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Citation:

Frenzel, F and Koens, K (2012) Slum Tourism: Developments in a Young Field of Interdisciplinary Tourism Research. *Tourism Geographies*, 14 (2). 195 - 212. ISSN 1461-6688 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2012.633222>

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Slum Tourism: developments in a young field of interdisciplinary tourism research

Abstract

This paper introduces the special issue on slum-tourism with a reflection on the state of the art on this new area of tourism research. After a review of the literature we discuss the breaths of research that was presented at the conference ‘Destination Slum’, the first international conference on slum-tourism. Identifying various dimensions as well as similarities and differences of slum tourism in different parts of the world we contest that slum tourism has evolved from being practiced at only a limited number of places into a truly global phenomenon which now is performed on five continents. Equally the variety of services and ways in which tourists visit the slums has increased.

The widening scope and diversity of slum tourism is clearly reflected in the variety of papers presented at the conference and in this special issue. Whilst academic discussion on the theme is evolving rapidly, slum tourism is still a relatively young area of research. Most papers at the conference and indeed most slum tourism research as a whole appears to remain focused on understanding issues of representation, often concentrating on a reflection of slum tourists rather than tourism. Aspects such as the position of local people remained underexposed as well as empirical work on the actual practice of slum tourism. To address these issues, we set out a research agenda in the final part of the article with potential avenues for future research to further the knowledge on slum tourism.

Slum tourism, definitions, ethics, commodification, representation

Introduction

This special issue of *Tourism Geographies* deals with the concept of slum tourism, which has been receiving increased attention in academic research after its (re)emergence at the end of the 20th century. Amidst a proliferation of case studies, the emerging field of slum-tourism now faces the challenge of addressing the definition of its scope and consequently its main conceptual questions. This is particularly true in respect of the many overlaps that exist between slum tourism research and related concepts and aspects of critical tourism research. We hope the special issue can assist in getting to grip with these challenges. It finds its origin in the conference “*Destination Slum! – Reflections on the production and consumption of poverty in tourism*”, which was held in Bristol from 9-11 December 2010. The current article serves as an introduction to the subject and aims to provide a backdrop for the following papers. After a concise critical examination of research on slum tourism to

date, we discuss the development of the conference and its purpose. We then reflect on the papers presented at the conference and provide an overview of the seven papers that now form this special issue. While the papers echo many of the themes that are found in the literature on slum tourism, they also point towards the development of new approaches and an expansion of the field. In the last section we discuss omissions in the current literature and line out potential fruitful approaches to the topic and directions for future research.

Assessment of previous research on slum tourism

Slum tourism has been addressed explicitly in tourism literature since it (re-)emerged as a distinct niche of tourism in the last three decades, although it has been punctually mentioned however, for example by MacCannell's (1976) comments on ghetto tours in "The Tourist". The academic debate follows very vocal discussions in the realm of journalism, which focused on the moral ambiguities surrounding "slum tourism". Academics were quick to dismiss many of the journalist accounts as problematic. Selinger and Outterson (2009, p.3) commented critically: "Perpetuating one-sided polemics, they fail to satisfy the demands of communal justification. Furthermore, most contributors to poverty tourism discourse do not comment on whether other people already have advanced similar, if not identical, views". Ethical concerns however remains one mayor topic also in the academic discussions, albeit often in a more differentiated and case-based manner.

Initially most reflections focused on two main cases of slum tourism in the global south: township tourism in South Africa and Favela Tourism in Brazil. The phenomenon of township tourism in the major urban centres of South Africa gained attention in the 1980s. Township tours, developed to educate white local policymakers on the situation in the townships, became increasingly popular among so called "struggle junkies" - political tourists interested in the fight against apartheid (Dondolo 2002). Since the end of apartheid this nucleus of township tourism has developed massively. It is now seen as a major source of potential economic revenue and government policy supports the channelling of tourism flows into townships. While no figures exist for South Africa as a whole, it is estimated that every year up to 300.000 people visit the townships around Cape Town showing the importance of tourism at least on a regional level (Rolfes 2009).

Authors have emphasized the role of township tours in representing the "new South Africa". According to Ramchander (2007) townships do not only stand as places of poverty and crime, but also evoke the courage of black South Africa struggle for equal democratic rights. Marginality continues to be an important feature of Post-Apartheid South Africa as political history; lifestyle and culture of people in townships are successfully commoditised and marketed in the tours. At the same time people from the townships have difficulty in profiting from the increasing tourism flows (Rogerson 2004). Such reflections on the ethics of township tourism can be seen as closely connected with a broader tourism research that deals with ways in which marginalised groups are subjected to the tourist gaze (Urry 2002) .

The other major global slum tourism destination can be found in Rio de Janeiro where the favelas - particularly 'Rocinha' - attract large groups of tourists. Favelas, like townships have a specific history as areas of urban poverty in the Brazilian context (Cardoso et al. 2005). They were predominantly associated with negative signifiers like poverty and later drug trade and violence. Favela tourism started during the Rio 1992 Earth summit, when so many delegates were interested in visiting the favelas that local tour operators started offering stand-alone "favela tours". Since then they have become a popular destination with around 480.000 tourists visiting per year (Freire-Medeiros 2009). Tourism has arguably played an important role in changing the image of the favela towards positive denominations. In the townships the initial tours started with the political motive to show the impoverished situation in the townships and this still forms the basis of most tours today (Butler 2010). Tourism in the favelas has always been more aimed at representing a rather positive imaginary. Some of these positive signifiers have been associated with the favela before the arrival of tourism. Favelas were represented as places of "authentic" culture, for example samba music and dance like in Marcel Camus' film "Orpheu Negro" from 1959 (Jaguaribe & Hetherington 2004). Freire-Medeiros (2009) has indicated that tourism has played an important role in the creation of what she calls the travelling "trademark favela", a global imaginary of the favela reproduced increasingly in films, video games, night clubs and parties around the world. The "travelling favela" has itself induced new flows of tourism to the favelas. It can be argued slum tourism takes place in the context of other modes of representation of slums and presumably much can be learned from exploring the semantics of these different modes (Linke 2012; Frisch 2012).

The most prominent example of the expanding development of slum tourism may be found in Mumbai. Its tourism development dates back to 2006 when an English/Indian owned tour operator started the tours after taking inspiration from favela tourism in Rio de Janeiro and it has rapidly established itself as another "big" slum tourism destination (Freire-Medeiros 2009; Meschkank 2010; Dyson 2012). A link has also been made to film tourism research in respect of "Slumdog Millionaire" and the subsequent increase in slum tourism in Mumbai (Mendes 2010). Other more recent work on slum tourism has taken place in Kenya where evidence suggests slum tours of the 'Kibera' slum date back to the global World Social Forum (WSF) meeting in 2007. Quite parallel to the initial occurrence of tourism in the favelas, delegates attending an international conference of civil society actors lined up for tours offered into Kibera during the WSF. These tours have by now turned into a lucrative business by at least five operators targeting mainstream tourists (Mowforth & Munt 2009). Slum tourism research has proven to be "undisciplined", much like tourism research in general (Tribe 1997). A wide range of disciplines have dealt with the phenomenon and it has been discussed from a variety of theoretical angles. The academic field of slum tourism research is comprised primarily of case studies. By nature these are unique and it is not always easy to directly transfer concepts, ideas and theoretical angles. Rolfes (2009) has pointed to the differences that matter between tourism in townships, favelas or other kinds of slums. While the definition of a slum according to the UN Habitat

is “a heavily populated urban area characterised by substandard housing and squalor” (United Nations Human Settlements Programme. 2003), these areas all originate in particular historical conditions and hence form distinct social and political spaces. Presumably then, forms of tourism to these areas also differ. Furthermore researchers have equally pointed to the fact that generalisations don’t stop on the level of the “global” slum, but continue in the more local denominations. A favela, as Freire-Medeiros (2009) has argued, is not like any other favela. Townships equally differ as do their possibilities for different forms of tourism (Koens 2012).

At the same time it is evident that the increasing number of case studies has led academic slum tourism debates to a certain level of comparative and conceptual reasoning. The occurrence of new cases has made a comparative approach towards a more thorough understanding of slum tourism even more salient, as parallels and indeed mutual influences between locations become more obvious. Flyvbjerg (2006) has argued how a range of case studies can be the backbone of good theorising. Such a development appears to be starting to take place within slum tourism research now.

A way of addressing conceptual questions has been to evoke a historical dimension of slum tourism. The poor attracted rich visitors long before the advent of “modern slum tourism”. Koven (2004) has pointed to the practice of “slumming”, a 19th century Victorian past time. Similar historical studies have been conducted for Harlem and Chicago and for the Bronx (Conforti 1996; Heap 2009; Anbinder 2001; Dowling 2009) but also for continental Europe (Welz 1993; Steinbrink 2012) follows up on the expansion of slum tourism research in his contribution to this special issue by identifying different periods of slum-tourism towards the development of what he calls “global slumming” in the present.

Seeing slum tourism as a business transaction, the questioning of the exchange is at the heart of quite a few conceptual attempts. As others Freire-Medeiros (2009; 2011) has evoked the concept of commodification to discuss favela tourism. Commodification of poverty is here understood as a way of capitalist value creation. For Freire-Medeiros, this is exceptional as she notes:

“ [A]lthough under capitalism every single thing may be turned into a commodity, [Marx states that] there is one thing which can never be bought or sold: poverty, for it has no exchange value. The fact is that at the turn of the millennium, poverty has been framed as a product for consumption through tourism on a global scale.” (Freire-Medeiros 2009, p.586)

The more general notion of commodification has been discussed intensely in tourism literature, also in relation to questions of authenticity (Hannam & Knox 2009). Critically, commodification can be seen as a differentiation between use value and exchange value. Use value is considered as socially embedded value while exchange value of the commodity is abstracted from the social context of its use. The question that remains is what is being commodified in slum-tourism or in other words: what is the slum-tourism product? Is it really the slum itself and the imaginaries associated with it? Asking the tourists, research has established that poverty is the most important quality that tourists associate with slums. One can follow logically that this is what they come to see when they do a slum tour

(Rolfes et al. 2009). Analysing the discourses of justification that tourists employ to explain their visits, it has been shown that mere curiosity to see poverty is rarely stated as a reason to visit slums, presumably because such a curiosity would be considered morally problematic and voyeuristic. Scrutinizing the specific role of intermediaries like tour operators and guides, Butler (2010), Rolfes (2009) and Meschkank (2010) all argue they fulfil a significant role in creating a transformative narrative, a re-interpretation of poverty into something that is more easily told and sold. In this sense the poverty of Mumbai's Dharavi slum, an expectation of the tourist, is transformed by the tour into the experience of entrepreneurial spirit, ingenuity and diligence. In tours in Cape Town poverty is translated to historical injustice as well as ethnic and cultural uniqueness, while in Rio's favela tours poverty translates into community and solidarity. The way slum tourism is packaged with a particular focus on the way representations are crafted by professionals in the field seems to be a fruitful future avenue for research that deals with the ethical aspects of this phenomenon. Slum tourism representational techniques and their critique can be studied also in reference to reflections of 'literary slumming', the constructions and representations of poverty and slums in novels, films, video games, urban design and art (Williams 2008). These questions were widely discussed in the conference and contributions to this special issue by Dovey and King (2012) and Dyson (2012) touch upon it. Crossley's (2012) article provides a further link focusing on a second transformation that is present in the slum-tourism exchange: the transformation that concerns the tourist subject.

Quite a few conceptual approaches have addressed the question of the slum tourist's subjectivity. Slum tourism in South Africa, Rio de Janeiro and Nairobi was initiated by politically motivated tourists. Their demand for the slum, often voiced in the name of awareness and political transformation, created the initial set up of slum tour infrastructure, used later by larger cohorts of more mainstream tourists for whom the experience is packaged and somewhat mass produced. This development mirrors a more general pattern of tourist consumption and comes with differentiation processes that are clearly visible in slum-tourism. Researchers have shown how slum-tourists, often aided by intermediaries, construct their own experience as more authentic, morally superior and more valuable than those of other slum-tourists (Freire-Medeiros 2009). Consumerist distinction, as Bourdieu (1984) has shown, employs aesthetic judgement to defend class positions. Slum tourism, as a highly ambiguous form of consumption seems to evoke consumerist distinction based on moral and political judgement. To avoid replicating the distinctions tourists makes about their slum tours, it is worthwhile referring Koven's (2004) definition of slumming:

"I have made mobility, not fixity, central to my definition of slumming. I use slumming to refer to activities undertaken by people of wealth, social standing, or education in urban spaces inhabited by the poor. Because the desire to go slumming was bound up in the need to disavow it, my history of slumming includes the activities of men and women who used any word except slumming – charity, sociological research, Christian rescue, social work, investigative journalism – to explain why they entered the slums. My definition of slumming

depends upon a movement, figured as some sort of “descent” across urban spatial and class, gender and sexual boundaries”(Koven 2004, p.9)

Such generalising allows linking slum tourism research to established areas of reflection on the role of poverty in the construction of middle class traveller, for example backpacker subjectivity. In this vein Hutnyk (1996) has shown how backpackers construct themselves as “better travellers” by engaging in charity in Calcutta. At the same time Calcutta is constructed as a place of poverty, which enables and justifies the charitable intervention. Rebuking the moral and political high ground those travellers may claim, critical researchers have also discussed volunteer tourism and justice tourism in respect of the images that these practices produce of the people visited. Critique has been voiced against the post-colonial character of the underlying discourses and imaginaries (Simpson 2005). Salazar (2004) has pointed out how ‘development tourists’ were often less interested in the development of the places they visited than their own development. This indicates a potential expansion of slum tourism research into the research of development and social movement practice when dealing with the context of high global mobilities and political tourism (Pezzullo 2007; Frenzel et al. 2011). In this special issue it is Crossley’s (2012) contribution in particular that sheds new light on this question. A further expansion of slum tourism research involves linking it to the more pragmatic questions of poverty relief through tourism. This question is paramount in research of tourism in the developing world. Is it at all possible for tourists to make any difference and if so, in what way? In the 1970s optimism was great that tourism could form a tool, a “passport” for development, a claim that first triggered a lot of development activity but was soon questioned by empirical research (De Kadt 1979). More detailed research on the benefits of slum tourism has particularly taken place with regards to the townships in South Africa and is less positive. Scheyvens (2007) has questioned whether tourism can provide economic empowerment for the township communities and Rogerson (2004) has – in respect of Soweto – identified problems like limited demand and limited training of communities in dealing with tourists as major obstacles to benefits of slum tourism for the townships. The question he asks concerns the potential of small businesses to provide development paths in townships.

We argue that slum tourism researchers could benefit from a deeper critical reflection of the debates surrounding community based tourism (CBT) and pro-poor tourism (PPT). Within CBT approaches, poverty is often part of the tourism product and poverty reduction the main rationale. CBT has been criticised for being rolled out as a catch all programme of neo-liberal development agencies, without much regard for local specific contexts or economic viability. Ruiz-Ballesteros & Hernunandez-Ramuriez (2010) criticise CBT by stating it created a niche market for a particular type of tourists rather than helping the poor. There is a dearth of critical empirical studies on CBT in Africa but Dixey (2008) found that donor CBT projects in Zambia were unsustainable and warns that this can perpetuate underdevelopment and argues that CBT remains a privileged solution. She concludes that even if lessons learnt are assimilated and community tourism enterprise development is more viable,

CBT will remain on the periphery of tourism development and have very limited potential for poverty reduction.

CBT is considered a form of PPT, defined as tourism that generates net-benefits to the poor (Ashley et al. 2001, p.2). However the emphasis of PPT is not necessarily on creating new tourism products but rather making existing (mainstream) tourism products more beneficial for the poor. PPT approaches have emphasised the need not to create new tourism products for poverty alleviation, but rather making existing (mass) tourism offerings more beneficial to the poor (Ashley & Haysom 2006). PPT approaches have been criticised on the basis of offering limited historical and conceptual grounding and doing little more than legitimising existing tourism practise with only minor changes (Harrison 2008). In an effort to rebuke this critique, proponents have argued that PPT chooses to focus on pragmatics and that even small improvements could be seen as a way forward (Goodwin 2008).

We believe slum tourism research can shed new lights on these debates by showing the importance of the global and local context in which tourism develops. Also it can help shift the focus away from the primarily quantitative and economic definitions of poverty that arguably underlies some of this research. Poverty cannot be limited to the lack of material resources, and hence poverty alleviation should not only focus on 'net benefit' or material income (Tomlinson et al. 2008). Slum tourism research might offer insights towards the development of qualitative criteria of poverty alleviation as existing research indicates the role tourists may play in giving recognition to urban communities that are stigmatised in their own societies (Freire-Medeiros 2009). At the same time such research needs to be wary of the fact that tourism can have a negative impact if the complexity and heterogeneity of communities are not sufficiently taken into account (Van der Duim et al. 2006).

Before we turn to a deeper reflection of how the conference and the papers in this special issue have contributed to an expansion of current slum-tourism research, let us state that this overview of the existing literature has been partial and limited. We hope to have shown some of the central debates in the field so far and we have also pointed towards the way in which this research can be expanded and further developed. In the next section we will reflect on the contributions from the conference and in more detail discuss the other papers of this special issue.

Reflections on the Destination Slum Conference

In this part of the article we reflect on the papers as they were presented at the conference "*Destination Slum! – Reflections on the production and consumption of poverty in tourism*". We investigate contributions of the papers but also comment on areas that received less attention and maybe need further investigation. The conference itself was enabled by an early career researcher grant provided by the University of the West of England to one of the authors (Fabian Frenzel) and marked the official launch of the international slum tourism network (Slum Tourism Network, 2010). Speaking on behalf of the entire organisational committee, we would like to express our gratitude to

all presenters and attendees for the great discussions and the organisational team for their support. The fact that it was possible to organise a conference solely involving slum tourism is indicative of the recent growth of interest in this subject. A total of 24 papers were presented at the “Destination Slum” conference, seven of which are highlighted in this special issue. Most of the other papers are published in an edited volume (Frenzel et al. 2012). Both publications form a comprehensive reflection of the state of the art of research in slum-tourism while also pointing towards omissions and future avenues for research. A full list of papers presented at the conference is shown in table 1.

Table 1: Papers presented at Destination Slum

The presented papers exemplified the interdisciplinary nature of slum tourism and included theoretical and empirical reflections using or combining approaches from anthropology, business and management studies, economics, geography, history, psychology and sociology. The majority of papers were qualitative in nature, while quantitative approaches were largely limited to descriptive statistics, reflecting the youth of the field and exploratory nature of much of the research. Half of the papers involved case studies, while the other half primarily approached slum tourism from a conceptual perspective. This contrasts somewhat with the general literature on slum tourism where most research is based on case studies. Few authors presented comparative research on different slums, although mutual grounds were often found in discussions following presentations. The outcomes of these discussions were enlightening and we would like to invite more research in this direction.

The geographical spread of the papers presented was impressive and showed slum tourism needs to be seen as a global phenomenon rather than restricted to certain parts of the (developed) world. Researchers from 6 continents presented their work on different forms of slum tourism in Africa, Asia, Europe, North and South America. Ten papers out of 24 focused on the townships in South Africa, the favelas in Brazil and Dharavi slum in India (figure 1), these are the areas that have received by far most attention in academic literature up till now. Other presentations focused on tourism in deprived urban areas elsewhere such as ghetto’s in the United States, the Ashwa’iyyatt in Egypt and Chinese “villages in cities”, while case studies from Cuba, Mexico, Thailand, Mozambique and Macedonia also were presented.

*Figure 1: Tag cloud describing the words most often used in abstracts submitted to Destination Slum!
– Reflections on the production and consumption of poverty in tourism*

A number of papers dealt with tourism in a setting that may not directly be viewed as a slum. An example of this is Linke’s (2012) contribution that discusses the way slum imaginaries are used in tourism in the ‘global North’. Other examples in the current issue come from Crossley (2012) and

Duerr (2012) and deal with tourism in a more rural setting. Although possibly better labelled poverty tourism, they provide enlightening findings that are relevant for tourism in urban slums as well and how loosely related these two types of tourism are. Indeed, it suggests that at least some forms of slum tourism may be seen as a type of poverty tourism.

Even though one of the defining characteristics of slum tourism appears to be poverty, the presentations showed that slums are not uniform entities. There are great social differences even within some of the ones visited by tourists and it is increasingly difficult to distinguish (parts of) slums from other more affluent suburbs. One example that was mentioned at the conference is 'Rocinha', the most famous tourist favela of which the lower slopes nowadays are highly developed (as represented by the presence of a McDonalds), which has led local government to actually no longer classify it as a favela. Such developments have not only practical consequences for slum tourism providers who need to adapt their narratives or for tourists expecting to see only abject poverty. They should also remind slum tourism researchers to critically reflect their conceptual understanding of poverty and slum tourism.

Nearly all authors acknowledge in one way or the other the ethical issues surrounding slum tourism dilemmas. Most papers focused their attention on the way slums are represented and consumed. Particular ethical implications seem to derive from the visual experience in which poverty depends on existing and often problematic signifiers. Such signifiers may for example be dirt and in a way certain tours seem to search for images of dirt. As Duerr (2012) shows in this special issue, this can go as far as making a rubbish dump into a tourism sight. Ethical problems also arise when slums are visually signified through the race and ethnicity of its inhabitants as for example the case of US ghetto tourism seemed to indicate.

Conference presentations primarily focussed on slum tours in which the visual experience was particularly emphasised. The extensive of images and films to support findings during many presentations highlights the importance of visual aspects of slum tourism on these tours. Although increasing numbers of accommodation and catering businesses become involved in slum tourism, these developments received little attention. Furthermore it was noted that there was a distinct lack of research that involved the ideas and perceptions of local people. Only a limited number of papers investigated the production of slum tourism and ways in which local businesses get involved. The lack of research on these issues might have practical reasons. Language and cultural barriers between (often) foreign middle-class researchers and local people make such research (particularly empirical) much more challenging than research on tourists. Almost all conceptual papers dealt with issues of representation, yet few discussed local concerns, even though particularly when dealing with issues of representation it is evidently important to take local concerns into account.

Overview of papers presented in the special issue

Turning to the individual papers that can be found in this special issue, we have tried to highlight certain work that reflects what was discussed at the conference and provides new insights on the concept of slum tourism. Starting with Steinbrink (2012), he reflects upon current globalised poverty tourism trends from a historical perspective. He notes how the emergence of different forms of tourism over time can be seen as a construction and reflection of the society they originate from. He takes the reader on a trip through the history of slumming, starting in London in Victorian Times and following it as it moved with British tourists into the United States in the late 19th century. He notices slums always have been constructed to represent “the other side” and “place of the other” not only in an economic, but also in a cultural sense. Changes in society (e.g. globalisation) can be seen as the precedent for the current manifestation of slum tourism. Steinbrink finishes by discussing how this affects tourists who relate themselves and their identity to those that are visited.

Crossley (2012) focuses on the role of poverty in the making of tourists’ subjectivities. Taking a psychosocial perspective she presents findings from a longitudinal research project that deals with the ways in which volunteers tourists experience and negotiate poverty. Poverty, she argues is perceived as “threatening” when it provides a challenge for Western materialistic lifestyles and identifies. This conflicts with their needs for presenting the Self in a positive light when doing volunteer work. Tourists deal with this by creating neutralising conceptions for the poverty that they see, for example by viewing impoverished communities as “poor but happy”. Such coping mechanisms act as barriers and prevent the intimate engagement that is seen as being exemplary of volunteer and slum tourism. This mitigation limits the potential of poverty to shock, move and change people’s perspective and may lead to objectification and stereotyping.

Dyson (2012) further develops the concept of representation and interpretation in his investigation of slum walking tours in Dharavi, India. The tours position themselves to represent “reality” to counter the “fake” or “fictional” negative images that dominate Western representations of slums. He explicates the difficulties of such a perspective and notes that representations are always subjective, conditional, and uncertain. His analysis of the different interpretations of “reality” by tourists sheds further light upon these issues by discussing how tourists use their agency to rationalise, interpret and comprehend what is offered to them in different ways. The article concludes that while the tours partially change tourist perceptions, the ability to transform the negative image of slums is restricted by the very techniques they use to position the slum as the archetype of “reality”.

Exploring the dilemmas and contradictions of the imaginary and representation of informal settlements in in Asia, Dovey and King (2012) tackle the aesthetics of slum tourism. While slum tourism involves the creation a brand like attraction of informal settlements as part of a city’s image, cities authorities generally see slums as having negative symbolic capital and place identity and try to hide them. Slum Tourism creates a paradoxical situation, where the flows of tourists to these areas are desired yet may foster urban imaginaries radically different from the ones cities and countries normally want to project. It is in this tension that they see the transformative potential of slum

tourism. The attraction of slums appears to be not formal beauty, but anxiousness and awe of being overwhelmed by informality. This may have the potential of re-considering political and moral positions.

Linke (2012) takes a more critical stance when she explores ways in which the iconic representations of shantytowns are produced for transnational consumption. In her insightful paper she shows how representations of the slum are taken out of their context and are recycled and consumed in tourism elsewhere. Competing representations of urban poverty are manufactured based on aesthetics and symbolic and affective means. Core images are detached from social life and globally mobilised for the use of artistic exhibits, fashion, social movements and private agents. Slums are represented in a decontextualized and typified way and consumed by those that can afford to refashion their social identity using these representations.

In his paper on tourism in Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro, Frisch (2012) explores the process through which the favela has been turned from a social problem into a tourist attraction. He argues tourism takes up the favela's rich symbolic potential and is both depending on as well as contributing to existing discourses. Of particular importance here are visual elements of the favela. In a critique on current tourism, the dominance of external agents and lacking local participation is seen as denying residents a role as thinking, independently acting subjects. He concludes current favela tourism does not go beyond a form of "negative sightseeing".

The difficult relationship between tourists and the local population is also explored by Duerr (2012). She relates slum tourism to the concept of transnational mobilities in the case of a town in Mexico where expats from the U.S.A. are involved in organizing tours to garbage dumps. The tours offer tourists the opportunity to visit a poor local community of people who dwell on the garbage site living from recycling. The stated aims of the tours are to educate and support these local communities. Duerr frames the tours in the complex North American-Mexican relationships, which is often shaped by power imbalances and uneven economic conditions. She highlights the role of transnational brokers in the production of slum-tourism as a potential field of further comparative research. Her conclusion is that despite potentially good intentions, the tours provide only limited space for local people to take ownership of how they are represented while the tourists and expats benefit either in their desire for 'authentic' experiences or in creating a nexus of meaning in which they might try position and legitimize themselves as foreign residents vis-a-vis the local community.

Avenues for future research

The papers in this special issue cover interesting ground and yet they provoke just as many questions as they answer. In the last section we will take a look at some of these questions. In this section we aim to describe some possible avenues for future research on slum tourism. Furthermore we try to single out what we think are crucial issues for future debate and have identified several points that come out of this from our perspective.

On the basis of the papers presented at the conference, it would appear that slum tourism is moving from individual and descriptive case studies towards more conceptual and theoretical work. This development is commendable and we hope it will continue. However, most conceptual work is limited to issues of representation and other areas of research are still mainly investigated from a case study perspective.

The increase of slum tourism research in different areas around the world has until now resulted in little research comparing and contrasting findings. To further conceptual questions and to expand knowledge in the field we would argue future research needs to address the difficulties that result from comparing cases and to embark on a comparative research agenda. This concerns for example the entry of the public sector as a stakeholder taking an active part in the development of slum tourism enterprises. In Rio de Janeiro, for example, recent developments have shown a whole wave of public sector interventions into the business in the name of urban regeneration and economic empowerment of the poor (Tourism Review 2010). These are similar to the frameworks in which the public sector has supported the development of township tourism in South Africa since over a decade ago (Rogerson 2005).

More significantly this support of the public sector in Rio comes after an initial scepticism over the practices of slum tourism from various state agencies. Slum tourism in Mumbai still is regarded with not dissimilar scepticism and has evoked what seems to be a vociferous condemnation in the Indian public realm (Dyson 2012). This shows some similarities to the initial reactions of certain parts of the Brazilian and South African public and might be a characteristic of early stages in the development of slum tourism. In all cases 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. Following on from this observation it might be worthwhile to explore a process character of slum tourism development. To what extent does it follow the route observed in the South Africa case and how can these differences be related to differing social contexts. Rio seems to be poised for a reflection on the gradual transformation of attitudes by the middle classes and political elites and research to be published by Bianca Freire-Medeiros (2012) will shed new lights onto the phenomenon.

The majority of papers implicitly or explicitly investigated slum tourism as a phenomenon of gazing at the “exotic and economically poor”. When viewed from this perspective such slum tourism research can be classified as part of the larger discourse of poverty tourism. However such a perspective does create a bias towards international slum tourism in developing countries and appears to be insufficient to describe domestic, cultural and/or political tourism in slums. For these forms of slum tourism, a definition based on geographical boundaries would seem more suitable, even if such an approach has its own limits (how does one delineate a ‘slum’). Extended depictions of what constitutes slum tourism appear to have their merits and difficulties and may be used to investigate different aspects of the phenomenon.

Several papers dealt with slum tourism as the commodification of poverty. However, it seems that it is not necessarily poverty itself that is commodified but rather the potentially transformative experience of poverty that is characteristic of slum tourism. Such a transformation can take two forms: either the tourist's knowledge and understanding of urban poverty or the actual conditions of poverty that the slum tours promise to transform. In this sense slum tourism is sold as a way to alleviate poverty and could be discussed in the context of the recent emerging field of philanthropic travel and more broadly business ethics and corporate social responsibility. Further contributions are needed to better understand the nature of transformations and transactions that form the core of the business of slum-tourism. Here future research could profit from an engagement with literature that theorises value creation and problematizes the predominantly quantitative outlook of studies that attempt to assess tourism's and slum tourism contribution to poverty alleviation. At the same time such approaches are useful in reminding us how slum tourism is at heart an economic process, in which a variety of global and local actors are involved. The lack of attention to how the slum tourism chain is organised and in particular ways in which local businesses participate, makes it difficult to understand the impact of slum tourism on local communities. The little research that has been done on this matter by Frisch (2012) in the current issue and Koens (2012) suggests these issues are complex with local participation influenced by power imbalances.

This brings us to our final avenue for further research. We note that the local perspective is relatively unknown. Research thus far has focused on the perspectives of slum tourism operators and tourists. Reactions of local people as well as the interaction with other local businesses have been much less reflected upon, a point made by Bianca Freire-Medeiros in the conference and reiterated in her recent work on the issue Bianca Freire-Medeiros (2012). Whilst there may be practical reasons for this, the lack of knowledge on this matter seems one of the most important gaps in knowledge today and this requires further investigation.

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