

Department of Geography  
Fall 2015  
Michael Watts

## **Geography 24: Freshman Seminar**

### **Urban Worlds of the Poor**

#### **Reflecting on Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers***

##### **Seminar Content**

The assigned book for incoming freshman at Berkeley this fall is the 2012 winner of the National Book Award by Katherine Boo entitled *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. The book is set in a slum in Mumbai called Annawadi, a makeshift settlement in the shadow of luxury hotels near the Mumbai airport, and as India starts to prosper, Annawadians are electric with hope. Abdul, a reflective and enterprising Muslim teenager, sees “a fortune beyond counting” in the recyclable garbage that richer people throw away. Asha, a woman of formidable wit and deep scars from a childhood in rural poverty, has identified an alternate route to the middle class: political corruption. With a little luck, her sensitive, beautiful daughter will soon become its first female college graduate. But then Abdul the garbage sorter is falsely accused in a shocking tragedy; terror and a global recession rock the city; and suppressed tensions over religion, caste, sex, power and economic envy turn brutal. As the tenderest individual hopes intersect with the greatest global truths, the true contours of a competitive age are revealed. And so, too, are the imaginations and courage of the people of Annawadi.

Katherine Boo is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and a former reporter and editor for *The Washington Post*. She learned to report at the alternative weekly, *Washington City Paper*, after which she worked as a writer and co-editor of *The Washington Monthly* magazine. Over the years, her reporting from disadvantaged communities has been awarded a Pulitzer Prize, a MacArthur “Genius” grant, and a National Magazine Award for Feature Writing. For the last decade, she has divided her time between the United States and India, the birthplace of her husband, Sunil Khilnani, a professor of politics at King’s College, London. This is her first book.

The purpose of this seminar is to use Boo’s book as a way of exploring, beyond the confines of India, the “life of the slum world”. Ms. Boo is not an academic but there is a large body of work by anthropologists, economists, political scientists and policy makers on the cities of the Global South and especially the life chances of the urban poor. We shall read some of this work and particularly read her book against another best selling book, Mike Davis’s *Planet of Slums* published in 2005 – this book was itself a response to an important publication of UN HABITAT *The Challenge of Slums* published in 2003.

We are fortunate in that Ms . Boo will be on campus giving a lecture and participating in seminars on September 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> (her talk is in Wheeler Auditorium at 7pm on September 24<sup>th</sup>).

You should peruse the book's website: <http://www.behindthebeautifulforevers.com/>

An interview with Boo is available at:

[https://www.bookbrowse.com/author\\_interviews/full/index.cfm/author\\_number/2129/katherine-boo](https://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm/author_number/2129/katherine-boo)

Other sources:

AUDIO: The Craft of Writing: Katherine Boo, by Jennifer Ludden *All Things Considered*  
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4111712>

The book has been praised as "The best book yet written on India in the throes of a brutal transition." A review in the *New York Times*  
(<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/12/books/review/katherine-boos-behind-the-beautiful-forevers-explores-a-mumbai-slum.html>) put it this way:

“But “Behind the Beautiful Forever” is, above all, a moral inquiry in the great tradition of Oscar Lewis and Michael Harrington. As Boo explains in an author’s note, the spectacle of Mumbai’s “profound and juxtaposed inequality” provoked a line of questioning: “What is the infrastructure of opportunity in this society? Whose capabilities are given wing by the market and a government’s economic and social policy? Whose capabilities are squandered? . . . Why don’t more of our unequal societies implode?” Her eye is as shrewdly trained on the essential facts of politics and commerce as on the intimate, the familial and, indeed, the monstrously absurd: the college-going girl who struggles to figure out “Mrs. Dalloway” while her closest friend, about to be forced into an arranged marriage, consumes rat poison, and dies (though not before the doctors attending her extort 5,000 rupees, or \$100, from her parents).”

All of the Readings will be available on Bcourses website.

### **Key books**

Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forever: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* New York, Random House, 2012.

Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, London, Verso 2005 (available on Bcourse website)

### **Instructor**

Michael Watts is Class of '63 Professor of Geography and Development Studies. A Guggenheim Fellow in 2003, he served as the Director of the Institute of International

Studies at Berkeley from 1994-2004. He has taught on campus for thirty-five years. His research has addressed a number of development issues, especially food and energy security, rural development, and land reform in Africa, South Asia and Vietnam. Watts is currently the Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Social Science Research Council and serves on a number of Boards of non-profit organizations including the Pacific Institute (check it out: <http://pacinst.org/>).

### **Seminar Expectations and Requirements**

This is a one-credit reading seminar. I am both attentive to the demands on your time and for this reason there will be no written requirement for the class. Likewise I shall try to keep reading to about fifty (50) pages per week. What is imperative however – because I shall run this seminar as a discussion in which everyone participates – is that each student read (carefully) the week's assignment and come to class prepared and willing to participate fully in class discussions. I will take a role in instigating and provoking a discussion but the seminar will turn largely on your struggling with ideas and expressing and airing your views and opinions.

Each week I will pose a question or questions about the core reading and ask you to come prepared to speak to it. In this way I shall feel comfortable calling upon any of you during the seminar to expression an opinion and comment upon the text under discussion.

### **Readings**

**Extra-Curricular Events.** There will be several events in the course of the semester including the Boo lecture and an October 30<sup>th</sup> roundtable on the book by urban experts that I expect you all to attend.

**Location of class:** the seminar will meet Wednesday 12.00pm-1.00pm in Room 55A McCone (this is at the rear of the Library in the McCone Building on the ground floor). We meet for an hour only so **PLEASE BE ON TIME.**

**Instructor details:** Michael Watts, Room 555 Earth Science Building (McCone)

### **Email and contacts:**

Michael Watts: [mwatts@berkeley.edu](mailto:mwatts@berkeley.edu)

### **Office Hours:**

Wednesday 10.00-12 Noon

## SEMINAR OUTLINE

### **Week 1 August 26<sup>th</sup> Introduction**

### **Week 2 September 2<sup>nd</sup> Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers***

First half of the book, Prologue, Parts I and II

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v91RhlnF1xI>

### **Week 3 September 9<sup>th</sup> NO CLASS**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMqglnW5M\\_w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMqglnW5M_w)

### **Week 4 September 16<sup>th</sup> Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers***

Second half of the book, Parts III and IV

### **Week 5 September 23<sup>rd</sup> The Urban Climateric**

Make Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, 2005, Chapter 1

HABITAT, *The Challenge of Slums*, 2003, pp.17-31

S. Mehta, In the violent favelas of Brazil. *New York Review of Books*, August 15<sup>th</sup> 2013.

### **Week 6 September 30<sup>th</sup> The Prevalence of Slums**

Make Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, 2005, Chapter 2

HABITAT, *Slum Cities and Cities with Slums*, 2009.

*The Challenge of an Urban World*, International Housing Coalition, Washington DC 2009

### **Week 7 October 7<sup>th</sup> The Treason the State**

Make Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, 2005, Chapter 3

Ananya Roy, Why India cannot plan its cities, *Planning Theory*, 2009, 8,

**Week 8 October 14<sup>th</sup> Illusions of Self-Help**

Make Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, 2005, Chapter 4

Ananya Roy, Civic Governmentality: the politics of inclusion in Beirut and Mumbai, *Antipode* 41, 9 2009.

**Week 9 October 21<sup>st</sup> Haussman in the Tropics**

Make Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, 2005, Chapter 5

Arjun Appadurai, Spectral Housing and urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai, *Public Culture*, 2000,

**Week 10 October 28<sup>th</sup> Slum Ecology**

Make Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, 2005, Chapter 6

Nikil Anand, Leaky States, *Public Culture* 27/2 2015

**Week 11 November 4<sup>th</sup> SAPing the Third World**

Make Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, 2005, Chapter 7

James Holston, Dangerous Spaces of citizenship, *Planning Theory*, 8, 2009.

Mattieu Aikins, Gangs of Karachi, *Harpers*, September 2015, 331/1984

**Week 12 November 11<sup>th</sup> NO CLASS: NATIONAL HOLIDAY**

**Week 13 November 18<sup>th</sup> A Surplus Humanity**

Make Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, 2005, Chapter 8

AbdouMaliq Simone. 2006. People as infrastructure. *Public Culture* 16(3):407-429.

**Week 14 November 25<sup>th</sup> NO CLASS THANKSGIVING**

**Week 15<sup>th</sup> Wrap up and Class party at my house**

Make Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, 2005, Epilogue

## **PRINCIPLES FOR SEMINAR DISCUSSIONS:**

The following guidelines are intended to facilitate seminar discussions. Some of them may sound obvious, but from past experience it is still important to make them explicit.

**1. READINGS.** At least for the first part of each seminar session the discussions should revolve around the weeks readings rather than simply the topic. There is a strong tendency in seminars, to turn every seminar into a general “bull session” in which participation need not be informed by the reading material in the course. The injunction to discuss the readings does not mean, of course, that other material is excluded from the discussion, but it does mean that the issues raised and problems analyzed should focus on around the actual texts assigned for the week.

**2. LISTEN.** In a good seminar, interventions by different participants are linked one to another. A given point is followed up and the discussion therefore has some continuity. In many seminar discussions, however, each intervention is unconnected to what has been said before. Participants are more concerned with figuring out what brilliant comment they can make rather than listening to each other and reflecting on what is actually being said. In general, therefore,

participants should add to what has just been said rather than launch a new train of thought, unless a particular line of discussion has reached some sort of closure.

**3. TYPES OF INTERVENTIONS.** Not every seminar intervention has to be an earth-shattering comment or brilliant insight. One of the reasons why some students feel intimidated in seminars is that it seems that the stakes are so high, that the only legitimate comment is one that reveals complete mastery of the material. There are several general rules about comments that should facilitate broader participation:

a. No intervention should be regarded as “naive” or “stupid” as long as it reflects an attempt at seriously engaging the material. It is often the case that what seems at first glance to be a simple or superficial question turns out to be among the most intractable.

b. It is as appropriate to ask for clarification of readings or previous comments as it is to make a substantive point on the subject matter.

c. If the pace of the seminar discussion seems too fast to get a word in edgewise it is legitimate to ask for a brief pause to slow things down. It is fine for there actually to be moments of silence in a discussion!

**4. BREVITY.** Everyone has been in seminars in which someone consistently gives long, overblown speeches. Sometimes these speeches may make some substantively interesting points, but frequently they meander without focus or direction. It is important to keep interventions short and to the point. One can always add elaborations if they are needed. This is not an absolute prohibition on long statements, but it does suggest that longer statements are generally too long.

**5. EQUITY.** While acknowledging that different personalities and different prior exposures to the material will necessarily lead to different levels of active participation in the seminar discussion, it should be our collective self-conscious goal to have as equitable participation as possible. This means that the chair of the discussion has the right to curtail the speeches by people who have dominated the discussion, if this seems necessary.

**6. SPONTANEITY vs. ORDER.** One of the traps of trying to have guidelines, rules, etc. in a discussion is that it can squelch the spontaneous flow of debate and interchange in a seminar. Sustained debate, sharpening of differences, etc., is desirable and it is

important that the chair not prevent such debate from developing.

**7. ARGUMENTS, COMPETITIVENESS, CONSENSUS.** A perennial problem in seminars revolves around styles of discussion. My own view is the following: I think that it is important in seminar discussions to try to sharpen differences, to understand where the real disagreements lie, and to accomplish this is it generally necessary that participants “argue” with each other, in the sense of voicing disagreements and not always seeking consensus.

Each week I will pose a question or questions about the core reading and ask you to come prepared to speak to it. In this way I can call upon any of you during the seminar to expression an opinion and comment upon the text under discussion.

### **Readings**

All of the key readings will be placed on Bspace. You may wish to consider purchasing the following however all of which are available cheaply in paperback and/or through second hand shops on Amazon):