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Brokers and Tours: Selling Urban Poverty and Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Abstract

This article explores how so-called “slum” tourism commodifies poverty and violence, transforming urban deprivation into a tourism product. In particular, we pay ethnographic attention to the role of brokers who mediate encounters between residents and tourists. The article explores how brokers—tour guides, art curators and civil society organizations—work to mediate power structures and enact a specific representational-performative politics. In so doing, brokers play a key role in aestheticizing and performing poverty and violence and converting disadvantaged spaces into a tourist product. We argue that brokers are vital to the reproduction of existing inequalities and to the formation of new social relationships and subjectivities.

Keywords

brokers, guides, slum tours, urban poverty, violence

Introduction

Tourism to Latin America and the Caribbean has concentrated on the region’s archeological sites, beaches, and nature reserves, as well as those cities with significant (pre-)colonial architecture and heritage institutions where tourist interests have tended to be limited to wealthier neighborhoods and restored historic centers. More recently, however, increasing numbers of tourists have begun to visit the *favelas* and *ghettos*—urban areas characterized by high levels of poverty and violence. This form of urban “poverty tourism” (also known as slum tourism) relies on and enhances processes through which poverty and violence become commodified. Involving both preexisting concepts of difference and attempts to bridge this difference, poverty tourism is a complex phenomenon that raises numerous questions concerning power, inequality, ethics, and subjectivity (Dürr & Jaffe, 2012; Freire-Medeiros, 2013; Frenzel, Koen, & Steinbrink, 2012). Based on ethnographic research in Brazil, Guatemala, Haiti, and Jamaica, the four articles that

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make up this special issue analyze the transformation of urban deprivation into a tourism product.

Our anthropological approach to poverty tourism pays ethnographic attention to the embodied and emplaced encounters between residents and tourists. Such encounters are premised on pre-existing national, class, and ethnoracial inequalities. Encounters may reproduce these existing inequalities, but they may also foster new social relationships and subjectivities (Babb, 2010; Jaffe et al., 2019; Pezzullo, 2009; Salazar, 2005). The local reality of the encounter requires a specific performance and negotiation of often abstract forms of global inequality. As such, tourists and residents find themselves embodying a structural position, becoming personally involved in reconfiguring difference and inequality along a set of imagined fault lines and expectations. This encounter, however, is far from unmediated: state actors, including police; community groups; and media representations set parameters for interaction. We examine how tour guides, art curators, and civil society organizations operate as brokers, facilitating and determining the relations between tourists and residents, often in highly contentious ways.

The special issue takes up James's (2011) call for a renewed attention to the broker in anthropology. The classic figure of the broker was central to the work of the Manchester School and to the emergence of political and cultural anthropology, notably in the well-known texts by Wolf (1956), Geertz (1960), and Silverman (1965, 1975). For the most part, brokers were understood and represented as morally dubious agents, mediators of information, and access to resources, functioning as gatekeepers for the state and adept at closing off markets to people or groups outside specified networks. Developing the insights offered by Robert Merton (1949) on political brokerage, the effects were generally regarded as reproducing the status quo ante, not least in terms of the distribution of political and social power, while creating opportunities for personal enrichment. Some research did identify the broker as operating within a sanctioned "moral economy" and thus avoiding zero-sum outcomes of exploitation (Scott, 1972). Others regarded brokers as political mediators, highlighting how they cut deals to distribute resources, introduced politicians to skeptical publics, and maintained a general readiness to political action (Auyero, 2001; Gay, 1999).¹ Ethnographic attention was given to brokers' creative and adaptive capacities in the context of changing social, political, and cultural circumstances. As James notes, however, the interest in the broker waned in anthropology as attention shifted to examine colonial and capitalist forces to analyze inequalities and less on the role of opportunism and the moral ambiguity of individual figures. In taking up James' call for renewed attention, we argue that refocusing on brokers is overdue under conditions of contemporary capitalism that are shaped by social relations driven by a need to convert "experience" into "personal capital" and construct markets that commodify new or newly represented forms of culture (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009). Brokers gain currency in these situations as they engage with and thus shape—at least partially—these emergent processes.

In this vein, the articles of this issue pose important questions about how brokers mediate the encounters between tourists, broadly defined, and the urban spaces of the *favela*, *bidonville*, and *ghetto*. Where existing studies on tourism to spaces of urban deprivation tend to analyze this phenomenon as a form of *consumption*, discussing tourists' experiences, motives, and perceptions, this special issue, instead, asks also how a broader range of actors (inter)connect in tourism encounters (cf. Cohen, 1984; Crouch, 2007) to convert disadvantaged urban places into a tourism product. In this endeavor, we build from studies that expose how tourists have agency in the making and marketing of sites (Frenzel, 2016, 2017). Tourism is frequently implicated in contestations over the (re)imagination of space and material urban change, and tourists are both the subjects of attempts to reshape the identity of particular places, often involving gentrification, and symbols, and occasionally allies, to processes of resistance (see Colomb & Novy, 2016; Opillard, 2016).

Brokers perform a critical role in influencing how tourists engage with discreet urban spaces, how those spaces are understood by the tourists and by residents, and what actions tourists are

encouraged to play or believe they are playing in both imagining and materially reconfiguring these spaces. Based on ethnographic work in Genoa, Guano (2015) argues that tour guides constitute a *sui generis* “creative class,” constructing narratives and itineraries that reveal an enigmatic city, more textually layered compared with the city that is usually presented to tourists and which often relies on concealing complicated renderings of urban life. Freire-Medeiros (2013) also notes that guides “do work” to challenge conventional representations, showing how in the case of Rio de Janeiro they dismantle the idea of *favelas* as intelligible only as places of violence and danger. In so doing, the guides set out to project a multidimensional and apparently more “authentic” favela to contest the mediatized stereotype.

The narratives of guides during tours of slums in Mumbai also disrupt hegemonic representations of poverty, including explanatory associations with laziness, welfare dependence, and religious norms. Rather, Jones and Sanyal (2015) show that tours, along with art installations and film, operate as technologies with the potential to “world” the slum as a space of creativity, resilience, and a counteraesthetic to the stigma of poverty. Nevertheless, the guides’ emphasis on slums as entrepreneurial and cosmopolitan spaces needs to be unpacked. Guides in Dharavi projected a capitalist libertarian space where success follows hard work, self-organization, and hustle, while everyone benefited from the presence of strong harmonious communities. Guides legitimate these counternarratives with set-piece vignettes that afford little attention to structural factors that determine poverty and exclusion—tended to pass over the influence of party politics—and discussions of intra- and intercommunity conflict. Representations of disadvantaged spaces as indicative of empowering economic, social, and cultural processes serve to valorize these spaces (Frenzel, 2016). Nevertheless, as research in South Africa and elsewhere has shown, while guides themselves may compete, cooperate, and collaborate with one another, often in ways that add value to their roles, there is limited evidence to back up claims that visitor presence generates economic opportunities for local small enterprises (Arkaraprasertkul, 2016; Broudehoux, 2016; Koens, 2012; Koens & Thomas, 2016; Rogerson, 2008).

An important body of work has explored how guides work to reduce the remoteness of the tourist gaze. In contrast to more conventional encounters that are unable to provide the first-hand, affective, experience sought after by some tourists, guides offer a performance of intimacy between tourists and residents (Frenzel & Blakeman, 2015; Jaffe et al., 2019). As Pezzullo (2009) explores in relation to tours of “toxic” sites in Louisiana, guides convey stories and enact gestures that present the tour as an interactive experience, drawing on visitors to “feel present” and emotionally moved (p. 9). The performances operate as a pedagogic device that affords legitimacy to the guides’ advocacy for redress of social, economic, cultural, or environmental injustice. This insight resonates with Butler’s work (2012) on local guides in township tours. She conceptualizes guides as curators whose more informal interventions open space for tourists to be (self)reflexive. The guides’ curatorial work portraying poor districts as integral parts of the city creates counterimages that oblige tourists to question the “otherness” of the place.

Taken together, these studies highlight the entanglement of diverse actors in producing slums as tourist destinations. The authors in this special issue were all drawn to consider how brokers “do work” to mediate power structures and enact a specific representational-performative politics. In many cases, these brokers play a key role in aestheticizing and performing poverty and violence as part of symbolic economies based on cultural production and consumption. This work is undertaken as what constitutes the tour and tourism are being reconfigured, as people and representations become in some sense more (or differently) mobile, and as cities are attempting to reposition—and notably brand—themselves in ways that require engagement with spaces of poverty and violence and notions of stigma.

From 19th-Century “Slumming” to “New Tourisms”

Tourist experiences that involve visiting urban areas characterized by poverty, deprivation, and violence are not a recent phenomenon. They resonate with earlier practices of “slumming,” such as the activities of “adventurous” 19th-century elites in London, Paris, and New York, who ventured into underprivileged neighborhoods and ethnic enclaves in search of entertainment and “experience” (Koven, 2006; Steinbrink, 2012). As Koven (2006) has shown, people were drawn to the slums of Victorian London, seeking out hostels, clinics, and asylums, often going incognito, and occasionally constructing a moral justification for philanthropy through the acts of “seeing” poverty and “interacting” with the poor. These putative ethnographic encounters generated reportage and emotive visual exposé, in some cases with the explicit intention to drive urban and social reform (Gandal, 1998; Green, 2002).

Contemporary poverty tourism operates according to a number of very similar registers to earlier cases of “slumming.” What Rifkin (2009) terms a “new age empathy” was marked by an existential realization that how we live—the “relationship of being”—depends on our knowledge of how others live and our sense of connection with their plight or well-being. This interest is marked by movements to promote fair trade and environmentally conscious consumption, a rise to prominence of faith-based organizations, “humanitarianism” and social enterprises, and the vicarious insight afforded by “following” “development celebrities” into spaces of suffering (Brockington, 2014; Goodman & Barnes, 2011). Tourism has been recast, offering an association with opportunities for development, a desire for “responsible” or “ethical” tourism, or an attention to “dark tourism” involving sites of death, fear, and disaster. As with the 19th-century “slumming,” contemporary travelers are drawn to the fascination, shock, character-building, and moral “worthiness” of their experience (Hutnyk, 1996)

So-called slum tours fit neatly with these impulses, attracting participants from gap-year students, actual or would-be development workers, journalists and writers, to celebrities and high-profile politicians. The content and style often puts stress on an activity, such as graffiti or photography workshops, or on time spent with a community-based organization. Other interactions are around events such as World Cup outreach projects or Biennales, or activities associated with (corporate) “social responsibility” that claim benefits to the local communities. Tours often involve “hospitality”, the chance to eat at local restaurants and bars—some tours even claiming to offer “street gastronomy”—and may include short-term stays in AirBnB rentals or hostels.

As an urban form of tourism, poverty tourism must also be understood in the context of shifts in urban development strategies. Increasingly, such strategies are part of a symbolic economy that is based on cultural production and consumption and that relies heavily on leisure and tourism (Zukin, 1995). Cities compete globally to attract investors and tourists by engaging in place marketing, city branding, and spatial imagineering, drawing on ideas of authenticity and local identity while aestheticizing the landscape (Spirou, 2011; Yeoh, 2005). Urban spectacles, from cultural festivals and landmark architecture to sports events, play an important role in selling cities (Broudehoux, 2016; Gotham, 2005). These processes, however, are not only tied into developmental and economic goals but also have an impact on urban sociospatial identities. They have the potential to create new cultural meanings and shape processes of subject formation (Vodopivec & Dürr, 2019).

Tourist visits to neighborhoods with “reputations” for violence and poverty can be understood as spectacular experiences, produced as part of these place-based symbolic economies oriented toward cultural consumption and leisure. Urban branding, mega events, and “starchitecture” are well-known state strategies for city branding, and a number of states have attempted to “securitize” the city as a means to reassure tourists and residents alike of their safety (see Hodge & Little, 2014). Nevertheless, poverty tourism may involve analogous attempts to attract tourists and investment by presenting neighborhood-level deprivation and violence as another type of

consumable spectacle. The aestheticization and performance of urban poverty is an obvious theme in “slum tours” (Dürr, 2012b; Frenzel et al. 2012). However, less attention has gone into the tours’ active engagement with a representation of these neighborhoods as dangerous, violent, “no go” areas (but see Robb Larkins, 2015). Perhaps even more than poverty alone, an idea of *violence* becomes part of the “buzz” for a tour.

Tourists’ ideas about the role of violence in these neighborhoods are often “preproduced” through media, and tour guides may extend this engagement in their narratives and itineraries. In certain cases, tours actively engage in performing and commodifying the “violent image” of a place. The cities that are the focus of articles in this issue relate in different ways to representations of violence. In Rio, the most sensationalist *favela* tours highlight recent histories of gang (*comando*) violence and the drug economy, equating *favelas* with “war zones” while the operators teasingly promise “safety.” Or, as Alana Osbourne’s article shows, tour guides in inner-city Kingston convey community histories that center on narratives of political violence rather than on gang war.

From a cynical perspective, such tours sometimes incorporate poverty and violence as part of a carefully produced “brand” and a means to convince the tourist that they are paying for exclusive access to a “real-world” and “authentic” dimension of urban life. However, as the articles show, those who live in these areas engage with their neighborhood’s reputation in multiple ways. Some of these engagements reproduce associations between place, class, “race,” and violence, while others alter the tourists’ preproduced perceptions and increase residents’ political and economic clout. These processes may be subtle, as Alessandro Angelini (2016) shows in the case of the *favela* tours in Rio de Janeiro, where racialized differences are present but framed primarily in terms of class and urban space. This is echoed to some extent on the walking tour in Trench Town in Kingston, when “White” tourists are confronted with structural violence in a “Black” neighborhood. Racialized hierarchies figure prominently in David Frohnafel’s contribution on the Ghetto Biennale in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where they are tied into privileged mobilities and relationships of power among artists, visitors, and curators as brokers.

The guides and other brokers perform a vital role in crafting the tourist experience in myriad ways. In Rio de Janeiro, “stunning views” of and from the *favela* are a key feature of the tour landscape, but some guides use them as the backdrop to discussions of social achievements, while others, as Angelini’s article shows, decry the signs of gentrification and frame the enterprise of *favela* residents as a struggle that fails to produce social mobility, explaining that state interventions entrench existing or provoke new community conflicts and cross-class tensions. As this article demonstrates, these tensions are captured by the dispositions of different guides: some stress the *favela*’s and their own entrepreneurial skills, and broker a relationship between tourist and toured that benefits themselves financially, while others adopt a more political stance, exposing frictions with guides who are “looking out for themselves.”

The ambivalent relationship between socioeconomic improvement and security/violence in the context of poverty tourism becomes evident in the case of nongovernmental organization activities offering tourists a safe and secure stay in an environment represented as otherwise unruly and violent in Guatemala. Poverty tourism as a funding strategy to ultimately increase socioeconomic mobility of the urban poor produces “safe” tourist enclaves under the umbrella of nongovernmental organizations while still maintaining the image of an otherwise risky place. Sarah Becklake’s contribution reveals that these geographies of touristic (in)security stress the pertinent role of violence in the context of symbolic economy by drawing on a preproduced image of place. In contrast, Alana Osbourne notes how for the case of Trench Town in Kingston, tours expose poverty as structural violence—positioning the neighborhood as the victim of institutional violence and linking it with histories of struggle—but avoid discussion of violence associated with crime, especially in the present.

Globally Mobile Representations and a Place-in-the-World

Approaches to urban transformation and tourism need to be connected to the study of global mobility regimes (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013), focusing on the physical movement of tourists and the virtual movement of images and information. Imaginaries of places and peoples are produced and reproduced through globally circulating (tourist) representations as well as through local encounters and interactions. How are these representations part of negotiating a low-income neighborhood's "place in the world"—that is, its sociospatial position within an encompassing set of global relations? As relational places, these neighborhoods are shaped through the representations and networks that precede and follow tourism encounters. They are also formed by the social practices performed in these places and by the cultural meanings that are attached to them.

Poverty tourism relies on globally circulating "familiar" representations of urban deprivation and violence. Dürr (2016) has proposed the term *slumscapes* to capture the spatialized social concepts of disadvantaged urban landscapes that differ from the dominant city image and feature specific lifeworlds. The slumscapes, she argues, become mobilized through particular representational modes such as music, films, pictures or texts, and travel through global communication channels. Such representational work presents the slum in ways that are more fluid than the metric conceptions based on predefined criteria such as housing quality, access to water, or medical care (UN Habitat, 2003). The neighborhoods discussed in this special issue have featured in a number of internationally successful films such as *The Harder They Come* in the case of Kingston or *City of God* and *Fast and Furious* in the case of Rio de Janeiro (see Freire-Medeiros, 2011; Jaguaribe & Hetherington, 2004), but they are also depicted and aestheticized in a broader range of media, including popular music, video clips, tourist websites, blogs, coffee table books, novels, biennales, and exhibitions. These representations act on place identities, and in turn, place identities reflect back on representational strategies.

While outsider tour companies appropriate such imagery for commercial purposes, residents and "cultural entrepreneurs" also play a role in the production, manipulation, and circulation of these representations of poverty, people, and place. Drawing on ethnographic approaches, the contributions to this special issue show how these representations gain power and are turned into capital in the tourist encounter. Tourists in Trench Town, Jamaica, are attracted by the legacy of reggae music and its many materializations in the built environment, such as Bob Marley's rehearsal grounds, his first guitar on display or the band's tour bus—the legendary VW van. Yet who has the power to convert local creativity into cultural capital is highly contested. David Frohnappel's analysis of the atelier and Ghetto Biennale in Port-au-Prince reveals how foreign artists and agents enact an authorial power over the work of others, motivated by a "feel-good politics" of artistic ecumene that silences local voices. These broker artists and agents are highly mobile, while the Haitian artists are "stuck" in place, thus reproducing a highly classed and racialized system of power (also see Angelini, 2016).

Stereotypical place images are incorporated in the tourist product to match the tourists' expectations; these images are also contested as guides point to social creativity and alternative representations that challenge well-established perceptions of place and people. Thus, the incorporation of references to films, video clips, or reggae songs in tour itineraries or narratives can have different effects, either reproducing or contesting popular culture imaginaries. Popular culture is significant as a global frame for poverty tourism, including local music, when, for instance, Jamaican tours locate the roots of reggae in the inner city. In some tours, clichéd images of the urban poor are reproduced, while in others, openings for oppositional representations emerge.

These globally circulating representations are used in sometimes surprising ways by the local tour guides who have the power to rearticulate dominant place narratives and—as in the case in Rio de Janeiro's *favela* of Santa Marta—create new branding strategies for their neighborhood to

put on global display. Local tour guides formed a committee to self-manage the tourism business and thus have become powerful brokers as community representatives and political leaders in local interactions with the state. In exercising roles that reach far beyond the tourism business but include more general developmental strategies, they increase their professional and personal networks. However, as is also evident in the favela Vidigal, successful marketing strategies, political networking, and entrepreneurial activity can also create intracommunity conflicts when tour guides compete with one another (also Koenig, 2012).

Aesthetics, Affect, and Embodiment

The importance of global representations and local performances in poverty tourism suggests an analysis that is attentive to the role of aesthetics and the affective and embodied nature of the poverty tourism ‘experience’ (Jaffe et al., 2019). While precirculating images of “slums” and violence motivate and inform the encounter with the urban poor, this encounter itself is also an aesthetic event. Aesthetics play a key role at the Ghetto Biennale in Port au Prince. David Frohnepfel frames this event as a form of “artistic poverty tourism” where visiting artists, often stemming from more affluent social strata, interact with local artists in a disadvantaged neighborhood. This aestheticized encounter reveals a complex negotiation of class privilege and exclusion, elite spaces and informality. Operating from a poverty-ridden exhibition space, the artist community *Atis Rezistans* curates the event that attracts many visitors to the marginalized neighborhood. Furthermore, while the members of the art collective struggle against extreme poverty in their everyday life, their art objects are consumed by global elites and put on display in art museums. The power of this “poverty aesthetics,” combined with a “politics of pity,” is deployed by the *Atis Rezistans* to advance their own goals.

In more conventional city tours, visitors are moved—sometimes literally—by the neighborhood’s sounds, sights, smells, and stories. While the “tourist gaze” (Urry, 2002) implies a qualitatively different kind of seeing than “everyday looking” because it focuses on differences, the involvement of other senses also allows for an experience that goes beyond the ordinary. Seeing crumbling infrastructure or bullet holes in the walls of houses, smelling raw sewage and uncollected garbage, hearing accounts of recent murders, or beatings or raids while being exposed to the added soundscape of police helicopters—these are embodied, sensory experiences that reach far beyond the visual. Tours through poverty districts encompass the whole body and walking tours in particular are multisensory experiences offering specific ways to interact with the environment (see also Pink, 2008, 2009). This is true in Trench Town, where reggae music and the smell of marijuana are key in place-making processes and the imagination attached to it. In the *favelas*, the smell of sewage deepens the experience of neglect, while a chance encounter with a group of electricity company workers hauling a generator up a narrow, steep, alley both evokes an idea of neighborhood improvement and histories of marginalization. Tasting local food, such as *feijoada*, made out of beans and leftover bits of pork, conveys both a unique sense of place that can be bodily sensed and memorized and, simultaneously, is redolent of iconic identities, in this case the popular classes and slaves.

It is important to note, however, that these experiences are mediated and contextualized by social actors with specific interests. Thus, embodied experiences become part of the tourist product sold by the local guides, carefully designed to enhance the excitement of the tour. Bodily experience also adds another level of involvement by turning visitors from mere observers into participants, albeit under a secure and safe umbrella of a (semi)professional broker. Seeing extreme poverty—often in a voyeuristic and ethically questionable way—can produce uncanny feelings that may attract thrill seekers or people bored with comfortable everyday lives (Dürr, 2012a). But the engagement may also elicit irritation, as some visitors feel uncomfortable and unsettled. Brokers are careful not to lose control of these emotional responses, keeping tours

“moving” to reduce the risk of boredom, offering short uncomplicated explanations; breaking up itineraries with food, alcohol, or more interactive encounters; and combining the “heavy” scenes of poverty and suffering with more light-hearted or life-affirming vignettes of economic mobility or cultural creativity (Jones & Sanyal, 2015; Pezzullo, 2009).

Conclusion

Contemporary poverty tourism—still found in the global North, but increasingly concentrated in the cities of Latin America and the Caribbean—continues to draw on discourses of difference and danger, developing leisure experiences out of insecurity and unfamiliarity, as well as promises of hospitality, creativity, and knowledge production. Critical to these encounters are a wide variety of actors, many of whom we might conceptualize as brokers, who translate between the toured slum and the tourist, and others. Taking our cue from James’s (2011) observation that it is time for a “return of the broker,” the articles in this collection attempt to relate the figure of the broker to the poverty tourism encounter. The premise of the articles is to consider how sites associated with poverty and violence, as well as other notions of difference, including that of “race,” form part of contemporary attempts at commodification. This commodification does not necessarily or primarily rely on material transformation but also, and even mainly, centers on the crafting of image and experience (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009). Furthermore, this process is not straightforward as it may entail intentions beyond entrepreneurial aspirations and profit making. As evidenced in the contributions of this special issue, more often than not tourist guides challenge stereotypical place-images and emphatically strive to deliver a political message.

The guides, curators, and civil society organizations foregrounded in the articles in this issue do work to spatialize the “slum” as a material, mobile, and imagined space, and to open the possibilities for encounter, promising opportunities for participants to affirm or produce themselves as knowledgeable, caring, and cosmopolitan subjects. Brokers shape these encounters and their affects, producing an “experience” through the performativity of their engagement with the tourist, choosing what to show and how to show these low-income, high-crime areas, in what Jones and Sanyal (2015) have considered a carefully constructed “itinerary.” As all the articles in this issue note, in different ways, the brokers’ work is as much about “silencing” particular voices and viewpoints, avoiding mention of certain themes, and interpreting others in ways that are intelligible from an outsiders’ perspective. Brokers, therefore, are conducting their classic role as mediators and translators in new circumstances.

Finally, it is worthwhile to position the researcher in the text. The research that informs all these articles is longitudinal, ethnographic, and in a number of cases multisited. This research involved walking and eating with participants and, in some cases, involvement in curatorial, development, and “guiding” practice. As Pink (2008) has theorized, ethnographic research is an embodied experience that helps better understand the places under question for research. A key point for us is how this entails walking, eating, talking, and practicing “with” people in relations that generate ethnographic knowledge. In many instances, the research on which these articles draw involved the accompaniment of a broker and implicated the researcher as both brokered and broker in the field.

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Note

1. Recent attention to brokers has examined their role in securing access to resources and services through a multiplicity of subterfuges as well as less imaginative vote-bargaining approaches to local politics (Björkman 2015; Szwarcberg 2015).

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