

Exploraciones/Explorations

Theorizing Slum Tourism: Performing, Negotiating and Transforming Inequality

Eveline Dürr and Rivke Jaffe

Abstract: This Exploration focuses on the emerging field of slum tourism research, which has the potential to connect Latin American and Caribbean studies on tourism and urban inequality. Slum tourism involves transforming poverty, squalor and violence into a tourism product. Drawing on both altruism and voyeurism, this form of tourism is a complex phenomenon that raises various questions concerning power, inequality and subjectivity. This essay seeks to advance the theoretical debate on slum tourism research and to stimulate comparative studies. Introducing brief examples of slum tourism in Mexico and Jamaica, this contribution moves towards an initial theorization of the performance, negotiation and transformation of inequality in a framework of tourism and global mobilities. *Keywords:* tourism, inequality, urban poverty, Mexico, Jamaica.

Several decades worth of research have been conducted on tourism developments in Latin America and the Caribbean. However, the bulk of this research has focused on non-urban tourism. Similarly, while urban inequalities have been the focus of much work on the region's cities, limited attention has been paid to urban tourism. This Exploration seeks to draw attention to the emerging field of slum tourism research, which has the potential to connect studies on tourism and urban inequality.

Slum tourism has been evolving quickly across the world, with a number of well-known cases in Latin American and Caribbean cities, and particularly in Brazil. The phenomenon has been gaining increasing attention both within the tourism industry and as a topic of scholarly research. It has also been the focus of growing debate amongst a broader public, triggering a controversy on tourism and poverty alleviation, voyeurism, ethics and exploitation. In scholarly research, approaches to slum tourism remain largely fragmented and characterized by a plethora of case studies based on different approaches and disciplines. Comparative research and theoretical contributions addressing more conceptual concerns are still scarce.

The majority of recent empirical research on slum tourism, with key studies emerging in the field of geography, has focused on commercial, entrepreneurial tours offered in Brazil, South Africa and India (Freire-Medeiros 2008; Rolfes 2010). These studies tend to focus on tourism as a form of consumption, rather than asking how a broader range of actors connect in the 'slum tourist encounter' (cf. Cohen 1984; Crouch 2007) to convert the slum into a tourism product. However, there are recent attempts to create a forum for discussion and exchange amongst researchers in this field (www.slumtourism.net), to go beyond single case studies and address more general issues. This is reflected in the first international conference on slum tourism, which took place at the University of Bristol in 2010, and resulted in an edited volume (Frenzel et al. 2012) and a special journal edition

(Frenzel and Koens 2012). These publications bring researchers from different disciplines into dialogue and provide an overview of the state of the art in this new research field.

Building on these developments, this article seeks to advance the theoretical debate on slum tourism research and to stimulate comparative studies. After a short introduction to slum tourism, we briefly discuss examples of slum tourist initiatives in Mexico and Jamaica, moving towards a preliminary theorization of the performance, negotiation and transformation of inequality in a framework of tourism and global mobilities.

Situating slum tourism

There is no clear and universal definition of a 'slum'. The term, which is subject to on-going debate, is vague and always relational, shaped by specific contexts and interests (Gilbert 2007). We understand 'slumming' as a tourist experience that involves visiting urban areas characterized by poverty, squalor and violence. Despite the current boom in slum tourism, the phenomenon is not a recent invention. Its historical trajectory reaches back to Victorian England, when affluent nineteenth-century 'adventurers' in the UK would leave their safe, comfortable elite spaces to explore underprivileged urban districts, which were perceived as dangerous and morally dubious (Koven 2006). This practice spread to cities in the USA, where slumming included trips to so-called 'ethnic' and 'exotic' neighbourhoods, such as 'Little Italy', 'China Town' and African-American districts (Heap 2009; Steinbrink 2012). Connecting socially and economically diverse spaces, these tourism activities created new forms of urban encounter.

Contemporary slum tourism continues to rely on converting insecurity and unfamiliarity into adventure and pleasure. This form of tourism is now widespread and constantly diversifying as marginalized urban spaces are commodified around the world. In addition to European and North American tours, slumming has become increasingly popular in cities in the Global South. It is important to note that a 'typical' slum tour is hard to define. These tours cater to different travel budgets, targeting low-budget backpackers as well as the premium tourism sector. Tours range from community-based approaches with a high level of residents' involvement to trips almost entirely conducted by entrepreneurs, with limited resident participation. Slum tours are also heavily shaped by their situatedness in wider historical and socio-political conditions: township tours in South Africa are tied into the legacy of apartheid politics while favela tours in Brazil rely on exotic and erotic connotations.

Slum tourism can be understood against the background of transformations in tourism. Following academic, policy and media critiques of the social, cultural and environmental impacts of mass tourism, and in the context of more individualized post-Fordist tourist desires, a set of so-called 'new tourisms' emerged (Mowforth and Munt 2008; Baud and Ypeij 2009). Tourism became an important site for the development of ethical and sustainable consumption initiatives, and for the elaboration of distinction through consumption.

An important recent trend in this regard is pro-poor, community-based, volunteer, ethical and other forms of 'responsible tourism', often viewed as better op-

tions for pursuing development and combating global inequalities (Scheyvens 2011). These forms of tourism promise a meaningful and transformative experience that is rewarding for both tourists and local communities (Vodopivec and Jaffe 2011; Dürr 2012a, 2012b). They also cater to tourists' desire to experience the 'authentic' rather than the staged – something that is not primarily 'created' for them. Urban deprivation marks tourism experiences as 'real', in comparison to other tourist performances which are perceived as compromised and artificial (Mowforth et al. 2008). A further important trend is the growing interest in visiting sites of death, decay and disaster, evident for instance in the growth of 'dark tourism' and 'disaster tourism' (Lennon and Foley 2002). We argue for an approach to slum tourism at the intersection of these trends.

Latin American and Caribbean cases: Mexico City and Kingston

Infamous for their violent and criminal reputations, the neighbourhoods of Tepito in Mexico City and Trench Town in Kingston offer community-based tours in similar but distinct urban areas. While both are central districts of globalizing cities shaped by urban inequalities, there are striking parallels and differences in the neighbourhood, urban and national contexts. Like many other tropical tourism destinations, Mexico and Jamaica rely heavily on the tourist trope of paradise, with national branding emphasizing tranquil beaches, lush jungles and cultural heritage. Such representations are undermined by slum tourism, which relies on the foregrounding of deprivation and squalor. Slum tourism ties into media reports of violent crime in these two countries, and as such is sometimes seen as damaging to mass tourism and foreign investment. These issues are negotiated differently in Mexico City and Kingston. In Mexico City, municipal actors are eager to present a refurbished historic centre and oppose the touristification of marginal spaces. In Kingston, state actors promote inner-city areas as official tourist attractions within a broader policy of urban development and heritage tourism. In both cities, the tours are community-based and rely strongly on residents' involvement.

Tepito

Tepito, a cluster of some 25 streets in the heart of Mexico City, is known as a *barrio bravo*, a crime-ridden, low-income neighbourhood where street vendors sell stolen goods (*fayuca*) at bargain prices. More recently, Tepito gained fame as the centre of the Santa Muerte cult which caters to the spiritual needs of a rapidly growing number of national and international devotees, including individuals involved in criminal activities.

Most research on Tepito has addressed the economy and organization of the street vendors, studying the multiple, intertwined relationships that vendors and their leaders maintain with state officials, political parties and residents. With the neoliberal turn, NAFTA and the wider availability of US goods, drug traffic and guns eclipsed Tepito's *fayuca* trade, resulting in violent conflicts and a social crisis. Tepito is also a site of South-South globalization processes: Korean and Chinese vendors are entering the market, while Chinese wholesalers have begun to offer credit to the local vendors, claiming leadership roles in organizations.

Tepito's contemporary networks extend far beyond Mexico, linking to formal and informal markets in the Americas and Asia (Ribeiro 2010).

Despite Tepito's image as a site of poverty, crime and violence, the residents demonstrate pride in their history and their barrio's achievements (Grisales Ramírez 2003). Their pride ties to Tepito-based cultural productions, from murals and photo exhibitions to movies and socio-religious innovation. Today, the local Centro de Estudios Tepiteños is a popular cultural centre that works on improving Tepito's reputation (Hernández Hernández 2008; Cross and Hernández Hernández 2011). One such initiative is 'Tepitours: the Safari Tepiteño', which arranges cultural tours through the barrio, aiming to alter its negative image. The tour starts at the cultural centre with an introduction to the barrio's history and its current situation. Newspaper articles, books and other records displaying Tepito's rich history and community life are proudly presented to the tourists. Emphasis is placed on this neighbourhood's uniqueness, on the residents' struggle to gain recognition within wider society and on a number of public characters who live in the barrio. The guided pedestrian journey through the barrio's streets highlights its markets, sporting centres, typical *vecindades* housing, eateries and spiritual sites. Close contact and conversation between tourists and residents is a central aspect of the tour. The tourists are predominantly international visitors, who want to learn more about Mexico's urban poor. National tourists hardly ever participate, although the tour received extensive coverage in the Mexican press (Mundo 2011; Publimetro 2011).

Tepito tours must be understood within Mexico City's wider globalizing urban context. As the city has grown, space has become a valuable resource and Tepito is a potential extension zone of the city centre. This is reinforced by efforts to revitalize the historic city centre as a tourist attraction and commercial hub, which have triggered gentrification, privatization of public space and new forms of surveillance. This has led to a new form of marginalization as municipally imposed visions of urban renewal and modernization threaten Tepito's existing social structures and built environment. Local resistance to these processes has, however, contributed to a strengthening of Tepito community identity.

However, the touristification of this barrio increases the tensions between state actors, who oppose the Tepito tours, and the local residents. The community-based Tepito tours challenge official policies and city planning. They can be read as a strategy of resistance: as the municipal government is incapable or unwilling to help alter Tepito's reputation, certain residents take action themselves, using tourism as a means to advance their goals by representing and performing a more favourable image to a global audience. However, tourism also entrenches previously existing conflicts between leading figures in this district as not all locals benefit in the same way from these activities.

Trench Town

Trench Town, in Kingston, Jamaica, is a so-called inner-city community in the heart of West Kingston, with a current population of about 25,000. While it first developed as a squatter settlement, housing early twentieth-century rural migrants in close proximity to the capital city's central market district, it was consolidated as a colonial government housing scheme in the 1940s. The area's impoverished con-

ditions were exacerbated following Jamaica's political violence of the 1970s, which led to internal divisions and enmity and reinforced the neighbourhood's reputation as a violent ghetto. The following decades saw Trench Town, along with Kingston's other inner-city neighbourhoods, becoming increasingly affected by transnational drugs trade, gang violence, and a criminal leadership sheltered by close political ties (Clarke 2006; Sives 2002).

Reggae and Rastafari have long been central in tourist imaginaries of Jamaica (Niaah and Stanley-Niaah 2008). Trench Town's main claim to fame is as the 'birthplace of reggae'. The neighbourhood was home to reggae superstar Bob Marley, along with many other reggae, ska and rocksteady musicians. In addition to being immortalized in a number of Bob Marley's songs, Trench Town provided the setting for internationally successful Jamaican movies such as *The Harder They Come* and *Rockers*. The neighbourhood also played a central role in the emergence of the socio-religious movement of Rastafari (Simpson 1998). These forms of popular culture mean that representations of Kingston and more specifically Trench Town have been subject to global circulation for several decades already.

However, Jamaica's tourism industry is concentrated on the island's north coast, far from Kingston's ghettos. Until recently, few tourists would leave their all-inclusive resorts for a one-day bus tour to Kingston. Such tours might drive through Trench Town without allowing tourists to leave the bus, letting them off at the official Bob Marley Museum in an upscale area of Kingston. Only a few of the more adventurous tourists would make their way to Trench Town.

This has begun to change over the past decade with the renovation and development of Culture Yard, Bob Marley's former home in Trench Town. Run by the Trench Town Development Association (TTDA), a grassroots community organization, Culture Yard invites tourists to experience inner-city Kingston for themselves. Local residents guide visitors on tours that feature a museum, a music studio and a school, as well as interaction with artists, craftspeople and community elders in the wider area. The tour highlights the neighbourhood's poverty, as well as local educational and economic initiatives. In addition to tours, a multi-day festival with live concerts featuring local and international artists is held annually to mark Bob Marley's birthday.

Kingston has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, related not so much to tourism as to the city's role within global networks of migration, popular culture and transnational crime. There have been various efforts to regenerate downtown Kingston by promoting heritage tourism and cultural industries (Hoagland 2007; Webster 2008). Consequently, unlike in Mexico City, Kingston's community-run tourism activities fit within official urban and tourism policies. Jamaican government agencies, local hoteliers and architects and international donors have supported the development of Culture Yard, which has been designated a protected national heritage site.

The TTDA's tourism initiatives are not only intended to improve the neighbourhood's reputation; the organizers also hope that they will promote unity amongst community residents and diminish the high rates of violence that the area suffers. While visitors to Culture Yard tend to have positive experience, the same violence still prevents tourists from taking the tour, or even coming to Kingston. Indeed, one of Culture Yard's founders migrated to London after one of his close

friends was murdered. Similarly, while many wealthier Jamaicans do see Trench Town as a source of pride and central to national heritage, and support its development as a tourism destination, they remain loath to visit themselves. Notwithstanding considerable local, national and international financial and media support (Morgan 2012), persistent violence in the area still threatens the neighbourhood's viability as a tourist destination.

Theorizing slum tourism: performing, negotiating and transforming inequality

Slum tourism involves transforming poverty, squalor and violence into a tourism product. Drawing on both altruism and voyeurism, this form of tourism is a complex phenomenon that raises various questions concerning power, inequality and subjectivity. The slum tourist encounter is premised on pre-existing national, class and racial inequalities. Yet the local reality of this encounter requires a specific performance and negotiation of these often abstract forms of global inequality. Tourists and slum-dwellers find themselves literally embodying a certain structural position, as they become personally involved in reconfiguring difference and inequality along these fault lines. This encounter is far from unmediated: state actors and media representations are significant in setting the parameters for interaction. We argue that grasping the complexities of this phenomenon necessitates a twin focus on the political economy of slum tourism projects and their representational-performative politics.

Such an approach enables us to understand how the urban poor, tourists and formal state actors participate in the unequal encounters involved in slum tourism. An empirical focus on the social practice of slum tours – how and by whom are these slum tours conducted, implemented and altered over time? – allows us to understand how political economies (at the neighbourhood, urban and global scale) intersect with discursive and imaginative features. This approach entails investigating what new social relationships and subjectivities are produced through the 'slum tourism encounter' between slum-dwellers, tourists and state and corporate actors. It also involves studying how the commodification of urban deprivation affects the political and economic clout of slum-dwellers. Finally, it requires a closer focus on the representational strategies and social practices through which urban deprivation is aestheticized, performed and marketed.

Mobile Representations, Mobile Tourists

Approaches to transformations in tourism need to be connected to the study of mobilities. The last decade has seen the emergence of a 'mobilities turn', or 'new mobilities paradigm', in the social sciences, with increased attention to the mobilities and immobilities of people, capital, technologies, commodities and images (Cresswell 2006; Hannam et al. 2006). A strong emphasis within this field has been on the interconnections between the physical movement of people and the virtual movement achieved through the circulation of images and information. A mobilities approach to tourism goes beyond studying the physical movement of people between and across material places. It also involves analysing the popular and offi-

cial representations of these movements and places, and the way these places are created, performed and modified by tourists and hosts (Salazar 2010; Sheller and Urry 2004).

Tourism mobilizes and alters places by linking them into global systems of dissemination and representation. The slum as a consumable spectacle relies on familiar representations of urban poverty that circulate globally through movies, documentaries, postcards and photographs. It is this aestheticized deprivation that lies at the heart of slum tours. Existing work on slum tourism has tentatively explored the often sensational representation of deprived urban areas as mobile imaginaries, considering a range of media (Freire-Medeiros 2008; Linke 2012). Little is known, however, about the agency of poor urban residents and the role of formal state actors in the production, manipulation and circulation of these representations of poverty, people and place.

These representations gain power and potential precisely in the interactions between tourists and these different groups. Slum tourism will often reproduce clichéd images of the urban poor, but it may also provide openings for more nuanced, alternative or unusual representations. We propose an approach that uncovers the ways in which mobile representations of slums and differentially mobile people are mutually constitutive. Imaginaries of places and peoples are produced and reproduced through local encounters and interactions, even as these imaginaries can also contribute to the modification of local identities on the ground. 'The local' and 'the slum' are both created and disseminated through globally circulating (tourist) representations. Such an analysis requires a holistic approach examining explicitly the interconnections between the hosts, tourists and state and corporate actors.

Tourism and inequality

Tourism is a valuable site for understanding cross-cultural, cross-class negotiations of power and inequality (Macleod and Carrier 2010; Church and Coles 2007). Much of the existing research on slum tourism focuses on the tourists' experience, motives and perceptions. Connecting the experience of local residents, tourists and state and corporate actors in the slum tourist encounter can extend our understanding of how these different actors negotiate inequalities. Where these inequalities may be implicit in other tourist encounters, in slum tourism they form the basis of the tourist experience. A focus on performance, interactions and interconnections enables a closer study of the meaning-making practices that emerge within the encounter between different stakeholders, and the new relationships and subjectivities that may be produced.

Within the slum tourist encounter, an explicit focus on the interpretations, aspirations and identifications of residents also allows a better understanding of how the urban poor can utilize global connections to achieve local change. Appadurai (2002) argues that the urban poor are increasingly able to position themselves simultaneously within local and border-crossing networks, utilizing global, horizontal networks to achieve physical and social changes in their direct environment. This poses the question to what extent slum tourism can function as a successful case of

‘globalization from below’ and how this affects the city and its sociopolitical, economic matrix as a whole.

At its most basic, slum tourism involves the commodification of urban deprivation. We suggest a research angle that starts from the slum tourist encounter to understand how this affects the political and economic clout of slum-dwellers. Residents of these marginalized areas take part in a politics of representation within tourism encounters, actively engaging with dominant representations of their neighbourhood, themselves, and their city. This may include the potential to strategically use slum tourism to improve both the reputation and the physical environment of their neighbourhood. In this context however it is important to note that the urban poor are not a homogenous class, but characterized by internal differentiation and hierarchies. This leads to a further field of exploration, which is to study how this kind of tourism reinforces or challenges intra-slum inequalities.

Conclusion

In this article, we have proposed an initial framework to advance the study of slum tourism, approaching this form of tourism as a site to understand the reproduction and transformation of global and urban inequalities. These inequalities are performed, negotiated and sometimes transformed in the context of the slum tourist encounter, where political economies and globally circulating representations intersect. Slum tours are situated in, and shaped by, specific local and global conditions that must be taken into consideration to comprehensively understand slum tours’ distinctive features and the ways they are advertised and performed (Dürr 2012a).

Given that very few studies have explicitly investigated the voices of locals (Freire-Medeiros 2012), more emphasis needs to be placed on the self-positioning and agency of the urban poor, while still considering the dynamic interplay between residents, tourists, and corporate and state actors. In addition, comparative approaches enable a more nuanced analysis of the mechanisms and institutions through which inequality is both reinforced and contested in an increasingly mobile world.

In both Tepito and Trench Town, residents use tourism to counter their neighbourhood’s negative reputation. In both cases, the tours engage with globally and nationally circulating spatial imaginaries of the neighbourhood, drawing on positive images of local cultural achievements in music, art and religious practice to combat the stigma of poverty, violence and crime. In contrast to more sensationalist slum tours, these community-based tours entail a performance of cultural resilience in the face of urban adversity. These representational strategies, which are closely connected to the livelihoods of residents, intersect in different ways with broader power structures evident in urban development policy and planning. In Kingston, Trench Town’s locally embedded politics of place are supported by urban and tourism policies, which promote urban regeneration through cultural industries and (pro-poor) heritage tourism. In Mexico City, however, municipal policies aimed at urban renewal and modernization see Tepito’s tours as undesirable and this form of tourism has led to tensions between residents and state actors as well as amongst residents.

Fully understanding the embodied performances as well as the embedded representations that constitute the slum tourism encounter necessitates more in-depth ethnographic research, going beyond the scope of this Exploration. A comparative, actor-oriented approach to slum tourism along the lines set out in this essay can provide fresh insights to tourism studies, urban anthropology and mobility studies, offering detailed analyses of how intersecting physical and virtual mobilities relate to social differentiation and place-making in the globalized cities of Latin America and the Caribbean.

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Eveline Dürr is a Professor at the Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology, Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich. Previously, she held a position as Associate Professor in the School of Social Sciences, Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. She received her PhD and *venia legendi* (Habilitation) from the University of Freiburg, Germany. She has conducted fieldwork in Mexico, the USA, New Zealand and Germany on topics ranging from patterns of cultural change to migration and the formation of cultural identities. Her research projects and publications reflect her interests in urban anthropology, spatiality, representation and globalisation, and take into consideration the historical trajectories that have formed present conditions. She has published in peer-reviewed journals such as *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* and *Tourism Geographies*. <Eveline.Duerr@lmu.de>

Rivke Jaffe is an Assistant Professor at the Centre for Urban Studies at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. She previously held teaching and research positions at Leiden University, the University of the West Indies, and the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV). She has conducted fieldwork in Jamaica, Curaçao and Suriname on topics ranging from the urban environment to the political economy of multiculturalism. Her current research, in Jamaica, studies how criminal organizations and the state share control over urban spaces and populations, and the formulations of governance and citizenship that result from this. She is the author of several peer-reviewed articles in journals such as *Anthropological Quarterly*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, and *Social and Cultural Geography*. In addition, she is the editor of *The Caribbean City* (Ian Randle, 2008) and the co-editor of *Urban Pollution* (with Eveline Dürr, Berghahn, 2010). <r.k.jaffe@uva.nl>

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