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# Situating Street Kids: An Ethnography of Nomadic Street Kids in Portland, Oregon

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Situating Street Kids:  
An Ethnography of Nomadic Street Kids in Portland, Oregon

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2013

Honors Thesis

Department of Anthropology

Connecticut College



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## **ABSTRACT**

Homelessness in the United States has been widely researched in the social sciences. Only within the last 20 years have ethnographic studies focused on street kids, a youth subculture. Some of this work has emphasized the transience of street kid lifeways and problematized the street kid lifestyle, an approach that has rendered street kids as victims. More recently, social scientists have refocused their analytic lens on the ways that street kids are agents of their own actions and understood only within the context of past events that shaped decisions to live on the street. This thesis aligns with the latter body of research and focuses specifically on street kid subculture in Portland, Oregon. I argue that a nomadic lifestyle is the cornerstone of street kid ethos and a meaningful site for framing a general disenchantment with mainstream American culture. Despite this disenchantment, I argue that street kid lifeways are better regarded as a subculture rather than a counterculture. To this end, I explore the ways that street kid identity is shaped by facets of their nomadic and communal lifestyle, dependent on the American mainstream, and ultimately impermanent. All data was collected during summer 2012 in Portland, Oregon through participant observation and interviews.



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## Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Portland, Oregon, has always been alluring to me. More than once, friends have told me that I need to get out there and that it was the “place to be” for aspiring musicians, like myself. So, when I overheard two friends planning a 2011 road trip from New England to Portland, I jumped at an opportunity to visit. Prior to the trip, I arranged for a job in the city, if only to have a secure income during my multi-month stay. But my heart was not in the work, and on the advice of my inner muse, I quit the job, took my guitar to Portland’s streets, and busked for many hours of most days.<sup>1</sup>

One night, while my friends enjoyed Portland’s bar culture, I once again took to the streets, preparing to play and people watch. There was not much foot traffic that night. A few people stopped to listen, dropped a dollar in my guitar case, and carried on. I had been playing for an hour or so, when two young men stopped to listen. Looking up to acknowledge their presence, I noticed a tiny kitten, perched on the head of one of the men, nearly invisible in his mass of black, tangled hair. It was then that I fully digested their appearances: large backpacks, plentiful tattoos, and, of course, the kitten. We began chatting, and eventually a small group of similarly dressed young people had formed at my busking post. One of the men invited me to join a small gathering at Waterfront Park, a few blocks east and situated on the banks of the Willamette River.

The group boisterously made their way to the river, with me quietly in their midst. The sight at Waterfront Park was unforgettable. There were five or six large circles of people gathered in the park. Dogs barking and playing, weaving in and out of the groups punctuated the sounds of laughter and conversation that greeted us. The man who had invited me to join their

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<sup>1</sup> Busking is any musical street performance, often done with the intention of making money.

party introduced himself as Squidward –another curious element of the evening. He and many of the others at Waterfront Park that night had chosen a life on the street.

I spent much of my remaining month and a half with Squidward. He would sit and listen to me play downtown, and I would follow him around Southwest Portland. Squidward showed me the mall entrance where he used to sleep (the “Penthouse”) and where he could always count on free pizza. My time with Squidward and several others made me wonder why these young people elected to live on the street. What had brought them to Portland, and how had they gotten there? These questions fueled my decision to return to Portland the following summer and conduct ethnographic research on street kids and travelers. My goal was to interview and observe young people who identified as street kids and to understand the underlying philosophies and ideologies that underlie a street kid identity. There are evident parallels between street kid identity and previously studied subcultures and countercultures in the United States. However, although street kid lifeways diverge from the mainstream, similar feelings of disenchantment with the mainstream are also evident in the larger Millennial Generation. Street kids paradoxically comprise a subculture that is at once subversive to the American mainstream and aligned with the sentiments of the Millennial Generation.

In the United States, 3.5 million people experience homelessness each year, of which 1.1 million are young adults or adolescents living on the streets (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2012). In 2004, 25 percent of the homeless population in the United States was between the ages of 25 and 34 (Joniak, 2008; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty). Despite the rising number of homeless young people, studies of homelessness in the

United States rarely address urban youth living on the street (Joniak, 2008).

The term “homeless” is most commonly used to label a broad range of people who do not own, rent, or lease durable housing for a sustained period of time.

For instance, the guy who never pays rent on your couch, but you let him stay anyway. Or maybe it’s the girl you’ve been sleeping with, who you don’t really care for, but it’s convenient and she is always down to hang out. Maybe that old man you see under the Hawthorne Bridge who you never made eye contact with, but you just read in the paper that he got shot in the chest when he was sleeping. All are experiencing homelessness. [Espinoza, 2012]

The constellation of circumstances leading to homelessness are varied but often include some combination of social, economic, and psychological factors, many of which may be perceived as beyond individual control (Koegel, 2007). Rarely is homelessness regarded as an elected status. This thesis, however, explores a seldom-understood urban subculture – street kids- that can be defined, in part, by elected homelessness.

Scholars have defined street kids in a variety of ways. As Finkelstein (2005) notes, “developing countries have two categories of street youth—children on the street and children *of* the street” (Finkelstein, 2005, emphasis mine). Children on the street panhandle for money from passersby during the day, and then return to their household each night. In contrast, children of the street do not return to a home, but instead permanently reside on the streets (Finkelstein, 2005). It is the latter group to which I apply the label “street kid,” although there are also distinctions to be drawn between young people permanently living on the street and those who primarily live in shelters (Finkelstein, 2005). Street kids have been presented as victims of circumstance, as well as agents of their own actions. Some street kids come from broken homes or abusive families, and life on the street “must be understood within the context of poverty, family

breakdown, and problematic social structures” (Karabanow, 2006: 54). Other street kids cite a yearning for the road as an impetus for elected homelessness. In general, street kids seldom cite only one driving reason for living on the street.

Street kids in the United States have been the subject of various newspaper articles, social media sites, and Youtube videos, among other popular analog and digital media outlets. Popular culture representations of street kids tend to reflect a shallow and essentialized understanding of street kid lifeways. Normative portrayals of street kids tend to highlight anti-capitalism sentiments and a general disenchantment with twenty-first century American values and lifeways. When interviewed, many street kids discuss seeking a life away from capitalism and consumerism (Hirsch, 2012; “Streetz!” 2010).

Generally speaking, the public prefers to ignore homelessness in any form, because it is a constant reminder of the ineptitudes of one’s society. While street kids fall under the category of “homeless youth,” the public perception of street kids is often more negative than that of homeless youth in general (Joniak, 2008). Studies of street kids that often focus solely on deviant behavior further fuel these negative opinions (Joniak, 2008). An often-unconventional aesthetic, a proclivity to travel in groups, and a perceived disregard for social norms in public spaces all contribute to public wariness. Negative characterizations of street kids, while not representative of street kids in general, are nevertheless anchored to real events, including instances of threatening non-street kids and vandalism (Anderson, 2012). When one street kid is reported as committing acts of vandalism or violence, all are labeled as more easily deviant, fostering a vicious cycle of reciprocal animosity between street kids and the general public.

Street kid culture in the United States has been examined with sociological and anthropological perspectives (Finkelstein, 2005; Joniak, 2008; Karabanow, 2006; Wilkinson,

1987). Each of these studies offers a diverse characterization of street kids. The delinquent behavior of street kids is often a point of focus (Joniak, 2008; Karabanow, 2006; Wilkinson, 1987). Through the use of ethnographic methods such as participant observation and person-centered interviews, these studies each examine specific elements of street kid subculture, including participation in mainstream culture, entering and exiting homelessness, outreach and aid reform for street kids, and socially divergent behaviors (Finkelstein, 2005; Joniak, 2008; Karabanow, 2006; Wilkinson, 1987).

A prominent point of difference between ethnographic studies of street kids is whether or not street kid subculture exists in opposition to mainstream U.S. values and is thus also a counterculture (Finkelstein, 2005; Joniak, 2008; Karabanow, 2006). Although Finkelstein's (2005) ethnography is focused on crusty punks in particular, her emphasis on nomadism and fictive kinship as crucial cultural attributes to crusty punk ethos also applies to street kids in general and is seldom explored in other studies (Finkelstein, 2005; Joniak, 2008).<sup>2</sup> Like Finkelstein (2005), Wilkinson's (1987) ethnographic study of street kid culture focuses on the factors contributing to "rebellion against traditional forms of shelter and care," (Wilkinson, 1987). Both studies examine the everyday lives of street kids, including modes of resource allocation and relationships on the streets (Finkelstein, 2005; Wilkinson, 1987). By educating the public about street kid culture in the United States, both Finkelstein (2005) and Wilkinson (1987) aim to develop of alternative forms of care for street kids, and conclude on a prescriptive note.

In response to studies like Finkelstein's (2005), Joniak's (2008) study focuses on street kid entrenchment in mainstream culture. Although street kids do not live a wholly traditional

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<sup>2</sup> Nomads traditionally travel from place to place with their families and kin. Unlike traditional nomads, street kids tend to travel in small groups of two or three, or by themselves (Barnard and Spencer, 1996).

lifestyle, Joniak (2008) argues that deviance and opposition to mainstream culture is uncommon, but that the majority of street kids continue to actively participate in mainstream activities:

They participate, for example, by working, going to school, attending theme parks, movies, bars, and parties, maintaining and building relationships with family and friends who are not on the streets, staying aware of current news and popular culture, and espousing societal values. In doing so, they demonstrate their allegiance to mainstream society and reinforce its values and institutions. [Joniak, 2008: 22]

Karabanow (2006) frames street kid culture as a career, emphasizing the impermanence and fluidity of street kid status with patterned changes in lifestyle. The trajectory of the street kid career begins with elected homelessness, followed by the experience of street life, and then concludes with reentry into mainstream culture (Karabanow, 2006).

### **Purpose and Organization of Study**

Building on prior ethnographic studies of street kids in the United States, this study examines the lifeways and attitudes of street kids in Portland, Oregon, with an emphasis on everyday experience, subsistence, identity, and social interaction. Throughout, I emphasize the centrality of nomadism in street kid identity, an underdeveloped in previous studies. Departing from previous ethnographic research, this study explores the parallels between the lifeways and ethos of street kids, and those of previously identified sub/countercultures in the United States. I contribute a new corpus of ethnographic data to the study of street kids in the United States, and I argue that street kids comprise a subculture unto themselves, but are reliant on and still actively engage mainstream U.S. culture. Although I focus on Portland street kids, conclusions drawn in my study may inform future studies of nomadic street kids in general.

Definition of a street kid is intentionally broad. Following Finkelstein (2005), Joniak (2008), Karabanow (2006), and Wilkinson (1987), I use the term “street kid” as a common identifier for the urban youth that are at the center of this study. Of course, this is how the street kids referred to themselves, but they also used “traveler” and I use both terms interchangeably. Use of these terms, within the context of in-depth interviews, helps to humanize street kids and dispel negative connotations (Karabanow, 2006).



*Figure 1: Pioneer Place Mall, Southwest Portland*

I define street kids in the United States as individuals under the age of 30 and living on the street all of the time or part of the time. Street kids primarily inhabit impermanent encampments in parks or on sidewalks, squats, and occasionally houses of friends (Karabanow, 2006).<sup>3</sup> The street kids I met and interviewed had been traveling for varying lengths of time, exhibited different aesthetics, and “are by no means homogeneous—there are numerous sub-categories within street culture” (Karabanow, 2006: 51). Following Finkelstein (2005), I distinguish between homeless young people living on the streets and those living in shelters (Finkelstein, 2005). I argue that living on the streets requires a unique skill set necessary for

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<sup>3</sup> In 2009, Portland’s Sit-Lie Ordinance –a policy that prohibited sitting/lying on sidewalks– was ruled unconstitutional, allowing street kids to convene on sidewalks and other public spaces, within prescribed parameters. (<http://www.portlandonline.com/shared/cfm/image.cfm?id=292901>)



resource acquisition and creative use of space that stands apart from the skills needed for living in a shelter.

The number of Portland residents who live on the streets or without permanent housing totaled 4,655 in 2011 (*Blight*, 2012: 16). Indeed, Portland has been referred to as “the place you go to be homeless” (Espinoza, 2012: 9). Every summer, Portland’s streets are packed with street kids from all over the United States. The street kids passing through Portland explained that it was the perfectly mild weather that brought them to the “Rose City” in the summertime.

There are many different subgroups of people living on the streets in Portland. Among these are nomadic street kids, an able-bodied, mentally sound group of young travelers.<sup>4</sup> Street kids distinguish themselves from other homeless groups, and do not regard themselves as “homeless.” This self-differentiation is based in their *choice* to live on the streets, and their self-elected nomadic lifestyle. Nevertheless, the appearances and activities of street kids are seldom perceived by the general public as distinct from other homeless groups. For example, during the summer months, there is rarely a street corner in southwest Portland without a panhandler.

Panhandling and asking passersby for “donations” is important to street kid sociality and acquisition of resources. The general public, however, rarely distinguish between qualitatively different intentions underlying panhandling activities. Similarly, small groups of humanitarian volunteers walk the downtown streets while offering food and toothbrushes to street kids and other people living without homes, further reinforcing the perception of a homogenous homeless population. A portion of the public adamantly believes that such actions toward street kids encourage those living on the street to exist openly in the public sphere (Pindyck, 2012). Regardless of the actual danger street kids pose to the public, their presence on sidewalks and in

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<sup>4</sup> There are street kids who are not able-bodied, but they are rare, and presumably live permanently in one city.

parks is believed to detract from the tourism potential of Portland (Busse, 2004; Pindyck, 2012).

In response to particularly one-sided, negative perceptions of street kids in articles found in *The Oregonian*, Phil Busse (2004) of *The Portland Mercury* argues that there is no statistical evidence to substantiate claims that street kids pose a threat to the public:

Portland police were not able to provide specific data about whether street youth commit more or less crimes than other residents--but several national studies and surveys present a picture that differs from the popular image of violent street kid. A recent Gallup Poll found that a majority of adults are under the impression that teens commit nearly half of all violent crimes in this country. Although that poll does not relate directly to street youth, it does provide a context for thinking about American misconceptions. In reality, according to FBI statistics, teens are only responsible for 13 percent of violent crimes--only one-third of what most frightened adults tend to believe. [Busse, 2004]

Busse (2004) acknowledges that street kids are individuals that cannot be collectively labeled as deviant.

Despite insufficient evidence supporting the excessive violence of Portland street kids, news media tend to reproduce this unbalanced image of the violent street kid. In December 2012, Portland's KGW local news channel aired a story entitled, "Food Vendors Attacked by Street Kids" (Benner and Hanrahan, 2012: 1). Witnesses describe "a big army of them [street kids]...watching us with their knives," (Benner and Hanrahan, 2012: 1). According to one of the six street kids arrested for alleged intimidation, harassment, and assault that afternoon, Zachary Lloyd claims that he and others were trying to "diffuse a situation" and defend themselves from a food vendor who was "armed with a baton" (Benner and Hanrahan, 2012: 1). Food vendors involved in the incident claimed that the street kids attempted to steal tip jars and harassed customers regularly. I did not witness any violent altercations between street kids and the general

public or police officers during my fieldwork.<sup>5</sup>

The ethnographic research conducted for this study is the first of its kind to take place in Portland, Oregon, and broadens the scope of understandings of street kids. The data reveal philosophical and ideological patterns within street kid subculture, examining what occurred in the past to influence these mindsets, and how these parallel mindsets converge to inform street kid identity. Street kid identity is at once subversive in its disenchantment with mainstream lifeways, and aligned with the post-modern identity crisis of other Millennials in the U.S. who participate in mainstream society. Through an anthropological consideration of street kid identity, it becomes clear that street kids make-up a subculture distinct from other homeless groups, and are not merely delinquents.

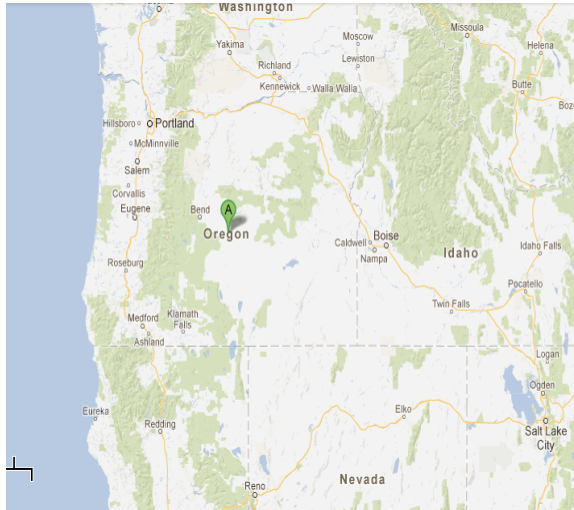
This study is organized into five chapters: in Chapter 2, I discuss the ethnographic methods, including participant observation and person-centered interviews, I used to collect data on street kids. In Chapter 3, I explore previously used definitions of subculture and counterculture, where these definitions overlap, and where they contradict. I advance the idea that countercultures are reactionary and intended not only to challenge but also to change the status quo. In Chapter 4, I examine the ways in which street kid status may be regarded as a subculture, counterculture, or neither. My discussion relies on in-depth interviews and conversations with six people, two of which exist outside the street kid community. I describe the importance of travel, sharing, fictive kinship, name changing, perceptions of freedom, and individuality amongst the street kids.

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<sup>5</sup> I must note that I conducted my research in the daylight hours, and therefore may have missed aggressive interactions fueled by drunkenness, which I will discuss further in Chapters II and IV.

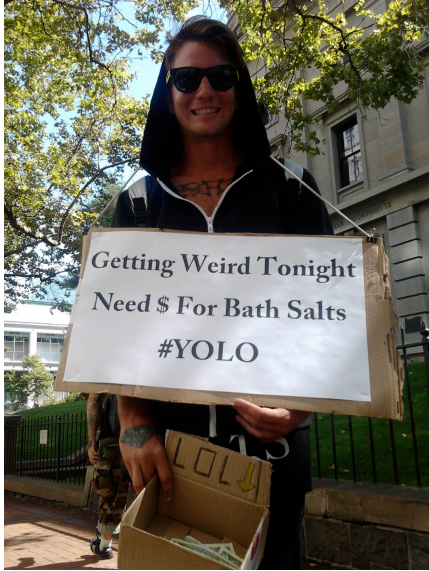
In Chapter 5, I conclude the study by locating street kid identity formation in a body of research addressing disenchantment with traditional American values as expressed and experienced by the Millennial Generation. Both street kids and housed American youth question what it means to live the “good life.” Although street kid lifeways can challenge and sometimes subvert mainstream U.S. culture, there are no compelling data to suggest that the pathways to and behaviors defining street kid status are anchored to a common goal of changing mainstream culture. In spite of widely shared attitudes and behaviors, including elected homelessness, there are limits to generalizations about street kid subculture. Ethnographic data made clear that every street kid has his or her own unique story to tell. I conclude that engaging in street kid lifeways is a crucial part of the identity formation process of these individuals and is therefore only a temporary way of life.

## Chapter 2: RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODS



*Figures 2 and 3: Geographical location of Portland, OR in the U.S. and Southwest Portland, OR*

Portland, Oregon, is commonly known as the city where young people go to retire. It is a place known for its quirkiness. From naked bike rides to dodge ball in the park to street performers on every corner, Portland is cultivating a reputation as a place for freedom of expression and acceptance. As a young musician, I was told that Portland is the place to be; unlike music scenes in other cities, Portland's music scene is known to be one of welcome and support. There are numerous successful musicians and bands that began in Portland, adding to the city's allure. With this in mind, I drove across the United States, ready to delve into the music community and see whether the rumors were true.



*Figure 4: A young man, not a street kid, spends his afternoon asking for donations in Southwest Portland –an example of the normalcy of panhandling in Portland.*

For this study I employed the ethnographic method. Ethnography “as a process” is a “collection of techniques,” including but not limited to “in-depth interviews, life histories, unobtrusive measures, secondary analysis of text, and historical comparative methods,” (Barnard and Spencer, 1996; Birx, 2006). The purpose of ethnography is to study the mundane, everyday routines of a particular group of people:

[As] anthropologists point out, it is often through these smaller, less institutionalized activities that people create central meanings for their lives and construct their understanding of both the present and the past. [Dubisch and Michalowski, 2001: 7]

In order to successfully use the ethnographic method, the anthropologists immerse themselves in the community that is the focus of study (Birx, 2006). Ideally, rapport will be established between the anthropologist and a “key informant.” This crucial connection is the impetus for slowly building trust between the anthropologist and others within the culture. When conducting ethnography, “researchers act as both members and scientists,” (Birx, 2006: 854). The most challenging goal of ethnography is simultaneously participating in daily activities and forming honest connection, and observing daily activities, solidifying the separation between researcher

and persons of interest. Unlike other social sciences, anthropological ethnography is highly qualitative:

Qualitative researchers are more interested in depth of knowledge than breadth of knowledge. Ethnography often involves not simply what is said or done but the underlying context of what is expected or assumed. This highly depends on researchers' insights, awareness, suspicions, and questions. [Birx, 2006: 854]

Qualitative ethnographic data may be expressed through writing, as well as "photography, film, and sound recordings (Seymour-Smith, 1986: 159). Ethnography is dedicated to describing a culture through writing and presenting a culture through multimedia means (Seymour-Smith, 1986). Today, ethnography covers a wide range of cultures and subcultures, a testament to modern anthropological principle that all cultures are equal and are therefore worthy of studying.

In their ethnography, "Run for the Wall: Remembering Vietnam on a Motorcycle Pilgrimage," Dubisch (2001) and Michalowski (2001) proposed a new approach to ethnographic research, calling themselves "observant participants," (Dubisch and Michalowski, 2001: 20). Participant observation, they argue, implies that the researcher takes part in a ritual "*in order to* observe and analyze it," (Dubisch and Michalowski, 2001: 20). As observant participants, they *began* as participants in the cross-country motorcycle ride to commemorate their loved ones who had been affected by the Vietnam War.

Only during their third ride did they consider documenting a sociologically and anthropologically analysis of the social phenomenon (Dubisch and Michalowski, 2001). Like Dubisch and Michalowski, my first encounter with and significant time spent with street kids began during Summer 2011. I was initially a musician and busker, emotionally and artistically moved by Squidward's story. I strongly connected to the disenchantment of the mainstream felt by Squidward and others on the street:

As participants first, and observers second, we can never be as personally and emotionally distant from [our subject of study] as are researchers who participate in some activity primarily to observe it. At the same time, the personal nature of our participation...has given us the opportunity to *feel* how it affects those who join it, and to make those feelings part of the story we tell. [Dubisch and Michalowski, 2001: 20-21]

It was not until I had returned to school the following fall that plans for this study took shape. I returned to Portland in Summer 2012 as a researcher and anthropologist. My goal in this study was to achieve a balance between my artistic connection with the street kids as a participant, and my fascination as an objective observer. In my effort to do so, I have composed songs for guitar and voice, depicting some of the stories told by street kids, and the ideological threads of continuity that arose in these:<sup>6</sup>

Certainly we can produce work in more than one genre and more than one voice. We can produce work that will satisfy us as scholars, and also produce work that communicates the essence of our ideas in a Democratic and distilled form...I have come to believe strongly that in order for ethnography to survive, we must learn to produce ethnographic work that is more accessible than it has been in the past, and work that is also artistically satisfying. [Behar, 2003: 15]

Like Behar (2003), I too believe that accessibility of information should be a crucial priority of today's ethnographers. In both writing and song, I aim to be a storyteller (Behar, 2003). There is just as much to be learned about a particular historical or cultural moment in a song or a poem as there is in a traditionally academic text. Although anthropologists strive for some semblance of objectivity in their studies, subjectivity does not diminish the validity of a work.

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<sup>6</sup> The lyrics to these songs are located in Appendix A. A separate document with sheet music and lyrics may be found in the Connecticut College honors theses online archives.



When I began fieldwork in Portland during Summer 2012, my guitar proved to be my most useful tool. I busked in downtown Portland nearly every day, playing guitar and singing for passersby. Most afternoons, I busked on street corners in areas with a lot of foot traffic, on the southwest, or downtown, side of the city. I was able to observe my surroundings in an inconspicuous manner, taking note of young people traveling in groups, carrying large packs, or carrying cardboard signs for panhandling. I began to approach street kids and travelers, expressing my interest in learning more about their lifestyle. Some of these conversations developed into structured interviews, which I recorded with their permission, using a digital audio recorder. Interviews occurred on downtown sidewalks or in Waterfront Park. I was participant and observer, and recorded notes at the end of each day. Participant observation was conducted almost exclusively in southwest Portland, namely at Waterfront Park and Pioneer Place.

*Figure 5:* Keller Fountain, Southwest Portland





*Figure 6: Waterfront Park, Southwest Portland*

Waterfront Park was usually my first destination of the day. Here, crowds of street kids sprawled on the lawn. I became familiar with one group in particular, and could typically find any number of them in the park by mid afternoon. Many lounged on person-sized backpacks, making their status as travelers obvious. Unlike other groups in the park, the circles of street kids were consistently large in number. Street kids are often more boisterous than other park-goers, uninhibited by the norms of public spaces. Mild afternoons were spent among these throngs of street kids and travelers. I played guitar and watched the activities unfold around me. Like other young people, they drank and smoked cigarettes, passed the occasional joint, and laughed a lot. Some played guitar, either using their own, or asking to play mine. In the same way that Taylor and Hickey (2001) used a video camera to facilitate conversations between themselves and the *cholos* of Barrio Libre, I used my guitar as my “in,” a symbol of freedom and individuality. My guitar was the cornerstone for building rapport with individuals, and a small but durable connection to street kid subculture (Taylor and Hickey, 2001).

I kept a long list of questions in my guitar case, but I committed the most crucial questions to memory. The interviews were guided/structured, but open-ended. I began each interview with questions about home life, where the individual had come from, and whether he

or she still spoke with family. The aim was to determine whether the individual had left home due to violence or some form of abuse. I asked about friendships, romances, and the extent to which street families had been found or come to replace traditional family roles. I was also curious as to how far each person had traveled to come to Portland and by what mode of transportation. This often led to a conversation about entering Portland and the length of time the interlocutor had been in the city, and how long he or she planned to stay. Once a solid rapport had been established, I asked why the individual had chosen to live on the street.

I conducted person-centered interviews with five people: Clint, Steel, Werewolf, North Star, and Walker. Clint was not a street kid, but had lived with Portland street kids in numerous instances. Steel was older and considered himself a “street father” of some street kids in the city. The remaining three individuals self-described themselves as street kids or travelers. With these five individuals plus three others –Providence, Moon Flame, and Taters –I participated in and observed daily activities. This included spanging or panhandling, busking, and roaming the city in search of food and ways to occupy their time.<sup>7</sup> When appropriate, I took photographs of street kids, as well as built spaces that we inhabited throughout the summer. Many of the street kids described in this study used pseudonyms, and some presented me with both a pseudonym and legal name. All names have –including pseudonyms –have been changed to ensure the anonymity of those who shared their stories with me.

I was unable to conduct in-depth interviews with each person I met. This was partially due to time constraints, as well as hesitations as a first-time researcher. Because of my small sample size, I am unable to draw broader, generalizable conclusions about street kid culture from my data alone. However, by comparing previous research conducted with street kids in other part

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<sup>7</sup> Spanging is a contraction of spare change. This term was preferred to panhandling by the street kids I met.

of the United States with my research, some general conclusions may be drawn. Regardless, I was chiefly concerned with generating in-depth ethnographic data on street kid lifeways. I was constantly challenged by the task of relocating individuals for initial and follow-up interviews. Many street kids have pre-paid cell phones, but these are often left uncharged for days, and it was rare for an individual to remain in the city for more than a week. For safety reasons, I did not conduct fieldwork at night, and this undoubtedly limited my observation of the range of activities and social interactions in which street kids engage.

### Chapter 3: U.S. SUBCULTURES and COUNTERCULTURES

But a lotta kids these days deny their birthright –  
White kids, ashamed of their parents trunk,  
Attempt to abandon their moneyed-ways,  
They move to the ghettos and the communes  
Searching for the guiltlessness of poverty.

Why? “Me on Beer,” *The Early Whitney EP*

One goal of this thesis is to locate street kid lifeways, attitudes, and philosophies in previous definitions of “subculture” and “counterculture” in the United States. However, academics seldom agree on how to define these phenomena. As such, definitions of subculture and counterculture are rarely static and always contingent on that which constitutes the mainstream. Nevertheless, at the core of various definitions I behavior that is identifies and perceived as “alternative.” Here, I argue that seeking an emic understanding of particular sub and countercultures is the surest way to draw conclusions about sub and countercultures generally. An emic, as opposed to an etic, approach, seeks to understand a culture through the perspectives of those within the culture itself. Sub and countercultures are phenomena that beg to be understood, because of their power to identify pitfalls of accepted values and lifeways in the dominant society. A subculture or counterculture does not come of nothing, for every dominant system “contains the seeds of its own contradiction,” (Yinger, 1977: 835). The desire to divert from the prescribed normal path is entirely common in all societies (Yinger, 1977).

Yinger (1960, 1977) defines subcultures as smaller groups of individuals who share common interests and ideas with one another, and exist within the larger cultural milieu. In some cases, those who identify with the same subculture also share a similar style of dress. Operating

under this perspective, any group of people that possesses similar interests and/or physical aesthetic would be considered a subculture (Schwartz, 1987; Yinger, 1960). The spectrum of subculture “candidates” ranges from art collectors to modern-day hipsters to beekeepers. It is common interest that drives the creation of such a subculture.

In cases of divergence from, but not necessarily opposition to, the dominant norms, a subculture exists on “the [social] margins of mainstream culture” (Schwartz, 1987: 17). At its onset, today’s hipster youth subculture exemplified a physical and social aesthetic that diverged from that of mainstream youth subculture. Now, the once alternative style has been appropriated and commodified. Those who claim subculture membership do not typically live together in a communal space, and therefore “lack the richness of group life in a particular community” (Schwartz, 1987: 18). Subculture as a space for honing one’s interests in the company of other passionate individuals does however have strong potential for building a community of like-minded individuals. The emphasis is on self-expression and individual exploration, within the security of those who share similar interests and passions, and, more often than not, values and ideologies. Defined as subgroups of a larger culture, subcultures are non-threatening and typically exist harmoniously with the larger society.

Skott-Myhre (2007) understands subculture as the reaction of individuals to significant changes in the dominant culture’s ideals and values, due to a particular event or series of events. Economic decline, increase in unemployment, a shift in the dominant political alignment, or war all have the potential to inspire subculture formation. In light of these changes, certain individuals feel that their values are not accurately represented by their society, and so they “break free from the constraints of mainstream society and burst forth with creative, personal forms of expression” (Skott-Myhre, 2007: 99). There is no desire to oppose the mainstream

society's lifeways and cause turmoil within it. Unsatisfied individuals move to the fringes of society to pursue creative expression, either metaphorically or literally. In some cases, the mainstream culture sees profitable potential in these new forms of creativity, popularizing values that were once marginal and catalyzing shifts in the subculture's values (Skott-Myhre, 2007). As such, there is a kind of symbiotic relationship between subculture and the mainstream, creating a continuous cycle where one defines itself against the other and the other actually embraces and popularizes these measures of distinction. Those outside a subculture might perceive the decision to divert from the mainstream to be inherently rebellious, but individual intent within the subculture outweighs public perception. To this end, a subculture may be defined as a low profile, non-rebellious divergence from the mainstream (Skott-Myhre, 2007).

Yet another definition of subculture differs from the others in the emphasis on active opposition against the mainstream society. Subculture formation of this nature has been identified as a reaction to changes in mainstream society that provoke a "commonly perceived threat to one's moral or material existence" in certain individuals (Wood, 1991: 145). Like Skott-Myhre (2007), Wood (1991) argues that subcultures are formed as a result of societal changes that inspire individuals to separate from the mainstream, as "threat resolution" (Wood, 1991: 145). Individuals who form a subculture are not only striving for creative fulfillment through an alternative lifestyle, but they are also so strongly discontented with the values of the dominant culture that they aim to subvert.

It is difficult to determine whether or not a group intends to oppose the mainstream through its alternative lifestyle. Divergence from established norms does not necessarily indicate an oppositional stance. Nevertheless, if the larger culture perceives the non-oppositional group as a threat to their way of life, individuals in the mainstream may attempt to squelch the differences.

The alternative group then feels threatened, becoming oppositional and rebellious (Muggleton, 2000). The question then remains as to whether or not the alternative group was a subculture before it became oppositional and rebellious, or whether it may only be defined as a subculture because of its newly acquired oppositional qualities.

Like Wood's (1991) understanding of subculture as an oppositional entity, Yinger (1960, 1977) identifies counterculture as an oppositional response to a significant event in the mainstream society (Yinger, 1960). When "counterculture" became a term in the 1960s, it was thought to be a derivative of subculture. However, I believe that this implies that counterculture may only surface once a subculture reaches a point of opposition. While this might be the case in certain contexts, Yinger's (1960, 1977) definition of counterculture does not account for the complex, individual development of every sub and counterculture. Like the aforementioned subculture definitions, individuality and freedom of expression in a counterculture is key (Yinger, 1960).<sup>8</sup>

Individuals in a counterculture are oppositional with the intent to change the dominant culture (Misiroglu, 2009). There is still an emphasis on assertion of individual identity and expression (Suri, 2009). I also posit that, because there is a common goal among individuals to oppose and change the dominant culture, it is necessary to form a strong community that can act as an organized whole, and it also a social movement driven toward changing the dominant norms of the mainstream.

The notion of implicit intention has the potential to blur the lines between counterculture and subculture; deducing the true intentions of an individual is entirely subjective. Learning the perceptions of the individuals within the marginal group is at the crux of determining whether

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<sup>8</sup> In the essay, *Contraculture and Subculture*, Yinger identifies a new subcultural type, previously discussed, but never individuated. He calls it "contraculture." In his essay written 17 years later, he makes note of the difference in prefix, declaring that the public has spoken, and the term is officially "counterculture."



their actions may be classified as subculture or counterculture. Individuals within a particular group often have varied and multilayered perceptions of the intentionality of their actions. It is first necessary to determine whether the individuals in question self-identify with the proposed subculture or counterculture label. If this is indeed the case, it is likely that a common philosophy may be gleaned from even the most complex and unique perceptions. It is important to bear in mind that, in the past, definitions of subculture and counterculture have been partially shaped by whatever the presenter perceived as its “ideal-type,” or the factors that most accurately define it (Muggleton, 2000).

... ‘subculture’ [and counterculture are] merely...nominalist abstraction[s], a purely arbitrary way of grouping together a number of individuals on the basis of certain selected features that we choose to highlight for the purpose at hand [creating an “ideal-type” of a subculture to present to the public]. From this perspective there are no real boundaries within which members of subculture [or counterculture] are ‘contained’, nor can there be. [Muggleton, 2000: 23]

Subculture and counterculture are not entities unto themselves, then, but are a grouping of individuals who determine the ebb and flow of the sub/counterculture’s form. There will always be discrepancies between subculture/counterculture definitions, indicating that an effective subculture or counterculture analysis may only be achieved on a case-by-case basis.

Another feature common to nearly all of the subculture/counterculture definitions is the manner in which these groups come to be. Opposition to the dominant culture is a critical element in understanding both alternative lifestyles. In this study, I define subculture as an alternative lifestyle that does not *intend* to oppose the larger society, while counterculture is an alternative lifestyle that exists in willful opposition to the dominant society, in word, deed, or both (Cutler, 2006). That is, I define counterculture as a group of individuals who actively intend

to oppose the mainstream. Opposition is bred in the midst of great social flux or stress, such that individuals feel that the pursuit of the “good life” is compromised. Therefore, countercultures are formed as a “threat resolution,” in response to negative social changes such as war, economic depression, or increased unemployment (Wood, 1991).

I argue that, like countercultures, subcultures are products of individual dissatisfaction. However, in the case of a subculture, the dissatisfaction felt by individuals is not necessarily a result of traumatic social changes. Individuals do not feel threatened and therefore do not attempt to reject the mainstream. Instead, the subculture acts as a supplement to mainstream values. Comparing and contrasting American Hippie counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s with the American Hipster subculture in the contemporary points to the differences between counterculture and subculture broadly. The Hippie movement began in the midst of the Vietnam War. Those who identified as Hippies actively opposed the war, although what set them apart from other anti-war groups was their further rejection of capitalism and consumerism, made manifest by some who left mainstream society to live on communes with like-minded individuals. Community living was an important characteristic of the Hippies. Individual participants felt their values were compromised by the nation’s actions, and so they sought to find a more fulfilling way of life. They were in no way quiet in their rejection, and many sought to change the mainstream values and way of life.

In contrast, today’s Hipster subculture was not formed as a reaction to any identifiable, impactful social event. Like the Hippie counterculture, a unified aesthetic and music taste are integral to claiming “membership.” However, Hipsters are not unified under a particular cause or a philosophical opposition to the mainstream. Although they often verbally reject nearly anything and everything that is popular in the mainstream, there is a level of apathy that prevents

any strong convictions from being formed. Members of the Hipster subculture, the extent to which community building may take place is limited, because connections between members are much more shallow and aesthetically based.

The counterculture relationship to authority is then different from the subcultural relationship to authority.

Our defining vision asserts that the essence of counterculture as a perennial historical phenomenon is characterized by the affirmation of the individual's power to create his own life rather than accepting the dictates of surrounding social authorities and conventions, be they mainstream or subcultural. [Jones, 2011: 16]

However, lines between the two become blurred if authority figures perceive a threat in subculture activities and act against them, as if the subculture wishes to challenge their power. It could also be argued that any group that chooses to operate outside notions of "normal" poses a threat to the mainstream society. This is why speaking with individuals in the groups is crucial to identifying anti-authoritarian, and possibly oppositional, sentiments. Although they differ, each of these notions of subculture and counterculture questions "the basic assumptions about the 'good life' that [underpin] social order" (Suri, 2009).

I argue that street kids comprise a subculture, but not a counterculture. Although some of their lifeways and attitudes are subversive, there is no unified movement toward greater cultural change within the mainstream, a necessary element in any counterculture. Street kids have participated in the Occupy Portland movement, however the decision to live on the street is not *driven* by a desire to oppose mainstream norms. Street kid lifeways diverge from the mainstream ideologically, but still street kids participate in the mainstream regularly and seemingly without any moral qualms.

## Chapter 4: DATA and ANALYSES

The information compiled through interviews and participant observation with street kids and travelers in Portland, Oregon, is not representative of street kid lifeways *in general*. The street kids I interviewed are, above all, individuals who come from unique situations. Where the undeniable similarity lies is in their collective choice to live a life on the street and on the road. In this chapter, I explore: why these individuals chose a lifestyle different from the established mainstream, how they survive on the street, how they work and play, and how they perceive and react to authority and the mainstream in general. Throughout, I highlight their unconventional perspectives on the “normal,” American lifestyle. Simultaneously, I attempt to show that these individuals are similar to young people their age living a mainstream lifestyle, in the hope that street kids will be seen in a holistic light, as people and not a category.

I spent my afternoons with the following street kids and travelers: Moon Flame (female, 26); Providence (male, 22); Taters (female, 17); Werewolf (male, 21); North Star (male, 18); Walker (male, 29); Darling (age unknown); and Benny (age unknown). Of the five people interviewed, Clint and Steel do not identify as street kids, but are connected to street kids and their communities in some capacity. Taters, Benny, Providence, and Moon Flame were part of the same larger group of friends who spent most of their time at Waterfront Park. Moon Flame and Providence were dating at the time of my fieldwork. Additionally, Werewolf and Taters had met once or twice before. North Star and Taters frequented the Occupy Portland encampment, but did not regularly interact. Walker and Darling had no known connection to any of the others.

Gender roles and romantic relationships were also topics of interest in this study. Because neither topic arose in great detail in the interviews, any information presented would be purely

speculative, and so it is not included in this study. These are both important topics in street kids subculture, as made evident by Finkelstein (2005), and I hope to study them in the future.

### **Sidewalks and Squats**

“Living on the street” does not necessarily mean that one is consistently sleeping and socializing on the street. What it means to live on the street is different for each street kid. Clint had encountered “squatting” since moving to Portland. He had been living in the “Bird House,” a home buzzing with art and poetry and music. “It was a giant rotating free box [of miscellaneous objects used for art projects],” (de Lise, 6/23/12). “Free boxes” are a common Portland phenomenon. Like a yard sale, Portland residents place boxes with unwanted items on the sidewalk. It is understood that these items are free for taking or trading. Eventually, it was this Zen-like philosophy of impermanence that slowly turned the Bird House into a “squat.” Clint described an abandoned warehouse that had been purchased by an artist and had become home to street kids and travelers. It was a space for creating art as well as a place to rest. According to Clint, the artist had built a giant pirate ship, which he suspended from the ceiling; this was where they slept.

While I never visited either of these places, I attended a punk show at a squat in northeast Portland known as the “Heretic House.” Like the Bird House, the Heretic House was leased by a few people, but was open to anyone who needed a place to sleep for a few nights. In order to stay in the house, those who did not pay rent were expected to maintain the cleanliness, a labor trade of sorts. Nonsense, a young musician and traveler, invited me to hear his band play at the Heretic House on Saturday night. While he could not remember the exact address of the house, he said to look for the house with the bright, green light on the front porch. Accompanied by Clint and one

of my housemates, we bicycled in the general direction of the Heretic House. Just as Nonsense had described, we spotted the bright, green light, indicating we had reached our destination- although the Heretic House would have been easily spotted green light or not. From a few houses down, the intoxicating beat of gypsy punk music was already audible. The front lawn and porch were crammed with concertgoers, most of whom were covered in tattoos and piercings, holding beers, and smoking cigarettes.

My stomach full of butterflies, we approached the house, searching for a place to stash our bicycles. I feared we would be identified and treated as outsiders in a space designated for street kids and travelers. Each of us symbolized the mainstream world that street kids had chosen to reject, and that I assumed resented. Clint had previously visited the house, and so he made for the backyard with confidence. Seeing our hesitancy, a young woman told us to lock our bikes in the backyard with the others. This basic instruction signified a sign of welcome that settled my mind and set the precedent for the evening. The backyard was less crowded than I had anticipated, based on the scene out front. Clint had joined a circle of people sitting on the ground. Three large dogs ripped through the yard playfully. A joint was passed and introductions were made. Curious to hear Nonsense's band inside, my housemate and I excused ourselves and we made for the house. Just outside, we could hear boisterous singing and many stomping feet. Weaving through the people strewn on the back porch steps, we passed through some kind of storage room, into the kitchen, and finally to the concert space. There was no furniture to be seen, only jumping and flailing, sweaty bodies, dressed in punkish and hippie styles, laughing and moshing.<sup>9</sup> Nonsense greeted me: "You smell fancy!" he said before being hoisted into the air by a friend.

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<sup>9</sup> Moshing is a form of dancing that involves purposefully colliding with other dancers. It can be very violent, but in this case, it was playful.

A few days later, while sitting inside a coffee shop in Northeast, I spotted Nonsense outside with his skateboard. He appeared to be searching for something on the ground, which soon I deduced must have been smoke-able discarded cigarettes. Gathering my books, I hurried outside, hopped on my bike, and rode to him. “Are you a hugging person?” he asked in his childish manner. I laughed, and we embraced. As it turned out, Nonsense was indeed scrounging for cigarettes for himself and others back at the Heretic House. I asked him how it was living in a place where people come and go freely. He explained that it got a little hectic sometimes, holding everyone accountable for his or her share of labor in exchange for a free place to stay. His search for communal cigarettes is a testament to the sharing philosophy of the Heretic House and street culture in general.

Otherwise, many of the street kids interviewed spoke of encampments near downtown Portland where they slept and kept some of their belongings. The Occupy site was a popular place to spend the night as well. When I asked Werewolf where he was staying in Portland, he laughed, motioning to his large backpack beneath him, and exclaimed, “In my tent!” (de Lise, 7/19/12). Wherever he could sleep without being woken by Portland police was a viable place to call home. Outside of Portland, they had stayed everywhere from an abandoned mattress factory, to a communes.

### **Choosing the Street**

Notions of freedom and independence are often at the center of street kids’ decisions to travel the country and live on the street. There is an element of disillusionment with the mainstream way of life. The consistent understanding of the “mainstream” is as a sedentary,

domestic lifestyle, working a “9-to-5” job, and being forever indebted to institutions of authority.

Walker expressed disdain for a mainstream lifestyle:

[My] friend Charlie would say, it’s the golden handcuffs. His brother has a [...] mortgage, and a baby on the way, and a wife, but, but, he’s comfortable, but he’s not happy. And [Charlie] would say that [his brother] has golden handcuffs. Because, he is tied down and he’s not going anywhere [...] He’s locked down, but it’s this idea, that he’s, that he’s, good and successful, or whatever. [Walker, 7/8/12]

Like Walker, Moon Flame felt a sedentary lifestyle was mundane:

[When you’re living in a house], you wake up, you have a job, you go to school, and you go to bed. You fall into a routine and you’re bored. [de Lise, 7/30/12]

Others are simply in search of something different from what they have known. Strumming his guitar, Werewolf thoughtfully explained that he was in search of a community of people who are not skeptical and distrusting of strangers (de Lise, 7/19/12). He does not necessarily condemn a mainstream lifestyle, but recognizes that for now, he does not need a “home base” to be happy: “You write the universe everyday!” (de Lise, 8/12/12). Likewise, North Star feels that his life is a continuous adventure. He compared moving from state to state as a child, with his mother and younger brother, to his current lifestyle:

It [moving with his family] wasn’t [...] as great as it is now, cause now, it’s an adventure! [...] It’s the road less traveled, you know? [...] It’s this amazing lifestyle, where every- all kinds of different potential, all different things can arise, you know, like, I’m not constricted by any different ties and shit. All kinds of different things can happen. That’s why I like it a lot, cause uh, all kinds of things happen, all kinds of wild things. [de Lise, 8/7/12]



The search for freedom from a mainstream lifestyle ultimately leads to settling into a new lifestyle, in which they may maintain a sense of personal freedom. It is a quest to fulfill the fickle twin human desires for individual freedom and a sense of belonging.

Few street kids cited their home lives as the main reason for choosing to live on the streets. Consistently, however, each of them spoke of difficulties at home. None of them rarely conveyed any regret or sadness in relation to family life, but there is no denying the central role this played in the decision to leave. Moon Flame casually mentioned many negative experiences in her past that undoubtedly informed her street kid status: sexual and physical abuse; a failed marriage engagement; her mother's death due to alcoholism; and her father's failing health. "I've been on and off the streets so many times" (de Lise, 7/30/12). Her father was in a care facility nearby. Had it not been for him, she would have left and stayed away from the Portland area long ago, but she felt she needed to return to his side every so often.

North Star also felt he needed to check in with his mother to let her know he was alive and well:

Yeah, I'm very close with my mom. Love my mom, and I try to call her as often, and remind her that, I'm okay, everything's all good, cause she knows I'm living this lifestyle. And she's um, not as...she's totally supportive of it, but she's like, always worrying about me and shit... My mom's a really open-minded, liberal person. It's good. [de Lise, 7/7/12]

He had left home approximately eight months ago. Charged with marijuana possession as a minor, he was given the choice of juvenile detention for a second time, or leaving the state of Missouri. He chose the latter and moved to eastern Oregon where his father lived "off the grid."

I'm a lot like my dad, which is why I don't really get along with him. He's um, he's...[laughs] I just don't get along with him very well, so I can't stand being around him- I like him, I love him, he's my dad, but I mean, I can't stand being around him...I usually think of him as a woodsman, nature-type guy, cause like he's, he's, like he's spent most of his life- like he began out with like, you know, train hopping, and political protests, and shit like that, travelin' and shit, back in like, the 60s and 70s...I always found him to be a really fascinating person, but it's a lot because I didn't know him very well, and that's why I found him so fascinating. But I don't get along with him very well. [de Lise, 7/7/12]

Had he not been forced to leave his mother's home, North Star might never have begun his life as a street kid and traveler. As it was, his philosophies align with this lifestyle that he claimed was voluntary.

The inability to emotionally connect with parents is a thread of commonality linking the narrative of street kids and travelers in Portland. Werewolf's mother had met a man online, with whom she traveled to Burning Man and then later moved.<sup>10</sup>

She became conservative, and like, voted for George Bush, and all this crazy stuff. And like, had this big, like, ordeal against, like, stoners... so I went to Boise, Idaho, and I took a semester there, and then the summer time came, and like...through the course of a month and a half, all these kids from the rainbow gathering starting flooding into the town and I just became friends with them, and ...when my roommate...kicked me out of the apartment, I just like, didn't really care, like, I just felt really good, and I just kept chilling by the river, and camping and I just like, when I left and I hitchhiked out of Idaho, I didn't even travel with any of the people I had met, it was just some random train hopper kids, two of them that came into town, and these other kids had been talking about Portland...[de Lise, 8/13/12]

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<sup>10</sup> Burning Man is a week-long, peaceful gathering in Nevada's Black Rock Desert.

Like North Star, Werewolf experienced disconnectedness and distance from a parent. Both reacted by asserting a carefree, nothing-left-to-lose, attitude, although this may have already been a prominent part of their respective personalities. Werewolf had also expressed distaste for the career paths his peers chose and the options he felt were made available to him.

Taters had runaway from home in a nearby suburb, nonchalantly saying that her parents were “crazy” (de Lise, 7/30/12). Given that she was a minor the police had the authority to return her to her parents if she was found. Because of this, she had been home a few times, but never for too long. For Providence, living on the street was second nature. As he explained it, he came from a family of pirates and “gypsies,” and so he was continuing a familial tradition (de Lise, 8/1/12). Each person’s decision to live on the streets was largely shaped by an inseparable combination of personal histories and philosophies, both of which have influenced the other.

### **Identity as a Street Kid and Traveler**

On my way to busk one afternoon, I spotted a familiar face from my first summer (2011) in Portland. I recalled her demeanor; carefree, but somewhat intimidating. I was hesitant to approach her and the two older men with whom she sat on the curb; I was at a low point in my constantly fluctuating levels of self-confidence as a first time ethnographer. Clutching the straps of my guitar case closer to my back, I strode over to the threesome and asked if I might join them. I sat across from the familiar young woman and pulled out my guitar, while they continued their conversation. She had a captivating manner of speaking, cracking dirty jokes and acting like “one of the guys” while simultaneously owning her femininity and striking beauty.

In the course of their conversation, it became clear that each person had some connection to street culture, but had strong ties to mainstream culture as well. One of the men, Pulley,

carried a phone and had a job (he actually received a call from his boss during our time on the curb), but also carried a large backpack. The other, Ariel, mentioned a roommate and house. The young woman, Darling, had a particularly striking lifestyle, and like her namesake, it seemed feasible that her youth would be eternal. In one sentence she spoke of hopping trains *and* her mother purchasing her a train ticket home. She was street kid, traveler, vagabond, train hopper, and your average 20-something woman. Navigating between these roles seemed as natural to Darling as it was foreign to me. I did not speak with her again, although we did have a moment of mutual recognition from the prior summer.

Those who identify as street kids distinguish between themselves and other people living on the streets. Sometimes, but not always, there is a notable tone of hostility when referring to those outside of their peer group. While spanging one afternoon with Moon Flame and Providence, a woman approached the area where we sat, situating herself a few feet away. She was talking to herself and seemed to take no notice of our presence. Providence urged one of us to tell her to leave. “These streets belong to street kids, not fucking tweakers,” he said.<sup>11</sup> Although recreational drug use is common for the majority of street kids in Portland, those I met make a distinction between their identity as “street kid” or “traveler,” and those to whom they refer as “tweakers” or “junkies.” By most measures, the latter were addicts. The distinction between the street kid who is also a drug addict and a tweaker or junkie was never made clear during the course of this fieldwork.

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<sup>11</sup> A “tweaker” is someone who uses methamphetamine and “tweak,” or exhibits symptoms of being addicted to methamphetamine.



*Figure 7: A traveler shows a book, “The Mystical Life of Jesus.”*

During our second interview, North Star spoke of the differences between Eugene, Oregon, and Portland:

Eugene is like, mostly *travelers*, most of the people there, most of the people livin’ on the streets there are travelers, as opposed to people, you know...*homeless people*. [de Lise, 8/12/12)]

North Star also drew a distinction between travelers like himself and others living on the streets, referring the latter as “homeless.” Although he lives on the street and is technically without a home, he made a choice to do so, whereas others living on the streets who presumably did not choose to be there. There are also subcategories within the greater street kid identity, such as crusty punks (who are not always street kids). Young people living on the streets will not befriend someone *because* they are also living on the streets, although they might feel a greater affinity toward someone of a similar social category. As in all communities, perceived similarities and differences are the basis by which alliances are formed and social groups created.

Street kids also differentiate between themselves and those living a mainstream, sedentary lifestyle. Sitting in Waterfront Park, a large group of tourists neared our circle. One of the street kids yelled, "Look at all those preps!" Another chimed in, "They came in like animals!" It was agreed that "messing with yuppies" was fun. Although it was not clear what constituted a "yuppie" in this case, the street kids who called out made a clear distinction between themselves and those who live in a house. Their patronizing attitude toward the group indicates a value judgment made about those choosing to live a mainstream lifestyle. Not all street kids exhibited these feelings. Taters once told me that she was surprised to discover I was not in fact a street kid, then saying that I was, "pretty cool, for a housie." At face value Taters's statement seems to imply that in general people living in houses are not "cool." I believe, however, that she had never encountered a housie who chose to interact and spend time with street kids, and she appreciated my acceptance of their lifestyle.

Homelessness is generally regarded as a highly stigmatized part of U.S. society with which street kids do not wish to be associated. Portland street kids express hostility or a lack of affinity toward who live on the streets, perhaps because they feel their intentional transience or elected homelessness affords them a higher social standing. Street kids who laud a simple, transient lifestyle, similarly differentiate between themselves and housies because they hold their lifestyle in a higher regard. It is a form of defense against those who condemn their lifestyle, a way for street kids to assert their lifestyle is justified.

Almost every street kid and traveler interviewed had a cell phone, many of which had Internet capabilities. While their phones were seldom charged, to have a cell phone makes one traceable and reachable by friends and family. Because many of the street kids were able to go online, they were somewhat connected to mainstream popular culture. Simply having a cell

phone is a symbol of connectedness. Aside from spending time in Waterfront Park and downtown streets, the Yamhill Pub downtown was a popular hangout for street kids and travelers. Their patronage at the Yamhill, though nominal, was another connection to mainstream culture. Street kids and travelers also frequently attend public festivals, including Hemp Fest, Burning Man, and Oregon Country Fair.

Connections with mainstream culture contrast with the choice to change one's name as a street kid. The majority of street kids I met were known by an alternative name, or a "running name." Street kids like North Star carry several names, some of them self-chosen, while others were given by those met on the road moving from city to city. Street kids spoke of renaming as a form of rebirth, or a chance at anonymity and perceived freedom from one's past. Those who bestow new names upon you become new family.

Because these individuals physically exist within mainstream society, they ultimately have no choice but to participate in mainstream society in some capacity. This ranges from adherence to certain city laws, to the consumption of goods, and thus participation in capitalism. Nearly all of them reaped the benefits of food stamps. When asked his thoughts concerning organized government in general and programs it provides targeting those with little to no income, North Star replied with the following:

I think people should just govern themselves, as simple as that. We should govern ourselves, you don't need government to...govern us...I mean, if we were to govern ourselves, that would mean widespread tribes of people....Interacting with the other...Food stamps are alright, because the government's doing something they should be doing, [which] is feeding people...I like food stamps [laughs]. I like having them, but I could live without them...I've actually thought about like, abandoning them, just a protest against organized government. [de Lise, 8/7/12]

The street kid identity is paradoxical. There is a desire to separate from a certain perception of the established norm: a sedentary lifestyle; a constant stream of bills to pay; and an authority figure to which one is beholden. Yet, in an effort to assert independence as a free human being, street kids become highly dependent on the systems in place to protect those living on the streets, a product of the lifestyle they are looking to subvert or simply avoid.

### **Relationship with Authority**

*You know what I see there? 'Portland Pigs' ... 'Portland Porkers!'*

Providence (de Lise, 7/26/12)

The attitude toward Portland Police varied from person to person. Providence often expressed contempt for police officers, although one afternoon he surprised me. As we walked toward the nearby food carts, a familiar street kid strolled toward us, accompanied by two police officers. Moon Flame was concerned and made a disparaging comment about police officers.

Providence responded calmly and thoughtfully:

You know, cops aren't different from you and me. A lot of them come from the same places- they just chose to enforce the law for the betterment of society. If a cop sees you with [a small amount of weed], he's gonna let it slide, because he gets it, and he has more important things to worry about. I like talking to cops. [de Lise, 8/1/12]

Attitudes towards authority figures are not easily generalized. Taters also expressed a similarly positive attitude, explaining that the police would inform her and the other street kids before conducting raids on their encampment, allowing them time to gather their possessions and stay away from the area for a few days, thus avoiding arrest. "They want us to stay [...] out of the



way,” she said. “So, they’ll roll through and tell us that they’re raiding on Monday, and give us a heads up,” (de Lise, 8/12/12).

Sitting at Waterfront Park, I witnessed a similarly civil, if not amicable, interaction between street kids and park police. The police officers approached dog owners and requested to see the animal’s proof of vaccinations papers. This was evidently a routine event, because many of the street kids with dogs had already prepared their papers for inspection prior to being asked. One of the more outgoing young women chatted comfortably with one of the police officers. I noticed the officer motion to me with a curious expression on his face. She explained that I was a newcomer, but that I was “cool.” The police were evidently familiar with the street kids who frequented Portland’s streets and parks.

While the police moved around the circle, Benny began telling me that he and his running partner had been “86-ed,” or banned for a specified duration of time, from the Colonel Sumner park earlier that day. One of the park police officers overheard his story and rushed over, insisting that he show her his citation. Benny immediately grew angry and defiantly yelled that he was legally allowed to be there. The police officer insisted, so he slammed the citation into her hand. Satisfied with what she read, she made to return it. “Oh, you can keep that!” Benny growled snidely. It was the first I had seen him so worked up. Clearly, his earlier interaction with Portland police had informed this later interaction on the waterfront.

There was also lingering tension between Portland police and the homeless population in general, at the Occupy Portland site. The Occupy site downtown had become somewhat of a homeless encampment, and police had been ordering campers to move, claiming violation of Portland’s sit-lie ordinance. Occupy participants had found a loophole, though, by sleeping on the portion of sidewalk that was technically public property. Police officers had since begun

patrolling the city late at night, making it impossible for anyone to get a decent night's rest.

According to a medical volunteer at the site, this made it impossible for many of the Portland's homeless to successfully maintain employment, due to their consistent exhaustion. Some of those interviewed did not express negative sentiments toward police officers at all. Throughout the duration of my fieldwork, I did not witness any outright defiance of authority figures by street kids.

### **Allocation of Resources on the Street**

Although life on the street purports to be chaotic and unpredictable, like any lifestyle, a routine may be found. Just as someone living in the Amazonian Rainforest knows the native flora and fauna, so too do the young people living on the street understand the intricacies of their urban environment. There are methods for survival that are common knowledge. Information about the best places to spange or busk is shared between street kids. The choice to share information seemed to be an assertion of worth as a street kid.

Taters had recently runaway from home and was slowly transitioning to living on the street full time. Despite what was comparatively a novice status, she had a wealth of knowledge concerning the best places to acquire food, as well as other tactics for resource acquisition:

We left the park with Taters. The original plan was to head to "the feed," where food was being distributed nearby, but for whatever reason, this plan was discarded. When we hit the street, Taters left us and *began checking trash cans for food, and checking parking meters for change*. She had explained earlier that the food carts on 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave are one of the best places to check for food, because there are benches beside them. This means that people will stick around to eat their food, and toss whatever they don't eat into the cans beside the food carts, as

opposed to the food carts on 5<sup>th</sup> Ave, where people bought food and walked away.  
[de Lise, 7/30/12]

Living on the street, you begin to see the urban environment in a way that those who live inside do not. Knowledge sharing is essential to surviving and thriving on the streets. “Learning” to be a street kid is experiential and takes practice.

Taters showed her creativity and industriousness each time we conversed. She began a free-trade hair cut venture at the Occupy Portland encampment. Basically, she would cut someone’s hair in exchange for whatever he or she had to trade. She loved cutting hair and had become relatively skilled by watching people in the beauty school downtown who cut her hair for free. “Everybody needs something someone else has,” she explained. Trading and bartering are both typical practices for many street kids. Providence frequently asked passersby to engage in “pocket” or “hippie” trades with him. This entailed reaching into your pocket and trading the first thing you grabbed with someone doing the same.

When North Star emptied the contents of his pack so I could take some photographs, I was curious about the large stones amid the camping gear and books. He claimed that these came in handy for bartering, although not everyone shared the same feeling:

I was like, “I’ll trade ya something for a beer, man!” and he’s [Tractor] like, “What do you got to trade?” I was like, “I got some rocks?” and he’s like, “I don’t want your fuckin’ hippie rocks!” [laughing] I was like, “okay, man, I’ve got some rolling papers,” and he’s like, “I don’t need rolling papers.” I was like, “I got a deck of cards?” and he’s like, “A deck of cards and the rolling papers, and it’s a deal,” and I was like, “Okay, here ya go.” [de Lise, 8/7/12]

North Star and Tractor's willingness to negotiate and compromise is a testament to the importance of bartering for street kids. While money is used when it is had, because it is not plentiful in the street kids' lives, other items are used as an alternative medium of exchange.

When they could, some of the kids I met would work odd jobs, including manual labor work or trimming marijuana on a marijuana farm. It was a hand-to-mouth existence in which kids worked for a short, concentrated period of time, and earned money "under the table." Illicit means of income were less common for those I met. Providence mentioned selling drugs in San Francisco before moving to Oregon. He and Moon Flame were looking to sell marijuana in Portland, hoping to make enough money to make their next move out of the city. Werewolf was casually selling LSD, after having received some from a friend. Stealing was not the norm, although Providence did steal a glass bottle from a restaurant's outside seating area. Afterward, he gleefully ran down the street, asking strangers to give him money so that he might fill the bottle with rum, "like a pirate." North Star once stole an expensive pair of running shoes, only to guiltily return them hours later. Stealing was never spoken of in any particular manner. Anytime we were in a store, street kids paid for their items using money they had spanged.

For street kids and travelers in Portland, surviving and thriving in their travels may be understood by the concept of "manifesting":

Walking back, we [Werewolf and I] were talking about the world conspiring to help you, which led us to talking about food in great detail, making both of our mouths water. Like others I've met, he said, "You just need to manifest it." Sure enough, as we were on the final stretch toward Keller Fountain, we walked by a building with food cartons on the window ledge. I slowed my pace, and he stopped completely, making a beeline for the cartons. In the first, there was nothing. The second was a Chinese food carton, full to the brim with Lo Mein! We both started laughing, in disbelief at how perfectly everything had transpired.

He pulled a spoon from his pocket and dug in. We continued walking, taking turns eating. [de Lise, 8/12/12]

Manifesting food and items of use is as simple as maintaining a positive outlook, no matter how desperate the situation might seem. This optimistic, yet pragmatic mindset, practiced in unison with an active awareness of one's environment, yields a fruitful life on the road. Manifesting is more often than not directly dependent on the "haves" providing resources for the "have not's." North Star is the embodiment of the principles of manifestation. He carries with him a backpack of tools and a wealth of environmental knowledge and an attitude of surrender and forgiveness toward the world around him.

*Figure 8: A street kid's traveling pack*



Manifesting may also result from the power of human connection, no matter how fleeting, and its ability to make two strangers' stories, one narrative. On his first day in Portland, a traveler who was also a musician received \$120 from a man in passing: the stranger's mother had just died, and the stranger was moved by the young man's music. A brief moment of interaction with a stranger is not always notable. Like the witchcraft of the Azande of north Central Africa, everyone is capable of manifesting, because it is entirely dependent on the will to

make it so (Evans-Prichard, 1976). However, instead of casting a spell on someone who has wronged you, manifesting implies a positive outcome. Like its more radical cousin, Freeganism, manifesting embodies the philosophy that everything has a use in a particular time, space, and situation.<sup>12</sup>

Manifesting aside, the city of Portland provides for its homeless. At least during the summer, boxes full of free clothing and objects, or “free boxes,” could be found on the majority of residential streets on the east side of the river. According to a friend living on the street, whom I met my first summer in Portland, Portlanders placed uneaten leftovers from restaurants on top of trashcans. He explained that it was common knowledge that this food was good to eat. One day I peered inside of a to-go box sitting on top of a trashcan, and sure enough, the food was good enough to eat. Sitting in the park, groups of individuals, none of whom were street kids, would approach our circle and offer sandwiches. Portland also provides a number of resource centers specifically focused on young people living on the street. Outside In, located in southwest, offers crisis counseling, employment and educational opportunities, and sanctuary off the streets from 1-8 p.m (Rose City Resource, 2013). The organization recently featured films created and acted by Portland homeless youth, providing the opportunity to share stories and promote public understanding of the complexities of homelessness.<sup>13</sup> New Avenues for Youth is also located in southwest, offers transitional housing, an alternative school, and hygiene services, available during the day to people ages 17-24 (Rose City Resource, 2013). Access Center (Janus Youth) offers shelter year-round, 24 hours a day, for people ages 15-23 (Rose City Resource, 2013). Places like Outside In were favored over shelters by the street kids I met.

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<sup>12</sup> While the street kids never expressed any alignment with Freegan philosophies or practices, street kid lifeways bear similarities to Freeganism. For more information about Freeganism, visit <http://freegan.info/>.

<sup>13</sup> Visit [http://www.oregonlive.com/living/index.ssf/2012/02/in\\_case\\_you\\_missed\\_it\\_outside.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/living/index.ssf/2012/02/in_case_you_missed_it_outside.html) to view the films.

Sharing is a crucial part of being a street kid in Portland. Sitting in Waterfront Park, two street kids joined us, carrying grocery bags filled to the brim. It was the first of the month and Food Stamps had just been distributed. The bags were set on the ground, and one by one, all sorts of non-perishables were passed around the circle. Those distributing food did not hesitate to do so, and those receiving food did not offer any thanks, because such sharing was expected. Although I was unfamiliar to those who had purchased the food, I was included in the food sharing as well.

On another occasion, Providence, Moon Flame, and I were buying burritos at a food cart downtown. Moon Flame, who is Native American, had just received a reparation check from the government and had some money to spend on food. Providence ordered and purchased my food for me. I nearly protested, but it was clear that he was practicing the reciprocity I had witnessed in the park. I had previously bought them lunch, and he wanted to return the favor, despite our difference in socioeconomic status. He also bought two extra tacos. When I asked to whom he intended to give them, he shrugged and said that he would find someone who was hungry.

When sharing was not reciprocated, it came as a surprise. Benny, a friend of Providence and Moon Flame, explained an instance where he asked Providence for some of his food and was denied. He was visibly disgruntled and offended. Providence's unwillingness to share came as a shock to Benny, especially because he had recently shared food with Providence. In this case, reciprocity was expected and not fulfilled.

## Levity and Downtime

*Play a song about Harry Potter themed Tetris, in deep space, with a rhythm derived from the circumference of a watermelon.*

Werewolf (de Lise, 8/12/12)

Relaxation and play for street kids and travelers often means lounging outside with friends and enjoying the perfect Portland summer days and nights. During the day they spent most of their time at Waterfront Park, Keller Fountain, and the Occupy Portland encampment where they drank, smoked cigarettes and marijuana, played music, and played with dogs. If food was available, it was eaten and shared. Unfortunately, I was unable to conduct participant observation in the evenings, and so I cannot paint the full picture of street kid social activity.



*Figure 9: A street kid plays my guitar in Waterfront Park*





*Figure 10: A traveler relaxes at Keller Fountain*

There is a notable overlap between methods of subsistence and having fun. When they were not basking in the sun with dogs and guitars, street kids were spanging or busking on downtown Portland streets. While both spanging and busking are methods of resource allocation, they are simultaneously modes of entertainment. Spanging with Providence and Moon Flame one afternoon, I offered them a bag of pennies I had uncovered in my apartment that morning. Instead of counting the pennies and using the money, Providence instructed us to help flip the pennies head's-side-up on the sidewalk in front of us. As pedestrians hurried passed, Providence asked, "Excuse me, do you need some luck today?" (de Lise, 7/26/12) It was games like these that earned him his name, Providence. Spanging is meant to acquire resources, as well as a way to pass time, and maybe brighten someone's day.

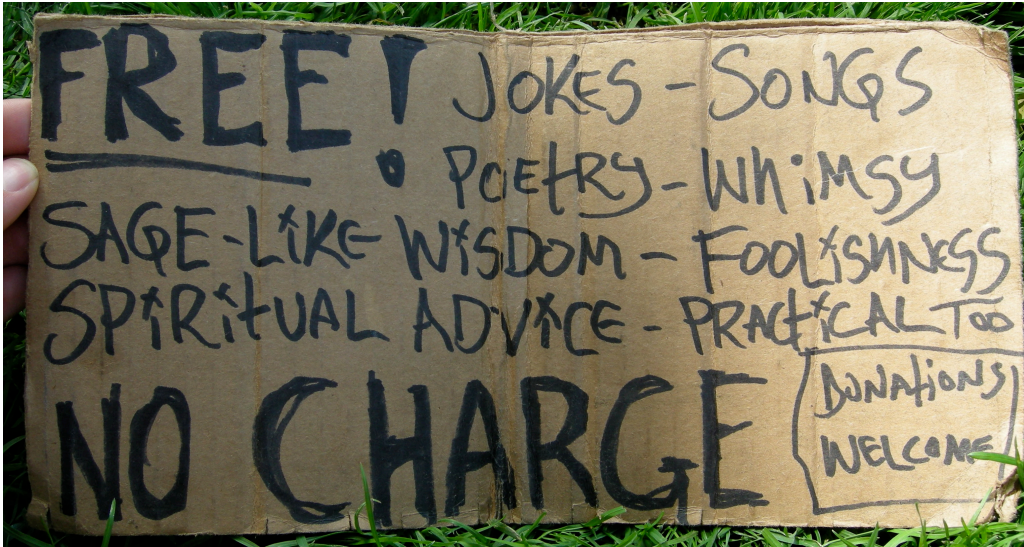


Figure 11: Spangeing sign meant to entice passersby and hopefully yield donations

North Star spoke about experiences busking in Portland, explaining that you need to entertain the public while performing; otherwise they will not pay any attention:

It's more than just like, playing music, cause if you're sittin' there playing music, they'll ignore you. But if you're like, all like talking to people and having a fun time and making people happy and what not, people, you know, people kick you down some cash. [de Lise, 8/12/12]

A large part of having fun on the streets is making people smile, connecting with them in some small way. This tends to increase the likelihood that someone will share money or food. I recall an afternoon walking with a group of street kids to get a meal at Outside In when Providence asked a man carrying donuts if he would share one. The man replied with a curt "no." Another traveler, Jiminy, began to ask him a question, during which the man interrupted and said that he would not be sharing donuts with anyone. Laughing, Jiminy replied with the following:

I wanted to know if you'd like to trade a joke for a donut, but based on your attitude, I think you just need the joke! ... What's the difference between a bus

station full of dirty travelers, and a lobster with four tits? One's a crusty bus station; the other's a busty crustacean. [de Lise, 7/30/12]

Jiminy's choice to tell a joke making reference to "dirty travelers" drew attention to their own status as street kids and travelers in a lighthearted manner, accessible to both parties. No donuts were shared that day, but the man with the donuts listened to the joke and laughed. Both he and Providence had a particular penchant and passion for playing games and engaging with strangers.

The levity with which many of the street kids lead their lives is not always compatible with the attitudes of the general public. During a beer festival held in Waterfront Park, Providence, Moon Flame, and I sat on the grass, watching festival patrons swagger happily by. Providence began playing his usual game of asking strangers for "random objects." A few people passed by with a laugh and nothing more. Some people were confused; never before had they been asked for anything but money. Two young women passed our spot, and Providence called out the same question. Clearly intoxicated, the young women stopped walking. One of the women began searching her purse for money. The other woman approached Providence. "Can I ask you a question?" He replied, "Ask away!" This is a paraphrased account of her question:

Why don't you have a job? You're able-bodied, there's nothing wrong with you mentally- why is it fair for you to sit around on this beautiful day, when I have to work my ass off. And then you think it's fair to ask me for money, when you could easily have a job?! Why don't you apply anywhere, you're in Portland, there are tons of places to work. I'll give money to people who have no other choice, but you could easily have a job. My family comes from the Philippines...English is my second language, I didn't go to college, and I have a job...I just got back from the Philippines, where my family sleeps on the floor and works 20 hour days and makes NOTHING. You should be making money to help the people in the world with nothing. [de Lise, 7/26/12]

In the middle of her monologue, Moon Flame removed herself from the situation, unable to contain her anger. Providence attempted to respond, but it became clear that the woman's drunkenness was inhibiting her capacity to have a conversation. As Providence stood to leave, another street kid, Moe, entered the conversation, although he too was intoxicated and unable to calmly respond to her questions.

The situation escalated to the point of both individuals yelling at each other, unable to listen to the other's opinions. With some sobering words from the young woman's friend, the anger began to dissipate. I attempted to mediate as best I could, desperately wanting to help each understand the other's perspective. "It is a choice, just like your lifestyle is a choice," I explained. In the newfound serenity, Moe revealed that he suffered from Bipolar Disorder, and thus was not wholly mentally stable as the young woman assumed. With this single fact, the young woman's assumptions about street kids were thwarted, causing her to take a moment to reconsider her original judgments. The young women were on their way soon after this semi-reconciliation. I heard them arguing about what had just occurred, one chastising the other for being forward. Providence's playfulness starkly contrasted with the young woman's anger. The interaction revealed tensions between street kids and non-street kids that frequently surfaced in conversations with non-street kids.

### **Closing Thoughts**

The choice to live on the streets is not mutually exclusive from engaging in mainstream activities, such as working a licit job for pay or contributing to the local economy. The street kids and travelers I met in Portland were disenchanted with the mainstream, sedentary lifestyle. However, because they continue to live *within* the society that they reject, they have no choice

but to participate in mainstream lifeways. Street kid lifeways subvert mainstream culture, but are inextricably dependent on the mainstream; without the kindness of strangers or those who work a “9-to-5” job, street kids and travelers would be unable to live such a lifestyle. Identity as a street kid and traveler is dependent on the choice to live on the street. It is this voluntary action that both separates and defines street kids.

## **Chapter 5: BETWIXT and BETWEEN**

### **Street Kid Lifeways as Subculture**

Street kid lifeways comprise a subculture that shapes its collective identity in relation to its mainstream context. As per Schwartz's (1987) definition of subculture, street kid subculture exists on the margins of the mainstream. Street kids diverge from the dominant paradigm in their pursuit of self-discovery. However, street kids and travelers coexist in physical spaces, share resources, and form strong bonds with one another, setting them apart from other subcultures that merely share common interests. In these ways, street kid subculture shares characteristics with the Hippie counterculture, although street kid subculture is not a counterculture itself.

Nomadic street kid subculture does not work "towards a shared goal," and cannot be defined as a social movement, a defining element of any counterculture (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2012). This is made evident through events at Occupy Portland. Street kids have frequented the Occupy Portland site since its inception. According to Portland news media, their presence has been a source of tension for both Portland police and protesters (Bloom, 2011; Mesh, 2011; Saker, 2011). When I arrived in Portland, the Occupy site, located downtown, had turned from protest site to encampment. The original, sit-in intent of the movement had been clouded by the abundance of unhoused individuals and travelers. Reports of violence and aggression involving street kids occurred namely during fall 2011. In these reports, street kids are consistently the cause of violence, or participatory in violence at the Occupy Portland site. In one such report, a group of 15 or so street kids allegedly beat and harassed a protester (Saker, 2011). Because the Occupy movement is adamantly nonviolent (*Occupy Portland*, 2011),

Occupy Portland peacekeepers “could not” intervene, and advised the victim to flee the scene (Saker, 2011).

Reports of street kid violence at Occupy Portland indicate a divide between them and Occupy protesters. Not all street kids present at the Occupy site are perpetrators of the violence depicted in Portland media. Violent actions committed by others who share the street kid identity confirm that not all street kids are unified under a shared code of conduct. Street kid subculture is therefore not a social movement, although some street kids may participate in movements like Occupy Portland.

In choosing not to work a “9-to-5” job, not to establish a private home base, and not to permanently share an established space with kin, nomadic street kid subculture is subversive. It is based in the formation of a “negative identity...they [youth] seem to want to be everything which ‘society’ tells them not to be: in this, at least, they ‘conform’” (Erikson, 1968: 26). Like the 1960’s counterculture to which Erikson refers, nomadic street kids have elected to reject many of the norms of modern U.S. society. Individuals who identify as street kids share the desire to live this alternative lifestyle, not *because* it is subversive (although some identify this as the reason for living on the streets), but because they feel it provides greater fulfillment than the life they lived before. The pursuit of fulfilling one’s desires boils down to the core desire to be recognized by others (Graeber, 2007). These young people who leave their homes to pursue a life on the street seek recognition that they feel they have not received prior. Nomadic street kid culture is highly inclusive, in that any young, sound-of-mind person may consider him or herself a street kid (Haenfler, 2003). Even still, an ideological pattern of the street kids in this study is apparent and speaks to the type of person who tends to choose the street kid lifestyle.

## **A New Means of Self-Exploration**

Street kid subculture is not a permanent way of life. By definition, someone is not a street kid past the age of 30. The interviews conducted for this study indicate that there is an assumed impermanence when a young person chooses to become a street kid. When asked what they foresee in their future, none of the kids I interviewed planned to remain on the street forever. Only Steel, who was not a street kid himself, seemed mentally to regard his life on the street as permanent, setting him apart from the street kids interviewed and observed in this study.

Street kid subculture is indeed a “career,” as Karabanow (2006) suggests. It is impermanent and serves as a period for self-exploration and discovery. Like the American youth who choose to attend college after high school, those who choose to become street kids seek new experiences that will broaden their scope of the world and instill them with invaluable lessons.

Shaping the identity of nomadic street kids is largely based in the natural affinity a young person feels toward other young people. As a teenager or “twenty-something,” the common thread of exploration and curiosity, being betwixt and between childhood and adulthood, solidifies this age-based bond. The impermanence of the lifestyle is directly connected to the impermanence of youth, and thus the youthful inclination to explore and search for the “self” is also fleeting. That nomadic street kids tend to be teenagers or young adults also speaks to the logistics and transience of the lifestyle. For example, traveling from place to place with a large backpack is a lifestyle suited to able-bodied individuals. This does not always exclude older generations, but in general, nomadic street kid lifestyle is a young person’s realm. Some nomadic street kids consider themselves more “truly” exemplary of the essence of what it means to be a street kid and traveler. These same individuals might consider others who claim street kid



identity as charlatans, merely interested in the romantic aspects of a traveler's lifestyle, ready to run back to the housie lifestyle as soon as something goes awry.

In the current post-industrial U.S. society, street kids and others in the Millennial Generation are seeking new forms of identity formation and reshaping or rejecting the values that defined the identities of past generations. Possessive individualism plays a critical role in these new modes of youth identity formation moving into adulthood. While in past generations, identity formation was namely spurred by participation in religious institutions and other "traditional organizations," people today are shaping identities based on consumer goods purchased (Best, 2011: 916). Modern youth identity formation is not only founded on different guiding principles, but the period of time between youthful exploration and "stable" adulthood has increased, a phenomenon known as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Best, 2011):

In the last decade, studies of youth identity formation by sociologists have sought to account for both the distinct historical moments that make possible particular types of youth, and shape the processes of identity construction. Here history is brought to the foreground. For example, a number of sociologists recognize the pressure to generate identity has intensified as we move into the 21st century. This is well captured in Jeffrey Arnett's (2000a,b) concept of emerging adulthood... Arnett (though not a sociologist) argues that identity concerns of the sort Erikson identified among adolescents now extend well into early adulthood. This has developed into a prolonged period whereby transition into adulthood and achievement of traditional markers of adulthood are significantly delayed and self-exploration and the inward-turning examination of the self have deepened. [Best, 2011: 915]

Studies of youth identity formation in the twenty-first century have concluded that some young people are seeking non-traditional forms of social interaction (Best, 2011).

Nomadic street kid subculture is representative of both an extended exploratory period

for young adults, as well as a non-traditional mode of modern youth identity formation. Like other Millennials, nomadic street kids do not feel fulfilled by the growing importance of consumer goods in defining a sense of self. In pursuing a life on the street, street kids and travelers seek an individualistic lifestyle, while surrounded by other young people who are equally disenchanted with the mainstream means of identity formation.

### **Connecting Street Kid Subculture to the Mainstream**

Nomadic street kid culture questions what it means to live the “good life” in the United States. In the U.S. today, skepticism toward the traditional U.S. identity is not reserved for street kids alone:

The conflict over American identity is a problem, particularly among young people. Young Americans repeatedly show in surveys and focus groups that they are prone to distance themselves from their role as American citizens (Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter, & Zukin, 2002); to be distrustful of the government, social institutions, and their fellow citizens (Jennings & Stoker, 2004; Levine, 2007); to not be proud of their American citizenship; and to be disinterested in politics (Delli Carpini, 2000; Levine, 2007). They are disconnected from their identity as American citizens and, as a result, are failing to develop positive civic identity. This is especially true in minority and urban youth populations (Atkins & Hart, 2003). [Malin, 2011: 54]<sup>14</sup>

Like other young U.S. citizens today, street kid culture brings traditional, societal values of individualism, egalitarianism, freedom, and patriotism into question (Schildkraut, 2011). In contrast, nomadic street kid culture challenges societal values by re-appropriating public spaces,

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<sup>14</sup> In Malin’s article, the specific age range of “young Americans” is not made explicit. Based on journalist Hannah Seligson’s “Mission: Adulthood,” in which she argues that pre-adulthood years are extended in the Millennial Generation, I apply this label to teenagers and young adults in general (The Diane Rehm Show, “What it means to be a Millennial,” 2/18/13).

moving from homes to the streets. Nomadic street kids at once physically separate themselves from mainstream culture and remain undeniably in the public eye by continuing to exist in public spaces.

Almost unexpectedly so, individualism, egalitarianism, freedom, and patriotism are made manifest in unique ways in street kid culture. Living a mainstream, sedentary lifestyle, the pursuit of individualism is achieved in one's private space. Outside of this private sphere, patriotism, love for one's country, is expected to motivate one to reach out to fellow countrymen in need (Schildkraut, 2011). The pursuit of individual fulfillment is a large part of why the street kids in this study left home; they felt their individual identity was compromised by the lifestyle they had been living. However, once on the street, individualism must be compromised with communal interactions. Unlike the idealized neighborly interactions of a mainstream lifestyle, in which there is a clear demarcation between private and public spheres of life, life on the street does not provide a physical separation between "mine" and "yours." In this way, street kids pursue egalitarian ways of life. Assertions of individuality must be navigated within the confines of a social environment of similarly strong-willed individuals and reconciled with the ideals of sharing and reciprocity at the core of nomadic street kid subculture. Street kid subculture is a testament to the subjectivity of what it means to be free.

That is not to say that street kids are not interested in material items; when offered an article of clothing or trinket in a trade, those I met were eager to call something their own. Like many other Americans, the nomadic street kids construct part of their identity with what they own, also known as "possessive individualism," (Graeber, 2007: 72). However, they are unable to define themselves based on a fixed, physical space. Without a permanent address, they are

anonymous to the state. Their names are subject to change based on space and place, adding to the fluctuating identity of nomadic street kids.

Despite similarities between street kid and Millennial identity formation, street kids distinguish themselves from mainstream youth through “imagined marginality,” a process by which previously non-marginalized people adopt characteristics or behaviors of stigmatized groups as a form of self-expression (Glass, 2012: 704). In the eyes of outsiders, street kids appear impoverished, similar to other homeless groups. In performing marginality, street kids reclaim the commonly stigmatized homelessness identity, while also expressing their individuality (Hetherington, 1998: 71):

The case is that the idea of margins, the idea of ethnicity and the idea of Otherness become important symbolic resources for those seeking to express their own identities in a world in which they do not feel at home. [Hetherington, 1998: 71]

In Glass’s ethnography of punk subculture in a small college town, he argues that “self-conscious ‘Othering’” separates upper-middle-class punks from marginalized and stigmatized groups, whose physical and behavioral characteristics are adopted (Glass, 2012: 704). Similarly, nomadic street kids re-appropriate homelessness as part of their identity formation. They are distinct from the homeless populations that they emulate because of their voluntary decision to live on the streets (Glass, 2012: 704).

Nomadic street kid subculture is situated between mainstream U.S. lifeways, and a nomadic lifestyle. Although they congregate in communities that emphasize resource sharing and fictive kinship, street kids do not travel in large groups, as nomadic peoples traditionally do. In every city and town, a new community is established, perhaps with one or two familiar faces. It

is the shared identity of street kid that binds the constantly fluctuating communities together. Shared street kid identity is defined namely by a common lifestyle choice, which may often be rooted in shared reasons for moving to the streets. The reasons for moving to the streets are based in a common ideology, one that defines freedom, individuality, and fulfillment differently than the ideology common to those living a mainstream lifestyle.

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## APPENDIX A: Song Lyrics

*Please see sheet music and digital recordings for the compositions in their entirety.*

### 1. Ode to Another Dylan

“Come with us love, bring your music to play  
Here take a smoke, drink your troubles away”  
So I followed him down to the end of the line  
Becoming a ghost, marching in time.

“If you know Dylan’s name, you know my name too  
In your eyes I see a soul, pretty and true  
So, why won’t they listen to your melody?”  
And so his story unfolded for me.

“I grew up strong where the sun never sets,  
But when people scorn me they seem to forget,  
That I too was born of a woman who yearned,  
And a father who cursed me, so I made him burn.

But, the fire it found me, and I was detained  
Caught up in cages and irons and chains.  
Where was the woman who once gave it all?  
Abandoned and reckless, I chose to fall.

And I dream of pirates and hippies, galore  
Perhaps in my childhood, I wished for more  
But, today I’m the happiest that I’ve ever been  
And I can’t wait to see you again.  
Midwest and married, a child in tow  
Factory job, far too much blow  
She laid beside me and asked for the truth  
And so I told her, and she cut me loose.

I searched for the fire in southwestern plains  
I found it in shamans with northwestern names  
Welcome to my town, these folks keep me fed  
My penthouse is public, no need for a bed.

And I dream of pirates and hippies, galore  
Perhaps in my childhood, I wished for more  
But, today I’m the happiest that I’ve ever been  
And I can’t wait to see you again.”

He showed me the secrets of the mad and the poor

And I asked the same thing his wife asked before:  
“Are you happy like this,”- for how could he be?  
“With a child you don’t know?”  
But he said to me...

“Well, I envy you, you’re learning my dream  
And I know I’m crazy, the voices they scream  
But if I wasn’t here, I paths would not cross.”  
So he says he’s happy, despite all his loss

“And I dream of pirates and hippies, galore  
Perhaps in my childhood, I wished for more  
But, today I’m the happiest that I’ve ever been  
And I can’t wait to see you  
I can’t wait to see you again.”

## **2. Home/less Lullaby**

Do you long to be still?  
Town to town and train to train  
Might just drive a kid insane

Freedom is not attained, you say  
Unless you live from day to day  
A week’s too long for you to stay

Cargo trains and stranger’s names  
I long to learn, but fear they’re beyond my reach  
Secrets of the streets and untouched lands-  
Is this what you planned?  
All along

The name your mother gave does not fit  
Name yourself so it’s just right  
You reborn on summer nights

Able limbs and sound of mind  
The public eye is blind at best  
As you beg them to invest

Cargo trains and stranger’s names  
I long to learn, but fear they’re beyond my reach  
Secrets of the streets and untouched lands-  
Is this what you planned?  
All along

You play games  
With the pennies they throw  
Drink the night  
With the Willamette flow  
Sorry, it's time to go.

Do you long for a home?  
Town to town and train to train  
Might just drive a kid insane

### **3. Stranger than Strangers**

Mom went looking  
For the dad I never had  
Married in the desert  
Lost to Burning Man

3 months of higher education  
Then the Rainbow Family came  
Traded my books for a backpack  
Skipped town and changed by name

Never really quite fit  
Anywhere, it seemed (until this)  
Family of strangers  
A company of dreams

And no matter how many times I leave  
Portland always calls

These strangers are strangers  
With faces I know  
A family of strangers  
With every town, it grows  
These cities are perfect  
Man's most valiant try  
Why else would we come back  
To (B7) smoggy streets and skies?

See them rush passed  
Wary-eyed and bleak  
Can there be no breaching  
These walls that make us weak?

So, I play on-  
A quiet melody  
If they'd only stop time  
Perhaps they'd finally see...

And no matter how many times I leave  
Portland always calls

These strangers are strangers  
With faces I know  
A family of strangers  
With every town, it grows  
These cities are perfect  
Man's most valiant try  
Why else would we come back  
To smoggy streets and skies?

Home is where the heart lies  
Resting in a stranger's smile  
But if home is where the heart lies  
Why are they surprised that  
I left mine?

These strangers are strangers  
With faces I know  
A family of strangers  
With every town, it grows  
These cities are perfect  
Man's most valiant try  
Why else would we come back  
To smoggy streets and skies?

#### **4. Pan**

Cast out  
From his home state  
Nowhere to go but up, and up  
On his father's land  
He could not sedate  
The same voice that had driven him up, and up, and up...

His namesake the same  
As the little boy who never changed

He...



He...  
Said unto me:

I will farm the land  
'Til the end of my days  
As soon as I stop  
My rambling ways

Mount Shasta  
Moon blocked sun  
The beating drums, her teenage grace, and they were up, and up  
But, to ramble  
Is to be one  
And so he came to this port town, up, and up, and up

His namesake the same  
As the little boy who never changed

He...  
He...  
Said unto me:

I will farm the land  
'Til the end of my days  
As soon as I stop  
My rambling ways

So, what now?  
You hopped a train out of town.  
Your foot's on the mend  
But couldn't you use a friend?

But you're sure  
You'll see them again  
Manifest all you need  
Ask and you shall receive

Calls himself a Jedi, he can summon all the powers of his mind  
Forget the guilt and obligation, hedonism is his bride.

But I can't help but speculate that he must miss his mother and his bed  
And little brother, mount Shasta lover, based on all those things he said

All those things he didn't say  
Is freedom the same as running away?

I will farm the land  
'Til the end of my days  
As soon as I stop  
My rambling ways

I will farm the land  
'Til the end of my days  
As soon as I stop  
My rambling ways (end on first chord)

## 5. Star Fire

Life's feeling different out on the road  
Friend or foe, how could you know?  
Your Lucky Charms ran out on you  
Were they true, the gypsy tales he spun you?

Life becomes tiresome, working "9 to 5"  
On Portland streets, you come alive  
But, life becomes tiresome, watching him spange  
Ain't that strange; either way we live, something needs to change

Oh, my, my, my Star Fire, where'd you go?  
Oh, my, my, my Star Fire, where'd you go?  
Ooooh  
Ooooh

Can't leave the county, you're father's too ill  
But you're scared to be alone, so you can't sit still  
Mom was a drinker- will her fate be yours?  
Without your man, you'll lose yourself, on these Northwest shores.

Oh, my, my, my Star Fire, where'd you go?  
Oh, my, my, my Star Fire, where'd you go?  
Ooooh  
Ooooh

The city streets aren't shaped the same as last night  
I'm sorry, love, but it was time to take flight  
I'm sorry that you had to go and take flight

Oh, my, my, my Star Fire, where'd you go?  
Oh, my, my, my Star Fire, where'd you go?  
Ooooh  
Ooooh

## 6. The End

The seasons don't change here  
And the leaves don't turn  
And the fires burn  
And the bellies yearn  
For something good to eat

Music reigns here  
Keeps it lush  
Silken and plush  
She orders the hush  
When summer ends...

When the summer ends I'm gone  
But when the summer ends I'm gone  
To a place where you don't know my name

Hey, friend, can I bum a smoke?  
Take this trinket in exchange-  
It's from a pirate on the Cascade  
Mountain Range-  
-Just rolled into town the other day

How came you to Portland?  
By foot or by gondola train?  
For, in the summer it never rains!  
And our gypsy lives are sustained  
The Redwood Roads twist and bend...

When the summer ends I'm gone  
But when the summer ends I'm gone  
To a place where you don't know my name

Have I ever been in love?  
Well, sure, her name is Freedom!  
She is what you make her  
You cannot forsake her  
Because you and she are one

And I feel what you feel  
That inner tumult and turmoil  
To reconcile my raising  
With these new dreams I'm chasing  
Before the journey's end...  
Before the summer ends...

When the summer ends I'm gone  
But when the summer ends I'm gone  
To a place where you don't know my name  
To a place where you don't know my name

## **APPENDIX B: Research Questions**

1. Are there definitive differences between street kids and other homeless people?
2. What defines a street kid?
  - a. How do street kids label themselves?
3. Is this subculture a counter culture?
  - a. What defines a counterculture?
  - b. What defines a subculture?
  - c. What parallels can be drawn between previously identified U.S. counter cultures and street kid lifeways?
4. Why are these people on the street?
5. How does the rest of the Portland community label them?
6. What is their relationship with authority?
7. Is there a shared street kid philosophy?
  - a. What is it?
  - b. How is it manifested in their lifeways?
  - c. Does this philosophy include rules and regulations for living?
    - i. What are these rules?
    - ii. What happens if these rules are broken?
8. Why do so many street kids have dogs?
9. Where do these individuals come from?
10. Why have they come to Portland?
11. What is the street kid demographic (age, gender, sex, race, ethnicity)?
12. Is there a collective opinion about money and economic gain?

- a. If there is a collective opinion about money and economic gain, what is it?
  - b. Is it made evident by lifestyle choices?
13. What is in a street kid's backpack?
14. Where do their clothing, food, beer, cigarettes and other material items come from?
- a. How are resources allocated on and off the street?
15. Is there a motivation(s) for choosing this lifestyle?
- a. Do motivating factors vary greatly from person to person, or is there a common thread?
16. How do street kids identify "one of their own"?
17. Who comes to Portland?
18. Why do street kids come to Portland?
19. How does Portland support/not support its homeless community?
- a. What laws are in place in Portland/ Oregon that directly or indirectly affect the homeless?
20. How has Portland supported/not supported the Occupy Movement?
21. How do the homeless perceive authority figures?
22. How do authority figures perceive the homeless?
23. What has led to each person's homelessness?
- a. Are there patterns apparent between each story?
24. Is there solidarity between all people on the street?
25. Are there street families?
26. What is the demographic of homeless people in downtown Portland?

## **APPENDIX C: Interview Questions**

1. What is your name?
  - a. Has this always been your name?
  - b. If not, why did you change your name?
2. How old are you?
3. How long have you been traveling?
4. Why did you come to Portland?
5. How long have you been in Portland?
6. How long do you plan to stay in Portland?
7. How did you come to Portland?
8. Where are you from originally?
9. Did you come to Portland alone?
10. Where do you spend your time in Portland?
11. What do you spend your time doing in Portland?
12. With whom do you spend your time?
13. Are you in touch with any of your family members?
14. Why did you begin traveling?
15. What is the first thing you do when you come to a new city?
16. Where do you eat?
17. What do you carry with you?
  - a. What do you consider essential?
18. Where do you get your clothing?
19. How do you self-identify?

20. Have you ever been arrested?
21. Do you like Portland?
22. Where do you sleep?
23. Are you part of a street family?