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Mediating and Representing the Slum: Introduction

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Abstract

As a lexical concept, *slum* has been widely criticized by twenty-first-century researchers but the formulation and spread of the concept has profoundly altered actual cities in many parts of the world since the early twentieth century. Examining the discursive history of the slum concept demonstrates the contribution literary studies focused on the city can make to urban history. Urban historians concerned with areas labelled as slums would benefit from problematizing the concept of *slum* as well as from establishing comparative histories of stigmatized urban zones in a planetary context. Such work leads to a definitional challenge in which undesirable conditions do need labelling in some way but the challenges and materialities of different cities on different continents are also all unique and potentially damaged by the application of an overarching tag such as *slum*. In various ways, the contributions to this special feature all address the foregoing issues.

Keywords: slum, literary urban studies, planetary urbanization, habitability, representation

The Concept and Lexis of *Slum* in Urban History

The slum, early-twentieth-century writers in English claimed, was an inhumane, shamefully filthy and dangerous side effect of unrestrained urban capitalism spread from the biggest

cities. Like Jacob Riis in New York at the beginning of the century, E.D. Simon in the UK thirty years later argued that “drastic action”, its objective to “hasten the day when the slums would finally be abolished”, was then the central fight being fought to secure cities’ future.¹ In Depression-era London, the London County Council (LCC) began an account of its own achievements improving housing in the metropolis over the preceding fifty years with a passage from an 1840s novel by Charles Kingsley describing a pile of human waste in a massively overcrowded court of tenements.² Nineteenth-century literary constructions of the slum were thus vital in the claims to have enacted successful progressive policies made by local government bodies such as the LCC, which conducted large-scale “slum clearance” during the 1930s,³ as well as at the national level in the UK and elsewhere. US President Harry S. Truman alluded to this tradition when he signed into law the 1949 Housing Act. Truman announced that the legislation “opens up the prospect of decent homes in wholesome surroundings for low-income families now living in the squalor of the slums. It equips the Federal Government, for the first time, with effective means for aiding cities in the vital task of clearing slums and rebuilding blighted areas.”⁴ *Slum*, this four-letter word, conveys the power to shock which urban squalor itself has when observed by the more privileged. The discursive history of the slum concept has had a direct impact on numerous actual city districts worldwide.

Academic disciplines we think of as belonging to the humanities bring new perspectives to urban studies. The work of urban studies has been to develop models of what cities are and what distinguishes city life from other human social arrangements. The humanities approaches which literary critics and cultural studies researchers practice show how concepts such as the “inner city” and the urban “underworld” form: in acts of verbal definition and tale-telling.⁵ Just as administrative and architectural histories chart the construction of cities, so do accounts of concepts’ genesis and varied fortunes. The specifically *literary* urban studies

emergent in the twenty-first century is a field devoted to charting the boundaries and contradictions of “the city concept.”⁶ Insights from literary urban studies provide urban historians with both methods and materials. Without asserting belief in “a self-evident proximity or direct relationship between world and word,” literary texts both represent complex materialities of urban life and are themselves material things, the outcome of production processes.⁷ According to Markku Salmela, for instance, Don DeLillo’s 1972 novel *End Zone* calls attention to cities’ habitual “sensory denial” which happens by their “keeping filth out of sight and mind.”⁸ Salmela proceeds to a detailed discussion of DeLillo’s later novels and short stories, among them several of which aim to capture in literary prose the immensity of New York City. In these, it is sewerage and other “waste management systems” which enable said denial.⁹ Representations of New York and smaller American settlements in DeLillo, Salmela writes, combine the “city upon a hill” metaphor used by earlier Puritans with the material “landfill” neighboring today’s population centers as it did earlier ones, however effective the waste management may be.¹⁰ Similarly, Flore Janssen shows how investigative writing like that, concerned with interwar London, of Ada Chesterton (1869–1962) establishes structures like “the idea of an ‘underworld’ that existed parallel to ‘the normal ways of London life’ and was a place of danger” for individual women and for society as a whole.¹¹ Salmela’s essay and Janssen’s both consider the lower life of cities, whether bodily or social.

The slum is a discursive concept of just the sort which literary urban research highlights. It intersects with the waste whose conceptualization Salmela traces and the notion of the “underworld” to which Janssen attends. Ideas of the slum have driven opinions and policy in countries on every continent. The actual word was coined in early-nineteenth-century London, then used widely in English-speaking countries during much of the twentieth century, by the LCC, Truman and others.¹² By the 1960s, it was a standard term in Anglophone sociology

with a seemingly stable meaning.¹³ Since 1970, its position has become at once more pervasive and more questionable. Applications of the term to informal housing conditions in Global South cities, for example by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme but also in political discourse, for example a 1978 speech by Conservative politician Julian Amery in the UK's Westminster parliament, have sometimes blurred the differences between regions of the world and between overall and localized conditions within countries.¹⁴ In the West since about 1975, the word *slum* has seemed to belong naturally in the past, but has appeared when conditions seem, outrageously, to be reviving a past sometimes labelled with historical and literary lexis: Victorian, Dickensian.

The twenty-first century saw two contrary aspects to the discursive history of the slum concept. While UN-Habitat took it into increasingly official use, many scholars sought alternatives. Postcolonial studies sought not the vocabulary of the outsider repulsed by the so-called slum's sensory aspects and sensing danger there, but the resident building a life there, resisting the assumption that "home ownership represents the 'natural' tenure."¹⁵ In place of a universalizing, detemporalized, and despatialized concept like that of the slum, there were calls for analysis sensitive to and indeed driven by the particularities of individual global regions, cities and even districts within cities, and the subjectivities existing there.¹⁶ Among urban historians, a consistent voice since the 1990s has been that of Alan Mayne.¹⁷ Mayne powerfully narrates examples of how the "potentially embarrassing" districts labelled slums have been pushed out of sight, from District Six in Cape Town (bulldozed in 1982) to Delhi.¹⁸ Ultimately, he argues, "the slum deceits" should be consigned to the past.¹⁹

Mayne's implication is that the term *slum* should be removed from any conversation aspiring to be scholarly because it is oppressive and unjust, having been used to justify the demolition of people's homes and their displacement in the interests of planners and capitalists. In this body of twenty-first-century research aiming to have a positive impact,

areas earlier described as slums appear reclassified as informal settlements. In parallel, the historical geographer Alastair Owens and the archaeologist Nigel Jeffries have claimed that discursive accounts making use of the slum lexis are unreliable. Instead, they argue, we need to turn to workers on informality in the twenty-first century world, or practitioners of the mobilities turn in the social sciences for insight into how areas stigmatized as slums actually functioned.²⁰ Relevant urban historical research includes a recent article by Adam Crymble placing a neighborhood such as the Church Street Rookery of St Giles in the Fields, London, into a longer *durée* and so showing how this micro-zone related to macro-trends.²¹ Yet Crymble, for example in the title of his article, deploys the word *slum* as if it were a neutral descriptor, without mentioning the recent critical discussion of the concept. This shows the need for greater conceptual insight into the discursive/lexical history of the word.²²

While literary scholars have contributed much to urban studies and urban history in recent times, there remains a resistance among them to comparative urbanisms which, using concepts like AbdouMaliq Simone's of the urban majority, would assess alongside one another, say, nineteenth-century London and twenty-first-century Jakarta.²³ One objective of this special feature is to bring historicized comparative urban studies together with methods focused on the specifics of representation. Our entry into the arena of slum discourse historicizes and problematizes the concept of slum and its relationship to other categories (lexical and cultural, looking comparatively across world languages) for spatializing inadequate urban living conditions. *Spatial* itself is a complex term uniting under one heading architectural or built environment-led approaches with those covering thinking and hence focused on experiential qualities examined in place-focused literary studies, for instance concepts like *urban imaginaries* or *imaginative place*.²⁴ Mayne observantly comments that writers of slum discourse over the past 200-plus years have often claimed to be revealing "foreign and topsy-turvy territory, the antithesis of the cityscapes and lifestyles with which

audiences are familiar.”²⁵ This special feature explores varied discursive acts of the sort Mayne means, first and foremost seeking insight into how they operate. Lower-status urban areas are unlikely to escape stigma any time soon, but they and their residents could benefit from better understandings of the sort we aim to provide of how the stigmatizing process works.

Toward a Comparative Urban Analysis

This reflection on comparative urban studies and the relationship between multiple categories across languages and national spaces referring to what are perceived as inadequate urban living conditions reveals an underlying *definitional* challenge of the slum. If what is defined as inadequate and worthy of stigmatization shifts across contexts, then there is no single definition of *slum*. Instead, we have a kaleidoscope of conceptualizations and stigmatizations of inadequate urban living conditions open to a refractive comparative analysis. This is perhaps seen most clearly in this special issue in Paroj Banerjee’s discussion of how, from the perspective of pavement dwellers, the slum is considered a *desirable* urban living situation. Despite *slum* frequently being a signifier used to stigmatize a certain urban formation as inadequate for human habitation (more on this idea shortly), Banerjee demonstrates how this meaning drastically shifts when moved to the discourse of the pavement dwellers. Mary Douglas’s now well-known thesis that there is “no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder” can just as easily be applied to the slum concept.²⁶ Put another way, considered as an objective reality there is no such thing as a slum: the slum exists only in the eye of the beholder.

This is further complicated when we analyze the affirmative aspects of respective understandings of urban spaces referred to as slums in the English language across international borders. For instance, can the provincial post-war US understanding of the slum

with its history tied to racial segregation, suburbanization, and ‘white flight’ be productively applied to other contexts? In fact, as Teresa Caldeira has noted in detail, the processes of segregation and the development of ‘inadequate’ housing in São Paulo are noticeably distinct from those in the United States.²⁷ Looking at the constitutive historical, geographical, and infrastructural elements of each, can one reasonably say that the term *slum* as deployed in the US is equivalent in coverage to the word *favela* as deployed in Brazil? To what extent, then, can we reasonably speak of a “Planet of Slums,” when the most basic conceptual building block of that idea—the slum—breaks apart upon simple comparative analysis?

The 2003 UN-HABITAT report, *The Challenge of Slums*, demonstrates this problem. The report is founded on the argument that slums, as a unifying category for a diverse set of what are perceived as inadequate urban formations across the world, are rapidly growing, with the global number of so-called slum-dwellers predicted to increase to about 2 billion by 2030. This empirical discussion, however, is complicated by the argument that slums are discursive inventions, “constructions of the imagination” that respond to political tensions and struggles, rather than simply neutrally describing modern urban forms.²⁸ UN-HABITAT itself only provides an “operational definition” of the term based on the variable combination of “the following characteristics [...]: inadequate access to safe water; inadequate access to sanitation and other infrastructure; poor structural quality of housing; overcrowding; insecure residential status.”²⁹ Indeed, even if one accepts the UN’s statistical figures and imprecise “operational definition,” this does not resolve the problem of how to mediate and represent the urban areas conceptualized as slums and the effect of such mediations, as discussed in the previous section. As *The Challenge of Slums* report summarizes succinctly, “Different definitions will have different impacts on slum incidence.”³⁰ Despite UN-HABITAT’s intent to unify the *favela*, the slum, the *villa miseria*, the *bidonville*, and so on under the conceptual umbrella of

“the slum itself,” its own analysis recognizes how that representational unity breaks apart upon analysis.³¹

Yet Davis’s concept of a “planet of slums”—or, to reword the phrasing in recognition of his promise to no longer use the “s-word,”³² a planet of urban formations perceived as inadequate—points to a useful conceptual distinction: *planetarity* versus *globalization*. Principally theorized by Gayatri Spivak (2003), this binary has been explained by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui as follows: “The globe is a Google icon, whereas the planet is an extremely complex and infinitely varied conjunction of living and palpitating beings”.³³ Whereas globalization implies “the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere”, planetarity implies a “species of alterity”.³⁴ To speak of a *planet of slums*, then, is to speak of a spectrum of different and variegated conceptualizations and stigmatizations of what is considered to be an ‘inadequate’ form of urbanism. To speak of a planet of slums is to comparatively analyze different modes of representing and stigmatizing inadequacy in terms of urbanism.

In some sense, then, we are in dialogue with the idea of *planetary urbanization*.³⁵ It might be said that Davis’s account is an early discussion of the subaltern underside of Brenner and Schmid’s idea that would be developed a decade after Davis’s book was published. Yet Brenner and Schmid have themselves noted that designating the twenty-first century as the “urban age” is questionable given that it is unclear what precisely we mean by “urban.”³⁶ We can apply that same logic to the subaltern underside of that challenge to the “urban age”: if it is unclear what constitutes a slum, then how can anyone reasonably speak about a “planet of slums”?

The question therefore presented to us is the following: How do we recognize that there *are* undesirable modes of urban living across the globe—and therefore become able to discuss a “planet of slums” in a comprehensible manner—and, at the same time, that these

undesirable urbanisms are not equivalent? There is no such thing as ‘the slum itself’—a singular unifying and global conceptual umbrella that can be used to categorize any and every inadequate subaltern urban formation—but there are forms of urbanism across the planet that are perceived as inadequate.

This tension has been explored in recent debates over the concept of *habitability*.³⁷ As AbdouMalik Simone summarizes, the category of “the uninhabitable” has been used to relegate certain subaltern urban populations to the status of “subhuman,” thereby representing their modes of urban habitation as “depleted forms of urban life.”³⁸ *Slum* is the nominal form assigned to “the uninhabitable,” the adjective used to represent certain modes of urban life as proper to the “subhuman” and that can therefore be casually dismissed. *Uninhabitability*, like *the slum*, frequently serves as a rhetorical strategy to silence subaltern visions of alternative urbanisms. Yet to critique the category of *habitability* in such a blanket manner is potentially to efface material inequities that affect subaltern urban populations. For example, critiquing a lack of access to potable water is not a question of an elite dismissal of subaltern urbanisms, but rather to address an unjust condition of urban existence that is undesired by subaltern urban communities themselves. This problem of representing the uninhabitable is the same question confronting the representation and mediation of the slum. How do we represent questions of uninhabitability without silencing those who live in those so-called uninhabitable spaces? Whose definitions of *uninhabitable* are valued and whose are dismissed? How do we put multiple definitions of *uninhabitable*—often across national, linguistic, gendered, classed, and racialized boundaries—into productive dialogue?

The point of this discussion is not to argue that there exist no uniting elements between these representations of urban inadequacy (colonialism, (post-)industrial capitalism, migration, and so on), but that these urbanisms cannot be reduced to the singular category of *slum*. What is needed, then, is a *comparative planetary* analysis of perceptions of urban

inadequacy, an analysis that will eschew any pretenses of a totalizing and overarching theorization of *slum*.

This special issue is a first step towards developing such a planetary and comparative analyses. Rejecting any pretenses of an overarching and universal theory of *The Slum*, this special issue seeks to put a select few instances of how subaltern urban formations have been represented in different urban, national, and linguistic contexts. What is offered by the contributors is therefore a comparative and planetary discussion, rather than a universal and global theory.

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²London County Council, *London Housing* (London: London County Council, 1937), 2.

³Jason Finch and Jessica Kelly, “Disinterring Slum-Clearance London: Expertise and User Perspectives in the 1930s Maritime East End,” *Literary Geographies* 7, no. 1 (2021): 127–45.

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⁵Aaron Andrews, Alistair Kefford, and Daniel Warner, “Community, Culture, Crisis: The Inner City in Britain, c. 1960–1990,” *Urban History* First View (December 2, 2021): 1-12, DOI: 10.1017/S0963926821000729; Flore Jansen, “‘On the Square’: Constructing the Dangers of Depression-Era London in Ada Chesterton’s Social Investigations,” in *The Materiality of Literary Narratives in Urban History*, ed. Lieven Ameel, Jason Finch, Silja Laine and Richard Dennis (New York: Routledge, 2020), 140–57.

⁶Jason Finch, *Literary Urban Studies and How to Practice It* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 27.

⁷Lieven Ameel, Jason Finch, Silja Laine, and Richard Dennis, “Urban History and the Materialities of/in Literature,” in *Materiality of Literary Narratives* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 7.

⁸Markku Salmela, “Recycling Fictions in the City: Don DeLillo and the Materiality of Waste,” In *Materiality of Literary Narratives*, ed. Ameel, Finch, Laine, and Dennis (New York: Routledge, 2019), 39–57.

⁹Salmela, “Recycling Fictions in the City,” 39-57.

¹⁰Salmela, “Recycling Fictions in the City,” 55.

¹¹Ada Chesterton from *Women of the London Underworld* (London: Readers Library, 1938), cited in Jansen, “‘On the Square’,” 149.

¹²Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006), 21–23; Mayne, *Slums*, 49–52.

¹³Gerald Suttles, *The Social Order of the Slum: Ethnicity and Territory in the Inner City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

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