkins (Sheila Reid), who has found some sort of shelter in a derelict house that has been classified as unfit for habitation, is initially presented as a person who is perceived as a nuisance, as an intruder in the public space shared by 'decent' people. Her face, hair and tattered clothes look extremely dirty, and it is obvious that nurse and midwife Jenny Lee (Jessica Raine), one of the series' protagonists, dislikes being addressed, let alone touched by the homeless woman. Jenny Lee's body language and facial expression clearly indicate that she is eager to get away from Mrs Jenkins.[42] Later on, this impression is confirmed when the nurse mentions her encounter with the homeless woman in a conversation with two of the other nurses: "'Never seen anyone so decrepit. […] And there was actually mildew on her coat'" (*Midwife* 0:11:15–0:11:26). This reaction on the part of the protagonist, which echoes a widespread aversion to being close to homeless people, is all the more remarkable given the fact that Jenny Lee is used to dealing with poverty and squalor on a daily basis and is known to regular viewers as a young woman who is capable of a very high degree of empathy. While the nurse at least tries to remain polite when she meets Mrs Jenkins, other inhabitants of Poplar are less considerate. When the old homeless woman is trying to play with a baby in a pram, the child's mother gets furious, accuses Mrs Jenkins of being a "filthy old crone" and pushes her away (*Midwife* 0:15:54–0:16:54). Beyond presenting Mrs Jenkins as a nuisance, the episode even alludes to the possibility of seeing her as a threat, i.e. as someone who might eventually steal a baby since she displays an almost obsessive interest

screened at the beginning of winter, in the run up to Christmas. […] Stories of homelessness, of people without roofs over their head or living in cold, damp, substandard housing, don't have the same impact on a balmy summer's day as they do when the nights are closing in and the weather is getting colder." Platt, "Home Truths," 106.

42 Heidi Thomas, creator. "Christmas Special 2012." *Call the Midwife*. UK: BBC1, 2012, 0:08:43–0:08:50.

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in newborn babies. All in all, the first impression of the old woman thus obviously echoes widespread prejudices with regard to homeless people.

Yet, in a fashion that is characteristic of *Call the Midwife* in general, the Christmas special subsequently invites the viewers to look beneath the surface and to understand why Mrs Jenkins is homeless. In the course of the episode, the viewers find out that the widowed woman and her five children were admitted to the Poplar workhouse in 1906 after having been found destitute. Upon entering the workhouse, mothers were routinely separated from their children, who had to stay in special wards. This piece of information already suggests obvious parallels between Cathy's fate and that of Mrs Jenkins; due to being homeless, both women are deprived of agency and have to watch helplessly when their children are taken away from them.[43] Moreover, poverty is gendered given the fact that both homelessness narratives focus on the particular plight of women. By portraying the mothers' pain both representations of homelessness criticise the inhumane practice of separating children from their mothers. Mrs Jenkins stayed in the workhouse until 1935, when the institution was finally closed. By that time all of her children had died inside the workhouse without ever having been reunited with their mother.[44] The loss of her children has left Mrs Jenkins traumatised and accounts for her intense interest in newborn children. The way destitute people were treated in the workhouse is obviously condemned in *Call the Midwife.* What the series fails to point out, however, is that the practice of separating children from their mothers had survived the abolishment of the workhouse. The intriguing temporal relationship between the Christmas special of *Call the Midwife* (produced in 2012, set in the late 1950s) and *Cathy Come Home* (produced in 1966, set in the early 1960s) implies that the documentary drama by Sandford and Loach can in fact be read as a corrective of the narrative of homelessness presented in the drama series: Contrary to what the Christmas special suggests, in

43 In this context, agency can be defined as follows: "The idea of agency is typically used to characterize individuals as autonomous, purposive and creative actors, capable of a degree of choice." Ruth Lister. *Poverty.* Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2004, 125.

44 See Liza Picard's account of the workhouse and the attitudes that nurtured an institution which shaped British policies regarding the management of 'poverty' for a long time: "To enter the workhouse meant giving up all self-respect, and abandoning family ties. It was dreaded with unimaginable fear. The Poor Law Act of 1601, which in its turn had replaced the old monastic charities, had set up parochial Poorhouses. They were suddenly seen by the Establishment to be too lenient. Things had to change. The poor could not be allowed to go on sponging on their richer neighbours. In 1834 the law was drastically altered. Every parish had to provide a workhouse. [...] No longer should an old or disabled person who just needed a bit of help to stay in his or her own house draw 'outdoor relief' from the parish. Spouses who had lived together for decades were to go into the workhouse and be separated into wards for 'male paupers' and 'female paupers'. Their children were taken from them." Liza Picard. *Victorian London: The Life of a City 1840–1870.* London: Phoenix, 2006 [2005], 93.

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post-war Britain poverty could still mean that children were forcibly separated from their parents.

While *Cathy Come Home* presents a narrative of inexorable social decline culminating in homelessness, the drama series adds a certain element of solace, giving the poverty trajectory a more positive ending. The episode suggests that there are many ways in which the modern welfare state, which was made possible by the National Assistance Act (passed by the Attlee government in 1948), can hope to assuage at least some of the pain that was inflicted on people like Mrs Jenkins due to the way homelessness had been dealt with in the U.K. before the new law was passed. The old woman is given new clothes, a more comfortable place to live in and is equipped with glasses and a hearing aid. Thanks to Meals on Wheels she also receives nourishing food for free. Here, social workers are shown to use their power exclusively for the benefit of the homeless woman. Beyond caring for Mrs Jenkins's physical well-being, the nurses also try to help her overcome her trauma. When they hear her terrible wailing, they understand that this is a symptom of her trauma; one of the older nurses explains: "'We used to call it "the workhouse howl". It's the sound of someone who has been at the bottom of the heap. I would call it a cry of protest, except there's no fight left in it. And no hope either'" (*Midwife* 0:30:01–0:30:19). Jenny Lee makes inquiries about Mrs Jenkins's past and the fate of her children; she finds out where they were buried and takes the old woman to the churchyard, where she can say goodbye to her children and in this way at least begin to come to terms with her loss.

Both in *Cathy Come Home* and in the Christmas special of *Call the Midwife* those characters who have been endowed with authority due to their role as social workers determine the fate of the central female character. In other words, Cathy and Mrs Jenkins are equally deprived of agency, of the right to make decisions about their life. Yet while *Cathy Come Home* has become famous for "the unfavourable light in which social workers are seen",[45] the series *Call the Midwife* consistently portrays nurses and doctors who feel empathy and are dedicated to helping and understanding people who are poor. This is particularly apparent in a scene where two nurses give Mrs Jenkins a bath, which symbolically marks the beginning of a radical transformation of her life. The old woman at first refuses help and feels embarrassed (*Midwife* 0:45:00). The nurses convince her to cooperate, however; then, they are shown to undress and wash the old woman very slowly and caringly. Her extremely thin and frail body indicates her vulnerability. While Mrs Jenkins is being washed, there is no dialogue; instead, the traditional English Christmas song "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" is being sung by a single female voice (*Midwife* 0:45:10–0:46:00). The nurses' slow movements and the

45 Paget, "'Cathy Come Home' and 'Accuracy' in British Television Drama," 79.

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song invest the scene with a solemn atmosphere, which almost seems to suggest that Mrs Jenkins is going through a rite of rebirth. Her successful transformation ultimately even annihilates her exclusion from the community. At the end of the episode, the previously stigmatised and ostracised woman is shown to become an active member of the community when she uses her sewing skills to help with costumes for the nativity play.

The sad story of Mrs Jenkins with its (moderately) positive ending is embedded within a more general narrative of social progress and optimism that is conveyed throughout *Call the Midwife*. The episode is characteristic of the series in so far as it establishes a straightforward dichotomy between a bleak, inhumane past and a bright, hopeful present (i. e. the late 1950s), which was made possible by medical progress, the introduction of the National Health Service and the emergence of the welfare state. This opposition between past and present is stressed when Mrs Jenkins's deep-set distrust of all kinds of social workers is explained by one of the nurses as a natural consequence of the way poor people used to be treated in the past: "'Who knows what brutality she knew when she was young. Help then didn't mean what help means now'" (*Midwife* 0:18:03–0:18:09).

A comparison of the TV episode to the corresponding chapters in Jennifer Worth's memoir reveals some interesting departures from the autobiographical text. What is shown in the Christmas special is essentially a condensed version of the following three chapters from the first volume of Worth's memoirs: "Mrs Jenkins" (211–20), "Rosie" (221–9) and "The Workhouse" (230–6). In some respects, the story of Mrs Jenkins as it is told in the TV series is very close to the account given by Worth. The repugnance initially felt by Jenny Lee, which is expressed by actress Jessica Raine's body language and facial expression, is presented in the memoir as follows:

> I had always been repelled by Mrs Jenkins, mainly because she was so dirty. Her hands and fingernails were filthy, and the only reason I spoke to her, reporting on the baby just born, was to avoid her grabbing my arm, which she would do with surprising strength if her questions were not answered. It was easier to answer briefly, and at a safe distance, and then to escape.[46]

A first crucial difference between the TV episode and Worth's autobiographical narrative is the fact that Mrs Jenkins's past is presented in a significantly more detailed fashion in the memoir, which explains why the widow ended up in the workhouse in the first place and gives an account of the gruesome living conditions inside the institution: After her husband had died of tuberculosis, Mrs

46 Jennifer Worth. *Call the Midwife: A True Story of the East End in the 1950s*. London: Phoenix, 2012 [2002], 213.

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Jenkins worked in a factory and took in sewing to provide for her children, but then an accident in the factory almost ruined her right arm, which caused the family to become destitute. According to the memoir, Mrs Jenkins took an active part in the reconstruction of the narrative of her life, recalling her past hardship in conversations with the nurses: "The records were dry and scant. Mrs Jenkins herself filled in the missing details in her conversation with Sister Evie. Little bits of the story came out here and there, relived with a complete lack of emotion or melodrama as though her story were nothing unusual."[47] Thus, the written narrative grants the old woman a somewhat more active role than the TV series does, where she says very little about her past. What has been added in the TV series are the last two scenes, i. e. Mrs Jenkins's visit to the graves of her children, which appears to provide her with some sense of closure, and her sewing costumes for the nativity play. Thus, the ending of the real Mrs Jenkins's story has been modified in order to make it slightly more hopeful and optimistic than it is in Worth's memoir – a change that may presumably be explained as a tribute to the narrative frame of the Christmas special and that reinforces the emphasis on progress and hope that is characteristic of the series in general.

Conclusion

Cathy Come Home and the 2012 Christmas special of *Call the Midwife* show some striking similarities: They focus on the fate of individualised female characters to render the problem of homelessness tangible, and they clearly favour structural explanations of homelessness. But the two homelessness narratives differ radically in terms of their assessment of the situation in post-war Britain. The Christmas special argues that "the dysfunctionality of social welfare systems"[48] has been remedied due to the abolition of the institution of the workhouse and the National Assistance Act, while *Cathy Come Home*, which is set in the 1960s, suggests that much of the optimism triggered by the National Assistance Act was in fact unfounded. The documentary drama, which has been accused of being "'biased' […], depicting officials as uncaring and often hostile in a manner that would have been unacceptable in a conventional documentary",[49] shows that many of the practices which are associated with the notorious institution of the workhouse were in fact perpetuated in emergency accommodations.

47 Ibid., 227.

48 Gerrard and Farrugia, "The 'Lamentable Sight' of Homelessness and the Society of the Spectacle," 2224.

49 Corner, "*Cathy Come Home*," 3.

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Despite some interesting parallels, the two stories about homelessness produced by BBC1 are clearly worlds apart as far as their effects are concerned. *Cathy Come Home* draws upon the conventions of the documentary and the drama in order to maximize the potential of making viewers aware of shortcomings in contemporary society. As was pointed out above, the strategy of showing fictional characters who represent very real social problems was quite a success, since *Cathy Come Home* actually made some difference in the way homeless people were treated in the 1960s. The Christmas special of *Call the Midwife*, which suggests that homeless persons only had to reach out in order to receive help in post-war Britain, presumably does not have the potential to make viewers aware of ongoing social problems; instead, it presents a story that comments on the inhumane treatment homeless people experienced in the past and primarily caters to a 'seasonal' interest in homelessness. The story of the real Mrs Jenkins has been modified by being retold twice (by Jennifer Worth in her memoir and by Heidi Thomas in the TV episode) and her actual poverty trajectory has all but disappeared underneath layers of melodrama. In other words, the character Mrs Jenkins could even be read against the grain, as a victim of the power of representation.

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