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The archaeology of urban landscapes: explorations in slumland

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In a handful of modern city places, archaeologists and historians together are probing within the all-but-forgotten local horizons of vanished inner-city neighbourhoods. In every case, the past textures of these places have been obscured by distorting 'slum' stereotypes. The researchers' focus in time is the urbanisation spurt which, beginning in Britain late in the eighteenth century, transformed both the parent society and its settler-colonies during the following two centuries. This book brings together their findings. It unravels conventional historical understandings in order to trace the actualities of working-class lives in neighbourhoods that have been marginalised and demonised as notorious slums where poverty, deviance and criminality intersected. Case studies are presented from both the hubs and the outlying regions of the English-speaking urban world system: from London and Sheffield; from Cape Town, Sydney and Melbourne; from the cities of New York and Quebec; from Lowell, Minneapolis and West Oakland. In so doing, *The Archaeology of Urban Landscapes* introduces the methods that underpin these new research agendas, and clarifies the concepts and conclusions that link and sustain them.

Urban digs fascinate the general community. The excavations seem to bridge present and past, as the archaeologists' trowels uncover evidence of earlier occupations. The integration of history and archaeology has frequently been urged in order comprehensively to reveal the hidden layers of the urban past, and explain their forms to the present. In practice, however, the material traces of past places have all too often been erased, denied and trivialised. Neighbourhoods have been bulldozed, rebuilt or selectively commemorated according to inappropriate taxonomies of historical significance. Memories of place have been lost or fragmented. Hopes for the effective integration of urban history and archaeology have largely been disappointed. City dwellers today, thereby denied an informed and abiding sense of their urban past, are sometimes said to live in a wilderness of both time and place.[1]

These paradoxes are highlighted by the misunderstandings that cloud public knowledge about historic central-city neighbourhoods that endured as centres of working-class work and residence well into the middle of the twentieth century. The complexities of these places – their variety of social worlds, and their complex patterns of continuity and change through time – are obscured by the homogenising, universalising and changeless qualities of slum myths. Slum stereotypes underpinned clearance programmes and redevelopment schemes which, between the late nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries, largely destroyed these neighbourhoods. The archaeological sites upon which this book is based attest to the magnitude of these changes: these sites are today betwixt-and-between places, with weed plots and parking lots where communities once lived. Freeways and high-rise towers have transformed the local skylines.

Slums are constructions of the imagination: a stereotype that was fashioned in the early nineteenth century by bourgeois entertainers and social reformers, and that obscured and distorted the varied spatial forms and social conditions to which it was applied.[2] Historians have perpetuated this slum myth. Mesmerised by the dramatic intensity of the caricatures that remain embedded in the documentary record, they have insisted that 'the essence of slums was their "environmental reality"'.[3] They have confused and thereby inadequately conflated the imagined reality of slums with the actualities of working-class neighbourhoods that were labelled in this way. Historians tend to regard material evidence from such neighbourhoods as providing, at best, illustrations of what they have already framed as the major themes of historical inquiry. Often they disregard material things altogether. Rarely has their tunnel vision been effectively challenged by a consideration of the archaeological record.[4] Some historical archaeologists concede that artefacts do serve merely to 'confirm and illustrate the historical record'. Others, with an insularity similar to that of some historians, refuse to engage in cross-disciplinary debate and claim to find documentary evidence helpful simply as corroboration of the archaeology.[5]

Resolving these debates about the relationships between history and historical archaeology requires archaeologists to engage their sceptics. By tapping the rich local idioms of vanished places, it is possible to demonstrate unequivocally

the advantages of interpretations that draw upon a broad appreciation of what constitutes the historical record. Finding these new facts is only the first step in developing such interpretations.[6] By interweaving documentary, oral and material evidence, both archaeologists and historians are compelled to develop concepts and arguments with which to interrogate these diverse sources, to highlight their significance and to pursue the questions that arise when juxtaposing and melding these data sets. As Carmel Schrire remarks, the test of historical significance has less to do with 'what new facts were revealed but rather what new emphases were [thereby] stressed'.[7] It must be conceded, however, that to date historical archaeology has hesitated to proceed from the first to the second of these steps. It has produced discrete data inventories rather than synthesising interpretations of urban sites. Schrire's proposition has yet to be demonstrated. The archaeology of modern cities has lacked compelling intellectual frameworks and questions to drive inquiry forward.[8] Urban historical archaeologists – in the main consultants and cultural resources managers – have tended to respond to the work briefs offered to them, and the scope of their work is often further constrained by limited time and money. Purely academic research on the archaeology of modern cities is comparatively rare.

A kick-start is needed. We think it is to be found by pursuing the contexts of the data we study. The archaeological record of itself is stuff retrieved from the dirt. The historical record of itself is flotsam thrown up upon an alien shore. Independently, both are indeterminate: relics from a world that has gone, anchorless, preserved in plastic bags and archival cartons. Their meanings today are ambiguous. Yet the archaeological and historical evidence of vanished working-class communities is idiomatic to the particular contexts of their past production and use. They were anchored in specific times and places. It follows that interpreting these data in order to piece together those contexts can provide a key to cultural worlds in the past which have hitherto been obscured by the universalising effects of elite-driven stereotypes.

The first step in such analysis is relatively easy: to critique these stereotypes.[9] However neither historians nor archaeologists have proceeded far beyond this threshold. They deconstruct slum myths and compile descriptive artefact inventories, but they do not go on to explore the enveloping social and cultural milieux of vanished inner-city communities. In order to do so, a synthesising analytical model is required that recognises the historical significance of individual lives and particular locales in the past, without surrendering thereby to directionless parochialism or antiquarianism: a model that simultaneously interweaves these local stories into broader historical arguments, without privileging present-day constructions of historical significance over the local actualities of past lives and places.

Archaeologists and historians are outsiders to the past. We can only pretend to speak as insiders. Its idioms are not our own. The immediacies of social experience then and now are not the same. The local stuff from past places perplexes us with its humdrum profusion and uncertain provenance. The local knowledge of those who once occupied these places eludes us. Our efforts to fashion historical significance for these local things by constructing possible social contexts for them produce ambiguous results, and afford no clear pathways for developing broader historical arguments. Judy Birmingham and Tim Murray conceded over a decade ago that

> A great deal of material data emerges during the excavation of most historic sites and by far the greater proportion of them are remarkably undistinguished. Broken kitchen china, glass grog bottles, and innumerable tonnes of building debris, nails and plaster samples are sources of social and economic information rather than cultural and aesthetic values. One challenge on such sites is to translate this assemblage of refuse and discarded material into a valid database for social and cultural interpretation.[10]

Our attempts at translation, however, have fashioned not windows upon the past, but 'mirrors, infinitely reflecting back to us our own worn visages'.[11]

The Archaeology of Urban Landscapes meets these challenges by starting where things are seemingly most opaque: with the particular – but vanished – places to which these undistinguished artefact assemblages are tied, and which lie behind the assumed realities of public knowledge and general histories. The book necessarily begins by acknowledging the enduring influence of the slum genre, which 'crated' real neighbourhoods as grotesque underworlds in public imagination. Thus Ellen Ross, in her chapter about the middle-class women who visited and chronicled disadvantaged communities in London between 1860 and 1940, unravels the potent narrative tropes of exploration which visualised these places in the imaginations of outside readers. The book proceeds, however, beyond these old narrative conventions. It attempts to present the local horizons of particular places in narrative vignettes that are as compelling to readers today as the slum genre was in the past. Compelling, and more credible. It constructs ethnographies of place.[12] Upon these deep-driven foundations are built broader arguments about the past social landscapes of modern

cities, without ever losing sight of the particular lives and places where interpretation begins. This is a transparent epistemology of the urban past.

In the following chapters, assemblages are related to the social landscapes of particular places in the urban past, and to a matrix of life stories about identifiable households and even individuals. Rebecca Yamin, whose chapter concludes this book, remarks that artefacts recovered from the Five Points neighbourhood in New York City 'are evidence of daily life in a place that until now has been portrayed as a living hell'.[13] But in the light of archaeological and historical evidence from this and central-city sites elsewhere, how should daily life in such neighbourhoods now be described? Not as constituting an homogeneous underclass. Nor as drip-down imitations of bourgeois prosperity and propriety. The material culture from such sites, researchers agree, is 'mundane'. By and large, one finds cheap and mass-produced homewares and domestic knick-knacks. They are intrinsic to the everyday lives of the inhabitants of these vanished communities. As James Deetz argues, 'in the seemingly little and insignificant things that accumulate to create a lifetime, the essence of our existence is captured'.[14] These objects – a decorated plate, for example, or a moulded clay pipe – are simultaneously functional and symbolic. They express personal and local identity. They exude a pride in self and place that is at variance with outside constructions by elite observers and later historians. Far from denying inequality, *The Archaeology of Urban Landscapes* focuses upon the ignored material residues of inequality on the edges of mainstream history making.

To call life in these places 'hell' makes impossibly remote the social contexts that shaped the data we study. It drains them of human agency. It saps the data of the immediacy that connected them to past lives. It denies the individual and collective strategies by which neighbours and communities maximised circumscribed life chances, and pursued goals other than those legitimised by hegemonic cultural determinants. Life in these communities *was* hard, but it was not uniformly so, nor was it inescapably so. Lives that to outsiders seemed to be played out upon the edge, and boxed in by unmitigated ugliness, were inevitably known very differently by neighbours. Imagine a local streetscape, as slum narratives so often did. But read against the grain of one's expectations. What might a neighbour have seen? One open door perhaps reveals hard-won comfort, vulnerable, though often consolidated by the next generation. A neighbouring door might reveal scenes unambiguously unpleasant: in which a treasured heirloom, and a modicum of slowly accumulated possessions, could not altogether compensate for cramped living space, preventable ill health, and an inequitable and intermittent wage. These locales knew frustration, hurt and anger. Yet there was still laughter in the poorest of households, and achievements, and dignity displayed there in forms that diverged from the codes of respectability that were enshrined by manuals of bourgeois etiquette. Working-class radicalism and resistance were nurtured in these places. But we also find military buckles (kept with pride, perhaps, or misplaced and easily forgotten?) in these house sites, and patriotic figurines. There are buttons, too, and tablewares that imitated the trends of well-to-do fashion. There are toys, and cleaning brushes. Everywhere in these places are to be found the prosaic residues of lives that were centred around family and neighbourhood.

We miss this humdrum immediacy – and with it, the plurality of experiences, opinions, strategies, and the open-endedness of neighbourhood outcomes – if we stress the marginality of such places. Any locale is necessarily immediate to its occupants. Individually and collectively, we fashion overarching imaginary templates which give coherence to our material surroundings, making them intelligible and knowable, and which guide our efforts to modify those surroundings. Thus it is, says Simon Schama, 'our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape'. Herein lies the distinction between what sociologist Herbert Gans called 'potential' and 'effective' environments: the intervention of human artifice whereby – in Michel de Certeau's words – space is fashioned into 'a *practiced* place'.[15] These mental and emotional constructs form the roots of community life, providing the matrix for neighbourhood identity and interaction.

It requires historical imagination to strip away the overlays and access those roots. As David Lowenthal aptly remarks, 'we can no more slip back to the past than leap forward to the future. Save in imaginative reconstruction, yesterday is forever barred to us.'[16] How far can this imagination extend, as we experimentally fashion social contexts from archaeological and historical data? Clifford Geertz cautions that:

> We cannot live other people's lives . . . it is with expressions, representations, objectifications, discourses, performances . . . that we traffic . . . Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else's inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness.[17]

Schrire concludes that past landscapes and their embedded meanings must necessarily be imagined in their reinterpretation today. 'Palpable though the documents

and artifacts may be', she writes, 'in the end their deeper messages can only be read through acts of imagination.' Anne Yentsch pushes the limits of historical imagination still further. Her goal, influenced by Geertz, is 'to see the people through the things they left behind'. Yentsch challenges us to 'reach beyond data' in order to make 'the imaginative effort to feel' as people in the past once felt.[18]

Yentsch's goal to 'feel' at one with people and places in the past is as dangerous as it is potent. Historical imagination, as the contributors to this book attest, must be grounded in hermeneutics rather than in the pretence of empathy. This style of analysis demands intimate collaboration between archaeologist and historian, as site-specific historical research is driven by the excavation data, and is painstakingly reinterpreted through engagement with the material culture. Herein lies the pathway for achieving a 'from the inside out' rather than a contrived 'bottom up' perspective upon the past.[19] As Geertz explains,

> The truth of the doctrine of cultural relativism is that we can never apprehend another people's or another period's imagination neatly, as though it were our own. The falsity of it is that we can never therefore genuinely apprehend it at all. We can apprehend it quite well enough, at least as well as we apprehend anything else not properly ours, but we do so not by looking *behind* the interfering glosses that connect us to it but *through* them.[20]

Yamin describes this hermeneutic circle as 'a manner of reasoning . . . that moves back and forth between past and present, between different categories of data – archaeological evidence, oral history, written sources, ethnographic data, anthropological theory, human experience – until the part and the whole begin to make sense'.[21] In so doing, one strives constantly to anchor the embedded artifice of document or artefact in the context of its past production and use. Eschewing the siren lure that one can 'see things from the native's point of view . . . [through] some unique form of psychological closeness . . . with our subjects', hermeneutics takes as axiomatic that the 'only way to discover who people actually are is through their expressions, through their symbolic systems'.[22]

This process of unleashing our imaginations, and the historical narratives we can construct as a result, are supported in turn by a revitalised ethnography that draws upon well-established anthropological principles and recent history making.[23] These ethnographic models entail three methodological principles. First, by reading through – instead of imposing upon – the available evidence, ethnographic interpretation 'begins with the most

difficult thing of all to see: the experience of past actors as they experienced it, and not that experience as we in hindsight experience it for them'. It follows that such interpretations must acknowledge the actions of past people in creating meaning – and thereby the multivocal, contested and dynamic nature of the past – if we are 'to enter into the experience of those actors in the past who, like us, experience a present as if all the possibilities are still there'.[24] Second, ethnographies of the past are structured in spiral sequences of particular case studies, rich in local texture, together with broader synthesising arguments that connect and are continually tested by the local studies that sustain them. Thick description and enveloping historical arguments are thus seamlessly combined. Third, ethnographic narratives are not only tools of rigorous description and argument in the hands of a research team; they must communicate findings to, and engage the attention of, broader audiences. Wide-ranging historical arguments, enriched by local texture, produce compelling stories which should be both entertaining and reflective.

The Archaeology of Urban Landscapes comprises twelve chapters, which are grouped in two sections. Contributors to Part I pursue themes of setting, scope and approach. Contributors in Part II range further into applications and conclusions. The first and last chapters of both sections act as 'book-ends', in order to consolidate arguments begun in this introductory chapter, and to stress the book's unifying concepts of exploration, imagination and narrative.

Part I contains five chapters. It begins with Ellen Ross's 'Slum journeys: ladies and London poverty 1860–1940'. Ross, a distinguished social historian, argues that narratives of slumland exploration decisively shaped public knowledge about urban poverty in London. She examines the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century narrative conventions that fashioned slums in public imagination, and focuses upon the aural confrontations between women of different classes that are contained in this narrative genre. In chapter 3 ('The making of an archaeological site and the unmaking of a community in West Oakland, California'), Elaine-Maryse Solari describes how slum myths fed into public policies which, in the name of urban renewal, unravelled an inner-city community. In all the studies contained in this book, archaeologists and historians have had to explore vanished communities: neighbourhoods which were torn apart by the redevelopment pressures that flowed from slum myths. The complexities of doing so are highlighted in chapters 4 and 5. In the first of these, 'Twice removed: Horstley Street in Cape Town's District Six, 1865–1982', archaeologist Antonia Malan

and historian Elizabeth van Heyningen set about describing a neighbourhood that was bulldozed by South Africa's apartheid regime, and recreated imaginatively in opposition to that regime through music, story telling, and the tapping of memories. In the next chapter, 'Archaeology in the alleys of Washington, DC', Barbara J. Little and Nancy J. Kassner review the development of historical archaeology in the US capital. Part I concludes with 'Small things, big pictures: new perspectives from the archaeology of Sydney's Rocks neighbourhood', in which historian Grace Karskens reflects upon the approaches used at the trail-blazing Cumberland and Gloucester Streets archaeological investigation since 1994. Karskens highlights the uneasy interface between slum stereotypes and the actualities of working-class life in 'the Rocks'.

Part II consists of six detailed case studies of the material culture of urban disadvantage in the modern city. It begins with 'Imaginary landscapes: reading Melbourne's "Little Lon"', where Tim Murray and Alan Mayne mesh archaeological and historical evidence from households in the Little Lonsdale Street precinct of Melbourne. In so doing they underline arguments used already by Ross and Karskens, setting aside nineteenth- and twentieth-century slumland depictions, and later historical interpretations, in order to tell an 'inside-out' story about a complex and long-enduring working-class locale. In chapter 8 ('Work, space and power in an English industrial slum: 'the Crofts', Sheffield, 1750–1850'), Paul Belford separates the early development of 'the Crofts' district in Sheffield from the later slum stereotypes which grew up around it. Mary C. Beaudry and Stephen A. Mrozowski continue this theme in chapter 9 ('Cultural space and worker identity in the company city: nineteenth-century Lowell, Massachusetts') and, building upon Belford, pay particular attention to archaeological readings of worker resistance. In Chapter 10 (The archaeology of physical and social transformation in Québec City's waterfront: 'high times, low times and tourist floods') Réginald Auger and William Moss apply archaeological perspectives to the cycle of abandonment and revitalisation which has characterised Quebec City's waterfront district. John P. McCarthy narrows the focus in chapter 11, ('Values and identity in the "working-class" worlds of late-nineteenth-century Minneapolis') to an examination of the particularities of neighbouring households within late-nineteenth-century Minneapolis, exploring the material record for variations by social class and ethnicity. This fine-textured perspective upon the local horizons of household and neighbourhood is maintained in the final chapter, Rebecca Yamin's 'Alternative narratives: respectability at New York's Five Points'.

Yamin juxtaposes the exploration tropes of narrative conventions in the past that constructed slums, and present-day ethnographies that deconstruct them. Yamin's 'narrative vignettes' about life within New York's notorious Five Points district underlines how new directions in historical archaeology can explore beyond slum myths, in order to address the complexities of working-class life in an urbanising world.

Although there is a unity of purpose in each of the contributions to *The Archaeology of Urban Landscapes*, there is a diversity of solutions to the pertinent question of how we achieve our goal. Given the present state of our explorations of the archaeology of the modern city, and the clear need to foster an environment where traditional divisions between disciplines and approaches are broken down, this diversity is both warranted and welcome. Understanding life in the city, especially in those parts which have been demolished in urban renewal programmes or demonised as exemplars of all that is reprehensible about living in cities, must first and foremost be built around an understanding of the contexts of neighbourhood, work, gender, class, ethnicity, childhood and old age, poverty, oppression and prejudice, but above all of possibility. In the nineteenth-century city, people from rural areas as well as immigrants from all over the world found work, found community, indeed found patterns of interaction which came to be increasingly the hallmark of life in the modern world. In the nineteenth century (as well as the twentieth) the city was celebrated as being the great engine of social and cultural differentiation, whether it was in the Parisian slums so memorably portrayed by Emile Zola in *L'Assomoir*, or by Charles Dickens' depictions of London slums in *Oliver Twist*. Notwithstanding these great literary feats, it is true to say that the nature of life in the poorest sections of the great cities of the western world was of a richer texture than that captured by either writer, and our job as historical archaeologists is to imagine the existence of other lives on the basis of the empirical information we have before us.

The agenda of this book, that our understanding of such places is not fixed by the writings of social reformers, novelists and evangelists, nor by historical convention, is an encouragement to explore those urban contexts and to integrate such diverse sources of information as documentary history, oral history and archaeology as a basis upon which to imagine different social worlds.

Notes

1 S. B. Warner Jr., *The Urban Wilderness: A History of the American City* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972),

p. 4. See also M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996); Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

2 Alan Mayne, *The Imagined Slum: Newspaper Representation in Three Cities 1870–1914* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993), p. 1.

3 S. Martin Gaskell, *Slums* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1990), p. 1. See also Alan Mayne, 'On the edge of history', *Journal of Urban History* 26:2 (2000), 249–58.

4 Two exceptions are Randall H. McGuire and Robert Paynter (eds.), *The Archaeology of Inequality: Material Culture, Domination and Resistance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) and LuAnn Wurst and Robert K. Fitts (eds.), *Confronting Class* special issue, *Historical Archaeology* 33:1 (1999).

5 Helen Proudfoot, Anne Bickford, Brian Egloff and Robyn Stocks, *Australia's First Government House* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin and the New South Wales Department of Planning, 1991), p. 159. These issues are discussed by Beaudry in Mary C. Beaudry (ed.), *Documentary Archaeology in the New World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 1–2, 43.

6 See Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

7 Carmel Schrire, *Digging through Darkness: Chronicles of an Archaeologist* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), p. 111. See Little's introductory comments in Barbara J. Little (ed.), *Text-Aided Archaeology* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 1992), p. 4.

8 Little has changed during the twenty years since Roy Dickens expressed a similar concern in Roy S. Dickens Jr. (ed.), *Archaeology of Urban America: The Search for Pattern and Process* (New York: Academic Press, 1982), p. 1.

9 Alan Mayne, 'A barefoot childhood: so what? Imagining slums and reading neighbourhoods', *Urban History* 22:3 (1995), 380–9.

10 Judy Birmingham and Tim Murray, *Historical Archaeology in Australia: A Handbook* (Sydney: Australian Society for Historical Archaeology, 1987), p. 91.

11 Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 11. Glassie expands this argument in the chapter 'History', in Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 5–39. See also Geertz, 'Found in translation: on the social history of the moral imagination', in Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp. 36–54.

12 Alan Mayne and Susan Lawrence, 'Ethnographies of place: a new urban research agenda', *Urban History* 26:3 (1999), 325–48.

13 Rebecca Yamin, 'New York's mythic slum: digging Lower Manhattan's infamous Five Points', *Archaeology* 50:2 (1997), 47. See also Grace Karskens, 'Making the "slums", making the Rocks', in Karskens, 'Main report', Godden Mackay Heritage Consultants, *The Cumberland/Gloucester Streets Site, the Rocks: Archaeological Investigation Report* (Sydney: Godden Mackay Logan, 1999), vol. 2, pp. 187–94.

14 James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), p. 161. See also Deetz's foreword in Anne E. Yentsch, *A Chesapeake Family and Their Slaves: A Study in Historical Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. xix.

15 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p. 10. Herbert J. Gans, *People and Plans: Essays on Urban Problems and Solutions* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 4–11. Michel de Certeau (trans. Steven F. Rendall), *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 130.

16 David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 4.

17 Clifford Geertz, 'Making experiences, authoring selves', in Victor Turner and Edward M. Bruner (eds.), *The Anthropology of Experience* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 373.

18 Schrire, *Digging through Darkness*, p. 5. Yentsch, *A Chesapeake Family*, pp. xxii, 294, 330. Note also the recent enthusiasm for 'storytelling' in historical archaeology, as expressed in Adrian Praetzellis (ed.), *Archaeologists as Storytellers*, special issue, *Historical Archaeology* 32:1 (1998), and continued in a multi-part 'Forum' in *ibid.* 34:2 (2000), 1–24.

19 See Glassie, *Passing the Time*, p. 86.

20 Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, p. 44.

21 Rebecca Yamin and Karen Bescherer Metheny, *Landscape Archaeology: Reading and Interpreting the American Historical Landscape* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), p. xiv.

22 Clifford Geertz, '"From the native's point of view": on the nature of anthropological understanding', in Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, p. 56. Greg Dening; *The Death of William Gooch: A History's Anthropology* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1995), p. 157.

23 We note, especially, the influence of Victor Turner – see, for example, Victor Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience* (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1985) – and of the 'Melbourne School' of ethnographic history, many of the contributors to which are included in Donna Merwick (ed.), *Dangerous Liaisons: Essays in Honour of Greg Dening* (University of Melbourne History Department, 1994).

24 Dening, *The Death of William Gooch*, p. 157. Greg Dening, *Performances* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), p. xvi. See also Mary C. Beaudry, 'Public aesthetics versus personal experience: worker health and well-being in 19th-century Lowell, Massachusetts', *Historical Archaeology* 27: 2 (1993), 91; and Mary E. D'Agostino, Elizabeth Prine, Eleanor Casella and Margot Winer (eds.), *The Written and the Wrought: Complementary Sources in Historical Anthropology*, Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers 79 (Berkeley: Department of Anthropology, University of California at Berkeley, 1995).

PART I

Setting, scope and approaches

2
Slum journeys: ladies and London poverty 1860–1940

ELLEN ROSS

In South London's miles of impoverished streets, wrote Alexander Paterson in *Across the Bridges* (1911), 'where it is not possible to find a good tailor or a big hotel', one might none the less catch a glimpse of 'a woman of another world, with the exotic appearance of a suburb or the West [End]', a lady who 'gives advice, and drops a leaflet on "Pure Milk"'.[1] The middle-class women who journeyed to poor London districts ranged from clergymen's wives to suffrage organisers; from Marie Hilton, a Quaker who established a day nursery in waterside Ratcliff in the 1870s; to Eleanor Marx, daughter of Karl; from part-time visitors like Lady Constance Battersea whose weekly destination was Whitechapel; and those, like educator Clara Grant, who devoted their remaining adult lives to their slum work. Their numbers, in London, can only be guessed: several thousand in any year before 1930. A single settlement, Blackfriars Women's University Settlement, for example, in 1901 had about a hundred part-time volunteers and twenty-five residents.[2] In the Stepney parish of St Dunstan's at about the same time, with a population of 22,000, the Church of England alone had 7 paid lady workers and 150 mostly female part-time volunteers. The Methodist East End Mission in 1897 employed, in addition to its ministers and 'evangelists', twenty ladies who did 'house-to-house visiting of the poor and sick'. Forty settlements in London alone are listed in *The Woman's Year Book* for 1923–4.[3]

The female visitors, however much they differed, had a great deal in common in this period of philanthropic activism. Nearly all had wealth and education superior to their clients; they shared assumptions – evangelical, 'humanitarian' in Thomas Laqueur's sense,[4] or, eventually, socialist – about the value of serving the poor. And

what they saw and heard in 'the slums', women and men charity-givers alike, was structured, as Alan Mayne points out in his book on slum journalists in this period, by common reading in a literature on London poverty that included Dickens, Mayhew, both Booths, George Sims and other popular journalists.[5]

My chapter, based on London from 1860 to 1940, is, for one thing, a reminder to all students of neighbourhood life that volunteer or official providers of services and advice, many of them non-resident, were active participants in the survival systems of poor neighbourhoods even in the interwar years. Secondly, I build on Mayne's *Imagined Slum*,[6] suggesting that the slums created through the discourses of philanthropic women and men diverged, in part because they were commentaries on different sensory confrontations with poverty: *aural* versus *visual*. Urban poverty, when 'heard', appears less exotic and dangerous than when it is 'seen'; more human, familiar and pathetic. Finally, in this chapter I explore an element of the slum encounter neglected by historians: conversation between women of different classes as represented in women's writings about poverty and the city, evangelistic publications and works of social reformers in particular.[7]

A discussion of talk among these long-dead Londoners might be seen as an improbable beginning to a collective project in urban archaeology. What our approaches share, however, is a way into the lives of 'slum' people that circumvents the standardised discourses of prestigious contemporary observers, views that continue to cramp our understanding of the history of urban poverty.

Gender and 'the erotics of talk'

Female 'slum travel' works from the 1860s through to the 1920s are remarkably conscious of the speech of poor subjects. Perhaps because the ladies were themselves throwing aside the Victorian injunction to silence, they include, on the whole, more dialogue than male writers do, whether quoted directly or indirectly, or fictionalised. Lady visitors, usually without formal position, in fact had to establish their authority mainly through talk in many forms: declaiming, questioning, listening, praying. Probably rare was real 'conversation' between women as imagined by feminists today, and which is defined by Carla Kaplan in *The Erotics of Talk* as talking between social peers that brings about 'recognition, reciprocity, and understanding'.[8] None the less I scrutinise power differences and the conventions of talk and of its print reproduction for these moments.

Male and female slum writings emerge from different locations within the worlds of slum philanthropy and

exploration, a point well illustrated by the two separate worlds of East London's Toynbee Hall. On the one hand there was the all-male institution whose residents conducted boys' clubs and a wide range of classes for working men; on the other, the women's world centred on the dynamic and appealing Henrietta Barnett: mothers' meetings, 'lady' rent collecting, parish visiting, and programmes for female servants and schoolchildren.[9] Congregationalist-affiliated Mansfield House and its sister Canning Town Women's Settlement displayed a slightly different sexual division of labour into the 1930s: clubs, teams, classes and lectures for boys and men at the men's settlement; an emphasis on social services for women and children (which even included a small hospital and a very active dispensary) at the women's settlement.[10]

Scholars have cited a great many other gender differences among 'slummers', many of which imply disparities in access to, or interest in opportunities to talk intimately with inhabitants of poor districts. Jane Lewis notes that men were interested in policy-making committees of organisations, while women were more active as visitors in workers' homes; and F. K. Prochaska has demonstrated women's special effectiveness as charity fundraisers. Anne Summers has pointed out that the 'domestic service paradigm' played a major role in shaping the behaviour and expectations of well-off women active in voluntary work. In contrast, many male social explorers were actually on their way to positions in government service.[11] Ross McKibbin contrasts the 'subjective' approach of most women investigators with the efforts of Booth, Bowley and Rowntree, among other prominent men, to formulate 'objective' (usually statistical) standards for measuring poverty. Seth Koven has explored the erotic valence that attracted so many well-connected men to settlement and child-rescue work; for Martha Vicinus, on the other hand, passion also pulled women into the slums, but it was the irrepressible appetite for work rather than for love.[12] Clearly, urban poverty offered different vistas for male and female explorers.

Street scenes

Experiencing and reading the slum as spectacle was an established gentlemanly enterprise. The privileging of the visual, an axiom of modern science since Galileo, intensified in the nineteenth century.[13] Many men slum visitors use *visual* metaphors of tint such as light/dark, clear/foggy, sunshine/shade; they 'draw' lines around bad districts; or, using cartographical references, refer to slums as continents, distant lands or separate nations.[14]

Indeed urban journeys are often illustrated, from the Dore–Jerrold collaboration (1869–72), to John Thompson and Adolphe Smith's photographic *Street Life in London* (1877), to George Sims' four-volume edited compendium of newspaper articles, *Living London* (1902), lavishly accompanied by photographs.

Raymond Williams equates the modern written representation of the modern city with 'a man walking, as if alone, in its streets' – the Baudelairian *flâneur* – and Deborah Nord adds to this equation the man's 'penetrating gaze'.[15] Not surprisingly, the male gaze more often dwelt on the cityscape, what could be seen outdoors in the boulevards and lanes. At least some women were aware of their different 'place' in the city. As Helen Dendy (later Bosanquet), a Charity Organisation Society (COS) caseworker in Shoreditch for five years, wrote rather scornfully in the 1890s, such often stereotyped views of poverty were 'the impression of the outsider who confines his investigations to the main thoroughfares, or makes official visits during the business hours'. Marie Hilton criticised slum journalists as too ready to judge from a glance, which produced depictions obviously 'written by people who do not look below the surface'.[16]

Streetscapes almost by definition minimise the human by directing the eye (or the mind's eye) to a built environment which is endowed with personality. To take one example: Thomas Archer's walk through what was, in the 1860s, getting to be the notorious Old Nichol in Bethnal Green places readers squarely in the street, moving their glance across the depressing landscape, both human and built.

> Even though here and there a falling tenement is propped up by a shoring-beam, to prevent a wall from bulging over into the street, there are still the remains of poor respectability in some places; and ragged, dirty children, and gaunt women, from whose faces almost all traces of womanliness have faded, alternate with the clean-looking and even well-dressed families of some of the shopkeepers.[17]

The description of the bulging wall is actually more vivid and less hackneyed than that of the 'dirty children' or 'gaunt women'.

George Sims' dozens of *Living London* contributors also highlight what can be seen outdoors. In many of the articles, as in 'London sweethearts' by Sims himself, the author/*flâneur* is at the boundary of propriety ('Discreetly, modestly, and with the tenderest consideration for the feelings of the inhabitants, let us take a stroll this quiet summer evening through Love-land in London'), and the reader follows unaware young couples