

Prachi More

ACTORS AND NETWORKS IN THE MEGACITY

A Literary Analysis of
Urban Narratives



[transcript] **urban** **s**tudies

Prachi More

Actors and Networks in the Megacity

Urban Studies

Prachi More (PhD) taught at the English Studies Department at the University of Tübingen, Germany. Her research interests include New Materialisms, Smart Cities and Weird Fiction.

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Image of Sam Miller's hand-drawn map of Connaught Place in Delhi as "The Hole":
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Image 1: Adrian Walker drawing from a specimen in a laboratory

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Introduction: Urban Narratives And Bruno Latour's Empiricism

Contemporary representations of cities and megacities are manifold. Cities are sometimes portrayed as rich semiotic fields or breeding grounds for poverty. They are a site of space wars, but also *Steuerungszentralen*¹. We observe an emergence of fashionable metaphors and concepts that become associated with cities such as SimCity, urban labyrinths, imagined cities, media city, and so on.² All these terms and concepts point us to various discourses that not only describe the city, but also constitute it as a concept. They indicate on the one hand, a treatment of the city as a nexus of global-local networks and entanglements of capital, people, cultural or political interests, and so on. On the other hand, these notions and discourses also represent varying interpretations of and reactions to the global, or local effects of this 'connectivity'. In order to retrieve the macro-view of urbanism and the political economy entangled with it, American urbanist, Edward Soja, has attempted to organize the innumerable city narratives coursing through various disciplines. He has identified and described six main discourses, which are, in his own words, "aimed at making sense of the whole urban region, the spatiality and sociality of the urban fabric writ large".³ Soja is interested in reasserting and recapturing the importance of the 'macro-urban' tradition, which he says has lost focus after being 'attacked' by 'micro-urban' critics for being masculinist and reductionist.⁴ He is referring to what he calls a growing,

1 | See in consecutive order Ledrut, "Speech and the Silence of the City"; Gottdiener and Lagopoulos, *The City and the Sign*; Davis, *Planet of Slums*; Bauman, "Urban Space Wars"; Sassen, "Cities and Communities in the Global Economy."

2 | See respectively Miller, *Delhi*; Eckardt, Bechtel, and Fahrholz, *Die Komplexe Stadt: Orientierungen im urbanen Labyrinth*; Alter, *Imagined Cities*; For a thorough study of approaches to (reading) the city, see Hassenpflug, Giersig, and Stratmann, *Reading the City: Developing Urban Hermeneutics/Stadt lesen: Beiträge zu einer urbanen Hermeneutik*.

3 | Soja, "Six Discourses on the Postmetropolis," 371.

4 | Ibid.

epistemological over-privileging of the experiences of the flâneur at the expense of understanding the structuring of the city as a whole, naming, in particular, Michel de Certeau's studies of the 'micro-worlds' of everyday life, that is, the local, the body or the streetscape.⁵

Bruno Latour would do away with the very idea of dichotomies and hierarchies such as micro-macro, small or large scale, local or global ensembles and similar:

"The big (states, organizations, markets) is an amplification but also a *simplification* of the small [...] the micro is made of a proliferation of incommensurable entities [...] which are simply lending one of their aspects, a 'facade of themselves', to make up a provisional whole."⁶

Latour's radical conceptualization of the social through his collaborative project, the Actor-Network Theory (ANT), uses semiotic tools for an exploration of the practices that produce, enact and embed knowledge (processes of knowledge production). The unique aspect of Latour's sociology is his attention to both human and non-human actors. Latour extends the agency concept to embrace humans *and* non-humans such as research objects and technical infrastructure, rather than focusing on an overarching social, natural or conceptual framework that 'contains' human actors or within which events take place. All these "actants" are assumed to form and exist in 'weak' or 'strong' networks, which may be observed, studied and 'described'.⁷ From the position of the observer, and only for the purpose of study, there is a levelling of heterogeneous elements without *a priori* assumptions about them in order to describe their relationality. An ANT study thus does not differentiate between large or small-scale.⁸ No fundamental difference is drawn between actants and networks (semiotic symmetry) as they are both considered effects and causes of relations.

At first glance, Latour's ANT as a method for ontological and epistemological studies presents itself as a rather open and flexible framework. Therefore, in an oblique response to Soja, my project takes its cue from Latour to study a collection of contemporary narratives that thematize life in different megacities.⁹

5 | Ibid., 379.

6 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 243.

7 | Latour advocates the method of description for his sociological project, distancing it from the "false dichotomy" of descriptions and explanations. Ibid., 137–8. More on this later in Chapter II.

8 | Ibid., 220.

9 | My project concentrates on four urban narratives that serve to illustrate and support my thesis and arguments. However, a number of other texts could have been included in the corpus but were not for reasons of economy and scope. The thesis was formulated with a number of other publications in mind. These include Byrne, *Bicycle Diaries*; Hardy, *Scoop*–

Focalization in these narratives is achieved through the authors themselves, as they perform as contemporary urban chroniclers. Their empirical observations, experiences and narrativization serve as our point of departure. It must be added, however, that it is not the aim or the scope of my project to justify or verify the truthfulness of their narratives. This ready acceptance of their authenticity comes from our acceptance of the explicit authorial intentions. The presence of these intentions in the text marks what I consider to be their *empirical anchorage*. A naïve phenomenology informs the authors' straightforward descriptive method to document a world whose ontological accessibility is assumed by them. This essential referentiality of their documentation is its *empirical anchorage*. In the next chapter, we will see how this term suits us better than the usual fact-fiction divide. We may venture a further postulation about their epistemic status – the empirical anchorage of these narratives allows us to anticipate knowledge about the documented urban space, despite or, as de Certeau would argue, especially due to their subjective stance (or 'micro-view' in Soja's terms). In this sense, they serve as demonstrations or case studies of possible ANT methods.

My descriptions of these books try to meticulously collect different representational and discursive strategies the authors use to render their observed and experienced 'reality'.¹⁰ In the process, I hope to reveal *how* these authors generate very specific topographies of the respective city, and thus actually oppose the 'flatland' metaphor conceived of by Latour.¹¹ My project thus concentrates on the *how* as an epistemic goal. It is thus led by questions as to *how* these authors do justice to their experiences of these urban spaces, or *how* they represent the city. Such a strategy is, as we will see, more productive for our ANT exercise as it gets out of our way the central problem of the situatedness of all knowledge by not asking the futile question 'but is it true?' The empirical anchorage of a text can, by contrast, be analysed, described, and rendered explicit. We can see how the authors generate a sense of their own presence in the narrative, and therein lies the great paradox that is the symptom of our times. This presence is simultaneously a testimony to both – the narrative's subjectivity *and* a narrative anchor. It aims to guarantee a 'realness' or the authenticity of the reality of the empirically anchored author-observer. Such a line of questioning allows us to see

Wallah; Alexander, *A Carpet Ride to Khiva*; Ackroyd, *Venice*; Morris, *Sydney*; McCloud, Kevin McCloud's *Grand Tour of Europe*; Ansary, *Destiny Disrupted*; and Delisle, *Burma Chronicles*.

10 | This study also treats the distinction between fact or fiction as inappropriate and inadequate in dealing with such works. See for example Heyne, "Truth or Consequences: Individuality, Reference, and the Fiction/Nonfiction Distinction."; See also Heyne, "Toward a Theory of Literary Nonfiction."

11 | The terms city and megacity (and their plurals) will be used interchangeably, referring to larger cities across the globe in the sense of Saskia Sassen and their urban agglomerations. See Sassen, "Cities and Communities in the Global Economy."

how it is possible to maintain some notion of objectivity (knowledge) considering the authors' subjective stance, and how this strategy of documentation can yield 'matters of concern' rather than 'matters of fact'.

In chapter I, we will see how the pursuit of such themes situates my project within studies pertaining to the realist and historical novel, which thematise the recurring return to documentary or journalistic aesthetics and travel writing.¹² The *Documentary Turn* has been identified as a contemporary return of concerns for an 'objective' representation of 'reality' in a variety of films and literary genres. It is marked by the use of documentary aesthetics and formal structures – not only to utilize and modify existing documents, but also to perform the integral task of creating new 'documents'.¹³ There is a development and proliferation of new and innovative documentary approaches, which establish a space and path for different concepts of reality and representation in the contemporary context of globalization. The emergence of such diverse forms points to the transformation of the very concept of 'documentary', wherein 'documentary' becomes merely *one* of the discourses of the real.¹⁴ This key change affects the relationship of documentary forms to 'reality', and has its effects on traditional public spheres and the structures of communication within and between them. Recent analyses of literature and discourse reveal a reinforced awareness of the problematic relation between narrative discourse and representation. The revised approach focuses on how the facts are described, and how authority and authenticity is ascribed to them in order to sanction one mode of explaining over another.¹⁵ The proliferation into the literary field of a re-analysis of the nature of narrative, and of the distrust of the authority and objectivity of historical sources and accounts is accentuated by new styles of writing as well as the plurality of alternative sources of information and their interpretation.¹⁶ In order to establish a relation and continuity with these developments in literature and the related emancipation in literary analysis, I will categorize my corpus as *literary documentaries*. This working term indicates both content as well as form. It brings together the 'empirical anchorage' of these texts as well as their use of literary techniques for the textualization of their documentary endeavor.¹⁷

12 | Nünning, "Mapping the Field of Hybrid New Genres in the Contemporary Novel."

13 | Weeks, "Re-Cognizing the Post-Soviet Condition: The Documentary Turn in Contemporary Art in the Baltic States."

14 | Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 10.

15 | Schlotte and Voigts-Virchow, "Introduction: The Creative Treatment of Actuality – New Documentarism."

16 | See for example White, *Metahistory*; See also Agrell, "Documentarism and Theory of Literature."

17 | A study and discussion of literary documentaries, especially in the contemporary atmosphere of medial simulations and a perceived "loss of reality", has been initiated and

Latour's ANT is also concerned with the *manner* of discursive constructedness of the object of study. In chapter II, we will delve deeper into his ideas of an Actor Network Theory for its applicability in our project. Latour urges a change in the conventional logic of research and a subsequent renewal of empiricism. Specifically, this requires a shift of focus from 'objectified' "matters of fact" to more complex and historically situated "matters of concern".¹⁸ Reality, Latour says, is not and should not be defined by "matters of fact", which are, in spite of the neutral status that they project, biased, "polemical political renderings" of what they claim to analyze or explain.¹⁹ In his re-assessment of science studies, Latour argues that for the field to regain focus and credibility, it needs to embrace an empiricism of a 'new order' – a return so to speak of the 'realist attitude', but with an emphasis on contextualizing data into more relevant and durable "matters of concern".²⁰

In this chapter, in order to systematically develop heuristic tools from Latour's ANT, we will trace a developmental trajectory of Latour's central idea of studying networks as a key to different levels or processes of constructivism. In ANT, we see the beginnings of such an empiricism with which Latour tries to invent a vocabulary that emphasizes the inter-connectivity of 'things' today and ties together the material, the human and the semiotic. ANT, more method than theory, bears many traits of that "workaholic, trail-sniffing, and collective traveller" – the creature emerging from the acronym – the ant.²¹ It stays true to the tenets of ethnmethodology by giving minute and detailed descriptions of the procedures and activities it observes. ANT imagines human and non-human "actants" in networks, of intricate machinations and connections in which we find "black boxes" that are not immediately decipherable.²² The bundled complexity of these black boxes has become a "matter of fact" or the accepted and unquestioned norm that we call 'common sense'.²³ Thus, 'following/tracing the network' implies an ant-like activity of sniffing out the trail of the network and 'undoing' the black boxes (also "reversible black-boxing").²⁴ Latour's guiding principles for a "second empiricism" prescribe a meticulous study of a "collective"

collectively subsumed by Schlotte and Voigts-Virchow under the Documentary Turn. Refer Schlotte and Voigts-Virchow, "Introduction: The Creative Treatment of Actuality – New Documentarism" See a more detailed description of these developments in chapter one.

18 | Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?"

19 | Ibid., 231.

20 | Ibid.

21 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 9.

22 | Latour, *Science in Action*, 3–17.

23 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 118; See also Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?"; and Latour, *Pandora's Hope*.

24 | Latour, "On Technical Mediation – Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy."

of “hybrids” and the “networks” they form (or are a part of).²⁵ Such a study must move away from a conception of the social in terms of artifacts or subjects since in Latour’s network these collapse into a “collective”.²⁶ Latour perceives this collective as a labyrinthine network of entities with ‘knots’ in it, which are, as mentioned above, conceived of as black boxes.²⁷ Different, even competing or contradictory, interpretations, associations and connections between ideas, things or events (hybrids) should then be considered and analyzed in order to ‘undo’ the so-called black boxes or knots in the network. Latour argues in favor of the ANT for, among other things, its ability to do away with hierarchies such as small or large scale.²⁸ I would contend, however, that while Latour foregrounds the intricacies of a flattened level of observation (undoing knots), his anti-essentialist conception of ‘reality’ nevertheless maintains, even simply at the level of terminology, the idea of the network as some sort of ‘whole’ (labyrinthine) even as it tries to use it to describe more local manifestations (knots/black boxes/associations). There is also a neglect on Latour’s part to address the role of the observer or spokesperson, which is directly related to a neglect of other issues in his theorization such as (i) the criteria for tracing networks, (ii) the basis on which a spokesperson may make decisions, and (iii) the perspective or stance of the spokesperson.

Followers of Latour must thus proceed with caution because Latour’s own model of a new empiricism is an on-going project with numerous inconsistencies and contradictions. These are displayed not least by his own publications with corrections and reappraisals of his ideas.²⁹ We will deal with further explanations and explications as well as contradictions, doubts and critique of Latour’s ideas in our second chapter. For the purpose of first bringing together Latour and our corpus, let me tentatively suggest an application of Latour’s ANT, and with that, state a starting point and hypothesis of my analysis. If the city in all its physical

25 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 115.

26 | Ibid., 14.

27 | This is much like Deleuze and Guattari’s metaphor of the “rhizome” in Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*; or Donna Haraway’s “cat’s cradle”. See Haraway, “A Game of Cat’s Cradle”. The terminology that Latour introduces for a new empiricism has been stated here and marked as such. All further use of these terms in my project refers to Latour even though, for mere typing ease, they may not be marked as such.

28 | Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications plus More than a Few Complications.”

29 | See for example Latour, “On Recalling ANT”; Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications plus More than a Few Complications”; Latour, “The Trouble with Actor Network Theory”; For an immediate critique of Latour’s ideas, see Bloor, “Anti-Latour”; and Latour’s response in the same issue, Latour, “For Bloor and Beyond – a Reply to David Bloor’s Anti-Latour.”

and abstract manifestations is such a 'knot' in the network, then each of the empirical attempts to discover, document and narrate the city embody author-specific methods of undoing the knot or opening and examining the black box. In other words, applying Latour's ideas and vocabulary to describe our corpus may reveal these city enterprises to be tangible methodologies for a new empiricism in Latour's sense, and thus provide a contemporary paradigm for describing matters of concern. The hypothesis is, to put things simply, that the authors of my corpus perform the function of the previously mentioned 'trail-sniffing ant' to describe and thus undo the knot called the 'city' (each in his own way). We may then carry out a bit of the trail-sniffing activity of the ant ourselves to describe the empirical, narrative and discursive strategies the authors use. These strategies can constitute a more tangible method for ANT than provided by Latour's study so far. We can take this part of the analysis further and make another addition to Latour's ANT. We will theorize the position of the spokesperson in our reading of the project's corpus as ANT-like methods. The authors establish the empirical anchorage through a reader address. This explicit presence of the authors in their texts can help us analyze their individual means of describing their urban enterprise (strategies) and ways of seeing (perspective). We may thus show *how* contemporary notions of objectivity and reality are 'authentically' *created* and *authorized*. Considering Soja's critique of micro urban narratives mentioned at the beginning, this line of inquiry serves us another purpose. It opens up space for a discussion on how we may possibly reconcile the gap between macro- and micro-urban concerns.

The description of my project so far would appear to advocate the narratives of my corpus for their ability to exhaustively document the city and contextualize it through the subjectivity of the authors and the stance they actively assume. However, we will later critically assess in how far the documentary endeavors of the authors fulfill such claims, or function, as I have suggested, as a sort of Latourian ANT (a new or second empiricism). Similarly, there will also be a stocktaking of Latour's ideas with the insights gained from the description of my corpus. Yet, it is still possible to bring Latour and the authors of my corpus together because of their joint concern about how to live in a world of increasing demographic density, where space is lacking. In other words, the questions that haunt both Latour and the authors pertain to how humans could possibly collaborate and create 'habitable spaces' in a rapidly transforming urban world.³⁰

In the chapters that follow, we will use Latour's concepts and vocabulary to analyze three such urban narratives in more detail.³¹ We will begin in chapter

30 | See for example Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*; and Latour, "Waiting for Gaia. Composing the Common World through Art and Politics."

31 | The fourth narrative in my corpus will be analyzed only in the concluding part of the project.

III with Iain Sinclair's *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire, A Confidential Report*, which zooms in our attention to a borough in London. Hackney, a borough in East London, found its way extensively into the news, as it was part of the site for the Olympic 2012 Games.³² Iain Sinclair, Hackney's indomitable defender and gazetteer, was a leading voice speaking against the changes that the Games brought for the borough, deeming the Olympic Development plan to be simply a guise under which developers and the state ally for selfish economic benefits.³³ Sinclair's book is born out of the conflict between the city's authorities and a certain artistic milieu of the borough that Sinclair represents. It thus represents a very individual response to the unwanted 'encroachment' in the borough. We will read Sinclair's very dense and yet fragmented narrative as an ANT-like tracing of networks and associations in Hackney, and analyze the various representational strategies used by the author. The aim in doing so is to evaluate on the one hand, the extent to which Sinclair's strategies may collectively offer one possible methodology of ANT. On the other hand, such an application of Latour's ANT ideas and terminology will also enable a critical analysis of ANT as a practice of studying networks as a key to processes of knowledge production. We will follow the same procedure for an analysis of two further city narratives. In chapter IV, Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* takes us to Mumbai and presents a rather dense narrative on the Indian megacity, but provides access to it by distinctly different means than Sinclair.³⁴ We will see how the interplay of perspective and authorial intentions can have startlingly different results through the use of different strategies of tracing networks. In chapter V, Sam Miller's *Delhi: Adventures in a Megacity* represents, on first glance, a more systematic approach to the megacity through a pre-mapped spiral route as the author's primary means of accessing the megacity – his 'tool for discovery'.³⁵ We will see, however, how the method ironically randomizes the author's urban enterprise. Despite the fixed route through the city, the author finds that his walk of Delhi takes unexpected 'adventurous' turns. Finally, in the conclusion, we will also join an author who takes us to different cities across the world. Patrick Neate's *Where You're At, Notes from the Frontline of a Hip Hop Planet* traverses from New York to Tokyo, Johannesburg, Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro, giving us rich insights into the hip hop scenes in these different cities.³⁶ Neate's music journalism, read as a sort of ANT method, demonstrates how ANT can push

32 | This title will henceforth appear as *That Rose-Red Empire*.

33 | Sinclair, "The Olympics Scam": "When did it start, this intimate liaison between developers and government, to reconstruct the body of London, to their mutual advantage? Dr Frankenstein with a Google Earth program and a remote-control laser scalpel."

34 | This title will henceforth appear as *Maximum City*.

35 | This title will henceforth be abbreviated as *Delhi*.

36 | This title will henceforth appear as *Where You're At*.

local, national, and conceptual borders for that matter. The authors of my corpus intervene, in their own way, in the formation of meta-discourses (indisputable matters of fact) on megacities, and by adding their narratives in a world-building activity (matters of concern), they can be said to 'de-naturalize' the absolute notion of 'factual' documentation. At the same time, as touched upon earlier, the specificity of the urban topographies generated by each author indicates an element of conjecture in the Latourian empiricism – his not quite unproblematic reliance on 'common sense' to guide the empiricist. This so far under-theorized aspect in Latour's thinking calls attention to the insufficient problematization of the position of the 'spokesperson' in such an empiricism and indicates a neglect of self-implication. In my project, I will treat this finding as a theory-immanent critique of Latour.

My first step will be to discuss the various generic traditions that are reflected in my corpus, and to then historicize my corpus for Literary Studies. This will allow me to 'contextualize' my own corpus within a collection of, on the one hand, representations of 'reality', and on the other hand, representations of the 'urban'.

I. Contextualizing Contemporary Urban Narratives as Literary Documentary

THE POSTMODERN CRISIS OF REALISM AND REPRESENTATION

In her foreword to Matthew Beaumont's *Concise Companion to Realism*, Rachel Bowlby has lamented that the status of "poor old realism" is of "tasteless spam in the sandwich of literary and cultural history."¹ My project treats its corpus as a stylized trope of realism, and is thus also interested in the contemporary continuity of the discourse of reality and realism(s). On the other hand, I would also like to move away from this tendency of measuring contemporary works against a yardstick of realism debates. Let us therefore see if we may not somehow move beyond bemoaning realism as Bowlby does. In this section, we will first try to understand how postmodernity came to become widely considered a period of *crisis* of realism and representation.² Against the backdrop of the 'crisis' ridden postmodern literary conventions, the insistence by our authors to explicitly anchor/situate their narratives in the materiality of actual sites and bodies indicates either an outright neglect of these conventions, or perhaps a counter-reaction. They abandon the despair of this crisis and disregard the postmodern problematization of the representation of reality through an adamant empirical adherence to the 'authentic' or the tangible 'real'. To describe this aspect of my corpus on its own terms, I would go so far as to say that the usual realist concerns such as truth and referentiality are so naturalized that they are rendered invisible. Is it possible, we may then ask, that this is an indication of a 'return of the real' through "gestures of authentication"?³ Is it possible, that this insistence on *real* places and *real* people challenges, or even simply ignores the perceived absence of reality in a "new architectural promenade" of simulations that contemporary media provides us?

1 | Beaumont, *A Concise Companion to Realism*, xiv.

2 | Marcus and Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*.

3 | Schlotte and Voigts-Virchow, "Introduction: The Creative Treatment of Actuality – New Documentarism," 108; See also Foster, *The Return of the Real*.

"This is the new architectural promenade [...] a city unrooted to any definite spot on the surface of the earth, shaped by connectivity and bandwidth constraints rather than by accessibility and land values, largely asynchronous in its operation, and inhabited by disembodied and fragmented subjects who exist as collections of aliases and agents."⁴

The physical and social urban geographies that our authors trace may be threatened by such a dystopian "disembodied and fragmented" future, but as represented by the authors, they are anything but 'mere' cyber entities. My argument is, therefore, that these authors and their narratives disregard the notion of the crisis of representation in postmodern literature precisely through an emphasis on a very tangible empirical reality. This emphasis is achieved through a narrative device, which I will call *empirical anchorage*. Specifically, in terms of method, the concept refers to the authors' phenomenological practice of exploring the material city – their personal, bodily, and 'non-abstract' experience of it. The subsequent discourse formation through the narrativization of their experience is also empirically anchored.⁵ However, as we will see in the course of this project, each author makes use of very different strategies to explore the city as well as to write about it.

Since there is not much consensus as to what the term postmodern exactly means or when it commenced, a general point of departure in its understanding is to consider it as a reaction to and departure from modernity.⁶ Modernity being, however, yet another such conundrum, the task becomes more muddling. Andreas Huyssen's caution in referring to both periods is telling when he tries to describe what postmodernism is:

"[A] slowly emerging cultural transformation in Western societies, a change in sensibility for which the term 'postmodernism' is actually, at least for now, wholly adequate. [...] I don't want to be misunderstood as claiming that there is a wholesale paradigm shift of the cultural, social and economic orders; any such claim clearly would be overblown. But in an important sector of our culture *there is a noticeable shift in sensibility, practices and discourse formations, which distinguishes a postmodern set of assumptions, experiences and propositions from that of a preceding period.*"⁷

The "preceding period" is modernity, whose vision of the world was generally perceived as technocratic and rationalistic. There was a strong belief in linear

4 | Mitchell, *City of Bits*, 24.

5 | More on this later in the chapter

6 | Eagleton, "Awakening from Modernity."

7 | Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern," 8, my emphasis.

progress, absolute truths, rational planning of social orders and standardization of knowledge and production.⁸ The distinguishing “noticeable shift” came in the form of *liberating* forces, which were, therefore, quite naturally, heterogeneity and difference. These two aspects thus laid the foundations for a postmodernist redefinition of cultural discourse. Postmodernism destabilized all manners of metaphysical solemnity embodied by “encompassing paradigms” through fragmentation, indeterminacy and distrust of all totalizing discourse.⁹ This postmodern inadequacy and uncertainty of the means of describing social reality or lived experience was described first in anthropology as a so-called ‘crisis’ of representation:

“While retaining its politicized dimension as a legacy of the 1960s, social thought in the years since has grown more suspicious of the ability of encompassing paradigms [...] Consequently, the most interesting theoretical debates in a number of fields have shifted to the level of method, to problems of epistemology, interpretation, and discursive forms of representation themselves, employed by social thinkers. Elevated to a central concern of theoretical reflection, *problems of description become problems of representation.*”¹⁰

The authors are describing a shift in their discipline to problems of ‘reading’ or ‘interpreting’ reality. The thing that signifies the crisis of representation becomes postmodernity’s signature – there is a proliferation of interpretations of realities with sensitivity to the role of ideology in meaning-making processes.¹¹

It is interesting to note that the postmodern *crisis* narration is thus revealed to stem from older dominant paradigms whose descriptive and explanatory abilities are challenged by the new reality/realities. The difficulty of grasping, let alone representing, the social world of a global and hyper-networked capitalism that was becoming increasingly abstract fuelled the perceived crisis of the realist novel. This was intertwined with the fragmentation of the social field produced by the micro-politics of difference. Literary realism, understood as typology, experienced its ‘crisis’ in postmodernism in the form of a deconstruction of the

8 | See Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 10–38.

9 | Ibid., 39–89.

10 | Marcus and Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, 9, my emphasis.

11 | Marcus and Fischer specifically use the phrase “crisis of representation” a few pages later. See *ibid.*, 12; See also HUTCHEON, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, on historiography: “the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past ‘events’ into present historical ‘facts.’”, 89; For further reading, see the work of writers such as Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, (French); Welsch, *Unsere Postmoderne Moderne*, (German); McLaughlin, “Post-Postmodernism,” (American).

ideology of representations.¹² ‘Realism’ became merely a yardstick against which different transformations or transfigurations of realism or other conventions and modes of discourse were held up against and evaluated (even though postmodern texts were most consciously resisting strict generic categorization).¹³ In the postmodern strain of experimentation, there was also a linkage of generally contradictory spheres of reality such as technology and myth or realism with fantasy. Even as postmodern works sustained the emphasis on the mediated status of all representation, their aim was nevertheless to aspire to represent and comment on the social world. On the other hand, the *unease* with regard to representation manifested itself also as an *inability* to represent something, as in the trauma narratives of Holocaust-survivors or post-9/11 stories. Their often debilitating experience is conveyed through an ‘absence’ or ‘lack’, which can be narratively represented only through devices such as the blurring of ontology (boundary blurring) or destabilization of meaning.¹⁴

Rather than constitute a crisis, such paradigms readily suggest radical plurality as the fundamental condition of postmodernist writing. This can be seen from the many mixed genres such as metafiction, historiographic metafiction, and varieties of the non-fiction novel that came to be celebrated.¹⁵ An implicit anxiety about the

12 | This refers largely to structuralist critique of literary realism. See for example Barthes, “To Write: An Intransitive Verb?,” who equates realism with the “totalitarian ideology of the referent” (159).

13 | Hence the engagement with terms such as blurred genre or hybrid genre. See respectively, Geertz, “Blurred Genres”; Nünning, “Mapping the Field of Hybrid New Genres in the Contemporary Novel”; On the other hand, one could speak of a dialogue with realism in genres such as magical realism or metafiction. See also Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*, who quite rightly criticizes literary theory’s tendency to view new literary trends as simply redefinitions of the real (36–7).

14 | See Onega Jaén, *Contemporary Trauma Narratives*; and Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*.

15 | In the American context, we also have the development of New Journalism and the nonfiction novel. These were a dramatized blend of fictional techniques applied to the detailed observations of the journalist. The crux of the movement was, however, not a play with form, but an affirmation of a moral position assumed by the “New Journalists”. A more recent revival followed and was called New New Journalism, with the difference that the emphasis now was on innovative “immersion” strategies and extended time spent on reporting. See Hellmann, *Fables of Fact*; A diachronic survey shows that such reportorial textualization of political, social and cultural “reality” are neither “new” as the American journalist-novelists would have it, nor are they restricted to the American context. One “other” example of such historical referentiality and “reshuffling of generic material” has already been thematized in discussions of 18th century English novels. See for example Ray, *Story and History*; See also McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*; Ansgar Nünning binds these characteristics

traditionally established categories of fact and fiction runs through postmodern literature. This anxiety comes from an awareness of the discrepancy between the actual historical events and its textualization. In this vein, there have been several attempts to analyse whether a text's reception of fact or fiction depends finally on the reader or whether there is indeed something, essentially 'factual' or 'fictional' that characterizes the narrative as one or the other. Is there an empirical method to differentiate factual from fictional narratives? In other words, is it possible to locate the difference between fact and fiction in the form that each narrative respectively takes? The response to these questions is the core of the fact-fiction debate and probably that, which indicates the true postmodern crisis.¹⁶ In the 1970s, Hayden White triggered the controversial debate over the epistemological value of historical truth with the provocative statement: "Written discourse is cognitive in its aims and mimetic in its means. In this respect, history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation."¹⁷ White's work contains a radical critique of historical methodology and the consciousness of historians. This view of history as a literary genre called into question the claims of truth and objectivity in historical work; simply put, it showed that facts cannot speak for themselves. History could now be considered a 'literature of fact' because the historian's forms of discourses and those of the 'imaginative writer' were shown to overlap.¹⁸ Moreover, the techniques or strategies they use in the composition of their discourses are often the same. They both aim at giving a textual image of 'reality' (verisimilitude) whereby the novelist may make more use of figurative techniques than the historian. If they are to lay claim to representing or documenting human experience of the world, both history and fiction must prove that they represent satisfactorily an image of something beyond themselves. To achieve this, White showed that both disciplines share a considerable number of conventions such as, selection, organization, diegesis,

and diachronic examples nicely in his phrase, calling them "the journalistic prehistory of the novel". Nünning, "Mapping the Field of Hybrid New Genres in the Contemporary Novel."

16 | The belief that fictional and non-fictional narratives look alike is but one side of the debate. Dorrit Cohn, for example, argues against such a persuasion. See especially her illustrations of mode and voice in different types of narrative. She shows, for example, that while fiction is freely able to show the inner thoughts of a character by a separate narrator, historians seldom allow themselves this privilege. That is, the representation or mimesis of consciousness distinguishes fictional narratives from non-fictional ones. A "good" historian may touch upon psychological motives and reasons only if "privately revealing sources such as memoirs, diaries, and letters are available". Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction*, 118. See also 117–23.

17 | White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 122.

18 | "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" in *ibid.*, 81–100.

temporal pacing, and emplotment.¹⁹ Such a questioning of recorded history is tied up with the social and cultural assumptions on which our theories are based. It is a critical questioning of accepted notions of representation and truth, causality and temporal homogeneity, linearity and constancy. The fragmentation of the representation of 'reality' and the blurring of genre boundaries in postmodern art and literature are but symptoms of such a re-assessment. This distrust of (historical) 'knowledge' – of the perceived objectivity of historiography and of the notion that truth can be obtained through a focus on empirical facts – represents an epistemological conflict. It indicates an urge to liberate the disciplines from 'empiricist' notions of knowledge and truth.²⁰

The next section elaborates how, despite postmodernism's pervasiveness, we can still pick up loose strands of a documentary impulse running through literature. The question that must then follow is how this documentary impulse makes the best of this 'crisis' situation? Is it perhaps a symptom of this crisis, or does it even acknowledge such a crisis? It may be argued that the documentary impulse in this project's corpus represents a move away from abstract postmodern representational paradigms to a form that is more materially grounded. Through its strategy of empirical anchorage, immersion and referentiality, it may just be the way forward, beyond the conundrum of postmodernity.

THE DOCUMENTARY IMPULSE IN LITERATURE

Let us consider this statement about the status of documentary today:

"As archives become fluid, and more and more information is available online, conflicts about the intellectual property of documentary images and sounds increase. The documentary becomes further implicated in processes of Othering and social disintegration. But contemporary documentary production has to face these conditions. They do not represent reality. They are the reality."²¹

19 | White argues that "emplotment" is one of the most characteristic aspects shared by history and fiction: "Histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of mere chronicles; and stories in turn are made out of chronicles by an operation which I have elsewhere called 'emplotment.' And by emplotment I mean simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures, in precisely the way that Frye has suggested is the case with 'fictions' in general." *Ibid.*, 83.

20 | See Dobson and Ziemann, *Reading Primary Sources*, 1–18.

21 | Lind and Steyerl, *The Green Room*, 26.

On the one hand, it thematizes the diffuse nature of ‘information’ in a globally connected world that is problematic because of the power asymmetries it reinstates. The latter part of the statement reflects that postmodern sense of the ‘loss of reality’ and the precariousness of representational systems.²² Historically, the statement points back to the loss of the hegemony of continuous models of history and evaluations of how a particular system of epistemology acquired effective discursive power in a given society.²³ A number of aspects play into this rhetoric – the linkage of knowledge to power (Foucault), a rethinking of the past and its textualization, and the union of intellectual knowledge and local memories.²⁴ These set the path for a postmodern preference of the fragmented and local knowledge directed against ‘great truths’ and ‘grand theories’.²⁵ The distrust of the authority and objectivity of historical sources or accounts is accentuated by a mixing of genres and recourse to alternative sources of information and their interpretation.²⁶ As we saw in the previous section, the articulation of these epistemological debates has largely constituted the postmodern crisis of representation. As Jean Baudrillard famously put it, the ‘real’ thus became “that of which it is possible to provide an equivalent reproduction”.²⁷ One would expect such a context of mediation, simulation and virtuality to open up an arena of practices that *re-stabilize* means of contesting ‘realities’ in art or literary productions. Perhaps these are represented by the scattered attempts in different disciplines to characterize a documentary turn in contemporary art and literary productions.²⁸ The works discussed by scholars are marked by their use of documentary aesthetics and formal structures – not only to utilize and modify existing documents, but also to create new ‘documents’.²⁹

What we are witnessing indirectly through such academic engagements is perhaps a proliferation of documentary approaches that are trying to establish a space and path for their different concepts of reality and representation. There is an irony and paradox in this newer concept of ‘documentary’. On the one hand,

22 | Baudrillard, *Simulations*.

23 | Dobson and Ziemann, *Reading Primary Sources*, 1–2.

24 | Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*.

25 | Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 11; See also Munslow, *Experiments in Rethinking History*, 13.

26 | Such as metahistorical novels, postmodern historiographic fiction and metafiction, new journalism or various forms of the non-fiction novel/creative non-fiction.

27 | Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 73.

28 | See Agrell, “Documentarism and Theory of Literature”; Weeks, “Re-Cognizing the Post-Soviet Condition: The Documentary Turn in Contemporary Art in the Baltic States”; Schlotte and Voigts-Virchow, ZAA, *Constructing Media Reality: The New Documentarism*.

29 | See Agrell and Schlotte and Voigts-Virchow, but specifically Weeks, “Re-Cognizing the Post-Soviet Condition: The Documentary Turn in Contemporary Art in the Baltic States.”

as Hito Steyerl has pointed out in the quote above, the documentary today poses as reality itself (even as it performs the function of being merely a wildcard for reality, and actually continues to signify an absence). On the other hand, these documentaries are being produced in a context in which they are merely *one* of the discourses of the real.³⁰ A more stimulating enquiry into contemporary documentary forms like those of our corpus should therefore not ask *what* the facts are, but rather, *how* the facts are described. More specifically, we must ask how authority and authenticity are ascribed to them to sanction one mode of explaining over another.³¹

In order to establish a relation and continuity with the above developments in literature and the related emancipation in literary analysis, I suggest a working label for this project's corpus of urban narratives. Broadly speaking, the term *literary documentary* will be used in this project to refer to the narrative mode of the corpus. By narrative mode, I mean the manner in which the narrative is rendered. In other words, literary documentary refers to the individual documentary and narrative strategies chosen to convey the authorial experience. The term indicates the disciplinary and generic overlap of its two parts, and describes the typology of the project's corpus.³² It highlights, on the one hand, what I consider the 'empirical anchorage' of these texts – the aspect that conveys their referentiality. Conversely, 'documentarism' in our usage refers first and foremost to this empirical anchorage or referentiality.³³ At a basic level, the term 'documentary' carries with it the meanings 'factual' and 'objective' or simply 'that which is meant to provide a record of something'.³⁴ In our case, this relates to the authors' investigations into different facets of contemporary life in different globalized, urbanized cities. It carries with it the meaning of its root

30 | Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 10.

31 | For such an analysis to succeed, my own project also considers the context of its corpus. In the course of this project, we will thus address the place and time of their production; the form of publication of these narratives, be it the physical form of publication including individual authorial variations; the social and normative rules of the institution governing the sources the authors use (such as newspapers, history books, personal correspondence, testimony, official documents such as court files or surveillance reports, other novels or documentaries); and the wider historical context which helps us embed them in a literary tradition.

32 | See also Schlotz and Voigts-Virchow, ZAA, *Constructing Media Reality: The New Documentarism*. A study and discussion of literary documentaries, especially in the contemporary atmosphere of medial simulations and a perceived "loss of reality", has been initiated and collected by Schlotz and Voigts-Virchow under the Documentary Turn, but there have been no follow up issues at the point of writing this PhD. .

33 | We will return to a more detailed discussion of empirical anchorage later in the chapter.

34 | Alluding to Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

in the word ‘document’ – to teach – derived from the Latin word *docere*. The pedagogical connotation in our urban narratives lies in their capacity to impart ‘knowledge’ and to instruct through their ability to thematize or problematize certain issues. The label fulfills yet another, more contemporary meaning of the word ‘document’, in that it refers to itself as a thing or a document – an artifact containing/providing traces of the contemporary urban situation. The ‘literary’, on the other hand, refers to the processes of narrativization. That is, it denotes the authorial use of literary techniques for the re-creation of their individual experiences and journeys in textual, narrative form. The label should also serve to remind us of the tension or oscillation in these works between the two aspects literary and documentary as generally polarized clusters of techniques – the metaphoric on the one hand, and realistic on the other.³⁵

Turning our attention to the narrative techniques and conventions in our corpus reveals how these narrativizations convey verisimilitude. That is to say, the literary mode that the authors select also conveys the authenticity of representation. This is sustained, on the one hand, through an explicit statement of intention by the author. He establishes himself explicitly as the figure that is the focalizing subject in his narrative, the central consciousness through which the city, events and people are experienced. The reader is assured that this narrative has a stable univocal origin – the author (a real person) as narrator. This move sanctions his subjective perspective by liberating it from the falsifying restraints of so-called ‘neutral’ observation. Technically, following Genette, if we take diegetic to mean the universe in which the story takes place, the author’s position is that of a homodiegetic narrator. He inhabits the same world as his story, but cannot perceive the inner workings of the minds of their fellow-beings. Subsequently, the narration is diegetic or a ‘telling’. On the other hand, authenticity of representation is achieved at the narrative level by deploying reality references to link the narrative to the real historical world. Motifs used to this end are explicit representations of current social, cultural or political issues, ‘real’ people and their names, description or testimonies, and a rendering of specific situations or problems. These, ironically, underline the authors’ individual perspectives and interpretations. In order to maintain a notion of documentariness in their narratives despite their subjectivity, these authors take recourse to developing reliability. To ensure reliability the authors never break with their aesthetic style of using reality as their reference.

However, the project refrains from thinking about them as ‘factual’ since it distances itself from the fact and fiction dichotomy. In a way, my stance reflects the authors’ own strategy of empirical anchorage as a means of overcoming the realist conundrum of the discrepancy between the real and its representation.

35 | See Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing*, 220.

This specific kind of referentiality that is situated in authorial experientiality will be discussed in the next section.

REFERENTIAL NARRATIVES AND THEIR EMPIRICAL ANCHORAGE

Hayden White sought to spectacularize his critique of historical texts by deeming them “verbal fictions”; his use of ‘fiction’ here shows the denigrating connotations of the word.³⁶ Conversely, my project does not seek to eulogize its corpus by giving it the documentary stamp. Rather, I hope to be able to use the semantic multiplicity of the term documentary to explore the strategies the authors use to record the city they perceive or experience. The most fundamental meaning of documentary in my work alludes to its most generic meaning – that of referentiality. This calls to mind Dorrit Cohn’s distinction of referential narratives from non-referential ones. Cohn views narrative as utterances that present a causal sequence of events concerning human beings, which she then differentiates into referential and non-referential. This is also more or less how the term narrative is being used in this project. Cohn’s taxonomy retraces the generic boundaries that White sought to blur. However, it is not in the scope of my project to address all the questions that are raised by her differentiation of narrative. Cohn attributes referentiality to historical works, journalistic reports, biographies, and autobiographies – works that are subject, as she maintains, to judgments of truth and falsity.³⁷ Consequently, non-referentiality becomes, for Cohn, a “signpost” for the fictional status of a text.³⁸ In her well-argued critique of White’s use of ‘emplotment’ as a literary technique, Cohn directs us to an important characteristic of referential narratives. She argues that emplotment may very well be applied to the process of structuring archival sources.³⁹ In contrast, a novel may be plotted, but not *emplotted* since its “serial moments do not refer to, and can therefore not be selected from an ontologically independent and temporally prior database of disordered, meaningless happenings”. If we turn this around to tell us something about our corpus of *referential* narratives, the crux of her argument is that the interaction of story and discourse in referential narratives is sustained by the logical and chronological priority of documented or observed events (the story must first ‘occur’ in order for discourse about it to form).⁴⁰ In non-referential narratives, there is no such presumption of story over discourse. They are both considered synchronous structural aspects.

36 | White, *Topics of Discourse*, 82.

37 | Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction*, 15–17.

38 | *Ibid.*, 107–31.

39 | *Ibid.*, 114.

40 | *Ibid.*, 115.

My point here is not to split hairs about the meanings or differences between types of narrative, nor to oversimplify the issue of reference in narratives. We must, however, gather tools with which to describe our narratives that embody a special kind of discourse, which emphasizes its own referentiality. As Cohn only fleetingly suggests, we may thus add the level of *reference* to an analysis of narrative (apart from the usual story/discourse model of analysis). As our corpus illustrates, a means readily available to authors for establishing referentiality in their narratives is by stating it explicitly. Such a narrative mode does not merely integrate or insert documentary/factual material into the text as a narrative device, but is *constituted* by the referentiality of its content. It does not *use* documentary realism, but *is* documentary realism, and is in this sense performative.⁴¹ The author is, however, restricted and restrained by this aesthetic choice for he cannot break with it to maintain his reliability. His representational accuracy becomes a matter of authenticity.

The authors of my corpus do not directly or overtly address issues pertaining to our (their) comprehension of reality. Instead, a reality 'out there' and their ability to know or capture it is assumed as an epistemic foundation. In each book, there is an almost frantic insistence by the authors on their subjectivity. This is, as we will see in more detail later, an authorial strategy of authentication and authorization that enables the authors to make their 'realism' more compelling for the reader. Due to the phenomenological aspect of the authors' city enterprise, this authorial subjectivity relativizes, but paradoxically also reinforces their assumption of an objectively knowable, describable external reality.

The narrator's reliability develops primarily from the fixed perspective of the author as experiencer, chronicler and narrator. His explicit acknowledgement of the referentiality of his work decides its reception as documentary, and hence 'factual' rather than merely 'verisimilar'. It is primarily through this strategy that the empirical anchorage of documentary is established and maintained. At the very beginning of each book, the reader is informed about the ontological referentiality he will encounter – the living author as experiencer and sincere narrator, the actual jungle of a city 'out there', real persons, their names and authentic testimonies. The epistemology of these documentary endeavors is linked to the voyeur's promise of a faithful rendering of his experience of the

41 | My use of the term documentary realism refers only very loosely to Sauerberg, *Fact into Fiction*. Sauerberg discusses it more thoroughly as a narrative mode that draws attention to the fictional and factual in narrative. I refrain from further use of the term in the sense that Sauerberg intends it because his usage assumes a (problematic) primal notion of reality as 'structureless chaos' that I distance myself from. Where it is mentioned in my project, it refers to the authors' treatment of 'reality', not my own. However, it is also not the scope of my project to interrogate the categories of 'fact' or 'reality'. I would like to use this footnote merely to indicate my sensitivity to the issue.

contemporary urban scenography. A very earnest sort of reader-address forms the basis for the acceptance of the empirical rootedness, hence documentariness, of the narrative. Mediatisation is thus instrumentalized as a device for authentication; the authors place themselves within the narrative as interviewers, chroniclers, narrators, and writers of the text. Their legitimacy is at no point in genuine jeopardy, for no opportunity is spared to inform and remind the reader that the author was physically there as an experiencer. In the process, the authors' experience of the city becomes a means of discovering, describing or understanding the city, but also of constituting it. Any totalizing claims to an integrated view of reality are denied by the centrality of subjective experience. Thus, even as their subjective experience is transferred into representation, the subjectivity paradoxically enhances the documentariness of these narratives.⁴²

In our discussion of the empirical anchorage of literary documentaries, we have already begun to address the question of what constitutes or characterizes these textual documentary works. On the one hand, we have the referentiality of source material and of the experientiality of the authors' own movements in the city. This is their foundation and what I have called their empirical anchorage. A characteristic trait that develops out of this situation is the paradoxical notion of objectivity arising from the subjective author/narrator complex. This objectivity is anchored in the reliability that the author/narrator establishes. Introducing the notion of empirical anchorage and theorizing the authorial sincerity to which it is harnessed enables us to avoid the terms fact and fiction in our project. The documentariness of the narratives is established through these notions and accepted as such. The project is not concerned with the verification of sources or authenticity where it designates truthfulness. My focus is more on an analysis of their authenticity where it attempts to camouflage the intentions or interests of the author. The ultimate aim being not to simply uncover authorial ideology, but to describe the strategies the authors use to authenticate and authorize their individual ideology. Thus, we must turn our attention to the 'text' at hand. The basic means by which the descriptions and experience of the city are rendered are almost facile, much like those used in straightforward realist novels to achieve the 'authentic' representation of everyday urban sights.⁴³ To evoke a sense of the people and places, the authors rely on realist codes of description such as

42 | One can therefore speak of "structuring" rather than "representing" reality. See Imhof, *Contemporary Metafiction*, 23; See also McCord, "The Ideology of Form: The Nonfiction Novel," 77.

43 | In my attempt to describe the narrative strategies of my corpus, it is not my intention to view it as "merely" a continuation of "realism", a concept that is itself an over-simplification that ignores, among other things, the historical variability of aesthetic criteria. See for example how Rachel Bowlby re-opens up the debate on realism in Beaumont, *A Concise Companion to Realism*; See especially Bowlby, "Foreword."

adding ‘local’ color through synecdochic details. This involves conveying a feel of place through *recognizable* tropes, emotions and motifs. Literary tropes such as metaphors, distinctions (often binary), concepts, narrator perspective or emplotment lend these narratives the necessary “reality effect”.⁴⁴

Linda Hutcheon refers to this inner-outer correspondence of realist narratives as the mimesis of *product*.⁴⁵ The reader must identify the *products* being imitated (characters, actions, settings), and recognize their similarity to those in the empirical reality to validate their literary worth. In the text itself, this process goes unacknowledged, which is why Hutcheon considers such an act of reading to be passive.⁴⁶ On the other hand, a mimesis of *process* defines the functions of the reader in decoding or reading a text.⁴⁷ These are thematized in the text itself, as in the case of metafiction, and indicate that order and meaning are not the only goals of the novel. We could extend Hutcheon’s model from its application for a textual analysis to an application to ANT as a method. Specifically, the notion of mimesis of process can be applied in our project to refer to moments in the authors’ ANT-like enterprises that draw the reader’s attention to the *method of discovering and experiencing the city*. The means of rendering that our authors use hinges on referentiality and experientiality. We will therefore later see how the notion of process mimesis provides a useful handle to discuss this interplay between the actual urban enterprise and its narrativization. Mimesis of process can thus be used to reflect on conventions of seeing, observing and experiencing. That is, the notion of process mimesis must also draw our attention to instances in the text where the reader is forced to confront his own means of seeing and experiencing the world. The notion of empirical anchorage and process mimesis will together help us to thematize and discuss the position of the spokesperson in an ANT, the lack of which is a central part of my critique of Latour’s ANT. By reading my corpus as enterprises similar to ANT, we will also be able to envision ANT in more tangible means than delivered by Latour’s theory. This means that I will highlight the influence of two important factors on the results of an ANT – that of different, individual *means of describing* that the spokesperson uses and the *perspectives* he assumes in order to do so.

44 | Barthes, “History and Discourse,” 154. This is not to say that the reality effect in our corpus is achieved by similar means or is the same “thing” as Barthes’ reality effect. Put simply, Barthes’ reality effect conceives of descriptive details as an attestation of the real, and therefore as an increase in the cost of narrative information. In the discussion of our corpus, we will see how excessive and detailed descriptions become ideological or political means for the authors. See also Rancière, “The Reality Effect and the Politics of Fiction”; “Descriptive Excess.”

45 | Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*, 38.

46 | Ibid.

47 | Ibid., 39.

The narratives in our corpus represent patterns imposed upon the urban experience of each author, albeit with varying degrees of authenticity. From Sinclair, we have a sort of memoir of a time and generation eased out of their borough in London through the workings of capitalism. His whimsy is almost signatory since a principle of non-sequitur governs the sequence of all his chapters. It resists reading by giving us urban and documentary 'excess' in rather random form. This is, however, a randomness that has been achieved through mechanical means, making it Sinclair's individual strategy to overcome and speak against current economic discourse on the city. Mehta's is a highly descriptive type of immersive travel journalism with a strong autobiographical strand running consistently through the book. His moralizing, exoticizing, perhaps even a burlesquing of the city, masquerades behind the 'sincere' intentions of writing a contemporary report on the city of his birth. What the author is doing, however, is rewriting Mumbai as a 'corrupted' city against an imagined, better 'original' (or a romanticised city of a remembered childhood). Nevertheless, through the testimonies it includes of various protagonists of the contemporary megacity, it also enables the reader a very essential sense of everyday living in Mumbai (even though this insight is often filtered through Mehta's judgmental perspective). Miller's exactitude in his 'walk' of Delhi indicates postcolonial repercussions of such undertakings as it relies in new ways on existing codes of description as index to place. Miller's city of Delhi is revealed as a site of the fast disappearing 'other' in an age of exhausted global reaches and as one more site of global homogenized urbanization/gentrification. Patrick Neate's authenticity is rooted by the author explicitly in the political intent of his book of recording the contemporary situation of hip-hop across the planet. It quite conveniently supports his theory about the global situation of homogenizing trends, which can be counteracted by hip-hop itself.

In this project, quite diverse narratives have been brought together because they are all a subjective, authorial focus on the diversity of cities' experience with globalization. There is recognition by each author, implicit or explicit, of global processes on local urban outcomes. If the broader theme of these literary documentaries is to participate in a larger discourse, their narratives may be taken to represent a subjective, phenomenological contribution to urban analysis. If one is to take their role in a contemporary urban analysis seriously, that is, if we are to make documentary allowance for the subjectivity that asserts a claim to reality, then we desperately need to reflect this position of seeing, telling and narrating. After all our acknowledgement of poetic strategies used to construct and color what is then taken to be reality, can we still accept the status of documentary as reality that Steyerl interprets in the opening quote to this section?

Looking through the authors' eyes, following them closely in their own narratives to describe their documentary endeavor is perhaps an obvious means to reveal the role their narratives play in constructing the specific images that

we get. On the other hand, this step also indicates that the sort of image that we get (or accept) depends largely on whether we read the narratives with or against the grain of the rhetoric of the written work, for this involves grappling with a gap between the perspective of the narrator and the reader.⁴⁸ Thus, the project retains a critical stance towards such observer-oriented subjective analyses 'disguised' as objective reports, and represents an inquiry into how the authors are systematically involved in meaning making processes (issues of authenticity and authority).

Finally, such a move must extend the critical strain to reflect on our own position as it is being developed as observer of the observers of the city. If our desire is to truly describe scenography without adopting the signifying practices of existing hegemonic discourse, then we must heed the following advice:

"What is called for is a form of travel writing that reflects on, problematizes, and ultimately extricates itself from imperialist meaning making, we need to explore how, and to what extent, travel writing summoned and wielded such force in the first place [...] We also need to explore how the internal meaning making processes operated through tropes, metaphors and other figures in the representational practices of travel writing, and how these were keyed into what Foucault calls "the order of things", the deep seated structures of knowledge that underpinned imperialist discourse."⁴⁹

Kuehn and Smethurst address these issues with regard to travel writing, but their goals may be applied to any 'signifying' narratives that strive to transgress "the order of things". Bruno Latour has called this the 'common-sense' that circulates among us – referring specifically to the signifying practices of scientific discourse that pervade and ultimately establish themselves as non-negotiable, hard and fast, 'matters of fact'. This critical reflection of "meaning making processes" which assert hegemonic ideologies sets urgent tasks for contemporary scholars. We must first analyze and describe *existing* representational practices, in order to then emancipate/extricate ourselves from them. The empirical anchorage of our works, and the objectivity that is generated in them relies on the author's presence in the text as the narrating and the observing/experiencing entity. This demands that if we are to understand the meaning-making processes at work in them, we must read the books *against* the grain of the authors' rhetoric. This will be our own first and most important reading strategy. Our project turns to Latour's Actor-Network Theory in the next chapter with this goal in mind – to gather the tools required for analyzing existing representational practices (strategies of representation) in our corpus.

48 | Refer Bracewell, "The Traveller's Eye," 219.

49 | Kuehn and Smethurst, *Travel Writing, Form, and Empire*, 2–3.

II. Bruno Latour's 'New Empiricism'

Bruno Latour's attention to processes of mediation and representation has drawn my project to a more detailed appraisal of his scholarship. What Latour is involved in ultimately is developing a method of observation and re-describing matters of fact as matters of concern, which do justice to what is given in experience. The texts of my corpus operate in a similar fashion; they have devised their own method to experience and document the megacities they are concerned with, and they have found different strategies of describing the megacity and their experience in it. At an initial stage, it is this shared purpose that allows me to consider Latour's ANT and vocabulary for my project. In the course of this chapter, we will use Latour's scholarship to develop heuristic tools for our own analysis of the authors' documentary strategies. As we proceed, we may also venture a further inter-disciplinary exchange and problematize aspects of Latour's scholarship.

To understand Latour's research logic and vocabulary, the chapter traces a developmental trajectory of Latour's central idea of studying networks as a key to different levels or processes of constructivism. In the first part, we will go back to the beginnings of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and its attempts to revive the critical spirit of sociology.¹ The second part of the chapter covers Latour's own, most recent updates and corrections to his proposed method of ANT. Then, in a third part, we will see Latour's implementation of ANT as a method in his interactive web-project *Paris: Invisible City*. These steps will

1 | As with most of the vocabulary that Latour introduces to describe his new empiricism, the term "critical" also has a special meaning. Latour deems the critical spirit itself suspicious; intellectual explanations having deteriorated to the level of conspiracy theories, he equates criticism with modernity's iconoclastic impulse. For Latour, "critical" is a designation, which has to be earned by a researcher by immersing himself long enough in a deep study of something without distinguishing between the domains of nature and culture and thus excluding one from the discussion of the other. Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?"; This attitude runs more explicitly throughout his Latour, "The Politics of Explanation: An Alternative"; See also Mallavarapu and Prasad, "Facts, Fetishes, and the Parliament of Things," 185–8.

progressively inform us about ANT's presuppositions and implications, and its goals and achievements. By critically engaging with them, we are made aware of the limitations of Latour's project as it stands. The larger goal of this chapter within our project is to accumulate a set of Latourian terms to enable a reading of our own corpus as illustrations of what may be conceived of as an ANT method.

At this point, we must acknowledge that our project bears certain risks in that it deals with the works of a living philosopher. Apart from being capricious in his manner and strategies of theory making, Latour is also a highly prolific writer with an extremely diversified body of work that is testimony to him still evolving as a thinker.² However, the open-endedness also emphasizes the fundamental openness of his ethno-socio-philosophical endeavor. Latour's early publications were historical and documentary accounts of the scientific processes of knowledge production.³ With *We Have Never Been Modern*, however, we see the beginnings of Latour's radical intervention in debates concerning the relations between science and politics as well as a reconfiguring of theoretical concepts that he says were sacrificed by modernity's rationalization. His subsequent publications represent a generalization of his approach by bringing in the anthropological perspective.⁴ As Latour scholar, Kyle McGee, puts it, these are progressive accomplishments of Latour's overarching project of interrogating Western civilizations in ways similar to those of ethnologists who address non-Western cultures – naively, realistically and pragmatically.⁵ It is thus most natural that many of his propositions remain essentially open questions. Latour is obviously aware of this and capitalizes on it by inviting scholarly additions or critique. See, for example, his open access digital platform designed to enrich his inquiry into possible ontologies of a nonmodern constitution through a dialogical exchange with other scholars.⁶

2 | See for example his own statement where he admits to obliging the "need to retool" without qualms. Serres, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, 92.

3 | See for example Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*; Latour, *Pandora's Hope*; Latour, *Science in Action*.

4 | See especially Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

5 | We can trace a trajectory of the radicalization of Latour's ideas by beginning with Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*; Latour, *Science in Action*; Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*. It reaches a turning point with Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*; This is followed by Latour, *Aramis, Or, The Love of Technology*; Latour, *Pandora's Hope*; Latour, *Politics of Nature*. So far Latour used ethnography as a "method" to develop philosophical ideas. In more recent works such as Latour, *Reassembling the Social*; or Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, Latour reverses his strategy and tries to highlight a philosophical strand in his ethnographical methods; See also McGee, *Bruno Latour*, especially xiii–xxi.

6 | "The AIME Research Group Website." (Blog-post)

Latour's own ideas being in the making, he urges scholars to "put their skills to work in devising for matters of concern a style that does justice to what is given in experience."⁷ Our task is thus set – in our engagement with Latour, we must make our additions to his project of reinventing the art of describing, or rather an "Art of Redescribing matters of fact."⁸ With an awareness of the reservations mentioned above and critique leveled against Latour, let us attempt to achieve some clarity by disambiguating the many diffuse ideas which form the theory and method of Latour's ANT, and then 'reconstruct' them with a difference – to advance our own project of analyzing literary documentary strategies.⁹ My reader will notice that I try to identify and pick up a golden thread (roter faden) in Latour's diverse publications in the interest of an overview (be it only in chronological terms). In order to remain within the bounds of my project, I have found it more fruitful to discuss and critically engage with only those aspects that I considered relevant for my project rather than attempt to fathom Latour's thought in its entirety or as a philosophically (un)grounded theory. Nevertheless, suggestions for further reading, for more information, or comments from different perspectives and disciplines have been provided throughout the text.

SHAKING THE MODERN FOUNDATION OF EPISTEMOLOGY

Latour is now a prominent figure in the critique of 'objective' scientific methodology and the power of the discourse that it produces. According to Latour, Science has long enough claimed to produce 'objective facts' while it has actually been leading us away from the 'real' nature of things. In discussions that were dubbed the 'Science Wars',¹⁰ Latour suggested a re-evaluation of the social studies of science (STS) and its critical spirit: "My argument is that a

7 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 50.

8 | Ibid., 46.

9 | Latour's own work resists the synthesizing thrust of my own attempt to grapple with his diverse body of writing. As much as Latour would condemn this synthesizing thrust, I believe he would endorse my own additions to his network as a sort of 'thought-experiment' with his ideas.

10 | See Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, Introduction This is a debate focusing on the creation of scientific knowledge. On the one side, positivists argue that scientists discover truth using a series of natural and logical processes. On the other side, STS scholars such as Latour argue that scientific knowledge is socially constructed. Latour is part of a group of philosophers and thinkers of object-oriented ontology as initiated by Graham Harman, practicing within the tradition of speculative realism. This group includes, among many others, scholars such as: Isabelle Stengers, Timothy Morton, Ian Bogost, Marshall McLuhan, Karen Barad, Deleuze and Guattari, and is in dialogue with systems theorists such as Richard

certain form of critical spirit sent us down the wrong path. [...] The question was never to get away from facts but closer to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism".¹¹ The "form of critical spirit" that Latour confronts here is an iconoclastic urge that he locates in the project of modernity.¹² Modernity's 'purification' of nature and culture into separate ontological domains of non-humans (nature) and humans (culture) has, Latour says, been misleading us.¹³ Latour's first step for a renewal of empiricism is foregrounding the work of 'mediation' and 'delegation'. That is, we must study how representatives or scientists speak on behalf of nature or culture. In other words, the 'new empiricism' must consider the *ways* we construct or represent things. By thoroughly tracing the whole process of scientific research, from the preparation of animals for experimentation to the publication of a scientific article, Latour shows how 'scientific facts' are indeed an 'ordering' forced onto the world. Scientific facts are not something out there in the world, but were shown as carefully and painstakingly 'constructed' through the application of technology. It is here that Latour first introduces the notion of "inscription devices" (technology), which aid in "literary inscription".¹⁴ In the laboratory, literary inscription translates a substance into a text. After different modalities are attributed to the substance and get added to the original statement about it, this statement gets passed on within a new text in a partially distorted form. Once these stabilized sets of relations are established, carried forward by 'recipients' and accepted unquestioningly, they become what Latour calls a "black box".¹⁵ Conceptually borrowed from Cybernetics, black boxes are a piece of machinery or set of commands too complicated to describe in complete detail. Through this (ant-like) activity of closely following and describing scientific practices, Latour demonstrates how technologies and political, social, and material factors converge to make black boxes meaningful and useful to us.

To overcome modernity's fallacies and the hegemony of scientific discourse, Latour proposes a non-modern framework and vocabulary that trace and describe the *networks* that constitute nature and society without drawing a demarcation between them. Latour's notion of networks signifies on the one hand, assemblages, channels or associations that make circulation possible. On

Lewontin and Susan Oyama, Alfred North Whitehead, Donna Haraway, Niklas Luhmann, Roy Bhaskar, Katherine Hayles. .

11 | Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?", 231.

12 | Ibid.

13 | Latour, "The Promises of Constructivism," 10–11.

14 | Latour, *Science in Action*, 67. Latour's ANT vocabulary appears in quotation marks only in the first instance. All further use of these terms or phrases, although unmarked, refers back to Latour.

15 | Ibid., 2, 128–132.

the other hand, networks are also the very flows of information, material, people and so on. Latour's notion of network includes humans and non-humans alike, and refers to them as simply "hybrids".¹⁶ The concept of "agency" conceptualizes how hybrids "attach, detach, and reattach anew".¹⁷ Since Latour's notion of agency may refer to human or non-human alike, it becomes freed of its meaning as subjective intentionality. Agency must, however, be effective (produce a trace) in order to count as agency. Thus, we have here on the one hand, an *abstract* notion of agency as simply the *capacity* of a hybrid for action. On the other hand, we have the empirical *manifestation* of that capacity, or its figuration as actant.¹⁸ That is, when agency is attributed to hybrids in networks, they become "actants".¹⁹ A "spokesperson" is the entity through which the "voices" or "inscriptions" of actants may find representation.²⁰ Inscriptions are defined as the various types of "transformations through which an entity becomes materialized into a sign, an archive, a document, a piece of paper, a trace."²¹ This is the core of Latour's critique of scientific practice; for it is through these inscriptions, that science is able to gain its hegemony.²² By its "deflating strategy", Science lends inscriptions validity in a manner such that a few elements can manipulate all the others on a

16 | Latour refers to these as "quasi-subjects" and quasi-objects" to indicate the move towards a unified vocabulary for both. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*; Latour, "The Politics of Explanation: An Alternative"; See also Latour and Akrich, "A Summary of a Convenient Vocabulary for the Semiotics of Human and Nonhuman Assemblies."

17 | Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, 33, 35.

18 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 54; See also Alworth, "Latour and Literature", forthcoming.

19 | Latour's choice of the word "actant" avoids anthropocentric connotations of the notion of agency in the term actor. See Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 75; This is a good example of one of the many instances in which Latour turns to indicate Latour's turn to literary studies for his scholarship. Here Latour is drawing on A.J. Greimas' narratology: "[A]ny thing that modif[ies] a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor, or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant." Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 54, 71; for more on the actant in literary studies, see Herman, "Existentialist Roots of Narrative Actants"; See also Alworth, "Latour and Literature," forthcoming.

20 | Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 64–70.

21 | Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 306–7.

22 | Latour, "Visualization and Cognition: Drawing Things Together," 16 "It is not inscription by itself that should carry the burden of explaining the power of science; it is the inscription as the fine edge and the final stage of a whole process of mobilization, that modifies the scale of the rhetoric. [...] So, the phenomenon we are tackling is not inscription per se, but the cascade of ever simplified inscriptions that allow harder facts to be produced at greater costs." (Original italics)

vast scale: “The same deflating strategy we used to show how ‘things’ were turned into paper, can show how paper is turned into *less* paper.”²³

Latour then plays with the semantics of the word ‘describe’ by pairing it in his discussion with the verb ‘to inscribe’. The new empiricist must, he says, “de-scribe” given inscriptions to “re-describe” the world beyond the dominance of science and epistemology.²⁴ His former use of ‘de-scribe’ refers to undoing the activity of the scientists while the latter verb ‘re-describe’ refers to the activity that the spokesperson must now carry out, namely, to give a thorough and detailed account. The spokesperson must successfully bring to the fore *all* the actants inscriptions/voices – these now constitute “matters of concern”.²⁵ The validity of the new (re-)descriptions, presented by spokespersons, must depend on the spokesperson’s ability to present the concerns of the actants.²⁶ Latour emphasizes “associations” as the empirical locus of actor-networks – the linkage of individual or collective material artifacts and human actors.²⁷ Tracing the associations enables us to study the relations that affect (stabilize or destabilize, strengthen or weaken) these networks.

In my brief attempt to introduce Latour’s formulations on actor-networks we have begun to see that his studies function largely as a polemic that seeks to blur the divide or demarcation between the ‘scientific’ and ‘poetic’, and to ultimately completely abandon the notion of them being separate spheres. In other words, the modern ‘purification’ of the world into two separate spheres – pre-existing objective Nature and man-made Culture/Society – is explained as a product of intangibly vast networks, strategic ‘translation’ processes (via scientists), and the existence of laboratories and a vast array of technology. This breaking point with modernity is the foundation of Latour’s sociology that seeks to reassemble the social through a new “constitution of hybrids”.²⁸ For Latour, what distinguished modernity was the belief in the existence of pure categories such as the scientific, the cultural, the economic or the political (or the purification of various realms of thought). As a result, the moderns developed and established the tradition of categorizing the world, of distinguishing between knowledge and interests, facts and values or between the natural and the social. The paradox of this practice is

23 | Ibid., 21 (Original italics).

24 | Ibid. In this essay, Latour refines the notion of inscriptions to “immutable mobiles” to encompass products of scientific practices such as images, graphs or physical samples, that is, the physical manifestation of inscriptions that get circulated.

25 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*

26 | Latour admits that representing non-humans is difficult but does not principally differentiate between the processes of representing humans and non-humans.

27 | Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications plus More than a Few Complications,” 2; Blok and Jensen, *Bruno Latour*, 49; Latour, *Reassembling the Social* See also.

28 | Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern.*

obvious, says Latour, when we look at something as common and everyday as a newspaper, we are surrounded by “hybrid articles that sketch out imbroglios of science, politics, economy, law, religion, technology, fiction. All of nature and all of culture get churned up again every day. Yet no one seems to find this troubling.”²⁹ Latour attempts to shake the modern foundations of epistemology and denaturalize scientific discourse by consistently mixing discursive genres.³⁰ Latour gives his work a distinctly sociological bend in that he explains his own study of the sciences and technology as a “sociology of associations”, which approaches the world in a ‘relational’ and ‘hybrid’ way. It shifts the focus from a ‘society’ of humans to ‘collectives’ of humans *and* non-humans.³¹ It asks which actors are connected with each other or which other actor in a given association can replace a given actor.³² Latour is thus enacting Gabriel Tarde’s monist understanding of activity, embracing a unified perspective for the hybrids or quasi-objects, and opening up sociological discussions to include technology and the co-existence of humans with technology.³³

The Nature/Culture Divide and Latour’s Critique of Criticism

One of the founding premises of Latour’s thought is a critique of the “bifurcation of nature” that splits the world into two systems of reality.³⁴ One of these systems describes the world in terms of “primary qualities”, for which we allegedly have knowledge – this is the “realism of science” that is expressed by a scientific discourse:

“[T]he world is made of primary qualities for which there is no ordinary language but that of science – a language of pure thought that nobody in particular speaks and which utters law from nowhere; as to no ordinary language, it deals with secondary qualities which have no reality. On the one

29 | Ibid., 2.

30 | Bowker and Latour, “A Booming Discipline Short of Discipline.”

31 | It also demarcates it from the Durkheimian tradition of the “sociology of the social”. See Latour, “When Things Strike Back – a possible contribution from “science studies” to the “social sciences””, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 51(1): 107-123. See also Blok and Jensen, Bruno Latour, *Hybrid Thoughts in a Hybrid World*, 2011. Also, one must keep in mind that early on Latour mainly concerned himself with science studies and technology. Only later has ANT been applied to other domains. .

32 | Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*, 304; Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications plus More than a Few Complications,” 370.

33 | Vargas, Latour, and et al, “The Debate between Tarde and Durkheim”; Latour, *Politics of Nature*.

34 | Latour, “Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social.”

hand there is nature which is real, but is a 'dull and meaningless affair, the hurrying of material endlessly'; on the other hand there is the lived world of colors, sounds, values, meaning, which is a phantasmagoria of our senses but with no other existence than in the circumvolution of our brain and the illusions of our mind."³⁵

The other system of reality describes the world in terms of "secondary qualities", which we perceive owing to our sensory faculties. According to the "old empiricism", only the language of poetry can express this.³⁶ Latour attacks such a segregated mode of explaining the world: "The harsh world of matters of fact is an amazingly narrow, specialized type of scenography using a highly coded type of narrative, gazing, lighting, distance, a very precise repertoire of attitude and attention."³⁷ Latour's feat of rhetoric here renders scientific narrative as being highly 'coded' so as to appear awe-inspiring and threateningly abstract.³⁸ This, for Latour, has been possible due to modernity's false division between the domains of nature culture.³⁹

A look at Latour's resistance to the role of criticism (in modernity's separation of the domains of nature and culture) helps to explain his relative neglect of a reflexive or critical stance with regard to his own work.⁴⁰ Latour associates 'criticism' with the modern critical paradigm that relies on an appeal to either the

35 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 10–11.

36 | Ibid.

37 | Ibid., 38 my emphasis.

38 | The notion of 'scenography' that Latour introduces here will be discussed in more detail in the next section on "Modifying Scenography" as this will form one of the central concepts for our own conceptual framework.

39 | Latour demonstrates his point further by assessing Shapin and Schaffer's reading of the debate between Hobbes and Boyle with regard to Boyle's experimental framework for the working of his air pump. Shapin and Schaffer show how access to the inanimate world of nature was made possible through Boyle's use of technology; the weight of air is not an absolute universal but requires a network to support it. In Latour's terminology, a problematic technology was transformed via material, literary, and social mediating processes into a "black box", or a standardized piece of equipment. Shapin and Schaffer thus turn the debate in favor of Hobbes, claiming that knowledge as well as the State are products of humans actions. While Latour agrees with Shapin and Schaffer that the category of nature is not a given but a product of an elaborate set of mediations (social construction of scientific facts), he criticizes them for taking for granted the social categories that Hobbes used. Latour reminds us that these social categories themselves are also not absolutes, and Hobbes and Boyle were, by assuming them to be so, laying the foundation for a "modern constitution" that bifurcates the natural and social domains. See Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, 27.

40 | See also Latour's own essay Latour, "The Politics of Explanation: An Alternative."

immanence or transcendence of Nature or Society.⁴¹ Nature becomes excluded from the realm of politics because politics is consigned to the social domain, and therefore, such a critique that is based on social *or* natural 'explanations' is limited in its explanatory power as well as in terms of its politics. In his later works, Latour equates the modern critical urge with an iconoclastic attitude, which he says is also based on appeals to 'truth' and seeks to demystify false ideology.⁴² For Latour, such critical practice that uses a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (borrowed from Ricouer) is reducible to conspiracy theories.⁴³ We will come back to Latour's rejection of the modern critical attitude as well as his rejection of 'explanations' (causality) in the next section, when we discuss the alternatives he suggests in place of them.

Latour visualizes the bifurcation between the social and natural domains using the metaphor of a river with two banks. One riverbank is the Social and the other is the Natural, separated by violent waters. What the old empiricism has been caught up in is an "arduous bridge-building" between these two banks. Latour suggests that "canoeing, kayaking or rafting" with the flow of the waters in a lateral direction, away from the bridge-building activity would create a better equipped, new perspective – that of forward movement or a 'going with the flow' towards what is given in "pure experience".⁴⁴

"What would happen to the so-called secondary qualities if they were viewed as being that which allows us to grasp the other entities with which we keep moving? Would they appear as "secondary", their meaning as devoid of any importance and reality as before? My intuition is that the two riverbanks would take on an entirely different meaning and that nature, having stopped bifurcating because of the way you have let it *pass...* will be now able to mingle with our speech and other behaviors in many more interesting connections."⁴⁵

What must result says Latour, is a *change of perspective*, a concept crucial to his new empiricism – the poet's metaphors of explaining the world and scientific knowledge can *co-respond* to one another. They can "involve one another in some of the new differences necessary for them to persist in their being."⁴⁶ Science need not claim to solely explain the world but can 'add itself' to the world, to the flow

41 | Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, 37.

42 | Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?," 230.

43 | Serres, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*.

44 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 14.

45 | Ibid. original italics based on the phrase Latour borrows from Whitehead – "passage of nature".

46 | Ibid., 22–3.

of experience, as simply one more way to describe or imagine the reality of the world.

Bringing about a Change of Perspective

The change of perspective that Latour intends to achieve through his symmetrical semiotics brings us to an important implication and development in Latour's thought. As a most natural next step in keeping with the Tardian tradition, Latour revisits the limitations of the macro/micro distinction and develops the principle of irreducibility: "the big is never more than a simplification of *one* element of the small".⁴⁷ In order to completely grasp and appreciate the radicalism of the empiricism Latour is trying to develop, one must go back in time to Tarde himself:

"It is always the same mistake that is put forward: to believe that in order to see the regular, orderly, logical pattern of social facts, you have to extract yourself from their details, basically irregular, and go upwards until you embrace vast landscapes panoramically; that the principal source of any social coordination resides in a few very general facts, from which it diverges by degree until it reaches the particulars, but in a weakened form; to believe in short that while man agitates himself, a law of evolution leads him. I believe exactly the opposite [...] instead of explaining the small by the large, the detail by the big, I explain the overall similarities by the accumulation of elementary actions, the large by the small, the big by the detail."⁴⁸

This is the source of Latour's critique of the dichotomy of 'ways of seeing'. It recalls Michel de Certeau's two different observers of the city and his linkage of their view points with the difference in their representations of urban space. One stands on top of the Empire State building, looking down. This is the spectator or the voyeur who has a 'totalizing' view of the city, while the "walker" is an 'ordinary practitioner' of the city who moves about at street level, 'amidst the bustle' so to speak.⁴⁹ De Certeau associates the first perspective with that of urban planners or cartographers (a bird's eye view) and rejects it at the same time as a simulacrum, not of the 'thing' or 'space' itself but an illusion of objectivity. The walker's city on the other hand is a "migrational, or metaphorical city [which] thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city."⁵⁰ It is this walker's narrative whose

47 | Latour, "Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social," 123, original italics.

48 | Gabriel Tarde as quoted in *ibid.*, 124–5.

49 | Certeau, "Walking in the City."

50 | *Ibid.*, 93.

authority Soja explicitly questions.⁵¹ Perhaps de Certeau sensed something amiss in this distinction he makes, for, he himself does not privilege either of these perspectives or their narratives, but has merely pointed out their characteristics – the former (of spectator/voyeur) has a simplifying thrust while the other has the ability to overthrow the former's apparent authority. This sense of 'something amiss' with the dichotomy of perspectives ties in neatly with Latour urging for a *change of perspective*.

There are two important aspects to hold on to here. Firstly, Latour is engaged in surpassing the division between a law and what is subject to the law.⁵² Secondly, and this is how Latour gets from Tarde to ANT, the notion of network also dissolves hierarchies of perspectives, and replaces the metaphor of 'scales' by the metaphor of 'connections'. A network does not impose an a priori hierarchy of top to bottom (or bottom to top), nor does it differentiate between macro and micro, which means that a network is never bigger than another but implies intensities of connection.⁵³ The network comes into existence through the associations of the actant, the actant being the smallest entity of a network. However, the network could not exist without the actant. This is finally how a *change of perspective* may be achieved. There is no opposition between structure and agency or an hierarchy of the global and local, and we get rid of what Latour calls "tyranny of distance or proximity".⁵⁴ I can be one meter away from someone in the next telephone booth, and be nevertheless more closely connected to my mother 6000 miles away.⁵⁵

MODIFYING THE 'SCENOGRAPHY', RENEWING EMPIRICISM

The Threshold of a 'New Empiricism'

Latour thus proposes a non-modern model of empiricism that foregrounds the work of mediation (that is, *how* associations are formed between actants), and suggests anthropology as a more suitable framework for 'noncritical' practice.

51 | See my own Introduction

52 | See Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto'" for more on Latour's critique of modernity for the bifurcation of nature and for the notion of "action without agency".

53 | Latour differentiates between weak and strong or stable and instable connections but has not really explained these attributes.

54 | See Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications plus More than a Few Complications," Especially 67–9 However, as I will argue further on, this "change of perspective", or by implication, a flattening of the field of hybrids for the purpose of study can not be achieved quite so simply as Latour seems to imply.

55 | Ibid., 67–9.

In order to ‘trace’ the tightly woven fabric of their networks, we must follow the actant in that we track and map its multiple associations:⁵⁶

“Once she has been sent into the field, even the most rationalist ethnographer is perfectly capable of bringing together in a single monograph the myths, ethno sciences, genealogies, political forms, techniques, religions, epics and rites of the people she is studying. Send her off to study the Arapesh or the Achuar, the Koreans or the Chinese, and you will get a single narrative that weaves together the way people regard the heavens and their ancestors, the way they build houses and the way they grow yams or manioc or rice, the way they construct their government and their cosmology. In works produced by anthropologists abroad, you will not find a single trait that is not simultaneously real, social and narrated.”⁵⁷

In Latour’s descriptivist empiricism, the follower of the network (spokesperson) must consider questions of epistemology, discourse or sociology together, in order to yield matters of concern.⁵⁸ However, and this is exactly that aspect of Latour’s theory and method which my own project would like to single out and strongly criticize, Latour does not reflect upon the various factors related to this process of ‘observation’ itself: How can a network be identified, traced and observed? Where does a spokesperson position himself?⁵⁹ Is he inside the network, or outside of it? Can he be truly inside or outside the network? How may a spokesperson even decide which networks are relevant?

Mallavarapu and Prasad have voiced similar critique by analyzing Latour’s reading of an excerpt from Anantha Murthy’s novel *Bharathipura* in *Pandora’s Hope*.⁶⁰ They too alert scholars to Latour’s failure to engage with the limitations of his framework, especially with regard to the choices made by the analyst of the network or spokesperson:

56 | Krarup and Blok, “Unfolding the Social.”

57 | Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, 7.

58 | Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?”; Latour, *Aramis, Or, The Love of Technology*.

59 | In my readings, I have used the words ‘observer’ and ‘spokesperson’ interchangeably. Latour, however, uses the term spokesperson instead of observer: “First, to delineate a group, no matter if it has to be created from scratch or simply refreshed, you have to have spokespersons which ‘speak for’ the group existence [...] some people defining who they are, what they should be, what they have been. These are constantly at work, justifying the group’s existence, invoking rules and precedents and, as we shall see, measuring up one definition against all the others. Groups are not silent things, but rather the provisional product of a constant uproar made by the millions of contradictory voices about what is a group and who pertains to what.” Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 31.

60 | Mallavarapu and Prasad, “Facts, Fetishes, and the Parliament of Things.”

"Latour also fails to consider that even if we deploy an anthropological method, we cannot argue that networks makes themselves visible to anthropologists in obvious ways – there are always certain choices that are made in the representation of networks. [...] To be fair to Latour, we have to accept that there is a methodological limitation to analyzing different factors, or in Latourian terminology, in recovering inscriptions of all the actants implicated in any event. Nevertheless, it seems vitally important to be sensitive not just to the difficulty of gaining access to all the voices and inscriptions, but also to the concern that the very structure (as well as politics) of the network can depend on the choice of the voices and inscriptions that are highlighted."⁶¹

Specifically, the "methodological limitations" that Mallavarapu and Prasad perceive in Latour's ANT is its failure to address imperative contemporary topics such as colonialism, gender and race. Latour could counteract such critique by arguing that somebody else could extend the network further by highlighting the role of these issues they see neglected in his ANT.⁶² He rarely concerns himself with related questions of the real or anticipated difficulties that arise due to asymmetries of power and identity between spokespersons (scientists/analysts) or in inscriptions of actants and their networks. From this point of view, it would appear that ANT simply reproduces the complexity of the world without yielding an angle to cope with this complexity, multiplicity or inequalities.

However, we can extend Latour's theory and method at this point to enable a more reflexive or self-implicating means of tracing the network/associations by emphasizing specifically the combined notions of subjectivity, perspective and agenda of the spokesperson. Specifically, we can use the terms empirical anchorage and process mimesis that I had introduced earlier on to discuss this situatedness of the author (the subjectivity of a spokesperson in an ANT) and his means of self-implication (self-referentiality of the spokesperson in an ANT). In order to constrain his own methodology, Latour suggests that we conceive of the network as a net with empty spaces.⁶³ That which is not the net, or these empty spaces, he terms "plasma" – that which is "not yet measured, not yet socialized, not yet engaged in metrological chains, and not yet covered, surveyed, mobilized, or subjectified."⁶⁴ Thus, we already have in Latour's ANT a notion of unknowability and selectivity in ANT. The spokesperson's tracing of networks becomes *his* specific conceptualization of the world, which in turn becomes stabilized through its narrativization and textualization. Latour lays down the basis for this addition in his specifications for matters of concern, where he says,

61 | Ibid., 193.

62 | Ibid.

63 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 242.

64 | Ibid.

it must be clear for *whom* they matter. The issue of interests can be conveniently linked with the spokesperson's position and situatedness, and is a central point of analysis that I add to Latour's framework.

Latour foregrounds processes of mediation by problematizing the notion of objectivity or so called 'objective' representation. At the center of Latour's theorization of an alternative empiricism, we have a critique of the meta-language of Science that turns matters of fact into a black box or indisputable common sense. Latour's polemic attacks precisely this aspect of scientific epistemology. He says matters of fact are fabricated – fabricated not in the sense of being 'made up', but 'made' through a very artificial setup involving numerous technologies and subject to human interpretation. In order to demonstrate this in terms of representation Latour discusses Jeff Wall's photography depicting Adrian Walker, a scientist, contemplating the anatomical drawing of a mummified human arm in a laboratory.⁶⁵

Image 1: Adrian Walker drawing from a specimen in a laboratory



Source: Visher and Naef, *Jeff Wall Catalogue Raisonné 1978-2004*, 124

This 'scene' renders objectivity sterile and completely unnatural as it highlights the challenge faced by the drawer in attempting a one-to-one representation of

65 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 29; Visher and Naef, "Jeff Wall: Catalogue Raisonné."

the limb in this particular artificial set up, exposing also the pretentiousness of photography's attempt to express, capture or re-present reality.⁶⁶ There is a doubling in the problem of 'exact' translation from the 'thing' itself into a representation of it. The art of drawing and 'objective' photography are shown to be insufficient and problematic means of capturing 'reality'. Latour extends this line of inquiry to scientific inscriptions by posing the question: How is it that we allow the hegemony of scientific claims of objectivity or truth (scientific representations of reality) to govern us?

"It is not simply that phenomena *depend* on certain material instrumentation; rather, the phenomena *are thoroughly constituted* by the material setting of the laboratory. The artificial reality, which participants describe in terms of an objective entity, has in fact been constructed by the use of the inscription devices."⁶⁷

However, this is not to be written off as merely the 'constructed-ness' of scientific facts, but to be understood as what constitutes the reality of science. The new empiricism must recognize and overcome the phenomena by which scientific facts become "common sense".⁶⁸ Once these 'scientific' matters of fact have established their authority and have clear boundaries or gain, in Latourian terms, "essence", they become absorbed by the 'collective' as *indisputable* common sense or black boxes.

"Once the candidacy of the new entities has been recognized, accepted, legitimized, admitted among older propositions, these entities become states of nature, self-evidences, black boxes, habits, paradigms. [...] They are part of the nature of things, of common-sense, of the common world. They are no longer discussed. They serve as indisputable premises to countless reasonings [sic] and arguments that are prolonged elsewhere."⁶⁹

The establishment of 'something' as common sense bestows it with power within the collective. Ironically, however, the capacity to publicly contest or debate this 'matter' becomes stunted (indisputable premises). Latour's scholarship thus attempts to build a new and durable basis for a new common sense.⁷⁰

66 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 29.

67 | Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, 64, original italics.

68 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 96.

69 | Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 104, original emphasis.

70 | Latour is not alone in his aspirations to purge epistemological efforts of common sense. See Bachelard, *The New Scientific Spirit*; Or Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, wherein scientific creativity is actually a break in scientific thinking, which might contradict "common sense". If

This brings us full circle to Latour's ANT method: the composition of a new common sense requires a "displacement of point of view" by shifting the gaze onto humans and non-humans alike.⁷¹ To recall ANT's central tenet very briefly: when we want to understand a network, we must study the actants, and when we want to understand an actant, we must study its associations.⁷² Thus, on the one hand, we must study how the actants themselves create and order their world, and on the other hand, also the (network) connections which offer the potential for interaction. In other words, we must study the process by which an actant becomes visible to us. According to Latour's epistemology then, "Science is not what allows us to study the monads from the outside, as if we were finding the laws of their behavior, but *one* of the ways in which they (the hybrids) spread and make sense of their world-building activity."⁷³ The contribution of the *sciences* becomes more important; *Science* no longer enjoys the hegemony that privileges it over other accounts of the world. Science merely adds itself to the world – as one more way of studying 'world-building activities' or 'reality-making'. This is the threshold of Latour's *second empiricism*.

Latour's Second Empiricism – Populating the 'Scenography'

Latour encourages scientists and scholars to avoid the hitherto simplification of society's differences to a sort of 'primary reality', which is then used to explain other 'realities' or 'societies'. Instead, they should work with the basic premise and goal of the 'irreduction' of 'reality'.⁷⁴ The concept of network surpasses the 'reductions' or restricting dichotomies and hierarchies that the nature-culture bifurcation caused. Latour's new empiricism is interested in understanding how an interaction between actants/hybrids comes to occur in the first place, for which it distances itself from questions of motive and causality.⁷⁵ Latour rejects *explanations* as they reduce events to 'something else' (an explanation), and turns his attention instead to *descriptions*. Latour does not methodologically discuss his rejection of explanations or his subsequent preference for description, but

this were the case then "common sense" represents "inertia" and acts as an epistemological obstacle. 1–15.

71 | Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 137.

72 | Latour, "Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social," 127.

73 | Ibid.

74 | Ibid.

75 | "Causes and effects are only a retrospective way of interpreting events." Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 39; See also Latour, "The Politics of Explanation: An Alternative."

we can locate his stance in his engagement with, and rejection of, the notion of causality and subsequent use of description as method.⁷⁶

"However, we worry that by sticking to description there may be something missing, since we have not 'added to it' something else that is often call an 'explanation'. And yet the opposition between description and explanation is another of these false dichotomies that should be put to rest. [...] Either the networks that make possible a state of affairs are fully deployed – and then adding an explanation will be superfluous – or we 'add an explanation' [...] If a description remains in need of an explanation, it means that it is a bad description."⁷⁷

Latour's failure here to theorize a method for descriptions appears to be an almost intentional gap on his part to avoid that same dogmatism for which he criticizes the Sciences. We must thus ask these questions in our own project – is it truly possible to deliver 'pure' descriptions and completely distance oneself from explanations? How do we ensure that our descriptions are good descriptions?⁷⁸ What Latour does instead is, that he plots out 'specifications' for an alternative "scenography" (second empiricism) that we can take to be the aesthetics of matters of concern.⁷⁹ These highlight the notion of 'entering the labyrinth' that Latour had introduced elsewhere, which visualizes the materialist turn of his empiricism for us, and simultaneously addresses and questions three types of representation – political, scientific and artistic.⁸⁰

To start with, he uses the contrast between matters of fact and matters of concern to describe the gap between the two empiricisms:

"A matter of concern is what happens to a matter of fact when you add to it its whole scenography, much like you would do by shifting your attention from the stage to the whole machinery of a theatre. This is, for instance, what has happened to Dutch landscape painting in Svetlana Alpers' able hands, and

76 | Latour is not alone in his rejection of explanatory sociological models. Niklas Luhmann has linked the dichotomy between explanations and descriptions more lucidly with the notion of causality, showing causality to be not a given ontological 'fact', but a construct of the act of observation – that which is bestowed on the observed by the act of reconstruction of events by the observer. See Gertenbach 264-83.

77 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 137.

78 | Description per se, is itself a very dense and debatable topic in literary studies. See for example Hamon and Baudoin, "Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive"; See also Bal, *Narrative Theory*, especially 341-97.

79 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*

80 | Latour, "On Technical Mediation – Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy," 30.

what has happened to anatomical drawing when restaged by a contemporary artist like Jeff Wall. Instead of simply being there, matters of fact begin to look very different, to render a different sound, they start to move in all directions, they overflow boundaries, they include a complete set of new actors, they reveal the fragile envelopes in which they are housed. Instead of “being there whether you like it or not” they still have to be there, yes (this is one of the huge differences), *they have to be liked*, appreciated, tasted, experimented upon, mounted, prepared, put to the test.

It is the same world, and yet, everything looks different. Matters of fact were indisputable, obstinate, simply there; matters of concern are disputable, and their obstinacy seems to be of an entirely different sort: they move, they carry you away, and, yes, they too *matter*.⁸¹

A ‘new common sense’ involves modifying the scenography by describing ‘what is given in experience’. Latour instructs us “a matter of concern is what happens to a matter of fact when you add the whole scenography to it”.⁸² How this may be done is, however, left methodologically open. The ‘specifications’ for matters of concern allow our own interpretations, and thus make Latour’s presence attractive in a literary analysis. Latour’s apparent abandonment of theoretical foundation here affords him the freedom of what David Alworth has so aptly called Latour’s “discursive heterogeneity”.⁸³ This is marked not only by the intersection of the many disciplines in his scholarship, but also by the literary tropes he uses to explain his theoretical reflections.⁸⁴ For our analysis, we can fill in these gaps in his scholarship with the individual strategies that my authors use to ‘discover’ the city and narrativize their experience. Thus, the strategies used by the authors can provide specific methods for an ANT enterprise. That is, the authorial strategies that we will discuss in our close readings of our corpus can enable us to imagine ANT in ways that are more specific.

81 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 39.

82 | He goes on to add that this is much like much like Svetlana Alpers’ analysis of Dutch landscape painting. By a shift of focus or by varying her object(s) of analysis to various elements other than just the artwork such as context, art manuals, implied dialogue in addressing prevalent technique etc., Alpers has given a new interpretation of Dutch paintings contrary to that upheld by art reception till date; her reading renders them descriptive rather than narrative. Again, Latour restrains from a more thorough engagement with Alpers’ work to elaborate what this “new” approach means or entails. For Alper’s own work, see Alpers, *The Art of Describing*; For a heavy critique of Alpers, see de Jongh, “Review of The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century.”

83 | Alworth, “Latour and Literature,” 4, forthcoming.

84 | Ibid.

The first specification for matters of concern is that they have to *matter*. Moreover, for them to matter, they have to be able to identify and mark clearly for *who* they are of interest, that is, for *whom* they matter. Matters of fact sought to be pure and objective; they were expected to speak for themselves, which resulted in abstract and confusing data. On the contrary, the second empiricism must “distinguish those various and confused layers to make sure that our scenography registers that they [matters of concern] matter for some people who have to be specified, and for whom they are a source of an intense interest and a redirected attention.”⁸⁵ This first specification which Latour articulates for matters of concern already supports an analyst. It will remain as testimony to his activity, our earlier addition to Latour’s methodology – that of highlighting the spokesperson’s agenda. Such an addition requires from the spokesperson a certain amount of self-implication that will serve as testimony to his own role of observation, narration and as scripter of the text. It indirectly demands reflexivity from the spokesperson pertaining to his identity and perspective (the ‘lens’ through which he observes). Earlier on we saw that in Latour’s new empiricism, the validity of the claims (matters of concern) presented by the spokespersons must depend on their ability to present the concerns of the actants by bringing to the fore their inscriptions/voices. Much like in a legal case, our spokesperson must identify at least a selection of the associations these actants enter into and then provide a substantial form of representation that emphasizes the identity of actants (for *whom* he ‘speaks’). Such a form of representation of actants already begins to make way for the other specifications.

For Latour, matters of fact exercise absolute power that allows the facts to speak for themselves “whether you like it or not.”⁸⁶ As a result, the old empiricism ultimately appealed to ‘violence’ in order to enforce closure. Thus, the second specification for matters of concern is that they have to be *liked*. They cannot be indisputable. Latour is acknowledging the importance of diversity with this specification. This specification warns and safeguards against hegemonic matters of fact that could assert themselves through mere ‘strength’.⁸⁷ By comparison, matters of concern should be conducive to discussion until closure can be attained.

Specification three then logically requires that matters of concern have to be *populated*, that is, a matter of concern has to be recognized as a ‘Ding’ and not ‘Gegenstand’. The Ding, Latour explains, designates “both those *who* assemble because they are concerned, as well as *what* causes their concerns and divisions”⁸⁸ Put simply, ‘objects’ become ‘things’ when matters of fact give way to include their

85 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 47.

86 | Ibid.

87 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 118.

88 | Latour, “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik-An Introduction to Making Things Public,” 13.

different associations or complicated entanglements. Matters of concern include all the “different sets of passions, indignations, opinions, as well as a different set of interested parties and different ways of carrying out their *partial resolution*”.⁸⁹ That is, under the modernist’s gaze, ‘Objects’ appeared in a clear light. In the network, we only have partial resolution – a sort of delineation and loss of clarity, which is, however, exactly what the new empiricism must acknowledge.

Specification four requires of matters of concern that they be *durable*, but that this continued existence has to be acquired. The acquisition of durability is a process: “Then physical endurance is the *process of continuously inheriting* a certain identity of character transmitted through a *historical route of events*.⁹⁰ Latour contrasts the durability of matters of concern with the ‘freeze-framing’ that is necessary for matters of fact.⁹¹ He asks us to ponder once more about the anatomical drawing of the human arm, and ask ourselves how it is that the world ‘jumps’ into representation. Freeze-framing does not take into account that the arm rots at some point or what happens after the rotting of that arm.⁹² Durability of matters of concern may thus be understood as the specification that ensures the tracing of temporal aspects/trajectories of the various associations (historical route of events).

CLEARING OBSTACLES, ‘TRANSLATING’ LATOUR FOR LITERARY STUDIES

In this section, we will take a quick look at Latour’s own experiment that demonstrates his ideas. Latour describes translation as the creation of a link that did not exist before and that to some degree modifies the two actors/elements. In this strain, I use the term ‘translate’ in the title of this section to refer to my own activity of pairing Latour’s ANT with literary studies. My description of Latour’s project *Paris: Invisible City* will recall all the main concepts and terms of Latour’s ANT so that, at the end of the chapter, we may consolidate the means of our own analysis. At the end of the project, we may then reflect on how we have ‘translated’ Latour for literary studies.

Latour’s ‘Sociological Opera’ Paris: Ville Invisible?

All of Latour’s dispersed ideas come together in Latour’s *Paris: Invisible City*.⁹³ In this electronically accessible multi-media essay, Latour tries to put into practice

89 | Ibid., 13, my emphasis.

90 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 49 my emphasis.

91 | Latour and Weibel, *ICONOCLASH*, 27.

92 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 34.

93 | Latour, “Paris: Invisible City (The Web Project).”

the various notions he explores in *Reassembling the Social*. He describes this photographic inquiry into the city of Paris as a “sociological opera” that aims to link social theory with a multi-medial experience of the workings of the city:

“The aim of this sociological opera is to wander through the city, in texts and images, exploring some of the reasons why it cannot be captured at a glance. Our photographic exploration takes us first to places usually hidden from passers-by, in which the countless techniques making Parisians’ lives possible are elaborated (water services, police force, ring road: various “oligopticons” from which the city is seen in its entirety). This helps us to grasp the importance of ordinary objects, starting with the street furniture constituting part of inhabitants’ daily environment and enabling them to move about in the city without losing their way. It also makes us attentive to practical problems posed by the coexistence of such large numbers of people on such a small surface area. All these unusual visits may eventually enable us to take a new look at a more theoretical question on the nature of the social link and on the very particular ways in which society remains elusive.”⁹⁴

The project is conceived of as a very specific and consciously selective virtual tour of Paris constructed through various images/impressions. The user can navigate through four different tabs called Traversing, Proportioning, Distributing, and Allowing which explore various departments that govern life in the city such as water supply, roads maintenance, the meteorological department, or a children’s school. All the time, the perspective of the person making the journey is emphasized. The accompanying narrativization instructs the user to be attentive to the difference and distance between the ‘things’ themselves and their ‘inscriptions’ such as a street as it appears on a map as opposed to the street’s physical ‘sign’ (the plaque bearing its name), or its materiality as experienced by physically being there. We zoom in or out of the city along with that perspective. Each of these tabs in turn consists of a specific ‘route’ through the city. Buttons along this route take us from one set of juxtapositions to another. These juxtapositions are accompanied by text, which narrativizes and describes the journey to which the images stand as witness. When the user arrives at a button, an attempt to view the images accompanying the button results in rapid, successive movement. It is not possible to view an image singularly, creating the impression of the simultaneity of the actual experience of journeying the city. In this manner, an impression is given of traversing the city, using different images such as photographs, graphs, maps or icons and manipulating perspective.

The project begins by describing the panorama from the top of the Samaritaine, a department store. The difference between the contemporary panoramic view

94 | Latour and Hermant, “Paris: Invisible City, Electronic Script,” 1.

and a ceramic panorama from the 1930s indicates the necessity of historical trajectories of changes in the city: “The legend no longer matches the pictures. Virtual Paris was detached from real Paris long ago.”⁹⁵ Here the emphasis lies on the impossibility of grasping the city in its entirety, irrespective of the perspective from which one wishes to do so. Latour is also trying to indicate the problems and limitations of a ‘macro-view’ by juxtaposing the insights provided by both, a detailed view by zooming in from the panorama into a small office, only to zoom out again to consider a satellite image of the same scene, and so on. The perspective on zooming out is compared to a macro-view while the zooming in provides a sort of micro-view. This applies not only to the perspective of the spokesperson but also to the perspective of the various ‘oligopticons’ (macro-view) that are required to consider the city in its entirety in order to plan its functioning, that is, to make possible the many million lives (micro-view). The point Latour wishes to make is that much like the evasive cities in Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, any attempt to describe a city is destined to remain partial; neither macro nor micro views can do full justice to the real city.

The activities in the office of the school, of drawing up schedules that encompass all the activities of that school, are compared to the vision of the far-removed, satellite. Both types of literary inscription are limited in their own ways with regard to the type of information they deliver. The former does not consider any deviations from the structured sequence of the schedules it draws up for the school to function while the latter consists of pixels which need to be interpreted to become legible: “The frame has the same dimension, in a sense, as the object it frames. The big is no bigger than the small; the satellite photo of Paris is smaller than Mrs. Baysal’s schedule.”⁹⁶

More importantly, this comparison between bureaucratic inscriptions to geographic data represents a shift of medium, institution, graphic representation and scale, with which Latour thematizes the role of perspective in relation to the medium and methods of observation and documentation. The kind of knowledge produced depends on all these factors (and maybe more). It quickly becomes clear that Latour views the knowledge gained as mere ‘traces’ of the ‘real’ thing. The dilemma he portrays is that while we can collect or follow these traces, these very traces render the ‘real’ thing elusive for they reduce it to ‘something else’ – like the cup of coffee that one drinks at Café de Flore:

“[T]he coffee is reduced to nothingness several times, cascading down from form to form until it becomes a number, gradually eliminating everything not concerning it, discarding its “externalities” one by one, sketching the practical

95 | Ibid., 2.

96 | Ibid., 9.

form of economics as it flashes past – in its accounting version at least. [...] the cup of coffee has been transmuted into a bottom-line.”⁹⁷

Here, the immediate trace of the coffee consumed is the cheque for it, really only a scrap of paper. This is “transmuted” ultimately into a “bottom-line” of the account book of the coffee shop; the traces of that cup of coffee do not in the least resemble the coffee, nor does it resemble the physical currency in which the payment for it was made. Similarly, to stick with Latour’s metaphor, the city (Paris) exists as a tightly folded inventory of such traces. Followers of networks in the city and ‘collectors of traces’ must unfold the urban fabric, but keep in mind the transformation of information: “To measure the hiatus explaining *transformations of information*, we should also avoid two symmetrical mistakes. The first would be to forget the gain and to deduct only the loss; the second, that we’re about to consider, would be to forget the loss.”⁹⁸ This statement can be made to stand in for Latour’s reflexivity because it acknowledges that even ANT is, at best, merely *one* performance of the social being explained; a ‘transformation of information’ occurs, at the latest, in the narrativization or during the textualization of the observations and research data.

Nevertheless, this unified perspective, a collective of things and people, or a turn to objects will enable us, reminds Latour, to discover in our descriptions of networks a performance of the social and thus provide a key to *how* the social is constructed.

“It’s to objects that we must now turn if we want to understand what, day after day, keeps life in the big city together: objects despised under the label “urban setting”, yet whose exquisite urbanity holds the key to our life in common [...] with a multitude of agitated little beings whose combined action gives height, width and depth to the entangled networks described until now as flat as a board.”⁹⁹

The key to a second empiricism is here, according to Latour, not to use ‘the social’ as an explanation for wider phenomena as sociology has hitherto been doing, but rather, to explain the social itself.¹⁰⁰ Latour thus turns pragmatically to objects such as the roads, road signs, plinths, monuments, the emblematic Pont neuf, and then goes beyond these visible ‘objects’/signs/traces to the people and institutions, the various ‘oligopticons’, responsible for making the ‘big city’ function as it does. It is in this that Latour sees a sort of flattening of Paris that exposes all the

97 | Ibid., 19.

98 | Ibid., 26, my emphasis.

99 | Ibid., 63.

100 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 96–7.

spaces in between – the plasma, as he calls it, of unknown spaces that completely elude surveillance.¹⁰¹ In comparison to the seemingly “congested, saturated and asphyxiated” Paris, Latour’s city consists of breathable, *unknowable* spaces:

“The illusion of the zoom, in geography and sociology alike, has the drawback of making life in the city completely suffocating. There are no more loci, since everything is filled by the apparently smooth transition from the whole to the parts and from the parts to the whole, as if there were not a single gap, not a single breathing space. The filling up has been done. We are suffocating. For politics to be reborn, for Paris to be breathable again, the city has to remain invisible, in the sense of neither the parts nor the different wholes into which they fit, being determined in advance.”¹⁰²

The “illusion of the zoom” refers to the reductive transitions between macro and micro-perspectives with no allowance for “breathing space” as Latour calls it, or the elements that go un-observed – the gaps in the knowledge of these disciplines. The non-normative (non-modern) anthropologist’s task is thus to be unbiased in his approach to the city, to *open up space* even if it means to acknowledge that so much eludes our ‘vision’, that most of the city must ultimately remain unknown:

“[T]o highlight the role of the countless intermediaries who participate in the coexistence of millions of Parisians. In the series of *transformations* that we followed with myopic obsession, we would like to have kept each step, each notch, each stage, so that the final result could never abolish, absorb or replace the series of humble *mediators* that alone give it its meaning and scope. Economics, sociology, water, electricity, telephony, voters, geography, the climate, sewers, rumors, metros, police surveillance, standards, sums and summaries: all these circulate in Paris, through the narrow corridors that can never be used as frames nor infrastructures nor contexts for others.”¹⁰³

Mediation here is thus the linkage between two actors in the network that modifies these two actors in a way so as to leave a trace of their transformations.¹⁰⁴ Under the influence of agency, actors become actants. Agency is thus first aligned with

101 | Ibid., 103. See also Plan 53 of same.

102 | Latour, “Paris, Invisible City: The Plasma.”

103 | Latour and Hermant, “Paris: Invisible City, Electronic Script,” 101, my emphasis.

104 | Latour, “On Technical Mediation – Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy,” 30–41. Using the semiotic field of the term mediation, Latour differentiates the concept further using its four meanings in ANT: translation, composition, reversible blackboxing, and delegation. As and when it is relevant, we will come back to these during our close readings.

effectivity, which is an abstract 'capacity' for action.¹⁰⁵ Its figuration, on the other hand, is the empirical manifestation of agency/effectivity. In Latour's explanatory anecdote, the phrase 'culture forbids having kids out of wedlock' is such an abstraction, while the phrase 'my future mother-in-law wants me to marry her daughter' becomes the concrete manifestation. The former is anonymous and abstract, the latter gives "a form, a cloth, a flesh to an agency forbidding me or forcing me to do things".¹⁰⁶ The uncertainty or anonymity of agency is endowed with a shape and established firmly through its figuration, which, however, may be manifold:

"Imperialism strives for unilateralism'; 'The United States wishes to withdraw from the UN'; 'Bush Junior wishes to withdraw from the UN'; 'many officers from the Army and two dozen neo-con leaders want to withdraw from the UN.' That the first is a structural trait, the second a corporate body, the third an individual, the fourth a loose aggregate of individuals makes a big difference of course to the account, but they all provide different figurations of the same actions."¹⁰⁷

This is the thread that we must pick to carry us over into our own analysis. The things that make us act or the ways in which the social is configured becomes visible in this notion of agency and figuration. ANT scholars must therefore attempt to identify and describe all the different figurations of the agencies it identifies/follows/observes in the network in order to describe the matters of concern so important to Latour's second empiricism.¹⁰⁸

Coming to Terms with Latour

"Think about it: the call of birds in the sky, the sough of leaves, the babble of waters, the hubbub of human habitations – so many thousands of sounds, big and small, rising without end; so many waves and tremors, comings and goings, yet only a small fraction of all this impinges on one's consciousness. This is chiefly because one's mind, like a fisherman, casts a net of integration and accepts only what it can gather at a single haul: everything else eludes it. When it sees, it does not properly hear; when it hears, it does not properly see; and when it thinks, it neither sees nor hears properly. It has the power to move all irrelevancies far away from the path of its set purpose."¹⁰⁹

105 | See also Alworth, "Latour and Literature," forthcoming.

106 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 53–4.

107 | *Ibid.*, 54.

108 | *Ibid.*, 53–5.

109 | Chaudhuri, *Clearing a Space*, 26.

Latour would himself probably refute Amit Chaudhari's formulations of the selectivity of the spokesperson on grounds that it assumes that 'great divide' between our minds and the outside world.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, Chaudhari's words sum up, more poetically than my own, the gist of my critique of Latour's alternate empiricism. Latour's methodological neglect of (i) the selectivity of the spokesperson's choices and (ii) the spokesperson's limitations when faced with the complexity of the scenography he/she is to describe, represent a serious neglect on his behalf of power asymmetries, political disaccords, opposing voices and similar conflicts. This is especially noteworthy since his project aims to increase the reach of democracy by including as many actants and voices as possible. It is not so much that Latour is unwilling to show sensitivity to questions of interests and politics.¹¹¹ Rather, he has simply not been consistent in applying this awareness. We can tentatively extend Latour's network by our own additions as I have been suggesting in this chapter. We can address questions of interests and politics in our own analysis by adding to it the *situatedness* of the non-modern analyst or anthropologist. To take it a step further, we must follow the non-modern analyst to see how his position and the description it produces is in dialogue or conflict with other interests and politics in a given moment in time. In the readings of my own corpus, it is precisely these aspects that will be emphasized and illustrated.

Latour raises various important issues in his rejection of scientific hegemony and its pretense of 'reducing' the world to smaller, simpler, 'something else' – a graph, image, picture or report. Through a critical engagement, certain limitations of his approach were indicated and tentative additions attempted to enable a more nuanced application of his theory. In order to put his ideas and our additions to task in our study, let us first apply Latour's own terminology to describe some of the basic methodological steps of his project *Paris: City Invisible*. Latour has repeatedly emphasized "a matter of concern is what happens to a matter of fact when you add to it its whole scenography, much like you would do by shifting your attention from the stage to the whole machinery of a theatre."¹¹² In Latour's 'speak', modernity's narrow scenography of matters of fact created black boxes while Latour's nonmodern scenography of matters of

110 | Latour, "Visualization and Cognition: Drawing Things Together," 30.

111 | Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 311: "In its linguistic and material connotations, [translation] refers to all the displacements through other actors whose mediation is indispensable for any action to occur. [C]hains of translation refer to the work through which actors modify, displace, and translate their various and contradictory interests."

112 | Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 110.

concern opens up black boxes (reversible black boxing).¹¹³ The scenography that Latour focuses on in *Paris: City Invisible* is primarily the material/physical city of Paris, which then leads him to the “countless intermediaries who participate in the coexistence of millions of Parisians”.¹¹⁴ As Latour emphasizes, his new empiricism acknowledges its own limitation by comparing its activity to that of ‘casting a net’. While Latour’s ANT focuses on different physical sites in the city, it simultaneously points to the empty, in-between spaces not captured by the net (plasma), thus indicating the incompleteness of any attempt to describe the city. Nevertheless, the scenography of Latour’s new empiricism becomes gradually populated, by the various actor-networks/figurations that Latour observes and describes. By re-describing the city as an actor-network, Latour tries to demonstrate how we may overcome thinking in terms of the modern dichotomy of subject-object, as the network is at once the ‘associations’ between various actors as well as the empirical locus of their linkage. Humans and non-humans are both capable of ‘agency’ or the power to link with and change or affect another ‘actant’ (mediation/translation).¹¹⁵

Latour’s concepts of scenography and matters of concern provide, in particular, a good point of departure from this chapter, and with that a transition from Latour to our own analysis. They are a guideline and constraint on a study that threatens to dissipate in favor of too much attention to detail. In each of the ensuing chapters, the analysis of my corpus will thus be broken up into a first part that analyses different representational strategies the authors use to re-describe and thus populate their specific scenography. Their strategies may be taken to collectively form a tangible ANT-like method for future scholarship. In the second part, our discussion of strategies of literary documentary will open up means to thematize the situatedness of the author and analyze the discursive effects of these representational strategies. In the third part, we may then evaluate whether these narratives succeed as matters of concern. That is, we may then discuss whether or how each author’s documentary and representational method succeeds as an ANT-like method.

113 | Ibid., 38 “The harsh world of matters of fact is an amazingly narrow, specialized type of scenography using a highly coded type of narrative, gazing, lighting, distance, a very precise repertoire of attitude and attention [...]”.

114 | Latour and Hermant, “Paris: Invisible City, Electronic Script,” 101.

115 | Latour, “On Technical Mediation – Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy,” 32.

III. The Poetics and Politics of Rambling in Iain Sinclair's *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire*

Sinclair's scenography is the microcosm of a London borough called Hackney. The title of his book is a combination of the grandeur intended by the borough's Town Hall and the rose red color and name of the music hall, the Hackney Empire. The former represents (for Sinclair) the city council's undesired interference in Hackney's future, while the latter stands in for Hackney's cultural heritage.¹ *That Rose-Red Empire* is born out of the conflict between the city's authorities and a certain milieu of the borough over the gentrification of the borough in preparation for the Olympic games of 2012. To put it in ANT terms, if we will handle this conflict as an actant or agency, Sinclair's book presents us some of this agency's figurations. Specifically, we encounter an intricate semiotic interplay of the material and the metaphoric, which strives to evoke the memory of the Hackney community that is being lost through the loss of the space it occupies. The thrust of the narrative is thus to counter the mainstream discourse that advocates the gentrification of the borough. To read *That Rose-Red Empire* as an ANT-like enterprise, we must 'travel' through the borough through Sinclair's own stories of forty years of life in Hackney. We traverse Sinclair's Hackney also through the stories and memories of the people he interviews, who relate to and share the on-going and future 'loss' of the borough as they cherish it. The book is structured like a series of diary entries and consists of the author's views, his nostalgic recollections about his past in Hackney, but also of interview transcripts of the people reminiscing about their time in Hackney. In keeping with the psycho-geographic tradition, Sinclair also maps the borough by his walks of it, visiting and documenting different streets and landmarks that he

1 | The Hackney Empire becomes an emblem for the cultural heritage of Hackney in Sinclair's book not only as a stage – an actual physical location, but also as a metaphor. These aspects will be discussed in more detail later.

fears will disappear in the wave of regeneration brought about by the Games.² The prose is thus liberally interspersed with his sardonic raving and ranting about the 'regeneration' of Hackney.

That Rose-Red Empire is thus a very dense and yet fragmented book, much like a picture collage of different elements from different repertoires.³ There is, however, a strong sense of materiality in Sinclair's mapping. As he so elegantly put it at his book launch: "Here, for me, is a *museum of words* reintroduced into the world, language-sounds becoming objects and images. So it folds and unfolds, the slippery narrative of memory and myth."⁴ The oxymoron (see emphasis) indicates Sinclair's unifying perspective. It is emphasized by the 'slippery' interplay of materiality and the non-material throughout the book as he weaves together characteristic descriptions of physical places in Hackney and their various associations, his own memories, photographs and diaries, testimonies of denizens reminiscing about Hackney and so on. The non-material (testimonies, memories) invokes the material such as pubs, streets, personages or celebrities, or cultural artifacts linked with Hackney, and these recall, conversely, the myths or heritage of Hackney.

Sinclair uncovers interesting trivia such as traces of famous people who visited or passed through Hackney (a highlight of these seems to be the former RAF member, Astrid Proll), or artists who have incorporated this disputed terrain in their work such as Godard with his filming of a naked lady walking down steps in a house in Hackney, accompanied by a voiceover by Sheila Rowbotham, or a unique and not yet aired footage by Orson Welles shot in Hackney. Visuality of this narrative collage is maintained by a change of script to indicate change of 'voice'. These textual fragments are the transcribed testimonies or oral histories of people for who Hackney was or still is a home and of people who are in some way connected to Hackney. Etched maps and hand-sketched drawings by Oona Grimes accompany chapter headings. These chapter headings coincide with different parts of the borough, which can be traced on the map provided as a book cover. The dust jacket of the hard cover edition is a foldable handmade map designed by Nathan Burton and produced by Handmade Maps Ltd., a commercial artwork studio specializing in illustrated and 'handmade' maps. The

2 | Sinclair counts as one of London's prominent psycho-geographers, but he differentiates his own practice as "psychotic-geography" in order to emphasize the permanent effects of events on a place. It is this quality of the city that he would like to discover and document. See Baker, *Iain Sinclair*, Introduction; See also Martin, *Iain Sinclair*.

3 | Peter Ackroyd has, in a similar vein, referred to Sinclair as being a master of the literary collage. See "Reviews for Hackney, *That Rose-Red Empire*". My comparison to a picture collage, however, renders the book visual, an issue that will be elaborated later in this section.

4 | Arnaud, "Rose-Red Empire – Iain Sinclair Book Launch and Exhibition," my emphasis.

artwork lends the book a hint of nostalgia, but more importantly, it indicates the author's determination to create a cultural artifact.⁵

Sinclair's ANT-like method is plotted as a detective story, albeit in the broadest sense of the genre. The subtitle *A Confidential Report* alludes to Orson Welles' detective movie *Mr Arkadin*, which first appeared in Britain as *A Confidential Report*.⁶ Hackney's past being in light of its future as yet unwritten, this detective story is an investigative report on the borough that will 'populate' Hackney with its past:

"I knew where the body of our poor borough was lying and who had killed it, but I didn't know why. The previous history of the corpse was blank [...] Hackney had no beginning, no end, its boundaries were strategic; they expanded or contracted in accordance with the political whims of the moment."⁷

This Sinclair is quick to recognize as opportunity – to make the "political whim of the moment" his own – a chance to delve deep into the borough's history and his own personal 'archives' to fill in this emptiness, to darken the lines of his own Hackney 'map'. Just as Mr Arkadin, the tycoon in the film, wants his past investigated, Sinclair can now investigate the borough where he has lived the past forty years. Like the detective in the movie, Sinclair must follow the networks of Hackney and trace the various associations to 'uncover a shape', to ultimately 'erect' a specific heritage for Hackney.⁸ Sinclair situates his narrative in the real world, in the 'now', establishing its empirical anchorage first through an explicit statement. As this passage draws to a close, we are introduced to his first interviewee,

Sidney Kirsch, "Alive in Victoria Park, in all worlds, at this time. Our time, today: 12 January 2006."⁹

The first part of this chapter discusses the rhetoric of the author's prose and articulates its agenda, perhaps more clearly that the author has done himself.

5 | We will return to a more detailed discussion of the book cover later in this chapter.

6 | Hoberman, "Welles Amazed."

7 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 32.

8 | In his seminal study of literary memory in narratives from the "black Atlantic", Lars Eckstein has shown how the idea of accumulating and generating cultural meaning is part of the functional aspect of dialogism (the intersection between literature and memory), aside from the ontological and descriptive aspects. He insists that for a crucial understanding of a politics of literature alongside that of aesthetic and poetic strategies used, we must analyze intertextuality as much as the material conditions and perspectives. My analysis follows a similar modus operandi. See Eckstein, *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic*, 3–59.

9 | That is, first in the order of appearance in the book. There are no explicit pointers to the chronology in which these interviews have been carried out. Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 33.

The challenges faced by a reader of Sinclair's prose are anticipated as reflecting difficulties faced by the author himself in his writing, both of which will be investigated briefly and tied up with urban issues and documentary aspects. We will also discuss the narrative and documentary strategies Sinclair uses, and whether or how they may be used to conceive of a more tangible ANT method. In the second part, we may thus be able to trace and describe the various figurations and associations we encounter by following Sinclair. Finally, in the third part, we can assess whether and how such a representation of Hackney is able to articulate matters of concern. My analysis strives in its entirety to achieve a portrait of its own – of the intricate topography of the London borough, that Sinclair's book offers us, or perhaps, after all, of the elaborate and exaggerated re-enactment of the author and his 'kin', a desperate last attempt at self-realization before being declared superfluous.

STRATEGIES OF LITERARY DOCUMENTARY: THE 'ART OF DESCRIBING'¹⁰

Sinclair's prose has been described in reviews as being "thrillingly alienating" or "vertiginous and polychromatic" – this is a tongue-in-cheek warning for a reader unacquainted with Sinclair's style, that it may take some getting used to.¹¹ A description of Hackney's landscape begins as follows:

"Lines of trees outrank us, their bulk is astonishing. Skins encrusted with witness: patches of green over grey, over fleshy orange. Scars, carcinogenic lumps. Hawser roots suck at dirt [...] Aisles of Neo-Romantic branches. A blood meadow: London Fields. Public ground for the fattening of herds and flocks, Norfolk geese, before they are driven, by very particular routes, to Smithfield slaughter. Chartered markets service drovers, incomers. They exist to peddle, plunder, and to fleece the unwary."¹²

Grammatically, Sinclair's sentences often function without recourse to verbs.¹³ His descriptions, especially of the landscape of the borough, are reproduced in the manner of a moving camera. It is as if Sinclair is walking and simultaneously

10 | To borrow from Latour: "[the] Art of Re-describing matters of fact to stop the 'fraudulent export' and uptake 'what is given in experience'". See Latour, *What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, 46.

11 | "Reviews for Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire". See specifically the reviews by Sandhu and Ackroyd.

12 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 7.

13 | See also Gallien, "The Politics of the Line in Bruce Chatwin's and Iain Sinclair's Travel Narratives."

showing us this scenography, filtered, however, through his perception of it. His reproduction of what he 'sees' and how he sees it is rooted in the present, the now. We have a rather straightforward, non-dialogic narration of "Lines of well rooted trees", which at the same time becomes a flashback, drawing the 'gaze' of the reader from the present backwards into the past: "A blood meadow: London Fields. Public ground for the fattening of herds and flocks, Norfolk geese, before they are driven, by very particular routes, to Smithfield slaughter." This thematized narration emphasizes the various associations of the lines of well rooted trees, personified as long standing witnesses (well rooted and scarred) to the park's history as a grazing ground for livestock before it passed through to the markets. The short and choppy sentences, together with this narrative denseness renders the prose "vertiginous", as Ackroyd puts it, and perplexing for the reader. This style can be attributed to Sinclair's artistic vanity to stand apart as the author himself implies. Writing about a film collection he has been asked to curate as part of a commemoration of his 70th birthday, he says,

"Now this, not another strategic menu compiled for film buffs, but a year-long curation on boats, in shop windows, parks and palaces. In effect: an anti-list. I wanted to avoid any notion of balanced judgment: most significant, loudest, longest, dullest, funniest, or most delightfully awful. My choices were, to a degree, influenced by on-going conversations with the film-essayist and novelist Chris Petit. We had been playing with the idea of an anti-pantheon, a difficult thing to define. These were films that struck us as having energy, attack, context – but which stood outside the usual registers of excellence, either as achieved works of art or as smartly delivered industrial product."¹⁴

What holds true for Sinclair's curating of the movies collection, also holds for his Hackney portrait: an eclecticism in his selection and handling of content and context, his thrust to create an "anti-pantheon, a difficult thing to define".¹⁵

On the other hand, it is precisely this strong sense of character in which his prose is steeped that lends Sinclair's work its incisiveness with regards to his political agenda (a harsh critique of the Olympic Plan while he documents and holds on to as much as possible of 'his' Hackney, fervently.) It is a sort of no-nonsense attitude that strides to get to the point, albeit with a couple of inevitable detours. Describing a pub in Hackney, which he anticipates may soon be lost, Sinclair describes the associations that the picture evokes and sets the tone of his Hackney magnum opus:

14 | Sinclair, "An autobiographical journey in film".

15 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 16.

"Havelock, the unbending officer of empire, revenger of Afghan outrages, blacks up to confront Hackney's shanty-town sprawl. Bowels excavated, he is white as a worm. Erased from history. A man forgotten. And a pub that is about to become a minor property speculation: aspirational flats with slender, bicycle-decorated balconies and an ecologically approved deficiency in parking space."¹⁶

The biting irony of the description of the seemingly "unbending" and intimidating historical Havelock (who is white as a worm as a result of a bad stomach and lives on as a pub in London's 'unwanted borough') continues into Sinclair's speculation of the scene that will replace the site of the pub. In merely a sentence, Sinclair anticipates a very precise picture. Namely, a fashionably rebranded and marketed sense of eco-living, which will, in a final step, wipe away all traces of the 'great Havelock', the man as well as the pub, named after him. The fact that the cause will be a 'minor property speculation' highlights the overwhelming injustice of urban regeneration that will push out, most probably even wipe out, what makes up (Sinclair's) Hackney. This 'speculation' by Sinclair deems property developers and allied politicians the 'common enemy'. Here, Sinclair is indicating that this is a debate, and establishing his own position within this debate, thus fulfilling Latour's specifications for matters of concern – that they must be debatable and that it must be indicated for *whom* they matter.

An Artistic Intervention: The Rhetoric of Rambling

The opening passage of the book challenges the reader to get past Sinclair's style of prose:

"We are the rubbish, outmoded and unrequired. Dumped on wet pavings and left there for weeks, in the expectation of becoming art objects, a baleful warning. Nobody pays me to do this. It is my own choice, to identify with the detritus in a place that has declared war on unconvincing recyclers while erecting expensive memorials to the absence of memory. This is a borough that has dedicated itself to obliterating the meaning of shame."¹⁷

There is no reader address or formal introduction of the author as the narrator or information provided as to who is being referred to or who is being addressed. The strategy is intricately woven into the text. The brusque tone and the emotions in the prose is our key to the author's alliance. The prose is interlaced with anger and sarcasm, obscuring in the first sentences the source and object

16 | Ibid., 9.

17 | Ibid., 7.

of the emotion. Then, the narrator aligns himself metonymically with the “rubbish” that is being ignored – the “unconvinced recyclers” who refuse the ‘recycling’ being propagated. The articulation of the conflict as a war, between those who do not buy into the propaganda and those who are trying to ‘recycle’ or regenerate Hackney (the developers trying to gentrify Hackney), intensifies this polarization, as it does not seek reconciliation. It also indicates, again, for *whom* his matters of concern matter. On the other hand, it is also opening up the black box of environmentalist propaganda. Sinclair’s ironic exaggeration in the following quote is an expression of his exasperation at the deceit and falsity of the propaganda.

“Eco defaulters, those who refuse to compost, are the latest criminals. If you don’t separate your tea bags from your plastic mineral-water bottles, you’ll be prosecuted, fined, evicted. Early morning streets are dressed with every shade of bucket and bin, stacked with nearly new white goods, vacuum cleaners, CDs in cellophane, computers, lavatory bowls that nobody wants. This is not property, this is antimatter of a virtual world subject to hourly revision. The flotsam and tidewrack of cyberspace.”¹⁸

The anti-consumerist backlash reveals but one figuration of the presence of the Olympic games in London – it debunks what Sinclair holds to be the myth of modern day recycling.¹⁹ Hackney is its people, and if the place loses its people, there will be no memory left. In a place where there is no memory, there can be no shame. The real stifling irony and tragedy of the Olympic games then is that for the people of Hackney, the stadium becomes a sort of cenotaph, signifying and enhancing the absence of memory of the place being ‘cleaned up’ for the Olympic games.

There is, admittedly, some difficulty in decoding Sinclair’s wordiness, which may be analyzed under two separate registers and attributed to two different

18 | Ibid., 17.

19 | Another author who has emphasized and perhaps even politicized the role of “rubbish” is Michael Thompson in *Rubbish Theory*, albeit in a different discipline than Sinclair. Thompson discusses the creation and transformation of the “value” of goods, of which “rubbish” is a stage in the “social life” of an object. What resonates from considering the “value” of a good or object as a result of ways of seeing rather than being an inherent quality is the fluid and dynamic notion of practice in the process of “value creation”. See also Parsons, “Thompson’s Rubbish Theory”. The continuity of this deconstruction of notions of value can be traced in Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*. These works reinforce my own Latourian reading of Sinclair’s mission of opening up “black boxes” (the proclamation of something as “rubbish” by the Hackney Council) to “follow the network” away from the readily accessible and visible “rubbish”, to the more “invisible” aspects related to it. .

reasons. One is Sinclair's own artistic intention of being eclectic – to provide access to this part of London through sometimes basic cognitive operations, describing an overwhelmingly enormous array of everyday objects and life-as-lived through memory or observation, instead of choosing or deciding for the reader what is important or relevant. It is an active refusal to attribute importance to one particular thing, person or event. This is, of course, an authorial narrative strategy that pretends not to be selective in what it represents and reads as rambling. Heavily tainted as we have seen with emotion and laden with metaphor, Sinclair's rambling gives birth to a paradox – its quasi non-selectivity should ideally point to its objectivity. Yet, it is the subjectivity of Sinclair's perceiving glance that is emphasized and drawn into focus, and the rambling rendered subjective. Seen as a mimesis of process, it works at disorienting readers in order to undo automatisms of 'seeing' Hackney. The process mimesis is didactic in that it forces readers out of their habitual practices of reading or 'seeing' and challenges them to keep up with Sinclair's urban drift.

"Forty years and I have learnt nothing, nothing useful, about the people, factories, politics and personalities of Hackney. The name has declined to a brand identity. A chart-topper: worst services, best crime, dump of dumps. A map that is a boast on a public signboard, a borough outline like a parody of England. My ignorance of the area in which I have made my life, watched my children grow up, is shameful. I've walked over much of it, on a daily basis, taken thousands of photographs, kept an 8 mm film diary for seven years: what does it amount to? Strategies of avoiding engagement, elective amnesia, dream paths that keep me submerged in the dream."²⁰

Sinclair admits to being shaken out of the dream of his life in Hackney by the Olympic Park project but also by this opportunity given to document the borough. This is a rhetorical strategy and Sinclair's reflections convey a sense of chronicler's pride. He has *forty years* worth of documentation on Hackney that, however, is still not enough – not enough for the author and not enough to save the borough. The author's wake-up call is the reader's caveat. It conveys the urgency to take stock once more of what is important, a romantic adherence to a place before it disappears completely, lost to development plans. If you see in Hackney simply the "brand identity" to which it has been reduced, then this is Sinclair challenging us to 'see' otherwise. He wants to break with this kind of reductive 'seeing' to expose all the minuscule details and processes of life in Hackney, or as Latour says, the "innumerable series of humble *mediators* that alone give it its meaning and scope".²¹ The result of this ANT is, however, a sort

20 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 31.

21 | Latour and Hermant, "Paris: Invisible City, Electronic Script," 101.

of seemingly disjunctive rambling. There is no clear chronological progress or similar conventional structuring device for the narrative. Much later on in the book, speaking of the artist, Ian Breakwell, Sinclair tells us "His genius lay in a trick I never mastered, knowing what to leave out."²² True to his self-professed inability to edit, Sinclair's prose is highly elliptical, making it, as the earlier mentioned review says, "thrillingly alienating"; it is as if Sinclair were conversing with a close friend, using intimate jargon and cross references to other people in common, to books, movies and places (familiar to him and his imaginary 'friend'), all without any explanations.

What evolves nonetheless is a tension between his agenda of exposing the ominous politics surrounding the Olympic games and his eclectic style that resists constraint and would like to 'show' the reader the complexities and sundries of 'real life' in the borough. There is a forward thrust to his urban drift – an urban sense of being singular and yet, through intimate associations in Hackney, a part of a bigger whole. The attrition of structure in the narrative should remind readers of the subjectivity and hence fragmentary nature of our perception of real life. At the same time, Sinclair's rambling aspires to be as informative about the borough as possible, and about its artistic milieu as a way of endorsement for them. Furthermore, as we will see in the following sections, despite the peculiar and arduous means of decoding and procuring the knowledge through Sinclair's prose, we have valuable insights into the past and present of the borough. In its entirety, Sinclair's technique is admittedly one that allows the author to be true to himself as an artist as well as his role as the borough's chronicler. The question as to why Sinclair should maintain his elusive prose style is thus related to the author's pull in two different directions – to be true to himself as an artist or author, and at the same time, to 'perform' as a chronicler for the borough.

Another aspect reflected in a reader's struggle with Sinclair's prose is tied up with the challenge of documenting urban space in general, one which Sinclair himself has to grapple with as chronicler and author. The quote above also poses questions pertaining to feasibility and technique. How does one grasp space which is living and changing continuously? Are these photographic or filmic methods efficient or sufficient? Moreover, what is it worth then, when one does try? I have already begun to describe various authorial strategies we encounter in the book. In the following section, we will continue this description of Sinclair's documentary strategies. We will describe different narrative, empirical and self-reflexive aspects or strategies in the text. These undoubtedly overlap, and can therefore also be thought of as strands only artificially disentangled for the analysis. For the sake of structuring my own study, in the following section, I will first take a look at the persons appearing in the book. Through this step, I hope to show how Sinclair capitalizes on all the associations and entanglements

22 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 462.

they represent to build a cultural heritage for Hackney. This is then followed by a description of the book's material focus, and Sinclair's self-critical moments in his endeavor. Our discussion will always take into consideration the specific social and historic conditions surrounding the author and thus describe how certain social or historic events (that is, the context) enter the text. These aspects that will be discussed are the representational and documentary means of the author, and may be considered as additions towards a more concrete ANT methodology.

Populating the 'Scenography'

Francis Yates' history of the organization of memory reveals a long and continuing tradition of a means of arriving at knowledge or a comprehension of the world, by combining significant memories of reality with signs, symbols and images (of reality).²³ These two tools, *memories* of reality and *signs, symbols and images* of reality, point us to Sinclair's own use of mnemonic strategies (signs, symbols and images of reality), of which his montage of testimonies (memories of reality) is the most obvious. In order to carry out a systematic reading of Sinclair's 'rambling', let us see if we can first systematize Sinclair's recourse to mnemonic resources in his narrative.²⁴ In his analysis of narratives from the 'Black Atlantic', Lars Eckstein distinguishes between two categories of narratives based on their specific use of mnemonic strategies, the choice of either of which he sees to be performative on the part of the author.²⁵ *Testimonies* are texts which point to a recourse to *mental* resources and lay claim to reconstruct an event by means of *immediate experience* while a text performs as *Palimpsest* or "second-degree

23 | Francis Yates, in his book on "The Art of Memory", expresses beautifully, the notion of the human memory as a source of knowledge of the world: "The Leibnizian monads, when they are human souls having memory, have as their chief function the representation or reflection of the universe of which they are living mirrors". Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 388.

24 | For this, Paul Ricoeur would appear to be the most logical starting point as he insists on the discursiveness of memory and employs the category "testimonies" to capture the nexus between memory (texts) and history (real life events). See Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. However, since we encounter a number of mnemonic strategies, for a more general conceptualization, I refer to Lars Eckstein's analysis of narratives from the "Black Atlantic"; See Eckstein, *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic*.

25 | In his analysis of narratives from the "Black Atlantic", Lars Eckstein posits that "there is a fundamental connection between memory as *ars* – in the sense of a text's perceivable structure of dialogic reference – and memory as *vis* – in the sense of its identity-giving potential, directed at a specific historical reality." See Eckstein, *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic*. These two notions of how memory enters and functions in the realm of narration gives us the means to follow through with our own analysis, of other mnemonic strategies in *That Rose-Red Empire*.

narrative" when it draws on other sources. Even though Eckstein uses images and music in his own analysis, the nature of these 'other sources' is essentially left open.²⁶ In reading Sinclair's narrative, one could argue in favor of a range of 'other sources' such as works by other authors, photographs, etchings, movies, movie footage, newspaper cuttings, pub-signs, shop names, graves, and so on, some of which will be discussed in the current analysis. We will see in the current section that *That Red Rose Empire* cannot be strictly divided into one or the other type of text but rather, that the author makes use of both styles. Eckstein's observation of his own corpus may prove instructive in anticipating their usage:

"The difference between testimonies and palimpsests is neither ontological nor epistemological, but is essentially performative in nature. What comes in guise of a testimony and what in the guise of a palimpsest will therefore largely depend on the choice of certain rhetorical strategies of representation, strategies which, in turn, owe much to the specific historical conditions and social processes of memory and forgetting surrounding an author."²⁷

The strategy of representation is itself performative as it bears witness to a narrative construction. Both, the associations invoked by testimonies and the intertextuality implied by the author's use of mnemonic sources to describe various historical occurrences, places or people, point to a discursive manipulation.²⁸ We will therefore see how Sinclair draws on the power of both in order to articulate and describe Hackney's networks of people, events and places.

The 'Scavengers'

Human dramas that informed the room in which we were sitting,
with the clutter of photo-graphs and trophies.²⁹

When we shift our own gaze to the machinery of Sinclair's theatre, the first thing we notice is the numerous "human dramas" to which readers become witness. They are a sign of his unwavering focus on people, but also on the "clutter of photographs and trophies" – their material associations and entanglements. Sinclair's most visible empirical strategy to enrich the scenography of Hackney is to literally 'populate' it. He fills the space with persons alive and dead, including

26 | Ibid., 12.

27 | Ibid.

28 | Thus, the "factuality" of the narrative is not deciding but rather, what is chosen to be shown and how it is shown or represented. See *ibid.*, 18–25.

29 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 37.

testimonies of those he interviews, and his research on the ones who are no more but have left their traces in Hackney.

"We shift with the geography; [...] At the start of it, this journey into a borough too large and strange to define, we were blank pages. Nothing in ourselves, but politicized by the connection with Ridley Road, sonar-echoes of Mosley, counter-currents of necessary opposition [...] History infects us."³⁰

A strange sort of geographical-social-historical association is being traced here, linking place, people and a historical event – the beating of fascist leader Oswald Mosley and other members of his anti-Semitic Blackshirt group.³¹ On the one hand, we have an abstract representation – that of "counter currents of necessary opposition" to Mosley. On the other hand, as "sonar echoes" they are linked with the physical location of the event, Ridley Road (in Hackney).

Thus, the histories and memories of a *distinct* assortment of people feed into Sinclair's 'politics of place construction'.³² These "counter currents of necessary opposition" have been united once more to speak up against the manipulation of the image of Hackney by capitalist development by recalling and retelling their experience of the borough. In an interview, Sinclair tells us:

"This (his project of a book on Hackney) would involve talking to 30-40 people, and recording them at length, weaving these recordings into some sort of random topography. To get a pattern of how exile worked, of why people came here, why they left – and to make a record of the *significant cultural figures* that moved through the borough."³³

Sinclair's portray of Hackney is a paradoxical composition of specificity and randomness; the testimonies of a specific round up of "significant cultural figures" and eccentric non-conformists play into his "random topography": "I was too fond of flaws, eccentricities. Characters who subverted any role assigned to them. Fictional projections who grew real flesh."³⁴ These are not anonymous, elusive entities as Sinclair so often suggests is the case when dealing with

30 | Ibid., 295.

31 | "Violence Flares at Mosley Rally."

32 | Hayden, *The Power of Place*.

33 | "At Home with Iain Sinclair", my emphasis; Sinclair has often invited criticism for not "truly" representing the people of Hackney for the book makes no mention of its various, resident ethnic groups. With the above statement, however, Sinclair explicitly indicates what we should expect Fox, "Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire by Iain Sinclair – Review."

34 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 32.

contemporary corporate giants. In Sinclair's portrayal, we have instead "real flesh" – the scavengers:

"Scavengers have abandoned the skips of our neat inner-city villages, the steady gaze of the energy police, for the *deregulated* wastelands of the emerging Olympic Park. They're all out there with bicycles, handcarts, vans, with pliers, bolt cutters and knives, asset-stripping ruins, peeling electricity cables, getting the price of a drink together. So that they can settle on a companionable bench, with a view of water, to smoke and chug in ruminative silence. Absorbed in the landscape they occupy, pilgrims and sadhus of the immediate. The ordinary. The last self-funding, self-motivating human machines in the borough. Lost ones on their first days to heaven."³⁵

Even as the passage creates imageries of the "neat inner-city villages" and "deregulated wastelands" somewhere 'out there'; it exposes on the one hand, that the 'waste' that people think is being recycled, is merely being pushed out from the inner-city to the wastelands of the Olympic Park. An ideological charge accompanies this narrative representation of space as it denounces modern patterns of consumption while it gives evidence of a moment of resistance in which certain subjects ("scavengers") undermine the imposed power relations ("the steady gaze of the energy police"). Embedded in this attempt to emphasize the absurdity of the 'new' recycling hype that has overcome the borough, is a reminder of a 'truer' way of recycling, of people whose existence is defined by it, and therefore, an urgent reminder and an endorsement of alternate ways of living.

Hackney's Artists

In the following two tables, I attempt a schematic catalogue of the "significant cultural figures" we encounter, maintaining the differentiation between persons alive and those who are no more, but have contributed in a way significant enough to be 'honored' an entry into Sinclair's 'archive' of Hackney.

35 | *Ibid.*, 16, my emphasis.

Alive (In a rough order of appearance)

NAME	OCCUPATION	HACKNEY associations
Stewart Home	Artist/writer/filmmaker	Hackney author
Anna	School teacher	Sinclair's wife/ Denizen
Peter Ackroyd	Biographer, author	Prolific writer about London
Mick Cohen	Underground filmmaker	Worked in Hackney
Renchi Bicknell	Artist	Denizen
Astrid Proll	Previous member of Baader-Meinhof gang	Her hideaway: lived and worked under assumed identity
Julie Christie	Actress	Retreat in Hackney
Rachel Lichtenstein	(Jewish) Artist, author	Authored book highlighting Jewish heritage of Hackney
Mole man of Mortimer Road	Hackney 'eccentric'	Denizen
Owl Man	Hackney 'eccentric'	Denizen
Oona Grimes	Artist	Her artworks feature Hackney
Will Self	Author	Collaborated with Sinclair in Hackney
Ken Warpole	Author on architecture	Denizen
Sheila Rowbotham	Social activist/ feminist	Work set in Hackney
Nigel Fountain	Author	Collaborated with Sinclair in Hackney
Godard	Filmmaker	Work set in Hackney
Hari Kunzru	Author	Lives/lived in Hackney

Gone but not Forgotten (References to them and their work)

NAME	OCCUPATION	HACKNEY associations
Dr. David Widgery	Doctor/activist	Worked in (Bethnal Green)
John Minton	Artist	Mare Street
Samuel Taylor Coleridge (referred to as a Highgate exile with a bad mouth)	Author	Highgate
Joseph Conrad	Author	Retreat at German Hospital
Orson Welles	Author/Film director	Worked in Hackney
Alexander Baron	Author	Raised in Hackney
Marc Karlin	Political filmmaker	Lived in Hackney
William Borroughs	Author	'In exile'
Samuel Richardson	Novelist	Lived in/worked out of
William Blake	Painter, poet	Lived in/worked out of
Roland Camberton	Novelist	Writings set in Hackney

This categorizing visualizes Sinclair's empirical strategy of drawing together a specific cast of people – their names appearing in his book along with their occupation and their books or films function as mnemonic elements as they represent for the most part, a 'leftist' political culture. The names invoke by mere mention, their artistry and genius (Blake, Welles, Conrad, Godard), social and political activism (Widgery, Karlin, Rowbotham) their rebelliousness (Proll), eccentricity (Coleridge) or an off-the-grid existence (the Owl Man, Swanny). Though many of these may not be alive or currently living in the borough, it is this power of their names to conjure a specific image of a lively borough, their "identity giving potential" (Eckstein), that Sinclair taps into and uses, for an acquisition and commemoration of Hackney's 'cultural heritage'. Here, Sinclair draws once more on his strategy of a moving camera which captures the present

but which changes into a flashback carrying the reader backwards into Hackney's past. This strategy also shows how an empirical strand, bearing witness to and commemorating the present and past, also functions as a narrative device. Sinclair sees evidently little prospect for the borough in the future so he has to link up the present with the past instead and builds an epitaph, something 'to remember it by'; how *he* would like it to be remembered. The future being dominated in the book by "the blue fence" of the Olympic site, "that shadow, the imposition of future memory"³⁶, covered by computer generated pictures, a hyper reality of the future of Hackney.³⁷

"I bump into a neighbour who throws me by asking, with some hesitation, if I could supply her with a poem about the future [...] I comb through notebooks, things published and unpublished, but I can't find a single poem that touches on the future. Everything is absolutely nudged by the now, under the drag of an invented past. I'm sorry, Harriet, I have no idea what the future holds. Or what it is. The architect Erich Mendelsohn, who was responsible for the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-Sea, said: 'Only he who cannot forget has no free mind.' In Berlin they labour to exorcize the past. *In Hackney we must train ourselves to exorcize the future.*"³⁸

This then makes Sinclair's portrait of Hackney rather exclusive. In the representation of a space which is otherwise stigmatized as being "the worst place to live in", Sinclair imports and inserts the testimonies of a living and practicing community of artists or "cultural producers", while simultaneously invoking mnemonic elements that hark back to the borough's artistic 'ancestors' and their legacy.³⁹ Sinclair's narrative montage of testimonies and past 'heritage' into a text composed to commemorate is a mnemonic strategy with political reverberations. It introduces ruptures in the negative discourse about Hackney, through which the space becomes interspersed with the associations that these 'characters' fill in: the vibrancy of a diaspora of cultures passing through, an exhaustive wealth of artistic personalities with their eccentricities and social activism – progressive and innovative, and an unexpected sense of comradeship through their 'non-

36 | Ibid., 442.

37 | "This is a kind of ethnic cleansing, the imposition of the computer-generated, virtual-world fiction over the grungy reality that has always been here. In the same way that on the blue fence around the Olympic Park you have perfected visions of the future, which are completely fictional." "At Home with Iain Sinclair," my emphasis.

38 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 25, my emphasis.

39 | Or worst place to have a car in: "Hackney once again topped the list: its official, according to this morning's statisticians, we are the worst borough in London for car crime. License dodging. Petty theft. Taking without the owner's consent." Ibid., 439.

conformism'. It gives rise to a rhetoric of 'Us' (radical authors and artists of an 'old East End') versus 'Them' (probably everyone else, especially ignorant but nonetheless powerful politicians). The politicization of the borough by a voice that has spoken itself into being representative of 'artistic' Hackney, as a place that has 'long' been home to so many creative figures, ensues the politicization of the discourse surrounding the borough in the context of the Olympics of 2012. Sinclair invites these people in his interviews to recall how they came to Hackney and to compare how it used to be with the 'now'. This "dredging of memory" is an empowering activity challenging a unified notion of history, rendering it ambiguous and intangible, wherein the history of Hackney becomes what (these) people remember; there is not one version of the past of Hackney but rather, many different (personal) histories: "It was habitual now, this *dredging of memory*: houses, work, movement. A *city obscured by revelation*."⁴⁰ In a period of an alleged 'crisis of memory', literary critic Aleida Assmann has already foretold the importance of art and literature as surrogates.⁴¹ Assmann engages with different forms and changes in cultural memory and in this context, discusses a paradigm shift in research related to memory storage and the neurosciences, whereby the notion of memory via durable inscription (script or the written word) is being replaced by the principle of constant overwriting (virtual memory storage).⁴² Sinclair's book, which is itself a complex ensemble of mnemonic montage, displays a playful twist within this paradigm shift, functioning as a written archive which nevertheless overwrites other attempted representations of Hackney. However, as Assmann rightfully asserts, and what holds true for Sinclair's book is that "the archive is not only a place where documents from the past are stored but also a place where the past may once more be reconstructed or even produced."⁴³ There are obviously ideological implications of 'lifting' older resources into new texts and contexts.⁴⁴ In this particular case, the memory of the text resides in this inter-textuality. We have in *That Rose-Red Empire* an allusion to a book called *Rain on the Pavement* by a lesser-known author, Roland Camberton (real name: Henry Cohen), and its political projection against a historical reality. It is a well-reviewed account of orthodox Jewish life living in Hackney but which has faded into obscurity. Sinclair describes this book, even praises it alongside say works

40 | Ibid., 521, my emphasis.

41 | Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume*, 22: "It is apparent [...] that the arts turn towards memory precisely in the moment when society is in danger of loosing it or tries to get rid of it. [...] Today, it is mainly the arts that have discovered the crisis of memory as their particular theme and try to come up with new forms in which dynamics of cultural memory and forgetting manifest themselves."

42 | Ibid., 22.

43 | Ibid., 22, my translation.

44 | See also Eckstein, *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic*, xv.

by Jean Luc Godard or Orson Welles. The individual work is thus alleviated to a 'body of texts' on or set in Hackney, displaying the identity giving potential of this body of texts and highlighting the role of *That Rose-Red Empire* as a collection of the traces that point to the borough's cultural heritage.

Streets, Sounds and Sights: Hackney and its "subterranean mythology"⁴⁵

That after many wanderings, many years/Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,/ And this green pastoral landscape, were to me/More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake⁴⁶

There were more Hackneys, stepping off my usual path, than I could ever know.⁴⁷

In Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, nostalgia in narrating a place is linked to the realization of the absence of the original experience of the place. In *That Rose-Red Empire*, it becomes linked with the anticipation, or perhaps with the acknowledgement, of its *future* loss. Nostalgia is conveyed as a driving force resulting from the knowledge that the borough as Sinclair would like it to be remembered, is already no longer there, what is possible now is to hold on to the *memories* of the original experiences. This nostalgia is the impetus to take stock of the place that was or is 'home'. In the interviews, Sinclair conducts, he asks people to recollect how or why they came to Hackney. Specificity comes not only by limiting the testimonies to those of "cultural figures" but also by localizing this specific mnemonic strategy – by collecting memories of a specific period in those persons' lives. Sinclair's narration of Hackney as a place of exile, where one went in order to be forgotten or to hide is indeed reflected by the testimonies. At the same time, the testimonies themselves also reveal distinct networks or flows within the borough. Therefore, we have on the one hand a representation by Sinclair and on the other; a representation implied within the testimonies, that is, a signification by these cultural figures.⁴⁸

Let me draw on Michel de Certeau's ideas in order to discuss these networks or the processes of navigation within the borough, and describe the experience

45 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 44.

46 | Wordsworth, William, "Tintern Abbey," Vol. ii, 85.

47 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 50.

48 | This idea reflects Bakhtin's notion that the meaning of novel has to be approached by negotiating its individual voices horizontally. Even though Sinclair's voice and narrative strand pushes to stand out or apart and threatens to overwhelm the reader, the analysis attempts to temper Sinclair and flatten out the 'individual voices' to try to juxtapose them.

of the material city engaged with the symbolic attached to it. De Certeau points out that *names of places* semantically order the surface of a city but these names lose their original ability to signify the geography of the city. Instead, people appropriate them as their meeting points. They become vested with meaning(s) associated with some memory of that place in people's lives, diverse meanings that may or may not be commonly acknowledged by others.

"Linking acts and footsteps, opening meanings and directions, these words (place names) operate in the name of an emptying-out and wearing-away of their primary role. They become liberated spaces that can be occupied. A rich indetermination gives them, by means of a semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second poetic geography on top of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning. They insinuate other routes into the functionalist and historical order of movement [...] Things that amount to nothing, or almost nothing, symbolize and orient walkers' steps: names that have ceased precisely to be "proper"."⁴⁹

The connection between the symbolizing and spatial practice (of walking) is contained within these 'symbolizing kernels' (place names which have ceased to be 'proper') and characterized by the following functions: the name *recalls* the 'original', which over time and usage becomes '*emptied out*' of its original meaning, thus offering itself to a new designation. It permits and thus *acquires a 'new' meaning* or rather meanings. De Certeau calls the discourse arising from such an act of signification of place names, a "local authority" or "local legend", which is a "crack in the system that saturates places with signification".⁵⁰ This is then precisely that property of urban space that 'techno-structure' wishes to exterminate, and if they succeed: "There isn't any place special, [...] nothing is marked, opened up by a memory or a story, signed by something or someone else." Therefore it is these 'local legends' that offer "ways of going out and coming back in, and thus habitable spaces [...] *One can measure the importance of these signifying practices (or legends) as practices that invent spaces.*"⁵¹

The process of signification in *That Rose-Red Empire* is recognizably produced by Sinclair walking different paths in the borough, naming place names, 'emptying out' the original meaning, 'filling it' with his or other people's memories and stories. He thus appropriates the space of Hackney discursively or invents a discursive space for Hackney. Here, narrative and empirical strategies mingle. The 'solid' knowledge of people's names, different dates are data that empirically anchors the different testimonies and Sinclair's own heterogeneous

49 | de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 105.

50 | Ibid., 105–6.

51 | Ibid., 106, my emphasis.

text. On the other hand, however, de Certeau has already warned us that a ‘map’ of walking signifies an absence. It can only trace a path that is not there anymore in the moment of its tracing: “The memorable is that which can be dreamed about a place. In this place that is a palimpsest, *subjectivity is already linked to the absence that structures it as existence* and makes it “be there”, Dasein.”⁵² Sinclair is aware that the territory will not be there anymore. Even as he researches and writes about it, Hackney, as he knew it is gone (if it isn’t gone already). Just as he will be gone, and the people he has interviewed, who make Hackney into what he would like to remember it as. This foreboding, the burden of the anticipation of the absence feeds the nostalgia, which inflects this Hackney narrative.

Early in the book, during the previously discussed episode on the pub named Havelock, Sinclair notices that people around him, himself included, often navigate their terrain by the name of pubs.

“Plenty of Hackney old-timers, I discover as I conduct interviews for this book, navigate their memory-terrain by way of pubs. *Do you remember?* Being on first name terms with the vampire landlady? Crowblack [sic] fright wig, purple talons, heavy gold manacles on thin wrist. Villainies of yesteryear: smoked ghosts propping up afternoon bars, sentimental about dead gangsters, shoplifting grannies. Holloway Nan. Shirley Pitts. Or revived literary societies in back rooms? Politics, conspiracies, pool. The Havelock is an anachronism. The coal fire fug, dirty glasses and recidivist linoleum. These old brown boozers are London fictions in embryo, waiting for the right ventriloquist: Patrick Hamilton, Derek Raymond, T.S. Eliot. Listening is also writing. First the pubs, then the petrol stations: they are declared redundant.”⁵³

With its “coal fire fug, dirty glasses and recidivist linoleum”, this “boozier” clearly belongs to an age long gone. Yet, in this narration, the pub name, functioning as a mnemonic element, becomes a key to the “memory-terrain” of a specific clique of Hackney dwellers or what de Certeau has called “fabric of alternate geography”. Sinclair uses it to invoke a picture of an almost enviably intimate space of “politics, conspiracies, pool” and “villainies of yesteryear”. In terms of documentary, we are presented with an experiential, but also mnemonic mode of gathering empirical data – through the collective memory of a life lived, shared or remembered. Reality here is a stipulated sense of familiarity and habitual culture in and of a pub that is reinstated each time by its recollection – a revisiting of the past to re-establish where you are from. Then we have the signatory Sinclairian critique of the regeneration project: These hubs of creativity

52 | Ibid., 109, my emphasis.

53 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 8–9, original emphasis.

have been made redundant – the pubs that have long been “London fictions in embryo” (Hackney’s artistic milieu), contributing to London’s literary heritage.

The depiction of a pub as a desirable and strangely intimate public space begetting creativity is reflected very precisely once more in the lengthy testimonial of a certain Douglas Lyne. Lyne being an “archivist and Chelsea habitué”, Sinclair interviews him in order to investigate a forgotten Hackney author, Henry Cohen, aka Roland Camberton.⁵⁴ As it turns out, Lyne was friends with Henry Cohen and this is how the lesser known author surfaces in his narration:

“For five years this was the center of my life. A spectacular melting pot, Soho. Fitzrovia. Rathbone Place. The Wheatsheaf. Every pub had its own clientele [...] Henry was with me. This was the atmosphere in which I got to know him. He was no doubt pursuing a course of his own. When peace came, film and arts people all got together. Johnny Milton, as a painter and a drinker, was one of us. He did the covers, the dust wrappers for Henry’s books [...] I was disenchanted with Soho when I met Henry. In the Pier Hotel. All the Chelsea mandarins were lolling about – with the great Henry. An extremely distinguished-looking Jewish man. Like a great composer, a huge brow. Hector introduced me to Henry [...] You change your house, you change your pub. Henry didn’t like the Surprise. Which was what you might call our *watering hole* [...] We used to go to a club called the Caves de France. It was quite close to the Colony Club. And the Mandrake. And the Gargoyle. *It was quite a nice pub crawl.*”⁵⁵

This is Sinclair’s quest within a quest: for Henry Cohen in Hackney, the man behind the name Roland Camberton – an elusive, solitary author figure with a traditional Jewish background who published under a different name in order to “keep the shame of this literary habit from his orthodox family”.⁵⁶ Of course, Lyne’s testimony leads him away from Hackney as this quest is entangled with and simultaneously unfolds the post-war pub culture in a different part of London. The social geography of Soho in those days is rendered as a “spectacular melting pot”. Lyne’s testimony then inscribes this space with the names of different pubs and evokes their particular atmosphere. The Fitzrovia, Rathbone Place and The Wheatsheaf, with their own specific ‘clientele’, form the coordinates of a specific Soho pub crawl. Lyne’s testimony gives us first hand information about who’s who at a particular pub at the time. The image produced by the language, of “Chelsea mandarins” “lolling about” with “the “great Henry”, who was “distinguished-looking [...] like a great composer, a huge brow”, renders the Pier Hotel affluent

54 | Ibid., 485, my emphasis.

55 | Ibid., 490–8, my emphasis.

56 | Ibid., 486.

and distinguished. The “nice pub crawl” described endorses Soho’s reputation further as being a place of drink and social gathering for the “film and arts people”, which on the other hand highlights Hackney’s status as a ‘place of exile’ for the elusive author Roland Camberton.

A rather different picture of the pub-frequenting artist is offered up by the testimony of Jock McFadyen, a contemporary British urban landscape artist, and still a faithful Hackney denizen. For McFadyen, the pubs bring back quite different memories, being associated more with a lonely period in his life. The same mnemonic element generates, on the contrary, a fairly bleak imagery:

“I tried the pubs around the [Victoria] park. I’d sit there, not knowing anyone, feeling totally pissed off. Drinking slow pints and thinking: ‘What the fuck am I doing here?’ Feeling fucking miserable. I was young. I used to drink and drive in those days. I used to get in my yellow car and drive down to the pubs I knew in Bow, in the days when I was happy. I went to the Five Bells & Blade Bone, by Limehouse Church – which I started! I started the artists going in there. Before me it was just Czech car thieves and tarts, a real dive.

I’d go every night, the Blade Bone. I got to know the landlord. A Scottish family ran the pub. I told all my friends to stop going to the pub on Flamborough Street, off Salmon Lane. A nice Young’s house. I wanted to frequent the Blade Bone [...] Sometimes I’d be sitting in the Caprice with patrons, famous names, the movers. Then I’d rush back to the Five Bells in Limehouse, tap on the window, and drink until three in the morning. Get up late, start work. Like living in Berlin, I suppose.”⁵⁷

A linkage of very different kinds of mnemonic elements and spatial perception of Hackney comes from Anya Gris, an architect who provokes debate with her designs rather than having them built.⁵⁸ Anya’s Hackney harks back to a time when it was still a “garden suburb”.⁵⁹ Her testimony is the story of her first, big romance whose beginning and end is mirrored metaphorically in her “Dyonisiac tribute” to the rave club called Labyrinth.⁶⁰ She tells us of a generation that experimented with rave music and drugs. Her testimony begins with her entering the smoke-filled “black cavernous space” for the first time with her big love: “I was with a man I was madly in love with. He gave me three ecstasy tablets

57 | Ibid., 522.

58 | “Not one building Anya designed has been built. Construction was never the point, she provoked debate.” Ibid., 139.

59 | Ibid., 140.

60 | Ibid., 145.

– which could've killed me.”⁶¹ However, reminiscing about the different flows of energy, rhythm and conviviality of the parties drives the architect to proclaim:

“The city became a site of visions and possibilities, wild utopian schemes: gardens to plant, rivers to uncover, schools to rescue, asylums to be thrown open. We saw what lay beneath the stones and the dirt and the anger and the noise and the bad will of all those who refuse to recognize what is lying around them. Hackney is actually heaven!”⁶²

Then, as her experiences turn darker, so do the associations with Hackney's labyrinthine spaces. We find out that Jonathan was much older, married and had kids. She tells us how the relationship ended when he was addicted to stronger drugs and lost his grip on life. And also of how, at the same, she was living in a cellar in Smithfield researching what she calls 'blood roads' – trails of animals brought to London for slaughter. The initial heartbreakingly “ruined grandeur” of the old cinema that was the night club turns into doom: “What happened next to the Labyrinth Club, at the time jungle music came in, was much darker [...] and the drugs got darker. I thought then the building was doomed. It was over. For all of us. For Dalston.”⁶³

On the one hand, the supposed mimetic presentation of testimonies gives the reader the impression of being direct witness to these testimonies. This narrative strategy is, of course, performative. The testimonies or mnemonic references and the associations these spaces generate in people's minds, thus presented, semantically order the surface of a city. This 'topographical mesh' is made up of very different layers and characterized precisely by the different emotions and associations thrown up within these testimonies, but held together by Sinclair's own narrative strand which disappears in the moment of the testimony but re-appears consistently throughout the book (even if as only a small comment in between testimonies). The testimonies could almost be said to provide a break from Sinclair's incessant narrative voice. In the following section, this authorial relentless will be explored and analyzed by speculating that its origins lie in the dilemma of documentarism in first person.

61 | Ibid., 141.

62 | Ibid., 142.

63 | Ibid., 144.

Mimesis of Process and Self-reflexivity in Sinclair's ANT

The guilty writer energized by these crimes, these rumours.⁶⁴

The ekphrastic description in the following quote draws on the semiotic power of artifacts to fixate, de-familiarize or destabilize social relationships. It allegorically renders a set of values, which at first glance appears to endorse (see emphasis).⁶⁵

"I've grown quite fond, lately, of that sculpture, a civic intervention, [...] a lifeless Pearly King and Queen; who sit, silent witnesses to so much agitation and hallucinatory folly. Crowned with bowler hats, eyes made red, they offer dishes of fruit from generous laps. A frozen tide encloses them, sea pebbles, pebbledash. Mosaic altars have been decorated by school kids: lobsters, flying fish, crabs. In beds of lavender. Buddhas of the city, the statues survive, untargeted by fundamentalists, iconoclasts. *The oracular indifference of this couple is a virtue.* They are assembled from chips and splinters of bright tile: reconstituted damage. The ruins of demolished terraces, which once ran to the edge of the Fields, have formed themselves into twinned, male and female, votive presences. They are authentically regal, divinely righteous, impervious to bribes or flattery. And they have adapted, graciously, to where they are, among rippling concrete dunes, troughs of hardy perennials, a backdrop of public housing."⁶⁶

The ethical dimension of the history of the Pearly King and Queen may indeed be inspirational to Sinclair's narrative scope and political goals.⁶⁷ Their description as being assembled from "reconstituted damage", their characterization as "authentically regal, divinely righteous, impervious to bribes or flattery", having "adapted, graciously, to where they are", could almost be written off as Sinclair's modernist tendency to present a feeling of place (or placelessness) through an estranged point of view – that of the "lifeless Pearly King and Queen" or, in a broader representative sense, that of a marginalized community. It recalls his opening sentiment to identify with "the rubbish" or the 'common' people of Hackney. However, there is more than a little irony to be read into these supposed

64 | Ibid., 128.

65 | Latour, "Which Politics for Which Artifacts?"; See also Winner, "Do Artifacts Have Politics?"; Joerges, "Do Politics Have Artefacts?"

66 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 8, my emphasis.

67 | "The History of the Original Pearly Families": "The Pearlies never forget their own history. Anyone can fall on hard times. What counts is making the most of the good times while they last, doing all you can to help others and having the support of your own kind when the going gets tough."

“votive presences”, those “silent witnesses”. They are the exact opposite of what Sinclair has become in the context of the Olympic Project and in his book. He cannot, and will not, be a silent observer to “so much agitation and hallucinatory folly”, and indulges in the role of what he calls the “guilty writer energized by these crimes”. This passage highlights Sinclair’s relentless omniscience in the text once again.

On the other hand, this is precisely Sinclair’s strategy of reversible black boxing, or undoing what has come to be accepted as common sense. We can analyze its narrative realization by imagining this to be the mimesis of process in Sinclair’s ANT-like method – a moment in his narrative that leads the reader on to commit a folly in his or her way of ‘seeing’. It is a denaturalizing of the most banal aspects of everyday life, to re-assemble the social by offering up new connections, interpretations, and implications to the reader. This attention to detail enables him to see his own project and its impact realistically. His omniscience is alleviated by his reflexivity in terms of the limitations and effectiveness of his own role as chronicler, interviewer and author:

“It’s a horrible contract, mutual exploitation; the way compliant authors indulge predatory characters, take them on expeditions, buy them drinks, hoping for the worst: a new story. Without a tame scribe, the unwritten of London become desperate, pushed into excesses that propel them towards secure wards, straitjackets, tiled cells – in the hope that somebody, anybody, will give form to the howling mania of their non-existence. And then they are sold short, misrepresented, ugly words put into their mouths.”⁶⁸

This self-reflexivity draws attention to the practices of experiencing, documenting and representing (see emphasis), but it does so also in the interest of establishing the text’s empirical anchorage. The underlying strategy of self-deprecating irony only strengthens Sinclair’s authenticity. It is assisted by a sense of self-implication, for Sinclair could almost be describing himself with the words “howling mania of (their) non-existence”, and he is anything but a “tame scribe”. The reiterative use of these strategies in Sinclair’s representation ultimately introduces a level of epistemological skepticism into the narrative that, however, interrogates the author again, rather than more global or universal issues.

There are numerous similar introspective instances throughout the book. On finding and reading Doctor Widgery’s memorial, Sinclair confesses, “Widgery’s dynamism was intimidating. I had been sleepwalking through the same territory, struggling to read the signs but *achieving nothing braver than keeping my own family more or less afloat and publishing a few booklets*”⁶⁹ While praising the

68 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 236, my emphasis.

69 | *Ibid.*, 302, my emphasis.

activist Sheila Rowbotham, Sinclair says: “*So many men of the 1960s had creased and crumpled*, waiting for the tide to turn. Incubating disaffection. Nourishing unpublished memoirs, boxes of dead photographs. Unrequired confessions.”⁷⁰ Quoting what Anya said about Swanny: “Treat him with discretion, please. He’s been stitched up too many times by people who can’t differentiate between truth and fiction. *Fools who think cobbled-together interview transcripts make a proper book.*”⁷¹ This sentiment culminates in the fear of being eliminated from his own Hackney portrait – a fear really of being banished from his beloved territory, perhaps for a lack of any grand social or political achievement like Dr. Widgery’s: “Realism has no part in the story. Depicting Hackney, through manipulated biography, the author is airbrushed from his own script.”⁷² This is, obviously and glaringly, a rhetorical strategy, a strategic authorial exaggeration. Towards the end, this sentiment becomes even more specific and personal: “Those who embark on a London Quest begin in a pub. They yarn, they misquote, improvise. They walk out, eventually, through a one-off topography *they are obliged to shape into a serviceable narrative*. Language creaks”⁷³ Is Sinclair resigned to or reveling in his experience of alienation? Is this perhaps a piqued Sinclair who prefers to leave the scene rather than *be* removed? Or is Sinclair simply indicating the transformation of information that Latour acknowledged in his ANT, and acknowledging its gain as well as the loss. The oscillation of the authorial presence between omniscience, benevolence and instability lets theme and form play into each other to indicate the paradox of this urban enterprise as ANT. In order to unfold and describe the tightly folded inventory of traces of Hackney, the author has, on the one hand, an obligation to produce a “serviceable narrative” about Hackney. However, this can only materialize if he may “yarn”, “misquote” or “improvise” and ultimately, the result is either insignificant or discomforting as “language creaks”.

On the other hand, Sinclair exploits the possibilities this form of inquiry generates, and succeeds in enhancing the ‘documentariness’ by simply denying the reader the satisfaction of any traditional sort of closure.⁷⁴ Instead, the author seems to take leave from his readers with a sort of encrypted message. The book ends with a chapter called the Blue Fence with an interview with the former RAF-member, Astrid Proll, after which the author describes his walk with Proll to the Olympic site, the ‘blue fence’, still under construction at the time. In her interview with Sinclair, Proll looks back on what brought her to Hackney in 1974

70 | Ibid., 288, my emphasis.

71 | Ibid., 432, my emphasis.

72 | Ibid., 483.

73 | Ibid., 552, my emphasis.

74 | Levine and Beaumont, “Literary Realism Reconsidered: The World in Its Length and Breadth,” 21–22.

and her life in the borough under cover and also, her life in London after 2000, where she went back to work after prison in Germany. Her interview reads as a fantastic synopsis of her biography, first as a member of the militant group, of her rejection of them, and also of her as a person as she acutely describes the borough through many of her first experiences of arriving in London and her life in Hackney. Towards the end of her transcript, there is a passage, which I must take the liberty to quote:

“People are now more aware of an archive. An archive has value. It’s a thing about history. History is business. In England you have heritage. You have so much media. Most people take their history from commercial outlets. Others take their work more seriously, they try to gather up all the evidence you find, in objects, in images and recordings.

Isn’t age important here? Don’t the ones who give commissions say, ‘Please, we only want young people. Innocents who are not tainted by history or memory. Save them from books and the old lies of unreliable witnesses.’”⁷⁵

With laden references to the “archive”, “history” and “heritage, themes running in overdose throughout the book, this last part of Proll’s interview sounds almost as if Sinclair is, as the saying goes, putting his own words into her mouth. The author compares Proll to Ishmael from *Moby Dick*, describing her as “the survivor, the teller of the tale”.⁷⁶ However, isn’t this, in a way, more a reflection of him in her? On the other hand, maybe Proll’s appearance in the book is strategic. Iconic, loyal and non-conformist, to convey a last SOS to the “Innocents who are not tainted by history or memory” of the importance of “books and the old lies of unreliable witnesses”. Is this perhaps, after all, Sinclair’s covert marketing strategy for his own book or an apology to the reader for its complexity and sheer, intimidating size? Through the description of his walk with Proll to the Olympic site in Hackney Wick, we become witness to its ‘landscape’ made up of “abandoned cars”, “half-abandoned plots” and “green tangles that would soon be dug up and flattened to become part of a perimeter fence”.⁷⁷ An insert in the text tells us that on his next walk to Hackney Wick, the author ran up against the ‘blue fence’ only to discover that an exclusion zone had been declared, making that last walk with Proll to the area a privilege. The whole episode thus appears staged: of the ultimate physical confrontation of the ‘leftist bohemians’ (tangible individual speaking beings) and the corporate world (powerful, overbearing and yet elusive – the ‘blue fence’). But then, Sinclair chooses to end this grand

75 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 570.

76 | Ibid., 571.

77 | Ibid., 572–3.

Hackney saga by describing banal everyday details, of tea time in his garden with his wife and Astrid Proll: “We watched thieving squirrels bounce along the old wall, headbutting [sic] the last petals from yellow roses. We heard *the scream of the door that can't be shut*.⁷⁸ One may be tempted to read a resignation in these last lines (emphasis), a sense of the failure of Sinclair's resistance to save the borough from interfering 'outside' forces. However, the essential open-endedness of Sinclair's process of introspection and interrogation underlines the potential endlessness of actor-networks, and thus justifies our reading of Sinclair's enterprise as an ANT.⁷⁹

The intensity of mnemonic references depends on various factors such as their quantity, selectiveness or communicativeness of the references for the reader, that is, how visible or clearly marked certain references are for the reader.⁸⁰ A special way of marking is auto-reflexivity, wherein a text reflects upon and comments on its own mnemonic limitations.⁸¹ This recurrent strand of 'performative' questioning by Sinclair, of the material, the medium and his role as scribe, thus works by extension as a strategy towards moral/ethical persuasion directed towards the reader. At a textual level, the rhetoric of this mimesis of process persuades the reader of the text's authenticity and at a discursive level, convinces the reader of the author's sincerity.⁸² Such an authorial reflexivity addresses the issue of narrativization in such a way that the text becomes a space in which the author can contemplate the validity of what he sees, observes and experiences. As we have seen above, the author's repeated performance of deliberating his tasks as chronicler, emphasizing in particular the decision-making, is to reflect his role as scribe (the act of transcribing the interviews and their narrativization into a Hackney story). Such intersections of the documentary venture by authorial confessional tendencies have been described as constituting the narrative means for the figuration of a documentary's subjective pole.⁸³ Our project argues, however, that the authorial self-reflexivity in our reading of *That Rose-Red Empire* as an ANT works as an authorial strategy of authentication. On the one hand, it rejects the dichotomy of objective-subjective observation, and on the other, reinstates the empirical anchorage of the enterprise through its referentiality to

78 | Ibid., 575, my emphasis.

79 | See also Levine, *Forms*, 22.

80 | Eckstein, *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic*, 48–9.

81 | Ibid.

82 | While my use of the terms sincerity and authenticity is informed by Lionel Trilling, they are being engaged here only in the broadest sense – “authenticity” to refer to a “state”, and “sincerity” to refer to a “practice”. See Milnes and Sinanan, *Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity*, 4; See also Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*; For a more recent update and theorisation of “sincerity” as a concept see Bal, van Alphen, and Smith, *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*.

83 | Agrell, “Documentarism and Theory of Literature,” 43.

the 'real' world. In the following section, we will see how such categories and strategies are established or used by Sinclair, and then flouted in order to create his own dichotomies. In showing this, my project suggests that such strategies are, in their capacity to problematize, vital to an effective ANT method.

MAPS AND MAPPABILITY: A 'NOT TELLING' IN HACKNEY'S 'SPACE WAR'

Tracing various instances of mappability in *That Rose-Red Empire* will enable us in this section to show how the author transgresses common ideas of mapping and thus problematizes the notion of objectivity. What emerges in its place will be discussed as a viable strategy for an ANT method. The section harks back to and draws heavily on de Certeau's theorization of two different perspectives on a city and his linking up of the difference in modes of representation of urban space with the differences in these viewpoints. Against this theoretical back-ground, we can analyze notions of perspective implied in *That Rose-Red Empire*, and likewise, the nature of the urban topographies that they map. De Certeau has long established a dichotomy of 'up' and 'down' with regard to the positions from which the city can be viewed. He embodies first the position of a spectator, the "voyeur" who looks at the city from above, while the "walker" is an 'ordinary practitioner' of the city who moves about at street level.⁸⁴ Sinclair introduces a similar split in perspectives or vantage points from which to view the city. However, unlike de Certeau who denies full power to any one viewpoint, Sinclair allows a distinct bias, but uses his position to overthrow the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity. Hackney is, of course, not New York, and there is no sky scraping building (in Sinclair's Hackney) from which it would be possible to look down upon it. Inclusion in Sinclair's portrait of the borough depends on whether the person lives or has lived in Hackney, or has contributed culturally or artistically so as to contribute to the borough's cultural heritage. De Certeau's clear-cut dichotomy of "up" on top of the Empire State building and "down" on the streets among the people transfigures in *That Rose-Red Empire* into a dichotomy of "living/lived in" Hackney versus "living outside/elsewhere". For the ease of articulation, let us refer to it as a dichotomy of inside-outside perspective.

84 | Certeau, "Walking in the City"; See also Gurr and Raussert, *Cityscapes in the Americas and Beyond*, 150. The authors imply that de Certeau empowers the elevated spectator. In my reading of de Certeau, however, neither positions are given preference or "power", as will be seen further in the chapter.

Sinclair's Distrust of Maps and Mapping

In a chapter about Dalston Lane, Sinclair draws into his narrative another author who previously wrote about the area:

"Even before it went out of print, Wright's book reversed Joyce's boast about Ulysses: that an obliterated Dublin could be rebuilt from his words. Patrick's long-breathed elegy, delivered by a man who is functioning on one lung, was a blueprint for destruction. He brought attention down on a place that had done its best to cultivate obscurity, as a necessary camouflage. Once a street is noticed, it's doomed."⁸⁵

Patrick Wright's account *A Journey Through Ruins: The Last Days of London* brought ruin to Dalston Lane, because it brought with it corporate speculation and lasting disputes over ownership of the land and its properties.⁸⁶ In an ironic turn of fate, the book that served to destroy Dalston Lane becomes the last valuable account of its thriving culture or heritage. What White's account did for Dalston Lane, the Olympics have done for Hackney; the Games brought attention to a borough and with it, the wave of change, which according to Sinclair is obliterating rather than enriching the vitality of the borough. In *Ghost Milk*,⁸⁷ Sinclair comes back to and explicitly attacks what he has nicknamed the "Grand Project" – the Olympic Plan:

"The good thing about Hackney, over the last forty years, was that nobody cared. Nobody noticed the place. Transport was hopeless, it was better to walk. A reasonable burden of debt hobbles the politicians, tempers their excesses. The trouble began when our crapness [sic] began to be celebrated with a post-ironic fervour: we manufactured enamelled badges with broken hearts. And then the Olympics arrived to swivel a search light on the dark places, to impose a fraudulent narrative. Everything they boasted of delivering, as legacy, after the dirt and dust and inconvenience, was here already. It had always been here, but they didn't need it, they lived elsewhere. They lived

85 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 126.

86 | Wright, *A Journey Through Ruins*; The disputes were especially between Hackney Council and the denizens of Dalston Lane, and remain unresolved to date. Hackney Council first neglected the area and later sold it to an offshore developer for demolishing and redevelopment. Due to intervention from Dalston's community, the City's conservation committee has investigated and stopped the demolition. The conservation of the "heritage" buildings of Dalston Lane and maintaining of affordable housing is still, however, a pending issue. See Dalston, "OPEN Dalston."

87 | Sinclair, *Ghost Milk*.

inside their illusions. Hackney ceased to become a game reserve and became a career.”⁸⁸

The “fraudulent narrative” imposed by Council officers living “elsewhere” sells the borough out to a fate subject to the Council’s highly questionable conduct, snatching away a Hackney culture of self-determination and self-sustenance. The mere visibility and the ensuing mappability of ‘his territory’ are threatening for Sinclair. It is a violent colonization of territory, an essentialization, a fixing or pinning down that constricts the vibrancy of lived space and reduces it to flatness – to two dimensionality, a mere diagram.⁸⁹ (Matters of fact) As long as a place remains unmapped and unnamed, its coordinates ambiguous and blurry, the boundaries elastic, the territory and everything held within it remains ‘safe’.

“Hackney is this: cameras and bicycles. On thin balconies of recent flats. Chained to fences. In the windows of council front-operations, TfL promotions. Sponsorship of bicycles and cameras. The folded maps in the London Fields cycle shop, highlighting cycle paths, are free: propaganda. They demonstrate how territory can be invaded by any determined special-interest group and how all maps are political, they are about *not telling*.⁹⁰

Here Sinclair dwells explicitly on the ‘dangers’ of mapping and maps: the artificial ‘green’ promotion of cycling and the cycle paths in the borough are nothing but the treacherous wolf (special-interest group) in disguise of a so-called eco- and borough-friendly operation. He exposes the masquerade – its all simply propaganda. As repetitive as it may sound, and Sinclair cannot seem to stress it often enough, the truth of the matter is that the Olympics put Hackney in the limelight, exposed its potential and vulnerability, and held it up for exploitation through “special-interest group(s)”. The Games imposed that “fraudulent narrative” – the “not telling” which a map fulfills, and of which it remains a painfully concrete manifestation.

This event, on the other hand, highlights and confronts the author with the borough’s connectivity – its position within the bigger city of London. Embedded in this desire for invisibility, a longing for obscurity, is the wish to live isolated from the main city of London, to be self-determining and autonomous, to be separated from it like an offspring come-of-age from its parents. Only, ‘unfortunately’ for Hackney, the parent city London wishes to re-claim its forgotten and neglected borough. The mythological map of the dust jacket of

88 | Ibid., 101, my emphasis.

89 | Magister, “New York und die Macht der Karten: Kartographie von Migration, Urbanisierung und Ethnizität,” 341–382. (Die Karte als Metapher kolonialer Fortifikation).

90 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 23, my emphasis.

the book visualizes this longing for independence. It opens up into an illustrated map artwork, depicting Hackney as a massive island-state (the Empire), a bit like England itself, in the midst of cerulean blue waters and Victoria Park a separate islet to its southeast.⁹¹ The map is complete with a scale, a numbered and lettered grid, a compass dial and hand drawn illustrations of prominent landmarks. This, together with the use of colors typical for lithography from a different age, calls to mind medieval maps used by navigators or seamen on expeditions.⁹² On the extreme right, we have the book description along with the book's List of Contents in the manner of a legend. Internally (inland), all streets, main roads, parks etc. are duly marked and coincide with other maps of the area. The legend invites the reader to search and locate different places on the map. We have advertisements such as for the "Philosophical Society of Hackney" and "Sidney Kirsch's Gentleman's Barber" or highlights such as an announcement for a guided tour to see the "World Famous Mortimer Road Tunnels with the Mole Man" and "Wanted Extras: for Carol Reed's Odd Man Out". These are set aside in square boxes and respectively indexed D6, F7, C6 and D8 so the areas may instantly be located on the map provided. The marking of landmarks onto a map communicates a semanticization; it establishes a boundary between 'mere' geographical space and 'symbolic' semantic spaces only to flout it.⁹³ The breach of the boundary consists in collapsing the distinction between two separate spheres of space conception that have just been established, and thus lays the groundwork for Sinclair's narration.⁹⁴

The map of the borough, which is by itself without 'sujet' (non-narrative), becomes a narrative, setting into motion a process of familiarization tied up with a sense of knowledge of the space being mapped and an intimacy with it. The searching and locating of place names or businesses/ tours on the map 'populates' the flatness and fills it with meaning. One is briefly led to think that this activity helps a reader or tourist to identify more solidly with the area as it appears to invite an alternate form of voyeuristic consumption of a city (for e.g.,

91 | Sinclair himself also suggests the fact that the borough's mapped outline is similar to the outline of a map of England: "The borough, as I pointed out when we checked my collaged map, was made in the shape of England." *Ibid.*, 442; The dust cover may be viewed online: "Hand Made Maps Ltd. Magazine: 'Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire' by Iain Sinclair" The beauty of the online version is that viewers can scroll a magnifying lens over the map in order to "read" it.

92 | See also "Hand Made Maps Ltd. Magazine: 'Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire' by Iain Sinclair."

93 | Lotman, *Die Struktur literarischer Texte*, 340 Lotman shows how the crossing of a boundary becomes a pre-requisite to narration. See also Löbbermann, "Weg(be)schreibungen, Ortserkundungen: Transients in der Amerikanischen Stadt," especially 273–5.

94 | *Ibid.*

to 'discover' the 'underground' of Hackney), offering up authentic 'secrets' about the borough. However, we have a mimesis of process at work here again. This 'beautiful' map of Hackney, however, has no intention of allowing easy access to the borough. Rather, it teases the reader even as he or she realizes that they are a part of a parody being played out – of a typically touristic activity of 'exploring' and 'consuming' the city. There are no visible connections to a 'mainland', that is, the city of London. We are offered only 'sea routes' marked by little boats travelling into different directions – The City, Tower Hamlets, Hackney Marshes, Finsbury Park and Islington, which are all a stand-in for *possible* but non-existent connections of public transportation into or out of Hackney. This 'mapping' adheres on the one hand to an older tradition of capturing 'place' geographically onto paper. On the other hand, the act of literally 're-drawing' and personalizing the map of Hackney in this peculiar manner, visually and wishfully liberates the borough, from being invaded by tourists, and from the clutches of a dominant and dictating City Council.⁹⁵

The Destructibility of Space and its Discursive Appropriation

Sinclair's antagonism towards mapping denounces the so-called objective 'view from above'.⁹⁶ Such an observer is scathingly discredited by Sinclair in a slandering description of Tony Blair looking at architectural models made by a collaborative school project called the Building Exploratory⁹⁷: "Blair rises over a dwarf principality: a blue-suited King Kong, close-shaved, Max Factored. A sweat-slicked moon-face with rictal grin pressed against the tiny windows of a faithfully reproduced miniature of one of the detonated Holly Street towers."⁹⁸ This and a reference to the street-view from a window offered by the dustcover of Roland Camberton's book *Rain on Pavements* are brief instances in the book of an elevated viewpoint, if they may truly be called 'elevated' at all, in the sense of de Certeau's use of the word. As of date, there is no strategically situated building in Hackney tall enough to physically allow the kind of observation de Certeau's spectator is capable of from the top of the Empire State building with

95 | Sinclair has admittedly not done the designing or drawing himself. Here, it is his sanctioning and subsequent use of it as a dust cover for his book that is being alluded to.

96 | This phrase has come to be associated with the work of Michel de Certeau, from whom I borrow it as well. We will come back to a more detailed analysis of de Certeau's dichotomy of perspective over the city as this chapter proceeds, to see how this differentiation is still relevant.

97 | A participatory program within the larger project Discover Hackney, which involves school children, local residents, partner organizations and private companies, and explores buildings and spaces. See "The Building Exploratory."

98 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 92.

its architectural height of 381m. De Certeau's spectator looks down upon the city from so high up that the "gigantic mass is immobilized" and he experiences the transformation of the concrete city of New York into a "texturology" from which he reads "a universe".⁹⁹ But unlike the inscriptions that he sees, "of architectural figures of the *coincidatio oppositorum* formerly drawn in miniatures and mystical textures", Tony Blair is a spectator of the architectural miniatures themselves, which have trapped in them "ghosts skins" and "disembodied memories" of places in Hackney that were demolished and do not exist anymore.¹⁰⁰

As de Certeau determines, the elevation between the city 'down below' and the spectator 'up' on the roof of the Empire State Building does not imply mere physical distance as much as it does a distance in the sense of a conceptual separation between spectator and the object. On having freed himself from the distracting bustle of the streets, the spectator is capable of a panoramic view, and becomes a "solar Eye" that makes the fiction of objectivity possible.¹⁰¹ For, "the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more" and "the voyeur-god created by this fiction, who, like Schreber's God, knows only cadavers, must disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them."¹⁰² De Certeau thus associates this sort of charting of city space with the activity of urban planners or cartographers (a bird's eye view) and rejects it at the same time as a simulacrum, not of the 'thing' or 'space' itself, but more as an illusion of objectivity. De Certeau's 'view from above' is extended and associated in *That Rose-Red Empire* to a 'politics from above', embodied among other things by the "blue-suited King Kong", Tony Blair. Blair's politics works with a myopic view of the borough offered by maps and architectural models. These physical objects, rather than being a *representation* of space, become associated with the *destruction* of space. The Holly Street project, the miniatures of which Blair is ogling at, was originally planned as a solution to housing problems in Hackney. It has now ironically come to symbolize a failure of urban planning and is held up as an example of the incompetence and whimsical nature of state-related decision making: "If there is a fashionable way of getting urban planning wrong, Holly Street has tried it."¹⁰³

The destructibility of space thus associated with the act of mapping is made possible due to the visibility and readability of space that the process of mapping brings about.¹⁰⁴ As de Certeau points out, the cartographer's map is a "transparent

99 | de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 91.

100 | See respectively *ibid.*; Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 93.

101 | de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 92.

102 | *Ibid.*, 92–3.

103 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 92.

104 | In an analysis of Thomas Pyncheon's *Mason & Dixon*, Stockhammer highlights the destructibility of space through cartography by juxtaposing its exactitude alongside

text", the mapping (with a 'view from above') "makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text".¹⁰⁵ It makes of the city, "imaginary totalizations produced by the eye."¹⁰⁶ There exists for de Certeau another city, a "migrational, or metaphorical, city [which] thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city."¹⁰⁷ The map is thus linked to a concept of the 'city', but there exists an elusive element – the 'everyday'. This 'everyday' is characterized by "ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity", an "invisible beyond".¹⁰⁸ The act of walking provides, however, a link to the elusive everyday. By comparing walking to enunciation (a speech act), de Certeau arrives at the "phatic" aspect of walking.

"This location (here-there) (necessarily implied by walking and indicative of a present appropriation of space by an "I") also has the function of introducing an other in relation to this "I" and of thus establishing a conjunctive and disjunctive articulation of places. I would stress particularly the "phatic" aspect, by which I mean the function, isolated by Malinowski and Jakobson, of terms that initiate, maintain, or interrupt contact, such as "hello," "well, well," etc. Walking, which alternately follows a path and has followers, creates a mobile organicity in the environment, a sequence of phatic topoi."¹⁰⁹

Seen within the framework of enunciation, walking becomes an act to establish social contact. Walking gives rise to an unlimited variety of operations similar to the endless possibilities of combinations of language, which cannot be reduced to a graph or map. This strategy of Sinclair's is a viable method of ANT – the means by which he, on the one hand, creates the network, and at the same time, traces the network. As in language, one may *turn a phrase*; the 'walker' composes a path. In language, a turn of the phrase gives birth to tropes in rhetoric, which

the possibilities of adventure and fantasy which unmapped space allows. On a quote from Pyncheon's book: "Als Analyse der kartographischen Macht ist dieser Satz genau, als Geschichte vom Niedergang der Phantasie folgt er einem konventionellen und verbrauchten Muster der Aufklärungskritik: der melancholischen Erzählung von der Zerstörung der Mythen, Träume und Möglichkeiten durch Exaktheiten, Wachheiten und politisch stratifizierte Tatsächlichkeiten." Stockhammer, "Verortung. Die Macht der Karten und die Literatur im 20. Jahrhundert," 338–9. Read as a critique of so-called scientific factuality, this could almost have been written by Latour himself.

105 | de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 92–3.

106 | Ibid.

107 | Ibid.

108 | Ibid., 95. These nevertheless form his starting point for a theory of spatial practices, which in the urban context he specifically refers to as "tactics" and "strategies".

109 | Ibid., 99.

are ‘deviations’ from a ‘literal meaning’, and thus ‘divert’ and ‘displace’ meaning. The comparison enables de Certeau to go a step further. He applies the rhetorical operations synecdoche and asyndeton to the act of walking:

“Synecdoche makes more dense: it amplifies the detail and miniaturizes the whole. Asyndeton cuts out: it undoes continuity and undercuts its plausibility. A space treated in this way and shaped by practices is transformed into enlarged singularities and separate islands.”¹¹⁰

Such an analysis of the act of walking gives rise to a “swelling”, “shrinking” or “fragmentation” of space. We have a ‘spatial phrasing’ through which the act of walking becomes endowed with a power to displace “coherent proper meanings of urbanism.”¹¹¹

A look at de Certeau’s attempt to locate this inaccessible ‘beyond’ through an analysis of walking as a means of ‘creating’ space helps us clear up at least some of the perplexity with Sinclair’s prose. Read against this theoretical background of walking as an act of enunciation, and therefore, of endless possibilities and combinations, one is no longer baffled by the author’s style. It is no wonder that Sinclair should, faced with the task of composing a portrait of Hackney, draw on his social contacts to various artists of the borough. This ‘activating’ of his social network, a rounding up of the cultural producers of the borough, is nothing but a kind of subversive ‘walking’, which creates fine networks that take us all across the borough’s map. These networks trace all the myriad associations of the people and places of Hackney, collecting their stories, the phatic aspect allowing a coming-into-being of the author himself in relation to his ‘kin’ and vice versa. The author’s movements trace ‘intimate’ pathways in his ‘map’ of Hackney, “diverting” and “displacing” meanings, allowing the boundaries of Hackney to “swell” and “shrink”, giving way to gaps, which appear along the “imaginary totalization” (de Certeau) of the cartographer’s map of Hackney and crack and splinter it like a fissure in an iceberg. The destructibility of space threatening Hackney is thus defied discursively. Sinclair’s ‘walking’ gives rise to a swelling and shrinking of the outlines of Hackney, which displaces the ‘proper’ meaning of the borough, rejoicing and maintaining in this manner a certain elusiveness about the place that keeps it from being over-determined or controlled.

110 | Ibid., 102.

111 | Ibid.

Here 'in Hackney' and out there 'elsewhere'

What we had to identify was the language of heritage.¹¹²

We have seen so far that Sinclair's aversion to cartography points us to his attitude towards the power and control entailed by the science/discipline. His own subversive use of the mythological map as a dust jacket for the book may almost be dismissed as a symptom of nostalgia for times gone by. However, as the analysis has illustrated, Sinclair personalizes the process of mapping in order to maintain a stronghold on his 'territory', making it a part of the author's artistic subversion against the dominance and suppression that geographical mapping has assisted. We have here in *That Rose-Red Empire*, possibly the oldest and classical juxtaposition of two separate methods of localization of space.¹¹³

Maps and similar methods of fixing space such as the architectural miniatures are the physical manifestations of *geographical means*. They signify abstractions of geographical space (matters of fact) as they document natural, physical or political elements of landscape, places, countries or continents in a specific time period.¹¹⁴ Even within their own discipline of geography or cartography, they underline different registers the discipline uses to organize physical space. The objectivity and power infused in them has been questioned and problematized by recent theoretical debates that have termed them "imaginative geographies" or "scientific abstractions of geographical realities".¹¹⁵ As Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift argue, maps utilize the illusion of objective description in order to disguise the power that they propagate:

"The practices of visual representation of the map serve to disguise the power that operates in and through cartography. Maps are not empty mirrors, they at once hide and reveal the hand of the geographer. Maps are fleshy: of the body and of the mind of the individuals that produce them, they draw the eye of the map-reader. Maps are framed, marked with text, are simplifications,

112 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 215, (Patrick Wright's testimony).

113 | For a lucid and detailed discussion of the 'non-mappability' of space and various modes of mapping as they appear explicitly or implicitly in literature, see Stockhammer, 'Verortung. Die Macht der Karten und die Literatur im 20. Jahrhundert'. The modes of cartography examined by Stockhammer include terrestrial and celestial mapping in Thomas Pyncheon's *Mason & Dixon* (1997), or visual and tactile as suggested in Jorge Luis Borges' short story 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' (1940). Lewis Carroll's design of a map, which is "a perfect and absolute blank", would be an example of a representation of non-mappability of space in literature.

114 | Magister, "New York und die Macht der Karten: Kartographie von Migration, Urbanisierung und Ethnizität," 341.

115 | Massey, Allen, and Sarre, *Human Geography Today*, 17.

fabrics. They raise to visibility, behind the map, around the map, in the map they consign invisibility.”¹¹⁶

The map thus considered, precedes ‘territory’ and paradoxically renders it (the territory) invisible to the map-reader.¹¹⁷ De Certeau puts this differently: for him, the ‘readability’ of the city is possible only from a distance. It is the objectivity of the “solar Eye” which transforms the complexity of the city into “texturology”. Of course, he then dismisses this “transparent text” as “a way of keeping aloof” by the space planner, urbanist, city planner or cartographer. The panorama city is a “theoretical (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short, a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices.”¹¹⁸ In discourse, the concept ‘city’ itself is an ideological concept – a totalizing nexus of socio-economic and political strategies that is kept in existence by the “language of power”.¹¹⁹ However, subverting de Certeau’s concept ‘city’ are “contradictory movements that counterbalance and combine themselves outside the reach of panoptic power.”¹²⁰ Locating these “movements” allows us to explore the *discursive strategy* of localization of space in *That Rose-Red Empire*.

The various elements that characterize Sinclair’s perambulations in Hackney such as his re-treading of various roads or areas or his use of landmarks, linking people, memories and places, suggest that the discursive charting of territory begins rather tangibly. While Sinclair’s method predominantly uses mnemonic devices (memories and testimonies) to locate and access place, walking is an important strategy. As we saw earlier, its phatic function not only rekindles communal associations and networks, but it also maps the spaces they occupy or signify. The first-person narration and pervasive self-reference and reflexivity overemphasizes and determines the subjective position/perspective even as it establishes authenticity, and through that a sense of objectivity. This allows for a phenomenological approach to space as opposed to the epistemic access upheld by geographical cartography. It is, nevertheless, a rather futile attempt to derive any sort of conventional map by following Sinclair about the borough in *That Rose-Red Empire*. This difficulty is greater due to the lack of narrative structure in the book. The fact that Sinclair’s prose resists reading, coupled with his reluctance to use conventional structuring devices for his narrative, is perhaps a symptom

116 | Pile and Thrift, *Mapping the Subject*, 48, 371.

117 | As Baudrillard’s simulacrum precedes (and replaces) the original. It is indeed an ironic coincidence that the fable from which Baudrillard derives and develops his notion of simulacrum should also utilize maps as a narrative trope. Borges and Hurley, *Collected Fictions*, 325; See also Pascalev, “Maps and Entitlement to Territory.”

118 | de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.

119 | Ibid., 95.

120 | Ibid.

of the (wishful or real) non-mappability of Hackney that is being drawn into discourse here. On the other hand, much in the sense of Latour's networks, this is also a different way of thinking and charting space than practiced by the conventional discipline. We have *pathways* rather than *coordinates* to mark the contours of the topography of Hackney invoked by Sinclair's narrative.¹²¹ Instead of de Certeau's up-down/high-low dichotomy of 'seeing' the city, we have a catalogue of perspectives in which *Hackney-insiders* and *outsiders* take up two focal points, which coincide with the inclusion or exclusion in (Sinclair's) narrative on Hackney.

Hackney *Insiders* are rounded up and described by Sinclair.¹²² They are romanticized and portrayed as eccentric, artistic, rebellious, mavericks bordering on anarchists, the different voices of their testimonials allowing this portrait to become 'polychromatic'. Sinclair's portrait focuses on a certain group of Hackney, 'cultural producers' as they may be called, a generation-specific sub-cultural group, consisting for most part of people who know each other, forming in *That Rose-Red Empire* an 'inner circle' of Hackney, held together by their interviewee, the author, Iain Sinclair. Access to them is allowed by and through Sinclair – the concrete manifestations are the transcribed testimonials appearing in italics, and thus set apart from. But they are also embedded within the main narrative, which reads as Sinclair's own long 'testimonial', his ode to Hackney. The insiders move

121 | Contrary to the first impression of non-mappability of space in Kafka's short story "The Castle", Stockhammer identifies and describes a charting of territory characterized by "pathways". (German: Bahnen) Stockhammer, "Verortung. Die Macht der Karten und die Literatur im 20. Jahrhundert," 325. The road leading up to the castle, that is, the distance between the protagonist K and the castle, is an example of such a pathway for Stockhammer. It simultaneously contains and enfolds a problematic space: while other characters appear to freely move in and out of the castle, this road (or a "path") never allows K, a land surveyor, access to the castle (the existence of which, according to Stockhammer, is also questionable). In an analysis of the semiotic language of high-speed urbanization and industrialization in more recent works, Detlev Ipsen has highlighted, in a similar vein, the semiotic forms islands and corridors. See Ipsen, "Reading Mega-Urban Landscape – A Semiotic Sketch" However, in the case of the present study, the description of space as "pathways" is more suitable because the notion implies flexibility (of space), and still retains an association with structure.

122 | At another level, the author is indeed, a "foreigner" in Hackney, a fact to which he alludes himself: "Hackney suited us both. As displaced Celts, at home nowhere on this earth, we stood apart: witnessing, with cynical detachment, the mess the English had made of it, the way they allowed Edinburgh advocates and Calvinist fanatics from north of the border to destroy the established structure from within." Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 310, my emphasis. But perhaps it is precisely this that makes him such an ardent observer of the borough. The cast of people appearing in the book also consists largely of those who have moved through the borough, a fact that possibly enhances their status of "standing apart".

about in *pathways* in Hackney that allow them to exist in relation to each other, in relation to the borough and in relation to the city (de Certeau's phatic aspect of walking). Thus, these *pathways* chart intimate knowledge about the 'insiders' as well as the borough and the city of London. They point to the existence in this borough through social interaction and community while highlighting the strength and significance of an independent and cultural existence for these 'insiders', with Sinclair as their spokesperson.

The position of one dwelling outside the borough, or the *outsider*, is also determined and described by Sinclair. That is, the author does not allow any sort of direct access to this position. The London city council or the Hackney council, which control decisions about what is to happen of the borough, are the 'outsiders'. I take liberty here to quote at length in order to display how the polarization between insider and outsider is established. The attribution of power asymmetries further strengthens the sense of victimization of the borough (see especially my emphasis):

"I listened, over years, to so many of Anna's stories [...] that I experienced, by proxy, the way the system collapsed. The crucial moment being the handover of control from the Inner London Education Authority to Hackney. Budgets were decimated. Bureaucracy increased by quantum leaps. Teachers didn't receive their pay cheques. *And the managers were so remote they didn't even live in London. They were premature multitaskers, running businesses in Manchester and Birmingham, [...] and still finding the odd moment to invent new torments for the foot soldiers in the trenches: the wretched teachers [...] In cutting loose from Hackney's patronage, my wife found herself coaching the children of aspiring families in tower blocks or teaching English to a constantly shifting group of asylum seekers in Peckham.* All of this was at the edge of charity: the willing volunteer in a *collapsing system* that depended on the altruism of good hearted individuals.

Search for what's on offer, given age and over-qualification, and you are soon conducting dubious surveys, door to door in dangerous places. Statistics to be manipulated. The fascination, Anna found, was not in the material she gathered but glimpses of the unknown lives, the way flats were decorated. The stories people told, the lonely confessions. The tea and sweet cakes they offered."¹²³

We see here that the unjust, corrupt avatar of authority (outsider) takes shape not so much by way of its description but rather by being singled out as the cause of the system's collapse. Juxtaposing it with "aspiring families in tower blocks" or the

123 | Ibid., 257–248, my emphasis.

“asylum seekers in Peckham” and the “altruism of good hearted individuals” then emphasizes it further. The catalogue emphasizing the two different perspectives thus displays the difference in modes of access to the city, and weakens the notion of one true objective ‘reality’.¹²⁴ This divergence is magnified by the fact that the ‘inside’ perspective itself is fragmented by virtue of it being constituted by numerous testimonials. The physical and ideological distance between the two positions represents the discrepancy in ways of understanding the urban space and points, at a more pragmatic level, to the predicament of its development in terms of city planning.

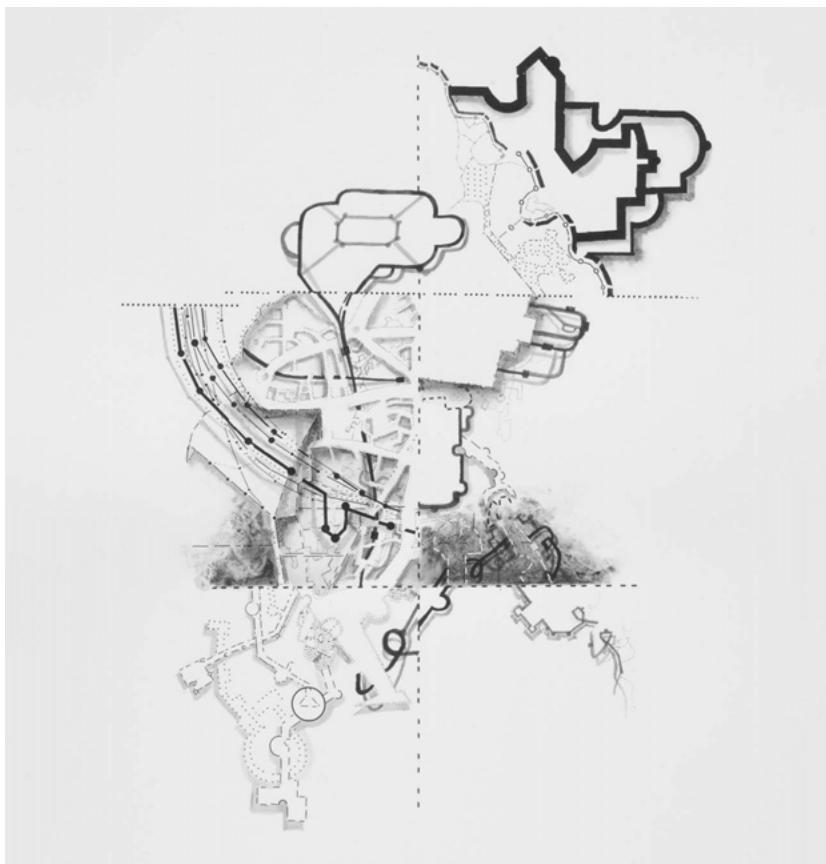
Paradoxically, maps again play an important role as a documentary strategy in the discursive mapping of Hackney, along with images of etchings by the artist Oona Grimes.¹²⁵ There are four maps included at different intervals in the book, see for example Image 2: Oona Grimes’ Etching of Hackney Map #1¹²⁶. These maps are made up of different registers much like a collage consisting of architectural blue prints, survey maps, transportation maps and street maps with layerings and shadowings, which add depth to the inherent flatness of such images. The dotted lines, which divide the image up into uniform sections, reminiscent of an architectural blueprint denoting different rooms, are perhaps merely lines along which the ‘map’ may be folded. Alternatively, they represent *ley lines* whose significance (if they are really ley lines and have any significance) is left inaccessible to the reader. They also allow a sort of fragmentation, which fractures the unity of the map as these lines demarcate the boundaries of the register of map used. At a glance, it appears to simply re-sketch a map of Hackney. This conglomerate of different registers of cartography teases the eye. As one compares it to a ‘proper’ map of Hackney or the map cover that Sinclair does provide us with, trying to pin down which area of Hackney the map may be of, one realizes that this assemblage undoes the integrity of so-called objective mapping. It points us to the fact that even within the mapping system, we have multiple registers/modes of mapping, which materialize in conspicuously altered representations of the same space.

124 | In Baudrillard’s terms, an extreme formulation of this idea would claim that the notion of “reality” itself is rendered irrelevant since we only have access to the testimonies or narratives (which are themselves acts of re-construction).

125 | Using ink, gouache & letraset. See “Oona Grimes Homepage.”

126 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 1, 229, 433, 576.

Image 2: Oona Grimes' Etching – Hackney Map #1



Source – As it appears in *That Rose-Red Empire*, 1. Copyright © Oona Grimes

The images or drawings are, like the maps, also etchings in black, of various motifs related to Hackney and made on demand after the artist had read some of Sinclair's work that was to appear in *That Rose-Red Empire*.¹²⁷ Going along Sinclair's hunch, of the ability of these drawings to lend structure of some sort to his narrative, we find that most of these drawings do reflect the content appearing in its pages.¹²⁸ However, the sequence in which the drawings are ordered in

127 | "Interview: Iain Sinclair and Oona Grimes."

128 | "This woman, I realized, might prove salvation of my Hackney project. She could convert the inchoate mess into a formal system. If she could devise symbols for each section of the book, like the intertitles of a silent film, readers would have something on which to rely. Trust the picture, not the word [...] Amassed evidence, I tried to convince myself, was moving

relation to the chapters (content) is again jumbled. Thus, as an example, the image on page 27 of the scissors and a gun which is being shot reflects the chapter called Park Barbers, but which appears instead much later on page 77, at the beginning of quite another chapter called Waste. Just as a 'normal' table of contents is expected to structure lengthier texts, this 'scrambling' of 'order' in Sinclair's lengthy narrative and the jumbled up sequence of Grimes' images is, by now, rather predictable and consistent with Sinclair's style. Therefore, I would like to suggest that contrary to their anticipated ability to structure the narrative, these visualizations represent a cultural practice. They represent on the one hand, the artistic tradition of etchings as practiced by William Blake, and thus function as a paean to the artistic heritage of Hackney.¹²⁹ On the other hand, they are not simply a substitution for verbal descriptions (Sinclair's narrative) but constitute representations of the author's (as well as the artist's) cognitive conceptualization – his selectivity and individual way of looking at, or conceiving, that which is re-presented in *That Rose-Red Empire*.¹³⁰ This juxtaposition of various 'means of mapping' plays a vital part in Sinclair's ANT. This play with images and geographical or discursive 'mapping' positioned within a politics of representation of the 'real' becomes a representation of cultural practices that make it possible to anticipate, to conceive and to understand how they become constructed.¹³¹ At the same time, it is precisely this strategy that points once more to the need to theorize the position of the spokesperson, the one who traces the networks, in Latour's ANT.

towards a mathematical system I would never interpret. But Oona, staying in one place, taking her time, evaluating the Jiffy bags of material with which I would keep her supplied, just might." Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 465.

129 | For a more detailed listing and discussion of the use of photographs, graphics, documents or works of art in novels see Hallet, "The Multimodal Novel" That is, apart from their function as a visualization of the narrative and providing motifs related to Hackney or reflecting Hackney.

130 | Ibid., 136–7.

131 | Ibid.

WHAT IS THERE AND WHICH IS HERE? THAT IS FACT AND THIS CONCERN!

So it folds and unfolds, the slippery narrative of memory and myth.¹³²

Generically speaking, we have in *That Red-Rose Empire* almost an exaggeration of typically Romantic elements giving rise to a narrative which is, as we have seen in the current analysis, anything other than the ethno-methodological description involving a planned, structured and deliberated activity of ‘observation’ that Latour’s empiricism would require.¹³³ These (Romantic elements) include a highly subjective speaker position, a critical stance towards prominent features of the contemporary urban scenario and a longing (I dare say, pining) for redemption “evoked in a synthesis of political and personal terms”, which is more than just a little intentional on Sinclair’s part.¹³⁴ The mediating agency is homodiegetic and yet, omniscient. However, it is an omniscience that hides itself behind the figure of an outraged author/artist and denizen of Hackney. Although not a ‘view from above’ (also literally from the top of a building), engaging with rival representations, the positioning of the author nevertheless becomes empowering as it works to expose the self-serving myth of a beautiful, gentrified city. Reminiscent of Dickens’ critique of the dehumanizing effects of utilitarianism, Sinclair’s treatment of corrupt politics and corporate capitalism is relentless and allows it an ‘identity’ only allegorically, implied in “aspirational flats with slender, bicycle-decorated balconies” or by mention of computer generated pictures on the Olympic fence, of what will replace ‘hard and fast’ Hackney.¹³⁵ Thus we see performed, a ‘displacement of point of view’ to shake the iron pillar of the ‘view from above’. (Latour’s words) The poetic of mnemonics in Sinclair’s montage of the testimonies of Hackney’s “leftist utopianism, and “bohemian collectives” also has an empowering thrust as it renders the borough a living breathing ‘organicity’ (de Certeau) which won’t simply be ‘cleansed’ away.¹³⁶

132 | Sinclair as quoted in Arnaud, “Rose-Red Empire – Iain Sinclair Book Launch and Exhibition.”

133 | ‘Observation’ itself is an institutionalized or ‘scientific’ activity. Latour’s import of ethno-methodology as a second empiricism in sociology thus needs to be thematized also in terms of the transfer of method that must then occur between two separate disciplines. This in turn would need to acknowledge the ‘observer’ as a ‘variable’ – an admittedly subjective position.

134 | Eckstein and Reinfandt, “The Adventures of William Blake, or: Romanticism Today and How It Got Here”; This is suggested by the explicit allusion to Blake by Sinclair. See for example Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 540.

135 | Sicher, *Rereading the City/Rereading Dickens*, 1–39; Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 9, 331, 559.

136 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 473.

We have seen in the preceding section(s), how Sinclair's project enriches the scenography of Hackney and thus suggests a way of turning matters of fact into matters of concern, presenting, as Latour would have it, a move towards a second empiricism.

Some caution is called for, however, as my own analysis has implicitly shown. Sinclair's narrative also displays how this second empiricism runs the risk of becoming a mere 'hording' of knowledge, an 'inchoate mess' or a documentary 'excess' which resists 'access'.¹³⁷ Often, it is characteristically cryptic or simply incomplete – for example, when Sinclair draws a similarity between a Marc Karlin film and his own project. The film in question is a "sort of elegy for a vanishing era", a portrait of, and featuring, the general practitioner and social activist Dr. Widgery and Sheila Rowbotham as they move about in (their) London, going about their work.¹³⁸ Sinclair describes the film content and follows it up with what is presumably an insert from the film – a dialog between Dr. Widgery and a patient, and finally, a film appreciation of sorts by Sinclair himself. However, none of this is textually or visually marked as such. Readers are left guessing as to which is what, and which film or footage Sinclair is referring to or how he has access to it. One can safely argue that such 'gaps' in the narrative are often not a 'telling' of anything as much as they are evidence of Sinclair's idiosyncratic style which demands constant deciphering, conveying the feeling that 'less' would have meant 'more'. To borrow from de Certeau, "looking from the shores of legibility toward an inaccessible beyond", Sinclair's narrative as well as the testimonies in the book imply a total lack of communication or at the most, an ineffective or even futile dialog between the counter positions (insider/outsider) we encounter in the book.¹³⁹ It implies an unresolvable struggle between these two parties. It is a struggle that will be confirmed and resolved outside the book, as the Olympic development plan pushes forward to 'regenerate' the London borough, thus determining the state's hegemony, and displaying the ineffectiveness of the artistic community as well as Sinclair's project.¹⁴⁰

137 | Schlotte and Voigts-Virchow, "Introduction: The Creative Treatment of Actuality – New Documentarism," 107–8. While defining a culture of pervasive media accessibility which influences documentarism today, the authors identify in "the urban" a culture of universal "axcess", a portmanteau derived from excess and access. See also Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing*, 239. Lodge analyses Jorge Luis Borges' "Funes, the Meorius": "In the overly replete world of Funes there were nothing but details, almost contiguous details.", which he describes as a metonymic excess that resists the reconstruction of something "whole".

138 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 46.

139 | de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 97.

140 | This evaluation is (sadly) rendered even more conclusive when read along Sinclair's following statement: "Transporting a raft of Hackney connected materials across the river to Lambeth is both an act of homage to the local artisan-visionary, William Blake, and an

On the other hand, this is possibly an indication of what distinguishes the contemporary ‘urban’ experience of this particular London borough or for this author. His ‘vertiginous’ prose conjures up a hologram composed from an endless sea of stories from an endless number of people, providing in its own way *access* to the urban *excess* that surrounds, engulfs and finally renders itself elusive and remains intangible. The city itself is conveyed as a separate universe and the borough is transformed into a city where people come ‘to disappear’ (reinforcing the age old belief in the lure of anonymity offered by urban spaces), and through which they pass, leaving traces, collected in Sinclair’s book like in a receptacle. Referring to the ‘regeneration’ that has accosted Hackney, for him an avatar of all evils combined, Sinclair anticipates the ‘documentariness’ of his project himself:

“Notices around the latest field of rubble boasted of IMPROVING THE IMAGE OF CONSTRUCTION. The thing itself no longer mattered, and barely existed, but the image got sharper and sharper. High definition, finally, absolves content.”¹⁴¹

This underlines what Hito Steyerl has identified as the documentary *uncertainty principle* in her discussion of the relationship between documentary and representation of ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ in the contemporary realm of art:

“Wir sind umgeben von groben und zunehmend abstrakten ‘dokumentarischen’ Bildern, wackligen, dunklen oder unscharfen Gebilden, die kaum etwas zeigen außer ihrer eigenen Aufregung. Je direkter, je unmittelbarer sie sich geben, desto weniger ist meistens auf ihnen zu sehen. Sie evozieren eine Situation der permanenten Ausnahme und einer dauerhaften Krise, einen Zustand erhöhter Spannung und Wachsamkeit.”¹⁴²

acknowledgement of a certain kind of expulsion: the dark shadow of the Olympic fence, supermalls, art as sponsored interventionism. My book, Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire, offending the index of Orwellian politics and spin, has been banished from its generative territory.” It appears to imply that more than just the book has been banished. See Sinclair’s statement in Arnaud, “Rose-Red Empire – Iain Sinclair Book Launch and Exhibition”; Such a reading justifies Zygmunt Bauman’s use of the metaphor of war over urban space. See Bauman, “Urban Space Wars”; See also Hansen, *Space Wars and the New Urban Imperialism*, who asks “But why use such a heavy metaphor as space wars?”, 16.

141 | Sinclair, *That Rose-Red Empire*, 470, original caps.

142 | My translation from the German “die dokumentarische Unschärferelation”. “We are surrounded by blurry and increasingly abstract ‘documentary’ images, shaky, dark or fuzzy structures which display hardly anything except a sense of anxiety. The greater their efforts to appear unmediated, the lesser can be expected to be seen on them. They evoke a situation

Steyerl is discussing the 'documentariness' of contemporary war photography taken (unintentionally) in low camera resolution, which is, of course, quite a different cup of tea than Sinclair's Hackney portrait. What I would like to borrow for our purpose is the attribute that she derives from it of what characterizes 'the documentary' today, that which she terms the 'uncertainty principle'. The low visibility of these pictures paradoxically lends them documentariness, or their unmediated-ness, their authenticity. Inversely, the uncertainty principle reflects Sinclair's assertion that "high definition, finally, absolves content". This condition in an urban context has already been imagined by de Certeau's description of the unreadability of the city. The "hero flâneur" finds that he is on the streets down below, beneath the "threshold of visibility".¹⁴³ If this is what characterizes contemporary documentary in the urban context, then it is logical to read Sinclair's narrative and textual style as an ideological documentary strategy, which resists 'visibility' and therefore, 'readability'. The narrative draws largely on mnemonic strategies or references, that is, sensory data from the personal perception of the people interviewed and the author. In face of the authenticity of the 'source' of information (memory) and the 'sincerity' of the chronicler, the question of the accuracy of its mediation loses significance and is perhaps even rendered irrelevant. Addressing the paradoxes of authenticity, Julia Straub's suggestion is to consider the dichotomy of inside-outside as an irreducible one when speaking about authenticity:

"From the seventeenth century onwards this wedge was driven between the inner, 'real' self and the external, 'fake' self. [...] With the onset of Romanticism, authentic selfhood became aligned with emotional honesty and artistic genuineness. Authenticity referred to some deep, internal 'core' of the self, controlled by and ultimately in conflict with expectations from the outside."¹⁴⁴

Let us, for a moment, juxtapose this inside-outside dichotomy of authenticity that Straub talks of with the insider-outsider dichotomy of perspectives that has been discussed in this analysis. The Hackney-insider perspective is the "inner, 'real' self", which is "controlled by and ultimately in conflict with [expectations from] the outside".¹⁴⁵ When the epistemological tenets that documentary could draw on have been undermined and the 'real' in history or memory is rendered a slippery 'thing', it appears that the means of representation offered by the "emotional honesty and artistic genuineness" of the "authentic selfhood",

of permanent crisis, a heightened state of tension/suspense and vigilance." See Steyerl, *Die Farbe der Wahrheit*, 7–17.

143 | de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.

144 | Straub, *Paradoxes of Authenticity*, 14.

145 | *Ibid.*

embodied primarily by Sinclair, gain irreducible authority as authentic narratives. On having read Sinclair's enterprise as an ANT-like method, we see that the spokesperson position not only constitutes the means of the method, but also functions as its authenticating authority.

In order to continue our quest into the productivity and applicability of Latour's ANT for a reading of literary documentaries, we will continue to thematize and problematize the position as well as the process of observation within the ANT-framework of analysis by focusing on the observer position and author-narrator. Indeed, it was very difficult to ignore Sinclair's grounding of himself into his text about Hackney – that essential referentiality of his documentation that ironically becomes a measure of authenticity in his literary documentary. An authenticity not so much in the sense of a measure of its truth content, but a means of making visible the connection between the text and its outer material world by showing how the author generates a sense of his own presence in the text and, for that matter, of the tangible and intangible 'world' he inhabits. This presence is, paradoxically, also a testimony to the narrative's subjectivity and a narrative anchor that guarantees its realness in terms of its assumed reality of the empirically anchored author-observer. Sinclair's narrative thus provides us with a particularly thick and layered description of Hackney that does justice to a particular mesh of relations and testimonies that have travelled through time and space, that have gone through a process of reflexivity, that are perhaps continuously changing, but in Sinclair's book, nevertheless, represent different positions from which Hackney may be 'seen'. To be able to reach such conclusions, however, it was necessary to extend the Latourian analogy to include and highlight the position of the observer, who must essentially remain within the network for a self-reflexive, and therefore particularly efficient, ANT analysis to be possible. In terms of measuring the applicability and productivity of Latour's ANT, what the following chapter strives to afford is, therefore, a means to further explore this position of the observer by turning our attention to a counter example to the elusive density of Sinclair's *That Rose-Red Empire*.

IV. Strategies, Spatial Trajectories and Scenography: Micro-Mapping the Megacity in Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City*

We now move onto a book that is more reader friendly than *That Rose-Red Empire* in the different ways it tries to document and communicate the city of Mumbai. Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* is a lucid and accessible, first-person narrative about the author's experiences of living in Mumbai for two years with his family. This part journalistic, part autobiographical account tells of the dirty politics, politicians and gangsters Mehta encounters, and exposes a different side of the film and entertainment industry. We learn of the religious feuds and instances of violence the city has had to live through, and meet Mumbai's 'aspirational' consumers as they relate their life in the megacity.¹ Readers are thus given glimpses into a largely inaccessible part of Mumbai as the author gives this clandestine world a discursive form. Anticipating the capricious and diffuse implications of present-day global mobility, Mehta advocates his book by urging the importance and need to understand Mumbai.² This over-arching grand project of 'understanding' contemporary Mumbai is a dominant strand running through Mehta's long and detailed journalistic report. The sub-title, "Bombay Lost and Found", indicates on the other hand, a subtle, more personal aspect of Mehta's narrative account. Mumbai is introduced to readers as a city the author first left (lost) to go to America and then returned to (found) again by writing about it:

1 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 31: "It is a population led to believe that every year they will get a little more than they had the previous year [...] From the top (of the pyramid of aspirations), there is only one way to go – and it is a leap – outside the country altogether, to America, Australia, Dubai. To go from the Maruti to the Mercedes, from blue Jeans to the Armani suit, necessitates a move abroad."

2 | Mehta, "Urban India: Understanding the Maximum City (LSE Cities Publication)."

"So I wander the streets with my laptop [...] As people talk to me, my fingers dance with Miss Qwerty. But I have to pay. My currency is stories. Stories told for stories revealed – so have I heard. *Stories from other worlds, carried over the waters in caravans and ships, to be exchanged for this year's harvest of stories.* A hit man's stories to a movie director in exchange for the movie director's story to the hit man. The film world and the underworld, the police and the press, the swamis and the sex workers, *all live off stories; here in Bombay, I do too. And the city I lost is retold into existence, through the telling of its story.*"³

Mehta invokes the existential necessity of story telling reminiscent of Sheherezade, who had to tell a story every night for 1001 nights only to keep herself alive. This has a twofold effect in that on the one hand, it adds a mystical-fairy tale touch to it: "Stories from other worlds, carried over the waters in caravans and ships". That is, we get a sense of Mehta as our storyteller, preparing us for a long session of storytelling. More importantly, it does away with the question of 'truth' as it wills the reader to acknowledge that life per se is available to us only in the form of stories. This is emphasized in the final flourish – "the city I lost is retold into existence, through the telling of its story". Of course, the city that the author 'lost' is a remembered city, of his childhood and from his occasional trips back from New York to visit India. It is a very personal idea of the city that he has left behind, shaped by numerous factors, social and psychological, and nurtured mostly by nostalgia. In order to 'update' his Mumbai, Mehta, based in New York as a journalist, moved back for two years to the city of his birth to write about it. The 'city narrative' is, however, embedded in the autobiographical frame of the author's story of how and why he moved back to Mumbai. The autobiographical strand is thus used to 'package and deliver' Mehta's extraordinary accounts of an unusual selection of people in Mumbai.

Methodologically, Mehta follows in the footsteps of American literary journalists, using immersion as a technique for inspiration for his writing. In the current chapter, I would like to take a closer look at the interaction between these two narrative frames – that of the immersive and investigative journalism and the autobiographical strand. As Mehta is the common denominator, it will allow us to reflect and comment on the position of the observer and spokesperson. In doing so, I do not mean to stretch the analogy to include traditional journalistic writing in an ANT framework. Rather, by reading this book within an ANT setup, my purpose is to firstly, collect and analyze different strategies of documenting and narrating the city. Secondly, I think it is possible to tease out the parts or techniques that endeavor to go beyond journalistic reporting in the hope that we may learn and add to our ANT framework through this exercise. Thirdly, by consistently problematizing the observer position, the chapter will underline the

3 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 38, my emphasis.

need to level the position of the observer-narrator and implicate it in the actor-networks. Documenting Mumbai is a task that most obviously exceeds the scope of a single man's perspective. My approach to an analysis of Mehta's narrative is based on the hunch that it is precisely the herculean nature of the task, which provides a sort of thrust to the movement of the author and his writing. That is, it gives direction to his analysis, shapes his narrative and the discourse it produces. Seen thus, Mehta's individual means of structuring and analysing become relevant for our analysis, as much as the places and people he interacts with in order to achieve his goals, and we will analyse these in the upcoming sections. In these midst, we may discover something in Mehta's narrative that goes beyond the plot and events in the spirit of Latour's ANT, to articulate not merely journalistic matters of fact but values or matters of concern.

The booming and bustling megacity, Mumbai, as the subject of Mehta's narration makes his journalistic account extraordinary of course. Its distinctiveness, however, comes from its explorer and narrator, Suketu Mehta himself, and the myriad possibilities of discovery and observation his specific position and identity enable him. That is to say that the author uses his strategy of immersion and his specific biography to create the empirical anchorage in *Maximum City*, and the weight of the book relies heavily on the creation of this anchorage – a *creation* of reality as a lived, experienced phenomenon, and then a transfer of this experientiality into representation. The phatic aspect of the means by which Mehta is able to achieve this 'experientiality' is, as we will see later in the chapter, not quite so explicit as in *That Rose-Red Empire* since the narrative only indirectly reveals how Mehta gets access to the people he interviews through social networking. The author also goes to some lengths to indulge in spheres of life in Mumbai that are lesser accessible in general such as interrogating violent criminals or the police who try to incriminate them. Here, Mehta's strategy of immersion and gritty realism functions as a sort of muckraking, but also shows a willingness on Mehta's part to extend his line of vision or to try to move beyond his upbringing and social or class barriers.⁴ It is precisely such instances, where Mehta must overcome himself or is forced to see beyond his means, that our study will attempt to isolate and juxtapose with Mehta's more journalistic writing for it highlights how ANT affords us different insights than journalism, depending on the role of the observer and the extent of self-reflection he concedes to.

It thus follows that I must highlight Mehta's role in the generation of a very specific image of the city. Mehta portrays Mumbai as a 'maximum city' – of extreme exigencies and eccentric characters. For example, the city unfolds in

4 | We will see later in his book that this is not always as easy to practice for Mehta, as his social surrounding rushes to help them set up their life in Mumbai. In this manner we have constant reminders of the etiquettes that serve as a stronghold of his social standing in the Indian society he has entered again – this time as a 'foreign returnee' – an 'American journalist'.

part as a dark alter ego of Mehta's 'remembered' city and as a horrific *schauplatz* for terrible hate crimes and riots. A description of the book's discursive strategies shows a sort of commodification of the Indian megacity by the diasporic flâneur. This 'othering' of the city caters to a voyeurism, but conceals itself behind the rhetoric of altruistic concern over the plight of a 'city in crisis'.⁵ This aspect will be used once more to indicate and support our critique of the neglect in Latour's ANT of the role of the observer, chronicler or spokesperson.⁶ Nevertheless, on the other hand, Mehta's immersive strategy enables him first-hand, empirical access to Mumbai. It thus presents itself as a stimulating case study for ANT scholarship. The combination of journalistic enterprise and personal experience in Mehta's descriptions of Mumbai gives rise to a uniquely dense narrative of at least some of the city's myriad actor-networks, and may indeed represent a stepping-stone toward the articulation of matters of concern.

Mehta begins by highlighting and tracing the tension between Hindu and Muslims in Mumbai at the time he was investigating his book back to the 1992-93 riots sparked by the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Northeast India.⁷ A substantial section of the book is dedicated to revisiting victims as well as the perpetrators of these events. The discursive structuring of bringing together their narratives exposes both, the victims and the perpetrators, as victims of higher opportunist political interests. The rest of the book, although structured into separate chapters or episodes, develops out of this episode as encounters with various persons and insights into the different institutions that were involved. The underworld is referred to as Black-collar work and we encounter various criminals as its avatars.⁸ On the other hand, Ajay Lal from the Indian police force in Mumbai is a winner of the President's Medal for Meritorious Service in the Bombay bomb blasts case. As the story unfolds, Lal is revealed, quite

5 | Mehta takes on the role of a post colonial "subject" himself, "forming" the city. Thus producing what Edward Said has called "second-order knowledge". See Said, *Orientalism*, 52.; This is, in other words, the sort of "Western" narrative that "domesticates and distances that which it constructs as 'the other'." Rudiger and Gross, *Translation of Cultures*, 77; See also Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*.

6 | See for example: "All great cities are schizophrenic, said Victor Hugo. Bombay has multiple-personality disorder. During the riots, [...] schizophrenia became a survival tactic." *Ibid.*, 45. See also "[T]he awesome ability to act on someone else's behalf or to have others do your bidding, to sign documents, release wanted criminals, cure illnesses, get people killed." (59) In a conversation with a criminal named Amol: "What will be the effect of this?" I ask Amol. 'Murders will cost two hundred rupees." (87).

7 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, See especially 40-5, but the theme runs throughout Part I of the book.

8 | *Ibid.*, 185-254.

unexpectedly, as more of an exception than a stereotype.⁹ Mehta's friendship with Lal reveals and unfolds not only the challenging life of a leading policeman in Mumbai, but also institutional processes and corruption, infrastructural limitations and unethical consequences. On the other hand, Mehta also confronts a personal ethical struggle as he becomes privy to the unofficial vigilantism and investigative or penal methods of the police in Mumbai.

Bollywood has stand-ins through Vinod Chopra (a director), Mahesh Bhatt (a producer), Sanjay Dutt (the criminally accused but highly successful actor) and Eishan (a "genuine struggler" in the industry).¹⁰ To Mehta's credit, his interactions with them reveal the flipside of Bollywood showbiz rather than adding gloss to its glamour. Mehta's interactions with bar dancers, cross-dressers and prostitutes make readers privy to a more stigmatized amusement industry.¹¹ To counterbalance this charged narrative and to give a closure of sorts to his Mumbai portrait, Mehta follows the lives of an extremely wealthy Jain family who 'takes diksha', that is, sacrifices their 'worldly' life for religious reasons.¹² This is an ironic twist in this tale of the city. Everything that is aspired to by the characters so far encountered – money with all its comforts and luxuries – is renounced by this family in the name of a higher goal, that of Moksha, the salvation of the spirit. This desire for salvation of the spirit almost reads as Mehta's desire of salvation for his beloved city. On the other hand, it is perhaps a reminder of spirituality in the 'jungle' of the megacity, and of the possibility of radical change.

I have already begun to sensitize my reader to Mehta's strategies to order and narrate his experience of the city. The three main nodes in Mehta's city portrait, "Power", "Pleasure" and "Passages" represent Mehta's attempt to structure the excess that he encounters and experiences and can also be seen as three different means of access to the megacity. What quickly becomes clear when we read *Maximum City* as ANT is Mehta's treatment of people as a nexus of associations that provides him with a starting point to trace the actor-networks that carry him forward in his journey of discovery.¹³ In the following section, we will continue this description of the literary and documentary strategies that Mehta adopts to render his experience. In a second step, the analysis of these strategies will help us map the book's spatial trajectories. The insights gained will, in the final section, aid in our evaluation of Mehta's journalism as a prospective ANT method.

9 | Ibid., 131–84.

10 | Ibid., 346–432.

11 | Ibid., 253–345.

12 | Ibid., 497–534.

13 | Ibid., See Contents, xi–xii.

MEHTA'S STRATEGIES FOR AN ANT METHODOLOGY

Tackling the City's Geography, 'Populating the Scenography'

"In vain, great-hearted Kublai, shall I attempt to describe Zaira, city of high bastions. I could tell you how many steps make up the streets rising like stairways, and the degree of the arcades' curves, and what kind of zinc scales cover the roofs; but I already know this would be the same as telling you nothing. The city does not consist of this."¹⁴

Italo Calvino's narrator in *Invisible Cities* is none other than the Venetian, Marco Polo, trying to describe to the great Chinese Ruler Kublai Khan, in vain, the cities he visited on his expeditions. He could be describing different individual cities, or offering different descriptions of the same. The narrator's doubts question the very idea of the accuracy of representation. In such a reading of Calvino's short book, the idea of 'true' descriptions is rendered impossible. In the quote, we get a glimpse of how Calvino contests the possibility of an accurate description of a city by emphasizing the 'petty' contribution made to representation by the perspective or methods of the describer.

In *Maximum City*, this inadequacy of 'methods' takes a more tangible form as we see Mehta grapple to find access to the excess that Mumbai presents, and ways to describe it. The first, most logical attempt is geographical orientation, implied by the map we come across in the first pages. This rather minimalistic and schematic map, however, could not be less useful; it visualizes Mumbai's island status, surrounded by water almost on all sides, but does not show its location in relation to the rest of India. The Gateway of India, a monument that recalls Mumbai's role as the port of entry into India during colonial times, stands lone and wayward as the only historical landmark appearing on the map. The other names are main stations on the western, central and harbor railway lines – the main and most effective means of commute and connectivity in Mumbai. The incongruity of this pairing reflects that of the non-descript map itself, which cannot even begin to define or describe what the physical space depicted, contains, and mocks our expectations from a geographical map. A more pragmatic problem of using maps in Bombay is linked by Mehta to the arbitrariness of the whims and caprices of the government in Mumbai: "The city is in the grip of a mass renaming frenzy [...] as a result, it becomes impossible to look to official maps and road signs for municipal directions."¹⁵ The physical historical landmarks such as the previously mentioned Gateway of India, the Marine Drive, the Taj Hotel, Victoria Terminus now Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, do still nevertheless function as mnemonic

14 | Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 9.

15 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 129.

sources. That is, as 'permanent' statuaries in the city's physical geography, for orientation in a city that is otherwise continually changing:

"The names of the real city are, like the sacred Vedas, orally transmitted. Many of the neighborhoods of Bombay are named after trees and groves that flourished there. The Kambal-grove gave its name to Cumballa Hill; an acacia – babul grove to Babulnath [...] The trees no longer exist, but their names still remain, pleasantly evocative until you realize what has been lost."¹⁶

This alternate geography gives rise to an 'unofficial' version of the city, an existence evoked by the city's denizens and their use of these personalized names for the city's areas. It is through such gestures that a city resists mappability and maintains a sense of elusiveness. Place names and people's stories, both permeate and survive in the urban fabric "like the sacred Vedas, orally transmitted", and find in Mehta, in his Mumbai portrait, a diligent collector and scripter. The place names, already emptied of their original meanings, gain yet further meaning in Mehta's narrative as authentic coordinates with which to map Mehta's movements as he goes about the city – Bandra where he works out of, the beer bars of Worli, the Irani restaurants of Malabar Hill and so on.¹⁷ Although these 'coordinates' are intertwined with specific associations – of descriptions of the author's experiences and the people encountered in these places – they do not provide a very practical guiding register with which to navigate through Mehta's inexhaustible narration, and emphasize the difficulties in mapping the city. Instead, as earlier mentioned, the Mumbai portrait is divided into chapters, which are grouped into three sections called Power, Pleasure and Passages, and then individually broken down into sub-chapters.¹⁸ This strategy of ordering and structuring the urban space and its representation will be examined in more detail further in the chapter.

As an opening, Mehta uses an autobiographical frame. This helps him embed the denser city narrative and thus ease access to it for the reader. Mehta's nostalgic narration of his experience as diaspora, 'in exile' from Bombay, additionally offers the reader a sort of personal connection to the story and a confidential rapport with the narrator. This is a vital function of the autobiographical strand for it establishes the empirical anchorage of Mehta's city narrative, and thus ensures authenticity.

A historical approach characterizes the next frame that we encounter. Mehta traces the trajectory of the renaming of the city – from its anglicized name, Bombay, to Mumbai, and combines it with the empirical strategy of

16 | Ibid.

17 | Ibid., see respectively 91, 269, 261.

18 | Ibid., See Contents, xi–xii.

research into the city's politics and related conflicts. Violence due to religious factors is a regular encumbrance of the Indian political scene; political success may often depend on how effective the political parties are in implementing violence as India's far right political party BJP and the more regional Shiv Sena in Maharashtra have reportedly done in the past.¹⁹ Echoing the general tendency of research on the subject, Mehta retraces the reasons for the destruction of the Babri Masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya in December of 1992, the Godhra riots in 2002 and the subsequent rise of right-wing fundamentalism in Indian politics, all to the Hindutva campaign.²⁰ The violent aftermath, which resulted from the demolition of the mosque and involved communal polarization of Hindus and Muslims, prepared the ground for what came to be known as the Gujarat Carnage.²¹ On February 27th 2002, there was a fire in one of the coaches of the Sabarmati Express in which fifty-nine Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya were burnt to death. The incident was the starting point of statewide violence that came to be classified as genocide as it reached out into 20 districts of the state with the participation and support of the police.²² The findings of the Citizen's Tribunal appointed to investigate the carnage revealed state and police complicity and connivance but despite the existence of thorough investigations, there has been a conspicuous failure on behalf of the Gujarat Government to act judiciously.²³ Due to the overall failure of the criminal justice system, the victims have not received adequate compensation. This episode in India's history is thus said to have revealed symptoms of fascism in a 'theoretically' democratic India and prefigured the "coming crisis" of India.²⁴

19 | Eckert, *The Charisma of Direct Action*; The Bhartiya Janata Party or the People's Party is India's far-right political party. The Shiv Sena is a regional party that aligns itself with the BJP, and sees itself as the Army of the Maratha Warrior-King Shivaji. See "BJP-Website"; See also "Shivsena Party."

20 | Subramanian, *Political Violence and the Police in India*, 176.

21 | Subramanian, *Political Violence and the Police in India*.

22 | Eckert, *The Charisma of Direct Action*, 175.

23 | The National Human Rights Commission on state failure in Gujarat, dated May 2002, notes that there was a "comprehensive failure to protect the rights to life, liberty, equality and dignity of the people of Gujarat starting with the tragedy in Godhra on 27 December 2002 and continuing with the violence that ensued in the weeks that followed". As quoted in Subramanian, *Political Violence and the Police in India*, 188. There were, of course, other failures – that of government intelligence, or lack of transparency in the ensuing arrests and investigations. However, the innumerable issues related to the incident are matter for a separate discussion. For a comprehensive study, see Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*.

24 | Subramanian, *Political Violence and the Police in India*, 228.

This chapter in Mumbai's history is first narrated as research, much like a journalistic study-report. It develops further, however, through his visits to the sites of the violence in Mumbai, and through the interviews that he conducts. A sizeable part of the book is dedicated to revisiting some of the victims as well as perpetrators of the 1992-93 riots that were sparked by the demolition of the Babri Masjid. The fact that the perpetrators are 'given a say' in the narrative is an outstanding feature of Mehta's report. This is the narrative instance I would like to begin with:

"A man who has murdered is not entirely defined by it. After he kills a human being, a large, perhaps the largest, part of him is a murderer, and it marks him off from most of the rest of humanity who are not; but that is not all that he is. He can also be a father, a friend, a patriot, a lover. When we try to understand murder, we mistake the part for the whole; we deal only with the murderer and are inevitably left confused about how he became one, so radically different from you and me. I want to meet the other selves that form Sunil the murderer and see what became of him after the riots."²⁵

Mehta is making an iconoclastic attempt here to understand the 'murderer'.²⁶ The Shiv Sena man, Sunil, is observed to be an attentive father and a husband who values "democracy in the household", and therefore supports his wife's involvement in politics even though she runs for elections as opposition to the party that he works for.²⁷ In his role as immersive journalist, Mehta follows Sunil's life very closely and gains access to intimate knowledge about the criminal. Sunil's openness and willingness to befriend goes to the extent of inviting the author into his home to meet his family. Mehta is shown the various 'business' ventures Sunil runs, goes campaigning with him for a BJP-candidate for Parliament, finds out how much he earns in a month, and becomes privy to his personal aspirations and dreams as he reveals them to the author. Descriptions of Sunil's life and the author's conversations with him are dramatized and unfold alternatingly in reported speech (third person narration), dialogue and authorial commentary in first person narration. The dramatization results in an engaging narrative for the reader and is a style that Mehta generally uses throughout his book. The use of dramatized dialogue and montage of testimonies gives readers a seemingly

25 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 69.

26 | For another similar instance, see Mehta's characterization of the criminal named Amol, who can't imagine sleeping alone at night: "He (Amol) declares, "I've never slept alone in all my life. I need other people in the room." The big tapori is wondering how I can sleep alone, without my mother, without my wife, without babies in the room. He wouldn't be able to; the lord of lafda is scared of the dark." Ibid., 94.

27 | Ibid., 74.

more direct access to the person – it reduces the distance between reader and the experience being described. This generates a more vicarious experience of the city, while signaling an intention to maintain objectivity. The switch to Mehta's own voice, that is, to a first person narration enables him to maintain epistemic authority, which lends his subsequent evaluations more credit.²⁸ In terms of the documentary effect of such narrativization, Mehta's direct and rather intimate exchanges with Sunil magnify the authenticity of the experience and strengthen the account's empirical anchorage. If the author were truly consistent with this style, these insights into the other 'sides' of the murderer could enable an emancipatory mimesis of process. It *could* shift the reader's obvious moral or ethical stance towards Sunil. However, even as the author probes into Sunil's life in order to gain and give insight into the life of a criminal as a 'normal' person, this remains a rather superficial authorial strategy. The bizarre incongruity of the two extremes of Sunil's identity that Mehta's narrative highlights – as a 'normal' family man and as a 'murderer' – only aids Mehta to ostracize Sunil and the class to which he belongs. Mehta cannot overcome the perspective from which he 'sees', that of his own (higher) social standing and his profession. His previously unconventional sketch of Sunil is very quickly counterbalanced by a tempering and rather conservative analysis of the social and historical context that produces the class to which Sunil belongs:

*"The new inheritors of the country – and of the city – are very different from the ones who took over from the British, who had studied at Cambridge and the Inner Temple and come back. They are badly educated, unscrupulous, lacking a metropolitan sensibility – buffoons and small time thugs, often – but, above all, representative. The fact that a murderer like Sunil could become successful in Bombay through engagement in local politics is both a triumph and failure of democracy [...] Most Bombay politicians need to mobilize huge sums of money for campaign expenditures. The salaries they get, the money their party officially sanctions for campaign funds, are a pittance, so they have to look elsewhere."*²⁹

The author's judgmental dichotomy between the Cambridge-educated inheritors and the class that Sunil represents hides behind the language of an immersive journalist trying to balance his participation and observation to render an objective picture. At first glance, his analysis does not judge Sunil personally but admonishes the system that engenders this class of "badly educated, unscrupulous [...] buffoons and small time thugs", and holds the richer classes and their neglect of the country's politics responsible. Studying the electoral roll from 1995 with a

28 | See "The Realist Paradigm" in Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*, 97–132.

29 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 75, my emphasis.

journalist friend, Mehta notes that listings for a slum show all names marked as compared to listings for well-to-do high rises, which show that only 20 percent had voted: "This is the crucial difference between the world's two largest democracies: In India, the poor vote."³⁰ However, Mehta's particularly derogatory description of Sunil and other similar "new inheritors of the country" (see emphasis) is striking when seen alongside his journalistic language that presents objective, empirical data. It points us in our analysis to the ethical conundrums arising from Mehta's stance as well as the position from which he 'sees' and 'speaks'. On a more personal level, it would be justifiable to raise issue with Mehta's abuse of the hospitality and confidence extended to him by Sunil. Besides, while Mehta's language for the 'poor' is distinctly pejorative and condescending, the critical stance he reserves for 'the rich' almost goes unnoticed:³¹ "It will take them a few generations, the new owners, to learn how to run their house and keep it clean and safe. *But how can we begrudge them that when we, who had been the owners for such a long time and had still botched it, handed it over in such disrepair?*"³² Mehta's statement discloses explicitly the position of privilege from which this observer 'sees'. Even while he acknowledges this position, his stance is unable or unwilling to move beyond mere acknowledgement to a questioning of this position. Thus, the mimesis of process that may have been possible in these instances fails to manifest. This also fails to produce reflexivity in Mehta's urban enterprise. The bias of Mehta's insights arising from his privilege and other implications will be further discussed in the next section.

Such incongruous extremes become a dominant trope in Mehta's perception and description of Mumbai. A sense of abnormality is conveyed by the juxtaposition of 'extremes'. In other words, it is Mehta's perspective that portrays Mumbai as a city of extremes. This is realized, for example, in terms of Mumbai's social morphology. An almost stereotypical but recurring theme is the juxtaposition of extremes of poverty and wealth. While there are barely clothed children begging for food or working, others host expensive birthday parties, while yet another family literally 'throws away' their wealth in the process of *diksha*.³³ The abstinence of the Jain family forms a stark contrast with the

30 | Ibid., 68.

31 | See also Mehta's insert of civic activist, Gerson da Cunha's description for this same generation of "inheritors": "The dregs at the bottom have become the scum at the top." Ibid., 77.

32 | Ibid., 77, my emphasis.

33 | See for example "Maybe they [the children in Madanpura, a slum] are working at construction sites, holding on their heads baskets of bricks weighing half again as much as themselves." (37) "There were a hundred kids in there; the hosts would have spent not less than 100,000 rupees – about \$4,000 – on that party." (35) Mehta, *Maximum City*. For the episode on Jain family, see "Good-bye World", 497-534.

alternative lifestyles encountered by Mehta at the beer and dance bars. This sense of a city of extremes is visible in the disparity between the Jain family's piety and the violence of the murderers, or in the difference between the immaculately clean and eerily quiet house of Bollywood icon Amitabh Bachchan and the daily production of feces in the city or the "psychedelic chaos of the streetscape".³⁴

Mehta's strategies of tackling Mumbai's geography that I have described so far also point to the difficulties in grappling the space he wants to represent. Ultimately, however, the ANT strategy of tracing networks is to be discovered in the most striking characteristic of Mehta's Mumbai portrait: the large cast of people that the reader encounters in it. Mehta's means of 'mapping' Mumbai is thus, to use Latour's phrase, to literally 'populate the scenography' with the people he meets. These function as nodes in the network and mark a sort of entry point for Mehta, for his activity of tracing networks. His means of articulating matters of concern lie in describing the networks that become visible to him through them. However, Mehta's means of populating the scenography and describing the networks differ from those of Sinclair, and will be discussed separately in the upcoming sections. The readability of such documentation is, on the other hand, maintained by categorically organizing his encounters with these people (which textually leads to chapters and sub-chapters.) Part I, for example, is called "Power" in which the sub-chapters accordingly deal with politicians ("Powertoni"), the police ("Number Two After Scotland Yard) and members of the underworld to whom he refers to as "Black-Collar Workers".³⁵

His method of immersive, investigative journalism leads him to different spheres of life in Mumbai. His move from America (with his family) to live in Mumbai exposes life in the city on a daily basis in all its sundry details, toils and labors included.³⁶ Following the lives of individuals such as the Bollywood movie director, Vinod Chopra, enables access to institutions such as Bollywood, the movie industry, and the related exposure of institutional corruption. We encounter Chopra as a suppressed artist fighting to find a balance between his ideas, public expectations from the movies and the arbitrary guidelines of the Indian censor board. This episode involves a de-mythification of the industry through juxtapositions such as the grandiose image of blockbuster actors such as Amitabh Bachchan vis-à-vis his subdued personality in real life and a possibly

34 | Ibid., See respectively, 359–62, 127, 260.

35 | Ibid., Contents.

36 | Ibid., 3–38.

dying career.³⁷ Or the misleading promises of the glamour of on-screen life as compared to the everyday realities of Eishaan, the struggling actor.³⁸

Some persons become a stand-in metaphor for sections of the population such as the sexualized and stigmatized bar dancer, Monalisa (often referred to as a “cut girl” with reference to her wrist-cutting). Or the likewise sexualized and stigmatized cross-dresser and married man, Manoj, who becomes Honey at night and works at the same bar as the dancer, Monalisa.³⁹ Ajay Lal is the avatar of the Bombay State police, described as “that rarity in Bombay: a cop who doesn’t drink.”⁴⁰ With his law abiding, tea-totaling nature, Ajay Lal is more an exception than the rule in the police force. This is, admittedly, a limitedly vicarious experience of the city as the testimonies of his cast of Mumbai denizens are represented diegetically (narrated in third person). When they are dramatized for a more direct rendering, they are always interspersed with Mehta’s comments. Despite Mehta’s presence throughout the narrative, his interactions with all these various individuals enables access to different spaces in the city. A hint of ‘normalcy’ is introduced through Babanji, the runaway poet. The son of a well-known chemistry professor in Bihar, a north-western state in India, Babanji runs away to Mumbai in pursuit of his dreams to write poetry, instead of following in his father’s footsteps. He forms a ray of hope in this collection of rather eccentric characters, even more so than the religious Jain family. Though he lives a disillusioned life on the streets of Mumbai, there is a happy ending of sorts to this strand of the city narrative as we learn that he finally becomes united with his father again who comes looking for him all the way from Bihar, and is to return to his home with him.⁴¹

The following section continues the task of describing Mehta’s literary documentary strategies. Specifically, I will show how Mehta uses the autobiographical strand as a story telling device, and that a closer analysis of this strategy reveals (i) the perspective from which the author ‘sees’ and ‘speaks’, and (ii) the influence of this perspective on the textual representation of the city.

37 | Ibid., 359–362. Similar examples include access to crime in the city through the murderers and “underground” gang members he interviews; or access to the world of a more stigmatized entertainment business of the bar dancers through Monalisa, and so on.

38 | Ibid., 385–93.

39 | See sub-chapter, “A City in Heat” ibid., 264–345.

40 | Ibid., 155.

41 | See sub chapter “Runaway Poet” ibid., 473–96. Another character who may be said to introduce this sense of normalcy is Girish, the software programmer who takes Mehta to meet some people involved in the riots in Mumbai. (page 41 onwards) Girish appears more or less consistently throughout the book, but he plays a major part only as a link to the Shiv Sena men.

Empirical Anchorage and Shifting Perspectives

Bombay is in my mind because it has given me something to write.⁴²

Contrary to Sinclair's fixed (insider) perspective in the previous chapter, we encounter here an author oscillating between what appears at first glance, to be two different perspectives. On the one hand, Mehta is an 'insider' to the terrain he covers, an Indian by virtue of his lineage and a childhood spent in Mumbai. Though the book rarely reveals it, he still has family in Mumbai and relies on them for the social networking that his immersive journalism requires.⁴³ On the other hand, he is an 'outsider' since he left India as a young man. He was educated in the USA, and now lives in New York. In the first part of the book, titled "Personal Geography", Mehta relates his background.⁴⁴ His experience as diaspora is narrated in first person as a 'looking back', and is overshadowed by feelings of exile and alienation towards his host country, America. I take the liberty of quoting the author at length in order to give my reader an impression of the rhetoric with which Mehta appeals to the sympathies of his readers in order to establish the empirical anchorage of his book.

"In Jackson Heights we reapproximated [sic] Bombay, my best friend Ashish and I. Ashish had also been moved from Bombay to Queens [...] We would walk around the streets of Jackson Heights, Ashish, his new neighbor Mitthu, and I, singing Hindi movie songs from the seventies, when we had been taken away; travelling back on music, the cheapest airline. On spring nights, the newly softened air carried news from home, from the past, which in Gujarati is known as the "bhoot-kal" – the ghost time. Three young Gujarati men on the streets, singing suspiciously [...] That was the true period of my exile, when I was restrained from forces greater than myself from going back. *It was different from nostalgia, which is a simple desire to evade the linearity of time.* I made, in the back of my school notebook, a calendar beginning early in the spring [...] Each day I crossed off the previous one and counted the remaining

42 | Ibid., 491. The "runaway poet", Babanji, speaks these lines about Mumbai just before leaving the city to return to his hometown in Bihar, but they could almost be Mehta's own sentiments.

43 | See for example "So when my uncle phones me one day and tells me about a family in the diamond market that is about to renounce the world – take diksha – I put aside everything else and go meet them." Ibid., 495.

44 | Ibid., 3–38.

days like a jail sentence [...] I existed in New York, but I lived in India, taking little memory trains.⁴⁵

He refuses to let his sentimentality be dismissed as 'mere' nostalgia. Although, it is, indeed, nostalgia, in the sense that the author romanticizes the place 'left behind'. But the reminiscing feeds the memory of an India or Bombay 'left behind', starting anew each time as a cycle:

"For us, who left at the beginning of our teenage years, [...] we kept returning to our childhoods. Then, after enough trips of enough duration, we returned to the India of our previous visits. I have another purpose for this stay: to update my India, so that my work should not be an endless evocation of childhood, of loss, of a remembered India. I want to deal with the India of the present."⁴⁶

His status as diaspora and the purpose of his visit to India this time is addressed explicitly and extensively. Its rhetoric reaches out to the reader on terms that are more sentimental and establishes a personal sort of author-reader rapport. It is perhaps a sense of caution on Mehta's part that the empirical anchorage of his enterprise hinges so insistently on his own honesty and reliability. It is a sign of his apprehension perhaps that all that which later appears in the book is possibly so estranging for the reader as to affect his credibility. To this end, Mehta introduces the ultimate trump card to gain the sympathy of his readers: that of a better life for his children. When their children were growing up in New York, the author's Indian mother tongue, Gujarati, was "rendered unspeakable" and their Indian food "inedible".⁴⁷ He wishes for his children to have the experience of "living in a country where everyone looks just like them" and "grow up with confidence" as "they will get a sense of their unique selves".⁴⁸

Continuing in this strain of honesty and sincerity, Mehta makes no pretenses: "I was no longer a Bombayite; from now on, my experience of the city would be as an NRI, a non resident Indian."⁴⁹ With this he draws attention to his 'outsider'

45 | Ibid., 8–9, my emphasis.

46 | Ibid., 38.

47 | Ibid., 12.

48 | Ibid., 12–3. "A sense of their unique selves" sounds like an odd and an almost inconceivable thing to seek for in Mumbai, or even in India, especially by someone who is visibly Indian. We will see, however, how Mehta's status as diaspora does indeed make him and his family "special" in their social circle.

49 | Ibid., 10.

status. The appeal of the rhetoric of sincerity in this authorial strategy of repeatedly laying oneself bare to the reader gains Mehta the empirical anchorage for his enterprise. The sentimental autobiographical strand distracts from the fact Mehta uses gritty realism as a documentary strategy to spectacularize the city's underbelly. Revisiting the city one perhaps lost, metaphorically or physically, gangsters and murderers are not really the first choice of people to meet with. In the first chapter, "Personal Geography", Mehta rigorously works to establish his authenticity and credibility by giving insight into his life and family history. The author thus anchors his personal history within this narrative about the city, a trope that is carried throughout the book. The familiar, confiding tone of the narrator's rapport, his introduction of himself and his statement of purpose in this first chapter, creates intimacy with the reader and establishes Mehta as a reliable narrator.

Mehta's immersive-investigative technique entails that he establish himself in the narrative as a reliable narrator. The figure of narrator thus embodies his roles as experiencer, interviewer and scripter, and becomes his instrument of authentication. The paradox and dilemma of the documentary endeavor lies in precisely this composition, to create a reliable speaking instance, only to render its 'constructedness' insignificant through the strategy of its authentication. Through his encounters with murderers, politicians or prostitutes, Mehta becomes our "eye into the forbidden", making us privy to their lives, their dreams and aspirations, their language, the personal stories they tell, or how they are a part of the city.⁵⁰ Mehta's voice is always present however, weaving in and out between their voices, always tempering the narrative, to try to create a careful balance between the fascinating and the scandalous. His style is a sort of descriptive realism, making rather conventional use of realist literary devices such as story-like chronology, teleological construction and representation of events enhanced by recording of minute details of the surroundings, dress and milieu, or dramatization through dialogues.⁵¹

The overall narrative construct almost succeeds in distracting us from Mehta's shifting perspectives. I begin by isolating and describing the various positions Mehta establishes. In the autobiographical chapter, the author tells us of his father's exasperation with him as a young boy, unhappy in India and in America:

"My father once, in New York, exasperated by my relentless demands to be sent back to finish high school in Bombay, shouted at me, 'When you were there, you wanted to come here. Now that you're here, you want to go back.'

50 | Ibid., 347.

51 | Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*, "The Realist Paradigm", 97–132.

It was when I first realized I had a new nationality: citizen of the country of longing.⁵²

This episode implies a dispossessed, 'neither-nor' position in society. However, it is precisely this position that Mehta exploits to create two vantage points, and recognizing their potential, oscillates between them. At a basic level, this movement occurs between the positions of an 'outsider' (diaspora) and an 'insider' (Indian, by birth and physical appearance). However, as we will see later, these are themselves dynamic categories since within each, Mehta may be an 'observer' (carrying out research and analysis), or he may be an 'experiencer' (an immersive journalist). Anonymously, he is an insider, that is, an Indian insofar his physical appearance allows the deception. For, as the author's experiences reveal, he is an 'outsider' from New York, come to live in Mumbai only for two years, and is also treated thus by friends and acquaintances.⁵³ Thus, interpellation of the author by his social environment is also a major factor in controlling or adjusting the author's perspective.⁵⁴ His actions and perspective are often a direct response to how other people 'hail' him.

The extent of the influence of Mehta's life in America becomes visible when he analyses a situation in India and draws a comparison to a similar phenomenon in the US: "The Bombay Police see Muslims as criminals, much as some *American police view African Americans*".⁵⁵ In another section, to give a non-Indian (or American) audience an idea about the Indian politician Bal Thackeray's character Mehta says, "Thackeray, now in his seventies, is a cross between Pat Buchanan and Saddam Hussein."⁵⁶ Mehta's western modernist tendency to measure a city's

52 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 31.

53 | See for example "When we decide to put Gautama in a Gujarati-language school, our decision is met with amazement and sometimes anger. 'How could you do that to your son?' demands the lady down the hall. 'You'll ruin his life.' Then she reflects. 'It's all right for you, you're getting out of here sooner or later. If you were living here permanently you'd put him in Cathedral.' [...] The fact that we need a place only for two years counts in our favor; it means that when Gautama leaves, another place will be created, to be bestowed upon someone else in exchange for a favor or a donation." *Ibid.*, 32–3, my emphasis.

54 | My reading is based on Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation of an individual into specific subject positions by a dominant ideology (ideological state apparatus) or by the social order of their specific time and culture. See Althusser, "Ideology And Ideological State Apparatuses," especially 174–5.

55 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 49, my emphasis.

56 | *Ibid.*, 59. See also, "The cities of India are going through a transition similar to what American cities went through at the turn of the twentieth century." (76) Or, "It (computer programming) is a hospitable new world for the bright young slum children of Bombay, people like Girish, showing them the way out, like boxing or basketball in Harlem." (454).

wealth or development in terms of the city's lacking infrastructure underlines this perspective on Mumbai from the outside.⁵⁷ In order to understand and explain his experiences in Mumbai, Mehta adopts a journalistic stance, paradoxically distancing himself from the place while he reports:

"India desires modernity; it desires computers, information technology, neural networks, video on demand. But there is no guarantee of a constant supply of electricity in most places in the country. In this, as in every other area, the country is convinced it can pole-vault over the basics: develop world-class computer and management institutes without achieving basic literacy; provide advanced cardiac surgery and diagnostic imaging facilities while the most easily avoidable childhood diseases run rampant [...] It is an optimistic view of technological progress – that if you reach for the moon, you will somehow, automatically, span the inconvenient steps in between. [...] It is still a Brahmin-oriented system of education; those who work with their hands have to learn for themselves. Education has to do with reading and writing, with abstractions, with higher thought."⁵⁸

Mehta's stance here portrays India as an anthropological subject. His mode is distanced, journalistic, as he describes the discrepancy between India's aspirations and realities. This quickly turns in the next passage as he talks of the "murderous rage" that builds in the mind when living in Mumbai, especially "when you've just come from a country where things work better, where institutions are more responsive."⁵⁹ The outburst is, however, quickly tempered and rationalized:

"As a result, in the Country of the No nothing is fixed the first time around [...] *Indians are craftsmen of genius, but mass production, with its attendant standardization, is not for us.* All things modern in Bombay fail regularly: plumping, telephones, the movement of huge blocks of traffic."⁶⁰

Between the two quotes above, Mehta moves from being an outsider-observer to being an outsider-experiencer. The first quote hovers at a more abstract level and pits India's high aspirations as a country against the deficient facilities it actually provides. In the second quote, Mehta is moving closer into the city but maintains his outsider perspective, narrating his and his family's (immersive) experience of everyday amenities in Mumbai in comparison to those in America.

57 | Rao, "Embracing Urbanism," 377.

58 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 24.

59 | Ibid., 23–4.

60 | Ibid., 24, my emphasis.

Strangely enough though, as if to secure the 'native' benefit, he slips in the "us" (see emphasis).

Mehta recognizes his interpellation by the Indian society and culture that surrounds him. Here, his status as insider varies and his experience switches between being treated as a (financially privileged) "foreign returnee" or as 'merely one of the crowd':

"A whole network of recently met strangers gather themselves to help us find a school for Gautama [...] they energetically make calls on our behalf, even go personally to wheedle and convince. They paint us as *innocents abroad, foreigners unsophisticated* in the ways of school admissions."⁶¹

"The city is groaning under the pressure of the 1 million people per square mile. *It doesn't want me any more than the destitute migrant from Bihar*, but it can't kick either of us out. So it makes life uncomfortable for us by guerrilla warfare, by constant low level sniping."⁶²

Mehta often weaves this kind of interpellation into an analysis of the city and its practices, as in the following episode about his initial day-to-day struggle and haggle over money:⁶³

"Bombay is more expensive for us in the beginning of our stay there than later on. Newcomers find it a city without options – for housing, for education [...] *Every new place has a right to charge a newcomer's tax [...] A city has its secrets: where you go to shop for an ice bucket, for an office chair, for a sari. Newcomers have to pay more because they don't know these places.* We haggle over minuscule amounts that have no value for us [...] it becomes a matter of principle. This is because along with getting ripped off for 10 rupees comes an assumption: you are not from here, you are not Indian, so you deserve to be ripped off, to pay more than a native. So we raise our voices and demand to be charged the correct amount, the amount on the meter, because not to do so would

61 | Ibid., 32, my emphasis.

62 | Ibid., 23, my emphasis.

63 | Not all instances are quite so neutral for Mehta. A painful moment of such a kind comes when conversing with Girish, the programmer. Mehta is convincing Girish to forgive his sister for choosing her own groom: "I tell him to make peace with her. I tell him I myself had entered into a love marriage. He stops arguing and says, 'You're not from here. It is different for you.' He cuts off his words, but the implication is clear: I am a foreigner. I cannot understand Indian customs. Here is the difference between us, out at last in the sunlight." Ibid., 473.

imply acceptance of our foreign status. We are Indian, and we will pay Indian rates.”⁶⁴

His generalizations (see emphasis) quickly reveal his style of lacing personal experience with ‘objective’ research as a means to stabilize the effect of his shifting perspective, which may otherwise threaten the authority and verisimilitude of his rendering. Mehta’s descriptions are staged strategically using the different positions and perspectives, which become visible through specific deictic markers such as “us” (Indians), or the “newcomer” and “foreign returnee” vis-à-vis “them” (Indians).

Mehta’s status as an outsider becomes more obvious as his insistence on his Indian identity and ‘inclusion’ soon gives way to a deluge of antipathy for the city when the difficulties overwhelm him:

“From all around, people ask us for money. [...] this fucking city. The sea should rush in over these islands in one great tidal wave and obliterate it, cover it underwater. It should be bombed from the air. Every morning I get angry. It is the only way to get anything done; people here respond to anger, are afraid of it. In the absence of money or connections, anger will do. I begin to understand the uses of anger as theatre [...] any nostalgia I felt about my childhood has been erased. [...] Why do I put myself through this? I was comfortable and happy and praised in New York; I had two places, one to live in and one to work. I have given all that up for this fool’s errand, looking for silhouettes in the mist of the ghost time. Now I can’t wait to go back, to the place I once longed to get away from: New York.”⁶⁵

Here is an echo from Mehta’s childhood, of his capricious relationship with the city. Now that Mehta is in Mumbai, he cannot wait to go back to New York. Paradoxically, acknowledging his capricious relationship openly and truthfully strengthens the author’s reliability, for there is a sincerity in Mehta’s display of being first besotted, then disillusioned, as his feelings alternate between love, nostalgia, anger, antagonism, and even plain, outright hatred. If Mehta’s shifting perspectives indicate opportunism on his behalf, it is this sincerity that ensures the author’s authority, and sustains it throughout the book. In turn, this spectacle of emotions towards the city also strengthens the book’s empirical anchorage, as it establishes and re-establishes the book’s empirical referentiality repeatedly throughout the book.

64 | Ibid., 29–30, my emphasis. Further examples include the episode with the car park in his building (28), or the theft of his shoes outside a temple (30).

65 | Ibid., 30–1.

On the other hand, especially since his immersion in Mumbai involves his family, Mehta actually succeeds in reaching an existential level of experience of Mumbai. His participation makes him a phenomenological witness in this particular city even as it displays how Mehta's portrait of Mumbai is restrained and regulated by his specific social and economic situation.⁶⁶ In a different scenario, stepping out of a Hindustani vocal concert around the twelfth century temple tank in Banganga, an area restored and beautified by the urban planner's institute and international banks, the author is hit by the stench from the slums all around Banganga: "It was beautiful because the messy poor and their children had been kept out [...] Bombay is both, the beautiful parts and the ugly parts, fighting block by block, to the death, for victory."⁶⁷ This pessimism could be dismissed as contempt, but it is not really a contemptuous analysis as much as it is proof of Mehta's restricted vision. Despite the sophistication of insight and empathy that the shifting perspectives could afford him, Mehta ultimately subjects the city space to the age-old simplification of rich, beautiful, poor, and ugly.

TRACING SPATIAL ECOLOGIES: MUMBAI 'UNFOLDING'

In Mehta's narrative, Mumbai emerges as a trope signifying, for the author, the nexus of 'home' and 'elsewhere', or 'self' and 'other'.⁶⁸ In this section, recalling Latour's ANT strategies of 'describing' and 'unfolding', we will see how Mehta instills certain dichotomies, which in turn 'unfold' Mehta's specific image of Mumbai as a city of extremes.

Mehta's descriptions of historical events (such as the riots) show how the very 'texture' of the city is affected. Through the polarization of the population and the city's politics – Hindus versus Muslims – we have a polarization of the city's space into strictly Hindu and Muslim neighborhoods. Accordingly, the city has become established as a site of these events, and as a 'spatial container' of the complex effects and heterogeneous ecologies that developed as an effect of these events. Mehta's descriptions of the city thus reiterate existing discourses that constitute the city as a site of global-local interactions, assemblages, flows or

66 | See for example his experience of organizing domestic help: "We learn the caste-system of the servants: the live-in maid won't clean the floors; that is for the 'free-servant' to do; neither of them will do the bathrooms, which are the exclusive domain of a bhangi, who does nothing else. The driver won't wash the car; that is the monopoly of the building watchman." And so on. *Ibid.*, 21–2.

67 | *Ibid.*, 127.

68 | See also Khair, *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness*, Introduction.

processes.⁶⁹ The global-local connections are not necessarily created by the cast of people appearing in the book, but rather by Mehta's own position as he moves to and fro between two countries in the comparisons and analyses he makes. However, we get a grasp of the real extent of contemporary urban actor-networks only at the end of the book, in an afterword from the author. It is 2001, he has moved back to Brooklyn and wakes up one morning to the grey cloud of debris from the burning World Trade Centre. As means of closure, Mehta lists a chain of events in Mumbai between 2001 and 2003, tracing a causal link between the 9/11 events in New York and the subsequent change in the nature of the gang-war in Mumbai.⁷⁰

On the one hand, the voyeur and journalist in Mehta succeeds in teasing out a sense of novelty and spectacle for even Indian readers, drawing largely on the rather straightforward strategy of analysis of urban life that uses the lack of or defunct infrastructure as a measure.⁷¹ Mehta's description of Mumbai as a city intimately and intricately associated with crime, gangster-dom and the underworld is also the image of Mumbai endorsed, solidified, and even glorified, by Bollywood.⁷² Mehta's enterprise may indeed have been directly influenced by Bollywood's glamorizing of Mumbai's underbelly; the people whose lives he chooses to follow are "morally compromised people, shaped by the exigencies of city living".⁷³ The book unfolds as a tracing and describing of these 'exigencies of city living', in this specific city.

De Certeau's phatic aspect may be applied again in order to conceptualize the different forms of movement in the city that trace and create networks due to the stimuli thrown up by the city. The difference here is that the phatic aspect in this case does not so much refer to the physical act of 'walking' as it does to people's actions in a given urban space.⁷⁴ De Certeau's formulations specify these

69 | See for example Sassen, "Cities and Communities in the Global Economy"; Or Soja, *Postmetropolis*.

70 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 541–2.

71 | See also Rao, "Slum as Theory."

72 | See also Rao, "A New Urban Type"; For an exploration of the concept of "projected" city in cinema, see Barber, *Projected Cities*.

73 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 538; As Ravi Vasudevan demonstrates in his essay, the effects of such representations of the city are strong in the case of a city like Bombay, which also actually forms the "real" site for the projected city in cinema. See Vasudevan, "Disreputable and Illegal Publics: Cinematic Allegories in Times of Crisis"; Mehta refers to this fact himself: "Bombay is mythic in a way that Los Angeles is not, because Hollywood has the budgets to create entire cities on its studio lots; the Indian film industry has to rely on existing streets, beaches, tall buildings." Mehta, *Maximum City*, 350.

74 | Georg Simmel has already foregrounded this idea in his understanding of the metropolis as a form of media that saturates the life of its residents and ultimately affects forms of social

interactions to refer to specifically state enforced 'strategies' of controlling the city and reactionary citizen 'tactics'.⁷⁵ We will see how, especially in the context of a city of the 'global South', such 'tactics' are 'creative attempts' by urban residents to overcome infrastructural deficiencies, and also to test or stretch legal margins. We will, therefore, follow Mehta in tracing the networks in Mumbai. In doing so, we also follow the spokesperson to reveal the specific topography his immersive experience generates of Mumbai.

The Pathways of People's 'Tactics'⁷⁶

If de Certeau's conception of people's movements in the city as tactics is our point of departure, our next step must analyze the city in not only its physical aspects, but also position its people and their network-producing activities as a sort of 'unofficial' infrastructure that allows the city to function.⁷⁷ In our attempt to trace such informal self-reliance in Mehta's *Maximum City*, we quickly encounter a long trajectory of how things work at all in Mumbai, legally and illegally, starting from basic amenities such as a cooking gas connection. The supply of cooking gas in India is a government monopoly, which, however, does not sufficiently provide for everyone. As the author finds out, the problem is overcome by means of a fraud in which literally everyone is involved (willingly or forcibly):

"The only way to ensure a constant supply of cooking gas is to have two cylinders. Everyone runs a scam so they have two cylinders in their name; they transfer one from an earlier address or bribe an official to get a second one. Bombay survives on the scam; we are all complicit."⁷⁸

Mehta's initial efforts to get a gas connection, officially and off the black market, are futile, so a friend sends her mother to accompany Mehta to a gas agency. They

interaction and formation of the social in space (which thus becomes "place"). See Simmel, "Metropolis and Mental Life."

75 | See *ibid.*; and de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, especially 51–5. With regard to the stimuli that the city throws up, they are significant mainly in their capacity to create these networks/associations.

76 | My use of de Certeau's terminology will, henceforth, not be marked as such, but I should stress here that the terms may be referred back to de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

77 | This has also been referred to as "invisible urbanism". The term refers to the phenomenon studied in anthropology, which stresses that it is necessary to study the city not only by its physical aspects but also by analysing the interactions of people living in it. See Simone, "People as Infrastructure."

78 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 25.

are refused, again, but this time, the mother who knows the ways of Mumbai steps in:

“He has two children!” she appeals to the female bureaucrats. “Two small children! They don’t even have gas to boil milk! What is he supposed to do without gas to boil milk for his two small children?” By the next morning we have a gas cylinder in our kitchen. My friend’s mother knew what had to be done to move the bureaucracy. She did not bother with official rules and procedures and forms. She appealed to the hearts of the workers in the office; they have children too.”⁷⁹

This tactic points Mehta towards a loophole in the system. A commercial tank of gas, which is bigger and more expensive than the household one, was easier and faster to get: “Once the workers in the gas office were willing to pretend that my household was a business, they delivered the cylinders every couple of months efficiently, spurred on by the vision of my two little children crying for milk.”⁸⁰

This description of the incompetence of the state to sufficiently deliver a basic facility, and then of people’s tactics to overcome it, is a recurring representational strategy for Mehta’s immersive experience of organizing the every day in Mumbai.⁸¹ The tactics here are seen to automatically involve an ‘unofficial’ information loop which relies on word-of-mouth propaganda. The effectiveness of the tactic remains, of course, a bargain on the emotional empathy of the various people involved, and does not rely on the efficiency of the institution. On a separate occasion, when Mehta calls a club to ask for accommodation for an out-of-town visitor, he is declined. However, when an uncle with ‘connections’ to the people in the club makes a call, suddenly a room becomes available. Mehta’s analysis of the incident is telling in terms of the means and importance of social networking in this vast mass of people:

“I had forgotten the crucial difference. There’s very little you can do anonymously, as a member of the vast masses. You have to go through someone. *The reservations clerk needs that personal touch of a human being he recognizes.* It is the same with railway reservations, theater tickets, apartments, and marriages. It has to be one person linking with another who knows

79 | Ibid.

80 | Ibid., 26.

81 | For another example, see Mehta’s experience in setting up his apartment: “For the month after my family arrives, I chase plumbers, electricians, and carpenters like Werther chased Lotte. [...] Then the phone department has to be called and the workmen bribed to repair it. It is in their interest to have a lousy phone system [...] All the pipes in this building are fucked. [...] The residents make their own alteration.” Ibid., 22–3.

another and so on till you reach your destination; *the path your request takes has to go through this network.*⁸²

The phatic aspect in Mumbai's networks comes close to a survival tactic. Where inherited municipal structures prove restrictive to life in the megacity (the bureaucracy that Mehta encounters), these informal tactics present themselves as creative potential. They are a conjunctive linkage not of footsteps, but of people with a strategically complicit understanding (and expectation) of the use of informal practices (tactics). The autonomy of these practices from state judiciary control indicates quite different notions and formations of citizenship in the city. In a fight over parking space in his building, Mehta quickly learns that certain categories as he knows them, or is accustomed to from America, have different footings in Mumbai: "This is a community of insiders, people who have lived in this building for a long time; they are asking the newcomer what right he had to claim his privileges. And they own the guards who are supposed to enforce those privileges for me."⁸³ It does not matter whether it is unfair or illegitimate. Here, the oldest resident of the building has the 'insider' advantage over Mehta when it comes to parking space, even though the slot was originally allotted to Mehta's flat. In a city where ownership of space is not only luxury but also power, this incident reveals, as Mehta is soon forced to acknowledge, a tactic, "an illegal usurpation of space and the defense of that usurpation through muscle power."⁸⁴

This tactic, of gaining power through 'usurpation' using sheer 'muscle' force, reoccurs as a trope as Mehta links the local with the national. Mehta talks here of Sunil, the murderer's conquests and his achievements in monetary and political terms:

"Sunil will inherit Bombay, I now see. The consequences of his burning the bread seller alive. When the Sena government came in two years later, he got appointed a Special Executive Officer; he became, officially, a person in whom public trust is reposed. [...] He is idealistic about the nation and utterly pragmatic about the opportunities for personal enrichment that politics offers. [...] the fact that a murderer like Sunil could become successful in Bombay through engagement in local politics is both a triumph and failure of democracy."⁸⁵

Such evaluations appear quite natural to Mehta and what for us ANT scholars is left wanting is some sign of self-reflection by Mehta, about his reactions,

82 | Ibid., 256, my emphasis.

83 | Ibid., 28.

84 | Ibid.

85 | Ibid., 75.

evaluations and his stance. Sunil's success feeds Mehta's estrangement in this space, and points to a fear of the boundless freedom of the city's unofficial, self-relying entities. His disillusionment with the city often renders Mumbai as a threateningly obscure urban space of uncertain ideals.⁸⁶ Asad bin Saif, however, who works in an institute for secularism in Mumbai and has reportedly seen humanity at its worst, instills hope in the narrative. When asked by Mehta whether he feels pessimistic about the human race, he replies "Not at all...look at the hands from the trains."⁸⁷ Mehta goes on to explain:

"If you are late for work in the morning in Bombay, and you reach the station just as the train is leaving the platform, you can run up to the packed compartments and find many hands stretching out to grab you on board, unfolding outward from the train like petals. As you run alongside the train, you will be picked up and some tiny space will be made for your feet on the edge of the open doorway, the rest is up to you [...] Your fellow passengers, already packed tighter than cattle are legally allowed to be, their shirts already drenched in sweat in the badly ventilated compartment, having stood like this for hours, retain an empathy for you, know that your boss might yell at you or cut your pay if you miss this train, and will make space where none exists to take one more person with them. And at the moment of contact, they do not know if the hand that is reaching for theirs belongs to a Hindu or Muslim or Christian or Brahmin or untouchable or [...] Come on board, they say. We'll adjust."⁸⁸

The normalcy of fighting existential conditions on a daily basis makes hope, compassion and humanity in this city of extremes a tactic for survival. It manifests as 'only' the simple act of 'adjusting' by the people on the train, but the act or the practice itself indicates the enormous importance of the solidarity behind it, as essential for 'survival' in Mumbai's urban 'wilderness'. When Arifa Khan, one of the pioneers of the women's group in the Jogeshwari slum, is asked whether she wouldn't prefer to live in an apartment instead of the slum with its open gutters, her answer reveals her fear of loneliness: "a person can die behind the closed doors of a flat and no one will know".⁸⁹ The self-reliance and sense of community that is fostered through Mumbai's alternate forms of informal settlements creates its own ecologies of relations:

86 | There are more such instances in the book. See for example the section on the movie director fighting with the Indian censor board, which thematizes the inhibition of the artistic abilities of the director. See also the budding actor's story. *Ibid.*, 346–74 and 385–405.

87 | *Ibid.*, 496.

88 | *Ibid.*

89 | *Ibid.*, 55.

"Issues of infrastructure are not abstract problems for them [...] we tend to think of a slum as an excrescence, a community of people living in perpetual misery. *What we forget is that out of inhospitable surroundings, people have formed a community*, and they are as attached to its spatial geography, the social networks they have built for themselves, the village they have re-created in the midst of the city, as a Parisian might be to his quartier or as I was to Nepean Sea Road."⁹⁰

Mehta analysis indicates the dynamic work of heterogeneous groups and factors in the creation of those very informal or 'unofficial' structures, through the use of which they define themselves as 'insiders', or citizens of Mumbai.

Mumbai's Slum Phantasmagoria – A Haven versus the Squalor

Mehta's description of the slums in Mumbai is a by now rather stereotypical trope that uses the city's slums as an empirical basis for understanding cities of the 'Global South' and global urban processes.⁹¹ In this section, we will identify various themes that characterize Mehta's descriptions of the slums. On the one hand, these enable us to see how the city unfolds as a result of Mehta's specific way of seeing it. On the other hand, my discussion of these themes also demonstrates how Mehta renders Mumbai as a 'city of extremes'.

Arriving in Mumbai on a plane, the author and his son look down at the city just before they are about to land. Mehta's descriptions of Mumbai's coastline are of the geographical features that he is able to see from the plane, but they are scenic:

"If you look at Bombay from the air; if you see its location – spread your thumb and your forefinger apart at a thirty-degree angle and you'll see the shape of Bombay – you will find yourself acknowledging that it is a beautiful city: the sea on all sides, the palm trees along the shores, the light coming down from the sky and thrown back up by the sea. It has a harbor, several bays, creeks, rivers, hills."⁹²

90 | Ibid., 55, my emphasis.

91 | See for example Davis, *Planet of Slums*; See also Rao, "Slum as Theory". This is, however, not a "new" phenomenon. In the 19th century, for example, we find that Friedrich Engels and Jacob Riis were already using slums as a trope for their urban analysis. See Engels and Hunt, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*; and Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*.

92 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 14.

The observers are at just such a distance so as to render a picture that is not abstract. Nevertheless, and rather predictably, the scenic beauty is an illusion – of a view of the city from a distance (here a quick nod to de Certeau):

“On the ground it’s different. My little boy notices this. ‘Look,’ Gautama points out, as we are driving along the road from Bandra Reclamation. ‘On one side villages, on the other side buildings.’ *He has identified the slums for what they are: villages in the city.* The visual shock of Bombay is the shock of its juxtaposition. And it is soon followed by violent shocks to the other four senses: the continuous din of traffic coming in through open windows in a hot country; the stench of bombil fish drying on stilts in the open air; the inescapable humid touch of many brown bodies in the street; the searing heat of the garlic chutney on your vadapav sandwich early on your first jetlagged morning.”⁹³

On the ground, the child’s perspective quite accurately identifies the “visual shock” of Bombay – the juxtaposition of slums (which he naively calls villages) and high rises. The physical experience of the city on landing is, however, that of a sensory shock and the first idyllic impression of the aerial view of Mumbai is flooded over by a cascade of stark sensory stimuli. The place-specificity of these ‘stimuli’ (especially bombil fish and vadapav sandwich) and their vividness creates a strong contrast to the physically removed, purely visual effect of Mumbai, and intensifies the “shock of its juxtaposition”. As this chapter proceeds, we will see that this trope of juxtaposition continues in Mehta’s descriptions of Mumbai. Mehta employs it for exactly this purpose of creating the ‘shock’ that triggers the perception of the city as a site of extreme exigencies (to use the author’s own word).

Another such juxtaposition that cultivates the image of Mumbai as a city of extremes is that of alternating and disjunctive descriptions of slums as idyllic retreats or rural havens on the one hand, and sites of urban squalor on the other.

“There are other villages all around the reservoir. One of them is so beautiful it inspires one campaign worker to say to another, “You want to get a place here?” Under towering banyan trees, strewn about with blue and pink plastic bags, is the settlement, made of brick walls and corrugated roofs. Roosters and chicken run about on the grass. In the distance, we can see the blue sea. Gleaming steel vessels are visible through the doorways; new ten-speed bicycles are parked out front. The inhabitants are well dressed. The children look healthy, and there are no open gutters. [...] they have power and water connections.”⁹⁴

93 | Ibid., 14–5, my emphasis.

94 | Ibid., 68.

This urban scene may be marked by garbage (plastic bags), but it is also marked by material and immaterial accomplishments Mehta thinks are particularly relevant in the specific context of a megacity of the Global South. These include healthy children and their new ten-speed bicycles, and even more importantly, the availability of amenities such as power and water supply. The basic environment of this slum is, however, described using markers of the rural (see emphasis). The rural is not only a material setting, but can also be found in the values shared or upheld in these slums, and in their strong sense of unity. The slum dwellers do not prefer a flat in a building even though they have the means. Sunil, the murderer, tells Mehta, "My children can knock on the neighbour's door at 1 a.m. and get food. They can eat anywhere in the chawl [slum]."⁹⁵ Another criminal, Amol, adds, "In chawls we get all facilities."⁹⁶ As Amol continues to explain, we find out that "facilities" have a completely different meaning in the Mumbai slum, and points to a completely different worldview than the one Mehta shares. The word refers to a certain sense of freedom from bourgeois social constraints or the privilege of having people readily on call to accompany you to the hospital if one required.⁹⁷ This unity arises, ironically, from common toilets as Sunil explains: "When you go to the toilet, you have to see everyone's face."⁹⁸ It also comes from a common tap for water where women fill buckets and converse, much like a scenario at a village well.⁹⁹ These circumstances conjure an image of rural serenity right in the middle of the urban.

On the other hand, the slums are also rendered as 'phantasmagorias', almost sublimely uninhabitable places inhabited nevertheless by humans (and animals):

"Raghav took me to a very large open patch of ground by the train sheds, a phantasmagoric scene with a vast garbage dump on one side with groups of people hacking at the ground with picks, a crowd of boys playing cricket, sewers running at our feet, train tracks and bogies in sheds in the middle distance, and a series of concrete tower blocks in the background."¹⁰⁰

This phantasmagoria is also a site of horrific events, forming a sort of no man's land between Hindu and Muslim neighborhoods. The spot where the author stands is where two Muslims were caught and burned by Hindu attackers. Mehta recalls that only a week ago he had been standing on the other side of this ground. A Muslim had pointed out to him the spot where he now stood, saying, "That

95 | Ibid., 92.

96 | Ibid.

97 | Ibid., 92–3.

98 | Ibid., 93.

99 | Ibid.

100 | Ibid., 45.

is where the Hindus [riot attackers] came from".¹⁰¹ Raghav, another criminal associate of Sunil's, continues the description of this 'wasteland', sustaining Mehta's degenerate image of the slums:

"Their bodies [Muslims who they burnt] lay here in the ditch, rotting, for ten days. Crows were eating them. Dogs were eating them. The police wouldn't take the bodies away, because the Jogeshwari police said it was in the Goregaon Police's jurisdiction, and the Goregaon police said it was the railway police's jurisdiction."¹⁰²

The abject imagery is alienating. It threatens the outer margins of humanity, and as it evokes horror and disgust, it instils an urge to distance oneself from it, to undo the vision it implies. In terms of the book's empirical anchorage, a sense of the horrific gets attributed to this urban space, as does a notion of conflict. This 'othering' of the slums continues to gain momentum from further abject descriptions of the inhuman ways of their more criminal inhabitants:

"What does a man look like when he's on fire?" I asked Sunil [...] (Sunil to Mehta) "You couldn't bear to see it. It is horror. Oil drips from his body, his eyes become huge, huge, the white shows, white, white, you touch his arm like this" – he flicked his arm – "the white shows. It shows especially on the nose" – he rubbed his nose with two fingers as if scraping off the skin – "oil drips from him, water drips from him, white, white all over."¹⁰³

The question is, especially as an opening line for a chapter, as unexpected as it is shocking, and the lack of inhibition or emotion in it elevates the shock. The dramatisation enables Mehta to distance himself from the exchange as he lets the perpetrator himself speak of his heinous acts. This may also perhaps be the only means possible for Mehta to communicate the violence in the testimony.¹⁰⁴

The projection of Mumbai as a site of urban squalor by Mehta takes a more graphic turn in his descriptions of the slum as a literal and discursive space for 'shit':

101 | Ibid.

102 | Ibid.

103 | Ibid., 39.

104 | See also: "Those were not days for thought," he [Sunil] continued. "We five people burnt one Mussulman [Muslim]. [...] I knew him; he used to sell me bread everyday." [...] "We poured petrol on him and set him on fire." Ibid., 39–40; For more examples of violent inhumanity in the city in general, see descriptions of the torture of inmates by police (Ajay Lal's testimony) ibid., 199, 221.

"When the government sweepers come to clean the drains, they scoop it out and leave piles of it outside the latrines. I couldn't use the public toilets, I tried, once. There were two rows of toilets. Each of them had masses of shit, overflowing out of the toilets and spread liberally all around the cubicle. For the next few hours that image and that stench stayed with me, when I ate, when I drank."¹⁰⁵

The disposal of excrement is, however, a problem not only for the slum-dwellers. The scatological references in Mehta's portrait of Mumbai present an aggressive and inescapable excremental reality that viciously plagues life in this city. So much so that the author resorts to martial terms such as 'battle' and 'defence' in his descriptions:

"Our early days in Bombay are filled with *battling* our foreign-born children's illnesses. Gautama has had amebic dysentery for two weeks now; he keeps going all over the floor and when he takes off his T-shirt it is painful to look at him; all his ribs show. The food and the water in Bombay, India's most modern city, are contaminated with *shit*. Amebic dysentery is transferred through *shit*. we have been feeding our son *shit*. it could have come in the mango we gave him; it could have been in the pool we took him swimming in. it could have come from the taps in our own home, since the drainage pipes in Bombay, laid out during British times, leak into the fresh-water pipes that run alongside. *there is no defense possible*. everything is recycled in this filthy country, which poisons its children, raising them on a diet of its own *shit*."¹⁰⁶

It is not just the food and water that is contaminated. Mehta and his wife contract granular pharyngitis caused by the pollution and high levels of dirt everywhere. The effect is dramatized further by the author's rhetoric of despair: "If we don't want it, we have to stop breathing in Bombay."¹⁰⁷ These scatological references are an essentially materialist description of the basest produce of human life. Its pervasiveness in Mumbai serves to magnify the absence of hygiene and cleanliness, that is, issues of sanitation that are linked with progress and modernity. Mehta's repeated use of the word "shit" (see emphasis above) indicates his despair, and is another of those moments in the narrative when he admits to his difficulties in coping with life in Mumbai. The issue concerning feces in Mumbai becomes omnipresent for Mehta, bordering on the obsessive as he finds himself challenged everyday anew, even as he looks out of his window "Every morning, out of the window of my study, I see men easing themselves on the rocks

105 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 53.

106 | Ibid., 28–29, my emphasis.

107 | Ibid., 29.

by the sea.”¹⁰⁸ Prahlad Kakkar, an ad filmmaker, has also made a film playfully called “Bumbay”, which deals explicitly with “shitting in the metropolis”¹⁰⁹. The World Bank has, apparently, also made its efforts to fight the problem by sending a group of experts to solve Bombay’s sanitation crisis, who proposed building 100,000 public toilets. Mehta mocks the idea, however. He does not provide an alternative, but explains why the World Bank’s solution would never work for Mumbai. Here, his personal experience delivers his argument:

“It was an absurd idea. I have seen public latrines in the slums. None of them work. [...] Indians do not have the same kind of civic sense as, say, Scandinavians. The boundary of the space you keep clean is marked at the end of the space you call your own. The flats in my building are spotlessly clean inside; they are swept and mopped everyday, or twice every day. The public spaces – hallways, stairs, lobby, the building compound – are [...] littered with [...] dirt of human and animal origin. It is the same all over Bombay, in rich and poor areas alike.”¹¹⁰

Mehta’s quasi-sociological explanations seek to once more rationalize his overwhelming experience of the Indian city and temper his reactionary emotional despair. Though his descriptions (discussed earlier) were grotesque, even vulgar, Mehta’s rational language to describe the lack of infrastructure, the extent of poverty of the inhabitants in these slums, or the Indian civic sense evokes a certain sense of objectivity. Mehta’s journalistic research and analysis stabilizes the effects of the abject and draws the reader back to acknowledge the urgent and essential nature of the pressures and demands of life in Mumbai.

MEHTA’S METAPHORS AND MATTERS OF CONCERN

‘Sone ki Chidiya’ or ‘Bird of Gold’

A number of metaphors are thrown up in the course of the book to refer to the city, which all lend their hue to Mehta’s portrait of Mumbai. A relative of the Jain family calls it a “paap ni bhoomi” or city of sins.¹¹¹ The father of Babanji, the runaway poet, sees in Mumbai a “maya ki nagri” or city of illusions.¹¹² Mehta himself has told us that Mumbai is “a naturally capitalistic city – a vaisya-

108 | Ibid., 127.

109 | Ibid.

110 | Ibid., 128.

111 | Ibid., 502.

112 | Ibid., 489.

nagra – one that understands the moods and movements of money.”¹¹³ All these meanings, of sin, money, dreams and hope come together in the single metaphor of “sone ki chidiya” or a bird of gold.¹¹⁴ A Muslim man from the Jogeshwari slum relates its story to Mehta, who interprets it as a Golden Songbird: “try to catch it if you can. It flies quick and sly, and you’ll have to work hard and brave many perils to catch it, but once it’s in your hand, a fabulous fortune will open up for you.”¹¹⁵ The metaphor resounds with the rhetoric of Mehta’s depictions of Mumbai as a *vaisya-nagra* (capitalistic city), a city ‘fallen’ from its previous ‘glory’ (see emphasis in following), but also as a city in crisis.¹¹⁶ Mehta’s rational ‘gaze’ becomes visible when, for example, he compares two sets of pillars at the caves of Elephanta Island (that are also a part of Mumbai):

“On my right, the pillars commissioned by the Rashtrakuta Kings in the eighth century; in front of me, the new pillars built by the archaeological survey of India. *In one panoramic sweep, you can see the whole decline of culture in India.* The original pillars, built a thousand years ago, are delicately fluted and in proportion, curving gently outward like an infant’s belly. The ASI pillars are stolid blocks of stone, each unmatched in shape and color and size with the other; at a glance you can tell they are wonky. They are devoid of ornamentation, which is probably just as well, since God knows what monstrosities their house sculptors would carve on pillars if they were allowed to. *What we could do so exquisitely in this country a thousand years ago we can’t even attempt today.* We were making some of the greatest art of the ancient world. Shattered by invasion and colonialism and an uneasy accommodation with modernity, we now can’t construct five pillars of equal proportions.”¹¹⁷

The panoramic sweep of Mehta’s ‘gaze’ has already historically inflected these differences in the architecture of the sets of pillars. The differences are measured against a modern yardstick of architectural aesthetics, his articulation aggrandizing the past and belittling the present. In documentary terms, the underlying emotional reactions to these differences are somewhat crude and misplaced. Even though Mehta tries to relativize these differences with explanations (invasion, colonialism, modernity), we sense his personal shame and indignity in ‘seeing’ these differences. Mehta implicates himself in the collective

113 | Ibid., 20.

114 | Ibid., 450.

115 | Ibid.

116 | See also Mehta’s interview with architect and urban planner, Rahul Mehrotra, who reveals his plans to prevent the deterioration of Mumbai and boost its preservation in order to “save the city”. Ibid., 121.

117 | Ibid., 119, my emphasis.

‘we’, but is ashamed and resentful through what he sees as the ‘decline’ of culture and skill in India. This instance highlights Mehta’s specific treatment of the city as a ‘diasporic returnee’ by showing how, for him, the city is a link to ‘the Indian’, and must accordingly stand in as a representative of this ‘Indian-ness’.

As a last episode in the book, Mehta’s descriptions of the religious Jain family’s “dramatic rejection of Bombay” lend the book a form of closure.¹¹⁸ One expects the episode to mark an ultimate exit from Mumbai. Now that the family has given up their aspirations to wealth, there is nothing more to keep them in this “paap ni bhoomi” (city of sin).¹¹⁹ We find out later, however, that one can never fully let go of this bird of gold; the city does not let go of its grip on a person so easily. A little later Mehta discovers that Sevantibhai, the head of the Jain family who has taken *diksha*, has a ‘backup plan’. A trust fund of sizeable amounts has been set up for all four family members taking *diksha*. “In case the children want to come back, they don’t have to stretch out their hand to anybody. They can get a car, a house,’ explains Hasmukh”.¹²⁰ The episode of the family’s religious rejection of their worldly life, appearing at the end of the book, offers the hope of redemption after an (exhausting) tour in a city of exigencies, greed and crime, only to deny it in the end through this revelation of Sevantibhai’s ‘back-up plan’ (thus reinstating all the above metaphors for the city). This narrative composition displays Mehta’s strategy of creating a tension in the narrative – that ‘shock’ with which Mehta renders Mumbai as a city of exigencies. The narrative tension reflects Mehta’s anxiety concerning the city, which derives on the one hand, from his perception of himself (and his family) being imperiled by the city, and on the other hand, from his way of ‘seeing’ the city as being in a state of peril.

Actors and Networks in the ‘Desert of the Real’

In reading Mehta’s enterprise as a possible method for ANT, we have seen how a vicarious experience of the city can be enabled through the stories of a vast cast of persona, despite the mediation through an omnipresent narrator. The strategic use of the biographical strand and Mehta’s frequent change of perspectives should be read, despite my critical stance, as tools of access to the scenography for the author and as a strategy of accessibility for the reader.

By providing access to Mumbai specifically through the figure of one of the diaspora, *Maximum City* highlights the many ‘realities’ of life in a ‘third world metropolitan’ as seen and experienced by someone who lives in New York: “I am new in the country still. It has not hit me till now, and I feel physically exhausted

118 | Ibid., 499.

119 | Ibid., 502.

120 | Ibid., 522.

[...] I am still reacting to the city as a foreigner.”¹²¹ Extensive descriptions of Mumbai’s slums and their inhabitants in Mehta’s narrative suggest that one read in them a sort of ‘slumming’ as it has come to be called. Passages often point to extreme poverty and human squalor as in the following where Mehta meets with a women’s group called Rahe-haq in their office in a slum called the Radhabai Chawl:

“Much of the slum is a garbage dump. The sewers, which are open, run right between the houses, and children play and occasionally fall into them. They are full of a blue-black iridescent sludge [...] It’s not merely an esthetic discomfort; typhoid runs rampant through the slum and spreads through oral-fecal contact. Pools of stagnant water, which are everywhere, breed malaria. Many children also have jaundice. Animal carcasses are spread out on the counters of the butcher shops, sprinkled with flies like a moving spice. The whole slum is pervaded by a stench that I stopped noticing after a while.”¹²²

It is a commodification, in other words, of Mumbai’s poverty and exigencies, which caters to and indulges a ‘Western’ voyeurism. Such a reading itself is not a new insight – the phenomenon is ultimately a continuity of the imperialist tradition of voyeuristic and titillating travel literature of the ‘empire’.¹²³ Slavoj Zizek has taken issue with this sort of ‘derealization’ tendency of Western media representations. He calls it a polarization that “even in these tragic moments, [...] separates Us from Them, [a distance] from their reality is maintained: the real horror happens *there not here*”.¹²⁴ In this sense, Mehta’s descriptions sustain this ‘derealization’ or polarization that Zizek is talking about. However, urban spectacle apart, Mehta’s descriptions of Mumbai’s many ‘tragedies’ also make the book a significant pointer to the ‘contemporary urban’ in Mumbai – an indication that these ‘real horrors’ are closer to ‘home’ than one thinks.¹²⁵ In November 2008, Mumbai faced a series of terrorist attacks that received much

121 | Ibid, 37.

122 | Ibid, 53.

123 | For a review of various ethical issues related to “slumming” see Dürr and Jaffe, “Theorizing Slum Tourism”; For a critical engagement with the reductive view enforced by Western portrayals of slums and slum dwellers specifically in the Indian context, Sengupta, “A Million Dollar Exit from the Anarchic Slum-World.”

124 | Zizek points out that in the media coverage during the WTC collapse, despite repeated mention of the death toll, there was very little of the “real carnage” being shown. This was in stark contrast to accounts of Third World catastrophes, the quintessence of which was “a scoop of some gruesome detail.” Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, 13, original emphasis.

125 | This refers not only to the ‘West’, but also to Indians who live in the security that their economic privilege affords them.

international media coverage and were termed, “India’s 26/11” in allusion to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, but without the magnitude of the original event.¹²⁶ The events and subsequent media coverage nevertheless ripped away the image of Mumbai as a convivial multicultural place (or, at least the façade of Mumbai that Bollywood portrays).¹²⁷ Could it be that in Mumbai too, a ‘passion for real’ culminated drastically in the ‘desert of the real’?¹²⁸

The ‘passion for real’ is linked to the desire for the authentic. Authenticity thus becomes a function of the narrative that becomes entwined with the product – it is what makes a story economically feasible.¹²⁹ This is where Mehta’s biographical strand and his immersive journalistic technique come into play again. What could make a more authentic story than a nostalgic ‘ex-pat’, bringing his family from New York to live in Mumbai, the city of his childhood, to retrace ‘memory mines’? As a journalist, he follows the strategy of his trade to tame this steed and ‘immerses’ himself in the city he wants to report on. Mehta ‘sells’ it, however, as a reification of his love of the city of his childhood. If the guarantee of the writer’s sincere intentions were to lie in his representation, my analysis shows that these intentions serve instead to camouflage discursive aspects of such quasi-anthropological studies. While it poses as a sincere and objective report, it is, in fact, a very subjective representation of the city. Arguably, a generic code is being subverted by including the testimonies of criminals. However, with its capacity to shock (in comfortable doses and from a comfortable distance), this trope is a marketable trait that adds that required dose of the sensational to make a good sellable book: “Gangsters and whores all over the world have always been fascinated by the movies and vice-versa; [...] they are our eye into the forbidden.”¹³⁰

Mehta aspires to a journalistic style in the articulation of his Mumbai portrait. There appears to be no surface and depth dimensions to his narrative, wherein interpretation may lie. Such aspects suggest, to remain very cautious in

126 | “Mumbai Terror Attacks Fast Facts – CNN.com”; See also, Arundhati Roy’s excellent critique of the media during this period and her biting response to the event being called India’s 26/11: Roy, “9 Is Not 11.”

127 | Roy, “9 Is Not 11.”

128 | I am alluding here to Schlotte and Voigts-Virchow, “Introduction: The Creative Treatment of Actuality – New Documentarism,” see especially 108–9; and to Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*

129 | Schlotte and Voigts-Virchow, “Introduction: The Creative Treatment of Actuality – New Documentarism,” 109.

130 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 347; Sensationalizing may, perhaps, also be one form of handling the trauma encountered or experienced. Think of works such as Capote, *In Cold Blood*; and Udwin, *India’s Daughter*.

our own formulations, a notion of objectivity, for Mehta bridges the gap between 'seeing' and 'showing' through rational explanations or analyses.

Reading Mehta's method and narrative as an ANT, however, leaves us wanting. This is because the observer positions that Mehta assumes remain judgemental and omniscient. All things said and done, his remains a bird's eye view of things as it were, which is not able to push beyond the usual boundaries of journalistic observation and documentation. For ANT to deliver desired results, that is, gather matters of concern rather than fact, its spokesperson must implicate himself within the actor networks he traces, which in turn can set into motion a mimesis of process that draws the reader's attention to the method of discovering and experiencing the city.

My reading of his endeavor as ANT shows, nevertheless, that the level of interpretation lies in recognizing the author's rhetorical and representative strategies and the specific kind of topography they generate of Mumbai. This recalls the asymmetric relation between depiction and the 'real' thing (something on paper is not the 'real' thing – remember Latour's example of anatomy drawing).¹³¹ In the larger scheme of things, this insight indicates the "tangling network of techniques of knowledge and strategies of power, so that any study of urban representations must remain sensitive and critical to the coding of power and knowledge."¹³² On the other hand, 'real' territory simply must resist cartography: "the Cartographer's Guild struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following generations [...] saw that the vast map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters."¹³³ The anecdote brings us full circle to Calvino, mentioned earlier, whose narrator Marco Polo wisely reminds us of the impossibility of accurately perceiving or representing any city. At the end, Mehta, too, acknowledges the *conditions of perception* that have modified his relation to the city: "After two and a half years, I have learnt to see beyond the wreck of the physical city to the incandescent life force of its inhabitants. People associate Bombay with death too easily. When five hundred new people come in every day to live, Bombay is certainly not a dying city."¹³⁴ Ultimately, Mehta's documentary 'access' (matters of concern) to the 'real' territory (scenography) retains something of the 'authentic' in the imperfections of its subjectivity and the contradictory and capricious stance of the experient. This admission – of the effect of the passage of time on the way he 'sees' and how he thinks about the city – hints at a possible mimesis of process in Mehta's

131 | Bernhard Schneider in Müller and Libeskind, *Radix, Matrix – Daniel Libeskind's Architekturen*, 120–7.

132 | Spivak in Mongolia, *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*, 204.

133 | Borges, *Ficciones*, 325, original caps.

134 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 537.

ANT-like procedure, and is thus finally that desired moment of self-reflexivity in his enterprise.

V. Of Spirals and Capitals: Sam Miller's *Delhi*, *Adventures in a Megacity*

At night I make plans for a city laid down
Like the hips of a girl on the spring covered ground
Spirals and capitals like the twist of a script;
Streets named for heroes that could almost exist¹

The rest of Josh Ritter's rock song "Thin Blue Flame" has less to do with the city, but these four lines on the inside cover of Sam Miller's book become an elegy for Miller's explorations of Delhi: the ambiguous explorations in Ritter's song reflect the author's own perambulations of a spiral route through the Indian capital. In the song, Ritter's search for "royal cities" ends in a somewhat trite epiphany, with the songwriter opening his eyes to finally discover that the heaven he has been pursuing is not *above* him but has been *around* him all the time.² Miller, on the other hand, had his epiphany while lying awake at night and fighting his insomnia by way of a "middle-of-the-night game: the search for the perfect geometric method for exploring a city on foot."³ It yields him the spiral, a form inspired by Muslim cities, which were built in concentric circles orbiting around a central mosque.⁴ The gendering of the city through the image of "the hips of a girl on a spring covered ground" presents it as an exposed and vulnerable space. These poetic implications form, however, a stark contrast to the materiality of the city that Miller must explore and document. The author takes us on a trip around Delhi as experienced by him, juxtaposing an 'older' historical city and

1 | Lyrics from American singer-songwriter Josh Ritter's "Thin Blue Flame" as appearing on the inside cover of Miller, *Delhi*; See also "Josh Ritter Official Website."

2 | The single lends itself to a broad landscape of interpretations; it has been described as an anti-religious diatribe, see Atkinson, "JOSH RITTER: Beauty in Uncertainty"; as an anti-war song, see "Anti-War Songs Listing"; and a stream-of-consciousness, universe-trotting epic, see "Thin Blue Flame | Girl in the Gloaming."

3 | Miller, *Delhi*, 11.

4 | Ibid.

a present, rapidly changing megacity. Echoing Suketu Mehta's descriptions of Indian attitudes towards Mumbai in *Maximum City*, Miller observes that Delhi lives for the present and the future, and has little time for nostalgia: "It is a city of migrants and the growing city-pride of its inhabitants relate to its aspirations, not its history."⁵ In contrast, Miller's own topography of Delhi is landmarked as much by its 'ruins' (monuments which bear witness to Delhi's historical past) as by its contemporary 'artefacts'. Miller is openly admiring and nostalgic about the 'old' Delhi, and grudgingly acknowledges the new, rapid transformations the city is undergoing. This meandering journey through the capital is interspersed with his random and sometimes peculiar encounters with people in the city.

The author places himself explicitly within the psycho-geographic tradition of the flâneur, declaring the well-known and ardent London chronicler, Iain Sinclair, as a source of inspiration for his walk of Delhi (although he does make a point of characterizing himself as "not quite as eccentric" as Sinclair).⁶ Walking is 'essential' for Miller, to get to know cities, especially one such as Delhi, where "so much of life is lived out in the open."⁷ A rather peculiar Contents page teases the reader with hints of what this 'life in the open' in Delhi looks like. We have sentence-long chapter headings consisting of the main events of that episode of the author's walk of Delhi. These headings arouse curiosity and anticipation, and add a touch of humor: "Chapter One: In which the Author is dazzled by the metro, finds a cure for hemorrhoids and turns the tables on an unscrupulous shoeshine man" or "Chapter Two: In which the Author explores the mysteries of the sodomitic gerund, monastic nudity and geocaching".⁸ Such descriptions are convenient tags to remember a particular episode by. The episodes in turn play their own part in structuring the density and enormity of the megacity in narrative as each episode coincides with a section of the spiral walk. Miller's personalized, hand-drawn maps at the beginning of each chapter help the reader too in keeping track of where one is 'in Delhi'. These chapters are then separated by Intermissions that are detours or breaks from the spiral of Miller's walk, providing him and readers some breathing space and time to ponder, away from the spiral of the journey.

Such strategies of structuring and ordering of a representation of Delhi aid both the author and the reader, in terms of the 'readability' of the urban space and its representation. In the following section, I continue this task of describing and discussing Miller's documentary strategies more systematically. This will aid us in a second step in understanding the various trajectories and associations that Miller's text creates and traces. The final section is a stocktaking of our analysis

5 | Ibid., 61.

6 | Ibid., 8.

7 | Ibid., 7.

8 | Ibid., Contents.

to comment and discuss in how far Miller documentary method may be said to succeed as ANT.

SAM MILLER'S STRATEGIES OF LITERARY DOCUMENTARY

Ordering and Structuring the Spiral Walk: A Template for 'ANT'

Sam Miller's "template for discovery" offers a tangible and rather pragmatic model for a Latourian ANT.⁹ The sheer size of a megacity or the over-whelming and intangible urban complexity and chaos, which have been so extensively discussed in urban literature today, do not appear to bother this author. Selectivity serves to reduce the complexity of such an enterprise, and becomes the author's primary ordering and empowering principle. Miller takes his inspiration from Louise Bourgeois' exaltation of a spiral, and finds the "device and metaphor" for his wanderings in Delhi or what he calls a "template for discovery" – he decides to walk a spiral through Delhi:

"[A spiral is] an attempt at controlling chaos. It has two directions. Where do you place yourself; at the periphery or the vortex? Beginning at the outside is fear of losing control...Beginning at the center is affirmation; the move outward is a representation of giving, and giving up control; of trust, positive energy, of life itself."¹⁰

Miller's spiral starts at Connaught place, modern day Delhi's commercial and geographical center, and moves gradually outward, anti-clockwise, towards the outermost conglomerations or Delhi's so-called satellite cities. The selectivity of this undertaking is a paradoxical resource, restrictive yet unique, because it enables Miller to capture unusual or lesser-known areas of Delhi. The route offers on the one hand, spatial orientation as it provides a fixed plan of action and itinerary for on one day or in one turn of the spiral. That is, it also affords the author the advantage of foresight as to which specific areas he must walk through and the difficulties that may arise. On the other hand, it promises a rare tour of the city. In a city laid out according to a particular system of planned access and connectivity, the spiral that Miller embosses on Delhi's map randomizes his approach to the megacity. The path that the author must take, that is, the spiral of his walk, challenges this prescribed order of access within the city. It forces him into a technique of transiting spaces by way of which the chance and the anticipated, the relevant and irrelevant, the profound and eclectic, intermingle

9 | Ibid., 12–3.

10 | As quoted in ibid., 12, gap in original.

and flow into his experience of the megacity. The quote above implies a decrease in authorial control proportionate to his progress on the spiral path. However, the subjectivity of the author's role as the central character around whom the walking and experiencing activity evolves, grants and ensures the author control over the process of narrativization.

In this book, the authority and authenticity of the narrative develop out of Miller's experiences combined with the unfolding and accrual of knowledge about the city. This is markedly different in *Maximum City*, where it develops from the extensive efforts of the author to establish his sincerity and identity, or in *That Rose-Red Empire*, where Sinclair engages the reader in his concern for the city. Miller's authority also comes instated in the simple guise of his training as a journalist with the BBC and employee of the BBC World Service Trust (inside book cover). His personal introduction in the prologue is very brief, consisting of the instances in his life when he became acquainted with Delhi.¹¹ Just as briefly, within a page or two, Miller establishes the tradition that inspired and sparked his decision to traverse Delhi on foot, especially with a particular route in mind. Here, the names Charles Baudelaire and Gérard de Nerval make their appearance, as does Iain Sinclair.¹² Miller, too, presents contemporary Delhi as having 'degenerated': 'All of its multiple avatars are visible through a thickening crust of modernity [...] Delhi, the city of Sultanates and Mughals, of Djinns and Sufis, of poets and courtesans, is now also a city of cybercafés and shopping malls, of Metros and multiplexes. It is the past and it is the future.'¹³ There is something magical and poetic about the 'old' Delhi for Miller, something definitely more romantic and regal than the present. Like T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, whom Miller quotes in a footnote, Miller's narrative is imbued by concern over the fate of the city and its people.¹⁴ This concern is tinted by nostalgia as Miller evokes the city's grander moments in history, paying homage to them by visiting their architectural witnesses. (Miller's tendency of signifying Delhi's monumental architecture as heritage will be discussed more extensively in the next section.)

Structurally the author uses a number of strategies in order to break with the tradition of a causal narrative. Such a fracturing is achieved by quaint, hand-drawn maps of his progress along the spiral, photographs, footnotes, and short Intermissions between chapters that allow the author time to reflect on matters

11 | Ibid., Inside book cover. Miller tells us that he learned of Delhi as a child learning capitals of the cities of the world and from a vaguely remembered childhood limerick. He also learned of Delhi as a city visited by the comic figure Tintin, then in 1984 as the backdrop of the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and yet later as the setting of the film *The Householder*. See 1-4 and 149-50

12 | Ibid., 5-8.

13 | Ibid., 1.

14 | Ibid., 6, see fn. 4.

not pertaining directly to the spiral walk, as a pause before the journey continues. Footnotes give readers additional information or function as a citation of the source of the author's information, much as in an academic text. They introduce a spatial aspect by first fracturing at a textual level the text on the page, and then of the reader's perspective via hyper-textuality; the reader can choose to set aside the book and read online, get 'lost' and/ or come back to text. The footnotes are thus breaks in the continuity and monotony of 'mere' text and may simply distract the reader by provoking or suggesting an online search, or give a good laugh as in the footnote about cockroaches, or do both as with the footnote about diarrhea in Paharganj.¹⁵ The additional knowledge in most footnotes offers historical trivia for the interested reader or is directed towards non-Indian readers such as the footnote that explains *Paneer*, an Indian cottage cheese or the various meanings of the Indian word *Pandit* in the Indian religious context and as source of the English word 'pundit'.¹⁶ Spatiality at the textual level reflects the spatiality of the city as Miller's text offers areas for the reader to voluntarily enter or evade. Through the footnotes, the text also gains a sense of movement between representation and reality. They thus serve an authenticating purpose; the documentary experience is extended by the 'extras' offered in the footnotes and enhanced by the hyper-reality through references for reading online.

Additionally, Miller's own amateurish, black and white photographs offer the reader a sense of tangibility by providing visualization; the imaginable is rendered 'real' through the images. At a textual level, these sometimes rather random-seeming inserts of photographs break the continuity of 'mere' text visually. Pictures such as that of a square piece of toasted bread that Miller has trouble getting because he orders it with a British accent or footnotes such as the one explaining the Indian species of cockroach are obvious indulgences of self-irony or a parody of the documentary endeavor itself.¹⁷ Miller's style of introducing humor into his city narrative through self-parody, tongue-in-cheek melodrama and irony is his means to break with the sobriety of what would otherwise run the risk of being an overwhelmingly eclectic journalistic rendering. Instead, Miller's account of his city walk maintains its entertaining and informative quality. Further into the chapter we will also consider the meaning and implications for ANT of such a turn of the observer's stance onto himself and his subsequent self-reflexivity. Narrated in the first person, it decreases the distance between the 'first-hand' witness (the author) and a witness of the second degree (the reader), while his specific style, meandering between documentary sobriety and parody, sustains the engaging, voyeuristic extent of (exotic) experience and exposition of the Indian megacity.

15 | Ibid., 46, 63.

16 | Ibid., 207, 23.

17 | Ibid., 80, 63.

'New' and 'Old' 'Spatial Fictions': A Peripatetic Journalist 'Describes'

We have seen earlier that Latour's theory of a 'second empiricism' asks humans to turn away from a 'warring of worlds' (the cleft between nature and culture) and move, in today's multi-polar, globally connected world, towards more 'peaceful negotiations' to build common 'habitable spaces'. In such a case, one's own world or 'spatial fiction' has to be negotiated and mediated with the world at large.¹⁸ Latour urges the need to exist in heterogeneous collectives or networks, which acknowledge the humans and machines that populate these networks.¹⁹ As a starting point for scholars, he advocates 'cultural translation' for the sake of understanding the spatial fictions with which different cultures construct themselves.²⁰ Latour's own jargon-ridden ideas being still in the making, it is possible to venture our own interpretations. From such a notion of habitable spaces and heterogeneous collectives, it is not a long leap to reading Miller's walk as an attempt to traverse through and gather Delhi's various 'spatial fictions', and seek in them traces or possibilities of 'negotiation and mediation' with a global and globalizing world. In how far Miller's representation may be said to be a 'cultural translation', and whether the collectives are desirable or the spaces habitable, remains to be seen. Conceptually, Latour's ideas have been deemed "romantic fictions": the immediate critique pertains to how the creation of common habitable space can, at the same time, be inclusive of differences, frictions or conflicts.²¹ The more pressing issue for our analysis, which will occupy us from now on, concerns the role and influence of the spokesperson and the nature of the 'translations' that Miller produces of Delhi's 'spatial fictions'.

By following Miller's steps of the spiral walk, we get a glimpse of his representative method. We see in it some of the eclecticism that so strongly characterized Sinclair's narrative. It appears that everything encountered is described, be it outstanding or mundane, Indian or foreign, functional or artistic, banal, curious or odd. If Miller's project of walking in an Indian city 'suffers from eccentricity' – judging from reactions of Miller's friends to his project – the

18 | The modernist concept of actors acting on a system is replaced by one where negotiators (actors) circulate along networks that involve mediators (humans or objects, that is, Latour's hybrids)

19 | 'When we ponder how the global world could be made habitable [...] we now mean habitable for billions of humans and trillions of other creatures that no longer form nature or, of course, a society, but rather, to use my term, a possible *collective*' Latour, 'Spheres and Networks: Two Ways to Reinterpret Globalization', 141, original italics.

20 | "Contrary to the dual notions of nature-and-society, the collective is *not* collected yet, and no one has the slightest idea of what it is to be composed, how it is to be assembled, or even if it should be assembled into one piece." *Ibid.*, 141, original italics.

21 | See Conley, *Spatial Ecologies*, 126.

author counterbalances the “madness and perversity” of his decision with poetry in which he finds “solace and inspiration”.²²

“At worst, one is in motion; and at best
Reaching no absolute, in which to rest,
One is always nearer by not keeping still.”²³

This display of doubt and conciliation has, of course, the rhetorical function of tempering Miller’s portrayal of himself as slightly eccentric. These words signify his perseverance rather than the restlessness he implies in his project of walking Delhi in a spiral. Much like Sinclair, this peripatetic journalist is inspired and spurred on by the bustle of Delhi’s streets. Miller appears most comfortable and confident when he is walking, describing Delhi’s new and old architecture and his often-curious encounters with people.

The book starts with Miller peering into the ‘hole’ at Connaught Place (CP) – a construction site for the Metro at the time (see Image 3). Miller catches CP in its moment of transition, as it becomes a lynchpin of Delhi’s Metro system. The Metro in Delhi is embodied in Miller’s narrative as the “latest addition of steel, glass and concrete in Delhi”, a “monument to modernity” and “harbinger of change” alongside so many other “gifts for a ‘modern future’” such as flyovers, malls, etc.²⁴ An anti-capitalist thrust shimmers through the language Miller uses to describe ‘aspiring’ Delhi, rendered in realist mode. Throughout the book, Miller maintains the style of a moving camera to ‘show’ everything he sees (or chooses to see), describing along the way the commonplace together with the monumental, the living and the built. As he peers into the hole of the construction site, the reader too participates in the child-like activity of pressing the face hard against the glass of a skylight to gape into the otherwise hidden “pulsating cavern”, to be “dazzled by this new world below”.²⁵ But in this shiny ‘new world’, Miller diagnoses a Delhi of an uncertain future: “The Metro has become the icon of Delhi’s uncertain future, carving its way above and beneath the city, *overshadowing and undermining the forgotten and neglected* mosques, temples, churches, forts and tombs of previous rulers.”²⁶ A conservative bias is discernable through such a juxtaposition of the new and old in Miller’s narrative (see especially my emphasis) that continues, in general, to flavor his representation of Delhi. A hint of nostalgia for a ‘lost’ Delhi emerges soon after through the testimony of an acquaintance that has lived in an affluent apartment in CP for the

22 | Miller, *Delhi*, 35.

23 | Thomas Gunn, *On the Move*, as quoted in *ibid.*

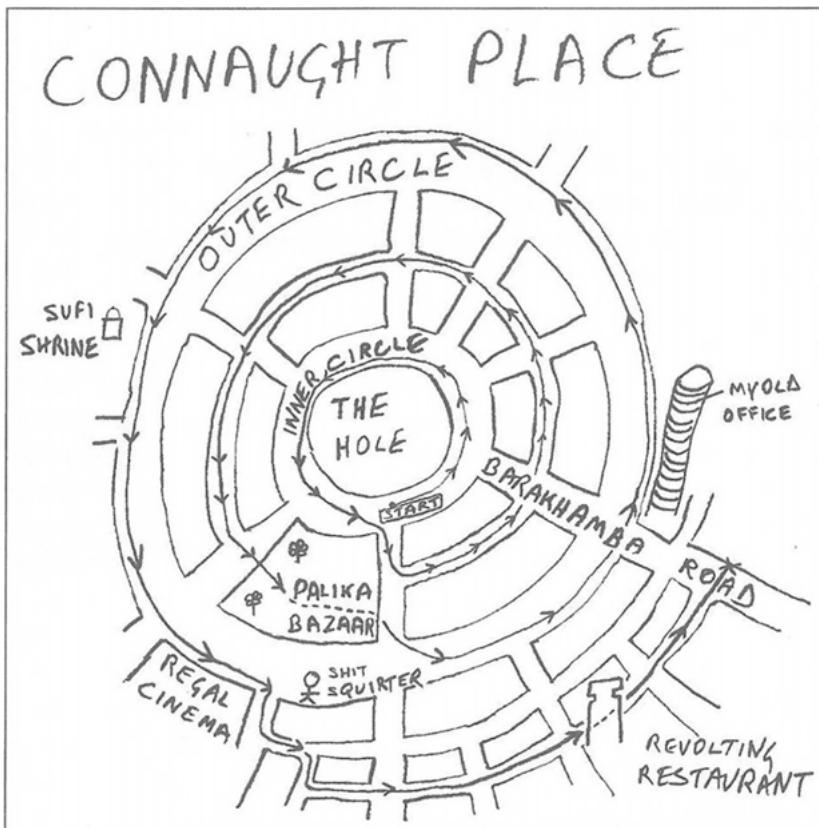
24 | *Ibid.*, 15.

25 | *Ibid.*

26 | *Ibid.*, 15, my emphasis.

past sixty-eight years: “When I asked her about how CP had changed, she looked up to the heavens. She recalled the old bandstand in the central park [...] it was a beautiful park. ‘The war years’, she began, with a nostalgic effusiveness [...] ‘were lovely years.’”²⁷

*Image 3: Hand-drawn map of the centre of Miller’s spiral
- Connaught Place in Delhi as “The Hole”*



Source – *Delhi*, 14 (Image used with author’s permission)

However, Miller being a man on a mission with his feet firmly on the ground quickly continues his journey of CP, which in a stoic turn he calls a “Palladian outpost suffering from modest urban blight.”²⁸ This is a sweeping statement. Miller’s choice of words here to refer to the center of the Indian capital city may,

27 | Ibid., 21.

28 | Ibid., 18.

for the sensitive reader, be unfortunate in their evocation of Joseph Conrad's short story "An Outpost of Progress", and threaten to fix our perception of Miller's observations as yet another imperial critique of the 'ex-Empire'.²⁹ However, his choice of words is simply symptomatic of his style of representation, which juxtaposes research and historical knowledge of the area and his perception of present-day CP. It highlights Miller's empirical strategy of taking a diachronic view of Delhi. We are repeatedly reminded of the layers of history in the architecture of Delhi.³⁰ Miller's description of the center of Delhi is on the one hand, historical, accompanied by a short recourse to the history of CP's origin as the capital's new commercial center, as well as an architectural history of its neo-Classical buildings. On the other hand, the geometrical consistency and circularity of CP is rendered visual and vivid through his own material description of the "three circles, nestled neatly inside each other, spoked by seven radial roads".³¹ An insert of a poem by Tabish Khair emphasizes this impression.³² It deals explicitly with the deliberate geometry of pre-Metro CP: "Stamped by foreign hands, concentric".³³ A few passages later, Miller's tone becomes doubtful again. This 'modest urban blight' is described now as "inner-city decay" with a "decaying jawful [sic] of fang-like unplanned high-rise office buildings".³⁴ The 'urban blight' becomes embodied in the many oddities he encounters. To list a few: an ear-cleaner; the underground 'grey market' or shiny CP's 'alter ego' called Paalika Bazaar with all its peculiar shops; Gopal Das Bhavan – the site of Miller's office for over a year, which formed the "backdrop for a legendary act of incompetence and brutality by the Delhi police";³⁵ the President of the Sufi Council of India working as a dubious apothecary; the Regal – one of Delhi's oldest cinemas, which now shows adult B-movies; a shit squirting man who runs a shoe-cleaning scam, and so on. Paradoxically, these quirky, comical descriptions succeed in shaking off the vaguely pessimistic tones of Miller's earlier descriptions. But the chapter on CP ends, nonetheless, in a gloomy description of the last of the

29 | Miller's specific observer position as a white, British male, and the nature of narrative it generates will be discussed in more detail later.

30 | See also, "Delhi – six hundred miles from the nearest sea port – was a fossil, an open air museum of Indian history" Miller, *Delhi*, 9.

31 | *Ibid.*, 18.

32 | Tabish Khair is a contemporary poet, novelist and literary scholar of Indian origin, currently living and working in Aarhus, Denmark. See "Tabish Khair, Official Website."

33 | Khair, *Where Parallel Lines Meet*; Miller, *Delhi*, 17, fn. 2 for Tabish Khair's full verse from his own volume, which is divided into three sections and is, in Miller's words, "obsessed with geometry". Miller's own reference does not mention from which section or precise poem he cites this verse.

34 | Miller, *Delhi*, 30.

35 | *Ibid.*, 24.

British-built bungalows in the last of the CP radials, which reads as the closing of the coffin lid over this era of CP: “The old house at 20, Barakhamba Road has had one side of it torn away by bulldozers. The rest still stands as a vacant ruin, dwarfed by its neighbors, a decaying reminder of Delhi’s recent past, gradually returning to dust”.³⁶

Miller’s self-imposed check on his nostalgia is administered to avoid the risk of writing “as if the past were more important than the present, as so many had done before.”³⁷ This, however, is a rhetorical strategy to detract from the fact that Miller makes his own exceptions to this rule. The growth of his spiral would normally take him just past Nizamuddin, an area Miller is personally attached to since it was his first home and has “the most gorgeous of Mughal monuments” – the medieval tomb of Emperor Humayun.³⁸ Here, for his own sake, the exception is made; Miller relents and makes the detour. The now restored and pristine Humayun’s Tomb brings forth in Miller his own ‘spatial fiction’, of the tomb from before it was part of a “confident new international city, provisionally ranked, after the Red Fort, at number two on most tourists’ sightseeing list”.³⁹ The tomb had previously been Miller’s “secret special place”, it used to be “wild” but now it is “pretty” and Miller, becoming “inconsolable”, longs to see it in its earlier state. “But that is nostalgia” he admits, finally acknowledging the irrationality of his feelings, and accepting the ‘now’.⁴⁰ Without denying Miller the truth of his emotions, it must be acknowledged that this little display of wistfulness in his exposition of Humayun’s Tomb has the narrative function of dramatizing the episode, while simultaneously making us witness to how the city is changing.⁴¹

Miller’s tendency to communicate Delhi’s urban imagery through descriptions of its historical monuments and other physical attributes reveals his predisposition to architecture and history. This can be read through descriptions of different modes of architecture (historical, functional or both) and various spatial elements (such as different modes of existence or paths of commuting in the city). Apart from innumerable monuments testifying to Delhi’s rich and layered history, the irregular topography of Delhi itself becomes a major asset in accentuating Delhi’s urban personality. The adjectival descriptions here continue

36 | Ibid., 33.

37 | Ibid., 158.

38 | Ibid.

39 | Ibid., 159.

40 | Ibid.

41 | There are at least a handful of similar scattered instances such as the before and after pictures of central Delhi’s oldest building, the seven-hundred-year-old step-well, Agarsen’s Baoli; or the mosque with apparently no record, which was lost to history due to the Commonwealth Games. Its existence is thus proven only by Miller’s own, before and after photographs of the mosque and of the wall that later replaced it. See *ibid.*, 47–9, 227–9.

to serve as pointers to the mediation of representation: the ‘decaying’ CP, the post-industrial West Delhi, Rajendra Place – “Delhi at its ‘most mediocre’”, the “arid rocky forestlands of the Ridge”, the “academic flavor” of the Delhi University area, Raisina Hill or the “heart of British New Delhi” and so on.⁴² This is complemented by emphasis on the city’s social morphology. The affluent in the city’s center, the “mini-America” and diplomatic enclaves of Chanakyapuri, the suspicious residents of the unauthorized settlement in Kabari bazaar, the poor Bangladeshi refugees in the slums of South Delhi, the refugees of Karol Bagh, the eccentric Brahma Kumaris, the even more eccentric aristocracies of Malcha Mahal, and so on.⁴³ The architectural representation that Miller gives of Delhi is a very significant aspect of his narrative of Delhi. As I will proceed to show, Miller’s articulation of space reveals the (imperial) ideology of appreciation and preservation of a ‘bygone age’ or, in other words, the codification of architecture as heritage. In the ‘aspiring’ Delhi of the Metro and Malls, Miller rather pessimistically perceives and criticizes the machinations of capitalistic ideology: “I find myself preaching to anyone who will listen that the world ignores Delhi’s current experiments with modernity at its peril.”⁴⁴ He turns his attentions more willingly to various historical monuments along the spiral, even (or maybe especially) the lesser known or not quite as historically prominent. Miller’s description of the 18th century observatory, Jantar Mantar, with its “warm terracotta shades”, or the “mesmerizing” domes of the Zeenat mosque, both of which feature in *The Householder*, achieves an emblematic symbolization of these architectural monuments in this Delhi portrait.⁴⁵ They are some of Miller’s personal favorites; the observatory because “it seems so eccentric, so unexpected, and so ludicrously post-modern in the middle of commercial Delhi”, and the “gorgeous” domes for “all their zebra-striped glory”, described by Miller as a mesmerizingly romantic backdrop for the domestic dispute that unveils in this scene of *The Householder*.⁴⁶ Pitted against the narrative of global capitalism, such eulogized descriptions of a ‘previous’ Delhi become emblematic (in a way that double-decker buses are in London), and in their identity-giving potential, function as mnemonic sources within the narrative. These descriptions display an act of signification of architecture – be it through its history, as in the case of numerous monuments and buildings described in the book, or through his personal relation to them as just described. In the example above, the observatory or the mosque domes and Miller’s signification of them by recalling them in his

42 | Ibid., See respectively 203, 136, 200, 71.

43 | Ibid., See respectively 20–2, 54, 157, 135, 130–5, 137.

44 | Ibid., 4.

45 | Ibid., 107–8 The Householder is one of the earliest films to be made by Merchant and Ivory Productions.

46 | Ibid., 44, 108.

narrative, make them vehicles of additional cultural and historical meaning and function. On the one hand, as is evident from the effect they have on Miller, rather than merely fulfilling their 'original' function as such, these architectural objects communicate a cultural history and heritage. On the other hand, they become vested with the connotations they have for Miller – of harking back to a cultural production that thematizes relations between India and the West, or as a reminder of domesticity (the social) in the urban. Conceivably, by describing the physical geography of the city marked by its losses, recoveries and substitutions, Miller arrives at what could be loosely an architectural history through the identities and ideologies attached to the space being described.

This "prospective candidate for the world's largest urban conglomeration in the world" also contains its share of open spaces, which may be categorically described as either natural spaces or skeletons of previous eras of urbanization.⁴⁷ At the beginning of one segment of the spiral, Miller looks around himself and with a far-reaching glance, gives us a panoramic view:

"All around is Delhi at its most sparse. The Ridge, empty except for jackals and peacocks and the princely siblings;⁴⁸ Chanakyapuri, home to a few disoriented diplomats and deserted after dusk; to the east, Nehru Park, with landscaped lawns where foreigners jog and sweat off their party paunches; a nine hole golf-course, and a polo ground – used only in season. Beyond that is Delhi's least visited large open space, a huge expanse of tarmac and grass."⁴⁹

This "expanse of tarmac and grass" has had various avatars. For Miller, it has various associations – from being originally Willingdon airport to the now renamed but dysfunctional Safdarjang airport, and from being a landmark in a comic strip Miller read as a child to the site of an airplane accident that killed Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's aspiring heir, Sanjay Gandhi. In ANT terms, this is an excellent example of how the material, the human and the semiotic are stringed together in Miller's descriptions. Another historical event enters this description, which reminds us of the far-reaching impact of 9/11, that watershed event on the other side of the globe. After the September 11 attacks in New York, this already secluded airport was closed to private aircrafts. It now houses the office of the Delhi Flying Club and its airstrip is occasionally used by the prime minister's helicopter. The area is described as having a "sleepy air" and being a

47 | Ibid., 159.

48 | The Ridge is a two-thousand acre, mostly uninhabited rocky forestland in Delhi. The "princely siblings" are Sakina and Cyrus of the former royal family of Oudh, whose rule ended in the 1850s. In the sixth intermission, Miller describes his meeting with the siblings, portraying them as a little "mad" in their "struggle to avoid ordinariness". Ibid., 137–45.

49 | Ibid., 149.

“high-security zone”, through which the author nevertheless manages to pass without being stopped. Miller encounters and reveals other pockets of ‘green and serene’ in the megacity such as the Lodi colony, an “under-loved” housing estate, which has now become “just another monolithic souvenir of one of Delhi’s previous incarnations”.⁵⁰ Or the fertile farmland on the floodplains of the Yamuna river occupied by farmers growing twenty different crops.⁵¹ These descriptions, coupled with markers of Miller’s rhetoric to describe the aspiring city, give rise to a juxtaposition in the narrative that magnifies these disparities and renders these open or ‘natural’ urban spaces vulnerable. Miller’s fear of the destruction of such spaces, in other words, the fear of total urbanization co-opted by global capitalism solidifies with hints of upcoming change or emphatic insinuations such as the following, regarding the isolated airport: “Narendra [the receptionist of the Delhi Flying Club] didn’t know it, but the real estate sharks are circling. The land occupied by this non-airport is enormously valuable, and there aren’t many modern multi-storey, air-conditioned shopping malls in this part of Delhi.”⁵²

Miller’s Stigma and The Role of Humor in ANT

In the first intermission, Miller concedes self-doubt and insecurity regarding his project of walking in the city. Faced with the Delhi heat of 45°C, he says: “I find it hard to admit to myself what I am doing. [...] There is no slower way to explore a city, no other route through a city that is as purgatorial. It is as if moving continents has left me a little unbalanced. Understandably, I command no sympathy from others.”⁵³ This is a strategic confession, resulting in quite the contrary. The reader’s sympathies are appealed to in the face of the physical hardships Miller must undergo. His determination must seem laudable, even as it is exaggerated a little later on by the mention of the “six surgical interventions” that have left Miller with a bad knee in his right leg.⁵⁴

Due to his visibility as a white British foreigner, Miller potential for immersion in an Indian city is limited. His strategy is to simply make the best of his ‘handicap’. This is done on two separate levels. First, the visual stigma gains him unforeseen advantages – people often mistaking him to be an ‘innocent’ or ‘lost’ foreigner are more than willing to lend him a helping hand or excuse a

50 | Ibid., 154.

51 | Ibid., 159.

52 | Ibid., 151.

53 | Ibid., 34.

54 | Ibid., 35, my emphasis.

mistake.⁵⁵ Out of general curiosity, they even readily enter into a conversation with him.⁵⁶ Secondly, Miller exploits his identity to introduce humor into the narrative. In doing so, he reverses the gaze – to see himself as the Indians would. The side effect of such a turn in the narrative is a lightening up of the otherwise documentary sobriety. A classic example is his language mix up. Miller describes how he started jumping and dancing “like a dervish” to rid himself of stubborn ants crawling up his trousers, shouting at the same time to an onlooker by way of explanation the word *chinta*, which means worry, instead of the appropriate Hindi word *cheenti*. The onlooker shakes his head “sorrowfully” before hurrying away.⁵⁷ At the surface level, such instances often provide comic relief in the narrative. Miller’s consistent use of a self-critical style makes his city-narrative endearing and draws the reader in, disarming him. The style is sustained by the fact that Miller wears his modesty on his sleeve. On seeing a misspelled signboard for English classes, Miller smirks, but is promptly reprimanded by his wife:

“[M]any sign painters are illiterate in their mother tongue, and it’s barely surprising that they have such trouble with English. ‘So would you, if you had to copy some words from Japanese.’ And since then, I have taken a more nuanced view of Indian felicities in the English language. English is now another Indian language – spoken by more people than in my homeland. [...] So who am I to tell an Indian how to parse her English noun clauses or that ‘prepone’ is not a word?”⁵⁸

This self-effacement also serves to thinly veil a slight unease the author feels about his authority as narrator and identity as a foreign observer (especially white male and British). In other words, what Miller is indeed doing here in ANT-related terms is more principled. He is laying bare his – the observer’s – imperfections, and herein, tied up with the author’s perspective and self-effacement, we find the mimesis of process in Miller’s ANT-like endeavor. Since the author is a foreigner in Delhi, the mimesis of process is located in the confrontation between him and the city, that is, in the empirical anchorage of his enterprise.

Miller’s physical ‘stigma’ and tall stature also influence the outcome of situations he chances upon, for example, when he comes upon two policemen hitting a boy, allegedly for carrying and peddling drugs to children.⁵⁹ On

55 | See for example the police officer at the Safdarjang airport, the watchman at the Nehru stadium, a young man, Atiq, at the Punj Peeran slum. *Ibid.*, 151, 155, 157.

56 | See for example the conductor of the National Police Brass Band or the mourners. *Ibid.*, 177, 185.

57 | *Ibid.*, 100.

58 | *Ibid.*, 200.

59 | *Ibid.*, 116.

seeing Miller, the policemen stop beating the boy and ultimately let him go. On a different occasion, the NDMC truck, which is looking to raid the black market, drives away because of Miller's presence.⁶⁰ This makes Miller, albeit unintentionally, an interventionist in the scene, and confronts him repeatedly with his own identity in Delhi/India. This is underlined by the fact that not everyone is as tolerant of Miller's sudden, unaccountable presence in their space in the megacity. When Miller chances to walk into an open-air slaughterhouse, taking pictures of the entrails and offal, and of the people working there, he soon discovers that he has walked out of his comfort zone and into an area, where his status as foreigner does not protect him. A group of young men working as butchers, prohibit his taking pictures and demand the film from his camera, while yet another group, whether in jest or in earnest remains unclear to narrator and reader, threatens him with knives: "One of them put his hand on my shoulder and lifted his knife. He brought the knife to within half an inch of my throat, and with a great venomous sneer, he then cut through the air as if he were ending my life."⁶¹ Among all the catastrophes that could befall Miller in a megacity, this is the only moment in his narrative in which he may be said to have truly been in danger. Yet, the vivid scene at the slaughterhouse, the author's discomposure and the shock of the life-threatening incident, are all quickly neutralized by the author who questions his own perception.⁶²

"I got out my mobile phone. I dialed my wife's number and it was engaged. I pretended to have a long conversation with her, telling her where I was and what I had been doing and that I'd meet her in fifteen minutes. They listened in, giggling to each other as they tried to make sense of my English. Suddenly the hostile butchers seemed like naughty children who had played a trick on an adult. By the time I had finished, they were quiet, almost timid. Each of them shook my hand."⁶³

Of course, Miller's choice of re-telling such a situation is also a staged and dramatized narrative inclusion to lend suspense and climax to his account. The description of his own fear, of the probable personal danger and vulnerability in this space exposes the author in an unsettlingly unforeseen moment of his walk. The narrative means by which it is rendered – in rather affected realistic

60 | Ibid., 29.

61 | Ibid., 122.

62 | There are mentions of minor accidents, which indicate the hazards of "walking" in Delhi such as the author falling into a manhole, or jarring his leg on a protruding metal piece and bruising his knee, and also of running into and then away from the "killer pigs". Ibid., 216–7, 156, 268.

63 | Ibid., 122.

descriptions of gore and personal danger – authenticates the experience. In this section, I have only just touched upon the complexity of the self-implication in Miller's ability to turn the observing gaze onto himself. These are suggestive of important reflexive aspects in ANT methodology and will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

SIM-CITY, SAM'S CITY: CITIES IN CRISIS AND UNFORESEEN SPATIAL TRAJECTORIES

Miller's juxtaposition of the 'aspiring' visions of Delhi's future and the Delhi he encounters on his spiral walk, alongside his nostalgic descriptions of historical Delhi depicts a city that is in the throes of a crisis.⁶⁴ In the eleventh Intermission, Miller describes Delhi as his *SimCity*, in a video game that allows the player to build and manage his or her own city.⁶⁵ Miller starts at the game's formal start-date, 1900, and continues through real Delhi's various historical phases. Hauntingly, his perception of the real city materializes in the game – Miller's Sim-Delhi is a city in crisis. Various infrastructural catastrophes befall it, and his incapacity as the city's mayor leads to the city's collapse as early as 1999.⁶⁶ *SimCity*, the computer game, provides the player management simulation based on the complex modeling of economic systems, and offers the player options and consequences for the planning, designing and controlling of an unlimited number of cities.⁶⁷ It raises, for Miller, the same issues that are "at the heart of modern Delhi's dilemmas" – a never ending spiral or a vicious loop: an improvement in the services or infrastructure results in more migrants, which in turn asserts pressure on the services.⁶⁸ While in the 'perfect' simulated environment Miller's Sim-Delhi is quickly reduced to rubble, the real city proves its strength and elasticity; it still stands and thrives. In the real Delhi, people have created their own 'options' to overcome infrastructural failures and produce desirable

64 | The notion of crisis and risk in the representations of cities represents a general shift from nation to cities as canonical subject of representations in contemporary discourse. See Rao, "Risk and the City"; See also Rao, "Slum as Theory."

65 | Miller, *Delhi*, 246–50.

66 | Miller is later able to, however, use a "cheat code" provided by his son to continue up to 2045, at which stage, the author's SimCity becomes an international hub for space travel. *Ibid.*, 248–9.

67 | Atkins, *More Than a Game*, 111–137. See especially 117.

68 | This is presented as a recurrent trope in the various dilemmas of "emergent" megacities. See for example Rahul Mehrotra, the urban architect Mehta interviews in *Maximum City*: "If we make the city nice, with good roads, trains and accommodation – if we make the city a nicer place to live- it attracts more people from outside." Mehta, *Maximum City*, 121.

'consequences'.⁶⁹ The course of the game is, much like Borges' *Garden of Forking Paths*, a proliferating expanse of decisions and results.⁷⁰ Yet, Miller's Sim-Delhi cannot grow beyond a population of only two million, while the expansion of the 'real' Delhi offers no geographical or demographical limits.⁷¹ Apart from raising issues about simulation and subsequent perceptions of city space and urbanity, this Intermission directly questions how Miller deals with such an expanse of 'options and consequences' in the 'real' city. The potentially innumerable options and the inevitable decision-making that must ensue in traversing and chronicling broach a central part of our critique of Latour's ANT. So far, we have seen how Miller's spiral can work as a structuring and ordering principle for an ANT. In the upcoming sections, we will take a look at some other strategies that enable Miller to overcome the urban 'axcess' he encounters.

The Aesthetics of Estrangement: Delhi Through Foreign Eyes

Apart from the brief information the author provides in the Prologue about his relation to and first encounters with the Indian capital, we learn more about him and his stance as observer through incidents he divulges in separate intermissions.⁷² The textual arrangement of the book alternating between Intermission and a chapter that is a section of the spiral in Miller's route around Delhi, adds a spatial quality to the reading experience of the book. The chapters are dynamic, reflecting Miller's urban drift and allowing the reader to participate in it, while the intermissions are static in terms of movement, but impart knowledge about our guide and his musings. The second intermission, for example, reveals how Miller's personal mobility affects his perception of the city spaces he encounters. He tells us how he fled Delhi one summer to go to Europe with his children. Life in Delhi has changed the author's perception: "London, where I have lived most of my life, appeared to have shrunk and become cute. Parts of it are being turned into an urban toy land, a post-modern parody of itself."⁷³ In a restaurant, he eats the decoration off a dish; the greater humiliation for Miller is, however, that he apologizes by saying that he has just come from India. Both these acts (the eating and the apology) and the emotions (embarrassment and humiliation) are testimony to his position in transition. In descriptions of his travels to London and other European cities on this holiday, Miller's homesickness for his new adopted home in India pervades. Back in India

69 | Miller, *Delhi*, 248.

70 | Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths."

71 | This is emphasized by the author's view from the tall university hospital building. See Miller, *Delhi*, 247–8.

72 | Such as his marriage to an Indian, and about life in Delhi with their children. *Ibid.*, 124–6.

73 | *Ibid.*, 58.

after this trip, he settles down in a flat adjoining the crumbling walls of the seven hundred year old Siri Fort, for Miller, “one of the most romantic evocations of Delhi’s extraordinary history. I have come to love these ruins, and show them off proudly to visitors.”⁷⁴ In India, Miller’s appreciation of Delhi’s history, its monuments and historical ruins throughout the book decidedly distinguishes him from his “fellow Delhiwallahs”, some of whom have never even heard of the fort, and whose city-pride Miller attributes to the city’s aspirations, not its history.⁷⁵ In the preceding pages, Miller has hinted critically at authors who are too nostalgia-led in their portraits of Delhi, a ‘folly’ he too, often subscribes to as in the above example, but from which he tries to distract the reader’s attention.⁷⁶

It is only later in the third intermission that Miller explicitly addresses the issue of his foreignness and difference, and what it entails for him:

“Life in Delhi has brought me a new kind of freedom. I am no longer one of the crowd. I no longer feel the need to conform, or to measure myself against London contemporaries. Here it is taken for granted that I am different, eccentric. I stick out wherever I go. As a *firang* [mildly derogatory word for foreigner], I have discovered a multiple role: I am a source of amusement for small children [...] I am a source of additional revenue for rupee-pinching shop-keepers [...] I am a source of income and consternation for wide-eyed household workers who discuss my unusual foreign ways with next-door’s servants [...] My size, my color, my gait, my accent, my demeanor, my body, my facial expressions mark me out as a foreigner [...] Because, unlike most foreigners here, I speak and read some Hindi, I appear even more unusual.”⁷⁷

These attributes emphasize Miller’s status as standing apart not just from the Indians but also from ‘other foreigners’. Moreover, they reveal Miller’s awareness of his own advantages and disadvantages as a Delhi flâneur. Miller admits this as he talks about using the ‘stigma’ of ‘uniqueness’ in Delhi to his advantage:

“I have learnt instead to take pleasure at others finding me amusing or incompetent; there are rewards. If I am lost, a crowd will gather to help me. If I enter a forbidden building, I only get a mild reprimand – as if I, a foreigner,

74 | Ibid., 60–1.

75 | Ibid., 61.

76 | ‘Those who write about Delhi tend to evoke a sadness about a lost past, a dreamy admiration for old empires. They rarely deal with it as it is now – one of the largest and fastest growing cities in the world.’ Ibid., 10.

77 | Ibid., 79–80, original italics, my insert.

would not know better. I am often dragged (only a little unwillingly) to the front of a queue when buying a ticket. I am, for better or worse, distinctive.”⁷⁸

Miller as experiencer and observer is, on the one hand, conspicuous through his being a tall, white British male in India, but he is obviously well aware of the privileges that accompany it. On the other hand, he remains silent about the selectivity of perception or nature of narrative his position produces. The appeal of Miller's documentary account of Delhi however lies in the author optimizing his peculiar position, in his ability to simultaneously estrange and familiarize the reader with the environment he moves about in and describes. His narrative keeps the reader engaged by the capriciousness and singularity of his spiral walk, but does not shock or disorient the reader at any stage, nor does it resort to reiterating common stereotypes about India. Here I should recall and emphasize his efforts to relativize his own shock and disorientation during the slaughterhouse episode, or the reserved manner and extent of his reporting on the atrocities such as dowry deaths and the gruesome murders of children in Noida.⁷⁹ The aesthetics of estrangement and of foreignness in Miller's account arise from him actually being a foreigner (physically and culturally) and his strategy of retaining a ‘touristic’ perception of India (and Indians), even if it often renders him naïve or makes him the subject of amusement for the people he encounters or the reader.

A look at some of the instances in the book that feature Miller's naïve foreignness also points to the errors in interpretation by the observer/spokesperson, and re-confirms our critique of Latour's ANT. When Miller contemplates having been witness to the beating of a man by policemen, he is shocked at his own immediate reaction – of his willingness to make allowance for the public beating of a drug dealer as an act of deterrence. However, his version of the story is soon completely dismissed by another possible, and plausible, explanation:

“I later told a journalist friend about this incident and she accused me of being totally naïve, of missing the most likely interpretation of what I had seen. She said that the Delhi police themselves are sometimes drug dealers and that the policemen were probably beating up the man I photographed for not paying them protection money.”⁸⁰

On another occasion, Miller mistakes the sheathed corpse of a fat man with a big paunch for that of a pregnant woman:

78 | Ibid., 81.

79 | Ibid., 163–4, 243–5.

80 | Ibid., 118.

"I asked in Hindi, pointing at the corpse, 'What happened to the baby?' He looked at me totally bemused. [...] The laughter became more raucous and audible. One of them, short with an enormous paunch, began stamping his foot with hilarity [...] he told me that the corpse was that of his seventy-seven-year-old brother."⁸¹

These confrontations and anecdotal mishaps function as a mimesis of process, and indicate once more the need to address and theorize the element of human error in judgments made by a spokesperson in an ANT. The explicit disclosure of these 'errors' by Miller adds that measure of reflexivity to his account that maintains its 'realism' and sincerity without impairing his reliability.

Eclectic descriptions of the everyday also form an important part of Miller's aesthetics of simultaneous estrangement and familiarization. The coexistence of the ordinary with the historical ruins and the 'monuments of progress' (as he calls the shining new infrastructure of 21st century Delhi) retains reality's randomness. It enables Miller's narrative to escape the iconicity and explicitly manipulative commodification that may otherwise seep into the representation of an Indian city, as rich in layers of history and politics. However, as we will see in the upcoming section, even the eclectic everyday displays, under Miller's estranging or familiarizing gaze, refreshing and different associations.

Encountering the 'Other': Post-Colonial and Urban aspects⁸²

The adventurousness in Delhi in Miller's account is achieved largely through his spiral route that takes him to lesser-known parts of Delhi. The very visible 'spectacle' of the Metro station discussed earlier is followed in the next section of the spiral by a more discreet, unspectacular place, known possibly only to a few backpacking tourists of Delhi. According to Miller's descriptions, the Everest Café of Paharganj in the backstreets of "backpacker land in Delhi" is an obscure and odd place of retreat for western travellers that does not normally welcome Indians, and is "full of un-Indian comforts".⁸³ From a fly on the wall description of the sorry state and apparent discomfort of various travellers in the Café, Miller's descriptions delve into the chance and experiential – of his unfortunate

81 | Ibid., 184–5.

82 | The label "post-colonial" is fraught with multiple meanings, but the scope of my dissertation restricts a thorough engagement with the complex term. I found it more conducive to inform my analysis by Gyan Prakash's idea that "containing a link to the experience of colonialism, but not contained by it, post-coloniality can be thought of as a form of realignment [...] critically undoing and redrawing colonialism's contingent boundaries." Prakash, "Who's Afraid of Postcoloniality?", 188–9.

83 | Miller, *Delhi*, 63.

interaction with an Israeli woman in the Café with whom he shares no common language. Escaping this estranging scene for both narrator and reader, Miller tries to find his way back to the main Paharganj Bazaar, but is offered drugs and illicit activities. The author finally admits: "This is not Delhi at its best, [...] yet it is the Delhi so many new foreign visitors first encounter, and yet again it is a part of this city that few of my Indian friends are aware of."⁸⁴ This scene is revealing in more than one way. For our analysis, more importantly, it calls attention to the role of identity and perspective of the spokesperson with regard to access to and perceptions of city spaces, and how these shape and color the narratives produced.

Echoing Mehta's representation of Mumbai's slums, we have, even though in smaller magnitudes, estranging descriptions of Delhi in Miller's account that also indicate the influence of the 'gaze' of the spokesperson on the rhetoric of the discourse produced. The incidence of accidentally walking into an open air slaughterhouse may possibly be the worst thing to happen to Miller in Delhi: "At the end of the lane, I came upon a scene of slaughter, the like of which I had never seen [...] after my first shocking glimpse, I looked down and shut my eyes as if not quite believing what I had seen."⁸⁵ After this first impression, the slaughterhouse is expressed in more tangible and material terms: "The air was suffocatingly [sic] heavy with the smell of fresh meat. Beneath my shoes, the street was sticky from the blood and viscera of cattle." This 'phantasmagoria' then continues to describe the human participants, which does not make it better, but turns it into a "scene of cruelty and comradeship, a giant courtyard of death and laughter."⁸⁶ Miller is so shaken on witnessing this scene and the potential danger he faces through his confrontation with the butchers (mentioned previously) that he seeks refuge in a cemetery to get a hold on himself: "I sat down, shaking with disgust and fear and anger. [...] I could not figure out what had upset me more – the sight of such slaughter, or the hostility of the slaughterers. I could not find the language to express what I felt."⁸⁷ Miller's affect distracts from the fact that only he perceived the scene as gross and intimidating. His description of the scene mention "two schoolgirls, with ponytails peeping from under their headscarves and with brown leather satchels on their backs", for whom the men even make way to let them pass.⁸⁸ There is also an old man sitting "hunched over his steaming tea, as if unaware of the series of human and animal dramas being enacted around him."⁸⁹

84 | Ibid., 65.

85 | Ibid., 120.

86 | Ibid.

87 | Ibid., 123. Miller would probably argue that these feelings come close to his aversion to shopping malls – he certainly behaves tortured on entering one. See especially 206-7.

88 | Ibid., 120.

89 | Ibid.

We have a similar stark change of scenery due to the spiral walk, demonstrated when our flâneur walks out of the grand Nehru stadium, past a conference building, and literally stumbles into an “oppressively pungent open sewer, housing Delhi’s most insanitary slum.”⁹⁰

“On the south side of what is officially the Khushak drain, a long narrow park with tall trees protects the well-heeled neighborhood of Jangpura from the worst of the sights and smells of Delhi shit that flows sluggishly past its homes. [...] For on the north side, garishly advertised by its multi-colored polythene roofing sheets, is a settlement of one thousand Muslim families, some of whom actually live on the bed of the sewer. The drain is about twenty meters wide, and so, except during the monsoon when the area is flooded, it is possible to stay in temporary structures built of wood and polythene without feces actually floating in while you sleep. During the monsoon, it is a lot less sanitary.”⁹¹

Much as in *Maximum City*, we have here a view of the landscape of poverty and slum in modernist terms of debris and degradation, something to be kept hidden from the affluent neighborhood.⁹² On the other hand, Miller typically does not dwell on the insanitation too long as he quickly falls into conversation with a friendly young man called Atiq who helps him maneuver on tussocks through the sewer to dry land. As they converse, the author’s initial perception of the unhygienic conditions of the slum are checked by the slum resident’s nonchalance about the state of his habitation:

“From a distance, Punj Peeran looked like an inner circle of hell. Close up, it didn’t look much better. But Atiq told me that things had improved a lot [...] The police had stopped harassing them [...] There was usually water once a day, [...] when there wasn’t, they’d make a hole in the nearby over-ground water-main and place buckets under the leak. They had a more dangerous solution to their electricity problems [...] by stringing an electric cable from the pylons supplying Jangpura on the other side of the sewer. And yes, most of the children went to school. [...] There is a large permanent community of Muslims in nearby Nizamuddin and they felt reasonably safe. The settlement had been there for at least fifteen years, and while this is quite the most pitiable of places, Atiq did not want pity.”⁹³

90 | Ibid., 156.

91 | Ibid.

92 | See Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*.

93 | Miller, *Delhi*, 157.

Like the slum dwellers of Mumbai, in order to make life possible in the city, the residents of Punj Peeran have found their own means or their own 'tactics' to deal with the lack of infrastructure and the failure of the state to provide for such communities. After his initial undisguised description of the slum and sewer, Miller's tone becomes more matter-of-fact when reporting Atiq's description of how they deal with daily requirements in the slum. By calling it the "most pitiable of places", however, Miller maintains a sort of human empathy for the slum dwellers. Unlike Mehta, he refrains from condescension as he mentions, "Atiq did not want pity". The slum dwellers' sense of self-sustenance, perhaps even a sense of dignity thus seeps into Miller's narrative.

Delhi's "sacred and ancient river" are yet another site of urban squalor in Miller's account. Here, again, Delhi is placed on a global map through a comparison drawn between Delhi and other "great inland cities":

"The Yamuna river is Delhi's shameful, rancid secret. [...] In other great inland cities of the world – Paris, London, Vienna, Cairo, Moscow – the river is the center of urban life, [...] In Delhi, it is a struggle even to get near the river, and you may regret it when you do. From close up, it is as black as pitch, with a grey-green scum where its viscose waters lap stodgily against the river bank, and a fog of minuscule midges flutter and hover above the filth. [...] clearly swimming would be suicidal. [...] I had been told to keep an eye out for half-burnt human corpses floating down the river or caught up in the reeds."⁹⁴

Admittedly, the bit about "half-burnt human corpses" has the sound of an urban legend to it. Miller's repugnance, however, arises from his knowledge of how such rivers can otherwise be and an educated environmental sensibility, highlighting again his perspective (observer position) and identity.⁹⁵ For, as he continues along the river, Miller meets some farmers who use the river as a source to draw water for their crops, and who either do not 'see' or do not seem to mind the "scum" as he does:

"But with a little imagination, and if you don't look too close, and while the wind is blowing eastwards, my stroll along the Yamuna seems rather beautiful, and the place seems, momentarily, to have been transformed into an unlikely

94 | Ibid., 160–1. Miller continues to explain the source of these corpses – that Hindus cremated by the riverside and dispersed the ashes in the river, and sometimes, the cost of sufficient wood being unaffordable for some, the bodies are consigned to the river without being fully burned.

95 | See also ibid., 259–60: "The failure of the world to implement a realistic electronic waste management system is slowly killing the e-waste workers of Seelampur, and poisoning the air of the city in which I live. The thought of this [is] the ultimate depressing irony of globalization."

pre-urban pastoral idyll. But the moment the wind changed direction, the stench of shit became hard to stomach. The farmer's did not seem to mind [...] I asked him if the water wouldn't poison his crops. 'Not at all,' he said, 'it's very good fertilizer – as long as it's mixed with fresh water from the bore-well.'⁹⁶

Frequently, it is the exposition of Miller's experience of repeatedly having his perception checked by other people's stance that functions as a mimesis of process and adds a genuine level of reflexivity to his narrative. Alternatively, the reflexivity lies in the narrative distancing achieved by the change of tone (from being affected to becoming phlegmatic), which is also a means of emotional distancing on being faced with such magnitudes of 'otherness' or coping with the unpredictability of the spiral walk. And it is perhaps due to a sense of humility that this specific urban space instills in Miller that he avoids extensive reports on topics such as the Noida killings or dowry deaths, which only find brief mention in his account. Just as Miller 'hurriedly skirts' Noida, his account of the Noida killings is a sort of obligatory journalistic rendering of the basic details of the case.⁹⁷ In a similar strain, he restricts an account of the status of women in Delhi and related women's issues to an Intermission.⁹⁸

The question of whether such discretion is not again simply an authorial strategy to divert the readers' attention from a commodifying gaze must remain unanswered as the issue remains ambiguous. There is, however, an instance in the narrative where Miller's voyeuristic curiosity becomes more explicit despite narrative attempts to camouflage it. On entering a crematorium, he is at first reserved: "But in a place of death, my nosiness about other people's lives is tempered by a fear of intruding on private grief of the mourners – so I try to make myself invisible".⁹⁹ However, this being "unrealistic for a large white man in an Indian cremation ground", Miller sits down on a stone bench and gives a detailed account of the procession of mourners and their preparation of the funeral pyre anyway, complete with a description of the wailing and grieving woman.¹⁰⁰

Miller often claims that he strives to avoid the usual mistakes in writing about India (write nostalgically or make fun of Indians). Yet, he becomes prey to the error of a similar sort of misconstruction himself while talking about female emancipation in India. Let us call it Miller's fallacy of catachresis with

96 | Ibid., 161.

97 | Although, at one point, Miller admits that the panning for bones by people of Delhi (which his children think of as 'sick') is perhaps one way for the people to deal with the trauma of the incident.

98 | Miller, *Delhi*, 163–5.

99 | Ibid., 182.

100 | Ibid.

a brief nod to Gayatri Spivak.¹⁰¹ In his seventh intermission, Miller broaches the subject of the status of women in Indian society and specifically in Delhi through government statistics and journalistic research. The intermission concludes with the description of a presentation by the bisexual Scottish-American performance artist and “self-proclaimed ‘drag king’” for a small group of “gob-smacked Delhiwallahs” in a “tiny back room of the Khoj arts center”.¹⁰² It included photographs of a performance artist with snakes crawling over her naked body, a woman who had strapped a huge green plastic clitoris around her pelvis and similar. At the end, on being asked if there were any questions, the audience remained “glassy-eyed” and silent.¹⁰³ Although Miller himself admits that this is one of more “radical ways to encourage serious debate about the status and image of women”, he concludes from the audience’s silence that “female emancipation has a long way to go in the Indian capital.”¹⁰⁴ We have here a case of catachresis working in two ways: Spivak’s meaning of catachresis can be identified in Miller’s act of ‘thrusting’ Western notions of feminism or female emancipation onto a marginal Indian audience to interpret their silence. The dissonance of Miller’s assumption, of a certain universality of Western notions of feminism and female emancipation, and hence their applicability in this specific Indian context, exposes a catachresis in the sense of Derrida’s notion, precisely that these notions are not universal and hence incomplete. Notwithstanding numerous differences in conceptions of what constitutes feminism or distinguishes female emancipation, my critique does not contest whether or not Miller’s analysis generally holds true for Delhi. Rather, the means of extracting such a conclusion from the silence of a very specific and small group of people, and this singular and particularly ‘radical’ event, is a much too hasty consensus. It assumes a universal validity, translatability of the cultural codes represented by the work of the Euro-American artist, and is insensitive to the many cultural subtleties, and intricacies that may be at play in the room on that occasion. This instance thus casts a small shadow over Miller’s otherwise insightful tour of Delhi. It signals that Miller’s representations are indeed laden in the sense that while they owe something to the seemingly privileged position of Miller as a ‘native’ informant, they are still very much determined by an assuming position of Western superiority.

101 | Spivak, “Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value,” see especially 200–4. Spivak extends Jacques Derrida’s trope of catachresis (in his ideas on deconstruction) to apply it in sub-altern studies. For Derrida, catachresis refers to an original incompleteness that characterizes all systems of meaning, and yet, grounds philosophical discourse. For Spivak, a catachresis occurs when “a cultural identity is thrust upon one because the center wants an identifiable margin”.

102 | Miller, *Delhi*, 164.

103 | *Ibid.*, 165.

104 | *Ibid.*

Miller's report of his Delhi walk is probably, in all likelihood, accurate in journalistic terms, and his rendering remains captivating with its occasional and enjoyable detours of Delhi's history or anecdotes of his experiences. One must add, to Miller's credit that his literary documentary of Delhi does not specifically try to 'explain' India to a foreign readership, nor is there an overt exoticizing thrust to it, and nor does Miller subscribe to 'slum tourism' for an Indian elite, as Mehta does in many ways in *Maximum City*. This may be attributed to a deeper lying concern for the city of his residence due to Miller's specific biography as a long time ex-pat who has settled in India. Moreover, Miller's narrative also displays a perceptive awareness of, or an eager belief in, the possibility of a more complex relation between the East and West – an issue that we will discuss in the next section.

MIMESIS OF PROCESS AND SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN MILLER'S ANT: REVISING PRECONCEPTIONS, ENABLING ETHICAL ENCOUNTERS?

'West is East and East is West'¹⁰⁵

On climbing up to the tower blocks which house the surgical wards of Delhi's Hindu Rao government hospital, Miller assumes to have reached the highest point above sea level in Delhi. On looking down from the building at the city below him, however, we have an observer who is momentarily disoriented. The panorama that the vantage point enables him is not quite the one that he expected to see: "I was staring down at something that was, momentarily, astonishing. It was a huge city that was not Delhi. There was absolutely nothing that I recognized. [...] It was as if the Hindu Rao staircase had teleported me to another city."¹⁰⁶ The author soon realizes that the tower he had climbed had no such magical powers, but that it was his mistake in observation:

"I realized that I had turned the city upside down, and smiling foolishly to myself, muttered, in an inverted echo of Kipling, that west is east and east is west. And the city I knew was behind me, and the unknown city, so much larger than I expected, was West Delhi."¹⁰⁷

This elevation, which should normally 'empower' the observer through the panorama it enables, unsettles Miller instead; his perspective and knowledge of the topography of Delhi is challenged by the disorienting panorama. He realizes

105 | Ibid., 199.

106 | Ibid., 198–9.

107 | Ibid., 199.

quickly though that the view is simply turned on its head and he only has to shift his perspective. This episode in Miller's walk offers a suitable metaphor for instances described by the author as moments in which his perception is challenged in the Indian megacity. These instances are also proof of the learning process that Miller undergoes through his walk of Delhi. Miller recalls a scene from a movie, *The Householder*, in which we have a paradigmatic East-West encounter between a young Indian teacher and his soon-to-be friend, Ernest, an American. Although they are both talking in English, they completely fail to understand each other, and yet end up becoming friends. This scene is noteworthy because it indicates Miller's narrative flexibility and willingness to change the/ his western anthropological gaze and suggests in his method of ANT, a potential ethical revision of preconceived notions (mimesis of process). Much in the sense of Latour's change of perspective, this enables Miller to see both, the East *and* the West, as *participants* in an encounter. Miller's self-implication is convivial in its effort to see friendship as an outcome of such an encounter despite the failure on each side to understand each other.¹⁰⁸

A more explicit staging of this mimesis of process can be seen in Miller's descriptions of Ghazipur, Delhi's 'East End'. Here, Miller comes upon a huge rubbish dump where he sees a little, poor, physically handicapped girl towing a big sack and a sickly dog following her. "Alone amid the debris of civilization, I was reminded of a film depicting the aftermath of a nuclear bomb. She looked as if she might be the last person on earth."¹⁰⁹ This scene immediately causes him to "rant rhetorically" to himself, asking questions such as

"How could people live like this? How can they raise their children here? And what must they think of people who don't live on rubbish dumps? And how have these people benefited from India's famous economic boom? Whatever happened to the legendary economic trickle down effects of economic growth I wondered?"¹¹⁰

108 | Miller is not alone in advocating such a model of multiculturalism based on tolerance without understanding that may be witnessed in India. See also Dasgupta, *Capital*, 41: "This ability of the Third-World city to embrace utter unintelligibility within its own population, to say not 'Let me understand you so I may live alongside you,' but 'I will live alongside you without condition, for I will never understand you,' seemed not only more profoundly humane but also more promising as a general ethos of globalization, since it was clear, in these times of global interconnections, that we were all implicated in relationships with people we would never know or understand."

109 | Miller, *Delhi*, 255.

110 | Ibid.

He continues in this strain, raising issues that reflect stereotypical ways of ‘seeing’ and thinking about the poor. Then, something happens in this scene, which curbs his initial reaction. The dog runs up to the girl, she drops her bundle and takes the dog into her arms and smiles a big happy smile at the author. It turns out that she isn’t at school because it is a holiday (contrary to the author’s assumption that she just doesn’t know school), that she was in the fourth grade, can read and write, and was only helping her parents on the rubbish dump that day. They also did not actually live on the rubbish dump but in a room, which was approximately a twenty-minute walk away. Here, the mimesis of process works by exposing the author completely and showing how he must completely turn around his original perception. During the lived experience, he walks into a trap – of viewing ‘the poor’ as one ‘would’ view ‘the poor’, of imposing values and judgments over someone and objectifying the person in the process. In the narrative, he takes the reader along with him to enter into the same trap. The revision of this process through his observation of what happens next and his interaction with the girl splinters the bias of the initial perception of this scene. The gaze in this case is reversed. (“And what must they think of people who don’t live on rubbish dumps?”)¹¹¹ He is forced to realize that not only is his positioning of the girl on a social ladder wrong, but that he, as an observer, is also in no position to make an accurate analysis of these people on the dump. He experiences once more a genuine clash of his worldviews and values with the reality that he encounters. Unlike Mehta, however, Miller does not attempt to interpret the differences, and it is precisely in this incompleteness that the strength of his ANT-like endeavor lies. He simply acknowledges the insecurity that the experience causes him: “I left the rubbish dump, unsure of what to make of my brief insight into the life of the rag-pickers. They worked in appalling health-endangering, life-shortening conditions, but there didn’t seem to be a hint of self-pity.”¹¹² The explicit narrativization of the observer’s own emancipation of thought and knowledge (mimesis of process) serves as a strategy that shakes a firm belief in existing discourse by highlighting how common sense (in Latour’s vocabulary) is propagated through pre-conceived notions that subtly disguise their own constructed nature.

Coming Full Circle at the End of the Spiral

In the last episode of the book, Miller has arrived in the last swirl of the spiral (the last ten miles of his walk), and is now in Dwarka, at the time, a ‘half-built’ sub-city in the city’s outer limits.¹¹³ By re-describing Miller’s representation style in this

111 | Ibid.

112 | Ibid., 256–7.

113 | Ibid., 267.

particular episode, I would like to explore the possibility he offers of describing associations or tracing actor-networks in the sense of Latour. Let us consider the dialogue that arises through the juxtaposition of conflicting opinions on issues of ownership and organization of city space.

“The only areas you shitholes “preserve” is the British legacy in colonial Delhi, of all those stupid roundabouts. The real “New Delhi” is the 90% Delhi made by the REAL people of Delhi who have built it with their sweat and toil.”¹¹⁴

This outburst is quoted in a footnote in the last pages of Miller’s representation of Delhi, and I would argue that it once more indicates Miller’s subtle self-reflexivity. It being a “not entirely unfair diatribe”¹¹⁵ against Delhi authorities (who have deemed a self-organized colony in Dwarka unauthorized), Miller quotes the correspondent, and notes that the correspondent has tagged the colony on Google Earth along with this entry that pours out the correspondent’s outrage. Miller’s own descriptions of the area ‘tag’ it as a ‘wasteland’ being built on fertile soil. A place of poor immigrants from Bihar, Miller continues to describe, who will become urban nomads working as unskilled laborers building homes for the ‘aspiring’ migrants of the city, but who will never be able to afford to live in these homes themselves.¹¹⁶ Miller’s rhetoric in describing Dwarka has some Marxist intonations that echo the sentiments voiced by the correspondent. With the difference, of course, that Miller does indeed consider the architecture of colonial Delhi – the British legacy – worth preserving. Yet, the tracing of these differences and their visibility in Miller’s text is an articulation of ‘matters of concern’ as it describes the complicated asymmetries in issues pertaining to ownership, organization and control of city space.

Finally, at the end of the spiral, both aspects come together – those that trouble postcolonial frameworks and political economy:¹¹⁷

“For me, a refugee from post-modern monotony, Gurgaon was worse than going back home [...] I, however, had come all this way to escape places where the streets are lifeless; places where people are too world-weary or too preoccupied to smile or to talk. Were India’s cities becoming like anywhere else? [...] Nothing, nothing at all, happened to me as I wandered through Gurgaon. I wasn’t chased by killer pigs; I didn’t step into a sewer [...] I suppose I should’ve been happy, but I wasn’t. I missed the bustle, the noise, the colors,

114 | Ibid., 276, original caps.

115 | Ibid., 275.

116 | Ibid., 275–6.

117 | Ong, “Worlding Cities, or the Art of Being Global.”

and the smells. For better or for worse, Gurgaon is probably the future, and Delhi, and other Indian cities, will become more and more like Gurgaon.”¹¹⁸

In the urbanization and westernization of Delhi, Miller identifies and criticizes the diffused technocratic enterprise of creating a ‘slick’ (millennium) city through a landscape of “middle class aspiration” and “westernized urban utopia”.¹¹⁹ He debunks this myth by describing how this “city of dreams” has fallen by the wayside as its young population of call-center workers is already suffering from burnout syndrome. Its various amenities have begun to break down, pointing to the real needs of a burgeoning megacity, namely, sustainable infrastructure.¹²⁰ In Miller’s expectations that Delhi remain ‘Indian’ and not become ‘just like the West’, we are witness, perhaps, to an essentializing of ethnicity and identity. Reminiscent of Sinclair’s attitude, Miller’s cynical outlook of what Delhi or other Indian cities might become in the future also borders on nostalgia and underlines his romantic vision of a former grandeur of Delhi, of retaining the otherness of India. Yet, and it must be said that this is perhaps, after all, a commendable trait in Miller’s literary documentary. He ends his spiral walk with this personal bone of contention – ultimately only his simple wish to retain the soul of a city as opposed to creating gentrified but homogenous city landscapes.

118 | Miller, *Delhi*, 281–2.

119 | Ibid., 279.

120 | Ibid., 281.

Conclusion: Actor-Network Theory and Literary Criticism

[T]he world is a millipede that inches forward on millions of real conversations.¹

LOOKING BACK

The initial concern of my project was the treatment of 'the contemporary urban' in a number of considerably lengthy and detailed city narratives. They presented a trend of 'discovering' and describing the city in very individual ways. They also resort to different individual means of emphasizing their concerns about the city and the authenticity of their subjective experience and descriptions of it. Their insistence on the 'reality' of their experience and the 'realism' of their descriptions of it ignores or possibly challenges what has been widely referred to as the postmodern 'crisis of representation'. This prompted me to take a look at what brought about this crisis in the first place, only to find out that it was more a matter of rhetoric. This type of crisis narration in scholarship was the result of viewing very hybrid developments from a somewhat traditional outlook about what literature can or should do with regard to representation. These were repercussions of a crisis in a different discipline – that of historiography. It was triggered by Hayden White, whose studies showed the similarities between the techniques and strategies that literary authors and historians use in the composition of their discourses, and thus rendered the epistemological value of historical truth precarious.

Despite postmodernism's pervasive thrust to rupture or transgress various means and modes of representation, there are still scattered traces of what I referred to as the documentary impulse in literature (the most prominent of which was perhaps the New Journalism in America). To distinguish our corpus's literary strategy of documentarism, I introduced 'empirical anchorage' as their main trope. This concept refers to the authors' phenomenological practice of

1 | Roy, "Edward Snowden Meets Arundhati Roy and John Cusack."

exploring the material city – their personal, bodily, and ‘non-abstract’ experience of it. The notion was extended to also include the subsequent discourse formation through the narrativization of their experience. Thus, empirical anchorage provided us with a more flexible means to deal with these narratives than retaining the traditional dichotomy between fact and fiction in our discussions. It is also a notion that collapses, especially in the case of our corpus, the difference between the ‘real’ thing and a ‘representation’. Additionally, Linda Hutcheon’s concept of the mimesis of process was introduced, but with a slight difference. In my project, it refers to the urban enterprise of the authors that I have read as possible ANT methods. The notion of mimesis of process drew our attention to instances in the text where the reader is forced to confront his own means of seeing and experiencing the world. In other words, moments in the text that draw the reader’s attention to the *method* of discovering and experiencing the city. The notion of process mimesis thus provided a useful handle to discuss this interplay between the urban enterprise and its narrativization. These terms together helped us to thematize and discuss the position of the spokesperson in an ANT, an aspect that I pointed out is lacking in Latour’s study. By reading my corpus as enterprises similar to ANT, we also envisioned ANT in more tangible means than delivered by Latour’s theory. We were thus able to see the influence of two important factors on the results that an ANT conveys – that of various *means of describing* and the stance or *perspective* that the spokesperson may assume.

The corpus reflects current urban discourses across various disciplines, which emphasize the contemporary city as a nexus of global-local networks and entanglements. Much like the circulating discourses, these individual engagements involve, however, varying interpretations of (or reactions to) the effects of this ‘connectivity’ on the cities and their populations. Bruno Latour’s attention to networks, especially in the urban context, suggested a more serious consideration of his ideas of an Actor Network Theory for our project. A critical appreciation of his burgeoning and diffuse corpus was attempted in order to extract heuristic tools for a reading of our own collection of city narratives. This was achieved by tracing a developmental trajectory of Latour’s central idea of studying networks as a key to different levels or processes of constructivism.

An appraisal of Latour’s scholarship took us back to Latour’s critique of modernity’s ‘misleading’ purification of nature and culture into separate ontological domains of non-humans (nature) and humans (culture). Latour’s aim is to rethink social constructivism and ‘reassemble’ the social in terms of networks and associations rather than structures. A unique aspect of Latour’s sociology (and thus also his contribution to social theory) is his focus on both human and non-human actors, and his extension of the agency concept to embrace research objects and technical infrastructure, or humans and nonhumans. These hybrid actants are perceived as forming, and relating to, one another in complex ways and thus form ‘weak’ or ‘strong’ networks depending on the stability of their

connections. The crucial contribution of such a unified perspective is that it collapses the conceptual difference between construction and reality.² For Latour, this 'unified perspective' enables a thematization of different, collective *means* of forming associations/networks (such as communication, language, social interaction and so on), and also different *levels* of social construction. Such an empiricism is, argues Latour, more 'realistic' as it is theoretically capable of accounting for *all* involved complexities.

For a more concrete application of this sociology of networks and associations, Latour turns to the language and techniques of ethno-methodology. This is, however, not the only discipline that Latour draws on. Latour's abandonment of theoretical or philosophical foundation manifests itself in the intersection of many disciplines in his scholarship, discernible by the range of concepts and terms that Latour introduces to conceptualize his ANT. These were reviewed for their applicability in our project. The first central step of Latour's Actor-Network Theory that is relevant for our project is the foregrounding of the work of 'mediation' and 'delegation' – a study of *how* representatives or scientists speak on behalf of nature or culture. In other words, the 'new empiricism' must consider the *ways* we construct or represent things. In the language of Latour's ANT, this translates as how associations are formed between actants. The actual means of 'tracing' these associations and networks is, however, an intentional gap on Latour's part in order to avoid the dogmatism for which he criticizes the Sciences. Latour provides, instead, a set of terms and concepts to accompany and guide scholars of ANT in their own projects. Thus it was that key terms from Latour's ANT such as scenography, black box, matters of fact and matters of concern found their way into our project. More importantly, Latour's suggestion to deploy description as a means to trace networks provided this project's impetus to regard our own corpus as possible ANT procedures.

In the course of my project, the city narratives were read as individual attempts by the authors to 'populate' their scenography and articulate 'matters of concern'. In other words, we followed closely in the footsteps of our ants (authors) to study *how* they describe and document their experience in the city. For an analysis of the documentary and narrative strategies used by these authors, it was necessary to read these city narratives against the grain of the rhetoric of the author. This step revealed how these narratives arise, even as they pose as quasi-objective accounts of the city, from the specific position or situatedness of the author. Each narrative reveals the author's individual way of 'seeing',

2 | See also "So we don't have to choose between realism and social construction not because we should try to imagine some sort of mix up between the two ill-fated positions. Rather, we have to decide between two philosophies: *one in which construction and reality are opposite, and another in which constructing and realizing are synonymous.*" Latour, "Stengers' Shibboleth," xiv, my emphasis.

experiencing and narrating. The significant role of the perspective of the author (spokesperson in ANT terminology) in a narrative that makes truth claims indicates for us a neglect on Latour's part to sufficiently theorize the position of this spokesperson in ANT. Latour's calls for a symmetrical anthropology ought to entail a reflexive stance with regard to the role of the observer/analyst or the so-called spokesperson. Latour also neglects to address the role of selectivity in the process or possible problems of retrieving *all* voices/inscriptions (for example, due to the limitations of a spokesperson). Further, he does not consider the role of power asymmetries that may arise in such an enterprise, and which can be directly linked to the identity and abilities of the spokespersons. These are issues that Latour has not directly addressed even in his later publications.³ This aspect of Latour's ANT was introduced as theory immanent critique. Where Latour's own formulations remain vague or leave room for interpretation, the methods and strategies of our corpus are tangible illustrations of possible ANTs. It was suggested that Latour's scholarship might thus be extended by adding to the analysis questions of interests and politics represented by the *situatedness* of the ANT spokesperson.

The urban enterprises we have seen seek to mediate the relationship not only between the local scenography (the city) and the national or international context, but also the innumerable intricate networks *within* the 'local' scenography. It must be noted that an ANT reading does not differentiate between levels or hierarchies, and so it was that we concentrated on the connectivities (nodes, networks and associations) as they were traced and described by the authors. The individual documentary and narrative strategies used by each author underscore how the literary and the documentary play into each other. There is no overt or active political action that is stated by their works or that occurs through their agency. Rather, the politics is to be located in the authors' very intention to document the city in the specific, individual manner that they choose and thus in the specific stance they assume; 'what' they document and subsequently, 'how' they do so overrides other aspects of their representations. A sense of objectivity arises from the fact that by foregrounding their subjectivity, they implicitly indicate *for whom* the matters of concern matter, thus fulfilling an important specification for matters of concern. If notions of objectivity are to be salvaged, they may be said to paradoxically reside in precisely this subjectivity. Notions of accuracy and objectivity become embedded within the premise of their 'openly acknowledged' subjectivity, as does the implicit or explicit ideology. There is a constant tension in these city narratives between the ideological stance of the

3 | Latour only fleetingly addresses the matter of reflexivity in his own work such as in *Pandora's Hope*, 27 or obliquely in his essay "The Politics of Explanation", where he rejects 'explanations' for their use of causality. See also Mallavarapu and A. Prasad who voice a critique of Latour from a post-colonial perspective, especially 193-5.

author (personal/political motives) and the documentary aesthetic and narrative strategies they adopt to render an objective depiction of the city, albeit in varying degrees and individual styles.

On reading Ian Sinclair's *That Rose-Red Empire* as ANT, we saw how networks between aesthetic (artistic and literary) artifacts and a community are not only traced, but also created. In this chapter, we analyzed different strategies that help to evoke the memory of a specific community that is being lost through the loss of the space it occupies. Here, the networks carry us across space and time. They carry us not only across the materiality of the city, but also through various complex layers that constitute a heterogeneous yet collective cultural identity. Sinclair draws on the power of these networks to establish a heritage for Hackney – an epitaph to commemorate the loss of the borough to gentrification. The joint force of Hackney and its artistic milieu, of the material city and cultural proponents, in the heritage for Hackney reflects and supports Latour's linkage of the human and non-human in quasi-symmetrical networks.

Sinclair's dominant ANT strategy is what I have called rambling. Sinclair 'describes' the networks of Hackney by rambling – be it about his own memories and life in Hackney or its history, or about interesting trivia from the borough. It includes his raving and ranting about the Hackney Council, the London authorities, and the politics surrounding the Olympic games. His narrative includes other 'voices' – the testimonies of denizens reminiscing about Hackney. Sinclair's rambling describes everything that passes or has passed through and exists or existed in Hackney. This makes a long list, from people, streets, books, and sculptures to the lake in Hackney and the natural habitat surrounding it. Sinclair's ANT strategy or method of tracing networks in his enterprise was described using De Certeau's notion of the phatic aspect. It enables Sinclair to create and sustain the innumerable networks between people, memories, stories and material artifacts. In his attempt to capture 'everything', Sinclair's rambling create a dense and diffuse excess. The project therefore introduced and adapted the notion of mnemonic resources in order to systematize the vast array of signs, symbols, images and memories that Sinclair uses to trace Hackney's networks. A systematic reading of this excess enabled us to see how Sinclair's scenography becomes 'populated' through myriad networks of various denizens or artistic personalities of Hackney and their works, as well as streets, sights and sounds of Hackney. The notion of mnemonic sources also aided in describing Sinclair's construction of cultural identity and heritage for Hackney.

Sinclair's narrative style resists reading; this is partly due to his strategy of excess. However, this rambling 'excess' is his political strategy of artistic intervention in a political scene that has lead to the gentrification of the borough. It is also a part of Sinclair's poetics and politics of artistic eclecticism and non-conformity, which seeks to elude an over-determining 'gaze' (of, say, the London authorities). Sinclair calls the politics of such a gaze a 'not telling', a sort of silence

or abstraction, the machinations of which may be observed in the conventional practice of mapping. Sinclair then situates himself opposite such fact-making, obscuring practices with a sort of cultural and discursive 'mapping' of his own. Here it was useful to draw on de Certeau's notion of perspective. The dichotomy of up and down that de Certeau introduces simplifies the notion of perspective. My project used this simplification as a productive point of departure to conceptualize various movements of the perspective of a spokesperson in an ANT method. Sinclair maintains de Certeau's dichotomy, however, as the polarization of Hackney insiders and outsiders, confirming or reinstating the tension between Sinclair's clique in Hackney and the authorities. In this 'space war', the poetics and politics of Sinclair's ANT has an empowering thrust for Hackney as it renders the borough a living breathing 'organicity'. The emphasis on allegiance in Sinclair's narrative fulfills Latour's specification for matters of concern that indicates for *whom* they matter. On the other hand, Sinclair's excess and our difficulties in reading it should be equally instructive for ANT scholars with regard to the role and restraints of the spokesperson in an ANT.

In Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City*, the author uses his identity and background as an opening for his city narrative. He was born in Mumbai and moved to America as a teenager. Now he is returning to Mumbai in order to come to terms with his nostalgic longing, or the loss he perceives of the city of his childhood. This enables the author, on the one hand, to introduce and establish a dominant biographical strand that acts as a primary means of access to the city and runs consistently throughout his narrative. On the other hand, by rendering his move back to Mumbai in such personal and sentimental terms, Mehta cleverly camouflages his strategy of immersive, investigative journalism. It also empowers him as a city chronicler with the native benefit.⁴ These strategies determine, in the very beginning, his narrative's empirical anchorage and authenticity, and establish his authority through the rhetoric of a sincere and reliable narrator. That is, we have two intertwining narrative frames arising from Mehta's immersion strategy – that of the investigative journalism and the autobiographical strand – with Mehta as a common denominator. This key position as observer, chronicler and spokesperson thus provided a starting point and recurring theme in this chapter.

In order to carry our ANT inquiry forward, the chapter looked at three important aspects. By reading this book within an ANT setup, it was possible to collect and analyze different strategies of documenting and narrating the city, and address the question of how ANT can and should go beyond journalistic reporting. Mehta uses a watershed moment in Mumbai's political history as an entry point for his investigative frame – the riots in 1992-3 that ensued after

4 | "In all that time, I hadn't lost my accent. I speak like a Bombay boy; it is how I am identified in Kanpur and Kansas." Mehta, *Maximum City*, 3.

the destruction of the Babri Masjid (mosque) in 1992 by Hindu extremists, and its subsequent repercussions. A sizeable part of Mehta's book is dedicated to revisiting the sites of the riots in Mumbai, the victims and the perpetrators. The city unfolds alternatingly through Mehta's research and interviews with the victims and perpetrators. Mehta thus traces the rise of right wing politics in India and other effects of the communal segregation that followed as a result of the politically motivated and instigated hatred. This frame provides Mehta with a means to inquire into different sectors and aspects of the city, but it cannot be really separated from the biographical frame as Mehta's family life, work, pleasure, and the urbanity he investigates mingle and drive each other. Mehta's work as a scriptwriter for a Bollywood production reveals the film industry's flipside through his subsequent interactions with its director and actors. He befriends Ajay Lal of the police force. This friendship unfolds not only the challenging life of a leading policeman in Mumbai, but also institutional processes and corruption, infrastructural limitations and unethical consequences. In light of Mehta's friendship with Lal, Mehta must confront an ethical struggle of his own on becoming privy to the unofficial vigilantism and investigative or penal methods of the police in Mumbai. The covert world of the stigmatized entertainment industry of bar dancers becomes accessible as Mehta befriends and interviews bar dancers, cross-dressers and prostitutes, tracing their different trajectories and networks.

The three main nodes that Mehta uses to structure the book on the other hand, Power, Pleasure and Passages, represent Mehta's attempt to structure the excess that he encounters and experiences. What quickly becomes clear when we read *Maximum City* as ANT is Mehta's treatment of people as a nexus of associations that provides him with a starting point to trace different actor-networks. Through Mehta's treatment of people as nodes that lead him to different networks, we have a (limitedly) vicarious experience of the city. Consequently, Mehta soon encounters what was analyzed in the project as tactics with reference to de Certeau – the 'creative means' by which urban populations interact and overcome infrastructural deficiencies. In his interactions, Mehta, consciously or unconsciously, displays a shifting perspective. This dynamic function of perspective was articulated with reference again to de Certeau's more static dichotomy of perspectives. Mehta was seen to be an insider (Indian) or outsider (foreign-returnee), an experiencer or observer, self-defined or interpellated, as well as various combinations of all these positions. In general, this display of a dynamic perspective offers ANT the rather stimulating prospect of a multi-perspectival spokesperson or observer position. In case of Mehta, however, these positions indicate his situatedness alternatingly as privileged or unprivileged diaspora in India, and the inferences he draws reveal their limitations. Mehta's means of populating the scenography and describing the networks render Mumbai as a city of exigencies – a 'maximum city'. Capitalizing

on the existing shock of juxtapositions in Mumbai of the rich and poor, clean and dirty, pious and criminal, and so on, Mehta's strategy of description is gritty realism. It spectacularizes what the author perceives, experiences and narrates as 'extremes'. A dominant trope that achieves this strategy is Mehta's description of Mumbai's slums as 'phantasmagorias' – a sort of other-worldliness. The pastoral backdrops and values upheld by slum dwellers are rendered equally strange by their juxtaposition with the criminal capacities of a number of slum dwellers. The image of poverty and crime becomes metonymic for Mumbai, and the estrangement that arises through such a rendering accomplishes an 'othering' of Mumbai. This narrative tendency of Mehta's was read as an indication of his anxiety. It is an anxiety that derives, on the one hand, from his perception of *himself* (and his family) being imperiled by the city, and on the other hand, from his way of 'seeing' *the city* as being in a state of peril (or crisis). This perception of the city by Mehta is further emphasized by the different metaphors he introduces for the city such as "paap ni bhoomi" (city of sins), or "maya ki nagri" (city of illusions). Mehta's analysis and critique of Mumbai in typically modernist terms of a lack of infrastructure and progress were shown, however, through the thematization of his perspective, to be his limited 'way of seeing' the city. This is a fact that Mehta must himself later acknowledge. It is that much needed moment of self-reflexivity in his ANT – the author's acknowledgment of the *conditions of perception* that have modified his relation to the city. Through the consistent focus on the observer-narrator position, or the spokesperson in ANT terms, this chapter underlined the need to implicate the position within the actor-networks it strives to document. By extension, this highlighted the importance of process mimesis as a conceptual handle to display and discuss self-reflexivity in an ANT. The asymmetry between the spokesperson and his actor-networks was especially visible in this book because Mehta moves alternatingly and visibly between various experiential and observational roles – between being immersed in his situation and assuming an omniscient fly-on-the-wall perspective to render evaluations. As a result, what Mehta offers are often matters of fact, and it is on rare occasions when he reflects his own role, position and effect that we come close to insights that Latour would call matters of concern. Altogether, Mehta's narrative signals, for us as ANT scholars, the productivity and success of his immersion strategy to access an existential level of life in the megacity.

In Sam Miller's *Delhi, Adventures in a Megacity*, we have as ANT method a rather pragmatic and practical 'tool for discovery'. A spiral drawn on the map of Delhi lays down the path that Miller must follow through the city. This spiral route provides a starting point and a means of access to the megacity. It contains the city, but at the same time, it suggests endless outward movement or even flexibility through the tightening or loosening of this coil. It serves as an indispensable handle on the complexity and enormity of the enterprise of 'discovering' the megacity. However, the structure and control suggested by the spiral route is

at best only partial, as it simultaneously randomizes Miller's experience in the city. In a way, Miller has a covert strategy of immersion in the city. Miller lives in Delhi with his Indian wife and children. His personal introduction through biographical details and subsequent intimate relation to the city establishes the empirical anchorage of this book. Miller's own authority comes instated in the simple guise of his training as a journalist with the BBC and employee of the BBC World Service Trust. Further, to facilitate the reader's anticipation of the kind of tour of the city they are going to get, Miller contextualizes his own work by situating himself in the tradition of psycho-geographers such as Nerval and Sinclair. The authority and authenticity of the narrator and narrative is thus established in a very simple and forthright manner. Miller's skill in sustaining it is then displayed throughout the book by the unfolding of the city through Miller's spiral tour. All the while, the reader has the sense of being guided gently through the megacity by Miller's own entertaining but skilled and informative commentary and further accrual of knowledge about the city.

Miller traces this spiral around the city by literally walking it. In our analysis, we entered what we called Delhi's various 'spatial fictions' and examined the networks and associations that Miller encounters and documents. Our reading of his enterprise emphasizes that Miller's experience, perspective and narrative stem from his identity as a white, British male. Miller exploits his physical visibility to achieve a sort of foreigner benefit in the Indian capital. People often mistake him for a lost tourist, they readily chat with him or are more than willing to lend a helping hand or even excuse his presence in an area, which would otherwise remain beyond his bounds (such as the cremation ground). Miller's openness to include his identity and modes of seeing or thinking in his reflections on the city is essential for a fulfilling ANT analysis, and is consistently upheld by various instances of the reversal of the gaze of the observer on himself. There is also a thematization of the role of the observer/spokesperson as *agency* in the instances when Miller's presence affects the outcome of a situation. Our discussion of Miller's game playing of SimCity opened up the issue of options that the spokesperson is presented with and the consequences of his decisions. The potentially innumerable options open to a tracer of networks and the inevitable decision-making that enable the tracing of networks broach a central part of our critique of Latour's ANT. This critique was indicated by Miller's ANT-like procedure especially when he discusses his game of SimCity in his eleventh intermission. An inquiry into possible strategies to deal with the arbitrariness of ANT continued as we looked at further strategies that Miller uses to overcome and access the urban excess of the spiral walk of Delhi.

We saw that the tempering of the foreign, alienating, or shocking was Miller's individual narrative strategy. Unlike Mehta, Miller utilizes his role alternatingly as foreigner and resident to achieve a productive balance between estrangement and familiarization. However, our project set out to maintain a critical stance

towards these narratives. Therefore, due to Miller's identity as a white British journalist, a post-colonial sensibility was adopted towards him. This made us sensitive to some of Miller's 'errors'. These mark, on the other hand, the self-reflexivity in his enterprise as he acknowledges them openly in his attempt to maintain a sense of modesty. Nevertheless, aspects of Miller's narrative that indicate his assumption of the universality of Western notions, say for example, of feminism and female emancipation, or that of viewing architectural monuments as heritage, were discussed as stemming from his identity. These indicate what Latour warns us against – a rationalized and black-boxed type of 'common sense'. However, there is also a very generous willingness from Miller's side to extend the strain of reflexivity to himself. It is displayed in his keen awareness of, and perhaps an eager belief in, the possibility of a more complex relation between the East and West. In this context, the turn of the spokesperson's gaze upon himself was discussed as a very effective means of revising deep seated knowledge or common sense – a sign of the much needed reflexivity in an ANT.

READING NETWORKS AS A FORM OF LITERARY CRITICISM: THE AFFORDANCES OF NETWORKS AND NARRATIVES

In the beginning of the project, we saw that what was seen as the postmodern crisis of representation was indeed a breaking away from the rationality and order of the previous era. It was seen to be manifest in the hybrid forms that cropped up, and academia has spent much attention on their tendency to experiment with formless or anti-formal tropes such as of intervention, disruption, dissolution or transgression. Our own corpus on the other hand displays, at first glance, a return of very individual yet traditional notions of authorial *control* and means of *ordering* experience and rendering it. Reading the corpus as potential ANT methods enabled us to discover numerous principles and strategies of connectivity that reinforced my reading of them as a certain type of network. This is an indication, perhaps, that a different strategy of reading is being suggested here. It is an indication, anyway, for scholarship to move its focus away from what it has maintained are postmodernity's various efforts to disrupt and destabilize order, and away from seeking its source in historical conditions. In order to theorize this particular sense of 'order' that our own corpus suggests, let us take a look at Caroline Levine's notion of *forms*, (especially networks) and their *affordances*.

In her stimulating book, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Levine invites us to a dialogue about how to apprehend literature in relation to social life. As a methodological starting point, we are introduced to a formalist notion of forms as organizing principles. Drawing on cases from literature, visual art, mass culture and everyday experience, Levine examines the manifestations of four abstract forms – wholes, rhythms, hierarchies, and networks. If we are to

follow Levine's logic for a reading of literary texts, we would have to track these forms also on the level of content. Next, the heterogeneity in form's conceptual theory becomes, for Levine, the five functions of form. Forms can contain, differ, travel, overlap, and operate politically. This new kind of close reading involves a careful attention to the forms that organize texts, bodies, and institutions, and how these organizing principles encounter one another inside as well as outside of the literary text.⁵ Levine demonstrates such a reading practice through close readings of her own and shows that the method builds on "what literary critics have traditionally done best – reading for complex interrelationships and multiple overlapping arrangements."⁶ The newness in Levine's methods lies in her exporting the practice to new objects – "the social structures and institutions that are among the most crucial sites of political efficacy."⁷

The literary-critical tool that accompanies Levine's analysis of forms is the notion of affordances. It describes the potential uses or actions latent in materials and design. This does not establish a distinction between form and affordance, but rather a relationship. Steel, for example, affords strength, hardness, smoothness, and durability. A specific design of this material such as a doorknob affords turning, pushing, and pulling. These intended affordances of an object may, however, be extended by a creative user for, say, hanging clothes or signs.⁸ Levine calls these possible extensions the latent affordances of a form. Since a specific form can be put to use in unexpected ways that may extend its affordances, it is not enough to ask what forms *do*. We must also look for the latent potentialities of aesthetic and social arrangements. If we use the notion of affordances to think about form, it allows us to grasp both the specificity and the generality of forms. That is, we can then think about the constraints and possibilities that different forms afford, and the fact that these 'new' patterns or arrangements carry with them their own affordances as they move across time and space.⁹ Networks, for example, afford connection and circulation, while narratives afford the connection of events over time. Forms as an organizing principle act also as a constraint. This entails that a form can encounter other, possibly contesting or dominating organizing principles and constraints. New encounters between different forms affords us the opportunity to study possible *latent* affordances, and by extension, the range of ways how forms may co-exist, overlap or collide with each other. This notion additionally emphasizes a 'latently' neglected aspect in the discussion of our corpus. Although ANT implies and advocates a collapse between representation and the outside world, these texts are not made of the

5 | Levine, *Forms*, 16.

6 | *Ibid.*, 23.

7 | *Ibid.*

8 | *Ibid.*, 6.

9 | *Ibid.*

material world they invoke. The texts lay claim to their own forms – narrative, rhetorical, discursive – as well as their own materiality – spoken, written and printed language. Together they lay claim to their own affordances, which indicate a range of possibilities. What were to happen if we follow the affordances of both literary form and material objects, and imagine them as mutually shaping potentialities without privileging one over the other?

On reviewing our project in this concluding section, we can say that the consequence of ANT in literary studies is a sensitivity to networks in our reading practice – the associations and interconnectivity between humans and non-humans or the social and natural. We may even venture to say that it indicates a starting point for a reading practice that does not differentiate between aesthetic and social forms. On having isolated a form in our object of study, the questions we must then ask are thus: what does this form afford, and what happens when it meets, clashes or collides with other forms? For example, and this is putting things very broadly, the affordance of Sinclair's ANT is the evocation of Hackney as a place of welcome social heterogeneity, a culturally rich and flourishing borough, or in other words, a commendable and promising space. This opposes the image of Hackney as worst borough propagated in order for its gentrification to be 'necessary'. We encounter numerous co-existing and overlapping networks in Sinclair's Hackney, but are also referred to wholes in the form of state power or developers. The book itself is the result of the collision between these two forms, an artifact that leads us again to the networks traced within it.

We saw how Latour's ANT asks us to notice points of contact between actors and the routes actors take. Levine sees this connectedness as the first and foremost affordance of a network. On the other hand, many other formal elements such as wholes, rhythms, and hierarchies also connect to create larger formations or networks. The actual and possible paths or routes that forms follow will lead us to specific patterns of contact between different forms, and the routes they take after this encounter.¹⁰ This methodological overlap between Levine's theory of forms and ANT brings us full circle back to Latour. Levine's formalist approach to reading forms and their affordances also suggests paying careful attention to the multiplicity of networks and especially to their differences.

In Levine's reading of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, she shows that the novel casts social relations as a complex heaping of networks that stretch across space and unfold over time. She argues that Dickens uses narrative form to convey society itself as a network of dynamically unfolding networks with multiple *principles of interconnection*. Depending partly on these principles, the networks can clash and collide with other forms, and they can overlap with other networks or forms.¹¹ Levine also touches upon other forms in Dickens' novel, but since our

10 | Ibid., 113.

11 | Ibid., 112–31.

focus is on networks, let us stay with the main points she makes about networks as forms. She argues that Dickens makes use of the affordances of narrative form to conceptualize the ways in which networks unfold temporally. In her reading of *Bleak House*, she imagines the enormous variety of connectors that link people. She identifies and describes different principles of interconnection such as the lawsuit, the contagious disease (smallpox), the network of philanthropies, the aristocratic socio-political network, rumor, patterns of kinship, and so on. Finally, there is also the space of the city itself, seen as a network of interconnected streets, buildings, and characters that are all linked largely by sheer contiguity. Larger networks of transportation and communication crisscross this space, linking it further to adjacent sites. Communications, transportation, and economic networks are commonly thought of as powerful connectors that consolidate nations or enable globalization. In her reading of networks in Dickens' *Bleak House*, however, Levine argues that a formalist approach to reading networks reveals many large and small opportunities to hamper networks and their coordinating power.¹² This discovery in Levine's study recalls our own discussion of tactics in the city and reminds us of an important goal of Latour's ANT – to question and 'undo' deep seated structures of knowledge and power which become silently accepted as common sense.

The point of this little detour to Levine's reading of Dickens is to ask the following question: Is it feasible for us to see Levine's notion of forms as a productive 'addition' to ANT as a method of literary criticism? We must, after all, grasp the affordances of each network and what they can entail for other forms to understand the specificity of the network. The questions Levine asks in her analysis are similar to the ones we asked in our reading of the corpus as ANT:

"What kind of network is it? What rules govern it? Which networks can jeopardize, stabilize, or reroute bounded unities, and how exactly do they do so? Which enclosures successfully contain networks, and why? Rather than assuming that "culture" entails a neat containment of networks by shapes, or conversely, that networks always destroy or disregard boundaries, a formalist method offers tools to track the particular range of ways in which these forms run up against each other and the consequences their encounters bring into the world."¹³

In order to bring our project to an albeit temporary but productive conclusion, let us draw together Latour's ANT method and Levine's notions of forms and affordances to offer a starting point for new ways of apprehending society and literary texts. In the following passages, I will attempt such a reading of Patrick

12 | Ibid., 114–5.

13 | Ibid., 119–20.

Neate's *Where You're At*. To stay within the scope of a concluding section, this reading will be brief and should be understood accordingly as a point of departure for further inquiries. In our reading, we will stay with our original strategy of reading the author's enterprise as a tangible method of ANT. We must therefore inquire into the means and principles of connectivity of the networks we encounter in it. Additionally, we will also ask in how far this book is organized around political, technological, economic, artistic and social networks. The part of our reading that is most interesting for this concluding section is to ask how Neate's ANT succeeds in analyzing the complexity and power of networked social experience.

ANT need not work only to populate a local scenography with the networks it traces. It can travel and need not stop at the local, adjacent or even national borders. The network's formal capacity (affordance) for extension and contiguity can push us in potentially any number of directions. We thus find ourselves becoming globetrotting 'ants' as *Where You're At* is set in five different megacities. In other words, Neate's book expands the affordances of ANT by carrying the method across the globe. Let us begin with the aspect that we first encounter – the materiality of the book – and follow Neate's networks from there. The title evokes a hip-hop classic by Eric B and Rakim "I Know You Got Soul".¹⁴ The line is completed on the back cover of the book: "It ain't where you're from/it's where you're at", and alludes to the heterogeneity of the hip-hop music scene. More importantly though, the original line calls for a unity in the hip hop movement of that era, and this is, as we later find out, the exact message that is intended on the cover of Neate's book. It is a call for unity of hip-hop communities, not only in America this time, but also *across the world*.¹⁵ The rest of the title, "Notes From the Frontline of a Hip Hop Planet" indicates the global reaches of this network. We thus already begin to get a sense of the importance of connectivity and networks in this book. The picture of Nike Vandal Supremes that claims most of the space on the book cover evokes and indicates the world of hip hop fashion – itself a series of networks of its own. The first part of the title, *Where*

14 | Eric B. and Rakim, *I Know You Got Soul*.

15 | Neate, *Where You're at*, 7. See also Lyrics/Eric B. and Rakim, *I Know You Got Soul*, my emphasis:

Now if your from Uptown, Brooklyn- bound,
The Bronx, Queens, or Long Island Sound,
Even other states come right and exact,
It ain't where you're from, it's where you're at
Since you came here, you have to show and prove
And do that dance until it don't move
'Cause all you need is soul self-esteem will release,
The rest is up to you, Rakim 'll say peace

You're At, may thus be understood to indicate a moment in a network that records temporality – a moment which catches hip hop where it's at 'now' as compared to 'before'. Of course, all this is confirmed only much later in the book. The rest of the title implies facticity and conflict as *Notes From the Frontline of a Hip Hop Planet* could mean a report possibly of an encounter between hip-hop and the world. The title is thus doing its own work in establishing the book's empirical anchorage. The first chapter, however, is almost autobiographical; the reader is given a personal introduction to the author as he reminisces about his first contact with hip-hop as a teenager.

We are introduced to author and narrator (our ANT spokesperson) Patrick Neate in first person. The rapport Neate develops is sociable and personal. He recollects the beginnings of his love for hip-hop, and admits to his nostalgia for its (almost forgotten) past 'glory' and attraction. Neate's language may occasionally come across as overtly stylized to someone not acquainted with hip-hop lingo. It often slips into a colloquial form colored with slang, filled with jargon and allusions to popular music as well as hip hop cultures. Through the use of vernacular in first person and direct reader address, Neate builds up an informal and intimate rapport with the reader. This bond is strengthened by his exaggerated self-reflexivity as an investigator. He acknowledges ever so often that his is only one 'take' on the matter and therefore not a definitive analysis of hip hop across the world: "I make no claim that this is a definitive analysis of worldwide hip hop; rather it's a snapshot of where we're at that inevitably omits more than it shows."¹⁶ It is ironically this subjectivity that reinforces the book's empirical anchorage as it is accompanied by an almost naïve sincerity: "But I hope you'll trust that I'm writing with complete love and honesty because I'm writing this for all of you who are open-minded enough to recognize the most intriguing, bizarre and downright important manifestation of popular culture of our times [hip-hop]."¹⁷ The book is a snapshot or a precise *fixation* of a particular (subjective) representation at a given time and place – this constitutes its 'documentariness', albeit in an indirect and somewhat crude manner. More importantly, however, this autobiographical opening is a key to the various networks the book traces/opens/creates. For it is Neate who is the most important 'association', 'principle of linkage' or 'connector' responsible for generating, documenting and narrating all the other networks that we encounter in his book. Neate uses the narrative form of the book to convey the world as a network of dynamically unfolding hip-hop networks. His narrative develops more or less chronologically as he moves from one megacity to another. We must keep in mind, however, that the networks we encounter in these cities exist, develop, crash, collide or break simultaneously, much as people's lives are played out simultaneously all over the world. Thus,

16 | Neate, *Where You're at*, 7.

17 | Ibid.

Neate makes use of the affordances of narrative form to illustrate how networks unfold. The reason for Neate's movement is the next principle of interconnection then, as a search for its 'essence' – what hip hop means today – is part of Neate's personal and global quest. This quest is driven by Neate's interest in existing and possible interconnections between far-flung lives that may be actively re-connected in order to revive hip-hop's original function of articulating their problems.

Neate begins this enterprise by first identifying hip-hop's displacement from its place of birth in New York, and tracing its transnational re-territorialization. That is, by personally visiting various cities across the globe and discovering how hip hop is being reused and recoded in very specific local contexts maintaining its essence as an articulation against the grain of capitalist, technocratic or hegemonic. The connectivity principle in *Where You're At* is contingent because it relies on the phatic capabilities of Neate as connector. That is, the linkage between nodes, and therefore between networks, arises more or less randomly as Neate follows hip-hop's networks by meeting with various DJ's or song-artists who are recommended to him by the previous network or node. This introduces and indicates the arbitrariness and unpredictability in ANT, and represents a positive attribute in that it ensures to an extent that our spokesperson remains unbiased. On the other hand, precisely the same aspect may appear unfavorable if we acknowledge the selectivity of the spokesperson. That is, how the spokespersons in our corpus were all indeed predisposed through the agenda or concerns that weighed on them. Neate is, on the other hand, also a musician himself, a prolific music journalist, and a successful author, and he puts all these skills to maximum use in his enterprise. Not only do we encounter a dizzying linkage of various song artists and their work that supports his statements, but also an array of academic literature that reflects and supports his research and analyses, thus relativizing his subjectivity and increasing the documentary sobriety of his book.

The arbitrariness of networks suggested here is also due to a principle of replaceability. The nodes and networks are replaced by other nodes and networks through time and space. It is how the hip-hop network is replicated over and over again. If we were to regard this as a sort of kinship network, it is characterized by the fact that it is always emerging and perpetually in process. The form of hip-hop's network reflects its affordance, that is, its resistance to totality. This processual aspect is nevertheless held in check by Neate's quest for hip-hop's *Ursprung*, its essence and authenticity. The outcome of this quest is, however, repeatedly held off by this changeability and drives Neate forward in his search: "hip hop has opened more doors of enquiry for me than any other aspect in my life."¹⁸

18 | Ibid., 202.

A look at the dialectics of globalization in circulating discourses indicates the contradictory affordances of globalization's networks. On the one hand, they are progressive and emancipatory. On the other hand, they are oppressive and damaging. Neate's main argument is that the latter can be contested and reconfigured from 'below' in ways that promote democracy and social justice. In other words, he too is looking for some means to hamper larger, hegemonic networks and their coordinating power, to bring about social change. Five different cities are inter-linked in the book by Neate's investigation of hip-hop's current status across these cities. Since Neate's investigation spans across the globe, it provides the author with means to link local conjunctures to global processes through his position as chronicler. On the one hand, we have a richly documented grassroots investigation of hip hop which seeks and suggests solutions to a number of pertinent urban problems in the specific sites visited by Neate. What quickly becomes clear and is partly even emphasized by the author himself is that his observations and research as a music journalist are rooted in his own critical attitude towards hegemonic or capitalist structures. The book thus culminates unsurprisingly in the author articulating an agenda for hip hop that advocates specific social, cultural and political change, the effectivity of which remains uncertain.¹⁹ I would argue, though, that the importance of Neate's book lies, as my brief reading of it implies, in the various networks around which the book is organized and which it analyses in the interest of this agenda. While the networks invite Neate to expand the affordances of his narrative, the narrative in turn affords us insight and understanding about the world in the form of these networks.

19 | Neate is very explicit about this: "Hip hop negotiates 'experience of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression'. That's its politics. [...] Hip hop should mean acting locally, connecting globally, thinking glocally. [sic] Surely that should be its first political manifesto." See also: "Hip hop must reclaim itself from the corporate giants." *Ibid.*, 159, 202.

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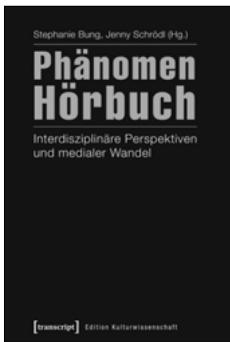
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