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## Spectacle and suffering: the Mumbai slum as a worlded space

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# Spectacle and Suffering: the Mumbai slum as a worlded space<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between spectacle and worlding. Using Dharavi as the site (cite) of analysis, the paper considers how slum tours, art and television documentaries produce particular narratives and imaginaries of the slum. We move beyond the discussions of voyeurism and the aestheticization of poverty and suggest, that the knowledge of the slum is entangled with the motives, preconceptions and experiences of multiple actors, giving the slum a relation with the ‘world’ that holds opportunities to disrupt hegemonic views of urbanism in Mumbai, while centering its own position as a locus of knowledge on urban poverty. The paper suggests that analysing the spectacle of the slum through the lens of worlding offers ways to think critically of how urban space is reordered and urban knowledge is produced and circulated.

Keywords: Slums, Spectacle, Worlding, Slum Tours, Dharavi, Mumbai

## Introduction

It must have been a strange moment when Mehboobi Sheikh was asked by a group of people who had just walked in to her home if they could examine her washroom and toilet. The request was not motivated by an urgent physical need. Rather, it was part of putative slum tour conducted by Sheela Patel of SPARC, a well-known NGO, to show poverty first-hand to Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela, a managing director of the World Bank. Mehboobi Sheikh’s home is in Dharavi, which is fast establishing itself as an iconic slum in the Global South’s metonymic city (Harris, 2012; Roy, 2011a). Indeed, the slum, and especially this slum, “has become the most common itinerary through which the Third World city (i.e. the megacity) is recognized” (Roy, 2011a: 225; also Brook, 2014; Žižek, 2004).<sup>2</sup> As Mehboobi Sheikh discovered, Dharavi forms a literal space on the busy itinerary of visitors wishing to gaze upon ‘real’ people living in urban poverty. Less obvious is Dharavi as an itinerary in a different sense- as a basis for constructing, confirming, contesting, and exhibiting knowledge on slum life that is then circulated beyond the immediate locality. Dharavi operates to combine these itineraries- a space that fulfils people’s search for an authentic experience of poverty and development, which is conveniently presented to them, perhaps as with the vignette

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<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge the [SOURCE] for funding fieldwork in Mumbai and the comments of referees whose insights have challenged us to improve this paper.

<sup>2</sup> We acknowledge the difficulties of slum as a term (see Gilbert 2007), and we use it here critically.

above through the intrusive inspection of a resident's toilet.<sup>3</sup> These experiences of the slum in situ become mobilised forms of knowledge that can travel beyond Mumbai, to and through the offices of the World Bank, NGOs, universities and media. Complex realities are lifted from their context and mapped on to larger frameworks of meaning; thereby producing the slum as a theoretical construct apparently grounded in real life (Rao, 2006). In the process Dharavi acquires the quality of an 'everywhere' for all slum spaces.<sup>4</sup>

This paper is prompted by the observed similarities between the 'slum tour' described in the opening vignette, a tour conducted by and for development professionals, and the many slum tours conducted for tourists to Mumbai on a daily basis. As others have observed, the distinction between these groups and their motives are not significant. Hutnyk (1996), for example, has explored how back-packers and development volunteers share understandings and experiences of poverty, arguing that both seek out suffering and are complicit in the reproduction of the idea (the 'rumour') and the materiality of the poverty that they find. To adopt Hutnyk's term, the tour operates as a 'technology' that brings together different actors and provides a means to acquire knowledge through experience of single site. For participants, the seeing, walking through, smelling and touching 'poverty', the disorientation of the maze-like alleys, the move through darkened buildings, the cacophony of noise and different languages, the sting of smoke, provide the tours with a corporeal power, a sense of poverty that demands to be engaged with in order to be understood. As with many tourist experiences, the newspaper report of Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela's tour informs us that she initially recoiled at the "smell and the dirt" of Dharavi before telling us that these conditions made her determined to press on and see more.

Tour itineraries also share a narrative that demonstrates how the conditions of the slum can be improved. Careful not to undermine the claims that Dharavi is a space of enterprise and industry, of ethnic neighbourliness, of cooperative service delivery and management, vernacular architectures and crime-free public space, tours nevertheless include and often end with examples for how community projects, properly supported, could alleviate conditions of poverty. The tour arranged for Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela ended with a visit to "various projects" that were described by Sheela Patel

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<sup>3</sup> The idea of 'staged authenticity', introduced by MacCannell (1999), argues that an awareness of the superficiality of most tourist experiences motivates some to engage in the frustrating quest to find authenticity. Promised "back door" access to the authentic, tourists are duped by what is prepared and represented to them as the 'real'.

<sup>4</sup> The point is not unique to Dharavi, although it has emerged as probably the most translatable site for the 'global slum'. Other contenders include Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro, Kibera in Nairobi, Ajegunle and Makoko in Lagos, Orangi in Karachi and Alexandra in Johannesburg.

and Jockin Arputham of the National Slumdwellers Federation. As others have noted, SPARC and National Slumdwellers Federation have refined the art of speaking for the poor, advertising the merits of community organisation and pressing for donor support through devices such as exhibition projects and ‘toilet festivals’ (Doshi, 2013; McFarlane, 2004). The intention is that Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela moves from the position of indiscreet voyeur to a potential advocate for a particular approach to poverty alleviation. But, the same process is at work in more conventional slum tours. Standing before a toilet block at the end of a tour we undertook in Dharavi as part of a pilot research project, our route took in a toilet block next to an area of open ground covered with rubbish, animal and human waste. The guide proceeded through a routine that described how the toilets had improved the area and demonstrated the potential of community organisation before spontaneously declaring that these were the same toilets shown to important visitors by Jockin Arputham and SPARC.

Both tours, therefore, draw on a notion of development that presents projects as a solution to poverty. The representation of poverty in ways that make it ‘attractive’ to tourists, volunteers and donors relies on brief non-technical narratives and a contrast with the participants’ own life and normative judgement on humane living conditions. The dialectic of social inequality and empathy is evident in the account of the visit to Dharavi by Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela. On the one hand, Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela represents the extreme of inequality. She worked for the World Bank, holds degrees from Harvard and MIT, had been two-time Minister of Finance and a future Foreign Minister in Nigeria, as well as member of a royal house. On the other, the pedagogy of the slum encounter relies on her position as a woman, mother and passing acquaintance of poverty in Nigeria. The newspaper quotes Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela expressing concern for women workers in Dharavi, if they were “being treated fairly”, and if the children work *or* go to school, an exchange that is prefaced with information that she is a mother of four. Discussion of the “entrepreneurial spirit” of Dharavi is articulated through an intuitive comparison with conditions witnessed growing up in Nigeria, the dynamics of urban livelihoods are therefore recognisable and understood as largely interchangeable.

This paper explores how ‘slum imaginaries’ are constructed and what forms of knowledge are produced as a result. The lives of Mehboobi Sheikh and her neighbours are enmeshed in relationships with NGOs and civil movements, and less directly with donors, tour operators, artists, writers, film-makers, architects, celebrities, and of course academics, each attempting to construct a coherent narrative to articulate a particular knowledge of the slum. This paper explores, therefore, some of the ways that Dharavi becomes a mobile site (or cite) of aesthetic perspective, inspiration, sentiment and understanding on urban poverty. Drawing from recent debates on spectacle,

cosmopolitanism, and worlding practices, the paper proposes that the reproduction of the slum as image, artefact, and experience relies on the representation of urban poverty as a spectacle that gains attention and value by shifting the interface between people's perceptions of the familiar and the strange (see Roy and Ong 2011). Specifically, the paper analyses slum tours we undertook in Dharavi, the emergent genre of 'slum art' and television documentary to demonstrate the slum as a space of spectacle and a 'worlded' source of knowledge.

### **The Slum as Spectacle**

The notion of spectacle has gained considerable currency in writing on the city (Pinder 2000; Gotham, 2005). Taking up Debord's provocation that "all that once was directly lived has become mere representation" (2002: 12), a common concern has been the idea that the production of space is dominated increasingly by images and events that reduce the novelty and potential spontaneity of urban life to set-piece, homogenised, corporatised spaces that carefully package the "experience of urban diversity, to be consumed without danger, and with limited risk of contact with social difference" (Stevens and Dovey, 2004: 359; Sorkin 1992; Gotham, 2005). To what extent can the 'toured' slum be added to the exhibition, shopping mall, theme park, gentrified downtown, or mega-event as a site of spectacle? In terms that Debord might recognise, are social relationships presented by the slum mediated by the organisation of everyday life as a series of images? These images, Sorkin has suggested from his discussion of Disney, involves a careful calculus of difference thriving on the algorithms of both the desirable and the attainable. He notes that these "images never really innovate, they intensify and reduce, winnowing complexity in the name of both quick access and easy digestibility. What's being promoted is not the exceptional but the paranormal" (1992: 226). The deceit is that an arrangement that "eliminates geographical distance" through a promise to organise and represent life as a series of familiar experiences produces that difference anew in "the form of spectacular separation" (Debord, 2002: 167). The commodification of everyday life requires the construction of distinctions between spaces and social groups, producing images of difference, while obscuring the control exerted over these manipulations. In a world of spectacle, visualisations of stigma can become commodified and operate as a means to distinguish difference and make that difference real (Ghertner, 2011; Jones, 2013).

For many writers, the spectacle operates as both a sign of and means to domination of the social by capitalism, provoking some to theorise the de-politicisation of social life through the disassembling

of power relations through the image (see Gotham 2005).<sup>5</sup> In this scenario people become passive spectators, voyeurs observing capitalism's duplicity and their own exploitation (Pinder 2000). Yet, the arrangement may not be so neat. First, as Stevens and Dovey note, the "choreography of life ushered in by the spectacle can produce a city with the qualities of a 'sieve'; despite the attempt to contain and order urban experience, meanings and actions consistently 'leak' through the cracks" (2004: 358). This leakage provides opportunities for alternative understandings and relations, and therefore possibilities for politics (Pinder 2000: 368). Second, there is opportunity for new kinds of spectators and some scope for a more conscious and critical unpacking of power relations of representation (Chouliaraki 2011).

It is tempting to think of the tourist as one such type of new spectator, able to discern between the representations of the slum provided by media and an understanding gained through the experience of visiting slums themselves. A number of authors have suggested that while tours might be predicated on an Orientalist fantasy in which slums operate as sexualised, exotic or primitive spaces, both operators and participants show a motivation and capacity to transcend these representations, challenging some preconceptions about the poor (Dyson 2012; Meschkank 2011; Rolfes 2010; Linke 2012; Diekmann and Hannam, 2012; Freire-Medeiros, 2011). As Kellner and Durham (2009: xii) argue, we need to examine carefully how people engage with cultural texts in order to reveal how messages, values and meanings are gained, and how these readings are often contradictory and resist dominant narratives. This is not to presume that the results of these critical engagements will be progressive and clear-sighted understandings of poverty. Sen's account of slum tours in Calcutta for example, examines people's excitement at seeing women's bare bodies bathing, negotiating prices with prostitutes, and the shock at witnessing old people abandoned at the dying grounds (Sen 2008). The experience provoked participants to reflect on their good 'luck', but also justified a sense that they had taken the right life choices and of cultural superiority. Encounters with suffering, therefore, need to appreciate the importance of irony that emphasises the politics of the self rather than the politics of injustice, thereby dehumanising the vulnerable and imposing a moral distance between our actions and lives of others (Chouliaraki, 2011: 3).

In analysing encounters with suffering we also need to unpack the territoriality of these engagements. On the one hand, the slum is often discussed as a contained space that subsumes wider economic, political and cultural networks in fairly predictable ways. In the tours that we undertook, the guides positioned themselves as informed interlocutors between the outside and the

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<sup>5</sup> Hutnyk regards "tourism and charity in the 'Third World' [as] the soft edge of an otherwise brutal system of exploitation." (1996: xi).

slum, but were reluctant to be drawn away from their itinerary to test more complex readings of the Dharavi economy, political contest, ethnic co-habitation, environmental conditions or subjectivities. An acknowledgement of the many ways in which Dharavi is entangled with the global economy, through the recycling sector for example, noted how it was a key collection-point in the city and that materials salvaged from household or industrial waste went to firms across India and beyond. Nevertheless, the discussions operated to reaffirm the territoriality of the slum; Dharavi exists as a dynamic but neatly categorised physical space. On the other hand, the presence of tour companies, NGOs and journalists, suggest that Dharavi exists as an idea generated from the outside (Brook, 2014). Exposing the competing representational form of the slum in these accounts, challenges ideas of Dharavi as limited to the mundane operation of poverty and toil, or a site representative of endogenous enterprise and innovation worthy of being one of “the crucibles of our global future” (Neuwirth 2011: 58; also Brugmann, 2009; Glaeser 2011). In this sense, we might challenge dominant narratives of urbanism in the South if we think of slum encounters as exercises in ‘worlding’.

As a concept first popularised by Heidegger, ‘worlding’ - by which he meant ‘being in the world’ as a phenomenological experience of life - has been adopted by contemporary scholars as a means to discuss the ontology of always emerging assemblages (Blaser, 2014), a means to unpack the “always experimental and partial, and often quite wrong, attribution world-like characteristics to scenes of social encounter” (Tsing, 2010: 48) and as a way of doing critical comparative research whilst ‘provincializing’ urban theory (Robinson and McFarlane, 2012; Jazeel, 2014). On this last point and drawing from Spivak’s self-confessed “vulgarization” of Heidegger, Roy has argued that worlding enables us to trouble our understandings of postcolonial urbanism.<sup>6</sup> She contends that describing diverse urbanisms is insufficient because it keeps intact dominant maps of power, economy and culture, whereas worlding can “open up lines of inquiry in the field of global metropolitan studies” (2011b: 307). Moreover, as Ong points out, worlding is a useful tool for analysing urban practices because diverse actors, materials and ideas come together in heterogeneous ways that do not fall neatly on one side or another of class, political or cultural divides. Instead, practices may be picked up by a variety of agents, with interests ranging from

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<sup>6</sup> Spivak uses ‘worlding’ to describe “the process whereby the colonized space enters the ‘world’ as crafted by Eurocentric colonial discourse.. a process of inscription whereby colonial discourse and hegemony are mapped onto the earth (Emerling, 229). Using a critical engagement literature produced during colonialism, she discusses how “Third World as distant cultures, exploited but with rich intact literary heritages waiting to be recovered, interpreted, and curricularized in English translation fosters the emergence of "the Third World" as a signifier that allows us to forget that "worlding," even as it expands the empire of the literary discipline” (Spivak, 1985: 243).

extending neoliberal forms of urbanism to a commitment to social justice, allowing each to creatively reimagine and shape alternative social visions, spatial configurations and urban futures (Ong 2011: 11-12; also Roy, 2011b; Simone, 2001). They might help us also to think through the multiple ways in which different actors both contest and engage in practices of worlding and in the “art of being global” (Ong, 2011: 23). For our purposes, worlding allows us to move beyond a discussion of authenticity or ethics, conventional frames to analyse the slum tour, or of policy approaches around livelihoods, housing and land tenure, valuable though these are, to consider how the slum as spectacle becomes part of a fluid representational stock of images and experiences that circulate, with the potential to be picked up and acted upon by diverse actors. The slum as spectacle considered as a ‘worlding’ practice has potential to create alternate urban imaginaries.

### **Dharavi, Making a Slum as Brand**

As Gyan Prakash puts it, “Dharavi is pure Mumbai” (2010: 339). A fishing village during the nineteenth century, Dharavi was settled from the early-mid twentieth as the city grew northwards and noxious or illicit industries were removed from Bombay. Constrained by mangrove and water to one side and rail lines to the other, the 432 acre site grew to a population density of over 1,200/acre characterized by limited infrastructure, low quality housing and poverty<sup>7</sup> (Chatterji, 2005; Weinstein, 2014). Although not described as a ‘slum’ until the 1960s, Dharavi is often described as “Asia’s largest slum”, a claim that is hotly disputed, impossible to prove and, as Weinstein notes, more to do with notoriety than demographics (2014: 52).<sup>8</sup> Dharavi had become “less a place than an odor” (Brook, 2014: 137). By the 1980s Dharavi was a focus for slum improvement programs that aimed to replace thousands of single-storey hutments with mid-rise apartments (Weinstein, 2014). The programs proved contentious, provoking resistance from civil society organisations such as SPARC and exposing the technical incapacity of the state that lacked accurate census and household registration data (Chatterji, 2005; Doshi, 2013).

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<sup>7</sup> London, which is the most densely population city in the UK, for example, had a population density in 2012 of 5,285 people per square km or approximately 20 people per acre. See Office of National Statistics, <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/regional-trends/region-and-country-profiles/region-and-country-profiles---key-statistics-and-profiles--october-2013/key-statistics-and-profiles---london--october-2013.html> [Accessed 25 January, 2015]. Mumbai in 2011 itself had a population density of 121,312people /km<sup>2</sup> or approximately 491people/acre. See “Urban Age Cities Compared” <http://lsecities.net/media/objects/articles/urban-age-cities-compared/en-gb/> [Accessed 25 January, 2015].

<sup>8</sup> Some claim Dharavi has a population of over one million but the more accepted 300,000 would not, according to the 2011 census, even make it the largest slum in Mumbai. As noted by a report in *The Times of India*, (6-7-2011), Dharavi has been “eclipsed” by the contiguous slum spaces of Govandi-Mankhurd, Kurla-Ghatkopar and around the foothills of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park.

At this point, as Rashmi Varma (2004) argues, the attention to Mumbai, and to Dharavi, encountered a paradox. On the one hand, theorists of global cities and globalisation, as well as international capital itself, were paying increased attention to Mumbai. A constellation of political and economic interests promoted the ‘vision’ of turning Mumbai into a ‘world class city’ in the image of Shanghai or Singapore. A range of interventions aimed to redevelop the central areas around Fort, convert the city’s famous textile mills to business parks and malls, release industrial and railway land to infrastructure projects, improve the road and metro network, change tax codes and land-use regulations to promote high-end condominiums (see Harris, 2013; Weinstein, 2014). The vision was supported or complemented by Mumbai’s long-standing claim to be India’s most cosmopolitan city, a claim enhanced by print and screen media (Prakash, 2010; Varma 2004). On the other hand, Varma argues that Mumbai was undergoing a process of provincialisation that was marked by the rise of the Shiv Sena and what Hansen identifies as an emergent “Hobbesian theatre of power” involving inflammatory rhetoric, thuggery and spectacle (2001: 120, 231-2).

At the geographical and representational apex of the contest between the global, cosmopolitan and the provincial city was Dharavi. National and international capital, supported by consultancies and donors, and the Shiv Sena promoted a slum-free city. Adjacent to the new Bandra business complex, Dharavi was identified as target of removal and redevelopment through the Dharavi Redevelopment Project (Graham et al., 2013; Weinstein, 2014). It was also a key site in the sectarian street politics that set Marathi Hindu ethno-regionalists, and Muslims against each other, during the riots of 1992 and violent events since (Hansen, 2001). Dharavi brought together perhaps the city’s most ethnically diverse concentration of people in a location in which criminal groups controlled the economy and everyday politics (Hansen, 2001; Weinstein, 2014).<sup>9</sup> In a context of ethnic tension, simmering violence, and rising real estate pressures, Dharavi received extraordinary attention from the state and media.

The attention afforded to Dharavi has marked it as an exceptional space that has contributed to it becoming the key locale for slum tours, the site of art installations and subject of works, for journalists and documentary film-makers. It is a critical space for the contemporary understanding

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<sup>9</sup> Dharavi has been a key site for major criminal groups with interests in real estate, smuggled goods, and the film industry, that by the 1980s had become associated with violence against the state leading to accusations of links with Pakistan and terrorist organisations (Hansen, 2001; Prakash, 2010).

of poverty, or what the tours often refer to as the ‘real Mumbai’ (Dyson, 2012).<sup>10</sup> Paradoxically, these claims to reality and authenticity are predicated on an argument that Dharavi is representative, if an extreme example of, all slums in Mumbai. Representations, therefore, tread a careful line between capitalising on the unfamiliar, exceptionalising the everyday to promote tours as adventure and art as a unique aesthetic (Dürr and Jaffe, 2012), and narrating this exceptionality as mundane. Hence, our argument that Dharavi operates as an itinerary, a space that can be traversed by those wanting to experience ‘real’ poverty and as a medium through which knowledge on slum life can be suggested, confirmed and projected.

### **The Slum on Tour**

The principal tour companies in Mumbai stress the relation between the specificity of Dharavi and the tour as a worlded practice. We experienced three of these companies. Of them, the largest and best known is Reality Tours and Travel, established in 2005 by Chris Way and Krishna Poojari. They apparently took inspiration from tours of favela in Brazil and, according to a guide, Reality ‘took-off’ with the success of Danny Boyle’s *Slumdog Millionaire*- scenes from which were filmed in Dharavi. Reality has also gained attention through extensive and professional use of social media and a web page that stresses that the company supports a range of projects in Dharavi. In contrast, Be the Local Tours explicitly positions itself as *from* Dharavi, rather than simply basing an office there. The people who run it, former Reality staff, and its guides are local- an attribute that is repeatedly referred to during tours with the suggestion that the guides offer more detailed contextualization and nuance to slum life. Finally, Mumbai Magic is not based in Dharavi and makes no claims that its guides are especially well-acquainted with the area. Before joining the company seven years ago, our guide had never been to Dharavi and she stressed her credentials as a professional rather than having insider status. Its ‘slum tour’ represents one option from a package of visit locations, putting Dharavi on a par with The Gateway to India and Elephanta Island, and its clientele extends from budget travelers to executives, diplomats and NGO staff wanting a ‘primer’ to the city’s slums<sup>11</sup>.

The differences in origin or ethos made little difference to the itinerary that each tour took through Dharavi. Itineraries concentrated on industrial workshops, waste recycling units, rooftop vantage

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<sup>10</sup> Tours exist for other slums but none with the ‘brand’ association of Dharavi. The reference point for other tours is novels. Beyond Bombay offer ‘bookworm’ tours that Gregory David Roberts’s *Shantaram* and Suketu Mehta’s *Maximum City*, and Be a Local was also devising a Shantaram tour.

<sup>11</sup> Realty also offers other kinds of tours in Mumbai. Interest in tours of Dharavi has gained such traction that there are growing numbers of more conventional companies such as Thomas Cook are beginning to offer tours (Ghosh, 2014).

points and opportunities to enter domestic spaces. These often included the same workshops for plastic, cardboard and metal recycling, stripping metal cores from wires, breaking down household appliances, the remixing of paints and solvents, leather tanning, tailoring, papad-making and pottery.<sup>12</sup> At each, the guides' narratives were echoes of each other; the residents' propensity for hard work, their enterprise and productivity, and more generally how Mumbai could not operate without Dharavi.<sup>13</sup> Yet, the conditions under which work was done were discussed in limited and particular ways. The lack of health and safety standards, for example, was explained away by one guide who suggested that workers did not like wearing protective clothing as it hampered their work. And, although all tours use the device of encouraging participants to ask questions, when topics of wage levels, working hours, breaks, illnesses (especially in cramped and noxious conditions), ownership, or hiring practices were raised, the explanations were impressionistic or avoided.<sup>14</sup> If repeating the narrative that Dharavi was a place of hard, 'honest', work did not suffice, then the guides would draw from another narrative, for example, on the harmony and equality of everyday life; hence, it was argued that the (never identified) workshop owners respected the religious holidays of workers and that women earned as much as men for similar work. There was little or no communication with workers at any of these sites, most of whom kept working despite our presence which, and despite a capability to communicate in Hindi (tours were exclusively in English) engagement was never encouraged.<sup>15</sup>

The opinion of Dharavi residents and workers to the presence of tourists, journalists and development professionals is carefully controlled by guides, whether these represent tour

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<sup>12</sup> Despite the unique selling point of Be the Local, their tours approximated the route taken by Reality, and we encountered other tours during our visits using the same transect. Mumbai Magic covered mostly the same sites but did deviate to include different industrial workshops and greater attention to food stalls.

<sup>13</sup> This idea circulates in other, related, forms through, for example, newspaper articles that stress Dharavi as a hub of concentrated workshops where enterprise occurs despite the state. See The Guardian, <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/nov/25/dharavi-mumbai-mini-factories-slum>

<sup>14</sup> The tour becomes a performance on both sides. Despite our declared role, we played the naïve tourists that framed questions in particular ways and despite an awareness of contrarian explanations in academic literatures.

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, some guides would demonstrate their social proximity to the population by holding short conversations with workers, store owners and residents, to which we were not expected to be a part. Away from these staged encounters, we overheard annoyance at our presence, most obviously when one guide turned on the house lights at a cinema so that we could see people's faces and support the observation that the cinema is used as a place for sleep! For analysis of residents' perceptions of tourists see Diekmann & Chowdary (2015).

companies, NGOs or are part of an emergent group of ‘facilitators’.<sup>16</sup> There are few opportunities for the knowledge being circulated through the tour to be contested which puts particular stress on how the guides articulate and source what they claim to know. In the tours that we undertook, the consistent sense was that guides communicated in broad terms, even in the rare instances when they referred to ‘data’— there are ‘over 100 recycling workshops’; about 70% of Dharavi is devoted to industry; resident origins or ethnicities break down as one-third Tamil, one-third Maharashtrian and one-third from North India. In discussions, guides struggled to develop claims. A statement that plastic recycling is connected to global supply chains, when asked who managed the chains was met with vague references to important people. When specific data did inform the narrative – for example, a Reality guide’s claim that industrial output of Dharavi was worth 4 billion rupees per annum – the figure was said to have been provided by the company’s office and backed by the statement that “we know this”.<sup>17</sup> The approach of Mumbai Magic was to deflect specific enquiries by referring to “reports” that it could send on by email. The two documents consisted of maps of Dharavi, a history of Mumbai, a commentary on living next door to slum-dwellers and an account of Dharavi as the “Third Face of Mumbai”, a site of entrepreneurial poor who worked, dreamed and struggled against all odds. None of the literature provided citations or sense of how ‘themes’ for the slum tours had been produced.

The point is not to accuse guides of ignorance but rather to ask what work this lack of specificity is doing. Each guide will have met with hundreds of visitors over preceding months, some of whom will have wanted precise information or will have asked follow-up questions similar to ours when detail was not volunteered. Our suggestion is that framing Dharavi in these impressionistic terms operates to underscore a brand-like quality of the space. It is the imagery that matters, unencumbered by details that might be checked, contested and therefore deployed to undermine the broader arguments. As we took multiple tours, there was an opportunity to listen for contradictions in the narratives although, as with the itineraries, these were mostly similar between guides. Nevertheless, in one example, a guide from Reality stressed the ecumenical nature of a Hindu temple, pointing to how it exhibited images relevant to Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. The Be the Local tour guide, however, dismissed this interpretation, arguing that the temple was largely

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<sup>16</sup> Rajesh Prabhakar is the best known having facilitated the introduction of Kevin McCloud to Dharavi (see below), the National Geographic documentary *The Real Slum Dogs*, and various authors and photojournalists.

<sup>17</sup> In fact the Reality web site claims that Dharavi’s economy is worth \$US 665 million or about R41 billion. See Brook (2014) on the grandiose claims to Dharavi’s wealth creation.

used for Ganpati pujas and not by Muslims.<sup>18</sup> The visual cues supported a general narrative of communal religious harmony that a detailed discussion of ethnic tensions in Dharavi could only undermine. All the tours emphasised communal harmony and no guide drew attention to caste, ethnic or gender differences, political clientelism, landlordism, frictions over uses of public space. Rather, despite high density living conditions, the noise of machinery long in to the night, the bustle of street life, the tours insisted on people's close social relations and strong sense of community. It is a seductive imagery and one that has prompted many commentators and including Prince Charles, who visited Dharavi, to argue that it serves as a model of harmony, sustainability and meaningful life from which everyone might learn (Wales et al, 2010: 233-5).<sup>19</sup>

The narrative of industriousness, harmony and resilience produces a particular Dharavi as the 'reality' of Mumbai. As the "Third Face of Mumbai", to quote one tour document, attention is turned away from a city pushing hard to promote itself as 'world class' but also associated with the abject poverty of pavement dwellers, street children and beggars. Tours, of course, retain the negativity associated with slums, the pre-cognate ideas of dirt and suffering, as the logic for the tours themselves and the need for development projects that are funded in some cases by them (Dyson, 2012). But, some authors point to the political and social potency of tours, a means to contest the aspirational drives of the entrepreneurial city, a means to disrupt the urban experience rendered through the competing spectacle of mega-homes and movie stars. To Dovey and King (2012: 291), slum tours become part of a city's brand, adding value as an authentic urbanism and even arguing that we might consider this a form of "insurgent urbanism" that resists global capitalism and offer protection against slum removal.<sup>20</sup> As a competing or counter spectacle, the slum offers a representation of the urban that 'leaks' through the cracks of official attempts to project a hegemonic brand of a world-class city, a new middle class, and even a resurgent India. Here is another vision of an urban future in Mumbai, one that travels through circuits of knowledge, even gets co-opted and in so doing, instantiates a world-in-making.<sup>21</sup> In so doing, the slum becomes a spectacle in itself, embodying the contradictions and instabilities of worlding projects.

## **Exhibiting the Slum**

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<sup>18</sup> Reality guides are mostly Hindu and Be the Local predominantly Muslim, giving the latter a chance to claim credibility on this point.

<sup>19</sup> A critical perspective might consider Sorkin's comment on the Disney theme park as "surely the redemption of the industrial metropolis: hygienic, staffed with unalienated workers apparently enjoying their contributions to the happy collectivity" (1992: 229).

<sup>20</sup>  
<sup>21</sup> Reality borrowed from Rio de Janeiro but its Dharavi tours have in turn become models for organisations in other cities of the Global South.

The Times of India article does not tell us where Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela stayed during her trip to Mumbai but in the event that it was the Grand Hyatt in Santa Cruz, just a kilometre or so from Dharavi then she might have encountered a different idea of the slum. Amidst an impressive art collection displayed throughout the hotel's lobbies, bars and restaurants is an installation by the Indian artist Hema Upadhyay entitled *Basti: an urbanscape*.<sup>22</sup> The piece is a mixed collage, about two metres by two metres, allegedly made from discarded materials and hung so that the viewer is afforded an aerial vantage point from which to look down on to the streets and cardboard huts, as well as giving the effect of precarity as the slum clings to the wall. Accompanied by images of 'real' slums, a sign next to the work tells us that 'Basti' was inspired by Dharavi, described as Asia's largest slum and a "honeycombed city-within-a-city". The piece is intended to serve as a "map, representing the dispersal of energy" that is expended by Mumbai's vast slum population as it runs the informal manufacturing and service sectors. In interviews, Hema Upadhyay has discussed how the daily journey from home to studio in Mumbai took her past slums that she imagined to be a "scenario of chaos" until delving a little deeper revealed intense organisation.<sup>23</sup> Upadhyay has produced a number of other works along similar lines. These include – *Think left, think right, think low, think tight*, and *Killing Site* among others. The description for her work *Killing Site* (2007) exhibited at the Saatchi Gallery states that: "The upturned slums reference the repercussion and socio-economic inequalities that emerge as a hidden consequence of the relentless tide of urban development in the city".<sup>24</sup>

Upadhyay's piece is of course neither the first nor the last piece of artwork produced that draws inspiration from or attempts to represent the slum. From Jacob Riis to Edward Popko, there has been attention paid to slums as subjects of photography, though framing the images through very different narratives. If Riis sought to document the poor living conditions of the "other half" in New York, then Popko used his work to consider how the urban poor in Cali developed squatter settlements, endowing the squatters with agency as they negotiate their lives in the city (Roy, 2011c). More contemporary exhibits have included Marjetica Potrč's *Caracas: Growing House* in 2003 at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris that draws from work carried out in the barrios of Caracas and exhibition on slums in Indian cities titled *Jugaad Urbanism: Resourceful Strategies for Indian Cities* at the Centre for Architecture in New York in 2011. The stress is, once more, on the poor's

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<sup>22</sup> A major name in the post-liberalisation Indian art world, Upadhyay has exhibited her work and held residencies in France, Pakistan, Singapore, the US and UK. Many of her pieces, but notably *Where the Bees Suck There Suck I* and *Dream a Wish-Wish a Dream*, deal with the urban poor and especially their creativity.

<sup>23</sup> See interview in *Initiart* magazine ([www.initiartmagazine.com](http://www.initiartmagazine.com))

<sup>24</sup> See [http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/hema\\_upadhyay\\_killing\\_site\\_2.htm](http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/hema_upadhyay_killing_site_2.htm)

ingenuity, innovation and entrepreneurialism. But, as del Real points out, works like those by Potř reveal that “the symbolic value of slums is too dear to be left untapped, to be abandoned to those who produce it” (2008: 97). Thus, the slum is brought into the art gallery to be consumed and to perhaps offer inspiration for alternate ways of ‘being in the world’, but in the process, many artists de-contextualise and sanitise their conditions, removing noxious matter and more perniciously, ignoring the political, economic and social causes underpinning the production and continuity of urban slums.

It is possible that guests at the \$250 per night Grand Hyatt might be provoked by *Basti* to visit one of Mumbai’s slums or to think critically about how such spaces are formed, sustained and represented. The ‘helpful’ advice from a member of the hotel staff as one of us stood looking at the piece, however, was to avoid the slum. He rattled off a list of sanitation and environmental problems, and concerns with disease and violence. Such spaces were a “shame” and far better viewed through the cinema, suggesting that *Slumdog Millionaire* offered an accurate portrayal and pointing out that it was filmed in Dharavi.<sup>25</sup>

The Grand Hyatt occupies a protected site – to enter one passes through a road checkpoint and to get into the hotel itself there is further security including metal detectors – that forms part of Mumbai’s drive to be a world-class city in the twenty-first century (Harris, 2013). It is located close to and midway between the airport and the new business centre at Bandra-Kurla, near the upmarket Pali Hills and the Western Expressway. *Basti*, therefore, brings a deliberate aesthetic imaginary of poverty into a space for elites and global cosmopolitans; the artist’s intent to stress the hard work, organisation and enterprise of the slum and its connection with the city economy is experienced in a key space of exclusion and exclusivity. Indeed, the overriding image of Mumbai into the twenty-first century is of the juxtaposition of riches with poverty. Residents of some of the highest value real estate in the world look over the blue-canopied slums, striking high-rise apartments accommodate a ‘new’ middle class as familiar with the boutiques and coffee shops of Bandra as those of cities in Europe, the US or Gulf, while families sleep on pavements, under the newly constructed flyovers and are ‘resettled’ closer to the dumps and polluting industries (Doshi, 2013). A growing array of ‘world class’ sites around the city compete on the comparative advantage of ‘first class’ amenities while the poor hustle and submit to clientelist practices in order to access basic utilities (Bjorkman, 2015; Graham et al., 2013).

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<sup>25</sup> In fact only a few scenes of *Slumdog* were filmed in Dharavi, the film’s slum scenes actually encompassing a number of different sites in the city and studio.

*Basti* therefore represents a bricolage, an object re-ordered for a new purpose or meaning that draws on a “sediment”, as Levi-Strauss put it, of older meanings. The message of the work rests on the contrast between the popular imaginary of the slum as a space of disorder, lethargy, decay and disconnection, and the corrective that it is none of those things. While the popular imaginary endures in media, politics and human psyche, and is itself constantly being reproduced, the corrective has been around at least since the critiques of marginality from the late 1960s. In these terms the representation at work in *Basti* is an assemblage of imaginations of the slum, of discourses and, more literally, of collaged items. Taken together with the NGO-managed ‘slum tour’ for Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela, *Basti* suggests another medium through which the slum is imagined, assembled and potentially acted upon. As Hema Upadhyay’s installations tour the world as objects or as images in magazines and on websites, so the bricolage of contemporary slum imaginations are similarly articulated and communicated. Again, the focus is Dharavi, or rather Dharavi is the ‘inspiration’, and once more the slum is projected to work as a sign for a series of human conditions and practices, and once more without explicit attention to the mechanisms that initially produced the ‘slum’ as idea or as material space, and what has made it endure since. It becomes a form of romanticizing poverty. As Roy (2004: 312) points out the political economy of urban informality is also a politics of representation. It is therefore important that the politics of representations must then engage in the political economy of urban informality in order to move past the aestheticisation of poverty to a meaningful dialogue about it<sup>26</sup>.

### **Televising the Slum**

Our final illustration of the slum as spectacle and ‘worlded’ knowledge is the documentary. Slums have been the location and subject for a large number of recent television shows. Considering just productions aired by the BBC alone, one might note the three-part *Welcome to Lagos* and *Welcome to India* shown in 2010 and 2012 respectively, *Famous, Rich and in the Slums*, made for Comic Relief and shown in 2011, and BBC 3’s on-going series *Slum Survivors* first aired in 2014. In different ways, all these programmes use the devices of familiar-strange, and exceptional as mundane, and juxtapose the lives of outsider with the ‘reality’ of poverty and suffering. In *Famous, Rich*, four celebrities are obliged to live in Kibera, shadowing real residents that include a child-headed household, a

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<sup>26</sup> Here, Roy points out that unlike the American debates on urban poverty that bemoan the dependencies of the poor, the Third World literature reveals the “fragile dependence of entire economies in the context of global capitalism. Here, dependency is inscribed as participation in capitalist production and underdevelopment is seen as constantly produced through development” (2004: 292).

prostitute, a hair salon owner who is HIV-positive and a young hip-hop artist. Each episode of *Slum Survivor* follows a group of young people with different skills – chefs, mechanics, plumber - as they attempt to survive in a Jakarta, Lagos or Mumbai slum. Dharavi features in *Welcome to India, Slum Survivors* and is the exclusive focus of the Channel 4 three-part documentary by architectural critic Kevin McCloud entitled *Slumming It* (McCloud, 2010).

What sets *Slumming It* apart from the other programmes, at face value at least, is its intention – or “mission” as Kevin McCloud puts it - to see whether Dharavi deserves its attention as a model of sustainable community living (see Brugmann, 2009; Wales et al., 2010). It is interested in testing knowledge derived from or attributed to the slum. Yet, from the outset *Slumming It* adopts the conventional slum as different, disordered and dangerous. The first episode opens with a medical practitioner going through the long list of inoculations needed for Kevin McCloud to spend two weeks in Dharavi. We then watch as the ‘jabbed’ presenter arrives at a high-end hotel in Mumbai in readiness for his visit to what is described as the “no go zone for foreigners like me”. We shift to Kevin McCloud at the edge of Dharavi and expressing his shock at seeing sewage discharge in to open waterways, mountains of rubbish and children defecating in the open air. In the first six minutes alone, three scenes show children defecating. For the remainder of the series, Kevin McCloud tries to ‘work out’ Dharavi. One moment he muses on the “beauty” of “the best dressed people on the planet”, the next he is sitting on a rooftop telling us that “it’s as if the place is deliberately trying to screw your mind”. The direct narration to the camera allows the viewer to become a sort of confidant to his mood swings, revelations and reflections. We become vicarious ‘slum tourists’ as we see Dharavi through the camera lens. Kevin McCloud becomes our guide.

*Slumming It* follows an itinerary familiar to the slum tour. Through Kevin McCloud we are introduced to Kumbharwada, the potter’s area, the waste recycling workshops and in to the domestic space of a local family. The original intentions of sleeping in Dharavi, however, is abandoned after a sleepless night in the company of rats – provoking the admission that he is already “missing a bit of civilisation” - and the plan is changed to ‘staying’ two weeks with a local family instead. Nevertheless, the premise of *Slumming It* is that McCloud goes deeper than the tour. Indeed, a scene near the end of the final episode shows the presenter sarcastically encouraging on a slum tour, giving the impression that he is no longer one of them (or us) but is now embedded in Dharavi. The legitimacy for this shift comes from the opportunity to participate in everyday life, although his mission to uncover how Dharavi works is always foremost. He works, for example, collecting garbage, allowing him to trace the movement of materials from the municipal dump to

Dharavi; rubbish becomes reconstituted as recycling, and Dharavi is transformed from dirty slum to green economy.

*Slumming It* projects knowledge of Dharavi around a series of familiar tropes. There is a focus on the obvious markers of poverty – introduced from Kevin McCloud’s first minutes in Dharavi and continued with long and close up shots of unhygienic living conditions, including dead rats, sewage filled water, faeces, animal intestines, and mud. The interior shots convey the practical difficulties of living at high density, providing a sense of claustrophobia and the dangers to health and safety of living in highly flammable constructions. By contrast with many observers, McCloud seems more critical of the political economy that forces so many people into poverty. He expresses admiration close to amazement at people’s resilience, enterprise and creativity – following the dominant narrative offered by slum tour guides and some artists – but is horrified that the returns for most amount to pennies a day. This, then, is a more sceptical account of what Daniel Brook calls the global “idea of the market-affirming slum” in which “[s]hantytowns all over the developing world were reconceived as industrious anthills of pluck and ingenuity, places that showed capitalism at its best” (2014: 140).

Yet, *Slumming It* finds some redemption for the misery in the slum’s architecture and urbanism. The pottery yards and the fish market are compared favourably to Mediterranean villages, and Kevin McCloud casts a keen eye over the marble work of small squares and the sturdy homes with art deco elements. *Slumming It* seems to suggest that while Dharavi may suffer from sanitation and poor housing, it is compensated by its people, their laughter, dignity and sense of community, every bit as important as the hard work, and which is informed by the appropriate, humane scale, of the slum space. This is a sentiment that puts Kevin McCloud in close proximity to The Prince of Wales, Hema Upadhyay and many others who valorise Dharavi as a site of subaltern inventiveness and community.<sup>27</sup> Yet, it is perspective that contests plans to redevelop Dharavi, capturing its land value to fund the construction of high-rise housing in situ for those with recognised rights to occupancy but relocation for others. The ambitious Dharavi Redevelopment Project is the brainchild of Mukesh Mehta who McCloud decides to confront. Drawing upon his position as an architecture critic, the documentary shows him pointing out that in the UK the decision to build high rise public housing had been long regretted. McCloud shows his frustration when shown some earlier tower blocks built to rehouse slum dwellers. Instead, and drawing from the knowledge gained from his stay, McCloud attempts to convince Mehta that it would be better to improve existing living

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<sup>27</sup> It is tempered by the confession that he wanted to leave having had two chest infections in a fortnight.

conditions. It is a futile exercise of course, that leaves McCloud lamenting the fate of Dharavi's residents should the redevelopment plans go ahead.

*Slumming It* relies upon and contributes to Dharavi as spectacle. It demonstrates the speed at which engagement with the slum can construct expert knowledge and how it empowers new actors to speak on and for the slum. McCloud's knowledge is deployed to confront Mukesh Mehta's corporate vision for Mumbai. In another scene we listen to Kevin McCloud at a party telling members of the Mumbai's elite about everyday life in Dharavi. A small 'p' politics of representation perhaps, and by no means inevitable, but one that suggests that the worlding of Dharavi is a complex and contradictory process that can simultaneously unsettle dominant narratives while centering its own<sup>28 29</sup>.

## Conclusion

The slum according to Slavoj Žižek has become the locale through which concerns for the human condition are expressed, its residents representing the "universal individual, a particular group whose fate stands for the injustice of today's world" (2004: 2). This claim provides slums with a representational significance far greater than an immediate concern with housing conditions or service provision. This is nothing new. They have long been a popular subject for novelists, journalists and academics, but slums are increasingly also the site and the subject of tourism, art, film and documentary. Politicians, celebrities, royalty, academics and development professionals are keen to offer opinions on the slum's contribution to urban life, city and global economies, cultural authenticity and diversity, and even celebrate them as paragons or models for future living. We have suggested that today's slum can be understood as a spectacle and worlded practice.

While the literature has focused largely on the making of 'world class' cities, it is not just urban designs, best practices, or elite aesthetics that circulate around the globe. Focusing on the example of Dharavi, this paper has offered a tentative exploration of the subaltern geographies of urban imagination and how the slum has engaged with the 'art of being global'. The spectacle functions as

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<sup>28</sup> Spivak discusses centering as the processes and practices by which the margins are given visibility and voice and made knowable. The teaching machine for example, is a centering apparatus of colonization. Here, a select and elite group of postcolonial academics are given the privilege to speak on behalf of the margins and claim authentic marginality. They become complicit in reproducing the exploitation of the Third World (Jackson and Mazzei 2011).

<sup>29</sup> The BBC's *Welcome to Lagos* paid considerable attention to the city's slums and rubbish dumps, and prompted an angry response from the Nigerian High Commissioner. In a letter to the BBC, the High Commissioner attacked a "sinister documentary" made in "bad taste" and as a calculated attempt to bring the Nigerian people "odium and scorn". Letter, 16 April 2010.

one worlding device that produces a specific and partial form of knowledge of slums, poverty and the urban poor that get taken up and circulate through the world. Slum tours, art and documentaries operate as technologies through which the slum is re-presented, aestheticized and worlded. How far this exercise in spectacle or counter spectacle offers new forms of knowledge and opportunities to think politically or socially remains contingent on context. Slum tours that signal the poor's entrepreneurial energy might be vital to contest dominant stigmas of laziness, turpitude and welfare dependence. But, representing slum life as a capitalist libertarian dream free from an oppressive state, in which dynamic individuals prosper through hard work while those less fortunate display stoic resilience bolstered by the strength of community relies on other potential misreadings. As we trace out the combinations of narratives, materials and images that represent the slum, the question might not be about what alternative urban imaginations these contain but how they motivate or appease distant strangers to action. An artwork that celebrates creativity through a vibrant aesthetics of recycled materials may lull elites that the poor are getting by and do not need help or fundamental shifts in the structure of the global economy (also Brook, 2014). The silence of slum dwellers during tours that give prominence to the cooperation and conviviality of slum life offers an aspirational consensus on cities rather than a nuanced understanding of how slums are organised and who benefits. The tourist or television viewer might equate their empathy with solidarity but do so without appreciating the constraints imposed on daily lives of slum dwellers (Chouliaraki, 2011). The worlding of the slum through the spectacle remains an inherently unstable practice, and the possibility of it contributing to rethinking injustice in meaningful and even radical ways remains distant.

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