2010

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Recommended Citation

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Boston University School of Law Working Paper No. 09-29
(June 2, 2009)

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The Ethics of Poverty Tourism

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Poverty tours—actual visits as well as literary and cinematic versions—are characterized as morally controversial trips and condemned in the press as voyeuristic endeavors. In this collaborative essay, we draw from personal experience, legal expertise, and phenomenological philosophy and introduce a conceptual taxonomy that clarifies the circumstances in which observing others has been construed as an immoral use of the gaze. We appeal to this taxonomy to determine which observational circumstances are ethically relevant to the poverty tourism debate. While we do not defend all or even most poverty tourism practices, we do conclude that categorical condemnation of poverty tourism is unjustified.

Introduction

Reality tourism in impoverished areas goes by several names; critics call it "poorism;" a more neutral term is "poverty tourism."[1] Articles in *The New York*

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1.   The term "poorism" evokes group-oriented oppression, the kind associated with "sexism" and "racism." Since debates about poverty should take place on fair terms, we recommend that future discussions of the practice of visiting impoverished areas revolve around the phrases "poverty tours" and "reality tours." If a convincing case can be made that poverty tours necessarily discriminate against poor people, then, and only then, does justification arise for using the term "poorism" to designate assessment of the practice. Unfortunately, present journalistic writing incites biased evaluations by using "poorism" to designate negative assessment of poverty tours as well as the practice itself. We recognize that the phrase "reality tours" can seem naïve, especially given the range of preconceptions about culture, class, and race that influence what tourists perceive and how tourists act during any kind of a tour. To minimize the likelihood of being misinterpreted, we concede that tourism is a value-laden experience, and that generally speaking, experience of any kind is value-laden. Our point is that it is not contradictory to (1) endorse a value-laden conception of experience while (2) defending the appropriateness of conceiving of visits to impoverished areas as "reality tours," because (3) our preferred designation is a comparative description. Outterson finds that when he brings students to a *favela*, they experience aspects of globalization

Times (Weiner 2008), *Smithsonian Magazine* (Lancaster 2007), *Newsweek* (Popescu 2007), *The Wall Street Journal* (Moroney 2007), *The Huffington Post* (Kohn 2008), and other popular media characterize these as trips as morally controversial. Critics attack not just actual visits, but also virtual poverty tourism through film.[2] In the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, the protagonist is an orphan from Mumbai's Dharavi slum. Shyamal Sengupta, a film professor at the Whistling Woods International Institute in Mumbai, condemns the film for being a poverty tour (Magnier 2009). In the month before it won the Oscar for Best Picture, *Slumdog Millionaire* was derided as "poverty porn" in the pages of the *London Times* (Miles 2009). National Public Radio even ran a lively episode of "Talk of the Nation" devoted to the topic called "'Poverty Porn': Education or Exploitation?" Are poverty tours really the moral equivalent of pedophiliac tourism in Southeast Asia (High 2005, 343)?

Far from being a trendy and short-lived topic of conversation, the debate over poverty tourism reaches back at least to Victorian London, where "slumming" was both vilified and celebrated, fueling both prostitution and significant social welfare institutions (Koven 2004). In all likelihood, poverty tourism is much older than critics acknowledge.

Since most of the criticisms of poverty tourism occur in journalistic contexts, the leading arguments espouse personal convictions that fall short of the criteria that typifies scholarly debate. Indeed, most of the contributors to poverty tourism discourse do not reconstruct opposing views charitably. Perpetuating one-sided polemics, they fail to satisfy the demands of communal justification. Furthermore, most contributors to poverty tourism discourse do not comment on whether other people already have advanced similar, if not identical, views. Given these problems of subjectivism and redundancy, the poverty tourism debate requires reorientation if it is to become a topic of mature deliberation.

With the hope of moving beyond the impediments just outlined, the purpose of this essay is to reconstruct and assess core moral issues surrounding poverty tourism, giving special emphasis to the most frequently cited problem, voyeurism (Weiner 2008, 1; Lancaster 2007, 96; Popescu 2007, 12; Moroney

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and Brazilian culture that traditional vacation itineraries render invisible. To be sure, what students perceive and learn while visiting a *favela* is mediated by a variety of factors, including their background preparation, their personalities and interests, and the types of exchanges that transpire during the tour. Furthermore, although the "reality" of the experience is constrained by the limited time-span of the tour (i.e., it is not immersive like a year of study abroad), it also is heightened by visceral immediacy (i.e., it is not a distanced encounter with poverty, such as would be obtained through such media as books, newspapers, television, the Internet, etc.). None of these mediating features, however, detract from our claim about comparative realism.

2. A feedback loop appears to be currently linking the virtual and the real. Chris Way, co-founder of Reality Tours, who proclaims that his business has increased 25% since *Slumdog*'s release (*USA Today* 2009).

2007; Gentleman 2006, Kohn 2008). Not only should this reconstruction and assessment benefit the general public, it should also be of special interest to readers of *Environmental Philosophy*. The debates about poverty tourism concern judgments about conduct that takes place in a distinctive environment. Were that environment to lose its defining characteristics, the conduct would cease. Moreover, the defining features of the environment at issue makes it impossible to discuss poverty tourism without considering some of the main concerns that animate environmental justice activists and scholars. Indeed, the practice of poverty tourism concerns the meeting of different place-based identities. Such identities embody differences in wealth (which effects opportunities for travel, education, consumption, and choice of residency), social privilege (which influences how "proper conduct" is understood), and culture (which influences conceptions of race, gender, class, individuality, and community). These differences readily engender situations in which matters of distributive justice, deliberative democracy, recognition justice, transformational justice, and procedural equity become salient.

This collaboratively written essay draws from different academic backgrounds and personal experiences. One author, Boston University law professor Kevin Outterson, has taken graduate students to Brazilian *favelas*. He has also taken religiously sponsored trips to *colonias* and garbage dumps in Mexico and to impoverished religious minority communities in Egypt. While journalistic coverage reduces Outterson's views to titillating talking points, people who read articles that quote him are given less restrictive opportunities to judge his conduct and values. For example, *The New York Times* provided an online discussion board for readers to respond to "Slum Visits: Tourism or Voyeurism," an article that quoted Outterson.[3] By addressing some of the central points that were posted there, we are introducing overdue parity.

The other author, Evan Selinger, is a philosopher. His training in phenomenology—the branch of philosophy that analyzes embodied first-person experience—enables him to discern ambiguity and nuance in ethical dilemmas that mainstream discussions fail to detect. While Selinger has not gone on a poverty tour, his expertise in phenomenology can: (1) enhance our understanding of experiences that Outterson and others share, and (2) clarify how the poverty tourism debates revolve around phenomenological concepts that have been subject to more sophisticated analysis in academic literatures than public editorials.[4]

Our essay is organized as follows. First, we describe Outterson's experience of preparing law students to visit *favelas*, and account for the significant

3. Although Outterson could have entered comments on *The New York Times* message board, we should keep in mind the fact that the forum is called "Readers' Comments."
4. In drawing explicit connections between the history of phenomenology and contemporary debates about poverty tourism, this essay demonstrates how phenomenologists can make positive contributions to the multi-disciplinary field "tourist studies."

interactions that transpired while there. Second, we address the charge the debate about poverty tourism is a journalistic red herring that distracts the public's attention from more pressing issues. Third, we reconstruct and assess the leading moral criticisms of poverty tourists that center on the allegation of voyeurism.

As a caveat, we should note that while we will be pursuing a deflationary agenda, what follows does not amount to a moral defense of most poverty tours that currently are being conducted. To the contrary, we acknowledge that many of the current tours are, in fact, morally questionable. When we defend poverty tourism, we do so with an eye towards a minority of actual practices that are structured around fairly robust educational ideals and reflexive moral considerations.

1. What Happens During a *Favela* Tour? Professor Outterson's Experience
The students were nervous about the *favela*. Most came from middle-class backgrounds from one of the poorest states in the United States. We were in Brazil for a three-week foreign study trip sponsored by the West Virginia University College of Law. The program was co-directed with a colleague, Professor andre cummings. For some of these students, this was their first trip outside the U.S. Our pedagogical goal for the foreign study program was to expose the students to Brazilian legal culture, forcing them to think more deeply about the relationship between law and society. Before we left, we spent two semesters exploring Brazilian history and culture, using both critical and conventional materials, assisted by Brazilian graduate students at WVU. While in Brazil, we attended classes with students at two Brazilian law schools (in Rio de Janeiro and in Vitória, Espírito Santo). Most of the classes were comparative in focus, and we enjoyed extensive discussions with our colleagues.

A *favela* tour was not part of the original syllabus. But a unique teaching moment emerged. We were staying in Ipanema, an energetic beachfront neighborhood in Rio. Ipanema is an expensive place to live, more residential and less touristy than nearby Copacabana. One key to Ipanema is the access to cheap labor from nearby Rocinha, a large hillside *favela* in Rio. It is an incomplete picture of Brazil to enjoy Ipanema's beautiful beaches, hotels, and restaurants without seeing the poor people who make it all possible: the people who swept the streets at dawn, cooked the food, cleaned the rooms, and sold things on the beach. The danger of voyeurism and reinforcing stereotypes concerned me, but our students were well-prepared for this experience, and we would have ample academic time to process the experience critically and personally.

We asked for a few student volunteers to come into the Rocinha *favela* with a local operator of a poverty tour. We chose this tour because he did not offer a "safari" experience from a tour bus, but led small groups, on foot, with some connection to the community. We began with a van ride from Ipanema

to Rocinha, a short fifteen-minute ride across a gaping social gulf. Rocinha is a hillside *favela*, home to perhaps 200,000 people. We ascended to the top of Rocinha using "motoboys"—small motorcycle taxis driven by young men. From the top, we walked down very small pedestrian streets for the next three hours, with the guide explaining his view on how the *favela* worked. We saw small shops, ate sonhas from a bakery, walked past tidy homes, bars, and impromptu laundries. The longest stops were at an artists' studio and a community center that some donors have supported. We have returned several times over the years and have seen the growth of the community center and its programs. The guide has built some financial relationships with the people along the route. All undoubtedly enjoy the tourist money, but we also experienced something more personal.

The guide paused several times to explain how Rocinha operates with very little government assistance. Basic public health facilities are modest; sewage runs in open gutters; water is piped in plastic pipes above ground; he reports that even the postal service stops at the road, and residents have to pay extra for delivery to their homes. For law students, many interesting questions follow: Do the residents own their homes? (Yes, in a practical sense.) Do they have legal title? (Not really, but the local community association functions as a semi-formal real property registry.) Is there much robbery or rape? (Not really, the drug gangs keep the peace unless a rival gang or the police enter the *favela*.) After three hours, we emerged at the bottom and caught vans back to Ipanema. For many students, it was the highlight of their time in Brazil.

We debriefed the students afterwards to help process the experience. Students consistently noted that their expectations were challenged. They were nervous about poverty, crime, and despair and expected to encounter things they had seen on film. What they saw instead was community, homes, and dignity in the midst of poverty. They interacted with real people, instead of images in a film like *City of God.* They also improved their understanding of the connection between rich and poor communities, both as a local process and in the context of globalization. The long-term effect on the students is still unknown, but the post-tour seminars we held with our students were some of the best discussions we had in law school. Many students appear to be deeply affected by the experience and report the experience as valuable.

The West Virginia program is primarily educational, and therefore may not be representative of poverty tourism in general. The program certainly can be improved. Others in Rocinha criticize the tour we took, and we have modest abilities to confirm many of the statements offered as "facts" along the tour without deeper ties to residents of Rocinha. It is possible to imagine ways to improve this experience for all concerned, especially for the residents of Rocinha. One can also find other forms of poverty tourism that would be easier to attack, such as "Ugly American" tours on a safari bus. We deliberately avoided those models.

2. Is the Debate About Poverty Tourism Unseemly?

Some see the debate about poverty tourism as unseemly. These critics allege that the debate diverts attention away from more significant moral and political issues, and even encourages the people who think about it to turn a blind eye to the injustices that affluent Western countries have committed against developing countries in the past and continue to commit in the present. One of the readers who posted a response to "Slum Visits: Tourism or Voyeurism" (Weiner 2009) makes this case in especially stark terms.[5] The reader alleges that because debates about poverty tourism focus exclusively on the current behavior of a few individuals who are engaged in unusual activity, they (1) obscure the relevant large-scale issues concerning how European and the

5.   The respondent writes: "So we go into countries (Africa, India, South/Central America . . .) and colonize them: extracting the natural resources for export back to England, Spain, Portugal, US, where we process them and sell them back to the colonies (Mercantilism=Exploitation). This goes on for several hundred years, during which time the colonial presence becomes entrenched in the colonized countries politically, economically, and culturally. Then, after the 'West' has fueled their industrializations with the wealth and sweat from the colonized countries—after they have become rich— they all of a sudden start to become socially progressive in their views of race, equality, autonomy/sovereignty, and allow some of these countries to kick them out, to nationalize, and to try and make it on their own. But they can't because their growth has been stunted by centuries of colonial presence; they can't compete in the world market. So the West 'helps' them out with loans via the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, but in the early 1980's there is a worldwide recession that foments the '3rd World Debt Crisis', and so we 'help' them out again with more loans, only now—to receive the loans--they have to de-nationalize their companies and sell them to corporations from the West, remove tariffs, reduce environmental standards, and accommodate the manufacturing presence and needs of the West. (So we're back to neocolonialism). Then after this phase—after the West has once again enriched themselves off the sweat and resources of the poorer countries—we become progressive again and offer loans without strings, and the forgiveness of debts. So what does all this mean? It means that we in the West got the head start on industrialization, technology, and weapons manufacture, we used this advantage to exploit the countries we colonized, and most of these countries have never been able to recover. They are like dogs at their master's table— looking for whatever crumbs they can get (tourism for instance). And now, we like to have trite discussions about whether some type of tourism is 'ethical' or not. Please. The only reason we care is because of the affluence bubble in which we live, and this is/was subsidized by the very barrios/colonias/slum conditions that this discussion is about. In other words, if it weren't for these conditions, we wouldn't be having this discussion. Those slums have given us what we have. The point? If you take away our wealth and comfort, we don't care anymore about things like this. Donations? Contributions? What's that going to do? How about all Americans becoming amenable to lower standards of living so that some of these other countries have a chance to get ahead. How about the American corporations all of a sudden become altruistic and giving? If white, upper-middle and upper-class Americans had to significantly reduce their standard of living all hell would break lose, and a discussion like this--luxury that it is--would be utterly insignificant" [sic] (spelling corrected).

United States policies have been and continue to be responsible for creating global inequality, and (2) obscure the rationalizations that Europeans and Americans offer to justify why they are not willing to further global justice by accepting a lower standard of living.[6]

We acknowledge the importance of questions concerning what obligations are entailed by "backwards-looking" (e.g., potential rectification) and "forwards-looking" (e.g. potential compensation) dimensions of justice at the large-scale. Nevertheless, we suggest that debates about poverty tourism actually enrich discussions about global ethics. Globalization reduces the difficulty and cost for tourists to travel the world—in both virtual (e.g., via Internet and film) and more robustly corporeal (e.g., via air and ground transportation) ways. If we take global tourism as a given, then it becomes increasingly important to determine which values and ideals should guide a traveler's conduct. The importance of providing careful ethical reflection on tourist conduct is heightened by the fact that the present is marked by the growth of "tourism reflexivity," a concept that sociologist John Urry defines as "the set of disciplines, procedures, and criteria that enable each . . . place to monitor, evaluate, and develop its 'tourism potential' within the emerging patterns of global tourism" (2001, 2). The combination of ease of travel, enhanced tourism reflexivity, persistence of differences in cultural practices, and changes in material culture make it likely that the foreseeable future will be plagued by normative concerns related to tourism, especially as it relates to

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6.   Such a view resonates with claims that political philosopher Thomas Pogge (2005) advances in the context of articulating his "negative duties" approach to human rights. Pogge defines "negative duties" as "duties not to expose people to life threatening poverty and duties to shield them from harms which we would be actively responsible" (6). Specifically, Pogge identifies two attitudes as root causes of why worldwide poverty has not been eradicated, even though the "problem is hardly unsolvable" (1). The first attitude is that "citizens of rich countries are . . . conditioned to downplay the severity and persistence of world poverty." The second attitude is that most people think of world poverty "as an occasion for minor charitable assistance." Pogge contends that cultural conditioning reinforces these attitudes, including biased economic perspectives that circulate throughout public sphere discourse. Crucially, Pogge insists that leading voices in Europe and America promote the message that "severe poverty and its persistence are due exclusively to local causes" while obscuring the truth that "*severe poverty is an ongoing harm we inflict upon the global poor*" (1). From Pogge's perspective, much of the prosperity that wealthy nations currently enjoy came about through violent histories of destruction, oppression, and colonialism. While Pogge does not believe that citizens should be blamed for the conduct of their ancestors, he does maintain that nobody is entitled to profit from the "fruits of [our forefathers'] sins," especially as concerns the "huge advantages" that some countries have over the global poor (2–3). Ultimately, Pogge's argument in favor of restitution for unjust enrichment remains contentious because it is not endorsed by those who favor the widely purveyed notion that governments have an overriding moral obligation to serve the "national interest."

matters of poverty, indigenous rights, natural resource use, and biodiversity. Comprehensive analysis of global justice requires analyzing poverty tourism.[7]

In anticipation of possible objections, let us note that we would be willing to withdraw our claim about the merits of poverty tourism discourse if someone were to establish that: (1) the public is capable of cognitively processing only a single debate about global justice at a time, or (2) debating poverty tourism diminishes how the public addresses pressing matters of global justice.

With respect to (1), no empirical evidence exists that validates the patronizing charge that discussions of poverty tourism detrimentally monopolize public attention. To be sure, good reasons exist for being skeptical about how informed the general populace is on a number of issues that are central to social welfare. Nevertheless, such skepticism only validates the argument being made by sociologist Harry Collins who insists that better tools need to be developed for analyzing the role that technical expertise should play in policy formation (Collins and Evans 2007). That is, while the public can entertain multiple policy issues, the level of technical detail surrounding any one of them may be beyond the scope of what the average person can grasp.

Likewise, no compelling logical, conceptual, or causal relation has been established that validates (2). Now, a bias may very well exist that inclines the general public to view responsibility primarily as a matter of assessing individual conduct, and not judging institutional structures and collective behavior. Anthropologist Allan Hanson makes a compelling case that this bias exists because assumptions related to "methodological individualism" have informed historical conceptions of responsibility (Hanson 2008). But even if such bias is pervasive, partisans can enhance discussions of responsibility by framing the debate over poverty tourism as an issue that remains contentious largely because large-scale issues of global justice have not been satisfactorily addressed.

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7. Sensitized to the disciplining power of technology, Urry's analyses of tourism include fascinating observations about how access to different technologies can change the very "nature" of what he calls the "tourist's gaze." For example, Urry approvingly cites nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's observation that the development of the mobile railway "annihilated space" by encouraging travelers to view landscapes through "panoramic perception" in which sights are meant to taken in quickly and not "lingered over, sketched or painted or in any way captured"; this experience is also conducive to perceiving an "enormous sense of vastness, of scale, size and domination of the landscape" (2001, 4). Urry further shows how other modes of transportation likewise discipline perception, as does access to different media for recording travel experiences. In the spirit of Urry's analysis of technological mediation, we can note that because contemporary tourists often travel with digital cameras that enable them to take voluminous amounts of pictures without worrying about financial costs (as was the case when analogue photographs had to be chemically processed to be seen), the very technology of representation encourages tourists to take up distinctive attitudes towards representation.

3. The Charge of Voyeurism

Poverty tourists regularly are denounced as immoral voyeurs, and the charge of voyeurism has fueled the recent debate over audience response to *Slumdog Millionaire*. As mentioned in the Introduction, critics like Shyamal Sengupta condemn the film for being a poverty tour; Alice Miles labels it "poverty porn." Are state universities and church groups engaged in the global pornography business?

Since critics presuppose different meanings when they use the term "voyeur," it can be difficult to assess which of their appraisals, if any, are valid. Moreover, inadequately formulated theses tend to accompany the prevalent linguistic impression. To overcome these impediments, we proceed by: (1) providing a taxonomy of the circumstances in which observing others has been construed as an immoral use of the gaze; and (2) appealing to this taxonomy to clarify which observational circumstances should be deemed relevant to the poverty tourism debate.

3a. Taxonomy of Voyeurism

No one argues that it is inherently demeaning to look at others. That view would be so extreme as to be the expression of deep pathology. However, some contexts of observation are seen as morally troubling. Claims about immoral behavior have been leveled at the following scenarios:

1. Immoral voyeurism occurs when undetected glances invade other people's privacy and take advantage of their vulnerability.

2. Immoral voyeurism occurs in some instances where people perceive that they are being observed for demeaning purposes.

3. Immoral voyeurism occurs when observers are motivated to look at others to further demeaning ends.

4. Immoral voyeurism occurs in some instance where observers are dishonest about their reasons for observing others.

5. Immoral voyeurism occurs in some instances where the mere presence of a distinctive group of observers makes people who are observed and not members of that group feel demeaned.

6. Immoral voyeurism occurs in some instances where members of a privileged group misrepresent the values and beliefs of an underprivileged group on the basis of selective observations of their lives.

7. Immoral voyeurism occurs when people view inappropriate events and images.

In the next three sections we clarify what each of these contexts entails and discuss whether they apply to the poverty tourism debates.

3b. Voyeurism and the Undetected Glance

Let us start by examining the first charge that immoral voyeurism occurs when undetected glances invade other people's privacy and take advantage of their vulnerability. The tradition of existential phenomenology provides us with some insight into this issue, especially a frequently cited passage of *Being and Nothingness* (1943 [1966]) in which Jean-Paul Sartre describes his experience of being startled by a walker's approaching footsteps as he covertly peeps at someone through a keyhole in a door. Sartre emphasizes feeling shame and suggests that the emotion is triggered by recognition that his gaze took advantage of another's vulnerability: "It is shame which reveals to me the Other's look and myself at the end of that look. It is shame . . . which makes me *live*, not *know* the situation of being looked at" (352). In characterizing the situation of shame as one that is "lived" and not "known," Sartre makes the anti-intellectualist point that his recognition of harm does not occur via an inner monologue that is expressed in propositional form. Rather, the recognition occurs in the visceral experience of a stinging emotional state.

In identifying emotional experience with moral awareness, Sartre appears to be suggesting that non-pathological people inevitably will feel deserved shame if they find themselves caught (or on the verge of being caught) being "Peeping Toms." However, at the time that *Being and Nothingness* was written, Sartre had not yet fully clarified the moral dimensions of existentialism. One way to attribute a moral interpretation to Sartre's description of voyeurism is to follow a line of thinking that Leon Kass, a contemporary bioethicist, advances. In *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity* (2002) Kass refers to emotional expressions of a distinct class of moral judgments as the "wisdom of repugnance." As Kass sees it, certain negative emotional responses offer evidence that an action or characteristic is intrinsically bad. In differentiating the evidentiary statuses of reasoned and emotional responses to moral harm in "crucial cases," he goes so far as to privilege emotional attunement: "In crucial cases . . . repugnance is the emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason's power fully to articulate it" (150).

Deep debate exists as to whether intuitive moral judgments of the sort designated by Kass are objective, or whether they merely reflect the contingent values that subjects internalize through cultural discipline. We will return to this issue in the next section. For now it suffices to note that the context under review does not apply to the poverty tourism debates. If poverty tourists are guilty of any moral infractions, these infractions occur in contexts where poor people realize that they are being observed. No one is accusing poverty tourists of engaging in surreptitious peeping.

3c. Voyeurism and Demeaning Ends

We turn now to second and third contexts in which voyeurism has been seen as immoral: instances where people perceive that they are being observed for demeaning purposes, and instances where observers are motivated to look at others to further demeaning ends. The following reader comments on "Slum Visits: Tourism or Voyeurism" (Weiner 2009) are illustrative examples of how critics see both of these contexts as applicable to the poverty tourism debates:

> [Poverty tourism] is simply the racist Othering of post-colonial societies by a metropolitan elite. It treats individuals as objects in a zoo, not as empowered agents.[8]

> I lived in Mumbai in 2003, close to the world trade center in a large and beautiful residential tower. It was only a couple of streets away from the nearest slum and the people that lived there were essentially the "support staff" of the wealthy who lived in the towers. They were cleaners, cooks, garbage collectors, elevator operators and street sweepers, keeping the district and its wealthy residents in tip top shape. I was always fascinated with the slums of Mumbai and would walk my shirts down to the local ironing men, on the edge of the slum to have them pressed. One day, my curiosity got the better of me and instead of handing over the clothes and turning back, I headed in, winding my way through the tiny lanes. I hadn't been walking for two minutes when a young man stopped me—and in halting English asked me what I was doing there. I said I was just walking and looking. He looked at me, then at the ground and replied, madam, you not see this. In an instant I was looking at the ground. I apologized, turned on my heel and left. My curiosity got the better of me, I wanted to see inside those homes, look through the doorways, see what "they" did in there. I didn't think about their dignity, that these shacks were someone's home. I would never walk through a neighborhood in the US to see how the people lived, to look through their doors, to see what "they" did in there. That young man taught me something about myself that day, I thank him for it, and I will never forget him.[9]

In "Shocked by Slumdog's Poverty Porn," *Times Online* columnist Alice Miles clarifies how the third context extends beyond the initial poverty tourism debates to other contexts of where poverty is observed.

> As the film [*Slumdog Millionaire*] revels in the violence, degradation and horror, it invites you, the Westerner, to enjoy it, too. Will they find it such fun in Mumbai? Like the bestselling novel by the Americanised Afghan Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns, Slumdog Millionaire* is not a million miles away from a form of pornographic voyeurism. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is obsessed with rape and violence against women, the reader asked

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8. We corrected the misspellings found in the original text.
9. We made some minor formatting changes in the original text.

to pore over every last horrible detail. *Slumdog Millionaire* is poverty porn.
(Miles 2009)

Many people suggest that poverty tourists treat poor people as "as objects in a zoo, not as empowered agents" (Weiner 2009). Unfortunately, most of these denunciations fail to clarify whether they are stating that poverty tourists intend to demean poor people, or whether poor people feel demeaned when observed by tourists. There is an important difference between the two scenarios. In the first scenario, the problem lies with the tourists' intentions, and we note our agreement with those who believe it is immoral for tourists to go on poverty tours in order to demean the poor. An elaborate justification of this condemnation is not necessary, given how easily different moral theories justify condemning the intention to demean marginalized people. However, we would add that no evidence exists that all poverty tourists or even a high percentage of poverty tourists have such despicable motivations. Crucially, it is an open empirical question as to how frequently such ill intentions exist. Critics thus are not justified in equating the practice of poverty tourism with immoral intention.

A problem similar to the confusion of likely with inevitable intentions plagues Miles's denunciation of *Slumdog Millionaire* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Miles presumes that since these artworks graphically depict violence against poor people, well-off audiences will be inclined to experience them with a sense of *Schadenfreude*. Now, Miles correctly recognizes that information often is structured in a non-neutral manner that "invites" viewers to respond in patterned ways. Recently, this thesis about constrained intentionality has extended beyond philosophical circles—where debates occur about Don Ihde's phenomenological conception of "technological mediation"—to mainstream understanding through the widespread reception of Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler's jointly authored book, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (2008). In this text, the legal scholar and behavioral economist appeal to such concepts as "choice architecture" and "default settings" to challenge readers to think about how design configurations interact with our perceptual and cognitive systems so as to "nudge" us in biased directions. They make their point by discussing a range of provocative examples, ranging from fly-etched urinals in the men's restrooms at Schiphol Airport (that minimize spillage) to strategically arranged cafeteria displays (that incline kids to select healthy food). They also feature insightful studies about how the format in which information is presented influences people's decisions, including which mortgages and medical insurances they select, how much money they save, and which investments they target.

The problem here is that Miles's cinematic and literary examples bear little resemblance to the instances of informational "nudging" that Sunstein and Thaler emphasize. By characterizing *Slumdog Millionaire* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as "poverty porn," Miles implies that the depictions of violence

against poor people there are so sensationalized as to likely arouse the vile viewer/reader response of enjoying the depicted miseries. Contrary to this view, we contend that neither logical nor empirical necessity supports such a cynical link between the content of violent media (of this kind) and the perceptions of those who view violent media (of this kind). The only response that can be reasonably inferred to follow from exposure to such emotionally powerful content is an emotionally powerful response. Of course, it could be argued that in a culture typified by widespread sadism, those emotions are readily expressed as pleasure in the other people's pain. But while some cultural critics identify U.S. culture with a sadist sensibility, we find that such a sweeping generalization is too reductive to be informative. It is more useful to posit that while some people will, in fact, feel better about their privileged lives as a result of being exposed to these stories, others will feel sympathy for the victims that these stories portray. Knowing that sympathetic viewers of these media do exist, the well-respected non-profit organization Save the Children is using *Slumdog Millionaire* as an educational tool to raise awareness of global poverty. In short, then, Miles does not provide good reasons for assuming the perverse response.

In fact, Miles's criticism does not become any more persuasive if we reconstruct it as a point about the ontological differences that distinguish film from reality. To be sure, movies like *Slumdog Millionaire* are heavily-edited, contrived, aestheticized, and replete with scenes that blend historical fact with cinematic fiction. Furthermore, the expectations that spectators bring to movies can differ from their expectations of real life events because their past movie experiences influence their current ones, exacerbating disciplined responses to artificial stimuli. Nevertheless, for all of these differences, it still remains the case that no compelling causal forces impinge upon viewers that incline them to respond in the objectionable manner that Miles identifies.

The second scenario concerning how poor people respond to being observed suffers from the same problem as the first. It also conflates possible with actual intentions by presuming that poor people necessarily must feel demeaned when observed by tourists. As the reader's comment about visiting Mumbai in 2003 establishes, some poor people do feel that being observed demeans their existence. Nevertheless, it is presumptuous to assume that all poor people necessarily must feel demeaned when observed by or interacting with tourists. Such presumptuousness is ironic because it actually deprives poor people of the very "agency" that it intends to safeguard. To this end, one of the readers of "Slum Visits: Tourism or Voyeurism" (2009) leveled moral accusations at the author, journalist Eric Weiner, and commentators who condemned poverty tourists as immoral voyeurs without actually consulting with the poor people who were observed and supposedly harmed. The following response is illustrative:

> Here's a really novel idea. To *New York Times* reporters like Eric Weiner, the tourists, tour organizers and all you fine folks who are commenting. Why not ask the residents themselves? This article appeared not to interview a single resident to ask their opinion on tourism vs. voyeurism. Nor has anyone in the commentary suggested that the article should have done so. Even those who are arguing for residents' dignity. Failing to grant residents' the agency of making that choice is the greatest transgression. Shame on all of you.[10]

The indignation expressed in this passage conveys a criticism central to environmental justice: Without the guarantee of participatory parity, ethically justified skepticism can be conveyed at any claim made by a privileged group about the identity or beliefs of an underprivileged group.

Having agreed that it is immoral for people to go on poverty tours with the intent of demeaning others, having rejected the thesis that one can make valid *a priori* assumptions about the intentions of poverty tourists and readers of poverty media, and having rejected the thesis that one can make valid *a priori* assumptions about how poor people feel about being observed, we now have to address the matter of what judgments are appropriate to the cases where poor people do feel demeaned by being observed. Should tourists in this circumstance feel the shameful "wisdom of repugnance" akin to the experience had by a person who looked at the ground in shame after realizing that a poor person felt it was inappropriate of him/her to be in the slums of Mumbai? Does it matter, morally speaking, that he/she did not intend to be demeaning?

Both effect and intention should matter, in different ways. Some people will feel demeaned by some poverty tourists, while others will not. This is an empirical question, but to the extent that people do not actually feel demeaned, the objection fails. For those who do feel demeaned, we might ask whether all poverty tourists would elicit the same response to the same degree. Perhaps the objection is not to poverty tours as such, but only badly executed poverty tours, just as some tourism has a much larger carbon footprint than others. This is a helpful exercise, as it makes us ask what aspects of poverty tourism elicit the strongest negative reactions from the residents or does the greatest harm to everyone involved. The next question then becomes how the tours could be modified to reduce or eliminate the harm.

As for intention, few would defend a tourist who was intentionally demeaning another person. To stay on point, we will make the simplifying assumptions that the remainder either have good intentions (the road-paving kind) or perhaps are clueless. Either way, when confronted with the unintended demeaning effect of their actions, these tourists and tour operators will have an opportunity. They can continue to act in the face of what is now a known harm (and become an intentionally demeaning tourist) or they can

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10.   This caveat about the dangers of elites representing marginalized people is a long-standing concern in postcolonial studies, and one of us has even written about it in the context of discussions of the Indian *Dalit*. See Amit Ray and Evan Selinger (2008).

modify their behavior with the intention to reduce the harm. Whether they are successful in the latter is again an empirical question, which might trigger an iterative action/reaction process. This process is a path to ethical improvement in tourism practices, if well executed. Crucially, the path opens up new opportunities for transformative justice as it can engender new forms of respect, new configurations of political relations, and changes in how power and agency are expressed. Ideally, participatory parity will be enhanced, and tourists will be more responsive to local conceptions of acceptable behavior, including behavior related to responsible times for travel, responsible terms of identification, and responsible norms of interaction.

One troubling assumption in this discussion is that the communities are homogeneous in their reaction to poverty tourism. Perhaps most residents of Rocinha are indifferent about the tourists; some are obviously pleased to see them. But what if one person is terribly upset by it? Is that enough to veto the visit? What if just one person is mildly annoyed by the tour?

At this point, we look for individual answers in contract, and community answers in democratic consent. Certainly, if the residents have made a bargain (a sale, as in the artists' studio in Rocinha), some of the objections fall away. No one forced them to sell goods or services to the tourists, but having done so, they are not well positioned to complain that they feel demeaned by the transaction. Some might say that the concept of consent is invalid in the context of gross inequality, that residents who sell to tourists are coerced by the extreme wealth gap into a transaction that demeans them. Such arguments are leveled at consensual sex workers and capitalism in many contexts. We acknowledge this argument but will not address it here, as it applies in many contexts well beyond poverty tourism. In any event, the vast majority of Rocinha residents do not consent by contract to poverty tourism, nor do they benefit directly.

Perhaps consent (or the absence of dissent) derived from the community through customary or democratic processes can bridge the gap. If a tour has permission from the community's legitimate leaders, or is otherwise permitted under local law and custom, then we might overlook the mild annoyance of the solitary objector. That person's difficulties have been weighed in the balance and found wanting; not by an external value system or neocolonial power, but by the legitimate and internal governance system in the community itself. And if that is true for the mildly annoyed, it is also true of the deeply disturbed minority, so long as the legitimacy of the leadership structure can bear the weight of the aggrieved minority.

In short, the consent of the community matters greatly, and complaints and suggestions from residents and their leaders should shape poverty tour practices. The absence of formal consent should not hinder tourism, so long as the community is not objecting. A legitimate community decision to ban tourists should be respected, and a visit in violation of that ban would be unethical. Identifying a "legitimate" decision is more difficult.

Democratic structures have the capacity to evaluate the relative merits

of restrictions on travel and tourism. In the United States, those opposed to freedom of travel bear a heavy burden to justify restricting such a fundamental right, which encourages us to operate with the presumption that consent is not needed until objections are voiced. As Gregory Hartch stated, "the right to travel has been recognized by American courts for more than 150 years" (1995; 457, 459). It was the first fundamental right recognized under the Fourteenth Amendment. The right to travel is fundamental to our national conception of freedom: "The rule of open travel on the roads was viewed as superior to freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of press throughout the late 1800s" (Roots 2005; 245, 249). "[T]he constitutional right to travel from one State to another . . . occupies a position fundamental to the concept of our Federal Union. . . . A right so elementary was conceived from the beginning to be a necessary concomitant of the stronger Union the Constitution created" (*United States v. Guest* 1966, 745, 757–58). The right to travel is an important component of personal autonomy. While the consent and participation of the community are ethically valuable, the mere absence of formal consent should not block the right to travel until legitimate objections are raised.

In the context of Rocinha, we have serious concerns about community consent, given the quasi-governmental role played by the drug traffic gangs, together with their erstwhile allies, the residents' associations. These institutions suffer significant democracy deficits, and yet one would be hard pressed to point to alternative institutions in a better position to govern Rocinha. In any event, the tours occur only because the gangs and the residents' associations tacitly allow them to continue.

3e. Voyeurism: Contexts 4–7

There is not much to say about the fourth context in which immoral voyeurism is said to occur. If poverty tourists are dishonest about their intentions, they deserve moral rebuke. For example, we should consider tourists to be morally reprehensible if they proclaim motivation to learn more about poverty, but in fact their guiding intention is to acquire life experience that will make for interesting party stories, or to make a profit (using the funds only for personal benefit) by selling pictures of suffering people once home. Because this judgment can be justified by a variety of moral outlooks, it does not require elaborate justification.

The next context, however, calls for more nuanced considerations. It is quite possible that the mere presence of tourists will make poor people feel demeaned, even if the tourists have good intentions. This issue might tilt the balance towards virtual poverty tourism, especially through film, if the primary harm is the demeaning presence. In Rocinha, several tour operators lead small tour groups every day. With a documentary film, the intrusion would occur just once. Of course, documentary films are exactly what send some tourists to the *favela*, sometimes with false impressions. Likewise, the *New York Times* article will undoubtedly spur some interest in these tours; some will go

with inaccurate expectations.Leaving the question of virtual versus physical tourism unresolved for the moment, let us consider the underlying claim about demeaning presence. The following responses to "Slum Visits: Tourism or Voyeurism" (Weiner 2009) defend the thesis that the tourist's gaze demeans the dignity of the poor people who are observed because poor people are a marginalized group.

> Why a rich person would pay someone to drive them around my neighborhood is beyond me. Imagining a red double-decker tour bus circling Hunts Point and surrounding neighborhoods would be more an oddity first, and after a while, anger. It would make me angry, if while I'm walking to the market with my children, to buy what groceries I can afford this week with my ever decreasing food stamp allotment, to see a group of wind tousled, pastel wearing tourists with cameras slung about their necks.[11]

> This kind of "tourism" of poverty is disgusting in its reliance on power differentials. If you visit rich neighborhoods and gawk at the people living there, chances are they have the means (if not the desire) to gawk at you. Day tours into the poorest places of the world, whatever country, appall me. "Mission" trips—teenagers spending $1,000 to go put in a few days work in exchange for a resume-booster—are no better.

> Are these privileged people really so unimaginative and shallow that they have to see poverty to know that it exists? And do they really think that their "changed" perspective justifies the damage done by their travel (because foreign poor people are generally so much hipper than the ones under the bridge when you drive home from work)?

The guiding idea in these responses is that poverty tourism is an unacceptable form of voyeurism because it *displays an asymmetric presence that reinforces social stratification*. The following sociological features are relevant to this issue: poor people cannot take a comparable tour of a rich neighborhood; poor people who work in resorts are instructed not to make eye contact with rich guests; despite the legality of free-association, poor people have been rounded up by the police for being in neighborhoods they do not "belong" in; and the conspicuous consumption of rich tourists can serve as a painful reminder of how much better off others are. For the reasons expressed in the previous section, no one is justified in assuming, *a priori*, that the presence of tourists must induce the harm and resentment that these quotes detail. However, it is empirically possible that poor people will feel this way about being observed, regardless of the tourist's intentions.

In the context of Rocinha, some of these concerns may not be well grounded. The theory of *asymmetric presence* as a damaging force loses power if you spend a few days watching television in Rocinha. Brazilian television is

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11. We made small stylistic changes to this quote.

ubiquitous in *favela*s, and wealth is prominently on display. If it is harmful for Rocinha residents to be confronted with wealth and inequality, poverty tours are not the primary cause. Likewise, the assumption that Rocinha residents cannot take a comparable tour of wealthy areas does not fit well with the Brazilian context. Many of the residents of Rocinha work in the homes and businesses of Ipanema. They travel by public transit every day to the homes and workplaces of very wealthy people. We are not defending the income inequality in Brazil, but merely stating the obvious: income inequality is not news to Brazilian *favela* residents. Nor would a Hollywood-style tour of the homes of the rich and famous do much to restore the moral balance.

Perhaps the argument is that Rocinha is a refuge for the poor, and should be protected as a safe haven from social difference. This is a plausible argument. In other contexts, such as that of Native Americans, certain areas are preserved for the tribal members from external intrusions. If Rocinha's community leadership took such a position, then it would be entitled to respect. But the mere presence of inequality (absent other compelling circumstances) should not create a zone of non-autonomy around the poor and their communities, preventing other people from exercising their autonomy, including the right to travel.

The sixth context in which immoral voyeurism is said to occur are instances where members of a privileged group misrepresent the values and beliefs of an underprivileged group on the basis of selective observations of their lives. The phenomenological tradition presents rich insights into this issue, and we can gain clear sense of its basic parameters by reflecting on a summary presentation of the concepts of the "male gaze" and the "racial gaze."

In her feminist classic *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir—Sartre's longstanding partner and collaborator—argues that women are defined as inferior "others" in male-dominated cultures and socially disciplined to accept their second-class status as a natural state of affairs. By extending de Beauvoir's insights into the social construction of gendered identity, feminist scholars learned how to analyze a range of representations—including photography, cinema, painting, and even the history of philosophy itself—as manifestations of a "male gaze." This reductivist gaze is defined by its tendency to view women not as subjects, but as eroticized and fetishized objects. It is identified as a leading cause underlying degrading depictions of women's lives, beliefs, and values—depictions that unduly demean their political, moral, and aesthetic worth, and which disregard the adverse psychological and social consequences that result from such abjection. By the 1980s, Laura Mulvey's conception of "Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look"—a section title found in her frequently cited essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975)—became an organizing principle of much feminist and cultural studies scholarship.

In his seminal *Wretched of the Earth* ([1961] 2005), Franz Fanon offers a forceful articulation of the idea of a "racial gaze." This idea is so powerful that

in the Preface Sartre himself writes: "The Third World finds *itself* and speaks to *itself* through his [Fanon's] voice." *AUTHORS: PAGE #*

As Teodros Kiros reminds us, Fanon explored the concept of the "racial gaze" by examining how "the black person is not only burdened by geography, history, and place" but also "most particularly saddled with the heavy weight of difference, difference exacted by the idea of race" (Kiros 2006, 216–17). Fanon contends that white people routinely look at black people with a gaze that emerges from a dangerous "double consciousness." According to Fanon, the white racist who condemns black skin and African cultures simultaneously "secretly desires their black bodies and ways of doing things" (218). Fanon insists that when black people begin to understand this paradox of desire and repulsion, they take a crucial step in developing an emancipatory psychology rooted in black pride.

This is a potentially damaging critique of poverty tourism, especially if the visits are superficial and poorly rooted in context—the "safari bus" rides again, now saddled with the "bourgeois gaze." Agencies serving the homeless in the U.S. are frequently inundated with requests for groups to provide dinner on Thanksgiving Day, but a dearth of volunteers in other months. Many challenge these holiday efforts as shallow and transient.

Poverty tours are certainly exposed to the real possibility of superficiality and reinforcing of stereotypes. But all superficial experiences are not equally problematic. In the United States, many Native American tribes host gambling casinos, legally permitted because the tribes have some autonomous legal authority. At some of these casinos, one will occasionally find a performance, replete with Native dancing and dress. In Boston, one can view an exhibition of Irish step dancing; in Houston, a rodeo; colonial re-enactments in Williamsburg; in Harlem, jazz and blues on Saturday night and Black gospel choirs on Sunday morning. Perhaps some of these are performances and not authentic cultural expressions. But if they are just images designed for consumption, that does not make them unethical. They are what they are: entertainment for the tourist and perhaps a small dose of culture or education. This point emphasizes the value of linking quality teaching (e.g., reflexive inquiry into the conditions under which identities and stereotypes are constructed) and tourism, rather than abandoning either teaching or tourism altogether. Also important are the consent of the observed, as discussed above. We recognize that in framing the issue of entertainment in this way, we are not addressing recognition justice concerns about the unequal ways in which certain groups have the power to incentivize underprivileged others to performatively adopt "entertainment" roles. This issue, however, brings us beyond the scope of the present essay.

Finally, the last context listed in our taxonomy of voyeurism is instances in which people conceive of certain events or images as inherently objectionable to observe. Outside of the tourism context, many examples meet this criterion. For example, some people consider pornography to be inherently immoral, other people consider public executions to be inherently immoral, and, as the

recent controversy over the Danish political cartoon of the prophet Muhammad demonstrated, some cultures consider depictions of certain religious imagery to be profane.

In the tourism context, several examples are germane. To pick but a single salient one, we can note that, according to a *BBC News* article, some Jewish settlers have offered special "terror tours" of the West Bank and Gaza where tourists receive training in hand-to-hand combat and weapon use, view Palestinian "terror enclaves" from a helicopter and suicide bomber belts that the Israeli army seized, and, finally, engage in a paintball fight in a simulated Arab village containing simulated Arab terrorists.[12] Not only does this practice raise questions about how tourism can exacerbate prejudices, but it also prompts us to consider whether it is inherently objectionable for people who are not journalists or soldiers to take a "tourist" attitude towards warfare. But why are actual preparations for real events acceptable, while mock preparations for the same events are condemned? People with money and time can put themselves through training camps as if they were minor league baseball players, racecar drivers, jungle mercenaries, or astronauts. Why not Jewish West Bank settlers? Beyond this extreme example, many Israeli kibbutzes offer short-term visits as a way to experience "real kibbutz life." Undoubtedly, some of that experience includes anti-terrorism training, formal or informal. If the underlying practice is defended solely on a ground of strict necessity, then the tourist may be acting unethically absent such necessity. But in most cases, necessity is not the explicit or implicit justification, and the ethical distinction between tourist and participant fades.

Conclusion

We do not defend all or even most poverty tourism practices. As noted in the introduction, empirical work may find that most poverty tours are ethically objectionable as voyeuristic experiences. Our delimited task has been to bring some taxonomic order to the debate, and to resist categorical condemnation of poverty tours. Hopefully the structure and insights expressed in this collaborative paper will help the debates over tourism transition to a mature discourse.

Additionally, we hope that our essay will advance inquiry into the following question—a question that is broader in scope than poverty tourism,

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12.   To avoid any potential confusion, we would like to note that in appealing to this example, we are not taking any side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Rather, we simply are claiming that if ethical criticism is being leveled at simulations of conflicts, they are missing the mark. If the conflicts themselves are morally questionable, then so too are the simulations, but only because they perpetuate aspects of conflict, which is the proper subject of moral critique. In other words, the moral problem lies in the conflict itself, not in the incorrect claim that the simulation (tour) demeans the brutality of warfare because it is a simulation (tour).

but which has been central to the present discussion. In the context of domestic and global travel, who has the right to enter another community? Certainly a fire truck or ambulance does when it responds to an emergency call. Perhaps the President does when touring a disaster area; this visit can be a public act of solidarity, not tourism. But what of journalists, social workers, artists, documentarians and students? If students are permitted, what possible difference could academic credit provide as an ethical justification? Indeed, it would seem that if the backpacker in Rio wants equal access to *favela* tours, he or she should not be afforded less liberty than U.S. law students. Such interrogatives and observations ultimately prompt the following question: If ethical considerations are insufficient to warrant suspending the right to travel, do they amount to little more than reflexive reminders to maintain vigilant awareness of the complexity and ambiguity that attends to unequally structured social encounters?[13]

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