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# DOWN AND OUT IN NEW YORK CITY

By  
Anthony Allen Marcus EO

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for  
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Abstract

DOWN AND OUT IN NEW YORK CITY

by

Anthony Marcus

Advisor: Professor Ida Susser

This dissertation, based on over 4 years of participant-observation fieldwork among under-housed poor and mostly non-white populations in New York City during the late 1980's and early 1990's, is an anthropological study of the social construction of the homeless crisis. This crisis, which developed because of rising housing costs, declining employment opportunities, and reduced social services, drove many New Yorkers into the streets to beg by day and sleep in public during the night. Rather than constructing this crisis of social reproduction as a problem of housing policy, employment markets, or public education and health care that confronted the majority of

the working population of New York City, it was imagined as a homeless crisis involving a group whose social difference was defined through its relationship to housing. Following earlier crises of urban poverty the debate over the homeless developed into a mirror image of the earlier culture of poverty debate. Scholars debated how the homeless fit into categories of poor people, and the degree to which their suffering was a result of macrostructural determinants or faulty values. This dissertation is an attempt to deconstruct the social categories and theoretical assumptions upon which this debate rests. Using data from the lives of those designated as homeless and those employed to provide services for them, this dissertation shows the ways in which American political culture, U.S. urban poverty scholarship and institutional constraints often lead to reifying folk categories of social distinction. These categories, which define and delimit success and failure, obscure rather than clarify the causes and effects of poverty in American society.

## **Acknowledgments**

The creation of a scholarly vision requires hundreds of people over decades. Those who have contributed most profoundly to my vision are first and foremost my mentors, who took a poorly read film maker and turned me into a social scientist: Ed Hansen, Gerald Sider, Michael Blim, Ida Susser, Eric Wolf, Robert Brenner, Leith Mullings, Charles Menzies, and Sharryn Kasmir.

As these people shaped my scholarly vision, I found myself enriched by teachers I met along the way: June Nash, Jane Schneider, and Marc Edelman. Among those who forced me to think and rethink all my work are Eric McGuckin, Katherine McCaffrey, Molly Doane, Sabia Prince, and Jonathan Hearn.

Nothing could have come of any of my work if it were not for the collaboration, friendship and challenges put to me by Mario Alfredo Gonzalez who shared the joys, traumas, and funding connected to this field study.

I could not have even had access to my field study without the help of Ezra Susser and Paul Colson, who employed me on their project and schooled me in research

methods. Kostas Gounis and Sarah Conover, who I also met at the homeless project, were always there to debate with me and make me rethink things. I must thank them for help.

Though not nearly as political, acknowledging the dead is even more emotional. This dissertation could not have been written without the intellectual foundations given to me early on in my graduate student days by Ralph Miliband. I also owe a debt to Happy Leacock. Though I never met her. She remains my intellectual guiding star. Her uncompromising courage, commitment and vision remain the standard by which I measure my progress.

I must also thank those who are responsible for my moral development. None of this would be possible without Mary Weisstein, my doting communist grandmother who taught me about the dream of a post scarcity society; Robert Marcus, my father, who taught me that skepticism could be a science and Mary Lennon, my companion of many years who always asked where's the praxis? These were the tools I needed to take up the long journey of the scholarly life.

Finally, I want to thank Jo Sanson, who helped me rewrite this draft and gave me reason to finish.

## PREFACE

In 1989 I began my studies of "the homeless" in New York City. I, like many of my colleagues, was drawn to this dramatically disadvantaged population, who were suffering the worst depredations of the Reagan revolution. Seemingly without any place to stay, deeply unhappy, uncared for and lacking the rudiments for survival, "the homeless" flooded into New York City's residential neighborhoods and business districts in unprecedented numbers in the 1980's. They provided a daily spectacle of suffering that did not befit the most productive economy in the world. These nomadic wretches lunged out of doorways demanding money, disturbed the morning commute on the subways and hovered around banks and restaurants seeking to play on people's guilt and obtain money.

Like the welfare debate that is occurring now, the homeless became an important symbol of social changes that were occurring in the United States at the time. Wanting to contribute to the debate on these changes, I organized a

research practicum for several students in the cultural anthropology program at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York.

I was living on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, not far from where I had grown up and gone to university. There had been a series of police riots and urban disturbances, in the late 1980's, surrounding issues of housing, gentrification, property ownership, and the use of Tompkins Square Park as a "Hooverville." Myself and two other students, Dr. Walter Ewing, and Mario Alfredo Gonzalez, spent several months doing participant observation research in and around the Tompkins Square Park area, as part of an independent study led by professor Leith Mullings.

While we were never able to pin down exactly what was happening in the Lower East Side, it was clear that it was part of a set of changes in the political-economy of New York City, in which housing, homelessness, and the management of space were important. When a position opened as staff ethnographer on a multi-year National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) funded demonstration project on homelessness and mental illness, I took it.

This demonstration project, known as Critical Time



Intervention (CTI), operated out of the Fort Washington Public Men's shelter, Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, and the New York State Psychiatric Institute. It was set up to test a clinical intervention designed to combat the homeless specific behavioral patterns, known as shelterization, in which the homeless are re-socialized into the dysfunctional values of shelter life. The intervention was also designed to provide for the special needs of mentally ill homeless men who were in the difficult process of obtaining and maintaining housing.

As one of the two staff ethnographers, (the other was Mr. Gonzalez) it was my job to track, interview and study a random collection of men from both the control group and the experimental group, over the 18 months that they were in the study. Each month I would locate these men and administer a one hour housing interview, that covered where they had slept, how they had earned their income, and how they felt about their life situation. I fulfilled these duties with 53 men over 3 years.

Though there were men who answered the questions, took the \$10, and disappeared for the next 30 days, for many of them, our interviews were a brief vacation from the

desperate reality they were living. For many of them who lived in the same neighborhood as I did, the process of being neighbors put some humanity into what was a difficult field situation. For those who were in the control group and experimental subjects who had finished the study, there was always the hope that I could somehow provide the support that they were lacking. This sometimes became very difficult and turned what was supposed to be a half time appointment, into something closer to full time childcare. Though my primary concern was to keep data on the 53 men who I was being paid to study. I often found that people living with them in their various situations could provide more data and I included them in my studies. In all, I administered roughly 950 interviews through the research project, Mr. Gonzalez administered about the same and we both passed considerable time outside the study, with informants, interviewing them when we had enough money.

The study employed me at 20 hours per week, but anyone who has done field work knows that there is no way to put a box around the field study experience and make it one little aspect of a much larger life. It is the job of an ethnographer doing participant observation to be an empath

and a sponge, absorbing people's joys and sorrows, ideas, feelings and understandings of the world. It is the job of the ethnographer to become a part of the group being studied and to make a part of him or herself a permanent member of the "tribe."

For the social worker or international development expert whose job it is to change, ameliorate or simply maintain the people involved, there is the active role of helping (regardless of how successful he or she is) and the intentional distance created by the judgement that the person or group under his or her aegis has some problem that needs to be corrected. For the ethnographer, there is no acceptable way to relegate informants lives to deviance and error. We must take the good with the bad and try to strike a realistic balance between them.

In writing this dissertation, I have tried to present both the good and bad. Due to my intensive focus on shelter residents and their friends, I have often missed some of the ambiguity and nuance in the lives and jobs of those who worked at the shelter. The representation has weighed heavily towards the perspective of the underhoused. I hope that other ethnographers will eventually tell the often sad

story of those who struggled to put some humanity into the  
irrational and chaotic New York City homeless bureaucracy.

Anthony Marcus

Tepoztlan, Mexico

June 1997

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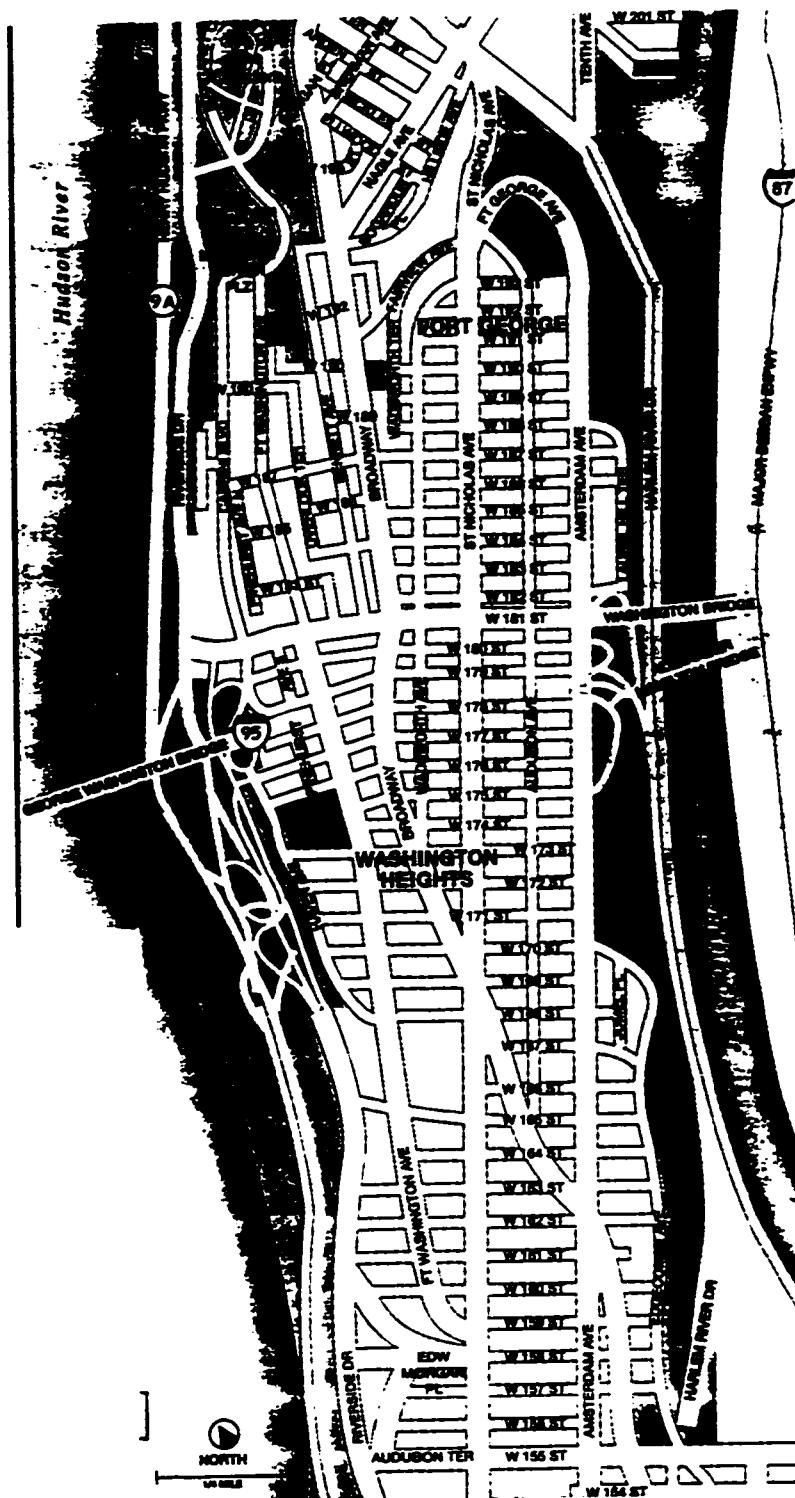
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## Manhattan Vicinity





# Washington Heights



## **DOWN AND OUT IN NEW YORK CITY**

### **CHAPTER I**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

If there is no mystery about the sympathetic attention paid to the problem of homelessness in America over the past decade, there certainly is a mystery concerning why comparable attention and sympathy were not extended to the homeless in the past. Homelessness has waxed and waned throughout our history, but America has always had a goodly complement of homeless people. Nevertheless, compared with the scale of contemporary popular concern, throughout most of our history the homeless have been regarded at least with indifference and often with contempt, fear, and loathing.

- Kim Hopper, 1987

#### **THE MYSTERY OF THE NEW YORK CITY HOMELESS**

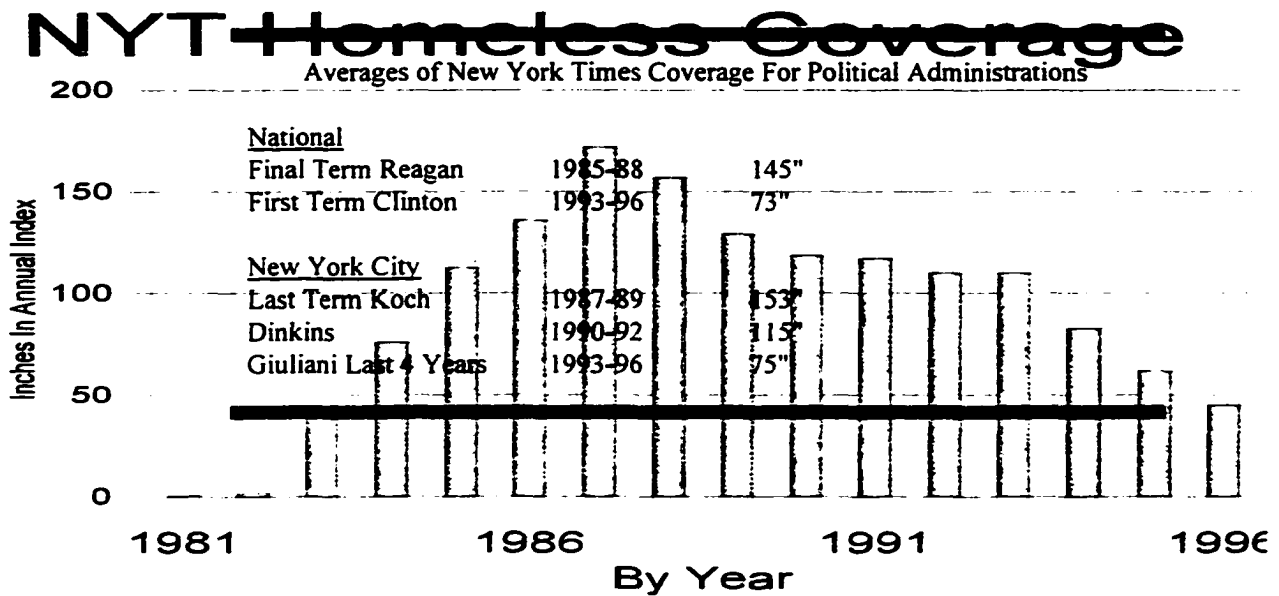
For a decade from the world recession of 1982 to the U.S. presidential election of 1992, a group that came to be known as the homeless took the spotlight and became the

subject of widespread social concern, debate, and urban policy. In New York City the homeless were discussed in newspapers, magazines, TV talk shows, community board meetings, churches, and political speeches. There was even a hit dance song about a homeless woman. Organizations formed to advocate for the homeless and David Dinkins was elected mayor of New York City based in part on his concern for the homeless. Task forces were set up to study the problem and funding was provided for academic research on the lives of the homeless. Books were written and courses were devoted to the homeless in anthropology departments, sociology departments, public health departments and social work departments.

Since the U.S. presidential election of 1992, the homeless problem has receded into what Michael Harrington called "the other America": an unseen underworld of poverty

and misery.<sup>1</sup>

There are no longer politicians devoting their campaign speeches to the "homeless problem." There are no longer numerous human interest stories in the news about the homeless, and there are none of the political



mobilizations on behalf of the homeless that there were in the 1980's. All the while there are as many people as before without proper housing. Rents have skyrocketed, New

1

The above tables have been created by measuring the column inches for the subject "Homeless" in the paper bound annual New York Times index. Typeset and page length are standard, allowing for a statistical comparison.

York City public shelters and transitional housing facilities are still crowded with the urban poor, and there are permanent shanty towns throughout New York City (Dehavenon 1995).

Kim Hopper wrote the above quoted opening paragraph in his definitive 1987 historical essay, "The Public Response To Homelessness in New York City: the last hundred years" At the time the tremendous importance of the homeless was a mystery to historically oriented scholars such as Hopper. Now that the homeless crisis has faded from public consciousness, the mystery has been taken one step further. For many people, the disappearance of the homeless problem can be attributed to the urban poor becoming less visible, people worrying about worse things, or simply the ebb and flow of contemporary problems. Even in New York City, reputed to have been one of the centers of the homeless crisis, the last five years have seen little public interest in the homeless and virtually no mention of homelessness in newspapers (see chart page 15) or public opinion polls about social concerns. This thesis, based on over four years of participant observation among Under-

housed<sup>2</sup> New Yorkers, social service providers, government funded poverty researchers and politicians, will attempt to explain this mystery.

Many researchers have focused on a variety of empirical aspects of the homeless crisis. They have expanded our knowledge of the ways that Under-housed people live; the problems with social policies directed towards them; the difficulties in counting them; perceptions of homelessness; and the political economy of housing loss. (Dehavenon, 1992, 1995; Gounis, 1990; Hopper, 1981, 1987,

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<sup>2</sup>

I use the term "Under-housed" here, for the first time, because this is my first direct mention of my informants. Throughout the text the term Under-housed will be used to refer to those who were generally defined as homeless. Peter Rossi, who has written one of the key books on homelessness, entitled *Down and Out In America* shares my concern with the problematic usage of the word homeless. He opted for the term "extremely poor", instead of homeless. This represents a recognition that the problems of "the homeless" are much greater than just housing. I am in agreement with Peter Rossi on the issue of typology. However, since his book was an analysis of the origins of "homelessness" in the declining welfare state, relative poverty is at the center of his analysis. The term "extremely poor" is therefore useful to him. Since I am attempting an analysis of the declining welfare state in the origins of homelessness, social images of housing are at the center of my analysis, rather than poverty. I have therefore settled for a term that refers specifically to the phenomenology of housing, but avoids a hard and fast categorization or an ideology laden typology.

1992; Jencks 1994; Rossi, 1989; Susser and Gonzalez, 1992; Susser, 1993). There has not yet been a study of the Underhoused that took U.S. society as its unit of analysis and, in classic anthropological fashion, holistically analyzed the homeless crisis as part of the political culture and political policy of the United States.

During the 1980's, housing densities in New York City increased, people doubled and tripled up, thousands slept on the streets at night and wandered them by day in search of change from passersby. (Barak 1991; Blau 1989; Dinkins & Cuomo 1992; Hopper 1987; Housing Now 1989) That there was a crisis of social reproduction for many working-class New Yorkers is clear. Wages were dropping for unskilled and semi-skilled labor, housing prices were rising, and there were many cuts in social services. (Fitch, 1993; Humphries, 1984; Nash, 1994; Warrington, 1995)

Such a crisis could have been socially constructed as a crisis of employment, a crisis of low wages, a crisis of housing prices, a crisis of health care, or a crisis of facilities for integrating immigrant populations; it could have led to constructing new low cost public housing, guaranteeing employment at a livable wage, or decent health

care. Such measures might have prevented more people from losing housing and taking to the streets, and provided the opportunity for those who were already on the streets to rebuild their lives. Instead of taking the crisis as based on concrete problems facing the New York City working-class that could be resolved with proactive policies, it was turned into a "homeless crisis" involving the creation of a new group to be studied and "social worked": the homeless.

Unlike previous studies that accept "the homeless" as an actually existing group of people with a special set of experiences, needs and problems, and which seek to understand their thoughts and life ways (Dehavenon, 1995; Gounis, 1993; Gruneberg & Eagle, 1990; Hopper, 1987; Hopper & Baxter, 1981; Hopper, Susser, and Conover, 1986) this study will follow the approach suggested, but not pursued by Mark Stern in his 1984 article "The Emergence of Homelessness as a Public Problem" and attempt an historical deconstruction of the social idea of homelessness<sup>3</sup>. Instead of taking the existence of the

---

<sup>3</sup>

There has been much excellent literature on "the homeless" that has argued that the homeless are "not that different from you and me." Some examples of this is the work of Kim



homeless as a given and using that given as the basis for empirical study, this study will explore the political and cultural history of the U.S. social formation to determine what longstanding conflicts, contradictions, and continuities created the social category of homeless.<sup>4</sup>

(Marcus, 1992)

This category, comprised largely of non-white urban

---

Hopper and Susser and Gonzalez who have described the homeless as part of "the working poor." However, none of these works, has deconstructed the category of "homeless." The one exception is Mark Stern's 1984 essay in the Social Service Review, entitled "The Emergence of the Homeless as a Public Problem." In this essay Stern follows historian Gareth Stedman Jones in examining the use of the gift as social control. Though Stern questions what creates the idea "homelessness", his answers focus almost entirely on the national role of the Republican Party, leaving out both the Democratic Party and the social sectors that provide services to the Under-housed.

4

When this first chapter was written in 1994, the notion of "homeless" as a political construction that related more to socio-cultural discourse than actual housing was still largely undeveloped. Besides the article already mentioned by Mark Stern (1984), Blau (1992) discusses visibility; Jencks (1994) talks about political partisanship in framing the problem; and Vaness (1992) discusses the struggle for use of space and the social construction of homelessness. When the other chapters were written in the spring of 1996 and 1997 the idea of homelessness as a product of 1980's/early 90's politics finally surfaced in the work of Don Mitchell (1997), who discusses the role of international capital accumulation and class conflict (from above) in formulating laws that reveal or hide social concerns like homelessness.

dwellers who faced slightly to significantly more extreme versions of the same housing, employment and healthcare problems that confronted the vast majority of Americans during the 1980's, came to personify social difference and failure in the way that Yuppies came to personify social distinction and success. Both these peculiarly 1980's social categories represented a cultural discourse on success and failure, housing, employment, healthcare, consumption patterns, behavior, and social justice, but neither category represented a salient group identity or operationalizable set of boundaries. (Marcus, Ewing, Gonzalez, n.d.; Marcus, Susser, Gonzalez 1992)

The social construction of the homeless in the 1980's, like all social constructions, was the result of a competition for ideological dominance among different social forces as much as it was about housing those without a home. Winners of this competition are those who can provide more than just food to their army; winners are those who can also provide ideas.

The struggle over social policy, financial priorities and cultural meaning in the 1980's was a war of ideas, definitions, and social mobilizations, involving a complex

symbolic raising and dipping of battle standards. The homeless was one of these battle standards used in a variety of ways by different competing forces to mobilize supporters and intimidate opponents.

This thesis is an attempt to deconstruct this symbolic flag play of American political culture, using those who came to be defined as the homeless and those who were concerned with "the homeless" during the 1980's in New York City as the ethnographic entry.

The patterns of U.S. political culture and sectoral alliances can be uncovered by statistically analyzing public texts, congressional studies or political speeches. However, the actual ethnographic study of a group of real people's lives, and the impact of social policy on those lives, provides a unique window onto the differences between social essence and social appearance. On the most basic level, empirical proof that this or that program is successful or failed can be gleaned from ethnographic study. However, far more important than the empirical recording of data is the understanding that comes from the study of a social problem from a point of entry in which

the very fabric of society is breaking apart<sup>5</sup>. It is in these places, which are central to social concern but marginal from generally desired or prescribed patterns of social life, that the contradictions between what is said and what is done, and the patterns of who is doing what to whom, become clear.

In this thesis I will try to guide the reader on the ethnographic journey I took from trying to help "the homeless", to seeing through their eyes the lack of use the category has for those who have been defined as homeless.

### **In Search Of The U.S. Proletariat**

In attempting to answer these questions, I will be drawing heavily on the idea of social classes as constituting the primary axes of struggle in U.S. society. Using the Marxian view of social class as a function of social relations of production (Kasimir 1996; Marx, 1954; Menzies 1996; Wolf 1982), and generalized social conflict

---

5

What I am referring to here is spaces in which the everyday has been systematically deranged. This might include the violation of social norms, through either choice or by force. It might include a dramatic and possibly obvious disjuncture between what is said and what is done (or a dramatic but not obvious disjuncture) (Harris 1978).

over the valorization process, this study will identify and describe the economic and political interests of the two major classes that arise out of the capitalist mode of production. These two classes are the class which creates the social product through its labor, the proletariat, and the class which depends for its existence on the extraction of surplus value, the capitalist class. Within these parameters for defining social class, the social product represents a zero sum game, with all that is enjoyed by one class taken directly from the hands of the other class. Within such a Marxian world view, the material interests of one class are inherently counterposed to that of the other class, yielding a society based on perpetual struggle between the classes. This war is called politics and its study political economy (Von Clausewitz 1968; Marx 1954, Lenin 1947, Trotsky 1969; Wolf 1982)

Identifying the objective material interests of these social classes is the first step towards understanding actions, choices, and the meaning and import to different segments of these two major social classes of the flag play of American politics. One may broadly identify these two social classes in an objective economic sense and find a

host of people with conflicting and contradictory class locations. However, finding the relationship between objective class interests, subjective class consciousness, and political activity, is a very different analytical task.

Though often intentionally obscure, arcane and deeply symbolic, the voices of the capitalist class are usually loud and ubiquitous in U.S. culture. This is accomplished through both the structural and instrumental control of media, the educational system, and the twin parties of the capitalist class: the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. (Baskin, 1971; Jessop, 1982; Lenin, 1947; McLennan, 1989; Miliband, 1969, 1970, 1982; Mills, 1959; Offe, 1984; Poulantzas, 1969, 1972, 1975) In order to discover the various conflicts, differing interests, and social visions for capitalist rule and the management of social problems, there is no shortage of text. What is required is patient interpretive evaluation of interests and actions taken in those interests. Filling in the proper colors for all the different rival interests and groups in the U.S. ruling class is not an easy task, despite the conscious, ubiquitous, and highly developed discourse of the social

texts, social institutions, and political policies of that class.

Interpreting and understanding the way the United States proletariat lives, acts, and thinks is far more difficult. Political opinion polls and election exit surveys reflect some of the interests, ideas, and social currents of the U.S. working class. However, in order to understand these highly divided, complex, and often counterposed goals and interests, theory is a crucial tool for recognizing the unrecognized. It is necessary to use theory and broad historical vision as a way of understanding the past and the future, in the absence of brute empirical data in the present. The task of finding the U.S. working class in its ideas and interests is a particularly difficult one for an empirically based discipline such as anthropology.

The U.S. proletariat lacks any collective voice in the form of a political party, a set of explicitly class conscious institutions and organs of popular consciousness, and even a strong ideological sense of its own existence as a social class. This has created a relatively violent and inarticulate working class history, in which social science

analysis and prediction of the motions of the U.S. working class requires what Gerald Sider has described as the most important obligation of the historian or anthropologist: "listening for the silences." (Quoted from a seminar, Spring, 1991. See also Sider, 1996) Similar to Spivak's vision of looking for the unspoken voices of the voiceless, finding the working-class content in an historical situation, such as the homeless crisis, involves more than research and data analysis; it requires imagination.

Ida Susser begins Norman Street, her book on the effects of the New York City fiscal crisis, by saying, "Local actions...measure the political process. The frequency of collective actions attests to their import for the society at large. But the analysis of small conflicts and local collective organization also provides a key to the political consciousness of working class America. The workers' view of the social system in which they live is expressed in these activities." This quotation from Susser's introduction, in which she lays out her goal of finding a part of the American working class as "a class for itself" through the relationship between their consciousness and their actions, is one of the basic



methods of anthropological study.

Though Susser found small local actions in Brooklyn and some sense of working class consciousness that could be identified in those actions, this methodology becomes increasingly problematic as groups and social classes become more silenced, and as the majority of class based actions come from the bourgeoisie.

To write the history of a social class merely by its collective actions is to miss layers of meaning, competing and conflicting leaderships, and latent tendencies. The history of a social class cannot be told merely from the articulated spoken voice. Such a story of the already vocalized might have missed a potential capitalist class in the USSR in 1980, a class conscious proletariat in the U.S.A. in the late 1920's, a hegemonic capitalist class in strike ridden contemporary Bolivia, and a working class component to the homeless crisis. To tell the history of a social class through its empirical actions as indicators of its social consciousness is to risk simply describing what can already be seen and losing social science's unique ability to explain the unseen, and imagine different possible pasts, presents, and futures. (Wolf, 1982)

I will provide ethnographic data describing the material relationships between Under-housed members of the New York working class and their more securely housed brethren, demonstrating the continuity of interest, and actual divisions, across housed and Under-housed sectors of the New York City proletariat. But this study will go beyond the behavioral particularism of poverty studies that reduce culture to a material stimulus/response reaction. I will attempt to find the meaningful silences, voices and muted voices of an American proletariat that has been historically silenced by the hegemony of the world's most powerful capitalist class.

#### **CONSTRUCTING HOMELESSNESS IN THE 20TH CENTURY**

From early 20<sup>th</sup> Century conflicts over housing and urban problems during the progressive era (Kolko. 1977; Unger, 1977; Wiebe, 1967; Weinstein, 1968) to the 1980's/1990's homeless crisis, the issues of defining adequate housing, housing the Under-housed and employing the underemployed have always been highly political. In the popular imagination, there have been three major moments in 20<sup>th</sup> Century U.S. history in which the issue of people

without housing has been important: the wanderings and dislocations of the great depression of the 1930's, the housing shortages in the wake of World War Two, and the homeless crisis of the 1980's.

All three of these crises occurred due to the inability of certain segments of the U.S. working class to afford housing. However, each was socially constructed in a different way, reflecting different historical conjunctures and varying strengths and weaknesses of competing political actors and class forces.

#### **Under-housed in the 1930's**

Much of the literature on Under-housed populations in the 1930's originates with sociological literature on "tramps" and "hobos" that discusses housing loss and nomadism in terms of psycho-cultural pathologies and socio-cultural difference (Anderson, 1923; Minehan 1934). Tramps and hobos were generally seen as social outlaws and lumped together with the poor and the underemployed, into a world described in terms of faulty values. This individualizing of the misery of large sections of the U.S. working class, in order to assign blame, was hotly contested during the

1930's, and in subsequent portrayals of the dislocations of that era. (Associated Press, 1995; Dudley, 1994; Hopper, 1987; Rosner & Markowitz, 1987)

Despite the power of the discourse on poverty that blamed the individual, there were strong and widely disseminated working-class oriented portrayals of the dislocations of the 1930's. From radical journalism covering the work of the unemployed councils and movies like Preston Sturges' "Sullivan's Travels" to the popularity of John Steinbeck's novel *Grapes of Wrath*, the 1930's crisis of social reproduction within the U.S. working class is seen by many as an era of unjust and undeserved suffering brought from above. To this day a sign reading "foreclosed" in front of a family farm or house at the beginning of a movie instantly gives both time and place to the story, and brings to mind in the movie-goers imagination the famous bank foreclosures of the 1930's and the California migrations that ensued.

In the 1950's, the class content of the dislocations of the U.S. working class during the 1930's was watered down by beat generation, romantic visions of hobo poet wanderers as mythic adventurers, absent father figures and

initiators into rituals of manhood (Frank, 1986; Kerouac, 1957; Klein, 1980). However, the working class narrative of loss of home and employment in the 1930's, as an intrinsic part of the war of capital against labor, is still the dominant one in U.S. culture.

### **Under-housed in the Early Post-War Period**

In the late 1940's, the continued existence of massive numbers of people without a place to call their own came to be defined in a more hegemonically working class way than it had been before, even in the class conscious 1930's. With large numbers of urban working class families in substandard living situations, a rural proletariat still living in 19<sup>th</sup> Century conditions, and a lack of affordable housing for returning soldiers, the national housing situation after World War Two looked little better than it had in the 1930's.

The combination of record birth rates, returning soldiers, reduced housing starts during World War Two, and the decay of existing housing due to the rationing and austerity of World War Two (Jackson, 1985), led to a severe shortage of affordable housing for the lower paid segments

of the U.S. working class.

However the politico-historical conjuncture was different. The United States enjoyed unprecedented world economic dominance. The war had effected the most massive devalorization of capital in world history, the economic modernization that had been occurring in stops and starts since the late 1920's was finally triumphant, and the U.S. was into a new wave of capital accumulation (Brenner & Glick 1991; Blim 1992; Mandel 1975; Nash 1989). In such an environment, the social cost of labor conflict appeared to be too high to rapidly growing U.S. capital.

In 1946, throughout the industrial world, from the United States to England, France, Germany, and Italy, the period of direct government management of industry and trade unions came to an end. In the United States, this was most apparent in the form of the World War Two no strike pledge passing into history, and conversion of war industries back to civilian applications. 1946 saw the biggest wave of industrial strikes in U.S. history, in which well over 100 million work days were lost to strikes. Though the United States trade union movement was not as overtly class conscious as it had been in the 1930's, and

never recouped lost war time wages (Brenner & Glick 1991; Clarke, 1994; Mandel 1986; Shaikh, 1978, 1980, 1994), it was more united than it had been since the strike wave of 1877 (Zinn, 1995). The massive strike wave, combined with the collective organization experience of direct combat and the developing post war boom, created a situation in which the crisis of massive numbers of U.S. workers without housing was not defined using individualistic psycho-cultural terms like hobo, tramp, skell, skid row denizen or homeless. It was defined as a housing crisis and resolved through a variety of working class housing policies.<sup>6</sup>

Although much of the housing history of this period is remembered in patriotic nationalist terms, as a time of government housing policies to provide for returning soldiers, this is only a small part of the story. The period 1946-1966 saw an incredible expansion of permanent housing options, driven by working-class demand for affordable housing (Tabb and Sawyers, 1984). The combination of stringent rent control laws in New York City

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See Tabb and Sawyers, 1984 for criticism of the particular forms that post-war working class housing took.

and Los Angeles, tremendous expansion of Roosevelt's experiments with public housing projects, the construction of major roads to suburban areas, and low interest loans for new construction and renovation of older buildings created a drop in relative terms in the cost of housing for nearly all members of the U.S. working class (Jackson, 1985).<sup>7</sup>

### **Skid Row In The Midst Of The Boom**

As the cost of housing declined during the early post-war period, there was very little significant social discourse on the psycho-cultural characteristics of those who either slept in public or had no permanent and fixed home. The little discourse that existed surrounded a combination of alcoholism, poverty, and mental illness that could typically be found on the "skid rows" that existed in virtually every city of the United States. Seen as a social problem, worthy of the time and money of social workers and charitable organizations, skid row was far from the

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Despite the fact that many of the best housing programs and subsidies were not available to blacks and Latinos in the Southwest, the overall cost of housing per unit of space dropped during this period.



experience of most Americans, and of secondary importance in their minds.

Isolated from residential areas and populated primarily by older white men as well as homosexuals, transvestites, prostitutes and other social outlaws, skid row was rarely mentioned in opinion polls about social problems, campaign speeches by politicians, or even the literature of organizations devoted to charitable causes. These urban neighborhoods were home to red light districts, drug buying areas, pre-Stonewall gay bars and "men's hotels" that catered to the gay or transvestite clientele, independently living ex-psychiatric patients, and the studios of artists and other marginal bohemian types. Skid rows and the homeless men or "bums" and "skells" who inhabited them were seen as a dangerous but colorful underworld to be heavily regulated by police vice-squads, social workers, and other public functionaries of social control, and avoided by "good, upstanding citizens" in post war social discourse. (Bahr, 1973; Bittner, 1995; Bogue, 1963; D'Emilio, 1983, 1988; Hoch, 1989; Hopper & Hamberg 1984)

### **Under-housed In The Late Post-War Period**

In the 1980's, this separation of the urban "nether regions" from the "respectable" working class, middle class, and even affluent neighborhoods of both the cities and suburbia, came to an end. All at once it seemed that the skid rows had emptied of their residents and, like in the movie "Night of The Living Dead", "the dead were feeding off the living" on every street. In cities across the country unwashed, unkempt people in tattered clothes wandered the streets, slept under cardboard, and lunged out of doorways to demand change from people on their way to work or the dry cleaners.

By the early 1980's, New York City was one of the worst sites for this urban social problem. There was hardly an automatic teller machine in the city that didn't have a colony of vagabond people camped out at the door asking for money from everyone who entered or left. Something was clearly different. There was a new mass social phenomena that people confronted daily, that needed to be articulated, explained, and managed. This mass social phenomenon came to be called "the new homelessness." According to journalists, social scientists, and activists,

this "new homelessness" was completely different from the "old homelessness" of "skid row" (Barak 1991; Hopper 1991; Rossi 1989; Susser, 1996). However, despite the seeming ubiquity and increasing numbers of "new homeless", study after study suggested that many of the root problems were the same: lack of resources for confronting unemployment, mental illness, alcohol or drug problems, physical deformities, and a variety of other social weaknesses that made a comfortable and rewarding life much more difficult. (Barak, 1991; Dinkins & Cuomo 1992; Farr, R.K., Koegel, P, & Burnam, 1986; Gruneberg & Eagle, 1990; Hopper, 1991; Hopper & Baxter 1981; Robertson, 1986; Rossi, 1989; Rossi, Fisher & Willis, 1986; Susser & Gonzalez, 1992)

Though this "new homelessness" burst onto the scene with the publication of Hopper and Baxter's *Private Lives/Public Spaces* in 1981, "the homeless" first emerged as a political concern during the recession engineered by Federal Reserve Bank Chief Paul Volker and President Jimmy Carter. This recession, which was officially designed to halt inflation, threw many people out of work and disrupted

the lives of U.S. workers. In the last year of the Carter administration, the term "homeless" occasionally appeared in magazines and newspapers to describe white, "middle class" workers and their "ordinary suburban families" who were said to be living in their cars in the Midwest. This phenomenon proved to be a media flash in the pan and a small part of the Republican critique of the liberalism of the Carter years.

After Ronald Reagan swept into office in 1981, everything changed with regard to social programs, social priorities, and labor relations. With the crushing of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) strike, the targeting of so called "welfare queens", and various neo-liberal anti-state sector initiatives on the part of the Reagan administration, the entire "New Deal/Great Society" sector of the Democratic Party was under siege. Unlike the immediate post-war period, in which there was a strong and united working class that could use the power to withdraw labor on a national scale and force the capitalist class to raise wages and lower the cost of living, the Reagan revolution confronted a working class that had been severely weakened from 50 years of being

represented by the pro-capitalist Democratic Party, the decline of utopian working-class political programs, and tremendous divisions between white and black, employed and unemployed, and immigrant and native.

Instead of a unified national fight back, Reagan confronted a working class that was sectorally divided. One of the divisions was between those workers who were connected to the public sector, the helping professions and the New Deal/Great Society anti-poverty apparatus, and those who faced a rising rate of exploitation and resented having to pay for "social programs" that they were not directly benefitting from. (Greenberg, 1995; Kymlicka, B.B. & Jean V. Matthews, 1988; Dinkins & Cuomo 1992)

It is in this battle by the Democratic Party public sector working class against Reagan's coalition of neo-liberal business, and a pro-austerity section of the U.S. working class, that the homeless crisis was defined and developed. Faced with a powerful assault by Reaganomics the leaders of trade unions, public sector workers, social work professionals, public school teachers, liberal academics in public universities, and social movement activists connected to sections of the U.S. working class dependent

on these programs, made a variety of attempts to fight against the tide rush of the Reagan revolution. (Dinkins & Cuomo 1992)

The homeless crisis was one of the key battle standards in this conflict in New York City. Throughout the 1980's, liberal pro-welfare sections of the Democratic Party struggled with the soft neo-liberal agenda of Democratic Party mayor Ed Koch. By the end of the 1980's, Koch's slow but steady assault on the public sector and fiscal austerity had made him very unpopular within his own party (Fitch 1993; Newfield and Barrett 1988). This led to the election of David Dinkins who used the homeless as one of the key symbols of his campaign, hiring the most unattractive and dirty looking black New Yorkers, (as told to me by informants who were part of this plan) to distribute his literature on the streets and highways of the city.

Described as a mobilization of the homeless in support of Dinkins and in defense of their own rights, it was a peculiar mix of coercion and marketing that was consistent with Dinkins' homeless policies in office. These policies prioritized the homeless as a symbolic issue over the

housing, employment, and healthcare problems that created the misery of these Under-housed New Yorkers.

At the time of the campaign, one of the key slogans put forward at Dinkins campaign events by "homeless activists" for Dinkins, was "we are all only two paychecks away from being homeless." This political scare tactic may have saved some social service jobs by directing resources to programs that provide emergency assistance for people without shelter. For a time it may have helped to pull together the rapidly disintegrating Democratic Party coalition of labor and capital, but it never addressed the fundamental issues that create poverty and housing loss.

### **Homelessness and Consciousness: Searching For My Tribe**

My study of the homeless coincided with Dinkins' mayoral term and I found myself in the middle of a brief golden age of homeless studies in New York City. Dinkins was issuing regular policy statements and reports on homelessness, and public money was being spent to "help the homeless" (Dinkins & Cuomo, 1992; United States General Accounting Office, 1991; United States; Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1989) with everything from

obtaining housing to unlearning "homeless specific behavior" and "homeless culture." Several times I found myself on the verge of being without housing, and the anthropologist I was collaborating with actually went for several months living in emergency housing and staying with friends. The growing discourse on this group, combined with my own personal experiences with housing loss, led me to become increasingly concerned about how I was defining my tribe. I found none of the "local actions" and "collective organization" that Ida Susser refers to in Norman Street as a standard by which political consciousness can be judged. The degree to which Under-housed informants lacked social connections that tied them to other social identities, such as Black, Latino, Gay, pro-Union, etc., was the degree to which the archetypical U.S. individualist ideology of the American Dream dominated their political consciousness and sense of self. There was no counter-hegemonic discourse of the homeless (Marcus, Susser, and Gonzalez, 1992) and almost nothing conscious that could be termed homeless specific. This ideology of the American Dream was central to the way that they narrated and constructed their lives, and was only mitigated by local actions and political



consciousness that took them outside of homelessness into alternate identifications and self-narrations.

As one of my informants pointed out, I was studying a group with no specific cuisine, religion, kinship system, educational rituals or coming of age rites, form of punishment for transgressors of the rules, language, or way of passing on the culture to the next generation. When I was unable to respond to this informant and looked worried, he just laughed it off and told me "I'm just messin with you." But the seeds were there for self reflection. The identity of "homeless" seemed to have virtually no importance for anyone, except social workers and researchers. During my 4 years in the field, I was unable to define who I was studying, either in terms of consciousness (emic) or practice (etic). This left me with an uneasy feeling about whose culture I was studying and why.

The fact that the several dozen anti-austerity/save social welfare demonstrations that I attended as part of my field work never contained any significant component of people on welfare, those defined as homeless, or other wards of the state, has always struck me as suspicious. The

national coalition for the homeless generated so little interest among the people that they sought to advocate for that in New York events they rarely even managed to present token "homeless persons" in public. All this made me more suspicious.

My informants not only had no self-identity and consciousness of being homeless, but most of them had to be constantly coached by their advocates, care givers and researchers on how to be more homeless. This took the form of extensive training sessions in how to appear needy, passive and pliable during admissions interviews for housing programs, how to hide the employment ambitions that were so central to my informants' aspirations, and even how to dress more homeless during staged public events. As one of my informants put it when talking about why he had no interest in the Dinkins campaign that "mobilized the homeless", "I'm proud of being black, I worked my whole life and was always part of the union, I don't need that stepin fetchit stuff now." He went on to talk about the shame of being put out on the streets in raggedy clothes by white campaign workers (referred to as "clean" in the Dinkins campaign), who wouldn't be interested in you unless

you looked "like something the cat dragged in." As a long time merchant marine and member of the National Maritime Union, he said he was too disgusted to even comment on the use of "the homeless" by the Chicago Tribune Corp., in order to try to break the Daily News truckers' strike.<sup>8</sup>

If this lack of a homeless identity were present in people who were genuinely apathetic about everything in life, the paternalistic idea that they must be taken care of like turkeys who look up into the rain and drown would be reasonable. However, I have spent many hours with Underhoused informants arguing about politics, attending Puerto Rican day parades, arguing about black nationalism and Farrakhan rallies that they attended, discussing unions that they were active in at one point in their lives, and Puerto Rican statehood. Their interest in Farrakhan rallies and political debates, and lack of interest in saving the

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This strike was one of the major labor confrontations in New York City during my fieldwork. The Chicago Tribune Corp., which owned the New York Daily News fought a strike by truck drivers. After a campaign against sales of scab papers by news vendors and a fire bombing of a news stand, the owners enlisted homeless men to sell the papers on the streets, assuming that no one would beat up a homeless person.

social programs that homeless and pro-welfare activists fought for, is one of the key paradoxes that led me to write this thesis about the creation of the homeless.

As far as I could tell, not only were the homeless "like you and me" and part of a larger group known as the poor, but the concept of the homeless or the poor as a group to be studied seemed like an impediment to understanding the situation of increasing misery, flexible housing arrangements, health and employment in the lower and sometimes middle reaches of the New York City working class. (Hopper 1987)

#### **Who's Reification Is It Really?**

As I became increasingly unable to justify my category to my informants I found myself desperately grasping for more objective definitions of the group I was supposed to be studying. As I read and discussed homeless issues with colleagues, the unit of analysis became even more unclear. Even those who had been studying the "homeless" for a long time were unable to properly pin down what the culture was which I was studying. Though there has been a large literature on defining the homeless (Dehavenon 1995; Hopper, 1995; Jencks 1994; Rossi 1989; New York Times, Sept

1991, U.S. Congress 1989), what Peter Rossi calls "the numbers game" has been directed almost solely towards debates over what social work interventions to fund and how much. I found only a few people who defined the homeless in terms of culture or self-identification. (Gounis, 1993)

I tried to get operationalizable definitions of the homeless, but none of my fellow researchers were able to provide them. Nobody was sure how many days per year of sleeping publically were required to be part of this "imagined subculture" that they were studying. Nobody was sure what constituted shelter which was poor enough to be counted as sleeping publically. Were the squatters I had studied in the Lower East Side homeless? Someone sleeping in a basement? Someone in a permanent shack in a garden? Did that person become homeful when an electric line was run into the shack?

For the more conservative of my colleagues, someone had to have slept for many months on the streets or in a shelter. Someone who had slept in Grand Central Station for a few nights due to quarrels with family showed incidences of homelessness, but was not homeless. For some what was required was not renting or owning a regular dwelling, and

not being part of a domestic unit that does (Dehavenon 1995). For some, it was a room of one's own. Though nobody was exactly sure of who the homeless were, we seemed to know them when we saw them.<sup>9</sup> A 1992 New York Times poll found that 58 percent of Americans said they saw homeless people daily (Fantasia and Isserman, 1994).

I had been collecting data on many of the Under-housed people, the beggars, street salesmen and mentally ill in my neighborhood (the Upper West Side of Manhattan, near Columbia University) and in the one where I was doing much of my field work (Washington Heights). As a social scientist, I felt that it was important to test the

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At this time, there were two definitions of the homeless that were commonly discussed and debated about by researchers. The first of these was the definition put forward by the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, which held that a homeless person is "a person who 1) lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, or 2) lives in: a) a shelter, b) an institution other than a prison, or c) a place not designed for or ordinarily used as a sleeping accommodation for human beings." The National Coalition for the Homeless posed the alternative definition which accepted the government's but added in those who they called the "invisible homeless": those who double up, make use of emergency lodging occasionally, and those who move from one temporary housing arrangement to another. (United States Congress 1987; National Coalition For The Homeless, 1988)

validity of people's impression that "they knew one when they saw one". Over the course of a few months I took many people around in my car, or walked them through the streets of my neighborhood and tried to discover who they thought was homeless.

It became clear after this experiment that either nobody knew a homeless person when they saw one, everybody was homeless, or else the category of homeless had nothing to do with housing. They pointed to the bizarre looking middle aged men asking for change from passersby. Though I knew that they were long time residents of the SRO on my block they presented an image of homelessness. The Vietnam veteran, with VA benefits that were 50 percent higher than my salary, who sold second hand books for a living, was seen as homeless. Though he had never spent a night on the streets, he was black, had a typically homeless way of passing his days, and dressed in rather raggedy clothes. There was an unbathed black woman dragging children behind her who also got the designation homeless, but lived two blocks down in a large, but cramped studio apartment with her sister and her sister's child. No one pointed to the well dressed Barbadian male sitting on a bench, reading a

paper on his favorite traffic island in the middle of Broadway. He was a shelter resident. The strange looking white guy on crutches hawking videos who sleeps in Riverside Park, the good looking young black man arguing with a shopkeeper and who sleeps in a basement uptown, and the Latin City University of New York (CUNY) student who works in the supermarket and alternates between an aunt's home in Jersey City, the student government office at City College, and her best friend's bedroom (when there is no boyfriend there) in a shared apartment got, no notice from people who I put to the spot the homeless test.

In this little experiment I discovered that it was not just social scientists who were not sure how to define a homeless person. For many ordinary people who were upset about homelessness, "homeless" was a folk category that described neighbors with some combination of being black, being poorly groomed, being on the streets during the day with little to do, and acting somewhat inappropriately. It was this test that led me to search for the sources of the invention of homeless people and the social construction of the homeless crisis of 1983-1993.



## **Deconstructing Poverty Paradigms**

In Chapter 2, entitled "Theory, Method, Practice: The Poverty of Poverty Studies", I establish both the problems with liberal poverty studies during the 20th Century and the way in which their application to the homeless crisis of the 1980's did more to obscure the truth than to illuminate it. Charting a history of the urban question from the 19th Century debates between Marxism and social Darwinism, I discuss the liberal methodology of Durkheim and Weber that attempted, in separate ways, to synthesize these two counterpoised approaches and generate a notion of society based on social equilibrium, social harmony, and positivist rationalism. It is out of this vision of rationalism and social equilibrium that the entire notion of a culture of the poor developed, and provided a template to create the homeless crisis.

As previous generations debated "the culture of poverty", without ever really pinning down exactly who and what was being studied, the study of the homeless burst onto the academic scene in the early 1980's in the same splashy, but ill-defined way. Born in a period of declining public sector funding, homeless studies did not even have

the forward looking optimism of the previous generation of poverty studies that looked to a combination of increased resources in the public sector and liberal social programs to resocialize the poor. Homeless studies in its most practical form represented a call for maintenance of the most impoverished sections of the working class in their poverty, rather than a real discussion of working class issues such as housing, lack of housing, health care, and employment.

In this chapter I will discuss ways of viewing poverty in the United States from a class-based analytic perspective that recognizes the severely Under-housed as economically, politically, and ideologically integrated into the bottom levels of the American working class.<sup>10</sup> I

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There are some who may recognize this as similar to Hopper 1981, Susser & Gonzalez 1992, Rossi 1989, etc., and others who have used a variety of terms like "working poor" and "extremely poor." Though these phrases sound similar to American working class or proletariat, the semantically similar terms tend to obscure the difference in typology and theory. As I explain in Chapter One, the connection to the word poor, has nearly always indicated a connection to a structural functionalist equilibrium analysis of the U.S. social formation. This analysis is sometimes quite static, as in the case of classic debates over the culture of the poor (Hannerz, 1969; Lewis 1970; Stack 1974; Suttles 1968) and sometimes processual or historical (Hopper, 1981;

will argue that the impoverished and Under-housed have no class interests outside those of the working class, have no independent poverty specific ideology, no separate value systems, religious practices, kinship systems, languages, economy, political culture, or social expectations and ambitions. They are structurally, socially, culturally, economically and politically participants in every aspect of the American working class and American culture. They simply participate at reduced capacity on the economic bottom, with less political power and less access to the benefits of the social wage. Due to various combinations of bad luck, meager resources, and social weaknesses, the severely Under-housed are simply the low end of working class immiseration.

Any attempts to resolve the problem of "the homeless" or "the poor" with policies specifically geared towards them, rather than towards those who have not yet lost housing or jobs, will be doomed to failure. They will be directed at socially and culturally specific groups that

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Gounis 1993; Hopper, 1991; Hopper and Hamberg 1986; Hopper, Susser, and Conover 1986) but nearly always based on a search for social health, social morbidity, deviance (either the deviance of the underclass or the overclass)..

have little real salience for anybody except those whose job it is to distribute the wasted money.<sup>11</sup> Any attempts to successfully solve the problems of under-housing and poverty must involve the culture of the American working class and the economy of the U.S. social formation.

In Chapter 3, I will present my most basic empirical data on the housing situations encountered by New York City's Under-housed. This data, which will include anecdotes, the observations and opinions of the Under-housed, life histories, and descriptions of events will show the ways in which the lives of the Under-housed, even those who encompass every definitional characteristic of "the homeless", fit seamlessly into the larger landscape of life on the bottom fringes of the New York City working class. Living, loving and working side by side with their poor and not so poor working class brothers and sisters,

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Though there is a vast and rich literature on the need to provide poor relief and other social programs to those who have not yet lost housing as a means to prevent homelessness (Blau, 1989; Gruneberg and Eagle, 1990; Hopper 1991; Hopper and Hamberg, 1986), these studies tend to take the homeless as being connected to the poor without ever defining the poor, thus defining one imagined group in terms of another.

the "homeless" are merely an exoticized reflection of the lives of much of the New York City working class.

Chapter 4 is a discussion of the relationship between values and subsistence strategies among those without housing. The liberal values of cooperation and contribution to the collective good that have been described as absent from the culture of the poor, can be seen as either deviant or normal depending on what is expected from those studied. It will be my argument that the values which social workers are charged with bringing to those in their care are not only contrary to the dominant values of U.S. society, but often stand in the way of the Under-housed gaining control of their lives. By setting up a false dichotomy between life inside and outside "the system", the Under-housed are judged to be dysfunctional due to their inability to fit the prescriptions of life inside a system that demands behavior that is contrary to the norms of U.S. culture. They are literally struggling to rid themselves of the American Dream in order to receive rewards from social workers and those who manage poverty programs.

Chapter 5 will discuss the way that U.S. kinship structures and values function among my informants.

Kinship, like most other features of human culture, requires resources in order to develop and be maintained. Whether housed, Under-housed, or completely without shelter, my informants found that the challenges of finding and maintaining friendships and kinship, of both the affinal and consanguineal types, created tremendous challenges that drew them in and out of difficult relationships. For most of the men who I studied, the principle challenge was confronting the belief that without a job, they were not entitled to love. This deeply held value in no way seemed to separate them from either the values or practices of U.S. society as a whole.

Chapter 6 concerns the problem of municipal politics and the importance of "the homeless" to party politics in New York City in the late 1980's. In New York City in the 1980's, the most powerful and important organization that shaped the poverty industry was the Democratic Party. This party held state power in New York City and New York State, controlling the governorship, the mayoralty, the majority of the city council and "grass-roots", community organizations. The Cuomo report, written by then governor Mario Cuomo's son, Andrew, was only the most famous of a

whole host of social science research projects on homelessness and poverty that represented points of contact between the Democratic Party, liberal academia, and the social service industry. In my work on the homeless, as part of a federally funded McKinney act research project, I was a part of this struggle over public policy. Often described at the job site as "tying Reagan's hands", the public policy goals preceded the research design and were explicit in the actions and words of the people involved.

The connection between partisan public policy and the social science of poverty was most obvious when shelter residents and other social service "clients" were brought into the political process. This was done through pressure exerted by some of the social "workers" and researchers. "Clients" were often expected by their service providers to be registered Democrats and participate in occasional rallies designed to further the political goals of their program.

At first I tried to find a working class politics and solidarity in this relationship between helpers and the helped, but despite the tremendously good intentions of many of the individuals involved in this industry, it

seemed that what was happening was one group of workers were making their living, and some attempting to build fortunes, at the expense of another.

Most of the workers I met in the poverty industry were well meaning and hard working people who were not scamming, but the ones who most often seemed to rise to the top were opportunists hoping to get wealthy on not-for-profit community residences. However, what all these people shared was the fact that they were part of a U.S. welfare state poverty system that depends for its existence on the notion of a difference between "the poor" and the "not-poor" employed and unemployed, Black and White. This process of imagining difference is the crucial U.S. cultural tradition for managing social inequality that reified those without housing into a social category and then folded them back into the larger category of "the poor" as quickly as they had been imagined.



## CHAPTER II

...the United States contains an underdeveloped nation, a culture of poverty...They are beyond history, beyond progress, sunk in a paralyzing, maiming routine...poverty in America forms a culture, a way of life and feeling, that makes a whole...Until these facts shame us, until they stir us to action, the other America will continue to exist, a monstrous example of needless suffering in the most advanced society in the world."

Michael Harrington 1962 in *The Other America*

### THE POVERTY OF POVERTY STUDIES: THEORY, METHOD AND PRACTICE

The publication of *Private Lives/Public Spaces* by Kim Hopper and Ellen Baxter in 1981<sup>12</sup> marks the beginning of the homeless studies that developed in the 1980's. Not since the generation of poverty scholars of the 1920's and 30's (Anderson 1923; Minehan, 1934) had there been scholarly work that integrated urban nomadic populations into the larger problems of housing, healthcare, employment, and poverty that challenge U.S. society as a

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Several months before the publication of *Private Lives/Public Spaces*, Barret Lee published a piece in *Urban Affairs Quarterly* entitled "The Disappearance of Skid Row: Some Ecological Evidence(1980)." Though this piece defines the end of an era, it did not create a new paradigm the way Hopper and Baxter did.

whole. Calling into question psychologistic studies of skid row, and rooted in Chicago School geographic models, Hopper and Baxter identified the problems of the "homeless" with those of New Yorkers living in poverty<sup>13</sup>. This brought studies of nomadic urban populations into the broader literature on poverty that had emerged from the 1960's "war on poverty" (Harrington, 1962, 1965; Leacock, 1971; Lewis, 1968, 1970; Moynihan, 1969; Stack 1974; Valentine, 1968) and the 1970's/80's re-evaluations of 60's initiatives (Auletta 1982; Mullings, 1987; Susser, 1982).

Though there was always a flow in and out of skid rows and changes in their size, composition and social conditions depending on a variety of socioeconomic factors connected to the wider society, skid row literature was entirely defined by geography and oriented towards social work. (Bahr, 1970, 1973; Bendiner, 1961; Bogue, 1963;

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In 1991, 1,838,545 New Yorkers lived below the poverty line (Rosenberg, 1993). This represents an increase of almost 450,000 people over the same statistics for 1979. Of those nearly two million New York City residents who live in poverty, conservative estimates put the number of people who have spent at least one night of the year without housing at 100,000-200,000 (Susser, 1993).

Wiseman, 1970) With the arrival of the homeless crisis of the 1980's, it suddenly seemed as if the skid rows of America were emptying their populations and flooding ordinary business districts and residential neighborhoods with frightening apparitions of human suffering.

This new concern with the phenomenon of masses of urban nomads flooding into every neighborhood could no longer be fit into the geographic paradigm. Though there were some who clung to geographic models (Gruneberg & Eagle 1990), the recognition that skid row populations were a part of the U.S. social formation, and that the U.S. social formation was a part of skid row, forced this approach to confront mainstream debates about the poor. Described as the "new homelessness" in contrast to the "old homelessness" of skid row, the break between these two literatures is so complete that Greg Barak, in his 1991 book *Gimme Shelter*, and Ida Susser, in her 1996 *Annual Review of Anthropology* article entitled "The Construction of Poverty and Homelessness in US Cities", entirely excluded skid row literature from their bibliographies. The influential New York City Commission on the Homeless's

February 1992 report, entitled The Way Home (often known as the Cuomo Commission report after Andrew Cuomo, the chairman) cites only one skid row book in its comprehensive bibliography.

There were significant differences between the demographics and social context of skid row populations and the "new homeless." Among the changes were larger numbers of women, children and families that were without proper housing, higher per square foot costs of housing, and more peripatetic urban nomadic populations. Despite these differences, nearly every study suggested that both new and old homelessness was the product of similar combinations of personal and professional failures such as alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, depression, unemployment, economic bad luck, social isolation, etc (Barak, 1990; Blau, 1989; Hopper and Baxter, 1981; Hopper, Susser, Conover, 1986; Rossi, 1989; Susser and Gounis, 1990). Though there were some researchers who made passing mention of the continuities between the old and new homeless (Hopper, 1987, 1991), the overall focus of this literature was on a new crisis. This crisis involved a group at the

exotic bottom margins of "the poor."<sup>14</sup> In this way, urban nomads who had previously been seen as part of the public health literature became part of the 1960's/70's culture of the poor debates.<sup>15</sup>

These scholars developed a rich understanding of the new ways that people in poverty lived in the 1980's, and added a processual understanding of changes in their lives over the previous 20 years since the war on poverty. Despite adding process to the timeless world of culture of poverty debates, the homeless studies of the 1980's shared a set of liberal theoretical assumptions, methodologies,

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Only Christopher Jencks, writing after the fact in 1994, realized the continuity of the problems and the confusion of categories that had developed in the late 1980's and 1990's. Though his book is actually called *Homeless*, it is really a deconstruction of the homeless crisis and is about housing at the socio-economic bottom of society. With chapter subtitles like "Liberal Partisanship Run Amok" and "Numbers as Political Rhetoric", he is one of the only writers on homelessness who really questioned the existence of "the homeless" as an identifiable social group, and the homeless crisis as a product more of liberal ideology than a phenomenal reality.

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Among scholars on the subject of the culture of the poor, Michael B. Katz (1986, 1990) and Joan Vincent (1993) both charted a path away from this movement towards reifying "the poor." Sadly neither of them focused much research effort on the problems with the concept of "homeless."

and categories with the previous generation.

This led them away from concern with continuing problems with the social relations of production under capitalism, and back to the classic 1960's/70's culture of poverty discussion of whether or not this population was different or the same as "the same America" (Katz, 1989, 1993; Vincent, 1993).

These categories, most recently inherited from Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (quoted at the top of this chapter), and progressive era social critics (Addams, 1965; Steffens, 1904) before that, represent an orientalizing of a particularly embattled section of the American working class. This section of the American working class has traditionally been largely African descended and defined by its use of various forms of relief for the poor (Frazier, 1948; Gordon, 1994; Katz, 1989, 1993; Myrdal, 1964; Vincent, 1993; Wilson, 1980).<sup>16</sup>

With a wide variety of ritual public humiliations, such as the food stamp program, soup kitchen lines, and

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Chapter 13 of Frazier's *The Negro Family* actually mentions the experience of black women and men without homes.

welfare offices, this sector of the U.S. working class has been very visible to scholars, politicians, and neighbors. This has enabled studies to avoid the issue of either self-definition or objective standards outside the use of public assistance.

In order to understand the basis and power of these ill-defined, tautological functionalist categories which have underpinned nearly all debates about poverty in America since the 1960's, it is necessary to explore their origins in the foundations of social theory and the urban question in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century America. (Harris, 1968; Marcus, 1974; Stocking, 1974)

## **THE INTELLECTUAL AND HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF POVERTY STUDIES**

### **Urban Poverty in 19th Century Europe**

The urban question, which has brought social policy makers, criminologists, and academic social scientists into political policy debate for over a century, has its origins in 19th Century European debates over the effects of the industrial revolution (Durkheim, 1964; Engels, 1958; Marx, 1971; Weber, 1958, 1968, 1969). The rise of capitalism and the industrial revolution in 17th, 18th, and 19th century

Europe wiped away the feudal world with its rigid social order, social hierarchy, and locally based economies. Families that had been legally bonded and tied to farming the same lands for hundreds of years were allowed to leave or were evicted as large manorial feudal lands were enclosed by fences and privatized. The relative stability of feudalism, where lords used armies to collect rent, was replaced by capitalism, the dynamic new system of production in which people used money to make more money (Aston, 1987; Brenner 1978, 1993; Roemer, 1986).

With the development of the steam engine, machinofacture and the increased efficiency of a narrower division of labor, the economy often grew more in one person's lifetime than it had in the previous five hundred years. New inequalities and social problems developed as more money circulated. Industrial barons who controlled vast holdings and inestimable wealth arose almost overnight, while vagabonds, whose feudal bonds to place and noble had been broken, wandered the countryside and entered cities looking for food and shelter. The cities filled with poor, often homeless, people who had nothing but their labor to sell in this new capitalist economy. Workers in



the factories of Europe watched their labor make employers fabulously wealthy, while their own families lived in poverty (Hobsbawm, 1969; Kautsky, 1936; Mandel, 1972; Marx, 1948, 1954; Thompson, 1964). Thus began the urban question.

As it became clear that a fundamental divide had been crossed, many people questioned the new world. Among those who publically questioned this darker side of industrial progress and "modernism" in the 19th century, were those who lived in urban hells, generals whose conscripts were too short and vitamin D starved to serve in the army, and threatened older elites who found themselves accosted on the streets and boulevards by the urban poor who had been broken from the traditional rules of European social hierarchy.

Such 19th Century novelists as Dostoevsky (1950), Elizabeth Gaskell (1947), Charles Dickens (1982), George Gissing (1978) and Emile Zola (1955) emerged to give voice to fears and speculations about this new urban world. In *Crime and Punishment*, *Mary Barton*, and *Oliver Twist*, people were cast out of traditional social settings and made homeless by industrialization and the anomie of the city.

In this new Europe where industrial giants were

flexing their muscles, bourgeois revolutions were occurring across the continent and in the Americas, and the capitalist class seemed capable of accomplishing anything through the rational application of science, political economists and other fledgling social scientists presented a variety of "scientific" projects of social engineering (Bentham, 1967; Comte, 1975; Jones, 1980; Malthus, 1963; Marx & Engels, 1948; Mosca, 1939; Pareto, 1971; Smith, 1981; Spencer, 1967; Weber, 1968). These projects were based on both explanations for what was happening and programs for social intervention, thus making the urban question highly political. Among the competing programs and projects of social engineering, two principal paradigms developed: Social Darwinism and Marxism.

For Social Darwinists, who most directly represented the aspirations of the emergent capitalist class, "what ever was, was right." Human progress was their explanation for the tremendous inequalities and dislocations. Life was a continual war of every man against all in the survival of the fittest, with the winners on top and the losers disappearing from the human gene pool. In the end, this sorting of the wheat from the chaff would make "the race"

stronger. This progressive explanation for the urban problem yielded a variety of proposals based on the notion of Laissez-Faire economics, in which the opportunity structure in society was naturalized and seen as the given social environment, and the state was viewed as a neutral institution that should insure the fair play of competition. The Social Darwinist vision held that the poverty, dislocation, and misery of the cities was an unfortunate, but necessary, bi-product of the Apollonian struggle to improve human life and move forward.

Marxists, who most directly represented the emergent industrial proletariat and a strange congeries of threatened, devalued or excluded older elites, argued that this was not the progress that had been promised by the industrial revolution and the tremendous economic growth, but an impediment to progress. Based on the labor theory of value, elaborated by David Ricardo, (Marx, 1954, 1971; Ricardo, 1977) they claimed a direct relationship between the wealth of one person and the poverty of many. Rather than viewing industrial triumphs as the genius of the fittest, they viewed them as a form of organized theft of labor and social wealth based on the organization of the

class of wealth takers against the class of wealth makers. Far from an individual struggle of every man against all, they observed the careful ways in which the state and the economy were constructed to benefit the capitalist class, and posed society under capitalism as a ceaseless war of one organized class, the bourgeoisie, against another less organized class, the proletariat (Marx, 1954).

They claimed that the competition that Social Darwinists held to be the basis of evolution was retrogressive rather than progressive. They saw the reduplication of production and the overproduction of commodities in a competitive market as a waste of human labor that could otherwise be redirected to further development. In their world view, the state was neither natural nor a politically neutral guarantor of individual economic freedom. Instead they viewed the state as a historically determined, socially constructed institution, that insured the specific class based property relations peculiar to capitalism. Engels' trans-historical definition of the state was "special bodies of armed men for the suppression of one class by another" (Miliband, 1969; Poulantzas, 1969).

Marxists further argued that the tremendous expenditures made by the state on the forces of coercion was wasteful and counterproductive to the goal of human progress. They claimed that "men make history but not on terms of their own choosing" and therefore none of the poverty, misery, and dislocations were natural results of the law of the jungle, but were rather the direct results of human planning around an economy based on the accumulation of surplus value by a small capitalist class.

Deriving their project of social planning from a mixture of 18th Century humanism, 19<sup>th</sup> Century German idealism, Heraclitian dialectics, and the demands of a rising workers movement in Europe, The United States and Latin America, Marxism proposed a society based on cooperative forms of property ownership, in which there was no surplus taking class. There would be a workers' state that defended these forms of collective property until the capitalist class and its armies were finally vanquished, at which time the state would no longer be necessary and would "whither away."

While variants of Social Darwinism still have a strong place in discussions of the urban question, particularly

among those who blame the poor for their poverty (Auletta, 1982; Glazer, 1963; Moynihan, 1969) and those who subscribe to invidious racial, biological, and cultural comparisons (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Jensen, 1972; Kallikak, 1989; Pearson, 1991), the vast majority of scholars in virtually every discipline, making virtually every argument, subscribe to various forms of what, in the twentieth century United States came to be called liberalism.

### **Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Growth of Liberalism**

First identified in the United States as "progressivism", 20<sup>th</sup> Century liberalism proposed a "third way" between the socially corrosive and highly conflictual visions and political projects of proletarian Marxists and bourgeois Social Darwinists. It mixed a commitment to capitalist property forms, a capitalist state, and an economy based on competition, with many of the ideological commitments of Marxism (Croly, 1915, 1965; Dewey, 1970; Durkheim, 1953, 1986; Mosca, 1939; Parsons, 1956; Weber, 1968). Softening the Social Darwinist phrases "survival of the fittest" and "law of the jungle" to "reward excellence" and "meritocracy", liberals grafted the Marxist ideals of

social cooperation, work for the collective good, and the struggle against an ossified opportunity structure onto the competitive structure of capitalism.

Like Marxists, they believed that ceaseless social conflict was wasteful and endangered rather than spurred excellence, or what they called "merit." However, unlike Marxists, they naturalized bourgeois property forms and assumed that capitalism was not only inevitable, but universal in time and space (Addams, 1965; Baker, 1901; Pareto, 1971; Steffens, 1904, Tarbell 1913.

### **Liberalism and its Discontents: Imagining Deviance**

The invention and imagining of sociocultural categories like "the poor" and "the homeless" is inherent in the idea of progressive liberalism. This theory of a society not based on conflict of either the organized class variety proposed by Karl Marx and the First International, nor the individual law of the jungle proposed by Social Darwinists like Herbert Spenser, poses human social life as a corporate structure or community in which moderation, equilibrium, and "play nice" are the goals of society. In this society, those with power who do not play nice

(Harrington, 1962; Hopper & Baxter, 1981; Stack, 1974), those who do not stay within the particular conjunctural limits of social etiquette (Adler, 1994; Estroff, 1981; Foucault, 1973) and those who cannot, for whatever reason, meet the minimum standard for economic fitness (Moynihan, 1969; Suttles, 1968), are seen as deviant in their values, and when outside these limits for long enough, deviant in their culture.

Among the many 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century theorists who laid the intellectual foundations of liberal social science, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber are the most important. They described a social balance, consensus, or pendulum based on rationality and humanism that swings from equilibrium to disequilibrium and determines the health or morbidity of society. For Weber, the state was central to ensuring order and protecting the corporate liberal structure of society. If the mass elements in society were kept in proper order, the genius of the few could be exercised without being disrupted. This genius was the ability to construct meaning and social order tied to that meaning. Weber's work on the genius of Germany is particularly instructive because of the heavy emphasis he



places on the role of the German army in establishing peace among the lesser races of the continent, thereby insuring the development of excellence.

Unlike Weber, who saw the construction of meaning and political order as first principles upon which social structure was built, Durkheim primarily focused on the division of labor and its effect on social integration, social solidarity and social cooperation. Durkheim viewed society as a set of cultural imperatives that derived from the mode of subsistence and which needed to be adjusted and monitored as it grew, developed and fell out of tune. It is out of these theories of social harmony that the study of poverty, the urban question and the homeless is derived.

In the liberal view of society where the axis of history is not the contradiction between a class of wealth makers and wealth takers or the law of the jungle, but rather a set of social solidarities involving some unsaid contract, consensus, or rational order, the existence of truly abhorrent suffering suggests that there is something out of balance. This lack of balance may represent the short sighted vision of government leaders who have not provided enough padding for the less successful

(Harrington, 1962; Hopper and Baxter, 1981; Stack, 1974; DeHavenon, 1995). It may represent too much social solidarity on the part of some successful group, such as White Anglo Saxon Protestants who are seen as excluding minorities from higher education, or venal 3rd World Elites who dominate opportunity structures (Mills, 1956; Domhoff, 1972, 1974; Lipsett, 1966, 1967; Wallerstein, 1966). Or it may represent some flaw in the socialization of the poor (Auletta, 1982; Grunberg & Eagle, 1990; Hannerz, 1969; Moynihan, 1969; Suttles, 1968). This flaw, when raised to the level of culture, becomes a social cul de sac where the "normal" laws of society do not function.

### **Muckrakers and Bull Moose: The Prehistory of the Culture of Poverty**

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, America has had the twin categories of poor and pauper. A poor person was held to be poor through bad luck or mistaken choices. This social definition carried no stigma and is generally described as "the deserving poor." The poor person works, struggles, gets no where and suffers in silence, asking nothing and remaining morally pure. The pauper, on the other hand,

refers to the person who lives in poverty and is seen as somehow having brought the poverty upon him or herself, through bad values, poor personality traits, laziness, etc. By definition, paupers comprised the vast majority of the poor who became publically visible by accepting relief (Katz, 1990).

After the civil war, the social composition of the United States changed radically. With the arrival of millions of immigrants and the dramatic rise in industry and urbanization, traditional forms of managing poverty and inequality became obsolete. Though poverty was widespread throughout the history of the United States, the contradiction between the massive wealth that was being produced and the increasing numbers of people who wanted for security and the basics of survival, came to be seen as a national social crisis (Katz, 1990). Beginning with the great railway strike of 1877, the United States saw a steady growth in the labor movement and the importation of foreign ideologies like socialism, communism, and anarchism. Rising social tensions found their expression in massive strikes such as the Homestead Strike of 1892, the Pullman Strike of 1894, the movement for the eight hour day

and the ill fated Ludlow Colorado massacre (Brecher, 1972, Zinn, 1995). Books, magazine articles and newspaper columns were written by social reformers who came to be called progressives. They had titles like *Shame of The Cities* (1904), *Poverty and Progress* (1879), *The Jungle* (1906), and *How The Other Half Lives* (1890). It was in this time of turmoil and change that U.S. culture developed many of the basic understandings of poverty and inequality that would shape the 1960's/70's culture of poverty debate and then the 1980's homeless crisis, nearly a century later (Gordon, 1994).<sup>17</sup>

Most of the social policies that were developed to administrate the homeless crisis were a direct outgrowth of social legislation and political alliances from the 1930's New Deal period and the 1960's Great Society war on poverty. However, it was during the Progressive era that the state became the principal location for adjudicating rival class claims on the social wage (Katz, 1990; Lehrer, 1987; Marcus & Marcus, 1998; Wiebe, 1969).

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For a look at the pre-history of the homeless crisis, see Alice Solenberger (1911) for a progressive era study of "homeless" men and social work in pre-WWI Chicago.

There has been much debate about the degree to which progressivism represented a new class of forward thinking technocrats (Hays, 1957), older threatened elites (Hofstadter, 1955), a new middle class (Wiebe, 1968), socialists and social workers (Weinstein, 1968), a rising labor movement (Guttman, 1987) or radical journalists (Weinberg and Weinberg, 1961). Regardless of which of these interpretive frameworks has the most explanatory power, there was a widespread fear among all these groups that society was breaking apart, and an increasing faith that the state, through conscious planning, could bring order to the chaos.

Muckrakers and progressives were more direct in pointing the blame for social conflict and chaos on the capitalist class than post New Deal liberals have been. With sweeping legislation limiting the power of corporations to control the national economy and the life of a community, basic laws about workplace safety, the length of the workday, the age of the workforce, and minimum standards for housing, etc., the progressive era was an era of working class radicalism and legislative reforms that has yet to be equaled. Despite these

improvements in the lives of workers, the issue of poverty and the unemployed that drove the New Deal and The Great Society was never far from the surface.

Liberal reformers, such as Frances Kelley, Jane Addams, and Lincoln Steffens, used the image of the pauper as dangerous seed of social chaos to shame the affluent into supporting programs of relief and resocialization for "the poor" (Wiebe, 1969). Though most of these programs were still privately funded, local government generally worked with these reformers. Much of the national legislation of the progressive era concerned the relationship between those who were working and those they worked for. However, even left progressives like Robert Hunter, who wrote the book *Poverty* in 1904, strongly distinguished between those poor who were poor through viciculousness and sin and those who were poor through bad luck. It is in these fledgling progressive era attempts to mediate between categories of badly socialized "vicious" poor and the badly socialized "robber baron" "new rich", etc., unfeeling elite that the sweeping poverty programs and reified entitlement categories of the New Deal and The Great Society are born.

## **From Square Deal to New Deal: The Institutionalization of Poverty in Black and White**

Though self-identified progressives would reemerge onto the national political stage from time to time in the years between the first and second inter-imperialist wars,<sup>18</sup> World War One represented the end of the progressive era, as millions were drawn into the war effort and the U.S. government clamped down hard on internal dissent. Despite the excitement generated internationally by the Bolshevik and the October Revolution of 1917, the few voices of opposition left after the war were largely cowed by a fierce period of repression and reaction. The red summer of 1919, the defeat of fragile attempts to integrate the labor movement, the Palmer raids, and the growing world dominance of U.S. capital, combined to create a social climate of triumph in the 1920's for the U.S.

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The most spectacular re-emergence was the 1924 presidential election in which Progressive party candidate Robert La Follette took 4.8 million popular votes, and 13 electoral college votes. At roughly 17% of the popular vote, this is the third highest total, after Theodore Roosevelt's anti-Debs/ anti-Tariffs Bull Moose run of 1912 and Ross Perot's 19% (Perot failed to win a single electoral vote) in 1992.

capitalist class.

Though there was terrible rural poverty in the 1920's, particularly among African-Americans, and a continuing urban crisis, concern for "the poor" faded from public policy circles. Without threats and inputs from below, the social reformers and progressives, who had a generation earlier relied on the specter of communism and urban chaos to gain support for their programs, were in retreat.

It was during this period of reaction and retreat for social movements that the study of poverty became academicized. In Universities such as the University of Minnesota and the University of Chicago, studies of poverty, paupers, and urban problems flourished. It was during this period that the most static and rigid typologies developed. Devoid of any notion of social forces in conflict, the studies that came out of the Midwestern social science of poverty generally posited geography as destiny and saw physical distance as the crucial factor in keeping paupers from entering the mainstream (Park, 1925; Park, Burgess, MacKenzie, 1967; Shaw, 1929, 1938). The famous University of Chicago concentric urban geography model is only one among many geographic models that



appeared during this time. Much of the literature on tramps and other rural poor also based its social categories on physical isolation of varying degrees for urban centers of culture (Anderson, 1923; Minehan, 1934).

Despite the fact that the geographical paradigms were important throughout the 1930's, there was little focus on paupers and far more focus on unemployment. During the 1930's, the Roosevelt administration's New Deal attempts to save the country from labor uprisings and general strikes led to a variety of public programs such as the Federal Housing Act, the Social Security Act, the Works Progress Act, the National Labor Relations Board, and the National Recovery Act (Fraser & Gerstle 1989; Leuchtenberg, 1963; Tomlins, 1985). This concern with the demands of an explosive labor movement took most of the focus away from paupers and put it on unemployed workers, cutting the bottom out of geographically bounded studies of "the poor."

Though most of Roosevelt's programs floundered due to a mixture of lack of funds, opposition by Republicans, and Roosevelt's concern for a balanced federal budget, the rise of a New Deal bureaucracy to manage social inequality, smooth national labor relations and regulate every day life

for the majority of Americans, is one of the lasting political legacies of the New Deal. It is this public sector national social caste for whom the issue of homelessness resonated most strongly during the Reagan Revolution of the 1980's.

The New Deal is also the place where the origins of those who were to become the homeless can be found. Though not a racist personally (Weiss, 1983), Roosevelt intentionally excluded African-Americans from most of the benefits of the New Deal (Fraser & Gerstle, 1989; Katz, 1990; Weir, Orloff, and Skocpol, 1988). As the standard bearer for the Democratic Party, one of the central pillars of his electoral support came from the Southern wing of the party, known as "Dixiecrat." The Dixiecrats were the legacy of the 1870's defeat of Reconstruction, the return of the Southern plantocracy, and the rise of Jim Crow.

In creating the powerful Democratic Party electoral alliance that would dominate American politics for 50 years, Roosevelt practiced a political triage in which he addressed the concerns of the white working class and sacrificed blacks. Major working class problems such as housing, retirement income, minimum wage standards and the

right to strike and demand more were addressed in sectoral ways that excluded blacks, who were still barely present in trade unions, rarely received standardized wages, and were predominantly trapped in the confines of paternalistic post-civil war sharecropping arrangements.

With little to no representation of black workers in the Roosevelt capital/labor New Deal popular front, increased national representation for Dixiecrats who had seen decreasing power during the Republican dominated post-civil war period, and national labor legislation designed to favor white workers, the New Deal provided the legislative context for addressing African-American working class concerns in a language of exception and difference rather than national citizenship, social class, and equality. The New Deal bureaucracy would eventually become the caretakers of those who were not part of the world of permanent employment, trade union protection, weekly social security contributions, and public higher education. Black Americans, particularly those in the South, were over-represented in this group (Kirby, 1980; Sitkoff, 1978; Weiss, 1983; Wolters, 1970).

## **World War Two to War on Poverty**

The post World War Two period was one in which questions of poverty and inequality were less important to U.S. social science. The U.S. capitalist class was once again triumphant, having defeated its German, Italian and Japanese rivals. The tremendous devalorization of capital that had occurred during the war left the United States ruling class in a position to profit from redevelopment and economic growth.

Though there was widespread poverty in both urban and rural areas of the United States (Fraser & Gerstle, 1989; Harrington, 1963; Jackson, 1984; Katz, 1990) the immense economic growth, rising standards of living in virtually every sector, and brutal repression against social dissent inhibited the study of social problems such as poverty. Though African Americans saw few of the benefits of the post war boom and were organizing their own civil rights movements beginning as early as the middle of World War Two, much of U.S. social science was presenting organizational theories and sociological analyses that described a largely conflict free society.

In this somnolent intellectual environment,

anthropologists were able to take the lead in discussions of political economy in a way that they never had before. Oscar Lewis, anthropology's most important urban theorist, would develop the first holistic anthropological approach to urban poverty during this repressive period. It was in the 1950's that Lewis developed his culture of poverty theory.

Coming from an explicit polemic against 1920's/30's Chicago School social science, Lewis confronted the work of anthropology's most important Chicago school disciple, Robert Redfield. Lewis challenged his geographically determined study of a Mexican village named Tepoztlan. This village, which existed in the shadows of Mexico City and Cuernavaca, had been used a generation earlier by Redfield to adapt Chicago School urban sociology to the anthropological study of other cultures. In challenging physical isolation and distance as the independent variable, and fully incorporating the people of Tepotztlan into the Mexican social formation, Lewis laid the groundwork for a whole generation of anthropologists to find their tribes in the economic and social interstices of urban America.

### **Functionalism, Liberalism and The War On Poverty**

Much of the liberal urban poverty literature that inspired the 1960's/70's golden age of urban studies and sparks the debates on the "new homelessness", finds its origins in Michael Harrington's celebrated book The Other America: Poverty in the United States. This book, first published in 1963, ends with a chapter entitled "The Two Nations." In this chapter, Harrington lays out what will be the methodology for much of the subsequent literature on poverty. He says, "...the United States contains an underdeveloped nation, a culture of poverty...They are beyond history, beyond progress, sunk in a paralyzing, maiming routine." He goes on to say, "poverty in America forms a culture, a way of life and feeling, that makes a whole." In this passage, Harrington sets up the debate on poverty and the urban crisis for the next 30 years.<sup>19</sup>

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Though Oscar Lewis used the phrase "culture of poverty" two years before Harrington in his book *La Vida* of 1961, it was Harrington's book, not Lewis', that spurred the culture of poverty debate and influenced social policy. Neither Harrington nor Lewis "blame the victim" in the simplistic way that has been attributed to the idea of "culture of poverty." Though Lewis becomes the stalking horse for this critique (Leacock, 1971; Stack, 1974; Valentine, 1968) he

In describing the poor as an "other America" and an underdeveloped nation, he presents a liberal functionalist vision of the United States as integrating two distinct national units. In one of these the system functions, while the other is outside that system and, from a theoretical perspective, is a deviant exception. In Harrington's liberal world view, until the will to change has developed through positive educational projects like his own, this exception will continue. In the last sentence in the book he echoes progressive era notions of shame and morality when he states, "for until these facts shame us, until they stir us to action, the other America will continue to exist, a monstrous example of needless suffering in the most advanced society in the world."

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is very clear that poverty is not a product of viciousness and ignorance, but industrial capitalism. Rejecting progressive era notions of shame and guilt, Lewis' work does not fit neatly into the liberal vision of social equilibrium that created the concept of "homelessness." The means for solving the problem of poverty in Lewis' work is political struggle and revolution, as exemplified by his later work on Cuba. For Lewis, the problems of the culture of poverty are not a lack of understanding, but a structural problem. Harrington, however, draws heavily on both the ideas and the actual phrases and policies of liberal progressive era reformers, thus creating the social policies and templates for liberal urban poverty literature.

### **Two Nations, Two Assumptions**

While Harrington's vision of the way in which poverty is reproduced was somewhat more complex than that of later scholars such as Moynihan, Stack, and Kelso, embedded in this methodology is an implication of difference and separation of the poor from the rest of the United States. This functionalist assumption, that suffering is needless in the most advanced society in the world (rather than the view that might be held by Social Darwinists and Marxists, that the suffering exists because of the advancement), is coupled with another liberal assumption: the social consensus concept of shame.

The first of these assumptions is the one that most directly confuses attempts to understand the homeless crisis of the 1980's: that of social typologies. Harrington uses a functionalist typology in which society is divided into two groups, or as he calls it, two nations. The first nation is a cross class group in which the system functions with the relatively balanced "social contract." (Gordon, Edwards, Reich, 1984; Nash, 1989; Piven, 1971, 1997) The second nation, which he calls "the other America" is an



entirely working class group where nothing functions.

While Harrington would probably not be comfortable having the idea of poor nationalism attributed to him, by the very title of his book he assumes two different Americas without ever clearly defining or justifying his division between poor people and not-poor people. Are there objective criteria for establishing these groups? Do these people have a group consciousness? Do they have a social vision? Do they have a culture? Do they make history. If so, how? What are the historical inputs and outputs that can be observed, and finally, how do we define who is actually in this group?

Is it a definition based on self-identity, like "middle class", "Italian", "Jew", "Black", "Asian", "coal miner", "truck driver", "homosexual", "leather fetishist"? Is it a definition based on some kind of operationalizable objective category with a contested or ill defined consciousness, like "worker"? Is it a definition based on the fantasies of the definer? And what are the social implications of this now defined group?

Without answers to these questions the poor becomes an imagined group; reified and bounded by being "different

from you and me." For later scholars who did extensive field work among the urban poor, the difference and separation that Harrington defined, even within the city of residence of the social scientist, was obvious: it was those who took poor relief.<sup>20</sup> It remained to describe the differences and explain why they existed and persisted.

The second assumption, that shaming the not-poor into action should be the goal of the scholar, is part of the long tradition of progressive liberal theories that assume the possibility of social equilibrium, harmony, or some type of consensus. The precondition for this possibility is what Marxists have called highly developed forces of production, or, as Harrington terms it, "advanced society." With a social harmony model of life under capitalism and a level of advancement that provides for more than enough resources for everyone, Harrington must find some person or group of people to blame for having deviated from the social imperative of order. In his case it was the shameless. Though he never precisely defines who this group

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This definition of the group to be studied harks back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century distinction between hidden poor and visible pauper.

is, in his pluralist model of the state we may take him to mean politicians, the smug, the self-satisfied, the wealthy, and the greedy of all classes.

Whether it is the Under-housed themselves who are blamed (Gruneberg & Eagle, 1990), the urban poor (Auletta, 1982; Gruneberg & Eagle, 1990; Moynihan, 1970; Suttles, 1968), black people (Glazer, 1975; Murray, 1994; Moynihan & Glazer, 1963), faulty Oedipal development (Felix, N.D.) or some vague and ill defined force like de-industrialization or runaway corporate greed, someone must be blamed and then shamed back into the social fold. If those who are to blame for this problem are not shamed, then the reason for their intransigence is the failure to put enough light and exposure on their transgressions.

This "shame 'em back into the fold" approach that Harrington used in *The Other America* has often been credited with initiating the war on poverty and bringing the urban question back to the days of Steffens, Addams, Kelley, and Bourne. For a whole generation of scholars who were involved in the public policy wars, known as the culture of poverty debate, the relationship between Harrington's ability to shame a U.S. president back into

the fold, and the resulting swing of the social pendulum towards a more play nice society, is a golden age.

### **The Golden Age: One Liberal Theory, Two Partisan Practices**

Despite a rising rate of exploitation and a declining relative social wage (Brenner & Glick, 1991), the 1950's and 60's were a golden age of economic growth. The question of why there were still so many places in the United States that had not seen any of the benefits of the boom was the original question that Harrington and later poverty scholars raised. In this post-war prosperity, there seemed to be no question that the system was functioning. It was therefore easy for even a scholar as critical of U.S. capitalism as Michael Harrington to talk about those who were not living the dream as being an "other America."

After the wave of black riots that started in Rochester in 1963/64 and culminated in the highly destructive and bloody Detroit, Newark, Washington and Los Angeles riots of the late 1960's (Kerner Commission, 1968; Moynihan, 1970), the question of urban poverty amidst plenty became even more important. The fact that the black working class had not benefitted from the post war boom and

had unemployment rates far higher than Euro-Americans, became a subject of debate and the object of much policy.

Though the literature on the culture of the poor is based on liberal theories of social harmony, it has tended to divide into two hostile groups based on specific public policy commitments. These two groups represent two sides of the traditional progressive era policy of attempting to mediate between short sighted and irresponsible members of the underclass and the overclass. Instead of blaming both, as progressive era reformers had done, scholars debated which group was responsible. This is the political and intellectual underpinning of the culture of poverty debate.

The first of these groups, which has usually, but not always, been more closely associated with the Republican Party, is a group of scholars who have been most influenced by Weber and the study of social meaning. These scholars have been concerned with "values", "norms", and "culture" among "the poor" (Auletta, 1982; Hannerz, 1969; Moynihan, 1969, 1970; Suttles, 1968). This group often demonized the poor and portrayed their lives as mired in dysfunctional cultural rituals that are part and parcel of their poverty, and which must be broken before any solution will work.

Though often characterized by their opponents as "conservative", in classic liberal fashion their program is one where, once the patterns of misbehavior have been worked out among the deviant population, there is the possibility of functioning in the larger society. But [However, until that is done their animalistic behavior, short sightedness and failure to be shamed into the social consensus, represents their incomplete incorporation into the ever changing industrial society.

For Moynihan, Suttles, Auletta & Hannerz,<sup>21</sup> as well as others who have taken the classic liberal values oriented "culture of poverty" position, the issue of self perpetuating systems of poverty specific values, ideologies, adaptations, forms of social organization (or disorganization), and general life ways has been paramount.

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Hannerz, unlike Lewis and Moynihan, combines the classic Weberian concern with meaning with a Chicago School geographical determination. In *Soulside*, poverty among working class blacks is the fault of poor socialization (what he calls culture lag), segregation, and lack of understanding of the vitality of life in the ghetto. Hannerz reduces the poverty, misery, and racism that has been endemic to U.S. society for over 3 centuries to a failure of communication.

Viewing poverty as a way of life, more than an economic state, this group of social commentators and scholars has tended to focus their policy suggestions towards a variety of social programs that emphasize increased spending on social/educational attempts to change the "culture of the poor"; ie. social work, school uniforms, the teaching of morality.

The other group, which might be referred to as "populist-liberal" and which often claims a Marxian genealogy, draws its form of liberal methodology primarily from Durkheim. Rather than problematizing the values, attitudes and actions of the poor, this group of scholars generally takes the life of the poor as some kind of extension of the division of labor, and focuses on what came to be called "macrostructural determinants" (Stack, 1974).

These macrostructural determinants are some combination of the labor market and public policy for the poor. Writing in the tradition of Michael Harrington, these scholars were ultimately writing about the dysfunctional values of those in power, and were attempting to shame non-poor Americans into providing more money for actually

existing forms of poor relief.

Eschewing culture or meaning as an explanation for U.S. poverty, this populist-liberal tradition that focuses on "macrostructural determinants" has generally taken a behaviorist approach to ethnographic studies of those in poverty. Portraying the poor as basically good or ordinary people trapped in bad situations that are not of their own making, they have reduced the culture of the poor to an outgrowth of the division of labor. In this case, the blame and shame must be put on those who control the "macrostructures." In the writings of Carol Stack (1974), Kreninsky and Susser (1987), Hopper (1981), Sharff (1987), and Piven (1971) we see a portrait of a capitalist state that is essentially lacking in either negative or positive class content. Problems develop when policy gets hijacked by politicians who do not have the people's interests at heart. In recent years this has nearly exclusively taken the form of critiquing budget cutting Republicans (Barak, 1991; Gordon, 1990; Jones & Susser, 1993; Piven, 1997). Whether it is short sighted welfare laws (Susser and Kreninsky, 1987), disappearing factories (Conover, Susser & Valencia, 1986), new structures of social control based on



new systems of production (Gounis, 1995; Wilson, 1987), etc., there are people at the helm who have never really been properly socialized into their social responsibilities towards the poor. They must be shamed into putting more money into relief to bring the social pendulum back to a more balanced state.

Though this approach has the value that it does not blame the victim (Leacock, 1971; Stack, 1974), it continues the progressive era functionalist tradition of social science as imagining an impossible social harmony based on a false comparison between two groups that cannot be properly defined: poor and not poor. Instead of providing social services to resocialize vicious people at the bottom, it provides social science that muckrakes and shames the people at the top into contributing larger sums to a top heavy bureaucracy that administers money to make the poor a little less poor.

As I will show in the following ethnographic chapters about life at the socio-economic bottom of New York City, the categories that divide functional society from non-functional do not stand up to the light of experience or analysis. When put to the test of field work, they become

painfully awkward, hamper an analysis, and ultimately melt away.

For those who are studied in these field work categories that determine access to emergency relief such as "homeless", "working poor", "poor", and "underclass" these arbitrary divisions in the U.S. class of producers mean virtually nothing and lead to no social ideology or action in defense of their group rights. When forced to attach themselves to history experiencing/making categories, they and their working class kin networks continue to see themselves as "white", "black", "Asian", "Hispanic", "etc".

This leaves those without housing, the underemployed, and those without proper health care scrambling to try and figure out how to fit into a procrustian bed that has been created through isolating and reifying "the poor", "the working poor", "the homeless", etc. Like sleeping in Procrustus' bed, the categories of homeless, poor, working poor, pauper, etc, require a social performance that is difficult to learn and involves a form of social and cultural amputation. The following ethnographic chapters are the story of people caught by the choice between

amputation and a bed.

**CHAPTER III**  
**IN THE LAND OF THE UNDER-HOUSED**

"Everyone in this city is looking for a job  
an apartment and a lover. If they already  
have one of each, they are looking for a  
better one."

A Popular New York City Maxim in  
the 1980's

When one enters the land of the under-housed for the first time, it appears like a Dante's vision of hell. The level of misery, depression, unhappiness, danger, and misfortune overwhelms one. The sight of old and young alike huddling for warmth around a fire in a metal garbage can, or the sight of someone who could be a grandparent, parent, sibling or child pushing a shopping cart containing all his or her possessions, can generate intense feelings of anger, dismay and fatigue. They sleep on steam gratings on the sidewalk, build temporary shelters out of cardboard under

bridges or scaffolds at construction sites. They live in the twisting and hidden underground tunnels that provide services and transportation to the city above. They sleep in basements, hallways, on rooftops, under trailers, and in doorways throughout the city, pulling old, ratty and often lice or flea infested blankets around them, hoping that they can stay dry and not freeze to death. The more intrepid and mentally and physically sturdy pass nights in city shelters, sharing a room with as many as 700 other men sleeping on cots spaced two feet apart. While shelter dwellers are not likely to freeze to death, they must still guard themselves against attack in the night, and struggle with the epidemic of previously conquered diseases of the third world and Nineteenth Century New York, such as tuberculosis, pneumonia, and amoebic dysentery, that have ravaged New York City since the 1980's.

Some of the severely under-housed double, triple, or quadruple up in small unrepaired apartments. Having their lives disrupted by bitter disputes over space and resources, they must still guard against many of the problems that those who do not have a roof to sleep under must deal with. Often these situations bring them back into

destructive family situations that almost inevitably lead to violence, abuse, and another bout of sleeping on the streets.

They pass their days wandering the streets harassing passersby for money, for anything from food to drugs to subway tokens to travel to somewhere where they think there may be a day of work loading trucks, sweeping hallways, or being a security guard. They generally have as few options for places to go during the day as they do for places to sleep at night. Nearly all my informants were ready to tell anyone who would listen that it is a wasted life. It is a waste of human potential. It is plain difficult to keep on going.

Many do not. Suicide and disregard for personal safety are common. Death through the vagaries of poverty and life on the streets is also common. It was only 3 months into my field work that I lost my first field friend to homicide. A handsome and well built West Indian man in his late 20's, with a sharp intellect and tremendous ambition, he was beaten down by several people in the hallway of an apartment building and then taken outside and shot in an alleyway, after he tried to make some pocket money on a

drug deal.

At the very end of my fieldwork, after developing a pretty thick skin and an ability to look right in the face of misery, I found myself in shock when one morning I came to the shelter and was told that one of my informants had leaped off of a 6 story building. This informant, who had struggled with alcohol, drugs and life on the streets for many months, seemed to have finally gotten his life together. He had "gotten clean", and with the help of social workers who were intervening, convinced his wife to take him back into their home, with their child. As part of trying to get his life back together he had a complete physical which included an HIV test. He tested positive. However, he received little to no counseling at the testing site. He became despondent. A few days after the test he jumped off the roof of his apartment building, dying instantly and leaving his wife with no money to pay for the funeral. He was buried in the New York City Potter's field.

For the majority who do not choose suicide, and who are not found with their brains spattered on a park bench in Washington Heights, there is the everyday violence that wears them down and ruins their health. Many live in the

illegal shanty towns generally found underneath scaffolds at construction sites, along the river on abandoned strips of land, and beneath bridges where there are no businesses and no one is likely to walk. They are subject to frequent police harassment, the attacks of teenagers who have been known to set temporary shelters on fire with people in them, and hypothermia and frostbite caused by cold winters. One of my informants froze to death after police put out his illegal garbage can fire, and my informants had numerous stories of police pulling down their shanties in the middle of winter.<sup>22</sup>

Others find more permanent shelter in the interstices of permanent housing. They claim space in a basement corner, a laundry room, a rooftop landing or an elevator housing space. With this type of shelter comes the constant danger of discovery and the continuous need to pay off the superintendent of the building, or whoever it is that is allowing this disregard for the law and the property rights of the building owner. These payoffs can be as simple and

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City regulations forbid permanent structures for people sleeping in parks and on the streets. Temporary shelters are supposed to be collapsible.



harmless as building maintenance and janitorial work, and as terrifying and dangerous as risking arrest or execution by carrying the drugs for narcotics traffickers.

For those who live with family in the obscenely overcrowded apartments that are common to New York City's poorest, a finger lost to the knife of a brother-in-law, blood poisoning caused by a bottle used in a fight, memory problems or epilepsy brought on by blows to the head, and deep emotional scars brought on by a wide variety of abuse and ancient tensions, are all every day occurrences in this kind of field work. Little gets reported to the police because there is little that the police care to do, and little that could be done without creating more trouble for an already troubled family or group of acquaintances. The only responses that make any sense to most people are "payback or move on", as one informant told me about household violence. He continued saying, "you can get them back, of course, but lots of times it just gets worse. That's the thing about the shelter: sometimes its better to get beat up by strangers than by your own people. Strangers don't give a damn, they just want to take your stuff."

**"The Fort"**

Of all the sites in the land of the under-housed, a public shelter is the one that could most be a set for a movie about hell. My principle experiences with a public shelter were in the Fort Washington Men's shelter in Washington Heights, NY. This shelter was an improvised national guard armory. The lower floors provide offices and hallways in which the residents pass much of their lives during the day, and the massive drill floor, that was once used for guard exercises and drill, was adapted as a giant bedroom in which, at any given time, over 500 men sleep side by side on cots in one great room.

When one enters the front door, and leaves the sun and sky behind, it is almost like leaving the land of the living. Virtually no natural light enters this building, which was built as an urban fortress. The garish fluorescent light shines above folding rectangular tables where guards sit. They are underpaid, and for them long periods of boredom are alternated with short bursts of violent confrontation when fights endanger the order of the shelter. The guards seem to handle this situation by using whatever abilities they have to intimidate all who pass

through the door.

While everyone who enters must be searched for weapons and pass a metal detector, the number of weapons inside the building is not small. Nearly every resident, except some of the least self reliant mentally ill, has access to a shiv or an improvised weapon.

As you pass through the metal detector and climb the old heavily worn staircase, your senses are overwhelmed by the smell of industrial disinfectant masking an aroma that smells like a combination of human sweat, fermenting cabbage and machine oil. The smell is not unbearably disgusting, but it is unpleasant and occasionally nauseating. It is merely enough to put one on edge.

The first thing that one notices upon reaching the first floor and looking down the one block long hallway that stretches in both directions, is that the people who are milling about, sitting on the floor with their backs to the walls, muttering to themselves, running small hairdressing and barbering businesses or shouting at fellow residents, is that these are all men. Lost to the land of the living is the female sex. While there are many transvestites in various states of dress, sometimes

revealing fully grown breasts which are the product of medical hormonal alteration, there are no biological women in the hallways. If one stands for long enough in the same spot, one may see a woman worker pass a few times a day. Moving fast from one office to the other, and while exiting and entering the shelter, they are usually accompanied by a few co-workers or a male friend. In spite of these occasional female presences, the Fort Washington Men's shelter, like most of the public shelter facilities built in New York City during the 1980's, is a single sex environment.

There is only a men's bathroom on this floor. Women workers who do not have access to the guards' facilities use the special private bathroom in the shelter medical office. Men who are neither shelter residents nor members of the guard staff, such as public health researchers, will often prepare themselves as if they were going on a car ride, by using the bathroom at a restaurant before going back to work. While men also have access to the medical bathroom, when given a choice between "holding it in" and using the shelter bathroom, they will hold it in. The bathrooms seem to generate large amounts of fear in many of

the professional white collar staff that has business in the shelter. Inside the bathrooms are standard tile floors, big old fashioned porcelain urinals and toilet stalls without doors or toilet paper. The latter must be obtained in small pieces from a guard. The residents do not seem to do much hanging out in these bathrooms, there is a little bit of drug trading, quite insignificant in comparison to other parts of the shelter, and there seems to be virtually no sexual action occurring.

Either a left turn or a right turn will take one down the main hallway. Here men sell various services to each other, watch the old color television in a darkened room off the hall (which is mounted out of reach and to which no one but a guard has the remote control), nap against a wall, or just sit and stare. This hallway, which runs under the giant drill floor where the 600 or so beds are located, is also where the men cue up for meals. Every 20 feet or so an old iron radiator rattles if it is winter, and as one passes rats can be seen scurrying for cover under the radiators. A set of ropes mark off a line in front of the cafeteria. There is a perpetual shortage of food, and the rations of stale bologna sandwiches and mealy apples are

far too small for many of the immense prison weightlifters who often reside in the shelter. This means that the ropes wind up being purely ceremonial. Since this vast hallway is circular and runs all the way around the building, the shelter dweller who doesn't care to fight for his food, and the experienced worker or anthropologist, will make sure to avoid a route that takes them past the food line during a meal time period. This may often involve what amounts to a two or three block walk out of one's way. However, this may well be preferable to negotiating a corridor packed with unruly would be diners, and overseen by the weightlifters and bullies that hold physical dominance over whatever resources are to be had in the shelter.

At the end of the hallway is another set of stairs that have been worn down in the middle by national guardsmen over the years. These stairs lead up to the drill floor and the showers. This is the bedroom and bathroom of the facility. The showers are off to the left at the top of the stairs and the drill floor is to the right, taking up nearly all the space. The vast wooden floor is larger than a football field, and it is enclosed high above by a cavernous sloping, domed ceiling. This main room is like

something between an indoor sports arena and one of the orphans' workhouses in Oliver Twist. It is ringed by bleachers about 25 feet above the floor. Residents are not allowed to go up into the bleachers. This is where the director of the shelter has his office, keeping ceremonial distance from residents, workers, social workers, doctors and researchers. The only people who regularly travel up the stairs to the lookout above the drill floor are the much feared security staff that shadow the director wherever he goes in the shelter.

At one end of the drill floor is a giant steel shutter door that is raised electronically during the winter every morning "in order to air this smelly place out," as shelter workers put it. This is seen as a way of getting residents out of bed and making it too cold to comfortably hang out there during the day. The director of the shelter and a few of his closest cronies generally parked their cars at this end, by the steel gate. When the cars enter, beds will be displaced and pushed together to create the space for the cars to be parked and washed with hoses and sponges by shelter residents. If a city inspector is coming, the cars will generally not be present.

At the other end of the drill floor there are a couple of basketball hoops. During the day, the beds under these basketball hoops are pushed away and some of the residents will play a game of three on three or horse. Those whose beds are moved about in order to accommodate the basketball games are the men who are disoriented, weak and vulnerable enough to accept the stigma of sleeping in the beds reserved for men in the mental health program. Known as the crazy beds, their residents have very little ability to assert their right to not be displaced by a game of basketball.

The bathroom is much like the one downstairs except that there are showers, and in these showers there is much contested sexual conflict. This is one of the many places where a man, naked and very vulnerable, may be caught alone by another man who is stronger and more aggressive. While I did not witness any forced anal or oral sex during the times that I ventured into these shower rooms, the stories of people being raped in the showers are numerous and notorious. Many people only go in as groups of friends so they can protect each other. In addition, residents complain about men having consensual sex in the showers,



thus inconveniencing them and forcing them to witness events that they would prefer happened in the cover of darkness on a bed somewhere on the drill floor.

When one walks along the edge of the drill floor, or weaves through the tight spaces between cots, early in the morning, one is immediately drawn to the fact that virtually all the beds have their spindly iron legs stuck into tennis shoes, oxfords, boots, and all variety of footwear. For those who do not have a permanent home, have very little spending money, and may find themselves out on the street if they fall afoul of a shelter resident who decides that he wants to kill them, footwear is important. In a city like New York, with broken glass on many streets and cold winters where frostbite is a definite possibility, the very real possibility of having one's shoes stolen while sleeping is disastrous. In spite of the precaution of putting the legs of the bed into the shoes, and often tying the shoes to the frame of the bed, shoes are still stolen. For the men who can actually sleep deeply in such an environment, two thieves can lift the whole bed up and set it down six inches to either side, thus freeing the shoes for theft.

If one looks carefully one can see blood stains in places on the floor. These stains are usually the result of a nocturnal battle over money, some personal possession, an attempted rape, or possibly a fight over one of the transvestites who provide sex and some comfort to the more dominant men at night. Occasionally someone will settle a score by knifing someone in their sleep, but this is quite rare. The violence usually occurs in the context of a conflict over some scarce resource.

While many of the men who live in the shelter are well dressed and carefully groomed at all times, there are also many of the men who appear more stereotypically homeless. These men, who are unkempt, unwashed, dressed in ragged clothed and who are often found muttering to themselves, are among the most hated and disrespected of all the residents. In a bedroom that has 600 people, someone who does not keep himself or his space clean can be in for much humiliation and misery.

There is very little that anyone says about the shelters that is good. For the workers it is a dangerous, underpaid job with virtually nothing in the way of professional pride and few job satisfactions. For residents

it can be a nightmare of violence, disorder, conflict, and boredom, where people go for days, and occasionally weeks or months, without seeing the sun (Gruneberg and Eagle, 1990). But for those who can put up with the dangers and miseries, there is food, warmth during winter, a bed, medical care, and some kind of structure and the chance to see friends.

#### **Who are the Homeless Really?**

"I couldn't move back in with my sister, someone would kill someone. She don't have any room for me anyhow. I got a friend in The Bronx who will let me stay in his living room until I work something out, and there is always 'the fort' [Fort Washington Men's Public Shelter]."

Michael, long term shelter  
resident and "street person"

"No apartment, no job, no self-respect"

Henry, long term shelter resident,  
ex-professional musician and

"street person"

When people lose housing and find themselves with nowhere to sleep and no safe haven to call home, it can be among the most devastating experiences of their lives. Possibly life threatening, particularly during some of the harsh winters of the northern United States, loss of housing is only surpassed in its destructiveness and ferocity by violent death or lack of food and medicine. As one man, who had lost housing after he was laid off from work and had his rent raised by his landlord, put it, "I no longer had any control over my life. I just wanted to crawl into a hole and disappear. It was like, where is my self-esteem and self respect?" This man, who was in his late 20's and struggling to become an artist, was living near Tompkins Square Park. He was lucky and found friends who let him sleep on their living room floor for over a month until one of his friends finally found a co-worker with an extra-bedroom who would rent it cheaply. He obtained temporary work and rebuilt his life. But in spite of this, the experience represented a major trauma for him. As he put it, "I spent the entire time that I was at their house

avoiding them and trying to stay away. I couldn't face them, I couldn't face myself. It took forever for me to get my head straight again." In spite of having working class parents who owned a house just outside New York City, he felt that he "couldn't face life back there, they do not have much room and it would kill me to move back."

This man, who is white and college educated, has a history of depression and has lost housing several times and has had frequent moves from one unsatisfactory living situation to another. Although he does not conform to the image of "homeless" people, or the general contours of this study, which was largely focused on men who have lived in the city shelters at one time or another, there are many striking parallels between him and those "hard core" inner city urban poverty cases that get discussed in the policy journals.

His feelings about housing loss were nearly identical to those expressed by Black and Latino "inner city" street people, and those of people recently released from prison. It was not just the analogous feelings of this man, but also various concrete aspects of his life, that led me to see similitude and connection with these other groups.

As a man in his twenties with a long term history of temporary work, frequent changes in living situations due to one or more substandard conditions in his living arrangement that prevented "homefulness", and a refusal or inability to put himself at the mercy of family, his story is similar to the stories that I encountered during the 4 years I did field work, and the over 1000 interviews I carried out. In this similarity lay the basis for my thesis: while homelessness does exist, the homeless as a social category worthy of an anthropological inquiry do not in fact exist.

While most of the popular literature on the homeless has taken the approach that "homeless: we know 'em, when we see 'em" (or to paraphrase Bill Clinton's first campaign for president, "it's people without homes, stupid,") the more one learns about the lives of the homeless, the more difficult it becomes to even figure out when someone is without housing.

It was difficult to develop rigorous criteria for quantifying even the simple question of how many nights a person has spent homeless. For example, it was always a sore point among researchers as to whether or not a

homeless person should be considered to be homeless for the entire time they spend incarcerated after being arrested and put in jail. The same concern came up with regard to hospitalizations for sickness, injury, or mental decompensation.

It is very difficult to determine who is and is not homeless at any given moment, or as a long term state. Because of the complex living situations of almost all of the 106 people who entered the study over the course of almost three years, I and my fellow researchers found ourselves shaking our heads in wonder at the prospect of even establishing if a single night in the life of a single human being was spent homeless. With this problem of defining homelessness in mind, I will present six brief case studies of people who posed paradigmatic definitional problems.

#### **Kevin and his Sisters**

Kevin was an African-American male in his early thirties who had been diagnosed as schizophrenic in his early teens. When his mother died, he lost his caretaker and he was forced to move out of her apartment. He had

three sisters who lived together in a three bedroom projects apartment in Brooklyn. He did not get along with any of them because, as he put it, "they all got families living there and they's got boyfriends who say, 'Kevin we gonna beat you if you act crazy'. They the ones who always act crazy." When I met Kevin he was living in the shelter and talked every now and then about going down to South Carolina to live with an aunt. I was never sure how much truth there was to his claim that "she'd take me anytime, that's the way country folks is." However, he never made the move and he didn't seem to have any plans for moving.

While in the shelter, Kevin had his case taken up by some of the social workers at Community Support Services, the mental health unit. They found that he was entitled to \$541 per month in SSI payments, and he started receiving regular payments. It was now possible to find permanent housing for him. The social workers contacted his sisters and when they heard that he could pay his own way, they offered to let him move into their apartment. As relatively young mothers with 6 children living together in one apartment and no employment, their public assistance checks were insufficient. They knew that Kevin's modest SSI check



would help to support the family. With each sister living in a bedroom with her children and Kevin sleeping in the living room, the apartment was brutally cramped. Besides his money going to help his sisters' households, he was required to put in many long hours babysitting for the 2 year old and the 3 year old during the day. Between the child care duties, the violent conflict over space and sharing of resources that the sisters engaged in, and the occasional beatings from one or another boyfriend, particularly during times when Kevin's mental illness became manifest, he would sometimes return to the shelter in order to get a rest from his living situation. Sometimes he would spend a few days sleeping on the roof of his own building during the summer, because "things get pretty bad here when everybody is crazy." He listed his sisters' address as his residence, in spite of being a frequent shelter resident.

In the case of Kevin and his sisters, it is not clear who is homeless and who is not. One sister held the lease and two were subtenants. While Kevin was the only one of them who actually spent nights sleeping in public or at a city shelter, he was also paying the majority of rent on

the apartment. Since the sisters found the living situation to be highly unpleasant, it is likely that Kevin passed the most time in the apartment, except during times when he slept on the roof, in the streets, or at the beach which was only a short walk away. Clearly, no one in this family was fully homeful, and yet no one was technically homeless for most of the time.

#### **Raul and his Mother's Extra Bedroom**

Raul was a Puerto Rican male in his late 20's who had lived in the shelter on and off for at least two years. While he certainly never came to regard the shelter as home, he was very familiar with living there and as he put it, "I have spent nights at home with my crazy mother that are worse than sharing a room with 600 nasty, ugly, horny guys." His mother had a one bedroom apartment, less than half a mile from the Fort Washington Men's Shelter, where Raul kept his belongings.

His mother was a serious alcoholic with occasional drug problems. She had not been permanently employed in over 10 years and survived largely through public assistance, work in the informal sector and the local drug

economy. Raul was a very effeminate gay male and had a history of mental illness. He had never developed a family of his own and had no work history.

During his stay in the shelter Raul had been signed up for SSI and was receiving roughly \$500 per month from the government. This money was at various times very important to his mother. She did what little she could to try and make Raul feel at home in her house. However, between her alcoholism and drug addiction and Raul's mental illness, they rarely got along. His mother was a devout Christian and believed that his homosexuality was an affront to God, and she would continually pray for Raul to change. Raul simply could not stand to live at home. When his mother got drunk, she would become abusive, often hitting him and throwing things at him. He relied on his mother to provide him with food when he had spent all his SSI money and to allow him to use her address to receive his checks and to keep his possessions. His mother relied on Raul to give her money from his SSI. While there were nights when he slept on his mother's couch, this tended to be the exception, and occurred because he was sure that somebody in the shelter wanted to kill him or rape him in the shower, or because he

missed the curfew and couldn't get in without problems. As Raul put it, "the woman is a crazy drunk and I can't trust her."

His typical pattern was to take his meals at his mother's house, often to dress and bathe at his mother's house, and to sometimes sleep in her living room. However, as far as the official records go he was one of the truly long term homeless that were described by Gruneberg and Eagle (1990) as "Shelterized." For Raul that term had no meaning, and when asked if the shelter was his home he said, "no, its like an extra-bedroom at my mother's house."

For a social scientist who must count nights of homelessness, Raul's case is relatively easy: the nights at the shelter were homeless, the nights at his mother's were not homeless, and the nights where for one reason or another he had to switch domiciles in the middle of the night he was called homeless even if he spent only five minutes in the shelter. For an anthropologist attempting to study what the culture of the homeless is, Raul is a somewhat more difficult case. He is clearly a shelter resident, and yet, he has a permanent address where he

spends occasional nights, he eats all his meals outside the shelter, and he spends almost no time with the other shelter residents.

**Robert: Raul in Reverse**

Robert, a Barbadian male in his late 20's, was my first informant at the shelter. When I first met him, he had been living there for slightly over 9 months. The path he took to the shelter is one that is not unusual. He had been working in a moderately high paying job as a janitor in an office building. He was laid off during a budgetary shortfall and went through several much lower paying jobs, before he was finally evicted from his apartment for rent arrears. He moved to the shelter and rapidly became a leader of the "West Indian corner": a roughly 20 bed section of the 600 bed national guard drill floor that was demarcated by a wall decorated with postcards of the West Indies, a giant color poster of the Jamaican basketball player Patrick Ewing, and "beaver photos" of black women.

Robert always dressed beautifully when he went out into the streets, paying one of the guards to keep his steam iron for him in a safe locker. He was well groomed

and always concerned with having razor sharp creases in his clothes. As he put it, "If you're living in the shelter, you got to work extra hard to make sure no one knows your living here. Besides I always liked to dress well before I moved here." He was well respected and liked and had the authority to get two beds saved for him, whether he showed up to sleep or not. While in the shelter he was registered with several employment agencies (this is a very common pattern) and had frequent temporary work as a security guard. He would often pass on information about day labor to his buddies in the West Indian corner.

At one of these jobs he met a woman with whom he established a relationship. He never told her that he lived in the shelter, but gave her a phone number at the pay phone downstairs. After a couple of calls she figured it out, but they never talked about it. He kept his belongings at the shelter, where his friends guarded them for him. Some nights he slept at his girlfriend's place and some at the shelter. When I last saw him, he was beginning a second relationship, and spending only 2 nights a week at the shelter. He hoped that the security guard day labor would eventually turn into a permanent job and enable him to move

out of the shelter and in with one of his girlfriends. But he was not optimistic. As he put it, "I never get noticed by the white guys. They know I'm smart, but they like to hire really big black guys." At \$5-\$7.50 per hour there was little chance to really make a living on a part time basis, and Robert supplemented his income with occasional drug deals that he never really explained. He was not well connected there either, which he ascribed to the fact that you have to be Hispanic to make it in the drug business. On the night of May 2, 1991 he was shot to death 2 blocks from the shelter while involved in one of these little drug deals. He generally used the money from them to pay for dates and gifts for his girlfriends.

While Robert was clearly homeless, without a place to keep his belongings like Raul and Kevin had; without regular government checks (he was making far too much as a security guard), and without the big unraveling sofa that Kevin slept on most nights, Robert was generally listed as at the shelter, despite rarely sleeping there. In his obituary in the local Washington Heights community paper he was listed as "a homeless person."

**Gregory: Keeping the Options Open**

Gregory, a diagnosed hard core schizophrenic, and a very long term shelter resident, is perhaps the closest to the stereotype of a homeless person that I met. As a person with serious schizophrenia, his behavior was bizarre. Although generally clean, he dressed poorly and looked like the kind of person that is typically identified as homeless. After several years in the shelter system he finally found a steady job. He caught on as an assistant superintendent for at two buildings in the Bronx. In exchange for a couple of hours a day of cleaning and other heavy labor, he was given a bedroom in the super's basement apartment and a small weekly income. The extra work that Gregory did in these buildings enabled the super to conduct a small drug business out of the apartment. Although he had a place to call home, which he worked to pay for, he still had his friends in the shelter who kept a bed for him. In fact, he seemed to have friends all over the northern part of New York City who he could stay with. At least twice a week he stayed in the shelter with his friends, or on a floor down the block from the shelter. As he put it, "you never know when you need to go back to the shelter."



In attempting to decide whether or not Gregory is homeless, it is both easy and difficult. It is easy in that he looks exactly the way a homeless person should look. His clothing is tattered, his appearance is somewhat bizarre, his hair is unkempt and he has a wandering eye over which he has no muscular control. For anybody who sees him standing on a street corner or begging for money, he is clearly the social problem that was called "homeless." However, he had his own bedroom that he paid for by working. This bedroom, was far from adequate by any laws or moral housing standards. It had no windows, the walls did not go up to the ceilings, there were exposed pipes and wires, and he did not feel particularly safe there.

This feeling of lack of safety was driven home to me when I did an interview with him under the watchful eye of a young man who had brandished a machine gun at me when I entered. As Gregory put it during an interview outside his domicile, "the drugs those guys sell are worth a lot more than I am." His response to this insecurity upon which his housing was based was to always "play it safe" and spend a few nights a week away from the apartment. He wanted to keep his options open and discourage the super from getting

too sick of living with "a homeless person."

As far as counting the nights that he was homeless, they were the nights that he fell asleep on a subway, in a public park, at friends' houses or in the shelter. In terms of nights homeless, he had far more incidences of homelessness than Kevin and far less than Raul or Robert. He had an apartment where he kept his belongings, he paid rent on his space and spent most nights sleeping there. However, if there is a community of homelessness or a culture of homelessness, Gregory was clearly an initiate and core member.

#### **Lester: Rent is Torture**

Lester had none of the appearances of a homeless person. He was an educated Euro-American in his late 20's. While he did not dress nearly as nattily as Robert, he was to all appearances a respectable member of the middle class. With a four year college degree from a large state university, an articulate manner and an ability to talk to almost anyone about anything, Lester did not look like a walking social problem. And yet his case is very typical of the white, educated, and often permanently employed people

that I interviewed about housing. He lived in The Bronx in a large one bedroom apartment that he shared with a student at City College of New York, who lived in the living room, and the belongings of two other people who had lived there before and occasionally came into town for a few days. Before Lester moved to this apartment (where he was relatively happy and expected to stay for a long time), he had no less than 6 different living situations in a three year period. When he first returned to New York City from college, after studying writing, his brother-in law died and left his sister with 6 children. She went into a deep depression, and since he still had no family of his own and had always been close with her, he felt he had to help out. He moved upstate and lived with his sister, helping to take up the slack in the family business and babysit for the kids who were going through a very difficult time. This lasted for 2 years until his sister sold the business, which had been going under, and remarried. Lester moved back to New York City and moved in with his parents until he could get a job and an apartment. This was not easy. He had an almost three year hole in his resume that he could not account for. As time went on things got somewhat tense

at his parents' house. He had no real work history, except helping his sister, and was having trouble finding a job. While he had his own bedroom there, he felt there was not much space in the house, and his parents were also the primary caretakers for his somewhat senile grandmother. He found a part time job in the city, working as an office temp, but it became increasingly difficult for him to return every evening to sleep at his parents' house. As time went on they expected more and more help with his grandmother. As he put it, "between the job, my grandmother and the commuting, there was no way I could get ahead at anything." He had no time to write or to meet other writers in the city.

He started working more hours at his job and he saved his money to move into his own place in the city. He found a share in one of the outer boroughs and moved into a three bedroom apartment with two other guys, one of whom he knew from work. He went out and celebrated his "freedom" with his friends. But the honeymoon did not last long. The living situation started to become difficult as one of the roommates became unemployed and depressed and started spending all the time around the house. As Lester put it,

"the guy just never left. It was like he took up the whole living room, all the time. With all that time on his hands you would think that he could straighten the place up a bit, but no, this guy just sat around in sweat clothes all day long. I couldn't take it."

As the roommate's depression became deeper, the guy started calling sex lines on the phone. He eventually ran up a nearly \$2000 phone bill. The phone company refused to deliver phone service to this house until it was paid. Lester, who was always looking for freelance work, had to hire an answering service with its own line. Besides having to pay for pay phones and the service, it created tremendous inconveniences. As the living situation deteriorated the three roommates became increasingly resentful of each other and inconsiderate. Lester was eventually forced to move out. He found a single room occupancy in downtown Manhattan, for which he paid \$450 per month. This was a huge amount of money for him, but he had always dreamed of living in Manhattan and this put him closer to the world he wanted to inhabit. He continued to work part time as a waiter and found another part time job as a receptionist in an office. It wasn't easy, but he was

getting by and writing more, and occasionally submitting to publishers, but with no success. He stayed at his SRO for a year, until the new lease raised his rent \$100 per month. There was no way that he could pay \$550 on his meager salary and he moved out. He moved his belongings into his parents' garage and slept on a friend's sofa. He started to become depressed and lost one of his jobs. The people that he was staying with had a friend who was moving out of the apartment that she had shared with her lover and for which she was still responsible for the lease. She offered to pay half of her share of the rent if Lester paid the other half. This was to last for three months until the lease was up. Lester agreed and moved in. He had a large and comfortable alcove in the living room, but kept most of his belongings at his parents' house. While he lasted the three months, he became increasingly despondent as the man who he shared with gave him virtually no rights over the communal space and was extremely messy. He found frequent refuge at an ex-girlfriend's house which was empty three nights a week while she was away at her new boyfriend's place. When this period was up, Lester still had not found a decent paying job or an affordable place where he could do his

art. He decided to move into the pantry in the apartment of some friends who had both been laid off from their jobs and needed help with the rent. One had been a government worker and the other was a teacher. He cleaned out the pantry and found that he could easily fit a small bed and a dresser into it. There wasn't much light in the six by eight foot space, but at least it had a door and he was with friends.

As time went on, it became clear to him that being with friends was not such a good thing. They were happy to share their space with him, but they expected him to socialize with them. He felt so worthless and angry at himself for the situation that he was in that he could not face them. They became resentful and angry at him for avoiding them, and he was frequently three weeks late with the rent. This led him to spend frequent nights on other friends' floors and occasional weekend trips to his parents' house. He finally heard about an apartment in the Bronx and moved there. This is where he was when I last was in contact with him. It seemed to be a relatively comfortable situation, although the tenant in the livingroom went away frequently and rented his space out to friends and associates, many of whom make Lester somewhat

uncomfortable. Since it was a rent stabilized lease, with a rent that was well below market rates, Lester's dream was to someday have the lease to himself and pay the entire \$450 per month.

While Lester, unlike Robert, Raul, Gregory and Kevin, had never spent a night in a city shelter (which he regards as a place where black lower class people stay, not unsuccessful middle class people like himself), and he only once actually slept in a train station, his situation has as many similarities to their's as differences. It is difficult not to see Lester's experiences as being commensurate with these other men. To a certain degree Lester's experiences are slightly more extreme but not atypical of what many Euro-Americans in their 20's face with regard to housing in New York City. Often having no recourse to family domiciles and earning salaries that are either inadequate to pay for rent, or at least inadequate to secure housing that they can be comfortable with, they move from living situation to living situation, staying as long as they can. How long they stay very often depends on how much time they can spend away from the apartment, how long it takes before the many people who are sharing "get



fed up with each other", or when the landlord raises the rent. I have seen this phenomenon among informants who are both steadily employed and among those who work as temps and are generally underemployed.

**Jaime: Number One on the Block**

A final story that ties together some of the themes discussed is that of Jaime, a homeless man who lived under a pile of cardboard in the community garden next to an apartment building in the heart of Loisaída.<sup>1</sup> Jaime was ravaged by alcohol to the point of incoherence. Although he spent most of the winter sleeping in the garden and sitting on the stoop of the building, bothering everyone who passed by, on very cold days he would sleep on the top floor landing of the stairs inside the building. Sometimes he would vomit or defecate on the stairs when he was particularly drunk. Although the tenants of this 21 unit tenement did not like the situation, Jaime was a childhood friend of the superintendent. The latter tolerated and sometimes helped Jaime, even though he had no respect for him and he constantly insulted him.

The general feeling among the tenants, who were

yuppies, working class Whites, Puerto Ricans, African-Americans, and a few students and Bohemians, was that there was not much to be done and that the least they could do for Jaime was to put up with his occasional drunken accidents. Everyone resented the way he bothered people, leered at women who lived in the building, and always insisted that "Jaime is number one on the block". However, he was always friendly, totally harmless, and ever-present on the stoop. He was a kind of building doorman, and people felt safe coming home and fumbling for their keys when Jaime was out on the stoop babbling at them. No one claimed to want him there, and yet if he wasn't there, many people would worry about him and no one would feel as safe entering the building at night.

Jaime had lived for 25 years in a building that had stood where the community garden now is, ever since he and his mother moved there from Puerto Rico. When it burned down under suspicious circumstances in the 1970's, he had moved into another building on the block, but was evicted in the early 80's. After this he moved back to his old place, which was just an empty lot. He simply did not want to leave his block. He was living on welfare and, being

illiterate, got his forms filled out by an actress who lived in the building next door with her carpenter husband.

When spring came, a block committee planted a community garden and built a house in it for Jaime. He called the garden his "hacienda" and the volunteers who built the shack his "employees". He had keys to the cyclone fence that surrounds the garden, and kept many cats to protect him from rats attacking him in his sleep.

In many ways Jaime was the classic "homeless person." Drunk, disgusting, dependent, and unkempt, Jaime lived in a house with no heat, no running water, no electricity, and no means for cooking. And yet he would always assert, "I am not homeless. A homeless person is someone who has no home. I have been living on this block all my life. I don't pay \$1000 to live with three people in a little room like most of the locos on this block."<sup>23</sup>

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Jaime died of tuberculosis and complications in the winter of 1996. I had not been doing field work or living there in years, but I was attempting to publish a paper in a journal and I needed more data. I went to try and find Jaime and found out about his death in the autumn of 1997.

## Chapter IV

### SUBSISTENCE, VALUES, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

"We cannot become a great democracy by giving ourselves up as individuals to selfishness, physical comfort, and cheap amusements. The very foundation of the American dream of a better and richer life for all is that all, in varying degrees, shall be capable of wanting to share in it. It can never be wrought into a reality by cheap people or by 'keeping up with the Joneses'."

James Truslow Adams (1931)<sup>24</sup>

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In his book, *The Epic of America*, is the first reference to the American Dream (Oxford English Dictionary, 1992 and Nevins, 1968). I have confirmed this through several keyword searches in databases. According to Nevins, Adams wanted to call the book "The American Dream", but his publisher refused, arguing that nobody would pay money for a book about a dream. This suggests the degree to which "the American Dream" was not part of the popular imagination. Chinoy, among others, has tied the notion of the American Dream back to Horatio Alger. This represents a

"Shelterization can be described as a process of acculturation endemic to shelter living... The residents show a decreasing interest in leaving the shelter and in engaging social work staff... Many shelters are physically similar to the early life surroundings of homeless persons who have emerged from ghetto dwellings... We suggest a strategy that may ameliorate the process of shelterization: it includes the establishment of positive social networks and the promotion of affiliations between the homeless and social service and mental health providers."

Jeffrey Grunberg & Paula Eagle (1990)

### **Poverty and Values: Imagining a Community**

Much has been written both in academic and non-

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presentism that probably obscures the intellectual history of the American Dream more than it illuminates it. The tales of Horatio Alger invoke many of the stereotypical notions of U.S. individualism, stories of rags to riches, and chosen people, that can be found in earlier Calvinist texts and a variety of colonial and post colonial American sources, but they never refer to the American Dream. They are concerned far more with reality than dreams.

academic sources over the years about the values and ideology of "poor people" in the United States (Lewis, 1970; Hannerz, 1969; Stack, 1974; Moynihan, 1969). Poor people are seen as carrying poverty specific ideology, disaffiliated values, and a variety of deviant poverty specific behaviors that issue from those values. The fact that Oscar Lewis and Michael Harrington could speak of a culture of poverty, and that it could touch off a 30 year debate on what is the culture of the poor and how it does or does not reinforce poverty, suggests the prevalence of the notion of a system of "poor values" and culture. With every new generation contributing a catchy descriptive phrase like "underclass", "subaltern", or "inner city" to the urban question, the problem of black poverty and its values and culture has been at the center of academic discourse on the urban crisis.

For those who have studied the homeless crisis of the 1980's, virtually anything that was said about the poor in the 1960's and 1970's goes double. A population that cannot even hang on to the basics of what has been established as the uneasy equilibrium of the poverty specific life, the homeless are an archetypical poverty bound population.

Poorer, more deeply embedded in the dysfunctionality of the poverty specific behavior, and more shockingly unable to sustain a decent life, the homeless are the apotheosis of what anthropologist Geraldine Casey has referred to as "the cootie factor" (in a public speech of November 1991): they are so repulsive in the way they live that they must be different.

A look at the quotation that begins this chapter should suggest some of the ways in which homelessnessology is the harvest of post-Harrington poverty studies. Because it is so direct and rhetorical, Gruneberg and Eagle's celebrated 1990 article on "Shelterization" provides a particularly clear vision of the problems with the underlying approach that has guided most of the work on homelessness in the 1980's. Having imagined a group known as the homeless, they create a personality disorder that uses a description of lacking housing to explain not being housed.

With hundreds of people sharing this personality disorder, they can declare the birth of a culture: the culture of the shelter. Like most cultures, it must have a national territory and set of boundaries. That national

territory, according to Gruneberg and Eagle, is "the ghetto", where the values are essentially similar to those in the shelter. All national territories must have a capital, where the most culturally initiated live, a Stewardian or Lattimorian core. The shelter is the core and those who are shelterized are the most intense and initiate: high priests of black poverty.

The problem for the liberal committed to "increasing the peace" or strengthening social solidarities becomes how to liquidate this culture and bring these people into "the mainstream." While there are a variety of versions of the shelterization hypothesis, they all share the same mistaken methodology of the shelterization approach that ably describes the bad behavior of the poor, but inevitably assumes exactly what needs to be proven: that social work prescriptions for rehabilitation of the poor are in line with "mainstream values" and that the everyday behavior of the poor is deviant and unique to the poor.

What is never questioned is whether or not the "disaffiliation", "criminal" and objectionable behavior, is really any different from the "mainstream" socially prescribed values of American culture. It will be my



contention in this chapter that the ability to adapt to the shelter and the inability to adapt to life within the structures of the social policies for poverty amelioration that has been observed by so many researchers, is actually a sign of full participation in the values and culture of mainstream America.

It is true that individual psychological problems may, as so many researchers have suggested, contribute to the possibility of a specific individual winding up in poverty, by in effect reducing that person's chances in the American dream lottery. However, in 1991, 1,838,545 New Yorkers lived below the poverty line<sup>2</sup> (Community Service Society, 1993), representing an increase of almost 450,000 people over the same statistics for 1979. Of those nearly two million New York City residents who live in poverty, conservative estimates put the number of people who have spent at least one night of the year without housing at 100,000-200,000 (Susser, 1993), suggesting that socio-political changes were dramatically altering the economic environment in New York City.

Though there have been researchers, writers, and journalists who have argued that there is nothing special

about the values of the poor, that "they are just like you and me, only poorer" (Susser, 1980; Leacock, 1971) and several prominent researchers of homelessness who have made the same argument (Hopper, 1990<sup>25</sup>; Rossi, 1989; Barak, 1991), this research on the urban poor has for the most part not attempted to actually explain what are those values that the poor share with everybody else.

Furthermore, it has in no way involved a real critique of the liberal assumptions of progressive era social reform that are still with us in the poverty industry. Instead, this literature has generally focused on the dysfunctional values of elites such as capitalists, politicians and policy makers, who are hard hearted or greedy in the face of so much suffering. Essentially the flip side of the

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With regard to under-housed people as a social phenomenon, in the 1990 wildly speculative discussion between Grunberg and Eagle on one side and Kim Hopper on the other side, over whether low self esteem creates "homelessness" or whether "homelessness" creates low self esteem, my studies of under-housed men and their life histories, indicate that Kim Hopper's explanation is the correct one. He claimed that "homelessness" was socially prior and called for "rebuilding decrepit housing and reviving a desiccated job market". He then curiously predicted that shelters will only disappear if there is another war.

dysfunctionality of the "underclass" argument, this approach takes the populist position that the problem rests in the dysfunctionality of the "overclass."

### **American Individualism and the American Dream**

Though there is a history of working class identified American culture (Applebaum, 1972; Brecher, 1974; Guttman, 1969; Susser, 1982), most scholars and commentators agree that it is less developed than in Europe, where there are highly developed national trade union movements and parties of the working class. The fact that none of these historical developments have occurred in the United States, and that the United States working class has not received the benefits of such forms of class specific organization, would seem to support the observation that competitive capitalist ideologies, political cultures, and socio-economic visions carry much greater weight in the United States than they do in Europe (Davis, 1986; Miliband, 1989; Piven, 1971, 1992; Thompson, 1964).

The peculiarly U.S. national culture that both "homeless" and "homeful", "wealthy" and "poor", "blue collar" and "white collar" share is one in which the values

of social and economic individualism are far stronger than one typically finds in the other advanced industrial countries. This social and economic individualism has been observed as one of the traits of U.S. culture since the colonial period (St. Jean de Crevecoeur, 1925) and later in the 19th Century (de Tocqueville, 1980).

Though the first usage of the phrase "American Dream" comes from James Truslow Adams' 1932 history of the United States, *The Epic of America*, in which he talked about a dream of plenty for the collectivity, the term "American Dream" developed to mean something entirely different after World War Two (Nevins, 1968). After World War Two, the American dream came to be promoted by "boosters" as an heroic individualism in business and commerce to be aspired to, and critiqued by social critics as a cheap, tawdry, superficial, selfishness that would lead to moral decline and social anomie (Adams, 1932; Bollier, 1996; Chinoy, 1955; Geisst, 1990). In its most recent usage, during the Reagan/Bush period of the 1980's, "the American Dream" has come to be used in a nostalgic sense that often inadvertently returns to the original idea that Adams presented when he coined the phrase. Authors have set up

the American Dream as a set of lost opportunities and values that have disappeared due to the rampant individualism and corporate greed that were publically celebrated in the 1980's. This latest discourse in the liberal tradition of normative social shaming (Browne, 1996), has been used by a variety of social critics to discuss the problems of increasing inequality in the United States (H.U.D., 1990; Palley, 1998; Wright, 1996). Finally, there has been a Marxian tradition of critiquing the American Dream that has seen it as a legitimating ideology for capitalist accumulation. In this vision it is a consciously promoted ideology designed to inhibit working class consciousness and keep the U.S. working class socially atomized (Davis, 1986).

Described in a multitude of different ways, by many different authors, what virtually all versions of the American Dream share, either consciously or unconsciously, is an heroic economic individualism in which society does not exist as a holistic or organically constituted entity, but only as a collection of disparate and atomized individuals. Instead, except during time of war, when the whole social constellation is threatened, there are only

individuals who are engaged in a ceaseless struggle to "make it." To make it generally suggests that one has done better than one's neighbors; thus proving a social Darwinian fitness and having access to "the good things in life", usually seen in terms of a house, a family, and some kind of a business in which a neighbor works for the person who "made it" rather than the other way around. Often thought of in terms of the phrase "keeping up with the Joneses", (Adams, 1931) those who dream the American dream are ideally "self made", independent of family and social connections, very hard working and steadily improving their lot.

Not interested in politics, particularly workers' politics or issues like collective social rights, the ideology of the American dream is one in which the solution to virtually every problem (except for the violation of social norms, which involves use of police or military), is a private one that involves the exercise of will by one person, one family, or a group constituted in terms of such familiar relationships (e.g. ethnic groups).

What the American dream represents is a latter day social Darwinism which is expressed in the form of a

capitalist ethic for working class people. Though most people do not "make it" and nearly 50 million people in the United States live in permanent underemployment near the poverty line, the American dream is not a myth. Among the advanced industrial nations, it is more likely that a poor or working class person starting with very little can through some combination of hard work, shrewdness, and good luck, "make it" and become wealthy. Though the vast majority of businesses fail and few workers achieve the huge salaries that are paid out at the top of the employment hierarchy, there are some people who do get ahead and others who are trampled under foot. This possibility of tremendous success or huge failure is much more common in the U.S., where the "safety net" hangs much lower to the ground and the tax system is not designed to even things out.

This use of a portion of the social wage as a lottery, rather than to support collective working class use values, such as keeping the price of housing, healthcare, and education affordable for all, is one of the basic institutions of U.S. culture. For those who do not like gambling, those who are starting with a particularly bad

hand, or those who just do not know the rules of the game, the politico-economic choice to invest a large percentage of the social wage into this form of organized gambling can make their time on this planet very sad.

Despite the sadness of the millions who wind up on the bottom end of the American Dream, this individualist capitalist ideology continues to be the dominant political vision for virtually every population in U.S. culture. This includes both the "other" and the "same" America (Davis, 1986; Chinoy, 1955; Moody, 1988).

As a social class, the U.S. proletariat continues to speak with a pro-capitalist voice, aiding in the making of history by actors who benefit from the profit portion of the total social product. For the under-housed, at the bottom of the U.S. proletariat, the power of pro-capitalist, individualist ideology is particularly striking, due to the incredible distance between their entrepreneurial dreams and competitive desire to outdo the Joneses, and their desperate poverty and lack of financial resources necessary for entrepreneurial endeavors (Davis, 1986; Moody, 1988).

In a world in which society does not exist but there



are only competing individuals, and with the absence of power for collective politico-cultural visions, the vast majority of the society who have not made it tend to become isolated and disaffiliated from politics. Steeped in the same heroic individualism of those who "make it" and believe themselves a fit select chosen few, those who don't make it are often just as convinced that their failures are because of some vague inner quality. By viewing their poverty as simply a function of some individual weakness, bad choice, wrong turn, or lack of consistency, there is no possibility for accepting a public explanation that accounts for all the millions of people who live in poverty. As a result, within this world view poverty does not really exist as a social phenomenon, but the poor do exist, defined by their shared mistaken values and behaviors.

Militating against collective action, the individualist ideology is a formula for trying to correct the individual's inability to fit the rules of the game, and an impediment to large numbers of people who all fit the same social profile calling into question the rules of the game. Simply stated, an individual who blames himself

is likely to either withdraw from public life (if there is one) without a fight, believing he deserves less or trying to resolve the problem through some individual solution such as self help programs, trying harder to please a boss, or trying harder to squeeze something out of his neighbor through small business or crime.

For the poorest sectors of the New York City working class, both housed and under-housed, there was no poverty or homeless specific ideology. If there were, one would expect that it would be an ideology and set of values that recognized a shared collective predicament and counterpoised a shared alternative reality, as Carol Stack seemed to have found in *All Our Kin*. This was not the case. For both those without housing and the relatives, friends, social workers, and poverty researchers who they were connected to, there was a seamless set of individualist American values, ideologies, and behaviors, that easily fit them all under the heading of "prisoners of the American dream" (Davis, 1986), or maybe one could say, victims of the American nightmare.

#### **A Dream Blocked**

When Langston Hughes wrote his poem "A Dream Deferred", he was writing about the aspirations and dreams of black people in general. Inscribed in the title of the poem is a message of hope and a belief that the dream of liberation is deferred, but will happen eventually. Though it is an angry and sad poem, it is also a hopeful one. Though many of my informants from the Fort Washington Men's Shelter and the area around Tompkins Square Park continue to struggle for their American dreams, their struggles are individual ones. They continue to hope despite the fact that they cannot even afford a ticket in the social lottery of the American Dream.

Unlike the black American population that Langston Hughes was writing about, my informants had no collective history, no collective identity, no set of cultural values, no collective expectations, no unique and salient experiences nor objective relationships that give them the self-consciousness necessity for political action. They are a group of individuals who have lost the social lottery so profoundly that their only use to society is as a political battle standard, an example of "what could happen to you".

Many of the most beaten down men - those who most fit

the "homeless" style - passed their days in the mental health unit of the shelter and have been assigned such diagnoses as schizo-affective disorder, somatoform disorders, paranoid schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder. However, even when these men discussed their dreams, aspirations, and goals they express the "normal and ordinary" desires that the rest of us generally want. Even when they are conscious of their mental illness, and quite capable of identifying it by its scientific name, they are not immune to the same ambitions of a stable family life, a house of their own, and a job that brings them respect and material plenty. Though these are ambitions that virtually every human being wants, for these men, the paths that they can take to "repairing their lives" are extremely difficult, unsatisfying, and often dangerous. Caught between the informal sector and the social work establishment, they are forced to continually reshape their dreams through the mediation of social workers, government agencies, local police, drug traffickers, the prison system and various private charities that deal with the very poor and mentally ill.

It is true, as Gruneberg and Eagle have asserted, that

there are some shelter residents who become passive and give up on trying to get their lives back on track. One of my informants - an older black man who had been a cook for many years - explained his view on it: "every time I try to get my ass out of here, somebody knocks me back down. The way I figure it is I got two ways out of here. In a box or a dollar and a dream [the advertising slogan for Lotto, the New York State Lottery Commission's numbers game]." At which point he showed me a stack of lottery tickets and started in on a laborious explanation of how he picks the numbers and how he decides when to play. While there are far less responsive people who have retreated into what could be described as a private world, sometimes catatonic, for the most part these severely mentally ill people are the exception rather than the rule. For them there is no issue of homeless consciousness, homeless culture, culture of poverty, or even shelterization (Gruneberg & Eagle, 1990). The crucial issue is what kind of medical care they will get. The fact that they are in a shelter is proof that they are not getting the kind of medical care they need.

The concept of "shelterization" - passive adaptation to the deviant and destructive values within the shelter -

assumes that the structures within the system for rehabilitating "the homeless" are a healthy "mainstream" norm and that life on the streets and in the shelter is deviant. This assumes exactly what needs to be proven: that the chaotic economic individualism within the shelter is different from the economic and social lifeways of American culture in general. Virtually every deviant economic activity described as part of shelterization, from drug dealing to moneylending, closely mirrors ways of getting ahead outside the shelter.

For most shelter residents, the variety of social programs and hurdles designed to resocialize them and cure them of their shelterization actually deracinated them from "the mainstream" far more than sleeping in the shelter. Despite being the pre-requisite for achieving one of their greatest dreams - real housing - they continually fought this deracination.

My observations of shelter life suggest that it is far more similar to the patterns of "mainstream" U.S. culture than the variety of programs and steps that have been set up to rehabilitate "the homeless." No matter how active and creative one is, getting out of the shelter is not easy,

unless you leave in a box or with a winning lottery ticket.

For most of my informants who were not nearly as resigned and sardonic as the man with the lottery tickets, the need to get out of the shelter and get a job, an apartment and a lover, usually in that order, was an obsession that filled thier days. The degree to which people discussed their strategies, planned them, talked about them and dreamed of them reminded me of movies about prisoners who attempt to break out of prison. Whether diagnosed mentally ill, or considered to be fully functional and emotionally sound, these latter day Papillions, usually broke their strategies down into two distinct methods: "on my own" or in "the system."

Very often strategies for getting one's life together involved some combination of the two. Though usually the most realistic, these combined strategies were often the most dangerous, as they involved large amounts of "gassing your worker" (lying about outside subsistence strategies), risking discovery, and violating the rules of "the system" by living in "the system", but trying to "keep your life outside." For most people it was impossible to balance the rules and demands of life in the system with social

connections outside. The conventional wisdom was that it was necessary. I often heard refrains similar to the following, which was told to me by a man who was at that moment in "intensive supportive community housing", a highly structured housing that he hated, but he stayed because he had been told that it was his eventual ticket to Section 8 housing<sup>26</sup>, and:

"if you go into one of these places [his current housing], you got to keep up with your people on the outside, even if it means climbing out a window at night, because if you don't, you forget who you are. You be some psychology experiment for some doctor. They be putting all kinds a shit into your body. You

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<sup>26</sup>

Section 8 housing is a federally funded program where a household pays 30% of its income for rent and the government pays the difference between that 30% and "a fair market rate", for 5-15 years. Becoming a part of this program is the great dream of most people without housing, who are trying to resolve their problems through "the system." Though there is a long waiting list and many complaints about the way it is administered, because it is the only program available to people without housing that allows them to work for a living, it is highly desired and is used as the principle carrot and stick to get compliance and cooperation from those in "the system."



never be able to get your dick hard again. Shit, I don't like the shelter, but I ain't ready to be giving up on pussy yet. What's the point of having your own place if you can't be getting no pussy."

### **Dreams of Money and Shelter**

There was a saying in New York City in the 1980's that everybody's looking for a job, an apartment, and a lover. If they have any of those things, they are looking for a better one. This sardonic New York City spin on the American dream is something that my informants living in and out of the shelter were no more immune to than steadily employed people. Their vision was generally of life as a highly individual struggle in which there was not enough of everything to go around, and in order to have a decent life and get ahead you needed to prove yourself by getting "juice", or as Bourgois (1995) has called it, respect.

For those who want to do it outside "the system" it is necessary, first and foremost, to have a job that pays enough to get an apartment. For most of these men, who have huge gaps in their work history, little in the way of jobs skills, almost no recommendations, and no personal networks

for a decent legitimate job, virtually the only option is the informal sector.

Several of my informants had connections that enabled them to get stolen merchandise and hawk it on the streets with some regularity. One of my informants, a black man in his late 20's who had occasional problems with depression that had made it difficult for him to keep employment and get ahead, explained many views saying:

"all that shit gets stolen from the Koreans, but it ain't worth shit. It's cheap garbage, they sell to black folks for lots of money. I can't sell it for shit. I sell it for what it's worth, because I don't have a store and I ain't got the relatives who make the shit. So what do I do, I buy something nice for my daughter. But that shit ain't gonna get me what I want. Just gonna make some Koreans rich."

For most people the way to make it on your own was through the drug economy. Far more democratic than the legitimate economy and far more lucrative than virtually any scam that these men could devise, if you could get in with a drug dealer, even a very small one, there was a good chance of getting out of the shelter. The drug economy

provided access to the kind of economic networks that could give them some of the things they wanted in life. For the most part, however, these men were at the very bottom of the drug economy and could count on it for very little. They could also expect to find terrible trouble eventually with either the law or drug related violence.

One of my informants, a Latino man in his 30's who was very independent and ambitious, found a relatively high paying permanent job in a *bodega* in Washington Heights and managed to get his own studio apartment in the building in which the bodega was located. His description of what had happened was:

"I'm Cuban and those Dominicans and Puerto Ricans who run all the business up here, they know we're smart. Man I was educated in Cuba they got better schools there than here. Why the fuck do you think they gave me the job instead of one of their own, I'm fucking smarter. I don't do drugs or any kind of crazy shit. These people got all kinds of business going on there and I'm learning bookkeeping."

It seemed likely that he was working in some kind of drug business and the fact that he was straight, good with

numbers, and had few real social connections in the neighborhood was to his benefit. He dreamed of becoming a tax preparer, setting up his own business and someday making lots of money and going back to visit Cuba. The last I saw him, in 1993, he had been badly hurt in an accident and was back in the shelter.

One way of engaging the huge economic networks in the drug economy was to become a shelter drug distributor. Though this required a continued presence in the shelter, it could mean a relatively comfortable and easy life in the shelter, privileges from the guards in exchange for drugs or payoffs, and the ability to easily mobilize a fair amount of muscle as protection. [\*\*However, etc] I had a West Indian informant who was trying to succeed in the drug economy who was gunned down in the streets while doing a drug deal. This West Indian male, in his late 20's was bright and very ambitious. With two girlfriends, frequent day labor as a security guard, and a "wise ass" attitude, he had a high profile in the shelter. This is always more dangerous than not being noticed. According to some of his "friends" in the West Indian corner, who I interviewed after his death, he was killed because he was ripping off

people outside the shelter, "and he didn't have enough juice."

He had lots of jobs, two lovers and was always looking for better in everything. His goal was to get himself set up enough to pay the rent on one of his girlfriend's apartments and live there until he made enough money to "go back to the islands in style." Where most of the tattered looking men who I studied represented no threat to anyone and were looking to find a way of just hanging on to life outside the shelter, he seemed to be bound for trouble due to his ambitiousness and his relentless pursuit of the American dream. He was convinced that he had what it took to "make it", because he was "from the islands" and could take advantage of African-Americans, who he described as "lazy", "stupid", and "passive about life."

A much more common way of using the drug economy to escape the shelter was bartering services for shelter in either a crack house or some kind of other business that sold drugs. I had three informants who were living in basements as part of drug related business. As men without homes they were entirely dependent on whoever was allowing them to live there. They were counted on to protect and

serve their keepers. As men with very little to lose, they could be counted on to beat up people who caused trouble and to take big risks, often not even aware of how big those risks were, and not expecting the kind of payment that is usually demanded for such risks. In this way, men without housing have brought down the price of labor in the drug economy.

For many, the dream of opening their own business was to be their ticket out of the shelter. One of the principal ways of obtaining extra money in the shelter was cutting hair. This was a job principally taken by transvestites who often also traded sex for money at night. During the day they set up tables in the halls below the drill floor and cut hair in exchange for cigarettes, food stamps, a couple of dollars or some barter item. Though this was a temporary gig, most aspired to work in or own hair cutting salons. One of the more ambitious ones - a very thin Latino transvestite in her 20's - told me:

"I'm not going to be young and beautiful forever  
(laughing), but I know how to cut hair. I know someone  
who has a friend who works at a place on Amsterdam  
[Avenue]. If I can get them to hire me and I can get

enough money together to go to school, I can get the license and save my money and open my own salon. I've been cutting hair since I was 12."

For those who stress the dysfunctional values of those at the bottom (Gruneberg and Eagle, 1990), the attempt to start low capital businesses such as barter oriented hair cutting businesses and drug sales and money lending services within the shelter was a sign of adaptation to the environment of the shelter. However the dreams and entrepreneurial activities of residents appeared so similar to that of working class youth throughout the United States, that one could as easily see their often failed attempts to better themselves as a refusal to surrender to the shelter. I don't know whether any of these would be hair dressers ever got licensed and worked legitimately, but this difficult and somewhat unlikely ladder was seen as one of the ways out of the shelter, "on my own."

Though I never encountered people who made a living from lending money, Grunberg and Eagle, in the 1990 article, "Shelterization: How the Homeless Adapt to Shelter Living", claim that "pay from a day's labor" could be lent out at "a daily interest rate of 100 percent" by the more

entrepreneurial. They described loan sharking as "a virtual grass roots shelter industry." I certainly had many informants who had been beaten up over money they owed.

Security guard was probably the most common job that shelter men took. Hired on a day labor basis, it was a very easy low skill job, that even many of the lowest functioning, least intelligent, and most unambitious could handle. For many of the men, though, it was not just a way of picking up extra money, but a way out of the shelter. The myth [\*\*story] that circulated was that there were security guards who got connections through impressing a boss by stopping a crime, or saving a life, and that this could lead to promotion or recommendation. One of my informants, a friendly, but very slightly retarded man in his late 20's, expressed his hopes saying:

"there's lots of niggers out there complaining all the time. They be complaining 'bout this complaining 'bout that. That's fucked up and that's why they don't get ahead. When I be working some convention or some show, I get serious. I got a chief sometimes hires me says he gonna recommend me to John Jay College of Criminal Justice. I could be a housing cop you know. I



don't got nothing on my record 'cept some juvy stuff."

There was a commonly held belief among black men that the reason why they were where they were was because they were black. This led many of them to see their way out of the shelter as being through the Nation of Islam (NOI) or some of the other\*\* black self help programs that recruited in the shelter. NOI sometimes provided jobs as security guards and helped find housing and social networks that occasionally enabled them to get out of the shelter. I heard about people who got out through NOI and I talked to some who were bitter about "not getting any real help from their brothers". However, as a white anthropologist it was often difficult for me to get anything more than propaganda for or against NOI from my informants.

Even in those who had been burned and were willing to say it, there felt a kind of tension talking to me that never passed. The main exception was a man who I'll call Fred [mentioned before], who was in his 50's, had been a merchant marine sailor, and he used to like to talk politics with me. He was ideologically committed to NOI, but seemed to have very little day to day contact with them outside of reading the NOI newspaper, *The Final Call*. He

told his clearest exposition on NOI to me one afternoon in a diner on Broadway and 106th:

"The problem with you white people is you eat swine and don't respect the earth. Reverend Farrakhan is pointing a way for black and white people too. It's all about self help: black people got to invest their money with black people, the way that white people invest their money with other white people. It is all about building businesses and helping your own. Look at the white union I was in for years. After a while they didn't even bother to get me work anymore. They just left me to die, when I had my breakdown. It was my own fault for putting my faith in the white race. It wasn't their job to help me out. It's my job to help myself out. This is how the black race has fallen, by not respecting ourselves. It's time we took a lesson from the Jews who all help themselves."

When I asked him what the Nation of Islam was doing to help him, he told me that they were giving him self respect and that they were providing jobs for black youth as security guards (a reference to the Nation of Islam security services that do contract work for the U.S.

government to privately police such U.S. government jurisdictions as public housing projects). Though without any homeless consciousness, this man obviously had a black consciousness.

This black consciousness, that many seemed to share, held that the reason for being in the shelter, prison, a public hospital, or some other stigmatizing public institution was because the system feared black men. The fact that black was the most common ethnic designation in New York City shelters seemed to confirm this fact in the eyes of many. This black consciousness became a source of attempts to get out of the shelter on one's own with the wide variety of "black owned" and "black identified" marketing plans that were circulating through the shelter. These marketing plans all seemed to be somewhat Afro-centric crosses between the Body Shop and Amway, in which people sold products through supposedly black owned mail order catalogues. As they built up a sales record they also recruited other people who became their sales agents and sold products from which they took a cut of the commission. Seen as a way of concentrating "black money", and phrased consciously in terms of "the American dream", there were a

variety of these schemes circulating in and around the shelter. Through them everything from vitamins and health food to black hair care and other personal products that supposedly drew on the wisdom of Africa, were sold.

There were shelter residents who were involved in just about every form of manual day labor, from loading trucks and doing lower skilled construction work to collecting bottle and can deposits and bicycle messengering. The number of schemes for starting businesses that concentrated money in or outside of the shelter was phenomenal. From mail order sales and selling the "homeless" newspaper, *Street News*, to hair salons, drywalling businesses and peddling, the shelter was filled with dreams of small businesses, most of which ultimately counted on hiring low wage shelter residents. In terms of job training, there were hundreds of plans I saw people pursuing, some of which involved returning to college, but most of which involved somebody proving his worth to a boss by doing better menial labor than the next impoverished black man and thus being allowed to learn a skill for which he would eventually get licensed.

Involvement in the drug economy was considered to be a

survival tactic: there were very few people who imagined themselves climbing up the drug economy hierarchy. In exchange for selling, carrying, watching, soliciting, or simply doing menial tasks and favors for those who were making money, they could count on occasional spending money, sometimes shelter in the interstices of the vast real estate holdings of drug traffickers in upper Manhattan, and a little comfort in the form of drugs and "blow jobs from crack 'ho's."

Though there was an occasional shelter resident who managed to become employed on his own and get out of the shelter, it was the rare exception. Usually the weaknesses that had put them in the shelter in the first place proved to be just as powerful when they ventured out of the shelter again. The costs of living in New York City were too high for them and the employment market far too tight. For most people, the "catch as catch can" \*\*? independent employment, freelance business, and informal sector drug economy, clearly did not provide enough job security, enough income, or enough regularity to be a viable way out.

**Out of the Frying Pan and into "The System"**

Though the public shelters were an intrinsic part of the social system set up for poverty relief in New York City, for most of the men who lived there, being in the shelter was not really being in "the system." For them, the shelter was a naturalized environment: just a part of life in New York City. Like sleeping on a friend's couch, the piers, by the river, in a subway tunnel, or at the house of a lover, the shelter has a set of physical and emotional advantages, disadvantages and environmental challenges all its own. For most of these men, it is little more than what it claims to be, a shelter. Though they recognize a stigma attached to it, which they deal with in a variety of ways, the stigma is at times less than the stigma of, for instance, living back home with parents (if this is even an option).

To be in "the system" is to surrender your freedom and the possibility to "make it" and get your life together. Seen largely as a kind of no win game, set up by white social workers (though many were indeed black and Latino) to torture black people with the promise of housing and a little bit of money, people were highly suspicious of what "the system" would do to them once it got hold of them.

However, as there were few other options and many of these men were, for a variety of mental and physical reasons, somewhat low functioning, "the system" was often a final refuge and the only answer. In many ways it was the most passive and "shelterized" people who sought out "the system."

Though there were a variety of Worker Education Programs in the shelter that claimed to prepare people for a work life with a work history, they involved very menial jobs, with no possibility for advancement and no real placement services, that paid \$12.50 for a 20 hour work week.

In private shelters such as those run by the Salvation Army, the wages were even lower, starting at 18c per hour and going up with seniority. Unlike the public shelters, the Salvation Army forced all its residents to do this work, which involved sweeping floors, guarding the thrift stores, sorting merchandise, etc. Despite the fact that this work was described for tax and government accounting purposes as rehabilitative training, the Salvation Army made much less of an attempt to try to convince its residents that the work was preparation for a real job.

All of my informants griped about the wages and the fact that it was forced labor, but no one even imagined doing anything about it. Instead they found ways of stealing from the Salvation Army to augment their miserable wages. A very common scam was to get work on or near the thrift store retail floor and to grant customers what one of my informants called "the great homeless 50% off sale." What this meant was putting on your most passive homeless look and wheeling around a half empty bin or clean, dry janitor's bucket. The customer would choose a piece of clothing, put it into the bin, and my informant who would take it to the back, pretending to do a price check or some other service. Ten minutes later my informant would bring the clothing out a back door and meet the customer, where he or she would pay half of the marked price directly to my informant.

For even the most desperate men, both Salvation Army work and Worker Education Program (WEP) work, was boring, humiliating and insulting. As one of my informants said in explaining why he refused to participate work programs he came across in the shelter - and despite desperately wanting a job:



man I may be crazy, but I am not stupid." Another informant pointed out to me, "I ain't heard about nobody who was ever given a real job, after doing all that work for nothing and it's not like they gonna promote you to chief fucking toilet cleaner. Shit if they did, you'd still be making fucking \$12 a week. You'd just have yourself a fancy title.

The degree to which some kind of career advancement was possible through this program is unclear in my data. I interviewed one of the shelter workers who had been working there for many years and asked him about the possibilities for advancement. He was dubious, though he did believe that if someone really was diligent and stuck with something long enough, and was bright and well liked, they would be noticed and rewarded. He was never able to provide an example of this ever happening or explain what the rewards were. He did, however say that, "none of these guys got that kind of discipline anyhow. They wouldn't be here if they did." His lack of confidence in the program reflected a general feeling among service providers and shelter employees that the worker education program was inadequate. However, with the low incentives offered and the lack of

examples of success it is difficult to imagine how anyone could have the discipline to continue.

Most of the men who I met at the shelter, both mentally ill and healthy, felt the way one of my informants, a gay black man in his twenties did about these work programs:

It's really a waste of time. If I work here 5 days at 4 hours a day and get 10 or 20 dollars, that is my week. You know time is money. If I spend two days looking for work and two days working, that is 80, maybe 100 dollars and I still have a day to go down to the piers and hang out and enjoy my money. They must think we are pretty stupid.

When I asked him who participates in the Worker Education Program, he wasn't sure, but he figured that it was

guys who have given up on life and figure there ain't nothing outside the shelter, guys who are too stupid to know better, and guys who don't know enough to get out of the way.

He then launched into the typical speech about the need to keep your ties outside "the system" and outside the world of social workers and doctors who think you are a medical

experiment.<sup>27</sup>

The worker education programs were set up for anybody who was in the shelter, and there were a variety of social work services to help residents obtain food stamps, medicare and medicaid, and subway tokens to look for work. However, the highest level of support was accorded to those who were deemed to be mentally ill or had AIDS. Those who had AIDS received priority in being housed and were deemed to be not appropriate shelter residents. Still I met several people who had somehow or other fallen through the cracks. But for the most part, the city was effective at providing various forms of housing from supportive to simply SRO housing for those who had AIDS. As one resident with HIV said, "it is amazing how it takes getting a disease that is going to kill me to get treated like a human being."

The possibility of getting out of the shelter

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The belief that they were a black medical experiment in the hands of white doctors was quite common in a variety of settings. Several of my informants independently referred to the Tuskegee study in which black men with syphilis had treatment withheld while they studied the progress of the disease.

permanently if you were mentally ill was quite good, but it required surrendering tremendous amounts of freedom, and was an entirely voluntary decision. As a result, some of the most mentally unbalanced people chose to avoid Community Support Services (CSS), the mental health unit at the shelter. However, CSS offered many resources and privileges that were not available to shelter residents who were not its clients. Among these was help getting on Supplemental Security Income (SSI), a program run by Social Security to provide for the blind or disabled. Though many shelter residents were qualified for SSI, many did not receive it. For those who had tried to get on it and had not qualified, participation in the CSS program, which was for the mentally ill, virtually guaranteed one's status as disabled. With two levels of SSI, which depend on the type of housing where one is placed and the severity of the disability, SSI could be anywhere from \$200 to \$500 a month with a friend, family member or landlord as the payee, or over \$900 per month payable directly to a transitional housing program.

Payment of SSI checks for CSS clients goes directly into money management accounts that are set up for the

clients and to which they do not have access while participating in CSS. Though there is much conflict around the holding of these funds, after several months in CSS, the amount of money that is in a person's name can be quite substantial. As one client at CSS said to me about money management, "I may not ever get to see a single one of my checks, but as long as Uncle Sam is paying me \$500 a month, I'm worth something to someone." This man who seemed to have an intuitive understanding of the way that the transitional housing industry functioned, found himself living with family who needed the monthly income, after a series of interventions and mediations on the part of CSS workers.

The principle reason that people came to CSS, however, was for housing. Though most of them were certain that employment was the first step to getting their lives together and finding their "American dream", they had either failed to find steady employment or were not really capable of trying. CSS represented the last option for those who had given up on getting out of the shelter on their own. Just to be able to hang on to possessions, have a place to live and a telephone to receive and make calls

from was a major step towards being able to negotiate the difficult task of finding work (Susser and Gonzalez, 1992).

Furthermore, it was promised that if they followed the CSS program, which typically involved months of receiving injections and medications designed to deal with their diagnosed illness, attending daily programs, workshops, and counseling sessions designed to improve "life skills", ameliorate emotional problems, and prepare them for the interviews at transitional housing facilities, then succeed at whatever programs they faced at the transitional housing facility, real housing would eventually be provided.

Although passing through various forms of transitional housing were usually the first step out of the shelter in the CSS program, the men who went to CSS were encouraged to believe that if they behaved properly and followed the rehabilitation plan that had been set for them, they would eventually be rewarded with Section 8 housing. For many men, whether severely or mildly mentally ill, struggling with alcohol, drugs, or situationally depressed, this promise of housing and a permanent road out of the shelter was very tempting.

There were some clients who had been in and out of CSS

and a variety of transitional housing programs over several years who liked to cynically point out to me that nobody ever wound up getting Section 8 housing and that the whole thing was a big scam to keep clients compliant. However, for most of the men I met through CSS, the mere act of coming to CSS and facing the stigma in the shelter of being one of the "crazies" involved a recognition that they were incapable of managing their own affairs. For the most part, these desperate men, who had given up on the possibility of making it on their own, were working very hard to please whoever was supervising their efforts in the hopes that they would be first on the list to get a desirable placement, ahead of people who were difficult, uncooperative, and still had illusions that they could be independent.

Even for these most pliant and resigned residents of the shelter, there was a competitive individualism that was pervasive. Seeing the process of getting through the CSS program as a competition for limited housing options, these men often expressed highly competitive visions of the

struggle to get mentally well and housed.<sup>28</sup> For those who - for either legitimate reasons or reasons related to their illness - were dissatisfied with their treatment, angry at something that they felt was an affront, who believed that they had been treated prejudicially for some reason, or those who merely could not fit into some procedure, any conflict or complaints tended to go against them and brand them as trouble makers. The lack of any collective apparatus for client input left these men pursuing a highly scaled down heroic individual struggle to have a place to call their own.

This individuation of clients was not, however total. Like in most of the United States, the idea of race and ethnicity was very important in the way the clients at CSS

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This picture of the quest for housing and mental wellness, in which there is little room for clients to express dissatisfaction with the process without being labeled difficult and possibly denied housing, was frequently contrasted with the Canadian system by a Canadian researcher that I had the fortune to work with. She described a system in Canada in which the mentally ill are collectively organized into union-like structures, that enables them to make complaints, give input into the structure of treatment and adjudicate conflicts with workers, without being penalized through the denial of "privileges" or the excessive use of drugs.



perceived the housing lottery into which they put their days. Believing that the rewards, punishments, forms of treatment, housing placements and occasional beatings that were meted out in the CSS center were not racially or ethnically neutral, there was much discussion among the men of the ethnic and racial politics that were played out within the staff and between staff and clients. From the point of view of the many clients who were chasing limited housing options and who faced staff with an almost life and death power over them, the politics of difference became very important.

Though the degree to which "making it" really did seem to have more to do with how well a client was able to satisfy the clinically determined demands of the staff, the buzz among most of the men during my three years in and around CSS, was that "if you want to get anywhere in this program you got to be Hispanic." Though CSS workers had little ultimate power over housing decisions, which were ultimately up to managers of boards at the placements, they did have the power to make recommendations, to reduce or increase medications, to use physical discipline on the men, and to give or take away money. For clients, the

struggle to get in with workers was formidable.

When I first started my research at the Fort Washington Men's Shelter, the manager was a Latino from Chile, but the psychiatrist in charge was Euro-American, as was the principle investigator of the CTI research project which worked closely with CSS staff and eventually merged. It was expected that the professionals who ran the unit would be Euro-American. The presence of a West Indian head nurse, of obviously African descent, who was well liked and made clients feel well cared for, created some trust in the medical care, (although I heard several comments like "X is a lovely lady, but them Hispanics is so afraid a black people that they had to go and find an islander instead o' hiring a sister from right here in America."

As time went on and all the black staff and much of the Euro-American staff were fired, driven out, or moved on and the staff became increasingly Latino, the suspicions among the black clients got much worse. More than a few times I heard men attempting to figure out if black men were being given larger doses of medication than Latinos. One man summed up this predominant, but unsubstantiated, claim by saying,

They all afraid o' black people. The whites, the Latins, the Chinese. We bigger, stronger and we a whole fuckin' lot angrier than these little Hispanics. They see a big black man who been shit on all his life and they know it's gonna be trouble unless they get a needle into his ass.

Virtually every client that I talked to claimed that the staff was more likely to call on the CSS enforcer to use physical force against a black client who was causing trouble than a Latino. Though the enforcer whose job it was to use physical force was a burly, barrel chested, heavily muscled black man, he had worked with the Chilean director of the project for years and was seen as his strong arm.

This black worker was eventually moved to double duty as both the bouncer and a social worker in order to placate the clients. However, for many it was an insult. They felt that this was tokenism, as the director did not bother to hire an outside, independent black social worker. As one man told me, "the only black person they got to help us is the guy who's been following the Spanish guy around for 5 years, beating people up for him." An ex-client who had been placed already expressed a similar viewpoint when he

heard about the promotion, saying, "the Hispanics prefer blacks to stay in their place. That's why they only hire brothers who are gorillas."

Though none of the men I talked to ever questioned the conflict of interest involved in being both counselor and hired muscle, even for those who liked the man in question, there was general feeling that this loyal enforcer buddy of the director had been promoted as way to avoid bringing potentially independent minded black social workers into a Latino old boys network. For the research staff, which was entirely white with the exception of my fellow ethnographer, Alfredo Gonzalez, an Argentine, and the staff administrator, who was Puerto Rican, the loss of all the black social workers created discussion about the problem of an entirely white and Latin staff. This may have been one of the factors that led to the choice of a South African black as the last employee hired for the CTI research team. As a researcher, however, it was not his job to provide any services and as such there was little change in the way CSS was perceived by its black clients.

In general, there was a feeling among the black clients that they would get better treatment from the white

people, as they were not so good at communicating with Latin clients and who would not favor the Latinos. All this was premised on the belief that white people hate all non-whites equally.

For the Latin clients, there was little question about race. From even in the beginning, when there was a racially mixed staff, there was generally no shortage of fellow Latinos and the place was seen as one of the most Latin friendly spaces in "the system." Though many Latin clients feared the staff enforcer, I was never told if this was racially motivated.

### **From Shelter To Community**

When shelter residents first enter the CSS program and talk to a housing counselor, the housing counselor assesses the client's personal strengths and weaknesses. He/she decides what kind of housing would suit him and more importantly, what kind of housing he can obtain. Most housing requires the client to be drug free, eligible for SSI level 2, complying with medication, and "cooperative."

Housing is generally categorized in terms of what is called the "level of support." From the perspective of the

clients, this amounts to a measure of the autonomy that is built into the structure of the program providing housing and the level of control that workers are allowed to exert. The "most supportive" form of housing is a community residence. Residences vary along a continuum, from supervised community residences to unsupervised Single Room Occupancies (SRO). Finally, a few placements involving mediation also occur in which men are returned to their families.

While there are a substantial number of types of "transitional housing" reserved for the homeless and mentally ill, from the point of view of the men themselves the choice is painfully limited. Even for someone who is relatively high functioning and not hampered by substance abuse, the choices are grim. Though extremely excited when first placed, many men soon find themselves very disappointed with "transitional housing." While there are variations in the housing arrangements, from communal rooms with 4 or 5 total strangers to having one's own SRO or sharing a real apartment with another man in the same program, these arrangements all have aspects in common from the point of view of my informants: there is not enough

space; not enough privacy; not enough freedom; and very little sense of having a place to call home.

From the time that they are placed, many men start looking for a better place and a way up and out. One of my informants expressed the problems with his situation, saying:

They say I am not homeless anymore, but I am still homeless. I got a room and they serve me food, but workers can open my door any time they want with their pass keys. I got to take urine tests to keep my housing and I can't even shit in private. That's no home.

Even after being placed in the transitional housing, most of my informants still regard themselves as homeless:

I don't have a decent job, I can't pay my own rent and they can put me into any old place they want. Maybe I am not homeless, but I have to share my living room with a bunch of psychiatric patients. If I could pay my own way, I'd have a home.

Although regulations vary from residence to residence, they include a curfew, restrictions on leaving the building, restrictions on visitors, restrictions on sexual

behavior and restrictions on drug and alcohol use.

Requirements may include compliance with medication, attendance at various programs, contact with caseworkers, and surprise room searches by staff. Although many of these regulations may be necessary to insure safety and security, they remain a source of conflict between residents and workers.

The men all went through the CSS program and entered residences because they wanted a home, not for medications or personal supervision. Having recovered some of their dignity in their departure from the homeless shelter, many men resented the high levels of supervision that most residences implemented. The tension between workers who were instructed to supervise residents and residents who increasingly resented supervision, triggered intense conflicts. Even those with good insight into their mental illness and who understood that they needed treatment still had trouble accepting residence rules.

Although many had been advised about the rules of a particular residence before moving in, it was only when they became residents that they experienced the actual limitations of independence and privacy and the constraints



of the rules and supervision as part of their "real lives outside the shelter." Some continued to try to create the kind of home that they dreamed about and this made their stay at the residence problematic and conflictive. Some, who were too sick to articulate their needs in an effective way, accepted the new setting with its rules and supervision in the same way that they once accepted the shelter.

But for most informants there was the desire to be able to come in and go as they pleased without having to explain their activities to anyone. The previously mentioned informant, who was a supporter of NOI, was placed in a community residence. He was very unhappy and left after 3 months, stressing the fact that "a man like me who has worked my whole life should have a home where people aren't always ordering you around." Two men who came to be very close informants were at one time serious musicians. They both constantly resented the cramped, highly supervised residences as they did not allow them to practice. They both kept saying that any place where they couldn't play was not home. For one of them, who was a jazz trumpet player, the chances of ever finding a home to be able to practice in seemed increasingly slim, and this led

him to "feel no desire to live, but don't tell the doctor that or he'll up my dose."

Many men also wanted to entertain their friends and to be able to foster emotional or sexual relationships. Often they felt that having to live in a program with so many mentally ill people was embarrassing. One of my informants who lived in a supervised SRO where he was not allowed to bring any after-curfew guests, repeatedly said that he wanted his own apartment "so he could get a real girlfriend, instead of sneaking out and messing with crack whores all the time." Another, who secretly had a girlfriend at a residence that forbade sexual activity, claimed that he needed a real place so he could "start dating women who are not mental patients. Nobody respects you if you're always fucking bad pussy. That's all there is here." Another man complained that, "real people don't have to share their bathrooms with strangers."

The desire for independence, privacy, and a life that they could take pride in led some of the men to leave or to be thrown out of supervised housing. The goal of the workers is to aid in the gradual adjustment of the new resident to his housing. However, many of the residents

soon felt that they were prepared to take the next step towards independence, and they thus set up the first conflicts with workers who viewed the process more cautiously. The residence support staff view the problems of the men as rooted in their mental illness. They connect housing, psychiatric treatment and drug treatment as a package that cannot be separated. The punishment for not taking medications or for using drugs is translated into the loss of housing. Residents are threatened with this possibility and in some cases they are sent back to the shelter for a period of time as punishment. The conflicts between residents and those managing the residences embody the tensions of the different agendas and priorities.

For administrators there is the constant pressure to justify their funding and develop the success rates necessary to get more funding for future projects. They attempt to head off possible problems in advance by "creaming." That is, selecting residents who they believe embody a combination of compliance, low maintenance and lack of potential for causing trouble. However with such an unpredictable population and the heavy emphasis that housing placement workers put on preparation for

interviews, many people with hidden problems or the need for more independence slip through, leading to conflict over regulations, the exercise of authority, and general residential disharmony. The balance of is always tilted toward the administration of the residence, and the resident finds that in order to obtain housing he has to subordinate his desires to institutional rules and regulations.

### **Employment**

Just like those who are trying to get their lives together outside the system, those who have taken the road into transitional housing for the mentally ill aspire to gainful employment and careers. Barriers to employment are well-recognized by staff, and they usually discourage such aspirations. Jobs are scarce, and frequently do not pay enough to justify the loss of SSI. In addition, acquiring a job and then losing it can lead to renewed housing loss. However, in spite of the conflicts with staff, lack of job skills and experience and market realities, a strong desire for employment and careers drives these men to endanger their housing and often wind up back in the shelter.

Despite often having little or no work history outside the informal sector, informants frequently expressed the need to find rewarding careers. One informant wished to be an architect, and had taken mechanical drawing classes at City College. Another informant wanted to be a housing policeman. Other informants took classes in computers, literature and even philosophy. One informant is still trying to pay off an old student loan from when he went to Baruch College in the 1970's. He hopes that if he pays it all back, they will be more kindly disposed towards letting him in again. Another informant matriculated at John Jay college for criminal justice. They were all adamant that they took these courses in order to improve career chances.

Attempting to fulfill such ambitions from inside transitional housing is in some ways even harder than from the shelter. Because the rules against holding a real job while collecting SSI are so strict, many informants languish for months in make-work programs, dead end jobs and piecework provided by voluntary agencies at significantly less than minimum wage. They often persist in these underpaid jobs with little future, holding on the

hope that they can prove themselves worthy of employment in order to establish a real career.

### **Employment In The System: Three Case Studies**

The first case discussed here documents one man's struggle with housing staff and the labor market to find regular employment. The second case demonstrates the need for meaningful employment for one particular informant. This shelter resident had done well in high school and completed some years of college. He found the status of office cleaner worse than no job at all. The third case documents one man's attempts to negotiate the SSI system within its rules.

#### *Roger M.*

Roger M., an African-American man in his mid 30's and diagnosed as schizophrenic, was placed in a community residence. From the very beginning he was unhappy with the highly structured environment and wanted to strike out on his own. He had to share a room with someone with whom he had little in common except for the fact that they both had been diagnosed mentally ill. He complained in interviews

that there were too many rules and he did not like being required to take anti-psychotic drugs, which he claimed impaired his ability to work and to function sexually. Because he lived in a Intensive Supportive Community Residence, he was entitled to \$842 a month from SSI. Out of that, \$742 paid for room, board, supervision and the drugs that he disliked. The \$100 that was left over each month was his only spending money. He knew that he would never be able to save up enough money to get his own apartment. In addition, if he left the residence, his SSI would automatically drop to \$508 per month, hardly sufficient to even cover rent.

He needed a job. However, a person who receives SSI is not allowed to earn more than \$74 per week. Roger broached the subject of getting a job with the residence staff and found them extremely hostile to the idea. They rightly reasoned that with his diagnosis and lack of skills, and the weakness of the employment market, any job he could get would be very insecure and low paying. If he lost that job it would be hard to find another one. Even minimum wage could get him thrown off the SSI rolls. His workers predicted that he would be back in the shelter in less than

a month if he found a full-time job. In spite of all these perils, Roger continued to look for work.

The mere act of looking for work endangered his housing, as Roger was labeled uncooperative and hostile. His relationship with the people who ran the facility in which he lived became very tense. He was severely punished for his first conflict with staff - pushing a guard who refused to leave his bedroom - and he was sent back to the shelter for several days. Though he was not sure which he disliked more - the prison like community residence or the shelter - he rightly reasoned that it would be a lot easier to find a job from a real residence. After a few days, the CSS staff intervened on his behalf and he was allowed back into the residence.

Once back, he continued searching for a job, much to their consternation. The one job that seemed relatively flexible and easy to get was bicycle messenger. It could pay a livable wage if one made enough deliveries in a day, and there was no need for much formal education or strong interpersonal skills. Roger spent several months saving his money to buy a bicycle, a messenger bag, and a license. He had shopped around to find a messenger service that



promised to hire him in advance, before investing in these necessary items.

The further he moved with his project, the more the staff regarded it with suspicion. This attitude alienated him further from his living situation and made him feel less supported by his workers. When Roger finally started working he discovered that messenger work was very difficult and as he put it, "I'm not in shape anymore." The drugs he was required to take as part of retaining housing were not conducive to the physical stresses of riding a bicycle around Manhattan all day long, and Roger found himself unable to continue with the job. He worked one day, got paid \$30, and gave the bicycle to his cousin. When I last saw him he was trying to find a less structured community residence and had not found any employment.

Roger's attempts to take control of his life demonstrate the intense conflicts that develop between client and worker around issues of personal autonomy. Because the system is set up in such a way as to deny government support to anybody who is earning more than \$74 per week, workers were forced to oppose his attempts to get a job. However, he continued his efforts in the face of

opposition, only to be stopped by the lack of appropriate permanent jobs.

### *Paco*

Paco came to the United States from the Dominican Republic as a teenager in the 1970's. He went to high school in New York City and graduated at the top of his class. He then went to Hunter College with dreams of professional success. Halfway through his sophomore year, Paco was forced to drop out due to the first symptoms of mental illness, and he was later diagnosed bipolar. He held a variety of jobs during the next ten years but found advancement difficult, possibly due to his mental illness.

When I met him he was a client of the CSS program at the Fort Washington Men's Shelter where he had come after his last hospitalization. He was placed in a supportive SRO and "rewarded" with a \$74 a week part-time job cleaning the CSS/CTI offices and running errands for the director. He confided to me that he did not like this arrangement and found it demeaning. Not only was the work boring and menial, but the combination of having no clear job description, no security, and almost no salary made him feel

humiliated every time he came to work. The job did not pay anywhere nearly enough to enable him to move out of the supervised housing that he abhorred, and he had no chance for advancement. As he pointed out, the previous three people who had run around for the director had not been given any placement assistance when they left, and there was nothing about the job that could be put on a resume. He felt that this job was a hand out and not a job. After two unsuccessful attempts to quit he sent the keys back with his resignation. He said "I'd rather be going to school or be a volunteer helping disabled senior citizens."

Because he was one of the highest functioning and better educated clients at his program, Paco was singled out for a job that was considered to be a reward for his success. The workers at the program couldn't understand why he wasn't happy with the job. They regarded the job as a clinical reward for someone with no resources and few options. They felt he should be grateful to have such an opportunity. For Paco, who had not given up his dreams of an occupation in which he could take pride, an apartment to call his own, and "a life", such a hand out meant very little. While he had scaled down the aspirations of his

youth, he believed that a decent permanent job was the least that he should expect.

### *Darren*

Darren, an African-American man in his early 30's, was forced to live in the shelter when he was paroled from prison. He was very bright and eager to get his life on track after a drug addiction and time "inside." CSS got him on SSI, placed him in a newly opened SRO in the Bronx, and found him a clerical job at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. The job paid minimum wage, had a title and was in a real office. He earned the maximum \$74 per week allowed for an SSI recipient and put in overtime, at no pay, hoping to please the boss. As he put it, "there's jobs out there I could do that would pay more, but that would be a day or two. This job is part of a program. It's got a future."

It was a six month program designed to give him employment skills. He worked for the six months at about twenty hours per week. At the end of the six months he found that he was so well liked that they extended his contract for six more months. His dream was that at the end of a year, of what he regarded as an internship, the hospi-

tal would offer him a permanent position. He would get off SSI, move out of the drug infested SRO where he had been placed and his life would finally get started.

They never hired him. Darren suspected that in spite of a year of good service they held his criminal record against him. The official word from the hospital was that there was no budget to hire him, as they were in a period of austerity. In 1993, the last time I saw him, he was still without work and living in the SRO on his SSI. It had been almost 10 months since the hospital program ended and he was doing occasional day labor off the books. He was spending some of his days looking for a job, and some of them "getting down on himself" and doing nothing. His big fear was that he would be drawn back into drugs since he still had no means of support and the drug trade at the SRO where he lived was very heavy. Thus, even a person who clearly demonstrated the desire to have a job and the ability to keep one, finds it impossible to negotiate a career in the face of SSI regulations and his own history.

Although some housing staff do encourage the search for employment, many discourage it in the face of the

bigger problems jobs create. In some instances, finding and keeping a permanent job may lead to loss of entitlement to housing. However, the desire for meaningful employment continues to cause conflicts and friction in the lives of those who live in residences, and anybody on SSI.

## CHAPTER V

### LOOKING FOR LOVE: KINSHIP AND UNDER-HOUSING

#### **Sex, Love and Kinship Meets Gender, Race and Class**

There has been an excellent literature on the feminization of poverty (Abramovitz, 1988; Gordon, 1994; Merry, 1995; Mullings, 1995; Passaro, 1996; Sharff, 1987; Sidel, 1990, 1992; Stack, 1974; Susser, 1986, 1989, 1991, 1993; Zavella, 1996; Zucchini, 1997) but relatively little on male gender socialization and extreme poverty. What has been written on this topic has focused on issues of race and economic exclusion of non-white men (Bourgois, 1989, 1995; Maxwell, 1988; Wilson, 1980).

For most of the men who I studied, the problems of poverty, kinship and male gender socialization were intimately connected. For the establishment and maintenance of both affinal and consanguinal kinship, a job and money were seen as preconditions. Not able to draw on the same kin networks of interdependence and mutual support that impoverished women draw on (Stack, 1974), these men found

the challenges of love, sex, and family to be among the most concrete indicators of failure.

Seen through the mercilessly individualist lens of the American Dream, the poverty and underemployment that my informants shared was viewed by them as proof of personal failure. It was also seen as the reason why they were not capable of sustaining the full range of U.S. institutions of kinship. Many of them felt that with their lack of resources they were not even entitled to have a family.

Sex and blood were the two forms of kinship (Schneider, 1973, 1980) to which they aspired. Though these goals were first and foremost in their minds, they were convinced that without a job they were better off trying to avoid the various kinship networks that they had maintained in the past. There was a deep sense of shame and they held a belief that they had to live in a loveless limbo until they managed to get their lives together. This loveless limbo was seen as more desirable than being constantly reminded of their lack of manhood by living off family resources. Though close friendships developed among men in and out of the shelter, most of them felt that this was neither family nor kinship, but only a holding pattern



until they were able to reassert old blood ties and make new sexual ones.

Though most of their sexual contacts were, of necessity, in direct exchange for drugs or money, the shame of not having "a sweetheart", "a regular piece", "a wife", "my own woman" or whatever version of the dream they were referring to, is something that loomed large for most of them. Similarly, the problems that many of them faced with their families of birth tended to make them feel shame, embarrassment and deficiency. Though most of my informants in the shelter had regular contact with psychiatrists, social workers and self help programs that posed their problems in psychological terms, there was a belief among most of them that these problems in creating and maintaining kinship networks were principally the result of not having sufficient resources.

One informant, who lived in the shelter and was very proud to be one of the men who played basketball with the HRA workers, and thus signifying his ability to get certain privileges in the shelter, used to complain that:

Black women are the most demanding 'ho's you'd ever want to meet. You're lucky you're white. They want you

to be good looking, dress like some kind of rich man, spend all kinds of money on them, have a big dick - at least I got that - and be ready to do anything just to please them. They bitches. Only out for what they can get. If you ain't got money you might as well learn to suck your own dick.

Although expressed in racial terms, this comment communicates a common belief that maintaining sexual relationships with women demands many preconditions which they cannot fulfil.

#### **LOOKING FOR LOVE IN THE BIG CITY**

If it weren't for crack how would crazy fucked-up homeless guys like me ever get any pussy?

Franklin, a "Prison Poet"

#### **Franklin: "Wandering in the Desert"**

Although most of myu informants expressed their lack of self-worth in relationship to woman through bitterness at their "excess" demands, others, like Franklin, were aware of the difficulties of the women they came into

contact with. Franklin was a 22 year old black male who had spent a year at City College, where he studied literature. He had drug problems and a variety of clinical diagnoses that had entitled him to SSI. He had been in and out of the shelter and prison, but he generally lived with his sister, Ermaline, who needed the help that SSI brought, and with whom he had a close but very conflictual relationship. His dream was to be a poet and a drug counselor. He explained his ambitions such:

There ain't much chance for black people to become poets, unless you're Malcolm X. That man was a poet, even when he wasn't writing poetry, but he got beaten down like all the rest of us brothers. But I know I can talk to young brothers who have problems with drugs. I got a way with words and a way of communicating. I can talk to anybody about anything. Look I can even talk to the Spanish guy who runs this place and he don't like black people at all, 'cept for Bobbie (the CSS enforcer) of course. I figure, if I can stay clean for a while, I can work my way up from patient to counselor. Seems like a good job. You know, there's lots of brothers who've done that. That's the

way out of this shit I'm always in. But my sister, she always say, Franklin, why do you have to be such a dreamer. Franklin, why can't you get your life together. Franklin, you a crazy fuck, the doctor told me so. It's always Franklin this and Franklin that. I get so tired of that shit. The women thinks her pussy is gold.

I asked him to explain his last comment, and he responded saying:

Well, its like this. Life's pretty tough for black women. I don't hate them for who they are. Lots o' times I'm ready to kill them for who they are, but I don't hate them. They really ain't got much besides their pussies and a lot a dead beat men who can't take care of themselves. They gotta protect themselves and be out for what they can get, 'cuz they can't get much. But shit, this sister of mine, what a pain she give me all the time. I tell her "you think your pussy is gold, save that shit for your boyfriend. He the one you gotta be gettin' some shit from. I'm just your no good mentally ill brother. Say to me Franklin you fuckin crazy, get out a the house before somebody

kills you." I stay out of that woman's way, because she's for real.

When I asked him about his women, he was happy to talk about it:

You know something. The women always loved me. They always be going, "hey Franklin, where you been?" and they always be checkin' me out. There's lots of good lookin' brothers out there, but you know what I said before about black women? Well it ain't totally true. As the bible says, man cannot live by bread alone. They hear my poetry and shit, they know I'm like a prophet. I don't mean I can predict the future or any shit like that. I've had about a million psychiatrists all ready to put me in the straight jacket, delusions of grandeur is what they say, but they got a whole page on me in the book they use to diagnose if you're crazy. A prophet is someone who tells about the future, who talks to people's souls, that don't mean its gonna happen that way, but it could, if enough people see it. But like I was saying, the black women, they got something deep inside them. I don't know whether it's in their hearts, or in the heads. Shit,

it's probably hidden somewhere in they' pussies. But it's there, they just love a poet, a preacher, a prophet and that is what I am. See that social worker over there? [Points to a black woman in her late 20's who is working with another client] She knows I'm crazy. She read all my reports. The psychiatrist warned her, he said "Franklin's got this and that, and everything he say is crazy." She know I'm a drug addict. She know I already spent about half my life in prison. She seen me getting medicated like a crazy person. She seen me in the straight jacket. She seen that I'm just about the most fucked up person out there. Shit, I'm a homeless guy and it's her job to cure me, not to like me. That woman wouldn't be nowhere near my ass for all the money in the world. But you know what, when I get my shit going and I be writing poetry and telling her my stories about Africa and all the things here and now and all the times past and what's coming in the future, I can touch that little spot in her soul, the one that says I gotta have a piece a you Franklin.

Though I always found his ravings to be interesting

and could easily imagine even the most hardened social worker being touched by his poetic ramblings, as an anthropologist it was my job to find out about his sex life and whether he had any real kinship that derived from that sex life. It always involves difficult questions that tend to put people on the spot if the information has not been volunteered already, but I asked anyway.

Well, it's like this. 'Case you didn't notice I'm a crazy fucked up guy from the shelter, who sleeps in Ermaline's living room, when she ain't got some gorilla over the house. So what woman would want me? I been doing crack ho's pretty much since I got outta prison. They good and sweet, if you know how to choose 'em. They cheap as all hell and nobody ever got AIDS from a pipe. I know it ain't befitting a prophet like me, but you know something, every prophet gotta wander in the desert for a while. And I like gettin' pussy, if you ain't got the money to make a family, it don't really matter who it's connected to.

In response to my question as to whether he would ever marry a crack 'ho', he said:

No, got to be clean, that shit ain't a way to raise

the next generation of prophets. But if she was clean, I don't care what she done with her past, there's plenty of sisters wandering in the desert too.

I asked him if would give up drugs to raise a family - a desire he had often expressed.

Oh yeah. You know something, I believe that I could get myself totally clean if I wanted, never smoke another pipe again. I'm gonna have to do that when I get a little older and want to settle down and be a drug counselor. I'll have to get clean before I can help all the young brothers who are still wandering in the desert. But right now, I can't give up the pussy. It's like I'm just busting out all the time for that milk and honey. I gotta fuck and if it weren't for crack how would crazy fucked up homeless guys like me ever get any pussy?

Though Franklin's behavior and presentation was very strange, his strong good looks and carefully cultivated Malcolm X glasses, haircut, and style, did get him a lot of notice from women on the streets and in the subway. He believed that if he could ever "grow up and stop wandering in the desert", he would find work and build a strong



family, "the way Malcolm finally did." It was never clear if that would be possible. Though diagnosed as having multiple personality disorders, his mania and lack of employment options were the biggest impediments to his getting his life together. It was not clear to what degree the mania was the result of an internal problem or a function of his very frequent crack use.

As a very bright, high functioning man who was almost without housing and whose sister was the primary payee for his SSI checks, he was dependent on the crack economy for more than just sexual pleasure. The drug economy was the source of his subsistence. He was unable to count on his sister for much except basic shelter and occasional spending money. His connection to the drug economy paid for much of the rest of his life: lunches at the Chinese restaurant near the park where people did crack; and occasional dates; dinners and breakfasts after sleeping on the streets when he had fought with Ermaline. Though he frequently jumped the turnstiles in the subways - and had had many run-ins with the law because of this, he still needed subway tokens.

Finally, he wrote tremendous amounts of poetry, and

felt that: "I need inspiration from other brothers like me."<sup>29</sup> Though paper and an occasional volume of poetry were not very expensive, for a person without a job and without housing, they represent a real cost.

Once after being convicted for drug possession I visited him in the state hospital. He had been transferred there after a beating in prison led to decompensation and a complete breakdown. He was being kept in a separate lock-up room to segregate him from the "non-criminal" patients. They had taken away his notebook, his pen and the three books that were in his possession. Somehow he had gotten hold of a lead pencil and a ratty stack of folded papers that looked like a mix of official hospital papers and paper towels. He had been writing poetry on them and insisted on reading me a poem that he had written after the beating. I was far too disturbed by his misery and

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<sup>29</sup>

Most likely for my benefit, he informed me that "there some white guys who can really write too." When I asked him about which white writers he liked, he could only name Shakespeare, whose sonnets he had read in high school and Dr. Seuss, "who's a really crazy man." (Not having read or thought of Dr. Seuss in many years, I went back and looked at his work and was indeed impressed with its energy and strangeness.)

desperation to actually hear and remember the poem. After he read the poem he pleaded with me to get him out of "the cage they were keeping him in." He was convinced that as a white person I could help him. I could not. Just before I left he showed me what was "keeping me alive in this horrible place." He had a wad of folded up papers ripped out of a paperback book. He told me he had torn them out of a Langston Hughes book just before they took his stuff.

The last I saw him he was out of prison and he was visiting me in my office. He was looking very dapper, though he seemed to be very strung out on crack and, for some reason that he wouldn't tell me, he had been cut off from any possibility of making money from drugs.<sup>30</sup> I was

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In general, since I was connected to a public health project that had no component written into it to study the drug economy and which took drugs to be merely pharmacological hazards without considering the economic, political, social and cultural rituals of the drug world, my informants who I had met through the project were very wary of giving me any information about drugs. By taking some of these drugs with them, I managed to create a surprising amount of trust, especially considering I was employed by an agency that could take away their housing or halt their SSI if I merely dropped the hint that so and so was doing drugs. However, they also recognized that I could lose my job for smoking with them which led them to be more open than they might have.

disturbed to hear this, because being cut off from a drug network is always highly problematic for someone with no other means of subsistence. A new form of subsistence must be found and a new network of friends must be developed. I could only imagine that this would mean theft.

He asked me for money, which I couldn't give him. I asked my supervisor if there were any paid interviews that could be administered to Franklin. The answer was no. Franklin read me a poem and I asked him for a copy of it. He told me that no professional writer gives away his work without pay. I then had to interview another subject for the research project and I told him to stay for 20 minutes, after which I'd buy him lunch. He thanked me and sat down.

The main office in which I worked had never been equipped for dealing with people who have drug addictions, on the assumption that people in the study were clean. So it had never been outfitted with a waiting room, despite the protests of the anthropologists. Before I went into my office to do the interview, I stopped at the office of my supervisor and warned him that Franklin was desperate for a fix. I told my supervisor that he probably would not steal office equipment, but that he might take cash. I asked that

someone keep an eye on him or ask him to leave the office until I was done. However, it turned out that nobody did either.

Franklin knew the office well after eighteen months in the study and was at that point "non-compliant", meaning he was not slow, sluggish and impaired by psychiatric medications. All it took was one 3 minute trip to the bathroom by my supervisor for Franklin to find the cash box and steal a couple of hundred dollars in interview money. He apparently returned to his seat then strolled out the door saying he would return later. He never returned. When my interview was over and I found out what happened, I convinced my supervisor to wait for three hours before calling the police. As I told him, crack was only ten dollars a vial and a blow job was another ten dollars. I offered to find him and try to get what was left of the money. Though, in retrospect, this was a bizarre fantasy on my part, I felt somewhat responsible and dragged one of my co-workers out with me on a hunting expedition. I went to his three favorite smoking locations, each time disturbing a nest of crack heads who looked at me as if I were a mad man when I asked if they had seen Franklin. I went to

several locations where I knew they were selling and three or four places where I knew he liked to eat. We gave up and returned to the office, cursing our unfortunate supervisor for leaving unguarded money in an office filled with poor and desperate men waiting to be interviewed.

I have only seen Franklin once since that day. Several months later I was traveling home on the number 1 subway that goes to Columbia University. I recognized his slightly frantic and manic voice a few seats down. He was chatting up a young white Columbia University coed who was encumbered by drafting supplies. He was telling her a totally fantastic story about having been an architecture student for a year at City College (I know he had studied literature) and having been burned out of his apartment and forced to leave school. My guess is that he was making remarkable use of a high school mechanical drawing class, but his patter was fascinating and I stopped to say hello to him before I got off the train. He pretended friendliness and wove his connection to me into his attempts to impress this young woman. However, he obviously did not want to see me. I wished him luck and got off the train.

**Isaac: From Poverty to Mental Illness and Back**

Yeah, I fucked everything up, but it was bound to happen sooner or later.

**Isaac - Diagnosed Bipolar**

Underemployment and low pay can have a very damaging effect on the male ego. Trained and socialized to be providers and "big men", many of my informants had actually played this role at one point in their lives. A layoff, demotion or rise in rent often had very damaging effects on their self-esteem and terrible consequences for the maintenance of their kin networks. Unemployment, housing loss, illiteracy, impotence, and virtually any other inability to perform the socially prescribed functions of an adult male often precipitated a breakdown of kin networks.

Though very few of my informants were successful at sustaining love relationships during the period I studied them, it was something that was always very much on their minds and represented one of the key markers of how

successful their lives were. Many of them had had wives, families and long term lovers, but there had been a steady disintegration in the quality of their relationship that began with becoming unemployed and unable to carry their share of the bills. For several of my informants things had gone relatively well until a spouse or girlfriend became pregnant. For many of them who had managed to pay for their own expenses and occasionally play the big shot with their partner, the arrival of a child created financial responsibilities that they were unable to handle.

Isaac was one of these men. He had been able to sustain a two year relationship living with a girlfriend, but found the responsibility of a new child to be too much. He was a black man in his late 20's from a New York working class background. His father had been a bartender who died while Isaac was a teen and his mother had "done domestic work." He had been diagnosed as having manic-depressive tendencies and was now on SSI and living in a supportive SRO in the Bronx. He had been working as a permanent security guard at \$7 per hour, and had sustained a "happy relationship" with a woman who was a receptionist in an office on the Upper West Side. He had been in his early



20's and she was only 19, and when she became pregnant he "felt a lot of pressure to do the right thing." He had been living in an apartment with his older brother and his wife and the place was very crowded. His girlfriend was living with her mother. They decided that they would try to move in together. He described his situation thus:

Everyone warned me. They said you guys ain't ready to be living together. You guys don't have the money and all kinds of things. But we wanted to have a family. She had a rough time growing up and wanted the whole family thing. I wasn't so sure, but you know how it is with women. We got a little apartment in Harlem. A nice little place over by the park (Garvey Park), but when my daughter was born things got really bad. The delivery was difficult and my daughter had medical problems. We tried to take care of her, but things just weren't working out. Janine couldn't work. She had to take care of my daughter, and I tried to get more work, but I just couldn't seem to keep it together. I was working too much and I still couldn't make enough money.

When I asked him how he wound up in the shelter, he

was reticent about answering, but he finally agreed:

I kind of lost my shit you know. Like really lost my shit. Things got really fucked up around our house. It was like something just snapped and everything good turned bad. The thing is I started hitting Janine. It's not like I ever put her in the hospital or broke her bones or nothing, but it's like I was crazy. I'd come home and I'd look at her and everything was her fault. I be yelling at her, and acting crazy and all kind o' shit. I was so angry I just wanted to fuck her shit up all the time. Like now, I am thinking about her and I am getting fucking angry again. But it's real sad too, because we was young and real in love and things got out of control. Now I know it was my illness. You know, doctor says I'm manic-depressive. Sometimes I go really nuts. Anyhow, one night I get home from working. I had a couple beers after work, but that wasn't the problem. The problem was I was fucked up inside. I didn't respect myself or anyone else. I started in on her. I started hitting her. She started screaming my daughter was screaming I was screaming the whole thing was like a blur. Somebody

downstairs called the cops. They arrested me.

Resisting arrest, assaulting an officer, assault and battery, the whole bullshit. Yeah, I fucked everything up, but it was bound to happen sooner or later.

He paused and looked as if he might cry.

You know the rest: Rikers [New York City's island jail complex], a couple of months at Fishkill [a state prison north of New York City] and then into the fort. Ain't no different than half the guys in the fort.

He said that Janine was,

still living in our place with my daughter. She got a cousin lives there with her now. Sometimes I go over to visit my daughter and I spend the night there, if the cousin's away at her boyfriend's place. I might be a manic depressive, but I still love that woman. But things ain't the same, I fucked up and she knows it, I know it, the NYPD knows it, now you know it. Shit, the whole world knows it.

It was clear from his account of going to prison, losing his job and ruining his relationship that he could not have gone back with Janine and felt like "a man." He told me that he had felt strange about visiting her and his

daughter when he got out of prison and so had postponed it for a month because he felt like a failure. "A real man can take care of his family without hittin nobody," he said.

I wanted to know why he was staying in the shelter so I asked about his family and whether they were a support:

What family? My father is dead, my mother has no room 'cuz my sister and her kids live there. It's one of them big Harlem apartments, the old time kind, like back in the days when black people lived in style, but still, where would I sleep, in the living room? That's not a good thing for children to be around, a mentally ill uncle sleeping on the floor in the living room. That's one thing you guys don't understand about black people. You think we always stick together. That just ain't true. We stick together, when we can do something for each other. I can't do shit for anyone, not even myself.

Isaac had a brother, but his place was not an option:

Stanley don't give a shit. He had me living there [before I moved in with Janine] 'cuz he and his wife had a child on the way and they needed the rent money. They was mad as hell when I moved out, too. They got

two children now, ain't no room for me.

Many of my informants' problems began before having a spouse and a child, and thus they could not put these accomplishments on their emotional resumes for social workers and doctors, but the pattern of loving and losing very often seemed to be intimately connected with housing loss. Isaac's prison record and subsequent slide into the shelter made getting back on his feet very difficult. He had had the job, the apartment and the lover - the three things that my informants dreamed of - but he couldn't keep it together.

The degree to which Isaac's decline was triggered by the biochemical problem that he was diagnosed with in his mid twenties, and the degree to which it was caused by the stresses of an already difficult situation, will never be known. However, the challenges he then faced to rebuild his life were far greater than those which he was struggling with before.

The last time I saw Isaac, in 1993, he was still on SSI and living in the same supportive SRO in the Bronx. He had been trying to "escape" it by washing cars at a used car lot on Jerome Avenue, near his SRO. His hope was that

the owner of the lot would take him on as a part time salesman: "I've always been good at selling things since I was a kid and I sold more candy and more raffle tickets than any other kid in the church." He was not very optimistic though, as he had heard his boss talking with his customers:

My boss tells them he likes to give work to homeless people, cleaning the cars. I tell him that I'm not homeless, but standing out there in the sun scrubbing cars, I could be dressed in a tuxedo and what do you think I'd look like?

He then added, "Who hires a homeless person to sell cars?"

The last time I heard from him was when he called me from jail. He had been caught trespassing. He claimed he had gotten too depressed living in the SRO surrounded by drug addicts and crack whores, and when somebody had threatened him in the halls he just gave up and took to the streets. He said that he had been arrested for trying to sneak into the City College of New York gymnasium to take a shower. He told me not to worry about him because his SRO room would be waiting for him again in two months when he got out. He had called the manager of the SRO to make sure

that SSI was still paying his rent.

**Gabriel: You Can't Go Back Home Again<sup>31</sup>**

Gabriel provides an example of someone searching for a family life and unable to pursue his aspirations in the context of poverty and mental illness. He was a Dominican man in his early forties placed by CSS in a supportive community residence. After only three days he had had an incident over his refusal to take the psychiatric medications which were required for residency. Like most of my informants, he hated forced medication, partly because he claimed it impaired his sexual functioning. He was divorced with children and dreamed of having another family someday. The rules that forbade outside overnight visitors, the humiliation of being under lock and key, and sharing a room with a stranger were too much for him. He felt that it

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The following case represents a departure from the previous style, because although I have met and worked with this man and regard him as one of my informants, he was principally an informant of Alfredo Gonzalez, who collaborated with me on the field work. As will be apparent from the style in which it is presented (no long speeches by the person himself), I had less direct information. Most of the information on which this case is based was told to me by Mr. Gonzalez as his contribution to a paper that I wrote with Dr. Ida Susser. This paper is yet unpublished.

blocked everything he wanted. As a result of the intervention of CSS counselors, he started to receive monthly SSI checks and was able to move in with people he knew in The Bronx.

His room in the Bronx was rented from a Dominican couple. He lived quite peacefully for a few months until he returned to the Dominican Republic to visit his mother. While staying there he ran into an old girlfriend of his, Julia, who was also the sister of his New York landlady. They talked about old times and she confessed that he had been the only man she ever loved. Gabriel had had two children in the United States by another woman, but his marriage had failed after he lost his job at a supermarket. Julia had a daughter by a man she said she was no longer involved with. She asked him to consider the possibility of getting back together. Gabriel thought about it and said yes. After a brief courtship they decided to marry.

The arrangements for the wedding were made by Julia's family, who according to Gabriel had some money. They even bought him a suit for the occasion. When he returned to New York, he proudly showed pictures of his wedding, which seemed to have been a rather private event. The couple



spent a few nights in a hotel for their honeymoon after which Gabriel went to his mother's home to get ready to return to the United States. Gabriel spent his last night in the Dominican Republic with his bride at her parents' house.

Gabriel returned to NYC alone while Julia waited to receive a visa. He used his SSI to rent a room from his new sister in law. However, he got tired of her pressuring him to find a job, and he moved back to the shelter. As he talked to people about his marriage, he discovered that Julia was involved in a long term common law marriage with the father of her daughter. The two of them lived together in a house they owned in The Dominican Republic. He also learned that in the recent past, Julia had unsuccessfully attempted to sneak into the United States through Mexico, spending 50,000 Dominican pesos in the process. He put two and two together and realized that he had been used by Julia to obtain a green card. Gabriel stopped looking for a job and decided to remain on SSI, knowing that it is impossible for someone on public assistance to request legal status for a relative. He wanted to turn his back on the whole situation but his sister in law continued to

pursue him demanding that he get Julia legal residence. He felt very humiliated by the whole situation, and feared facing the ridicule of his friends and family back in the Dominican Republic. He could only bring himself to give his sister-in-law excuses and lies about the bureaucracy.

This relationship was doomed from the start by Julia's attempt to exploit Gabriel, but it does suggest how desperate Gabriel was to try and resolve his problems on his own, and prove his worth and fitness. He believed that Dominican women, like his first wife, "got ruined" when they came to the United States. He felt that they became too demanding, overly assertive and lacking in loyalty. He believed that both his marriages failed because his wives were "not traditional enough" and too influenced by United States culture. Gabriel, like many of my informants who expressed bitterness and rage against "demanding" women, was adept at rationalizing his own personal failure, providing himself with a self-defense.

#### **LOVE, FAMILY AND KINSHIP: DOING IT IN "THE SYSTEM"**

The problem of finding and maintaining kinship and

affective relationships is even greater within "the system" than outside it. Love and relationships are necessary even for someone who has entered "the system". Residences often do not allow for love and relationships.

As one of my informants, a black male in his 30's, said of the intensive supportive community residence where he lived, "they want you to check your dick at the door." I asked him if he had.

"What are you crazy", he answered, but then repented: Well to keep my housing, I gotta get those horrible injections. I walk around like a zombie all day, got this terrible dryness in my mouth and feel like a pot o' mashed potatoes. The worst thing is you can't get your dick hard. They know it. The doctors know it, the nurses know it and they love to do it to you. It makes them feel like big men. But for good behavior they reduce your dosage every now and then. I'm gettin' practically nothing these days. Sometimes I fuck the guy across the hall when the medication's wearing off. I'm not a homo, but they don't let me outta here because I'm still getting clean. I gotta stay away from the pipes [crack] and ho's. Besides, they got him

so doped up, that he probably don't know what the fuck is happening.

For one of my informants, a gentle and relatively compliant gay black man in his late 20's who was living in an intensive supportive community residence, part of the therapy was actually not having sex. There were signs posted throughout the building saying that sex of any kind was prohibited. When I asked this informant about this policy, he said:

You know it's a rule they can't enforce. There's gotta be people in here who are doing it. That's just the way people are, but they sure keep it a secret. They say the rule's there, because sex is too complicated between two residents who are fighting drugs, but it seems pretty complicated to stop it too.

I asked him if he had ever heard of anyone being thrown out for having sex. He said that he had not, but he had only lived there for a short period. He went on to add that he figured they knew it was going on, but:

they say that the treatment means giving in and surrendering, like to parents. I think it's to break us down. Lot of us have pretty fucked up lives and

need to be broken down though.

For those who were in less restrictive environments, there were more options for sexual relationships despite rules against them and the continued imperative of medication which often led to impotency. I found no supportive residences that allowed overnight guests. A project manager explained that this was necessary in order to make the treatment environment more important than the environment that caused homelessness, drug addiction, or mental illness. As he put it, "we are fighting a battle for their souls, against all the bad influences and bad examples they have had in their lives." He then proceeded to tell me about his own previous struggle with alcohol and drugs, and how it had been necessary to surrender everything to the treatment. "Like dying and being reborn," he said.

Though many social work professionals are not as rhetorical as this one was, and are more likely to see that it is a very difficult balance in allowing a resident/client aspects of an ordinary life and at the same time segregating him in a treatment community. Even with the most balanced approach to treatment, there is still an

inflexibility to the rules and regulations of SSI and the other government structures that have been put in effect to provide emergency support to the disabled and indigent.

This artificial dichotomy between inside "the system" and out forces care providers to not allow residents to go too far in their desires for kinship. Such desires are never approved by the agencies that fund these programs and there is no provision for fitting a family into the treatment. "The system" sets up the goal of resocializing these men to be better citizens, yet in the process it alienates these men from the very values - which they hold dear - that are at the core of United States culture.

### **Wilfred**

Wilfred was a 38 year old Black Crucian (native of the island of St. Croix) who has been an intermittent resident of the shelter for the last few years. Wilfred, who was gay, had maintained many friendships and long term love relationships over the years. He did not have a drug problem and was high functioning and likable. He was prone

to occasional bouts of mild depression, particularly as his relationships ended, and this was his reason for being in the CSS program.<sup>32</sup> However he found himself frequently losing SRO housing because of his desire to have a satisfying love life.

In one instance Wilfred was placed in an unsupervised SRO on 116th St in Manhattan. This was one of the least restrictive types of housing available to mentally ill homeless men. Like similar dwellings, this one had rules against visitors. Wilfred, as with the other residents, was forced to sneak in the man he was then dating. He was able to manage this inconvenience until the relationship started to sour. Wilfred, his lover and their conflicts became more noticeable to managers and neighbors. One day Wilfred's lover wanted to get into Wilfred's room when he wasn't there. Knowing that he couldn't come in through the front door alone, he climbed the fire escape and got in through

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Wilfred was very high functioning and seemed to have found his way into CSS and onto SSI, due largely to this fact. Nobody seemed to think he was actually mentally ill, though people were generally very happy to include him among the mentally ill because he was so easy and pleasant to deal with and everyone figured that he would eventually become a program success story.

the window. Neighbors saw him and called the police who broke into Wilfred's room and found his lover there. In a situation that might have otherwise called for police protection from an abusive ex-lover, Wilfred was evicted for having an unauthorized guest.

After this incident Wilfred came to realize that for a poor man like himself, a long term relationship may have been a luxury that he could not always afford. After having been evicted from the SRO he stayed in the shelter for about a year, where he could pursue his personal life as he pleased. He was finally placed in a supportive SRO. This was a more restrictive setting, designed for people in need of a higher level of supervision than the initial one. Before long he had ended two relationships after realizing that they presented potential threats to his housing. As long as he lived in such managed housing, Wilfred would not be able to fulfill his dream of a happy life with a companion.

While virtually all my informants complained that their housing prevented them from having a sex life, maintaining other social relationships was also difficult.

The frustrations these men expressed are mirrored in



the housing section of the CTI monthly interview. In answer to the question, "Why do you want to leave your current housing?" the three almost universal answers were space, privacy and independence, all of which were regarded as essential to establishing a satisfying social life. As one put it, "I can't bring friends here, its just crazy people, like me." Whether the respondents were living in a community residence, a supervised SRO, an unsupervised SRO, the shelter, or with their families, these three needs were identified as unfulfilled.

#### **Discussion: Blood and Sex In and Out of "The System"**

Finding and maintaining an affective and supportive kin network or regular sexual partners is very difficult for the unemployed and under-housed. They often do not meet many new people, they have few resources to offer, and they generally feel like useless failures who are not yet in a position to be partners, fathers, or responsible masculine care takers. Left to their own devices outside the system they find a variety of compromises, many of which are relatively satisfying for periods of time. During times of stress or crisis, when they are forced to measure their

lives against the American dream they come up short. This often pitches them into self pity and depression, further blocking them from what they want.

Robert's two steady girlfriends provided him a relief from shelter life. Robert was much more aware than most of my informants of how far he had to go before he could be tested by his dreams. He consciously avoided moving in with either of his girlfriends and was absolutely committed to avoiding fatherhood, which he believed would be the ultimate destruction of a man who could not even support himself. This premeditated upward mobility that Robert had was unusual among my informants, many of whom, like Gabriel, were ready to dive deeply into any possible opportunity to fulfill the American dream, no matter how unrealistic.

Isaac, whose occasional nights with his ex, fostered the hope that he could become "a man" again and get a new relationship or rekindle the old one, if he could find steady work. Isaac, unlike Franklin or Robert, had already failed to build the family he had dreamed of. A beaten man who had also to a degree accepted that his diagnosis would prevent him from achieving his dreams, Isaac was torn

between trying to become something of what he once was, and trying to mark time on SSI and in the system for the rest of his life. Since neither of his two options were appealing to him, he would get down on himself and spend periods of time where he did not seem to care if he lived or died.

Kevin, though receiving SSI, was barely in "the system" but lived with sisters in a very crowded apartment. He was relatively low functioning and severely mentally ill. Though he managed to pick up some money here and there "doing odd jobs", which I assume had something to do with drugs, his dream was that one of his sisters would get rich and take him out to live in the country or the suburbs. There, according to his dreams, they would have more space and he could learn a craft like woodworking or stone cutting, and become an "independent contractor." The kinship bonds that he shared with his sisters and their families was very strong, in their own tragic way. He was a provider who brought in a paltry but needed few hundred dollars per month from his SSI. They provided him with a home, food, and a small amount of care that kept him off the streets most of the time. In return he also provided

thousands of dollars worth of free child care for his sisters who had small pre-school age children.

Gregory faced the basic problem that he was bizarre and ugly looking. He had facial deformities and serious mental illnesses, however, his network of friends in and around the shelter, with whom he stayed, his ability to find his own housing and employment in a basement in the Bronx, suggest his ability to get the things that were needed for living. One of the main resources he used for getting back onto his feet, was the network of friends that he could maintain by staying in the shelter, and not in a SRO.

Though not living in the shelter, and never having spent a single night there, Jaime was closest among my informants to having the problem of shelterization. Badly damaged by alcohol and a nervous breakdown that was precipitated by his apartment building burning down in the 1970's, he adapted to a very low level of existence on his same block. Jaime lived in severely substandard housing, with no goals, no ambitions and little shame about his life. He was the buffoon on the block and a regular fixture who seemed relatively comfortable with his life (although

his living conditions led to his early death). He had no friends except a building super who had been a childhood friend, and apparently no sex life, but he had the support of the community around him, who built his house and tolerated his annoying presence.

Wilfred, who had a sister in New Jersey and kept in occasional contact with his family in St. Croix, believed that it would only be a matter of time before he got back on his feet financially and obtained private housing so that he could establish a love relationship and a regular circle of friends. He hoped that at some point he and his lover would be able to buy a place of their own and have some security.

### **Kinship and Poverty**

For most of my informants, the struggle for kinship and affective ties was defined by fear and unresolved longings. Knowing that it is human to express their sexuality and attempt to keep kinship networks active, they struggled with the package of housing, employment and kinship. When they were looking for love in the city and outside "the system", they struggled with their own

personal failures. In a society where the individual is deemed responsible for his or her own successes and failures, those without financial resources sit on the bottom rung and believe that they are to blame for their misery. They believed that they deserved less in the here and now and they attempted the difficult balance between their human need for companionship and survival and their inability to present themselves to those friends and lovers who they desired.

For those inside "the system", these same inner conflicts were compounded by a variety of rules designed to re-socialize and punish the poor. From SSI maximum earned income limits, to harsh rules in "transitional housing" against keeping active kinship networks, they found themselves in a battle just to hang on to the highly problematic kinship relations that they made or maintained during their period without shelter. For many of them, these transitional housing arrangements were seen as part of the process of obtaining permanent housing and employment. This was considered as the first step towards self-respect and repairing damaged kin networks. This attempt to become an adult participant in their

communities, usually came in direct conflict with the goals of the residences, which were to strip these men of their law of the jungle, compete with your neighbor socialization, into U.S. culture and recast them in a less deviant more cooperative set of values.

**Conclusion: "A Dollar and A Dream"**

No money, no honey.

- a common American expression often repeated in the shelter

Employment, or what you do for a living, and kinship, or who cares about you, are the two sites where the American dream is either realized, not realized, or deferred. In the view of most commentators and people living in the United States, the quality of housing and the quality of a kinship network must in some way derive from economic successes and failures. However, these three principle basic human aspirations are intimately linked, and it is generally thought that without one it may be difficult or impossible to have the others. Although a job, an apartment and a lover are three things that nearly

everybody on this planet wants, the way they are culturally managed varies from society to society.

In the United States there is a common belief that a job is not a right, but a privilege that must be earned through a variety of forms of service testing to prove worth and fitness. Though this is not the case in every country and every culture, under the ruthless discipline of the social lottery known as the American dream, and with a set of government policies that are regularly revamped to maintain that ruthless discipline, 10-20% of the population are kept in a state of roughly permanent underemployment in the United States. Black Americans tend to be the leading edge of this population that is denied employment, with official unemployment rates often double those of Euro-Americans and actual unemployment for blacks - many of whom do not report employment status to the government - far higher than that.

For those who lose this social lottery, the penalties can be very great. Similarly, with countries where a job is commonly considered a right, adequate private housing is also considered a right. For those who have not competed effectively enough in the economic arena, it stands to



reason by the individualist logic of U.S. culture that a private and safe home is not deserved. As one of my informants always used to say, "if they gave me anything good, why would white folks like you pay your rent?"

Finally, the right to the form of kinship that is tied to sex is clearly a powerful form of social control. Whether one analyzes the family and marriage as control of women, a site of support, care, love and escape from commodification and the rat race, or simply a neutral unit of social reproduction, denial of full access to this basic institution of all human societies, and the denial of the specific kinship forms that are normative in the United States is a powerful social sanction for failure to beat your neighbor in the economic lottery. Though it might be argued that a job, an apartment and a lover are all part of the same set of socio-economic rewards for social power, for my informants, they were connected, but separate. These three goals were the ways in which my informants measured their progress in life and tried to figure out how well they were doing. They are also the three arenas that can bring the greatest feelings of failure and shame. My informants saw them as very real. When these men were

reduced to being "the homeless", only one of their problems was being addressed. When they were reduced by the system to being the "mentally ill", none of these concerns were addressed, reducing almost any treatment or intervention to a failure before it started.

For those who tried to obtain their desires through the system, there was a need to turn off their sense of themselves as individuals, as Americans, as men, and as people with connections in the world. The only way to truly succeed in the system was to take the very ordinary goals of friends of one's own, sexual satisfaction, privacy, independence, kinship, employment, respect, love, and personal accomplishment, and check them at the door of whatever residence or program one entered. Usually this meant a renunciation of the desire for sex-kinship in favor of a variety of dangerous, fleeting and fugitive sexual encounters, a renunciation of the desire to be employed and pay one's own way, and a lack of concern for the basic housing amenities that they had been raised with as Americans.

For those who could not fit into such treatment communities, such as Isaac, Gabriel, Jaime, Gregory and

Franklin, there was a clear understanding that the membership credentials that were necessary for obtaining such kinships were too high for them. Though they all desperately wanted a family and a real place to live, none of them were quite as clear as my West Indian informant Robert, who understood exactly what the American dream was about and consciously articulated it and planned for it.

For Franklin, who was still very young, untested and hadn't yet won or lost the U.S. social lottery, he did not yet feel the need to define himself as a winner or a loser. Though his charismatic personality had the potential to take him a long way in business (or at the least starting some kind of religious cult), his drug problems, his inappropriate behavior, and his lack of opportunity due to reduced family resources and color did not put him on an easy path toward a comfortable, happy or well fulfilled family life. However, he understood well the quotation above, and realized that there was no honey without money: there was no way to have a home without a job, and no way to have a job without a home, and no way to have a family without both. His allusion to "wandering in the desert" was an equivalent of "I'm waiting for my ship to come in."

Though a very energetic and optimistic person, his resentment about race and his suspicion of white people seemed to be intimately tied to an understanding that he had very few tickets in the social lottery of the American dream and that he would be lucky to win the small prize of a family with someone who might be an ex-crack whore, a job at the margins of the social service industry, and a house that was better than his sister's floor.

Gabriel, who unlike Franklin was too old to put off asking himself if he'd won or lost the social lottery, attempted to make use of contacts outside the United States to take a short cut to the things he wanted. Though it seems likely that Gabriel was aware that the American dream had passed him by and that he was a loser, he thought he could return to a place where this social lottery was not such a dominant force, and from where he had a higher starting point. However, his wife, Julia, was no longer a misty eyed teenager, her town in the Dominican Republic was no longer an isolated agricultural community where simply being able to do labor was enough to give somebody value as a person, and he was no longer a promising youth. He was a slightly crazy, beaten man who had spent enough time in the

United States to fall off the edge, and Julia had enough contacts in the United States and enough familiarity with his situation to know that he was no *Sueño Americano* and could not give her much more than citizenship. For Gabriel, there was no returning home, he had lost the lottery and there was no hiding that fact and little chance of starting over.

For Isaac there was a very clear understanding that a family required the kind of financial and emotional resources that someone in his circumstances did not have. Just as he understood that a real job, and not charity for washing cars, was something that was going to be very difficult to get without a real house or a family to prove that he was not some "disaffiliated street person". He had fallen off the edge and couldn't get back up. A big loser in the social lottery, he had taken a gamble and started a family, the way Bill Gates took a gamble and dropped out of Harvard. One won and the other lost, and the size of the social wage probably did not change because of this fact. However the distribution remained skewed towards keeping the prize purse worth fighting over with one's neighbor.

## CHAPTER VI

### RUMPELSTILTSKIN REVERSED: MAKING HISTORY, MAKING POLITICS

You think you gonna find homeless people with culture? It's just a bunch of poor niggers. You want to find culture here, talk to the [social] workers.

Henry J.- Public shelter  
resident

#### An Informant Gives Me A Warning About Typology

For Henry, quoted above, the concept of culture' represented some kind of symbolic production, creative choice and control over the physical environment. As a trumpet player with an excellent and strong sound, but few financial skills and little professional success, Henry was absolutely convinced that he was a culture bearing animal, but saw no connection between homelessness and culture. He always assured me that I was studying black culture and that if I wanted to know about black culture, studying in the shelter was the last place to look.

His favorite topic of conversation was music, which he believed to be the pinnacle of black culture. At an early age he had committed himself to Jazz music, which he saw as classical music for black people. He had studied classical music as an exercise in multi-culturalism and could play many European classical compositions on the trumpet. He believed that Jazz was in the blood of black people and Mozart was in the blood of white people and that he could improve his music by studying other people's cultures.

When he was not trying to find money for drugs or worrying about someone messing with his trumpet, he would tease me, asking if I had found any homeless culture yet, and if I had, could I teach him some of their songs. He said he wanted to do jazz improvisations on them. I generally took his teasing in a good natured way, though there were times when it stung me because he was issuing a challenge to my field work. In an unsophisticated way, Henry was cognizant of the Marxian idea that humans are architects and not bees, and that there was conscious political activity behind his "homeless" nightmare. He realized that someone was making culture and history and that it was not him or any of the people living in the

shelter.

As I thought more about his challenges and those of other informants, particularly those with a black political consciousness, I came to realize that studying the homeless or even the broader category of the poor, was problematic. I was studying a category, which I had inherited from past researchers. The people who were grouped into this category had no self-consciousness, no history, no organizations, no objective definition, and none of the cultural rituals that made such picturesque photos for my colleagues' monographs. I might as well have been studying the lives and cultures of subway riders for use by *The Straphangers*<sup>33</sup> or the ways that people who love lima beans prepare them. However, *Straphangers* seemed to be more actively making history than any of the under-housed that I met, and lima bean lovers probably had more variety in their diets.

I went back to the literature on poverty that I had read as a graduate student. All of it seemed to be debating whether the homeless and poor were "the same as you and me"

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Straphangers is a lobby group that claims to support the interests of subway riders.



or living in a culture of poverty that was the poverty of culture. Like Fitzgerald saying, "the rich are different" and Hemingway responding, "yeah, they have more money," I found myself turning these debates over and over. The culture of poverty people seemed to be right about the poor having less culture, and yet I agreed with the populist liberals who were making the Boasian argument that "the poor" are actually human beings too.

As the study neared an end and I sought a position between the two poles, in desperation, I contacted my first social science theory teacher, who had introduced me to these debates. His comments were simple. He told me that there was nothing particularly interesting about people dying from lack of resources, "That has been happening since the agricultural revolution." "What you have to do," he continued "is figure out what makes your tribe different in the time and place you study them, otherwise you might as well be an accountant counting how much they make and how they spend it."

As I looked at the many works on skid row, tramps in 1920's America, Hobos in the great depression, !Kung in the Kalahari desert, and vagabonds after enclosures in Europe,

I saw little that was unique about the homeless. They seemed to have less culture than the !Kung, virtually the same origins and problems as skid row dwellers and vagabonds, and none of the colorful songs that hobos had borrowed from the many parts of rural America that they had come from.

Over time, I came back to the quotation from Henry that begins this chapter. Many of my informants had expressed similar sentiments over my 4 years of field work and I simply had not listened. I had been trying to figure out whether Kim Hopper was right and they were relatively ordinary people, or whether Jeffrey Gruneberg was right and they were deviant in their values and culture. I was trying to resolve a debate that should not have been a debate at all, but should have been the starting point for any inquiry. They were human beings and human beings are architects not bees. So who was making history on the backs of my informants, who was making history on my back as a researcher, and why? With this basic exercise in mind, I went back through my research and looked for the creation of meaning, and attempted to tie it to the conscious and concrete struggle of people organized in groups to make

their own history. In this chapter I will discuss some of the social actors who made history in the homeless crisis and on what terms they made that history.

### **Politicians and Social Workers Make Municipal History**

That's the last time I bring the homeless out to get a black mayor into office. He hasn't appointed any Hispanic homeless officials. He doesn't care about Latinos. It is only blacks and whites. Next time I'll get the guys to help a white.

- A Latino "homeless" researcher

Dinkins don't care about black people. He's always smilin', puttin' his people on welfare and he's got a stack of Yarmulkas on his head.

- Black shelter resident who wouldn't "play homeless" for the Dinkins campaign commenting on why he likes Farrakhan better than Dinkins

Statements such as the above were ubiquitous during my

fieldwork. For those who were educated and politically conscious enough to discuss municipal politics, there was a clear identification that was typically made between David Dinkins, New York City's first black mayor, and homeless policy. For nearly all my black informants, there was a sense that Dinkins' homeless policy had almost nothing to do with them, but rather was about race. For Latino informants there was often a sense that a black mayor was a way for white people to completely disenfranchise Latinos. For social workers and the occasional white under-housed informant, there was a strong belief that Dinkins was good for "the homeless."

Much of the belief that Dinkins was the mayor for the homeless came out of his election campaign in which he had "mobilized the homeless" and participated in "the Cuomo commission." Both of these actions, and the numerous less public ones he took on behalf of the homeless, were tied to an overall critique of the federal Reagan government. This was most explicitly stated in the report published by the Cuomo Commission entitled *The Way Home: A New Direction in Social Policy* (Dinkins & Cuomo, 1992). This report was well

received by most New York City Democrats and quite a few local Republicans. It was endorsed by prominent businessmen and community leaders. Andrew Cuomo's chairmanship of the commission led him to become Clinton's Assistant Secretary of Housing and Urban Development.

In its subtitle, *The Way Home* claimed to provide "a new direction in social policy". Featuring a variety of relatively uncontroversial suggestions for downsizing the public shelter system, the most controversial part of the report was its assertion that New York City had so many people without housing because "the federal government, historically the provider of low cost housing, has abandoned the business." Yet, there was no discussion of the fact that the federal government never played a major role in low cost housing in New York City (Jencks, 1994); why the same so called Republican abandonment of low income housing had not led to the same shortages in other parts of the country (Jencks, 1994; Rossi, 1989); or what role the majority Democratic Party congress had played in housing policy in the 1980's.

Lacking any empirical basis for such claims and ignoring overall housing, healthcare and employment

policies that were crucial to my informants and their families, *The Way Home* stood as one of the key intellectual texts in the partisan battle over public sector funds. Inhabiting the left wing of the Democratic party since WWII, the Dinkins Democrats represented a congeries of black democrats, public sector workers, and social service providers whose subsistence environment was threatened by the Reagan revolution nationally, and former mayor Ed Koch's local coalition of Wall Street bankers and bond holders.

Though these Dinkins Democrats were threatened both locally and nationally, the defeat of Ed Koch in the Democratic Primary determined that Dinkins' mayoralty would be focused on attacks on Washington Republicans. In this war for a part of the social wage that Reagan was privatizing, the word "homeless" linked together a highly visible impoverished population and its social advocates into a political struggle over public programs. Appealing to guilt, shame, and compassion, the homeless were a group that could present a battle standard for this threatened social democratic wing of the Democratic Party, without raising difficult broader issues such as overall working

class housing, healthcare, and employment.

Fitting perfectly with the New Deal exclusion of non-whites from employment based programs and the Great Society policy of paying one section of the working class to keep another impoverished section alive, the homeless crisis represented the latest rendition of traditional U.S. symbolic roles for African-Americans in the discourse and politics of social inequality. Most of my informants expressed an unconscious understanding of this traditional role of the lowest sector of the black proletariat in the political culture of the United States. Some of them, such as the above quoted man talking about David Dinkins, were able to consciously articulate an explanation of this role and performance for these people.

#### **Dinkins Stages a Homeless Performance**

The following is a discussion of how the various types of informants I studied fitted into the Dinkins campaign's "mobilization of the homeless." Many of my informants had been encouraged by campaign workers and public shelter employees to stand on streets and highways with Dinkins

signs and literature. Though many of them personally fitted the stereotype of "a homeless person" and thus represented a useful political symbol to be manipulated by campaign workers, shelter administrators, and homeless activists, many of them resented being forced to abandon their American values and play a public role that was deeply humiliating.

### **"Working Poor"**

Susser and Gonzalez, among others, have documented the existence of so called "working poor" in the shelters. These fully employed people with permanent jobs, who because of some strange concatenation of unlucky events lost their housing, were a substantial group of the under-housed during the 1980's. Many of those who I studied during my field work had sad stories of roommates who had not paid the rent, landlords who jacked up the rent or fires in rent controlled apartments that forced them to look for places that cost two, three or four times as much.

These people are not the ones who sparked the public imagination, signified the homeless crisis or stood on the highways with "Dinkins for Mayor" signs during the election



campaign of 1989. If Dinkins had mobilized these people when he mobilized the homeless, he would have had to pay more than \$4.50 per hour as they were accustomed to higher salaries. These severely under-housed people did not look ratty or poor enough to stand out on the highway pitching the Dinkins campaign, and anyway were usually too busy working overtime to save for a deposit on a lease. If these homeless had been "mobilized" by Dinkins, most New Yorkers would have said that Dinkins was causing traffic jams by filling the highways with badly paid black people, not homeless.

### **Slackers and Gen X**

While doing fieldwork among the under-housed who lived in and around Tompkins Square Park, I came across a social category of housing-deprived individuals who were white, in their 20's and usually had some college education. Although some did not have college educations, they appeared as such because they lacked the New York white ethnic blue collar style. The relatively large group I met that fit into this category had usually never had a permanent, regular job. They tended to move from temporary job to temporary job and

picked up occasional day labor in a variety of service oriented settings. Though some were bohemians chasing dreams of acting, writing and being artists, many were not and just had not been able to find adequate work. They all shared a common housing problem and had rarely kept the same housing for more than 6 months at a time over the previous 5 years. This was due to some combination of lack of resources and conflict from overcrowding.

Because of their skin color and self described middle class status (despite what I counted to be entirely blue collar parental backgrounds), these people never considered spending a single night in a public shelter. In their view shelters were dangerous places for lower class blacks and Latinos. However, these informants had spent nights in the park, on friend's couches, at all night diners and bars, and in Grand Central Station due to housing loss, territorial conflict in crowded shares, etc. Some of them had been in squats, where they only contributed to maintaining the building, and a few had slept on roofs. For the most part they had avoided sleeping in public, due to some combination of family resources, friends and kin networks, but in most ways they faced the same challenges

as those who had been defined as part of the homeless crisis.

Though these people lacked housing, clearly they were not what was meant by "the homeless". If David Dinkins had "mobilized" these people as part of his election campaign, most New Yorkers would have said, "the guy mobilized the slackers." Perhaps such a strategy would have worked in Seattle, but not in New York City.

Though it did not fit with the cultural concerns of the time or the peculiarly U.S. racial sense of who is entitled to aspire to cultural production, a 26 year old white college graduate who had never been regularly employed, had been barely housed for 4 years, used coke socially and aspired to be an artist, was not fundamentally different from a 22 year old black male who had one year of college, had never been regularly employed, smoked crack socially and wrote poetry with the hopes of being an important writer "like Malcolm X." Besides the difference in color/caste and crack versus coke, the major differences between these two informants were the fact that the white one was less likely to end up on public assistance or in the shelter system.

**"Trailer Trash" Without Trailers**

During my fieldwork at the shelter, and through networks I developed in homeless studies outside the shelter, I discovered a whole underworld of barely educated, blue collar style ethnic white people living in older urbanized neighborhoods at the edges of New York City. Many of these people were similar in every way to the archetypical homeless person. Spending large parts of the day in parks, on streets, and in public programs, these people lived off "the system." They often slept in substandard semi-public housing such as laundry rooms, unconverted basements, and tripled up apartments in which territorial conflict would lead to occasional nights in the shelters or on the streets. They had many of the same problems as the black people identified as "homeless": lack of family resources, drug addictions, long term unemployment, alcoholism, bad grooming, depression, mental illness and inappropriate behavior. In style and lifeways many of these people were completely indistinguishable from "the homeless", except for one thing: they were white and lived in the interstices of largely white neighborhoods.

This also is not the group that inspired pity and

fear, leading to the McKinney act on Homelessness or for whom the "color blind" Cuomo report was written. If David Dinkins had "mobilized" these people, it might have been said that he mobilized white trash - an unappealing prospect to voters. In the mainstream U.S. political symbology, a well dressed tennis playing black mayoral candidate who emptied the edge-cities of their poorest and least presentable white folks and displayed their semi-urban poverty in public would not have inspired the kind of compassion, shame, and guilt that Dinkins drew on to create his political coalition. Instead he might have been seen as being "uppity" for violating the American political rules that say that black is poor and white is middle class. With no vocabulary to describe white poverty, voters would probably have seen such a display as unnatural, confusing and invidious.

### **"Well Spoken", Without Housing**

Many of the people who live in shelters, unlike those who sleep in the streets, are very well groomed. With little employment, no housing of their own, and many of the problems facing other shelter dwellers, these well dressed

and carefully groomed men were undistinguishable from fully housed New Yorkers. Some had lost housing and had long term employment problems due to a variety of causes ranging from short prison sentences, bad work histories and emotional problems, to roommates who had not come through with the rent. Though black and not college educated, some of these people were "well spoken black men", to use the phrase designed to refer to people who surprise the listener by not speaking in black English. Taking care to dress well and present a decent image on the streets, it was important for these people to "not look homeless" and some succeeded admirably. This is certainly not what was meant by "Dinkins mobilized the homeless." If these people had stood out on the Westside highway at rush hour with Dinkins signs, people would have said, "Dinkins put Buppies on the streets", and this would not have appealed to those who saw "the homeless" as their battle standard. This strategy also might have appeared "uppity", and similar to Spike Lee's representations during that same period of blacks as better middle class people than whites.

#### **The Semiotics of Willie Horton**

The fact that one of the salient features of the defeat of Ed Koch at the hands of New York's first black mayor, David Dinkins, was connected to policy for and social mobilization of a group of people who could only be characterized as black, ugly, and repulsive, should suggest the differences between housing crisis and homeless crisis.

Dinkins was a savvy manipulator of social signifiers who understood the political semiotics of "the homeless" along with the politics of race. Taking a page from George Bush, for whom black represented urban poor and lacking the restraints of civilization, Dinkins played the race card in the opposite sense. George Bush, in his 1988 campaign, displayed Willie Horton as the libidinous "super-spade", "Mandingo", black, inner city murderer and rapist, unencumbered by Christian/Freudian social restraints. This he used in order to argue for taking away social support for the ghettos, militarizing the poor neighborhoods of U.S. cities, expanding both the prison population and the prisons system, and reinstituting the death penalty.

Dinkins used under-housed, underemployed symbolically emasculated black men, wandering the streets of New York like zombies from a George Romero movie, to promote his

protection of the public sector. As these living dead flooded onto the highways and into public places vacantly carrying the Dinkins signs that they had been paid, bribed, cajoled and coerced into carrying, Dinkins argued for saving social service jobs and protecting the public sector from the ravages of neo-liberalism.

David Dinkins made the homeless his Willie Horton. Though few of them understood the issues, besides the fact that there might, for the first time, be a black mayor, this "mobilization of the homeless" represented Dinkins' affirmation that black should remain a signifier for impoverished and disrespectable.<sup>34</sup> The underlying message of this campaign was that, in the face of neo-liberalism, the white working class organized into its public sector unions, social work communities and academic research projects, should remain the prioritized bringers of civilization. They would bring civilization through the poverty programs, social work projects, institutions of

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This happened at a time when, by nearly all reports, the so called black middle class was growing faster than similar Euro-American social status/employment caste segments.



public education and welfare.<sup>35</sup>

Both Dinkins and Bush clearly understood the role and meaning of the black working class in U.S. culture. However for George Bush, who spoke to a broad U.S. audience in which black people are only a small minority, white workers are rarely unionized and the majority of voters are from the petty bourgeoisie, Willie Horton was a well calculated risk that paid off. For Dinkins, who was trying to appeal to the well organized but highly bureaucratized New York City working class with its vast multi-racial public sector, the cultural symbols were adjusted and reinterpreted to follow a different vision of the caste/color system of the United States. Instead of the unchained Mandingo, Dinkins took the fear of unkempt unwashed black men blighting residential neighborhoods and business districts, lunging out of doorways begging commuters for quarters, and he presented the black working

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Despite the political drama of black as victim and white as civilization bringer, the public sector in New York City is multi-racial, with Dinkins' support coming from unions like Transit Workers Union local 100 whose majority is people of color and 1199 which is also majority people of color and run by black, Puerto Rican, and Euro-American officials.

class as victim rather than victimizer. These victims in desperate need of help, education, re-socialization and other forms of non-penal state control and re-education, were proven by Dinkins to be rehabilitable through their political "mobilization", a major step towards citizenship. By getting these living dead onto the highways and streets of New York and giving them campaign literature and placards he accomplished two things: he proved, in traditional progressive era fashion, that with proper care and social control the homeless could be contained or even uplifted; and that no great white hunter like George Bush was going to protect the neighborhood from these prelapsarian "men of the forest."<sup>36</sup> In the semiotics of

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A crucial comparison could be made between the different ways that Dinkins and his successor Rudolph Giuliani presented and managed the people who washed windows at stoplights on the West Side Highway and other streets. During the 1980's and early 90's these people were a constant source of consternation, stories and complaints. A common discussion was how do you deal with these people who nearly block your way on the highway and clean your window against your will, sometimes doing a genuinely excellent job using real cleaning solvents and tools, and sometimes just making it dirtier. For Dinkins they were presented as "homeless window washers" who became campaign workers. They were an annoyance but they needed to be tolerated until Dinkins could rehabilitate them. The Giuliani administration actually waged a campaign to change their

David Dinkins' campaign, with its "gorgeous mosaic" of cultures, each a distinct separate tile in the ethnic design of New York, there was only one man who could bring together all the tiles. It was not a "great white hunter" like George Bush, but a "well spoken" black man who could mediate between these unmixable groups.

The ability that Dinkins was supposed to have to please the black community was made explicit, not just in regard to the mobilization of the homeless, but in a variety of other ways. During the election period there was much talk about the way in which Dinkins' election would heal some of the bitter racial divide that seemed to be getting worse through the 1980's.

Though there was much optimism about Dinkins, it was during this period that Al Sharpton rose to prominence in state politics. Presenting a black centered vision of politics, Sharpton drew on the vision of Martin Delaney and Booker T. Washington, in opposition to Dinkins' integrationist perspective. An unpublished study of

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name, they became "squeegee pests" to be harassed, arrested, and ignored. He thus solved the homeless problem on the highways with a simple change in terminology.

Sharpton's "Slave Theater" meetings, done by African-American anthropologist Sabia Prince, charted the rise of his organization during this period. Prince argued that the rise of Al Sharpton was a response by black people to Dinkins' vision of black people as disempowered. She found two crucial factors that fueled Sharpton's still limited popularity: Dinkins' public subordination of black symbols to Jewish ones; and the attempt by the Dinkins campaign and its black political supporters to block the Sharpton march in response to the cold blooded murder of black teenager, Yusef Hawkins in a racially motivated incident in Bensonhurst.<sup>37</sup> Describing Dinkins as a "handkerchief head" with too many yarmulkas (just as my informant had), who would rather get elected than express outrage at a

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This incident, in which the mainstream black political leadership was united in its opposition to causing trouble that might endanger Dinkins' chances in a potentially racially polarized election, became the first major moment in the political career of Reverend Al Sharpton, now a Democratic Party black leader. He refused to follow the line set by the Dinkins people and took a march of black and white anti-racists into the streets of Bensonhurst. This may have been the moment in which Sharpton went from being a small player with a record of espionage for the FBI against the black liberation movement, to being an important political figure in New York City black politics.

lynching, Sharpton's people made political use of Dinkins' playing of Willie Horton in reverse. Though Sharpton's group never made a systematic critique of the usage of the homeless crisis by Dinkins, they did not share Dinkins' political strategy of parading the ugliest and dirtiest black people in front of the New York public.

When Dinkins was elected he expanded services and facilities for the homeless and participated in a wide variety of pro-active policies for solving the homeless crisis. However, the cost of housing continued to increase, several firehouses in black neighborhoods were closed, health services in largely black neighborhoods like Harlem were reduced, and support to CUNY was cut. A professed liberal, lifelong progressive, and associate of Michael Harrington, Dinkins blamed New York City's poverty on the Reagan administration (Dinkins, 1991). His attempts to shame the government in Washington into helping New York were a way of disappearing his own tremendous power over city tax regulations, selective enforcement of rental laws and protections, and the a dramatic expansion of the New York police force (7,000 new officers) at the expense of other social spending, such as public education and

housing.

Through all these "soft-neo-liberal" policies, Dinkins continued his commitment to "the homeless" as a symbol of the social imbalance of national neo-liberalism. Many civil servants, large public sector unionists, social workers, and others who were threatened by the Reagan revolution, found in Dinkins a brake on the attack against their progressive era liberal belief system and the destruction of their publically funded subsistence environment.

#### **Social Science: Making History and Playing the Numbers Game**

For social scientists who were studying the increasing poverty in New York City, the category of homeless was an easy extension of the earlier category "poor". Part of a series of discussions about the nature of the "underclass" and the urban poor, homeless was a sensational category that connected researchers to an emerging political discourse on a contemporary social problem. The "mobilization of the homeless" by David Dinkins created tremendous excitement among scholars who claimed a relationship to poor people's movements and funding for public projects and research (Jencks, 1993).

At the municipal level, there were jobs studying, ministering to and designing policy for "the homeless." At the national level, there was considerable funding that helped to replace traditional sources of funding for the social sciences, which was shrinking at the hands of the Reagan revolution. Among these new sources of funding the most spectacular was the one billion dollars apportioned to the homeless in the 1987 federal legislation known as the McKinney Act.

The McKinney Act was named after Stewart B. McKinney, who had been a congressman representing Connecticut's 4<sup>th</sup> district and a Republican opponent of the Reagan administration's attempts to cut domestic programs, particularly ones connected to the poverty industry. Introduced in January of 1987 by Democrat Thomas S. Foley under the title "Urgent Relief For the Homeless Act", it was passed by the House 264 to 121, with only 43 Republicans voting for it. Later that winter the Democrats decided to back away from the bill, which was touted as big spending on the homeless. They made a compromise bill with the Republicans, which they named after McKinney as part of a bi-Partisan response to some of the more public and

desperate results of the Reagan revolution.

Despite many studies of "the homeless" prior to 1987, the passing of the McKinney Act stood as a pivotal moment in the social science of homelessness. There was suddenly far more money apportioned to homeless studies, a larger network of jobs in the field, courses at Universities, and newspaper and media coverage. The McKinney Act helped to create a homeless industry the way poverty programs in the 1960's and 1970's had helped create a poverty studies industry.

The fact that research money was available to specifically study "the homeless" pre-determined a confusion in typology due not just to the fact that the unit of analysis had been set before beginning the study, but also due to the physical location of most of the studies. Generally working closely with social service providers in the sites where this population was found, anthropologists, public health researchers, sociologists and others who were concerned with the lives of the underhoused were taking a unit of analysis from the agenda of social workers for whom emergency shelter was the key problem.



Though the 1980's saw a genuine increase in the number of people who did not have adequate housing and there were more people sleeping more nights on the streets of New York City than at any time in recent memory, all the literature, both academic and explicitly government policy oriented, shared an initial assumption that there was a homeless life. This life revolved around an adaptation to the social environment of the shelter and the social service industry: the site where most of this population could be found and defined. It is this unitary focus on the environment of social services and shelters that led to such designated identities and problems as "homeless specific behavior", "shelterization", and "the culture of poverty."

Instead of attempting to define what the problem that came to be called "the homeless crisis" actually was and how it could be prevented, most of the literature started with the assumption that "homelessness" was the problem and then sought a definition based not on what the problem was caused by, but on how many people could be classified as "homeless" and therefore how much money and what priority should be given to the problem. In short, what should have been an exercise in establishing the quality of the problem

became an exercise in establishing the quantity of an entirely unproblematic population.

This definitional numbers game was engaged in a number of ways, by a number of authors, with a variety of policy suggestions for dealing with the problem of the "homeless." Obviously the definition of the population is the crucial factor in determining the extent of the problem and the quantity of those affected. Some of the broader working definitions have relied on legal financial criteria such as the holding of a lease or connection to a domestic unit that holds a lease (Rossi 1991); some have taken essentially arbitrary phenomenological criteria, such as numbers of nights homeless per month over a certain period (Susser, Caton, Valencia, 1990), while others have used entirely anecdotal descriptions to suggest what has happened in the lives of their informants (Dehavenon 1995). Others still have used arbitrary space definitions and argued that "almost homeless", or those who are too crowded in their apartments, should be counted in the numbers game and in policy recommendations (Louise Stark, quoted from Barak, 1988). Finally, the 1992 New York City Commission on The Homeless, in their celebrated report entitled *The Way*

*Home*, which charted the course for "homeless policy" in New York City through the 1990's (Popularly known as "the Cuomo Commission Report" after the Chair of the commission, Andrew Cuomo), never even attempted to define the population that they sought to help.

An interesting exception to this was Kim Hopper, probably the most important scholar on "homelessness" in America. He recognized the problem of the numbers game and presented two definitions of "homeless". The first of these involved "people who claim as their usual nighttime residence either the streets, parks, alleyways, abandoned buildings and other out-of-the way sanctuaries, known only to their users" (Hopper 1987:11). The second definition suggested that "homeless" referred to those people who have been identified by society as "homeless", labeled by the social service system as "homeless", given services and resources as "homeless". According to this definition the "homeless" comprised only a small percentage of those who shared similar housing problems (Hopper 1987). Hopper recognized that this invisible population that Greg Barak (1991) has called the "prehomeless" is crucial in the production of the "homeless", but since his studies were

ultimately centered around the problem of homelessness, this recognition was never fully developed and represented a footnote to the numbers game instead of a qualitative challenge to defining the nature of the crisis.

Finally, the one exception to this lack of reflexiveness was Mark Stern's 1984 article in *Social Service Review* entitled "The Emergence of the Homeless Problem." In this article, he argues that the homeless problem was socially constructed as part of the Reagan revolution, which sought to rehabilitate the notion of deserving poor versus undeserving poor. In this way he viewed homelessness as partly the creation of the Republican Party's domination of American political culture in the 1980's. Though Stern identified the mechanisms by which U.S. political culture shapes public perceptions and he developed an analysis of what the problem of "homelessness" meant to Republicans, he neglected the role of the Democratic Party in the symbology of U.S. politics.

Stern's analysis of the development of the idea of homelessness stood as a moment of promise in the study of urban poverty and the deconstruction of the homeless

crisis, but it was never fulfilled due to what Christopher Jencks described as "the liberal partisanship" of the homeless crisis.

This liberal partisanship was the crucial U.S. cultural tradition within which we can understand the meaning of the homeless crisis in America. Unlike the under-housed themselves, the liberal partisans who participated in this crisis, whether academics, government policy makers, social activists, union leaders, or those inclined to charitable volunteering, were actually making history.

#### **Under-housed and the Performance of Homelessness**

Though not carrying any self-identification as homeless or any set of homeless specific shared meanings, most of my under-housed informants were as acutely aware of what a homeless person was as most New Yorkers. Though the raggedness, passivity and pathos that were popularly identified with being homeless in the 1980's appeared obvious and natural, like all social roles it required a social performance that had to be learned by the individuals who were fitted into that role. Within the role

of homeless, there were many subtle variations, moods, and performances required for the different circumstances in which under-housed individuals found themselves. These roles and performances all revolved around a character that might be known as "the deserving poor man" (Stern 1984).

For the majority of my informants, the role of homeless was one that they were conscious of either trying on, using, or rejecting. Although most of my under-housed informants attempted to reject this performance as often as possible and asserted other mostly conscious roles and characters, such as the angry black man, the disrespected older worker or trade unionist, the cultured poet, musician, or actor down on his luck, when pushed to the wall by lack of shelter and lack of employment, most of them could and would "play homeless."

Contrary to prescribed U.S. social values, particularly for male gender socialization, becoming "homeless" took more than losing housing, it took practice. Based on an image of pathetic submission, passive misery, and a complete loss of control of all aspects of one's life, playing homeless was reserved for moments when a social worker, housing counselor, or other person who could

offer something "homeless specific" demanded going into character. Despite what was offered and the rational logic of playing that role, many informants refused.

This issue of performance became particularly problematic with strangers who had high standards and conflicting expectations from the performance, such as the supervisors of the street corner sales of the *Daily News* during the truck drivers strike and admissions interviewers at transitional housing facilities. In such public and unfamiliar situations my informants felt stretched to the breaking point by the conflicting demands that they be in character as homeless, but also function at a high level in public, selling papers and dodging striking workers.

One man who had refused work as a scab paper seller during the *Daily News* strike complained bitterly about how bad it was that they not only expected their employees to "spend all day working and selling newspapers, but ya gotta look like something the cat dragged in, because they didn't want none of them drivers to beat you up. Couldn't pay me enough to do that."

For many of my informants the roles of crackhead and homeless were antipodes that they would experiment with,

contrast, and try on, depending on the situation. They often drew comparisons between the crackhead who "no one fucks with, because they're crazy and got nothing to lose" and the homeless man who "everybody fucks with and feels sorry for." Which of these roles a man played and when depended largely on the context, the value perceived in the performance and the possibility of being convincing. For the younger men in their teens and twenties, whether or not they had experiences with crack, they understood that being young, black, and poor made them a visible threat and that the possibility that they were crackheads added to their danger; thus entitling them to some respect and a wide berth in the streets and in their difficult housing circumstances.

One informant, Mark, a twenty-three year old African-American male who was slightly retarded and had never held a full-time job or had a crack habit, told me that because he did not know how to fight well, he pretended to be a crackhead sometimes because "guys don't fuck with you as much if they know you a hard motherfucker. Problem is when you gettin' trouble from guys that really is. But you can always convince the white folks that you're dangerous."



This same man agonized for days over his difficulties with the admission interview at a supportive community housing site where his social worker was trying to place him. As he put it, "I get real nervous in those interviews. Got to pretend I'm some vegetable that don't want work or pussy."

For those who faced the grueling admissions process in transitional housing, there was the conflicting demand that they seem presentable, civilized and able to live with others, and yet disaffiliated, passive, and dysfunctional enough that they were not likely to cause trouble by trying to take control of their lives. This was a particularly difficult performance of homelessness, since they were generally faced with one or more interviews to get into a residence. In order to prepare for these interviews they often spent many weeks practicing and being coached by their social workers at the shelter on how to beat the interview process. As one man, who obtained transitional housing, told me after he had been forced to leave because he was "too independent", "it's like the opposite of a job interview, they want to know what you can't do."

Equally problematic for those "playing homeless" was

the ontological panic that one could actually become "homeless". There was a belief that this identity that had been imposed from above could actually take root and become a way of seeing oneself. As one of my informants suggested, "you act like one of them zombies for long enough and you could become one."

This link between the performance of homelessness and the living dead or zombies was a common one that my informants made. There was a general paranoia that the only way that the social workers, researchers and service providers could get them to act like the homeless people they wanted them to be was to turn them into zombies. This involved a combination of psychotherapy and intra-muscular injections of drugs to make them more passive and take away their sex drive. This was usually done by medical staff in the shelter or at transitional housing facilities. As a director of one of the supportive residences where one of my informants lived told me, "we had to up his dose[of Halidol], because the guy is acting too independent. He kept out a worker who wanted to search his room. He claimed he's straight, but I don't believe him. We're trying to run a place for people who want to cooperate, not crackheads."

When all else failed, there was brute force. This was not generally used in transitional housing, but it was often used by shelter workers.

Regardless of the context in which my informants found themselves playing homeless, they all deeply resented the charade. When the charade put them into environments in which they were required to stay in character for more than a set of transitory interactions they struggled with the counterposed demands of their lifelong connection to the values, requirements, and rituals of being an adult in American culture and their on again off again dependence on the homeless industry. This industry which promised to take straw homeless men and turn them into pliant, cooperative gold men who could fit into the highly regimented world of transitional housing communities, drug treatment programs, mental health care facilities and other social service environments was regarded by many of them as a race specific form of torture.

### **Rumpelstiltskin Reversed**

Lots of people look at this shelter and see a bunch of homeless niggers. I see black gold.

- Franklin, Self-described Prophet and Poet

In the fairy tale, *Rumpelstiltskin*, a young woman was able to turn straw into gold simply by saying a name. Amidst the rising rate of exploitation, increasing inequality, and leaner meaner economy of the 1980's a two syllable word, in the hands of a variety of New York City political actors, helped turn the gold of human life, human labor, and human creativity into straw. That word was "homeless". The use of this word created a public services trap that came to be called shelterization. Twenty years earlier the word "poor" and all the policies connected to it had institutionalized socio-economic problems such as unemployment, lack of job skills, education, and proper health care into an "underclass", defined by being caught in what Susser and Kreninsky called "The Welfare Trap." In both the 1960's/70's golden age of poverty programs and

culture of poverty debates, and the 1980's homeless crisis, a group of social actors, connected to social services, research, and government made history by constructing a Krippendorff's tribe which they studied, argued about and came to understand. That neither "the poor" nor "the homeless" represented a salient self-identification, with a set of objective or definable boundaries or rituals, helped further the confusion over typology and allowed for the reification of timeless and unproblematized categories. The original reification that began with 19<sup>th</sup> Century paupers and later continued with the culture of poverty debate was able to continue with the homeless crisis, because there were no real members of the tribe to challenge data, boundaries, and conclusions. Just as there are no real political movements by people on welfare to collectively stand in defense of public assistance programs, there continue to be no homeless who organize as homeless. In passing nearly a decade studying and thinking about "the homeless", I have come to realize that an anthropological study of "the homeless" makes as little sense as an anthropological study of the "homeful." There is nothing about being poor or lacking housing that brings people

together or gives them a collective identity.

The riddle that this dissertation started with: Why is there no direct relationship between the number of people without housing and the scope, breadth and importance of the homeless crisis, can be easily answered. The answer lies buried deep in the cognitive map of American culture. The United States political system, more than any other in the advanced industrial world, is founded on individualism and a rejection of concepts of society and class. In the American system for describing and understanding social inequality, there are currently no words for describing the American working class, the social wage, and its overall relationship to housing, health care and employment. There are only words for describing individuals, races and their differences.

If there is no word for describing what is happening, for most people it is not happening and is unreal. If there is a word for something that is not happening, it may become seen and thus be perceived as real. Words like "society", "working class", "housing" (as in housing policy, as opposed to individual houses) and "employment" (again in the social sense, rather than an individual job)

can be uttered and still not be heard or have meaning.

Rather than guarantee employment at a living wage for all, a certain percentage of the American working class is kept under-employed. Rather than provide decent housing for all, the New York City municipal government and the federal government continue the long term policy of committing massive amounts of the social wage to federal housing programs designed to reward private ownership through tax breaks. These expensive social programs are not counterbalanced by the small subsidies apportioned to allow for the basic survival of those whose lives are adversely affected.

"Homeless", like "poor" and "pauper", is an American cultural keyword describing race and difference that creates one understanding and obscures another. Despite having little meaning for those who suffered most from this crisis, the word created an imagined reality that obscured the existence of a government public housing policy and employment policy that were highly destructive to large sectors of the working class. "Homeless" was a small part of a much bigger crisis of social reproduction that many working class New Yorkers faced in the 1980's. The word

"homeless" proved (to paraphrase my informant Franklin) that by uttering a word, black gold can be turned into straw and the difference between these two substances can be a matter of perception.



## EPILOGUE

### THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES: SEARCHING FOR THE U.S. WORKING CLASS

In the fairy tale called "The Emperor's New Clothes" an emperor has a very important fashion authority design for him a gorgeous set of clothes to wear in a public pageant. The designer gives him an imaginary suit of clothes that leaves the emperor naked. The citizenry and advisors to the crown are far too afraid of the emperor and the authority of the designer to point out that the emperor is naked. He parades in public, without any clothes, until the lie is revealed by a child who says, "the emperor is naked." In this moral tale about authority and truth, one imagines that the designer was put to death and the child rewarded for his truthfulness. This is because truth and beauty are the principles that this emperor uses to rule.

However, one might as easily imagine that if the child had not been there and this ruse had continued for many years, what was a deviant exception might well have become a cultural tradition. When the child finally was allowed to

come to the pageant and uttered the simple truth that the emperor wore no clothes, no one would have believed him because they would not see the nakedness, but instead the many colors that they had come to expect. In such a situation, if the emperor felt any doubt, the child and his family would be the ones put to death. But a seed of doubt might have been planted in some of the more open hearts in the kingdom.

The purpose of anthropology is to put that doubt into open hearts and call into question the cultural maps that we use to get from one point to another. That all social behavior is historically and socially constructed is a cliché, but sometimes the task of seeing how, why and where the construction occurs is a difficult one. The 1980's was a period of increased class struggle on the part of those who benefit most directly from the portion of the social product that goes to profit. This period, characterized by the breaking of the PATCO union, the defeat of the British miners strike, an increasing rate of exploitation both individually through the lengthening of the work day and collectively through public austerity, and the defeat of workers' states in the East, created the current world we

live in. This post-cold war era, described by George Bush, echoing the Nazis, as the "new world order", is one in which the social program and ideology of the Social Darwinists who were discussed in chapter two is triumphant. Though some of the protagonists of the homeless crisis, such as Andrew Cuomo, have been integrated into the downsized, streamlined and more efficient (higher rate of exploitation) public sector, the homeless are no longer useful battle standards. Those who believed in the cause of providing for the homeless have either been folded back into a world of reduced expectations and fewer resources or cast out into other economic arenas.

As Americans work harder and harder to stay in the same place economically, rather than creating the resistance that is often predicted, the lack of class based moral tales of truth and justice for the toilers of the world has created a situation more like what Gerald Sider describes in his critique of the "hydraulic model": you push people down in one place and instead of popping up in another, they are crushed. Like truth in a kingdom led by a naked emperor, resistance must have an underlying basis in the social world that the resisters inhabit. There must be

an ideology, discourse, or vocabulary of truth and justice. Though flawed by its connection to race and the public assistance industry, the homeless crisis was a moral tale of truth and justice, in which one group of workers defended themselves while they demanded a better life for another group. Though they rejected the Social Darwinist values of a war of every man against all, they were guided by the U.S. cultural vocabulary of race, difference, and individuality. This cultural vocabulary prevented them from understanding the situation in working class terms and seeing it from a working class perspective. Perhaps if those social workers, public sector employees, public health researchers, teachers of classes on homelessness, and activists had spent less time using words like "homeless" and "poor" to distinguish categories of entitlement, and more time looking for words to describe the challenges facing the totality of their inarticulate and poorly organized social class, the homeless crisis and all the money, time and labor that went into it might have yielded a better life for the U.S. working class in the 1990's for weak or strong, mentally ill or mentally stable, blue collar or white collar, African descended or European

descended.

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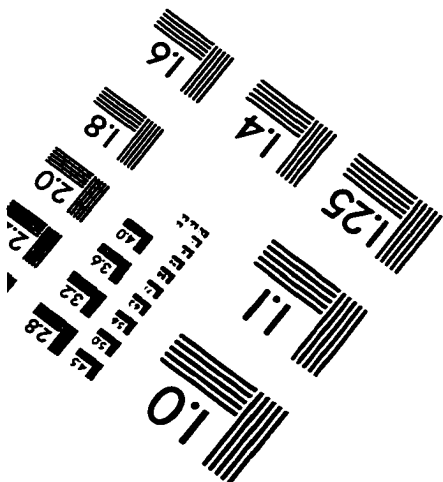
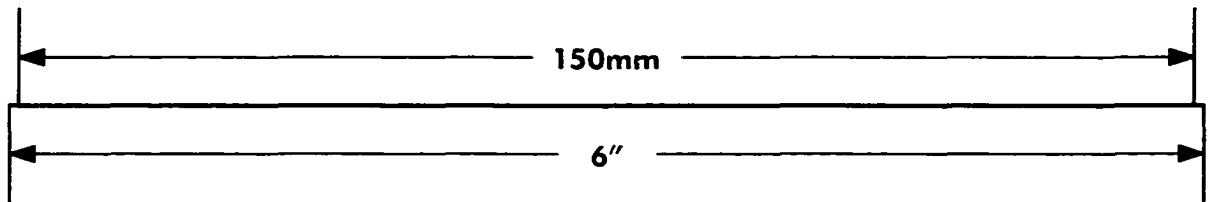
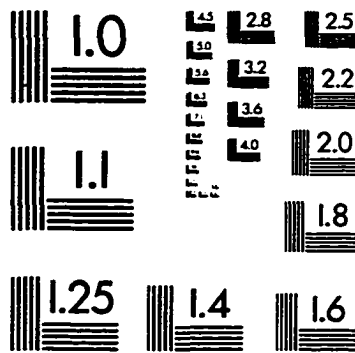
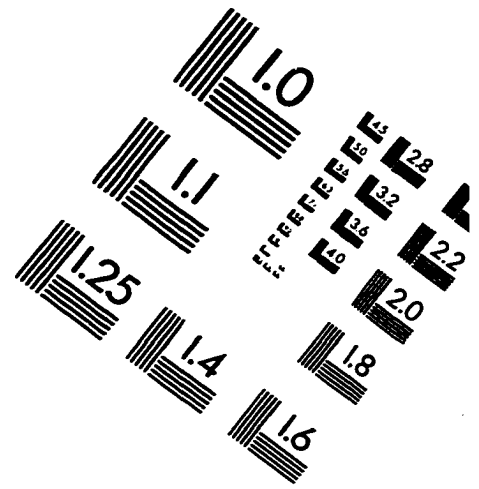
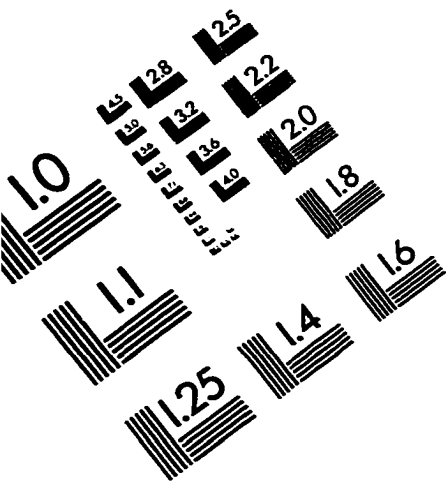
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