"We're all on the same boat, but we're not the same passengers": an exploration of the hidden

and fragmented nature of the homeless subject

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Sociology and Anthropology

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts (Social and Cultural Anthropology) at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

July 2016

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

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and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts (Social and Cultural Anthropology)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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ABSTRACT

"We're all on the same boat, but we're not the same passengers": an exploration of the hidden and fragmented nature of the homeless subject

Zenas Kuate Defo

The subject of homelessness is one that has been covered extensively in social scientific research. Yet, it continues to remain hidden and fragmented, even to those researchers who have had significant experience working with this population. Using a combination of anthropological methodologies – oral history, archival research, and participant observation –, the current research project examines some of the reasons for this fragmentation of the homeless subject matter, first through an examination of the changes in homelessness literature over time, then via examination of parallels to other homelessness research and the life history of one homeless individual, an exploration of the ways in which shelters impact the lives of those residing within them, and finally through reflection on the ways in which 'experience' informs homelessness research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many have contributed to bringing this thesis to fruition, and to all I am grateful. I would especially like to thank my supervisor, Mark Watson, for having pushed me to think critically, and to never be truly satisfied with my work. Thanks to David Howes and Katja Neves, who mentored me in subtle, but significant, ways. Thanks to the members of my cohort in the anthropology, as well as sociology, MA programs (and also those in the PhD program in Social and Cultural Analysis) for challenging me intellectually, both within classrooms and outside of them, as well as for the friendships formed.

I would also like to thank all those behind the scenes who work to ensure graduate students graduate on time and satisfy their degree requirements – Jody Staveley (now retired), Eve Girard, and the numerous other faculty and staff of Concordia's Department of Sociology and Anthropology. You truly make a phenomenal team, and your kind words and actions have not gone unnoticed.

To Xavier, thank you for taking the time to share your story with me. If you have the opportunity to read this, I hope this project does you proud.

Finally, I must thank my parents and brothers for being there, from day one, through the ups and the downs. Thank you.

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Homelessness – A Fragmented Subject Matter

Recent developments in Montreal indicate that the fragmented nature of homelessness as a subject matter is gaining greater public attention. In 2015, a project was led by the Douglas Mental Health University Research Centre, whose mandate was four-fold:

1. To generate a unique method of counting homelessness in Montreal via examination of street count surveys in other major cities across North America and Europe;

2. To direct and oversee the homelessness street count on March 24 2015, where a team of volunteers would peruse various communal housing areas and public places across Montreal, in an attempt to survey as many homeless individuals as possible within the city;

3. To deliver a report to the city of Montreal detailing the results of the homeless survey, and;

4. To estimate the number of hidden homeless within the city of Montreal.

Drawing upon past studies from other regions across Canada (i.e. Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto) and around the world (i.e. New York, Brussels, Paris),[1] a methodology was used which involved recruiting volunteers – over 800 volunteers – and deploying them across the city, so that they could meet with homeless individuals, both on the streets and in day centres, to ask them about

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[1] No author. "I COUNT MTL 2015: Montreal Homelessness Survey." Accessed August 1, 2016, http://icount-mtl.ca/about/

their living arrangements.[2] This indicates an acceptance of the fact that the category of 'homelessness' needs to be re-imagined, precisely because of its hidden nature.

The results of the study claimed the city of Montreal had a little more than 3,000 homeless individuals, with the following key findings: slightly more than three quarters of the homeless in Montreal were men; over 90% of those sleeping outside were men; slightly more than half of those living in traditional housing were women; slightly more than 40% of those experiencing homelessness were Montreal-born, and approximately 10% of the homeless population were immigrants; 10% of the homeless population was aboriginal (in contrast with percentage of the total Montreal population that was aboriginal – less than one percent); and veterans represented 6% of Montreal's homeless population.[3]

Even with this broad initiative, homelessness in Montreal continues to be a hidden and fragmented subject. Specific to the survey conducted, the findings remain disputed by many community groups, who in 2014 had claimed the number of homeless in the city to be on the order of 30,000.[4] Moreover, the day of the actual survey on March 24, 2015, the downtown core of Montreal was the scene of a major demonstration[5,6,7,8,9,10] – an occurrence that resulted in

[2] No author. "Montreal Homelessness Count finds 3,016 homeless people in city: 10 per cent of city's homeless population is aboriginal, new survey shows." *CBC News*, July 7, 2015, accessed July 11, 2016, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/montreal-homelessness-count-finds-3-016-homeless-people-in-city-1.3141007

[3] No author. "Montreal Homelessness Count finds 3,016 homeless people in city: 10 per cent of city's homeless population is aboriginal, new survey shows." *CBC News*, July 7, 2015, accessed July 11, 2016, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/montreal-homelessness-count-finds-3-016-homeless-people-in-city-1.3141007

[4] No author. "Montreal Groups say feds blocking homeless funds: group says Ottawa is blocking $3.2 million earmarked for helping Quebec's homeless." *CBC News*, July 22, 2014, accessed July 11, 2016, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/montreal-groups-say-feds-blocking-homeless-funds-1.2715049

[5] No author. "Thousands march in evening protest in downtown Montreal: police quickly declared the demonstration illegal, arrests made." *CBC News*, March 24, 2015, accessed July 11, 2016, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/thousands-march-in-evening-protest-in-downtown-montreal-1.3008331

many homeless avoiding the area so as not to have to confront police and other security personnel. An interview, conducted by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, with the CEO of the Action Jeunesse de l'Ouest de l'île (AJOI) Benoit Langevin, the co-director of I COUNT MTL 2015 James McGregor (http://icount-mtl.ca/), and the director general of the organization Plein Milieu Sonya Cormier, suggested there were discrepancies between the figure obtained by the survey, and the results expected by the organizations based in the West Island and the Plateau Mont-Royal regions of Montreal, mainly because of the choice of methodology used in the research, as well as the strategic decisions undertaken prior to the conducting of the survey regarding places within the city to omit.[11] The Montreal Homelessness Survey defined the 'hidden homeless' as those who "couch-surf[ed] or [stayed] in temporary accommodations with no security or permanence" – a truly ambiguous definition, for it could be applied to a homeless individual, just like it could be applied to a graduating university student returning to live with their parents post-graduation. It should be noted this does not even take into account the forms of homelessness hidden *within* the category of the hidden homeless, like the homeless student, or

[6] No author. "'Young Communists' Demonstrate Downtown against Austerity." *CBC News*, March 24, 2015, accessed July 11, 2016, http://montreal.ctvnews.ca/young-communists-demonstrate-downtown-against-austerity-1.2295790

[7] Muise, Monique. "Students back in the streets Tuesday night." *The Montreal Gazette*, March 25, 2015, accessed July 13, 2016, http://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/students-back-in-the-streets-tuesday-night

[8] Rémillard, David. "Manifestation contre l'austérité: 274 arrestations à Québec." *La Presse*, March 24, 2015, accessed July 13, 2016, http://www.lapresse.ca/le-soleil/actualites/societe/201503/24/01-4855212-manifestation-contre-lausterite-274-arrestations-a-quebec.php

[9] Gervais, Lisa-Marie. "La 'grève sociale' débute dans l'affrontement: la première journée de débrayage officielle a donné lieu à un choc entre policiers et manifestants, et à plusieurs arrestations à Montréal." *Le Devoir*, March 24 2015, accessed July 13, 2016, http://www.ledevoir.com/societe/education/435261/une-manifestation-etudiante-rapidement-dispersee

[10] Simard, Marie-Claude. "Journalistes agressés: la FPJQ dénonce des 'entraves à la liberté de presse'." *Le Journal de Montréal*, March 24, 2015, accessed July 13, 2016, http://www.journaldemontreal.com/2015/03/24/journalistes-agresses-la-fpjq-denonce-des-entraves-a-la-liberte-de-presse

[11] Benoit Langevin, James McGregor, and Sonya Cormier, interview by Daybreak Montreal, CBC News, July 21, 2015.

the transsexual and transgender homeless women who have been denied access to shelters during the winter months in Montreal.[12]

What is more, the Mayor of Montreal, Dennis Coderre, believed these findings suggested "there was a light at the end of the tunnel," and that thanks to the results of the survey conducted, the city of Montreal was "getting somewhere" in addressing the hidden aspects of homelessness.[13] Yet, it might be said the poor conclusions of the Montreal Homelessness Survey, in addition to the poor definitions used of key terms like 'hidden homeless,' suggest a more critical anthropological examination of homelessness in Montreal is needed.

This thesis serves as a means of doing just that. It developed out of my experiences working with the homeless, and the ways in which they informed certain preconceived biases I had regarding this population. I began volunteering at a homeless shelter – "Shelter X" – in the summer of 2012: by the fall of the same year, I had become an employee. As I interacted with the residents of this shelter, both within Shelter X and outside of it, I began to pose myself numerous questions about the subject matter that was homelessness. It was the beginning of a period of questioning that would follow me well into graduate school, piquing my interest in issues relating to the street-engaged around Montreal.

Ultimately, these questions served to answer the following central question: *what is it about the category of homelessness that makes it so difficult to access?* That the term 'homeless' is dynamic, similar and at the same time unique to different locations, particular to individual street people, shaped by institutional regulations, and complex to comprehend (irrespective of

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[12] Head and Hands. "Transsexual and transgender women denied access to shelters as temperatures drop in Montreal." *Head and Hands*, February 6, 2013, accessed July 11, 2016, http://headandhands.ca/2013/02/trans-women-denied-shelter/

[13] Denis Coderre, interview by Alex Leduc, CBC News Montreal, July 7, 2015.

one's 'experience in the field') indicates that it is a hidden term – a whole constituted of many distinct but interwoven fragments.

The methodology used in this research was a combination of oral history interviews, archival research, and participant observation. The use of oral histories in academia, and even at the level of national governments, occurred as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, with former US president Franklin D. Roosevelt obtaining thousands of first-person narratives of slavery from former slaves (http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/). Alessandro Portelli (1991) highlighted, in his work, the importance of having a range of oral histories – of having multiple subjectivities – rather than a single person as a representative of an entire group, as evidenced by the differing press and oral accounts of the killing of Luigi Trastulli. The works of Greg Sarris (1994) and Daniel James (2001) highlighted how this range may be obtained through several in-depth histories from a single person, thus providing insight into a culture or social grouping whose voice has been marginalized, be it because of class status, or because of a way of life (i.e. basket-weaving) that is on the verge of extinction.

This methodology has been used in studies of homelessness, where oral histories encouraged research participants to become agents for social change through their lives and actions (Kerr 2003). Steven VanderStaay (1992), for his part, explored that which homelessness entails for a wide variety of American – a mechanic in his fifties, a 30-year-old ex-convict, and a college drop-out, among others – through elucidation of personal narratives. Oral histories have also allowed for an understanding of how it is residents of a McCreesh Place apartment building for formerly homeless men can, through their lived experiences, construct a new voice and a new story specific to the region of McCreesh Place (Davis *et al.* 2010). What is more, street life in

Miami has been chronicled, and greater social awareness of homelessness has been achieved, through this methodology (Provenzo Jr. *et al.* 2011).

An advantage of this technique is that it can reveal how one's past was shaped by individual beliefs and norms and, concomitantly, how present-day values and actions have been shaped by one's past (Truesdell, 2001: 1). By achieving, through thorough elucidation of a life history, an emic stance vis-à-vis a research participant, one might then come to grasp the nuances that have come to define this latter in their actions, worldview, and creation-of-self.

The approach to the oral history used in the current study was a variation of that proposed by Valerie Raleigh Yow (2005). Briefly, Raleigh Yow proposed that interviews first be prepared for, via: (1) conceptualization of the research project, (2) composing an interview guide (using appropriate strategies and words/phrases in interview questions), (3) selecting and contacting those to be interviewed, (4) scheduling the interview, and finally (5) preparing the necessary interview equipment. Next, Raleigh Yow suggested one remains wary of the following interview techniques (following the preliminary meeting): (1) rapport building and diminishing, (2) the art of the skilled question, (3) ways of coping with troublesome situations, and (4) appropriate means of ending the interview. Ethical and legal issues were also raised as essential considerations that must be addressed prior to, during, and after the oral history, as were the interpersonal relations – the effects of the interview on the interviewer and interviewee – that may impact research findings. Raleigh Yow also noted one should be attentive to methods of analysis and interpretation of the oral history – how to reflect on the interview, transcribe it and later publish it as part of a research piece (or in my case, thesis), and how to involve the interviewee in this process. The oral history was thus generated through the following of these steps (with some exceptions, as will be outlined below), while remaining sensitive to and

respectful of the needs, sentiments, and desires of the interviewee, and aware of the potential

shortcomings of this methodology (i.e. the selectivity of one's memory, the tendency to portray

oneself in the 'best possible light,' the fact that usually the most articulate – thus omitting the

non-articulate and the not-so-articulate – individuals will be suitable for an oral history (2005:

17-21)).

The oral history method was used particularly when interviewing the one key informant

of this study, 'Xavier.' More specifically, the process of generating an oral history for Xavier – a

process that lasted over a year – went as follows. The research project was conceptualized

primarily as a result of the principal researcher's encounter with Xavier in a library, and the

effect this unexpected event had on his perception of what it was homelessness entailed. This

was back in 2013, and over the years, a rapport was built between the two parties. Following

this, an interview guide was constructed, based off of a sample guide (Yow, 2005: 335-341),

which had the following overarching themes: biographical information, 'homelessness' as a

category, 'school' as another category, community (both in the shelter and at school),

motivation, empowerment, security, and constraints. One final section was added to the

interview questions, which asked why it was Xavier had made a particular claim – notably, that

"we're all in the same boat, but we're not the same passenger" – and what was meant by this.

These themes, and the questions particular to each theme, were intended to provide some

sort of structure to the interview. Yet, the interviews themselves were also quite open-ended,

such that certain questions were even eliminated from the interviews when they were found to

have the potential to trigger recollection of a traumatic experience (as will be shown later in this

text. Moreover, there were times when Xavier would raise issues that would lead to additional

questions – questions that were not in the original interview guide – but that, ultimately,

contributed to the production of a much richer history. The interviews were recorded on an audio recorder that the researcher kept safely in his possession.

Archival research was conducted by perusing various news sources on the Internet. These ranged from local (i.e. The Montreal Gazette, *Le Journal de Montréal*) to national (CTV News, CBC News), and even international (i.e. The Guardian) news outlets. Conducting archival research benefitted the current research by providing insight into current trends in media reports on the homeless – trends that could then be incorporated into sections dealing with Xavier's unique situation, or into the conclusion (as a means of highlighting potential future research directions, as well as the need for additional research on homelessness). This was done over the course of one month. This methodology was used as a means of obtaining findings that, in no way, were influenced by the researcher – one of the advantages of archival research (Rodriguez and Baber 2006: 65). However, the method was not used in isolation, as a means of minimizing potential biases (65).

Finally, participant observation was conducted by the researcher undertaking two different roles. The first was that of an outreach worker at Shelter X. In this capacity, the researcher would note various events taking place during a particular work shift, and would quickly record these in a notebook. These preliminary recordings would then be completed with 'filled-in notes' following the shift, so as to generate a more complete account of that which had taken place. This method of participant observation occurred for the duration of the research project – the full two years during which the research was conducted. The advantages of this method are, among other things, that it allows for the revelation of matters research subjects may not have been able or willing to talk about (Becker and Geer 1957: 30), and that it provides context for interview and archival material (31). However, participant observation here needed to

be coupled with an interview-type methodology – such as oral history interviews – to provide the initial substance for which contextualization was required.

The second was that of a pedestrian on the street. Simply walking around the city of Montreal put me in touch with many homeless individuals doing a wide variety of activities. These activities, much like those from Shelter X, were first recorded in a preliminary manner in a notebook, and then 'filled in' once in a more tranquil location.

During participant observation sessions, one of the techniques used was that of spatial analysis. Spatial analysis is defined as "that set of analytical methods which requires access both to the attributes of the objects under study and to their locational information" (Goodchild 1987: 68). As will be shown later in the text, the location and proximity of individuals within Shelter X often resulted in one feeling disconnected with others, which exacerbated a set of behaviours and brought about a level of discord amongst shelter dwellers.

Prior to entering the field and making use of the above methodologies, it was imperative one first have an understanding of trends in homelessness research, so as to better situate this research project in recent developments within the field. With regards to how it is the notion of 'homelessness' has changed over time, an exploration of the history of homelessness in North America and around the world revealed that around the 1970s, homelessness became more of a public matter, as the phenomenon ceased to be confined solely to large cities, and Americans and Canadians began encountering homeless individuals more frequently on the streets of various cities (Glasser and Bridgeman 1999: 1-2). The deinstitutionalization of mental illness, around this time, resulted in the production of a discourse on homelessness based on pathology; this was

to change as it was noted both in the media and the academe that affordable inner-city housing was being destroyed in the name of urban gentrification (1999: 2).

Concomitant with this changing awareness of homelessness on the ground level was an influx of new definitions specific to the term. For example, Peter Rossi defined the homeless generally "as those who do not have customary and regular access to a conventional dwelling or residence" – noting some of the complexities embedded in such ideas as the 'conventional dwelling' –, and more specifically as either "literally" (i.e. clearly lacking a conventional dwelling) or "precariously" (i.e. having temporary or tenuous claims to a conventional dwelling) homeless (Rossi *et al*. 1987: 1336). Worldwide, it was noted there existed a vast range of cultural definitions of homelessness, from the *itinerants* and the *sans-abris* used by religious advocates and professionals/academics, respectively, in Montreal, Quebec, to the *roofless* in India, the *furosha* in Japan, and the *gamino* in Columbia (Glasser and Bridgeman 1999: 4): thus, some defined homelessness as the absence of "adequate, affordable shelter" (The Limuru Declaration, as cited in Turner 1988: 187), with that which "adequate shelter" entails being specific to different geographical regions. However, it was also noted that for some groups, such as the pastoralist seasonal migrants (Nanda 1991; Shostak 1983; Gmelch 1985; Helleiner 1992 and 1997) and those residing in recreational-vehicles year-round (Behr and Gober 1982; Counts and Counts 1996), a lack of affordable, adequate shelter was not synonymous with homelessness. Questions apropos of refugee and immigrant populations – the former forced into migration away from home, the latter voluntarily doing so – and whether they should be included within the category of 'homeless' also came to the fore, especially in light of evidence of overlap between migrant populations away from their homeland and shelters: for instance, a high

proportion of refugees reside in Sudanese squatter camps (Bascom 1993), and many African immigrants are found in the *Habitations de Loyer Modérés* in Paris (Boudimbou 1992).

As for anthropological methodologies and analysis of homelessness, the most prevalent research tool – resulting from periods of extended fieldwork within a particular culture – has been that of ethnography: a methodology that "entails not only noting cultural behaviours and actions, but also understanding *interpretations* of behaviours and beliefs on the part of different members of a society" (Glasser and Bridgeman 1999: 6). Examples of this methodology used in the context of homelessness include James Spradley's study of men on the streets of Skid Row in Seattle, Washington (1970), Jennifer Wolch and Stacy Rowe's study of homeless women and men in Los Angeles (1992), Robert Desjarlais' study of the mentally-ill homeless in Boston's Station Street Shelter (1997), and Irene Glasser's study of a soup kitchen as a place with a sense of community (1988).

Homelessness has also been viewed from a cross-cultural (i.e. both domestic and unfamiliar cultures (Glasser and Bridgman 1999: 11)) perspective since the 1980s, thus affording the anthropologist a chance to distance themselves somewhat from their own culture and, ultimately, to view the phenomenon of homelessness as a socio-culturally specific construct (Glasser 1994). For example, Peter Lloyd (1980) argued the self-made houses of the *sin techo* (roofless) poor on the periphery of Lima, Peru formed the foundation for adequate living accommodations that would enable communities to flourish, forming so-called *pueblos jovenes* (young towns). More recently, Bruce O'Neill (2014) explored how boredom forms an integral part of everyday life for the post-communist Bucharest homeless in Romania, as structured by the politics of consumption therein.

Finally, another recent trend since the 1970s in anthropological work on homelessness has been a tendency towards advocacy for these latter – although some anthropologists still believe anthropology as a discipline does not do enough to really affect any changes in public understanding or policies regarding homelessness (i.e. Hopper 1995). Anna Lou Dehavenon (1995), for instance, researched over 25 years those factors which increased hunger and homelessness in New York City, and, subsequently, used the research findings as a basis for annual reports and recommendations to improve the living conditions of the homeless in East Harlem. In another case, Janet Fitchen (1994), through her research, was able to (1) help state and federal legislators see that homelessness was not restricted to urban metropolises, but was also relatively commonplace in rural areas as well, and (2) outline recommendations that would support home ownership for the rural poor (1996). Anthropological works on homelessness have also been used in court cases to improve the sanitation of New York City shelters (Hopper 1990: 111).

In sum, homelessness research has undergone significant changes from the 1970s to the present, first with the phenomenon of homelessness becoming an increasingly public matter marked by gentrification rather than pathology, next with the emergence of new definitions on that which homelessness entails, then with a movement towards cross-cultural ethnography, and, finally, a much greater trend towards applied anthropology – in the form of advocacy at the local, state, provincial, federal, national, or international levels – on behalf of the homeless communities being studied.

In North America, then, these new definitions of homelessness have increased the number of social programs designed to 'help the homeless' escape their precarious position. As such, numerous shelters have come to be characterized by their assistance to those experiencing

situations of drug addiction (Carr 2006), AIDS infection (Clatts and Davis 1999), psychiatric disability (Lovell and Cohn 1998), or youth unemployment (Bridgman 2001). Even places like Shelter X in Montreal have seen influxes of homelessness assistance programs, ranging from transitional housing, psychical and psychiatric health programs, to programs for those experiencing homelessness for the first time in their lives.

To be homeless, then, entails much more than simply a lack of housing. How, then, will this thesis bring to light the hidden and fragmented nature of the category that is 'homelessness'? First, I will examine the work of sociologist Kurt Borchard, who asked many of the same questions I did during his research in Las Vegas. Chapter 1 presents some of the realities of homeless men in Las Vegas: how popular interpretations are not necessarily in accord with their lived experiences; survival strategies used by these men to overcome their situation; and the risks – in terms of crime and the like – faced in their precarious position. Even with discrepancies between the study sites used by Borchard and in the current study – specifically in terms of the placement of shelters and the climate of the cities in question –, his text still demonstrates that homelessness is a fragmented phenomenon, with both individual and social components.

Chapter 2 takes an in-depth look at the life of "Xavier," a homeless man who faces many unique problems given his dual status as both 'homeless' and a 'student.' The constraints of one category influence the other, such that Xavier must find different ways to successfully – albeit not without difficulty – navigate through both.

In chapter 3, a description of life in the very place where Xavier sleeps, Shelter X, will be given. Shelter X is one of the premiere shelters in Montreal, and has a series of unique programs designed for different categories of homeless individuals. While conveniently located (it is in the

heart of downtown Montreal, near public transportation), it can also be difficult to navigate for those who do not necessarily 'fit' each program's requirement.

Chapter 4 serves as something of an auto-ethnography, examining how it is my experiences working with the homeless in different capacities have both enabled – and even disabled – me in my ability to conduct this research project. Even after having worked in a shelter for close to four years, the subject of homelessness still appears at times to be hidden, complex, and difficult to access. A reflection of my work with Xavier will be included, as a means of demonstrating how problems with the current research relate to broader problems with homelessness research – many of which were alluded to by Borchard.

I conclude by exploring some of the implications of my thesis, and why it is important to appreciate homelessness as a problem with interconnected individualistic and holistic dimensions.

Chapter 1 – Homelessness through Borchard

Homelessness is a fragmented subject matter for one main reason: notably, that "the problems faced by homeless men [...] cannot be fully understood outside of the context of the social environment in which they occur" (Borchard 2005: xxv). Borchard's *The Word on the Street: Homeless Men in Las Vegas* will here be discussed in depth so as to further illustrate this point. Before highlighting the parallels between Borchard's text and the current research, a definition of fragmentation will first be presented.

Here, fragmentation, as emerging from trends in both Borchard's text and my own research, is to be defined as the process resulting from the discord between a set of rules designed to generate an 'ideal being,' and the inaccessibility of this same 'ideal being.' The rules here operate much like Michel Foucault's panopticon (2004: 76), being invisible to the homeless, but acting upon these individuals in constraining ways all the same. While designed to create a normative subject – an ideal being that complies with social norms –, these rules ultimately act in a Kafkaesque manner, standing in the way of one's attainment of normative status, and leaving one in a nightmarish situation where one always feels they cannot *quite* reach what they seek. By being less than human – than a normative human –, the homeless individual is dehumanized, and essentially removed of their citizenship. This results in a homeless individual feeling broken and fragmented – to the point of sometimes giving up all hope.

Regarding the parallels between *The Word on the Street* and this text, first, Borchard's trajectory is similar to that of the ethnographer of this thesis. In both cases, one has an individual who has worked in some capacity in a homeless shelter. Moreover, this time spent working amongst the homeless led Borchard, much like it did for me, to reflect upon "the assumptions underlying [homelessness assistance programs] and the paradoxes left unaccounted for by these

assumptions" – such as the fact that "some homeless men were [...] more worthy of assistance than others based on their ability to articulate and achieve goals in line with [an organization's] mission statement" (xvi) –, and to realize "that even agencies with good intentions [...] neither address[ed] the larger reasons behind individuals' becoming homeless in the first place nor change[d] how certain perspectives seem[ed] to justify homelessness" (xix). For instance, over time he came to realize that, despite "[spending] many hours helping participants [in the Men's Transition Program] develop plans as well as directing them to social or other services that might help them achieve their goals," many of these men ultimately could not achieve the ultimate goal of ending their homelessness, precisely because "the difficulties facing them were so numerous": numerous debts ranging from hospital bills to child support, delays and difficulties in receiving paychecks or finding employment, securing enough money to pay apartment expenses, and the like (xviii-xix). Borchard's work, much like this thesis, is then the product of an 'enlightenment' phase common to many ethnographers who begin their fieldwork with one set of expectations about homelessness, only to have these challenged and reconfigured once faced with the lived experiences on the ground (Desjarlais 1997). By being a product of the aforementioned phase, this thesis, much like Borchard's work, further contributes to the collection of knowledge on the experiences of those working in homelessness settings, and the effects the social and cultural fabric in which they are engulfed might have on the very individuals they seek to assist.

Second, Borchard's research deals specifically with male homelessness. As someone whose experiences with the homeless have been relegated primarily to males, by virtue of the way in which shelters are run (for instance, at 'Shelter X' where I was employed, males could only work at the male branch of the shelter, while females could work at both the male and female branches), using Borchard's text as a backdrop for the current research allows for greater

contextualization of this thesis within the realm of *male* homelessness. This is necessary to

address and acknowledge some of the limitations – in terms of the type of informant I could

access – my status as a male brought to the present research. As it will be shown later in this

section, homeless men are often treated differently from homeless women or children, by virtue

of the expectation men should fit their socially- and culturally-ascribed gender role of

'breadwinner' (Passaro 1996) – an expectation that can result in political pushes for budgetary

cuts of funding for male homelessness assistance programs.

Third, Borchard's work speaks to the fact that the topic of homelessness, despite having

been studied countless times over the last few decades (Adkins 2010; Bourgois 1998; Clatts and

Davis 1999; Dehavenon 1989; Desjarlais 1999; Hyde 2000; Rowe 1989; Sterk-Elifson and

Elifson 1992; Simpson 2015; Susser and Gonzalez 1992; Whitley 2013), continues to be a

complex and difficult subject matter, for the anthropologist, to access. Even for someone like

Borchard, who worked for several months with homeless men as a director of a Men's Transition

Program for the Salvation Army in Fairbanks (2005: xv), securing interviews with informants

during his fieldwork proved to be quite a difficult task. As noted in his text,

> *Often I would only be able to conduct an interview with a man once, talking to him for a half an hour to two hours, only to never see him again.* Occasionally a man would allow me to spend the better part of a day with him, or I would see him and talk to him informally several times after our initial interview. In one instance, a man named Bill kept a journal for me for two weeks, documenting his day-to-day experiences and thoughts while homeless. (218, emphasis added)

Thus, while Borchard's work does illustrate many of the subtleties inherent in the lives of

homeless men in Las Vegas, it also presents a more fundamental reality of homelessness

research: notably, that there is no real correlation between one's experience working with the

homeless and one's ability to do research on the said population. Much like Borchard's research, the current project was conducted by someone with extensive experience working amongst the homeless (nearly four years of employment in a shelter, to be exact). Yet, this 'experience' did little to simplify the task of securing interviews with the key informant (here to be presented in chapter 2).

The Word on the Street, therefore, serves as a sound basis for an exploration of the fragmented nature of the subject that is homelessness, precisely because much like the current study, it: (1) makes use of an ethnographer who has, in some capacity, worked in a homeless shelter, (2) it deals specifically with male homelessness (although in his case, the choice was more self-driven, whereas in the current research, the choice was the result of a series of institutional regulations), and (3) highlights some of the complexities of studying the often hidden subject of homelessness. Parallels between Borchard's text and the current study also greatly serve this research by firmly situating the latter within current trends in homelessness research – as the following paragraphs and subsequent chapters will show –, ultimately reflecting the importance of the current research.

Borchard is not the first researcher on homelessness to have worked in a shelter, studied male homelessness, or highlighted the complexities of accessing the homeless subject. Yet, a review of the literature indicates he is unique in having satisfied all three points within the aforementioned trifecta. Vincent Lyon-Callo, for instance, conducted ethnographic research within an emergency shelter in Massachusetts, exploring how it was routine shelter assistance practices produced subjects who self-blamed and self-governed (2000). He had been employed as a staff member for four years at a "20-bed emergency homeless shelter in Northampton, Massachusetts" (2000: 332). However, his research dealt with homeless men and women. For

instance, interviewees in his ethnography included: Raymond, a "homeless African American man in his late forties […] with a long history of social activism focused on racism and poverty" (328); Jerry, a "24-year-old white man [trying] his hardest to work his way out of homelessness through paid employment" (335); Maria, a lady with "a fairly extensive history of social activism around racial inequality [who] had also worked for many years in social service jobs" (337); and Ariel, "a white women in her late fifties [who was supporting] herself through house cleaning[,] [only to lose] her room at a local rooming house when she was no longer able to secure enough work to pay rent" (339). As a researcher cognizant of the limitations of my fieldwork – limitations imposed by my access point (a male shelter) to the homeless community – Lyon-Callo's work thus does presents an unaccounted variable that Borchard's research controls for, making Borchard's work more amenable to the current study.

Josea Kramer and Judith C. Barker, for their part, look at homelessness among Older American Indians, in Los Angeles, over a two-year period in the late 1980s (1996). Their study, however, was constructed in such a manner that the researchers themselves were not the ones 'going out into the field,' but rather by employing 'locals' – in the form of American Indian adults – to interview other locals. Moreover, the research participants were not of one gender, and as such their methodology and conclusions could not be used as a basis for accurate comparisons.

Steven Persaud, Lynn McIntyre, and Katrina Milaney (2010), in their research, focused on how it was young working homeless men dealt with homelessness while in the thriving city of Calgary, how they created a sense of identity, and navigated social services while dealing with issues of food insecurity. Here, the mono-gendered focus serves as a parallel with the experience of many employees of homeless shelters who, based on their gender, may be relegated to either

the male or female shelters. Yet, no mention in the text has been made of whether or not any of the authors was employed in a shelter prior to, or during, the research. Rather, we are told one of the authors "spent periods of up to four hours a day and at different times of the day at a number of locations within downtown Calgary that are commonly frequented by homeless men" over a period of three months. Problems emanating from the research design may here be ascribed to 'naïveté,' rather than an inherent, hidden nature to the subject of homelessness.

In continuing with the remark raised by Persaud *et al.*, Nicole Constable is instead interested in how it is Filipina domestic workers come to define home while employed in Hong Kong (1999). While Constable's study, much like the studies of Borchard and the current study, take a mono-gendered approach, her study does not suggest she has been employed in a homeless setting prior to, or while, conducting research. The fact that researchers like Borchard, Lyon-Callo, and I have faced challenges studying the homeless brings further credence to the notion of a 'hidden homeless subject matter,' precisely because it allows for the elimination of 'work experience' as a variable. The research of Constable here, and Kramer and Barker (1996) above, give ammunition to the argument that any challenges they (or their informants) may have faced in the field were rooted in inexperience. Using Borchard's work, then, as a means of undergirding the current research, also allows for the strengthening of the argument of 'homelessness' as hidden and fragmented.

Returning to Borchard's work, briefly, he begins by examining some of the common questions asked, and assumptions made, about the homeless: "'Is it true that most homeless men are mentally ill?' 'Aren't most of them alcoholics, or drug addicts?' 'Aren't homeless men usually uneducated, or illiterate?' 'Why don't they just get a job?' 'I see a homeless man around town named [blank], and he just wants to collect cans. He seems to like being homeless'" (xiii).

Equipped with knowledge of shelter life from his days as a director of a Men's Transition Program, Borchard pursues the subject of homeless men in Las Vegas in an attempt to "[correct] views that seek to style male homelessness entirely as an individual, and not as a social, problem" (xv). Over the course of five chapters, he presents a variety of fieldwork, ranging from a literature review on homeless men and "the spatial arrangement of Las Vegas" (xxv), to in-depth interviews with one homeless man "to show that he is not fully culpable for his homelessness" – interviews which subsequently undergird a more general exploration of how it is men become, and problems they face when, homeless –, and the different forms of living accommodations used by these individuals. The effect of crime and violence on the lives of homeless men in Las Vegas, and recent debates "about the wisdom of centralizing services for homeless men [while] increasing calls to reduce charity for local homeless men [and] criminalize their survival practices" were then presented in two final chapters (xxvi), after which a reflection on the social and individual components of male homelessness was provided as a means of concluding the text.

Borchard, in his text, presents the stories of numerous Las Vegas street people. However, three stand out in particular, as they reflect his key argument: notably, that male homelessness in Las Vegas cannot be understood without exploration of the social context responsible for this situation. The first is the case of Jerry, a man who, by his own admission, has made a series of bad life choices (30). For instance, he continued to smoke, despite having emphysema, thus making him sicker (33-34). Yet, these choices, as later Borchard found, were also driven by a series of social factors, of the institutional variety, that propelled Jerry to act in the manner he did. Thus, the apparent "dismiss[al] [of] information about social services for homeless persons that [Borchard] was telling [Jerry]" was not simply a case of an individual being ignorant (36).

Rather, as Jerry's unsuccessful attempt to obtain a place to sleep at Working Shelter demonstrated (44-45), it was a case of someone whose lived experiences had informed them of the tendency shelters had to simply given homeless men – particularly those in dire need of a place to sleep – "the runaround" (45). This notion of the 'runaround' reflects the sense of fragmentation – as defined above – of many homeless individuals. Much like Clifford Geertz's view of culture as a set of control mechanisms (2010: 50), or Anthony Giddens' claim that the 'universal' encapsulates both "the active constituting skills of [a society's] members, [and the] conditions of which [these members] are unaware or perceive only dimly," such that individual interactions produce "modes of *structuration* [that] reproduce [these same interactions]" (1976: 157), Borchard's experience with Jerry demonstrates that for homeless individuals in Las Vegas, the mannerisms of these men are dictated not solely by internal factors, but also by external factors. It is these factors, lying outside the individual proper – such as the generalized actions of shelters towards homeless men like Jerry –, which act upon the individual in constraining ways, ultimately shaping individual behaviours into one universal way of being.

The second relates to the multitude of causes, and ways in which these causes led to situations of homelessness. For Borchard, "the causes that may lead a man to homelessness are overlapping and seem to frequently interact with one another" (2005: 98). In the case of Bob, contracting chronic active hepatitis C from a blood transfusion at a local hospital resulted in him being stripped of everything he owned (58), and caused him to experience more frequent bouts of fatigue while at work – to the point where "medically, [he] just couldn't work" (86). Drawing upon Ernest Gellner, then, ascribing one's homeless status to one causative agent is an exercise in futility, for these causes are better served being combined into 'one' that can then become reified as 'truth' (1959:263) – the 'truth' here being a description of the lives of homeless men in

Las Vegas. Similarly, Louis Dumont refers to holism as a conceptual framework that promotes the social whole at the expense of the human individual (1986:279). This has parallels with observations by Borchard, who cautions against reducing homelessness to several categories, and instead chooses to think of this phenomenon as "the result of a process in which a bad break or unfortunate circumstance leads to other problems that in turn affect a man's ability to maintain reliable shelter" (2005:99) – an occurrence that ultimately combines the multiple reasons one might lack a house into the tidy category of 'homelessness,' however one chooses to define and connote this term. One might then say that for Borchard, 'homeless' as a holistic category serves as "as an idiom or vehicle of intersubjective life" (Jackson 2013: 133) – as a means of further exploring the different fragments that might precipitate one's involvement with the streets. In the case of Bob, one sees the benefit of using such an approach, for through the category of 'homelessness,' one may access the multiple, fragmented causes that result in his current predicament.

The third refers to the situation described by Borchard regarding debates over funding shelters in Las Vegas. In his text, Borchard notes that many prominent members therein were not entirely supportive of providing funding for all homeless men. For some, funding was only to be given to 'innocent' homeless persons – a discourse that often privileged "charitable support for women and children over the support of men" (200). Rooted in a combination of core American values of hard work (the idea that those who work hard will, in a competitive market, rise to the top and achieve spiritual success in the form of an accumulation of wealth and material (3), while those who are lazy will fall to the bottom) and individual freedom (the idea that "an individual can determine his or her own fate" (3)), Horatio Alger myths of "stories about individuals who succeed materially despite humble beginnings" – stories that "define the United

States as a meritocracy in which individual achievement can determine one's social class and material wealth" (2) –, and the consensus that for a man, one's masculinity is defined through by their "role as an employed, self-sufficient, breadwinner" (Borchard 2005: 5; Bernard 1992; Pleck 1992), political discourses on which homeless should be funded often resulted in the exclusion of homeless men – ultimately assuming these individuals had *chosen*, in some form or another, to be in their current situation. This assumption undermined the fact that, for many homeless men in Las Vegas, their plight was the result of a combination of factors both internal, and external, to the individual in question. For others, like former mayor Oscar Goodman and Councilman Gary Reese, funding was to be limited because the homeless were primarily lazy, and "'the more [people] have done [for the homeless], the bigger the problem [of homelessness] has got[ten]'" (201). In both cases, one sees that a series of discourses on homelessness have contributed to, and even exacerbated, the situation of the homeless, putting the lives of men who depend on the safety of the shelters for stability at risk. Here, it is a series of political factors, and discourses in political spheres, which contribute to some of the characteristics of homelessness, like the sense of uncertainty felt by many homeless men in Las Vegas.

In all three cases, one finds that Borchard's presents homelessness as a fragmented subject matter because of the multiple overlapping causes that precipitate one's spiral into street life. These causes can be internal – in the form of health problems (although these health problems can have external sources, as in the case of Bob's blood transfusions) –, or external (be it at the institutional, employment, or political levels).

The examples presented in Borchard's text are not specific to Las Vegas, however. Much of what he described has parallels to lives of homeless men in Montreal. In the following section, an in-depth examination of the life of Xavier will be provided.

Chapter 2 – Xavier

The day I am about to describe is similar to the subject of this ethnography: like so many others, unassuming and presumptively ordinary. I was an undergraduate student then, and had an assignment to complete. Naturally, this meant a date with one of the computers on the second floor of the library building, for it was in the library, and more specifically on the second floor of the aforementioned library building, that my productivity was enhanced, and that I was able to focus best on the writing of the monstrous essay due in a few hours' time. In essence, it was a case of business proceeding as per usual.

Except, on this day, something seemed odd – but I initially could not quite figure it out. So, as I had done countless times before, I made my way to an available computer, entered my user name and password, and then prepared myself for the eternal wait as the computer chugged along, at a turtle's pace, applying this user setting and preparing that desktop. So unbearable was the wait that I decided to look away from the computer and around, more generally, at the space that was the second floor computer area. And then it happened.

Him.

Is it him?

What is HE doing here?

My screen had finally loaded, so I reverted my gaze back to the computer, thinking what I had seen was a mirage. *Maybe it wasn't him.* That week had been especially difficult, with midterms, in addition to the aforementioned assignment. *You should really get more rest.* I reasoned I should focus on the essay, and put the event on the backburner.

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Several minutes later, with a few paragraphs under my belt, I felt the curiosity resurface. I tried to sneak a peek to see if what I had seen was in fact true.

And indeed, there he was. A middle-aged man of Haitian and Cuban origin, 'Xavier' is somewhat slight of stature, stands somewhere between five foot seven and five foot ten, and is not particularly physically imposing. Yet, he exudes a sort of quiet strength: one that can only come from years of adversity and, as he would later so often say during our conversations (but refused to divulge the specifics), "a dream" [14] that kept him moving forward. His complexion is reminiscent of strong oak. However, Xavier's skin lacks the smooth finishing of these tables, instead being rough, and even wrinkled, in places. If the wrinkles were not enough to betray his mature student status, then the tinge of grey in his hair certainly does.

On the ground, by his side, was a bag. The bag had a strap on it such that when he left the scene, he did so with the bag wrapping around one side of his body and hanging down the other. I found it interesting that he possessed a more professional-looking shoulder strap bag than a prototypical school bag, despite the fact that we were in a school setting. Adding to the 'professional' look was the fact that the bag was dark in colour: a dark grey, almost black tint.

He was working away on the computer adjacent to mine, oblivious to the fact that I was eyeing him. His eyes were 'shifty' – and not in the sense of 'fidgety,' but rather of 'dynamic,' for as he was typing away furiously on the keyboard, one could see his eyes move from restive one moment to ablaze with fire and passion the next. After a few moments, he looked up from his computer screen, and our eyes locked. Our encounter resulted in him emitting a squirm. Within a

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[14] 'Xavier' (homeless student) in discussion with the author, January 14th, 2016.

matter of seconds, he had hastily logged off his computer and moved to a more distant place. I would not see him for the rest of the day.

Later during the day, as I navigated through my various classes, I reflected upon the encounter. Why had I been so shocked to see him? After all, mature students in university settings were not much of an anomaly in the 21st century. Moreover, many universities had systems whereby guests and alumni could access their computers if need be. What was the big deal?

And then the all-too-evident truth reared its head. I had to acknowledge that my preconceived notions and biases of who Xavier was, and where he should (and should not) be, was what made the encounter so earth-shattering. Xavier resided at the homeless shelter where I was employed part-time. I was soon to learn he was also a university student.

This was in 2013.

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Over the following two years, a rapport was built with Xavier, to the point where he no longer hid from me when we crossed paths in the library. In those moments of crossing, he would sometimes tell me about developments in his life, such as trips he was planning to take to visit various family members across North America. On one occasion, a positive event had taken place in his life (Xavier has requested this event not be elaborated upon in the ethnography) that caused him, somewhat out of the blue, to hug me out of joy. I was taken aback, and while my ribs were sore for days from the bear-hug he delivered, I had to admit that, secretly, I was pleased.

I was also going through a period of self-discovery while an outreach worker at the shelter where Xavier slept. Questions pertaining to what the category of "homeless" meant, and whether or not this internalized definition had any congruency with the lives of those in the shelter, soon came to the fore. I came to realize there existed a plethora of diverse experiences amongst the homeless, many of which were often silenced by the dominant narratives present of the discourse on homelessness; that these dominant narratives often produced a category of the homeless as a homogeneous whole, as if the homeless had some sort of essential quality that made them such. Thus, labels such as 'vagrant,' 'mentally ill,' 'dirty,' 'lazy,' and 'thief' came to characterize the latter (labels which, as an ethnographer, I am still guilty of using from time-to-time, both in my speech (i.e. speaking of the homeless as if they are all incompetent) and in my actions (i.e. refusing to give a panhandler money because I believe they are 'up to no good')). My reaction upon seeing Xavier for the first time in the library, coupled with my growing awareness of the multitude of different forms of homeless individuals, allowed for a realization: a realization that the imposition of these discourses on the homeless collective could, and in many cases did, undermine the particular and unique life histories of the individuals comprising this collective.

Homelessness is a reality not only for Xavier, but for many students across North America, and even around the world with institutions such as the University of Santa Barbara dedicating a website to the population of the homeless student (http://foodbank.as.ucsb.edu/news/), and more recently, counties such as Frederick County in Maryland forming initiatives for student homelessness (Student Homeless Initiative Partnership – http://www.shipfrederick.com/). In fact, the United States possesses an association that strives to be the "voice and social conscience for the education of children and youth experiencing

homelessness" – the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth

(NAEHCY) –, and they have generated a toolkit for homeless youth seeking an education

(http://www.naehcy.org/sites/default/files/dl/toolkit.pdf). In London, Patrick Mulrenan has

shown through his survey research that there were a significant number of homeless

undergraduate students – some being mature students hoping to increase their quality of life via

additional schooling, others being more 'traditional' students – in just one of the ten schools at

London Metropolitan University.[15] Yet, negligible mention has been made either in the scholarly

literature or the Canadian media about this population, and very few services exist in Canada in

general, and more specifically in Montreal, tailored to the cohort of the homeless student – an

oddity given that services specific to this population exist in places like Santa Barbara, California

(homeless population ~6,150 (Heroux 2006)), but not in Montreal, Quebec (homeless population

~13,000 (http://www.santemontreal.qc.ca/en/support-services/services-by-type/homelessness/)).

     With regards to the academic literature on student homelessness, it appears the topic is

one that only recently has begun to gain popularity, with several articles having been published,

worldwide, on the subject over the last ten years. Publications on the matter have dealt with:

homelessness among junior high school students in Japan – as reflected in an autobiographical

novel – (Freedman 2011), temporary family and student homelessness among families in the

south east of Scotland (Powney 2001), ways of integrating homeless students within school

districts in Northern California through better policies (Hallett, Low, and Skrla 2015), the need

for a critical analysis of research on student homelessness (Miller 2011), hidden student

homelessness in North-East Melbourne (Michael 2010), and the role of school psychology in

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[15] Lightfoot, Liz. "Hidden Homeless: the Students Ashamed to Admit they've Nowhere to Sleep." *The Guardian*, June 21, 2016, accessed July 11, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/jun/21/homeless-students-nowhere-sleep-london-emergency-accommodation

student homelessness in the United States (Sulkowski 2016). Much of this research deals with homelessness amongst primary school students, making the cases presented by Mulrenan in London above and by Xavier below so compelling, speaking even further to the hidden nature of the homeless subject.

Returning to the case of Xavier, one finds his current predisposition is the result of a combination of both social and individual factors – an occurrence that brings further credence to the idea of homelessness being a fragmented subject matter. On the one hand, there exist a plethora of factors external to Xavier that confine him in his way of life. Some of these external factors include the operating hours of the shelter where he resides: "sometimes, the place [where I] sleep, I [leave it] at 4AM, then come back at 7 o'clock PM. That's a long [amount of time to] spend outside. Your body's tired, [your] mind's tired; I feel my brain is scrambled. So, it's hard!"[16] Evidently, the fact of always having to leave the shelter by a certain time, only to subsequently return at yet another particular time in order to maintain one's bed, confines Xavier to a street life he so desperately wants to escape.

> When I started, I had a class [from] six o'clock to eight. By the time I leave the building to [...] board the train to go to the shelter, it's almost nine o'clock. Nine o'clock is the scheduled time – everybody's got to be there! To save my bed, I have to leave the class half an hour early. OK. Sometimes, the teacher – some of them – might not like it, because [if as a student] you leave the class half an hour early...maybe they don't know. She or he, [they] don't know why you keep leaving like this, you know? [...] But when I get to the shelter, I always have to come in with excuses, you know? "Oh, I went to the school." Some people understand, some don't.[17]

Much like (1) Emile Durkheim's emphasis on 'social facts' as representing ways of being which exist outside the individual consciousness, and which are laden with a coercive power that places

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[16] 'Xavier' (homeless student) in discussion with the author, January 20th 2016.
[17] 'Xavier' (homeless student) in discussion with the author, January 14th 2016.

all individuals at the mercy of these facts (1966: 51), (2) Clifford Geertz's classification of 'culture' as a set of control mechanisms, in the form of plans, recipes, and instructions, which govern human behaviour (2010: 50), and (3) Anthony Giddens' view of the universal as both "the active constituting skills of [a society's] members, [and the] conditions of which [these members] are unaware or perceive only dimly," such that individual interactions produce "modes of *structuration* [that] reproduce [these same interactions]" (1976:157), Xavier's situation as a homeless male in Montreal is rooted in factors lying outside the individual proper: factors which act upon the individual in constraining ways, such that they conform to a series of norms – societal (or *social*) norms –, which shape individual behaviours into one universal way of being.

Yet another social factor contributing to Xavier's predicament are the financial institutions, and the multitude of bureaucratic preconditions he must satisfy in order to obtain any monetary assistance for his schooling. Experiences with these organizations – where he has often felt pushed into the background and neglected – have led to a sense of worthlessness, and a belief that the only form of income for which he was worthy lay in that of a welfare cheque. As a researcher, despite my best attempts to remain objective in my fieldwork, I had to acknowledge that stories like these left me somewhat moved by his determination and perseverance, even though one could clearly see he was almost at the point of despair. Consider the following poignant testimonial, which parallels "the runaround" alluded to by Jerry in Kurt Borchard's text:

> Xavier: [...] I was in financial trouble. I went three times to the [financial aid] office. I asked them [for money]. It seems to me there [were] a lot of paradox[es]. They asked me if [...] why [did] I come [to them] at this time? Where have you been? [Why did] you wait for so long? [...] They sent me home. They asked me, OK, are you married? I said yes – married, divorced. But I cannot afford my education right now. I feel like I need to [go back to school for

some more education]. But, they kept sending me home, back again. Every time I come, I...uh...I didn't have a place to sleep. Then I called my social worker. She helped me out, because I couldn't pay the rent! I ain't got no money to pay the rent. You have to have money. To have money, you have to have a job! And I have nothing!

Then, [at] my last appointment with the financial aid office, I bring my paper up there, [and] I showed them I slept in a shelter. But they still never called me. Nobody ever called me. They avoid me. You understand? Like this, I didn't have any other choices. I had to collect money from welfare to pay the few credits that I needed. You know? But I was hoping, because they said they would call me back, you know, for the grant [...]. But nobody ever talked to me, you know? So, what [am I to] do? I feel like it's enough for me. I can't take no more. And [so] I just give up everything.[18]

Ernest Gellner states that issues pertaining to the particular are usually insignificant, as they produce a multitude of phenomena which are better combined into 'one': this 'one' can then become reified as 'truth', unlike the untidy and complex 'many' of particularism (1959:263). Similarly, Louis Dumont refers to the social (here in opposition to the individual) as a conceptual framework that promotes the social whole at the expense of the human individual (1986:279). One might then say that for Xavier, his status as a 'homeless' individual serves as "as an idiom or vehicle of intersubjective life" (Jackson 2013: 133) – as a means of further exploring the different constituents and factors that may precipitate one's involvement with the streets, rather than the converse (i.e. the constituent parts allowing for greater understanding of homelessness). Using the category of the homeless, then, one can access the intersubjective realities of homeless individuals – including homeless students like Xavier – and how they come to define certain concepts (and, ultimately, remain trapped in the cycle of homelessness, despite their best efforts to escape). For instance, one can see that for Xavier, 'normalcy' is congruent with neglect: a

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[18] 'Xavier' (homeless student) in discussion with the author, January 14th, 2016.

neglect that he finds to be quite prevalent in his life as an itinerant student in search for financial aid.

However, to say that Xavier's situation was not partially precipitated by factors specific to Xavier, or that he was not trying to take matters into his own hands to escape his present circumstances, would be disingenuous. Consider now the case of Xavier, and how his unique way of being presents something of an affront to more universal constructions of that which 'the student' entails.

> Zenas: So, have you felt like, um, the fact that you might be older than some of the students...um...has that affected your studies?
>
> Xavier: Right, right! Because...I'm, I'm glad you asked that. I was in a class...biology [...]. My...uh...lady teacher...but I was not [the] only [...] student [who was] older. There are so many students. But, you know, sometimes I come in late. [...] She called me [to] her office. She [asked] me if I didn't talk to [the other] students. I asked "what do you mean by that?" [She said,] "they don't say to you 'you look older'?" [I said] "I don't know what you mean by that." I was not the only one [who was] older. There were younger students also – 20, 19 [years old] – OK? [...] I didn't really pay any attention to all of that. Maybe...this is Quebec: because you are older, they have some kind of discrimination [...]. But I didn't say nothing. I said "I came to the class because I need it; I didn't come to socialize with the other students." If they talk to me, if they don't want to talk to me...but I don't feel like I'm inferior to anybody. She said "oh, sometimes we do that." She asked me if I had been in school before. I had my old ID – I showed [it to] her. I said "go to the registrar's office...the admissions office...and see if anything comes up [...]."
>
> [...]
>
> Z: So on the day, she called you out like that?
>
> X: Yeah, she called me, and she said after the class [to] come over [to] her office. I came in, and [while] talking, she said [that] to me.
>
> Z: But...was she saying that to offer you some help?

X: Well...she didn't offer me any help. But I...I did pretty well! But only one thing: what I'm saying is that I was [an] independent [student], and so [being] independent means [that you're] sponsored by nobody. It's a problem, because it seems like I am a ghetto student! They know that, OK? That can affect my grades also. But [all things considered], I did pretty well! The class I had, I already had it in high school. Even though [I left high school] over 25 years [ago].[19]

As previously indicated, Xavier often arrived late to class, given his difficult situation. Moreover, he frequently had to leave before the end of the class, so as to ensure he would retain his bed at Shelter X. Yet, this is not what preoccupied him, here. Rather, it was the set of assumptions placed on him by a professor: that, perhaps, given his advanced age vis-à-vis his peers, and his outward appearance, he might be there to 'socialize' – and, dare one assume, given his habit of arriving late to and disrupting the flow of the class (Chin 2008), 'corrupt' the younger students with his 'unbecoming ways.' Here, a series of factors unique to Xavier, such as age, have resulted in his being granted the status of 'outlier' in the classroom – an ascription that concomitantly pushes him towards a category more 'suitable' for marginalized peoples, like 'homeless.'

In addition, Xavier's unique makeup and sense of agency allow for the *breaking away from* the category of homelessness.

Zenas: So, basically, what you are saying is you don't really...you like to keep to yourself – you don't really interact with people at the shelter...

Xavier: No!

Z: ...you just use it to get some sleep...

X: How you gonna interact with people in a shelter? It's not a prejudice. It's not...uh [...] narcissistic. It's not that. Because...everybody comes in [to the shelter] for different things.

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[19] 'Xavier' (homeless student) in discussion with the author, January 20th 2016.

Z: OK.

X: The guy you see on the street, the guy maybe stayed out all day, outside, [to] smoke, smoking whatever they're smoking, drinking. We don't have the same...same level.

Z: Yeah, I see what you're saying.

X: I sleep up there, it's not because...uh...federal penitentiary sent me. I bring myself because I'm [in a bad position]. I don't have opportunities; I don't have nobody. So, I need to concentrate, you know, I just sleep [there].

I don't even eat there. I don't even...uh...they give you clothes – they give you shelter clothes. I don't even wear them, because I don't want to, on the street, I don't want to give people any sign that I'm in trouble. I am trying to be, you know, [a] strong guy. [...] OK? But, I don't know for [the] next guy, who sleeps, you know, next to me, or in the top of the bunk bed, you know? Because we're there.

We don't know nobody. If I knew some students living in a shelter, maybe I could make a friend, OK? 'I know him. He [goes] to [school X]. Or [school Y].' [then, in an excited tone, as if speaking to an imaginary friend:] 'OK, man...come here! Tell me about it!' [But] I don't know nobody. Understand?[20]

For Louis Dumont, individualism is defined as a negation of the social whole by the autonomous and rational being (1986: 279). Similarly, Edmund Leach views the individual as one who "resent[s] the domination of others and seeks to exercise choice on [their] own" (1977: 19). Dumont's and Leach's individual, thus, views society not as a reality, but rather disregards the social whole as a valid entity. Ultimately, by avoiding any association with others at Shelter X (and, by extension, undermining the validity of his classification within the category of 'homeless'), Xavier makes it quite clear that the social whole that is the category of 'homelessness' has its flaws, precisely because individuals within the whole live such disparate lives, ultimately calling into question the very validity of the term in the first place.

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[20] 'Xavier' (homeless student) in discussion with the author, January 14th, 2016.

In sum, the unique set of experiences lived by Xavier as a homeless student demonstrates that homelessness is both produced and reproduced by a combination of social and individual factors. It is this imperfect and interconnected duality between the 'whole' and the 'individual,' and the literature emerging therein, which undergirds the current research project. In the following section, a description of Shelter X, the place where Xavier sleeps, will be provided, so as to better illustrate how it is life within a Montreal shelter can limit one's ability to free oneself from the often cyclical nature of homelessness.

Chapter 3 – Shelter X

So how is it that places where the homeless like Xavier sleep further contribute to fragmenting the homeless subject? Here, a description of one of the larger shelters in Montreal, Shelter X, will be provided, so as to answer the aforementioned question. This is a shelter with a defined set of rules, as well as several assistance programs for homeless individuals. As will be shown, Shelter X's structure and unique set of rules often oppose one another, ultimately creating a fragmented sense of self for the individual looking use the shelter's living accommodations.

Looking out from The Convention Centre, one does not notice the Shelter X, for it is located behind a parking garage and a music store. Yet, what the Shelter X lacks in conspicuousness, it makes up for in importance for many street people, as made evident by the multitude who, around 5 PM, form a queue for the suppertime service. From the exterior, the building looks like it has seen better days – despite attempts to 'modernize,' one still finds remnants of the Shelter X's past, in the form of worn-out signs and cracking paint, which speak to the historical importance of the organization.

Past the front door lies the reception area, where shelter residents and outsiders often go to receive their medications, inquire about the possibility of having a place to sleep, check to see if loved ones have left any messages, or – for the hungry late-night stragglers – inquire about the possibility of having a brown lunch bag, among other things. It is this area that serves as Shelter X's engine: the team leader of the *intervenants* – those outreach workers on the ground level who have the most personal interactions with the clients of the shelter – resides here, as do all the technological devices which serve as databases for client information. In essence, the reception area is the New York of the shelter, for it never sleeps.

Going further into the shelter, one can continue straight ahead into the cafeteria, climb a set of stairs, or take the elevator. The cafeteria is something of a jack-of-all-traits, for it doubles – and even triples – over as a sleep area during the winter months, and an art gallery for local artists looking to present their artwork. Of course, the primary use of the cafeteria is as a place to consume a meal. During suppertime, each of the 16 tables are usually full – save for days when some of the more transient clients are taking advantage of their welfare checks –, such that the cafeteria becomes especially boisterous. It is almost as if cattle are being herded, for individuals come in one way, are directed to certain spots by employees and volunteers, and then are shuttled out another way. Between the tables lie pillars – four to five in total –, which watch ominously, almost like a rendition of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, over the supper service as it unfolds. Xavier does not usually eat supper at Shelter X – preferring instead to get his own food from outside the shelter, as "successful" people do.

> Xavier: The guy you see begging people for quarters. He's homeless. He's begging people for the piece of pizza. [He's] not a success. I don't want to go out there, you know, begging people for quarters. I don't want to go out there, go into the shelter, [to get] a coat, [...] one coat, [that] isn't even good, isn't even warm. It's not a success.
>
> [...] So, to me, that's what success means. Every time you do [a purchase] with your [own] card, with your arrogance... OK, I need a coat. I am going [to shop for] a coat right now. I need to eat. When I leave the campus, I am going to the Chinese [restaurant]. I need to eat shrimp. I need to eat steak. I need to eat filet mignon. This is success. But, if you sit down, outside, [and] you beg people for the piece of pizza, it's not a success. If I leave the campus right now, [go] to the shelter, [and] I put myself in line with the street people, as a student, [in order] to eat, [then] that is not a success. It's bad. That can affect me [and] my grades. "Oh, I'm not going [anywhere]. Look at me, I study hard. Nobody cares for me."
>
> [...] You put yourself on line, you stay fifteen minutes or twenty minutes in the cold winter. [...] Sometimes the piece of food, they give it to you [and it doesn't even] taste good. It's not a success. If

you leave the campus, [and] you go to the Chinese restaurant, you eat good food, you pull your wallet out, you pay ten dollars for the food you eat – you feel like you're successful! That's what it is.[21]

This suppertime service is one of the many rule-governed facets of life at Shelter X. For one, the suppertime service is split into sections, with one dedicated to those shelter dwellers in transition programs, and another reserved for the more transient homeless sleeping on the second floor (more on this later). A transient homeless person may not eat supper during the time reserved for transition program members; yet, a member of a transition program may eat supper during the time reserved for the transient (provided they have a valid reason for missing their reserved supper time). What is more, supper may be denied to a transient homeless individual if they are deemed too inebriated, or are acting in a non-compliant manner – with non-compliance being characterized by episodes such as refusing to queue in an orderly fashion. The supper service, then, fragments the homeless into those 'deserving' of supper and those not, with those individuals in transitional programs having the most flexibility in terms of when they can have supper, and the transient homeless having the least flexibility.

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Moving beyond the cafeteria, the stairs and elevators in Shelter X both lead to either the upper floors – of which there are four – or down to the basement. The former are where the clients reside, with the second floor being reserved for the more transient clients (with some individuals belonging in homelessness assistance programs) and the third/fourth/fifth floors reserved exclusively for those in programs. The latter is where one finds the furnace room, the *vestiaire* – where, on select days of the week, clients may obtain fresh clothes that have been

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[21] 'Xavier' (homeless student) in discussion with the author, January 14 2016.

donated to the shelter –, and the laundry room – where dirty towels and the like are washed so as to be redistributed on subsequent nights to the clients.

With regards to the second floor, it is mainly a collection of bunk beds spread amongst three dormitories. One dormitory houses the bulk of the beds; the other two contain significantly less. Individuals residing on this floor, for the most part, do not have access to lockers. The combination of (1) shoes that have been walked in over the course of twenty-four hours or more, trampling everything from water, to snow, to vomit, to animal excrement; (2) socks that inhabited the aforementioned shoes; (3) clothes that have been worn for days (sometimes even weeks or months), without ever being washed; and (4) food items that have been snuck onto the said floor, for all the 200 or so clients, makes for a unique smell on the second floor.

Here, attention must be given to the rule prohibiting food on the second floor, and how it further fragments the homeless residing at Shelter X. Briefly, Shelter X has had its share of problems with bed bugs in the past, often having to drastically alter shelter life for a while as exterminators came in to eliminate these insects. Given the realization that undergoing such an operation again would not be particularly cost-effective, and that it would almost assuredly negatively impact homeless individuals looking for stability in some way, the administration of Shelter X decided to ban food on the upper floors, as they brought about bed bugs. To aid in this effort, clients are chosen at random each night for 'verification' – basically, a search of their bag – to see if, among other things, they have any food. The fact that the 'verification' is random means that some individuals are, ultimately, not chosen to be searched – individuals who might be carrying food with them.

While initially applied to all shelter dwellers, it became quite evident that such a rule might compromise the well-being of certain individuals: mainly, those with health conditions. As such, one of the rooms on the fourth floor, reserved for individuals with health conditions, has its own fridge – locked by key – from which snacks may be obtained. In fact, individuals staying in this room may eat snacks from this fridge twice during the evening.

The fact that the shelter survives on donations can, at times, further undermine the rules put in place to create a sense of cohesion and equality amongst its homeless clients. Consider, once more, the fourth floor, but this time its common area. In this common area, one finds several couches arranged around a television set, such that many of the clients on this floor, who work during the day, may come here during the evening to relax. Of note in this area is the presence of a vending machine – a partial gift from an external organization. Soft drinks are usually not allowed on the upper floors; yet, the location of this vending machine undermines that very rule. Here, one has a situation where a set of rules, designed to be universally applied to all shelter dwellers, is challenged by the health conditions of, and donations given to, different residents of Shelter X. These rules, coupled with the differential access individuals on separate floors have to services, contribute further to the fragmentation of the homeless collective – to the point where occasional conflicts, between one individual who might wonder why another is allowed to circulate the shelter while in possession of food, may ensue.

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Joining the dormitories is a long hallway, which branches into five rooms. The first is an office: it is where the counsellor of the floor – and the roles of the counsellor and outreach worker are not to be confused, for the former has a set of role expectations distinct from those of

the latter – resides. There, the counsellor meets with clients of the second (and other) floors, providing them with guidance when searching for a particular social service, and often aiding the latter in developing a plan of sorts to 'escape homelessness.' The second is a bathroom. If one pictures the bathroom as a square, then one might say one pair of opposing walls consists of a set of sinks and bathroom stalls, while the other pair of opposing walls consists of a set of urinals and a white wall (in front of which lies a garbage bin). The sinks are a depository for virtually everything imaginable. Water is the predominant substance, but at other times, one might find: remnants of a beard or a mustache (from a shave), hair (because a client decided to clip their hair over the sink), vomit (because something someone ate had suspicious qualities, or they drank too much), and even excrement (this one remains a mystery). Of the four bathroom stalls, one is out of service, being reserved for bathroom-cleaning items that are used almost daily (to unclog the sink from all that has been deposited, for instance). The third room is a stock room – it is here one can find extra towels, bed sheets, pillow cases, and bed covers. The fourth room lining the hallway is a public shower, with ten shower stalls. When all ten are going at the same time, the steam often engulfs the fifth room lining the hallway, which lies directly in front of the showers. It is in this last room that the volunteer delegate to the second floor, whose role it is to check off which clients have taken their shower, resides. Adjacent to one of the dormitories is a medical walk-in clinic, locked by key, and only accessible to the healthcare professionals working on weekdays. It is on this floor that Xavier sleeps.

The dormitory housing the bulk of the beds has, in addition to the aforementioned four factors, another 'smell culprit' adding insult to injury. To understand this culprit, one must first explore the process of taking a shower. Briefly, the process of taking a shower is a four-step process. First, the individual must register with the aforementioned volunteer housed in the room

facing the multi-stalled shower. Second, the individual must pick up a towel (from a series of towels placed on top of a series of overturned milk crates – these crates, it should be noted, are obtained from the room where lies the volunteer), and wait until the volunteer tells them where to go. Third, once there is an open stall, the volunteer tells the individual which stall is open, and the individual proceeds to that stall, where they then shower. Fourth, the individual, following the completion of their shower, throws the towel into a grey bin – lying in the hallway along which are found the shower and volunteer room – reserved for dirty laundry, and continues to their bed. This process repeats itself for every individual. It is these towels that, when later placed in a large yellow bin in the largest dormitory, further exacerbate the somewhat pungent odour that tends to permeate the second floor.

The process of taking a shower on the second floor of Shelter X, much like the suppertime service, is highly rule-governed, such that individuals who do not respect the rules might be asked to meet additional criteria before taking a shower. Often times, individuals who, for whatever reason, do not figure on the volunteer's list are refused access to the shower. In order to receive shower access, they must first leave the second floor and return to the reception area so as to obtain the necessary proof that they do, in fact, reside on the said floor. This process has the effect of, ultimately, singling out a particular individual – one who might then be looked upon with disdain by his fellow mates. For a moment – and this moment can be brief, or exacerbated to last several days if the individual in question is of a different ethnicity –, the non-compliant individual is viewed as an outsider. This dynamic of outsider-versus-insider, which can be produced and reproduced in the shower line, thus serves as yet another indication of how it is the category of 'homeless' can be fragmented through shelter life.

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As mentioned, eventually, a point is reached where the bin is filled to the brim with towels. These towels have to be removed somehow and placed elsewhere to make room for additional towels, as more clients take their showers. The largest dormitory is the lucky recipient of these used towels, for it is there that is housed a series of giant yellow bins. These yellow bins are also home to used bed sheets and pillow cases following the 9 PM 'Bed Check' – the curfew that must be respected by the clients in order to retain their right to the bed in which they slept the night before.

Here, a description will be given of the dormitories, and the bunk beds therein, as a third example of how it is Shelter X – and more specifically, the portion of Shelter X frequented by Xavier –, contribute to the construction of a fragmented sense of self. The bunk beds are placed in each dormitory such that there is an absolute economy of space: no more than two metres separate one set of bunk beds from the next. Yet, these close quarters do not correspond to a sense of community for all members. Much like the Basseri nomads described by Fredrik Barth, for whom community is created "not by shared possessions and *a boundary*, but by social bonds" (2000: 23, emphasis added), communities in Shelter X are also formed by social bonds. This makes the dormitory an ideal illustrator of the disjointed nature of the category that is 'homelessness,' for many of the individuals therein do not share much in common (other than their lack of housing), and as a result choose to keep to themselves. The following excerpt from Xavier makes this case in point.

> X: For example, when I leave the campus, I have no place to go. Then I see so many homeless on the street with bad behaviour, some of them, I don't know what kind of...if they suffer [from], you know, psychiatric problems. You know, they try picking up the food in the garbage. Seven o'clock, then I gotta put myself on line, go into the same shower line. When you're going to

> bed, the same guy you see in the street, begging people for
> quarters, the guy sleeps [in the same dormitory] next to me![22]

Here, one can see that the confines of the dormitory reflect the fragmented nature of the category that is 'homelessness.' If one equates 'homeless' with 'dormitory,' one is faced with a situation whereby a group of individuals pertaining to, or living in, a bounded entity in fact have different values and worldviews.

Interestingly, the differences in worldviews can be further exacerbated by the close proximity of the bunks. On many occasions, arguments have arisen in the different dormitories, precisely because one person's nocturnal tendencies were in conflict with those of another person. I will never forget the day an argument nearly erupted during one of my shifts, because one client wanted to make use of the ladder adjacent to their bunk bed to descend to the first floor and take their medication. Another client had been using this space to hold a water bottle – he often got thirsty at night, and wanted to have his water in an easy-to-access location. Eventually the conflict was resolved, and a few days later, one of the individuals chose not to return to the shelter, seeking temporary residence elsewhere. This example illustrates how it is the close proximity of the bunk beds, and the set-up of the dormitories, further contributes to the fragmentation of the homeless collective: by placing individuals with disparate ways of life – ways of life that are often antithetical – adjacent to one another.

One of the fundamental goals of Shelter X is to allow people to achieve a sense of autonomy and, ultimately, 'escape homelessness.' Yet, the rules put in place by the shelter, while designed to provide clients with a certain stability and structure to their lives, also result in a certain fragmentation, or breaking down, of the homeless collective residing therein – in essence

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[22] 'Xavier' (homeless student) in discussion with the author, January 14th, 2016.

partially undermining the very objective of building individuals up so as to function in society. In the following section, I examine my own experiences as a researcher conducting fieldwork in this setting, and explore how it is my work with the homeless, in different capacities, have both facilitated and disrupted my capacity to conduct this research project.

Chapter 4 – Lessons from Xavier and the Shelter

I started volunteering at Shelter X in June of 2012. While this put me in close proximity with a population I was very much interested in studying ethnographically, the homeless, I realized quickly that my position would only allow me to interact with my target population in the context of suppertime; more specifically, suppertime in the cafeteria. This was certainly not the ideal window through which to observe how the homeless lived out their daily lives, for it only provided a glimpse into a part of their day. Had I maintained my status as a volunteer, I would not have been able to live completely removed from "other [members of my home society], *right among the natives*" (Malinowski 2007: 47; emphasis added).

I thus decided it would be best to work as an outreach worker in order to circumvent this problem. From my volunteer experience, I had deemed these people to be those closest to the homeless people in question: they were the ones that knew the names of the people coming in to eat supper; the ones who engaged in hearty conversations about the events of the day; the ones who poked fun at those coming in to eat (while expecting to be made fun of in return). What is more, these were the people that had the most frequent access to the dormitories where the homeless people slept; to the lounge areas where the individuals congregated to talk; to the 'line' homeless individuals formed when waiting to enter the shelter to eat at night or get a place to sleep; to the showers and bathrooms where a variety of smells and sounds could be accessed, each one providing a distinct perspective on the life of the homeless individual. Essentially, they were the only ones I saw interacting with the homeless on a consistent, long-term basis.

I have continued working at Shelter X over the last four years, and despite having established relationships with many in the shelter – Xavier being a case in point –, I still notice there are elements within the broader subject of homelessness that appear to be difficult to

navigate, and a challenge to access. Here, I demonstrate, through my experiences in working with, and doing research on, the homeless, that the aforementioned subject matter is difficult to access for three reasons: many homeless have unpredictable lives, the unique homeless individuals have different worldviews, and the homeless are considered a 'vulnerable' population.

First, homelessness is a difficult subject matter to access because the homeless themselves have unpredictable schedules. Imagine you have finally, after waiting for ethical approval from your university, managed to find a time when your key informant might sign a consent form. The conditions of the signing may not have been ideal – you might have had to watch, like a hawk, for the instant when the said informant would have a spare moment, and have pounced accordingly –, but you got it done. "Finally," you exclaim, "I will never have to chase after my informant again. The rest of the project will, undoubtedly, go smoothly." Only to find, of course, that matters become increasingly more difficult as you try securing an interview date and time with your informant.

This is exactly what happened over the course of the fieldwork. Consider the following email sent to Xavier:

> Hello Xavier,
>
> I hope all's well.
>
> I hope this is not too last minute, but I am by the entrance of the library, on the couches in front of the elevator, until 3:00pm, if you would like to do an interview. If this time does not work for you, then let me know what time(s) work(s), and we'll proceed accordingly.
>
> Take care,

Zenas[23]

Emails like the one above were sent to Xavier requesting that he tell of his availabilities. In addition to these, during those random times when our paths crossed, I would place the same request. There were times when I began thinking he might not want to participate in the project: that perhaps he had felt compelled to accept involvement in the research, for whatever reason. On one occasion, while I was working at the front door of Shelter X, I noticed Xavier entering in the late afternoon. When our paths crossed, I asked him, bluntly: "do you still want to participate in the project?" Before he could respond, I told him he was free to leave the research project at any time, as had been stated in the consent form. He told me everything was fine, and that he still wanted to participate, but that he was busy. Somewhat relieved by his desire to continue with the project, but also dejected that he had not given me a concrete date and/or time when we could conduct interviews, I accepted his response, and did not push the issue any further. A few weeks later, we managed to commence with interviews.

Yet, this stability was short-lived, for some time in February 2016, Xavier informed me he would leave to the States. Naturally, I was shocked to hear this: we had finally been able to conduct some interviews, and the research project seemed to be flowing. Sensing my disappointment, he informed me that I need not fret, as he would be coming back to Montreal from time-to-time. Upon hearing that, I breathed a huge sigh of relief.

We would stay in touch.

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February 2016 was the last time I heard from Xavier.

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[23] Email sent to Xavier on December 3rd, 2015. No response was received.

Attempts were made to reach him via e-mail, but no response was ever received. The following speaks to this effect.

> Hello again Xavier,
>
> I sent you an email a few weeks ago...but it looks like you've been too busy to respond! I hope all's well on your end.
>
> Good luck with all your work! And don't forget -- you can always let me know if you want something omitted from what was said during the interviews.
>
> Take care, and all the best.
>
> Zenas[24]

Naturally, this was the final nail-in-the-coffin for an attempt at the production of a collaborative piece (which was one of the initial goals of this research project). There was no way to co-write a text with a colleague who was unreachable. Yet, while Xavier's departure (and subsequent inability to be reached) presented one problem, it also forced me to realize that the difficulty in doing homelessness research lay not so much in a failure to produce a collaborative text with Xavier. Rather, it lay in the fact that homelessness, as a subject matter, was not fully comprehensible, precisely because of the unpredictable schedules the informants possessed. This is a problem Borchard noted in his work – how he would, more often than not, "only be able to conduct an interview with a man once, talking to him for a half an hour to two hours, only to never see him again" (2005: 218). I had worked among the homeless for nearly four years: yet, despite my familiarity with this population, I was still, much like Borchard, unable to overcome the unpredictability – and sudden disappearance – of key research participants.

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[24] Email to Xavier – Sunday, April 24th, 2016. No response was received.

Second, the subject of homelessness is difficult to access because the individuals comprising the homeless collective differ in their life objectives, and in the ways they live their lives. For instance, for Xavier, despite his difficult situation, he continued to view an education, and specifically higher education, and his path to 'success.' On August 19th, 2014, Xavier told me, over the course of an informal conversation, he and his fellow street people were "all in the same boat, but [...] not the same passenger." When asked, at a later date, what it was he had meant by that claim, he had this to say:

> X: Who wants to be in my situation? Nobody. Who wants to [...] homeless? Nobody. Who wants to be the last number? Nobody. Everybody wants to be the best. That's why when we go to school, we study hard. Sometimes when you fail, you feel hurt. Like I [told] you, I live in [a] shelter, I asked for help, [and] they gave me welfare. I couldn't be an A-student, because I lived in [a] shelter – I'd never been in this situation before! Understand me?
>
> [...]
>
> Then I have dreams. If I hadn't had a dream, I would never choose that direction. OK? I have [my] high school grades [...]. I went to college – maybe nobody seems to care for me. They just avoid me. This hurts. It's not easy. You understand? So...that's life.
>
> Excuse me. It's not because [*pause; then a sigh*] I see that I'm better. I'm not better. I'm not the best. But I do the best I can...motivation locus. [...] I am trying, you know, to do something, if I can get out, you know, of the ghetto. But nobody could help me! Understand?[25]

Xavier thus places huge importance on higher education, as it is his way "out [...] of the ghetto]." However, not all homeless have this sort of view on life.

Another individual from Shelter X instead chooses to spend his days some five kilometres from the shelter at a street corner, crossed by one of the busiest streets in Montreal, and another street which branches into a rather affluent residential district. This street corner is

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[25] 'Xavier' (homeless student) in discussion with the author, January 14th, 2016.

characterized by the presence of numerous financial institutions. He is not an aggressive panhandler, instead preferring to offer pedestrians passing by a warm greeting. Many have taken quite warmly to him, such that when passing by this intersection, one might see him engaging in deep, but convivial conversations with others.

Still others spend their entire days at Shelter X, because in addition to lacking access to housing, they have physical or psychiatric problems that necessitate they remain in one of the shelter's programs. One such individual had a condition that made it difficult for him to remain in one place – he was always moving about. During my evening shifts, if I were working at the front door, I would see this individual leave the shelter numerous times to have a smoke, only to re-enter the shelter, walk around for a good half hour, and then re-exit for another smoke. During another shift, I saw my colleague working at the front door confront this same individual, who had reached into the garbage bin and pulled out an uneaten sandwich. My colleague – a solid man, with the build of a nightclub bouncer – said in a commanding voice: "Sir, put down that sandwich!" My colleague was not playing around, and was not one to be played around with. Within a matter of seconds, the sandwich had been returned to the garbage, and the client went on his way up the stairs to his dorm room. Although this did not stop this individual from searching through garbage cans for more food – something he did on yet another occasion, retrieving an orange.

Here, one is presented with three individuals – all homeless – whose ways of living differ drastically from each other. These unique ways of being undermine attempts at finding a 'unifying characteristic' of homelessness, and ultimately bring further credence to the fact that homelessness is a fragmented subject matter. It should also be noted that the lifestyles of each individual are not necessarily to be thought of as being reducible to several categories, but rather

can be, as Borchard states, "overlapping and [in frequent interaction] with one another" (2005: 98). While the three individuals presented live drastically different lives, it should also be noted there are others at Shelter X who lead a combination of the above lifestyles.

Third, homelessness is a difficult subject matter to access because of the vulnerability of this population, and the ways in which the construction of the homeless as 'weak' influences the ethnographer to limit the number and types of questions asked. As noted previously, an interview excerpt from Xavier revealed he had been married, and then divorced. Some of my subsequent questions dealt with family life – whether he was married, or had children. However, it became quite clear I would have to steer clear of those subjects – and anything that might be even remotely linked to those subjects – so as to avoid causing any harm.

> Zenas: I...I don't know if you want to speak about this...because you mentioned that you were married, and then divorced...um...
>
> Xavier: Well, I don't want...we don't want to speak about my past life.
>
> Z: Alright! No worries.
>
> X: I don't want to be...uh...you know...have to suffer...traumatic stress.
>
> Z: No worries, no worries, no worries. I won't ask...any of that. [26]

Lakshmi Fjord differentiates between 'vulnerability' and 'vulnerable persons,' defining the former by "inequitable social *relationships* to social ecologies that increase risks of harm," and the latter as "sorts of people, grouped by their lack of particular physical, emotional, cognitive, or social resources which seem to explain their disproportionate harms from disasters and everyday" (2010: 13). In many respects, Xavier fits both definitions, for as a homeless

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[26] 'Xavier' (homeless student) in discussion with the author, January 14th, 2016.

individual residing at Shelter X, he is in a social ecology that, by his own admission, has many people who have been convicted of various crimes – certainly a larger concentration of such individuals than one would find in the general public. In this sense, he is in a state of *vulnerability* because he is in a social context that increases his risk of harm. Moreover, he is a *vulnerable person*, by virtue of his lack of resources – primarily, social resources. He has no significant other – simply talking about his ex-wife, as indicated above, leads to traumatic stress. Moreover, while he does have a social worker with whom he works, he also acknowledges the absence of a social network in Montreal – something which he felt he had an abundance of back in the United States, when he used to live there.

> Zenas: [...] well, you mentioned social events of going to Miami. Were you partying a lot?
>
> Xavier: Oh, a lot!
>
> Z: Oh yeah? You were a big party animal? [laughter]
>
> X: You know, Cuban community...it's great for me! You know?
>
> Z: What's a typical party like? I want to hear this...I don't know much about Cuban parties, so...
>
> X: Oh...uh...this is Latino party. Latino people, they're always hard. Uh...I don't know. It's a party. When we say party, PARTY. [laughter]
>
> Z: [laughter]
>
> X: We spell it, you know, like it is! Party, PARTY.
>
> Z: [laughter] Right.
>
> [...]
>
> And...and so, what: is it, like, characterized by a lot of food? A lot of drinking? A lot of...I don't know...staying up really late? [...]
>
> X: Of course! Of course. Because...because I say 'party, PARTY.' There's no question of 'this guy is darker than me; this guy is...his hair is afro hair.' Party, PARTY!

Z: OK. So, so there are no barriers?

X: No, no, no, no, no. You don't speak Spanish – you speak English, because up there we don't really have a lot of people speaking Spanish. OK? We partying...we partying. That's what it is.

Z: Sounds like...like a good life in the States.

X: Oh yeah! Oh yes. I...otherwise I would never say that, [but] because I have more social events in the States, I feel like I am really home...

Z: Ahhh...

X: ...than here, because here, I don't really, you know, I don't really feel like I'm home.

Z: That...that's interesting! So what you're trying to say is you feel like there, you know more people, [there is] more of a social scene there, so you can have more fun, party more...

X: Right!

Z: ...and that kind of thing, but here, you just feel like...so what do you feel like here? Like you're just here to study? And that's it? Or...

X: Right, right. [...] I'd like to be honest with you: I've been [...] three years here with a lot of difficulties. I'm not really...never had a chance to even socialize with no student whatsoever.

Z: Right.

X: OK? They...[sigh]...always...you know...have their groups. I call this segregation, OK? But...in the States, I heard [of that being prevalent there], [...] between races, black and white. [...] But me, I never suffered...never met [with that] kind of experience, OK? [...][27]

Here, one sees that Xavier's lack of social ties in Montreal have contributed to him facing numerous difficulties, ultimately resulting in his becoming homeless.

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[27] 'Xavier' (homeless student) in discussion with the author, January 14 2016.

With regards to the way in which vulnerability contributes to the fragmented nature of the homeless subject, one must allude to the claim by Laura Nader that one should not "study the poor and powerless, because everything [one says] about them will be used against them" (Farmer 2004: 26). In an effort to ensure, as all anthropologists should do, that as little harm as possible is caused to their research participants, it is almost imperative that certain subjects not be breached. For Xavier, this meant not discussing anything pertaining to his family life – marriage, children, or anything relating to those matters. Admittedly, this resulted in the production of an incomplete life history of Xavier – one which, by virtue of Xavier's vulnerable status, had *no ethical way* of reaching completion. Looking at the work of Borchard, one sees additional parallels with his research: mention of the vulnerability of homeless men in Las Vegas because of their loss of social and family networks (2005: 89-95), of the violence that might occur in shelters due to the violence of some homeless men (180-185), and of social policies for the regulation of homeless individuals based on past findings that suggest the 'problem' of homelessness has been 'aggravated' by increasing social services (201). These parallels further suggest that homelessness continues to be a fragmented subject matter because of the vulnerability of the homeless subject, and of the ways in which social policies, based on past findings, might undermine homelessness assistance initiatives.

In sum, my experiences working with the homeless at Shelter X and beyond have taught me that the subject matter of homelessness cannot be neatly arranged into distinct categories, and that it is a fragmented notion, for three reasons. First, many homeless have unpredictable lives, which makes it challenging to secure a time and a place, of their convenience, where the minutiae of their lives may be accessed during an interview. Second, the unique homeless individuals have different worldviews, and often have drastically different lifestyles. Third, the

homeless are considered a 'vulnerable' population, which means an ethnographer must be extremely cautious in the questions they ask, and in the findings they later present, for the questions asked might cause irrevocable harm during the interviews, while the findings published might cause irrevocable harm in the future as policy makers interpret the data. In the following section, I conclude by exploring some of the implications of my thesis, and why it is important to appreciate homelessness as a problem with interrelated individual and social dimensions.

<u>Conclusion</u>

Throughout this study, I have explored the issue of homelessness in Montreal, drawing upon interviews with one key informant, participant observation of homeless individuals in a variety of settings – from a shelter, to the streets, and even to an academic institution –, a review of the academic literature, and various newspaper articles and community organization websites to do so. The results presented herein demonstrate homelessness is clearly a significant problem in Montreal, and that there are many bodies within the homeless collective that continue to feel alone and abandoned, even with all the social services present today.

Homelessness is a highly fragmented subject matter. The work of Borchard speaks to this effect, as he demonstrates in *The Word on the Street: Homeless Men in Las Vegas* that the problems of the homeless cannot be fully understood without allusion to the broader social context from which they emerge. Moreover, his work presents numerous parallels with the present study: a similar trajectory between ethnographers, an emphasis on male homelessness, and difficulty in obtaining interviews with research participants. Through Borchard's text, one sees that the subject matter of homelessness is a fragmented one precisely because of the multiple overlapping causes that precipitate one's involvement with street life – the likes of which include individual (i.e. health problems) and social (i.e. institutional and political regulations) factors.

Homelessness is both produced and reproduced by a combination of social and individual factors. One of the many unique narratives on homelessness is that of student homelessness, a growing worldwide phenomenon. The case study of Xavier, a Montreal-based male homeless student with whom I conducted two challenging interviews – and for whom the process of securing the interviews was often quite emotionally draining –, speaks to this effect, as both

external (the operating hours of the shelter where he sleeps, the financial institutions and their aversion to giving him funds) and internal (his desire to outcast himself from his peers and shelter mates) contribute to his predicament.

Shelters have their own set of rules and regulations, which often act in contradictory ways so as to create a further sense of fragmentation for the homeless individual residing therein. The suppertime service compartmentalizes the homeless into the 'deserving' and 'undeserving,' on the basis of their comportment while forming a queue. Moreover, the rules governing the types of individuals allowed food within the shelter often result in arguments pertaining to why it is one person, and not another, can circulate the shelter while in possession of food. The process of taking a shower, and all it entails, can further segregate individuals within the homeless collective, particularly for those who lack the necessary documentation required to be eligible to enter the showers. Finally, the structure of the dormitories makes it such that individuals with no social ties are placed in close proximity with one another – an occurrence which, rather than strengthening social bonds, serves rather to further alienate individuals from each other.

This research project was also revelatory of another way in which the subject matter was fragmented. I came to realize that my broad experience working amongst the homeless, much like it was with Borchard, had little bearing on my ability to circumvent many of the problems associated with fieldwork, including the securing of interviews, and the avoidance of harmful subject matter. I came to understand that homelessness was a difficult subject matter to access because of three reasons: the unpredictability (often through no fault of their own) of their schedules, the different ways in which the homeless lived out their lives, and the classification of the homeless subject as a 'vulnerable person.' By virtue of the topic of 'homelessness' being

difficult to access, even with one's extensive 'experience' in the milieu, the subject matter has become fragmented.

This project has been quite enlightening (and for someone who entered this research project quite sure of their direction, humbling), as it has brought new meaning to what it means to be 'hidden.' After all, many individuals like Xavier are not truly 'out of sight,' as the word 'hidden' connotes, but rather ignored and marginalized while in plain sight. Moreover, conducting research on such individuals proves to be a delicate balancing act of, on the one hand, a desire to obtain knowledge on a unique way of life and, on the other hand, a realization that this very way of life is more susceptible to harm than others. It suggests something more is at stake: that there is a moral obligation to exercise a certain amount of care when conducting research on the homeless. The fact that these individuals are in a state of fragmentation – as resulting from a feeling of helplessness in the face of rules driven by an omnipotent and invisible negative force –, indicates that the choices an ethnographer makes when working alongside this population must be carefully measured.

It has also been instrumental in highlighting some of the difficulties inherent in counting, and providing services for, the homeless. After all, a wide variety of combinations of social and individual factors contributes to one's involvement with the streets. One – or even a handful – of social assistance programs cannot account for this great variety. What is more, to ask someone if they reside on the streets – even in an indirect manner – might produce mixed results, given the desire of some street people, like Xavier, not to appear homeless. Returning then to this idea of an 'ethics of care,' it is necessary, when conducting research on the homeless, to pay special attention to the specific circumstances of the individuals involved. Going forward, further

research aiming to understand further the hidden and fragmented nature of the homeless subject

should make sure to include such a moral framework in their fieldwork.

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