

Waste Lands and Human Waste in Postcolonial Texts.
Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*

Abstract: In this paper I would like to provide an eco-aware and human-rights-aware exploration of the literary representations of two communities who live on a dumping ground, at the margin of society, and who end up being considered as disposable as the garbage they live among. The first case is the novel *Carpentaria* (2006) by Alexis Wright, where a community of Australian Aborigines live off the rubbish dump of the town of Desperance, in the Gulf of Carpentaria. The second case is the Annawadi community of the notorious Mumbai slum, just outside the International Airport precinct, portrayed by the American journalist Katherine Boo in the novel *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012). Both Aborigines and Annawadians live of garbage picking, recycling, sorting, selling and trading. Yet, in spite of the little profit they might make, or right because of that, they end up arrested, beaten up, and even brutally murdered. Both the Foucauldian categories of control and punishment and Bauman's theories of "waste" assimilate those people to garbage itself, transforming them into a residual existence: invisible, undesired, marginalized and refused.

Keywords: *waste*, 'human as waste', *environmental humanities*, *Aborigines*, *Slamabai*, 'deep-democracy'

"We no longer have ready-made answers to such fundamental questions as: What is the relationship between the quality of persons on the one hand and material wealth, poverty, hunger and disease on the other?"¹ In his essay, "Democracy as a Community of Life", Achille Mbembe questions our contemporary world and asks if material conditions of life still determine and affect the very nature of human beings. In other words, if history, social status and economic wealth can influence the ethical principles of single individuals as well as of entire communities.

¹ Achille Mbembe, "Democracy as a Community of Life", *The Johannesburg Salon* 4 (2011), 5.

The philosopher, sociologist and political scientist Achille Mbembe writes from a country, South Africa, which, by turning apartheid into law, installed "a privileged mechanism for turning black life into *waste* – a race doomed to wretchedness, degradation, abjection and servitude".² The end of the apartheid regime has by no means meant the erasure of this phenomenon. On the contrary, Mbembe detects the permanence or even a new resurgence of such a-symmetry, to the point that "Today, questions concerning the place of race in capitalism and capitalism's intrinsic capacity to generate '*the human*' as *waste* are being raised anew, at a time when radical shifts can be observed in the way neo-liberalism operates".³

² *Ibid.*, 6.

³ *Ibid.*

Although Mbembe analyses the situation of present-day Africa, his words also describe other realities. For instance, when he writes that “both the logic of privatization and that of extraction are underpinned and buttressed by various processes of militarization”,⁴ one cannot but think of India and of the on-going internecine warfare between the federal army with the help of paramilitary forces and the adivasi, or so-called tribals, for the control of natural resources, namely forests, water and minerals. This racialised war constructs the “tribals” either as backward savages and non-citizens, or as most dangerous terrorists (Maoists, or Naxalites), thus allowing the police forces to act violently by setting villages on fire in the forests, arresting, torturing and raping women as happened in the so-called operation “Green Hunt”.⁵

⁵ See Arundhati Roy, *Walking with the Comrades* (New York: Penguin, 2011), and Graham Huggan and Hellen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 44-51.

⁶ Mbembe, “Democracy as a Community of Life”, 6.

Furthermore, Mbembe detects a major weakness in the capitalist system, or neo-liberal capitalism: “where access to wage labour is still a – remote – possibility, it is more and more embedded in a logic of disposability”.⁶ These two paradigms, that is, communities dispossessed of their natural resources, and disposability of jobless people are particularly relevant to the discussion and analysis of two novels which are centred around “the human as waste”: *Carpentaria* (2006), by the Australian writer Alexis Wright and *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012), by the American journalist Katherine Boo.

Carpentaria is an epic reconstruction of the life of a community of Aborigines in the region of the Gulf of Carpentaria, in North-West Queensland, Australia. It goes without saying that in spite of their millenary presence on – and deep knowledge of – that land, they live at the margins of the (fictional) white town of Desperance. “For the reader it is an ironic reminder of the town of Esperance in Western Australia. Esperance was supposedly named by French explorers who took shelter there during a storm in 1792 but in 2007 it was hit by a violent storm which caused significant flooding which destroyed hundreds of homes and washed away part of the highway linking it to Perth”.⁷

⁷ Susan Barrett, “‘This Land Is Me’: Indigenous Australian Story-telling and Ecological Knowledge”, *ELOHI*, 3 (2013), 32.

More precisely, Aborigines live off the dumping ground of the whites. Angel Day and Norm Phantom, two of the main protagonists in *Carpentaria*, chose the spot for their house for “all she had to do was walk across the road to the rubbish dump, and there she could get anything her heart desired – *for free*. She thought the dump was magnificent, as anyone dirt poor would.... she ended up with an igloo made of rubbish”.⁸ This short presentation of the humble shack in which Angel and Norm live shows the new philosophy of recycling that seems to characterize Aboriginal thinking, thus creating an anti-capitalistic and anti-consumeristic philosophy and a consequently consistent ecosophic behaviour.

⁸ Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (Artarmon, NSW: Giramondo, 2006), 15. All references are to this edition, quoted as *C*.

This situation immediately calls to one’s mind the Leonia of Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, quoted by Zygmunt Bauman in his introduction to *Wasted Lives* (2004). Leonia is a city which produces tons of indestructible garbage every day, for Leonians are obsessed with what is “new” and pathologically enjoy

“expelling and discarding”.⁹ Similarly, they are paranoid with hygienic measures including “cleansing themselves of a recurrent impurity”.¹⁰ This seems exactly the portrait of the white citizens of Desperance, obsessed with the impurity of the *blackfella* and with their need to throw away their belongings.

Thus, Angel Day uses recycled materials (“it was nothing for her to walk back and forth to the dump two dozen times a day to cart back pieces of sheet iron, jerry cans, bits of car bodies, pieces of rope, logs, plastic, discarded curtains and old clothing” [C, 15]), because she is “dirt poor” and because she has them “for free”. But also because she lives according to an alternative system of beliefs, habits and practices, completely opposite to the consumerist and capitalist ones. Therefore, she envisions her own aesthetics out of the recycled rubbish (“The structure of the house was a tribute to far-off monuments representing noteworthy moments in history” [C, 12]). The one drawback in this situation is that Angel Day engenders envy among her community for all the riches she is accumulating (“tins and pickle bottles of nails, screws, bolts” [C, 16]), and anger for the “contagion” she gets from contact with the whites: “This led them to say privately that she had acquired a disease from making her life out of living in other people’s rubbish. Who knew what kind of lurgies lurked in white trash? The dump was full of disease. And the pricklebush said, *If she had any sense, she ought to stay right away from the rubbish dump*. It was of no benefit to anyone if she had magical powers to make her more like the white people” (C, 16).

Although the dumping ground is not described as toxic, it ends up intoxicating the community anyway, since a comic, mock-epic fight breaks out between Angel and another Aboriginal woman over the statue of a Madonna, which causes the community to split into two opposing factions. On one lucky Monday morning, among the steaming leftovers, badly smelling under the first sunrays, Angel finds first a huge pile of children’s story books, the foundation bricks of western culture (Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Peter Pan, *Cinderella*, *Alice in Wonderland*). Then she finds a “large black mantelpiece clock with a cracked glass cover”, and she hides it in her sacks so as not to be accused of stealing it from the Uptown: “To live without it was a betrayal of the future she was already imagining in which the Phantom children would be going to school on time. No one in the Phantom family would be guessing the time anymore from where the sun sat in the sky” (C, 22). The clock is one of the symbols of western civilization in the colonies, for it signals the schedule of imported daily tasks and routines that regulate and discipline the life in the colony of both colonisers and colonised. It is in sheer contrast with Wright’s challenges “to convey the Indigenous sense of time as a continuum rather than a linear process, something which is important as a way of showing that humans have always and will always be linked to the land”.¹¹

⁹ See Chiara Giobergia, “A Path through a Landscape of Waste”, *Ri-cognizioni*, 2.3 (2015), 225-237.

¹⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 1.

¹¹ Barrett, “This Land Is Me”, 35.

Thus the clock becomes to Angel a potent symbol of whiteness. Later on Angel finds the discarded statue of a Madonna and takes it home, not before having fought verbally and physically over its ownership with her opponent. Angel then restores the statue not by giving it back its lost splendour, but painting it with colourful strokes and making it a black Madonna, an indigenized and aboriginal-like icon.

The fight between the two women soon involves the whole community and two factions openly give way to a real war that sends half of the community to live on the East side of Desperance. The two sides will be at war for ever. The East sides will even be complicit in the Mine's violent security system, turning their unemployment into a medium for exerting power and control. This shows exactly that material conditions can change human beings to the point of making them lose hope in their own community. Divisions among the black communities have always been a sign of weakness; the impossibility to fight with one voice for a common goal has decreed the political defeat of many a battle fought in the name of human rights.

Waste is a motif in the novel. But what is striking is that most of the waste and of the wreckage are the products of white society and white lifestyle: "Some Aboriginals were seen pushing up into Uptown itself – abandoned car bodies to live in. You could see Aboriginals living in them behind the fences at the end of their backyards even" (C, 33). Some of the inhabitants of the car wrecks are three children who are considered by the whole of Uptown as petrol sniffers and good-for-nothing.

Car wrecks are the second example mentioned by Bauman in his essay: "Used cars, cars declared used up and so no longer wanted, were squeezed by gigantic presses into neat metal boxes. 'But those metal boxes did not vanish from the world... They probably melt down the crushed metal to make iron and new steel for new cars, and thus rubbish is transformed into new rubbish, only slightly increased in quantity'.¹² In Desperance there are not even the infrastructures to dispose of car wrecks, nor is it possible to mend cars by substituting exhausted parts, so they remain there, dotting the landscape with their rusted carcasses, as a monument to Western wasted civilization.

¹² Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, 4.

When a man is found dead in the Uptown, the three little children are immediately suspected and accused of murder. Gordy, a security guard to patrol and safeguard the paranoid citizens of Desperance, indeed dies under mysterious circumstances. The result is the immediate arrest of the three innocent boys:

those little Pricklebush boys, the petrol sniffers, were arrested and taken to a shimmering silver, green, gold and red tinsel-decorated jail. Tristram

Fishman, Junior Fishman Luke, Aaron Ho Kum. Three little boys. There was a roar for those three little boys, saying, ‘They got their just deserts’.

They were left there, locked up in town’s jail, known as Truthful’s planetarium, neglected amongst crowded foliage of the *jarrbikala*’s strappy and viney tropical indoor oasis, feeling like they were starting to rot. (C, 311-311)

Quite soon it becomes clear that from being dwellers amongst rubbish and waste, these three children are considered to be outsiders, parasites, killers, human waste. Aged twelve, eleven and ten, not being claimed back by their families, they are considered as disposable.

Together, when they had been left alone, when sure no one was listening, they huddled in a corner spinning out in a whirl of raw-felt fear, clawing into each other, believing they were not humans. Often, they spoke about how they thought they were being kept like lizards in a zoo.... Spinning on their addiction and sudden withdrawal, they interpreted ‘just deserves’, as the impending time when Truthful would molest them. (C, 313)

Truthful is the policemen in town, he is in charge of the jail, which he has transformed into a green-house and together with mayor Bruiser maintain order by performing acts of open racism through violence and rape. Their names are, of course, symbolic. Truthful pursues the truth by any means, while Bruiser is one who causes “bruises” to any Aborigines, particularly women, under his jurisdiction:

It was unfortunate for them they were incoherently high on petrol, glue, metho, or whatever cocktail had been their last meal, when Truthful and Bruiser found them.... Like potatoes, the boys just hit the floor and stayed where they fell.

Manhandling was proving to be pretty fruitless exercise, as Truthful was quick to discover. He suddenly stopped throwing the boys around. A cop had to remember his duty. Truthful noticed how abstract their blood looked, as it dripped down from the clean walls and onto the clean concrete floor. A sickening image of cattle being slaughtered flashed across his mind ... now, he finds, they are starting to look as though they had been put through a mincing machine.... Hey! Come on Bruse, this is not getting us anywhere.... If there was a Death in Custody.... (C, 333-334)

Violence erupts as expected and quite predictably. Only, the policeman seems to regret his complicity and would like to avoid an inquest about Death in Custody, of which Aborigines are accounted for suffering the most in Australia. These children are clearly considered less than human:

The policeman watched helplessly as Bruiser hauled up one of the boys, holding him at face level, while his spit sprayed into the boy's face as he spoke.... He looked into the boy's face, which was only inches away from his own, and found it was blank. So, with his other hand rolled into a fist, he rammed it into the boy's stomach and sent him flying. Truthful saw the boy land, slammed into the far wall, where he fell into a crumpled heap.... Thump! Crash! Another kid went flying past the cop.... The cop dragged each of the boys inside to the cell and locked them in. (C, 336)

This episode of incredible and gratuitous violence is even more hateful for the boys are clearly undernourished, fragile and confused. The reason why they sniff chemicals is that they need to sedate their hunger, it is not merely a criminal act. They are unable to defend themselves either verbally or physically against the gigantic, blind rage of the Mayor. Asymmetry of power and strength is the least one can observe in this brutal performance, when State authorities turn into torturers, embodying the function of "control and punishment" in Foucauldian terms. This is how Law is performed, rather than interpreted, by white authorities. It is clear that it is the exact opposite of the Law intended in aboriginal terms:

in Alexis Wright's *Carpenteria*, set in northern Australia ... such forces [rivers and serpents] are concentrated in the Law, in an Aboriginal conception of the Law. This, reverting to Rabasa's appropriation of philosophy "considered in Indigenous terms", and returning also to Derrida specifically, would be a "law of originary sociability". And it is these forces which, in the novel's culmination, regeneratively sweep away in a cyclonic flood the artefacts of imperial exploitation along with its operatives, the "Law-breakers".¹³

¹³ Peter Fitzpatrick, "Necessary Fictions: Indigenous Claims and the Humanity of Rights" (London: Birkbeck College, University of London, 2010), 17-18.

The episode that stigmatizes the human as waste reminds us, among various possible examples, of a similar image connected to the holocaust and the Nazis' persecutions of the Jews in Anne Michael's novel *The Winter Vault* (2009), where the author narrates the total devastation of the Warsaw ghetto and its dwellers' persecution. Here she describes a moment when German soldiers send children flying in the air and shoot them to their death. Both situations insist on how small, fragile and weightless children are easily disposable and vulnerable in their innocence and total lack of historical responsibility for what happens around them. But, above all, in both cases the only reason for their killing is racial prejudice.

Achille Mbembe reminds us that in Foucault's terms "racism is above all a technology aimed at permitting the exercise of biopower, 'that old sovereign right of death'. "In the economy of biopower, the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the murderous functions

of the state. It is, he says, the condition for the acceptability of putting to death”.¹⁴

¹⁴ Mbembe, “Necropolitics”, trans. by Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture*, 15.1 (2003), 17.

A similar image was presented at the TRC hearings in South Africa. Reports say that a black boy was sent flying and smashing against the floor and beaten to death by the body guards of Winnie Mandela, the so-called Mandela United Football Club. Again, asymmetry between the subjects involved and the hyperbolic disproportion of the accusation, whatever the kids did wrong, remains as a degeneration in the South African liberation struggle. Even more hideous is the fact that in that case racism was not the cause of the assault, for it all happened within the black community of Soweto around 1989.¹⁵ Here, too, the political and moral dilemmas of a whole country are stigmatized exactly in the terms Mbembe is posing by questioning ethics within communities where the violence imposed from outside, namely the whites, generates violence inside the community itself, in this case the blacks. Mandela reports facts in these terms:

¹⁵ “The first thing that I did to Stompie was to hold him on both sides.... throw him up in the air and let him fall freely on to the ground. And Mommy was sitting and watching us. He was tortured so severely that at one stage I could see that he would ultimately die. We kicked him like a ball”. Antjie Krog, *The Country of My Skull* (New York: Random House, 2010), 376.

Political violence also had its tragic side. As the violence in Soweto intensified, my wife permitted a group of young men to act as her bodyguards as she moved around the township. These young men were untrained and undisciplined and became involved in activities that were unbecoming to a liberation struggle. Winnie subsequently became legally entangled in the trial of one of her bodyguards who was convicted of murdering a young comrade. This situation was deeply disconcerting to me, for such a scandal only served to divide the movement at a time when unity was essential. I wholly supported my wife and maintained that while she had shown poor judgment, she was innocent of any serious charges.¹⁶

¹⁶ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (London: Abacus, 1995).

It is also to avoid such an easy equation between human and waste that South Africa has tried to reconstruct itself according to new social models and utopias:

The post-apartheid State fostered a normative project with the aim of achieving justice through reconciliation, equality through economic redress, democracy through the transformation of the law and the restoration of a variety of rights, including the right to a dignified life. This normative project was enshrined in a utopian Constitution that attempts to establish a new relationship between law and society on the one hand and law and life on the other, while equating democracy and the political itself with the ethical and the just. This Constitution’s underlying principle is *ubuntu* or *human mutuality*. It promises a transcendence of the old politics of racial difference and an affirmation of *shared humanity*....

Underpinning the Constitution is the hope that, after centuries of attempts by white power to contain blacks, South Africa could become the speech-act of a certain way of *being-in-common* rather than *side by side*.¹⁷

¹⁷ Mbembe, “Democracy as a Community of Life”, 6.

¹⁸ Fitzpatrick, "Necessary Fictions", 18.

¹⁹ Ibid., 5.

A similar utopia is the one pointed at by Derrida: "a law that has not yet presented itself in the West, at the Western border, except briefly, before immediately disappearing".¹⁸ Moreover, as Peter Fitzpatrick notices, Elizabeth Anker further observes of the post-apartheid nation that "the status of human rights in South Africa has often been read to betoken a prognosis for the global future of the human rights paradigm".¹⁹

Similar solutions are to be expected also in Australia, where Alexis Wright claims that Aborigines are still considered as "a problem to be solved" by the Government. The city of Desperance is but the fictional site of the real racial conflicts Aborigines were subjected to in the Seventies and Eighties.

Another sign of the lack of solidarity and of the divisions between the two communities of Aborigines in Carpentaria is the destiny of Kevin, the youngest of the Phantom's brothers. Kevin was a most promising student at school, while completely unable to complete any manual task because of his slimness and clumsiness: "Kevin could have been the brains of the family.... 'What kind of consolation is that for a brainy boy, being rendered a mental retard?'" (C, 104) Yet, allured by easy money he goes to work at the local Mine, but on the very first day he has a terrible accident. He is severely burnt and remains mentally retarded forever:

He went down the mine on the day he got the job and came out burnt and broken like barbecued spare ribs. He heard the ancestor's voice when an explosion with fiery rocks went flying at him – left, right and centre. The boy they dragged out of the crush had been rendered an idiot and it was plain as day no prayers would undo the damage. (C, 109)

Once he has become the village fool, he is chased at night by a group of "self-acclaimed tough guys gang, from the other side of town" (C, 111), drunk youngsters on a jeep with the spotter light on as if for kangaroo hunting. The second time this happens, he is assaulted, his hands are tied and a sack is put on his head by KKK's-like men. He is left on the side of the road maimed, with his bones broken and hardly breathing:

Whenever he regained consciousness, it was to feel the thud of being struck with something heavy. He heard his bones break with a pain that forced him to open his shock-sealed lips, and call out through the muffling bag to his father.... He was being skinned alive, pulled behind the car, its exhaust fumes choking his breath. (C, 344)

His final flight to a far away hospital stands for the defeat of an entire community to safeguard their own members, particularly those weakest and the

most needy. The lack of humanity among Aborigines is such that Kevin's aggressors might well have been his own cousins.

There is then a more referential way to discuss waste, real waste, on the part of Alexis Wright, when she deliberately shows how whites disperse and disseminate solid and toxic waste all around the place, without any respect for nature, the environment and specific ecosystems. The Gulf of Carpentaria where the city of Desperance stands is a hybrid space where salty water from the sea often comes inland and mixes up with the clean water of the river and the lagoons of its delta. It is a territory of dry clay for most of the dry season, then subject to floodings and hurricanes, beating rains and strong winds, in the humid season. In this complex natural ecosystem where land and water exist within an unstable balance, due to ebb and flow, and above all due to tempests, plastic waste is often the remains of white men's activity.

Elias Smith, a mysterious character pushed on shore from the sea by a storm, has been saved by a polystyrene fruit box floating at sea, with a bit of fruit still left inside to eat. Something similar happens to Will Phantom, the young Aboriginal eco-activist, whose main concern is to boycott the new mining pipes and pumps, to the point of being considered a terrorist and being chased by both the local and the federal police. It is through Will that the novel "practises what might be described as a form of anti-corporate indigenous ecogism".²⁰ At the end of the novel, a providential, final and apocalyptic cyclone hits Desperance to its total annihilation and to wash away its injustice. As one more Biblical plague, similarly, a devastating fire, lit by the Aborigines' need for justice, destroys the infrastructure of the Mining Company. Both the fire and the final cyclone are symbols of destruction and possible regeneration.²¹

²⁰ Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 130.

²¹ See Kate Rigby, "Dancing With Disaster", *Australian Humanities Review*, 46 (May 2009); Barrett, "'This Land Is Me'".

The fire thus destroys the mine but importantly the Aboriginal characters recognise it not just as the end of the mine but as the start of a "new beginning" for fire in Australia is life-giving – certain plants, such as banksias, will only germinate after their seeds have been burnt in a bushfire and heated to temperatures above 400°C.²²

²² Barrett, "'This Land Is Me'", 36.

In the meanwhile, Will throws himself in the receding, turbulent sea-water to go in search of his wife and his son, whom – he knows by dreaming them safe – are somewhere in the middle of the tempest. While at sea:

It was there, during the night, that Will was washed onto a wet, slippery object. He did not know what he held on to in the darkness but it kept him afloat.... He struggled out of the water, by clawing into the slipperiness, and climbing, not knowing if he was crawling onto the body of a sea serpent.... He imagined the new island stretching for many kilometres.... The clouds broke, the new moon shone its halo of peace. Relieved for such an absolution of light, he looked down to find he had been dumped onto an extraordinary floating island of rubbish. (C, 493)

Thus, paradoxically, Will saves his life thanks to this artificial island made of rubbish dumped at sea, encroached with vegetal and biological life, with birds' nests, plastic and wood and much more. This floating Robinsonian wreck is in sheer contrast with the natural islands of the sandy archipelago where the rest of Will's family had reunited, after the tempest had calmed down. On an island, family reunions are possible after the great chaos and order is finally re-established as in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Alexis Wright is a critical voice speaking in defence of the environment and the Ocean polluted by what is by now notorious as "Great Pacific garbage patch", or "Pacific trash vortex". That is, immense floating islands of suspended and microscopic plastic particles, debris and chemicals dispersed in the water, but not in a solid structure, which currents entrap in vortexes. In contrast, the island of plastic presented by Alexis Wright in *Carpentaria* is solid and indestructible. Susan Barrett provides a more symbolic reading of the island of garbage in her comment:

Will's arrival on the island can be read as a symbolic parallel of the arrival of the whites in Australia but unlike the whites, who immediately tried to exploit the land, Will is initially interested in maintaining the balance on the island and every night he stays awake "to sing the Fishman's ceremonial song cycles". Eventually, however, solitude weighs on his mind and he longs for rescue, wondering "would the discoverers call the sole inhabitant on his sinking oasis: a native?"²³

²³ Ibid.

The Gulf of Carpentaria is represented in the novel as polluted by plastic containers, and plastic bottles, leftover from mining activities, and wrecks of mechanical machinery disseminated in the desert. This insistence on toxic waste and material pollution of the environment caused by the whites is again in sharp contrast with the worshipping attitude the Aborigines have towards Nature and Mother Earth due to their cosmogonic, all-inclusive and holistic philosophy. There is another community of people who lives on a dumping ground by recycling waste and rubbish, exactly like the Pricklebush Aborigines of Alexis Wright. It is the community of squatters and slum dwellers in the Slum of Annawadi, in contemporary Mumbai portrayed by Katherine Boo in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2014).²⁴ Her writing is not proper fiction, for she lived there for a while, gathering life-stories as sociologists or anthropologists do. And this sociological intent lays behind Alexis Wright's narrative, which derives from firsthand experience of life in an Aboriginal community and from listening to "the Law" and the yarns of the old chiefs.

Annawadi is a real slum grown between Mumbai airport and the city: here Muslim and Hindu families live a life of struggle off a dumping ground. Abdul's family, for instance, "had been buying and selling to recyclers the

²⁴ Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (New York: Random House, 2014). All references are to this edition, quoted as *BF*.

things that richer people threw away” (Prologue *BF*, ix). Almost two dozen families live in shacks, on the rim of a vast pool of sewage:

Here, in the thriving western suburbs of the Indian financial capital, three thousand people had packed into, or on top of, 355 huts. It was a continual coming-and-going of migrants from all over India – Hindus mainly, from all manner of castes and subcastes.... a place booby-trapped with contentions, new and ancient.... For Annawadi was also magnificently positioned for a trafficker in rich peoples’ garbage. (*BF*, xii)

Abdul has to look for a hiding place, since the police is after him, for he is charged with setting fire to his neighbour, a crippled woman, who actually set herself on fire in order to obtain a reward. The only safe place Abdul can think of is his shack, a storeroom full of garbage to be sorted and sold. His residence among rubbish, now that he is considered a criminal, once more establishes an easy equation between humans and waste. After all, Annawadians know perfectly well their condition: “squatter settlements looked like villages that had been airdropped into gaps between elegant modernities”, and Abdul’s brother thinks: “everything around us is roses. And we are the shit inbetween” (*BF*, xii).

Annawadi as well as all other slums in India and in the urban area of Mumbai best embody Achille Mbembe’s observation on “spaces of vulnerability”, for the slum is exactly such a type of space: “Today, this logic of waste is particularly dramatized by the dilemmas of unemployment and disposability, survival and subsistence, and the expansion in every arena of everyday life of spaces of vulnerability”.²⁵

²⁵ Mbembe, “Democracy as a Community of Life”, 7.

Slums, like townships in South Africa, are places where severe oppression and poverty are experienced on a racial and class basis.²⁶ Similarly, as Fanon was writing and as Mbembe rehearses the “colonial city” is “a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other”.²⁷ In this case, sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not.²⁸ In contrast, Arjun Appadurai provides examples of virtuous democratic spirit among slum dwellers in his essay: “Cosmopolitanism from Below: Some Ethical Lessons from the Slums of Mumbai” (2011). He describes the actions of the Alliance, a triad of slum based organizations, that have managed to create a net of information, opportunities and services in order to become a credible negotiating partner to local authorities with the aim of improving the life conditions of slum dwellers. This cooperative system, which struggles for the rights of the slums, has proven successful and has become a model for international aid organisations.

²⁶ Ibid., 26.

²⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 37-39.

²⁸ Mbembe, “Necropolitics”, trans. by Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture*, 15.1 (2003), 27.

Appadurai is not necessarily optimistic about life in the slums, where he

defines slum dwellers as “citizens without a city” and as “toilers”, that is daily hard workers, who cannot be counted either as proletariat, or working class or labouring class. Moreover he sees this type of associations as a self-balanced system of control:

For, as Alliance leaders are the first to admit, the poor are not immune from greed, conflict and jealousy and there are always slum families who are prepared to lie or cheat to advance themselves in the context of crisis or new opportunities. Such problems are resolved by informal mechanisms in which the testimony of neighbours is utterly decisive, since the social life of slums is in fact characterized by an almost complete lack of privacy.²⁹

²⁹ Arjun Appadurai, “Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics”, *Environment and Urbanization*, 13.2 (October 2001), 35.

What happens in the Annawadi of Katherine Boo’s novel is exactly such an explosion of greed, conflict, jealousy, lies and cheating attitudes. The cripple woman sets herself on fire just out of jealousy towards her neighbours, who gained a relative economic growth over the years, to the point of slightly improving their shack. The woman just wants to extort money out of their family, but she dies while in hospital for an incurable infection. Her accusation however has become part of the police’s plan to squeeze money from the family. Thus, once arrested, father and son are brutally beaten up and the ruin of their activity as rubbish pickers and sellers is decreed. As in the previous novel, they are equated by corrupted State authorities to waste, wasted humans.

In Annawadi most of the male, adult characters, fathers and husbands, are crippled or disabled and they cannot work anymore. Most of their health conditions are due to the dangerous and toxic jobs they used to do as garbage pickers, to bad hygienic conditions and lack of money to be cured. Thus, males become parasites, unproductive and dependent on the work of women. Women end up prostituting themselves, as is the case of Fatima, the one-legged woman and with Asha, the slum-lady befriended with corrupt politicians of the Shiv Sena Party, and the ones who live in the brothel of Annawadi. They become entrepreneurs of both legal and illegal practices. Children and young adults are mainly the bread-winners for their crowded families. These young people are adventurous and become more and more daring, overcoming boundaries, and walls, even private properties and the airport premises in order to look for discarded plastic and metal to re-sell, while children pursue their own opportunities off the track, in order to gather garbage in unattended places:

Some of the taximen tossed their cups and bottles over a low stone wall behind the food stand. On the other side of the wall, seventy feet down, was the Mithi River – actually, a concrete sluice where the river had been redirected as the airport enlarged. The drivers probably liked to imagine their garbage hitting the water and floating away, but Sunil had climbed the wall and discovered a narrow ledge on the other side, five feet down. By some

trick of wind in the sluice, trash tossed over the wall tended to blow back and settle on this sliver of concrete. It was a space on which a small boy could balance. (*BF*, 38)

It is close to the airport that one young man is left maimed and dead after a long agony, for hours, in the guts, before the police carts him away. Another had been murdered but the case is hushed under a ridiculous diagnosis: “irrecoverable illness”, at fifteen (*BF*, 168). Nobody will ever come to claim the corpse for burial or to ask to open an inquest: “The following morning, Kalu lay outside Air India’s red-and-white gates: a shirtless corpse with a grown-out Saman Khan haircut, crumpled behind a flowering hedge” (*BF*, 165).

A young boy, Sanjay, aged sixteen, was deeply shaken and he was crying like a child for he had seen his friend Kalu surrounded by a gang of men and now he fears he would be tracked down by them and beaten up or even killed for what he saw. His only choice is to flee Annawadi and once he reaches the far away slum of Dharavi, where his mum and sister live, he commits suicide by swallowing rat poison. Before dying he confesses to his beloved sister that he had seen “a group of men swarm Kalu all at once. ‘They killed my friend,’ he kept repeating. ‘Just threw him off.’ Like he was garbage” (*BF*, 170).

Once again the explicit equation of garbage pickers with waste, the fact that their life is valueless, their death is not recorded in the figures of the city casualties and accidents are all particularly meaningful here. Death is the only choice for Meena, too, back in Annawadi. She had fallen in love with a boy, but her family had already promised her to a man in a village. She is frequently beaten up by her violent father and brother and kept almost a prisoner in her shack. She, too, swallows rat poison. Garbage and death amongst garbage, like rats, seems a contagion in Annawadi. The community is completely disrupted by all that happens. Their aspiration was simply to improve their life conditions, while to Abdul it was enough “to be recognized as better than the dirty water in which he lived” (*BF*, 220).

Necropolitics and necropowers are at work here and they create topographies of cruelty and the “spatiality for a social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*”, for whom the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred.³⁰

³⁰ Mbembe, “Necropolitics”, 40.

Tolerance, solidarity, or even grass-root organizations are completely absent from Annawadi. Annawadians fight for survival, one at the expenses of the others, and thus even the possibility “to aspire” is denied to them;

in 2010 or 2011, the airport slums would start being razed.... But plans were well underway. A small part of the cleared acreage would be used to serve the expanding airport, and the rest would be leased on the open market. In

place of thirty-odd slums, there would be more hotels, shopping malls, office complexes, perhaps a theme park.

The airport clearance would roughly follow the state's slum-redevelopment scheme. Under it, private developers were granted rights to build on slum land only if they agreed to construct apartments for those slumdweller who could prove they'd lived in their huts since 1995 or 2000, depending on the slum. Corruption in the scheme was endemic; organized crime syndicates had become major players (*BF*, 224).

Annawadi eventually will be cleared up: "The bulldozers of the airport authority began to move across the periphery of Annawadi.... the sewage lake that had brought dengue fever and malaria to the slum was filled in, its expanse in preparation for some new development" (*BF*, 233). This is what happens in Carpentaria, too, not because of the authorities, in spite of people asking to do so: "Why couldn't we just? Bulldoze the crap out of those camps, flatten the lot?" (*C*, 36). Only nature can undo what has been done by man, thus a final hurricane sweeps away the city of Desperance. Both communities of squatters are an "eyesore" to the uptown people and city authorities:

What was unfolding in Mumbai was unfolding elsewhere, too. In the age of global market capitalism, hopes and grievances were narrowly conceived, which blunted a sense of common predicament. Poor people didn't unite; they competed ferociously amongst themselves for gains as slender as they were provisional. And this undercity strife created only the faintest ripple in the fabric of the society at large. The gates of the rich, occasionally rattled, remained unbreached. The politicians held forth on the idle class. The poor took down one another, and the world's great, unequal cities soldiered on in relative peace. (*BF*, 237)

Katherine Boo is evidently quite pessimistic about the type of society and lack of solidarity that characterizes a slum like Annawadi. This view is in deep contrast with Appadurai's experience of Mumbai slums as places where what he calls "deep democracy" is a common practice and where federation easily takes place:

"deep democracy" suggests roots, anchors, intimacy, proximity and locality; and these are important associations.... They are about such traditional democratic desiderata as inclusion, participation, transparency and accountability, as articulated within an activist formation. But I want to suggest that the lateral reach of such movements – their efforts to build international networks or coalitions of some durability with their counterparts across national boundaries is also a part of their "depth".

This lateral or horizontal dimension, which I have touched upon in terms of the activities of Shack/Slum Dwellers International, seeks direct collaborations and exchanges between poor communities themselves, based

on the “will to federate”. But what gives this cross-national politics its depth is not just its circulatory logic of spreading ideas of savings, housing, citizenship and participation, “without borders” and outside the direct reach of state or market régimes. Depth is also to be located in the fact that, where successful, the spread of this model produces poor communities able to engage in partnerships with more powerful agencies – urban, regional, national and multilateral – that purport to be concerned with poverty and with citizenship....

This form of deep democracy, the vertical fulcrum of a democracy without borders, cannot be assumed to be automatic, easy or immune to setbacks. Like all serious exercises in democratic practice, it is not automatically reproductive. It has particular conditions of possibility and conditions under which it grows weak or corrupt. The study of these conditions – which include such contingencies as leadership, morale, flexibility and material enablement – requires many more case studies of specific movements and organizations. For those concerned with poverty and citizenship, we can begin by recalling that one crucial condition of possibility for deep democracy is the ability to meet emergency with patience.³¹

³¹ Appadurai, “Deep Democracy”, 42-43.

This is definitely not the case in Annawadi, where activism is not encouraged, where youths are doomed to prison, flight and death, where aspirations and hopes are crashed by corrupt politicians and egotistic practices. The “right to aspire” of which Appadurai speaks in his writings on Mumbai slums seems not to take roots in Annawadi. Similarly, it does not take roots in the communities of Aborigines in *Carpentaria*, where Will as an eco-activist is an isolated heroic figure, till the very last moment when he finds unexpected support from the fringes of his community. Yet, Katherine Boo’s pessimistic view brings one back full circle to the beginning, to the material conditions of life as de-humanizing factors, which Mbembe had started questioning:

What appeared to be indifference to other people’s suffering had a good deal to do with conditions that had sabotaged their [young people] innate capacity for moral action.

In places where government priorities and market imperatives create a world so capricious that to help a neighbour is to risk your ability to feed your family, and sometimes even your own liberty, the idea of the mutually supportive poor community is demolished. The poor blame one another for the choices of governments and markets, and we who are not poor are ready to blame the poor just as harshly. (*BF, Author’s note 254*)