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Looking behind Grand Façades: The Ambiguous Visibility of Urban Wealth in *The Unknown Terrorist, Saturday*, and *The White Tiger*

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Abstract: Scholarship on literary renderings of the urban has focussed primarily on poverty and thus contributed to a somewhat one-sided perception of social inequalities. For the sake of a more comprehensive perception of the social asymmetries shaping today's cities, this essay focuses on urban wealth and explores its centrality to three neoliberal city-novels written in the first decade of this century: Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), Richard Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist* (2006), and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008). To explore how these three otherwise quite dissimilar texts represent the perceived "fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and affluence" (Baudrillard 25) in modern cities, the essay considers voices in urban studies critiquing the once optimistic understanding of cities as "wealth machines" (Molotch) and draws on Andrea Brighenti's theoretical deconstruction of the popular equation of visibility with power and invisibility with powerlessness. Conspicuousness, it submits, is only one side of urban wealth; another is, as the three novels under study show, the typical intangibility of capital power, enforced by an intricate interplay of exposure and concealment of urban wealth and itself enforcing social divides in cities.

Keywords: urban wealth, (in)visibility, neoliberal city, social inequality, representation of the urban rich

> Shut your eyes and see . . .
>
> James Joyce qtd. in Brighenti, "Visibility" 323

> . . . what it means to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass.
>
> Saul Bellow qtd. in McEwan

Literary, and especially postcolonial, critique has been engaging with urbanisation—the world's recent "epochal transition" (Davis 1)—in a remarkably one-sided fashion. Despite the discipline's preoccupation with the postcolonial city as today's site par excellence of difference and contestation, it has not sought to develop a view comprehensive enough to include also those profiting most from the truly spectacular rise of the neoliberal capital city in recent decades. Instead it has ensured that the urban poor continue to be seen as the real subjects of colonial history (Yeoh 464) for whose sake the "structuring oppression" and "rigid social and symbolic compulsions" (Ashcroft 54) at work in postcolonial cities need to be studied. This does not mean that its models of the urban are all the same. They vary considerably, ranging from Bill Ashcroft's optimistic conceptualisation of postcolonial cities as "smooth space[s]" (48) in which "the rigidities of national doctrine" (48) are contested by "the unruly reality of the transnation" (51) to Mike Davis' pessimistic projection of a "planet of slums" (7) brought forth by the rapid "over-urbanization" of the "Third World" (16). In line with Henri Lefebvre's famous insistence on everyone's right to the city, Davis identifies the squatter as "the major human symbol, whether as victim or hero, of the Third World city" (90). Ashcroft, in turn, attests that the urban poor—especially refugees, as the latest arrivals in today's postcolonial cities—have revolutionary potential; he argues that it is they who will militate successfully against existing inequalities and render "the very stability of the nation state 'precarious', at least to politicians" (49).

Although reading literary explorations of the contemporary urban with a focus on poverty is undoubtedly productive, I nonetheless want to take a different approach and recall that the raison d'être of modern cities is, and always has been, the creation and accumulation of material wealth. To this end, I probe fictional representations of the urban subaltern's Other—the winners of the contemporary scramble for urban capital—in the conviction that to ignore the power of urban financial elites not only perpetuates a particular way of seeing socioeconomic inequalities in today's cities but sustains and enforces such inequalities. The essay begins by reflecting on the academe's implication in a neoliberal politics of subterfuge (symptomatic of which is a consistent non-recognition of extreme wealth) before comparing three novels with regard to how they map social inequalities in the cities they portray and in so doing address the specific visibility and invisibility of different social groups as indices of either their power or their powerlessness. The three novels in question are Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), Richard Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist* (2006), and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008). Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's notion of the hypervisibility of urban wealth and Andrea Brighenti's model of visibility as a social category, I identify crucial analogies between these three texts and thus demonstrate how, despite considerable differences, they are similarly informed by an acute awareness of the need to narrate the stories of urban underclasses not in isolation but as embedded in a wider web of social relations that extends to and includes urban elites. I show that in casting such webs, the three novels invite us to see urban spaces as exerting a gravitational pull away from poverty toward wealth and thus perpetuating the injustices that underpin life in cities.

The resistance of the urban settings in *The Unknown Terrorist*, *Saturday*, and *The White Tiger* to social transformation is not at variance with the dynamism and vitality the authors ascribe them. Rather, the social stasis that marks people's lives in McEwan's London, Flanagan's Sydney, and Adiga's Delhi and Bangalore is the result of these cities' unending production of movement, or in Andy Merrifield's terms, of a life-force "going nowhere very fast," simultaneously causing "active creation and creative destruction" and producing "undergrowth as well as overgrowth," "abandonment as well as overcrowding," and "underdevelopment as well as overdevelopment" (x). As a feature specific to the neoliberal city, this duality was not a concern of earlier urban researchers. Though aware of inequalities in urban spaces, they still trusted that the "urban process under capitalism" (Harvey 59) could be steered in such a way that it was a fair one, benefitting all citizens. Indeed, in the 1950s Bert Hoselitz still believed that the "generative cities" of the Global North, in contrast to the "parasitic cities" of the Global South, were not ruled by non-working elites squandering public assets but by sophisticated structures facilitating even resource allocation. Likewise, Ray Pahl, while critical of Keynesian welfarism and its autocratic forms of city governance, did not doubt that fair wealth distribution was possible even in the Fordist city (Mayer 170–71). In his 1975 essay "Whose City?" he emphatically rejected the argument that inequalities were a necessary price to pay for growth. A year later Harvey Molotch published "The City as a Growth Machine," which, while criticizing a new entrepreneurialism turning American cities into engines of wealth production, insisted that the "evils of bigness" (327) rampant in modern cities were only a transient phenomenon and that city managements were bound to return to local policies and to serving local populations rather than bow to business interests (328). A similar optimism informed David Harvey's prognosis that activist initiatives in European cities in the 1980s would bring the "roving calculus of profit" (253) to a halt and revive an urbanism "appropriate for the human species" (58). "Those were heady days, to be sure," Pahl recalled in 2001, "but, with hindsight, one can be nostalgic for our enthusiasm and hopeful idealism, respectful of our anger and perhaps a little sad for our naïveté" ("Market Success" 779).

This attitude changed under the impact of neoliberalism. A far more sceptical view of cities as justice-enabling systems began to take hold in the later 1980s when scholarly and public attention turned to the injustices that occurred as a result of cultural, ethnic, and gender differences. As Nancy Fraser has repeatedly argued since, the resultant neglect of questions of class was above all in the interest of an economy that had (and still has) a vested interest in diffusing public debates about issues of class, social inequality, and economic justice. Pahl was one of the first to point out that the "persistent enthusiasm to discuss poverty in relation to specific milieu" ("Market Success" 881) was distracting public attention from the fast increasing power of urban elites and hindering an understanding of how extreme immiseration in cities is causally related to the aggregation of extreme urban wealth. In fact, warnings of exploding populations and worsening poverty even encouraged the belief that the wellbeing of all citizens and especially of the poor depended on the ability of their governments to attract potent investors. While it thus became possible to think of cities as owning the wealth of billionaire residents, one could conveniently overlook that, in actual fact, cities were, to an ever-larger extent, owned by their richest residents. Seeing this, Pahl warned that successful cities were "dangerous beasts,"

> not for what they do to the poor but for the opportunities they provide for the rich to cause damage by drawing themselves further apart from the rest of society. Thus we come full circle: matters relating to 'Whose city?' and social justice relate much more significantly to the rich than to the poor. The glamorous wealth creators in finance, IT, the media and so forth are quintessentially urban in style and location. Their galloping incomes and bonuses inflate property prices and services; they are more likely to use up more energy, to patronize private health and educational provision, and in a multitude of ways encourage social polarization and disrupt social cohesion. The degree to which the rich are restrained by fiscal policy is probably the key to variations in social inequality within and between societies. ("Market Success" 881–82)

In 2004, Jonathan V. Beaverstock, Philip Hubbard, and John Rennie Short reiterated Pahl's warning, insisting that without a "careful specification of the global, national and local geographies of the super-rich we will be unable to make much progress in understanding the iniquitous impacts of global capitalism" (406). Yet it took until after the global financial crisis of 2007–08 that researchers, notably in the fields of economics, geography, and sociology, came to agree that the "gentrification of world cities and the 'gentrifying global elites' have . . . become a global problem" (Lees qtd. in Koh et al. 18). Nevertheless, in 2014 Merrifield still felt the need to plead for "a deeper insight into what's happening to our urban world, how it is used as an accumulation strategy by wealthy, powerful people, how they produce spatial and social inequalities" (xii). "All this," he opined, "might equip people with a capacity to think; to think through what we're up against, to channel one's anger and rage of knowing" (xii). Returning to Pahl's question, "Whose city?" he phrased his own "rage of knowing" with singular bluntness:

> [T]he answer, perhaps, is pretty clear: it's the parasites' city; their progeny is a species we can now label the parasitic city. A parasite, remember, is an organism that feeds off a larger 'host' organism, an uninvited diner at the lodge who doesn't pay for their grub. Parasites chomp away at the common-wealth the world over, eating away inside the social body, stripping people's assets, foreclosing homes, dispossessing value rather than contributing anything towards its creation. In parasitic cities, social wealth is consumed through conspicuously wasteful enterprises, administered by parasitic elites, our very own aristocracy (the 1%) who squander generative capacity by thriving exclusively from unproductive activities: they roll dice on the stock market, profit from unequal exchanges, guzzle at the public trough; they filch rents and treat land as a pure financial and speculative asset, as a form of fictitious capital. (109)

Merrifield's outspokenness stands in sharp contrast to the restraint exercised by other urbanists who insist—as, for instance, Ray Forrest, Sin Yee Koh, and Bart Wissink, the editors of *Cities and the Super-Rich* (2017), do—that the aim of their work is neither to blame nor to glamourize the new urban affluent. Indeed, they expressly distance themselves from what they consider "an uncritical tendency to accord unlimited agency to economic elites and to exaggerate the effects of their assumed agency" (279). The super-rich, they hold, "may have acquired massive amounts of wealth, but they do not necessarily operate in circumstances of their own choosing or construction" (279). Instead they deserve to be seen as victims of "a complex interplay of intermediary institutions and changing structural conditions" (279). This is in line with Saskia Sassen's reasoning that socioeconomic inequality is the product of "complex assemblages of multiple elements" (14), of intricate systems whose workings we still do not understand properly. Accordingly, Sassen recommends thinking not of "predatory elites" but of "predatory formations," of "a mix of elites and systemic capacities with finance as key enabler, that push toward complete concentration" (3) rather than "a collection of powerful individuals and firms that make decisions with major consequences for people and places worldwide" (13). "There are decision makers at each step of the process," Sassen concedes, but one should never forget that their decisions are made from within the "sticky web of systemic logics" (78) in which they themselves are caught.

Such an overtly poststructuralist disavowal of individual agency and personal responsibility no longer seems tenable in a time in which individual billionaires can claim the stage of world politics and act their part at will and in defiance of any logics; in which the combined wealth of as few as twenty-six individuals equals that of the poorer half of the world population (Elliott); in which two individuals, Bill and Melinda Gates, are able to pay off the debt of an entire nation state (Nigeria) to another (Japan) (Berger); and in which a group of only eighty-three billionaires can confidently assume that a new wealth tax will be able to curb the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic (Neade). In such a time, it is imperative that scholarly inquiries into social justice be based on a clearer sense of redistributive agency and responsibility (Fraser, "Abnormal Justice") and cease constructing economic power obliquely, if not euphemistically, as a "sticky web of systemic logics." Otherwise, scholarship might inadvertently become complicit in the typically neoliberal refusal to see wealth accumulation as a problem causally related to poverty.

Paradoxical as it may seem, this particular way of looking is enforced by modern cities themselves, which, according to Brighenti, have become sites of visual enjoyment, rich with spectacles of abundance and displays of goods whose conspicuous presence has long replaced that of its makers, just as the presence of leisure and consumption have replaced that of work and production in cities. Accordingly, Brighenti likens the lure of modern cities to that of the cinema—already for Walter Benjamin an inherently urban mode of entertainment that provides a form of distraction (*Zerstreuung*) akin to the flâneur's experience of ever-moving visual impressions (Brighenti, *Visibility in Social Theory* 132). Thus the specific visibility of the neoliberal capital city has come to surpass the "fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance" that Baudrillard identifies as the quintessence of Western modernity (Baudrillard 25). The ostentatious presence urban wealth claims today amounts to a veritable hyper-visibility, paradoxically fulfilling the dual functions of, on the one hand, demonstrating and asserting capital power and, on the other, distracting from it and the ever more intangible realities of its production. It is to these twin ends that materialisations of urban wealth work much like façades, attracting and arresting the gazes of their beholders, inciting curiosity and awe, and at the same time concealing what they contain and envelope. In this way, the surface glamour of urban wealth helps ensure that modern cities form "plutocratic cloud[s]" (Atkinson 1304) that allow their richest inhabitants to "embrace street life to the extent that it is vibrant, but also dense enough to conceal the overt presence of wealth" (1313) such that their near physical co-presence with other citizens can remain "largely un-punctured or impeded by the problems manufactured by inequality" (1304).

Such screening of the super-rich, however, is not where the interplay of exposure and concealment ends that produces and sustains the ambiguous hyper-visibility of urban wealth. The fashionable industry of place branding contributes to it in multiple ways—for instance, by advancing forever new rankings of the world's "wealthiest" (Chang), "richest" (Dhiraj), "most prosperous" (Plunkett), "most economically powerful" (Florida), "most successful" (Dyer), "most expensive" (Jezard) "hub[s] of everything" (Rimba) and giving special recognition to those habitats most "beloved by the super-rich" ("Top Ten"). The iconography used in the promotion of the winners of such contests is remarkable for its consistent omission of urban populations. Images of seemingly uninhabited spaces boasting expansive skylines, grand squares and avenues, spectacular street fronts, and lavishly restored historic buildings appeal to an awareness of the urban as a set of material assets. In their complete emptiness, they await acquisition and occupation by whoever crystallises as the best bidder. Thus, at a point in the history of capitalism in which capital flows have lost all visible materiality, cities occupy collective imaginaries more than ever as concrete, intensely visible, palpably real nodes of capital flows. They are the capitalist dream come true even against the odds of economic instability.

Critics of urban neoliberalism routinely address these odds, offering evidence of growing impoverishment more often than not with the declared aim of undoing the invisibility of "the underclass, *le peuple sans visage* who inhabit the slums of the world[,] . . . the unseen, the excluded" (Brighenti, "Visibility" 330). As Brighenti points out, to assume that visibility will improve their situation is to ignore Michel Foucault's work on surveillance and visibility as a trap, as well as Benjamin's projection of the shop keeper and the private buyer as public citizens typically indifferent to being seen—in fact, intent on hiding themselves and the goods they sell or covet and transforming them into personal fetishes cherished in secret ("Visibility" 336). As a phenomenon of the early twentieth century, these two figures' eschewal of recognition may still signify a relatively benign form of clandestineness, not yet indebted to the tradition of the "*arcana imperii*" and its exploitation of visibility as a means of harnessing and exercising power. Since the crisis of 2007–08, however, "what really counts is the obscure nucleus where things are disposed, the unknown chamber where the programmer is drawing the algorithm" (338). When processes of capital accumulation have become more arcane than ever, we "must admit," Brighenti asserts, "that power does not rest univocally with seeing or with being seen. Rather it is the style in which seeing and being seen take place that carries the most important consequences. The exercise of power is always an exercise in activating selective in/visibilities" (339). By locating power neither in the act of seeing nor in the state of being seen, Brighenti opens up new ways of thinking about agency as the ability to engineer and control both visibility and invisibility.

With this alternative to the routine perception of visibility as power and of invisibility as powerlessness in mind, I consider the politics of (in)visibilisation at work in *The White Tiger*, *Saturday*, and *The Unknown Terrorist* and pay special attention to how Adiga's narrator, the entrepreneur Balram Halwai, McEwan's protagonist, the celebrated neurosurgeon Henry Perowne, and Flanagan's seemingly marginal character, the millionaire Frank Moretti, as modern incarnations of Benjamin's shopkeeper and collector, partake in and own the cities in which they live precisely by—often more unconsciously than consciously—activating (in)visibility. My analysis will depart from readings of *Saturday* and *The Unknown Terrorist* that are focussed on their complexity and limitations as post-9/11 fictions[1] in order to show how the novels work as broader than usual portrayals of urban societies—portrayals that include the urban rich and criticise their place in the urban fabric, which is one not hermetically sealed off from but inevitably related to other, not so rich or poor citizens. Because of the proximity in which poor and rich citizens live it comes as no surprise that the great divide between them is constantly crossed. Yet as this crossing is into the habitats of the rich it marks a transgression or violation of established protocols of coexistence. In each novel this infringement of the otherwise well-protected homes of the affluent ends in a "catastrophe," the world's indifference to which ultimately urges the sobering conclusion that nothing will change.

The same pattern may be traced in *The White Tiger*, which, as a novel about national and regional rather than international terror, manages to throw into even sharper relief the divides tearing Delhi's and Bangalore's social textures. The narrator's tale is a rags-to-riches story of his "rise *into* social mobility, and thus, in a sense, out of subalternism" (Ratti 230; emphasis in original). Despite or because of the brutality with which he achieves his goal, his account is often interpreted by critics as one of "resistance, heroism, and even 'goodness' in the wake of class and caste oppression" (Ratti 230) and even understood "as an illustration of Fanon's theory that violence is a force that frees the colonized from oppression" (Schotland 12).[2] Such readings ignore that the narrator of *The White Tiger* does not, as Manav Ratti claims, tell his story "from the perspective of the poor" (229) but relates it from that of a successful entrepreneur who has reached his goal with ruthless brutality. In a recent essay, Michael K. Walonen chooses a different lens that allows him to examine Adiga's portrayal of India's elite as a corrupt cohort opposing innovation and economic growth and "parasitically benefitting from the scleroticness of the local socioeconomic structure rather than participating in any sort of dynamism" (251–52). Adiga's critique, Walonen argues, needs to be seen not as one of poverty but of inequality and *The White Tiger* less as a macabre indictment of subalternity in modern India than a text that debunks the myth of entrepreneurship.

Though not completely unpredictable, the fact that all three novels ultimately negate the possibility of social transformation comes as a surprise as it does not follow logically from the pervasive atmosphere of imminent change that propels the protagonists through their cities and causes them to feel an acute sense of connectedness with the world beyond, or what Roland Robertson describes as an "intensified consciousness of the world as a whole" (9) and regards as the defining feature of life in the postmetropolis. A Russian aircraft spectacularly catching fire in the night sky over London, mass demonstrations against the 2003 UK and US invasion of Iraq, the Chinese Premier poised to pay a state visit to Delhi, and a bomb scare at the Homebush Olympic Stadium hold individuals and crowds in thrall. Yet it would be wrong to assume that the palpable "spatio-temporal compression of the world" results, as Edward W. Soja's work suggests it should, in an intensified sense of change in the form at least of cultural diversification (41). Even so, critical studies of *Saturday* and *The Unknown Terrorist* focus above all on McEwan's and Flanagan's depictions of London and Sydney, respectively, as cities pervaded by a collective fear of invasion by an unknown Other.[3] No less palpable than this fear is an uneasy awareness, in both novels, of a vast *social* distance between rich and poor citizens that remains insurmountable despite the geographic proximity in which they live. In this respect, *Saturday* and *The Unknown Terrorist*, which at first glance bear little resemblance to *The White Tiger*, certainly lend themselves to a comparison with Adiga's novel, which, in turn, has been discussed extensively for the social disparities it describes, yet not for its intricate play with the theme of (in)visibility that aligns it with McEwan's and Flanagan's depictions of urban wealth.

In all three novels this play on (not) seeing and being seen raises crucial questions of empathy, belonging, and social cohesion that are typically passed over by the protagonists as well as the people around them. What we get to see is what Don Mitchell calls the "post-justice city," in which traditional ties with one's fellow beings have been replaced by other far more tenuous affective bonds made conceivable by globalisation. Henry Perowne in *Saturday*, for example, identifies not with other Londoners but with the passengers he believes to be travelling on the burning airplane he watches from the privacy of his bedroom very early one Saturday morning. The closeness he feels in this moment to absolute strangers provides a meaningful contrast to the distance he senses later in a face-to-face encounter with a fellow citizen different from him only by virtue of class. Likewise, while the wealthy entrepreneur Balram Halawi in *The White Tiger* eagerly pursues (or professes to pursue) a confidential correspondence with the Chinese Premier, he shuns any kind of connection with other Indians, severs all ties with his family, and withdraws into total isolation. By the same token the pole-dancer Gina Davies in *The Unknown Terrorist* experiences intimacy only during a one-night stand with a foreigner from the Middle East, whereas her relationship even to the most longstanding of her super-rich clients remains one of professional aloofness. For them, she is never the lover she becomes in the few hours she spends with her fleeting acquaintance. As in *The White Tiger* and *Saturday*, in *The Unknown Terrorist* it is not cultural difference but social inequality that separates citizens despite the physical proximity in which they live.

In fact, spatial closeness forces the characters in each novel to reenact the divisions their cities impose on their citizenry. Knowing their place, they move through the city along clearly defined thresholds of visibility and invisibility, forever renewing their compliance with the dictate of what Michele Micheletti calls "*individualized collective action*" (xi; emphasis in original)—streamlined behaviour performed under the illusion that one is acting by choice, when in actual fact one is trapped in a fruitless search for choices. As Matthew Eagleton-Pierce writes, "[i]t is almost as if crowds of consumers are crying out to be led towards a particular choice, even if each prefers to be known as 'an individual': we're all together and 'we're all individuals'" (2). For a moment, even the otherwise aloof Henry Perowne seems overcome by such "community 'we feeling'" (Molotch 314) when reflecting on the opulence displayed in the shops he visits in central London. The future, he believes, "will look back on us as gods, certainly in this city, lucky gods blessed by supermarket cornucopias, torrents of accessible information, warm clothes that weigh nothing, extended life-spans, wondrous machines" (McEwan 77). He is convinced that "[s]uch prosperity, whole emporia dedicated to cheeses, ribbons, Shaker furniture, is protection of a sort. This commercial wellbeing is robust and will defend itself to the last. It isn't rationalism that will overcome the religious zealots, but ordinary shopping and all that it entails. . . . Rather shop than pray" (127). London's conspicuous prosperity, he is certain, is a guarantee for social peace.

Petr Chalupský compares Henry's complacency to that "of Zygmunt Bauman's 'stroller'—the prototypical urban gaper" who enjoys "the power of projecting and directing other people's fates from the anonymous safety of his house" (28). This is not at all how the young Balram experiences New Delhi in *The White Tiger*. For him, "commercial wellbeing" is still a distant reality. As a poor man, he is barred from the shopping malls his employer, Mr. Ashok, likes to frequent. Even so, he contrives a way of entering one of them. One day he decides to dress like Mr. Ashok and, for once looking just like a rich man, manages to pass through security and see with his own eyes the spectacle of conspicuous consumption his master enjoys every day. "I was conscious of a perfume in the air, of golden light, of cool, air-conditioned air, of people in T-shirts and jeans who were eyeing me strangely," he recalls. "I saw an elevator going up and down that seemed made of pure golden glass. I saw shops with walls of glass, and huge photos of handsome European men and women hanging on each wall" (Adiga 129). It is more the space itself than the goods displayed in it that fascinates Balram; and it is the desire not to buy and possess but to be seen by his own kind as part of this forbidden realm of abundance that suddenly overcomes him. "If only the other drivers could see me now!" he recalls thinking years later, after he has managed to become as rich as Mr. Ashok and, like him, has learnt to manage his visibility with care (129). In fact, Balram, the narrator, abhors attention even more than Henry Perowne and Frank Moretti do. Having murdered his master, he must shun recognition and stays hidden in his office throughout the novel, although not without limelight of a sort: he repeatedly asks readers to picture him seated under the largest of his many chandeliers, invisible to the world he can no longer trust yet brilliantly illuminated while recounting his life, often with a mind to throw up his arms and holler, “I’ve made it!” (Adiga 275).

In the scattered light of his chandelier, which is “full of small diamond shaped glass pieces just like the ones they used to show in the films of the 1970s” (24), Balram has reached crystallisation and fixity. As the owner of a successful taxi service, he no longer needs to chauffeur anyone across Delhi, let alone try to learn from his rich passengers by watching their every move closely in the rear-view mirror. His position is that of a predator, a white tiger, luminous but nonetheless unseen. So is that of Frank Moretti, a former race-car driver who has garnered immense wealth from compensation payments for an accident that left him paralysed. Like Henry Perowne’s elegant Regency house in Fitzrovia, or the Ashok clan’s bright apartment thirteen floors above New Delhi, Moretti’s stylishly refurbished Federation Mansion on Manly Bay is an expression of both his celebrity status and the perfect sedentariness he has attained. Screened from the public eye, he can indulge in his own ways of seeing the world from a distance through a collection of artefacts—mediations of human nature he has no desire to experience directly. It includes a “cabinet of human comedy” (Flanagan 132) that contains all manner of souvenirs of massacres and genocides from around the world: a pair of worn-out shoes from a mass grave, an old poison gas container, a Beretta used in Srebrenica. “I don’t give a shit, really,” Moretti volunteers, unasked. “Unpronounceable people, ugly places. . . . But I like the story and so I keep the gun” (134). Moretti’s understatement fails to conceal the sense of superiority he derives from showing his collection to Gina as proof of his detachment not just from the buzz of the city but from the flow of time and global events at large. To enjoy such detachment along with a fair dose of proprietorial pride, *Saturday*’s Henry Perowne likes to retire to his private library where he too may find the world stored in a conveniently mediated form that does not as yet include the immediate present and what he abhors of it: political activism and his children’s dilettante attempts at artistic expression. Oblivion comes even more easily to Balram’s employer, who can see the lights of Gurgaon’s malls at all times, even in broad daylight, from his balcony on the thirteenth floor of the gigantic, shiny, and new Buckingham Towers, a landmark in the most expensive district of Delhi. The brightness outside matches the brilliance inside the apartment, which, furnished with white soft leather sofas and huge framed photographs of Mr. Ashok's two white Pomeranians, Cuddles and Puddles, forms a grotesque contrast to the dark, filthy, vermin-infested cells in the basement where Ashok's servants wait to be called upstairs and ordered to cook and clean for their master.

On such occasions, Balram follows the unspoken rule that he should never sit down or pause in the apartment. The right to fixity belongs to the rich. Even when there is no other work for Balram, he has to play badminton with Ashok's wife or kneel before Stork, Ashok's father, and massage the old man's feet in hot water. For all his busyness, he remains as invisible to his employers as Gina Davies does to her clients who pay to see not her but her naked body in motion. On her weekly visits to Moretti, her eyes never really meet his. While he watches her strip to Chopin's "Nocturne in G Minor," she allows her gaze to travel beyond her client's face and linger on a Miró painting on the wall. It is an ironical sign of its extreme value that it is gathering cobwebs while Gina keeps dancing for three hundred dollars a visit in the hope that one day she can stop doing so and, with the money she has saved, buy herself an apartment and settle down. She never does, but until the moment of her sudden premature death she must keep moving, almost as if doomed to do so—like Baxter, in *Saturday*, with whom Henry has an ugly altercation after their cars collide. Baxter and his irate friends are on the brink of beating up the neurosurgeon when Henry realises that Baxter is showing the first signs of Huntington's disease. Speaking to Baxter about his condition—the tremors of his hands and face, "uncontrollable movements that will eventually turn into "helpless jitters" and "overwhelm him, render him too absurd for the street" (McEwan 211)—Henry regains control over the situation and escapes feeling as smug as he does when winning a game of squash against his friend or an argument with his daughter.

In the wider context of globalisation and international terrorism in which McEwan, Flanagan, and Adiga situate their narratives, such victories seem insignificant. Crowds in *Saturday* protesting against their government's plans of military intervention abroad, mobs in *The White Tiger* angered by state corruption, and a citizenry in *The Unknown Terrorist* thrown into panic by warnings of an imminent terrorist attack remain naturally oblivious to such discrete enforcements of power and the injustices this power produces in their own neighbourhoods. And thus it comes as a surprise to Gina Davies when she wakes up one morning and learns from a news report on television that the police suspect her of consorting with terrorists. On her subsequent search for somewhere to hide, she experiences Sydney as an archetypal "punitive neoliberal city" (Herbert and Brown 755) in which ascriptions of culpability are arbitrary and public condemnations are irrational and as a rule do not concern its wealthiest inhabitants. This becomes crystal clear to her when, in her despair, she seeks out Moretti, hoping that the privacy in which she has always offered him her services has created a bond strong enough to invoke his compassion and willingness to help her. Moretti thinks otherwise and, unmoved by her plight, turns her away. For several hours Gina continues a frenzied escape across Sydney but then surrenders to the visibility she has acquired, walks into the nightclub where she used to work, and, while everyone is watching, shoots the TV presenter responsible for her sudden notoriety and then herself. Moretti's part in her destruction is easily overlooked, and her exchanges with him can be easily mistaken for little more than short distractions, minor interruptions in the fast escalation of events, brief interludes witnessed by the reader but undisclosed to the public who would not have an interest in them given the much more titillating spectacle provided by Gina's bloody undoing.

Like Moretti, Henry Perowne gets away with near-murder in *Saturday*. He also finds his sheltered private life unexpectedly invaded by a city-dweller in distress. His unannounced visitor is Baxter. By the time Henry opens the door to him, he has already forgotten the altercation he had with the man only a few hours earlier and is all the more surprised by the anger and aggression Baxter vents after forcing himself into Henry's house and taking Henry's family hostage at knife-point. The invasion threatens to culminate in Baxter raping Henry's daughter but takes a quite different turn when Baxter demands that she read from a collection of poetry and Daisy complies. Her recital of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" has a powerful effect on Baxter, which the reader—by now biased in Daisy's favour—is tempted to interpret as a catharsis of sorts despite the fact that what really confounds Baxter is Daisy's claim that she has written the poem herself. Her deception is never revealed but instead is followed by an even more consequential one contrived by her father. Under the pretext that he has some data on a new treatment for Huntington's disease in his office, Henry lures Baxter out of the room and up the stairs, only to seize an opportune moment and, with the help of his son, push the man off balance. The moment

> seems to unfold and luxuriously expand, when all goes silent and still, when Baxter is entirely airborne, suspended in time, looking directly at Henry with an expression, not so much of terror, as dismay. And Henry thinks he sees in the wide brown eyes a sorrowful accusation of betrayal. He, Henry Perowne, possesses so much—the work, money, status, the home, above all, the family . . . and he has done nothing, given nothing to Baxter who has so little that is not wrecked by his defective gene, and who is soon to have even less. (McEwan 227–28)

There is no need, though, for Henry to worry. Baxter lands at the bottom of the stairs, severely injured and unconscious. The police are called, yet when asked by Henry's guilt-ridden son whether they may have committed a crime in pushing Baxter, the officer only laughs and, touching Baxter with the tip of his shoe, remarks, "I doubt if he'll be making a complaint. And we certainly won't be" (231).

The trajectories toward disaster devised in *Saturday* and *The Unknown Terrorist* bear a striking resemblance to the course of events that lead to Balram's flight from Delhi to Bangalore in *The White Tiger*. In this novel, too, the stress the narrative places on the unruliness of the abject populating the post-justice cities of Delhi and Bangalore distracts the reader's attention from the destructive power held by the rich ruling these hotbeds of corruption and crime. It seems to be a natural and indeed all too logical consequence of the state of anarchy into which city life has degenerated that when individual rich citizens are implicated in the deaths of poorer subjects there is no one to hold them accountable and no one to request retribution for the damage they have caused. In this absence of any arbiter of justice, Adiga's reader becomes sole witness to a gruesome closet drama. No one else learns about the evening when Pinky Madam, Mr. Ashok's wife, asks to take over driving duties from Balram and, in a state of complete drunkenness, runs over and kills a child. The next day, the Ashok clan forces Balram to take responsibility for the accident and sign a corresponding confession. This moment marks a turning point in Balram's life; he is expelled from the family of which he thought that he had become a part. Consumed by disappointment, he begins to plot Ashok's murder, eventually carries out his plan, and flees with a bag stacked with banknotes. Indifferent to the revenge his employer's family will take on his own, he settles in Bangalore and becomes a rich entrepreneur. All of this is possible because, in the lawless city he leaves behind, the aforementioned death of the child is never reported and, in the equally lawless city in which he hides from Ashok's henchmen, he can become an arbiter of justice. When one of his employees kills a boy, he finds it easy to console him and declare that "it was not his fault. Not mine either. Our outsourcing companies are so cheap that they force their taxi operators to promise them an impossible number of runs every night. To meet such schedules, we have to drive recklessly; we have to keep hitting and hurting people on the roads. It's a problem every taxi operator in this city faces. Don't blame *me*" (Adiga 267; emphasis in original). In the end, the wrongdoers in *The Unknown Terrorist*, *Saturday*, and *The White Tiger* literally get away with murder and disappear into the sticky web of apparent plausibilities. Blame is conveniently shifted from their actions to social (and personal) circumstances: Gina's own "classic profile of someone profoundly emotionally damaged" (Flanagan 288), Baxter's physical affliction, and the squalor in which Balram had to grow up. In each case, the closure reached proves profoundly unsatisfactory and the ethical dilemma posed remains unsolved. Nonetheless, Ratti is convinced that *The White Tiger* manages to displace readers' reductive reading of subaltern justice and, drawing on Wai Chee Dimock's work, asserts that literary justice can produce an "image of justice . . . rendered back to us, most often with a shock of recognition" (243). Yet what kind of recognition can a focus on the poor and the injustices they suffer and perpetrate—admittedly in despair—produce as long as it distracts from the rich and the brutal injustices they commit? What kind of recognition do Balram Halwai's callous final words produce if the reader overlooks, as Ratti does, that they are spoken not by a subaltern but by a super-rich entrepreneur in hiding? "Even if my chandeliers come crashing down to the floor," Balram declares, "even if they throw me in jail[,] . . . even if they make me walk the wooden stairs to the hangman's noose—I'll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master's throat" (Adiga 276). This is hyperbole, we are prepared to think; this is satire, we want to believe; this is fiction, we may tell ourselves; and, suspending our disbelief, we may succumb to the temptation to overlook that what McEwan, Flanagan, and Adiga's tales of capital cities have us see are the dark shadows of urban wealth rendered almost invisible by constant illumination.

Notes

1 See, for example, Colombino, Foley, Gauthier, Carr, Sheckels, and Wilson.

2 See Khor for her discussion of subaltern agency and underdevelopment as the cause of inequality in *The White Tiger*.

3 See, for example, Foley, Butler, Carr, and Webb.

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