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

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

### Abstract

The emergent field of “sensory urbanism” studies how socio-spatial boundaries are policed through sensorial means. Such studies have tended to focus on either formal policies that seek to control territories and population through a governance of the senses, or on more everyday micro-politics of exclusion where conflicts are articulated in a sensory form. This article seeks to extend this work by concentrating on contexts where people deliberately seek out sensory experiences that disturb their own physical sense of comfort and belonging. While engagement across lines of sensorial difference may often be antagonistic, we argue for a more nuanced exploration of sense disruption that attends to the complex political potential of sensory urbanism. Specifically, we focus on the politics of sensation in tours of low-income urban areas. Tourists enter these areas to immerse themselves in a different environment, to be moved by urban deprivation and to feel its affective force. What embodied experiences do tourists and residents associate with urban poverty? How do guides mobilize these sensations in tourism encounters, and what is their potential to disrupt established hierarchies of socio-spatial value? Drawing on a collaborative research project in Kingston, Mexico City, New Orleans and Rio de Janeiro, the article explores how tours offer tourists a sense of what poverty feels like. Experiencing these neighborhoods in an intimate, embodied fashion often allows tourists to feel empathy and solidarity, yet these feelings are balanced by a sense of discomfort and distance, reminding tourists in a visceral way that they do not belong.

### Keywords

Inequality, Poverty, Exclusion, Culture, Arts, Creativity, Place branding, Sensory urbanism, Tourism

### Introduction

The urban experience is always an embodied, aesthetic experience. While early urbanists such as Georg Simmel (1903) suggested that the overwhelming hubbub of city life had an anaesthetizing effect on its inhabitants, contemporary scholarship emphasizes the extent to which sensorial experience is central to how we know cities. We move between and through a variety of buildings, walls and streets, marked by graffiti or advertisements, while hearing singing and shouting, loud music and whispered conversations. We experience urban life pressed up against other commuters in hot, crowded public transport or separated from them in

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3 an air-conditioned private car; inhaling the smells of cooking, exhaust fumes and unwashed  
4 bodies; eating breakfast on the go or having leisurely drinks while seated with others. Our sense  
5 of a city forms through our bodies' affective responses to such sights, smells, sounds, touch,  
6 and tastes: specific combinations of sensory stimuli evoke discomfort, disgust, pleasure, delight  
7 or nostalgia.  
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11 An emergent body of research on “sensory urbanism” has begun to analyze the range of  
12 embodied sensations that city dwellers experience, and the political and economic effects of  
13 these experiences (e.g. Adams and Guy 2007; Degen 2014; Low and Kalekin-Fishman 2017).  
14 Much of this literature emphasizes the extent to which the socio-spatial order of cities is a  
15 sensory order, analyzing the role of vision (e.g. Urry 2003; Cooper et al. 2018), sound (e.g.  
16 Atkinson 2007; Bieletto-Bueno 2017), smell (e.g. Manalansan 2006) or taste (e.g. Rhys-Taylor  
17 2013) in the (re)production of urban sensory regimes. Howes and Classen (2014: 66) note that  
18 “the senses are directly put to political ends through acts of marking, excluding, punishing or  
19 exalting particular individuals and groups”. Sensory classification is a spatial process in which  
20 sensuous and moral geographies are entwined: “bad” areas and their residents can be  
21 recognized by offensive sights, smells, sounds and so on.  
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31 Studies of sensory urbanism have tended to focus on the governance of urban sensation,  
32 studying the state's role in producing and maintaining sensory regimes through legislation,  
33 planning and policy. Such state efforts have often sought, whether in the name of rational or  
34 revanchist urbanism, to regulate the proliferation of sensory stimuli and to instill in city  
35 dwellers proper sensory dispositions. The associated measures have often been aimed at  
36 eliminating specific stimuli – removing signs of visual, auditory or olfactory disorder from  
37 public space (e.g. Cardoso 2017; Ghertner 2015) – but also involve state attempts to actively  
38 create or promote new sensory experiences by adding new elements, such as light (Edensor  
39 2015). As Mónica Degen (2014: 92, 93) argues, “the management and organization of urban  
40 atmospheres is of crucial importance in contemporary urban policy ... the senses have been  
41 consciously adapted, manipulated and framed to market and brand urban places”. This sensory  
42 manipulation may involve the production of an exclusive, pleasurable “urban sensorium”, an  
43 ideological, aestheticized form of space that shields the wealthier classes from physical  
44 exposure to urban misery (Goonewardena 2005).  
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55 Another emphasis within this literature has been on what Pow (2017: 270) calls “visceral  
56 micro-politics”, with authors studying how everyday practices and discourses of sensory  
57 “othering” reproduce urban inequalities. Urban exclusion and segregation are not only  
58 produced through government policies and market forces, but also through more intimate  
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3 socio-spatial contestations (see e.g. Tan 2013; Low 2013). City dwellers learn to identify and  
4 categorize social and material environments through aesthetic markers, and draw on these  
5 markers in their everyday negotiations of social boundaries. Feeling at home in a specific urban  
6 community involves more than a cognitive awareness of social location; the sensation of  
7 belonging is also produced through embodied, emotional responses to surroundings and  
8 activities perceived as normal and friendly. Conversely, feeling “out of place” can involve  
9 physical sensations of discomfort, evoked by unfamiliar, unwelcoming sights or sounds. In  
10 addition to reproducing a specific urban order by discursively rejecting “foreign” smells,  
11 accents or visual markers, certain social groups may fashion sensory “attacks” to intimidate or  
12 exclude others (e.g. Oosterbaan 2009).

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21 The majority of authors writing on sensory urbanism, then, have focused on how socio-  
22 spatial boundaries are policed through sensorial means, whether through formal governance  
23 strategies or in everyday life. In this article, we aim to extend this work by concentrating on  
24 contexts where people deliberately seek out sensory experiences that disturb their own physical  
25 sense of comfort and belonging, and that contrast with the urban sensorium they normally  
26 inhabit. While engagement across lines of sensorial difference may often be antagonistic, we  
27 develop a more nuanced exploration of sense disruption, one that attends to the complex  
28 political potential of sensory urbanism. Specifically, we focus on the politics of sensation in  
29 tours of low-income urban areas. This type of tourism, often referred to as “slum tourism”,  
30 offers visitors an opportunity to experience urban poverty from up close (see e.g. Frenzel et al.  
31 2012; Jones and Sanyal 2015). Tourists enter these areas to immerse themselves in a different  
32 environment, to be moved emotionally by urban deprivation, to feel its affective force. What  
33 embodied experiences do tourists and residents associate with urban poverty? How do guides  
34 mobilize these sensations in tourism encounters, and what is their potential to disrupt  
35 established hierarchies of socio-spatial value?

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46 This article draws on a collaborative research project on tourism in low-income areas in  
47 Kingston, Mexico City, New Orleans and Rio de Janeiro. The next section of this article  
48 describes the context of these cases and the methods used to research them. We go on to explore  
49 how tours offer tourists a sense of what poverty feels like. This sensing of urban poverty relies  
50 on visual shocks, but is also achieved by exposing tourists to auditory, olfactory, gustatory and  
51 tactile sensations that are presented as central to “ghetto life” or “favela culture”. As they move  
52 through the neighborhood on foot or by bike, guides curate specific encounters in terms of  
53 tasting food or listening to music. They will sometimes frame these sensory experiences  
54 explicitly through narrative, while at other times the connotations are left implicit. This  
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3 variation in narrative framing is central in a following section, which analyzes the often careful  
4 balancing act on the part of guides, rendering certain forms of poverty sensible, while obscuring  
5 others. Songs, films, novels and other media sensitize visitors so that they perceive some forms  
6 of poverty more readily than others. We argue that the tour can be seen as a means of  
7 attunement and place-making, which directs tourists towards sensing specific forms of  
8 inequality and misery that the guides want to foreground. The final section focuses on the  
9 political implications of these aesthetic experiences, understanding the attunement of sensory  
10 perception towards a shared norm as a form of what Jacques Rancière (2010) calls *consensus*,  
11 or sensing together, a central mechanism in processes of subjectivation and the inscription of  
12 community.  
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### 22 **Urban poverty tours across the Americas**

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24 The research project on which this article draws involved long-term, multi-sited ethnographic  
25 research, conducted from 2015-2016 during multiple periods of largely neighborhood-based  
26 fieldwork in four cities: Kingston (Trench Town), Mexico City (Tepito), New Orleans (Lower  
27 Ninth Ward) and Rio de Janeiro (multiple favelas, with a focus on Vidigal and Santa Marta).  
28 Our fieldwork focused on interactions between tour guides, tourists, residents and community  
29 organizations. Methods included participant observation in neighborhood tours, and formal and  
30 informal interviews with tour guides, residents and tourists, as well as with key stakeholders in  
31 government, business, NGOs, heritage institutions and academia. A strong emphasis was on  
32 tour guides, given their central role in shaping tourist encounters. The fieldwork was conducted  
33 in part by individual project members, and in part through team-based research in the different  
34 sites; a comparative analysis was organized collaboratively through periodic team meetings.  
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43 Tepito, which houses a centrally located street market known for *fayuca* (stolen goods), has  
44 long been known as a *barrio bravo*, one of Mexico City's most crime-ridden neighborhoods.  
45 Notwithstanding, Tepito's low-income residents, many of whom have ties to the market,  
46 demonstrate pride in the barrio's history and achievements, and the cultural center *Centro de*  
47 *Estudios Tepiteños* seeks to counter Tepito's stigmatization, collecting and displaying Tepito's  
48 popular culture and heritage. The Center also organizes "Tepitours: the Safari Tepiteño", a  
49 pedestrian tour through the barrio's streets that highlights the neighborhood's social life and  
50 cultural features, including its graffiti, murals, typical *vecindades* housing and eateries. Close  
51 contact and conversation between residents and predominantly Mexican tourists is a central  
52 aspect of the tour. Tepito should be understood within Mexico City's political economy; the  
53 neighborhood is adjacent to the city's historic center, which has recently been redeveloped as  
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3 a tourist attraction and commercial hub, triggering gentrification, surveillance and the  
4 privatization of public space. As municipally imposed visions of urban renewal threaten  
5 Tepito's social structures and built environment, the community-based Tepito tours can be read  
6 as explicit attempts to improve Tepito's reputation, without changing its economic,  
7 demographic and physical makeup.  
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12 New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward is a historically Black low-income community,  
13 immiserated by Hurricane Katrina but increasingly valorized as a repository of the city's  
14 cultural heritage. The commercial success of post-Hurricane Katrina bus tours turned the area  
15 into a "disaster tourism" destination. Following the city's prohibition of these bus tours  
16 (announced in 2006 but not enforced until 2013), most tours to the neighborhood are cycling  
17 tours, frequently led by residents. While still emphasizing the disaster and its aftereffects, these  
18 tours include a stronger focus on the area's heritage and its contributions to New Orleans'  
19 history. Tourists are mainly White Americans and both White and Black guides indirectly  
20 acknowledge the associations that these visitors have with African-American ghettos. They  
21 partially counter them, presenting the neighborhood as *working*-class, rather than lower-class  
22 or underclass, with high levels of historical home ownership amongst the neighborhood's Black  
23 residents. New Orleans' broader urban redevelopment, combined with the post-Katrina  
24 displacement of many of these homeowners, has resulted in incipient gentrification and an  
25 associated demographic shift.  
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30 Santa Marta and Vidigal are both centrally located in Rio de Janeiro's wealthier Southern  
31 Zone. Compared to Rocinha, a favela where internationally-oriented commercial tours promise  
32 a spectacular experience of poverty and violence, these two neighborhoods host smaller  
33 individual endeavors that seek to highlight local creativity and resilience. The association of  
34 favelas, whose residents are disproportionately of African descent, with danger and popular  
35 culture has been one reason for celebrities and tourists, most of them White European, US and  
36 Latin American, to consider these places as "must see" destinations. As the 2014 FIFA World  
37 Cup and 2016 Olympics prompted efforts to re-brand Rio, programs to "pacify" favelas  
38 through police-military occupation, along with state policies providing tour guides with  
39 accreditation, stimulated the growth of favela tours in the Southern Zone. Some state officials  
40 regard the tours as means to "integrate" and "normalize" favelas. However, in Santa Marta and  
41 Vidigal, residents protest the gentrification and the displacement of locals that resulted from  
42 the combination of pacification and tourism.  
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47 Trench Town developed as an early twentieth-century squatter settlement, but was  
48 consolidated as a colonial government housing project in the 1940s. Its reputation as a  
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3 dangerous “ghetto” grew during Jamaica’s political violence of the 1970s, and worsened in  
4 following decades as Kingston became affected by the transnational drugs trade and gang  
5 violence. Trench Town’s main claim to fame is as the “birthplace of reggae”; it was home to  
6 reggae superstar Bob Marley, along with many other musicians. While Jamaica’s tourism  
7 industry is concentrated on the island’s north coast, far from Kingston’s ghettos, this has begun  
8 to change with the recent renovation of Culture Yard, Marley’s former home in Trench Town.  
9 Visitors are usually White Europeans or North Americans, but sometimes include middle-class  
10 Jamaicans of mixed or African descent. Walking tours, mainly guided by African-Jamaican  
11 local residents, tend to start from Culture Yard’s museum, and may include interaction with  
12 artists, craftspeople and community elders. The guides highlight the neighborhood’s poverty,  
13 but also local educational, economic and cultural initiatives. There have been various efforts to  
14 regenerate Downtown Kingston by promoting heritage tourism and cultural industries; Trench  
15 Town’s community-run tours fit within official urban and tourism policies, but its location and  
16 levels of violence still preclude gentrification.

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18 As these brief descriptions of the different sites suggest, the research neighborhoods and  
19 their tours differ in a number of ways, including the measure of ethnoracial differentiation  
20 between residents and tourists; whether the neighborhood’s location makes it susceptible to  
21 gentrification; and whether government policies support, tolerate or critique local tours. In this  
22 article, however, we stress their similarities with the analytical objective of exploring the  
23 sensorial dimension of urban poverty and inequality. In the following three thematic sections,  
24 we highlight features common across these cases: poverty as sensory disruption; the role of  
25 guides; the political implications of sensory transgression.

### 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 **Sensing urban poverty**

44 What does it feel like to live in poverty? How do we sensorially identify an urban place as  
45 poor? The embodied experience of place is inevitably relational: it is different for residents  
46 than for tourists and other visitors. How residents of low-income neighborhoods experience  
47 their surroundings can be understood usefully through theories of dwelling. Heidegger’s work  
48 on *Dasein*, or being-in-the world, is often invoked to explain the relation between individuals  
49 and their physical environs. Long-term practices of dwelling feed into a type of skilled  
50 interaction with a specific landscape (Ingold 2000), and these extended practices of inhabitation  
51 enable affective place-connections and the possibility of “feeling at home” (Duff 2010). In  
52 addition, the experience of living in a low-income, marginalized urban neighborhood is  
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3 generally constructed comparatively, with residents acutely aware of the physical and social  
4 contrast between their surroundings and other urban places.  
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6 The everyday experience of living in spaces marked by political and infrastructural neglect  
7 (or punitive interventions) gives rise to a range of affective responses, from anger, frustration  
8 and exhaustion to pride and defiance (see e.g. Bourgois 2003; Auyero and Swistun 2007).  
9 These responses connect to specific physical sensations and aesthetic markers: having to trudge  
10 up a steep hill every day to get home because you lack transport, living in a crowded tenement  
11 yard where you hear everything the neighbors say and do, but also feeling buoyed by the social  
12 intensity and neighborliness, and by music and street art that affirms the cultural strength of  
13 your community. These affective responses are no means all negative; in a discussion about  
14 moving out of Trench Town, one resident explicitly referenced local sensory comfort: “Sure, I  
15 want a big house, AC and all them things. But Uptown is too quiet. I like hearing people.  
16 Hearing everything. It kind of make me feel safe, you know?” Similarly, one of the  
17 neighborhood guides saw the smells and tastes of “ghetto food” as a source of pride rather than  
18 embarrassment, noting that “people travel from all over Kingston to the ghetto to get the real  
19 chicken back”.

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

32 This experience of sensory rupture was evident during the tours of Tepito, Mexico City’s  
33 notorious *barrio bravo*. For the tourists who take an increasingly popular multi-sensory  
34 walking tour through the neighborhood, the *barrio* tends to be an overwhelming experience.  
35 Most visitors walk in from the historic city center or the nearby metro station, and the contrast  
36 between Tepito and other parts of the city is vivid. The neighborhood’s bustling street market  
37 immerses pedestrians in a mix of sensations: they are engulfed by a hot, noisy dense space,  
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3 crowded from all sides by the many shoppers, by the tightly packed stalls with their yellow and  
4 blue tarps, and by the sheer quantity of merchandise on display. Visitors are enveloped by the  
5 visual abundance of the goods for sale, by the cacophony of commerce, and by the smells of  
6 cooking emanating from the food stalls, the heat of the day and the physical contact as people  
7 push and squeeze to get through. While residents, vendors and regular shoppers take this  
8 commotion in their stride, to many middle-class visitors (most of whom are Mexican) this  
9 intense ambience feels like an assault on their senses, a physical shock that that confirms many  
10 of their notions of Tepito's street life and their social distance to it. This sense of amazement  
11 was expressed to one of us by a young male tourist, a student at Mexico City's Iberoamericana  
12 University:  
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22       You go to this place and you leave with your mouth open. It's impressive, it's a hot spring  
23       of people... People coming and going, loading, yelling, selling, fiddling, selling the food. It  
24       is incredible.  
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29 A middle-class female Mexican tourist who joined the Tepito tour with a group of her friends  
30 described her experience of disruption in similarly explicit terms:  
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34       I think this is what it boils down to, that you know this other side of the city. That it is  
35       violent, visually, it is very violent. Because there is a lot of everything, no? You smell, you  
36       look at this... you feel this as you go along... you walk in the middle of the garbage. You  
37       see, it is, it is..  
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43 She hesitated, trying to find the right words:  
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46       It is very different, no? One of the things that surprised us is that, physically, we felt very  
47       exhausted, because there is an energy there... You have to go with all your senses. Probably,  
48       there are people who only go and look, no?<sup>1</sup>  
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53 This tourist wanted to get to know "this other side of the city" but had not expected the physical  
54 impact to be so dramatic. The "energy" of the neighborhood felt like an assault on her senses.  
55 She felt that it was not enough to only look, but the "violent" visual impact combined with  
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59 <sup>1</sup> All non-English quotes translated by authors.  
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3 other sensations to leave her feeling exhausted, almost pained. Knowing the *barrio bravo*  
4 turned out to be a not entirely pleasant full-body experience.  
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6 A comparably multi-sensory experience is offered by the walking tour in Kingston's Trench  
7 Town. Tourists tend to enter this "ghetto" neighborhood at the Culture Yard museum, a small  
8 exhibition space at the site of Bob Marley's former home. Following a visit to the museum,  
9 many go on to explore Trench Town on a walking tour, which offers a more direct physical  
10 exposure to poverty. For many visitors, it comes as a visual shock – expected, but still often  
11 distressing – to witness the rundown housing that residents inhabit. This visual dimension  
12 interacts with other forms of sensory exposure. Moving through the streets on foot, in the  
13 blazing sun, is a very different way of experiencing the city than from the comfort of an air-  
14 conditioned car, the usual mode of transport for foreign tourists and Uptown Kingstonians.  
15 Unused to the heat, both local and international tourists risk getting a sunstroke or dizzy spells.  
16 They may be accosted by both the smell and the sight of sewage in sections where it runs  
17 through the streets. This encounter with dirt is reiterated on those tours that stop at a pottery  
18 workshop run by a Jamaican return migrant, who sometimes organizes workshops with  
19 neighborhood children to produce clay souvenirs. The workshop is a calm space, but it is also  
20 hot, dusty and dirty, and visitors can immerse their hands in the cool, sticky clay if they wish.  
21 Feeling increasingly sweaty and grimy, a brief visit to an air-conditioned recording studio  
22 offers some relief from the heat, and emphasizes the sonic dimension of this neighborhood's  
23 atmosphere. The brief escape from the hot sun also makes tourists aware of the fragmentation  
24 of this space. The spaces do not all feel the same.  
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39 These tours interact with tourists' preconceptions in different ways. In Kingston, for  
40 instance, the sounds of reggae satisfy visitors' musical expectations, while the feel of dirt and  
41 deprivation ties into their previous understandings of what a "ghetto" should feel like.  
42 However, the relatively quiet and spacious character of Trench Town – its wide streets, the  
43 green and airy feeling of certain areas, the crowing of roosters and other countryside sounds –  
44 may disturb their impression of urban squalor. The tensions between pre-existing expectations  
45 and the physical features of the built environment were made clear in an ironic way in an  
46 anecdote recounted to one of us during fieldwork. Residents told [author] about a film that  
47 centered on inner-city violence and that involved scenes shot in the neighborhood. However,  
48 the house where the shoot took place was deemed insufficiently poor-looking for the film's  
49 purposes, and a crew set about visually impoverishing it to achieve the desired "ghetto look".  
50 Happily for the house's residents, the film crew de-impoverished the house afterwards, but the  
51 incident demonstrated the expectations of a specific urban aesthetic.  
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3 Similar to the Kingston and Mexico City tours, New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward bike tour  
4 also offers a multi-sensory experience, but one based on a different kinetic engagement with  
5 the urban surroundings. Even in the cooler months, cycling through the humid Louisiana heat  
6 can be quite strenuous and tourists sweat it out to get from place to place. The bicycle also  
7 affords a specific type of interaction, involving a much more halting, start-and-stop movement  
8 than either walking or driving. This movement encourages a tendency for tourists to wave at  
9 local people, sometimes accompanied by an impromptu "good day" in mock familiarity, and  
10 to be waved at by them as they pass, experiences that in turn seem to engender a sense of  
11 connection with the neighborhood. Cycling enables an intimate co-presence, yet offers tourists  
12 a "safe" distance from the sidewalk, and the ability to quickly move on from residents or scenes  
13 the guides might want to avoid.

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

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25 This emphasis on local foods is also common to many of Rio de Janeiro's favela tours.  
26 Tourists get an authentic taste of these neighborhoods favelas when eating *feijoada*, a working-  
27 class food with roots in slavery, made out of beans and leftover bits of pork. Over time this  
28 dish became a national symbol, and certain favela restaurants, such *Feijoada do Pituca* cafe in  
29 Babilônia or *Bar do David* in Chapéu Mangueira received significant coverage during the 2016  
30 Summer Olympics. In other favela tours, such as that through Vidigal, guides invite visitors  
31 onto local residents' rooftop (*laje*) to buy a homemade *picolé*. Sucking on this sweet ice pop  
32 emphasizes the contrast between the cold treat and the heat of the neighborhood. Drinking and  
33 eating as residents do – in a specific architectural environment, surrounded by sounds and  
34 sights – allows a sense of consuming difference, from an invited vantage point (cf. hooks 1992).

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

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15 Another sensory route to proximity and intimacy is through eating and drinking. These are  
16 perhaps the most unsettling forms of engagement, as they involve a very visceral relation to  
17 difference, the literal incorporation of the unknown (see Rhys-Taylor 2013; Hayes-Conroy  
18 2014). Being introduced to goat curry in Culture Yard or miga stew in Tepito's market often  
19 involves an interplay between culinary intimacy and culinary suspicion. Across our different  
20 research neighborhoods, many visitors declined to eat street food or other locally prepared  
21 dishes, softly muttering about a lack of hygiene. This suspicion sometimes appeared to result  
22 less from actual sanitary conditions, than from popular connotations of poverty and dirt. Guides  
23 would sometimes reassure and cajole visitors to try something new, but refrain from pressing  
24 them at other times. As the next section underlines, guides play an important role in mediating  
25 the intensity of tourists' bodily experiences: they gauge when to encourage visitors to engage  
26 their senses more fully and when to hold off and allow them more distance, while carefully  
27 framing the perception of these sensations through narratives that both recognize and contest  
28 pre-existing notions of low-income areas.

### 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 **Guiding the senses**

49 Allowing tourists to "know" what urban poverty feels like is achieved in part through the  
50 creation of a specific place atmosphere. It is through such an ambience or the "vibes", as  
51 Jamaicans call it, that visitors experience the ghetto, the favela or the *barrio bravo*. This  
52 embodied knowing is achieved through the tour, which we can understand as an aesthetic  
53 formation that is crafted only partly intentionally. Tourism guides and other brokers engage in  
54 a form of curation that involves an ongoing aestheticization of the landscape through physical  
55 and narrative signposting, through referencing music, literature and visual art (cf. Butler 2012;  
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3 Guano 2017). Yet the work of the tour guide in crafting a sensational tourism experience does  
4 not always involve conscious strategies or explicit intentions. In our research, while many  
5 guides do consider their narratives as political interventions (cf. Santos 2017), their aesthetic  
6 framing sometimes seemed less deliberate – but no less effective.  
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10 Many tour guides seek to dispel pre-existing images of neighborhoods such as theirs. Their  
11 role as tour guide is a balancing act, in which an engagement with certain tropes – dirt,  
12 substandard housing, illicit drug use – may be necessary to address and counter stigmatizing  
13 associations, but can inadvertently reinforce them. At times, the various sensorial features of  
14 these neighborhoods do not match visitors' anticipation. While outsiders may expect noisy,  
15 cramped housing and crowded spaces, many of the neighborhoods, including Trench Town  
16 and many of Rio's favelas, are rather quiet, some houses are relatively spacious, and the streets  
17 may be empty depending on the time of day. In the Lower Ninth, visitors are both shocked at  
18 the lack of post-Katrina rebuilding and yet surprised that the area does not look poor. Indeed,  
19 the area has become last poor as many low-income residents did not return or were displaced  
20 through gentrification. In addition, many visitors expect project housing rather than the  
21 neighborhood's predominantly owner-occupied single houses. New Orleans guides sometimes  
22 explain such mismatches between expectation and experience, by pointing to the lack of noise  
23 and people on the street as evidence of residents' working-class character. "You guys [the  
24 tourists] are the only ones not at work right now," one bike tour guide would often joke as a  
25 way to remark on the relative quiet of the neighborhood.  
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38 Tourists' sensory impressions of urban poverty are mediated through tour guides' narratives  
39 and their foregrounding of specific aesthetic forms in the landscape, but this experience is never  
40 separate from the pre-circulating representations of these neighborhoods (see Freire-Medeiros  
41 2011). This came out clearly in the case of Trench Town, where a "ghetto feel" is achieved in  
42 a multi-sensorial fashion. As tourists arrive at the Culture Yard, to the sound of reggae music,  
43 they generally pass a small group of Rastafari men who sit by the entrance, a regular hangout  
44 spot for these residents to "reason" and smoke marijuana. While "ganja" is semi-decriminalized  
45 in Jamaica, it is still formally illegal, and the smell of weed not only ties into tourists' olfactory  
46 associations with Rastafari (reinforced by the sounds of reggae), it also offers a thrill of the  
47 illicit. Some tours begin by welcoming tourists into the Yard with Styrofoam cups of sweet  
48 cornmeal porridge. Sipping this offers a literal taste of poverty of "ghetto food", but the  
49 connection to Bob Marley is also made explicit through a reference to his song *No Woman, No*  
50 *Cry*, which includes the lyrics "I remember when we used to sit in the government yard in  
51 Trench Town ... Then we would cook cornmeal porridge, of which I'll share with you." Here,  
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3 the gustatory sensation of poverty is made explicit through guides' reference to these lyrics,  
4 encouraging visitors to participate in an authentic, corroborative experience.  
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6 In Tepito, visitors have to attune their bodies to both the tour guide's pace and the rhythm  
7 of the place. Passing many small shops where self-made and second-hand products are on  
8 display, they must step carefully as they make their way through the streets, which are strewn  
9 with rotting produce, litter and broken glass, while the putrid smell of garbage mixes with the  
10 exhaust fumes of cars. These sights and smells connect to prevalent stereotypes of Mexico  
11 City's low-income neighborhoods as places where locals neglect their surroundings. However,  
12 one tour guide, whom we call Alvaro here, re-narrates the olfactory sense of backwardness by  
13 pointing an area full of conscious recyclers that is neglected by the city administration. Alvaro  
14 explicitly challenges aesthetic norms of "proper" urban space by framing garbage as a valuable  
15 resource in reuse and recycling. He points to Tepiteños' long tradition of repurposing discarded  
16 items. Tepito, he argues, makes good use of those materials a careless, throw-away-society no  
17 longer sees as valuable: this neighborhood's residents should be seen as the "real ecologists",  
18 experts of sustainability in their own right. This narrative guides the tourists' sensory  
19 experience in a new direction, reframing their perceptions of the sight and smell of garbage in  
20 terms of subject formation: these residents are caring environmentalists, whose activities are in  
21 line with expectations of modern urban citizens (Dürr and Winder 2016).  
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34 Other neighborhoods similarly engage with ideas of ecological neglect and sustainability.  
35 In the Rio favela of Santa Marta, guides reference the smell of sewage while discussing the  
36 lack of infrastructure and public services that residents suffer. Patricia, an upper-middle-class  
37 Brazilian woman who resided in Argentina, toured Santa Marta with her three children and  
38 their nanny. "I'm Carioca [a Rio native], but I don't know my city," she explained. She idly  
39 surmised that fixing infrastructure in the favela would be a complex endeavor, but when  
40 affronted by the foul odor of an open sewer, she covered her nose and mouth with her hand.  
41 "“Why can't you call the government to fix this?” she asked her guide, expressing concern and  
42 disbelief. Multiple favela tours make a stop at community gardens, emphasizing both that a  
43 favela can include cool, green spaces and that residents have a commitment to environmental  
44 goals, while in the neighborhood of Vidigal, tourists can spend the night at a sustainably  
45 constructed boutique eco-hotel.  
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55 In New Orleans, one guide took time to explain why old tires and trash fill many of the  
56 area's empty lots – this is an issue that irks many residents, who regard the garbage as  
57 contributing to their stigmatization. The guide blamed both outsiders for coming to the Lower  
58 Ninth Ward to dump things there, and the government for not redeveloping the plots quickly.  
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3 However, both guides and visitors would gesture toward dilapidated houses in ironic tones as  
4 “fixer-uppers” and “real-estate opportunities.” This kind of humor, in presenting these areas as  
5 available to be transformed by the speculative capital, discloses a subtext that asserts the shared  
6 class position of the guide and tourists. Various tour guides working in the Lower Ninth Ward  
7 point out that residents traditionally knew how to “live with the water”, fishing in the nearby  
8 wetlands, whereas the damage wrought in the neighborhood by Hurricane Katrina was the  
9 result of more powerful actors’ unsustainable hydrological practices. In a much repeated  
10 phrase, guides point to the “rebirth” of the Lower Ninth through sensitively managed  
11 neighborhood gardens, beekeeping projects, and urban agriculture such as the Sankofa “fresh  
12 stop market”. Intentionally or unwittingly, such emphases reiterate (racialized) associations  
13 many visitors may hold between poverty, authenticity and being “closer to nature”.

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

### 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 **The politics of sensation**

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38 Tours of low-income urban areas are often intentionally geared towards invoking or  
39 strengthening feelings of solidarity, or at least a humanitarian impulse. Tourists themselves  
40 may also actively seek out this shock as a part of an attempt to effect positive change in the  
41 self. As Émilie Crossley’s (2012) analysis of volunteer tourism suggests, a confrontation with  
42 destitution and the emotions generated by this encounter are central to a process of moral self-  
43 transformation. However, this change is geared more towards a reshaping of individual  
44 morality than of larger structures of social difference.

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The tours discussed here perhaps offer a slightly larger political potential in terms of  
redrawing social boundaries. As philosophical work on the politics of aesthetics elaborates,  
this political dimension lies in the sensory nature of processes of subject formation. Focusing  
on what he calls “the distribution of the sensible”, Rancière (2006: 12) emphasizes how a  
“system of self-evident facts of sense perception ... simultaneously discloses the existence of  
something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within  
it”. Such sense of who we are, and to what communities we belong, takes shape through



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3 embodied experiences and encounters, with a range of people and environments. These  
4 experiences and encounters often work through bodily sensations of sameness and difference,  
5 of comfort and discomfort, of social proximity and distance. Pre-cognitive feelings of  
6 commonality and alterity – the Rancièrian *consensus* – may gain conscious articulation in  
7 terms of race, class, gender or urban space. Understanding both why socio-political orders  
8 persist, and how they come to be challenged, requires attending to both consensus and  
9 dissensus, the crafting and the disruption of a shared sense experience (see also Panagia 2009).

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15 The senses can play an important role in affecting the subject positions of tourists, guides  
16 and residents as they venture through impoverished neighborhoods. The main potential of these  
17 tours lies in providing visitors with the opportunity to sense – up to a point – residents’ daily  
18 lived experience *in situ*, in a shared space. Through a sensory immersion in the neighborhood,  
19 guides seek to achieve a shared awareness of the place that works to evoke a feeling of  
20 solidarity on various levels, allowing tourists to “know” what it feels like to be marked by  
21 poverty and neglect. Visitors have their senses directly offended by the smells of sewage and  
22 the sight of garbage and destitutions, but can also have them lifted by the taste of food born of  
23 scarcity and the sounds of community forged through stigmatization.

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

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When narrated in terms of urban inequality, emergent feelings of community and affinity  
can take on a political dimension. Many tours generate an explicitly emplaced and embodied  
sensation of marginalization. The Lower Ninth Ward bike tours, for instance, are structured to  
make tourists feel the neighborhood’s isolation from the rest of New Orleans. The groups of  
cyclists depart for the neighborhood, which is generally left off of tourist maps, from a park  
near the historical city center, where the main tourist attractions such as the French Quarter are  
located. Cycling across the St Claude Avenue bridge over the Industrial Canal into the Lower

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Ninth, guides often pause to stress the neighborhood's social and physical separation, emphasizing that the narrow bridge (which is raised to allow shipping access to the canal) is the only functioning entrance to the area, which can present a major problem for emergency services. The canal stands as a geographic marker of difference, and the narrative marking of its crossing invites a strong feeling of leaving the city proper. A corollary marker of geographic disparity focuses on verticality: guides point out the relative low-lying areas of certain areas with relation to the nearby grassy levees, as well as the high-water lines still visible on the sides of ruined houses as an index of the catastrophic failure of those same levees in the wake of Katrina.

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

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

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

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

### Conclusion

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

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3 neglect how perceptions of such places are also shaped socially and politically. Sensations of  
4 sterility and order are constructed and always have a political connotation.  
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6 The tour guides discussed in this article actively engage with such preconceptions of what  
7 poverty feels like. The intended effect of their tours is rarely purely economic. Both tourists  
8 and guides often seek to reconfigure boundaries of class, race and nation, if only temporarily.  
9 Aesthetics and affect play an important role in these processes. Getting to know these  
10 neighborhoods and the everyday life of their residents in a personal, embodied fashion – having  
11 to navigate unpaved streets where sewage bubbles up from leaky pipes, physically experiencing  
12 a sense of distance and isolation from the rest of the city – often has a disruptive effect on  
13 tourists, enabling an empathy based on shared sensations. Yet these sensations of solidarity are  
14 balanced by feelings of discomfort and difference, as tourists are often also reminded in a  
15 visceral way that they do not belong to these urban places.  
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24 In this article, we have sought to show that, while the politics of sensation need not be  
25 emancipatory, tourism in low-income neighborhoods can have a more ambiguous effect than  
26 simply reinforcing established lines of urban value. As an aesthetic formation that shapes a  
27 specific embodied experience, tours of low-income neighborhoods confront participants with  
28 sometimes intense feelings about who they are and where they belong. This sensation of  
29 belonging or non-belonging works in complex ways. When largely middle-class, White tourists  
30 visit impoverished and in many cases predominantly non-White neighborhoods, the experience  
31 of the tour simultaneously produces a sense of socio-spatial distance and proximity. These tours  
32 can be seen as a socio-spatial force close to what Sara Ahmed terms affective economies, in  
33 which “emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities — or bodily space  
34 with social space — through the very intensity of their attachments” (2004: 120). Sensing  
35 community and feeling affection for the individuals that visitors encounter during tours  
36 produce an ambiguous mix of similarity and difference, of proximity and distance.  
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