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**SEXUALITY AND LOVE IN THE LIVES OF HOMELESS MEN
IN NEW YORK CITY**

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

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M. Alfredo González

Adviser: Professor Ida Susser

After succeeding waves of positive and negative attention, the homeless have become the unavoidable evidence of poverty in New York City. Since scarce low-income housing is adjudicated to families, single adults remain residents in the municipal shelter system where they have found refuge for more than two decades despite advertised official efforts to end homelessness. From these impersonal buildings the poorest of the poor conduct their daily lives and in them, their sorrows and joys find a stage. They not only sleep, eat and keep their meager belongings in them, but they also locate in the shelter the center of their social and emotional worlds.

Poverty imprints its mark on every aspect of the lives of the poor. While health and education are known to suffer from the scarcity of material resources, its effects on the emotional and sexual lives of the underprivileged are less recognized. Furthermore, if we accept on one hand, that social classes possess characteristic cultural formations and

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on the other, that sexuality and emotion are culturally constructed, it would then follow that the poor experience their emotions and their sexual lives and identities in culturally specific ways.

This work examines the sexual and emotional lives of homeless men who have sex with men, along the lines of gender, sexual identity and their position in the socio-economic ladder. It highlights these men's social networks, sexual activities, and amorous liaisons within and without shelter buildings. Additionally, this narrative details the intimate lives of a handful of working-class men in the context of economic restructuring and housing shortage in New York City. The contrast of the materials of this ethnography with widely accepted ideas of sexual identity, sexual behavior, and emotional attachment in the United States, seem to indicate the role that social class has in the experience of sexual and emotional intimacy.

Acknowledgements

In my adolescence, a woman I loved and admired told me: *we only have this exquisite moment in which we are together*. It was only in my thirties, with my faith in the future nearly extinguished, that I was able to *live for the day*. During the early portion of my research for this dissertation, before 1994, the possibility that I would ever write this dissertation seemed unlikely, and so I immersed myself into my fieldwork with the certainty that it would be my last anthropological gesture. I wrote my field notes not as much in hopes that one day they would be the data that would support my dissertation, but in the delight of recording my informants' experiences. Since what I expect rarely comes true, today I am writing the *acknowledgements* section of a work I thought I would never be able to complete, a privilege that is hard to describe, in which the following people were implicated in different ways.

First and most importantly, the expertise and warm attention of Dr. Paul C. Bellman impeded my premonitions from coming true. *Bellman* not only looked after my health staying two and three steps ahead of the game, but strengthened my self reliance in repeating the mantra "you have amazing healing powers." While he made sure my body was up to the challenge of writing these pages, the unflinching and optimistic support of Professor Ida Susser, the director of my dissertation committee, mentor, role model, and friend, restored my confidence and inspired me (and pushed me) to finish the work. Had I not had the opportunity to meet Ida or *Bellman*, I would never have been written this dissertation. To say that I thank them would be an understatement. Let respectful and loving silence convey what words would never do.

Gerald Creed, Shirley Lindenbaum, and Richard Parker, cheerfully and readily joined Ida Susser in my committee. They were patient readers and tactful commentators even when I needed less subtle methods to see what was standing before my eyes. Shirley took to the task of setting these pages in Standard English. My writing is not worthy of her editorial skills, but I accept them nonetheless.

The men I met during the different stages of my research were generous in sharing their public and private lives with me. They repeatedly entrusted me with their most cherished, embarrassing and painful memories and confessions. That trust is the most precious gift they could bestow upon me and I thank them for it. I hope that my accounts make justice to the shreds of life on which they are based. If there is something I regret is that one day my fieldwork ended but their miseries did not. I do not delude myself in thinking that my research will contribute in any meaningful way to improve their lives but I hope that at least it will be a record of their existence, their courage, and the love they gave.

Without the help and companionship of Anthony Marcus, fieldwork would have been a lonely and grim experience. He heard, discussed, challenged, and contributed to most of the ideas in this dissertation. Over the years he has been a loyal and critical *compañero* in my academic, political and personal life. I am lucky to have met him and to keep him among my friends.

For years, the Anthropology Department of the Graduate Center became my extended family in ways that exceeded the intellectual. There I learned about poverty, urban anthropology, and the anthropology of the United States from Ida Susser. Shirley Lindenbaum taught me about sexuality and to organize my ideas. Leith Mullings opened

for me the doors of Black Feminist thought, and that changed me profoundly. From Gerry Sider I learned that in these postmodern times there remains a fruitful radical anthropology commitment to social change. His lecture on *silences* is still engraved in my memory and I feel most honored when he greets me *comrade!* Neil Smith introduced me to the work of Henri Lefebvre and to radical geography. Along with the work of Cindi Katz and David Harvey, Neils' has been a source of inspiration and a multitude of ideas. In more general terms, the work of Eleanor Leacock, June Nash and Eric Wolf are at the root of my understanding of the relevance of anthropology in today's world. I hope I deserve to be counted within their intellectual tradition. Louise Leniham was always ready to lend a hand and, from the time she was my advisor in Hunter College, she always had my best interests at heart. As an undergraduate, it was Louise who suggested that I should take a class with Ida Susser and since then, has never failed in her optimistic support of my interests. In my path through the Anthropology Department the most important lesson I learned from the faculty as a whole, was that a commitment to intellectual rigor is maximized when intimately linked to a deep sense of social responsibility.

Participating in the dissertation seminars led by Jane Schneider and Vincent Crapanzano were the key to start writing. Professor Crapanzano's reception of my first pages saved them from the waste basket and gave me the hint that it was worth to continue. Jane took time to listen to my exposition of the ideas I wanted to explore in this dissertation and declared them a contribution. Unfortunately, only a fraction found their way into this work. Professor Martin Duberman, on the other hand, thought that leaving a record of the lives of homeless men who have sex with men would be worth the effort

and similarly, only a fraction of the stories I collected is included here. I pledge not to forget them and put in paper the accounts and ideas that were left behind.

My classmates were a source of support and intellectual stimulation that made graduate school a growing experience and inspired me to finish. Betsy Andrews, León Arredondo, Jaime Atencio, Cristiana Bastos, Hugo Benavides, Helio Belik, Julia Butterfield, Walter Ewing, Carmen Ferradás, Alcira Forero Peña, Trenhom Junghans, Yvonne Lasalle, Kate McCaffrey, Eric McGuckin, Carmen Medeiros, Anthony Marcus, Sabihya Prince, Aseel Sawala, Ligia Simonian, Patricia Tovar, and Ara Wilson. The dissertation seminars under the leadership of professors Schneider and Crapanzano were most effective “safe spaces” to share the most embarrassing writing attempts. In them participated my classmates Julia Butterfield, Alcira Forero Peña, Murphy Halliburton, Trenhom Junghans, Carmen Medeiros, Guita Ranjbaran, Aseel Sawalla, Johnathan Shannon, and Bea Vidacs, and they were the most wonderful, thorough and encouraging critical readers I could have wished for. I cannot close this paragraph acknowledging my fellow classmates without remembering that I was in a sinking boat with Helio Belik, Ian Carmichael and Pauline Herrmann. Somehow, I was lucky to swim to temporary safety. I wish they were with me now.

The topic of my research was connected to my HIV activism. The Latino Caucus of ACT UP-New York and the ACT UP-Américas committee provided camaraderie and encouraged me to pursue the connections of research and activism. Gonzalo Aburto, Moisés Agosto, Jesús Aguais, César Carrasco, Sam Larson, Carlos Maldonado, Cándido Negrón, Jairo Pedraza, Luis Santiago, José Santini, Gustavo Vianna-Biehler, and Walt Wilder, and the late Lidia Awadalla, Victor Parra, Luis Salazar, Hector Seda, and Luis

Vera should be mentioned among many more.

My fieldwork would have not been possible without the help of Ida Susser and of Ezra Susser and Elicer Valencia in the CTI portion of it. At that time Sarah Conover provided logistic help, a congenial work environment, and an intelligent mind to try out my ideas. During my writing Ezra Susser again provided employment and, along with Dan Pilowsky, guided and taught me epidemiology on-the-job. Sarah Conover one more time, helped me fulfill my duties and listened to my ideas with sincere interest. Angelica Bocour, Helen Calderón, Pamela Collins, Leo Destin, Guillermo Di Clemente, Miguel Muñoz, José Quiñones, and Pablo Zapón formed a loyal and reliable team that turned work into pleasure. Working in a research study written by Allan Berkman was a unique source of pride and his company, delightful. During the last year Dr. Milton Wainberg invited me to join the *Brazilian HIV Intervention for the Severely Mentally Ill* study. Working with Milton, Karen McKinnon, Bob Remien, Isela Puello, Paulo Mattos and the Rio de Janeiro team is an exciting opportunity, a learning experience, and a priceless opportunity to be connected through work with Latin America. It is also a joy to work under Dr. Francine Cournos aegis, because she is a lovely person and because she weekly refills a huge bowl of candy for her workers to chew on. The women and men listed in this paragraph have regaled me with numerous favors, overlooked my inadequacies, and tolerated neurotic bouts during my writing. Their leniency and generosity made possible that I finish this dissertation.

My writing and research was aided by the selfless help and contributions of various people. Vincent Crapanzano suggested I should read Pierre Bourdieu and Aseel Sawala gave me a copy of *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. K.

Shaun Carmichael provided essential help with last minute editing. He read thoroughly these pages and identified so much with the points made in them, that the tenor of the most activist paragraphs result of his suggestions. Ann Duggan gave me current information about New York City's homeless shelter system. Guillermo Di Clemente and Kinjia Hinterland graciously allowed me to print several versions of this dissertation in their laser printers. The collaboration of this group of friends facilitated my research and sped up the process of finishing the analysis and writing.

Finally, my brother and sister and best friends, Rubén and Hebe González, and their life companions Renata Gangemi and Adrián Rusovich, are giving me reasons to stay happy: Tomás Rusovich, Natalio and Tiago González, and a fourth nephew or niece on his or her way to be born and named. Their love gives me courage. Two other persons have given me unconditional love and for years, insisted that this dissertation should be finished: my mother, Hebe C. López, and my companion of thirteen years Jairo E. Pedraza. This dissertation is dedicated to them, and to the memory of my father, José Américo González, who did not know I would take this road but I like to think, he would be pleased I did.

New York City

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Preface

This is a study of two subjects as they are reflected on each other: homelessness and sexuality. Between them, in place of a mirror, are the homeless men that were my informants. Within their bodies and along their lives, poverty and desire took a form I could observe. In that form, social suffering was evident in the intimacy of the men; economic restructuring revealed itself in their lovemaking. I am not sure that I know much about poverty or sexuality but I know my informants had experiential knowledge of them. The only way I have learned anything about either subject is because my informants' narratives alluded to them, their sorrows and joys.

In this dissertation, homelessness is understood as a manifestation of poverty. I reject conceptualizations of homelessness that construct it as an expression of individual pathology but err on the side of theories that view this social problem as the impact of structural forces on socio-economically vulnerable populations. Therefore, instead of representing the homeless as a sort of exotic *tribe*, I labor to find in them those interests, aspirations, and emotions that are common among the rest of United States' population. That is why I chose to focus on sexuality and love.

I do not use the data on the sexual and emotional lives of the homeless to support a theory that erases their particularities but to outline characteristics of a working-class culture. I stay away from both, conservative views that see the sexuality of the poor as dangerous and the cause of their misery, as well as liberal attempts to depict sexuality and love as universal manifestations of *human nature* that in their expression, unite all human beings. Instead, I confront the homeless' universal need for intimacy and love, as shaped

by poverty and lack of housing. Thus, they emerge distant from middle-class standards, contradictory, ambiguous and occasionally, self-defeating. I see these features of the intimate lives of my informants as the result of the way their emotions and sexuality were inextricably interwoven with their economic needs. Their predicament, that forces them to live their private lives in public spaces, evokes with strength that *the personal is political*, and comparing them with the public/private dichotomy at the root of the Gay movement's tactics of *visibility* and *coming out*, required me to reevaluate their significance for people that have no material means of privacy.

There are two themes in the analysis of my data: the construction of sexual identities and communities away from the Gay paradigm, and the *paradoxes of masculinity* that homeless men confronted as result of their social and gender location. Their alternative sexual notions and the social networks, in which they circulated, hint to the role of class culture in the production and maintenance of Gay and *homeless* understandings of sexuality alike. *Masculinity* conveys promises of privilege that for homeless men, materialize only in their most ephemeral or violent expressions. Yet, their pursuit places them in paradoxical circumstances from which they emerge with a more vulnerable sense of self-value that underscores the power of violence as their only reliable means of attaining respect, however brief.

In this ethnography I have consciously underplayed the ethnicity and race of my informants. The literature on sexuality often links instances of sexual activity between men in the absence of Gay or *homosexual* identities, to the ethnic or national location of the sexual agents. I believe that this is a dangerous practice that, in its partial depiction of the ethnic and national *other* as sexually *exotic*, often ignores the fact that *exotic* sexuality

can be found within the borders of the United States; even if in social classes different from the ethnographer's. I also played down ethnicity and race as well, as my intension was to explore social class as a prism for the analysis of sexuality. I wanted to keep the reader's attention on the relevance that socio-economic position and, in this specific case, scarcity of resources may have in shaping the experience of intimacy. I hope I have achieved that goal.

Finally, I present this ethnography as a product of action anthropology, inspired by the work of feminist anthropologists and informed by Marxist political economy. Thus, it can be inferred, that in going about my fieldwork and writing its results, I consciously take a political stance. I am also ready to admit, that this dissertation was written from an activist point of view and with the dream of a more just world, where no one would have to live in shelters and everyone could blossom to contribute the best expression of their intellectual and aesthetic abilities.

Research and Activism

This dissertation is the result of my combined interests in anthropology and social change. As an undergraduate anthropology major and as a *scholar* of the Minority Access to Research Careers (MARC) program, I was granted the opportunity of a summer placement in Indiantown, Florida (population 5,000, at that time). For three months in 1987, under the guidance of Professor Allan Burns (University of Florida, Gainesville), I did fieldwork with Kanjobal refugees who had successfully reached the United States after fleeing from Guatemala's civil war. As a volunteer of the Holy Cross Service Center, I helped Mexican and Guatemalan immigrants apply for legal residence under the

immigration law of 1986. My work experience that summer convinced me that whatever subject I chose to focus on in my career as an anthropologist would have to be socially relevant.

With that idea as a guiding principle, and as a gay man living in New York City, it was clear to me that the epidemic of HIV/AIDS would be the topic of choice. When I returned home in August of that year, I wasted no time in visiting the Minority Task Force on AIDS (MTFA) and offered myself as a volunteer. The MTFA was housed then in an apartment on Saint Nicholas Avenue and 114th Street. After my second or third day volunteering I joined my good friend Horacio, who lived on 113th Street, for dinner. He wanted to hear everything about my experience in Indiantown. I had met Horacio in Argentina and over the years we had become very close friends. I was helping him pick up the dirty dishes that evening, when I noticed a huge bulge in his right armpit. Two weeks later he was diagnosed with lymphoma, but it took him three months to tell me his doctor said it “may be HIV related.” Horacio died in early December of 1987, but his reluctance to admit his diagnosis to me, an old and close friend, remain engraved in my memory as further indication of the urgency of HIV infection as a topic of study.

Horacio’s shame of having AIDS, begged the question of what HIV meant for New York City’s Latin@s. In search of that answer, I visited and interviewed workers from various agencies in the city who provided them with health and social services. I was also granted permission to participate in what at that time was the only Spanish language support group in New York City for people with AIDS. This group was run under the auspice of the People with AIDS Coalition (PWAC). This experience exposed me to the lives of Latin American immigrants with AIDS and to the workings of ethnic

solidarity.¹ Looking to explore this interest I took an International Health class with Professor Ida Susser. She not only legitimized my interest in the connection between health and social justice for anthropology, but over the years, offered me many research opportunities to explore it.

The first occasion was a chance to spend the summer of 1988 in the Dominican Republic studying male sex workers, under Professor John Kreniske's supervision. That summer I also met young working class gay men that were part of a local HIV prevention effort, and I began to realize how power differences could have a central role in HIV transmission. In the liaisons of these two groups of men with tourists, sex workers had greater leverage to determine what went on than did the young gay men who often became romantically involved and thus less able to set limits. Like most people, I was aware of the connections between sexuality and HIV, but through my experience in the Dominican Republic, I began to understand the weight of emotions, particularly when combined with meager resources.

Upon my return to New York City, Professor Susser invited me to join her research project on homelessness and HIV as an ethnographer. I agreed and for the first time, I entered a municipal homeless shelter: the Franklin Avenue Men's Shelter, located in the Morrisania section of the Bronx.

¹ Domingo, a Dominican man with African features in his late twenties, shared once that during the past weekend, he had a fever so high that for two days he could not get up from bed to make himself a cup of tea. Bertha, a tiny Peruvian in her late fifties and the only woman in the group, turned her Indian face to express loving and respectful reproach, and told him: *pero m'hijito, porqué no me llamó? ;Yo hubiera ido a hacerle una sopita! No puede estar sin comer.* (But son, why didn't you call me? I would've gone to cook a little soup for you! You can't go without food.) At that time, CMV retinitis had reduced Bertha's vision to bright and dark shapes.

The culture shock that I did not experience in the Dominican Republic, I underwent in the homeless shelter. The combination of the smell of stale urine, disinfectant, and body odor; the noise of a TV set and the yelling of men reverberating in the cavernous interior of the armory building; and the sight of ocean of metal cots and men's bodies in different stages of dress and undress, caused a sensorial overflow in me I will never forget. Although after a few days I overcame the initial "shelter shock," it took me longer to accept the idea that the misery of the residents, the institutional indifference, and the dilapidated city blocks that surrounded the shelter's building, were located in the wealthiest city of the planet's richest nation. What I learned in the Dominican Republic about interpersonal relations and HIV transmission gained its larger, structural counterpart in Franklin Avenue Men's Shelter.

Besides finding out about the predicament of the homeless for the first time, I had a chance to be part of a collaborative HIV prevention effort. Along with my fellow ethnographers, Tamara Apollon and Sheryl Heron, a social worker, Ricardo Rodríguez, a security guard, *Magic*, and a fluctuating assortment of shelter residents, I worked on a video project that had HIV prevention for homeless men as its main goal (Susser and González 1990, 1992). Since the story line was collectively developed, the residents were able to portray the quagmire of their lives. In the work-group meetings where the inclusion or exclusion of segments were discussed, the residents explored their fears, prejudices, and causation theories of their homelessness, resulted in a reassessment of their circumstances and rich reflection on solutions to their plight in the political sphere.

An interest in ethnicity and sexuality as well as my search for a *home base* for my personal politics, led me to explore the landscape of Gay Latin@ organizations during the

late 1980s. I went to the meeting of Hispanics United Gays and Lesbians (HUGL) and the Boricua Gay and Lesbian Forum (BGLF) and although I am not Puerto Rican, my membership application to BGLF was readily and cheerfully accepted.

During one function of BGLF I met two Mexican men, Gonzalo Aburto and Victor Parra. Our passionate discussion of imperialism, the class struggle, and gay politics made me feel thoroughly *en familia*. Before parting that evening they invited me to a meeting of a group who they said, was *more political*: the Latino Caucus of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP-NY). My experiences in the Latino Caucus and the warm welcome BGLF gave me, illustrated what I was learning about ethnicity from with Professor Leith Mullings.

After we left Franklin Avenue Men's Shelter in the summer of 1989, our focus turned to homeless women. At "Women in Need," a shelter for battered women, they wanted *big brothers* for their many kids in exchange for allowing me to meet the women. I agreed and met a six years-old African American boy who I will call Richard, his mother and his four years-old sister. Instead of meeting more women I spend my time my time on this family. A month after I met Richard, they were placed in an apartment in the Bronx. I continued my visits there for the next year and a half until the mother and a Puerto Rican man she met in church, moved with the kids to Florida. I have kept in touch throughout the years and have visited each other. Today Richard is a twenty four years-old man living with his girlfriend and his sister, now twenty two, has just given birth to a baby daughter.

From October of 1989 to February of 1990 I did fieldwork at the Open Door, a drop-in center for men and women behind the Port Authority building, on Ninth Avenue.

Every evening some of the guests were shuttled to spend the night in private shelters, mostly in churches. The rest were allowed to stay but, since the program was not thought as a place to sleep, they could not lay down. Instead, they slept on their chairs with their heads on the table. The most daring would sneak under a table and lay down on the ground. I also visited a “tier two” hotel run by the Red Cross in the spring of 1990, where Yvonne Lasalle and Gwen Martínez were doing fieldwork among homeless women with children.

In 1990, Professor Susser obtained permission to conduct research in the New York City’s notorious *welfare hotels*. This allowed me to enter the King George Hotel in October of that year. Like other so-called *welfare hotels*, the King George Hotel was, at that time, a structure with a grand past and a dismal present. In terms of funding the city’s *welfare hotels* were at the opposite end of the shelters for homeless men in that their private operators received luxury hotels rates in combined federal and city funds, to accommodate hapless families in decaying, vermin-infested and crime ridden buildings. Boys and men family members were forcefully banned from these facilities (Susser 1991, 1993; Lasalle 1991). Not only were these families being split along gender lines, but homeless women were designated ritual eunuchs in their path through the institutions designed to help them; as if they had to renounce their sexual lives in exchange for assistance.

With images of the institutional perception of the sexuality of the extremely poor I began to learn from Professor Shirley Lindenbaum how sexuality is culturally constructed. Soon I began to ask myself if specific class cultures produce different constructions of sexuality.

In February of 1991, I was one of two interviewers and ethnographers that joined the Critical Time Intervention (CTI) study led by Ezra Susser and Elicer Valencia. My co-ethnographer was Anthony A. Marcus, a class-mate, co-worker, friend and dare I say, comrade. The CTI study was based in Fort Washington Men's Shelter, which coincidentally was known by workers of the system of homeless services as the *gay shelter*. There I found many more cases of homeless men who have sex with men than at Franklin Avenue, and my participant observation added a wealth of insights into their lives and their social networks. Although the focus of the CTI study was on the transition of mentally ill men from the shelter to various forms of housing, the monthly interviews I conducted in my three years as ethnographer, with more than fifty men, gave me a clear sense of how the material conditions of their lives changed during the eighteen months they participated in the study. Additionally, the principal investigators' and Sarah Conover's, the project director, scientific curiosity, concern with HIV transmission, and largesse, allowed me to explore the topic of their sexualities at will. In Fort Washington Men's Shelter I spent the longest period of my fieldwork and from it sprung friendships and acquaintances I followed out of the shelter into private homes, residential programs, *cage hotels*,² and the streets of various city neighborhoods.

The first four years of the nineties were professionally, politically and personally exciting times for me. My participation in the Latino Caucus of ACT UP-NY was a

² *Cage hotels* house their guests on wooden boxes or *cages* of about six feet long, by six feet wide, by seven feet high. The beds are planks of wood held from the walls, and the *ceilings* of the rooms are made of chicken wire. This makes very difficult to be in the dark in them and impossible not to hear noises from other rooms. *Cage hotels* have open floors in which the structures of the *cages* are set attached to each other. Sanitary facilities are shared and may be on another floor.

priceless opportunity to project myself as an AIDS activist in New York City, the United States, and the American continent. Furthermore, it provided me with an extended family of Latin@s concerned with social justice and the politics of HIV transmission and care. In one of the Latino Caucus meetings I met Jairo E. Predraza, my life companion of thirteen years. The Latino Caucus was a critical voice on HIV services for Latin@s and other racial and ethnic minorities in New York City. It also denounced loudly the inadequacy and moralizing of Puerto Rico's response to AIDS in a series of activist events that, among other strategies, compared HIV to other natural disasters common to the island: *¡Huracán SIDA!* (Hurricane AIDS!). Along with a group of members of the Latino Caucus I was part of the creation of ACT UP-Américas, a committee of ACT UP-NY concerned with the HIV epidemic in Latin America. ACT UP-Américas edited a Spanish language treatment bulleting and launched in the early nineties, the idea of transnational HIV activism that was taken up in recent years in the campaign for global access to HIV treatments. ACT UP-Américas denounced the HIV/AIDS policies of Mexico, Venezuela and Argentina. In its most successful campaign it put international pressure on Argentina's government to grant legal personality for the only LBGT organization there, the Comunidad Homosexual Argentina (CHA). A public statement on its favor was obtained from President Carlos S. Menem on November 19, 1991 when I confronted him, with the support Anthony Marcus, Jairo Pedraza, and Luis Santiago, during a talk he gave in Columbia University (Garbato 1999; Verbitsky 1993).

Through my activist work in the Latino Caucus of ACT UP-NY and ACT UP-Américas, I joined the Asociación Panamericana de Personas que Viven con HIV (APPVVIH), the Pan American Association of People Living with HIV in 1992. In 1995,

I served as its Vice President. My deteriorating health forced me to go on disability that year, and I remained very weak for the rest of the nineties.

In August of 1997, I managed to organize in Havana, Cuba a training workshop for people with HIV with the support of APPVVIH, Grupo de Prevención de SIDA (GPSIDA), and the Instituto de Medicina Tropical Pedro Kourí. The workshop spotlighted the importance of self-advocacy for people with HIV. Since only twenty two of its sixty participants came from other American countries, the emphasis of the workshop was the attending Cubans living with HIV. It was also the first workshop of its kind and the first opportunity for people with HIV in the island to meet outside the direct governmental purview. The workshop has since been repeated on various occasions during the following years.

In 1999, feeling strong enough to go back to the field, I started the final stage of my research on homeless MSMs. This time I collected oral accounts of their sexuality, their sexual identities, their socio-cultural backgrounds, and how they became homeless. Unable to enter city shelters, I approached potential informants right outside the buildings and I offered to pay them \$10 for each recorded interview. Those who agreed talked to me for about forty five minutes to an hour. My interviews initially took place outside Franklin Avenue shelter and then I moved on to the area surrounding Atlantic Avenue Men's Shelter, in Brooklyn. I learned that most *queens* were sent to Wards Island Men's Shelter and there I finished my collection of oral histories.

In December of 2000, I joined the newly formed Queer Economic Justice Network, one of the few organizations that have ever dealt with poverty in the gay community. It was there that I met Ann Duggan, of the Coalition for the Homeless, the

person who told me of Wards Island as the “new” *gay shelter*. On June of 2001, I helped her organize a contingent of homeless Lesbians who marched in that year’s Gay Pride Parade. In working with them, I was surprised by how different they were from the men I had met in my fieldwork, in their willingness to view their sexual identities in political terms. This intriguing question will not be entertained in this dissertation but, seems to me an important subject for anthropological study nonetheless.

My Role as Ethnographer

The ethnographic material discussed in this dissertation was collected while I was doing research on studies of risk of HIV infection and housing of mentally ill residents. For these studies, my centers of operation in the city shelters were the offices of the Community Support Services (CSS) program. In them I gained greater familiarity with its clients. While the CSS program was geared toward the mentally ill residents it also maintained an open door policy which allowed general population residents to seek refuge in its premises regardless of a psychiatric diagnosis, provided they followed rules of behavior. I made efforts to spend time outside of the CSS office to familiarize myself with the functioning and daily life of the shelter and its residents. My preference for simple and comfortable clothing made me look more like a resident than a worker, and sometimes workers thought that I was a resident. Residents never made that mistake. Although very few times residents associated me with the CSS program when on the *drill floor*,³ I was commonly assumed to be a worker. This could have been the result of my

³ The *drill floor*, inherited its denomination from the time the building was used by the National Guard. It was the largest open space and therefore, it was there that in the past military exercises took place. In its reincarnation as a shelter for the homeless the space

usual observing stance and the fact that I never sat on a cot unless I was invited to do so.

I did not limit myself to observing. I engaged and was engaged by residents in conversation not only in the *drill floor* but also in the hallways and on the front steps of the shelter. During part of my ethnographic work I lived in the surrounding area of the shelter. After leaving the shelter a few residents moved into the vicinity of my apartment, as close as three or four buildings from mine, and as far as four or five blocks away. This gave me opportunities to cross paths with current or former shelter residents on the street. For a couple of years after my work at the shelter I was recognized in the street by men who, realizing I did not know who they were, told me they knew me from the shelter. I believe that this does not only bear witness to my poor physiognomic memory but also to my profile among residents and workers of the shelter: my presence there was more prominent than I was aware of.

Since I am a light skinned Latino I was not always readily recognized as such by either workers or residents. The fact that Spanish (or Castilian, to use the proper word for the language spoken in Latin America) is my native language, this eventually revealed my ethnic background to other Latinos. The non-Latino among the shelter's workers and residents became aware of my ethnicity when they saw me using my native language with other men whose phenotype resembled more of what in the United States is understood as Latin American features. The use of a common language facilitated a certain degree of rapport with the Latino residents and allowed for a small measure of

was covered with cots. These historical roots and space use are common for most armories in New York City.

privacy for my conversations with Latinos when there were non-Latinos within earshot. Still, no Latino resident ever told me he had thought I was a resident.

I neither hid nor announced my sexual interest in men to shelter workers or residents. I would just speak openly about it if in a conversation I was asked questions about my private life. There was at least one instance in which a man perceived it. I was walking around the *drill floor* of the shelter with my fieldwork *compañero*, Anthony Marcus, when we saw among a group of Latinos seating on their cots and chatting, one of them showing the others his *hard on*. At my request we stood at some distance to see what was going on. The man stood up and holding his *hard on* in his shorts he walked directly to where we were. He spoke to both of us but I felt he was talking to me. He said that on the day I got paid I should come back for him so we could have fun. He spoke with a hand around the contour of his penis and suggestive smile in his lips. I was surprised he acted so fast and so assuredly. By then I already knew that some workers had sexual liaisons with residents. There is a growing belief among anthropologists researching sexuality that intimacy with the *natives* provides insights that can not be attained in any other way.⁴ For reasons that probably have more to do with my own feelings of inadequacy than anything else, I have opted for abstaining from engaging in sex with the people among which I am doing fieldwork.

In the case of homeless men, knowing well the great extent of their powerlessness and the misery to which they are subjected has proved to be the most profound *turn off*. Still, it was eroded when I got to know each man as an individual, personal affinity was

⁴ For discussions on the sexual identity and activity of anthropologists in the field see Kulick and Willson eds., 1995, and Markowitz and Ashkenazi eds., 1999.

established, and in addition, some *natives* were *hot*.

Dealing with the sexual interest of my informants has been much more difficult and awkward than dealing with my own. One afternoon standing in one of the side streets of a Brooklyn shelter, Kenny, a 24 years old resident I had met and interviewed a few weeks earlier approached me and after some small talk he suggested we go somewhere in the vicinity to have sex. The following words were exchanged:

Alfredo- Sorry, man; I'm working now, and I try not to mix work and play.

I knew he was sharp so I had doubts that I would be able to convince him of how strictly I construed the realms of work and play. Still, his reply surprised me.

Kenny- What? You don't get down with "the help"?

I had no illusions that my efforts to establish democratic ethnographic relationships with my informants, could do more than *tone down* our differences. But still, I was surprised by Kenny's use of a labor analogy. My discomfort was amplified by the euphemism "help" that indicated *his* awareness of those differences and his own effort to *tone them down*. Since I felt he might think, perhaps correctly, that his homelessness made him unattractive to me, I try to qualify how I saw our relationship.

Alfredo- No. It's not that, man. Plus, I don't consider you my "help." I rather think of you as my "informant."

Kenny's black face looked back at me with sudden seriousness. "Informant" and "informer" were not very different words. My mind exploded with the notion of black FBI informers and their treachery, and I began to wish I were using my mouth for something else, as he had asked, instead of letting it get me into such a mess.

The description of my position in the field would be incomplete without a brief

report on my *personal agenda* in choosing the research topic. When I came to terms with my same-sex desires, during Argentina's *dirty war*, my sexual interest in men was called *entender*, I was *un entendido*, and the circle of men and women I belonged to was *el ambiente*. Very shortly after, I was informed that I should use *gay* to speak about myself. After moving to Buenos Aires from my provincial hometown, I kept two separate lives and circles of friends: in one I was straight and was gay in the other. I slowly merged my social networks and informed one of the other, but the schizoid split in my life did not ease. Amazingly, I had more difficulties fitting in with my gay friends. My straight friends were not that involved in sports; we shared an interest in literature, art, music, and often talked about our emotions. We greeted each other with a kiss, at a time when the practice was not as widespread in Argentina as it is now, and they were warm and supportive on first hearing about the extent of my sexual experiences. Most of my gay friends on the other hand, were resistant to discuss politics and when we did, we rarely agreed. They seemed to me overly concerned with money and social status, were indifferent to social injustice, even when it pertained to gay people, and some surprised me with racist views. Additionally, they smirked at my interest in rock 'n roll, my *roquero* friends, and the *roquero* slang I used. What alienated me most from them was that they expressed their disagreement not as much in heated discussions, like my straight friends, but through ridicule.

In New York City those difficulties increased. Being interested in sex with men was not enough to establish a gay social network. I also had to know about Judy Garland, Broadway musicals, and the Hollywood film tradition. At that time, Rossellini, Truffaut, and Fassbinder did not hold much weight in US Gay culture. I had to learn what a *jock*

and a *swim team* were. Hardest was to understand that a common sexual experience did not impede hierarchical patterns of racial, ethnic, and class division in the gay community. I was very naïve. The closest I have come to experiencing a sense of *belonging* was in AIDS activism, within the Latino Caucus of ACT UP-New York. While I remain committed to equity and justice for alternative sexualities, the directions of the Gay political agenda and Gay (or Queer) communities in the last decade, have estranged me further from them.

My ethnography grows out of these life experiences. My search for community opened my eyes to groups of men-loving men that like me, did not find a home in the mainstream gay community. The men in this ethnography never insisted in finding a downtown *home* and accepted the roles and practices offered to them by their communities of birth. In doing so they exercised a sexuality marked by characteristics that keep them close to the *home* they grew up in. These characteristics often include homophobia, but their choice exempted them from being race and class exiles in the downtown gay community.

The Dissertation

In Chapter One I discuss homelessness by looking at it in historical perspective and in efforts to define it. Then, I move to a description of homeless shelters and an account of the ethnographic record. In Chapter Two I take a brief look at the concept of *home* and then move to the discussion and the research on the causes of homelessness. I end the chapter with a history of contemporary homelessness in New York City.

The theoretical tools I use in this ethnography are described in Chapter Three.

Bourdieu's (1977; 1984) concepts of *habitus* and distinction are selected for a more complex account of class. Gender is addressed through Connell's (1987; 1995) concept of *masculinities*, and *contemporary hegemonic masculinity*. I incorporate the critiques of Connell's work by Donaldson (1993) focus on upper class masculinities and Demetriou's (2001) concept of *masculine bloc*, a concept that flows from the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971; 1985). I end the chapter with overviews of *racialized* and *classed* masculinities.

The ethnographic section begins with Chapter Four and a description of the neighborhood that surrounds the shelter where most of my fieldwork took place. I depict the physical characteristics of the shelter, the demographic profile of the residents, and how they make a living and coexist in a community of destitute men. The subject of sexuality is first broached at length in Chapter Five. I discuss the sexual system of the shelter, and the sexual identities available in it. On this material I base reflections on the social meaning of the sexuality of the poor and I use Gramsci's concept of folklore (1985) to find in the sexual culture of the shelter a *proto* counter-hegemonic culture.

The following three chapters contain closer views of the lives of homeless men who have sex with men. Chapter Six is an opportunity to get to know four homeless men and orient ourselves within their sexual universe. It shows the homeless men's idiosyncratic way of conceiving and experiencing sexual identity as well as the healing effect sexuality has on their beleaguered selves. Theories about the morality of the poor that accuse them of being the cause of their own misery are challenged in Chapter Seven. My demographic data shows that my informants had many moral flaws but their ethical breaches have to be considered in the context of their wretchedness. Finally, in Chapter

Eight, I take up the paradoxical results of the attempts of more masculine men of the shelter to take advantage of those more feminine. In giving in to their sexual objectification by more feminine men, more masculine men lose power to the stigmatized *Homos* and *Queens*.

In the Epilogue I briefly review the history of the Gay movement and its lofty initial ideals and question the meaning of its current tactics for a sexual emancipation of homeless men. I conclude that even sexuality and love have the imprint of class and that my homeless informants have achieved a measure of sexual freedom even in the absence of Gay politics in their lives. Yet, I find in their sexual, emotional, material lives, ample vulnerabilities for HIV transmission that are not being addressed.

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Chapter One

Homelessness as a Manifestation of Poverty

In this initial chapter I set the discussion of current homelessness in the historical context of late twentieth century United States. To expose the underlying role of the state in placing the parameters of a social issue, I focus on the efforts of some social scientists and commentators to define homelessness in ways that conform to, contest, or expand the official rhetoric.

I turn then, to descriptions of the most common civic response to homelessness, emergency shelters, to show how institutional assumptions about homeless people shape life in these shelters. I close the chapter with a review of ethnographic literature that contributes new appraisals of established characteristics or elaborates on neglected aspects of homeless life.

Homelessness

In the late 1970s, when the “new homeless” began to be seen in the United States urban centers, the phenomenon of homelessness per se, was not what was new. By then “hobos” and “bag ladies” were part of city folklore, books had been written about them and social scientists had accumulated decades of research on this population. *Hobos* and *tramps* were largely men who were construed as lazy or bohemians who refused to join the permanent work force preferring instead to travel across the country in search of occasional work and spending their wages in alcohol. *Bag ladies* were women who roamed city streets with their possessions in numerous shopping bags and digging in

trashcans for food. In thinking of them we thought these women were pushed into vagrancy by mental illness. The apparent absence of kin networks in the lives of these men and women gave rise to the concept of *disaffiliation* (Bahr 1970, 1973; Bahr and Caplow, 1973; Bahr and Garrett 1976) that, in spite of its empirical weaknesses, has remained in the official understanding of homelessness for almost half a century.

The change of this phenomenon at the end of the seventies consisted in both its quantitative and qualitative aspects. The number of people sleeping in the street in any given night increased noticeably and could be seen outside *skid row* areas. The homeless were different also in kind: the majority were younger and people of color at that. They were no longer just individuals but family groups with children that wandered the streets, ate at soup kitchens, spent nights in churches basements and municipal shelters. It was the beginning of homelessness as one of the major urban problems, a problem that only grew and marked the last two decades of the Twentieth Century in urban United States.

The struggle to legitimize current homelessness as a relevant social problem took place during the 1980s. The debates on the dimension, origin, and the solutions of homelessness bore the mark of the worldview and political conviction of their participants. Governmental institutions put forward a view of the homeless crisis that simultaneously underestimated the numbers of the homeless and located the causes of homelessness in personal failure and responsibility. This two-pronged approach had two interlinked objectives. On one hand it limited from the outset the magnitude of the state's efforts in dealing with it, and on the other, it focused the causes of homelessness away from the issue of social justice placing it within the realms of existing bureaucracies, namely the National Institutes of Mental Health. Treating homelessness in terms of

medicalized categories like mental illness or substance use avoided the examination of problems such as unemployment, and the shortage of affordable housing left the political and economic institutions intact, and justified the forcible removal of the homeless from public spaces (Blau, 1992:77; Mathieu, 1993).

It would be unwise to totally disregard the role played in the crisis of homelessness by the deinstitutionalization of the men and women who were committed in state psychiatric institutions, and the growing epidemic of crack in the United States. There are no studies of the composition of the homeless population that show the significant numbers of the subsets of the mentally ill and the drug addicted among the homeless. But the fact that there are other groups within the homeless (e.g.: families, the unemployed, and those released from prison to the streets) suggests that there are underlying factors that turn various individual vulnerabilities into a life without a home.

Definitions

Kim Hopper (2003) writes that *the homeless* (like *the poor*) have been defined “not [by] unmet needs *per se*, but [by] a distinct set of ‘practices’ and a formal social response” (p. 15, emphasis in the original). Those who yesteryear were called *tramps* or *vagrants* are today’s *migrant workers* whose housing reflected the fleeting work they followed. The flophouses they inhabited also housed others that would not be considered homeless. Even the solid structures and political organization of Central Park’s *Hooverville* of the Depression would not compare with contemporary instances of homelessness (16). Contemporary feminist activism has helped define *battered women* as a population that may become homeless in its search for safety adding in this way a new post in the line of

defense against homelessness: *the shelter for battered women* (17).

If different historical moments have produced specific concepts of homelessness, the same is true when we examine the category cross-culturally. Irene Glasser (1994:3) tells us that every present-day society has imprinted its own mark in the definition of homelessness it uses. The construct of *disaffiliation* as a device to define homelessness¹ has characterized research in the United States and England. The extent of what is considered homelessness varies. England includes the *doubled-up* in its official definition of homelessness while in the United States advocates have argued unsuccessfully for their inclusion. Finland on the other hand goes beyond *the doubled-up* to include *separated families*, that is, families whose members live in different places because they lack their own dwelling (Glasser 1994:118). It seems clear that defining homelessness is directly related to the financial resources each society is willing to allocate for the poor (Glasser 1994:128; Huth and Wright, 1997:2) at a particular moment in history. This we should bear in mind when we examine the different definitions of homelessness that are used currently in the United States.

Official homeless policy in the United States has dealt with this group of people as if they had a common essence that caused the observable symptoms. Placing the complexities of displacement under a single rubric has rendered the homeless a *tribe* depicted by its superficial, observable characteristics. The unwillingness of the state to conceptualize the occurrence of homelessness by its close relationship to poverty has

¹ "Homelessness is a condition of detachment from society characterized by the absence or attenuation of affiliative bonds that link settled persons to a network of interconnected social structures" Caplow, Bahr and Sternberg (1968). Homelessness. In International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. Sills, ed. 6:494-98. New York: Free Press. Quoted in Glasser 1994:3.

resulted in the collapse of old images with new social trends. This creates the sense that everyone knows who we are talking about if we just resort to a catalogue of shared ideas to conjure an image. I heard someone saying “you’ll recognize the homeless when you see them” as if they were difficult to describe but easy to identify by referring to cultural prejudices about the homeless.

Unfortunately this is not just a recourse taken by the common citizen attempting to put into words a definition of social subjects that she has seen but never thought she would have to characterize. A few of the immense numbers of texts published during the past 25 years with the objective of elucidating and addressing the social problem of the homeless contain more questionable stabs at communicating what is the object of their studies. Consider this excerpt from Alice Baum and Donald Burnes’s (1993) *A Nation in Denial: the Truth about Homelessness*:

Everyday, in cities and towns across the country, men and women dressed in rags walk the streets aimlessly, oftentimes talking to visions, and frequently begging for money. They are often carrying plastic bags or pushing shopping carts filled with their possessions ... these people are called the homeless, but they are obviously more than just people without homes. They are dirty and sometimes frail; when they talk to visions, they show signs of mental illness or drug addiction, and the smell of alcohol that infuses their clothing reveals their drunkenness. (Pp. 11)

Luckily their “operationalization” of the subject of their study is placed in the first few pages of their book allowing us early on to get a sense of whether they will deliver what they promise in its subtitle.

The work of Emily Martin (1994) has shown how scientists have used ideas from the military and finance fields as inspiration and illustration of their models injecting a subtle slant into “hard science.” For social inquiry into issues of power and powerlessness

the challenge has not been lesser. The investigation of questions of gender, race, sexuality, class, justice, just to name a few categories that involved power asymmetries, has been hindered at times by biased assumptions in the hypotheses that have resulted in deleterious effects on the findings. Baum and Burnes' description of the homeless predicts their results: Mental illness and drug and alcohol abuse are the causes of homelessness, not income, housing, or unemployment.

Defining homelessness has been a difficult job because the state, in its local and federal instances, pre-empted the task through many practices of government that sent a clear message to all about what it would consider legitimate renderings of the problem. From the time it was first used in the nineteenth century the word *homeless* described only observable circumstances of certain people. By *enforcing* this "street deep" construction of a social problem the state asserted that the fates of the citizens who roamed aimlessly the urban landscapes of the United States would be thoroughly ahistorical. There would be no attempts to link their misery to any socio-economic phenomena of the moment or the recent past. Their prolonged lives in public spaces would be appraised at face value: only the associations that their pitiful figures could trigger in the mind of the bourgeois observer would qualify for probable cause. Very often those associations stood in the place of investigation, debate, and judgment, producing an instantaneous verdict: guilty. Even a cursory look into their personal work histories was replaced by socially available prejudices that privileged indolence, idleness, and alcoholism as the roots of poverty. Only widows and the elderly would be granted a small measure of compassion.

In its latest manifestation at the end of the twentieth century, the use of the word *homelessness* served for a while to isolate the visible phenomena from the debates about

poverty that had raged in the 1960s. There had been occasions in recent history when economic deprivation awakened a genuine concern in government and society that resulted in its perception as an issue of social justice and in legislation to address it. In the late 1970s it was clear to the government that poverty was not an issue that should be revisited. The word *homelessness* was connected to funds for its scientific study along very specific lines that carefully avoided the “p” word. Poverty was excised *a priori* from any explanatory models and thus it could not be included in the definition of *homelessness*.

It is no wonder then, that its description has been limited to certain observable symptoms such as spending nights in a public place, using illegal substances, or talking to people who are not physically there. Other symptoms that are observable such as income, or less evident like the legal right to use a particular place for nighttime residence, have been rendered dependent on individual characteristics variables (substance use, for example) or simply left out of the equation. Schutt and Garrett (1992a) propose: “*Homelessness can be simply defined as the inability to secure regular housing when such housing is desired.*” While this definition is a great improvement on Baum and Burnes’ attempt, it presupposes that we are in tacit agreement about what is regular housing. Such a presupposition is unscientific and the term needs to be detailed more carefully. In addition, the clause *when such housing is desired* leaves open the possibility that a homeless person would not want to be housed, that is, that some of the homeless of today would be the contemporaneous equivalent of the mythical *tramp*. I believe that, in addition to lacking a reference to income or employment, their definition is unduly informed by their professional work experience with homeless alcoholics. To their credit

they qualify the statement quoted above in another work (1992b:3) where they say that an effective approach to the problem should reject *simplistic solutions and constraining definitions*. Other writers have used observable phenomena, namely nights spent in a place not planned for sleeping, to convey an empirical quality to the definition of homelessness. Sosin and co-workers (1990) used longitudinal data in attempting to create a dimension in which vulnerability could be better portrayed. Charting shifts in and out of homelessness they are able to talk about greater or lesser “residential instability” in individuals. To some extent, we could elicit a measure of “financial precariousness” through this dimension.

Similarly, Peter Rossi using subjective terminology defines “literal” homelessness as “*not having regular and customary access to a conventional dwelling*” (1989:10). Aware of the shortcomings of the definition, in the following three pages he explains what he understands as “regular and customary” and “conventional dwelling.” Since this definition was used in a census of Chicago’s homeless carried out during 1985 and 1986 it came under heavy criticism for not including those who are unstably, precariously and temporarily housed, a population that becomes totally roofless from time to time. Rossi includes this population among the “extremely poor” and then tries to define what that means. His reason for not including the “*hidden homeless*” or “*precariously housed*” in his census is that “*by definition [they] cannot be studied. Studying the precariously housed involves working with very broad sampling frames including most impoverished households and entails both high costs and severe measurement problems*” (48). This definitional acrobatics would have been avoided by defining homelessness as a manifestation of poverty not as an independent phenomenon.

In his book *Down and Out, On the Road: The Homeless in American History*, Kenneth Kusmer (2002) has dug out the definition of a homeless person that Nels Anderson used in 1933 when he conducted the first count of the homeless:

“...A destitute man, woman or youth, either a resident in the community or a transient, who is without domicile at the time of enumeration. Such a person may have a home in another community, or relatives in the local community, but is for the time detached and will not or cannot return” (4).

While this definition is vague or broad in the use of the term “domicile” it does not ask for a subjective assessment by using words like “regular” or “customary.” Like the other definitions it includes only those persons who have come to be known the “literally homeless” (Rossi 1989:9). But in comprising the notion of *destitution* as a necessary condition of homelessness, it adds the economic aspect in the outlining of the homeless that is so blatantly absent in most other definitions. The attention that Anderson gave to income may be the result of his intimate knowledge of the homeless condition for he was inspired to go into sociology by his own experience as a homeless man. It also suggests that the exclusion of monetary resources from most definitions of homelessness is a more contemporary occurrence related to the right wing administrations of the 1980s. In 1933, when the homeless census that used Anderson’s definition of the homeless was conducted, the Great Depression was the highest national priority. The fact that, in the words of Kenneth Kusmer *“the ‘starvation army’ of men (and, to some extent, women and children) on the road had become the clearest evidence of a nation in the midst of a deepening economic crisis”*, not only barred the neglect of income when studying homelessness, but it was poverty that gave the impetus for initiatives such as the census and the creation of the Federal Transient Service (2002:193).

In an ethnography on homelessness in the affluent community of Santa Barbara, California, Bob Rosenthal adds an element in his definition of the homeless so far missing in those reviewed so far:

*“I will thus define homeless people in this work as those without sleeping quarters where they (or their legal guardians in the case of minors) have **legal** rights of residency for a period of at least seven days. I therefore include those in shelters or doubling up with friends, for instance, as homeless, since they may be evicted without legal recourse. I do not include those living in Single Room Occupancy (SRO) or welfare hotels, or those threatened with legal eviction after seven days... This, of course, is merely an arbitrary cutoff point, since the smallest setback—a delayed paycheck, a missed welfare check, a night of ‘inappropriate behavior’—may result in eviction and joining the ‘truly’ homeless. As a result, the ‘nearly homeless’ are often part of this discussion as well.” (1994:5; emphasis in the original)*

For the first time we see the consideration of the lack of legal right to a particular residence as a defining element of homelessness. While legal right to use a particular housing unit for seven days seems a very small a window to assert that the person with such a right is housed, it effectively allows for the inclusion of people doubling up among the homeless. Not only does it add a nuance that is absent elsewhere, but it sets up a priori a condition necessary for Rosenthal to deem a person housed. This very well might be the reason why it is missing from the official definition: not only because it would raise the numbers of the homeless but it would make the task of housing them a bit more complicated. Although Rosenthal promises to discuss from time to time the ‘nearly’ homeless, the explicit exclusion of SROs and welfare hotels residents is problematic, mainly because the federal government is willing to consider the latter as homeless.

Jahiel (1992) calls the definitions of homelessness that focus on the use of public spaces for nighttime residence and pathologized individual reasons (drug use, mental

illness, and disaffiliation) for being there, “place-based” definitions. He calls “theory-based” definitions of homelessness those that add issues of income and precarious residence, that is, they insert a dimension that connects the individual to the socio-economic environment. While Jahiel’s classification of definitions is helpful, we cannot say that “place-based” definitions are not backed by a theory of homelessness. They are, and it is a theory that sees in the personal failures of individuals the causes of homelessness. Throughout the crisis of homelessness the federal government has privileged “place-based” or more accurately “subject-blaming” definitions. The official understanding of what a homeless person is can be found in the text of the Stewart McKinney Homeless Act with scientific rigor: a homeless person is *“one who lacks a fixed permanent nighttime residence or whose nighttime residence is a temporary shelter, welfare hotel, or any public or private place not designed as sleeping accommodations for human beings”* (cited in Blau 1992:8).

When we consider more comprehensive definitions of the homeless, when we abandon the constraints of defining homelessness as spending the night in a public space or in homeless shelter to include those who are shuttling from relatives’ to friends’ or are otherwise precariously housed (more on this under “Home”), we are including in our definition a variable that ties the individual to the socio-economic context. We are also departing from conventional definitions that depend on physical evidence and going in the opposite direction to those definitions that either suggest or clearly spell out some underlying systemic aspects of homelessness.

Arriving at an inclusive definition of *the homeless* without making reference to poverty can be a daunting task of negotiation. According to Blau (1992) there are three

degrees of possible inclusion in the definition of the homeless. The most restricted includes persons using shelters and other services for the homeless. This would be the most favored by government because it is limited to those already receiving services. The second adds persons in the streets and this is the definition preferred by advocates. The third and last degree of inclusion takes in persons included in the preceding definitions and those “*at risk*,” that is people on the verge of eviction or living doubled-up. This degree is so far away from government acceptance that advocates do not spend much time and energy trying to have it included in the official definition of homeless. Attention and services for those at risk of becoming homeless has the potential to reduce the numbers of homeless people and would result in equal or less public expenditures in the long run, but it requires the political will to set aside funds for crisis prevention.

There are anthropologists who have documented that doubling-up is a common strategy to avoid homelessness, and that many families do not succeed in staying housed because of the stress caused by living in somebody else’s home. M. Rory Bolger (1999) describes the increasing impoverishment of a working class neighborhood in Detroit and relates it to the decline of the auto industry and the loss of affordable housing. Bolger recounts the role of reciprocity and doubling-up as strategies that preceded the economic decline sparked by deindustrialization, and that became an even more important survival strategy during times of recession. He documented this practice among both African-American and Anglo-American families.

A piece of the long term research on homelessness in New York City of Anna Lou Dehavenon is her 1991 fieldwork in Emergency Assistance Units, EAUs, where homeless families seek relief (1999). Over seven months she interviewed parents (mostly

women) who waited with their children to be seen by a worker. In her interviews she recorded health and demographic data and where they had spent the night before.

Dehavenon also documented the conditions of the families' most recent doubled up residence that lasted a month or more according to five *domestic functions* previously established by the anthropologist. She found that one third of the hosts were also on public assistance; although 92 percent of the guests paid rent, only 64 percent had their own room, and 45 percent paid more than half of the rent; additionally, one third left without receiving the public assistance that would have allowed them to contribute to the household economy even though they were eligible. More than half had doubled-up more than once before seeking help from the city, and slightly less than one third of the families were soliciting public assistance for the first time. Of them, 78 percent had spent the night before in somebody else's home and 18 percent in a public place.

The fact that less than half the parents had a room or bed they did not have to share and that 56 percent of the mothers with mates could include them in the household clearly shows how the arrangement interfered with their intimate lives. Eighty six percent of the families could cook in their hosts' kitchen but this has to be qualified by limitations on food storage, eating together as a family and friction over food ownership. One fifth of the families could not receive mail and 60 percent could not use the telephone. The most common reason for leaving the double-up arrangement was overcrowding.

This data suggest that homeless families before seeking public help make several attempts to fend for themselves; that in those cases, they contribute to the household finances; and that the networks they resort to for assistance are also suffering economic hardship. Double-up arrangements are far from ideal, often not providing the minimal

requirements of comfortable bedding, privacy, and the ability to have means of communicating with social services agencies, employers, family and friends. The relevance of Dehavenon's work resides in that it addresses the official attempt to force homeless families to resort to their kin networks before they request public help. Her work at the EAUs shows that they are doing it, but the housing conditions of the people they can request help from are already stretched to the limit. The fact that in New York City so many guest families were paying rent, unlike in Bolger's example where reciprocity was the basis of doubling-up, points to the fact that most hosts used doubling-up as a source of additional income. Including these families before they get housing services, that is when they are *at risk*, would increase considerably the numbers of persons needing housing assistance, which would in turn call for the state to increase the budget for housing relief. After more than two decades of a homeless crisis the political will is still lacking.

Dehavenon's research suggests that our discussion is about degrees of poverty, with the total lack of a roof as a characteristic of extreme poverty (Rossi, 1989; Wright 1997). But the media and the funders of social science research have already set the polemic in terms of the end result of poverty, *homelessness*. This has given the term a misleading legitimacy, as if it described accurately a well-defined phenomenon.

The Homeless Shelter under the Scrutiny of the Social Scientist

There have been published already works on the contemporary shelters for the homeless centered on the depiction of the men, women and children who sought refuge in them (Schlig, 1989-90; Grunberg and Eagle, 1990; DeOllos, 1997). There is more to this

institution than the description, however detailed, of its residents and their way of life. Even if we decide to leave out momentarily for the sake of space and focus, the historical, social and economic forces that have led large numbers of people to live in shelters, a portrayal of these shelters would be incomplete without considering their institutional history, the nature of the social services they provide, and who are the workers that staff them. While my fieldwork did not dwell particularly of these subjects I will complement a few of my ethnographic observations with the published works of other social scientists.

The policies to deal with homelessness in New York City and in general in the United States have been marked by governmental foot-dragging or outright resistance. They exist as a reaction to the demands of advocates and are imbued by the symptomatic responses to poverty that view with distrust this subgroup of the poor that most dramatically portrays the limitations of the *American Dream*. By and large, its most prominent characteristic has not been the examination of the causes of poverty in the richest country on the planet but on the unwanted effects and misuses of the measures grudgingly set in place to ameliorate their difficulties. This attitude has resulted in a focus on the homeless shelter as part of the problem, although it was created as a temporary solution.² In this section I will review some instances of the attention the shelter as an institution has received from state official and social scientists.

It is hard to tell if the ugliness of shelters as institutions comes from their military pasts, for many were armories, or if it is the accumulation of half hearted measures that

² The program *Aid for Families with Dependent Children* (AFDC) and other instances of public support have also come under scrutiny.

begot them, that makes them so strangely unpleasant. Beyond the warehousing of people there is no other overall plan. They are the embodiment of the patchwork of measures forced by advocates on the government to address poverty. Today they have become the enduring symbol of a crisis we do not wish to end.

While the existence of shelters for the homeless is the result of advocates' efforts to force the government to provide humane assistance to the poor (Blau, 1992; Demers 1995; Hopper 2003, Hopper and Cox, 1982), its custodial nature has prevailed (Hopper, 1990). As places where large numbers of people escape the elements, there are rules that mark their functioning. These rules regiment in great detail the daily activities of those living in the shelter. Control and surveillance are facilitated by those rules (Hopper 1990).

Although single, occasionally employed men have provided essential labor in periods of economic expansion and populated armies during wartime, United States culture has failed to deal with their existence except through stereotypes. In spite of their contributions to the nation, their presence in large urban centers has been perceived through the lens of dependency or disability. It is not surprising then that shelters for homeless men have found an ambiguous place in United States society: deemed necessary yet suspected of being a hot bed of sloth and crime. Kim Hopper (1990) revived a term coined by S. A. Rice in 1922 who called the shelter a "hybrid institution," historically at once a custodial and a relief institution; a makeshift trestle that attempts to connect the limits of the help that family and friends provide and the configurations of formal relief. Since a shelter house the out-of-work poor it provides relief for the unemployed members of working class families. But it is also custodial in as much as it

serves the disaffiliated poor, the physically or mentally disabled, and those with substance use problems. This is the role that more clearly marks the shelter as an institution customized to fit the lowest common moral denominator and thus, as Lyon-Callo (2001) describes, purportedly a therapeutic institution. Although the history of the last century's social science studies should have made clear, the connection between declines in the job market and the rise of homelessness, there has remained an obstinate belief in the personal accountability for homelessness. The only progress that has been made is a degree of consciousness of the need to expand the capacity of the shelters for the homeless. Unemployment, its underlying cause remains unaddressed.

The articles reviewed deal with shelters and those who seek refuge in them. The custodial character of shelters emerges as the central institutional trait colliding with the personal lives³ of shelter residents. During their stay at the shelter the individual enters into a struggle to retain some degree of privacy and individuality to counter the institutional force that for managerial convenience prefers to deal with residents as an undifferentiated human mass. The theoretical underpinnings of this homogenization are the United States folk belief on the individual responsibility of the poor for their condition, or its academic equivalent, the concepts of the culture of poverty and the underclass.

There are two major different strategies in the descriptions of the shelters for the homeless in these articles. The first is the description of shelter rules as a defining drive in the experience of homelessness. Shelter regulations are shown as dehumanizing, futile

³ I chose the word *personal* over *private* because once a person enters a shelter for the homeless privacy shrinks to nearly disappear.

and at times in contradiction with the ostensible aims of the institution. They describe the impact in the personal and family lives of the homeless and the attempts residents make to resist. The second strategy is that of focusing on the adjustments homeless persons made to shelter life and describing them as pathological and ineffectual stratagems to survive in the new environment. In this group of articles the responses of the poor are seen as a key in the delay of housing acquisition.

Louisa Stark (1994) reports on her ten years of participant observation research in Phoenix, Arizona and compares the characteristics of shelter life to life in a "total institution" (Goffman 1961). Following Goffman's work on psychiatric hospitals, She quotes shelter workers as they justify shelter regulations as necessary to prevent chaos. Stark sees in the professionalization of services for the homeless the cause for the emergence of these traits. The pursuit of family life, work, or romantic endeavors is curtailed by curfews or by regulations on male visitors of women and children (Susser 1993) or on any kind of visitor. She identifies the control and surveillance of residents' lives, the treatment of residents as less than adults, and the conflict of life-long roles and self-image with the role of shelter resident, as central to institutional culture. The loss of autonomy imposed on shelter residents infantilizes them disrupting their other social roles and precluding their reinsertion in the labor market and subsequent housing attainment. For Stark, the major problem is the clash between the official goal--helping the homeless achieve economic self-sufficiency--and internal rules that undermine residents' autonomy.

Jean Calterone Williams (1996) highlights the role of surveillance on the lives of residents of homeless shelters. Residents' lives were regulated to the most minimal detail.

They were also expected to participate in shelter activities, dress and behave in particular ways, and even submit their sexual history and thoughts to the case managers. She argues that the ideological underpinnings of the shelters' regulatory system are the theories of the culture of poverty and the underclass.

Williams enriches her detailed description of the ways in which largely women residents' lives and feelings are examined by adding the issue of the effects of a "*sellers market*" and the conception of the culture of poverty and the underclass in the homeless industry. The great demand for beds in homeless shelters allowed the operators to *cream* prospective residents by selecting those they deemed more compliant and more likely to succeed in obtaining housing. This practice effectively left out the more vulnerable homeless such as the mentally ill. Among those who were accepted, the threat of eviction was constant and was brought up in case of perceived failure to cooperate or insubordination to shelter workers' authority. Workers ascribed to ideas about the homeless that construed them and their homelessness as the direct result of dysfunctional families and other pathologies of poverty. They used a medical model of homelessness and their main strategy was individual treatment.

Williams complements her narrative on the institutional attempts at control and surveillance with descriptions of resistance. She describes the ways in which residents on a daily basis contest and avoid the rule of shelter workers. She also describes a homeless camp formed by persons who are not willing to subject themselves to the constrictions of shelter life.

Ida Susser (1993) presents an analysis of the ways in which the segregation of homeless people by gender causes family breakdown. This article is based on long term

research on a wide variety of institutions for the homeless: drop-in centers, shelters for single adults, transitional housing, and *homeless hotels*. These different agencies applied various rules of gender and age separation with detrimental effects on family ties. Susser links these rules to the requirements of the AFDC program in which the absence of a father in the family is a *sine qua non* requisite for grant adjudication (Stack, 1974; Abramovitz, 1988). Fathers and young boys were construed as suspect and were not welcomed in agencies serving families. Like during slavery, in *homeless hotels* women were separated from their male significant others. In some cases the hotel guests were able to fool entrance rules and fathers were seen helping out with family life. Unfortunately the porosity of entrance rules also implied that other less caring and sometimes criminal men could be found in the premises rendering these buildings dangerous. In transitional housing (also called *Tier II* shelters) the rules against the presence of men were more stringent, including legally married husbands and even adolescent male children who were forced to live with relatives or go on foster care. This resulted in some cases in the unraveling of marriages and families. Women resisted their enforced separation from their male companions by meeting with them during the weekends and ensuring the children spent time with their fathers. On one occasion women staged a demonstration to express their disagreement with rules in which males were depicted as a threat to the women who in turn had to be protected. They said “*we’re not just mothers, we’re women*” (Lasalle, 1991). Homeless men and women were only allowed to share quarters in drop-in centers. In this case children were banned and although the centers were open 24 hours a day, sleeping was forbidden. In her account, Susser presents a system of service torn between providing succor and custody over its

charges--the ambivalence to which Hopper (1990) refers--and enforcing family forms and relationships that preexist in the institutional imagination, thus causing more damage to people already battered by poverty.

The literature describing life in homeless shelters, repeatedly reports on the ways that rules interfere with the lives of the residents. Curfews, parenting supervision, and other behavioral controls also come up in the work of Timmer, Eitsen and Talley (1994) entangling the days homeless mothers and their children spend in shelters. Like others, these authors describe the institutional second-guessing of the extremely poor as not only detrimental to self-esteem of those in need but also as a detriment to the agency of the homeless. They document the way in which ideas very much like the culture of poverty are at the root of the regulations of shelter life (104-105). Their analysis of the rules reveals that these mothers and children were undergoing a re-education of sorts. Behavior that would have gone unnoticed by the families and at the neighborhoods of origin of the homeless is penalized by the institutions supposed to help them. By chastising their eating, speaking and smoking habits the poor are told sometimes literally, that those are the causes of their poverty. The authors conclude that homeless shelters' rules attempt to re-socialize their guests into the culture of the middle class (106).

Vincent Lyon-Callo (2001) describes how the social services available to shelter residents attempt to reform them. In these programs homelessness is *medicalized* and redeployed in a discourse that blames the homeless for their condition. A social problem is transformed into individual failures such as drug use, unfinished education, unemployment, etc. As the residents worked to solve these deficiencies they grow frustrated as they realize that it is not sufficient to obtain housing.

The works that report on the social life of shelter residents range from the benign to the atrocious. The task the authors set for themselves is not unlike the one I attempt in this work: to inform and reflect on the lives of the poor who are housed in homeless shelters.

In *More than Refuge* Gwendolyn Dordick (1996) reports on her ethnographic fieldwork at an Upper Manhattan shelter that she calls *the Armory* and apparently is Fort Washington Men's Shelter. She concentrates on the description of the social organization of residents in cliques and dyads that in her account emerge due to the absence of the authority of the state. In her view the shelter establishment failed to supervise effectively the residents. She draws three conclusions: a. the homeless *pay* the price of emergency shelter in the daily chore of staying alive in the institution; b. the institutional form of the shelter shapes the homeless experience; c. the social and economic milieu of the shelter impedes exit from it. In Dordick's view the time and effort invested in the construction and maintenance of these relationships impede residents from leaving the shelter because they do not have the time or energy to look for alternative housing. They become dependant on this safety net and somehow they take too seriously the obligations accrued in the shelter.

An interesting contrast is drawn from another piece by Dordick: chapter four of her book *Something Left to Loose* (1997:151-183). In these pages the author reports on her fieldwork at a church's private shelter in New York City. This setting is very different from the *Armory* she also describes. Dordick says that of all the homeless settings she

worked in,⁴ this was the hardest to enter. Although there wasn't a metal detector she felt that movement in and out of the premises was much more controlled. The other dramatic difference was that the private shelter housed just ten men.

Unlike other shelters most of the work of serving the homeless residents was done by volunteers who came in nightly to cook for them and to make sure that everything ran smoothly until next morning's departure. The social services workers were located in a different area of the church and apparently its operation was minded solely by volunteers. Dordick reports how volunteers brought in food they had cooked for the residents and at times used some of their own money to supplement a particularly meager meal. In their conversations with the author all the volunteers reported some sense of social responsibility. In addition, they did not directly censor the residents but wrote the night's events in a log book that was later read by the workers and used to enforce regulations.

The private shelter had rules that dictated among other things, the time to enter and exit the site, no smoking, and no visitors and using drugs or alcohol in and off the shelter, but they were tempered by the volunteers' individual decisions to enforce them. In addition, the rules were enforced or not according to the resident in question. Residents resented the rules and could cite occasions when they were used unfairly. Theft, a common occurrence at the *Armory* and the other shelters described, did not take place here even though residents kept their belonging in unlocked cabinets. By the ethnographer's account this was a "clean and well-ordered place" and the residents were aware of how uncommon that was. Residents were advised to use their time productively

⁴ Besides the *Armory* Dordick also did fieldwork at a train station and a collection of huts she called the *shunty*.

and during the twelve hours the men spent in it they were busy or asleep. Since one night per week the residents were volunteers at the church's soup kitchen they had grounds to feel different from other homeless people. When she began to visit the shelter she was warned that she was not going to find "bums." The shelter screened prospective residents probably choosing the most compliant.

I have dwelt on such detailed description of this work because it reports on a setting in which the pathologies commonly associated with the homeless are absent. Yet this seemingly ideal place had problems. Dordick reports that even if conflict was virtually absent from the private shelter and safety, food, order and a bed were guaranteed, the social worlds the men inhabited were completely lacking in autonomy, an autonomy that she found in all the other settings. The men did not talk to each other and failed to form a community. When someone was evicted no one wanted to talk about it and it was as if that person had never existed. Behind these odd behaviors there was probably the fear of been evicted themselves: not talking to their fellow residents prevented them from releasing information that could get them in trouble, and not acknowledging that someone had been kicked out could had been a way of blocking off the possibility that it could happen to them. In addition, almost all the men were "closeted" homeless who did not share with family, friends and coworkers that they lived in a shelter.

The men living in the private shelter did not have the traits that shelterization theorists attribute to the culture of shelterization. Most of them held jobs. Substance use was prohibited for all residents whether they had a drug problem or not. They were encouraged to be productive and most were. The supposedly negative influence of shelter

associations were not present as the men kept their social lives with their families, work, school and AA associates. Still the men remained dependent on the services provided by the shelter. Some had lived in the shelter for years. Dordick does not touch on the subject, but her description of the private shelter shows that the fundamental determinants of homelessness persisted even when the men had not developed the negative features of shelterization. Their atomization as individuals, their inability to connect with one another and form a community aware of the circumstances they shared speaks also of shelter-generated pathology. In this case the pathological features are the result of the rules and the very effective way in which they were implemented.

Gounis and Susser (1990) use the concept of shelterization in a creative way. Their chapter is based on extensive long-term ethnographic fieldwork in various New York City shelters, and at its core are the efforts to establish and maintain a Community Support Services (CSS) program for the mentally ill at a Bronx shelter. The authors describe as immersed in the poverty of the surrounding neighborhoods, the inner social ecology of municipal homeless shelters in which residents reinterpret services,⁵ and overworked staff behave unprofessionally. They place the institution in the context of the urban political economy of late Twentieth Century United States, and the activist-led legal battles that prodded the creation of the system of emergency shelters. Their use of the term *shelterization* makes reference to the concern that long shelter stays would produce similar effects to those caused by *institutionalization* in the mentally ill, i.e. behaviors that could be construed as mental illness. The imaginative aspect of this work

⁵ *Reinterpretation of services*, refers to the use of services by residents in ways other than those intended in their establishment.

is extending the use of the concept of *shelterization* to describe the limited success and ultimate demise of the CSS program in spite of the good intentions of its leaders and workers.

The CSS program is depicted as a resource overwhelmed by residents' demands and the expectations of HRA. The actual scarcity in New York City of housing, detoxification, and job training programs and the failure of the program's institutional parent to provide support are cited as factors that respectively set hurdles on its functioning, limited its success and ushered its end. The staff of the program attempted different innovative strategies in service providing often inspired on residents' based priorities, which at times set them in opposition to the shelter's authorities and staff. In turn, the latter expected the CSS program to provide help in caring for the mentally ill, yet objected when the program took on advocacy tasks on their part. Additionally the sponsoring institution saw the shelter program as a costly legal responsibility and became disinclined to back it in its struggles with HRA. The authors conclude that this set of circumstances amounted to the virtual *shelterization* of the CSS program; that is, abandoned by the sponsoring hospital it fell prey to the limitations and pressures of the formal and informal practices of the host shelter, and the social decay of the surrounding neighborhood.

Ethnographic Focus

The discussion of the culture of poverty and related theories can be considered an attempt by some social scientists, politicians, journalists, and other to open a window into the motivations of the poor. The problem is to explain the pervasive poverty of certain

sectors of United States society across generations. While these ideas have a centuries old history, since 1960s they have enjoyed scientific and governmental legitimization. In a society that prizes individualism these ideas validated widespread beliefs about individual responsibility for failure or success. They maintained that psychosocial pathologies are deeply ingrained in people's minds that are bound to repeat them through generations, and that poverty itself generates destructive behavior. The authors of these theories have rarely been anthropologists and by and large, have relied on statistical information and information elicited from observation in clinical settings within a therapeutic context.

Recent ethnography reveals more than just first hand accounts of the lives of the homeless. The holistic nature of the research technique has allowed gaining some insights on the way this population sets priorities, lives their lives; evaluates opportunities; handles the pressures of poverty and of relief institutions and uses services. The ethnographic reports reviewed are varied in the extent to which they stress the role of individual pathology as a cause or part of the homeless experience. For example, in some cases substance use is given a great deal of attention in an attempt to convey the ways in which the lives of the homeless are affected by addiction (e.g.: Snow and Anderson, 1993). Other authors mention it only in passing because they want to place emphasis on another aspect of their struggles (Passaro, 1996; Wright, 1997). Even when pathologies are described in great detail the reader does not walk away with the sense that they are the principal force of their misfortunes. The inclusion of other aspects of their lives such as memories, frustrations, work histories, or failed attempts to remain sober flesh out complete human beings. These ethnographic accounts present us with multifaceted and

complex persons, closing the distance that separates us from them. For all the virtues of quantitative studies of the homeless, they have also contributed to the alienation of the homeless from the rest of society. While these one or two-dimensional portrayals of the extremely poor in the United States can be instrumental in setting up services for them, they corrode the motivation of the public to identify with their hardships. Quantitative accounts of social problems emulate physics and natural sciences in their quest for precision and predictability, yet this attempt to achieve scientific rigor overlooks the nature of the focus of social science: human behavior is not just the result of history, social and cultural pressures or individual proclivities but also the products of emotions and free will.

The Humanity of the Homeless

Elliot Liebow, the author of *Tally's Corner*, the remarkable ethnography of African American men in the inner city, has put to work his outstanding skills in an ethnography of shelters for homeless women in the Washington, DC area in his book "Tell Them Who I Am" (1993). During the 1980s Liebow worked for about five years as a volunteer in several shelters for homeless women. This inspired him to begin to take notes, documenting the lives of the clients whom he considered his friends. The quality of his relationships is apparent in the compassion with which the ethnography is written. He spent a great deal of time working at the shelters and hanging out with the women, taking them in his car to appointments and other places, lending them money, and in general being a supportive friend that they could count on.

The result is a work that details the daily events largely in the shelter setting but

with valuable information about how they used their time and how they endured the hardships of living without a home of one's own. In the process Liebow give us a portrait of the toil of being homeless in which each woman chases a measure of dignity. We can see the specter of racial prejudice as it emerges among them with its ephemeral righteous promise. Their main obstacles besides poverty, are the rules and the institutional treatment shelters use as a tool of engagement. The women learn to accept the limitations of the help provided and hope is replaced by cynicism, skepticism, and depression. At the end we have a collection of intimate accounts of the compounding of frustration that as a whole succeed in giving humanness and emotional depth to a set of people most often dealt with by means of stereotypes.

Liebow concludes that the cause of homelessness is mainly the lack of housing and poverty. He argues that in the last decades the standard of life across the board in the United States has been lowered placing more people literally in the streets or at risk of loosing their housing. In addition to establishing a record of the subsistence, social networks, and group cohesion and tensions among the residents Liebow dedicates a chapter to the workers and volunteers dealing with the women on a daily basis. Liebow identifies patterns of behavior among workers that are deeply related to the judgmental ideology of the deserving and the undeserving poor. But he also points to the fragility of the life of the workers in a society with rampant unemployment. Devoid of a specifically feminist theory in his work, Liebow succeeds in evaluating these women as human beings deserving of the rights, duties, and the chances to lead the lives they aspire to, largely humble expressions of privacy and autonomy. He recognizes in them their humanity, their generosity and their enviousness just like anyone can find in any of us.

Gender

“The Women Outside” instead (Golden 1992), is a work by a feminist author that uses ethnography as part of its methodology. Most of the analysis is made by means of historical accounts and cultural interpretation. The ethnography is based on Golden’s work as a volunteer of a shelter for homeless women at the end of the seventies with a reappraisal ten years later. The shelter is “The Dwelling Place” located in midtown Manhattan and run by Franciscan nuns. The women who the author meets are those who are popularly labeled as “shopping bag ladies” which were the bulk of the homeless women at the time of the fieldwork. Through the book the meaning of lonely women “outside” is explored by contrasting the profiles of the women she meets to another type of independent woman that has existed in Western civilization for centuries: the witch. In the process of her analysis Golden recounts a Brothers Grimm tale, questions our assumptions about mental health and examines how a woman’s role in society shapes the limits of her sanity. The author assesses the ideas that flow from the concept of the witch. Women living independently away from society and its rules conjure fears and resentments that are millenniums old. She argues that it is the autonomy, the sexuality untamed by marriage, the rejection of control, either by men or society, which makes these women/bag ladies/witches threatening and hateful.

She finishes by evaluating our conception of marginality and the imagery that marginalizes the homeless. Golden maintains that the way in which women are socialized, particularly those in her sample—who were older than those that came to the Dwelling Place in the eighties—has something to do with their coming “outside.” The

contradiction between their realities and acceptable female roles leaves some of them with few choices except living in the street. Some women are too passive and when their support systems fade away they are helpless and unable to remain housed and need to be taken care of. She argues that some women in the streets who are deemed mentally ill were not so considered while they had husbands, children, families or someone to look after them. They become “ill” when there is no one left to care for them. On the other hand, stronger women can’t come to terms with their power as it contradicts societal expectations.

Gender roles are also the centerpiece of Joanne Passaro’s book, “The Unequal Homeless.” Her work is based on extensive fieldwork in the streets of New York City at the beginning of the nineties. Passaro does not dwell on the causes of homelessness but on its persistence. She argues that although the political economy of our postindustrial society frames homelessness, it is culture that colors it and perpetuates it among certain groups. For her, the experience of homelessness has implications shaped by our cultural understanding of gender and gender-based institutions that go beyond the lack of housing. But I suspect that they do not go as far as to perpetuate homelessness. Even if housing were provided to those who need it most, regardless of any preconception about gender and race, homelessness will persist. Although we are dealing with a social phenomenon of great complexity the experience of which is the sum of many different factors, what perpetuates homelessness is lack of affordable housing and income to pay for it.

Passaro’s points are worth considering nonetheless. Her work reminds us that the dichotomy of the deserving and the undeserving poor is still very much at work, and that

whether one is a man or a woman greatly affects the treatment one will get from the public and social agencies. The heterosexual nuclear family is one of the chief normative patterns at work in our lives and the prescribed roles in it shape the societal and institutional responses to homelessness. Social services and charities reward those homeless mothers who show the abnegation and dedication to their children that are expected of women. Their vulnerability and sacrifices insert them securely among the ranks of the morally deserving of help. Women know that as long as they behave in a particular way there will be support for them and their children. Thus the category of persons that are more likely to receive public housing and welfare are women with dependent children. Bag ladies quite often do not have to do much in order to receive a donation from passersby. Sometimes just simply standing there with their eyes on their feet is enough to generate empathy from the public. Men do not have such luck. Their lack of attachment to a nuclear family and the supposed characteristics of their gender make them suspect and dangerous. They go to the end of the waiting list when it comes to help.

In addition, Passaro argues that the nuclear family as a pillar of patriarchy makes demands on its members they are not always prepared to meet. Some men, mostly white and middle class, with stable families and jobs may be unhappy because they feel that their familial obligations restrict their own chances of self fulfillment and leave their homes and families. At the opposite end, men of color who live in poverty are deprived of their possibilities of enacting the traditional roles of breadwinner and protector of the family. Feeling they are a burden or perceived as such by other members of the family these men find themselves often homeless.

Disconnecting oneself from a family is not always a negative or antisocial attitude. There are situations in which leaving the family unit can be a survival strategy because of the scarcity of resources. At times the circumstances of family living are so pathological that abandoning one's family can be an act of physical preservation and mental health. This is the predicament of many homeless battered women and that of young adults in a distressful family situation. Passaro sees in these gestures of personal search, or physical or mental preservation of the self or others, acts of resistance to the imposition of the monogamous heterosexual nuclear family as the preferred domestic arrangement. Her work also suggests that certain types of disaffiliation are not necessarily pathological, but instead foster mental and physical well-being.

Homelessness and Relationships: *Disaffiliation* Revisited

For many years *disaffiliation* has often been negatively connected to homelessness (For example Bahr, 1973; Bahr and Garrett, 1976). Recent ethnographies of the homeless report on the building and maintenance of relationships that counter the established belief of isolation (See Dordick, 1996, 1997; Rosenthal, 1994; Snow and Anderson, 1993; Wagner, 1993; Wright, 1997). In these works people who live in the streets are portrayed as active participants of more or less extensive networks of street people that support each other in survival, informational, and emotional matters. In fact isolation is defined as a counter productive attitude that leads to danger and most characteristic of the mentally ill. The homeless also maintain links with housed friends and family members as well as with service organizations and individuals who work in them that allow them to deal with issues of income, shelter, nutrition, clothing, etc. The belief that the homeless are isolated

and disaffiliated may be the result of the method of study. Many early studies were conducted in shelters, which in itself selected the type of circumstances that would be found most commonly (Rosenthal, 1994).

In "Down on their Luck," Daniel Snow and Leon Anderson (1993) combine an ethnography with the study of records from the police and social services agencies to track the lives of a group of homeless people in the streets of Austin, Texas. They are able to document several networks of people that interact daily with each other. The quality of these relationships is varied. They go from acquaintances to romantic bonds and to some degree they help to survive in a hostile environment. These groups are classified in categories that have to do with time in the streets, with common interests and similar backgrounds and survival strategies. Time in the streets allows them to identify three major groups: "Recently dislocated," "straddlers," and "outsiders." Background and mental illness are the basis for seven subgroups. They argue that "street subculture" are not shared values but of adaptive responses to similar circumstances. Snow and Anderson admit that these relationships may be fragile and short-lived but to contextualize them they point the ease with which friendships are initiated and to the unstable social situations in which they take place.

The authors suggest that just as prisoners need to adopt strategies to rescue a sense of dignity and humanity, the homeless resort to similar ploys in the face of countless constraints and the demeaning attitudes of society. From the point of view of housed people and government bureaucrats, some of their behaviors are unintelligible. Indeed they walk a narrow path to maintain a certain degree of sanity and self esteem without falling into substance use. To safeguard a sense of autonomy, for example, could

be at the root of why some homeless people choose not to go into shelters but to spend the night in makeshift accommodations.

In their examination of the homeless of Austin, Texas, Snow and Anderson locate the causes of their plight in the interactions of both structural and individual vulnerabilities. Structural causes apply the pressure and individual vulnerabilities determine who of all that experience it would eventually become homeless. Among the macro-level causes they list the loss of decent-salaried jobs, the proliferation of low-wage service jobs and the polarization of income caused by deindustrialization; the two pronged effects of the transformation of the urban landscape: shrinkage of available low-cost housing and increase in the cost of housing; the mismatch between income and housing costs resulting from the combined effect of deindustrialization and the transformation of cities; the lack of political will on the part of the state to alleviate the blows of these forces on the poor; and the disrepair and later the contraction of the welfare state. The authors resist giving priority to one over another factor but point to the fact that not all the people under their pressure become homeless, as evidence of the role of personal risk factors. Since they were able to ask their informants for their opinions on what led them to loss of housing, Snow and Anderson feel more confident about placing lack of family support as the most common personal cause of housing loss, followed by various disabilities and *bad luck*. They note that the families of the homeless people they met were not in a financial position to provide the support needed and that one misfortune triggers or aggravates another, and so on. It is remarkable that, although they reveal awareness that the *emic* category *bad luck* can be rephrased in *etic* terms, they refrain from unpacking it in an attempt to be faithful to their experiences.

A good example of the way in which different environments foster certain types of relationships is Gwendolyn Dordick's ethnography in New York City. Dordick selects four different settings for her fieldwork: a bus station, a *shanty*, a public shelter, and a private shelter. In her view, survival is the main goal that shapes and motivates the creation and maintenance of social bonds.

At the bus station the men she meets⁶ are engaged in a group association that allows them to share resources. The men share their money by creating a common fund to which everyone contributes. This fund is used to supply for the group's needs or projects, and occasional individual necessities. The main rule governing this common reservoir of cash condemns not contributing money a member has gathered. This proscription is meant to insure the men share their funds but is also the source of conflict. The men eat, spend the day, and sleep together to insure their nutrition and safety. Another informal rule discourages dyadic relationships so that loyalties remain tied to the welfare of the group.

The relative privacy of the *shanty* allows for heterosexual romantic relationships and in general for a rather individualistic rule of behavior. The shacks allow their inhabitants to engage in sex and eat but also to hoard resources. Still a certain cooperative spirit rules, in particular, in the sharing of food and to a much lesser extent of drugs. But still personal gain is paramount as is shown in this book by the sale of stolen electric energy by one resident of the *shanty*, to the others.

At the public shelter Dordick studies the interpersonal relationships of two folk

⁶ Most of her informants are male with the exception of her work in the *shanty* and a few occurrences in the bus station. Both shelters are for men only.

organizations: The Crew and male-male marriages. The Crew refers to the “house gang,” a group of men that exerts authority over the residents and the running of the shelter. They control access to resources like the food line, beds, etc. It is argued that the power of the gang is the result of a vacuum of institutional power. Security guards are unable and unwilling to challenge the Crew. In fact many are in cahoots with them for the sale and smuggling of drugs into the shelter. Physical power is one of the means to establish stability within the shelter, but there is also “respect,” which is to know when to and when not to use force. Male-male liaisons need not necessarily be of a sexual nature. They can simply be an alliance between two men to look after each other. But at times sex is involved. Thus Dordick describes relationships between “mos”⁷ and other men in the shelter that resemble in great measure that of a marriage. Even these partnerships are based on tacit pacts of comradeship and support and at time they also generate conflicts.

The private shelter is the one setting where interpersonal relationships are not fostered. Its goal goes beyond that providing safety for its residents. It attempts the task of changing their perceived moral shortcomings and compliance at this level is paramount. The overwhelming official surveillance makes bonds between men suspect and distrust thrives among the residents. Men come in every night and leave in the morning, mostly alone. Tenure on the beds is so frail that it may be jeopardized by any mistake, misunderstanding, or unsubstantiated accusation. Men keep to themselves.

In light of these ethnographies we should reconsider the established wisdom about the isolation of the homeless. On one hand we can say that the group of homeless people that most resemble the stereotypes of disaffiliation seems to be only a small portion of the

⁷ Short for “homos,” itself a derogatory shortening of the term “homosexuals.”

mentally ill. It is true that this population has the least developed interpersonal skills but it can hardly be said that they are totally isolated as they maintain contacts with their social workers, psychiatrist and quite often, family members. For the rest of the homeless the evidence appears to indicate that they are able to build and maintain relationships with their peers of different degrees of quality, and that even romantic bonds may develop. Essential to these liaisons is the nature of the demands that the environment in which they are fostered effects on them. Dordick's private shelter is the only environment in her work where surveillance is moral as well as physical, and it is the only environment in which relationships do not flourish. The public shelter's failed attempt at physical scrutiny and control does not impede but encourages supportive relationships of different types, just as the bus station does.

Political Organization

Daniel Wagner's work "Checkerboard Square", like Passaro's, sets the traditional family ethics under a light of suspicion. He goes further to suggest that along with the work ethics, traditional family forms are cultural myths that have been historically used against the poor, the minorities and immigrants. He says "...the crisis of homelessness represents the continued failure of the work and family ethics and of traditional state services to hold much legitimacy" (10). He also contends that the "pathologies" of the poor are actually conscious and unconscious ways of resisting the established stipulations of work and family as they are presented to the poor.

Wagner's ethnography takes place in a New England city of about 270,000 inhabitants. It involves what he calls "street people," a group of largely white homeless

people that range from teenagers to mentally ill individuals. One of his centers of attention is a mobilization and protest that the homeless held in an encampment in the city. He employs this event to provide an example of homeless self-empowerment and political action as well as involvement in community affairs.

The debates of the culture of poverty and the underclass have generated among some social scientists and the public in general a negative attitude to the idea that there are cultural formations that are the result of deprivation. Street people in fact have their own self-consciousness, culture and communities, asserts Wagner. They resist established family forms, low wage employment and the rule of the dominant institutions of state bureaucracy while surviving and creating their own alternative communities. Wagner questions the established knowledge that indicts the networks of the poor as the root of social pathologies, and he instead sees in them loosely organized social movements. In his view these communities should be considered an asset when trying to help the homeless. As such they should be used to build on strategies for housing and serving this population. This book closes with a reflection on the role of individualism and charity in North American culture.

Two other cases of the active and functional networks of homeless people are described by Rosenthal's "Homeless in Paradise" (1994) and by Wright's "Out of Place" (1997). These authors engaged in ethnographic research among urban homeless people to discover patterns of behavior that reinforce community life and sharing. Both authors went on to document the daily life of their informants and their efforts to organize for common political ends.

Rosenthal's study took place in Santa Barbara, California during the 1980s. In

analyzing the different paths to homelessness of his different informants he found so many different variations that lead him to think that "...finding a single unifying theory of homelessness is likely to be futile" (4). He did find though that most homeless had taken advantage and used up the help of family and friends on their way to the streets or shelters. In fact the social networks of homeless people were far more extended than commonly believed. "Isolation from family is in part artifact of methodology" (81).

Rosenthal divided up the homeless people he met and knew of in different categories according to their demographic characteristics, survival mechanisms, age, etc. In this way he was able to identify different degrees of social alienation and integration. He found that the mentally ill were in fact the only homeless people who bore a rather high degree of isolation from the rest of society. The rest had some degree of participation in networks of homeless people or with housed people, usually family and friends.

Expressions of these associations were the two instances of political organization that took place among the homeless to resist local policies and to demand better services: the Homeless People Association (HPA) and the Street People Association (SPA). Rosenthal shows how these two groups succeed in organizing the homeless and in connecting them with other groups throughout the United States.

Rosenthal explores the ethics and the frame of mind of street people. In general his informants have very much the same values as other residents of Santa Barbara. But there are certain values that although positive in our society could be regarded as negative when enacted by the homeless. One of them is the sense of community that develops among groups of homeless. The survival of the group precedes the survival of the

individual and therefore scarce resources are shared. The result is that the homeless do not take full advantage of personal opportunities unless they are shared with the group. Certainly this is the type of ethics fostered in military organizations. Rosenthal also argues that it may be true that the very poor are more present minded. He offers that it may not be the result of pathology but of a realistic assessment of what the future has in store for them.

Place and Identities

Susan Ruddick *Young and Homeless in Hollywood* (1995) uses the empirical case of homeless youth to analyze the role of space in the process of fixing social identities. She argues that space is a medium through which social identities are shaped and contested. Its tactical use not only endows *marginal* subjects with a means of survival but it also conveys symbolic elements in the construction of their social imaginary. Control of space is continuously contested and whoever exerts some control over it gets it to carry a particular meaning. The author argues that the homeless through their tactical use of public space imbue it with their identity and in turn their social imaginary is formed by the space they use. The ability of social identities to hold on to a particular social imaginary rests on the degree they hold on to space.

Ruddick (1995) takes the example of the punks in the 1970s. They used marginal spaces within Hollywood, which contributed to the construction of their oppositional identities. They hang out in the cemetery and squatted two mansions that had the myths of murder and orgies in their past. By holding on to these marginal spaces punks were able to transcend the identity of homeless youth in favor of a punk identity. As the state

pushed them out into the streets (literally) by demolishing the abandoned buildings they occupied and fencing the cemetery, their identities become frailer, leading eventually to the disappearance of the subculture. The legitimacy of the presence of homeless youth in Hollywood is owed in great measure to the participation of their service providers in different community boards overseeing redevelopment. Since the 1970s the number of service agencies has multiplied and the presence of homeless youth has been normalized by their advocates' argument that they are attracted to Hollywood for the same reasons that tourists are.

The author presents her case methodically paying extensive and particular attention to related subjects. She analyzes and critiques the development of the modern conception of adolescence the juvenile justice system, modernization, and research on homelessness. She also presents us with a history of the punk subculture in Hollywood and local redevelopment efforts that set different sectors of the community against each other.

Her ethnographic data seems insufficient to back up the theoretical claims she makes. In fact there isn't a section on the methodology used, the time spent in the field, or what type of information her interviews elicited. According to the text the reader deduces that she interviewed fifteen runaways in one agency, some service providers, and other community leaders. Her discussion of the punk subculture apparently rests on conversations with just one person: a male from the upper middle classes (should one assume that he was white?). Gender, race and to some extent, class does not play a significant role in her analysis (although she gives us hints of the relevance of class). For example, she tells us that the first waves of punks were well educated upper middle and

upper class kids, and the third and last wave were violent lower class youth that had strayed into fascism, but no inferences are made from this data. She uncritically poses that service providers represent the interests of homeless youth in Hollywood while describing the different types of strategies of service provision used which necessarily had to have different responses from their clients.

Talmadge Wright's 1997 ethnography and analysis reflects the exhaustion of the causes of homelessness as subject of scholarly analysis. His work spends little time if any speculating about what led "his" homeless to total destitution. Substance use does not take much space either. It is succinctly described with specific purposes: to show the efforts of the groups to circumscribe and manage the use of substances, as well as ensure the wellbeing of substance-using members of the group (1997:276); to show how the use of substances is used by the media and housed drug dealers to demonize and take advantage of the homeless respectively (1997:205, 211). Wright is interested in writing about a set of issues seldom discussed in the literature on homelessness: the socio-cultural construction of "the homeless" and its repercussion on the existing concept of "the poor"; the production and consumption of different types of urban spaces and their relationship to the homeless; the production by the homeless of collective identities that resist hegemonic conceptions; and the emergence of organized responses in which the homeless coalesce with students and community activists.

The theoretical framework of this work is both sophisticated and diverse. The overall context is a critique of the impact on urban spaces and utilization by late Twentieth Century forms of capital accumulation and flow. In it Wright inserts the concept of social imaginary as Castoriadis' uses it (1987) as well as Henri Lefevre's

(1976, 1991) idea of social and physical space as utopian and strategic, and uses both notions as effective tools to plow his ethnographic data. He complements the foucaudian term *heterotopias of deviation* with his own *resistant heterotopias* to be able to speak of the homeless as agents within the landscape. His data allows him to enhance social movement theory with the concept of *placemaking*. Wright puts this rich set of intellectual tools to work projecting an alternative notion of homelessness in which anomie is replaced by action. Since the author includes in his analysis a critical review of the way in which homelessness has been dealt with by social science, he repositions himself in his ethnographic experience in an alternative role as a researcher/activist. His research projects in San Jose and Chicago allowed him to define the role of the scholar engaged politically in the social issues he tackles.

We could argue that Wright's is a case of multi-site ethnography. Although not planned as such from the start, the author's successive involvement with two instances of homeless power-defying organized responses to homelessness allows him to contrast the two experiences. The first evolved from his informal relationship with students working in a homeless camp in the city of San Jose, California, to become the faculty advisor of the Student-Homeless Alliance (SHA) that also included community activists and received the organizational support of the Communist Labor Party and the Committees of Correspondence. For a year (June 1990 to June 1991) the author was the facilitator of the SHA at the center of the three constituencies that formed the group. During his tenure SHA denounced San Jose City Council's redevelopment plans, and police raids of downtown encampments. He participated in squatters' takeover of vacant housing, and developed the tactic of *counter surveillance* to monitor acts of police brutality toward the

homeless. A couple of months after Wright's departure from San Jose (October, 1991) he began to study *Tranquility City*, a collection of huts in Chicago's Near West Side occupied by about fifty homeless persons who resisted entering the homeless shelter system and enlisted support from local churches, artists and community activists. The homeless of Tranquility City turned its location in a *functional* and *refuse space* into their *pleasure space*⁸ where they relaxed after a day of procuring their livelihood. The location of Tranquility city was not haphazard but the result of a calculated attempt to engage the city in a match of symbolic politics. Through a series of forums, a local art gallery connected Mad Housers, an Atlanta group of architects, planners and community activists with an interest in homelessness, to a group of homeless willing to live in huts built by the group as a means of attracting attention to their plight. The huts received coverage by the local media and the tacit acceptance of the city's government for a little less than a year until Mayor Daley decided to end Tranquility City. All inhabitants of the encampment received city public housing and from their efforts, an organization was formed, the People's Campaign for Jobs, Housing, and Food. While both San Jose and

⁸ *Functional, refuse and pleasure space* are Wright's terms to characterize urban spaces according to their use. *Functional spaces* are "places one through which one moves to get a particular destination, or a space planned for moving through to get to a particular destination... Not in essence, designed for consumption, although those features might be included to market the space, such places are engineered for ease of transport and to relieve the burden of waiting" (109). *Refuse spaces* are "space[s] that [are] excluded from development, held in reserve for future development, or residual space from a particular development." (106). The most complex of Wright's terms is *pleasure spaces* because they "can assume a variety of guises—from commercial, tourist, club, and dining complexes that satisfy food, drink, touch, visual, or acoustic cravings, to private residencies with 'historical' themes, to theme parks, museums (cultural capital), beaches and parks, and shopping malls... [They] are invested with symbolic capital by both producers and consumers, a meaning that is explicitly class, race, and gender based... and subject to contestation, a product of ongoing cultural struggles over representation and identity" (101).

Chicago's experience ended with the victory of the state, they resulted in the empowering of the homeless. They also attest to the homeless willingness to act on their own behalf and educate students and community on issues of housing. Talmadge Wright's nuanced account reveals the complexities of these types of alliances as well as their potential for the creation of new strategies to deal with homelessness.

In this chapter I have outlined how the official erasure of poverty from the scientific conceptualization of homelessness has underpinned the efforts to define it. The result has been a turn to cultural stereotypes and awkward attempts to define homelessness as a social category apart from poverty. These definitions lacked the power to describe the homeless and to contain neatly all the phenomena that from the lives of the extremely poor necessarily lead to analysis of the labor and housing markets, and to stigma and poverty. Thus social scientists have challenged the official understanding of homelessness and extended their inquiries in various directions that are reflected in the definitions they used in their work.

Yet, while the attempts of social scientists to arrive at more precise and comprehensive definitions have resulted in more profound understanding of the predicament of the homeless, their efforts have been limited to their scientific work. Much of their work has followed the establishment of service structures that were set up using biased notions of the homeless and their needs that were available in the official discourse. The resulting services are marred by assumptions about the lives and motivations of the homeless, and translate into a myriad of restrictive rules that often effectively destroy what is left of their dignity and prevent them from attaining housing

or work.

Ethnographic research has revealed that the homeless, far from being an alien tribe within the United States, share in the dreams, virtues and shortcomings of the rest of the citizenry. If they appear disaffiliated to the superficial observer, is because their living conditions (extreme poverty) shape the types of relationships they form and not because they are atomized beings. Gender informs not only their experience of homelessness but also their way in and out of utter abjection, determining along with the social space they occupy, their identities and their praxis. Far from being anomic subjects they are able and they do engage in political struggles on their own behalf.

In the next chapter I give an overview of the causes of homelessness explored by social scientists that have explored or contested state-promoted causality. I follow with a brief history of the emergence of homelessness as a social problem in New York City, and the tensions between city government and homeless advocates over service provision.

Chapter Two

Causes and History of Homelessness in New York City

In this chapter I start the review of the research on the causes of homelessness with a brief exploration of the concept of *home*. If for argument's sake we accept the federal government's narrow definition of a homeless person as anyone who does not have a *home*, we ought to reflect on the meaning of *home* to understand what its absence implies. This is followed by a critical examination of the proposed and researched causes of homelessness to assess their explanatory power. I look to both the causes contained in the official model individual-centered explanations of homelessness (whose research was profusely funded), and those who departing from individual-centered explanations, seeking instead, systemic analyses for the roots of homelessness.

In the second part of the chapter I provide a summary of a quarter century of wrangling between New York City's government and homeless advocates to determine the types and extent of services that are provided to the homeless. Since my ethnographic research took place in the city under discussion, I insert vignettes from my field notes to ground discussions that took place in courts and within the pages of newspapers on the lives of the homeless men who were affected by policy decisions.

What is a Home?

Let us take a step back for a moment to the official definition of homeless to see what the implied definition of home is: "*one who lacks a fixed permanent nighttime residence or whose nighttime residence is a temporary shelter, welfare hotel, or any public or private*

place not designed as sleeping accommodations for human beings.” This is a very narrow definition of home or more precisely, a narrow definition of bedroom. Its limitation to nighttime residence leaves out the possibility of day habitation if the person is sick or tired. What other characteristics of home are left out of this definition?

Robert Frost in “Death of a Hired Man” gives us a clue:

*‘Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.
I should have called it
Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.’*

The right to enter the home by virtue of law or kinship ties is a necessary condition of the opposite state of homelessness that, using the same structure of the word that names the lack of home, we could call *homefulness*. If a person does not have the legal right to sleep under a roof we could say that such a person is homeless. Frost also adds that deservedness should not be an issue for discussion: All humans should have a home. The state in its legal battles with advocates for the homeless fiercely contested responsibility for the one aspect of *homefulness* the poet honed: the right you should not have to merit, that is, an inherent right.

Other aspects of home, like those Dehavenon evaluated in double-up arrangements, are also missing and for a reason; their inclusion would render homeless many of the poor who have nighttime residence. Let us go back to the question above, what is a home? Is a roof enough even if it allows for daytime access? Shouldn’t it include the space and the fixtures necessary for the care of the body? Single room occupancy (SRO) hotels, whose disappearance is so lamented by workers inquiring into the causes of homelessness, consist of small rooms with a bathroom shared by other

tenants and in lieu of cooking facilities, permission to plug in a hotplate. There is no way to boil water because hotplates never reach sufficient temperature, and thus, cook. Privacy is guaranteed by the door and lock but security was uneven at the time of my fieldwork as the ceiling of some rooms (at times just large wooden boxes in *cage hotels*) could be made of chicken wire that impeded the possibility of silence. SROs allowed residents to receive mail, yet they proscribed visitors other than institutional ones (a category that included me), effectively crippling the function of the home as headquarters for a social (and sexual) life with people who did not reside in the building. Irene Glasser (1984:4) quotes the Limuru Declaration description of the minimal requirements for shelter or housing: affordability, protection from the elements, potable water and sewer, drainage, emergency life-saving services and access to health care and social and economic opportunities. She adds that one should have legal rights to inhabit a *home*, and also have access to transportation, be protected from intruders and from fire and structural collapse, and enjoy sufficient space and privacy. It is amazing that the possibility of preparing meals is not included. But I find even more incredible that the freedom of inviting friends and family to visit is not considered a *sine qua non* stipulation of adequate housing. Considering all that has been written on disaffiliation as a characteristic of homelessness and the great importance given to social and kin connections in the literature, it would seem obvious that the ability of granting hospitality in one's home should be a pivotal element in any conceptualization of housing. Sovereignty depends on the right to live in one particular space but the right to extend hospitality to those one desires, complements it. Hospitality is at the core of the ability to remain a social being. It is suspicious to outline homelessness as a function of

disaffiliation, when some of the solutions provided (SRO hotels, community residences for the mentally ill, for example) preclude the possibility of making them the epicenter of one's social life.

Causes of Homelessness

In existing research on the homeless, the number of the quantitative studies on the causes of homelessness is greater than that of qualitative studies. The emergence of homelessness as a social problem in the conservative eighties caused research funds to focus on the numbers of the homeless, the causes of homelessness, and what should be done about it (Barak, 1991). The issue of the quantity of homeless persons became one of the first debates that emerged in the literature. The numbers of homeless people were important because on them hinged the monies allocated to alleviate the problem.¹

Unfortunately (or maybe predictably) there was a great disparity between the estimates of advocates and the government. Both efforts were confronted with the problem of how to count those who do not have a domicile and both decided to extrapolate the impressions of experts and service providers in order to arrive to a total. Advocates contended that at the beginning of the eighties there were about 1,5 million homeless persons in the United States (Hombs and Schnyder, 1982). The official numbers were a considerably lower number, 254,000 (HUD, 1984). The disparity of the results is a pointer to the high level of politization of the research and the importance of the definition of homelessness on which it is based.

¹ Joel Blau believes that the general disagreement about the definitions of homelessness led researchers to count the homeless, not knowing what they were counting (1992:18).

Research on the causes of homelessness tended to point to the individual as the causal force of the social phenomena. Drug use, mental illness, social pathologies were described and presented as precursors of homelessness. Daniel Wagner (1993:7-10) finds three fundamental reasons that impel individual pathology to the forefront of explanations for homelessness. First, most studies are not longitudinal and are limited to meeting the homeless only once in shelters, soup kitchens, and other contexts in which they are found at their worst. Since these studies do not follow their subjects through a period of time they can't witness when their situations improve and/or their depression or addiction recedes. Second, the professional training of researchers (and their self interest) inclines them to identify phenomena they believe they have the skills to modify. This way they establish a field where they can exert their professional leadership and managerial abilities. In this case the personal pathologies of the homeless represent to them a road for personal advancement. Finally, even when social scientists find structural reasons for the situation of the homeless, they outline them in reformist sketches that the liberal wing of the Democratic Party can adopt. They do not risk going beyond its political will. Talmadge Wright (1997:20) arrives at similar conclusions pointing to the force shaping homeless research that is, to funding geared at identifying individual shortcomings. This is a realm in social science ready made for contextualizing pathologies and the concept of deservedness that long theorized in social sciences and readily applied to the poor. I might add that the research designed to minimize the numbers of the homeless and make individual afflictions the root of the problem was congruent with the then conservative agenda of minimal governmental involvement in the response to social problems. Thus, the results of much state funded social science

studies during the eighties reported smaller numbers of the homeless than those of advocates, and defined homelessness as the result of individual pathology.

Individual Causes of Homelessness

Two personal difficulties were identified as the major causes of homelessness: mental illness and substance use. In both cases there is an element of truth that lead observers to focus on psychiatric and addiction disorders to explain homelessness, but it is not easy to discern how much of this problems is present before housing is lost and to what degree they are caused by the intrinsic hardships of homeless life. In addition, while focusing on mental illness and addiction addresses the stereotypes of the homeless, it does not explain all homelessness. By the end of the eighties homeless families began to emerge in considerable number, of demanding models with wider explanatory range.

Mental Illness:

Many research studies have reported that a broad proportion of the homeless are mentally ill. The numbers reported suggest that between one half and one third of the homeless are mentally disturbed (Fischer and Breakey, 1991). The wide margin between highest and lowest indicators gives us reason to pause. On reexamination, one of the most apparent flaws in the data is the indiscriminate aggregation of the mental imbalances that result from the innumerable stresses of homeless life (withdrawal, anger, or depression) and that are the normal reaction to extreme poverty, along with the other mental illnesses that are independent of the environment. This is an area of research on the homeless where ethnographic methods can help clarify the murkiness of mere enumeration.

Conservative commentators and social scientists, as well as psychiatrists, often report high numbers of mentally ill among the homeless. The focus by the former, on personal causality or responsibility for homelessness avoids the examination of structural causes. For the latter we could infer that their inclination to define homelessness within the realm of their expertise has to do with the incentive of capturing federal monies disbursed for research and services.

Today there is no doubt that a large segment of the homeless are families and it seems undisputable that mental illness, while adding an element of susceptibility to homelessness, is not the cause it was once thought to be (Baum and Burnes 1993). In all fairness, even if we agree that mental illness is not *per se* the cause of homelessness, we also have to accept that, in the contemporary manifestation of homelessness, the numbers of the mentally ill are higher than in the beginning of the twentieth century.² We could trace this particular profile to the efforts to deinstitutionalize psychiatric patients during the 60s and 70s and the subsequent *non-institutionalization* that was, and is the effect of the partial implementation of that legislation, are widely discussed in the scientific literature on homelessness.

In the 1950s the emergence of psychotropic drugs allowed for a radical change in how mental illness was managed in psychiatric hospitals. The effectiveness of tranquilizers in diminishing the symptoms of the most severe psychiatric disorders

² Alice Willard Solenberger in her book on homeless men Chicago (*One Thousand Homeless Men*, 1914:118-23, New York: Survey Associates, cited in Kumer 2003:159) found that 5% of the men “were suffering from various degrees of insanity.” Rossi’s et al. (1986) results of the census of the homeless in the same city estimated that between 20% and 30% of the men had some sort of mental problem. Rossi’s numbers are the aggregate of depression and psychotic symptoms, which suggest that at least some of that mental illness may have been caused by the condition of homelessness.

allowed for the more effective management of the behavior of institutionalized patients and could be used to stabilize them after release. The timing of the launching of these new drugs coincided with a preoccupation of the state with reducing the budget dedicated to the caring of the mentally ill. New York State among others began to use tranquilizers throughout the state mental health system in a successful effort to control its growth (Blau, 1992:81). The states liberalized the guidelines for the discharge and tightened the rules for the ingress of new patients. Consequently, starting in the mid 1960s, a new generation of persons with severe mental illness that had never set foot in psychiatric hospital began to emerge (83-84).

In 1963 the regulations of the federal program Aid to the Disabled (ATD) changed, allowing for community treatment of the mentally ill and the states were able to resort to treatment strategies that further shifted to the federal government the burden of caring for the mentally ill. In the same year president Kennedy signed the Mental Retardation Facilities and Community Mental Health Construction Act. It intended to fund the construction of 2,000 community mental health centers by the year 1980. By the target date only 789 had been opened (82).

In the realm of civil society, the deinstitutionalization movement was fueled by the growing knowledge that the conditions in psychiatric hospitals were comparable to prisons. Civil libertarians questioned the rehabilitative capability of psychiatric institutions. The courts began to bring into play their ethical principles in the 1960s. In a series of decisions in different states judges limited the ability of mental health establishments to curtail the liberty of patients, redefined the concept of adequate treatment, established "dangerousness" as the criterion for involuntary commitment, and

ordered higher staff-patient ratios. Some states complied with the latter by simply releasing more patients (83).

In 1990 the National Institutes of Mental Health, the Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration, and the United States Department of Health and Human Services presented to Congress their report *Deinstitutionalization Policy and Homelessness: a Report to Congress*. In it the authors stated that the connection of homelessness with deinstitutionalization was not as prominent as once thought (cited in Blau 1992:85). What may have caused the overstatement of the connection of mental illness and homelessness for more than a decade was the combination of the high visibility of mentally ill people in the streets, the knowledge that deinstitutionalization had not been adequately coupled with enough serviced community housing, and the allocation of federal research monies within the context of shrinking welfare state in the eighties. Targeted funding for research on homelessness may have caused other distortions as well³ but it is clear that for the last twenty five years there had been higher numbers of mentally ill men and women living in the streets than ever before. The character of the changes in dealing with persons with psychiatric disorders added a layer of vulnerability to populations that were exposed to the brunt of larger socioeconomic phenomena. In addition, focusing on the homeless mentally ill and thus construing the problem of homelessness as a problem of mental illness had an added advantage:

“The image of dependency attracts public attention because it simultaneously excuses the viewer from empathizing with the homeless person or otherwise recognizing some shared responsibility for his or her

³ *“As researchers, we were literary tracked into studying the homeless in the shelters where they were plentiful and easy to study in a way that enabled us to fulfill our obligations to the government agencies that funded our research.”* (Marcus, 2003:140).

plight, and yet enables the viewer to express sympathy and support for public efforts to care for these unfortunate people” (Hoch and Slayton 1989:204)

This helps to explain why we rushed to define the problem of homelessness in psychiatric terms.

Substance Use

One of the most notable continuities between the “new homeless and old” (Hoch and Slayton 1989) is the perceived use of substances and its implicated role in causing homelessness. The skid row resident has been construed as a heavy drinker whose alcohol use is at the root of his sad fate. The overwhelming social agreement on the intractable alcoholism of these men appears to crumble when we call on the writing of social scientists who have studied the environment. In 1984 Charles Hoch and Robert Slayton (1989:127) conducted in Chicago a survey of SROs hotels, which they followed with 185 face-to-face interviews and found that only 14% of respondents drank once a day or more, and 37% abstained completely. Their data resonates with the work of other social scientists. Howard Bahr, the notable writer on the concept of disaffiliation among homeless men, reported in “Skid Row: An Introduction to Disaffiliation” that “*most skid row men are not problem drinkers, and they are not in skid row because of their drinking*” (1973:103). Donald Bogue, who ten years earlier wrote about Chicago, made the sensible effort in his account to differentiate those among the homeless that had a drinking habit and were thus plagued by other health problems, from those who drank moderately. Both groups mixed together, something that was evident to Sarah Harris in the mid 1950s when she wrote that *bloody buckets*, her term for taverns, were like social

clubs attended by “*Rowers who were not heavy drinkers*” with purpose of meeting friends (Bogue and Harris cited by Hoch and Slayton 1989:98-99). These accounts are echoed by the historian Kenneth Kusmer who writing about New York City’s skid row asserts that “*alcoholic bums (sic) ... were far from typical skid row types—if such a type existed at all*” (2003:158).

Even if the writers called on above attest to the presence of at least some alcoholism in skid row, it is difficult to conceive of this urban legend so devoid of drunks. So powerful are the stereotypes we share about its inhabitants that the factual sobriety of some gets buried by the easily accessed inebriated images of the others. We have more cultural and scientific tools to deal with pathological failure. Either as individuals or as a society we can access more responses that explain or propose solutions to self-destructive failure than to the dejection of the well behaved. The former, we expect but the latter challenge our sense of justice and the rules of success. Both are social problems, but self-inflicted misery has built-in elements that allow us to see our fate disconnected from theirs. Poverty for no apparent (individual) reason can potentially swallow us also, and attending to its causes or to plotting its end requires questioning the foundations of social justice and the institutions that underpin it in the United States. So efforts to corroborate and document the extent to which individuals cause their own homelessness have continued with the enthusiastic funding of federal agencies.

Throughout the eighties and nineties several studies measured the degree of substance use among different populations of the homeless across the United States. Although some workers found very high rates of alcohol and/or drug use among the homeless, none found 100% of respondents with addiction problems, thus disqualifying

substance use as the fundamental cause of homelessness. The difficulty of determining whether serious alcohol or drug use preceded the first bout of homelessness, or started and/or intensified while the person was homeless further muddles the picture. Although many of these research efforts were initiated in the hopes of documenting the causal connections of substance use and homelessness, they are included in this chapter with two purposes. On one had to convey the great diversity of the homeless, and on the other to underscore a serious problem of the poor, that it whether they are homeless or not.

There are widely divergent reports in terms of the percentages of drug using homeless persons but some general trends are evident. As in the general population, homeless men are more likely to use substances than homeless women. Studies that were conducted in shelters reported higher rates of substance use. Although there is a considerable pattern of substance use and mental disorders combined in both men and women, more men are just alcoholics, and persons who use drugs are more likely to also use alcohol than vice versa. During the first decade of homeless research methodological issues such as design, sampling, and defining the population and assessing the disorders studied were obstacles to their integration and comparison (Fischer and Breakey 1991).

Of the alcohol lifetime prevalence studies, where all or most respondents were men, one reported 36% prevalence in New York City (Susser, Conover and Struening 1989); two were in Baltimore, one finding 66.8% (Fischer and Breakey 1990) and the other 68% alcohol lifetime prevalence (Romanoski, Nestadt, Ross, Fischer and Breakey 1988). Koegel and Burnam (1988) found 62.9% prevalence in Los Angeles. In terms of other drugs Fischer et al. (1986) found in a sample of 51 mostly male respondents in Baltimore 20% and Koegel et al. (1988) 30.8% prevalence of substance use among the

homeless. The focus changes after 1993. The majority of studies seek to elucidate the impact of homelessness in specific populations, including drug users. This adjustment in the focus of studies suggests the realization in scientific circles that the data from the eighties do not allow evaluating whether substance use had any role in people becoming homeless (Fischer and Breakey 1991:1125) and the possibility of more productive results in seen homelessness as an added stressor to lives that were already plagued by vulnerabilities.

There are some problems with the assessment of substance use among the homeless that go beyond the methods. Most important is the contribution it makes to the medicalization of a social problem (Estroff 1985). Kim Hopper (1989) argues that the mere enumeration of substance use says very little about its significance and the role it plays in the experience of being homeless. Snow and Anderson (1993:208-213) among others, document how drug and alcohol provides an escape and a means of dealing with the stresses of life in the streets.

Structural Causes

Moving the causes of homelessness from the individual to social and economic phenomena within recent history allows for explanatory models that apply to more sub populations of the homeless. It is unlikely that any of the possible cause outlined below is alone at the root of homelessness. It is also probable that the individual pathologies described above have rendered vulnerable to homelessness certain segments of the citizens of the United States. But structural models of homelessness can explain why some people without mental illness or addictions, and even some who have remained

employed, have become homeless.

Economic Restructuring:

To understand the causes that have led the extremely poor to become homeless we need to consider the dramatic changes that industrial production and the labor market underwent in the last decades of the twentieth century. These changes have resulted in the shrinking of the income that the classes at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder received for their sustenance, and in the disappearance of the types of employment that fed the working class for most of the last hundred years, namely unionized factory work. Surely, this is not the only cause of homelessness, but in New York City where most of the housing stock was accessed through a rental market it represented, in combination with the emergency of gentrification, a significant qualitative and quantitative change that debilitated the social networks of the working poor.

Since the beginning of the 1970's the economy of the United States of America and other industrialized countries has been driven by what they call the forces of deindustrialization. Flexible capital hinged on the emergence of a global economy. The traditional industries (initially the auto industry but soon many other like the apparel industry), which were the main employers of the working class of the United States, fled overseas or relocated to states with weak union organizing to garner the benefits of cheaper labor markets and less regulated labor pools⁴ (Bluestone and Harrison 1982). The closing and transferring of industrial units resulted in the loss of millions of jobs and the

⁴ The emergence of global capitalism was ushered the abandonment of the gold standard and fixed exchange rates, and the oil crises of 1973 and 1978.

decimation of many communities that depended on them (Nash, 1989; Pappas, 1989).

The new jobs that were created paid lower wages, were not unionized, and had no benefits. The new employment strategy included the creation of part time jobs that curtailed benefit eligibility. Automatization replaced skilled positions driving workers to lower paid unskilled work. Portions of the production chain were handed to subcontractors (outsourcing) that using non-unionized labor lowered their production costs (Sassen-Koob, 1988). These post-Fordist practices downgraded the factory hierarchies, lowered the average income level and shrunk dramatically the labor market. New employment grew at both ends of the spectrum: high paying jobs in finance, real estate, insurance and professional services, and the private welfare industry.⁵ The low paying jobs that emerged were in retail, transportation and consumer services.

The more flexible organization of capital was made possible in great measure by the advances in communication and technology. Consultants from the many firms providing those services replaced in-house professionals. The new low paying jobs, chiefly in the informal economy, are filled by lower paid workers such as immigrants and women (Kwong, 2001:70-72). As these jobs have grown in numbers the working conditions, salaries, and employment opportunities for the conventional working class dwindle. The gap between rich and poor has widened and the number of people living under the poverty line has mounted.

The restructuring of the US economy left many men unable to continue feeding their families and many others knowing that the role that a patriarchal society promises young men was not in their future. Industrial employment had given men more inclined

⁵ Health, education, and social services.

to manual work or who for racial, economic, or personal reasons could not go to college, the possibility of living a decent life and raise a family. The disappearance of a large proportion of blue-collar jobs left many men vulnerable to underemployment, poverty and thus, homelessness.

The Shrinkage of the Welfare State

Companion to the restructuring of the economy is the erosion of the welfare state that took place over the same period. During the last four decades of the twentieth century AFDC⁶ transfer payments did not keep up with the increase in the cost of living (Morgen and Weigt 2001:152-54; Piven 2001:140-42; Susser 1996, 1998). The nineties saw the further reduction of the eligibility of legal immigrants for public assistance (Piven 2001:139; Zavella 2001:110) and the institution of *workfare*, as yet another bureaucratic hurdle in the lives of the poor (Mink, 1998; Piven 2001:140). The gradual but relentless dismantling of the safety net increased the economic vulnerability of economically disadvantaged families, forcing them to resort to the housing strategies studied by Anna Lou Dehavenon.

The Great Society programs in the sixties marked the peak of the welfare state in the US. By the early seventies, the Nixon administration began dismantling the federally sponsored safety net for the needy. The reasons were the expenditures for the Vietnam War, the economic upheaval, and the tax revolts combined with the ideological proclivities of the Republican administration. The standards of eligibility for the different welfare benefits were made more stringent, and by the end of the seventies some states

⁶ Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

were charging fees for social services in an effort to reduce expenses (Wolch and Dear, 1993).

The administration of Ronald Reagan sharpened the rollback of benefits. Funds were shifted from social spending to defense, reducing the welfare state and consolidating the warfare state. Social service resources were redistributed to the private sector through privatization. The policy of new federalism limited federal responsibilities by transferring them to state and local governments. Eligibility was further reduced (Palmer and Sawhill, 1982; Wolch, 1990). Between 1980 and 1983 child nourishment services were reduced by 28%, AFDC and food stamps by 13% and employment preparedness programs by 60% (Levitan and Johnson, 1984). In 1978 the total authorizations for housing were 7% of the federal budget. By the end of the eighties the percentage had been reduced ten times to just a 0.7% of the budget.

It was claimed that the private sector was better able to provide services more efficiently and at lower costs than “big government.” But this semiprivate sector was funded in great measure by the federal government. Moreover, lower costs depended on the non-unionized jobs created by private agencies. The mechanism of diverting resources to the service providing agencies in the private sector that had government contracts amounted to the emergence of a “shadow state” (Wolch, 1990). The role of NGOs was supported by a philosophy of self-help which “*fragments poor communities into sectoral and subsectoral groupings unable to see the larger social picture that afflicts them and even less able to unite in struggle against the system*” (Petras,

1997:15).⁷ The ideals of individualism, voluntarism, small government, were the inspiration of a movement of small agencies serving the poor (particularly those with mental and physical disabilities, older persons, and alcoholics/addicts), which was possible by government contracts and a more flexible labor market.

The retrenchment of welfare has reduced significantly the alternatives accessible to the poor. Although here we are concerned with housing the reductions in education and health services have limited the funds available to put a roof over poor families. The changes in the real state market have limited the number of affordable housing units.

Housing

The shrinking and deterioration of the labor market and the roll back of the welfare state succeeded in increasing the vulnerability of the poor but did not cause the homeless crisis alone. There were shifts in the housing market that restricted the possibilities of attaining housing affordable. After World War II federal housing programs promoted the building of reasonably priced homes for the working class, bringing the number of units in the housing stock to an all time high (Hoch and Slayton 1989:115-17). In the 1970s the availability of homes for rent or ownership at the lower end of the market decreased. In different ways, the combined changes in federal housing policies and the urban housing markets reduced the residential pool for a working class with increasingly lower income and for the dependent poor with lower cash benefits.

The housing priorities of the Federal Government were inverted during the

⁷ James Petras makes this argument in reference to Non Governmental Organizations in Latin America countries. Similar conclusion can be drawn of their role within the United States.

1980's. In 1977 most funds for housing in the Federal budget were directed to families with low incomes. By 1988 within the federal housing allocations tax deductions to homeowners had grown five fold and funds for low-income housing had been more than halved (Children Defense Fund, 1991). During this same period Federal authorization for housing were cut down by 78% (Gilderbloom and Appelbaum, 1988). Programs that funneled monies to the private sector through the poor, such as "Section 8" grew from 20% to 96% of the national housing budget from 1980 to 1988. On the other hand the proportion of the federal budget geared to the construction of new public housing units fell from 80% to 4% (Children's Defense Fund, 1991). The construction and maintenance of public housing was undermined by the belief that its commitment to the poor converted public housing projects into "instant ghettos". The effect of the move away from public housing was compounded by three factors: most public housing developers are allowed to return units to the private market after thirty years; scarce funds for maintenance keep units vacant or uninhabitable; the sale of public housing units to tenants not able to afford them and default on the payments recycles them through the banks shifting previously affordable housing to the private market. The retreat of the US government from the provision of affordable housing was one important factor in the advent of the crisis of homelessness (Wolch and Dear, 1993).

After WWII the working and middle classes moved to the suburbs abandoning the central cities to the poor and minorities. War veterans qualified for loans for housing and the federal government involved itself in the construction of housing for ownership. By the seventies the value of their properties mounted. Their children, the "baby boomers", were not able to buy into the suburbs in which they grew up (Newman, 1993). Better

educated than their parents, they became the affluent young professionals who *pioneered* (Smith 1996) the return to the city.

In the eighties the central cities of most major urban centers in the United States were moving toward gentrification. Portrayed by the media as a “back-to-the-city” movement this phenomenon was caused less by changes in the life-style of younger households than by the demographic and economic changes in the urban land markets, in the nation in general and in certain regions in particular (Smith, 1986, 1996).

The rise in urban rent was the result of three factors combined. First, urban slow growth movements and exclusionist zoning limited the scale of development in the suburbs and created distinctive class, racial, and ethnic enclaves (Davis, 1990). Second, urban renewal efforts succeeded in luring developers to the construction of office building, convention centers, and stadiums, which in turn attracted firms providing corporate and professional services. They also raised the stakes that made possible the gentrification of central city neighborhoods. Finally, the gap between actual rents and potential rents grew large enough to justify redevelopment for profit (Smith, 1986).

Conversions and demolitions swept across cities. Low rent housing shrank as more profitable housing for middle and upper classes increased. In neighborhoods formerly abandoned young, professional, largely white households of one or two persons replaced the blue and lower white collar workers, minorities, the elderly, people with AIDS, and the disabled (LeGates and Hartman 1986; Lee and Hodge 1984). The displaced were difficult to relocate and house because NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) sentiments spread shutting them out of other neighborhoods.

Recent History of the New York City Shelters for the Homeless

The history of the contemporary homeless shelter is not rooted in the concern of the state for the extremely poor. The existence of buildings such the one described was conceived out of the contest between advocates of the homeless and the government of the city of New York (Blau 1992:96-111; Hopper 2003:178-85). The adversarial and unwanted coitus in the courts that begot the program to combat homelessness marked the destiny of this bastard offspring. As such, it is devoid of long term strategies to address unemployment and the lack of low income housing, and is plagued by minutely detailing the characteristics that emergency assistance should have.

The historical pedigree of today's homeless shelter can be traced to the nineteenth century poorhouse and the concept of "indoor relief," and we find great resemblances of its ancestors in the contemporary institution. The present day homeless shelter, more than a tool to aid those who have fallen by the wayside, is meant to keep the deprived barely alive while dismantling their dignity and thus conveying that their poverty is utterly suspect. The idea is that the poor should feel uncomfortable lest they should become used to receiving something for nothing (Blau, 1992).

This is the attitude that Robert Hayes found in the administrator of the only shelter for homeless men in 1979. As a New Yorker, Hayes had noticed the increasing number of men living in the city's streets. He learned from them that the conditions on Third Street Shelter, then the only city shelter, were so deplorable that they preferred to live in the streets. He had just graduated from NYU Law School and convinced the law firm he was working for to take up their cause. Probably out of naiveté, Hayes

“Thought that ‘by talking to city officials about what was going on, they

would be moved to do something.' But when Hayes met the director of the [shelter], the administrator bluntly explained that conditions were kept 'forbidding' in order to 'encourage these people to make other arrangements.' 'It was then I got angry,' Hayes said. 'And when lawyers get angry, they can only think of one thing.'" (Blau, 1992:98)

He found thus the motivation to file the civil action suit known as Callahan v. Carey in October of 1979. In December of the same year the New York State Supreme Court dispensed a preliminary injunction recognizing the right to shelter and compelling the city and the state of New York to make available enough shelter for all those who needed it. It also opened the flood gates for many similar law suits in different districts across the United States. This landmark decision defined New York City response to the homeless crisis during the 1980s and in it was pinned to the "tortuous process of grudging compliance with, and exacting monitoring of what would become a slew of court orders" (Hopper, 2003:65). The dynamic stimuli of this legal activity were the city's determination to amend the conditions of the enactment of Callahan v. Carey, and the resolve of advocates to resort to the courts to offset the official resistance to comply. The Coalition for the Homeless and Hayes went to court about thirty times during the following five years, in their efforts to enforce the terms of the consent decree (Blau, 1992:100). While that legal victory marked the birth of the official homeless program, the attempts to make help unpalatable has remained.

As result of Hayes success in the courts, the Keener building in Wards Island, an empty state psychiatric hospital, was destined to housing the homeless. But in April of 1980 advocates had to sue again the state and the city of New York, as the owners and operators of Keener, for overcrowding and failing to provide adequate services to residents. In January of the following year again an overcrowding suit was filed.

In early 1983 the city established the Work Experience Program (WEP). The program was implemented first at Harlem Shelter and introduced to other shelters afterwards. The program required that participants work twenty hours per week in exchange for \$12.50. From its inception the program was used as a tool to deny help to those men who refused to participate. The parallel that can be drawn between WEP and the early twentieth century requirement that the needy chop wood in exchange for the help they received unveils its punitive nature. The argument made in favor of WEP existence was “work readiness.” The point of compelling shelter residents to do menial work at the rate of ¢62 per hour, was to instill structure in the daily routines of the homeless while familiarizing them with punctuality, responsibility and obedience. Just in case WEP did not prove to be sufficient disincentive to use the municipal shelter system, the city attempted to make them more uncomfortable. In November of 1985 Joe Calderone reported in New York Newsday the publication of a city commissioned report entitled *An Observational Study of Toilet and Shower Utilization in Three Men's Shelters* that judged as excessive the number of sanitary facilities (Blau 1992:100, n.14:212).

If the interest of the city of New York was in the wellbeing and safety of the homeless it would have ensured that the guidelines set up as result of Callahan v. Carey applied to all homeless persons, but this was not the case. In 1983 a new legal suit (*Eldredge v. Koch*) was filed to ensure that the minimal requirements that applied to men's shelters were also followed in women's shelters. Additional proof of the city's foot dragging is the fact that in the following year Legal Aids Society filed McCain v. Koch to prevent it from keeping homeless families sleeping on the floor of welfare offices and then house them in roach and rat infested and crime-ridden welfare hotels

(Blau1992:106). But the city did not take up the task of emptying out the welfare hotels seriously until in 1987 the Department of Health and Human Services proposed reducing in half the welfare reimbursements the city was using to pay for housing families in hotels (Blau 1992:163).

In 1995 Mayor Giuliani requested from Governor Pataki new shelter regulations that would allow the City of New York to eject from shelters homeless persons who failed to comply with service plans, violated shelter rules, hindered assessment of resources and failed to comply with public assistance requirements. In New York City the Legal Aid Society and the Coalition for the Homeless succeeded in obtaining stays on the implementation of the order for homeless families and individuals respectively. Unfortunately in other state counties the new regulations resulted in the denial of shelter to many individuals and families (Coalition for the Homeless 2002:1).

In the context of that order there was a push from city government to force the homeless to request assistance from their families instead of the city as part. As part of the assessment of resources homeless individuals and families were expected to provide information about their kinship networks as it was assumed that their mere existence implied their availability as a housing resource. The Giuliani administration argued that *“many are not really homeless but merely want a better place to live at the city's expense”* (Levy 1996). Research had shown that 46% of the families that were applying for shelter were fleeing overcrowded conditions (Dehavenon 1996). In an attempt to reverse the expansion of the definition of homelessness that advocates and social scientists had been advancing for years, and thus reduce overcrowding at the emergency units where intake screening took place, city workers were instructed to *“reject*

applications for emergency housing from families who have lived doubled up with other families 'immediately prior to requesting temporary housing' (New York Times August 28th, 1996). The city argued that the shelter system was intended for victims of abuse or fire and not for young women who were not getting along with their hosting relatives. This assertion relied on the power of the myth of the rebellious young mother who refused to follow her elders' guidelines of appropriate behavior.⁸ It went along with the conservative suspicion that the poor have more resources than they would admit; a suspicion of which most prominent example was the legendary "welfare queen"⁹ which Ronald Reagan proposed in the 1980s as a rationale for the rollback of the welfare state.

What was more dramatically true of homeless families also applied to homeless individuals. In spite of their unsightliness shelters for homeless men have an important role in the impoverished communities where they are placed. Some are located amid inner city areas blighted by urban decay and desperation. Franklin Avenue Men Shelter was one of them. Located in the Morrisania section of the South Bronx the shelter—in another armory—was surrounded by burnt out blocks, abandoned buildings and vacant lots. It did not have the benefit of proximity to commercial areas, which decreased dramatically its residents' opportunities of engaging in occasional labor for local merchants. The area was overwhelmed by the epidemic of crack use. The neighborhood

⁸ This rule was quickly qualified by the justice system which, in response to a suit by the Legal Aid Society, instructed workers to resort to other means to determine homelessness besides a face to face interview (Álvarez 1996).

⁹ The "welfare queen" was a fictitious character, a woman of color that collected government benefits she did not need and which were amassed in their bank accounts. This myth came into existence along with another by which it was argued that working class students were using their grant money to invest in the stock market. These myths were used as rationales for taxing this type of income.

apartment buildings were in great disrepair, many lacking a front door lock or a superintendent to attend to its maintenance and cleaning. Local families lived in overcrowded apartments. There I met Winston.

Winston was an African American man in his late twenties. He was tall, had wide shoulders and a deep voice, and his skin was dark and covered with bumps and dark spots. He clearly was very strong and his facial features were far from attractive. He was a CSS client, which meant he had some type of psychiatric problem. When I met him, workers and clients made sure I knew he was sexually interested in men. With mischievous smiles they made comments filled with innuendo to which he did not respond. I probably did not need their help in figuring that out. While Winston was not particularly effeminate his mannerisms set him apart from the other men. He was gentle and quiet and sometimes made a gesture that could be described as feminine. I did not think he was “slow” but the way the other men talked to him gave me the impression that they did. He was always clean and his hand-made sweaters and scarves suggested that he was not as fashion conscious as the other guys. I asked him once who had made his sweater. *“My mom—he replied. She’s afraid I’m gonna catch a bad cold. Plus, my brothers never use what she knit for them, so she knit just for me.”* I asked him where she lived. *“A couple o’ blocks from here. I be at my house everyday. My mom cooks for me. I hate the food here, and she don’t want me to eat that shelter food, so I eat all my meals with her. I go there everyday, talk to her and watch TV. But she don’t let me sleep in my house ‘cause my brothers be making fun of me and I can loose it. She think one day I’m gonna kill one o’ them ‘cause when I get mad I can’t control myself. So, I sleep here.”* (Field notes, September 15, 1988)

Winston was not an exception. Many of the men who lived in the different shelters where I worked and visited had ties to the surrounding communities. Since now the city does allocate residents to shelters with available space, some of these connections are created after the men move in the shelter, but there were men who like Winston, have family and friends in the blocks around the shelter. The second instance was more common at the beginning of the nineties when decentralized admission was the common practice. Gounis and Susser (1990) documented this development at the Franklin Avenue Men

Shelter:

“Men displaced from housing in the deteriorating environment of the South Bronx could simply walk over to the shelter. Many maintained an ongoing involvement in the surrounding community, with social networks and social supports there. Thus the shelter evolved into an extension of community beds, which men can utilize as a place of last resort or as a place to return to sporadically when precarious arrangements in the community collapse” (239).

It is hardly surprising that this would be the case. Although much of the literature on the homeless has portrayed the homeless as uprooted vagrants they do have families or communities where they come from, and they foster as much as they can their ties with other social groups. Negating this connection turns the homeless into a population unlike other city dwellers upon which numerous labels that explain the existence can be attached. This has been a common strategy to avoid addressing the links between homelessness and poverty. These atomized individuals can thus be called mentally ill, criminals, addicts, or deviants of any sort, but not displaced, unemployed or underemployed persons in a predicament that would require structural changes to be addressed. This portrayal of the homeless changed when city government perceived that it could be advantageous to reframe them in the context of a community. Although the attempt to redefine the *Callahan* consent decree originally did not succeed, its discussion discouraged dramatically new requests for shelter.

In October of 1999, New York City authorities announced its intention to enforce the 1995 regulation issued by governor Pataki at the behest of major Giuliani, requiring the performance of workfare in exchange for shelter. Residents who failed to comply with welfare and shelter rules would be ejected from the premises for periods of time that could go up 180 days. The children of non-compliant families could be placed in foster

care. In December of the same year two state courts responding to a motion from the Legal Aid Society, placed a restraining order on the city and an ad hoc coalition of family shelter providers made public their intention of not ejecting homeless families (Coalition for the Homeless, 2002:2).

In the month of February of 2000 a State Supreme Court judge prohibited the city from putting into practice the 1995 instructions (Bernstein, 2000). The decision pointed out that the city did not consider the possibility that residents would not be “unwilling” but “unable” to abide with city regulations due to social impairment (Hopper, 2003:190). The cost of bureaucratic error in determining the basis of noncompliance would be too great to risk. A few weeks before the end of its term in a flurry of executive activity that attempted to extend the effect of his philosophy of government into the next administration, Major Giuliani filed a notice of appeal of the February 2000 decision that in June of 2002 was taken up by the Bloomberg administration (Coalition for the Homeless, 2002:3).

In January of 2003 the City of New York reached a settlement with advocates of the homeless and agreed not to eject families from shelters and to create a panel that would mediate the dispute between the city and homeless families (Kaufman, 2003). The hope that this agreement would set the tone for dealing with single homeless adults ended a few weeks later when the Bloomberg administration filed an appeal to retain the right to eject *troublemaking* residents from municipal shelters. Saying that “*there is not perpetual right to shelter*” city lawyers petitioned for the right to eject from 30 to 180 days those residents who do not follow shelter rules such as cooperating with assessments, or taking their medications, or complying with job-search strategies (Saulny 2003). In June the

City of New York finally obtained the right to refuse shelter to those it deemed as noncompliant, reversing the two decades rule of the consent decree of *Callahan v. Carey* (Kaufman 2003a, b). The decision stated, “*the decree does not state that homeless individuals who do not qualify for public assistance can rely on ‘social dysfunction’ as basis for refusing to cooperate with reasonable requirements for resident cooperation*” (cited in Lin 2003). Advocates for the homeless plan to appeal this decision saying that the city should not be spending resources trying to determine the difference between mental illness and social dysfunction; a determination they say city workers are not equipped to make (Kaufman 2003b).

The examination of the two decades history of the city of New York program for the homeless reveals two major trends. The first approach in the eighties was characterized by passive resistance to providing shelter for the homeless. During this period city government had to be taken to task by the courts by advocates for the homeless. The city resisted the expansion of services to the different classes of homeless persons, first men, then women and finally families. Within each category of service recipients the city had to be sued to improve the quality of the services. In the nineties the city adopted a more proactive stance by attempting repeatedly to redefine the terms of service provision seeking the right to refuse shelter. The stated rationale for such a move was an interest in establishing different degrees of deservedness among the needy and limiting help to the most deserving. This was ascertained by a measurement of compliance. Both trends clearly aimed at serving the least number of homeless persons, but both approaches resulted in the discouragement of the homeless from seeking help from the state. We would not find today a city official naïve enough to admit openly that

detering the poor from seeking services is inherent to the design of service strategies but the fact that it was once admitted to Robert Hayes by the director of East 3rd Street Men's Shelter force us to consider that it remains the unwritten foundation of the state response to homelessness.

Joel Blau argues in *The Visible Poor* (1992:107) that it is in the interest of the state to maintain a perceivable difference between the housing provided for the homeless and that the lowest paid workers can afford. If this is so, as I think it is, there will be no improvement in the services the homeless receive until the standards of living of the housed working class are raised. While it is not uncommon to hear from shelters and social services workers that "*we are all one paycheck away from homelessness,*" it is the stigma of homelessness that prevent us from realizing that our fates are linked.

Discussion of compliance and deservedness obfuscate the nature of poverty in United States society.

I started this chapter with a discussion of the concept of *home*, to determine what it is that the homeless lack. All commentators agree that a home is a place where one can be protected from the weather, enjoy privacy, and engage in the activities of social reproduction. Few point to safety, legal right to inhabit a particular dwelling, and access to transportation. The role of the *home* as locus of hospitality is completely absent from all discussions, and I consider this absence extremely problematic. Since we define humans as *social beings*, freedom to grant access to one's abode to those we wish is an essential characteristic of the *human home*. Of all the different proposals for and actual instances of housing for the homeless, very few are more than a bedroom and one that is

periodically subjected to inspections, at that.

The state's investment in a focus on the lack of a home, or more appropriately *nighttime dwelling* to define homelessness, goes hand in hand with its vigorous endorsement of individual-centered explanatory models of homelessness. Historical circumstances (i.e.: the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill and the epidemic of crack cocaine) made mental illness and substance use the phenomena favored by the federal government as causes of homelessness during the conservative eighties. Besides avoiding the discussion of poverty they allowed for the advancement of conservative causes, such as more stringent enforcement of drug laws and the depiction of the human rights-based deinstitutionalization movement as liberal projects gone wrong. Yet neither mental illness nor substance use alone or combined could explain the wide range of problems found in the homeless population; least of all the ballooning of homeless families as a homeless subgroup at the end of the eighties.

Structural causes of homelessness rest on the effects of macro-economic phenomena that affected large segments of the people of the United States and on more vulnerable portions of the population. Vulnerabilities that include but are not limited to mental illness and addiction. The major forces are the restructuring of the economy, the shrinkage of the welfare state, and the changes in the housing market, which forced workers out of jobs, reduced state help for the poor, and dramatically decreased low income housing.

The impact of these changes combined began to be felt in New York City at the end of the seventies and were manifested in the appearance of the current wave of homelessness. For the next two decades homeless advocates and successive city

government resistant to their demands engaged in court battles that slowly expanded and improved the quality of the services available to the homeless. Taken together these legal squabbles represented two adversarial philosophies about the role of the state in addressing social problems in general, and poverty and homelessness in particular.

City administrators often argued that compared to other urban administrations in the United States, New York City government had been a model of sensitivity in its proactive policies for the homeless and that the liberal tradition of the city had made it more receptive to the plight of the poor. In response, the activists disputed not that the services for the homeless were less comprehensive than in other cities, but that they were still mismatched with regard to the proportion and seriousness of the problem in New York City.

While the disagreements were loud and the protagonists of both positions were convinced that they stood on the right side of history, they did not represent diametrically opposed points of view, but two varieties of liberal ideology. Proof of this is that the debates and court battles centered on emergency services for the homeless. Only a few more radical and grassroots activist groups such as ACORN demanded the expansion of the low income housing stock and provided a systemic analysis that included jobs and workers rights.

In the next chapter I address practical and conceptual methodological issues. I discuss the concept of *masculinity* as it appears in the sociological and anthropological literature and in relation to my ethnographic data. Masculinity as it appears in the next chapter and in the following chapters is positioned within a political economic understanding of gender.

Chapter Three

Conceptual Tools

Chapter three provides the notions along which I examine the lives of these homeless men: gender and masculinity. In the past two chapters I have provided a description of current homelessness as a manifestation of poverty. If a few of them were born and brought up in the middle or even the upper classes, the predicament in which my ethnography finds them is that of extreme poverty. Since the majority of the men were formed in the working classes or among the poor it is the ethos of the lower classes that mostly informed the communities of homeless men among whom I conducted my research. This leads me initially to a brief account of Pierre Bourdieu's (1984:101) concept of *habitus* and its relation to the notion of *taste* as a means to link their class experiences to their experiences of gender and masculinity.

I use the notion of *masculinity* as a means of structuring the lives of the residents of the homeless shelter. I include *masculinity* as part of a depiction of poverty in contrast to accounts of it that usually isolate it and marginalize it as an expression foreign to the United States gender system. I seek to depict the masculinities of homeless men as a manifestation of gender tinged by race and class, intimately connected with those that, for their location within the socio-cultural mainstream, are accepted and lauded. Besides examining the lives of my informants through the lens of masculinity, it is helpful in looking at the power-imbued interactions of the men who lived or worked at the shelter.

Pierre Bourdieu: *Habitus and Taste*

Habitus for Pierre Bourdieu, is a *generative principle* that determines and unifies the specific practices of social agents, that is, their *disposition* to engage certain practices and not others, and their *homology*, a similarity between different practices that can be traced to a common origin. The habitus is laid down unconsciously, during the agent's childhood and adolescence and it is never finished, but is open to conscious readjustments or correction. The *habitus* represents the incorporation or internalization of the material or objective conditions of a group or class (in a definition that includes but is not limited to its relation to the means of production) and their transformation into the ability to produce patterned responses (that can be practices or interpretations) to random events and circumstances which have a propensity to reproduce the objective conditions that produced the *habitus* in the first place (1984:170-73).

The *habitus* of a particular class or group produces their *life-styles*, and it is the internalization of objective conditions that is the *habitus*, that generates the particular *taste* with which the group makes evident its *distinction* from others. *Taste*, as the tendency and ability to appropriate systems of classification as well as specific sets of classified people, objects, practices, language, body language, etc., is the formula that organizes *life-style*, harmonizing the diverse realms that comprise it in a coherent whole in which each part or dimension represents the other and represents *with* the other. And "*as one rises in the social hierarchy, life-style is increasingly a matter of what Weber calls the 'stylization of life.'*" (1984:174)

Through *taste* the world of objects and practices is regrouped in contrasting arrays with discrete and distinctive meanings. It elaborates the diversity of things into symbols

of distinctive manifestations of class position and it is perceived as such. So at risk of repeating myself, the *habitus* by means of the classificatory structures of *taste* brings into being practices that are in sync, in tune, congruent with the regularities intrinsic to a particular condition. More specifically, it transforms necessities into the choices that constitute different *life-styles*, which receive their value from an organization of contrasts and associations that ultimately are a better means than income to determine *use-value*. So it is the lack of a *habitus* appropriately corrected for a new social position that makes the *nouveau riche* to reveals their “newness” through their *taste*.

Bourdieu talks about *taste* as the *virtue made of necessity* because it makes predilections out of limitations. One gets what one likes because one likes what one has, and what one has are the corresponding attributes of the position assigned to one in the classificatory system. So those distant from the experience of necessity are better described by the *taste of luxury or freedom*, which actually produced them. In contrast the proletariat and its *taste of necessity*, “choose” that which will give them *more for their buck*. For Bourdieu then, the notion of taste is fraught with the bourgeois connotations of *freedom of choice* that get in the way of comprehending the concept of *taste of necessity*. (1984:177-8)

The variety of tastes is the assertion of the unavoidable dissimilarities of the objective conditions they represent, and they are affirmed by the categorical repudiation of other tastes, that is, they are defined by the dislike, the value-imbued negation, or *distaste* in Bourdieu terms, of other tastes. It is the intrinsic relation that taste has to the *habitus* that makes taste *feel natural*; it *naturalizes* its ontogeny. The taste of the working classes serves as a negative point of reference against which other tastes in the aesthetic

system define themselves and from which they must strive to differentiate themselves. (1984:56-57)

Bourdieu backs his ideas about how social agents differentiate themselves and assert their social position through taste with a study he conducted in France. He interviews persons from a variety of social positions and employments on their tastes of performing (largely music) and visual (largely painting) arts, and their preferences regarding the practices of food consumption and the presentation and care of the body. His choice of different sources of employment for each social block (working, middle, and dominant classes) allows him to make intra-class and occupational inferences that connect each group with a particular set of choices.

I believe that it would be possible to extend those inferences to the choice and labeling of sexual practices and thus create a loose parallel between the ways in which groups of social agents distinguish themselves from others in their taste. It is my point that endorsing one or another sexual system, specifically their construction of sex between males, has come to symbolize the social position of agents and is used not only to instill with meaning their own practices, but also to catalogue the sexual practices of others.

Bourdieu focuses on three realms or *structures of consumption* to investigate: food, Culture (as opposed to anthropological *culture*), and presentation (1984:184). These three realms, as much as they represent biological, social, and aesthetic activities, have points in common with sexuality. Even if food, Culture, and presentation take place and are discussed publicly, and sexuality is not so directly observable, the growing incursions of sexuality as a subject matter of public discourse allow for its use as a means of

establishing distinctions between social groups in more subtle ways.

The Masculinities of the Homeless Shelter: Defining “Masculine”

The first hurdle in discussing masculinity is the definition of *masculine*. The most conventional way to do it is to equate *masculine* with strength, aggression, and risk-taking attitudes, which could be illustrated with examples of the men I met during fieldwork. But in doing this, I would be choosing the gender characteristics of the homeless shelter most relevant to me, which would hardly be a scientific definition. Similarly, if I defined *masculine* as *what men ought to be* according to cultural norms of the United States, many of my informants would not fit the delineations of *masculine* and others would surpass it. I am unsure that any would match it. The pitfalls of essentialism are not uncommon even among gender theorists, when they talk about *exaggerated* or *hyper-masculinity* (Pyke 1996), suggesting that there is a measure, which could only be subjective, of how much masculinity is *too much* masculinity.

A positivist approach would define *masculine* as *what men actually do*. This would leave me without the possibility of discussing an important aspect of my data: *feminine* men. Defining *masculine* as *what is not feminine* that is, through a *system of symbolic differences and contrasts*, would allow me to use both words to discuss either men or women without the problems of the other definitional strategies to arrive at a definition. But I would not be able to discuss other types of relationships such as those the men had with the state as a gendered institution (Connell 1990). It seems more useful to draw on Robert W. Connell’s definition:

“Masculinity”, to the extent the term can be defined at all, is

simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture. (1995:71)

This definition should allow me to describe the *masculine* and *feminine* features of my informants. Since, like in other ethnographies such as those by Cornwall (1994), Kulick (2003, orig. 1999) and McElhinny (1994), femininity and masculinity were evident in the same individual, I would refer to my informants as “more or less masculine or feminine.” In this way I would avoid fixed, totalizing, and final accounts of their gender identities. The concepts *hegemony*, *masculine bloc*, and *practices of masculinity*, would let me discuss the relationships the men established among themselves as ranked in a hierarchy of masculinities, as well as in terms of their different masculine and feminine gender enactments. Connell’s definition will also enable me to contextualize the experiences of my informants within the logic of the gender system as *ascriptor of power difference*. This logic is inherent in the *emic* understanding of the United States gender system that “feminizes” their homeless condition and the racial and ethnic markers most of them bore.¹ The homeless men I met in my fieldwork will appear as *feminized* subjects, vis-à-vis the *masculine* state,² but there will be occasional accounts of their ability *to get over the system* and snatch a small measure of autonomy from it.

¹ For discussions of the “feminization” of subordinate subjects see among others Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994:21-22) and Connell (1998:13-15). Examples of the feminization and infantilization of war enemies and the colonized can be found in MacDonald (1994) and Shire (1994). Margold (1995) shows how the treatment of Filipino men working in the Middle East that denied their masculinity had repercussions on them long after returning home.

² *The system*, in their words.

Connell: *Hegemonic Masculinity*

Michael A. Messner in *Politics of Masculinities: Men in Movements* (1997) recalls a meeting of a National Conference on Men and Masculinity where a white man eloquently exhorted the attendees to “‘renounce masculinity’ and ‘give up all of our male privilege’” (6-7). A Black man retorted “I’ve never been allowed to *be* a man in this racist society.” And a Gay man echoed his feelings: “my struggle is not to learn to cry and hug other men [...] I am oppressed in this homophobic society and need to empower myself to fight that oppression.” This exchange paralleled the challenge women of color and working-class women put forward to the feminist movement years earlier, showing how the experience of gender is never abstract or free-floating but intimately qualified by other social structures (Baca Zinn et al. 1986; Collins 1990; Wittig 1992; Mullings 1986; Rapp 1987). While all men benefit from the *patriarchal dividend* (Connell 1995:79-80) their ability to cash it, and the size of their returns, to maintain the financial analogy, is contingent. These contingencies may reduce or eliminate male privilege (Anderson 1990, 1999; Gershick and Miller 1995; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 1994; Nonn 1995; Staples 1995).

Robert W. Connell (1995) speaks of *masculinities* (various ways of being a man that are determined by the objective conditions of existence and elaborated by the habitus). The concept of *masculinities* calls for an understanding of their hierarchical organization that can explain their similarities and differences as well as their alliances and confrontations. A plural understanding of masculinity can produce a nuanced map that in describing the hierarchical distinctions between men can set the basis for and understanding of men’s domination of women. The relevance of this strategy is that for

Connell, the primacy of external gender dynamics is contingent on power dynamics within genders.

Hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to women and to subordinated masculinities ... The most important feature of contemporary hegemonic masculinity is that it is heterosexual, being closely connected to the institution of marriage; and a key form of subordinated masculinity is homosexual. (1987:186)

In analyzing gender relationships, taking history into account allows for the idea of *changing masculinities and gender orders*, avoiding static models that could be construed as choices of lifestyle (1995:76), and permitting future transformations to remain in the horizon.

The concept of *hegemonic masculinity* propounded by Robert W. Connell and his associates (Carrigan et al. 1985/2000; Connell 1987, 1995) speaks of “one form of masculinity rather than others [being] culturally exalted” in a particular historical moment (1995:77). *Hegemony*, as Connell uses it, is Antonio Gramsci’s conception (1995:77). Gramsci was a leftist Italian intellectual of the early twentieth century who wrote a great portion of his contribution to Marxist theory while imprisoned by the fascist regime. He slowly developed a right to keep books of his interest in his cell (except Marx’s works), and carefully preserved his permission to write. Prison officials inspected every page he wrote and then stamped it as a record of the inspection. Gramsci did not have access to a library so he used his memory as resource. These conditions produced a collection of *Note* not meant for publication and that were sprinkled with reminders to review arguments or check facts. For these reasons, they are open, provisional, and fragmentary, “hard to read” texts, that are quite apt for examining today’s social issues (see Crehan 2003:13-35). This explains why, in the Selections from the Prison

Notebooks, there isn't *one* definition of *hegemony* and the reader depends as much on explicit, as on implicit references to the concept.

Hegemony is a process that entails the *domination* and the *leadership* of a class and a moral or philosophical system. It allows a departure from mere economic models of dominance toward the involvement of ideology. Hegemony is never complete but always *becoming* and fluid. Thus, it is susceptible to contestation, able to co-opt challenges, and reconfigure itself. Its *leadership* aspect, in the hands of civil society, is linked to the consent of the masses. If the attempt to achieve consent fails, *domination* is asserted through state *coercion*. In Gramsci's terms, civil society and the state are part of the *integral state*.

Connell defines *hegemonic masculinity* as

...The configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. (1995:77)

He warns us not to regard the concept *hegemonic masculinity* as a fixed *type* of men but as "configurations of practice" in a fluid and historically contingent "structure of relationships" (1995:81). Yet, in spite of his awareness of the possibility that *hegemonic masculinity* could be conflated with a violent, oppressive, negative *type*, Connell uses the term inconsistently, as the excerpt above shows, and he is conscious of it (Connell 1998:476). Many authors have adopted the concept *hegemonic masculinity*. Most conflate it with *type*, in part because doing so frees them from describing the characteristics of the masculinity in question (Martin 1998:473), in part because they have adopted uncritically Connell's inconsistency in the use of the term (Demetriou 2001:347; Donaldson

1993:646-47). I will only use *hegemonic masculinity* to refer to the idea that a particular masculinity can be hegemonic. To refer to the violent, heterosexist, and misogynous masculinity of patriarchal capitalism, I would use *current* or *contemporary hegemonic masculinity*, *current Western* (or *US*) *hegemonic masculinity*.

For Connell the most powerful men are not necessarily holders of currently hegemonic masculinity. Yet the upper echelons of government, businesses, and the military display its authoritative corporate manifestation that succeeds in eliciting wider consent. Its malleability allows Western hegemonic masculinity to absorb and neutralize critiques while preserving its fundamental structure (77).

Gender relations among men place homosexuals at the bottom of the hierarchy in a category Connell calls *subordinated masculinities*. Heterosexual men subordinate homosexual men through a set of material practices. This objective oppression takes the form of cultural, legal, physical, and economic violence discrimination and abuse. While homosexual masculinities are the most clearly subordinated, they are joined in this disreputable location of gender by the stigmatized masculinities of heterosexual men and boys that bear characteristics considered unmanly such as *wimps*, *mama's boys*, *four-eyes*, etc (78-79).

The interface of gender structures with other social structures like race and class, produce *marginalized masculinities*. Since the context of Connell's concept of (Western) hegemonic masculinity is *patriarchal capitalism*, these undervalued masculinities are the effect of complex and dynamic social forces in the labor market (for example ethnicity or nationality, in addition to class and race). The marginalization or subordination of certain masculinities can be "suspended" in specific cases by the *authorization* of the hegemonic

group that can allow specific members of these groups to be exemplars of the hegemonic masculinity (80-81).

As much as *currently hegemonic masculinity* represents normative masculinity and given its complexity and internal contradictions, very few men fulfill the hegemonic pattern. (In my view, because any hegemonic masculinity resembles an *ideal type* in a society at a time in history, it is impossible to enact it fully). Yet the majority of men benefit from the *patriarchal dividend* produced by the gender system of patriarchal capitalism. This advantage gained or expected by most men, despite their proximity or distance to the masculine norm, is termed by Connell as *complicity* (79) and it is at the base of most men's consent, regardless of their position in the gender system.

Gender, as a social pattern, is a historical product and also "a *producer* of history" (81, emphasis in the original) and so, it is located in the realm of social agency. Connell sees then gender change being triggered from other social structures and also from within gender relations. As a structure of inequality, issues of social (in)justice are inherent to Western hegemonic masculinity, and it generates groups interested in its preservation and in its dismantlement. When consent fails, coercion emerges. Violence mends the imperfections of Western hegemonic masculinity: toward women, in its external form, and toward subaltern men in its attempts to maintain internal dominance. Violence unveils the multiple "crisis tendencies" of the gender order in its power relations, production relations, and relations of cathexis (82-85).

Robert Connell's work is widely regarded as pivotal for its dynamic understanding of gender. His use of Gramscian concepts and his critique of the static "sex roles" model has inspired many social scientists and commentators, giving a significant

impulse to the study of masculinities. In the last decade theorists like Donaldson and Demetriou have reworked Connell's model while maintaining his broad understanding of masculinity.

Donaldson: Gender and Upper Class

Mike Donaldson (1993) takes issue with Connell's idea of the autonomy of the gender order from other social formations. If this were the case, he argues, counter-hegemonic forces should be found within masculinity because the hegemonic masculinity links the "broader historical sweep [of the gender structures] to lived experience" (644). If these forces are not found, the independence of the gender system is questionable. For Donaldson, the gender system is weaved in with the class system, and their relationship with each other should be examined in order to find the locus of political practice (643-44).

The purpose of the hegemony of current Western masculinity is to stabilize the *structure of dominance and oppression of the gender order*. This is achieved through *exemplars*, or culturally accepted heroes. Yet, the problem for Western hegemonic masculinity is the contradictory masculinities of exemplars.

Sport stars represent a masculine synthesis that is undermined, for example, when they get involved in fashion modeling, a sexual objectification comparable to the one men inflict on women. Sport stars have to refrain from drinking, fighting, and taking part in other *masculine* practices, in order to maintain their status as archetypes of a given masculinity; or to show toughness by allowing punishment in the playing field, or mutilation on the surgeon's table, with the ensuing loss of power (647).

The inefficient counter-hegemony of those left out of the hegemonic model is equally troubling. The subordinated status of homosexual masculinities is based, among other reasons, on their association with effeminacy. Donaldson's argument against male homosexuality as a counter-hegemonic force centers on the adoption of traits of Western hegemonic masculinity such as toughness, physical aggression, and checkered support of women's liberation. "Finally, it is not 'gayness' that is attractive to homosexual men, but 'maleness' [...] How counter-hegemonic can this be?" (649).

Donaldson points are well taken, although somewhat myopic. Exemplars, as billboards of currently hegemonic Western masculinity, are not meant to portray every aspect of manliness, but just those that can inspire consent across the board. If exemplars were also shown inebriated, raping women, or beating their wives (as some indeed, have) their masculinities would elicit resistance and not the allegiance of women and also of many men. Exemplars are meant to promote everyone's support of a purportedly *benevolent* male dominance and therefore, its injustices should not be highlighted. The failure of Gay men to become a counter-hegemonic force vis-à-vis the currently hegemonic masculinity is an accurate assessment. The gay movement is a prime example of hegemonic co-optation. Yet, in its diversity, some groups like the Radical Fairies, are indeed counter-hegemonic elements that provide a sharp critique of capitalist masculinity from within the ranks of the gay community.

Donaldson critical assessment of Connell's model includes his proposed tactics to take apart the hegemonic masculinity: men should help bring about the end of the gender segmentation of paid work and work in men's counter-sexist efforts. The former tactic would imply that men renounce one third of their pay, which is not only unlikely, but would result in more benefit to capital than to women. If men were to pursue *female work*, their *colonization* of women's jobs would undermine their social position without

ensuring their access to better-paid *men's jobs* (649-50). Donaldson posits that men would change more if they took a larger share of women's unpaid labor: parenting. The personal, relational, and familial benefits of sharing responsibility for the "second shift" are accepted today but unfortunately, the media is also aware of them and, as *organic intellectual* of the currently hegemonic masculinity, it has begun to legitimize images of sensitive, nurturing men (650-52).

The concept of *hegemonic masculinity* has failed to reveal contradictions within *the* hegemonic masculinity that could generate counter-hegemony, deny its autonomy. Connell argues that gender is deeply embedded in social relations (1987:45) and that politics, economics and technology are gendered (Donaldson 1993:653). In this case gender change would never come from *outside*, as it is implicated in every social structure. Recognizing the interface of gender and class is crucial to understand gender change. While the external effect of the hegemonic masculinity grants men power over women, its internal form grants a few men power over other men. It is this small group of men, with power over men and women, which should be the focus of our scientific interest: ruling-class men (Donaldson 1993:655).

Demetriou: *Masculine Bloc*

Demetriou's critique of Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity lies with its internal constitution and dynamics. For Demetriou, Connell misses the dialectical character of Gramsci's hegemony and thus his concept of hegemony hinges on an elite masculinity that succeeds in subordinating and marginalizing other masculinities. For Gramsci, argues Demetriou, hegemony *involves reciprocity and mutual interaction between the*

class that is leading and the groups that are led (2001:345) that is the basis of a composite alliance (historic bloc) of groups with reconcilable interests. The leading class in its construction of a *historic bloc* appropriates elements of allied groups that appear historically useful for the hegemonic project and makes concessions that do not affect its fundamental values, thus achieving the equilibrium of the various interests within the historical bloc (Gramsci 1971:161).

Connell sees masculinities occupying different hierarchical positions, changing as result of their mutual interactions that, in turn, alter each other's realities (1995:198). His concept of *authorization* denotes a dominant masculinity's appreciation of specific representatives of marginalized or subordinated masculinities, and their use in its hegemonic project (1995:81). Yet, in spite of these practices, Connell's hegemonic masculinities remain *clearly demarcated* and *never "infected" by non-hegemonic elements*, missing Gramsci's dialectical construction of a historical bloc (Demetriou 2001:346). Hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities appear in Connell in a tense dualism: the former as white, rational, individualistic, violent, and heterosexual, and the latter as black, illogical, peaceful, homosexual, and incapable of infiltrating the hegemonic form; one defined by its complete negation of the other (347). This dynamic appears as an end in itself that omits the pragmatic construction of an historical bloc and the appropriation of elements (345) potentially useful in achieving the ultimate goal of contemporary hegemonic masculinity: the subjugation of women (Connell 1987:186).

Demetriou's response to these problems in Connell's conceptualization of hegemonic masculinities is to rework it as a hybrid masculine bloc that *unites various and diverse practices in order to construct the best possible strategy for the reproduction*

of patriarchy (348). He conceives this *masculine bloc* neither as white nor as heterosexual necessarily, but he follows Stuart Hall in thinking of it as a strategic alliance of diverse social forces (1988:170) whose flexibility and dynamism hinges on that diversity. The formation of the bloc is achieved not through negation but through negotiation (Bhabha 1988:11) in a unique historical moment in which the specific histories of the constitutive forces are displaced in favor of a new “third space” in which novel configurations of relationships of power are launched (Bhabha 1990:221).

Demetriou illustrates his ideas using Gay masculinities as a case study. His argument is that in the latest transformation of the contemporary masculine hegemonic bloc, elements of subordinate and marginal masculinities useful to the reproduction of patriarchy were incorporated. Aspects of *gay visibility* were crucial to this renovation. He argues that *visibility*, which was once a central political strategy of the gay movement, is now more closely in tune with the logic and structures of late capitalism. In turn, the development of gay identity as a marketing niche has contributed to the wider circulation of gay images in popular culture, transforming the homosexual from social subject to a consuming subject. The *mainstreaming* of gay images, far from representing a step toward the liberation of homosexuals, is a strategy for the reproduction of a freshly legitimized capitalism (350).

In addition, the incorporation of gay bits into the mainstream mosaic has gone a long way in terms of the reproduction and legitimation of patriarchy by making possible their appropriation by heterosexual men (350-51). “Gay visibility in commodity culture is thus a notion that links the reproduction of patriarchy and the reproduction of capitalism” (351). The women’s movement made necessary this more covert strategy of legitimation,

because it exposed men's powers and privileges but did not eliminate them. The masculine hegemonic bloc, instead of marginalizing the elements of gay masculinity that reached the masses through commodity culture, selectively incorporated them in an effort to secure women's consent (352).

[At least in the United States, the gay movement, like the feminist and black movements, is not monolithic. From the outset there were internal disagreements about the meaning of liberation centered on the extent and width of the changes sought. While some wanted "a place at the table" (Bauer 1993) through the normalization of homosexuality, others wanted to preserve the critical vantage point and do away with the table altogether through alliances with other movements for social justice. The former camp was apt to negotiate with the masculine historic bloc as its point of contention was having been left out it, so it provided the *organic intellectuals* who helped shoehorn gay masculinities into the hegemonic masculinity.]

I find in Demetriou's revision of Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity the most useful tool for the analysis of the masculinities of the shelter. His concept of *masculine historic bloc* allows the voices of the socially marginalized men to emerge from an authoritative place in United States culture. Although their poverty ejected them from the social mainstream, their working-class masculinity kept them at the center of the gender system. This is because on its construction of a historic bloc, contemporary hegemonic masculinity has shed its class specific elements to allow for a wider, more efficient alliance in the legitimation and reproduction of patriarchy.

These coexisting masculinities are possible because they share features with the more abstract and overarching currently hegemonic masculinity of the United States,

which we can think of as the deep masculine structure of this nation. The features of the national masculinity are broad and general enough to allow the proliferation under its shade of other dominant ways of being a *man* in specific settings. The sense of masculinity of the white middle class and the military are closest to the national hegemonic masculinity, but cannot be equated with it. For example, the idea of *rugged individualism* was (and continues to be) during the last decade of the twentieth century, one of the central features of the national masculinity of the United States. Yet, it is the interest and ability to benefit from the *patriarchal dividend* inherent in the national masculinity that aligns all hegemonic masculinities.

While residents benefited less from the *patriarchal dividend*, their interest in it was not absent. They did not have the social location or the social relations necessary for fully profiting from it: a job, a home, or a family. But masculinist ideology was implied in their *habitus* and they acted as if they were recipients of the *patriarchal dividend* and its only return laid in their corporeal enactment of masculinity.

Masculinity and Social Class

Post-structuralist and post-modern critiques of gender and sexuality studies have rendered class analysis gradually invisible in research on gender and sexual difference. The understanding of social class based on binary oppositions appears simplistic and insufficient to account for the growing complexities of the current conceptualizations of identity. Ironically, this flight from class has resulted in studies of difference centered on the self, oblivious of social inequalities, and thus unable to address issues of exploitation, oppression, injustice, etc. (Atkinson 1982; Beneria 1979; Leacock 1972; Leacock and

Etienne 1979; Lim 1983; Martínez-Alier 1989; Susser 1989; Weir 1996; Wright 1983). Since inequality and power are at the core of gender and sexual difference, they have to be conceptualized and studied considering other inequality-producing social structures like class, race, ethnicity, age, abilities, etc. as *processes* that are woven into them (Jones 1983, 1985; Mullings 1986; Reay 1997). This implies a move away from models of gender dynamics in which concepts of men and women as homogeneous classes are depicted as oppressors and oppressed, towards more nuanced views in which genders are raced, sexualized, classed, etc., qualifications that bear on inter and intra-gender relations.

In terms of masculinity, Andrew Tolson's 1977 book, *The Limits of Masculinity* is one of the first works that attempted to give a more detailed account of men and masculinity. Central to his argument is his positioning of *men* within the context of industrial capitalism and his use of *work* as the chisel that shapes their identities within it. He writes about "paradoxes of masculinity" that both working-class and middle-class men face in late twentieth century industrial capitalist societies. For working-class men the paradox hinges on the pay they receive in exchange for their labor, which boosts their power base in the family and local communities, yet their position as workers alienates them from the product of their labor and places them as subalterns, vis-à-vis factory authorities. The disempowering aspects of work incline them to seek compensations through a chauvinistic masculinity, characterized by misogyny and homophobia (Collinson 1988; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Messner 1994; Peña 1991), "cultural bribes" because they allow them to feel like "real men" while remaining subservient to work-setting hierarchies (46). In another paradoxical twist, male chauvinism is at the core of their acts of resistance and organization in the workplace (59).

The “paradox of masculinity” middle-class men face is caused by the economic changes of the last decades (for Tolson, the masculinity of the middle-class was unproblematic for most of the twentieth century). Before World War II, men who worked as professionals or managers were inspired to fill their place in the economy by civil pride, principled service to the nation and community, and devotion to a career. But in Tolson’s native England, the post-war growth of bureaucracy and economic restructuring weakened these ideological values and revealed the insecurities faced by the middle-classes. The resulting “crisis of confidence” brought about two patterns of reactions among of men in the professional and managerial classes. One is a cynicism that replaced the fading ideals with the goal of gaining wealth. The other, is the *myth of “domesticity”*: waning ethics were replaced by concern with the future and the well-being of an *objectified* family, of which men remain the center and authoritative protector, and to which they dedicate their “continuing *economic power*” (95). Tolson’s view of masculinity as diverse manifestations of gender assembled not only in opposition to women but also to other men was one of the intellectual bases in the eighties, for the development of the concept of hierarchically arranged masculinities Brod (1987), Connell (1987), and Segal (1990).

The relation of masculinities to systems of power has made them susceptible to socio-economic changes. In capitalism, social class, as determined by the relationship to the means of production, is a locus for the inflection of masculinity. Different *habitus* produce specific masculinities that are congruent with the objective conditions of each group or class. The position of different masculinities in a hierarchy of taste is informed by the bundle of circumstances (class, race, sexuality, etc.) at the base of their respective

generative *habitus* because they are the stuff of which gender is produced and the contexts in which it is enacted (Pyke 1996:531). The relationship between different masculinities is complex and formed by tensions and allegiances. In the *hegemonic masculinity* model, dominant masculinity (the masculinities of middle and upper-classes, heterosexual men of European descent) is counterposed hierarchically, to the masculinities of working-class men, men of color, and homosexual men (Connell 1987, 1991, 1995; Donaldson 1987, 1993; Majors and Billson 1992; Messerschmidt 1993; Messner 1989, 1992).

Working class masculinities are closely related to the body as they are produced by the *habitus* of a group that relies on its bodily abilities to inhabit their assigned social niche. Similarly middle and upper class masculinities are linked to intellectual and decision making abilities and are institutionally mediated. Working class men see in their capacity to endure hard labor, take physical risks, and tolerate pain, the embodiment of *true masculinity* vis-à-vis the masculinity of *paper-pushing* managers or bosses (Collinson 1992; Donaldson 1987). Karen Pyke (1996) describes the thus characterized working-class masculinity, as *hyper-masculinity*.

The implied existence of a standard of *measured* masculinity against which *hyper-masculinity* is determined, is not only ethnocentric (or more precisely *class-centric*), but also it represents the refusal to locate the acts of power of middle and upper class men within oppressive masculinity. Consider, for example, the (hyper)masculinity implied in the CEO's closing down a factory and leaving hundreds of families without sustenance; a judge who condemns another person to death; the university professor who through his decisions affects lastingly the lives of students and colleagues, or engages in

vicious rhetorical battles in academic journals; or the elected or appointed state administrator who is praised for his ability to make “hard choices” such as cutting down the public health budgets, closing a firehouse, or invading a nation. The term “making hard choices,” so often uttered in United States politics as a synonym for public service, is hyper-masculinity in a nutshell. It not only means choices that may affect one’s popularity, but the ability to make decisions unencumbered by sensitivity and empathy (the feminine hallmarks) for those affected and therefore, the capacity to be tough, hard, masculine. What makes these masculinities appear *civilized* is that the men in question remove their bodies from the line of fire (hardly a masculine practice). They do not risk their physical well being in the performance of these “hard choices.” They are *hyper-masculine* by proxy. We can conceptualize the market, armies, police forces, legal or regulatory apparatus, etc., as the institutional tools for the enactment of their *macho* masculinities.

The work-place powerlessness of working-class men, which the progressive undermining and devaluation of men’s labor in favor of women’s has intensified, causes compensatory practices such as boasting of sexual prowess, and misogynous discourse and attitudes (Collinson 1992; Connell 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 1994; Willis 1977). This is one of the fundamental optics of my analysis of homeless men. Their misogyny and homophobia is that of a group of men who have been denied the benefits of patriarchal power: being working class *pater familias*. Denigrating women and homosexuals is at its highest compensatory value among homeless men. Yet, the possibility of meaningful and lasting relationships with them, have great weight in their imagination as they are, in the face of homelessness and unemployment, the most feasible

means of attaining dignity and self-esteem.

Middle and upper class men benefit from this configuration of working class masculinity in that, in an act of *distinction*, they position their masculinities to appear *gentler* and more *civilized*. They can assert their cultural superiority, and disguise gendered power in their personal practices and in the institutions they control (Farr 1988; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 1994; Messner 1993). Pyke writes about *a division of labor in the production of gender* (1996:532). Upper-class men profit from the physical attributes of working-class masculinities in bolstering the *masculine mystique* while appearing distinct and nobler in contrast. The logic of their incorporation in the contemporary hegemonic historic bloc appears evident.

The connection between social class and masculinity is intimate. Work in capitalism represents a means of survival and the way in which people attain and retain a meaningful place in the social group. The physicality of working-class masculinities, the centrality of endurance and strength, relate to the role of the body in manual laborers work. Donaldson (1991) study of Australian factory and mine workers shows that they are not only selling their labor but also “using up” their bodies. The ability to endure the progressive destruction of their bodies (through work-related injuries) is a key location and the proof of the workers’ masculinity. The laborers obtain their salaries in exchange for their bodily capacities. The increasing skills of the workers make up the predictable decline of their bodies during their work lives. Once workers reach their peak skills, their value as laborers is determined by their waning physical power alone. (Manual labor does not have to destroy the body but managerial and economic pressures, render it destructive.) Although the work of white-collar workers takes place in a completely

different environment than factory laborers, Collinson et al. (1990) show that they consciously construct and defend their office work as the site of their masculinities.

Racialized Masculinities

The most profound and lasting wound on the social body of the United States is the one caused by slavery. During the last half century much has been done for the civil rights and social conditions of blacks and other minorities, but racial inequality continues to stain the social fabric of this nation. Much to the chagrin of Latin@s, Asians, and Native Americans, discussions of race are often phrased in terms of blacks and whites. The stubbornness of this racial dichotomy, however, reflects precisely the historical centrality of slavery that haunts US society like an original sin and is played out within the context of patriarchy as the symbolic and actual confrontation of black and white men.

Statistics clearly delineate the vulnerability of black men in the United States. Since the unemployment rates of black men are twice as high as those white men, reaching 60% among the young (Taylor 1994), it should be no surprise that they are over-represented among the homeless (Jones and Christmas 1994). Drop out rates of between 40% and 70% in large urban centers mirror the declining quality of public education in black areas (Taylor 1994). Homicide rates have doubled between 1960 and 1988 (Gibbs 1994) and imprisoned black men outnumber those in higher education (Mauer 1994). The institutional racism of the criminal justice system compounds this vulnerability by giving harsher sentences to African American men than to men of European descent for the same crime (Mauer 1994). In the South, white men are about 50% of those convicted for rape, yet 90% of those executed for it (largely the rape of white women) are Black men

(Segal 1990:178).

This is not a random fact. The sexuality of people of African descent, men in particular, is a salient concern in racial tensions (Fanon 1970). Angela Davis wrote in 1981, that after the Civil War, the myth of the black rapist became a fundamental tenet in the subordination of black men. Clarke refers to the United States myth on the misbehavior of Black men, as an obsession (1991). While the concern with black men's sexuality was a response to the changing racial system and an attempt to replace the shackles of slavery with the chains of fear (most lynching were on grounds of *interest* in white women), it effectively prevented black men from competing for jobs with white men held (Staples 1986).

The work of resisting and reversing sexual mischaracterizations remains an ongoing and daunting task, made harder by the embracing of these stereotypes of masculinity by some black men. The Black Power Movement (BPM) redefined and manipulated black men in the name of liberation by displaying "an aggressive heterosexual masculine persona as a way of waging psychological warfare against their white male oppressors" (Messner 1997:68-9). Eldridge Cleaver, one of the leaders of the BPM, said of his self-confessed racially motivated rapes: "[r]ape was an insurrectionary act ... I was very resentful over the historical fact of how the white man had used the black woman. I felt I was getting revenge." Paradoxically, Cleaver honed his skills by first assaulting the women he purportedly tried to avenge (1968:26). Wallace wrote that Stokely Carmichael--another head of the BPM--embodied America's fears of "the Black man seizing his manhood, the Black man as sexual, virile, strong, tough, and dangerous" (1978:60). Today, the depiction of the sexually dangerous black man is coupled with that

of the violent black man, clung to by male rap artists of the *gansgta* variety and promoted by profit-hungry producers, and industriously reported on by the sensationalist press.

Homophobia is another pervasive aspect of patriarchal masculinity that the BPM espoused as a means of liberation. Its enthroning of aggressive heterosexist masculinity was meant to *feminize* the white man for his dependence on technology to assert and maintain power. “American white men are trained to be fags” stated Amiri Baraka in the 1960s (quoted in hooks 2004:14).³ While that homophobia was meant as an attack on the domination of white men, it also worked to label black men who loved men as race traitors. In the 1960s James Baldwin was the object of this moral assault, but years earlier the stature of the civil rights organizing work of Bayard Rustin was undermined under the same premises. This means that homophobia took new rhetorical dimensions in the BPM, but predated its emergence.

Larry Icard sees the root of that homophobia in the central role of the church in African-American culture and communities and its fundamentalist views on the Judeo-Christian doctrine (1985-86). For Robert Staples, African-Americans view sexual activity between men as a threat to the black family (1978). Others see it as a disempowering factor for black men (Briggs 1987; Joe 1987), or more specifically, as their emasculation (Staples 1978). Still, a tacit tolerance of discreet sex between men has characterized African-American communities in the United States (Peterson 1992). bell hooks in

³ We could argue that in addition to racial difference, the working-class traits of African-American masculinity challenged the middle-class white masculinity, following Bourdieu’s (1984:190) delineation of the former, and Elias’ (1983) conceptualization of civilized masculinity as the latter, and paralleled by Collinson’s (1988) and Peña’s (1991) description of the tensions between shop-floor hands and managers.

writing a chapter on men-loving men for her book *Salvation: Black People and Love* (2001), called Ms. Rosa Bell, her mother, to ask for her recollections about the school teacher across the street, who everyone knew was *funny*.

She shared that in small towns where black people 'had known someone all their life,' you accepted folks' sexuality because they were 'just born that way'—'They couldn't change themselves and you could not change them, so there was no point in trying.' In those days Christian fundamentalism emphasized the importance of religious teachings that urged us to love everyone. (2001:189-90)

For hooks, homophobia and misogyny resulted from the intolerance of the patriarchal ideology that overtook portions of civil rights movement in the 1960s (2001:188-9). Robert Reid Pharr (2001) argues that the attack on *black gay men* is a challenge to the perception that *there is no normal blackness, no normal masculinity to which the black subject, American or otherwise, might refer*; a belief that blacks are interchangeable and thus boundaryless. Homophobia is a fleeting attempt to inscribe those boundaries, yet the very violence of homophobia immediately reinstates that boundarylessness (103-4). While Reid Pharr is writing about homophobia in literature, I believe that the paradox he describes applies to all instances of homophobic intolerance.

Cool, is one cultural legacy of African-American men to humanity, for it has been adopted across genders, sexualities, social classes, races, and international borders. “Its about how black men have created the tool for hammering masculinity out of the bronze of their daily lives” (Majors and Billson 1992:2). It is the result of the creative skills of black men that, barred access to dominant US society, use them to reconstruct their physical and symbolic world as an arena where they produce the rules of engagement and success. *Cool* is a unique coping and distancing strategy to deal with the stress of

oppression and marginality. It allows black men to mask the feelings of inadequacy, lack of control, and low self-esteem instilled by their social disadvantages. It is...

...Poise under pressure and the ability to maintain detachment, even during tense encounters. Being cool invigorates a life that would otherwise be degrading and empty. It helps the black male make sense out of his life and get what he wants from others. Cool pose brings a dynamic vitality into the black male's everyday encounters, transforming the mundane into the sublime and making the routine spectacular (Majors and Billson 1992:2).

It is an avenue to express misgivings for dominant society that helps maintain pride and cope with anxiety by providing a sense of control (8-9). The tacit confrontation of *cool* with classed and racialized masculinities directs its performance primarily to an imagined audience of white men. Women are less visible but essential elements in struggles for dominance between black and white men, as their “protected” or “threatened” bodies are means to *stake a claim to “manhood”* (Messner 1997:69).⁴ A great deal of what is described in accounts of *shelterized* men (Grunberg and Eagle 1990) belongs to the repertoire of *cool*. The perplexity of social scientists before these universes of mastery by underprivileged men reflects the effectiveness of its distancing and masking strategies.⁵

Baca Zinn (1982) and Peña (1991) find similar motivations for the expression of *machismo* among working-class Latinos that channel their frustration over class oppression toward the realm of gender where they remain privileged. Messner (1997:77) warns about reducing misogyny to men's *symbolic displacement* of their condition of subalterns in the class system. Misogyny can appear as a symbolic move within the class

⁴ In battles for masculine dominance women seem little more than avenues to communicate threats and announce power without risking confrontation with another man.

⁵ Note the parallels of the compensatory goals of *cool* and Tolson's (1977) descriptions of working-class masculinities.

system but it takes on material characteristics as it enters the realm of gender in the form of violence against women.

Race and class oppression produce paradoxical results in their interface with gender oppression in that the latter can be used to compensate for men's powerlessness. The recent opening of the labor market to women, to the detriment of men's employment, can be perceived as their competition for the same jobs and result in gender tensions. New employment opportunities, which translate in the increased autonomy of women, are possible through the cultural devaluation of women's work that allows employers to pay less for their labor. Segal (1990:188) warns that achieving the full-fledged masculinity currently denied to men of color (and working-class men) can lock them in destructive relations with women and men of the same racial group (and social class). For Segal, the risk is to miss that the profounder issue is the concept of masculinity itself (and the manipulation of gender by bosses).

Masculinities of the Homeless Shelter

Since I will be discussing the sexual and emotional lives of a diverse group of men who lived in homeless shelters, I will address gender as one organizing social structure for their ways of being and their relationships to others (in and out of the shelter). Their gender enactment, as a product of their habitus, was interlaced with their social circumstances and was deeply implicated in their same-sex amorous and sexual endeavors. Conversely their homelessness, as a marker of their social position, sexuality, and love life, were marked by the socio-cultural implications of being a *man*. Since the convergence of gender with other structures mark social experience (Connell 1998:4;

Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994:18-23) even within the same cultural setting or institution (Foley 1990; Messerschmidt 1997; Barrett 1996) result in multiple configurations of masculinity, I will be speaking of the *masculinities of the homeless shelter*.

The focus will be the interpersonal relations of homeless men as bearers of different masculinities and how masculinity structures their emotions and sexual activity. In the background, there will be other men and women. The men will be shelter workers, who failed or succeeded in differentiating themselves from the homeless residents, and other *housed* men that engaged them, most often for sexual ends, and who stood in a variety of better socio-economic conditions. The few women in these stories will not be powerless, but self-contained and able to foster or end the relationships they held with some of my informants. Most importantly, although these men were not beyond misogyny, the concept *women* will hold a profound symbolic power as potential purveyors of heterosexual legitimacy and as necessary means to attain the elusive ideal of working-class family life of these men's imaginary.

Even the most masculine residents of the homeless shelter will occasionally find themselves at other people's mercy (most often other men), and the most feminine will demonstrate ability to stake their grounds suggesting that their enactments of masculinity or femininity were not irreversibly linked to power or powerlessness. In the narratives, power will be fluid and often, although not always, contingent upon the intertwined effects of gender and economic resources. At times, the conscious and proactive actions (agency) of these homeless men, will succeed in turning the tides of power in their favor.

I will be referring to a number of competing masculinities in this ethnography

(Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994:20) and will focus on the interaction of at least two manifestations of *currently hegemonic masculinity* within the context of the homeless shelter. Of them, one held sway among residents and the other among workers. While residents benefited less from the *patriarchal dividend*, their interest in it was not absent. When I use the term *dominant masculinities* I will qualify them with reference to the group of men under it. I will use the unmarked term *dominant masculinity* to refer to that which prevailed among the shelter's residents.

Historical Context

Delineating the historical context of this ethnography will locate my informants within the context of the national and the *world gender order* (Connell 1998:7-9) at the end of the twentieth century. The most immediate historical context of these homeless men I have delineated in the first two chapters, and this is the crisis of housing/homelessness in the United States. This is not only a historical but also a social context. If the crisis of homelessness is to be understood, we also have to consider the gender crisis caused by the restructuring of the economy of the United States. As noted earlier in Chapter Two, the flight of jobs overseas has caused unemployment. The undermining of labor unions with the subsequent debilitation of blue-collar purchasing power, are intimately enmeshed with the growing inability of working-class networks to support the poor within their families and social circles and to afford the rising costs of housing. Male heads of households, that were able to support their families on their salaries and the benefits attached to them, have lost their employment or find increasingly difficult to continue that practice, with the subsequent loss of authority that their income *afforded*

them. If there were a *crisis of masculinity* as the “new men’s movement” announces (as opposed to a *crisis of the gender system*), it would be more clearly visible among the working-class, where men have lost power while patriarchal capitalism remains solidly in place. For the younger generations of men who would have found employment in the now defunct factories, this turn of events has translated in underemployment, unemployment, and thus, homelessness.

Sexual Cultures/Sexual Systems

One way to think about sexual practices and ideas that are shared by a community is by means of the hermeneutic concept of *sexual culture*. Gilbert Herdt defines sexual cultures as “*a system of rules, beliefs, and norms that define membership in a community, and hence inclusion or exclusion of its members, by virtue of their sexual conduct*” (1999:110). The concept of *sexual culture* allows considering ideas of gender, eroticism, human nature, sexual control, religion and politics that may appear in connection to sexuality, within the ethical understandings of cultural relativism (Herdt 1997). Yet, in order to assert cultural relativism in the discussion of sexuality the use of Western categories poses problems. The binary heterosexual/homosexual, the gender system, and sexual values, among other aspects of sexuality, although ostensibly rejected by science, remain deeply embedded. But if we are not to be blinded by cultural constructions of sexuality familiar to us, the challenge remains to be able *to see* culture and reality *through* cultural constructions, in other words not to throw the baby with the bath water (Treichler 1992).

To think in terms of sexual cultures let us place sexuality in a complex milieu. In

this context sexual agency is not free-floating but connected to other socio-cultural forces that shape it and foster or prevent its change. It permits us to depart from a psychologistic stance in which sexual motivation is lodged within the individual, and move toward an understanding of sexuality linked to the ever changing flow of history. Within this intricate realm we can speak of sexual communities and take into account phenomena such as the Internet, migration, or globalization that today mark the emergence of new sexual practices and identities (Altman 2000). Most significantly we can study sexuality through the lens of the AIDS pandemic and evaluate the impact that HIV and sexual expression have had on each other.

Herdt's argument in favor of using sexual *cultures* and not *subcultures* is based on the latter term's baggage of hierarchical implications that place them in an abnormal, pejorative, subaltern, or *outsider* position vis-à-vis a more legitimate or central sexual culture (Lindenbaum 1992). If I were to use the term *the sexual subculture of the shelter* I would be adding sexual expression to the list of characteristics that depict the men who lived in the shelter as marginal to mainstream society, while their condition would be described more accurately as the product of historical socio-economic processes central to the moment we live in. But if I spoke of *the sexual culture of the shelter* it would imply a linked *system of rules, beliefs, and norms* with its own concepts of gender, human nature, etc., that could stand alone congruently. It would also portray the shelter as a bubble disconnected from the rest of the city and the nation, when the sexual expressions of the shelter residents are nested in the sexual culture of the United States and can be traced out of the shelter to other social contexts. Most importantly, I would have to speak of several sexual cultures and this would obscure how the manifestations of sexual

diversity in the shelter were historically related, incorporating, elaborating, or reacting to the same features of the wider sexual culture of the United States.

A sexual system on the other hand is comprised of categories of possible sexual agents, relevant markers of sexual agents such as gender, age, race, etc., sex acts, spaces and relationships, and a set of rules that organize them and assign legitimacy, stigma, and taboos. Sexual systems can be historically diachronic replacing each other in accordance with cultural change or synchronic resulting from the changing and intertwined circumstances of different groups of sexual agents. Thus we can see sexual systems as produced by group *habitus*. Therefore in describing the sexualities of the homeless shelter, I prefer to speak of several coeval sexual systems, with shared and contrasting features, which rendered them similar or different from each other. Since only men lived in the shelter, the sexual system in which sex between them was prominent, had considerable dominance over the others.

These convergences and divergences were comparable to Richard Parker's description of the sexual systems that shared the Brazilian urban setting, in that they emerged from and represented various social realities and histories (1999:42-3). One element of Parker's description that, while it was not absent, certainly did not have the same weight, is the impact of transnational processes. In Brazil, European and North American emerging conceptualizations of sexual identity and *Gay rights* flowed in through the exposure of the educated bourgeoisie to these ideas by means of overseas travel and international media. Later on, the speeding communication made possible by the Internet in combination with the global effort against the HIV pandemic, flooded in and encountered communities eager to learn from other's experiences, and to adapt them

or create their own response to the emergency. In the homeless shelter, and hence the working class neighborhoods of New York City and the United States, globalization burst in by means of immigration from developing countries. Many immigrants bore gender-based notions of sexuality, specifically of sexual activity between men. But these notions were not foreign to the people immigrants were in closer contact with, that is, co-workers, neighbors and other residents, in the case of the shelter. United States versions of gender-based constructions of sexuality can be found in poor, working class, and rural areas. So, global flows of ideas and people had a different impact on the sexual cultures of the United States and the developing world. In New York City, the shelter was an apt site to observe their confluence.

In this chapter I have laid out the theoretical tools I use in sorting out my data in the following pages. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* will allow me to examine the lives of my informants considering their practices as the result of a nuanced definition of social location that includes class, race/ethnicity, and gender but also sexuality, education, position in the labor market, and their homelessness as an expression of extreme poverty. Connell's concept of (contemporary) hegemonic masculinity as reworked by Donaldson and in particular Demetriou, will be essential in understanding my informant's interaction with each other as well as other men and women who were not homeless. In particular, the notion of *masculine bloc* will help me make sense of the gender practices of these *marginalized* men that so closely resemble the prescription of currently hegemonic masculinity.

In the next chapter I will guide you into *the field*. First, we will take an actual and

historical look at the area that surrounds the shelter. Then, we will venture into it and get familiarized with its physical structure, institutional functioning, and the men living in it. We will learn who they are in terms of their demographic characteristics and learn how they interact with each other, and what life is like in the shelter.

Chapter Four

The Social Geography of the Homeless Shelter

This chapter is an overview of the institution where I did most of my fieldwork. I will start with a description of the neighborhood where the armory that houses the shelter for homeless men is located. I will contextualize it in history by including a historical sketch of the transformations of the area during the last eighty years, the reception its opening had among the neighbors, and its current positioning in relation to the hospital across the street.

We will then get acquainted with its physical and institutional organization, and the characteristics of the residents in terms of their race and ethnic origins, their education, their sources of income, including employment. Here I discuss the different social identities available to residents and how they were organized in their occupation of cots in different areas of the sleeping space. I close this chapter with an account of their lives as homeless men living in New York City. In this section I engage in a critical description of the rules they had to live by, and an account of the types of associations and relationships they had with each other that frequently are labeled as *pathological* in social science literature.

The Shelter and the Neighborhood

When one emerges from the subway exit in 168th Street and Broadway at 3:00 PM, one is met by the noise of a very busy corner. Shrieking ambulances arrive at the emergency room of Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital, neighbors walk by talking, people come in and

out of the hospital with concerned faces, beggars plead for help or try to sell subway tokens, school children inundate the corner crossing the streets in different directions and diving into the subway entrance, employees of the hospital walk to the truck that sells snacks or to the deli across the street (nurses, secretaries and janitors talking to each other and walking calmly; doctors, interns, residents, and med students looking ahead with decisive strides.) Men and women, who would not have crossed each other otherwise, meet briefly in this corner of uptown Manhattan. Dominican immigrants, university professors, health professionals, crack-heads and street vendors interact almost without looking at each other:

"Do you know where the Black Building is?"

"Can you spare some...?"

"See you later at the library."

"Yo, Edwin, come'n! I wanna get stupid!"

"How much the bagels?"

"Don't push me!!!"

"...told her, that next time I'm gonna call the Division of Child Services."

"Brand-new Calvin Klein shirts for 10 bucks!!!"

Some are getting ready to call it a day and go home downtown. Others hurry with their children on tow to the bodega. Still others are thinking that there are still two hours to kill before lining up for dinner.

This is one of the busiest corners in upper Manhattan. In it two radically different neighborhoods (or populations?) meet and overlap: A large medical center and teaching hospital with its workers' and students' housing, and the Dominican neighborhood that

surrounds and leaks into it. They have a relationship colored by dependence and mistrust of each other. The hospital fulfills its community obligations providing care for the area residents and tapping that population for its many research projects, but its workers feel threatened by the drug trafficking and related crime that are present in any impoverished urban community. The local community relies on the hospital for health care, some employment and as an economic engine, but the University is regarded as a fickle partner, prone to abandon initiatives. They also feel that the medical center is a gentrifying force in the neighborhood that has resulted in displacement and racial and class tensions.

The original hospital building reached its capacity many years ago. Other buildings with inner passages and bridges that connect them have sprouted around it. The medical center and related housing expands about four blocks south of 168th Street, North to 173rd Street, West to the river, and East to Audubon Avenue. The shell of the Audubon Ballroom where Malcolm X was assassinated encloses restaurants, shops and a biomedical research center.¹ This area includes the hospitals, the School of Public Health, parking lots, libraries, research centers, faculty, students, and staff's housing, and Dominican families in the northern and southern reaches.

In the heart of the medical center area, on Fort Washington Avenue between 168th and 169th Streets, there is a shelter for homeless men. The shelter is housed in an old National Guard Armory: a massive red brick building of pleasant simple lines that

¹ At the beginning of my field work the Audubon Ballroom was an abandoned site. Columbia University purchased it and in the early nineties decided to turn it in to a research center. The community opposed such a plan citing the historical value that the structure had. Construction was delayed until Malcolm X's widow interceded in favor of the University.

occupies the western end of the block. At the time of my work there the National Guard occupied a portion of the ground floor from where they ran programs for neighborhood kids. The shelter occupied the second and third floors and at that time, seven hundred men slept there each night. Since then the shelter has been dedicated to accommodate men with psychiatric diagnoses. In recent years, part of the building has been reconverted into a track and field club and attractive red and blue banners with its name and a symbolic winged foot on them has been hung from the sides of the building.

The shelter had always represented a problem for the hospital administration. Most of the pedestrian traffic circulated on the "safe sidewalk," opposite the Armory. The half block the shelter occupied was deserted except for a few men at the door,² hospital janitors, and a few daring male medical students. Some men would beg at the subway entrance. Others were inserted in the informal economy of the area performing occasional work for the local merchants while others manned less legal tasks for the area drug dealers. As a result the shelter received frequent visits by the police. Since most of the men received some type of economic assistance from the government a significant portion of the aggregate income of the men was spent in the neighborhood.

Heightsters' Memories.

The insertion of the Homeless men Shelter in this neighborhood was seen with resentment by older residents. For some it represented the quintessence of their powerlessness vis-à-vis city government. They felt that they did not hold any role in

² Like at other homeless shelters in NYC residents were not allowed to stand at the door or in the corners. They had to cross the street if they wanted to hang out. At the Armory, this was out of the question.

determining the type of institutions that were brought in to the neighborhood.

Although many of the area residents lost their apartments and suffered a great deal during the crisis of the seventies, they did not use the shelter as a resource. They were working class whites and regarded the shelter inhabitants as “trash” probably because of the overlap of their poverty with their racial otherness. The shelter was not seen as a refuge for the poorest of the poor but as a hotbed of criminals and mentally ill men from where these problems radiated into their neighborhood.

Another sentiment that the Fort Washington Shelter evoked was that of good times past. It marked the end of a “golden era” in the neighborhood when most residents were ethnic whites and the city’s economy was in good health. For the generation that moved out of Washington Heights, the shift of the ethnic make up of the area towards the present prevalence of immigrants of color also meant the loss of their youth. They describe how the neighborhood character changed and how these changes made them feel strangers in the streets that had been home for them and their parents. They felt unable to extend their empathy to the new immigrants who they experienced as extremely different. They also saw themselves on the losing end of a territorial battle.

I contacted some *Heightsters*³ through an Internet Washington Heights Nostalgia Bulletin Board. Most of them are White and moved out in the aftermath the sixties. Through the Internet site they exchange memories of the working class neighborhood where they grew up. Their words reflect a resentment-tinged nostalgia for the neighborhood that changed beyond their control. I asked them about what was going on in the neighborhood when the shelter was opened and how the *Heightsters* felt about its

³ Washington Heights’ residents used to call themselves *Heightsters*.

opening. Chris and Oops (screen-names) responded:

Crime started to rise in the 70's, it just peaked in the 80's and was brought to everyone's attention when the Heights became 'Dodge City North', which was what the Daily News said about us on their front page. We had broken the record for murders in 81 or 82, and when you walked in the neighborhood, you could tell. I graduated from George Washington in 1980, the year a student was shot by another student in the lunch room. Out of a class of over 1000, less than 200 of us graduated. Most of the people I grew up with moved away, the second 'white flight.' The shelter was HATED by most of us as it was seen as a signal that the city did not consider us a 'good' neighborhood and could stick what ever they wanted there.

Most of the people I knew were poor and struggled to make ends meet, but no one from the area that I knew or any of my friends knew went into the shelter. It was filled with overflow from everywhere else. It was literally the dumping ground for mentally ill, drunks, criminals, etc. When they went out in the morning, they gravitated uptown to the bus terminal. There were always men sleeping downstairs or on the upper level. Men were sleeping or begging or harassing people in the subway there as well. Only after people were killed was something done about it.

When community people lost their apartments, they stayed with relatives or left the area. NO ONE would go there." (Chris, May 28th 2003)

The Armory was converted to a homeless shelter, housing at one time over 1,800 beds, each sleeping about 3 feet apart. Various local precincts would make a sweep, forcing those roaming the streets with a ride and dropped off to stay at the FW armory. Those that did not want to enter and stay would spend their time drifting along the WH vicinities.

I remembered during that time (1981-beyond) how uncomfortable I felt seeing a flux of homeless wandering around 181ST during the evening and nights, it contributed to the area's decline and unkept streets - among other factors that was happening in the neighborhood (gangs, drugs, crime). I also notice many were mentally ill - loitering and panhandling even at the courtyards of residential buildings.

I remembered many in the community did not approved of the armory for use as a shelter, but what the gov't wants to do, the gov't will do, whether we protested or not. During that time, the neighborhood was changing and there was too many things going on, too fast to keep up or grasp to. Many longtime residents unable to deal with the change in the area were moving out as a newer ethnic group were massively moving in (mainly

Dominicans). The community was changing hands with a more "Scarface" minded, get rich quick scheme along with "this is our territory" frame of mind mob. Between the gangs, drugs, the emergence of 3rd world vociferous and boisterous immigrants, Reaganomics, high unemployment, Welfare and other gov'tmental abuses, crimes and homelessness, WH was going through a fast and massive change that many who lived there for so many years such as myself did not expect so suddenly and so harshly."
(Oops, May 27th 2003)

These accounts of Washington Heights reflect the pain and impotence the deterioration of the area caused on long-time neighbors. Unable to confront macroeconomic forces they witness their working class locality spiral downwards. They became victims of the economic restructuring the country as a whole was undergoing, the changes in the real estate market, the deterioration of public education, and the rise in crime that accompanied the increasing poverty. The city, under the pressure of homeless advocates, turned the Armory that had provided solace in their childhood into an emergency shelter for the homeless. The homeless along with *3rd world vociferous and boisterous immigrants* became the symbol of their socio-economic defeat. Like the homeless the *Heights* were displaced forming the ranks of *the second 'white flight.'* (Presumably the first "white flight" was of the middle class.) They mourn the passing of the neighborhood they grew up in. They resent the betrayal of government in forcing them to coexist with the stigma of homelessness and allowing Washington Heights to *chang[e] hands with a more "Scarface" minded, get rich quick scheme along with "this is our territory" frame of mind mob* as the majority that gave the new character to the area. These comments find a catalyst in racist prejudice but reveal the bewilderment of a people who in the face of their economic misfortunes desperately clutch at racial privilege as the last source of dignity.

The hospital across the street from the shelter is a world-class medical center. Throughout the Twentieth Century the hospital went through various institutional changes that were reflected in its name. These changes implied the expansion of the hospital and related offices in its surrounding area and its influence on the change of the adjacent urban landscape and the use of its structures. Two of the institutional changes that the hospital underwent were related to its affiliation to the medical schools of Columbia and Cornell University. With the addition of Cornell University to what was then Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital, the institution became New York Medical Center. The association of the hospital with Columbia University carried along reluctance from Upper Manhattan's community agencies to trust research initiatives headed by the University. In particular, neighbors in Harlem felt that when the research efforts ended, the white investigators and their research assistants left the impoverished community to tackle new challenges in their paths of success.

Historically the hospital provided health care and employment for Washington Heights' residents. The neighbors from the surrounding area felt privileged to have in their midst such a prestigious institution. But their use of its services hardly differed from the way other working class communities of color used the facilities. One of the contributors to the Washington Heights Nostalgia Bulletin Board remembered:

As to the hospital, it was very convenient and used by many. There was a public health center that you used to be able to go to for immunizations for school. Many area people worked at the hospital, they paid fairly well and you didn't have to go downtown. Many women got jobs there as secretaries, assistants, etc. and the hours were good if you had kids in school. Many quit at 4PM. When a lot of area residents moved out in the 70's, they kept their jobs and commuted to them. I know many of them are still there today. Chris May 28th, 2003.

The Washington Heights former resident Richard O'Prey in his recently published book of memoirs remembers about the hospital:

...At 168th Street at the convergence of Broadway and Fort Washington Avenue lay one of the foremost medical facilities in the world. Associated with Columbia University, Medical Center was world renown for its medical research and its treatment of cancer. Its emergency room was more to our taste. (O'Prey, 2001).

In the Medical Center today, top surgeons and scientists work and receive guests from abroad and members of New York City's wealthiest families are cared for with state of the art technology. Through the great arched windows of the handsome Columbia University Physicians and Surgeons Faculty Club (formerly the hospital library), if they stand at the sides of the floral arrangement, Nobel Prize winners can perfectly see the homeless men across the street coming in and out of the shelter. The former are mainly white, the latter largely African-American and Latino. One group is at the top of a life of achievements, the other, at the bottom of a life of disappointments; welded to each other by geography and the logic of capitalism, yet separated by the street and an ocean of cultural and socioeconomic difference.

A Shelter in Upper Manhattan

I entered Fort Washington Men's shelter for the first time in early February of 1991 and did fieldwork there for the next three years. The entrance to the National Guard and track and field club was on Fort Washington Avenue the shelter's gate was on 168th Street. A few steps led to a small hall where security guards made workers sign a book upon

arrival. Residents had to show their "meal ticket"⁴ to a person in a booth (often, another resident). After that, they had to pass through a metal detector to the left of the entrance in order to go upstairs. Workers used the stairs on the right side of the entrance hallway that did not have a detector. Once above and to the right, there was a long hallway. As one walked east, on the right side, a door opened to a weight room that I only saw open early in my fieldwork. At the end of that long hallway one could only turn north and then again to the West. The corridor concluded in a set of stairs that led to the floor where the residents slept. Before getting to the steps one passed on the right side the doors of the cafeteria, the social services office, the clinic and the CSS office,⁵ in that order. On the left side and about in front of the social services office there was a door that was kept locked. I was surprised to find out well into my fieldwork, that apparently every worker except the security guards had a key to that door. Through it they had access to a short cut that, passing through a big and badly lit room where cots, linen and nonperishable food was stored, led to the entrance hall giving one the benefit of a shorter way in and out of the shelter without having to negotiate the more dangerous hallways. Anthony Marcus, my partner in fieldwork, and I were not given the benefit of using this shortcut, an oversight that allowed us to make many observations of the daily lives of the residents.

At the top of the stairs to the left, there was the bathroom, and to the right, the doors of the "dormitory." In this immense *drill floor* with an extremely high vaulted ceiling, the National Guard exercised in the past. At a height of around one story and a

⁴ In NYC shelters, the meal ticket is a surrogate identification card. It means that the carrier has gone through the admittance procedure.

⁵ The shelter's mental health program and my home base in it.

half, bleachers surrounded the floor for the spectators of the military and sporting events that took place there. On the western side, at the very top of the benches, was the office of the shelter's director. Very rarely he would be seen coming in and out of his office or on the *drill floor* but was always followed by a crew of security guards who communicated that he felt that residents would attack him if unguarded. While female workers tried not to walk in the hallways alone, the shelter's director's apprehension of the residents conveyed his awareness of the resentment the men felt about him. He had the strong and authoritative demeanor of a prison officer yet his appointed "body guards" signaled the potential assaults he was trying to avoid. For the further protection of the director, residents were not allowed to go up to the bleachers area, but they sneaked in anyway to do some of things that were not allowed in the shelter, such as sex and using dugs.

The *drill floor*, illuminated by cold fluorescent lights, was covered with seven hundred narrow metal cots. They were arranged in rows and columns separated by aisles of about two feet width. The beds were surrounded by wider walkways that separated them from the lockers each resident was entitled to, along with the cot and the meals. In the middle of the *drill floor*, to the east, there was a tall booth where security guards supervised the activities of the residents. Some of the men got phone calls at that booth.

The cavernous corridors and *drill floor* amplified and echoed the sounds: mainly shouts, radios, conversation, laughs, orders and curses. The smell of industrial disinfectant and warehoused bodies so characteristic of the shelter added to the alienating institutional atmosphere. At times one could see bloodstains on the floor of the hallways. They were reminders of the violence latent just beneath the surface of shelter life. In

these corridors assaults and revenge often took place. Everyone walked through them with cautious attention and very seldom alone.

Fort Washington Men's Shelter is not the only shelter where I have done ethnographic fieldwork. From the fall of 1988 to the summer of 1989 I also worked in the Bronx, at Franklin Avenue Men's Shelter. For a description of that shelter and that experience see Susser and González (1990, 1992). For another description of Fort Washington see Marcus (1998).

Who Were the Residents of the Shelter?

The men who lived in Fort Washington Men Shelter were homeless men. That is the obvious answer to the above question. But having spent several years working in homeless shelters raises one's consciousness about the tensions and coincidences between this answer and what one knows about these men. It forces me to reflect on the popular images, largely constructed out of governmental social policies and media reports of the homeless, and contrast them with the men I met.

The images of the homeless and homeless men in particular, have been those of the "hobos," during most of the twentieth century. Hobos were typically white men who traveled through the United States and did not keep a permanent address. The legend says they were given to the use of alcohol and were reluctant to reside with families or keep a permanent job. They were thought to be bohemians who rejected the trappings of society (Nels Anderson 1961, c1923; 1940; 1998). Another popular idea about the homeless discussed earlier is that of the "bag lady." For some reason this stereotype was gendered female, but it could also apply to men with some type of mental illness that made them

wander the streets carrying their belongings in shopping bags or supermarket carts. Like hobos bag people were disheveled and dirty but unlike them, they were loners constantly moving through the urban landscape, muttering to themselves at times. The expression “urban nomads” was inspired in the way they lived. With the explosion of the homeless crisis the homeless began to be seen as members of one of the two larger minority groups in the United States, and who thus bore the stigma of race and ethnicity in addition to that of substance use and mental illness. More specifically, they embodied ideas about the pathologies of poverty that inundated social science and policy since the 1960s.

But the men I met resisted this classification in conscious and unwitting ways. They were aware of the stigma of shelter living and in many cases they were deeply troubled by it. On meeting them individually one of the first phrases that came of their mouths was “*I’m not like the others.*” The repetition of this statement by most men represented a desperate plea to be considered as individuals and not thrown into some general stigmatizing category. It was a request that their stories be heard independently because in spite of being subjected to the same social forces with other men inside and outside the shelter, they were the only witnesses of their own life trajectories and the feelings that went with them.

Many avoided confronting the embarrassment and pain of not been able to care for themselves by severing ties with the worlds of kinship and friendships that knew them from better times. They centered their lives in the shelter because it was only there that they had a place and even there, the legitimacy of their prerogative was constantly challenged. At the shelter they remembered with nostalgia the parents, wives and children

that they had when they thought they had a future. For many those memories were of childhood, because as they turned into men they had run into the obstacles that would prevent them from achieving their dreams. Of the many entitlements that a patriarchal society promises men, a more masculine demeanor was one of the few they had left. Denied the independence that financial resources provide, most men chose to emphasize their masculinities that, besides being a survivalist necessity in the shelter environment, allowed them to preserve a small measure of self-respect.

They never stopped dreaming. In spite of the concrete evidence that flooded their lives about the impossibility of creating or recreating a family, they still hoped for it. They talked about getting jobs that did not exist and about living in apartments that however humble their aspirations, they could not afford. They spoke about times of abundance in the past or the future and, if they dwelled on that too much or too often, they risked being psychiatrically labeled. Like the rest of the poor and to a somewhat lesser extent, the working classes, their actions, decisions and aspirations were second-guessed by government, media, and the middle classes. Their most direct experience of this hindsight correction of their lives came from their contacts with social services workers, in particular those who were based at the shelter. These workers in public displays of sympathy for their “clients” would proclaim accurately that they also lived *“one paycheck away from homelessness.”* This consideration of their own fate as it related to that of the men they served did not stop them from examining critically every aspect of the personal lives of the residents. The most obvious realm of scrutiny was substance use, but it quickly spread to spending, eating and work habits and it culminated with the inspection of the emotional, reproductive and aspirational lives of the men.

Every instance of second-guessing augmented further the ignominy of poverty.

Their dignity driven to an all-time low, led the residents of the shelter to defend fiercely whatever was left of it. Maybe it was that contradiction between their desires and the harsh reality that surrounded them that made them focus on the presentation of their bodies. Contrasting the popular image of the homeless they dedicated a considerable portion of their limited financial resources to being dressed according to current fashion. They also invested time in washing and ironing their clothing. It was also noticeable that the men did not neglect their cleanliness, showering and shaving as often as possible. If their neatness was accompanied by a submissive and compliant personality it was regarded as a virtue. If instead of they expressed an inordinate masculinity as measured by the workers standards, they were classed as “pimps” of sorts.

The men who lived at the Homeless Shelter were poor. Since the shelter was located in New York City, it follows that the racial, ethnic, and socio-cultural profile of the resident population resembled that of the poor in the Metropolitan area. That is, largely *men of color* who grew up in working class neighborhoods of New York City and other urban centers of the United States. A few of them were Caucasian and even a smaller number, Asian. The proportion in which each racial and ethnic group was represented in the shelter reflected the differential impact of poverty in their communities of birth.

Men of African descent formed the largest and most visible group, but they were not a homogeneous group. While most were New Yorkers, some men were originally from other areas of the United States. Many were from the South and had come to New York City to try their luck. Others came from large cities but had not arrived in New

York seeking jobs and a better standard of life. They were looking for better social services and had been put in a bus by their caseworkers in other US cities. In the late eighties and early nineties exporting the homeless was an accepted practice in many urban centers to solve their housing problem. They were given one-way tickets to New York City and were furnished with the address of the Travelers Aid office in Midtown. A third group of men of African descent were immigrants from the English speaking Caribbean who had come with their families as children, and as they grew up found themselves subjected to the forces of the housing and job markets. Finally, there were some Afro-Latino and African men who had followed similar paths into homelessness as other immigrants.

Latino men formed the second largest group. They were divided between those born in the continental United States and Puerto Rico, and immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Cuba and other Latin American countries. The majority were Puerto Ricans and Nuyoricans but were closely followed by the foreign born. Most Mexicans were part of a recent migratory wave that at that time was formed almost exclusively by men from rural areas (*campesinos*), and were finding places to live in Washington Heights. They usually rented apartments that were shared by a group of them. Landlords were reluctant to rent to Mexicans because they feared the deterioration of the premises that came with overcrowding. Some building superintendents would divide up the basements of the buildings into very small rooms that shared bathrooms and rented them to Mexican immigrants. Some Dominican neighbors rented rooms in their apartments to Mexican couples and women. The overflow of these immigrants lived at the shelter. Some Cubans who had come to the United States during the Mariel boatlift

that took place between April and September of 1980, lived at the shelter as well.

Most Cubans at the shelter had some type of mental illness which had made coexistence with friends or relatives difficult.

As far as the educational achievements of the shelter's resident could be assessed by participant observation alone, it can be said that most had finished or dropped out of high school. A smaller number had not finished grammar school or had attained some college work. The records of the shelter were imprecise on this as well as many other subjects, as the performance of the computer system was uneven and the population of the shelter would change from night to night. It is even harder to say that the men reflected the educational attainments of most New Yorkers because a considerable number of the men came from other urban centers and even other countries. And also we have to consider the questionable quality of the education the poor and the working classes receive from the system of public schools in New York City and the United States at large.

We have to be careful not to overemphasize the relevance of education in work opportunities. Before the industrial flight from the New York City metropolitan area to "freedom to work" states of the Union and other countries, a good number of the men who lived in the shelter would have been employed in factories. As the regional economy shifted from manufacturing to services, the employment opportunities of these men shrank (Hopper, Susser and Conover, 1985).

Some men at the shelter had jobs in the formal economy. They usually had those jobs when they entered the shelter because living in the shelter made it difficult to get a regular job. Not only the restrictions about the time to enter and leave the shelter limited

their possibilities to go to a job interview, but probably more important was their inability to give a telephone number where they could be reached without revealing to prospective employers that they lived in a shelter.

Raul was a Puerto Rican man of African descent in his late twenties. When I met him he had been in the shelter for five months.

Raul- I was living with my mother when I met Kevin. We immediately hit it off and wanted to live together. Kevin was living in a building in the South Bronx and he invited me to move in with him. It was very dangerous and the front door didn't have a lock. Crack heads would come in at night and get high in the hallway and, you know how they are, they would take a shit anywhere! I didn't like it but I just wanted to be with Kevin. It wasn't great but it was close to the hospital where I had just started to work. I was working nights as a nurses aid. One morning, when I came back from work I found the police and shit all over my block because there had been a small fire in one of the apartments. I wasn't too bad but we got water damage and the ceiling collapsed. So everyone had to move out of the building. They declared it unsafe because so much water had messed it up. I didn't want to go back to my mother's and she wouldn't have allowed Kevin to move in. So we came to the shelter. Kevin had lived here before he found that apartment. At first it was hard, you know, because I worked at night, but I begged this supervisor to change my schedule and she did. She was nice.

I was told that Raul and Kevin slept in contiguous cots and at night, they held hands across the aisle.

There were some men who had managed to get themselves jobs as security guards after they entered the shelter. Slim was an African-American man in his early thirties. He was originally from Brooklyn and had been trained as a guard prior to entering the shelter. When he became homeless he did not have a job for a long time. Eventually, "a well-off gentleman" in Manhattan agreed to take messages for him. He contacted the security guards agency that had trained him and eventually he found a job in the New York Blood Bank. The hours were not good and the job did not last, but through the same

agency he was able to get employed again.

There were work-readiness efforts out of the CSS office and the shelter social workers. The few men who attended them were trying to put together their résumés had to place somebody else's addresses and phone number because of the stigma of shelter living. They were utterly ineffective and it resulted in the men growing discouraged at ever been hired.

A larger number of men held jobs in the informal economy of the city at large, and the neighborhood in particular. Building contractors would arrive at the door of the shelter in trucks announcing the number of men they needed. Men would crowd around the vehicle hoping to be chosen. At times they would be brought back at the end of the day, but mostly they returned in public transportation.

Shaun, a Black Jamaican man in his mid thirties, used to work for these building contractors a couple of days a week. He said that the contractors knew him already and that is how he was sure to put in two or three days of work for them in the week. In the morning he would come out of the shelter and hang out in the corner as the men were not allowed to just stand at the door. He kept an eye on all the vehicles coming through the street and run to the truck once it stopped. If he was in the crowd he was certain to be picked, if not somebody else would go instead. The contractor did not have to announce who they were or what were they looking for because all the men knew them. Very seldom Shaun could work the five days of the week and if the driver was not one of the two or three contractors that knew him he stood the same chance as everyone else. He would have to yell harder "*take me, take me!*" I often saw him walking from the train station, returning from work around 4:30 PM,.

Even the police would show up at the door of the shelter looking for men to place in a line-up. Unlike the building contractors they would stop their cars in front of the shelter's door. They knew the type of men they were looking for, so having been in a line-up before did not help in being picked again. The residents said that the pay varied according to the kind of crime being investigated. Theft or robbery would pay \$10 while a murder case could mean a \$25 or higher payment. Some men worked for the local merchants who would set them on the sidewalk guarding that no one would take the merchandise and walk away with it. They were also given odd jobs around restaurants.

A waiter at *El Malecón* (a local restaurant) told me that they had a homeless guy come daily to clean their sidewalk and take out the garbage. In exchange he would get a meal and \$5 or \$10. He presumed the man lived in the shelter.

Others would help building superintendents with the cleaning and repairs. This resulted in some men having two residences, so to speak. One was a room at some building basement in the surrounding neighborhood, and the other the cot and the locker at the shelter, two places of unstable dwelling.

This was the case of Paquito a Cuban *marielito* who was a CSS client. The shelter workers knew of his double arrangement and sent me to look for him in the building where he worked and had a basement room. The super told me that he was then working in one of the apartments and I left a message for him. It was believed by the shelter workers that he could not sever his relationship with the institution and was held as an example of someone who had been swallowed up by the shelter's culture and lifestyle.

He would come to the shelter one or two days a week just to preserve his right to his cot and locker. About a month after I went looking for him, he lost his room for some

reason and was seen at the shelter everyday. Apparently Paquito knew his situation at the building was frail and kept his place at the shelter as a safety net.

All these jobs were occasional and were paid off the books. They were the most commonly available and the most desirable jobs because they allow the workers to continue receiving government help. Jobs in the formal economy automatically disqualified the men of the shelter from whatever government aid they were receiving, and it was too risky to forgo the secure income that had been obtained after a long and complicated process.

Another group of men obtained income from the illegal economy. They were hired to do menial tasks by people running “the numbers” or selling drugs in the neighborhood.

Once, I had to find Amaury, another *marielito* who lived in the shelter. I was told that I could find him in a candy store where he worked, on Nagle Street in Inwood, North of Washington Heights. When I arrived at the location I realized that the so-called *candy store* barely had any candy for sale. Inside the store there were some men behind and in front of the counter that became quiet when I walked in. I asked about Amaury and was told he was not in. I left a message and left.

On a second visit, Amaury was behind the counter by the door, obviously not selling candy but taking the numbers. Again some men were in the store. I left with the impression that beside the numbers there was probably another illegal activity going on, perhaps the sale of drugs. I believe that was the case because the other men in the shop were not engaged in the sale of whatever little candy was there, or the number’s game, since Amaury was taking care of that end. Yet they seemed busy doing some type of

business. I also knew that in New York City *smoke spots* were often disguised as *candy stores*.

A small number of the men were actually in the street selling drugs. The number was diminutive because shelter living, with its constant stealing from one another, did not offer the necessary security for storing the merchandize they sold. In addition, most drug-selling is done at night and the shelter curfew required the residents to be inside the building by 10PM. Of course, some men had the “juice”⁶ to enter the shelter at any time during the night but they were a small number.

Robert was a Barbadian man in his late twenties. He may have been a drug dealer, although he had the good sense of not letting me know. He was smart, witty, self assured and well dressed (I met him while he was ironing a pair of pants.) About a month or two after meeting him in the shelter *drill floor*, there was a report in a neighborhood newspaper of a shoot-out among drug dealers. Robert was reported to have died in it. Shelter residents thought that he might have cheated someone on a drug deal.

Some of those who entered the shelter at night were sex workers who traveled downtown to make money. Even these men were not many because their access to cash soon allowed them to rent a more centrally located room where they would have the freedom to come and go as they pleased and receive guests.

As noted in chapter two, one of the myths about the homeless is that they are all mentally ill. The image often evoked is that of the “bag lady” roaming city streets carrying her possessions in numerous shopping bags and talking to herself. In areas

⁶ *Juice*, is slang for power, influence; resources in terms of physical strength, money, drugs, sexual favors or other exchangeable goods.

outside midtown these individuals, men and women, are sometimes seen pushing supermarket carts that contain their paper and plastic bags. On rainy nights the cart becomes a wall of their makeshift shelters that they build with the aid of sheets of plastic and flattened cardboard boxes. While it is true that some of the homeless are mentally ill they are not the majority but a relatively small proportion of all shelter residents. Specifically, those homeless of the conventional imagery of the “urban nomads,” did not live in shelters because the small size of the lockers allocated to shelter dwellers would not allow them to store all their belongings. Some were fearful of the violence that pervaded the shelter or they preferred not to be engaged in conversation by other people.

Most of the shelter residents with a psychiatric diagnosis had more social skills than these people so familiar to the urban folklore, yet even they might only talk to anyone if they were approached. The mentally ill residents of the shelter were both feared and victimized. A resident talking to himself would make others stay away from him for fear of unexpected violence. Still, very few these men if any, were ever violent. Many were withdrawn and other simply dressed or behaved in odd ways. The stigma of mental illness was rampant at the shelter and it was reflected in jokes and stories that were told about them. In most cases mentally ill men were used and victimized by others. In the most benign cases, abuse amounted to taking cigarettes or other small items from them, but at times they were cheated out of their monthly disability check.

The CSS office focused on serving this population. It provided caseworkers to help locate housing and a stress-free space where the men could hang out during the hours of the day. An outreach worker would approach the men offering services and the possibility of housing. If they accepted the help, the men learned that an important

condition of the deal was that they took psychiatric medications. Medications were a pivotal element in their leaving the shelter, because none of the residences for the mentally ill available to this population would accept them unless they had been medicated for a significant amount of time. The other equally important stipulation from residences was that they were drug-free for an equally long period. The CSS workers helped their clients stop using substances by devising a plan for drug abstinence and testing them periodically. Most of the mentally ill residents did not use illegal drugs and most of those who did took them in an attempt to calm their symptoms.

After CSS clients accepted medication and stopped using drugs, they began the long journey to housing with the help of their workers. Workers identified residences that were apt for each man and made appointments for interviews with those that had openings. Then they prepared the men for the interview by setting up mock meetings in which those with an upcoming interview answered questions from peers and workers. In these meetings the men were given pointers about what things not to say and what attitudes to foreground, i.e., not to make violent statements and announce that they were willing to cooperate with staff and other residents.

This process, that resembled college or employment interviews, was odd to me and it told about the type of a housing market for the mentally ill that predominated in the city. To be ready to go for an interview would take months and at times, years for some men. Many were rejected and after a few rejections some became skeptical of the promise of housing that had lured them into the CSS office in the first place. I witnessed men yelling at their workers; calling them liars after learning they had not been accepted at a particular residence for which they had interviewed. A few would leave the program

after these experiences but the workers tried to reestablish hope in their clients. Some men, discouraged by the length of the wait or the rejections, would find housing in the surrounding community or with family or friends. Most of these arrangements did not last and they would return to the shelter.

The Social Geography of the *Drill Floor*

Inside the rectangular *drill floor* there was a smaller rectangle formed by aligned metal cots. As the men entered the shelter for the first time they were assigned one of the cots. When they arrived there in the great majority of the cases, they found that it was already occupied. They would proceed then to use any cot that was free until they figured out the social arrangement of the sleeping space and they decided where to find a niche.

The institutional logic of the space overlapped with the folk understanding of the “right” and valuable places to be in the shelter. Its main guiding principle was that of protection through alliances, and it reflected the overarching survival strategy of the shelter. Those alliances were made largely along ethnic and racial lines. In this way there were the “*West Indians’ corner*,” the “*Spanish corner*,” the “*Psychos’ corner*,” and the “*Homos’ corner*.” Men who could claim one identity or the other would try to find their way into his corresponding section. If a man wanted or was wanted in a particular area, another who was in it without *legitimate* reasons to be there or who was deemed weak, would be displaced to allow room for the newcomer. If the newcomer was strong enough he would do that himself. If not, the other men would convey to someone that he was no longer welcome there. If the displaced man was smart he would quickly try to find a free cot someplace else. If not, threats and violence would ensue. The logic of the folk

arrangement of the *drill floor* was that they could protect each other and their belongings, but there were other rationales for relocation within the sleeping space and cleanliness was one of them.

Robert, who died in the shoot out, slept in the West Indian corner. He was handsome, well kept and very personable, but he also made it clear that he was not someone to be messed around with. When asked about the sleeping arrangements he admitted that he preferred to sleep around other West Indians but he qualified his predilection:

Robert- I don't like messy guys, you know. I can't stand them! There was this niggah who slept next to me. He was a motherfucking mess! He'd leave his bed undone and his shit be all over. I couldn't take it. I told him 'you got to move, yo.' I just can't put up with shit like that, you know?

Robert did not expand on whether the guy moved someplace else or not or how fast, leaving it to me to understand that he did and fast.

In spite or maybe, because of the common association of homelessness with filth and poor personal hygiene shelter residents would publicly announce their efforts at staying clean and condemn those who did not meet their standards. The mentally ill fell most often in this category and would be evicted from their cots and sent to the "Psychos' corner" always along with their mattresses.

Very few of the mentally ill would raise objections to anything along the lines other residents did. They were a sorry bunch of confused, withdrawn and weird-acting men. Because of their psychological frailty and vulnerability, the CSS office had arranged with the shelter administrators for the rows of cots closest to the doors in the western end of the *drill floor* to be reserve for its clients. It was one of the benefits of

program participation, and the rationale of that measure was that it allowed for better protecting of the men who slept in that area. What came to known then as the *Psychos' corner* was the only space in the *drill floor* that maintained to some extent, its original institutional planning.

Not all mentally ill men slept in that corner. Some men feared the stigma attached to having a cot in that area and refused to move into it. Other men did not sleep there because they had not joined the CSS program, often because they did not want to be perceived as *psychos*. Of the men who had some insight into their psychiatric problems most were also aware of what the other men thought and felt about them. As much as their condition allowed then, they attempted to disassociate themselves from the disgrace of a psychiatric diagnosis by trying to blend in with what was considered the "*general population*." In this, they had mixed success because for some, their disability was more evident when they tried to interact with the rest of the shelter population. There was another drawback to sleeping in the Psychos' corner: almost every day, most of the cots from the area were removed or pushed aside to allow for a basketball game on the retractable hoop right above it. Not far from it, in the North West corner, there was another retractable hoop, but the CSS workers had not been able to prevent the West Indian residents from taking over that area and thus, that hoop was not used for games.

The North East corner was another notorious area. It was the *Homos' corner*. The Queens and their husbands, and assorted *Homos* populated it. A great deal of its notoriety came from the sexual and social attention that the transvestites received from residents and workers in the shelter. The fact that their mates were some of the meanest looking and most fear-inspiring residents was equally important in establishing that corner as the

epicenter of the power economy of the *drill floor*.

Jetty and Big B. slept in the nook of the *Homos' corner*. I remember having seen their cots joined together on my first stroll through the *drill floor*. They had a large bedspread that covered both cots giving the illusion of a double bed. On top of the *bed* there were two square ornamental pillows and between them sat a teddy bear. There were one or two other pairs of cots pulled together, but none paralleled this one in terms of neatness. Eventually I learned that such arrangements were against shelter regulations and were considered fire hazards because they blocked the aisles that separated the cots.

Jetty was a pretty *Queen* who was very popular among the residents. There were times when she was seen at the entrance booth taking care of the ingress of the men into the facilities. She straightened her hair and wore tight jeans and tank tops or backless tops. Other *Homos* and *Queens* usually surrounded her. Big B. also preferred to use tank tops that would allow him to exhibit his strong body. It was said that he was an ex-convict. He had a seductive smile and was feared by most of the residents. The day I saw their corner for the first time neither of them were in the shelter.

In 1997, when I interviewed Doug, a shelter resident who lived in my block for a while, I learned that they had been together for a number of years. I do not know if they were at the beginning, the middle or the end of their relationship when I was doing fieldwork at the shelter. Around 1993, I had seen Jetty lining up for a meal in the lunchroom of GMHC.⁷ I learned through Doug that she had died of AIDS.

⁷ Gay Men's Health Crisis, the leading AIDS organization in New York City. .

⁸ Bourdieu states that the care and use of "*the body [are] the most indisputable materialization of class taste*" 1984:190.

During my work at the shelter Jetty and Big B. reigned among residents and security guards in symbolic and very concrete ways. Symbolically they *ruled* because, in their different types of charisma and style, they represented archetypes of femininity and masculinity to which all residents aspired in one way or another. Their union gave them an aura of legitimacy in a social space where legitimacy was hard to achieve and maintain. Concretely, their power came from their ability to summon allegiances from other residents, and their physical and economic resources. In many respects their cots were the focal point of the *drill floor*.

This is what my neighbor Doug, remembered of his path through the *Homo's corner*:

Doug- They all did not sleep together. Some of them slept with their man. Me, myself, I slept with my boyfriend. A lot of them slept with their boyfriends, you know, pulling beds together and the whole nine. I mean there was nothing that could be done about it because there was just too many of them to enforce such... They even sent around letters take to your bed telling you 'you have to keep your beds separated, such and such.' Nobody paid that stuff any attention... They can't make you do it. They could not make you do it because the directors weren't there all the time. Off course when the directors are there they give them respect by separating but the directors, he goes home at night, they go home at night. They go home sometimes in the day so they put them together all over again, so...

The tough guys that slept in or around the *Homos' corner* probably were no more than eight or ten, but since they were believed to be ex-convicts, that conjured ideas about their physical power and their readiness to resort to violence to solve problems. Their leadership of some of the other men in the shelter added to the mystique of the corner.

Doug- Myself, even with my beds together I had a bedspread, my six pillows I even, I don't know if you ever seen it, but I had two hot plates! I

was cooking my own meals there... A whole lot of things that you could do there. Like you said: making yourself comfortable. I figure if I had to be there I might as well be comfortable, you know what I'm saying? But... there was a lot of crazy stuff, murders...

The spaces the couples held in the *Homos' corner*, were not threatened by residents or security guards. Many left things unattended because indeed, all the other residents were guarding them. If anything was missing everyone was in trouble. Other *Homos* and *Queens* slept in the same area and that made it the *Homos' corner*. Some were single but others had mates that did not have the *juice* to sleep among the toughest guys or to deal with the relative stigma of a relationship with a *Queen*. Their cots reflected the highest investment in domesticity and place making in the entire shelter.

Latinos occupied the South East corner surrounded by some of the few Caucasians residents. The different corners did not hold all the residents of the corresponding identity or condition but rather gathered a particular clique that, with exception of the men in the *Psychos' corner*, also represented the strength of the group. Assorted residents of all kinds filled the space between the corners. Most could trace connections to some corner because in the volatile atmosphere of the shelter, peaceful living was predicated on alliances. Still, there were some men who remained isolated within the shelter population. They were gay men who because of their sexual identity, did not forge alliances with any of the cliques and considered themselves different from the *Homos* and *Queens*; mentally ill men who were escaping the stigma of a psychiatric diagnosis, although some of the cliques protected some of them; and a few "rugged individualists" who refused allegiances or clique memberships.

Overlapping this social geography of the *drill floor* there was a "land value"

system or more precisely, a topography of “cot value.” Cot value was predicated on its proximity to its corresponding locker and its accessibility. The lockers were aligned along the Western, Northern and Southern walls of the *drill floor*. They were separated from the cots by much wider aisles or corridors than those that separated the cots among themselves. Of the corridors, the busiest was the Southern corridor because it also led to the security booth or makeshift panopticon. The Western corridor was narrower and was usually cluttered by long folding tables on top of which some residents ironed their clothing. Because of this arrangement the cots on or closer to the Northern corridor were more sought after, followed by those on the Southern and Western edges. Since a great portion of the Western edge was also the *Psychos' corner* the valuable cots on that edge were on the *West Indian corner*. The cots in the middle of the floor, because of their greater distance from the lockers and more difficult accessibility, were the least valued. To some extent this explained why the different cliques sought the corners where both locker proximity and accessibility were maximized.

The Tense Relationship of Workers and Residents

Most residents of the homeless shelter, regardless of how masculine they were, occasionally found themselves at the mercy of other men and sometimes women. The more feminine residents frequently staked their grounds suggesting that their masculinities or femininities were not irreversibly linked to power or powerlessness. Masculinity, as a gender category, is imbued with contradictions that either by itself, or when coalescing with other socio-cultural structures such as class or race, or in various historical, economic, or social contexts, results in outcomes that can surprise of the

enactors of that masculinity and (participant) observers alike. Like in other social settings the exercise of gender power was often contingent upon the intertwined effect of economic resources, which made it unstable.

Within the context of the homeless shelter and its competing masculinities (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994:20), there were at least two manifestations of *hegemonic masculinities*. The coexistence of these two dominant masculinities was possible because they shared features with the more abstract and overarching *hegemonic masculinity* of the United States that we can think of as the deep structure of masculinity in this nation. The features of the national *masculine bloc* are broad and general enough to allow various ways of being a *man* in specific settings to find room under the shade of its coalition. While the masculinities of the white middle class or the military are closest to the *national hegemonic masculinity*, they cannot be equated to it. The idea of *rugged individualism* is one of the central tenets of the national masculinity of the United States. Yet, the interest and ability to benefit from the *patriarchal dividend* inherent in the national masculinity is what aligns all dominant masculinities in the masculine bloc.

Of the two coexisting hegemonic masculinities of the shelter one held sway among residents and the other among workers. While residents benefited less from the *patriarchal dividend*, their interest in it was not absent. Workers and residents shared the space of the shelter by means of a tense relationship. Both groups could resort to effective tactics to overpower the other, but they seldom did it for fear of retaliation.

The masculinity of the workers was closer to the middle class'. They wagered their claim of superiority on a higher level of education and used their ability to establish or interrupt services for the residents as a *weapon*; a practice reminiscent of Elias' notions

of *self-control* (1983), and his equation of the *civilizing process* as the historical progressive abandonment of personal acts of physical violence (1978). The residents' *claim to superiority* and their *weapon* were one and the same: their ability to beat the shit out the workers. Although institutional violence was applied more often by workers than physical violence by residents, a kind of *peaceful coexistence treaty* was in place between workers and residents. This *treaty* was *sealed* by the exchange of favors (some of which were sexual) and by the withdrawal of the workers to their offices, leaving the surveillance of the *drill floor* to the subcontracted security guards who were socially and economically closer to the residents.

Norbert Elias' notions about a tighter control of the emotions and the body in interactions of conflict are an accurate appraisal of the historical change in Western masculinities. The preference for bodily aggression has declined in favor of more detached modalities. The state has increased its role as a buffer of face-to-face confrontations and, particularly in the United States, the legal system has become the preferred avenue for solving conflicts. Quarrels that two centuries ago were solved by duels are now addressed in the courts. Aggression has not ceased to be a central characteristic of hegemonic Western masculinities, but their *civilized* methodologies are characterized by its mediation through impersonal institutions such as the market and the courts. The shelter's workers chose this approach but the residents relied more on their bodies to settle disputes.

If Pierre Bourdieu is right in his suggestion that the use of the body is informed by *class taste*, the thoughts of Elias about the control of the body and the avoidance of personal confrontation would be a characterization of the middle class ethos that was in

many ways, foreign to the shelter's residents. Is not that they were less *civilized* than the workers, but that the latter felt more inclined to institutional forms of violence.

The characteristics of the residents' masculinities were informed by the ethos of the African-American working class. While not all residents were U.S. citizens of African descent the fact that African-Americans were the majority of the shelter's residents, made it necessary for the rest of the men to gain a working knowledge of how they expressed their manhood. A sense of affinity with the masculinity of African Americans was most visible among the Nuyorican residents as they had more social connections with each other. In New York City, most Nuyoricans and African Americans grow up in the same neighborhoods, attend the same public schools, and participate in each other's political struggles. More importantly they have shared equally in the production of the current Hip-Hop youth culture (Flores 2000:115) which, considering the age bracket of the residents (from early twenties to mid forties), had great weight in shaping the style and value system of the men who lived in the shelter.

The social proximity of residents represented a threat to the frail social position of workers. Their shared racial and ethnic backgrounds were a reminder of the common origins that implied the possibility of a common destiny. The workers' treatment of the residents was a witness of their own fears of downward mobility.

Shelter Life

The day at the homeless shelter was punctuated by the meals and the times to wake up and lights out. Early in the morning the lights would go on and the residents had to leave their cots. There was a shelter regulation that precluded residents from staying in bed past

a certain hour but they were also motivated by the need to secure some breakfast.

After that residents had to leave the shelter and look for employment but this rule had exceptions for the mentally ill, those who had appointment with the social service workers of the shelter and those who were sick. Some managed to stay in by making arrangements of various sorts with the security guards or by threatening them. Most residents would leave the premises anyway because it was a depressing environment. This rule was suspended in days of bad weather. Some residents would gather back at the shelter at noon for lunch and most at the end of the day for dinner. Lights out was a 10PM but there were formal and informal ways to enter the shelter after that time.

Three times per day residents would line up or more accurately, crowd around the small dining room. Breakfast consisted on small packages containing cereal and milk, both with commercial brand-names not found in New York City's markets. Lunch was a sandwich wrapped in a cellophane envelope, a piece of fruit, and a plastic container with a sweet artificially-flavored and brightly-colored beverage. I never saw what was offered for dinner. Overall the shelter's meals were the motive of bitter complaints or sarcastic jokes by residents.

A few residents served the prepackaged meals in trays for the others. Since the dining room was very small not all the men fitted in it at the same time. This meant that while some sat at the table and ate other waited outside the room. Although it was not allowed a few would leave with their trays and eat sitting on the hallways' floor. Lining up to receive their meals was a tense time for residents when fights could erupt. The CSS office attempted to protect their clients by providing meals within its premises as often as possible. CSS clients could bring their trays and eat on the tables of the clients lounge

when the office was open. In the same lounge they would seek a safer refuge during the day.

Many of the men who lived at the shelter came from very similar life experiences of growing up in blighted inner city neighborhoods. A few knew each other from the blocks where they grew up or the schools they attended as children. The men were cognizant about issues of racial and ethnic discrimination. They were also familiar with difficulty of getting jobs and staying employed. Many had very similar work histories. Living in the shelter implied a new physical environment but a similar social and cultural context in which they lived all their lives.

Reportedly when the authorities and workers of the shelter were absent, life was more unpredictable. Workers often told me *“you have to come back during the weekend.”* Reportedly on Saturdays and Sundays the power relations of the shelter shifted in favor of the residents and apparently, of the strongest among them. The awkward position of the security guards lost the small amount of official support it received during the weekdays. I never entered a New York City Homeless Men Shelter during the weekend. During the late nineties, when I was interviewing men I met around various shelters, I was asked on a couple of occasions to stand across the street because the authorities did not want men hanging out in the corner or in front of the door. Therefore I chose weekends to work because my presence hanging out on the sidewalk raised fewer objections than when the Shelters’ director and workers were in.

It is well known that this shelter was a violent place, but this violence was not unmanageable by shelter residents because Violence was not random. It was mainly predicated on theft, revenge, or respect. Only the big guys could at times be seen showing

off valuables. Even they did not keep those small treasures for long because the pressure of poverty forced them to exchange them for cash or in payment of debts. For the rest it was clear that the possession of things such as gold chains and the like was an invitation for trouble. From time to time someone would be mugged right after cashing his public assistance check, but most men were aware of this possibility and let their cash with a trusted person outside of the shelter, or spent it quickly. CSS workers opened bank accounts for their clients in a mixed strategy to prevent theft and to encourage saving. A sharpening of the skills necessary to navigate New York City streets would reduce dramatically the chances of being mugged in the shelter: keep your eyes open and your ears pricked up; do not flash money, gold, or other valuables; seek safety in numbers. Most theft was surreptitious and non-violent. Very often violence was issued out of retaliation for a previous affront, most commonly the uncovering of bad-faith dealings, the non-payment of incurred debts, infidelity, or theft. At times a shelter resident would be missing for days and upon inquiry it would be revealed that they owed money or had cheated someone in a deal. Seducing or attempting to seduce someone's mate could also draw out violence. Avoiding violence elicited by the infringement of the rules of respect was more complicated but it was also one of the more uncommon kinds of aggression and one that could be applied in different degrees, of which physical force was its apex. To give respect to other residents necessitated the knowledge of the social geography of the shelter floor, "who's who" among the residents, and the type of relationships that linked them. It also required knowing how to manage one's own assertiveness, a minimal sense of how one could be perceived, and presenting oneself as deserving of respect. It might be inferred that, since avoiding disrespect-based violence required good

interpersonal skills, the mentally ill were the most common recipients of this type of aggression, but that was not so. As I mentioned above, because of fear or compassion, mentally ill residents were allowed some lenience in the observation of respect.

When we spell out in detail what could trigger violence and how to avoid it, staying safe seems a daunting task, but these are all skills that most city dwellers possess. It seems to me that what made shelter safety different from street safety during the period of my fieldwork that took place inside shelters, was the city's wish to spend the smallest possible amount of financial resources in services for the homeless. This represented the almost complete absence of the state as a buffering force inside these institutions, which accompanied by the fact that we usually have contempt for those who demand respect in the shelter, resulted on a different sense of what was involved in safety.

Stark (1994) and William's (1996) give detailed accounts of institutional violence in the form of intrusiveness. Fort Washington Shelter was much larger than the other and the City of New York a more reluctant manager. Resident violence only encroached within the interstices of the authoritarian role of the state. As a resident entered the shelter he recognized the institution of the shelter and its representatives as the principal meritors of his respect. Withholding services (i.e.: a cot) was the way in which the shelter as an institution sanctioned (i.e.: punished or retaliated for) real or perceived rule-breaking (i.e.: disrespect) by residents. Bureaucratic violence (i.e.: putting someone out in the cold) was not absent from the shelter and physical force could be employed to achieve it.

Advocates for the homeless have documented the violence of city shelter by pointing to homeless men and women who prefer to *sleep rough* than check in a shelter. Simultaneously they have pointed to street-dwelling homeless in order to demand more

shelter space. What at first sight seems like a contradiction is actually a remark on the various degrees of tolerance to shelter violence by the homeless. Neither the street nor the shelter are safe, and different kinds of people can deal successfully or not with different types of violence. The independence of homeless people who may prefer to sleep in the open does not come without cost either.

It was important for the men who lived at the shelter to foster connections and associations with other residents. The most common explanation was the need of protection against violence. The shelter could be a violent place and one way of preventing violence was to convey the fact that one was not alone and that there were men ready to come to one's help. Establishing connections with networks of residents also provided a safety net against the poverty that they all experience. If a resident missed lunch he could ask his friends for anything they were not going to eat. The consciousness of the value of food drove residents to keep sandwiches or fruits they were not going to eat and provide them to other residents. Of course, this generosity was also based on the accurate perception that, on another day, one could have missed lunch and it was good to have people who could return favors. Bartering was the main activity in the cash scarce economy of the shelter.

Solidarity was channeled along network lines. These networks or cliques were represented in the use of sleeping space (the corners). The predominant network, the one with the toughest guys, was the African-American network that slept in and around the *Homos* corner. Besides the ability to instill respect,⁹ power was conveyed by holding

⁹ For a rich description of the management of respect by the predominant network or "the crew" see Dordick (1996).

steady relationships with the prettiest *Queens*. The other networks were somewhat looser. Each clique served as a safety net for the redistribution of food and safety beside other scarce resources. Networks also served to return a measure of the dignity that poverty and the institutional setting had depleted. They were like fictive kin providing social referents for their members and administering makeshift justice when necessary. The ethnic character of these cliques reinforced the sense of oneness within. While the mentally ill were the least equipped to maintain this type of association, their association to the CSS program gave them common bonding experiences. Still, they were the least cohesive group.

Many held dyadic relationships that had similar purposes to that of the cliques. The strength, effectiveness and longevity of these couples were determined to some extent on whether they were based on sex, love, business, or friendship. Some dyads were based on more than one of these elements. For example friends could be picking and exchanging cans for cash or selling things in the street; a couple of lovers would mind different ends of a drug operation: one in the shelter and the other in the street. The fact that these associations had only two members limited the power that they could project against others, but their intimacy gave them more inner strength. Some of these relationships had begun prior to their members entering the shelter and some continued after they left the shelter. At times the men knew each other from the neighborhoods of their childhood or had gone to school together. Sometimes they had met at another shelter, for many of these men had been in the shelter system for years. A few had met in jail and by coincidence ended up at that shelter. Some, upon release, made an effort to go

to a shelter were they had friends.¹⁰ There is also the possibility that since this was shelter for *difficult* men, they were released directly to the Fort Washington Shelter.¹¹ These associations could be very frail and succumb to the suspicion that one was playing the other. Other lasted for years and transcended the shelter.

In considering these cliques and dyads there is the risk of exoticizing them. The fact that we come in contact with them within the shelter and that we see them dealing with the daily challenges of life in its milieu, does not mean that their social relations are a *pathological* or otherwise a problematic formation. All associations are field-dependent, emerging from the human inclination to deal with specific problems of life in social ways. The nature of each association reflects the interests and abilities of its members and responds to the pressures of the environment to its membership. That one would concentrate on crime and another on fishing does not make one more *pathological* than the other. *Pathology* would be the refusal to associate with others and psychiatry has diagnostic labels for this type of behavior. Social science's literature has countless

¹⁰ Some residents wrote to their *locked up* buddies letting them know where they were so that they could be located, or as a piece of valuable information for their friends who did not have where to go upon release.

¹¹ For some reason, correctional facilities preferred to release some inmates to shelters: Eddy was a 20 years-old Puerto Rican man living with his brother and sister in law in the Bronx. He had been shot in the head as child by a stray bullet in a shoot-out. The injuries from the bullet had affected his psychological functioning. '*I be slow sometimes,*' he would say. The police picked him up with bag containing drugs that according to him, a friend had given him and the contents of which he was unaware. Since this was his first offence he went to boot camp. He contacted me a few days before his release to inform me that he was going to the East 28th Street. Knowing that he had been living with his brother before going to jail I asked him why he was going to a shelter. Eddy said that the correctional authorities wanted him there because they could keep better track of him. Eventually I could not locate him where he said he was going or at his brother house and lost track of him.

descriptions of networks of people linked to a particular social setting or problem. In the case of the homeless the assumption has been that these associations, networks, or *crews* by focusing on the short term goals of mastering the current environment they forgo the more mediate end of acquiring conventional housing.¹² These hypotheses have gained popularity because the theories of the *culture of poverty* and the *underclass* have primed the background of the poor as pathological. Yet they remain highly unscientific. For one, they assume that privileged academics can assess and make better choices than people who have been marginalized by the educational and judicial system, the labor and housing markets, and some by their racial and/or ethnic background. In addition these theories take for granted that there are education and jobs to be had, affordable rooms—not even considering apartments—to be rented, and drugs detoxification programs in which to enroll on demand. That the crisis of homelessness is at its worst in its third decade signals that there may be at least a grain of truth in these men's assessment of their own situation. The ultimate experiment has not been done: make available jobs with living wages and decent housing and let's see who remains in the shelters.

In this chapter I have presented two perspectives of the homeless shelter. First, as an institution, in relation to the neighborhood and other institutional entities that surrounded it. And second, as a social space where destitute men found refuge. In this section I have

¹² Jenks (1994) has argued that the homeless make the rational choice of preferring to stay in a free shelter than having to pay rent in a private home. While, for the sake of argument, we could accept that this is the case, it would be a tiny proportion of shelter residents that would not find cumbersome dealing daily with the tension, the survival work, the lack of privacy, and couple of hundreds of housemates than being able to live on their own.

given a description of the interior of the building noting the ways residents used it. I have also characterized the residents of the homeless shelter in terms of their racial, ethnic, and national origin, their sexuality, and psychiatric diagnosis, as along these categories they organized the sleeping space, the *drill floor*, and forged alliances for the redistribution of material resources and mutual protection. I have also addressed their employment and other sources of income. Finally, I have detailed what their lives were like as residents of a shelter and as members of a community of extremely poor men. In this section I have detailed the relationships they formed and the types of exchanges implied in each of them.

In the next chapter I will focus on the shelter as a socio-sexual space that housed gendered and sexual subjects that were extremely poor. I will discuss the different forms of sexual identities of the men who lived in the homeless shelter. I will discuss the dominant sexual system of the shelter, its relationship with coexisting sexual systems. Finally, I will address the reliance on rule-breaking and other characteristics of the dominant sexual system of the shelter, as a *proto* counter-hegemonic formation.

Chapter Five

The Sexual System of the Shelter

Sexual activity among the residents of the homeless shelter is the topic of this chapter. I examine the dominant sexual system of the shelter and the sexual identities of the men living in it, as they varied from the systems and identities of mainstream US society, in the science of sexology, or the gay community. Next, I look at the place of *in-house sex* in the daily life of the residents, and rule-breaking as a requisite for sexual activity within the shelter, and for couples of residents' attempts to achieve domesticity and *place-making*. I view the residents' ability to break the rules of the shelter as a symptom of the half-hearted efforts of the city's government to provide services for the poor. Finally, I look at the sexual system of the shelter as an instance of Gramsci's concept of folklore that he considered, contained the seeds for building a counter-hegemonic culture.

Creaking Cots

The shelter as an institution was meant to house men only. It was assumed that all residents would self-select and only those persons with penis bodies would dare come up to the door and ask for a bed. If other characteristics of their readily perceptible appearance did not raise doubts, they were accepted, as there was no further inspection to ascertain they were men. In theory, there was the possibility that someone without the required organ could be sleeping in one of the cots. To my knowledge, it had never happened but not all residents had the *look* or *demeanor* commonly associated with men

in the United States. The tone of voice, shoulders and/or hips width, and the nerve to request shelter convinced the person at the entrance booth that they were appropriate prospective residents.

This comment is not superfluous, since it is not uncommon for homeless people to lose documents that identify them and establish their legal names and sex in their frequent change of sleeping place. A few of the shelter residents preferred to use a female name or used the nouns *woman* or *girl*, and the pronouns *she* and *her*, when referring to themselves or their peers. The task of determining a person's biological sex at the shelter's gate was often simple, but the ingredients for a potential complexity were there.

Shelter residents were forbidden to wear female clothing such as skirts and high heels inside the building. This probably unconstitutional rule did not bar their use of make up, tight pants, tops with shoulder straps and/or opened backs, jewelry and other accessories that succeeded to different extents, in feminizing the outer manifestation of their bodies. Usually, this type of attire was accompanied by a body language and a pitch of voice that was congruent with their style of dress.

Clearly their intention was to attain a self-presentation that could bring them closer to the North American cultural understanding of the appearance of a "*woman*."¹ Although one or two residents approximated very closely this ideal type, probably by their lack of financial resources, most efforts of *gender bending* failed in different degrees. The most simple and effective tool to attain a *passing* feminine persona was

¹ I make reference to the "cultural understanding of the appearance" fully aware of the wide diversity of women's enactment of femininity.

costly or difficult to obtain for free: hormone shots.² It was quite possible that the men most successful in looking like women simply would be denied entry into the shelter.

I remember only one person who could have been interpreted as engaged in *gender-fuck*, the *Queer* practice that implies the deliberate mismatch of gender markers. He was a very tall black man with long straightened hair who wore tight jeans and a backless bolero, and who during the first weeks of fieldwork, I often saw working out in the shelter's weight room. His lack of playfulness or self-consciousness distanced him from the *gender-fuck* practitioners I had witnessed. The intentional and simultaneous pursuit of both feminine and masculine characteristics seemed to imply that he recognized them as legitimate aspects of himself, or that the less than ideal type of the physically strong woman inspired him.

It was obvious that his workouts were not occasional or had begun recently since he already had an impressive musculature. The development of his muscles combined with his long extremities and height, revealed that he had lifted weights for years.³ Very often I saw him quietly exercising by himself or while other residents were using the facility in teams of two or three. The latter would chat or goof around in accordance to the relative common practice in non-professional gyms where socializing seems to be the primary goal. Instead, he concentrated in the task at hand displaying a more serious

² Years later I met residents of another shelter that had managed to convince the resident physician to prescribe hormones for them, which those who had Medicaid could access easily. This achievement could be the result of a more sympathetic doctor or of the fact that that shelter at that time had a clearer role, though by no means official, as the city's *gay* shelter.

³ The muscles of shorter persons respond faster to weight lifting.

attitude to the activity. Soon after I started to visit the shelter regularly, the weight room was closed. I do not remember having seen him much after that.

The presentation of the gendered selves of the rest of the more masculine residents of the shelter did not differ from that of other inner-city men. To a great extent, their masculinity was informed by urban youth styles. Body language accentuated the display of their masculinity: seating with opened legs or slouching, walking with a “bop” or limp, swaggering with arms away from the trunk, and expansive hands gesturing while talking. The visual impression was reinforced by different degrees of aggressiveness, assertiveness, and autonomy, in interpersonal exchanges. The masculinity of the shelter’s residents was closer to that of the security guards and Institutional Aids (IAs) and more distant from that of male social workers, but the three groups of men shared more among themselves than they did with male doctors. In very general terms, shelter men projected various degrees of fearlessness and preparedness to either effect violence or withstand it.

Shelter Sex

Some of the shelter residents were men who had sex with men. Some of this sexual activity took place within the shelter building among residents or between residents and workers, but it also took place in other locations and involved men who did not live in the shelter. Although probably no more than one third of the residents engaged in sex with men, all residents and workers knew about it and could contribute stories about it.

The shelter sexual system had idiosyncrasies that differentiated it from other sexual systems in New York City. Its peculiarities set it apart from the systems of contemporary sexology or that of Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT)

communities. The preferred categories in the shelter did not conform to scientific terminology or those of the Lesbian and Gay community but residents were not foreign to them either. The knowledge that shelter men had, of how other people sort out their sexual desires and activities made the shelter sexual system looked to be the conflation of different models. Some residents followed the logic of other systems (e.g. the LGBT system) but the most visible and one people referred to when talking about sex within the shelter or the sexuality of the residents was what I call *the shelter sexual system*. Its most relevant differences from the systems mentioned above were found in how stigma was allocated to persons and sexual acts and in the meanings, motivations, and contexts of sexual activity.

A Sexual Taxonomy of the Shelter's Residents

Most residents who had sex with men would use the words *Homos*, *Faggots*, *Queens*, *Guys*, or even *Straight* and *Bisexual* (although very few chose the latter) to talk about the men who were active participants in their sexual community.⁴ These pejorative words were used in a matter-of-fact way, without hostile underpinnings. The word *faggot* was used to describe or refer to a particular person, but to become an insult, it had to be qualified (e.g. *damn faggot*; *mother fucking faggot*). Shelter residents used those words in the same way they used *niggah* to talk about themselves or to refer to each other even if one or both of them were not necessarily black.

They would not call themselves *Gay*. That term was reserved for more masculine men, who wore men's clothes and did not conceal their sexual interest in men. Usually

⁴ Since these words were used as identity categories I capitalize them.

Gays would not hang out with the *Homos* and *Queens* or have emotional or sexual relationships with other residents of the shelter. They were not the type of men *Gays* wanted. Largely, their point of reference was the gay community in downtown Manhattan, even though they may not have been there in a long time.

Homos, *Faggots* or *Fags*, were more feminine men who dressed in the style of the more masculine residents and were active members of the shelter community. They would exchange food, information, and drugs with other residents and would engage in sex with shelter *Guys* and sometimes would hold steady relationships with one or another. *Homos* or *Fags* would not have sex with each other or with *Queens*. The latter were the most feminine of all the residents in their demeanor, pitch of voice, and dress style. They often had steady relationships with some of the toughest *Guys* among the residents. Since *Queens* most resembled actual women they got much attention from most men. Some of them worked in the cafeteria or at the entrance booth.⁵ This allowed them to have more access to essential resources: food and information. Their strategic positions in the administration and running of the shelter, their association with *Guys* who could instill fear or respect, and pervading societal homophobia led most to believe that *the Queens run the shelter*.

These categories, *Queens*, *Homos* and *Fags* were not discrete and could overlap. It seemed that what could mark the difference more clearly was the style of dress and

⁵ There was a work program available to some residents of the shelter, WEP -Work Experience Program. It was limited to a few positions. It paid \$12.50 per 20 hours of weekly work and most assignments were demeaning. Most residents considered the program a cruel joke or a disguised form of slavery. They could make that amount of money in a couple of hours of begging or running errands for some of the local merchants.

hairdos. Demeanor and voice supported dress and hair but *Homos* and Fags often abandoned their less feminine manners and spoke and acted like *Queens*. In the shelter's gender system the range of their enactment of gender placed them between *Guys* and *Queens*. These sexuality and gender-related typology was prevalent during the early nineties. When I began to conduct recorded interviews in the second half of the nineties I was surprised to learn that a new category had been added to the system: *Butch Queens*. It referred to men comparable to *Guys* in their overall more masculine style, who were comfortable to admit they *took dick*. They differed from *Gays* in that they were more *thugz* than *nice*, their aesthetics were more along the lines of the inner-city's than of Chelsea, and they were active members of the shelter community. About a year later some of the men who placed personal ads in HX (Homo Extra, a gay magazine) described themselves as *Butch Queens*. I heard this term first from Wanda who used it to describe himself: *a Butch Queen, because I dress in boy clothes, like that, a Butch Queen*. Somewhat surprised, I tried to ensure I had heard right and determine what had happened to the neat little system I had documented eight or nine years earlier.

Wanda- *There still be Queens and Homos, man. There still be Queens and Homos at the shelter. Only that now you have Butch Queens like me too, that's all. Shit like that be changing all the time, man!*

I listened attentively, happy that none of my professors and mentors were there to witness me taking from Wanda a lesson that I should have learned from them: culture ain't static, man!

The rest of the shelter's residents were *Guys*. These were undifferentiated more masculine men. All other residents fell into this category. It did not refer to sexuality but to gender. Occasionally, in the conversations of shelter residents a *Gay* or a *Homo* may

fall into the *Guys* category but it was *Butch Queens* that were more likely to be called *Guys* but otherwise, “*Guys*” was the most discrete of all the types. There was the underlying assumption that *Guys* could potentially have sex with any being with an orifice. It was also assumed that their sexual role during sex was that of *the man* or, to put it in the lingo of sexology, the *active partner*. *Queens*, *Homos*, *Fags*, and *Butch Queens* found their husbands and sexual mates from among *Guys*, and vice versa.

Their relationships with *Queens*, *Homos*, *Fags* and *Butch Queens* did not stigmatize them in the eyes of the other residents. Even for security guards those unions did not raise an eyebrow. They too from time to time engaged in sex with *Queens*, *Homos*, *Fags* or *Butch Queens*. It was the *Guys* nemesis within the shelter, the social workers, who if asked would sneer or express their disdain for *Guys* and their sexual relationships with the more feminine men and that, never to their face.

Among the shelter’s workers above the level of security guards and IAs, most were well aware that sexology categorized any person who took part of a sexual act between members of the same sex as *homosexual*. Their knowledge of *scientific* theories did not inspired a more open approach to sexual diversity, but they used it as another tool to further diminish the condition of the homeless men who lived in the shelter and differentiate themselves from them. In their eyes both partners of a sexual act between men were *homosexuals*, and in spite of the clinical connotations of the word, for them it only evoked a stigmatized subject position of the same rank than *faggot*. Their feelings were far from the compassion, pity or acceptance that a medical or genetic definition of the word often evokes. All of the shelter residents who had sex with another resident, or any man for that matter were *homosexuals*, and ignorant at that, for about half of them

did not know they were *homosexuals*. In discussing the sexual lives of the shelter's residents a worker said: *Whether you're a pitcher or a catcher they're all Homos to me.*

That shelter was known among "system"⁶ workers and clients as "*the gay shelter*" because by coincidence or informal design, many men-loving men⁷ lived there. Some afternoons the *Queens* would set up "*beauty parlors*". All they needed to create a small space for *Queens* and those who wanted their grooming services was a couple of chairs, a few beauty supplies and for ambiance, a radio. *Beauty parlors* did not exist alone. *Guys* had their own "*barber shops*" set up upon the request of clients by some residents who owned electric clippers⁸ and knew how to cut men's hair. These small enterprises were part of the informal economy of the shelter and were spaces for gender-marked social interaction.

Security guards were in charge of enforcing the rules of the shelter but residents constantly challenged them. They earned the lowest salaries, had no benefits, and came from the same neighborhoods and social circumstances as the residents. Some of the guards had lived in homeless shelters at some point in their lives, and a few residents worked as security guards during the day. On the weekends, when social workers and the director of the shelter were away, residents encroached on the power of the guards.

⁶ "The system" is the way by which poor people refer to the social services system. In this case was the homeless shelter system.

⁷ Today, the term "gay" is used interchangeably with the word "*homosexual*". Since "gay" has very particular cultural implications that relate to the Gay movement and the well known Gay communities in the cities of the United States, I reserve the word "gay" to refer to that particular meaning. The term "*homosexual*" also has medical meanings that I wish to avoid as much as possible, for the purposes of this work.

⁸ Scissors were considered weapons and were confiscated if upon entering the shelter the metal detector revealed their presence in the clothing or bag of a resident.

Guards were part of the sexual economy of the shelter allowing, for example, some residents to enter the building after curfew in exchange for sex. Doug said about guards and other shelter workers:

Doug- Tell you the truth, 90% of the shelter was gay. Even some of the workers were closet cases. They didn't want anyone to know that they messed around with homosexuals. But, I don't know. On the other hand, I had many experiences with a lot of them that worked in there, that I knew they were closet cases. Some of them even went with of the so-called Queens... that they called Queens, that they called Queens. Just that everything was on a hush, hush. Nobody wanted nobody to know what they was doing, you know? Afraid that they might lose they job or something. Or that people that they worked with would not respect them anymore.

Within the shelter there was a different set of principles from outside that guided behavior, and “minding one’s own business” was its golden rule. The vigilant role of the institution although imperfectly performed, was clearly felt by the men and they did not appreciate or tolerate another layer of surveillance from their peers. This translated into a unique sense of freedom from established social mores that was particularly evident among men who had sex with men. Some residents of the shelter expressed their interest in sex with men openly. Critical comments about their sexual practices were made in a low voice, since some of the scariest *Guys* had stable liaisons with *Homos* or *Queens*. Indeed, one or two *Homos* were scary themselves. Men would walk hand-in-hand with each other, talk about their “wives” and “husbands,” and discuss their sex and love lives publicly.

Men would also have sex on the *drill floor*, behind staircases or in the bathroom late at night.

*Alfredo- In relationships there is the touching, the kissing, the...
Doug- I have done all of that on the drill floor. I've done all of that just like if I was behind doors. Because you'd think at night, at three or four*

o'clock in the morning nobody was really watching what you're doing but they were. Always people walking around or doing the same thing you were doing because it was a normal thing because people think that they live back in jail because that how it is when you are incarcerated. Nobody cares what you do. Half of the people were scared to even say something. They wouldn't come out openly and say anything to you. Like I said, 90% of the people that were there were either homosexuals or they indulged with homosexuals.

A- And if you didn't do it in the floor?

Do- *I did it in the showers. If I didn't do it in the showers I did it by the mess hall. They had a staircase up there. Did it up there, I didn't care.*

Shaun, a more masculine resident, reported similar experiences.

Alfredo- So when was the next time? How did you come to have more sex experiences with guys?

Shaun- *Smoking crack, smoking crack. I was in G.P. Men Shelter and there was this Homo there named Charles. He was a funny guy, you know? I was indulging with crack at the time when I run into him. Seen that I was down and out he offered and I accepted. We went in the back of G.P....*

A- Let me stop you there. When you say 'seen that I was down and out,' what do you mean?

S- *As far as I didn't have anymore drugs. So he seen that I was down and out, you know? Basically, basically [he] caught me at the right time. We went to the back of the stairs; you know what I'm saying? The fire exit, we went back there and we smoked, talked, touched, feel, you know? I liked him. For some reason I liked him.*

You see, you see with me, when I do drugs I always get in the urge to have sex. And plus sometimes all depends on the person...

Shaun described himself as *bisexual*. He had many relationships with women and married one who he still remembered with great affection and regret because he felt that it was his fault the marriage did not work (more on Shaun's marriage bellow). His sex with men also started earlier in life, but for a long period of his life his sexual activity with men was characterized by embarrassment and self-reproach, as he recounted above. A great deal of his sexual activity with men was centered on the shelter. By the time I met him he seemed to have begun to grow more comfortable with his interest in men. He had gone

from engaging in sex with more feminine men to sexual activities with men who could be characterized as more masculine. This is suggested by his description of Ross below, and their interactions before having sex.

Shaun- ...*Because there be times when I'm not doing drugs and I feel like having sex. Like there was a guy here, about three months ago, named Ross and I found him very attractive, you know? So every time you see him is "hey what's up big boy," you know what I'm saying? So I'm in the shower one day and he passed by the shower, he see me in there and he said 'Hey, what's up? Can I get in there with you?' I said 'yeah sure come on,' you know? And it was in the shower, and we did our thing, you know? And that was it, you know?*

Alfredo- And in that case it was just because you liked him?

S- *Yeah, you know what I'm saying? Because I found him attractive.*

Kenny, who was 24 years old, also had sex with other shelter residents. He preferred younger and *cuter* men for more involved relationships, so he limited his shelter encounters to oral sex. Still he apparently wanted a lot of oral sex.

Alfredo- What about here in the shelter...

Kenny- *I let a couple of dudes; I let a couple of dudes give me head.*

A- Is that it? You don't have a steady partner?

K- *No, none of these dudes turn me on like that. They can give me head though, that's about it.*

A- And when you say some of those dudes give you head every now and then, are you talking about regular guys or transvestites?

K- *Regular dudes, regular gay dudes, yeah.*

A- Are there many there?

K- *Many that wanna do it for me.*

A- And if you wanted somebody to suck your dick how would you go about it?

K- *I just... I can just look at them or whatever then I go over there and talk to them, like you know, like 'hey, I like it when dudes do that for me' and they be like 'well me too, do you want me to do it for you' that's how start like that. And they be the roughest, toughest dudes, walking around with the bop and all of that... And some of them be gay swishing around. I like them too; they can do it for me too.*

At times some men would just stand in front of the showers staring at those who were washing up. Those who did not appreciate the attention could do little about it unless they

were prepared to fight. Daniel, a new shelter resident did not like it at all.

Alfredo- How did you begin to get used to what the rules of the game were?

Daniel- Well, it wasn't that bad, you know, because I stayed to myself but it wasn't hard, it wasn't hard to get in with everybody, you know? You just got to mind your business and stick to your business and let those stick to theirs, that's it. Taking a shower; that's the bad part about it. You gotta wait to late at night to take a shower because some of the Gay guys that is in there they stand when you're taking a shower. They stand there and look at you while you are taking a shower. They talk about you, you know, sex things and stuff. I get mad. I don't like that. Don't, don't do that. If you're my man then that's a different story but you are not. First try to talk to me, get to know me first before your stand in the shower, you know, gazing at me, thinking about me. No don't do that, don't do that.

A- In some way it's a compliment too.

Da- Yeah, it's a compliment in some way but you know, come on! Damn! Privacy, you know what I'm saying, ha, ha, ha. That's all...

A- That was some of the stuff that I was getting at because there is no privacy in there.

Da- Oh, no! Especially no, the shower is wide open. They don't have curtains for the showers. And then when you're sleeping it's a bed right next you, you know. No, no privacy at all in there. But you get used to it. Depends on how long you are planning to stay here, you get used to it. Like me, I should be here another month. I got some money save up. That should be another month, hopefully, hopefully.

One winter afternoon I saw two men--one lying down on his cot and the other curled up under a blanket--having oral sex on the *drill floor*. I could only see one of them but his wide-open eyes looking straight back at me told what was going on.

The rule-breaking pursuits of the men I met during fieldwork went well beyond sex. Although the utter poverty and numerous needs imbued with distrust and suspicion all the relationships that evolved in the homeless shelter, some men found love and short-lived happiness within the inhospitable walls of the shelter. There were no rules forbidding emotional involvement, but the detailed regulations that governed their lives rendered miraculous their ability to seize occasionally a small measure of love and

companionship from the institutional setting.

Doug- *And when I got hooked up with this Guy up there, that I fell in love with was just like... I always wanted to be right up under him all the time. He was real, because he used to sell weed and stuff and every time I look around the only reason why I wanted to be with him... It started off I only wanted to be with him because he sold weed, you know? He had a clientele, you know what I'm saying, and he would buy me clothes or he would let me wear his jewelry. He made sure I ate every night and he bought stuff for me to cook. I went with him for a couple of years before we even went into the shelter system. We had broke up and then I run into him again into the shelter system.*

Alfredo- So you knew him from outside. You had a connection with him...

Do- *He had a job and everything and he got hooked on drugs. He lost his job. His sister threw him out so he ended up into the shelter system. When he saw me in the shelter system he was like 'this is not gonna work, one of us is gotta do something.'*

A- Do you think that if you hadn't known him from outside you would have been able to develop the same relationship? If you had met him at the shelter do you think that the shelter allowed you for...?

Do- *I think so, I think so because it seemed like I had a lot more freedom with him up in the shelter.*

A- In terms of what?

Do- *The way that he would treat me. We could walk around holding hands, kissing, you know, doing what we wanna do when in his sister's house we couldn't do that. I mean I don't enjoy having sex outside all the time and hotels was getting expensive and welfare is not gonna help to pay for that, you know what I'm saying?*

A- When you say outside you mean parks or other places.

Do- *Yeah.*

The Sexuality of the Poor

The similarities between homeless shelters and prisons have not been lost to social scientists. The many rules that govern their functioning and the practice of addressing individuals and their needs as if they were the carriers of group pathologies have prompted analysts to categorize homeless shelters as *total institutions*. Numerous ethnographies describe the daily struggle of homeless persons with regulations that interfere with their individual and family lives. In the preceding pages I described the

notorious and consistent braking of the rules pertaining to sexual activity in homeless shelters. I will now propose a way to understand the noncompliance of residents.

The responses of the homeless to shelter regulations are many and they range from silent compliance to refusal to enter the system of homeless shelters. The ethnographic accounts mentioned in chapter one give detailed narratives of the ways in which homeless persons' lives are affected by these regulations and the ways in which they express their frustration. In most cases resentful compliance is their only choice.

To examine the determined pursuit of sexuality in the restrictive context of a homeless shelter we need to acknowledge the social science theories that have regarded the sexuality of the poor as problematic. In both "culture of poverty" and "underclass" theories, the sexual lives of poor people emerge as a partial cause of their financial predicament. While these ideas have been debated extensively and debunked in academia, much of social policy is still grounded on the belief that poverty is the result of the concomitant "pathologies." The poor are expected to follow moral standards that are not required of more affluent groups. In this framework sexuality is a "*luxury*" that may open the door to social disorder. The outlawing of sexual practices from homeless shelters seems to speak to the perceived need to maintain a particular order and to exclude happiness from what should be a locus of atonement for socio-economic failure.

Still, the success of the enforcement of these rules is uneven across the landscape of services for the homeless. The marked failure to suppress sexual activity in New York City's homeless shelters during the last decades of the twentieth century is correlated (suggesting causality) with certain ideological inconsistencies in the state's effort to address poverty. These contradictions were centered on the role of the welfare state with

and the deservedness of the homeless.

New York City was forced by the courts to provide services for the homeless. At issue were, who among the homeless deserved services and the comprehensiveness of the assistance. The city was caught between its original aim of limiting and discouraging the use of services and the pressure from civil society to expand them. At every legal failure the city attempted to comply with the lowest financial investment. This resulted in large shelters with subcontracted and underpaid security guards that were in many ways very similar to the people they had to control. These conditions sealed the fate of the weak on-the-ground state coercive apparatus *par excellence*: the policing force of a welfare agency. Although the institutional scrutiny of social workers was more effective, the security guards had more direct daily contact with the residents and thus, more bearing on the quotidian routine of the shelters.

It was through the interstices of the supervision of every day shelter life, that residents constructed relationships and activities that often directly contradicted rules and hegemonic ideology. Sexual activity was one these activities but they also included substance use and sale, joining cots, cooking, money loaning, entering the premises after curfew, etc. There are social scientists that see in these activities the expression of *shelter pathologies*, similar to the concepts of the *culture of poverty* and the *underclass*, that they term *shelterization* (see Grunberg and Eagle 1991, for its most obtuse example).

The residents' insistence on the exercise of sexuality, far from being an instance of social pathology, represented a joyful attempt to remain whole and autonomous human beings. The ethnographers reported on in chapter one cite the undermining of autonomy as a generic feature of shelters for the homeless, a common trait of total institutions

(Goffman 1961).⁹ Besides helping residents attain pleasure, breaking the rules that forbid sex in the shelter, reaffirmed in a very personal way, their autonomy. It was not a show of autonomy for onlookers but for the participants in the sexual acts. The possibility of engaging in sex implied recapturing the self-esteem and emotional integrity that are the first casualties of poverty. Love and companionship were the ultimate reward and very few achieved it. Yet every instance of furtive sex held the promise of remaining emotionally whole human beings.

The fact that the residents of the homeless shelter were able to engage in sex in spite of shelter regulations afforded them the possibility of experiencing trust, even if for a fleeting moment. In the resource deprived environment of the shelter trust was a sentiment seldom felt. It also allowed the men to establish and maintain networks of exchange that could be used for daily survival. Whether one had sex with other residents or not, the fact that it was done by some and accepted by the others, fostered a sense of community in a group of men who had lost theirs under the pressure of homelessness and institutional surveillance.

The Sexual System of the Shelter as *Gramscian Folklore*

To describe the sexual system of the shelter we have to consider it as the hierarchical overlapping of multiple systems. Shelter residents were aware of the existence of these

⁹ "...*Total institutions disrupt or defile precisely those actions that in civil society have the role of attesting to the actor and those in his presence that he has some command over his world—that he is a person with 'adult' self-determination, autonomy, and freedom of action. A failure to retain this kind of adult executive competency, or at least the symbols of it, can produce in the inmate the terror of feeling radically demoted in the age-grading system*" (43).

systems but each individual privileged one or two of them. Just as we spoke of a hegemonic masculinity of shelter residents there was one hegemonic sexual system that structured the sexual practices of the residents. That the system was hegemonic (within the shelter) implies that under it there were various degrees of compliance, tension, and coercion and a minimum of consensus that unified it. The consensus was built around the belief or acceptance of the idea that each individual had a right to his sexual practices, and the primacy of the body as the locus of motivation.

The subaltern sexual systems were limited to the beliefs and practices of some individuals who did not structure the sexual practices and beliefs of the larger group. The sexual system that I am calling *hegemonic* did not structure the sexual practices of all the residents, but shaped all the resident's outward attitudes. It also was the only system that was fully enacted within the shelter. This fact alone was an important factor in the maintenance of its hegemony. Of equal or greater importance in hegemonic maintenance were the association, in the minds of both residents and workers, of the shelter sexual system with the sexual systems of maximum-security prisons, where inmates serve long sentences and engage in hierarchical sexual practices with other men. This association rested on the belief that most residents had correctional experience, but most of the men that I met who had been incarcerated had not been in jail for long periods at a time. In their descriptions of jail life, very few men reported having had sexual incidents while imprisoned because they were serving short sentences and those institutions still hold the mores against sex between men that are prevalent in United States society at large. They spoke instead, about not having thought about sex with other inmates, or having to conceal their sexual interests. If there was a similarity between the shelter's and prisons'

sexual systems was not the result of the number of residents who had been confined. I believe it was a function instead of the *juice* that some residents active in the shelter's sexual system had in the shelter who may have been in maximum security prisons, in terms of their charisma or their ability to intimidate others, muster strategic alliances, or appear strong and prone to violence. These characteristics alone but most often combined, had the effect to legitimize the activities of those men or place them within the realm of *that which is not questioned*. At any rate, the connection with the prison *ethos* accounts only for the sexual practices of the more masculine residents.

The black and Latina Queens who were these men's wives contributed the other half of the rules of the shelter's sexual system was. The *in-your-face* performance of their more feminine gender type as far as appearance and mannerisms had a rather masculine quality in that it implied a great deal of assertiveness. The ways that they used to engage in interpersonal relationships with other residents were not very different from those of their husbands in that they were louder than many residents, conveyed no fear, and were ready to defend their *turfs* and possessions, and their men fell in the latter category, by any means, including physical aggression. All of the residents were cautious to some degree of the prospect of being provoked into violence by a *Queen* even if it only were in terms of the uncertainty of how to fight with a person who looked more like a woman yet could fight more like a man. If we were to agree that their gender performance was more feminine, it would be a fierce femininity at that.

The ways in which *Queens* and *Homos* went about their sexual lives was evocative of non-normative sexualities as they can be found among African-American and Latino inner city residents. The merging of this sexual system with that which could

or could not be traced to prison sexual practices conform what I call the shelter sexual system. The categories of sexology could be found occasionally in their conversations. In fact, it could be argued that the expletive “homo” finds its roots in the word “homosexual,” a type of sexology. But scientific notions about sexuality did not hold much relevance if any, for *Homos*, *Queens*, and their husbands.

The strong presence of *Queens* and their husbands among shelter residents was predicated on the traits that characterized each group and in their alliance that presented them as one block. When regarded separately, their style, demeanor, and physical appearance were strikingly different, yet the strategies they used to interact with other residents had many similarities. Most often they were regarded in relation to each other. For example conversations about a *Queen* very often included comments about their present or past husbands and vice versa. The influence they exerted over the norms of shelter life and in particular in maintaining the hegemony of the shelter’s sexual system was the result of the combination of their different styles as well as their similar strategies to gain and maintain ascendancy over other shelter residents. They complemented each other and augmented their power in the shelter to levels that they would not be able to attain alone. While a great degree of that influence rested on their potential ability to inflict physical damage on other residents, equally or more important was their charisma, and that charisma was the basis of the consensual element in their hegemony. Among shelter residents *Queens* and their husbands were not only among those with more material resources, but they also enjoyed a great share of the moral resources and thus, dignity. They were the shelter residents whose personal lives appear to have been least affected by poverty and homelessness. Amid the residents *Queens* and their husbands

were the only ones who had found in the deprivation and misery of homelessness, a bit of happiness, and that bit was strikingly similar to what happiness looked like outside the shelter and in the residents' imagination. In fact, for reasons that might be related to their material resources, some of their relationships had been in place for long periods, conveying a degree of stability that was elusive to most residents. The fact that they had found within the walls of the shelter a measure of respectability did not go unnoticed by residents and workers alike. Additionally, *Queens* and their husbands received a great deal of attention from the other men, which they were able to return magnanimously if they wished. I believe that they were aware that relying on fear and utter physical power placed them in a weaker position than if, in addition to fear, they inspired love and admiration. And so, they were.

Their social position in the shelter de-stigmatized their sexual practices and those of other residents who engaged in sex with other residents and an assortment of men, mostly disenfranchised, outside the shelter. This truce over their sexual practices within the shelter was not absolute and it was its combination with institutional surveillance what prevented physical aggression based on sexual practices on weaker men. Respect was only clearly granted to the husbands. While *Queens* were accepted in their display of robust femininity, at times men who did not desire them or those who desired them cautiously mocked them, but their desire was not positively acknowledged.

Some residents engaged in sexual practices with *Queens* and even more with *Homos* because there were more *Homos* than *Queens* in the shelter, but very few were ready to acknowledge those relationships in the street. In particular, if they saw their more feminine partners outside the shelter, when they were in the company of other men,

they would sneak a nod or a wink, or they would just ignore the *Homo* they had had in their arms not long before. The *Homos* seethed in the face of such hypocrisy but usually remained quiet allowing them to walk away with their reputations intact. They reserved their rage for other affronts.

Homos and *Queens* could find in the hegemonic sexual system of the shelter the institutional representation of their poverty, and a degree of sexual and emotional wholeness they could not find elsewhere.¹⁰ Some managed to find marital happiness and even sobriety in the shelter. Many Guys joined them in enjoying the spatial suspension of the homophobic rules they encountered as soon as they stepped out of the building, but for them it was harder or undesirable to carry outside the building the sexual ethos of the shelter.

The rest of the residents, those who were not active participants in the shelter's sexual system, accepted, tolerated, or ignored but never defied it. Their sexual referents were outside, as were their actual or idealized sexual partners. The conceptions of sexuality of some of these men were informed to lesser or greater extents by the categories that sexologists use in their descriptions of human sexuality and the conceptual relations between them. Although their notions of sexual practices might contain a scientific lexicon, this did not necessarily imply that they included the medicalizing or value-free approaches of the science of sexuality. The categories of sexology were used

¹⁰ I heard accounts from workers and residents that some *Homos* lived in the shelter for the possibility it afforded to engage in sex with men. I never heard a first person account of such a tactic. The absolute lack of privacy, the robberies, and the violence of the shelter made it an utter inhospitable place to live. Yet, *Faustian exchanges* of this sort were not completely foreign to the lives of my informants. The positive results of an HIV test represented an avenue for a private room or an apartment in the logic of New York City's homeless services.

alternatively with equivalent folk-categories that operated within systems that had as organizing principles ideas of *right*, *wrong*, and *stigma*.

If a particular shelter resident preferred female sexual partners he understood his preferences within the norms of the working class heteronormative sexual system and the congruent gender system, or in a few cases, those of sexology, and perceived as deviant the sexuality of *Homos*, *Queens* and their husbands. If he was *Gay* he made sense of his desire within the norms of the sexology-informed sexual system of the Gay community. He would not object to the sexual practices of *Homos* and *Queens* per se, but he would not consider suitable for him the socio-spatial contexts where they had sex, the potential sexual partners available in the shelter, and the gender-marked relationships that were common among the residents. Regardless of whether they preferred male or females for sex, in the social space of the shelter with its inverted social and sexual hierarchies of the shelter vis-à-vis the United States at large, these men did not find reinforcement for their conceptions of sexuality. Yet, in stepping onto the sidewalk, they felt society's approving tap on the back.

Scientific Knowledge of Sexuality as Distinction

In Chapter Four (p. 146), I mentioned the tense relationship between male shelter workers, other than security guards and Institutional Aids (social workers, etc.), and residents. I pointed to the ethnic, racial, and class similarities of the two groups yet their masculinities emerged as opposites in the shelter's social space, with the power of the workers mediated by the institutions of social services among which the shelter was one of them, and the residents relying on the unmediated power and possibilities of their

bodies. The reality of their different forms of power established a tense truce between the two groups of men. In private, workers would present the sexuality of the residents as a proof of their ignorance: they did not know they were all "*Homos.*"

The different attitudes about sex among men that workers and residents evidenced, suggest similarities and differences in terms of habitus. Their similar working class backgrounds endowed them with comparable notions of sexual stigma and normativity, but their different education and life experiences of poverty and possibly crime, had transformed their habitus in such a way that their understanding of sexual shame differed from that of the other and of the working class as well.

I propose that working class habitus with respect to sexuality privileges reproduction and the relief of the body's sexual tensions. The preference of function over form¹¹ allows for a *more relaxed* approach to sex between men on grounds of the need for relief of sexual tensions, which may be facilitated by the inclusion of gender markers. That sex between men produces less anxiety means that the insertor might be less stigmatized than the insertee, but the stigma remains a core feature. I view these markers *in flux*, as the objective conditions of the U.S. working class have changed over the last forty years but most importantly, as media have entered the equation of the formation of the working class habitus with ever increasing vigor.

The residents' habitus departs from the working class habitus in its further decreased apprehension about sex between men. This may be related to the experience of time in jail of some of the residents, a possibility that I am not in a position to either

¹¹ See Bourdieu 1984:193-200 for his comments on the difference of bourgeois and working class eating habits.

assert or deny. If this were the case, the presence of *Queens* in the shelter may have steered the transformation of the jail *ethos* into the shelter *ethos*, since correctional facilities tend to house cross-gendered inmates separate from other convicts. I feel more confident to say that it is the state's handling of poverty, with its differential access to services for men and women, and its segregation of male and female bodies, that has confined destitute males in a *city of men*, of which the clearest examples are the homeless shelters where I conducted my fieldwork. These circumstances have had a transformative effect on the habitus and thus, the masculinities of homeless men, and have conveyed a sense of lifting of norms that in turn have made possible the open expression and articulation of postponed or seldom-examined sexual desires. The high number of men who think of, and socially project themselves as *straight*, yet engage in sex with other men in the shelter, may not be instances of *circumstantial homosexuality* but expressions of the malleability of human sexuality.

Instead, education has been the force that has transformed the habitus of the shelter workers. They have been able to transform this cultural capital into a move out of the blue-collar sources of employment of their parents and possibly grandparents into their white-collar jobs they held at the shelter. It is hard to tell in the restructuring economy of the end of the Twentieth Century whether it also represents a relative improvement over their parent's earnings and the standards of life in which they grew up, but the fact that their jobs centered on their intellectual and not manual skills, suggests at least a status improvement.

To be sure, their working class origins emerged time and time again in expressions of solidarity with the homeless men of the shelter, although largely in the

voices of the female workers. “We are [or, I am] just a paycheck away from homelessness” was an expression of awareness of their socio-economic vulnerability and common fate with their *clients* that I often heard of workers not only in shelters, but also in drop-in centers and welfare hotels. But that empathy decreased, most clearly in institutions that dealt with large numbers of persons as in shelters, and in particular if their *clients* were men approaching the near-antagonism that I found among male shelter workers. The exceptions to that animosity were no less problematic as it took the contour of asymmetric camaraderie. Some male workers would request of specific residents, whom they trusted, that they go into the surrounding areas or to their *drug spots* and buy illegal substances for them. In other cases residents who sold drugs made some of their sales among the workers, or conversely some workers hired specific residents to sell their drugs among the other residents or in the shelter’s vicinities, with the resulting effect of workers becoming wholesalers in the drug market of the shelter. In a completely different vein, some workers may engage in sexual relations with residents, or request that residents procure and negotiate sex with women of the area. Besides the legal and ethical implications of these transactions and contacts, they were marred by the imbalance of power between those involved. One has to think that workers, who may have had more to lose (their jobs), insured that they would not be betrayed by some sort of blackmail, and not just in terms of interruption of services or ejection from the shelter, but along the lines of some secret that could get the resident thrown in jail. As noted elsewhere, residents on their part, could threaten the worker with bodily harm if the conditions of the deal were not respected. These types of arrangements between workers and residents were not widespread, but were common enough to have reached my ears. The variety of

the types of transactions mentioned above show that while not endemic, informal agreements among workers and residents was a possibility explored. They also point to the social proximity between residents and workers that in spite of their educational and financial differences, with the possible exception of sexual relationships, allowed them to broach the subject of these questionable associations.

It is in this context that we should consider the shelter workers' brandishing of their knowledge of sexology against the sexual character of the residents: "whether they pitchers or catchers, they're all 'homos' to me." They knew that *scientific* theories of sexual behavior regarded *every* participant in a sex act between men as a *homosexual* and so they used that knowledge to undermine the residents' masculinity (the more masculine residents, that is.) To attempt to call into question their masculinity on their terms, by means of physical threats were doomed to failure, if not by their fighting skills by their ability to convoke a legion of comrades to their help. As noted above direct, body-to-body forms of violence did not exemplify the form of aggression of the workers' social position, and so they chose the mediation of sexology to exert symbolic violence and even that was mediated. They chose a third party, the ethnographer, to launch their veiled attack. Had they done it in any other way, the delicate balance of power between them would have been unsettled.

In the process they revealed the limitations of their knowledge of sexology. They clearly knew the names and the main categories of sexological rhetoric. But apparently they were not able to follow to the principal aims of sexology and used its types and the way they were connected, not in a value-free scientific effort or to medicalize *deviant* practices, but to parcel out stigma.

The workers' labeling of residents who had sex with men, specifically *Guys*, reflected the tension between the two groups. The use to which the workers put their educational capital (i.e.: knowledge of sexology as a means of allocating stigma) signaled their working class *habitus*. Bourdieu calls the *hysteresis effect* the *mismatch* of the properties a social agent might possess at a particular time, vis-à-vis the *habitus* of origin (2003/1977:83; 1984:109-110). *Hysteresis* can be seen in the gap between objective opportunities and the agent's lack of disposition to take advantage of them. In the *hysteresis effect* the conditions of acquisition of educational capital in this case, become evident when the workers use that newly acquired capital in ways that resonate with them, the pre-existing *habitus*. Education had a fundamental role in the maintenance of the workers masculinity in a co-hegemonic position along with the residents'. It also buttressed institutional authority and its overall dominance, which rendered the residents subordinate. But, as the case of the labeling of those involved in specific sexual practices suggests, it supported the workers efforts to distinguish themselves from the residents.

The shelter workers made their selective appropriation of the discourse of sexology, a means of distinction from the residents who they accurately perceived as a proximate social "other," dangerous to them mainly in that they embodied a reminder of the fragility of their own social position. They used the *assertion* of the conception of sexuality they espoused to firmly establish the ideological superiority of that social position that they could not help but experience as frail. As Bourdieu argues, *taste* is affirmed: they used a strategy of *refusal* of other sexual systems to grant validity to their own and in doing so they used the sexual system of the working class, of which theirs was a subset higher in the class/education system of hierarchies, as a negative reference

point. They were not as ignorant as the residents; they knew that for sexology it is just as *bad* to be *pitcher* or *catcher*. They focused their attempt at distinction on those *mean ass* husbands of the *Queens* who were their opposite more masculine subjects within the shelter with whom they shared the tenuous balance of power and whose demeanor, and at times speech, demonstrated their unawareness of the macula their sexual practices placed on them. The words of Pierre Bourdieu come to mind:

Aesthetic intolerance can be terribly violent. Aversion to different lifestyles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between the classes.
(1984:56)

It is easy to see the parallel between aesthetic *taste* and the *choice* of sexual system in the context of the power tensions between the shelter's workers and the *Guys* among the residents. Sexuality is a form of aesthetics in the selection of objects of desire and practices, and the distinction between the sexual systems of *Guys* and workers that evoke the gap between the easily satisfied *taste of the sense* of the subaltern classes and the mediated and pure *taste of reflection* of the dominant classes (1984:488-96). The former in the penis attaining completion or climax by means of any bodily orifice, the latter predicated on those orifices being placed in a female body. The first was the *equal opportunity* sexual *taste* of the *Guys*. The second, was the more reflective sexual *taste* of the workers for which orifices are not enough; it also needs gender.

Gramsci and Sexuality in the Shelter

One of Gramsci's approaches to the notion of subaltern culture is through his unsentimental reworking of the nineteenth century notion of *folklore*. He opposed the romantic conception of folklore as a reflection of the "*soul of the nation*" and saw it as

the juxtaposition of different versions of *tradition*, and modern philosophical and scientific ideas (Crehan, 2002:108). For Gramsci folklore also draws from the dominant classes' motifs, which it combines with older traditions. Thus he concludes, "*There is nothing more contradictory and fragmentary than folklore*" (1985:194).

If we say that there was a sexual system, along which the shelter's residents aligned their sexualities, we would have to admit that its most salient characteristic was that it included elements of many sexual systems that have succeeded themselves in the West. The adjudication of the more masculine residents with (perceived) insertive sexual practices, the label of *Guys* (men), and their opposition to other residents with (also perceived) receptive sexual practices, who were given the stigmatized labels of *Fags*, *Homos*, or *Queens*, evoked pre-modern sexual systems. That some residents called themselves *Bisexual* or *Gay* referred to the sexual systems installed by sexology and the contemporary Gay movement respectively. The use of the term *Homo* contemptuously, bore witness to the overlap of *scientific* concepts and stigmatizing attitudes about alternative sexualities. The fact that sex between men remained stigmatized, yet some men felt free to express their same sex preferences openly, points to the contradictory coexistence of conservative and progressive sexual conceptions. Based on this evidence, we can argue that the sexual system of the residents of the homeless shelter had the characteristics of the Gramscian notion of folklore: various understandings of sexuality concurred in the cultural space of the shelter cross-fertilizing and contradicting each other.

Gramsci also saw in folklore an opposition to hegemonic conceptions of the world.

“Folklore should instead be studied as a ‘conception of the world and life’ implicit to a large extent in determinate (in time and space) strata of society and in opposition (also for most part implicit, mechanical and objective) to ‘official’ conceptions of the world (or in a broader sense, the conceptions of the cultured parts of historically determinate societies) that have succeeded one another in the historical process.” (1985:189, my emphasis)

He believed that folklore contained elements that could be transformed into a counter-hegemonic culture. I would like to rescue this counter-hegemonic potential from the exercise of the sexual and emotional lives of the homeless men I met during my fieldwork in New York City. This potential is both conceptual and pragmatic. It is conceptual in that it rejects stigma in the tacit decision to exercise sexual self-determination in an oppressive institution within a homophobic society, going beyond autonomy to the establishment of an environment where there is room for alternative sexualities. It is pragmatic in its impetus to occupy any unguarded cultural (and physical) space and in its resolve to extract a measure of freedom, however small, from within the walls of a homeless shelter. In the sexual expressions of these homeless men there was a potentially liberatory element that could be developed into a counter-hegemonic subaltern culture.

In this chapter, I have analyzed the sexual system of the shelter as a cultural formation that in its *sui generis* combination of elements demonstrated considerable degree of autonomy from the currently hegemonic sexual systems. This sexual system had its own sex/gender system with their correspondent sexual identities. It was formed exclusively by men and therefore sexual identities and practices were characterized by fluidity. Besides pleasure, shelter sex had numerous beneficial effects for the men who took part

in it. Since a great deal of the sexual activity of the shelter sexual system, and the lives of the men who structured their sexual lives according to its norms took place within the walls of the shelter, rule-breaking of major and minor significance was necessary for its existence and functioning. Rule-breaking was the result of the constant struggle between a state institution, weakened by the government reluctance to invest in services for the poor, and the largely black and Latino men who lived in the shelter.

The sexual culture of the shelter in its *mosaic-like* and multilayered internal diversity (the scientific, folk, political, etc. provenance of its elements) and the independence of its sexual system from its hegemonic counterpart, make it similar to Gramsci's notion of *folklore*. I have suggested that as in Gramsci's model of folklore, in the shelter's sexual culture and systems there may be the clay for the molding of a truly counter-hegemonic subaltern sexual culture.

In the following three chapters we draw closer to the lives of homeless men by means of their narratives about their emotional and sexual lives. The topic of the next chapter is the intertwining of sexuality and social class, and their combined effect on each other. The data under examination are four narratives of homeless men about their love and emotional lives. The goal of the chapter is to show how homelessness, or extreme poverty as a surrogate for social class, imprints its mark on people's experience of love and sex. The effects of this intertwining are many, but in the following pages we will focus on idiosyncratic sexual identities and sexual fluidity among the poor.

Chapter Six

The Intimate Lives of Homeless Men Who Have Sex with Men, I

Four Men

I turn now to a more detailed account of the emotional and sexual lives of four homeless men: Miguel Ángel, Slim, Doug, and Shaun. In the preceding chapter, we heard accounts of their sexual activity in the shelter, from the last two and in the following chapters we will know more about Shaun and Miguel Ángel. The narratives here place their sexual and emotional relationships within the larger context of their lives. In their words we will find sexual identities that depart from the conventional, as well as a different sense of what they mean. We will see a preparedness to experiment with a wider sexual repertoire. I call this flexibility, *sexual fluidity*. The material of the following pages was extracted from taped interviews. The voices of these four men accentuate their feelings, with vivid descriptions of passages of their lives.

Four Homeless Men

The *close-up* on the sexual and emotional lives of these four homeless men points to the evidence of their poverty in intimate aspects of life. Commonly, employment, housing, education, and health are associated with poverty. Its presumed causes or its material consequences make a powerful argument to inspire work for its end. The detailed description of the struggles of the poor and the marks poverty leaves in their bodies are necessary to understand its nature and its undeniably profound effect.

Inquiring into the intimate aspects of life among people who live in poverty

expands our knowledge about the love and sex lives of the needy, and gives us the opportunity to infer about the subject in the culture of the United States at large. An account of how scarcity undermines a person's self-esteem in a society ideologically centered on financial success, and its expression in the ability to consume, adds to the understanding of its multi-level consequences. Through a careful look into the intertwining of material conditions and sexual and emotional well-being, we can learn how the latter, purportedly uniform cross-class experiences, shape and are shaped by the experience of class and the social structures that sometimes are interchangeable with it, race and ethnicity. This understanding can be a useful tool for a critical reconstruction of sexuality and emotion in the United States.

These personal accounts depict four homeless men (as well as others in the following chapters) with a surprising humanness that, in surprising us, reveals their absence in other descriptions of their predicament. Although in following chapters I will not return to the issues that emerge here, the reader will be able to identify them in the narratives of other homeless men.

Miguel Ángel

I met Miguel Ángel across the street from Franklin Avenue Men's Shelter, in the Bronx, in the fall of 1998 when the shelter had undergone major structural changes that allowed separating residents in smaller dormitories. According to his description of life in the shelter, I can infer that shelter rules were enforced more strictly than ten years earlier when I first entered the building.

At that time, Miguel Ángel had been living there for a couple of months. He was

28, white and handsome; had brown longish hair and sweet brown eyes. He was born and raised in Puerto Rico, in a working class family and had been living in New York City since the beginning of the nineties.

Miguel Ángel had not finished high school. Life was knocking on his door loudly and its excitement took over. His parents had tried to make him concentrate on his studies and keep him away from the streets but had not succeeded. They had not known all that he was involved in, but it was not necessary to have a confession from him: his bad grades, nights out, erratic behavior and the entire weekends when they would not see him were enough to suspect that he was getting in trouble. They had known that he was using and selling drugs. He had not been able to keep it from them. But they never found out that he was having sex with men to get money to buy drugs, go out, and hang out with friends. Maybe, they had suspected it but did not allow themselves to know it. They had kept those misgivings far from that part of a parent's mind and heart where only what had been confirmed by facts is stored; where strong suspicions are not allowed on hopes that they are just nightmares.

They had tried to turn him away from the friends they disliked. They had introduced him to a few good boys and girls. They had tried to entice him to stay more at home and find in the extended family and their friends a satisfying social life, but it had not worked. Miguel Ángel knew what his parents were doing and had tried to comply. He knew that they wanted what was best for him. He had listened scared when his mother would say, "*you are going to end up in jail.*" His inability to live the life his parents wanted for him depressed him but he accepted it with resignation.

When he reached his early twenties his mother thought that the only thing she

could do was to get him out of the environment of petty criminals and drug users that surrounded him. She had a sister who agreed to host him and help him start a new life in the Bronx, and she had sent Miguel Ángel to New York City. He worked and stayed away from drugs for a year but it did not take long until he found himself doing the same as he did in Puerto Rico. As a result he ended up in the street.

Miguel Ángel- *I have slept in the trains, in abandoned buildings, in roofs, in cars abandoned in the street, in basements, in train stations. I have been in all, here in New York.*

(Miguel Ángel- *Yo he dormido en los trenes, en los buildings abandonados, en los rufos,¹ en carros en la calle abandonados, sótanos, en las estaciones del tren. Yo he estado en todas acá en Nueva York.*)

He resumed exchanging sex with men for money; money he would use to buy drugs. He had made a few gay friends in Manhattan that would pay him to have sex with him. Miguel Ángel said that he did it for the cash he could get; that he took advantage of them; that he exploited them. Sometimes while having sex with men he could not enjoy himself as when he did it with women. With a woman he was more spontaneous, he said. That's how he knew that "it wasn't what [he] was looking for but that [he] was experimenting." Miguel Ángel said he had been confused, he did not know what he was.

Because the men he had sex with were *obviously gay*, he knew he was not one of them, but when he talked to me about them it was hard to tell how different from him he thought they were.

Miguel Ángel- *Usually they were homosexuals that... that you can tell what they are, do you understand, the way they are. Not me; I'm not going to show it because I feel more... more man, do you understand, than to be gay but I even did it until recently and I did it more for the money.*

¹ Spanglish for *roofs*.

(Miguel Ángel- *Usualmente ellos eran homosexuales que... que se les puede notar, tú entiendes, la forma como son. Yo no; yo no lo voy a demostrar porque me siento más... más hombre, entiendes, que ser gay pero sino que también lo hice hasta hace poco y lo hacía más por el dinero.*)

MÁ- [I identify] *as a man; one hundred percent man. I know, and it has happened, that I have had relationships with men and women, and maybe [someone] could think that I'm bisexual but, you know? I go more with that I am a man. I don't consider myself Gay ... I like women more. Do you understand?*

(MÁ- [Me identifico] *como hombre; cien por ciento hombre. Sé y ha pasado que he tenido mis relaciones con hombres y mujeres, y talvez pueda pensar que soy bisexual pero, tú sabes? voy más con que soy hombre. No me considero Gay ... me gustan más las mujeres. ¿Entiendes?*)

MÁ- *Although many times I used it, I did it, I did not take to the pleasure of doing it daily; look for a person without any interest, from the heart. To say "oh, I have this person and I'm not going to take his money, I'm not going to exploit him," do you understand? But is going to be a mutual relationship, sexual, do you understand? But truly, I consider myself a man.*

(MÁ- *Aunque muchas veces lo empleé, lo hice, no le cojí ese gusto de hacerlo a diario; buscar una persona sin interés ninguno, del corazón. Decir "oh, tengo esta persona y no le voy a sacar dinero, no lo voy a explotar." ¿Entiendes? Sino que va a ser una relación mutua, sexual. ¿Entiendes? Pero de verdad, me considero hombre.*)

He spoke sincerely. He looked alternatively at my eyes and to the ground of the deserted playground where we sat, as if trying to make sense of something that he did not clearly understand, as if he were trying to project congruently a reality that was held precariously within him. He could not see himself like the men he had sex with because he saw himself as more of a man, more masculine. He admitted that he could perform sexually with men, but he was not about to identify as Gay.

Apparently it was a matter of degree and motivation. *I like women more.* He knew

he liked women. His desire was the only motivation for sex with women. With men, he *did it more for the money*. He could also get an erection with men, and the motivation for Miguel Ángel to have sex with men was the need of cash. And it was precisely his erection that gave evidence that he might have liked men, at least a little. Inevitably, when he spoke of his sexuality he underlined it with his gender. There was no way to know where one ended and the other began. A couple of things were clear to both of us: Miguel Ángel was a rather masculine man; he was physically able to have sex with both men and women; and he was not about to take on a spoiled identity like *Gay* or *bisexual*. The problem was to make his person and his behavior fit the categories, we had to speak about them.

Recently, there had been a woman in Miguel Ángel's life. They had been together until a couple of months before our conversation. He called her *novia* and *compañera*, that is, *girlfriend* and *companion, comrade*.² Mariana also used drugs and help him when he went stealing. He would go into the stores and she would wait outside with the packages. When they were done they would go to get drugs and then to have sex. They spent a great deal of time together. Those days Miguel Ángel was using drugs daily. She had somewhere to live and knew he was living in the shelter. He said he loved her and

² In Latin America the terms *compañera/o* can have different meanings depending on the context of the companionship. The oldest and most common refers to people who do something together: *compañero de trabajo*, co-worker; *compañero de clase*, class-mate. There is also a political meaning that indicates a shared political affiliation. Juan Domingo Perón referred to his followers as *compañeros*, term that they also used to address each other. In revolutionary Cuba the term has the same meaning. During the 1970s, with the influence of feminism and the sexual revolution, the term began to be used to give a dignified veneer to unions that had not been sanctioned by the state or church, which had begun to proliferate among the middle classes. Also, it was used to point to the new character of marital partnerships that was more in accordance to the changing position of women in the Latin American middle classes.

still felt it on that day. They stopped seeing each other because Miguel Ángel decided to go to a program to get himself off heroine. He still saw Mariana occasionally and felt sad for her because she was still doing drugs. She was doing then what he had done before: sleeping with men. But he felt that she wasn't protecting herself like he did. He advised her to stop getting high, to get in a program like he did. She paid him no mind. Unlike the men in Miguel Ángel's life, Mariana's friendship went well beyond the sexual. They shared an addiction and together they procured the drugs and the means to obtain them. It could be inferred that they had been "*sick*" together, that is, that they had seen each other under the pressure of the symptoms of heroine deprivation. They had shared together the ecstasy of orgasm, the agony of withdrawal syndrome, and the laboriousness of gathering resources to get more drugs. These experiences granted them a great deal of intimacy. The terms "lovers" and "running mates" could sum up their relationship. Just one thing Miguel Ángel kept from Mariana: his commercial sex with men.

Doug

In the winter of 1998 I noticed on my block in 148th Street, a tall black man with a vaguely familiar face saying hello to me. I could not figure out where I knew him from so one day, seeing that I did not quite recognize him he told me. I knew him from the shelter at 168th Street. He told me that he was living with his aunt in the same block where I lived. I would see him in the street and often he would ask for a coin to get a beer. It seemed to me that he still regarded me like one of the "*non residents*" of the shelter, and as such someone with more resources than him, which at the time that we met again, was

not necessarily true.

He was not happy staying with his aunt. He said that “*people* [I assume his aunt and her friends] *did drugs in there*” and that he was trying to stay clean so he would linger outside the apartment as much as he could. I saw him once with two other young men on the corner of Broadway and 116th Street. He told me then that he had HIV and was on his way to a church where they gave free meals to people with HIV. I was impressed by the sudden confession and thought that maybe he had reached a level of comfort with me that would make that an appropriate moment to ask for an interview. He agreed and we decided to set up the time and place for our conversation later. During the following month we agreed to several dates that he later would cancel. Finally, on a warm fall afternoon of 1998, we talked sitting on a bench on the park side of Riverside Drive and 147th Street. The location of our exchange turned out to be noisy but we went ahead anyway.

Doug’s story was one of poverty, drugs and emotional resilience. It was a chronicle of a lonely journey through the desert of homelessness and substance use with a few stops in what seemed to be oases of companionship, stops that at times ended in disappointment.

The first time he had moved into the Men’s Shelter he was coming from my block on 148th Street. He had been living with his aunt where he had been doing drugs for a few months. He knew people around the neighborhood who were also using illegal substances and he felt that the only way to stop was to leave that environment. So, Doug chose the shelter as his road to sobriety. And it worked, for a while at least. Drugs were all over the shelter and it seemed odd that someone would flee to such a haven of drug use to achieve

precisely the opposite effect but that is what the shelter did for him. For one he was just a little shy. He felt funny approaching someone he didn't know to get drugs and at the shelter he did not know anybody. On the other hand, he did not like the way he looked when he was high. If he got high at the shelter he could not have concealed "the other side of [him]" from all the strangers around him. So he managed to stay clean at the shelter for some time. After a while he began to miss his friends on the block, went back to visit, and that marked the end of his abstinence.

Doug- But I started coming back. My problem was I kept coming back to the block to visit people. Once you start visiting, your system starts saying you miss this person or you miss the fun you used to have. All my fun came with getting high you know what I'm saying? I didn't think you can have fun without being high.

Doug began to walk the twenty short blocks that separated the shelter from our block to procure drugs. The magic that the new environments had worked wore off and he was getting high just as much as he did before, only that he lived somewhere else. Having lost the sense of purpose that initially guided him out of the block, he lost his original introversion and made friendships in the shelter. He stayed some time and went back to his aunt's house on 148th Street. What was the point of staying at the shelter? It was not keeping him drug free any longer and the man he was having a relationship had suddenly left... Why continue enduring the hardships of shelter life?

He went back to the Men's Shelter a second time. He had been in the Bronx at another shelter for about three or four months when he finally got tired of it. There was too much of "that theft, that thieving thing, they were doing a lot of stealing, braking peoples lockers and stuff like that, and [his] clothes and stuff was stolen twice." Doug picked up and left to 168th Street but when he got there he found that it had been

transformed into a “CSS *shelter*,” a shelter for the mentally ill. They sent him to 28th Street where he spent one night and they sent him to the Bellevue Emergency Assistance Unit where he had to sleep on a chair waiting to be processed. He had not patience for that so he came back to 148th Street, our block, and soon he was doing drugs again.

It is obvious that Doug had a drug problem. We could even say that he had a weakness for drugs, if we prefer. Again and again he was using illegal drugs or alcohol, like when we met again, on our block. But his recidivism spoke also of his desire and attempts to stop, to live drug free. The public shelters of New York City, despite much publicity to the contrary, offered Doug a refuge, a place to run to when he got “*tired*” of drugs. It was not a great choice: he had to witness others using substances and probably to withstand offers, a burden so heavy that it would brake his sobriety, but for short while after he moved in, it was a new crowd for him, a change of air, distance from an environment where everything led to using. It was an alternative of the worse possible kind, but the most readily available to him as a young, poor, urban, black man in the Big Apple. A while after his return to 148th Street, again he sought out his aunt’s house. He went then to Camp La Guardia, a shelter on the outskirts of the city. There, besides the regular shelter for the “*general population*,” there was a building run by Phoenix House, a drug treatment program, which was separated from the rest of the structures--the Betty Ford Clinic for the extremely poor. “*You don’t even get to see those strung out or trying to sell drugs or whatever, you don’t really see that.*” Doug stayed there for six months and once clean, he went to South Carolina to his immediate family. To attest his repeated attempts to change his life he told me that this had not been his first contact with this institution. He had received their services much earlier in his life, when they were on 74th

Street. He had to live in their residence for a year and a half, then in Long Island City, and was shuttled daily to Manhattan in a van. The results to his repeated stabs at a drug free life, he described with these words:

Doug- It worked back for a while; until I came back here for a visit. I started getting high again. I just couldn't find the proper assistance like my own apartment, a job... They say that jobs are out here, but they are not that easy to find.

The shelter had been the stage for some of the happiest and saddest moments in Doug's life. He had spent long periods of time sleeping in its public cots, breathing in its confined atmosphere, and eating its institutional sandwiches. He could not be holding his breath until he came out. This was his life, he had to live and take every miserly opportunity to be happy.

Doug had met Joe when he lived at his aunt's place. Joe was working and living with his sister, and Doug moved in with them. It was hard because they could not have sex at her house. They had to have sex outside, in parks or hotels, and hotels were expensive. After a couple of years they broke up.

One day, when Doug was in the shelter, they met again. Joe had gotten hooked on drugs and had lost his job. His sister had thrown him out so he went to the 168th Street shelter. By then Joe was selling drugs and that was what drew Doug back to him: interest. Time began to change things. Joe made him feel good. He had acquired a clientele and had money. He bought Doug clothes, would let him wear his jewelry, made sure he ate every night, would bring groceries for Doug to cook, which he did with a hot plate and the acquiescence of security guards. He fell right back in love with Joe and right there at the shelter, they had some of the best days of their relationship.

Doug pulled their cots together and covered them with a full-size bedspread. He got two regular pillows and six ornamental ones, which he arranged, on the comforter. That improvised matrimonial bed, became their bedroom, their private space, their love nest. Since there were no walls separating theirs from the rest of the cots, by arranging their beds so, Doug communicated to the rest of the residents that this was *their* area. If there was an informal guideline on respecting residents' sleeping space, the arrangement of their cots announced a more complex site: not just a sleeping space but a living space, a loving space; a family of two men lived there. The effort Doug had put in embellishing the spot conveyed that those cots meant more for them than similar ones meant for single residents. Everyone knew that *two men guarded bedroom* and they would retaliate against violators.

They never had to resort to such extreme measures. Their union was acknowledged and respected by other residents. This setup was the best they had had. They could express their feelings for each other, which they had not been able to do in the past when Joe was living with his sister. They walked holding hands; they kissed. Joe was affectionate. None of that had been possible before. They had never had so much freedom as in the shelter. These were some of Doug's happiest times.

Doug- *...and I just had a thing that I just got me to the shelter thing. I always called my self a "shelter bum" from then because I enjoyed been around a crowd of people, you know what I'm saying? Didn't wanna be alone. And now I wanna be alone all the time.*

One evening Joe had to go outside the shelter to get something from the store. When one hour had passed and Joe had not returned, Doug became a little worried. Another hour passed, and then another. Soon it was ten PM, curfew time.

Doug- *He left me... And he never came back, and that was five years ago, the last time I saw him... and still today I still have a feeling that I'm going to run into him again but it won't be in the shelter system, that's for sure.*

The most striking episode in Doug's narrative he had gone through shortly before our conversation. His recent stay with his immediate family in his hometown exposed him to new experiences that revealed personal characteristics until then unknown, that give us a hint of other motivations in his life. He opened this account by saying, "*I'm just satisfied with the lifestyle that I have, but one part that I left out I recently found out, this is last year, that I was a bisexual.*"

After Doug left Phoenix House in Camp La Guardia he was faced with the possibility of returning to 148th Street, to his aunt's place, to the same friends and circumstances that got him hooked on drugs several times before. He decided against it. Instead he moved back to South Carolina, where his immediate family lives. There he has two sisters and one brother. His parents are divorced and his father has remarried. His mother is a minister, his father an evangelist, "[his] *whole family are church people*" so there were many opportunities for him to do one of the things that he enjoys most: singing. Soon after he arrived he was invited to sing in church, and he agreed readily.

Singing was good for him. It positioned him in good relations with his mother and siblings. It gave him a chance to have a notable role in the community. It made him feel that there had been a substantial change from his life at camp La Guardia. Most importantly, he went from being one among many addicts, to being a member of a community with a special gift.

There was a girl, Anita, who would never miss an opportunity to hear him sing.

He had noticed her watching him sing with undisturbed attention. He had also noticed her watching him intently when he was not singing. His mother and his sister had also noticed Anita, so they introduced them and gave them plenty of opportunities to get to know each other. Doug knew what his mother was trying to do: she was attempting to straighten him out so to speak, to turn him heterosexual. It was strange that she would make such an effort. After all it was she who caught Doug having sex with another boy in her bed when he was a teenager. It could not have been any clearer to her what his inclinations were: she had watched it. Yet there she was, taking a chance at sexual engineering.

He could have resisted his mother's maneuverings but in one of the many chances she offered him to get acquainted with Anita, he met her brother Leon. Doug developed a profound, astounding, and irreversible crush on him. Leon was fine, friendly, and had such a sexy walk! After meeting him, Doug did not need any maternal prompting to visit Anita. Leon and he became buddies. They would watch the game together; go shopping together; hang out together; just like a couple. But Doug never told him about his sexuality.

His mother may have thought that her machinations had worked. Doug spent a lot of time with Anita, her children and her brother. Eventually he began to have sex with her and soon she was pregnant. They had a little girl and he felt that he was in a big mess. When the baby was four months old, one early morning Doug got up, packed and left town. He could not deal with it. He had fallen for a guy and ended up having a baby by his sister. He had not told either of them that he preferred men and did not have a job to support his kid. It was too much pressure. Surely, when he left, his mother realized her

strategy had failed.

Doug left, and that could be qualified as cowardly if you will, but in our conversation he showed deep concern for his daughter. He also felt very responsible to the mother because she already had other four children. When he arrived in New York he went upstate to work in a hotel. From there he sent money every week to Anita to help out with the baby expenses. He did that for a few months but he never received any acknowledgement from anybody. He felt hurt that no one—not even his mother—bothered to send him a little note telling how the baby was or a picture for him to keep in his wallet. They were probably mad at him and he wondered whether his mother one day would tell Anita why he did leave. He also wanted to come clean with the baby. During his stay in his home town he had felt the pressure of living a life that did not reflect his feelings and did not want his relationship with his daughter to be tinged by the indignity of those lies. He said people told him she was too young for that now. Yet his entertaining the thought gives us an idea about how important was that little girl in his mind and heart.

Doug- ...If I was in charge I would have the answers but right now all I can do is pray and hope that everything works out alright but I do know that I wanna be a part of my daughter's life and yes your father is a homosexual but he is still a man, he still can provide and take care of you.

Do- ...It's all up to God, when he gets ready to work it out He will finish working it out. But I just pray because I'm a praying person, I pray all the time and I just ask Him "as she do grow up just let her know that I love my child, is not that... just I could not deal with what was going on." Me living two separate lives. I even liked her brother. You know what I'm saying?

Do- ...And then I couldn't deal with that because he was living in the house where my fiancée and the kids was living and I just was like... I gotta... Oh! I can't deal with this. I just up and just left, you know?

This story says a great deal about Doug, his family, his hometown, and the stigma of sexual difference. But the most prominent issue that emerges from this narrative is sexual fluidity. He had not experienced his "*bisexuality*" before, and in his late twenties he "*found it out.*" His sexuality was open for reassessment. As a "Homo" he was among some of the actors of the shelter sexual drama that were more committed to their sexual identity. One does not take a spoiled sexual identity casually. In positioning oneself in the more feminine end of the gender spectrum of the shelter one burns bridges and gives up whatever privileges are implied in holding on to a more masculine homeless persona. While Doug was not particularly "*feminine*" he accepted that his role in his sexual pairings with men would be that of the "*woman.*" Still, in South Carolina he found that he was aroused by women, or at least by Anita, and he was aroused enough times to get her pregnant. And that happened when the main motivation he had to be around her, was her brother.

Slim

During the fall of 1998 I met Slim in a playground across the street from Franklin Avenue Shelter. His voice had a sad, melancholy tone. Slim's words had the sullen lilt and pace of a 37-years-old who has just woken up to find out that his childhood has suddenly disappeared leaving him empty handed across the street from a Bronx homeless shelter with some guy wanting to find out how it all happened. He did not know for sure, but his first bet was that it was his fault.

Slim had grown up in Brooklyn with parents, brothers and sisters. He was a smart

black kid who by age 12 was reading the college books his father gave him. His pronunciation and comprehension were above his age group. He always hung out with kids who were a couple of years older than he. He finished high school and went on to college in Virginia but dropped out after the third year. He was majoring in psychology and sociology.

His parents died nine years before we met. After their death his siblings took whatever was there to take and that triggered his depression and substance use.

The way [my brothers and sisters] handled that, the way they ransacked, they themselves the possessions it really was painful, so I turned to the drugs. I started to get angry about it... and upset. I'd get drunk about it, drink about it. But I don't have much contact with them anymore. They still out there; still staying around in Brooklyn.

He was really close to his parents. He referred to them as "my main peer group." His father had been a basketball coach and he trained Slim in the sport. Basketball was something that drew them together. His dad wanted him to play for the NBA and he got pretty close. But he did not pursue it like he should have. He thought that if he had focused more he could have made it. There had been times when he had "city wide championship games with all the superstars around the city that sometimes I just got so drunk I didn't come to make the date." Predictably, those opportunities began to fade after a while.

Substance use, particularly alcohol, had been present in his life way before his parents passed. It may have been a refuge when the pressure of performing before a citywide audience that included his father became overwhelming. Maybe he felt that pressure even earlier, when he saw himself having to read and understand college level books when he was only twelve. And again when his siblings squabbled over inheritance

and he could not get over the immense void in his chest and in his life that the death of his parents had left, alcohol may have provided warm reassurance. He said that he became homeless as a result of substance use and domestic violence. His fights with his brothers became physical, the gloomy ghost in his interior took over, and Slim left the house. The streets, the nights sleeping in parks and subway cars probably compounded his depression to a level that only drugs would relieve but also would deepen.

At the time we spoke, only stays at Project Return, Samaritan Village, and other substance treatment program had interrupted those eight years of homelessness. He was aware that chemical and psychological dependencies were a serious problem in his life and he had tried to address them but the problem was that *"once you leave out you still homeless."*

The only two women he had seen during that time were women he knew from his childhood. High school mates, neighborhood friends, which he had considered for sex but changed his mind. Eventually they knew about his drug use and somehow, that immobilized him. *"I don't impose,"* he said. One of them had told him *"just don't come over here drinking. You can come any time."* And in spite of the contradictory statement, he thought that one day he might still take her up on that invitation. *"But I'm not that type of guy, motivated to impose on them for sexual favors if I don't have something to give. My mom and father raised me that much."* If he could, he would only have sex with a girl he knew from before he became homeless, and on the condition that he could give something in exchange. Meeting somebody new was much harder and he had not met any women in the past eight years.

Slim's self-esteem was extremely low at that point in his life. When we talked

about his homelessness he never complained about the most obvious problems: not having a home, not been able to eat a home cooked meal, not having money for carfare (he agreed to the interview because he needed money to go job hunting the following day). I got the impression that he felt the impact of his poverty more clearly in his interpersonal relationships. His financial hardships also had an impact on the friendships he made, what he felt he could expect from them, and aware of the limitations he valued his associates as if he could not aspire to anything better.

Alfredo- Do you have friends here (at the shelter)?

Slim- *Well, I consider acquaintances and since you got nothing that's a friend, ha, ha. Acquaintances; you say hi, they say what's up to you, we play basketball together but that's about it. When you ain't nobody, believe me, that becomes something very important. So what another person would consider a friend, this what we consider our friends, these are small acquaintances. Still, you are satisfied with what you have.*

If he needed it maybe he would ask for food to one of his acquaintances but “[he didn’t] *impose on nobody like that*” and he never borrowed money from anybody. Once you borrow money if you did not return it on the established time period, the guy who loaned it to you would put pressure on you and he did not like that. “[It] *creates confusion. You don’t want nothing like that. It’s already hard enough dealing in the shelter.*” Precisely to prevent the violence that came with loan-sharking there were shelter rules against it. His shelter friendships were restricted to small courtesies and the occasional basketball game. “*It’s depressing sometimes, you know? You don’t wanna complicate it...*”

Slim’s social life had suffered greatly since his parents death. He had opted out of his family because of the bickering with his brothers and sisters. This was one of his decisions with wider and deepest consequences because he not only lost the set of persons who knew him better besides his parents, but he became homeless as a result. It

could be possible also that while he thought he *decided* to leave he was actually driven out. Once in the street it was more difficult to make new friends: when you are homeless you are usually a little smelly, a little hungry, constantly on the go, can never show hospitality and that needy look in your eyes... plus prudence demanded holding back from the already limited shelter contacts. New romantic liaisons with women were apparently out of the question and reigniting old interests was on hold until he had something to offer. Slim only opened his heart to the men he offered his body in exchange for cash.

He said that his sex with other men was only with the purpose of getting money that would later use to get drugs. He also said that he was *ashamed* of it. He did not think he was Gay or bisexual because when he had sex with guys he was not *real sincere*. Slim also said, "*most of the time was a lot of talking.*" He probably said it to downplay the sexual aspect of his interactions with men. It was apparent to me that he was not totally at peace with his sex with men. Yet, it was from these men that Slim got a great deal of emotional release and his wounded self-esteem was reassured that he was worth listening to.

There was one particular man to whom Slim always referred as a "*gentleman,*" whom he considered a friend. He lived in Manhattan and they had met one night in 1997, when Slim was working for a company that provided security guards for the New York City Blood Bank. He had the midnight to eight AM shift and the *gentleman* passed by and struck a conversation with him. He invited Slim over for a cup of coffee when his shift ended, which slim accepted. Since that morning he had visited him repeatedly.

...There was a gentleman I knew in Manhattan that I could go there and I

don't have to... he is not interested in sexual relationships, but he is Gay and he is self confessed Gay but he has lovers but he sees me as a friend because he says I'm a nice guy, which is something I really needed to hear without no strings attached, and gives me encouragement, feeds you, spend the night.

Slim downplayed that the initial motivation when the guy approached him, had been sex. "Once we kissed and he sucked my penis, but that's about the extent of it." The gentleman's inclination for Slim gained more substance since, according to him, there had been just one sexual occasion between them since they met. Slim believed that their relationship was not based *just* on sexual interest but on the man appreciation of his value. He would listen to Slim, which "I really needed it because I isolated myself from my family, brothers and sisters..." Slim was a very lonely man.

He said that this *gentleman* looked after him. He had helped him out with food, carfare and toiletries. By Slim's account, this man was "really middle class and upper echelon." Just as in his imagination the *gentleman's* material wealth was linked to his emotional and relational riches, the description of his comfortable life was followed by a reflection on how difficult shelter life was.

In between the times that I would drop over he already had his friends. He wasn't without friends. He has a vibrant family life and friends that he speaks to in a regular basis. That was opposite than me. I'm in a shelter. You pretty much don't feel like talking to nobody. You be more or less... you can call it sad. At least I try to think about it that way. It's not a happy situation, the most happy situation in the world.

Slim's visits to this man were like vacations from extreme poverty for him. As if a travel announcement had enticed him to travel to an exotic and pleasant social location. For a night at a time, Slim would get a chance to sleep in a bedroom with just one other person in it, who listened to him and gave him head. That bedroom would be just a few steps

away from the bathroom and would not smell like stale urine. For a night he was a “guest” in somebody’s house, not a “resident” in a homeless shelter. If the host did not have to go out early in the morning, Slim would get to sleep in late. Before he left, he could borrow money knowing he would not have to look over his shoulder if he did not paid it back. During his visit he would be treated like “Slim,” his sins and his ethical standards would be assessed individually and with compassion and he would not be judged on the infractions of others. While he may have idealized middle class living, his appraisal of homeless life was grounded in personal experience.

Poverty had trapped Slim in a city of men. Women, like most people, feared the homeless, and since they were less well equipped to respond to an attack by a man, they very seldom took a chance to establish a conversation. His female universe was formed by women he knew from his youth and now, unemployed and living in a homeless shelter, Slim was ill prepared to engage in the most trivial courtship. He would not project the usual masculine self-assurance while living on those conditions. His addiction made his standing before a potential female sexual partner even more precarious. He was left with two groups of males he could seek friendship from: other shelter residents and homosexuals. Although he called himself *straight*, his sexual relationships and friendships with men were more forthright and less tortuous than those with women. Maybe precisely because he did not have to prove he was a fitting sexual partner for another man, like he had to with women, it had become easier for him to meet men and find in them the warmth he craved.

Shaun

Shaun was a thirty-two years old Jamaican man I met during the fall of 1999, outside Atlantic Avenue Men's Shelter, in Brooklyn. The afternoon I first spoke to him I had approached and announced the purpose of my visit to a group men standing on the corner of the shelter. As it was always the case, no one volunteered to talk to me. I did not expect it, either. I withdrew from the group and stood about twenty feet from the corner. The group dissolved and the men left in different directions. One or two minutes later Shaun came back and approached me. I did not remember his face as one of the men in the group but that did not mean much because I am so bad with faces.

He was dark skinned and about 5'10" and probably weighed 160 lbs. He had a beautiful and friendly smile. On that day he was wearing a white Kangol cap covering his incipiently balding head. He told me that he knew Guys in the shelter that had sex with Guys and he could send them to me. I thanked him and asked him if any of them were around at that moment and predictably, none of them were. *So, what about you? Could you talk to me?* I asked him; and of course, he could. He never got around to referring to me any of those men he had mentioned, but he turned out to be one of my best informants. He took care to give long and detailed answers to my questions, answering all of them, even when they required him to remember painful parts of his life. But it was also his warm attitude that made me feel welcome while intruding into his life.

Shaun had come to the United States when he was twelve. His mother had come first and managed to bring all her kids to her side. He had stayed with his aunts until that moment came. He had never met his father that is, until the day his aunt took him to the embassy to get his visa. They were riding a taxi on their way to immigrations office when

his aunt asked the driver:

"Excuse me, is your name McIntyre?" And he said, "Yes," you know? Then she said "do you have a son named Shaun?" He said "yes, but I haven't seen him since he was born." And she said, "Well, he is right here in the back seat with me."

At the time I was about eleven years old; born without a father. I always had a father figure in my mind, of what my father would look like; and it wasn't him. It wasn't him. It wasn't the father that I had imagined.

Alfredo- How was the father you had in mind then?

Shaun- *Well the father I imagined, in the base lookeded like me; tall, you know, slim, just about the same age, weight, and size that I am right now, back in the seventies, you know? And it wasn't him. He was short, bold; but I accepted that he is since my aunt said he is. And he took us out for the day and that's the last time that I've seen him.*

Shaun did not know much about his father side of the family. Just little bits he had heard from his mother's siblings. But he held a desire to connect with them, even if for a fleeting moment he wanted to meet other males that were related by blood to him. The physical appearance of his father had been a little disappointing to him because the bond was not as evident as he had anticipated, but he had come to terms with it.

When he went back in his honeymoon to Jamaica, in '93, he tried to see him again. That did not come to happen, but in inquiring about his father's whereabouts Shaun learned that he had a brother by him. He was unable to meet him and nobody knew where he was. A few years later, while he was in Rikers Island, he was reading a Jamaican paper another prisoner had lent him, when he saw his last name in it.

...And I see "McIntyre." And I read "Sherman McIntyre." I'm Shaun McIntyre, and what I heard my father is Sherman McIntyre, you know? [He] had got murdered in Jamaica over a woman. And it hit me really hard because I felt it; you know what I'm saying? Because for some strange reason, even though I never met him, for some strange reason I felt that it was him, I felt it...That's about the last that I've known about that side of the family, you know? The last... and I really wanna know who he was. I would have loved to know who he was. I would have loved to know who he was at least to see my next brother, you know.

We never went into what was that he expected from meeting his brother. But I presume that his need to connect with other males in his family reflected a need to connect with himself, to see how other men that could have been closer to him were dealing with life and learn from them. Being “Shaun” had not been easy, and he may have wanted to check how they were dealing with being a man.

I'm the only bad apple. When I say bad apple, I'm the only one that ever got himself in trouble or do the things that nobody else would do, you know what I'm saying? ... I was at Rikers Island for selling drugs. Then I ... went upstate. I got all the way upstate. I've been in and out of the shelter system for a while, for a while. I've been in and out of the shelter system since 96, in and out. I've seen and done since that time... because I was also on drugs, still on drugs: crack, crack cocaine. And sometimes I've done things to get drugs that sometimes I'm even ashamed of... you know? A lot of times ... I mean my life has ups and a lot of downs, ups and downs. I have to thank god sometimes, that I'm still living, you know? I'm surprised I'm still alive, you know?

He had other two brothers on his mother's side but he knew them well. Shaun could not fantasize about them like he did about his father. He had never had a good relationship with his older brother, Gerald. At the time of our conversation they were beginning to get along. *We starting to act like brothers for the first time; in the last two years, anyway.* You know what I'm saying? Shaun was closer to Everton, his baby brother, but he was ten years younger than him. He felt he had raised him.

Shaun's first sexual experience with another man had been during his adolescence, when he was fourteen. A maternal uncle was visiting from Jamaica and was staying with his family. He had a jovial and attractive personality.

He was such a likable guy you couldn't... you know? He was funny; you know what I'm saying? He'd make you laugh; stuff like that, you know? I was taken to him. And one thing led to another and we had sex... and we had sex. I really didn't know what I was doing at the time, but we had sex.

Shaun said that he had been very aroused with his uncle: he had two orgasms. He had been captivated by his personality. Perhaps in him he was looking for what had hoped to get from his father. He made no qualms about the admiration he had felt for his uncle. And he knew that he had been led to do something he wanted to do. Something he had been pondering.

There was some interest. I mean he, like I said, was my first experience. He came when I wanted to know what it would be like, you know. I was wondering what it would be like.

But this was more than he had bargained for. Maybe if the idea of having sex with a man had not crossed his mind it would have been easier to dismiss. But it had and that implicated him more into what had happened. When he thought about it he not only had to process his fulfilled desire, but also the incestual context in which it took place. Shaun remembered the incident with a mix of excitement, resentment, and the admiration he felt for his uncle.

And then it felt really, you know, awkward, doing it with him. You know what I'm saying, but good. And then after we finished, after we messed around, you know, I felt really messed up you know? You know? [It] messed me up really bad. So, I tried to avoid him as much as possible after that.

Shaun did not want to be left alone in a room with his uncle. When it happened, the man would touch him and try to get him aroused. Shaun would disentangle himself from his uncle and run outside. But he had a sense of opportunity and a few months later, his uncle managed to catch him a second time when he was a little drunk and feeling *lonesome*.

Me and my cousin Rich, had stole a bottle of Manischewitz wine from my mother's cover and we drank it down and I came upstairs and he was upstairs. I was little tipsy and he see that, you know ... That was the second time. It seemed like he always seemed to appear at the right time.

*But I avoid him plenty of time. I was lonesome, this was the right time.
And that was the very last time that we did it.*

Shaun's sexual liaison with his mother's brother ended with that. His emotional struggle with his memories of those encounters continued for a very long time.

He saw him again at a new year's party in the early nineties and that had been the last time they were in a room together. Shaun's uncle again came back to New York City for a vacation during the mid nineties. His mother told him that he was incarcerated in Rikers Island. *So he came up there, you know, to see me and see how I was doing.* But Shaun did not want to see him and did not accept the visit.

Because he my uncle I felt somewhat embarrassed, you know? Being my uncle it shouldn't have happened ... I didn't wanna see him. It was like I was ashamed, or something. Ashamed of what I'd done with him.

His uncle had opened a door for him that he was going to cross many times with other men but in the process the door and everything that lay behind it, was tainted with shame.³ As the years went by and he became a man he got involved in other activities he was not proud of. Among them, his drug use was intertwined with sex with men.

Like hanging out with guys, you know? Doing things in stalls ... you know? Like sexual things; stalls and stuff like that, you know? Like, taking money from people. Stuff like that, you know? It puts you through it where the next day you would wake up and say "oh, man I don't believe I did that!" You know? Or "what was I doing?" And a lot of days feel like that, the very first day: "what the hell is wrong with you, straighten up!"

His first sexual experience would haunt him and compounded his general embarrassment about the life he was leading.

³ As his narrative approached the present Shaun began to talk about instances of sex with masculine men that were not related to drug use and without the same sense of shame noted above. The mere fact that he was talking to me so openly denotes that he had grown more comfortable about his sexual proclivities for men. Still he favored a discrete approach to his sexuality.

Maybe that was why Shaun cherished the memories of Joan, the woman he married. Even though he had had many relationships with girls, his marriage had been the most significant. They met in a car of the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR). He was selling drugs at the time and was coming back from uptown carrying his merchandise in his pocket.

She was this Italian woman that I met on the LIRR. We had a moving conversation on the train because when I first got in the train she came and she didn't seat across from me but she came and sat next to me... and she came and sat right next to me, and we just started talking. The chemistry between us was great.

Shaun was very attracted to Joan. On the day we met he still carried a picture of her in his wallet. The problem was she was married. She and her husband stayed together for the sake of their daughter even though the relationship was dead. Still, before she got off the train Joan gave him his work phone number and he called her the very next day.

Joan was off work sometimes on Fridays, so they met in the city and they went to the Statue of Liberty. It was the first time Shaun had been there since he had come to New York City in 1977. They had a great day. They began to talk on the phone more often and soon he was calling her home.

There were times when I called her home and her husband was sitting right across from her and we would talk for hours with each other. We would talk like she would talk to one of her girlfriends, you know. We would talk for hours like that when he's sitting right there. That's how much attention he pays to her, you know.

Eventually, on one of those Fridays they went to hotel on 43rd Street. *We had a wonderful time. It was a while for her so she really got a lot out, you know.* After that, and much to Shaun's surprise, Joan started to say that she was falling in love with him.

She was fun and we had a lot in common, you know. She started telling me

"I love you, I'm falling in love with you" and I'm like "yeah, I like you very much," you know.

In recounting this Shaun said that he was just beginning to have those feeling for her; that he was simply a couple of steps behind Joan in reaching the same emotion. But at that point he was just very attracted to her and "liked her." His shock was only going to increase shortly after when Joan told Shaun that she wanted to end her marriage. Afraid that he had caused the collapse of a relationship and I guess, that he was going to get trapped in its debris, he asked for reassurance that he had not triggered her actions. And Joan in a demonstration of tactical sensitivity said no, that *it was coming, anyway.*

It came a day when I spoke to her she said to me "Shaun, you wouldn't believe what I did." "What, what you did?" She said, "I told my husband I wasn't in love with him no more, I was in love with somebody else" and she wanted a divorce and she kicked him out. I'm like, "what!" you know? I'm like "I hope I didn't cause all of this." Because the feelings that I had for her wasn't that strong, you know. So she said "no, but it was coming anyway" you know what I'm saying?

Asking for a divorce was easy to do but going through with it proved to be difficult and painful. In revealing to her family that she was divorcing her husband, Joan had to disclose that there was another man in her life. That would have been different if that other man was not Shaun, but he was, and he was black. Racism unleashed opposition from her family instead of support. And according to Shaun, his race was what drove her husband to battle successfully for the custody of their daughter. Joan had proven her integrity and her love for Shaun. She not only had ended her marriage but also had antagonized her family and lost guardianship of her child and Shaun was at the center of all of it.

...and even though we had so much problems, so much... and I'm talking about problems, family problems we still made it through, you know? So I

said: "I tell you what. Let's get married." Because I felt that a chick going through all that for me and I went through all that with her, you know what I'm saying, we deserved each other. We got married. We had a wonderful honeymoon in Jamaica, you know... Now you making me [feel melancholic about] her. Now you making me [feel melancholic].

Their marriage did not last long. Shaun got overly confident of her feelings for him. He would lie that he was hanging out with his brother or at his mother's and began to cheat on her. Then he was caught selling drugs and was sent upstate to jail. That did not help either. Ultimately, he lays blame on himself.

You know what it was I took her kindness for weakness because I felt that she had loved me so much that nothing could go wrong. I mean, I could mess up and still wouldn't go wrong, you know?

On the afternoon that we spoke about Joan, Shaun not only had a picture of one of her visits to him in jail, but he still had a place for her in his heart. He had spoken to her that morning. She told him that she was seeing another man. Shaun did not want to interfere with that. He could see that Joan was not in love with him anymore but he had not been able to stop loving her.

All the same feeling that I got for her is still there. It won't go nowhere, you know? It just won't leave me, man! It won't leave.

It is hard to know what make people fall in love for each other or why, even once it is clear that that love is no longer corresponded, we cling fiercely to the emotions that a person spawned in us as if it were the last bit of them that we still have. But it is less difficult to see that sexual and emotional relationships restore our confidence in ourselves. They become a proof that we are sexy and lovable; that we deserve to be admired and cherished; that we are important, not only to ourselves but to somebody else. Shaun did not fool himself. He took no pride on his drug use and sales, his times in jail,

his living in a homeless shelter for three years at the time of our conversation. After listening to Shaun recount with regret the story of his marriage to Joan, I had to conclude that for a homeless man, having gained the appreciation of a brave woman like Joan was a reminder that he was worth something more than living in a warehouse among the discards of society. I had to infer that his marriage to Joan had been the closest to heterosexual happiness he had ever been and thus, the closest to dignity. For a homeless man, that had to count for something.

She sure made a difference in my life. She made a very big difference in my life. The confidence that I had, was gone you know? She helped me build up my self esteem. So she was very important in my life. At one point I was, I was... I was useless to myself, you know? And she brought that back to me. She brought that back to me. If I had a chance to make it all over again with her I would do it all over with her, but different this time, yes. I wouldn't mess it up at all.

No one can tell if Shaun would not make the same mistakes if he was given a second chance. It is easier to look at times past and, seen the errors committed, to promise to do better than to recognize the imperfections of today. Whether next time Shaun would succeed or not at being a better husband, that afternoon's conversation showed the importance that the memory of love can have when everything else has gone wrong.

The narratives of these four homeless men show evidence of the *pathologies* that are associated with homelessness in individual-centered causality theories: substance use, crime, mental illness. Their behavioral profiles would find niches in the statistics put together to demonstrate personal responsibility for a social problem, perhaps making a detailed account of their tribulations unnecessarily sentimental. Yet, without their list of regrets, disappointments, failed efforts to overcome their weaknesses, embarrassments,

hopes, and brief moments of happiness, the ruthlessness of the stereotypes of the homeless would dominate our perception of their lives.

None of these men were altar boys, although they may have dreamt that their children could be. They may have been morally flawed, but those imperfections were not that uncommon. It was their poverty that magnified their individual failings. Had they not been poor, their substance use or their possible mental illnesses would have been dealt with more effectively and their criminal instances probably unnecessary. Their first-person descriptions flesh out the statistical profiles and turn them into the tragic result of poverty in regular people that deserved better chances.

Probably as an artifact of my line of questioning, sexuality emerged at the center of their lives in our conversations. With the exception of Doug, sex seemed more connected to the material conditions of their existence than to their sense of personhood. Although all four had exchanged sex for money, only Miguel Ángel had engaged methodically in sexual work. For the other three, their sexual labor seemed to be the only labor they had an opportunity to sell, and that, sometimes in exchange for a comfortable bed or just companionship and understanding. Their sexual identity was not defined by the terms commonly used in the *mainstream*: gay, heterosexual, etc. Doug, in talking about us, said “HH...,” looked at me, and completed the word “Gay,” conveying he thought I would not understand or approve of “Homo.” Miguel Ángel made a great effort to describe his sexual interests as disconnected of his sexual behavior and asserted himself a “man” (“hombre”). Shaun, after some thinking, uttered *bisexual*.

It is very possible that they were not familiar or comfortable with the categories of sexology, or those emerging from gay communities, which have attained comparable

legitimacy. I reckon it would feel strange to follow the words “I am” with a term one does not use regularly, which meaning one is not familiar with, or does not know. If speaking with authority about personal identity requires certain level of education it may imply that having that type of identity, or the words used to qualify it, are not universal. It may be that the conceptualization of that identity is linked to a specific social condition (middle-class, in this case) that limits its translation to the signifiers of other social reality (poor, people of color).

Regardless of the certainty with which these men spoke of their sexual preferences, one commonality was evident: its fluidity. All four men had had sex with men and women despite their avowed predilection for one or the other. The most remarkable case is Doug’s, whose identification as a “Homo” implied a high social and psychological investment in the actualization of his sexual interests. Although the most difficult steps of his sexual life were in his past, the last word about it had not been said. While his romance and sexual activity with Anita did not change his overarching interest in men, the fact that he did not rule out sex with women and that she was able to arouse him, speaks of psychological and physiological malleability.

For the other men also, sexuality was not a closed subject. But their path from the norm toward stigmatized sex was presumably harder than Doug’s. Yet, Miguel Ángel and Slim did not think that their sexual activity with men affected their normative identities. If they had a sexual identity, it was located in a deeper, more genuine place of their beings, disconnected from their actual behavior. Obviously they did not know that feelings and action were supposed to be organized along the lines of *one* sexual identity. And neither of them expressed signs of the proverbial *macho* personality that combines

sex with men with the denigration of the men they had sex with: both had accomplished considerable emotional intimacy with *self-confessed* homosexuals and they shared this with me because neither had problems talking about it.

The idea that their sexuality was not linked in essential or final ways to their self-understanding seems supported by the fluidity of their sexual activity. Miguel Ángel, Doug, and Slim had clear notions of their sexual interests but those notions did not prevent them from engaging in types of sex they were less interested in.⁴ This questions the reputed centrality of sexual identity for all contemporary individuals, suggesting that level and type of education, as well as social origins, may influence the relevance of the congruence of sexual identity and activity.

The significance of emotional relations in the lives of these four men is evident. Whether as romantic liaisons or friendships, love in any of its forms, had a healing effect on them. It seemed that it provided them with a confirmation of their existence that countered the alienation of homelessness. It was not only that they existed but they were also worth the attention and interest of another person. Slim put it well: *When you ain't nobody, believe me, that becomes something very important*. These relationships lifted them from the condition of *marginal social refuse* and dropped them among the happily loved. When it is clear that society does not think you deserve a roof and a job, finding someone who thinks you deserve their appreciation returns you to the world of the socially alive.

⁴ McLelland (2000) cites Lunsing's (1997:284) assertion that for the Japanese, being part of a child rearing family and not sexuality, is the most important aspect of personhood. This leads many gay men and lesbians to retain hopes of forming that type of unit.

In this chapter I took a closer look into the intimate lives of homeless men by means of four first person accounts. Their narratives, in reporting on their love affairs and disappointments, regrets, and hopes, provide a corrective to the more common descriptions of homeless men drug use, illegal endeavors, and manipulation of relationships, all of which they also engage in. Moreover, they named their sexual identities with words not used for that purpose by sexology or the gay community. Even their understanding of sexual identity was at variance with the general understanding of the subject. Their sexual activities did not seem restricted to their sexual identities, but exceed them. It was a topic open to reappraisal, and they showed considerable *sexual fluidity*. Finally, love in any of its forms, as sexual or romantic liaisons, or friendships, had a healing effect on them and their self-esteem.

In the following pages we will encounter again Miguel Ángel and Shaun and will meet other men. I will use their stories to illustrate other issues, but the peculiar relation of sexual identity and selfhood, the sexual fluidity of the men, and the redeeming qualities of love for them, while not highlighted, will be evident.

The next chapter regards the ethics of the poor. From the point of view of the state in the case welfare, or private donors when we talk about charity, it is important that receivers conform to a specific code of morals. This code has varied greatly in the course of history, but whether it is more or less stringent it seems evident that a look the principles of the poor will be attached to the help they might receive. What is the root of this preoccupation? Are the poor more prone to crime, dissipation, and manipulation? I try to answer these questions by reviewing three social scientists. Additionally, I examine the narratives of five of my informants to see the context of their ethical breaches and

measure the depth and extension of their lapses.

Chapter Seven

The Intimate Lives of Homeless Men Who Have Sex with Men, II

The Morality of the Poor

I will show in this chapter how some commentators and social scientists characterize the sexuality of the poor as primitive and animalistic, and their affective relationships as bogus, a mere utilitarian performance. I will contrast these depictions with narratives from my fieldwork that show the complexities and contradictions of love and sexual desire among some of the men I met. I will conclude that poverty has a pronounced impact on poor people's emotional and sexual lives, making the former more fragile and the latter more cynical. Yet the poor, like the rest of us, always aim at achieving meaningful sexual and emotional companionship that can enhance the joys and soothe the pains of life.

The Heirs of the *Culture of Poverty*

During the last four decades the sustained social policy debates about the nature of poverty have provided the context for the contemporary depictions of the moral problems of poverty and specifically sexuality. Although today there is an attempt at scientific rigor and less overt religious moralizing, stereotyped representations of the poor continue to hold sway in the rhetoric of social science. We still find the alienating gaze of the missionary, which political scientist Edward Banfield represents well. In *The Unheavenly City Revisited*, he wrote about the "lower-class" male:

"His bodily needs (specially from sex) and his taste for 'action' take

precedence over everything else--and certainly over his work routine."
(1974:61)

Reading this statement in the early years of the twenty first century, it seems almost unfair to focus on such a sample of naked and profound prejudice. We are tempted to let it go, in a magnanimous move and rather concentrate on more sophisticated indictments of the morality of the poor. But, in light of the appreciative reappraisal of his work brought about by his death on 1999, those of us who are invested in conveying corrective representations of the underprivileged cannot afford to take the high road. The crass association of sexuality with work habits is emblematic of widespread beliefs that, while more complex now, have not disappeared, and demand our attention.

What were the "bodily needs" Bandfield did not think should take priority over work? In order to object to their being prioritized, he was clearly talking about a bodily need historically construed as "superfluous": sex. To say that sex in the *lower-class male* take precedence *over everything else* is to place his sexual desire within the instinctual realm, unmediated by intellect, making him thus, less than human and the carrier of an animalistic quality. We do not know how Mr. Bandfield knew this, whether he had the ability to know people's motivations, or whether he had conducted a quantitative study on needs and tastes and their influence on the work routines of the extremely poor. It appears that he collected widespread middle class prejudices about the poor and, by including them in a book, gave them legitimacy.

Although he finds fault in the male, he does not exonerate the female:

"The woman who heads [the lower-class household] is likely to have a succession of males who contribute intermittently to its support but take little or no part in rearing the children." (62)

The presence of the male in the household is quickly tainted with promiscuity: "a succession" The contributions these men make to the household economy are downgraded: "intermittently." Apparently she emasculates her mates, or they are not masculine enough to do what men do best: impart discipline. In this theory testosterone seems to be the only source of restraining power and men their exclusive producers. These men refuse to be fathers and these women cannot impart control over their children. The possibility that mothers insist on being the only source of education to their children because they do not completely trust such a delicate task to a "succession" of companions does not occur to Banfield.

George Gilder elaborates in more detail the mystification of sexuality. Whereas Banfield believes that present time orientation is central to lower-class culture and psychology, Gilder thinks that the compound family/sexuality are at the center of the pathologies of the poor:

"The lives of the poor, all too often, are governed by rhythms of tension and release that characterize the sexual experience of young single men. Because female sexuality, as it evolved over the millennia, is psychologically rooted in the bearing and nurturing of children, women have long horizons within their very bodies, glimpses of eternity within their wombs." (1989:53)

Obviously he has a more profound view of the relationship of sexuality and class. It ties reproductive biology and sexual dimorphism to an epistemology of life and its motivations. It seems that, for Gilder biology is destiny, but amazingly this only applies to the poor. It might be that the poor do not have the same level of evolution of the rest of society. For some strange reason they got behind and culture does not mediate their more primal instincts. How can he prove that the same patterns do not exist in other social strata? Why testes do not have within themselves glimpses of eternity? Like in Banfield the hard data is missing, and sexist assumptions about the nature and differences between

men and women can be taken on face value. He carries on:

"When marriages fail, the man often returns to the more primitive rhythms of singleness." (Ibid)

Back to evolution, but in this case with an interesting twist: devolution. The poor male presents an attribute never before documented: he undoes millennia of evolution and returns to more primitive patterns. Once he has specialized he loses his specialization, not by replacing it with a more sophisticated adaptation, but by returning to simpler configurations. Like if the nation state was to transform itself back to bands of hunter-gatherers.

Interestingly in the following passage, the pathology producing female-headed household cedes its central place as the *key* to poverty to the unattached male:

"The key to the intractable poverty of the hard core American poor is the dominance of single and separated men in poor communities... It is familial anarchy among the concentrated poor of the inner city, in which flamboyant and impulsive youths rather than responsible men provide the themes of aspiration." (53-54)

It is not clear how single and separated men provide the themes of aspiration. How do they get the young kids to think, "When I grow up I want to be divorced like my uncle" if they have abdicated all household involvement? Assertions like the one above overstate the importance of "role models" in the development of personality and in the shaping of destiny.

There is truth to the assumption that the examples provided to the young will have an impact in their adult lives but there are nuances to this influence. For one, the model needs not be of the same gender than the child. The theories described here assume that women are incapable of providing good examples because the major culprits among the

lower class are young males. In this model gender differences weigh more than day to day coexistence. Sons cannot look up to their mothers, and just a glimpse at the guy in the corner condemns them to life at the margins.

Another problem is the measure of success. For the poor success may mean just to be employed and be able to feed a family, get a college education, or stay out of jail. These standards clearly do not apply to the middle class for whom employment and university attendance are granted. These theories do not explain how "good" parents can beget "bad" children and vice versa; instead they place the bulk of the guilt on families and family dynamics.

Gilder's estrangement from the ways of the poor is apparent when he affirms,

"...A very fundamental way of defining the stagnant lower classes is by its lack of family structure." (54)

His attempts to force the kinship characteristics of the poor into a pattern based on the middle class leads him to the only conclusion possible: they do not have family structure. Gilder is not advancing the idea of the negative effects of deficient or ill-formed family structures but of its absence altogether. That can only mean the atomization of all members with none depending on anyone other than himself or herself, regardless of age; a total impossibility as children cannot do alone most things. The standing on an equal plane by all members, equally sharing or abdicating responsibilities and lacking hierarchies would be a horizontal structure. A family where the children have the ultimate authority would have an inverted family structure. One does not need to know much about the poor to know that neither of the above options represents poor families. Since it is known that underprivileged families may be headed by women and can include

members other than parents and children, we have to conclude that the lack of a male head and the presence of grandparents and collateral and fictive kin, is the absence of structure in Gilder's eyes. Gilder writes from the context of the theory of the underclass, which like that of the culture of poverty, finds fault with the passing of patriarchal arrangements among the poor.

Moralizing to the *Underclass*

Like Gilder, Elijah Anderson writes from the point of view of the theory of the underclass,¹ but unlike the former his work is informed by his ethnographic studies of impoverished African-American Philadelphia neighborhoods. The interpretation of his data bears the mark of a social theory of poverty invested in showing pathologies and overstating the relevance of role models in the lives of the poor. Although Anderson took the time and effort implied in "meeting the natives" and he seems aware of how macroeconomics shape and limit the lives and aspirations of individuals, in this book he is more interested in proving the ideological core of the culture of the United States: the personal strength and the moral qualities of poor folk can overcome the most adverse conditions. If they do not triumph over poverty they should only blame themselves for their fate. In his 1999 book *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, Anderson achieves this through methodological and interpretational lapses

¹ I am not going to expand on underclass theory but I will say that its central thrust is that in the last decades the poor have lost the positive influence of the middle classes that have left the inner cities of the United States. Racial or ethnic discrimination is no longer the main reason racial and ethnic minorities are overrepresented among the poor. The concentration of poverty is the reason why certain characteristics considered pathological prevail in poor urban neighborhoods in the eyes of underclass theorists.

that allow him to represent the Black poor as an exotic tribe within urban United States with a culture alien to that of mainstream society.

He dedicates a chapter of this book, *The Mating Game*, to the sexuality of young boys and girls in the inner city. Births out of wedlock are the fact that draws most attention to the heterosexual relational drama of young and poor African Americans. The most common evidence of the moral baseness of young fathers is their determinate avoidance of parental responsibility and their aversion to marriage. According to Anderson, by conquering the hearts and thus the bodies, of girls, inner city boys find respect and increased social standing among their peers. Like other forms of wealth they can never have too much “pussy” and are inclined to add more girls to their lists of conquests. The feigning of emotions and the promise of marriage is their modus operandi. When the girls, initially motivated by romantic middle class notions of love, become pregnant and their state *shows*, the boys cool the relationship and begin their withdrawal. When their disentanglement is successful and evident, the girls try to pin down any boy with fatherly responsibilities. Some boys grow up to try and “pull” a woman with many kids and get a slice of their welfare check.

Although Anderson says that this line of events applies to a segment of inner city young people, the detailed description of the cynical practice of sexual and emotional liaisons, the amount of space and its conceptual centrality in the narrative magnifies its dimensions. He is aware that the lack of employment may be the reason young men try to avoid marriage, but his repeated lamentation of the passing of a time when men were the moral axes of their families and communities (which he exemplifies in the descriptions of the *decent daddy*), convey the message that the problem is the abandonment of ideas of

masculinity that began fading in the sixties.

There are some problematic elements in Anderson's interpretation of his ethnographic data. He uncritically adopts *emic* categories such as the *decent/street* or *ghetto*, dichotomy as tools of analysis. He says that in the inner city, even *decent* people have to be able to act *street* to get respect and survive. This qualification diminishes the heuristic power of the dichotomy, making it more akin to a behavioral continuum in need of further clarification.

Anderson presents first person quotes of *decent* people and others who crossed his path. The quotes on *street* folk are always in the third person leaving one to wonder if the latter is nothing but an ideal type. That he doesn't find anyone to speak from the *street* point of view undermines his argument about the pervasiveness of those behaviors. Had he provided a look at the thoughts and emotions of *street* young men, the caricature of the type would have gained depth and blurred the contrast. It is clear that a great degree of stigma is attached to the *street* label and it is more an accusation than a label. The reader wonders what the benefits are for the labeler of being able to label someone *street*. It seems that it allows for the delimiting a moral territory and for the construction of distinction in the form of a degree of dignity, so elusive for those who have to live in poverty, but this is never spelled out.

"The overwhelming majority of families in the inner-city community try to approximate the *decent*-family model, but many others clearly represent the decent families' worst fear," (45) says Anderson. Do those who "represent the decent families' worst fear" try to approximate or at least think of themselves as *decent*? Answering this question would give us a hint of whether inner-city dwellers retain configurations of the

middle-class values that supposedly left with the middle-classes.

The insistence on the deleterious effects of the lack of middle-class values implies that there are no positive working class values. Although Anderson provides a plethora of examples of the efforts of working-class inner-city residents to provide for their families and raise their children well, their lives do not seem to provide effective role models. This probes the relative power of role modeling in the face of the lack of jobs that would allow young people to legally eke out a decent living for themselves and their prospective families. Anderson acknowledges the negative effects of economic restructuring on the job market in connection to the unwillingness of young men to “*play house*,” to commit legally or otherwise, to a woman and raise a family together. This implies their knowledge that there are not many lawful sources of income that could allow them to be heads of household. To them the author contrasts the example of “old heads” and “decent daddies,” men who, at times of economic expansion, had two or three jobs or worked in Philadelphia area factories that are now closed. Yet the decline of the United States economy is an element of the realities of inner-city youth excluded from the analysis remaining responsible for extracting a legal living out of thin air.

Anderson’s use of the term *traditional values* is under-qualified and presented in an unproblematic positive light. The reader wonders whether the author refers to African-American or European-American *traditions*, and if it is *tradition* as it was construed in the nineteenth century, at the beginning or in mid twentieth Century. He evidently knows what *tradition* he is referring to, but it is difficult to think of a *tradition* that deserves unquestioned emulation. I opt to believe that his definition of *tradition* is similar to that of *traditional family values* as represented by contemporary United States social

conservatives, itself a mythical construct. *Tradition* discourages unmarried women from becoming pregnant but do its efforts to contain births out of wedlock support the use of contemporary and age-old methods to prevent or terminate unwanted pregnancies? *Traditionally*, African-American women have had to work outside the home, yet the idea that women can be something other than mothers and have careers is rather *non-traditional*. So we are pressed to ask what *tradition* Anderson is talking about.

In a patriarchal society like the United States' men are encouraged to be prolific fathers. Thus, the masculinity of inner-city boys, maybe at variance with mainstream society (read white middle-class) in matters of *degree*, not of *kind*. In the *tradition* Anderson longs for, the *man of the house* was its undisputable ruler. The wife "[knew] her place, which [was] taking care of the house and preparing food to his satisfaction." In public she did not talk much or "out of turn." "Violations of such rules reflect[ed] poorly on him, suggesting disrespect in front of his friends" (183). This does not seem very different from what he reports is the practice of the contemporary young man who "to prove his dominance unequivocally, may attempt to 'brake her down' in front of her friends and his, 'showing the world who's boss'" (154).

What is missing from the three of these descriptions of the lives of the poor is the emotional dimension. These portraits of the poor only present the story as it is told by the observer and heard by an ear that knows what it wants to hear. Their visual appearance and context are taken for the ultimate evidence of their motivations in the representation of the poor. A deeper observation may reveal a more complex array of circumstances.

A more complete representation should include the ways in which sexuality,

poverty, and emotion interact with each other and together paint a nuanced picture of the motivations of the poor. This picture would have characteristics that might be common to most of the poor but it also would have very specific and personal traits that account for the individual. These types of generalizations yield a caricature, which does not actually fit anyone living in poverty. The tour bus glance at life in the ghetto could surely reveal men hanging out in the corner, crack heads under the staircase, young women surrounded with children. It does take more insight to know their expectations and frustrations and how they may or may not emerge as pathology.

These authors discuss the lives of the poor without taking into account cultural differences between the middle class, working class and the poor. Their scientific efforts bear the mark of a process of differentiation (distinction) that privileges their class position. They are unaware of their ethnocentrism. They believe that the poor should live in their moral cosmos; that their own lives should be (presumably) the model to follow. Like the *conquistadores* they hope to conquer a world outside of their experience and to transform it to their liking. The indigenous blood overflowing the ditches of the Inca town, are their glorified misperceptions.

Sexual impulses are important for the poor just as much as for the rest of us. Poverty exposes, emphasizes, amplifies, and "cheapens," the sexuality of the poor to the eyes of the social scientist. Their sexual expressions lack the focus on form and rejection of facile gratification that support the claims of "propriety" and sophistication that characterize bourgeois sexuality (Bourdieu 1984). Without these elements, their sexuality appears to the outside bourgeois observer as primal, uncivilized, and raw. But it is actually cooked; broiled in the grill of poverty and its flavor is the object of this work.

Ethnographic Accounts

The three authors discussed above convey an unproblematic profile of the sexual and emotional worldview of the underprivileged man: he is concerned primarily with achieving many sexual conquests while remaining emotionally and legally unattached. He seeks to remain in control of his sexual and emotional² affairs and is ready to desert them as soon as an entanglement beyond his expectation surface, and his motivations to enter and remain in a liaison are first and foremost utilitarian as they mediate his status in the peer group, satisfy his sexual needs, and serve him to extract material benefits.

My data will not completely disprove these assumptions. Poverty discourages a man from taking up responsibilities in which he runs the risk of emerging a failure. Like any other man, or any human being, he prefers to accept challenges in which he can succeed. He then creates rationalizations that allow him to avoid embarrassment before his peer group, which are the embodiment of his self-esteem. The multiple material needs he faces may lead him to attempt to satisfy them by extracting benefits of some sort through the people to which he is emotionally attached. While all of this is true, it is also evident in my data that he fails to remain emotionally distant. Often, he gets involved beyond his original intentions and turns out with his pride, his self-love, his heart, or all three, damaged. Often, his pride prevents him from describing his feelings with so many words but in the narratives below readers will be able to find evidence of it.

² I hesitate to include the word “emotional” in this sentence, as the works reviewed do not address in any way his feelings. I do it because I believe that emotions are implied to different degrees in any sexual relationship.

Wanda

In this story we find an apparent instance of manipulation of feelings for an ulterior motive: housing. The situation crumbled after the narrator committed an act of violence toward member of the household. The violence was the result of a moment's impulse but it was preceded by months of frustration over an unattainable goal. Still his story suggests that our hero had a clear understanding of what would result from his actions. His narrative implies that labeling him *street* or *ghetto*, in Anderson's system, would produce an incomplete appraisal of a more complex, contradictory, and three-dimensional human being.

At the time we met, in the winter of 1999, Wanda (the pseudonym he chose) was a thirty-nine years old rather masculine male, and had been living in Atlantic Avenue shelter for a few months. He described himself as a *butch queen*. Wanda had sold drugs in the past and might have been doing it at the time of our conversation. He had been in jail and talked and acted like a gangster.

I noticed in Wanda the expectation of outwitting the interviewer: not satisfied with the verbal agreement that he was going to get \$10 for an interview that could last between 45 minutes to little more than an hour, he demanded I "*show him the money.*" I flashed the money in my pocket to him and then he wanted to see each bill. I said no. He knew I had money and we either had our interview on those conditions or did not have one at all. I had to show determination to prevent him from snatching the money, and he agreed to my terms. I thought we were off to a bad start but he proceeded to open up his heart as if nothing had happened. Unfortunately, the tape recorder did not work for part of the interview. The following comes from a combination of what was recorded and my

recollections of our conversation.

I met Wanda in August of 1999. He had been homeless on and off since 1988. During his twenties he was married and had children. He began to act on his desire for men when he was twenty-seven and, when his wife found out, the relationship fell apart and he became homeless. Wanda moved into the shelter and sold drugs for a living. While homeless he had two meaningful relationships with men. At the time of our interview Wanda afraid that Judgment Day was coming, was trying to turn around his life and stick to women. When I asked him if he thought that it was possible to change his predilection for men he told me that just a few months back he had been staying with a female lover.

The woman had a gay son that lived with her and whom Wanda secretly admired. Indeed, Wanda was infatuated with the young man. He delighted on his facial features, his skin color, his body, and his manly demeanor. He fantasized about him and wondered what he could do to seduce him. Since the young man was openly gay the issue was not sex. The problem was, not only that he portrayed himself as heterosexual, but also that he was already in a public relationship with the head of the household. He figured the best strategy would be to awaken the sexual desire of the youth. Wanda considered that, since the woman worked during the day and they spent much time together alone in the apartment, the stage was set up to his advantage.

For months he tried different tactics, from intense looks to leading conversations and all failed. Several times he had covered up himself with baby oil and placed an empty bottle of liquor on the coffee table. Stretching out on the sofa with only a little underwear on he had pretended to be totally drunk, but to no avail. The last time, the young man

passed through the living room without even glancing at Wanda. He went to his room, closed the door and lay down to take a nap. Wanda was enraged and frustrated. He went into the room, and covering the mouth of his girlfriend's son, he sat on top of him. Putting a knife to his throat he told him that he was going to fuck Wanda or get cut. The fact that he achieved the unlikely feat of raping a man with his butt while holding him down with a blade goes to show both Wanda's erotic skills and his ability with the knife.

Wanda got what he wanted but he knew that soon the woman would return home. There was no way of hiding from her what had taken place. He hoped the young man would not say anything, but he prepared himself to spend the night at the shelter. When the woman arrived she learned what had happened. All hell broke loose and Wanda's current bout of homelessness began.

I do not know how Wanda felt about his girlfriend, but at the very least, he had been able to play the part of a loving heterosexual male up to the day of the incident. He did not fear his homosexual feelings. For a while he tried to achieve his goal and kept the situation hidden from his girlfriend. Wanda could not have expected that after he put a knife to the throat of his lover's son, his housing situation would not be jeopardized. It is very unlikely that he would have been able to stay at the apartment after raping one member of the household.

Wanda knew that he preferred men to women all along. Probably he nourished his relationship with that woman to stay out of the streets. He might have been less than completely honest in his affair with this woman but his deceit has to be considered in the context of his homelessness. Far from being a justification of his actions, his deception was not motivated by garden-variety greed but for the specific need of one of life's basic

necessities.

Wanda, a man Anderson and his informants would have described as *street*, may have been involved in that relationship with that woman for the roof. He may have resorted to cold emotional deceit in search of material goals, even if essential. Yet his emotional life was not completely clouded by the rule of greed. Wanda was also trying his luck at love, and with mixed results at that. I asked him “have you had any relationships since you left your wife?” And Wanda, the tough guy that twenty minutes earlier tried to cheat me out of my money, grew somber and looking away answered:

Wanda- Yeah, I had a couple but they didn't work out but I'm freelancing right now.

Alfredo- Would you mind talking about them? What didn't work out?

W- Well, some were really for getting high. Some of us had too many attitudes ...life. And some really liked women; some really liked women and, you know, was just using me.

A- And when you say 'some really liked getting high,' what do you mean by that?

W- Crack and drugs and they just wanted to get greedy; take everything. Started stealing and thinking that this is how is supposed to be; this is how one is supposed to be treated. Like that, and that is not how's supposed to work. It's a two way situation.

A- Did you ever have a relationship in which you felt that you were appreciated the same way you appreciated them?

W- Yeah. But then things happened. I met another guy.....

A- This person that you cared about and who cared about you, was someone that you met while you lived in the shelter?

W- One was and one is not. The relationship is over, you know. We are friends. We see each other and 'hi dude, how are you doing' and like that. But that's respect, because we respect each other.

A- The guy that you met at the shelter, how was it having a relationship when you live here and you don't have any privacy.

W- Well we built together (???) We tried and we tried...

A- You built a what?

W- We built awhatever we had we shared and shared a life, whatever. Got clothes, whatever, we shared them, whatever. But then things got rougher and he couldn't hold it down.

A- And if you wanted to have sex where would you go?

W- We would go to a hotel, we would go to hotels.

A- Aha, but that would cost you a lot of money.

W- No, but we were hustling. Like I said, selling drugs and things in the city,³ and like that.

Wanda knew about heartache, and in talking about it his predatory stance crumbled. He showed his vulnerabilities: he got involved thinking he was loved just to find out that *some really liked women and, you know, was just using [him]*. He was even brave enough to acknowledge his own mistakes: *Yeah. But then things happened. I met another guy...* In his trial-and-error attempts at finding companionship, Wanda had even developed a healthy philosophy for dealing with failure:

A- Can you think of problems about been in love and relationships...

W- No, because I let life go on. I don't let it stop me because a relationship is over. I let life go on.

He dealt with pain just like he lived in poverty: taking whatever little was good, not letting frustration and troubles stand in his way. Just like at times he hustled for a living, he fought for happiness. I would say that *let[ting] life go on* was his emotional hustle, if the word *hustle* did not have the negative connotations it does. His strategy for dealing with disappointment was no different from what most healthy human beings do, and what middle class people are told to do in endless psychotherapy sessions.

Wanda's love life, other than taking place in a homeless shelter, was unremarkable; his *street* or *ghetto* ways were no different than anybody else's ways:

A- What it is like to have a bad relationship?

W- Just like a man and a woman. You start fighting and angering each other...

A- Did he ever get physical?

W- And I got just as physical with him. Like I told you I'm still a man regardless of how do I feel. And I mean that. Nobody would take advantage of me.

³ Manhattan. This interview took place outside a Brooklyn shelter.

Unfortunately, that relationships between men often turn violent was not news to me. One did not have to be homeless or a member of the underclass to have gone through that, repeatedly. I also knew that male pride cut in numerous ways, some times ushering dignity, other drawing blood.

In preparation for Judgment Day, Wanda was doing more than trying to straighten up his sexual life. He wanted to cut down his illegal activities, *get his shit together*:

A- If that is the case [that Judgment Day was near], what would it be for you to get your shit together?

W- Well right now I have to take care of my business: get on welfare or something like that. I'm hustling every now and then....odd jobs.....

A- Have you ever hustled for sex, like...

W- No, I never sold my body, I don't get down like that, no.

Yes, Wanda saw in the welfare state his route to eternal life. His hopes that the meager governmental benefits available to him through welfare would allow him to stop selling drugs summarized the quandary on many inner city men. In my readings on the uses and misuses of government income transfers, I had not come across such an argument and wondered how it could have been missed: salvation through welfare. The Christian right surely would support that idea. In the process of discussing his income, Wanda revealed where he drew his moral line: he had never exchanged sex for money; he was not into that.

Shaun

Shaun also had affairs with men. During our second interview, when I asked him about his sexual orientation he said reluctantly that he was bisexual. He was introduced into sex with men when he was fourteen by his maternal uncle. Although after that, sex with men

became a recurrent reality in his life he had a hard time shaking the feeling of impropriety attached to it. Sex with men was often related to his drug use.

Shaun- I've been in and out of the shelter system for a while, for a while. I've been in and out of the shelter system since '96, in and out. I've seen and done since that time, everything that ... because I was also on drugs, still on drugs: crack, crack cocaine. And sometimes I've done things to get drugs that sometimes I'm even ashamed of... You know? A lot of times ... I've done it.

Alfredo- What kind of things?

S- Like hanging out with guys, you know? Doing things in stalls ... you know? Like sexual things; stalls and stuff like that, you know? Like, taking money from people. Stuff like that, you know? It puts you through it where the next day you would wake up and say "oh, man I don't believe I did that!" You know? Or "what was I doing?" And a lot of days feel like that, the very first day: "what the hell is wrong with you, straighten up!"

Like Wanda his ascription of moral qualifications to his behavior was uneven if measured by middle class standards. Although he was the son of a solid working class immigrant family, he did not possess the antibodies against drug use and trafficking that his numerous cousins and siblings had:

Shaun- I'm the only bad apple. When I say bad apple I'm the only one that ever got himself in trouble or do the things that nobody else would do, you know what I'm saying? I'm the bad apple in the family.

In the eyes of Banfield, Gilder, and Anderson, Shaun's mother would be another bad apple. Not only she had three boys and girl by four different men but she had remained resolutely single also, rejecting marriage proposals from her male companions:

Shaun- She was too independent, you know, for a man to come in there "OK, I'm gonna bring the bread and butter." No she wasn't like that at all. Even when she was pregnant with my little brother, they weren't together at the time because they were having some marital problems. He went to live somewhere else and she still was going to work, six months pregnant with my little brother. And she was still going to work because she refused to let anybody else take care of her kids.

Shaun's mother had all sociological predictors against her, yet she succeeded in raising a

family by herself. She moved from Jamaica to New York City alone and she brought all her children to her side, one by one. From the point of view of the anthropologist, the only problem with the succession of men that passed through her life well into her maturity (she must be good looking like her son), is that when Shaun said "my step father" was hard to tell who was he talking about. Her main failure (if indeed was hers) seemed to be Shaun, the bad apple of the family.

For homeless men the most superficial romance offers a much-needed balm to their self-esteem battered by a succession of failures and the companionship that even when fleeting is a step up from the milieu of atomized individuals of the homeless shelter. But soon thereafter the possibility of improving his life conditions by means of that relationship becomes a motivation to remain in it and make it work. Still, this desire is not paramount and may be abandoned if proving too costly for his pride.

Shaun lived for about six months with a male lover, Emery. The friendship began when they met at the Green Point Men Shelter and continued after Emery was given housing in a "city building." Eventually Shaun moved in with him:

Shaun- ...*When he got his room he invited me over there. He had just got his check,⁴ you know, so he said 'come on let's go hang out.'* So I said OK.

⁴ I asked Shaun how Emery qualified for SSI benefits. The following exchange took place:

Shaun- *I mean there was nothing wrong with him but...*

Alfredo- There must be a reason. They don't give away disability.

S- *Anybody can get disability. Believe it or not. Like say for instance, you can go to a doctor and the doctor prescribes that you are mentally ill and you can't work, you know what I'm saying? And I guess that's what he did, but he was getting disability.*

A- But then you have to go to a doctor of the government and he has to take a look at you and say yes he...

S- *Let me tell you, let me tell you: you see, you can go to a doctor and play crazy and he would believe you. You can walk up in his office pulling a piece of rope*

So I went to his house and we had a ringing day, we had a nice day, ha, ha, ha. Yeah, we had a very nice day. 'Stay here with me if you want.' The next time I see him I said ok, because I was having problems at the shelter, you know. I said 'OK, I come stay with you'.

Their affinity was established by the time that Emery got his room and was based on the use of drugs as well as sex. Once Emery got an apartment and had cashed his SSI check he made an offer to Shaun: Let's spend a day together. I have money for drugs, food, cigarettes, and a bed between four walls. It was a rare chance given to Shaun and he took it. They had a *ringing day*.

The next offer Emery made was more long term. Probably because they shared a taste for drugs, perhaps because the sex was good, maybe because Shaun was having "problems" at the shelter, they began to live together. With time Shaun began to care for Emery. He said that Emery had *potential* and that his main draw back was his drug use. In fact, Shaun cared so much for Emery that eventually he began to feel so jealous of his friends that it led to their separation.

Shaun liked the non-confrontational style of Emery. It probably gave him a sense that he was in control of the situation and that made him feel the head (or man) of house. That Emery gave in to Shaun did not mean blind compliance but a different method of doing what he wanted to do. Whether, as a result work or drugs sales, or because he needed to be alone, or because he just felt he had the right to do it, he spent a good

saying "came here boy, come on boy" you know what I'm saying? Like if you had a dog there. Or stand in a corner and talk to yourself and laugh to yourself. I would prescribe that person as crazy.

A- Aha, so you just basically have to do the same...

S- *That's it, you know? It's very easy. Back to Emery...*

New York City shelters have many mentally ill. The only category of single homeless men that can get city housing directly out of a shelter like Emery did, are those with HIV.

amount of time outside of the apartment. He mentioned in passing instances when he had been away for a couple of days, like a fact that did not need to be qualified. At his return he would find that Emery was not home; that is, that he also chose to have a life in the masculine public realm and headed for the street. This would enrage Shaun. He realized that the fact that Emery complied with Shaun's instructions on his presence did not mean that he would not take any opportunity he could grab to exercise his independence. Shaun appraisal of the situation, that Emery was seeing other men, was probably right, and his jealousy began to get out hand.

Shaun- ...So when I came back and I opened up the door he had a chain in the door. So I said "Emery open up the door" so he said "wait a minute" and I wait for about two minutes, you know. When I went in there I smell the odor of sex and the guy he was sitting in the couch and Emery looked all nervous, you know, so I got really upset so I through the guy out and we got in a fight. We was always fighting. I remember one time when I grabbed him by his head and I pushed his head... and I pushed his head inside the sheetrock, you know? There was times when I wouldn't even let him go out of the house, you know? So I scared him to the point that he didn't wanna be around me no more.

Alfredo- It's funny that you say that you did those things because that's not the way you strike me. You don't seem like a violent person.

S- No, no, no, and I'm not. You see, Emery he does some very spiteful things you know what I'm saying? It's just so much you can put up with in a person, you know? It's just so much. Other than that he was alright, you know he was OK.

Shaun accused Emery of been *spiteful* and *sneaky* and commanded him to not let anybody in the apartment and to stay home during his absences.

Shaun- ...after that little incident with that guy I really didn't trust him no more, you know what I'm saying, I actually leave him alone, you know. Sometimes I'd go out and said "listen don't come out of the house; don't let nobody in the house. If I come in the house and I see anybody in there you'll have problems" and I threaten him which I don't really have to and I didn't want to but that's what I had to do, you know.

Once Shaun left Emery locked in. At his return, Emery sneaked outside when Shaun was

in the bathroom and came back with the police. These incidents signaled to Shaun that the relationship had already given them the best it could give. He also knew that his own behavior had contributed to the destruction of what they had. *"I got very possessive, you know, and he got very terrified of me."* He reasoned he was trying to milk an old cow and he went back to the shelter. As in Wanda's case, the shelter was his refuge from marital problems. *"It was so much trouble to go through that with him, you know? So much trouble, you know? I said 'you know what? I'm gonna go.'"*

The relationship that at first sight was an association of convenience developed into something deeper. Chances are that the two men had discovered an affinity that they articulated through the use of drugs and the need of housing. Surely, for Shaun it was easier to say that he was with Emery for the narcotics and the access to privacy than for the sex and personal liking. As time went on, the arguably *ghetto* motivations to take up Emery's housing offer became blurred with Shaun's emotional interest and the wounds on his pride inflicted by Emery's other sexual interests. Shaun realized that the dynamics of the relationship were destroying it. *"I scared him to the point that he didn't wanna be around me no more,"* he said in a moment of self-reckoning when the destructiveness of his passion became evident in his narrative. The situation was a lost battle for both of them. It could only get worse.

One of the unusual aspects of talking to Shaun about his life's ups and downs was that he maintained a cool self-critical stand. He only positioned himself as a victim when he remembered what went on with his uncle, and he did that without hiding from me (and thus, himself) his own interest and the rancor that tinged those memories. In talking to him I could challenge him to tell me parts of the story that showed him in a different light

and trust that, if my challenge had any merit, he would agree and expand on it. If it did not he would just say so without defensiveness. This can be seen in our exchanges when I pointed out that I did not believe that Emery was the only one prone to sexual adventure:

Shaun- ...*Because he was, he was, he was... to me he was kind of weak to the flesh. You know? Weak to the flesh, you know? So he would try to sneak around...*

Alfredo- Are you gonna tell me that you didn't fool around when you were with him?

S- *Yes, I did. Yes, I did. I'm not gonna lie to you. Yes, I did. Because there was a lesbian living downstairs named Charlotte...*

And he went on to tell me how he had sex with one of Emery's friends. He had made unsuccessful advances to her in the past, and one afternoon when she and her girlfriend had argued, Shaun got what he had wanted for a long time. Shaun's infidelity was so close to home that they had to hurry up. If Emery came home and did not find him in the apartment, he would surely come downstairs to hang out with her and would see what they had been up to. Again, I tested his lack of self-righteousness:

Shaun- ...*Like I said I was dying to get this girl because she had a body on her. So when I did get it I said "OK," you know? And Emery didn't find out about that you know...?*

Alfredo- So, the only difference between him and you is that you found out.

S- *Exactly, exactly, and since he didn't found out I made a big deal out of it, you know? I made a very big deal out of it, you know?*

Honesty with oneself has to count for something. There was something admirable in a man like Shaun, who had lived his youth using and selling illegal substances, manipulating his nimble sexuality for ulterior and overt motives, to be able to look in the mirror my tape recorder offered him and, without sentimentalism or making excuses, accept the image in it. I would argue that there is more to respect in men like him than in

those invested in the praise of ill defined *family, traditional, or middle class values*, while casting a blind eye to their sanctimonious, judgmental, repressive, and hypocritical facets.

Daniel

I have shown some ways in which my informants manipulated the emotional and the material worlds to their advantage. At times the advantage they sought was housing, like in the case of Wanda. Other times the advantage they hoped to extract of a relationship unexpectedly took the shape of an affection that brought up a passion they could not control as Shaun and Emery's case shows. Still, some men held on with conviction to the ideal value of romantic love unspoiled by material interest. They aimed at pure feeling even when the evidence before their eyes showed that often, affection was enmeshed with convenience. More than anything, they dreaded to be used and they knew that for men in their circumstances the chances of ending up at either end of the bargain were high.

Daniel was a thirty-three years old gay man who had spent three months at the shelter when I talked to him outside Atlantic Avenue Men's Shelter, in the summer of 1999. I first saw him on the sidewalk at the corner of the shelter, quietly seated on an empty milk crate, surrounded by a group of men who were talking among themselves. That afternoon I was looking for Wanda, so I walked to the end of the block. I returned to the corner without Wanda and asked the group of men if anyone wanted to talk about sex with men. Tall, dark and handsome, Daniel was making my *gaydar*⁵ beep but he did not

⁵ *Gaydar* is a concept of USA gay culture. It is the operationalization of the maxim "*it takes one to know one*." A brief definition of this emic notion could be "the ability to

say anything. Two loud guys came up to me saying they were gay and began to give me explicit details that they thought would corroborate their sexual predilection. I made excuses for not interviewing them.⁶ With the corner of my eye I saw Daniel nodding and told myself “heroine.” A car went by and stopped at the door of the shelter. Everyone ran and crowded around it. When the men came back I went up to Daniel and asked him what that car was. “*Line up*”⁷ he said, and asked me to interview him.

Daniel said he lost his apartment because of a heroine addiction he got from his last lover: a guy who lived in the Polo Grounds Housing Projects not far from Daniel’s lost apartment. He told me he was enrolled in a methadone program and hoped to get back on his feet soon. Like many shelter residents he worked occasionally and that afternoon was waiting with the other men for any contractor that may come looking for occasional workers. He also maintained connections with his old employer and expected to work for him again in the near future. When I asked him about what he looked for in a man, he answered:

Daniel- ...*As long as you're gay and fair we can get along. That's all I worry about. And if you're working. If you are not working we can't get along. I'll spend some money on you but then after a while, after a while, that's too much, that's too much, that's too much.*

recognize oneself in others and through this recognition, make an *a priori* assessment about the sexual orientation of the observed. While my *gaydar* has been on and off out of order, putting me in many awkward situations, I did heed to the beeping elicited by Daniel and it was a correct evaluation.

⁶ I did not want to interview them because I did not trust their openness, their loudness, and their readiness to give details most men have a hard time talking about even in a low voice. They also wanted to be interviewed together something that I would not do even if I believe they were having sex with men.

⁷ A police car seeking men to stand up in a “line up” in exchange of money.

Unlike the common stereotypes that depict the homeless as lazy and not willing to work, Daniel saw in the possibility of joining again the work force the exit to all his troubles. Work, not only would rescue him from his present difficulties, but holding a job was a necessary prerequisite he demanded of any potential companions, the ticket for getting in his heart, and his bed--when he had one.

Daniel had come to the shelter with standards that were probably formed in the poverty-stricken neighborhoods where he grew up and lived. He knew people piggy-bagged on each other before falling to the bottom.

Daniel- Oh, man! When I first became homeless I had my friends who don't know that I'm gay. Well, one do; one know. But uh, they helped me a little bit. They got me more odd jobs, moving people and stuff. Well, then the jobs stopped. I was homeless, I had no money. That's where you go before they send me here. And then you know I come here and stand in the corner. Every once in a while, get a job; an odd job here and there.

He felt very responsible for his fate. *"I put it to my nose. I put it to my nose myself, you know?"* he said about his drug use.

He still had enough idealism and pride to try to keep his housing and his love life in separate compartments. Wanda and Shaun knew that homelessness can be resilient and took the compromised road. On the other hand, Daniel was so concerned the relationships he was involved in were symmetrical that he had refused an invitation to live with someone he was seeing.

About a month before our conversation he saw by chance a man he knew from the Bronx. He lived near his old job. Although they used to talk and hang out, they had never discussed their sexual preferences. When Daniel saw him again after a while of being out of touch, they went to the movies together and in a conversation the guy told Daniel he

was gay and they began to see each other regularly. Daniel did not keep his living in a shelter from his friend and he repeatedly asked Daniel to move in with him. He refused every time. Daniel felt he had to take care of his problems before he moved in with his new boyfriend.

Daniel- ...Yes, yes. He got a two-bedroom apartment, you know? So like I said, I'm not stable. I gotta get myself stable first. When I get myself stable we can talk about myself moving in with you or you moving in with me or whatever the case may be; but just let me get myself together first.

Daniel was in a juncture not uncommon to many of us. We have emotional needs and material needs and at times, the roads to taking care of them are quite apart. At other times they overlap. A response to a material need may direct us to take a particular direction in emotional terms or vice versa. Most people do not make material or emotional decisions without considering their impact. Daniel's decision required great moral strength. He did not like to live in the shelter, did not like the life that the men living at the shelter lived, but resolved not to rush to take a housing opportunity based on an emotional relationship for fear of negative consequences.

He may have feared that the relationship would not work out and he would end back in the street and heart broken; or that the asymmetry of resources available to him and his friend may poison a relationship that he valued. Maybe he felt that just as he required gainful employment from a potential lover he should place the same demand on himself as prerequisite to enter a relationship; or seeing himself addicted and homeless Daniel doubted his right to love and companionship. It also could be that, due to his recent first admission to a shelter for the homeless, Daniel underestimated the difficulties of finding regular housing and still held hopes of quickly getting back to the

“community.”⁸

The description of Daniel’s apparent ethical decision to turned down his friend’s offer to move in with him has to be weighted along with the times when he accepted money in exchange of a sex act.

Alfredo- Have you ever had to exchange sex for money?

Daniel- *Maybe I’d say three times, yeah, three times. But they came and asked me for it, they ask for it. I was surprised at that too, because they asked me.*

A- What surprised you about it?

Da- *Well, I had them tell me what they was gonna give me. Twenty dollars is all got. That’s all, twenty bucks. Like, the last guy he was mad weird. All he wanted me to do was pull my pants down for him to look at me! I was like, ha, ha, ha; oh shit! Alright! He was weird. He was mad weird, and then he gave me forty dollars for that. We had made a deal for twenty he gave me forty for it... I was surprised for that.*

.....

A- Where did you meet him?

Da- *I was, I was walking down the street and he pulled up in the car and I was sitting in the car. All he wanted me to do was sit there in the car with my pants down, that’s it. When he gave me the money I got out and left. He pulled off and I ain’t see him no more.*

A- And the other times that you did that, where did you meet the people that you did it with?

Da- *Uhm, the other times I did it I was in a bar in the Village and... I was in two different bars in the Village, the last two guys; I only did that three times, though.*

A- You were there because you needed the money or... How did it just happen?

Da- *Yeah, yeah, I did it because I needed the money. Like, the first time I did it, I spent all my money. I was out there hanging out and getting drunk and stuff and I had spent all my money, and I had no way home, to get back on the train and I didn’t want to hop the train. And then, you know, I got lucky somebody came... I got the money from them and went home. But they approached me, they approached me, I ain’t approached them.*

Considering these instances of commercial sex in Daniel’s life gives a more complete

⁸ The "community" is an expression used by service providers for the homeless to refer to the population that remains housed. Finding a place where to live is referred to as "returning to the community."

portrayal of his predicament. His financial situation did not allow him to skip an offer of money for sex. Although he would not move in with his friend until he dealt with his personal issues, he was not beyond a more clear-cut exchange. This is not to say that Daniel did not recognize the stigma and moral assumptions attached to sex work in contemporary US society, but that the sense of right and wrong that impeded him from mixing emotion and convenience did not preclude him from accepting money for sexual favors. All aspects of his sexual life have to be taken into account lest we rush to place Daniel in Anderson's informants' *decent* category. In looking at the moral quandaries of the three men described, it seems that the morality, whose disappearance mourns poverty theorists, is to some extent, a privilege money can access.

One of the most important lessons I learned when I came to New York City was that one does not give up an apartment unless it is unaffordable or strictly necessary. The state of the real estate market of the metropolitan area in the last two decades has been such that New Yorkers have developed apartment hunting into an art form: a source of constant worry, analysis, and perfecting attempts. Even when one had convenient housing there continues to be concern about a larger space, a safer neighborhood, a less deteriorated building, a more sympathetic landlord or superintendent, a lower rent. Most working class New York tenants are aware of the limitations of their housing arrangements and try to improve them if they can. Improvement implies spending money in real estate fees or moving expenses, so it requires careful planning, savings, time, perseverance, and good luck. So much is involved in acquiring and maintaining housing in New York City that these matters are taken very seriously. People measure carefully the repercussions of their

acts on their housing stability. The high cost and the scarcity of decent residential space have a great weight when people make decisions about their most intimate affairs. It is easy and convenient for people romantically involved to decide to move in together and save their rent money. Couples going through difficulties may decide to work them out because of the logistic, financial, and residential issues of splitting up. Others for whom there is no hope to rescue their relationship may agree to confront the multiple challenges of living as roommates until one of them can move out. Independent in New York City is quite expensive and most people have to sacrifice space, safety, convenience, and comfort in exchange of affordable rent, the deciding factor between having a home and being homelessness.

Pablo

The housing situation makes New Yorkers keenly aware of the value that space and privacy have and that they can be used as cash. The characteristics of the stories of Wanda, Shaun and Daniel are not exclusive of homeless people, but poverty is what put the personal lives of the poor under the critical scrutiny of the social scientist. Wanda, Shaun and Daniel were either on welfare or trying to obtain welfare benefits when I talked to them, yet their lives and the lives of others like them, were vulnerable to institutional prying because they were potential recipients of government transfers.

I met Pablo in 1993. He is a handsome Peruvian gay man living in New York City. Although he is trained as a lawyer in his native country, in New York he lived as an undocumented immigrant for the first years of his stay. When I met him, he was living with his equally attractive Puerto Rican boyfriend in an apartment in *Queens*. Eventually,

tensions within the relationship emerged. Both *pretty boys* needed reminders from other men of their physical attractiveness. They cruised Jackson Heights' bars together arguing if one, the other, or both succeeded to get the attention of a third or fourth man. These tensions ushered their brake up and both moved out of the apartment they shared as neither of them could pay the rent alone.

Pablo moved in with Richard, a wealthy man who lived in a spacious, art filled apartment in downtown Manhattan. He was never precise about the nature of their relationship but a few things were clear: Pablo used the apartment as if it was his and did not pay rent; together they went to various Caribbean resorts on vacations paid for by Richard; during his stay at Richard's, Pablo got a new boyfriend, who made him very happy. I do not know if Pablo had his own room. I believe he mentioned it once but whenever I visited we hung out in the kitchen or the living room. It is clear to me that with Pablo's salary (he got his immigration papers and worked in an HIV service organization) he could not afford to live in that block, or that building. Pablo has lived in that situation for several years now and the arrangement seems to work. It apparently does not interfere with his love life.

Obviously Richard trusts that Pablo would take good care of his valuable possessions and his pets. I believe that Pablo's solid middle class upbringing and education feed that trust. From the beginning I knew that some degree of sexual exchange was involved. I never knew exactly the extent and the nature of those exchanges but at the very least, Pablo's company, good-looks and pleasant demeanor, were part of what the Richard gets in return for free rent in an expensive area.

The Immorality of Need

In the narratives of these four men who engage in sex with other men, we find different kinds of crimes, and ethical lapses or situations that may suggest manipulation of some type. There are drug trafficking, victimless crimes like drug use and sexual work, and the possible utilization of an emotional liaison for ulterior ends. None of these crimes or unethical behaviors should be condoned but we should not take a legalistic or moralistic approach in their examination. We would not be doing anthropology if we neglect to take into account the context of these real or perceived contraventions to delineate the ethical principles of these men.

The framework of their behavior is two fold. One more general are their socioeconomic circumstances: poverty as manifested in their homelessness for all but Pablo, and undocumented immigration for the latter. The other, more particularistic, is the contrast of their contraventions as they stand against each other. This procedure will result in the delineation of the inner consistency of their ethical universes and their coherence with each man's socioeconomic predicament.

As we saw in the last chapter the extreme poverty of these men's lives gave the material circumstances of their existence paramount relevance to them. They stood first and foremost in their consciousness. Whether they thought first about securing a roof or cash for their necessities is unknown to me, but my hunch is that they took every opportunity as it came up, trying take to advantage of all of them. They did not have the luxury of maintaining a hierarchy of needs. Housing was a possibility with every new and pleasurable emotional or sexual relationship. I don't have an answer for the question of where genuine personal interest ended and emotional manipulation began but I'm sure

that even in Pablo's arrangement both were present.

This does not apply to Daniel. His inexperience with extreme poverty made him feel he would be soon out of the shelter and on his own. It also allowed him to keep an order for solving his problems: get drug free, a job, or an apartment first, and then think more seriously about his emotional needs. Pablo was at the opposite end. His education and contacts had kept him housed and employed even when his immigration issues were unsolved. With his days as an undocumented immigrant in the past, his salary allowed him to support himself but not in the manner and the neighborhood he aspired. His particular housing arrangement was a result of his interest in keeping living standards comparable or better than those he had back in Perú.

Wanda and Shaun had sold or were selling drugs. Of the four men, they had been in *the system* the longest and had solved their need for cash by entering the ever expanding illegal trade selling the substances they used. Of them, only Shaun had sought and engaged in legal work. This has to be qualified by noting that his source of work was in the informal economy, that is, his employer did not make the contributions the state required of him. While his work was within the law, his employment was not. Both Wanda and Shaun spoke of "cleaning up their act" meaning for the former, not to sell or use drugs and for the latter and not to use them. Wanda had put in place an ideological scaffolding for his goal (Christianity) and was working on setting up the material one (welfare). Shaun spoke of doing it *cold turkey*.⁹

Wanda may appear as the man with the more questionable morals of the three

⁹ This term of drug users' jargon means to stop using drugs without the help of rehabilitation treatment.

homeless men. Like the other two he used drugs and like Shaun also sold them. His living situation was more clearly manipulative, which was made clear by his rape of his girlfriend's son. Shaun used Emery's interest in him to get away from the shelter and eventually his jealous rages caused him to be violent with him. The regret he felt for his actions toward Emery, like his lament for losing his wife in the last chapter, may account to little, but denote a reflective nature. Wanda did not express anything of this sort, but unlike Shaun and Daniel, he had never exchanged sex for money and exhibited an unmistakable opposition to ever doing it. The lower intensity of Pablo's needs as well as the expression of his *habitus* had kept his housing pact for a long time. His milder needs and his middle class upbringing, allowed him to foster a friendship with Richard without pressure, as if convenience was not part of the deal. Pablo manipulated the situation to put a *better* roof over his head. Although not identical, the difference between his living arrangement and Wanda's and Shaun's could be paralleled to that of a thief who steals to feed his family and a kleptomaniac who does it for the satisfaction of achieving the feat. The key to the sexual conduct of all the men presented here is in the mismatch between the material conditions of their lives and their expectations.

The ethical proscriptions and permissions of these men are complex and a great deal of their complexity grows out of their poverty. They cross back and forth the already foggy and capricious division between *right* and *wrong*. They carry along the motivations of their particular circumstances that explain their *wrongs* and qualify their *rights*. Their narratives neither prove nor disprove theories about the baseness of the morality of the poor but they provide ample examples of how the lack of material resources can mark a person's emotional or sexual relationships.

In this chapter I have critically examined the arguments of three social theorists that implicated the morality of the poor in their social condition as either cause of poverty or as insidious effect of it connected. I have shown that their assumptions do not stand without the support of sexist, racist, or other theories that imply the intrinsic inferiority of the poor. I have done this in the context of a critical examination of the combination of Judeo-Christian ethics with capitalist ideology that have resulted in the strategy of questioning the morality of the poor to avoid the eventuality that charity or welfare could prevent the poor from selling their labor, with negative consequences for the further expansion of capitalism.

I have challenged constructions of the morality of the poor with examples from the lives of four men, three of whom were homeless. My strategy has not been to deny their ethical lapses, but rather to draw a map of their individual ethical configurations in which their slips are contextualized amid their needs, and contrasted to their personal taboos. My goal has been not to depict my informants as unsung heroes but as humans struggling for happiness while living in poverty.

My ethnographic data has shown that my informants did exhibit ethical flaws, in particular the apparent or actual manipulation of emotional relationship for ulterior ends (housing) that compares to the manipulation of love affairs by young inner-city men whose ethics Anderson labels as *ghetto* or *street*. As often as not, the moral breaches of the homeless men were rooted in their material needs and subjection to various types of social injustice. Additionally, none of them showed a pervasive immorality, and all had ethical taboos that delineated the limits of their moral permissiveness. Finally, I

compared my homeless informants to a gay man in a loveless relationship, in which housing and a life he could not afford for himself, was made available to him through an agreement that remained murky to me.

In the next chapter we will focus on masculinity by examining the paradoxical effects of the intersection of homophobia and objectification. Poverty will be again at the center of our discussion, creating the conditions for a renegotiation of masculinity that will invert power relationships between homeless men.

Chapter Eight

The Intimate Lives of Homeless Men Who Have Sex with Men, III

A Dance of Polarities

This chapter deals with the ironic results of the interaction of two pillars of contemporary hegemonic masculinity in an environment characterized by the scarcity of material resources. My argument is that homophobia and sexual objectification, two sides of the patriarchal coin, when enacted by men experiencing poverty are modified considerably. These modified versions produce different effects in the intra-gender relations of extremely poor men, inverting positions of dominance between them, giving power to the devalued masculinities of some homosexual men (*Queens* and *Homos*, specifically) and placing heterosexual men in the position of *ritual women*.

This discussion on gender and sexuality is framed within homelessness, but the traits identified are not exclusive of my informants and the effects cited could theoretically be found elsewhere where gender and socio-economic conditions are similar. Far from trying to describe “sub-cultural” aspects of their lives, I present this data as one instance of the diverse cultural manifestations of gender and sexuality in the United States. The manner in which class, gender, and sexuality structures, mutually define each other’s observable characteristics, is part of the deep socio-cultural structure of this nation and, I suspect, of the Western world.

Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friends

Men’s sexual objectification of women, a fundamental element on their oppression by

men, goes hand in hand with a prohibition on the like objectification of men. The cultural prescription of one and the companionate proscription of the other, are linchpins of the patriarchal gender order by their simultaneous achievement of the domination of women and the establishment and preservation of heterosexuality as the normative form of sexual expression. The existence of the family, in its patriarchal form, is insured by sexual objectification (Carrigan, et al. 2002/1985; Connell 1987).

The taboo on homosexuality is necessary for the maintenance of men's domination of women. Homosexuality opens a possibility for the sexual objectification of men with their inherent loss of power. The oppression of homosexuals is therefore a *sine qua non* condition, which is effected through the perpetuation of widespread irrational fear and hatred of homosexuals (ibid); *the fear that other men would unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and to the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men* (Kimmel 1994:131), i.e. homophobia. Accounts of homophobia describe its expression as men's fear of intimacy with other men, their persistent need to demonstrate and prove their masculinity to other men, loathe of homosexuals, etc.

In the shelter sexual objectification and homophobia often overlapped. The considerable freedom of *Queens* and *Homos* to express their sexual interest and the male training that encouraged them to objectify what they desired, resulted in their objectification of *Guys*. The latter refrained from responding with violence probably as a response to the institutional presence, but also because their poverty led them to interpret objectification as one of the few opportunities to fulfill their multiple financial or material needs. *Guys* acceptance of objectification produced in them a feminizing effect in their relations with *Homos* and *Queens* that inadvertently transformed their autonomy into

dependence. *Homos* and *Queens* also found their stigmatized social position fading and their ability to call the shots increased. The inversion of their social positions gained a larger dimension outside of the shelter, in particular if housing was involved. The paradox consisted in that *Guys* initial intentions to *play* the *Homos* and *Queens* put them in a relation of subordination, infantilization, or feminization. This is a general description of these dynamics. In the examples that follow we will see the manner and the extent to which this happened.

Among the homeless men who were my informants, talk of masculinity and femininity was based on the sensorial markers of gender that in the United States pervade their discussion (i.e. dress, mannerisms, subject of conversation, tone of voice, etc.) Gender was not determined by personality features such as assertiveness, indecision, autonomy, or dependence. For example, a *Queen* could be aggressive, loud, and even violent, but it was the way she wore her hair, the tightness of her jeans, and her mannerisms, what would mark her as rather *feminine*.

On the surface, men's pairings reproduced the composition and balance of power in heterosexual middle class couples: the more masculine male imparted direction and worked, when work was available, and the more feminine male took care of the social reproduction of the couple. But, in an environment characterized by the scarcity of financial assets, the administration of food, clothing, and leisure took surprising weight. *Queens* and *Homos* found themselves in a better position to exert some control on their more masculine mates because of their willingness to place themselves in administrative and gender-marked positions in close proximity to the supplies for the whole shelter

population.

Some aspects of the masculinity of homeless men, subtly undermined their advantageous gender position in relation to *Homos* and *Queens*. The narcissistic character of masculinity (i.e. the belief on the inherent privilege of masculinity) in combination with the (homophobic) devaluation of homosexuals resulted in *Guys* certainty that *Queens* and *Homos* were doubtlessly interested in them. The pairing of this assurance with poverty, urged *Guys* to attempt to extract some kind of material benefit. In the end, this strategy often brought about the loss of the lead more masculine men had over the more feminine ones: a *Guy*, sure that his masculinity was coveted and that, in relationships with *Queens* or *Homos*, goods should flow in his direction, engages them in some way that eventually created his dependence on them and their gifts. He unwittingly had placed himself in a position of questionable masculinity (according current hegemonic standards) or outright conventional femininity, such as the positions of a *gigolo* or *kept boy*.

In the shelter, as in US society at large, more feminine men were thought to crave the masculinity of more masculine men. Admiration did not imply imitation but a desire to possess that masculinity, similar to the way in which some men feel attracted to feminine women. Most *Queens* and *Homos* enacted this craving and took the role of avid observers of *Guys*' masculinity, deploying an objectifying gaze on the more masculine men, not unlike the sexually charged way in which some men look at women in the street. Interestingly, if they were not prevented by their homophobia, most shelter men, basked in this attention, in defiance of proscriptions of currently hegemonic masculinity. Some responded by being flirtatious, playful, or returning the objectifying gaze, and

considered how they could use that admiration in their favor, that is, to their material advantage. Independent of whether or not they felt attracted to their observers, men felt that *Queens* and *Homos* should pay voluntary or involuntary accolade (?) to their masculinity; as an *access fee* of sorts. They approached these admiring men or responded to their advances in hopes of obtaining gifts or at least an opportunity to steal something from them. Knowledge of these intentions prompted Wanda--whom we met in the last chapter--to say:

Wanda- *Well, some were really for getting high ... And some really liked women. Some really liked women and, you know, was just using me.*

Alfredo- And when you say some really liked getting high, what do you mean by that?

W- *Crack and drugs, and they just wanted get greedy. Take everything. Start stealing and thinking that this is how is supposed to be; this is how is supposed to be treated, like that. And that is not how's supposed to work. It's a two way situation.*

Here Wanda shows his awareness that some men who approached him did not do it exclusively for the love, the companionship, or even lust, but in hopes of obtaining in return cash or other goods. Although some men *really liked women*, Wanda did not exclude the possibility of genuine attraction, but even in those cases, attraction might be placed on the back burner in the stove of shelter relationships. The poverty of the men, not their substance use, prompted them to use Wanda. Exceeding the short range of his generosity, some started to steal, confused in their belief that their masculinity warranted Wanda's willingness to pay a fee. The idea that masculinity could be exchanged for things was very much like what made Marilyn Monroe sing, "*Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friends*." Unknowingly, they inverted cultural conventions on gender difference and placed the person with the less valued subject location, i.e. the more feminine man, in the

position of purveyor and protector, motivating Wanda to call on another cultural norm, and admonish: *It's a two way situation.*

Doug corroborated Wanda's assessment:

Alfredo- How was it getting a boyfriend there? I mean, what did it take?
 Doug- *It wasn't very hard because most of these guys came straight from jail; you know what I'm saying? They came straight from jail where they had done a number of years and have been around homosexuals probably out the whole bit, you know? Whether it was two to three years or five to fifteen they been around men all their life, you know? It was just such an attraction; but most of it they was just using them anyway, the Queens. Those guys were just using them to get a new pair of sneakers, you know; or a new outfit or something. There was no really love there, not for all of them. You know what I'm saying? However, I do know that there were a few that still are together but a lot of it was just that you can take care of them, you know?*

And he puts clearly how the *Guy/Queen*, butch/femme, strong/weak, masculine/feminine dichotomies stopped short of applying to the logic of sharing resources: "*a lot of it was just that you can take care of them.*" The independence and autonomy of the masculine partner was shunted aside to give place to a receptive dependency. This reversal implied more of a stretch for *Guys* than for *Queens* or *Homos*. The latter were brought up as men, and carried a stigmatized identity; they were not foreign to engaging in various types of negotiations in exchange for acceptance. *Guys* used the ideological support of the overlapping beliefs that *faggots should pay for their difference* and in *the privilege of masculinity* as cultural resources in sliding comfortably into the role of ritual *pretty-girl-that-expects-to-be-regaled-for-simply-being-who-she-is*.

In the shelter the tension between being a more masculine man and accepting shelter "diamonds" from more feminine men did not have major negative consequences in the lives of *Guys*. Since many saw themselves exploiting the *Queens* and *Homos* or

used the pretext of material interest to hide their emotional or sexual interest, this kind of pairing did not have to be explained away. If they succeeded in keeping their emotions at bay and as long as they were not humiliated at the end of the association, all they had to do if dumped was just brush off the dust, so to speak, and move on. As Wanda and Doug mentioned, *Queens* and *Homos* were aware of the *bartering* intentions of some *Guys*, and they allowed this swapping of attention and/or sex, for goods (and money I presume, although it was never mentioned) to go on until their pockets, their pride, their tolerance, their interest, or a combination of any of them determined the end of the relationship. They would just have to do without whatever they obtained from that *Queen* or *Homo* or get somebody else to supply it.

It was more difficult for *Guys* to remain aloof when these relationships took place outside the shelter and involved housing. Escaping grim shelter or street life was a strong motivation for *Guys* to get involved with *Queens* or *Homos* who had attained housing or were not homeless. Moving in with them alleviated the stress of homelessness and was a source of the dignity they lacked. Sometimes these relationships were predicated solely on housing and other times emotions were an integral part of what was exchanged. Often, in either case, the inclusion of a *conventional dwelling* was an element that tilted the playing field against *Guys*.

It seemed that an apartment, a room, any type of structure for which it could be made a better claim as a home than the shelter, brought up in the masculinity of *Guys* the desire to be the head of the household. As if moving out of the dehumanizing institutional setting into a more usual abode in the company of an individual of lesser masculine standing with whom there was some type of sexual interaction opened their ears to an

ancient calling from their male ancestry urging them to install a patriarchal household with them as *pater familias*. It seemed that the merger of home and mate let them experience a whiff of the squarest dignity that had so eluded them, awakening their desire to contribute to the crafting of bliss by placing themselves at the head. Usually, they were allowed to take up this role although the lease of the apartment and thus the weight of the law were in the hands of the more feminine man. The latter accepted these asymmetrical roles but retained the tacit option to exercise their autonomy if and when they thought necessary. The hold that *Guys* had on the ruling of the household was precarious at best and in moving in with their more feminine partners, they made themselves vulnerable to their assertiveness. Their *gigolo* stance, through which they bartered their *masculine mystique* for material resources, turned to frailty and impotence when the owners or administrators of the resources decided to withhold them. The concentration of power went then from one end of the relational dyad to the other with more dramatic results than at the shelter where both were at the mercy of the state.

Often *Guys* realized they were the underdogs of the contest and fled relationships before their pride was too badly damaged. Their enactment of the role of patriarch in a housing unit where they did not hold the lease did not preclude emotional involvement, and at times in the flight of heart-broken *Guys*, the only thing left to salvage was pride. At other times their insensibility, self-centeredness or drug use, clouded their judgment impeding their perception that they had worn out their welcome and were forcefully expelled in an ultimate assertive act of their more feminine and stigmatized host. While we are not concerned here with the success of *Guys* in keeping the household and/or relationship under their control, it should be noted that they sometimes remained as head

through physical or emotional blackmail.

The following stories illustrate these ideas. They provide nuance and counter the preceding mechanistic words.

Wilfred

I do not want to start writing about Wilfred without saying something about our friendship. His life, personality, and unwavering optimism provided a great deal of the inspiration for engaging in this ethnographic project and writing this dissertation. Wilfred's generosity and openness in talking about his life and the interest he showed in finding out about mine, gave me the hints that would eventually lead to the dialogical approach that I used in collecting the data for this ethnography. Throughout the years that we were in contact, our trading of stories of personal joy and disappointment helped forge between us a compassionate and symmetric connection in which our victories and weaknesses were framed. Considering that initially we only shared our sexual interest in men, and that in most other respects we were quite different, it is no small feat that every tale we told each other triggered in the other a personal response that included descriptions of our most intimate dreams and aspirations.

When I met Wilfred, in February of 1991, at the CSS office of Fort Washington Men's Shelter, he was an ex-resident of Fort Washington Homeless Men Shelter. Like other men, although he had moved out of the shelter and lived in an *unserviced*¹ SRO

¹ An *unserviced* SRO does not have any type of social support for its residents such as caseworkers or social workers. It does not have any requirements for admittance other than the ability to pay the rent. CSS clients had some kind of psychiatric diagnoses or were presumed to qualify for one and were placed in housing with some type of service.

hotel on West 116th Street, he kept coming back to its CSS program.² Wilfred's file in the program mentioned depression, recurrent drug use, and apparent low IQ. His HIV positive seroestatus was also recorded there. Obviously he did not mind the stigma of mental illness attached to CSS clients, or if he did he felt that the safe heaven of the CSS office and the personal relationship he enjoyed with most of the workers was well worth the mark of a presumed psychiatric diagnosis. It could be also that, since he was well integrated to the community of all the shelter residents, he could take advantage of the services and the warm interactions he received from the staff of the program, free of any concerns, for although he had had many problems, he was well liked.

Wilfred was born on the Caribbean island of Saint Croix and had been connected to the shelter for a number of years. He had managed to move out into different SROs on a couple of occasions, but usually problems arose and he left or was thrown out. One reason Wilfred's stays in SROs did not last long was his insistence on maintaining an active sexual life. Visitors are not allowed in this type of housing and he did not feel that all his sexual encounters should take place in parks and other public spaces. He always would find ways to sneak in his sexual partners past the front door. After a few times he would get caught and subsequently evicted. Fortunately for him the shelter's doors remained open when others were closed for him. Maybe his mental illness was his certainty that he deserved privacy and his unyielding hope to find an apartment to live in,

Often, clients that were tired of living in the shelter would find housing for themselves. When they did they went to live with family, friends, or an unserviced SRO.

² Wilfred would say that he continued to participate in the CSS program because he had good relationships with the workers but it is also true that the program fostered a sense of community that while devoid of tension, addressed his concerns without mowing down his dignity.

a hope that he did not fulfill during the years I knew him.

Wilfred was 36 years old and a slim *Homo* about 5'10" tall with a ready and warm smile. His hairline was receding but his jovial personality gave the impression he was much younger. Before we met I had been told about him and his sexual preferences by some of the CSS workers.

A couple of months after we met he was back living at the shelter. His stay had come to a sudden conclusion when the landlady found another man alone in his room. His worker was going to visit the SRO, but she suspected that Wilfred's eviction one week before the end of the month was triggered by his drug use. While it was true that Wilfred was using drugs at the time, the story was a bit more complicated.

Wilfred had been seeing a man who also used drugs. Although he had been able to smuggle him into his room as usual, at the time of his eviction he had lost the privilege to have visitors during daytime hours. The man came by one day when Wilfred was not there. Unable to gain access to his room through the front door, he climbed the fire escape and entered through a window. Why he did that was unclear. He could have been looking for a place to rest, or he may have been trying to take some of Wilfred measly belongings to exchange for drugs. From the legal point of view, by breaking in, the guy was an offender and Wilfred should be considered the victim of his offense. Instead, alerted by neighbors who saw the guy going up the fire escape, the police broke down the door and found the man inside and Wilfred was kicked out of the SRO. He was furious at receiving a punishment when he was actually the victim of the crime.³

³ For another description of Wilfred's eviction from the SRO on 116th Street, see Marcus (1998).

He went to stay with his godmother. Not long after living with her Wilfred returned to the apartment to find it completely empty: no people, no furniture, even the closets had nothing inside. He lived in the streets before going back to the shelter.

Alfredo- But don't you find that staying in the streets is more dangerous than your godmother's empty apartment?

Wilfred- *I can't live alone. I hate loneliness.*

Maybe that was Wilfred's mental illness. If that was the case, it was not listed in the DSM-IVTM⁴ because he did not qualify for SSI. Even his HIV infection did not qualify him for SSI because he was asymptomatic and he had not told his doctor he was living in a shelter. Yet it was ironic that an AIDS diagnosis that, then more than now, implied illness and short-term death, but for Wilfred it was the only feasible way to obtain some type of housing.

Wilfred was making his best attempt yet at staying drug-free when the minimal requisites for the diagnosis of AIDS were modified to include a low t-cell count, even in the absence of other symptoms. The idea was to be prepared to qualify for admittance at the Mount Eden Residence in the Bronx, where a third of the rooms were reserved for people with HIV. After three months of not using drugs and living at the shelter, he applied for a room, went with his worker to an interview, pledged allegiance to the rules of the residence, was accepted, and moved in. Although he had to share bathroom and kitchen and would never adjust to the infantilizing supervision and constant second guessing of the staff, this residence provided the longest housing stability in his recent past. He did not think this was his final stop and kept yearning for a more private arrangement.

⁴ Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

He tried hard to not get thrown out. In spite of the admission requirements the building, like the surrounding area, was drug-infested and the workers of the program scrutinized residents and their rooms for signs of substance use. Wilfred maintained his own drug use under control and kept good relations with his neighbors while avoiding entangling himself in anything that might bring him trouble. As the addiction of his good friend Raul, whom he knew from the shelter, attracted the attention of the staff of the residence, Wilfred was forced to announce publicly his disassociation from him.

Some time after he moved into Mount Eden, Wilfred met a man. He had come to the shelter to visit old friends and was in Riverside Park with one of his *girlfriends* when he struck a conversation with a guy who asked him for a cigarette. The park was one block away from the shelter and residents and other neighborhood men went there looking for sex. Wilfred felt very attracted to this man and it seemed that the feeling was mutual. They agreed to spend some more time together, and agreed on a second date. Wilfred wanted to be in a relationship and was very excited to have met someone he liked who liked him just as much.

In order to allow time for them to get to know each other, Wilfred proposed not to have sex right away. The man, Bob, was happily surprised by the care and dignity that Wilfred showed in dealing with him. He worked as a security guard and understood what Wilfred was going through because he had gone through the same struggle with drugs and shelters. At that time Bob was staying with his brother. He would show his interest by bringing shopping bags packed with groceries to Wilfred's room. Wilfred's measured approach developed into a very romantic relationship. When the time to have sex finally came, it fulfilled Wilfred's every fantasy, and he fell in love. He was very happy and was

prepared to do anything to make this relationship work.

One night in a hotel, Wilfred was giving Bob a back rub when he asked him to "*stick it in.*" Wilfred was very surprised. He thought "*Oh, God! He's a faggot just like me!*" He put on his robe and went to the bathroom to consider what he was going to do next. Wilfred came back a few minutes later and fucked the guy "*to the bone; to the tees; all ten inches!*" They took a shower together and Bob gave Wilfred a blowjob afterwards. He told him "*you can have that anytime you want.*"

Up until that night Wilfred thought he was the *faggot* and Bob was straight; or that Bob was the man and Wilfred the woman. It was Bob's masculinity and Wilfred's lack of it, or femininity what helped one identify the other as potential sex partners and what attracted them to each other on the day first they met. Yet, the predictions on the type of private gender/sexuality that their public gender seemed to warrant were reversed that night. In spite of his initial shock at the sexual role reversal, the fact that Wilfred's interest and affection did not decrease because of it bear witness to the depth that the relationship had reached in a short time.

Muñoz (2002) has documented that Latino bisexual men determine whether they would be receptors or inserters in anal sex based on an assessment of the masculinity of potential sex partners. A man assessed as more masculine gains the privilege of inserting. The two men in question were not Latinos but the principle applied to them as well. My data suggests a caveat to that rule. Just as Wilfred was granted the role of more masculine partner between four walls, my *Queen* and *Homo* informants often reported instances in which their *Guy* partners requested penetration or offered fellatio to them. At first sight this type of role reversal could be interpreted as a covert way of engaging in a particular

stigmatized sexual activity, but the fact that at times *Queens* were asked to put on make up for it, reveals a more complex gendered erotic play. The compliance of *Queens* and *Homos* and their willingness to sustain this sexual activity without letting it affect an ongoing liaison, imply its strength and that the connection between gender and sexuality in which the former determined the latter, for these men, was not an irrevocable constraint. In the minds of some *Queens* and *Homos* gaining the affection of a more masculine man would justify the renegotiation of their sexual practices and alter the interactions their sexual system prescribed.

A couple of months later somebody saw Bob selling drugs. With the argument that he was trying to protect Wilfred's belongings from the crack addicts in the building, he also took a radio and a pile of new clothing supposedly to his aunt's apartment. Wilfred realized that Bob was staying all night in the streets. In the morning he would come by Wilfred's room "*funky, with red eyes, and tired.*" Bob did not show up one day when they were supposed to go to the movies. As Wilfred's trust faded, suspicion of his drug use mounted, and their union started to deteriorate.

A few days after their cancelled movie outing, Bob came to Wilfred's room asking for \$40 that he did not get. Bob became very upset and left only to return one hour later to reiterate his request, now as a demand. Wilfred did not budge and Bob *smacked him in the face*. Before leaving Wilfred's room he grabbed a lamp, obviously to sell it. Wilfred was not only enraged but also profoundly embarrassed. For a week he stayed out of his room to evade questions from the woman who checked periodically that all the furniture was still there. Eventually, Wilfred had to pay the manager of the residence, \$83 for the lamp to prevent getting thrown out.

Wilfred was devastated by the incident. On one hand, it was now clear that the love and companionship he had enjoyed with Bob was over. Again he was alone, longing for someone he could trust. On the other, as result of the theft of the lamp, his humiliating disgrace had become a public affair in the building. He felt the lamp could not have cost that much and that the manager was overcharging him, either to make a profit or to punish him for his vulnerability. The little trust he had left in the institution charged with his wellbeing evaporated in the fire of his anger. Wilfred felt desperate, depressed, and lonely. His cravings for the ephemeral oasis of drugs threatened to end his longest period of abstinence in many years.

In his suffering Wilfred planned ways to get back at the man who broke his heart and smeared him with shame. He told me that his family was a resource he could count on. His god-sister wanted to beat the shit out of Bob. His little brother told him once *"Wilfred, I may be the youngest of all, but if you are ever in any trouble with any of your lovers all you have to do is let me know and I'll go down there and take care of business."* He had done it before, although his brother lived in the Virgin Islands. Wilfred felt he could and had to deal with Bob, alone. He had told him once, that if he had to, he would do just that. *"I may be a fag but I can whip your mother-fucking monkey ass, you hear me!"*

Bob was not done with Wilfred. One morning after the lamp incident, he came by his room. Wilfred opened the door and expressionless, went back to watching TV. Bob asked for a cup of tea but Wilfred did not move from his seat. He demanded his tea and, since that did not work either, he called Wilfred a *bitch*. Wilfred exploded. *"Bring the tea yourself. I'm my own woman, or my own man, or my own fag and I ain't about to bring*

you no cup of tea!!!"

After that morning, Wilfred he told the security guards at the front door, that if he ever returned, they should not allow him back in. During the following weeks Wilfred would find Bob waiting for him at the door of the residence. In a display of utter insensitivity he would ask Wilfred to tell him why he did not want to talk to him.

Wilfred was constantly tested for how much emotional strain he could take. He depended on the state for the meager income he received. He depended on the management of the SRO for housing. They were constantly looking over his shoulder. Eviction, intervention, confiscation hanged over Wilfred's head like Damocles' sword. Health, housing and benefits were sources of worry and frustration for Wilfred. There were always problems to solve even to maintain a substandard existence. He had learned a couple of tricks to help him manage difficult bureaucratic situations but they were not always effective. Wilfred's love and sexual experiences provided him his few satisfactions. Although even in these matters he had to struggle, they were the areas of life where he exercised agency, autonomy, and self-determination.

He had more power to make decisions in his sexual and emotional relationships than in any other aspect of life. Although he could not decide to invite someone to spend the night in his room, Wilfred could set the priorities and called at least fifty percent of the shots. He could pursue a relationship, nourish it or starve it, avoid it or encourage it, end it or change its character. Wilfred could fall prey to the schemes of a lover, but even if asymmetrical, the *loving field* was the most level of all. He knew that if the need arose he could *whip* [any man's] *mother-fucking monkey ass!* They had to be careful not to wake up the macho in him.

The character of Wilfred's love affairs was unlike those of heterosexual men and women or gay men. As the more feminine man, Wilfred followed, submitted, seduced subtly. His more masculine mates controlled, decided, overpowered. Yet, in the blink of an eye, they could ask him to "*stick it in*" and turn the relationship upside down. This could not stand for subtle seduction but it would certainly get them penetrated "*to the bone; to the tees; all ten inches!*"

Bob had retained the power to turn their erotic play around, but in the last instance, they were more equal than not. Both could be autonomous, assertive, and fight for what they wanted, physically if need called for it, and Bob had learned that. He could think of Wilfred as if he were a woman and even act on that belief. But Bob had to be careful not to get his nose broken, for Wilfred was a man. They danced this carefully choreographed dance of polarities: one on top and the other below; one protective and the other basking in that care; one nurturing the other thriving in that nourishment; one in the streets, the other one at home. But there was always the risk in this dance that a step on the wrong direction could transform both into sovereign and aggressive agents of their lives, streetwise and ready to attack; or needy, hungry, homeless, and evicted. In an instant the *asymmetrical equilibrium* could disappear and, like an erupting volcano, their clashing masculinities could overflow the moment. (Or worse, a misstep could awake the wrath of the state, that most masculine entity of them all, and Wilfred and Bob could end up locked up or in the streets, reduced to a tearful pile of sorry humanity.)

As the more masculine man, Bob eluded the stigma of a relationship with a *Homo*. His masculinity also engendered the belief on his right to be kept. Wilfred was the marked element of the dyad, and as such, he should pay. He knew that usually that

was the deal with *Guy*s. Wilfred was generous and did not mind sharing on the rare instances when he had extra money. Money was always scarce, so soon there would be a chance for the *Guy* to show how much he cared. Wilfred knew that his motivation would be revealed soon.

At the beginning Bob was the giver, the magnanimous, and the powerful. In a security guard uniform his arms wrapped around Wilfred's homeless shoulders. He lived in an apartment and Wilfred in a serviced SRO. He had a job and with his salary he supplemented Wilfred SSI paltry income. But as he went back to drugs he lost his housing, his job, and eventually, Wilfred. He switched from showering Wilfred with presents to draining him for drug money. Camaraderie turned into exploitation. The lover became the gigolo or worse, a thief.

Wilfred's exclamation "*Bring the tea yourself. I'm my own woman, or my own man, or my own fag and I ain't about to bring you no cup of tea*" was an assertion of the complexities of his subject position. The words woman, man, and fag, by themselves, did not summarize who he was, and so he juxtaposed them to convey his conception of *self*. Wilfred was more than the sum of his parts and as such, he was not going to *bring* [Bob] *no cup of tea*. His agency defined for Bob the limits of his power over Wilfred; the limits of his femininity.

Shaun and Emery

By now we know well Shaun and his relationships from the preceding chapters. Here we will dwell further into his relationship with Emery which was first motivated by his desire to leave the shelter and avoid *some problems he was having*.

When Shaun lived with Emery he established the rules of their relationship and cohabitation. Emery had the lease of the apartment and its rent was paid with Emery's SSI benefits. They only had to pay for *a small part of the gas bill* and the telephone that, since they did not use it much, was no major problem. In addition to Emery's benefits, Shaun's *every now and then ... would get a hustle ... like get a job*, that would allow him to *chip in every now and then as best [he could]* for the bills and the cost of food.

Alfredo- Who would buy the food?

Shaun- *We both would, we both would. Like a lot of times when I come in from work, you know and back then I was on drugs, you know? So ...but I would give him half the money that I made for food and when he gets his money, he would buy food as well. So, we both took care of that. We both took care of that, we both took care of that, you know?*

They organized their lives according to the gender division of labor of heterosexual households as mildly implemented by Shaun. Emery took care of the "woman's chores in the home" such as cleaning and laundry. Shaun, the man of the relationship, would take the garbage out. Since he was not overly invested in the "male role" and was very proud of his (Jamaican) cooking skills, he ensured that both were well fed by preparing his favorite recipes.

Alfredo- So you also cooked for Emery.

Shaun- *So, I also cooked for Emery.*

A- And if you didn't cook for Emery, who would cook for him, or what would he eat?

S- *He would, he would. He would either find something to eat or just fry chicken. That's the only thing he knew how to do: fried chicken and french fries, you know? But see, I'm not with that fried chicken and french fries. I like my own cooked food, my Jamaican food. I would cook and he loved the way I cooked, you know? As far as keeping the house clean... I'm a clean person. I'm a neat person, but he does that you know? He cleans up the house. He does the dishes. I take out the garbage, you know? So we made an agreement when it came to that, you know? So would be no*

"well, I'm doing this all the time and you just seat around don't do nothing at all."

This agreement was the basis of their domestic harmony. Everyone knew his responsibilities within the household and they performed them without hesitation.

Cooking was the only *woman's chore* taken care of by Shaun. All other *feminine* tasks were assigned to Emery. Shaun seemed proud to be able to cook. He said they had an agreement by which they divided the different responsibilities of keeping a home, and apparently housekeeping did not generate any conflicts.

As a man, Shaun chose to have a life in the public realm. ...*A lot of times I would be hanging around in the house, in the corner, in the stoop, you know what I'm saying?* He expected Emery to play the role of a *stay-at-home* wife while he scouted the streets in search for a hustle and adventures. It was Emery's failure to fulfill this specific expectation, among all of the gender-marked behavior Shaun had set down for him, that initially generated his suspicions of infidelity.

In Shaun's narrative Emery's presumed sexual life outside of their relationship, elicited friction. As in feminist characterizations of the double standard, Shaun's sexual life outside the home, of which we had an example in the last chapter, was taken for granted and did not enter the bargain. Shaun praised Emery's pliable and acquiescent temperament as one of his best personality traits. With time Shaun began to see in Emery's easygoing temperament a delicate ruse to turn submission and compliance into an independence that could allow for sexual autonomy. Eventually, it became evident that Shaun could not control one specific aspect Emery's behavior: his sexual adventures.

Shaun- For instance, I went away for two days, came back, there was another guy in the apartment, you know? ... So when I came back and I

opened up the door he had a chain in the door. So I said "Emery open up the door." So he said "wait a minute" and I waited for about two minutes, you know? When I went in there I smelled the odor of sex and the guy... he was sitting in the couch, and Emery looked all nervous, you know? So I got really upset. So, I threw the guy out and we got in a fight. We was always fighting, I remember one time when I grabbed him by his head and I pushed his head, and I pushed his head inside the sheetrock, you know? There was times when I wouldn't even let him go out of the house, you know? So I scared him to the point that he didn't wanna be around me no more."

Emery did not confront Shaun. Probably because he felt intimidated, Emery's adamant strategy for doing what he wanted consisted on sneaking around Shaun. His impotence to change that distressed him immensely:

Shaun- I mean like I said, I got very possessive, you know? And he got very terrified of me. He even called the police on me once, you know/ Because I wouldn't let him out of the house. I took his keys and the way the lock was you gotta lock it with the key from inside and outside. So I took his key, locked him up in the house and go, you know? And when I come back and I go to the bathroom he would sneak out and go away. He called the cops. A few minutes later there was a knock on the door, you know? It was so much trouble to go through that with him, you know? So much trouble, you know? I said 'you know what? I'm gonna go.'"

Their conflicts escalated to the point that the situation became untenable and Shaun went back to the shelter.

Conflict between them arose around sexuality. Emery did not exhibit the restrained and reserved sexual behavior Shaun expected of a more feminine person. Ultimately, Emery was raised as a man and was assertive about his sexual desire. Shaun could not tolerate this. His jealousy or his male pride, got out of control when he suspected Emery had been with another man. Shaun brought about a double standard for sexual behavior between them by being possessive of Emery while cheating on him. On the other hand, Emery was a good housekeeper but retained his right to a masculine

sexuality that prized multiple partners. This "incongruence" with their gender role-play was congruent with the gender socialization of both of them. Shaun had staked too much value on a gender assignment that was mainly erotic. This miscalculation marked their separation. Shaun found himself being unusually violent with Emery. For a low-key personality like Shaun's, his rage told him that the relationship was out of control. When I talked to Shaun it was clear that he missed Emery. He talked about him with affection and appreciation for someone he considered nice, kind hearted, and a good sex partner.

By the time Shaun moved in with Emery his sexual activity with men was no longer necessarily predicated on drug use: while he no longer blamed his sex with men on his drug use and was having sex with men while not on drugs, if he used drugs he got horny and looked for sex. His account of moving out of the shelter and into Emery's was based on the invitation and certain problems he was having at the shelter. Their life together was harmonious, thanks to good sex and clearly delineated domestic roles. Shaun installed himself as the dominant force or the head of the household. In addition, since he took pride in his skills in the kitchen, he cooked for both of them. His Jamaican cooking was appreciated by Emery who was half Jamaican. The Achilles' heel of his rule was that he did not have the apartment's lease in his name, and that the funds for the rent were also under Emery's control. So, to offset this asymmetry and moved by a genuine sense of responsibility, he contributed money whenever was possible.

He appreciated Emery's low key and complacent temperament because it did not challenge his self-assigned position as the leader of both the home and the couple. Besides taking the garbage out and cooking, he established a double standard for Emery and himself in terms of the access to the public realm: he would go out either to make

money or for leisure but Emery should make his life as much as possible within the confines of the apartment. There was another double standard in terms of their sexual activity. Emery was not to have sex with anyone else. He reserved for himself the right to have sex with other people but this he had not said with so many words.

Shaun saw in Emery's inability to comply with his two double standards the causes for the break down of their covenant. He could not bring himself to stay in the apartment and to be sexually available only to Shaun. The breach of the first rule implied the infringement of the second because Shaun assessment that Emery went out looking for sex was probably correct. All his docility was undone by a remnant of free will.

In spite of Shaun's assertiveness in setting himself up as the head of the household and his ability to overpower Emery physically, his authority was undermined by his lack of control of the resource that brought them together: the apartment. Shaun had legal limitations that impeded the effective assertion of his power and Emery had psychological characteristics that impeded the effective performance of his obedience. In other words, they were not different enough for an asymmetrical arrangement to work without contradictions.

Miguel Ángel and Francisco

We met Miguel Ángel in chapter six where we followed his life from Puerto Rico to the Bronx, through his substance use, sexual work, and relationship with Mariana. Here we will take a closer look at his friendship with Francisco, which started as an escape from the streets to grow into a deeper relationship than he would want to admit.

There had been also one man with whom Miguel Ángel achieved a certain

intimacy. That was Francisco. They met one afternoon, in the summer of 1993.

Miguel Ángel was living in the streets in those days and spent a lot of time in Fordham Park. In that park they found each other. They talked, Francisco invited him a beer, and thus began their friendship. Miguel Ángel went to Francisco's house, they had sex and he began to spend every night there. He lived in that apartment for a few months.

Miguel Ángel- ...*And there we established a friendship and then we went a little beyond and I went to his house and I would stay over, that is I staid living there for some time. We began doing it first, like I say, because I wanted but also we created a kind of friendship. We were al tanto⁵ with each other...*

(Miguel Ángel- ...*Y ahí establecimos una amistad y ahí fuimos un poquito más allá y fui a la casa y me quedaba ahí, o sea que me quede viviendo un tiempo. Y empezamos a hacerlo primero, como yo digo, por que yo quería pero también creamos una forma de amistad. Estábamos un poco al tanto el uno al otro...*)

He said: "we started doing it because I wanted..." Because he wanted sex? Or because he wanted housing? Whatever the answer is one or the other Miguel Ángel's agency cannot be denied. It did not happen to him. He made it happen, surely because he knew the arena he was treading and knew that, whether it was sexual desire or hustling for a roof, he had the required expertise. "...*But we also created a kind of friendship. We were al tanto with each other...*" It is impossible to know how much of the sex and how much of the coexistence was in the formula that eventually gave birth to their closeness. It could have been that Francisco was very giving and Miguel Ángel needed so much, and not only material things. Whatever the initial motivation was, Miguel Ángel remembered

⁵ The Castilian expression *estar al tanto* means *to be informed*. In relationships between people it means to follow closely the developments of someone's life. Miguel Ángel followed the phrase with *el uno al otro*, which emphasized the symmetry of the dyadic proximity.

fondly the camaraderie that sprouted from it.

Miguel Ángel- Yes sure, yes he was a person who helped me... He helped me in many ways because I was for a time in the street. He gave me where to live; economically he helped me, emotionally, you know? He was a person who acted kindly [toward me.]

(Miguel Ángel- Si seguro, si el era una persona que me ayudó... Me ayudó de muchas maneras por que estuve un tiempo en la calle. Me dio donde vivir; económicamente me ayudó, emocional[mente], sabes? Fue una persona que se portó bien [conmigo].)

The collapse of that harmony was caused by what to Miguel Ángel's eyes was Francisco's sexual misbehavior. He said that after a while of living together, the apartment began to feel different when he returned. He sensed, noticed, knew that Francisco was bringing other men to the apartment when he was away and that made him jealous. Apparently the fabric of their relationship allowed for possessiveness and regardless of his initial intentions, Miguel Ángel felt now vulnerable. Their small and probably calculated initial investment was giving back unexpectedly large returns. They argued over it and the quarrels began to eat away at the relationship.

Miguel Ángel- Things began to break up because he also brought people to the house, and I didn't like that, do you understand? I would get jealous... If when I was or I wasn't there at times I knew I left and I know that someone was there. I knew because of the vibrations in the house: you see one thing here and the other thing is there and you realize that there was someone. And thus the problems started, you know? And somehow, the friendship started to come to an end. The love that was growing of one friend to the other, ended.

(Miguel Ángel- La cosas se fueron rompiendo por que él también traía gente a la casa y eso a mi no me gustaba ¿Entiendes? Me ponía celoso... Si cuando estaba o no estaba a veces yo sabía que me iba y yo sé que alguien estuvo ahí. Sabía por el ambiente en la casa: tu ves una cosa aquí la otra cosa está allá y te das cuenta que alguien estuvo. Y ahí se fueron creando problemas ¿Tú sabes? Y un poco la amistad se fue acabando. El amor que estaba creciendo de un amigo para otro, se acabó.)

This is the most arresting page in Miguel Ángel's story: he felt jealous about a man, a person who, because of his sex, was not his first sexual choice; of a guy that when Miguel Ángel met him, probably only meant a night on a mattress, and then another, and then another. But Francisco was also someone who had lent him a hand and an ear at a time when he needed them.

Those nights together, baring their hearts to each other, talking about their lives, frustrations and aspirations, being *al tanto* with each other, had fed the feeling of love in Miguel Ángel's heart. Whether it was love, even in its broadest sense, or maybe affection or just esteem, he was not indifferent to Francisco; he cared about Francisco. In those days, even if with faintest significance, Francisco was for Miguel Ángel his significant other, to put it in therapeutic jargon. Of course he had to say something about that procession of men who behind his back went in and out of the apartment! We now know that he *had* to become the *man* of the house, because Francisco was *gay*. As such Miguel Ángel could not but be enraged with such an offensive behavior. What kind of a man would Miguel Ángel be if he allowed it silently? Gradually, the disagreements and tension caused by Francisco's sexual life kept Miguel Ángel away from the apartment. It was a losing battle. All his manliness was not enough next to Francisco's name on the apartment's lease, and the lease was the trump card in their contest. He who had it had the last word on what did or did not go on in the apartment. Miguel Ángel spent more time on his work, selling drugs, and less at home. One fateful day, he was arrested and sent to jail for a year. He never saw Francisco again.

A year after he came out of jail he ran across one of Francisco's friends in the street. The man told Miguel Ángel that during the time that had passed since he last saw

Francisco, he had gotten pneumonia and had died. It had been HIV related pneumonia. He had lost a lot of weight and you could tell AIDS was killing him. Reflecting on the circumstances of their estrangement Miguel Ángel showed a caring empathy for Francisco.

Miguel Ángel- ... *We all make mistakes and we all like different things and at times, no one can tell you what to do or not to do. You can have your life and have another person and even if that person tells you don't do it you keep doing it because it is your life. You were doing it before you had met him and nothing, nothing changes. It would be very hard for something to change.*

(Miguel Ángel- ... *Todos cometemos errores y nos gustan diferentes cosas y hay veces, que nadie te puede decir lo que tú hagas o no. Tú puedes tener tu vida y tener otra persona que esa persona por más que te diga no lo hagas tú lo sigues haciendo por que es tu vida. Tú lo estabas haciendo antes que lo hubieses conocido y nada, nada cambia. Sería algo muy duro para que cambie.*)

He delivered these words of ancient wisdom about the hardheadedness of human kind in a soft tone, as if expecting me to take them as the moral of the story. Instead, I picked up the tenderness and the compassion of his voice. I heard Miguel Ángel speaking from the intimate knowledge that only experience gives. He could have been speaking about himself or his girlfriend Mariana. It was a profound statement that could have been in his mother's lips and thus revealed the kinship that he had established with Francisco: the fast blooming and easily broken kinship of needy strangers.

Miguel Ángel said those words about Francisco. Apparently he was the other person saying "don't do it," the person Francisco "had." These words also could have been said about Miguel Ángel. All his life was in a package where his sex work, his friendships with prostitutes and petty criminals, his own thievery, his drug use and his failure to live a conventional life coexisted. In that cold November afternoon Miguel

Ángel remembered his mother saying, "*Don't do it.*"

Miguel Ángel's predicament was similar to Shaun's. Although he insisted that he did not feel attracted to men, living in an apartment with a gay man, in his eyes placed him automatically in the dominant position. He also had drawn closer to Francisco and independently of whether he felt attracted to him or not, he cared for him. He cared enough for Francisco to feel his pride threatened by his independent sexual life. Like Shaun he had questioned Francisco about it. He began to inspect the apartment for proof that Francisco was lying. While Shaun relied on the *smell of sex*, Miguel Ángel saw in objects that had been moved out of place the evidence that confirmed his suspicions. And like Shaun eventually decided to return to the shelter, Miguel Ángel's realization of his ultimate powerlessness to assert his will, led him to increase his stays outside the apartment.

In this three stories we have seen how the gender certainties of *Guys* in the face of their economic powerlessness, undermined them vis-à-vis *Queens* and *Homos*. Had they resisted the temptation to *play* them, to take advantage of them, their confrontation with their ultimate inability to prevail would have been avoided or delayed. But they were blinded by masculinity and walked into their own trap ending up as hunted hunters. Initially, the seduction of sexual objectification made them vulnerable. Once that linchpin of hegemonic masculinity was removed, the floodgates were open and the edifice of their privilege, a structure weakened by their poverty, crumbled under its own weight.

In the following pages I will include some reflections on the significance of the sexual lives of homeless men for a society on the verge of normalizing sexual activity

between men and a commoditized Gay identity under the aegis of the increasingly mainstream Gay movement. I will summarize the points made in this and the preceding chapters a briefly address their significance for HIV transmission.

Epilogue

Poverty and Sexual Communities

Since the dawn of the 28th of June of 1969,¹ the events of the preceding night in and around *The Stonewall Inn* were inscribed into the mytho-historical annals of the LGBT movement. The confusion, anger, violence, and startling confrontation that resulted from what should have been just another installment of customary police harassment of a gay venue ended decades of passive endurance of abuses and *pacifist* advocacy for equal rights.

During the two and half years prior to the riots, *The Stonewall Inn* had been a popular gay bar in Greenwich Village, most likely because dancing was allowed. Like the rest of the gay bar scene at that time, *The Stonewall Inn* was owned by the mafia and its days were dotted by conveniently-tipped periodical police raids, in which the night's profits were safely stashed away. The ages of the men working and relaxing at *The Stonewall Inn*, were between the teens and the early thirties. Its clientele were hustling *street-queens* and *chickens*,² and those who sought their company. Most of them were working-class black, Latino, and ethnic white *queens*, who the older and classier clientele of the nearby bar *Julius*, considered *tacky*. A few patrons and most employees of the bar shared an interest in petty crime and a dedication to drug use. Often, the youngest costumers were homeless and lived across the street, in Sheridan Square, under the

¹ The following account of the incidents of June of 1969 and the description of *The Stonewall Inn* are based on Martin Duberman's (1994:181-212).

² Teenagers.

distant aegis of Bob Kohler, a neighbor who, on occasion, bailed out Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson. The three of them were soon to become part of the nascent Gay Movement.

On that fateful night, the police emerged from the bar into the street, leading the costumers without identification handcuffed toward the police van. Those who were allowed to leave the premises and passers-by whistled, booed and showered them with coins. After the police van left the site to deliver the prisoners to the sixth precinct, the Stonewall riots began.

The revengeful horde of dark skinned *queens* and other misfits, roared insults long rehearsed in private, and hurled bottles and other projectiles toward the door of the bar, keeping the police captive inside. Someone threw lighter fluid into the bar, and lit matches immediately followed. Inside, the distressed cops attempted to use a water hose to break the siege, which only succeeded in making them slip on the wet floor. In the street, handcuffed *queens* pushed officers to the ground, took their keys, and freed each other. What happened that night and the nights that followed, are today a compilation of legends, allegories, parables, and facts that form the myth of origin of the Gay movement.

Many within the gay community deplored the incidents of June of 1969. In the upper class gay community of the Pines, Fire Island, the riots were characterized as the regrettable actions of *stoned, tacky queens*. The police also received the support of older gays, and not just the more affluent. During the unrest, costumers of *Julius* restrained rioters and turned them to the police when they arrived. Many residents of the Village were happy the *sleaze joint* was finally closed. The Los Angeles' *Homosexual Information Center* in its Newsletter #21, of January 1972, expressed that the Stonewall

riots were a “*defensive reaction by a group of jaded, role-playing bar queens who had rejected society ... emotionally immature, self-ashamed patrons of a gay club*” (quoted in Duberman 1993:302, n.60).

News of the incidents spread throughout the Village by word of mouth and were reported in the major newspapers for all New Yorkers to read. During the second night of the Stonewall riots, many more people participated. They were activists of various degrees of radicalism and persuasion, with considerably more political experience and political ambition than the Puerto Rican, black, and *white-trash queens* of the preceding night. They saw in that historical moment of collective action, the crystallization of the means for change they longed for.

For the following decades, the spontaneous leadership of the patrons of *The Stonewall Inn* was diluted with the cultural and political direction of an *elite* characterized by a middle-class, Caucasian, and usually male background. For many, but certainly not all of them, their sexuality alone stood in the way of inheriting from their fathers a dominant place within patriarchal capitalism, and for them, the riots did not taste of *revolution*, like for Sylvia Rivera,³ but were the first steps toward *assimilation*.

The *queens* who rioted that night were different from my informants. Yet, they were in many respects, closer to my homeless *Queens*, than the latter are to the gay community of today. The costumers of *The Stonewall Inn* were looked down on, and despised by older, wealthier, whiter gays (*The Pines, FI*, has always been a white community, after all). While polarized by class tensions, both groups shared a

³ Martin Duberman (1993:198) quotes Sylvia’s reply to her lover Gary’s invitation to go home: “‘Are you nuts?’ she yelled. ‘I’m not missing a minute of this—it’s the *revolution!*’”

geographical and cultural space. They were highly aware of each other even though the profile of working class *queens* decreased over the following decades to represent today a faint signal on the gay community's radar.

My homeless *Queens, Homos and Guys* do not even exist in the imagination of LGBT political leaders and organic intellectuals, or in the minds of *Chelsea boys*. After June 28th, 1969, a political movement and a community delineated itself in history, and for the world, by leap and bounds and with great strength and poise. A new kind of justice marked the North of its compass, but the map of the territory to cross, kept in its rivers that flowed backwards, away from the sea.

In 1971, Dennis Altman stated:

The basic difference is rather that gay liberation advances beyond the civil rights liberalism of the earlier groups; it is, if you like what "Black Power" is to the civil rights movement. No longer is the claim made that gay people can fit to American society, that they are as decent, as patriotic, as clean-living as anyone else. Rather, it is argued, it is society itself that needs to change. (1971:106)

The sexual difference of Lesbians and Gay men, endow them with a unique vantage point to assess critically the socio-cultural structures which make them second class citizens. This subaltern perspective can be a tool for the dismantlement of patriarchal capitalism and the radical and more just reorganization of society. Marriage, child rearing, family, the gendered division of labor, discrimination of any type, education, the legal system, housing, and health care, are some the many areas of socio-cultural practice that could benefit from the input of sexual dissidents and that were implied in Altman's idea of change. The utopian mandate of those heady days, when a revolutionary youth could assert, not that he was good enough for the nation, but that the nation would be much

better with him in it (not *a place at the table* but a new larger table), slowly was replaced by the pursuit of acceptance and assimilation.

The idea that the experience of sexual difference could contribute to a broad reorganization of society slowly evaporated from the agenda of the gay movement. Instead, its strategy was the achievement of the more immediate goals of equality and justice, by means of tactics that have become the cornerstone of LGBT activism: *coming out, visibility, ending victimization, and fostering community*. Without denying their historic efficacy in US society at large, these tactics bear a class imprint that cast doubt on their efficacy in the socio-cultural milieus of the *queens* of *The Stonewall Inn*, and make them almost meaningless in the shelter for homeless men where I did my fieldwork. These are some examples:

Coming out refers to the political relevance of the individual disclosure of sexual preference of Lesbians and Gay men. Besides its political value for the collective, *coming out* has psychological benefits in the unification of the self. Talking openly about one's sexual life, making visible what usually is not, has been a central tactic of the LGBT movement since its inception. It creates and promotes awareness of the existence and proximity of same-sex desire.

Yet, *coming out* assumes that sexuality is never evident, something *Homos* and *Queens* would challenge. But if it were possible, can someone ever *come out* in the shelter where most actions (including sex) are witnessed by numerous residents? Doesn't *coming out* implies a preexisting privacy? In the overcrowded human warehouses where the poor often live, the body is in constant display reducing privacy to thought not verbalized, and emotions not displayed. *Coming out* in this context would be a tactic

bordering on the empty gesture. For the extremely poor, a goal for a sexual politics congruent with their socioeconomic condition would be conquering some privacy.

The LGBT tactic that focuses on *visibility* is meant to convey society's diversity. It is a communal form of *coming out*. *Visibility* is the evidence of LGBT individuals and communities projected toward other communities and individuals, evidence that could be distant but is necessarily clear. *Visibility* reassures LGBT individuals that they are not alone.

Evidence of *Homos* and *Queens* in the shelter, was everywhere. The *Queens* had managed to be at every turn of the quotidian life of the institution. They were so *visible*, that even though there was a rule forcing them to dress in men's clothing, it did not turn them invisible. Either as individuals or as communities, for the shelter's *Homos* and *Queens*, *visibility* was a *fait accompli*.

Ending Victimization, or resisting, condemning, and demanding the prosecution of crimes committed against community members, is a major part of the work of LGBT organizations. Well over thirty years after the Stonewall Riots, Lesbians and Gays continue to be subjected to discrimination, taunting and violence. Large financial and human resources are dedicated to preventing and denouncing incidences of homophobic injustice. Yet this central piece of the LGBT agenda is of relative importance to the shelter's men-loving men.

Everyday, residents of the homeless shelter have their bodies and rights trampled upon. As members of communities of color, the poorer classes, and because of their sexuality shelter residents are victims of numerous infringements to their human and civil rights. While the LGBT movement has begun to address racial diversity, it lags behind in

regard to economic justice.⁴ Being poor in a consumerist society imply daily survival, enduring scorn, and facing innumerable incitements to consumption. For the homeless, scarcity, scrutiny, contempt, and public display, confounds the effects of societal homophobia, making hard to prioritize or separate out overlapping victimizations.

The growth and successes of the LGBT movement have been imprinted in the landscape by the emergence and *fostering of LGBT communities*. Its institutional landscape has mushroomed, providing spaces for multiple interests and aspects of life. We could speak of a parallel society, populated by Lesbians and Gays, embedded within the social fabric of the US. Gay businesses and services have sprouted in most US urban centers signaling the emergence of the LGBT market (Chasin 2000). Perhaps, it is the commodification of LGBT subjectivities (Maskovsky 2001) that precludes including the poor in its worldview.

In contrast, the communities where homeless MSMs live are based on scarcity, not on sexual non-conformity. Extreme need is the brittle bond that holds them together, and that, they reflect. Homeless shelters are nodes in an urban geography of despair. The strength of the networks of the deprived is inversely proportional to their destitution. Ordered by hardship and less constrained by bourgeois morality, in these structures the homeless' proletarian sexualities find ways to maneuver resources. Yet, it is that, what make them the object of moralizing rhetoric.⁵

⁴ The first steps in that direction were taken recently with the birth of the Queer Economic Justice Network and the inclusion of economic justice in the program of the NGLTF.

⁵ Ironically, poor and LGBT communities have been demonized for their unfettered sexualities. The latter carry on their backs the AIDS epidemic, and the former, their poverty as a result.

The disengagement of the LGBT political agenda from the lives of the poorest men-loving men (and women-loving women as well), reveal the absence of poverty in it. The *Stonewall queens* were replaced by the *all American boy* in the LGBT social imaginary. Like the older homophile movement did, the LGBT movement is careful not to undermine the ideological pillars of the United States on its political path. In 1990, *Queer* emerged as a denunciation of complacency and an attempt to cash in the dream of Stonewall. *Gays in the military*, the institutionalization of *Queer* as an academic turf, and more recently, *gay marriage*, effectively silenced the radical outcry. With its default on the promise of Stonewall, it is no wonder that LGBT communities reproduce mainstream values and marginalize the poor.

Homelessness, Sexuality and Love

Explaining the dramatic explosion of homelessness in the United States at the end of the Twentieth Century, has represented an ideological challenge for the state and those who are most invested in the *status quo*. To prevent its perception as the overlapping manifestations of a failing economic system, individual-centered explanations of homelessness were vigorously championed through profuse funding of research that could explain it in those terms. The theories of causation that official initiatives produced fell short of accounting for the diversity of the populations showing up at the gates of homeless shelters. The few social scientists that devised theories of homelessness with wider explanatory range, linked it to poverty and other structural causes. Qualitative researchers, who took on homelessness as a subject of study, were able to dispel

stereotypes and provide examples of how several types of social inequality, in combination with poverty, were the likely causes of homelessness.

For many years, the attempt to examine homelessness in state-produced terms, set off numerous difficulties. Disagreements centered on the definition of *home* or *conventional night-time residence*, *doubling-up* at somebody else's home, and establishing the minimum *length of time* without a roof of one's own, to qualify as homeless. The most notable were at the foundation of the concept of homelessness as a unit of analysis. These definitional difficulties also had policy implications that revealed the inadequate conceptualization of the social problem.

The city of New York for years was less than cooperative in providing adequate services for the homeless. For two decades advocates for the homeless took the city's government to court to expand or improve services. The existing infrastructure of services is the minimum the city has been forced to set up under a succession of lost legal battles. Only within the last three years the courts have been willing to allow the establishment and enforcement of punitive rules against those seeking the help of the state.

Since the late seventies, men, women and children have been forced to live for long and repeated periods in municipals shelters. In them they still attempt to attain a measure of happiness. In particular, single adults are the group of the homeless that remain inadequately housed for the longest time. Among the homeless, men who have sex with men, set up their social networks and their sexual and emotional lives congruently with their many deprivations. The resulting socio-cultural patterns diverge

widely from the norms of LGBT communities who are closer to conventional middle-class ways of life.

Their identity categories, the dynamics of their relationships, the men they love and desire, their fashioning of the self, are some of the characteristics that differ from those of Gay men. In the shelter, their networks provide not only sexual relief and the company of friends. Like other shelter networks they are also means of protection and sharing scarce resources.

The sexual lives of these men seem fluid and the way they think about their sexuality is open to reassessment. Maybe the stigma of homelessness prepares them to accept love and emotional warmth without placing much weight on whether it comes from a man or a woman. Perhaps, *form* is less important than *function* for them. But surely that degree of malleability is less common in Gay communities

Their multiple material needs have a great impact over their experiences of love and relationships. It is hard to determine their relative weight in the emotional affairs of homeless men. There is no such a thing as blind love or sheer manipulation. It is evident that they cannot deny themselves a little of one or some of the other. In a relationship, housing often tilts the scale in favor of the man who can claim legal rights to it, inverting the power relations initially in place, and challenging preconceptions about the dominance of masculinity.

Although my informants did not use LGBT tactics, their sexual oppression in the shelters where I met them was far from overwhelming. This was the result of their numbers, their *sui generis* visibility, their willingness to stand their ground, their indifference to bourgeois respectability, and the faint repressive power of the state in the

under-funded shelter system. This was also because sexual oppression was the least pervasive of all the oppressions they suffered. Their racial and ethnic backgrounds, and their poverty manifested in their homelessness, competed effectively with their sexualities as avenues of societal subjugation. Yet, within the diverse mix of their cultural universes there were unique seeds of agency, autonomy, and self esteem waiting to germinate that could turn into lush vegetation in a utopian future.

The homeless men I met during my field work are a *vulnerable population* for HIV transmission. Their gender experience and their socio-cultural position in the United States lead them into *paradoxes of masculinity*, the kind Tolson (1977) wrote about: to compensate for their subaltern position they enact empty and short lived tropes of gender power and when they are dismantled by holders of economic and legal power, their abjection takes crude and disheartening form for them. Their awareness of the stigma and cultural marginality attached to their condition amplifies their emotional neediness. Sexual fluidity allows them to fill their relational vacuum and construct a healthier sense of self, but they approach these relationships hungry for love and validation. Their emotional craving, utter poverty, and the paucity of HIV prevention strategies that take into account their specific conceptions of sexual identity or lack thereof, place them at an increased risk for HIV transmission. Yet, homeless people are absent in UNAIDS conception of *vulnerable populations*, and their *liminal* social position seem to preclude HIV service agencies from claiming them as a population within their purview. It appears that, as long as they remain *un-housed*, their health will remain ignored by comprehensive HIV strategies. Such an indefensible omission is nothing short of a crime.

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