

## *The Poetics of the City: Abstracts*

The 2023 Conference of the Stanford Center for the Study of the Novel

Ulka Anjaria, Brandeis University

### ***"Our Time Will Come": Mumbai's Urban Poetics***

How do we find the poetics of overcrowded, segregated and unequal cities? This paper makes the case for an urban poetics of Mumbai, India through a reading of Zoya Akhtar's 2019 film *Gully Boy*. The film tells the story of Murad Ahmed aka Gully Boy, a rapper born in the largely Muslim, working-class neighborhood of Dharavi, who uses rap to articulate new visions of the city beyond dystopia or despair. Against powerful narratives that either lament Mumbai's decline from a 19th-century cosmopolitan idyll or celebrate its ascendancy to a world-class, capitalist city, Murad's rap uses rhyme, linguistic innovation and poetry's unique temporality to articulate an alternative to both teleological narratives. Imagining a subjectivity deeply enmeshed with urban forms and building a poetics from the everyday idioms of Mumbai street life, *Gully Boy* outlines a new poetic imaginary that gives voice to the lived experience of a global, 21st-century megalopolis.

Ato Quayson, Stanford University

### ***Representing New York: Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and the Jazz Perplex***

New York can arguably be said to deliver the most complex questions of how it is represented in literature. This is partly because historically it has always been at the crossroads of different literary currents and also of different migrant populations from both within and outside of the United States. My talk will merge these two senses of the crossroads to focus on Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues", both of which deploy music as theme and method to make sense of what is really the intractability of representing New York. As they are both set in Harlem, they allow us also to see different dimensions of the area as a chronotope of simultaneous ethnicity and heterogeneity. The main interest of my talk will be to explore some ideas to do with the formal devices that these two writers have used, and how they align with or qualify other representations of cities elsewhere.

David Kurnick, Rutgers University

### ***On the Difficulty of Imaging an Ideal City***

My title is taken from a two-page piece 1981 by Georges Perec comprising a seemingly random list of ambivalent opinions about cities and geography: "I wouldn't like to live in America but sometimes I would ... I'd love to live on the Boulevard St. Germain but sometimes I wouldn't." Only toward the end of the list ("I wouldn't like to live in the Yonne but sometimes I would ... I wouldn't like us all to live in Zanzibar but sometimes I would") does it become clear that the hidden principle according to which the twenty-six-item list is constructed is the alphabet.

This is of course the rule-regulated whimsy of the OULIPO group of which Perec was a key member. But it is also a signal observation about how cities function as invitations to perceive occult structures behind a rush of apparently random perceptual data. We know about the intimacy between cities and mental abstraction from the sociology of Georg Simmel, as well as from the abstraction-prone urban perambulations of Leopold

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Bloom and Clarissa Dalloway. This paper will make the case that this intimacy also works in reverse—not just that cities encourage the articulation of cognitive abstractions but that some of our most famous theories of modernity are often in the first place (as in Jameson’s cognitive mapping and Sartre’s seriality) theories of cities. I’ll suggest that this complicity between theoretical abstraction and urban space is incubated by the realist novel—especially the sprawling narrative universes of Balzac and his multiplot-creating descendants—whose very formal architecture first sutured mental abstraction to urban (and fictional) structure.

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Catherine Flynn, University of California, Berkeley  
***Paris and Popular Revolution in James Joyce’s Ulysses***

Joyce wrote that his early experience of Paris made the street-life of Dublin newly visible to him. Reflecting on the reshaping of the two cities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this talk explores the explicit and implicit presence of the French capital in the cityscape of *Ulysses*. It asks how Joyce’s characters engage with memories of popular uprisings, both Irish and French, as they encounter Dublin’s residual medieval urban fabric and its monumental streetscapes.

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Catherine Nesci, University of California, Santa Barbara  
***Recollecting Metatexts: Cityscapes as Memoryscapes in post-Shoah Fiction and Nonfiction***

Hélène Gaudy’s *Une île, une forteresse* (2015) belongs to the French contemporary trend of nonfiction, investigative work, and “fieldwork literature”—to use the English translation of Dominique Viard’s key concept, “littérature de terrain.” Combining the genres of tourist travelogue, pilgrimage to sites of traumatic horrors, and factographic narrative (Zenetti), Gaudy writes about her visits to Theresienstadt—nowadays Terezín, the infamous, famed fortress-city located in the Czech Republic—, which served as a Jewish ghetto, concentration camp, and transit place toward death camps from 1940 to 1944. As a researcher and archivist, visitor turned detective, and walker/arpenteuse in a desolate place, at times accompanied by a female guideinterpreter in what seems like a dystopic ghost town, Gaudy investigates, among other mysteries, the fabric of a mirage, a staging of visualized narratives transforming the wretched ghetto into a beautiful place. Referring to Sebald’s last novel *Austerlitz* in her inquiry into the patterns of memory and oblivion within the urban and militarized space, she explores the shooting of a deceptive documentary that aimed to lure the German officers of the International Red Cross Committee and, beyond, the whole world into seeing Theresienstadt as a model town for happy Jewish families. In the culmination of his quest for his lost murdered mother, Sebald’s *Austerlitz* searches for the image of her face in the extant documentary film footage.

In my paper, I will study the ways in which Gaudy’s arpentage and walkscapes unfold the fabric of a multifaceted simulacrum, both in Theresienstadt and Drancy (180), and elaborate competing memoryscapes based on situated observations, testimonials, and encounters with witnesses and survivors. Echoing Sebald’s memorial novel and its metatextual narrative layers, Gaudy’s nonfiction unfolds a chain of transmission that both repeats a barbaric, catastrophic history and unveils the repression of the past while reactivating mechanisms of transmission via a poetics of intertextuality and flânerie.

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Anne Lounsbury, New York University  
***“This isn’t Paris”: The Russian Provinces as Abyss***

How should we think about Russian cities and what they mean at a moment when Russia itself seems to be retreating into atavistic darkness? How can we understand where Russia’s all-important (and imaginary) center lies at a time when its borders are so unstable, thanks to the war it is waging to conquer – or in its

own representation, take back – the neighboring state of Ukraine? Russia has long existed in multiple temporalities at once, and arguably in multiple geographies as well: it has been described (and has described itself) as maybe peripheral but definitely not small, European but also Asian, behind but possibly ahead, Christian but perhaps not exactly Christendom in the sense of “the West.” This talk will approach such contradictions by analyzing how Russian literature has imagined the country’s symbolic geography, particularly in its enduring focus on the divide between the capitals and the provinces. As Fyodor Sologub said of the Russian provincial town in his dark Symbolist masterpiece *Petty Demon*, “This isn’t Paris.”

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Cajetan Iheka, Yale University  
***African Literature: A Poetics for the City***

The African city has emerged as a robust site of intellectual work in literary criticism and cultural studies in the past two decades. This scholarship has emphasized the city’s precarity and creativity; formality and informality; the intersection of the local and transnational; and of the interaction of the rural and urban across the continent. Performativity is also a crucial element of the African city, which is seen as site of self-making and image laundering within this growing corpus. Overall, recent work on African cities has centered a poetics of the city concentrating on the image and agency of urban residents across Africa (Simone; Mbembe; Quayson). But what if we shift attention from the poetics of the city to the poetics for the city? My presentation explores the dynamics of this prepositional shift, drawing examples from African literature. What does the city expect from the countryside and what stories are, in turn, invented for the city? And what does the world figured as city demand of its signified bush—Africa? These questions stand to sharpen our understanding of the relationship between rural and urban spaces in Africa and help us to ponder the extent to which African aesthetics—including its literature—are best read as poetics for the city.

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Matthew Beaumont, University College London  
***Profane Illuminations: Electric Light and the Early 20th-Century City at Night***

This paper claims that, in the early 20th-century city at night, brightly lit as it is by electric streetlights and billboard advertisements, the metropolitan streets serve, in a peculiarly literal sense, as the site of what Walter Benjamin famously called ‘profane illuminations’. Above all, what the electric light illuminated was – the darkness. For the poets and novelists of the period, what this meant was not so much that the electric light eradicated the darkness as that, on the contrary, it exposed its irreducible, ineradicable presence. It rendered ‘darkness visible’, to echo Milton’s phrase from *Paradise Lost*, dramatizing the barbaric underside of modern, consumer-capitalist civilization. The paper takes as its pretext Rupert Brooke’s scintillating description of the commodity culture of New York City at night in the 1910s. It then explores the treatment of the nocturnal metropolis in novels of the 1930s and early 1940s that are set in London. There, in oneiric passages that test the limits of social realism, novelists such as Patrick Hamilton used the electrified city to reveal not merely the alienation and isolation of the modern metropolitan subject but the moral darkness into which the planet was being plunged at this time by the political situation in Europe.

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Emily Steinlight, University of Pennsylvania  
***Rented Spaces: Vacancy, Totality, Metropolitan Form***

Centering the abstract cognitive power of the detective, Arthur Conan Doyle’s fiction trades on “the essentially intellectualistic character of the mental life of the metropolis,” which Georg Simmel would correlate with the city’s status as seat of the money economy. As a distinctly metropolitan genre, detective fiction from Wilkie Collins to Doyle mobilizes specialized mental labor and ascribes it new social agency via its separation from material production and from private property. It can seem from this angle to echo a late-imperial shift in the metropolitan core of the world system from ‘real’ to ‘fictitious’ capital, which the

Warwick Research Collective would stress as a recurrent tendency of global capitalist development rather than a unique feature of the deindustrialized present. Yet to reconstruct historical causes and personalized motives, the mystery genre's plots rely on spatial infrastructure as the ground or analog of those deductive processes that drive its narrative. It is by recourse to rented rooms and in traversing vacant or half-built urban spaces that it gains the mobility of perspective and powers of geographic projection that its deductions require. This talk will consider how the functions of consciousness get spatialized in city novels, and how a particular brand of brainwork is tasked with managing domestic and geopolitical space. Focusing on nineteenth-century mystery and crime fiction, I will suggest that the psychology of detection brings mental labor into a new relationship with property and with the speculative abstractions of exchange that alters the novel's lease on totality.

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Brigid Rooney, University of Sydney

***The Slip Beneath the surface: from Iconic Harbor to Multiethnic Suburbs***

Sydney is routinely visualised through its location on the shores of its stunning, many-lobed Harbour, and through its architectural icons of Opera House and Harbour Bridge. Settler Australian poets and novelists have depicted the Harbour as, on the one hand, integral to the everyday, modern, commuter city while, on the other hand, figuring the fatal depths of its waters in terms that at once suggest and displace Sydney's colonial origins. The first part of this paper thinks about these origins, and about the Harbour's haunted poetics, by setting Eleanor Dark's novel *Waterway* (1938) alongside *The Visitors* (2021) by First Nations playwright and Muruwari woman Jane Harrison, a play first staged in Sydney in January 2020. The comparison serves to highlight how the narrative of Sydney's origins is currently undergoing seismic shifts. Sydney, however, extends well beyond its Harbour precinct. Greater Sydney is comprised of a vast mosaic of suburbs in distinctive socio-geographic subregions. The voices of its diverse population are at the forefront of the city's newest literary movement. The second part of my paper therefore moves out from the touristic theatre of the Harbour into the sprawling settler-suburban space of Western Sydney. Focusing on one example – Felicity Castagna's *No More Boats* (2017) – I attend to this novel's relocation of the Harbour's aqueous trope (its tidal, estuarine element) to a suburban setting upriver in Western Sydney, and I consider how its exploration of intergenerational trauma linked to migration speaks to wider settler-colonial structures and legacies.

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Jini Kim Watson, New York University

***An Archipelago of Illegals: Sydney, Migrant Spatiality, and Aravind Adiga's Amnesty***

Narrated by undocumented Sri Lankan Tamil migrant, Danny (Dhananjaya) Rajaratnam, Aravind Adiga's novel *Amnesty* (2020) is a one-day murder mystery set in contemporary Sydney. The novel is several things at once: an investigation into the production of illegality in contemporary Australia, the urgent narrative of a migrant-detective who forestalls deportation by story-telling, and a vernacular cartography that reveals a dark underside to this famously sunny city. As Danny—who blurs the boundaries between overseas student, refugee, and illegal migrant—observes: “always expanding, this city of Sydney, except for those people for whom it was always contracting.”

In this paper, I seek to make two arguments. The first is to observe the way Adiga's novel participates in a larger body of contemporary urban narratives that unsettles aspirational models of “the global city” in stories of “disaffection, displacement, injury, loss, sickness and returns away” (Rashmi Varma, 2022). Functioning as a powerful counter-image to typical celebrations of Sydney's global multiculturalism, the novel traces an alternative genealogy of the global through histories of colonialism, migrant exclusion, and the neoliberalized education industry. *Amnesty* thus retheorizes itineraries of the global city, and re-writes Sydney's urban landscape as a function of the pieced-together pasts and stalled presents of migrant identities, that is, as a function of migrant spatiality. Second, the paper argues that understanding today's contemporary global migration regime requires a deeper engagement with the way the violent histories of racial exclusion, decolonization and war in the Asia Pacific have shaped forms of mobility and refugee policy. Employing

Suvendrini Perera's concept of the borderscape, I consider the way sites such as Sydney condense and obscure the ongoing bordering effects of (settler) colonialism, White Australia policies, and today's neoliberalization of migration management.

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Ursula Heise, University of California, Los Angeles

***Under Water: Climate Change and Urban Narrative***

Narratives about cities under conditions of climate change typically focus on scenarios of large-scale disaster and end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it, with cities under water as a prominent motif. My presentation will focus on what might be problematic about current apocalyptic narrative and present two examples of urban storytelling that go beyond apocalypse to open up new ways of narrating climate change as a portal of opportunities for greater social justice: the American science fiction novel *New York 2140* by Kim Stanley Robinson and the Vietnamese science fiction film *Nước 2030* by Nguyễn-Võ Nghiêm-Minh.