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Homelessness in the United States is identified as a social problem (Amster, 2008; Gowan, 2010; Marvasti, 2003; Stern, 1984). It receives attention from social service agencies, local and national government departments, faith-based institutions, advocacy groups, legal organizations, and grassroots coalitions. It has implications at both local and national levels. The people experiencing homelessness—their unique stories, perspectives, and ways of being—are overshadowed, even usurped, by constituted ideas about homelessness; as a result they themselves are surveilled, categorized, and pathologized. Additionally, the concept of homelessness is hegemonized, disciplined through a master narrative imbricated with crisis, pity, victim-blaming, medicalization, and criminalization.

This rhizoanalysis considers how the current master narrative of homelessness as a social problem is a form of oppression and domination fed by neoliberalism and often evaluated by whether one is a “contributing member of society.” The intractability of this narrative makes it very difficult to radically imagine a construction of homelessness beyond that *which is*, yet, people are resisting this status quo and imagining a different future in which they hope to live. Informed by a postmodern, anarchist, feminist epistemology, I apply various methods in this dissertation, including critical storytelling, performance narrative, and qualitative inquiry with people experiencing homelessness, to (a) understand and expose the dominant narrative about homelessness, (b) identify ways that homelessness is used as a resistance tactic against oppression, and (c) imagine new ways of engaging with each other and the world around us.

BEGINNING WITH HOMELESSNESS: A RHIZOANALYSIS OF  
NEOLIBERALISM, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND COMMUNITY

by

Kathleen Elizabeth Edwards

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

I want to be homeless. (Buddy, 2003)

**Becoming Torpified: Buddy's Story**

I have worked with people experiencing homelessness for more than 15 years. In that time, an oft-repeated statement from homelessness advocates, including myself, has been “No one *chooses* to be homeless.” I follow the statement with a list—ranging from mild discomforts to life-threatening situations—that people experiencing homelessness encounter. The statement is in response to individuals who suggest that people choose homelessness as a way to abuse government programs (e.g., food stamps, housing vouchers) or shirk their responsibilities to the community (e.g., being contributing members of society, paying taxes).

But, I do know some people who choose homelessness. Or rather, they choose a way of living that fulfills something for them, something that they cannot experience or attain—or so they believe—through traditional routes. There are numerous people who do this, although they do not have the homeless moniker attached to them; we describe them as nomadic, minimalist, free spirited, punk, anarchist, homesteaders, living off-the-grid.

The first time I met someone who wanted to be homeless was early in my first job at a day center for people experiencing homelessness, in 2003. Buddy was a well-known and well-loved character at the center. He was an older white guy with shoulder-length wiry white hair and ruddy, leathered cheeks, and usually a fair amount of dirt and

grit that settled into the wrinkles on his forehead, eyes, and nose. The same dirt was well cemented under his fingernails as well as the cracked, dried skin on his knuckles. His voice was loud, it frogged from all the cigarettes he smoked, and it was always ornery sounding.

I had only been working there for a couple of months and was trying to learn as much as I could about programs and agencies that helped get people housed. Buddy came in to see if he had received any mail. I was the person passing out mail that day, and Buddy was the lucky recipient of my naïve enthusiasm and newly gained knowledge of federal initiatives for people experiencing homelessness. Agencies were using a new strategy to address the issues faced by people identified as chronically homeless; the new strategy was called *Housing First*. Housing First, as I understood it, maintained that people could not focus on topics like addressing addiction or mental health problems until their basic need for shelter was resolved. This idea was in direct contrast to the typical practices of case workers, practices with an underlying philosophy that it is better to address people's addiction or mental health problem *before* getting them housed because otherwise they cannot maintain their housing.

So, Buddy said, "Hey there!" and I said, "Buddy! Hey, there is this new program and I think you would really like it and you could get housed and you wouldn't have to sleep in your tent and you could possibly get a job and maybe you could work on some goals! And did I mention you could have an apartment or something?" As I stopped to take a breath before explaining more about housing first, Buddy assertively jumped in, "Stop with your snake oil!" So I paused, and then he said these words, "I want to be homeless."

He tried to explain more:

I don't owe nobody nothing. I sleep when I want, wake up when I want, keep my place how I want, and drink when I want. I don't have to follow anyone's rules 'cept my own. If I need some money I collect cans. I don't live off the government, I don't have piles of bills. I have friends, I'm social if I want to be or I stay to myself. I help out you all at the center, when ya need it. I can read any book from the library, listen to the news on my radio, catch free concerts in the park. I rule my life; I am happy, healthy, and in a good place. Why on earth would I go and ruin a good thing?

I stared at him, stunned. No one had ever told me they wanted to be homeless. But his explanation made sense. I had no rebuttal for his explanation; I understood it. At that moment I was torpified, "stopped in my tracks long enough to become so aware of my ignorance that I realize I cannot continue as I have been" (Diller, 1998, p. 7). Buddy's story shattered my assumptions and continues to be a grain of sand that has lodged in my brain, still agitating, making me forever question my assumptions as well as the popular narratives about homelessness.

### **Homelessness in the United States**

Homelessness in the United States is identified as a social problem (Amster, 2008; Gowan, 2010; Marvasti, 2003; Stern, 1984). It receives attention from social service agencies (e.g., Partners Ending Homelessness, Family Services of the Piedmont), local and national government departments (e.g., Housing and Urban Development, Department of Education, Veterans Affairs), faith-based institutions (e.g., Salvation Army, Urban Ministry), advocacy groups (e.g., National Coalition for the Homeless, National Alliance to End Homelessness), legal organizations (e.g., National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, Homeless Advocacy Project) and grassroots coalitions (e.g., Street Watch, We Are Visible). It has implications at both local and

national levels. The people experiencing homelessness—their unique stories, perspectives, and ways of being—are overshadowed, even usurped, by constituted ideas about homelessness; as a result, they themselves are surveilled, categorized, and pathologized. Additionally, the very concept of homelessness is hegemonized, disciplined through a master narrative imbricated with crisis, pity, victim-blaming, medicalization, criminalization, and paternalization (wrapped in language of meritocracy, and the “American dream”).

I am interested in researching how the current master narrative of homelessness as a social problem is a form of oppression and domination fed by neoliberalism and often evaluated by whether one is a “contributing member of society.” Its intractability makes it almost unfeasible to radically imagine a construction of homelessness beyond that *which is*—meaning that these ideas have become so entrenched in communities, workers and advocates, policy makers, and even people experiencing homelessness—that considering other possibilities, thinking outside this master narrative seems immutable. In this dissertation, the goal is to destabilize, overturn, rupture these boundaries in order to engage in the possibility of imagination—the reassemblage of that *which is*—to explore, excavate, re-imagine homelessness and to be in solidarity with those who choose homelessness or have it thrust upon them. What happens when homelessness is engaged as a strategy for analyzing neoliberalism? What happens when people experiencing homelessness remap our communities to expose the “prohibitive cartography” (Monmonier, 2010, p. xi) of social, economic, political, historical, and spatial apparatuses of control? The possibility of imagination requires a shift away from the current deficit orientation of the master narrative and a shift in why people study the phenomenon so that their purposes for research extend beyond writing

policy, applying for grants, or developing general “best practices” for working with people experiencing homelessness. Such an orientation positions people experiencing homelessness as lacking. The result of a deficit-based orientation is that we cannot see beyond solving the social problem or “fixing” the people who have succumbed to it.

Informed by a postmodern, anarchist, feminist epistemology, I think of myself in this study as a bricoleur: a person who critically and creatively uses the resources at hand to advance her goals, rather than be restricted by traditional fixed concepts or definitions (Denzin, 2010). The metaphor most often associated with bricolage and the bricoleur is that of the toolbox because a toolbox serves as a location for multiple tools, and I carry around a toolbox because I do not know what any given encounter is going to require, yet I want to be prepared. The toolbox contains various methods from which I can select. In this dissertation some of the methods include critical storytelling, performance narrative, and qualitative inquiry.

### **Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this research is to trouble the dominant narrative of homelessness as a social problem; consider the ways that homelessness can trouble other status quo narratives (e.g., importance of independence, valorization of particular behaviors and values); and explore how people who address issues of power, privilege, oppression, and resistance in their personal, community, and professional lives can strengthen these challenges to the status quo.

### **Social Justice Research**

For me qualitative research is a political act. “It is about making the world visible in ways that implement social justice goals” (Denzin, 2010, p. 57). This research serves social justice goals by questioning the status quo narrative about homelessness rather

than taking for granted its current construction, exposing ways that homelessness in its current form serves neoliberal intents and prevents community action against it, and providing examples of how, nonetheless, people are resisting this status quo or imagine a different future in which they hope to live.

### **Research Questions**

1. **Understanding and exposure:** What are various conditions used to constitute homelessness as a social problem?
2. **Resistance:** (How) can homelessness be a site of resistance? Resistance against what?
3. **Imagination:** In what ways might homelessness move us toward imagining new ways of engaging with each other and the world around us?

### **On the Ethics of Researching Homelessness**

The very act of research on homelessness is in itself political. Ferrell (2012) asserts that to choose to engage with, ask questions about, and consider topics in relation to homelessness is to “forfeit the right to hide such research behind protestations of ‘neutrality’ or ‘objectivity’” (p. xi). I agree. It would be *unethical* for this research to ignore issues of power, privilege, oppression, and resistance. These spectral systems are present in every aspect of the research, and it is my responsibility to bring them to the fore and make them visible.

Throughout this research I have been aware of a particular risk: romanticizing homelessness. To be clear, I am in no way trying to glorify the lived experience of homelessness; it is a corporeal reality that can cause extreme physical, psychological, and emotional (dis)stress. And although I have never experienced homelessness myself, I have been deeply connected to those who are experiencing it. I have been the person



to send someone into the dark freeze (after multiple opportunities for him to alter his behavior, and only after equipping him with a heavy coat, layers of clothes, and strategies for staying warm) as well as the person to beg another to come in from such cold (only to be turned down). I have walked away from the person settling into his tent only to get in my car and head home to my house. I have driven past the man laid prone on the sidewalk trying to get some sleep: I know his name, I know his situation, and I hope I will see him the next day. But hoping to see him the next day is not the only thing I could do in that situation: I could brainstorm with him a “better” (i.e., less public, safer) place to sleep and help him move his belongings; I could deliver him another blanket and more cardboard to soften his palette; I could encourage him to let me take him to the night shelter; I could invite him to rest at my place. I have enacted all these options at different times to varying degrees of success and failure. And I have ultimately concluded that it is not that simple.

Similarly, researching homelessness is not that simple. I have chosen to risk being misinterpreted or criticized for this research because I ultimately believe that there are many benefits to rearticulating homelessness not as a social problem but as a source of radical social imagination. My intention with this dissertation is to contribute to “re-visioning” (Rich, 1972) taken-for-granted concepts and practices that currently perpetuate oppression.

### **Subjectivity Assemblage Statement**

“A certain identity is never possible, the ethnographer must always ask, ‘Not Who Am I?’ but ‘When, where, how am I?’ (Marcus, 2009)” (Denzin, 2010, p. 16).

Because I view research as both personal and political, here is some information about me that may help explain my interest in and relationship to this topic. I have

worked with high poverty populations for more than 15 years. In college, my introduction to understanding social and economic justice came from engaging with grassroots non-profits in the Over the Rhine area of downtown Cincinnati, Ohio. I worked full time at a day center for people experiencing homelessness in Dayton, Ohio, for two years in a variety of capacities: shelter staff, volunteer and educational outreach coordinator, intake specialist, and transitional housing case manager for formerly homeless veterans. During that time I was also introduced to tenant and community organizing, learning about the strong ties between those who are marginally housed and people experiencing homelessness. The tenant organizing work was an opportunity to bring together some of my skills, values, and knowledge related to education and learn from tenants the immense knowledge gained from lived experiences. This was formative to my continued work in a number of ways: I learned about the inextricable connections between individual experiences and the socio-economic and political structures that framed individual's lived experiences; I recognized tensions between the purpose of social service agencies and the groups they served (a.k.a. the non-profit industrial complex); I discovered that my interests and skills were best utilized when working with adults (as opposed to youth, families, or other special population categories); I found that I get along with, enjoy the company of, and can successfully engage with adults who are chronic alcoholics, drugs users, sex workers, registered sex offenders, felons, and people with severe mental illnesses.

When I moved to the South, I became involved with a day center that had only opened one year prior to me volunteering with them. I have worked with this agency as a volunteer, consultant, researcher, and staff member. I was initially drawn to the agency for a couple of reasons: (a) it was not faith-based, and that is sometimes difficult to find

in the South, but important to me as an atheist; (b) it was community-centered; in its first years people were reminded every morning that they were each others' best resources; and (c) it was holistic, meaning that camaraderie, community, and relationships were as important as traditional social service practices such as case management. In my first couple of years volunteering there I made lunch bags side-by-side with people experiencing homelessness; along with three guests<sup>1</sup>, I helped rescue a cockatoo from a tree and deliver it to the animal shelter; I walked with guests in the city's Fourth of July parade then helped work at their car wash to raise money to have a cook out. It was an inspiring place because it was not like any other social service agency in the city and certainly not like any agency I had worked with before. We made art, held writing classes, and dug in garden beds. It was egalitarian, co-created, and community-led, in contrast to the uni-directional, rules-heavy, clinical, and hierarchical atmospheres and practices that I often observed at non-profit agencies.

Homelessness is not a distant experience for me. Although I have never experienced homelessness myself, I have a sibling who has on numerous occasions been very close to eviction and needing emergency shelter. If it were not for the safety net my parents provided for him by helping pay his rent, utilities, and groceries, he could have very easily been someone I met at a day center. In fact, there were times I encouraged my parents to consider that option.

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<sup>1</sup> The people accessing services at the agency shaped its creation. One of the minor, yet meaningful, ways they influenced the agency was by identifying a different word by which to refer to each other. Instead of being called *clients*, the folks at the day center chose to be called *guests*. The rationale was that people are treated differently as guests. We welcome guests, treat them with hospitality, and appreciate their presence. Whereas clients is a clinical term used by social service agencies, and does not evoke any of the warmth or relationality of "guests." Words matter.

I have worked with people experiencing homelessness off and on ever since that first job at the day center. The people whom I have gotten to know and worked with have significantly influenced my thoughts on homelessness. As I was writing aspects of this text I found myself asking, “How do I know this?” I did not have an author or scholar to cite for an assertion I made, but rather I knew it from the lived knowledge of people experiencing homelessness and agency staff whom I worked with and my own reflexive conclusions drawn from my work as a volunteer, case worker, program director, homelessness advocate, and tenant organizer. This is not surprising given my belief in and practice of popular education (PE). PE is built on a belief that “life educates” (Horton, 1938/2003, p. 78). “[T]he way you learn is to start something and learn as you go along.... if you know it in advance you kill it... Then you can’t learn from the situation, can’t learn from the people” (Horton & Freire, 1990, pp. 40–41). When I have worked with people experiencing homelessness what we have often discussed has been “rooted in the real interests and struggles of ordinary people’ (Crowther, 2013, p. 2). We do not shy away from addressing the political aspects of homelessness or the acts of oppression they have experienced. We’ve shared in the meaning making and critical thinking process of identifying the political interests of agency rules, city ordinances, and federal regulations that shape their lives, our lives. To go search for an academic reference to support a statement in this text that I actually learned through my work with people experiencing homelessness would be to dismiss what they know (and have taught me) through their lived experiences.

What I have shared so far is what I call an assemblage statement. Puar (2007) describes assemblage as “a series of dispersed but mutually implicated and messy networks, [that] draws together enunciation and dissolution, causality and effect, organic

and nonorganic forces” (p. 211); assemblage allows me to try and answer Marcus’s questions, “*When, where, how am I?*” Just as assemblage is dispersed, so too are the pieces of information that show when, where, and how I am. It comes in various forms, such as the stories dispersed throughout the dissertation, the meaning making challenges I faced while coding and thematizing the qualitative interviews, the analysis of the *storyscapes* project, and the layered performance narrative, all of which are included in the various nodes of this text.

### **Epistemological (Re)Configurations, Theories, and Conceptual Framework**

I am drawn to research that explores possibilities and draws from multiple perspectives, multiple disciplines, and multiple methods. This rhizoanalysis is both process and product.

A rhizome holds potential for studying tendrils that creep in capricious directions and have multiple entry points. Rhizoanalysis functions as an analytic tool for examinations of multiplicities, of ideas and concepts that move as emulations of rhizomes via subterranean flows of horizontal shoots. (Hagood, 2009, p. 39)

This project is informed by postmodern (Brown & Jones, 2001; Gannon & Davies, 2007; Stuhr, 2003), anarchist (Call, 2002; DeLeon & Love 2009; Kahn, 2009), and feminist (Gannon & Davies, 2007; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Hesse-Biber & Brooks, 2007; Labaton & Martin, 2004) epistemologies. The purpose of research, for me, is to invite imagination then work toward that which cannot exist within current systems of knowledge and power (e.g., education, government, economics). I approach research as political; active; community-engaged and immersed; co-constructed; always incomplete; value-laden; reflexive; informed by multiple perspectives; in conversation with past, present, and future; embedded in an assemblage of constructed identities, including gender, race,

class, sexual orientation, ability, and faith tradition; and part of multiple social, cultural, historical, political, economic, temporal, and spatial contexts. It is messy and imperfect and absolutely necessary.

### **N-Dimensional Space and the Bricoleur**

Denzin (2010) describes research that is located in the eighth historical turn in qualitative research as the “future” historical moment (p. 13). This is the moment in which we are currently located—these moments, however, are not linearly constructed, and they can operate simultaneously. Researchers who situate themselves in this eighth moment navigate what Denzin describes as the “epistemological border” between postpositivism and poststructuralism. I find it useful to use Lewis’s (2012) nuancing of *n-dimensional space* as a way to articulate the connections between epistemologies, theories, and the conceptual framework:

An ‘n-dimensional space’... suggests that the possibility of interaction between theoretical perspectives cannot be limited to two disparate perspectives engaging with one another. It suggests a multitude of perspectives coming together, still under the asymmetrical power relations... to offer certain aspects up to each other and to a potential larger project. (pp. 70–71)

It is in this n-dimensional space that postmodern, anarchist, and feminist epistemologies both cooperate and collide for me. The n-dimensional space also serves well the bricoleur construction of this full product.

The bricoleur is a trickster, a person who is a jack-of-all-trades, a person who can fix things with the materials that are at hand, a nurse’s aide who performs a tracheotomy with a knitting needle. The bricoleur uses what works. It is like a baroque method, it resists clarity. It is radically uncertain, it might not work the next time. It is an interruptive method (MacLure, 2006, 729–730). (Denzin, 2010, p. 36)

Like n-dimensional space, where multiple perspectives “offer certain aspects up to each other and to a potential larger project” (Lewis, 2012, p. 71), bricolage utilizes various methods, pedagogies, literature, and knowledge with little regard for artificial disciplinary distinctions; “bricoleurs move beyond the blinders of particular disciplines and peer through a conceptual window to a new world of research and knowledge production” (Kincheloe, 2014, p. 39). It is more important to utilize that which will serve to best accomplish the task at hand. One of the ways that this most strongly plays out for me with this dissertation is the inclusion of knowledge gained through lived experience.

### **Postmodernism**

I work within a postmodern paradigm, seeking “to distance us and make us skeptical about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self and language that are often taken for granted within and serve as legitimation for...” the status quo (Flax, as cited in Gannon & Davies, 2007, p. 79). Postmodernism deconstructs. It ruptures the artificially created linear history, understanding of time, containment of bodies and unitary subjects, and assumptions about truth and reality. Within postmodernism, everything is positioned in the particularities of temporality, history, “subjects,” spatiality, and geography. Nothing is truly ever known. Brown and Jones (2001), describe the advantage of such a way of thinking:

[By accepting] the premise of ‘not knowing’ rather than ‘knowing’ and by acknowledging the excess of meanings and the endless possibilities deriving from this may well loosen the ties that ordinarily guide us into over-familiar and well trodden styles of accounting for what we see. (p. 104)

Rather than beginning from the “truth” of homelessness as a social problem, I deconstruct that dominant narrative, finding the various connection points between it and

other unquestioned norms and practices in our society. If I begin from a premise of “not knowing” about homelessness, what else can it reveal? What other multiple meanings might it possess?

Postmodernism is criticized for being too critical, without room for action/transformation because postmodernism disrupts the foundations upon which that action is built. This claim is used to distinguish between critical theory (action/transformation) and postmodernism (criticism) (Gannon & Davies, 2007). I reject this claim though. What postmodernism provides is the constant agitation that reminds me that those actions and claims are never the *only* actions and claims, and that they are imperfect, incomplete, and come with risks; it also provides me with a clarity of thought that means I understand and accept these risks as I act. Foucault draws important connections between action and criticism:

A critique...consists in seeing on what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based.... Criticism consists in uncovering that thought and trying to change it; showing that things are not as obvious as people believe, making it so that what is taken for granted is no longer taken for granted. To do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy. Understood in these terms, criticism...is utterly indispensable for any transformation. For a transformation that would remain within the same mode of thought, a transformation that would only be a certain way of better adjusting the same thought to the reality of things, would only be a superficial transformation. On the other hand, as soon as people begin to have trouble thinking things the way they have been thought, transformation becomes at the same time very urgent, very difficult, and entirely possible. (as cited in Gannon & Davies, 2007, p. 78)

Therefore my postmodernism still holds to some of the same goals as critical theory. Thinking differently leads to acting differently. I align with Deleuze, “Maybe speech and communication have been corrupted....We’ve got to hijack speech” (as cited in Stuhr, 2003, p. 95). By deconstructing homelessness I suspect that we can think differently



about it, speak differently about it and, thus hopefully, act differently once we expose some of the normalized, unquestioned assumptions that are embedded in its current construction. A goal of this project then is to hijack homelessness in order to move toward creation.

Another criticism of postmodernism is that it is inaccessible (Gannon & Davies, 2007). From my experiences with people experiencing homelessness there is an understanding of the characteristics of postmodernism though. Many of them live it. They experience the postmodern fragmentation because people see them differently depending on where they are. They deconstruct texts and discourses all the time when they contrast the “rules” of a non-profit against how the non-profit really runs, or when they hear from the city council that they are concerned about the homeless yet direct money toward investing in a performing art center downtown, which those on the streets know will only make their life downtown more difficult.

A valuable metaphor in postmodernism is the rhizome. A rhizome is a non-linear root system that consists of nodes, buds, and off-shoots. Ginger and bamboo are examples of rhizome vegetation. Rhizomes are decentralized and can wander in any direction. Deleuze and Guattari apply the term metaphorically to contrast with the traditional philosophical form of linear, hierarchical thinking that constructs itself around a central concept. In the

[tree-like] form, ...parts are related to each other only through their relationship to a common root, and whose importance is measured according to their distance from the root. In contrast, the rhizome spreads horizontally through leaps where each germination marks a new root system and one cannot assign an origin or end-point. (McMahon, 2011, p. 52)

The rhizome holds multiple meanings for me in relation to this research. At an academic level, I resist being held to the dissertation both in format and purpose only for the sake of continuity or tradition. The typical formula for a dissertation is five to six chapters that follow the order of introduction, literature review, methodology, discussion, and conclusion. It progresses linearly and focuses deeply on one very particular research topic. Through a rhizomatic construction of a dissertation I am interested in creating a text that grows in a number of directions—a hypertext. Later in this introduction I offer a vague map of the dissertation, and I borrow the botanical term “node” (as opposed to chapter) to describe more accurately the different main points of exploration. Through this approach to the dissertation I am hoping that the content will provide some “unpredictable juxtapositions” (Rhizome Manifesto, n.d., para. 3) that would not otherwise be visible. I admit however that I have found it challenging to always keep the structure open. This writing process has made me aware of how embedded this traditional format is in my way of thinking about writing—at least academic writing—the resistance against it that exists within me, and the question of whether or not I possess the skills and capacity to create something different.

The rhizome also represents the various forms of knowledge that weave through this dissertation. Traditionally academic knowledge is privileged over other forms of knowledge. However, with the inclusion of a community-engaged participatory project (*storyscapes*), the lived knowledge of interviewees, the performance narrative form, and my own knowledge gained through the work I have done with people experiencing homelessness, there is a rhizomatic network of different forms of knowledge throughout this product.

## **(Postmodern) Anarchism and Feminism**

My use of anarchism and feminism are situated within a postmodern paradigm. A postmodern paradigm strengthens how I utilize anarchism and feminism in meaning making because when considered within this paradigm, I ask questions of both concepts. In other words it pushes me to more critically think and feel and to challenge situations where a linear narrative appears or I am only considering one perspective or I am trying to suggest a singular answer. Postmodernism prevents me from excluding the outliers in order to draw clean conclusions. There is literature about both postmodern anarchism and postmodern feminism, even as these seem like oxymorons to some people. In the following sections I describe how I configure these two epistemologies.

**(Postmodern) anarchism.** Anarchism is often thought of in relation to subversive political action. It gets caricatured as chaotic and violent, as people dressed all in black smashing store windows<sup>2</sup>. When discussing anarchist theory, it is usually situated as a political theory. However, just as there is no one feminism, there is no one anarchism. Some of the main characteristics of many anarchisms include (a) distrust of the State because it protects the privileges of the powerful and surveils objectors (Berkman, 2003; Ward, 2004), (b) desire for decentralized decision-making and practices via self-organizing and collaborative cooperation instead of coercion and competition (Call, 2002; DeLeon & Love 2009), rejection of capitalism (Ben-Mosh, Hill, Nocella, III, & Templer, 2009; Berkman, 2003), and defiance of uniformity and bureaucracy (Kahn, 2009). Anarchism possesses a DIY (Do It Yourself) ethos because

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<sup>2</sup> This image is a misrepresentation of anarchism. Black bloc is a tactic, just like civil disobedience is a tactic that brings together anarchists and other interested persons in planning a particular action during a protest. The black clothes, hats, and masks are to create an unidentifiable mass of people. Black blocs occur around the world; most media attention is directed toward the violent exercises, but it is not an explicitly violent tactic (King, 2013).

of its emphasis on the local and the distrust of state power. Thus, popular anarchism—  
anarchism in practice—is often associated with zines; repurposed items, including food;  
cooperatives and communal housing; protests; and punk rock.

Anarchism can:

serve as a tool for deconstructing and challenging the hegemonic nature of  
'reality' while at the same time providing a basis for envisioning and constructing  
new 'realities' that might exist above, beyond, and within the cracks of the  
dominant framework of the State. (Amster, 2008, p. 125)

Because of its focus on exposing and subverting the dominant forms of structural power  
that are enforced through the government, police, businesses, faith traditions, and  
schools, it is a valuable way of meaning making for this research. Homelessness is a  
public experience, and it reveals to observers the elements of public space that we most  
value and seek to control through "privatization, regulation, and policing" (Amster, 2008,  
p. 42).

Call (2002) describes anarchism as "perfectly well suited to the postmodern  
world" (p. 11) because of its distrust of fixed structures and desire for a more particular,  
contextualized fluidity. Postmodern anarchism extends beyond critiquing the state or  
national powers. It:

decentralizes the political movement, motions toward tactical rather than  
strategic action, brings anarchist thought into touch with a range of  
influences...and provides the foundation for a thousand lines of flight; [it] brings  
traditional anarchism into new relationships with the outside world. (Rouselle,  
2011, p. vii)

I rely on Call's (2002) three points of a postmodern anarchism for my thinking:

1. "Anarchy of the subject" (p. 22) – The postmodern subject is fragmented, multiple, an assemblage, not a singular, contained subject.
2. Capillary power – Power is everywhere, in any social relationship, not simply in structures of the state. This is built upon Foucault's (1980) capillary design of power. Power moves through networks, and we all participate in power at different times and contexts. This also means that we can resist oppressive, coercive power.
3. Play gestures – Drawing upon the Situationists' "play ethic," gestures exist in moments of time, they are transitory. They "might be artistic or overtly political, satirical, or subversive. Above all they are meant to be playful." They take us into the "strange and unexplored terrain of the symbol" (Call, 2002, p. 102).

Within the limits of this research, postmodern anarchism serves as a valuable form of meaning making that can (a) inform the community-engaged participatory project known as *storyscapes*, (b) provide imaginative ways to interpret elements of the research, from *storyscapes* to the meaning of homelessness, and (c) mindfully guide disruptive intentions with regard to the construction of the final dissertation. In other words, it informs process, meaning-making, and product.

**(Postmodern) feminism.** One way that feminism influences my work is by reminding me that the elements I identify are not "sedimented truths" but rather tools "to work with the cracks and fissures of dominant discourses, and the contradictory details of the everyday, to multiply and enable alternative discourses" (Gannon & Davies, 2007, p. 85), which also always needs to be subjected to critical questioning. While first and

second wave feminist research may have centered gender, I agree with Labaton and Martin (2004) that now “feminism offers a central belief system that helps interpret how power imbalances effect our lives” (p. xxvi). Any examination of power is going to reveal inextricable links between gender, race, class, and other socially-constructed categories. Social justice issues are interconnected. And the principles and practices of *storyscapes*, the community-engaged project analyzed in this dissertation, are inherently feminist; they may “do feminism but do not intuitively embrace Feminism” (Walker, 2004, p. xiv). The principles and practices applied include striving for equitable partnerships, awareness of power dynamics, and emphasis on shared knowledge creation and knowledge ownership. Feminism is not only concerned with gender as the topic of research, *how* the process occurs is also important. Sandoval (2000) explains that feminism “recalibrated its dimensions” (p. 63). Feminism can operate in a location of the differential, “a location wherein the aims of feminism, race, ethnicity, sex, and marginality studies, and historical, aesthetic, and global studies can crosscut and join together in new relations through the recognition of a shared theory and method of oppositional consciousness” (p. 64). That is the location of the feminism shaping this dissertation.

An important aspect of feminism informed by postmodernism that is especially relevant to this research is the challenge to binaries, such as female/male, man/woman, good/bad. However, postmodern feminism, with its deconstruction of these binary categories, troubles this standard used to determine feminist legitimacy. One aspect of the argument I make with regard to homelessness is that by identifying it as a social problem we are limiting what it can reveal, and as a result, we maintain a status quo that continues to permit us to surveil homelessness, privilege economic forms of capital, and perpetuate the Algerian myth of bootstrapping. Part of how this occurs is through the use

of binaries such as housed/homeless, employed/unemployed, rich/poor. While binaries are conveniently orderly, “categories tend to slip around and to glue themselves onto other binaries, conflating one with another” (Gannon & Davies, 2007, p. 73). The current narrative of homelessness is conflated with unemployed, poor, uneducated, lazy, unreliable. Housed is affixed to the employed, rich, educated, motivated, reliable. Through postmodern feminist meaning making, I ask questions that challenge these binaries and go beyond them.

I attribute my postmodern feminist epistemology to helping expose the breakdown I encountered while coding and theming the data from the interviews I conducted with four men experiencing homelessness. I was setting up binaries related to their behaviors. It was not until considering Sandoval’s (2000) postmodern feminist theory of differential consciousness that the binaries started to breakdown and new meanings emerged.

### **N-Dimensional Space, Revisited**

I acknowledge that there are aspects of these epistemologies and theories that may be in tension. Still, these inform how I know and make meaning of the world, even through and with their contradictions. Perhaps due to the postmodern leaning, I embrace the ambiguity, the disjointedness, believing in possibility of connections. All the while, I adopt critical self-reflexivity as an intervention in order to be mindful of the possibility of misinterpretation, abuse of power, appropriation of ideas and practices, harm to community, and multiplicity of possibilities. I do not think of these as rigidly separate theories, but as dynamic and evolving ways of making meaning and being in the world, therefore, they have the capacity to morph with the context, time, and space, which allows for promises of open space and the unknown.

### **Critical Self-Reflexivity**

Research is difficult to navigate. In this research there are people whom I think of as co-researchers even though they were not always present during the writing process. Some of these folks include Ben, George, Isiahm, and Jarman (who were much more than interviewees); the collaborators in *storyscapes*; and the multiple people who informed, challenged, and guided my own development during the two-year break that I took from the university to work full-time at the day center for which I had previously been volunteering. This creates all sorts of opportunities for our situated and multiple subjectivities to influence the process and the product. Pillow (2003) explains that reflexivity serves numerous roles in research: establishing trustworthiness, interrogating power throughout all stages of the research, troubling the idea of “representation” both of one’s self and others involved in the research, situating how knowledge is produced, exposing the political nature of research, and making visible to self and others the way this knowledge was constructed.

Reflexivity is important to me in this project for how it has helped and will continue to help with every stage of the research. As a practice it has helped me be more intentional in the choices I make in various aspects of research. The very decision to construct and operate *storyscapes* in the way we did comes from my concerns regarding how to prevent exploitation of stories and experiences.

### **Conclusion: Mapping this Rhizomatic Manuscript**

This dissertation begins with homelessness, not as an origin but as an intentionally selected starting point. Once I brought together my personal experiences and reflections from working with people experiencing homelessness, the adept and thought-provoking interviews with Ben, George, Jarman, and Isiahm—four men



experiencing homelessness—and further research into the literature, I found that I had picked up roots that led me to neoliberalism, community, and social justice.

The dissertation contains four nodes that are loosely linked to each other but written in a manner such that I was not intending to create a lot of continuity or connections between them. In other words, they are not constructed as a linear progression from one idea to the next; instead I approached them more as independent articles. The four nodes are bookended by this introduction and a conclusion. Each node draws from my bricoleur toolbox, using different methods and approaches to the three essential research questions. I fully acknowledge the rough edges of each section of the text. This is DIY after all. This construction of the nodes means that readers, if they want, may jump around in this dissertation. Is there a certain research question that interests you more than another? In the following paragraphs, does the description of one of the nodes catch your attention more than the others? I encourage you to move around and between the nodes. Start with the conclusion, if you would like. The point is that each portion of this text can stand on its own (although it may be a bit wobbly), and I hope that you will read sections based on your interests, since I also think that will more likely encourage you to keep reading as opposed to losing interest.

The first node introduces semi-structured qualitative interviews I conducted with four men who currently or previously experienced homelessness. This node contributes to the first research question about understanding and exposure, and also considers the social justice practice of **Resistance**: (How) can homelessness be a site of resistance? Resistance against what? I intentionally sought out these men and their ideas because I think of them as possessing the perspectives that go against the status quo narrative of homelessness, the resisters, and—as they described themselves—the fools.

Traditionally, in academic scholarship, a literature review prefaces research findings. Given that readers will likely read the dissertation linearly, and since I strongly emphasize the value of knowledge gained through lived experience, I want people experiencing homelessness to introduce the first ideas about homelessness. For this reason I have placed the interviews before the literature review node.

The second node serves as a general literature review and addresses most directly addresses the first research question and topic—**Understanding and exposure**: What are various conditions used to constitute homelessness as a social problem? Within it I work to show how homelessness is currently thought of as a social problem. One section works at defining homelessness and how it is currently discussed by social service agencies, the U.S. federal government, and advocacy groups. Another section looks more at the scholarly research, and in it I identify a couple of themes about how the causes and solutions to homelessness are presented.

The third node continues with the topic of resistance, introducing critical storytelling as a tool for resistance. In the text I lift up a community-engaged project from 2013-2014 that utilized stories of place to provide new perspectives about downtown Greensboro, North Carolina. The project was comprised almost entirely of people experiencing homelessness, and within the node, there is examination of the process as well as the stories in light of resistance.

The final node, before the conclusion, contributes ideas to all three research questions by considering how neoliberalism and homelessness interact with each other. I explain the ubiquitous ideology of neoliberalism and show ways that it has shaped the status quo understanding of homelessness, and I present a layered performance narrative about a local tent encampment that was closed after being a haven and

intentional community for people experiencing homelessness who wanted a different way of living than that offered by traditional nighttime shelters and transitional housing. Although it no longer exists, the tent encampment is an example that provides information for the final research question—**Imagination**: In what ways might homelessness move us toward imagining new ways of engaging in and with each other and the world around us?

The conclusion serves as another bookend to the dissertation; I use it as a pause point, to step back and look at the disparate pieces to see where there are connections. I address the research questions a final time, synthesizing and analyzing together elements of the previous nodes, to see what new or different meaning can be made as a result of this rhizomatic research.

Lastly, I offer this reminder to the reader: Assemblage is what I believe is most unique to this dissertation project. At first glance the diversity of methods, questions, and concepts may appear fragmented, an observation with which I would both agree and disagree. Fragmentation more accurately reflects how I approach and think about things. Rather than linearity, I seek hypertextuality, the space to make connections, leaps, flights of fancy and bring disparate pieces together. In this case, I see connections between critical storytelling, homelessness, neoliberalism, community, and resistance, and I hope to explore these connections and implications in order to see what meaning can be made from them. While this process risks privileging breadth to depth, there may be great value in playing to this breadth as a political act of subversion to the Academy's attempts to maintain isolated disciplines and areas of expertise (Harney & Moten, 2013). Given my experiences in popular education, what I have witnessed as collaboratively

powerful is the bringing together of disparate people, perspectives, experiences, knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

CHAPTER II  
INTERVIEWS NODE

**Acting the Fool: Interviews with Four Men Experiencing Homelessness**

There's the fool—which is my favorite character—the person that don't obviously got it all together. I always feel like the fool knows something that everyone else doesn't know, and later on in the act he's going to be the genius...I think that is what the homeless are in society, these are the crazy folk. Then I think it's going to happen very suddenly that they won't be.... The fool is a genius. (Isiahm Wardlow, 2016)

This fellow's wise enough to play the fool,  
And to do that well craves a kind of wit:  
He must observe their mood on whom he jests,  
The quality of persons, and the time;  
And like the haggard, check at every feather  
That comes before his eye. This is a practice  
As full of labour as a wise man's art  
For folly that he wisely shows is fit;  
But wise men, folly-fall'n, quite taint their wit.  
(William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 1969)

Subversives, they [fools] utter the unspeakable, violate taboos, flout decency.  
(Bell, p. 57, 2010)

**Introduction**

Homelessness is a lived experience that is thought of as a social problem in the United States. Local, state, and federal governments have departments and initiatives dedicated to ending homelessness; non-profits and faith-based organizations exist for the expressed purpose of providing services to people experiencing homelessness; legal and advocacy groups are organized to protect the rights of people experiencing homelessness. Within the current dominant narrative about homelessness in the U.S., it

is an undesirable position in which to be. People experiencing homelessness are often portrayed as one-dimensional characters that are either pitied (the single mother, the young child, the natural disaster victim) or demonized (the addict, the non-compliant mentally ill, the criminal). The narrative itself is controlled more by the agencies working on “behalf” of the people experiencing homelessness than by the individuals themselves experiencing homelessness.

In this research node I share the findings of semi-structured qualitative interviews with four people experiencing homelessness. The interview questions are informed by my multiple years of working with people experiencing homelessness and the conversations during those years that have given me pause, required me to trouble assumptions that I may have been making, opened up new possibilities or perspectives with regard to understanding homelessness itself as well as other aspects of U.S. socio-economic order. Some of those conversations and events occurred with the four men who also participated in the research, while other conversations and events served as precursors that shifted, agitated, or completely ruptured my assumptions and thus created opportunities that allowed me to operate differently in my community building with the four guys and the “homeless community” of our city.

The purpose of this node is to consider new perspectives on homelessness, built on the lived experiences and knowledge of Ben, George, Isiahm, and Jarman, who are the four men interviewed for this project. I focus on the content of their interviews that most directly or interestingly address the focus areas of the main research questions: (a) understanding and exposure, (b) resistance, and (c) imagination. I begin by framing the research itself, everything from descriptions of methods, settings, the interviewees, and the coding and analysis processes. In the next section I provide descriptions of the

findings. These findings and the discussion in the subsequent section reflect only a few of the multiple worthwhile and significant topics that could be covered here. Ultimately the ones I focus on here were selected for their saliency to the broader project (i.e., challenging the accepted homeless narrative, looking for resistance tactics, and imagining a different way to be in the world) of which this is only one section. The findings from the interviews are also woven throughout the other nodes of the dissertation in different ways—sources of inspiration, expert knowledge based on lived experiences—but this node is specifically dedicated to diving deeply into the knowledge, worldviews, experiences, and meaning making of the stories from the four folks I interviewed.

### **Framing the Research**

This research tries to make “the world visible in ways that implement social justice goals” (Denzin, 2010, p. 57). Two goals that Denzin identifies are particularly relevant to this project: (a) linking the personal with the public and (b) demonstrating, through interviews, observations, and personal experiences, that there are multiple examples of oppression (p. 55). Additionally, this project is about imagination—imagining beyond that which is. My main research questions are organized around three topics: 1) Understanding and exposure, 2) Resistance, and 3) Imagination.

1. **Understanding and exposure:** What are various conditions used to constitute homelessness as a social problem?
2. **Resistance:** (How) can homelessness be a site of resistance? Resistance against what?
3. **Imagination:** In what ways might homelessness move us toward imagining new ways of engaging with each other and the world around us?

## **Participants and Setting**

The original research project for this node included semi-structured individual interviews with four people experiencing homelessness: Ben, George, Isiahm, and Jarman. They offered strong counter-narratives, thus providing rich soil for this rhizoanalysis about homelessness. These interviews are also rich because of the depth of relationships I shared with each person. I have known these men for at least a year, many of them much longer. In the time that we've known each other I have worked on projects with them; spent overnights in the emergency shelter with them; shared meals; had disagreements, even fights; laughed, a lot; cried some; and sadly even petitioned for one to be held at the hospital for his mental health and safety. While some of these moments strained our relationships at the time, they ultimately deepened our connections because we've been willing to take risks and be vulnerable with each other. For the purpose of research, our personal and deep relationships contribute to the quality of the interviews. The trustworthiness of this project and its findings are heightened due to the relationships. I have heard the stock stories that people experiencing homelessness share with interviewers; for mental and physical survival people have learned to perform a narrative that they believe fits with what the interviewer expects to hear. However, because of the many times that I have talked about the topics in the interview questions I asked with the participants, I could push back or question when I thought I heard a response that I suspected was not really authentic. Although everyone was given a choice to use a pseudonym or his real name, all interviewees desired to use their real names. I am glad for that since it allows me to attribute their ideas to them. These are smart men who deserve to be recognized for what they are contributing to the thinking around homelessness. While the men's names are real, I



have changed some information in their narratives to obscure the identity of some of the non-profits they discuss. This is because their critiques of the agencies could have negative implications for their access to resources at these organizations.

I have written the following descriptions of the men in a relational manner because this more story-like practice provides a deeper portrait of each individual and reveals some of the background related to how long I have known each of them, thus hopefully also establishing some credibility and trustworthiness to the reader(s) of the value of this research. These descriptive narratives offer images greater than the data collected by PIT counts or other quantitative assessment surveys. If that sort of information is useful to you, then here it is: These are four men of color, ranging in age from 35-70. Two of them have been diagnosed with mental illness, one is a chronic alcoholic and occasional drug user, one is currently a recreational drug user, while another one is currently sober but used drugs and alcohol intensely in his past. Only one of them has a recorded criminal background, but three of the four admit to being criminally active. Three of the four men are single, one is newly married, and three of them have children (both adult age and a toddler).

**Ben.** Ben is a formally educated sort of Renaissance man; he listens to public radio, reads the newspaper, and uses words in his everyday vocabulary that I have to look up in a dictionary. The first time I met Ben he was looking through binoculars to bird watch from the conference room at the local day center for people experiencing homelessness. The next time I saw him, after he had spent two weeks in the behavioral health ward at the hospital, he recited an Emily Dickens poem to me. I was drawn to his love of nature and literature; those are also interests of my own. Later I learned about his precarious relationship with the voices in his head; he shared stories of the voices'

origins as well as his own adventures in life. This bank-robbing, schizophrenic, alcoholic father is also a published author, bibliophile, and college graduate who has lived quite a life in his sixty-five years. Now, as his interview will reflect, he lives a quiet life in a garden-level apartment—where the windows barely peak above the ground. Because his disability check is sent to a payee, who handles his income, Ben does not control his own money and instead has to request money, with an explanation of what he will use it for. He also cannot move around the small town because he does not have personal transportation and there is no public transportation. I visited him in his apartment for the interview; in the dark room he reminded me of someone pacing in a small cell, nowhere to go, yet needing to move.

**George.** George is a musician and poet. He is an artist. He is also an activist. Often he wears stiff cotton tunics with vibrant colors that visually alert people to his African identity, which is further reinforced when he speaks and his accent shapes the cadence and pronunciation of words; He was born and raised in Cameroon. George is intense! He gets noticed when he walks into a room both for his physicality and his stride, which alerts others to his clear purpose. He is “here”—wherever *here* is—in order to *do* something. George has been homeless off and on for more than two years. I have known him all of that time. I met him when the day center for people experiencing homelessness opened in its new downtown home. He took one of the cavernous classrooms and transformed it into a music room, and he explained to me how he uses music to work through his schizophrenia. His hope was to offer music to others for that purpose as well. He saw himself as a teacher, a role he took seriously, and was looking for students. He knew that the student role could offer structure to a person and the music could offer hope—two items he believed were important to someone experiencing

homelessness. The next time I saw George it was a couple of years later and he was a guest at that same day center, homeless. He still carried his guitar with him though, and he played it. Whether he was guiding a group of volunteers and guests in a song writing exercise, playing the strings softly to the side of an agitated guest, performing at a wake for a guest we had lost, or self-soothing the voices in his head while he strummed, the guitar and the music it made at his hands, was/is as much part of his language as his Cameroonian-modulated English vocabulary. The man is a brilliant artist, a driven dreamer, and a strategic advocate for people experiencing homelessness.

**Isiahm.** In his early thirties, Isiahm is a spoken-word poet, nascent activist, unsure yet committed new husband, fledgling father, and critical thinker who is outraged and perplexed by the overt injustices he both experiences and observes through current events. He does not see the world through rose-colored glasses; rather, he sports a gas mask (literally). We met in a writing workshop at the homeless day center; it was his first week in the city. He had exiled himself from a nearby city and was now wandering Elm, Washington, and Lee Streets downtown. He followed the diaspora that moved from Lee to Washington—from the night shelter to the day shelter—in the early mornings, wandering into the writing class by happenstance. Our first meeting was years ago, and since then Isiahm has become a good friend, trusted critic, and artistic partner on various projects. We have co-taught writing classes, co-created the poetic art installation: *storyscapes*, and consulted with a neighboring city as it opens its first day center for people experiencing homelessness.

**Jarman.** Walking into the emergency winter shelter at 3:00am in a navy blue wool pea coat, pilled toboggan, overgrown beard, and calm demeanor, Jarman made a lasting first impression on me. I got his name and explained how the winter emergency

shelter operated, all the while waiting for him to comment on the frigid air he had just walked through. He never did, so I finally asked him if he was cold since it was about 15° outside. He quietly chuckled, smiled—mostly with his eyes, since his facial hair covered his mouth and cheeks—and spoke so softly I could barely catch his response. He reminded me of a gentle giant, and his comment only reinforced this comparison; he said he really liked the outdoors and had been sleeping well in his tent but was concerned about a woman in the tent encampment and so he agreed to sleep inside if she would also do the same. Then he grabbed a cup of coffee, made his way to an open spot against a wall, slid down to a sitting position, sipped from his drink and quietly drifted back to sleep. Minutes later the woman he had referenced also checked in to the emergency shelter. A couple of months later, with the snow melted, grass growing, and sun warming the air, Jarman walked up to the day center with a shaven face, trimmed hair, and a frame that was, while strong, noticeably less thick because he had shed the multiple layers of shirts, sweaters, and coat. I barely recognized him. We have spent hours talking about living off the grid, cultural expectations of black men, the health benefits of a vegetarian diet, and the dangers of consumerism.

### **Settings**

All the interviews took place in North Carolina, during the fall of 2016. The interview location for two (George and Jarman) of the four interviews was a day center for people experiencing homelessness. This was a difficult interview location due to regular disruptions—announcements over the intercom, people knocking at the door of the interview room—but it was also a familiar and somewhat comfortable location that quickly transformed the “interview” into just another one of numerous similar conversations I had had with these men at the center. Isiahm and I met on two

occasions, first walking around a local public park and then sitting on my living room while his young son patiently and curiously explored each terrain. Ben and I met at his new apartment because he did not have transportation to meet me anywhere else. Each participant selected the interview location, whether out of convenience or necessity. Every interview had to be rescheduled at least two times. With George we scheduled at least five meetings before an actual time worked out. The challenges that led to rescheduling interviews included: transportation issues, unexpected meetings or opportunities, and appointments that were delayed or took longer than planned.

### **Methods**

This section describes aspects of the methods used to recruit participants, transcribe interviews, then code and thematize the transcripts. The coding and thematizing for this research were rather circuitous and elongated, with swaths of time between portions of these processes. These were not, however, ellipses in the research, but rather, moments of rumination for me, where the men's stories and ideas steeped. I sat with them, they accompanied me while working, having conversations with others, even in the consulting I was doing with numerous nonprofits working with people experiencing homelessness. In this way, there was a crystallization process whereby the information from the interviews reflected and refracted with other aspects of current events, daily life, and academic texts. I believe that this allowed for deeper and more significant interpretations ultimately.

### **Interview Process**

The interview questions touched on stereotypes of homelessness (Q1, Q2, and Q3), freedom and control within the experience of homelessness (Q4 and Q5), resistance (Q5 and Q11), community (Q4, Q6, and Q7), corporeality or the bodily

experience of homelessness (Q8), and homelessness as a learning experience (Q9 and Q10). The participants did not have to answer any questions that they did not want to answer. Initially I intended for the interviews to last no longer than 45-60 minutes with an option for us to meet again if we had not gone through all the questions. The interviews actually lasted a minimum of 90 minutes, with a couple going much longer. In one case, we met twice, each time for about 90-120 minutes.

**Interview questions.** This is a list of the interview questions. The questions are informed by previous conversations that I have had with people experiencing homelessness. Additionally, the university's Office of Research Integrity approved the questions.

1. What do you think are the most common or mainstream ideas of who is homeless and how people become homeless?
2. What do people in [this city] think about people experiencing homelessness? Are there different ways people think about you depending on who they are (e.g., business owners, social workers) or where you interact with them (e.g., downtown, at a non-profit)? What experiences have taught you this?
3. In the previous question, you stated (provide paraphrase of answer), how does your story differ from or match that?
4. In what ways do you feel controlled or watched by others in [this city] (or wherever you were experiencing homelessness) - publicly, in organizations, with family, etc.? In what ways do you feel supported?

5. How much choice do you feel like you have as a person experiencing homelessness? Where/how are your choices increased, if at all?  
Where/how are your choices limited?
6. Who is your community?
  - a. How did they come to be your community?
  - b. What do they provide to you, do for you as community?
  - c. If not mentioned, what about [this city]? Do you feel like a part of that community?
7. How do you contribute to your community?
8. Describe some of the physical experiences of homelessness. How have you felt it in your body?
9. How has experiencing homelessness impacted the ways that you behave?
10. What have you valued about being homeless? Has it helped you think/feel differently about anything?
11. As someone experiencing homelessness, do you intentionally do anything to resist/disrupt other people's expectations of you? What? Why?
12. A common idea in the United States is that each person is responsible for her/his situation. This is called "individual responsibility." This idea opposes community and common good, which are ideas related to people helping each other and sometimes having less yourself so that others can also have some. What do you think about this? Has your opinion changed any through the experience of homelessness?

13. Given that I'm interested in thinking about homelessness differently, and also seeing if homelessness can help us think differently about how things could be in our communities, is there anything else that you would like to share that I might not have thought to ask?

**Transcription.** I transcribed the interviews. I included all pauses, inserted notes that I had made about facial and body language during the interviews, and observations about tone of voice. I encountered a few challenges to transcription—overhead noise from the intercom system at the non-profit, outside noise at the park, rapid or quiet speaking from interviewees, slang that I was unfamiliar with, and, in George's case, a thick accent along with English not being his primary language often meant a different pronunciation of words—but I made every effort to transcribe accurately. If I could not make out a word or phrase, I left an “indecipherable” notation in the transcript as opposed to guessing what was being said. I also listened to the recordings between three to five times each. To help manage the interviews, I included attribute coding (e.g., location, timeframe, and participant characteristics) at the beginning of every transcript (Saldaña, 2013, p. 70).

**Recruiting participants.** I purposefully sought out Ben, George, Jarman, and Isiahm for these interviews based on previous conversations that we had. I have known each of them for a minimum of one year (Jarman) and as long as five years (Isiahm). In that time, I have had meaningful discussions with each of them that left me asking different questions about homelessness. They indirectly shaped the questions asked during their interviews. I also kept open the option for snowball sampling (Glesne, 2006, p. 35) of other participants based on recommendations by the four men, but none of them had other people to recommend.



## **Navigating the Complexities of Coding, Theory, and Ethics**

The research steps that followed the interviews were messy and complex. Throughout the process I was keenly aware of tensions and contradictions: within interviews, between interviews, between interviewees and me. With regard to subjectivity I questioned how I might be coding and categorizing in a way that was perhaps overlooking nuanced elements of the men's interviews. And simultaneously I was running up against a question of "truthfulness" as it related to some of the stories the men shared. This section describes how I worked through the messiness.

### **Coding Process**

I manually, solo-coded the interview transcripts from Ben, George, Isiahm, and Jarman. Codes, in this case, follow Saldaña's (2013) definition as "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 3). In the initial coding process, I read and reread the transcripts of the interviews line by line and applied a combination of in-vivo, versus, and descriptive coding to the transcripts (Saldaña, 2013, p. 100). I chose these traditional coding methods to establish distance between the men's ideas and me as well as to preserve the men's words by lifting codes that used direct quotations.

**In Vivo coding.** Through In Vivo coding I lifted direct interview words that I found to be "significant or summative" of the interview's content (Saldaña, 2013, p. 98). The In Vivo method helped ensure that I kept to the chosen language of the participants. Since I value the lived knowledge of people experiencing homelessness, this was one way I could credit the participants. Additionally, participants provided vibrant metaphors throughout their interviews that were worthy of attributing. Metaphors can contribute to

research by offering distance yet clarity and nuance to a research finding. As Kincheloe explains:

The metaphor is intimate enough with the original entity to illuminate it, sufficiently far away from it to inflate its power to move us to a new conceptual understanding of an intangible relationship in the physical, social, or psychic world. Here we move to a new cognitive domain, a new understanding of self and world and the relationship between them. (as cited in Kress, 2013, p. 178)

**Versus coding.** Versus coding “identifies conflicts, struggles, and power issues observed in social action, reaction, and interaction” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 107). This coding method helped me identify tensions that the participants were experiencing or were aware of based on their social position on the “lowest rung of the community’s ladder” (Ben’s words). There were moments in the transcripts when a participant was making a clear distinction between two concepts. For example, George, who was raised in a village in Cameroon, described two different ways of thinking—*primitive thinking* and *civilized thinking*—that he had to learn to distinguish between when operating in the United States. Once he explained what each of those terms meant to him, it was evident that he viewed them as mutually exclusive ways of thinking, thus versus coding was a useful tool. Although I applied versus codes, I did so with a postmodern skepticism toward the easy binary that versus coding could establish.

**Descriptive coding.** I intentionally applied descriptive coding to the transcripts as a way to slow down my own desire to immediately interpret the content of the interviews. As Saldaña explains, “[descriptive coding’s] primary goal is to assist the reader to see what you saw and to hear what you heard...[not] scrutinize the nuances of people” (p. 88). The descriptive coding was useful in the initial coding process to organize and reorganize topics that all of the participants discussed in their interviews.

While I approached the initial coding process with some methods in mind, through the practice of reading through the transcripts multiple times, I found these initial coding methods (In Vivo, versus coding, descriptive) insufficient in considering how the interviews speak to each other as well as speak to broader concepts.

### **A Cord of Three Strands**

I mentioned that this was a messy process. Part of that messiness came from my effort to neatly separate the research stages at this point: start with coding, move those to categories, identify themes, be aware of my own questions and concerns and separate those from what I am doing. The very method of trying to follow a linear process created more confusion for me. When I stopped doing that, and instead, accepted the chaotic nature of these multiple and varied research strands, I began to finally see some forms. By starting to consider the interviews—in full form and codes—along with how those interviews spoke to each other, to me (intellectually, emotionally, and relationally), and to broader theory, I discovered a cord of three strands that I held on to and followed. Reflectively, I would describe this as a rhizomatic experience, going where the information wanted to wander, rather than forcing all of it, including me, through a prescribed route with a clear destination. This section describes aspects of the research process that I initially considered as outliers or that I thought were not supposed to be a part of the process at this stage.

**Analytic memo writing.** In general I practice critical reflexivity through regular writing about current events, my experiences, conversations, etc. I informally use the DEAL model (Describe, Examine, Articulate Learning), which is a common reflection model used in service-learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009) for documenting and making meaning of my interpretations and the writing. Throughout this dissertation process I

have also specifically recorded “analytic memos,” the purpose of which is “thinking critically about what you are doing and why, confronting and often challenging your own assumptions, and recognizing the extent to which your thoughts, actions, and decisions shape how you research and what you see” (Mason, as cited in Saldaña, 2013, p. 42). I have been intentional about this because I am keenly aware that my lived experiences as a white woman who has never been homeless or precariously housed and the lived experiences of the participants—four black men currently/previous experiencing homelessness—are vastly different and it is very likely that our meaning making is also different, as informed by these identity categories plus different and lived experiences within differently situated contexts. In other words, this is one way that I try to put a check-in in place that requires me to pause and consider the multiple possibilities of *what, so what, and now what* that can emerge from an event or decision. I attribute the incorporation of Sandoval’s differential consciousness of opposition (2000), which I discuss next, largely to the unsettledness I kept on encountering and trying to work through during the initial stages of the research coding and analysis.

**Decoding.** Coding was a dissatisfying process. In particular I was wrestling with how flat the words seemed, when pulled out as codes, compared to the strength of stories. The themes I was naming were not interesting or inspiring; in fact, I worried that I was somehow inadvertently maiming their ideas. In conversations with others, I would share ideas of resistance, questioning the status quo, bold acts against capitalism that I was learning about in the interviews. During one of these conversations the other person was skeptical about what I describing. She admitted that she could not turn off the critical Marxist in her brain that suggested that although the four guys were *saying* one thing, their *reality* was still one of hunger and lack of shelter. In other words, their lived

experience clearly revealed the systems of oppression under which they were suffering, even if they asserted that they were there by choice or that they intentionally wanted to sleep outside in freezing weather (for example). I bristled at her remarks but was unsure how to counter her point.

What occurred in that encounter reflected also what was happening in the actual coding too. The flatness, or the dullness, was coming from, among other things, a skepticism I had about some of the “truth” of the men’s interviews along with a false belief that I was somehow going through this process of coding and theming without the interference of any theory or conceptual framework, which is untrue and impossible. Although I never verbally responded to the person sharing her skepticism about this research, I did begin to recall then Sandoval’s theory of oppositional consciousness (2000).

**Methodology of the oppressed.** Sandoval’s theory is framed within an explanation of US third world feminism, which she analyzes alongside other second wave feminist movements. However, as she argues, and I concur, these “feminist forms of resistance” are analogous to “five fundamental forms of oppositional consciousness... and manifest a generally applicable theory and method of oppositional consciousness” (p. 45). In other words, all five of these forms of resistance—equal rights form, revolutionary form, supremacist form, separatist form, and differential form—when used tactically, may likely be identified in other resistance efforts, whether or not they are explicitly labeled feminist. The stories and ideas the men shared in their interviews were not feminist per se, however, the forms of oppositional consciousness breathed life into the men’s words, bringing attention and emphasis to elements of their stories that I was previously overlooking, or even misunderstanding. Agee (2009) emphasizes that

qualitative research “should embrace theory, either explicitly or implicitly as a way of giving direction and framing particular ideas. Theory...serves as a conceptual tool that can move an inquiry forward toward deeper levels of understanding” (p. 438). Rather than wait to bring the interview findings into conversation with theory during the discussion portion of this research, instead, I have brought it in much earlier to help me decode the portions of the interviews that I should lift up in the first place.

What Sandoval provides is a way of making meaning of action, not as typologies, which are fixed definitions but rather as modes, which suggest the action and ascribed meaning may morph, move, wander. In particular, Sandoval describes a “differential form of consciousness” that serves the men’s interviews well. This differential form of consciousness is a way of describing and explaining individual (or group) thoughts and actions in relation to systems of oppression. The first four modes—equal rights, revolutionary, separatist, supremacist—have been adopted by activists at various times in feminist history, but Sandoval points out how ultimately, all of them end up enacting some of the very forms of oppression that they intend to disrupt due to entrenched ideologies. The fifth mode—the differential consciousness of opposition—is unique from the other modes because it does not rely on a central ideology, rather it “enables movement ‘between and among’ ideological positionings” (p. 58), thus allowing individuals to adjust their plan based on context and what will work best given what is available. Philosophically it aligns with the practice of bricolage and assemblage in ways that more accurately trouble the fixedness of positionality and subjectivity, which can so easily give way to identity politics.

By attributing a differential form of oppositional consciousness to the men, the meaning(s) of their stories, explanations for their actions, descriptions of their beliefs

take on new meaning. Similarly, my concerns about discrepancies, even what I thought of as contradictions, refract and shift and morph. What on its face appears to be Ben parroting niceties about social service agencies that, in the past, he has viciously condemned no longer makes me question his comment; rather, it makes me ask why is he choosing to describe the agency this way? Ben later explained that he held back some of his sharp critiques because he knew the interview was for my dissertation and he was concerned that those critiques might serve to have his other points, or my arguments, dismissed by readers. It was tactical self-censorship.

**(Un)Reliable narrators.** Looping back to another reason for why I was unsettled with this portion of the research process, I believe it is necessary to address a concept that I mostly attach to fiction writing, yet found relevant to this research as well: the *unreliable narrator*. In particular, I encountered this when interviewing Ben and George. I found Ben's answers very tame and kind of formulaic, and I knew of inconsistencies between what George was sharing with me and information about the events as others had relayed them to me.

Having worked with people experiencing homelessness in numerous settings (e.g., city council meetings, demonstrations, at agencies, one-on-one and in groups) I have seen the multiples ways that they adjust the stories that they share. The skills required to read a group of people, to understand what they expect, and adjust a story in order for listeners to hear what they want, are admirable and tiring and often necessary for self-preservation. However, given the way people experiencing homelessness are stereotyped in popular media as distrustful and lazy, it is possible for a reader to question the reliability of the information Ben, George, Isiahm, and Jarman shared,

especially if I also include my observations about discrepancies to stories or behavior.

Should I not share inconsistencies?

Rather than withhold inconsistencies, I prefer to address what I anticipate some readers would describe as reliability, or the confidence to believe in what is being shared. None of us are truly reliable narrators. We all perform. Reality is itself interpreted through our individual lenses and two people can easily relay distinctly unique descriptions of the same event and believe the “truth” of their descriptions, thus believing that they are reliable. Thinking in terms of each interviewee as operating from a differential consciousness of opposition however, the assessment I should make regarding the content of what Ben, George, Isiahm, or Jarman shares with me is not about “truth.” I am better served to ask why would someone share *this* version of the story with me? It still reflects something that is worthwhile and valuable to them. *Why* might an interviewee be inconsistent—even contradictory—in his responses to the interview questions; *why* might, even as they were experiencing hunger and a lack of shelter, the interviewees emphasize their choices and acts of resistance as they discussed experiencing homelessness?

### **Aspiring to Critically Reflexive Ethics**

Along with trying to conduct research that serves social justice, I also aspire to pursue and share research that is infused with critically reflexive ethics throughout the process. Critical reflexivity requires researchers to be “attentive to how our experiences, knowledge, and social positions might impact each aspect and moment of the research process,” while also being alert to how power is potentially operating throughout the research, including both the process and the various ways we then represent it (e.g., articles, conference papers, trainings) (Bettez, 2015, p. 940). Bettez also links theory to



the concept of critically reflexive ethics, asserting that all aspects of research are theory-laden. The sense I make of this idea is that there are conceptual or theoretical frameworks that help me know what I know, which has shaped what, why, and how I conduct this research. Such theory is integral to the research; it is not only something to reference in the discussion section of a manuscript about the research.

It is in this effort to practice critically reflexive ethics that I have detailed the challenges at various steps of the research. I hope to have made transparent at least some of the ways that I have been critically reflexive in the relational elements of the research, the choice of research topics and questions, and the interpretations and meaning-making based on the interviews (as well as the rest of this dissertation). The length of time that I have known the interviewees, my position within the local homeless community, and the previous and ongoing conversations that I have had with the participants contribute to the credibility of this research. Rather than follow traditional research practices for the sake of following traditional research practices, I took my cues from people experiencing homelessness: to be a bricoleur. This bricoleur effort required agility, flexibility, and creativity to anticipate and respond to the lived experiences of the interviewees. It allowed me to navigate the chaos of homelessness that raises constant unanticipated barriers, and it also helped me navigate the uncertainty of meaning-making after the interviews were completed.

### **Findings**

Since the questions for the semi-formal interviews were informed by my years of working with people experiencing homelessness and specifically my familiarity with these men in particular as well as my conceptual framework, accordingly the responses addressed certain topics. While some of the questioned were not new, meaning that

others have asked those questions too, and the participants had answered those questions before, what I attempted to do was think differently about the answers provided. The broad topics align with the questions: there were details about experiencing homelessness, views on community, stories explaining why they were homeless. Additionally, there were reflections on their relationships to the broader city population, connections made between the dominant cultural and socio-economic narratives of success and their choices related to participation in those narratives, and intriguing metaphors built from their imaginations. I focus on the findings that serve this specific project: understanding and exposure, resistance, and imagination.

### **Understanding and Exposing the Dominant Narratives of Homelessness**

When asked what they thought about the common mainstream ideas of who is homeless and how they become homeless, the answers were all similar. People became homeless because of mental illness and substance abuse; issues with authority or criminal behavior; they are the ne'er-do-wells, the panhandlers, the persons living off the government. Their descriptions, possibly based on their own identities as men, never touched on descriptions about families or couples. The image of homelessness that they constructed was that of the single man.

While they could name the dominant perspectives about homelessness, often in the same breath, they hoped to trouble their answers or show more complexity. Jarman made sure to point out that "most people that I encounter, they're really nice and they're really just looking for help to get to the next level." With this caveat, Jarman was reminding me that even as he listed the various traditional reasons why someone is homeless, there was also more to be aware of. He was inserting a both/and into a narrative that was usually situated as an either/or. These insertions were ways to resist

the medicalized and pathologized consequences that come with this dominant narrative: When we attend to the personal, individual deficits of people experiencing homelessness than we can obscure the structural issues that contribute to this form of oppression.

The interviewees tended to situate their discussion of homelessness in a macro framework and then nod to individual characteristics, behaviors, or choices. Isiahm explained that people experiencing homelessness are “people who started off kind of in debt to society: Coming from broken homes and being in poverty.” He demonstrated his understanding of this complexity with an example:

I remember this one woman that I used to sell drugs to. She would have her daughter ask for money from people outside the Food Lion to help support her habit. And her daughter would miss school and because of this, so she's already starting indebted to society not for any decisions she's made. So then you see her 15 years later in a position like that and you automatically think that this person is lazy...or slow, or however you want to describe it. But you don't know that person's story or the situation she may have been in and the trauma that may have kept her from realizing the basic need of housing.

Through the example Isiahm was emphasizing the years of invisible baggage that a people experiencing homelessness carries before ever becoming homeless.

The men continued their emphasis of complexity throughout the interviews. It was not only that how someone finds oneself homeless is intricate, but also, once a person is experiencing homelessness the intricacies continue. All of the men described challenges that they faced while homeless that demonstrate that it is important to not simply take a scene at face value but to also understand the context, or the “bigger picture.” Ben described feeling invisible. When he walked along the downtown sidewalks, no one made eye contact with him or acknowledged his presence.

It's made me feel less than. And when I feel less than it erodes my self-confidence.... There's stores I won't go into because they will follow me around. I don't have the self-confidence to go and strike up a conversation with somebody...It just makes you feel awful sometimes.

The eroding self-confidence had a snowball effect on Ben because it contributed to his depression, which kept him more isolated, which then made it more difficult for him to reach out to services that social service agencies might offer.

Jarman described the very practical intricacies of staying presentable in order to be hired or to maintain a job while also keeping warm when sleeping outside. In the winter Jarman grew a full beard because it kept his face warm at night while he slept in his tent. At the same time, "I didn't always have the money to go get like [beard maintenance] and if I did have the money I could use it toward something more important than going to get my beard trimmed up every two weeks." Yet he found that during the winter, with his beard, people treated him differently, more negatively, which sometimes prevented him from making money. This is a contradiction of interests that people experiencing homelessness face regularly. In his case it was that he both needed the beard to stay warm at night and also that the beard likely contributed to some of the reasons why he was sleeping outside in the first place.

He also pointed out the challenge of having presentable clothes for a job interview. He shared information about the practices of the Salvation Army and other thrift stores. In this example he exposes not only the no-win situation for someone experiencing homelessness but also the way that social service agencies can both perpetuate the homeless stereotypes and work against people experiencing homelessness. Social service agencies that Jarman has worked with have all emphasized the importance of getting a job since he is an able-bodied man. As Jarman

pointed out, before the job, there's the job interview and making a good first impression. Agencies have voucher programs established with local thrift stores in order for people experiencing homelessness to get presentable clothes for job interviews and uniforms. However, the thrift stores often set aside different clothes for the people using vouchers than what they sell to the general public.

A lot of times the vouchers they give you, they give you stuff that's kind of run down. Then the nice stuff they sell. [starting to laugh, laughs through the rest of his explanation] So the really nice stuff they want to sell and make money off of and the stuff that's not so nice, they wanna give it to us.

Not only does this expose highly questionable behavior by the thrift stores, it exposes how the system is working against Jarman who still ends up going to his interviews in raggedy clothes because those are the only garments available to him at the store.

Another relevant critique the men articulated about the dominant narrative of homelessness as a social problem was that it led to deeply embedded and unquestioned generalities that informed how social service agencies, law enforcement, emergency management, faith-based groups, and general residents interacted with them. In contrast the men emphasized how important it was to actually get to know individuals and their unique situations if people really desired to help end homelessness.

Jarman pointed to the unquestioned assumptions that social service agencies used when working with people experiencing homelessness. He observed how the actions of a few individuals could impact the experiences of the many. In this case he had asked a staff member if there were any pairs of socks available. Socks are a highly sought after item because they are not often donated and people wear them for multiple

days at a time. When he asked about socks, which he had heard were available at the night shelter, the staff person responded:

well, we don't give them out anymore because they said people was going and selling them and stuff.... but not everyone is doing that...Is it worth stop doing something cuz a small group of people is going to affect a lot of people?...I think every situation has to be judged you know according to the situation. I don't think everyone's situation is the same.

Another significant example of what Jarman saw as problematic about agencies came in the form of Jarman's goals. He was specifically looking for an intentional community where he could live and work, off the grid, which does not fit with the expectations that service providers have for someone experiencing homelessness. He explained that he did not share his real goals because he is concerned that they will ask him to leave.

I feel like I can't really be up front about what I need because it doesn't fit the box of what people think homeless is. Either you got a drug problem or a mental illness problem and somehow you need to stay in that box.... I'm just quiet so people don't question [me].

Because of not fitting with the agency's expectations, Jarman stays quiet, afraid to even ask questions. He shared that the previous night one of the caseworkers at the shelter sat him down to discuss how he was progressing. "They were just saying that you know, that basically I need to finish out the program, or it would be nice if I finished out the program...which I don't understand, what's the program?" I wondered if he had sought some explanation of "the program," to which he explained, "No, I didn't ask. I was kind of like, I didn't want to mess anything up or I was going to be sleeping outside again."

Jarman has conducted significant research on intentional communities and he has lived

in a few communities in the past. His desire to return to that sort of living space is not unreasonable, but he worries that if he shares that goal with a caseworker, it will jeopardize his bed at the night shelter since it is a goal that does not fit with the traditional trajectory for people experiencing homelessness. The result is doubly negative for Jarman in that not only does he feel he has to keep quiet, and thus isolate himself, but he also does not receive any sort of support service from the caseworker, who could potentially assist Jarman in locating an intentional community that is a good fit for him.

Just as the men had complex views about homelessness, they also held complex views about other dominant narratives and social norms, especially as they related to what it means to be successful. In most of their cases, it was this complexity and suspicion of social norms that led them to homelessness. They had observed, and even experienced, the “good life” of capitalism – having money, buying things, being viewed by others as successful. Yet Isiahm, Jarman, and George could see how this trajectory was dangerous for them, both in terms of their physical lives as well as their sense of self. They did not like who they had become, but they also were either unsure of what they desired instead or knew that in order to get where they wanted to be, they needed to break from these dominant narratives. Ben’s experience was somewhat different from the other three men because he did not have quite the same experiences around monetary success, yet it still runs parallel and is relevant. For Ben, the social norms he came up against were about medication compliance, mental health management that disregarded the insight of the patient, and the dominant narrative about schizophrenia as a debilitating illness that necessitated strong drugs and outside interventions in the most personal of independent skills (e.g., managing money). From these experiences and the

explanations they provided in the interviews, the men are very aware of the pressure, or outright force, put on individuals in society to behave certain ways and believe certain things. In their situations, not only were the men aware of the pressure to conform, their awareness was triggered because of a desire to be or do something different than what was the norm. It was not only that they knew the dominant narratives existed, their desires, goals, and aspirations conflicted with those dominant narratives, meaning that they could not achieve their aspirations while simultaneously cooperating with, or participating in, the dominant narrative. This awareness is what fed their acts of resistance, which are discussed in the following section.

### **Resisting the Dominant Narrative of Homelessness**

Initially, as I crafted the interview questions to discuss with the men, I wanted to open up space for them to discuss the ways that they resist the dominant narrative of homelessness. I had previously had conversations with them and others that had suggested acts of resistance but I did not know if (a) the acts were intentional and (b) if there were acts that I would not recognize. They did provide some responses that address that specifically, however, what I found to be just as significant was that three of the four men's acts of resistance started much earlier by way of *choosing* homelessness to break from their previous lives. In other words, they were resisting the status quo expectations of work, family, and success trajectories. They entered homelessness with eyes wide open as an intentional break from the status quo and a reboot to living. Although they were not naïve to the challenges of homelessness, they preferred what homelessness opened up for them—space, time, opportunities for reflection, different experiences—to how constrained they had felt previously.



**Resistance by becoming homeless.** George, Isiahm, and Jarman all shared stories of *choosing* homelessness as opposed to having it thrust upon them. Jarman had a “traditional” 9-5 job that brought in a good wage. He collected motorcycles. George was an internationally known musician, who had toured around the world. Isiahm was a perceptive and clever street corner drug dealer who also succeeded in traditional education when he wanted to. All of them explained that they did not like who they were in those lives, that although they were “successful” by social norms, it was at a cost to their character, their health, and/or their future goals. Jarman described it this way:

I have a nice vintage motorcycle and I come from a family with a little bit of means and I could just go back but I know I’m gonna be miserable...It’s like I start working and I get this thing that starts going—start buying stuff and it’s possessions—and I just get real *selfish*. I fall into that whole “American dream,” you know, where you can have whatever you want, so I just start working a lot and buying everything I see and then I start not treating people so good because I get into this cycle of just seeing stuff I want. So I feel like I get trapped in this thing where I’m just like a *consumer*. I’m working and I’m working just to buy stuff. And then after I see people around me that need stuff and it’s like, “but I’m trying to work towards getting this” and maybe I’m not so giving with my money because I’m getting caught up in this whole consumer thing...where it’s pretty much trying to make myself happy with toys and being able to buy what I want. But I really don’t, I don’t have an identity that I like, so after a while I end up...I just walk away from it. You know, I’m not happy. I’m not happy just working to try and build some kingdom for myself. I’m not really treating people really good because I’m...on this quest to get this and that...I don’t even notice people...I’m just trapped in this whole race, a race for items and stuff.

The dissatisfaction that Jarman describes is significant. It cuts past superficial expectations of behavior to his core sense of self-identity. He states that he does not like the person that he becomes when he gets caught up in the “American Dream,” which he views as really being about consumer consumption. But it is not only about the excessive consumption, it is also about the cost to his relationships and how he treats other human beings that is unsettling to him.

Isiahm grew up knowing that his uncles and cousins sold drugs and seeing his mother use drugs. He also saw people experiencing homelessness and swore to himself that he would “sell crack before [he] became homeless,” Meaning that he would go to serious extremes before ever having to be homeless. When he was faced with that choice, he did start to sell drugs and build up a name for himself. He aspired to have the “American dream”—“all the possessions and material things in the neighborhood.” In his job he learned to establish a “false sense of care and love for [people] that I really didn’t have for them,” but it helped him move his product and his goal was making money. Things changed for Isiahm though when he surreptitiously passed on some counterfeit bills to a woman who then unwittingly used those bills to buy crack. She was assaulted for using the fake bills and then feared more retaliation if she came home. Later he learned that she froze to death in an abandoned building.

From that moment on I really felt what I call Death on me. It just was, it was haunting me to my very core. I knew what I had done was very evil and very opposite of who I am. I had lost myself completely; the whole lifestyle was not me. I had been pretending for so long that I became this person who wasn’t me at all. So I finally resolved that me—who would never be homeless, I’d sell crack before I’d be homeless—would leave my city with [\$15] and the clothes I had on my back and I came to [this city] just wanting to clear my head, wanting to start over.

Isiahm saw the severity of the implications of his actions on others. He was jarred to his core and knew that only a stark break from the life he had been living would help him recover his true sense of self. Like Jarman, he saw how by setting his sights on the American Dream his actions were detrimental to not only him but also others around him.

George was a successful musician, touring the world. During that time, he explained,

First you got to get high to be normal, and then get high to be high. And while you're playing on stage you got to sneak off and get high while you're playing. So it's really not you, it's the influence of whatever you took that's making you do all of that.

Living life like that George realized,

Wait a minute, I can't really breathe. So I cut off that. It wasn't easy. I cut off that life.... I make that choice out of fear. Because I know that if I go back there I will not live long. So that choice is out of fear. It's fear that motivates me to not go back there. It's not my homeless situation I fear, it's the fear of what will happen to me if I were to go back there.

When George's house burned down a number of years ago and he "lost everything," he could have gone back to touring "like that" [assertive finger snap], but he made a conscious choice to not do anything illegal and he recognized the rush of adrenaline he got from his previous actions as addictive; he knew he got a rush from the game of "how can I get around that?" Homelessness provided George with freedom to reboot his life. Stop seeking adrenaline rushes, creating music that came from a clean self, serve others instead of manipulate others. It is his way of resisting the temptations that came with the other life.

For George, Isiahm, and Jarman, homelessness was not something that just happened to them. They sought it out. They chose it as a way to resist the traditional social expectations and addictions: the expectations that they should desire money and all of the "toys" that money can buy, the addiction to consumption, an addiction that led them to prioritize it over the lives of others and themselves.

Ben, although he was more practical about homelessness and regularly reminded me of its challenges during our interview, was beginning to also see homelessness as a way to resist. He had been homeless for two years and is currently housed in a garden apartment in a small city about 40 miles from this city. His social worker identified the location, his payee made the deposit and covered rent, and his family now rested easier knowing he had a roof over his head. However, it was clear while visiting Ben that he did not want this apartment: it was dark, isolated, and echoed with “reincarnated spirits.” When Ben complained about his living conditions—the lack of furniture, light, cooking utensils, food, transportation—his Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) team, which is an interdisciplinary team consisting of social workers, therapists, housing specialists, and others that provide support to people with severe mental illness, responded with, “Well Ben, it’s better than being homeless” but Ben thought, “mmm, not altogether.” He missed the community and interactions he had while he was homeless in this city; he critiqued Adult Protective Services and his payee for their limited capacity to recognize that there was more to housing (and thus their jobs) than simply dropping off a person in an empty, unfurnished domicile; he was dependent on his social service agency and ACT team to drive the 40 miles to take him grocery shopping since there was no public transportation and they had not found a way to move his scooter from this city to the new location. Essentially he felt isolated, trapped, and worse than when he was homeless. But, APS and his ACT team had met their responsibilities of getting him housed. He was left asking, “At what cost” to his mental health, his sense of independence, and connection to community? His resistance, at the time of the interview, was in critical questions that he raised to himself and me.

To all four of the men, experiencing homelessness was not the worst that could happen to them. They all believed that there were traditional expectations of participating in society—working, consuming products, performing based on expectations imposed upon them but that which they did not connect—that were more problematic. George feared literal death if he continued participating in society in the way he had been encouraged to. Jarman saw such behavior both isolating and preventing him from being a person of integrity. Isiahm felt the weight of the lives of others that he would be manipulating. And Ben was experiencing a deep unhappiness, built on isolation and a sense of powerlessness over choices that should have been his to make—but were not—now that he was housed and compliant with the social services agencies working his case.

**Resistance while homeless.** The resistance that the men enacted while experiencing homelessness was directed at a variety of different groups, including the social service agencies that they interacted with, the city and police, general community residents, and the broader system of social norms. For both Isiahm and George, part of the purpose for their acts of resistance was to be a role model for other people experiencing homelessness. George, who believed that some people experiencing homelessness had what he described as a “homeless mindset,” was aware of how his actions were specifically being watched by other people experiencing homelessness and he wanted to be a role model to them. Resistance came in the form of how he interacted with the police, whom he regularly encountered on the downtown sidewalks and at the agencies where staff called the police to assist them in getting George to cooperate with their requests.

Sometimes George's resistance is creative and playful, such as when he found a work-around the busking and noise ordinances downtown. George often plays his guitar on a corner of downtown and he received a ticket for playing at that corner after 11pm. The ticket was for having his hat out to collect money during hours when no busking is permitted. Now after 11pm when George still wants to play music downtown, he walks up and down the sidewalks strumming his guitar and singing. He does not ask for money but accepts any money that is offered to him. Since he is mobile and not asking for money, he is not violating the ordinance. Sometimes he follows behind police officers that are walking the sidewalks. Other times he circles around them as they convene for a few minutes to talk. He is not doing it spitefully, but rather as something to give the officers. He receives compliments from them for his playing, so he knows that he is contributing some happiness to their night. Now the police cannot ticket him because he is not breaking any rule.

George desires to bring awareness to issues. In this way, his actions are not obstinate, but genuinely about resistance. He tries to find balance in accepting responsibility for his own actions, respecting the jobs of others, and also responding with integrity when he sees injustice. His goal is education, trying to expose what is morally wrong even when it is "legally right." He strongly emphasized the importance of contextualizing individuals and the implications of rules on them. He gave the example of a guy who was acting out at the day center. The man was schizophrenic and his behavior was disturbing others. The staff ordered the man to leave; that scene—the act of being rejected in front of others—escalated the man's behavior and "the guy left and started a fight on Elm Street and went to jail." George's critique was linked to the purpose of the day center. Rather than being trained in a way to understand behavioral

health and recognize causes of behavior, the staff is trained to run the center in an “orderly fashion.” George’s observation reveals a tension he sees enacted at various agencies that he has accessed, the tension operating in ways that are both orderly and compassionate. He sees agencies choosing orderliness over compassion. This is a concern for him because it privileges short-sighted decision-making rather than considering longer-term effects of choices. George identifies this as a distinction between “what is” and “what should be.” Additionally, this critique is about the purpose, or as George explains it, the “raison d’etre” of an institution. It is another example that reinforces his distrust of social service agencies and their claims to want to “help the homeless.” Is this *help*, or is it control and containment?

While some of the resistance that the men demonstrated was linked to their experience of homelessness, they also showed resistance to norms and behavior beyond homelessness. Homelessness was the position from where they enacted the resistance, and sometimes was the catalyst for becoming aware of what they resisted.

Isiahm was especially intentional about his actions while he was homeless. He is aware of systemic oppression and how it plays out not only through everyday actions but also through seemingly neutral systems. During the interview he shared his growing awareness of how urban planning and public transportation controlled how and where certain people could travel within the city. He described the confusing mazes created with one-way streets in public housing communities that made no sense.

Who are those people?...The people that say, “Let’s make this bridge 14’ high” so that the city buses can’t clear it and so they’re going to have to go around. And this space is going to be for people who can drive, who are more affluent. *Who* makes those decisions?

He could see the effects of the construction, but he was trying to figure out the people who are responsible. A theme in his observations and actions was that of invisibility. He described how people experiencing homelessness are invisible, even going so far as to describe them as “subhuman.” And he saw a significant link between how people experiencing homelessness are currently treated and how black slaves used to be treated.

...I've seen a lot of hypocrisy when in homelessness and I equate it to something that I heard Dick Gregory say about a slave that could be in the private quarters cleaning or something like that while a very important and fundamental conversation was going on and they would be all ears to what is being said regardless of how devious it is.... They would be privy to it because they were subhuman, so it doesn't matter you know if I'm making an Illuminati deal with the president [laughs] or whatever. I can say this to you just like I would make a bank robbery plan with my dog and not worry that my dog would have any authority to say anything.

Although this invisibility is greatly troubling, Isiahm recognized the opportunities that invisibility could provide as well. “I think experiencing homelessness and the way that people saw you—and didn't see you—gained you an edge almost. It was like a superpower that you could see outside of the ruckus.” He was able to see things differently, like a bird's-eye view, on the world when everyone else only had a worm's-eye view.

I was able to really take time, try to gain some understanding of what life is instead of just living it because it's this prefabricated thing that got passed down from my parents from their parents and their parents, saying this is how you live. [I got to] explore that for myself and test some of those things.

This ability to see things differently is a skill that Isiahm greatly values and one way he enacts it is through being more empathetic with everyone he encounters. Because he is



aware that different people view and experience life differently, he does not impose his assumptions, instead he seeks to understand others from their perspective. And “that’s all due to the experience of homelessness.”

Resistance came in various forms for the men. Choosing to be homeless was itself an act of resistance for three of them: George, Isiahm, and Jarman; and Ben also recognized it as a form of resistance, one he was beginning to contemplate. While experiencing homelessness, the men also resisted the stereotypes imposed on them within the dominant homeless narrative, in both subtle and ostentatious ways. These were not acts of obstinacy, going against a norm simply to be difficult. Rather, their acts were contemplative and calculated; they had purpose.

### **Imagination**

As if two sides of the same coin, in some ways the men’s acts of resistance reflected their capacity to imagine something other than what is—the normative, unquestioned status quo. Sometimes the resistance ruptured the neatly contained hegemonic understandings of all that is around them, so that they could now see new possibilities. Other times it was as a result of their imagination and their inkling that things could be different that led them to resist the status quo. In other words, imagination and resistance served each other.

**A desire for minimalism.** Experiencing homelessness served as a reboot for Ben, George, Isiahm, and Jarman, a stark break from one way of life and the new beginning of another. In Jarman’s case, he had a very clear idea of what he was seeking as well as what he was breaking away from. He was breaking from the individualistic, consumption-focused lifestyle linked with traditional employment. “It’s not about physical things...I, I can’t *stand* money. I mean, I understand that you have to work and stuff like

that.” Jarman had a strong work ethic, and he found certain types of work very satisfying, “I love work, working hard...but I just don’t want to be bound to it.” He had a different way of life in mind. “I’m so interested in [intentional] community, you know.... everyone works to take care of one another....I don’t know if there’s anything out there that’s really like that, but I’ll keep looking and see if I can find something close to it.” The search, even if it took the rest of his life, was better than settling for “the capitalist world where you run over whatever you gotta run over to make sure you’re okay.” He was resolute in this idea:

I don’t care if it kills me to try to find what I’m looking for. I don’t have any life any other way. I’m not going to be happy—I’m not suicidal or anything—but the way I see it, I’m not living anyway by just going 9-5 and just buying stuff. It doesn’t make me happy.

He wanted to find an intentional community where he could “return to the basics.

He possessed a strong connection to the minimalism of nature,

being in the woods and just going back to planting stuff, it does something to you. In some kind of way it takes you back to the way things should be, instead of going to Wal-Mart to get freezer vegetables.

He recognized the fabricated world created by capitalism and it stood in stark contrast to the life he wanted to live. “I’m thinking of a beehive. Bees, they don’t live for themselves, they live to keep the hive alive; they’re not in it for themselves.” Jarman was really driven by this desire to serve others, to take care of others, to be in a place where people took care of each other as opposed to everyone being on their own. Based on past experiences, where he had been a part of communities like this, he knew that these sorts of locations, without all of the distractions, brought something out of him and others

“that never gets to come out” otherwise. “In the end it’s all about relationships, you know.”

**A new type of social service agency.** George also had a clear direction for this reboot. He had a vision of a way of working with people experiencing homelessness that did not impose expectations of success on those with whom he worked. Like Jarman, he knew that there was a different way of operating in this world, and he wanted to direct it towards working with people experiencing homelessness. He knew it would be difficult, radical even. It would require “a paradigm shift” that involved “see[ing] the humanity in each one of us.” Currently, George explained, “We are all feeding off of fear and then fear will assume the worst, so you assume the worst of me and I assume the worst of you.... We need a paradigm shift.”

With such a paradigm shift also comes a very different way of working with people experiencing homelessness. He spent more than 30 minutes describing the program he plans to run. Much of his program would be dedicated to simply breaking down all of the negative ideas that people experiencing homelessness learn by working with social service agencies, churches, police officers, and emergency management people, all of who have taught the people experiencing homelessness to think of themselves as “less than human.” By operating out of fear and distrust, the people in those roles fail to get to know the gifts and passions of the folks with whom they work. Then those experiencing homelessness begin to see themselves as less than human. It creates a negative feedback loop for everyone involved, “You [service provider, volunteer, church] give the help you think is needed, and you do not get the result that you expect. It feeds into the notion that that person is lazy, a bum, a criminal.” Using himself as the example, he describes how the “long-term” support he knows is

necessary begins with what most people would describe as the basics, but which seem like “luxuries when you’re homeless.”

I have to get George adjusted to being a human being first, where he can sleep by himself and wake up by himself. You know what sleep is? Sleep is when you can close your eyes by yourself and open them by yourself. In the homeless community it doesn’t happen that way...When I slept in the doorways on Elm Street, in the morning people are sweeping the streets...VRRROOOOMMMMMM! I got to get up, like it or not.

George knows how smart people experiencing homelessness can be. Rather than trying to simply work with them to find a basic, minimum wage job, he thinks the next steps to humanizing people are identifying, encouraging, and building on their passions. While doing this, George inserts that you also have to be prepared that people will make mistakes, even significant mistakes. “They will make big mistakes!” Some of it will be self-sabotage, but George also presents the perspective that what is often viewed as self-sabotage is actually a survival strategy because:

I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop.... You take me, you give me 60-70 days at the [emergency shelter], then I have to go back out on the street. I’m worse off! But in your opinion, you’re helping me. Short-term help to a homeless [person] hurts because in the fullness of time, I’ll be right back where I came from, but weaker!

Ultimately, George’s plans for the future come from a way of thinking that he calls “primitive” or “tribal,” and it contrasts with “civilized” or “Western” thinking. Civilized thinking, what George has learned about since being a musician, touring, and making records, is a form of thinking that prioritizes self-interest over the interest of your community. He gave the example of busking on the corner when he knows that there are people at the day center whose spirits could be lifted if he went there and played his

guitar. “Civilized thinking deals with the facts as you see them.... Primitive thinking deals with the facts as they should be.” From an outside perspective primitive thinking may not seem rational, or make sense but to the person practicing primitive thinking and making decisions based on it, it will bring a sense of satisfaction.

**A right to be a person, not a problem.** In Ben’s case, what he had experienced while homeless fed his imagination and provided him with the confidence to resist settling for the life that his ACT team and APS case worker were trying to pass off on him as desirable. While he was homeless he had more freedom, access to stimulating ideas, and opportunities to appreciate life (even something as simple as enjoying a hot meal).

I learned that there was certain people that, no matter who you were or what you looked like or what color you were and what your background was, they would still talk with you on an even level, that would still engage you and show you love. I didn’t really understand that before, that there were people out there like that that cared. There are a lot of people out there like that...

Previously in his life, Ben explained that he had not come across such people. His interactions with people had mostly been transactional, “they always wanted something from me.” Yet, while he was homeless and knew he “couldn’t do anything for anybody,” there were people who approached him to ask what they could do for *him*. “When they...asked what they could do for me, then I knew it was...there was no exchange. They were not saying, ‘I’ll do this for you if you do this for me.’”

Sometimes Ben’s schizophrenia causes him to be distrustful of people, however, even factoring that into the situation, he trusted that people were being authentic with him because there was nothing they could gain from him. During our interview, when Ben made these comments, I found myself thinking that his point was pessimistic, but it

really is a reflection of how he thinks. And even though it sounds pessimistic, I think he was actually sharing something that he was truly hopeful about. In spite of every bad thing that was happening to him while he was homeless there were people, not only other people experiencing homelessness, that engaged with him in a manner that he read as genuine. He was holding on to that “truth” and it was fueling his current resistance. He knew how things could be, that people could see him for more than a problem or a case, and he was no longer tolerating interactions with people who were not genuine. Because of that he was frustrated with the case workers who were not listening when he named his preferences for housing, or the psychiatrist that would not acknowledge the side effects Ben was experiencing from his medications. He knew things could be different, which is a rather optimistic thought for him to hold on to.

While Ben had experienced a sliver of what life could be like—how people could treat each other—and that was what he was using to resist his current housing situation, Isiahm operated from a place of believing there were radical changes that would be happening in our culture. In order to encourage those changes he needed to contribute his gifts because he knew his gifts aligned with the world he wanted to usher in. It was during his homeless experience that Isiahm learned what his true gifts were:

My gifts is encouragement, conversations, just sharing humanity with people who don't necessarily always receive that, recognize people as people regardless of how they look and what their living condition is.... And actually having conversations outside of “How can I help you?”

Isiahm was always very honest about his life, his actions, and the subsequent implications. He built relationships with some of the younger guys at the day center and he would share with them,

“Oh, I was there, I went left and going right would have been a lot better.” They might be selling drugs, so just explaining how I seen it by stepping outside of it: what’s to gain from it and what’s to lose. Just to encourage them...Be who they want to be in life.

Being so honest—even being as honest as he was in his interview with me—is risky. By sharing these aspects of his story, it is possible that others will judge him or stop listening before they understand why he’s risking such vulnerability.

**A just world.** Isiahm has a belief that the world can be different. He hazards to expose himself through his personal stories because he believes that others can learn from what he has gone through, which will lift up people who are existing on lower rungs of society. “I believe that once you bring that rung of society up, other rungs of society will climb as well, and we’ll live in a place that’s better for everyone, a place that’s more equitable.” Recalling the urban planning and transportation control conversation that we had previously had, Isiahm used that to explain why he thinks it is important for him to “tell the truth, even when it’s scary to tell the truth.”

The city planner—I don’t even know what that position is—but they made decisions for groups of people that they don’t have any encounters with or they [those in the decision-making positions] haven’t really dealt with some of the trauma that’s been passed down to them through their families and the generations in America, and having to make decisions that’s going to determine the majority of the people’s output, where they end up in society. I think that’s really important.

Isiahm was weaving a connection between his truth-telling through his stories and the decisions being made by city planners. Stories, such as his, need to be shared, as much as possible because there are people making decisions that will impact everyone’s lives, and those decision-makers need to be aware of the challenges faced by others who do not share in their privilege. Isiahm’s decision to share his lived experiences stems from

his belief in justice and the future he could imagine, “I believe that there’s going to be a change in the way of thinking where love and community will be our first thoughts instead of afterthoughts.” He was also aware that not everyone would understand what he was doing; some might even call him a fool. He was confident in knowing how things could be though, so being called a fool was of no consequence to him.

Through the interviews, the men demonstrated immense strength in being able to discover, explore, and sustain ideas of what *could be* even as they trudged through mundane actions, daily challenges, and overt forms of oppression that were intended to maintain the world as *it is*. In this way, the men are examples of how to enact a both/and existence that straddles a reality and a potentiality. The reality is the daily experiences of homelessness: impacts on the body; the imposition of city ordinances; interactions with the police, social service staff, people walking past and avoiding eye contact; the potentiality is imagination of what is possible: building community in spite of the neoliberal emphasis on individuality, competition, and self-interest; acknowledging and valuing the lived knowledge of people experiencing homelessness; and operating in the world in ways that recognize and encourage what people may become rather than imposing one-dimensional identities upon them.

### **Conclusion: The Differential Consciousness of the Fool**

The conversations that I shared with Ben, Isiahm, Jarman, and George are rich with ideas worth exploring, however, for practical reasons, what I have shared here is linked to my initial dissertation questions. Through the interviews the men demonstrated a nuanced understanding of homelessness that was absent from much of the literature included in the literature review node. The men made connections between their individual experiences and political, social, and cultural systems that inform, influence, or



restrict their movement—both physical as well as aspirational movement—and participation through, in, and with the world. They also used homelessness as a pivot point to address broader topics, whether it was their critiques of extreme consumption promoted through U.S. capitalism; the systems of oppression that operate in such places as social service agencies (e.g., homeless shelters, Adult Protective Services) and city government (e.g., urban planning, the police); or the negative impacts that invisibility can have on people in society (or alternately, the value of belonging). Through homelessness the men saw the world differently and had much to reveal.

Quite insightfully, Isiahm used the metaphor of *the fool* to explain how he conceived of people experiencing homelessness. In literature, the fool (also identified as the jester or the trickster) is a key character, an archetype. The fool was “an entertainer, a commentator, a critic, and a truth-teller in Shakespearean texts” (Adeleke, 2012, p. 15). Shakespeare relied on the fool in his plays to be the truth-teller, the one that could see through the mirage of apparent action on the stage and understand more deeply the significance or moral of the events. Isiahm describes the fool as

There’s the fool—which is my favorite character—the person that don’t obviously got it all together. I always feel like the fool knows something that everyone else doesn’t know, and later on in the act he’s going to be the genius...I think that is what the homeless are in society, these are the crazy folk. Then I think it’s going to happen very suddenly that they won’t be.... The fool is a genius.

The archetype of the fool runs parallel to Sandoval’s differential consciousness of opposition. The acts of foolery or opposition are viewed questionably. The purpose is not always clear and often misunderstood. What looks like acquiescence to power (e.g., Jarman remaining quiet about his true goals, George “respecting” the power of the police officer) is not. In these cases the men are very aware of their situation, and upon reading

that context, make decisions to perform in ways that will “permit functioning within, yet beyond, the demands of dominant ideology: the practitioner breaks with ideology while also speaking in and from within ideology” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 63). In other words, the men used the tools available to them without concern that to do so meant attaching themselves to certain beliefs or values; in the next situation they may pick up the same tool or use a different one. Sandoval even refers to this as the “activity of the trickster” (p. 62).

The fool is a contradiction, a paradox; the fool is simultaneously rational and irrational, foolish and wise (Seiden, 1979). These characteristics can also be ascribed to Ben, Isiahm, George, and Jarman. Giving up the security and safety of housing to instead sleep on sidewalks, shelter beds, in the stairwells of parking garages? How foolish! Or not? Shedding the heavy and constraining chains of neoliberal expectations in order to seek and find a sense of freedom that bespeaks their intimately sought values seems radical, difficult, dangerous, even, respectfully, foolish.

CHAPTER III  
LITERATURE REVIEW NODE

My name is not “Those People.”...  
My name is not “Inadequate.”...  
My name is not “Problem and Case to be Managed.” ...  
My name is not “Lazy, Dependent Welfare Mother.”...  
My name is not “Ignorant, Dumb, or Uneducated.”...  
My name is not “Lay Down and Die Quietly.” ...  
Before you give in to the urge to blame me,  
    the blame that lets us go blind and unknowing  
    into the isolation that disconnects  
    your humanity from mine,  
Take another look. Don’t go away.  
For I am not the problem, but the solution.  
And...my name is not “Those People.”  
(Julia K. Dinsmore, “My name is not ‘Those People,’” 2007)

**Kathleen’s Story: Bifurcated Knowledge and the Issue of Access**

In the midst of writing my dissertation I accepted a full-time position working for a day center for people experiencing homelessness. During this time, there were a few semesters where I did not register as a university student, thus losing my access to the institution’s library, databases, and journals.

While at the day center I constructed curriculum, drafted policies, and initiated advocacy campaigns. In all of these cases, I conducted research: What are low-barrier emergency shelter policies in other cities, and what are the benefits of them; how do I construct a “self-sufficiency” curriculum that is not steeped in neoliberal assumptions about individualism and success; what research has been done about providing open bathroom access in downtowns? As I researched these questions, I found policies on

agency websites, government reports, news articles, and some white papers from advocacy groups. Sometimes they were useful. Sometimes they were not.

But I also wanted to dig deeper. Occasionally a report would include references, and I would find a few that I thought could be helpful, but they were in academic journals that I could not view because I did not have an individual subscription, nor was I part of an institutional membership since I was not a registered university student. Other times the information I found was missing a critical, feminist, or other useful framework that would help me explain to staff and funders why we should adopt a harm reduction rather than zero-tolerance approach in our low barrier emergency nighttime shelter (a shelter that opens overnight due to life-threatening weather), or why only focusing on jobs programming without also advocating for living wages and “ban the box” efforts (related to the box on many employment applications that signifies a person has a criminal background) with employers was insufficient. I found myself emailing university colleagues asking them to access articles to send me or adding research questions to my list of service-learning project ideas so that students could use their library privileges to see what was available.

Going through this experience, I was alerted to the limited information that social service agencies could access to inform their decision-making about programs, policies, and practices. I observed how easy it can be for associations, such as the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH, one of the few associations that conducts research, while also acting as a bridge between the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development and local agencies, especially in regard to federal funding) to control the narrative about homelessness and what initiatives receive attention or are ignored.

The result is that practitioners rely on what they can search on the internet, what reports they receive via the associations with which they affiliate (which is usually few if any, since membership costs are often considered extraneous when having to cut a budget), what funding sources announce will be the funding priorities for the next grant cycle. Academic scholars go to the databases available through their institution, and they can easily limit their searches to academic journals, edited volumes, and book chapters from academic presses. Ultimately both become comfortably situated in the sources of information, research, and theory that they have access to or are trained to value. From my experiences, and what I hope to reflect through this literature review to an extent, I realized that there is an invisible barrier that divides practitioners from researchers with regards to what knowledge they can access, share, and advance.

### **Postmodern Literature Review**

I hold a postmodern perspective about the literature review. It serves as a useful exercise by which I can consider the systematic and networked nature of the knowledge and provides a space where I can bring seemingly disparate information together in dialogue to see what happens when they “talk” with me (e.g., self-reflexively) and each other. For this dissertation, the literature review serves to provide context for readers and to address my first research question about understanding and exposure, “What are various conditions used to constitute homelessness as a social problem?”

Because valuable and relevant information exists in multiple forms (beyond academic books and journal articles), lives in various locations (beyond higher education), and is generated by diverse peoples (beyond academic scholars and researchers), I have applied an adapted version of Onwueabuzie and Frels’s (2016) MODES framework in order to include a wider, more inclusive swath of “literature.”

MODES stands for Media, Observations, Documents, Experts, and Secondary data.

Expanding the literature to include non-traditional sources such as personal observations and communication, online media and popular magazines, and visual as well as written communication brings the literature review into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Onwueabuzie and Frels explain that traditional literature reviews (and the training to conduct a literature review) is outdated because it very often limits the review content to printed documents, mostly academic documents like peer-reviewed articles and books. However, these are not the only knowledge products available anymore.

Expanding what knowledge products I access helps me achieve a different type of literature review, what Walker (2015) calls a *transformational literature review*, which moves beyond the positivist perspective of a literature review as identifying a gap in the scholarly research and establishing reliability for my research (Walker, 2015; see also Glesne, 2011). This expansion creates opportunities as well as challenges. I do include knowledge and information gained from my observations and work with people experiencing homelessness, and I include personal communication between guests of the day center, colleagues, and me. Because of postmodern anarchist and feminist epistemologies, I have given critical thought not only to the content of the literature but also whose voices are present or absent in the resources; what information—if any—is shared about the author in relation to the content of the resource; whether the orientation of the content is asset or deficit based and why; and how the resource takes into consideration the cultural, socio-economic, political, and historical contexts in which it is embedded. With the breadth of resources available, these questions helped me determine what resources to focus on and productively bring into conversation with each

other. This does not mean that I ignored resources that run counter to my project, only that I was intentional about how I engaged with them.

I have structured the literature review to reflect the knowledge bifurcation that I have experienced through my differing roles. The first section of the review highlights and categorizes much of the general literature on homelessness. By general literature I mean information service providers, volunteers, policy makers, and the general public might search. The literature is public, meaning it does not require someone to have membership to journals or databases in order to search for it or find a copy of the material. This is relevant because the accessibility of the literature shapes the dominant narrative of homelessness. However, I do bring in scholarly sources to assist in the analysis of this general information. The second portion of the chapter provides a survey of literature that is more academic, research-based, and, at the practical level of access, is not as easy to find because it is situated behind journal or database paywalls or resides within college and university libraries that are not publicly available without some form of paid membership (e.g., student tuition or patron subscription fee). This literature poses research questions, reviews literature, describes findings, and engages in discussion.

### **Part One: Review of General Literature on Homelessness**

What is common to this review of general literature on homelessness is the idea that homelessness is a *problem*, a social problem. It costs money (federal and local dollars); requires interventions by social workers, case managers, and emergency response staff (police and EMTs); necessitates governmental policies and laws in order to manage; and evades a simple solution. From a scan of homelessness news articles and organization reports from 2017 and 2018, authors urgently describe homelessness

as a *crisis* (Flaccus & Mulvihill, 2017; Gee, 2017; Stewart, 2018), *epidemic* (Ahlert, 2018; Gurrola, n.d., Spokojny, 2017), *catastrophe* (Coalition for the Homeless, n.d.; Wilonsky, 2017), even a “blood and guts war” (de Blasio, as cited in Stewart & Neuman, 2017). Since “the way a narrator constructs a scene [visually or textually] is directly related to the story that narrator tells” (Cronon, 1992, p. 1354), on the topic of homelessness, the dominant story about homelessness is that it is an undesirable problem in rural, suburban, and urban communities throughout the United States. It is dangerous to the people experiencing it and draining on the communities that must respond to it. The literature reflects, at least at a surface level, that everyone involved with homelessness has a shared goal of ending homelessness.

Before delving into the research on homelessness, here is some basic information about the number of people experiencing homelessness in the United States, North Carolina, and Guilford county. According to data collected through the Point-in-Time (PIT) count in 2017, HUD reports that 553,742 people experienced homelessness on any given night in the United States (excluding Puerto Rico and U.S. territories); this a 1% increase from 2016, and a 12% increase in the number of chronically homeless (2017, p. 1). In North Carolina, there were 8,962 people experiencing homelessness based on 2017 PIT counts (North Carolina Coalition to End Homelessness [NCCEH], 2017), which is down from 9,559 in 2016 (NCCEH, 2016). According to Partners Ending Homelessness (PEH), Guilford County’s Continuum of Care oversight organization, in 2015, there were more than 2,000 people experiencing homelessness, while in 2013, the number was 3,773 (n.d., “Homeless statistics”). PEH’s PIT count in 2017 was 521 people, while the 2016 number was 721 (2017).



The PIT counts are “unduplicated 1-night estimates of both sheltered and unsheltered homeless populations. The 1-night counts are conducted by CoCs [Continuums of Care] nationwide and occur during the last week in January of each year” (Henry, Cortes, & Morris, 2013, p. 2). From my own observations about how PIT numbers are collected, these are not very reliable estimates, and most likely under-reported.

The following categories encapsulate what most of the literature covers:

- defining and categorizing homelessness,
- causes of homelessness,
- solutions to homelessness,
- the “homeless experience,”
- who is homeless: populations and tracking, and
- city responses to homelessness.

### **Defining and Categorizing Homelessness**

Homelessness is varyingly defined. At its most expansive, it includes anyone with no permanent place of residence—whether for one night or longer—who, instead is staying in:

- (a) an emergency shelter or transitional housing;
- (b) a location not meant for human habitation – an abandoned building, parking garage, shipping container, park, street/sidewalk, entryways/stairwells, cars, etc.; or
- (c) is “marginally housed” – doubled- or tripled-up with family or friends, hotels/motels as well as
- (d) those that self-identify as homeless.

A much more limiting definition is used by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) by first categorizing individuals or families as

- (a) Literally homeless;
- (b) Imminent risk of homelessness;
- (c) Homeless under other Federal statutes; [or]
- (d) Fleeing/attempting to flee domestic violence (n.d., “Homelessness assistance,” para. 6).

The categories determine what sort of programmatic and monetary support people experiencing homelessness are eligible to receive from federal funds (distributed to local agencies for dispensation). HUD revised its definition(s) of homelessness in 2011. The official full definition is found on pages 20-21 of the 26-page *Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing: Defining “Homeless”* final rule (Márquez, 2011). The Community Technology Alliance (CTA) summarized HUD’s complicated definitions, providing a more direct, less jargon-filled, resource for agencies working with people experiencing homelessness. The summaries, approved and then used by HUD itself, explain that to be *literally homeless* means

An individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, meaning:

- (i) Has a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not meant for human habitation;
- (ii) Is living in a publicly- or privately-operated shelter designated to provide temporary living arrangements (including congregant shelters, transitional shelters, and hotels and motels paid for by charitable organizations or by federal, state and local governmental programs); or
- (iii) Is exiting in an institution where (s)he has resided for 90 days or less and who resided in an emergency shelter or place not meant for human habitation immediately before entering that institution (CTA, 2015, “Homeless Definition”)

As previously mentioned, the official definition is located part-way through a Federal Register report, each page of which includes three columns of single-spaced, 10 point Times font. In contrast, the CTA created a four-page, easy-to-read document, including tables, to help translate the government's definition into something understandable for agencies and organizations. The jargon and bureaucratic documentation provided by HUD, raises questions to me about their desire to be understood and accessible to the organizations that seek funding through HUD's competitive and challenging to understand grant process.

Another way to categorize homelessness is by *temporal history*: How long someone is homeless and how often. This typology has maintained a sustained use since its inception in 1998 (Kuhn & Culhane, 1998). In this way individuals and families might be

- (a) Chronically homeless – homeless for an extended period of time (e.g., a year or more) or in and out of homelessness often within a period of time, AND has a disabling condition (e.g., mental illness, substance addiction, physical disability) (National Coalition for the Homeless, n.d., “Homelessness in America;” Tregoning & Coloretti, 2015);
- (b) Episodically homeless – having experienced homelessness more than once but often for brief durations and likely to experience it again given certain circumstances such as low wages and high rent (McAllister, Lennon, & Kuang, 2011);
- (c) Transitionally homeless – homeless for a brief and single period of time. Could occur because of a natural disaster or other catastrophic event (National Coalition for the Homeless, n.d., “Homelessness in America”)

These varying definitions have implications, such as determining who is homeless and how many people experience homelessness. Whether using the broadest definition or the most specific, homelessness is underreported because it relies on (a) collecting numbers from agencies serving people experiencing homelessness, which some people will not or cannot access, and (b) subjective counting by self-identification or observation, which means missing many people because it is impossible to have omniscient knowledge of where people are in order to include them in a count. This concern receives further attention in the section on who is homeless.

The previous definitions of homelessness demonstrate that there is not agreement on what it means to be homeless. Because many organizations that work with people experiencing homelessness are reliant on federal funds, most organizations default to that federal definition. However, HUD's definition of homelessness does not consider everyone who is homeless. Some examples of excluded individuals are people living doubled- or tripled-up in housing due to an inability to afford rent; people in this situation are in violation of lease agreements and risk eviction at any time. Additionally, people who currently live with family or friends are often not defined as homeless, even though their housing is not fixed (i.e., guaranteed) and may not be regular (e.g., people may not be permitted to stay every night or there may be conditions regarding the hours in which they may be there). People who often fall into this category are unaccompanied youth and families. It is also unclear whether or not living in substandard housing qualifies someone for homeless status, since substandard housing could be considered a habitat not meant for human dwelling. Although the U.S. government has established requirements for qualifying as homeless, there are numerous people who fall outside the categories HUD recognizes. HUD operates from a scarcity model intended to "protect

against fraud and waste” (Márquez, 2011, p. 76010). Although they frame it as preventing waste and fraud, another consequence of this way of operating is that less people experiencing homelessness are eligible for services and funds.

### **Causes of Homelessness**

The literature on the causes of homelessness attaches responsibility to either macro- or micro-level causes. Macro causes extend beyond individuals and are typically structural. Micro causes are associated with an individual, sometimes framed as individual choice or responsibility. Because of my critical way of thinking, it is difficult for me not to draw connections between examples of micro-level causes and broader structural or systematic forms of inequity and oppression. In this section, I try to simply report how the causes are being framed by organizations.

Some of the literature discusses both the micro and the macro, yet often the emphasis is on one or the other. While it can be beneficial to be able to focus research on a particular aspect of homelessness, when such literature advances discussions about homelessness that do not represent the network of topics related to what causes homelessness then it inhibits a clear examination. More dangerously, it can mislead readers to inflate the factors of one level—micro or macro—to the detriment of the other. I think this can be particularly dangerous for reinforcing stereotypes of individuals and encouraging a deficit perspective of people experiencing homelessness as well as distancing the relationship and responsibility between people experiencing homelessness and others. Without the macro level causes being present in the discussion, people who are not homeless may not recognize their own complicity or benefits in a system that creates homelessness in the first place.

**Macro-level causes of homelessness.** Macro-level causes identify the systems and structures that contribute to homelessness. These causes include:

- lack of affordable, safe housing (NAEH, n.d., “What Causes Homelessness;” National Coalition for the Homeless [NCH], 2009; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty [NLCHP], 2015);
- poverty (NCH, 2009; NLCHP, 2015);
- income (NAEH, n.d., “What Causes Homelessness;” NCH, n.d., “Why are People Homeless”);
- dwindling public assistance (NCH, 2009);
- structural racism (Olivet et al., 2018); and
- lack of affordable healthcare (NCH, n.d., “Why are People Homeless”).

I think this list barely identifies macro-level, or structural, causes of homelessness. Many of the causes (public assistance, housing, income, healthcare) are effects of or examples of more hidden causes (e.g., neoliberal economics, racism, poverty).

Sometimes, the way an organization frames the topic determines whether it is a macro- or micro-level cause. This is the case with the topic of health. The NAEH lists health as a cause of homelessness (n.d., “What Causes Homelessness”), but NAEH frames the issue as people not accessing the clinics and services available to them. “Treatment and preventive care can be difficult to access for people who are experiencing homelessness. *This is often because they lack insurance or have difficulty engaging health care providers in the community* [my emphasis].” But then explains that most cities have qualified clinics for people experiencing homelessness and Medicaid services. Such an explanation flips this from a macro to a micro issue then, because, if most cities have these services, then the responsibility is on the individuals to access

those services in order to maintain their health. NAEH does not mention concerns about how these clinics are understaffed, under resourced, and with long wait times to see a medical professional. The NCH, on the other hand, attends to the lack of an affordable health care system that results in people accruing bills that cause them to forego rent payments and eventually lead to eviction (NCH, n.d., “Why are People homeless?”). The contrast in how each organization frames the issue of health leads readers to understand this as either a micro or macro issue.

**Micro-level causes of homelessness.** Micro-level causes of homelessness attach responsibility for homelessness to the person experiencing homelessness. The causes include addiction (NCH, n.d.; NLCHP, 2015), mental illness (NCH, n.d.; NLCHP, 2015), unemployment (NLCHP, 2015), eviction (NLCHP, 2018), and incarceration (Mitchell, 2018). According to HomeAid America:

Homelessness is, in fact, caused by tragic life occurrences like the loss of loved ones, job loss, domestic violence, divorce and family disputes. Other impairments such as depression, untreated mental illness, post traumatic stress disorder, and physical disabilities are also responsible for a large portion of the homeless. Many factors push people into living on the street. (n.d., “Top causes of homelessness in America”)

While trying to identify individual factors contributing to homelessness, this line of inquiry risks establishing a deficit-orientation toward people experiencing homelessness, essentially attributing their homeless experience to their choices and behaviors or “tragic life circumstances.” Additionally, these statements are asserted on websites without any references attributed to them. How do organizations know these causes? Yes, it is possible to pick up ideas of causes from interacting with people experiencing homelessness, working in an agency, etc., but the certainty with which these causes are

stated, often without any nod to complexity or interaction with broader causes, leads me to suspect that it is a broader dominant narrative about homelessness that reassures them in their claims.

There is one micro-level cause that is moving into a macro-level discussion. The connections between eviction and homelessness are gaining public attention, and with the creation of the Eviction Lab at Princeton University, there is a more structural, or macro-level conversation that is starting to make it into national, state, and local news outlets (see for example, Barron, 2018; Budds, 2018; Gross, 2018). However, the agencies that respond to people experiencing homelessness or people about to become homeless often operate at the micro level, with such interventions as one-time only rental assistance payments made to property owners and budgeting classes and job skills training to the individuals seeking the rent or utility help; such programming insinuates that if people were able to get/keep a job, acquire a better paying job, or manage their money better, then they would not find themselves in this predicament. What is not offered is programming about tenant rights or legal services to assist with evictions or foreclosures.

There is a critical tension between the macro- and micro-level themes with regard to causes of homelessness. The micro-level causes, because they attend to the individual, are often deficit-oriented, looking for what is wrong with the person: what mental health or addiction problem do they have, what skills or knowledge are they lacking? Lyon-Callo (2000) calls this a disease model of homelessness whereby “detecting and diagnosing disorders” of the individual is primary to non-profit agencies’ work with people experiencing homelessness (p. 333). This practice has at least two consequences: (a) it pathologizes individuals, looking for mental illness, substance



abuse, or other disorders in order to determine the correct treatment plan, and (b) it directs attention and priority away from structural contributors to homelessness, such as the increasing lack of affordable house or living wage jobs.

### **Solutions to Homelessness**

Solutions to homelessness should be intimately linked to the causes of homelessness. There are still two typical levels to solutions—micro and macro. At a macro-level there are such things as living wage campaigns, affordable housing initiatives, and economic development plans. These initiatives are directed toward law and policies, business and property owners, and city officials. The micro-level solutions are directed towards the individuals experiencing homelessness. At the micro-level there are such things as alcohol and drug rehabilitation, mental health services, wrap-around services, Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams, social workers, emergency shelters, health clinics, and assistance with applying for Social Security Disability (SSDI), housing assistance, job skills programming, and free community meals.

There is a misalignment between causes and solutions to homelessness. While there are numerous macro-level causes to homelessness, a large proportion of social service agencies are established to work with individuals experiencing homelessness. By default, this directs the focus of caseworkers, social workers, and other staff toward the person, as opposed to working on the structural issues such as lack of housing stock or structural racism. These agencies set their priorities based on funders, mostly the federal government, which is currently emphasizing housing first initiatives (Saunders, 2017). The impact on agencies is that they are always reactive, waiting for someone to seek out their services once they have become homeless. Because the agencies are

non-profits, they are restricted in their political activity, known as lobbying, or influencing legislation (see Internal Revenue Services [IRS], 2018).

Legislation includes action by Congress, any state legislature, any local council, or similar governing body, with respect to acts, bills, resolutions, or similar items (such as legislative confirmation of appointive office), or by the public in referendum, ballot initiative, constitutional amendment, or similar procedure. (IRS, 2018, para. 2)

From consulting that I have done with a few agencies in Greensboro and Durham, agency directors and staff possess only a vague understanding of the laws related to non-profits' involvement in lobbying; because the laws seem vague and vast, they err on the side of caution and do nothing with regard to advocacy or communication to local, state, and federal officials. This means that not only do funders and grants dictate solutions by identifying what they will fund—thus obfuscating the connections between causes and solutions to homelessness—but agencies believe that they will lose their non-profit status if they do any advocacy work. What we are left with is a breakdown between causes and solutions. Financial support goes to the agencies responding to the material needs of people experiencing homelessness, but this in no way will ever end homelessness.

One enacted but veiled “solution” to homelessness is to change *who* counts as homeless. By reducing the number of people who fit the definitions of the homeless categories it appears that homelessness is being reduced, when actually it is not that the number of people experiencing homelessness is lower, but rather by constricting the categories those who define homelessness eliminate people from being counted as homeless. For example, chronic homelessness, a category that receives significant attention has changed meaning over the years. Researchers Kuhn and Culhane are

credited with identifying “chronic homelessness” as a temporal typology for distinguishing between people experiencing homelessness (1998). In their description of who is chronically homeless, they observe that “often” these individuals are “suffering from disabilities and substance abuse problems” (p. 211), but the authors never recommend that this should be a determining characteristic for someone to be identified as chronically homeless. During the inception of the federal government’s, and subsequent cities’, Ten Year Plans to End Homelessness (beginning in 2003), ending chronic homelessness was a top priority since this small number of individuals consumed the most in terms of services and resources (Perl & Bagalman, 2015). The government’s definition of chronic homelessness, informed by Kuhn and Culhane’s definition, had specific criteria for who could be called chronically homeless, and it included a required disability diagnosis. Between 2003 and 2016, the definition changed a few times, always with revisions that narrowed the qualifying criteria, especially regarding the amount of time someone must of have been homeless. In the initial years, individuals were chronically homeless if they were

either (1) an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition who has been continuously homeless for a year or more, OR (2) an unaccompanied individual with a disabling condition who has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years. (HUD definition, as cited in Technical Assistance Collaborative, 2007, p. 3)

This definition was changed again in 2015, with new restrictions. The four episodes of homelessness in the past three years must add up to a minimum of 12 months in total (NAEH, 2015). An example of the results of this change is that the number of people identified as chronically homeless in 2015 in Guilford County was 75, and the next year, after HUD changed the definition, this number dropped to 36 (PEH,

2017). In its reporting PEH credited the drop to the definition change, not a change in services that moved more chronically homeless people into housing. With each revision, the criteria for this category has gotten more restrictive, which means that fewer people are eligible for the services that go along with this nomenclature. This also means that the number of people who are chronically homeless looks like it is decreasing. Really though, people who formerly were identified as chronically homeless now are categorized as episodically homeless.

### **The Homeless Experience**

This category of literature describes what it is like to experience homelessness. Often this literature serves one of two purposes: (a) to evoke sympathy or provide success stories to social service agencies to legitimize their work, or (b) to provide advocacy for people experiencing homelessness in response to criminalizing efforts (e.g., panhandling ordinances, NIMBY [Not In My Back Yard] resolutions). While some of this literature does include voices and perspectives of people experiencing homelessness, it is for a particular purpose, so grant writers, fundraising staff, and agency directors have a vested interest in shaping the narrative. The public encounters these stories in agencies' annual reports, end of year fundraising letters, and urgent appeals for donations; the stories are intended to serve the needs of the agency, not to provide a fuller, more nuanced understanding of who experiences homelessness.

In other cases, the knowledge, stories, and feedback shared by people experiencing homelessness are dismissed. Sparks (2012), who lived in a tent encampment for six months and interviewed 43 people in that encampment, along with participant observations, and interviews with city and county officials identified such a pattern "wherein policy makers eagerly sought input from homeless individuals, but their

input was often dismissed as irrelevant or ‘exceptional’ when their views diverged from prevailing policy prerogatives” (p. 1511). Similar patterns are reflected in trends to include a former homeless person on the board of an agency. With growth in social media there are a few direct connections to people experiencing homelessness, but they are still the minority.

One non-profit of note is *We are Visible*, which provides instructions to people experiencing homelessness about how to set up email, acquire a Google Voice phone number, and share their stories and experiences via Facebook, Twitter, and blogs. We are Visible is intended to be “a home online for those without one” (n.d.), and it is organized mostly by people experiencing homelessness. There are online private communication boards as well as open posts where people share resource ideas based on what they have had to do while homeless. Its purpose is both personal and political. In addition to helping people experiencing homelessness access free social media resources to stay connected to family, friends, and others who are having a similar experience, We are Visible also encourages people to tell their stories in order to challenge the negative stereotypes that dominate social media (n.d., “Why social media?”). With the number of agencies and organizations that try to tell people’s stories, We are Visible stands out for its effort to encourage people to tell their own stories.

### **Who is Homeless: Populations and Tracking**

We want to know who is homeless. This is a consistent practice by those who work with people experiencing homelessness. To do this we’ve created the Point-in-Time (PIT) count and the Homeless Management Information System (shortened to HMIS, a less threatening title that hides the surveillance it is really conducting) as tracking devices. Most government grants are linked to populations (e.g., veterans,

families, youth, chronically homeless). It is one of the ways that we can divide the deserving from the undeserving (e.g., homeless veterans are only eligible for resources earmarked for veterans if they have an honorable discharge status; other discharge statuses disqualify the veteran for accessing these resources, essentially striking their veteran status from them and pooling them with the general homeless population). We categorize by such groupings as: singles and families; youth; veterans; people with HIV/AIDS; race; age; geographic location (rural or urban); gender (but only male/female); LGBTQ; length of time homeless; and mental health and addiction.

There are two commonly accepted ways that the federal government—and subsequently any state, county, or city agencies that request money from the federal government—determines how many people are experiencing homelessness: the annual PIT count and HMIS. As a reminder, the PIT is a nation-wide, “unduplicated 1-night estimate of both sheltered and unsheltered homeless populations.... that occur during the last week in January of each year” (Henry, Cortes, & Morris, 2013, p. 2). Although it claims to be an unduplicated count, there are numerous ways that people may be counted more than once (e.g., completing surveys at different social service agencies) or not at all (e.g., not being present at the locations where volunteers go in order to count people). While the PIT provides a number, the reliability of that number is questionable since it is collected differently from county to county and even from year to year within a county; it involves the “inventive productions of data” (Fang, 2009, p. 9).

HMIS is a federal database of anyone who has ever accessed services from a social service agency that works with people experiencing homelessness. The information collected in the database, linked to a client’s HMIS record, includes medical and mental health records and diagnoses, criminal record, drug and alcohol use,

domestic violence and other abuse, veteran status, race, gender, ethnicity, Social Security number, number of nights in a shelter bed, income or other non-cash benefits, history of services that the individual has accessed, and more (HUD, 2018). Individuals can decline from answering any of the questions, but as explained to me during my own HMIS training, HUD expects records to be as fully completed as possible and incomplete records may negatively impact future funding.

HMIS is mandatory for any agency that applies for federal funding, yet it is a database that many agencies describe as confusing (Dumas, personal communication; Fryer, personal communication; Montaque, personal communication; Edwards, personal experience). The end users do not have sufficient training with the database to use it confidently and, thus, are often applying for technical assistance grants in order to be trained on how to properly use it. Additionally, it is a costly system, with an annual end user license fee, so most agencies identify one to two people to input all the required data, thus it is not even a useful in-house system and agencies often use another system on top of HMIS for their case notes and client files. Although HMIS is mandatory for agencies receiving federal funding, there are numerous non-profits that do not use the system since they do not seek federal funds. In Greensboro, for example, the day center only uses HMIS for approximately 5% of its clients (Projects for Assistance in Transitions [PATH] clients, as required by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], the PATH grantor; SAMHSA, n.d.). But a significant portion of the day center's clients do not go anywhere else where their information would be logged into HMIS (e.g., the emergency night shelter or family shelter). This means that when numbers of people experiencing homelessness in one year are tallied for Guilford County, as determined through HMIS reporting, the numbers are grossly under reported.

By categorizing people into these groups we shape how we think about homelessness. One outcome of this practice is that it allows people who are not experiencing homelessness to look at their situation and assure themselves that they do not fall into any of those categories, thus homelessness is not their problem. Additionally, the breakdown between the causes and solutions to homelessness means that most people learn about homelessness through the services that agencies provide directly to people experiencing homelessness. So even though the causes of homelessness are mostly structural, the “solutions” that people see agencies providing are directed toward individuals. This means that the general public is more aware of the money (tax payers’ money or donations) being spent on those thought of as unemployed, often fighting addiction, and often receiving government support via SNAP benefits or SSDI. This information, filtered through neoliberal values of individual responsibility and entrepreneurship, often means that dominant narratives about homelessness encourage or reinforce stereotypes about people experiencing homelessness, such as lazy, irresponsible, using the system, and distrustful.

These are socially constructed categories (race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age) identified by researchers, granters, social workers, and policy makers; this means that there could be other categories by which we count—if we must count at all. Categorizing people into these populations means that there are other ways of categorizing people that do not occur. The categories we track create informal and formal typologies of who is homeless. Due to the questions asked, the typologies are very often deficit-oriented (e.g., the mentally ill, addicted person; the single mother fleeing abuse; the criminal offender). Different questions could create other typologies though. For example, if they were asset-based maybe we would find that people



experiencing homelessness are more likely to loan money to family and friends even when it is not in their personal best interest, or they are more likely to sacrifice a job or school if someone in their family is ill and needs caretaking. The point is that the image we develop of people experiencing homelessness is shaped by the supposedly neutral questions we ask on intake forms and data we collect through HMIS and PIT counts, and thus the ways in which people experiencing homelessness become categorized. Considering these categories in light of Cronon's (1992) assertion about scenes and images reflecting the narrative of the storyteller, raises critical questions such as: (a) What benefit is there to these categories, (b) Why these categories and not others, and (c) Who benefits from these categories?

### **City Responses to Homelessness**

Although homeless services are influenced by HUD, homelessness is focused on at the local level. People look to their local non-profits and city/county government to address the individuals they see sleeping on the sidewalks, panhandling on corners, or gathering in parks for community meals. By some standards, homelessness is a reflection of a city. Both whether or not the city has people experiencing homelessness, and how a city then responds to its homeless citizens reflects on other things such as the "livability" of the city.

The United States Conference of Mayors has published an annual survey on hunger and homelessness since 1982. The purpose is to raise awareness about the shortage of emergency services available in cities of 30,000 or more people. In the first report, the mayors hoped to show the high demand for emergency services (e.g., shelter, food, medical care) and their inability to meet even half of the demand. Since then the survey "provide(s) information each year on the magnitude and causes of these

problems, the local responses to them, and the national responses that city leaders believed were needed for the problems to be adequately addressed” (US Conference of Mayors, 2016, Introduction, para. 2). In the most recent report authors use the PIT numbers along with emergency shelter bed capacity to determine how well they are meeting shelter needs. The result is that even if these cities were able to put someone in every available shelter bed, it would only shelter 80% of people experiencing homelessness (Unmet needs, para. 1). City mayors believe that more permanent supportive housing, better employment and skills training, and improved coordination between mental health and substance abuse services would decrease the need for emergency shelter services (Unmet needs, para. 2). While the survey provides information on who is homeless, it does not provide any information about *why* people are experiencing homelessness, so naming programs that they believe will decrease homelessness seems to be premature; it also could be considered evidence of their own narrative about homeless.

Homelessness was a common topic for mayoral candidates in 2017, and some examples include Seattle, Washington (see Beekman, 2017), Atlanta, Georgia (see O’Hayer, 2017), Minneapolis, Minnesota (see Thomas, 2017), Toledo, Ohio (see Troy 2017), New York City, New York (see Goldmacher, 2017), Sacramento, California (see Remington, 2017), and Everett, Washington (see Kim, 2017).

Public space, a factor in community livability, is also a common topic in literature on homelessness. Parks, sidewalks, benches, fountains, public restrooms, libraries, and trails are some examples of public spaces that become contested through such avenues as ordinances, law enforcement, and design (Amster, 2008; Toolis & Hammack, 2015; Wright, 1997). Amster (2008) describes spiky ironwork that was added to elevated

flowerbeds in downtown Tempe, Arizona, as a strategy by city government to prevent undesirable punk youth from hanging around the flowerbeds, which were located on public sidewalks in front of downtown businesses. This “revanchism” – “the vengeful reclaiming of prime city spaces (e.g., train stations, parks, sidewalks) by (white) upper classes from street criminals, minorities, the poor and especially homeless people” (DeVerteuil, May, & von Mahs, 2009, p. 648) – is one aspect of trending downtown gentrification.

### **Part Two: Academic Research on Homelessness**

For this portion of the literature review I conducted an interdisciplinary analysis of select literature. I began with a few significant database searches and skimming through multiple texts, and then I selected these particular articles and books because they provided some breadth in order to show what literature is available, and they seemed to have the most substance. In other words, other texts were not revealing much more than what is presented here. This is intended as a survey of the literature.

Within the academic literature, I observed a basic division of scholarship. One form of scholarship—the macro framework—mostly explores homelessness as a concept, considering its social construction through larger structures such as economics and history, while the other form of scholarship—the micro transactional change framework—mostly attends to the specifics of who is homeless and how to meet their immediate needs, without concern for changing the status quo narrative about homelessness. In the following sections I outline each framework before analyzing literature related to it.

I make a distinction in the language choices used in the following frameworks. Although I choose to use person-first language when discussing people experiencing

homelessness, the academic literature that follows does not reflect this choice always. Instead of altering authors' language, I use their phrases (e.g., the homeless, homeless people) when describing the text. In any analysis that I provide, I return to my preferred language of people experiencing homelessness.

### **Macro Framework**

The macro literature reveals how the day-to-day experiences of homelessness and the traditional discourse about homelessness are embedded in broader historic, socio-cultural, political, and economic structural factors. The literature in this framework generally includes these characteristics: (a) pointing to broader, macro-level issues that cause homelessness and (b) making an argument that these issues must be considered in discussions of responding to or ending homelessness. Often the systemic issues are foregrounded while individual people experiencing homelessness are discussed more generically. A purpose of these texts is less about addressing the day-to-day reality for someone experiencing homelessness and more about how to address homelessness as a social issue. This form of research is usually critically oriented, thus raising questions to heighten awareness of broad injustices. Homelessness is still a social problem, but from this framework, individuals are not to blame.

**Amster (2008).** Amster, a self-identified scholar-activist and homelessness advocate, uses ethnographic research (including interviews, participant observations, and document analysis) within an anarchist methodology (pp. 126-141) in his book, *Lost in Space: The Criminalization, Globalization, and Urban Ecology of Homelessness*. He explores the relationships between five spheres connected to homelessness: (a) homeless persons' lived experiences, (b) development and gentrification, (c) "material and ideological erosion of public spaces" (ch. 2), (d)

criminalization of homelessness, and (e) forces of resistance by homeless people. His interdisciplinary study draws on urban geography, cultural studies, sociology, criminal justice, law, and history. While his ethnographic research focuses on Tempe, Arizona, he evaluates public policies, laws, social services, and current events in other large cities (e.g., Portland, New York City). By looking specifically at how public spaces are patrolled by government and business forces in the developing commercial center of downtown Tempe and the emerging laws that criminalize homelessness (e.g., panhandling and busking restrictions, ordinances prohibiting sleeping in public parks or sitting on public sidewalks), Amster reveals how these interrelated strategies are elements of larger social, spatial, and economic control.

His research fits firmly within the macro framework because he is interested in revealing the invisible connections between the lived experience of homelessness (via interviews with people experiencing homelessness in downtown Tempe) and economic (e.g., downtown economic development) and political structures (e.g., new city ordinances). Amster is explicit in his idea of the macro framework. He describes it as a “third way position...one that credits structural explanations yet seeks to preserve individual autonomy and promote a free spirit of contestation” (p. 13). This third way position provides him the space to recognize and show the interplay between both individual agency and systemic constraints.

Amster provides a lengthy example of individual agency by way of describing the sit-in he organized in Tempe when the city council passed an ordinance that prohibited sitting on public sidewalks. What is absent from the description though is evidence that “street people” (his term) had any role in co-organizing the event. He reports that there were about “15 or 20 [street people] throughout the day, [they] seemed to enjoy the

spectacle.... Many of them spoke eloquently to the media and passersby about their experiences and feelings about being singled out for criminal attention” (p. 182). Because of his personal involvement in the event, Amster provides excerpts from various news sources that covered the event to provide other perspectives. Noticeably absent from any of the three excerpts are comments from people experiencing homelessness. Amster, a retired faculty colleague, the police lieutenant, and the mayor are all quoted. Even in his efforts to provide evidence of resistance, his example only highlights the individual agency of the homelessness advocates. The people experiencing homelessness fade into the background.

**Golden (1990).** While homelessness for women and men is often predicated on similar issues (e.g., lack of affordable housing or living wage), an additional determinant for women is “a society’s image of Woman” (p. 6). Golden uses newspaper clippings and research studies from the late 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries to demonstrate how women were thought to abrogate their identities as “real women” due significantly to their inability (or choice) to maintain a style of dress that allowed others to identify them as “virtuous” women. It was a cyclical problem: Virtuous women were identified by their cleanliness; since women who were homeless could not stay clean, or access clean and proper clothing, they were not trusted, and people would not assist them in changing their appearance in order to be viewed, once again, as virtuous. “The homeless woman was reduced to the image that her clothes presented” (p. 3). Through historical descriptions of the female tramp or hobo or homeless woman, Golden shows how female sexuality—via clothing and appearance—of the indigent woman was primary to her marginal and deviant status in society. Whether through the “transvestism dress” (p. 5) that female hobos adopted as a way to deflect sexual violence or the shabby dress

and appearance of urban homeless women, which was conflated with prostitution, homeless women were read by society as sexually deviant, leading to great distrust of them. Homeless women today demonstrate their awareness of similar standards when they identify unwanted sexual advances and abuse as primary issues for them while they are homeless. Another major challenge, also associated with female sexuality, is lack of “access to appropriate clothing,” which they identify as a main obstacle to finding a job.

By providing these examples from the 19th and 20th century, Golden draws connections between the challenges that women experiencing homelessness encounter today and their historical counterparts and reveals how many of the societal attitudes remain the same. The macro framework highlights how historical context influences contemporary scenarios and experiences of homelessness for women. Sexual violence is both a reason why women are homeless and one of the more common experiences for women while they are homeless. By prioritizing gender, Golden introduces a new perspective by which to analyze women experiencing homelessness in relation to broader social structures, such as the unnamed cultural images this society has of women—caretakers or prostitutes—and gendered economic structures that sometimes allow women to move more quickly out of homelessness. I include Golden’s work in this review because there is not as much research that considers the single woman who experiences homelessness. Most research about women who are homeless is addressing families. For me this research is relevant because it points to perspectives that may be overlooked.

**Gowan (2010).** Gowan’s sociological ethnography uses discourse analysis of data from interviews with 38 single, homeless men; participant observations; and

document reviews in San Francisco to identify three discourses of homelessness: sick-talk, system-talk, and sin-talk. Sick-talk is reflected most often in the homeless who are recovering substance abusers or who have diagnosed mental health problems that they try very hard to manage. System-talk is most often reflected in the narratives of those who see the inequitable social systems at work and recognize their experiences within structures of power and oppression. And sin-talk is reflected in narratives of choice related to participating in a shadow economy, or messing up one's life at an early age. The discourses are also connected to particular spaces: sick-talk in shelters and rehab facilities; systems-talk in tent encampments and other alternative-to-social-service-agency locations; and sin-talk in the "rougher" areas of the urban streets. Gowan's goal for providing a history of US-based homelessness is to disrupt the assumption of "naturalization" that most people adopt with regard to homelessness – homelessness is just a natural part of our culture, and, thus, it will always be here. She operates from an assumption that homelessness is a "rupture" in the social order. In addition to the three discourses amongst the homeless men, Gowan also analyzes the discourse(s) used by the city of San Francisco and social service agencies as they provide rationale for their decisions related to policies, budgets, and service plans. In particular she focuses on the medicalization of homelessness discourse (attending to the "needs" of individuals, not broader social structures) and the "care not cash" initiative/discourse that emerged out of San Francisco's ten-year plan to end homelessness. Both of these discourses assume a deficit perspective on people experiencing homelessness, thinking something must be wrong with the individuals, because who would want to live like this?

**Kerr (2003).** Kerr's research is participatory in nature, so he begins from a relational position with people experiencing homelessness in Cleveland, who are mostly



(or all?) men based on what he describes in the article. It is through the knowledge base of his homeless co-researchers that they expose the macro elements contributing to homelessness. Kerr worked with a group he founded, the Cleveland Homeless Oral History Project (CHOHP), to conduct collaborative research in a project called the CHOHP video project (1999). Kerr's video research project included asking homeless persons what they thought were the causes of homelessness and what solutions they would recommend. Homeless people watched the videos at various locations, such as outdoor feedings, and began to ask Kerr to reshow particular videos, thus revealing certain topics that seemed to most resonate with them. Kerr's taping turned into a live radio show when he was challenged to consider how the ideas of the homeless were getting out to people other than those that already knew the answers (i.e., other homeless people). The research continued with collaborative analysis of the data and themes through weekly discussion groups at a nighttime emergency shelter. The co-researchers identified six interrelated themes that "were essential in understanding the present state of homelessness" in Cleveland: (a) policies that led to withdrawal of public and private monies in working class neighborhoods, after 1966; (b) the elimination of SROs (Single Room Occupancies) being replaced by "revitalization" initiatives; (c) welfare reductions; (d) growth of the prison industrial complex and criminalization of homelessness; (e) increase in temporary (temp) work; and (f) creation of an inhumane, penitentiary-like shelter system (pp. 37–40). Kerr's final section of the text describes numerous social change initiatives that resulted from the project, including protests and community organizing, especially around shelter practices and day-labor employer accountability.

Within the macro framework, Kerr's research stands out because it is highly relational on multiple levels. Within the text, Kerr establishes a relational connection between the homeless in Cleveland with each other as well as with public officials. Additionally, by making this a participatory research project, Kerr and the homeless co-researchers share relational positions, as opposed to Kerr positioning people experiencing homelessness as objects to be studied for the purpose of understanding the macro facets of homelessness. Simultaneously, the six interrelated themes are at the macro-level and critique the prison industrial complex, economic development, public policies as well as employment and housing issues. Those themes, while being specific to Cleveland, are also evident in other research, thus, making them relevant beyond one city.

**Stern (1984).** Stern positions homelessness within a historical macro framework, focusing on the late 20th Century as a shifting point in U.S. society's understanding of homelessness. Using "Social Problems as Collective Behavior" by Herbert Blume as the "starting point" for his conceptual analysis (p. 292), Stern examines the years 1980–1982 to identify homelessness as a national "social problem," with New York City's legal action to provide beds for every homeless person as the catalyst for raising social consciousness about homelessness. Since then we have been trying to understand the nature of homelessness, why people are homeless, and how to address the issue. Stern's intention, however, is to use homelessness—how it has been framed and addressed—as a way to better understand our society because homelessness, like all public problems, is socially constructed. Stern uses Blumer's "five steps that comprise the career of a social problem" (p. 292), focusing specifically on the legitimation stage of this process, because that is where responsibility for the problem is established. Major

public attention to homelessness emerged in the early 1980s due to a convergence of research, national advocacy, business-owner complaints in urban areas, and extreme winter weather in 1981–1982. Resulting plans (e.g., establishing shelters, including funding in city budgets) “normalized” homelessness so that people expected the homeless to always be a part of U.S. society. Stern contrasts this development with the Reagan-era, conservative agenda that promoted the “cutoff of welfare to ‘ablebodied’ recipients” (p. 296). Turning attention to the homeless allowed people to still feel like they were helping the impoverished while also lessening welfare support to others in poverty. Stern articulates this as the “gift relationship,” with the giver being the non-poor and the receiver being the poor. Characteristics and expectations within this charity relationship include gratitude and good behavior by the recipient. Unlike other welfare recipients, the homeless were in dire, life or death situations. Stern identifies demographic characteristics (e.g., race and gender), the labor market (e.g., job growth or decline), and comportment of the receiver as critical to whether a group is deemed worthy or unworthy of the gift. He uses the example of the “mother” to demonstrate this: In the 19th Century, the single mother was the symbol of the worthy poor in contrast to the hobo or tramp as the symbol of the unworthy poor. By the 1970s that same single mother was vilified because she challenged the government’s social welfare programs, thus allowing a new symbol of the worthy poor to take her place—the “docile and appreciative homeless” (p. 299).

While identifying historical, economic, political, and governmental structures that have influenced the social construction of homelessness as a “social problem” today, Stern also looks at homelessness at a relational level through the study of the “gift relationship” between gift-givers and gift-receivers. There are no distinctions between

people; a person is either a giver or a receiver, which does not then acknowledge the complex relationships that people experiencing homelessness have with each other and the broader community. In other words, in this analysis there is no room for the people experiencing homelessness to be gift-givers. Is it assumed that they do not possess any assets worth giving?

**Wasson (1998).** The purpose of Wasson's article is to show Economics faculty how they can use the socially-relevant topic of homelessness as an educational device for teaching the concept of the economic supply and demand curve. With the large-scale reemergence of homelessness and growing emphasis on community service, Wasson asserts that homelessness is an engaging and familiar topic for college students. But she has found very little by way of homelessness research within the field of economics. Her article provides classroom presentation guidelines on homelessness based on an analysis of affordable rental housing supply and demand curve.

Wasson provides a brief history of homelessness, identifying "waves" of homelessness from early colonialism in the United States to the Great Depression (transient camps), to 1940s-1970s (mainly men, emergence of "Skid Row"), to late 1980s through now. This current wave of people experiencing homelessness can be categorized into three types: chronic, situational, and economic. Wasson identifies the current main causes of homelessness as "personal crises" (mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence), lack of affordable housing (especially single-room occupancy), and the growth in the percentage of the population living in poverty. The author anticipates some of the stereotypes and media representations of the homeless and provides research-based information to challenge those images of homelessness. After providing this contextual information, Wasson walks through the process of using a

demand and supply curve to analyze contemporary homelessness, explaining and challenging assumptions at various stages of the process and drawing implications for landlords, the rental market, and homeless persons.

**Willse (2015).** In *The Value of Homelessness: Managing Surplus Life in the United States*, Willse raises awareness to the intentional process of pathologizing a group of people, people experiencing homelessness, by focusing at the individual level, “as if living without housing is a personal experience rather than a social phenomenon” (loc. 104). He flips the script by discussing *housing deprivation*, a phrase that “expresses that living without housing is systemically produced and must be understood as the active taking away of shelter, as the social making of house-less lives” (loc. 104). For him, the very conceptualization of homelessness is political, intentional, and problematic; it is a strategy of neoliberalism that obscures the true goal, which is to create more opportunity for urban consumption and capital (e.g., new trendy businesses downtown, hipster lofts, and \$7 organic juices). Willse asserts that people experiencing homelessness are caricatured to the point of becoming one dimensional and then folded into a category known as “surplus life.” Non-profits exist to manage this surplus life, thus making their existence, which is in need of management, an economic resource.

Willse concludes that “homelessness is a problem to be managed” (loc. 480). Non-profit agencies serve as the source for such management, and they themselves are indirectly managed through the federal government, due to their reliance on federal grant funding to operate. Willse identifies HMIS and homeless typologies as strategies used for surveillance and management—management of people experiencing homelessness by non-profits and management of non-profits by the government. The attention dedicated to the category of people known as chronically homeless and the adoption of

housing first initiatives—once thought of as a radical liberal idea—reveals a neoliberal interest in such management. Housing first became a palatable option for managing people experiencing homelessness once research showed how much money and resources the chronically homeless were consuming. Housing first is a cost-saving strategy, which conveniently also has the benefit of appearing compassionate.

**Considering the macro literatures in relation to each other.** This macro literature spans multiple disciplines from history to economics, with some similarities amongst various texts. Amster (2008), Gowan (2010), Stern (1984), Wasson (1998, and Willse (2015) all point to the “homelessness problem” as a social construction that has emerged beginning in the 1970s–1980s when laws requiring shelter for the homeless were drafted and the number of people experiencing homelessness increased because of changes in other social services (e.g., the closure of many community mental health facilities, limitations in eligibility for social services). Before that time, people were still experiencing homeless but homelessness as a national trend was not a social problem. Golden’s (1990) historical analysis of single women experiencing homelessness is the outlier amongst Amster, Stern, Gowan, and Wasson because adding gender as a purposeful evaluation factor reveals that women experiencing homelessness have been considered a social problem far longer due to their perceived association with prostitution. Amster (2008), Kerr (2003), Wasson (1998) and Willse (2015) similarly identify commercial economic development and the lack of affordable housing as two factors contributing to current urban homelessness.

### **Micro-Level Transactional Change Framework**

The micro-level transactional change literature is motivated mostly by a desire to understand various groups of people experiencing homelessness and how to work with

them. Transactional change “aims to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of what...already exists” and is not concerned with altering systems or structures, in fact the current structures are “both adequate and desirable” (Cuban, 1988, p. 341). This is an accurate description of the following texts, which do not deeply question current economic, political, or socio-cultural systems that perpetuate homelessness. Within these texts there is no investment in ending homelessness; rather, they study characteristics of people experiencing homelessness in relation to homeless interventions to determine how to best respond to the immediate needs of people experiencing homelessness or people working with those experiencing homelessness. Whereas in the macro framework people experiencing homelessness are often discussed broadly, the micro-level transactional change framework specifically seeks to delineate between different populations, or subpopulations, of people experiencing homelessness. People experiencing homelessness are broken into smaller categories, or types.

The typologies differ; among other things, researchers identify and examine patterns based on how long someone is homeless (McAllister, Kuang, & Lennon, 2010), the character traits of the people experiencing homelessness (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003; Rice, 1918), and implications of homelessness for different groups of people (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003; McAllister et al., 2010). The literature within this framework serves the overarching purpose of treating homelessness like a social problem to be solved at the individual level. These micro-level transactional change responses prepare social service staff for how to work with varying types of people experiencing homelessness (e.g., the chronic homeless, families with children, the temporarily displaced).

**Julianelle and Foscarinis (2003).** According to Julianelle and Foscarinis, the most common causes of youth homelessness are related to dysfunctional family dynamics for unaccompanied youth, the high-cost of housing, and low wages for families. When youth and families become homeless, their shelter options are limited, and children are at increased risk of emotional and physical health problems. The impact on their education is also high, especially if students cannot continue to attend the same school. The authors look at the impact of “school mobility” on the academic achievement of homeless students, separating the impacts into three categories: (a) unrecognized educational needs (usually the result of lack of communication between family and teacher or the stress of homelessness preventing families from recognizing issues that would have been identified in a more “stable” environment), (b) unmet educational needs (often occurring due to the lag in transferring files or resistance from school administrators to invest money/time into mobile students, waiting lists for services, or continuous enrollment requirements), and (c) lack of stable social relationships (family relationships stressed due to shelter rules and experiences of homelessness; mobility means constant change and rebuilding relationships).

The authors respond to these categories as a way to introduce and educate readers to the McKinney Vento Act (1987) and the changes made to it in its reauthorization. Some of the requirements from the Act include: unaccompanied youth allowed to enroll in school without consent of legal guardian, students do not have to transfer schools even if they “move” out of the district, immediate enrollment of students even without documents such as school and immunization records, and homelessness liaisons at every school. The authors provide some examples of litigation to point to weaknesses that still exist in the act (e.g., providing transportation across districts,



coordination of services between social service agencies and schools, lack of education regarding parental rights). Finally, the authors argue that the Act is responding to the needs of both homeless students (providing stability and “positive role models”) and their families (schools acting as child-care for guardians searching for employment).

Although Julianelle and Foscarinis identify low-wage employment and lack of affordable housing as contributors to homelessness, it is a brief part of their introduction to the article. The focus of the article is identifying the very specific inhibitors to student success for homeless youth so that teachers and schools’ homeless liaisons are aware of the challenges of working with these youth and can apply effective interventions, such as following up on transportation issues and educating parents about their rights with regard to enrolling their homeless children in school. The McKinney Vento Act—the foundation of this article—is not intended to change social dynamics. Rather, it helps support and protect homeless youth and families within the current educational system.

**McAllister, Kuang, and Lennon (2010).** McAllister, Kuang, and Lennon’s quantitative research is based on an interest in the three common, temporally-based typologies of single, adult, homeless men: transitional, episodic, and chronic homelessness. Frequency and duration of homelessness are the temporal factors used to categorize the men. These typologies were developed based on a time-aggregated approach (number of episodes and for how long). The researchers hypothesize that a time-patterned approach (number of episodes, for how long, and distance between episodes or “how events occur over time” [p. 228]) would reveal more nuanced findings and thus theorize and delineate typologies differently. They recreate the Kuhn and Culhane original study (1998) upon which the three-category typology is built using quantitative data collected from the Homelessness Management Information System

(HMIS) for New York City and run an analysis of the data using both the Kuhn and Culhane time-aggregated measures and their own time-patterned measures. The researchers argue that while both approaches provide useful information, only the time-patterned approach provides the information necessary to consider the interactions between structural conditions (e.g., shelter environment) and individual traits (comfortability with rules). The analysis process should depend on the depth of information needed to answer the research questions, but the time-patterned approach to analysis would provide more complex data for studying the reasons why people become homeless as well as the impacts of that homelessness on the future potential of becoming homeless again.

McAllister et al.'s study is firmly planted within a micro-level transactional change framework. The reason for the research is to identify if there are alternative forms of data analysis that will more precisely predict whether someone will become homeless again, based on individual-level characteristics (e.g., level of comfort with rules); there is no evidence of structural measures being taken into consideration (e.g., New York's unemployment rate, or availability of affordable housing stock during the time when the data was collected).

**Rice (1918).** In this 1918 article, Rice lays out four types of homelessness that people may go through and offers descriptions of who might be found in each of these categories as well as what is most needed by these persons. Rice's audience is social workers who are trying to learn more about how to "rehabilitate" the homeless. While most of the article focuses specifically on advice to social workers, he does go on a brief tangent about one very specific and avoidable cause of homelessness: employers. Rice is concerned with the "abnormal lives" that "casual and seasonal workers" have to

experience in order to live (p. 140), and he accuses employers of exploiting people experiencing homelessness in order to help the labor market expand and contract as needed. Unfortunately, Rice never returns to this economic cause of homelessness anywhere else in the article in order to develop it; it is as if he accepts that such exploitation will always exist. Even though this article is 100 years old, I have chosen to include Rice for two reasons: (a) that he mentions the exploitation of workers by employers, even in an article that attends mostly to micro-level transactional change, is unique in comparison to the other authors in this category; and (b) the consistency of recommendations, even after 100 years of research and changes to socio-economic, historic, and political cultures, reflects a continuity in social work practices, focusing at the individual level without expanding to consider the need to address structural issues.

The four stages of homelessness and some recommendations for working with people in these stages include: (a) The self-supporting need housing, hygiene, and recreational and educational opportunities (e.g., money-management); (b) the temporarily dependent need to be validated and encouraged through good food and fresh air until they can find a job; (c) the chronically dependent—many of whom are elderly, physically disabled, “imbeciles” and “morons,” or war veterans—need to be referred to appropriate service agencies (e.g., elderly care facilities, treatment centers, or mental clinics), and work ought to be realistic for the capacity of the person; and (d) the parasitic will be someone that the social service agency will seldom see because s/he is street smart and looking for adventure and is not to be held to social rules.

**Considering the micro-level transactional change literatures in relation to each other.** More so than any other author in the micro-level transactional change framework, Rice (1918) suggests specific transactional change responses to particular

types of people experiencing homelessness—provide food, fresh air, money-management training, or nothing at all because they are incapable of being rehabilitated. These very practical recommendations provide social workers with tangible ideas for how to respond to the immediate needs of a people experiencing homelessness. While not as specific as Rice, Julianelle and Foscarinis (2003) also prepare teachers for common incidents that occur when working with youth and families experiencing homelessness. McAllister et al. (2010) take a positivist approach to their research, staying neutral to the topic and simply presenting data analysis options to other researchers or service providers. In all of these texts, even if a structural issue (e.g., low wages, a dearth of affordable housing) is identified, it is presented in a minimal way because first-order change is concerned with how to make things more effective and efficient within the system-as-it-is. The system-as-it-is accepts homelessness as a constant social problem in the United States and so these authors want offer strategies for responding to homelessness and the individuals experiencing it, not to end homelessness.

### **How is this Dissertation Different or Similar to the Academic Literature?**

In this dissertation I attempt to use personal experiences, specific projects and events, and direct interviews with people experiencing homelessness to ground the analysis of broader topics. I also work to present the perspectives of some people experiencing homelessness as central to the new meaning-making that can occur when we move beyond thinking about homelessness as a social problem. What the academic literature provides, which is absent from much of the information available to the general public, is deeper consideration of the ideas as well as presenting contrasting views. Because much of the literature accessible to practitioners and others comes from

agency websites, advocacy group fact sheets, or blog entries from professional associations, the information adopts the style of being brief and advancing the information they want to attend to, as opposed to adding complex or contradictory factors. This quietly creates simplistic understandings about issues related to homelessness, whether that is categories, definitions, causes, or solutions. With simplistic understandings, it becomes easier to maintain a dominant narrative of homelessness as a social problem, whether or not texts intend to do so. In this regard, the dissertation is similar to the academic literature, seeking the complexity of evidence and meaning-making.

### **Conclusion**

In her work, *Terrorist Assemblages*, Puar (2007) suggests that *assemblages* describe action, or process, of time, space, bodies, affects, and interactions, occurring between and around each other. What assemblage allows for is fluidity and questioning that is erased from the fixed form and product of identity. Puar uses assemblage in her scholarship of queerness and Muslim identity to trouble the ways that U.S. capitalism and patriotism have co-opted these and manipulated their representation to the public. I think U.S. capitalism and neoliberalism have used homelessness in a similar manner. As described through the literature review, people experiencing homelessness are categorized and pathologized, creating fixed, one dimensional identities that are then forced on top of complex, always changing, assemblages of people who are in a particular moment experiencing homelessness. These identity shrouds then make it simpler for social service agencies, the government, the media, and others to focus on and regulate limited elements of those they name as homeless, and they control the

narrative about homelessness. Through this literature review, I have sought to animate the complexity of homelessness and people experiencing it.

The literature in part one of this literature review provides evidence of the deficit-oriented current understandings of homelessness. The implications of this deficit orientation are strongly felt by people experiencing homelessness, because it creates certain categories of homelessness that “count” while other people experiencing homelessness go unrecognized, and it perpetuates a surveillance system of individuals who are homeless and non-profit organizations, thus establishing a dominant orientation towards homelessness that is embedded in mutual distrust: people experiencing homelessness are distrustful of non-profit agencies for what looks like privileging select groups of “worthy” homeless, non-profit agencies are distrustful of people whom they view as unlikely to use funds and services for their intended purpose, the government is distrustful of agencies’ stewardship of funds and clients’ worthiness to receive those funds.

Although there is accuracy to this framing of homelessness as a social problem in terms of the lived experiences of homelessness and the causes and effects of homelessness; this framing also prevents (or possibly elides) other ways of thinking about homelessness. Or, more accurately, it keeps researchers, policy makers, and community members from considering what homelessness could show us about other aspects of our socially constructed world. Instead of shining a light on homelessness, what if homelessness was the perspective from which we shined a light on other topics? What could we learn about our communities if we suspended the intense focus on homelessness as a social problem? In other portions of this dissertation I consider what homelessness can reveal about community, neoliberalism, and social justice.

CHAPTER IV  
STORYSCAPES NODE

*Storyscapes* to me is a getaway. It allows me an entrance into how I receive the world and an exit of how I perceive it. It allows me to release my thoughts creatively and gives me pleasure in knowing that everyone who sees the work will interpret it differently. This to me is unity embodied wherein myself and the people who view my art come from a million different walks yet we are able to share the same space inside the story itself. It's beautiful. (Wardlow, 2013, Participatory Budgeting poster for *storyscapes*)

I don't look at people's shoes anymore  
I look at their eyes  
And I look up  
(Melea G. Lail, "[Look up](#)," *storyscapes*)

Ruptured sidewalks and hemorrhage-stained blocks, many strangers you have  
deceived  
Rusted rivets and arches, an ugly structure thou art, but abundance of character  
you have received  
Are you a moment of shelter, moment of shade, maybe a moment of clarity  
In this moment of thought, I'll tell you a dream, o' bridge of Faith, Hope, and  
Charity  
(Gas Man, I, "[Dream Bridge](#)," *storyscapes*)

**I was There: Donna's Story**

"I was there!"

The eight of us sitting around the beat-up conference table remained silent for a few moments after Donna revealed her connection to what is referred to as the 1979 Greensboro Massacre. My silence was out of surprise and a growing sense of awe that I was working with a woman who had been present at—and survived—this violent event. We were together on this Tuesday mid-morning for a writing group at a day center for people experiencing homelessness in Greensboro, NC. We were working on an art

project, named *storyscapes*, which used specific geographic locations as the prompt for storytelling. Leading up to Donna's assertion, we had been recalling childhood memories of downtown. Someone had just shared their experience of buying school supplies at the Woolworth's and the extra treat of getting a snack at the diner located in the store. All of us around the table knew the significance of Greensboro's Woolworth's—the location for the sit-in that ignited a protest movement throughout the Southern region of the United States during the 1960's civil rights era.

My own social justice interests linked the Woolworth's sit-in with another, less well-known, event in Greensboro known as the Greensboro Massacre. I had shared an observation about the historical significance of the city with regards to civil rights, mentioning the massacre, and the subsequent truth and reconciliation process, as additional evidence of the city's status within racial justice history. That comment led us into a discussion of the events of the massacre, because, even though six of the eight people in the writing group were Greensboro natives, four of those natives had little to no recollection of the events.

I cautiously tried to share the story of November 3, 1979: A labor organizing protest march through the streets of the Morningside Homes—a low-income housing development—that attracted attention from Ku Klux Klan and American Nazi Party members, who violently disrupted the march with gun fire that killed five people; all of this happening without any police intervention because the police had been instructed to stay away from Morningside even though they had knowledge of the KKK's interest in the protest (Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2006). Within the writing group, a call and response of questions and answers followed. Having made it through most of the historical details, we shifted our discussion to the psychic impact of violence



and raised questions about what that moment must have been like for the community. That was when Donna made her reveal, "I was there!" In the subsequent silence, Donna started to slowly share her memories of that day: She was a young girl at the time and had been playing outside. She shared her shock at hearing gunfire, seeing people aggressively rushing each other, not recognizing most of the faces that were passing her in the neighborhood. She recalled the anger that many of the adults shared about having this violence brought into their community and the collective sense of trauma that the neighborhood experienced in the aftermath of the attack.

At the following week's writing group, Donna volunteered to start our work with a poem that she had written. She did not preface it with any explanation, instructions about what she would like us to listen for, or any other piece of information; she simply began with a deep breath in,  
a long, controlled exhale,  
the name of the poem, and  
a moment of eye contact with everyone around the conference table.  
"This poem is called '[I was there](#)'" she said.

Some would say the day was ordinary,  
Not foreseeing a tragic end...

A celebration of civil right leaders and some of their  
Supporting friends...

We all gathered around, to witness history  
At it's best...

And suddenly we were approached, by  
Unwanted guests...

A playground that once held laughter, of children  
Stories you can feel...

Was instantly turned into a bloody battlefield...

It was a crucifixion that the whole world would  
Soon ask WHY?

Sandi  
Michael  
James  
Cesar  
and Bill  
had to die.

Why justice never prevailed....  
and the KKK went free...  
How this horrible act is a part of my legacy...  
How this changed my life forever, and forgiveness is  
Still taking it's time...  
November 3rd, Morningside homes 1979  
(Harrelson-Burnett, 2013, "I was there")

The room was quiet, and the air was charged. The poem deserved a moment of silence, and we honored that. As I was soaking in the meaning of Donna's poem, I knew that I was participating in a significant moment, a moment of speaking a truth to power.

After a few deep breaths and still without any eye contact, Donna began talking. She described the journey she had taken in the week since we had last gathered for writing group. After the previous meeting, she drove directly to the intersection of Everitt and Carver, where the shootings took place in 1979. She described feeling drawn to the location because our conversation had resuscitated the vivid memories she had of the event. What she saw shocked her. "There was nothing!" She had trouble even locating the spot of the shoot out because the streets had been renamed and the housing complex had been razed, replaced with new low-income homes. There was no historical marker or tangible memorialization of the shooting victims. "It's been erased. Like it never happened, but it did. I remember! So I got to writing this poem."

## Introduction

The preceding story and Donna's poem, "I was there," are examples of critical storytelling as process and product. Her poem is a counter story; counter to the stock narrative that is told about a "shootout" that happened in a Greensboro housing project between members of the Communist Workers Party and Klan and Nazi members; counter to the "image management and misplaced blame" (Jovanovic, 2012, p. 8) that was generally presented to explain what happened that day—that this was less about race and class in Greensboro and more about the clash of extreme radical groups (Chafe, 1980; Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2006, Jovanovic, 2012). The discussion we had during those two writing group sessions was a critical storytelling process. There were native residents in our group that did not know much about Nov. 3, 1979, or what they did know was radically different than what others of us were describing. In these discussions, we focused on the contradictions and asked the pointed questions of why and how there could be such drastically different stories about the same event. We were also able to use this as a catalyst for discussing stories more generally. Everyone in the writing group could identify mainstream stories that diverged a great deal from their own personal experiences, especially when it came to their stories of homelessness.

A premise of this dissertation is that there are stock stories about homelessness, all informed by a dominant narrative that positions homelessness as a social problem. When most people think about homelessness, some mainstream images and storylines often come to mind. Typically, these include the single homeless man at a corner panhandling or pushing a shopping cart or resting on cardboard on the sidewalk; or the image is of a family, single mother and at least two children, all of them looking forlornly

at the camera. These are our representations of homelessness. There are also other icons or archetypes of homelessness: the drug addict, the drunk. Non-profits and other organizations trying to end homelessness make use of the first images to raise funds for their organization and/or to create a feeling of pity in viewers. To look at these images we know that the people are not experiencing a good quality of life. The second set of images is also used to perpetuate a certain story about homelessness; it is the story of distrust. People living off the government, not keeping a job, drinking and doing drugs all day without contributing to society. Both of these archetypes serve the status quo narrative of homelessness as a social problem in U.S. culture but neither work to reveal the complexly layered lives of people experiencing homelessness. Rarely do we actually seek the opinions, perspectives, or stories of the people themselves. Their stories might complicate the standard frameworks about homelessness—usually that individuals brought this on themselves or that they are suffering at the hands of a system of oppression that we individually cannot overcome.

Even when we do listen to the voices and experiences of people experiencing homelessness, it is not guaranteed that the stories they share will be different than the stock stories we expect. I believe that people share stories that match stock stories because they've had to learn how to operate within a system that does not want to actually learn their stories, instead only wants to hear what they expect to hear. In order to receive services at a nonprofit, in order to receive money while panhandling, in order to receive the prayerful support of a church congregation, the storytellers have to fulfill the listeners' story expectations. The listeners desire a sort of *slum voyeurism* (Lund, 2015) whereby they get to hear the tragic, destitute stories of homelessness, but from a safe distance. People experiencing homelessness have learned that if their story is not

good enough, rough enough, inappropriately detailed enough, the listeners will withhold the services, money, or prayers.

What are the stories that people really want to share? What are the messages that people experiencing homelessness want others to know? Maybe they are not all about their trials and tribulations, or their kowtowing appreciation for people or organizations that provided them with some support. Maybe they have advice for others, maybe they have fond memories of home, or harsh truths about the community we live in—just like those of us who are not homeless. This is what we discovered when we initiated a creative writing and art project at a day center for people experiencing homelessness.

*storyscapes* was a collaborative art installation project conducted in Greensboro, NC, in the summer and fall of 2013 that worked to bring personal stories—their importance identified by the storytellers themselves—to downtown Greensboro. The project was a combination of written word (e.g., short stories, poems, letters), visual art, and mapping that examined the relationships that people experiencing homelessness had with the geography and landscape of downtown Greensboro. There were 12 poems, letters, and short stories—written by seven authors—located at particular intersections of longitude and latitude along the downtown streets, shops, and public buildings. People experiencing homelessness contributed to every element of the project, from deep involvement as artists to more sporadic participation with such aspects as making the visual installations, posting them, promoting the project, and creating the [storyscapes map](#). The project began as a way to introduce critical stories, or counter narratives (Bell, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Giles & Hughes, 2009) through a couple of questions:

What are the stories that people experiencing homelessness want to share? What are the messages that people experiencing homelessness want others to know?

Within critical storytelling, stories cannot be thought of as impenetrable or untouchable. I think critical storytelling can serve to disrupt the invisible machination of oppression and inspire us to imagine something beyond that which is, provide us with a “pedagogy of possibility” (Aveling, 2001, 2006; Sleeter, 2008), which is why *storyscapes* and critical storytelling is included in this dissertation. In particular, it may be a strategy for resisting the hegemonic influence of the dominant narrative about homelessness as a social problem.

In this node, I describe critical storytelling—a pedagogical practice informed by Critical Race Theory and LatCrit. Then I analyze the *storyscapes* project—its collaborators, the process, and some of the stories themselves—in light of this practice. I provide a thorough description of who was involved and how the project was conducted because the process by which critical storytelling is introduced and practiced contributes to how, even if, the skills, knowledge, and values persist beyond the time-contained project itself. Since critical stories are a realistic product to expect from a critical storytelling process, I also include analysis of a few of the works created by the authors. I do not include all the stories, but rather, I have intentionally selected ones that serve as useful examples of various types of critical stories based on Bell’s critical story typologies (Bell, 2010).

### **From Storytelling to Critical Storytelling**

Through the years that I have worked with traditional college students, in curricular and co-curricular settings, I have witnessed how sometimes stories have shut down conversations or been used to dismiss another person’s experience; other times

stories have revealed racism, sexism, or classism and helped us collectively respond to oppression instead of pretending we did not hear it. In recognizing both the challenge and potential of storytelling, I believe that educators can benefit from acknowledging it as a pedagogical process; to do that though, requires work to understand different types of stories, the motivations for why people employ the stories, and the strategies for using stories to disrupt, rather than maintain, dominant narratives.

### **Stories and Storytelling**

Aguirre (2000) defines stories as the “social events that instruct us about social processes, social structures, and social situations” (p. 320). Stories “reinforce our arguments; they assist us in our attempt of persuading listeners that we are ‘right’” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 75). What Aguirre calls stories, Stone-Mediatore (2003) refers to as narratives, using the two words interchangeably. She explains that storytelling replaces the Enlightenment idea of universal reason, serving in its place to foster democratic public engagement. And although there are “ideological public narratives...[that promote] only rote, prejudiced modes of thought,” she argues that the way to disrupt those narratives is by “practicing more experience-attentive, explicitly engaged, and innovative public narration” (Stone-Mediatore, 2003, p. 48). Although I agree with Stone-Mediatore’s assessment of the value of new public narratives/stories, I think there is a worthwhile distinction to be made between stories and narratives: Stories are the reconstructions of one’s experiences, narratives are a part of the social context that informs the interpretation that the storyteller and listeners/viewers make of the story.

Storytelling is always a reconstruction, but not as a faithful recalling of the past. Instead, storytelling is *allegorical*. It is

at once concrete and abstract...[narrating] a specific story which hints at a more general significance. Its characters are at once particular and symbolic, simultaneously historical and metahistorical, even mythological.... [It is] not merely an exchange of information.... Rather we self-reflexively articulate what is at hand, reactivating the past so as to render the present, including ourselves, intelligible. (Pinar, 2012, p. 50)

A story is shared from a perspective that reads the world (Freire, 1985; Macedo, 2006) based on the storyteller's subjectivity in that moment, influenced and informed by both context and structure. A story is never fully independent, meaning it may adapt as the listeners (or viewers) change and as the purpose for telling the story and the context in which the story is shared change. Stories are layered and complex—even when they are presented simplistically—and their meanings are not only shaped by the teller but also the listeners who filter what they hear through their own subjectivity and meaning-making. Stories can perpetuate dominant narratives, through stories of the American Dream or meritocracy stories (Bell, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Macedo, 1995, 2006), Manifest Destiny stories (Jensen, 2016; Loewen, 2007; Zinn, 2003), and stories of the U.S. effort to bring democracy to oppressed nations (Chomsky, 1993, 2012; Chomsky & Vltchek, 2017) to name a few. And they also have the capacity to make visible, even expose, ideologies, dominant narratives, and discourses that rarely are acknowledged and, in fact, need to be invisible in order to maintain their power.

Do stories recount factual events? Are they meant as a rhetorical devise of persuasion? Are they personal? Public? Real or imagined? Fact or fiction? What the previous definitions suggest is that the answer to these question is yes. Yes, they are fact and fiction; yes, they are both real and imagined; yes, they recount and persuade; and yes, they are personal and public. To understand this *both/and* construction I have developed my own definition of story: A (re)construction shared by a person about an



inter- or intrapersonal experience or series of experiences for the purpose of illustrating a particular point (e.g., a lesson learned, a question raised, a value one holds).

Stories are all around us. Stories are more than facts—sometimes facts are not involved at all; sometimes stories are presented as facts, whether or not they are.

Stories have shifted position in our culture. What used to be the grist for family reunions, morality tales, or how we describe our weekends is now also the way we sell coffee or cars in commercials, gain votes in elections, and market a university to the public. In other words, while stories mostly used to exist in life's personal sphere, they have been strategically coopted and moved to the public sphere in order to manage reputations (Fog, Budtz, Munch, & Blanchette, S., 2010; Tyler, 2006), market products (Fog et al., 2010; Mathews & Wacker, 2008), and create public narratives that are then used to shape individual meaning and decision-making (Jones, 2014; Shanahan, McBeth, & Hathaway, 2011; VanderStaay, 1994). Brown, Denning, Groh, and Prusak (2005) identify storytelling as a necessary skill for rising business leaders, a strategy to be taught in higher education and business schools. VanderStaay, through applied narrative analysis, demonstrates how narratives about homelessness first gained a "universal right to shelter" policy in Washington, DC, only to have the policy rescinded once the story changed to one that pitted "alcohol-consuming, quarreling, middle-aged men" against toddlers, pre-schoolers, and daycare teachers in the city's public parks that were now "unsafe and unsanitary" (1994, p. 311). According to the op-eds in the DC papers, readers attributed the increased numbers of people experiencing homelessness in the city to the "right to shelter" policy, which was attracting people from other locations (VanderStaay, 1994). With these new uses for storytelling in the public domain, it would

be naïve to think of stories as harmless or innocent, which speaks to the need for critical storytelling. The power and risk of storytelling necessitates critical storytelling.

### **The Move to Critical Storytelling**

Lee Anne Bell (2010) presents a useful framework for thinking about stories as educational tools that work to prevent, or at least address, the ways stories are used to mask ideology and oppression. She identifies four different types of stories:

- *Stock stories* are tales shared by “dominant groups, passed on through historical and literary documents, and celebrated through public rituals, law, the arts, education and media” (p. 23).
- *Concealed stories* reveal how people who are not privileged experience life differently than what is expressed through stock stories.
- *Resistance stories* “demonstrate how people have resisted [oppression], challenged the stock stories that support it, and fought for more equal and inclusive social arrangements” (p. 24-25)
- *Emerging/transforming stories* are “new stories...buil[t] on ... concealed and resistance stories, [that] interrupt the status quo and energize change” (p. 25).

Given this typology of stories, critical storytelling can serve as a pedagogical process that challenges status quo narratives by offering storytellers and listeners the opportunity to share personal experiences that go against the establishment narratives of traditional storytelling. These critical stories bring complexity to the experiential terrain so that the meaning-making process for both teller and listener becomes (more) intentional. As a result, future encounters with status quo, or stock, stories are more easily identified and questioned. Additionally, people sift future meaning making through a more critical lens in order to question dominant narratives. The critical stories agitate

against dominant narratives, leaving both teller and listener dissatisfied with formulaic stock stories (Bell, 2010).

### **Critical Storytelling in Relation to Critical Race Theory and LatCrit**

Storytelling as a tool for social justice is not a new practice. Storytelling is embraced within Critical Race Theory (CRT) and LatCrit, both of which assert that racism is institutionalized and commonplace in the United States, is enacted in our daily lived experiences, and that white supremacy benefits from the perpetuation of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Giles & Hughes, 2009). Dominant ideologies of meritocracy, colorblindness and living in a post-racial era maintain the current U.S. racial order (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Counter-stories—counter-narratives and testimonies—are integral to CRT and LatCrit, “providing thick description and alternative, unique, antiracist interpretations of human actions” (Giles & Hughes, 2009, p. 692). “Laurence Parker and Marvin Lynn (2002) articulate how CRT has advanced the use of narrative and storytelling to uncover, challenge, and ‘expose the historical, ideological, psychological, and social contexts in which racism has been declared virtually eradicated...’ (10)” (Hughes & Giles, 2010, p. 44). Through counter-narratives, the deficit thinking within master narratives gets ruptured (Hughes & Giles, 2010), and new asset-oriented frameworks, such as community cultural wealth, emerge to identify the multiple forms of capital present in communities of color: linguistic, resistance, aspirational, familial, social, and navigational (Yosso, 2005). LatCrit, congruent with CRT, uses testimonios in a way comparable to counterstories yet extends the focus to include experiences and structures related to immigration status, language, accents, and culture for example (Huber, 2009; Yosso, 2005).

Critical storytelling joins the conversation with CRT and LatCrit by extending CRT's and LatCrit's critiques of the dismissal of narratives as legitimate knowledge. Whereas CRT and LatCrit attend specifically to oppression via structural racism, critical storytelling invites stories that address varied forms of oppression. CRT points to the importance of counterstorytelling as a way to center the voices and experiences of marginalized people and challenge the dominant research claims regarding the importance and possibility of neutrality, objectivity, and validity in "good" research (Hughes & Giles, 2010). Critical storytelling requires us to seek out counter-stories in order to expose the multiple forms of oppression at play in the world. Critical storytelling, counter-narratives, and testimonios serve to provide examples of what a multiplicity of people experience so that we learn that there is no one Truth. They show how the same event can be experienced and interpreted differently by different people. And they offer a framework for new ways of analyzing the interconnections of the personal and the social through historic and current events, relationships, structures (e.g., schools, law enforcement, community centers), and daily interactions.

### **A Critical Storytelling Process**

I conceive of critical storytelling as a critically reflexive and collaborative process that involves making connections between lived experiences and broader social, political, economic, historical, and cultural structures and contexts that influence those experiences as well as the possible meaning-making of those experiences. Critical storytelling is participatory, with people understanding that they will share their interpretations of experiences, have those interpretations explored and questioned by others, and may reinterpret the experiences within the dialogue. Critical storytelling is political—the purpose of the process is to question the status quo and consider the

issues of power, privilege, oppression, and resistance that are hidden or made explicit in our stories. Critical storytelling then has the potential to become beneficial for learning when it is used to (a) “help us understand what life is like for others, and invite the reader [or listener, or viewer] into a new and unfamiliar world” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 41), (b) push against unquestioned dominant ideologies, (c) explicate the common, everyday ways that privilege and oppression are enacted, and (d) engage us in imagining “new possibilities for inclusive human community” (Bell, 2010, p. 75)

Critical storytelling assists us in developing a self-understanding so that we can imagine our participation in the social world; it has public ends. Critical storytelling supports complicated conversations because it simultaneously asks storytellers to hold internal conversations (e.g., what do I recall, why is that important, how does it reflect who I am, how does my subjectivity influence this recollection?) as well as social conversations with listeners who filter the stories through their own temporal subjectivity.

Within critical storytelling, stories cannot be thought of as impenetrable or untouchable. Although critical storytelling includes more perspectives in whatever space it is being applied (e.g., a classroom, neighborhood, housing complex, non-profit), its strength is in how it asks us—both tellers and listeners—to look quite differently at the potential, most likely hidden, meanings of those stories that have been pushed to the corners, or swept under the rug. Critical storytelling asks us to investigate the nooks and crannies of our experiences, our memories, our histories that the status quo intentionally attempts to suppress or rewrite for us. It serves as a disruption of the invisible machination of oppression and inspires us to imagine something beyond that which is, providing us with a “pedagogy of possibility” (Aveling, 2001, 2006; Sleeter, 2008), which

is what we aspired to accomplish through *storyscapes*. The following sections describe both the process by which *storyscapes* operated and the products we created.

### ***storyscapes*: A Narrative Landscape of Downtown Greensboro**



Figure 4.1 *storyscapes* Hand-Drawn Map

This picture (Figure 1) is a hand-drawn map of downtown that shows viewers where to find 12 location-linked stories written by people experiencing homelessness. For one month in the fall of 2013, people could find art installations in the physical locations identified on the map. Each installation included a story linked in some way to that site, sharing “seldom heard stories of downtown Greensboro” (*storyscapes*, “what is *storyscapes*,” para. 2). Viewers could read the stories or scan a QR code to listen to the

original author read the story to them. All of the stories can still be found online, even though the physical installations have been removed (see [gsostoryscapes.wordpress.com](http://gsostoryscapes.wordpress.com)).

*storyscapes* was a summer-fall project that emerged from an ongoing writing group at a homeless day center. I had agreed to co-coordinate the writing class with Gwen, a part-time staff member at the center. During some initial planning meetings, we came up with a project idea to propose to the writing group for the summer. It was a seed of an idea that was informed by some interests shared by Gwen and me that also seemed very fitting for the writers we knew to be in the writing group at the time. So while the nascent idea came from the two of us, it only progressed and grew because the entire writing group agreed to pursue it. We wanted to combine critical storytelling and radical mapping—the practice of challenging maps as neutral or objective, instead exposing their discursivity (Crampton, 2010; Piper, 2002; Wood, 2010)—in ways that would provide for the stories and perspectives of people experiencing homelessness to be shared publicly. The idea was that places are shaped by what is physically present and also by the memories that people hold of that location. Baughelard (1958/1964) calls this the *poetics of space*—thinking of space not as a container (e.g., a classroom, the woods, a library) that could be objectively represented, but rather “as a lived experience that encompasses daydreaming..., the everyday moment, and meaningfulness” (Crampton, 2010, p. 160). Space now encompasses stories, images, experiences linked to particular locations. This is the connection between critical storytelling and radical mapping; they can both be different ways of representing our storied landscapes. This is how we have thought about *storyscapes*. As such, those locations/places are filled with experiences. Imagine digging into the ground of a place, the layers you would find there

would include the stories of everyone whose passed by, each holding different meaning and possibly informing how you now think of that place. One way to appreciate a place is to learn about the stories that are compacted there.

### **Collaborators**

Many people were involved in this project in ways both minor and major. Among them were the authors, coordinators, visual artists, mappers, and numerous supporters that assisted “in the moment” at the day center, which was the locus of operations for the project. Central to the project were the authors and coordinators. They were the primary collaborators, involved with the project throughout its entirety. The visual artists, mappers, and volunteers were secondary collaborators meaning that they moved in and out of the project, sometimes supporting it through participation in multiple events or moments of it or maybe only informing one element. Whether people were involved throughout or with one aspect, they were *collaborators* in that very little of this project was predetermined, so at every moment the project was influenced by those present, who informed the meaning-making and planning for what happened next. This meant the project was fluid, and the roles were iterative and porous: Coordinators were also authors, visual artists, and mappers; authors were also sometimes coordinators, visual artists, and volunteers.

**Coordinators.** Gwen, a part-time staff member at the day center, and I were the appointed coordinators for the project. This meant that we took responsibility for the work needed to connect the pieces of the project. We wrote grants to fund the project, contacted media to promote the project, facilitated the meetings and events around the project, thought about the process, recruited and supported the authors, visual artists,



and volunteers, and much more; these responsibilities were never exclusively ours, we committed to them though, no matter who else was involved in them.

We both agreed that *process* was as important as *product* for this project, and co-creation was a primary value we held while moving through the process. This meant that we always invited other people to be involved in all aspects of the project. If we were meeting to plan something, we would see if anyone at the day center wanted to join us; we would let the authors know when we were meeting for planning and met at times that were accessible to people, not just convenient for us; if we needed to make supply runs, we invited others to come with us and help in making decisions about supplies. Although we wrote our first grant by ourselves, all subsequent efforts to raise funds included collaborators. The point is that we always invited others to participate, and usually others would accept the invitation and often the people involved changed from one moment to the next. This was both exciting and challenging.

We supported a process that worked for the people in the situation they were experiencing: homelessness, an experience that is guaranteed to be chaotic. Schedules change day-to-day, minute-by minute. People move through the day center and as committed as they can be to something, such as *storyscapes*, they cannot anticipate when a job might be available, or their case worker needs to see them, or they can get housing; all of these things can alter their reality and shift their commitments and priorities. So what was important to us was not consistency in having the same people involved all of the time, rather it was to always create space for whoever was available to be involved in whatever capacity they could offer. A major responsibility for us was to provide consistency throughout the project.

**Authors.** The authors were the other primary collaborators. They were a part of the project from beginning to end. The authors included: David, Donna, Forrest, G, Gas-Man I, Melea, and Shannon. This group emerged from the weekly writing program held at the day center. The authors were drawn to both the idea of having a concrete product at the end of a certain amount of time and the opportunity to share their writing with others outside of the writing group. The authors not only wrote their stories of place; they were co-coordinators because once the stories were completed we used the weekly writing group meeting time as our planning time for the rest of the project. Authors then contributed to promotion and media, creating the art installations, installing the art in various downtown locations (e.g., seeking permission as well as physically posting the stories) as well as grant writing and presenting to future *storyscapes* supporters.

**Visual artists.** The visual artists created the final elements of the map (i.e., the icons that marked the locations of the stories). Gwen was the primary artist for the map, which we constructed like a zine using good ol' scissors, glue, and lots of copying, cutting, and pasting. The icons were layered on top of a map of downtown that was laid out by people experiencing homelessness during a radical mapping exercise at the day center. During this exercise, people drew a map that foregrounded the locations and routes of which they were most aware, concerned with, and used most often. The prompt for the original draft of the map was, "make a map that reflects your downtown."

**Secondary collaborators.** There were many secondary collaborators on the project. Some of them participated in a single aspect of the project, while others reappeared for a few elements. The volunteers included people experiencing homelessness, friends and neighbors of the primary collaborators, regular day center

volunteers, and people who responded to one of our social media volunteer announcements. We never knew who would show up.

### **Process**

Given the power dynamics between the various collaborators, Gwen and I, both of whom are housed, recognized our privilege in the project; our economic stability freed time and mental space for us to think about this project in a way that those experiencing homelessness could not. My status as a long-term volunteer at the day center and Gwen's status as a staff member meant that we had access to resources that the general day center population did not (everything from room keys and storage to the listening ears of other staff members). We verbalized this knowledge of privilege to each other and agreed that we hoped to use that privilege to leverage resources for this project. We accepted that this privilege and stability meant that whether we desired it or not, others viewed us as core to this project. Rather than try to somehow change that, we identified ways that we could use it to benefit the group, and we stayed open to regularly examining the group to recognize the various forms it took—because it was always morphing—and to consider what values we needed to maintain as a group to be successful with this project; this inquiry took various forms, including regular check-ins with the authors, interventions by each of us toward the other when one of us questioned the power dynamics, and individual reflexivity, meaning a critical analysis of ourselves in relation to others (Bettez, 2015). We acknowledged that the values and characteristics that needed to be fostered would likely be different from our experiences with groups in the past. For example, we both wanted to make sure that the project was collaborative and co-created. In the past, this meant distributing responsibilities amongst people and holding people to expectations. In our current group, instead of asserting requirements

(e.g., be on time for meetings, follow through on your tasks) and holding people accountable to them, we expressed gratitude and excitement for whatever anyone could offer. We were very aware of the many ways in which our collaborators experiencing homelessness were made to feel inadequate in their lives (e.g., the ways they were looked at by people passing on the street, the private information they had to share in order to access agency services), and we did not want to add to the list of shortcomings others imposed on them. To support an asset-based orientation, rather than a deficit-based orientation, we incorporated the following practices throughout the *storyscapes* process: (a) invitation and hospitality, (b) community building, and (c) co-creation. These practices were intentional, in that Gwen and I explicitly named them at the start of our work together, and we regularly used them throughout the project, as both practices and points of reflexivity. We were able to do this because our own subjectivities were so informed by them, Gwen as a practicing anarchist and me as a popular educator.

**Invitation and hospitality.** One of the ways that we tried to keep an open process was to actively and regularly extend invitations to people experiencing homelessness. We extended invitations by announcing our project activities at every morning meeting at the day center, and we posted invitations on the center's Facebook page. What were most effective though were personal invitations by all the collaborators. Gwen personally invited her neighbors to assist with creating the art installations. I personally invited people spending time at the day center. Authors personally invited friends from the night shelter or transitional housing. The invitation was personalized based on what the person was interested in or needed at the time. When I spoke with folks who were bored or depressed I encouraged them to participate so that they would have something to do. If someone was a good artist, I let them know about our mapping

project and asked them if they would want to draw one of the elements of the map. This sort of genuine and specific invitation process was important because of who was being invited: people experiencing homelessness who received explicit and implicit messages everyday of being undesired and unwelcome in places (e.g., going into a store, spending time at the park, panhandling at a corner). It was not enough to make announcements, or even to invite someone just once. Often, we would extend multiple invitations to the same person.

Similarly, hospitality was critical to our work. We gathered in public locations so that people could easily see and join us. Whenever we brought people together, we always practiced introductions in the group. Within both the formal and informal introductions that we conducted, we made sure to include what we appreciated about individuals' contributions to the project. Hospitality was important in order to help people feel comfortable in the space and feel connected to each other. Again, this was a priority because of how unwanted people felt in most locations.

**Community building.** Community building took the form of creating time for everyone to check-in at the beginning of writing group or planning meetings. People experiencing homelessness have multiple topics that they're thinking about at one time, all competing for priority (e.g., where will I sleep tonight, when is my next meeting with my case manager, how is my little girl doing while she's staying with her grandma, what day and time do I need to show up at court for that ticket?). Those priorities were not discarded at the door when people joined a *storyscapes* activity, so instead of ignoring them, we brought them to light. Sometimes this took awhile; meetings were never short. By doing this though the individuals in the group grew closer and they offered each other support. It also created empathy in the group because we could understand why

someone was distracted or kept being called out of the meeting. And it also meant that we celebrated accomplishments related or unrelated to *storyscapes*.

**Co-creation.** From my years of volunteering at the day center, I had learned important lessons from observing other projects. Usually projects started with someone unrelated to the day center contacting the organization and sharing an idea they had. What followed was often something entirely dictated by the project organizer, with the day center members fitting into one element of it. Gwen and I were deeply committed to not doing that with *storyscapes*. We wanted as many components of *storyscapes* to be co-created as possible. Co-creation was important for a number of reasons: (a) to enhance a sense of ownership for the project, (b) to create opportunities for leadership and skill development for everyone (authors have this listed on their resumes and still reference it in interviews and applications), (c) to affirm to the knowledge and skills that people had developed through their lived experiences, (d) to challenge people's assumptions about people experiencing homelessness as possessing few skills or knowledge, and (e) to create something that could not be created by Gwen or me alone.

Co-creation looked different at different times in the project. Sometimes it was shared decision making, sometimes it was having different people representing the project to possible funders or media outlets, sometimes it was someone stepping up to take care of an aspect of the project entirely on their own. We emphasized co-creation, especially with the primary collaborators, and as Isiahm's quote demonstrates, Gwen and I were not the only ones to appreciate or see the benefits of what co-creation offered to our group: "[I]t's been a shared responsibility thing.... Anyone willing to take initiative in it can be a leader.' [Wardlow] continues: 'Different people have got different talents and strengths, so those are being used.'" (as cited in Dumlao, 2018, para. 12). The

process of shared creation was sometimes frustrating, often slow, and usually resulted in something much better than what a single person could have done individually.

Now having some distance from *storyscapes*, I see some elements that contribute to the process we enacted. In particular these elements are connected to the values and practices of the day center where the project originated alongside the shared values of the two coordinators, Gwen and me. At the time of *storyscapes*, the executive director of the day center was an anarchist (she is still an anarchist, but unfortunately no longer the ED for the center), and the anarchist values she held were enacted throughout the day center's daily operations. In particular the day center was focused on providing support to people—guests, staff, volunteers—to pursue their own ideas, with the day center being an incubator through which the ideas became reality (Hans, 2014). The day center's ethos was one where people participated in activities, art was a valued form of expression, and the stories of people experiencing homelessness were lifted up and centralized. This ethos attracted like-minded people, including Gwen and me, to the center. Gwen, like the executive director, is an anarchist. She enacts this in her daily life through such avenues as her political practices (e.g., protests, organizing), choice of where she works and lives (i.e., the values of these locations align with her values), and how she operates in her community (i.e., the collective practices she and others have adopted). While I do not identify as a practicing anarchist, my worldview is deeply informed by anarchist principles such as disruption of entrenched power, shared decision-making, and creative, DIY practices as opposed to imposed formulas of how things must operate. A fitting statement, often shared by the ED, that undergirds the day center and people who access that location is, "People know best what is best for themselves." Because of the alignment of values and familiarity with practices that reflect

those values, what I have described within these sections on collaborators and process emerged; they were not accidental, arbitrary, or forced.



Figure 4.2 Meeting of *storyscapes* Collaborators: Isiahm Wardlow, Gwen Frisbie-Fulton, Kathleen Edwards, and Melea Lail

### **Product(s)**

We created three main products through the project: (a) a month-long, downtown art installation of 12 found-object art pieces that each include a personal story; (b) publicly-available prints of a hand-drawn map of the downtown area, which was co-created by people experiencing homelessness; and (c) a website comprised of audio recordings of the stories along with pictures and biographies of the authors. The website now serves as an online archive of the project (see [gsostoriscapes.wordpress.com](http://gsostoriscapes.wordpress.com)).



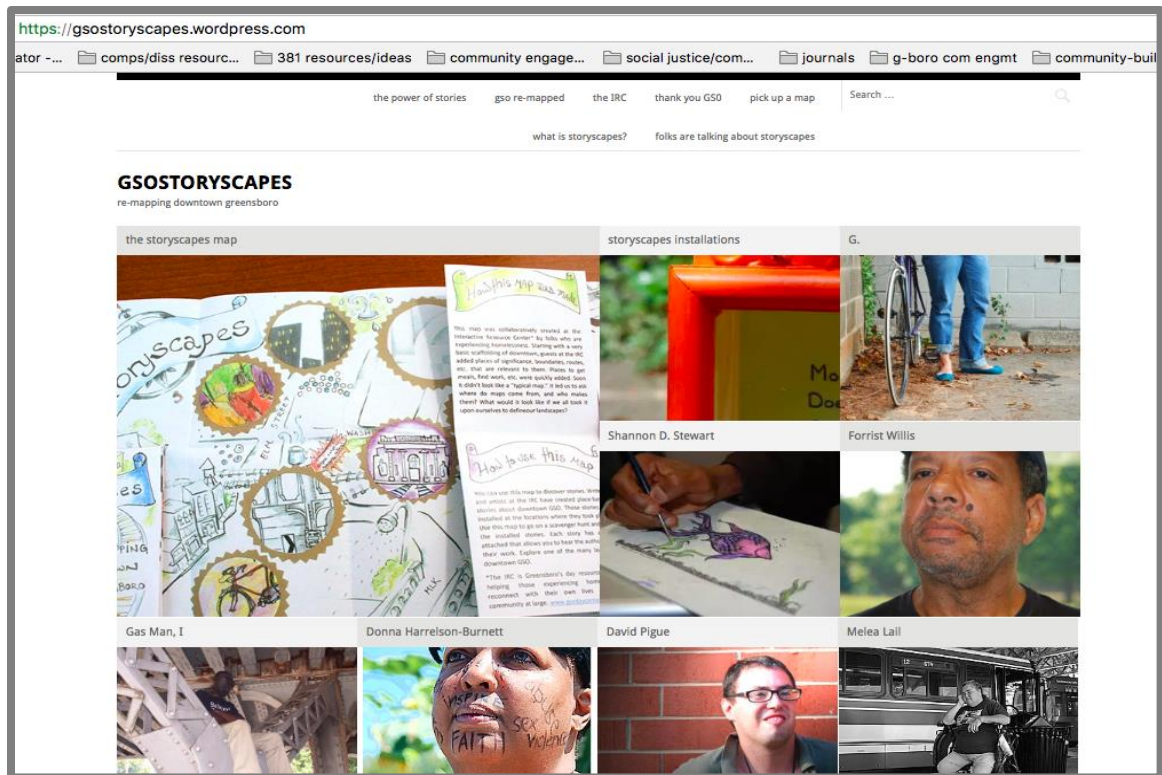


Figure 4.3 Screenshot of *storyscapes* Webpage

**Stories.** The authors wrote their own stories. During writing group, we used writing prompts as catalysts for the stories. For this project the main prompt was,

Pick a downtown location that is significant to you and share a story about why it is important. What is the story that grows from that location: what happened there, what does it trigger for you, why is it important? Write the story that you want/need to share with others.

People workshopped their stories during group: reading their piece out loud and having others respond to it. The responses took the form of discussion. Some people reacted to the content of the story by sharing what they liked (e.g., images, topics) or what the story reminded them of. Some people focused on specific words or phrases and raised questions about what the author was trying to accomplish. Some people

made suggestions that they thought would strengthen the quality of the piece. While some authors were nervous at first to share their writing with the group, ultimately people valued the feedback of the group. The story at this beginning of this chapter, of Donna's poem, "I was there," is a good example of how the writing sessions went. The group regularly discussed memories and experiences that revealed perspectives of elements of Greensboro that were not always apparent, were not the typical stories that would have been shared about downtown (e.g., school supplies shopping at Woolworth's but not being allowed to have lunch in the racially exclusive restaurant; being surveilled by security officers in a public parking deck; being turned away from downtown businesses whilst looking for a restroom to use). Not all of these experiences were written down and shared through *storyscapes* but they served as catalysts for significant conversations during these writing group sessions, similar to what could happen in a classroom.

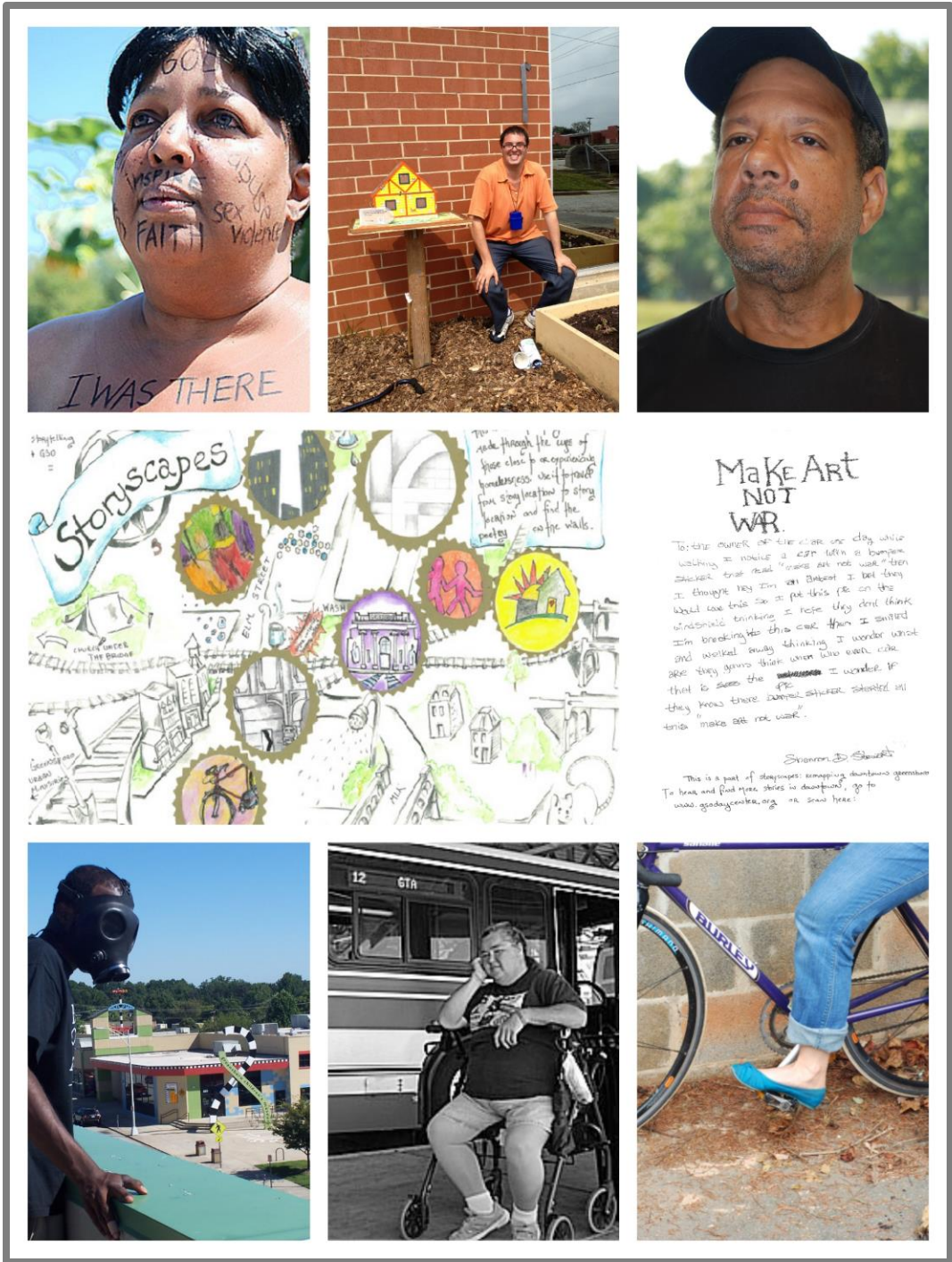


Figure 4.4 storyscapes Authors and Images (L to R): Donna, David, Forrist, map, Shannon, Gas Man I, Melea, & G

**gsostoryscapes.wordpress.com.** Halfway through the project, we started to think more about what the actual art installations would look like, where they would be, how we would get them there; in other words, as the project began to take shape, one idea we played with was that of “walking tours.” We thought about our experiences at different museums – the civil rights museum downtown required guided group tours, but the Weatherspoon museum allowed you to wonder on your own. And some of us had been to places where there were self-guided tours. Playing with these ideas led us to some of the products we ultimately generated: a self-guided walking map of downtown, a website, and author-recorded audio files of each story. The project took shape within multiple dimensions: (a) the physical installations would be present at their geographic locations for one month to encourage a place-based experience, and (b) the installations would be archived at the [gsostoryscapes](http://gsostoryscapes.wordpress.com) website along with the audio recordings, pictures of the locations, the map, and the story texts. This would allow someone a couple of options. Even after the installations were removed from the physical locations, the stories were still present as long as someone had access to the website, which has extended the lifespan of the project.

**Map.** Along with critical storytelling, radical mapping was the parallel practice in this project. We wanted to show people a sense of downtown from the perspectives of people experiencing homelessness. In order to create a map that reflected how people experiencing homelessness thought about their physical landscape and what elements of downtown were foregrounded for them, the first draft of the map was created by the center’s guests in the dayroom. We provided an eight-foot sheet of butcher paper, with only four markings on it: three lines that represented Elm, Washington and Lee Streets, and a X to represent the day center; these served to directionally orient people. Our

prompt was simple, “What to you are the relevant details of downtown?” Armed with a bunch of random markers, people, three layers deep, started to lean over the paper, drawing. New streets emerged, icons like showerheads and forks and knives showed up to represent where someone could get a shower or a meal, “shovels on one location because that’s where they go to find work as day laborers” (Ladd, 2013a). In one corner of the drawing three guys were deciding what the boundaries of the map would be— could they use Fisher as a boundary or did they need to go further out to include the tent encampment near the hospital? We left the map in the dayroom for the day, along with markers and an invitation for people to continue to add to the paper. Eventually we had a map that highlighted resources that the guests used (agencies, churches, public buildings), locations where they slept (emergency housing, tent encampments, and parking garages), routes that they used to get from one location to the next (mostly railroad tracks and the Greenway) and small notes or images (heavy police traffic here, a lot of rodents, mud, or drug dealers in these other spots).

We discussed the significance of the map and what they chose to include or exclude from it. That discussion helped us translate the eight-foot butcher paper into the final product that was distributed around Greensboro in order for people to learn about *storyscapes* and the locations of the storied art installations.





Figure 4.5 Images of Mapping and Art Projects

**Art installations.** Within the art field the term *outsider art* is used to describe art that is “outside of what the everyday person knows to be art” (Cohen, p. 15, 2017). Along with the product not generally being recognized as artwork, outsider artists are “not trained in the norms and practices of the art world” (Risser, p. 79, 2017). Although a contested term (Cohen, 2017; Risser, 2017), it is a useful term here because of how it fits both figuratively and literally the people involved in this project. We identified with outsider artists, who have no (or very little) formal art training. The status of outsider artist also held other meaning because most of us identified in some form or fashion as outside the norm or status quo of the community; the artists exist in the margins of the community. The folks experiencing homelessness were literally outsider artists in that they were outside of any shelter. Gas-Man, I was sleeping in the stairwell of the same parking garage that inspired his work, “Chicken Little from the Fifth Flo’.”

We created the art installations using found objects. People dropped off donations of supplies. Center guests brought in objects that they had found on their travels, and Gwen and I picked up discarded items laid out on curbs: warped plywood, a plastic dollhouse, picture frames, bike gears and chain, aluminum cans, wood posts and gravel for securing installations to the ground.

Similar to the map-making, the installations provided opportunities for numerous people to participate. We needed people to create the containers to showcase the stories—picture frames, shadow boxes. We also needed people to help deliver and install the art pieces. There were jobs for anyone who wanted one, and tasks that needed different skills. This was a project that benefited from the collective knowledge of the individuals.

The sense of shared ownership for the project was strong. Rather than pretend that we knew everything or had ideas for what every installation should look like, we asked others for their opinions and encouraged them to make whatever task they had their own. Small groups decorated the installations, three self-proclaimed “handy men” made the plan for the order of the installations as well as what tools were needed to secure each installation. Throughout the time that the installations were at their sites, volunteers made repairs to them or reported when something was wrong, evidence of a shared sense of ownership within the project.

This project resonated with people at the day center. While it was not going to help folks find housing or lead directly to a job, the practices of critical storytelling and radical mapping meant something. When interviewed by the media (Yes! Weekly, Greensboro News and Record, and Fox 8), often the points that guests emphasized were that they had stories that they believed others needed to hear and the map was a

way to invite people who were not homeless to think about downtown from a different perspective.



Figure 4.6 Images of the Physical Art Installations



### ***storyscapes* in Light of Critical Storytelling**

Throughout this dissertation, I have explained how people experiencing homelessness are often silenced, made invisible, or manipulated for the benefit of cities, churches, governments, and non-profits. Stories are constructed *about* them. In *storyscapes* we attempted to challenge this manipulation of people experiencing homelessness and their stories by guiding a project that actively incorporated people experiencing homelessness in both the process and the products. In this portion of the node I harvest texts from and about *storyscapes* (e.g., interviews, news coverage, grant applications) to analyze the project in light of critical storytelling.

As a project in and of itself, *storyscapes* was intended to counter stock stories that undergird the status quo narrative of homelessness as a social problem. This purpose is evident in various documents about the project, beginning with the first grant proposal we wrote:

Those experiencing homelessness have uniquely intimate relationships with Greensboro's downtown landscape. However, their stories are seldom heard or considered in dialogues about space. We propose a project through which the guests of ... a daytime center for people experiencing homelessness, write and record their place-based stories, creating an installation of these stories in the locations they occurred. ... (Frisbie-Fulton & Edwards, 2013)

The project invited people to write the stories that mattered to them. Would the stories be about homelessness? What messages would be shared? In its totality *storyscapes* positioned itself as a challenge to stock stories, both traditional story forms and traditional stories shared through maps. As we described it on the website, "storyscapes...[re-maps] downtown Greensboro to reflect the multiple experiences and contrasting perspectives of our landscape" (website, "GSO re-mapped", para. 1).

Authors also echoed this purpose when they were interviewed by news sources. “You’ll find yourself standing in the same location and thinking about the experience of somebody else who previously stood in that location—the differences and similarities of your lives” (Lail as cited in Buckley, 2013). “...[M]yself and the people who view my art come from a million different walks yet we are able to share the same space inside the story itself” (Wardlow, as cited in Edwards, Wardlow, Lail, & Pigue, 2013). Such statements like Lail’s and Wardlow’s are significant because we did not prep authors for interviews or comments. Their responses were reflections of their own understanding of the project. They knew they were telling new stories, not the stock stories of downtown.

A goal of the project was that by applying an intentional process and framework, the stories that resulted from *storyscapes* would themselves be critical stories. Referencing Bell’s (2010) story typologies I have selected three stories from the project that I think make apparent the ways that stories can be critical stories differently. When examining the stories in light of typologies—stock, concealed, resistance, and emerging/transforming—I found some of the stories to be easily identifiable as concealed or resistance stories; while other stories had aspects of more than one type.

### **Concealed Story**

On the face of it, David Pigue’s (2013) poem, “[Journey to Summerfield](#)” could be mistaken as a stock story – a memory of his Grandma’s house in Summerfield. David imagines returning to Summerfield, a place where he grew up; “Memories of Summerfield are precious to me.” Although most of the short story is a description of the lake and Grandma’s house in Summerfield, it is the sentences that bookend this memory that serve to offer a stark contrast to what otherwise might be anyone’s memory of visiting their grandparent.

When I sit upstairs in the Greensboro Public library and log onto a computer whether it is on Market009 or Washington008, I imagine I am at the beach.

...

There are times when I am in my campsite off Yanceyville Street, that I am still reminded of Summerfield. I realize now that I am in a very different world, a world that does not have the magic that my hometown had. ... This is my reality. Going back and forth to the library, seeing the same people, and doing the same things every day.

It is with these bookends that the stock story transforms into a concealed story. By sharing his current locations and experiences that trigger his boyhood memories, David adds an effect that startles readers out of their own sense of familiarity with his story: his current daily routine of staying in a tent encampment off of Yanceyville Street, building a fire for warmth and light, walking the miles from his hidden encampment to the downtown library where he can access a computer and the internet from an uncomfortable metal chair.

### **Resistance Story**

Recalling Donna's poem, "[I was there](#)," from the beginning of this chapter, it is a good example of both a resistance story (as a product) and what resistance stories can offer within a process of critical storytelling. The poem is a direct response to the atmosphere of civility (Chafe, 1980) that Greensboro maintains by trying to erase its moments of disruption and violence. When Donna went back to the location of the Greensboro Massacre, an event that she lived through, she found not only an absence of evidence that the location had been a spot of racial violence, she discovered that any trigger for such a memory was erased, "white-washed" – "the streets have since been rerouted, names changed so the bloodiest intersection no longer exists" (Wypijewski, 2005, para. 3). "I was there" is a resistance story in response to and against this white-washing, an element of Greensboro's history that only recently was officially

acknowledged with a state historical marker (North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Program, n.d.) and a formal apology from the city council (Killian, 2017). Donna's poem was not written in a vacuum. It was developed through the critical storytelling process we used during the writing group. In those meetings authors had been recalling their memories of marginalization and oppression in Greensboro (by police, business owners, and general people they passed on the sidewalks), which was the catalyst for Donna to go back to her childhood home. At the next meeting, after she read her poem, the responses to it included writers acknowledging the power and necessity of creating stories for *storyscapes* that would challenge the unquestioned stock stories many people accepted.

### **Emerging/Transforming Story**

An example of an emerging/transforming story is Gas Man, I's poem, "[Chicken Little from the 5<sup>th</sup> Flo](#)." It also contains elements of a resistance story. His poem emerged from an experience on the fifth floor of the Church Street parking deck next to the downtown public library. He received a trespassing ticket one night for sleeping there. In his poem he calls us to question our choice to unquestioningly follow rules that he argues are related to blind capitalism. Taking up the child's story of Chicken Little, he subverts it to point to all of the distractions and strategies used to maintain oppression so that people do not see that the sky is actually falling:

I want my eyez on the prize//  
But there's eyez in the skiez//  
I see spies in disguise// that devise a trillion liez//  
To make a phoenix on the rise// accomplice his demise  
...  
I surmise that the system wants this crack televised//  
Now my people slinging pies, is the black enterprise//

Simultaneously, Gas Man, I asserts that he is not going to fall for these distractions and tactics that will eventually lead to an apocalypse, he does see that the sky is falling and here is what he's going to do about it; this is his transforming story:

They want me swallowed by the tidez//  
but I've buried all my pride// I'm ALIVE!//  
Dreams turn to goals, you'll visualize// Lead turns to gold, you'll realize//  
Prayers manifest, now watch my words materialize//  
As sure as I can speak, sprout wingz and I'mma fly//  
I'm EYE(I), dat guy//  
Middle finger up escaping genocide//

Gas Man, I's transforming story though does not end with his "middle finger up escaping genocide." He does not leave the rest of society to figure out what to do with the falling sky, rather, "Expose the true nature of the Savage, I'm obliged" and so his story ends with an affirmation, even in the chaos, that he accepts a role in exposing and challenging the lies, especially the ones perpetuated through the "American Idols" and "pyramids with eyez" of consumerism.

There were a combination of story types within *storyscapes*, and this served the project well. Individual listeners/readers will be at various stages of their own critical awareness—while some will be ready to engage with strong resistance stories, others may shrink from stories that are too significantly different than the stock stories they have absorbed; for them, concealed stories can serve as the stories that start to agitate within their worldview. This is how critical storytelling can be a process that can work with anyone.

### **Conclusion**

Critical storytelling has the potential to (a) "help us understand what life is like for others, and invite the reader [or listener, or viewer] into a new and unfamiliar world"

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 41), (b) push against unquestioned dominant ideologies, (c) explicate the common, everyday ways that privilege and oppression are enacted, and, (d) engage us in imagining “new possibilities for inclusive human community” (Bell, 2010, p. 75). *storyscapes*, from its inception, invited people into the worldviews of people experiencing homelessness. “We’re not supposed to stay in our stories,” explains *storyscapes* writer Donna Harrelson, “Stories are meant to reach others” (*storyscapes* press release, 2013). Yarbray, a community member who walked *storyscapes* while it was installed downtown, stated:

When people who are experiencing homelessness are able tell their stories of place, it allows them to become visible as human beings, but it also adds a dimensionality to the place we live....As we walk across the world — on paths, on streets, in woods — every step we take has been taken by others before us. (Yarbray, as cited in Neal, 2013, para. 11)

The individual stories, along with the new map of downtown, pushed back against the unquestioned and accepted dominant ideologies that maintain homelessness as a social problem and promote a map and experience of downtown that do not include railroad tracks as trails, free community meals, or rats that invade the underpass-as-bedroom space of more than a few people experiencing homelessness in Greensboro. Often when people pass people experiencing homelessness on the street, they avoid eye contact or cross the street before having to pass by them. Although some of those actions are precipitated by fear or misunderstanding, there can also be other feelings evoked, feelings that people prefer to avoid or do not know how to cope with: guilt, disappointment, complicity, maybe even recognition. Ladd (2013b), a reporter and community member that engaged *storyscapes*, stated, “Walking in their [the authors’] shoes gave me a street-level view of their everyday lives—and made me keenly aware

of my privilege” (para. 3). In promotional materials, grant applications, and media coverage, we named critical storytelling and radical mapping as the tools we were using to “reflect the multiple experiences and contrasting perspectives of our landscape” (Edwards et al., 2013). *storyscapes* was our effort at getting critical stories out to the public in a way that was sufficiently welcoming and intriguing enough that people might see people experiencing homelessness as more fully human, not just a social problem that they ought to fear, pity, or rage against.

This entire project—process, collaborators, and products—enacted tactics of resistance while also imagining (and then operating in) more equitable, asset-oriented, creative, community-focused, and welcoming spaces. From the very construction of the process, which was co-created, we worked to ensure that everyone knew they had knowledge, skills, and values that were validated, appreciated, and necessary in order for us to pull off this subversive endeavor. People experiencing homelessness—authors, visual artists, and secondary collaborators—recognized and embraced this as a way to resist the status quo, a way to challenge the stereotypes imposed on them, a way to properly educate folks through art and lived experiences. Imagination came into play when we protected our space from succumbing to rigid expectations of participation, titles, and roles. Unlike service agencies that penalize clients for not showing up for meetings, or case workers that foist pre-determined social goals (read: expectations) on clients for what they need to do to end their homelessness, we practiced flexibility and understanding, which allowed for people to feel comfortable returning to the project even if they had missed some meetings or had not been able to follow through with a task they accepted. We assumed abundance rather than scarcity in terms of resources, skills, and participation. And the final product—the map, installations, and creative writing—

reflected a new possibility for our community. The people experiencing homelessness were showing the rest of Greensboro a new way to see them, to appreciate them, to learn from them. We were inviting Greensboro into a new way of being a community: A way of community informed and imagined by people experiencing homelessness.



## CHAPTER V

### NEOLIBERALISM AND HOMELESSNESS NODE

In the 1980s a shift occurred in homelessness. There was a large increase in the numbers of people experiencing homelessness (Kerr, 2011; Wright, 1997). Much of the responsibility for this growth is linked to President Reagan and his economic policies (Bogard, 2001; Kerr, 2011). Two specific alterations made by Reagan are still continuously associated to the rise in homelessness: (a) defunding mental health facilities and (b) significantly reducing the federal government's contributions to welfare programs (e.g., education, housing, food stamps) (Finley, 2003; Stern, 1984).

Within his first year in office as president, Reagan decided not to renew funds for mental health facilities, essentially defunding residential mental health services. Without federal money, residential facilities closed and many of the people in them had nowhere to go. While some of them were housed in the process of closing the organizations, it was mostly a precarious form of housing without long-term plans in place to ensure support, therapy, or medication management. Thus, very soon after being independently housed, numerous former residents either left or were forced out of their housing. This was especially true for low-income folks or those without familial safety nets. Reagan also reduced the federal government's contribution to welfare programs that had previously assisted in subsidizing the costs of food, heat, healthcare, and general family care and altered the eligibility requirements so that a large portion of previously eligible people no longer qualified for these programs. This all occurred at the same time as there was a severe rise in unemployment; a steep decline in labor and wage growth,

essentially stalling raises (even necessary cost of living adjustments); and federal efforts to eliminate unions (Campbell, 2005). With decreases in wages and welfare programs, safety nets for low-income individuals disintegrated. The number of people experiencing homelessness grew drastically.

The 1980s are also linked with a new kind of philosophical and economic meaning making known as neoliberalism. The Reaganomics of the time are the enactment of such neoliberal ideology (Cahill & Konings, 2017; Wilson, 2018). While Reaganomics is a term of the past, neoliberalism is still very much a part of the social and economic fabric of today. It is so deeply woven into our contemporary meaning making as to be invisible. Even though neoliberalism was initially an economic philosophy with subsequent strategies, it pervades all aspects of contemporary life. It rears itself when we use phrases like “cost benefit analysis” to determine whether or not to continue in a personal relationship or when we strive for “efficiency” in our early morning routines so that we can sleep longer.

In this node I look at homelessness in light of neoliberal ideology. I begin with a broad overview of neoliberalism: What is it? How does it work? Who benefits from it? Then re-examine some aspects of homelessness to more clearly understand how neoliberalism gets operationalized. This re-examination includes a layered textual narrative of events that occurred a couple of years ago: A tent encampment was closed through enforcement of a property owner’s no trespassing request.

### **Neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism is “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private

property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Neoliberalism is a “set of social, cultural, and political-economic forces that puts competition at the center of social life,” where the market pervades the nooks and crannies of our lived experience (Wilson, 2018, p. 2). Government support and care for its citizens is antithetical to this notion of competition because it—operating through support of social service agencies and welfare programs—makes people dependent on others, rather than self-sufficient, creative, and entrepreneurial (Steger & Roy, 2010; Wilson, 2018). This competition promotes individualism that is less about autonomy or self-determination and more about “hyper-individualism” or a “me-against-the-world” way of thinking of one’s self in relation to others (Wilson, 2018, pp. 3-4). Such a way of viewing other people puts strain and distrust on relationships. Interdependence and community cannot thrive when competition is core to our understanding of relationality.

Neoliberalism is enacted directly through capitalist forms of economic practices and philosophies—there are proprietary and market-oriented values to *everything*, even where there have not been such practices before (e.g., education, social service agencies, health care)—as well as through its influence in how government, non-profits, and other entities operate within a public sphere and the values and decision-making practices of entities within more private spheres (e.g., individuals, families, and other personal groups [shared interest groups or neighborhoods for example]). Neoliberalism has, in other words, attached itself to practically every aspect of our lives, regardless of whether such an ideology aligns with the purposes and practices of those areas. Neoliberalism has become the “common sense way” that individuals understand, make decisions about, and basically frame their lived experience in the world (Harvey, 2005, p. 3).

But neoliberalism was not always the lens through which people made meaning of the world. Historically, neoliberalism is associated with the rise of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the late 1970s to 1980s (Harvey, 2005; Steger & Roy, 2010). Before that, neoliberalism and its practices were thought of as minority views within economics and government (Harvey, 2005). At the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s these minority views were repositioned, through the power of government leadership, into majority practices (Harvey, 2005).

### **Neoliberalism as an Ideology**

With its growth in the 1970s and 1980s, neoliberalism transformed from an economic theory to an ideology. In the United States, neoliberalism positions capitalism, free-market trade, and the various characteristics of labor and production as primary to our understanding of what it means to be human (Harvey, 2005; Steger & Roy, 2010). It is so essential as to be simultaneously both invisible and pervasive; “production and exchange of material goods are at the heart of the human experience” (Steger & Roy, 2010, p. 39). This has serious consequences for what we expect of citizens in our democracy. To be a good member of a community is to be a self-sufficient, entrepreneurial producer and consumer (Sparks, 2012). Therefore, a good community member does not require any support from the broader community (e.g., through charities or social service agencies, through the government via programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [a.k.a. food stamps] or Medicaid). Neoliberalism is a “profoundly political and moral force that shaped all other aspects of a free and open society” (Steger & Roy, 2010, p. 42). Although neoliberalism began as an economic philosophy, it influences other aspects of the social world (Harvey, 2005). For example within the realm of government, or the state, neoliberalism reframes what the

very purpose of governance is: “ensuring that the main role of the state is improving the functioning of markets and creating markets in previously non-market areas of societies” (Allais, 2012, p. 259).

### **Neoliberalism as Enacted Through Governmentality**

Governmentality—a neologism of Foucault’s, a stand-in in his research on government rationality—is a “way or system of thinking about the nature of the practice of government (who can govern; what is governing; what or who is governed)” (Gordon, 1991, p. 3). Governing is meant broadly to cover the way that conduct “shape[s], guide[s], or affect[s]” the behavior and way of thinking of an individual or group of people (Gordon, 1991, p. 2). The governance is thought of broadly to include the self upon the self, interpersonal relations, government (at any level), and social groups or institutions. (Gordon, 1991). Zooming out from governmentality, it is possible to see that the umbrella concept in which governmentality is situated is the concept of power (Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991): how does power—enacted through individuals, groups, the state—control people and how do people resist power forces? Foucault’s concept of power has an important element in that “power is only power (rather than mere physical force or violence) when addressed to individuals who are free to act in one way or another” (Gordon, 1991, p. 5).

Neoliberal governmentality, which took shape in the late 1970s, works to shift the role of economics in society. With the growing centrality of neoliberalism, there comes a way of governable thinking that emerges where economic growth becomes critical to the purpose of governance (Gordon, 1991). Whereas before governance was concerned with responding to and supporting the social needs of the governed, or citizens, now governance is concerned with ensuring citizen’s economic rights, through competition

and market growth in all areas—public and private—of society. In fact, the script is flipped from government’s responsibility for the common good to an emphasis on “individual’s civic obligation to moderate the burden of risk which he or she imposes on society” (Gordon, 1991, p. 45). This emphasis leads to the judgment of individuals who access social services. There is suspicion of people abusing the system or being lazy, not participating as “contributing members of society.” This suspicion leads to blame, marginalization, and pathologizing of individuals, which then gets operationalized through government as “accountability” and permission for surveillance of these individuals.

### **Neoliberal Paradoxes**

As pervasive as neoliberalism is in our culture and society, when we look closely at the actions of various institutions and structures and even our own individual decision-making, it becomes evident that there are cracks in its logic and immutability. Cheng (2012) identifies three paradoxes of neoliberalism: (a) neoliberalism positions itself as amoral and rational, yet the way it is enacted advances conservative moral values related to family, gender, sexuality, and other social constructs; (b) social risks are depoliticized (i.e., individuals should take risks, and individuals are responsible for whatever the consequences are of those risks, with no consideration for inequity) at the same time that national security is politicized to the extreme through a discourse of fear and protectionism (e.g., immigration, overt and covert influence of external governments); and (c) the simultaneous removal of social welfare initiatives and the promotion of individual charity, volunteerism, and humanitarianism. All of these are relevant to homelessness, and will be explored through the layered narrative in this node.

## Neoliberalism and Homelessness

Homelessness, as we now know it, is a direct effect of neoliberalism (Amster, 2018; Willse, 2015). The current explanations of why homelessness happens, recommended practices and interventions for working with people experiencing homelessness, and even the normative research on homelessness are all imbricated with neoliberal ideology (Farrugia & Gerrard, 2016).

One extremely strong neoliberal thread woven through much of the homelessness literature is comparisons between people experiencing homelessness and good citizen subjects. The result of these comparisons is that the good citizen subject is positioned as the norm as well as the desired outcome for people experiencing homelessness (Clift, 2014; Sparks, 2012). Good citizen subjects maintain jobs, pay their taxes, and purchase houses; in other words they are *independent* and *self-sufficient*. They do not take away resources from the local, state, or federal government, whether directly through programs like food stamps or indirectly through social service agencies that receive government funding. By lifting up this good, “normal” subject, people experiencing homelessness are then positioned outside of the norm. People experiencing homelessness are marked as deviant and marginalized. In this narrative, they cannot—usually due to laziness or psychosis—perform as good citizen subjects. The result is a focus on and judgment of the individual values and behaviors of people experiencing homelessness and the adoption of “medical and psychotherapeutic discourses” and recommended interventions (Farrugia & Gerrard, 2016, p. 275). Yet focusing on the individual values and behaviors means not having to focus on other issues, structural issues, that would call into question the lack of fit between neoliberal ideology and addressing homelessness. The narrative could be different; “If

homelessness is caused by factors located outside of the individual, then [people experiencing homelessness] can be deemed as deserving of state support according to the terms of welfare liberalism” (Farrugia & Gerrard, 2016, p. 275). However, by fixating on individual responsibility, a value of neoliberalism, structural barriers—such as the lack of living wage jobs, unaffordable and unsafe housing stock, and structural racism—may get acknowledged to some extent, but addressing these structural barriers is overlooked entirely or overshadowed by the emphasis on creating independent and self-sufficient individuals.

The very term, *homelessness*, is itself a way of controlling how we think about this phenomenon: who is it, how is it experienced, who is responsible. We could, as Willse (2015) suggests, name this phenomenon very differently by framing it as *housing deprivation* as opposed to homelessness. *Homelessness* leads us to think about the people experiencing it, while *housing deprivation* requires us to think about the people depriving others of housing. Whose responsibility is it to ensure that all people have access to safe, decent, and affordable housing? Toward whom do we direct our gaze, our questions, our critical analysis? Housing deprivation is about an active and intentional act of withholding a basic necessity from others, whether that is in the immediate sense of a bed or cot at an emergency nighttime shelter or the more permanent form of housing in the case of a room, or apartment, or house that one rents or owns. Housing deprivation means that government entities, contractors, landlords, and property management companies do not supply sufficient resources for the number of people who need it. Housing deprivation is linked to: city and county zoning and housing laws that determine what can be built and who can occupy it and the standard by which it must be maintained; real estate managers and property owners who decide



where to build, what type of housing to build, what quality of housing to build, whom one desires as renters or owners; and rental management companies that choose how to maintain their properties, what rules to put in place and enforce, to whom they rent. Housing deprivation is linked to housing that is (un)safe, (un)affordable, and (in)decent. When we consider a community do we ask, “How many people are unsheltered at night?” Or do we ask, “How does this community ensure shelter available to all its members?” Housing deprivation is partially a result of gentrification—the passive removal or active forcing out of low-income renters and home owners by the process of making locations unaffordable to them (i.e., increased rents, property taxes, general cost of living in certain geographic areas—mostly linked to urban downtowns). In other words, the terms used to describe what is happening—such as homelessness versus housing deprivation—influence the perspectives on the issue.

What follows is a genre-blurring, layered narrative that considers some of the conflicts that arise from this deep imbrication of homelessness and neoliberalism. I created this narrative, which is focused on the details surrounding the closure of a tent encampment, using autoethnographically-informed text, based on personal journal entries and work notes, along with interview text and media excerpts and public social media quotations. Specifically, the elements provided here take the form of a “layered fragmented text” that “blurs the lines, the edges between text, representation, and criticism” (Denzin, 2010, p 29). I chose this form because I was involved in the closure due to my work at the day center for people experiencing homelessness that was across the street from the encampment. The layered texts serve to capture the lack of ease and transition between moments leading up to the closure and also the chaos of multiple events taking place simultaneously. Within the narrative I have inserted text boxes that

hold quotations from news articles that were published about the camp closure as a way to represent the multiple perspectives on and representations of the story. This is a reflection of my postmodern understanding of meaning making and representation, which resonates with Denzin's sentiment that "there is only narrative, that is, only different genre-defined ways of representing and writing about experiences and their multiple realities. ...No form is privileged over another, each simply performs a different function for a writer and an interpretive community" (2010, p. 30).

### **Once Upon a Time, There was a Tent Encampment...**

Located across the street from a day center for people experiencing homelessness, abutting the neighborhood church, and quietly nestled in the woods rented to a plumbing supply company, there was once a tent encampment that housed usually between 15 to 20 people experiencing homelessness. The tent encampment existed for more than three years.

Jesse Franklin is among a dozen people living in seven tents in a wooded area off Washington Street that's between a plumbing supply business and a church. The camp is within walking distance of the bus lines, a day center for the homeless and groups offering community meals. (McLaughlin, 2016a)

Walking into the tent encampment was like stepping into a magical world! There were walking paths cleared out between the tents; trash cans resting under trees to prevent littering, trash accumulation, and critters (mostly raccoons and rats); some of the tent sites were elaborate: two or three tents elevated on pallets with tarps hanging over them, mattresses resting inside, folding chairs positioned next to insulated coolers; other sites were much more minimalist: a single-person shelter; wind chimes, "god's eye" craft projects made from brightly colored yarn, and whittled pieces of wood hung from trees or

the front entrances of tent sites. The encampment overflowed with personality, whimsy, and creative problem-solving.

[T]he camp...has its own community trash can and a gathering space with chairs. (McLaughlin, 2016a)

I came to know this encampment while working at the day center for people experiencing homelessness, and I grew to appreciate its presence in the neighborhood. The folks in the encampment used the day center's outside spigots and outlets in the evenings to gather water and charge their phones. They would inform the day center staff of any suspicious behavior happening on the property after hours and their presence prevented people from using the center for drug exchanges or prostitution. They did the same for the church that was next door to them as well as the property on which they camped.

...[H]omeless residents have been careful to pick up after themselves, keep troublemakers out of the camp and befriend the property owners around them. They even have rules and meetings. (McLaughlin, 2016a)

Based on their relationships with folks at various community feedings, they arranged for trashcans, which they then included in the day center's daily trash pick up. I joined them a few times for cookouts in the church parking lot. They built relationships with all of the surrounding businesses and provided them with a sense of security for their properties.

People from the nearby church often drop off food. Someone from the plumbing company gave them a weather radio. Others will sometimes offer a 'God bless' and a few dollars. The police sometimes bring extra blankets. (McLaughlin, 2016a)

Unfortunately, not everyone took the time to get to know the encampment members personally, instead some people associated the presence of the encampment with any criminal activity that occurred on their property and blamed the presence of the camp for creating an absence of safety. This became apparent only after a member of the church next to the encampment filed a complaint with the police and approached the day center with an expectation to “take care of the problem.” This was the beginning of the end of the encampment.

It started in January, when the Greensboro Police Department received a complaint from a citizen in the area about the camp. The department then notified the landowner, who is based in California. The landowner told police he wanted to enforce his property rights and evict the people living on his land. According to police, the landowner also said he was unaware of the homeless camp that's made up of about 12 people. (Mensch, 2016)

### **Conversation between a Church Representative and Kathleen, Monday Late**

#### **Morning**

[*Setting:* A man walks into the day center for people experiencing homelessness while Kathleen is sitting at the front desk checking in with another staff member. Kathleen makes eye-contact with him, and he immediately asks to speak to a manager. He does not introduce himself and his demanding tone of voice immediately puts Kathleen in a state of defensiveness. The other staff member steps away from the desk to allow Kathleen, part of the management team, to talk with the man. Kathleen responds to him.]

**Kathleen:** Well let's see what you need first.

[The man stands taller, puffing out his chest, then orders.]

**Man:** You need to get rid of that tent camp across the street.

**Kathleen:** We don't run the encampment.

**Man:** Well you need to get rid of it!

**Kathleen:** Why, has something happened?

**Man:** No, it just needs to go.

**Kathleen:** Can you tell me who you are?

**Man:** I'm an associate minister at the church, associate minister of security. The cars are getting broken into.

**Kathleen:** And you know it's the people in the camp?

**Man:** I didn't say that.

**Kathleen:** But why mention it then?

**Man:** People feel unsafe in the parking lot.

**Kathleen:** They've been great neighbors to us! But, we do not control or own the camp. It's on private property, and they have worked out an agreement with the plumbing company.

**Man:** Oh, I've gone over there, and they want it gone too.

**Kathleen:** Really? Well I'm sure there's something we can do. They camp has been there for such a long time. They don't have any place to go. We can talk out something.

**Man:** No, they have the same chances I've had. It's not my problem they're homeless. It needs to go.

**Kathleen:** Is there someone else at the church I can speak with?

**Man:** You need to make it go. I'm going to the police next.

**Kathleen:** Well, like I said, we don't control it. I'm happy to try and get everyone together to discuss the concerns and we can come up with a plan.

[Man leaves the building. As Kathleen tries to steady her breathing and understand what just happened, she looks up from the desk to see a long-time volunteer standing there. The volunteer's hands are clenched, as are her lips.]

**Volunteer:** I heard everything! That man may be a church member, but he does not speak for that church. I am a member of that church, and he is no Associate Minister. There is no Associate Minister of Security! I've never heard anyone share that they feel unsafe in our parking lot, and I don't know of any cars being broken into. He clearly has an issue with people experiencing homelessness. I'm calling the pastor right now! This is not okay. That camp has every right to be there.

Stewart [the de facto mayor of the tent encampment] said police have rarely had to come to the camp. "We're not bothering anybody," he said. "If it was a problem, we'd have been gone a long time ago." (McLaughlin, 2016a)

### **Conversation between Operations Manager (OM) of the Plumbing Supply Company and Kathleen, Monday Early Afternoon**

[*Setting:* This brief encounter takes place in the hallway of the office of the Plumbing Supply Company. Kathleen walks over from the day center to try and meet with the OM.]

**Kathleen:** This morning a man representing the church next door stopped by the day center and insisted that the tent encampment needs to go. From my understanding you have an arrangement with the encampment.

**OM:** I just lease the property. It's the property owner you have to talk with.

**Kathleen:** Okay, can you share their information?

**OM:** No, but I'll pass on your information.

**Kathleen:** Do you have concerns about the folks in the camp? I mean, we've really appreciated having them there. They keep an eye on the day center when we're closed. And they've never told me about any troubles with you; I thought there was a pretty good understanding between you.

**OM:** I'm just trying to run a business. I'll get your info to the owner.

[Kathleen leaves the brief conversation feeling puzzled; it was as if the OM wanted to avoid being involved in the growing situation. Did he not want to take responsibility for the arrangement he had with the encampment? Why? Was he concerned that it could jeopardize his lease with the property owner? Something else?]

Jim Harris, the operations manager at Greensboro Plumbing Supply, which leases the property from someone in California, said there have been a few complaints, which he didn't have details about. 'There's also a real liability issue for the owner,' said Harris, who put up 'No Trespassing' signs Thursday, which the police require before clearing out a camp. (McLaughlin, 2016a)

## **Conversation between the Church Pastor and Kathleen: Leaving Voicemail**

### **Messages over a Couple Days**

**Kathleen:** [phone call made on Monday afternoon]. Hi, could I speak with the pastor? He's not there? Yes, I would like to leave a voicemail. Hi pastor, my name is Kathleen Edwards, and I work at the local day center for people experiencing homelessness that is across the street from your church. I'm hoping to speak with you about an interaction I had with one of your associate ministers, the associate minister of security to be exact. He came into the day center earlier today and insisted that I get rid of the tent encampment that abuts your parking lot. He explained that people coming to church feel unsafe due to the

encampment, and he insinuated that there were car thefts that could be attributed to people staying at the camp. Anyways, another member of your congregation, who also volunteers at our day center, was present during the whole exchange and later shared with me that she did not think that his sentiments actually reflected the views of the church. I'm concerned because this associate minister asserted that his next stop would be the police to file an official complaint. I wanted to both make you aware of this situation and ask to speak with you about your relationship with the folks at the encampment. I'd like to see if we could avoid involving the police in this matter, and instead arrange a meeting with you and others from the church, representatives from the encampment, and representatives from the day center. Please call me back. Thank you for your time. My number is....

**Pastor:** [voicemail message left on Kathleen's cell phone Tuesday morning]. Hi Miss Katherine, this is Pastor [indecipherable]. Yes, I'd be happy to come to a meeting. I can tell you that the man that visited you did not represent the church, and he has been spoken to. I've learned that he's already filed a complaint with the police. I do not want to jeopardize the encampment.

**Kathleen:** [leaving message on church's main number, Tuesday late morning]. Hi this is *Kathleen* Edwards, returning the pastor's message from yesterday. This message is for the pastor. I will proceed with setting up a meeting between the encampment and us. Now that I know the police have received an official complaint, I will also reach out to our police "community liaisons" assigned to our neighborhood. I'd like to know if you have certain times that I should avoid for



arranging this meeting, since I really hope you'll attend. Also, is there a better number than the general church number for trying to reach you?

**Pastor:** [voicemail message left on Kathleen's cell phone that Tuesday afternoon]. Hi again Miss Katherine. If you could schedule the meeting for a Tuesday or Thursday, after 10 am, that would be most appreciated.

**Kathleen:** [leaving message on church's main number Wednesday morning]. Hi this is *Kathleen* Edwards. This message is for the pastor. I just learned that there is already a meeting set for tomorrow, Thursday, at 2:00pm. I've also learned that the police have initiated a trespassing order for the property. The police are invited to this meeting, as is the OM of the plumbing supply company, and I'm also trying to reach the property owner for the land since the plumbing company rents the property.

**Pastor:** [voicemail message left on Kathleen's cell phone Wednesday evening]. Hi Miss Edwards. Unfortunately I cannot make that meeting time. My schedule is full all of this week and next. Please keep me informed of what happens at the meeting.

**Kathleen:** [leaving message on church's main number Wednesday night]. Hi this is Kathleen Edwards, This message is for the pastor. I'm really sorry that you won't be able to make the meeting. I will keep you informed. I'd like to be able to make some statements on your behalf, so could you confirm that (a) the tent encampment is not a bother to your church, (b) in fact you've actually spoken to folks at the encampment in the past and even provided them with a trash can to keep the place clean, and given them permission to have some cookouts in your

parking lot, and (c) you would like them to be able to stay where they are and are opposed to them being displaced. Thank you.

**Pastor:** [voicemail message left on Kathleen's cell phone the Thursday morning]. Hi it's the pastor again. Yes, you can share all those sentiments for me during the meeting.

### **Conversation between the Community Liaison Police Officers and Kathleen, Wednesday Morning**

[*Setting:* Kathleen gets paged to the front desk to find two police officers waiting to talk with her. She recognizes them because they've worked together before. They are the appointed "community liaison" officers for the neighborhood and try to intercept any calls that relate to people experiencing homelessness in the vicinity since they have built some rapport with folks as opposed to other officers who know nothing about the situations or behaviors of the people experiencing homelessness who spend time downtown. The three of them—Officer One, Officer Two, and Kathleen—move to an alcove off the main room for a quieter conversation.]

**Officer One:** We wanted to stop by because we've heard about what is happening with the tent encampment.

**Kathleen:** What is happening? All I know so far is that there was someone from the church that filed a complaint. I've been playing phone tag with the pastor, trying to prevent anything extreme from happening.

**Officer Two:** Right, there was the complaint from the church and then our chief called the property owner. Typically we don't do anything unless a property owner asks us to enforce a no trespassing order for the property. There are not

any “no trespassing” signs posted on the land, which is why we’ve been able to work with the guys over there. But now the chief has a formal request from the property owner to enforce no trespassing.

**Kathleen:** Seriously? Already?! There’s been no chance to explore options or see if we can negotiate anything. The folks at the camp are great! They have a perfect set up over there and they don’t want to move. / don’t want them to move. It’s wonderful having them as neighbors!

**Officer One:** I know!

**Officer Two:** Yeah, we really like them there too. They help us out all the time, especially if we find someone who doesn’t know where to sleep at night and we think they might get hurt if they stay out. We’ve stopped calling the night shelter because they’re always full. But the tent folks help out. We stop over there and they’ve always agreed to take the person we have. They let us know that they’ll get them situated and direct them to the right services in the morning.

**Kathleen:** So, is there any way to turn this around? Can I talk to the property owner or the chief?

**Officer One:** We’ll let the chief know that you’d like to talk with the property owner, but I’m not sure that we can give out that information. The chief had us go over today and inform the guys that we’d be enforcing a no trespassing request and the plumbing supply company put up some “no trespassing” signs. They have two weeks to get everything out of there. After that we’ll be required to cite them if we find them over there.

[Later that day Officer One calls and informs Kathleen that the chief will not give out the name or contact information for the property owner. The officer also tells

Kathleen that the chief touched base with the Director of the day center and there's going to be a meeting Thursday afternoon. Kathleen, subsequently leaves a message for the church pastor, asking him to join the meeting. Kathleen is starting to become troubled by her observation that the property is receiving more care and protection than the people currently living on the site. What does this reveal about individuals' views regarding people experiencing homelessness?]

Greensboro Police officer Douglas E. Campbell, who patrols the area, said last week, "My heart breaks for those guys." (McLaughlin, 2016b)

## **Conversation between Jesse from the Tent Encampment and Kathleen**

### **Wednesday Morning**

[*Setting:* Jesse from the tent encampment meets with Kathleen—around a battered conference table in a quiet room of the day center. Jesse has been sent to represent the other people at the tent site.]

**James:** What is going on?! Are we just going to get kicked out?

**Kathleen:** Hopefully that's not the case. What have the police told you?

**James:** Nothin'! All I know is that I came back to the camp and there are "no trespassing" signs nailed to trees. Someone said something about having two weeks to move out. What happened? What'd we do?

**Kathleen:** Here's what I know so far. Someone made a complaint to the police about the tent encampment. The police contacted the property owner of the land that you all are on. I guess the plumbing company rents the space. The property owner told the police that they didn't want people living in the woods.

**James:** But, why? We don't bother nobody. We take care of things, and I thought we had it worked out with the plumbing company.

**Kathleen:** I agree. You all have a great community set up there. You keep everything under control and help folks out. This is all a surprise. So what we're trying to do now is have a meeting between all of us: you, the church, the plumbing supply company, the police, and the property owner. Maybe we can work something out. What do you want to do?

**James:** We want to stay, of course. That's our home. I've lived there for years. You know how we are over there. We're not causing any trouble. Where are people supposed to go if they make us leave?

**Kathleen:** Well, let's also use this as a chance to check in with everyone at the camp to see if there is anyone that wants to try to find more stable housing and maybe to get linked up with some services. I know some of you have tried that stuff in the past and aren't interested but maybe some programs have changed or your situations are different. There might be some things you're eligible for.

**James:** So you're making us move out?

**Kathleen:** No, no! No, the first priority is to see if we can work with the police and others to keep the camp there. Also, though, let's start considering alternatives. If you don't want to work with other agencies, that's fine. But let's start scoping out other sites then for a camp.

**James:** Nothing is going to be as good as this place though. It's private, no one sees us. We're close to everything. We've got water and electricity across the street. I thought we had this worked out. We were helping each other out.

**Kathleen:** Yeah, I know. This is shit. I know the day center has really appreciated having you there. We want you to stay. It's good for all of us. And that's what we'll try to emphasize at the meeting, right.

"Where are we supposed to go?" asked Franklin, standing in front of his green nylon tent. (McLaughlin, 2016a)

Mayor Nancy Vaughn... said that even though the city's Housing First Initiative is getting chronically homeless people off the street, the program is only as good as the number of affordable housing units available. (McLaughlin, 2016a)

### **Kathleen Tries to Communicate with the Property Owner**

[*Setting:* The OM of the plumbing supply company and the chief of police have both spoken with the property owner, but they will not provide the name or contact information to Kathleen so that she can communicate directly with this person. She figures that this is public information so she starts searching. After digging through online city documents to identify the property owner for the address of the tent encampment, she then searches for the contact information for the name listed on the documents. She finds someone who is 85 years old and living in California. Is this right? She thought that the person would at least be living in the city, or the surrounding area. This person is on the opposite coast! She calls the number linked to the name and address in California].

**Kathleen:** [leaving voicemail]. Hi, my name is Kathleen Edwards, I work at a day center for people experiencing homelessness in Greensboro, North Carolina. Currently I'm working with a group of folks who have a tent encampment on your property that you rent to a plumbing supply company. I understand that you've

spoken with the police and requested that they enforce a no trespassing order on the land, which will mean that the tent encampment will be closed down. I'd like to speak with you about trying to come to some arrangement that allows the folks to stay in their encampment. I'm not sure how much you know about the encampment but it's pretty phenomenal. It's a strong community that contributes to our neighborhood. The day center really appreciates having them as neighbors. They also work with the police and accept people to the encampment whom the police find wandering around. So please, give me a call back. The encampment would like to stay, and we don't want to lose their presence in the area. Thank you.

"What's especially cruel is telling people in the dead of winter that you have to go," Stewart said. "In the spring at least you can walk around town all night and not freeze to death on a park bench." (McLaughlin, 2016a)

### **Portions of the Meeting between the Police, the Plumbing Supply Company, the Property Owner, and the Day Center Management**

[*Setting:* It is a cold and snowy January afternoon. Sitting around a bright orange Ikea table are the Chief of Police and assistant deputy, the OM of the Plumbing Supply company, the day center director, and Kathleen. The Chief makes a phone call, resting the phone in the middle of the table and turning on the speaker phone once the person on the other end of the call answers. The chief starts the conversation.]

**Chief:** Hi everyone. Landowner, we're at the day center, in the director's office. Around the table are [he points to each of us so that we can say our names]. We're meeting to discuss a plan for how to close the tent encampment.

**Kathleen:** So there's no room to discuss alternative approaches? I was hoping we could establish an agreement that would allow the encampment members to stay where they are.

**Property Owner:** I've discussed this with my lawyer and although I certainly don't want to be kicking out anyone, it is too much of a liability risk for me. What if someone gets harmed over there or something illegal happens there? I am responsible.

**Kathleen:** I've spoken with the encampment members as well as neighbors. This is a really unique site, and I think we have an opportunity to develop a creative and progressive arrangement that could become a national model. It could be an example of a humane partnership that includes the police, church, businesses, and non-profits, along with the people experiencing homelessness.

**Chief:** We've already posted the "no trespassing" signs. At this point the homeless need to move out by the end of two weeks.

**Director:** Wait a minute, it's the middle of winter, and you want to uproot these folks? We've had our nighttime emergency shelter opened the last two nights. The folks at the encampment sometimes use the shelter but they also have some very resourceful set ups that provide them with warmth and relief from the winds. A number of them have chosen the encampment site because they do not do well in crowded places like an emergency shelter or they don't operate well with a lot of rules, which they encounter when they go to the regular nighttime shelter.

**Kathleen:** Wait, can we go back to the conversation about alternative possibilities? You should know that the tent encampment has been a great addition to this community. They have relationships with their surrounding



neighbors. From our experience, they have been very helpful to us by keeping an eye on the day center after we're closed. They've prevented crime from occurring on our property and alert us to what activity they see over here at night. The church also thinks that they keep their property safe after hours. The church even gave them a couple trash cans to keep their sight clean. I've attended a couple of social events in the church parking lot that were held by the encampment, cook-outs. They also prevent people from breaking into the plumbing supply company. If they are kicked out of the encampment, I think we can expect to see a rise in crime. And that spot, even with "no trespassing" signs will become a location for drug dealing, drug and alcohol use, and prostitution. All stuff we'd like to avoid given the number of people we work with who are working on starting or maintaining sobriety. The police are never called to the site. And when they do visit, it's because they are asking for help from the camp members. This is a group of people who accepts folks who've just arrived in Greensboro. The police even direct people to the camp! This group is so helpful to all of us! Also they have an agreed upon code of conduct for the camp. It's something that a UNCG Peace and Conflict Masters student just researched and presented on for her capstone. I'm sharing all of this because I want you to see how this decision to close the camp will have widespread effects. I also think we're at a choice point and although shutting it down is one option, we could also work to establish an agreement with the encampment that could be mutually beneficial.

**Property Owner:** I'm sorry. I'm really sympathetic to what's happening to these guys but I just can't unring this bell. I'm aware of it now and I have to think about the liability of it. I can't unring that bell, I just can't.

**Chief:** Well let's move on. Now, the folks have two weeks to remove all of their property from the site. There's been an official trespassing notification made to them. The property owner has specifically asked for us to monitor the property and enforce the no trespassing order.

"Nobody wants to see these people out on the street in cold weather," city spokesman Donnie Turlington said. "We are just enforcing what the property owners want us to do." (McLaughlin, 2016a)

"...It's not a long-term solution, but I consider that a victory," said Shannon Stewart..."Nobody wanted to have to move the tents and all their belongings in the cold." (McLaughlin, 2016b)

Residents of a homeless camp that was to be cleared out by the city will have until spring to leave. City and police officials, the property's owner, and homeless advocates reached a compromise that would allow them to stay until April 18. "We hope providing more time allows the camp residents to find permanent housing and it avoids having to vacate the camp in the middle of winter," city spokesman Donnie Turlington said. (McLaughlin, 2016b)

As the April 18 deadline approached numerous day center staff worked with the people at the tent encampment to find them a new location. We scouted for a new site around the downtown area. Our criteria were: isolated location with trees to block people from being able to see the site easily; ideally, close to a water source; preferable on city land, not private property; no obvious "no trespassing" signs; away from heavy drug and prostitution activity; sufficiently flat land and elevated so as to drain well from rain and snow; and large enough for at least 10 camp sites. We found a few places that could be possibilities, but they were not satisfactory to the encampment members, which we

expected would be the case. They were losing their home and community and were traumatized from it.

A couple encampment members left independently, finding single spots for themselves: under overpasses, loading docks behind businesses, a sliver of woods between two private properties; all of these locations are precarious, even unsafe (e.g., fumes collect under overpasses and people can accidentally roll over in their sleep and injure themselves in the steep decline of their fall). The day center staff helped pack up sites and move people so that the process did not feel entirely overwhelming.

“Some camp residents say they do not want to stay in shelters, which they think can be unsafe, and will bide their time in tents where they can follow their own schedules.” (McLaughlin, 2016a)

A group of homeless people in Greensboro have been evicted from an area they've called 'home' for the past three years. “It's been my home for a long time now. And the people here are family,” Shannon Stewart explained. “I'm going to miss it.” (Mensch, 2016)

At the end of the day on April 18, there was only one person left at the site: A long-term member of the site, whom everyone had looked after because of her mental health. Very attached to the site, she could not comprehend the order to relocate. And although we eventually helped her move her items that day, she regularly returns to the camp site even now. The image of the site, empty of all encampment members, was desolate. Camp members had to leave a number of items behind (pallets, mattresses, coolers); some sites were simply abandoned (tents, tarps, trash cans, everything). The lack of grass, along with the increased foot traffic, left the ground a muddy mess of puddles and tree roots; the footpaths that used to gently guide people's movement in the

camp had been disregarded and eventually lost. The whimsical wooded community was demolished, leaving a trash site full of discarded pallets, broken lawn chairs, and “no trespassing” signs.

### **Conclusion**

The previous layered narrative encapsulates a number of the tensions, questions, and paradoxes raised by the current entanglement of neoliberalism and homelessness. One reason for including this tent encampment story in this node about neoliberalism is that I wanted to bring to the discussion of neoliberalism an example that is situated in the specific actions and decisions of individuals to demonstrate how neoliberal ideologies get enacted at the human level. The story highlights dominant assumptions held about people experiencing homelessness, including what they are capable of. It reveals the hierarchy of member status within cities. And it raises meaningful questions about what it means to be a part of a community. I also want to acknowledge a dilemma I faced while writing this narrative. In the process of highlighting the intentional community values and practices of the tent encampment, I have risked focusing too much of the story on the “good behavior” of the camp members. It can be easy when presented with people displaying admirable qualities to empathize with their situation. However, I want to be clear, regardless of the behavior of the camp members, their worthiness is not dependent on how well they act as “contributing members of society.” No one should be thought of as expendable or unworthy.

One perspective on the situation could be that this situation worked out really well because the people in the encampment avoided the crisis of a move during the harsh winter, and the extra time provided opportunity for agency staff to help find better shelter for the camp members. The crisis was abated by the extension of time and the

cooperative nature of all the parties involved. This perspective is accurate only if we assume that the disbandment of the camp was a foregone conclusion. There were alternatives though. The camp could have stayed, but it would have meant decision-making and actions based on different priorities.

### **Returning to the Paradoxes of Neoliberalism**

Cheng (2012) articulates three paradoxes to neoliberalism—risk, rationality, and humanitarianism—all of which are present in the narrative about the tent encampment.

**Risk.** Neoliberalism emphasizes self-sufficiency and responsibility. In a competitive marketplace individuals need to take risks to advance, and when those risks work out, individuals are rewarded. However, individuals are expected to understand that taking such risk is their choice. There are no government or community safety nets to lessen the negative effects of risk. At the same time, our society is plagued by a discourse of fear: fear of the outsider and of the unknown. In the situation of the tent encampment, perhaps one reason there was not a greater public outcry about the eviction of the twelve camp members, was that people viewed this as the risk that the members took by setting up their community on someone's private property. Additionally, none of the neighbors took the risk of speaking up strongly for the presence of the tent encampment; to do so would have meant possibly jeopardizing our livelihoods. The property owner, influenced by a fear discourse about the unpredictability of people experiencing homelessness, also failed to take any risk in this situation. We could have pursued an agreement, one that was even legally binding if necessary, to arrange for the camp to remain where it was.

Risk is real and has serious consequences, especially if, and when, safety nets are removed. The complexity of risk can be highlighted by the tensions experienced by

the various neighbors. For example, the day center's director and I had been both been in our jobs for less than one year when this incident occurred. Part of what we had been working on with various organizations, businesses, and government entities was creating communication paths so that when others have a complaint about homelessness, they think to first reach out to the day center rather than to the media or the general public. In this case what the day center faced was a complicated scenario where relationships were still new and in the nascent phases of forming (with the police and local businesses for example). We had to balance thinking about both short- and long-term consequences of our actions and the process of building relationships. While we did advocate on behalf of the people in the tent encampment, there were also other elements influencing the strength of this advocacy or how seriously it would be taken by people like the Chief of Police and the landowner, when we did not have especially strong connections yet established. What would have happened if we advocated differently, perhaps pursuing some stronger acts of civil disobedience (e.g., protesting at the camp sight, submitting strongly worded opinion editorials in the paper)? Would those actions have completely stalled all progress, and ruined the chances of deeper relationships further in the future? Although we cannot know what the real risk for the day center was, these fears and concerns did go into informing how we approached the negotiations with unfamiliar partners.

**Rationality.** Part of the economic theory linked to neoliberalism is that people make rational choices that are in their individual best interest, which keeps capitalism operating competitively (Steger & Roy, 2010). This rationality framework obscures a conservative moral agenda that expects particular types of behaviors from people. In the case of the tent encampment, essentially the camp operates outside of the accepted

moral agenda by not playing by the rules: living on someone else's land, rejecting the disciplinary enforcement of the night shelter, being able to create a community without all the necessary consumer trappings. That the camp can admirably and successfully operate outside of society's values is a great threat to neoliberalism, therefore it must be disbanded. If this group of people experiencing homelessness can create such a place, what if other people were to follow?

**Humanitarianism.** As the mayor acknowledged in her media comment, “the [city's Housing First Initiative] is only as good as the number of affordable housing units available” (McLaughlin, 2016a). Lack of affordable housing stock is one of the major contributors to homelessness. This is linked to the removal of national welfare programs that have usually made up the difference for low-income individuals and families when their income does not suffice for their basic living costs (i.e., rent, food, utilities). The eradication of support systems has been replaced with individual charity, volunteerism, and a humanitarian perspective that responds to the immediate needs of crises. In the tent encampment narrative, this humanitarianism took the form of a weather radio, a couple trash cans, a few donated dollars and a “God bless,” and other small gestures that in no way altered the housing system that made shelter unaffordable for these twelve camp members or the many others that cannot find or maintain safe, decent, and affordable housing. While all of us remained concerned about housing for the camp members being displaced, we did not raise questions around the Mayor's acknowledgment of insufficient affordable housing units. This was a lost opportunity for the day center, the Mayor, and other homelessness advocates and service agencies to bring more attention to the broader issue of housing deprivation.

## **The Dominant Narrative Prevails**

The dominant narrative about homelessness inserted itself in this story through the media coverage and the criminalizing assumptions made by individual community members. Often tent encampments—or tent cities as they have been popularly called through the media—are presented as nuisances by the press (NCH, 2016). Even McLaughlin (2016a), in her first news article about the closure mentions a different site that had been closed down the year prior, “In February 2015, a camp with a large plywood hut was discovered at the back of the new State Employees Credit Union. ...police also found piles of garbage and human waste around the property. It was nothing like [this] camp” (para. 14). Her stylistic choice to set up this contrast is telling of what readers expect of tent encampments. It is reflective of the assumptions people have about those who are experiencing homelessness: unhygienic, a disregard for the broader community, and an absence of dignified human behavior.

This misrepresentation of people experiencing homelessness—through typical media stories, the advocacy work of the day center, and non-substantive complaint(s) lodged against the camp members—sufficiently validated the property owner’s own narrative about people experiencing homelessness for him to issue his eviction, or trespassing enforcement request. Even as more people came forward to counter the complaint, the dominant narrative of homelessness and the stereotypes of people experiencing homelessness were too strong. This was strengthened all the more by the absence of direct voices from the tent encampment. The property owner was presented with stories of how the camp contributed to the community and ideas of how the camp could be a model for other sites. In these neoliberal times though, where money is the ultimate factor in decision-making, he reverted to legal language about liability and risk in



his final decision. The needs and hopes of the camp members and the surrounding neighbors seem to have come up lacking in his cost-benefit analysis. His decision though received a benevolent interpretation by almost everyone, as is evidenced in the remarks made to the media: "...It's not a long-term solution, but I consider that a victory," (Stewart, as cited in McLaughlin, 2016b), and "We hope providing more time allows the camp residents to find permanent housing and it avoids having to vacate the camp in the middle of winter," (Turlington, as cited in McLaughlin, 2016b). The question that we never asked was what sort of community do we live in where the property rights of a person living thousands of miles away are more important than either the (a) individual basic needs of a dozen people or the (b) collective continuity and strength of a neighborhood? Additionally, even as all parties were operating in this strong neoliberal ethos, we never acknowledged it. What could have been different about the events if we had been honest and transparent about the various tensions we were possibly encountering? Some of these tensions or uncertainties included: (a) the possible uncertainty felt by Jim, the Plumbing Supply Company's Operations Manager, with regard to speaking up in the interest of the camp members on property that the company itself only leased; (b) the limited confidence the day center director and I felt about the relationships we had, but needed, with our neighbors and the police for future work together; (c) the consequences the police might face if observers interpreted their actions as supporting law breakers (the tent members trespassing on private property) instead of others thought to be observing the law; and (d) the negative possible consequences for the tent members and other people experiencing homelessness if they did not abide by the property owner's decision, since they already hold a marginalized position in communities.

## **Succumbing to Governmentality**

All parties in this narrative succumbed to governmentality. Even though the tent encampment and all its neighbors had good reason to resist the powers that be, at every point along the way, we all behaved as good citizen subjects. The Plumbing Supply Company stayed passive in the exchanges; Jim Harrelson, the OM, defaulted to the decisions of the property owner even as the company could have spoken up on behalf of the tent encampment. The church also acquiesced. The absence of a church representative in the final meeting meant there was one less voice supporting the camp and its position in the neighborhood. This absence also meant that there was no one speaking first-hand to the false complaint lodged against the camp, which was the original action that “rung the bell” for the property owner. The day center also deferred to the power structures by cooperating with the police once the trespassing enforcement took affect. Rather than supporting the people experiencing homelessness in the camp, who wanted to stay, and had good reasons—although not legally valid—to insist on remaining at the site, the day center acted as a buffer between the camp members and the police and city.

One example of the failure of all the neighbors is the absence of any of the tent encampment members from being present at the final meeting with the policy, property owner, plumbing supply company, and the day center. At this meeting, the people most impacted by the decision were absent. No one spoke up to reschedule the meeting and insist that a representative from the camp be present. Could things have been different if the property owner had to actually speak to someone who was directly impacted by his distant decision?

## **The Loss of Community**

The disbanding of the tent encampment was a tremendous loss for many people. The camp was a home to the dozen people living there at the time of the closure as well as a home for the many, many people who had lived there in the previous three years of its existence. As McLaughlin identified in her newspaper articles, the camp had a de facto mayor, Shannon Stewart. There were rules and agreements between the camp members, and they intentionally gathered for meetings to discuss the camp and what needed to be done. The people in the camp were a community, supporting and taking care of each other. Jarman, who lived there for about a year, described an immense sense of care and equity that existed there between people:

when I was living in the tent community, you know, it wasn't anyone above anyone else; everyone just looked out for one another.... and the beauty, at least when I think about it in terms of community there is something about a reciprocity in community. Okay, I know that there are going to be things that I need and I rely on people for that but I also know that there are things I can give and when other people need those things I can be there for it, so there's this like agreement.

People were drawn to the camp because of the interdependence established between the individuals living there. All of us could have learned a great deal from this intentional community; the city, which benefited by the presence of the tent community, never reciprocated in treating all of its citizens equitably. Instead, the property rights of a distant landowner took priority over the needs of a dozen community members.

The day center, church, and plumbing supply company also experienced a great loss after the property owner evicted the people living on his land. The camp members had participated in our neighborhood by being an example to others in the neighborhood of how to behave and take care of the area. They held themselves and others to high

expectations about how to act in the space, keeping people from using the area for drugs or sex work. They provided a sense of security for everyone, which was lost when they left.

There could have been a different outcome to this situation. Unfortunately neoliberal values and concerns like rule of law, the dominant narrative of homelessness as a social problem, and fears about liability and risk contaminated the meaning making of these events for those with the power to determine the ending. However, we also worked to insert different perspectives into the events as they were happening: interdependence, community, flexibility, and creativity.

This narrative raises questions though for social justice advocates. It is not easy to challenge neoliberal norms when they so thoroughly saturate systems of power as well as individuals influencing decisions within those systems. We are entrenched in them, and sometimes we do not recognize our own participation in them. This includes social justice organizations and communities as well as traditional agencies of governmentality. Social justice advocates need to be extra vigilant and reflexive about their decisions and actions, always revisiting choices with questions related to whether we've perpetuated or challenged neoliberalism in this situation. The layered narrative about the tent encampment reveals how pervasive and invisible neoliberalism is in our society as well as how difficult it can be to act outside of neoliberal influence.

CHAPTER VI  
CONCLUSION

“We need new numbers for this”  
Scientist explaining the term ‘overkill’ to Congress

...

Because graves outnumber affordable housing 25,000 to 1  
Because the 21st century must be redefined.

Because it is possible for every voice  
And every word of every voice  
And every letter of every word of every voice  
And every part of every letter of every word of every voice  
to pass into nothingness  
(Josie Kearns, “New Numbers,” 2000)

This dissertation has been part of effort to contribute to social justice work that prevents the possibility that “every part of every letter of every voice [may] pass into nothingness” (Kearns, 2000, p. 5). The dominant narrative of homelessness as a social problem is threaded through with a neoliberal ideology that views people experiencing homelessness as failed humans, “surplus life” that can then be used by others for profit, blame, and distraction (Willse, 2015). However, there are people resisting this dominant narrative and imagining a different world of which they desire to be a part. In this rhizoanalysis, I have brought together interviews with people experiencing homelessness, popular and academic literature, a community-engaged participatory critical storytelling project, and the events of a tent encampment closure to understand and expose the dominant homeless narrative, search for resistance tactics by people experiencing homelessness, and consider how people are also asserting their imagination to create a different way of being in this world.

Through this project I have tried to answer three research questions:

1. **Understanding and exposure:** What are various conditions used to constitute homelessness as a social problem?
2. **Resistance:** (How) can homelessness be a site of resistance? Resistance against what?
3. **Imagination:** In what ways might homelessness move us toward imagining new ways of engaging with each other and the world around us?

In this conclusion I pull meaning from each of the four interior nodes (interviews, literature review, *storyscapes*, and neoliberalism) to seek connections, disruptions, and new perspectives. Each node, in some way, helped answer at least one of these research questions.

### **Understanding and Exposure: Homelessness as a Social Problem**

I delved into the first research question mostly through the literature review, which brought together public literature and academic literature to analyze how homelessness is represented and researched. The public discourse describes homelessness as an urgent concern that needs a response. The literature typically covers themes such as: (a) definitions and categorizations of homelessness; (b) causes; (c) solutions; (d) the “homeless” experience; (e) populations and tracking; and (f) city responses to homelessness. In all of these categories, I noted challenges or critiques of the content. The academic literature tends to fall into one of two themes: a (a) macro framework or (b) micro transactional change framework. This literature is often situated behind a pay wall, thus requiring some sort of membership or subscription for access to the full content. This prevents agencies from being able to independently stay up to date on changing data, theories, and interventions, relying instead on more limited access to

information via HUD reports and association reports. An implication of this is that the federal government is able to more easily shape the direction of programming and services, emphasizing a focus on individuals, self-sufficiency, and personal responsibility rather than structural barriers to housing. This forms the dominant narrative that has pathologized and medicalized discussions about people experiencing homelessness by emphasizing the mental health problems, addiction issues, and non-compliance of individuals receiving services.

### **Definitions and Categories of Homelessness**

There are multiple ways to categorize and thus define homelessness and the people experiencing it. Some definitions are very broad, while others are much more exclusionary. The most exact definition of homelessness comes from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), especially with regard to chronic homelessness. HUD requires that agencies receiving funds from them use the definition to determine if and to what extent someone is eligible for assistance. The result is shadow populations that exist but do not “count.” They still seek support, maybe receive it or are turned away from services, but are not often taken into consideration or consulted as new funding becomes available.

### **Causes and Solutions to Homelessness**

The most often identified causes of homelessness include housing deprivation, poverty, lack of living wage jobs, mental health, and addiction. While all of these causes can be traced to structural or systemic issues of oppression (the macro-level), and some organizations and associations do that, there are other organizations that explain these causes by way of the individual (e.g., the person experiencing homelessness has a mental illness or addiction issue; the person experiencing homelessness could not pay

rent and, therefore, was evicted; the person experiencing homelessness—due to lack of personal drive, education, or skills—was not making sufficient money to cover housing, utilities, food, and medical bills). The focus is on the individual informed by neoliberalism and its emphasis on independence and personal responsibility. The result is that people experiencing homelessness are identified as causing their situation: they're ill, addicted, poor money managers, lazy, uneducated, and so on.

The focus on individual responsibility plays out in the solutions to homelessness by way of the programming and services that agencies provide: financial literacy (i.e., budgeting), self-sufficiency (i.e., job search assistance, interview skills, resume writing), and housing (i.e., placing people in unsafe and inadequate housing because it is all that is available in the necessary price range; or Housing First locations, where rent is paid for up to one year [at the discretion of the agency and the rental payments may be for more like three to six months]). These solutions are also dictated by the funding sources for services, such as through HUD, which is focusing on addressing chronic homelessness through House First initiatives.

While agencies reactively work to respond to the needs of individuals and assist them in gaining housing, employment, medical care, etc., the macro-level causes go unaddressed except mostly by the far fewer advocacy agencies and law groups.

### **The “Homeless Experience”**

Personal stories from people experiencing homelessness are often used by agencies for fundraising purposes, or in news coverage. The story is highlighted to advance the message of the agency, which emphasizes to the public that people experiencing homelessness are helped because of the agency, the agency plays a vital role in the community by supporting people experiencing homelessness.



## **Populations and Tracking**

There is a pervasive trend to count who is homeless. One main reason for this is that the federal government requires data tracking as an eligibility requirement for funding (Willse, 2008). Funding is linked to the number of people experiencing homelessness in an area as well as to certain priority populations (e.g., honorably discharged veterans, chronically homeless, families). This can impact decisions about what programming and services agencies provide (Sparks, 2012). This counting is conducted through the annual PIT counts and HMIS, a database of all people experiencing homelessness who have ever accessed services at an agency that receives HUD funding. Although framed as data to evaluate agency programs, HMIS serves as a surveillance tool in two ways: HUD tracks agencies through it, and agencies track individuals (Willse, 2008, 2015). This sort of oversight is unsurprising since neoliberalism promotes competition between people and organizations, often explaining it as due to resource scarcity. Such monitoring and competition breeds distrust amongst everyone. This ethos is unproductive to community building, but beneficial to neoliberalism.

## **City Responses to Homelessness**

Homelessness is lived at the local level, even as services are influenced by funds awarded from the federal government. It is a topic of concern in mayoral campaigns, at city councils, and with downtown business associations. Decision-makers (e.g., business owners, city council) respond to homelessness both through policies (e.g., panhandling ordinances, bathroom use policies) as well as the curation of physical spaces (e.g., trespassing signs, fences). At this level though, the conversation is often one where community members are in tension with each other, and homelessness is being

addressed through terms like public nuisance, safety concern, and detracting from business. People experiencing homelessness are minimized and spoken about with regard to problems: hygiene, needles and bottles, intimidation. The complaints reinforce the story of people experiencing homelessness as failed humans, and neoliberal priorities like the government removing barriers to economic development are centered in decisions about how to respond to the “homeless problem.”

### **Macro Framework and Micro Transactional Change Framework**

Much research about homelessness addresses broad structural issues, pointing to ideology, policy, racism and poverty. Another significant portion of the academic literature focuses on homelessness at the individual level, including how to work with people experiencing homelessness and strategies for meeting their immediate needs. Some scholars raise grave concern about much of the research on homelessness (Farrugia and Gerrard, 2016; Lyon-Callo, 2004, 2008, 2012; Lyon-Callo & Hyatt, 2003; Sparks, 2012; Willse, 2008, 2015):

The silent (and unintended) consequence of the desire to ameliorate homelessness within the terms of a neoliberal imagining of the social world, is a representation of homelessness as a discrete social problem caused by isolatable mechanisms and the rehearsal of problematic discourses of individual success and failure. (Farrugia & Gerrard, 2016, p. 276)

Lyon-Callo (2012), who has worked in social service agencies addressing homelessness and has conducted research on homelessness for more than 25 years, identifies an integration of the two frameworks (micro and macro) as still missing from research. “If we hope to intervene in more effective ways, it is imperative to understand the full complexity of what produces and maintains the objective, subjective, and systemic violence of homelessness” (p. 219).

In order to understand the full complexity of what maintains homelessness, researchers will need to integrate structural analysis with the daily lives of people experiencing homelessness, through their own lenses. One possible way for this to occur is through the adoption of more participatory (Lewin, 1948; Torre et al., 2008) and community-engaged research methods (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003) as well as research partnerships with people experiencing homelessness in addition to—and sometimes instead of—agency or government partners. And practitioners will need to seek out literature beyond what is easily accessible. Of course, scholars, higher education, and academic journals could also make their research and scholarship more accessible as well. Journals can be made open access, libraries could offer no-cost memberships to non-profits, and scholars could commit to publishing only in open-access journals or publishing companies.

### **Resistance**

In the second research question I considered whether homelessness might be an act of resistance, and if so, resistance against what. This question is built upon a shift in thinking about homelessness and people experiencing homelessness. It requires a suspension of the dominant narrative of homelessness that situates individuals as lacking—lacking skills, values, and knowledge to successfully maintain work and shelter. This lacking then extends to other aspects of life, including a lack of care for others (otherwise people experiencing homelessness would not put such resource strain on a community). The lack of care is assumed to be a reflection of self-interest, even selfishness. When these stereotypes and assumptions about homelessness are set aside, it is possible to identify acts of resistance in the actions and choices of people experiencing homelessness.

## **Dissident Community Members**

George, Isiahm, and Jarman all chose homelessness as a way to reject the previous way that they had been living. George was an international musician, Jarman worked hard to save money for his motorcycle collection, and Isiahm was living independently by selling drugs. Regardless of legal assessments, all three men were successful by neoliberal standards: they were independent, entrepreneurial, and they participated in capitalist consumption. Even with such success they each felt constrained in different ways: George knew that continuing on this way would eventually kill him, Isiahm “felt Death on him” because of the choices he was making, and Jarman feared that he was becoming someone that would choose objects over relationships.

Homelessness was a tactic for resisting a broader concern about their participation in a capitalist, consumer culture that valued possessions and money more than people and community. All three men also recognized their interdependence with others and did not make this decision simply for their own gain or benefit; rather, their resistance was aspirational. Believing in their roles and responsibilities in a community, they used the experience of homelessness as a space to practice and share with others the sort of participatory community they believed in. They were performing as “dissident citizens.”

Sparks (1997) defines dissident citizenship as

the practices of marginalized citizens who publicly contest prevailing arrangements of power by means of oppositional democratic practices that augment or replace institutionalized channels of democratic opposition when those channels are inadequate or unavailable. ...[it] encompasses the creative oppositional practices of citizens who by choice or (much more commonly) by forced exclusion from the institutionalized means of opposition contest current arrangements of power from the margins. (p. 75)

While Sparks is focusing on democracy, citizenship, and traditional government, with the spread of neoliberal ideology through all aspects of life (economics, government, leisure), I broaden this concept beyond Spark's focus. Instead of citizenship, which in this time I think misleads people to think too narrowly of government, I would describe the men as dissident community members who are performing creative oppositional practices even as they are forcibly marginalized by arrangements of power. Those power arrangements can take the form of police, government, shelters and social service agencies, neighborhoods, businesses, and others who adopt the dominant narrative of homelessness that is entrenched in neoliberal values. Dissent, which means to "maintain a principled oppositional stance against a more powerful group while remaining...engaged" (Sparks, p. 82), is a resistance. In the cases of George, Isiahm, and Jarman, they are doubly dissenting. Their first dissent was against the neoliberal expectations and ideas of success (earning money, consuming products, competing for resources), which they oppose by choosing homelessness. And their second dissent was against all the forces trying to push them back into the appropriate channels of being "contributing members of society" through proper employment and respectable housing.

### **Oppositional Consciousness**

I intentionally invited these men to participate in the interviews because from previous conversations they had shared thoughts about homelessness different from the dominant perspective. In the interviews they provided clear examples of what and how they were resisting traditional norms related to consumption, capitalism, and even what behavior is expected of people experiencing homelessness. The interviews opened up in new ways when I considered the content in light of differential consciousness; some of

what I had previously thought of as discrepancies and contradictions in the interviews took on new meaning. Ben's decision to temper some of his critiques of agencies was a tactic: He considered who might be the audience of this dissertation and what they might expect to read—or be ready to understand—and adjusted his language accordingly. Rather than risk being entirely dismissed by readers, he chose a softer critique. Sandoval describes the differential mode of oppositional consciousness as “performative” (2000, p. 58). When applied, the performers are assessing the scene, audience, set, and other performers before self-consciously adopting a tactic that they think will achieve the desired outcome. In Jarman's case, for example, when he chooses not to share his true goal—to find an intentional community—with the case worker, or ask what “the program” is at the night shelter, doing so allows him to stay at the night shelter for longer. Being quiet, withholding his questions, gives him more time to do his own research and make a plan for how he can rebuff capitalism and seek out a like-minded community.

With this new way of understanding and interpreting the actions and words of people experiencing homelessness, I have to reconsider my initial decision to only interview Ben, George, Jarman, and Isiahm. What resistance tactics might I have seen in other people experiencing homelessness whose behavior might initially have seemed to maintain the status quo? I would pose this same question to other researchers as well.

### **Critical Storytelling**

Another form of resistance highlighted in the dissertation is critical storytelling. I have drawn on the collaborative art project, *storyscapes*, as an example of critical storytelling. Critical storytelling is a social justice strategy for exposing ideology and

dominant narratives that benefit from the status quo operation of power. In *storyscapes*, we invited people experiencing homelessness to write poetry, letters, and short stories about their experiences of downtown locations. The co-created process and the final products are examples of resistance to norms that typically position people experiencing homelessness one dimensionally, as problems to be managed, rather than as full humans. The project inserted people experiencing homelessness into the downtown landscape, where they are often forgotten, ignored, or forced out. It allowed people experiencing homelessness to make a claim on their positions as community members in the growing public space of downtown Greensboro. In this way the project itself—all of its art installations, the remapping of downtown, and the stories—was a tool for resistance; by participating in a community-funded participatory budgeting grant process to fund the project, we also illuminated a larger portion of the community population that was interested in making these critical stories public. Additionally, the way we brought people together and how people participated in the process were intentionally collaborative, flexible, and welcoming. The process was a way for us to counter the constant hierarchical, rigid, and clinical processes and places that individuals experiencing homelessness deal with on a daily basis. We worked to create a space where people were able to imagine and enact different ways of thinking about themselves and working with others, where folks felt confident in the skills, values, and knowledge that they contributed.

In the current neoliberal environment, a high value is placed on output, products, and efficiency. I think this is to the detriment of the significance of process, which is where time and space combine with thoughtful reflection in order for people to be able to create meaningfully. The interviews with Ben, George, Isiahm, and Jarman as well as

the critical storytelling project reflect this conflict. In their interviews all of the men described how time took on different meaning to them. Without the sense of urgency created by moving through an overscheduled day, Ben found that he could read and think in the park; George could walk the miles to his appointments instead of taking the bus; Isiahm could explore new buildings downtown and acknowledge people by name as he observed the activity around him, and Jarman could fetch water and food for his neighbor in the tent encampment. They were able to establish and build relationships with people, offer advice to others experiencing homelessness, or—just as importantly—be a listener to someone else’s frustration with the racing world around them that was pushing them to, even past, the margins. *storyscapes* also prioritized process, which allowed us to foster community building, hospitality, and co-creation. The emphasis we put into the process translated then into the meaningfulness of the products in (a) how they were carefully created, installed, and then watched over by guests of the day center; and (b) how the installations created a pause point in the daily activities of everyone walking along the downtown streets. Individuals stopped to read the stories and for a moment reflect on the multitude of people and experiences that co-existed in that “place.” Folks were drawn out of their bubbles of isolation and reminded that they are part of a community, that they share this space with others. These moments of resistance work against the goals of neoliberalism, which guide people to think atomistically about themselves and believe that their success or failure—as defined by neoliberal ideas and values—is entirely their own responsibility.

### **Imagination**

Imagination is critical to social justice. It is the crux of being able to look beyond that which is and conceive of new ways of engaging in and with each other and the



world around us. Resistance relies on imagination, it relies on an idea—whether fully formed or only beginning to take shape as a gut feeling—that there is the potential for a more just and equitable world.

### **Imagination by way of Community**

The tent encampment, referenced in the node about neoliberalism, although it no longer exists, is an example of imagination. Many of the people living there chose to live there instead of the night shelter because they wanted to be a part of a community, where people looked out for each other, rather than having to deal with the strict rules and inflexibility of the shelter system. They desired to participate in something where interdependence, not individualism, was the norm. The tent encampment has left an indelible mark on this world through the people who lived there, who've had a glimpse of a cooperative community and continue to seek it out.

### **Imagination by way of Critical Storytelling and Art**

*storyscapes* also required imagination. As the two initial coordinators, Gwen and I, relied on our imagination to construct a process that emphasized hospitality, co-creation, and community building because we imagined a project—built on these qualities—that could speak truths to the dominant narratives about people experiencing homelessness. The full project also invited imagination from those that interacted with the art installation. The project asked people to suspend the dominant narratives about downtown and homelessness that we're entrenched in everyday, and through their capacity for empathy, to open up new space for the artists' critical stories to establish themselves.

### **Imagination by way of Lived Experience**

Imagination was evident in the interviews with Ben, George, Isiahm, and Jarman as well. Experiencing homelessness actually fed their imagination because while homeless each of them had the opportunity to enact some of the skills, values, and knowledge that were nourishing their imaginations.

**Altruistic relationships.** Ben, always the skeptic, admitted that it was while he was homeless that he actually encountered true community. He interacted with people who genuinely cared about him. His previous experiences, before homelessness, had taught him that everyone expected a transaction in relationships, “I’ll do this for you if you do this for me.” Because of relationships he built while homeless though, he now believes that relationships do not have to be motivated by self-interest.

I couldn’t do anything for anybody, but when they came and asked what they could do for me then I knew it was... there was no exchange. ...There are people out there like that. ...and I got to meet some. Yeah, and it was good, it was a good experience for me. ...I am going to try to be one of those people.

In the space of homelessness, which the dominant narrative would have us believe is filled with crime, pathology, selfishness, laziness, and illness, Ben encountered, for the first time in his life, altruistic actions by others. Now that he is housed, he desires to bring that altruism into traditional spaces by acting counter to neoliberal values.

**Time and passion.** George’s imagination contributed to his ideas for the sort of agency he hopes to operate for people experiencing homelessness. Based on his own experiences of homelessness along with his knowledge of how community can operate—gained from his upbringing in his village in Cameroon—George has clear plans for his imagined center. He recognizes that it is counter to how current agencies are run.

He understands that healing, which many people experiencing homelessness are in need of due to how they've been treated by traditional structures, takes time. Creating a space where time is abundant runs counter to the neoliberal emphasis on efficiency. Along with an abundance of time, his center is also going to encourage exploration. Rather than targeting job skills in order for people to immediately gain employment, he wants folks to discover their passions. "If you find out my passion, if you give me opportunity in my passion, I will do it nonstop." George's plan includes investing in people long-term, not setting them up for failure, which is what happens in 60- or 90-day programs. It has taken years for people to absorb the self-hate, distrust, and helplessness that our current society directs towards them; how can that be overcome in 90 days?

You give me 60 or 70 days at the [emergency shelter] or however long and...I'm worse off. But, in your opinion, you're helping me. If it's short-term, short-term help to homeless [people] hurts because in the fullness of time [they are] going to be right back where [they] came from, weaker.

George has never seen an agency operate the way he imagines that his agency will run. His experiences though feed him imagination, motivating him to create a space that will not only support people in successfully moving out of homelessness but also contribute to the betterment of the community by way of returning people to their communities stronger and healthier than they previously were.

**The fool's fight against industrialized slavery.** Isiahm was able to see through the falsity of neoliberalism, naming our current capitalist structure a new form of slavery:

Capitalism to me is industrialized slavery, just a new form of it. It's kind of like a daughter of slavery, a little bit less grotesque on the outside but with the same maliciousness. She says, "I own you." But I don't need a chain to own you or a

whip to own you, in fact that's financially against my goals. Me beating you and chaining you, I'm making less money doing it that way than this way, which is capitalism; it's industrialized slavery. Now I own you without your knowledge of me owning you and when you do realize that I own you, what are you going to do about it?

People experiencing homelessness are directly resisting this industrialized slavery by not participating in capitalism. This comes at a high price though—critique, criminalization, physical strain and abuse, and isolation being some of the consequences. One reason that people experiencing homelessness resist capitalism, however, is that they can imagine a different world. During his interview, Isiahm directly spoke to imagination through his use of the metaphor of the fool.

I always feel like the fool knows something that everyone else doesn't know, and, later on in the act, he's going to be the genius. And then there will be a power revealed behind it that shows that...he was foolish to you because you didn't see the power that was attributed but now that it's been revealed, the person is a genius. I think that is what the homeless are in society: There's so much truth in their realm, and these are the fools, these are the crazy folk, and then I think it's going to happen very suddenly where all of a sudden they won't be.

For Isiahm, imagination strengthens him to persist against oppression and to continue on acting the fool.

**Freedom from consumption and intentional community.** Jarman chose homelessness as a way to escape the trappings of traditional life, which he found to be individualistic and consumption focused. Homelessness helped him re-evaluate his values and goals.

I'm just like trapped in this whole *race*, race for items and stuff! When I don't have any of that, you're stuck with just people and like talking to people and havin' conversations and there's flowers and trees and buildings and walking down streets you wouldn't normally walk down. I don't know I just feel like I can do anything I want to. It's like I'm not bound by anything.

Homelessness, without all the distractions of possessions and without the urgency to work in order to buy those possessions, helped him to see and appreciate all that was around him: nature, people, relationships, exploring the new and unknown.

With this new appreciation came a search for a different type of life and experience, where selfishness is replaced by interdependence:

I'm so interested in [intentional] community, you know....Everyone works to take care of one another....I don't know if there's anything out there that's really like that but I'll keep looking and see if I can find something close to it.

His imagination is feeding this desire to find an intentional community.

What is evident through all of these examples of imagination is that imagination is a necessary component of social justice work. It is imagination that feeds the resistance measures that people undertake to challenge power and oppression.

Imagination, and the skills required to enact it (courage and creativity), are undervalued in our current culture. They are in fact a threat to the current power regime. To be imaginative is to be able to think and operate in the face of fear, to be comfortable in ambiguity, to persist even without certainty. The neoliberal ideology that has a stranglehold on our society right now feeds on fear, competition, and a belief in scarcity. It teaches us to advance ourselves at the expense of others; it measures worth by numbers (e.g., test scores, credit ratings, bank accounts; property values); and it values independence to the detriment of community.

### **More Assemblage**

In the beginning of the dissertation I provided an assemblage statement as a way to introduce myself to readers, contextualizing myself as a researcher, advocate, practitioner, and scholar. As a reminder, assemblage is “a series of dispersed but

mutually implicated and messy networks” (Puar, 2007, p. 211). The dispersed, messy networks exist throughout the nodes. I share stories, and although those stories are often about other people I have known, they are also stories about me: what I learned from the experience I was sharing with someone (e.g., Buddy’s story); the challenges I encountered while conducting and coding interviews; the rationale(s) for why Gwen and I structured *storyscapes* the way we did; and the difficulty of making decisions for a nonprofit, advocating for people experiencing homelessness, and trying to suggest alternative options for the future of a tent encampment all the while suffocating under the weight of neoliberalism that was so heavily, yet invisibly, threaded through every aspect of the tent encampment events. In other words, I have tried to write a relational dissertation, honoring the relationships I have built with people experiencing homelessness and also trying to connect genuinely with readers. It seems appropriate then, in the conclusion, to share a couple new reflections. These are about what I have learned through the very process of writing a dissertation as well as what seems apparent to me now at this pause point on the research questions I have asked.

## **Time**

While reading and rereading the text that I have created, I noticed that I lift up *time* as a worthwhile and necessary element of social justice work. The men I interviewed valued the new-found time they received by way of choosing homelessness. Through *storyscapes*, we intentionally focused on time and protecting time in the process of the project because of how it helped serve our efforts towards hospitality, community building, and co-creation. Time—the lack of it or the protection of it—can either serve neoliberalism or social justice and community. Neoliberalism manipulates the representation of time in order for us to think of it as a scarce resource. We never

have enough time to do everything we need to do in our day; we are always running behind on time to finish our work responsibilities. The activities that consume our time also prevent us from doing other activities with our time. For example, if I have to work two jobs to pay my rent, then I have less time to attend city council meetings, stay up-to-date on current events, join community members and neighbors in getting to know each other, and reflecting on the hidden or broader significance of my daily actions and choices. When time seems scarce, I risk treating people as nameless tools that I manipulate or interact with to achieve my ends. When I think about time though with regards to process, rather than ends, my relation to time shifts, and what I do during and with the time I have is less transactional and technical; it becomes more relational. It means I slow down, look people in the eyes, use their names, actively listen to the stories of their lives whether it seems “relevant” to our interaction. I pause. I breathe. I think about this moment and being engaged in the now, as opposed to allowing my body to be here while my mind has already raced off to the next three items on my to-do list. I do not multi-task, I community build. I observe, reflect, think critically, and ask difficult questions. I feel, and I heal, and I begin to recognize how it is only possible for *me* to be me through *us*.

Time has also been a theme in this entire dissertation process for me. This writing process has taken me a long time. While there are various reasons for that, one reason is that it is reflective of the emphasis I put on process over product. For me, I often think that the journey is the destination, and that has been true for this dissertation, both in what I wanted to do in it as well as how I imagined the representation, or final manuscript. Rhizoanalysis is a journey, and in this case it felt like a slow, meandering, wander and wonder: I wonder what homelessness could teach us? I wonder if the

current framework of homelessness is intentional, and if so, how? Why? I wonder what is obscured or hidden because of our current dominant narrative of homelessness as a social problem? I wonder what I have learned from my extended work with people experiencing homelessness?

I suggested some ideas in my proposal that I ended up not developing in the dissertation, while I landed on and spent time with other ideas that I am not sure I could have anticipated in the initial proposal. I credit this to the open, flexible, unstructured nature of rhizoanalysis. Along the way, I thought I stopped working on the dissertation numerous times—working full-time at the homeless day center for a couple of years, for example. Looking back I recognize that I never stopped thinking about my questions, and what I have written could not exist without those intense two years. In other words, it was part of my wandering and wondering.

But I will admit too that wandering is not always comfortable or easy for me. I suspect it would have been much easier to have some clear answers and a final product in mind from the beginning. Maybe I would not have needed the extensions I was fortunately granted. I could have been more purposeful and efficient with my time. Sometimes the wandering felt overwhelming: Like standing in a vast open field and looking out in every direction at endless possible paths I could take—paths already well-trodden, slightly formed, or not as yet conceived. The expanse felt like too much. Paradoxically, the wandering was also overwhelming due to feeling so confined, claustrophobic, like trying to force my 5'4" tall body to stand up straight in a 4' tall closet packed with precarious piles of journal articles, books, and transcripts all riddled with marginalia and sticky notes, along with scraps of paper tacked to the walls with reminders about methods and points to make and questions to raise and, and,



and...[breathe]. That was my brain, both stuffed to overflowing and cavernously open to possibilities.

Actually, it was not only my brain, but also my heart, and my gut. This dissertation is as much a personal and interpersonal story collage as it is an academic research manuscript. While at the start of my PhD program I remember sitting in Dr. Bettez's office (she later became my dissertation chair) and sharing with her my hesitation and skepticism about the emphasis faculty and students were putting on personal experiences and stories by way of class readings, assignments, and discussions. Now, I find myself at the end of this program arguing for the necessity of such critical storytelling, that relies on knowledge gained by the persistence of making it through both the human-made and natural disasters of lived experiences in a world heavy with oppression and privilege. I am now unwaveringly confident in the necessity of personal and interpersonal critical storytelling if one is doing any sort of social justice work, be that research, teaching, organizing, community building, or simply being present, spending *time* with self and others.

### **Relationality**

When I first imagined this dissertation, I did not anticipate how many "stories" I would include: stories through the interviews, stories at the beginning of some of the chapters and nodes, stories by way of layered narrative. But I have realized that if the dominant narrative of homelessness as a social problem is going to be critiqued, and if I hope for readers to be open to the idea that people experiencing homelessness can teach us important lessons about other concepts like neoliberalism, capitalism, minimalism, community building, resistance, imagination, and social justice, then the dissertation has to be written in a way that hopefully feels like I am sitting across from or

next to readers, making eye contact, and being vulnerable so that readers will also risk being vulnerable and allowing some of the stories, ideas, and suggestions to take root with them. This mirrors the way that I have worked at building relationships with Ben, George, Isiahm, and Jarman and the co-creators and collaborators of *storyscapes*. Such relationality is important when discussing ideas that can otherwise be dismissed as not connected to us or too large, too systemic, and, therefore, too big for individuals to alter.

### **Imagining Future Research**

Farrugia and Gerrard (2016) assert that academic research reflects relationships of power and oppression between scholars and research subjects, which then has “consequences for the production and experience of wider inequalities” (p. 268). This is why we need to continue to conduct research that exposes the oppressive nature of neoliberalism and its contradicting messages. Research about homelessness and poverty can often operate within the norm of the dominant narrative of homelessness as a social problem, and as long as research continues to do this, then we fail to make visible the broader systems and structures that benefit from this framework. This is part of the politics of research.

I offer three suggestions for future research. The first suggestion is to explore the idea of *fixedness*. By fixedness, I mean, what are the consequences of the unquestioned value in the United States to possess a home? A house exists physically as a fixed set of walls and roof, with an address. This address serves multiple purposes: (a) it enables certain forms of communication and tracking (for example, it contributes to how the census is administered); (b) it enables people to vote, know where to vote, and determines what issues people are eligible to vote on, yet districts (established through addresses) can be manipulated and changed, which then alters outcomes in our

representational democracy; and (c) it prohibits us from imagining alternative ways of living because the fixed—four walls and a roof—becomes a standard of evaluation for determining goals and success (and, thus also, deviancy and failure) for individual community members. This topic and these questions hovered around the dissertation, but by relying on the ideas contributed through the interviews, *storyscapes*, and the tent encampment scenario, fixedness never concretized for me in this text.

As a result of the topics I researched, two areas of future inquiry that became apparent to me are the HMIS database used by HUD and the visual representation of people experiencing homelessness. HMIS can be viewed as a technological advancement and, consequently, thought of as a neutral tool that provides deeper insight and understanding into who is experiencing homelessness. However, as Willse (2008, 2015), Lyon-Callo (2012), and Farrugia and Gerard (2016) all argue, HMIS is a deceptive device that serves neoliberal surveillance. Instead of using HMIS as a data source, I recommend researching the system: (a) how is the database framed by HUD, (b) how do agencies using HMIS think about the tool, (c) how do Continuums of Care, who are mostly responsible for HMIS training and certification present HMIS to users, and (d) what do people experiencing homelessness think of HMIS? Once these layers of information are collected, where are there tensions, misalignments, and overlap?

Lastly, as I accessed popular literature (e.g., agency webpages and annual reports, newspaper stories, and national reports by coalitions, the federal government, and other entities), it became apparent that there are visual themes represented through the pictures used in these resources. I think a critical visual discourse analysis of documents could provide worthwhile findings with regard to how these visual representations may contribute to and strengthen the dominant narrative of

homelessness as a social problem. Conversely, how do people experiencing homelessness represent the experience? A photovoice project as well as viewing the images that people experiencing homelessness use in their social media could offer additional images to compare and contrast with the images used in reports, by the media, and by agencies.

### **Conclusion**

Through this rhizoanalysis I worked to discover what could be learned from people experiencing homelessness when the dominant narrative about homelessness as a social problem is suspended. The various nodes reveal a strong critique of neoliberalism and how it has shaped our society. We place a misguided emphasis on independence, which prevents us from learning how to trust others and participate interdependently in community. We mistakenly believe that people's worth is determined by money and possessions, thus perpetuating privilege and hierarchy. Manipulated by the fear and stress of scarcity and competition, we make rushed decisions based on distrust, when we could have an abundant future if we fostered and appreciated the diverse array of strengths that individuals are willing to contribute.

The minimalism, necessary interdependence, community orientation, worthiness of lived experience, courage, creativity, and imagination displayed by people experiencing homelessness in this dissertation are all skills, values, and knowledge that are transferrable to broader society. These will be necessary if we desire to create a more just and equitable world where "every part of every word of every voice" no longer risks "passing into nothingness" and, instead, is valued and encouraged.

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