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Citation: Davies, D. (2018). Literary Non-Fiction and the Neoliberal City: Subalternity and Urban Governance in Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 55(1), pp. 94-107. doi: 10.1080/17449855.2018.1496468

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Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/20301/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2018.1496468>

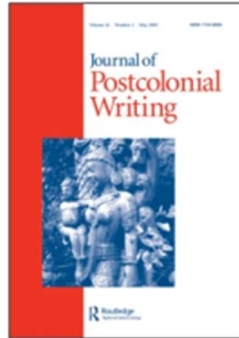
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Literary Non-Fiction and the Neoliberal City: Subalternity and Urban Governance in Katherine Boo's Behind the Beautiful Forevers

Journal:	<i>Journal of Postcolonial Writing</i>
Manuscript ID	RJPW-2017-0167.R1
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Katherine Boo, Gayatri Spivak, literary non-fiction, Mumbai, subalternity, the neoliberal city

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Literary Non-Fiction and the Neoliberal City: Subalternity and Urban Governance in
Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*

Abstract

In this article I challenge the claims made for Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* as a piece of non-fiction, using the text to attend to continued questions around subaltern agency and voice that have been at the centre of postcolonial studies since Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asked her field-shaping question, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. Reading Spivak's essay alongside *Beautiful Forevers* foregrounds the continued relevance of her question in the post-Millennial context of the neoliberal city, particularly as it relates to issues of urban governance. The article demonstrates that a rigorous postcolonial reading of Boo's book tells us something more about subalternity in the twenty-first-century Indian city, the violent social and spatial infrastructures of which continue to be shaped by the enduring legacies of colonialism, even as these are in turn exacerbated by more recent ideologies and policies of neoliberal urban governance. It concludes by arguing that *Beautiful Forevers*, and perhaps the genre of creative or literary non-fiction more widely, is undoubtedly responding to, and at times both complicit with and resistant to, this regime.

Keywords: Katherine Boo, Gayatri Spivak, literary non-fiction, Mumbai, subalternity, the neoliberal city, urban governance

The Pulitzer Prize-winning American journalist, Katherine Boo, published her self-identifying 'non-fictional' narrative, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life and Death in a Mumbai Slum*, in 2012 to almost unanimous critical acclaim. The book documents a series of events in the lives of a community of slum dwellers resident in Annawadi, an informal housing settlement situated close to Mumbai's international airport. While most of the book's early reviews unquestioningly celebrated Boo's shrewd journalistic eye and immersive writing style, some did highlight the tension arising from, on the one hand, the book's status as a piece of non-fiction, and on the other, the novelistic, seemingly fictional qualities of its narrative content. Yet even in these more cautious analyses, concerns around Boo's ventriloquizing ~~of the inner thoughts~~ of Mumbai's slum dwelling classes are swiftly put to one side, as renowned scholars of Indian writing such as William Dalrymple and

1
2 Amit Chaudhuri concur that, in the end, the content of *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*
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4 justifies its non-fictional claims. The book's non-fictionality has since been cemented by its
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6 winning of a number of non-fiction prizes from prestigious organizations including PEN,
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8 the Los Angeles Times Book Awards, the New York Public Library and the American
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10 Academy of Arts and Letters. Most notably, *Beautiful Forevers* was in 2012 awarded the
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12 US National Book Award for Non-fiction.
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16 In this article I wish to ~~challenge~~~~explore the complexities of~~ the claims made for
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18 *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* as a piece of non-fiction, using the text not to dispute them
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20 ~~(though they will be challenged), but rather~~ to attend to continued questions around
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22 subaltern agency and voice that have been at the centre of postcolonial studies since Gayatri
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24 Chakravorty Spivak asked her field-shaping question, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'.¹ Reading
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26 Spivak's essay alongside Boo's text foregrounds the continued relevance of (and also
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28 necessary amendments to) her question in the post-Millennial context of the neoliberal city,
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30 particularly as it relates to urban governance and the subalternity of 'the lowest strata of the
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32 urban proletariat', to whom Spivak herself has drawn attention (1999, 269; see also Franco,
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34 215). ~~I contend that a~~ As Indian creative non-fiction—in particula~~especially about that~~
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36 ~~which addresses~~ the subcontinent's citiesurban spaces—becomes—an~~becomes an~~
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38 increasingly lucrative and 'prized' (Huggan, 105-121) -genre in the postcolonial ~~the~~ literary
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40 marketplace, I contend that~~postcolonial criticism must read~~ critics must continue to read
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42 such texts —for their literary qualities. I, ~~which~~ in Boo's case, these speak to
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44 postcolonialism's ongoing self-reflexive critique of 'theory's embeddedness in global
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54 ¹ Throughout this article, when citing Spivak's essay I will refer to the first full-length version published in
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56 1988 (rather than the shorter first version, published in *Wedge* in 1985). I also refer to its later incarnation as
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58 Chapter 3 of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), where Spivak further fleshes out her argument ~~yet~~
59
60 further.

1 capitalism’—the ‘signal contribution’, according to Pheng Cheah, of Spivak’s original essay
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3
4 (179).
5

6 The emergence of non-fiction as a new postcolonial literary category must not
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8 ~~therefore~~ deter postcolonial criticism from ~~itsthe~~ resistant reading practices ~~it has developed~~.
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10 Self-proclaimed non-fictional texts such as *Beautiful Forever*s, which embed themselves in
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12 and then appear to conceal a set of neocolonial power relations, can still be productively
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14 critiqued. Indeed, this article ~~hopes to demonstrate~~s that a rigorous postcolonial reading of
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16 Boo’s book tells us something more about subalternity in the twenty-first-century Indian
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18 city, the violent social and spatial infrastructures of which continue to be shaped by the
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20 enduring legacies of colonialism, even as these are in turn exacerbated by more recent
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22 ideologies and policies of neoliberal urban governance.
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27 The article centres on *Beautiful Forever*s’ reproduction of a set of literary and cultural
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29 tropes that derive directly from Spivak’s perennial postcolonial question of whether the
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31 subaltern can or cannot speak. In particular, Boo’s narrative addresses itself to the
32
33 phenomenon of *sati* (or *suttee*), British imperialism’s strategic (mis)labelling of self-
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35 sacrificial widow burning in early British India and the issue on which Spivak’s essay
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37 hinges. Boo’s account of the lives of slum dwellers in Mumbai is unashamedly narrativized,
38
39 organising reams of surveys and hours of recorded interviews and video footage—an
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41 ethnographic project that ~~ecrings with~~oes Spivak’s description of neocolonialist ‘UN-style
42
43 universalism’ (361)—into a neat and highly readable story. Nevertheless, in ~~theis~~ process of
44
45 organising the complex entanglements of slum life into her ~~concise and~~ apparently
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47 contained narrative, Boo revealingly positions the self-immolation of an urban subaltern
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49 woman at the heart of her story. This act, around which the rest of *Beautiful Forever*s
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1
2 revolves, explicitly invokes the discursive and legal implications of *sati*, the cultural
3
4 practice that Spivak uses to frame her question.
5

6 I will first unpack the problematic assumptions of *Beautiful Forever's* claim to non-
7
8 fictionality by situating it within the ~~emerging larger and increasingly popular~~ field of non-
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10 fictional writing in India, before then proceeding to lever open the political implications of
11
12 the book's surface level claim to capture subaltern voices by highlighting the book's
13
14 invocation of *sati*. ~~Such an emphasis~~ This reading alters the text, forcing it to reveal the
15
16 discursive knots that disrupt its otherwise smooth, transparent narrative, an aesthetic and
17
18 political project that pertains to India's contemporary neoliberal urban governance in
19
20 particular. If a As Cheah remarks ~~in his reading of Spivak's essay~~, 'the clamour for and
21
22 claim to have retrieved the true voice consciousness of the subaltern [is] deeply complicit
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24 with the continuing development of capital' (181), these concerns ~~that~~ are both embedded
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26 within and self-reflexively addressed by Boo's narrative. Focusing on *Beautiful Forever's*
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28 account of subalternity and urban governance reveals that embedded into the literary
29
30 components of her non-fictional narrative is a 'caution, a vigilance, a persistent taking of
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32 distance always out of step with total involvement', which Spivak herself claims 'is all that
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34 responsible academic criticism can aspire to' (1999, 362).
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41 In conclusion, I will suggest that the recurrence of the image of the self-immolating
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43 subaltern woman in Boo's non-fictional text exposes the endurance of colonial apparatuses
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45 such as law, infrastructure and bureaucracy into the twenty-first century, even as these are
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47 complicated and exacerbated by ~~the ruthless~~ India's contemporary neoliberal urban
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49 governance ~~of contemporary neoliberal India~~. That the British colonial legal apparatus
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51 continues to impinge on Boo's literary non-fictional depiction of Mumbai evidences the
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53 enduring qualities of imperialism's foundational infrastructural base, despite the fact that the
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city's social and spatial arrangements have been fundamentally reshaped since India's post-1990s economic liberalisation. It is the emphasis on these continuing material circumstances, I argue, that allow Boo's text to offer a pertinent reminder of the self-critical and anti-hegemonic efforts that have long-informed the critical efforts of postcolonial writing, both literary and theoretical.

Literary Non-Fiction and the Subaltern Voice

Attending to the poorest inhabitants of a city ~~widely seen as epitomising~~ widely viewed as epitomising the violent conditions ~~wrought by~~ neoliberal urban governance (see Davis, 36; Harvey, 18), *Beautiful Forever* attracted reviews from notable cultural critics and historians of India. Some of these ~~commentaries~~ drew attention to the sticky problem of Boo's assumed ability to represent the outer and inner lives of Mumbai's underclass. As William Dalrymple observes, ~~if few:~~ 'It is never easy for a middle-class intellectual's' have conveyed to convey 'the struggles of the lives of the poor and disadvantaged [...]'; ~~while acknowledging that 'few [...] have succeeded~~ without sounding either condescending or voyeuristic', he maintains that 'Boo has succeeded better than any of them'. Amit Chaudhuri similarly comments that while Boo's 'own absence from the encounters with her biographees, the complete and unflagging access to their thoughts and speech, [and] the decision to adopt the novelistic approach [...] are the greatest risks Boo takes', *Beautiful Forever* should nevertheless be considered 'a small classic of contemporary writing'.

~~Meanwhile, writing in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Elsewhere, Liam Julian cites Boo herself~~ omments that Boo, aware 'that in his celebration of the book:

~~In interviews she has confessed to initially doubting that she, new to India, so fresh to the country and its people, could make a serious and valuable journalistic~~

~~contribution. And certainly she knew that~~ Indians can be prickly about non-Indian writers who, ~~they perceive, [...]~~ descend on their country, stick tape recorders in a few faces, and then jet back west to pen bestsellers². ~~practices in Beautiful Forever a [...]~~ Her ~~distaste for conjecture notwithstanding, she does hold a strong position, make an argument, which is embodied in her writing—‘an argument for reportorial humility’.~~

~~And Meanwhile~~ Daniel M. Murtaugh, ~~though lamenting that is similarly uncritical of Boo’s project: ‘~~

~~[...] this being a work of journalism rather than scholarship,~~ we do not have the apparatus of footnotes and source lists that can help us retrace the process by which Boo—a Westerner married to an Indian but with no proficiency in the languages of India—pieced this novelistic texture together². ~~[Nevertheless,] I very much want her account to hold up, because claims this should be forgiven because she conveys ‘it conveys such~~ an inspiring and heartbreaking sense of the obduracy of hope’.

These commentaries are representative of *Beautiful Forever’s* early reception.² They raise ~~the thorny of issue of concerns about~~ the neocolonial power relations clearly embedded in the non-fictional claims of Boo’s text, before tautologically excusing them on the grounds of the ‘humility’ and ‘hope’ that they claim she has infused, formally, into her ‘novelistic’, yet somehow still journalistic, account.

~~But d~~Despite this almost unanimous celebration, I ~~would~~ argue that the text’s claims to capture the subaltern voice surely cannot be overlooked ~~because of because Boo herself practices with ‘reportorial humility’, or because the narrative itself constructs a ‘heartbreaking sense of the obduracy of hope’.~~ ~~these somewhat abstract traits. To better make this argument, Beautiful Forever might helpfully needs to~~ be situated ~~here~~ in the

² ~~All of these reviews were published in US or UK outlets. Through reviews of Beautiful Forever in India itself are far harder to come by (the book appears not to have garnered anywhere near as much of an impact there), those that do exist are still generally celebratory (see, for example, Menon). If a full account of the geography of the book’s sales figures are beyond the scope of this article, it does appear that here, as Dwivedi and Lau have argued of Indian writing in English more broadly, ‘the literary map of India is drawn for consumption and distribution by economic forces operating outside of India’ (3).~~

larger literary marketplace of what Dalrymple describes as ‘India’s new wave of non-fiction’, much of which focuses particularly on the city of Mumbai: Sonia Faleiro’s *Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay’s Dance Bars* (2011), Pavan Varma’s *Being Indian: Inside the Real India* (2011), Anand Giridharadas’s *India Calling: An Intimate Portrait of a Nation’s Remaking* (2012), Akash Kapur’s *Indian Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India* (2012). As Dominic Davies has observed, the issue of representation is foregrounded by titles such as these: ‘the first clause of these titles denotes each text’s specialist angle on India, whilst the second reaches for some “beyond” that is often framed (“portrait”) as an attempt to grasp something of India’s “inner truth”’ (120-121).³

Boo’s text makes a similar rhetorical manoeuvre. Its title, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, references a billboard advertising a specialist tiling company that shields the view of Annawadi from the road linking Mumbai proper to its airport. That an advert for luxury housing shields the informal settlement from international arrivals to the city dramatizes Boo’s own ‘arrival’ from the US, and perhaps also the arrival of her international readership. The title thus invokes the tendency of recent Indian non-fiction to ‘frame’ its urban subject matter, before then claiming to do something more: it first offers the portrait of ‘modern India’— the ‘Beautiful Forevers’ billboard—promised by competing titles, before emphasising its ability to get ‘behind’ this image, thereby positioning itself within and moving beyond an increasingly lucrative literary marketplace.

Beautiful Forevers dramatizes this departure from its non-fictional peers in its form. Literary non-fiction about India tends to foreground the voice of the author/journalist, self-reflexively documenting the process of data collection—formal interviews, anecdotal

³ [Varma’s book in particular, which attempts ‘a new and dramatically different inquiry into what it is to be an Indian’, is preoccupied by the issue of ‘Image versus Reality’ \(1\).](#)

1 encounters, and so on. Consider, for example, Rana Dasgupta's *Capital, A Portrait of*
 2 *Twenty-First Century Delhi* (2014), another comparable work of literary non-fiction.⁴ This
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 4 long tome combines journalistic research and long poetic descriptions with extensive
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 6 interview recordings, as well as rather derivative meditations on India's twenty-first century
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 8 urban development. Throughout *Capital* it is ~~—therefore—~~impossible to lose sight of the
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 10 perspective and voice of Dasgupta himself. Even when he gives several pages at a time over
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 12 to direct quotations from his interviewees, intermittent interventions remind us that
 13
 14 Dasgupta himself is their interlocutor, ~~—operating as a representational filter.~~ The insertion of
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 16 the journalist/author as a character in his own text ~~—thus—~~continually reminds readers of the
 17
 18 conditions in which the 'non-fictional' evidence was recorded.

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 25 In contradistinction to Dasgupta's book and ~~much other literary non-fictional writing~~
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 27 ~~about India the other examples cited above~~, Boo cuts herself entirely out of *Beautiful*
 28
 29 *Forever's*'s main narrative. The space and place of Annawadi—its informal infrastructure,
 30
 31 its juxtaposition to the airport, its fraught social conditions—are described in meticulous
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 33 detail, certainly, but at no point is Boo herself revealed. To use Spivak's words, as a 'data
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 35 gatherer or activist who zealously desires access to a subject of development or oppression',
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 37 the text thus appears to 'pay no attention to the complex social relations—patriarchy,
 38
 39 polytheism, divisions of class, caste, and tribe—that constitute subaltern space and block
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 41 access to it' (181). Boo records numerous social interactions between a number of her slum-
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 43 dwelling subjects as though the exchanges took place in her absence; readers have no sense
 44
 45 of how her own presence as an American journalist might be impacting the scene she
 46
 47 describes. Perhaps most ~~problematic, however, troubling~~ is Boo's liberal use of free indirect
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 49 discourse, ~~where she. In page after page Boo~~ ventriloquizes the voices and inner thoughts of
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her subaltern subjects, ~~as the journalist/author and~~ assumes omniscient access not only to the urban locale, but to the internal decision-making processes of those who inhabit it.

Of course, Boo's decision to adopt this narrative strategy was a conscious one. She addresses this directly in ~~the promotional interview that accompanied an interview~~ accompanying the book's publication, and ~~these her~~ comments are worth quoting at length:

As a reader, I sometimes find that the 'I' character [...] impedes the reader's ability to connect with people who might be more interesting than the writer, and whose stories are less familiar. Which is not to say that the narrative without an 'I' is a paragon of omniscience and objectivity. Does it still need saying that journalism is not a perfect mirror of reality, that narrative nonfiction is a selective art, and that I didn't write this book while balanced on an Archimedean ethical point? My choices are reflected on every page, and I look forward to discussing with readers whether those choices were justifiable ones. But I long ago decided I didn't want to be one of those nonfiction writers who go on about themselves. When you get to the last pages of *Beautiful Forever*s, I don't want you to think about me sitting beside Abdul in that little garbage truck. I want you to be thinking about Abdul. (Boo & Medina)

Despite this lengthy justification, it is demonstrably wrong to claim that the insertion of the journalist figure ~~somehow must~~ inevitably reduces the text to an account of the author's subjective idiosyncrasies; the ~~examples other authors~~ noted above often do so with a self-deprecatory attentiveness to the subaltern lives their writing documents. But my point here is not to tell Boo how she should have written up her admirably extensive research; it is rather to question the text's distracting non-fictional claim, and to explore what that claim reveals. Indeed, by bringing *Beautiful Forever*s into a fuller intertextual dialogue with Spivak's landmark essay, I want to demonstrate how Boo's choices are in fact, as she claims, 'reflected on every page'.

Before ~~turning to undertaking~~ this reading, it is first necessary to consider ~~here~~ the moment in *Beautiful Forever*s when Boo's own voice does eventually appear: its concluding 'Author's Note'. The other literary non-fiction writers listed above include

1 similar qualificatory statements that directly address issues of representation, translation and
2 documentation. Returning once more to Dasgupta's *Capital* as a useful counter-example, a
3
4 prefatory 'Note to the Reader' informs us that the author has 'changed all names (except of
5
6 public figures)', and 'has chosen to make all characters in this book speak the same,
7
8 standard, English so that their widely differing relationships to this language do not
9
10 themselves become the issue' (xiii). But indicatively, where these statements are almost all
11
12 situated at the front of these non-fiction books, Boo's author's note is nestled at the back,
13
14 after the main narrative, concealed as an appendix rather than foregrounded as a necessary
15
16 qualificatory framing to be accounted for in any reading of the textion.
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23 Here, Boo at last offers some details of her disrupting presence, throwing into relief
24 the falsity of the claims, made indirectly through the omniscient form of her narrative, that
25 her presence as journalist did not impact the urban environment she documents:
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28

29 My reporting wasn't pretty, especially at first. To Annawadians, I was a reliably
30 ridiculous spectacle, given to toppling into the sewage lake while videotaping
31 and running afoul of the police. However, residents had concerns more pressing
32 than my presence. After a month or two of curiosity, they went more or less
33 about their business as I chronicled their lives. (2012: 251)
34
35
36
37

38 It seems unlikely that an American journalist toppling into sewage lakes, surrounded by a
39 team of translators with notepads and tape and video recorders, would become invisible to
40 slum dwellers even after the four years that Boo spent in Annawadi, never mind 'a month or
41 two'; and indeed, the text's main narrative contradicts such assumptions.
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47 Boo details the lives of some of Mumbai's poorest but also most innovative
48 inhabitants, documenting their abilityttempts to transform literally—anything—mostly
49 garbage—into an-economically lucrative ventures, the profits of which they will then use to
50 purchase their next meal (see Boo, 249). If this documentation is perhaps *Beautiful*
51
52 *Forever's* most important journalistic contribution, these details also make it difficult to
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1 believe that these slum-dwelling Indians would cease to view Boo, 'after a month or two',
2
3
4 as a possible source of income. ~~I want to emphasise here that~~ it is not therefore my claim
5
6 that the desperate poverty of most Annawadians means all their social relations are defined
7
8 by such economic opportunism—or in David Harvey's words, that 'the neoliberal ethic of
9
10 intense possessive individualism' has now 'become the template for human personality
11
12 socialisation' (14). The point is that Boo's account *itself* demonstrates the divisive violence
13
14 that such economic impoverishment has on social relations in the neoliberal city, between
15
16 the slum dwellers themselves, certainly, but surely between Boo and her subjects as well.
17
18

19
20 What 'fascinates' Boo, she tells us, are the twenty-first-century city's 'juxtapositions
21
22 of wealth and poverty', ~~leading her to ask the overriding question that a fact that constitutes~~
23
24 the book? ~~seeks to answers overarching question~~: 'there are more poor people than rich
25
26 people in the world's Mumbai's [so why] don't more of our unequal societies implode?'
27
28 (248). Her answer to this is, at least in part, the ruthless opportunism of many of the slum
29
30 dwellers about whose lives she writes—that such opportunism would not shape, if not
31
32 entirely define, Boo's relationship with her subjects is therefore very difficult to digest. The
33
34 text is thus riven by a tension that its novelistic narrative form and ~~its~~ unquestioning use of
35
36 free indirect discourse seeks to smooth away. Rather than address the complexities of this
37
38 representational relationship by inserting the fact of the author/journalist's presence—or
39
40 conversely, avoiding them by marketing the book as a novel—Boo chooses to excise herself
41
42 completely from the text, all the while maintaining her book's non-fictional status.
43
44 Nevertheless, these excisions are not, as I will now ~~go on~~ to demonstrate, as complete as
45
46 they may at first appear.
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55 Sati, Self-Immolation and Colonial Law in the Neoliberal City
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4 | Boo ~~does go some way toward justifying attempts to justify~~ her extensive use of free indirect
5
6 discourse, also in the book's concluding author's note:
7

8
9 When I describe the thoughts of individuals in the preceding pages, those
10 thoughts have been related to me and my translators, or to others in our presence.
11 When I sought to grasp, retrospectively, a person's thinking at a given moment,
12 or when I had to do repeated interviews in order to understand the complexity of
13 someone's views—very often the case—I used paraphrase. [...] Although I was
14 mindful of the risk of overinterpretation, it felt more distortive to devote my
15 attention to the handful of Annawadians who possessed a verbal dexterity that
16 might have provided more colourful quotes. [...] everyday language tended to be
17 transactional. It did not immediately convey the deep, idiosyncratic intelligences
18 that emerged forcefully over the course of nearly four years. (250)
19
20

21
22 | ~~In this concluding note we have, then, Here~~ the curtain is pulled back, the stage inverted—
23 this is 'behind the scenes' footage.⁵ Boo describes the practicalities of her research, as well
24
25 as the literary or novelistic work ~~she has done to of~~ moulding it into a coherent narrative.
26
27 This concluding note also suggests that the book's labelling as non-fiction is not a strategic
28
29 capitulation to an increasingly lucrative literary marketplace, but is rather informed by
30
31 Boo's political agenda. As she writes on the following page, 'I don't try to fool myself that
32
33 the stories of individuals are themselves better arguments. I just believe that better
34
35 arguments, maybe even better policies, get formulated when we know more about ordinary
36
37 lives' (251). If we take Boo at her word, her non-fictional claims and novelistic style are
38
39 both motivated by her desire to gain her subaltern characters political recognition at the
40
41 level of government policy by better representing their inner subjectivities.
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51 ⁵ It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss David Hare's stage adaptation of *Behind the Beautiful*
52 *Forever*, which ran at the National Theatre in 2015. Reviews of the play were mostly positive (see
53 Isherwood). However, if we are concerned by Boo's ventriloquizing of the subaltern voice, then the acting
54 out of the bodies of slum dwellers by actors on a West End stage clearly raises a whole new set of concerns
55 that I am unable to address here. Nevertheless, both this adaptation and my own tentative use of theatrical
56 metaphors are, I would argue, invited by Boo's narrative, much of which revolves around 'stages', both
57 literal and metaphorical (see for example, Boo, 93, 177, 180).
58

1
2 In this self-confessed effort we find the blurring of two modes of representation:
3
4 *vertreten*, or political representation ('a proxy'), and *darstellen*, or aesthetic representation
5 ('a portrait'). Spivak begins 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' by critiquing Gilles Deleuze and
6
7 Michel Foucault for committing ~~such~~this same blurring, which 'valorizes the concrete
8
9 experience of the oppressed, while being so uncritical about the historical role of the
10
11 intellectual' (275). As Graham Riach notes in his reading of Spivak, the blurring of these
12
13 related but discontinuous representational modes 'prevents the critic from exposing the
14
15 reality—what subalterns actually want—that lies behind representations' (40). As another
16
17 close reader of Spivak's essay suggests, 'subalternity is not that which could, if given a
18
19 ventriloquist, speak the truth of its oppression or disclose the plenitude of its being'; the
20
21 'hundreds of shelves of well-intentioned books'—to which we might now add Boo's text—
22
23 'claiming to speak for or give voice to the subaltern cannot ultimately escape the problem of
24
25 translation in its full sense' (Morris, 8). With Spivak's critical insights in mind, ~~then~~, Boo's
26
27 formal efforts to render herself transparent in *Beautiful Forever* results in the quite literal
28
29 ventriloquizing of the innermost thoughts of her slum dwelling characters. This move
30
31 explicitly conflates *darstellen* with *vertreten*, as Boo attempts to represent Annawadians
32
33 'within state formation and the law, on the one hand, and in subject-predication, on the
34
35 other' (Spivak, 275).
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44 Nevertheless, *Beautiful Forever* in fact contains, embedded within its narrative, a
45
46 negotiation of these complexities, and these are illuminated when it is brought into fuller
47
48 intertextual dialogue with Spivak's essay. To draw these out, it is necessary to quote at
49
50 length Spivak's famous account of the Hindu practice of *sati*, or widow sacrifice:
51
52

53 The Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself
54 upon it. This is widow sacrifice. (The conventional transcription of the Sanskrit
55 word for the widow would be *sati*. The early colonial British transcribed it
56 *suttee*.) The rite was not practiced universally and was not caste- or class-fixed.
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The abolition of this rite by the British has been generally understood as a case of ‘White men saving brown women from brown men’. White women—from the nineteenth-century British Missionary Registers to Mary Daly—have not produced an alternative understanding. Against this is the Indian nativist argument, a parody of the nostalgia for lost origins: ‘The women actually wanted to die.’

The two sentences go a long way to legitimize each other. One never encounters the testimony of the women’s voice-consciousness. Such a testimony would not be ideology-transcendent or ‘fully’ subjective, of course, but it would have constituted the ingredients for producing a countersentence. (1988: 297)

If one of Boo’s overriding aims ~~of Boo’s narrative is a to~~ critique the violence of what Nikhil Anand calls Mumbai’s uneven ‘infrastructures of citizenship’ (10)—or as Boo herself terms it, ‘the infrastructure of opportunity’ (247)—then *Beautiful Forever*s offers a curious reworking of Spivak’s ‘most quoted and misquoted passage’ (Morris 3).⁶ Boo’s framing of her novelistic narrative (*darstellen*) as a manifesto for the improvement of state policies toward Mumbai’s urban poor (*vertreten*) invites a reconstruction of Spivak’s notorious phrase, one that might read thus: ‘A rich white woman saving poor brown people from rich brown people’. Such a reformulation registers the dynamics of neoliberal urbanism that have infiltrated and altered subaltern conditions in twenty-first-century India, stratifying power relations *across* as well as *between* national boundaries and (ex)colonizing/colonized populations. As Cheah remarks, though Spivak’s question, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, ‘remains as urgent today as twenty-five years ago when the essay was first written’, the new ‘question that must be posed is whether power in contemporary globalisation operates according to the same regulative logic established under colonialism’—and so he asks, ‘how does infrastructural power operate in the contemporary [International Division of Labour] IDL?’ (188)

⁶ For a full account of the long and contested critical engagement with this phrase, as well as its references to Freud, see Morton, 112-123.

1
2 ~~I want to argue, then, that~~ Boo's text self-reflexively asks us to consider and engage
3
4 with the question of whether we ever 'encounter the testimony' of the Annawadian's
5
6 subaltern 'voice-consciousness', thereby speaking to Cheah's own reframing of Spivak's
7
8 question for the neoliberal era. Moreover, it reminds us that Spivak's concern was not so
9
10 much about whether or not the subaltern could speak, but rather if it could be *heard* (see
11
12 Riach, 11). As Spivak has more recently commented, the 'point that I was trying to make
13
14 was that if there was no valid institutional background for resistance, it could not be
15
16 recognised' (2010, 223). We should not, therefore, dismiss *Beautiful Forever*s for its
17
18 cooption of a subaltern voice-consciousness. Following Rob Nixon, we must be aware that
19
20 although 'power, including representational power, often works at an exaggerated remove',
21
22

23
24
25 in the scheme of things, this hardly seems [...] the most suspect kind of distance.
26
27 Relative to the invisibility that threatens the marginalized poor and the
28
29 environments they depend on, the bridgework such writer-activists undertake
30
31 offers a mostly honourable counter to the distancing rhetoric of neoliberal 'free
32
33 market' resource development [...]. (26)

34
35 Worrying less about Boo's ventriloquizing of the subaltern voice, we might instead, as
36
37 Nixon advises, attend 'seriously' to her 'adaptive rhetorical capacities [and] the chameleon
38
39 powers that make [non-fiction writing] such an indispensable resource for creative activism'
40
41 (26). Nevertheless, so doing in turn reveals that while Boo is attempting the 'bridgework' of
42
43 the writer-activist, there is yet more critical purchase embedded into the literary components
44
45 of her novelistic narrative. Looking closely, it becomes possible to identify the text's own
46
47 self-reflexive foregrounding of the issues of subalternity as they are contained not in the
48
49 explicit flow, or grain, of the text, but rather melded, almost silently, into the granular
50
51 details of its plot.

52
53
54 As noted at the beginning of this essay, *Beautiful Forever*s revolves around an act of
55
56 self-immolation that corresponds to Spivak's account of *sati*. After an argument with
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58

1 Zehrunisa, the mother of Abdul (one of Boo's main protagonists), a desperate and
 2
 3 somewhat erratic one-legged slum dweller called Fatima sets herself on fire:
 4
 5

6 'What do you see, Noori?'

7 'She's pouring Kerosene on her head.'

8 'Don't, Fatima,' Cynthia yelled, trying to make her voice heard over the
 9 music. Seconds later, the film song was overwhelmed by a *whoosh*, a small boom,
 10 and an eight-year-old screaming, 'My mother! On fire!'

11 [...] They found Fatima thrashing on the floor, smoke pouring off her skin.
 12 At her side was a yellow plastic jug of kerosene, along with a vessel of water.
 13 She had poured cooking fuel over her head, lit a match, then doused the flames
 14 with water. (Boo, 2012: 95)
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19 Whilst this episode invokes Spivak's account of *sati*, this is not a simplistic one-to-one
 20 mapping. Fatima is very much an agent in her own self-immolation, and though she sets
 21 herself ~~her~~ on fire, the subsequent and immediate dousing of herself in water counters what
 22 Spivak calls 'the Indian nativist argument [...] "The women actually wanted to die"' (1988,
 23 297). Meanwhile, though present as a journalist, Boo's commitment to authorial
 24 transparency leads her, at least within the text (but perhaps also without), *not* to intervene
 25 during this catastrophic scene: she refuses to 'save' Fatima from her own actions.⁷ Already,
 26 then, placing the template of Spivak's account of *sati* over this moment in Boo's plot
 27 reveals Fatima's refusal—albeit a violent, if not vindictive one—to be subsumed into the
 28 philosophical logic of patriarchy and colonialism that, according to Spivak, speak for and
 29 across the woman subaltern.
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45 However, the intertextual relationship between *Beautiful Forever*s and Spivak's essay
 46 becomes more clearly delineated during the legal fall out of Fatima's self-immolation.
 47 Though severely injured, Fatima remains conscious for several days after the event, in
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53 ⁷ We might even speculate that the international visibility that Boo's presence in Annawadi would have
 54 signified to its inhabitants might have encouraged Fatima's recourse to such a spectacularly violent act. Such
 55 an ethical dilemma raises questions that would need to be thoroughly grounded in more than critical
 56 conjecture, however.
 57
 58

1 which time she sets out to cause as much trouble for Zehrunisa, Abdul and their family as
2 she is able. First, she claims that Abdul himself set her alight, a lie that is swiftly refuted by
3
4 she is able. First, she claims that Abdul himself set her alight, a lie that is swiftly refuted by
5
6 the numerous bystanders that witnessed the event—testimonies from which presumably
7
8 Boo, too, compiled her narrative. Acting on the advice of ‘Poornima Paikrao, a special
9
10 executive officer of the government of Maharashtra’, Fatima therefore changes her story
11
12 slightly to bring a different set of prosecutorial legal proceedings against Abdul:
13

14
15
16 As the special executive officer understood, inciting a person to attempt suicide
17 is a serious crime in India. The British had written the criminal code, and their
18 strict anti-suicide provisions were designed to end a historical practice of families
19 encouraging widows onto the funeral pyres of their dead husbands—a practice
20 that relieved the families of the expense of feeding the widows.
21

22 In the new account, Fatima admitted to burning herself, then carefully
23 apportioned the blame for this self-immolation. [...] She didn’t mention
24 Zehrunisa, who had the best possible alibi, having been in the police station when
25 Fatima burned. Instead, she put the weight of her accusation on Abdul.
26

27 Abdul Husain had threatened and throttled her, she said in her statement.
28 Abdul Husain had beaten her up.

29 How could you bring down a family if you failed to name the boy who did
30 most of the work? (101-102)
31

32
33 Situated at the book’s midway point is, then, a direct implementation of the British criminal
34 code that was introduced to end the practice of *sati* (‘white men saving brown women from
35 brown men’). The entire preceding narrative leans toward this episode, and its ramifications
36 impact the majority of its remaining plot details—from here, Boo’s protagonist, Abdul,
37 becomes entangled in a corrupt, criminal state bureaucracy in which justice is bought
38 through bribes rather than administered in a courtroom. The law with which Fatima
39 prosecutes Abdul, the *sati* law, is placed centre-stage, and Boo builds the rest of her literary
40 narrative around it.
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52 What should we make of this apparent allusion to one of the most cited paragraphs of
53 Spivak’s essay at the centre of a book fraught with questions around voice, representation
54 and subalternity? ‘This suicide that is not a suicide may be read as a simulacrum of [...]’
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1 truth-knowledge' (1988, 300)—the parallels with Spivak's essay, despite its own sometimes
2 circumlocutory argumentation, are uncanny. Let us look again at Poornima Parkrao, the
3
4 special executive officer of the government who is 'commissioned to take the hospital-bed
5
6 statements of victims' (101). A 'pretty, plump government official [...] with gold-rimmed
7
8 designer glasses', she has been 'dispatched' by 'the police' to obtain 'a more plausible
9
10 victim statement' so that 'a charge against the Husains [would] stick, and money from the
11
12 family [could be] extracted' (101). Poornima obtains Fatima's victim statement thus:

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18 Gently, she helped Fatima construct a new account of the events that led to her
19
20 burning. Even when Fatima had admitted that she couldn't read over what the
21
22 officer had written, nor sign her own name at the bottom, the woman in the gold-
23
24 rimmed glasses had remained respectful. A thumbprint would be fine. (101)

25
26 So Fatima, in fact, cannot and does not speak. Despite *Beautiful Forever's* para-textual and
27
28 formal claims to the contrary, Boo appears here to reach the same negative conclusion as
29
30 Spivak. But the text does not die in this conclusion; rather, it is in this moment of failure
31
32 that its political work begins. Here, the target of Boo's critique becomes not Fatima, but the
33
34 endemic corruption and ruthless neoliberal opportunism of urban India's wealthier,
35
36 supposedly 'civil' society—police, doctors, lawyers—all of whom are ready to rinse the last
37
38 rupees out of Mumbai's subaltern underclass. Boo dramatises 'the profound irony in
39
40 locating the [subaltern] woman's free will in self-immolation' (Spivak 1988, 303),
41
42 mobilizing a compelling critique not of the individual actions of her subaltern characters,
43
44 but the conditions of neoliberal urban governance in which they find themselves
45
46 imprisoned.
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51 Tracing this intertextual relationship infuses other moments in the text with a self-
52
53 reflexive meta-commentary around issues of subalternity and the related blending of
54
55 aesthetic and political modes of representation. Crucially, these again pertain to Boo's
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1
2 overarching critique of the policies and corruption of neoliberal urban governance. Consider
3
4 one moment in particular from relatively early in the book, when some ‘foreign journalists’
5
6 arrive in Annawadi ‘to see whether self-help groups were empowering women’:
7

8
9 government officials sometimes took them to Asha. Her job was to gather random
10 female neighbours to smile demurely while the officials went on about how their
11 collective had lifted them from poverty. [...] Asha understood plenty. She was a chit in
12 a national game of make-believe, in which many of India’s old problems—poverty
13 disease, illiteracy, child labour—were being aggressively addressed. Meanwhile the
14 other old problems, corruption and exploitation of the weak by the less weak,
15 continued with minimal interference. (28)
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18
19 The duping of these ‘foreign journalists’ by both government officials and the slum dwellers
20 themselves—for a small fee—reveals the saturation of Mumbai’s varying layers of social
21 and political relations by the ‘neoliberal ethic of intense possessive individualism’ noted
22 above (Harvey, 14). But it also contributes to Boo’s project of making her own presence, as
23 a foreign journalist, all the more invisible. By including journalists *in* the text, readers are
24 either encouraged to overlook the presence of Boo herself, as a foreign journalist, or to view
25 her as exceptional; the four years she spent in Annawadi distinguishes Boo from these
26 fleeting visitors. In light of the book’s wider preoccupation with issues of subalternity, Boo
27 ~~seems to invite us~~ here invites us to think through the entangled relationship between her
28 own authorial transparency and ventriloquization of the subaltern voice, on the one hand,
29 and the increasingly violent neoliberalization of urban social and political relations in
30 Mumbai, on the other.
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39 ~~We can go some way toward unpicking this entanglement. By situating the above~~
40 ~~encounter within larger national and international layers of (mis)representation~~ It is in this
41 very entanglement that, *Beautiful Forever* enters into a critical dialogue with contemporary
42 India’s neoliberal urban governance, which D. Asher Ghertner has described as a ‘rule by
43 aesthetics’. According to this mode of urban governance, city space is transformed in both
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1 the national and international imaginary from the dilapidated, ungoverned and informal
2 infrastructure space of the slum into the bright, gleaming glass-scapes of shopping malls,
3
4 financial districts and other neoliberal architectural edifices. This ‘rule by aesthetics’
5
6 corresponds to what Boo describes as the ‘national game of make-believe, in which many of
7
8 India’s old problems—poverty disease, illiteracy, child labour—were being aggressively
9
10 addressed’ (28). Such an effort, Ghertner contends, ‘requires the dissemination of a
11
12 compelling vision of the future [...] and the cultivation of a viewing public that takes part in
13
14 that very vision’ (1-2). Urban policy in India has become *about* representation rather than
15
16 that which is represented, cultivating ‘new forms of cultural consumption—much of which
17
18 has to do with “seeing”’ (see Varughese, 495). Is it any wonder, then, that Boo’s book
19
20 congregates thematically around questions of subaltern representation (both political and
21
22 aesthetic), when the urban governance that she herself claims to challenge is itself obsessed
23
24 with who is seen and heard—with who, in fact, is allowed to speak?
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32 Moments in *Beautiful Forevers*, such as the above quoted encounter with a group of
33
34 foreign journalists, therefore function as meta-textual nods to the knowing reader who is
35
36 acquainted with Spivak’s essay. For in the end, Boo’s early reviewers excuse her
37
38 ventriloquizing of subaltern voices because of ~~herthe aesthetically pleasing and qualities of~~
39
40 her undeniably compelling literary narrative. As for policies of urban development in
41
42 neoliberal India, then, Boo’s project is an aesthetic one. Her claim to non-fictionality is
43
44 embedded in, and yet tries also in part to subvert, the ‘truth game’ of neoliberalism. This
45
46 ‘truth game’ is predicated on a set of founding ‘truths’, which are outlined succinctly by
47
48 Douglas Spencer in his commentary on the architecture of neoliberalism: that ‘the economic
49
50 market is better able to calculate, process and spontaneously order society than the state is
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1 able to'; 'that the competition between individuals facilitated by equality of access to the
2 market is a natural state of affairs'; and 'that its truths are a guarantee of liberty' (2).
3
4

5
6 Here we enter into a feedback loop in which the problem of Boo's removal of herself
7 as author/journalist from *Beautiful Forever*s ~~—so that we readers are not thinking 'about~~
8 ~~[Boo] sitting beside Abdul in that little garbage truck', we're 'thinking about Abdul' (Boo~~
9 ~~& Medina, 2012)—~~ is dramatized in the text's own literary motifs. Boo plays
10 neoliberalism's truth game, ventriloquizing *aesthetically* a range of subaltern voices to
11 further their *political* representation, even as her commentary details how, as Spivak herself
12 has observed, 'access to "citizenship" (civil society)' can become complicit with 'the
13 mobilizing of subalternity into hegemony' (1999, 309-310; see also Medovoi et al.). If as
14 Spencer points out, the 'rules of [neoliberalism's] truth game require that the contrivance of
15 its truths be concealed from the players' (2), Boo's literary ~~motifs~~~~motifs and creative~~
16 ~~narrativization~~ lead *Beautiful Forever*s, despite its ostensible claims to non-fictionality, to
17 break this fundamental rule.
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37 Conclusion: Can the Subaltern Speak?
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41 The recurrence of the British colonial law introduced to prevent *sati*—entangled as it is in
42 multiple discursive layerings of subalternity, representation and resistance—at the centre of
43 Boo's twenty-first-century piece of literary non-fiction testifies to the enduring and
44 markedly violent legacy of colonialism, even as this is re-calibrated by new modes of urban
45 governance in the neoliberal era. Can the subaltern speak here? *Beautiful Forever*s' itself
46 suggests that this is perhaps now the wrong question to ask. Rather, we might follow Cheah
47 to question instead Spivak's 'understanding of subalternity as a structural space of
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1 difference that is always excluded by hegemonic regimes of representation as power
 2 precisely because power now functions through productive incorporation' (208). Boo
 3
 4 follows Spivak by trying to demonstrate that if there is 'no valid institutional background
 5
 6 for resistance, it [can] not be recognised' (2010, 223). But this is embedded in the much
 7
 8 wider constellation of neoliberal urban governance, in which previous routes of political
 9
 10 representation (*versteten*) have been conflated with aesthetic concerns (*darstellen*). Boo's
 11
 12 text, and perhaps the genre of creative or literary non-fiction more widely, is undoubtedly
 13
 14 responding to this regime, and is at times deeply complicit with it. Nevertheless, when read
 15
 16 closely with one of postcolonial criticism's key questions in mind, *Beautiful Forever*s
 17
 18 dramatizes this dilemma, allowing the occasion for the most pernicious aspects of
 19
 20 subalternity and urban governance in the neoliberal city to be unpicked, critiqued and
 21
 22 perhaps even ~~on occasion~~ resisted.

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Literary Non-Fiction and the Neoliberal City: Subalternity and Urban Governance in Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*

Abstract

In this article I challenge the claims made for Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* as a piece of non-fiction, using the text to attend to continued questions around subaltern agency and voice that have been at the centre of postcolonial studies since Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asked her field-shaping question, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. Reading Spivak's essay alongside *Beautiful Forevers* foregrounds the continued relevance of her question in the post-Millennial context of the neoliberal city, particularly as it relates to issues of urban governance. The article demonstrates that a rigorous postcolonial reading of Boo's book tells us something more about subalternity in the twenty-first-century Indian city, the violent social and spatial infrastructures of which continue to be shaped by the enduring legacies of colonialism, even as these are in turn exacerbated by more recent ideologies and policies of neoliberal urban governance. It concludes by arguing that *Beautiful Forevers*, and perhaps the genre of creative or literary non-fiction more widely, is undoubtedly responding to, and at times both complicit with and resistant to, this regime.

Keywords: Katherine Boo, Gayatri Spivak, literary non-fiction, Mumbai, subalternity, the neoliberal city, urban governance

The Pulitzer Prize-winning American journalist, Katherine Boo, published her self-identifying 'non-fictional' narrative, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life and Death in a Mumbai Slum*, in 2012 to almost unanimous critical acclaim. The book documents a series of events in the lives of a community of slum dwellers resident in Annawadi, an informal housing settlement situated close to Mumbai's international airport. While most of the book's early reviews unquestioningly celebrated Boo's shrewd journalistic eye and immersive writing style, some did highlight the tension arising from, on the one hand, the book's status as a piece of non-fiction, and on the other, the novelistic, seemingly fictional qualities of its narrative content. Yet even in these more cautious analyses, concerns around Boo's ventriloquizing of Mumbai's slum dwelling classes are swiftly put to one side, as renowned scholars of Indian writing such as William Dalrymple and Amit Chaudhuri concur that, in

1
2 the end, the content of *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* justifies its non-fictional claims. The book's
3
4 non-fictionality has since been cemented by its winning of a number of non-fiction prizes
5
6 from prestigious organizations including PEN, the Los Angeles Times Book Awards, the
7
8 New York Public Library and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Most notably,
9
10 *Beautiful Forevers* was in 2012 awarded the US National Book Award for Non-fiction.
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14 In this article I wish to challenge the claims made for *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* as a
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16 piece of non-fiction, using the text to attend to continued questions around subaltern agency
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18 and voice that have been at the centre of postcolonial studies since Gayatri Chakravorty
19
20 Spivak asked her field-shaping question, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'.¹ Reading Spivak's
21
22 essay alongside Boo's text foregrounds the continued relevance of (and also necessary
23
24 amendments to) her question in the post-Millennial context of the neoliberal city,
25
26 particularly as it relates to urban governance and the subalternity of 'the lowest strata of the
27
28 urban proletariat', to whom Spivak herself has drawn attention (1999, 269; see also Franco,
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30 215). As Indian creative non-fiction—especially about the subcontinent's cities—becomes an
31
32 increasingly lucrative and 'prized' (Huggan, 105-121) genre in the postcolonial literary
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34 marketplace, I contend that critics must continue to read such texts for their literary
35
36 qualities. In Boo's case, these speak to postcolonialism's ongoing self-reflexive critique of
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38 'theory's embeddedness in global capitalism'—the 'signal contribution', according to Pheng
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40 Cheah, of Spivak's original essay (179).
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50 The emergence of non-fiction as a new postcolonial literary category must not deter
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52 postcolonial criticism from its resistant reading practices. Self-proclaimed non-fictional texts
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54 such as *Beautiful Forevers*, which embed themselves in and then appear to conceal a set of
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60 ¹ Throughout this article, when citing Spivak's essay I will refer to the first full-length version published in 1988 (rather than the shorter first version, published in *Wedge* in 1985). I also refer to its later incarnation as Chapter 3 of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), where Spivak further fleshes out her argument.

1
2 neocolonial power relations, can still be productively critiqued. Indeed, this article
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4 demonstrates that a rigorous postcolonial reading of Boo's book tells us something more
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6 about subalternity in the twenty-first-century Indian city, the violent social and spatial
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8 infrastructures of which continue to be shaped by the enduring legacies of colonialism, even
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10 as these are in turn exacerbated by more recent ideologies and policies of neoliberal urban
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12 governance.
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17 The article centres on *Beautiful Forever's* reproduction of a set of literary and cultural
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19 tropes that derive directly from Spivak's perennial postcolonial question of whether the
20
21 subaltern can or cannot speak. In particular, Boo's narrative addresses itself to the
22
23 phenomenon of *sati* (or *suttee*), British imperialism's strategic (mis)labelling of self-sacrificial
24
25 widow burning in early British India and the issue on which Spivak's essay hinges. Boo's
26
27 account of the lives of slum dwellers in Mumbai is unashamedly narrativized, organising
28
29 reams of surveys and hours of recorded interviews and video footage—an ethnographic
30
31 project that echoes Spivak's description of neocolonialist 'UN-style universalism' (361)—into
32
33 a neat and highly readable story. Nevertheless, in the process of organising the complex
34
35 entanglements of slum life into her apparently contained narrative, Boo revealingly positions
36
37 the self-immolation of an urban subaltern woman at the heart of her story. This act, around
38
39 which the rest of *Beautiful Forever's* revolves, explicitly invokes the discursive and legal
40
41 implications of *sati*, the cultural practice that Spivak uses to frame her question.
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50 I will first unpack the problematic assumptions of *Beautiful Forever's* claim to non-
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52 fictionality by situating it within the emerging field of non-fictional writing in India, before
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54 then proceeding to lever open the political implications of the book's surface level claim to
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56 capture subaltern voices by highlighting the book's invocation of *sati*. This reading alters the
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58 text, forcing it to reveal the discursive knots that disrupt its otherwise smooth, transparent
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1
2 narrative, an aesthetic and political project that pertains to India's contemporary neoliberal
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4 | urban governance in particular. If as Cheah remarks, 'the clamour for and claim to have
5
6 retrieved the true voice consciousness of the subaltern [is] deeply complicit with the
7
8 | continuing development of capital' (181), these concerns are both embedded within and self-
9
10 reflexively addressed by Boo's narrative. Focusing on *Beautiful Forever's* account of
11
12 subalternity and urban governance reveals that embedded into the literary components of
13
14 her non-fictional narrative is a 'caution, a vigilance, a persistent taking of distance always
15
16 out of step with total involvement', which Spivak herself claims 'is all that responsible
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18 academic criticism can aspire to' (1999, 362).
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25 In conclusion, I will suggest that the recurrence of the image of the self-immolating
26
27 subaltern woman in Boo's non-fictional text exposes the endurance of colonial apparatuses
28
29 such as law, infrastructure and bureaucracy into the twenty-first century, even as these are
30
31 | complicated and exacerbated by India's contemporary neoliberal urban governance. That
32
33 the British colonial legal apparatus continues to impinge on Boo's literary non-fictional
34
35 depiction of Mumbai evidences the enduring qualities of imperialism's foundational
36
37 infrastructural base, despite the fact that the city's social and spatial arrangements have been
38
39 fundamentally reshaped since India's post-1990s economic liberalisation. It is the emphasis
40
41 on these continuing material circumstances, I argue, that allow Boo's text to offer a pertinent
42
43 reminder of the self-critical and anti-hegemonic efforts that have long-informed the critical
44
45 efforts of postcolonial writing, both literary and theoretical.
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54 **Literary Non-Fiction and the Subaltern Voice**

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2 Attending to the poorest inhabitants of a city widely viewed as epitomising the violent
3
4 conditions wrought by neoliberal urban governance (see Davis, 36; Harvey, 18), *Beautiful*
5
6 *Forever*s attracted reviews from notable cultural critics and historians of India. Some of these
7
8 drew attention to the sticky problem of Boo's assumed ability to represent the outer and
9
10 inner lives of Mumbai's underclass. As William Dalrymple observes, if few 'middle-class
11
12 intellectuals' have conveyed 'the struggles of the lives of the poor and disadvantaged [...]
13
14 without sounding either condescending or voyeuristic', he maintains that 'Boo has succeeded
15
16 better than any of them'. Amit Chaudhuri similarly comments that while Boo's 'own
17
18 absence from the encounters with her biographees, the complete and unflagging access to
19
20 their thoughts and speech, [and] the decision to adopt the novelistic approach [...] are the
21
22 greatest risks Boo takes', *Beautiful Forever*s should nevertheless be considered 'a small classic of
23
24 contemporary writing'.

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32 Elsewhere, Liam Julian comments that Boo, aware 'that Indians can be prickly about
33
34 non-Indian writers who [...] descend on their country, stick tape recorders in a few faces, and
35
36 then jet back west to pen bestsellers', practices in *Beautiful Forever*s a 'reportorial humility'.
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39 Meanwhile Daniel Murtaugh, though lamenting that 'we do not have the apparatus of
40
41 footnotes and source lists that can help us retrace the process by which Boo—a Westerner
42
43 married to an Indian but with no proficiency in the languages of India—pieced this
44
45 novelistic texture together', claims this should be forgiven because she conveys 'an inspiring
46
47 and heartbreaking sense of the obduracy of hope'. These commentaries are representative
48
49 of *Beautiful Forever*s's early reception.² They raise concerns about the neocolonial power
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56 ² All of these reviews were published in US or UK outlets. Through reviews of *Beautiful Forever*s in India itself
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58 are far harder to come by (the book appears not to have garnered anywhere near as much of an impact
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60 there), those that do exist are still generally celebratory (see, for example, Menon). If a full account of the
geography of the book's sales figures are beyond the scope of this article, it does appear that here, as Dwivedi
and Lau have argued of Indian writing in English more broadly, 'the literary map of India is drawn for
consumption and distribution by economic forces operating outside of India' (3).

1 relations clearly embedded in the non-fictional claims of Boo's text, before tautologically
 2 excusing them on the grounds of the 'humility' and 'hope' that they claim she has infused,
 3
 4 formally, into her 'novelistic', yet somehow still journalistic, account.
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9 Despite this almost unanimous celebration, I argue that the text's claims to capture the
 10 subaltern voice surely cannot be overlooked because of these somewhat abstract traits.
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 12 *Beautiful Forever*s might helpfully be situated here in the larger literary marketplace of what
 13 Dalrymple describes as 'India's new wave of non-fiction', much of which focuses particularly
 14 on the city of Mumbai: Sonia Faleiro's *Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay's Dance*
 15 *Bars* (2011), Pavan Varma's *Being Indian: Inside the Real India* (2011), Anand Giridharadas's
 16 *India Calling: An Intimate Portrait of a Nation's Remaking* (2012), Akash Kapur's *Indian Becoming: A*
 17 *Portrait of Life in Modern India* (2012). As Dominic Davies has observed, the issue of
 18 representation is foregrounded by titles such as these: 'the first clause of these titles denotes
 19 each text's specialist angle on India, whilst the second reaches for some "beyond" that is
 20 often framed ("portrait") as an attempt to grasp something of India's "inner
 21 truth"' (120-121).³
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39 Boo's text makes a similar rhetorical manoeuvre. Its title, *Behind the Beautiful Forever*s,
 40 references a billboard advertising a specialist tiling company that shields the view of
 41 Annawadi from the road linking Mumbai proper to its airport. That an advert for luxury
 42 housing shields the informal settlement from international arrivals to the city dramatizes
 43 Boo's own 'arrival' from the US, and perhaps also the arrival of her international
 44 readership. The title thus invokes the tendency of recent Indian non-fiction to 'frame' its
 45 urban subject matter, before then claiming to do something more: it first offers the portrait
 46 of 'modern India'— the 'Beautiful Forevers' billboard—promised by competing titles, before
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³ Varma's book in particular, which attempts 'a new and dramatically different inquiry into what it is to be an Indian', is preoccupied by the issue of 'Image versus Reality' (1).

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2 emphasising its ability to get ‘behind’ this image, thereby positioning itself within and
3
4 moving beyond an increasingly lucrative literary marketplace.
5

6
7 *Beautiful Forever*s dramatizes this departure from its non-fictional peers in its form.

8
9 Literary non-fiction about India tends to foreground the voice of the author/journalist, self-
10 reflexively documenting the process of data collection—formal interviews, anecdotal
11 encounters, and so on. Consider, for example, Rana Dasgupta’s *Capital, A Portrait of Twenty-*
12 *First Century Delhi* (2014), another comparable work of literary non-fiction.⁴ This long tome
13 combines journalistic research and long poetic descriptions with extensive interview
14 recordings, as well as rather derivative meditations on India’s twenty-first century urban
15 development. Throughout *Capital* it is impossible to lose sight of the perspective and voice of
16 Dasgupta himself. Even when he gives several pages at a time over to direct quotations from
17 his interviewees, intermittent interventions remind us that Dasgupta himself is their
18 interlocutor. The insertion of the journalist/author as a character in his own text continually
19 reminds readers of the conditions in which the ‘non-fictional’ evidence was recorded.
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37 In contradistinction to Dasgupta’s book and **the other examples cited above**, Boo cuts
38 herself entirely out of *Beautiful Forever*s’s main narrative. The space and place of Annawadi—
39 its informal infrastructure, its juxtaposition to the airport, its fraught social conditions—are
40 described in meticulous detail, certainly, but at no point is Boo herself revealed. To use
41 Spivak’s words, as a ‘data gatherer or activist who zealously desires access to a subject of
42 development or oppression’, the text thus appears to ‘pay no attention to the complex social
43 relations—patriarchy, polytheism, divisions of class, caste, and tribe—that constitute
44 subaltern space and block access to it’ (181). Boo records numerous social interactions
45 between a number of her slum-dwelling subjects as though the exchanges took place in her
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⁴ Curiously this subtitle, ‘A Portrait of Twenty-First Century Delhi’, was altered after in later editions to ‘The Eruption of Delhi’, with the word ‘portrait’ notably removed.

1
2 absence; readers have no sense of how her own presence as an American journalist might be
3
4 impacting the scene she describes. Perhaps most **troubling** is Boo's liberal use of free indirect
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6 discourse, **where she** ventriloquizes the voices and inner thoughts of her subaltern subjects
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9 **and** assumes omniscient access not only to the urban locale, but to the internal decision-
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11 making processes of those who inhabit it.
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14 Of course, Boo's decision to adopt this narrative strategy was a conscious one. She
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16 addresses this directly in **an interview accompanying** the book's publication, and **her**
17
18 comments are worth quoting at length:
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22 As a reader, I sometimes find that the 'I' character [...] impedes the reader's
23 ability to connect with people who might be more interesting than the writer, and
24 whose stories are less familiar. Which is not to say that the narrative without an 'I'
25 is a paragon of omniscience and objectivity. Does it still need saying that
26 journalism is not a perfect mirror of reality, that narrative nonfiction is a selective
27 art, and that I didn't write this book while balanced on an Archimedean ethical
28 point? My choices are reflected on every page, and I look forward to discussing
29 with readers whether those choices were justifiable ones. But I long ago decided I
30 didn't want to be one of those nonfiction writers who go on about themselves.
31 When you get to the last pages of *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, I don't want you to
32 think about me sitting beside Abdul in that little garbage truck. I want you to be
33 thinking about Abdul. (Boo & Medina)
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39 Despite this lengthy justification, it is demonstrably wrong to claim that the insertion of the
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41 journalist figure **must** inevitably reduce the text to an account of the author's subjective
42
43 idiosyncrasies; the **other authors** noted above often do so with a self-deprecatory
44
45 attentiveness to the subaltern lives their writing documents. But my point here is not to tell
46
47 Boo how she should have written up her admirably extensive research; it is rather to
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49 question the text's distracting non-fictional claim, and to explore what that claim reveals.
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51 Indeed, by bringing *Beautiful Forevers* into a fuller intertextual dialogue with Spivak's
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53 landmark essay, I want to demonstrate how Boo's choices are in fact, as she claims, 'reflected
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55 on every page'.
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2 | Before **undertaking** this reading, it is first necessary to consider the moment in *Beautiful*
3
4 *Forever* when Boo's own voice does eventually appear: its concluding 'Author's Note'. The
5
6 other literary non-fiction writers listed above include similar qualificatory statements that
7
8 directly address issues of representation, translation and documentation. Returning once
9
10 more to Dasgupta's *Capital* as a useful counter-example, a prefatory 'Note to the Reader'
11
12 informs us that the author has 'changed all names (except of public figures)', and 'has
13
14 chosen to make all characters in this book speak the same, standard, English so that their
15
16 widely differing relationships to this language do not themselves become the issue' (xiii). But
17
18 indicatively, where these statements are almost all situated at the front of these non-fiction
19
20 books, Boo's author's note is nestled at the back, after the main narrative, concealed as an
21
22 appendix rather than foregrounded as a **necessary** qualification.
23
24
25
26
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28
29

30 Here, Boo at last offers some details of her disrupting presence, throwing into relief the
31
32 falsity of the claims, made indirectly through the omniscient form of her narrative, that her
33
34 presence as journalist did not impact the urban environment she documents:
35
36

37 My reporting wasn't pretty, especially at first. To Annawadians, I was a reliably
38
39 ridiculous spectacle, given to toppling into the sewage lake while videotaping and
40
41 running afoul of the police. However, residents had concerns more pressing than
42
43 my presence. After a month or two of curiosity, they went more or less about
44
45 their business as I chronicled their lives. (2012: 251)

46 It seems unlikely that an American journalist toppling into sewage lakes, surrounded by a
47
48 team of translators with notepads and tape and video recorders, would become invisible to
49
50 slum dwellers even after the four years that Boo spent in Annawadi, never mind 'a month or
51
52 two'; and indeed, the text's main narrative contradicts such assumptions.
53
54

55 Boo details the lives of some of Mumbai's poorest but also most innovative inhabitants,
56
57 documenting their **attempts** to transform anything—mostly garbage—into economically
58
59 lucrative ventures, the profits of which they will then use to purchase their next meal (see
60

1
2 Boo, 249). If this documentation is perhaps *Beautiful Forever's* most important journalistic
3
4 contribution, these details also make it difficult to believe that these slum-dwelling Indians
5
6 would cease to view Boo, 'after a month or two', as a possible source of income. It is not
7
8 **therefore** *my* claim that the desperate poverty of most Annawadians means all their social
9
10 relations are defined by such economic opportunism—or in David Harvey's words, that 'the
11
12 neoliberal ethic of intense possessive individualism' has now 'become the template for
13
14 human personality socialisation' (14). The point is that Boo's account *itself* demonstrates the
15
16 divisive violence that such economic impoverishment has on social relations in the neoliberal
17
18 city, between the slum dwellers themselves, certainly, but surely between Boo and her
19
20 subjects as well.
21
22
23
24
25

26
27 What 'fascinates' Boo, she tells us, are the twenty-first-century city's 'juxtapositions of
28
29 wealth and poverty', **a fact that constitutes** the book's **overarching question**: 'there are more
30
31 poor people than rich people in the world's Mumbai's [so why] don't more of our unequal
32
33 societies implode?' (248). Her answer **to this** is, at least in part, the ruthless opportunism of
34
35 many of the slum dwellers about whose lives she writes—that such opportunism would not
36
37 shape, if not entirely define, Boo's relationship with her subjects is therefore very difficult to
38
39 digest. The text is thus riven by a tension that its novelistic narrative form and unquestioning
40
41 use of free indirect discourse seeks to smooth away. Rather than address the complexities of
42
43 this representational relationship by inserting the fact of the author/journalist's presence—
44
45 or conversely, avoiding them by marketing the book as a novel—Boo chooses to excise
46
47 herself completely from the text, all the while maintaining her book's non-fictional status.
48
49
50
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55 **Nevertheless**, these excisions are not, as I will now to demonstrate, as complete as they may
56
57 at first appear.
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Sati, Self-Immolation and Colonial Law in the Neoliberal City

Boo attempts to justify her extensive use of free indirect discourse, also in the book's concluding author's note:

When I describe the thoughts of individuals in the preceding pages, those thoughts have been related to me and my translators, or to others in our presence. When I sought to grasp, retrospectively, a person's thinking at a given moment, or when I had to do repeated interviews in order to understand the complexity of someone's views—very often the case—I used paraphrase. [...] Although I was mindful of the risk of overinterpretation, it felt more distortive to devote my attention to the handful of Annawadians who possessed a verbal dexterity that might have provided more colourful quotes. [...] everyday language tended to be transactional. It did not immediately convey the deep, idiosyncratic intelligences that emerged forcefully over the course of nearly four years. (250)

Here the curtain is pulled back, the stage inverted—this is 'behind the scenes' footage.⁵ Boo describes the practicalities of her research, as well as the literary or novelistic work of moulding it into a coherent narrative. This concluding note also suggests that the book's labelling as non-fiction is not a strategic capitulation to an increasingly lucrative literary marketplace, but is rather informed by Boo's political agenda. As she writes on the following page, 'I don't try to fool myself that the stories of individuals are themselves better arguments. I just believe that better arguments, maybe even better policies, get formulated when we know more about ordinary lives' (251). If we take Boo at her word, her non-fictional claims and novelistic style are both motivated by her desire to gain her subaltern characters political recognition at the level of government policy by better representing their inner subjectivities.

⁵ It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss David Hare's stage adaptation of *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, which ran at the National Theatre in 2015. Reviews of the play were mostly positive (see Isherwood). However, if we are concerned by Boo's ventriloquizing of the subaltern voice, then the acting out of the bodies of slum dwellers by actors on a West End stage clearly raises a whole new set of concerns that I am unable to address here. Nevertheless, both this adaptation and my own tentative use of theatrical metaphors are, I would argue, invited by Boo's narrative, much of which revolves around 'stages', both literal and metaphorical (see for example, Boo, 93, 177, 180).

1
2 In this self-confessed effort we find the blurring of two modes of representation:
3
4 *vertreten*, or political representation ('a proxy'), and *darstellen*, or aesthetic representation ('a
5 portrait'). Spivak begins 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' by critiquing Gilles Deleuze and Michel
6
7 Foucault for committing **this same** blurring, which 'valorizes the concrete experience of the
8
9 oppressed, while being so uncritical about the historical role of the intellectual' (275). As
10
11 Graham Riach notes in his reading of Spivak, the blurring of these related but
12
13 discontinuous representational modes 'prevents the critic from exposing the reality—what
14
15 subalterns actually want—that lies behind representations' (40). As another close reader of
16
17 Spivak's essay suggests, 'subalternity is not that which could, if given a ventriloquist, speak
18
19 the truth of its oppression or disclose the plenitude of its being'; the 'hundreds of shelves of
20
21 well-intentioned books'—to which we might now add Boo's text—'claiming to speak for or
22
23 give voice to the subaltern cannot ultimately escape the problem of translation in its full
24
25 sense' (Morris, 8). With Spivak's critical insights in mind, Boo's formal efforts to render
26
27 herself transparent in *Beautiful Forever*s results in the quite literal ventriloquizing of the
28
29 innermost thoughts of her slum dwelling characters. This move explicitly conflates *darstellen*
30
31 with *vertreten*, as Boo attempts to represent Annawadians 'within state formation and the law,
32
33 on the one hand, and in subject-predication, on the other' (Spivak, 275).

34
35 Nevertheless, *Beautiful Forever*s in fact contains, embedded within its narrative, a
36
37 negotiation of these complexities, and these are illuminated when it is brought into fuller
38
39 intertextual dialogue with Spivak's essay. To draw these out, it is necessary to quote at length
40
41 Spivak's famous account of the Hindu practice of *sati*, or widow sacrifice:
42
43

44
45 The Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself
46
47 upon it. This is widow sacrifice. (The conventional transcription of the Sanskrit
48
49 word for the widow would be *sati*. The early colonial British transcribed it *suttee*.)
50
51 The rite was not practiced universally and was not caste- or class-fixed. The
52
53 abolition of this rite by the British has been generally understood as a case of
54
55 'White men saving brown women from brown men'. White women—from the
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57
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nineteenth-century British Missionary Registers to Mary Daly—have not produced an alternative understanding. Against this is the Indian nativist argument, a parody of the nostalgia for lost origins: ‘The women actually wanted to die.’

The two sentences go a long way to legitimize each other. One never encounters the testimony of the women’s voice-consciousness. Such a testimony would not be ideology-transcendent or ‘fully’ subjective, of course, but it would have constituted the ingredients for producing a countersentence. (1988: 297)

If one of Boo’s overriding aims is to critique the violence of what Nikhil Anand calls Mumbai’s uneven ‘infrastructures of citizenship’ (10)—or as Boo herself terms it, ‘the infrastructure of opportunity’ (247)—then *Beautiful Forever* offers a curious reworking of Spivak’s ‘most quoted and misquoted passage’ (Morris 3).⁶ Boo’s framing of her novelistic narrative (*darstellen*) as a manifesto for the improvement of state policies toward Mumbai’s urban poor (*vertreten*) invites a reconstruction of Spivak’s notorious phrase, one that might read thus: ‘A rich white woman saving poor brown people from rich brown people’. Such a reformulation registers the dynamics of neoliberal urbanism that have infiltrated and altered subaltern conditions in twenty-first-century India, stratifying power relations *across* as well as *between* national boundaries and (ex)colonizing/colonized populations. As Cheah remarks, though Spivak’s question, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, ‘remains as urgent today as twenty-five years ago when the essay was first written’, the new ‘question that must be posed is whether power in contemporary globalisation operates according to the same regulative logic established under colonialism’—and so he asks, ‘how does infrastructural power operate in the contemporary [International Division of Labour] IDL?’ (188)

Boo’s text self-reflexively asks us to consider and engage with the question of whether we ever ‘encounter the testimony’ of the Annawadian’s subaltern ‘voice-consciousness’, thereby speaking to Cheah’s own reframing of Spivak’s question for the neoliberal era.

⁶ For a full account of the long and contested critical engagement with this phrase, as well as its references to Freud, see Morton, 112-123.

1
2 Moreover, it reminds us that Spivak's concern was not so much about whether or not the
3
4 subaltern could speak, but rather if it could be *heard* (see Riach, 11). As Spivak has more
5
6 recently commented, the 'point that I was trying to make was that if there was no valid
7
8 institutional background for resistance, it could not be recognised' (2010, 223). We should
9
10 not, therefore, dismiss *Beautiful Forever*s for its cooption of a subaltern voice-consciousness.
11
12 Following Rob Nixon, we must be aware that although 'power, including representational
13
14 power, often works at an exaggerated remove',
15
16
17

18
19 in the scheme of things, this hardly seems [...] the most suspect kind of distance.
20
21 Relative to the invisibility that threatens the marginalized poor and the
22
23 environments they depend on, the bridgework such writer-activists undertake
24
25 offers a mostly honourable counter to the distancing rhetoric of neoliberal 'free
26
27 market' resource development [...]. (26)
28

29
30 Worrying less about Boo's ventriloquizing of the subaltern voice, we might instead, as Nixon
31
32 advises, attend 'seriously' to her 'adaptive rhetorical capacities [and] the chameleon powers
33
34 that make [non-fiction writing] such an indispensable resource for creative activism' (26).
35
36 Nevertheless, so doing in turn reveals that while Boo is attempting the 'bridgework' of the
37
38 writer-activist, there is yet more critical purchase embedded into the literary components of
39
40 her novelistic narrative. Looking closely, it becomes possible to identify the text's own self-
41
42 reflexive foregrounding of the issues of subalternity as they are contained not in the explicit
43
44 flow, or grain, of the text, but rather melded, almost silently, into the granular details of its
45
46 plot.
47
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50
51 As noted at the beginning of this essay, *Beautiful Forever*s revolves around an act of self-
52
53 immolation that corresponds to Spivak's account of *sati*. After an argument with Zehrunisa,
54
55 the mother of Abdul (one of Boo's main protagonists), a desperate and somewhat erratic
56
57 one-legged slum dweller called Fatima sets herself on fire:
58
59
60

'What do you see, Noori?'

1
2 'She's pouring Kerosene on her head.'

3 'Don't, Fatima,' Cynthia yelled, trying to make her voice heard over the
4 music. Seconds later, the film song was overwhelmed by a *whoosh*, a small boom,
5 and an eight-year-old screaming, 'My mother! On fire!'

6 [...] They found Fatima thrashing on the floor, smoke pouring off her skin.
7 At her side was a yellow plastic jug of kerosene, along with a vessel of water. She
8 had poured cooking fuel over her head, lit a match, then doused the flames with
9 water. (Boo, 2012: 95)

10
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12
13
14 Whilst this episode invokes Spivak's account of *sati*, this is not a simplistic one-to-one
15 mapping. Fatima is very much an agent in her own self-immolation, and though she sets
16 herself on fire, the subsequent and immediate dousing of herself in water counters what
17 Spivak calls 'the Indian nativist argument [...] "The women actually wanted to die"' (1988,
18 297). Meanwhile, though present as a journalist, Boo's commitment to authorial
19 transparency leads her, at least within the text (but perhaps also without), *not* to intervene
20 during this catastrophic scene: she refuses to 'save' Fatima from her own actions.⁷ Already,
21 then, placing the template of Spivak's account of *sati* over this moment in Boo's plot reveals
22 **Fatima's** refusal—albeit a violent, if not vindictive one—to be subsumed into the
23 philosophical logic of patriarchy and colonialism that, according to Spivak, speak for and
24 across the woman subaltern.
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42 However, the intertextual relationship between *Beautiful Forever* and Spivak's essay
43 becomes more clearly delineated during the legal fall out of Fatima's self-immolation.
44 Though severely injured, Fatima remains conscious for several days after the event, in which
45 time she sets out to cause as much trouble for Zehrunisa, Abdul and their family as she is
46 able. First, she claims that Abdul himself set her alight, a lie that is swiftly refuted by the
47 numerous bystanders that witnessed the event—testimonies from which presumably Boo,
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⁷ We might even speculate that the international visibility that Boo's presence in Annawadi would have signified to its inhabitants might have encouraged Fatima's recourse to such a spectacularly violent act. Such an ethical dilemma raises questions that would need to be thoroughly grounded in more than critical conjecture, however.

1
2 too, compiled her narrative. Acting on the advice of ‘Poornima Paikrao, a special executive
3
4 officer of the government of Maharashtra’, Fatima therefore changes her story slightly to
5
6 bring a different set of prosecutorial legal proceedings against Abdul:
7
8

9
10 As the special executive officer understood, inciting a person to attempt suicide is
11 a serious crime in India. The British had written the criminal code, and their
12 strict anti-suicide provisions were designed to end a historical practice of families
13 encouraging widows onto the funeral pyres of their dead husbands—a practice
14 that relieved the families of the expense of feeding the widows.
15

16 In the new account, Fatima admitted to burning herself, then carefully
17 apportioned the blame for this self-immolation. [...] She didn’t mention
18 Zehrunisa, who had the best possible alibi, having been in the police station when
19 Fatima burned. Instead, she put the weight of her accusation on Abdul.
20

21 Abdul Husain had threatened and throttled her, she said in her statement.
22 Abdul Husain had beaten her up.
23

24 How could you bring down a family if you failed to name the boy who did
25 most of the work? (101-102)
26
27

28 Situated at the book’s midway point is, then, a direct implementation of the British criminal
29 code that was introduced to end the practice of *sati* (‘white men saving brown women from
30 brown men’). The entire preceding narrative leans toward this episode, and its ramifications
31 impact the majority of its remaining plot details—from here, Boo’s protagonist, Abdul,
32 becomes entangled in a corrupt, criminal state bureaucracy in which justice is bought
33 through bribes rather than administered in a courtroom. The law with which Fatima
34 prosecutes Abdul, the *sati* law, is placed centre-stage, and Boo builds the rest of her literary
35 narrative around it.
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48 What should we make of this apparent allusion to one of the most cited paragraphs of
49 Spivak’s essay at the centre of a book fraught with questions around voice, representation
50 and subalternity? ‘This suicide that is not a suicide may be read as a simulacrum of [...]
51 truth-knowledge’ (1988, 300)—the parallels with Spivak’s essay, despite its own sometimes
52 circumlocutory argumentation, are uncanny. Let us look again at Poornima Parkrao, the
53 special executive officer of the government who is ‘commissioned to take the hospital-bed
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1
2 statements of victims' (101). A 'pretty, plump government official [...] with gold-rimmed
3
4 designer glasses', she has been 'dispatched' by 'the police' to obtain 'a more plausible victim
5
6 statement' so that 'a charge against the Husains [would] stick, and money from the family
7
8 [could be] extracted' (101). Poornima obtains Fatima's victim statement thus:

11
12 Gently, she helped Fatima construct a new account of the events that led to her
13
14 burning. Even when Fatima had admitted that she couldn't read over what the
15
16 officer had written, nor sign her own name at the bottom, the woman in the gold-
17
18 rimmed glasses had remained respectful. A thumbprint would be fine. (101)

19
20 So Fatima, in fact, cannot and does not speak. Despite *Beautiful Forever's* para-textual and
21
22 formal claims to the contrary, Boo appears here to reach the same negative conclusion as
23
24 Spivak. But the text does not die in this conclusion; rather, it is in this moment of failure that
25
26 its political work begins. Here, the target of Boo's critique becomes not Fatima, but the
27
28 endemic corruption and ruthless neoliberal opportunism of urban India's wealthier,
29
30 supposedly 'civil' society—police, doctors, lawyers—all of whom are ready to rinse the last
31
32 rupees out of Mumbai's subaltern underclass. Boo dramatises 'the profound irony in
33
34 locating the [subaltern] woman's free will in self-immolation' (Spivak 1988, 303), mobilizing
35
36 a compelling critique not of the individual actions of her subaltern characters, but the
37
38 conditions of neoliberal urban governance in which they find themselves imprisoned.
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45 Tracing this intertextual relationship infuses other moments in the text with a self-
46
47 reflexive meta-commentary around issues of subalternity and the related blending of
48
49 aesthetic and political modes of representation. Crucially, these again pertain to Boo's
50
51 overarching critique of the policies and corruption of neoliberal urban governance.
52
53 Consider one moment in particular from relatively early in the book, when some 'foreign
54
55 journalists' arrive in Annawadi 'to see whether self-help groups were empowering women':
56
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60 government officials sometimes took them to Asha. Her job was to gather random
female neighbours to smile demurely while the officials went on about how their

1
2 collective had lifted them from poverty. [...] Asha understood plenty. She was a chit in a
3 national game of make-believe, in which many of India's old problems—poverty
4 disease, illiteracy, child labour—were being aggressively addressed. Meanwhile the
5 other old problems, corruption and exploitation of the weak by the less weak,
6 continued with minimal interference. (28)
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8
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10 The duping of these 'foreign journalists' by both government officials and the slum dwellers
11 themselves—for a small fee—reveals the saturation of Mumbai's varying layers of social and
12 political relations by the 'neoliberal ethic of intense possessive individualism' noted above
13 (Harvey, 14). But it also contributes to Boo's project of making her own presence, as a
14 foreign journalist, all the more invisible. By including journalists *in* the text, readers are
15 either encouraged to overlook the presence of Boo herself, as a foreign journalist, or to view
16 her as exceptional; the four years she spent in Annawadi distinguishes Boo from these
17 fleeting visitors. In light of the book's wider preoccupation with issues of subalternity, Boo
18 here **invites us** to think through the entangled relationship between her own authorial
19 transparency and ventriloquization of the subaltern voice, on the one hand, and the
20 increasingly violent neoliberalization of urban social and political relations in Mumbai, on
21 the other.
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40 **It is in this very entanglement that** *Beautiful Forever* enters into a critical dialogue with
41 contemporary India's neoliberal urban governance, which D. Asher Ghertner has described
42 as a 'rule by aesthetics'. According to this mode of urban governance, city space is
43 transformed in both the national and international imaginary from the dilapidated,
44 ungoverned and informal infrastructure space of the slum into the bright, gleaming glass-
45 scapes of shopping malls, financial districts and other neoliberal architectural edifices. This
46 'rule by aesthetics' corresponds to what Boo describes as the 'national game of make-believe,
47 in which many of India's old problems—poverty disease, illiteracy, child labour—were being
48 aggressively addressed' (28). Such an effort, Ghertner contends, 'requires the dissemination
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1
2 of a compelling vision of the future [...] and the cultivation of a viewing public that takes
3
4 part in that very vision' (1-2). Urban policy in India has become *about* representation rather
5
6 than that which is represented, cultivating 'new forms of cultural consumption—much of
7
8 which has to do with "seeing"' (see Varughese, 495). Is it any wonder, then, that Boo's book
9
10 congregates thematically around questions of subaltern representation (both political and
11
12 aesthetic), when the urban governance that she herself claims to challenge is itself obsessed
13
14 with who is seen and heard—with who, in fact, is allowed to speak?
15
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19
20 Moments in *Beautiful Forever*s, such as the above quoted encounter with a group of
21
22 foreign journalists, therefore function as meta-textual nods to the knowing reader who is
23
24 acquainted with Spivak's essay. For in the end, Boo's early reviewers excuse her
25
26 | ventriloquizing of subaltern voices because of *the aesthetic qualities of her* undeniably
27
28 compelling literary narrative. As for policies of urban development in neoliberal India, then,
29
30 Boo's project is an aesthetic one. Her claim to non-fictionality is embedded in, and yet tries
31
32 also in part to subvert, the 'truth game' of neoliberalism. This 'truth game' is predicated on
33
34 a set of founding 'truths', which are outlined succinctly by Douglas Spencer in his
35
36 commentary on the architecture of neoliberalism: that 'the economic market is better able
37
38 to calculate, process and spontaneously order society than the state is able to'; 'that the
39
40 competition between individuals facilitated by equality of access to the market is a natural
41
42 state of affairs'; and 'that its truths are a guarantee of liberty' (2).
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49
50 Here we enter into a feedback loop in which the problem of Boo's removal of herself
51
52 | as author/journalist from *Beautiful Forever*s is dramatized in the text's own literary motifs. Boo
53
54 plays neoliberalism's truth game, ventriloquizing *aesthetically* a range of subaltern voices to
55
56 further their *political* representation, even as her commentary details how, as Spivak herself
57
58 has observed, 'access to "citizenship" (civil society)' can become complicit with 'the
59
60

1 mobilizing of subalternity into hegemony' (1999, 309-310; see also Medovoi et al.). If as
2
3
4 Spencer points out, the 'rules of [neoliberalism's] truth game require that the contrivance of
5
6
7 its truths be concealed from the players' (2), Boo's literary motifs lead *Beautiful Forever*,
8
9 despite its ostensible claims to non-fictionality, to break this fundamental rule.
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14 **Conclusion: Can the Subaltern Speak?**

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19 The recurrence of the British colonial law introduced to prevent *sati*—entangled as it is in
20
21 multiple discursive layerings of subalternity, representation and resistance—at the centre of
22
23 Boo's twenty-first-century piece of literary non-fiction testifies to the enduring and markedly
24
25 violent legacy of colonialism, even as this is re-calibrated by new modes of urban
26
27 governance in the neoliberal era. Can the subaltern speak here? *Beautiful Forever*' itself
28
29 suggests that this is perhaps now the wrong question to ask. Rather, we might follow Cheah
30
31 to question instead Spivak's 'understanding of subalternity as a structural space of
32
33 difference that is always excluded by hegemonic regimes of representation as power
34
35 precisely because power now functions through productive incorporation' (208). Boo follows
36
37 Spivak by trying to demonstrate that if there is 'no valid institutional background for
38
39 resistance, it [can] not be recognised' (2010, 223). But this is embedded in the much wider
40
41 constellation of neoliberal urban governance, in which previous routes of political
42
43 representation (*versteten*) have been conflated with aesthetic concerns (*darstellen*). Boo's text,
44
45 and perhaps the genre of creative or literary non-fiction more widely, is undoubtedly
46
47 responding to this regime, and is at times deeply complicit with it. Nevertheless, when read
48
49 closely with one of postcolonial criticism's key questions in mind, *Beautiful Forever* dramatizes
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1
2 this dilemma, allowing the occasion for the most pernicious aspects of subalternity and
3
4 urban governance in the neoliberal city to be unpicked, critiqued and perhaps even resisted.
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6
7

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