

Call for Contributions

MEDIATING AND REPRESENTING THE SLUM

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Las grandes ciudades modernas: Nueva York, París, Londres. Esconden tras sus magníficos edificios lugares de miseria, que albergan niños mal nutridos sin higiene, sin escuela, semillero de futuros delincuentes. La sociedad trata de corregir este mal, pero el éxito de sus esfuerzos es muy limitado...México, la gran ciudad moderna, no decepciona a esta regla universal"

[*"The great modern cities: New York, Paris, London, hide behind their magnificent buildings places of misery, that host malnourished children without hygiene, without school, nursery of future delinquents. Society tries to correct this wrong, but the success of its efforts is very limited...Mexico, the great modern city, does not disappoint this universal rule."*]

Los Olvidados (1950), Luis Buñuel

We are calling for contributions to *Mediating and Representing the Slum*, a special issue/collection. Building on a series of sessions at the 2018 Association of American Geographers conference in New Orleans, recent debates surrounding Alan Mayne's (2017) most recent work, and earlier widely circulated examinations of slums (UN-HABITAT 2003; Davis 2006), this special issue/collection seeks to examine the effect and function, as well as the cultural and urban politics, of representing and/or mediating those urban spaces referred to as 'slums'. Interested participants are encouraged to contact **Jason Finch (jfinch@abo.fi) and Maxwell Woods (mswoods@wisc.edu)** prior to submission of abstracts with any questions they may have. **Abstracts of 500 words are due to Finch and Woods by November 1.**

The 2003 UN-HABITAT report, *The Challenge of Slums*, announced the continuing growth of the urban phenomena of slums, noting that by 2030 the global number of slum dwellers is predicted to increase to about 2 billion. This number is likely to further increase with global warming and other symptoms of the Anthropocene, in which the world is re-ordered into regionalizations of the un/inhabitable and millions are displaced by rising sea levels, unbearable heat, and unpredictable weather patterns (Wallace-Wells 2017; Sheller 2018). This empirical discussion, however, is complicated by arguments that slums are myths, "constructions of the imagination" that respond to political tensions and struggles, rather than simply "neutrally" describing modern urban forms (Mayne 1993). UN-HABITAT itself only provides an "operational definition" of the term *slum* based on the variable combination of "the following characteristics...: inadequate access to safe water; inadequate access to sanitation and other infrastructure; poor structural quality of housing; overcrowding; insecure residential status" (12). Indeed, even if one accepts the UN's statistical figures and imprecise "operational definition," this does not resolve the problem of how to mediate and represent the urban areas conceptualized as "slums" and

the effect and function of such mediations. As *The Challenge of Slums* report summarizes succinctly, “Different definitions will have different impacts on slum incidence” (14).

The significance of representations and mediations of ‘slums’ can be gleaned through an analysis of the various slum ‘improvements’ throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Perceived as backward, dirty, and under- or un-developed, these urban spaces have been subjected to various modernization, development, and public-health projects, thereby leading to upgrading and slum-clearance schemes that have had significant social costs and, in some cases, have done some good (Mayne 2017; Harris 2018). Moreover, definitions of slums as ‘dirty,’ ‘undeveloped,’ or ‘backward’ tend to come from higher-income groups outside of the slums themselves. Such definitions function not so much to identify particular parts of the city as uninhabitable and/or unacceptable as to establish the narrow pursuit of certain middle-class norms of habitation as the only viable form of urbanism (Cuming 2016). They render slum-dwellers—perceived as themselves responsible for the ‘dirtiness’ and ‘uninhabitability’ of their built environments—as not really or fully human (Simone 2016). For instance, Kevin Kearns (1994) notes in his oral history of Dublin slums that, despite their reputation in colonial Britain for being “human piggeries,” the actual testimony of slum-dwellers repeatedly emphasizes that they took the greatest care in maintaining the cleanliness of their room and hallways. That representations of “slums” as public health hazards tended to have little actual interest in the well-being of slum-dwellers is demonstrated by a brief glance at health statistics for nineteenth-century New York: squalid and insanitary conditions in slums persisted long after so-called improvements (Gandy 2002).

This special issue/collection will bring together contributions concerned with the 19th- and early-20th century genesis of the notion of the slum (chiefly in the industrialized cities and imperial capitals of what became the Global North as well as in cities tied to these industrial and imperial capitals through global colonial matrices of power), with work on the period post-1945. In the past three quarters of a century, urban settlements labelled ‘slums’ have grown explosively on every continent. But no study of the relationship between this urban phenomenon and earlier history exists. Equally, it is envisaged that the collection will bring together researchers in a wide range of disciplines, thus opening up several new cross-disciplinary conversations.

This special issue/collection therefore seeks to investigate the function and effect of the mediation and representation of slums throughout the world. We seek papers and presentations from a diverse set of areas, languages, and time periods. Diverse methodological approaches are welcome, including but not limited to those offered by participants with backgrounds in fields such as human geography, cultural geography, urban history, literary studies, anthropology, sociology, and the history of art, architecture, and design. We are interested in perspectives from all geographical locations.

Questions we are asking include (but are not limited to):

- Should the word ‘slum’, viewed from the perspective of multiple disciplines, have continued currency in the mid-twenty-first century, or should it be replaced and if the latter then by what term or terms?
- How are slums mediated, conceptualized, and represented in literary works, artwork, cinema, formal reports, planning documents, and news media?

- What are the functions and effects of such mediations and representations?
- How are slums differently perceived by different urban collectives and populations? How do residents or potential residents of areas labelled 'slums' view them differently than government agencies?
- What is the relationship between 'slums' and discourses of modernization, development, and public health?
- What relationship do representations and mediations of 'slums' have with discourses and practices of colonialism, coloniality, and/or imperialism?
- How are slums being reconceptualized in the Anthropocene and/or the era of global climate change?
- How do race, gender, and class participate in the mediation and representation of slums?
- Can urban areas across time, space, and cultures be mediated through the concept of 'slum,' or should new modes of mediation be developed?
- How do the contemporary and historicized local histories and topographies of individual 'slum' areas relate to the longer-term identities of individual cities grasped through notions such as citiness, Deep Locational Criticism (Finch 2016) or the 'stratigraphy' proposed by geocritics (Westphal 2011)?
- How should the concept of the slum be related to notions of non-standard, non-traditional or provisional housing and urban living viewed not only negatively, including to notions of informality and improvisation?
- How does the history of the concept of the slum, including the history of the word 'slum' and related lexical items, affect an understanding of actual urban areas?

Again: Interested participants are encouraged to contact **Jason Finch (jfinch@abo.fi)** and **Maxwell Woods (mswoods@wisc.edu)** prior to submission of abstracts with any questions they may have. Abstracts of 500 words are due to Finch and Woods by November 1.

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