

# What does poverty feel like? Urban inequality and the politics of sensation

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## Abstract

The emergent field of 'sensory urbanism' studies how socio-spatial boundaries are policed through sensorial means. Such studies have tended to focus on either formal policies that seek to control territories and populations through a governance of the senses, or on more everyday micro-politics of exclusion where conflicts are articulated in a sensory form. This article seeks to extend this work by concentrating on contexts where people deliberately seek out sensory experiences that disturb their own physical sense of comfort and belonging. While engagement across lines of sensorial difference may often be antagonistic, we argue for a more nuanced exploration of sense disruption that attends to the complex political potential of sensory urbanism. Specifically, we focus on the politics of sensation in tours of low-income urban areas. Tourists

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enter these areas to immerse themselves in a different environment, to be moved by urban deprivation and to feel its affective force. What embodied experiences do tourists and residents associate with urban poverty? How do guides mobilise these sensations in tourism encounters, and what is their potential to disrupt established hierarchies of socio-spatial value? Drawing on a collaborative research project in Kingston, Mexico City, New Orleans and Rio de Janeiro, the article explores how tours offer tourists a sense of what poverty feels like. Experiencing these neighbourhoods in an intimate, embodied fashion often allows tourists to feel empathy and solidarity, yet these feelings are balanced by a sense of discomfort and distance, reminding tourists in a visceral way that they do not belong.

### Keywords

exclusion, inequality, place branding, poverty, sensory urbanism, tourism

### 摘要

“感官都市主义”这一新兴领域研究如何通过感知手段对社会空间边界进行监管。这些研究往往侧重于寻求通过感官治理来控制领土和人口的正式政策，或者关注更多以感官形式表达冲突的日常微观排斥政治。本文旨在扩展这项研究，我们的方法是重点关注一些情境，在这些情境中，人们刻意地寻找那些打扰他们自己的身体舒适和归属感的感官体验。虽然跨越感官差异的参与可能经常是對抗性的，但我们主张对感官颠覆进行更细致的探索，以了解感官都市主义的复杂政治潜力。具体而言，我们关注的是低收入城市地区旅游的感官政治。游客进入这些地区，让自己沉浸在不同的环境中，被城市贫困所感动，并感受到它的情感力量。游客和居民将哪些有形的体验与城市贫困联系在一起呢？导游如何在游览过程中调动这些感受，以及这些感受有哪些可以颠覆既定的社会空间等级价值观的潜力？基于在金斯敦、墨西哥城、新奥尔良和里约热内卢开展的一个合作研究项目，本文探讨了旅游如何让游客体验贫困。以亲密、有形的方式体验这些社区往往让游客感受到同理心和团结，但这些感受又被不适感和距离感中和，以一种本能的方式提醒游客，他们不属于这里。

### 关键词

排斥、不平等、地方品牌化、贫困、感官都市主义、旅游

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### Introduction

The urban experience is always an embodied, aesthetic experience. While early urbanists such as Georg Simmel (2013 [1903]) suggested that the overwhelming hubbub of city life had an anaesthetising effect on its inhabitants, contemporary scholarship emphasises the extent to which sensorial experience is central to how we know cities. We move between and through a variety of

buildings, walls and streets, marked by graffiti or advertisements, while hearing singing and shouting, loud music and whispered conversations. We experience urban life pressed up against other commuters in hot, crowded public transport or separated from them in an air-conditioned private car; inhaling the smells of cooking, exhaust fumes and unwashed bodies; eating breakfast on the go or having leisurely drinks while seated with

others. Our sense of a city forms through our bodies' affective responses to such sights, smells, sounds, touch and tastes: specific combinations of sensory stimuli evoke discomfort, disgust, pleasure, delight or nostalgia.

An emergent body of research on 'sensory urbanism' has begun to analyse the range of embodied sensations that city dwellers experience, and the political and economic effects of these experiences (e.g. Adams and Guy, 2007; Degen, 2014; Low and Kalekin-Fishman, 2017). Much of this literature emphasises the extent to which the socio-spatial order of cities is a sensory order, analysing the role of vision (e.g. Cooper et al., 2018; Urry, 2003), sound (e.g. Atkinson, 2007; Bieletto-Bueno, 2017), smell (e.g. Manalansan, 2006) or taste (e.g. Rhys-Taylor, 2013) in the (re)production of urban sensory regimes. As Howes and Classen (2014: 66) note, 'the senses are directly put to political ends through acts of marking, excluding, punishing or exalting particular individuals and groups'. This sensory classification is a spatial process in which sensuous and moral geographies are entwined: 'bad' areas and their residents can be recognised by offensive sights, smells, sounds and so on.

Studies of sensory urbanism have tended to focus on the governance of urban sensation, studying the state's role in producing and maintaining sensory regimes through legislation, planning and policy. Such state efforts have often sought, whether in the name of rational or revanchist urbanism, to regulate the proliferation of sensory stimuli and to instill in city dwellers proper sensory dispositions. The associated measures have often been aimed at eliminating specific stimuli – removing signs of visual, auditory or olfactory disorder from public space (e.g. Cardoso, 2017; Ghertner, 2015) – but also involve state attempts to actively create or promote new sensory experiences by adding

new elements, such as light (Edensor, 2015). As Mónica Degen (2014: 92, 93) argues, 'the management and organisation of urban atmospheres is of crucial importance in contemporary urban policy ... the senses have been consciously adapted, manipulated and framed to market and brand urban places'. This sensory manipulation may involve the production of an exclusive, pleasurable 'urban sensorium', an ideological, aesthetised form of space that shields the wealthier classes from physical exposure to urban misery (Goonewardena, 2005).

Another emphasis within this literature has been on what Pow (2017: 270) calls 'visceral micro-politics', with authors studying how everyday practices and discourses of sensory 'othering' reproduce urban inequalities. Urban exclusion and segregation are not only produced through government policies and market forces, but also through more intimate socio-spatial contestations (see e.g. Low, 2013; Tan, 2013). City dwellers learn to identify and categorise social and material environments through aesthetic markers, and draw on these markers in their everyday negotiations of social boundaries. Feeling at home in a specific urban community involves more than a cognitive awareness of social location; the sensation of belonging is also produced through embodied, emotional responses to surroundings and activities perceived as normal and friendly. Conversely, feeling 'out of place' can involve physical sensations of discomfort, evoked by unfamiliar, unwelcoming sights or sounds. In addition to reproducing a specific urban order by discursively rejecting 'foreign' smells, accents or visual markers, certain social groups may fashion sensory 'attacks' to intimidate or exclude others (e.g. Oosterbaan, 2009).

The majority of authors writing on sensory urbanism, then, have focused on how socio-spatial boundaries are policed through sensorial means, whether through formal

governance strategies or in everyday life. In this article, we aim to extend this work by concentrating on contexts where people deliberately seek out sensory experiences that disturb their own physical sense of comfort and belonging, and that contrast with the urban sensorium they normally inhabit. While engagement across lines of sensorial difference may often be antagonistic, we develop a more nuanced exploration of sense disruption, one that attends to the complex political potential of sensory urbanism. Specifically, we focus on the politics of sensation in tours of low-income urban areas. This type of tourism, often referred to as 'slum tourism', offers visitors an opportunity to experience urban poverty from up close (see e.g. Frenzel et al., 2012; Jones and Sanyal, 2015). Tourists enter these areas to immerse themselves in a different environment, to be moved emotionally by urban deprivation, to feel its affective force. What embodied experiences do tourists and residents associate with urban poverty? How do guides mobilise these sensations in tourism encounters, and what is their potential to disrupt established hierarchies of socio-spatial value?

This article draws on a collaborative research project on tourism in low-income areas in Kingston, Mexico City, New Orleans and Rio de Janeiro. The next section of the article describes the context of these cases and the methods used to research them. We go on to explore how tours offer tourists a sense of what poverty feels like. This sensing of urban poverty relies on visual shocks, but is also achieved by exposing tourists to auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile sensations that are presented as central to 'ghetto life' or 'favela culture'. As they move through the neighbourhood on foot or by bike, guides curate specific encounters in terms of tasting food or listening to music. They will sometimes frame these sensory experiences explicitly through narrative,

while at other times the connotations are left implicit. This variation in narrative framing is central in a following section, which analyses the often careful balancing act on the part of guides, rendering certain forms of poverty sensible, while obscuring others. Songs, films, novels and other media sensitise visitors so that they perceive some forms of poverty more readily than others. We argue that the tour can be seen as a means of attunement and place-making, which directs tourists towards sensing specific forms of inequality and misery that the guides want to foreground. The final section focuses on the political implications of these aesthetic experiences, understanding the attunement of sensory perception towards a shared norm as a form of what Jacques Rancière (2010) calls *consensus*, or sensing together, a central mechanism in processes of subjectivation and the inscription of community.

## Urban poverty tours across the Americas

The research project on which this article draws involved long-term, multi-sited ethnographic research, conducted from 2015 to 2016 during multiple periods of largely neighbourhood-based fieldwork in four cities: Kingston (Trench Town), Mexico City (Tepito), New Orleans (Lower Ninth Ward) and Rio de Janeiro (multiple favelas, with a focus on Vidigal and Santa Marta). Our fieldwork focused on interactions between tour guides, tourists, residents and community organisations. Methods included participant observation in neighbourhood tours, and formal and informal interviews with tour guides, residents and tourists, as well as with key stakeholders in government, business, NGOs, heritage institutions and academia. A strong emphasis was on tour guides, given their central role in shaping tourist encounters. The fieldwork was conducted in part by individual project members, and in part through

team-based research in the different sites; a comparative analysis was organised collaboratively through periodic team meetings.

Tepito, which houses a centrally located street market known for *fyuca* (stolen goods), has long been known as a *barrio bravo*, one of Mexico City's most crime-ridden neighbourhoods. Notwithstanding, Tepito's low-income residents, many of whom have ties to the market, demonstrate pride in the barrio's history and achievements, and the cultural centre Centro de Estudios Tepiteños seeks to counter Tepito's stigmatisation, collecting and displaying Tepito's popular culture and heritage. The Centre also organises 'Tepitours: The Safari Tepiteño', a pedestrian tour through the barrio's streets that highlights the neighbourhood's social life and cultural features, including its graffiti, murals, typical *vecindades* housing and eateries. Close contact and conversation between residents and predominantly Mexican tourists is a central aspect of the tour. Tepito should be understood within Mexico City's political economy; the neighbourhood is adjacent to the city's historic centre, which has recently been redeveloped as a tourist attraction and commercial hub, triggering gentrification, surveillance and the privatisation of public space. As municipally imposed visions of urban renewal threaten Tepito's social structures and built environment, the community-based Tepito tours can be read as explicit attempts to improve Tepito's reputation, without changing its economic, demographic and physical makeup.

New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward is a historically Black low-income community, immiserated by Hurricane Katrina but increasingly valorised as a repository of the city's cultural heritage. The commercial success of post-Hurricane Katrina bus tours turned the area into a 'disaster tourism' destination. Following the city's prohibition of these bus tours (announced in 2006 but not enforced until 2013), most tours to the

neighbourhood are cycling tours, frequently led by residents. While still emphasising the disaster and its aftereffects, these tours include a stronger focus on the area's heritage and its contributions to New Orleans' history. Tourists are mainly White Americans and both White and Black guides indirectly acknowledge the associations that these visitors have with African-American ghettos. They partially counter them, presenting the neighbourhood as *working-class*, rather than lower-class or underclass, with high levels of historical home ownership amongst the neighbourhood's Black residents. New Orleans' broader urban redevelopment, combined with the post-Katrina displacement of many of these homeowners, has resulted in incipient gentrification and an associated demographic shift.

Santa Marta and Vidigal are both centrally located in Rio de Janeiro's wealthier Southern Zone. Compared to Rocinha, a favela where internationally-orientated commercial tours promise a spectacular experience of poverty and violence, these two neighbourhoods host smaller individual endeavours that seek to highlight local creativity and resilience. The association of favelas, where many residents are of African descent, with danger and popular culture has been one reason for celebrities and tourists, most of them White European, US and Latin American, to consider these places as 'must see' destinations. As the 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Olympics prompted efforts to re-brand Rio, programmes to 'pacify' favelas through police-military occupation, along with state policies providing tour guides with accreditation, stimulated the growth of favela tours in the Southern Zone. Some state officials regard the tours as means to 'integrate' and 'normalise' favelas. However, in Santa Marta and Vidigal, residents protest the gentrification and the displacement of locals that resulted from the combination of pacification and tourism.

Trench Town developed as an early 20th-century squatter settlement, but was consolidated as a colonial government housing project in the 1940s. Its reputation as a dangerous 'ghetto' grew during Jamaica's political violence of the 1970s, and worsened in following decades as Kingston became affected by the transnational drugs trade and gang violence. Trench Town's main claim to fame is as the 'birthplace of reggae'; it was home to reggae superstar Bob Marley, along with many other musicians. While Jamaica's tourism industry is concentrated on the island's north coast, far from Kingston's ghettos, this has begun to change with the recent renovation of Culture Yard, Marley's former home in Trench Town. Visitors are usually White Europeans or North Americans, but sometimes include middle-class Jamaicans of mixed or African descent. Walking tours, mainly guided by African-Jamaican local residents, tend to start from Culture Yard's museum, and may include interaction with artists, craftspeople and community elders. The guides highlight the neighbourhood's poverty, but also local educational, economic and cultural initiatives. There have been various efforts to regenerate Downtown Kingston by promoting heritage tourism and cultural industries; Trench Town's community-run tours fit within official urban and tourism policies, but its location and levels of violence still preclude gentrification.

As these brief descriptions of the different sites suggest, the research neighbourhoods and their tours differ in a number of ways, including the measure of ethnoracial differentiation between residents and tourists; whether the neighbourhood's location makes it susceptible to gentrification; and whether government policies support, tolerate or critique local tours. In this article, however, we stress their similarities with the analytical objective of exploring the sensorial dimension of urban poverty and inequality. In the following three thematic sections, we

highlight features common across these cases: poverty as sensory disruption; the role of guides; and the political implications of sensory transgression.

### Sensing urban poverty

What does it feel like to live in poverty? How do we sensorially identify an urban place as poor? The embodied experience of place is inevitably relational: it is different for residents than for tourists and other visitors. How residents of low-income neighbourhoods experience their surroundings can be understood usefully through theories of dwelling. Heidegger's work on *Dasein*, or being-in-the world, is often invoked to explain the relation between individuals and their physical environs. Long-term practices of dwelling feed into a type of skilled interaction with a specific landscape (Ingold, 2000), and these extended practices of inhabitation enable affective place-connections and the possibility of 'feeling at home' (Duff, 2010). In addition, the experience of living in a low-income, marginalised urban neighbourhood is generally constructed comparatively, with residents acutely aware of the physical and social contrast between their surroundings and other urban places.

The everyday experience of living in spaces marked by political and infrastructural neglect (or punitive interventions) gives rise to a range of affective responses, from anger, frustration and exhaustion to pride and defiance (see e.g. Auyero and Swistun, 2009; Bourgois, 2003). These responses connect to specific physical sensations and aesthetic markers: having to trudge up a steep hill every day to get home because you lack transport, living in a crowded tenement yard where you hear everything the neighbours say and do, but also feeling buoyed by the social intensity and neighbourliness, and by music and street art that affirm the cultural strength of your community. These

affective responses are by no means all negative; in a discussion about moving out of Trench Town, one resident explicitly referenced local sensory comfort: ‘Sure, I want a big house, AC and all them things. But Uptown is too quiet. I like hearing people. Hearing everything. It kind of make me feel safe, you know?’. Similarly, one of Trench Town’s guides saw the smells and tastes of ‘ghetto food’ as a source of pride rather than embarrassment, noting that ‘people travel from all over Kingston to the ghetto to get the real chicken back’.

In contrast to the long-term dwelling that informs residents’ embodied experience of poor urban places as home, tourism is generally premised on short-term environmental immersion and the complicated appeal of feeling out of place. Tourists seek to achieve various forms of transformation – relaxation, inspiration, invigoration – through physical exposure to a different environment (Picard and Robinson, 2012; Pritchard and Morgan, 2011). Wandering through unfamiliar streets, surrounded by new sights, smells and sounds, consuming different food and drink – these experiences allow tourists to gain new bodily ways of knowing themselves and others. The way that tourists experience urban poverty similarly centres on a temporary experience of sensory unfamiliarity and disruption. Tourism to low-income urban areas relies on giving visitors a physical, emotionally meaningful sense of deprivation through guided, mediated exposure to a range of sensory impressions – and thus an exceptional tourist adventure.

This experience of sensory rupture was evident during the tours of Tepito, Mexico City’s notorious *barrio bravo*. For the tourists who take an increasingly popular multi-sensory walking tour through the neighbourhood, the *barrio* tends to be an overwhelming experience. Most visitors walk in from the historic city centre or the nearby metro station, and the contrast between Tepito and other parts of the city is vivid.

The neighbourhood’s bustling street market immerses pedestrians in a mix of sensations: they are engulfed by a hot, noisy dense space, crowded from all sides by the many shoppers, by the tightly packed stalls with their yellow and blue tarps and by the sheer quantity of merchandise on display. Visitors are enveloped by the visual abundance of the goods for sale, the cacophony of commerce, the smells of cooking emanating from the food stalls, the heat of the day and the physical contact as people push and squeeze to get through. While residents, vendors and regular shoppers take this commotion in their stride, to many middle-class visitors (most of whom are Mexican) this intense ambience feels like an assault on their senses, a physical shock that confirms many of their notions of Tepito’s street life and their social distance from it. This sense of amazement was expressed to one of us, Barbara Vodopivec, by a young male tourist, a student at Mexico City’s Iberoamericana University: ‘You go to this place and you leave with your mouth open. It’s impressive, it’s a hot spring of people ... People coming and going, loading, yelling, selling, fiddling, selling the food. It is incredible’. A middle-class female Mexican tourist who joined the Tepito tour with a group of her friends described her experience of disruption in similarly explicit terms:

I think this is what it boils down to, that you know this other side of the city. That it is violent, visually, it is very violent. Because there is a lot of everything, no? You smell, you look at this ... you feel this as you go along ... you walk in the middle of the garbage. You see, it is, it is ...

She hesitated, trying to find the right words:

It is very different, no? One of the things that surprised us is that, physically, we felt very exhausted, because there is an energy there ... You have to go with all your senses. Probably, there are people who only go and look, no?<sup>1</sup>

This tourist wanted to get to know ‘this other side of the city’ but had not expected the physical impact to be so dramatic. The ‘energy’ of the neighbourhood felt like an assault on her senses. She felt that it was not enough ‘to only go and look’, but the ‘violent’ visual impact combined with other sensations to leave her feeling exhausted, almost pained. Knowing the *barrio bravo* turned out to be a not entirely pleasant full-body experience.

A comparably multi-sensory experience is offered by the walking tour in Kingston’s Trench Town. Tourists tend to enter this ‘ghetto’ neighbourhood at the Culture Yard museum, a small exhibition space at the site of Bob Marley’s former home. Following a visit to the museum, many go on to explore Trench Town on a walking tour, which offers a more direct physical exposure to poverty. For many visitors, it comes as a visual shock – expected, but still often distressing – to witness the rundown housing that residents inhabit. This visual dimension interacts with other forms of sensory exposure. Moving through the streets on foot, in the blazing sun, is a very different way of experiencing the city than from the comfort of an air-conditioned car, the usual mode of transport for foreign tourists and Uptown Kingstonians. Unused to the heat, both local and international tourists risk suffering sunstroke or dizzy spells. They may be accosted by both the smell and the sight of sewage in sections where it runs through the streets. This encounter with dirt is reiterated on those tours that stop at a pottery workshop run by a Jamaican return migrant, who sometimes organises workshops with neighbourhood children to produce clay souvenirs. The workshop is a calm space, but it is also hot, dusty and dirty, and visitors can immerse their hands in the cool, sticky clay if they wish. Feeling increasingly sweaty and grimy, a brief visit to an air-conditioned recording studio offers some relief from the

heat, and emphasises the sonic dimension of this neighbourhood’s atmosphere. The brief escape from the hot sun also makes tourists aware of the fragmentation of this space. The spaces do not all feel the same.

These tours interact with tourists’ preconceptions in different ways. In Kingston, for instance, the sounds of reggae satisfy visitors’ musical expectations, while the feel of dirt and deprivation ties into their previous understandings of what a ‘ghetto’ should feel like. However, the relatively quiet and spacious character of Trench Town – its wide streets, the green and airy feeling of certain areas, the crowing of roosters and other countryside sounds – may disturb their impression of urban squalor. The tensions between pre-existing expectations and the physical features of the built environment were made clear in an ironic way in an anecdote recounted to one of us during fieldwork. Residents told one of us, Alana Osbourne, about a film that centred on inner-city violence and that involved scenes shot in the neighbourhood. However, the house where the shoot took place was deemed insufficiently poor-looking for the film’s purposes, and a crew set about visually impoverishing it to achieve the desired ‘ghetto look’. Happily for the house’s residents, the film crew deimpoverished the house afterwards, but the incident demonstrated the expectations of a specific urban aesthetic.

Similar to the Kingston and Mexico City tours, New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward bike tour also offers a multi-sensory experience, but one based on a different kinetic engagement with the urban surroundings. Even in the cooler months, cycling through the humid Louisiana heat can be quite strenuous and tourists sweat it out to get from place to place. The bicycle also affords a specific type of interaction, involving a much more halting, start-and-stop movement than either walking or driving. This movement encourages a tendency for tourists to wave



at local people, sometimes accompanied by an impromptu ‘good day’ in mock familiarity, and to be waved at by them as they pass, experiences that in turn seem to engender a sense of connection with the neighbourhood. Cycling enables an intimate co-presence, yet offers tourists a ‘safe’ distance from the sidewalk, and the ability to quickly move on from residents or scenes the guides might want to avoid.

Lower Ninth Ward tours also prominently feature a gustatory element. On one tour that our group took, the guide stopped at her own ‘shotgun house’ (a vernacular architectural symbol of the city), where she offered the participants cans of beer kept cool in an ice-box on the porch. For lunch, this tour stops at a Vietnamese immigrant-owned grocery store to buy Po’ Boys, the typical New Orleans sandwich, and tourists take their food to the House of Dance and Feathers, a community museum run by Ronald Lewis, an elderly African-American archivist and local cultural figure. They eat lunch in his yard, surrounded by Mardi Gras memorabilia and listening to his stories of the neighbourhood, of the Mardi Gras Indians and of Hurricane Katrina, with the taste of New Orleans in their mouths.

This emphasis on local foods is also common to many of Rio de Janeiro’s favela tours. Tourists get an authentic taste of these neighbourhood favelas when eating *feijoada*, a working-class food with roots in slavery, made out of beans and leftover bits of pork. Over time this dish became a national symbol, and certain favela restaurants, such as Feijoada do Pituca cafe in Babilônia or Bar do David in Chapéu Mangueira, received significant coverage during the 2016 Summer Olympics. In other favela tours, such as that through Vidigal, guides invite visitors onto local residents’ rooftops (*laje*) to buy a homemade *picolé*. Sucking on this sweet ice pop emphasises the contrast between the cold treat and the heat of the

neighbourhood. Drinking and eating as residents do – in a specific architectural environment, surrounded by sounds and sights – allows a sense of consuming difference, from an invited vantage point (cf. hooks, 1992).

As these different tours suggest, outsiders can immerse themselves in an atmosphere of urban difference with varying levels of intensity. As the middle-class Mexican tourist suggested, for some it might be possible to limit their engagement with sensorial difference to a visual shock. However, for many, these visits to ‘the other side of the city’ involve other types of physical surprise or discomfort. In certain cases, this involves the tactile sensation of squeezing through Tepito’s market, a new intimacy with normally distant bodies. This is comparable to the experience of tourists who travel up the steep hillsides of Rio’s favelas pressed up against the back of a motorcycle taxi driver, or amidst residents packed into a crowded *funicular* cable car. In all the cities we researched, middle-class mobilities tend to be car-based, and other forms of transport – walking, cycling, sitting on the back of a motorbike without a crash helmet – can in themselves be a transgressive break from this classed norm (cf. Middleton, 2010). When a tourist uses the same mode of transport as locals, they often literally feel each other’s bodies. This sensation makes some outsiders quite nervous and they may take out their cameras, seeking to insert some distance, mitigating what they experience as an excess of bodily proximity.

Another sensory route to proximity and intimacy is through eating and drinking. These are perhaps the most unsettling forms of engagement, as they involve a very visceral relation to difference, the literal incorporation of the unknown (see Hayes-Conroy, 2014; Rhys-Taylor, 2013). Being introduced to goat curry in Culture Yard or miga stew in Tepito’s market often involves an interplay between culinary intimacy and

culinary suspicion. Across our different research neighbourhoods, many visitors declined to eat street food or other locally prepared dishes, softly muttering about a lack of hygiene. This suspicion sometimes appeared to result less from actual sanitary conditions than from popular connotations of poverty with dirt. Guides would sometimes reassure and cajole visitors to try something new, but refrain from pressing them at other times. As the next section underlines, guides play an important role in mediating the intensity of tourists' bodily experiences: they gauge when to encourage visitors to engage their senses more fully and when to hold off and allow them more distance, while carefully framing the perception of these sensations through narratives that both recognise and contest pre-existing notions of low-income areas.

### Guiding the senses

Allowing tourists to 'know' what urban poverty feels like is achieved in part through the creation of a specific place atmosphere. It is through such an ambience, or the 'vibes' as Jamaicans call it, that visitors experience the ghetto, the favela or the *barrio bravo*. This embodied knowing is achieved through the tour, which we can understand as an aesthetic formation that is crafted only partly intentionally. Tourism guides and other brokers engage in a form of curation that involves an ongoing aestheticisation of the landscape through physical and narrative signposting, through referencing music, literature and visual art (cf. Butler, 2012; Guano, 2017). Yet the work of the tour guide in crafting a sensational tourism experience does not always involve conscious strategies or explicit intentions. In our research, while many guides do consider their narratives as political interventions (cf. Santos, 2017), their aesthetic framing sometimes seemed less deliberate – but no less effective.

Many tour guides seek to dispel pre-existing images of neighbourhoods such as theirs. Their role as tour guide is a balancing act, in which an engagement with certain tropes – dirt, substandard housing, illicit drug use – may be necessary to address and counter stigmatising associations, but can inadvertently reinforce them. At times, the various sensorial features of these neighbourhoods do not match visitors' anticipation. While outsiders may expect noisy, cramped housing and crowded spaces, many of the neighbourhoods, including Trench Town and many of Rio's favelas, are rather quiet, some houses are relatively spacious and the streets may be empty depending on the time of day. In the Lower Ninth, visitors are both shocked at the lack of post-Katrina rebuilding and yet surprised that the area does not look poor. Indeed, the area has become less poor as many low-income residents did not return or were displaced through gentrification. In addition, many visitors expect project housing rather than the neighbourhood's predominantly owner-occupied single houses. New Orleans guides sometimes explain such mismatches between expectation and experience by pointing to the lack of noise and people on the street as evidence of residents' working-class character. 'You guys [the tourists] are the only ones not at work right now', one bike tour guide would often joke as a way to remark on the relative quiet of the neighbourhood.

Tourists' sensory impressions of urban poverty are mediated through tour guides' narratives and their foregrounding of specific aesthetic forms in the landscape, but this experience is never separate from the pre-circulating representations of these neighbourhoods (see Freire-Medeiros, 2011). This came out clearly in the case of Trench Town, where a 'ghetto feel' is achieved in a multi-sensorial fashion. As tourists arrive at the Culture Yard, to the sound of reggae music, they generally pass a small group of

Rastafari men who sit by the entrance, a regular hangout spot for these residents to 'reason' and smoke marijuana. While 'ganja' is semi-decriminalised in Jamaica, it is still formally illegal, and the smell of weed not only ties into tourists' olfactory associations with Rastafari (reinforced by the sounds of reggae), it also offers a thrill of the illicit. Some tours begin by welcoming tourists into the Yard with Styrofoam cups of sweet cornmeal porridge. Sipping this offers a literal taste of poverty through 'ghetto food', but the connection to Bob Marley is also made explicit through a reference to his song 'No Woman, No Cry', which includes the lyrics 'I remember when we used to sit in the government yard in Trench Town ... Then we would cook cornmeal porridge, of which I'll share with you'. Here, the gustatory sensation of poverty is made explicit through guides' reference to these lyrics, encouraging visitors to participate in an authentic, corroborative experience.

In Tepito, visitors have to attune their bodies to both the tour guide's pace and the rhythm of the place. Passing many small shops where self-made and second-hand products are on display, they must step carefully as they make their way through the streets, which are strewn with rotting produce, litter and broken glass, while the putrid smell of rubbish mixes with the exhaust fumes of cars. These sights and smells connect to prevalent stereotypes of Mexico City's low-income neighbourhoods as places where locals neglect their surroundings. However, one tour guide, whom we call Alvaro here, re-narrates the olfactory sense of backwardness by pointing out an area full of conscious recyclers that is neglected by the city administration. Alvaro explicitly challenges aesthetic norms of 'proper' urban space by framing rubbish as a valuable resource in reuse and recycling. He points to Tepiteños' long tradition of repurposing discarded items. Tepito, he argues, makes good

use of those materials that a careless, throw-away society no longer sees as valuable: this neighbourhood's residents should be seen as the 'real ecologists', experts of sustainability in their own right. This narrative guides the tourists' sensory experience in a new direction, reframing their perceptions of the sight and smell of rubbish in terms of subject formation: these residents are caring environmentalists, whose activities are in line with expectations of modern urban citizens (Dürr and Winder, 2016).

Other neighbourhoods similarly engage with ideas of ecological neglect and sustainability. In the Rio favela of Santa Marta, guides reference the smell of sewage while discussing the lack of infrastructure and public services that residents suffer. Patricia, an upper-middle-class Brazilian woman who resided in Argentina, toured Santa Marta with her three children and their nanny. 'I'm Carioca [a Rio native], but I don't know my city', she explained. She idly surmised that fixing infrastructure in the favela would be a complex endeavour, but when affronted by the foul odour of an open sewer, she covered her nose and mouth with her hand. 'Why can't you call the government to fix this?', she asked her guide, expressing concern and disbelief. Multiple favela tours make a stop at community gardens, emphasising both that a favela can include cool, green spaces and that residents have a commitment to environmental goals, while in the neighbourhood of Vidigal, tourists can spend the night at a sustainably constructed boutique eco-hotel.

In New Orleans, one guide took time to explain why old tires and rubbish fill many of the area's empty lots – this is an issue that irks many residents, who regard the rubbish as contributing to their stigmatisation. The guide blamed both outsiders for coming to the Lower Ninth Ward to dump things there, and the government for not redeveloping the plots quickly. However, both guides and visitors would gesture towards dilapidated houses in

ironic tones as ‘fixer-uppers’ and ‘real-estate opportunities’. This kind of humour, in presenting these areas as available to be transformed by the speculative capital, discloses a subtext that asserts the shared class position of the guides and tourists.

Various tour guides working in the Lower Ninth Ward point out that residents traditionally knew how to ‘live with the water’, fishing in the nearby wetlands, whereas the damage wrought in the neighbourhood by Hurricane Katrina was the result of more powerful actors’ unsustainable hydrological practices. In a much repeated phrase, guides point to the ‘rebirth’ of the Lower Ninth through sensitively managed neighbourhood gardens, beekeeping projects and urban agriculture such as the Sankofa ‘fresh stop market’. Intentionally or unwittingly, such emphases reiterate (racialised) associations many visitors may hold between poverty, authenticity and being ‘closer to nature’.

As bell hooks (1992: 21) notes, ‘The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling’, but the desire for encounters with difference can inform politics in multiple ways, potentially disrupting and subverting entrenched subject positions. Tourism in low-income neighbourhoods, often inhabited by minority populations, can be read as an obviously problematic sensorial form of commodifying socio-economic and racial difference. Yet these encounters may also hold in them the potential for change, as we suggest in the following section.

### The politics of sensation

Tours of low-income urban areas are often intentionally geared towards invoking or strengthening feelings of solidarity, or at least a humanitarian impulse. Tourists themselves may also actively seek out this shock

as a part of an attempt to effect positive change in the self. As Émilie Crossley’s (2012) analysis of volunteer tourism suggests, a confrontation with destitution and the emotions generated by this encounter are central to a process of moral self-transformation. However, this change is geared more towards a reshaping of individual morality than of larger structures of social difference.

The tours discussed here perhaps offer a slightly larger political potential in terms of redrawing social boundaries. As philosophical work on the politics of aesthetics elaborates, this political dimension lies in the sensory nature of processes of subject formation. Focusing on what he calls ‘the distribution of the sensible’, Rancière (2006: 12) emphasises how a ‘system of self-evident facts of sense perception ... simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it’. Such sense of who we are, and to what communities we belong, takes shape through embodied experiences and encounters, with a range of people and environments. These experiences and encounters often work through bodily sensations of sameness and difference, of comfort and discomfort, of social proximity and distance. Pre-cognitive feelings of commonality and alterity – the Rancièrian *consensus* – may gain conscious articulation in terms of race, class, gender or urban space. Understanding both why socio-political orders persist, and how they come to be challenged, requires attending to both consensus and dissensus, the crafting and the disruption of a shared sense experience (see also Panagia, 2009).

The senses can play an important role in affecting the subject positions of tourists, guides and residents as they venture through impoverished neighbourhoods. The main potential of these tours lies in providing visitors with the opportunity to sense – up to a point – residents’ daily lived experience in

situ, in a shared space. Through a sensory immersion in the neighbourhood, guides seek to achieve a shared awareness of the place that works to evoke a feeling of solidarity on various levels, allowing tourists to 'know' what it feels like to be marked by poverty and neglect. Visitors have their senses directly offended by the smells of sewage and the sight of rubbish and destitution, but can also have them lifted by the taste of food born of scarcity and the sounds of community forged through stigmatisation.

Recognition and subject formation can be achieved through eating and drinking as ways of knowing other people's worlds, sharing their tastes and smells (Pink, 2008: 181). Walking together, eating together, listening together – such shared sensations are key to community formation. On the walking tour through Tepito, Alvaro proudly invites visitors to a food stall where *migas* are sold. *Migas*, a spicy, garlicky stew based on pig bones, tacos and old bread, bear the stigma of being greasy, viscous poor people's food (Hernández Hernández, 2008). While tourists often refused to try the dish or picked at it carefully, both the guide and cooks celebrate it as an iconic Tepiteño delicacy. Tasting together, within a specific spatial context, helps confirm sensorially the guide's narrative of Tepito as a space of discrimination and disadvantage but also of resistance and cultural pride. The tourists' pickiness illustrates the limits of their willingness to embrace this *consensus*.

When narrated in terms of urban inequality, emergent feelings of community and affinity can take on a political dimension. Many tours generate an explicitly emplaced and embodied sensation of marginalisation. The Lower Ninth Ward bike tours, for instance, are structured to make tourists feel the neighbourhood's isolation from the rest of New Orleans. The groups of cyclists depart for the neighbourhood, which is generally left off of tourist maps, from a park near the historical city centre, where the

main tourist attractions such as the French Quarter are located. Cycling across the St Claude Avenue bridge over the Industrial Canal into the Lower Ninth, guides often pause to stress the neighbourhood's social and physical separation, emphasising that the narrow bridge (which is raised to allow shipping access to the canal) is the only functioning entrance to the area, which can present a major problem for emergency services. The canal stands as a geographic marker of difference, and the narrative marking of its crossing invites a strong feeling of leaving the city proper. A corollary marker of geographic disparity focuses on verticality: guides point out the relatively low-lying parts of certain areas in relation to the nearby grassy levees, as well as the high-water lines still visible on the sides of ruined houses, as an index of the catastrophic failure of those same levees in the wake of Katrina.

On favela tours, entering the neighbourhood with a tour guide is also like crossing a threshold, a shift that is felt when the pavement changes abruptly from asphalt to cobble stones, broken concrete and uneven soil. This tactile experience is intensified by the physical exertion of getting up the hill, sweating it out like the locals do on a daily basis, experiencing in a direct embodied fashion what it feels like to be a favela resident – often without easy connection to the city centre and neglected in terms of infrastructure. In addition to the smell of sewage, explained by guides as a form of infrastructural neglect, visitors may also notice the limited and precarious electricity supplies, as on one tour to Vidigal we participated in, where a truck struck a power line and blacked out the neighbourhood for an entire day. Visitors who stay into the late afternoon may notice the generally low phosphorene lights, which add to the sense of danger as darkness falls, offering a glimpse of what the favela might be like at night. Such embodied experiences that tourists

share with the locals allow for a sensory immersion into a place of neglect.

Like the threshold moments that mark the movement into a space of alterity, such sensations of deprivation work ambiguously. They can encourage a physical sensation of empathy and solidarity, challenging socio-spatial boundaries and hierarchies of value. In Trench Town, a Dutch-Jamaican-Canadian couple took their children on a tour that went inside some of the poorest households. The Dutch mother was a little shocked by the area's poverty. 'I feel it is good to know how people live, and for the children to get to see this', she explained, her eyes starting to tear up. Wiping the corner of her eye, she continued: 'But, I feel ... uncomfortable, you know, like we're not supposed to be here, I wish I didn't feel like that, but I can't help this'. Her Jamaican-Canadian partner put his arm around her and went on to explain why he felt that tourists should come to Trench Town: 'Maybe they see this on tv and hear about it, but they want to feel it. Maybe then, they will share the issues people face here and this will open up their eyes'.

Despite this possibility of 'sharing the issues', the question remains how long that sense of solidarity lasts, as tourists return to more middle-class spaces, turn on the air-conditioning and wash off their sweat. Tours can also reiterate boundaries and hierarchies, reinforcing preexisting notions of difference and distance through sensations such as disgust or fear, experienced not only by tourists but also by residents. One octogenarian woman in Vidigal, for instance, emerging from a kombi van packed with tourists, was overheard muttering her desire to see drug gangs reassert dominance in her community if only so the 'gringos would finally leave'. The rupture implied in such negative affects might be necessary for transformation of the line between different urban subject positions – what tourists seek, what

guides want to achieve in terms of reconfiguring difference and what residents perceive as a disruption of their daily routines.

More generally, the evocation of feelings of similarity through the tours is by no means a given. Across our research sites, residents emphasised the difference they felt vis-a-vis visitors. Some greeted outsiders welcomingly, while others expressed their uneasiness with the tourist other. In these situations, tourists themselves become a kind of spectacle that leaves them *feeling* White or middle-class, and out of place. Many tourists may experience for the first time what it feels like to be 'a sight'. In favelas, residents tend to deliberately ignore tourists, offering them only blank facial expressions. However, on the Trench Town tour, children like to call out 'White foreigners' when they see tourists (even those who identify as non-White or as Jamaican); such interpellations reinforce experiences of national and racialised difference.

## Conclusion

Authors focusing on Europe and North America sometimes suggest that the cities of the global North have become homogenous 'landscapes' that are aesthetically barren and banal, with sensory variety or excess disciplined as a result of the modernising tendencies of bureaucrats, police, planners and corporations (Porteous, 1996: 154–156). Tim Edensor contrasts this unsensual, sterile character of the modern city, enforced by the more contained habitus of the modern urban subject, with 'unfamiliar, non-Western space, such as an Indian bazaar, which may appear as wildly sensual and disordered' (Edensor, 2007: 221). He suggests that escape from this purified sensory order can be found not only in the global South, but also in the margins and industrial ruins of European cities, where an excess of matter and unregulated sensory stimuli can promote a richer,

more powerful sense experience. However, to portray poverty and decay as a more sensory experience than visiting a wealthy, ‘cleansed’ and ‘modern’ space is to neglect how perceptions of such places are also shaped socially and politically. Sensations of sterility and order are constructed and always have a political connotation.

The tour guides discussed in this article actively engage with such preconceptions of what poverty feels like. The intended effect of their tours is rarely purely economic. Both tourists and guides often seek to reconfigure boundaries of class, race and nation, if only temporarily. Aesthetics and affect play an important role in these processes. Getting to know these neighbourhoods and the everyday life of their residents in a personal, embodied fashion – having to navigate unpaved streets where sewage bubbles up from leaky pipes, physically experiencing a sense of distance and isolation from the rest of the city – often has a disruptive effect on tourists, enabling an empathy based on shared sensations. Yet these sensations of solidarity are balanced by feelings of discomfort and difference, as tourists are often also reminded in a visceral way that they do not belong to these urban places.

In this article, we have sought to show that, while the politics of sensation need not be emancipatory, tourism in low-income neighbourhoods can have a more ambiguous effect than simply reinforcing established lines of urban value. As aesthetic formations that shape a specific embodied experience, tours of low-income neighbourhoods confront participants with sometimes intense feelings about who they are and where they belong. This sensation of belonging or non-belonging works in complex ways. When largely middle-class, White tourists visit impoverished and in many cases predominantly non-White neighbourhoods, the experience of the tour simultaneously produces a sense of socio-spatial distance and proximity.

These tours can be seen as a socio-spatial force close to what Sara Ahmed terms affective economies, in which ‘emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities — or bodily space with social space — through the very intensity of their attachments’ (Ahmed, 2004: 120). Sensing community and feeling affection for the individuals that visitors encounter during tours produces an ambiguous mix of similarity and difference, of intimacy and alienation.

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### Note

1. All non-English quotes have been translated by the authors.

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