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The Origin of *Slum* as a Trans-Class Concept

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Abstract

The *slum* concept originated as a descriptor for trans-class, or urban majority, environments in and around which people of different social levels lived in close proximity to each other. This article reappraises the concept's emergence in physically aging neighborhoods of London between the City of London and Westminster from the 1820s to the 1850s, within which a stage of rediscovery and reapplication of the word after the late 1830s has so far been overlooked. It focuses on a discursive shift in which a word borrowed from low-life slang became part of the accepted vocabulary for urban areas judged undesirable. Early identifications of sites labeled as slums in the St Giles district of London were by writers and visual artists who themselves lived and worked nearby. Several alternative words including *rookery*, *court*, and *Alsatia* were used in the effort to label a place zone previously unrecognized. The article traces these lexical changes with their consequences for how urban semantics became fixed through case studies from journalistic and political rhetoric, and from the imaginative fiction of Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray which in the 1840s and 1850s viewed the area of the word's coinage with a degree of nostalgia.

Keywords

Dickens, Charles; London; slang; slum; Thackeray, William Makepeace

This article reinterprets the earliest phases in the history of the concept *slum*. Acts of verbal classification produce urban histories. To label places is to create meanings applicable by extension to the people those places contain. Between 1820 and 1860, the slum emerged as a neighborhood space, on or very close to the personal territory in Central London of the writers who made its name known alongside semantically linked terms including *court*, *rookery*, *Alsatia*, and *bohemia*.¹ The slum's origins are as a trans-class social and spatial concept.

Critical and polemical accounts of the *slum* concept written during the twenty-first century mention the word's first appearance in 1820s journalism publicizing London's low-life slang.² But such scholarship does not go deeper into the concept's development as part of a localized microhistory on the fringes of London's West End, which became established as the capital's chief "pleasure district" after 1850.³ The neighborhood being described when the word *slum* was first used in print, the St Giles Rookery close to today's Tottenham Court Road station, has

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received considerable attention from historical archeologists and urban historians.⁴ Largely absent from such work, however, is problematization of the discursive concepts which formed in this locality.⁵ Such concepts later proved influential much more broadly.⁶

From the 1820s onward, the word *slum* and several other labels indicated in print the way people of different social levels lived in close proximity to one another in aging buildings, chiefly dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, across a swathe of London due west of the ancient City of London. The 1840s and 1850s journalism and parliamentary rhetoric, like contemporary fiction by William Makepeace Thackeray and Charles Dickens, highlights specific areas of inner London within and close to Westminster, center of political power, as socially uncertain and materially decayed, the lexis for doing so then being in development. Between the 1840s and the 1880s, the word *slum* moved from being a nostalgic use of slang with highly niche application among elite Londoners, to become a term that could be used without inverted commas in discussions of working-class housing.⁷ It did so via acts of rediscovery: both of physical sites and of vocabulary half-remembered from the 1820s. This preceded the formal definition of what a slum was in British urban contexts which underpinned twentieth-century Acts of Parliament mandating what became officially labeled as “slum clearance.”⁸

This article develops previous research into the part of London on the eastern borders of Westminster where the word *slum* was coined, and into broader nineteenth-century conceptualizations of the slum.⁹ Its method incorporates the historical notion of the *longue durée* and understandings of how actual urban possibilities can expand through discourse on the city that were formulated in human geography, in dialogue with urbanist research connecting the Global North and Global South via concepts such as informality and, most importantly for the argument here, the urban majority.¹⁰ Formulated by AbdouMalik Simone as a means of comprehending twenty-first century Jakarta, *urban majority* is a heuristic concept that highlights how in specific urban contexts people who are neither the elite nor the poorest but at varied levels in between “work together or keep their distance in order to make the city endure.”¹¹ It emphasizes the provisional nature and porosity of residential segregation in environments where richer and poorer people live their lives in close physical proximity.

Exhilaration, Fear, and Foreign Labels: Making the City Comprehensible

While the modernist urban planning of the twentieth century used the fictional discourse of a century earlier to encapsulate the slum as an enemy, the concept began as a descriptor for colorful survivals of the past into the present. In its moment of emergence within a retrospective, *slum* is offered as an insider’s label for sectors where disreputable nightlife can be found. The tonality of *slum* is thus very different from in the twentieth century and since, when it became a means in urban planning and public policy research of labeling “[w]hat is considered to be unfit” in urban housing conditions.¹² In the earliest examples of its use, the word *slum* appears together with visual representations of the environments it labels. The next section considers the word *slum* among means of interpreting London at a time when urban growth was explosive and often hard to comprehend for both residents and visitors. The 1820s depictions of drunken nightlife in which the word *slum* was first recorded were succeeded during the following decade by a more anxious tonality in urban descriptions such as those by the young Dickens, and by the application of toponymic labels drawn from outside Britain.

A specific circle of writers and artists including the sporting journalist Pierce Egan and his scandal-hungry imitator C. M. Westmacott, together with the brothers George and Robert Cruikshank, introduced the word *slum* to the English language. They did so within a small group of London neighborhoods, on the eastern and north-eastern fringes of today’s West End. It was

in the caption of an illustration by George Cruikshank to Egan's *Life in London* that the word *slums* made its print debut as a place category denoting non-respectability. Among the "thirty-six scenes from real life" by the Cruikshanks with which *Life in London* was illustrated is one showing Egan's main characters, during a nocturnal spree, "'masquerading it' among the Cadgers, in the Back Slums, in the Holy Land," or in other words in the St Giles Rookery.¹³ This particular plate by Cruikshank and its caption surely helped fix the word *slum* in the minds of Egan's largely male and genteel English readership. In 1812, Egan was working as compositor to a printer on St Martin's Lane.¹⁴ Having earlier lived near the same street, just west of Drury Lane, as well as in Bloomsbury, just north of St Giles, the Cruikshanks grew up in Dorset Street near Salisbury Square, just off Fleet Street, close to the heart of the printing trade just a few minutes' walk to the east.¹⁵ Westmacott, author of 1825's *The London Spy* under the pseudonym Bernard Blackmantle, had a dubious background which linked him to the Covent Garden area just south of St Giles and east of St Martin's Lane, and made his way as a writer "publishing pseudo-satirical gossip with a view to extortion."¹⁶ *The London Spy* was illustrated by Robert Cruikshank. The work of the Cruikshank brothers jumped off from that of their father Isaac which itself explored London lowlife. Isaac Cruikshank's 1790s print "Indecency," for instance, depicted a woman urinating in the street, specifically marked as being Broad St Giles, the main street of the Parish of St Giles.¹⁷

In Egan's *Life in London*, the low-life corners of the city are seen from the point of view of strolling men of leisure and pleasure, the technique being to insert non-elite newcomers from outside the capital into it.¹⁸ Egan had "phenomenal" popular success with his book and attracted imitators who produced books that had a deliberately Eganesque quality of cynical jollity.¹⁹ In her historical lexicographic study of cant dictionaries, Julie Coleman notes that in contrast with "earlier glossaries" presenting "the secret language of thieves and beggars," Egan and his Regency imitators "list the slick lingo of London's ultra-fashionable world."²⁰ Rather than a novel or guidebook, but with elements of both, *Life in London* emerges on Coleman's reading as a glossary brought to life with anecdotes and illustrations. The book is a generic oddity. On the success of *Life in London*, Coleman comments,

[o]ne of the work's most popular features was its inclusion of contemporary metropolitan slang terms, which caught on throughout the country at all levels of society. Egan was presented at court and allowed to dedicate the work to George IV when it was reissued in book form.²¹

The word *slum* thus came into public view as part of a presentation of daily life for gentleman on the loose in the metropolis, almost an advertisement for London life, and not as part of a polemic, condemnation, or sociological enquiry.²²

Westmacott apes Egan by including a scene that formally resembles the Dickensian sketch of a decade later, set in "The Holy Land": "The Wake; or Teddy O'Rafferty's Last Appearance. A Scene in the Holy Land."²³ This is accompanied by two illustrations by Robert Cruikshank of manic and disorderly carousing scenes, the second including a mass fight by the bedside of the dying O'Rafferty, which resemble George Cruikshank's engraving for *Life in London* of the "Holy Land." Beginning a long-term trend, Westmacott links the phrase "back-slums" to an earlier phase in metropolitan lowlife:

Formerly, such a visit would have been attended with great danger to the parties making the attempt, from the number of desperate characters who inhabited the back-slums lying in the rear of Broad-street: where used to be congregated together, the most notorious thieves, beggars, and bunters of the metropolis, amalgamated with the poverty and wretchedness of every country, but more particularly the lower classes of Irish, who still continue to exist in great numbers in the neighbourhood.²⁴

A list of the drinking parties presided over by aristocrats and others which, Westmacott claims, were formerly held in the low dens of the St Giles Rookery follows, accompanied by a list of the writers and artists who repaired thither to capture the “extraordinary characters” to be encountered there. Now, on his account, things have changed for the professional beggars he claims lived there “[f]ormerly”: “the police have now disturbed their nightly orgies, and the Mendicant Society ruined their lucrative calling.”²⁵ For Westmacott, the word *slum* only exists in conjunction with an excited presentation of outrageous nightlife to be enjoyed by wealthy males on the prowl. This becomes apparent in the verses that accompany a later scene, concerned with “The Stock Exchange” as London’s ultimate gambling venue:

Has your penchant for life ever led
You to visit the Finish or Slums,
At the risk of your pockets and head?²⁶

Here, pluralized but without the qualifier “back,” “Slums” appear alongside “the Finish” (a notorious category of after-dinner drinking venue at which sex workers were present) among the experiences which a man aspiring to heroism might have experienced.²⁷

Writing in the 1820s, Egan and Westmacott thus conveyed the exhilaration of the expanding city. By contrast, the 1830s writings of Dickens on London, many of them first published together with illustrations by George Cruikshank, are haunted by fear of what the city can do to people. Incomers to the city such as Dickens’s Nicholas Nickleby and his relatives struggle, threatened by predators and con artists. The short prose piece “Our Next-Door Neighbour” in *Sketches by Boz*, first published in 1836, describes a succession of lodgers who rent the same room one after another in a house next to that of the story’s narrator. A pair of “single gentlemen” who get riotously drunk or disappear with items from the room are succeeded by a widow and her teenage son, “very poor” and “removed from some country place.”²⁸ Having copied documents in the effort to support them, the boy dies, perhaps of tuberculosis, his last words as follows: “Mother! dear, dear mother, bury me in the open fields—anywhere but in these dreadful streets. I should like to be where you can see my grave, but not in these close crowded streets; they have killed me.”²⁹ *Oliver Twist*, similarly, represents the city and its streets as deeply threatening and disturbing.

Labeling practice for new portions of the city with no pre-existing identity drew, in early nineteenth-century London, on underworld slang, as Westmacott underlines when he writes of how “Grose and others obtained the flash and patter which form the cream of their humorous works” from nights out in the “Holy Land.”³⁰ A related practice was that of importing toponyms originally attached to places outside England. Like the word *slum*, coined in London, the word *bohemia*, imported from Paris, entered English via early Victorian journalism. In the 1830s, areas close to St Giles continued to be appealing to young writers. The circles of aspiring journalists Thackeray memorializes in *Pendennis* themselves make up a London bohemia; Dickens, for instance, lived in lodgings at Furnival’s Inn while writing *Sketches by Boz*, then moved into a house in Doughty Street just north of Gray’s Inn in early 1837, following the success of *Pickwick Papers*.³¹ The earliest example of *bohemia* known in English is from London journalism and dates to 1854; the closely related *bohemian*, for a person with artistic connections and, in the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition text, “an unorthodox lifestyle,” was first used in 1843 in a book about Paris, then soon afterward, in his 1848 novel *Vanity Fair*, by Thackeray.³² *Bohemia* is an imported toponym for a non-English place which became altered into a noun for a group of people. Comparable is the name *Alsatia*, which Thackeray, later in the 1840s, redeployed from one specific zone of central London where its etymology was like *Bohemia* a toponym situated in continental Europe (as an older name in English for the region today called Alsace and lying

between France and Germany).³³ London discourse of the 1820s to 1850s, then, exemplifies how growing cities often import toponyms to label places that until recently were non-existent. This fact is important in the establishments of fixed and stigmatizing boundaries between areas.

The 1840s-1850s Re-Emergence of *Slum*: Representing the Built Environment in Journalism and Politics

Dickens wrote in an 1840 letter: “I mean to take a great, London, back-slums kind of walk tonight.”³⁴ Uses such as this of the word *slum* and its derivatives echo formulations like Egan’s phrase “in the Back Slums,” and they place it into a tight geographical focus. The word’s increasing use during the 1840s in controversies related to housing and urban planning was not a coinage but an unearthing, a reapplication. A generation younger than Egan, Dickens was similarly raised on the fringes of gentility in the north-western part of London’s then built-up area. Although Egan’s male characters enjoy nights out to the area surrounding the docks in East London, his “Back Slums” are very specifically located in the parish of St Giles in the Fields. The concept of *slum* returned to London discourse and became established there during the 1840s as a way of conjuring up a memory of the racy Regency, of lavishly illustrated books such as Egan’s, aimed at a masculine audience hoping to be men-about-town. Thackeray reported remembering *Life in London* from his teenage years then ordering it up from the British Museum during the 1840s, finding “the style of the writing” disappointing while the illustrations seemed “just as fine as ever.”³⁵ The critical twenty-first-century literature on the *slum* concept builds on its lexical origins in Egan’s London. But the crucial stage in which it became established in respectable journalism and political rhetoric during the 1840s and 1850s has until now not been investigated.

By the mid-1840s, warmer and even sentimentalizing visual depictions of the Rookery were appearing which contrast strongly with the Cruikshanks’ illustrations to Egan from twenty years earlier. Notable among these are the watercolors of John Wykeham Archer, who painted the area many times in the years running up to the demolition of much of it and the dispersal of its population toward the end of the 1840s. Archer depicted the Rookery “during daylight” when its atmosphere was “calm,” making “the most of the softness of watercolor to smudge out any damp or dirt.”³⁶ Originally from Newcastle upon Tyne, he settled in London producing engraving plates during the 1830s and then watercolors from the 1840s onwards.³⁷ His interests in antiquarianism and the picturesque made his presentation of the Rookery very different from that of Egan and followers. But like them he pursued a career in the area around St Giles and to its east in London’s then-bohemian zones, and like them he used that very area as material: the lives of jobbing artists such as Archer were entangled with the streets they represented.

By the mid-1840s, the word *slum* was starting to be used in the interests of campaigning, while it was not yet linked as would become the norm later to demands for improvement to the living conditions of the urban working classes. Two examples of this category of use are discussed next. The first is found in an early campaign for conservation of the built environment. In January 1845, echoing Archer’s approach to the Rookery and environs, a column in the *Athenaeum* journal and a letter to *The Times* newspaper made the same point: that a picturesque architectural survival of London’s past should be protected. This was a seventeenth-century bathhouse—associations with Queen Anne were claimed—built over a natural spring not far north-east of Covent Garden market, “[i]n the thick of the once-renowned ‘slums’ of St Giles’s.”³⁸ This is the first recorded use in print of the phrase “the [. . .] slums” as opposed to “the back slums,” the formulation used by Egan and Cruikshank in 1821 and then Dickens in 1840. Notable are the inverted commas: the *slum*, long before its era of worldwide fame, is positioned in the past.

The *Athenaeum* article reveals that, in the mid-1840s, the bathhouse had just appeared from out of its recessed position thanks to what in the twentieth century would have been called slum clearance:

it is to be seen at No. 3, Old Belton-street, between Holborn and Long-acre, in the direct line of the intended new street between Holborn and the Strand; one side of the street in question has already been pulled down, so that the bath is now once again brought to light, though sadly shorn of its ancient splendour.³⁹

The tiled and pillared room labeled “Queen Anne’s Bath” retained some degree of architectural and historical interest at least until the 1860s and 1870s, on the evidence of its appearance in an 1860 issue of *The Builder*.⁴⁰ This use of the word is as a component in a debate among elite members about what in the built environment deserves protection. As such, it is distinctly different from the earlier representations of low-life scenes.

The second illustration of the emergence of *slum* in public discourse is an 1851 speech in the United Kingdom’s Westminster Parliament. This was given by A. J. B. Hope on February 4, 1851. Hope’s speech is an anti-Catholic reaction to the re-establishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales in September 1850 with Nicholas Wiseman as its first cardinal-archbishop of Westminster. Hope protested that the people of Westminster’s “slums,” as he called them, needed an Anglican bishop devoted to them, not a Catholic one:

As a member of the Church of England, no doubt he felt [. . .] it [. . .] annoying that, in the great city of Westminster, teeming with souls under the care of the Church of England, the opportunity should have been allowed (through a niggardly parsimony) to pass by for giving to the noble abbey its proper representative—a bishop of the Church of England, who would, among the “slums” of that city, search out the lost sheep of his flock. It was annoying that another, and an antagonistic, body should have seized the opportunity thus neglected by the Church of England.⁴¹

Westminster’s backstreets had recently become notorious thanks to the campaigning of Dickens and others: contemporary engravings show the towers of Westminster Abbey looming over low, tumble-down cottages.⁴² Wiseman, who had spent his career in Rome until the late 1840s apart from two visits to England in the previous decade, had denounced the “labyrinths of lanes and courts, and alleys and slums, nests of ignorance, vice, depravity and crime” which he noticed around the Abbey, in a widely read 1850 book making the case for Catholicism’s official re-establishment in the United Kingdom.⁴³

St Giles in the 1840s was thus recast as picturesque and associated with the past. At the same time, moralization and also aestheticization of the zones which were the first to be described as slums was increasing. While the modernist urban planning of the twentieth century used the fictional discourse of a century earlier to encapsulate the slum as an enemy,⁴⁴ at the moment of the concept’s birth, as marked by the article on the seventeenth-century bathhouse of St Giles and the treatments of Westminster by Wiseman and Hope, it was already being built around survivals of the past into the present.

The Unspoken Slum: Court, College, Alsatia, and Lane in Thackeray and Dickens

In major novels of theirs from the late 1840s and 1850s such as *Pendennis* and *Bleak House*, Thackeray and Dickens memorialized areas close to St Giles in Holborn and the Strand.⁴⁵ Their descriptions of place and uses of toponym in the process indicate an area in which people of different wealth levels and social grades lived in close proximity to one another, their lives

overlapping at key moments. In these works, both novelists juxtapose respectable and non-respectable urban lives lived at in close quarters with family, strangers, and acquaintances in central London, avoiding the use of the term *slum* and instead alternatives like *court* and *college*. They use three related techniques in doing so. First, they represent and name specific architectural zones, partially closed to the outer urban world, in which people of different grades of fortune and rank interact. Second, they allude to the immediate and longer-term past of the city, through literary techniques and through references to the unique history of London between the City and Westminster, with the lawyers' stronghold of the Temple at its heart. Third, they animate the perspectives on one another of people from different social levels. Illustrative of the mediation of central London in these novels is Shepherd's Inn, a fictional inn of chancery which becomes the residence of a group of rogues in the second half of *Pendennis*. Thackeray's tone of satirical detachment often contrasts with Dickens's efforts to connect the area with universals of human life, particularly through child figures, using compassion as a rhetorical technique.

As architectural arrangements, the courts of central London were where overcrowding and lives hidden away from the authorities were often concentrated in the post-seventeenth-century city. By *courts* is meant housing surrounding a central courtyard often linked to larger streets only by an alley or archway, seemingly tucked away behind other houses.⁴⁶ In some respects these areas resembled the architectural arrangements of colleges at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge and other institutions whose premises were closed to outsiders. Egan in 1821 referred to "the back settlements of St. Giles's," echoing the phrase "the back slums" and underlining the fact that buildings in which his characters carouse belong in just this history.⁴⁷ The text of *Pendennis* contains 126 examples of the word *court*, although the figure contains references to legal and royal courts as well as architectural ones. In *Bleak House*, "news" of a corpse found in a lodging-house room is swiftly heard by the children of the "court" in which the house lies.⁴⁸ In *Little Dorrit*, meanwhile, Dickens repeatedly calls the inmates of the private Marshalsea prison (situated in a different zone also proximal to central London on the south side of the River Thames) "collegians."⁴⁹ Many of Thackeray's uses of the word *court* in *Pendennis* indicate the lodgings of his protagonist Arthur Pendennis and a friend at Lamb Court in the Temple. The Temple was the training ground and, in some cases, the lifelong home of London lawyers, housing them in walled arrangements of medieval-looking courtyards. Lamb Court is of a higher social level than the crowded area to the west of the temple, filled with "courts [. . .] whereof the damp pavements resound with pattens, and are drabbed with a never-failing mud," but they share occupancy of the same London zone, share an antiquity, and share a status as living zones partly closed off from the remainder of the city.⁵⁰ Alluding to the crusading order, the title of Chapter 29, "The Knights of the Temple," contrasts with the fact that the characters actually live in "a dingy court."⁵¹ Chapter 32, a visit to a failed journalist jailed for debt in the Fleet Prison, entails going "through a court" to reach his door.⁵²

The physical nearness to one another of these areas matters. In common with Dickens's *Sketches by Boz*, the most disreputable portion of London described in *Pendennis* immediately neighbors the walls of the very high-status Temple.⁵³ Thackeray and Dickens, then, connect rather than shut off from one another urban spaces with identifiable exit routes and courtyards, despite great disparities in status between these spaces: the college, the palace, the gentleman's lodging, the slum court, the prison. Of course, some of the above areas are more formally separable from the rest of the urban world by a lockable exit door than are others.

Shepherd's Inn is described in Chapter 43 of *Pendennis*, the title of which is "Alsatia." The use of *Alsatia* as a term was connected with lawlessness in the vicinity of the lawyers' capital, the Temple.⁵⁴ Specifically, it was used for a portion of the zone immediately to the east of the Temple which before the Reformation had been covered by the Whitefriars monastery. This portion of the post-Reformation Whitefriars district retained a legal status as a sanctuary where debtors and other offenders could not be arrested until the early eighteenth century.⁵⁵ Thackeray is making an

antiquarian joke by labeling a residential Inn of Chancery north-west of the Temple “Alsatia”: no such legal sanctuaries actually existing in his lifetime. “Alsatia” is an allusion to the past of the city, a purpose also served by literary technique. Thackeray and Dickens fill the legal area of London with transients and indigenous folk living in and around decayed accommodation some of which had once been grand. The wealthy lawyer Tulkinghorn, the middle-class law stationer Snagsby, the opium-addicted law writer Nemo, and the destitute crossing-sweeper Jo overlap in their use of the area’s buildings and streets in *Bleak House*, for instance. Dickens conferred onto the area characteristics of the Gothic and the grotesque, drawing on eighteenth-century fiction and visual art. The “tomb-like” and prison-like, even “suicidal” qualities of such settings are emphasized in Dickens’s 1860 essay “Chambers,” which became part of his collection *The Uncommercial Traveller*.⁵⁶ The “RAG AND BOTTLE WAREHOUSE” of Mr. Krook, who later mysteriously dies there, in *Bleak House* is another example.⁵⁷

Shepherd’s Inn lies in a “close neighbourhood” that is also precisely the territory that Dickens would choose for *Bleak House*, as well as being one portion of the slum concept’s territorial origins:

Somewhere behind the black gables and smutty chimneystacks of Wych Street, Holywell Street, Chancery Lane, the quadrangle lies, hidden from the outer world; and it is approached by curious passages and ambiguous smoky alleys [. . .] the doors are many-belled [. . .] these courts; whereof the damp pavements resound with patterns, and are drabbed with a never-failing mud.⁵⁸

We are in a part of the neighborhood north of the Strand and south-east of the Parish of St Giles in the Fields which gained a semantic charge that was non-respectable but also somehow intriguing during the mid-Victorian decades. As Lynda Nead has shown, the area of Holywell Street and Wych Street was depicted in watercolors and engravings many times between the 1840s and the 1870s in ways that combined a sense of the picturesque recalling Archer’s pictures, with one of obscenity.⁵⁹ *Pendennis* and *Bleak House* share settings in the early adulthood of their authors: they offer readers views of a London they claim to be now partly vanished. Thackeray’s Shepherd’s Inn is described as leading into “Oldcastle Street,” easily connected with real-life Newcastle Street, “[. . .] and so into the great London thoroughfare,” or in other words the Strand.⁶⁰ By the time Thackeray was writing, this specific area, often linked with a small commercial area called Clare Market, was replacing the St Giles Rookery as the most notorious slum zone, linked in the media and popular imagination with crime and squalor, of the interstices dividing the City of London and Westminster. In the late 1860s, much of its eastern section would be demolished to create a site for the new Royal Courts of Justice. The western section that remained, including Newcastle Street, would largely disappear in the first decade of the twentieth century, replaced by the grand Imperial planning of the Aldwych and Kingsway.⁶¹ This area, just as much as its predecessor the St Giles Rookery further north, contributed to the early discourse of *slum*, not least through its naming by Thackeray as the district of Holywell Street or as a new “Alsatia.”

Dickens campaigns but also seeks to render fleeting moments of everyday life. *Bleak House* contains a famous slum description, of the scandalously exploited people living in Tom All Alone’s, a fictional rookery whose location is left unclear.⁶² But much earlier in the narrative of *Bleak House*, in Chapter 5 of the novel, readers are introduced to “a narrow back street, part of some courts and lanes immediately outside the wall of the inn,” the inn being one of the legal Inns of Court, in which the house of the hoarder Mr. Krook is situated.⁶³ This lies in a complex of courts and lanes adjoining Chancery Lane, also named in Thackeray’s orientation of Shepherd’s Inn for readers of *Pendennis*. The house is a key plot locus because there resides the law writer “Nemo” who unbeknownst to protagonist Esther Summerson as she visits early on in her “Morning Adventure” through legal London, is actually her father. Miss Flite, another lodger at

Krook's who has been driven mad by pursuing the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, confides in Esther: "The children in the lanes here say he has sold himself to the devil. I don't know what he can have done with the money."⁶⁴ These "children in the lanes" convey a sense of human lives as ordinary and valuable which was absent from the coinage of *slum* in Egan and Westmacott as part of a callous account of exploitative nightlife.

Conclusion

In its first stage, the word *slum* has to be seen in its toponymic context. This involves a constellation of other terms of which this article has considered only some: *rookery*; *Alsatia*; *court*; "Holy Land"; *bohemia*; even *college* and *lane*. It has its own variants too, whether "the back slums" or "the slums"; in singular or plural; with or without article *the*. And its context includes the associations which official place names such as St Giles and Holywell Street gathered over time. But the word also needs understanding as having a purpose. Specifically, *slum* began as a means of labeling the exotic and transgressive in London nightlife and it retained this inflection when it returned as a word in the 1840s and 1850s. In this analysis, interdisciplinarity is vital: the study of discourse contributes to urban history just as literary scholars must draw on the work of archeologists and urbanists.

The genesis of the *slum* concept in scandalous writing about high society has continued to touch its meaning ever since. The term *slum* originated in the proximity of high fashion to desperate lowlife in the mushrooming, confusing early-nineteenth-century city. This proximity was both physical and social. It is charted in the work of Egan and those who cashed in on his success, including Westmacott and the author of *Real Life in London* (1821), an earlier imitation of Egan's *Life in London* by an unknown hand. For the latter, a truly metropolitan life involved "associating with men and women of every description and of every rank, from the highest to the lowest—from St. James's to St. Giles's, in palaces and night-cellars—from the drawing-room to the dust-cart."⁶⁵ The re-emergence of the word in the 1840s and 1850s occurs at the most elite discursive levels in the heart of the biggest city on earth whose power, at this moment, was at its apogee. It is presented as a return to the past, a temporal gesture in discourse which was present at least as far back in the history of the word *slum* as Westmacott's 1825 *English Spy*. In Thackeray and Dickens's fiction of the 1840s and 1850s, the complex lexis of urban toponymy and place identification as it grew, at that stage, *without* the shorthand label provided by *slum* becomes clear. The idea of the Victorian slum is inseparable from the person of Dickens but this is a mis-identification. After all, he avoided the shorthand in both fiction and campaigning journalism concerned with urban poverty.

The geographer Alan Gilbert identifies *slum* as a shorthand now well established for "'bad' shelter [. . .] at varying scales: anything from a house to a large settlement can be classified as a slum providing that it is perceived to be substandard and is occupied by the poor."⁶⁶ The origin of the concept contrastingly is as a trans-class space. This is in part the London tenement house, court, or building let in chambers of the period after the mid-seventeenth century, but equally, certain events within it: late-night, potentially dangerous drinking parties. Its birth in discourse has two stages, as outlined here, the 1820s one and, a reanimated memory of the former, the 1840s to 1850s one.⁶⁷ The birthplace of *slum* is a zone well described via Simone's conceptualization of urban space in which members of an "urban majority" containing people with divergent wealth levels interact. Instead of emphasizing the social distinction between Lamb Court, Shepherd's Inn and the Fleet Prison of *Pendennis*, without denying that such a distinction exists, we can see their commonality as west-of-the-City enclosed spaces with some barriers to entrance and exit. Thackeray's Lamb Court keeps those who do not belong there out while the Fleet, like the Marshalsea of Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, keeps its "collegians" in.

The concept of *slum* carries some of the trans-class character of Simone's *urban majority* with it into its later history: an enduring link between *slum* and *bohemia* can be detected which from the mid-twentieth century becomes one factor in inner London areas' gentrification. Scholarship questioning and even openly hostile to the concept of *slum* has justifiably flourished from the 1990s onwards, both in a global context and in reappraisals of London's past specifics, emphasizing the material over the discursive and debunking myths. But only a discourse-based reading can show how the myths emerged and solidified.

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Notes

1. On *rookery* as a conceptualization of overcrowded and stigmatized urban locations, see Thomas Beames, *The Rookeries of London: Past, Present and Prospective* (London: Thomas Bosworth, 1850).
2. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso, 2006); Alan Gilbert, "The Return of the Slum: Does Language Matter?" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31, no. 4 (December 2007): 687-713; Mayne, *Slums*.
3. Rohan McWilliam, *London's West End: Creating the Pleasure District, 1800-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
4. Archeology: Sian Anthony, *Medieval Settlement to 18th-/19th-century Rookery: Excavations at Central Saint Giles, London Borough of Camden, 2006-8* (London: Museum of London Archeology, 2011). Urban history: Adam Crymble, "The Decline and Fall of an Early Modern Slum: London's St Giles 'Rookery,' c. 1550-1850," *Urban History* 49 (2022): 310-34.
5. Crymble ("Decline and Fall") uses the word *slum* in his title without problematizing it in its argument, although he is discussing the area which the word was coined to describe. Cf. two other studies of the area in which the word *slum* appears but is uninvestigated as a concept: Joanna Hofer-Robinson, *Dickens and Demolition: Literary Afterlives and Mid-Nineteenth-Century Urban Development* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), for example, 91; Richard Kirkland, "Reading the Rookery: The Social Meaning of an Irish Slum in Nineteenth-Century London," *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 16, no. 1 (Earrach/Spring 2012): 16-30.
6. For example, on the process by which the term was "exported" to Australia by the 1930s, see Alan Mayne, *Slums: The History of a Global Injustice* (London: Reaktion, 2017), 131.
7. J. A. Yelling, *Slums and Slum Clearance in Victorian London* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986).
8. Gilbert, "Return of the Slum," 707; J. A. Yelling, *Slums and Redevelopment: Policy and Practice in England, 1918-45, with Particular Reference to London* (London: UCL Press, 1992). See also Jason 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.
9. On the St Giles area and adjacent neighborhoods in the early nineteenth century: Anthony, *Medieval Settlement*; Crymble, "Decline and Fall"; Jason Finch, "Excavating London's St Giles as Imaginative Place—Towards a Dialogic Relationship Between Literary Studies and the Urban Humanities," *Yhdyskuntasuunnittelu / Finnish Journal of Urban Studies* 54, no. 2 (2016): 74-93; Jason Finch, "How Cultural? How Material? Reading the Slums of London, 1820-1850," in *Imagining Spaces and Places*, ed. Saija Isomaa et al. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 85-106; Kirkland, "Reading the Rookery." On the evolution of slum notions in nineteenth-century London: H. J. Dyos, "The Slums of Victorian London," in *Exploring the Urban Past: Essays in Urban History by H. J. Dyos*, ed. David Cannadine and David Reeder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 129-53; Jason Finch, *Deep Locational Criticism: Imaginative Place in Literary Research and Teaching* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2016), 153-72; Jason Finch, "Workers in the Dawn, Slum Writing and London's 'Urban

- Majority' Districts," in *George Gissing and the Place of Realism*, ed. Rebecca Hutcheon (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2021), 36-54; Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Jerry White, *London in the Nineteenth Century: A Human Awful Wonder of God* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007).
10. Fernand Braudel, "History and the Social Sciences: The Longue Durée," trans. Immanuel Wallerstein, *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 32, no. 2 (2009): 171-203; Alan DiGaetano, "The Longue Durée of School Governance in Boston," *Journal of Urban History* 45, no. 4 (2019): 711-46, here 711; David Pinder, "Reconstituting the Possible: Lefebvre, Utopia and the Urban Question," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 39, no. 1 (2015): 28-45; Ananya Roy, "Who's Afraid of Postcolonial Theory," *Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40, no. 1 (2016): 200-9; AbdouMalik Simone, *Jakarta: Drawing the City Near* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
 11. Simone, *Jakarta*, 4. For an application to nineteenth-century discourse of London, see Finch, "Workers in the Dawn."
 12. Gilbert, "Return of the Slum," 699.
 13. Egan, *Life in London*, iii; between 344 and 345 (the illustration). The toponym "Holy Land" was one of "a range of Irish-inspired nicknames" for the St Giles Rookery as seen in Crymble, "Decline and Fall," 329. Its use was inseparable from racist anti-Irish and anti-Catholic rhetoric: see Kirkland, "Reading the Rookery."
 14. Dennis Brailsford, "Egan, Pierce (1772-1849), Sporting Journalist and Author," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
 15. Robert L. Patten, "Cruikshank, George (1792-1878), Graphic Artist," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
 16. Charles Molloy Westmacott [as "Bernard Blackmantle"], *The English Spy: An Original Work, Characteristic, Satirical, and Humorous. Comprising Scenes and Sketches in Every Rank of Society, Being Portraits of the Illustrious, Eminent, Eccentric, and Notorious, Drawn from the Life by Bernard Blackmantle, the Illustrations Designed by Robert Cruikshank, two volumes* (London: Methuen, 1907). The quotation is from Manfred Draudt, "Westmacott, Charles Molloy (1787/8-1868), Journalist and Blackmailer," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
 17. For reproductions and discussions of this image see Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight against Filth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), illustration 29, between 90 and 91; Finch, "Excavating London's St Giles," 79.
 18. Pierce Egan, *Life in London: or, the Day and Night scenes of Jerry Hawthorne Esq. and His Elegant Friend Corinthian Tom, accompanied by Bob Logic, the Oxonian, in their Rambles and Sprees through the Metropolis* (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1821).
 19. J. C. Reid, *Bucks and Bruisers: Pierce Egan and Regency England* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 73. On the 1820s imitations and adaptations of Egan, *Life in London*, 73-92.
 20. Coleman, Julie, *A History of Cant and Slang Dictionaries: Volume II 1785-1858* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2004), 259.
 21. Coleman, *History of Cant and Slang Dictionaries*, 157.
 22. As Gregory Dart points out in "'Flash Style': Pierce Egan and Literary London, 1820-1828," *History Workshop Journal* 51 (2001): 201, Egan's "low-life scenes" lack the "moralizing tone" of later Victorian writing on the slum.
 23. Westmacott, *English Spy*, volume 2, 22-33.
 24. *Ibid.*, 28.
 25. *Ibid.*, 29.
 26. *Ibid.*, 110.
 27. In 1840, a French female visitor to London wrote of the physical abuse of young women at late-night entertainment sites (in the "Finish" category of place about which Egan and Westmacott joke) as "satanic depravity": Flora Tristan, *Flora Tristan's London Journal*, trans. Dennis Palmer and Giselle Pincetl (London: George Prior, 1980), 78.
 28. Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz: Illustrative of Every-Day Life and Every-Day People* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1854), 27.
 29. *Ibid.*, 28.

30. Westmacott, *English Spy*, volume 2, 28. Londoner Francis Grose (1731-1791) was the author of *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785) and various other works of antiquarianism and lexicography.
31. Both Gray's Inn, one of the major Inns of Court where lawyers trained, and Furnival's Inn, a smaller establishment further east, were close to Holborn, the main road between the City of London and St Giles.
32. *Oxford English Dictionary* (third edition), s.v. "bohemia, *n.*," "Bohemian, *n.* and *adj.*." As a word for a gypsy, Bohemian had a history in English stretching back to the sixteenth century, alongside alternatives like Egyptian. See OED s.v. "Egyptian, *adj.* and *n.*"
33. *Oxford English Dictionary* (third edition), s.v. "Bohemian, *n.* and *adj.*," (sense B.2).
34. Letter to Daniel Maclise, November 20, 1840, cited in Dyos, "Slums," 131.
35. Reid, *Bucks and Bruisers*, 55.
36. Crymble, "Decline and Fall," 315. See the paintings by Archer reproduced in Crymble's article (*Ibid.*, 316, 327).
37. Lucy Peltz, "Archer, John Wykeham (1806-1864), Printmaker and Watercolour Painter," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
38. Cited by Dyos, "Slums," 240, fn16.
39. "Miscellanea: Baths," *Athenaeum* 899 (January 18, 1845), 75.
40. "A Seventeenth-Century Bath-House, or Bagnio, at St. Giles, London. Wood Engraving," Wellcome Collection, accessed July 12, 2022, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/gr6kr983>.
41. United Kingdom, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, A. J. B. Hope (February 4, 1851).
42. Charles Dickens, "The Devil's Acre," *Household Words* 1 (June 22, 1850): 297-301, an article promoting reformatory schools in the area.
43. Dyos, "Slums," 240, fn17.
44. For example, London County Council, *London Housing* (London: London County Council, 1937), 2.
45. All of the places discussed in this section lie just south and east of the parish of St Giles in the Fields, just north of the River Thames between the City of London and Westminster. They are contained in the same sheet of Charles Smith, *Smith's New Map of London* (London: Charles Smith, 1830) (see an online image of this map: <http://mapco.net/smith/smith.htm>).
46. From the late sixteenth century on, speculators constructed residential courts adjacent to thoroughfares: see M. Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 82. Some were decent and even "closed at night with a gate"; others, including "courts within courts and alleys behind alleys" badly built and quickly deteriorating.
47. Egan, *Life in London*, 44.
48. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. Norman Page (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 194.
49. Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1857), 48-49.
50. William Makepeace Thackeray, *The History of Pendennis: His Fortunes and His Misfortunes, His Friends and His Greatest Enemy*, ed. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 531.
51. Thackeray, *Pendennis*, 367. The chapter starts, significantly, with the following sentence: "Colleges, schools, and inns of court, still have some respect for antiquity, and maintain a great number of the customs and institutions of our ancestors with which those persons who do not particularly regard their forefathers, or perhaps are not very well acquainted with them, have long done away" (365).
52. Thackeray, *Pendennis*, 403.
53. The moralistic closing story of *Sketches by Boz*, "The Drunkard's Death," situates the protagonist's final lodging "[a]t the back of Fleet-street, and lying between it and the water-side, are several mean and narrow courts, which form a portion of Whitefriars," in Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, 299.
54. *Oxford English Dictionary* (third edition), s.v. "Alsatia, *n.*"
55. In "The Drunkard's Death," Dickens pointedly calls the area "the ancient sanctuary," as well as calling it "stained" and full of "rottenness," in *Sketches by Boz*, 299.
56. Charles Dickens, *The Uncommercial Traveler*, ed. Daniel Tyler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015),
57. Dickens, *Bleak House*, 98.
58. Thackeray, *Pendennis*, 531.

59. Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 161-89. Nead writes that “Holywell Street’s name was a critical element in the creation of the mythology of the place,” since it “carried the weight of London’s complex history [there had once been a supposedly holy well there], but its sense had become perverted; it had lost its original meaning and become, precisely, improper,” in *Victorian Babylon*, 164. Nead’s statement is relevant to the toponymic interests of this article and recalls the renaming of the St Giles Rookery as “Holy Land.”
60. Thackeray, *Pendennis*, 532.
61. Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, 201-3.
62. Dickens, *Bleak House*, 272-74.
63. *Ibid.*, 98.
64. *Ibid.*, 106.
65. “An Amateur,” *Real Life in London, or, the Rambles and Adventures of Bob Tallyho, Esq., and his Cousin, the Hon. Tom Dashall, through the Metropolis; Exhibiting A Living Picture of Fashionable Characters, Manners, and Amusements in High and Low Life*, two volumes (London: Methuen, 1905), 25.
66. Gilbert, “Return,” 699.
67. The Shepherd’s Inn lives of *Pendennis* seem to reanimate the 1823 murder of the flamboyant professional gambler William Weare, resident in Lyon’s Inn, a real place resembling in location and low character Thackeray’s fictional inn of chancery. See George Henry Jones, *Account of the Murder of the Late Mr. William Weare, of Lyon’s Inn, London [. . .]* (London: Sherwood, Jones, 1824). Like *Pendennis* at Lamb Court in the Temple, the equally flamboyant Weare was attended by a laundress (Mary Maloney of King Street, Drury Lane) with an Irish surname, in Jones, *Account*, 46-47; Thackeray, *Pendennis*, 370. “The Old Entrance to Lyon’s Inn, Holywell Street, Strand” was painted in 1847 by John Wykeham Archer (see Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, 173). Dickens includes a blackly comic Lyon’s Inn tale in his “Chambers” (*Uncommercial Traveler*, 142-45) and pays attention to laundresses in the same sketch.

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