TODAY'S MUMBAI
AS PHOTO-TEXTUALITY

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ABSTRACT • The aim of this essay is to enquire into representations of the city of Mumbai whose urban development has produced images of heaven and hell, sometimes within enclosed boundaries. What is interesting to tackle here is its aestheticisation in a photo-book which presents itself as 'image-text' (Mitchell, Stafford), *Bombay/Mumbai. Immersions* (2013). Not differently from what happens in other cities, such as Cape Town, for instance, here considered only very briefly as counterpoint, the Indian megalopolis's development has produced disconnected images of urban heaven and hell. The photo-text here discussed presents itself as a composite narrative of words and photos, as the product of the cooperation between an Indian woman poet, Priya Sarukkai Chabria, and an English photographer now based in France, Christopher Taylor. Last but certainly not least in a long sequence of urban photo-texts, this new project requires the reader's attention in order to try and clarify its role, its meaning, its function, its ethical/aesthetic responsibilities.

KEYWORDS • Mumbai, photo-text, photo essay, urban studies, slums, adivasi

There are cities whose birth, history of development, architecture and urban planning brought them on the verge of an abyss where heaven and hell coexist in an inextricable bond that traps people in economic, social and racial cages. One such city is Cape Town. The white city with its breath-taking landscape placed between ocean and mountains is the counterpoint to the still existing townships, separated not only spatially, but above all economically, socially and racially from the other half city.

With the fractured image above on the background, showing on the left side the white Cape Town and on the right side the black Cape Town, Yazir Henry, ex-freedom fighter of the Umkonto we Sizwe in South Africa, is nowadays lecturing around the world to present us all (the Western audience) with the bill: "The Cost of Forgiveness".[1] Since his articulate and lucidly passionate speech is available on the web, suffice it here to present a brief summary, which anyway will never be able to convey his deeply felt message. A message that derives from a life dedicated to the fight for freedom, a fight that he, as innumerable others, carries inscribed in every single cell of his own body and of his own mind, for he had been imprisoned under apartheid, interrogated and indelibly psychically wounded.

Yazir Henry affirms that South Africa has slightly changed from the past, that most black people and their communities still live a life of abjection, are still deprived of dignity, social services, civil facilities, schooling and working opportunities. He insists that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has "miraculously" managed to transport the country towards democracy, avoiding plunging it into an atrocious civil war, yet it has not allowed the citizens, victims of apartheid at all levels, any real reparation. What people have been reconciled to, the truth of their lives, what they have forgiven the perpetrators, both nationally and internationally, what they have fought for with bodies and weapons is the inequality, the imbalance, the asymmetry of the *status quo ante* which persists indelibly, which still preserves or continues to produce that split city, where heaven and hell are irreconcilable.[2]

Another such split city is Bombay / Mumbai, whose development has produced a similarly disconnected image of heaven and hell, sometimes adjacent, both enclosed within circumscribed boundaries. The first objective of this essays is testing notions of heaven and hell through a recent publication: *Bombay / Mumbai. Immersions* (2013) by the poet Priya Sarukkai Chabria and the photographer Christopher Taylor.[3]

The second aim is trying to define the genre of this multimedia text. This photo-book is presented as a "photographic essay" to borrow the famous definition coined by W.J.T. Mitchell for works where texts accompany photographic images in a cooperative spirit, although it is necessary here to determine more precisely the meaning and status of this cooperation between the two artists and the two media: words and images, texts and photographs (Mitchell 1994).

This 'photo–text' (Stafford, 2010: 1) is the product of the cooperation between an Indian woman poet, Priya Sarukkai Chabria, and a British photographer, now based in France, Christopher Taylor. At least apparently, this type of collaboration could be labelled as "collaborative photo essay," according to a classification that Andy Stafford produces following Mitchell: "in which contemporaneously a writer works with a photographer" (Stafford, 2010: 6).

Mitchell defines the subgenre of the photographic essay as a "literal conjunction of photographs and texts – usually united by a documentary purpose, often political, journalistic, sometimes scientific" (Mitchell, 1994: 285-286). He also includes cases in which the texts dominate the images, that is, they become predominant and enforce a metadiscoursive criticism on the photos: they describe them, discuss them, and question them critically. Thus, paradoxically, Mitchell sees the highest degree of cooperation when the texts subvert, question, criticise or deconstruct the accompanying images. Or, in other words, he limits cooperation to a

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[1] One such occasion is Yazir Henry's speech "The Cost of Forgiveness", at the Ford School, University of Michigan, (Ford School 2007). See also, Henry (2012).

[2] A similar view of South Africa is provided by the docufilm *Nelson Mandela: The Myth and Me,* by film director Khalo Matabane (2013).

[3] Sarukkai Chabria, Taylor (2013); further page references will be cited in the text.

condition where the two media remain independent from each other, or when one resists the other.

As a third step, it is necessary to evaluate this tension "between the claims of the ethical and the political, the aesthetic and the rhetorical" (Mitchell, 1994: 286) in this work by Priya S. Chabria and Taylor. The two artists indeed journeyed and walked together through Bombay, pausing to photograph and interview people, looking around, looking for or just coming across traces of the past, while snapping photos and blotting down on paper information from the present. By doing so, they revive the classical tradition of the *flâneur*, to which they add an ethical and political dimension.

Exemplary urban image-texts may be named here, such as *Istanbul* by Orhan Pamuk (2005) and by *Ara Güler* (2009), and *TJ. Double Negative. A Novel* (2010) by David Goldblatt and Ivan Vladislavić. This new urban photo-textual project on Mumbai draws our attention to understanding its own role, its meaning, its function, its ethical/aesthetic responsibilities.[4]

With reference to Orhan Pamuk's Istanbul, there are two texts which are relevant to this discussion. First, his autobiographic memoir, *Istanbul. Memories and the City* (2005) interspersed with black and white family photos and with black and white photos of urban landscapes in the 1950s and the 1960s by Ara Güler – in whose house-museum-archive Pamuk has worked, as if inhabiting both the photos themselves and the space that had produced them. Second, the portfolio *Ara Güler's Istanbul. 40 Years of Photographs* (2009), with photographs taken between the 1950s and the 1980s, which includes a short introduction by Pamuk. This type of collaboration would fall into Stafford's category of "the retrospective photo-essay", for in that case a writer comments on photographic images of the past.

In both works, the one that portrays the Nobel prize winning author / narrator as *flâneur* in his city of birth and the one that honours the gaze of the world-prized photographer, Orhan Pamuk rivisits his beloved city with such nostalgia (he calls it sadness or melancholia, the same he attaches to Istanbul itself) that only finds relief in Güler's black and white street-photographs of Istanbul and of its people (mainly ageing, grieved, poor and burdened with labour).

In contrast, Ivan Vladislavić's *Double Negative. A novel* (2010), which accompanies the volume of photographs of Johannesburg by David Goldblatt *TJ Johannesburg Photographs 1948-2010*, is more a postmodern ekphrastic exercise, while Goldblatt's photo-book is rather documentary, denouncing a history and politics of segregation and social as well as geographic fragmentation. The photos move from the early black and white of the apartheid period to the colour of the 2000s in the post-apartheid era, they are more varied in terms of subject matters, they include more staged portraits of people, and, ultimately, they are more political.[5] Actually, the latter type of collaboration involves two of Stafford's categories, for the two artists here cooperate, producing two well defined – and to a certain extent – independent works. To be more precise, Vladislavić's novel might not stand on its own without the photo-album. On the contrary, Goldblatt's photo-album is an example of "self-collaborative, or introspective photo-essay," "in which writer and photographer are one and the same person" (Stafford, 2010: 6). It must be said that from Mitchell's perspective, instead, these two separate products are maybe the best example of a collaborative enterprise where the two media are independent, and even resistant to each another (Mitchell, 1994: 286).[6]

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[4] The concern here is similar to the one expressed by Stafford (2010: 1): "seeing what happens when two equal and autonomous media, photograph and written text, come together in dialogue."

[5] Stafford claims a "fundamentally political nature of the medium of photography" (Stafford, 2010: 2).

[6] See also: "The co-equality of photos and text is, in one sense, a direct consequence of their independence, each medium being given a "book" of its own, each equally free of admixture with the other" (Mitchell, 1994: 292).

In spite of those specificities, *Bombay / Mumbai. Immersions* shares a number of similarities both with Pamuk/Güler's *Istanbul* and with Vladislavić/Goldblatt's *Johannesburg*. First, it is a collection of mostly black and white, analogic street-photographs, devoted to urban spaces and landscapes and to the people of Mumbai. Second, it is the result of the close cooperation between a writer and a professional photographer, where the writer does not limit herself to produce ekphrastic descriptions of the photos, and the photos are not simple illustrations of the texts.[7] The narrative – aesthetic, ethic, didactic, informative and sometimes autobiographic – occupies roughly an equal portion of the book with that of photographs. Thus, in this specific case the text both explains the photos and transcends them, mostly, creating an alternative, wider view of how the city looked like in the past and how it has transformed in the present. Priya Sarukkai Chabria renounces her poetry, to adopt a lyric and highly suggestive prose to accompany Christopher Taylor's photos. All the photo-texts mentioned so far place themselves on the threshold between the traditional analogic photography and the digital era that only Goldblatt seems to embrace more willingly than other photographers. Finally, while Güler follows Cartier Bresson's technique, stealing, so to speak, his street-photos without people even noticing, Taylor shares with Goldblatt acceptance of a number of more or less staged photos of people,[8] although he admits to having used "two other cameras, more easily adapted for spontaneous image-making […] each camera is fitted only with a standard lens that sees pretty much as the eye sees. […] For me the key is simplicity" (p. 12).

Bombay / Mumbai. Immersions starts exactly where and how the journey of a western tourist would start, that is to say, at the end of the monsoon season, towards the end of August, when western tourists generally flock into Mumbai. The first photo for the beholder to see (and the first visual experience for the tourist) is a huge colour image of a statue of Ganesh. A lapidary preface to the book, by Ranjit Hoskote, a few pages later, titled "Inside the Labyrinth", captions the picture:

> Immersions, reminds us of Bombay / Mumbai's central metaphor, associated with its most spectacular annual festival, Ganesh Chaturthi, at the conclusion of which idols of Ganesha, the guardian of inaugurations, are ritually immersed in the sea: the god departs, only to return the following year, bearing a renewed promise of adventurous beginnings (*Intr.*).

Nevertheless, the image without caption, speaks per se to those who can recognize it and works as an auspicious invitation to start the journey and read on one's own.

Among the first photographs, there is one more that represents something generally mesmerizing and puzzling to visitors: the "absurdly fragile scaffolding, thin as toothpicks" (p. 25), precariously embracing high-rises, that make one think of safety measures for labourers, insurances, possible accidents. The textual referential comment does not perfectly match the photo it refers to (p. 13), thus creating a spatial (in the book) as well cognitive (in the reader's mind) displacement of the words related to that specific image. This drifting away of words from images, this mismatching of texts and photos, this displacement, contribute to create that relationship of resistance and independence between photos and texts that Mitchell described as constitutive of photo essaysm.

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[7] "Simultaneity of text and photographic image is probably a utopian avant-guard dream" (Stafford, 2010: 41).

[8] In commenting on Agee and Evans's photo essay *Let Us Now Prise Famous Men*, Mitchell shares Agee's appreciation for "the openness of Evans at work, his willingness to let his human subjects pose themselves, stage their own images in all their dignity and vulnerability, rather than treating them as material for pictorial self-representation" (Mitchell, 1994: 299).

Furthermore, quite recognisable is also a night photo (pp. 18-19) of the flyover that accompanies voyagers from Mumbai International Airport to the downtown Fort area, for the flights from Western Europe arrive in Mumbai in the middle of the night. Such an experience rather than being welcoming presents the traveller with a fleeting view through the taxi's windows of the surprisingly crowded night life and of the many street sleepers under the pillars of that flyover. What is at first recognizable by travellers soon makes room for what has dramatically changed in the past few years and for less famous areas and views of this ever-changing megacity. In this way the photo-text achieves one of its aesthetic aims, that is to say, shifting from recognition to estrangement, from familiarity to de-familiarization. For this reason, it is not possible here to provide an exhaustive description of the photos by Taylor, for that would mean adding yet another layer of ekphrastic narrative.

The quality of the collaboration between the Mumbai poet (an insider) and the foreign photographer (an outsider), although Taylor has specialised in photos of Mumbai over the years, with various projects and exhibitions, seems similar to the one discussed by Mitchell among four case studies: Edward Said and Jean Mohr's photographic essay on the Palestinians in *After the Last Sky*.[9]

As in that case, here too, "the text oscillates between supplementary relations to the images (commentary, meditations, reflections on photography) and independent material" (Mitchell, 1994: 313), in the specific case the history of the city and autobiographic anecdotes. Moreover, some of the photos do not receive a direct commentary in the text. Similarly, in spite of simple captions naming places and locating the photos, they remain silent and obscure to the viewer, once again producing estrangement.

While the two artists speak of a complete immersion and submersion into the city spaces and into vanishing memories that need to be captured, the reader and viewer cannot but look at what emerges and surfaces, and stays in the memory in pools of photos and words. What strikes in the texts by Priya Sarukkai Chabria, always to the point, is the language rich in oxymorons that the city itself attracts in order to be described. A language that feeds on and refurbishes the traditional binary opposition of heaven and hell, or as reviewer notice of both beauty and damnation (Mukherjee 2013). The poet, for instance, claims that the photographer Taylor found "stillness amidst chaos and silences in the city's clamour" (p. 9), particularly in the photos of vestiges of the colonial past in Mumbai. Then, she further claims that both artists "seek the sempiternal amidst the ephemeral" (p. 9). This sounds very much like exposing a poetics/ethics of intentions. The very title of the volume "reflects the dichotomies that shoot through this metropolis" – the 'hard city,' "located in maps and statistics, books on demography and urban sociology" and the 'soft city,' "imagined, dreamt of, the sight of illusions and nightmares" (p. 10).

Another objective of this essay is to show the relationship between the aesthetic and ethic project of the two artists. While Priya Sarukkai Chabria acknowledges the necessity of "subtle shifts in narrative tone, as this more effectively reflects the character and ambience of different areas, and the experiences of its inhabitants" (p. 10), Taylor maintains that his main activity consists in creating art projects for exhibitions in galleries, therefore he keeps on working traditionally with film cameras and black and white darkroom techniques in order to create fine prints, but also to obtain "a closer understanding of the created image" and to obtain a meditative quality (p. 11).

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[9] Edward Said and Jean Mohr, *After the Last Sky* (London: Pantheon, 1986), quoted in W.J.T. Mitchell, "Exile and Return: After the Last Sky" (Mitchell 1994, pp. 312-322: 312).

A truism about Mumbai is that "every cliché about this city rings true, and every contradiction" (p. 19), too, and the city combines heaven and hell for a specific category of people, the poorest among the poor:

> The city gathers this people in its ever expanding limits, its crevices and alleys, allowing them to make their homes in places of disuse: over-bridges, under-bridges, corners of graveyards and places where the sea washes in every day. To many, home in this city could mean a segment of an unused sewage pipe tossed by the roadside, its cement curvature becoming floor, ceiling and walls providing cramped sleeping space in a dismal parody of the comfort of the womb; home could mean the footpath where the curb becomes a pillow and a nearby fire hydrant transforms into a clothesline to drape the second shirt or petticoat, with the sky as ceiling, or, if lucky, a shop front's awning providing shelter after hours. Home could be merely the body one possesses that is rented out to sleep. Lay down the body, the home (p. 20).

This great metropolis has the power to fascinate and to repulse in equal measure, says the poet. By 2015, Mumbai's projected population density is 23 million.

> Social scientist Sunil Khilnani points out that the rich cannot flee from the poor for the poor often live in scabby slums at the feet of high-rises […] More than half of Bombay's population live in slums squeezed into around 8 percent of the land area. The slum residents are workers and the educated lower middle class, not the very poorest, some 700,000 of whom exist as they can on the pavements, in segments of sewage pipes and under flyovers" (p. 25).

This is exactly how heaven becomes contiguous with hell. After presenting the extravagant personality of a billionaire, who built for himself a home, a skyscraper in central Mumbai, with an overall of twenty-seven floors, six devoted to parking places, and with three helipads on the rooftop, the novelist/activist Arundhati Roy criticises "the most successful secessionist movement in India: the secession of the middle and upper classes into outer space." (Roy, 2014: 46)[10].

> Many large cities, such as Mumbai […] combine high concentrations of wealth (tied to the growth of producer services) and even higher concentrations of poverty and disenfranchisement (Appadurai, 2001: 25).

> The National Stock Exchange is inaugurated in 1994 at the posh Bandra-Kurla complex. But near this enclave, guarded and glistening as if descended from a future time, just across a ditch still with leaden water scramble shanties of tin, cardboard, sheeting plastic, ingenious in invention (p. 26).[11]

By sharing their view on Mumbai slums with various Indian intellectuals, Priya S. Chabria and Christopher Taylor seem to satisfy Mitchell's principle of "seriousness", that is, "construed in anti-aesthetic terms, as a confrontation with the immediate, the local and limited, with the un-beautiful, the impoverished, the ephemeral, in a form that regards itself as simultaneously *indispensable* and *disposable*" (Mitchell, 1994: 310). It is really difficult to overlook the aesthetic purpose of black and white artistic and professional photographs, for particularly black and white urban street-photographs belong to a by now classical genre that has its roots in the very beginning of the history of photography. Thus, Taylor's photos produce not only an

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[10] See also the video interview on BBC Newsnight (2014).

[11] As comment to an otherwise mysterious photo by Taylor portraying three men in white shirts, standing along a railing in a street and watching upwards, Priya S. Chabria explains: "in rain and in sweltering heat people line the street opposite the colonial era Bombay Stock Exchange building at Fort, their eyes on the running band of figures that indicate shifting stock market prices" (p. 94).

aestheticised effect but also a very democratic one, providing an aura of dignity and neatness to all subjects (people), regardless of social class or status, and to the subject matter (urban sites), such as, material buildings, cloudy skies, sea waters, aerial views or interiors. On its part, the text responds to this formal rhetoric with lyricism and a refined and rarefied lexicon which manages to avoid exoticism. Therefore, the text becomes eloquent, even more militant and partisan, to the point of meeting the quality of "seriousness", mentioned above. All this allows this image-text to be something more than a mere photo-book or coffee-table book.

This photo-text becomes relevant also because it traces the history of the city. Today's boom-town is yesterday's colonial port. British Bombay had grown monstrously out of Portuguese "*ilha da boa vida*" (p. 35). The area, the seven islands that will later become one land, was green with a luxurious vegetation of fruit trees and gardens. Previously a Muslim city, it was rooted in the Chalukyan dynasty who also prised the area's plantations and gardens. To that dynasty one owes the Elephanta Cave Temples dating back to year 550. Centuries earlier, the Bhuddist Kanheri Caves had been dug out of the hills. Islands of fisher folks since antiquity, Bombay's lands emerged from "volcanic upheavals and seismic sinking of the basalt floor" (p. 43) of the region, proof of that is a forest of petrified stumps of *Acacia catechu* of the mimosa family, still rooted in the soil under layers of clay, bearing no sign of having been cut down by any tool. Thus, Priya S. Chabria's story-line of the city's geo-history goes back to the very beginning of time.

Divided into various chapters, the book distinguishes itself from Goldblatt's *TJ*, for in that case the history of Johannesburg is photo-graphed through decades and is organized in six corresponding chapters, from the 1950s to the 2000s. Similarly, Güler's Istanbul is portrayed chronologically from the 1960s to the 1980s. One major difference, however, between Istanbul, Mumbai and Johannesburg, is that the two latter cities have changed and have transformed themselves through a speedy development towards modernity, whereas *Güler's* Istanbul in the 80s seems to have maintained some of the features it showed back in the 50s.

What the photo-text by Priya S. Chabria and Taylor shares with *Istanbul* is a certain indulgence in sea images. The second chapter of the photo-text is all about tides, monsoons, and the Arabian Sea (grey, in the photos as well as to the eyes of travellers, maybe because it reflects the grey sky of monsoon bank clouds) as the clogged lung of Mumbai. While the Bosphorus is so attractive to both Güler and Pamuk because of its vitality and traffic, its various boats and ships and its fishermen and their ancient nets and jobs, here the Arabian Sea's influence is mostly felt along the shorelines and beaches which suddenly become crowded with families, couples, vendors and children. The sea gives the opportunity to Priya S. Chabria for some poetic autobiographic lines:

> I should not forget to mention the high tide as it swelled outside my window. I should not forget how moonlight played on the sea as I awoke from dreams; how it lay gleaming silent as a prayer on dark waves; or how it rode over sapphire depths as I awoke to study for exams or from lovemaking (p. 59).

The use of the first person and the telling of very private views, which shift the tone of the essay from factual and pragmatic to introspective, do not change the quality of the image, for the moonlight still produces a sort of 'light-writing' in black and white, and allows the reader to imagine what photos cannot show. One could argue that only privileged citizens have a view of the sea from their windows, but it is not so, for the presence of the sea is pervasive in Mumbai, and the slums along the coast present shacks daringly clinging to the rocks of the seashore. Their view onto the sea does not provide improvement to their life condition, nor is their life necessarily healthier. The sea is not an aestheticised presence, it is rather a realistic, democratic, grey and by far an un-inviting element of the life in Mumbai.

Precisely for this reason, when rain and sea swell because of monsoons, tides and storms, the city is in the grip of the surrounding sea, clogged, under siege by ever-surfacing and floating garbage and sewage. In this chapter, text and photos do not match perfectly, they only provide an idea of low and high tides. For instance, when Priya Sarukkai Chabria refers to "a vast field of windmills rising out of the ocean off the coast of Mumbay [as] a happy vision of the future" (p. 51) we are left alone to imagine them.

Clogging tides may be also visualised in the traffic and transport difficulties in Mumbai.

> Though commerce is shifting northwards, Mumbai's elongated shape still forces waves of commuters to travel from homes in the north to offices in the south. When these streams meet with the east to west movement of traffic the effect is of chaotic rip tide (p. 62).

Rather than being continuous movement, the traffic in Mumbai, in fact, proceeds by blocks, stops, halts and stasis: "As in photographs, memories of traffic jams freeze" (p. 65). It is the 'local', instead, the suburban train system with its 5000 squeezed commuters that detains the records of movement, together with a reputation for passengers's tolerance: "A hand stretched out by someone wishing to leap onto a running local will, famously, find strangers' hands reaching out to haul one more into crowded confines" (p. 71). It is also in this chapter that traffic at sea is mentioned, as ferries, fishing boats, ships, cargoes trail the waters in any direction. Air traffic has its share, too, in the city's movement and moving population. These descriptions contribute to provide a hint at pollution, which is the main difference between this Arabian Sea and the Bosphorus.

There is another type of tide that sweeps inward, into the city, that of migrants. They suffer mainly because of poor urban housing policies. They are deprived refugees, men, women, and children, looking for jobs, houses, schooling and dreams. They never know "when the slippery threshold of *migrant-ness* does solidify into the firm floor of the fully fledged resident" (p. 85).

> About 40 per cent of the population (about 6 million persons) live in slums or other degraded forms of housing. […] Another 5-10 per cent are pavement dwellers. […] This huge and constricted population of insecurely or poorly housed people has negligible access to essential services, such as running water, electricity and ration cards for food staples (Appadurai, 2001: 27).

Besides, women are "sucked into the euphemistically termed 'hospitality' industry. Lured by Bollywood glamour or brutally kidnapped and sold, they work in the city red-light districts" (p. 85),

> While men form the core of this labour pool, women and children work wherever possible, frequently in ways that exploit their sexual vulnerability. To take just one example, Mumbai's gigantic restaurant and food service economy is almost completely dependent on a vast army of child labour (Appadurai, 2001: 27).

"The taxi driver is, possibly, the most visible metaphor of the migrant settled in Mumbai" (p. 86). Taylor has photographed such characters framed by the window screen of their cabs, young and old men, like Bollywood actors. In this case we must remember that taxis are an institution in Mumbai. They are endemic, used by everyone, and taxi drivers represent the class of self-made men who managed to improve their social status. Their pose is theatrical, they

show pride and idiosyncratic manners. Moreover, rather than being the exotic targets of the photographer, they would certainly recognize their portraits as realistic and fair.[12]

The city's scent is not only that of the sea, but it is also that of money. Mumbai is the financial capital of India, where heaven and hell are always at odds with one another. Mumbai is home to a solid local film industry (Bollywood), local, national and international financial institutions, corporate headquarters, local, national and international companies, multinationals and foreign banks. And yet:

> Dharavi, in central Mumbai is Asia's largest slum. Here a large recycling industry processes waste from other parts of the city. […] Their jobs are to go through other's rubbish, sorting discarded plastic, tin, adding their mite to India's financial capital's might (p. 95).

> Dharavi is a turist attraction […] made famous by the feel-good film, *Slumdog Millionaire*. According to activists, close to one million people live within its maze of alleys […] The buildings, of various heights, are made of corrugated tin, cement, plastic sheeting, boxes of wood, steel sheets, iron bars draped with cerulean waterproof, unplastered brick – everything and anything that can be inventively used. It's resourceful, energetic, unhealthy and crowded (p. 163).

Dharavi is the hell that borders mega malls, such as Infinity Mall, Andheri, and is counterpoint to heavens, such as the Bandra-Kurla financial neighbourhood. Thus, Priya S. Chabria writes through juxtapositions: "Relics of the past rub up against futuristic visions of steel and concrete. Scarred chimneys rise alongside glistening malls. Images of want and wealth alter rapidly down these roads" (p. 181). In an area where historical mills, hosting the cotton industry of Bombay, are now being turned into malls, "Mumbai's gaping inequalities ensure that the wealthy can never escape the sprawl of poverty" (p. 192). Consistently with her style of binary oppositions the poet goes on writing that: "the city nurtures like a mother but it is also the demon city of broken dreams" (p. 202). Thus, this photo-text is no exception in presenting us with the disenfranchised fringes of the society, yet, not just out of curiosity but rather because the well-off and the poor people live contiguous lives, and their juxtaposition is inevitable.

Priya S. Chabria and Taylor's photo-text volume on Mumbai really presents us with immersions, as the title promises, into specific private and public spaces: quarters, streets, enterprises, temples, buildings, malls, film studios, back alleys, shorelines, caves, cemeteries, gardens and parks. Maybe unconsciously the book moves linearly from Mumbai South to Mumbai North but also circularly, from one sacred festival to another sacred type of worshipping, from one lung to the other.

The narrative starts from the Ocean, the external lung of Mumbai, its porous peninsular skin. There the book begins, with the immersion of the Ganesh idols into the sea. Regardless how polluting those huge idols of *papier mâché* and other materials are, all painted in lively colours and richly decorated, once they are thrown into the already grey waters of the Arabian Sea, the sacred festival is a symbol of Mumbai's life and renewal.

The book ends in the second lung of Mumbai, its internal lung, so to speak, the Sanjay Gandhi National Park, its urban pristine forest.[13] In this hidden paradise, adivasis live:

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[12] Reviewer Anupama Raju (2013) speaks of "poetic objectivity" and "grace": "The city, captured through pictures, prose and poetic objectivity."

[13] See chapter 5 "The Lungs" in Pellegrino (2011, 99-115). The organic vision of Mumbai, although disfunctional, is also stressed by Raju (2013): "the duo's journeys through the city's skin, heart and belly."

Sometimes leopards kill adivasi tribals who have been living in this forest for generations, gathering its produce and doing jhum cultivation for existence; in fact their very name – *adi* meaning first and *vasi* meaning inhabitant – implies their origin and birthright to forest harvest. Naturally, they have foremost knowledge of medicinal plants, fruits and roots, a knowledge that, in an all too familiar tale, is sought for commercial advantage by large pharmacy companies even as the adivasis continue to live within the park's ambit and a few of their members, usually school-going children, die in leopard attacks. […] Adivasi hamlets comprising 40 to 50 families each dot the park; each family lives without electricity and running water; they live with the fear of losing their children to a leopard attack on their way home from the municipal school that is a 45 minutes walk, each way, each day. Despite these difficulties, the adivasis have stayed on, maintaining that they cannot adjust to the rhythms of city life, that they will not be given appropriate work in the city, that the forest is their natural home, its produce of wild honey, firewood, fruits, their hunting for food and basic agriculture, usually of vegetables, are their rights (pp. 262-263).

This story, too, needs to be photo-graphed. It is maybe a story on the verge of extinction: for in other parts of India, adivasis are being chased out of their forests and jungles by the army, they are deprived of their lands to honour international agreements and multinational contracts of exploitation of minerals:

This is the darkness that slides its many tongues into the cracks of my dreams and speaks in the dialects of mining communities in deep forests fought over by Naxalites and paramilitary troops who tramp the same track of shaded blood green, and in the idiom of the women of Manipur stripped themselves naked to protest custodial rape-deaths, rattling locked gates, their breasts shaking while they howled in that particular tone of anguish which is always too high, never-ending and is never heard, and in the languages of the tribes who lived amidst clouds, gathering their hard life of danger and exclusion into songs that are now lost to winds that blow through towns where large, black pigs grunt near garbage heaps that sit beside the national highways that always run on; this too I know is real and is my home (p. 272).

Thus Priya S. Chabria concludes her narrative, acknowledging both adivasis and slum dwellers in the very heart of Bombay / Mumbai's development. The encounter in the forest with adivasis is a story of secrecy, right in the middle of the hub of city life, to the point that Priya S. Chabria evokes the concept of 'deep ecology': "popularised in the 70s by the Norvegian philosopher Arne Naess, and earlier propounded by Polish philosopher Henryk Skolimowski who based his premise on a startlingly simple fact: all life is interconnected and separate parts of the ecosystem - including humans – function as a whole" (p. 263).

If slum dwellers are the counterpart of rich citizens, and 'deep democracy' is their only weapon to negotiate their rights, similarly, adivasis are the counterpoint of urbanized masses, and deep ecology is their only sustainable future. Yet, all these realities coexist and define Mumbai's unique essence, as well as being a portrait of heaven and hell. The last note of the book is a visit to one of the adivasis' temples: a mud hut.

Stooping to pass through the law doorway, our eyes gradually adjust to the roomy dimness. […] This is the residence of the god Shiva and Parvati, of Hanumanji, of Sri Ganesh and many others too whose images stand as a row of small, brightly coloured prints balanced on a bed of flowers. It is a site of Panchayatana veneration of the five main deities of orthodox Hindu worship and represents a fusion of multiple streams of devotion. It is the living testament to the sacredness of sites that survive by accommodating the changing and growing phalanxes of Hindu gods. More, this is the place of worship of Jeevadani Mahalakshmi Mata, Goddess, Life giver, and Protector of the World, the Ancient Numinious Lady, "*tranquil, fragrant, auspicious Mother*" (p. 264).

The sanctuary of Seven Goddesses in the forest is the closing counterpoint to the Ganesh Festival of the beginning. Thus the journey of the reader / viewer comes to its end. While the Festival invades the streets, day and night, with drumming, dancing and parading, as a peculiarly urban performance that needs the city as stage and the sea as final curtain, that private, dark and enclosed syncretic Temple in the forest surviving times past and present, in complete quietness, is opposed to the forest of jutting concrete high-rises of the new Mumbai and to the sea of shanties, all around, down below.

To conclude, it is possible to claim that this image-text is both an art book and a literary essay. The combined rhetoric of both black and white photos and emotionally involved essay writing contributes to liven up the debate on the characteristics of photo essays. If the combination of the two media is more agonistic or more collaborative, more complementary or more supplementary it is really difficult to say. In spite of the fact that the text might be more explanatory and exhaustive in terms of factual information but also in terms of imagined possibilities and of autobiographic, enriching details, the eyes of the reader are first and inevitably caught by the photos, be they transparent or obscure.[14] Thus, no matter to what extent the text dominates, in the end, the photos are questioned first and do not necessarily receive 'saturating' answers.

A profitable dialogue and dynamic interaction occur between the two media. Thus, they avoid both mere voyeurism and mere exoticism. Together, they proceed from the aesthetic to the ethic, for they bring to the foreground the contradictions and the diverging realities of a city that is changing and the two artists manage to question and interrogate a critical moment in time and in the history of its development that includes slum dwellers and adivasis, as well as the neglected cotton mills of the economically frustrating colonial past,[15] while showing portraits of traditional trade (taxi drivers) side by side with portraits of new profit seekers or investors (cinema industry). Thus, this specific photo-text escapes the 'coffee-table-book' status, and becomes a document of an era, without being necessarily documentary, and maintaining the subjective poetics of the two artists. If the book is not for everybody, for both adivasis and slum dwellers might be excluded from the circuit of its readers/consumers, they might recognize that their presence has been acknowledged and inextricably included as part of the city itself. They are Mumbai as well as Mumbai is them. Their absence would surprise the informed reader, while their presence avoids simple voyeurism and orientalism by providing an anthropological, engaged complete vision of the multiple ethnic groups and social classes who cohabit in Mumbai.[16]

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[14] A reviewer confirms this idea: "I mentioned perspectivism at the beginning, and I must turn to it again to talk about the miraculous subjective-objective bind that the photographs and text create. I was more aware of 'looking' than 'reading', and therein the delight of the eye." (Roy 2015).

[15] "'Immersions' plunge the reader into accounts of how the city's cotton industry crumbled, leading many a mill to shut shop, rendering many jobless. Sarukkai Chabria recounts how the locality of Girangaon was a space for an "artistic culture and poetry in Marathi in which words were woven with the looms." These accounts are accompanied by stark photographs in black and white of the facades and interiors of abandoned cotton mills." (Raju 2015).

[16] "This fascination made them traverse the metropolis, recording its history, sociology, demographics, culture and politics with the aid of images and text. [...] underlying themes here [are] nothing, none remains still. Be they the sea, localities, people, architecture, every aspect of the city is in a state of flux, thereby altering shape." (Mukherjee 2013).

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