Morality in aversion?:
Meditations on slum tourism
and the politics of sight

ABSTRACT
Despite fairly widespread popularity, slum tourism is enmeshed in moralizing debate. Supporters acknowledge that slum tourism may sometimes be problematic, but also may potentially be an important pedagogical experience which reveals the horrors of capitalism to westerners. Plus, supporters argue, there is no morality in aversion – we should never turn away from slums and poverty. However, social theory on the politics of sight and opacity suggests that the promise of transparency – showing the real poverty – may lead to a violence of seeing and knowing rooted in western development epistemologies. I argue that morality can be found in aversion and turning away from slum tourism in many instances. I suggest that wealthy, western and usually white bodies of slum tourists represent the violence of the status quo which seeks to make legible a periphery and to partially re-integrate into capitalism those who have been expelled from it. This paper contributes to a growing literature which deploys social theory to understand and critique slum tourism and its relationship with capitalist society.

INTRODUCTION
Over one million people take tours of urban shantytowns, also called slums, each year (Steinbrink et al. 2016: 13). Slums can be a major component of a country’s tourism portfolio – for example, one in four visitors to South Africa
take a guided tour of the infamous townships (Frenzel 2014: 432). However, despite fairly widespread popularity, slum tourism is enmeshed in moralizing debate in both academic and popular presses. Slum tourists are regularly accused of participating in people—zoos, social bungee-jumping, voyeurism and exploitation (Meschkank 2011). Meanwhile, slum tourism critics are sometimes labelled as ethnocentric, with condescending attitudes towards local agency (Basu 2012). Critics of the critics point to the persistent finding that, ‘the rejection of slum tourism seems to originate in the respective middle and upper classes, while the residents affected by slum tourism tend to sanction it’ (Frenzel and Koens 2012: 207; Frenzel 2017).

The essence of the ethical quandary of slum tourism—at least for this author—is most clearly evoked by Dovey and King (2012). After critiquing the tourist gaze which radiates into private spaces of the urban poor, they pose a simple counterpoint: ‘what are the politics of turning away […] where is the morality in aversion’ (Dovey and King 2012: 280–83)? I read Dovey and King’s sentiment in posing these questions as a cautious support for slum-based (site)seeing. After all, those of us who have benefited from capitalist accumulations should be made to bear witness to the destruction wrought through both primitive accumulations and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2007)! A transparent assessment of life in dispossessed and underserved spaces which result from upward wealth accumulation could potentially be radically pedagogical. My initial intuition is to rally behind this sentiment (Henry 2019). However, the argument presented here takes a counterintuitive position. Inspired by Timothy Pachirat’s (2011) understanding of the politics of sight, I argue that slum tourism is an excellent case of the fetishization of transformative visibility and its failures. Acknowledging that the ‘urge to know’ and make legible is often bound up in colonial impulses (Scott 2009; Said 1994), I make a cautious case for finding the morality in aversion and explore the potentially radical possibility of turning away.

This paper also engages in a meta-dialogue on how we might better integrate slum tourism into social theorizing (Connoy and Ilcan 2013). Some scholars have raised concerns about conducting macro-conceptual analyses of slum tourism, arguing that practices on the ground are simply too diverse to form a coherent whole (Iqani 2016: 52). Indeed, I am encouraged by and draw from the extended case study work which has proliferated on slum tourism since the early 2010s. However, if slum tourism scholarship is to follow other sub-fields of critical tourism studies into maturity it will need to, ‘begin to unpack how [slum tourism] as a social trend is part and parcel of, and contributes to our understanding of, broader social theories’ (Sin et al. 2015: 121). There is precedent here: Dyson, for example, realizes that slum tourism raises, ‘questions about the current world order’ (2012: 272) and Nisbett calls on scholars to, ‘begin theorizing slum tourism, to connect it with political philosophy and poverty studies, and embed it within scholarship on power, race and class’ (2017: 44; see also Murtola 2014; Frenzel et al. 2015). If the analytic refractions between the politics of sight and slum tourism presented here do not apply to every slum or every tour, burrowing into such divergences will only enrich future theorizing.

**REVIEWING SLUM TOURISM**

My usage of *slum tourism* follows Fabian Frenzel (2014, 2018) who suggests that slum tourism is defined by the primacy of poverty-as-attraction. While other forms of tourism like volunteer tourism or even beach tourism in
some places may involve encounters with slums, this does not make these encounters slum tourism (cf. Holst 2018). Rogerson concurs that the, ‘major defining characteristic [of slum tourism] is the intersection of tourism and urban misery’ (2013: 196). On slum tours, tourists are guided through the narrow passageways and main drags in slum communities, often traveling on foot, by bicycle or in safari trucks (Steinbrink 2012; Freire-Medeiros 2009). The itinerary usually includes visits to restaurants selling ‘traditional’ food, indigenous craft markets, township cultural hubs and a staged slum home for refreshments and hospitality. Along the way, if the tourists are walking rather than travelling by bus, they may see, ‘butchers shoo flies away from sheep’s heads, starving dogs spraw[ing] listlessly in the road and children dig[ging] in piles of trash’ (Witz et al. 2001: 238). In short, they spend the day consuming human tragedy in the structural wasteland of capital (Linke 2012).

The slum tourism market is highly concentrated, with areas in and around Johannesburg, Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro accounting for approximately 90 per cent of all slum tours (Steinbrink et al. 2016: 13). This geography is reflective of slum tourism’s history: townships in post-apartheid South Africa were the first slums to host mass tourism, though the practice of ‘slumming’ as informal domestic tourism had a long history in European and North American cities (Steinbrink 2012). Cities like Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro have now fully incorporated slum tourism into the outward tourism brand of the city (Dovey and King 2012).

Slum tours often purport to show the ‘real Jo’burg’ or the ‘real Rio’, the implication being that the glitz and wealth of the downtown or beachfront is not an authentic experience of the Global South. Tourists understand the ‘urban poor […] as an unrecognized and undervalued group who live a life “more real” than can be observed in the “rich spaces” of the city’ (Dyson 2012: 262; Briedenhann and Ramchander 2006). Entering the slum is depicted as a rite of passage in which the tourist gets to the bottom of the search for authenticity (Butler 2010; see also MacCannell [1976] 1999). This authenticity is reinforced in at least two ways. First, there is nowhere for slum residents to hide. While the wealthy can put up gates and generally avoid tourists in their neighbourhood, slum residents’ tight living spaces put virtually all life on display (Whyte et al. 2011). Second, the tour guides may tell an ‘unexpected story’, about how the slums are generally nice places to live. This disconfirmation of tourists’ prior expectations signifies reality and honesty. Additionally, guides may take tourists to briefly visit the newer, truly destitute informal settlements on the edges of the slums: ‘confronting the tour participants with the signs of ‘absolute poverty’ […] [to convey] the message that nothing had been embellished or staged for tourists [and lend] credibility to the programme as a whole’ (Steinbrink et al. 2016: 79).

THE POLITICS OF SIGHT

Timothy Pachirat (2011) understands the ‘politics of sight’ to concern the ways in which societal violence is either made visible or concealed, by whom, and for what ends. Pachirat suggests that civilization and progress do not necessitate a reduction in social violence, but rather a subcontracting of it to hidden places. Therefore, the politics of sight is a particularly apt framework to understand sites of extreme violence which are relatively hidden from the large number of people who benefit from them: in Pachirat’s case, industrialized slaughterhouses and in the current case, slums (Davis 2006). There are
at least two theoretical stances on transparency which are encapsulated in a simple exchange between Michel Foucault and Michelle Perrot: ‘PERROT: There is a phrase in the Panopticon: “Each comrade becomes an overseer”. FOUCAULT: Rousseau no doubt would have said the reverse: each overseer should become a comrade’ (Foucault 1980: 152). The Rousseauist dream of transparency and its contemporary liberal iterations attempt to deploy transparency to combat violence. These mainstream progressive versions of the politics of sight often seek to, ‘invert the “power through transparency” formula in the service of transformation rather than control and domination’ (Pachirat 2011: 243). Pachirat invokes the popular food writer Michael Pollan who suggests that the easiest way to halt the violence of industrialized slaughterhouses is to replace their concrete walls with glass facades. Pollan argues, ‘if there’s any new “right” we need to establish, maybe it’s this one: the right to look’ (Pollan in Pachirat 2011: 246). And Pollan seems to have tapped a nerve – in the United States, it is a felony offence to record the goings-on in slaughterhouses. Those in authority clearly agree that if the true violence needed to sustain capitalism (and, in this case, carnivorism) was made visible to its beneficiaries, the outcry would be swift, and the accumulation of profits might halt. Some municipalities and tourism boards – particularly in India – have taken a similar approach to slum tourism. They try to shut it down and direct tourists towards more officially sanctioned sites (Frenzel 2017; Holst 2018).

However, other places adopt a more ‘Rousseauist perspective’ within the politics of sight. Rather than opting for concealment, some municipalities readily put slums on display to pre-empt social critique. As one official in Rio told Freire-Medeiros, ‘[m]y job is to show what the favela really is […] to promote the city as well. It’s a job I look at from a patriotic and economic viewpoint, because it improves the image of Brazil outside the country’ (2009: 585). Additionally, many slum tour operators with social justice goals subscribe to this theory of transformation via transparency. Guides – especially those who have lived in the slum – often explicitly seek to transform tourists’ negative perceptions about urban shantytowns (Dyson 2012). When responding to critics, ‘guides insist that tours are not an attempt to make a voyeuristic theme park out of poverty’ (Briedenhann and Ramchander 2006: 136). Like other genres of urban walking tourism, slum tours are often meant to ground visitors in a sense of place and produce a social urban landscape (Wynn 2005). The tours aim to combat the social opacity which supposedly inhibits transnational and cross-class care. Such tours are deeply rooted in a theory of transparency leading to knowledge, leading the tourists to radical action. If Rousseau wanted a ‘transparent society, visible and legible […] [with] no longer existing any zones of darkness … each individual, whatever position he occupied, might be able to see the whole of society … unobstructed by obstacles’ (Foucault 1980: 152), he would have likely been an ardent supporter of such slum tours.

SLUM TOURISM AND THE GLASS WALLS FALLACY

Transparency for transformation is fairly intuitive in a post-Enlightenment world. However, Pachirat (2015), drawing on Foucauldian thought, believes the promise of glass walls to be a fallacy. He argues that there is likely little transformative value in the beneficiaries of violence gazing upon it, and such gazes might even have a de-politicizing effect. In what follows, I use the case
of slum tourism to describe how transparency which ‘should’ lead to radical politicization in fact leads to a reassertion of power and violence.

**De-politicization of the consequences of interwoven political economies**

Slum tours are transformative in the sense that the tourists’ minds are often changed during the tour, but not usually for radical action. As Mutschank argues, ‘doubts concerning the morality of the tour tended to be resolved [upon completion] due to the reception the tour received from residents’ (2011: 58). Rather than sitting with the ambiguities of slum tourism, the tourists may totally discard the common critiques of slumming (but see Holst 2018: Chapters 4–5). Tourists often describe the slum tours as, ‘potentially game-changing educational experiences’ (Iqani 2016: 82). This pedagogical characteristic seems to emerge from guides’ skilful use of partially disconfirming narratives. While the physical landscape of the slum meets tourists’ expectations, the ‘humanistic qualities’ of the slums tell an unfamiliar story of hope and resilience (Dyson 2012: 266). Upon ‘learning’ this new information, repentance and dismissal of ‘negative stereotypes’ becomes part of the ritual experience of slum tourists. For example, when tourists in Windhoek were given a post-tour survey, ‘the term poverty […] which had played an important role in the association survey conducted before the tour … became an astonishingly rare occurrence after the tour: no more than 8% of the posttour interviewees mentioned the poverty feature’ (Steinbrink et al. 2016: 90, original emphasis). It is certainly important to tell complex social stories in which poverty is not the only feature of life in townships, favelas and locations (Gilbert 2007; Hoogendoorn and Giddy 2017; Freire-Medeiros 2012). However, poverty – and the historical and ongoing capitalist and imperialist dispossession which causes it – remains central to slum formation and should be fundamental to any narrative aiming for Rousseauist transformation via transparency.

However, in many slum tours, the erasure of poverty is part of a wider – perhaps unintentional – project of de-politicization. Holst notes that slum tour narratives are often kept, ‘comfortable by downplaying the suffering of the subalterns they supposedly represent […] in the interest of [operators], which benefit financially, [and] the tourists, who get to engage in a playful alleviation of pain’ (2018: 6). He draws heavily from feminist theorist Sara Ahmed to argue that slum tourists deploy confession and ‘bad feeling’ which

> is converted into good feeling only by forgetting that the capacity to give depends on past and present appropriations […] such forgetting makes the other the ‘object’ of our feeling: they are indebted to us, and must return what we extend to them, through gratitude.

(2005: 75)

Sontag further critiques these declarations and confessions as de-politicizing. Such ‘bad feeling’ might,

> spur people to feel they ought to ‘care’ […] [but] also invites them to feel that the sufferings and misfortunes are too vast, too irrevocable, too epic to be much changed by any local political intervention. With a subject conceived on this scale, compassion can only flounder.

(Sontag 2003: 79)
Korstanje pushes this argument further, theorizing that slum tourism reminds tourists,

how the success of the few depends upon the ruin of the whole […] they need to witness the Other’s suffering to experience a sentiment of false happiness […] Tourists are there not to learn, but to reinforce a sentiment of supremacy which is ideologically given by the ecology of disaster.

(2017: 34)

This critique of ‘transformation’ can help explain why slum tours often, ‘erase the difference inscribed by poverty in the name of solidarity [and] tourists in a number of ways help to perpetuate the economic system that reproduces the inequality’ (Holst 2018: 18). In some cases, transparency does not simply erase poverty, but glorifies it. Nisbett (2017), for example, records a tourist’s conclusion that life in Dharavi in Mumbai – purportedly Asia’s largest slum – should serve as ‘a model for the world’. Rather than emerge with a sense of transformational justice, tourists learn that the world might be a better place if we all lived more like these ‘deserving poor’.

De-politicization via transparency is aptly theorized within the politics of sight. Prior to the tour, the tourist could only imagine the horror of slums. After the tour, the tourist claims witness to a transparent reality that clearly revealed a horror not nearly so bad as previously imagined. Philosopher Edmund Burke provides some insight here: ‘to make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes’ (Burke [1757] 1999: 54). When the slum moves from opaque idea to transparent reality among the everyday participants in capitalist violence, the violence of dispossession is rendered not so bad after all. Transparency falls short when what, ‘each of us imagines might be lurking in the dark is ultimately more terrifying, more moving, and more interesting, for that particular person, than anything that could be revealed’ (Vorobej 1997: 238). For Burke, the real danger is too much transparency:

the most lively and spirited verbal description I can give, raises a very obscure and imperfect idea […] but then it is in my power to raise a stronger emotion by the description than I could do by the best painting.

([1757] 1999: 55)

When transparency is deployed, activist guides run the real risk, ‘that, once unveiled, the audience may find the [horror] uninteresting – or worse, laughable!’ (Vorobej 1997: 232).

When the violence of capitalism, normally concealed from its beneficiaries, is clearly displayed behind glass walls – perhaps the window of a Land Rover – the monstrosity of the results of accumulation by dispossession shifts from the extremes imagined into a materialist assessment which often concludes that such living situations are perfectly acceptable, even ‘a model for the world’. The logic of transparency, ‘is as likely to be a basis for making a profit off the pleasure of feeling pity for the less fortunate as it is for the transformation of their plight’ (Pachirat 2011: 254). Indeed, ‘who can stand the sight’ becomes a challenge. Who among us can bear to see the real Mumbai?! And once we do see the ‘real’ Mumbai or Rio or Cape Town, the imaginary of poverty, which to
this point was only vaguely understood, solidifies. Slum tours make concrete – through a fetishized understanding of transparency – the violence and poverty which previously was limited only by tourists’ fuzzy imaginations. And once ‘poverty’ is no longer abstract, it likely becomes easier for perpetrators to ‘accustom our eyes’ to capitalist violence and rationalize it away using specific, illogical and context-free exemplars (Crossley 2012).

Legibility: The politics of sight as watchful eyes

Transparency for transformation imagines the ‘right to look’ upon social ills as imbued with radical potential. However, like much Enlightenment thought, this ignores how the ‘right to look’ already exists as a tool of colonization and imperialism. Indeed, Euro-colonial ‘ways of seeing’ and landscape epistemologies shaped the social world through inclusion, exclusion and claims to omniscient and universal knowledge (Cosgrove 2008; Haraway 1988). It is completely unsurprising that these colonizing ontologies still shape the right to look. Philosopher Shannon Sullivan (2006) describes contemporary ‘ontologically expansive whiteness’, arguing that

white people tend to act and think as if all spaces – whether geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily, or otherwise – are or should be available for them […] Ontological expansiveness is a particular co-constitutive relationship […] in which the self assumes that it can and should have total mastery over its environment.

(Sullivan 2006: 10)

Edward Said agrees:

a white middle-class Westerner believes it his human prerogative not only to manage the non-white world but also to own it, just because by definition ‘it’ is not quite as human as ‘we’ are. There is no purer example than this of dehumanized thought.


Slum tourism brings watchful, colonizing eyes into spaces which might be typically concealed from such gazes. This process is perhaps best explained using Foucault’s classic analysis of the Panopticon – a tool of surveillance which engages a ‘form of power whose […] opinion will refuse to tolerate areas of darkness … the formula of “power through transparency”, subjection by “illumination”’ (1980: 154). The bright shining light that tourism brings to peripheral communities facilitates a quasi-integration. Alternative or radical lifeways are made visible for annihilation, but full inclusion in liberal citizenship is very rarely achieved (see Jung 2015). After all, ‘development […] rests fundamentally on notions of difference […] as Bhabha puts it: “Colonial power produces the colonised as a fixed reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible”’ (White 2002: 413).

As James C. Scott (2009) has argued, populations which are not legible (made transparent) to the state and capital are difficult to govern and exploit. Scott argues that through technologies like record-keeping, taxation, conscription and concentration, populations become known and governable. States (and capital) use this legibility to ensure the perpetuation of vastly unequal power and wealth relations. In this version of the politics of sight,
all dissonance must be illuminated, all must be integrated, there must be no alternatives arising in the darkness! States and capital,

break up the patches of darkness that blocked the light, eliminate the shadowy areas of society, demolish the unlit chambers where arbitrary political acts, monarchical caprice, religious superstitions, tyrannical and priestly plots, epidemics and the illusions of ignorance were fomented.

(Foucault 1980: 153)

Scott developed these ideas while studying swidden agriculture in highland areas of South East Asia; however, his analysis is just as relevant for the informal urban shanty-spaces at the margins of major cities. Like the highlands, slums are notoriously difficult for states to control, and often have a proud legacy of resistance (Butler 2010). However, unlike the early South East Asian states which lived and died on the unfree labour and taxation from the highlands, contemporary capital does not ‘need’ slums. As Saskia Sassen has argued, under contemporary capitalism, ‘expulsions’ of large numbers of people from capital can occur alongside so-called ‘economic growth’ (2014; see also Smith 2011; Ferguson 2006). Slums serve as an arrival terminal of urbanization, the spatial holding ground needed to house those people whose wealth and commons have been dispossessed (see Li 2010). However, growing cities have not made the, ‘necessary investments in new infrastructure, educational facilities or public-health, systems – [they] have simply harvested this world agrarian crisis’ (Davis 2006: 16). Tania Li puts it bluntly: slum residents’ ‘perilous conditions’ are ‘a sign of their very limited relevance to capital at any scale’ (2010: 67). There is little incentive for capital or states to spend large amounts of resources to accumulate from or exploit slums spaces and residents – capital just needs to ensure that alternative lifeways do not blossom in expelled space. Panopticon governance – in which ‘each comrade becomes an overseer’ – is a logical and resource-lite approach to countering resistance that might form in spaces where the hegemonic contracts of sovereignty and economy are broken.

This article may critique the tourists who engage a ‘happy but poor’ logic to rationalize away the tribulations and interwoven character of contemporary poverty. However, this does not preclude analysing slums as spaces of potentially radical politics based in expulsion from capitalism. Sassen (2014) suggests that expelled spaces – often urban communities at the edge of capital’s grasp – are prime sites for hosting prefigurative politics that challenge capitalist logics in contemporary times (see also Springer 2016; Pickerill 2017). Other social theorists have also thought about the radical possibilities of getting out from under the watchful eye of the state. Mbembe understands radical politics to be emergent along the rifts of capitalism: ‘in these spaces apparently doomed to nothingness and to radical negation lie unsuspected possibilities, those, even, that authorize us to resuscitate […] hope itself’ (2005: 43). Post-development icon Arturo Escobar also concludes, ‘post-Fordism necessarily connects or disconnects … regions and communities from the world economy; although always partial, disconnection not infrequently presents attractive opportunities from poor people’s perspectives’ (1995: 217). Also of relevance here is scholarship from Black Geographies on maroon communities, ‘those settlements established by runaway slaves, who sought to escape their condition as fungible, accumulated property’ (Bledsoe 2017: 31). These communities were autonomous from the geographies of terror that surrounded them; they
discarded ‘prevailing practices of sovereignty [and rejected] nominal insertion into dominant society’ (Bledsoe 2017: 42). Rather than imagining the radical possibilities of illegibility as a romanticized vision for the future, we might think of it as part of an autonomous here and now (Springer 2016), or even well-situated within a long legacy of Black geographies, ‘forming unique worlds in which the most wretched, beset upon groups in society could form a new spatial being, despite dominant notions that such spaces were completely untenable’ (Bledsoe 2017: 32).

Marronage or other spatial possibilities of expulsion operate within the politics of sight: ‘populations deemed invisible and forgettable were able to create spaces that defended them against the violence that accompanies an a-political existence’ (Bledsoe 2017: 41). As Foucault taught us, ‘darkness […] afford[s] after all a sort of protection’ (1980: 147). Tourists, however, bring surveillance. The tours may initiate a re-dispossession of an absolute surplus population – poverty becomes a ‘natural’ resource for extraction. When expulsion from capital has become a norm, slum tourism is a trailblazing social innovation which has figured out how to profit off of poverty: dispossession is re-monetized beyond what Marx could have imagined. Under a classic Marxist framework the only ‘thing which can never be bought or sold [is] poverty, for it has no exchange value’ (Frenzel and Koons 2012: 199) but slum experiences are being bought and sold on a global scale, neutralizing (in the beneficiary’s imaginary) the horrors of capital (cf. Frenzel 2017).

While there is an urge to frame slum tourism as potentially radical prefigurative politics, the politics of sight suggests that it would rarely push those who benefit most from capitalism to radical action and often brings additional legibility and capitalist attention. James Ferguson, writing about development initiatives generally, argues that,

there is little point in asking what such entrenched and often extractive elites [such as tourists] should do in order to empower the poor. Their own structural position makes it clear that they would be the last ones to undertake such a project.

(Ferguson [1990] 1994: 280)

Transparency and glass walls allow spaces at the margins of capital to become surveilled by powerful westerners and bourgeois locals. If this is the politics of transparency, perhaps the more radical option is to turn away, to not put such worlds behind glass?

**TAKING SERIOUSLY THE POSSIBLE MORALITY IN AVERSION**

Having critically engaged with the politics of transparency, it is time to return to Dovey and King’s (2012) questions: what are the politics of turning away and where is the morality in aversion? The above arguments emerge after considering the structural position of most slum tourists and the disappointment that often lies behind the promise of transparency, even with the best intentions. It is an argument against slum tourism, but not for the typical concern of voyeurism or for more practical critiques of specific tour logistics. Rather, the morality in aversion draws from taking non-white agency seriously (e.g. modern marronage) and from understanding that the colonial bourgeois subject is relationally constructed through white ontological expansiveness and a colonial helping impulse to meddle (Gronemeyer 2010; Heron 2007).
This framing flips the geographies of ‘empowerment’ (Nisbett 2017) upside down and presents the politics of turning away from slum tourism as a viable possibility for those who are ontologically inclined to make the whole world legible. In what follows, I hope to dispel two remaining counterarguments that arise when taking seriously the possibility that aversion might be the most moral path in some, or even most, instances of slum tourism.

**Slum landscapes and anti-development incentives**

Some would suggest that slum tourism can become a motor for mainstream development. Basu, for example, reminds us that tourism has long been defined as a path to economic development precisely because it places a value on objects, landscapes, and even people that were previously deemed economically ‘worthless’ – that is, they may have held a moral aesthetic or even spiritual but not monetary value.

(Basu 2012: 70)

However, the political economy of slum tourism raises serious questions about its development potential. Like other forms of landscape-based tourism, slum tourism transactions are reliant on the preservation of a landscape to gaze upon – in this case, a landscape of recognizable poverty (cf. Hoogendoorn and Giddy 2017). It is true that toured slum spaces are no longer monetarily ‘worthless’, but they only contain capitalist ‘worth’ so long as poverty is the main attraction. Just as cutting down a rainforest landscape would hinder ecotourism, ‘developing’ a shanty-landscape would hinder slum tourism. Murtola describes the insidious profit model of slum tourism: ‘slum tours show [that] capital might not even have anything to do with actual experience production itself, yet it can claim rent off sociality and general humanity’ (2014: 851). Pachirat suggests that, shock, like many other emotions, requires increasing stimuli to maintain itself … we are not far from a strategy that demands increasing intensification of its representations of suffering … reduc[ing] the shock level of subsequent representations in yet another iteration of the symbiotic relation between sight and concealment.

(Pachirat 2011: 253)

In the context of slum tourism, this means that cities that have based (or might base) their tourism brand on slum tourism have little incentive to implement development initiatives in slums. Perhaps, they are even incentivized to do the opposite, instead increasing the intensification of visible poverty to maintain the shock commodity and the rent collected from landscapes of dispossession.

**The value of inclusion?**

Some scholars argue that further legibility is the key for expelled people and places to be integrated into liberal iterations of governance, citizenship and sovereignty. Such arguments are supported by some respected critical scholars: James Ferguson (2015), for example, has recently argued that in contemporary times, poor people often hope for exploitation and domination rather than expulsion. Michael Denning reminds us that many people believe that,
under capitalism, the only thing worse than being exploited is not being exploited’ (2010: 79). These questions of inclusion and exclusion have serious material and philosophical implications. There is undoubtedly value in inclusion or even quasi-inclusion in the structures of power. However, the very essence of states and capital is to exclude and differentiate (Springer 2016) and Gavin Smith (2011) explains that expelled spaces have the least amount of negotiating power within conventional state-based grievance structures. As Bledsoe reminds us in the context of maroon communities, ‘prevailing practices of sovereignty or nominal insertion into dominant society’ were never actually viable options to accomplish the goal of creating more just geographies (2017: 42). Integration for slum residents into the same structures of sovereignty that have expelled them is likely a developmentalist fallacy.

Within the context of slum tourism, one commonly cited benefit of inclusion and legibility is protection against eviction campaigns. Occasionally, small and ‘historically significant’ slum communities are saved from demolition and re-location because of an increased tourist presence (Wattanawanyoo 2012). However, the reverse seems just as likely to occur: as Holst explains, tours simultaneously exposed […] particular slums to the civic authorities of Delhi who were eager to represent the [city] as a slum-free space and thus might be even more disposed to demolish slum colonies if they were made into tourist attractions. (2018: 4)

Frenzel adds that slum tours can also lead to eviction-via-gentrification: ‘whole sections of the inner [Johannesburg] have been bought up by property developers, securitised and “regenerated” in versions of a soft “Haussmann”’ (2019: 78).

Another argument for integration may come from slum residents themselves. Often slum residents believe their lives will be made materially better by increased slum tourism (Ramchander 2004; Freire-Medeiros 2012; Saarinen 2010; Steinbrink et al. 2016). However, the often-rehearsed empirical evidence reveals that most tourist expenditure is leaked from the slum (Frenzel et al. 2015; George and Booyens 2014; Binns and Nel 2002; Frenzel 2014; Rogerson 2008). The few ‘survivalist entrepreneurs’ (Rogerson 2008) who engage in micro-capitalist ventures inside the slum are often skilled former salary workers, meaning the portion of the cash which does stay inside the slum is never evenly distributed (Steinbrink et al. 2016; Dürr 2012; Saarinen 2010). Tourism almost never financially helps the poorest residents (Blake et al. 2008). However, residents’ time is spent pursuing entrepreneurial endeavours and competing with neighbours for the scarce and fickle resource of tourism dollars (Butler 2010). In a (predictable) turn, increased reliance on capital may inflame divide-and-conquer market mentalities within the social fabric of the community and decrease the amount of energy available to practice alternative forms of sovereignty and mutual aid.

CONCLUSION
The morality in aversion and the radical potential of turning away from slum tourism is embedded in rejecting the western humanitarian impulse and planetary consciousness that have long defined development endeavours. It is
premised in the notion that the urge to see and to help can only be understood contextually within the long history of colonialism and the contemporary subject positions of racialized capitalism (Connoy and Ilcan 2013). It is rooted in the commitment that ‘Others’ do not need westerners to solve problems – they do not need creatures of capitalist epistemology to become ‘Enlightened’ in order to enact prefigurative alternative economies. The morality in aversion is found in acknowledging that wealthy, western and usually white bodies represent the violence of the status quo that seeks to make the periphery legible and to violently re-integrate into capital those who might be trying to ever-so-quietly slip away from it. Humanitarian transparency leads to legibility that leads to ‘expert’ knowledge, which leads to subjugation. As Foucault taught us, in the politics of sight, ‘the principle of the dungeon is reversed; daylight and the overseer’s gaze capture the inmate more effectively than darkness, which afforded after all a sort of protection’ (1980: 147).

Some might argue that it is a moral imperative to expose the wasteland of capital for what it is no matter the method. However, slum tourism – through the very structure of its commodity – serves a latent function for capital. Rather than catalysing western revolutionaries, the transparency and realism of the slum tour – the politics of sight – convinces the tourist to scold their former self for thinking of the slum as a destitute, oppressed place. Though the concept of spatially segregating the dispossessed might have originally seemed problematic to the global middle class, slum tours end with a flying endorsement for capital to keep dispossessing and segregating. A few images of welcoming smiles or children playing in the street often wash away all of capital’s violence. Additionally, there are broader ethical questions raised about ‘people who […] travel far and wide to rid themselves of harmful stereotypes […] they are taking great expense and undertaking significant moral risk to … counteract beliefs that traditional forms of education might remedy’ (Whyte et al. 2011: 345).

Indeed, slums have an important story to tell. My critique should not be read as a call to ignore slums. However, I question whether slum tourism – the whole embodied, ‘transformational’, transparent experience – is the best way for the beneficiaries of capitalism to engage with the people they have indirectly dispossessed. Perhaps we would be better off limiting ourselves to Burke’s ‘spirited verbal descriptions’? Using the politics of sight to understand slum tourism helps scholars to better conceptualize the dangers of looking, knowing and acting. It leads us to a counterintuitive position that there may be a moral imperative for aversion and that the actually radical act may not be ‘helping’ or ‘knowing’ but rather getting out of the way. All this leads me to make a cautious case for further theorizing the potentially radical possibility of turning away; of refusing to re-integrate and re-monetize; refusing to allow our bodies to traverse – as agents of capital – through sites of expulsion and refusing to disrupt the potentially emergent prefigurative post-capitalist politics which may imagine into reality a new here and now.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article was first conceived in dialogue with the Marxian anthropologist, Rex Clark. I would also like to recognize Kesho Scott’s influence on my initial interest in slum tourism. Ashley MacDonald provided her ever-helpful notes on the submission draft and Mary Mostafanezhad pushed for this article to see the light of publication. The three reviewers improved this article with prompt and rigorous reviews.
REFERENCES


Steinbrink, M. (2012), ‘“We did the slum!”— urban poverty tourism in historical perspective’, Tourism Geographies, 14:2, pp. 213–34.


SUGGESTED CITATION

Henry, Jacob (2020), ‘Morality in aversion?: Meditations on slum tourism and the politics of sight’, Hospitality & Society, 10:2, pp. 157–72, doi: https://doi.org/10.1386/hosp_00018_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jacob Henry is a cultural geographer at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. He is currently working on two projects. The first investigates the cultural studies and political geographies of tourism, especially volunteer tourism. The second project investigates post-wage livelihoods in rural Namibia. Readers of this article might also enjoy his recent articles in Geopolitics, Annals of Tourism Research and African Geographical Review.

Contact: Department of Geography and Environment, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu, HI 96826, USA.
E-mail: jacoblh@hawaii.edu

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9329-4332

Jacob Henry has asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.